Feminist Refiguring of La Malinche in Sandra Cisneros' *Never Marry A Mexican*

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Abstract

La Malinche, the mistress of Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, has evolved from a historical figure into Mexican national myth that connotes all the negative aspects of woman's sexuality in Mexican and Mexican-American Culture. Sandra Cisneros in her Never Marry A Mexican reinterpretsLa Malinchein a more positive light and points out how women sexuality can be the site for women empowerment.By drawing on insights from feminist theories on motherhood, marriage, and incest taboo, this study identifies the way Cisneros revises the negative image of La Malinche as a dupe, passive and submissive mistress. This study identifies that Cisneros has created a strong protagonist character named Clemencia, who exerts her subjectivity and claims for her sexual agency totransgress patriarchal construction of woman passive sexuality, imposition of maternal identity as asexual mother and taboo on incestuous relationship. Cisneros's La Malinche is no longer depicted as the victim duped by the patriarchy, but as the survivor who is able to preserve her sense of herself in the dominating patriarchal world.

Keywords: Feminist Refiguring, La Malinche, Mexican-American Literature

A. INTRODUCTION

Sandra Cisneros is a Hispanic American novelist, short-story writer, essayist, and poet whose works bring the perspective of Mexican American women into the American literary mainstream. In her short story *Never Marry a Mexican,* one of the short stories in the collection *Women Hollering Creek,* Cisneros reinterprets historical figure that has constructed the sexual and maternal identities of Mexican and Mexican-American women, La Malinche the whore, lover of foreigners, mistress, and traitor.

The figure of La Malinche has been connoted negatively in Mexican culture as a representative of native land conquest by Spain in particular, and outsiders in general. La Malinche was an Aztec woman who became the translator and mistress of the sixteenth century Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. Her role as Cortes' translator had significantly contributed to the downfall of Aztec and imposition of Spanish rule over the native peoples. Besides, as Cortes' mistress, La Malinche had borne a son for Cortés, Don Martin, the first mestizo, or Mexican, thus ushering the pollution of native ancestry with European blood. La Malinche indeed had unique positions both as the creator and the destroyer. On the one hand, she was considered as the Mexican Eve or the Mother of the Mexican race. On the other hand, her sexual complicity with the white man had brought the downfall of her native culture. La Malinche has been seen with shame and contempt by the Mexicans because of her role in the destruction of the native culture. The figure of La Malinche has come to represent the rape of the indigenous people and their land by the Spanish conquistadors in Mexican and Mexican-American mythology

(Wolfe, 2013).La Chingada, the 'penetrated one,' is commonly associated with La Malinche (Wolfe, 2013:7). La Malinche has been an iconic mythical figure behind the construction of the gender stereotype in Mexican and Mexican-American culture in which men are seen as dominating and active, whereas women are submissive and sexually inactive. In contemporary Mexican and Mexican-American culture, La Malinche is iconic for women who depend on men for social advancement, conformity and security and are later left violated or abandoned (Campbell, 2004). Moreover, according to Krauss negative interpretation on the figure of La Malinche in Mexican national myth has been responsible for the men's low perceptions of women which are evident in the nation's current high rate of infidelity and domestic violence (Campbell, 2004).

During the 1970s the paradigm of La Malinche as the victim is prevalent among Mexican and Mexican American feminist writers (Townsend, 2006). However, in the 1980s and 1990s a number of feminist writers adjusted this notion that La Malinche perhaps is not entirely victimized, but a resourceful and intelligent survivor (Townsend, 2006). Recent Mexican-American feminist writers have endeavored to recover La Malinche's negative image as a traitorous whore by claiming her power as a strong female figure who is able to survive between the two worlds and disrupt patriarchy. According to Cypress, La Malinche's role as translator and white man's spokesperson has disrupted the patriarchy on both the indigenous and European sides (Wolfe, 2013). Her language ability has helped her to negotiate her power between the Spanish and Indian culture and thus, helps her to survive. Moreover, her maternity is interpreted by the feminist writers in a more positive light because it has created the new mixed-blood race, the Mexican.

