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Nathanial Eli Gardner



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Being Mexican: Identity, Location, and Rosa Nissán (II)

Nathanial Eli Gardner

“Novia que te vea : a Sephardic childhood in the navel of the Moon”

Education

- 1 In our exploration of the public space in Nissán’s first two novels, it is important to consider the role of Oshinica’s educational experience. When we first encounter her as seven year old girl living in the Colonia Industrial in the northern part of Mexico City, one of the first places she shows us is her school. At that moment her family lived near the *Basílica de Guadalupe*, in Tepeyac (with her grandfather even living along the *Calzada de los Misterios* which runs parallel to the *Calzada de Guadalupe* and alongside grounds to the famous Catholic cathedral). Hence it should be of no surprise that the young protagonist is strongly influenced by the Catholic tradition and the worship of saints that permeates that area : praying to saints, collecting Catholic stamps, going to mass, and sharing her concerns with us that her family will not go to heaven for not being Christian. Perhaps due to this evangelizing experience that exists in that area, during her second year of primary school, she transfers from *Colegio Guadalupe Tepeyac* to *Colegio Sefardí* (right in the heart of a sizable *sefardí* Jewish community) provoking a cultural shift in the public arena for this protagonist. Oshinica expresses herself positively in both schools for the most part. As is common, she enjoys time with her friends and loathes any mean teachers and classes that are difficult. It is not until she is finalizing her sixth year of primary school that she realizes that her life could take an entirely different course :

Ya este año terminó sexto. Casi todas las niñas las sacan de la escuela para que se queden en casa con su mamá ; toman clases de corte, de cocina, repostería, y no sé cómo le hacen, pero de pronto se ponen bonitas y se casan. A los niños los dejan estudiar más.¹

- 2 This realization of a possible impending future for her occurs while she is still fairly young and is beginning to comprehend that being female means her life will take a different course from that of her male school mates. Since Oshinica enjoys her studies and finds the home where she lives to be tedious and unimaginative, the thought of being relegated to this area permanently is quite unpleasant. Fortunately, her fears of having to leave school after finishing sixth grade do not come true. She is allowed to continue on to secondary school. At that point her mother wants to withdraw her from school and prepare her for marriage at home and the narrative centers on how cultural forces attempt to oblige the protagonist to conform to the social norm within her community.
- 3 Nonetheless, Nissán centers on this conflict as the protagonist struggles to continue to be able to live her life in the public space, through continuing to study. Oshinica makes use of her close relationship with her father in order to do this. She pleads with him to allow her to go to a technical school. This event has two important ramifications : it allowed her to move in the public arena yet it also put her on a path what would only permit her certain professional achievements. Against her mother's will, the father grants permission and Oshinica studies journalism. Even so, it is noteworthy that the protagonist is only allowed to study in an all-female technical school. In the Mexican educational system this particular educational pathway truncates its students. Those who attend technical schools would not normally be eligible to study at any university after those studies. Oshinica would not learn of this until much later, when she would discover how her parent's map for her life would ultimately place a clearly defined limit on the manner in which she would be meant to occupy the public arena. Hence, even though her parents both agree to allow her to study beyond secondary school ; they still truncate her professional possibilities as they expect her to be a bride, just as the title of the narrative suggests. The narrative tension between the mother and the daughter becomes obvious in Nissán's novel. Oshinica desires to stay in the public space via education (and later employment) while the mother wants her to be a well-prepared wife and housekeeper.
- 4 Of course, Nissán's narrative underscores the striking contrast between what occurs when her brother does not want to continue his professional studies. It becomes a protest about the gender differences within in the community in which Oshinica lives. Not only do we see that the parents understand the route needed to development professionally (the send Moshón to a regular high school as opposed to a technical one) it also shows the distinct roles their culture believes the different sexes should adopt :
- Mi mamá ha llorado toda la tarde ; Moshón no quiere seguir estudiando ; apenas va en primero de prepa y ya se aburrió ; quiere trabajar en la tienda y ganar dinero. - ¡ Pero qué problema ! dice mi papá. ¡ No es posible eso ! [...] Si lo que quieres es un coche, no es necesario que dejes tus estudios ; te prometo que apenas cumplas dieciocho años te lo compro. [...] ¡ Qué coraje ! ; si yo fuera la que no quiere estudiar, harían una fiesta para celebrarlo.²
- 5 Nissán's narrative underlines the perceived injustice on behalf of the narrator. Such distinct standards for different siblings heighten our awareness of the different locations the children are groomed by the parents to occupy. This is not one set of parents raising their children differently than another or educational decisions borne of ignorance. Their different standards are gender-based and Nissán's protagonist rebels against this imposed identity, encouraging the reader to share her feelings of protest. In the case of Moshón, he wishes to follow the path of his father, yet his parents push him to become a socially mobile professional whilst the standard for the eldest daughter, Oshinica, appears to

want to oblige her to occupy the same space as her mother. The second novel suggests that, much to the protagonist's chagrin, their viewpoints modify with time as the youngest daughter is allowed study at university. This movement towards a more liberal viewpoint is fortunate for the youngest daughter but not for Oshinica.

