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**Slave-Master Relationship in
Ramón Méndez Quiñones' *¡Pobre Sinda!***

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[Hipertexto](#)

Por eso, sin libertad,
Yo no comprendo la vida;
Antes, me es aborrecida...
Prefiero la eternidad
Méndez Quiñones *Vivir* (1877)

Puerto Rican playwright Ramón Méndez Quiñones' (1847-1889) *¡Pobre Sinda!* (1884) captivates the audience with its depiction of the “época de la odiosa esclavitud” in this not well-known work (432).¹ Faced with the dearth of critical attention, the purpose of this essay is to situate the dramatic text among the rich Caribbean antiestablishment literary mode that is representative of 19th century cultural production related to slavery in Puerto Rico. Based on author’s manuscript notes, the essay will examine, among other things, the significance of the title, the selection of genre, and his personal views on the slavery. Therefore, it makes known that the author’s intent was to bring to the center of 19th century discourse the power relations between the master and his slave. Thus, the last component will analyze the role slave-master relationship plays in the moral decay of the ruling class in colonial Puerto Rican society.

The significance of Méndez Quiñones work does not reside in the literary merits alone but rather, as a document that provides a glimpse into the slave regime.² Equally important to bear in mind, texts that contain the thematic representation of slavery are

¹ Text remained unpublished until 1991 and has not been staged.

² Puerto Rico officially entered the sugar industry and the slave trade, in response to the production the Haitian Revolution (1794-1804). Slave trading ended by 1840 prompting discussions of alternative forms of labor (Shmidt 4).

scarce in nineteenth century Puerto Rican literature.³ Therefore, the dramatic text portrayal of the life of slaves and their master in a sugar plantation is very significant in the comprehension of that historical time period and racial attitudes.⁴ Furthermore, as the playwright's manuscripts asserts, he had a clear objective based on his personal contact with the slave system.⁵

For starter, as his notes suggest, the title plays a critical role insofar as it speaks to the positionality of the authorial worldview of the slave system and the characterization of the protagonist. The manuscript notes indicates that the play was originally titled 'Pobre María' which is a common and neutral Spanish name that was assigned to the slave master's wife. Decidedly, the change of the title and the adjective placement bolsters the author's stand against the regime. In the postposition, the descriptive adjective 'pobre' (poor) refers to the main character's economical status. However, in the preceding position it means 'unfortunate' and 'wretched' and, consequentially, 'Sinda' alludes to the main character's African origins. Given that this adjective describes a young and beautiful slave that becomes the prey of a lecherous master, it strongly suggests that the social and political enslavement caused the character's misfortune. Moreover, the expectations raised by the title -including the exclamation punctuations -are neither neutral nor masked because they bear traces of the authors' particular oppositional view on slavery or aspects of the slavery system based on his experiences.

With much insight, the manuscript notes show that author realized that the portrayal of the slave system requires an approach that can compassionately dramatize such topic and, at the same time, denounce its harshness. Better known as a *costumbrista* playwright, he determines that his authorial criticism must fall in line with a tragic mode. Understandably, the staging will depict the sadism behind the history of slavery. Therefore, the discursive style in his six "costumbres jibarescas" do not have the solemnity nor demonstrate the incompatibility of life and social norms considered

³ Among the Works are: *La cuarterona* (1867) by Tapia y Rivera, the poem "Día vendrá" (1863) by Salvador Brau, *La juega de gallo o el negro bozal* (1852) by Ramón C.F. Caballero, and 'Diálogos grotescos' published in *El Ponceño* (1851-1853) (González-Pérez 47).

