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ANA CASTILLO IN SEARCH OF HERSTORY

Abstract

The paper discusses four novels by Chicana writer Ana Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, *Sapogonia*, *So Far From God* and *The Guardians* which demonstrate gradual change in the author's position from a supporter of the radical feminism towards an advocate of moderate feminism. Another interest of Castillo that may be traced in her novels is the search for a counter-history of Mexican-Americans connected with their quest for identity and the deconstruction of the utopian Aztlan. In my analysis and interpretation I also focus on the issues of religious syncretism in Castillo's fiction and her attachment to parody and the grotesque, which is a tribute to her literary master: Gabriel García Márquez.

Keywords: Chicana literature, feminism, herstory, Latina representation, border studies, Mestizo myths

No Chicana writer is so preoccupied with the feminist perspective as Ana Castillo. For Castillo the ethnic is always connected with the feminist and the deconstruction of the static Latin American legacy, in which woman protagonists belong either to the realm of Malinchismo or Marianismo¹, seems to be her primary goal. In my paper I would like to trace the artistic journey of Castillo starting from the radical feminism of her first novels (*The Mixquiahuala Letters*, *Sapogonia*, *So Far From God*)² to the moderate

¹ Malinchismo refers to a derogatory perception of women in Latin American culture as the followers of Malinche (portrayed as the one who betrayed and gave birth to an illegitimate Mestizo) and therefore does not deserve any respect and Marianismo illustrates the completely opposite perception; women are seen as the followers of Mary, Mother of God, always patient and submissive, totally devoted to family life. One of the first critics of these extreme portraits of women was Octavio Paz in his *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) and in later revisions of the daughters of Malinche see T.D. Rebolledo, *Women singing in the snow*, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson 1995.

² Castillo wrote three more novels between 1993 and 2007, but they are not relevant for my paper; *My Daughter, My Son, the Eagle and the Dove* (2000) is for young readers and the remaining two (*Peel My Love Like an Onion*, 1999, and *Watercolor Women, Opaque Men*, 2005) do not focus so much on Mexican past.

feminism of *The Guardians* in which she continues recording the counter-history of those marginalized in the official discourse of history, not only women.

Critics who analyse the works of Castillo usually start from a brief summary of her literary manifesto *Massacre of the Dreamers*³ in which Castillo sounds very similar to Gloria Anzaldúa and especially her idea of Mestiza, always rebellious against the patriarchal culture. This rebellion also consists of rewriting the history of Americas that leaves space for women. Thus the image of history is revisionist to the extreme (in many instances, if not all) because contemporary Mestizas construct their identity by recreating a feminist memory that is connected with regaining power. In order to regain power, they “repair” history tainted by the bias resulting from the patriarchal perspective. Individual subjectivity also needs reconfiguration because it has to encompass its hybrid and transnational aspects. Chicana identity has been destroyed or dissolved in the patriarchal version of history and its integration is possible by, among other methods, acknowledging Indian identity. Similarly as in the prose of Sandra Cisneros, Indian identity in the works of Castillo is perceived as homogenous (both writers do not refer to specific Indian tribes, but to a general category) which is visible even in the term they use, “Mexic Amerindian”, which, e.g. Benjamin D. Carson⁴ elaborates in his article. Carson’s ideas are really useful for my interpretation because he refers to the most important philosophical and literary theories that Castillo uses both in her criticism (*Massacre*) and her fiction.

Carson starts from recalling Derrida, with whom Castillo agrees, that history is “a centered structure”⁵ which a writer-archeologist might oppose as long as he/she does not give up in excavating a heterogeneous representation of postmodern ethnicity, i.e. in tracing counter-histories and exposing complex ethnic portraits. Carson also recalls a theory about Mestizas by Cheli Sandoval who notices that a Mestiza must alter her consciousness to be able to rebel against the dominating ideology of white representatives of Western culture. In order to do this, mixed-blood women have to get to know the system of oppression because only in this way can they work out their strategy of resistance thanks to which they can finally obtain the power necessary for protecting their autonomy. Another academic Carson refers to is Mary Louise Pratt who writes in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* that even though the colonized were not able to control the culture imposed by the colonizers, they could decide to some extent which elements of that culture they could accept and what they could use them for and this strategy might be useful for a Mestiza. Carson indicates a wider network

³ A. Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays on Xicanisma*, New York 1995.

⁴ B.D. Carson, *The Chicana Subject in Ana Castillo’s Fiction and the Discursive Zone of Chicana/o Theory*, “Billingual Review” May 2004.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

of similarities between critics and academics connecting Sandoval's and Pratt's ideas with the theory of "differential consciousness" by Sandoval and the theory of Chicano/a historical consciousness⁶ by Emma Pérez. The latter type of consciousness was born out of rebellion against the dominating discourse, as Pérez explains:

If we divide history into these categories – colonial relations, postcolonial relations, and so on – then I would like to propose a decolonial imaginary as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history⁷.

