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ABSTRACT

Various literary views of the Mexican American woman have been presented over the past 150 years. Anglo treatment of Mexican American women in literature has varied from blatant prejudice or vague mystical eroticism in early portrayals to more realistic views of the Chicano in modern writing. The current identity crisis of Mexican Americans is reflected in the way Chicano writers portray Mexican American women. A good example of this may be seen in the three different generations of women in the novel "Chicano." Alicia, of the oldest generation, plays the traditional role of subservient wife and mother; Angelina, Alicia's daughter, defies tradition enough to leave home for a job, but later becomes subject to her Mexican American husband; and Mariana, representing the third generation, completely breaks with tradition by engaging in premarital sex with an Anglo. Perhaps the identity crisis of Chicano writers is an attempt to find identity apart from Anglos without destroying the minority culture. (JM)

MEXICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: DIVERSITY IN DEPTH

Marleen E. Weaver

Julio's concept of marriage was not a new one. He believed every attention should be showered on a potential mistress or fiancee. But once married, that was all over. The complete patriarchy had existed among his --- and her --- people for many generations, and Julio saw nothing wrong with it.[1]

From the novel Chicano, this passage exemplifies the traditional role of the Mexican-American woman. As one of the first major novels written by a Mexican-American, Chicano portrays the traditional role definitions in contrast to changes occurring within Chicanos. Julio's wife, Angelina, reflects the changes beginning to occur when she turns Julio in to the police for beating her, thus recognizing the political power she has under the law.[2] Chicano provides a fascinating study in both traditional and transitional behavior patterns as it becomes a revelation of the current crisis within Mexican-American communities. However, before an in-depth analysis of this one work can be given, the literary background from which the Mexican-American community evolved its literary heritage must be examined. Two areas will be covered in this examination, including the Anglo view of Mexican-American women and the Mexican view of woman's role.

The earliest recorded views about Mexican-Americans are present in various chronicles from the 1800's. From the Austin Papers, March 4 to May 16, 1823, comes this statement about Mexicans in the United States territories or states: "The Mexican women were considered tolerable, 'but the men are the damnest rascals in the world.' "[3] Early writers were shocked at the eroticism of a Mexican-type society with its easy acceptance of bodily passions. The first impression reaching the public was written by Major Zebulon Pike:

> The general subjects of conversation among the men are women, money, and horses, which appear to be the only objects, in their estimation, worthy of con sideration, uniting the female sex with their money and their beasts, and from having treated them too much after the manner of the latter, they have eradi-cated from their breasts every sentiment of virtue and ambition, either to pursue the acquirements which would make them amiable companions, instructive mothers, or respectable members of society, their whole souls, with few exceptions, like the Turkish ladies, being taken up in music, dress, and little blandishments of voluptuous dissipation. Finding that the men only regard them as objects of gratification to the sensual passions, they have lost every idea of the feast of reason and flow of soul, which arise from the intercourse of two refined and virtuous minds.[4]

The downfall of Mexican culture in the Southwest was often attributed to this seeming lack of morals as seen in such books as Ganilh's Mexico versus Texas, written in 1838.

In contrast, later Southwest writers treat the Mexican-American woman with an attitude of wonderment. To many such writers, she has a mystical charm. A description of Chelo in Border City typifies the conventional Mexican heroine:

> She is the beautiful woman ... There is something about her ... that has a definite appeal. It is a disturb-ing quality of some kind I cannot define.

> For beauty in a woman is an entity, a whole that has come into being because the parts have been fused together by something that is more than physical matter --- by something that is of the spirit of human life, call it a soul if you wish. Her dark beauty radiated that form ... of life.[5]

Several other novels show this portrayal of the stereotyped Mexican heroine. They include The Life of Little Jo, The Yogi of Cockroach Court, and Heart of the West, all by Anglo writers. Sometimes this mystical portrayal becomes an idealization of the fallen-woman-type as in Bernard DeVoto's 1846: The Year of Decision or in the film High Noon. This is still another facet of the Anglo stereotype of the Mexican-American woman. Blatant prejudice or vague mystical eroticism thus form the major picture in early portrayals of the Chicana: she is seen from the eyes of Romantic writers as an idealized abstraction of exotic beauty or as an immoral animal.

