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**The feminine characters in Soledad Acosta's *Una holandesa en América*  
and the construction of a new national model**

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**Abstract:** In the novel *Una holandesa en América* (*A Dutchwoman in America*), Soledad Acosta (1833-1913, Bogota, Colombia) traces the journey of a young woman, Lucía, to America. Acosta uses literary models such as the Bildungsroman and the chronicles of European travelers to explore women's place in society of her time and the question of European modernity against American "barbarism" in the context of national construction. As most of the speeches around this topic are from men, Acosta offers a different point of view in the debate and puts into question-established ideas.

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**Keywords:** Nineteenth century, Colombia, Europe, women, education.

Soledad Acosta (1833-1913) was a Colombian journalist, translator and writer. She wrote many novels and articles about women's place in the society of her time. Her novel, *Una holandesa en América* was first published as a serial story in the Colombian newspaper *La ley* in 1876, under a pseudonym. In 1888, it was published as a book in Curacao, and it would not have another edition until 2006.<sup>1</sup> In this novel, written under the model of a bildungsroman, Soledad Acosta uses her characters to criticize the lack of opportunities for women to be more active members of their society and to defend the importance of an adequate feminine education. In the same way, this novel explores different national models. This "national-building" project is a constant in Acosta's works. In *Una holandesa* she uses Lucía's –the Dutchwoman of the title– point of view to contrast European and American society and to show the benefits and problems of different national models. To better understand Acosta's project, is important to remind first some elements of her historical and social context.

The second half of the nineteenth century was a complex moment for the territory today known as Colombia. As in many other South-American countries, in Colombia the end of the Independence wars did not bring stability, the nineteenth century was marked by popular uprisings and recurrent civil wars, mainly due to the confrontation between two political models: the "liberal" and the "conservador." This instability of the post-independence period is reflected by the changing names of the country, the constantly shifting frontiers and also in the six constitutions that ruled the country during the nineteenth century.

The "liberal" and "conservador" parties emerged in the 1850s as a response to the failure of the project known as "la Gran Colombia," which consisted in uniting Colombia, –of which Panama still made part–, Venezuela and Ecuador in one nation. When it failed, at the end of the 1830s, the new nations sought an identity no longer associated with the idea of an American

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<sup>1</sup> The edition I quote in this article is the critical edition by Catharina Vallejo, published in Habana, by Ediciones Uniandes, 2006. I also used the original edition from 1876, illustrated by the author herself with engravings and drawings taken in their majority from European newspapers. It is also important to note that all translations are mine.

union and they turned towards new role models different from the Spanish, trying to create a distance from their colonial past. For some politicians, the federal model of countries like the United States made more sense for a country divided by economic and political problems.

However, the federal model also contributed in the creation of strong regionalisms. Those regionalisms were often in open confrontation with the government's reforms. They were an obstacle to the modernization of the nation and the return to peace and political stability. This was aggravated by the division between the countryside and the cities in terms of education, wealth and standards of living. In a country without an economic, social or political unity, the Catholic religion and the Spanish language were the only two unifying elements.

Nevertheless, some contested those elements because they were seen as a pernicious legacy of the Spanish colonization. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Church and the liberal government often clashed in subjects such as education. The liberal party saw the Church as an enemy of progress because it had supported Spain during the war, and for them they were the main reason for the country's underdevelopment. Therefore, they looked for other kinds of political and economic models, such as the ones in England or France. On the other hand, the Catholic Church also had a great influence on the principles that ruled women's behavior and their place in society. In a country often in war, women represented civilization, stability and order. Women's place in society was a fundamental issue, because, as mothers, they were responsible for the first education of the future citizens and they were seen as the base of social order.

Despite their importance in the building of the new nation, women were still second-class citizens, and even no-citizens at all. Women owed obedience to their fathers, brothers and husbands. They had no independence, economical power and, of course, no civil rights (vote). Women were limited to a domestic sphere with little power outside of it and even in it they were submitted to their husbands. In this sense, the feminine characters presented in Acosta's novel are different from the traditional model. Although they are still limited to a domestic sphere, the women in *Una holandesa* are not completely passive and they manage to conquer

spaces of freedom and autonomy. Additionally, the two main characters of the novel, the Dutchwoman Lucía and the Colombian Mercedes, also illustrate the differences between the feminine model in Europe and America. Therefore, to begin this analysis we will see more in detail the different female protagonists and how the European women are opposed to the Americans.

