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The Power of Words: Feminism in Latin American Literature

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**THE POWER OF WORDS:
FEMINISM IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

An Undergraduate Research
Presented to
School of Arts & Sciences
La Salle University
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts in Foreign Languages, Spanish

by

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Introduction

Women in Latin America are suffering from oppression by men in economic, political, and social aspects of their life. Because of the stereotypical gender roles and the idea that women should be quiet and submissive, their fight for equality is often met with a backlash while their identities are belittled or even demonized. However, many Latin American feminist writings significantly contribute to the women's rights movement by providing new representations of women and their roles in the society while shattering the stereotypical "ideals" of a woman. Through their extensive work, Latin American authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Cristina Peri Rossi, and Elena Poniatowska "make meaning of their worlds and the complexities, contradictions, and varied experiences that characterize their existences."¹ Their literary works also shed light on the violence that women experience within their homes, exposing the issue and demonstrating that it needs to be addressed by the entire society. Writing, therefore, became a subversive act in a woman's battle towards self-liberation from the patriarchal society, as well as a movement towards rediscovery of her own identity and self-worth.

Machismo, the never-ending search for superiority

Machismo, a word used for masculinity in the Latin American culture, has become a pervasive term in the conversation of gender studies. Scholars have taken great strides to observe and analyze the impact that *machismo* has on gender roles;

¹ Blake, Debra J. *Chicana Sexuality and Gender: Cultural Refiguring in Literature, Oral History, and Art*. Duke University Press, 2005. p. 1

² Parker, Richard G. "Behavior in Latin American men: implications for HIV/AIDS interventions." *International Journal*

however, no universal definition has been established as *machismo* is a cultural phenomenon and everyone defines their culture uniquely.

Therefore, machismo is considered to be a group of attitudes that allows the male to overtly assess his presence on women, but also around other men. According to Dr. Richard G. Parker, a professor of sociomedical sciences and anthropology at the State university of Rio de Janeiro, machismo has become “the single most important or most deeply rooted feature of sexual culture in Latin America.”² When describing the concept of machismo, Dr. Parker places male and female sexuality in an ideological system with gender hierarchy where males are seen as dominant, “expansive and almost uncontrollable” figures while females are more passive and submissive “objects of male control.”³ As a result of these heavily gendered identities, marriages are often based on the concept of “respect” with a hierarchal power structure, which is another aspect of Dr. Parker’s study.

Dr. Parker focuses on expectations imposed on both genders by the society, including the behaviors leading to a marriage. For example, women are to refrain from any sexual activity before marriage and to remain faithful to one man throughout the “marriage”. They are expected to stay pure and devoted, following the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe. Additionally, women are largely expected to be *amas de la casa* (homemakers), ensuring that the home and children are well taken care of.⁴ Males, on the other hand, are expected to begin sexual activity during their early adolescent years

² Parker, Richard G. “Behavior in Latin American men: implications for HIV/AIDS interventions.” *International Journal of STD & AIDS*, 1996. p. 62

³ Parker, p. 63

⁴ Hirsch, Jennifer. *A Courtship Before Marriage*. University of California Press. Los Angeles, California: 2003. P. 100

and have multiple partners before and even after marriage. By having multiple partners, they are supposed to satisfy their desires, as well as prove their manliness through dominance and building up a reputation, not only among women, but their peers as well. In order to maintain the reputation of “the man of the house”, men often resort to domestic violence as means of intentionally trying to control their romantic partner.

Culture of Violence

Machismo took on a negative meaning during the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s when it was used to signify violence and male aggression. While the concept of machismo can allude to positive male characteristics such as being hardworking and protecting one’s family, machismo is currently more often associated with the idea of a man trying to have complete control over his romantic partner. As mentioned before, the power difference between a man and a woman in a relationship contributes to the social norm of machismo,⁵ in which men are prone to constantly trying to prove their strength and masculinity. Through jealousy, competitiveness, and pride, violent encounters are often pursued as demonstration of superiority.

It is important to remember, however, that machismo takes a mental toll on men as well. Boys are socialized into the machismo beliefs from a very young age. They are taught that males are born to be the head of the household, strong and able to handle the responsibility of having a family. That belief is reaffirmed through their daily experiences in their surroundings, which oftentimes also include moments of domestic

⁵ Sequeira, David. *The Machismo and Marianismo Tango*. Dorrance Publishing Co, Inc., 2009. P. 22

violence. Seeing abuse in one's household can have severe effects on a child, especially young boys for whom the violence may become more acceptable after witnessing a mother or a close relative as the victim.⁶ Eventually, those boys may choose to display the same acts of violence and aggression that they have viewed at a young age to their spouse.

