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Flying Daughters and Xicanisma Mothers: An Analysis of Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*

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CONTENTS

Abstract

Female oppression has led to the apparition of several social and intellectual movements that aim towards women's liberation. Such movements have been traditionally included under the label of feminism. However, throughout the second half of the 20th century, many female groups started to voice out their discontent towards this term. Due to this, in this period many feminist movements which unified different cultural, racial or social female groups emerged. Among them we find the Xicanisma philosophy which represents women from Mexican heritage and which includes a wide literary and intellectual production, one of its main representatives is Ana Castillo. This essay will analyse Castillo's novel *So Far From God* (1993) from a Xicanisma point of view. The main purpose will be to analyse the roles of the five female protagonist of the novel and to evidence how they embody the different aspects that conform Xicanisma ideology. Special attention will be paid to the constant connections between the Chicana feminist movement and Mexican mythology. Therefore, this essay will showcase how traditional elements from the Mexican culture, which are negatively and stereotypically associated with women, such as sexuality or spirituality, are subverted and included within the Xicanisma portfolio as key elements towards female liberation.

Resumen

La opresión femenina ha desembocado en la aparición de varios movimientos sociales e intelectuales enfocados hacia la liberación de las mujeres. Estas ideas han sido tradicionalmente incluidas bajo la etiqueta de feminismo. Sin embargo, a lo largo de la segunda mitad del siglo XX, distintos grupos de mujeres comenzaron a expresar su descontento hacia este término. Por consiguiente, en este periodo surgieron muchos movimientos feministas que unían a mujeres de diferentes grupos culturales, raciales o sociales. Dentro de los mismos, encontramos el movimiento Xicanisma que representa a mujeres de descendencia mexicana y que incluye una amplia producción literaria e intelectual; una de sus principales representantes es Ana Castillo. En este trabajo se analizará la novela *So Far From God* (1993) de Castillo desde el punto de vista de la teoría Xicanisma. El objetivo principal será analizar los roles de las cinco protagonistas femeninas de la novela y evidenciar cómo encarnan los diferentes aspectos que conforman la ideología del feminismo Chicano. Se prestará especial atención a las constantes conexiones entre esta corriente y la mitología mexicana. Por lo tanto, este ensayo mostrará cómo elementos tradicionales de la cultura mexicana, comúnmente asociados de manera negativa con las mujeres, como la sexualidad o la espiritualidad, son alterados e incluidos dentro del movimiento Xicanisma como factores clave para su liberación.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, women have been placed into the category of the other by the masculine center of representation, falling outside the small molds created by those in control of society and the mainstream culture, and therefore, deprived from equal rights. However, the fight for equality is something that has been around for a considerable amount of time. In the second half of the 19th century, women were already attempting to gain an equal spot in society, with writers and thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft partaking in the early and first stages of the feminist movement. Along the end of that century and the first decades of the 20th century, the second wave of feminism emerges, with developments aiming at the acquisition of equal vote, political participation or social rights. From the 60's onwards, the third wave of feminism appears. This stage is characterised by a fight for female independence from men, sexual freedom and the contributions of women from different minorities, ethnic, racial or sexual.

One of the main ideas highlighted by this third wave of feminism is that for many female writers and thinkers —in particular those with mixed heritage— standard feminism failed "to appraise race and class oppression" and therefore "helped to perpetuate white middle class values" (Quintana 74). According to their claims, mainstream feminist movements represented white middle class women exclusively, leaving out of the question women from other cultures, ethnicities, races or social classes. In this context, the Chicana feminist movement emerges, where Chicana refers to American women of Mexican descent. Significantly, writers from this movement are caught up between two different cultural systems (74). Their efforts are aimed at forging a new cultural and feminist identity, which will successfully represent women with a blended

heritage, both Mexican and U.S. American. However, simultaneously, they have to dismantle the male-dominated systems which continue to suppress and oppress them and redefine themselves in the process.

In this quest for self definition on the part of Chicana women, an essential step is the process of naming themselves as an organised group that seeks differentiation form others who have failed to include them. Ana Castillo coins the term "Xicanisma," which can be considered a synonym for Chicana feminism. Her main purpose is to challenge the dominant patriarchal system by examining issues of identity and sexuality, and in doing so, re-empowering women's role in society. The possession of a name created by themselves, and for themselves, was something incredibly meaningful and powerful; according to Anzaldúa, "now that we had a name, some of the fragmented pieces began to fall together, who we were, what we were, how we had evolved. We began to get glimpses of what we might eventually become" (in Hölber 12).

