

Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls: Shattering the “Old World” Order in Julia Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*

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Julia Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a political novel, a record of the violence which led thousands of people into exile or to death in the hands of the Dominican government’s military police. In it, Álvarez documents the lives of four Dominican women caught in the maelstrom of Dominican politics and history, but she insists in her postscript to the women’s stories that “a novel is not...a historical document, but a way to travel to the human heart.” Through her fictional rendition of the Mirabal sisters’ stories, Álvarez claims to be presenting not the “real” historical women who sacrificed their lives for a better world but “the Mirabals of my creation.” Her purpose, she says, is “to immerse [her] readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that...can only be understood by fiction, only finally redeemed by the imagination” (*In the Time of the Butterflies* 324).

The imaginary women whom she creates are traditional upperclass Dominicans who are also good Catholics, devout, the kind of women who do not question the status quo and ask their father’s permission to attend the university. Throughout the novel, Álvarez documents, methodically, the sisters’ dedication to their religion, their families, and the traditional, albeit patriarchal, Dominican way of life. In their world, men rule, both in the private and public spheres, and their rule is seldom questioned or challenged. Through the Mirabal sisters’ revolutionary struggle against President Trujillo, however, Álvarez creates a new kind of Dominican woman who dares to challenge the “old world” order of the patriarchy without being too strident about it. The Mirabal sisters join a revolution not because they want to challenge the patriarchy but because it is the right thing to do. Through their involvement in the political movement against Trujillo’s tyranny, they redefine what it means to be a good Catholic and a good Dominican woman.

Because the Mirabal sisters are historical characters, much of the criticism written by Dominican critics focuses on the liberties taken by Álvarez in creating the fictional Mirabal sisters. Fernando Valerio Holguín argues in “Una reinterpretación de la historia” that, in writing this novel, Álvarez answers Neil Larsen’s call to write the definitive novel about Trujillo’s reign in “¿Cómo narrar el trujillato?” Valerio Holguín claims that Álvarez

“propone una alegoría política de la República Dominicana durante la dictadura de Trujillo,” an allegory in which “el cuerpo de las Mirabal se convierte en texto político gracias a la inscripción de lo público en lo privado y de lo político en el poético” because “la novela de Álvarez inserta la política y la historia en la vida privada de la familia Mirabal” (96). Valerio Holguín’s point is that Álvarez means to “devolverles el carácter de sujetos históricos” to the Mirabal sisters in order to “restituir el cuerpo político escamoteado por la leyenda y el mito” (95).

Of the three sisters who become revolutionaries, only Minerva dares to stray from the prescribed gender specific role of the Dominican female. She understands even as a girl in high school that something is wrong with the government in her country because people behave in ways that are not consistent with religious teaching or even decent human behavior. At the Mirabal sisters’ private Catholic school, for example, the talk is that girls disappear from school because they move on to live in homes provided by Trujillo. When her own father points out “a high iron gate and beyond it a big mansion with lots of flowers and the hedges all cut to look like animals,” he tells her, “Look, Minerva, one of Trujillo’s girlfriends lives there, your old schoolmate, Lina Lovatón.” Minerva’s immediate response is to question the president’s behavior. “But Trujillo is married,” she exclaims. Minerva’s father

Looked at [her] a long time before he said, ‘He’s got many of them, all over the island, set up in big, fancy houses. Lina Lovatón is just a sad case, because she really does love him, *pobrecita*.’ Right there he took the opportunity to lecture [her] about why hens shouldn’t wander away from the safety of the barnyard. (*Butterflies* 23)

Girls in Dominican society are not expected to “wander from the safety of the barnyard,” but when they do wander into the homes of powerful men the rest of the well-bred Dominican society pretends that nothing has happened. Minerva, however, is not capable of pretending.

Although three Mirabal sisters, Minerva, Patria, and María Teresa, join a revolution and are eventually murdered because they dare to challenge the rule of the Dominican patriarchy, they are not radical or subversive in any recognizable sense of the word. As girls, they attend Catholic school; as young adults, they look forward to marrying and having children. Their lives are ordinary by anyone’s standards. In fact, Minerva’s most radical expectation is that she be allowed to attend the university to study law, something denied to most Dominican women and especially to Dominican women of her class. In the 1950s and 1960s, the time when the events in the book take place, the roles of women as caretakers and housewives were clearly defined. It takes a special kind of emotional and religious awakening for the Mirabal sisters to join the struggle for liberation against Trujillo.