As men attempt to meet the high expectations of machismo, which "discourages them from revealing the anxiety, confusion, or uncertainty prompted by changes in the family's power structure,"⁷ they are not being able to express their feelings and concerns. Suppressing their emotions causes some men to respond by becoming more authoritarian and, consequently, using violence or threats to maintain control over their partners, creating a dangerous and toxic environment for the family within one's own house. According to the 2005 World Health Organization's report on Women's Health and Domestic Violence, homes have become "a place where women are more at risk for experiencing violence in intimate relationship than anywhere else."

The abuse that women experience takes on various forms, including emotional, physical, or even sexual assault. What's worse is that a high number of crimes against women goes underreported due to women feeling inferior and dependent on their husbands and male relatives, who are often the perpetrators, as well as the law working against them due to the male-dominated systems. For example, there have been court cases in Brazil focusing on the so-called "defense of honor", which allow men to murder their spouses if they are caught in an affair. In Guatemala, domestic violence is

⁶ Pigeon, Jared. "Machismo and how the Family is Molded into Form: Analysis of Gender Roles." Minnesota State University Moorhead. p. 3

⁷ Johnson, Andy J. *Religion and Men's Violence Against Women*. Springer, 2015. P. 155

considered a health problem and not a crime. In Argentina and Bolivia, torturing female prisoners by accusing them of failing as wives and mothers is a common practice.⁸ However, in the recent years, the feminist movement in Latin America has joined the political arena to combat the concept of machismo and reach beyond the patriarchal boundaries, which traditionally defined “women’s issues”.

The Feminist Movement vs. Machismo in Modern Latin America

In the Latin American history, women have not only played key roles within the family and the society, but have long been active participants in political and economic life. However, the majority of their political identity remained tightly linked to the nurturing role. Motherhood offered them a particular entry into politics and had significant cultural value, which allowed a power base for women, but brought with it certain constraints due to gender relations.⁹ Despite the difficulties, though, over the years women have achieved a greater voice and presence in the region’s politics, and, consequently, had an impact on the development of citizenship.¹⁰ Whatever strategy or position they take on, whether they dedicate themselves to gender studies and research or fighting the patriarchal society that is considered the root of women’s oppression, many feminist women are focusing their very existence in the collective effort to raise

⁸ Sequiera, p. 23

⁹ Craske, Nikki. *Women and Politics in Latin America*. Polity Press, 1999. P. 9

¹⁰ Craske, p. 12

the awareness of women to their rights as human beings and the consequent sociopolitical implications.¹¹

The growing feminist movement found its boost in the power of unity. Women are increasingly joining forces to fight the stereotypical gender roles, change and improve legislation to gain protection and equality, and seek punishment for those who have harmed them. The spark can especially be seen in Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia. These three countries have been recently put under the media radar due to the continuous research and horrific events that put into perspective the dangerous life that the women in Latin America lead on everyday basis.

Mexico

Mexico has the unfortunate privilege of having coined the term *femicide*, which stemmed from the cases of 300+ women being missing and/or murdered in the city of Ciudad Juárez since the 1990s. This drastic phenomenon has since been discovered to be a nationwide trend of increasing violence against women just because they are women. The current military situation in Mexico also has a significant impact on women as it increased incidence of rape by the military and police personnel while the growing organized crime has caused increasing concerns about human trafficking.¹²

The situation in Mexico has become a topic of increased conversation as well as a literary theme. For example, in 2014, an acclaimed poet and prose-writer Alicia Gaspar

¹¹ Campos Carr, Irene. "Women's Voices Grow Stronger: Politics and Feminism in Latin America." *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer 1990), p. 451

¹² Dashner Monk, Heather. "Mexican Women – Then and Now". *Solidarity*, 2008.

de Alba, wrote *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, a book that focuses on the effects of patriarchy and gender identity, specifically in the context of femicide in Ciudad Juárez. Additionally, there have been shifts not only in the social/artistic movement, but in the political one as well. Since the 1990s, Mexico has observed an increase non-governmental organizations (NGOs) relating to women's rights that were meant to provide benefits and services that were originally cut from government spending, to women affected by gender violence.¹³ The presence of NGOs refashioned women's organizing movement, especially in the rural areas of the country where women typically do not get an opportunity for economic and political participation or support in their time of struggle.¹⁴

Argentina

In June 2015, Argentina was shaken by the brutal murder of Chiara Páez, a 14-year-old girl who was killed by her boyfriend for getting pregnant. When her body was discovered, there was an explosion of anger among women in the country with literally hundreds of thousands of them taking to the streets and starting a *#NiUnaMenos* movement.¹⁵ A year later, another horrific crime devastated the nation as a 16-year-old Lucia Perez was abducted outside her school in Mar del Plata, drugged, repeatedly

¹³ Dominguez-Ruvalcaba, Hector and Ignacio Corona. *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*, University of Arizona Press, 2010. p. 37

¹⁴ Vaughan, Mary Kay and Gabriela Cano. *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico*. Duke University Press, 2006. p. 252

¹⁵ Lenta, Malena. "Feminism in Argentina: From the #NiUnaMenos Protests to the International Women's Strike". *Novaramedia*, March 2017.

raped, and murdered.¹⁶ The inhumane and brutal sexual abuse sparked widespread protests, not only within Argentina, but internationally. Women from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Guatemala, and various other countries in the region once again took to the streets to condemn gender-based violence.