According to Carson, the theory of Pérez corresponds well with that of Homi Bhabha who was the first who showed the so-called "third space" conditioning the articulation of the cultural difference. The task of Mestiza was best described by Anzaldúa, quoted by Carson:

What this means for the Chicana subject, the "new mestiza", is that she must cope by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be a Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates from a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else⁸.

Carson concludes that Chicana identity has more and more characteristics of post-modern and postnational identity.

In Castillo's prose transculturation also plays an important role. To explain that, Carson refers to the analysis of transculturation by Pratt⁹ and the artist Gómez-Penia who contrasts homogenized global culture and new essentialist culture (promoting national, ethnic and gender separatism which aim at regaining cultural autonomy, regional identity and traditional values) with hybrid culture stressing the cultural, political, esthetic and sexual diversity that encompass many ethnic and linguistic traditions and many contexts of interpretation. Gómez-Pena suggests that hybrid culture is a product of history and results from the experience of nomadic migration which has become more important in postmodernism. Thus, the Mestiza position is similar to the position of an intercultural diplomat or intellectual "coyote" who smuggles ideas. A Mestiza also plays the role of a nomadic chronicler, intercultural translator and political trickster who does not accept borders, fills in the gaps, builds bridges, draws new cultural maps, reinterprets and redefines signs and symbols in order to define

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London 1992.

the external borders of her culture and transgress them¹⁰. It is hard not to notice that Castillo included some of these variants of a Mestiza in her fiction which has been noticed by different literary critics.

In the article on *The Mixquiahuala Letters* Lesley Larkin¹¹ interprets the novel by relying on a feminist and post-colonial analysis focusing to some extent on the ways in which Castillo reconstructs the history of women in her fiction, i.e. herstory. I start from *The Mixquiahuala letters* because the relation between this novel and the other works of Castillo I mentioned at the beginning is similar to the relation between Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and her *Women Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo*. In *Mango*, Cisneros shows the consequences of the lack of history for Mexican immigrants in the U.S. which contributes to their sense of alienation and rootlessness and in *Caramelo* she introduces the history of immigrants to counterbalance the picture of dislocation. Similarly Castillo in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* portrays the landscape without history stigmatizing the main protagonists who desperately try to identify with alien cultures and in her later novels she includes a historical perspective which helps to understand the dilemmas of the heroines deprived of history. For that reason reading the first texts of Cisneros and Castillo without the context of their later production is challenging.

At first glance, the epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* has nothing in common with the history of Chicana/os or Latina/os, even though it registers the trip of two Chicanas to Mexico in search of their roots. The trip is far from satisfying because the main characters do not find any community with which they might have something in common, in contrast they travel as individuals who are not able to discover their own place but become more alienated because Mexico, as described by Castillo, is a patriarchal hell that leaves no space for female autonomy. What is worse, Alicia and Teresa go to Mexico because they want to escape the American culture which marginalizes them and they want to reach Mexico which they perceive as utopian, frozen in time, pre-Columbian Aztlan. Castillo deconstructs this myth brutally, simultaneously uncovering the ignorance of the travelers who imagine that Mexico hides an Indian world untouched by European colonization. Leslie Larkin is right¹², when she notices that Castillo even in *Massacre* voiced her protest against such romantic treatment of the Aztec culture which was extremely patriarchal. Larkin concludes that for that reason it is absurd to expect that the identity of contemporary emancipated women might have anything in common with that of pre-Columbian women. Alicia and Teresa learn this lesson well because instead of meeting Indians of their utopia they repeatedly

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

¹¹ L. Larkin, *Reading as Responsible Dialogue in Ana Castillo's the Mixquiahuala Letters*, "Melus" 2012, vol 3.

¹² *Ibidem*.

meet more or less ostentatious machos who try to reduce them to sexual objects. It is difficult not to agree with Larkin that, in this case, the journey to one's place of origin does not bring satisfaction of reaching an inspiring homeland¹³. This mythologized Mexico created by the American/Chicana tourists is not only a country with a simplified pre-Columbian culture but it is also a place devoid of colonial and neocolonial history. It is a Mexico from tourist brochures, a Mexico canonized in pop culture. The authentic Mexico has been affected by centuries of imperial influences which sanctified relationships based on exploitation and violence. In order to challenge this oppressive space it is necessary to work out a fluid identity which helps to combine the past with the present and find a counterbalance for historical abuses. Therefore Castillo's protagonists cannot just become daughters of the Mixquiahuala region, but they have to identify with Mexican folk culture and the culture of the U.S. which enriches the novel with transcultural themes. As Larkin points out¹⁴, in this way Castillo warns us against defining identity through the prism of static gender or cultural notions which is emphasized not only on the level of the content of the novel, but also its form. While reading we get confronted exclusively with the letters of the protagonists that Castillo proposes to read in three possible sequences (paying homage to Cortázar's *Hopscotch*). They in turn lead us towards three types of interpretations. In this way the readers can cooperate in deciphering the meaning of the novel and through this interactive reading become aware that the context is crucial in the interpretation of identity and personality; Larkin notices that depending on the sequence of reading the characters become different women, once conservative, once cynical and once mad. This engagement of the reader is particularly important in the context of ethnic literatures, Larkin writes¹⁵, which become prone to a "tourist" interpretation without the reader's involvement. "Dialogic" reading is therefore an ethical interpretative practice.

