



Cockfights and Colonial Ghosts: Identity and Violence in Latin American Postcolonial Horror

King Philip G. Britanico

Central Luzon State University, Philippines

britanico_king@clsu.edu.ph

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Abstract

This paper analyzes *Cockfight* by María Fernanda Ampuero through a postcolonial lens, focusing on identity fragmentation and cultural dislocation as shaped by historical trauma and colonial legacies. Using Homi Bhabha's concepts of "cultural hybridity" and the "Third Space," the study reveals how Ampuero's short stories explore gendered violence, familial horror, and psychological trauma within postcolonial Ecuador. Through horror motifs, the narratives depict women navigating oppressive domestic spaces and confronting hybrid identities shaped by the clash between colonial structures and indigenous traditions. Stories such as *Auction* and *Monsters* illustrate how violence is embedded in cultural memory, while *Griselda* and *Blinds* expose the lingering effects of colonial exploitation on identity and autonomy. Ampuero's use of horror not only subverts patriarchal and religious norms but also foregrounds the resilience of her female characters, making *Cockfight* a critical contribution to contemporary Latin American postcolonial literature and demonstrates the enduring relevance of postcolonial frameworks in analyzing contemporary literary expressions of trauma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Latin America has a distinct history of serving as the testing ground for early Spanish and Portuguese imperial projects, experiencing a relatively long duration of these projects—albeit historically early end to them—and navigating a specific and complex trajectory of internal and external postcolonial relations, despite having fundamental similarities to other colonial and postcolonial experiences (Bortoluci & Jansen, 2013). These complex experiences produced some of the world's most iconic pieces of art and literature known today. The rich history and experiences of Latin America were mirrored in its literature and art.

With the help of the "Latin American Boom" in the 1960s, the study of Latin American literature expanded from its origins in the early post-independence era to Europe and the United States during the twentieth century. The "polemics of possession," which alluded to Spanish conquistadors' sentiments toward the Americas' land and culture, were at the core of Latin American literature. These polemics of possession centered on freshness and persuasiveness, but these ideas acquired new connotations in the centuries after colonization (Adorno, 2011).

For the past centuries, Latin American literature has been studied with a focus on magical realism; today, studies are more focused on colonial and postcolonial discourse (Vidal, 1993). The colonial past still lingers in works of literature to this day, and the discovery and understanding of these experiences remain relevant in the field of literary and cultural studies.

Although the term "Latin American postcolonial studies" implies the existence of a regional body of knowledge, it actually highlights a problem: there is not a widely accepted body of work on Latin America designated as "postcolonial" (Coronil, 2016). It makes sense that Latin Americanists' reactions to postcolonial studies would have been mixed. Numerous scholars have questioned whether postcolonial studies is suitable for Latin America, arguing that it addresses the scholarly concerns of large universities and the unique realities of Asia and Africa, or represents the viewpoint of scholars who write about Latin America but are not from it and ignore its own cultural traditions (Coronil, 2016). However, postcolonial themes are evidently present in Latin American literature and cannot be disregarded. The effects of historical events and experiences that linger on its people are still reflected in the contemporary world.

Writers in the contemporary world, combining their modern experiences with postcolonial traces that still linger today, continue to write and make their mark in literature representing the Latin American experience in the modern context. María Fernanda Ampuero, a writer and journalist, was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 1976. She has written pieces for international newspapers and magazines and authored two nonfiction books: *Permiso de residencia* and *Lo que aprendí en la peluquería*. Her first collection of short stories and her first English-language book, *Cockfight*, was published by Feminist Press through Words Without Borders in 2022. She has lived in Spain since 2005 and was named one of the 100 most important Latin Americans in Spain in 2012 (The Short Story Project, 2021).