The voices have finally been heard as the president of the National Council of Women, Fabiana Tuñez, and the President of Argentina, Mauricio Macri, announced a new National Action Plan for the Preventions, Assistance, and Eradication of Violence against Women.¹⁷ The plan is the first of its kind in Argentina and calls for making greater use of technology like ankle monitors on offenders and cellphone tracking as well as development of an app to call the police without actually dialing any numbers. The plan is still in development and will take another three years (estimated finish time is in 2019) to be fully implemented, but it will be a huge factor in fighting back and providing protection to women.

Colombia

Women in Colombia have been directly impacted by the on-going military conflict between the Colombian government and one of the largest guerilla armies, known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, in the entire Latin American region. The atmosphere of fear and terror due to forced displacement and sexual violence has affected women during that time. Despite those negative aspects of the conflict, women in Colombia stood their ground and received a fundamental role to play

¹⁶ Hola, Constanza. "Lucia Perez murder: Mother's plea to end Argentina gender violence." *BBC Mundo*, 2016.

¹⁷ "Buscan frenar la violencia de genero con el monitoreo electrónico de los agresores." *Clarín.com*, 2016.

in the peace negotiations. Even though they had minimal presence as lead negotiators, they made their voice heard through civil society involvement, shaping the path to peace. According to the UN 2016 report on Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia's Peace Talks by Virginia M. Bouvier, women and several women's organizations have taken advantage of every opportunity to "shape public opinion, support a negotiated solution to the conflict, and build their capacity to engage."

While the initiative of women in peace talks makes a positive impact, their involvement also includes many dangers. As Colombian men still follow the misogynistic attitudes ingrained in the mainstream culture and high levels of violence, many women have fallen victims to acid attacks where 90 percent of perpetrators are men, according to Gina Potes, the first acid attack victim in 1996. However, as legislature becomes more progressive, President Juan Manuel Santos signed a new law that closed legal loopholes, which treated acid attacks as "personal injuries", allowing the attackers to go free. Under the new law, anyone using any kind of "chemical agent" to physically harm another person will receive a minimum sentence of 12 years behind bars.¹⁸

The Power of Literary Representation

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Any discussion of Latin American feminism must address the *cultural* achievements of women. As far back as the seventeenth century, women have

¹⁸ Tegel, Simeon. "Colombia cracks down on a horrific wave of acid attacks against women". *USA Today*, January 2016.

distinguished themselves as outstanding poets, novelists, painters, and musicians.¹⁹ However, the first *published* feminist in the New World was Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Sor Juana was a 17th century nun, who was born and raised in Mexico. The story of her life is an inspiring story of tension between education, religious beliefs, intellectual freedom, and the male domination that has been and still is silencing female voices.

Sor Juana developed a passion for studying and writing at a very early age. However, because of the societal beliefs that women should not have such an ambitious attitude towards education, she had to pursue her studies in secret until the age of twenty when she entered a convent. At the time, it was the only socially acceptable way for a woman to pursue education. However, even there, her love for studying and writing was met with a backlash. She constantly struggled within the church environment, where women were encouraged to remain in “holy ignorance”, a concept through which women were not allowed to question religious teachings and its interpretations done by men. The idea of “holy ignorance” was enforced even more after the arrival of a new Jesuit Archbishop, António de Vieyra, who claimed that having a nun devote her time to trivial things like writing was a mockery of God.

However, Juana found another source of support, or so she thought, in the Bishop of Puebla. Even though, the bishop and Juana became strong allies in fight for intellectual freedom against the archbishop, their friendship ended in 1690 when the Bishop of Puebla published Juana’s critique of a famous sermon, without her

¹⁹ Zimmermann, Lisa. “Women in Latin America”. *Latin American Resource Center: Resources Focusing on Women in Latin America*. The LARC Lending Library. p. 3

permission, along with his own a letter which he signed using a pseudonym “Sor Filotea de la Cruz”, admonishing Sor Juana for her intellectualism.²⁰

After publication of the bishop’s letter, the Inquisition ordered an examination of Sor Juana, which led to the creation of her most famous work, *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*, which defends women’s rights to educational access. She argued that studying and writing allowed her to fulfill her duties towards God because, “How without Logic, could I be apprised of the general and specific way in which the Holy Scripture is written?”²¹ *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* quickly became one of the most powerful expressions of women’s desire for freedom as the author traces her own life and the numerous challenges she faced in a world that was determined to suppress her from the very beginning, which was and still is the case for many women in the world today.