⁴ Puerto Rican racial history is linked to George Flinter's study *Examen del estado actual de los esclavos en la Isla* (1832). It reported that slaves lived better than the free labor because their needs were met by the master. Tomás Blanco's *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico* (1942) and Luis Díaz Soler in *Historia de la esclavitud negras en Puerto Rico* (1952) suggested that the small slave population and the history of miscegenation produced a more humane regime than in the rest of the Americas. Isabelo Zenón Cruz in *Narciso descubre su trasero* (1974) examines the subalternity of blacks in Puerto Rican history. José Luis Gonzales in *El país de cuatro pisos* (1979) posed that Puerto Rico is a Afro-Caribbean. The works of Benjamín Nistal, *Eslavos prófugos y cimarrones* (1984), Francisco Scarano, *Haciendas y barracones* (1993), and Guillermo Baralt, *Eslavos rebeldes* (1982) have shown that slavery in was characterized by runaways, slaves' revolts, and in large plantation slaves completed most of the work. Alan West-Durán and Lillian Guerra have studied racial dynamics in contemporary society (West-Durán 48).

⁵ Girón included the 'nota', 'advertencia', and the section in Africanized Spanish.

necessary for his endeavor.⁶ Moreover, the author methodically establishes the inappropriateness of *costumbrismo* to openly deal with the complex thematic representation of slavery by composing scene 1, 2, and the conclusion in an Africanized Spanish known as “habla canga” (Álvarez 25).⁷ Méndez Quiñones details that “hablando en su jerga, no convencería, y en los momentos más patéticos no haría sentir; produciendo en sí exclamación de dolor la hilaridad del público” (400). Equally important to bear in mind, slavery is not a far and distant past since only eleven years had lapsed between the abolition of slavery and the production of dramatic text. For that reason, the play is a fundamental historical and cultural document to gain a greater understanding of past slaves’ experience and the influence it had on Puerto Rican society.

Not surprising, due to his knowledge of the political and social events, the playwright positions himself in the text as a voice of authority by spotlighting the customs of the master class and tribulations of the slave community. One cannot but notice that the author strategically functions as authenticating agent to boost the truth-bearing value of the dramatic text. Similar to the authentication editing process and introductions in slave narratives, his notes attest to the reader the horrors of the institution (Sekora 223). Méndez Quiñones asserts that “tal vez parecerán exagerados” but continues to explain that “por desgracia y para mengua de los esclavistas” (432). As a witness, he manages to blur the lines of ‘fact’ and ‘fictions’ by creating a fictional discourse that can “induce effects of truth” (Foucault 193). With much sorrow, the playwright describes the degradation of slaves he witnessed as follows:

Cuadros de crueldad como el que me he propuesto pintar se veían a menudo en muchas haciendas de café. El hecho de ser atado a la cola de un caballo y morir asfixiado el infeliz prófugo, como el sacar los dientes a los que se atrevían comer para matar su hambre, así como tampoco el hallar restos humanos al procederse a la preparación de los terrenos y desenterrarlos por el arado. (400)

Hence, the daily lives of those in bondage was filled with much anguish which serves to dismantle the held belief that slavery in Puerto Rico was mild. Such a slur against the slave-owning class, gives emphasis to the interactions between the races (Girón 28). Likewise, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1826-1882) affirms that the barbarism was caused by the lack of justice since the slaves were “fuera de las leyes comunes y sometido a la arbitraria e interesada autocracia de un hombre, que se llama su dueño y que es juez” (76). Therefore, the overarching feature centers on his criticism of the slavecrats and

⁶ His plays contain the mimetic representation of the *jibaro*. However, the trope of the *jibaro* discursively represents liberals ideology (Otero Garabís 38).

⁷ José:

y eso do somber matate
pa catigar su maldá.
Tú vite Sinda asotá
porque nella guena a sío,
Tú lo puere tó, Dío mío...!
Mandadono la liberta! 411

the race-class conflicts that arise by exploring the cohabitation of white master and black female slave.

By looking at the behavior and psychology of the ruling class, in particular the practice of gender honor system, the transparency of race-class conflicts and gender relationship surfaces in the dramatic text. In the early nineteenth century, the practice of 'purity of blood' in Spanish colonies meant genealogical proof of not mixing with other races.⁸ Under the sex/ gender system of honor, dichotomies were created and sustained which separated women from men and, as well as, divided society by class and race which served the objectives of ruling class (Dore 137).⁹ Once more, the canonical and state laws created social differences if members of the colonial society did not marry *in faccia ecclesia* (Lavrin 155). Although the 'purity of blood' practice fell out of use, nonetheless, the racial differences were engrained among the ruling class. Hence, the legitimacy acquired by this collective upheld white supremacy in the colonial space and, accordingly, female subjects of African origins did not figure in the process of familial continuity nor granted a solid base to a family's position.