Cockfight, Ampuero's debut collection of short stories, was listed by *New York Times en Español* as one of the top 10 fiction books of 2018. Ampuero illuminates the hidden facets of the home—the horrific truths of family, growing up, religion, and class conflict—in clear and captivating prose. Two sisters are left at the mercy of their vengeful brother; a girl is put up for auction by criminals; and a family's maids witness a terrible cycle of violence. Characters live their entire lives locked in reenactments of their past traumas, with violence masquerading as love. *Cockfight*, a violent and distinctive voice, examines how the home can both build and destroy its occupants (Feminist Press, n.d.). The themes present in Ampuero's work form the focus of analysis for this paper.

Given the postcolonial themes present in Latin American literature that linger in the contemporary world, this paper aims to explore the postcolonial themes in Ampuero's short stories in *Cockfight*. There is little to no existing scholarship on the works of Ampuero, specifically on her English-translated works. This paper may be the first to analyze her English-translated work through a postcolonial lens.

In order to guide the analysis presented herein, Bhabha's (1994) concept of "cultural hybridity" and the "Third Space" will serve as the critical lens for analyzing the themes of postcolonial dislocations and identity fragmentation in Ampuero's *Cockfight*. These concepts are foundational in the field of postcolonial theory in literature and are particularly useful for analyzing and examining the nuanced ways in which Ampuero's narratives engage with the legacy of colonialism in Ecuador, her hometown, and beyond.

To address the main aim of the study, this paper pursues the following research questions:

1. How does María Fernanda Ampuero use horror as a narrative device to explore themes of identity fragmentation and cultural dislocation within a postcolonial context?
2. In what ways do the stories in *Cockfight* reflect Bhabha's (1994) concept of "Third Space," and how does this space contribute to the creation of hybrid identities?

3. How do legacies of colonial violence and trauma manifest in the characters and settings of *Cockfight*, and what role does cultural memory play in these representations?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned above, this paper uses Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and the "Third Space." As Bhabha (1994) argued, cultural hybridity means that colonial and postcolonial identities are not fixed but rather exist in a "Third Space" that emerges from the tension or conflict between the colonial and the indigenous. This means that the Third Space represents a realm of cultural negotiation and hybridity where colonial identities are destabilized, leading to the emergence of new, hybrid identities.

Moreover, Bhabha (1994) emphasizes the role of ambivalence and displacement in narratives that are postcolonial in context, which is central to Ampuero's exploration of trauma and identity in *Cockfight*. Ambivalence—the simultaneous coexistence of contradictory feelings—allows for a nuanced understanding of how colonized subjects negotiate their identities within oppressive structures. Displacement, similarly, reveals the psychological and cultural dislocation experienced by individuals navigating hybrid spaces.

Using Bhabha's (1994) theory, this paper examines how Ampuero's stories in *Cockfight* portray fragmented realities, cultural dislocations, and the blending of colonial and indigenous histories, offering insights into postcolonial horror.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper employs a qualitative research approach to address its main objective and specific research questions. Unlike quantitative research, which collects numerical data points and introduces treatments, qualitative research generates hypotheses to investigate further and understand contextual phenomena. In this paper's case, the qualitative data are the texts from the stories in Ampuero's book *Cockfight*. Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems by collecting the experiences, opinions, and actions of individuals. Rather than addressing how many or how much, it addresses the hows and whys (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022).

Qualitative research is appropriate for this paper as it suits the specific aforementioned research questions. With this approach, the paper provides an in-depth analysis and discussion of the texts examined in this study.

Further, the research employs textual analysis in analyzing *Cockfight* through close reading of selected stories, with a focus on themes such as violence, trauma, and colonial legacy. Textual analysis, the foundation of qualitative research, provides invaluable insights into human behavior and communication. Using this analytical method, researchers identify patterns, themes, and underlying meanings by closely examining spoken or written language. Researchers from a variety of fields use textual analysis to interpret everything from historical records to social media posts, better comprehending cultural contexts and societal trends (Williams, 2024).

