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Being at Crossroads: The politics of identity in the narratives of Gloria Anzaldua

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Abstract: The radical narratives of Gloria Anzaldua and their subsequent formulation into a theory/culture imply the immense signification of territorialization and de territorialization of a country. As a colored, Chicana, homosexual, woman writer, her greatest endeavor has been to analyse the multifarious identities assumed by these women to find a foothold in the mainstream Western, heteronormative world, owing to their cultural, racial and sexual differences. Quite ostensibly it results in the annihilation of a woman's native entity. All of these contexts begs the question as to what efforts are made by such women to retain a concrete yet distinct identity in such a partial society? Also, are those 'efforts' one of appropriation or resistance? I will examine these issues through the "mythos" of the mestizaje as conceptualized in her works, *This bridge called my back* and *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Keywords: Third world, feminism, Mestiza consciousness, Chicano, oppression. Identity.

Introduction

Noted Mexican-American author, Americo Paredes states the significance of identity through a person's naming- both literal and metaphorical, which lets him acquire power over others- mortals and immortals alike" (Paredes 31). Our author under scrutiny, Gloria Anzaldua, a Chicana feminist scholar, has based a fair share of her studies on the conflicts prevalent around these power relations in her homeland, the US-Southwest/Mexican border. Afro-American feminist Bell hooks summarizes the constraints of staying at the margins which holds similitude for the Chicanos; "Living as we did-on the edge-we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from inside out. We



focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both...” (Hooks Preface to the first edition.)

Consider the center/margin dichotomy hooks talks about. Anzaldúa, along with other women of color like her, highlights the existence of several such dichotomies, which are operative in the mainstream society to marginalize the border people on the grounds of racial, sexual and cultural differences. This eventually leads them first, to concealing their ‘real’ identity in order to prevent tokenization and later, assuming a ‘disguised’ identity with the intention of blending in what she calls the ‘white frame of reference’. Anzaldua rejects to adopt either of these identities and searches for a third alternative, in all her radical polemics. As Cherríe Moraga, another Chicana feminist and Anzaldua’s compatriot states, that the first bondage that restricts the woman of color to make her presence felt is the Western feminist mode of homogenizing women’s oppression. My first text in consideration, *This Bridge called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) that they both edited, subverts this notion of homogeneity in the mainstream system of social order in order to mark the difference in oppression from White women.

My second text, Anzaldua’s most celebrated work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) is a more personal work which narrates the traumatizing stories of dispossession, extermination and exploitation (Bassnett 71) that have been an integral part of the lives of the people of her community. Anzaldua’s chief objective to compose this book was to divert the focus of the world to her Chicano heritage and locate them on the global map for identification. This was her first foundational step towards building a paradigm of struggle which is driven by the intersectionality of class, gender, race and sexual orientation.

Merging these two primary texts, what we get is an unusual discourse of ‘quest for identity’ which gives rise to diverse questions such as how do her texts prevent the annihilation of native identity? what efforts are made by these women to retain a concrete yet distinct identity dismissing all the spatio-temporal expectations of a society, which refuses to even recognize their existence? Are those efforts one of appropriation or resistance? And finally a brief inquiry into how do these questions shape Anzaldua’s concept



of the *áutohistoria-teoría*? I will analyze these issues in this paper, through the ‘mythos’ of the *mestizaje* as contemplated in her works, to trace a comparative pattern of her feminist epistemology, which Anzaldua tries to shape through her powers of language and spirituality.

Exploring ‘silenced’ spaces: making in-roads

The European perspective of designating anything non-European as the ‘Other’ is a kind of strategic formulation to create binaries of identity from the very beginning. Stuart Hall reiterates this fact by saying “...it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not...to what has been called its constitutive outside 'that the positive meaning of any term- and thus its identity- can be constructed. (Hall and Du Gay 4,5). Thus, the Other emerges as an artificial product of the Western, heterosexual and white standpoint. And when they do not conform to these standards, they are pushed further back into the periphery, an alternate space constructed out of hegemonic power. This bestows the former with what Bornstein-Gomez calls ‘hegemonic epistemic privilege’ (Bornstein-Gomez 47). Thus, the crisis of identity formation becomes a trap for the native consciousness in a Eurocentric setup.