Through her reply, Sor Juana refused to comply with the patriarchal and religious ideals of a submissive woman, lost in “holy ignorance”. Instead, she used her writing abilities and great knowledge acquired through determination and self-discipline to negate any claims of inferiority and prove her intellectual capabilities. For example, at one point Sor Juana states, “Oh, how much damage might have been avoided if our aged women have been learned...”²² referring to the idea that women should be able to assist in teaching young girls. During that time period, many fathers wanted to avoid the danger of having male teachers in an intimate setting with young female students, so they refused to allow their daughters to learn. Sor Juana argued how detrimental that

²⁰ *The Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Key Years and Events*. National Endowment for the Humanities.

²¹ Ines de la Cruz, Sor Juana. *Answer by the poet to the most illustrious Sister Filotea de la Cruz*, translated by William Little, Santa Fe College, Florida: 2008. P. 7

²² Ines de la Cruz, p. 25

action was to a young woman's education and explained how the paternal concerns could be avoided through allowing women to pursue education and, later on, teach others. The work of Sor Juana ultimately opened the creative and professional doors to many female authors and artists in the future.

Redefinition of Religious and Historical Figures

Popular images of women in Latin American cultural productions, including literature, were long restricted to only two roles: a stereotypically submissive wife or the demonized fallen woman, who was simply expressing her malaise about the status quo. However, new representations of women and their roles in the Latin American society have shattered the ideological mirrors that reflected these images. Women began using their writings as a form of liberation and a way to redefine their identities. In *Chicana Sexuality and Gender: Cultural Refiguring in Literature, Oral History, and Art* (2008), Debra J. Blake discusses the history and power of female representation between what has been constructed and imposed under "patriarchal religious ideologies" and what is being reconstructed by shedding light on "what was left unsaid"²³. Blake focuses on Mexican female cultural symbols - La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe – and how they are being redefined "to represent the concerns and desires of contemporary Chicana feminism."²⁴ Through the new understandings of those three figures, women can realize that they are not restricted to

²³ Blake, p. 13

²⁴ Blake, p. 25

the traditional sense of being a woman, but rather that their nature and their stories are in fact flexible and shifting to go beyond the patriarchal ideals.

La Malinche

Malintzin Tenepal, more commonly referred to as La Malinche, is an actual historical figure that played a significant linguistic role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the 1500s. As an interpreter for and sexual object of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conqueror, she became a scapegoat for Mexican defeat and one of the most condemned figures in the Chicano culture. Even though she is perceived as a positive character, “the way that the history book described her is that he was a smart woman who’d been able to learn and help”²⁵, yet her name came to signify a traitor, since La Malinche was seen to be on the side of Cortés and not her people during the Spanish conquest. Not only has she been condemned for sleeping with, or rather being forced to sleep with the enemy, but also all women after her were deemed responsible for the violation committed against them and Mexico.²⁶

Chicana and Mexican writers began restoring La Malinche’s name by reviewing her place in history, revealing her as a cultural and gender scapegoat, and representing her as a historical subject-agent. La Malinche is given a voice that was initially taken away from her by the writers of the Spanish chronicles of the conquest. She became a

²⁵ Blake, p. 35

²⁶ Blake, p. 41

transgressor who spoke as a sexual being and deserted her role as a mother.²⁷ She was a woman with a futuristic vision beyond the narrow power politics of male antagonists.

La Llorona

The figure of La Llorona, or the “Weeping Woman”, is mostly depicted as an infamous ghost, designed to keep children from wandering away at night. The colonial version of the legend shows La Llorona as a victim of male infidelity, which causes her to drown her children in despair. As punishment, she is “doomed to walk the earth, searching for her children for eternity, and haunts creeks and streams, crying or wailing in pain.”²⁸ La Llorona was meant to serve as a model of how women should act and relate repercussions for women who do not accept their stereotypical roles as reproducers and servers to the male population. The story of La Llorona was meant to “socialize women into traditional roles, control their conduct, and define what constitutes Mexican femininity.”²⁹ Her narrative reinforces the concept that women without men are dangerous; women without men may not be good for children, because they lack control which men put them under.

On the other hand, the narrative is advising contemporary Chicanas to use their voice to protect themselves and speak out against the patriarchal “ideal” of a family. In the 1990s and into the new century, the figure of La Llorona was recuperated and revised. Her wailing began to symbolize the children lost through assimilation into the

²⁷ Blake, p. 41

²⁸ Nelson, Patricia E. “Rewriting Myth: New Interpretations of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe in Chicana Feminist Literature”. The College of William and Mary, 2008. p. 6

²⁹ Blake, p. 49

dominant patriarchal culture or lost to violence and prejudice.³⁰ Now she is considered as a calming, liberating, and joyful influence for the abused woman.³¹ Many writers also began comparing and relating La Llorona to La Malinche and the Spanish conquest in a way that La Llorona's actions could be perceived as "symbolic act of saving her family, her culture, and her people from subjugation by the Spanish conquerors"³² and an act of resistance from white male dominance.

