

The Chicana as "Amphibiana" in Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*

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Abstract: This article studies the ways in which Sandra Cisneros, the Mexican-American novelist, inscribes her women characters in severely difficult circumstances, even demeaning positions, and how they constantly try to liberate themselves, formulate their own identities, and rebuild their lives as strong and independent women as shown in her book of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). Throughout these stories, mostly, "One Holy Night", "Women Hollering Creek", and "Never Marry a Mexican", the figure of woman is irrepressibly scripted as an "amphibian" subject who attempts to redefine her identity and centralize her life from the often marginal and racially inferior position allotted to her not only by the white American man but by the Mexican one too. These stories reflect Cisneros's experience of being surrounded by American influences while still being culturally and racially bound to her Mexican heritage. Indeed Cisneros addresses the reader in a voice that is alternately optimistic, strong, funny and sad, which often depicts her romantic dreams as a Mexican emigrant to the wonderland of America, as an exemplar of a racially marginalized woman who endeavours social centralization and recognition as a free independent subject. This article shows how Cisneros succeeds in reflecting the disillusionment of these female figures and how they experienced a new mode of modern, happy and prosperous life in modern America, of the vivid and colourful picture of life beyond the Texas/Mexico border.

Keywords: Chicano/a literature and Culture, Postcolonial, Ideology, Hegemony, Subjectivity, Femininity

In a culturally and racially-bound western society the Mexican-American novelist Sandra Cisneros writes her women characters in severely difficult circumstances and in fallen, even demeaning, positions who constantly try to liberate themselves, formulate their own identities, and rebuild their lives as strong and independent women as exhibited in her book of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). Throughout these stories, mostly, "One Holy Night", "Women Hollering Creek", and "Never Marry a Mexican", which will be the focus of this article, the figure of woman is irrepressibly scripted as an "amphibian" subject who attempts to redefine her identity and centralize her life from the often marginal and racially inferior position allotted to her not only by the white American man but by the Mexican one too. These stories reflect Cisneros's experience of being surrounded by American influences while still being culturally and racially bound to her Mexican heritage as she grew-up north of the Mexico-US border. Indeed, in these three stories I have chosen, as often in the rest of the collection, Cisneros addresses the reader in a voice that is alternately optimistic, strong, funny, and sad, which often depicts her romantic dreams as a Mexican emigrant to the wonderland of America,

as an exemplar of a racially marginalized woman who endeavours social centralization and recognition as an independent and free subject. The purpose and contribution of this paper are in fact embodied in how these stories demonstrate the great disillusionment these female figures have experienced of the modern, happy and prosperous life in modern America, of the vivid and colourful picture of life beyond the Texas/Mexico border.

As part of the descriptive as well as textually analytical methodology adopted throughout this paper, and in many ways in order to understand this topic properly, one needs to give a brief analysis of what is termed as Mexican (Hispanic, Latino or Chicano) American literature. Chicano (the term Chicano is used for the male, and Chicana for the female) literature is that literature which refers to anything written by those immigrants from the south of the Texas/American border, and which forms what is termed later as the Chicano Movement. Cisneros was so active in this movement and all of her writings revolve around her own analysis of being Chicana. The Chicano/a culture depicts those Mexican immigrants who came to America as farm workers who then became the target of discrimination despite their immense contribution to the land. Historians Augenbraum and Olmos (1997) painted a vivid historical and social landscape of such case of discrimination:

Latino culture ...creating economic, educational, and political organizations to defend their communities against racial and ethnic oppression. As these groups became more settled, a type of invisible, Spanish-language parallel universe began to evolve that encompassed community organizations as well as the ongoing traditions of Spanish-language newspapers, local radio and television programming, cinema, and theater. This hidden culture met the needs of a people whose lives and experiences were not reflected in U.S. mainstream media (p. 138).