Apart from conceptualising the term Xicanisma, Ana Castillo has applied it to her own fiction. This popular Chicana author was born in June 15, 1953 in Chicago, Illinois. She is the daughter of a Mexican-Indian mother and a Chicago-born father and therefore, she grew up with strong influences from both U.S. culture and Mexican culture. She studied at Northeastern Illinois University, where she started to be involved with different Hispanic American groups of writers and intellectuals. She became a writer, poet, activist and essayist, delving into subjects such as race, gender or sexuality and with special emphasis on the Chicana Feminist movement. Among her most influential works we find *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) and *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (1994). She is one of the most important figures in the development of

the Xicanisma movement, along with other fellow writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros or Cherríe Moraga.

This essay will analyse the Xicanisma subject in Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God.* In order to do so, the focus will be placed on the main female characters of the story: Sofi and her four daughters. This essay will study how their living circumstances and endeavours help to affirm the figure of the Chicana and the evolution of Sofi into one of the first Xicanisma activists in her community. *So Far From God* (1993) narrates the short life and consequent deaths of Sofi's four daughters, as each of them attempts to survive and thrive in a male-dominated world. The story is set in the tiny town of Tome, near Albuquerque in New Mexico and, although it is not directly mentioned, it takes place around the expansion of a couple of decades, somewhere around the 80's and the 90's. Fe, Esperanza, Caridad, and La Loca seem to be haunted by an atmosphere of doom and predestination, in which their efforts appear useless as they are set for an untimely and unfair death. Fe dies as a result of a long exposure to chemical components, while working in a factory in order to achieve the American Dream. Esperanza dies as a war prisoner while working as a war correspondent in Saudi Arabia. Caridad decides to plunge off a cliff with the woman she has fallen in love with, and La Loca, who has never been anywhere but her house, dies from AIDS, a sickness she has inexplicably contrived. With each death the narrative takes us back to the figure of Sofi, who seems to be the link and golden thread that unifies the plot. However, with each downfall, she manages to extract some kind of learning which enables her to become a first prototype of a Chicana feminist.

2. A Method to the Madness: Formal Aspects in *So Far From God*

So Far From God encapsulates several stylistic and formal aspects which not only empower, but also assert, its social and political criticism, and therefore they reinforce the Xicanisma values of the novel. In other words, we can claim that "the novel does not operate according to a patriarchal capitalist logic; on the contrary, the text becomes a manifestation of resistance against it" (Anténe 109). For this reason, it is important to comment on some of these aspects, since they are strongly linked with the analysis that will be carried out in the second part of this essay.

The first thing to analyse, which is closely related with the implicit and explicit criticism found in the novel, is the narrator. Castillo chooses quite a complex narrative voice, she "packages a third-person omniscience inside a 1st person narrative voice with a pronounced personality" (Teubner 68). The narrator in the novel is unnamed, and he or she does not participate of the events of the narrative; however, we do get the sense that s/he belongs to the community of the story, due to the plural perspective voice which is sometimes used. Apart from this, the narrator adopts the same type of language as the characters, which again, leads us to believe that s/he belongs to their community. The language employed combines U.S. American English and "a smattering of Spanish words and syntactic constructions" (68). Castillo's narrator can be compared with a *mitotera* (77), someone who enjoys gossiping and creating stories, and who is very opinionated and participates in everybody's business. The tone of the narrator epitomizes the overall tone of the novel, it is zany, humorous, haunting, surreal, sassy, knowing and filled with direct political judgements.

The language used in the novel is also a central element in its critical endeavours. The style is quite lyrical and it can suggest that Castillo uses "her poetic speech and language, [as she] moves closer to her political opinion" (Hölber 39). The text deals with a combination of English and Spanish, both utilised by the narrator and the majority of the characters. The decision to work with Spanish in the novel has direct political and critical implications. In an interview, Castillo claimed that "la decisión de escribir en inglés fue algo consciente, porque quería dirigirme a los 'gringos' que no tenían en cuenta a la comunidad chicana y a los latinoamericanos que vivían en Estados Unidos" (Lerate and Toda Iglesia 23). Because of that, the novel is filled with features of the Spanish language, which affect vocabulary, grammatical constructions and syntax.

