



**Women in Narcoliterature: Analysing Samantha Valdes in Elmer Mendoza's Silver
Bullets and The Acid Test**

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Abstract

Narconovels are often notoriously known for their base and questionable portrayal of women. At first glance, Samantha Valdes, the leader of the Pacific cartel in Elmer Mendoza's narconovels *Silver Bullets* and *The Acid Test*, appears contrary to this representation. She strikes as the perfect example of a powerful female character – determined, decisive and ruthless. However, most other women in these novels have stereotypically sexist descriptions: they are described primarily by their looks and secondly in a manner which can be classified as impulsive, indecisive and generally, untrustworthy.

This paper will look at the characterisation of Samantha Valdes in the novels *Silver Bullets* and *The Acid Test*, and examine the factors that make her stand out from other women in the series. Using Judith Butler's seminal article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" as the theoretical framework, this paper speculates that her characterisation is based more on her post and less on her gender. Mendoza attributes performative masculine elements of a capo to her character, a position held normally by men. Using Butler's theorization on gender and performativity, this paper will also look at

the characterisation of the major female characters in the novel to understand that the characterisation of Samantha Valdes is akin to a man because of her position of capo, and not with the aim of empowering women.

Keywords: Narcoliterature, women, Latin America, narconovels, Performativity

Introduction:

Academician and researcher Elsa Ivette Jimenez Valdez in her article *Mujeres, narco y violencia: resultados de una guerra fallida* gives a damning verdict about the relationship between women, the drug trafficking syndicates and narcoculture in one very simple sentence – “Narcoculture is misogynistic”¹. According to Valdez, in the social construct of drug trafficking organisations, otherwise known as cartels, women are generally perceived to be little more than objects of decoration. For younger cartel members, women are only good enough as objects for sexual release (Valdez 109). Therefore, the cultural production around the criminal phenomenon of drug trafficking in the northern parts of Mexico also tends to skew misogynistic narratives while trying to portray women. Narcoliterature, the literary aspect of the broader narcoculture phenomenon, has amassed public attention across the past three decades in Mexico. It has also historically had an extremely complicated history of portrayal of women in its pages. Over the last thirty odd years, since the original “boom” of narcoliterature in the early 90s, plenty of works have emerged that not only portrays women in an extremely misogynistic manner, but also have a certain degree of fascination towards femicides within their pages. This suggests a kind of enjoyment of the author, as he writes about gruesome ways of killing women in the pages of their novels for the amusement of the audience.

¹ Translated from Spanish original.

Take for example the case of the novel *Cementerio de trenes* (2001) by Mario Trejo Gonzalez writing under the pseudonym of “Gonzalo Martré.” In his article, *Restos del Narco: el impulso necropornográfico en la narconovela Mexicana*, Glen Close posits that Mexican narconovels have been using a style of writing which he terms as “necropornographic.” In this, authors combine the graphic pornographic writing style of the pulp fiction genre with the central theme of violent deaths to capture audience interest (Close 82). The target of most of these necropornographic depictions of violent deaths are the women characters of the novels (Close 84). To prove this initial hypothesis, Close takes the example of the novel *Cementerio de trenes*. Written in primary narration, the protagonist of the novel is a mobster from Sinaloa named Jesús Malverde Chandler who has been tasked by a drug cartel to retrieve a stolen shipment of cocaine from the national police. Throughout the length of the novel, Malverde Chandler rapes and kills every single woman he encounters (Close 85). The novel includes the scene of a gratuitous rape and murder of two non-commissioned female police officers by the protagonist, narrated completely from the perspective of the protagonist with a hint of black comedy (Close 86). But the worst instance of gratuitous violence in the novel doesn’t appear till the end of the novel, where Chandler gets betrayed by his love interest Sirenia and decides to “punish” her for her betrayal by brutally raping her and finally breaking her neck as he orgasms.

Cementerio de trenes is hardly the only novel which is guilty of including extremely graphic scenes of violence against women and does not criticize the perpetrator of the violence. Author Rolo Diez’s novel *Mato y Voy* also seems to take a certain sense of pride and pleasure in depicting gratuitous violence towards women in its pages with certain scenes comparable to that of snuff films. The novel centers around the killing of a U.S. pornographer and one of his actresses, with aspects of cartel activity sprinkled all across the story. The novel begins with the scene of the assumed murder of an adolescent actress, where the drugged woman is put in

front of a camera and is disrobed by multiple men. The description stops just before the gangrape. Throughout the rest of the novel, it is revealed that the dead pornographer provided girls for rape and torture in front of the camera, oftentimes till their deaths. The investigators also find the body of the dead actress which is horribly mutilated. The novel ends with the continuation of the first chapter, with the imminent gangrape of the actress in question. However, as all hope seems lost, the scene is invaded by multiple policemen who capture the would-be perpetrators. But in a major plot twist, instead of helping and rescuing the helpless actress, the policemen beat up and rape the woman, before stabbing her to death.

