Representing Modern Female Villain: On Feminine Evil, Perverse Nationhood, and Opposition in Rómulo Gallegos’ Doña Bárbara and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children

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Abstract

This thesis aims to contribute to the scholarship on modern female villainy by further exploring the ways in which 20th century female villains are represented as well as the functions they carry out in the text. In this study, I look at Rómulo Gallegos’ doña Bárbara from *Doña Bárbara* (1929) and Salman Rushdie’s Indira Gandhi from *Midnight’s Children* (1981). I argue that both villains are a combination of already-existing forms of evil in more recognizable contexts as well as a rejection of and opposition to modern values. Firstly, I examine how the villains both conform and resist the formula of the femme fatale. Secondly, I look at the way they represent national evils. Lastly, I study their relation of opposition to the hero(s) and the ways they mark the boundaries that separate binary oppositions. I conclude that modern representations of female villainy continue to reactivate degrading conceptualizations about womanhood.

Keywords

Female evil, femme fatale, nationhood, opposition, villains and villainy, Doña Bárbara, Indira Gandhi
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Introduction

Traditionally, villains and heroes have been “our first contact with moral judgement” (Cuenca 39), whereby the hero represents desirable values and behaviors while the villain represents negative values and counterexamples to socially accepted behaviors (Kokoroski 26). The villain-hero categorization, typical of fairy tales and children and youth literature, has, historically, established a “stereotypical white and black pattern” (Kokoroski 25), whereby the “villains symbolize evil in its purest form ... There are no shades of grey, there are no moments of doubt, they show no ambiguous behavior; they are evil for evil’s sake” (Kokoroski 25-6). In fact, many of these villains are completely dehumanized and often made to evoke utter repulsion. This rigid classification of good and evil was created to teach its audience about morality in simple terms. In addition to its primordial role in children’s literature, villains have also played a key role in religious narratives, particularly in Judeo-Christian narratives, in which the evil figure is depicted as the embodiment of sins while the hero represents virtue. While this conceptualization of good and evil has lost its relevance due to the decline of religious belief in modern societies, the good versus evil narrative is still a fundamental basis of religion. Moreover, villains have also been produced by colonial discourses to legitimize imperialism. In fact, Corina Lenhardt notes that villains are often described as “dark-skinned, dark-haired ... all-black savage creature[s] of the colonies” (113), characterized by a lack of “humane virtues and human rationality; [and they are] unpredictable and uncontrollable” (114). In other words, the villains of colonial texts were for the most part a reflection of the pervasive racist colonial discourse of the time, which in turn produced and perpetuated racial stereotypes. While most texts have conventionally been centered around the protagonist-hero, the character that readers are supposed to imitate, the rise of Gothic fiction re-structured the narrative so that the villain occupied “the centre of all narrative attention, plot and character development; it is the lurking villain of whom we cannot rid ourselves” (Lenhardt 112). In Gothic fiction, “the villains function... as a negative foil for the construction of our humanity and for the guidelines against which we define normality and healthiness” (Lenhardt 113). Although the Gothic villain was still defined as a repulsive “Other,” it now evoked feelings of fascination as well. The romantic period saw the rise of the beautiful but destructive woman that bewitched and destroyed men, the figure that fully developed into the femme fatale in the 19th century. The 20th century was characterized by the vilification of historical and political figures that brought about oppressive regimes to
their people. The most recent villains have been portrayed as human hybrids, an “in-between figure… [that transgresses] Western…dichotomies and thus undermines order” (De Coster 172). While the good and evil framework has weakened over time due to an increasingly unstable classificatory system of good and evil (Doerr 97), the villain, whether it be a monster, a femme fatale, a tyrant, a savage, or a cyborg, is still very much a part of our modern narratives, firstly, because “we need to define ourselves against a negative foil of abnormal 'otherness'” (113) and secondly because “society needs a discourse of singling out dangerously deviant 'otherness' in order to keep intact a matrix of structural unity and conformity” (Lenhardt 113). In other words, the villain “is a creation of society [itself]” (Balchin 240).

While villainy has been attributed to both genders, female evil has been particularly portrayed as a rejection of traditional female norms and as a menace to men, masculinity, and patriarchy. The fear of women has been manifested in a variety of ways throughout time, from the biblical portrayals of unfit women, such as Eve and Jezebel, to the mythological depictions of female monsters, such as Medusa and the sirens, to the historical representations of threatening women, such as Cleopatra. While the fear of women has been perpetuated throughout time, the representation of wicked women has changed in accordance to their changing roles. Beverly Gross states that “the metamorphosis of bitch from the context of sexuality (a carnal woman, a promiscuous woman) to temperament (an angry woman, a malicious woman) to power (a domineering woman, a competitive woman) is a touchstone to the changing position of women through this century” (151). Although some of these subtypes of feminine evil are distinctly found in literature, they often overlap with one another. It is perhaps the figure of the femme fatale arguably the most widespread construction of female evil not only because it has been extensively portrayed in literature, film, art, and history, but also because it encompasses a variety of subtypes of feminine malevolence. Regardless of the form(s) they take, female villains are for the most part portrayed as usurpers of masculinity and as foils to morality and virtue. They articulate the societal intolerance for women who reject female values as well as “male disgust with women’s sexuality … male hatred and fear of women’s procreative power” (Stein 124). While the figure of the malevolent woman is found in works of fiction across time and place, gaining particular attention in the 19th century, the evil woman is hardly found in works of
fiction today. Sarah Aguiar notes that the rise of feminism has led to the diminished appearance of the evil woman in literature, whereby her figure has been substituted instead by victims, “searchers for identity and self, the liberated, illuminated, empowered and subjectified heroines” (1).

I became firstly fascinated by the topic of female villainy after reading Doña Bárbara and learning about the impact the character had had on popular culture. I became intrigued by the character for two reasons. Firstly, she was unlike any other antagonists I knew; she seemed to be a particularly Latin American female villain, one born out of Venezuelan soil. Her mestiza origins and her cowboy lifestyle made her unique. Secondly, while I recognized her blatant evilness, I admired her assertiveness, independence, hardworking spirit, and her ability to perform rough tasks. Although doña Bárbara represented to some extent the emancipated woman and possessed admirable qualities, she was far from being a suitable construction of femininity, for she also represented modern evils and embodied archetypal forms of female wickedness. While the character of doña Bárbara was the initial source of inspiration for this thesis, this project was also inspired by another villain, Indira Gandhi. After sitting in one of Professor Montano’s classes, where the resemblance between the politician and the dandy (the gallant man) was discussed, led me on to think that not only is the political figure a contemporary dandy insofar that he or she seeks to make himself or herself appealing to others, but he or she can also represent a modern threat to society. Inspired by the idea of the politician as a threat, I chose to include Indira Gandhi from Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, firstly because she was depicted as a national evil due to her political management of India, and secondly because she was portrayed as a form of feminine evil. I was interested in finding out the extent to which Indira Gandhi was vilified because of condemnatory female behaviors, as perceived by the author, and/or because she represented the threat of the political figure. While both villains interested me for very different reasons, I found that they both shared much in common. Both antagonists were a combination of recognizable forms of feminine evil (i.e. the seductress, the witch, the terrible mother, the castrating bitch) as well as a rejection of and opposition to modern values, more specifically national values. While both villains appear to be iterations of female malevolence, they are repetitions with difference insofar that they call forth archetypal images, but they are not defined by these archetypes. Moreover, the characters are, indeed, born out of and made to depict the strife of
edifying the nation and its failures and the struggles brought about by development and modernization. Lastly, both antagonists re-establish systems of binary oppositions by acting as borders that divide dichotomies, imposing a value system that matches evilness, barbarism, and chaos with femininity and goodness, civilization, and order with masculinity.

This thesis, thus, hopes to contribute to the scholarship on villains, particularly on modern female villainy, by further exploring the ways in which female antagonists are represented, particularly in the 20th century, as well as their functions in the text. In this study, I will be looking at two modern female villains, namely, doña Bárbara, portrayed in Doña Bárbara, written by the Venezuelan author, Rómulo Gallegos, in 1929, and Indira Gandhi, in Midnight’s Children by the British Indian author Salman Rushdie in 1981. Although doña Bárbara is not always portrayed as evil, that is, she turns to evil and eventually gives it up, this study will mostly focus on the character as a wicked woman. Moreover, even though this investigation will allude to related topics such as evilness, modernism, colonialism and postcolonialism, it will not engage in a discussion of these topics. Lastly, while this work offers a feminist reading of the characters, this thesis intends to analyze the literary representation and functions of female villainy in the texts. The research questions guiding my research are: how are the villains represented in the texts? What types of functions do they carry out? What do the authors condemn through them? In this essay, I argue that while they reproduce images of archetypal female evil, these images are adapted to fit a modern context. Secondly, I state that they expose modern evils, in this case, the perverse state of affairs of the nation. Lastly, I suggest that the villains represent opposition and difference not only because they actively antagonize the protagonists, but because they are perpetually placed at the outside, marking the boundaries that separate binary oppositions.

In the first chapter, I chose to look at the ways the villains both conform to and resist the formula of the femme fatale. I decided to compare the villains to the femme fatale not only because it is the most consolidated and widespread formula of female malevolence, encompassing a variety of subtypes of feminine wickedness, such as “the witch,” “the terrible mother,” “the castrating bitch” (Aguiar 50), etc., but also because the concept has evolved through time, adapting to changing views of womanhood. While both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi manifest characteristics of the femme fatale, they divert from the concept of the femme fatale. While doña Bárbara becomes a Latin American femme fatale, Indira
Gandhi’s character, more than representing female evil as such, posits the political figure as the image of the modern femme fatale. In this chapter I draw mostly upon theories of the femme fatale by Mary Ann Doane, Virginia Allen, Patrick Bade, James Maxfield, Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe, and Heather Braun, among others. I incorporated their theories into my analysis, as they provided insight into the portrayal of the femme fatale over time, her evolution, and her characteristics. While Heather Braun analyzes the evolution of the femme fatale, Patrick Bade, Helen Hanson, Catherine O’Rawe and Virginia Allen examine the various images of the femme fatale, and they outline her characteristics. Moreover, James Maxfield focuses on the masculine anxieties surrounding womanhood while Mary Ann Doane analyzes the figure from the point of view of psychoanalysis and film theory. Their texts proved, thus, invaluable in my understanding and exploration of the figure of the femme fatale. In my project, I argue firstly that like the femme fatale, Gallegos’ doña Bárbara and Rushdie’s Indira Gandhi are portrayed as seductresses. Doña Bárbara is characterized as a seductive exotic and androgynous beauty who lures men and then destroys them. Indira Gandhi, on the other hand, seduces people of India through political promises but then leads the nation to its ruin. Secondly, I posit that both villains are associated with supernatural powers and witchcraft. Doña Bárbara’s attributed supernatural powers point more to the superstition of the people than to her own sorcery. In the case of Indira Gandhi, her portrayal as witch is intended to debase the historical figure and denunciate her witchlike administration of India. Thirdly, I discuss the ways in which both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi, like the femme fatale, reject motherhood and in so doing rejects the possibility of male progeny (Allen 196). While Doña Barbara rejects her own daughter as well as her domestic role, Indira Gandhi, who embodies the new independent India, sterilizes all of the children born at the moment the nation was born, thereby rejecting India’s own first-born generation. Fourthly, like the femme fatale, both villains are portrayed as threatening women whose threat is perceivable but not understandable (Doane 1). While doña Bárbara’s identity slips away from the characters’, the narrator’s, and our own grasp, Indira Gandhi’s identity remains undisclosed until near the end of the narrative. We, thus, encounter a threatening but unknown villain for most of the novel. Lastly, in keeping with the formula of the femme fatale, both villains threaten men by robbing them of their masculinity. Doña Bárbara, like the femme fatale, indeed seduces men by making herself an object of their gaze, and then incites them to defy the patriarchal system in order to possess her (Maxfield 11). Under
Indira Gandhi’s government, male children born during the Independence of India are castrated, and thereby divested of their masculinity and possibility of procreation. While the female villains do show characteristics of the femme fatale, they also posit modern reformulations of archetypal forms of feminine wickedness.

In the second chapter, I focus on the portrayal of the villains as mediums through which the authors put forth a critique of their nations. I postulate that while doña Bárbara represents Venezuela’s underdevelopment, backwardness, and barbarism, Indira Gandhi represents corruption, authoritarianism, and oppression in India. While there has been much scholarship done on the relationship between doña Bárbara and barbarism, in this study, I intend to analyze the character in a broader scope by looking at the villain as an amplification of the nation. In this chapter, I draw upon a variety of sources from different disciplines such socio-political concepts and theories on the portrayal of primitiveness. Most importantly, I draw upon theories of the nation, nation-making, and national images by authors like Benedict Anderson, Doris Sommer, Véronique Eicher, and Kenneth Boulding. Their texts have provided me with a deeper understanding of the diverse conceptualizations of “the nation.” In my study, I depart from the idea that the characters provide insight into the state of affairs of the nation. Through doña Bárbara, Gallegos criticizes the barbaric and uncivilized lifestyle of the Venezuelan plains (Johnson 457-59). On the other hand, through the portrayal of Indira Gandhi, the character based on the historical figure of India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Rushdie sets a direct attack against Indira Gandhi herself and her corrupt administration, particularly during the time of the Emergency (Weickgennant 81). The Emergency of India was proclaimed on June 26, 1975 by Indira Gandhi as a means of securing her political control of the nation. The Emergency was characterized by censorship, suspension of civil liberties, intolerance for any form of resistance and opposition, and a mass-sterilization campaign (Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf 255). I suggest that both villains posit a symbolic representation of their perverse nations. I argue that their names offer a pre-reading of the character as a symbol of failed nationhood. While Gallegos names his villain as “Bárbara,” for “barbarism,” Rushdie’s villain, “Indira Gandhi,” is an intentional allusion to the historical figure Indira Gandhi. Secondly, I claim that both characters are further portrayed as symbols of their nations by being associated with an image that further upholds their pre-determined identity. Gallegos portrays doña Bárbara as an embodiment of the
Venezuelan plains to reinforce the association between the character and barbarism. On other hand, Rushdie depicts a parodied version of the historical figure, further strengthening the connection between the character and the historical referent. Lastly, I stipulate that doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi manifest supposed national flaws, as perceived and constructed by the authors. Doña Bárbara emblematizes Venezuela’s backwardness whereas Indira Gandhi represents the corrupt foundation of India, both of which are characterized by superstition, illegitimacy, accumulation of power, violence, among others.

Lastly, in the third chapter, I discuss the ways in which both villains are portrayed as opposition to modern values. To further my examination on the portrayal of villains, I use theories on the hero-villain structure in narratives. Some of the authors I reference are Luke Seaber, Mieke Bal, Robyn Warhol, and Karin Kokoroski. I also use Saussure’s definition of binary oppositions, and I allude to Francine Masiello’s treatment of the barbarism-civilization binary in Argentinian texts. In my investigation, I suggest that the antagonism between protagonists and antagonists highlights the values endorsed by the protagonists and at the same time sets the boundaries between binary oppositions. I state that throughout the novels, both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are rendered images of opposition and difference insofar as they not only represent opposite ideals to that of the protagonists, but they are also antagonized by protagonists who represent authorial values. I postulate that while Luzardo is the image of advancement and Marisela the image of transformation, doña Bárbara is made to represent barbarism. On the other hand, Saleem is the voice of equality, solidarity, and freedom, while Indira Gandhi is the image of despotism. Their antagonism is, in turn, extended to notions of good and evil, whereby the villains come to occupy the evil sphere. I further argue that their opposition is established throughout the narrative in three ways. Firstly, the narrator posits the protagonists and the antagonists as ideological opponents by building a relation of difference and opposition between them, mainly based on their contrasting ideologies. Secondly, I discuss the conflict between both parties, whereby their opposition is further established. I suggest that their internal conflicts also articulate the clash between binary oppositions. Lastly, I add that their opposition is further reinforced by the defeat of one or both parties. I argue that the villains’ defeat further confines them to their evil roles insofar as their fall is to be interpreted as the obliteration of evil. Finally, I state that their opposition leads not only to the negative definition of the antagonists, but it also places
them at the boundaries between good and evil, modernity and stagnation, and progress and deterioration.

I conclude that, indeed, Rómulo Gallegos’ Doña Bárbara and Salman Rushdie’s Indira Gandhi from *Midnight’s Children* pose new formulations of the femme fatale, while acting as archives of female evil. They denunciate their respective nations by acting as perverse images of their nations; in addition, they represent opposition, and consequently determine the limits between binary oppositions. Finally, I identify some of the implications of portraying women as villains. I argue that through them, the authors not only condemn unorthodox female behaviors, but they also perpetuate existing fears regarding womanhood and insist in the division and nesting of genders. I suggest that in representing national faults as feminine, they also locate the contemptible aspects of society in a feminine sphere. Additionally, they produce prejudiced definitions of femininity, barbarism, and evilness, among others, which further debase women and reinforce stereotypes. While the character of the wicked woman is no longer as popular as it used to be, existing representations of female villainy continue to reactivate degrading notions about womanhood.
Chapter 1

On Female Evil

Although there are various forms of feminine evil, the femme fatale is arguably the most popular form of female wickedness. The femme fatale, as opposed to other forms of male malevolence, has been categorized as a form of feminine evil insofar that she is a direct threat to men, male dominance, and the patriarchal system. Mary Ann Doane adds that the femme fatale not only compromises the male subject’s ability to assert control, but she threatens the stability of his ego (2). Virginia Allen suggests that the femme fatale represents female evil in that by rejecting maternity, she also rejects the possibility of male progeny and in so doing threatens patriarchal society (196). Additionally, James Maxfield argues that the femme fatale is portrayed as female evil in that she incites men to defy the patriarchal system in order to possess her, which, in turn, leads to the male’s loss of manhood (11). Maxfield adds that although the femme fatale is often the catalyst that leads to men’s destruction, it is, in fact, men who bring destruction upon themselves (12). The femme fatale is, thus, represented as evil in order to veil the male fear of loosing his power of control.

While figures such as Eve, Lilith, Medusa, and Salome have been categorized as the first proto-types of the femme fatale, embodying the duality of the femme fatale, a beautiful but destructive woman, the concept of the femme fatale itself did not fully develop until the 19th century. Virginia Allen states that many of the proto-femme fatales are portrayed as revengeful women whose victim is often a male lover. She is described as beautiful but destructive, erotic, demonic, and dangerous (34). Patrick Bade also notes that the concept of the femme fatale developed over time, originally being merely portrayed as the seductive woman who pleased her victims sexually and then killed them (7). He further argues that the first versions of the femme fatale were mythological figures who represented both decay and death and fertility (7). He also adds that historical figures and prostitutes, which were examples of extreme sensuality, seduction, disease, and death, further inspired the creation of the femme fatale. Moreover, he argues that the femme fatale arose and developed as an expression of male fears of womanhood and
menstruation, associating women with death, bad luck, and malevolence (9). As the concept of the femme fatale developed, she became increasingly associated with sin, described as a woman who rejected motherhood, and attributed supernatural powers, eventually becoming a symbol of beauty and death (Allen 109).

Although Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe propose that the idea of the femme fatale could be tracked down to the portrayal of Eve or Lilith, Adam’s alleged first wife, the boom of the femme fatale took place only until the 19th century, the period in which the femme fatale was extensively portrayed in literature and visual arts (3). Allen also suggests that the femme fatale gained momentum as an opposition to the emergence of birth control and the women’s emancipation movements (193-4). During the femme fatale’s boom, however, she underwent several transformations. In Gothic ballads, she began to appear as a “wandering form” (Braun 19) that “perpetuated cycles of erotic longing and prolong[ed] the moment of their completion” (Braun 18). Then in realist novels, she began to “resist the confines of motherhood and domestic duties maintaining the precarious position of outsiders” (Braun 50). Finally, in sensation novels, she became a transgressor “with fuller command of her own allure, specifically its power to secure socio-economic stability rather than romantic love” (Braun 109). The femme fatale, hence, developed and changed over time as a result of changing social trends and morphed into various forms according to the genre in which she appeared.

The femme fatale suffered its demise at the end of the 19th century. Heather Braun suggests that the femme fatale of the end of century “began to lose her elusive charms. This suddenly obvious and overdone cultural icon … was ridiculed and transformed into a parody of her former elusively seductive self” (109). She further adds that at that time, the femme fatale was “stripped of her ornament and mystique” (139) and became “conscious and terrified of her competing powers to repel and seduce … [she was] confronted [with] her own grotesque construction” (139). Braun adds that “the new social and sexual developments such as equitable property rights, opportunities for foreign travel, and independent artistic careers, and the public emergence of same-sex relationships greatly affected constructions of the fin de siècle femme fatale” (139-140). Despite the demise of the femme fatale, however, the seductress resurfaced “in the visual
realm of the twentieth-century silent film and *film noir*” (Braun 141) and reappeared with different characteristics in literature and art. One of the transformations the femme fatale registered was her new image as a “highly-powered businesswom[an] [who] rarely stopped until [she got] what [she] wanted” (142). The femme fatale of the 20th and 21st still retained her main features, while acquiring different characteristics that no longer pertained to the archetypal femme fatale.

Despite the evolutionary phases that the femme fatale has undergone, the femme fatale has consolidated as being the lethal seductive woman who brings destruction upon her male lover (Allen 1, Bade 6, Maxfield 9). Doane suggests that the femme fatale is the threatening woman whose threat is perceivable but not understandable (1). Doane adds that the femme fatale represents the fears regarding the loss of the stability of the ego insofar that she represents the unbridled power of the unknown (2). Moreover, Hanson and O’Rawe add that despite the stereotypical portrayals of the femme fatale, she remains undefinable insofar that her identity remains unknowable (2). Additionally, she also represents the rejection of maternity, freedom from moral and social responsibility, and full control of and over her behavior and sexuality (Allen 196). Bade also states that the femme fatale is also associated to bestiality, and defines her as mysterious, distant, remote, evil, cruel, cold, destructive, dangerous, impassive, unfeeling, and androgynous (8-11). James Maxfield states that the femme fatale is the beautiful woman who threatens men’s life and psychological well-being (9-10). The femme fatale articulates fears of subjection as well as the complete rejection of female traditional values.