### **European women versus American women**

To begin this analysis, it is important to keep in mind the following elements about the novel. *Una holandesa* follows, to some degree, the model of a *bildungsroman*. We have a young woman's –Lucía– passage to adulthood. Lucía is the daughter of an English man and a Dutchwoman. She was raised in the Netherlands under her aunt's care while her parents travelled to America looking for a better life and fortune. The novel starts with a description of a little town North of Amsterdam. The description of the town and of the people that live there already show some elements that will guide Lucía's actions in the course of the novel. Dutch people are described as hard working, peaceful and religious. Lucía was raised by her aunt in this peaceful environment until she receives a letter from her father: her mother has died, so he asks her to travel to Colombia to help him take care of her little brothers and sisters in his *hacienda*. She travels to Colombia and lives all kind of events –including a civil war– that show her the reality of life.

Lucía stayed in the Netherlands because she was too young when her parents decided to travel to America, but her older sister Clarissa and two other siblings went with them. Because of their mother's "apathy and indolent nature" towards her children, Clarissa was the only one who survived the trip to America. Being the older daughter, Clarissa was expected to take care of her father and her little brothers and sisters during her mother's frequent illnesses. However, Clarissa was strong willed and even rude, as her sister often describes her. Therefore, instead of being the submissive daughter she is expected to be, Clarissa constantly disobeys her father, and shortly after her mother's death and tired of being exploited by her father, fled with a carpenter who was working at the "hacienda."

To avoid a scandal, Mr. Harris had to accept their marriage, but Clarissa's husband became a constant source of tension between father and

daughter. Because of the social differences and Clarissa's temper, the marriage soon proved to be a failure. Clarissa and her husband fight all the time, he often complains to Mr. Harris about Clarissa's aggressive attitude. Finally Clarissa also abandons him and runs away with an actor. Clarissa, therefore, is neither a good daughter nor a good wife; she constantly goes against social norms and her duties as daughter and wife. Finally, her social transgression is punished: the actor also mistreats her and when he dies, Clarissa is far away from her home without any money or friends. At the end, turned into an alcoholic, she returns to her father's "hacienda", where she asks Lucía for help, showing remorse for her bad decisions. Lucía helps Clarissa to go to Bogota where she gets a job and her reputation is restored through her hard work. It is important to note that Clarissa's mistakes are caused by a lack of adequate role models. The first of them, her own mother, Johanna.

At the beginning of the novel it is stated that Johanna was different to other young girls in the Netherlands because of the education she received in Amsterdam. It was not a formal education under today's standards, but she learned how to dance and speak French, losing at the same time all interest in domestic occupations and making her lazy. In consequence, her education is shown as something negative because it was not based on a practical aspect and did not teach her to live in the real world. She is often described as "ilusa" and "soñadora" (dreamer, foolish). Soon after returning to her father's home, Johanna and her sister get engaged to two good men. However, Johanna is quickly disappointed by her fiancé because Johanna's image of love and her ideas about how her fiancé should behave contrasted with his practical and unromantic nature.

She then meets an Irish man, Jorge Harris, who soon discovers Johanna's vanity and her ideas about love, and manipulates her to get married ("se manifestó tan sentimental como ella quiso" 69<sup>2</sup>). She believes in him and decides to marry him against her family's advice. Harris, who in reality was broke and was only interested in Johanna's money, soon proves to be another disappointment. After her failed marriage, Johanna quickly lost

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<sup>2</sup> "Showing himself as romantic as she wanted to."

all interest in the real world. She neglected her children and showed no interest in domestic duties. The trip to America was supposed to be a new beginning, but there, the final disappointment –America– is presented as the cause of her death.

