

UNIVERSITATEA „ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” IAȘI
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ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE STUDII FILOLOGICE

**THE FEMALE SUBJECT IN CHICANO/A
LITERATURE**

Abstract of the Doctoral Thesis

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ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

The Chicano/a movement, upon which the doctoral dissertation entitled **The Female Subject in Chicano/a Literature** focuses, has always provided critics with an array of self-definitions in a constant attempt to justify its relevance as a cultural and socio-political movement.

Approaching such an issue related to minority literatures in an east-European environment might seem, in the beginning, at least an audacious attempt, if we consider the fact that there is little academic and public interest upon the topic.

There is, however, an intrinsic need for cultures that are relatively homogenous from an ethnic perspective (such as the Romanian one) to confront minority issues in order to surpass a certain “uncomfortable position” (cf. Michaela Mudure) when discussing different racial groups. Aside from this geographical and ideological motivation of the dissertation, dealing with the role of the female subject within an ethnic-bound literature such as the Chicano/a also brings forth another set of premises.

First of all, the issue of the female subject is central in the theoretic works of Chicanas, all the while being ignored by the representatives of the masculine ideology (Chicano). It is in this context that the Chicanas try to define their own creativity as well as the unique experience they have as inhabitants of communities of Mexican origins, by writing theoretical works alongside the literary ones (such as is the case with Gloria Anzaluda, Cherrie Moraga, Ana Castillo). A second premise is thus that of identifying a paradigm of literary and public/politic behavior for these writers.

Furthermore, by discussing the issues of identity within the Chicano/a environment, the dissertation also brings forth the idea that the female subject and its multiple manifestations is to be considered as being positioned in between *performance* and *performativity* (in Judith Butler’s terms). On the one hand, this approach provides the opportunity to define the Chicano/a literature as one that creates identity through discourse and imagination, and, on the other, it equals the process of writing with the act of self-definition, a process which the individual willingly goes through in search of his/her own identity.

By studying a set of relevant literary works belonging to the Chicano/a movement as well as some theoretical works, the analysis also bears another purpose, that of placing the two sub-movements (Chicano and Chicana) on parallel grounds and trying to

identify both common and divergent elements in their ways of dealing with the female subject.

After defining two fundamental concepts – *identity* and *ethnicity* - in the context of cultural studies and upon exploring the relationship they develop as cultural constructs, the dissertation focuses on the idea that *performance* is one of the necessary conditions in configuring an ethnic identity.

By placing the female subject in a series of “constitutive acts” (cf. Judith Butler) of this identity, the issue becomes one that helps individualize the Chicana experience. It is in this particular context that the dissertation aims at developing a taxonomy of female subject positions available within the literary and critical Chicano/a environment. Furthermore, the purpose of such an endeavor is that of highlighting the ways in which a minority identity is created and the way it functions in relation to the others (the afro-american, the asian-american etc).

By appealing to other areas of scientific interest, the dissertation can also be integrated in the larger context of gender studies.

The doctoral thesis has five chapters, two theoretical ones and three dedicated to the development of the proposed taxonomy of the female subject positions. The five chapters evince a constructionist approach to the process of identity formation, by assuming that cultural studies, in general, encourage such an approach, and that the Chicano/a movement, in particular, is relatively unique in that it provides a series of “constitutive acts” of the borderlands identity.

Both the theoretical and the argumentative chapters are, in their turn, structured on the basis of initial enunciation and further argumentation of the theories upon which the taxonomy is grounded. Thus, each chapter provides a series of general arguments applicable to the Chicano/a movement, as well as their particular encounters within the literary or theoretical works.

The first chapter, entitled, **The Cultural Construction of Chicano/a Identity**, defines, on the one hand, the two core concepts – identity and ethnicity – and on the other, provides an analysis of the contrastive approaches upon the topics. Identity is regarded as a “process” (cf. Stuart Hall) through which the individual configures his/her own existence, while ethnicity is rather essentialized, through a general ideological tendency to consider racial characteristics (invariably linked to the ethnic ones) as given by birth and not assumed by the individual.

However, there are critics that do not exclude a compromise between the two approaches (cf. Karen Christian, 1997) accept both the essentialising and the constructionist stances, and emphasize the fact that ethnic identity, just as gender identity (cf. Judith Butler, 1990), is rather assumed through discourse. This opens up the possibility to identify a series of *signifying performances* in constructing the Chicano/a identity.

There are five such constitutive performances which the analysis identifies as contributing to the construction of Chicano/a identity: the (re)discovery of *corrido*; the introduction of *la frontera* as a symbol of in-betweenness; the re-affirmation of Aztec origins through the revival of the mythical homeland of Aztlan; linguistic differentiation as a strategic tool in dealing with the white dominant and eventually the co-existence of the political and social activism and the literary activity.