The mixture of cultural systems is directly related with "the physical and psychological regions Gloria Anzaldúa defines as 'the Borderlands'" (Teubner 67), which highlight the physical and metaphorical position of the characters in the novel. A combination that appears quite often is the use of articles, such as *el* or *la* before names. We can find these articles before the protagonists' names: "La Caridad" (Castillo, *So Far* 135) or "La Loca" (163), and the same thing happens with the other two sisters. It is also used with other characters in the story, such as "La Rita" (217), but in the case of the sisters the placement of these articles helps to "render their names as common nouns (charity, faith and hope, respectively), emphasising the characters' allegorical significance" (Teubner 72).

Throughout the novel, we also find numerous amounts of linguistic expressions that belong to Mexican culture, and that are used directly, without any translation, which presents a challenge for non-native speakers of Spanish. These

elements can be found, for example, in a conversation held between Sofi, her comadre and Domingo, in which they exchange a series of *refranes*, such as "¡*El mal vecino ve lo que entra y no lo que sale*!" or "¡*Bocado sin hueso*!" (Castillo, *So Far* 145). The use of these expressions creates a linguistic barrier with those readers who are unable to speak Spanish, hence, "readers […] may experience such exclusion as is usually undergone by people who, like most of the novel's characters, are immersed in dominant national languages they do not fully command" (Teubner 80), which is an example of how the novel's use of language reinforces its criticism.

Another way in which Spanish is introduced in the text is through colloquial expressions typical of the spoken language. Said expressions appear blended with English in the dialogues between characters, and they portray the reality of people living in small towns of the American Southwest, next to the Mexican frontier, where both languages are used simultaneously. Among these expressions we find: *"¿A'ca'o que?"* (Castillo, *So Far* 138), "*nomás*" (139) or *"our'jita*" (142). Once more, the use of these colloquial phrases represents an accurate portrait of the reality lived by people who are either Mexican immigrants or their descendants.

Apart from the different choices in language, there are a few other formal aspects which differentiate the novel from others, and that take part in the political critique. One factor which is quite striking are the titles used for the different chapters; we find a total of sixteen chapters, and, one of the things which is more surprising about them is their length. They are longer than the average title and they contain information which acts as prolepsis of what is going to happen in the chapter. In chapter 12, for example, the title anticipates Caridad's death by saying:

"the end of Caridad and her Beloved Emerald" (Castillo, *So Far* 11). The fact that such crucial information is delivered before the reader gets to read it can be considered anticlimactic, but it also places the reader in a similar position to La Loca, who knows the outcome of events before they happen. These titles also convey the subjective and opinionated attitude of the narrator, who addresses the reader directly and expresses her/his own opinions, calling attention on the fictionality of the text. Such metafictional aspects can be found in chapter 15, in which the narrator brings attention to his or her own remarks: "a Few Random Political Remarks from the Highly Opinionated Narrator" (11), or in chapter 8, where the reader is directly addressed: "the Reader Will Discover That There Is Always More Than the Eye Can See to Any Account" (10).

Another formal aspect which is representative of this novel is Fe's speech after she is dumped by Tom. She is left in a shell-shock state in which she is unable to utter complete phrases, therefore, the text provides a physical representation of her handicapped voice. We can use an example like the following: "You __ you're a woman now, __ you?" (Castillo, *So Far* 156), where we find empty spaces for words or sounds that she is unable to say. This visual representation of her speech has a humorous outcome, since in certain situations she is not understood by other characters; but it also emphasizes Fe's inability to communicate with her surrounding society, the inability to cope with it or understand it, as well as the inability of her surroundings to understand her. As it has been evidenced, there are multiple types of speeches, which represent the different layers of cultural groups found in the novel; in fact, the presence of this heteroglossia is an illustrative component of Chicano texts (Teubner 72). In *So Far From God*, the blending of languages is found both in the dialogues and in

the narrative voice, which according to Bakhtin allows us to define the novel "as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (Bakhtin 1192).

It is also important to mention the great amount of symbols and cultural references that can be found in the novel, which, as a matter of fact, are constantly linked with linguistic elements. The novel captures an amalgam of references that come from the Mexican culture, Aztec mythology and the Christian faith, as well as from Native American beliefs and pop culture elements of the U.S. Because of that, in the same novel we find references to Cantinflas (Castillo, *So Far* 53) at the same time as we find references to ancient Aztec deities such as Tsichtinako (211). We also find a great amount of symbolism in the names of the characters. The names are of Spanish origin and in their translation we find the qualities of the character they belong to. Sofi for example, is related to the God of wisdom, Sophia, and it refers to the ability that Sofi will have to collect knowledge from her daughters' actions. Caridad is a healer who gives herself to the community by working as a nurse, and she has a liberal approach to sexual relationships, which is ill-considered by the community. La Loca's name carries a lot of irony, since she ends up not being the crazy one, but the most capable character; Esperanza attempts to bring hope "as an activist and journalist" (Blauman 212); and Fe has faith in a social system which keeps on preventing her from achieving the American Dream.

