

What it means to be a woman

PALM LATITUDES

By Kate Braverman (Simon & Schuster, \$18.95)

By Gyde Martin

An exploration of womanhood in language that reveals on every page that the author is also, and maybe foremost, a poet. Kate Braverman's second novel may cause some impatience even in those drawn to the subject and to lyrical prose.

To convey what it means to be a woman, *Palm Latitudes* tells in separate sections of three Chicana women living in Los Angeles. Through a stream of reminiscences, we first learn of the life of Francisca Ramos — how she started out as a domestic servant, became the mistress of a married millionaire, was used, abused and dismissed, and is now known as La Puta de la Luna, a prostitute at an intersection of Sunset Boulevard. Waiting for customers, she has repeatedly noticed a woman on a passing bus and has been startled by the rage in her eyes. This woman, she feels, is a "walking wound" that will not fester quietly but erupt.

Her intuition is right. In the sec-

ond section, Gloria Hernandez tells her own story to the police, beginning with her marriage at 15 to Miguel, their illegal immigration to the U.S., motherhood, citizenship, middle-class security on Flores Street, up to the day she murdered the gringa who had seduced Miguel with stale ideas of revolution. No one had believed meek Gloria Hernandez capable of such passion, not even Marta Ortega, the wise woman of the barrio and by far the most interesting of Ms. Braverman's women.

Long before Flores Street became a street and Los Angeles a metropolis, Marta had "invented feminism." While still in her teens, she began to educate herself by reading the classics alphabetically: Aristophanes, Baudelaire, Cervantes to Zola. This idiosyncratic approach suggested to her that one can exercise freedom of choice within fixed parameters, a belief that was confirmed by her gardening: not everything will grow just anywhere, but one still has control over selection and composition. And the same seemed to hold true of life in general.

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An exploration of womanhood

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When her marriage became intolerable, she weeded out the undesired elements — she got a divorce and broke with the Catholic Church. Like Doctor Faustus, Marta had become convinced that one could control one's destiny if one only knew enough, just as one could create new orchid species if one studied genetics.

But her grave misperception of Gloria Hernandez forces Marta to question her powers. She may have had success with her orchid hybrids, but looking at her daughters, Angelina and Orchidea, and their endless marriages, divorces, and broken-off careers, she knows she has done more harm than good in telling them that they were a "new species (of woman) to inherit a new world."

At the end, Marta renounces her vainglory and accepts "accident and happenstance" as the true forces shaping a woman's life.

Personally, I liked Marta better before she changed her philosophy, but that's not what tried my patience. To suggest the cycles of nature, the constant ebb and flow, and woman's part therein, the novel's language is deliberately rhythmic

and repetitive, like a drawn-out incantation whose magic fails after a few pages. Soon, not only the images become predictable but also certain juxtapositions: the city versus nature, English versus Spanish, North versus South, male versus female. Such dichotomies are dangerous simplifications that can easily lead to stereotyping. In its treatment of men, *Palm Latitudes* is guilty of just that. With the exception of a homosexual couple, the men are either victimizers or hopeless louts and invariably creatures of inferior sensibility.

If womanhood is indeed definable, an attack (quite literally) at *hominem* will not do and is likely to disappoint not only me.

Gyde Martin is a Fort Worth freelance reviewer.