This quotation then reflects the Chicano social attitudes, as reflected by Cisneros and the Civil Rights Movement which was concerned with such injustice and which thus sought to recover the lost Mexican lands illegally taken by the United States. This struggle for land inspired urban Chicanos to organize and voice their grief for being treated like second-class citizens in their own lands and homes.¹

The sense of discrimination against the originally Mexican people, like so many other minorities, was so clear on the level of education for instance. During the 1940s, 50s and 60s many schools along the Mexican border segregated Mexican-American students from their Anglo-American counterparts. Mexican-American students were neglected, marginalized and even made to feel ashamed of their ethnicity and culture. They were severely punished for speaking Spanish in schools, the language which many Mexican-American students spoke at home, like the so many parents we meet in the stories by Cisneros, and by many other Chicano/a writers for that matter.² Their culture then was stigmatized by such pejorative epithets as "lazy," "dirty," and even "dangerous" and became identical with Mexican-American identity and culture, as we see, for example, in the character of Chaq Uxmal Paloquin, who appears in Cisneros's short story "One Holy Night," who "to you he might be a bum. Maybe he looked it.... He had broken thumbs and burnt fingers. He had thick greasy fingernails he never cut and dusty hair."³In "Woman Hollering Creek" Cleófilas's six brothers are all "good-for-nothing" who would never be able to help and rescue her from destruction; they all, including her father, embody the typically "lazy" and "dirty" Mexican men. Interestingly, Mexican women also "smell like corn," and when they "grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like ... little wooden dolls

¹ See Hector Galán, "Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement," *PBS Series*. Galán Inc. Austin, Texas, 1996. 30 Sept 2012. <http://www.galaninc.com/site/filmography/1996/04/chicano/>

²In the documentary, "Chicano! Taking Back the Schools," Hector Galán also explains how during the 1960s in East Los Angeles, only one in four Mexican-Americans graduated from high school. Low-levels of education affected employment among Mexican-Americans. Unemployment within East Los Angeles was almost double the national average and those who worked only received two-thirds the amount of money of other employees throughout Los Angeles.

³ Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991; New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 28. Further references to all the stories in this edition will be cited parenthetically within the body of this essay.

that fit one inside the other" (pp. 6-7). Mexican women within such an American white society are made to feel, as we shall see throughout this essay, and like what all minority women and men feel, that they do not "belong to any class"; they are "amphibious" and whatever they "do to make a living is a form of prostitution" (p. 71).

Indeed, Chicano Literature and culture slowly began gaining ground by the American education system instead of being completely ignored. For Chicano writers recovering the history of one's ancestors then became an awakening experience for them, and that is why their community expressed a need to gain and maintain political voice and power. Thus, Chicano literature specifically underlines the various challenges posed by the hegemony of American culture. Chicano signifies the affirmation of working-class and indigenous origins of the Mexican Americans, and their rejection of assimilation, acculturation, and of the myth of the American melting pot; it signifies the strategic social struggle and reform of these people.

This process of assimilation and acculturation became the central theme in many of Sandra Cisneros's stories, and indeed in the works of many other Chicana writers as, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa, in two of her books of short stories, *Friends from the Other Side* (1993) and *Borderlands / La Frontera: e New Mestiza* (1987). We also see here a vivid depiction of the problematic positions given to female characters as bicultural immigrants, familial reporters, and female warriors living on the borderlands or barrios of America. They are representatives of a collective cultural identity, just like amphibians trying to develop their cultural identity when they cross over all possible cultural and social boundaries in order to manage adaptation and adjustment. They always attempt to define their own consciousness in grappling with displacement, alienation, isolation, hybridity, and un-homeliness. Indeed, living in two cultures with their contradicting poles and harsh realities, such female characters represent the struggle and desire of Latina community and explore ways towards independence and resistance. In their own history of silence, shame, and the sense of not belonging, Chicana subjects become more alert watchers, sensitive feelers, and critical mutterers to navigate their worlds—the world of old Mexico and the World of new America, new territory, new borders and new waters just like amphibians. They explore their personal problems which reflect many socioeconomic and political issues and suggest multiple solutions to acquire their cultural identity.