Anzaldua and Moraga bring to the foreground the issue of representation of women by three forces: men, society and women themselves. Anzaldua informs that Chicano women, like women worldwide, endure ‘double colonization’ in the hands of the white supremacists and the Chicano men. Western discourses of theoretical practice, view women from the purview of men and this thought is deeply ingrained in how women view themselves. Hence the theories of ‘white is good/pure/male’ and ‘evil is dark/impure/female’ arise. What follows is the gradual submission to parochial notions, resulting in the ‘epistemic violence’ of a woman’s perceptions, ideas and knowledge, which are marginalized if not entirely erased. As Cherríe Moraga, in her preface to *This Bridge...* recounts how she confirmed to the notions of being ‘la guera’ or fair skinned which saved her from the ‘white gaze’ of ridicule in the society. Gloria Anzaldua re-affirms this by pointing out how she had internalized the superiority of the oppressor’s language and inferiority of her own in her initial years.



The grassroots foundation itself is problematic since women, with these segregated thoughts set out to claim their feminist rights, when feminism cropped up as a movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The White women spoke for themselves and, for marginalized women as well, by arbitrarily constructing an image of the ‘third world woman’ which “subsumes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of woman” (Mohanty 336); equating their sufferings and by this notion of ‘familiarity’, White feminism reasserts the imperialist mode of sustaining the first world privilege through ‘otherness’ (Anderson 127). Because, building a unified, national identity around race is extremely difficult, since race is not a biological or genetic category; “It is a system of representation and social practices, based on bodily features- as ‘symbolic markers’ in order to differentiate one group socially from another” (Hall, Heed, Hubert and Thompson 617).

This anthology also addresses issue of the implicit and unconscious oppression that Queer people encounter. Moraga recounts how, initially, she nurtured a strange ‘shame’ for being Queer, a social misfit; “not man enough” to love, “not woman enough” to be loved (Moraga 33) and that later she achieved a renewed vision of her mother’s situation owing to her homosexuality, a concept that the Mexican culture refused to address and labelled its followers to be ‘abnormal’; sometimes even beating, torturing them. Moraga emphasizes that “For all women, lesbian and gay men, land is that physical mass called our bodies. Throughout ‘las Americas’ all these ‘lands’ remain under occupation by an Anglo-centric, patriarchal, imperialist United states” (173). Through this book, these women writers staunchly indict themselves and other women as to how they have failed each other terribly, to the escalating racial divisions within the US feminist movements and how white women have achieved their privileges at the expense of Third World colored women.

“And when our white sisters/ radical friends see us/ in the flesh...Not as a picture they own/ they are not quite as sure... If they like us as much: --Jo Carrillo” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 63)

The editors of the anthology promoted a ‘Theory in the Flesh’, which states that it is high time that women no longer shied away from voicing their opinions, emerging out of the



body politic. Thus, this anthology came out as a collection of poems, tales, essays and testimonials by radical women of color from diverse cultures, which brought to the Western forefront, a picture of segregation and humiliation carried out on colored women in the U.S. It turned the entire course of feminist epistemology in the West and gave a small but significant 'visibility' to the colored woman's issues. "We are the colored in a white feminist movement. We are the feminists among the people of our own culture. We are often the lesbians among the straight" (23).

There is a close kinship between Gloria Anzaldua's metaphors of the body and their subsequent formulation into a theoretical perspective; in fact, both are quite inseparable, for she views the woman's body as the deepest source of her expressions. She equates the history of Anglo penetration into Mexican lands in terms of the violence of physical penetration into a woman's body. For these women, colonization and sexual violence are used interchangeably. In one of her essays in the book, 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers', Anzaldua appeals to all women of her clan to give birth to a new language which uses their bodies as the site for reconciliation of the 'First/Third World' dichotomy. Anzaldua wishes these women to become 'bridges' carrying ideals of separate cultures, spaces and rationales on their backs.

The aim is to 'bridge' these gaps- gaps of linguistic, sexual, and racial identities which create 'silenced spaces' that hooks points out to be important factors (space and location) in Third World discourse of resistance. Hooks designates this very space to be a place of 'radical possibility' (Hooks 1989.206). It can be a location from which marginalized people may articulate their counter-hegemonic resistance. All of these points out to the necessity of the advent of a 'strategic essentialism' as Spivak posits.

Bridging gaps; Writing Borderlands

Post the publication of *This Bridge...*, Anzaldua found that the discrimination in American society was still very much in practice. Her individual inclusion into western academia as a dignified scholar couldn't be viewed as a picture of 'emancipation' for Chicanas in a wider perspective. All her creative energies and frustrations thus culminated



into the composition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa starts off by defining a border as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 3). These frequent territorializations are enmeshed in feelings of hatred, anger and humiliation. The tradition is hierarchal which gives rise to a new Border culture. A border, thus, straddles between two cultures, thereby alienating the sentiments of its inhabitants. The sense of exile, belonging and non-belonging is a fundamental companion of people across postcolonial cultures, such as these (Bassnett 75). Being a person of Anglo- Mexican descent herself, Anzaldúa has had to witness the shifting subjectivities of the women and thus, frames *Borderlands*, as a sort of hybrid text itself, one which also straddles between several genres of history, myth, anthropology, personal narratives and cultural studies. “I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean/ Where the two overlap/ a gentle coming together/ at other times and places a violent death. “This is my home/ this thin edge of barbed wire” (Anzaldúa 1).