Some modern Anglo writers have presented a more realistic view of the Chicana. However, this may be merely an ability to capture the nature of the Mexican-American woman in a primitive setting as in Katherine Anne Porter's "Maria Concepcion." Other portrayals may only see her as more knowledgeable about sex or as more sensual than Anglos. One example of this is found in the character of Dona Lupe, the wife of an upperclass, in The Conquest of Don Pedro:

> Lupe came of a class and race of women for whom sex had been their whole profession and relation to life for centuries, and they made an art of it and of every phase of it, from the first smile of flirtation to the final spasm. She was the heir of a great and ancient erotic tradition but her silky skin and her gift of touch were her own. She was truly an artist of love. It seemed to him that along with her clothes she had shed her whole social personality, with its prides and poses, had become another creature, all desire, pure and shameless, and one that captivated him completely ... She was supremely discreet, cunning as a coyote and happily free of guilt. Sin she

> accepted as a necessary part of human life on earth. For her, every act of passion was both a fall and a redemption, leaving her pure and pacified.[6]

Also in this novel is a sort of synthesis of the Anglo and Mexican culture in the marriage of Magdalena to Leo, an Anglo. Magdalena breaks convention totally by marrying Leo, and yet, she retains much of her old culture through creating ". . . a typical Mexican establishment with six or seven servants."[7] According to Cecil Robinson in With the Ears of Strangers, Magdalena represents the result of the impact of the two cultures; she seems to have the freedom of the Anglo woman along with the mystique of the Chicana woman.[8] However, although some modern Anglo writers are more able to realistically portray the Chicana or Mexican woman, they seem only able to deal with her in terms of a primitive environment or a historical background (The Conquest of Don Pedro was written in 1954 about the 1870's or 1880's); they seem unable to deal with her character in terms of the identity crisis facing modern women of a minority group with a strong traditional role identification. For this realism about the modern identity crisis, only Mexican-American writers are able to capture the essence of conflict.

To fully understand the Mexican-American crisis today, however, the role of traditional Mexican conditioning must be examined. A statement by Cecil Robinson in With the Ears of Strangers summarizes this traditional conditioning:

> To match the inhibitions in the area of sexuality to be found in the United States are the taboos, rather rigidly enforced from without, in respect to the sexual conduct of Mexican women. Here we encounter the famed double standard, an inevitable component of the code of 'machismo.' A society which on the one hand puts a premium on masculine virility and masculine sexual virtuosity and on the other hand encourages attitudes of jealous possessiveness on the part of men toward their women forces a division upon the women of such a society into two marked classifications, the respectable and the unrespectable, with little grey area between. Perhaps such a code of male dominance is not

> unnatural in a land and nature-attached people whose precarious economies demand the realiability and stability of the woman of the house but whose men, in order to maintain the economy and at the same time endure---and even enjoy---life, might well erect a paradoxical set of mores.[9]

Traditional elements such as the elevation of women, the double standard before and after marriage, the emphasis on sheltering daughters (and the corresponding emphasis on virginity in women), and the male dominance and possessiveness are thus revealed as the cultural heritage out of which the Mexican-American woman emerges.

The elevation of women to this almost superhuman purity is due partly to the reverence and superstition connected with the Virgin Mary. And when a Mexican thinks of the Virgin, he inevitably thinks of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the special patroness of Mexico. The legend says that she appeared in early colonial times to a poor Indian, Juan Diego, and has ever since been the object of adoration by the whole nation. F.S.C. Northrop explains the power of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the culture of Mexico:

> The fact is, this image of the Virgin conveys in some direct and effective way a basic, intuitively felt element in the nature of things and in the human experience which is spontaneously natural and convincing to the native Mexicans. In some way, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the story of her revelation, directed especially to the Indians, call forth from the Mexican spirit a devotion and sweeping response not equaled by any other influence in Mexico today.
>
> The truth is that it is the Virgin representing what Plato termed the female 'eros' (the emotional, passionate, metaphysical principle in the nature of things) and not the Christ representing the male 'logos' (the rational, doctrinal principle, formalized explicity for orthodox Catholocism by St. Thomas Aquinas) who has for the most part caught the imagination and devotion of the Mexicans.
>
> This fact shows itself in countless ways .... in journeys covering hundreds of miles radiating from Mexico City in every direction no ... image of Christ located in the countryside or even made very conspicuous in the churches comes to mind; in its place appears instead the Madonna of Guadalupe.[10]

Thus the traditional conditioning from which the Chicana emerges is seen as a combination of rigid role definitions and the idealization of the female through an association with the Virgin.