Cisneros's *Never Marry A Mexican* joins that of many feminist writers who attempt to reinterpret the figure of La Malinche in the positive light a survivor, rather than as a victim of patriarchal domination. Cisneros is particularly interested in revising the negative representation of La Malinche as a passive and submissive mistress. She creates a female protagonist, Clemencia, who shares some similar characteristics with La Malinche. Similar to La Malinche who lives between two worlds and cultures, the Spanish and the Indian, Clemencia also lives between two cultures, the Mexican and American. Both of them are working as translator to mediate the communication between the two cultures. Both of them are the mistress of White man and suffer from betrayal. The difference is that, to revise the negative image of La Malinche as a dupe, a passive and submissive mistress, Cisneros creates Clemencia as a strong woman who exerts her sexual agency and transgresses the patriarchal construction of woman passive sexuality and maternal identity. In *Never Marry A Mexican* Cisneros points out that women sexuality can be the site for women empowerment. Cisneros's La Malinche is no longer depicted as the victim duped by the patriarchy, but as the survivor who is able to preserve her sense of herself in the dominating patriarchal world.

B. FEMINIST REFIGURING OF LA MALINCHE IN SANDRA CISNEROS' *NEVER MARRY A MEXICAN*

Never Marry A Mexican is told from the perspective of the heroine, Clemencia, in a form of monologue to recount her inharmonious family life and her sexual life and affair with married men. Clemencia is born from a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. Because of the cultural discrepancy, her family life is not harmonious. Her Chicana mother cannot meet the gender

expectancy of his father. As a Mexican, his father demands for a typical submissive wife and mother. Being unhappy as Mexican's man wife, Clemencia's mother always warns her for never marrying a Mexican.

> Never marry a Mexican, my ma said once and always. She said this because of my father. She said this though she was Mexican too. But she was born here in the U.S. and he was born there and it's not the same, you know. (Cisneros, 1991: 68)

Defying the expected gender role, Clemencia's mother cheats on her father while her father is sick and bedridden. Her mother has an affair with a white man, the foreman at the photofinishing plant where she works. Her mother's agency and transgression of patriarchal prescribed gender role and racial difference certainly impresses Clemencia, thus she follows her mother's defiance. She follows her mother 's counsel for not marrying a Mexican man which she arbitrarily interprets and expands to include all Latino men.

> Mexican men, forget it. For a long time the men clearing off the tables or chopping meat behind the butcher counter or driving the bus I rode to school every day, those weren't men. Not men I considered as potential lovers. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chilean, Colombian, Panamanian, Salvadorean, Bolivian, Honduran, Argentine, Dominican, Venezuelan, Guatemalan, Ecuadorean, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Costa Rican, Paraguayan, Uruguayan. I don't care. I never saw them. My mother did this to me. (Cisneros, 1991: 69)

Clemencia has misinterpreted her mother's counsel because what her mother means as Mexican is the Mexican descent like her father. She arbitrarily interprets it that it is okay to have an affair with a white man as her mother does. Hence Clemencia follows her mother's defiance by having an affair with his art teacher, a married white man named Drew. This affair has deeply affected Clemencia because she comes to love Drew deeply. However, for Drew, Clemencia is just his La Malinche, his courtesan, his mistress, his sexual object that does not need to be committed to and can be abandoned anytime he wishes. After his wife has borne a son, he makes love with Clemencia for the last time before he breaks the liaison. This betrayal deeply affects Clemencia's love life in the future.

Besides being betrayed by Drew, Clemencia has also been betrayed by her mother. After marrying her white lover, her mother becomes powerless under her white husband's domination. Her new husband and son take over Clemencia family's house. Clemencia and her sister are soon ousted from their own house. Clemencia feelsbetrayed by her mother submissiveness. She cannot accept that her mother has cheated her father and abandoned her family just for being dominated by another man. She witnesses how marriage is complicit with patriarchy to oppress women.

