

JOURNAL OF
WEST INDIAN LITERATURE



Published by the Departments of Literatures in English
The University of the West Indies

Eyes Brimming With Tears

Author(s): Ángela Hernández Núñez and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

Source: *Journal of West Indian Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 1/2 (NOVEMBER 2004), pp. 149-153

Published by: [Journal of West Indian Literature, Department of Literatures in English, University of the West Indies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23019742>

Accessed: 22/09/2013 21:30

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Journal of West Indian Literature, Department of Literatures in English, University of the West Indies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of West Indian Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Eyes Brimming With Tears

Ángela Hernández Núñez
Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

Filomena refuses to move on. Perhaps it is because her hair has gone missing. She isn't like most of the dead, who skulk around frightening people or guiding them to buried gold. No, she lurks—particularly at dusk—just as she did in life, neither offensive nor fearsome, simply exasperating everyone by her very existence. Her sisters had tried to discover where the mother had hidden the mane of hair she had cropped off her daughter while she lay in her coffin—as punishment for her turning away from God. But the mother was too old. She didn't remember having buried the hair, or that her daughter was dead, or having sworn spitefully—*she will not go in one piece*—as she struggled with the dull scissors over the corpse. One had to make allowances, she had been through so much.

Filomena had been born the colour of a ripe lemon. The mother had made a vow to Jesus, promising that if the girl's appearance changed she would never cut her hair. When she was about fourteen her skin turned pinkish, but by then it had become clear that colour was hardly the only thing wrong with the girl. She didn't look like anything, or anyone. The father was forever questioning his paternity. Although, to tell the truth, the only feature the girl had inherited from the family had come from him: a slowness, a heaviness, a resistance to displacement. But the father consistently denied this common trait, arguing that his own slowness was not innate, it had come to him with the sugar in his blood, with overweight and old age. He had also been so old when Filomena was conceived, ten years older than the wife. But as if to deny her parents' advanced years, she herself seemed ageless. She must have been around thirty when she died, but she looked like an adolescent: forever smiling, loving all those people whose names she knew.

However, one should not be deceived by her innocent and placid appearance. At the slightest vexation she would tear apart whatever was

before her: dishes, chairs, dresses. On one occasion she kicked an oil lamp, setting her mattress, sheets, and mosquito net on fire. After the fire had been doused, there remained the smoldering bedspring, fragments of the headboard, and glass shards from the framed lithographs of saints. As punishment, they kept her tied up until the damage was repaired.

No one was ready to tend to her or try to understand her. At times she displayed some industry: she carried water, husked rice, and washed the dishes in the kitchen. They did not allow her to cook, so as to keep her away from the fire. They all knew full well how fire engrossed her. At their slightest distraction she would pick up a half-burned piece of charcoal and spend hours shaving off the layers of ash with her fingers, as if she wanted to lick it. At times she became troublesome indeed and it was even difficult to bathe her. It had been like this since just before she turned twenty.

By then there were no other children left at home. The eldest daughter lived nearby and came daily to help her parents. As her own children increased in number, however, the frequency of her visits decreased, just when they needed her the most: Filomena had begun to chase after the animals to watch them copulate. More than once she had been caught disengaging coupling pigs or inspecting the roosters at the very moment they mounted the hens.

The neighbours teased her affectionately. *Do you have a new boyfriend, Filomena? I hear Enrique's in love with you. You better get a move on, or you'll become an old maid. You already let Pedro get away. He eloped with Elvira last week. Filomena, I brought you some star caramel.* She would kneel before her elders, asking for their blessing, but would not allow anyone to touch her, except for her parents and eldest sister. Certain things deranged her—a blunder in the way she was greeted, someone who distractedly placed a hand on her arm or back—and the outburst would be such that the offender was compelled to flee from her rage.

The mother loved her in a special way. But Filomena gave so much trouble that sometimes she wished her daughter dead. Particularly after she began taking her clothes off anywhere. They locked her in the house, where she whiled away the days in the buff, tirelessly pacing up and down and singing by the hour. The sisters had to take turns helping her. She remained nonetheless as affectionate as ever, asking after every acquaintance, sending regards and messages, inviting them to come by and see her, since

she was *ailing*. The situation deeply embarrassed her mother, who had never let herself be seen naked, not even by the husband with whom she had conceived ten children.