Such theories of racial oppression and cultural segregation and even enslavements have taken a lot of their cues from the dominant theory of post colonialism. Postcolonial discourse provides us with useful various tools imported from the wider spheres of post structuralism, deconstruction and cultural theories which help us recognize the impact of colonization on culture as a whole, or the question of identity. Identity is always "shaped" by and for ideology; it is always "itself ideological.... Discourses and their means of representation live and die within history," within their own "materiality" (Easthope, 1983, p. 23). It seems then that "discourse produces readers as much as readers produce discourse.... There is no discourse without subjectivity and no subjectivity without discourse" (Easthope, 1983, pp. 26-32). Michel Foucault's notions of discourse and discursive practices in relation to power, knowledge, control and imprisonment is very useful here. Cisneros's fiction, just as all Non-white writings in America, and within such irreducibly dialogic elements of colonialist discursive practices, describes Mexican Americans as trying to achieve self-identity and struggle for equality and even for life. Mexican Americans posed a strong challenge to the dominant ideology and their irrepressible presence signified that their discourses or meanings are always sites of ideological struggles. In their own carnivalesque fashion and discourse, Mexicans tried to resist domestication, directing us back again to where meanings are always produced: the generative process of society (Drakakis, 1987, p. 59). This is exactly how Foucault relates ideology, power and self-identity into this site of struggle. He does this through a multiplicity of scientific, political, religio-social, psychological, colonialist and often feministic discourses to reject how people should struggle to achieve their freedom as a whole. Throughout his writings Foucault connects the exercises of power and control over people, "subjects" who refuse to be intimidated even by death or extermination, who resist domination, *coercion* and "governmentality," or the "means to produce *docile* or conforming citizens" (Durring, 1993, p. 5). It is quite important to refer the idea of *coercion* to its original idea of *ideology* and the notion of *hegemony* as advanced by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci.

For Foucault and many other critics ideology means the naturalization of the unnatural. Ideology constructs our social identities as handicapped subjects who have no power but to submit to it. Ideology always

positions the individual within ideological practices as being free, as if he has a choice. Ideology is always marked by such contradictions and struggles, and therefore the individual is already defined or chained by its equivalences and contrasts, either/or dictum, which always ushers him into structures of domination and resistance. When the white American ideology practiced mobilization, *coercion*, *consent* and *governmentality* against non-whites, it is aptly described by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer as "culture industry," where "the individual is an illusion" and everything seems to be stamped by the monopoly of society, by "the power of the generality" (Durring, 1993, pp. 29, 41). In this respect, all those non-white native or immigrant Americans are not only seen as illusive poor subjects but in the end annulled or exterminated. At the same time, even those white people who may have wanted to defend them had found themselves unable to do so because "the individual who supported society bore its disfiguring mark; seemingly free, he was actually the product of its economic and social apparatus" (Durring, 1993, p. 42). Stuart Hall is again useful here when he argues that identity or structural unity emerges out of historical complexity, difference and contradiction.⁴ For him society can only be seen as a network of differences within which power operates "microphysically"; that is, non-hierarchically. Society is a "complex unity, always having multiple and contradictory determinations, always historically specific, and always culturally ideological and hegemonic" (Grossberg, in Morley and Chen, 1996, p. 157).

Foucault defines the category of "identity" as something which fills the "gap between our history and History" (Rabinow, 1986, p. 343). Although identity is naturally given and historical, for Foucault, yet, it, as advanced by K. Racevskis, is also an "inevitably a product of the otherness of cultural, social, and linguistic determinants" (Quoted in Olssen, p. 31). Ultimately, in asserting the strength and "the ontological autonomy of the discursive," Foucault focuses on the complex system of "discourse formation" which reveals the close engagement of discourse with the world, the *materiality* of discourse, the world as always mediated to us by discourse, and discourse as always constituted by "relations" that "are established between institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterization" (Olssen, p. 42). Even Derrida, the later founder of post-structuralism or deconstruction who prioritizes the linguistic over the referent, treats all forms of discourse, including science, as literary genres. Indeed, he privileges discourse over the world and denies the possibility of ever escaping the discursive and ever knowing reality independent of discourse. Derrida believes that there is no escape from discourse. All is text: "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, p. 158).

Within such poststructuralist investigation into the implications of discourse, the colonialist and postcolonialist discourse, the question of identity and its complex formations formulated by Sandra Cisneros is quite striking. Cisneros has emphasized such collective Chicana experiences of minimized class, gender, and regional marginalization while at the same time romanticizing the Mexican past and origin. Cisneros, like many other Chicana writers, emphasized this woman's sense of oppression and victimization, especially in the chosen short stories subject of this paper. In general, these stories focus on the social role of women, how they are subjected to abusive and unjust relationships with men who treat them like slaves. Cisneros presents these characters as stereotypes: men who are seen as machismos while women are naïve, weak and submissive. They are constantly depicted with three feminine clichés: the passive virgin, sinful seductress, and traitorous mother. They are constructed as lost Chicana women who do not exactly belong to either Mexico or America, who earnestly search for their identity and independence, and who only discover abuse and shattered dreams.

