

# SHAMING IN CHILD REARING AND ITS EFFECTS IN LATER LIFE

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In my doctorate in creative writing at Melbourne University, I am researching shame in childhood from the perspective of the object relations branch of psychoanalysis (which emphasises the formative influences of the (m)other-child relationship) and looking at how shaming in childhood has been portrayed in literature. Here, however, I would like to reflect on a number of issues related to shaming and authoritarianism, not so much as someone looking into shame and psychoanalysis, but as a novelist, one whose writing draws heavily on personal experience.

Some of my thoughts are inspired by Mario Vargas Llosa's work, especially his latest novel, *The Feast of the Goat*.<sup>1</sup> And I want to share a few ideas about another great of Latin American literature, Gabriel García Márquez.

Some viewers may have noticed the signs on the streets of Havana in David Bradbury's recent film, *Fond Memories of Cuba*. Above corner cafés, alongside badly patched roads, the billboards loom, proclaiming, 'The Commander-in-Chief gives the orders'. Seen from our great distance in Australia, these assertions might seem quirky and relatively harmless. It takes a wilful leap of the imagination to ask oneself what sort of society would we have if such messages

were omnipresent, and what it would say about our culture.

Mario Vargas Llosa's novels and essays have delved into the phenomena of authoritarianism and dictatorship, as well as the Latin urge towards anarchy. He has referred to the 'passionate irrationalism of the Latin tradition',<sup>2</sup> but his careful dissection in his novels of the forces that produce despots shows that if such forces are irrational, at least they are capable of being understood. His writing has explored and illuminated the results of *machismo*, and the consequences when fathers are abusive and children are reared with humiliation and shaming so that each generation bequeaths a withering of the soul to the subsequent one.

*The Feast of the Goat* is set in the Dominican Republic and concerns the three decades when Rafael Trujillo ruled the tiny Caribbean nation. As the novel opens Trujillo is long dead. The reader is introduced to Urania Cabral, a successful New York lawyer who has not visited or written home since she was 15 and the nuns bundled her out of the country. Her silence perplexes her aunts and cousins, who see Urania's father as a loving and misunderstood man for whom things long ago stopped going well. When everything was rosy, el Señor Cabral was a member

of Trujillo's inner circle of power. But Trujillo periodically 'tested' his lieutenants by subjecting them to public humiliation and censure, all the while keeping them in the dark about the cause of their opprobrium (usually nothing). Cabral proves more sensitive than others and instead of taking his humiliation quietly and so-called manfully, he suffers, begs and wheedles, and ultimately, in the vain hope of regaining favour, offers up his most cherished possession — his young daughter. This offer is made in the context of the extreme *machismo* of the culture surrounding Trujillo, where government ministers averted their eyes or frenetically travelled abroad when Trujillo came into their own homes to demand the sexual services of their wives. This, of course, was another way in which Trujillo humiliated his subordinates.

Theorists working on the subject of shame<sup>3</sup> view humiliation as one of the many forms of shaming. Pattison situates shame, particularly chronic shame, 'within the metaphorical ecology that pertains to defilement, pollution and stain' contrasting it with the metaphorical ecology surrounding guilt, which he sees as 'one of offence, debt and punishment'.<sup>4</sup> He admits that in many ways modern notions of shame revolve around concepts of 'internalised pollution', a notion that also informs Kristeva's ideas of abjection, which sees defilement and dirt as moving from the external into the internal sphere, thus becoming incorporated within the concept of the self.<sup>5</sup>

An often overlooked result of chronic shaming in childhood is that the resultant, damaged self does not fully identify with society, living outside it and in this sense anarchic and asocial. Pattison observes that 'chronically shamed people are pre-social and pre-moral'.<sup>6</sup> Even when

seeming to be moral, they have not really joined the moral community; they are not really other-regarding.

Vargas Llosa was born in Peru in 1936, and in 1990, established as one of Latin America's leading writers and social commentators, ran for the presidency of Peru. He lost the election, perhaps because the electorate identified him with the cultured, moneyed class; they voted instead for Fujimori. It has been said that Vargas Llosa was devastated. There is little doubt that he has been an idealist. In the early sixties he saluted the Cuban revolution, believing it gave writers of all ideologies freedom to publish their work.<sup>7</sup> In subsequent years, observing the imprisonment of dissident writers and the oppression of the populace, he turned away from Castro, moving from bewilderment to outrage.<sup>8</sup> That free, dissident and creative writing has not flourished in Cuba is evident from the many writers who have fled the island to publish their work, including Reinaldo Arenas, who left because of persecution for both his homosexuality and his writing, and Zoe Valdés, whose *Yocandra* is a biting satire on Castro's Cuba. Vargas Llosa allegedly fell out with García Márquez over his intimate friendship with Castro (legend has it that Vargas Llosa struck García Márquez in the face, a claim that Vargas Llosa neither publicly affirms nor denies).