Marriage and nuclear family become primary patriarchal institutions to enslave woman sexually, physically, emotionally, and economically. According to Rowland and Klein (1996) the enslavement can be done through physical manifestation in assault, economic manifestation in male control of resources and decision-making, ideological control through the socialization of women and children, and control on women's energy in emotional and physical servicing of men and children The enslavement of Clemencia's mother by her new husband is manifested in the male control of economic resources and decision-making that make Clemencia and her sister get ousted from their own house.

Having betrayed both by her white lover and her mother, Clemencia decides to never submit herself into marriage.

> So, no. I've never married and never will. Not because I couldn't but because I'm too romantic. Marriage has failed me, you could say. Not a man exists who hasn't disappointed me, whom I could trust to love the way I've loved. It's because I believe too much in marriage that I don't. Better to not marry than live a lie. (Cisneros, 1991: 69)

Here Clemencia is being sarcastic about marriage by claiming that she is too romantic and believes too much in marriage. Having affair with a married man and witnessing his infidelity to his spouse and also the powerless of women within marriage (Drew's wife and her mother), she defies marriage and claims her agency as an independent single woman who has freedom to express her sexuality.

In the story it is told that Clemencia makes her living as a freelance translator, substitute teacher and painter. After breaking up from Drew, she continues her affairs with many married men. She perceives her status of mistress as power and agency to express her sexuality without being subordinated under patriarchal domination as happened in the role of wife. In this aspect, it can be seen how Cisneros reverses the negative stereotype of La Malinche as passive mistress and sexual object of male desire into active and aggressive sexual subject. Cisneros empowers Clemencia status as mistress by allowing Clemencia to exercise her sexuality aggressively in her affairs. Even though, in the eyes of his lovers, she is just their La Malinche, a mistress and sexual object, it is Clemencia who actually takes control on them.

> I've witness 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 vindicative and cruel and I'm capable of anything. (Cisneros, 1991: 68)

From the above passage, it is only with Clemencia's consent that her affairs are conducted. She is no longer the victim of male desire. Without a doubt, she asserts her complicity in the liaison. When Clemencia is still having affair with Drew, her sexual aggressiveness is foregrounded by Cisneros.

> When we forgot ourselves, you tugged me. I leapt inside you and split you like an apple. Opened for the other to look and not give back…You were ashamed to be so naked. Pulled back. But I saw you for what you are, when you opened yourself for me...When you slept, you tugged me toward you. You sought me in the dark. I didn't sleep….I was taking you in that time. (Cisneros, 1991: 78)

From the above passage, it is certain that Drew's La Malinche is no longer the 'La Chingada' the penetrated one, but the penetrator. In this scene, Cisneros reverses the role. Clemencia's sexuality is masculinized, whereas Drew's is feminized. Certainly, Cisneros reinterpretation of the figure of La Malinche is not simply done by reversing the gender binaries, but allowing Clemencia to move forth and back between the binaries. Besides appropriating masculine traits in expressing her sexuality to Drew, ambiguously, Clemencia is also expressing her maternal instinct in it. Rather than treating Drew as a dominating man, Clemencia treats him as powerless child that has to be embraced and protected by her. Clemencian fuses her maternal instinct with sexual desire.

> You're almost not a man without your clothes. How do I explain it? You're so much a child in my bed. Nothing but a big boy with needs to be held. I won't let anyone hurt yo. My pirate. My slender boy of a man. (Cisneros, 1991: 78)

The fusion of maternal instinct with sexual desire is subversive due to its transgression of patriarchal notion of asexual mother who has pure maternal love untainted by sexual desire.

Clemencia also expresses her maternal instinct in her sexual intercourse with Drew during the night Drew's wife is giving birth his son. She positions herself in parallel to the birth process.