- 6 Ultimately, the solution to Oshinica's dilemma to want to continue engaging in the public arena via her studies is to give in to family pressure to marry and reach a personal compromise via marrying a man who promises to allow her to continue her studies. As the first narrative draws to a close, she believes that she has created a solution. We are able to observe the two tensions in her life as she tries to bring them into harmony : that of fulfilling her own desire to study and that of living in concordance with her parent's wishes to carry out to their expectation for her to marry. What is most clear is that as she searches for her preferred identity in Mexico, she wishes to occupy the public arena.
- 7 Another important point from Nissán's narrative is that notwithstanding the time she spends working and studying outside the home, by the end of *Novia que te vea* even these public spaces are still quite limited for the protagonist. She does not really participate in the wider Mexico that is to be found outside her Jewish circle, nor is she clearly aware of what Mexico offers as a country and a society. The youthful character is portrayed as only having small fragmented notions of the country of her birth. From the time she leaves the proletariat neighborhood of the Colonia Industrial near the Basílica de Guadalupe where popular Mexican culture reigns and Catholicism is densely concentrated, for the more closed and exclusive area of La Condesa near Polanco (both of which contain some of the highest concentrations of Jews in Mexico) that we see that Oshinica never really escapes the strong influence of her family and community. All of her social relations are with those of her family or Sephardic community, which all strongly influence the vantage point she has of the world and the manner in which she is able to interpret it.³ There are moments when she begins to deduce that some things are perhaps a bit unusual (like when she meets a man from her community who marries his niece so he can be sure of her upbringing). When she accompanies her friend to the National Autonomous University in Mexico City she begins to form an inkling of the different options she might have been able to follow for her own life had she be shown a different educational path, yet her character still does not leave the space of her community and home in order to fully experience the realms of mainstream Mexico. The narration of Oshinica's work experience brings this point to fact even further.

The Workplace

- 8 As the adolescent Oshinica matures, she is able to enter the public sphere of employment outside the market. However, while the protagonist spends a season of *Novia que te vea* working she does so in a protected space employed by her "paisanos" as she calls members of her community. She quickly comes to the understanding that, here too women have their specific role to which they are strongly bound. In the first two of Nissán's narrative perpetuates this stereotype by making all of the patriarchal figures in her family vendors. However, the author has underlined that though she has recreated this type of character in her narrative, it is one she has tried to escape her whole life, distancing herself from the world of selling and trading as much as possible.⁴ Perhaps as her narrative is one in which the majority of these figures are ones the protagonist

eschews underlines this narrative's desire to search for other identities that are distinct from those found in the family.

- 9 Oshinica's father and grandfather both have stores in La Lagunilla. This neighborhood in central Mexico City whose nucleus even today has been its market which has existed since Aztec times when it was located next to a lagoon of Lake Texcoco⁵. Rivaling in some ways its neighbor, the famous Tepito market, La Lagunilla has provided cheap wears and foodstuffs for the lower classes for the entirety of its existence⁶. This space would have been a natural location for Oshinica's immigrant family as it provided not only a livelihood but also one that would allow them to be independent of many aspects of Mexican society and systems. The fact that in the novel vending is the profession of all of the older male figures (and several of the younger) reinforces the isolation of the community. They were able to keep most aspects of business among their community and only deal with the mainstream Mexican society as customers or suppliers.
- 10 Perhaps for this same reason, when Oshinica describes the La Lagunilla market which has over a thousand stalls for sellers and offers an endless variety of wares, she only describes those of her father and grandfather. As a child, when she was required to take her father his lunch, it would appear that she would only travel directly to his shop, give him his meal, only then to return home again without exploring the market place except perhaps to visit her grandfather's stall as well. Though the character's father spends the entirety of his working life in this space, the narrative offers an extremely limited view of it, giving minimal detail and ignoring in its entirety the idiosyncrasies and enormous multiplicity of this iconic capitalistic space in Mexico City. Nonetheless, later in the narrative the protagonist does awaken to the wide variety available in the Mexican markets because as the adult Oshinica would return to these and other commercial areas as a photographer with the intent of capturing its vibrancy and color (an experience the narrative only hints at, yet does not explore in detail), but the younger version of this character does not appear see further than that of her community. Perhaps the author has offered this portrayal with the hopes of underlining her limits as a young woman under the tutelage of her parents.
- 11 It is worth noting that much of the first narrative exhibits a world that shows a strong degree of isolation. One example, as we have seen, can be evidenced via the business and the market place. Though much of the time the narration covers is known in Mexico's history as the Mexican Miracle during which the country experienced enormous economic growth⁷, this is not commented by the narrative. It is either a sign that the author ignores much of the world of business as she insinuates during interviews and on other occasions or that indeed, she purposely choose not to include it in order to foment a sense of community isolation within the narrative ; or possibly, this economic event affected some groups of Mexicans but Oshinica's family belonged to one of the ones that was untouched by this special period of economic growth. All are viable possibilities and create their own distinct social commentaries. Whatever the correct explanation may be, the narrative is either uninterested in the wider Mexican context or opted to ignore it while preferring to further explore her community and family.
- 12 As a child Oshinica does not enjoy La Lagunilla. She finds the atmosphere false and mentions that even though her father teaches her not to be hypocritical at home, she notices he does not live this standard in his workplace. She also is forced to enter in this façade as she sells her father's merchandise on occasion. Though he may sell his goods for a low profit, he scolds her if she does the same. The workings of her father's business

seem confusing to the protagonist as his teachings from the domestic space do not seem to be applied in her father's space in La Lagunilla and in the end she tries to avoid that location altogether. Nevertheless, this merchandising culture does have its influence on the character. For example, she makes deals with her brother in order to buy his share of her favorite food. In her elementary school Oshinica also sells *chamóis* (a kind of tart and acidic sweet made of pickled plum) in order to make pocket money, even though it is forbidden to do so. She even feels proud of her small business: "La última vez gané \$ 5.80. Hoy otra vez me van a dejar ; voy a comprar 200 gramos ; los grandes los voy a dar a veinte y los chiquitos a diez centavos. En la escuela ya no dejan vender, así que a escondidas ; al fin que todos los niños ya saben que traigo"⁸. Even though she eschews the world of business, as a youth Oshinica also seems to participate in sales as well when she is able to do so independently and believes she does so well. This reinforces the notion of a character that feels that life lived on her own terms is what she most enjoys.

