

# Analysis of Subalternity and Self-Esteem in the Character of Zenobia in *La zarpa* by José Emilio Pacheco.

Análisis de la subalternidad y la autoestima en el personaje de Zenobia de *La zarpa* de José Emilio Pacheco.



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## Summary.

The subaltern is any person subordinated from a position of class, age, gender and trade or in any other way. As well as any marginalized social sector. The objective of this paper is to analyze in the short story, *La zarpa* by José Emilio Pacheco, the subalternity in the character of Zenobia before Rosalba. It shows the way in which the subaltern character is represented in the story and the relationship between self-esteem and subalternity in Zenobia, from resistance and autonomy, that is, how the character seeks to renegotiate power relations from subordination, while longing for liberation and emancipation. It is analyzed from the discourse analysis from the interpretative and analytical approach with the perspective of subaltern studies. Likewise, with the help of the computer program ATLAS ti. 9, codes were created based on subaltern theory and self-esteem to carry out the analysis. It was possible to demonstrate that the character of Zenobia is a subaltern woman in relation to Rosalba. Likewise, it is shown that there is a relationship between self-esteem and subalternity.

**Keywords:** Subaltern. Self-esteem. *The paw*. Literature.

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**Abstract:**

The subaltern is anyone who is subordinated based on class, age, gender, occupation, or any other factor, as well as any marginalized social sector. The objective of this study is to analyze subalternity in the character of Zenobia in relation to Rosalba in José Emilio Pacheco's short story *La zarpa*. This analysis examines how the subaltern character is represented in the story and explores the relationship between self-esteem and subalternity in Zenobia. From the perspective of resistance and autonomy, the character seeks to renegotiate power relations from a position of subordination while simultaneously yearning for liberation and emancipation. The study is conducted through discourse analysis from an interpretative and analytical approach, using the perspective of subaltern studies. Additionally, with the aid of the ATLAS.ti 9 software, codes were created based on subaltern theory and self-esteem to carry out the analysis. The study demonstrates that Zenobia is a subaltern woman in relation to Rosalba. Furthermore, it highlights the existence of a connection between self-esteem and subalternity.

**Keywords:** Subaltern. self-esteem. *The paw*. Literature.

**Introduction**

José Emilio Pacheco Berny, writer, poet, narrator, essayist and translator, has been one of the most important writers of 20th century Mexican literature. He was born on June 30, 1939 in Mexico City and died on January 26, 2014. Pacheco was a polygraph who cultivated and dabbled in all literary genres, "but profoundly he was a poet", (Villoro, as quoted in El Colegio Nacional, 2024) . In the short story he marked a style characterized by narrative economy, precision of language and the ability to suggest emotions and complex conflicts with great subtlety, as will be seen later in the case of the analysis story *La zarpa* in this work. According to (Domínguez, quoted in Aristegui Noticias, 2014) Pacheco is a reference for writers today as Alfonso Reyes was in his time for him; both great humanists of a great clear, clean prose. His stories show an always experimental author, in search of the impossible perfect text: from minification to realist and fantastic exercises (López, 2023) .

The problems posed in this literary work according to the digital internet portal Lectura Abierta (2015) "the author of the story has built a very expressive character: a woman with low self-esteem and with a lot of anger against another person and with herself

for being envious". Zenobia, who is the main character attacks herself for considering herself fat and ugly. However, from the subaltern perspective in this analysis this problem is addressed, but as a symptom, which in effect has her in conflict with her self-esteem, although this same conflict allows her to fight against oppression and break with the stereotypes of women. That is to say, Zenobia from our point of view is not an envious and sinful woman, on the contrary, in spite of living from subalternity she manages to fight, to give voice to herself and to free herself from oppression. The subaltern is any person subordinated from a position of class, caste, age, gender and occupation or in any other way (Guha, 1981) . As well as any marginalized social sector. The subaltern is a migrant, changing subject, whose identity is varied and situational, so it should not be limited to privilege particular subaltern groups "workers, peasants, men" but have access to the vast and mobile set of the masses, Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios Subalternos, 1993 as cited in Mallon (2010) .

Therefore, in this paper the following questions are posed: **How is subalternity represented in the character of Zenobia in relation to Rosalba in the short story by José Emilio Pacheco? How is self-esteem and subalternity related in the story?**

*La zarpa* is a story with an autodiegetic narrator. This introspective story is told by a woman named Zenobia, from a church confessional, where she recounts the thoughts she has had against a childhood friend, Rosalba, who is very beautiful, intelligent and kind according to the narrator. According to the portal Los Resúmenes, (2024) Rosalba symbolizes beauty and success. While Zenobia feels inferior to her. The story begins by telling the priest about the friendship she had with Rosalba since childhood. He tells him how after childhood experiences their paths diverged as they grew up, and how his friend always lived in luxury and married several times. The story culminates when Zenobia meets Rosalba in her old age.

In this story Zenobia is aware of what Rosalba represents and has had thoughts such as: "Oh, father, believe it or not, Rosalba was more beautiful and elegant than ever, in full bloom, as they say. I felt so bad that I would have liked to see her fall dead at my feet", Pacheco, (1972, p. . 2)

Pacheco is characterized by his brief narrative, social criticism and ability to capture the complexity of human relations and social transformations in Mexico. Therefore, we will surely find internal conflicts from everyday life framed in the reality of the mid-twentieth century, reflecting the structural transformations and the consequences of these inserted in this literary work.

### Justification

Analyzing this story would mean adding a different look from the literary studies that have been carried out in which Zenobia's envy is emphasized, for example, according to Molano (2024) the artistic creation of José Emilio Pacheco allows understanding human nature through the characters, referring to envy. On the other hand, in the portal Los Resúmenes, (2024) highlight Zenobia as a character full of insecurities and resentment, while seeking revenge, who in the context of a metropolis feels lost and overwhelmed. Or as mentioned by Metri, (2019) is referred to as a tale that talks about the fear of time, that is, fear of growing old.

As we have mentioned in the story no analysis bypasses Zenobia's conflict, in relation to Rosalba who is the antagonistic character. Similarly in this study we will focus on this conflict, but demonstrating how Zenobia is not a resentful and completely passive character before Rosalba, on the contrary, despite the "inferior rank" that society has assigned to her, she has been able to fight and break patriarchal, social, beauty and professional structures.

In this sense, the analysis of fictional texts about subaltern women helps to understand the situations of inequality and systematic oppression of which they are victims, and which are manifested in these texts. In the framework of what is established by Barthes (1987), a text is not constituted by a row of words from which a single message emerges, it is composed of meanings of many interwoven cultures, which are installed in the reader. This question is appropriate for the analysis, because of the silences, doubts and contradictions in Zenobia's discourse, which, seen from the perspective of subalternity, is not an individual discourse but one composed by a society that has excluded her and imposed norms that

have oppressed her. In addition, throughout the narrative the story is fragmented with episodes of resistance and moments in which the dominant discourse is weakened.