To his credit, Élmer Mendoza, the focus of this research paper, does not usually rely on such scenes of gore in order to capture the audience's imagination as his contemporaries do. This is not to say that Mendoza, over the course of his long and illustrious career, has not been guilty of maintaining some of the narrative beats that have been discussed in this section. In his novel *Firmado con un Klinex*, published in the year 2009, the titular detective Edgar "el Zurdo" Mendieta is called upon to investigate a spate of suicides amongst women, where the victims seem to be satisfied and happy. Initially, it is insinuated that the culprit is feminism, as by committing suicide the women in question are taking the ultimate ownership of their own selves. However, eventually it is revealed that the women were manipulated by certain people to take their own lives. This particular novel also includes scenes which can be classified as necropornographic. In a particular scene, a naked young woman is about to commit suicide by administering herself with a lethal injection while being watched by a bearded man from the corner of the room. The reader sees this scene from the man's perspective, which suggests voyeurism and a twisted sexual tinge. In this entire scene Mendoza meticulously describes the lady in question all the way to her clitoris and carefully mentions that the man watching is excited by the scene of suicide unfolding in front of his very eyes. This type of a scene further proves that the problematic and misogynistic portrayal of women in narconovels is more of an

industry-wide issue that permeates through the writings of multiple famous and celebrated authors.

Women in the novels *Silver Bullets* and *the Acid Test*.

In lieu of the discussion of the shocking rate of mortality of women in narconovels, women also tend to die more often than not in the novels which that this paper focuses on—namely *Silver Bullets* and *the Acid Test*. In fact, a dead woman and the mystery surrounding her death forms the entire main plot of the latter novel. This section looks at some of the main women characters that appear in the first two novels in this celebrated series by the author Élmér Mendoza, their lives and characterizations, and at times, their unfortunate demises.

Starting off linearly with the first novel *Silver Bullets*, it introduces the reader to the first important woman character of the novel – Paola Rodriguez. She is the ex-lover of the murder victim for this novel, Bruno Canizales. The mystery of the plot centres around Paola discovering the dead body when she arrives at the Canizales' house with murderous intentions. Finding him dead, she returns home, reminisces about their shared love, and then promptly commits suicide by shooting herself in the head. Functionally, the life of Paola Rodriguez serves very little purpose in the overarching plot of the story, save to establish a couple of side characters which then branch off to a separate subplot that acts as a red herring for the detective, Edgar Mendieta. Even in her death, Paola Rodriguez is subjected to the male gaze, with the detective self-reflecting on her beauty when he views her corpse before the funeral. Mendieta brings along a forensic expert, characterized as a notorious womanizer, who also comments rather loudly on the beauty of the cadaver, much more crudely than the detective. Laura Frias is another minor female character and a friend of the deceased Canizales, who is used in the beginning of the novel to give some necessary background about the characters. She ends up giving a rather scathing opinion about Paola's character, presenting her as a suicidal, hysteric

and self-destructive woman who was prone to extreme emotional outbursts when it came to her relationship with Canizales.

Paola Rodriguez is far from the only character that is characterized as the stereotypical hysteric woman in the first novel. The lover of Samantha Valdes, Marianna Kelly, also gets characterized as a person prone to emotional outbursts by Laura Frias. Laura recounts the incident where Kelly threatened to kill Canizales with a pistol to force some distance between Samantha Valdes and Canizales. In the overarching plot, Marianna Kelly's character has very little impact, acting as yet another red herring for the detective Mendieta to chase. What is curious is that this characterization of women as emotional creatures prone to making impulsive, and often violent choices is a theme that carries across not throughout this novel, but also across the remaining three novels in the series. True to form, Marianna Kelly also dies eventually. However, her death takes place in the third novel, Name of the dog, and the circumstances and the consequences resulting from her demise are fascinating from an academic perspective and unfortunately, outside the scope of this article.

