

Female strategies to undermine the scars of colonialism and patriarchy in Helena Maria Viramontes's works

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Mujeres, a no dejar que el peligro del viaje y la inmensidad del territorio nos asuste – a mirar hacia adelante y a abrir paso en el monte. Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar (ANZALDÚA in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 1983).

Before directly approaching the post-colonial issues in Viramontes's work, it seems appropriate to catch a glimpse at the first representation of colonialism in English literature: Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, written after the first British conquest of other lands and peoples throughout the world. In fact, the so radical and striking representation of two characters such as Caliban and Prospero as two opposite forces in the play is already an evidence of Shakespeare's geniality and great capacity of observation of the subtle and complex relationships between the colonizer and the colonized that the post-colonial theories would only acknowledge some centuries afterwards.

That is why I insist on beginning this paper recalling some aspects of the play, which reinforce the subaltern's strategies of resistance to oppressive power. Prospero refers to Caliban as an "abhorred slave", which clearly shows Caliban as inferior, different, the Other. Taking into consideration the binary fossilization of the colonizer /colonized relationship, the other is a tabula rasa to be inscribed by the colonizer and subject to domination and manipulation. However, this Other, son of a devil and the witch Sycorax, unable to speak before the arrival of Prospero and his group, was taught English by Miranda – Prospero's daughter. After learning the language of the colonizer, Caliban engages in a process of empowerment, acquisition of voice and agency, and political awareness, as can be seen when he says "You taught me language, and my profit on it is, I know how to curse" (1: 2: 365-6) and "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother/ which thou tak'st from me" (1: 2: 334-5). Besides his discursive strategies, Caliban displays other forms of resistance and rebellion against domination when, for instance, he does not obey Prospero refusing to come when he is called, or simply ignores Prospero's curses, carrying on with his own discourse.

It seems inarguable that Caliban represents the first Other in English literature to endure the effects of colonialism and display strategies of resistance. According to Annabel Patterson, referring to Felix Holt: *The Radical*, the novel in which George Eliot "elaborates her theories of class structure, electoral politics and the deep connections between cultural and political conservatism" (Patterson, 1989: 154), Felix's ideas show a possible solution to Caliban's problem:

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As Felix sees it, no amount of political liberation or consciousness-raising will have any melloristic effect "while the common man remains the common man... while Caliban is Caliban, though you multiply him by a million, he'll worship every Trinculo that carries a bottle. I forget, though you don't read Shakespeare, Mr. Lyon" (Patterson, 1989: 154).

Fred's comment leads us to the conclusion that all the colonized peoples around the world who have suffered domination and oppression can be considered "contemporary Calibans" and the only way out of this subaltern position would be by establishing strategies of resistance in order not to be Caliban anymore. These strategies would lead all the contemporary Calibans (my focus here is on Chicanas) to a process of acquisition of voice, agency and political awareness concerning the social injustices involving them.

That is exactly what Chicana writers have been doing. These "contemporary Calibans", suffering multiple and simultaneous oppressions, torn between two worlds and cultures, facing the second-class status of

the hyphenated (Mexican-American) have invented new literary norms and strategies that reflect their experiences. Taking advantage of the emphasis on the local, on the margins and on difference brought by postmodernism, they have created their own space, which Ellen McCracken calls “the feminine space of postmodern ethnicity” in *New Latina Narrative* (1999). Their narratives redefine the concepts of multiculturalism in the U.S. once they take part, simultaneously, in mainstream and in “borderland” writing. According to Ernesto Laclau, one of the most relevant and striking characteristics of multiculturalism is that of inclusion through difference: “the discourse of integration was founded on the articulation of an increasingly complex system of differences” (Laclau, 1981: 92).

Thus, my aim in this article is to show how Helena Maria Viramontes makes use of multiple strategies of resistance, such as silence, enunciation, the revisiting of Aztec myths and Mexican legends to manage to resist not only the hardships imposed by the post-colonial oppression, but also patriarchy, undermining the condition of subalternity imposed by those dominant forces.