*La zarpa*, the title of the story to be analyzed, refers to the attack that Zenobia has received in her life sublimated in Rosalba. This internal conflict is reflected in her self-esteem. This idea of the experience of being fit for life and its requirements, which refers to the confidence in our ability to think and to face the challenges of life, the feeling of being worthy, of deserving, of having the right to assert our needs and enjoy the fruits of our efforts while being happy (Branden, 1993) . However, it is important to question this idea that focuses on the individual this valuation, as it happens in Zenobia's character, since her environment is marked by inequality, violence and patriarchal rules, consequently, the perception of herself is influenced and should not be understood only as a personal and psychological problem, but rather, as the result of having grown up in a system that punishes women who do not fit the expected and imposes certain aesthetic models of success and femininity that do not describe her. In relation, according to (González-Arratia (2001) "is a cognitive structure of real and ideal evaluative experience that the individual makes of himself, socially conditioned in its formation and expression, which implies an internal and external evaluation of the self". Rosenberg and Coopersmith refer to self-esteem as a positive or negative attitude towards a particular object, specifically the self (cited by González-Arratia, 2001). In this analysis Zenobia could be considered with low or negative self-esteem according to the author and authors mentioned, since she is framed within the model mentioned: low self-esteem is related to self-rejection, self-deprecation and negative self-evaluation, as will be seen below. Although it should be clarified that more than evaluating her self-esteem, what is significant is to see how her self-perception has been shaped by discourses of power that oppress her.

This internal conflict is a reflection of what Spivak (2003) mentions that the subaltern woman cannot speak and even if she is silenced it does not mean that she does not exist. Therefore, Zenobia's self-esteem would be the symptom that speaks for her, because of the hegemonic social and cultural conditions that have marginalized her. She maintains that her

silence is repressed by the systems of domination that block the legitimate recognition of her voice. Thus, her word is traversed by such systems. For example, as a metaphor the confessional could signify such silencing, that is, she speaks out, but she does so through the figure of a man and who is a priest, this shows patriarchal oppression. Similarly, as shown below, the low self-esteem expressed in the character is related not only in her individual sphere, but as a structural problem that is imbricated in the social, the aforementioned silencing is indeed a symptom of structural issues. Therefore, seen in this way Zenobia's emotional conflict not only evidences the hurt subjectivity, but also shows the prohibition of enunciating herself from her autonomy and outside the dominant order.

The story of *La zarpa* arises in the 70's in Mexico, coinciding with the boom period of Mexican literature, influenced by the narrative of social and political criticism in Mexico. Just as they were the years in which Mexico City generated significant changes to modernize the urban context, which produced social tensions and social class disputes. This is reflected in the story. For example, in the following statement: "you are not from here, father, you did not know Mexico when it was a small, beautiful, very comfortable city, not the monstrosity we suffer now in 1971", says Zenobia (Pacheco, 1972, p. .1)

Therefore according to Spivak (1998) literary texts operate as alternative rhetorical sites where subaltern narratives can be articulated. Likewise according to Ebenhoch (2019) fictional subaltern protagonists, do not limit themselves to being victims, but as seen in a remarkable number of stories, they struggle to get rid of the subaltern status and take the floor in the form of character discourse or narrative instance. In the case of Zenobia that resistance is reflected when she decides to tell her story, even though the space in which it is enunciated is controlled by a man, although her voice appears from the margins, in a sense of guilt, confused and dependent, she makes herself present in an attempt to control her own story and show herself from otherness. This is intertwined with what she says (Spivak, 2003) how difficult it is to legitimize her subaltern voice without using the codes of power. That is, Zenobia demonstrates this tension, although she speaks her word she is still conditioned by a system that does not favor her and that limits her full freedom.

In turn, as mentioned by Uscátegui-Narváez (2014) the subaltern protagonist: an Afro-descendant, an Indian, a child, a woman and an old man are taken up as sociocultural criticism. In the same way and finally, the analysis of Josefina Plá's narrative by Zambrano (2021) shows how the atmosphere of discrimination and humiliation and the pitiful conditions in which the female figures live exacerbate their state of vulnerability.

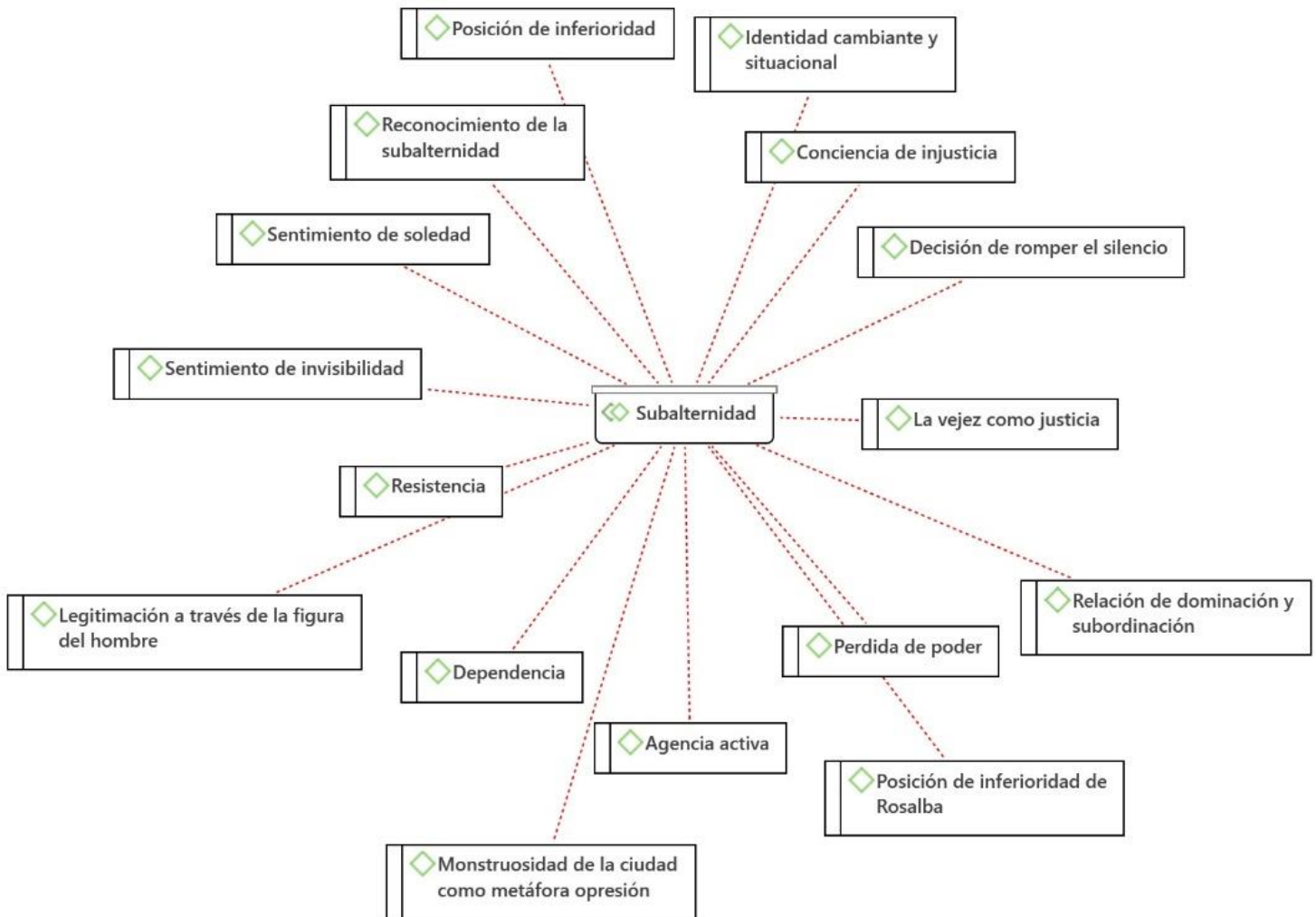
Taking into account the aforementioned background, the objective of this study is to analyze the subalternity in the character of Zenobia before Rosalba. In addition to identify how the subaltern character is represented in the story. Also, to show the relationship between self-esteem and subalternity in Zenobia's character.