On the other hand, we have Lucía’s Colombian friend, Mercedes. When Lucía travels to Colombia, she is put under the protection of the Almeida family, old friends of her mother's family. Lucía describes the daughter, Mercedes, as an elegant young woman, although “reservada y seria” (reserved and serious). Mercedes has some traits that set her apart. She studied in Europe and is fluent in different languages. For example, both Lucía and Mercedes speak German and English, besides Spanish, which not only allows them to communicate and to quickly become friends, but is also an element that distinguishes them from others: Lucía indicates that Mercedes’s mother, despite having lived in Europe for four years, never learned another language. Therefore, this facility for languages sets them apart from other women and is a sign of intelligence, the most distinctive of Mercedes’ features. Being an only child, she educated herself with books, she is inclined to quote them and, according to Lucía, she often produces “conclusiones filosóficas”<sup>3</sup> (93) about what she sees. This is described as something uncommon, usually surprising Lucía with her attitude and the way she speaks.

It is often pointed that Mercedes’s intelligence is unusual, even if Mercedes herself does not want to look too smart, showing in this way the prejudices of the time against educated women. Although she emphasizes that it is uncommon for someone of Mercedes’s age and of her time to be like her, Lucía does not see Mercedes’s intelligence as something negative. In fact, it is this peculiarity that brings Lucia closer to Mercedes: Lucía feels that they are both outsiders, one because of her upbringing –being raised in a different society– and because of their character.

Mercedes serves as Lucía’s bridge between the European and the Colombian society. It is at the Almeida’s that Lucía meets people (“Varios

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<sup>3</sup> “Philosophical conclusions.”

parientes y amigos visitaban la casa del señor Almeida”<sup>4</sup>), where she does the usual social practices of the time –going to church and visiting other young ladies–, and later on, through the letters they send each other, Mercedes will explain to Lucía the complex political and historical events taking place at the time such as José María Melo’s coup in April 1853 and the following civil war. This event provoked what might be Soledad Acosta’s first text written for an audience, the so-called "Proclama a las valientes bogotanas" (Proclamation to the Brave Women of Bogota). This text was written when Melo's army was about to enter Bogotá. Under this threat, Acosta calls women to action and to fight in the war in order to fulfill their patriotic duties and defend the constitution against the dictator.

Mercedes also shows her interest in politics and defends patriotic duties, being often criticized by her own mother. Before the coup, for example, there is a gathering at the Almeida's and there is a discussion about the possibility of a civil war. When Mercedes talks about the patriotic duties the men will face in the imminent conflict –between joining the constitutionalist army and staying with their families– her mother is scandalized by her ideas and interrupts her by saying: "Las mujeres no entendemos de eso"<sup>5</sup> (190). But Mercedes defends her position and the patriotic duty not only of men, but also of women to defend the constitution and face Melo. In her letters to Lucía, she constantly criticizes the dictator, showing the violence and corruption of his government.

In those letters, Mercedes also allows us to see the differences between the role of men and that of women in the society of the time. Men go to fight in the war while women stay at home. The only way they can take part in the war, as Mercedes indicates, is by making embroidered ribbons with patriotic slogans for the soldiers. Secluded in their homes, they have no way of knowing how the fight is going outside the city. They receive contradictory versions of the events, rumors and false news. Mercedes herself is worried about the man she loves and will eventually marry, who went to fight for the constitutionalist army. Added to her fear, therefore, is

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<sup>4</sup> "Several relatives and friends visited Mr. Almeida's home."

<sup>5</sup> "Women do not understand that."

the frustration she feels because of her secondary role in the conflict. A scene that clearly shows the social differences –if not the distance– between men and women and the passive role of the latter, is the moment of the final battle close to Bogotá. It is interesting to study how this passage is written: at the moment of describing the battle to Lucía, Mercedes already knows the outcome, but chooses to hide it to create the same uncertainty in her reader she felt while watching the battle.

Mercedes and other women are on a balcony, looking at the two armies with a spyglass, trying to understand what is happening through the smoke and the fog in the battlefield. The physical distance between them and the battlefield underlines the gap between men’s and women’s social roles: while men have an active role, women are only passive observers. Mercedes also describes the fear of women who have no way of knowing the fate of their husbands or children, including herself among them: “nuestra angustia” (our distress) “nosotras, pobres mujeres” (us, poor women) (222), etc.