- 13 Her avoidance of formalized selling is not to be taken as a surprise. Even when she is moderately successful her father always criticizes her for not doing better. In the store she is not excluded from selling, but when she does sell with her father and her brother Oshinica always feels that she does not achieve the same success they do and they look down upon her in this arena. Independent of what the author has mentioned of her own experience with selling, the text suggests that this could be the reason why the character would ultimately reject this livelihood. With time Oshinica comes to resent her brother, who excels in this arena and has no qualms about offering a false smile in order to convince customers to buy the family's merchandise.
- 14 In parallel with what was discussed with regard to the women in the home space, the men also have their secrets in the workplace, some of which the protagonist also reveals to us. Their secrets are almost always linked to money somehow. In the financial aspect of selling, Oshinica is separated from her father and her brother Moshón in the store. As in their home, in the store her younger brother Moshón also guards the keys. In this case, they are the keys to the strong box of the store. "[...] donde guarda mi pa sus secretos"⁹. Moshón never allows her see what it holds. When discussing money issues with the father, Oshinica is excluded from the conversation as if she were a stranger¹⁰. This separation also marks the difference of gender as viewed by the family in the narrative. Hence, we see that the difference exists in both of the public and the private space occupied by the family. The women hold their secrets as the men have theirs. In the case of the women, theirs tends to be about disobedience and injustice and the men have ones that can be described as more capitalistic in nature. Resentful of this cultural paradigm, Oshinica asks her father why she is not allowed to hold onto the keys claiming seniority as she is the oldest. He responds :
- Otro día. Se las doy a Moshón porque él es hombre.
-Pero yo soy más grande.
El idiota de mi hermano sonrío muy presumido y dice : — ¡ Bajáte la falda ! ¡ Mejor métete ! ¡ Papá !, ¿ Qué está haciendo aquí afuera ? Los que pasan se le quedan viendo.
-No me voy a meter, idiota.¹¹
- 15 This preferential treatment allows Moshón, although younger, to feel superior in the public space occupied by the family. As the narrative advances we observe that, ultimately this character will experience great professional success in the public sphere whilst Oshinica will struggle with most aspects of the same. Nissán's narrative underlines how the treatment of gender is able to influence characters in the long term. Moshón

displays the confidence his privileged status within the family has given him through his attitude towards Oshinica whilst giving her orders. She, on the other hand, shows her rebellion by refusing to obey and insulting him. However, ultimately the support from the family towards the son bears fruit through his professional triumph over time. The father supports Moshón's position of superiority, by giving him more responsibility and confiding in him. Later in the narrative, this leads to the protagonist's rejection of this model as an identity for herself.

- 16 As an appropriate means of evading the pressures found in the market place, the protagonist encounters a job as a secretary in an upscale store in central Mexico City owned by a member of her community. Here, not only is she able to escape the profession of a vendor, but she is also able to exercise her studies as a journalist. This experience is met with a certain level of satisfaction by the protagonist. It is in this location that she is able to meet the class of man she was hoping to : one who promises to grant her permission to study even after they marry. Another key to understanding the protagonist's choice of life paths is that in *Novia que te vea* and the first third of *Hisho que te nazca*, the narratives do not include any characters who are female professionals, even though they existed at this time in Mexico. The women are secretaries, mothers, housewives, or maids ; in short, other professions that require few formal studies and all of which find themselves in subordinate positions. The only other women professionals in *Novia que te vea* are teachers in the Sephardic school and Oshinica views these women as over-zealous and strict. Aside from this group, it is as if (like the Mexican Miracle) the female professional did not exist. This portrayal may owe itself to the fact that so few of her relatives pursue education and comments on the narrators world view. It is not until the protagonist begins to move in other circles that she finds them and her vision of Mexico begins to shift more fully.

Sacred Spaces

- 17 The other important space Oshinica explores as she searches for identity is linked to the sacred. One of the more important of these is the synagogue. From the onset of the first novel, Oshinica notices the physical separation of men and women in their centers of worship. She also notices differences in religious rituals. For example, the women are not allowed to read aloud from the Torah whereas the men can and are encouraged to do so. The young Oshinica, longing to participate, and understand and occupy this specific space tells her grandfather that she wants to go read from the scriptures. His response is worth noting :

Las mujeres no pueden... -¿ Por qué ? -Luego te explica tu tía, ahorita me voy a mi cuarto.... -Pero, abuelito, es que a mí también... --Ven Oshinica chula -dijo mi tía, y en la cocina me dijo con su voz pequeñita : “Te voy a explicar ; es que las mujeres, cada mes... ¿tú sabes verdad ? Estamos impuras, por eso nosotras... es un honor que sólo tienen ellos [...]”¹²

- 18 Oshinica discovers that in this arena that being a woman has placed a barrier between what she desires and what her community allows. Nissán's portrayal of men views them as avoiding such uncomfortable questions for the obvious reasons. Upon reflection of Nissán's narrative, it is of no wonder that many times during the narrative the protagonist underlines her envy of men : their opportunities to study, privileges in the home, freedom in the synagogue and in the business-world, even the fact that they do not

have to be handsome are all subject to her desire : “¡ Qué suerte que [Moshón] no tenga que ser guapo ! ; la que necesita ser guapa soy yo [...]”¹³.

19 Some of these qualities are ones that the author has mentioned to have longed for in real life¹⁴. Hence, in them we can observe some of the autobiographical aspects that clearly spill over into her novel.

