

Reviewing the Chicana

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Abstract

A Chicano Movement evolved from various struggles with specific leaders, agendas and organizational strategies and tactics. Sharing ideological roots with Black cultural nationalism, Chicano cultural nationalism—Chicanismo—advocated an ideology and spirit of active resistance within Mexican American communities throughout the United States. The Chicana feminists shared the responsibility of defining their specific feminist ideology and movement with other feminists, especially with other women of color. This paper probes into the various stereotypes and misrepresentations that the Chicanas have struggled to overcome and how they replace it with new images and self-representations. The specific focus is on the women characters in the novels of Castillo, who, by creating a determined voice of their own, offer resistance to the hegemonic and patriarchal structures of oppression. It also studies how Castillo has succeeded in challenging stereotypical stories and hegemonic narratives written about the Chicanas. She rewrites her people's history and experiences of freedom and oppression.

Keywords: Chicano Movement, ideological roots, Black Cultural Nationalism, Chicanismo

Issues relating to identity became a major concern of Chicana feminists during the 1990s. Gender identity in particular garnered a lot of attention as Chicana feminists sought to confront notions of female sexuality perpetuated by a macho culture. Chicana feminists challenge the traditional role of women within the Mexican and Mexican American culture and question how history, religion, and culture have imprisoned them in patriarchy. They seek to break out of the chains of passivity and essentialism, and bring forward new models of women who struggle and assert. For Chicanas, that includes the dismantling of accepted cultural models that have kept them from following their own self-constructed models.

The women in the novels of Ana Castillo, a Mexican American Chicana feminist, struggle to find a space in which they are not restricted by the cultural and patriarchal norms set by the hegemonic culture. They are torn between their ambitions as empowered women and their cultural affiliations which they respect and wish to maintain. They strive to shape their own feminist identities that are independent and yet strongly connected to their cultural origins.

Castillo's novels are a strong response to the pervasive stereotypes of Chicanas as submissive individuals victimized by oppression or

subordinated by patriarchal society. Castillo thus writes back by presenting a cast of female characters who resist domination in every aspect of their lives. Alicia Gaspar de Alba in the article, "Malinche's Revenge" identifies three archetypal roles available to women within the Mexican and Chicana/o culture - —la madre (the mother), la virgen, (the virgin) y la puta, (the whore) (51). In spite of the fact that, women cannot be easily restricted to these rigid categories, the ideological structure maintains these divisions and stipulates that all women be defined by these roles. Some of these roles can develop an uneasy and even untenable co-existence, as in the iconic image of the Virgin Mother.' Others, such as the virgin and the whore, are seen as opposites, demanding a perpetual binary division. Therefore, women are constantly compelled to conform to an irrational standard, oppressing their sexuality and giving more privilege to male experience in order to be the pure virgin or the sacrificing mother rather than the unyielding whore.

Castillo's *So Far From God* introduces the reader to the atmosphere of the borderland city of Tome. Women are assigned specific roles as mothers, wives and servants of the church, in a community in which women are taken for granted and spirituality is guided by the principles of the

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patriarchal world. In this novel, Castillo reshapes the inherited images according to new visions of a female-dominated world. The plot revolves around Sofia's family, with her four daughters, Esperanza (Hope), Caridad (Charity), Fe (Faith), and La Loca (The Crazy One) and it narrates the transformations they undergo. This is the story of a family comprising only of women: Sofia, a single mother who does much for her daughters and her four daughters; Esperanza, a political activist and broadcast journalist; Caridad, first a nurse's aide, then a battered woman and, finally, a curandera; Fe, a jilted bride whose job as a factory worker leads to her death by cancer; and Loca, a childhood saint, a recluse and healer.