Another passage that shows the limited social options women had at the time is Mercedes’ journal, included in the fourth chapter of the fourth part of the novel, “En Bogotá” (In Bogotá). It is included without further explanation and is inspired by Acosta’s personal experience. During the civil war, young women from Bogotá’s upper and middle class were sent temporarily to the city’s convents for protection. In the novel, the experience of the convent is used to provide a “cuadro de costumbres”. As the French *tableaux des mœurs*, these texts were used to show different social types, in this case, the portraits of the nuns. The “cuadro de costumbres” is an example of a common debate at the time: does life in a convent mean freedom or imprisonment for women?

Lucía, who was recovering from the romantic disillusion of seeing the man she loved marry her cousin Rieken, finds the convent as a refuge “del engañoso mundo” (from the deceptive world) and “las vanidades de la vida” (“life’s frivolities” 196). Mercedes, on the other hand, describes the convent as a gloomy and sad place. What most impresses her is the visit to the convent’s cemetery. When she sees the crypts where the nuns are buried, for

example, she says: “¡Qué triste será morir y ser enterrada aquí!”<sup>6</sup> (205). Then she goes to a bell-tower where she has a view of the city and there, Mercedes realizes the limited options the nuns had –the convent they were at was of an enclosed order. As a nun shows her the different streets, Mercedes thinks about their different lives and how the nun will never be able to go out again. At the same time, she recognizes the importance of the nun’s work (taking care of the sick, for example). This conflict between duty and happiness is an important aspect of Lucía’s character, as we shall see.

To summarize, we can say that from Mercedes’ perspective, the nun’s portraits allow us to see the limited options women had outside of marriage. Mercedes does not criticize religion or faith: moreover, she respects the nuns who are there by true faith and she appreciates the work they do. It is also interesting to note that the nuns who have not true faith, who are hypocrites or take their fate to extremes are shown negatively, marking a difference between devotion and fanaticism.

Despite all her unique traits, at the end of the novel Mercedes marries a man from a respectable family who had fought in the war on the constitutionalist side, and therefore has proved his patriotism to her. Being a marriage both for love and according to social norms it should be the perfect marriage. However, in the letter that Mercedes writes Lucía just before the wedding she seems to regret her decision. She describes how she is divided between the ideal of love and the reality and how: “el matrimonio arranca las delicadas ilusiones del alma, y la mujer casada nada tiene de poética”<sup>7</sup> (251). This sentence recalls Johanna’s disappointment, and shows that to be good wives women had to leave their dreams and romantic illusions aside. After this letter come the following lines: “Quince días después de escrita aquella carta Mercedes se casó”<sup>8</sup> (251). It shows that Mercedes decided to do her duty, giving up her illusions about love, but by doing so, her voice is silenced: we have no other letters from Mercedes to Lucía. And maybe her journal stopped too, although we have no information about it, this was the common

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<sup>6</sup> “How sad it would be to die and be buried in here!”

<sup>7</sup> “Marriage ends with the delicate illusions of the soul, married women are not poetic.”

<sup>8</sup> “Two weeks after writing this letter, Mercedes was married.”

practice at the time. When they married, women usually stopped writing their diaries and most of them also destroyed them, maybe as a way of protection or maybe because marriage is a negation of the wife's introspection.

In conclusion, Mercedes character shows the traditional Colombian women of the time: centered in domestic duties and a good marriage. She shows the limited options women had, their place in society as observers and not actors. But Mercedes is also different of other Colombian women because of her European education and her intelligence. Now, let us focus on the other central character of the novel, Lucía and how, through her perspective, the author questions the idea of America present in books and pictures and the reality.

### **Books against reality**

Even from the title of the work Lucía is presented as different from the others, she is "la holandesa" (the Dutchwoman). While other things about her change, this notion of being an outsider remains a constant in the story. Even at the end of the novel, after living in Colombia for more than ten years and is decided to stay, she is still called "la holandesa". She was raised in another country, with another language and a different religion. This influences the way she acts and the way she thinks, differently from the young women of her time. Lucía is described in contrast first to her cousin Rieken and later to Mercedes. Contrary to other feminine protagonists in the novel of the time, Lucía is not an example of perfection. According to her description, she is neither as beautiful as her cousin nor as intelligent as Mercedes. However, she is kind and a hard worker, which are more important moral traits, as we will see.

