



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

The Naked Woman

ARMONÍA SOMERS

Translated by Kit Maude

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Armonía Somers is the pen name of Armonía Liropeya Etchepare Locino (1914–1994), a Uruguayan writer, teacher, education advocate, and public servant. She made her literary debut with *The Naked Woman* in 1950 and published several novels and short story collections before quitting her civil career in 1971 to become a full-time writer.

Somers's writing career coincides with the Uruguayan literary movement known as the Generation '45, comprising authors who came onto the scene between 1939 and 1969 before the rise of Uruguay's civic-military dictatorship in 1973. The movement was defined by the desire to rebuild the cultural values of modern Uruguay, resist conformity in style, and offer new critical and intellectual perspectives. Somers, however, bristled at the notion of being assigned to the Generation '45. She became a part of a diverse and dynamic group of women—including Cristina Peri Rossi (who was once exiled for her work) and Clara Silva—who pushed the boundaries of style and theme, experimented with form, and wrote critically about intersections of gender, culture, and oppression.

La mujer desnuda (*The Naked Woman*) was first serialized in 1950 by a local literary magazine, then published in book form in 1951 and 1966, and republished posthumously in 2009. Upon its emergence, the book shook the Uruguayan literary world: readers considered it too subversive and too overtly sexual to have been written by a woman, and speculated that the author must be male and/or sexually deviant. Over time, Uruguay's mainstream literary scene came to accept *The Naked Woman* as a significant and groundbreaking work. This is Somers's first book to be translated into English.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Original sin (71)

According to the Book of Genesis of the Hebrew Bible, after Eve eats fruit from the forbidden tree and entices Adam to do the same, they are banished from the Garden of Eden. Their sin—the original sin—is carried on by their descendants as they are born. In *The Naked Woman*, the villagers regard the titular character's nudity as shameful and impure, just as Adam and Eve do when they “wake up” from innocence.

Names of the Naked Woman

Besides Rebeca Linke, the Naked Woman takes on a variety of names throughout the book, many of which allude to classical and biblical culture, including:

Phryne (95): An ancient Greek courtesan who was put on trial for impiety.

Judith (17): A woman in the Christian Old Testament who decapitates an enemy general, saving her people from the Assyrian threat.

Semiramis (17): A queen of Assyria, often attributed with inventing the chastity belt, eunicism, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Magdala (17): Mary Magdalene was a follower of Jesus and witness to his crucifixion. She is most likely from the town of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee.

Gradiva (17): The titular character of a twentieth-century novel by Wilhelm Jensen, who cast her as a mythological figure that may or may not be the figment of a man's dream. The character was studied by Freud and has since become a modern mythical figure.

Apostate (74)

A person who renounces their faith or principles.

King Solomon (74)

The priest defends the Naked Woman, condemning those who cast judgment upon her presence in the village. To do so, he channels a biblical figure, King Solomon, widely known for his wisdom. In one of the most famous stories of Solomon, still discussed and debated today by critical and feminist theologians, two women are in dispute, each claiming to be the rightful mother of the same child. To end their argument, Solomon suggests cutting the baby in two, so each woman can have half. Solomon discerns the real mother through the women's reactions: one agrees to the ludicrous idea; the other forfeits her motherhood for the sake of the baby. Solomon deems the latter the baby's real mother. In *The Naked Woman*, the priest invokes Solomon to scold villagers who claim righteousness and moral judgment about the Naked Woman's appearance, but expose themselves as hypocritical and prejudicial through their actions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The novel sets up many parallels between the Naked Woman and Eve. In the opening sequence, when Rebeca Linke beheads herself, Somers writes that "the head rolled heavily, like a fruit," which could be interpreted as an allusion to the forbidden fruit in Genesis (7). How do the Naked Woman's interactions with other characters evoke and/or modify the biblical narrative of original sin? Are there other biblical women or stories that the book evokes?
2. The Naked Woman is first spotted by twins riding together on one horse across a field. When the twins leave to alert the other villagers, the Naked Woman has a one-sided conversation with the wounded animal, who reappears at the novel's conclusion. What roles do animals and other nonhuman things—like the forest, the moon, or a knife—play in the book? How does their presence contribute to the narrative?
3. How are the eroticization of and violence against women juxtaposed throughout Somers's novel? Are these seen as similar or distinct forces? What does the Naked Woman's appearance in the village do to make these things come to the surface, plain for the reader to see?