### Analysis

This section will show the categories and subcategories that were found when exploring the story of *La zarpa*, in the computer program Atlas ti. The relationship found between self-esteem and subalternity. As well as the 19 codes that were created from the subaltern theory and self-esteem.

In the story in the character of Zenobia the following characteristics were found that demonstrate her subaltern position, aspects such as: feeling inferior, awareness of injustice, feeling of loneliness, dependence, feeling of invisibility, active agency, legitimization through the figure of the man, changing and situational identity, loss of power, decision to break the silence, relationship of domination and subordination, resistance, monstrosity of the city as a metaphor of oppression and old age as a metaphor of justice (See **Figure 1**).

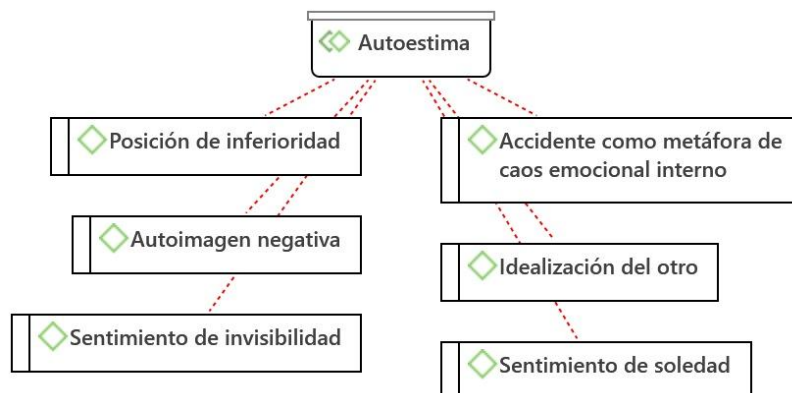
Figure1 . Subalternity in the story of *La zarpa*.



Source: own elaboration

Regarding Zenobia's self-esteem, the following characteristics were found: position of inferiority, negative self-image, feeling of invisibility, accident as a metaphor of internal emotional chaos, idealization of the other, feeling of loneliness (See **Figure 2**).

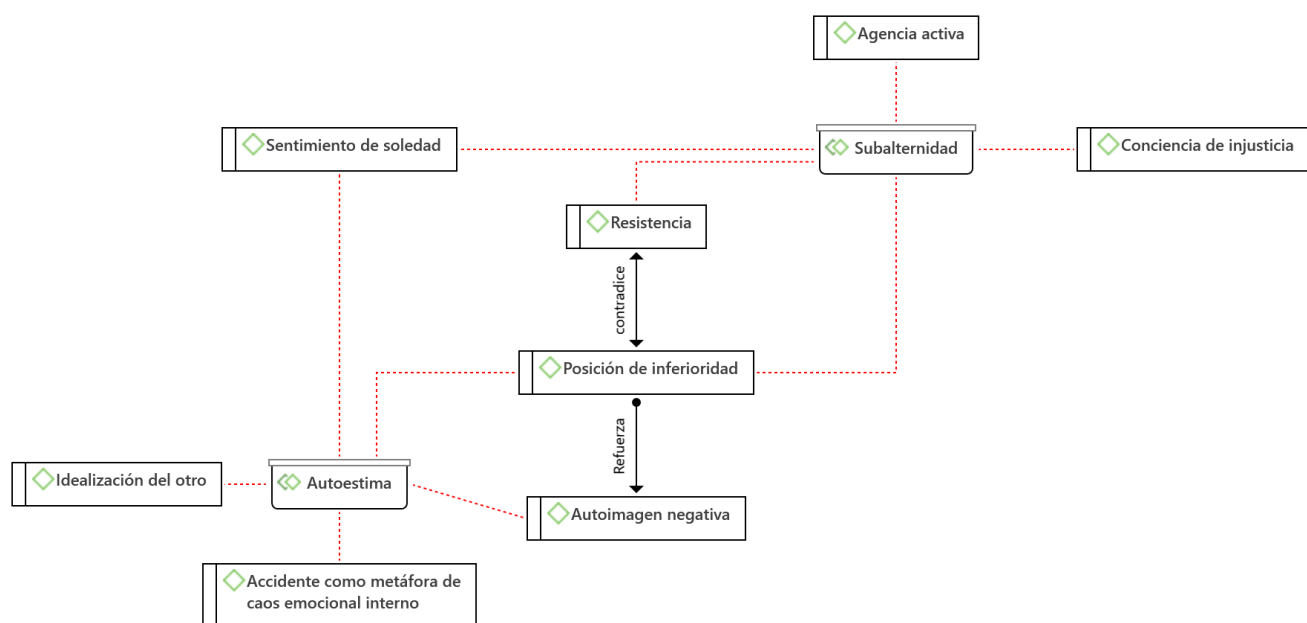
**Figure2** . Zenobia's self-esteem



Source: own elaboration

It is shown how the position of the subaltern and Zenobia's self-esteem are intertwined in the story. Both converge in the position of inferiority and feeling of loneliness. Likewise, the negative self-image reinforces the position of inferiority, on the other hand, the resistance from subalternity against the position of inferiority is observed (See **Figure 3**).

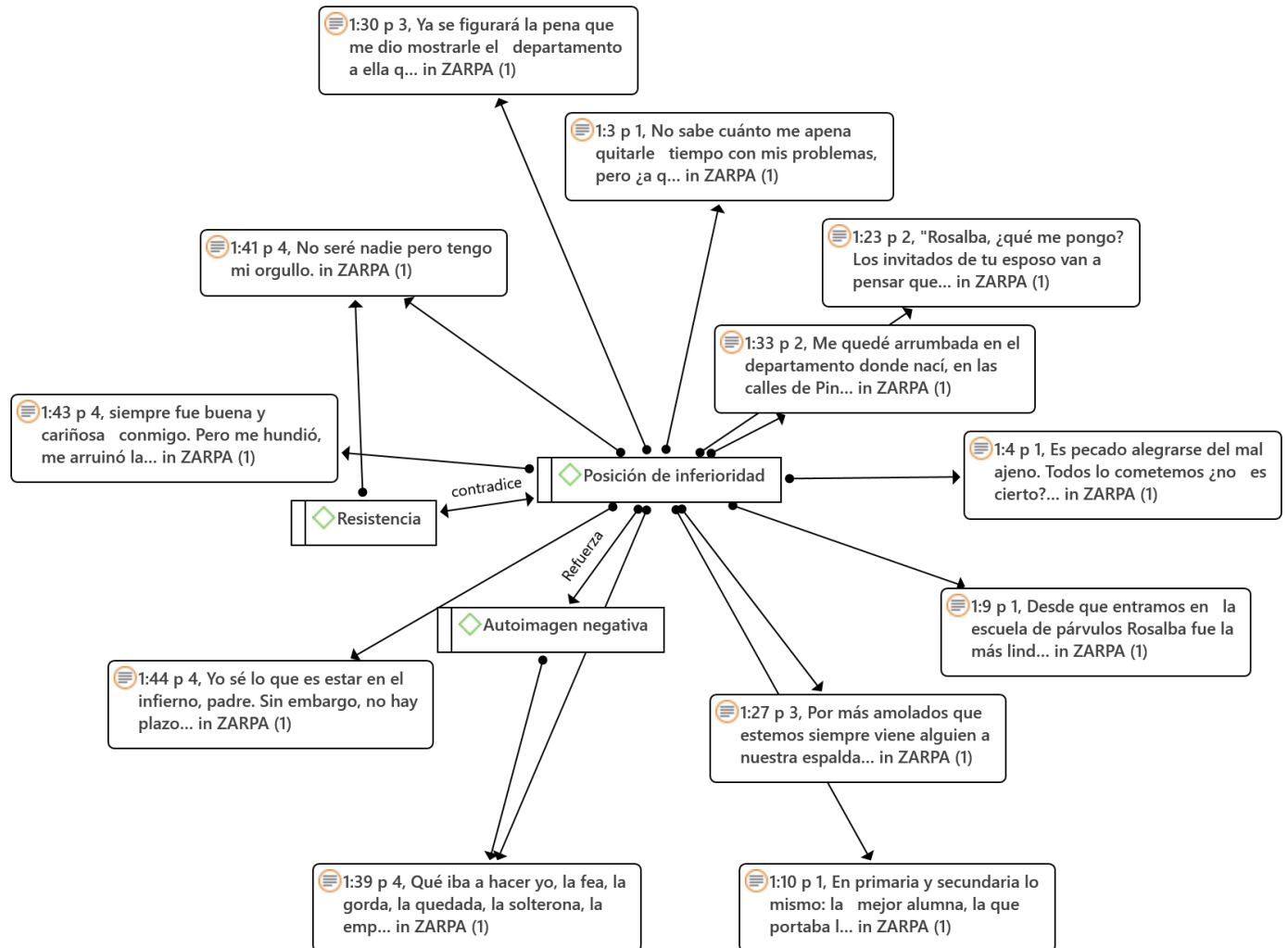
**Figure3** . Relationship between subalternity and self-esteem.