As a member of the lettered city, Méndez Quiñones denounced these asymmetrical power relations that upheld racial and class differences. The slavecrat's need to preserve social and economic status explains how Eugenio obtained his fortune. María, the daughter of a slavecrat must marry in order to safeguard her honor as a woman and maintain the family's social status. Thus, her father determined that she had to marry Eugenio whom at the time was the overseer at plantation to secure that "será administrado y ricos series los dos" (460). Soon after the death of María's father, he had "todo en su poder" since he became the patriarch (460). On the other hand, Sinda, as a slave and as a black woman, is not guarded by these norms and becomes the victim of "lúbricas miradas" and the "infame intenciones" of the master (459). Based on these attitudes in the colonial society, the victimhood of the bondswoman is symptomatic of decadence of the ruling class.

Ramón Méndez Quiñones' work draws upon these racial-class attitudes among the master class to represent the degradation of the slave women. During the 19th century, Puerto Rican colonial society held that race was the social standard by which subjects come to be judged "both by society as well as her-or himself, have less to do with ethnicity that with the dominance or subtlety in which stereotyped characteristic of

⁸ In Spain "Limpieza de sangre" was a requisite for positions in civil bureaucracy, military posts and church. From 1766 and 1778 in the colonies, attempts were made to prevent marriages between unequal partners. In 1805, the Crown decreed that individual of unknown purity of blood or nobility over the age if consent must appeal to the viceroy or *audiencia* (Supreme Court of the region) for permission to marry blacks, mulattoes or any other group. By the 1840 it ceases being a principal concern for officers and by 1865 the courts abolished the practice (Martínez-Alier 15-19).

⁹ A white woman under the honor system had to maintain her virginity until wedded, monitor at all expense her reputation, and be modest in the presence of men. In contrast, males were charged with the duty of safeguarding the family's honor-that is class- by protecting the women in their family. Notwithstanding, the number of conquests defined men's sexual virility.

that ethnicity are physically expressed [and] how that person could be classified and treated by members of society who lack or share similar qualities” (Guerra 214). Understanding the attitudes of this sector, despite her moral character, she was marked for a life filled with unpreventable struggles and sorrow due to her racial difference. Furthermore, Sinda’s race implied that as a bondswoman she will be unprotected by law and vulnerable to personal, social, political, and erotic racism of white males in the hierarchy. As can be observed, race as well as gender is a fluid construction of differences which reveals the multidimensional elements of racism.

In this context, one achievement of this work is the illustration of the gender mediation and racism as a symptom of decay of the ruling class. Méndez Quiñones metaphorically represents the Sinda’s sexual exploitation in a plantation in 1864 with the attention given by the two male characters to a ring she owns. It was given by the mistress as a token of appreciation since she was pious and they had been schooled together. From Sinda’s and the other slaves’ viewpoint, it is a visible symbol that she is highly esteemed for her dignified character. Therefore, when Luis demands for the ring, she anguishes over: “¿Qué será de la honra mía?”(441). She fully understands that surrendering the piece of jewelry has a great consequence to her image as she ponders “¿Qué dirá mi ama María?” (441). The protagonist’s character is tarnished since it is an external sign of her honor and it is linked closely to sexual activity. For Sinda, the forced transfer of ownership signifies a horrific assault on her self-esteem and it is emblematic of her powerlessness in divided society in Puerto Rico.

To Méndez Quiñones’ merit, he vividly captures the ever-present threat faced by the enslaved women caused by a society that is engaged in slavery. The slippage in the meaning of the ring, strategically demonstrates the playwright’s scorn of the hollow social and moral order of a society founded on sugar-based wealth. The object is not of any monetary value, however, in the scheme of gender relations under a slave regime, the ring represents that Sinda’s body exclusively belongs to white males. The first aggressor, Luis, demands that Sinda surrender the ring as a token of her approval because “a menos que esa sortija me des de cariño en prueba y quieras ser mi manceba” (440). To the reader’s dismay and horror, he is neither restrained nor discreet about his reprehensible intentions. Luis, the overseer, does not propose an option that conforms to the norms of honor or religion; instead, he demands that she becomes his lover. He wants to exert his power and make it known publically that they will/have had physical relationship with Sinda.