20 Nissán’s narrative allows the reader a small window into one view of the Jewish role in public space. In the home or other community areas, school, church, community centers, as so forth ; religion is a common denominator. It unites the family in the private sphere. In the outside world though, the character’s Jewishness is something that sets her apart from the majority of Mexicans. As we see with the young protagonist, this caused her problems at times while she attended a Catholic school :

Ayer en el recreo estaban haciendo montoncitos de arena y al moverme para agrandar el castillo, le pisé el suyo a una niña. Se enojó tanto que me echó tierra a los ojos y me gritó : ‘¡Judía !, ¡judía !’ Al oírla me asusté, la mayoría de las niñas no lo saben. Se fueron juntando y en un ratito ya eran varias las que gritaban : “¡Ustedes mataron a Cristo !”, y me ponían la señal de la cruz casi en la cara mirándome como si yo fuera el diablo, les grité : “¡Mentira !, no soy judía, digo mis oraciones y me confieso como ustedes”.¹⁵

21 This scene from her early childhood in the *Colonia Industrial*, and others similar to it, continue to torture her for some time after that. She is not the only one that suffers religious persecution. When Oshinica and her brother Moshón are together playing outside, on several occasions others bully them because they are Jewish. Another type of mental torture Oshinica suffers manifests itself every time she goes into a Catholic Church. Once inside she is reminded of the generally held concept that the Jews killed Christ. Curiously, Oshinica concludes that the others are right to hate the Jews for their part in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ : “¡ Cómo no odiar a los que hicieron eso [la crucifixión de Jesucristo] ! ¡Malvados !”¹⁶. At times, the hate that she and others are subject to for the role of the Jews in the crucifixion convinces her want to hide that she is a Jew. On other occasions, she simply tries to deflect that hatred to the Romans by saying that they killed Jesus Christ – a coping technique Oshinica learned from her father.

22 This contrast between the public and the private evidences the reality that Oshinica is living in a protected environment. As the narrative advances, we find this is even true for many of the public spaces she inhabits. In these spaces their holy days are different from the mainstream. Their dietary restrictions are not the same. Some of the principles parents use to raise their children are unlike other Mexican parents from the mainstream. All these differences sometimes cause Oshinica and her Jewish friends to conceal their religion and harbor feelings of frustration as expressed by Oshinica’s friend Becky who studies in the National Autonomous University :

Pesa ser judía. Una milésima parte de este país, ¡ qué digo !, una diezmilésima parte de los habitantes tiene la misma religión que nosotras. Nacimos en un lugar donde la mayoría no es judía, y pudiendo elegir entre tantos (muchachos), estás limitada. Además si no te casas pronto, te hacen sentir que eres solterona a los veinte años [...] Además de esto, a los muchachos de aquí, les dices : ‘Sí, soy judía’ y se encojen, y ya no sabes si después de saberlo te van a volver a hablar. Porque no cabe duda, el judío no goza de mucha simpatía en el mundo. Vete tú a saber lo que cada uno ha oído de los judíos.¹⁷

23 Oshinica consoles herself at times by rationalizing in her own mind that there are other identities that she considers to be more difficult than being Jewish : “Lo bueno es que [...]”

lo judía no se nota así a primera vista. Yo, francamente prefiero ser judía a negra”¹⁸. Precisely because it this is something that can be concealed, she does so in order to avoid certain social consequences on occasion. When invited to parties she offers excuses like the ones her father does in his workplace in order not to attend. When she does go in order to please her friends at school, she invents other reasons that exclude her from the activities. Hence, though the narrative on one level wants to rebel against her community ; on another we observe that Oshinica often finds it more comfortable to remain within her circle where she does not have to justify her religious choices. A parallel can be seen in Nissán’s portrayal of her character and La Lagunilla market. Just as Nissán’s narratives seek refuge in the father’s sales stall in La Lagunilla as opposed to exploring the variety offered to her by the market, Oshinica often prefers the safety of her community to a more open exploration of Mexico. In this narrative of self-discovery we observe that in the early years the protagonist is still quite hesitant to be a part of the mainstream Mexican culture.

- 24 With so many pressures from without to be like the dominate culture in Mexico, and suffering hostility at times by those that dislike Jews, the narrative evidences how members of the Jewish community pull inward towards the family and the community. This reaction should not be viewed as a surprise : “Judaism, particularly, has depended upon the family for its very survival. Confronted almost constantly in its history by a hostile and alien environment, the Jewish family had to inculcate in its young the will to affirm its difference as a positive, desirable and worthy self-sacrifice”¹⁹. While the protagonist follows this pattern as she is confronted with distinct forces from society ; even so, she never stops observing. She watches, but never becomes a full participant in activities outside her home or community center. The different areas in the Jewish community are the other main backgrounds : “The Jewish community has been second in importance only to the family ; it has been a macrocosm of the family”²⁰. The description of the community life as described above occurs in Nissán’s narrative as well. The settings for many narrated events in the novel are limited outside of the home to the basic elements of work, school, synagogue, and some play : all of which incorporate some form of Jewish element to them. For example, when they go on vacation, they stay in hotels owned by Jews. Thus, Oshinica’s family lives in Mexico but is seldom part of its mainstream. Most likely for this reason, when Oshinica does experience life outside her family and community she finds she is exploring a Mexico that is widely foreign to the one she had experienced as a youth, thus allowing her a range of new and previously unfamiliar options as she searches for Mexican identity.
- 25 Hence, we see that in the first of Nissán’s novels, Oshinica spends much of her youth attempting to discover the different elements and aspects of the community into which she was born. Oshinica questions the limits placed upon her with regard to educational aspirations, inclusion in religious worship, and her professional potential ; yet, she finds no satisfactory responses. In her bildungsroman, we observe in the young version of Nissán’s character who begins to feel certain levels of rebellion, though at this point in the narrative they are only disclosed to the reader as we are privy to her internal thoughts expressed in her diary and are not openly manifested by the young protagonist except on small occasions when she takes refuges in her father in order to be present during men’s meetings and other activities of which a woman would not normally be included. While she is young, Oshinica is still unwilling to challenge the status quo, so she

settles on compromise; therefore, this narrative demonstrate the power of the protagonist's birth community exercises over her.