The use of a foreign narrator was common in some novels of the time, but having a female traveler like Lucía introduces a double innovation. First, because few women travelled alone, and they did so only in a situation like Mercedes, with their families. Secondly, Lucía's point of view allows playing with the notion of exoticism. Texts describing how Europeans saw America or other continents considered exotic were common in the nineteenth century, but here we also have the image that Colombians had of Europeans.

This is linked to the idea of modernity mentioned in the introduction: after the Independence, Colombia and other Latin-American countries were looking for new role models that would lead the country to modernity. Leaving aside the Spanish past, they usually turned to France and England as models of civilization and progress. But, as we will see with the case of Lucía's father, Europe was not always a perfect role model.

The notion of exoticism implies a contrast between reality and imagination, a duality explored throughout the novel. Lucía is an example of the romanticized vision of America created by European artists. She is a voracious –although uneducated– reader and she learns Spanish by herself to be able to read books about America, the fantastic land in which her parents lived. Her vision of America is also deeply influenced by her father's letters, where he describes: "la regalada vida que él y su familia llevaban en la Nueva-Granada (hoy Colombia)"<sup>9</sup> (71). She imagines Colombia as a wealthy land, where her parents are living an easy and happy existence –while her life at her aunt's home is described as pretty dull and monotonous. Later on, we have the first image she has of America and the poetic description she gives of it. For example, she refers to Martinique –the first American land she sees– as: "la tierra prometida"<sup>10</sup> and promises to love it forever.

This image of America as the "Promised Land" is soon erased by reality when she meets people from Santa Marta –in Colombia's Caribbean coast–, and she describes how shocked she is by them: "El idioma y costumbres tan diferentes de los que le eran habituales le causaron impresión desagradable"<sup>11</sup> (97). Later on, Lucía has to face the discomfort of the journey from Santa Marta to Bogotá. For example, she writes a letter to her aunt complaining about heat, insects, and: "la sensación de asco que por la fetidez y el desaseo había despertado en ella la estrecha camilla"<sup>12</sup> (98).

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<sup>9</sup> "The opulent life that he and his family had in Nueva-Granada (today called Colombia)."

<sup>10</sup> Promised Land.

<sup>11</sup> "The language and the customs so different from her own caused her an unpleasant impression."

<sup>12</sup> "The feeling of disgust that the stench and filth of the narrow bed had provoked in her."

This shows that, despite her intelligence, suggested by being able to learn a language by herself, Lucía does not have a real knowledge about the real world and the real America clashes with the imagined one. Her ideas about America and Colombia are described as a product of her “ignorancia del mundo y entusiasmo juvenil”<sup>13</sup> (72) and are an illusion created by her readings. This contrast between practical and theoretical knowledge is also underlined at the beginning of the novel by the Spanish Lucía had learned. When she meets Mercedes they are forced to speak in German and the letters they later write each other were written in English because, as Lucía states in a letter to her cousin, “mi español no sirve sino para leer algo, y no para hablarlo”<sup>14</sup> (90).

Lucía’s final disappointment is her father’s hacienda. In his letters, Mr. Harris had described the wealthy and comfortable life they had in America but Lucía soon discovers is another of his lies. In reality, her father is broke, the “hacienda” in ruins and her brothers and sisters live in absolute disorder: “Dormían en los corredores sobre cueros de res que les servían de camas, y cubiertos con inmundas cobijas que amontonaban durante el día en un rincón”<sup>15</sup> (137).

They did not go to school or knew how to read or write because Mr. Harris, their father, “no quiso darles ninguna educación”<sup>16</sup> (138). Lucía’s father is an interesting figure because, for the Colombian readers at the time, he is supposed to represent the so-admired European culture mentioned before. He is not completely ignorant, as he has books in different languages at the “hacienda.”

However, he is a figure of failed authority, often described as an eccentric if not a ridiculous character. He is not only a liar but also violent, especially towards his children. Despite this violent character –or maybe

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<sup>13</sup> “Ignorance of the world and youthful enthusiasm.”

<sup>14</sup> “My Spanish is only to read a little and no to speak it.”

<sup>15</sup> “They slept in the corridors, using cow skins as beds, covered with filthy blankets that they piled up during the day in a corner.”