> While his mother lay on her back laboring his birth, I lay in his mother's bed making love to [Drew]. (Cisneros, 1991: 75)

She symbolizes her sexual intercourse with Drew as the act of impregnation, conceiving and giving birth in the same time. Clemencia always thinks of Drew's son as her pseudo-son.

> Your son. Does he know how much I had to do with his birth? I was the one who convinced you to let him be born. (Cisneros, 1991: 74)
>
> …
>
> You could be my son if you weren't so light-skinned. (Cisneros, 1991: 76)

Clemencia has reenacted this imitation of birth many times with her other lovers

> "And it's not the last time I've slept with a man the night his wife is birthing a baby. Why do I do that, I wonder? Sleep with a man when his wife is giving life, being suckled by a thing with its eyes still shut. Why do that? It's always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that, without their knowing it. To know I've had their husbands when they were anchored in blue hospital rooms, their guts yanked inside out, the baby sucking their breasts while their husband sucked mine. All this while their ass stitches were still hurting." (Cisneros, 1991: 76-77)

Through parallel imagining on the pleasure of coitus and the pain of birth giving, Clemencia is defying patriarchal ideology and mocking the woman who has been deceived to fulfill maternal instinct; one has to be a biological mother, the one who conceives and suffers from giving birth. Clemencia asserts that she can also fulfill her maternal instinct through her liaison with their husbands. She can express her maternal instinct without becoming a biological mother and suffering the pain of giving birth. Clemencia resists the patriarchal imposition of maternal identity as a biological mother. Therefore, besides resisting the institution of marriage, Clemencia also resists motherhood as patriarchal institution. Adrienne Rich (1986) argues that motherhood has been the most pervasive patriarchal institution to control and subordinate women. Motherhood has been imposed by patriarchy as the ideal of womanhood that must be embodied by every woman. Patriarchy imposes that it is only through motherhood that women can achieve full self-realization of their maternal instincts, while in fact women are confined within domestic sphere and excluded from public sphere. For Clemencia patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the only channel to realize her maternal instinct because it can be actualized in various forms, and in her case it can be actualized through her affairs. Moreover, Clemencia shows that to be (imaginary) mother should not in conflict of being sexual. She fuses

sexual desire with maternal instinct to subvert patriarchal ideology that reifies motherhood as an innate of pure and chaste maternal instinct.Clemencia's maternal instinct is always imbued with sexual desire that it is almost impossible to demarcate the two. The fusion of sexual desire and maternal instinct enacted by Clemencia fits to Weisskopf's concept of maternal sexuality, that is, a woman's sexual feelings or behaviors while she is involved in tasks normally associated with motherhood (1980). Clemencia enacts this maternal sexuality during her coitus with her Drew and Drew's son whom she imagines as her sons. Rossi proposes that the strict demarcation between maternity and sexuality is connected to male dominance (Weisskopf, 1980). Asexual motherhood is patriarchal myth to control women's sexuality toward their own children. To secure patriarchal system the internalization of asexual motherhood is very important because it effectively prohibits incestuous relationship. By depicting the fusion of sexual and maternal instinct in Clemencia's affairs, Cisneros attempts to subvert patriarchal oppressive myth that has alienated mother from their own sexuality and body. Accordingly, Clemencia's sexual affairs have been crucial for her to actualize her sexual and maternal identity while in the same time transgressing and subverting patriarchal ideology.

Another revision done by Cisneros on the figure of La Malinche is her agency to take revenge for betrayal. La Malinche in Cisneros' work is no longer a submissive victim who is silent in enduring malebetrayal and humiliation. Cisneros' La Malinche has turned into one of the Furies who seeks for vengeance. The first revenge is done soon after Drew breaks their affair in his house. Clemencia deliberately announces her presence to Drew's wife by putting her gummy bears in the most private belongings of Drew's wife.