- 26 On observing her behavior in both the public and private arena it becomes clear that even though Oshinica is a young woman, she does not share the same enthusiasm her mother or others for their role in the community. She would much rather live the life men do :
 Quiero parecerme a mi mamá, a mi abuela, a mi tía ? No, mejor a mi abuelo, a mi papá, o hasta a mi hermano. ¡ Qué aburridas son las mujeres y además tontas ! ; bueno, mi mamá no es tonta, pero no es nada divertida ; mi abuelita no puede ir sola ni siquiera a Sears, que está a dos cuadras. Pero a escondidas se va con Uba. Las mujeres siempre en casa, no se les ocurre ni irse a remar. Mi papá es bien simpático ; los esposos salen y ellas a cuidar a sus hijos o a sus hermanos, como me toca a mí.²¹
- 27 Consider the adjectives Oshinica uses to describe women in her community : “*aburridas*”, “*tontas*” and “*nada divertidas*”. This critical language offers a negative view towards womanhood in the protagonist's domestic circle that underline her growing rejection of patterns for women within that space. Unfortunately for her, the cultural forces at work in her family difficult the fulfilling of her desires. As Nissán's character discovers what particular type of Mexican identity she wishes to assume, these initial seeds of resistance will transform into other forms of behavior.

Domestic Identity – Limits and Rebellion in *Novia* and *Hisho*

- 28 One of the main themes of the previous chapter foregrounds Oshinica's desire for more liberty and equality in the public and private arena. The person who most wants to control the protagonist is her mother. One explanation for this behavior involves the notion that Judaism is passed through the mother, so to the extent that the mother sees her traditions and customs as being linked to her religious identity, she will want to transmit this to her daughters as they too are viewed as the vessels which transmit religion throughout the generations. Any deviation from these established patterns and forms for living could be viewed by the mother as threatening to the future religiosity of her daughter. Hence, one way of understanding the mother's actions is to view them as a conservative and protective stance she takes in order to transmit her belief system, especially in an environment where the mainstream is not Jewish. She appears to desire that Oshinica not only to continue with her beliefs, but also to be accepted by others in her society so as to continue with tradition.

The home in Novia que te vea

- 29 Oshinica's mother appears to be comfortable in her role as a housewife whose sole occupation is the running of the home and the care of her six children. For the most part she, at least outwardly, is a submissive wife who takes charge of the cooking, cleaning, and assuring the children grow up to be contributing members of the Jewish community. The mother never openly manifests any desire for any other profession aside from motherhood. Perhaps this could be owing to a notion that some Jewish woman are “[...] willing to put self-development in second place” as a part of their identity²². Only once in the two narratives do we encounter Mamá evidencing a spark of rebellion. This occurs

when she defies her husband by deciding to have their daughter Zelda's nose surgically modified so she can modify its particular shape, that resembles her father's nose : "Que vaya y se enoje, cosa que no me hinche : dos trabajos va a tener. Yo quiero que tu hermana se vea bonita y tope un mazal, y voy a hacer todo lo que pueda, ¿ oíste ?, quiera o no tu papá. Yo no soy como tu abuela que pide permiso hasta para ir a pishar"²³. Though she claims to be liberal in comparison to her mother-in-law, this is the only overt rebellion she manifests in the narrative. She appears to do this in order to eliminate from her daughter a physical characteristic that conforms to a Jewish stereotype. On one level her striving to eliminate it would reinforce her adherence to European models of beauty – perhaps an influence of the Europeans schools she attended in Istanbul as well, it could be an attempt to demonstrate she is of a higher social cast than what is sometimes associated with the Sephardic. Though, perhaps the explanation is much simpler : the mother has the responsibility to prepare the children to contribute to Jewish society so she may feel she is in her right to have her daughter's nose operated on if it will increase her chances of finding a suitable marriage partner. Marriage to a proper suitor is, according to many in her Jewish community, an ideal to which women should aspire. The reader never knows whether or not the plastic surgery takes place²⁴, but does observe that the father fails to take any action to stop his wife from carrying out her plan. Whatever the case may be on this regard, for the rest of the narrative ; if Mamá disobeys, she does so secretly so as not to cause a stir. The mother's, as well as others, efforts to look as though she is obedient result in the domestic space containing various examples of secretive behavior.

30 Another aspect to be considered is the degree to which the mother attempts to control the lives of her children without their consent. As Oshinica's narrative voice confirms, Mamá exercises a ridged control over her children. For example, we do not know if Zelda wants to change her nose or not. The mother simply acts as if what she wants for her children will always be best and expects them not to question her judgment.

31 The protagonist promptly discovers that if she follows matriarchal desire, all goes well ; if not, life rapidly becomes intolerable. However, as Oshinica matures it becomes evident that this stance becomes increasingly difficult to sustain as she desires more independence. The reaction creates narrative tension as the mother counters the protagonist's rebellions with further restrictions.

32 The methods the mother employs in order to control or limit her daughter are worth mention. She interferes with her relationships. Consider the case of Andrés : the first real boy with whom Oshinica falls in love. He is a Jewish convert who dreams of moving to Israel and becoming a part of the Jewish socialistic movement there²⁵. As Oshinica matures she yearns to become a part of his aspirations. Her mother however, does not approve of Andrés. She views him as a gentile and for that same reason forbids Oshinica to be with him :

Sigue pensando que Andrés es goi [gentil]. De allí no la saco. Cuando se fueron [Andrés y su madre] pregunté : --Oye, mamá, ¿ es cierto que se acaba de hacer la circuncisión ? -Sí, me platicó su mamá, pero de todas maneras aunque la mona se vista de seda... procura no mucha amistuca, ¿ eh ?²⁶

33 Though Oshinica underlines that Andrés has taken significant steps, like subjecting himself to circumcision, to show his commitment to the Jewish faith, her mother does not accept him. As he is her first love in a culture that pushes marriage to young women, the character sees him as a potential partner with whom she could marry and fulfill her

personal passions. Oshinica makes various attempts to convince her parents to accept Andrés, but it is to no avail because as in the Jewish faith it is the mother who transmits the faith and it was Andrés' mother who was the gentile in the mixed-couple relationship, Andrés is seen as a non-Jew by the Mamá. The Jewish scholar J. Simcha Cohen in his book *Intermarriage and Conversion: A Halakhic Solution* explains this principle that appears to guide the mother more clearly: "It is without dispute a cardinal halakhic principle that the children of gentile mothers and Jewish fathers are categorized as gentiles. They are simply not Jews"²⁷. So even though Andrés does what is required by Jewish law to "convert" to Judaism, Mamá finds she is unable to view him as otherwise. In many ways the mother's outlook manifests the conservative *Weltanschauung* of the Sephardic mother in this novel, contradicting perhaps her aggressive actions she took with her daughter Zelda with regard to beauty – showing us two poles of her personality that appear opposite but that are actually united under the premise of the mother's mission to keep her children well within the religious community.