The novel *So Far From God* opens to the death of the youngest daughter La Loca (also called La Loquita Santa). At the age of three, she is mistakenly taken for dead from an epileptic attack and is resurrected during the Holy Mass. This resurrection functions as an awakening as it becomes—the beginning of the child's long life's phobia of people (Castillo 23). She becomes a resurrected goddess to the people but she denies the worship she would have received from the educated patriarchal believers. She becomes estranged from society and lives her life only around the premises of her own house avoiding human contact and society. An anti-social being, reluctant to engage in human affairs, she becomes a 'saint' unknowingly. To emphasize La Loca's refusal to accept a pre-established position, Castillo concludes that 'Santa' was dropped from her name and she was soon forgotten by strangers (25). Towards the end of the novel, she dies for the second time but this time never to return. She becomes the new goddess who is killed by modern disease; she is thought to have AIDS. On a surreal death pilgrimage to Albuquerque hospital, people canonize her and eventually declare her the patron saint of kitchens, new brides, and progressive grooms. La Loca's life, then, is identified by her first death, resurrection, contraction of AIDS without human contact, and her canonization. La Loca is ignorant of the entire world and is unresponsive to people, but she is responsive to natural stimuli. Though a virgin, she dies of a disease transmitted through human contact. Castillo uses this irony to justify the fact that even those who are seemingly pure, isolated and submissive can become victims of fate, whether they choose to accept it or not.

Castillo presents the idea that patriarchy can be displaced through the character of Loca. She thrives in the female-dominated environment that

is her mother's home, not associating with the outside world until it becomes absolutely necessary. She needs no spiritual guidance from the external world, discounting the importance of even the Catholic Church. Here Castillo suggests that women can transcend the patriarchal institution of religion and achieve a spirituality that comes from within instead of above. Her extreme resistance to the world outside the walls of her home is unduly punished as her life is invaded by an unseen force: AIDS. Not even Loca's ability to heal can save her from this destructive force, which is neither male nor female. With her death certain, Loca is still resistant towards accepting the church as the spiritual guide, she becomes a spiritual healer for herself and others: "Perhaps some ... had hoped to see her rise again. And yet there were still others who believed that her true powers would be revealed after her final death." (Castillo 232).

Using Loca, Castillo suggests that patriarchy could be dominated by matriarchy. Loca is not identified in any way by her relationship to a man. She serves as a symbol of strength and power to Sofia and other women. Sofia does not question Loca's mysterious contraction of AIDS or Loca's role as a martyr/ saint. Both merely accept it as another consequence of living in a world split by faithfulness to two value systems.

Sofia's eldest daughter Esperanza, who disappears (her body is never found) in a hostile territory, is a person who makes her own choices, and she makes her own decision to go to Saudi Arabia, a "faraway and frightening place" as a reporter (47). Esperanza is not only brave but also an intellectual woman and she is the only one of Sofia's daughters to go to college. She is interested in the struggles of her people:

Esperanza had been the only one to get through college. She had gotten her B.A. in Chicano Studies. During that time, she had lived with her boyfriend Ruben (who, during the height of his Chicano cosmic consciousness, renamed himself Cuauhtemoc). This, despite her mother's opposition, who said of her eldest daughter's non-sanctified union: "Why should a man buy the cow when he can have the milk for free?" "I am not a cow," Esperanza responded, but despite this, right after graduation Cuauhtemoc dumped her for a middle-class gabacha with a Corvette.... Upon receiving her degree, she landed a job at the local T.V. station as a news broadcaster. These were transitional years where she felt like a woman with brains was as good as dead for all the happiness it

brought her in the love department. (Castillo, *So Far From God* 25-26)

Through Esperanza the readers encounter an intelligent, independent and hard-working woman. The novel also portrays Sofia as possessing traditional views, and shows Esperanza claiming her status as a young woman, refusing to be seen and treated like an animal. Though Esperanza is independent, hard-working and employed, she is an introvert, desperately in need of affection, and willing to sacrifice her career in the name of love (she gives up an offer to go to Houston for the sake of being reconciled with Ruben).

