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The (Un)Making of the Woman as Sinner in *The Memories of Ana Calderón*

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RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la intertextualidad de las historias de Eva, Hagar, La Malinche y Yocasta en *The Memories of Ana Calderón* de Graciela Limón. La autora además nutre el texto de referencias a la cultura popular y a las telenovelas, añadiendo así al efecto melodramático del mismo. Al enfrentar estas narrativas "universales" la protagonista logra resignificarlas y liberarse a sí misma de la carga patriarcal que encierran.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the intertextuality of the stories of Eve, Hagar, Malinche and Jocasta in Graciela Limón's *The Memories of Ana Calderón*. The author also feeds the text with references to popular culture and soap-operas, thus adding to its melodramatic effect. In confronting these "universal" narratives, the protagonist is able to re-signify them and to liberate herself from the patriarchal weight that they encompass.

Palabras clave:

Graciela Limón, mujeres, Eva, Hagar, La Malinche, Yocasta, narrativas maestras

Keywords:

Graciela Limón, women, Eve, Hagar, Malinche, Jocasta, master narratives

The (Un)Making of the Woman as Sinner in *The Memories of Ana Calderón*

Graciela Limón's *The Memories of Ana Calderón* (1994) is a text that explores the "master" narratives that envelop the protagonist, sometimes as a Mexican woman, but mainly so as a woman. These narratives are founded upon the premise that women are either cursed or a curse lives within them; a premise ensconced within traditional icons of "derailed" womanhood such as: Eve, Hagar, La Malinche, and Jocasta. However, the question as to why that curse is or exists prompts the re-valorization of these rather "commonplace" or "universal" stories to see these characters/myths in a different light. Ana Calderón, the protagonist of a first-person account highlighted within the broader perspectives that a third-person narrator provides, faces and re-valorizes these iconic literary and cultural prototypes by narrating her life, and advancing Hélène Cixous call, herself as a woman. The curse she was told to believe she had since she has a child becomes not a self-fulfilling prophecy, but a patriarchal-fulfilling one that she must undo.

As Ellen McCracken asserts: "*The Memories of Ana Calderón* uses first- and third-person narration to elaborate the protagonist's counter-memory as a resignification of several master narratives; the various re-semantizations that the novel undertakes are a useful solution for the protagonist but are not set up as a new universal master text that all must follow" (43). In this analysis, I explore the intertextuality of Ana's account with the aforementioned icons to underscore the pervasive nature of these narratives that encompass a deep rejection, if not abhorrence, of all that is related to women in the singularization or trope of the "sinning woman." It is a trope with a cultural and discursive foundation that Gloria Anzaldúa aptly sums up: "If a woman rebels, she is a *mujer mala*" (39). In this work of fiction by contemporary writer Graciela Limón, this singularization is embodied by the penitent woman Ana Calderón sees in a Shrine when she was a child; an image that haunts her throughout her life. When Ana asks about this lady, she is told by her Tía Olga in a black-and-white melodramatic manner that this woman was in penitence because "[s]he [was] a sinner" (Limón 30). Given the role of melodrama as the general backdrop for the aforementioned icons of "problematic" or

"derailed" womanhood, an overview of the plot gives us the clues as to how their narratives as rebellious figures are re-signified in this text.

Limón's novel is the story of a woman who was raised believing that she was cursed; the kind of belief that propels major melodrama. Her father thought Ana had "poisoned" her mother's womb, since all of her siblings turned out to be "useless girls" (22), until the day her brother César was born. Still, Ana's father "stared at [her] with his resentful eyes" (19) as if she were intrinsically evil. When her mother dies, the family decides to go north and end up in Los Angeles. In her late teens, Ana becomes sexually involved with her childhood friend Octavio (who had joined them in their going north) and Ana becomes pregnant. Rodolfo, Ana's father accuses her of being a "whore" (73) and almost beats her to death (72-74). Not knowing that Octavio was the father of the child, Rodolfo convinces him that he should marry Alejandra, Ana's sister, and above all, that he should have as much sexual experience as possible. Octavio leaves Ana waiting at the altar on the day they were supposed to get married, and he ends up marrying Alejandra, the "respectable" one in the eyes of the family. In crafting the novel, it is more than evident that Graciela Limón is drawing from an easy to identify pool of soap opera/melodramatic and popular culture material (McCracken 43) that appears as commonplace for, at the very least, the Latino/a readership. All the while, the author and the text are in dialogue with the canonical myths about Eve, Hagar, La Malinche and Jocasta.