- 34 These actions we have just commented show us the conservative stance the mother takes with regard to her daughter. Further on the subject of Oshinica's first love, it could also be argued that since Oshinica is the woman (who does originate from a long line of Jewish heritage) one could rationalize it would be permissible for her to marry Andrés as it is Oshinica who 'carries the religion' and not the convert male. However, the mother's conservative ideas in this regard hold in this narrative. She is unable to share Oshinica's view point nor emphasize with her daughter's feelings for Andrés. Ultimately the narrative suggests that it is this conservative and restrictive outlook that is one of the reasons Oshinica gradually begins to look for other mother figures who will show her other modes of life that allow the protagonist to negotiate her identity and view of the world distinctly. Nonetheless, Oshinica copies her mother's behavior and begins to defy her family's decisions by dating the men her mother has picked out for her and then secretly meeting with Andrés on other occasions.
- 35 This clandestine relationship maintains the element of secrecy, which is always present in both novels when Oshinica is being manipulated and becomes a character trait that underscores the breach between the protagonist and her parents, and later the relationship between herself and her husband. Ultimately, this method becomes fatiguing and we see that the character's behavior results in two outcomes: the protagonist bending to the will of those who hold power or demonstrating rebellion and breaking the paradigm altogether. As a youth, Oshinica chooses to be obedient to her parent:
- Creo que de plano con Andrés nada; mis papás dicen que tiene sólo dos años más que yo, que apenas está empezando su carrera, que con qué me va a mantener. Su mamá dice que nos casemos y nos quedemos a vivir en su casa los dos años que tarde en terminar sus estudios. Sería una locura; no, no creo poder [...].²⁸
- 36 Curiously, though the mother originally cites religious problems for her decision to withhold her blessing on Oshinica's relationship with Andrés, ultimately they convince her with economic reasons. Oshinica desists, but claims she never to have stopped loving him even after she is married.
- 37 A similar situation arises with another man but, due to the father's intervention, it ends distinctly. While Oshinica is working she meets a young man named Eduardo (Lalo). He too fails to win Mamá's approval. Lalo is a half Sephardic and half-Arabic Jew. One might assume that Mamá would approve of him as he is at half Sephardic, but once again it is the boy's mother who causes the problem. In Lalo's case the mother is Arabic – and the

mother disapproves of them. Further causing difficulties is that, Lalo's Sephardic father has a bad reputation within the Jewish community. When Mamá discovers the pair are seeing each other in secret, she obliges Oshinica quit her employment and studies and remain at home with her. This is an extreme reaction to her daughter's actions : "[...] para eso vienes a la escuela [...] se te acabó la escuela. De hoy en adelante vas a ir a todos lados conmigo."²⁹. It is at this point that Oshinica decides to break the power relationship between herself and her parents by opting to marry Lalo – thus, transferring the power over to her husband.

- 38 At this point in the narrative we observe the role of the father is key in the development of the character. Even though her mother disapproves, the father shows his ultimate authority and allows Oshinica to marry Lalo. The mother consents on the condition that they will do so quickly so the mother does not have to deal with Lalo in her home. The mother behaves as if, once her authority in the domestic space has been undermined, that she wishes to purge herself of the situation in which she was not able to exercise her control over her daughter.
- 39 This episode also underlines that it is the father who defends Oshinica and not the mother. According to Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*, it is common for the mother in Mexican society to want to create a daughter who is subservient to her husband and does not aspire to be more than a housewife so that a broader section of society will accept her³⁰. This would be an aspect in which the mother seems to be more similar to the wider Mexican society or simply a point of overlap between broader Mexican culture and the mother's personal values. With this notion in mind it could be argued that Mamá acts in accord with the norm in her society and possibly a section of the greater society as well. Hence, we observe the need in the narrative of the father to break this cycle and permit the protagonist another course of action. As when she was younger and was allowed by her father to come into the meeting where women were not allowed, on this occasion he allowed to her do as she wishes.
- 40 It is important to note in our observations of space and identity that not everything that occurs to the protagonist in this narrative is directly linked to religious identity, even if the narrative might appear to want to persuade us to the contrary. For example, according to one interpretation of Jewish law, children are bound to obey their parents *except* in the following four cases : when commanded to do something that causes them to break the Sabbath, when told not to associate with another Jew, when the parent tries to keep them from intellectual growth, and upon choosing their marriage partner³¹. This of course argues that Oshinica's desire was within the rights and bounds of her religion. In fact, it could be argued that every one of the significant problems Oshinica has which her mother forms a part of these instances in which the child is free from any religious bonds of obedience to parents, which provokes the question of what is more dominate in the text and in the domestic space: religious ideology or parental authority? This is especially true when these do appear not to share the same view.
- 41 The other point of conflict between Oshinica and her mother are her studies. It is also a theme linked to the character's search for a new identity and becomes increasingly important to Oshinica's life narrative.
- 42 Upon graduating from *la secundaria* Oshinica decides she wants to continue studying. Nevertheless, her mother will only allow Oshinica to maintain her academic pursuits if she attends a technical school for girls and studies something that will teach her

shorthand and typing so she can be a secretary. The mother does not see the value in formal studies : “¿ Para qué una [carrera] larga ? Luego nos casamos y ni terminamos”³².