Another character that has a major part in the first novel is Goga Fox. Unlike the previous two characters discussed in this section, Goga Fox is incredibly important to the central plot and mystery of the first novel. Appearing for the first time around the middle of the first novel, the narrative immediately reveals that Fox and the detective Edgar Mendieta share a romantic past. From this point, she acts as a distraction in Mendieta's life, as he focuses on rekindling his affair with Fox rather than solving the mystery behind Bruno Canizales' death². Fox, for her part, leads on Mendieta, and since the reader sees Goga through the eyes of the detective, there are more instances of sexualization due to the male gaze. Goga Fox and

² In defense of the detective Mendieta, by this point of the story he had been very clearly instructed to drop the investigation behind the death of Bruno Canizales by his superiors.

Mendieta end up reestablishing their passionate relationship, but in the final chapters, in a massive twist that comes slightly out of the left field, it is revealed that not only is Goga Fox married, but she and her husband were accomplices in the murder of Bruno Canizales. Once this is revealed to the readers, the light in which Goga Fox is shown changes quickly. Now she is characterized as the quintessential femme fatale; both in her words and in her actions, she becomes a manipulative and conniving person who is not afraid to kill people to satisfy her sick urges. This characterization of women as manipulative and deceitful elements is also something that tends to repeat in the later novels.

Keeping in line with its predecessor, the second novel in the series the Acid Test also sets up the central mystery of the novel. This time, the dead body belongs to a Brazilian exotic dancer, Mayra Cabral de Melo, otherwise known as Roxana. The novel, in fact, opens with the scene of her death that reflects on some of her final thoughts as she is led by the murderer to her inevitable demise. Right after killing her, the murderer makes the gruesome choice of mutilating his victim's body by cutting off one of her nipples and keeping it as a sort of macabre souvenir. Early into the novel, Roxane and the detective Edgar Mendieta have spent a short amount of time together in Mazatlán. Roxane's characterisation is almost entirely constructed by the inner thoughts and memories of Mendieta during his short acquaintance with her.

Since the character in question is an exotic dancer with multiple lovers, it gives the characters inside the novel a sort of carte blanche to comment relentlessly on her body, which according to the testimony of multiple characters was the definition of perfection. By the end of the novel, one does not know much about Roxane except that she was gorgeous, a little on the jealous side, slept with multiple extremely powerful men and was extremely kind towards Mendieta. The last reason forms the entire crux of Mendieta's decision to solve the mystery of her death. Mendieta also appears to be motivated by returning the cut off nipple back to her

body, thus re-establishing the wholeness of her body. This again, suggests the valuation of a woman's body over other factors like character and personality.

Other female characters throughout the story, are again either characterised as people prone to emotional outbursts or as untrustworthy femme fatales. Patricia Olmedo is a character inserted into the story for fulfilling both the stereotypes in one go. Patricia, or Paty Olmedo, first appears as a named character in chapter 12. Her introductory paragraph is an excellent case study on all the problematic ways women are characterised between the pages of Mexican narconovels. The tell-tale symptoms are all present – the overtly sexual nature of the physical descriptions, including the mention of the edges of a tattoo "...on her pubis."³ and the readers get a sense of what the detective is feeling regarding this encounter immediately in the next sentences. "Lovely. Perfect body. Mendieta felt what you might expect."⁴ These sort of comments and remarks on the bodies of women are quite commonplace across this series of novels. In Paty Olmedo's introductory scene, she arrives at the police station to confess to killing her father Fabián Olmedo. Paty cites her general hatred towards her father as the reason behind her committing the crime. This reasoning, along with Mendieta's reaction to it, makes her look like a petulant child. Moreover, in an environment where murders and assassinations are commonplace occurrences, Paty is the only person across the two books to have a failed attempt on taking someone's life, as Fabián Olmedo was wearing a bulletproof vest when he was shot by his daughter. As a result, Paty Olmedo appears incompetent in addition to being petulant.

Samantha Valdes: A Look through the Prison of Performative Masculinity.

³ *The Acid Test*, quoted from the official English translation by Mark Fried. Page 86.

⁴ Ibid.

In the middle of all the representational issues that women face in the novels of Élder Mendoza, including the subtle and bodily misogyny, the character of Samantha Valdes, seems to be the exception, at first glance. Prominent from the beginning of the novel series, she plays a major part in both the novels. She appears in the climax in the first novel and gives the much needed armed support to Mendieta for the climatic fight of the second novel. She also becomes the supreme leader of the Pacific cartel after her father, Marcelo Valdes, dies in the second novel. Hence, she is usually considered as an extremely rare example of a strong female character done well in the pages of a narconovel. In this section, I shall attempt to argue that contrary to expectation, Samantha Valdes is characterised similar to the other women that appear in the novels. Her characterisation only undergoes the drastic empowering change after she becomes the leader of the Pacific cartel. Using Judith Butler's essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", this paper tries to argue that the sudden change in characterization of Samantha Valdes as the series progresses to the second book is due to Mendoza ascribing her with attributes normally associated with a capo, a position normally held by men.