As the eldest, she was used to being ignored by her mother and rejected by her family (it is only after her death that her family starts talking about her and Ruben realizes how much she meant to him). Not being heard, understood or cared for, she decides to get away from her dysfunctional family whom she holds responsible for her sense of displacement in society. She thus goes to Saudi Arabia, in spite of Caridad's foreboding dream. Later as the plot progresses, she becomes an American heroine, a tortured prisoner of war, and is posthumously awarded medals by the American Government. Esperanza goes to someone else's war because she wants to get away from her family, thinking that they don't love her. Her efforts to make herself heard are fruitful, but only after her death. Her death as a television reporter covering the Gulf Crisis is shown to be utterly meaningless.

Esperanza enters a dangerous territory when she chooses to leave home and work as a television anchor in Washington, D.C. On the surface, her decision appears sensible: "... it was pretty clear to her that there was no need of her on the home front. Her sisters had recovered" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 46) from their encounters with physical and emotional abuse. Esperanza also believes that her mother no longer needs her because her father has returned home years after abandoning them. Esperanza, however, misjudges her own position and the source of power within her family. She accepts this fate because she desires to move away from home. It is ironic that Esperanza chooses a male hero as her model for leaving home, and participates in a patriarchal institution, war, because she says, "it's part of my job" (48). She lives with the fear of rejection from the outside culture and also with the fear of losing her home and her mother, "La Raza" (race), (Castillo, *Massacre* 20). Esperanza thus experiences a psychic paralysis. She is a woman of color who is alienated from her mother culture. 'Alien' in the

dominant culture, she does not feel safe with her inner self. Petrified, she can't respond, "her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits (20).

Even when she goes away from her home, her mother and her sisters continue to keep in touch with her. In the novel Esperanza is deceived by the male values that dominate the outside world. By turning away from the female world of her home space, which her mother and sisters created, to the male world of war, she actually moves towards self-destruction and can only return home after she is dead, in the form of a spirit. At first, she speaks through La Llorona, who is described in the novel as "a loving mother goddess" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 163). La Llorona is a messenger in this novel who informs La Loca that Esperanza has died. Later Esperanza is seen by all the members of the family including the father who is a bit disturbed by his "transparent daughter" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 163). Sofia sees Esperanza as a little girl who "had had a nightmare and went to be near her mother for comfort" (163). Caridad has one-sided conversations with Esperanza talking mostly about politics, and La Loca sees and talks to her by the river behind their house. Even after death Esperanza is able to keep in touch with her family.

As a spirit, Esperanza returns to her home space to be comforted by her mother and sisters and also to teach them. Once Esperanza becomes a spirit, she is no longer a victim or an object of the 'White world'. It is no accident that the dead Esperanza communicates with *La Llorona*, "a woman who had been given a bad rap by every generation of people since the beginning of time..." (162- 63). While she lived, Esperanza was also given a "bad rap" (162). But in death, *La Llorona* is given high respect and so is Esperanza. Both are liberated from the boundaries of the White culture.

Fe, another daughter of Sofia is introduced to the readers as a perfect woman. The novelist says:

Fe, the third of Sofia's daughters, was fine. That is, twenty-four, with a steady job at the bank, and a hard-working boyfriend whom she had known forever; she had just announced their engagement.... She was a reliable friend to the 'girls' at work. (Castillo, *So Far From God* 28)

Fe chooses marriage, a patriarchal institution that moves her away from her home space and eventually destroys her. She chooses marriage and in a literal and symbolic way, it poisons her to death. Fe, by marrying Casimiro

and moving to the land of “the long- dreamed- of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart and the VCR” (Castillo, *So Far From God* 171), is trying in her own way to return to her mother but she cannot truly find her way back because of her inability to view her home and her culture in all of its complexity. She can only look at her mother’s home and her sisters as a source of embarrassment or pity. “As it was, while Fe had a little something to talk to Esperanza about, she kept away from her other sisters, her mother, and the animals, because she just didn’t understand how they could all be so self-defeating, so unambitious” (28).

