

The Politics of Womanhood: The Mirabal Sister's Resistance

The Americas

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Abstract: The Mirabal Sisters, Patria, Minerva, María Teresa, and Dedé, lived during one of the most repressive times in modern Dominican history, the Trujillo Regime. Their lives were marked by political instability, violence against women, and resistance. Through an analysis of both primary and secondary sources, including newspaper articles, Dedé Mirabal's memoir, and journal articles, this paper argues that the Mirabal sisters, especially Minerva Mirabal, challenged Spanish-Colonial and Dominican ideals of womanhood through their education, politics, and questioning of masculine authority. Following a brief history on the Trujillo Dictatorship and his relationship with women, the paper establishes what womanhood meant in Dominican society through examining

colonial foundations of gender norms and directives of the Trujillo government. Using this definition, the paper then seeks to prove the Mirabal Sisters challenged these ideals and concludes with modern context of the international importance of the Mirabal sisters. Their influence continues to remain salient in society today, notably through literary references such as Julia Alvarez's 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Junot Diaz's 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Additionally, the anniversary of the death of three of the sisters at the hands of the regime, November 25, stands as the official International Day of Nonviolence Against Women, revealing their global impact.

Patria, Minerva, María Teresa, and Dedé Mirabal were born in Ojo de Agua in the early 1900s and lived during the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Tragically, three of the sisters died during this regime as well. Today, society remembers these women for their bravery, strength, and resilience in the face of danger. Their story continues to resonate with modern audiences through popular retellings, such as the 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* or the 2001 feature film of the same name starring Salma Hayek. These women have remained influential in society almost 60 years after their deaths because they stood as bastions against an overwhelming and oppressive masculine power. In a time of strict gender roles and expectations, the Mirabal sisters, especially Minerva Mirabal, challenged ideals of womanhood through their

education, politics, and questioning of masculine authority.

Rafael Leónidas Trujillo controlled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961. Despite only officially serving as president from 1930 to 1938 and 1942 to 1952, Trujillo exercised absolute power as a dictator through instituting puppet presidents and working as the commander of the armed forces and a foreign minister during his years not in the presidency.¹ Following his election in 1930, Trujillo created *La 42*, an organization which terrorized, persecuted, and assassinated his political opponents.² Trujillo also abused his power through establishing monopolies on meat and salt, controlling the majority of industrial production in the country, and appointing friends and families to positions of power within the government. Perhaps one of the most atrocious acts carried out by the

¹ James Davis, "Trujillo, Rafael," in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry

Louis Gates, Jr., second ed. (Oxford African American Studies Center).

² Ibid

Trujillo regime was the massacre of approximately 20,000 Haitians and Dominican-Haitians in 1937.³ Often referred to as the “Era of Trujillo,” Trujillo’s rule was marked by violence, censorship, and corruption.

In addition to his ruthlessness and fear mongering, Trujillo’s relationship with women served as a defining characteristic of his regime. Trujillo, a known philanderer, was married twice and involved with many different women during his life. In the article, “Women’s Political Participation in the Dominican Republic,” author Nancy Robinson defined Trujillo’s “appetite for young women” as “legendary.”⁴ Young women would be hidden by their families when Trujillo visited their town, in order to

protect them from the dictator’s wandering eye.⁵ Reports indicated that Trujillo had a group of “beauty scouts” who were tasked with finding beautiful young women to be delivered weekly to the National Palace for the sexual pleasure of Trujillo.⁶ Notably, Trujillo courted young socialite Lina Lovatón in 1937 and later had two children with her.⁷ When they met, she was around 17 years old; Trujillo was almost 50.⁸ Furthermore, in the article, “The Dictator's Seduction: Gender and State Spectacle during the Trujillo Regime,” Lauren Derby asserted that much of Trujillo’s power came from his “sexual conquests” and the “concrete numbers of women he acquired.”⁹ His exploitation of women impacted entire families, as parents could lose their jobs if

³ Davis, "Trujillo, Rafael,"

⁴ Nancy Robinson, "Women's Political Participation in the Dominican Republic: The Case of the Mirabal Sisters," *Caribbean Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 2006): 176.

⁵ Ibid, 176.

⁶ Robinson, "Women's Political," 176.