Rómulo Gallegos’ doña Bárbara and Salman Rushdie’s Indira Gandhi both perpetuate the paradigm of the femme fatale and divert from it, thus, offering a reinterpretation of the concept. Although they represent archival forms of female evil insofar that they are associated with archetypal forms of feminine malevolence, such as seduction, castration, witchcraft, and murder, they break away from the formula of the femme fatale. Doña Bárbara comes to represent the Latin American femme fatale, a combination of femme fatale characteristics and Latin American culture. Indira Gandhi’s character, on the other hand, gives way to the reconceptualization of the femme fatale, not as a dangerous woman, but as a political figure. Firstly, both villains, like the femme fatale, are
seductresses. While the femme fatale seduces men through her feminine charms, Doña Bárbara seduces men through her androgyny, a combination between the exotic beauty of her mestiza origins and her adopted masculinity, as a 'vaquero' (cowboy) of the Venezuelan plains. Indira Gandhi is also a seductress; however, she seduces through political promises. Secondly, like the femme fatale, both villains are associated with supernatural powers and witchcraft. In the case of doña Bárbara, her supernatural powers are both constantly credited and discredited, pointing more to the superstition of the people than to her own identity as a witch. Indira Gandhi’s association to witchcraft, on the other hand, is not meant to be taken literally. Rather, the narrator caricaturizes Gandhi as a witch in order to expose her cruelty and maliciousness and her witchlike management of India. Thirdly, both villains, analogous to the femme fatale, reject motherhood and domesticity. While doña Bárbara completely disowns her own daughter, Indira Gandhi, otherwise known as “Mother of India,” rejects the first-born generation of the newly-born India by ordering their sterilization. Fourthly, both villains are perceived as threatening but unknowable, much like the femme fatale. Doña Bárbara’s identity constantly escapes the characters’ and readers’ comprehension, hence the mystery and fear around the character. Indira Gandhi’s identity remains unknowable through most of the narrative. Her elusive presence haunts both the narrator and the text in the form of marginal references to the negative impact she had on other characters and on India itself; however, her villainous identity is only made known near the end of the narrative. Lastly, in keeping with the formula of the femme fatale, both villains threaten men and masculinity by stripping them of their masculinity. Doña Bárbara persuades them into giving up their masculinity to possess her, a metaphorical castration. Indira Gandhi does so by ordering the castration of the male children born during the eve of India’s Independence, thereby stripping them of their masculinity and possibility of procreation, reproduction, and multiplication. Although both authors borrow from existing constructions of female evil, they seem to use these archetypes as supplementary tools to construct a new type of villain. Doña Bárbara becomes a Latin American re-adaptation of the femme fatale, while Indira Gandhi becomes a medium through which a new femme fatale is posited, that of the political figure.
1.1 Seductresses: The Menace of Subjection

Among one of the main powers attributed to the femme fatale is her ability to entice men through her feminine charms. The femme fatale’s seductiveness is translated as a threat of subjection. Both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are seductresses; while doña Bárbara seduces men through her androgynous appearance, a hybridity of exotic beauty and her adopted masculinity, Indira Gandhi enchants both men and women through political promises. Doña Bárbara was a mestiza, “fruto … [de la] violencia del blanco aventurero en la sombría sensualidad de la india” (32), (‘fruit of the sowings of white adventurers in the dark passion of the Indian’ (28))\(^1\). Like the femme fatale, whose beauty is often tied to death and destruction, the villain’s beauty was, since early on, charged with destructive potential, not only for those around her but also for herself. Similar to Kant’s concept of the “terrifying sublime” (Kant 16) which he exemplifies as being similar to “the sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peaks arise above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by Milton arouses satisfaction, but with dread” (14), her beauty while mesmerizing was also monstrous. Even as a young girl, Bárbara’s monstrous beauty “había perturbado ya la paz de la comunidad. La codiciaban los mozos, la vigilaban las hembras celosas” (39), (‘the youths coveted her, [and] the women kept a jealous watch over her’ (35)). Moreover, even his Taita, the closest parental figure she had soon saw in her an opportunity to become wealthy by capitalizing on her beauty. She found out that

Moloch de la selva cauchera había ofrecido veinte onzas por Barbarita, y que si no se llevó a cabo la venta, fue porque el capitán [el Taita] aspiraba a mayor precio, cosa no difícil de lograr ahora, pues en obra de unos meses la muchacha se había convertido en una mujer perturbadora. (35)

Moloch had, on their previous trip, offered twenty ounces of gold for Barbarita, and that if the business was not settled then and there, it was simply because the

\(^1\) All translations of *Doña Bárbara* come from the edition translated by Robert Malloy.
captain [the Taita] wanted a better price for her; and this would not be difficult for him to get, because in a few months the girl had become an alluring woman. (31)

The realization that she had been commodified by someone whom she trusted stripped her of her innocence and contributed to her transformation into a merciless seductress, an alluring woman in charge of her own allure. Not only did his Taita plan to sell her to Moloch, but he also ordered the assassination of the only man she had ever loved, Asdrúbal, perceiving him as a threat to his plans regarding Bárbara. Moreover, her overpowering and overrepresented beauty also led to an uprising by the crew members, who desired to possess her. The narrator notes that a “rebelión que hacía tiempo venía preparándose por causa de la perturbadora belleza de la guaricha [estalló]” (36), (‘mutiny which had been brewing for some time on account of the girl’s disturbing beauty [erupted]’ (33)), in the boat where she had grown up. In fact, soon after the “muerte del capitán … [fue] el festín de su doncellez para los vengadores de Asdrúbal” (37), (‘death of the captain and of The Toad … [came] her rape at the hands of Hasdrubal’s avengers’ (33)). Unaware of the destructive potential of her beauty, Bárbara became the victim of her own beauty. After being rescued by Eustaquio, an old Indian crew member, Bárbara, overtaken by her “hirviente sensualidad y el tenebroso aborrecimiento al varón” (39) (‘[her] hot sensuality combined with her bitter loathing for men’ (36)), became motivated to take control of her own unsettling beauty and began to use it against men. Doña Bárbara earned her reputation as “devoradora de hombres” (man-eater) for having “fustaneado a muchos hombres, y al que no trambuca[ba] con sus carantoñas, lo compon[fa] con un bebedizo o se lo amarra[ba] a las pretinas, y hac[fa] con él lo que se le antoj[aba]” (18), (‘pocketed heaps of men, and she never misse[d] when she beg[an] sweet-talking. She [gave] a man a love potion and tie[d] him to her apron-strings, and then [did] what she like[d] with him’ (9)). Like the femme fatale, doña Bárbara subjugated men to her will. In fact, “todos sus amantes, víctimas de su codicia o instrumentos de su crueldad, habían sido suyos como las bestias que llevaban la marca de su hierro” (189), (‘all her lovers, victims of her greed or instruments of her cruelty, had been hers as the steers marked with her brand were hers’ (217-18)). Unlike the traditional femme fatale who subjected men by resorting to her feminine charms, the villain subjugated men like the animals she dominated in a rodeo, whereby she aggressively took
over the beast, a tactic which reflected her rather manly life as “vaquero” of the Venezuelan plains. The first man she seduced and brought destruction upon was Lorenzo Barquero, a bright young man with much potential and in whom much expectations and hope had been put. Both attracted to and repelled by him; she tells him that “[la] primera vez te me pareciste a Asdrúbal… Pero ahora me representas a los otros: un día eres el taita [el capitán], otro el Sapo” (40), ('when I saw you the first time you reminded me of Hasdrubal…One day you will be the captain, and another day The Toad' (37)). Finding in Lorenzo a medium through which she could discharge her mixed passions, Bárbara slowly took over him. After having seduced him, she gave him

[un] brebaje afrodisiaco… mezclándolo con las comidas y bebidas, y no fue necesario que transcurriera mucho tiempo para que de la gallarda juventud de aquel que parecía destinado a un porvenir brillante, sólo quedara un organismo devorado por los vicios más ruines, una voluntad abolida, un espíritu en regresión bestial. (41)

aphrodisiacs she mixed in his food and drink, [and] it was not long before the stalwart youth of the man apparently destined for a brilliant career became no more than the life of an organism subject to the lowest vices, with a broken will and a degenerate spirit well on the way to bestiality. (38)

Like the femme fatale who threatens men’s lives and psychological well-being (Maxfield 9-10), doña Bárbara not only dispossessed him of his own subjectivity, but she turned him into the abject. The abject

has only one quality – that of being opposed to I … [it is] a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries [him] radically separate, loathsome. Not [him]. Not

2 Asdrúbal (Hasdrubal) is Doña Bárbara’s beloved.

3 El Sapo (The Toad) is member of the captain’s crew. He assassinated Asdrúbal, doña Bárbara’s beloved, and was later killed by other rebellious members of the crew.
that. But not nothing either. A “something” … A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant … On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination. (Kristeva 1-2)

Similarly, Lorenzo Barquero, a well-educated who had come back to the Venezuelan plains after having studied in the city, was detached from his subjectivity, becoming simply a lifeless, ruined man, “a deject who places [himself], separates [himself], situates [himself], and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging or refusing” (Kristeva 8). He, thus, wanders aimlessly, with no purpose in life, no responsibilities, no desires, and no subjectivity; “it is death infecting life” (Kristeva 4).

Additionally, doña Bárbara also dispossesses him of all his territories. Advised by Colonel Apolinar, one of her lovers, she “se [puso] en la propiedad de La Barquereña, sin necesidad de que se [casara] con don Lorenzo … [a través de] una venta simulada” (41), ([got] control of La Barquereña [w]ithout marrying Don Lorenzo… [through] a dummy bill of sale' (38-9)), and became the owner of La Barquereña. Not even “el nombre quedó de La Barquereña pues Bárbara se lo cambió por El Miedo” (43), (’not so much as the name La Barquereña remained, Barbara [changed] it to El Miedo (Fear)’ (39)). In her study of onomastic strategies, J.B. Croft states that “the name is the essence, it [summons] … [its] being” (151). Similarly, the name change of the ranch in turn brings about its being; it begins a reign of fear in all its extension. Doña Bárbara’s appropriation of Barquero’s lands points to her avarice and her desire to “arrancar” (to snatch) from others what belongs to them with no mercy. Like the femme fatale of the 19th century, doña Bábara uses her seductive power to advance herself socioeconomically (Braun 109). In order to take over Colonel Apolinar’s wealth, she led him to believe that he had won her love by appearing to “[rendirse] a su amoroso asedio y se complació en sus artes. Por el momento la mujer…se le entregaba con aquel tú” (42), (’[surrender] to his advances, and felt quite pleased with himself … the woman … had signified her capitulation by addressing him familiarly’ (39-40)). After securing her position as landowner of El Miedo with the help of Colonel Apolinar, she “recuperó su fiera independencia haciendo desaparecer, de una manera misteriosa, a aquel hombre que podía jactarse en llamarla suya” (43), (’she recovered her proud independence by causing, in some mysterious way, the disappearance of the man who prided himself on calling her
his own’ (40)). Like the femme fatale, she succeeds in obtaining the masculine gaze through the purposeful spectacle of her beauty. For example, when she attempts to seduce Santos Luzardo, the one man that she falls in love with, she

avanzó a tenderle la mano con una sonrisa alevosa … brillantes los ojos turbadores de hembra sensual; recogidos, como para besar, los carnosos labios con un enigmático pliegue en las comisuras; la tez cálida; endrino y lacio el cabello abundante. Llevaba un pañuelo azul de seda, anudado al cuello con las puntas sobre el descote de la blusa; usaba una falda amazónica, y hasta el sombrero “pelodeguama”, típico del llanero, única prenda masculina en su atavío, llevábalo con cierta gracia femenil. Finalmente, montaba a mujeregas, cosa que no acostumbraba en el trabajo, y todo eso hacía olvidar a la famosa marimacho. No podía escapársele a Santos que la femineidad que ahora ostentaba tenía por objeto producirle una impresión agradable: mas, por muy prevenido que estuviese, no pudo menos que admirarla. (176)

came forward to give him her hand, with a treacherous smile … Her eyes were brilliant with that disturbing light of a sensual woman’s, her full lips were gathered as though for a kiss, with an enigmatic twist at the corners. He noticed that her complexion was warm and rich, and that her hair was coal black, abundant, and straight. She wore a blue silk bandana, knotted around her neck, with the points lying between the collar of her blouse, and a rather severely tailored skirt; but she wore all, even the wide velvety sombrero, the only masculine detail of her costume, with a certain feminine grace. Lastly, she rode side-saddle, a thing she did not usually do at a rodeo, and all this made one forget the notorious woman she had become. It could not escape Santos that her show of femininity had the sole object of making an agreeable impression on him, but prepared as he was, he could not help admiring her. (201-02)

Molly Martin posits an intromissive optic theory, which proposes that “the gazer becomes the object of the image” (6), whereby “vision begins with the imaged body” (7), hence, “locat[ing] the power with the image” (13). Likewise, doña Bárbara as the imaged
body is empowered by commanding the gazer’s attention to her, thereby becoming the object of the image. In addition to her beauty, doña Bárbara, like the sirens, also seduces men through her voice. Like “the sirenic [voice which] contains the line of both the loss of self and the offer of regression into a self-effacing state of yielding” (Pollock 14), “la voz de doña Bárbara, flauta del demonio andróginho que alentaba en ella, grave rumor de selva y agudo lamento de llanura, tenía un matiz singular, hechizo de los hombres que la oían” (180), (‘Doña Barbara’s voice, the instrument of the half-masculine demon within her, was now like a slow rustling of the forest, now like the harsh lament of the windswept plain, and had a peculiar timbre which was the enchantment of every man who heard her’ (207)). Men are, hence, subjected to an overabundance of sensuality that she exudes through her physical beauty and through her voice, which mesmerizes them and forces them into a state of yielding. Despite doña Bárbara’s intentional spectacle of her beauty to seduce Santos Luzardo, she was “una mujer apetecible … [aunque] carecía en absoluto de delicadezas femeniles … el imponente aspecto del marimacho le imprimía un sello original a su hermosura: algo de salvaje, bello y terrible a la vez” (46), (‘she was … an alluring woman, and if she was entirely lacking in womanly delicacy, the imposing appearance of this Amazon put, in exchange, the stamp of originality on her beauty: there was something about her at once wild, beautiful, and terrible‘ (43)). Both the femme fatale and doña Bárbara represent the threat of subjection, particularly that of male subjection, through seduction. However, unlike the traditional femme fatale, who seduces through feminine coquetry, she seduced men through her androgynous beauty and imposing presence, one which reflected the roughness and wildness of the Venezuelan plains.

As opposed to doña Bárbara who bewitches men, Indira Gandhi captivates the people of India through her political promises and promotional self-identification as “Mother of India.” Karl Sornig posits that the difference between conviction and seduction is that “whereas the mechanisms of convincing and conviction obviously work mainly along the lines of cognitive argumentative lines, seduction, instead of trusting in the truth and/or credibility of arguments, rather exploits the outward appearance and seeming trustworthiness of the persuader” (97). Similarly, Gandhi posits herself in a seemingly trustworthy manner which then allows her to persuade others into believing her political
promises. Firstly, her promotional slogan, “India is Indira and Indira is India” (Rushdie 483), is Gandhi’s self-identification not only as a symbol of India, but also as an embodiment of India, a political maneuver meant to appeal to the rising patriotism of the people of India who having disowned the colonial British figure, sought not only for a leader of their own, but also for one who would reclaim their culture and look after the newly-born nation. Furthermore, she posits herself as the “Mother of the Nation” (483), which further appealed to the people. Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf note that historically women have been perceived as the “upholders of their sacred religious traditions … [and] as bulwarks protecting what was seen as the 'uncolonized' space of the home against an outside world dominated by colonial values” (146). In positing herself as the “Mother of the Nation” she seems to appeal to the idea that as a woman and as a mother, she represents their sacred traditions and the values of their uncolonized homes, in turn evoking the positive image of the nurturer and protector of Indian culture. Similar to the way sirens entice men through their chant, offering them the possibility of eternal pleasure, the villain gained the people’s support through her political promises. According to Carlos García Gual,

las sirenas atrapan y arrastran … con su canto meloso, sugestivo. Ejercen una irresistible fascinación a través de sus melodías y promesas…La seducción de las sirenas estriba en su promesa de gozar a su vera exquisitos placeres, oyendo sus cantos y saboreando los idílicos encantos que dispensan … [su canto es sin embargo una] trampa letal, mortífera. (12-3)

sirens trap and drag [you] … with their melodic and suggestive songs. They exert an irresistible fascination through their melodies and promises… The sirens’ seduction lies in their promise of enjoying exquisite pleasures, hearing their songs and savoring their idyllic charms … [their song is, however] a lethal, deadly trap.  

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4 My traslation of Garcfa Gual.
As opposed to doña Bárbara’s seduction technique which awakens in men the erotic desire to possess her, Indira Gandhi uses language to persuade the people of her promissory political project of national birth. It is only through the narrator, who remains skeptical of her enticing political promises, that her deception is eventually discovered. For example, the narrator states,

via Ceylon we flew, sixty thousand and sixty-one innocent airline passengers, avoiding overflying India, and thus losing our chance of watching, from twenty thousand feet, the celebrations of Indira Gandhi’s New Congress Party, which had won a landslide victory – 350 out of a possible 515 seats in the Lok Sabha – in another recent election. Indira-ignorant, unable to see her campaign slogan, GARIEL HATAO, Get Rid of Poverty, blazoned on walls and banners across the great diamond of India. (408)

Jacques Ellul describes political speeches or debates as “political spectacle[s]… the real political mechanism – the state structure – remains completely hidden, outside of all control: all the more so as the flickering little screen fixes the individual’s attention on the spectacle, and prevents him from searching deeper, and asking himself questions on the true nature of power” (161-62). Likewise, her slogans and speeches were mere spectacles diverting the people’s attention from the actual management of the nation. The narrator, however, notes the contradiction between her slogan against poverty and the banners placed across the great diamond of India, a symbolic irony that foreshadows the incongruence between the political promises made by the politician and the reality of her government. Elena Pasquinelli states that one of the characteristics of illusions is that they are systematic. In other words, despite the fact that “different subjects [are] confronted with the [same phenomena] … [they] all experience the same illusion” (62). She further suggests that unlike hallucinations, which are a “private phenomena … [whereby] one has the impression of seeing or feeling things that those nearby do not perceive” (Pasquinelli 63), illusions lead to “repeated, controlled perception experiences” (Pasquinelli 63). Similarly, through manipulated perception experiences, the people of India are made to perceive the villain as India’s mother figure, and by extension, not only deposit their faith on her, but even worship her. For example, the narrator says,
In the home of Uncle Mustapha, I sat silently amongst my pulverized cousins listening to his nightly soliloquies which contradicted themselves constantly, veering wildly between his resentment of not having been promoted and his blind lap-dog devotion to every one of the Prime Minister’s acts. If Indira Gandhi had asked him to commit suicide, Mustapha Aziz would have ascribed it to anti-Muslim bigotry but also defended the statesmanship of the request, and, naturally, performed the task without daring (or even wishing) to demur. (450-51)

Like doña Bárbara, who in seducing them, strips them of their will, Indira Gandhi also persuades them into subscribing to her political actions and blindly supporting her campaign. In fact, some people became so enchanted with her, that they became echoes of her political lies. For example, Uncle Mustapha, firmly believing in Indira’s management, attempted to convince those around him of her commendable government. For instance, he says, “our country is in safe hands. Already Indiraji is making radical reforms – land reforms, tax structures, birth control – you can leave it to her and her sarkar” (454). Not only does she manage to gain the support of the people of India, but they came to “worship [her] like a god … [she was] a manifestation of the OM” (503). Uncle Mustapha and Indira’s supporters not only supported her actions by further promoting them, but they reinforced the illusion of a safe, stable, and progressive India. While Gandhi is successful in appealing to the masses, the people eventually become aware of her falsehood and cynical attempts to appeal to them with her political promises. Paul Chilton states that the success of a “political discourse involves … the promotion of representations … [and] the evident need for political leaders to imbue their utterances with evidence, authority, and truth … a process … [called] 'legitimisation’” (23). As a result of a lack of political legitimization, the people eventually not only withdraw their support to her campaign, but they also call into question her management. Nevertheless, both through her self-portrayal as the Mother of India, and her political promises, Gandhi manages both to secure the support of the people of India and maintain them under the illusion of progress, while in actuality, the nation was being plundered by its own leader.

Both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi manifest seductive powers over others, which in turn allows them to subjugate others. While doña Bárbara is able to subject men through
her beauty like the femme fatale, her beauty reflects her identity as both the exotic Latin American mestiza and rough vaquero of the Venezuelan plains, putting forth a plausible face to the Latin American version of the femme fatale. While Indira Gandhi does not resort to physical beauty to subject others, the politician, like the femme fatale, nevertheless, embodies the concept of the seductress by enticing the people of India to support her through her political discourse. Like the femme fatale, both villains, ultimately, articulate fears of subjection.

1.2 Of Witches and Supernatural Powers

According to Virginia Allen, the femme fatale is often attributed supernatural powers and is characterized as a witch (109). Although both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are associated with the occult, doña Bárbara’s supernatural powers are both constantly credited and discredited, pointing more to the superstition of the people than to her own sorcery. Thus, her depiction as a witch, more than reproducing the archetype, intends to depict the Latin American superstition, the integration of the fantastic with the mundane together into a single seemingly ordinary reality. On the other hand, while Indira Gandhi’s characterization borrows from witch-like imagery, using the archetype to interpret her negatively, she is presented to us only as a metaphorical sorceress, whose witchcraft is rather manifested in her witch-like management of India.

Like the femme fatale, doña Bárbara became possessed by a desire to “apoderarse de los secretos que se [relacionaran] con el hechizamiento del varón. También la iniciaron en su tenebrosa sabiduría toda la caterva de brujos … todos le revelaron sus secretos” (38-9). (‘she lived only to gain the secret knowledge necessary for bewitching men’ (35)). Moreover, she became convinced that she was

asistida de potencias sobrenaturales y a menudo hablaba de un “Socio” que la había librado de la muerte … y que desde entonces se le aparecía a aconsejarle lo que debiera hacer en las situaciones difíciles o revelarle los acontecimientos lejanos o futuros que le interesara conocer … lo llamaba simplemente y con la mayor naturalidad: “el Socio”, y de aquí se originó la leyenda de su pacto del diablo. (45)
endowed with supernatural powers, and often spoke of “a Partner,” who had saved her life one night … and who had appeared since then to counsel her in difficult situations or to acquaint her with such distant or future happenings as might interest her … she called him simply and naturally “my Partner” – and from this arose the legend of her compact with the devil. (41-2)

While nobody knew for sure whether she was assisted by supernatural forces or not, doña Bárbara legitimizes her supernatural abilities by alternating between predicting things that were to occur such as telling the workers when they would not “[cojer] ni un maute” (80) (‘catch a single calf today’ (82)) in the plains of Corozal or when they would be able to find “una rochela de cimarrones: … setenta y cinco reses” (80), (‘a pack of strays … seventy-five of them’(83)) and being seen purportedly consulting with “el Socio,” a supernatural spirit that assisted her in her evil plans. However, unlike the traditional femme fatale, doña Bárbara’s supernatural powers are constantly discredited by the narrator, who often reveals them to be fabrications made by herself to earn power and respect from others. For example, the narrator says, doña Bárbara acababa de servirse un vaso de agua y se lo llevaba a los labios, cuando, haciendo un gesto de sorpresa, echo atrás la cara y se quedó luego mirando fijamente el contenido del envase suspendido a la altura de sus ojos … [y dice:] El doctor Luzardo que ha querido dejarse ver … Era, en efecto, una de las innumerables trácalas de que solía valerse doña Bárbara para administrar su fama de bruja, el temor que con ello inspiraba a los demás. (70)

had just poured herself a glass of water and was putting it into her lips, when with a gesture of astonishment, she jerked her head back and continued to stare fixedly at the vessel, holding it at eye-level … [and says] Dr. Luzardo [allowed] himself to be seen … it was one of Barbara’s many tricks for furthering her prestige as a witch and heightening the fear it inspired in others. (73)

This, in turn, raises questions about the veracity of her powers and suggests that the villain purposefully posits herself as a witch as a means of manipulating others. Although some characters believe in her supernatural powers, others remain skeptical about it. For
example, while Pajarote is convinced that “doña Bárbara es faculta en brujerías, [y] eso nadie lo puede negar” (79), (nobody can deny that Doña Bárbara knows witchcraft’ (82)), Carmelito, on the other hand, reproaches him for believing in her powers when he says, “¡hasta cuando irán a estar ustedes con eso de los poderes de doña Bárbara? Lo que pasa es que esa mujer es de pelo en pecho, como tienen que serlo todos los que pretenden hacerse respetar en esta tierra” (79), (how long are you people going to keep up this nonsense about doña Bárbara’s spells? The real truth is that she’s got hair on her chest, that woman, and you’ve got to have it if you want respect in this country’ (82)). The disbelief of some of the characters further raises questions about the authenticity of doña Bárbara’s sorcery. Moreover, the narrator even hints at the possibility that “El Socio” is in reality doña Bárbara herself, further discrediting her supernatural assistance. For example, after several attempts of invoking “El Socio, she suddenly heard

una frase que ella no había llegado a pronunciar: Las cosas vuelven al lugar de donde salieron. Eran las palabras que había pensado decirse para apaciguar su excitación; pero “el Socio” se las arrebató de los labios y las pronunció con esa entonación familiar y extraña a la vez que tiene la propia voz devuelta por el eco. Doña Bárbara levantó la mirada y advirtió que en el sitio que hasta allí ocupara su sombra, proyectada en la pared por la luz temblorosa de la lamparilla, estaba ahora la negra silueta del “Socio”. (256)

a phrase she herself had not succeeded in pronouncing: 'Everything returns whence it came.' These were the words she had thought of saying to quiet her agitation; but the Partner had wrestled them from her lips and spoken them with that intonation, at once strange and familiar, of her own voice changed into an echo. Doña Bárbara raised her eyes and saw that the black silhouette of the 'Partner,' flung on the wall by the fluttering light of the votive lamp, was now in the place formerly occupied by her shadow. (302-03)

The narrator, hence, suggests that the voice of “El Socio” is in reality the echo of her own thoughts and his appearance is, in fact, her own dark shadow that projects back her own
thoughts and feelings. This both discredits the idea that doña Bárbara is assisted by paranormal forces and strips her away of her supernatural aura.

In spite of the veracity of her supernatural powers, however, the myth of doña Bárbara as a witch overpowers the reality of it, for ultimately, she manages to inspire fear amongst the people and by extension command them. Unlike the traditional femme fatale, whose supernatural aspect is constantly emphasized and reaffirmed, doña Bárbara’s sorcery is more often questioned than confirmed, and the focus of the narrative turns instead to the superstition of the people rather than to the character’s supernatural powers. For instance, if anything unexpected happened, the people would quickly attribute the event to her powers. For example, after Bárbara is forced to allow Luzardo to recover some of his stolen herd, “un toro se abría paso en el centro de la madrina con una arremetida impetuosa, precipitó la avalancha del barajuste” (183), (‘a bull … made his way through the centre of the herd in a furious charge, started an avalanche of stampeding beasts’ (210)), the workers then conjectured that it had been a manifestation of doña Bárbara’s witchcraft: “¡Maldita bruja! – exclamaron los peones de Altamira, atribuyendo el suceso a maleficios de doña Bárbara” (183), (”the damned witch!’ exclaimed the Altimara peons, attributing the event to the evil powers of doña Bárbara’ (210-11)). Furthermore, the multiple fires that erupted in Altamira, leaving “el vasto paño de sabana carbonizado … las cimarroneras, desalojadas de sus breñales, se regaron por todas partes” (208), ([a] wide surface of … charred prairie … the stray cattle, dislodged from their retreats, scattered to all sides' (242-41)), were also attributed to doña Bábara: “esto es obra de doña Bárbara – afirmaban los peones de Altamira --. Aquí nunca se habían visto quemazones como ésta” (208), (”This is Doña Barbara’s work,’ declared the peons. ‘Fires like this have never been seen around here’” (241)). Additionally, doña Bárbara herself comes to believe that she had, indeed, provoked the fire. For instance, the narrator says, “doña Bárbara, a su vez, interpretó los incendios que asolaban Altamira como obra de los “poderes” que le asistían, puesto que la destrucción de la cerca con que Luzardo pretendía ponerle límites a sus desmanes no había sido realización de un deseo suyo” (211), (’doña Bárbara, in her turn, interpreted the conflagration which had razed Altamira as the work of the “powers,” assisting her, especially as the destruction of the fence Luzardo expected to put an end to her outrages had been no more than the realization of
her own desire’ (245)). More than being a result of witchcraft, doña Bárbara’s supernatural identity resulted from her own and the people’s lack of distinction between objective “fact” and subjective “superstition.” The subjective or psychical factor was perceived by them as though it were a part of the object. There was no realization that these added facts were a part of the observer, indeed there was no differentiation between objective and subjective … The subjective element was projected into the object. (Harding 5)

The conflation of objective facts and subjective beliefs, endowed the antagonist with the identity of a witch. Consequently, she became both empowered and untouchable, using the people’s fear and intrigue to control them. Eventually, the myth of doña Bárbara detached from the character, gaining its own independence, no longer controlled by her. The myth of doña Bárbara was not only well-known in the plains, but it also spread to the city of San Fernando. People in San Fernando also told

las mil historias de sus amores y crímenes, muchas de ellas pura invención de la fantasía popular, a través de cuyas ponderaciones la mujerona adquiría caracteres de heroína sombría, pero al mismo tiempo fascinadora, como si la fiereza bajo la cual se la representaban, más que odio y repulsa, tradujera una íntima devoción de sus paisanos. Habitante de una región lejana y perdida en el fondo de vastas soledades, y sólo dejándose ver de tiempo en tiempo y para ejercicio del mal, era casi un personaje de leyenda que excitaba la imaginación de la ciudad. (344-45)

the thousand tales of her amours and crimes … Most of them were pure inventions of popular fancy in whose exaggerated versions the Amazon acquired the character of a heroine, dreaded, yet at the same time fascinating, as though the ferocity under which she was represented, displayed a close devotion on the part of the countrymen rather than hate or repugnance. Inhabitant of a distant region lost in the depths of the lonely fastness and allowing herself to be seen only from time to time and only for evil purposes, it was almost as a legendary figure that she excited the city’s imagination. (421-22)
Her myth had outgrown itself, turning doña Bárbara into a character who fed from the imagination of people. Similar to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, the myth of doña Bárbara, like the rhizome, “[had] neither beginning nor end but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills” (21). Like the femme fatale, doña Bárbara’s association to supernatural powers endows her with power, protection, and control over others; however, her supernatural identity arises more from the superstitious imagination of the people than from her own attributed powers.