In her phenomenal essay, Butler writes the following regarding the performative nature of gender:

In order to describe the gendered body, a phenomenological theory of constitution requires an expansion of the conventional view of acts to mean both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted. In other words, the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts. (Butler 521)

From these lines, it is clear that Butler views gender differently from the conventional perspective. According to her, gender is not solely dependent on the body and the performative

aspect of gender is equally important. This performative aspect of gender can be akin to a performance act, and this performance can ascribe aspects of a different gender on to the body. A reading of Samantha Valdes' character along these lines also makes important revelations.

To find out if Samantha Valdes has been ascribed characteristics associated with capos, a position normally held by men, readers should be able to notice a marked shift in her characterization at a particular point in the two novels. Hence, this section looks at the character of Samantha Valdes and studies the way she is written in the first and second books. It also focuses on comparing and contrasting her behavior in two extremely significant incidents that take place at the climax of the first novel, *Silver Bullets* and right before the climax of the second novel, *The Acid Test*.

As already established in the previous section, women in these novels tend to fall under a few broad categories – emotional, incompetent, hysteric and prone to outbursts or simply as untrustworthy femme fatales. When Samantha Valdes first appears as a character in the novel *Silver Bullets* in chapter 6, her father and the leader of the Pacific cartel, Marcelo Valdes, assumes that his daughter was behind the assassination of Bruno Canizales. It is clear from the interaction that follows immediately that there is a definite difference in approach when it comes to business between the father and the daughter:

The old man shook his head, disapproving. Pa, it was necessary, he had me at the end of my rope, besides, you intimidated him several times, don't you remember? When you speak to me, do so properly, don't you forget that you owe me respect and that this is an honorable home, his pale face had turned bright red;... this will be the last time you take care of somebody without my consent, and start behaving like a decent woman, don't think I approve of the life you lead... and if I had any dealings with him it was to protect you, don't forget that I am on good terms with his father. (Mendoza 30-31)

While Samantha Valdes defends the assassination of Bruno Canizales, terming it as something that was necessary, Marcelo Valdes vehemently disagrees with that justification and admonishes his daughter severely. In this particular interaction between the daughter and the father, Samantha comes off as someone impulsive, with the more tactical and experienced Marcelo Valdes. Although he too is prone to emotional outbursts of anger, he is portrayed overcoming himself and appears as the more calculative person who plays the long game. The narrative follows a similar pattern when both of them interact again in a later chapter. Chapter 32 begins with Marcelo Valdes talking on the phone with Samantha and admonishing her for demanding money to buy a new yacht. Although she does eventually get the money from her father, she comes off as extremely childish in the process, akin to a rich, spoilt child asking for gifts from her father rather. This is very different from what a ruthless drug lord, the second in line to the Pacific Cartel needs to be.

Comparing these instances to the first time Samantha Valdes appears in the second novel, readers can immediately sense a jarring shift in the characterisation of Samantha. By the seventh chapter of the *Acid Test*, Marcelo Valdes is clearly too ill to run the daily functions of the cartel, and hence Samantha is somewhat the de facto leader of the organization. Gone are the tantrums and her petulant behaviour that Marcelo Valdes keeps associating Samantha Valdes with in *Silver Bullets*. Now she holds a high-level meeting with a smuggler named Leo McGiver, securing arms and ammunitions for protection of the cartel and also buying his loyalty so that she could keep an eye out on all her potential competitors.

This is not the only noticeable change early into the second book when it comes to Samantha Valdes. One key change that is almost immediately noticed is the lack of any further glimpses into her personal life. In *Silver Bullets*, one gets constant reminders that although Samantha is next in line to the Pacific Cartel, she has a personal life of her own, enriched by

the presence of her son and her romantic partner, Marianna Kelly. However, both these characters almost entirely disappear from the next part of the series *The Acid Test*. The lack of any new interactions between Samantha Mariana Kelly or her son is a clear attempt to not show the former in a more relaxed, personal environment. Every time Valdes appears from this point in the story, she appears from the place of the official position of a cartel leader. Even when Kelly dies in the third book, it is Valdes's fury that the narration focuses on through the violent actions of the cartel, without a moment of mourning by her. All this is an attempt to not show the potentially sensitive side of the cartel leader, which can be perceived as a weakness by the people around her.

