

Magic in the Borderlands: Anna Castillo's playful magical realist narrative in so far from God

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ABSTRACT

Through a unique blend of playful humour, parody and magical realism and a mixing of genres, the Mexican American Chicana feminist author Anna Castillo, in her novel So Far from God, creates a narrative which offers to the modern day Mexican American woman living in the borderlands of the U.S. the vision of a balanced and harmonious lifestyle where she can negotiate between the American and the native Mexican ways of living. This paper explores the ways in which Castillo keeps the golden mean between feminist enterprise, political agenda and the aesthetic demands of a fictional narrative.

Sprouting from the Mexican Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s, the Chicano Movement (Movimiento Chicano) of the 1960s took a stance of opposition to the negative projection of Mexican Americans in the American Society. The movement also stood up against the discrimination that Mexican Americans had to suffer in any and every sphere of social life. The Chicano movement did substantially well to create a niche for Mexican Americans in American Society. However, the role of women in the movement and the degree to which it contributed to the upliftment of the traditionally marginalized and subdued Mexican American women - was minimal. The Chicano movement, although it stood for Mexican Americans of both genders, was all about men.

The lot of Mexican American Women stayed much the same. They were still having to put up with the double discrimination of being women and being coloured as well. Quite simple they were "other in two respects : as women and as people of colour"(Milczarek - Desai 127). Since the early 1980s, there has been a steady blooming of a substantial corpus of Chicana feminist thought in the writings of Gloria E. Anzaldua, Cherric Moraga, Auna Castillo, Emma Perez and others. The influential and seminal *This bridge Called My Back*, edited by Anzaldua and Moraga, centres on the experiences of coloured women across such categories as Mexican American, African American, Asian American, Native American Poor and working class, lesbian women, and exposes the failure of white feminism to incorporate these experiences.

So, Chicana feminism is a critique of racial inequality as also gender inequality in America, an attempt to formulate a "theory in the flesh", as Moraga and Anzaldua have put it:

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives - our skin colour, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings - all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here we at-

tempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience. We are the coloured in a white feminist movement. We are the feminists among the people of our culture. We are often the lesbians among the straight. We do this bridging by naming ourselves and telling our stories in our own words (Moraga and Anzaldua 23)

These influential words constitute what may be termed as a manifesto of Chicana feminism, where Moraga and Anzaldua attempt to tell the untold stories of women across hitherto unrepresented categories. It is an endeavor to bridge the long-existing gap in feminist theory.

The writings of the Chicana feminist and author Anna Castillo belong to this very tradition. While in her critical works she has tried to give a more concrete and practical shape to Chicana feminism, her novels, too, deal with the condition of contemporary Mexican American women living on the fringes of American society. Her much appreciated novel *So Far from God* a work that Lisa Sandlin describes in the *New York Times Book Review* as a "magical realist account" (Sandlin 23-27) revolves around the story of a Mexican America woman and her four daughters living in the borderlands a small town called Tome in New Mexico. Through her trials and sufferings, Sofi, the mother gains new insight into the meaning of life and womanhood. Losing all of her daughters, she still finds the strength to immerse herself in political activism and is elected the Mayor of the town. Interspersed throughout with humour, the novel addresses serious issues of social inequality and worker exploitation, the condition of Mexican American women, lesbianism, disease and war. Sofi emerges as a survivor at the end, although she has to live through the deaths of all her daughters, who are allegorically named Esperanza, Fe, Caridad and La Loca. While Esperanza, a journalist, dies a hostage in the middle-east, Fe is exposed to lethal radiation while working with radioactive chemicals in the weapons industry and dies as a result. Caridad, drawn to her

lesbian loves, ends her life by jumping off a cliff and La Loca, the "Saint" once resurrected at the age of three, having rejected human contact all through her life, dies of AIDS in a truly Absurdist fashion. The story involves many instances of the marvelous, wherein ethnic beliefs and superstitions find a tangible manifestation in a magical realist narrative that explores the problems of Mexican American women in the borderlands of the U.S. We find in the novel what I would like to call Nepantla magical realism. The concept of Nepantla has always been central to native, ancient Mexican thought. The word Nepantla is a Nahuatl (Aztec) term meaning "land in the middle", an in-between space. Ancient Aztec philosophy saw the ideal human existence as one of careful balance, a middling way, envisioned as a person walking down cautiously along a narrow jagged path on a mountain peak, a place the Aztecs would call the Tlalticpac. Life was seen as one of constant negotiation between extremes. On the Tlalticpac, if one leans too far, one will fall, as there is an abyss to the right and an abyss to the left only by negotiating between extremes, by living a Nepantla existence, can a person live meaningfully, can a person live meaningfully, can a person survive. Thus, Nepantla-existence or Nepantla-mode of living has always been a prescribed model for human existence in ancient Aztec philosophy.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa observes:

I use the word nepantla to theorize liminality and to talk about these who facilitate passages between worlds, whom I've named nepdanceras. I associate nepantla with a state of mind that questions old ideas and beliefs, acquires new perspectives, changes worldviews and shifts from one world to another (Anzaldúa 1)

In this novel we witness such an endeavor by Sofi to carry out a unique Nepantla existence, through a continuous cultural confrontation and negotiation between Mexican and American ways of life, a transculturation wherein cultural difference is seen not as a source of disempowerment but something empowering. Sofi becomes an active political worker within her own indigenous community which finally leads to her election as mayor of the town. It is the author Anna Castillo's way of using her writing to reveal and change the subdued position of Mexican American women, her way of attempting a re-positioning of this community, long since marginalized. Interestingly the realms of the natural and the supernatural are seamlessly merged through a faith that is actualized through female agency. There is an inherent magical realist worldview at work in which the imaginary is accepted as the real. It is faith which makes it possible for the 'dead' La Loca to become alive from inside the coffin in the first chapter of

the novel. When abused and mutilated by an unknown force it is faith that helps Caridad to have a miraculous recovery, the same faith that enables Dona Felicia the psychic to have her powers of holistic treatment, and makes it possible for the spirits to make their appearance. Thus, the female characters are the impelling force behind the affirmation of an alternative way of existence a counter hegemonic way of life that can overcome the fragmentation and dislocation experienced in the border regions. This multiplicity of discourse, the assumption of a listener and the dialogic way of speaking creates in the minds of the readers an image of community life in Tome. The community of Chicanas in Tome becomes Castillo's focal point in the novel for the expression of Chicana feminism. Sofi becomes the central figure of female activism. In the backdrop of the loss of land and identity, Fe's selling out to the Anglo way of life and her death, it becomes clear that the necessity of activism becomes a matter of survival. Castillo creates community as a bulwark against the cultural imperialism of the whites and the destructive fragmentation of the Chicana individual.

Sofi decides to run for the post of the mayor of Tome and this decision of hers is backed by the rest of the female population. It is this landmark decision of Sofi that leads to the creation of an alternative, economically self-sufficient community: "People began to respond to Sofi's campaign", which they did not see as a mayoral one so much as one to rescue Tome. (Castillo 2005 146) This "Campaign" in fact, is more than one intended to rescue Tome. It is Castillo's blueprint for the rescue of the contemporary Chicana woman living in the American borderlands. The first step that the women take is the decision to begin a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise which they name "Los Ganados y Lana Co-operative". They model it... after the one started by the group up north that had also saved its community from destitution. (ibid 146)

The 'group up north' is Castillo's hint that poverty and loss of land are problems that extend well beyond just the bordering regions, with regard to Mexican Americans. Skilled as ranchers or not, many began working in some way for the co-operative by learning an aspect of the business of sheep grazing, wool scouring, weaving, administration and selling the wool products. Unemployment had been at an all-time high in the first years of the enterprise so there was no shortage of volunteers. (ibid 147) Here again Castillo addresses a key, problematic issue in the Chicano society, that of unemployment. However, she makes an indirect statement, merely saying that there 'was' no shortage of volunteers' because of the high unemployment rate. The narrative voice states the problem but does not sentimentalize or get emotional, stating it is

a matter-of-fact way. The second year after the start of the sheep-grazing enterprise a core group of twelve women began the wool-weaving co-operative. Eventually, the business created and sustained the livelihoods of more than two dozen women. (ibid 147)

The Anglo structures of representation do little for the upliftment of Chicana women and their efforts at activism and social representation and greater social prestige are purely their own. It is Castillo's vision of how the modern Chicana woman's Neplantla or in-between existence should be like - one of positivity, activism and community life. It would be pertinent to mention that the First and Second Waves of Feminism had failed to represent or offer solutions for the existential problems of Chicana women living in the borderlands of U.S.A. or elsewhere, or for that matter, to represent other non-white women. It was in response to second wave feminism's failure in this respect that the Third Wave feminism arose in the initial years of the 1980s. It embraces contradictions and diversities among women across race, culture, religion and sexuality, challenging the Second Wave's essentialist conception of femininity, which had focused primarily on the experiences of white heterosexual middle class women. The third wave stresses a post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality, incorporating queer theory as well. Sonia Saldivar-Hall poignantly observes, regarding the failure of the Second wave to incorporate Chicana experience. We begin to understand how the specific interests of Anglo-American and other European feminists tend to erase the existence of Chicana, Puerto Rican, Native American, Asian-American and other Third World feminisms.....(Saldivar-Hull 37)