⁷ Lauren Derby, *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 117

⁸ "Lina Lovatón Pittaluga," My Heritage, https://www.myheritage.com/names/lina_lovaton%20pittaluga.

⁹ Lauren Derby, "The Dictator's Seduction: Gender and State Spectacle during the Trujillo Regime." *Callaloo* 23, no. 3 (2000): 1113.

their daughters rejected advances made by the dictator, further expanding his ability to manipulate and control the population of the Dominican Republic.

Not only was Trujillo's relationship with women inherently connected to the power he exerted as a dictator, but also it mirrored the treatment of women in the Dominican Republic historically. The entrenched history of a Spanish Colonial rule provides a lens to understand the foundations of these gender norms and the treatment of women. In 1492, Christopher Columbus laid a Spanish claim to the territory now known as the Dominican Republic, and the colony, named Santo Domingo, remained under Spanish Rule for centuries. In the article "Women in Spanish American Colonial Society," Asunción Lavrin stated that in colonies, such as Santo Domingo, women were viewed as having an

"intrinsic weakness," and laws were implemented to restrict their social mobility.¹⁰ In addition, society thought of women as "less rational" and "more emotional" than men.¹¹ These both contributed to women being considered less capable of enacting social or political change in societies. Furthermore, women's roles heavily depended on traditional ideas of marriage and motherhood. The limited education women received was centered around "careful home administration, marital fidelity, and good care of the children."¹² It served mostly as a source of preparation for duties of motherhood, marriage, and housekeeping. While elite women sometimes received formal education in American-Spanish colonies, they were not permitted to "flaunt" their educations in public spaces.¹³ This reveals

¹⁰ Asunción Lavrin, "Women in Spanish American Colonial Society," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 327.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 327, 331.

¹² Lavrin, "Women in Spanish," 337.

¹³ Lavrin, "Women in Spanish," 340.

that societal standards restricted higher-class women, as well as those in lower classes.

Over time, these colonial ideals of womanhood became ingrained into Dominican society. After the Dominican Republic gained its independence in the late 19th century, women still faced oppression and sexism. In the 1920s, men in the Dominican Republic publicly denounced the modernization and progression of women. An article published in 1921 stated, "Let not women, by her 'masculinity,' weaken the... effective evolution of society."¹⁴ Much of this female modernization was connected to American values, which were seen as largely immoral at the time, and women became scapegoats for the infiltration of American values into Dominican society. This shows that society looked down upon women who were viewed as bold or masculine in their actions. Trujillo upheld

the notion that women should not stray outside of their traditional and historical place in society. His regime pushed values of motherhood and marriage onto women, promised to "protect the traditional family and national morality," and enacted "paternalist protections."¹⁵ Additionally, although women held political offices, they had little power within these positions. According to Derby, women "were not perceived as full and equal participants" in the government, and the actions of women were rarely given attention or legitimacy.¹⁶ Ultimately, the Trujillo Dictatorship defined ideals of womanhood by expectations of political incompetence, domesticity, and docility to male figures.

While the Trujillo regime promoted domesticity and docility as aspects of an ideal woman, the Mirabal sisters spent their lives rejecting those expectations. Instead,

¹⁴ Derby, *The Dictator's*, 61.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Manley, "Intimate Violations: Women and the *Ajusticiamiento* of Dictator Rafael Trujillo, 1944–1961," *The Americas* 69, no. 1 (2012): 62.;

Elizabeth Manley, "Of *Celestinas* and Saints, or Deconstructing the Myths of Dominican Womanhood," *Small Axe* 22, no. 2 (2018): 77.

¹⁶ Derby, *The Dictator's*, 166.

these women embraced education, politics, and independence throughout their lives. While women in the Dominican Republic did have access to education, they were often expected to use this knowledge for professions such as sewing and teaching.¹⁷ This paralleled the colonial expectation of education to be for the purpose of homemaking and childcare, as sewing and teaching are both considered professions typically assigned to mothers. However, both María Teresa and Minerva Mirabal actively sought out higher education, straying away from the expected educational path. According to Robinson, María Teresa graduated with a degree in agronomy, which is the scientific study of agriculture, while Minerva pursued a degree in law.¹⁸ Much of Minerva's family opposed to her pursuit of a law degree, however this did not deter her. In their active quest for higher educational opportunities and Minerva's direct defiance

of the wills of her family, the two sisters revealed their rejection of traditional standards of women's education. Furthermore, they sought out subjects that interested them, even though neither law nor agronomy related to motherly or household duties.