Add to this tradition the prejudice toward the Mexican-American, and the development of a stable new identity becomes almost insurmountable. From the early chronicles mentioned previously, prejudice is seen as the dominant attitude of Anglos. In 1954 this prejudice is again pictured in The Conquest of Don Pedro:

> "Don't you know you can't trust a greaser?" he demanded. "They'll work for you, sure, but they'll steal anything that ain't nailed to the floor and put a knife between your ribs for two bits." This, Leo knew, was the standard Texan's conception of a Mexican.[11]

This view is beginning to change as seen through the character of Leo, himself an Anglo. Leo responds to this Texan's prejudice by saying that he has never had any trouble trading with Mexican-Americans.[12] The modern influence of prejudice can be seen in Chicano, a novel written from the viewpoint of a Mexican-American:

> Well he remembered one time, in almost an emergency, his father had stopped to use a rest room at a filling station. His father had gone into the men's room before the attendant knew what was going on ... The attendant had waited ,arms crossed, at the restroom door until Leonardo came out. Then a look was enough ... He had been somewhat puzzled at his father's reluctance to drive into the station ... But that look, under which his father wilted -- a look that said, ". . . Don't ever use this restroom again. It's not for people like you. My white American customers will think less of me. . ." It said all that, and more. It showed the unbridgeable gap between a dirty Anglo service station mechanic who was "American" and a well-read literate crop picker who was something else. . ."It's because the American guys don't like the Mexicans," his father had explained one day . . . But Julio saw that was not altogether true. He had seen Mexicans go into American restaurants and stores ... He saw that they dressed in pressed pants, spoke English well, used American slang, and above all, he noticed they looked at the dirty ragged little children, the young adults with defeat and humiliation written on their faces, with the same

look the attendant had given his father for sneaking in the restroom.[13]

This quotation reveals the complicated nature of prejudice. It also shows that total assimilation into the Anglo culture is the acceptable way for a Mexican-American to find an identity. Out of this background comes the conflict of identity seen in Chicano writers today; for, they do not merely wish to be a rubber stamp of another culture.

Since this identi risis is seen most dramatically in the way writers portray the Mexican-American woman, the development of her changing role will be emphasized in an analysis of the three different generations in the novel Chicano. The first generation Chicana, Alicia, shows the traditional role idealization in the following description: "All who knew her were aware of her unwavering, immense mother love, which motivated her life far more than anything else, which influenced her every movement, even as her strong hand flicked out to crack sharply against a small cheek or bottom."[14] Alicia thus typifies the devotion to home and family through a limited role definition. However, her daughter Angelina shows the beginning of change when she talks back to her father and leaves home for a job in the city: "Rarely had a son or daughter talked back to him, but Neftali knew this was one of the changes coming about in the younger generation away from the old country."[15] Angelina further reveals her break with tradition when she starts her own business. But this break is not complete as shown by her passive subjection to a Mexican-American male when he woos her and marries her only to take over her business. This subjection ends abruptly, however, when the police enter their home during a beating of Angelina by her husband.[16] She then realizes her political power and uses it to again take a place of dominance.

Although Angelina shows many changes in the role definition of the Mexican-American woman, the third generation, as exemplified by Mariana, shows that the change is a permanent reality. She completes the cycle of change by voluntarily engaging in sexual relations with an Anglo boy before marriage. She cannot be placed in either of the two rigid categories which defined a woman's role

for two reasons. First, she was a virgin before her encounter with the Anglo-American boy and did not receive payment as a prostitute would. Second, she would not fit the traditional role (as would Angelina) because she broke all courtship and marriage rules which applied to women. Despite these drastic differences in behavior, the change is not yet complete as shown when Mariana assumes the traditional role by absolving David of all guilt in a death-bed statement that he had had good reason to leave her because she was "running around" on him.[16] The martydom of Mariana underscores the compulsion of a Chicana to save the reputation of her man at all costs, thus reflecting the traditional loyalty to male dominance. The magazine El Grito adds the insight that the relationship between David Stiver and Mariana Sandoval shows the full impact of two cultures in collision. This collision is so forceful that the death of Mariana results:

> Symbolically, the death of Mariana is but a logical conclusion of the basic theme of the novel---unidirectional social change with the ultimate annihilation of the non-conforming minority culture.[17]

Although assimilation of the Mexican-American has occurred, the Chicano writer shows the inability of the two cultures to blend without a loss resulting.