It is interesting to compare the two writers. Both contend for the title of Latin America's greatest living novelist. Both have been fascinated by the theme of the *caudillo*, the *generalissimo*, the dictator. Along these lines, the Nobel prize-winning García Márquez has offered us *No One Writes to the Colonel*, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In these one often finds a barely

concealed admiration for the trappings and excesses of power. In the non-fictional work *News of a Kidnapping*, García Márquez wrote: 'Power is a double edged sword ... it generates a state of pure exaltation and, at the same time, its opposite: the search for an irresistible, fugitive joy, comparable only to the search for an idealised love that one longs for but fears, pursues but never attains'.<sup>9</sup>

This distinct romanticising of power, twining it with romantic love, perhaps offers some insight into García Márquez's relationship with the Cuban dictator. As well, what García Márquez has said he admires about Castro may be instructive. García Márquez cites his lack of orthodoxy, for instance, and his spontaneity — for many years Castro governed without an office, roaming the island with no set schedule. What others would call disorder bordering on irresponsible government here is considered a virtue, as is Castro's longwindedness; his speeches, as evident in *Fond Memories of Cuba*, are narcissistic displays that can go on for as long as seven hours. In *My Friend, Fidel* (1990), García Márquez proclaims his awe for what others might call intemperance. He describes a lunch where Castro finished a huge meal by devouring 18 scoops of ice cream. 'I believe he is one of the greatest idealists of our time', he writes, extolling Castro's 'nearly mystical conviction that the greatest achievement of the human being is the proper formation of conscience'. This of course was said about a dictator whose regime had already imprisoned dissidents such as the poet Armando Valladares for upwards of 20 years and handed out death sentences to others.<sup>10</sup> 'I have seen the most self-assured people lose their poise in his company',

writes García Márquez, without wondering if this has anything to do with the fact that Castro is head of a single-party, authoritarian state.<sup>11</sup>

The admiring portrait García Márquez draws of Castro seems to be a caricature of those twin failings in the Latin American temper, the urge towards authoritarianism on the one hand and intemperance, closely aligned to an anarchic urge, on the other. It is interesting, in this context, that Castro was born into circumstances that were considered shameful at the time. His father, Angel, came from Galicia, the wild north-west corner of Spain, a place, as Geyer writes, 'of exaggerated pride and of the deep sense of shame that lurks like a shadow behind that pride'. Angel Castro migrated to Cuba as an adventurous twenty-year-old, leaving behind a Spain that had moulded his character. As V.S. Pritchett wrote, the Spanish considered themselves 'the master-race of the world, the founders of the first great empire to succeed the Roman Empire ... They fought to preserve, and for a long time successfully did preserve, the spirit of the Middle Ages'.<sup>12</sup> As a Spaniard in the newly independent island, Angel Castro was an outsider but he managed to carve for himself a large and profitable sugar *hacienda*, often by stealing land. He married a respectable schoolteacher and had two children, but his wife left when she realised he had been having an affair with the housemaid, Lina Ruiz. Angel Castro continued to live, unmarried, with Ruiz, and it was in these circumstances that Fidel was born. As Geyer writes, 'never — not in any writing or in any interview or in any reference — did Fidel ever refer to the fact that he and his siblings were bastards in a Cuba that ... was Roman Catholic and Spanish

Puritan'.<sup>13</sup> Castro was my father's classmate at Colegio La Salle in Havana, where he was mocked for being a double bastard — illegitimate, and the son of a Galician, or *gallego*, as they were disparagingly called. Shaming and its product, internalised shame, would have been Castro's constant companions.

García Márquez's antecedents, like Castro's paternal line — and like my own father's — all originate from that inhospitable corner of Spain, Galicia, Franco's birthplace and home. Geyer writes that:

To many people it seemed 'natural' that Castro and Franco would have hated each other; one was a Communist, the other was a Fascist Falangist who had defeated the classic Marxist threat in the Spanish Civil War and then ruled his country with the iron hand of the Catholic *caudillo*. But such neat ideological classifications most often lie. As a matter of fact, the two twentieth-century strongmen with nineteenth-century roots in Galicia had been filled with admiration for each other for many years. They had yearned to meet, and when Franco died, Castro decreed a full week of official mourning in Cuba.<sup>14</sup>

Vargas Llosa comes at authoritarianism from a different angle from García Márquez. He spent his early childhood believing his father dead. His parents were divorced, a source of shame in his mother's Catholic household. Later, when his parents reconciled, Vargas Llosa grew to hate his father for his bullying.<sup>15</sup> But such formative experiences, rather than turning him into an authoritarian or despotic personality, seem to have laid the ground for insights that generated great writing. In *The Feast of the Goat*, Urania asks her father how Trujillo could have dominated and emasculated cultured,

educated, intelligent men. In her imagination, her father replies:

After reading, listening, investigating, thinking, you've come to understand how so many millions of people, crushed by propaganda and lack of information, brutalised by indoctrination and isolation, deprived of free will and even curiosity by fear and the habit of servility and obsequiousness, could worship Trujillo. Not merely fear him but love him, as children eventually love authoritarian parents, convincing themselves that the whippings and beatings are for their own good.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Trujillo beat, abused and humiliated his son. Undermined, Ramfis grew into a feckless playboy. But this is the same Ramfis who returns to the Dominican Republic to avenge his father's murder, meting out horrendous cruelty. Here we have a terrible but compelling portrayal of what happens when there is no real insight into the way a child's self is twisted by shaming, and how the rage is stored within the weakened self, to re-emerge in the bullying of others. In the gravity of his work, Vargas Llosa, to my mind, sometimes leaves García Márquez looking like a dilettante.

The historical forces that inclined Spain towards authoritarianism, and also towards its paradoxical counterpart, anarchy, are varied, sometimes subtle and sometimes overt. Pritchett referred to 'the Spanish temper'. Doubtless the Spanish culture was influenced by the Islamic invasion of Spain, and the nature of Islam, and the nature of medieval Spain, and the rise of tiny fiefdoms, and the Spanish *hidalgo* — who had an Arabic counterpart. Other factors were the uneasy partnership of Jew, Christian and Moslem in medieval

Spain, and the *Reconquista*, and the Inquisition, and inflexible, intolerant Catholicism. And the way Spain entered the counter-reformation, with a fortress mentality, the mark of an embattled society. These forces had their poisoned flowering centuries later in the Civil War, so eloquently bringing to the fore all that had quietly simmered for so long.

In Latin America, it may have had to do with the *Conquista*, and the nature and social organisation of the indigenous cultures that were conquered, and, again, the Spanish temper. One must also consider how the rule of law was imposed, and whether the conquerors brought their womenfolk with them. Unlike the English, who generally dispersed as colonists looking for greener pastures, were transported as convicts (both male and female), or migrated with their families fleeing religious persecution, the Spanish colonisers were more often seeking wealth and largely left their women behind in Spain. They bred instead with the indigenous people and, when these had been exterminated by toil and disease (as in Cuba), with the African slaves. This created a more *mestizo* and sometimes a more racially tolerant culture. A working-class Cuban term of affection for women, regardless of their skin colour, is *mi negra* — my black woman. But perhaps leaving the women of higher social status back home in Spain also increased male feelings of superiority, and disparagement of the feminine, and the cult of *machismo*, which goes so well with authoritarian repression. In *Feast of the Goat*, Urania speaks of Trujillo's 31 years in power during which, she says, 'all the evil we had carried with us since the Conquest became crystallised'.<sup>17</sup>

The roots of authoritarianism in Latin America may also have to do with Simon Bolivar, our great South American

liberator, who expressed the opinion that extraordinary men — the *caudillos* — not democracy, would lead the nations of Spanish America forward (in this he was no different from the United States founding fathers who conceived the electoral college as a means of defence against democracy in the broadest possible sense).

*A Road Well Travelled* (by Doran, Satterfield et al.) is a collection of interviews with Cuban-American women.<sup>18</sup> One of the things the researchers reported was the difficulty they had getting older Cuban women to express their feelings. One woman said, 'In Cuba, you don't ask yourself all kinds of questions like, who am I? What do I want with my life, and why? Here (in the United States) it is natural to have a psychoanalyst, or a clergyman, or somebody you can trust, and you know, go and empty your garbage.' It is significant that she describes expressing feelings as emptying garbage — feelings are obviously something associated with the shameful, contaminated and abject. The Cuban women interviewed nevertheless managed to convey some sense of the restrictions of their culture. The authors wrote, 'These women came from a background of strict upbringing at home and at school, with their lives all but predetermined. Daughters were expected to live at home.' And to stay there. This was the case in my own experience. During a visit to my parents, my husband was bemused when my father took him aside and told him, 'Don't let Olga drive the car. Olga must not drive.' I was 35 at the time, and the mother of three. I had been driving, with an unblemished record, for 15 years.

What was particularly interesting in the interviews with Cuban American women was how these women grew

emotionally, partly because of the challenges posed by a culture that allowed women to be less dependent on their male relations and allowed both genders somewhat freer expression of the deeply personal.

