

CHICANA EXPERIENCE IN DENISE CHÁVEZ'S *FACE OF AN ANGEL* : A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE¹

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Abstract: This study is an attempt to examine the experience of three generations of Chicana, women of Mexican descent in the United States, which is viewed from feminist perspective. The purpose of this study is to reveal the changing perspective of Chicanas toward their feminine identity that has been established by patriarchal Mexican and Catholicism cultures. The result of the study shows that the awareness on feminism existing in each generation stimulates the changing perspective toward the constructed feminine identity.

Key words: Chicana, Chicano, feminism identity

INTRODUCTION

Chicano people in the United States are well recognized for their characteristics in relation to their inherited Mexican traditional culture and Catholicism. Both traditional Chicano culture and Catholic tradition are considered to be significant aspects of the mindset formation of this society. Sociologically, traditional culture and religion are institutions as well as forces that shape the awareness and experience of society (Andersen 1997:50, 224). Thus, values, norms and beliefs of Chicanos are shaped on the basis of the heritage of Mexican culture and Catholicism.

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In relation to gender issues, the inherited Mexican culture and Catholicism are believed to be the source of the patriarchal culture which creates as well as justifies the patriarchal mode of living of Chicano people. Patriarchy is seen to be a manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and over women in society in general (Carmody 1989:237), and is the means by which “men’s dominance is constructed and maintained” (Kafka 2000:xix), thus, the awareness and experience of women of Chicano society, called as Chicana, is determined and controlled by men—Chicano, this male power is rooted in Chicano and Catholic culture.

In its real manifestation, the controlling system set in Chicano society is found in the form of restrictions, rules, or norms derived from Chicano traditional culture and Catholicism, and socialized effectively through social institutions namely family, church, and school.

Historically, the annexed part of Mexico was grafted into an oppressive situation in the United States because it was placed in a racially discriminative situation. Of the two genders, women have experienced the most oppressive and difficult situation since they experience both racial and sexual discrimination. Dealing with sexism, Chicanas face two layers of gender discrimination, both from White men and from their Chicano men.

This study is intended to explore a novel of Denise Chávez entitled *Face of an Angel* (1994) that exposes the gender inequality experienced by Chicanas of three generations. As found, the discriminative and oppressive conduct is mainly focused on the gender inequality within the Chicano community. The issue identified within the novel not only deals with a discriminative and oppressive reality, yet more importantly, it deals with the Chicana struggle to free themselves from the oppressive conditioning. Chicanas strive to free their mindset from the established patterns of thinking, values, and beliefs as well as to reconstruct their determined feminine identity, which is later manifested in the decisions they make for their life.

DISCUSSION

A. Machismo and Marianismo

As explained previously, the mindset and identity of Chicano people is constructed on the basis of the inherited Mexican culture and Catholicism.

Therefore, their mode of living, including the pattern of male-female relationships, is determined based on these two significant aspects.

In Chicano community, patriarchy or male power is represented by the term *machismo*. Alfredo Mirande explains that *machismo*, both in Mexico and in the United States, is often associated with “exaggerated masculinity, male chauvinism, or an extreme male supremacist ideology” (1997:149). Elena (cited in Ruiz 1999:15) adds that in the idiomatic usage of contemporary Mexico, *machismo* deals with a social relationship that promotes male superiority over the female in all aspects of life (Ruiz 1999:15). Considering that the male is a “privileged being in his family and in larger society from birth to death” (Ruiz 1999:16), *machismo* thus is identical with male power which creates the unequal male-female relationship.

To be more specific, Andersen states that “*machismo* in Latino families has been assumed to encourage aggressive, violent, authoritarian behavior in men, and saintly, virginal, submissive behavior in women” (1997:171). Thus, *machismo* has prescribed the idea of the masculine and feminine identity of both genders.