Source: own elaboration

In the following Figure 4, it can be shown on 12 occasions how Zenobia feels subordinated before Rosalba, it could be said that this form of subalternity is from the hegemonic beauty. Likewise, it can be observed that it changes with time, for example, in childhood Zenobia mentions, "Since we entered kindergarten Rosalba was the prettiest, the funniest, the most intelligent". In another moment as an adult she says "what was I going to do, the ugly one, the fat one, the old maid, the maid in that environment of wealth" this happens when her friend invites her to eat at her house and she decides not to attend, in this appointment the position of inferiority is economic as well as beauty. However, as well as the decision not to attend and the position she demonstrates when she states "I will be nobody, but I have my pride" exposes the ability to act and resist despite domination.

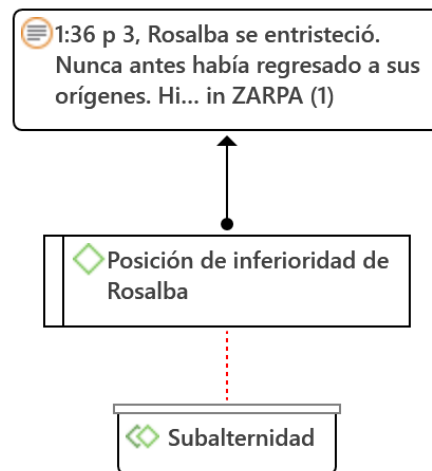
Figure4 . Zenobia's inferiority position



Source: own elaboration

In the story only once is Rosalba's position of subalternity found, "she was saddened. She had never before returned to her origins". The type of subordination she has is of gender, as mentioned in the story, Rosalba was only illusioned by men and they never left her alone (See **Figure 5**).

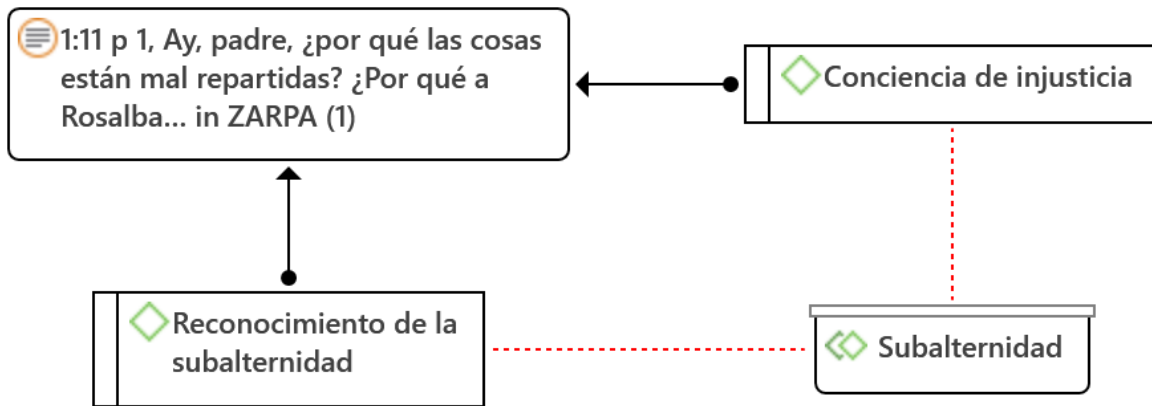
**Figure5** . Rosalba's inferiority position



**Source:** own elaboration

The following Figure 6 shows the moment in which she recognizes for the first time her position of subordination accompanied by the awareness of injustice: "Oh, father, why are things badly distributed? Why did Rosalba get the good things and I got the bad things?"

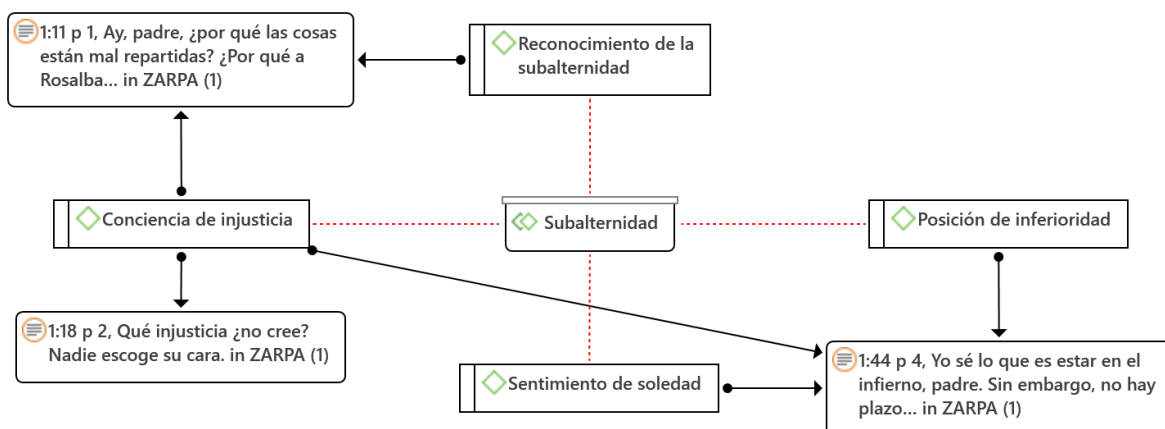
Figure6 . Recognition of Zenobia's subalternity.



Source: own elaboration

Figure 7 shows injustice through the social construction of beauty: "What an injustice, don't you think? Nobody chooses their face. If someone is born ugly on the outside, people manage to make her look ugly on the inside". Likewise, it is related to the recognition of the subaltern position, position of inferiority and feeling of loneliness.