As the novel encapsulates so many different elements, we can consider as well, that it blends many different genres together, as it does with language. According to Mermann-Jozwiak, it includes genres such as "the family saga, the *telenovela*, myth […], *cuentos* (oral stories), magic realism, comedy, tragedy,

folkloric elements such as *remedios* and recipes, and religious narratives" (Mermann-Jozwiak 102). All of these rhetorical and formal factors configure *So Far From God* as a narrative of rebellion and political intention, while they also help to shape it as an amazing fictional tale which serves as an allegory for the Xicanisma movement.

3. The Importance of Flying: Its Implications for a Xicanisma Point of View

In *So Far From God* we can find the representation of five women, who in different ways embody several aspects of both the traditional Chicana and Anzaldúa's concept of The New Mestiza, defined as a "mixed race woman […] without borders, without boundaries" (Carson 113). These five different women fall into the category of the so-called *Nueva Mestiza*, as they are trapped between two different cultural systems, both failing to equally include them. Therefore, throughout the subversion of the primary aspects of the dominate ideologies, Castillo creates in her fiction a space in which, due to the Mestiza consciousness, we are able to hear "the voice of the unheard, the unthought, the unspoken" (Pérez 5). Taking this into consideration, we could claim that, in the ominous destiny that Sofi's daughters encounter, we find much of the social and cultural criticism that is usually linked with Xicanisma literature.

In order to carry out the analysis of the aforementioned criticism, I will go over the life and death of each of Sofi's daughters, attempting to break down the results of each decease, its influence on Sofi, and its social, political and cultural implications. It is important to point out that, within this review, the narrative takes us back and forth around the lives of Sofi's four daughters, using the mother as a linking unit between the dispersed sisters. In fact, on several occasions along the story, we lose track of Sofi, only for her to reappear when least expected and with the most startling outcome. Accordingly, Sofi is going to be the one recipient of all of her daughter's actions, although she hardly ever leaves the home. With the return and death of her daughters, Sofi will acquire learnings that will serve her as an impulse to attempt to find a better life for herself and will, in turn, inspire other fellow Chicanas.

According to Lozovschi, Sofi's figure can be compared to Coatlicue (150), a Mexican deity who carries a necklace around her neck, which contains multiple hands and hearts that symbolise, respectively, the act of giving life and the pain of giving birth to children who will struggle in the world. Following this approach, each of Sofi's girls could be interpreted as a literal representation of these expanding arms and hearts, being sent out to the world by their mother, and set to return to her once the world has imposed its effects on them. Following this line of argumentation, Sofi's girls are like expanding arms that explore the world and its injustices only to come back after death —sometimes literally— and provide Sofi with knowledge and tools in order to avoid the same problems and mistakes. While this idea is quite accurate, and it exemplifies the way in which each daughter acts as an extension of the mother, I would suggest an idea that shares many of Lozovschi points, but that is slightly different at its foundation.

In this respect, it is my contention that each of Sofi's daughter can be understood as an independent entity which leaves her mother in their first attempt to "fly", thereon, each sister is like a winged emissary sent by the mother into society. If they manage to fly, they will come back home with whatever findings they have gathered; if they fail, they will not be able to return, implying that whatever they harvested was not useful for their mother. The idea of flying is a motif that appears quite frequently in the novel, and it is explicitly linked to three of the four sisters. In chapter four Sofi says, "I had to produce the kind of species that flies" (Castillo, *So Far* 84); this is quite interesting because each of her daughters is going to metaphorically fly out to the world and three of them are going to fly literally, only to ride back to their mother afterwards.

