

HARALAMBIE ATHES (PhD, MA – Cultural Studies, MSc – Environmental Management) has co-authored *An Introductory Guide to Shakespeare* (2004) and contributed to various kinds of dictionaries – *Science Fiction Dictionary* (2006), *Dictionary of Literary Genetics* (2007) and *Dictionary of North-American Scholars. A* (2008). He edited *Contextualizing Ecology in Global Culture. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Environmental Protection* (2007) and *Identity Dissolved* (2010). Haralambie Athes is the editor-in-chief of the *PostModernism(e)* journal. His academic interests include postmodernism, utopianism and environmental philosophy.

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INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN  
Iași, str. Grigore Ghica Vodă nr. 13  
[euroedit@hotmail.com](mailto:euroedit@hotmail.com)

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## MAPPING IDENTITY POLITICS: DIFFERENCES AND BRIDGES

With a Foreword by HARALAMBIE ATHES

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## Cuprins

Foreword (Haralambie Athes) / 7

The New Mestiza In Cisneros' *Caramelo* (Alexandra Radu) / 15

Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*: Violence in Writing and Writing as Violence (Alina Anton) / 25

Adrienne Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers": the *ars poetica au féminin?* (Anca Luisa Viusenco) / 37

Transformed Identities – Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (Cătălin Tecucianu) / 47

Refusing to Name Names: Lillian Hellman Facing the House Committee on Un-American Activities (Corina Popescu) / 59

Dual Identity. The American West between Reality and Fiction (Gianina Roman) / 83

The Utopia of Identity in Philip K. Dick's Novels. Dysfunctionality as Norm (Haralambie Athes) / 103

Squaw, Mistress or Princess? – Stereotypical Representations of Native American Women in Hollywood Narratives (Mădălina Prodan) / 121

Mapping Identity through Conflicting Political Ideologies in *The Secret Agent* (Marian Sebastian Lupu) / 141

Intergenerational Conflict Of Ethnic Identities In Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (Sorina Ailiesei) / 161

Notes on contributors / 181

## The New Mestiza In Cisneros' *Caramelo*

ALEXANDRA RADU

**Abstract.** The paper analyzes the double pattern of oppression suffered by the members of the Chicana Feminist Movement. Through an insight into Sandra Cisneros's "Caramelo", coupled with the reviewing of the "mestiza" concept designed by Gloria Anzaldua, the confinement of identity and the partly patriarchal, partly racial oppression are being mapped out, with a focus on issues like homophobia, cultural discrimination and marginalization.

**Keywords:** *feminism, chicana, mestiza, machismo, gender inequality*

"To make things even more confusing everyone says ma-ma or mamacita when some delightful she walks by. If the delight is a he – Ay, que papacito! Or – papasote for the ones truly delicious to the eye. A terrible incessuous confusion. Worse, the insults aimed at the mother, - Tu mama!. While something charming and wonderful is – Que padre! What does this say about the Mexican?"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cisneros, Sandra, *Caramelo or Cuento Puro*, Alfred And Knopf, Vintage Contemporary Books, 2002, p. 23.

Sandra Cisneros, born in 1954, is a Mexican-American writer, part of a group of *Chicana* and *Latina* writers interested in issues such as gender and race, among them Gloria Anzaldua, Julia Alvarez and Laura Esquivel. They became popular especially during the 1980s and 1990s, taking part in the *Chicana* Feminist Movement, which began in the 1970s, and which was initially a Mexican struggle to rid the U.S. political and social structures of inequalities, called the Chicano Nationalist Movement. But, as the *Chicanas* were fighting alongside their men for their cause, they came to realize that gender inequalities existed inside and outside the movement. Consequently they organized themselves in a separate movement, called *Chicana* Feminist Movement, which questioned machismo (sexist attitude towards women, in favor of men), criticized attitudes regarding gender and sexuality and pleaded for the legalization of abortion, equal access to education, and the abolition of traditional marriages. Gloria Anzaldua was the most prominent figure of the entire Movement, because of her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which can be considered the manifest of the entire *Chicana* Feminism.

*Chicana* refers to Mexican women who were born or raised on American soil. *Latina* is a more extensive term, referring to all the women from the Latin American countries. *Chicana* feminism, also called *Xicanisma*, analyzes the social, historical, political and economical roles of Chicanas in the United States. Women stereotypical images such as house-wives, child-bearers and caregivers were seriously put into question, and among all race was what they had to fight more angrily for. Unlike White Feminists Women, Chicanas had to overcome fierce racial issues.

Like many other Mexican-American writers (Gloria Anzaldua, Sonia Saldivar-Hull), Sandra Cisneros writes about the borderlands, and the clash between cultures southwest in the US Mexican border – the cultures of Mexico and America. They combine with each other, creating a tormented American Southwest. Cisneros' identity as a Latina writer of Hispanic ancestry is essential when analyzing her work. She has her hallmark everywhere in her writings, talking about

the richness of her traditional culture and about her dual inheritance (being of mixed-blood) born out of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. She is a woman who writes about the women who live in the twentieth century and who are forced to survive in an environment saturated by masculinity and patriarchy, and who try to define and fulfill themselves in one way or another.