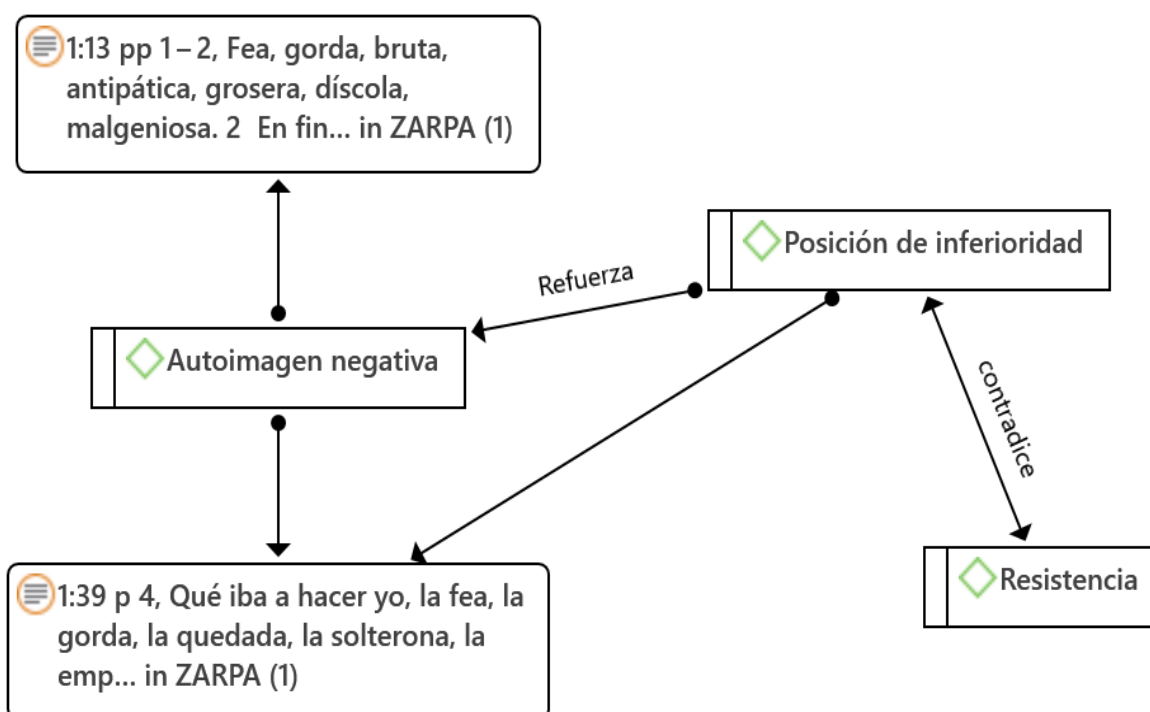
Figure7 . Zenobia's awareness of injustice



Source: own elaboration

In the following example, the negative self-image reinforces the inferiority position, when Zenobia says that she is "ugly, fat, brute, unfriendly, rude, fractious, ill-tempered. In short. The last expression seems to work as an irony resource that resists at the same time the inferiority position (See **Figure 8**).

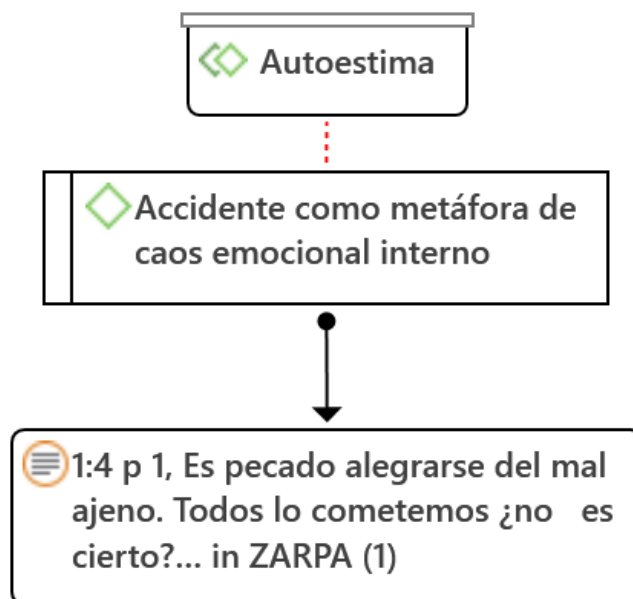
**Figure8** . Negative self-image of Zenobia.



Source: own elaboration

At the beginning of the story Zenobia's self-esteem is reflected in the following way, "it is a sin to rejoice in the evil of others. We all commit it, don't we? Look when there is an accident, a crime, a fire". It could be interpreted as a metaphor for the emotional chaos Zenobia faces (See **Figure 9**).

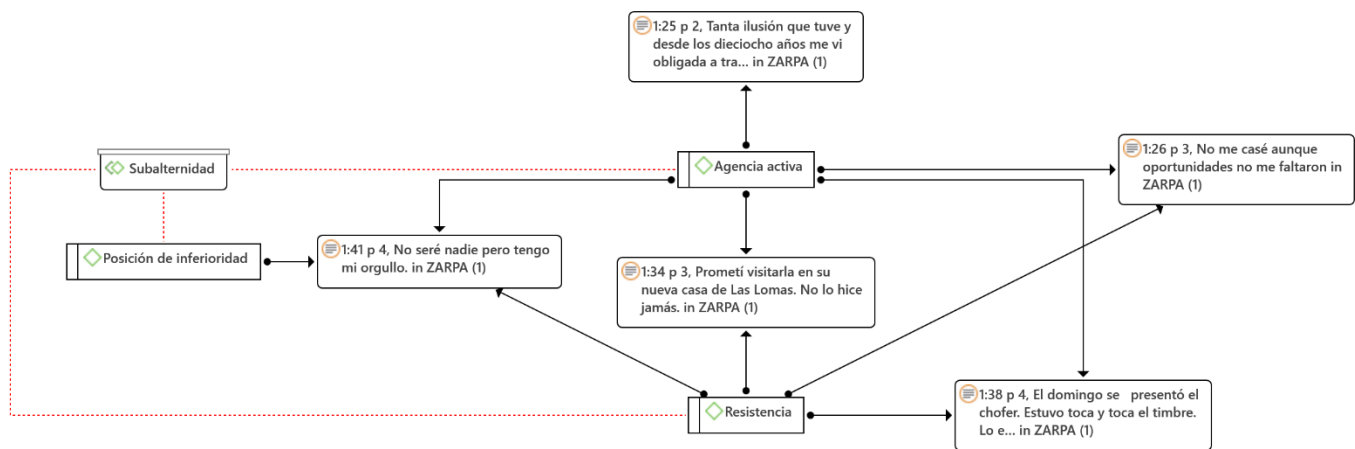
Figure9 . Metaphor about Zenobia's self-esteem.



Source: own elaboration

One of the fundamental aspects in subaltern theory is agency, which refers to the ability of people to act independently with their resources to develop their potential, this is observed on several occasions despite the oppression from subordination, for example, "I did not marry, although I did not lack opportunities". Zenobia decides not to be hunted, there is no better way to demonstrate her capacity for agency despite oppression, and the continuous comparison with Rosalba, she decides to write her own story, she breaks with the traditional scheme of women, dependent on men. Likewise, this active agency is related to the struggle against imposed hegemony (See **Figure 10**).

