

# HISTORIA PROBLEMA Y PROMESA

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jorge basadre

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ASIA AS SEEN BY A SPANISH INTELLECTUAL:  
PARDO - BAZAN

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A quarter of a century ago, the author of this article led the movement to recognize the extraordinary talent of Emilia Pardo-Bazán (1851-1921). Until then she was dismissed as a prolific writer, only two of whose novels, *Los Pazos de Ulloa* and *La Madre Naturaleza*, had survived the test of time. In fact, her enormous literary production is all worth studying. She was an extraordinarily intelligent, albeit not very profound woman. Her view of the world was jaundiced because she, a proud liberal Catholic Spaniard, saw her country defeated at the hands of a Protestant great power which suddenly emerged on the world scene in 1898. It seemed as though the Protestant Anglo-Saxons were destined to enjoy world hegemony, while once imperial Spain and indeed the whole "Latin" world, to use a term then becoming fashionable, were condemned to a secondary role. We must remember this when we read Pardo-Bazán's articles on world history and culture. Her attacks on England and the United States were, as is so often the case, a reflection of her despair and pessimism, and indeed an expression of envy. While making then due allowance for this, we should realize that probably no Spaniard of her time had such a wide view of world culture and history. She introduced Russian literature to the Spanish-speaking world. We should not attach an absolute value to her judgments, but rather regard them as an expression of the Spanish response to a peculiar set of world circumstances. In any case, what she wrote was invariably lively and interesting.

This is International Woman's Year, and we are honoring a great scholar from a country which looks out over the Pacific toward Asia, a scholar who is known throughout the world and who, while profoundly Peruvian, is also a great cosmopolitan in the best sense of the word, as Emilia Pardo-Bazán was. It therefore seems appropriate on this occasion to study her interpretation of Asia, always remembering that she was writing at a time when Spain had suffered the final humiliation of losing her outposts there.

Doña Emilia in her early years was an orthodox Roman Catholic; she was

therefore fundamentally hostile to the dominant religion of the Near East, Islam, the traditional enemy of the Spanish Church. She later developed into an exponent of the Aryan race theory; from this viewpoint also she should have been unfavorably disposed toward the Oriental peoples. However, she regarded them as victims of Islamic and more recently Anglo-Saxon imperialism. While she detested Islam, her heart went out to Indian religions and culture and to Buddhist Japan, although she was careful to avoid approval of oriental religions as such because of her own Catholic faith.

While in the Spanish-speaking world she was in this regard a pioneer, it must be recognized that she knew the Orient through France. The introduction of Orientophilia by writers such as Loti and the Goncourts was followed in France, at the end of the last century, by a keen interest in the civilizations of the East. Without slavish imitation, Pardo-Bazán responded quickly to every cultural movement and impulse, and the cult of the Orient awoke resonances in her, although she never harmonized them into a synthetic philosophy. Forgetting her Aryan race-theory, she argued, without attempting a coherent exposition of her views, that the Oriental peoples are among the most gifted in the world. They have, however, suffered from two alien influences: Islam, and European imperialism. Islam she deems a danger even at the present day. Reviving her theory of the conquering mission of the Aryan races, she expresses her faith in Russia to keep back the hordes of *Mohammed*, thus conveniently forgetting her opposition to European imperialism in the East, an antipathy primarily directed against that hated country, England. The refusal to see that the Russians, who swept across to the Pacific and even established themselves on the American continent, have played in the East the role of conquering kings, is indeed a curious blind-spot in Doña Emilia's vision. Likewise, her contention that Russian imperialism is directed chiefly to restraining the Crescent is difficult to reconcile with fact, and her silence concerning the *pax britannica* in Mohammedan countries is a serious omission. Such in any case is Doña Emilia's opinion, which she prefaces with a typically unpleasant reference to the United States: "Ahora que se estila alabar las instituciones de los Estados Unidos, a mí me cae en gracia ensalzar a Rusia. . . Hace años que confío en Rusia para asegurar el porvenir de Europa y contener a los mahometanos, que son muy poéticos vistos en grabados, acuarelas y *terra-cottas*, pero una peste para la civilización del mundo"<sup>1</sup>. She suggests even that she would be happy if Russia

1 *De siglo a siglo*, 141.

assumed an autocratic leadership of the whole world. It appears that in reality a Slavic peace would be more congenial to her than an Anglo-Saxon one.