The aggressor personifies the sexual gaze that dehumanizes and forces bondswomen to be their paramours because of racial and social attitudes in a slave system. Within this paradigm, Luis understands the fluidity of race and class constructs. Although he belongs to a lower class, the overseer has more power within the system than a black female slave and, thus, she becomes the target of his attacks. Motivated by his sense of racial and class superiority over the main character, Luis callously remarks that her positionality renders her powerless given that: “¿Qué no es suyo el pensamiento? ¡Ni aún el aire que respire!” (438). The antagonist underlines that he does not have loving or sincere feelings towards her and states: “¿Enamorado? ¡mal

dicho! Es linda y me he encaprichado!" (438). The objectification of Sinda means that her character, reputation or chastity are not valued by the overseer because of her Otherness (read blackness). As the plot develops, force and desire are not mutually exclusive under male supremacy and, particularly, in a racially divided society.

In the eyes of reader, the characterization of the Luis pales in comparison to the sadistic and evil nature of Eugenio, the master. At the sight of Luis wearing Sinda's ring, the jealous master perceives this as challenge to his masculinity because a stronger male has outwitted and taken possession of an object that belonged to him. Eugenio angrily laments having his lecherous plan spoiled because "¡Era esclava y era mía! ¡Y que esa infame se rinda sin antes!" (448). Her refusal to succumb to his desires, is seen as emasculating and sets in motion a plot to seek vengeance against her to redeem his "orgullo herido"(449). Therefore, he devices to destroy the relationship he believes exists between Sinda and his rival by forcing Luis to punish her with fifty lashes in front of the other slaves while naked. Eugenio's fury is directed towards the sexual activity that he believes has taken place and labels her as "traidora", "ramera", and "hechicera" (451). The derogatory terms stereotype her as promiscuous in a society that has clearly defined codes of moral conduct for white women and, in contrast, judges women of color as amoral. Thus, the masters' insults cast a dark shadow over the young woman's dignity among the other slaves in the plantation. Furthermore, his racist attitudes are transparent when he yells in anger "¡En el infierno, que es negra!"(462). Thus, this anger against his slave which highlights Méndez Quiñones multidimensional critique of the colonial society.

As the author demonstrates, that master-slave liaisons took place within the complex relationship of concubinage. Ironically, central to the slave-owning family's prominence and strength is the association of personal and community identification which is built on the idea of races as separate, unequal, and different. Under these defined racial and class divisions, the bondswoman may convert the sexual relation into a commercial transaction by gain favors from the master such as the promise of freedom and goods from the master or be raped. Faced with this reality, Sinda begs her master for "piedad a la esclava fiel y la protección que reclama" (452) but her pleas for mercy go unheard. Considering, for example, the main character's fear and the power that Eugenio had over her, this mode of resistance displays that the political life of the slave was not recognized (Scott 198). As such, the sexual harassments that Sinda suffers are not an isolated event or a moral transgression but a campaign of terror within a systemic context (MacKinnon 67). Likewise, the vile nature of Eugenio showcases the propensity of the slavecrat towards slave women and their sexual abuses.

Therefore, the victimology portrayed shows the prevailing notion of womanhood under bondage. In this view, the sexual aggression by both men against Sinda leaves her feeling humiliated and questioning "¿Porque soy esclava y pobre, negra, solo por eso quiere en amoroso exceso ver si soy de oro o de cobre?" (442). As the reader undoubtedly can surmise, the response to Sinda's problem is closely linked to common theme of sexual exploitation in female slave narrative since this is an additional; aspect

of victimization imposed on enslaved women (Braxton 380).¹⁰ Historically in the early stages of slavery in the Caribbean, black female slaves were more objectionable on the island on the belief that a mix-gender population would promote promiscuity among the slaves. These essentialist attitudes suggest that slave women were amoral, sexual aggressive, and susceptible to the desires of the white male (Morrisey 4). The protagonist's awareness of the sexualized image voices how racial, social, sexual and religious gazes strengthen the visibility of power and the power of visibility (Foucault 176-77). Although Sinda is kind-hearted and pious, her life is severely circumscribed (slave, black, women, father a slave) under the slave system and her exploits.