Similarly, Indira Gandhi is also portrayed as a witch. The narrator uses the image of the witch not to define her but to interpret her negatively, that is, as a way of associating the character with the archetypal image of the witch, one related to evilness, cruelty, and danger. For example, he says,

No colors except green and black … the Widow’s hair has a center-parting it is green on the left and on the right black … the Widow’s arm is long as death its skin is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black … the Widow’s arm comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream … the Widow’s hand curls round them green and black. Now one by one the children mmff [sic] are stifled quiet … the Widow laughs her tongue is green but her teeth are black…and children torn in two in Widow hands. (238)

The green and black colors with which he describes her, the snake-like arm, her long and sharp nails, her perverse laugh, and her cruel murder of children construct an image of the villain as a witch. While the image of the villain is suggestive of a witch, the antagonist is not endowed with supernatural powers. Rather, her witch-like image is meant to be a negative reading of the character, one which highlights her perversity.

Although Indira Gandhi’s supernatural identity is never legitimizied by the narrator, he does, however, point out that her government was associated to the occult. He reveals that her government “was falling increasingly beneath the twin spells of power and astrology … Indira sarkar, like her father’s administration, consult[ed] daily with purveyors of occult lore … [and] Benarsi seers help[ed] to shape the history of India” (450). Moreover, Saleem reveals that “the Prime Minister went nowhere without her
personal astrologer” (491). Not only was India’s government founded upon astrological and superstitious beliefs, but it was also ran in a witchlike manner. The narrator constantly makes parallels between Indira and her government, whereby Indira and her government become mirrors of one another. By extension, her characterization as a witch becomes metaphorically reflected in her witch-like management of India. Her government, like her, was also characterized by cruelty, perversity, and a lack of compassion. There was “corruption inflation hunger illiteracy landlessness … gross inequities of wealth distribution … police harassment … disease” (473) and censorship, among others. Her oppressive government, in fact, sponsored the sterilization of the midnight children, children with magical qualities born during the eve of India’s independence, an act of utter dehumanization. Sibylle Birkhäuser-Oeri suggests that enchantment can also be understood as the act of “robb[ing] … one’s true nature, [whereby] one is forced … to live, for instance, like a bird, a bear, a donkey or a pig … a person who is “enchanted” in this way is dehumanized due to the influence of a complex which takes away one’s human dignity” (82). In ordering the sterilization of the midnights’ children, they are robbed from the possibility of having children and stripped of their identities and forced to live without their magical qualities. The narrator notes that, “test- and hysterectomized, the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves … the awakening from anesthesia was cruel indeed, and whispering through the wall came the tale of their undoing, the tormented cry of children who had lost their magic: she had cut it out of us … and now we were nothing” (505). Much like a witch who degrades her victims, Indira Gandhi’s government becomes characterized by debasement and brutality. Although both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are portrayed as witches, neither of them embody the identity of the witch. Like the femme fatale, they both borrow from witch-like imagery; however, neither of them are fully portrayed as witches. Whereas doña Bárbara appears to be a Latin American witch, whose witchcraft is endowed to her by the superstition of the people, Indira Gandhi appears to be a political witch, whose macabre management of India is characterized by evilness, cruelty, and superstition.
1.3 Rejecting Motherhood and Domesticity

One of the main characteristics of the femme fatale is her rejection of domesticity and motherhood. Likewise, both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi defy motherhood and domesticity. Doña Bárbara not only refuses to undertake domestic roles and rather performs masculine ones, but she also rejects her own daughter. On the other hand, Indira Gandhi, while claiming to be the “Mother of India,” sacrifices the first-born generation of India, and by extension her own children, thereby rejecting domestic values and threatening masculinity. While doña Bárbara rejects domesticity, she does so through her appropriation of male roles and occupation of the male sphere. She embodies the rough 'vaquero' (cowboy) of the Venezuelan plains, a role that has often been attributed to men only. She is a powerful, wealthy, ambitious, and fearless landowner of “El Miedo,” her ranch. She is, hence, an androgynous figure, a 'marimacho,' who in adopting a masculine role breaches traditional gender roles. The narrator describes doña Bárbara as a woman who had

atrofiadas hasta las últimas fibras femeniles de su ser por los hábitos del marimacho – [ella] … dirigía personalmente las peonadas, manejaba el lazo y derribaba un toro en plena sabana como el más hábil de sus vaqueros, y no se quitaba de la cintura la lanza y el revólver. (45-6)

the last fibres of femininity in her being were atrophied by the habits of the virago—she personally directed the labour of the peons, tossed the lasso, and could bring down a bull out in the open as well as her most skillful cowboy. She was never without her lance-head dagger and her revolver. (43)

In mastering even the most masculine tasks, doña Bárbara gained not only an equal status to men, earning her the ability to perform the same tasks, work under the same conditions, and demonstrate the same amount of endurance and strength as them, but it also gained her the power to command others. For example,

durante las jornadas se entregaba a una actividad febril, a horcajadas sobre el caballo, amazona repugnante de pantalones hombrunos hasta los tobillos, bajo la
falda recogida al arzón, lazo en mano, detrás del ganado altamireño que paciese por sus sabanas, insultando a los peones por el menor descuido y destrozándole los ijares a la bestia con las espuelas. (167)

during the day she gave herself up to a feverish activity, astride a horse, a repellent Amazon with her man’s trousers, down to her ankles, under the skirt thrown over the saddle-bow, lasso in hand behind the Altamira herds grazing within her lands— insulting the peons for the least slip, and cutting up the horse’s flanks with her spurs. (192)

Even though the villain does not seek to replace masculinity, she does defy gender norms by manifesting androgynous qualities that remove her from the traditionally submissive sphere of femininity. Stephen Henighan further states that doña Bárbara

upsets Spanish American gender norms not merely because she is a woman, but because she is a woman who has appropriated male modes of domination in both the public and private spheres. She seizes land that belongs to others just as she dominates and then discards the men who become her lovers. (30)

While the author seems to vilify her for occupying the masculine sphere, her insubordination of gender norms promotes gender equality by demonstrating feminine strength, fearlessness, power, and endurance. In addition to rejecting domesticity by adopting a masculine role, doña Bárbara also denies motherhood by disowning her own daughter. The narrator states, for example, that

ni aun la maternidad aplacó el rencor de la devoradora de hombres: por el contrario, se lo exasperó más: un hijo en sus entrañas era para ella una victoria del macho, una nueva violencia sufrida, y bajo el imperio de este sentimiento concibió y dio a luz una niña, que otros pechos tuvieron que amamantar, porque no quiso ni verla siquiera. (40-1)

not even motherhood could quench the ogress’ hatred. On the contrary, it deepened that hatred. A child in her womb was to her another victory for the male, a new injury undergone. And under the influence of this feeling she
conceived and bore a girl child, who was perforce suckled at another breast, for her mother would not so much as look at her. (37-8)

She lacks maternal feelings for her daughter, and she completely refuses to acknowledge her existence, reducing her to the status of an unborn or aborted child. Lorenzo Barquero tells Marisela that “en la partida de registro civil no [aparece] como hija suya. Ella no quiso que la mencionaran” (274), ([she doesn’t] appear as her daughter in the Civil Register. She didn’t want to be mentioned’ (329)). The absence of doña Bárbara’s name in the official records of Marisela’s birth is not only her legal disassociation from her, but it is also the confirmation of her masculinity insofar that she completely breaks away from her gender by denying having ever given birth. The only sentiment that she shows for her daughter is jealousy, which arises out of Bárbara’s masculine territoriality. Doña Bárbara’s jealousy of her daughter further implies that Marisela is the only one who possess the potential of overriding her, and she is the only character for whom doña Bárbara expresses any fear. After Juan Primito tells her that Marisela has

¡ojotes tan requetelindos! Más bonitos que los de [ella] … Bien vestida que la tiene el dotol … ¡Sabroso que debe ser para un hombre … tener a la vera suya una mujer tan bonita como está esa muchacha!… las palabras de Juan Primito hicieron saltar de pronto impetuosos celos de mujer. (173)

such beautiful eyes! Prettier than [hers] ... The Doctor certainly keeps her well dressed ... It ought to be nice for a man … to have a girl as pretty as that one at his side! ... Juan Primito’s words brought out a sudden impetuous womanly jealousy. (199)

Her daughter becomes her own enemy, for Marisela threatens to dispossess her of her power and possessions and steal Luzardo’s love away. There is, thus, a rivalry born out of their mother-daughter relationship, neither of whom would show affect for the other. In fact, their only encounter is one of violence. After Marisela learns that doña Bárbara was going to perform a witchcraft ritual to gain Luzardo’s love, she tries to stop her from doing it, which leads to a violent confrontation between mother and daughter. The narrator recounts that the
la primera vez que se [encontraron] frente a frente madre e hija … [Marisela exclamó] ¡Bruja! … Enfurecida, rugiente, doña Bárbara se le arrojó encima, le sujetó los brazos y trató de arrebatarle la cuerda. La muchacha se defendió, debatiéndose bajo la presión de aquellas manos hombrunas que ya le desgarraban la blusa, desnudándole el pecho virginal, para apoderarse de la cuerda que había ocultado en el regazo. (254-55)

It was the first time mother and daughter had met face to face … [Marisela exclaimed] “Witch!” … Doña Barbara, infuriated, seized the girl and tried to take the cord away from her. Marisela resisted, struggling in the grasp of the powerful, man-like hands that were tearing her blouse, baring her virginal breast. (300-01)

It is only when she attempts to kill her own daughter that doña Bárbara recognizes herself and her familial relation to Marisela. For example, after doña Bárbara finds out that Luzardo plans on marrying her daughter, the villain heads to Altamira, Luzardo’s ranch, and

[Viendo] a Luzardo sentado a la mesa con Marisela … Doña Bárbara avanzó hasta el alcance de un tiro de revólver … Despacio y con fruición asesina, sacó el arma cañonera de la montura y apuntó el pecho de la hija … el arma bajó sin haber disparado … doña Bárbara se había visto de pronto a sí misma … pendiente de las palabras de Asdrúbal … tomó cuerpo en una emoción maternal. (353)

[Seeing] Luzardo seated at the table with Marisela … Doña Barbara rode up within revolver range … Slowly, and with a murderous pleasure, she took the weapon out of the saddle holster and pointed it at the breast of the girl … the revolver descended without a shot … Doña Bárbara had seen herself … listening … to Hasdrubal’s words … a maternal sentiment [took form]. (432-33)

This moment of absolute motherly denial and cannibalistic detachment from the other, who is also kin, is the moment where doña Bárbara is finally able to connect with Marisela, seeing in her not only a daughter but also a recognition of herself, a woman who had also been deeply in love. After this moment of self-recognition and maternal
recognition, the villain is finally able to acknowledge her daughter through a letter that states, “no tengo mas heredera sino mi hija Marisela, y así la reconozco por ésta, ante Dios y los hombres” (356), (‘I have no other heir but my daughter Marisela, and I hereby recognize her as such before God and men’ (437)). This is doña Bárbara’s only genuine moment of giving, and it is, in fact, one of self-sacrifice, which allows her to partly redeem herself. Moreover, it is the moment in which the barbaric and transgressive model of femininity surrenders to and is replaced by the submissive and civilized model of womahood represented by Marisela. Although at the end, doña Bárbara acknowledges Marisela as daughter, doña Bárbara, nevertheless, represents a refusal of motherly and domestic values.

Indira Gandhi also rejects motherhood. While she claims to be “the Mother of India,” promising to undertake the role of a mother, who looks after India as a mother would do so after a child, in reality, Gandhi disregards her motherly role by attacking the first-born generation of India, her own children. In fact, the very first description of Gandhi, otherwise known as “the Widow,” is one of a witch who maims children, (“now one by one the children green their blood is black unloosed by cutting fingernails it splashes black on walls (of green) as one by one the curling hand lifts children high…And children torn into little balls” (238)). Rather than being overtaken by a nurturing, caring, protecting instinct of a mother, the “Widow” is possessed by a violent impulse to haunt children like preys and tear them apart. The suggested images of rape, mutilation, and death of children, in turn, posit the “Widow” as the archetypal “terrible mother.” Carl Jung states that the mother archetype possesses qualities associated with … maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility … On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable. (16)
In other words, the archetypal figure of the mother is charged with both creative and destructive potential. Similarly, Gandhi appears to be on the one side the life-giving, nurturing mother of India, while on the other, she is the “terrible mother,” “the annihilating side of the maternal principle” (Birkhäuser-Oeri 26). Her portrayal evokes the dark mother figures [in fairy tales who] … appear particularly to have a great appetite for human flesh … Being mistresses of the art of magic, they can also hunt or kill people … They kill their victims with knives, tear them to pieces or drown them, and so on. (Birkhäuser-Oeri 27-8)

Like the terrible mother in fairy tales, Gandhi exerts her destructive force upon the first-born children of the nation by ordering their pursuit, incarceration, and sterilization. After capturing, Saleem, for he “held the key to the location of every single one of the children of midnight” (496-97), he, along with the rest of the midnight’s children, were imprisoned and tortured. The narrator notes that,

[he] was locked away in a tiny upper room … under the influence of the unnameable – forgotten – pressures, [he] became loquacious … [and the children of midnight] were brought to the Widow’s Hostel … A cucumber-nosed prisoner, festooned with iron rods and rings which made various natural functions impossible … who-has-the-gift-of-levitation had been tied by the ankles to rings set in the floor, and a werewolf is obliged to wear a muzzle; who-can-escape-through mirrors must drink water through a hole in a lidded can, so that he cannot vanish through the reflective surface of the drink. (498-99, 500-01)

Their imprisonment is not only a demonstration of empowerment, but also a symbolic return to the womb, whereby a reverse birth would take place, culminating in the moment of the children’s undoing. Similar to doña Bárbara’s impetus to destroy her own child, Gandhi is also driven to destroy the nation’s children. In ordering their sterilization, Gandhi, in fact, strips them not only of the possibility of progeny, but also of their identities as magical midnight’s children.
One-by-one, to the chamber in the cellar … ectomies were performed, but irreversibly: testicles were removed from sacs, and wombs vanished forever. Testicu- and hysterectomized, the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves … the awakening from anesthesia was cruel indeed, and whispering through the wall came the tale of their undoing, the tormented cry of children who had lost their magic: she had cut it out of us … and now we were nothing. (504-05)

Ultimately, Indira becomes the “terrible mother” of India, who maims and destroys her own people. Like the femme fatale, both doña Bábara and Indira Gandhi defy gender norms by rejecting maternity and domesticity. Doña Bábara adopts the lifestyle of a Venezuelan plainsman, rejecting domestic roles, including that of motherhood. Indira Gandhi, on the other hand, claims to be a motherly figure for India, while simultaneously harming her own people.

1.4 The Threatening but Unknowable Woman

Doña Bábara and Indira Gandhi are introduced into the narrative as threatening but unknowable villains. Doña Bábara remains unknown and thereby dangerous, for her identity constantly slips away from the characters’ and readers’ grasp. On the other hand, while Indira Gandhi is intended to be read as a reimagining of the historical figure, she is initially introduced into the story as “the Widow,” a perceptibly dangerous but unknowable woman who haunts the protagonist. Since the beginning, doña Bábara appears to us as a Latin American myth, whose identity is composed of empty spaces to be filled up by the people’s imagination and fears. For example, even before Luzardo arrives to La Arauca and meets doña Bábara, he has already formulated an idea about her based on the circulating rumors about her. For example, upon his arrival, he asks, “¿conoce usted a esa famosa doña Bábara de quien tantas cosas se cuentan en Apure? ... Dice n que es una mujer terrible, capitana de una pandilla de bandoleros, encargados de asesinar a mansalva, a cuantos intenten oponerse a sus designios” (15), (‘Do you know this Doña Barbara of whom there are so many tales told in the Apure country? ... They say she’s a desperate woman, and leader of a troop of bandits she orders to assassinate anyone who shows any signs of opposing her’ (5-6)). This, in turn, suggests that her
identity is mostly constructed by the people of the plains primarily based on her villainy, a provisional and incomplete rendering of the villain. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator reveals that she was “casi un personaje de leyenda que excitaba la imaginación de la ciudad (345), (‘almost as a legendary figure that she excited the city’s imagination’ (421-22)), revealing, thus, that doña Bárbara was really an imagined villain.

Moreover, her intentions, plans, thoughts, and feelings are oftentimes impenetrable to others. Her silence and privacy function as walls that isolate her but also as a means of frustrating and negating communication, which thereby positions her outside of community. For example, after mocking Balbino Paiba, one of her lovers, for failing to defy Luzardo’s will,

the smile disappeared from her face, but she maintained her disconcerting silence. Balbino’s expression now changed to one of discomfiture, and he said to himself: “I don’t like the looks of this a bit.” In fact, the woman’s superiority, her domination over others, and the awe she inspired seemed to spring from that very ability to observe and say nothing. It was useless to attempt to wring a secret from her. No one knew a single detail of her plans, nor anything of her attitude towards a person. Her favour gave such a one everything, including the eternal uncertainty of really possessing her, but when the favourite approached her, he never knew what he would find. (102-03)
Her self-alienation and deliberate inaccessibility to others, renders her mysterious, elusive, and dangerous. Her power derives from her ability to remain seen but unknown. Even her own close subjects and lovers are unable to access her evil plans. For example, Balbino says, “con esta mujer no hay brújula. Hasta el caballo, que es bestia, se le descubre lo que está pensando, sólo con mirarlo cuál de las orejas amuga; pero con esta mujer siempre está uno bailado en un tusero” (310), (‘there’s no spying into this woman’s mind …You can discover what even a horse is thinking, beast that he is, just by looking to see which of his ears he lays down, but with this woman, you’re always dancing on a tightrope’ (376)). Even when she does articulate her plans, her thoughts and intentions remain unknown. That is, we are always left with a sense of concealed duplicity and a sense of dread. Despite the readers’ and the characters’ attempts to understand her, she remains undefinable. Peter Brooks postualtes that meaning does not consist in any single link of the chain … The analyst … hears in the analysand’s language the pressure toward meaning, which is never pinned down or captured since there is a perpetual sliding or slippage of the signified from under the signifier. (56)

Similarly, doña Bárbara’s identity is not constructed in a cumulative way, but rather it is sporadically captured by the narrator or the characters, and then it slips away again. Doña Bárbara is like, the femme fatale, a threatening but unknowable villain, whose identity is born out of the imagination and fears of the people of La Arauca.

Rushdie’s villain is also introduced into the narrative as an evanescent but menacing figure. Although the antagonist is later identified as Indira Gandhi, a character charged with historical meaning, the narrator presents us with an apparently unknown villain, referred to as “the Widow,” for most of the narrative. While an audience familiar with the modern history of India may be able to deduce the identity of the Widow, given the fact that Indira Gandhi was herself a widow during her time as Prime Minister of India, “a threatening, mysterious aura is [nonetheless] gradually constructed around the figure” (Weickgennant 78) of the Widow. Nancy E. Batty further posits that “the mystery of the Widow’s identity is … the most carefully guarded secret of Saleem’s narrative. From her
introduction ... until the revelation of her identity ... the Widow’s looming presence overshadows Saleem’s fate. Saleem’s refusal to disclose her identity ... is the most sustained and substantial instance of deferment of disclosure in the novel” (78 – 9).
Throughout the novel, both the narrator and the text seem, indeed, to be haunted by the Widow. For example, he first introduces her into the narrative when he says,

> When after some months of inner torment, I at least sought refuge from grown-up voices, I found it in an old clocktower, which nobody bothered to lock; and here, in the solitude of rusting time, I paradoxically took my first tentative steps towards that involvement with mighty events and public lives from which I would never again be free ... never, until the Widow. (197)

The delayed identification of the villain seems to add an element of suspense on the one hand, and on the other, it predisposes the readers to develop a feeling of aversion towards the villain. Hayden White states that the structure of a historical narrative “tells us in what direction to think about the events [and characters] and charges our thought about the events [and characters] with different emotional valences” (91). Though Rushdie’s work is fictional, Saleem tells us how to perceive and feel about the villain, whose referent is a historical figure, by portraying her as a perceptibly dangerous figure. In other words, since early on, the unknown villain is made to evoke dislike and danger. Despite her unknown identity, her sinister presence becomes more and more evident in the text. Although Saleem intentionally leaves the Widow “for the end” (220) of the narrative, her presence looms not only in Saleem’s thoughts, but also on the text since the beginning of the narrative. For example, in one of his reflections about the impact of Evie Burns, one of his childhood loves, in his life, he mentions the Widow again when he says, “if Evie had not come to live amongst us, my story might never have progressed beyond tourism-in-a-clocktower and cheating in class ... and then there would have been no climax in a Widow’s Hostel” (207). Although his narrative builds towards the moment of his encounter with Gandhi and the ensuing moment of his castration in a linear manner, Saleem seems to be constantly jumping to it, unable to separate himself from it. Not only does he appear to be haunted by the trauma of it, but his narrative seems to be driven forward by the yet-to-occur encounter with the daunting Widow. As the narrative
progresses, the intangible villain becomes increasingly more present. For example, Saleem notes that “children are the vessels into which adults pour their poison, and it was the poison of grow-ups which did for us. Poison, and after a gap of many years, a Widow with a knife” (293). The references to the Widow increase as the narrative proceeds, and they become frequently accompanied by threatening words such as “undoing” and “knife,” thereby making her presence in the text both persistent and more sinister. Moreover, while the narrator suggests that the Widow had a negative impact on his life throughout the book, their antagonism becomes increasingly clearer as the novel nears its end. For instance, he states, “as I recall my rage, I remain perfectly calm; the Widow drained anger out of me along with everything else … In the Widow’s Hostel, I was taught harshly, once-and-for-all, the lesson of No Escape” (440). He finally reveals the identity of the Widow as Indira Gandhi when he says,

Mrs. Indira Gandhi was born in November 1917 to Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru … M.K. Gandhi, her surname was the legacy of her marriage, in 1952, to one Feroze Gandhi, who became known as “the nation’s-son-in-law” … Mr. Feroze died of a heart seizure in 1960 … I have included this somewhat elementary summary just in case you have failed to realize that the Prime Minister of India was, in 1975, fifteen years a widow. Or (because the capital letter may be of use): a Widow.

Yes, Padma: Mother Indira really had it in for me. (483-84)

The identification of the Widow as Gandhi, in turn, endows the character with historical meaning; nevertheless, the character is presented to us as an impenetrable but intimidating character whose presence in the text is inescapable. Much of Gandhi’s characterization as a malevolent woman arises from the traceable negative effects that she has upon other characters and upon India itself. For example, Saleem’s trauma, which resulted from Indira’s cruel sterilization program, becomes a testimony to Indira’s villainy. In other words, we become aware of her evilness through the consequences of her actions. Unlike doña Bárbara whose evilness is explicitly alluded to since the beginning of the novel both by the narrator and the characters, Gandhi’s evilness is only
hinted at for most part of the novel. Both villains are, hence, presented to us as menacing figures, frustrating the readers’ and the characters’ attempts to understand them.

1.5 Castration

Both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi endanger men and masculinity. Indira Gandhi divests men of their masculinity by ordering their castration. Like the femme fatale who seduces men to defy the patriarchal system in order to possess her, losing his manhood in submitting himself to her (Maxfield 11), doña Bárbara strips men of their masculinity by luring them into giving up their manhood in order to possess her. Moreover, she further emasculates her victims by undertaking the role of the conqueror and subjecting her lover to the role of the conquered. If “era hombruno tomar [y] … femenino entregarse” (46), (‘[it is] a man who takes … [and] a woman who gives’ (43)), in submitting to her, her lovers, thus, were divested of their manliness and inverts traditional gender roles. Rather than “stand[ing] as [an] … object … [who] is ‘taken’, ‘procured', 'given', or 'received', and … above all [treated as] a sexual object” (Ljung 27), like in traditional text, doña Bárbara becomes an acting subject, conquering men at her will. In ensnaring men to relinquish their masculinity to possess her, doña Bárbara metaphorically castrates them.