La Virgen de Guadalupe

In contrast to the images of seemingly corrupted womanhood in the forms La Malinche and La Llorona stands La Virgen de Guadalupe. Ever since her first appearance to the converted Aztec man, Juan Diego, in December of 1531³³, La Virgen de Guadalupe has been an extremely important figure in the Catholic tradition of Mexican and Chicana culture. As the Mother of Christ and a witness to his suffering, La Virgen de Guadalupe became a passive, submissive role model for Mexican Catholic women. She symbolized "blind devotion" which encouraged piety, purity, virginity, and unquestioning obedience in women's primary roles as a wife and a mother.

Because of her traditional roles, it was not until the 1970s that La Virgen de Guadalupe became a part of the female liberation movement. Even then, though, writers had a hard time refiguring and redefining her identity. The artists, on the other hand, began intertwining the image of La Virgen with real women, depicting them as

³⁰ Blake, p. 53

³¹ Cisneros, Sandra. "Woman Hollering Creek." First Vintage Contemporary Editions, 1992.

³² Blake, p. 47

³³ Nelson, p. 8

creative and spiritual beings that have endured significant hardships and survived.³⁴ In the late 1980s, several writers finally found a way to provide a positive, female-liberating outlook on the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe by depicting her as an outlet for lesbian desire. Her body specifically “has been re-appropriated by Chicana lesbians who ascribe alternative meanings to her traditional cultural role, rejecting her characterization as chaste and virtuous and instead reading her as a strong, rebellious and possibly queen figure.”³⁵ The writers are illustrating the oppression and control that religion exacts over issues that surround sexuality and deal with the role of the female body, specifically focusing on the role of La Virgen as a mother and a virgin. What they are trying to do is show what happens when the female body is no longer a passive vessel for patriarchal ideals, but rather becomes an active participant in the religion and controls what ideologies she “lets in”.

Sandra Cisneros, the Chicana pioneer of published feminist writings

The history of women’s participation in literary culture and political life in Latin America is a history still in the making. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, a significant number of female writers had advanced the issues of women’s rights, especially with respect to civil status, family, and participation in literary life.³⁶ One of

³⁴ Blake, p. 60

³⁵ Anderson, Emily K. “Queer like La Virgen: Catholicism and Lesbian Sexuality in Carla Trujillo’s *What Night Brings*”. *Nebula*, Vol 2.4, Issue Dec/Jan, 2005, p. 25

³⁶ Bergmann, Emilie. *Women, Culture, and Politics in Latin America: Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America*. University of California Press: 1992. P. 1

those writers, who managed to achieve worldwide success for her works, is Sandra Cisneros.

Born on December 20, 1954, Sandra Cisneros was the only daughter in family of six brothers. With a Spanish-speaking Mexican father and an English-speaking mother of Mexican descent, Cisneros struggled with constant migration of her family between Mexico and the United States, finding serenity in her writing. One of her big female influences was her mother who, even though she was dependent on her husband and restricted to fulfill her own potential, ensured that Cisneros would not experience the same disadvantages.³⁷

Cisneros' writing often exemplifies her personal experiences, especially from the period of time when her family settled in Humboldt Park, a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood on Chicago's West Side when she was eleven years old.³⁸ This location provided inspiration for her famous novel *The House on Mango Street*. Thanks to that novel, Cisneros became the pioneer in her literary field as the first female Mexican-American writer to have her work published by a mainstream publisher.³⁹ Once published, *The House on Mango Street* received many positive reviews; however, because the plot focused on the problems of being a woman in a largely patriarchal society, there have been some male Mexican-American critics who have condemned Cisneros for perpetuating negative stereotypes of Chicano men.⁴⁰ Cisneros and her

³⁷ Ganz, Robin. *Sandra Cisneros: Border Crossing and Beyond*. MELUS, Spring 1994. p. 21

³⁸ Ganz, p. 22

³⁹ Burling, Alexis. *Women in Literature*. Abdo Publishing, 2017. p. 12

⁴⁰ "The House on Mango Street". Sparknotes.

defenders argue that men and women view and experience life differently and it's important to be able to see both sides of the story rather than as a unified front.

To this day, Cisneros continues to reflect her culture through her main characters while being an active feminist who keeps on breaking boundaries and empowering the less fortunate to fight against stereotypes and take action against what impacts their individual lives. Her focus remains on helping shape a new movement by creating strong female characters that do not fit the stereotypical stay-at-home mother figure, but rather express their femininity by owning their natural identity.

The House on Mango Street

Published in 1984, *The House on Mango Street* follows the life of a Chicana girl named Esperanza who, at the age of twelve, moves with her family into a house on Mango Street. Far from being an ideal place to live, Esperanza promises herself that one day she will leave and have a house of her own. Until that happens though, the girl observes the lives of her neighbors, which represent the many possible paths Esperanza may follow in the future. The novel covers a year of Esperanza's life during which she significantly matures, both sexually and emotionally as she makes friends, endures sexual assault, and begins to use writing as a form of expressing herself.