Filomena noticed men—too pointedly, in the opinion of the relatives, who had found temporary relief in the thought that she would not let anyone lay a hand on her, only to grow increasingly more apprehensive every time they caught her, without the slightest provocation, fondling herself. Once the mother had had a bad turn when Filomena had suddenly tightened her legs and grown rigid, her eyes rolling, her body stiffening. She was convinced that her daughter was about to die, but by the time the eldest daughter arrived with her husband, they found Filomena happy and relaxed.

Distressed as they were by their daughter's predicament, the quarrels between the two older people became more frequent. He would suggest every so often that she couldn't be his: *from whom did she get that pointy nose? She's so tall, whom does she take after? She's so giddy, where did that come from?* It was his way of hinting at his suspicions. He didn't dare confront his wife directly, nor could he acknowledge that his daughter's behaviour came from her not being normal. The wife, on her part, blamed him for Filomena's problems; due, according to her, to his having impregnated her in a sleepwalking trance while she herself was asleep. Neither one of them remembered very well how she had been conceived.

They were both old and could barely control her. The eldest girl tried to take her in, but her husband threatened to leave the house rather than countenance the damaging example of a woman in the buff fondling herself in front of the children. Filomena herself objected to the move; she had to be tied down to keep her from returning to her parents' home.

With the help of a doctor in the neighbouring town and the intervention of various relatives they managed to commit her to a lunatic asylum. But she was sent back after a month because she was dying of sadness. She was harmless, moreover, and the hospital had other priorities. The siblings raffled her among themselves resignedly, but it was impossible to keep her in any one home for more than a couple of days. When it came to the brothers, the wives were not willing to take on such a responsibility; in the case of the sisters, Filomena, obscene and provoking despite herself, presented a dangerous temptation to their respective husbands.

They built her a windowless room, with one sole door that opened into the old people's bedroom. They kept her locked in. When the moon was full Filomena became agitated, screaming and grating her hands against the palm-wood walls until they were raw flesh. The parents would then take the precaution of tying up her hands and legs until the moon waned. Sometimes the eldest sister came to dress her and take her for a walk around the neighbourhood. She was reverting to her ripe-lemon tint, probably because she needed sunshine.

The father and mother, grown frail with age, forgot their differences, drawing closer in their acceptance of their fate. Between them they bathed her with warm water and rosemary. She lathered her; he combed her hair, which reached almost to the floor. Filomena, wasting away, allowed herself to be cared for. Although her deteriorating eyesight kept her from noticing the return of her daughter's unhealthy hue, the mother knew that Filomena was wilting and felt the pain deeply.

When it appeared as if the three of them were dying at the same pace, Filomena got pregnant. Her colour changed once again, turning a very pale pink. The mother wept at the swooning and vomiting, without understanding what was happening. No stranger had access to the small room, the father was so old that it seemed absurd to attribute lust to the body he dragged about like an oppressive burden. Consulted by Filomena's siblings, the doctor in the neighbouring town told them that they were probably dealing with a psychological pregnancy. They took her to the clinic, eager to have her examined to confirm the reassuring diagnosis. She let herself be guided, lying on the bed at the doctor's request. But when he tried to open her legs, he was stunned by a strong kick on the face. They were not able to examine her, so they had to take her back to her small room, trusting that the doctor was right and no new Filomena would be born to embarrass everyone.

Her belly grew, as it happens to any pregnant woman. However, the noticeable swelling spreading over the rest of her body instilled in all a renewed hope that the pregnancy was false. At seven months she was incapable of getting up from the floor, her legs were as thick as young trees, her neck was swollen; it welded her face to her torso in a seamless line. They poured water and food down her bloated throat. She let her eldest sister change her clothes and put red cayena flowers in her hair, sometimes

whispering endearments in her ear and exchanging caresses.

After her death, her belly stuck out of her coffin; they flattened it with a slab of wood tied to her back with hemp. The mother ranted and raved—*he's sleep-walking, what is he doing? He doesn't know what he's doing, he's sleep-walking*—as she cut off her hair so she would not leave in one piece, her fingers trembling on the toothless scissors.

The daughters kept her out of people's way to make sure no one would overhear her and think badly of their father.