Whereas the villain de-masculinizes men by making them her enslaved lovers, Gandhi, too, threatens men and masculinity by having their “testicles … removed from sacs” (504), depriving them of their reproductive capabilities and manliness. In fact, we see the protagonist-narrator, himself, a victim of the sterilization campaign, grappling with his infertility, sexual impotence, and loss of masculinity throughout the narrative. Through his use of metalipsis, “one of the many versions of metonymy, which calls forth an event either through its causes or its consequences” (Ganteau 199), the encounter with the Widow and his ensuing castration are constantly brought to bear. For example, even before Saleem begins his narration of the history of the new-born India, he says,

And Padma is a generous woman, because she stays by me in these last days, although I can’t do much for her. That’s right – and once again, it’s a fitting thing to mention before I launch into the tale of Nadir Khan – I am unmanned. Despite Padma’s many and varied gifts and ministrations, I can’t leak into her, not even
when she puts her left foot on my right, winds her right leg around my waist, inclines her head up toward mine and makes cooing noises; not even when she whispers into my ear, “So now that the writery is done, let’s see if we can make your other pencil work!”; despite everything she tries, I cannot hit her spittoon. (38)

In other words, Saleem expresses his lack of masculinity by referring to his sexual impotence, which is a matter that he returns to over and over again and which increasingly comes to occupy the forefront of the novel. Although the connection between Gandhi and Saleem’s sterility is not made clear until the end of the novel, Saleem’s constant struggle with his masculinity emerges as an effect of the villain’s sterilization campaign. As a result of his castration, Saleem is made to experience the “pain of ‘castration’ [which manifests as a] loss of virility, loss of self-confidence, [and] a loss of a felt sense of masculine potency” (Steinberg 36). Not only is he constantly confronted with his own masculinity but also with his inability to maintain a romantic relationship since. For example, he establishes a connection between Padma’s perceived anger and his sexual dysfunction when he says,

Is it possible to be jealous of written words? To resent nocturnal scribblings as though they were the very flesh and blood of a sexual rival? I can think of no other reason for Padma’s bizarre behavior … Distressed, perhaps, by the futility of her midnight attempts at resuscitating my “other pencil,” the useless cucumber hidden in my pants, she has been waxing grouchy. (137)

María Martínez-Alfaro posits that “traumas re-emerge in different guises as uncanny repetitions of a past that remains present” (183). Likewise, his castration trauma is constantly reformulated, appearing under the guise of disability, sterility, unmanliness, and romantic failure. The constant intrusion of the present, of his present sterile condition and of Padma’s attempts to awaken his sexual desires, point to a psychologically-broken Saleem. For example, he says,

I repeat: I don’t blame Padma. At the feet of the Western Ghats, she searched for the herbs of virility, *mucuna puritus* and the roots *feronia elephantum*; who knows
what she found? Who knows what that state of “churning” from which, as all students of Hindu cosmology will know, Indra created matter, by stirring the primal soup in his own great milk-churn? Never mind. It was a noble attempt: but I am beyond regeneration – the Widow has done for me. Not even the real mucuna could have put an end to my incapacity; Feronia would never have endangered in me the “lusty force of beasts.” (222)

In acknowledging the loss of his masculinity, he identifies himself as a “disabled” person. Todd Reeser argues that men “experience masculinity in relation to [their] own bod[ies] … [and] in relation to other bodies … as difference, as similarity, or as a movement between sameness and difference” (100). Similarly, Saleem’s reduced experience of masculinity results from the perceived difference between his pre-sterilized body and his current amputated body, whereby the severing of the testes is experienced as a removal of male power. Neil Kortenaar further describes this moment as the traumatizing moment when Saleem and “his peers, male and female alike, are reduced to a woman” (138). Like the femme fatale, who not only threatens men’s lives, but also their psychological well-being (Maxfield 9-10), Indira Gandhi brings about Saleem’s psychological breakdown by castrating him. Even though he writes his narrative many years later, both the narrator and the text seem to be haunted by Indira’s character.

Indeed, his narrative seems to be driven forward by the yet-to-occur encounter with the Widow. He, thus, “rehearses tragedy, i.e. repeats it looking both backwards and forwards to the next occurrence of the repetition, adopting the movement of the gryre or spiral, as if trauma were beyond itself” (Ganteau 200). For example, in the middle of his narration about his stay with Pia and Hanif Aziz, he adds a side-note where he says, “I have had more mothers than most mothers have children; giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents, a form of reverse fertility beyond the control of contraception, and even of the Widow herself” (278). His side-notes or interruptions seem to be a way of coping with his infertility and his attempts to compensate for it. They are also unarticulated returns to the moment in which the Widow orders his castration. Moreover, in looking back at his life, Saleem no longer perceives himself as an agent, but as someone whose life has been constantly determined by others, especially by the Widow.
For instance, he says, “From Ayah to Widow, I’ve been the sort of person to whom things have been done; but Saleem Sinai, perennial victim, persists in seeing himself as protagonist” (272). Saleem sees himself in an increasingly more negative and debasing way. Although he claims that it was a “series of women who bewitched [him] and finally [undid him] good and proper” (276), he admits that “above all, the Widow” (466) was by far his worst enemy. He marks his encounter with the Widow as the moment of his final undoing when he says, “that unavoidable Widow, who added to my history of drainage-above the final ignominy of voiding-below” (198). For Saleem, the moment of the drainage is more than just the moment in which he lost his manhood; it is the moment in which, like the rest of the midnight’s children, he is forever stripped of his identity. The moment of his castration is the moment in which “the Widow drained [him] of past present future” (462) and ultimately of his identity too. His sterilization displaced him from being a midnight’s child, born at the same time as India, as a promise and reflection of the nation-to-be. His past, present, and future became tied to the indelible moment of his castration, leading to a reconfiguration in his relation to time and history, whereby trauma “spread in all directions and [became] both ubiquitous and a-temporal (Ganteau 200). Additionally, it led to his rebirth as a rather pessimistic, de-masculinized, and broken Saleem.

In conclusion, both Rómulo Gallegos’ doña Bárbara and Salman Rushdie’s Indira Gandhi manifest some of the defining characteristics of the femme fatale, such as seduction, rejection of motherhood and domesticity, witchcraft, and castration, while at the same type refuse to conform to the formula. Both villains behave both like the femme fatale but also appear to be an “other” that insists on emphasizing difference and originality. They “[move] about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming “I am like you” while persisting in her difference, and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at” (Trinh 74). Indeed, whereas doña Bárbara appears to be a combination of the femme fatale and an embodiment of the rough ‘vaquero’ of the Venezuelan plains, Indira Gandhi is, likewise, a combination of the femme fatale and the historical political figure. In fact, beyond representing female evil, they further affirm their “difference” from the femme fatale by being representations of their deficient nations.
Chapter 2

2 Perverse Images of Nationhood

Both Rómulo Gallegos and Salman Rushdie use their female villains as means through which they denounce their nations. The characters seem to have been premeditated and purposefully created by the authors to expose national deficiencies. Firstly, the names of the female villains already invoke a certain reading of the character. Gallegos names his villain as “Bárbara,” which is meant to signify “barbarism,” and Rushdie’s villain is called “Indira Gandhi,” an explicit reference to the historical figure, Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984. Secondly, both characters are associated with an image that further confirms their designated identity. In the case of doña Bárbara, the author portrays doña Bárbara as an embodiment of the Venezuelan llano, whereby the qualities of the landscape are transferred unto the character. In the case of Indira Gandhi, the author portrays the character as a caricaturized version of the historical figure, further confirming the character’s association to its historical referent and the authorial intention of ridiculing the politician. Lastly, doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are portrayed as perverse images of their nations by representing national deficiencies. While doña Bárbara symbolizes the barbaric, underdeveloped llano of Venezuela, Indira Gandhi’s narrative is the re-imagination of the rotten foundation of India, at the hands of the historical Indira Gandhi. Indeed, Doña Bárbara’s and Gandhi’s evilness is manifested both in their re-enactment of archetypal feminine evil and in the parasitic role they undertake within their nations.

2.1 Pre-readings: Naming the Villain

In both Doña Bárbara and Midnight’s Children, the names of the villains call forth a particular interpretation of the character. Both names carry with them a certain intentionality. The name of Gallegos’ villain, “Bárbara” which signifies “barbarism,” suggests that the author intends to criticize the barbarism inherent in Venezuela through the character, while Rushdie’s naming of the antagonist as “Indira Gandhi,” the actual name of the historical Prime Minister of India, seems to call for a reading of the character as a translation of the historical referent.
By naming the antagonist, “Bárbara,” the author endows the character with allegoric meaning. In other words, she is meant to be read not solely as a character, but as a representation of barbarism, particularly in Venezuela. Her name molds the character and dictates the way she should be read. Paul Ricoeur states that “in an allegory what is primarily signified – that is to say, the literal meaning contingent, and what is signified secondarily, the symbolic meaning itself, is external enough to be accessible. Hence, there is a relation of translation between the two meanings” (16). In other words, her name is meant to be translated, not as the character’s proper name, but as barbarism, which, in turn, invokes a metaphorical reading of the character. Carlos Alonso points out that “the text has, in a sense, incorporated into itself its own reading, so that the reader is faced with what could be described as corroboration rather than interpretation” (421). The first time the character is introduced, she is immediately associated to barbaric actions\(^5\), corroborating the symbolic significance of her name. Rather than solely acting as an identifier for the character, the name is performative. J.L. Austin postulates that “if a person makes [a performative] utterance … we should say that he is doing something rather than merely saying something” (1290). Similarly, the character’s name “Bárbara,” more than identifying the character or describing who she is, is “doing the act of warning” (Austin 1295) for both the characters and the readers. For instance, upon his arrival, Luzardo is told, “tenga mucho cuidado con doña Bárbara” (17), (‘be very careful of doña Bárbara’ (9)). In a literal sense, the characters come to fear her and use her name as a warning against her; in a symbolic sense, her name acts as a warning against barbarism. In other words, the name comes to precede the character. Moreover, at the beginning of the novel, whenever her name is mentioned, it is the symbolic meaning that is called forth over the character herself. For instance, the narrator says, “luchar contra doña Bárbara, creatura y personificación de los tiempos que corrían, no sería solamente

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\(^5\) For example, Luzardo says, “¿conoce usted a esa famosa doña Bárbara de quien tantas cosas se cuentan en Apure? ... Dicen que es una mujer terrible, capitana de una pandilla de bandoleros, encargados de asesinar a mansalva a cuantos intenten oponerse a sus designios” (Gallegos 13).

'Do you know this Doña Barbara of whom there are so many tales told in the Apure country? ... They say she’s a desperate woman, and leader of a troop of bandits she orders to assassinate anyone who shows any signs of opposing her' (5-6)
salvar Altamira, sino contribuir a la destrucción y fuerzas retardatarias de la prosperidad del Llano” (32), (‘to struggle against Doña Barbara, symbol of the times, was not only to free Altamira, but to destroy the forces which were holding back the Plain’ (27)). Even before we are introduced to the character herself, the readers are faced with a name which aims to point to a larger evil, the barbarism and underdevelopment of Venezuela. In other words, the character is “written out of the story of the creation of civilization, permanently marginalized as the potential corruptor of man, of citizens (all male), and of state order” (Henighan 1-2). Additionally, the sporadic use of the word, “bárbara,” to describe the llano invites a reading of the character’s name in the same sense. Although the descriptor is not directly applied to the character, it indirectly supplies the proper name with symbolic meaning. The adjective comes to function as a reminder of the proper name’s symbolic meaning. While the noun “barbarie” and the adjective “bárbaro(a)” are oftentimes meant to describe the plains or related aspects of it, the constant repetitions of the noun and adjective throughout the novel not only create a parallel between the plains and the character, but the proper name is endowed with its symbolic meaning by acting as another derivative of the word “barbarie,” which further endows the character with allegorical signification.

As opposed to doña Bárbara, whose name invokes a certain reading of the character even before the character is formally introduced, the identification of the villain as Indira Gandhi is only revealed towards the end of the text, causing the reader to re-read and reconstruct the character based on the newly-acquired information. Throughout the narrative, we are faced with two seemingly distinct villains, “the Widow,” whom the narrator identifies as his personal enemy, and Indira Gandhi, whom he criticizes for her poor management of India. Derek Alspop and Chris Walsh state that when reading a novel, “we are always looking back or looking forward, and each new piece of information we are given will force us to revise our expectations and ‘rewrite’ our memories” (59).

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6 For example, the narrator states, “la vida de la ciudad y los hábitos intelectuales habían barrido de su espíritu las tendencias hacia la vida libre y bárbara del hato” (29). In the English version, the word ‘bárbara’ is translated as ‘savage’. ‘Urban life and intellectual habits had barred from his spirit all urge toward the free and savage life of the ranch’ (23).
Similarly, the knowledge that the villain known as “the Widow” is actually Indira Gandhi provokes a second re-reading of the character, whereby the reader is prompted to rectify his or her understanding of “the Widow” as a re-imagination of the historical character. Although the narrator mentions Indira Gandhi’s name throughout the text, often postulating her as a secondary antagonist, her participation in the first two parts of the novel is rather marginal. Nancy E. Batty states that “Indira Gandhi is mentioned as a character in the novel … more than once before her identity is linked to that of the Widow, but Gandhi is elsewhere referred to as “The Madam” … and this would seem to indicate that Saleem is consciously prolonging his ultimate and explicit disclosure” (79). In other words, the narrator purposefully leads the readers to interpret the Widow and Indira Gandhi as two distinct characters. In the first part of the narrative, the villain’s name (Indira Gandhi) appears to function more as a historical marker than as a direct antagonist to the protagonist. Because the novel is itself composed of two narratives that intertwine with each other, namely that of Saleem’s autobiographical narrative and an underlying narrative, and “that pre-text is national history” (Kortenaar 31), Indira Gandhi’s appearance in the text is unavoidable, given her major role in the management of the newly-independent India. His autobiography becomes also the biography of India, including that of its major historical players.

when I returned to India, concealed in a wicker basket, “The Madam” was basking in the fullness of her glory … On December 16th, 1971, I tumbled out of a basket into an India in which Mrs. Gandhi’s New Congress Party held a more-than-two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. (444)

Despite previous mentions of Indira Gandhi, Saleem only identifies “the Widow” as Indira Gandhi near the end of the narrative (483-84). Indira Gandhi’s name, rather than acting solely as a contextual marker, takes on historical and national resonance. In other words, she moves from being a villain in the private sphere to being a villain in a public and national sphere. Neil Kortenaar states that “the expansion of the self to the scale of the nation implies not just the centrality of the self but also the personalization of the nation-state” (131). Similarly, the expansion of the villain from a private figure to a national public figure leads to the personalization of the nation-state as an evil villain as
well. The revelation of her name demands a backward re-reading of the character, whereby the reader must substitute “the Widow” for Indira Gandhi, in turn, endowing the previously unknown character with a historical and political status. In other words, the knowledge of the character’s identity offers a new reading of the character, one born out of “the confrontation between, on the one hand, our previous knowledge [of] and … expectations [of the historical figure] … and on the other, the realization of the character in the narrative” (Bal 121). At the same time, the reader is asked to interpret the villain as an image of the historical referent from then on. In fact, Rushdie seems to base the villain’s character upon the historical figure. Like Bárbara’s name, Indira Gandhi’s name is also corroborated by being accompanied by the historical Gandhi’s biographical information. For example, the narrator states that,

Mrs. Indira Gandhi was born in November 1917 to Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru … M.K. Gandhi, her surname was the legacy of her marriage, in 1952, to one Feroze Gandhi, who became known as “the nation’s-son-in-law.” They had two sons, Rajiv and Sanjay, but in 1949 she moved back into her father’s home and became his “official hostess.” (484)

Drawing from an interview with Salman Rushdie, Katherine Frank suggests that Rushdie’s deliberate choice to base his villain on Indira Gandhi was to expose the abuses of her government, especially those of the Emergency period (252). The Emergency of India was proclaimed on June 26, 1975 by Indira Gandhi as a means of furthering her political reign, having being asked to resign due to corrupt electoral practices. Under the Emergency of India “all civil liberties … were suspended; rigorous press censorship was brought into force; opposition political parties were banned; tens of thousands of Ms. Gandhi’s opponents were unceremoniously thrown into jail … In July, Parliament was convened to enact a constitutional amendment exonerating Mrs. Gandhi retrospectively from any charges of electoral malpractice.” (Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf 255). During this time, his son, Sanjay Gandhi, was also appointed to conduct a mass sterilization and slum clearance campaign meant to to beautify the country and control population growth. In his study of villainy, Nigel Balchin posits that readers are taught to “[confuse the villain’s name] with the evil of which he [or she] is accussed” (236).
Similarly, the Emergency of India becomes inextricably linked to Indira Gandhi’s name, so much so that we are unable to forget their association. Furthermore, like doña Bárbara’s name, it also acts as a value judgement. In fact, her name carries with it a negative connotation. Even before the narrator identifies “the Widow,” the narrator already reacts negatively towards Indira Gandhi, constantly critiquing her government, for example, when he says that during the Emergency,

all over India policemen were arresting people, all opposition leaders except members of the pro-Moscow Communists, and also schoolteachers lawyers poets newspapermen trade-unionists, in fact anyone who had ever made the mistake of sneezing during the Madame’s speeches … [Like her] white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency, too, had a white part—public, visible, documented, a matter for historians—and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us. (481, 83)

Although Indira Gandhi’s name remains in the background of the narrative for two thirds of the novel, in naming the antagonist as Indira Gandhi, the villain is no longer judged on her personal attacks against Saleem, but rather on the national implications of her actions. Saleem is, in fact, revealed to be one of the many victims of her sterilization campaign, one of the many perverse projects she initiates during her government. Furthermore, she becomes increasingly characterized as a tyrant, associated with the rotten foundation of India, thereby converting her name into a national threat. Ultimately, the names of the villains function as molds that invoke pre-set readings of the characters.

2.2 Characterizing the Villain: Molding the Symbol

In addition, both villains are further associated with an image that reinforces their pre-determined identities. Mieke Bal states that “repetition is … an important principle of the construction of the image of a character … [as well as] the piling up of data … the accumulation of characteristics causes odd facts to coalesce, complement each other, and then form a whole: the image of a character” (125). Doña Bárbara’s image as an incarnation of the Venezuelan plains is, indeed, consolidated through a continuous transfer of qualities from the landscape unto the character. Not only does the narrator represent
doña Bárbara as possessing the physical appearance of the Venezuelan llano, but also as possessing the defining traits of the landscape. On the other hand, Indira Gandhi is depicted as a caricaturized version of the historical figure. The narrator hyperbolizes her parti-colored hair, which consists of black hair on one side and white hair on the other, an image that the narrator then uses to portray the nation as well.

Throughout the novel, the narrator describes doña Bárbara as the vivid image of the Venezuelan plains, possessing traits ascribable to the wild landscape. Her physical appearance, much like the wilderness, is both alluring and demonic. John Cooley states that the “primitive character … is seen as evil, as a source of terror, violation, and death, because nature itself is [perceived as] evil” (19). Similarly, doña Bárbara in being characterized as the landscape is also perceived as a source of terror and evil. For example, the narrator states that “su hermosura … [tenía] algo de salvaje, bello y terrible a la vez” (46), (‘her beauty … [was] at once wild, beautiful, and terrible’ (43)), and her voice was like “[un] grave rumor de selva y agudo lamento de llanura, tenía un matiz singular, hechizo de los hombres que la oían” (180), (‘a slow rustling of the forest, now like the harsh lament of the windswept plain, and had a peculiar timbre which was the enchantment of every man who heard her’ (207)). Moreover, she became consumed by “[una] mezcla de apetitos y odio” (45), (‘a wild mixture of lust and hatred’ (43)), and she partook in “un culto bárbaro que exigía sacrificios humanos: el recuerdo de Asdrúbal [su enmororado] la asaltaba siempre que se tropezaba en su camino con un hombre en quien valiera la pena hacer presa” (46), (‘a barbarous cult demanding human sacrifice. The memory of Hasdrubal [her beloved] always came to her when she encountered a man who was a worthy prey’ (43-4)). Additionally, she often acted based on the “provocación impulsive … golpe a salga lo que saliere, para ponerle término a una situación complicada” (329), (‘impulsive provocation, a hit-or-miss blow with any possible result, to put an end to a complicated situation’ (400)). Her physical appearance, unrestrained impulses, barbaric cult, and her “alma recia y brava como la llanura” (195), (soul, wild and uncouth as the Plain (224)) render her a personification of the plains.

Furthermore, like the wild, which is often perceived to be a “region where a person was likely to get disordered, confused, or ‘wild’” (Nash 2), both the plains and the villain
propitiated others to become mad. For instance, in describing the plains, the narrator states that “en ella caben, holgadamente: Hermosa vida y muerte atroz. Ésta acecha por todas partes ... El Llano asusta ... El Llano enloquece” (84), (‘it holds, side by side, beautiful life and hideous death. The latter lurks everywhere ... The Plain frightens ... The Plain crazes’ (88)). Likewise, doña Bárbara, also known as the “devoradora de hombres,” [‘the Ogress’] tempts, terrifies, and maddens men. For example, Lorenzo Barquero, doña Bárbara’s first victim, comes to perceive the plains as doña Bárbara and doña Bárbara as the plains when he says, “¡la llanura! ¡la maldita llanura, devoradora de hombres!” (110), (‘The Plain! The cursed Plain, the Ogress!’ (119)). The conflation between doña Bárbara and the plains reinforces the image of doña Bárbara as the incarnation of the landscape. Moreover, Luzardo himself suggests that more than being a victim to a woman’s seductive techniques, Barquera is a victim of the landscape, when he says, “realmente, más que a las seducciones de la famosa doña Bárbara, este infeliz ha sucumbido a la acción embrutecedora del desierto” (110), (‘I really believe this poor devil has fallen under the spell of the desert more than the wiles of Doña Barbara’ (119)). In other words, doña Bárbara more than merely representing feminine seduction, symbolizes the plains’ engulfing and brutalizing action, one which strips men from their rationality and either reduces them to its barbarous impulses or turns them into the abject. Luzardo, in fact, seems to treat her not as a threatening woman but as the perverse embodiment of the plains. For example, the narrator states that Luzardo, in looking at doña Bárbara,

había experimentado la curiosidad, meramente intelectual, de asomarse sobre el abismo de aquella alma, de sondear el enigma de aquella mezcla de lo agradable y lo atroz, interesante sin duda, como lo son todas las monstruosidades de la naturaleza; pero, en seguida lo asaltó un subitáneo sentimiento de repulsión por la compañía de aquella mujer. (180-81)

he had been curious in a purely intellectual way to see into the depths of her soul, to solve the riddle of that mixture of the pleasing and repulsive, interesting, beyond doubt, as are all monstrosities; but a sudden feeling of aversion for the woman immediately overcame him. (207)
Although he experiences both a certain attraction and repulsion for doña Bárbara, it is not for the woman herself but for what she represents, namely, the 'Venezuelan llano' (the Venezuelan plains) as a natural monstruosity. The narrator himself reinforces her symbolic representation when he states that “luchar contra doña Bárbara, criatura y personificación de los tiempos que corrían, no sería salvar Altamira, sino contribuir a la destrucción de las fuerzas retardarias del Llano” (32), (‘to struggle against Doña Bárbara, symbol of the times, was not only to free Altamira, but to destroy the forces which were holding back the Plain’ (27)). The characters’ perception of the villain as a representation of the plains and the narrator’s portrayal of the character constantly corroborate doña Bárbara’s image as a personification of the landscape and of its inherent barbarism.

Rushdie, on the other hand, confirms Indira Gandhi’s character as a re-imagination of the historical figure by depicting the villain as a caricature of the historical character. In fact, the historical figure is “[reduced] to the Widow – a grotesque green and black monster who emerges as the novel’s chief villains” (Howard Mezey 181). She possesses witch-like features and is portrayed as a “terrible mother,” who maims children. In addition to associating her to archetypal images of female evil, the narrator endows the villain with the historical Gandhi’s characteristic feature, namely, her parti-colored hair. For example, the narrator notes that Indira’s hair was “parted in the center; [it] was snow-white on one side and black as night on the other, so that depending on which profile she presented, she resembled either a stoat or an ermine” (460), in turn, evoking a grotesque image of the historical Indira. Moreover, the parti-colored hair becomes the villain’s identifying marker as well, prompting us to see a satirized version of the recognizable historical referent. For example, the narrator refers to her as “the Madam, the Widow with particolored hair” (497), “a mother with particolored hair” (500), and as an aspiring “Devi, the mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect … a multi-limbed divinity with a center-parting and schizophrenic hair” (504), constantly bringing attention to her rather monstrous image. In addition, her hair becomes a symbol of her equally schizophrenic management of India. Saleem notes, for instance, that

the country’s corrupt, “black” economy had grown as large as the official, “white” variety … [the] economy as an analogue of a Prime Ministerial hair style …
Mishra, the railway minister, was … the officially-appointed minister for bribery, through whom the bigger deals in the black economy were cleared, and who arranged for pay-offs to appropriate ministers and officials. (460)

In other words, the villain’s particolored hair becomes a reflection of the grotesque state of affairs of the nation. The narrator points out that,

if the Mother of the Nation had had coiffure of uniform pigment, the Emergency, she spawned might easily have lacked a darker side. But she had white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency, too, had a white part, public, visible, documented, a matter for historians – and a black part, which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us. (483)

The image of the historical figure, thus, appears not only distorted, but it is also reflective of the inherent duplicity and deformity of her government and of the nation. Nicole Weickgennant adds that “the horror of the Widow-Witch has its correspondence in the actual brutality and totalitarian measures during the Emergency” (81). By portraying doña Bárbara as an embodiment of the Venezuelan plains and Indira as a caricature of the historical character the narrators are able to turn them into symbols through which the authors put forth a critique of their flawed nations.