### *Persia*

Pardo-Bazán selects Persia as a good example of the fate of an Asiatic nation. The Persians, she maintains, have valuable innate qualities, but they have remained undeveloped on account of the tyranny of Islam and of Western imperialism. Toward the middle of the 19th century the healthy and fertile elements in the population banded together to form a religious sect known as Babism. Its partisans were brutally massacred by the representative of traditional Islam, the Shah Nasir-u-Din.<sup>2</sup> When this ruthless despot visited the Exhibition of 1889, the Parisian press devoted long eulogistic articles to him, partly through ignorance of the internal history of Persia, and partly because European interests would suffer should Persia be modernized and reformed. Asiatic progress, concludes Pardo-Bazán, is being obstructed by Islam and by Europeans.<sup>3</sup>

### *India*

A more notorious case is, according to Doña Emilia, that of India, a land of culture and art, indeed, to use her decidedly vague expression, "the cradle of the human race". It has, alas, fallen victim to northern barbarians. Our fledgling ethnologist overlooks the Aryan origin of the invaders. Doña Emilia forgets the role of Islam in India, and devotes her energies to denouncing the rapacity of the hated Anglo-Saxons: "Esta nobleza y distinción que noto en ellos (Indians she saw at the Paris Exhibition of 1889) es la nobleza característica del Oriente, cuna del género humano, manantial sagrado de la tradición y de la historia. ¡Pobre raza soñadora, filosófica y artística, convertida en mercado de los productos ingleses! ¿De qué le sirve a un pueblo la inteligencia sin la voluntad? . . . el indio no es el salvaje, en cuyas labores nos interesa el candor infantil; es un pueblo que elaboró completamente su cultura, y a quien esta cultura bastaba para ser dichosa, si razas del Norte, del Norte individualista y batallador, no hubiesen codiciado la riqueza y la fertilidad de su suelo paradisíaco"<sup>4</sup>

2 See Sir Percy Sykes, *A History of Persia* (2nd edit.; London: MacMillan, 1921). II, 341ff. Certainly the vengeance wreaked on the Babis by Nasir-u-Din after an attempted assassination was barbarous (p. 344). Doña Emilia's eulogios of Babism are however unjustified.

3 See "Un Dioclesiano", *Al pie de la Torre Eiffel*, carta xviii.

4 *Al pie de la Torre Eiffel*, 173-74.

Pardo-Bazán observed with satisfaction the renaissance of Indian letters and art; a week before her death in 1921, she published an article on Rabindranath Tagore, then at the height of his fame.<sup>5</sup> A large number of his works had just been translated into Spanish by Zenobia Camprubí de Jiménez, wife of the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, and had been well received, especially by middle-aged women.

### *Japan and China*

It was not until she came into contact with Japanese culture that Doña Emilia developed into a whole-hearted admirer of Oriental civilization. She owed the stimulus for this advance in her outlook partly to French writers such as the Goncourts, and partly to the Paris Exhibitions of 1889 and 1900, at which Japan organized brilliant displays of the products of her civilization. It is curious that Pardo-Bazán rapidly became an admirer of Japan but never felt the slightest sympathy for Chinese culture. In her description of the 1889 Exhibition, she stressed the contrast between the Chinese and the Japanese pavilions: "¡Ah! Lo que es el Japón —al menos para ojos españoles— es otra cosa, otra cosa bien distinta, tan distinguida como es vulgar lo chino"<sup>6</sup>. It was not until the Exhibition of 1900 that Pardo-Bazán became a real devotee of Japanese culture. In chapter XXXII ("Un Drama japonés") of *Cuarenta días en la exposición*, she describes with great enthusiasm a Japanese play which was given at the Exhibition. She then expresses her admiration for all Japanese literature, and finally for all the culture growing in the radiance of the Rising Sun: "Gran escultor, gran fundidor, muy literario, buen pintor, elegante y refinado decorador, ese pueblo es sensible y progresivo" (228). Pardo-Bazán says that she no longer feels that a barrier separates her from the Orientals. She does not mention the question of religion, nor the Aryan race-theory which she had recently been expounding. She has implicitly abandoned it. She has become an internationalist in almost the widest sense of the word.

For Pardo-Bazán as a Spaniard, Japan has a special attraction as a country whose development had been similar to her own; both have a deep innate traditionalism against which a violent reformist spirit has had to struggle bitterly. Doña Emilia herself makes this comparison in her article on "The Women of

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5 See Aubrey Bell, *Contemporary Spanish Literature*, 62.

6 *Al pie de la Torre Eiffel*, 112.