Possibly the identity crisis seen among Chicano writers can thus be seen as an attempt to find an identity apart from the Anglo culture ... an identity gained without destruction of the minority culture. Two examples of Chicano poems may help show this search for new meaning by using modern symbols to characterize the love relationship between a man and a woman. The first poem is called "Woman":

> You are the lizard I wrestle with
> In the green fires of the Sunday;
>
> You are the rose where gardeners kneel
> To lick the petal flown;
>
> You are the slippery noise I hear
> With my fingers deep in the orifice
> Of the early morning falcon;
>
> You are the steps that---pat, pat, patting---
> Fall asleep with warm flesh

On the nylon carpets I have known;

You are the gasp, singing in the contrail
Of the love pigeon;

You are the oven where red-hot pistons
Bake the thousand other poems
That are never read.[18]

Woman is portrayed here as more violent and powerful than past idealizations would allow. She is compared to the wrestling of a lizard and the sound of a falcon in captivity, both unusual images for describing a woman. Such modern images as "red-hot pistons" and "nylon carpets" blend with a traditional image like the "rose". But even the rose lacks its traditional idealization as the gardners kneel "To lick the petal flown..." Raw sensuality prevails throughout with such images as "warm flesh," "slippery noise," and with such verbs as "wrestle," "lick," and "gasp."

A second poem adds the shopping center to implant yet another modern twist to the male-female encounter. In "Mind Shopping..." by Ricardo Sanchez, the past is called "yeaterday's splintered remembrances" thus implying a loss of past idealism:

soft hues and shadows browse,
multi-colored rings reel out
an often muted expectaion...
and
even idle chatter
shatters yesterday's splintered remembrances
forcing me to recant;
"yes, you are beautiful,
and i love you!"

mental carts careen---
thought registers register---
erotic signs supplant---
and
gift-wrapped packages of love
got sacked, stacked, and loaded
onto the automatic response parked
near the self-operating eyelids
that morse code out
"i love you"
in our modern sense
of hedonia ....

CASHIER, DO YOU GIVE
GREEN KISSES?[19]

Modern hedonism and mechanized love have changed the idealism of the past into an absurd question---"CASHIER, DO YOU GIVE GREEN KISSES?" There is not yet an answer to the clash between materialism and idealism just as there is not yet an answer to the clash between two cultures.

Only brief moments of compassion brighten a dark horizon. One example of this compassion can be seen in the treatment of prostitution in Chicano. The rigid role definition of women coupled with poverty is seen as the major cause of prostitution. Instead of immediate condemnation, a growing awareness is examined through the encounter between Julio and Rosa:

> He had deduced from his experience that girls who screwed, prostitutes or not, would screw anybody, any time, and all you had to do was ask them in the vilest language. And he knew that prostitutes were all business, and personal love or affection never occurred to them. And here he was confronted with evidence that perhaps all he knew of women was not true.[20]

With such dim rays of hope, the reader must be content. For a problem of generations cannot be solved in a few decades.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Richard Vasquez, Chicano (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 123.

[2]Vasquez, p. 127.

[3]Stephen F. Austin, "The Austin Papers," ed. Eugene C. Barker, Annual Report for the American History Association for the Year 1919 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1924), March 4 to May 16, 1823.

[4]Cecil Robinson, With the Ears of Strangers (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1963), p. 82.

[5]Hart Stilwell, Border City (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1945), pp. 118-119.

[6]Harvey Fergusson, The Conqest of Don Pedro (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1954), pp. 115-116.

[7]Fergusson, p. 192.

[8]Robinson, p. 94.

[9]Robinson, p. 246.

[10]F. S. C. Northrop, The Meeting of East and West (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946), p. 27-28.

[11]Fergusson, p. 162.

[12]Fergusson.

[13]Vasquez, p. 96.

[14]Vasquez, p. 75.

[15]Vasquez, p. 80.

[16]Vasquez, p. 127.

[17]El Grito, Winter 1970.

[18]Jorge Alvarez, "Woman," El Grito, Winter 1970.

[19]Ricardo Sanchez, "Mind Shopping...." El Grito, Winter 1970.

[20]Vasquez, p. 110.

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