The above lines from the first chapter of *Borderlands*, titled ‘The Homeland, Aztlán’, give away the sense of despair one feels on residing in a conjunction of two lands, when neither of them are her own, despite an ancestry which proclaims it to be hers. As one of the proponents of Chicana feminism in its infant stages, Anzaldúa uses her strength of mythmaking, storytelling and mysticism, hitherto deemed to be evil and pagan by the First World, to construct a whole new framework of feminist discourse which contributes largely into ‘US Third World Feminism’. We will be discussing these stages in the following pages, through which *Borderlands* provided a significant voice to these mute mouths by developing a whole new discourse of consciousness to look at oneself and intellect to fathom the inner soul, countering the Western standards of rationality.

- **Battling ‘Cultural Tyranny’.**

Mexican historian, Carlos Fuentes, had some historical facts about the global aspirations for discovering America; land of the Noble savage (Fuentes 184). All these aspirations met with disappointment when the conqueror plundered and demolished the virgin lands for their selfish economic goals, rendering the natives as a-historical. Gloria Anzaldúa from the onset attempts to construct a revisionist history of her indigenous roots; a claim that invalidates all



the prior Anglo centric postulations regarding the fixity of origin, to the Chicano community; “In 1000 B.C., descendants of the original Cochise people migrated into what is now Mexico and Central America and became the direct ancestors of many of the Mexican people” (Anzaldua 4).

Similarly, resurrecting legends of ancient Mexican and Mesoamerican deities to establish the antiquity of Chicano culture, helps her arguments to concretize, on reading which the border residents take pride in their heritage. She also exposes the extremist attitudes of the *Gringos* (Mexican name for the Anglos) towards the Chicanas by talking about the Mexican concept of Cervicide. Apart from this cross-cultural domination, she focuses on the domestic violence that is practiced by men, who have constructed all the metaphors of a women’s existence and demand subservience from women. According to Anzaldua, Culture is essentially a male domain, whose rules are to be transmitted by women (“...don’t poach on my preserves, only I can touch my child’s body”). The Chicano’s psychic restlessness, owing to his ambiguous identity, enrages him which leads him to brutalize women as proof of his ‘machismo’ (83). As she aptly states that a woman has been endowed with three vocations by patriarchy: a nun, a prostitute, a mother. Either she is the incarnation of *Virgen de Guadalupe* or shamed as the ominous *La Llorona/ Cihuacoatl*. However, “Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us” (17).

Anzaldua notices that all the women goddesses in her culture have been depicted in horrid, and negative lights; capable solely of destruction of humankind. She dedicates an entire essay, “Entering into the Serpent” in which she invokes these deities to conjure uninhibited supernatural powers that women would imbibe and delegitimize metaphors designated to them earlier. She separates herself from all appellations of being a ‘woman’ and prefers being identified as a body with “coming together of opposite qualities within” [half and half] (19). Lesbianism is another act of resistance for women similar to the Black ‘womanish’ traditions, asserting the free will of one’s sexual preferences and establishing ideals of solidarity and sisterhood.



- **Invoking a ‘new’ spiritualism**

This sphere of her discourse can be further divided into two: 1.) *la facultad* and 2.) *Shamanic aesthetics*. These two categories are Anzaldúa’s alternate means of cognition; a parallel cosmic world that a woman can resort to for “reprogramming my consciousness” (70). *La facultad* is a mode of resistance; a capacity to dispel binaries of heteronormative differences. Fear is what engenders this faculty of ‘senses’ rather than conscious reasoning. Anzaldúa thus, calls for a separate spiritual invocation for the ones who are socially ‘separated’ from the world (females, homosexuals, dark skinned, persecuted, marginalized and the foreign, of all races). The ‘Shaman’ on the other hand, is the eternal conjurer, healer of wounds whose physical counterpart is the writer (“the writer, as shape-changer, is a nahual, a shaman”). Her literary discourses (or Writing as ‘sensuous act’, as she describes) are mostly shaped by these mystical epistemologies, which are often dark and depicts the dilemma of a writer, where h/she has to believe in her creative Self only for the total Self to manifest itself into a solidified whole (73). Her spiritual contemplations are empowering for every woman for it constitutes a state which is a prelude to transcending the ephemeral world (crossing) to attain ultimate freedom of the soul.