Former psychoanalyst Alice Miller, in *For Your Own Good — the Roots of Violence in Child-Rearing*, writes that:

{To be able to} recognise the poisonous effects of ... upbringing and not balk at what they are ... requires a measure of tolerance which does not automatically obtain in every country, nor in certain families, where fanatical ideas on child rearing are applied beginning in infancy. A little less rigidity and a minimum of democracy are therefore needed if the suffering of the citizen in the state and the child in the family is to be articulated to any degree at all.<sup>19</sup>

These are some of the ideas that I set out to explore in my novels. If they are anything, they are a sort of *cri de coeur* against the emotional and physical abuse of children, which is one of the hallmarks of shaming and humiliation, and the widespread ignorance of what constitutes abuse. One of my central tenets is expressed in *The Rooms in My Mother's House*. This is about the father, Pedro, and his relationship with his adolescent children, Ana and Carlos:

Ana had learned to goad Pedro, to challenge him when he was in one of his rages. When he lifted his hand to hit her she said, Yes, that's right, hit a woman! You're having a bad day, a bad year, a bad life go ahead, take it out on me. She did not flinch, did not cry, did not take her eyes off his face. The look in them astonished Pedro and he could not believe her words. His hand wilted like a man's passion and he stopped hitting her so that he would

not have to hear her challenges. He roared that she was twisted and as ugly and insane as her Abuela Dolores, that they both had the same horse face and were both impossible. Then he walked away. But Carlos still flinched when he roared, still made to run when his hand snaked out. Carlos was thin and not quite as tall as Pedro and he was gentle, gentle and noble, and he infuriated Pedro beyond endurance — drove him *fuera de quicio* — each time he flinched. Pedro could not allow anything in his son that had been denied him, because that would have touched his deepest pain. To keep it buried, he had to repeat what had been done to him. Any weakness, any misdemeanour, any infraction had to be punished severely, any gentleness quashed. He had to make him a man. He had to beat Carlos, for the sake of young Pedro, who had once been beaten by his own parents.<sup>20</sup>

An authoritarian and restrictive upbringing shames the self and impinges on self-confidence, leading to a disassociation from our innermost feelings. If we are not allowed to express ourselves freely because of intimidation, humiliation and shaming in our early years, we learn to stifle our feelings. The self becomes lost to us; we become imprisoned in our own bodies, victims of the repression we have internalised. In severe cases, such as we see in Vargas Llosa's portrait of Trujillo and his sons, and in what is known about Fidel Castro, it leads to a cutting off from our social obligations and from fellow feeling, so that the individual is both anarchic, disrespectful of rules fairly governing social intercourse, and authoritarian, repeating the shaming and bullying that was the hallmark of his own upbringing.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Feast of the Goat*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).
- 2 See Jason Cowley, 'Dictators Be Damned', *Weekend Australian*, 15 June 2002.
- 3 Donald Nathanson, *The Many Faces of Shame*, (New York: Guildford Press, 1987); Stephen Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Gershen Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame*, (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1999).
- 4 Pattison, *Shame*, p. 88.
- 5 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 6 Pattison, *Shame*, p. 12.
- 7 Mario Vargas Llosa, *Chronicle of the Cuban Revolution: Making Waves*, (London: Faber and Faber, (1996, originally published 1962)) pp. 20–24.
- 8 Cowley, 'Dictators Be Damned'.
- 9 Gabriel García Márquez. *News of a Kidnapping*, (London: Jonathan Cape Books, 1997).
- 10 In March 2003, 75 dissidents were arrested in Cuba and sentenced to jail terms of up to 28 years. According to the *Melbourne Age* (4 September 2003) 'they had called for peaceful democratic reforms to Cuba's one-party system'.
- 11 Gabriel García Márquez, *My Friend, Fidel: An Encounter With Fidel*, Ocean Press, extracted in the *Sunday Age*, Agenda, 2 September 1990, pp. 1–2.
- 12 V.S. Pritchett, *The Spanish Temper*, (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1965, quoted in Georgie Anne Geyer, *Guerrilla Prince*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991)) p. 21.
- 13 Geyer, *Guerrilla Prince*, p. 25.
- 14 Geyer, *Guerrilla Prince*, p. 342.
- 15 Cowley, 'Dictators Be Damned'.
- 16 Vargas Llosa, *The Feast of the Goat*, p. 53.
- 17 Vargas Llosa, *The Feast of the Goat*, p. 46.
- 18 T. Doran, J. Satterfield, et al., *A Road Well Travelled: Three Generations of Cuban American Women*, (Fort Wayne, Indiana: The Latin American Educational Centre, 1988).
- 19 Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: The Roots of Violence in Child-Rearing*, (New York: Virago, 1987) p. xv.
- 20 Olga Lorenzo, *The Rooms in My Mother's House*, (Melbourne: Penguin, 1996) p. 348.