In a practical context, *machismo* is marked by the following traits as explained by De La Torre and Aponte. (2001:58-59)

For Latinos, to be a man, a *macho*, implies both domination and protection for those under them, specifically the females in the family. The *macho* worldview creates a dichotomy in which men operate within the public sphere — that is, the overall community — while women are relegated to the private sphere, specifically the home. The family’s honor is augmented by the ability of the *macho* to provide for the family. The wife who works becomes a public testament then to the *macho*’s inability to be a good provider. While family honor is achieved by the *macho*, shame can come to the family via the women. In the mind of the *macho*, the possible sexual infidelity of the women in his household makes his honor susceptible, thus their banishment to the home. By confining women to the private sphere, the *macho* protects “his” women from their supposed sexual urges. Yet, the *macho*’s own sexual urges

require no protection. In fact, his actions of infidelity only enhance his machismo.

Thus, it is explained that machismo is not merely about men's superiority, instead, it is also about the exploitation of men's power through customs, traditions, and norms designed to create restrictions over women.

It has been stated that machismo is equal to superiority; therefore, it requires an inferior object. Within Chicano culture, the concept of marianismo, recognized as the ideology that shapes and controls women's way of thinking and conduct, fulfils the requirement to be inferior as required by the concept of machismo.

As machismo is derived from Mexican traditional sexist culture, marianismo is rooted from the religious myth figure, Our Lady of Guadalupe—who is believed to be a representation of the Virgin Mary. This lady is widely known as the patron saint as well as the role model for Chicanas.

Historically, The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared on December 9, 1531, on the spot where Tonantzi, the Aztec goddess known as Our Lady Mother, the good mother appeared (Madsen 2000:9). Tonantzi is a powerful figure and a representation of all aspects of a dual nature and cyclical figure who was worshipped by the Nahuatl (Madsen 2000:59). Due to the interest of religious mission to convert the natives, Catholic missionaries accommodated the need for the existence of deity in Mexican Indian's lives by creating a manifestation of the existing goddess. According to Madsen, Tonantzi is easily translated in Christian terms as Guadalupe, the maternal protector of the people with her marianismo traits which later shaped the feminine identity of Chicana.

Our Lady of Guadalupe represents the image of ideal or good women. Chicanas are expected to identify themselves with the image of the Virgin, whose traits are believed to be the basic elements of Chicana feminine identity. Rebolledo and Rivero state that the personal intervention of the Virgin Mary and the cult of marianismo, which refers to the process of emulating the Virgin by internalizing her characteristics of faith, self-abnegation, motherhood, and purity, deeply influenced Hispanic women (Chicana) in their daily lives (1993:189). Moreover, Bidegain explains that marianismo shapes an ideal by which Latinas are expected to live (1989:21).

Due to the dichotomy between the Virgin and Eve, which represents the dichotomy between good women and bad women, Our Lady of Guadalupe is then, oppositional to two cultural mythical figures namely La Malinche and La Llorona (Rebolledo and Rivero 1993:191).

Historically, La Malinche is a mistress of Hernan Cortes, a Spaniard conquerer. Her being a mistress is unknown, however, the history that has been created states that she is considered as a traitor to her people. As described by Madison, La Malinche is equal to betrayal and treachery since she is regarded as the one who causes the downfall of her people (1994 : 11).

Referring to a different story, La Llorona is famous as a woman who killed her children due to her anger towards her unfaithful husband and her desire for revenge. The emphasis of this version is to expose the quality of being a mother, regardless of her true condition. Both mythical figures have been set to provide women with clear models of bad women. Religious justification comes to underline this quality by identifying these figures as the Eve who caused trouble for Adam or men.

In the novel *Face of an Angel*, Denise Chávez depicts both machismo and marianismo as representations of masculine and feminine identity through the description of and experience of male and female characters. *Face of an Angel* emphasizes the experience of Chicana of three generations through the eyes of the narrator, Soveida. The first generation is represented by the grandmother, Mama Lupita, whose function is as gatekeeper of the culture. Despite the suffering she experienced, she properly fulfils her role to maintain the established values and norms within the context of patriarchal culture. The second generation is represented by the mother, Dolores, whose pattern of thinking is somewhat similar to the previous generation. From a patriarchal point of view, she has been an appropriate role model for her daughter. This is indicated by her teaching of service directed especially toward men in the family. The third generation, Soveida, is initially described as a good girl as identified by male culture, however, her meditation and actions in the course of her womanhood indicate an opposite image.