The second chapter, entitled **Towards a Taxonomy of the Female Subject in the Borderlands** starts off by admitting the fact that the female subject was not among the priorities of the Chicano nationalist movement. It becomes relevant, however, during the second half of the 20th century, as feminism develops. Is it for this reason that the author of the thesis has considered it relevant to mention the different feminist waves, and insist upon the differences between feminism of color and 'wasp' feminism during the third wave. It is during this time that the previous ideological debate (largely based on contradicting Freud's psychoanalysis and the subsequent reflex of considering the female subject as inherently inferior due to the absence of the penis/phallus – a tendency that we have named "the castration reflex") is abandoned in favor of the ethnic element, as a super-stratum of the female persecution. By constructing a different identity, the Chicana female subject employs a certain "survival strategy" (cf. Gloria Anzaldúa).

The Chicana feminism is an outcome of this third wave debate, and it aims at providing an alternative to both the American feminism, largely focused on accumulating rights for women, and the nationalist masculine Chicano movement, which ignored the role of women in the political realm.

When discussing the integration strategies of the female subject within the two previously mentioned opposed ideologies, there are at least three which prove constant: 1) the revision of the legendary figures, previously employed by the dominant ideologies to establish the boundaries of traditional female behavior; 2) the reconfiguration of the rules according to which the female should behave within the Chicano community and which implicitly

perpetuate the subordination of women towards men; 3) the issuing of new identities for the Chicana female subject, by appealing to self-definition elements (such as the process of writing or queerness).

The three subchapters dedicated to these strategies foreground the analysis to be carried out in the following chapters.

Chapter III, **Female Agency in Rewriting Mythological Figures**, focuses on the mythological figures and the strategies to reconfigure them within the literary space. Starting off with the totalizing image of Coatlicue (the Aztec fertility goddess) and tracing her trajectory as a patriarchal symbol, the Chicanas purport to recover the lost image of femininity as it was defined in matriarchal societies. Both the Catholic derivatives (*La Virgen*) and the Mexican ones (*La Malinche*, *La Llorona*) are reinvested with human characteristics which aim at diminishing the passivity of the female subject and instead transform it into an active agent. The chapter deals with three texts (*So Far from God*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*) that justify these reconfiguration strategies. An at least surprising vision upon the mythologic female subjects is the to be seen in Rudolfo Anaya's *The Legend of La Llorona*.

The fourth chapter, **Female Regularity and the Reconfiguration of the Norm**, discusses a set of female attributes that have become rules over time and which are based on the previously mentioned mythical typologies, as well as on the silent acceptance of a patriarchal status quo over the centuries.

One of the first distinctions that the chapter brings forth is between the ideologies of *machismo* and *marianismo*, that have encouraged generations of Mexicans to believe that men can be violent and that women are traditionally submissive. By revising the attitude on these two ideologies, the Chicanas also operate a shift in the roles available to women in general. Thus, it becomes necessary to evaluate the extent to which the sex role inventories (BSRI and MSRI) are applicable to the Chicano/a environment and the ways in which they function within the respective community.

The analysis also brings forth issue of lesbianism and its presence as a literary device in contesting heteronormativity. By rejecting the idea that sexuality is regulated by heterosexual norms, the Chicana female subject affirms its independence in relation to any subordination tendency (cf. the *subaltern* position as defined by G. Spivak). Furthermore, a discussion upon lesbianism and the historical momentum in which it becomes an identitarian strategy

re-affirms the necessity to associate the construction of identity with the notion of performativity through discourse.

The textual analysis also aims at discussing the strategies employed to abolish the gender paradigms. One of those strategies is to present the pattern and gradually re-configure it (as in *Face of an Angel*). A second would be introducing a new typology with which potential female readers could identify (as it is the case in bildungsroman-like texts such as *The House on Mango Street*, or lesbian texts such as *Giving Up the Ghost*). The masculine view on the topic also follows different strategies, from reaffirming and perpetuating the female roles (as is the case in *corridos*, the works of Luis Valdez or in the *I am Joaquin* poem written by Rodolfo Corky Gonzales), to simply affirming them, without suggesting a divergent position (as in *Bless Me, Ultima*, by Rudolfo Anaya) and eventually to completely ignoring the feminine issue.

The fifth chapter, **Living as a New Mestiza: Asserting Female Agency through Writing and Public Personae**, discusses the performance elements of the female subject identity in Chicano/a literature, as well as in the public existence of the Chicana authors previously discussed.

The theoretical background of this final chapter is explained by an appeal to Judith Butler's notion of gender performance. The analysis proves to be a necessary one in order to justify, on the one hand, the previous idea of constructing identity through literary discourse, and, on the other, the interference between the real and the literary realms in the case of Chicana authors.

By concluding that the female subject is constructed by means of literary and public discourse, thus being an "effect" of it, it becomes relevant to mention a series of theoretical contributions of the Chicana movement.