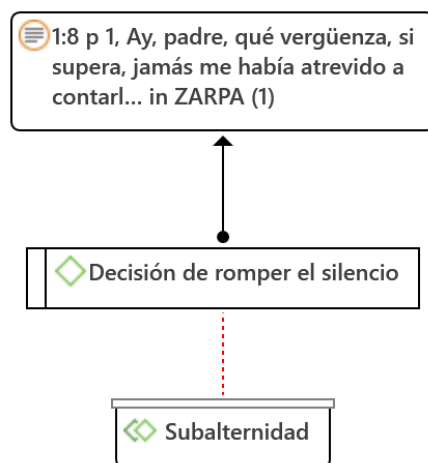
Figure10 . Zenobia's active agency



Source: own elaboration

As we have seen, active agency begins to help Zenobia to give voice to herself, in Figure 11, it is shown how she breaks the silence, exposing her situation "oh father, what a shame, if only I knew, I had never dared to tell this to anyone, not even to you. But I am here now. Later I will feel calmer". Although the confession is to a man, what is remarkable and complex is that he begins to give voice to himself, after years of silence.

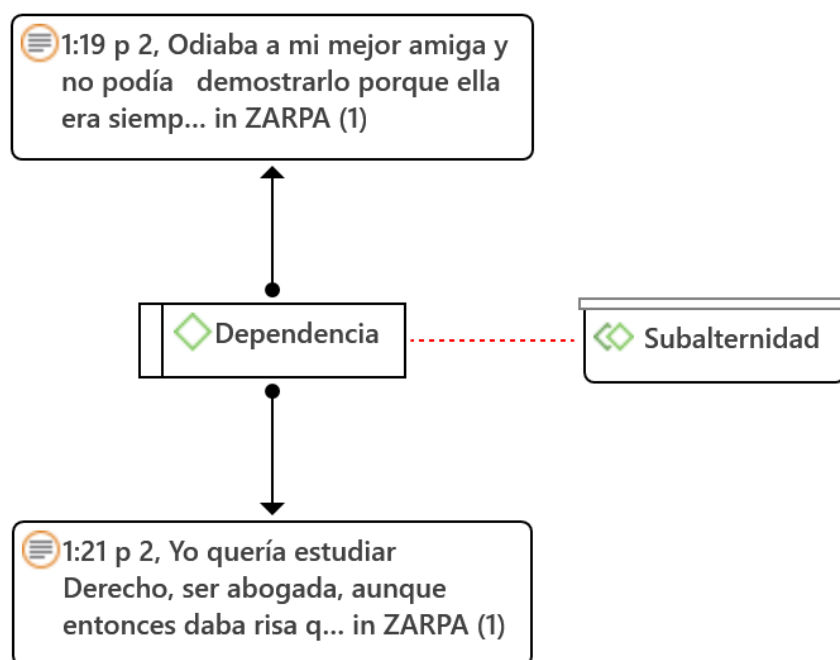
Figure11 . Breaking the silence in subalternity.



Source: own elaboration

Subalternity is characterized by a condition of oppressor and oppressed, which can sometimes be seen as dependence, as shown in Figure 12. Zenobia's dependence on Rosalba is so complex that despite the constant resistance and discomfort due to the subordination she represents in relation to her, she could not at times not depend on her, for example, when she mentions "I wanted to study law, to be a lawyer" however, she did not dare to enter the university without Rosalba, or how when she says "I hated my best friend and could not show it because she was always good, kind, affectionate with me. These contradictions show the complex position of a subaltern person.

**Figure12 . Zenobia's codependence**

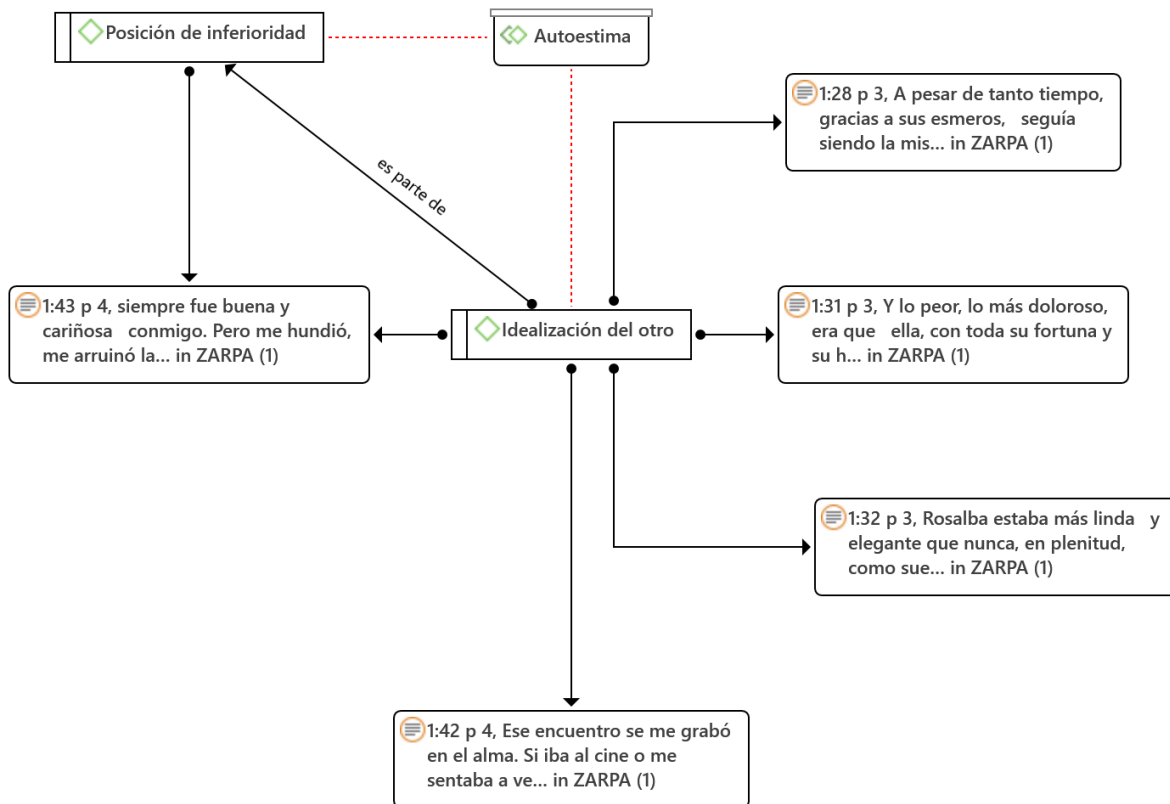


Source: own elaboration

Rosalba's idealization of Zenobia was so because it is composed of her self-esteem and subalternity, and as we have seen they are related by the position of inferiority she assumes. As can be seen in Figure 13, "in spite of so much time, thanks to her efforts, she was still the same: her fresh girl's face, her slender body, her green eyes, her brown hair, her perfect teeth...". It is clear that this quote reflects a somewhat unrealistic idealization because no

one can be the same person or maintain the same qualities in adulthood as they did as an adolescent.

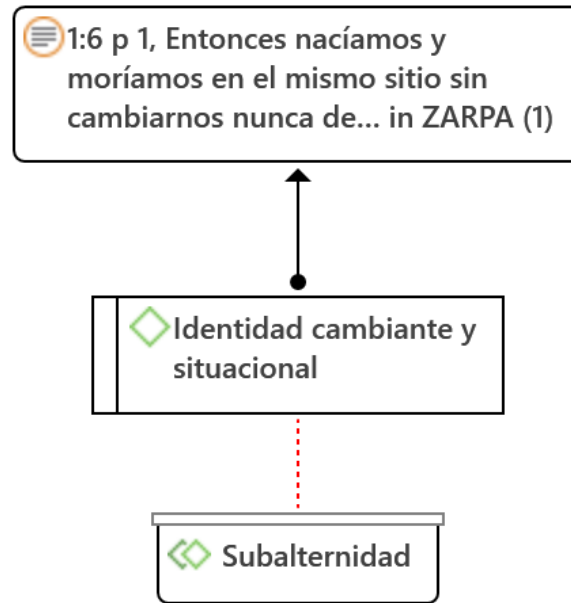
**Figure13 . Zenobia idealizes Rosalba**



Source: own elaboration

Next, in Figure 14 on changing and situational identity is exposed when Zenobia mentions, "then we were born and died in the same place without ever changing neighborhood. We were from San Rafael, from Santa Maria, from Colonia Roma. Nothing will ever be the same again [...]".