Something similar is done by Plutarch in his book *Life of Pyrrhus*. Analysing the aspect of performative masculinity in the meeting between an infant Pyrrhus and the king Glaucius in Plutarch's *Life of Pyrrhus*, Leon suggests how the meeting place between the two was a careful narrative choice by the author. Pyrrhus and Glaucius meet in the presence of Glaucius's wife and away from the official court, which allows Glaucius to show a more affectionate side to his character towards the infant Pyrrhus in a setting where he doesn't need to hide his sensitive side, like he would have had to do in front of his courtiers in a more official setting (Leon 185). This is to say that the only place a character does not need to show their masculinity while performing the duties of a head of organisation/state is in an informal, personal setting. These informal, personal settings disappear entirely from the life of Samantha Valdes as soon as she assumes the role of the cartel leader. This suggests the taking up of a role by Valdes that attempts to highlight masculinity rather than the 'feminine weakness' that narconovels have a history of showing.

We also see key differences in the way the character of Samantha Valdes functions in situations that lead to violence. Having the capability to cause extreme violence is a pre-

requisite for being a drug trafficker in any level, let alone the head of a cartel. Hence, it is quite interesting to study the events that lead to the violence involving Samantha Valdes in *Silver Bullets* and the *Acid Test*. In the novel *Silver Bullets*, the instance of violence involving Samantha Valdes comes at the climax of the novel, when she arrives at Mariana Kelly's house along with the latter, completely unannounced, only to discover that the detective Edgar Mendieta had discovered the killers of Bruno Canizales to be Goga Fox and her husband Renee. When Samantha understands the situation, she takes the instantaneous, cold-blooded decision of killing both Goga Fox and her husband in revenge, simply because Samantha's son was fond of Canizales and his death had hurt the child. Despite the violent nature of her decision, her decision to kill the murderers still comes off as impulsive, or at least one that was made without much putting much thought put into the decision-making process. This also happens to be something that is consistent in the characterization of the majority of the women in the books.

A very different kind of violence occurs in chapter 42 of the second novel, the *Acid Test*. In this instance, Foreman Castelo, who runs a local guns-for-hire agency, hosts a group of cartel leaders in his house for a party. Here, the cartel leaders decide to split from the Pacific Cartel post the death of Marcelo Valdes, and rebel against the newly wielded authority of Samantha Valdes. However, Samantha Valdes and her cartel play spoilsport, ambushing the convoy of the rival cartel leaders and killing them all, with Samantha personally executing her biggest rival in the region, Eloy Quintana. As Eloy Quintana waits at gunpoint, to be executed by Samantha, he says almost in reverence, "You are just like your father"⁵. This single sentence makes a comparison of the female capo with a pre-existent ruthless male authority. This not only legitimizes the reign of Samantha, but also works as a sign of respect which suggests that despite Samantha's femininity, she can be as ruthless as a male capo. Later, it is revealed that

⁵ *The Acid Test*, quoted from the official English translation by Mark Fried, page 266.

Foreman Castelo, the man responsible for setting up the meeting between the rebel cartel leaders, had been an informant for Samantha Valdes before he rebelled. This works to remove the impulsive nature of the assassination of the rebel cartel leaders and gives it a look of a precise, calculated plan executed to perfection by a mastermind. This is far removed from the meek manner in which Samantha is portrayed throughout *Silver Bullets*.

Conclusion:

As we have seen in the above sections, narcoliterature clearly has a big problem when it comes to representing women. Often times women are killed, brutally and perversely, by the protagonists of the novels with whom the readers are supposed to sympathise, giving the novels a snuff movie aesthetic. The novels that are not guilty of doing this are often guilty of still killing women in their pages, not to mention the constant misogyny and their characterization as impulsive and violent. Very few women characters, like that of Samantha Valdes, appear in the pages of narconovels for being different from other women characters. But unfortunately, in the case of Samantha, the author codes her character female in *Silver Bullets*, where her characterization follows the normal stereotypical routes of women in narconovels. This characterization goes through a massive shift once Mendoza codes Samantha Valdes to be the capo of a cartel, thus ascribing the opposite of the stereotypes that were associated with her in the previous novel. Judith Gardiner, in her seminal article *Female Masculinity and Phallic Women* insists that it would be intellectually dishonest to assume every bourgeoisie woman running a business to be masculine (Gardiner 618). However, in this case, the change in coding of Samantha's characteristics is clearly visible. Samantha goes from just any other woman in the first novel to a ruthless capo in the next novel, and this shift is due to the authorial intent of ascribing performative male characteristics of a capo to the pre-existing character of Samantha Valdes.

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