To give a brief literature review about the place and importance of Sandra Cisneros's fiction, and in a way of locating this article among such already available studies in the field, is in fact a good idea. Mary Reichardt (2001), for example, and in a way of highlighting my main contention in this paper of the Chicana as "amphibiana," the hybrid nature of American and Mexican ethnicities and their women appropriation into specific roles in their society, observes that Cisneros's previous work as well as

⁴See Stuart Hall, "Encoding, decoding," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996): 90-103.

in *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), the female characters break out of the molds assigned to them by the culture in search of new roles and new kinds of relationships. Cisneros portrays women who challenge stereotypes and break taboos, sometimes simply for the sake of shocking the establishment, but most often because the confining stereotypes prevent them from achieving their own identity (p. 59).

As will be shown later in this paper, Cleófilas (just as Ixchel), who struggled all her life for a better life after crossing the borders from home in Mexico to live in the United States, she ended miserably in a failed marriage with a wicked man. In the same way, Clemencia, the Chicana protagonist of the story "Never Marry a Mexican", represents the women's use of their bodies as political and social instruments in their attempts to fight against numerous levels of male domination (Rojas, 1999, p. 135). Highlighting another tragedy in this regard, critic Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (1996) argues about the same story: "Cisneros portrays the mother as a destructive emotional force, alienating and condemning her daughter to repeating her own mother's destructive powers" (p. 164). Finally, Deborah Madsen (2003) praises Cisneros's way of conveying such political and ideological lessons through employing narrative techniques, including interior monologue, and "bold experimentation with literary voice and her development of a hybrid form that weaves poetry into prose to create a dense and evocative linguistic texture of symbolism and imagery that is both technically and aesthetically accomplished" (p. 5). Such complexity of voice experimentation and various types of points of view are made radically clear in what follows of the textual analysis of these stories, the focus in this study.

In "One Holy Night," for instance, the marginalized or even "colonized" thirteen-year-old girl, Ixchel, the self-named protagonist who lives in Chicago with her uncle and grandmother, "the wrinkled witch woman who rubs my belly with jade "and among "sixteen nosy cousins" (p. 27). As an emigrant from Mexico, she is seen in a negative way that fits the misrepresentation maintained by those who created negative stereotypes for people like her. Being employed by her uncle, every Saturday, this young teen sells vegetable products from his pushcart. In this short story we see how the production of knowledge about this "inferiorizing" figure of a woman as being naturally stupid or even a "slave" as the main male character Chaq Uxmal Paloquin treats her. This "foolish" girl, who in her quest for true love, ignorantly gives herself to one of her customers, a captivating, yet dangerous 37-year-old man Chaq, or as nick named Boy Baby, whose real name is Chato, who lies to her about belonging to ancient Mayan royalty.

Indeed, Ixchel realizes that she has been seduced by a mass murderer with alleged Mexican roots, but remains unable to reconcile herself with the fact that she is still in love with him. She is constructed as a girl who is "doing devil things," but not completely "bad" "like the Allport Street girls, who stand in doorways and go with men into alleys" (p. 28), as the aforementioned construction of women as "prostitutes" (p. 71). Of course Ixchel regrets the moment she gave him her body, how she gave a cry that she "wouldn't be anymore" what she was, and to have been a fool to feel that "I was initiated beneath an ancient sky by a great and mighty heir—Chaq Uxmal Paloquin. I, Ixchel, his queen (p. 30). That is why she suddenly realizes how she "became a part of history and wondered if everyone on the streets "knows what happened to her. "I know I was supposed to feel ashamed, but I wasn't ashamed. I wanted to stand on top of the highest building, the top-top floor, and yell, *I know*" (p. 30). The worst thing is still yet to come when her pregnancy has shown itself and she had to leave school for the fear of shame among neighbours, how she would be an outcast and sent back to Mexico. She observes that people will never "understand how it is to be a girl. I don't think they know how it is to have to wait your whole life. I count the months for the baby to be born, and it's like a ring of water inside me reaching out and out until one day it will tear from me with its own teeth" (p. 34). Ultimately, she realizes that love and the whole category of man "is a bad joke" since for her he is a liar, a rapist and a criminal killer of women. This is what she said to her girl cousins, back home in Mexico where she was sent to deliver her baby, who were still under the illusion of love relationship, "how it is to have a man," and "how perfect is a man" (pp. 34-5). Love then becomes to her just a mirage or "a white hum"; it is something that you breathe through "all day long, wheezing, in and out, in and out" (p. 35) but with no viable consequences.