Perhaps because the characters in the novel are drawn as traditional and recognizably Hispanic women, some readers want to place Álvarez’s novel within the Latin American literary tradition. Gus Puleo argues in “Remembering and Reconstructing the Mirabal Sisters in Julia Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*” that in this novel “Álvarez places

herself within two of the oldest cultural traditions in Latin America—orality and the written chronicle” (Puleo 11). He explains that the “written chronicle” or *crónica* is “the one-dimensional and univocal record of society, in which society is defined as the mere result of a military or political movement.” The *crónica* emphasizes “the role of the witness who saw and now tells what actually happened and the role of the writer or compiler.” In Álvarez’s novel, *Dedé*, the one sister who does not become involved in political activities, is the long survivor, the witness who tells her sisters’ stories. The compiler or narrator is a *gringa dominicana* (*Butterflies* 3) whom most readers recognize as Julia Álvarez, the writer who returns to Santo Domingo to research and document the story. Gus Puleo recalls attending one of Álvarez’s lectures and watching slides of her visit to Santo Domingo during the time when she was researching the book. He alludes to Álvarez’s personal interest in the lives of the Mirabal sisters and calls her novel “a novelized autobiographical chronicle in English that deals with recovery, with recapturing a lost past and a lost self” (13). He also reminds his readers that bell hooks “describes this mode of storytelling as ‘a process of historization that does not remove women from history but enables [them] to see [themselves] as a part of history’” (quoted in Puleo 13).

Like Gus Puleo, Concepción Bados Ciria notes the importance of including the female voice in the Latin American *crónica*. In “*In the Time of the Butterflies*, by Julia Álvarez: History, Fiction, *Testimonio* and the Dominican Republic,” Bados Ciria argues that the novel “offers an alternative reading to the autobiographical canon” (408) and to the previous tradition of writing *testimonios*, which “until now [were] only written by men” (409). Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez, likewise, focuses on the inclusion of women’s voices in the Dominican Republic’s *crónicas*. She points out that the novel “represents Dominican history through women’s lives, a feature unavailable in traditional Spanish-language Dominican novels” (“Recovering a Space...” 264). She finds the novel to be “a beautiful tribute to intelligent women who struggle alongside their men, against governments that continue the Spanish colonial philosophy of an autocratic, elitist, and racist white power controlling the nation,” and she argues that

The Dominican woman, as well as her counterparts in other countries, needs to be found in the place she disappeared, her own context, her own participation in her struggle. Only in that space—between the West and the Third World, between patriarchy and imperialism—can the sexed subject speak. (“Recovering a Space...” 267)

That Julia Álvarez presents Dominican history through the lives of four women adds another dimension, one in which gender becomes important, to Dominican literature. Through this novel, Julia Álvarez introduces her country’s painful history to the world at large and, specifically, the English-reading world. For her, keeping the Mirabal sisters’ stories from being forgotten is significant; *sin querer*, however, she also provides clear evidence of the radicalizing influence of a traditional Catholic upbringing on women who understand what it means to have religion in their lives.

Julia Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* may not be a novel about religion, but it is a novel about women for whom religion means something. While Álvarez chronicles the

radical political choices made by the Mirabal sisters, she also documents the subtle process of radicalization that forces the three sisters to ask themselves, “what is a good Christian to do?” Their answer is simply that, when faced with a tyrannical oppressor, a good Christian must join the struggle for liberation. Their choice to join the revolution places their story within the realm of what Lois Parkinson Zamora defines as literature that carries “the conviction that historical crisis will have the cleansing effect of radical renewal” (*Writing the Apocalypse* 12). According to Parkinson Zamora,

Apocalypse is *not* merely a synonym for disaster or cataclysm or chaos. It is, in fact, a synonym for ‘revelation,’ and if the Judeo-Christian revelation of the end of history includes—indeed, catalogues—disasters, it also envisions a millennial order which represents the potential antithesis to the undeniable abuses of human history. (12)

Parkinson Zamora warns that “while it is true that an acute sense of temporal disruption and disequilibrium is the source of, and is always integral to, apocalyptic thinking and narration, so is the conviction that historical crisis will have the cleansing effect of radical renewal” (12).

An apocalypticist writer, Julia Álvarez means not only to document the chaos of history in Santo Domingo during the reign of General Trujillo, to answer Neil Larsen’s call and “write” the “trujillato,” but also to herald the advent of the new woman. Although the Mirabal sisters become victims of the chaos rampant in their country, their political involvement in the revolutionary movement against Trujillo’s reign allows them to make choices that other Dominican women of their class had never made before. Their awareness of Trujillo’s violations and their decision to oppose his tyranny through active participation radicalize them and, thereby, create a new woman capable of defying patriarchy and the status quo.