3.1 Esperanza's Flight

Esperanza is Sofi's eldest daughter and she is also the first to fly and the first to die. From the very beginning, she is described as a clever and career-focused woman who wants to seek higher education in college and pursue a life as a working independent female. This is, in a way, the complete opposite to Sofi, who has stayed at her hometown all her life. Nonetheless, they both share an ambition for self-independence, since Sofi has managed to take care of her daughters by herself. As the translation of her name postulates, in Esperanza, we see a *hope* for better opportunities, so that Chicanas can get an education and fulfil their own personal drives, other than being mothers and housewives. This is directly related with one of the main ideas in Xicanisma and portrayed by Anzaldúa, which is that "for the new mestiza an education is imperative for liberation" (Saldivar-Hull 213). According to this, Esperanza embodies this new woman who, through education, attempts to free herself from the constraints of the society in which she lives.

Esperanza is a woman with strong political ideas who participates in *La Raza* politics and who is aware of the limitations imposed by a culture organised by men. Therefore, she tries to fight not only this unequal situation, but other problems around the world, which is why she flies to Saudi Arabia to work as a war correspondent. She can be compared with a *soldadera*, a Chicana feminist who fights, like revolutionary Mexican men, for her rights, which gives her attributes traditionally viewed as masculine (Cullison 3). Her death implies a strong criticism of a society which feels threatened by a female who is outspoken in her political opinions and who is not afraid to take actions to change things. She can also be compared with *La Malinche,* a figure which is quite ambivalent in

Mexican culture and that represents "Chicanas who are independent and who see more in themselves than just being mothers and wives" (Hölber 31). But *La Malinche* is also seen in a negative way by the Mexican *Patriarcado*, since she is also related with the clash between cultures and treason because of her relationship to Hernán Cortés.

In her figure we see how, as one of Sofi's winged emissaries, Esperanza literally flies from home to another country, and how with her return as a ghost, she provides Sofi with a lesson. As it has been stated, Esperanza successfully flies, therefore she is able to return, and her comeback is what inspires Sofi and gives her *hope* to run for mayor of Tome. It is after Esperanza's death that Sofi understands all of the ideas that her daughter defended: the need for women to fight for their rights and to change the system, as well as the realisation that the only way to change all of these things is "if *we*, all of us together, try to do something about it" (Castillo, *So Far* 142). With this first learning, we see the spark that lights Sofi's figure as a proto-Xicanisma activist, as she will eventually be mayor of Tome.

3.2 Caridad's Flight

Caridad, the second daughter, is linked to two of the main concepts that are traditionally attached to Chicanas, that is, sexuality and spirituality. This highlights the overall unequal society in which Chicanas live, which is doubly suppressive, since they are subjected to both men in their culture and in the country they inhabit. It also emphasises the double standards placed in women, in which sexually active women are often looked down upon and considered less holy or respectable. According to Moraga, "women of colour have always known

[…] that our sexuality is not merely a physical response or drive, but holds a crucial relationship to our entire spiritual capacity" (Moraga, in Quintana 81). This is something that patriarchal authorities know and use to their advantage, hence why in Mexican culture, the female body and its sexuality is commonly linked with religion and spirituality, more accurately, with the negative side of religion: sin and indiscipline. Because of that, in Xicanisma line of thinking, these aspects have to be used in the liberation process; in Moraga's words "if the spirit and sex have been linked in our oppression, then they must also be linked in the strategy towards our liberation" (81).

These claims are all portrayed in the character of Caridad, for she is, out of the four daughters, the one who is going to go through the biggest transformation during her life (Lozovschi 145). At the start of the narrative, she is linked with sexuality, she suffers several abortions after being rejected by her boyfriend and she attempts to find comfort in multiple sexual relationship with other men. These actions are seen in a negative light by the society and neighbourhood that surrounds her. These double standards take a physical embodiment in the figure of the *malogra*, which will attack her and rape her, almost to her death. Accordingly, sexual freedom in females is linked to violence and marginalisation, withal, Caridad —as Fe— will take in a "holy restoration" which will change her life. This miraculous recovery —linked to the magic realistic aspects of the novel—[1] will transform Caridad into an individual intently linked to spirituality and to the traditional figure of the *curandera.*

[1] *So Far From God* can also be studied under the genre of Magic Realism. It participates in the main characteristics of this genre as Castillo comes from the Mexican Culture, therefore she uses Magic Realism for "the denouncing of the binaries and the preoccupation with borders, mixing and hybridity" (Benito et al. 67).