- 43 Oshinica chooses to study journalism and enjoys it and the public space she explores whilst she is a student. It is the first time since Oshinica was a little girl and went to a Catholic school that she finds herself in an outside space surrounded by people who are not from her Jewish community. This experience as a young adult causes her to awaken to the Mexico that has always existed around Oshinica but in which she has not participated fully. She enjoys it and underlines the surprise with which she experiences mainstream Mexico. With the knowledge Oshinica acquires at school, she is able to secure a job working as a secretary in a laboratory for a French doctor and his Mexican cousin. Her mother is elated that Oshinica is able to find a good job with people of her faith because in her mind this means that she will now be able to save money for her wedding expenses. However, the mother’s joy is soon replaced by anger when the protagonist announces that she plans to return to school to learn to be a laboratory technician. Oshinica’s bosses have given her the idea, underlining the notion that it is more family and her immediate community of family and friends who push her toward marriage as opposed to study since they share the protagonist’s religion. Mamá’s reaction is worth noting :

¿ Laboratorista ? ¡ Dios mío, esta niña nunca va a acabar !, ¿ estás loca ?, Estaba amán amán para que acabaras, ¡ qué no va a ver fin para esta desgraciada escuela ?, para esto te va a servir ; estás atavanada, a ver, ¿ quién de tus amigas hace lo que tú ? Dorí no terminó nada ; se casó. Ni siquiera tiene un título ; está feliz ; el otro día la vi con su niña, me dio mil modos de alegría ; está lindísima su niñita. Y tú, cuando gracias a Dios ya terminaste y ya eres periodista titulada y que tu papá te pagó los estudios, se te ocurre otra carrera. Y cuándo vamos a descansar un poco para decir : muestra hija, sosdó ya gana su dinerito, ¡ No !, apenas dos meses de sueldo y ya inventas algo nuevo, y sales con que quieres ser química. ¡ Dios mío !, ¿ por qué mos diste una hija sabia ?, ¿ por qué ?, ande le afitan tantos estudios [...].³³

- 44 Unlike Moshón’s case, the mother rebels against her daughter’s desires to study. At this point the father intervenes and allows Oshinica to continue to study. The reader might think that the mother would support Oshinica in her efforts to enrich herself ; however, it is the father who allows the protagonist to secure what she desires. Simone De Beauvoir comments : “hay mujeres lo bastante satisfechas de su vida que desean reencarnarse en una hija, a quien quisieran dar las oportunidades que han tenido, y también las que les han faltado, para crearles una juventud dichosa”.³⁴ Perhaps, the reader might imagine that the mother could even wish to live some of her own unfulfilled dreams through Oshinica ; nonetheless, this is not the case. The mother’s attitude better fits another type of mother De Beauvoir describes :

Irritada por haber engendrado a una mujer, la madre la recibe con esta equívoca maldición : ‘Serás mujer’. Espera redimir su inferioridad haciendo una criatura superior de aquella a quien mira como si fuese su doble, y tiende también a infligirle la misma tara que ha sufrido. A veces intenta imponerle exactamente su propio destino : ‘Lo que era bastante bueno para mí, lo es también para ti ; así me han educado, y tú continuarás mi suerte’.³⁵

- 45 This is a fitting description of Nissán’s protagonist. However, we soon find that what the mother wants is not always what occurs. The other reason that the two women do not support each other may be because of the belief held by some that the Jewish mother : “[...] perceives herself to be a vital link in the chain of the *masorah* -tradition— and firmly believes her priority is to raise Jewish children who will contribute to society and to the

perpetuation of the Jewish community”³⁶. Hence, one must ask the question, is it self-interest that perpetuates the patterns that arise in the domestic space described in Nissán’s novels or religious tradition? Or perhaps it is a combination of both?

46 As a character we observe that Oshinica is self-focused. This tends to lead her away from the conservative Jewish tradition. The mother is a tradition keeper. It is possible the mother fills her personal desires by assuring the children keep their families’ tradition and not allowing them freedoms she does not enjoy herself. Since the mother fails in this area with Oshinica when she rebels and decides to marry Lalo, the mother rejects her daughter, creating a schism between the two women. Regardless of what the mother’s motives are in this dilemma, the narrative further along teaches us that Nissán’s character is not so religion focused, but rather she is concentrated on herself and her own developments. Perhaps it is this notion of possessing difference without strict religious adherence which has generated such popularity with regard to Nissán’s protagonist. It is not that she rebels against religious tradition, but rather that she rejects control to which any one person or institution might subject her. This becomes more evident as we observe her rebel against her husband when he tries to impose his will on her.

47 Notwithstanding her rebellion at times, Nissán’s youthful protagonist often finds she allows herself to be led via principles of compromise. Hence, the first time we see Oshinica take Lalo seriously as a prospective partner is when he proposes marriage and promises that she may continue to study. In a letter Oshinica writes to Andrés, she explains to him what could be construed as her self-centered reasons for marrying Lalo: “Lalo me quiere mucho y yo también. Dice que casada podré seguir estudiando; él me dice a todo que sí [...] Trabaja y puede mantenerme”.³⁷ Though the character’s words adopt one position, her actions indicate another. Even when Oshinica says she loves Lalo, she gives that which she cherishes most (her graduation ring) to Andrés as a token of their feelings for one another.³⁸ In some ways the existence of this letter shows how Oshinica attempts to convince herself that her compromise is what she wants even though her actions belie what she writes. Nissán has created a picture of a young woman who sacrifices much in order to enter into womanhood in the manner in which her parents desire. Perhaps this aspect of the character is what reached many of the members of Nissán’s community who later contacted her with regard to her narrative³⁹. However, this sacrifice appears to have born a bitter fruit. In *Hisho que te nazca*, the protagonist comments:

-Susan, te presento a Andrés. Estuve enamorada de él más de quince años.

-Sí, muy enamorada pero la casaron con otro.

-¿Te casaron? -pregunta mi amiga pelando los ojos.

-No... no me obligaron, pero si no me casaba con Lalo me habría tenido que casar con quien fuera, ¡pero ya! [...]