As a novelist documenting a political event, Julia Álvarez insists on investing the sacrifice of the Mirabals’ lives with historical meaning. Apocalypticist writers “use the historical vision and narrative forms of apocalypse to explore the relationship of the individual, the community, and the novel itself to the process of history” (4). They place their characters within the historical reality of their respective countries and move their stories toward an apocalyptic ending, but in order to study the writers whom she defines as apocalypticists, Parkinson Zamora first defines the different ways in which prophets and apocalypticists see history. According to her theory, “the prophet sees the future as arising out of the present and exhorts his listeners on the basis of an ideal to be realized in this world.” Parkinson Zamora points to the works of the early Spanish settlers and the Puritan writers who come to the New World to escape the chaos of the Old World and find a Paradise on earth. For these writers, exhortation for “the ideal to be realized in this world” becomes the message, but “the apocalypticist, on the contrary, sees the future breaking into the present, and this world being replaced by a new world under God’s aegis” (11).

Replacing the old world order with a better world is precisely what the Mirabal sisters are attempting to do in Julia Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*; however, Álvarez’s characters are not radical. They are ordinary women of a certain class and religion, and they

lived before the women's liberation movement could provide them with the language and the method for rebellion. Minerva, Patria, and Maria Teresa (Mate) are Catholic women in a patriarchal world. For them, revolution and liberation must come through the one thing they know best, their Catholic religion, which explains why Parkinson Zamora's theory of the apocalypticist writer resonates through Álvarez's novel. Álvarez's characters are such good Catholics that their stories become heavily invested in religious imagery and language; as a result, their choices and their fictional lives can only be understood through a clear understanding of what living like a Catholic means to the awakening revolutionary Catholic. Since the language and symbols of religion are all they know, they use it to question the roles prescribed to them by the Church and by their own social class.

A perfect example of how religious imagery and symbols help define the characters' rebellion is the chapter in which Patria joins Minerva and Mate in the revolutionary struggle against Trujillo. Patria's conversion from a traditional Catholic woman into a radical revolutionary takes place in a religious retreat in the mountains. There, she witnesses the slaughter of the innocent. Her revolutionary epiphany "happened on the last day of our retreat." Patria notes that "the shelling happened in a flash, but it seemed the chaos went on for hours. I heard moans, but when I lowered my chair, I could make out nothing in the smoke-filled room." She remembers "an eerie silence, interrupted only by the sound of far-off gunfire and the near by trickle of plaster from the ceiling." Like good Catholics,

Padre de Jesús gathered us in the most sheltered corner, where we assessed our damages. The injuries turned out to look worse than they were, just minor cuts from flying glass, thank the Lord. We ripped up our slips and bandaged the worst. Then for spiritual comfort, Brother Daniel led us through a rosary. When we heard gunfire coming close again, we kept right on praying. (161)

Patria's statement reveals the lack of involvement that characterized not only the church but also its members during the thirty-one years of Trujillo's reign of terror. When the gunfire is "far off," Catholics pray. Before too long, however, the gunfire gets too close for comfort.

As the people gathered in the room pray, the revolution rages on outside. The outside world barges in and forces itself on the people who had been gathered by their priest "in the most sheltered corner." That they are gathered "in the most sheltered corner" speaks volumes for the role of the church during Santo Domingo's time of crisis. Good Catholics found shelter away from the dangerous things happening outside the church as priest acted as if nothing was happening. On this day, however, Patria faces her own complicity in the events that take place. She remembers that

There were shouts, and four, then five, men in camouflage were running across the grounds towards us. Behind them, the same *campesinos* we'd seen on our walk and a dozen or more *guardias* were advancing. Armed with machetes and machine guns. The hunted crouched and careened this way and that as they headed towards the cover of the motherhouse. They made it to the outdoor deck.

I could see them clearly, their faces bloodied and frantic. One of them was badly wounded and hobbling, another had a kerchief around his forehead. A third was shouting to two others to stay down, and one of them obeyed and threw himself on the deck. But the other must not have heard him for he kept on running toward us. I looked in his face. He was a boy no older than Noris. Maybe that's why I cried out, 'Get down, son! Get down!' His eyes found mine just as the shot hit him square in the back. I saw the wonder on his young face as the life drained out of him, and I thought, Oh my God, he's one of mine! (161–162)

When the country is in chaos, no one is safe. Patria admits that, after the event, she “cried all the way down that mountain” as she “looked out the spider-webbed window of that bullet-riddled car at brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, one and all, my human family.” The good Catholic attempts to make sense of what happens, but she finds no answer. She cannot even find a hint from God when she tries to look “up at our Father, but [she] couldn't see His Face for the dark smoke hiding the tops of the mountains.”