Since her restoration, Caridad will be linked with spirituality, which plays a central role in Mexican culture, as well as in Chicana Feminism. In the novel, she is constantly connected with elements of Mexican tradition and folklore. Caridad, as La Loca, is able to communicate with ghosts and has several episodes in which her visions predict upcoming events, such as Esperanza's departure and its unfortunate outcome. Caridad rejects her past life, which was closer to the U.S. way of living, and she will eventually reach a status similar to La Loca's, in which she will be an outcast, living in a marginal way according to the ever-judging society which surrounds her. Caridad's persona is the result of the influence of the world in which she lives; which is not only based in a patriarchal system, but which is also strongly misogynistic.

Caridad puts an end to her life by jumping off a cliff with the woman she is in love with, Esmeralda. The fact that she is in love with a woman is quite relevant, and its importance should be pointed out, as lesbianism and homosexuality are recurrent themes in texts by various Chicana authors.[2] However, I would highlight the way that these two women perceive this suicidal jump as their only chance to escape from the overbearing society in which they live. For this reason, their jump can be understood as a strive to flee from a sexist and homophobic culture. At the same time, this is linked with Aztec mythology, in the description of their fall the implied author explains how they could hear how "*Tsichtinako was calling*!" (Castillo, *So Far* 211). Consequently, their fall is not seen as something tragic, but rather as their attempt to go back to their origins.

[2] The defense of homosexuality within the Xicanisma movement is present in many of the representatives of said movement. Anzaldúa identifies herself as a *Mestiza*, and as such, she sates the following: "As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race; my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races)" (80).

For Lozovschi, "[t]heir flight is not towards the male figure, the Sun. It is a female descent into earth; the reunion of dispersed spirits; spirituality, creativity, sexuality; the completion of the female self" (147).

In this return into earth, both females are able to detach themselves completely from the oppressive male constraints of the world above. They are able to renew themselves as free independent Chicanas, through the union of sexuality and spirituality, and with their jump we can say that "Castillo makes another strong point in her critique of society (Anténe 113). Furthermore, Caridad's figure has also been linked with Tlazolteotl, an Aztec deity which embodies "filth, sin and a powerful sexuality on the one hand, and forgiveness, cleansing, purification on the other" (Lozovschi 145). Subsequently, Caridad sets an example for other women, as a female who has been judged by society and who has suffered its cruel hand, who, nonetheless, has been able to overcome this ill-judgement and has come back stronger than ever to help others who are in her former position.

Her flight is described in the novel as that of a kite: "Esmeralda was flying, flying off the mesa like a broken-winged moth and holding tight to her hand was Caridad, more kite than woman billowing through midair" (Castillo, *So Far* 211). This image compares Caridad with an inanimate object, and at the same time, it provides her with a mythical aura turning her into a mythical being capable of flying. However, it also takes away some of the fragility traditionally associated with women, making her figure almost masculine. This masculinisation through objectification is something that had already been used by previous feminists, more specifically by Adrienne Rich, who also describes a flying female in the last stanza of the poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" (1963).

> Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
> breasted and glancing through the currents,
> taking the light upon her
> at least as beautiful as any boy
> or helicopter,
> poised, still coming,
> her fine blades making the air wince
> but her cargo
> no promise then:
> delivered
> palpable
> ours. (1795)

Here we also see a figure of a female who plunges into the air, not as a delicate fragile woman, but as something stronger and more masculine like a "helicopter." So we can establish a parallelism between Rich's woman and Caridad: both fly into the sky, fearless and free, in order to deliver their experience and their strength to the many women who are still behind. In the case of Caridad, this learning flies back to her mother and provides her with another aspect that she previously lacked. Caridad's death and ectoplasmic return showcase to Sofi the possibility to live free from men, so she decides to divorce her husband and establish herself as a fully independent woman. As with the return of Esperanza, Caridad manages to successfully fly, so she is able to go back to her mother with another missing piece of the puzzle that will help consolidate Sofi's figure as a Xicanisma activist.

3.3 Fe's Stay on the Ground

Sofi's eldest daughters —as well as La Loca— manage to fly, and therefore they are able to come back to their mother in order to help her. In Fe's case, she is the only one who does not return; this is immediately linked with the fact that she does not fly, she is, in other words, "the only one who stays earthbound" (Castillo, *So Far* 85). One possible interpretation for her inability to fly is the fact that her

figure is strongly linked to the concept of the American Dream, and therefore, she receives some of the sharpest criticism on the part of Castillo. Fe is described as a woman who apparently fills up many of the requirements of the American Dream: she has a stable job, a boyfriend and an overall tidy life. However, she is first met with the inequalities of American culture when Tom decides to cancel their engagement, as a result of which she suffers a crisis during which she is only able to scream. She is referred to by the neighbours and her family as "La Gritona," which is linked with a traditional figure in Mexican folklore: La Llorona, a woman who drowned her two sons and came back after death as a ghost crying constantly for her children, after realising what she had done. In the case of Fe, it seems as if she screamed after the realisation of her unfair and helpless position, she screams against the injustices of a society that keeps on rejecting her despite her efforts to belong to it.