2.3 Symbols of Failed Nations

Both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are metonymical representations of their nations insofar that they represent failed national projects. Benedict Anderson postulates that the nation … is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign … The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations… It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical realm … It is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation
that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as deep, horizontal comradeship. (16)

Not only do doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi fail to construct sovereign communities, but they build economically, socially, and politically unstable communities. Doña Bárbara’s narrative becomes an allegorical narrative, “a narrative with two parallel levels of signification. These are temporarily differentiated, with one revealing or “repeating” the anterior level of meaning … trying desperately to become the other” (Sommer 42-3), whereby the narrator desperately tries to fuse the antagonist with its anterior level of meaning, namely, Venezuela’s barbarism. Through his allegory of barbarism, Gallegos aims to denunciate the existing deficiencies in Venezuela. According to Hilda Marbán, for Gallegos “los males que afligían a Venezuela … [eran] la falta de educación, el incumplimiento de las leyes, y la carencia de respeto a la Constitución, la explotación del débil por el fuerte, la violencia en todas sus formas, [etc.]” (35), (‘all the evils that afflicted Venezuela … were the lack of education, the failure to fulfill the law and the lack of respect for the Constitution, the exploitation of the weak by the strong, violence in all of its forms, among others’7). On the other hand, through Indira Gandhi, Rushdie not only sets a direct attack against the historical Gandhi and her government, but her narrative becomes by extension the narrative of the atrocious foundation of India. Fredric Jameson argues that “the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself” (Jameson 85-6). Likewise, Doña Bárbara’s and Indira Gandhi’s depictions as flawed characters serve, in turn, as a way of reflecting their faulty nations, both of which are characterized by superstition and ignorance, corruption, illegality, and economic mismanagement, tyranny, violence and immorality, and in the case of India, deception.

7 My translation of Hilda Marbán.
2.3.1 Superstition and Ignorance

Both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi exemplify superstition and ignorance. While doña Bárbara represents the credence of ungrounded beliefs, which prevents progress, Indira Gandhi’s political management of India becomes increasingly guided by astrology. Doña Bárbara, herself, is the epitomy of superstition, for ‘las más groseras y extravagantes supersticiones reinaban en el alma de la mestiza’ (39), (‘the half-breed girl was entirely possessed by the grossest and most extravagant superstitions’ (35)). Her belief in unsubstantiated notions, however, is reflective of her lack of education and of the pervasive existence of false notions in the plains. Luzardo argues that the preexisting superstition in the plains thwarted progress insofar that it perpetuated ignorance and precluded people from finding actual remedies and solutions to illnesses and problems. He notes, for instance, that, “[en el Llano] todavía se pretende curar el gusano con oraciones, y como los brujos abundan y hasta los inteligentes terminan creyendo en ellos, no se procuran remedios” (242), (‘[in the Plains] they still pretend to cure worms with prayers, and since there are magicians in plenty and even the intelligent people end up by believing in them, no remedy is found’ (284)). In fact, she, like the rest of the people of the plains, performed barbaric rituals, such as digging a hole, placing a horse inside it, and then “[echándole] tierra encima del caballo vivo” (127), (‘throwing earth over a live horse’ (139 - 40)) so that it would then protect the land. Max Oelschlaeger states that primitive people are often associated with “mythology and magic, imaginative fabrications and superstitious practices ungrounded in reality” (11). For Luzardo doña Bárbara represents the primitive adherence to superstition and mythology. For her, “hechicería y creencias religiosas, conjuros y oraciones, todo estaba revuelto, y confundido en una sola masa de superstición” (45), (‘religion and witchcraft, incantations and prayers were … confounded into a single mass of superstition’ (42)). Not only did she hold superstitious beliefs, but she was convinced that she was aided by supernatural powers. The narrator notes, for instance, that “en cuanto a la conseja de sus poderes de hechicería, no todo era tampoco invención de la fantasía llanera. Ella se creía realmente asistida de potencias supernaturales y a menudo hablaba de un “Socio” que la había librado de la muerte” (45), (‘as for the tales of her powers as a sorceress, neither was all here the mere fancy of the Plainsman. She really believed herself endowed with
supernatural powers, and often spoke of a “Partner,” who had saved her life’ (42)). In her study of enchantresses, Geraldine Heng states the enchantress is given “a measure of freedom available to [her] as manipulator … [and is] release[d] from normal codes circumscribing mortal relations [which allows her to] unleash acts [upon society] … without self-conscription” (844 - 45). Likewise, in claiming supernatural powers, doña Bárbara is able to operate outside of society, exempt from normal codes. Through doña Bárbara, the author condemns Venezuela’s superstition, one which propagates ignorance, fear, injustice, and disinterest in the truth and encourages the performance of barbaric or absurd rituals.

Like doña Bárbara, Indira Gandhi was also credulous of superstitious beliefs. In fact, Indira entrusted herself and the nation to the occult. As the narrator notes, under her leadership, India was “falling increasingly beneath the twin spells of power and astrology … the Indira Sarkar … consult[ed] daily with purveyors of occult lore … [and] Benarsi seers help[ed] to shape the history of India” (451). Moreover, Indira Gandhi “went nowhere without her personal astrologer” (491), and in making decisions regarding the management of the nation based on astrology, she subjected India to a period of arbitrariness which ended in a campaign of mass sterilization of India’s own midnight’s children. Rushdie denounces Indira Gandhi’s superstitious beliefs as well as her astrology-ridden nation. Doña Bárbara comes to represent Venezuela’s prevailing superstition, whereas Indira Gandhi projects her own superstitious beliefs unto the nation, subjecting it, too, to her astrological frenzy.

2.3.2 Corruption, Illegality, and Economic Mismanagement

In addition to representing superstition, both villains are exposed for their corruption, illegality, and economic mismanagement. Doña Bárbara epitomizes the deep-rooted unlawfulness and corruption of the Venezuelan plains. For instance, she stole others’ property and cattle; she bended the law to her convenience and arranged illegal transactions to engross her ranch. For example, to acquire more cattle, she would “[cachilapear] todo el ganado sin hierro que … [pisara] su posesión … [arreando] de allá para acá cuanto bicho de casco y pezuña se encuentre por delante” (296), (‘smuggle off all the unmarked cattle that put their feet on [their] land … and [driving] whatever …
comes across with hoofs over to here' (357)). The narrator describes this method of acquisition of cattle as a “forma primitiva de adquirir … con la sola limitación de la extensión de las tierras y número de cabezas que para el efecto se deben poseer” (122), ([a] primitive form of acquiring property … with the one limitation of the extent of land and number of cattle which must be possessed as a qualification for pursuing it’ (134)).

Moreover, she had managed to steal her neighbor’s cattle through Luzardo’s own administrator, Balbino Paiba. For instance, Antonio tells Luzardo that “don Balbino tenía dispuesto empezar a darles choques a las cimarroneras para repartírselas con doña Bárbara. Por algo se [había] enredado ella con él” (57), (‘Don Balbino was ready to start a stampede so he could divide the strays with Doña Barbara. She’s not fooling with him for nothing' (56-7)). In addition to the illicit acquisition of cattle, she was also known for obtaining others’ lands through simulated sales (133). In addition to the illusory transactions made to obtain more land, doña Bábara also changed the dividing line between her lands and that of Luzardo’s. Furthermore, the villain had managed to occupy Luzardo’s land by taking advantage of the judges’ imprecise identification of territorial borders and the gradual change of posts that served as boundaries between their lands.

The narrator notes that

el lindero de El Miedo iba metiéndose por tierras altamireñas, mediante una simple mudanza de los postes, favorecida por la deliberada imprecisión y obscuridad de los términos con que los jueces redactaban las sentencias por la complicidad de los mayordomos de Luzardo, que se hacían de la vista gorda. (43)

the boundary of El Miedo crept farther into Altamira by means of a simple change of boundary posts— this helped by the deliberate ambiguity and lack of precision the well-bribed judges wrote into their verdicts, and by the collusion of the Luzardo overseers who winked at it and let it pass. (41).

The continuous changes to the dividing line between doña Bábara’s and Luzardo’s terrains point not only to the antagonist’s corrupt methods of acquisition but also to the conception of space as open, imaginary, and unfixed as well as to the complete disregard for the law. According to Hilda Marbán, “[una] de las causas de los males venezolanos la
hallaba Gallegos en la falta de respeto a la ley” (50), (‘for Gallegos, one of the causes of the existing Venezuelan evils was the lack of respect for the law’). Doña Bárbara is indeed the epitome of this lack of regard for the law, in fact, she treated it as a commodity. Doña Bábara had created the “law of the Plains” to advance herself socioeconomically. The narrator points out that law was known as “‘Ley de doña Bárbara’ … porque a fuerza de dinero había obtenido que se la elaborasen a la medida de sus desmanes” (155), (“Doña Barbara’s Law” … because she had paid to have it made to suit her’ (176)). “Doña Bábara’s Law” functioned as a simulacrum, merely pretending to be a law. It acted as a façade that allowed her to engage in corrupt and unlawful actions without the threat of repercussion. This, in turn, permitted her to exist outside the legal system, exempt from legal responsibilities. Jean Baudrillard states that “to simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have … simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ (3). Likewise, the “Ley of the Llano,” while pretending to be real and legitimate, lacked legal validation. Before Luzardo’s arrival, the villain had made and unmade the law to her whim, further pointing to her ability to impose, manipulate, and dominate the legal system. Additionally, she bribed the state president, so as to keep the state’s legal system from interfering with her pseudo-legal system. For example, the narrator notes that “a El Miedo no llegan circulares, porque el presidente del Estado es amigo de Doña Bárbara […] le debe favores que no se olvida” (285), (‘circulars [didn’t] touch El Miedo because the President [was] a friend of Doña Barbaro’s … He owe[d] her favours that can’t be forgotten’ (343)), thereby making her untouchable. Her abuses were not only not condemned, but they were legitimized by her own self-made law and overlooked by those in power. She represents the widespread corruption and illegality of the llano, a degenerating force that hindered the development of the nation.

Secondly, doña Bárbara also comes to exemplify the unequal distribution of wealth amongst the people of the Venezuelan llano which impeded the development of the nation. Santos Luzardo criticizes the economic system of the plains when he notes that “[el] llanero no … [hace] nada por mejorar la industria. Su ideal es convertir todo el dinero que le caiga en las manos, meterlo en una múcura y esconderlo bajo tierra” (241-42), (‘the Plainsmen have done nothing to improve the industry. Their ideal is to change
everything that comes into their hands into money, put it in a pitcher, and bury it' (284)).
Doña Bárbara, in fact, manifested their tendency to accumulate wealth. The narrator
notes that she

se propuso ser dueña de todo el cajón del Arauca … y mientras las tierras
limítrofes iban incorporándose de este modo a su feudo y la hacienda ajena
engrosaba sus rebaños, todo el dinero que caía en sus manos desaparecía de la
circulación. Hablábase de varias botijuelas repletas de morocotas, su moneda
predilecta, que ya tenía enterradas, y era fama que … ella para apreciar su dinero
no lo contaba sino lo medía, cual si se tratase de cereales. (43-4)

determined to own the entire basin of the Arauca … and while the adjacent
properties were becoming hers by these methods and the neighbouring ranch was
swelling her herds, all the money which fell into her hands disappeared from
circulation. People spoke of numerous earthenware jars full of twenty-dollar gold
pieces, her favourite coins, and said that she did not count money, but measured it.
(41-2)

Her excesses are the result of a disregard for limits as well as a reflection of the
ineffective economic management of the Venezuelan plains. The antagonist’s amassment
of wealth and increasing territorial expansion posits a capitalistic yet centralizing
economic system. Like the capitalistic system, it was “based on the unlimited
accumulation of wealth, investment for profit, and expanding commercial markets”
(Freedman 36); however, doña Bárbara’s economic system was rather centralized. In
other words, it was constructed around a center that suctioned and accumulated wealth
for itself, without redistributing it, displacing everyone else to the margins. Her
accumulation of land and wealth is an extreme manifestation of the unequal distribution
of capital in the Venezuelan plains.

While doña Bárbara exemplifies the existing unlawfulness and ineffective economy of
Venezuela, Indira Gandhi constructs a nation based on corruption and lack of political
transparency. Unlike doña Bárbara, whose parasitic role within the nation was readily
observed, Indira appeared to be a progressive leader, while on the other side, she acted as
a parasite of the nation. Although the people of India had remained dormant under a state of illusion, convinced that national progress was under way, Indira Gandhi’s nation was increasingly characterized by corruption, unlawfulness, “gross inequities of wealth distribution … police harassment, disease, [and] illiteracy” (475). The narrator further notes that while the people believed that “Indiraji [was] making radical reforms – land reforms, tax structures, education, [and] birth control” (454), Indira’s government was actually engaging in corrupt activities. For instance, Saleem reveals that “the railway minister was… the officially-appointed minister for bribery, through whom the biggest deals in the black economy were cleared, and who arranged for payoffs to appropriate ministers and officials” (460). In other words, while the people believed in the nation’s growth and improvement, India was being plundered by its own public servants and leaders. Moreover, there was a constant lack of transparency, whereby the inner machinery of the nation remained hidden, obscure, and invisible. The narrator states that “her labia-lipped son [and herself] spent two days behind locked doors, burning files” (456). Although the narrator has no evidence to prove the deliberate disappearance of the file regarding the mass-sterilization of the midnight’s children, he blames Indira Gandhi and her son for the disappearance of files. This further points to the lack of transparency of her government, and by extension to the obscure and fraudulent foundation of the nation. Despite the widespread illusion of progress, the nation was soon discovered to be in a rotting state. The narrator points out, for example, that

in Bihar, where corruption inflation hunger illiteracy landlessness ruled the roost, Jaya-Prakash Narayan led a coalition of students and workers against the governing Indira Congress; in Gujarat, there were riots railway, trains were burned, and Moraji Desai went on a fast- unto-death to bring down the corrupt government of the Congress (under Chimanbhai Patel) in that drought-ridden state. (474)

The decaying insides of the nation soon vanished the image of a reforming country, and Indira turned into an image of dishonesty and lawlessness, thereby becoming also an enemy of the nation. Through the villains, both authors reprove the abominable state of the law and the economy in their nations. While doña Bárbara exemplifies Venezuela’s
inherent unlawfulness as well as its ineffective economic system, Indira Gandhi constructs the newly-independent India based on corruption, lack of transparency, and wealth disproportion.

2.3.3 Tyranny

Both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi establish tyrannical systems of domination. Doña Bárbara monitors and controls everyone in La Arauca, forcing them to abide by her arbitrary laws. On the other hand, Indira Gandhi institutes an authoritarian regime over the people of India. Consequently, both villains become images of tyranny and oppression. In addition to the creation of her own law, which obligated everyone in the plains to fear and obey her, doña Bárbara also formed a network of connections, who overlooked her abuses and an army of subjects, through whom she monitored and controlled others. Firstly, she maintained friendly relations with people in the government, who in turn bypassed her abuses. For example, when Luzardo decides to go to see the colonel to denounce doña Bárbara, Mujiquita tells him that he had had “suerte … de no encontrar al coronel, porque con él [hubiera] perdido [su] tiempo. Es muy amigo de doña Bárbara” (145-46), ('good luck … in not meeting the Colonel, because you’d have wasted your time with him. He’s a great friend of Doña Barbara’s' (164)). Secondly, she recruits a group of subjects who not only support, protect, and feed her dominion, but who also carry out her orders. For example, el Brujeador, otherwise known as the Wizard, is “el espaldero preferido de doña Bárbara” (17), ('Doña Barbara’s chief cutthroat' (9)), and he appears to function only as an extension of doña Bárbara. In fact, his identity is defined by his function and association to doña Bárbara. The narrator states, for example,

él tenía el alma de espaldero genuino … en quien tienen que encontrarse reunidas dos condiciones que parecen excluirse: inocencia absoluta y lealtad a toda prueba. Así le servía a doña Bárbara, no sólo para aquello de brujear caballos … sino para cosas más graves. (260)

he had the soul of a real henchman, in whom two qualities, apparently irreconcilable, must be joined: absolute unscrupulousness and unflinching loyalty.
Thus he served Doña Barbara not only in hunting horses by night … but in more serious affairs. (310)

While El Brujeador exercises his own will, refusing to be doña Bárbara’s will-less subject, he acts as a spy through whom she can keep an eye on her opponents. For example, upon Luzardo’s arrival to El Arauca, he is immediately spied by El Brujeador, who perceives him as a threat for doña Bábara. Knowing that Luzardo intended to


bring counter suits against [her] for all [she] won from him. I was curious to know the man and at last I got him pointed out to me. Then I lost sight of him … [when he saw him again he] took [his] poncho and smuggled [himself] into the cabin where he was getting supper so that [he] could hear what he said. (69-70)

In addition to monitoring her enemies, he also disposes of her enemies. Luzardo is told that, “con el enemigo [doña Bábara] no se agua el ojo para mandar a quitarse de por delante a quien se le atraviese, y para eso tiene el Brujeador” (18), (’[with the] enemy she don’t shed tears at sending somebody who’s daring enough to put him out of the way. And that’s what she keeps the Wizard for’ (9)). Besides El Brujeador, who is in charge of removing doña Bárbara’s opposition, the villain also relies on Balbino Paiba, one of her lovers and Luzardo’s administrator, to expand her dominion by gaining control over her neighbor’s ranch, “Altamira.” Although he is introduced as one of Luzardo’s enemies, he is often doña Bárbara’s strawman. Through him, the villain is able to commit unlawful acts, such as illegitimately appropriating her neighbours’ land and cattle. As an example, Antonio tells Luzardo that “don Balbino tenía dispuesto empezar a darles choques a las cimarroneras para repartírselas con doña Bábara. Por algo se [había] enredoado ella con él…la misma doña Bárbara dice que fue ella quien hizo poner a Balbino en Altamira” (57), (’Don Balbino was ready to start a stampede so he could divide the strays with Doña Barbara. She’s not fooling with him for nothing … Doña Barbara herself says that she got
Balbino his place at Altamira' (56-7)). Even though he claimed to be Altamira’s administrator, the only reason he “estaba allá, era por complacer[la]” (96), (‘was there … was to please [her]’ (102)). In fact, the narrator notes that, more than benefitting himself from his own corrupt administration of Luzardo’s ranch, doña Bárbara [fue] quien realmente se benefició con su mayordomía de Altamira, pues mientras ella sacó de allí orejones a millares marcados con el hierro de El Miedo apenas había “manoteado” por cuenta propia unos trescientos “bichos,” entre reses y bestias, número insignificante para sus habilidades administrativas. (93)

Doña Barbara had been the [only] one who really benefited by his administration of Altamira, for while she had taken from there thousands of strays to be burned with the El Miedo mark, he had managed to lay hands for himself on no more than some three hundred horses and cattle, a number insignificant in comparison with his “skill.” (99)

Balbino facilitates Bárbara’s gradual occupation of Altamira, leading to the empowerment and enrichment of her own ranch and to an increase in her control over the plains. Like el Brujeador and Balbino Paiba, Juan Primito, “un bobo de allá de El Miedo, que todo lo descubre y es un telégrafo para transmitir novedades” (47), (‘that’s a booby at El Miedo, a regular telegraph for every bit of news he finds out’ (46)), also acts on behalf of the villain. While he is in charge of performing small tasks for her, his real function is to repeat her words and reify the myth of doña Bárbara as a sinister witch, spreading fear amongst the people of the plains and thereby ensuring their obedience. In other words, he is the mouthpiece and message carrier for doña Bárbara. She continuously sends Juan Primito to Altamira to deliver her messages, and he “despach[a] su comisión con las mismas palabras de doña Bábara” (172), (‘he delivered his message in Doña Barbara’s exact words' (198)). In fact, his visits to Altamira are often perceived as the arrival of news from El Miedo. Upon his arrival to Altamira, Marisela tells Juan Primito, “vas a condenarte por estar trayendo y llevando [mensajes]. ¡Sal de aquí inmediatamente! … Oye lo que te voy a decir: como vuelvas a venir por aquí con recados de allá, te voy a
ehar los perros” (172-73), (‘you’re going to send your soul to the devil with all this [message] bringing and carrying. Get away from here, and right away! ... Listen to what I’m saying: If you come here again with messages from there, I’m going to turn the dogs on you’ (198)). His name, like that of Balbino and el Brujeador, implicitly carries within it the name of doña Bábara. In addition to being her messenger, Juan Primito also represented “el pavor supersticioso y la sumisión incondicional” (168), (‘superstitious fear and unconditional submission’ (193)), to doña Bábara. In fact, through him, she was able to spread fear, and thereby control everyone. The narrator reveals that Juan Primito was convinced of the existence of “unos pájaros fantásticos que denominaban rebullones” (165), (‘certain grotesque birds he called “furies”’ (189)) that drank strange liquids depending on their thirst. To Juan Primito, these imaginary birds were

una especie de materialización de los malos instintos de doña Bárbara, pues había cierta relación entre lo que el género de perversa actividad a que ésta se entregara y el líquido que él les ponía a aquéllos para que aplacaran su sed: sangre, si fraguaba un asesinato; aceite y vinagre, si preparaba un litigio; miel de aricas y bilis de ganado mezcladas, si tendía las redes de sus hechizos a alguna futura víctima. (165)

a sort of materialization of Doña Barbara’s evil inspirations, and there was a certain relation between the particular kind of perverse activity she was contemplating and the liquids he placed on the roofs to slake the birds’ thirst:

Blood, if she were scheming to assassinate someone; oil and vinegar, if she were preparing a suit; and a mixture of wild honey and the bile of cattle if her enchantments were being directed towards a future victim. (189)

While the people did not believe in the so-called “rebullones,” they did fear doña Barbara’s wicked activities. By serving them the diverse liquids, each liquid representing a different evil, Juan Primito announced doña Bábara’s perverse plans, in turn, spreading fear amongst the people and further fortifying her image as an evil woman. Like her stolen herd and multiple lovers, which she marks with her iron to indicate her ownership, her subjects are also possessions and extensions of herself that carry out her orders. For instance, the narrator states that, “para las puñaladas, Melquíades; para las bribonadas,
Balbino; para los mandados Juan Primito. Sólo que algunos mandados de Juan Primito eran como puñaladas” (165), (‘for stabbing, Melquiades; for general knavery, Balbino; for messages, Juan Primito. Only some of the messages Juan Primito delivered were just like stabs’). Through them, doña Bárbara is able to establish, expand, and strengthen her dominion over the plains. They also make it possible for her to monitor and control everyone else. In addition to her network of connections and subjects which enforce her tyrannical domination over others, doña Bárbara also develops a panoptic system of surveillance, designed to place her in the highest position of power. In Discipline and Punish, Michel Foucault’s draws on Bentham's panopticon, which

is the architectonic figure [that places] ... at the periphery an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open up onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheral building is divided into cells ... all that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy... each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible ... He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication. (200)

According to Foucault, “the major effect of the Panopticon: [is to] induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). In other words, the panopticon establishes asymmetric relations between the inspector who sees it all and the prisoners who are seen but can’t see the inspector. Similarly, in doña Bárbara’s panopticon, the villain monitors everyone both through her subjects as well as through her self-attributed supernatural powers which allow her to see what others cannot. Whether legitimate or not, in claiming to be able to see more than what everyone else can see, she positions herself as the one and only eye who sees it all. Aided by “the tradition of caciquismo, her wealth, her sensualism, her superstition, her war upon men, [and] her barbarism” (Sisto 169), the villain further institutes her tyrannical system of domination over the people in La Arauca. Ultimately, through her

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8 Caciquismo is a form of government, common in rural communities, whereby a political leader obtains full control over the community and dictates its functioning.
multi-layered acquisition of power, doña Bárbara establishes a system of asymmetrical relations that allows her to exercise control over everyone else.

Like doña Bárbara, Indira Gandhi also becomes associated with authoritarianism. As opposed to doña Bárbara’s caciquismo, Indira Gandhi establishes an utterly oppressive totalitarian regime in India. As the people began to realize that the nation was deteriorating, riots begin to take place all over the country. The narrator notes that due to her increasingly poor management of India, “the country was getting angry … [and] in late 1974, J.P. Narayan and Morarji Desai formed the opposition party known as the Janata Morcha: the People’s Front” (473). Anderson states that in democratic societies, the political figure posits him/herself as “one among many of the same kind as [him/herself] … [as having] a representative function” (82). Likewise, Indira conceded that she was one with India; however, upon being exposed for her despotic management of India, Indira became perceived as a national evil. William Hart posits that “evil acts worthy of the name victimize others besides their obvious victims; they injure us all… they are assaults upon our ethical order” (22). Similarly, Indira Gandhi not only victimized her own people by instituting an injurious regime in India, but she also subverted their moral order. The country was suddenly attacked by its own leader and the people were treated no longer as citizens but as subjects. The narrator states that if there were any meetings or protests against her, the “police materialized … to break up the meeting with lathi-charges and tear-gas … [when] the tea-gas came … [they] had to flee, coughing, spluttering blind, from riot police, like criminals” (475). Censorship and a violent repression against anyone who opposed her government were suddenly imposed. Even though she had been convicted of campaign malpractice, “the Prime Minister was refusing to resign” (479). Not only did she manage to stay in power through an appeal, whereby “the Supreme Court … [informed] Mrs. Gandhi that she need not resign until her appeal” (480), but “the Prime Minister was giving birth to a child of her own” (481), namely, the Emergency. Katherine Frank states that, “for Rushdie, Gandhi’s cardinal sin was the Emergency she imposed in 1975, when civil rights were suspended, opposition leaders and thousands of political prisoners jailed, slums ruthlessly cleared, and a notorious program of sterilization” (252). During the Emergency,
all over India policemen were arresting people, all opposition leaders except members of the Pro-Moscow Communists, and also schoolteachers, lawyers, poets, newspapermen, trade-unionists, in fact, everyone who had ever the mistake of sneezing during the Madam’s speech … [there was a] suspension of civil rights, and censorship of the press, and armored units on special alert, and arrest of subversive elements; something was ending, something was being born … the birth of the new India. (481-82).