In the novel *Sapogonia* there is a bigger focus on history than in the first novel by Castillo, but it is worth emphasizing that what distinguishes her works is a mixing of historical facts with totally fictitious events and processes; visible even in the title (*Sapogonia* is an invented country very similar to Mexico). The novel is no historical reconstruction, even though historical references or allusions are important. This strategy of Castillo makes the novel more universal and enables to sustain the distance between the reader and the fictional world. In my opinion, it is important at this point to take into account the literary tradition which inspired Castillo and might help us to understand what effects she wanted to achieve. As she often remarked, one of the writers who truly impressed her was Gabriel García Márquez and it is really difficult not to

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

notice some affinity between the grotesque world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*¹⁶ and other works of the Colombian author and some works of Castillo. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is especially helpful in the analysis of *Sapogonia* because it also tells the story of the colonization of America on the basis of fictional Macondo, the space in which the probable merges with the fantastic. The same intertwining of the real and the magical takes place in *Sapogonia* and *So Far From God*, what Castillo additionally shares with Márquez is the grotesque characterization of the protagonists who are both archetypes and individualities and the position of the narrator who reports miracles in a language full of realistic accuracy and is never shocked or surprised. Like in Márquez's prose, in Castillo's fictional history blends with myth, and elite culture blends with a popular one and everything is possible thanks to the style of the invincible storyteller whose art is a homage to oral literature.

This introduction into the strategies that stand behind the creation of fictional Sapogonia would not be complete without noticing the elements that go beyond Márquez's legacy and these are connected with feminist and Chicano issues. The latter elements are visible mainly on the level of content. In her novel Castillo introduces the character of Máximo Madrigal, who came to the U.S. from Sapogonia and having forgotten his Indian roots, chose the American Dream as his main goal in life. The punishment for the denial of his tradition is a subsequent degeneration of Madrigal who gradually loses his integrity and becomes an even bigger Macho abusing women and ruining all relationships. Castillo counterbalances this character with two feminine figures: Mamá Grande and Pastora Ake, the former Madrigal's grandmother and the latter his lover who are faithful to the Indian tradition. Mamá Grande lives in Sapogonia and Pastora is a woman Madrigal meets in the U.S. so their ties with the Indian tradition are different. The grandmother is a Mexican traditionalist who represents the indigenous legacy of this country and the lover is an illustration of the New Mestiza concept that I have already discussed. They share a belief in the need to achieve harmony between the material and the spiritual which Castillo juxtaposes with the patriarchal tradition of the U.S. and Sapogonia. According to the followers of the patriarchal tradition this kind of balance cannot be reached. Pastora is called Coatlicue¹⁷ by Madrigal exactly because she can combine the extremities such as life and death, beauty and horror. She is also a witch ("la bruja") who has a matriarchal power at her disposal. In Castillo's prose one can thus see an analogy to the way in which Sandra Cisneros used Mexican syncretic myths, as Tey Diana Rebolledo noticed in her study¹⁸. "Syncretic" because they encompass not only pre-Colombian tradition but also these mythical qualities

¹⁶ G.G. Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. G. Rabassa, New York 2009.

¹⁷ Coatlicue was the Aztec goddess of the Earth, see e.g. www.britannica.com

¹⁸ T.D. Rebolledo, *Women Singing In the Snow*, Tucson 1995.

that Coatlicue develop during colonization as a result of contact with Western culture. Similarly as in Cisneros' prose, feminine versions of Coatlicue in Castillo are characterized by rebellion against the imposed order (the patriarchal culture) and they use different strategies aimed at the destruction of the oppressive system. Modern Coatlicues never accept the roles the system imposes on women and the result of their attitude is a war between the model of a passive Virgin of Guadalupe (marianismo) and an awareness of her power as Coatlicue. Finally, the latter wins because Pastora defeats Madrigal and deconstructs the patriarchal world.