The primary data source of this paper is the texts from *Cockfight* by María Fernanda Ampuero. The paper also incorporates secondary sources such as critical essays and analyses, as well as postcolonial theory texts, specifically from the paper's theoretical framework.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Disruption of Colonial Identity

For the first short story in the collection titled *Auction*, the author's juxtaposition of childhood memories with the horrors of the present creates a stark contrast that highlights identity fragmentation. The main character recollects her father's cockfighting events, which serve as a metaphor for violence and commodification. The fear and horror of being auctioned off amplifies cultural dislocation; as she transitions from a life of innocence to one of exploitation, this reflects broader societal issues stemming from colonial legacies.

In *Monsters*, the author uses monstrous imagery, which symbolizes the internalized fears and trauma experienced by the main character. The story reveals how relationships within a family can produce psychological monsters that lead to fragmented identities. The horror in this story lies in the realization that true monstrosity often resides within those close to us; this further emphasizes cultural dislocation as the characters navigate their roles within a dysfunctional family structure.

Griselda employs a first-person narrative device to provide an intimate view into the main character's psyche, emphasizing her abusive relationship with her mother. This personal story and history shaped the character of Griselda; this reflects how trauma within a family leads to fragmentation. This particular story highlights cultural dislocation as the main character confronts issues such as societal expectations surrounding motherhood and femininity, revealing the complexities of navigating personal histories within oppressive social structures.

In *Nam*, the fragmented narrative style mirrors the disjointed sense of self of the story's main character as she reflects on her past relationships. The use of flashbacks that intersect with the present experiences emphasizes the impact of trauma on identity formation. This again shows cultural dislocation as the main character navigates existence in a patriarchal society that continuously undermines agency and autonomy.

Pups features dialogue-driven scenes, which emphasize the emotional distance between the characters, also revealing their fragmented identities amidst domestic chaos. As the couple grapples with unresolved traumas while attempting to build a family, their struggles reflect cultural dislocation rooted in historical violence and societal pressures.

Meanwhile, the voyeuristic perspective used in *Blinds* allows readers to witness horrors within domestic spaces that are often hidden, emphasizing the isolation and alienation among the characters. The detachment presented in the story underscores fragmented identities shaped by societal norms that dictate behavior and relationships; this reflects how colonial histories have led to disconnection from authentic selves.

In *Christ*, the author uses religious symbolism to explore themes of guilt and redemption. The main character's internal conflict reveals how cultural expectations can fragment one's identity, particularly regarding faith and morality. The story confronts the notion of hypocrisy within religious institutions; this highlights cultural dislocation as the characters struggle to reconcile their beliefs with lived experiences that are products of historical oppression.

The use of nonlinear structure in *Passion* captures the chaotic nature of desire and infidelity; this emphasizes identity fragmentation as characters grapple with conflicting emotions. This exploration further illustrates cultural dislocation as societal norms around love and fidelity are challenged; this forces the characters to confront their own desires against a backdrop of historical violence.

In *The Age of Goodbyes*, the author captures the bittersweet nature of goodbyes and changes that challenge the character's sense of belonging. The main character's struggle with her identity during these moments reveals how traumas from the past shape present realities; this reflects cultural dislocation rooted in familial ties and societal expectations.

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In *Chasing the King of Hearts*, the author blends humor and horror to further explore youthful recklessness amidst societal pressures. The camaraderie displayed among friends highlights individual struggles with identity as they confront external expectations while seeking personal fulfillment—an embodiment of cultural dislocation influenced by historical contexts.

The author employs a slow-paced narrative style in *In the Go-Slow* to reflect the stagnation experienced by the main character in her environment. This pacing reflects feelings of being entrapped, still rooted in historical oppression, and emphasizes identity fragmentation as characters grapple with unfulfilled aspirations within a culturally restrictive context.

In *Changes*, the portrayal of shifting perspectives highlights the complexities of relationships as time passes; this reveals how identities evolve in response to external pressures still rooted in historical contexts. Characters navigate and negotiate their roles within family structures that often resist transformation because of the lingering effects of colonialism.