Similarly, the story of "Woman Hollering Creek," with its protagonist Cleófilas, also embodies such binary classification and exclusion of non-white, semi-slave of a woman, who belongs to the "inferior race" of Mexico. Cleófilas is inscribed as a woman who is physically abused by her husband and feels drawn towards the nearby creek in her town. She becomes depressed and sits beside the water with her new baby, reflecting on how a woman could be driven into madness. Drawing upon the slightly modified myth of La Llorona (Spanish for "weeping woman") in Aztec, Greek and Spanish cultures, Cleófilas attempts to gain freedom, hence meditated "drowning her own children" and ironically becoming the ever isolated "weeping woman" (p. 51). Cleófilas is constructed as a traditional Mexican "inferior" woman who naïvely accepts her father's own choice of marrying her to a wicked abusive man, who typifies the abusive and unfaithful—most often—Mexican husbands that Cisneros attacks. However, through the hardships of her marriage, Cleófilas is empowered to fight for her rights and to gain freedom, albeit temporal. Indeed, her power of independence is solidified when she meets Felice and Graciela, the other two independent, wage-earning exemplars of women who act as new role models for her and who ultimately helped her escape this abusive lifestyle.

Indeed, right from the beginning of the story Cleófilas, and reflecting upon such racial notions of cultural determinism as a Latina figure, overwhelmed with binary oppositions of *superiority/inferiority*, self/other, and subject/object constructions, she remembers her father's last words when she got married: "*I am your father. I will never abandon you*" (p. 43). Cleófilas's psychological and socioeconomic worries as a Latina woman, with a double-ethnic identity, is shown to be in a crisis of identity formation with all sorts of conflicts and desires, as a naïve girl who has always "been waiting for ... passion" (p. 44). But what she wants always is to overthrow such masculine and even colonialist outright domination, even insurgence against minorities in the United States, and stigmatization, as women who have "to put up with all kinds of hardships of the heart, separation and betrayal, and loving, always loving no matter what, because *that* is the most important thing" (p. 44). Hence for such Latina women the saying that "you or no one" is seen as applicable, as it seems for them "to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow" (p. 45). But at the same time women like Cleófilas are seen as very clever and hardworking. She had to put up with "a father with a head like a burro, and those six clumsy brothers" (p. 45). As a result, she is constructed as a woman who is "fascinated" with the name "woman hollering." Of course she is hollering for her freedom from all sorts of psychological and physical prisons. She reflects all those faceless, nameless, invisible, and taunted women on the borders, as illegal immigrants, all those "mojados" or "wetbacks", because "they float on inflatable rafts across el rio Grande, or wade or swim across naked, clutching their clothes over their heads. Holding onto the grass, they pull themselves along the banks with a prayer on their lips" (*Borderlands*, p. 33). Indeed, they tremble "with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation. Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a closed country" (Ibid).

Of course this is reflected in Cleófilas's new home across the border with her husband and how she describes her two widow women neighbours, lady Soledad and lady Dolores, who "were too busy remembering the men who had left through either choice or circumstance and would never come back" (p. 47). Cleófilas is constructed as a weak woman who had to put up with a lot of physical violence inflicted upon her by her husband when she "had always said she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her" (Ibid). But when the moment came and he slapped her many times she never fought back, "she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away as she imagined she might" (Ibid). She is shocked by this man when "her parents had never raised a hand to each other or to their children," and treated her as a "princess". That is why this act "left her speechless, motionless, numb", and she did nothing except "stroking the dark curls of the man who wept and would weep like a child, his tears of repentance and shame, this time and each" (p. 48). Their absurd relationship is compared to "dogs chasing their own tails before lying down to sleep, trying to find a way, a route, an out, and—finally—get some peace" (Ibid). That is why Cleófilas always wonders about such relationship; is this "the man I have waited my whole life for?" (p. 49) Yet she accepts her destiny to be married to,