<sup>16</sup> “Did not want to give them any education.”

because of it– his children disobey him and the people who work at the “hacienda” steal and lie to him. When Lucía arrives, she faces the opposition of her siblings –who see her as an invader– and even of her father, but through hard work and effort she gets to clean the house, dress her little sisters, teach them religion and send her brothers to school. Contrary to her father, Lucía is never violent towards her sisters even when they disobey her, ripping their new dresses or lying to her, thus proving that it is not through violence that real authority is achieved, rather through hard work and temperance. Also, is important to note that Lucía has a civilizing role not because she is European but because she is a woman.

Lucía’s character is modeled following the idea of the domestic angel. This figure became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century and is present in many poems. One of the most popular ones was written in 1854 by Coventry Patmore, it describes a woman who is completely devoted to her husband and her family. Women were supposed to rule the domestic space and provide a safe and peaceful environment in contrast with the troubles of the outside world. In the novel, Lucía is depicted as an obedient daughter from the beginning, ready to take the role of a substitute maternal figure and be the domestic angel her mother never was.

However, in other aspects Lucía does not follow the norms and even in some cases she is not a completely obedient daughter. For example, when her sister Clarissa returns to their father’s home, she hides Clarissa in her room, giving her food and clothes without Mr. Harris’ knowledge. She even tells her other sisters about this and gets their help to send Clarissa to Bogota, showing women’s complicity against men’s authority. At the end of the novel, her brothers have respectable jobs, some of them families on their own; one of her sisters is married, and the other two stayed at home to help her. Lucía eventually softens even her father. At the end of the novel he accepts her authority over him and by Lucía’s request, he finally allows Clarissa to return to the “hacienda”.

Also, in contrast with the established model, Lucía decides neither to marry nor to enter a convent, the social accepted alternative for an unmarried woman. It is not only a conscious choice: it is presented as her best choice. She even refuses the idea of marrying an older man to improve

her social status. One could argue that her refusal of marrying only because of economic reasons also comes from the fact that Lucía has not entirely given up her illusions and the idea of love, refusing the idea of a marriage only by necessity. Her cousin Rieken at the beginning of the novel often describes Lucía as exaggerated and dramatic and it is stated that Lucía has the same romantic tendency of her mother. However, in Lucía's case, the education she received and her good character balance this tendency.

Lucía uses the practical, realistic education she received from her aunt and her own intelligence to discern what is real from what is only an illusion. When she falls ill because of a romantic disillusion –Rieken's marriage– it is following the classical model of women dying of unrequited love. However, Lucía does not die; rather, she recovers from her disillusion and learns from her mistakes. At the end of the novel, she renounces the idea of finding true love and having a happy life, considering that true happiness does not exist in this world and can only be obtained in the afterlife. Instead, she chooses to live a useful life, working hard and taking care of her father, his "hacienda" and her sisters.

In conclusion, this novel proposes many types of feminine models, which differ from the archetype of the time –both the Colombian and European feminine model. Both Johanna and Clarissa are victims of Mr. Harris lies and violence. The main innovation in this novel is that Lucía and Mercedes are complex characters with their own voices, shown through their journals and letters. They are critical and reflexive and not just passive observers. Lucía understands the rules and limitations she has to follow as a woman, but she finds a way to work with them and to subvert men's authority. Soledad Acosta is, therefore, not proposing a radical new model. Rather, she works from the established feminine role of her time to show that some women, even if they do not marry, can lead moral and Christian lives, useful to those around them.

This is important because, while the problem of modernity and civilization is central in this novel, the conflict in *Una holandesa* is not so much America against Europe but more about men versus women. Lucía is as European as her parents but, as we saw they have very different characters, mostly because Lucía's religion and education teach her the importance of

hard work and gave her a more realistic approach to life –although she tend to romanticize some things, as we saw with her first description of America. Acosta also uses Lucía’s character to show her country through European eyes. She demonstrates that the exotic image of America, created by Europeans artists, was far from the reality. From Lucía’s point of view, America appears as beautiful but also often uncivilized and violent. However, Europe is not presented as the model of modernity either. As we can see with Mr. Harris, Europeans suffered from the same problems and vices. Therefore, true civilization, according to Acosta, came from educated and had working women. In order to assist the process of national construction and modernization of the country, women should be able to participate more.

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