Helena Maria Viramontes firmly believes that literature can bring about social change. That is why she deals mainly with social issues in her work. According to Luce Irigaray, social order determines sexual order and in patriarchal societies, the males are “producer subjects and agents of exchange” while the females are the “commodities” (IRIGARAY, 1985: 192). Conscious of the oppression endured by ordinary Chicana women, treated as “commodities”, Viramontes, in her first published book of short stories, *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), focuses on the daily struggles of Chicanas within the Chicano family and culture. Her female characters are not idealized feminists making use of force to achieve power. Rather, the women in her stories are real people, with strengths and weaknesses, conscious of their unfulfilled life and of their need to conform to patriarchy to be able to survive. Most of them, however, display resistance.

In “The Moths”, oppression comes from a domineering father who does not accept his daughter’s rejection of the Church:

That was one of Apá’s biggest complaints. He would pound his hands on the table, rocking the sugar dish or spilling a cup of coffee and scream that if I didn’t go to Mass every Sunday to save my goddamn sinning soul, then I had no reason to go out of the house, period. Punto final (29).

The young narrator, whose name is not revealed, subverts patriarchy, using silence as her strategy of resistance. After being obliged by her father to go to mass, she does not argue and silently does what she wants:

So I would wash my feet and stuff them in my black Easter shoes that shone with Vaseline, grab a missal and veil, and wave goodbye to Amá. I would walk slowly down Lorena to First to Evergreen, counting the cracks on the cement. On Evergreen I would turn left and walk to abuelita’s (29).

Concerning silence involving women, the theorist Trinh Minh-Ha explains its various implications and significations:

Within the context of women’s speech, silence has many faces. Like the veiling of women, silence can only be subversive when it frees itself from the male-defined context of absence, lack, and fear as feminine territories. On the one hand, we face the danger of inscribing femininity as absence, as lack, and as blank in rejecting the importance of the act of enunciation. On the other hand, we understand the

necessity of placing women on the negativity and of working in undertones, for example, in our attempts at undermining patriarchal systems of values. Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored (MINH-HA, 1997: 416).

An opposite strategy of resistance to patriarchal oppression is revealed in "The Long Reconciliation". In this story Amanda, the protagonist, displays resistance through enunciation. Her behavior is doubly transgressive: not only does she abort the baby her husband wants so much, but also engages in adultery. The dialogue that takes place between Amanda and her husband Chato about her killing the baby and Chato killing her lover shows Amanda's strategy of resistance and empowerment through enunciation.

When Chato tells her that he has killed for honor, she says:

... I killed for life... which is worse? You killed because something said, "you must kill to remain a man".
– ... For me, things are as different as our bodies ... But you couldn't understand that because something said, "you must have sons to remain a man" (84).

Needless to say, Chicanos have swallowed the American dream. However, it is exactly in myths that Chicana writers have found their "Balancing Act" as Anzaldúa defines it in *This Bridge Called My Back*. By revisiting old Aztec myths and Mexican legends, they have been able to establish a mediation process between their Mexican past and their American future, which has given Chicanas the necessary strength to engage in a more active struggle to guarantee their present reality. Thus, old Aztec myths and Mexican legends have functioned as strategies of resistance, helping Chicana writers build up an identity of their own. For them, myths such as La Malinche, La Llorona and The Hungry Woman have been extremely important once they represent women who transgress their culture, fight for self-assertion, and cannot be contained or silenced.

In "The Cariboo Cafe", an illegal immigrant, a washerwoman from El Salvador, dies facing the police. When the cops arrive there, she realizes she has been betrayed by the cafe owner and reacts, shouting, crying, fighting for the boy she thinks is her son, screaming, joining La Llorona: "It is the night of La Llorona. The women come up from the depths of sorrow to search for their children. I join them ..." (72).