The House on Mango Street provides a clear look at the concepts of machismo and the role of a stereotypical submissive wife as it includes many individual stories that allude to how women are constantly being subjugated, causing them to lose control of the situations they are in and submitting to the dominating man, often without a choice.

The novel is a great example that “the patriarchal discourse associated with [La Virgen de] Guadalupe as a Mexican female ideal, and the colonial and patriarchal violence of the conquest, are still very much alive”⁴¹, while any woman that does not fit that ideal is met with consequences. To provide a deeper and more detailed explanation how the novel exemplifies machismo and the need for feminism in Latin America culture, this paper will focus the following themes: search for identity, women being viewed as property, lack of educational/professional opportunities, violence against women, and sexual harassment.

Search for Identity

In the Latin American culture, for years women have been reduced to having a very specific role of a stereotypically submissive wife. According to Dr. Claire Taylor, a professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Liverpool, “the only possible destiny for an honorable woman is marriage, understood as the institution that sacralizes women’s economic, cultural and religious dependence on men/husbands.”⁴² Their destiny was to become the type of wife who will answer to all of her husband’s wishes while diligently taking care of her family and not asking for anything more. Any woman who decided not to follow the path of marriage had only two options to choose from: convent or prostitution, each one of them a form of captivity from exploring one’s identity. From generation to generation, women were not allowed to be confident

⁴¹ Blake, p. 18

⁴² Taylor, Claire. *Identity, Nation, Discourse: Latin American Women Writers and Artists*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. p. 69

individuals. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza talks about her great-grandmother who

“was born like me in the year of the horse - which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female - I think it is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong.”⁴³

Through the figure of her great-grandmother, Esperanza notices the gender roles and the stolen identities. Her grandmother is considered to be a strong woman, not afraid to speak up her mind, which is impermissible in the Latin American culture. Later on, Esperanza mentions the negative changes in her great-grandmother’s behavior, such as sadly looking out the window or staying at home all day, after she was forced to marry. Esperanza realizes that women were meant to follow their husbands and be fully dependent on them.

Women were forbidden from freely expressing their sexuality as well. As mentioned previously, women were meant to be pure before and after marriage, faithful to only one man for the rest of their life. Which is why, when a woman breaks away from that stereotype and chooses to live a life on her own terms, she is seen as an image of empowerment.

“There is always one with red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away. I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am

⁴³ Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage Press, 1991. p. 10

one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate.”⁴⁴

Esperanza is fascinated by the women she sees in the media, the beautiful femme fatales with red lips who are not afraid of the men around them. She also strives for her own identity. She does not want to be defined by a man, the way her mother and her great-grandmother were. However, she does not separate herself from the people in her neighborhood. In a quite opposite manner, she embraces her life on Mango Street, which, ultimately, helps her achieve her identity as a writer. Her new identity deals with the way she sees the world, which sets her apart from non-writers.

Esperanza has seen many women in her life going through different struggles and experienced suffering herself. Women in writing are doing the same thing in the modern day. They are trying to redefine their identities and/or sexualities in order to feel empowered and to see themselves as individuals. Considering the previously mentioned religious and historical figures such as La Llorona, those figures initially intended to show women as bad mothers and wives. However, female writers are redefining their image to provide other women with a source of empowerment and liberation to create their own stories and identities.

Women seen as “property”

The concept of machismo also contributes to the idea of women being seen as property; specifically, meaning that the wives and everything they own belong to their husbands. From the youngest age, men are taught that one day they will be the sole

⁴⁴ Cisneros, p. 89

breadwinners of the family and, because of that role, women (regardless if they are wives or daughters) will be dependent on them financially, allegedly making them inferior. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza mentions how women were looking out the windows because they were literally locked inside their homes by their husbands. She especially focuses on her neighbor, Rafaela, whose husband

“comes home late because that’s the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at.”⁴⁵

Esperanza draws a parallel between her neighbor and her great-grandmother, who also “looked out the window her whole life”⁴⁶ after being forced to marry her husband. As Esperanza explains, her great-grandmother was “so wild, she wouldn’t marry. Until [her] great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off.”⁴⁷ The issue of an arranged/forced/child marriage is still a big issue in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to UNICEF’s 2016 Database on child marriage, 23 percent of girls in Latin America and the Caribbean were married by the age of 18 between 2008 and 2014. While child marriage is generally considered a violation of the human rights, some countries find it acceptable. Those countries tend to see the child marriage as means of ‘protecting’ the girls. Parents may genuinely feel that once their daughter is placed firmly under control of a regular male guardian, she will be better off, not only economically, but also socially. In Brazil, for example, girls themselves seek older

⁴⁵ Cisneros, p. 79

⁴⁶ Cisneros, p. 11

⁴⁷ Cisneros, p. 11

husbands to escape from sexual and other violence they experience at home, or because of teenage pregnancies or the lack of job opportunities.⁴⁸ In *The House on Mango Street*, the character Sally decided to get married early to leave her family home and escape her abusive father. However, she did not realize that the cycle of violence would follow her into her married life.