Fe desperately wants to modify her mother’s house by making it sterile, shiny, and closer to the definition of ‘home’ of the mainstream white culture. She cannot see the spiritual richness in her home. In fact, Fe describes one of her sisters, La Loca, as “a soulless creature” (Castillo, *So Far From God* 28) because she always wears the same clothes and doesn’t bother with shoes. For herself, Fe insists on imitating the mainstream culture with a considerable amount of effort: “Fe was beyond reproach. She maintained her image above all from the organized desk at work to weekly manicured fingernails and a neat coiffure” (28). She embraces mainstream White culture and wishes to be like the White women she works with, thinking she will be accepted by the Whites. She chooses “three gabachas” (29) from her job to be her bridesmaids instead of her sisters. But instead of gaining power, she ends up wrapped in the shower curtain, screaming her way back to the matriarchal circle of her mother and sisters. Her first boyfriend, Tom, decides he isn’t ready for intimacy and commitment. And it is her mother and her sisters who become the healers and nurses to Fe and who pray for her.

Fe seems to have everything and to be living out the much-desired American Dream. However, the narrator soon strips away the veil of perfection when Fe faces disillusionment with the ‘Great White Way’. Fe wants to “have a life like people do on T.V.” (Castillo, *So Far From God* 189), so she is not prepared for Tom’s short note on a yellow paper. After reading the note of abandonment, a long period of loud, continuous screaming follows:

Fe would only shut up for an hour or two at a time when she slept. She even screamed while she was being fed.... Fe and her bloodcurdling wail became part of the household’s routine so that the animals didn’t even jump or howl no more whenever Fe, after a brief intermission when she

dozed off, woke up abruptly and put her good lungs to full use. (Castillo, *SoFar From God* 32)

When her first fiancé, Tom, breaks their engagement, Fe gives up on faith and identity. Her reaction to her disillusionment humorously becomes known to the members of her family as the era of *El Big Grito*, which consisted of “one loud continuous scream that would have woken the dead” (Castillo, *So Far From God* 30). For months after she is jilted, Fe is unable to give voice other than scream. As a result of the straining of her vocal cords during the crisis, Fe is left with a speech impediment whereby she cannot vocalize every word in a sentence. Sofia and La Loca take care of her and she recovers slowly. She stops wailing and begins hollering. However, the painful transition leaves her with a fragmented discourse and a “scratchy- ounding” (85) voice, “similar to a faulty World War II radio transmitter, over which half of what she was saying did not get through” (Castillo, *SoFar From God* 85). Yet, she still does not learn how to integrate her home space with the world outside. She is left with an amnesia concerning the period of her so- called illness.

Fe is fortunate enough to experience a rebirth, a change in personality. Seeking independence, she moves from Sofia’s protective house. Powerful and confident in her strength, she hopes to have her own family. So, she decides to get married again, this time to her cousin, Casimiro. She still desires to live in a suburb in a house that does not smell the way her mother’s house smells. She even gets “the long- dreamed- of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR, not for wedding presents..., but which she had bought herself with her own hard-earned money from all the bonuses she earned at her new job” (Castillo, *So Far From God* 171).

Fe leaves her safe position at the bank for a higher paying job at an arms manufacturing company. She works hard with her usual diligence and earns a promotion. Thus, her faith in the American Way of Life is rewarded. This promotion, however, proves fatal as the company exposes her to a hazardous chemical that causes cancer, which eventually kills her.