In addition to surpassing societal expectations of education for women, the Mirabal sisters rejected the notions that women were not rational or capable of enacting societal change through their active participation in politics, specifically the politics against the Trujillo regime. As explained earlier, violence and fear dominated the political climate during the Trujillo dictatorship. Still, many people throughout the Dominican Republic fought for revolutionary values and their freedom despite the risk. For example, on June 14, 1959, Dominican exiles staged an invasion in hopes of overthrowing the Trujillo

¹⁷ Ibid, 58.

¹⁸ Robinson, "Women's Political," 175.

regime.¹⁹ Although the attack was unsuccessful, it sparked hope amongst revolutionaries in the country, including the Mirabal sisters. A few months later, in January of 1960, inspired by Fidel Castro's march into Havana, Minerva Mirabal reportedly stated, "If in Cuba it has been possible to bring down the dictatorship, then in our country, with so many anti-Trujillo youth, we can do the same" while at lunch with María Teresa and their husbands.²⁰ Days after she made this statement, the sisters, along with their husbands, created a revolutionary group called "Movimiento Revolucionario 14 de Junio" or "the 14th of June Revolutionary Movement," as an ode to the spirit of the failed invasion.²¹ Minerva's words, in conjunction with the joint creation of a revolutionary movement with her sisters, revealed a dedication to the

political ideas these women espoused. Therefore, the Mirabal sisters rejected the belief that women were "emotional" and "less rational" in their thinking. Their creation of a group to fight for the revolutionary cause logically followed from their anti-Trujillo sentiments and political leanings; this demonstrates clear, rational thinking from the women, instead of emotional thinking which would arguably not follow a logical path. Additionally, their revolutionary group was joined by many others and created plans of action against the regime, suggesting this group did have a tangible impact on members of Dominican society. Thus, they rejected the notion that women's emotional mindsets incapacitated their ability to enact change.

Moreover, in her memoir *Vivas en su jardín*, Dedé Mirabal recounted that Patria

¹⁹ "Mirabal Sisters," in *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (Encyclopedia.com, 2019), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedia-s-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/mirabal-sisters>.

²⁰ Miguel Aquino García, *Holocausto en el Caribe* (Santo Domingo: Editora Corripio, 1996), 107.

²¹ "Mirabal Sisters.," Robinson, "Women's Political," 178.

opened up her house as a hub for revolutionary meetings and ideas. According to Dedé, Patria hosted people from all across the country, including people from “San Pedro de Macorís, San Juan de la Maguana, San Francisco, Moca,” and more.²² This reveals that Patria actively created a space that fostered revolutionary thinkers. Through giving a space for these voices, Patria supported the political movement against Trujillo. Dedé also asserted that Minerva actively participated in the June 14th Movement, providing her own ideas on how to take down the Trujillo dictatorship.²³ The activism by Patria showed that she was a “full and equal participant” within the movement, challenging the Trujillo government’s intention for women to not have power within the political sphere.

Although the Mirabal Sisters participated in politics in conjunction with

their husbands, they did not act in a way that was subservient or dependent on their husbands’ ideas. Instead, they acted independently in their political actions and thoughts. For example, the husbands of María Teresa, Patria, and Minerva were all imprisoned in January of 1960 after a failed assassination attempt against Trujillo.²⁴ While the sisters visited and supported their husbands during this time, their political affiliations and activism did not wane without their husbands present. For example, in *Vivas en su jardín*, Dedé recalled speaking with Minerva about a publication released in July of 1960.²⁵ During this time, Minerva’s husband was imprisoned, yet she still interacted with political documents and had discussions with her sisters about them, showing an ongoing engagement with political and rational thought despite her husband being

²² Dedé Mirabal, *Vivas en su jardín* (New York: Vintage Español, 2009), 151-152.

²³ *Ibid*, 152

²⁴ Robinson, "Women's Political," 178.