When Sandra Cisneros started to write a new short story (which was to become in fact a long novel) she set about to research and in an interview with Ray Suarez she confessed that “in telling my father’s story, I had to place him in time and history, and then I had to go back and look at how he became who he was. So I had to invent my grandmother’s story and how she became who she was...”<sup>1</sup> And so *Caramelo* came into being Cisneros’ longest and most challenging novel, which is, as she later on confesses, a tribute to her father. Unlike her previous works, such as *The House on Mango Street* and *Women Hollering Creek* which were written with a certain target reader in mind, this novel was meant to attract people of all sorts, big and small, old or young. I would even go as far as to say that she also had in mind those who did not know anything about the Chicano culture – hence all the footnotes and all the extra details about traditions and customs account for. However she remained constant in her primary interest, that is, the domestic sphere and the woman’s universe, which she explores with great interest in *Caramelo*, focusing primarily on the intricate ways in which her female characters reach a more profound understanding of their identity as women living in-between cultures. She carefully weaves fact and fiction, cultural fragments with historical ones, stories and family memories in a great knitting, similar to that of the Mexican shawl, the rebozo, which is passed down from generation to generation to Celaya, our narrator. Being concerned with family (hi)stories Cisneros speaks for the women, from the side of family, which is the only place where women

<sup>1</sup> Cisneros, Sandra, Interview by Robert Birnbaum, “Identity Theory”. *Identity Theory Magazine*, January 2000. Web. 20 May 2008.

hold a position of authority – Chicanas roles can only be that of dutiful mothers and faithful wives. Cisneros observes these cultural traditions and from a feminist viewpoint she analyzes the problem voicing the women and focusing on their suffering and pain. She creates empowered women, or at least women with a will to rebel, but who do not yet manage to pursue their interior voice. Esperanza, the protagonist from *The House on Mango Street* wants to become independent and leave the barrio without ever coming back as a subdued woman living under the rules of patriarchy, but for the moment she cannot do that, however her future prospects are presented optimistically, so that the reader could make a guess that she will follow and fulfill her dream. Celaya is herself a rebel nature, she does not find her true nature and seeks for clues towards her identity, which she will finally find embodied in every woman present in her family. However, she knows that she has a different path to follow.

But before getting into details with Cisneros' style and feminist thinking, one should get acquainted with *Chicana* feminism, which is different from the White women's feminism, as *Chicanas* suffer from a double-oppression: one because they are *Chicanas* (therefore not White) and the second because they are women (in a patriarchal society whose rules are still applicable and valid today). *Chicanas* tend to be split into two categories – they are either Virgin Mary (la *Virgen de Guadalupe*) their patron saint, which is frequently mentioned in their writings as embodying the pure mother, the responsible woman, and also the obedient one; or they choose to identify themselves with la *Malinche*, who is considered the traitor woman, the perfidious woman, who betrayed her people and led to them being conquered by the Spaniards. La *Malinche* (or *Malintzin*) played a major role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico, being the interpreter and advisor of Hernan Cortes. She also is considered the first woman to give birth to the first *mestizo* - person of mixed blood, born from European and Indigenous American blood. Therefore, *Chicanas* are either saints, or whores. There is no in-between solution. And because the main emphasis for *Chicanas* is put on family

orientation and solidarity, it is hard for the *Chicana* writer to identify herself in this context. "She is generally educated and professional with aspirations for self-definition on her own terms. To write is to take control, to express your environment, and to break away from acceptance. The pressures on the *Chicana* writer to adhere to *Raza* values involve, among other things, not being a feminist. Feminism has been seen in some senses as opposition to traditional values and as acculturation, selling out to Anglo culture."<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is very hard for a *Chicana* feminist to leave her community and not be considered traitor, just like la *Malinche*. However, her need of self-identification and self-assuredness is bigger than their desire to become wives and bear children. Yet they do write about their communities and for their communities because their suffering reflects the community's. Their personal submissions reflect those of all the other Chicanas, those who did not have any other solution but to stay faithful to their husbands and their duties. And these dutiful wives have a wild and free spirit, which is entrapped in a patriarchal society, where men still have an important word to say.

For *Chicanas*, being bicultural (that is living in-between borders and not managing to identify with only one culture or the other) is what urges them to try to find their identity, is the reason to rebel. One of the leading Chicana writers Gloria Anzaldua speaks about this issue "concentrating on the physical border that exists between the United States and Mexico, she describes its history, the signing of treaties, the battles waged, the people caught between two worlds, – one, of a first world and the other of a third. She also introduces the concept of the new *mestiza*. From a people of Indian and Spanish blood with the traditions of Mexico as part of their heritage, this new *mestiza* lives in the United States and occupies the

<sup>1</sup> Gonzalez, Maria (Ed.), *Contemporary Mexican-American Women novelists: Towards a Feminist Identity*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 1996, p. 4.

borderland.”<sup>1</sup> The new *mestiza* survives by developing a tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity:

“ She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.”<sup>2</sup>

She suddenly becomes an empowered woman, even if split in-between identities, but the future will belong to the *mestiza* as Anzaldua herself assesses.