This man who farts and belches and snores as well as laughs and kisses and holds her. Somehow this husband whose whiskers she finds each morning in the sink, whose shoes she must air each evening on the porch, this husband who cuts his fingernails in public, laughs loudly, curses like a man ... this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this lord, this master, this husband till kingdom come (Ibid).

This is why she always thinks of running away from such prison-like life but would not because she worries about what the people would say about her: "how could she go back there? What a disgrace. What would the neighbors say? Coming home like that with one baby on her hip and one in the oven. Where is your husband?" The whole town would ask and gossip. This town which is a ghost-like one would mock her; this "town of dust and despair" seems "empty"; there is "nothing, nothing, nothing of interest" in it. Even "the towns here are built so that you have to depend on husbands. Or you stay home" (pp. 50-51). Ironically, the only interesting thing in this town is the creek, which looks like "a muddy puddle in the summer" and it is a constant reminder of "La Llorona, the weeping woman, who drowned her own children" (p. 51). Towards the end of the story Felice, when hollering over the creek, confirmed this sense of despair about the town: "Did you ever notice ... how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she's the virgin. I guess you're only famous if you're a virgin" (p. 55).

This town, like all other towns, is full of tragedies committed against women, as Cleófilas relates: "this woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car. This one's cadaver, this one unconscious, this one beaten blue. Her ex-husband, her husband, her lover, her father, her brother, her uncle, her friend, her co-worker. Always" (p. 52). Indeed, things get even worse when he threw at her one of her own favourite books, a love story she likes. What is even more annoying to her is that she is living in modern 20th-century America but "without a television set, without the *telenovelas*" (Ibid). Her life is deteriorating like a very tragic *telenovela*, "only now the episodes got sadder and sadder. And there were no commercials in between for comic relief. And no happy ending in sight" (pp. 52-53). Hence she begins contemplating committing suicide like the weeping woman "when she sat with the baby out by the creek behind her house" (53). But she asks in a comic way, can this happen to her, with a name of hers as Cleófilas? She mocks that she has to change her name into a more romantic name, "more poetic than Cleófilas", because "what happened to a Cleófilas? Nothing. But a crack in the face" (Ibid). Cleófilas's final attempts at collapsing all such social restrictions, racial differences, her sense of displacement, alienation, isolation, un-homeliness and motherhood domesticity have succeeded when she finally managed to run free at last, to escape back home across the borders to Mexico. Interestingly this is achieved through the help of other free Chicana women, Graciela, the doctor who gave her medical check-ups, and through the help of Felice, who is a very strong truck-driver woman. Graciela sees that Cleófilas must have been suffering from severe physical abuse and that is why she decides to help her: "this poor lady's got black-and-blue marks all over. From her husband. Who else? Another one of those brides from across the border. And her family's all in Mexico.... This lady doesn't even speak English. She hasn't been allowed to call home or write or nothing" (p. 54). Indeed, Felice becomes for her the symbol and means of freedom when she says that she likes the name of the creek because it "makes you want to holler like Tarzan" (p. 55). For her Felice is an amazing free woman since "she drove a pickup. A pickup, mind you, and when Cleófilas asked if it was her husband's, she said she didn't have a husband. The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it" (Ibid). Such strong discourse "coming from a woman" is what Cleófilas wants to have like all Chicana women Cisneros has created: "Felice was like no woman she'd ever met" (p. 56). Thus, for Cleófilas crossing the river back to Mexico is a crossing from a world of "anger and pain" in the US into a world of freedom and liberty.