²⁵ Mirabal, *Vivas en su jardín*, 177

absent. Others also recognized the independent minds of the Mirabal women. For example, Johnny Abbes, the head of Trujillo's secret police force, once said "Minerva Mirabal was the one who had taken the seed of sedition to her family and [her husband Manuel] Tavarez Justo."²⁶ Abbes statement revealed that leaders within the Trujillo government viewed Minerva Mirabal as the person responsible for revolutionizing those around her, demonstrating that Minerva was not seen as reliant on her husband for cues on how to act and what to think. This independent thinking rejected expectations for women based on traditional family values of subservience to husbands and dependence on male figures.

Perhaps the most striking way in which the sisters challenged ideals of womanhood was their successful

questioning the masculine authority of the Trujillo regime, evidenced through Minerva's rejection of Trujillo's sexual advances and public commentary against him, as well as through the government's response to such actions. Much of Trujillo's power came through his sexual conquest of women and his ability to have almost any woman, or girl, he wanted. However, when he made a romantic advance on Minerva at a party the Mirabal family attended, she rejected him, supposedly slapping him on the dance floor.²⁷ In addition to rejecting Trujillo's sexual advances, Minerva made public statements against the politics of Trujillo. Dedé stated that Minerva made a political declaration against Trujillo in 1949 and was arrested in 1951 for anti-Trujillo public rhetoric.²⁸ Aside from arrest, the Trujillo government took other actions against Minerva, such as momentarily

²⁶ Robinson, "Women's Political," 177.

²⁷ Larry Rohter, "The Three Sisters, Avenged: A Dominican Drama," *New York Times*, February 15, 1997, 4.

²⁸ Mirabal, *Vivas en su jardín*, 329

barring her from her law studies and refusing to grant her a license to practice law. The government taking clear actions against Minerva reveal that she did pose a threat, at least ideologically, to the regime and government. Because masculinity dominated power and politics of the time, Minerva's ability to create enough unrest within the government to prompt retribution indicated that she successfully questioned the masculine authority of Trujillo.

In conjunction with the actions taken against Minerva, tragically, the sisters successful challenging masculine power can be seen in the regime's assassination of the women. On November 25, 1960, agents of Trujillo stopped Minerva, María Teresa, and Patria Mirabal on a deserted road while the women were on their way to visit their imprisoned husbands. The agents bludgeoned and strangled the women, before

putting their bodies back into their car and pushing them over a nearby cliff.²⁹ While a news story published on November 30, 1960 in the *New York Times* titled "Wives of 3 Foes of Trujillo Dead: Sisters Killed in Dominican Auto Plunge – Group Here Charges 'Assassination'" did allude to the possibility of murder, articles initially did not confirm the regime's role in their deaths.³⁰ However, a few weeks later in mid-December, reports on their torture and true cause of death began to surface, as evidenced by the article published on December 9, 1960 in the *New York Times* titled "3 Dominican Sisters Reported Tortured."³¹ The dictator's need to rid Dominican society of the Mirabal Sisters highlighted the insecurity felt by the government due to the power and determination of the Mirabal sisters. In revealing this weakness of Trujillo's

²⁹ Robinson, "Women's Political," 179.

³⁰ "Wives of 3 Foes of Trujillo Dead: Sisters Killed in Dominican Auto Plunge – Group Here Charges

'Assassination'," *New York Times*, November 30, 1960.

³¹ "3 Dominican Sisters Reported Tortured," *New York Times*, December 09, 1960.

government and politics, the Mirabal sisters successfully questioned the hegemonic nature of masculine power at the time.

In conclusion, the Mirabal sisters acted courageously throughout their lives. Their dedication to education, rational thinking, and political liberation challenged norms of womanhood in the Dominican Republic, including expectations for women to think emotionally and inconsistently, to be ineffective politically, to be loyal to family over all else, and to be dependent on men for power. While challenging Trujillo's masculine-rooted power ultimately led to three of their murders, the Mirabal sisters remain a salient part of modern society. The anniversary of their assassinations, November 25, stands as the official

International Day of Nonviolence Against Women, in honor of María Teresa, Patria, and Minerva. Additionally, they appear in contemporary literature and media. For example, the sisters are present in Junot Díaz's 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Díaz, a Dominican-American author, provides a unique exploration of modern gender relations in Dominican society in this novel. The lives of the Mirabal sisters provide historical context and insight into the narrative told by Díaz. His work reveals that the question of gender in Dominican society is not one that can be answered succinctly; it comes with an understanding of historical and modern context.

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