Finally, *Acid Dreams* presents surreal dream sequences and scenes that serve as metaphors for escapism from harsh realities. The fragmented narrative mirrors the main character's struggle with identity amidst oppressive circumstances shaped by historical trauma; this illustrates cultural dislocation as she grapples with desires versus the constraints of society.

Through these interconnected narratives, Ampuero effectively captures the intricacies of fractured identities shaped by colonial histories and contemporary violence presented in *Cockfight*. Each story in the collection reveals how personal histories intersect with broader societal issues—particularly regarding gender dynamics—challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths about identity and belongingness in the postcolonial context. The author's work not only illuminates individual experiences but also presents critiques of systemic structures that perpetuate cycles of trauma and exploitation; this makes *Cockfight* a vital contribution to contemporary Latin American literature and world literature exploring these themes.

4.2. Horror as a Means of Addressing Cultural Trauma

In *Cockfight*, María Fernanda Ampuero uses elements of horror to explore the lingering impacts of colonial violence and cultural dislocation in contemporary Latin America. The collection of stories exposes the brutal realities of domestic life, particularly for women, by showing how traumas brought by history continue to influence and shape the identities and societal dynamics of today.

In *Auction*, the author presents a chilling scene where a woman character is kidnapped and sold at a black market auction. This act of human commodification reflects how dehumanized people were treated during colonial history, where women's bodies were treated as objects of exploitation and commodification. The main character's memories of cockfighting symbolize violence and objectification, connecting personal trauma to broader societal narratives. The horror is further intensified by the author's imagery of being auctioned off; this reflects the exploitation that echoes colonial practices of the past.

In *Monsters*, Ampuero uses monstrous imagery to explore the internalized fears of young girls raised in environments where male violence was normalized. By juxtaposing fairy tales with the horrors of real life, she illustrates how cultural narratives shape identity, leading to fragmented selves. The horror lies in the realization that societal expectations can create "psychological monsters," reflecting the deep-seated fears rooted in historical violence against women.

In *Griselda*, the author delves into the main character's abusive relationship with her mother; this highlights how family trauma contributes to identity fragmentation. The story exposes how colonial legacies perpetuate cycles of violence within families; this emphasizes cultural dislocation as characters struggle to navigate oppressive dynamics and their fractured identities.

In *Blinds*, Ampuero uses a voyeuristic perspective to depict the horrors hidden within domestic spaces; this emphasizes isolation and alienation in the story. The detachment reflects how colonial histories disconnect individuals from their authentic selves, revealing the psychological impact of living in a society shaped by violence and oppression. Through these stories, the author critiques systemic structures that perpetuate trauma and exploitation, making *Cockfight* a vital contribution to contemporary literature in Latin America and the world.

4.3. The "Third Space" in *Cockfight*

In *Cockfight*, María Fernanda Ampuero creates a "Third Space" where colonial and indigenous influences intersect, resulting in hybrid identities that reflect the complexities of contemporary Latin American life. This space emerges through narratives that explore violence, gender dynamics, and cultural dislocation, serving as a backdrop for characters grappling with their fragmented identities.

Ampuero's stories are deeply rooted in the historical legacies of colonialism, which continue to shape power dynamics and social hierarchies in Latin America. The remnants of colonial violence are evident in the domestic spaces her characters inhabit, where patriarchal norms and familial expectations perpetuate cycles of abuse and exploitation. This creates a "Third Space" where indigenous values clash with colonial structures, leading to hybrid identities that reflect both resilience and trauma.

The characters in *Cockfight* often experience cultural dislocation, caught between patriarchal expectations and their desire for autonomy. This tension reflects how colonial legacies have fragmented identities, forcing individuals to reconcile conflicting cultural influences. In stories like *Griselda*, the domestic setting becomes a battleground where indigenous familial ties and colonial legacies dictate the roles and struggles of the characters.

Violence, often disguised as love, emerges as a common theme in Ampuero's narratives. In *Auction*, for instance, the protagonist's horrifying experience of being auctioned off reflects both the commodification of women—rooted in colonial exploitation—and the internalized misogyny that continues to persist. This duality creates hybrid identities where characters are both victims and survivors, grappling with their trauma while confronting societal expectations.