The suffering and oppressive situation is rooted in the manifestation of machismo in all aspects of life. Machismo as seen in the forms of the exclusion of women and aggression toward women is identified from male domination patterns as defined by Sanday (1993:88). This division helps to

identity machismo found in the novel. In the novel, machismo is embodied in male characters—the husbands of the three Chicanas—in the frame of marriage or the family.

The exclusion of women is especially found in the area or domain of work. All the husbands are described as breadwinners who work outside the home, whereas, women of the first and the second generations are housewives. The third generation initially experiences being a housewife in order to fulfil the requirement of being a good wife. This situation indicates the superiority of men over women in terms of restricting women from becoming more independent economically so that men have more control over women. The exclusion of women defines the status as well as the role of women. Instead of including women as bread winners and decision makers, women are set as wives and mothers with certain obligations as defined by the society.

As explained previously, ideal wives and mothers are those who make themselves inferior to men, who are considered passive, obedient, and silent—which means repressing their freedom in ‘voicing’ their needs and desires. Ideal women have the ability to do household work and have the quality of service, especially that of serving men. Soveida defines the meaning of being a woman through the “*Service Creed*” which reflects her meditation on the experience of the previous generations and on her own.

The dictionary defined serve as: To render assistance, to be of use.

To answer the purpose.

To go through a term of service.

To render obedience and homage.

To perform duties.

To contribute, to promote, to serve a cause.

To treat in a specified manner.

To gratify.

To mate with.

Whoever wrote this dictionary had it right.

Also called “divine service,” the service of God by piety, obedience, etc. (Chávez:171).

Thus, the quality of their service determines women's quality. The necessity to fulfil the requirement to serve implies that women are placed in an inferior, passive, and obedient position. The internalized value of service is also seen in the three women's services in their duty as wives. Despite their hidden objections and sufferings, the three women attempt to give their best service to their husbands and to other men in the family in order to fulfil the criteria of either being good wives or mothers.

Regarding aggression against women, Humm explains that the term aggression covers physical, verbal, and psychological attacks as well as physical attacks (1990:5). To be more specific, within a family context, Sanday states that male aggression against women is marked by the expectation that males should be tough, brave, and aggressive; the presence of quarrelling, fighting, and wife beating; the occurrence for rape, and raiding other groups for wives (1993:87).

Forms of aggression found in the novel are primarily physical and sexual attacks. A psychological attack is considered as a form of aggression that may come along with physical or sexual abuse. Soveida, the third generation of Chicana, overviews the false treatment directed against women in her family as a common phenomenon experienced by women. She states, "abuse was rampant, and it was mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual" (Cháves 1994:318).

In the novel, sexual abuse is a form of aggression found in every generation, whereas physical abuse occurred against women of the first and second generations. Physical abuse is most commonly found in the form of wife beating or hitting. This type of abuse is reflected in the action of husbands of pre-third generations. This is obviously seen through the experience of Mama Lupe and Dolores. Regardless of the wives' mistakes or lack of them, beating or hitting became part of their husbands' expression of power over these women.

Sexual aggression is manifested in the form of rape—including marital rape. Feminist theory defines rape as "an act and a social institution which perpetuates patriarchal domination and which is based on violence" (Humm 1990 : 185). Concerning sexual aggression towards women, Humm explain that under patriarchal culture women are defined as sexual objects, due to their being sexually passive and receptive.

In the novel, the action of rape is conducted by Luardo against his niece, Mara when she was a child. Concerning his false conduct, Luardo was not found guilty; instead he was ‘protected’ by his own mother and wife. This phenomenon indicates that male domination over women is justified by both men and women themselves.

Regarding of marital rape which often occurs within a marriage is defined as a “forced sexual activity demanded of a wife by her husband” (Andersen 1997:177). However, the “forced sexual activity” is often considered a normal action since sexual activity is an inseparable part of marriage. More importantly, the inferior position of women and the expected obedience of women have shaped the awareness that marital rape is a normal action.

Denise Chávez shows this continual phenomenon through description of the sexual relationships within three generation of marriage. The three Chicanas experience marital rape regardless of their unavailability. This condition reveals the pattern of the male-female relationship which underlines the presence of machismo within Chicano society, and at the same time, it reveals the ‘acceptance’ of women of this unequal and oppressive relationship.