Spain.<sup>7</sup>"

### *The Philippines*

Her conversion to Orientalism had taken place by the turn of the century. Whereas she panegyricizes most Orientals in a perhaps naive fashion, she has only very unpleasant criticisms to make of the talagogs of the Philippines. Then she might also have idealized, but for the anti-Spanish feelings they had displayed in the 1898 war. To patriotic Doña Emilia, their very physical aspect is repugnant: "Rostro deprimido, chata nariz, achocolatada tez, y cabello azulado y lacio"<sup>8</sup>. Cruelty is innate in them<sup>9</sup>. If they have not tortured and killed the wife and children of General Agustín, it can only be on account of the restraining influence of the United States, anxious not to provoke indignation in Europe: "Entregado el tágalo a sí mismo, haría de la señora de Agustín lo que hizo de otra pobre dama peninsular, a la cual uncieron al yugo que servía para los carabaos, y desnuda y a cuatro patas la obligaron a servir a sus tiranos a la mesa"<sup>10</sup>. Pardo-Bazán admits that she does not see how this last detail is physically possible. It is curious that when speaking of other Oriental peoples she sees only their virtues, and the tyranny of European imperialists. When speaking of the *Filipinos*, she condemns them *en bloc*; it does not occur to her for a moment to criticize Spanish imperialism. Nor does she seem to have suspected that, among the Oriental peoples, cruelty is not exclusively a characteristic of the *Filipinos*.

### *Conclusion*

From this survey it might appear that Pardo-Bazán was very opinionated, and she was. Yet this is precisely why she, like Unamuno, is fascinating. Indeed, Unamuno, thirteen years Pardo-Bazán's junior, was undoubtedly influenced by her, and their view of the world was very similar, as was their temperament. In order to appreciate Unamuno we must have a total understanding of his vision of the world, and so it is with Pardo-Bazán. For this reason a list of earlier articles in this series is attached. From them the reader may see how her attitude

7 *Fortnightly Review*, New Series, LI (1889), Part I, 883.

8 *De siglo a siglo*, 117.

9 *De siglo a siglo*, 121.

10 *De siglo a siglo*, 122. The odyssey of the wife and children of Basilio Agustín (or Augustí), Governor General of the Philippines, was a touchingly sentimental episode of the 1898 War. See James A. LeRoy, *The Americans in the Philippines* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914).

towards various cultures and nations developed. Only passing mention is made in this study of her attitude toward Spain, Spanish America, France, England, the United States and Russia. Those who wish for more information are therefore referred to the appropriate article. Her view of Asia then appears as part of a worldwide vision which is rich and complex, as was Unamuno's.

It is easy to poke holes in her interpretations. For example, she was the leading feminist in the Spanish-speaking world of her time, and that is why she deserves to be remembered in this year being celebrated as International Woman's Year. She battled defiantly for women's rights. Yet in her praise of India she completely suppressed any mention of suttee and other horrible expressions of what John Stuart Mill called the servitude of women, nor does she give the British credit for suppressing suttee and greatly advancing the cause of women's rights in India. Nor does she refer to the servitude of women in the life of Japan, which she deemed so poetic.

Pardo-Bazán was not alone in this. The Mexican José Vasconcelos in his later years went through a similar phase, and he was probably influenced by Pardo Bazán. Today in California, for example, there are highly intelligent devotees of Zen Buddhism and followers of Indian gurus. They close their eyes to every aspect of Asian life except those which appeal to them. Yet we cannot dismiss men like Aldous Huxley as uninformed or unintelligent.

This turning to the Orient in search of something like James Hilton's Shangri-La is in the utopian tradition of the eighteenth century philosophers whose weariness of their own European culture was expressed in an idealized view of the Incas or of China. Yet the curious thing is that these philosophers admired the China of Confucius and the old order and not Japan or India. It was Pardo-Bazán who rejected Chinese culture and Confucius, seeing beneath this façade a rough, crude country. What has happened in China in the last decades suggests that she was right and more perceptive than the lovers of chinoiserie. At the same time she developed a cult of Japan and of India, precisely the two countries which enjoy the prestige as centers of spiritual life among the intellectuals of the West today.

In this regard Pardo-Bazán was a forerunner, just as she was in her study of Russian literature. Much as we may question her ideas, she was remarkably perceptive in many things, and in all the history of the Spanish-speaking world there has been no woman who can compare with her as an intellectual pioneer.



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This is another in a series of articles the author has devoted to the worldview of Pardo-Bazán, as representing a significant segment of Spanish opinion at the turn of the century. Other articles are:

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