The resistance shown by the washerwoman transforms her from Llorona into Gritona. According to Ana Maria Carbonell in "From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue in Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros", women "reclaim their voice by transforming themselves from Llorona figures who wail at their loss into Gritonas who holler at their oppressors". The washerwoman's behavior, trying to save her "son" and facing the dominant order, crying and throwing hot coffee in the cops' faces, embodies not only the legend of La Llorona (or Gritona), but also the myth of La Malinche, a symbol of transgression, Hernan Cortés's lover and translator, who gave birth to a new race: The Mexicans. Her role as a translator and a mediator during the Spanish invasion and conquest of Mexico contributed to avoid the annihilation of innumerable indigenous tribes in Mexico. According to Donna Haraway, "Stripped of identity, the bastard race teaches about the power of the margins and the importance of a mother like Malinche. Women of color have transformed her from the evil mother of masculinist fear into the originally literate mother who teaches survival" (HARAWAY, 1990: 218-9). It can still be said that the myth of The Hungry Woman, the one who cannot be silenced, is also present when the washerwoman is dying, but is still howling and speaking.

Although in *The Moths and Other Stories* issues of gender, ethnicity, and social injustice are displayed, Viramontes has acknowledged that in some of these stories she "screamed" and "shouted" against the pain endured by women in a patriarchal society, "creating the type of narrative violence that Butler-Evans

has attributed to a writer's preoccupation with a single totalizing issue" (McCRACKEN, 1999: 186).

In her later novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), this totally negative portrayal of man does not take place. Much on the contrary, male characters are fully developed, together with other issues such as gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and social injustice.

Viramontes's parents were migrant workers who met while they labored in the fields of California picking cotton, which seems to have prompted her to write *Under the Feet of Jesus*, influenced by her own childhood experiences and also by the work of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers.

Under the Feet of Jesus is a rite-of-passage narrative as its Chicana protagonist, Estrella, reaches maturity. Estrella is thirteen and labors with her farmworker family in the fields of California. Her mother, abandoned by Estrella's father, lives with Perfecto, a man who is thirty-seven years older than Petra, her mother. As mentioned above, this novel does not present reductionist positions between good and evil, or men and women. Perfecto is a good man who "makes many sacrifices to help Estrella's family" (McCRACKEN, 1990: 184). Although he is a man with no memories, no history, it becomes clear that he yearns for his home in Mexico, especially when he perceives Petra is pregnant.

Estrella has two brothers, Ricky and Arnulfo, and twin sisters, Perla and Cookie (Cuca). The family faces the peripatetic lifestyle of migrant workers, poverty, disease, poor housing conditions, low wages, pesticide contamination, and lack of appropriate health care. The constant diasporas, to which post-colonial peoples are subjected, lead them to risky situations, once they are trapped in strong power relations. As Roberto Fernández Retamar explains, these massive migrations of people (for whom he elects Caliban as a perfect metaphor) from the poor countries into the rich countries produce conflicting situations:

As I write this essay they constitute more than two-thirds of the human beings now living; by the beginning of the twenty-first century (which is to say, tomorrow), they will be three-fourths of the world, and by the middle of that century, nine-tenths (RETAMAR, 1997:169).

The tough context of migrant life leads Estrella, as all post-colonial females, to perpetual crossroads, always moving to dangerous and unknown places, assuming new identities and names, as well as being themselves bridges to other selves, communities and peoples. This consideration is brought up by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), and is echoed in the following lines of the novel:

Of all the people who migrated to the fields, Maxine was the only one Estrella knew by last name. Last names were plentiful and easily forgotten because they changed with the crops and the seasons and state lines (28).

This echo becomes stronger in the end of the novel, when Estrella takes over the barn, which has been a forbidden place for her so far: "Okay, she said to her other self" (172).

Despite Petra's warning against the Devridges, Maxine and Estrella become friends for a while. As Maxine is illiterate, Estrella reads comic books to her. One day, Maxine suggests to Estrella that Petra sleeps with Perfecto. Infuriated, Estrella beats up the girl and causes her family's eviction from the migrant camp. Ellen McCracken, in *New Latina Narrative* (1999), explains:

Although language has been Estrella's strong suit in her relationship with this companion, to whom she

reads comic books, on this occasion she resorts instead to physical violence... (McCRACKEN, 1999:182).