The question of interplay between history and fiction is also a focus of the article by Joy M. Lynch¹⁹, who shows the connections between the novel of Castillo and the history of the Southwest. Repeated loss of land resulted in identity problems, best exemplified by Madrigal, the man for whom the broken tie with tradition is a first step towards auto-destruction. Lynch agrees with other scholars that the most traumatic year was 1848, the year of the Guadalupe Hidalgo treaty which forced Southwest Mexicans to become a part of the U.S. Lynch writes:

At that historical moment in 1848 when all Mexican nationals in the conquered borderlands overnight "became" United States citizens, 'the Mexican Americans were created *as a people*: Mexican by birth, language and culture; and United States citizens by the might of arms' (Rodolfo Alvarez qtd in Saldivar 17). So how does that subject survive in exile? Divested in nationhood and reinvested with new loyalties, the wanderer claims or feels claimed by no nation and bears the emotional costs for losing placement in history and in time²⁰.

In this way Mexican Americans broke the bond with the landscape, like in the case of Native Americans, but for Latinos the landscape was a familiar place, as Lynch puts it, familiarized by the anthropocentric impulse to give it a name that reflects its value and usefulness for the people who inhabit it²¹. In this frame location is a human property, a homeland and the process of naming is never objective. Ethnic writers often explore the relationships between geography and identity because the way of perceiving one's place in the world usually reveals identity dilemmas exposed by post-colonialism. As the scholar explains: "For the displaced, the sense of "belonging" becomes disguised, concealed or hidden behind borrowed words, gestures, and silences that form the language of identity"²².

¹⁹ J.M. Lynch, *A Distinct Place in America Where All Mestizos Reside*: *Landscape and Identity in Ana Castillo's Sapogonia and Diane Chang's The Frontiers of Love*, "Melus" 2001, vol. 26, no. 3.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p.120.

²¹ There is a difference between the Native American and Latino/a and Euro-American attitude to landscape which has been best described by Leslie Marmon Silko's in her essays *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit*, New York 1996.

²² J.M. Lynch, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

Joy M. Lynch devotes lots of space for the rhetoric of the colonizers who, right from the moment of reaching America, started to create a coherent myth to sanction the conquest. Lynn points out that, from the beginning, this vision was a masculine vision because it was, in majority, men who “discovered” and “conquered” the American continents.

The frontier has always been presented as an encounter between civilization and barbarity and what it is worth emphasising that the landscape has been repeatedly feminized and sexualized which resulted from colonizing impulses. Thus, the American land was a “Virgin Land”²³ that had to be won in order it to stop it from being wild and so it could bear fruit for the colonizers. Lynch gives many examples of this rhetoric referring to feminist research focused on certain transformations in the analogies between the American land and the female body. According to the critic, in the description of the American soil one can see a gradual transition from the vision of the wild Virgin Land transformed by the strong conqueror’s hands into a pastoral paradise. What is more, this last image has also evolved into the vision of the American soil as a wasteland ruined by industrialization. In all these concepts the American land is compared to a woman responsible for its own destruction because, just like a women, the land seduced the explorers²⁴. This rhetoric is dangerous because in each of these cases the real reasons of exploitation are veiled and history is falsified by the suggestion that Americas were nobody’s land.

Lynch claims that Madrigal is a perfect example of the colonial product and he represents a man lost by following the rhetoric of America’s conquerors. Madrigal rejects Sapogonia to profit from the materialistic American culture. Introducing this character into the novel Castillo recalls the myth of the conquistador who is only interested in the exploitation of the soil and women; treated as subjects. Thus, as Lynch quotes from the novel, Madrigal is “the Cortes of every vagina he crossed”²⁵.

Lynch is also right when she notices that right from the beginning of the novel geographical space is used as a pretext to speak about the inner condition of Castillo’s characters. We understand that Madrigal is torn inside because he comes from Sapogonia characterized as:

[...] is besieged by the history of slavery, genocide, immigration and civil uprisings, all of which have left their marks on the genetic make-up of the generation following such periods as well as the border outline of its territory²⁶.

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

²⁶ A. Castillo, *Sapogonia*, New York 1990, p. 1.

and we realize that it is a space that all ethnic minorities share. Madrigal is a fallen Mestizo, Lynn concludes, because he renounces his identity (selling it sometimes) and he undergoes “self-colonization”²⁷ by eliminating Sapogon elements from his identity. Sexual conquests help him to create a fake identity that could compensate for his inner emptiness. Everything complicates when Pastora stands in his way because she intrigues him with her power and mystery. His obsession with Pastora is, according to Lynch, proof that Madrigal knows nothing about himself and he knows to know everything about Pastora and starts to perceive her as Coatlicue which drives him crazy. Thus Madrigal’s encounter with the past is nothing more than a haunting by suppressed memories that cannot lead to regeneration. Pastora, in contrast, can profit from tradition and overcome the historical trauma of a Mestizo (she is a Mestiza fortunately).