- **Shaping a Language of the Oppressed, by the Oppressed, for the Oppressed**

Chapter Five of the book is perhaps the most famous and widely mentioned piece of her colonial discourse. Titled “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”, it talks about the violence that is caused by the negation of language (“Who is to say that robbing a people of/ its language is less violent than war?”) For Anzaldúa, language is a ‘male discourse’ and a key component of her rhetorical strategy to define, describe and empower her Chicana identity. Constant subversion and demeaning of the native language gives rise to a sense of low-esteem in the Chicano children; “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity- I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (59).

Moraga recalls about having felt a deeper sense of proximity with Spanish language than with English, while listening to a seminar in the native tongue- the former, a language in her blood; the latter, a language injected into her body forcefully. In order to overcome this



humiliation, time demands the blooming of a new language, exclusive to the Chicanos; “a forked tongue... a secret language” (55). Anzaldua indicates the uprising of a new language- of the Borderlands- a mixture of several versions of Spanish- a ‘bastard language’ called Chicano Spanish which she claims is gradually making its way through the legitimate systems of linguistic discourse. This language is, she warns, gross, wild and ‘untamed, often slangy, thereby rejecting western hegemonic conventions of language. There is a consistent rupture involved while studying her works for she creates a unique mode of ‘code-switching’, incorporating Chicano Spanish in between the lines, interrupting the reader’s smooth absorption of knowledge. Barring the inculcation of a wholesome meaning of the text fulfils Anzaldua’s motive of inviting the reader and therefore decentering the author. However, Anzaldua also takes into account the need for the oppressor’s language’ which has a universal potential to become a medium for the oppressed to reach out to the world in order to inform them about the linguistic terrorism committed in various locales of the world, or effect what Chakrabarty terms ‘provincializing Europe’.

- **Connecting the dots: a new Consciousness**

So far, the author has catalogued distinct modes of reflections for the Chicanas to take refuge, for a better way of leading their lives within the First world. However, she fails to envision them fitting into an alienated society such as the US mainstream and conjures up an inclusive consciousness, which she realizes must emerge out of the same hybrid progeny (“crossing over”) to which their existences belong; only much more empowered, ready to take on the world. This new breed of females have an all-inclusive intellect resulting from the “racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination” (77) - that of the *mestiza*; “a consciousness of the Borderlands” (77). The new *mestiza*, straddles between cultures, constantly transitioning, exploring multiple layers of existence, assuming a plural identity; at once a Mexican, an Anglo- an indigenous native. Delving deeper, we find that what she expects of a new *mestiza* is not merely resisting the oppressive forces by engaging the self as an agent of violence but rather; “...constantly shifting out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking...to divergent thinking characterized by movement away from set



patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (79).

This emphasis on inclusivity’ is what propels the mestiza to finally secure a ‘place’ for her in the macrocosm of the world; nurturing divided loyalties for both White and Chicana identities- the final appropriation. Anzaldúa depicts this process in terms of a ‘rebirth’ of the Chicana; “push Gloria breathe Gloria/ feel their hands holding up...Trying to scream/ from between your legs...” (“that dark shining thing”, Ehecatl/The wind, 172).

This is when she finds herself at the ‘crossroads’; not of the master/ slave, male/ female, pure/evil dichotomies, but on the verge of a leap which results in her penultimate ‘crossing over’ bridging all gaps.

Conclusion

Gloria Anzaldúa’s methodology of appropriation and resistance prompt the formulation of the notion of ‘autohistoria- teoría’- a fleeting possibility of articulating the Self, one of the central concerns of her aesthetics. There is not any systematic definition of this proposition, except for some abstract ones like ‘a fictionalized biography’. But there are traces of transcendentalism throughout her earlier works which find expression in her later works. Going against the wind, Anzaldúa has located herself in several self-articulations: Chicana feminism, Mexican- American society, queer, straight, dominant and submissive paradigms, margin and the center- appropriating yet deconstructing all these “fleeting multiplicities of possible identities”, in a postmodern world where identities are rather incoherent, fractured and fragmented.

History has been replete with such instances of ‘exclusion through identification’, all of which share a similarity in their efforts to erase their ‘social invisibility’. Initially possessing a ‘disturbed- identity’, As a Chicana-feminist poet, she has looked into gender stereotypes, hegemonic approaches to language questioned them by cultivating a counter stance in her polemical texts. For her, ‘the personal is political’ as her discourses appeal women at the margins to take the baton of representation from the hands of first world women, speak in a new language of articulation, tell a new story of strength rather than of



pain and voicelessness. These final lines convey effectively, her trajectory of studying identity politics:

...this is a give away poem,
I cannot go home,
until you have taken everything
and the basket which held it
When my hands are empty
I will be full". (Chrystos)

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