4. Consider Nathaniel, Juan, and the priest: three men who are featured prominently, though differently, in the novel. What is the role of each of these men? How does each man's interaction with the Naked Woman illuminate the patriarchal village that Somers depicts? How are the different men affected by her?
5. Throughout the novel, Somers makes tongue-in-cheek references to dominant literary voices and canons. For instance, a "crime novel aficionado" emerges as the key investigator into the Naked Woman's disappearance, "saying words that nobody could understand" to make himself the self-appointed expert on the matter (37). Later, Somers writes, "It was impossible to describe in words, but if someone were forced to, they'd need the vocabulary of a great novelist" (42). In what ways is the novel itself a commentary on, and disruption of, prevailing literary forms and dominant literary voices? How does Somers use this novel to critique how certain voices become authoritative by virtue of power, while others remain marginalized?
6. While Somers describes various ways in which women's bodies are subjected to ownership by men in the novel, she also suggests that the Naked Woman's walk through the forest is the "first night she had ever truly owned" (11). How does ownership appear as a theme throughout the novel? What are ways that ownership is articulated as a patriarchal and colonial mechanism? What are the ways it is resisted?
7. The Naked Woman distances herself from Rebeca Linke (104), and yet it seems as though they were once the same person. How do names influence our understanding of a character? Why do you think names are used so sparingly in this book? What effect does it have on how characters are perceived and understood?
8. The novel often deals with abrupt changes in perspectives and beliefs. Of the villagers, Somers writes, "For a long time, they had been happy in their wooden houses, but now, suddenly, someone had told them about iron and glass" (112). What is the significance of the contrast between the expected restraint of cultural propriety and the fervor of the villagers' response to the Naked Woman?
9. The Naked Woman views her covering up as a significant act, saying the coat "might as well be the shell of the world" (108). What role does her nudity play in the book? How is that role subverted or altered when she clothes herself? What does it mean that the Naked Woman considers nudity to be her "true form" (109)?
10. To the villagers, the sight of the Naked Woman covered up was "like a slap in the face. Now that she was covered, they felt disappointed somehow" (108–9). How do the villagers' frantic imaginings of the Naked Woman compare with their actual sighting of her? What or who were they expecting to find, and why? How are these expectations rooted in the idealization and eroticization of women's bodies and sexualities?

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

Passage 1

nightstand there was a small dagger, a work of art, just right for beheading a woman imprisoned in irritating parallel bars like these. They were keeping her from finding herself.

The grasping hand won't make it. It knocks a glass of water off the table and sits there like a frozen flower. But then the dagger shows that it can reach her on its own. It moves, attracted to her fingertips and, of course, to her hand, which is attached to an arm, which in turn belongs to a body with a head and a neck. A head, such an important part of the body on top of something as fragile as a neck.

Although the arm was limp and the hand fingerless, the blade penetrated easily. It came across countless things that might have been called arteries, veins, cartilage, or warm, viscous blood, everything except for pain. By then, pain no longer existed.

The head rolled heavily, like a fruit. Rebeca Linke watched it fall impassively, feeling neither joy nor sorrow.

This marked the beginning of a new state of being, no more than a black strip, frozen definitively in time. Was it possible that the moving world had been resolved just like that, with a single thrust? The headless woman lay on the dark carpet, stretched out nightmarishly in her final act. There could be, there very well may be, a

→ the moon through the window shades depicts the room as a prison, from which Rebeca Linke seeks liberation.

the "grasping hand" that beheads Rebeca Linke first objectifies her, separating person from body ←

← an allusion to the forbidden fruit? / foreshadowing comparisons to Eve

One man, the first to hear said news, took the precaution of grabbing his pitchfork. This act was significant in that it served as an example. More men emerged from doors and milking stalls, initially empty-handed given the nature of the news, but when they saw that their neighbors were armed, they ran back inside and returned with hoes, shovels, rakes, and whatever else they could lay their hands on. Then they strode forward with their weapons on their shoulders, barking instructions and shoing the women and children inside. Some primal instinct told them that they had been drafted into a private war, in which the opposite sex and the young would only be a hindrance.

→ patriarchy reproduces generationally, by example

women ushered back inside, into private, where patriarchal power has historically reproduced.

Soon the barbarian army was fully assembled. It seemed very important that they head out on their expedition en masse. Although the bounty would ultimately be individual, or at least impossible to divvy up, a sense of victory could still be shared and the presence of so many men served as justification in itself: they were a united front. No one quite knew who it was that might be judging them, but their numbers undoubtedly helped keep the fear nipping their ankles at bay.

Eventually, the procession arrived at the epicenter of the phenomenon: the place where the twins had left their plough and horse, and where they expected to find the stranger and her shameful femininity, her arms across her chest and her eyes pleading. But what they found instead left

→ this depiction evokes representations of Eve.

"shameful" femininity as a construct of the male gaze.