In this way Castillo, similarly to Sandra Cisneros for example, reinforces the matrilineal perspective by writing a counter-history of America in which it is women who take control over reality by transforming the tradition in a way that makes continuation possible without sacrificing one’s cultural heritage and Madrigal pays a high price for the denial of the Mestizo identity and the performance in his ‘conquistador costume’. Castillo does not write a revisionist version of history by altering the facts from the official history but incorporates simultaneous narratives about the past forcing us to observe the process of creating such stories as other postmodernists do. Her novels are kinds of games with the reader who is the last interpreter of sense and has to negotiate between different versions of the same story. To achieve this affect of a reader’s empowerment, Castillo creates distance between the reader and the presented world, among other ways, by hyperbolic and grotesque characterization. Her Madrigal resembles, to a great extent, Márquez’s Aureliano Buedía, a famous arch-macho of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and her Pastora is his counterpart by posing as an arch-witch. For that reason the identification of the reader with the characters is absolutely impossible, similarly as in the case of the novel *So Far From God*, which I would like to analyze now.

As Roland Walter²⁸ writes, in the novel *So Far From God* the reader is faced with a complete vision of the world governed by women who grow into power. The main protagonists of the novel: Sofia, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe and Loca from New Mexican town Tome are types rather than individualities (or flat rather than round characters). Thus Castillo shows a fusion of the individual and communal experience of female representatives of the country about which Porfirio Díaz once said is: “So far from God, so near the United States”. The context of these words is connected with the annexation of a vast territory of Mexico by the U.S. in the first half of the 19th century

²⁷ J.M. Lynch, *op. cit.*

²⁸ R. Walter, *The Cultural Politics of Dislocation and Rrelocation in Ana Castillo’s Novels*, “Melus” 1998, vol. 23, no. 1.

which links the novel with a historical context important for *Sapogonia* and makes it political. The heroines of *So Far From God* do not live in the 19th century, but in the 20th and their activity denies the stereotype about the passivity of Mexican women and men (more on the stereotype can be found in an article by Carlos R. Herrera)²⁹. This activism only guarantees survival to some; the war with the cultural imperialism of the U.S. takes the lives of all Sofi's daughters. As Walter³⁰ points out, the community of women created by Castillo is a utopian project which aim is to prevent the loss of identity, gradual assimilation and Americanization. It is a discourse of radical liberation completing the quest initiated in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, the novel exposing the consequences of displacement and continued in *So Far From God* where Castillo shows the stages of relocation, which also might be interpreted as search for identity through individual and collective history culminating in finding one's place in the ethnic group. As Walter explains: "The politics of dislocation and relocation, seen as the political unconscious of the novels, instantiate counter-hegemony in the Chicano borderlands through an affirmation of otherness – an otherness not imposed but recreated"³¹. Castillo reconstructs Indian roots for her characters and the result of it is their historical and political awakening. The new Mestiza, according to Walter, is able to transform cultural practices in a way that liberates and empowers her.

The most important question for me is how Castillo creates her revolution through literary strategies. B.J. Manriquez³² points out the use of oral tradition by Castillo who introduces the narrator *Mitotera*, in a Mexican context associated with a "know-it-all nosy neighbour". The language of *Mitotera* is ungrammatical, full of exaggeration and stereotypes, reflecting her prejudice and bias. In my opinion, it again resembles the achievement of Castillo's literary master Márquez who repeatedly admitted that writing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would not have been possible without reconstructing the language of his grandmother from Aracataca who always blended the real with the fantastic in a fluid way. The difference stems from the fact that Márquez's language is grammatical, but still the narrators of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *So Far From God* seem to be related, just as the presentations of the fictional worlds full of parody and irony. Manriquez does not take this comparative context into consideration, but notices Castillo's love of the absurd which the critic explains by her motives. According to the scholar, Castillo does not want to reform the world which is so degraded that

²⁹ Carlos R. Herrera, *New Mexico Resistance to U.S. Occupation During the Mexican-American War of 1846-48* in *The Contested Homeland: a Chicano History of New Mexico*, ed. by Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and David R. Maciel, Albuquerque 2000.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

³² B.J. Manriquez, *Ana Castillo's So Far From Go: Intimations of the Absurd*, "College Literature" 2002, vol. 29, no. 2.

it cannot be understood or improved, but by portraying the absurdity of the situation with which Chicanas are faced, Castillo concludes that it must be some type of cosmic joke³³. The biggest paradox in the situation of Mexican-Americans is that neither denial nor acceptance of Mestizo heritage can guarantee success in the Anglo-Saxon world. Fortunately, Castillo does not succumb to the rhetoric of the absurd and in her novel she shows that even if society is absurd, life is not. That is why Sofi is able to live after the death of her daughters. The recipe for achieving success, despite the tragedy, is combining folklore, Catholicism and feminism into a new ideology that can challenge the negative power of the patriarchal culture.