B. Chicana feminism of three generations of Chicana

Madsen defines Chicana feminism as a distinct feminist consciousness and theory that is meant to resolve practical issues concerning birth control, domestic violence and abuse, poor working conditions, poverty, family dysfunction, illness and any matters faced by Chicanas in the United States (2000 : 10). Gloria Anzaldua, a Chicana feminist, states that Chicana feminism is not merely a reaction against the cultural imperialism of the United States, it is also a rejection of “the cultural imperialism of the male-dominated, patriarchal, misogynistic Chicano culture” that enforces silence—a basic component of Chicana femininity—upon women (cited in Madsen 2000:24). In her essay, “*La Conciencia de la Mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness*,” Anzaldua offers an alternative way to realize the expected result of feminism. She offers to set up a new consciousness of Chicana by reinterpreting history, shaping new myths and changing the perspective of Chicana self-identity (cited in Madsen 2000 : 19). Thus, Chicana feminism is Chicana feminist consciousness as well as its manifestations in real life which emerge in order to create a significant improvement. Nevertheless, among

Chicana feminist issues, the examination and reconstruction of Chicana's own identity is regarded as a central issue.

Denise Chávez offers a shifting paradigm of Chicana feminine identity through the depiction of her female characters. The stories of Chicana within the range of three generations provide Chicana's experience in dealing with patriarchal culture in Chicano community. The shifting of the established perspective which indicates the reaction against patriarchal culture can be clearly seen through the characters of the three Chicanas. As quoted from an interview with Denise Chávez, it is revealed that in relation to the shifting perspective, "the breaking of the ancestral bread" is significant to "empower women to break the legacy of self-persecution" (Kevane and Heredia 2000:42).

As observed in the novel, Chicana feminine identity is manifested in the form of Chicana feminine role and feminine sexuality. As Chicana feminine identity is inseparable from the presence of Chicana feminine role models, it is important to discuss the existence of Our Lady of Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona. The changing perspective toward the image of these three mythical figures, consequently brings Chicanas to revise their understanding of the established feminine role and sexuality.

Chicana feminists view the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe differently from that of the constructed image. Chicanas refuse the established traits of Lady Guadalupe which have been used to justify patriarchal culture. The unselfish giving, the willingness to endure suffering, the acceptance of reality are all perceived as superiority since these traits imply women's strength and power. Furthermore, this role model inspires Chicanas in defining their implied power as reflected in their efforts and survival strategy in facing the hard realities of life.

Similarly, Chicanas attempt to reinterpret the existence of La Malinche and La Llorona who have been regarded as negative images. Instead of viewing these figures as betrayers, evil, or even as whores, Chicanas seek their worth and strive to undercover the untold interpretations given to them. The conduct of these figures, as described from generation to generation, is seen in terms of their efforts to survive within the context of an unfair and oppressive patriarchal culture. Thus, they become symbols of power as well as of the strength of Chicanas.

In relation to the Chicana feminine role, it is explained that women within the marital bond or family of a larger context—the extended family—are demanded to hold the role as dutiful, obedient wives and mothers. As observed from the novel, the feminine role can be identified in the form of the inferior status of wives within marriage which keeps women from their right to be decision makers and from any other privileges owned by men. It is the domestication of women which consequently creates economic dependence upon the head of the family, and ties them to the function of cultural gatekeepers. Thus, the redefinition of the feminine role is an effort to revise the perspective and stereotypical role of Chicana. In other words, it is an effort to break the structure of the traditional role that has confined and burdened women.

Denise Chávez offers some forms of feminine role through her representation of female characters and their experiences. The effort of redefining the feminine role covers the criticism and refusal of the subordinated status and domesticity of women, an evaluation of women's role models as represented by the older generations, the effort to gain education, and economic independence. The following is the depiction of the shifting understanding of the feminine role as found in the novel.

As defined, Mama Lupita, the first generation of Chicana, manages her role as carefully as expected by her society. Regardless of her husband's infidelity and abusive conduct, Mama Lupita, as a wife and a mother, has tried to give the best service to her husband and her children. However, as she evaluates her own experience and compares her life to Dolores and Soveida, she learns that she should have had the strength to gain her freedom and chose life for herself, by leaving her husband to free herself from the oppressive situation. This state of mind is revealed in the meditations of her old age.