Ampuero also subverts traditional narratives, particularly through the perspectives of women. In *Monsters*, indigenous folklore is reinterpreted through a feminist lens, challenging patriarchal norms and creating hybrid identities. Additionally, characters like Narcisa in *Monsters* embody the intersection of class and gender, representing indigenous resilience within colonial structures. These experiences highlight how colonial legacies continue to shape social dynamics, creating a "Third Space" where traditional roles are contested and redefined.

Through her exploration of violence, cultural dislocation, and hybrid identities, María Fernanda Ampuero's *Cockfight* creates a "Third Space" where colonial and indigenous influences interact. Her narratives reveal how historical traumas continue to shape contemporary identities in Latin America, challenging readers to confront the complexities of belonging in a postcolonial context. By centering female experiences and subverting traditional narratives,

Ampuero highlights the resilience and agency of her characters as they navigate their fragmented selves amidst ongoing societal challenges.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Postcolonial Horror and Identity Formation

In *Cockfight*, María Fernanda Ampuero employs horror elements to align with Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, illustrating the fluidity of identity shaped by the intersections of colonial and indigenous influences. The grotesque realities faced by women in stories like *Auction* and *Monsters* reveal how trauma and violence contribute to fragmented identities that navigate both personal and societal expectations. Through these horror elements, Ampuero exposes the psychological scars left by colonial violence, emphasizing that identities are not fixed but rather dynamic and evolving.

Ampuero creates a "Third Space" within domestic settings, where traditional family dynamics clash with the harsh realities of abuse and exploitation. In *Blinds*, for instance, the voyeuristic perspective allows readers to witness hidden horrors within seemingly safe environments, highlighting the dual nature of domesticity as both nurturing and violent. This complexity reflects Bhabha's idea that cultural identities emerge through interactions between different influences, resulting in hybrid identities shaped by both love and trauma. The stories illustrate how characters grapple with cultural dislocation stemming from colonial legacies, complicating their roles within society.

Furthermore, Ampuero subverts traditional narratives by centering female experiences that challenge patriarchal norms. In *Christ*, for example, religious symbolism intertwines with themes of guilt and redemption, revealing how cultural expectations can fragment identity. The nonlinear narrative structure in *Passion* captures the chaotic interplay of desire and violence, emphasizing how societal norms influence personal identities. By exploring these themes, Ampuero effectively demonstrates that identity formation is a negotiation between various cultural forces, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of hybrid identities in postcolonial contexts.

5.2. The Role of Ambivalence and Displacement

In *Cockfight*, María Fernanda Ampuero vividly captures the ambivalence and displacement experienced by her characters, reflecting the broader postcolonial struggles faced by women in contemporary Latin America. The narratives often unfold in violent domestic environments where the myth of the happy family is shattered, exposing the harsh realities of abuse, exploitation, and societal inequality. Characters such as those in *Auction* and *Coro* navigate their lives amidst systemic oppression, embodying a sense of ambivalence as they oscillate between moments of resilience and despair. This duality underscores their struggle to find agency in environments that continuously seek to undermine their identities. Ampuero's portrayal of displacement is particularly evident in the way her characters confront their fragmented identities shaped by colonial legacies.

For instance, in *Monsters*, the protagonist grapples with internalized fears and societal expectations that distort her sense of self. This displacement is not merely physical but deeply psychological, as characters often feel trapped in roles defined by patriarchal norms and historical injustices. The horror elements present in these stories serve to amplify this sense of dislocation, forcing characters to confront their traumas while simultaneously seeking to reclaim their identities in a world that frequently denies them autonomy. Bhabha's concept of ambivalence is particularly relevant here, as it captures the simultaneous attraction and repulsion that colonized subjects experience toward dominant cultural norms.