Fe’s journey ends at home and she is finally able to see her home as a source of comfort, wisdom and spirituality, but it is only after the outside world has done its best to destroy her. After being exposed unknowingly to a very toxic chemical, Fe goes home to die:

A year from the time of her wedding, everything ended, dreams and nightmares alike, for that daughter of Sofia who had all her life sought to

escape her mother's depressing home-with its smell of animal urine and hot animal breath and its couch and cobijas that itched with ticks and fleas; where the coming and goings of the vecinos had become routine because of her mom's mayoral calling... Despite all this and more, Fe found herself wanting to go nowhere else but back to her mom and La Loca and even to the animals to die just before her twenty-seventh birthday. Sofia's chaotic home became a sanctuary from the even more incomprehensible world that Fe encountered that last year of her pathetic life. (Castillo, *So Far From God* 171-72)

In the end, the faith that Fe had placed in the basic tenets of society and its culture completely fails her. Thus, faith also becomes meaningless. Fe is the victim of "the society of spectacle" (qtd. in Aldama 81). In Fe's chase of the American Dream, she only finds infertility, deception, and ultimately a death that unlike her sisters' deaths, offers no spiritual transformation or resurrection- "Fe just died. And when someone dies that plain dead, it is hard to talk about" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 186).

Caridad, like Fe and Esperanza also finds violence and ultimate destruction in the world outside the home. As in the case of her two older sisters, Caridad experiences Memo's infidelity and his adulterous affairs. After she finds out about Memo's character, she leaves him and lives in the bars around Tome. After being rejected in love, she "no longer discriminated between giving her love to Memo and only to Memo whenever he wanted it and loving anyone, she met at the bars who vaguely resembled Memo" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 27).

One evening she is attacked, tortured and mutilated by a mysterious "thing both tangible and amorphous..., pure force... made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 77). The narrator describes this as a supernatural force (the malogra). The rape leaves Caridad in a critical condition and she is hospitalized for three months. The mystery surrounding this incident remains undisclosed, and one may even have the impression that she has in fact been attacked by someone, probably a man, trying to destroy her womanhood. "Sofia was told that her daughter's nipples had been bitten off. She had also been scourged with something, branded like cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy was performed because she had also been stabbed in the throat" (Castillo, *SoFar From God* 33).

Caridad's attack is treated by her society as merely a cause for prayer, because "the mutilation of the lovely young woman was akin to martyrdom" (33). And it is treated with contempt by the police who felt she deserved what she got because of her sexual promiscuity. In the end Caridad is "left in the hands of her family, a nightmare incarnated" (33).

In this manner, Caridad's flirtatious nature is severely punished. However, she heals miraculously and from that moment on, she no longer has an interest in men. In spite of being mutilated and treated like an animal, of being changed from "the sister of porcelain complexion" into a "nightmare incarnated" (33), she is miraculously resurrected through the healing power of her youngest sister La Loca. She floats through the living room wearing Fe's wedding gown and is beautiful again. Her wounds vanish because La Loca prays for her. She moves into a transcendent world by no longer existing as an object for the world. Caridad becomes transformed into the beautiful self she was before the assault. After experiencing this physical and spiritual mutilation, her healing powers are revealed, and she becomes a curandera (a healer). She takes up training in curanderismo, the art of spiritual, psychological and physical healing that originated in pre- Columbian Latin America with the help of her teacher Dona Felicia. It is Dona Felicia who points out the power that Caridad and her family possess. She says, "All they did at the hospital was patch you up and send you home, more dead than alive. It was with the help of God, heaven knows how He watches over that house where you come from..." (Castillo, *So Far From God* 55).

The main character in *So Far From God* is Sofia, the mother of these four daughters. From her emerge hope, faith, charity and saintliness. Her daughters are aspects of her dynamic self and it is through her that Castillo presents the various aspects of being a Chicana. In the beginning of the novel the reader encounters a very scared, vulnerable and sensitive Sofia, a mother who has to protect herself and her daughters from the dangerous world they live in. Sofia was married to a gambler, Domingo, who returns years later and attempts to win back Sofia's affection. But she has no desire to share a life with him again. She no longer accepts his perceptions as the ultimate. She tells him, "And don't call me 'silly Sofia' no more neither....' 'Do I look like a silly woman to you, Domingo?'" (109- 110). She is no longer "silly Sofia," but a strong, confident woman. She learns from Esperanza to speak her mind and make her