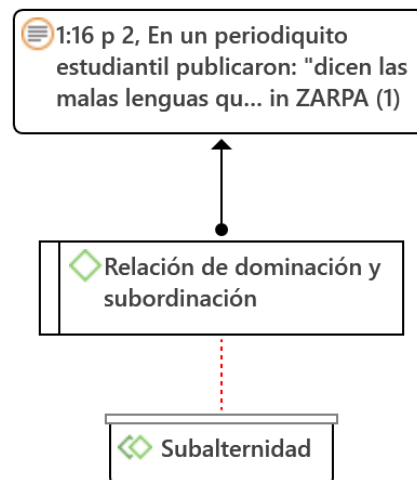
**Figure14** . Situational identity in subalternity.



Source: own elaboration

The relationship of domination and subordination can be clearly seen in the following Figure 15, Zenobia mentions, "the evil tongues say that Rosalba goes everywhere with Zenobia so that the contrast makes her unique, extraordinary, incomparable beauty shine even more". This situation evidences Zenobia's subordinate position before Rosalba.

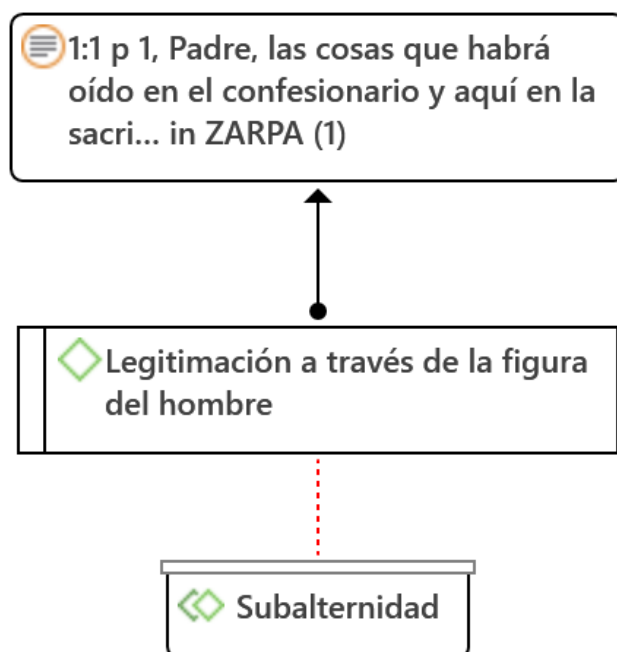
**Figure15** . Relationship of domination and subordination between Zenobia and Rosalba.



Source: own elaboration

The following Figure 16 is very interesting because it is a clear example of how Zenobia's voice is legitimized through the figure of a man, "Father, the things that you must have heard in the confessional and here in the sacristy.... You are young, you are a man. It will be difficult for you to understand me". These are the first propositions seen in the story, as if Zenobia's voice could not be heard without the figure of a man.

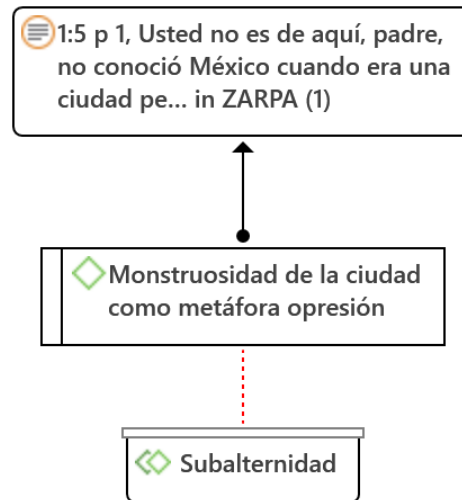
**Figure16.** Legitimization of Zenobia's voice from the figure of the man.



Source: own elaboration

One of the metaphors that represents Zenobia's oppression can be seen in Figure 17, with the following expression "you are not from here, father, you did not know Mexico when it was a small, beautiful, very comfortable city, not the monstrosity that we suffer now in 1971. It coincides with the time when Luis Echeverría was president of Mexico, and his government was characterized by the repression of social and student movements, metaphorically representing this monstrosity of the political system that oppressed many subaltern people like Zenobia.

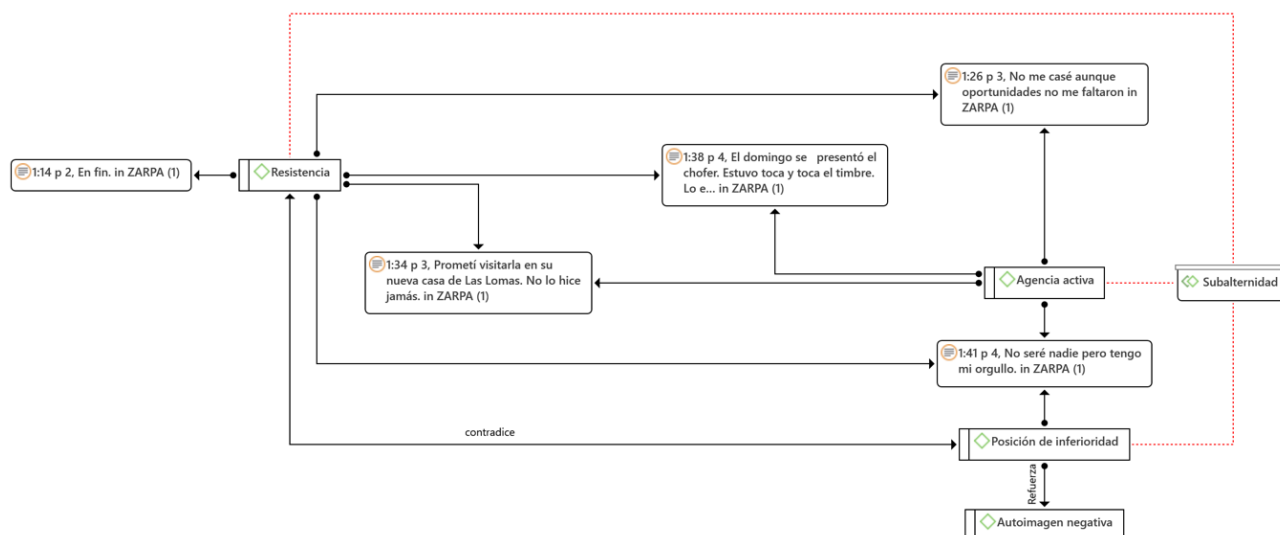
Figure17 . Metaphor of Zenobia's oppression.



Source: own elaboration

One of the very important aspects in subalternity is resistance, active agency and the search to make oneself heard despite all the oppression, as shown in Figure 18, "I promised to visit her in her new house in Las Lomas. I never did." This silence and others such as when she did not open up to the driver even though he came for her to take her to Rosalba. They can be interpreted as a form of active agency, against her position of inferiority and negative self-image.