What Patria learns on the last day of her retreat in the mountains is that there is no place to hide from injustice. The good Catholic must make choices. She admits that on her way down the mountain, she makes herself pray, but her “prayers sounded more like I was trying to pick a fight” with God. For some reason that she cannot yet understand, she is angry with God, but she is beyond asking why bad things happen to good people. On her way down that mountain, Patria tells God, “I'm not going to sit back and watch my babies die, Lord, even if that's what You in Your great wisdom decide” (162). The good Catholic who goes up the mountain to her safe religious retreat comes down as a radical revolutionary steeped in the knowledge that no one is safe. She learns to question not only what she has been taught to identify as God's will but also her own role as an instrument of His will.

Before her moment of epiphany in the mountains, Patria reassesses her life and her sisters' lives through what appears to be a symbol of security. This very revealing chapter opens with an almost religious account of the houses in which the sisters live.

Build your house upon a rock, He said, do my will. And though the rain fall and the floods come and the winds blow, the good wife's house will stand.

I did as He said. At sixteen I married Pedrito González and we settled down for the rest of our lives.

My boy grew into a man, my girl into her long, slender body like the blossoming mimosa at the end of the drive. Pedrito took on a certain gravity, became an important man around here. And I, Patria Mercedes? Like every woman of her house, I disappeared into what I loved, coming up now and then for air. I mean, an overnight trip by myself to a girlfriend's, a special set to my hair, and maybe a yellow dress.

I had built a house on solid rock, all right. (*Butterflies* 148)

The “good wife,” Patria, builds a house on “solid rock” and feels trapped by it because her social class requires that she refuse to see what is happening in her country. If she wants to

preserve her house and her family, she must ignore the obvious abuses taking place, but after eighteen years of marriage and security, Patria admits that “all of us were praying for a change this new year. Things had gotten so bad, even people like me who didn’t want anything to do with politics were thinking about it all the time” (149).

After many years of marriage, Patria realizes that she has taken her security for granted. Her solid rock home begins to seem less secure when she learns that Nelson, her teenage son, has been talking to his uncles about politics and may, in fact, be involved in the counter-revolutionary movement against Trujillo. The good wife/good mother fears for her son and begins to think about her own sisters’ lives through their houses, the only terms that she can understand. She complains that her sisters, Minerva and Mate, “were so different! They build their homes on sand and called the slip and slide adventure.” According to her, “Minerva lived in a nothing house...in that godforsaken town of Monte Cristi” (148), the distant town where Minerva and Manolo move so that they can better serve the revolution. Like Minerva, “Mate and Leandro had already had two different addresses in a year of marriage. Renters, they called themselves, the city word for the squatters we pity in the country” (149). Minerva’s and Mate’s homes are built on sand because they are redefining the role of the Dominican woman during the revolutionary period; although they are wives and mothers, they are revolutionaries first and good wives later.

Patria decides to fight Trujillo’s tyranny after she witnesses the killing of her country’s “babies” (162) during her religious retreat in the mountains. Soon after her conversion experience, she returns to her church to learn that she is not alone in her determination to fight the tyrant. It takes thirty years of tyranny to move the church to action, but little by little, a priest at a time, the church joins the struggle. As Patria attends a cultural gathering sponsored by her church, she finds that “the room was silent with the fury of avenging angels sharpening their radiance before they strike.” The priest and several of the people who had also lived through the experience in the mountain retreat “invited only a few of us old members whom—I saw later—they had picked out as ready for the Church Militant, tired of the Mother Church in whose skirts they once hid” (163). The experience in the mountain retreat radicalizes the people involved, and “the priests had decided they could not wait forever for the pope and the archbishop to come around.” Patria is surprised. She says that

I couldn’t believe this was the same Padre de Jesús talking who several months back hadn’t know (sic) his faith from his fear! But then again, here in that little room was the same Patria Mercedes who wouldn’t have hurt a butterfly, shouting, ‘Amen to the revolution.’

And so we were born in the spirit of the vengeful Lord, no longer His lambs.
(163–64)

Patria’s conversion, her radicalizing experience, comes through her involvement with the church. As a Christian, she cannot stand by and bear witness to the slaughter of the children, the young people who, like her son Nelson, joined the struggle and performed many of the most dangerous acts of defiance. Her religious convictions demand that,

pregnant as she is at the time of her conversion, she join the cause; thus, she speaks of her co-conspirators as “avenging angels” who are “born in the spirit of a vengeful Lord,” but the real message is that, like her sisters Mate and Minerva, Patria is no longer willing to play her socially prescribed role of the “good wife” at the expense of her conscience. She may not have been born a radical, but she becomes one.