Fe is eventually able to perform a second attempt to enter the so-called American Dream, as she starts working for a big company, she gets engaged again, and she manages to go up in her job. In this new company she is defined as a "utilising and efficient worker" (Castillo, *So Far* 182). This is an ironic description, because she is in fact being efficiently utilised by the company, which is putting her in an extremely dangerous position. She dies as a result of cancer, which she develops due to the chemicals used in her work, against which protection was not provided. This implies a very evident critique upon inequalities in the work environment and how females —in particular those from ethnic and racial minorities— were being used as labor force in very unsafe circumstances. So in Fe's death and life, we are made witnesses of how "the chances are slim that a Chicana will survive the battle against the combined forces of a sexist Chicano

culture and the racist power of the dominant culture: economic exploitation ensures that Chicano stays in their place" (Saldivar-Hull 213). The fact that Fe does not come back illustrates the crude reality for many people in the U.S. and accentuates the reality of Chicanas, who are twice alienated, because of their race and because of their gender.

Apart from this interpretation, Fe's non-return also highlights the dislike that traditional Chicanas have for this illusion of the American Dream. Furthermore, she is unable to return because what her life showcases is something that Sofi is already familiar with, the distrust of a culture which failed to accept them as equals at the time. In Sofi's own words: "It's not "imagination" that I've always had, comadre, it's *faith.* Faith has kept me going" (Castillo, *So Far* 138). According to this, Sofi has never believed in the imaginary perfect life promised by the American *Dream*, but she has always had faith in her own work and her own effort. Since she is already faithful, there is no need for Fe to return to her. Fe's *faith* on the possibility of accomplishing the American Dream, and the later realisation of the impossibility of it, are learnings which Sofi already possesses, which explains why Fe will not fly back after death.

3.4 La Loca's Flight

La Loca is Sofi's youngest daughter, and she epitomises many of the aspects linked with the supernatural part of the novel, which explains her name, but also presents one of the biggest ironies of the novel, since on many occasions she is actually the most reasonable character within the plot. From chapter one, she is linked with spirituality, religion and the uncanny elements of the story. She dies at the age of three and resurrects at her funeral, ascending up to the ceiling of the

church and proclaiming that she has been in heaven, hell and the *purgatori*o and that she has been "sent […] back to help you all, to pray for you" (Castillo, *So Far* 24). With her miraculous return she is given the name of La Loca Santa by the community, although with time everyone would drop Santa and simply call her La Loca, and we never get to know her real name. She is closely linked with nature, in fact she does not allow other human beings to be around her or touch her, other than her family members; she never leaves the house and she only really interacts with the animals.

In the preceding sections we have been comparing Sofi's daughters with emissaries that fly out to the world; however, La Loca's situation is slightly different, since she does not ever leave the house. Nevertheless, we can still consider her as one of these emissaries, because, although she never leaves, she is in constant contact with the outside world, not only the physical one but most particularly the "other world." She is constantly receiving information about this supernatural world through conversations with ghosts and spirits, like La Llorona. Because of these events, we can affirm that she is, in fact, as much in contact with the outside world as her sisters. In fact, the narrator draws attention to this fact, and suggests that "for a person who had lived within a mile radius of her home and had only traveled as far as Albuquerque twice, [La Loca] certainly knew quite a bit about this work, not to mention beyond" (Castillo, *So Far* 245).

It is also interesting to mention that we can establish a parallelism between La Loca and different mother figures, which brings her closer to Sofi. During her sister's illnesses she will be the one to help take care of them, nursing them, and trying to heal them. This parallelism is even stronger taking into consideration how the figure of La Loca can be connected with La Virgen de Guadalupe

(Lozovschi 174). This virgin represents one of the most recognisable symbols of Mexican society, as well as of Chicana Feminism. She is one of the central topics and symbols in Chicana literature; in fact, for Chicanas she is associated with "the values of being a female, a mother, a woman with darker complexion, a mestiza" (Hölber 22). In the case of La Loca, she is associated with La Virgen de Guadalupe because of her mother-like attitudes and because of her holy resurrection, and the narrator even mentions that she is buried "in the *camposanto* of the Church of our Lady de Guadalupe (Castillo, *So Far* 246).