Through the Emergency, Indira imposed a repressive rule in India, which, in turn, led to the “[conflation] [of] the Emergency with Indira Gandhi’s persona” (Howard Mezey 181), earning her the image of enemy of the nation. The narrator reveals that “the Constitution was altered to give the Prime Minister well-nigh absolute powers […] [he] smelled the ghosts of ancient empires in the air … in that city which was littered with the phantoms of Slave Kings and Mughals, of Aurangzeb the merciless and the last, pink conquerors […] [he] inhaled once again the sharp aroma of despotism” (488). Ángel Castiñera states that “the banal exultation of the I contributes to the dissolution of the we” (71). In other words, the movement from the “I,” who claims to represent a collectivity, towards itself and away from the collectivity leads to the dissolution of the “we”, and to the fragmentation of society. Charles Taylor describes the fragmented society as “a society whose members have more and more difficulty … identifying their political society as their community” (117). Similarly, in Rushdie’s novel, the people of India no longer recognized their political society as their community or their leader as one of their own. Like doña Bárbara, Indira Gandhi also established a centralized political system, whereby all power was unlawfully accumulated by her. Far from constructing a democratic nation, Indira Gandhi’s administration was ultimately characterized by its suppressive dictatorial regime.

2.3.4 Violence and Immorality

While doña Bárbara came to represent the pre-existing violence and immorality in the Venezuelan plains, Indira Gandhi set in place an extremely brutal and unethical government. Doña Bárbara, actually, represents “la arbitrariedad y la violencia del desierto” (297), (‘the desert[‘s] ... violent and arbitrary deeds’ (358)). For instance, it was
rumored that she was “una mujer terrible, capitana de una pandilla de bandoleros, encargados de asesinar a mansalva a cuantos intenten oponerse a sus designios” (15), (‘a desperate woman, and leader of a troop of bandits she orders to assassinate anyone who shows any signs of opposing her’ (5-6)). The narrator then confirms the rumours when he reveals that she had, indeed, murdered Colonel Apolinar after she had used him for her own purposes. He notes that after Apolinar falls into “la zanja con su propia lanza hundida en la espalda” (128), (‘the trench with his own lance-head in his back’ (141)), Bárbara tells Míster Danger, “no lo compadezca, Don Guillermo. Él también me tenía sentenciada. Yo lo que he hecho es andarle adelante” (128), (‘don’t waste any pity on him, Don Guillermo. He had me marked out for death, too. What I’ve done was to get there first’ (141)), thereby confessing to the murder. Not only did she kill others with utmost indifference, treating others’ lives as insignificant and disposable, but she often gave herself up to her violent impulses. Threatened by her own daughter Marisela, who had interrupted one of her rituals to seduce Luzardo, “enfurecida, rugiente, doña Bárbara se le arrojó encima, le sujetó los brazos y trató de arrebatarle la cuerda. La muchacha se defendió, debatiéndose bajo la presión de aquellas manos hombrunas, que ya le desgarraban la blusa” (255), (‘infuriated, seized the girl and tried to take the cord away from her. Marisela resisted, struggling in the grasp of the powerful, man-like hands that were tearing her blouse’ (300-01)). Doña Bárbara, thus, represents the unrestrained violence and destructive force of the plains. Moreover, she has a group of people who work for her whose sole purpose is to kill those that stand in her way. For example, after seeing that Luzardo was getting in doña Bárbara’s way, all of her followers began to ask her “¿qué espera usted para mandarnos matar al doctor Luzardo? ¿No estamos aquí para eso? ¿No ha adquirido con nosotros el compromiso de darnos sangre que derramar?” (311), (‘what are you waiting for to order us to kill Dr. Luzardo? Aren’t we here for that? Haven’t you agreed to give us blood to spill?’). The fact that doña Bárbara turned murder into a job, systematically performed, points not only to her complete lack of morality, but also to the incorporation into and even acceptance of murder in the everyday life. The villain, hence, represents the normalized violence in the Venezuelan plains, one that is not only not punished but integrated into their lifestyle.
Likewise, Indira Gandhi edifies the newly-independent nation based on brutality and destruction. During her leadership, anyone who opposed her government was perceived as a threat, which ultimately led to censorship, imprisonment, torture, and murder. Her principal enemies were, however, the midnight’s children, children born with magical powers at the eve of India’s independence, especially Saleem Sinai, the narrator. The midnight’s children were perceived by Indira’s government as a “fearsome conspiracy which had to be broken at all costs – that gang of cut-throat desperadoes before whom an astrology-ridden Prime Minister trembled in terror -- the grotesque aberrational monsters of independence, for whom a modern nation-state could have neither time nor compassion” (499). Drawing on image theory, Eicher et al states that “the enemy is also perceived to be an equal in capability and cultural status; however, it is judged as a threat… the function of the enemy is a demonization of the other group in order to justify violence against them, without impairing the moral self-image” (129). Perceiving them as a threat, Indira ordered the pursuit, imprisonment, torture, and forceful sterilization of the midnight’s children, ultimately confirming her position as an enemy of the nation. In fact, the narrator notes that he himself had been captured and tortured by Indira Gandhi’s paranoid government to reveal the identities of the rest of the midnight’s children. Howard Mezey adds that “the paranoia Rushdie assigns to the Indian state is solely the purview of Indira Gandhi” (181). Saleem points out that under a so-called “civic beautification program… [an] authorized operation of Sanjay Youth Central Committee” (493), which on the surface, claimed that its objective was to beautify the magician’s ghetto, a “slum [considered to be] a public eyesore” (493), the actual purpose of the campaign was to capture the midnight’s children, particularly, him. In fact, Saleem notes that “the explicit instructions of the Widow [were to come] to the colony to seize [him]… [for he] held the key to the location of every single one of the children of midnight” (496-97). Not only did the government undertake secret missions under apparently beneficious campaigns, but it also unleashed unlawful and violent assaults against its own people. For example, Saleem notes that the so-called beautification program also led to a violent ransacking of the ghetto, where Indira’s people

were seizing magicians, and old beggars, people were being dragged towards the vans … [an] assault [was] unleashed upon the slum: troops [were] sent in against
magicians, women, and children … now the machines of destruction were in their element, and the little hovels of the shanty-town were slipping sliding crazily beneath the force of the irresistible creatures, huts snapping like twigs, the little paper parcels of the puppeteers and the magic baskets of the illusionists were being crushed into a pulp … there were a few deaths … [and] magicians were carted off to the barbed-wire camp caked Khichripur. (494-96)

This barbarous destruction of certain areas of the city is actually based on the historical Gandhi’s “slum clearance” program, one which led to the “massive demolition of shacks, shops, and residential headquarters that cut a swath across the city right up to the gates of the Jama Masjid, and dislocated perhaps half a million people” (Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf 256). By alluding to the historical “slum clearance” program, Rushdie points to the abuse and excess of state-force, markers of an increasingly despotic nation, which cared not for its own people. In addition to the destruction of their neighbourhood, the attack on the magicians’ ghetto had the intention of leading to the “unnoticed capture of the one person on earth who held the key to the location of every single one of the children of midnight” (496-97), himself. Not only was he unlawfully imprisoned, “[and] given no reason … for [his] incarceration” (499), but he was tortured until he was forced to reveal the identities of the midnight’s children. He states that,

[he] was locked away in a tiny upper room and the bereaved women brought [him] prison food … under the influence of the unnameable – forgotten – pressures, [he] became loquacious in the extreme. What poured, blubbering, from [his] lips … names addresses physical descriptions … [he] told them everything, [he] named all five hundred and seventy-eight. (498)

After having obtained the identities of the magical children, Indira Gandhi then ordered the pursuit and imprisonment of the midnight’s children as well. They “were brought to the Widow’s Hostel, between April and December [and] they were rounded up, and their whispers began to fill the walls” (499). In identifying the midnight’s children as enemies, Indira Gandhi treated them as monsters, “morally excluded, beyond … moral concerns, and eligible for deprivation, exploitation, and other harms that might be ignored or
condoned as normal, inevitable, and deserved” (Opotow et al 305), giving way to their inhumane treatment. The narrator states that,

[he] sat barfettered in a tiny room, on a straw palliasse which was the only article of furniture [he] was permitted, sharing [his] daily bowl of rice with cockroaches and ants… [he] a cucumber-nosed prisoner, festooned with iron rods and rings which made various natural functions impossible – walking, using the tin chamberpot, squatting, sleeping – lay huddled against peeling plaster and whispered to all … who-has-the-gift-of-levitation had been tied by the ankles to rings set in the floor, and a werewolf is obliged to wear a muzzle; who-can-escape-through mirrors must drink water through a hole in a lidded can, so that he cannot vanish through the reflective surface of the drink. (499 - 501)

In addition to being subjected to an implacable torture, they were also forcefully sterilized. According to historians, Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, during Indira’s administration, “sterilization was [indeed] decreed for men who had had more than two children. To meet the hight targets set, the poor and the vulnerable were often dragged off by the police and forcibly sterilized” (256). In the novel, Saleem notes that the midnight’s children, too, underwent “ectom[ies] … a cutting out” (503) of their reproductive organs, and consequently, of their hope, of their dignity, of their magical powers, and of their nationhood as well. In other words, they were not only physically, emotionally, and mentally broken down, but they were also estranged by their own nation. Neil Kortenaar adds that “the Widow, Indira Gandhi, quite literally threatens men with the loss of their nationhood, first, in the form of forced sterilization, and then in the form of castrations performed on all the Midnight’s Children” (138). The sterilization of the first-born generation of India was an act of moral exclusion, which involved “a) seeing those excluded as psychologically-distant from and unconnected with oneself, b) [a lack of] constructive moral obligation toward those excluded, c) viewing those excluded as nonidentities, expendable, and undeserving of fairness … d) [the approval] of procedures and outcomes for those excluded that would be unacceptable for those inside the scope of justice” (Opotow et al 305-06), and also an act of national mutilation, whereby its own nation turned against its own people. Saleem notes that “those who would be gods fear no
one so much as other potential deities; and that and that only, is why we, the magical children of midnight, were hated feared destroyed by the Widow” (504). Indira’s attack on her own people resulted from an act of self-delusion and narcissism, whereby she believed herself to be the sole representative of the nation. The narrator, in fact, suggests that “the truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight” (492). Kenneth Boulding suggests that the antagonistic relation between nations is born out of a perceived incompatibility, whereby both parties are confronted with “two images of the future in which realization of one would prevent the realization of the other” (130).

Similarly, Indira Gandhi, in perceiving an incompatibility with Saleem and with the midnight’s children sets an assault against them. Like doña Bárbara, who, though often engaging in violent acts for practical and personal reasons, demonstrated a complete disregard towards the Other, Indira Gandhi, also demonstrated a disregard towards the Other by instituting a government of violence. Gandhi founded a nation based on illegality and immorality, leaving an “India … [that] is ‘impotent’” (Kortenaar 33) too. Both villains, hence, come to represent violence and immorality.

### 2.3.5 The Artificial Nation

As opposed to doña Bárbara, who openly embodies national defects, Indira Gandhi appears to promote progress, order, and democratic values on the surface; in actuality, however, she constructs the nation based on illegitimacy and despotism, establishing an artificial nation-state that superficially met the people’s interests. The narrator, who not only does not fall under Indira’s spell but remains critical of her leadership, traces the apparent development of India while, at the same time, exposes the artificiality of the national project. Although the people of India aspired to build a sovereign community, Indira had only superficially implemented this model, instead creating an artificial nation, based on what Anderson calls an “official nationalism … an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups who are threatened with marginalization and exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community” (95). Originated in an effort to “[preserve] … imperial-dynastic interests… the one persistent feature of this style of nationalism was and is, that it is *official* – i.e. something emanating from the state and serving the interests
of the state first and foremost” (Anderson 145). In attempt to gain the support of the people, Indira Gandhi had adopted an official nationalism, whereby she claimed she would serve the nation’s interests. However, India was only a simulated nation. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard’s work, Matthew Potolsky adds that “the simulation has the objective qualities of the real without being real; it is a second order reality, and not the reflection of a sovereign truth” (154). Likewise, Indira’s nation while appearing to be sovereign and communal was a second order reality that did not reflect the truth state of the nation. Throughout her government, the nation, like Indira Gandhi, was characterized by a constant duality. The villain, herself, displayed a split identity, whereby on the one hand, she posits herself as “Mother of India,” and on the other, she was a “terrible mother,” a witch, and a tyrant. Drawing on Socratic thought, Hannah Arendt points out that each of us, 'being one' can at the same time talk with himself … as though he were two. Because I am already two-in-one, at least when I try to think, I can experience … an ‘other self’ … The condition is that he be of one mind with himself, in agreement with himself … Somebody who contradicts himself is unreliable … [it leads to the] splitting up, of no longer remaining one. (20)

Her split identity then became projected unto the nation, turning India into a nation also in disagreement with itself. While the seemingly prosperous nation appeared to be working for the people, in actuality, it only served the interests of a few, sponsored unlawful acts, and mismanaged economic resources, among others. Firstly, the nation itself was founded on two contradictory political systems, the democratic system, on the one side, and the dynastic and authoritarian rule on the other. Although in 1971, “Indira Gandhi’s New Congress Party… [appeared to have] won a landslide victory – 350 out of a possible 515 seats in the Lok Sabha” (408), legitimizing Indira’s electoral triumph and by extension India’s democratic system, the democratic system was merely an outward appearance. That is, it fulfilled the citizen’s imaginary control of the nation; in reality, however, the future of India was decided by a few political figures in power. The narrator later reveals that the elections that positioned Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister had been fixed when he points out that “without Picture Singh, [he] might never [had] known about the poll-fixing in the state election in Kashmir” (460). He further adds that, “the
Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty, by Judge Jag Mohan Lal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court, of two counts of campaign malpractice during the election campaign of 1971” (479). Indira’s administration failed to fulfill the law, and it also denied citizen-participation insofar that it only pretended to give them a voice while major decisions and elections were predetermined by those in power. Moreover, while pretending to be a democratic nation, India was also increasingly becoming a pre-arranged dynasty. The narrator notes that “certain high-ups in that extraordinary government (and also certain unelected sons of prime ministers) had acquired the power of replicating themselves … a few years later, there would be gangs of Sanjays all over India! No wonder that incredible dynasty wanted to impose birth control on the rest of us” (454-55). Instead of being characterized by “deep horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 16), India became increasingly associated to nepotism as well as an illegitimate concentration of power among certain political leaders, including and most importantly, Indira Gandhi. Kortenaar suggests that “the metaphor of the nation’s bloodlines [had] been dangerously misappropriated and the history of the nation confused with the history of a single family” (42), positing Indira and her empowered family as usurpers of the nation. The nation, under her administration, was turning into a politically, economically, and socially unstable nation. During the Emergency, a moment in which,

all over India policemen were arresting people, all opposition leaders except members of the pro-Moscow Communists, and also schoolteachers lawyers poets newspapermen trade-unionists, in fact anyone who had ever made the mistake of sneezing during the Madame’s speeches … [with the] Emergency… [came] the suspension-of-civil rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armored-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive elements … [Like her] white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency, too, had a white part –public, visible, documented, a matter for historians –and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us. (481, 83)

Although the Emergency had also brought about some positive changes, such as having “trains run on time, black-money hoarders [were] frightened into paying taxes … and
harvests [were] reaped” (499), allowing the people to forget and even overlook the underlying unlawfulness and violence shaking the nation. The Emergency, more importantly, led to the loss of rights, censorship, abuse, and impoverishment, among others. Todd Kuchta states that Salman Rushdie writes this narrative “as an attempt to subvert Gandhi’s mythological embodiment of the nation … [one which allowed her] to maintain an almost divine aura in India and convince its citizens, along with the citizens of the world, to forget her atrocities” (211). Indeed, in the narrative, Indira Gandhi is portrayed as a national parasite, responsible for the superstition, authoritarianism, and immorality in India.

In conclusion, through the villains’ names, their characterization, and their manifestation of national faults, the authors portray doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi as perverse images of dysfunctional nations. David Sisto adds that “Gallegos, in his creation of Doña Bárbara, is the liberal crusader against backwardness, superstitions, and barbarism found in the deep interior of his llanos” (168) and a promoter of civilization and progress. Indira Gandhi, on the other hand, represents “everything that’s wrong in India” (Frank 251). In his narrative, Salman Rushdie both condemns the modern nation-state, particularly at the hands of Indira Gandhi, and also seems to call forth for a new India, brought up on morally-correct, democratic, and progressive values. Both narratives are endowed with “moral criticism … [becoming] a creator of values. How do We Live becomes How Should We Live?” (Howe 1395). They “teach people about their history, about their barely formulated customs, and about ideas and feelings that have been modified by still unsung political and social events” (Sommer 9). In other words, through the villains, the authors aim to raise awareness about their depraved national circumstances and promote instead order, equality, lawfulness, morality, and education. Both Gallegos and Rushdie, nevertheless, write versions of morality, styles of sexual behavior, tokens of psychic anxiety: such elements of fictional characterization are shaped by the moment of composition as well as by the individual sensibility that conforms to, or rebels against, that moment … [the characters] emerge out of the writer’s historical awareness, out-
of-a-sense of fixed moment. The characters come, so to say, from the writer-in-
history. (Howe 1393)

Despite the fact that their narratives are attempts at rebelling against their national
circumstances, both authors overemphasize the antagonists’ wickedness, presenting a
rather partial depiction of the characters, whereby the readers are given an already made-
interpretation of the characters. While Rushdie’s text intends to remind the people of
India of the abuses suffered during Indira Gandhi’s government as well as the
antagonist’s own immoralities and transgressions, which have national repercussions, the
portrayal of the political figure is, nevertheless, overly vilified. Matthias Galler states that
“Indira Gandhi’s war-based popularity is only briefly mentioned … and her premiership
is only remembered for its dark side, the abuses committed during the Emergency” (291).
Moreover, the narrator, through whom Rushdie often speaks, mediates the encounter
between the readers and the villain, whereby the readers are encouraged to constantly
regard her negatively. Nigel Balchin argues that “the problem of the historical villain is
merely the problem of the villain of fiction. [That is,] he must be simple and consistent,
so that there are none of those irritating moments when we are not sure whether to cheer
or hiss” (241). Similarly, in the text, the narrator posits the historical figure as an utterly
despicable villain, leaving no room for redemption, and instead constantly made to evoke
our disdain. Furthermore, the villain is not endowed with any agency, which suggests that
her character is based on the narrator’s own negative perception of her, and by extension,
on the author’s subjective conception of the historical figure. Similarly, doña Bárbara is
not only introduced as a threat since the beginning, but the narrator constantly prompts
the readers to interpret her as a symbol for barbarism. Lastly, the villains, more than
being evil figures in their own right, seem to function as a means through which the
authors express their deep resentment against the state of affairs of their own nations and,
in the case of Salman Rushdie, against the historical Gandhi herself. Both villains carry
within them a political agenda, which is not only to disparage their nations, but also to
promote the authors’ own political and national ideals.
Chapter 3

3 Opposition and Difference

Both doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are what Luke Seaber describes as “antagonist villains… [characters] forever paired with and plotting against their respective heroes and nemeses” (viii). By the nature of their narrative function, they are made to represent opposition and difference. The characters are not only in direct conflict with the protagonists, but they are also an antithesis of the protagonists, who represent authorial values. By using a binary opposition system, the authors center everything around two opposing poles, the positive pole being represented by the protagonists while the negative pole is occupied by the villains. The values assigned to the protagonists and those assigned to the antagonists are, however, never equal insofar as those represented by the protagonists are overtly favored whereas those represented by the villains are scorned. While doña Bárbara is antagonized by Luzardo and Marisela, Indira Gandhi is opposed by Saleem Sinai. Santos Luzardo represents the civilizing project of Venezuela, and Marisela embodies the potential for goodness and growth of the Venezuelan plains. Saleem, contrary to Indira Gandhi, represents equality, unity, freedom, and solidarity. Their opposition is expressed in three manners. In the first instance, the narrators build a relation of difference between the characters, increasingly positing them as ideological opposites. Secondly, their antagonism materializes into an overt conflict between parties, whereby their internal conflict articulates an external one, such as the clash between barbarism and civilization and progress and deterioration. Finally, their antagonism leads to the downfall of one or both parties, which further confirms their opposing stances. As a result of the constant opposition between the protagonists and the antagonist, the villains are negatively defined. Moreover, in Between Civilization & Barbarism: Women, Nation, and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina, Francine Masiello states that the woman is always portrayed as an outsider, and “as the outsider she set[s] the boundaries between intelligibility and irrationality; she define[s] the limits between high and low cultures [and] between elite and popular responses” (9). Similarly, the villains are posited permanently at the outside, separating binary oppositions, such as good and evil, civilization and barbarism, and progress and deterioration.
3.1 The Juxtaposition of Opposing Ideals

In keeping with their political agendas, the authors further vilify their antagonists by portraying them as an antithesis of their protagonists, who function as spokespersons for their own ideals. Since the beginning of the narratives, both narrators build a relation of difference and opposition between the protagonists and the antagonists, mainly based on their contrasting ideologies. As a result, both the protagonists and the antagonists are defined by their distinctions. According to Saussure, “concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their more precise characteristic is in being what the others are not … differences carry signification” (860). Similarly, in building a relation of difference between the character, doña Bárbara is defined in terms of primitiveness and evilness, while Luzardo is defined in terms of civilization and morality. Likewise, Marisela, in contrast to doña Bárbara, symbolizes goodness and development. In the case of Indira Gandhi, the villain is associated with tyranny, corruption, and wickedness whereas her opponent, Saleem, represents hope, equality, solidarity, and change. In keeping with the hero-villain narrative structure, the opposition between the protagonists and the antagonists is, moreover, made to “coincide with that between good and evil” (Bal 208), thereby assigning them opposing moral values.