Like all marginalized women such female figures are always in strife, in struggle, in perpetual upward mobility in order to fulfill their ever-deferred dreams of a better life, of a cultural identity within and beyond the borders, as we see with Clemencia, the Chicana protagonist of the story "Never Marry a Mexican", who represents one of the most critical issues related to poor and working-class Chicana community. Acting as an "anti-colonial" text and depicting the chaos of Mexican collective cultural identity which suffers most from the effects of capitalism and other related ideologies as classism and sexism, Clemencia takes revenge on her white

lover Drew who abandoned her for another younger woman, and inevitably making his naïve son pay dearly for his father's past transgressions. Clemencia's attitude can be related to that of the historical figure La Malinche, an indigenous woman who played a role in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire in the 16th century, acting as an interpreter, advisor, lover, and intermediary for the Spanish conquistador. As one critic argues, both La Malinche and Clemencia were mistresses to men of a different ethnicity than their own, "doomed to exist within a racial and class-cultural wasteland, unanchored by a sense of ever belonging either to [their] ethnic or [their] natal homeland" (Kevane, 2003, p. 65). Clemencia's final revenge in this story then is not only a triumph in the memory of La Malinche, but also for all women who "feel that their value depreciates if they do not have a husband" (Stoneham, 2003, p. 244).

Reflecting upon reconstructing Chicana identity which is doubly oppressed by American dominance and the traditional patriarchal system, Clemencia symbolizes free and unique identity of a free woman who has escaped, explored a new albeit strange way of adaptation or adjustment within American society. She is set in a world full of difficulties, contradictions, and ambiguities, which in many ways reflects the inequity and injustice of imperial racial America, where even as a child she was told by her mother "never to marry a Mexican". Cisneros's literary technique of magical realism in this story blurs the lines between reality and fiction and indeed arises from a demand for mythologizing the present, as exhibited in her re-appropriation of the myth of La Llorona and the re-invocation of another myth of "the forsaken female" La Malinche. That is why she openly declares at the beginning of the story:

I'll *never* marry. Not any man. I've known men too intimately. I've witnessed their infidelities, and I've helped them to it. Unzipped and unhooked and agreed to clandestine maneuvers. I've been accomplice, committed premeditated crimes. I'm guilty of having caused deliberate pain to other women. I'm vindictive and cruel, and I'm capable of anything (p. 68).

Originally as any Chicana young woman, she is constructed as a weak female who wants nothing but marriage, "I admit, there was a time when all I wanted was to belong to a man. To wear that gold band on my left hand and be worn on his arm like an expensive jewel brilliant in the light of day" (Ibid). She mocks how she treats men and the whole idea of sexuality: "Borrowed. That's how I've had my men. Just the cream of skimmed off the top.... They've come to me when they wanted the sweet meat then" (p. 69). She is decided that, "I've never married and never will. Not because I couldn't, but because I'm too romantic for marriage. Marriage has failed me.... Better to not marry than live a lie" (Ibid). For her, and as her mother taught her, "Mexican men ... were not men. Not men I considered as potential lovers," men who only gave her pain. She relates how her mother was treated very badly only because she comes from "the other side" of the border, "and my father had married down by marrying her. If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado*, that would've been different. That would've been marrying up, even if the white girl was poor" (Ibid). The whole thing then is race, isn't it? This is how Benjamin Disraeli, for example, captured the stupidity of the mid-nineteenth century by declaring the only truth to be that "all is race," in addition of course to what Darwin argued in his theory of natural selection, and as of course reflected later by many colonialist and postcolonialist critics.⁵

Indeed, a great deal of Latina feminist and post-colonialist discourses reveal the representations of women as reflected effectively through biculturalism and bilingualism, which ultimately characterize and formulate the Latina identity, the woman who seems always engaged in the process of identity formation. As "inferior" outsiders, such women seem to be suffering from a subjectivity crisis, or a "psycho-pathological" "split identity", and they seem to be always attempting to assimilate themselves within white culture. The question of subjectivity crisis can be understood further in light of Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis and his notion of the term of "subject". It is very close to how Catherine Belsey defines the Lacanian "subject" as "the

⁵ Such critics include the works done by as early as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, to mention only a few. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 6-10; also his, *The Racial State* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 74-79.