What specific elements constitute the feminist resistance ideology in *So Far From God*? The answers to this question have been partially provided by Ralph E. Rodríguez³⁴ and Daniel Cooper Alcarón³⁵. Both critics refer to religious syncretism included by Castillo in the novel, which is of course connected with the historical context of colonialism.

Rodríguez also finds it important to point out to the development of the history of Chicano literature. He distinguishes two phases of this literature in the U.S., the first initiated by the Chicano movement in the years 1966-1972 whose main motive was to retrieve Aztlán as a homeland, and the second, also known as the New Wave of Chicano literature the scholar dates as starting from 1984. These two phases differ by the intentions of the writers, the first wave Rodríguez calls “resistance literature” and the second “contestation literature”, the latter stressing more the awareness of the loss of historical sense and a disintegration of subjectivity. The antidote for the loss of sense is a return to the past.

Rodríguez³⁶ sees the precursors of this way of thinking about America in the writers and poets of the second half of the 19th century such as Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson and Melville, who resurrected collective American memory. According to the scholar Ana Castillo has a similar goal in mind when in *So Far From God* she tries to recapture the collective memory of Latinos, as in the U.S. In my opinion, this conclusion might be extended to all ethnic writers who do this work for the sake of their groups, e.g. Toni Morrison for African-Americans, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie and James Welch for Native Americans or Cristina García for Cuban-Americans. Rodríguez continues his analysis stating that in *So Far From God* Castillo returns to the past in order to find a myth that would not diminish the role of women. This impulse of recreating past

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ R. E. Rodríguez. *Chicano/a Fiction from Resistance to Contestation: the Role of Creation in So Far From God*. “Melus” 2000, vol. 25, no. 2.

³⁵ D. Cooper Alcarón, *Literary Syncretism in Ana Castillo's So Far From God: Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, University of Arizona 2000

³⁶ R. E. Rodríguez, *op. cit.*

mythology is similar to which inspired the writers of American romance literature, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, but the form of Castillo's novel is entirely different, most often described as anti-romance.

Castillo herself admits that a doctrinal reading of the Bible and the conservative teaching of the Church contribute greatly to the suppression of women by forcing them into submission and for this reason, Rodríguez notices, one of the goals of her writing is to show a syncretic alternative for orthodox Catholicism which will enable a deconstruction of the oppressive system. As a proof of the incorporation of this strategy in *So Far From God* the scholar gives the story of the Black Christ that Castillo retells in one of the sub-plots.

The figure of the Black Christ, called *Nuestro Señor de Esquipúlas* is a story connected with Caridad, Sofi's daughter who becomes a follower of the syncretic religion. Rodríguez notices³⁷ that kind of transformation of Eurocentric Christianity is a powerful tool for many post-colonial authors. I agree with this remark, but I would like to emphasize the fact that even before postmodernist interest in religious syncretism it was used by many Latin American novelists which, similarly to Márquez, might be a more important source of inspiration than U.S., European or African authors. Syncretism in Latin American masterpieces of the XXth century (e.g. in *Balún Canán* by Rosario Castellanos, *Deep Rivers* by José Marii Arguedas, *Lituma in the Andes* by Mario Vargasa Llosa, *People of the Maize* by Miguel Ángel Asturias or *Son of Man* by Augusto Roa Bastos) plays a similar role like in the novel by Castillo, i.e. it becomes a source of the subversion of the colonized characters. The novel by Roa Bastos is particularly important here because it also tells the story of the cult of the Black (and Leprous) Christ which united 20th century Guaranís in their resistance against the official Catholic Church.

The analysis of Rodríguez³⁸ uses the story of the Black Christ who probably came from the region of contemporary Guatemala, from a place called Esquipúlas. What is interesting is the fact that the carving of the figure was ordered by Spanish conquistadors in 1594 and the artifact was put in a local church in 1595. The figure was traveling as the conquest was spreading and in 1595, Don Juan de Onate brought its replica to the territory temporarily called New Mexico where its cult has continued up to the present. Thus Castillo does not invent a new syncretism but uses one that is historically grounded.

Another mythical reference that is a constituent of the religious syncretism of the characters in *So Far From God* comes from the creation myths of Acoma Pueblo Indians. In the novel it is Caridad who is looking for a pan-Indian religion and decides that