“[Sally] married him in another state where it’s legal to get married before eighth grade. (...) She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay. Except he won’t let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn’t like her look out the window. And he doesn’t like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working.”⁴⁹

While it may not be explicitly stated that Sally’s husband is abusing her physically like her father was, their marriage still shows signs of being a violent relationship. Through his violent and manipulative behavior, Sally’s husband is the perpetrator who tries to establish his dominance by not letting Sally see or even contact her friends and destructive bursts of anger.

Lack of educational and professional opportunities

While equality has become the main guide in changing public policy in Latin America for the past two decades, there are still several areas which equality has not

⁴⁸ Moloney, Anastasia. “Child marriage accepted in Brazil to escape abuse at home: researchers”. *Reuters World News*, 12 July 2015.

⁴⁹ Cisneros, p. 101

reached; specifically, in educational and professional aspects of life, where gender inequality still persists. According to The World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development, a report created by Brazil's The World Bank, in disadvantaged segments of the population, girls' enrollment in primary and secondary schools continues to be below that of boys. Especially in rural areas, education is not as easily accessible and the societal norms suggest that a woman's role involves domestic activity and helping around the home as opposed to working for an income.⁵⁰ In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza shares the story of her neighbor Ruthie, who

“had lots of job offers when she was young, but she never took them. She got married instead and moved away to a pretty house outside the city.”⁵¹

Similarly to Ruthie, many women in Latin America continue to believe that their only role is that of a housewife and give up on any potential educational or professional opportunities in order to pursue married life.

We also get to learn about Esperanza's mother and hear her story of trying to get education, but because she lived in poverty, she felt ashamed and got married instead. Esperanza's mother is trying to get her daughter to understand that there is a better world out there and with her writing talent, she can be the one to get out of Mango Street and live her own life. Esperanza's mother wants her daughter to avoid living at a disadvantage of not having education. A significant driver of female labor force participation is indeed education. According to the 2017 report on women at work

⁵⁰ UNICEF Bolivia. “The Situation of Women in Bolivia”. UNICEF, 2003.

⁵¹ Cisneros, p. 69

in Latin America and the Caribbean created by the International Monetary Fund, education drives more women to work and increases the productivity of those who do. As matter of fact, thanks to education, women are less likely to engage in unprotected (informal) work such as domestic help, breaking the stereotypical gender roles.

Violence against Women

Domestic violence is a form of harm that frequently takes place without public comment, because it occurs within the boundaries of an intimate relationship, behind closed doors.⁵² In most Latin American countries, violence against women continues to be sanctioned by custom, even by law, because it is considered a ‘private crime’ and is therefore not penalized.⁵³ Another factor why the perpetrators are not punished is the underreporting of crime by women due to fear of their partners. For example, men in El Salvador are showing patterns of aggression as they intimidate women with more violence to silence them and threaten them into fear of reporting the domestic abuse as well as staying in the relationship.⁵⁴ However, not only threats force women to stay with their abusers. Latinas are reportedly more likely than others to stay in an abusive relationship because of their children and because of family pressure to remain in the relationship.”⁵⁵

The House on Mango Street addresses a few situations dealing with domestic violence, but the two most evident and heartbreaking ones are experienced by Minerva

⁵² Ochoa, Maria and Barbara K. Ige. *Shout Out: Women of color respond to violence*. Seal Press, 2007. p. 3

⁵³ Chant, Sylvia H. and Nikki Craske. *Gender in Latin America*. Rutgers University Press, 2003. p. 119

⁵⁴ Hume, Mo. “The Myths of Violence: Gender, Conflict, and Community in El Salvador.” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 35, No. 5, September 2008. p. 67

⁵⁵ Sequiera, p. 23

and Sally. Minerva is only a few years older than the main character, but she's already married with two kids.

“[Minerva] has many troubles, but the big one is her husband who left and keeps leaving. (...) But that night he comes back and sends a big rock through the window. Then he is sorry and she opens the door again. Same story. Next week, she comes over black and blue and asks what can she do? Minerva. I don't know which way she'll go. There's nothing I can do.”⁵⁶

Minerva is trapped in a cycle of domestic violence as her husband often beats her, but then asks for forgiveness, only to hurt Minerva again. Because the society considers her situation to be a private matter, there is nothing that Esperanza can do to help her friend other than be there for her in time of need.