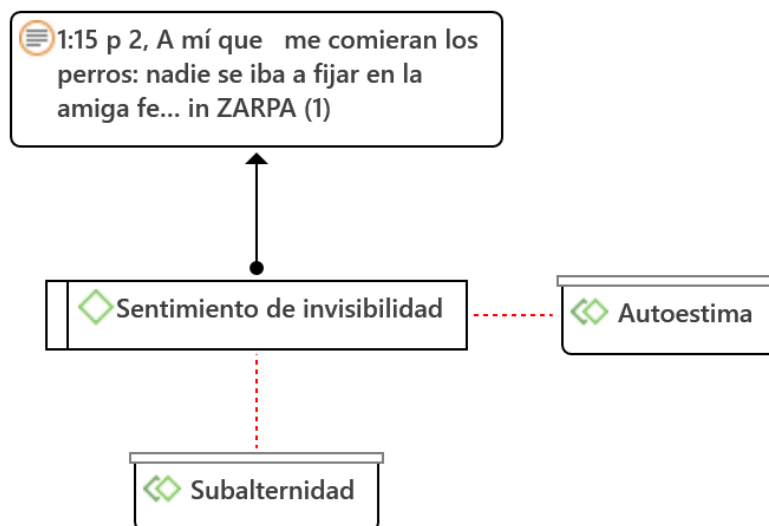
Figure18 . Resistance in subalternity



Source: own elaboration

Zenobia's self-esteem is intertwined with subalternity, and the feeling of invisibility as seen in Figure 19, in the proposition, "I'll be eaten by dogs: no one will notice the ugly friend of the pretty girl".

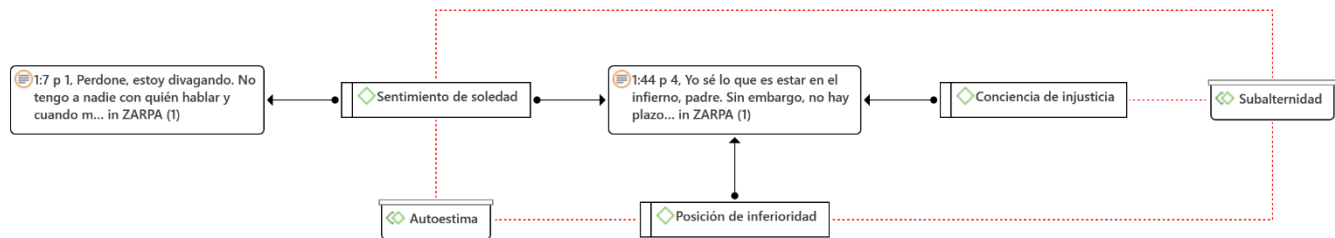
Figure19 . Zenobia's feeling of invisibility



Source: own elaboration

Another aspect that demonstrates Zenobia's negative self-esteem and feeling of loneliness is observed when she mentions "Excuse me, I'm rambling. I have no one to talk to and when I let go...". Here again self-esteem and subalternity are seen to be imbricated (See **Figure 20**).

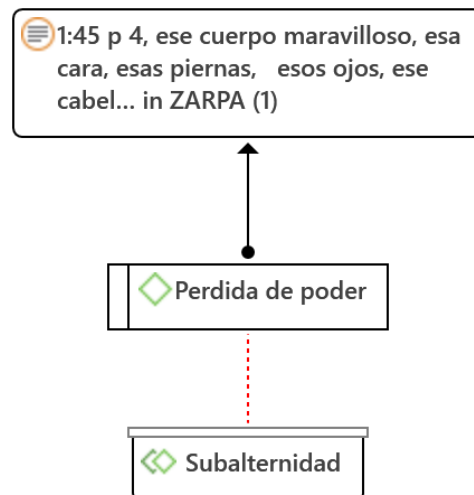
**Figure20** . Zenobia's feeling of loneliness



Source: own elaboration

Rosalba loses her hegemonic position, losing her beauty, as shown in Figure 21, "that wonderful body, that face, those legs, those eyes, that hair, were lost forever in a barrel of butter, bags, spots, wrinkles, double chins, varicose veins, gray hair, makeup, blusher, mascara, false teeth, false eyelashes, bottle-bottom glasses".

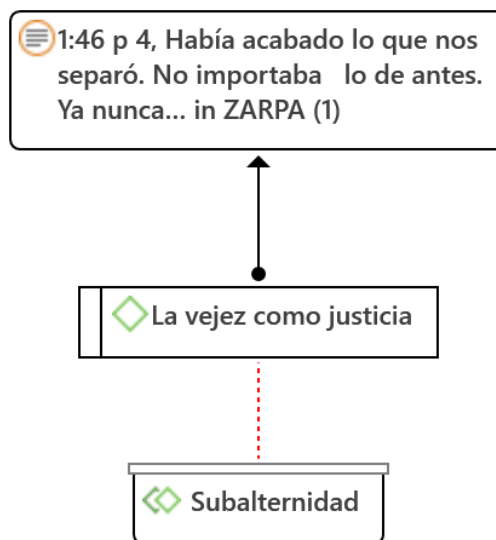
**Figure21** . Rosalba's loss of power



Source: own elaboration

Finally, as a liberation and justice to Zenobia, old age is presented, symbolically as that which breaks the subordination and position of inferiority, before Rosalba, "what separated us was over. It didn't matter what happened before". She mentions that old age has made them equal (See **Figure 22**).

**Figure22 . Old age as justice**



Source: own elaboration

## Conclusions

In the short story *La zarpa* by José Emilio Pacheco, it was possible to demonstrate that the character of Zenobia is a subaltern woman in relation to Rosalba. Likewise, it is shown that there is a relationship between self-esteem and subalternity. Unlike Zenobia, who more than 10 times is shown in a position of inferiority, Rosalba is only 1 time in this position in the story. Subalternity is demonstrated with 16 different categories, as seen above in Figure 1. Negative self-esteem in Zenobia on the other hand with 6, as seen above in Figure 2. These two related categories converge in the position of inferiority, that is, being a subaltern person and having a negative self-esteem can be in a position of subordination. The hegemonic form in this story is reflected in the image of the beautiful woman, it also highlights from the beginning of the narrative as the voice of women will be legitimized from a patriarchal figure,

as if the truthfulness or permission to speak is given with the consent of the man, who historically has subordinated women. In the work, Zenobia is shown as a woman who is economically and socially vulnerable, and Rosalba, who represents an unaffordable ideal because of her beauty and wealth, symbolizes the patriarchal, economic and social system that oppresses her. However, another interesting perspective of the analysis is that Zenobia unwittingly manages to break these structures, mainly because she decides not to marry and not to be employed, at a time when machismo and patriarchy dominated the female sex. Unlike Rosalba, she did not need a man to live. This exploration between subalternity and self-esteem is very complex because, as we have mentioned, structural inequalities and power relations interact, bringing to the forefront whether emancipation is possible and whether it is possible to be heard in order to obtain justice. Finally we can say that, in writing, even in stories, the realities of life are filtered and there are no accidents or random issues, for example, it is not uncommon that Zenobia resembles xenophobia and Rosalba resembles a very beautiful and delicate flower. *La zarpa* not only represents a tale of female rivalry or low self-esteem, but it is also a literary text that makes visible the discursive mechanisms of subalternity. Thus when Zenobia enunciates herself, even if she does so from the margins, she breaks with a dominant symbolic system. This fragmented, imperfect, ambiguous discourse configures a voice that exists and, although it is not strong, it can be heard.

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