While the enmity between doña Bárbara and Luzardo firstly arises as a result of doña Bárbara’s illegitimate appropriation of Luzardo’s lands and cattale, their main opposition is born out of their disparate ideals. Although Luzardo had been born in and grown up in [un] medio llanero, rudo pero lleno de intensas emociones endurecedoras del carácter … [volviéndolo un] muchacho animoso, de inteligencia despierta y corazón ardiente – de quien tan orgulloso se mostraba el padre cuando lo veía jinetear un caballo cerrero y desenvolverse con destreza y aplomo en medio de los peligros del trabajo de sabanas, digno de aquella raza de hombres sin miedo … [tras mudarse a la ciudad] se volvió obtuso y abúlico, se convirtió en un misántropo … al fin la ciudad conquistó el alma cimarrona de Santos Luzardo … [y] se entregó con ahínco a los estudios, (27-9)
the Plain, rude, yet full of intense, character-forming emotional life … [turning him into a] boy of spirit, keenly intelligent, full of high courage; the pride of his father, who enjoyed watching him break a wild horse or retrieve himself with dexterity and assurance from amidst the constantly recurring dangers of the cattleman’s life; a worthy representative of the fearless race that had furnished more than one epic with its centaur and the Plain with many a lord … [upon moving to the city he] became dull and procrastinating, and changed into a misanthrope … But in the end, the city conquered the exiled soul of Santos Luzardo, (21-3)

eventually returning to the plains as a foreigner, as a man of the city, with ideas different from those entertained by the people of the plains. The first description of Luzardo posits him as a foreigner insofar that his description is inconsistent with the description of the landscape and its inhabitants. Since the beginning, the character appears to stand out from the rest of the people and even from the landscape. The narrator starts by describing the “bongueros,” whom he describes as “[hombres] insensibles al tórrido sol, [sus] broncíneos cuerpos sudorosos, apenas cubiertos por unos mugrientos pantalones remangados a los muslos” (11), ([men with] bronzed [bodies] bathed in sweat, apparently insensitive to the torrid sun though but meagrely covered by dirty trousers tucked up above the knee' (1)), and then interrupts the description to introduce Luzardo, “un joven a quien la contextura vigorosa, sin ser atlética, y las facciones enérgicas y expresivas prestanle gallardía casi altanera. Su aspecto y su indumentaria denuncian al hombre de la ciudad, cuidadoso y del buen parecer” (12), (‘a young man whose strong, though not athletic, stature and decided expressive features gave him an air of almost aristocratic hauteur. His bearing and attire were those of the city dweller who is careful of his appearance' (2)), only to be followed by the description of the landscape, which he describes as an expansion of land illuminated by “un sol cegante de mediodía llanero … a la derecha, las calcetas del cajón del Apure –pequeñas sabanas rodeadas de chaparrales y palmares –, y a la izquierda, los bancos del vasto cajón del Arauca –praderas tendidas hasta el horizonte” (12), (‘a blinding sun, the sun of the Plains at midday … on the right, the basin of the Apure, a succession of small grassy plains enclosed by chaparral and palm trees, while on the left was the immense basin of the Arauca— its sides, vast green
prairies stretching as far as the eye could reach' (2-3)). The narrator introduces Luzardo, the refined man of the city, as being different to the undomesticated landscape and the rough hardworking men of the plains and Luzardo, thereby emphasizing their dissimilarity. His appearance posits him as an image of modernity, and “his emblematic name signals his mission of bringing the light of civilized rationalism to the llanos … thereby integrating the farflung region into the Venezuelan national fabric” (Henighan 29-30). In addition to his stark contrast to the plains, the protagonist also develops a relation of difference with doña Bárbara. Even before the antagonist has been properly introduced, Luzardo already appears to define her not only as his personal enemy, but also a national enemy, who contributes to the perpetuation of barbaric ways in the plains. The narrator, for example, notes that

ante el espectáculo de la llanura desierta, pensó muchas cosas: meterse en el hato a luchar contra los enemigos, a defender sus propios derechos y también los ajenos, atropellados por los caciques de la llanura, puesto que doña Bárbara no era sino uno de tantos … que no [dejan] penetrar la civilización … [y a] modificar las circunstancias que producen estos males: poblar. (31)

before the spectacle of the deserted Plains, he thought of doing many things: settling on the ranch to struggle against the enemy; defending his own property and his neighbours,’ outraged by the chiefs of the country, of whom Doña Barbara was but one of many … [who] shut off the Plain from civilization … [and] change the circumstances that lead to these evils, to populate the country. (26)

While Luzardo is presented to us as a messianic figure, bringer of order, legality, and morality to the underdeveloped plains, doña Bárbara is contrastively rendered an image of disorder and instability. According to Francie Masiello, in Argentinian texts, “a masculinist rhetoric corroborates virtue and patriotism and, in fact, becomes a symbol of order … the masculine is the equivalent of self-control and restraint, whereas the feminine is viewed as inimical to the state” (143). Similarly, by portraying Luzardo as the Venezuela of the future, a masculinist rhetoric comes to enunciate virtue and nationalism. Moreover, as Luzardo is increasingly portrayed as a visionary and future-oriented man,
doña Bárbara consolidated as an image of backwardness progressively more. For example, the narrator further notes that he wanted to “consagrarse a la obra patriótica, a la lucha contra el mal imperante, contra la naturaleza y el hombre, a la búsqueda de remedios eficaces” (62), (‘devote himself to a patriotic duty, the struggle against evil both in man and nature, and the search for effective remedies’ (61)), whereas doña Bárbara was a perpetuation of inefficacy and superstition. As opposed to the decadent Venezuela put forth through the villain, Luzardo’s Venezuela is an idealistic and imagined community, reigned by order, lawfulness, and morality. While he fights to construct a community characterized by horizontal comradeship, doña Barbara’s nation is contrastingly portrayed as an oligarchy. Homi Bhabha argues that “the ’Other’ is never outside or beyond us, it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously ’between ourselves’” (Nation and Narration 4). Likewise, doña Bárbara represents the “Other” within the nation, an “Other,” born out of the civilizing discourses introduced into Venezuela, in this case, by Luzardo, bringer of civilization. Moreover, while the antagonist’s actions are entirely based on her self-gratifying desires and impulses, Luzardo demonstrates a moral duty towards the Other. For example, while she disowns her own daughter, Luzardo takes it upon himself to transform Marisela into a civilized woman by teaching her hygienic habits, how to speak, how to read, and how to behave. He initiates her transformation by “tomando el agua en el hueco de sus manos, comenzó a lavarle los brazos y luego la cara, como hay que hacer con los niños” (115), (‘scooping the water in the hollows of his hands [and] began to wash her arms and her face, like an infant’s’ (125)), a metaphoric baptism that represents her rebirth into a civilized lifestyle. Soon after their encounter, Luzardo observes a radical transformation in her. He notes, for instance, that she

era una persona ya diferente de aquella sucia y desgreñada. Vestía uno de los trajes que Santos le había hecho mandar … y todo en ella daba muestras de aseo y hasta de acicalamiento … Santos se complació en esta transformación, que era obra de unas cuantas palabras suyas. (136)

was a different person from that dirty, unkempt girl. She was wearing one of the dresses … [which] Santos had sent to her, and everything about her was neat and
clean … Santos was pleased by this change in her, the work of a few words of his. (151)

Bhabha postulates that the colonizer desires to covert the colonized into a “reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Location 86). Similarly, Luzardo aims to reform Marisela by turning her into a sophisticated lady, who, while mimicking his ways of life, is never entirely his equal. Marisela, thus, becomes his symbolical civilizing project, one which sought to substitute the pre-existing ferocity and primitiveness of the plains for education and progress. Whereas Luzardo symbolized the advent of development, doña Bárbara was reduced to being an image of superstition and ignorance. Both characters are portrayed as ideological opponents insofar that they represent opposing ideals.

Additionally, the narrator further defines the villain negatively by juxtaposing her to Marisela. Their antagonism articulates the duality of the Venezuelan plains, whereby doña Bárbara represents the destructives forces of the landscape as well as its masculine aspects while Marisela represents the creative forces and feminine aspects of the plains. Unlike Luzardo, Marisela, like doña Bárbara, appears to belong to the plains. The first time she is introduced in the narrative, she is described as a “criatura montaraz, greñuda, mugierte, descalza y mal cubierta por un traje vuelto jirones” (111), (‘wild, dishevelled, barefooted girl, barely covered by… tatters’ (121)). David Mazel states that narrators portraying images of primitiveness often use “language [that is] scarcely able to distinguish people from place” (xi). Similarly, her description not only evokes the image of primitiveness, but like doña Bárbara, Marisela also appears to be one with the landscape. In addition to her savage-like appearance, her language, often composed by made-up words or noises (i.e. güía, umjú, hum), further constructs her image as that of the “‘stupid Indian’ full of gibberish, irascible, and childlike” (Vickers 36). Moreover, like doña Bárbara, Marisela was “como la naturaleza … a ratos inquietante también como las monstruosidades de la naturaleza … en sus relaciones con el padre nunca le había visto un movimiento de amor filial … [tenía] la crueldad retozona del cachorro” (239), ([like] nature herself … at times disquieting too, like all monstrosities of nature … [Luzardo] had never seen a gesture of filial love in her relations … she [had] the playful cruelty of a
Unlike Luzardo, whose relationship with doña Bábara is immediately introduced as one of contrast and opposition, doña Bábara and Marisela share a common origin as well as potential for monstrosity. However, Marisela, despite her savageness, shows glimpses of humanity: “Marisela parecía tener selladas en el corazón las fuentes de la ternura. [Era] alegre, jovial, y expansiva” (239). (‘Marisela seemed to have the springs of tenderness sealed up in her heart. Happy, gay, and expansive as she was’ (280)).

Additionally, while Marisela increasingly becomes a symbol of transformation and improvement, doña Bábara remains, despite her desire to change, “de entregar sus obras y a cambiar de vida … [impulsada por] un ansia de renovación [y] curiosidad de nuevas formas de vida” (290-91), (‘to give up her plans and change her life … [motivated by a] desire for rebirth too, a curiosity to see what another kind of life would be like’ (350)), as an icon of backwardness. Despite her attempts to undo her evilness, she remains excluded from the virtuous sphere. Marisela, on the other hand, is able to give up her backward ways by learning how to speak, dress, and behave more sophisticatedly, thereby allowing her to extricate herself from following her mother’s path and partake in the virtuous sphere, alongside Luzardo. As opposed to doña Bábara, who remains trapped in the imposing barbaric lifestyle of the plains, Marisela represents the transformation from barbarism to civilization. The narrator notes that Marisela appeared “limpia, presumida ya, todavía silvestre … nada quedaba en el aspecto de Marisela de aquella muchacha que portaba el haz de chamizas sobre la greña inmunda … [andaba] calzada y vestida con decencia” (159), (‘neat, even vain … still a rustic … nothing remained in Marisela’s appearance to recall the girl who carried bundles of wood on her frowzy head … [she was] well shod and well dressed’ (181-82)). In abandoning her animalistic and childlike self, Marisela seeks to secure a fixed identity within the new symbolic order, thereby adopting not only more sophisticated ways of life, but “[accepting] the ideology of civilization that assigns the woman the domestic chores” (Henighan 36). While doña Bábara who rejects domesticity, Marisela increasingly comes to occupy a role in the domestic sphere, re-establishing traditional gender roles. For instance, she states,

de mañanita me levanto a bañarme … después me voy a la cocina a ver si ya han colado el café, y en cuanto Santos sale de su cuarto, ya le estoy llevando una taza del más tinto … después a arreglar la casa. Las manos me quedan ardiendo de
tanto darle a la escoba. Si hay que remendar, remiendo, y luego me pongo a estudiar las lecciones. Ya cuando va a ser la hora de que él regrese de la sabana, me meto otra vez a la cocina a prepararle su comida. (201-02)

I get up very early and have a bath … then I go into the kitchen to see if the coffee’s made, and when Santos comes out of his room, I give him a cup of the strongest there is … Then I tidy up the house. My hands are blistered from so much sweeping. If there’s any mending to be done, I do it, and then I start to study my lessons. And when it’s time for him to come back from the prairie, I go into the kitchen again to fix his dinner. (232-33)

However, in acquiring her new role, “she is excluded from participation in the social contract … because the reality of women’s life and behavior falls outside the contemplation of the organization of civil society and government” (Henighan 12). As Marisela fully immerses herself in the domestic sphere, doña Bárbara is further vilified for her refusal to undertake feminine roles. In other words, “we come to know [the] character by seeing examples of who and what she is not” (Warhol 5). Through the antagonist’s relationship of opposition and difference with the novel’s protagonists, the villain is not only negatively defined, but also permanently placed at the margins between good and evil, barbarism and civilization, and masculinity and femininity.

Like doña Bárbara, Indira Gandhi is also further defined through a relation of opposition with the protagonist, who puts forth Rushdie’s political ideas and also contributes to the consolidation of the villain as an evil tyrant. Unlike doña Bárbara’s and Luzardo’s antagonism, which is clearly articulated since the beginning of the narrative, Saleem’s and Indira Gandhi’s enmity is disguised and only revealed near the end of the narrative. As opposed to explicitly articulating his opposition to Indira Gandhi, Saleem, instead, establishes a relationship of antagonism with “the Widow.” Although their opposition remains palpable, but unexplained, for most part of the novel, upon identifying the villain, their internal conflict suddenly becomes a national conflict as well. Firstly, the antagonism between Saleem and Indira arises from their struggle for metaphorical representation. Both aspire to become representatives of India. While Saleem Sinai is
born at the exact time of India’s Independence, earning him the metaphorical role of representing India by becoming the marker of a new era in India’s history, “the Widow (Indira Gandhi) is a woman whose metaphorical self-interpretation [is] summed up in her … infamous campaign slogan” (Fenwick 61). As opposed to Indira’s artificial and absolutist claim for metaphorical representation, Saleem is automatically endowed with metaphorical representation simply by the nature of his birth. In addition to acquiring a position of centrality in the history of India, he also becomes identified as the “mirror of the nation.” The narrator notes that “newspapers celebrated [him]; politicians ratified [his] position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: ‘Dear Baby Saleem … you are the newest bearer of the ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life … it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our nation’” (139). The naming of Saleem as the image of the nation undermines Indira’s self-proclaimed metaphoricity, positing Indira and Saleem as automatic enemies. Moreover, both Indira and Saleem claim to have a metaphorical family relation with the nation. Saleem, for instance, claims to be India’s twin sibling when he says that India was his “twin-at-birth … joined to [him] … at the hip, so that what happened to either of [them], happened to [them] both” (444), thereby experiencing himself both as an individual and as the nation. Indira, on the other hand, claims to be the “Mother of India.” Ironically, Indira is later exposed for imprisoning, torturing, and sterilizing the first-born generation of India. Linda Hutcheon states that irony is “both the said and the unsaid working together to create something new … [and it] is structured on a relation of difference [between the said and the unsaid]” (65). In other words, the villain’s self-proclaimed metaphoric role as the mother of India (the said) and her underlying unmotherly behavior (the unsaid) are built on a relation of difference. The irony lies in the incongruent sum between the said and the unsaid. On the other hand, Saleem’s family relation to India, is constantly reaffirmed. In being India’s twin sibling, he is perceived and perceives himself as India’s equivalent. In fact, the protagonist is conflated and conflates himself with the nation. For example, he notes that “at a crucial point the history of our child-nation, at a time when Five Year Plans were being drawn up and elections were approaching and language marchers were fighting over Bombay, a nine-year old boy named Saleem Sinai: acquired a miraculous gift” (196), that of telepathy. The blurry distinction between the child and the nation suggests
that the child stands for the nation and the nation stands for the child. Furthermore, both
the child and the nation are perceived to be growing together, in a constant process of a
simultaneous “becoming.” For example, the narrator notes, “the subcontinent’s new
nations and I had all left childhood behind; the growing pains and strange awkward
alterations of voice were in store for us all” (134). Indira Gandhi’s and Saleem’s
antagonism is, thus, initially established as a result of their competition for metaphoricity.

In addition to their competition for representation, Indira and Saleem epitomize opposing
national projects and discourses. Firstly, while Indira Gandhi claims to establish a
pseudo-democracy on the surface, her actual political system borrows from former
systems of power, such as dynastic rule and authoritarianism. For instance, Saleem states,
“when the Constitution was altered to give the Prime Minister well-nigh-absolute powers,
I smelled the ghosts of ancient empires on the air … in that city which was littered with
the phantoms of Slave Kings and Mughals, of Aurangzeb the merciless and the last, pink
conquerors, I inhaled once again the sharp aroma of despotism” (488). Indira’s
management of India, thus, seems to echo former systems of power, including ancient
empires as well as the colonial period. Saleem, on the other hand, represents national
ideals such as equality, unity, solidarity, etc., as well as the possibility of a new start,
distinct from previous forms of power. Since early on, Saleem demonstrates that “[his]
thoughts … always aspired to higher things” (456). In fact, he becomes convinced that
he, along with the rest of the children born at the eve of India’s Independence,
represented the hope of India in the form of a “third principle.” Although he initially
decides to create the Midnight Children’s Conference after “having [being] expelled from
one gang” (237) of friends, he eventually comes to see the conference as means of
fulfilling a “third principle” and by extension the promise of their birth. The third
principle, which Saleem posits as India’s hope, seems to be based on alterity, innocence,
equality, and unity. Firstly, the children, along with Saleem, represented potentiality, for
in being “children of the time: fathered … by history” (132), they had been “endowed
with features, talents … [and] faculties, which can only be described as miraculous. It
was as though history arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had
chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from
anything the world had seen up to that time” (224). Saleem himself was initially endowed
with the ability to hear others’ thoughts, and after losing that ability, he developed the ability to smell the truth. While his ability to hear others’ thoughts allowed him primarily to connect with the Midnight Children, it, nevertheless, allowed him “to look into the heart and minds of men” (229), which enabled him to view the world in its actuality, stripped from appearances and social constraints. After having lost his telepathic abilities, however, he developed an extremely keen olfactory sense, which made it possible for him “to inhale a very great deal more than the scents of purely physical origin … [he] began to learn the secret aromas of the world, the heady but quick-fading perfume of new love, and also the world, longer-lasting pungency of hate … [it gave him] the powers of sniffing-out-the-truth” (352). Most importantly, Saleem learns that the “only important divisions [among smells] were the infinitely subtle gradations of good and evil smells” (364), acquiring knowledge of morality through his senses. By means of his supernatural powers, both Saleem and the midnight’s children become symbols of alterity and potentiality. Drawing on Levinas, Brian Treanor states that “the other by the very fact of his otherness [calls me into question] … calling me into question and calling me to justify myself, the other appears as on a height, as my master” (33). Likewise, Saleem, as well as the rest of the midnight’s children, calls Indira into question as well as her alleged centrality, further contributing to their opposition. Not only did they come to represent the possibility of change, but also that of being an absolute Other. In fact, Saleem suggests that “[they] must be a third principle … by being Other, by being new … [they could] fulfill the promise of [their] birth” (292). In fact, Saleem seems to aspire to be an “other with an alterity constitutive of the very content of the other” (Levinas 39), an absolute Other, that “denies even the notion of a frontier that separates the same from the other” (Treanor 50). Indira Gandhi, threatened by the magical children’s otherness, ultimately, strips it away from them. Saleem represents the possibility of starting anew through alterity, while Indira Gandhi represents the re-imposition of a centralized system of power and the subjection of people.

The key aspect of the “third principle,” however, seems to be innocence and purity. Saleem states that “if there is a third principle, its name is childhood” (294). The narrator suggests that despite their youth, they were able to discuss complex questions about politics and society through a common language, when he says,
You ask: these are ten year-olds? I reply: Yes, but. You say: did ten-year-olds, or even almost elevens, discuss the role of the individual in society? And the rivalry of capital and labor? Were the internal stresses of agrarian and industrialized zones made explicit? And conflicts in socio-cultural heritages? Did children of less than four thousand days discuss identity, and the inherent conflicts of capitalism? ... I say: maybe not in these words; maybe not in words at all, but in the purer language of thought. (293)

For Saleem, it is children, unpolluted by politics and social distinctions and pure of thought, who could bring about change, for when “the adult world infiltrated the children’s, there was selfishness and snobbishness and hate” (348). It was, ultimately, “the poison of grown-ups which did for [them], and after a gap of many years, a Widow with a knife” (293). Not only is Indira Gandhi a metaphorical opponent, whereby she comes to symbolize corruption, but eventually she also becomes responsible for their destruction, further articulating the underlying opposition between Saleem and Indira Gandhi.

Lastly, Saleem’s third principle also seems to encompass equality and unity. Even though “the midnight miracle had indeed been remarkably hierarchical in nature, that the children’s abilities declined dramatically on the basis of the distance of their time of birth from midnight” (260), Saleem saw and treated everyone as equals. In fact, he decides to create the Midnight’s Children Conference as a “loose federation of equals, all points of view given free expression” (252). Although he “didn’t like Shiva” (259), he initially chooses to include him in the Conference, for he notes, “it would not have been fair to have kept him apart from the other members of the Conference” (259). The community he proposed to construct, contrary to that of Indira’s, often characterized as a dynasty, was a community of siblings, “a family, of a kind” (260), whereby he would act not as their “chief … [but as] a big brother” (260). Though utopic, in Saleem’s community, they would all possess equal rights and membership to the conference, regardless of class, language, and backgrounds, where the “I” would become a “we.” As Saleem becomes a voice for unity and equality, Indira Gandhi is increasingly rendered an image of partition and disintegration. Not only does the protagonist bring the midnight’s children, the future
of India, together, but he proposes that they become One. The narrator tells the midnight’s children that instead of being divided by “the duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and labor … money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, and right-and-left” (292), they should “come together … love each other … [become just] people-sticking-together through thick-and-thin” (293). Eric Strand adds that Saleem believes “that class differences can be transcended: that through appeals to rationality and a common humanity … citizens can debate issues of the common good in a privileged public sphere” (977). While Saleem proposes a dialogic nation, characterized by freedom of speech, the antagonist is contrastingly associated to totalitarianism and censorship. Saleem himself becomes the medium through which a multiplicity of different voices are brought together and given a space to engage in dialogue with each other. Upon discovering his telepathic ability, he states that he could hear “the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike … [he learned that] language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words” (192). Furthermore, his telepathic ability allowed him to hear others and understand them despite linguistic variations and to establish a network with the other midnight’s children. Saleem notes that “[he] found out that it was possible not only to pick up the children’s transmissions, not only to broadcast [his] own messages; but also … to act as a sort of national network, so that by opening [his] transformed mind to all the children [he] could turn it into a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another, through [him]” (259). Although he is unable to fulfill his national project, for the Midnight Children’s Conference falls apart, Saleem comes to represent horizontal comradeship, solidarity, and dialogue. While the enmity between the protagonist and the antagonist is initially established by the fact that both characters compete to occupy a position of centrality in India, it is further reinforced by their contrasting ideological frameworks.

By building a relation of opposition and difference between the antagonist and the protagonist(s) based on their disparate ideologies, the narrators further encase the villains in their assigned identities as embodiments of evil while promoting authorial values put forth through the protagonists. Karin Kokoroski argues that villains show “an affinity for destruction, cruelty, unscrupulousness, and they often possess seductive powers: [their
job description] excludes every character trait like moral integrity, inner justice, pity, empathy, and love” (26). In addition to representing vices, both villains are also permanently excluded from the virtuous sphere, thereby displacing them to the margins whereby they become markers of separation between binary opposites.

3.2 The Clash

According to Arturo Torres-Ríoseco “el conflicto interno de voluntades y de pasiones se externiza en esta lucha de carácter social, jurídico, o político en que la mujer personifica la anarquía de nuestra existencia semi-salvaje y el hombre la ley y la justicia, productos de la cultura” (104), (‘the internal clash of wills and passions is materialized into a social, legal, and political battle, where the woman personifies the anarchy of our semi-savage existence and men as the representative of law and justice, products of culture’).  

Likewise, the underlying tensions between the protagonists and the antagonists materialize into an external conflict between parties. The internal conflict between doña Bárbara and Luzardo translates as the clash between barbarism and civilization, while the conflict between doña Bárbara and Marisela is interpreted as the battle between good and evil. The conflict between Indira Gandhi and Saleem represents the battle between the tyrant and the oppressed. Moreover, in both cases, the male protagonists must fight against a female antagonist, who represents chaos and disorder.

Although doña Bárbara and Luzardo are posited as ideological opponents since the beginning of the narrative, their underlying antagonistic relationship fully materializes when Luzardo decides to fight against doña Bárbara, and by extension, against barbarism. To fight against the villain and the underdevelopment of the plains, Luzardo designs a “plan civilizador de la llanura” (122), (['plan] for reclaiming and civilizing the Plain' (133)) which involved “suprimir [la] ferocidad” (122), (‘the suppression of ferocity’ (133)) and the primitive ways of the plains. In identifying himself as the bringer of modernization and civilization, he not only posits himself as superior, but he also renders

9 My translation of Torres-Ríoseco’s quote.
the villain and the plains as an image of primitivism. John Cooley states that “‘primitive' is [a] value judgment. It is a designation of contrast made by the one who sees himself as civilized and wishes to call attention to 'uncivilized' people, lifestyle, and landscapes” (11). The reader is made to read both doña Bárbara and the landscape as inferior and as inherently evil as well. Luzardo’s first civilizing action is to restore the law and order in the plains, a direct attack against doña Bárbara’s corruption. While doña Bárbara represents the illegitimate and primitive methods of appropriation of cattle and corrupt commodification of the law, Luzardo represents legality as well as modern methods of acquisition of property. For instance, he ordered the separation between lands through a fence, thereby imposing clear and legal limits between lands where none had been. Luzardo observes that there was a “necesidad de implantar la costumbre de la cerca. Por ella empezaría la civilización de la llanura; la cerca sería el derecho contra la acción todopoderosa de la fuerza, la necesaria limitación del hombre ante los principios” (123), ('the necessity of implanting the custom of fencing. Through that the civilizing of the Plain would begin. The fence would be a bulwark against the omnipotence of force, the necessary limitation of man prior to his undertakings' (135)). Although the construction of the fence was intended to legitimize and protect property rights, it also served as a way of declaring war unto his enemies. The narrator notes that “cuando [doña Bárbara] vio que la plantaba justamente donde debía, sin caer en el ardid, tuvo la intuición de que algo nuevo comenzaba para ella desde aquel momento” (142), ('and when she saw that he had put them just where they belonged, without falling into the trap, her intuition told her that something new to her was beginning at that moment' (161)). David Sisto further states that “the symbol of … intrusion is the fence Luzardo wishes to build around the borders of his ranch, thereby cutting off the encroachment of his neighbors and differentiating the modern methods of round-ups from the old” (169). In addition to reclaiming his lands, he also reconfigured the power relations between doña Bárbara and himself. In other words, rather than conforming himself to the role of victim, as the people of the plains had done over the years, he actively fought against her abuses, positing himself as her equal in terms of power. Moreover, he also reinstates the law by revalidating it and enforcing it. In fact, he forces both doña Bárbara and Míster Danger to respond to the law by criminalizing them for their actions. For instance, he informs Míster Danger that he “está
fuera de la ley, porque no posee la extensión de tierras que la Ley del Llano señala como mínimo para tener derecho a cazar orejanos” (151), (‘is outside the law, because he doesn’t possess the amount of land fixed by the Law of the Plain as the minimum qualification for the right to round up unbranded cattle’ (171)), and reminds doña Bárbara that she is obliged to let him reclaim his cattle from her lands; however, upon seeing her refusal to do so, he warns her that if she “no se aviene a lo que [exije], dentro del término de ocho días, la [demandará] por ante un tribunal” (153), (‘and if … she does not accord with my demand, at the end of eight days I shall hail her before the Tribunal’ (174-75)). Luzardo replaces the arbitrariness of the llano with disciplinary forces that aimed to correct their ways and force them to partake in his homogenizing project of modernization. Upon Luzardo’s s arrival, however, not only was doña Bárbara held accountable for her illegality, but the “Ley del Llano” was relocated to the public sphere and reinvested with its performative force. According to Austin, “lawyers when talking about legal instruments will distinguish between the preamble, which recites the circumstances in which a transaction is effected, and on the other hand the operative part – the part of it which actually performs the legal act which it is the purpose of the instrument to perform” (1291). In other words, the law regained its power to perform legal acts, even against its own creator. As opposed to doña Bárbara, who believes that to fight their enemies, “no hay sino dos caminos, matar o sucumbir … en esta tierra no se respeta sino a quien ha matado” (210), (‘there are only two possible alternatives here, kill or be killed … Nobody is respected in this country unless he’s killed someone’ (244)). Luzardo, ultimately, opts to fight his opponents through legal ways, thereby discontinuing the tendency to use violence against one’s enemies. While Luzardo is, undoubtedly, characterized as the hero of the narrative, bringer of civilization and morality, he also undergoes moments of weakness. As opposed to doña Bárbara, who fails to defeat her own barbarism, Luzardo fights the temptation to adapt to the plain’s barbaric ways. In spite of “todos los esfuerzos … por reprimir los impulsos de su sangre hacia las violentas ejecutorias de los Luzardos … y por adquirir, en cambio, la actitud propia del civilizado, en quien los instintos están subordinados a la disciplina de los principios” (316-17), (‘all the efforts he had made … to repress the impulse of his blood towards the violence of the Luzardos … [and] to acquire the viewpoint of a civilized man
in whom instinct was subordinate to the discipline of principle' (384)), Luzardo eventually did give in to his impulses, “[procediendo] como procedería doña Bárbara” (306), (’[proceeding] as doña Barbara would' (370)). Although Luzardo’s moral conscience keeps him from fully adopting their ways, it is Marisela who saves him from succumbing to the plain’s barbaric ways. He sees

la luz que él mismo había encendido en el alma de Marisela, la claridad de la intuición en la inteligencia desbastada por él, la centella de la bondad iluminando el juicio para llevar la palabra tranquilizadora al ánimo atormentado, la obra – su verdadera obra, porque la suya no podía ser exterminar el mal a sangre y fuego, sino descubrir, aquí y allá, las fuentes ocultas de la bondad de su tierra y de su gente, -- su obra inconclusa y abandonada en un momento de despecho, que le devolvía el bien recibido, restituyéndolo a la estimación de sí mismo. (337)

It was the light he himself had set burning in Marisela’s spirit, the clarity of intuition in the intelligence he had brightened, the spark of goodness directing her judgment to carry comforting words to his troubled soul. It was his work, his real accomplishment, for his was not to crush out evil with blood and fire, but to discover, here and there, the hidden springs of goodness in his people and in his land. It was his work, unfinished, and abandoned in a discouraged moment, which was returning good for good, restoring his self-esteem. (411)

Like in Argentinian texts, whereby women “[serve] as a buffer[s] between the civilizing purposes of Europe and the perceived barbarism of the American hinterland” (Masiello 19), Marisela also serves as a buffer between the barbaric plains and modernization. His project, thus, becomes not one of imposing his civilizing ways, but of recognizing and bringing forth the positive aspects inherent in the land and the people while modernizing the Venezuelan plains. In other words, Luzardo’s project is geared towards the “recover[y] of the llanero’s primitive essence without lapsing into the pre-modern backwardness that characterizes the llanero’s culture (Henighan 35). According to Homi Bhabha, the nation is “a liminal form of social representation, a space that is internally marked by cultural differences and the heterogeneous histories of contending people”
Likewise, the Venezuela put forth by Luzardo is also a liminal form of social representation, whereby both modernity and tradition continuously converge with one another. Gallegos’ novel portrays a vision “of a progressive and democratic national destiny built on the integration into national life of sectors of the popular previously marginalized (e.g. the mestizo) … which, as in the case of Doña Bárbara, tended to pit enlightened upper or middle-class heroes against representatives of oligarchic backwardness and anarchy” (Beverly and Zimmerman 20). Through the characters’ internal conflict, the author externalizes the conflict between the backward ways of the plains and the advent of civilization and modernity.