Although Estrella's reaction is not yet a strategy of resistance, it can be said that her attitude reminds us to La Malinche, the mythic symbol of transgression and to the Aztec myth of The Hungry Woman, the one who cannot be silenced or contained.

In other situations, Estrella's empowerment through enunciation and the embodiment of these mythical figures becomes clearer. This will be examined in due course. Before, it is necessary to understand what happens to Alejo, the boy she meets in the fields, a lonely teenager whose only local relative is a cousin, Gumecindo. Estrella and Alejo fall in love. Once, working in the fields, Alejo is aerially sprayed with pesticides and gets seriously ill. With no one to count on, he is taken to Estrella's house as Petra thinks it is her duty to help others who, like herself, are doomed to poverty, backbreaking work and lack of health care. She says: "If we don't take care of each other, who would take care of us?" (96). Petra tries traditional Mexican recipes, home remedies, to save Alejo, while Estrella takes care of him.

Before carrying on with Alejo's difficult situation, it must be said that Estrella has learned a lot with the poor living conditions her family and other migrant workers go through, but it is Perfecto who provides her actual empowerment. This is what McCracken examines when she says:

... he teaches Estrella to use his tools; like language, they empower Estrella, as Perfecto changes them for her from empty signifiers ("as foreign and meaningless to her as chalky lines on the blackboard" /25/) to the vehicles of pride in one's ability to "build, bury, tear down, rearrange and repair" (26) (McCRACKEN, 1999: 184).

With tools and language (she also learns to read), Estrella develops a double strategy of female empowerment. When Alejo becomes worse, the family is forced to take him to a clinic trailer. The journey is a nightmare as the car gets stuck in the mud. Perfecto, already worn out, becomes desperate and it is the young Estrella who takes control of the situation and assumes a leadership role, scooping mud and laying stones under the tires. In the community clinic, an unfriendly nurse charges the family's last nine dollars just to confirm that Alejo is seriously ill and needs to be taken to hospital. They have no money for gas and become paralysed after Perfecto gives the nurse all the money he has. Estrella, then, takes a crowbar and asks their money back, once the nurse has only diagnosed his disease and not treated him. She breaks things and uses language as strategies of resistance to convey her seriousness in defending her family. According to McCracken, "she now uses words and controlled violence to achieve a small degree of social justice..." (McCRACKEN, 1999: 182). Her behavior frightens the nurse. She manages to get the money and take Alejo to hospital, where she is forced to leave him alone, once the family is aware they all may be arrested for what has happened in the clinic trailer.

Estrella's reaction, her agency, voice, and empowerment, not only remind us, once more, to La Malinche, here transgressing the law and to The Hungry Woman, again the one who cannot be silenced or contained, but also to La Llorona, the symbol of maternal resistance. It is exactly this maternal resistance that prompts Estrella to protect Alejo and her family as the washerwoman in "The Cariboo Cafe" has done to save "her" son. According to McCracken, Estrella goes beyond when she displays all these strategies of resistance, acting outside the law, breaking rules, and altering the established order:

In the same way she substitutes one moral for another, Estrella offers an alternate model of the ideal feminine to the nurse's perfect makeup, perfume, patent-leather purse, and photos of her children on her desk (McCRACKEN, 1999: 183).

It becomes clear that the “alternate model of the ideal feminine” referred to by McCracken is caused by the embodiment of the three mythical figures: La Malinche, La Llorona and The Hungry Woman. Our young protagonist Estrella is a “contemporary Caliban” who uses language to curse and to subvert class differences and social injustice.

If we take into account Donna Haraway’s considerations on cyborgs, their hybridity (machine/organism), and their “power to survive not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (HARAWAY, 1990: 217), it seems appropriate to conclude that Chicanas, as all other post-colonial females, can also be called cyborgs, once cyborgs display the same disposition and courage to fight, to subvert, to transgress, by establishing strategies of resistance. Estrella, our cyborg, literally, seizes the tool (the crowbar) “to mark the world that has marked them as other”.