Of the four Mirabal sisters, Minerva is the natural born rebel. She is the one who asks herself “What’s more important, romance or revolution?” and hears “a little voice [that] kept saying, *Both, both, I want both*” (86). When the Mirabal family is invited to a state dance in Trujillo’s honor, they realize that Trujillo has his eye on Minerva, the eldest of the four sisters. They try to get out of attending the dance, but they know that it is too risky an act to defy Trujillo by ignoring his invitation. Once at the dance, Trujillo asks Minerva to dance, an act that would have impressed most Dominican girls of Minerva’s class, but during the dance

He yanks me by the wrist, thrusting his pelvis at me in a vulgar way, and I can see my hand in an endless slow motion rise—a mind all its own—and come down on the astonished, made-up face. (100)

The slap on the face resonates through the room and sets in motion the chain of events that will determine the future of the Mirabal family. Shortly after the dance, Minerva’s father, Don Enrique Mirabal, is arrested. When he is finally released from jail, he “is such a pitiful sight. His face is gaunt, his voice shaky; his once fancy *guayabera* is soiled and hangs on him, several sizes too large” (112).

Don Enrique, whose only crime is being Minerva’s father, emerges from prison a broken man who greets his family speaking nonsense. Although he tells the family that he is “feeling much better,” he also adds, “I just hope the music hasn’t spoiled the yuccas while I’ve been gone.” His wife reminds him that they have not planted yuccas in years, but the family soon realizes that the old man’s mind is gone. When his wife asks him to explain his comment about the yuccas, his reply is, “every time there’s a party, half the things in the ground spoil. We’ve got to stop feeding the hogs. It’s all human teeth anyhow” (112). Thus Don Enrique becomes the first casualty in the struggle between Trujillo and Minerva Mirabal, between the tyrannical old order of Dominican men and the new Dominican woman.

Shortly after Don Enrique is released from prison, the Mirabal family must sign a letter of apology in Trujillo’s presence. Defeated, Minerva, Don Enrique, and Señora Mirabal are taken to the general’s office to sign their names to the dreaded letter. Minerva, however, will not leave well enough alone and manages to manipulate Trujillo into allowing her to attend the university. Having noticed two sets of dice, one loaded and one not loaded, sitting on the scales held by the statue of Justice, Minerva offers to roll the dice for her “dream of going to law school.” As it happens, the two sets of dice were a gift given to Trujillo by one of Minerva’s relatives, so Trujillo, knowing that one of the sets is loaded, agrees to roll the dice with another gambling Mirabal. “You win, you get your wish. I win, I get mine” (115), he tells her. Minerva, of course, picks up the loaded dice and wins the game, a win that guarantees that her parents can no longer object to her going to school.

Once Trujillo agrees to grant Minerva's wish, the father must also agree or risk incurring Trujillo's wrath. Not being a man of integrity, however, Trujillo thwarts Minerva's plan by allowing her to study at the university and receive her diploma but denying her the license to practice law in her country once she finishes her studies.

In spite of the spunk that leads her to defy the system, Minerva can only go as far as the men in her country are willing to let her go. She lives in a world where good Catholic girls are expected to protect their reputations, but slapping the wrong man for abusing that reputation can cost her and her family their freedom. Still, by the time she acquires her law degree, Minerva has become a central figure in the underground movement working against Trujillo's regime, which explains why Trujillo denies her the license. She has also married and given birth to a child, but she does this while becoming more and more involved in dangerous revolutionary activities. Through her involvement with the revolution, Minerva succeeds in redefining the role of the woman as wife and mother in the world that she helps to create.

As a young woman living in her parents' home, Minerva also redefines the role of the daughter when she discovers that her father has another family living near her own family home. Like Celia in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Minerva recognizes her own half sisters. She notices that

Every time I drove the Ford, these raggedy girls came running after me, holding out their hands, calling for mints.

I studied them. There were three that ran to the road whenever they heard the car, a fourth one sometimes came in the arms of the oldest. Four girls, I checked, three in panties, and the baby naked. One time, I stopped at the side of the road and stared at their Mirabal eyes. Who is your father?' I asked point blank. (85)

The answer to her question is that her own father is the girls' father, but Minerva reacts to the knowledge of her father's illegitimate children with sympathy rather than anger. She demands to be introduced to them, and she visits them often after their initial meeting. When her father realizes that his life is in danger and that he may die in Trujillo's prison, he asks Minerva to take over the job of providing a monthly check for the girls' support, a job that she performs until she herself becomes a prisoner.