> I went around the house and left a trail of them in places I was sure she would find them. One in her Lucite makeup organizer, One stuffed inside each bottle of nail polish. I untwisted the expensive lipsticks to their full length and smushed a bear on the top before recapping them. I even put a gummy bear in her diaphragm case in the very center of that luminescent rubber moon. Why bother? Drew could take the blame…I got a strange satisfaction wandering about the house leaving them in places only she would look. (Cisneros, 1991:81)

However, Clemencia's attempt to separate the spouses fails. Drew's wife chooses to ignore her presence and his husband's affair. It is clearly seen when Clemencia deliberately calls Drew at dawn

> Once, drunk on margaritas, I telephoned (Drew) at four in the morning, woke the bitch up. Hello, she chirped. I want to talk to Drew. Just a moment, she said in her most polite drawing-room English. Just a moment. I laughed about that for weeks. What a stupid ass to pass the phone over to the lug asleep beside her. Excuse me, honey, it's for you. When Drew mumbled hello I was laughing so hard I could hardly talk. Drew? That dumb bitch of a wife of yours, I said, and that's all I could manage….Excuse me, honey. It cracked me up. (Cisneros, 1991:77)

In the above passage Clemencia is laughing and mocking the submissiveness of Drew's wife. Rather than invoking conflict into her household, Drew's wife chooses to ignore the fact of her husband's treachery. Having failed to break up Drew's household, Clemencia finds another way to have her revenge that is by seducing Drew's son.

> I sleep with this boy, their son. To make the boy love me the way I love his father. To make him want me, hunger, twist in his sleep, as if he'd swallowed glass….I can tell from the way he looks at me, 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. (Cisneros, 1991:82)

By choosing this kind of revenge, Clemencia has extremely transgressed the patriarchal strongest taboo on incestuous relationship between mother and son. Adrienne Rich (1976) states that mother-son incest has been the strongest and most consistently taboo in every culture because mother-son relationship is considered as regressive, circular and unproductive that hinders the son's further development to make his way to the world of patriarchal law and order. Incest taboo has been constructed by patriarchy as the mechanism to enforce discrete and internally coherent gender identities within a heterosexual frame (Butler, 2007). Butler explains further that incest taboo is necessary to establish basic patriarchal kinship structure and identification to gender identities.

> The incest taboo that bars the son from the mother and thereby instates the kinship relation between them is a law enacted "in the name of the Father." Similarly, the law that refuses the girl's desire for both her mother and father requires that she take up the emblem of maternity and perpetuate the rules of kinship. Both masculine and feminine positions are thus instituted through prohibitive laws that produce culturally intelligible genders. (2007:38)

As explained by Mitchell(1974), basic kinship structure requires three types of family relationship: consanguinity (brothers-sisters), affinity (husband-wife), and descent (father-son). Incest threatens to disturb basic kinship structure if it is not socially and culturally prohibited. Mitchell argues further that incest taboo is "the subjective expression of the need for exogamy" (1974:373). Exogamy is the basis of society because it is a form of reciprocal exchange of values between kinships. Exogamy expands and builds alliance between kinships that sustains the societal structure. In the exogamy system women become family commodity for exchange with other families to expand the patriarchal kinship alliances. It is due to these reasons that patriarchy prohibits incest. Cisneros's portrayal of Clemencia's sexual relationship with Drew's son whom she always considers as her pseudo son symbolizes Clemencia's transgression on the patriarchal interest in terminating a mother-son liaison. Clemencia's affair is also the modification of Oedipus Complex. The mother is no longer the object of the son's desire, but she asserts her agency of sexuality in seducing her own son for desiring her.

C. CONCLUSION

Cisneros's reinterpretation of La Malinche through her character Clemencia has subverted patriarchal construction of passive female sexuality,imposition of maternal identity as asexual mother and taboo of incestuous relationship between mother and son. Without being confined into patriarchal institution of marriage and motherhood, Clemencia asserts her subjectivity and claims her agency in expressing the fusion of her sexuality and maternal instinct in her role of mistress. The figure of mistress is no longer seen as the passive and the victimized, but the one who controls and is liberated from patriarchal oppression.

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