The indignity confronted by the protagonist represents to the reader a bridge between her positionality and her self-awareness in a slave state. She does not conceive a plan to runaway but, indeed contemplates a suicide because “el barranco o el río ocultarán mi vergüenza” (466).¹¹ She tries to find solace in death as a strategy to cleanse herself from disgrace and feeling “siempre avergozada”(470). It can be observed that she derives her Self-worth from the other slaves and the white slavecrats as a subordinate. As a slave, the punishment and the sexual aggression compounds the effects of humiliation. In the same manner, her wish to die illustrates that honor falls within the domain of the private and public space. Along these lines, challenging Eugenio's authority -as he thought she did- Sinda courts further humiliation and she must remain voiceless (Spivak 289-91). In contrast, the master is not limited by these boundaries. His sexual immorality is a presumed function of his class. Although his behavior is scandalous, it spotlights his illegitimacy but does not alter his social positioning. Moreover, both Sinda and María suffer a similar fate at the hand of the slave-owner, which demonstrates the concern for gender equality surfaces tangentially in the criticism of class and race

The author's disdain for the master is a manifestation not only of his character's virulent and beyond redemption behaviour, but of the flagrant exploitation of slave labor. The constructed Self-image of Eugenio as “el amo” and “el rey del ingenio” express his belief that he has complete power (economic, male, and white) and on the powerless Sinda (black, slave, and woman) (448). Despite the antagonist lack of breeding, he has

¹⁰ This reality is captured in such Cuban texts as “Petrona y Rosalía” (1838) and *Francisco* (1880), as well as the slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Cayetano Coll y Tostes (1850-1930) addressed the sexual abuse in his *leyenda* titled “La negra azul” (1833).

¹¹ There were more than 40 revolts between 1795 y 1873. Among these, the Marcos Xiorro plot in 1821 is worth noting for its elaborate organization to take over and kill the white population (Baralt 33-39).

¹² Capitalization in original text.

gained a degree of prestige based on his marriage and his exploitation of the slave labor. In his need to gain wealth, the master demands extensive hours of labor with a limited number of slaves because “la cuestión está en hacer lo de un mes en la semana” (446). This practice was documented by Víctor Schoelcher (1804-1893), a French abolitionist that visited Puerto Rico during the *zafra*. He observed that at three in the morning slaves were heading to the mills and worked until eight or nine in the evening, the only reward after these backbreaking days of labor was eating sugarcane, and on Sundays and holidays slaves had to work (Scarano 70-71). Like Schoelcher’s observations, Eugenio’s strategy to maximize the production was to “saca [r] el jugo” since he deemed they were “animal[es]” (446). Ironically, the slavecrat’s crimes against humanity meant his self-destruction (Césaire 41). Therefore, Méndez Quiñones’s work affirms that slavery in Puerto Rico was “the fatal poison of irresponsible power hands and gradually commenced its infernal works. Thus, slavery is the enemy of both the slave the slaveholder” (Douglass 31). As the epigraph indicates, the author emphatically affirmed that without liberty: “¡Prefiero la eternidad!”(479). After the death of Luis and Eugenio, Sinda’s reunion with her father and mistress signifies “¡todos iguales con la ansiada LIBERTAD”(471).¹² The harmonious ending among the social sectors seeks to guarantees racial democracy for the present and future of Puerto Rico.

In conclusion, the dramatic text is an important work of literature because it offers several provocative points for discussion on Puerto Rican racial history. The action centers on life of a virtuous slave that is marked for hardships due to her race and class. This brutal depiction of her life dramatizes the destructive nature of the ethos of slavery and racism. Therefore, it allows for exploration of slaves past’s experience. Considering the valuable information it provides, this work that has received limited critical attention merits a more prominent place among established 19th century literature.

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