³⁷ *Ibidem.*

³⁸ *Ibidem.*

apart from the Black Christ it should include Tsichtintako, the heroine from Pueblo oral literature. Rodríguez and other critics are right in concluding that the myth of Tsichtintako also functions as a counter-narrative opposed to patriarchal Catholicism. The Pueblo myth is indeed a part of matrilineal tradition and has nothing in common with the myth of the biblical Eve who is blamed for the fall of the human race. Rodríguez writes³⁹ that this contrast between the Pueblo and Christian myth is crucial because Castillo herself remarked in *The Massacre of the Dreamers* that the biblical story of Eve is a tale about taking autonomy from women. The choice of Tsichtintako, the woman who, together with her daughters, filled the earth with plants and animals in the Pueblo creation story is a complete reversal of the Book of Genesis story where it is a man who has the power to create, and a woman (Eve) who causes auto-destruction through her disobedience. In Castillo's novel *Caridad* and her partner Esmeralda participate in an act of creation when they jump into "the womb of the Earth" to meet Tsichtintako. This act is interpreted as a sacrifice that makes the fulfillment of the Tsichtintako myth possible and it is also an escape from a world that does not provide many opportunities for independent women. Additionally, it is, however paradoxical it sounds, the happiest death in the novel, because other sisters die in miserable conditions, e.g. Fe dies of cancer after working in an toxic American factory and Esperanza dies as a war correspondent sacrificed by her American bosses. The proof that the death of *Caridad* and *Esmeralda* is happier comes from the novel:

But much to all their surprise, there were no morbid remains of splintered bodies tossed to the ground, down, down, like bad pottery or old bread. There weren't even whole bodies lying peaceful. There was nothing.

Just the spirit deity Tsichtintako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back not out towards the sun's rays or up to the clouds, but down, deep, within the soft, moist dark earth where *Esmeralda* and *Caridad* would be safe and live forever⁴⁰.

The analysis of *So Far From God* by Daniel Cooper Alcarón completes the study of religious and literary syncretism of that novel⁴¹. Alcarón notices that apart from referring to Indian myths, the novel contains many intertextual references to the Bible, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, hagiographies, Catholic legends and American-Mexican folk tales. Simultaneously, Alcarón, just as Rodríguez did, grafts myths onto history, proving in that way that the goal of Castillo is not an interplay with multicultural motives but a strengthening of the rhetoric of resistance against colonial and neocolonial practices, the genesis of which is clear when one refers to history. The proof of using

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ A. Castillo, *So Far From God*, New York 1993, p. 211.

⁴¹ D. Cooper Alcarón, *op. cit.*

this strategy is the fact that Castillo incorporates into her plot the character of Malogra, the monster from New Mexican folklore, who in *So Far From God* approaches Loca in her dream and later brutally rapes Caridad. Alcarón points out⁴² that the image of Malogra in Loca's dream comes from a folklore version, but Malogra attacking Caridad is Castillo's transformation of the traditional monster because it not only rapes but also tries to devour Caridad. The critic concludes that through this transformation Castillo manages to introduce the plot of the Spanish conquest and colonization, which can be supported by other critical interpretations to which Alcarón refers and by the excerpt from the novel:

It was not a stray and desperate coyote either, but a thing, both tangible and amorphous. A thing that made be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never forget it, it was pure force⁴³.

Alcarón agrees with those scholars who interpret this fragment as an allusion to the conquest, adding that this way the cruel rape of Caridad is not presented as a historical anomaly but as a part of the ruthless conquest of Indians in America. Similarly, Alcarón finds historical context for other events from the novel, this time not through the interpretation of the mythical beast but by referring to specific historical events that Castillo incorporated into her novel. The critic concentrates particularly on Fe. As I have already mentioned, Fe dies of cancer, which was a result of her poisoning while working in an American factory. Alcarón makes a connection between this plot and the events that took place at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s in one factory of the IBM concern where workers were also exposed to toxins (and this information was kept secret just like in the story of Fe) and many of them died of different forms of cancer. Taking into account that Esperanza dies in the Persian Gulf and Loca dies of AIDS after a blood transfusion, Alcarón concludes that in this way Castillo consistently shows the abuses of the imperial culture of the U.S., a country Castillo repeatedly portrays as full of violence and chaos. The antidote is the activity of Sofi after the death of her daughters who finds enough energy to create MOMAS, a society for mothers and consolidates her local community by creating a new ideology based on the myths of Saint Joan and La Llorona⁴⁴.

Castillo plays with historical and mythological plots mixing them in the way that they become new syncretic versions of old stories and these hybrids take into ac-

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

⁴⁴ D. Cooper Alcarón, *op. cit.*

count a matriarchal tradition. The author of *So Far From God* and *Sapogonia* is not interested in balancing the female and male perspective because her ultimate goal is complete deconstruction of the patriarchal culture because **history** so far has left no place for **herstory**. When one takes this strategy as a trademark of Castillo, one might be surprised by her last novel *The Guardians* which, in my opinion is a departure from radical feminism.