Dolores, the second generation of Chicana, takes a similar role that of women of previous generations. The successful indoctrination of giving "service" has shaped Dolores to be a stereotypically 'good' wife and mother. Regardless of Luardo's abusive conduct and infidelity, Dolores makes the same choice as Mama Lupita's to keep her marriage and her status as a wife. However, she more openly expressed her anger about and disagreement with her husband's actions. Yet she knows that she is not able to fulfill her dreams and expectations. Dolores' dilemmatic situation is seen through her



confusion whether to accept the established value of marriage or to divorce at the age of fifty. However, eventually, she has the courage to create a better life of her own by divorcing Luardo and getting married to another man.

Unlike the previous generations, the effort of redefining feminine role is mostly shown by Soveida. She is initially shaped into a person who regards passivity and inferiority as part of the cult of a good woman. However, the complex and complicated reality she experiences and witnesses, distorts her established perspective and stimulates her to be critical. The redefinition of the feminine role undertaken by Soveida is found in her disobedience, in her demand to be treated equally in the marital relationship, in the fact she has access to education and in her gaining economic independence by working outside the house.

In dealing with feminine sexuality, Chávez attempts to show that the construction of feminine sexuality is closely related to the dichotomy between the Virgin and Eve. Furthermore, feminine sexuality is manifested in the form of a system controlling women's sexuality, and leading to women's objectification. The main purpose of this definition is inseparable from the fulfilment of machismo as the realization of male domination in Chicano culture.

The redefinition of Chicana feminine sexuality is closely related to the attempt to free women from such restrictions and stereotypes. In her novel, Chávez tries to expose her intention to alter women's perspectives on the established understanding of sexuality. Especially through Soveida's state of mind and her witness of the older generation's experience, questions about and criticism of sexuality are presented.

The attempt to redefine feminine sexuality is undertaken by breaking the taboo discussion on sexuality or bodily functions, by refusing men's control over women's bodies and sexuality which is found in the form of marital rape and in all other forms of sexual abuse, and by gaining more freedom in expressing sexuality. Thus, the redefinition of feminine sexuality is an attempt to fulfil the condition concerning sexuality as expected and defined by women themselves.

Above all, despite all forms of suffering and oppression experienced by the Chicanas of three generations, it can be noted that each woman

already has the so called feminist consciousness in their minds. Yet, the established values, beliefs, and norms regarding feminine identity have been deeply internalized and ingrained in Chicanas' lives so that the redefinition of Chicana feminine identity requires a long process and a prerequisite condition that should be met by both genders. Thus, the voice of Chicana cannot be heard and the following questions, as reflected through Soveida's meditation, gain an uncertain response.

My grandmother's voice was rarely heard, it was a whisper, a moan. Who heard?

My mother's voice cried out in rage and pain. Who heard?

My voice is strong. It is breath. New Life. Song. Who hears?
(Chávez, 1994:1).

CONCLUSION

Through the exposure of a variety of aspects of Chicana's lives, Chávez attempts to reveal the internalized values, beliefs, as well as norms that have been established and that shape Chicana's experiences, especially within the scope of Chicano community.

This study proves that there has been an effort to redefine the constructed Chicana feminine identity. The redefinition of Chicana feminine identity is revealed through the experience of Chicanas of three generations. The first redefinition is closely related to the interpretation of three mythical figures that represent the dichotomy between the Virgin and Eve. Instead of accepting the given interpretation, Chicanas view these images differently. Chicanas regard them both as sources of power and strength. The second redefinition is based on a reshaping of the accepted feminine role. Chicanas consider the established role as restrictive and oppressive, therefore, the redefinition is conducted to release the burdens of Chicanas and to make available to them more opportunities to determine their own roles. The third redefinition deals with feminine sexuality. Refusing to be confined and controlled by male power, Chicanas attempt to define feminine sexuality as the equal opportunity to gain more freedom in expressing their sexuality, and controlling their own bodies.

Chávez, through her novel, *Face of an Angel*, makes a significant contribution to the redefinition of the Chicana feminine identity. However,

Chicanas still struggle to gain total freedom to determine their own lives and identities. As observed earlier, the effort to redefine Chicana feminine identity involves a long process and requires a prerequisite condition in order to gain the expected result.

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