-No te imaginas cuanto lo quise --le digo a Susan--. Recuerdo nuestro nerviosismo cuando nos encontrábamos, yo siempre con mis niñas. Nuestros ojos se enganchaban, no nos salían palabras. Sólo esa mirada lánguida de la que me enamoré. ¿Por qué no se habrá casado?, me preguntaba. Cuántas veces estuve a punto de detenerlo y decirle: ‘No te he olvidado.’ Nunca me atreví. [...] en mi vida él fue mi último amor, y con esta nostalgia sobreviví los desencantos y la rutina del matrimonio.⁴⁰

48 Even though it is not obvious at the time of the wedding, Oshinica makes known her real motives for marrying Lalo. The mother’s will takes precedence over that of her daughter. She cannot marry Andrés, so she marries Lalo thinking he will fulfill most of her desires.

Lalo becomes a kind of knight that rescues a damsel in distress, but there is no happily-ever-after. Nonetheless, it could be argued that this knight need have been necessary. As commented earlier, all of the conflicts between the protagonist and her parents up to this point are aspects, according to her religion, that Oshinica should be free to choose for herself. Hence, we see that, it is family and ideas reinforced by her community to a certain extent that really drive the treatment of Oshinica in the narrative. In certain ways, just like many of the male figures exhibit the stereotypical trait of being involved in sales as their livelihood, Mamá is also behaving as the stereotypical Jewish mother who is a “smothering mother”⁴¹. This stereotyping surely added to the popularity of the story and many a reader’s ability to identify with the narrative⁴². Another part of the stereotype is manifested by her “unremitting concern about every aspect of her child’s welfare, [that is] expressed for the most part by unceasing verbalization”⁴³. The irony is that the stereotypical attributes actually turn her into a mother who goes against what some would consider is Jewish law.

NOTES

1. (*Novia* 30)
2. (*Novia* 142)
3. With perhaps the exception of *La Universidad Femenina*, during which we observe that she does not even know the Askani community very well as it is found she was unaware that some of her classmates were of that community and the young women had no connection to each other.
4. Nissán has commented: “También me molesta que todo mundo me dice : uuuyyyy tú has de ser buenísima para los negocios porque los judíos son muy buenos para eso, y yo no he sido nada buena para los negocios, creo que nada más para demostrarles que no todos los judíos somos buenos negociantes, por eso no vendo ni un boleto para la rifa de la Cruz Roja, yo no vendo nada” (Perea 41). (Perea Inclán, Isabel, “Como vive una familia judía en México”, in *El financiero*, Oct 22, 1992.)
5. Its metro sign is a duck, a bird that was said to inhabit this lagoon during pre-Columbian and colonial times.
6. However, the emergence of antique markets in *La Lagunilla* has led to several upper-class individuals being seen there such as Jacobo Zabłudowsky and María Felix. Juan José Arreola is known to have collected old books from the market and Carlos Monsiváis is said to have acquired many of his collection which now forms a part of the Museum *El Estanquillo* from this market.
7. (Beezley 544)
8. (*Novia* 57)
9. (*Novia* 125)
10. (*Novia* 125)
11. (*Novia* 126)
12. (*Novia* 82)
13. (*Novia* 78)
14. Several of these are mentioned in the article ‘Escribir es tan bonito como hacer el amor : Rosa Nissán’ published in *La Jornada* by Mónica Mateos.

15. (*Novia* 10)
 16. (*Novia* 13)
 17. (*Novia* 132)
 18. (*Novia* 13-14)
 19. (Hofstein 49)
 20. (Rosenthal 16)
 21. (*Novia* 25-26)
 22. (Hartman 114)
 23. (*Novia* 136)
 24. This is not the only loose end in the narrative. Literary critic Eduardo Mejía notes the episode in *Novia* in which the young Oshinica mentions twenty-eight cavities being discovered by the dentist is commented yet left undeveloped within the text (Mejía 13).
 25. A character not so different to the character Rifke Groman in the film *Novia que te vea* – bar the fact that Rifke is not a convert.
 26. (*Novia* 108)
 27. (3)
 28. (*Novia* 126)
 29. (*Novia* 158)
 30. (16)
 31. (Linzer 80-85)
 32. (*Novia* 94)
 33. (*Novia* 152)
 34. (229)
 35. (299-300)
 36. (Hartman 114)
 37. (*Novia* 169)
 38. The older Oshinica will ask him about the ring while feeling hopeful about a possible future for them together, just after she has separated from Lalo. However, her hopes are dashed when he claims to have lost it.
 39. One example of Nissán's mention of this can be found in Mónica Mateo's 1996 article on Rosa Nissán in *La Jornada* that is listed in the bibliography.
 40. (*Hisho* 266-267)
 41. (Schlesinger 44)
 42. This particular stereotype is common in literature, with one recent example being found in the mother of Marcus Goldman in the best-selling novel *La Vérité sur l'Affaire Harry Quebert* by the Swiss novelist Joël Dicker.
 43. (Schlesinger 14)
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ABSTRACTS

Being Mexican is the first book-length attempt to understand the narrative of the Mexican writer Rosa Nissán. Its focus are her first two novels, *Novia que te vea* and *Hisho que te nazca*, which are coming-of-age narratives in which the protagonist, Oshinica, attempts to understand her family and community as she grows up during the prosperous years of the Mexican Miracle and the

changing society found in Mexico in the 1960s and 1970s. After setting down the groundwork for this study in the first installment, these next two -included in this edition of *Amerika*- focus on different aspects of male and female identity. While Oshinica forges her identity she does so in several spaces, both public and private. These next two sections analyze the public: education and work as well as the private spaces: the home and the sacred, with the purpose of identifying the forces that work to create an identity for the protagonist. The analysis reveals the tensions created as the protagonist tries to resolve the conflict between self and family, between the mainstream and the marginal, and between the traditional and the modern; asking important questions regarding how identity is formed and how the spaces one inhabits exercise control over their identity.

AUTHOR

NATHANIAL ELI GARDNER

University of Glasgow
g.nathaniel@gmail.com