The old-fashioned Dominican woman would never have helped support her father's illegitimate children, but Minerva not only delivers the monthly checks that her father asks her to deliver but she also makes sure that her sister Dedé knows to take money "out of her inheritance for those girls' education." Dedé is so moved by Minerva's act of compassion towards the illegitimate Mirabals that she also decides to "put in half" (211) of her own money, which is not much to begin with. The money provided by Minerva and Dedé allows Margarita, the eldest, to get a pharmacy degree. When she starts work as a pharmacist, she helps the other three sisters with their own education, an education which they owe entirely to Minerva's intervention in their lives. One of Minerva's first acts after her father is released from prison is to deliver the first check to his father's mistress and ask that the girls, who had

never attended school, be allowed to attend. The illegitimate girls thus benefit from Minerva's audacity and kindness, from her ability to see not class but people.

Patria, Minerva's sister, admits that she "had always kept [her] distance" from her father's illegitimate daughters because she "did not want to be associated with the issue of a *campesina* who had had no respect for the holy banns of matrimony or for the good name of Mirabal." Associating with a *campesina*, a farm girl beneath Patria's social class, is part of the reason why Patria cannot even consider acknowledging that the illegitimate children exist. Minerva, however, acts with acceptance and compassion towards the ones who would normally have been ostracized by the community, and her behavior reveals the new kind of woman that her revolutionary ideals are shaping. In the post-Trujillo Santo Domingo that Minerva wants to forge, the separation between the social classes will no longer be an issue, and the social stigma of illegitimacy will no longer separate families. In fact, in Minerva's case, it is Santicló, a cousin of her father's mistress, who smuggles the Mirabal family's care packages into prison during the many months of the women's imprisonment. Margarita Mirabal, the illegitimate family's oldest daughter, visits the Mirabal family home and offers her services to Patria. She tells Patria about her mother's cousin who works at La Victoria prison where the sisters are detained; she also tells her to leave the care packages with her at the pharmacy where she works, the pharmacy where Patria has been purchasing her medicine for years. Patria has probably been dealing with Margarita for years, but she has also been denying the family resemblance that Minerva recognizes and acknowledges at once.

That simple act of solidarity between the illegitimate family members and the legitimate family members breaks the code of behavior by which the Dominicans of the old world order lived. Necessity forces even the legitimate daughter, Patria, to accept the assistance provided by her father's illegitimate children, the ones whom she had never before acknowledged, and she tells herself

I sat down on the bench by the birds of paradise, and I had to laugh. Papá's other family would be the agents of our salvation! It was ingenious and finally, I saw, all wise. He was going to work several revolutions at one time. One of them would have to do with my pride. (210)

Whether the "He" who will work revolutions is her dead father or God is not very clear. What becomes clear is that Minerva's kindness to her father's illegitimate family brings the two families together and pays off in the way that the girls behave when the legitimate Mirabal sisters are in prison. Margarita Mirabal risks her job and her life to help her half sisters.

Minerva's acceptance of her father's illegitimate children and her new way of living as a fully involved citizen redefine the Dominican woman's role in Dominican society. In many ways, her life represents the new world order that she hopes to create after the tyrant has been defeated. Although she is a daughter, her life is not restricted by her parents' wishes. After she becomes a wife and mother, she still does not relinquish her involvement in the political struggle that she hoped would bring about a new way of life for her compatriots. Minerva's struggle represents the apocalypticist writer's ideal for a new world order, and in the process she also redefines the role of the woman in Santo Domingo. That

she pays for her efforts with her life simply reminds the reader of the cost of freedom in countries where political chaos reigns.

Julia Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a novel about revolutionary characters because it documents the revolutionary ways in which people deal with the tyranny of oppression. When Patria's husband, Pedrito, is arrested, he is not only physically tortured but he is psychologically tortured as well. His imprisonment is also used to torture the relatives who are presumably "free," not in prison. When Patria, in her attempt to find out what has happened to her husband, visits the office of Captain Peña, a presumed "friend of the family," and pleads for news about Pedrito, she realizes that the Captain "got some thrill out of having me plead for information." The Captain, however, tells her that

'Your husband was offered his freedom and his farm back—

'My heart leapt!

—if he proved his loyalty to El Jefe by divorcing his Mirabal wife.'

'Oh?' I could feel my heart like a hand making a fist in my chest. Peña's sharp, piglike eyes were watching me. And then he had his dirty little say. 'You Mirabal women must be something else'—he fondled himself—to keep a man interested when all he can do with his manhood is pass water!' (204)

Captain Peña's remark reminds one of the sadistic nature of tyrants, but it also stresses the fact that the Mirabal women are "something else." They are the new women of Santo Domingo, the ones who will not sacrifice their consciences to the socially prescribed roles of mothers and wives. When confronted with such a woman, a man like Captain Peña would naturally find nothing better to do with his "manhood" than pass water, but Pedro, Manolo, and Leandro know that their wives are equal partners in a revolutionary ideal for a better world.