site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation" (Belsey, 1980,p. 65). Hence Clemencia describes herself as "amphibious ... who doesn't belong to any class. The rich like to have me around because they envy my creativity.... The poor don't mind if I live in their neighborhood because they know I'm poor like they are.... I don't belong to any class" (pp. 71-72). Indeed she rejects how society, racist white society, constructs her as lost for profession, or even as a "whore": "any way you look at it, what I do to make a living is a form of prostitution" (p. 71). Clemencia even no longer thinks of her mother as mother after the latter got married from a white man after the death of her father: "Once Daddy was gone, it was like my ma didn't exist, like if she died, too.... My mother's memory is ... like if something already dead dried up and fell off ... like if I never had a mother" (p. 73). Clemencia is so proud to say it, "I'm not ashamed to say it either. When she married that white man, and he and his boys moved into my father's house, it was as if she stopped being my mother. Like I never even had one" (Ibid). Her revenge against her mother's interracial relationship with white men as a whole stems even from earlier time when her mother began seeing that white man, Owen Lambert, "even while my father was sick. Even then. That's what I can't forgive" (Ibid). Of course this reflects her reaction to her mother's miscegenation; how in anger she flees to the barrio. Then, in order to deal with her own miscegenation, Clemencia assumes such a vindictive attitude towards Drew's wife in the same way and with no sense of guilt at all.

Clemencia gets her power and revenge against Drew, the symbol of white men, the one who had abandoned her, through abusing his own son. She tells him:

I paint and repaint you the way I say fit, even now. After all these years. Did you know that? Little fool. You think I went hobbling along with my life, whimpering and whining like some twangy country-and-western when you went back to her. But I've been waiting. Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is? (p. 75)

As a cultural outsider, Clemencia suffers most from the sense of not belonging, from being marginalized and differentiated against, and such differences not only separate her from her ethnic community, but also from mainstream American culture patterns; her marginalized community shuns her in the way the dominant culture discriminates against minority communities. Hence in a revengeful way she tells Drew's son:

I was sleeping with your father the night you were born.... I was sleeping with your father and didn't give a damn about that woman, your mother. If she was a brown woman like me, I might've had a harder time living with myself, but since she's not, I don't care. I was there first, always. I've always been there, in the mirror, under his skin, in the blood, before you were born. And he's been here in my heart before I even knew him. Understand? (p. 76)

She even boasts that this is "not the last time I've slept with a man the night his wife is birthing a baby" because this gives her "a crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that" (pp. 76-77), who are of course racially different. In her own vindictive way, she even becomes hysterical with laughter when she once phoned Drew at four in the morning and his wife answered politely, "just a moment": "what a stupid ass to pass the phone over to the lug asleep beside her. Excuse me, honey, it's for you.... That stupid. No Mexican woman would react like that. Excuse me, honey. It cracked me up" (p. 77). She concludes that she knew that Drew would never marry her for being a Mexican: "he could *never* marry me. You didn't think ...? *Never marry a Mexican. Never marry a Mexican* ... No, of course not" (p. 80). Clemencia thus overpowered both father and son in her own seemingly inexplicable way which suggests her successful revenge on the white man for his demeaning treatment: "I have him in my power. Come, sparrow. I have the patience of eternity. Come to *mamita*. My stupid little bird. I don't move. I don't startle him. I let him nibble. All, all for you. Rub his belly. Stroke him. Before I snap my teeth" (p. 82). At the end of the story she hollers in freedom in the same way like Felice, Cleófilas, the Esperanza figure,

the *mestiza* Chicana figure, the "new culture—una cultura mestiza"—with their "lumber," "bricks," and "mortar" to form their own "feminist architecture," their free entity (*Borderlands*, p. 22).

Thus, throughout these stories the protagonists embody the *mestiza* consciousness that struggles to develop her own subjectivity through subverting restrictive identifying paradigms. They develop some sense of resistance against all kinds of hegemony and try to struggle and shoulder the responsibility of self-transformation and social activism, identify themselves with all sorts of images which ultimately lead to their freedom. These *mestizas* have finally succeeded in foregrounding their womanhood, maturity, and empowerment through constructing, reconnecting their fragmented selves and as ways of resistance, of rejecting their racist segregation within the larger racist United States. They have indeed succeeded in creating alternative worlds; they make out of their marginality and of their being "outsiders" a "site of resistance" that nourish their own capacity to resist and persist, to explore all the dynamics of power relations between insiders and outsiders, and to get freedom and independence.

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