In addition to being antagonized by Luzardo, doña Bárbara is also opposed by Marisela, her own daughter. While their conflict is born mainly out of their competing love for Luzardo, their battle is to be interpreted as a battle between good and evil. In fact, after she faces doña Bárbara, her mother, for the first time, Marisela is confronted with “el hábito del mal” (254), (‘the consciousness of wickedness’ (301)), and consequently stripped from her innocence.

10 Henighan notes that “the description of Doña Bárbara’s attack on her daughter is replete with overtones of male sexual aggression … [a] figurative rape” (41), which, thus, led to Marisela’s symbolic loss of innocence. In acquiring knowledge of good and evil, Marisela could no
longer be “la muchacha despreocupada y ávida de felicidad que en Altamira había podido vivir … indiferente ante el espectáculo de aquella repugnante y dolorosa miseria física y moral, ajena a las tormentas del espíritu” (304), (‘she was no longer the careless, pleasure-seeking girl who had been able to live at Altamira … indifferent to that spectacle of repugnant and heart-breaking physical and moral misery, entirely distant from the torments of that spirit’ (367-68)). Following her encounter with the villain, Marisela had not only rejected evilness, but she had experienced herself differently. She had recognized within her “una nueva Marisela, deslumbrada por el hallazgo de sí misma, con la divina luz de la bondad en el rostro y con la suavidad de la ternura en las manos que había acariciado, por primera vez con verdadero amor filial, la frente atormentada del padre” (305), (‘a new Marisela sprang up, dazzled by this self-discovery, with a light of goodness on her face and the softness of tender affection in the hands that had for the first time caressed her father’s troubled brow, with genuine filial love’). As opposed to doña Bárbara, who was devoid of filial responsibilities and tenderness, Marisela became an incarnation of goodness and tenderness and “[la] personificación del alma de la raza, abierta, como el paisaje, a toda acción mejoradora” (160), (‘the personification of the soul of the Plainsman, open as the prairie and improved by every experience’ (183)). As the narrator emphasizes Marisela’s inherent virtues, doña Bárbara is oppositely confined to her role as an evil woman.

Like Luzardo’s and doña Bárbara’s antagonism, Saleem and Indira also engage in a direct conflict against one another, articulating the tensions between the figure of the tyrant, personified by Indira, and the oppressed, role incarnated by the narrator-protagonist. Throughout his life, Saleem undertakes two national projects, both of which stand in ideological opposition to that of Indira Gandhi’s national project. His first national project is developed during his childhood in the form of what he calls, a “third principle.” Unable to fulfill his project, he, then, undertakes a second national project in his adult life when he decides to join the resistance against Indira Gandhi’s government. While both of his national projects fail tragically, Saleem, nevertheless, stands as an ideological opponent to Indira Gandhi and as a constant threat to her government.
Despite being unable to realize his first national project, Saleem, later reassumes his responsibility towards the nation and towards himself and renews his aspirations to save the nation, becoming an active opponent to her political management. He says, for example, “if I, snot-nosed stain-faced etcetera, had had a hard time of it, then so had she, my subcontinental twin sister, and now that I had given myself the right to choose a better future, I was resolved that the nation should have it too … I had already decided to save the country” (444). Analogous to Luzardo, who feels responsible for the development of his nation, Saleem takes it upon himself to emancipate India once more. The protagonist decides to save the nation by joining the Communist movement. He notes, “I began zealously to turn red and then redder … so that my mission of saving-the country could be seen in a new sight; more revolutionary methodologies suggested themselves” (457). His new project consisted on actively denouncing Indira’s political management and calling instead for a socialist movement instead. He became a “sort of aide-de-camp to [Picture Singh] … who … added a lecture on socialism on his serpentine performances” (457). Increasingly, Saleem became more and more “preoccupied with politics and [his] dream of national salvation” (472), becoming a symbol of resistance. Similar to the way the natives resisted the colonizer by “[refusing] to return and restore the image of authority to the eye of power” (Bhabha, Location 100), Saleem refused to validate Gandhi’s government by “[denouncing] the government’s arrests of union leaders … [speaking] of the gross inequities of wealth distribution … police harassment, hunger, disease, illiteracy … the nature of the red revolution” (472-474), etc., thereby becoming a menace for her government. In his study of colonial resistance, David Jeffress argues that the colonized people’s “various forms of refusal, which often took the form of an assertion of their humanity and equality … led the colonist to hate a group with which they understood themsevels as being in competition or conflict” (55). Similarly, Saleem’s refusal to accept her authority along with everyone else in the communist movement led Indira Gandhi to identify them as a group with which she was in conflict, thereby identifying them as her hostile enemies. While Saleem’s political activism may have contributed to the growing dissatisfaction with Indira’s government, the protagonist was unable to fulfill his dream of saving the nation. Soon after joining the communist movement, Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency, which led to the magical
children’s undoing, including Saleem’s. It also “damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to put it together again” (482). During the Emergency, Saleem, along with the rest of the midnight’s children, were imprisoned, tortured, and eventually castrated by Indira Gandhi’s management, whereby they lost their magical abilities. In so doing, Indira Gandhi “converted something unknown (other) into something known … eliminating otherness by … [reducing] it into a known quantity” (Treanor 4-5). Moreover, India was subjected to a period of oppression, whereby there was a “suspension-of-civil-rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armored-units-on-special alert, and arrest-of-subversive elements” (481), among others. Both of Saleem’s national projects were destroyed by Indira Gandhi in the form of mass-sterilization, which led to the undoing of the midnight’s children, and in the form of an oppressive regime, which prohibited any form of resistance against the government. Not only was Saleem broken down, but his dream to save the nation was brutally stripped away from him. He was “no longer connected to history—that long-ago midnight had come to a sort of end” (508), and with that his hope of catalyzing India’s rebirth as a free, upright, and bountiful nation.

Even though Saleem is posited as the hero of the narrative, endowed with positive values, and oftentimes even portrayed as a Messianic figure due to his historical birth, he was, rather, a flawed human being with national aspirations. Like Luzardo, who does not simply embody virtuousness, as he, ultimately, engages in barbaric acts as well, Saleem also confesses to engaging in unheroic acts. For example, the protagonist confesses that “despite the many vital uses to which his abilities could have been put by his impoverished, underdeveloped country, he chose to conceal his talents, frittering them away on inconsequential voyeurism and petty cheating. This behavior—not … the behavior of a hero” (196). Additionally, he took it upon himself to judge and punish others’ behaviors, which, in turn, led to two violent deaths. Determined to teach his mother to be faithful, he decided to punish Lila Sabarmati, whom he perceived as a “loose woman … [an] adulteress” (296) by exposing her “lascivious[ness]” (296). Saleem confesses that his action against Lila Sabarmati
was no act of heroism … imitating the action of the snake, [he] began to cut pieces out of newspapers … glued [his] completed note…on to a sheet of paper, snake-like, [he] inserted the document in [his] pocket, like poison in a sac … [he] slipped inside Commander Sabarmati’s almirah and inserted [his] lethal missive into the inside pocket of his spare uniform … By unmasking the perfidy of Lila Sabarmati, [he] hoped also to administer a salutary shock to [his] own mother. Two birds with one stone; there were to be two punished women. (297-99)

Rather than contributing to the edification of India, Saleem’s actions led to violence, death, and pain. The narrator notes that, Commander Sabarmati “shot [Lila Sabarmati] twice in the stomach at point-blank range… [and then] found Homi Catrack [her lover] … shot him once in the genitals, once in the heart, and once through the right eye” (299). His actions point not to the messianic image attributed to him, but to a rather malicious young man. Moreover, in his adolescent years, he confesses once more to having succumbed to unworthy pursuits. The narrator states, for instance, that “Saleem could sink no lower: [he] could smell on [himself], the cesspit sink of [his] iniquities. [He] had come to the land of the Pure [Pakistan], and sought the company of whores – when [he] should have been forging a new, upright life for [himself]” (377). Saleem, as opposed to Luzardo, was not a romantic hero, but an imperfect human being who though inspired by national ideals and motivated to contribute to India’s edification was, like any other person, often distracted by ordinary human desires. Finally, in his early adulthood year, having lost memory of his identity, he joined the Pakistani army and participated in violent attacks against innocent people. Saleem confesses that he, otherwise known as buddha, “led troops to Sheikh Mujib’s lair. Students and lecturers came running out of hostels; they were greeted by bullets … [their] soldiers-for-Allah…held Pakistan together by turning flame-throwers machine-guns hand-grenades on the city slums” (410). His actions were once more, far from virtuous, shameful. As opposed to Indira who portrays herself as India’s Mother and Savior, the narrator’s own revelations about having engaged in unworthy behaviors posit an ordinary man, undressed from all the saint-like expectations invested on him. Contrary Indira Gandhi, who lacks self-consciousness, Saleem’s “totalizing consciousness seems to embrace his flaws or failings as well as his heroic, or self-aggrandizing characteristics” (Milne 32). Although Saleem is presented to
us as a defective character, his opposition with Indira, nonetheless, redeems his position as hero. His narrative is, ultimately, a rendering of the struggle against oppression in India, one which recalls actual historical events and historical figures, namely, the Emergency and Indira Gandhi. Through the exposition of their internal conflicts between the protagonists and the antagonists in both texts, the narrators are further able to establish not only their relations of opposition and difference but to articulate an already-existing conflict outside of the text.

3.3 The Defeat

The opposition between the protagonists and the antagonists lastly culminates in the defeat or partial defeat of one or both parties. In Doña Bárbara, Luzardo successfully defeats the antagonist by establishing a new order that substitutes doña Bárbara’s oligarchy. Marisela, on the other hand, not only earns Luzardo’s love, but she represents the restoration of traditional gender values and the triumph of good over evil. Despite giving up her evil deeds and recognizing her daughter as her inheritor at the end of the narrative, “the consolidation of the nation demands her replacement by a different heroine” (Henighan 40), one who is “categorized [by] chastity, beauty, modesty, and innocence, not willful (not desirous), and removed from social interaction” (Henighan 12). At the end of the narrative, the villain, and symbolically the old Venezuela, is completely effaced from the national narrative while the protagonists Luzardo and Marisela come to the forefront of the narrative as representatives of the new Venezuela. Benedict Anderson posits that “the novel and the newspaper … provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (30).

Similarly, Gallegos, thus, imagines the ideal nation through Luzardo while presenting the failed nation through doña Bárbara. Luzardo becomes the modernized Venezuela while Marisela, on the other hand, represents what Gayatri Spivak defines as the “post-colonial woman,” one who “disappears not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shutting which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development” (61). Doña Barbara’s downfall leads to the reorganization of political, economic, and social systems in the plains and also to the triumph of civilization over barbarism. The villain’s depiction as the image of
Venezuela’s underdevelopment is, hence confirmed by being opposed, overcome and replaced by her counterparts, Luzardo and Marisela. Despite giving up her evil actions and undergoing a conversion at the end of the narrative, the villain is inextricably tied to the symbol, and as such, perpetually placed at the outside, unable to partake in the new order. According to Terry Eagleton, the allegory is at the end “drained of all immanent meaning… [lying] as pure facticity under the manipulative hand of the allegorist awaiting such meaning as he or she may imbue it with” (6). Similarly, upon her defeat, doña Bárbara is also emptied of all meaning, vanishing completely from the narrative. Contrary to Luzardo who overpowers the villain, in Midnight’s Children, Saleem is defeated by Indira Gandhi. At the end, the protagonist is nothing but a “nine-fingered, horn-templed, monk’s-tensured, stain-faced, bow-legged, cucumber-nosed, castrated, and … prematurely aged [man] … a grotesque creature who had been released from the pre-ordained destiny which had battered him until he was half-senseless” (515) with the realization that his “dream of saving the country was a thing of mirrors and smoke, insubstantial, the manderings of a fool” (475). In other words, he represented the tragic destruction of hope and potentiality and the unfulfilled promise of a “would-be-savior-of the nation” (502). While Indira Gandhi succeeds in her fight against the midnight’s children, her success is only partial. The narrator notes that “on January 18th [1977] … the Prime Minister had, to the astonishment of all, called a general election” (507), which cost her the position of Prime Minister of India. Ultimately, Indira’s own arrogance brings her government down. Moreover, despite her mass-sterilization project, the possibility of a second generation of magical children, fathered by Shiva, one of the midnight’s children, arises at the end of the novel. The narrator-protagonist states that Major Shiva, whom had contributed to their violent capture, became a “notorious seducer; a ladies’-man … women fell into his arms … and certainly there were children. The spawn of illicit midnight children” (470). In fact, his own adopted son, Aadam Sinai, “the true son of Shiva-and-Parvati” (483), was born on “a night-shadowed slum on June 25th, 1975 … [at] midnight … at the precise instant of Indira’s arrival at Emergency” (482). The newly-born represents the resurgence of hope and the possibility of India’s rebirth. Saleem notes that “Aadam was a member of a second generation of magical children who would grow up far tougher than the first, not looking for their fate in
prophecy or the stars, but forging it in the implacable furnaces of their wills” (515). Mac Fenwick further adds that “the hope for a better future, even for improvement, is not contained within the vision of an absolute cycle of repetition without a relation that inaugurates repetition with difference” (633). Despite Indira Gandhi’s temporary triumph over Saleem, it is her inability to see into her own self that leads her to her own downfall. As opposed to Doña Bárbara’s and Luzardo’s antagonism, which eventually dissipates when the antagonist is finally displaced and defeated by the protagonist, the tension between Saleem and Indira Gandhi never fully dispels. Even after Indira Gandhi is overcome, the narrator continues to express his opposition towards her. In fact, his autobiographical text itself becomes a deliberate form of resistance against Indira Gandhi, one which re-articulates and repeats their opposition. Michael Reder posits that “by setting up opposing binary values – in which one term is constantly subjugated to he other – allegory provides the locus for meaning within colonial discourse … The split from which colonialist allegory creates its meaning is irreconcilable and is dependent upon the subjugation of the lesser of the terms” (233). Similarly, the characters’ opposition establishes a relationship of permanent irreconcilability even after the defeat of one or both parties, as is the case for Saleem and Indira Gandhi, and it forces the subjection of the villain to the heroes’ terms, as is the case for doña Bárbara. Nonetheless, their defeat serves as a way of consolidating their opposition, whereby the antagonists’ fall is interpreted also as the destruction of evil.
Implications and Further Considerations

More than simply taking already-made models of villainy, doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are a combination of already-existing forms of evil in more recognizable contexts and opposing modern values. In the first chapter, we see primarily the use of archetypal images of female evil, such as “the witch,” “the terrible mother,” “the seductress,” etc., to portray the female antagonists. While these images abound in fairy tales, children’s literature, literature of the romantic period, gothic literature, fantasy, among others, they are no longer as common in modern literature firstly as a result of feminist movements. In addition, as Kahn suggests, “moderns have lost the strong rock of a supernatural sanction and the clear guide of a revealed Scripture” (108), leading to the devaluation of archetypal images of evil and to the unclear distinctions between good and evil. In other words, the witch, the terrible mother, and the seductress, etc. are no longer recognizable villains to modern readers. Consequently, authors, like Gallegos and Rushdie, have had to adapt these images to fit modern contexts. In the first chapter, we see that while both villains manifest characteristics of the femme fatale, neither of them conform to the formula. In fact, I further suggest that they postulate a new conceptualization of the femme fatale. In the case of doña Bárbara, the concept is adapted to fit the Latin American context. We, thus, encounter a beautiful mestiza associated with witchcraft, who seduces men, defies traditional gender roles, and adopts the masculine role of the vaquero. Because of the reigning patriarchal system in Venezuela, and the majority of the Latin American countries, doña Bárbara does, indeed, represent a threat to society not only because she transgresses gender norms but also because she occupies a strictly masculine sphere. In the case of Indira Gandhi, on the other hand, the formula is applied to a political figure, in that the political figure acts both as a seductress and a terrible mother of the nation. I admit that, in the case of Indira Gandhi, the application of the formula is problematic because the idea of the political figure transcends gender while the formula itself is gender-based. Nevertheless, because the portrayal of Indira Gandhi as a witch, as a terrible mother, as a seductress, etc. is both significantly determined by her political role and charged with political implications, it is possible to read the political figure, itself, as a femme fatale as well. That is, the villain’s portrayal in the novel, although intended to debase the historical figure, also creates, what Deleuze calls, a new
line of flight by extending the formula to the political figure as a means of reflecting on the idea of the politician as the modern threat. Both offer provisional re-interpretations of the concept, adjusting the formula to conform to modern contexts.

In addition, we have seen that modern female villains reflect recognizable evils pervasive in modern society. In the case of doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi, both villains mirror the perverse state of affairs of their nations; that is, they are to some extent born out of the historical contexts from which the authors are writing in. Moreover, they carry with them a particular political agenda, in the case of Indira Gandhi, the author intends to denunciate India’s state of turmoil under Indira Gandhi’s management. In the case of doña Bárbara, the author proposes to condemn the supposed barbarism in Venezuela. The concepts of civilization and barbarism put forth in the novel are, however, realities invented by the author, wherein the invention of barbarism creates, feeds, and glorifies the concept of civilization. That is, the villains are made to represent authorial definitions of faulty nationhood, barbarism, deterioration, and transgressive femininity. Drawing on Stephen Pfhol’s work on deviance, Roxanne Barbara Doerr states that “being ‘deviant’ is not a matter of actively transgressing established rules but rather of not being accepted by others” (99). Similarly, doña Bárbara and Indira Gandhi are portrayed as social, moral, and legal transgressors mostly as a result of an already-established system of values that disparages their behaviors and actions while promoting that of the male protagonists’. This, in turn, suggests that whether or not the authors justify the proposed association between femininity and perverse nationhood, “the vile elements of society are [nevertheless] singularly debased to the sphere of the feminine” (Masielo 143), while the positive aspects of society are embedded in a masculine rhetoric, further insisting on the division and nesting of genders. In the case of Rómulo Gallegos, the feminine portrayal of barbarism remains unjustified whereas, in the case of Salman Rushdie, the association between flawed nationhood and the female sphere seems somewhat justified and almost incidental by the fact that his villain is based on the historical figure of Indira Gandhi. However, Rushdie incurs in the division and nesting of genders by constantly debasing the female gender in general and by making use of archetypal images of female evil to portray Indira Gandhi.
Furthermore, because the authors intend to posit a critique of their nations through the villains, the antagonists are endowed with symbolic signification. Doña Bárbara is a symbol for barbarism, and Indira Gandhi represents the rotten foundation of India, both of which are manifested in the form of superstition, corruption, tyranny, and immorality. Moreover, although the villains represent a rejection of modern values, that is, they do not reflect the modern preoccupation with the construction of a sovereign nation characterized by comradeship, equality, and legality, both villains are only partially effective in their representations as perverse images of nationhood. Doña Bárbara is at times overrepresented as a symbol of barbarism. In fact, the character is constantly interpreted for us, as mentioned by Carlos Alonso, primarily as a reading of barbarism from the perspective of the urban, civilized man. In the case of Indira Gandhi, on the other hand, we encounter a fictional character that moves in and out of the text, between history and fiction. While the character is recognizable, insofar as it alludes to accepted historical and biographical accounts of Indira Gandhi, at the same time, Rushdie only presents a partial representation of the villain and her government, oftentimes reflective of the author’s own resentment towards the historical referent. Despite their limitations, both villains are relevant to us insofar that they represent recognizable national flaws.

Lastly, in chapter three, we see that the villains also represent opposition and difference by acting as foils to the protagonists. Historically, villains have been defined in negative terms by being contrasted to the protagonists or heroes, who function as exemplars for society. Modern authors still use this framework to portray their villains and their narratives; however, the distinctions between good and evil are less strict. Both Salman Rushdie and Rómulo Gallegos contrast their villains to their protagonist or protagonists, thereby defining them also in negative terms. While Gallegos implements a rather strict binary system to define his heroes and villains, Rushdie uses a looser version of the system, in which the hero fails to exemplify heroic traits. Nevertheless, there is still a clear differentiation between good and evil. In other words, no matter what changes they

11 “The text has, in a sense, incorporated into itself its own reading, so that the reader is faced with what could be described as corroboration rather than interpretation” (421).
undergo, they are always-already excluded from the virtuous sphere. This, in turn, places them at the outside and imposes a value system that matches evilness with femininity and goodness with masculinity.

Indeed, while both Rómulo Gallegos and Salman Rushdie principally use their female villains as a means to criticize their nation’s social and political circumstances, they have also perpetuated established fears surrounding femininity; they have reinforced traditional gender norms by vilifying women who breach them and re-established binary positions. While this study focuses mainly on the negative portrayals of the characters as well as their functions within the text, the texts not only vilify women, but they also, perhaps inadvertently, empower them. In fact, both villains appear to be powerful, autonomous, ambitious women. It is possible to hypothesize that it is perhaps due to the intriguing combination of positive and negative aspects that has allowed these villains to gain popularity among audiences, especially in the case of doña Bárbara. In addition to receiving much scholarly attention and critical acclaim, both texts have gained much popularity. Rushdie’s text has caused much controversy about the extent to which the representation of Indira Gandhi relies both on the fictional and the historical, and the extent to which it accurately exposes the historical Indira Gandhi and her government (Frank 247). Moreover, it has already been adapted into a film (Midnight’s Children, a British-Canadian film produced by Deepa Mehta in 2012). Doña Bárbara has, however, had the highest extra-literary effect by becoming an archetype of the Latin American female villain. Doña Bárbara’s story has been adapted into films (Doña Bárbara, a Mexican film produced by Fernando de Fuentes in 1943; Doña Bárbara, a Spanish-Argentinian film directed by Betty Kaplan in 1998) and several TV series (Doña Bárbara, a Venezuelan TV series produced by Venevision in 1967-68; Doña Bárbara, a Venezuelan TV series produced by RCTV in 1975; Doña Bárbara, an American-Colombian TV series produced by Hugo León Ferrer for Telemundo in 2008-09). Both villains have, thus, generated renewed discussions on the state of affairs of their nations and their leaders as well as the creation of newer and fascinating models of female villainy relevant to modern times. Moreover, in the case of doña Bárbara, the villain has managed to transcend the text by occupying a space in the imagination of the people and by becoming her own archetype.
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