Although the Mirabal sisters, the butterflies, help bring about an end to oppression, their one surviving sister, Dedé, questions the purpose of their sacrifice. As a character, Dedé also questions the novelist's purpose in writing the novel. Long after her sisters have been murdered, Dedé finds herself one day talking to Lío, an old friend who had also been involved in the revolutionary struggle. Lío, however, was lucky enough to leave Santo Domingo before he was arrested. She says that, through their conversation, they "are working their way towards the treacherous past, the horrible crime, the waste of young lives, the throbbing heart of the wound" (318). Lío had once dated Minerva, so his pain over the loss is as significant as Dedé's pain, but when he tells her to "look at what the girls have done," Dedé thinks,

He means the free elections, bad presidents now put in power properly, not by army tanks. He means our country beginning to prosper, Free Zones going up everywhere, the coast a clutter of clubs and resorts. We are now the playground

of the Caribbean, who were once its killing fields. The cemetery is beginning to flower. (318)

For Dedé, the sacrifice of her sisters' lives means more than whatever it presumably accomplishes because, in Santo Domingo, as in most Latin American and Caribbean countries, one bad government succeeds another one. There is no antidote for what ails politics in these countries, and people like Dedé have resigned themselves to simply surviving as best as they can by leaving the country or staying and waiting it out. Like the angel in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," they are witnesses to the wreckage of their countries and their lives, but they do not become active participants in effecting change.

Dedé's skepticism about the role played by her sisters in Santo Domingo's history becomes more evident when she overhears two apparently wealthy young women, members of the new elite, discussing a revolution in another country. "'Oh yes,' I hear one of the women say, 'we spent a revolution there'" as if spending the revolution in a Latin American or Caribbean country were the same as spending time in a vacation resort. The casual tone and the flippancy of the woman's statement belie the sacrifice of human lives that revolution requires. The young women overheard by Dedé have no clear understanding of the sacrifice made by the Mirabal sisters. They commodify it because they understand only what their sacrifice accomplishes; the country has prospered. For the ones like Dedé who suffered through the sleepless nights of worrying about her sisters and later crying about their deaths as well as raising their orphaned children, the sacrifice is measured in the private grief that cannot be assuaged. Dedé says that she "can see [the young women] glancing at us, the two old ones, how sweet they look under that painting of Bidó. To them we are characters in a sad story about a past that is over" (318). For Dedé, however, the past is not over. She lives with the loss of her sisters every day of her life.

When Dedé wonders, "Was it for this, the sacrifice of the butterflies?" (318), she questions not only the purpose of her sisters' lives and deaths but the way in which Julia Álvarez intends her novel to be read. Álvarez admits in the postscript to her novel that

When as a young girl I heard about the 'accident,' I could not get the Mirabals out of my mind. On my frequent trips back to the Dominican Republic, I sought out whatever information I could about these brave and beautiful sisters who had done what few men—and only a handful of women—had been willing to do. During that terrifying thirty-one-year regime, any hint of disagreement ultimately resulted in death for the dissenter and often for members of his or her family. Yet the Mirabals had risked their lives. I kept asking myself, what gave them that special courage? (323)

Clearly, Julia Álvarez intends her novel to be read as a *crónica*, a testimony to the things that were done during the thirty-one years of Trujillo's regime; however, she also creates in Dedé a character who catalogues what is left of her sisters' lives after their ordeal is over and, thereby, questions not only the significance of her sisters' sacrifice but the meaning of Álvarez's *crónica*.

Having been the only one to survive, Dedé is also the only one left to pick up her sisters' remains and their personal belongings. Unlike her sisters, she stands by, like Walter Benjamin's angel, and simply witnesses what is happening in her country. After having to collect what remains of her sisters, however, Dedé begins to count "the losses. I can count them up like the list the coroner gave us, taped to the box of things that had been found on their persons or retrieved from the wreck." She admits that what remains is "the silliest things, but they gave me some comfort," and she calls out the items on the list "like a catechism, like the girls used to tease and recite 'the commandments' of their house arrest" (314). For Dedé, her sisters' lives have become

One pink powder puff.
One pair of red high-heeled shoes.
The two-inch heel from a cream-colored shoe.

After the women are gone, the only tangible things that remain are their personal belongings, but these things are not enough. She can find no meaning in their sacrifice because she never shares their revolutionary zeal. Dedé sees only the waste in the loss of her sisters' lives.