voice heard. She becomes the Mayor of Tome. She also confronts Domingo and demands respect and affection. She demands to be looked right in the eyes and to be seen. This is evident when she tells him, "Look at me, Domingo!" ... It was the first time they had looked directly at each other since his return. Then Domingo lowered his eyes again and suddenly with three quick steps he was at Sofia's feet, his head on her lap, "I'm sorry, Sofia. Perdoname, honey, for all the grief I've caused you" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 111-112).

Domingo makes the mistake of losing Sofia's house in a gambling bet and that is one mistake Sofia cannot forgive; for her, identity and history is the house. "But the house, that home of mud and straw and stucco and in some places brick-which had been her mother's and father's and her grandparents, for that matter, and in which she and her sister had been born and raised- that house had belonged to her" (215). Domingo's insensitivity and carelessness concerning this loss is what finally pushes Sofia to file divorce papers. She also manages to hold on to her house. Sofia balances her dedication to her home, her duty to her children and her devotion to herself when she decides to finally bring closure to her failed marriage. Sofia does not act in a fit of rage; in fact, with a charitable and flexible nature, she offers him a small house in Chimayo, which was built for Caridad. She does not want to be married to Domingo but at the same time does not want to see him homeless.

Throughout the novel the readers see Sofia evolving into a new independent woman with a voice of her own. She fights to change her status, to listen to the voice within. She also suffers the transformations that her daughters suffer. She is tortured, mutilated, hurt, and rejected. Despite her tragic fate, she is able to understand who she is, to accept her real self and to always remember her story, her past. However, all this requires overcoming difficult experiences, and she adapts to the martyrdom of her children. She changes and becomes stronger and more confident in her identity.

Ana Castillo is skilled in presenting her female characters who are no longer dominated by the males. They all have evolved into the new Chicana women, free, independent and not subordinated by the patriarchal system. They now have a room and a voice of their own, and they need to adapt to their new status. The world of Castillo's fiction is not one in which men deliberately treat women badly. The world of Sofia and her daughters is one where men love and

appreciate their women but cannot cope with their flaws. For instance, Ruben who leaves Esperanza is later shown to be desperately clinging to her bathrobe, realizing too late how much she meant for him. The readers also come across the character of Tom who is unable to go on with his life and Memo trying, though unsuccessfully, to become a man. There is also the protective and affectionate Domingo, who, unfortunately, is too weak to confront his demons.

Sofia is not the passive, obedient woman everybody – including herself – expects her to be. She is the woman who takes her life into her hands and makes decisions according to her will and desires. She is a fighter who is able to assert her identity as a woman - a wife, and a mother. This transformation is seen in all the female characters of the novel. Castillo portrays the Chicana women who deviate from the norm. After the death of hope, faith, and charity, the three theological ideals of the Church, all that remains is Sofia's wisdom. According to Castillo, women do not have to leave home to gain power- Sofia and La Loca never leave home, but they do have integrity and strength. Despite all the hardships, Sofia manages to find balance between the traditional culture of Mexico that considers women inferior, and the modern culture of the United States that exploits women of color. Sofia is active and hardworking and can achieve things, but she is also spiritual, compassionate, and nurturing. Castillo's writing attempts to change the traditional image of the Mexican American family, that of, patriarchy imposed by the Catholic Church, with a family that is matriarchal and nurturing, where female spirituality and sexuality is not oppressed, and where the mother is the center and the guiding principle (Calafell 50).

This novel questions the politics of gender where Castillo depicts her female characters to showcase the Chicanas as noble women. Each of the characters in this novel attempt to reconcile issues of identity, cultural heritage, sexuality, and male-domination while simultaneously overcoming the traditional stereotypes associated with the female gender.

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