Feeling the need to formulate an aesthetics of chicana feminism, Anna Castillo, in 1990s, in her influential *Massacre of the Dreamers*, came up with a term that would, from then on, define Chicana feminism. Castillo coined the word 'Xicanisma'. She observes in the *Massacre* text. Feminism therefore, is perhaps not a term embraced by most women who might be inclined to define themselves as Chicanas and who in practice, have goals and beliefs found in feminist politics(Castillo 1994 10-11). Thus, to convey the experiences of the Chicana, 'feminism' as a concept would not do, as it is not something a Chicana can relate to. Castillo further says :

I introduce here the word Xicanisma, a term that I will use to refer to the concept of Chicana feminism. (ibid 10-11). And when the Chicana wishes to express her Xicanisma through her fiction, what better way to represent the unrepresented, to do so in a narrative mode that avoids a univocal, totalizing narrative voice, to encompass the marginal, the 'other', the queer,

the uncanny, and yet remain historically grounded, yet retain a strong socio-political purposiveness and not stray into the purposeless zone of fantasy fiction, than to make magical realism her creative vehicle? Excluding the purely experimental scholarly variety, magical realist fiction of the last few decades displays a certain unmistakable political orientation. It is often a reaction to certain socio-cultural or political paradigms, a challenge thrown in the face of some hegemonic system. Naturally, most instances of magical realist fiction come from indigenous authors, many of them, women. Louise Erdrich and Leslie M. Silko show an engagement with the contemporary condition of Native Americans in the U.S., Alexis Wright- with the plight of the Aboriginals in Australia, Isabel Allende writes in reaction to the horrors of the Pinochet regime, Toni Morrison writes in response to slavery. Anna Castillo represents the condition of the Chicana.

Castillo makes extensive use of native Mexican folklore in the novel, as in the reference to 'La Malogra', a monster who attacks those traveling alone at night :.... It wasn't a man with a face and a name who had attacked and left Caridad mangled like a run-down rabbit but a thing, both tangible and amorphous It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf It was pure force. (Castillo 2005 77)

Caridad trains to be a curandera (traditional healer) under the guidance of Dona Felicia, a clairvoyant. Soon, she is helping people through her dreams, having harnessed her psychic powers : She often fell into semiconscious trances and communicated with spirit guides as a way of communicating messages to clients. (ibid 118-119) The worlds of the dead and of the living fuse seamlessly in the novel. As Wendy B. Foris observes : Fluid boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead are traced only to be crossed. (Faris 172) If we ponder and consider traditional literature along the lines of European Realism and treat it as the conscious human mind, magical realist fiction would, then, perhaps be like the unconscious. It is no coincidence that the supernatural, especially ghosts and spirits make their repeated visits in magical realist fiction. Spirits of departed, beloved characters like Esperanza in Castillo's novel, as I have just mentioned. They would be examples of the uncanny, a concept much elaborated upon by Freud. The word uncanny is derived from the original German *unheimliche*, meaning strange, not familiar, *heimliche* meaning whatever is homely and, thus, familiar. However, interestingly, *heimliche* also means hidden and thus, *unheimliche* or uncanny might mean whatever was supposed to be hidden but has uncomfortably come to light. The un-

canny is characterized by both familiarity and strangeness. It is partly known, but partly alien as well, like the ghost of a beloved person, that of Esperanza or Mama Elena(in *Like Water for Chocolate*). Magical realist fiction makes use of forgotten, subdued native folklore and mythology, legends and belief-systems that the dominant cultural forces had attempted to bury. In the works of Toni Morrison, Silko, Erdrich, Esquivel and Castillo, we find such native belief systems, often involving the supernatural and the seemingly irrational, making their presence felt, rising as from a state of burial, uncomfortably, disturbingly, more so because these seemingly magical elements are given a matter-of-fact treatment, not dismissed as fantastic, but treated at par with everyday reality. The whole corpus of magical realist writings may, then, be described as a return of the uncanny to the placid surface of realistic fiction.

Castillo uses a similarly Absurdist style, using distancing, irony and artificiality in her narrative

voice, with a purpose that Charles B. Harris, had talked about way back in 1971, talking about the American novelists of the Absurd, who strive, as Harris says, to : Comment upon the artificiality not only of art, but of life as it is usually lived, of mass society, and of all things which prevent the realization that life is absurd. (Harris 23) In its use of irony, playfulness, black humour and parody and the mixing of genres like the telenovela, allegory, magical realism and Absurdism, the novel carries a strongly postmodern strain. What Castillo achieves in this novel is something very substantial: the vision of an alternate lifestyle more suited to the modern day Chicana woman living in the U.S., a way of life neither fully American nor native, but a neplantla, in-between existence that harmonizes both. Yet she maintains effectively the veneer of fiction, foregrounding the artifice of art through a uniquely sarcastic-sympathetic narrative point of view, keeping this work of serious socio-economic preoccupations from becoming a manifesto.

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