While reading through the list of what remains, Dedé also catalogues a different type of loss. After the sisters are murdered, the Mirabal family dissolves, one person at a time, and Dedé catalogs those losses too, beginning with the collapse of her own marriage. She writes that Jaimito, her husband, who also had had no involvement in the revolution,

went away for a time to New York. Our harvests had failed again, and it looked as if we were going to lose our lands if we didn't get some cash quick. So he got work in a *factoría*, and every month, he sent home money. I am ashamed after what came to pass to say so. But it was gringo dollars that saved our farm from going under. (314)

The gringo money that once helped to sustain Trujillo's government becomes Dedé and Jaimito's salvation, but it also helps to bring home the point that their marriage could not survive what had happened. Dedé catalogues the remains as if they were a litany because she must grasp the meaning of what has happened by enumerating what is left. Reality, however, interferes with her list because the fact remains that, for her and all the others who survive, life goes on. The farm must be saved; the children must be fed.

The catalogue of her sisters' private belongings allows Dedé to also catalogue the personal changes through which the surviving members of the family evolve. Clearly, the revolution changes more than the lives of the revolutionaries involved in the struggle. Dedé says that when her husband, Jaimito, returns from New York, "he was a different man. Rather, he was more who he was. I had become more who I was, too...we had already started on our separate lives" (314-15). As her own personal life with her husband falls apart, the list continues with

One screwdriver.
One brown leather purse.
One red patent leather purse with straps missing.
One pair of yellow nylon underwear.
One pocket mirror.
Four lottery tickets. (315)

The end result of the historical sacrifice of the butterflies' lives is a personal tragedy as "we scattered as a family, the men, and later the children, going their separate ways."

After the women are murdered, the men lose their bearings. The first to go is Manolo, Minerva's husband, "dead within three years of Minerva." The revolutionary struggle had been the focus of Minerva's and Manolo's lives; without it and without Minerva, Manolo could not function. He goes "off to the mountains" to continue the fight for the socialist society that he and Minerva once envisioned, but he does not live long. The other two surviving husbands, Leandro, Mate's husband, and Pedrito, Patria's husband, fare differently.

After Manolo died, Leandro got out of politics. Became a big builder in the capital. Sometimes when we're driving through the capital, Jacqueline points out one impressive building or another and says, 'Papá built that.' She is less ready to talk about the second wife, the new, engrossing family, stepbrothers and sisters the age of her own little one.(315)

Leandro starts a new life and becomes successful. Pedrito also attempts to do the same, but the memory of his past life haunts him. Dedé claims that Pedrito

Had gotten his lands back, but prison and his losses had changed him. He was restless, couldn't settle down to the old life. He remarried a young girl, and the new woman turned him around, or so Mamá thought. He came by a lot less and then hardly at all. How all of that, beginning with the young girl, would have hurt poor Patria.(315)

For the men, life without their revolutionary wives becomes as significant a struggle as it is for Dedé. Although they attempt to carry on by remarrying and starting new families, the ghost of the past stays with them. They sever their ties with their past by visiting as little as possible, but the memory of their experiences never goes away.

For Dedé, the only comfort available is the list of what remains, and she continues the count by acknowledging that her sisters, at the moment of their deaths, had with them,

One receipt from El Gallo.
One missal held together with a rubber band.
One man's wallet, 56 *centavos* in the pocket.
Seven rings, three plain gold bands, one gold with a small diamond stone, one gold with an opal and four pearls, one man's ring with garnet and eagle insignia,

one silver initial ring.
One scapular of our Lady of Sorrows.
One Saint Christopher's medal. (315)

History having taken its course, the wreckage that remains is made up of things that seem to have no meaning in and of themselves. Only the ones who recognize the items as part of the whole, items belonging to the living women who once wore the shoes and the rings, can actually gauge the meaning of the wreckage.

Through the catalogue of her sisters' belongings, a very personal statement of loss, Dedé questions the purpose of Julia Álvarez's novel. While Álvarez, as a writer, seems to assume the task of interpreting Dominican history for her audience and investing the sacrifice of the Mirabal sisters with historical meaning, Dedé, as the surviving sister, denies that there is any meaning other than the losses suffered by the family. The author and her character disagree on what it means to be an active participant in the historical process. The writer may want to romanticize history to invest it with meaning; she may want to argue that freedom is worth the sacrifice of human life, but the people who survive the wreckage of history know better than to think that there is anything more important than the loss of their loved ones. For Dedé, Santo Domingo's freedom is not worth her sisters' lives. In spite of Dedé's ambivalence about the purpose of her sisters' death, the most important message emerging from Julia Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* is the significance of the Mirabal sisters' resistance to oppression and the sacrifice of their lives. Through their stories, Álvarez presents a new woman who is willing to defy the old world order to redefine herself and the role of Dominican women in the process. The message clearly is that Santo Domingo is a better place because women like Minerva, Patria, and María Teresa are not content to merely witness the wreckage of history but find a way to act and leave their marks on their world.

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