Anzaldua’s views on the idea of borderland and of the Chicana identity influenced many writers and in a very short time (20 years) became the hallmark of the entire Latina feminism. She considered that those inhabiting this borderland are those who are prohibited and forbidden: the queer, the perverse, the mulatto, the half creed, those who normally pass the confines of normal. Anzaldua also describes the necessity either to change the destructiveness of all societies which reject these type of people or to be crushed by it. Introducing the enemy as patriarchy, homophobia, cultural tyranny and oppressive organized religions, she details how this enemy hurts women, discriminates against homosexuals, and commits cultural genocide and silences individuals. She uses the image of Malintzin as the symbol of the conquered society to emphasize the idea of the marginalization of these people. Cisneros uses storytelling as a way of escape for the entrapped Chicanas who manage through this to break the norms imposed on them by society and tradition. She re-tells history from her perspective as the ‘other’ and manages to create a

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Anzaldua, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Third Edition, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, 2007, p. 101.

mythology of Chicano population which attenuates in one way or another the border that fragments personalities and splits selves.

In an article from the *Companion to Latino/a Studies*, Nelly Rosario speaks about her own experience of tradition confessing that

“Being raised here, has brought me into conflicts with my parents. Though they raised me to be educated and hence, independent, the result later proved to go against their own traditions. They were uncomfortable with my wanting to go study away from home, to travel, to have boyfriends (premarital sex), to move out on my own. Along the way they’ve eventually supported my decisions, but I was always left with a feeling of guilt, of having betrayed them and broken from traditions. For them American women aged before their time because they lived worldly lives.”<sup>1</sup>

Similar case with Cisneros when she started her career as a writer, she confronted herself with her father’s disapproval because of her chosen path, but however, given the fact that she gained enough money to support herself and to live on her own, he finally encouraged her and even advised her not to let them to rip her off, not to be influenced by anything and most importantly to be careful what husband to choose so that he would not leave her without any money.

Theoretically *Caramelo* should enter the frames of the novel genre, yet it consists of a series of interwoven stories, which speak about Chicanos and their lives in U.S., their presence adding more flavour to this country. Cisneros speaks in the name of her entire community and not just for some certain individuals, like in the traditional novels. And even if this personal truth and history is told from a totally different perspective, she manages not to fall into historical discourse. Details are very important for her and in an interview with Robert Birnbaum she admits she has done some

<sup>1</sup> Flores, Juan and, Renato Rosaldo (Eds.), *A companion to Latino/a Studies*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2007, p. 155.

thorough research on various histories and that all stories, that seem to be more fiction than truth are in fact derived from reality – as is the case with Elvis Presley’s comment he would never kiss a woman whose skin is darker (a Mexican?); she asserts that the event caused a great scandal at the time. She wants to create a unified image of the Mexicans, especially all the women, and she tries and apparently manages to do that through her writing, making these women identify with the situations described and join forces in their common suffering

From the point of view of narrative, Cisneros’ novel can be angled, as belonging to its assigning category, as the story does have a narrator and a narratorial line, yet the definition of the novel does not totally frame this exact work of hers when it comes to the structure of *Caramelo*. The plot follows indeed the life and development of Celaya, but it moves back and forth in time, it changes the focus from one character to another, and most important the chapters are similar to those in Cisneros’ previous novel *The House on Mango Street* where she describes her chapters as vignettes, not long enough to be considered chapters but not short enough to be considered poems. She admits in one of her interviews that she wanted to create something different, something challenging, something that anyone could read and something that would appeal to the public of various ages. And it seems she has fulfilled her task through *Caramelo*, which is not only her most vast book, but also the most post-modern, if one could use such degrees of comparison. The structure can be associated to a type of mestizaje – a mixture between the classical novel structure and a post-modern back and forth flashbacks and personal life confessions. The plot follows Celaya’s coming of age and her development, focusing on several important moments in her life, around which all the other characters gravitate. Cisneros even embellishes the end of her book with a Pilon, which she explain: “You are talking about the final chapter, which is a *pilon* chapter. *Pilon* is what the grocer gives you as a little token of thanks. He throws in some extra of whatever it

is you bought. Or a toy or candy. Just to say thank you for patronizing her store. It’s a Mexican term.”<sup>1</sup>

The women depicted in Cisneros embody the consciousness of the new mestiza, a term often used by Anzaldua when speaking about the woman who “can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. It is the work the soul performs.”<sup>2</sup> Yet her female characters do not specifically identify with this type of new mestiza but seem to be on their way towards attaining this plural perspective on the issue of gender. However, it is the same woman who has to choose between two variants: either be the saint – identifying with la Virgen de Guadalupe, or be the promiscuous woman – identifying with Malintzin, the traitor. When trying to distance themselves from all these stereotypes imposed by society they either gain their freedom, either deepen their current position in the hierarchy established by men. “La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move towards a single goal, to divergent thinking.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Anzaldua, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Third Edition, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, 2007, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*