



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (092)

TEXT: *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000)

AUTHOR: Mayra Santos-Febres

EDITOR: Debra A. Castillo

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Mayra Santos-Febres: A Powerful Caribbean Voice

Mayra Santos-Febres (b. 1966), a prolific Puerto Rican writer, poet, and essayist, is celebrated for her original and powerful voice in contemporary Latin American narrative. Her work, including her acclaimed novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000), consistently explores themes of gender, sexuality, race, and postcolonial identity within the rich, often contradictory, context of the Caribbean. She describes her writing as a means to “include things thought of as exotic and reveal them as a different type of knowledge.”

Sirena Selena: A Mythic Transformation

The novel narrates the adventures of the titular hero/heroine, Sirena Selena, a young Puerto Rican drug addict with an extraordinary voice, transformed into a Caribbean drag diva specializing in boleros by her mentor, Miss Martha Divine. This transformation is presented as an act of “becoming who one truly is,” blurring the lines between inner self and outward performance. The narrative challenges conventional notions of gender and identity by embodying a figure that is both beautiful and monstrous, human and mythic. Performance, Identity, and the “Factory of Desire”

Sirena Selena delves into the performance of gender, using drag as a metaphor for the construction of identity. Santos-Febres argues that the Caribbean has historically been a “factory of desire” for the rest of the world, and her work aims to deconstruct these exoticized stereotypes by showcasing a different, more nuanced understanding of desire and the body. The novel highlights the profound impact of performance on identity, questioning the stability of fixed gender roles and the “truth” of essentialist identities.

Critique of Colonialism and Patriarchy

The narrative implicitly critiques the colonial legacy of Puerto Rico and the patriarchal structures that shape gender roles. Miss Martha Divine’s project to recreate Sirena Selena also reflects a broader commentary on how identities are constructed and consumed, particularly in the context of Latin American queer experiences caught between dominant cultural hegemonies. The novel explores themes of racial marginalization, poverty, and the search for self-worth in a world often hostile to non-conforming identities.

Intertextuality and the Power of Voice

The novel is rich in intertextual references, drawing from classical myths (like Homeric sirens), traditional Caribbean musical forms (the bolero), and contemporary literary theory (e.g., Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performance). The “penetrating voice” of Sirena Selena serves as a powerful medium for expressing pain, desire, and the complex relationship between artifice and authenticity. The protagonist’s tragic awareness—that her appeal lies in both her mesmerizing presence and the knowledge



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that her gender identity is simultaneously essential and performed—underscores the novel's profound engagement with the nature of reality and illusion.

PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

The Caribbean as a "Factory of Desire":

Discuss **Mayra Santos-Febres's** assertion that "the Caribbean has been the factory of desire for the rest of the world." How does *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* explore and challenge this notion, and what "different kind of knowledge" does it offer about Caribbean desire and the body?

Performance and Gender Identity:

Analyze the role of drag performance in the novel. How does **Sirena Selena's** transformation and performance challenge essentialist ideas of gender? Discuss **Judith Butler's** theories on gender as performance in relation to the characters.

Truth vs. Reality and the "Beautiful Monstrosity":

Explore the novel's central tension between "Truth" and "Reality," particularly as embodied by **Sirena Selena's** "beautiful monstrosity." How does **Miss Martha Divine's** philosophy of "becoming who one truly is" interact with the idea of a constructed identity?

Postcolonial and Queer Perspectives:

Discuss how the novel addresses issues of postcolonial identity, race, and sexuality in Puerto Rico and the wider Caribbean. How do the characters navigate between the cultural influences of the United States and Latin America?

The Bolero and Narrative Voice:

Analyze the significance of the bolero music genre in *Sirena Selena*. How does the emotional and lyrical content of boleros contribute to the narrative's themes of love, loss, and constructed reality?

The "Micro-Utopian Site" of the Sirena's Body:

Examine the concept of the siren's body as a "micro-utopian site" where different desires and realities converge. How does **Sirena Selena's** physical ambiguity (both delicate femininity and grotesquely sized penis) enable a broader exploration of sexual identity and desire?

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- **Santos-Febres, Mayra.** *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*. SpanishBookPress Edition.
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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

What is Sirena Selena's primary talent as a performer?

- A) Flamenco dancing
- B) Opera singing
- C) Bolero singing
- D) Stand-up comedy

Correct Answer: C

Who is Sirena Selena's mentor and "re-creator"?

- A) **Hugo Graubel**
- B) Leocadio
- C) Miss Martha Divine
- D) Solange **Correct Answer: C**

The novel critiques the Caribbean as a "factory of desire" for:

- A) Its abundance of natural resources
- B) Its vibrant music scene
- C) The rest of the world
- D) Its historical significance

Correct Answer: C

Which classical mythical figures are explicitly referenced in relation to Sirena Selena's character?

- A) Amazons
- B) Nymphs
- C) Sirens
- D) Gorgons

Correct Answer: C

The editor, Debra A. Castillo, highlights the novel's engagement with which contemporary literary theory on gender?

- A) Marxist literary criticism
- B) Post-structuralism
- C) Performance theory and Butler's ideas on gender
- D) Ecocriticism

Correct Answer: C

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