It is hard to find in this novel a strong feminist commitment or grotesque characterization so typical for Castillo's earlier fiction. In *The Guardians*, Castillo puts parody and intertextuality aside and instead presents a realistic story about contemporary New Mexico and the drama of Mexicans and Americans divided by the border. What makes it similar to other works by Castillo, is its social and political criticism of the imperial policy of the U.S., although the presentation of borderline reality is far more subtle than in *Sapogonia*. In *The Guardians*, Castillo additionally managed to construct psychologically convincing characters that escape easy judgment because they complex individualities and not types or archetypes. The main protagonist is Regina, a single independent woman bringing up her teenage nephew Gabo whose father Rafa disappeared while being smuggled by coyotes through the Mexican-American border. Other important characters are Miguel, a divorced schoolteacher who helps Regina and Gabo to find Rafa and Miguel's grandfather Milton who becomes one's of Gabo's guardians. The novel again takes place in a small New Mexican town and on the level of form it consists of first-person narrations of the above-mentioned characters. The most striking is probably Gabo's part because they are letters to Father Pio (Gabo wants to become a priest). Milton's narrative is important for different reasons, it gives the novel a historical dimension. By using Spanglish, Milton reconstructs the history of New Mexico in a microscale, from a small town perspective, proving repeatedly that the violence that characterizes this region now has always been present in the borderline area. As he explains:

Legend has it that in the Wild West days, Wyatt Earp come by here before he went to Tombstone and found it too wild for him. All kinds of desperadoes passed through El Chuco looking for refuge. The gunslinger John Wesley Hardin is buried over in the Chinese graveyard. Los chinos were building railroads back in them days.

It's still pretty wild around here. Maybe no more than other places in the world. Just yesterday, a man got shot in broad daylight. He worked for a car dealership. He was shot by a woman. Her brother was driving the getaway car. [...]

I seen a lot during all my years of owning a cantina. Las viejas can be just vicious as any man. N'hombre. You gotta watch las güisas, también. Once a woman slit her man's throat, just like that, with a kitchen knife. Right in front of me⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ A. Castillo, *The Guardians*, New York 2007, pp. 128-129.

Milton consistently shows changing American presidents and technical novelties that were supposed to “civilize” the people in the region, but the constant presence of violence leaves no doubts that the frontier world has remained wild. El Chuco is a place that magnetically attracts men fascinated by violence who become even more dangerous at the turn of the 20th and 21st century when they engage in drug and human trafficking. Milton is aware of this dangerous historical continuity and in the conclusion of his story admits that he is happy that almost all of his children have left the place. Milton knows the place and its inhabitants so well that he is the first who predicts Gabo’s tragedy; the old man unmistakably recognises the murderous instinct of the gang member Tiny Tears, who later kills Gabo as a result of his unrequited love.

Despite the drama, Regina decides not to abandon El Chulo and even adopts the child Tiny Tears leaves behind. Miguel also does not fall into despair and takes care of his children and their mother who had been raped by a gang of criminals involved in drug trafficking. Showing a male character who is capable of empathy and makes mature decisions is a breakthrough in Castillo’s prose and it is proof of liberation from the radical and sometimes naïve rhetoric of her earlier novels. For the first time, in my opinion, the past has not been used exclusively to speak about the abuses of the patriarchal culture, about the burden of the **history**. The past, accessible to the reader through the relations of Milton and partially through the stories of Regina and Miguel is not only the space contaminated by the patriarchal violence. Even Milton, the eldest and the most conservative out of the three narrators, emphasises the actions of violent women who influenced the history of the frontier, proving in this way that men had no monopoly on violence and cruelty. Milton’s observations finally get confirmed in Gabo’s story. In this way the discourse acknowledging historical contexts is well-balanced and his goal is not opening old wounds, but convincing the readers that violence, no matter if it comes from men or women, ruins the possibility of a decent co-existence of the inhabitants of the Mexican-American border. In this aspect, the character of Regina plays a very important role because she is the first strong female in Castillo’s prose who is not a literary illustration of the New Mestiza theory, but a person of flesh and blood.

What is more, in *The Guardians* Castillo creates a much subtler counter-discourse against Catholic ideology than in her earlier novels. It is particularly visible at the level of the title and the angelic motive in the book. The “guardian” is not just a “protector” but also a “guardian angel”; in the novel, the men around Regina have the names of angels: her brother is Raphael, her nephew Gabriel and her lover Miguel. Even though they have the names of the most powerful angels from the Christian tradition, they do not protect Regina but she has to protect them and she partially fails when she loses two of them to drug gangs. Castillo also makes us appreciate the male perspective in

the story of Miguel's transformation, who changes from an egoist into an altruist and has an important part to play in Regina's story when he starts to deserve his name by becoming a true guardian angel of his family. Through such solutions Castillo proves that she is a novelist who does not only deconstruct the contested space but is capable of creating something new in a frontier world struck by another "apocalypse" giving us hope that the reconstruction of history does not have to lead to digging up buried antagonisms, but might become a lesson of responsibility without sentimentalism and pathos.