It is in this context that the process of writing becomes the main tactic in configuring a new identity for the female subject and the ways in which these writers position themselves towards it suggests the type of identity they want to perform.

The final subchapter entitled **The Contemporary Chicana Subjectivity 'in' or 'out of' Process?** questions the relevance of a feminist movement in the 21st century, bearing in mind the fact that there are voices claiming that the women have already gained a "power to self-define" (cf. Natasha Walter) and all they have to do is exploit it in a contemporary context, and also opinions that advocate the necessity to continue the struggle to overcome the masculine domination (cf. Naomi Wolf).

The analysis of the Chicano/a female subject identity is brought into a contemporary debate as the two apparently divergent positions are discussed in this sub-chapter. Some of the Chicana authors seem to have abandoned the social struggle and shifted their interest to an exclusive academic environment, while others perpetuate the initial struggle of the movement by appealing to new technologies and by being actively involved in the public life of the community. Either they have ended the process of creating an identity or not, the two attitudes prove that there is in fact a certain synonymy between *discourse performativity* and *theatrical performance* (which Butler herself avoids). It is this context that it becomes necessary to acknowledge the fact that the Chicano/a movement no longer bears the same significance in the realm of social activism as it used to.

Writing a dissertation upon the female subject in Chicano/a literature proves pertinent as the topic is relatively unknown in Romania (there are few articles related to the Chicano/a topic and not full translation of works by Chicanos/as)/

The taxonomy of the female subject that the dissertation enlarges upon reflects, on the one hand, a status quo, and, on the other, the repeated attempts to revise it. Even though conceptual distinctions among female subject positions within the Chicano/a environment have been made, the current project deserves a special place as it brings together in structured manner a series of theoretical works (such as the ones related to the mythological figures) and it also identifies some specific categories (such as the regular female subject or the writer who is a subject of her own discourse).

The originality of the dissertation also springs from the contrastive approach to the Chicano and Chicana movements, from both literary and ideological perspectives, although the female subject could be considered a feminine preference rather than a masculine one. The analysis is even more relevant as it is rarely the case within the Chicano/a exegesis to encounter the two components in a parallel position, some of the critics preferring to approach the comparison unidirectionally (by excluding one or the other sides of the gendered movement), while others prefer incorporating the two under the same label of a minority vision.

KEY WORDS

Female Subject, Identity, Ethnicity, Minorities, Feminism,
American Literature, Chicano/Literature

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Chicana literature is a form of literature that has emerged from the Chicana Feminist movement. It aims to redefine Chicana archetypes in an effort to provide positive models for Chicanas. Chicana writers redefine their relationships with what Gloria Anzaldúa has called "Las Tres Madres" of Mexican culture by depicting them as feminist sources of strength and compassion. Chicano Literature Students: Castro, Carolina Frascino, Vanessa Professor: Mariana Mussetta Subject: Literary Studies II UTN. Villa Mar a 2012 Topics Key Concepts " A free PowerPoint PPT presentation (displayed as a Flash slide show) on PowerShow.com - id: 62dd1c-MzNkM. Chicano Literature - PowerPoint PPT Presentation. To view this presentation, you'll need to allow Flash. Click to allow Flash. After you enable Flash, refresh this page and the presentation should play. Loading PPT " Chicano Literature PowerPoint presentation | free to download - id: 62dd1c-MzNkM. The Adobe Flash plugin is needed to view this content. Get the plugin now. The Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies major offers an interdisciplinary curriculum of academic study that critically examines the historical and contemporary experiences of people of Mexican descent in the context of American society and institutions. Moreover, in light of continuous immigration from Mexico, and now Central America, the Chicano studies major curriculum includes the study of particular aspects of Mexican history, culture, and politics as they bear upon the Chicano community, past and present. Emphasis is given in the major to the student developing a broad knowledge of the Chicano experience. 1996. Conjugating subjects in the age of multiculturalism. In Mapping multiculturalism, ed. Gordon, Avery F. and Newfield, Christopher. 1998. Irigaray's female symbolic in the making of Chicana lesbian sites y lenguas (sites and discourses). In Living Chicana theory. See Trujillo 1998. Google Scholar. In Criticism in the borderlands: Studies in Chicano literature, culture, and ideology, eds. Calderón, Hector and Saldivar, José David. Durham: Duke University Press. Google Scholar. See more ideas about chicano, books, books to read. Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico, a book by Deborah Cohen. Alice Bag. Feminist Books. PILGRIMS IN AZTLAN by Miguel Mendez 1992 Chicano Literature Paperback. (Item #Z0927534223Z3|0). | eBay! J-B ASHE Higher Education Report Series (AEHE): Chicanos in Higher Education Vol. 22 : Issues and Dilemmas for the 21st Century 42 by Adalberto, Jr.