Ultimately, *Cockfight* serves as a poignant exploration of how ambivalence and displacement reflect the ongoing postcolonial struggles in Latin America. Ampuero's characters are not simply victims; they are complex individuals navigating a landscape marked by violence and inequality. By weaving together personal narratives with broader societal critiques, Ampuero highlights the resilience of these women as they confront their realities, revealing the intricate interplay between identity formation and cultural dislocation in a postcolonial context. Through her unflinching lens, she invites readers to engage with the uncomfortable truths of their lives while recognizing the strength found within their struggles.

5.3. Implications for Postcolonial Studies

María Fernanda Ampuero's *Cockfight* contributes significantly to broader discussions on postcolonial identities by exploring the complexities of gender, violence, and cultural trauma in contemporary Latin America. Through her unflinching portrayal of domestic horrors, Ampuero reveals how colonial legacies continue to shape the lives of women, often forcing them into roles defined by patriarchal oppression and societal expectations. The narratives depict characters who navigate their fractured identities amidst a backdrop of violence, illustrating the ambivalence and displacement that arise from historical injustices.

By centering female experiences and challenging traditional narratives, Ampuero opens up a critical dialogue about the intersections of identity, culture, and power in a postcolonial context. The role of horror in *Cockfight* serves as a powerful mechanism for addressing cultural trauma and the psychological scars left by colonial violence. Ampuero employs horror elements to amplify the emotional weight of her characters' experiences, forcing readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of abuse and exploitation that permeate their lives.

This approach not only underscores the pervasive nature of violence but also highlights the resilience of women who must navigate these traumas. By blending elements of fairy tales and horror, Ampuero subverts conventional narratives that often marginalize female voices, creating a space where hybrid identities can emerge. Ultimately, *Cockfight* challenges readers to engage with the complexities of postcolonial identities and recognize the enduring impact of cultural trauma on individual lives, making it an indispensable text for contemporary postcolonial literary studies.

6. CONCLUSION

María Fernanda Ampuero's *Cockfight* presents a profound examination of identity fragmentation and cultural dislocation, employing horror as a narrative device. Using Homi Bhabha's concepts of "cultural hybridity" and the "Third Space," the stories reveal how colonial legacies persist in shaping fragmented identities. The narratives, such as *Auction* and *Monsters*, vividly illustrate the lingering impact of colonial violence through the characters' psychological and cultural struggles.

Horror is employed to expose systemic violence and trauma. Stories such as *Griselda* and *Blinds* highlight the interplay between domestic violence, cultural expectations, and the dislocation of identities. Hybrid identities emerge as characters navigate indigenous traditions and colonial residues, creating spaces of ambivalence and resistance. Ampuero's subversion of traditional gender roles and her focus on female perspectives further underscore the complexity of postcolonial identity.

Ampuero's *Cockfight* bridges contemporary and historical narratives, positioning itself as an essential text in postcolonial literary discourse. It underscores how colonial violence and cultural trauma manifest in domestic and societal spheres, with horror acting as a lens to unpack these dynamics. The exploration of fragmented identities offers nuanced insights into the

postcolonial condition, resonating with Bhabha's theory of hybridity by illuminating how identity is negotiated within oppressive structures.

The collection's emphasis on cultural memory, gender, and violence offers critical contributions to understanding postcolonial trauma. By placing women's experiences at the center, Ampuero challenges patriarchal narratives and colonial legacies, making *Cockfight* a pivotal work for both Latin American and global postcolonial studies.

Ampuero's themes align with Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "Third Space," where colonial and indigenous influences converge to produce hybrid identities. Stories such as *Auction* exemplify the commodification rooted in colonial exploitation, while *Christ* critiques the fragmented morality imposed by colonial religious structures. These narratives resonate with Coronil's (2016) argument about the persistent colonial legacies in Latin America. Furthermore, the use of horror aligns with Adorno's (2011) perspective on the cultural negotiation of trauma, emphasizing the critical intersection of gender and historical violence in shaping postcolonial identity. Ampuero's work invites deeper engagement with postcolonial theory, enriching contemporary discourse by exploring the unresolved tensions of identity, culture, and historical trauma.

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