The chapter titled “What Sally Said” focuses on another character named Sally, who is dealing with domestic violence. Due to her aunts' actions of running away from home with men, Sally's father worries about Sally bringing the same shame to the family. To prevent that from happening and keeping his daughter pure before marriage, he punishes her frequently for any provocative behavior.⁵⁷ One day after witnessing Sally going out with a boy, Sally's father severely beats her with a belt causing her to miss two days of school. The cycle of violence is perpetuated as Sally's mother treats Sally's cuts and bruises, but keeps the whole situation within the walls of their home, refusing to get any sort of help.

⁵⁶ Cisneros, p. 85

⁵⁷ Cisneros, p. 92-93

Sexual Harassment and Rape

Sexual harassment is defined as unwelcome behavior, either physical or verbal, of sexual nature. Some of the most common types of sexual harassment are catcalling, pressure for sexual favors, deliberate touching, leaning over, cornering, or pinching, and actual or attempted rape or sexual assault.⁵⁸ In Latin America, similarly to domestic violence, sexual assault is often a hidden crime, meaning that the Latin American governments never had the basis to provide the public with appropriate legislation to fight that crime.

When it comes to analyzing the perpetrators, men who engage in that kind of behavior often “endorse traditional stereotypes about gender roles – machismo and marianismo. They are hostile to women; have experienced abuse as a child; and have had early and frequent sexual experiences.”⁵⁹ Because of the machismo culture, sexual harassment is not uncommon in Latin America and the Caribbean. Taking a closer look at El Salvador, reportedly 57 percent of women at least on occasion suffer from sexual mistreatment in their household while 51 percent of workingwomen have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. Additionally, only 5 percent of rapes in the country are reported.⁶⁰

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza experiences both sexual harassment in the workplace as well as sexual assault. Her initial ideas of sexuality revolved around

⁵⁸ “What is Sexual Harassment”. *United Nations Women Watch*.

⁵⁹ Sequiera, p. 27

⁶⁰ Colburn Forrest D. *Latin America at the End of Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2002. p. 93

flirting with boys and wearing high-heeled shoes⁶¹, but one fateful day at work, she was forced to realize that being a woman has its dark side as well.

“Then he asked if I knew what day it was, and when I said I didn’t, he said it was his birthday and would I please give him a birthday kiss. I thought I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both his hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn’t let go.”⁶²

What was supposed to be a friendly peck on the cheek with an elderly coworker turns into a violent kiss on the lips forced on the young girl. What Esperanza initially thought of sexuality is now clouded by violence and foreshadowed an even worse fate.

In the chapter titled “Red Clowns”, Esperanza talks about being bothered by a group of boys at a carnival and, while not explicitly stated, sexually assaulted by one of them. The interesting thing about this chapter is the way Esperanza expresses her anger about what happened to her.

“Sally, you lied. It wasn’t what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn’t want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it’s supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me? (...) You’re a liar. They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong.”⁶³

Esperanza has seen so much violence against women in her world that it became ordinary and so she does not blame the boys for what happened. She is not upset with

⁶¹ Cisneros, p. 41

⁶² Cisneros, p. 55

⁶³ Cisneros, p. 99

the boys, but with Sally and the women who have contributed to Esperanza's idea about sex. In the past and the contemporary times, media is utilized to surround people with sex, not realizing how the constant exposure can develop subconscious expectation about sexuality. Thus, many have an unrealistic idea that sex should always be passionate and that both people will have simultaneous satisfaction.⁶⁴ However, what Esperanza experienced were dirty fingernails against her skin and a stranger's sour smell.

Conclusion

From the very beginning, women in Latin America have been struggling to break away from the dependency on men that the society has imposed on them. One of the most important aspects of the fight for their liberation is writing. Through writing and literature, women have been able to redefine their role in the society and claim their independent identities. Living in a very religious region, Latin American feminist authors found that redefinition of the religious figures allows for them to become more relatable for the modern everyday woman as she works and fights for her rights. It's easier for her to redefine herself from the negative stereotypes of a submissive wife into valiant women.

One of the biggest struggles women have to deal with is machismo, which continuously attempts to "put women where they belong" according to the patriarchal views it is based off of. Machismo takes many different forms, as seen in *The House on*

⁶⁴ Kircher, Jake and Melissa. "Does Media Distort Love? A look at our corrupting views of romance, relationships, and sexuality." *Relevant Magazine*. 12 Apr 2011. Web.

Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros. From catcalling to sexual assault, the literary work sheds light on the violence within private homes, making the issue more public and showing that it needs to be addressed by the society as a whole. Even though the novel was written in 1984, it still accurately reflects the violence and harassment that women experience in the modern days.

However, women are no longer destined to fight a lonely fight as they had in the novel. The problems of machismo and violence are still present in the lives of women in Latin America, but women are increasingly and continuously coming together to fight against the gender norms and harassment as they take and create opportunities for themselves; opportunities to take matters into their own hands and push forward to have their voices heard and take on an active role in political and economic life of their region.

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