This is quite ambiguous and is open to several interpretations. The idea of a virgin is not usually related with resurrection, they come back or manifest themselves in the physical world to help those in need, which is precisely what La Loca says after her resurrection. However, the fact that she resurrects can also connect her with the one figure who resurrects in Christian faith, that is, Christ. Following this idea, La Loca undergoes a similar process as Caridad and Esperanza, since she is linked with a masculine respected figure, in her quest to help other women. Her figure includes both the female symbol of protection and purity and the masculine idea of resurrection, which establishes quite a harsh critique in religious faith and its authorities in Mexican American society. This is highlighted with the final irony of her death, in which La Loca Santa, the Virgin, dies of AIDS, although she has never been out of her house or interacted with anybody but her family.

In the case of La Loca, we can say that she literally and successfully flies back to her mother after having been sent to the "other world." With her first return she will help Sofi through her life in order to endure the death of her three other daughters. She is there to help Sofi and her sisters through their lives, and

once all of her siblings have died her purpose is finished. However, with her second death, she gives Sofi the final impulse that she needed, in fact we can say that "[t]he death of Loca […] persuaded Sofi to found an organisation of mothers, who have children with special powers or talents, M.O.M.A.S., Mothers of Martyrs and Saints" (Hölber 92). We are told that she comes back after this second death as a ghost, which is linked with her successful flight. For Sofi this final death represents the last push in her process of transformation, she creates the M.O.M.A.S. organisation, which grows into a large, important and serious association, that partakes in important events and that many people want to belong to. This organisation shines and gains importance in a male-system, transcending the boundaries of the patriarchal society in which it was born. Therefore, through the M.O.M.A.S community Sofi is able to "empower women like herself who have long suffered, and with their help she sets out to redefine society" (McGarry and Sirias 87).

4. Conclusion

So Far From God shapes a narrative in which the fictional story works as an allegory that epitomises the role of Chicanas in U.S. society and their struggles to flee from its constraints. The allegorical aspects of the novel allow the reader to center his/her views not in the mournful deaths of the four sisters, but in their positive outcomes. Through each casualty Sofi grows stronger and wiser as she is able to create a collective movement that challenges and outplays the male-centred one. It can be said that the loss of her daughters enables Sofi to become the first Xicanisma activist in her community.

Through their deaths, Sofi's flying daughters strive towards liberation and towards the destabilization of the patriarchal system which oppresses, not only them, but also other fellow Chicanas. Their sacrificial flights are headed for liberation and each of the sister's leaps embodies an action of political, cultural and social resistance. Therefore, Castillo's novel emerges as a place in which Mexican-American women develop into active beings, who embark themselves into the accomplishment of political and spiritual equality.

The novel conveys and reinforces its strong critical endeavours through the creation of a singular narrative voice, visible both in the narrator and the characters on the story. This is intensified due to the use of a beautiful, powerful, rich, mythic and diverse imagery, which fills the plot with playful, yet critical, images and motives that reinforce the demanding narrative. The mixture of languages allows Castillo to invent a unique work which combines different cultural elements in an attempt to portray the heterogeneous reality depicted in her

fiction. In *So Far From God* language does not translate frontiers, it transcends them and it thus challenges the social structures affected by them.

Castillo creates a world in which the mythic and the ordinary converge and melt into one single unit. Rather than creating something that differs from reality, her fiction mirrors society in a particular but nonetheless realistic way. Accordingly, the reader is more surprised by the inhumane and cruel actions inflicted on Chicanas by the male-dominated system than by the fact that little girls resurrect or that young *chicas* are able to predict the future or communicate with spirits. Thus, the novel relies on these supernatural elements, not to shock the reader, but to highlight the double morality and the hypocrisy of the misogynist and consumerist society in which the protagonist live.

Sofi's daughters, and of course Sofi herself, illustrate a new type of woman who is not only proud of her culture, but who uses her unique position to boost herself and uplift other women. Esperanza, Caridad, Fe and La Loca represent different parts of their mother, who constitutes a new type of Chicana, a woman who welcomes and enhances her role as a mother, as a special spiritual entity, as a worker, as a lover, as a leader, as an intellectual and as an activist. In doing so, Sofi sets an example for other women to fight for an equal and better future and to confront whichever systems prevent them from achieving their goals.

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