As all rite-of-passage narratives, *Under the Feet of Jesus* represents maturation. There is a clear shift in the protagonist’s behavior as when Estrella arrives back in the camp, after leaving Alejo in the hospital. Her movement toward self-awareness is striking: she runs to the forbidden barn, gets to its top, and experiences freedom, pride and power for having shown resistance, for having fought against the evils of a sick system.

A post-modern work, *Under the Feet of Jesus* has no closure. The reader does not know about Alejo and the family’s trouble with the police. What the reader does know is that the traditional ethnic strategies of resistance, such as prayers or home medicine, are replaced by Estrella’s alternate strategies: enunciation (language) and the embodiment of mythical Mexican and Aztec female figures. This is emblematically shown in the final scene: while Estrella is at the top of the barn (“an angel on the verge of faith... powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed” /176/), the family stands below, holding the broken plastic statue of Jesus which Petra adores so much.

Concerning the title – *Under the Feet of Jesus* – an enigma remains. Petra has kept the family’s birth certificates under the statue of Jesus, probably because, being so religious as she is (every time they have to move, the first thing Perfecto does is to find a place in their bungalow for Petra’s altar), this is what should be done to look for protection. However, considering their substandard way of living, their daily struggle to survive, the social injustices they go through, and their political disenfranchisement as if they were invisible people, a question must of needs be posed: are the birth’s certificates under the feet of Jesus or are they, all migrant workers, literally, under the feet of Jesus?

As can be seen, although not easy, it is possible for the subaltern post-colonial female subject to find her way in-between the intricate contact zones in which colonial empires (or ex-colonial empires) and colonized (or ex-colonized) nations go on weaving their hybrid relationships. The post-colonial female subject oppressed by patriarchy may also resist and subvert domination. In both cases, success may only be achieved through the use of appropriate strategies of resistance.

We have seen that Caliban, the first colonized subject portrayed in English literature, has developed his own strategy: language. He learned the language of the colonizer to show resistance to the imperialist domination represented by Prospero. Needless to say, Caliban has left a legacy in the sense that his attitudes and his strategy of resistance have left influence on the future.

That is why we can consider Chicanas, who have also learned the language of the colonizer, “contemporary Calibans”. They have developed their strategies of resistance such as silence, enunciation (language), and the embodiment of Mexican legends and old Aztec myths.

Following a totally different way of thinking, Donna Haraway’s, Chicanas may also be considered cyborgs. As Haraway has put it, their goal would be “to mark the world that has marked them as other”.

The strategies of resistance displayed by these women of color have been shown throughout

Viramontes's work. In *The Moths and Other Stories*, these strategies aim, mainly, at undermining the subalternity imposed by patriarchy, although this central plot, the dilemma and suffering of women submitted to patriarchal assumptions about their rules, is better understood if the reader acknowledges that it is framed by broad social and economic problems.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus* there is a clear shift concerning the role of men in patriarchy. This time, Viramontes portrays men in a more positive and human way, not privileging one single issue. This is what Ellen McCracken explains when she says:

Viramontes situates the ethnic and gender issues of the novel in the context of the dismal social conditions in which migrants live and work in the United States. Issues of social injustice are as important as those of gender and ethnicity; no single issue is foregrounded at the expense of others in the novel (McCRACKEN, 1999: 184).

It is worth mentioning that in *Under the Feet of Jesus* the female strategies of resistance aim, mainly, at undermining the sad reality of the post-colonial subject. Centered on Estrella, the young protagonist, this coming-of-age narrative shows that it is possible for the subaltern post-colonial female subject to find her way in-between unequal and strong power relations.

In a word, the female characters in Viramontes's work undertake the hard and risky task of fighting against their subaltern post-colonial situation and of facing domineering fathers and husbands in a deeply rooted patriarchal society. Using strategies of resistance, they become able to subvert, transgress and survive by acquiring voice and agency. As *La Malinche*, *La Llorona* and *The Hungry Woman*, these women are symbols of resistance.

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