Ana, with the help of people from various nationalities living in East Los Angeles, will become very successful in business, and like the biblical Hagar, will name her son Ismael. She raises him with the help of an Oklahoma couple who truly valued her talents and potential. However, a new complication arrives. Octavio, upon returning from the war, steals Ismael from Ana when the boy is about ten years old. Alejandra, like a twenty-first century version of the biblical Sarah, was married to Octavio and rejects Ismael (even though he is her nephew) because his presence reminds her that she cannot conceive. The boy ends up getting adopted by an American couple who decides to change his name, and thus his identity, to Terrence Wren; a change Ana did not know

about. This is certainly material that provides the grounds for major soap operas to unfold, --and brewing tragedies--, to thrive on.

Years later, when he is twenty-five, Terrence ends up working for Ana, then a successful businesswoman in her mid-forties and who does not recognize him as Ismael. In a quick, melodramatic and tragic fashion, they become sexually involved, and soon after, he dies in a plane crash. This is mainly the plot in terms of the intertextuality with the story Eve, Hagar, La Malinche, and Jocasta, and indeed, with soap-opera material. Terrence never knew that he had been sexually involved with his mother. However, later on, Octavio told Ana that Terrence was in fact her son Ismael.

Ana then --*a post-curse Jocasta*-- is the one who has to live with that knowledge. This underscores how a person can change names, addresses, professions, national allegiance or hair color --that is, aspects of identity that are circumstantial--, but kinship is the one aspect that is not circumstantial. It remains a fact, a biological and historical one, throughout. Moreover, their not recognizing each other as related underscores the diversity in physical traits that is often found in Hispanic/Latino families. From the gender perspective, the fact that Ana does not recognize Terrence as Ismael challenges the idea of the exaggerated naturalization of motherhood that makes women mothers before and above their being individuals. Why, then, would she necessarily or *naturally* recognize Terrence Wren as her son? In her mind, he was probably still a child since that is how she would remember him, regardless of the passage of time. But more importantly, for her, he would still be Ismael.

The Four Icons/ The New Narrative

Seamus Deane has affirmed that: "[a] colonized people is without a specific history and even, (…) without a specific language" (10). As subjects subordinated to another power, in this case, the patriarchal ethos of the narratives in which they are conceived and/or regarded, the four icons: Eve, Hagar, La Malinche and Jocasta do not appear, as women, to own a history or a language (much less their own stories) while viewed within the same optic in which they were made to be seen as the instigators of sin

or bearers of a curse. As Marta E. Sánchez observes: "La Malinche is allowed to represent 'family' and 'nation,' but she, like the women she represents, is not permitted to speak for family and nation…" (34). Thus, La Malinche, as well as the other icons, are represented by an ideological framework that make them appear to represent the fears and the contempt projected onto them because they are women. Ana María Carbonell, following Anzaldúa, explains how the "pervasive denigration of female agency in Mexican culture has created the well-known virgin-versus-whore paradigm, a dualistic structure that attempts to police female behavior […] while denigrating figures who take action, such as La Malinche and La Llorona[1], as selfish, treacherous and destructive" (56). Allowing such icons to fully own and question the narratives imposed on them, and in which they are nonetheless influential protagonists, as is the case of Ana Calderón, is a way to re-signify them and to denounce the patriarchal ideology in which they are founded.

The protagonist of Limón's novel will identify herself with these four women to one degree or another, Hagar being the more obvious of the two biblical ones. Eve disobeyed the rules of Eden because she was searching for knowledge, and so did Ana when she wanted to study and be a dancer when she was growing up instead of becoming a mother, which was culturally expected of her. Ana did get pregnant, but out of wedlock, which made her an outcast in the eyes of her father. Around that time, Ana was living with the Oklahoma couple with whom she would read passages from the Bible and that is how she learned about the story of Hagar, who is regarded as the mother of Islam, the "handmaid[2]" who, as decided by Sarah, the mother of the Hebrews (Teubal xv), was to have sexual relations with Abraham so that he would have offspring. However, Hagar was sent away once Sarah was able to conceive a child with Abraham. Hagar's son was Ismael, who also becomes an outcast when his mother is sent away, as decided by his father. Interestingly, of the four mythical icons of womanhood influencing Ana's narrative, Hagar is more of an outcast than a sinner, and is the one whose story directly allows Ana to re-define her own. It was Ana who pointed out to Franklin and Amy Bast, the Oklahoma couple, when interpreting Hagar's story that "the Lord saved Hagar because she was important on her own; because she was who she was" and "not only so

that she could have the baby" (Limón 101) after being expelled from Abraham and Sarah's household.

In regards to the myth of La Malinche, in many ways, Ana Calderón emerges as a *neo-Malinche*, since she performed as cultural translator with the people she met in East L.A., and as a labor union-style negotiator when working as an operator at the Feurmann shoe-manufacturing site. But from the patriarchal perspective, La Malinche is devalued and seen as the embodiment of the woman as traitor[3]. Commenting on other classical and folkloric icons, Sandra Messinger Cypess highlights how: "[f]ear of women, distrust of woman in a powerful position, envy of the woman as procreator, all of these features of masculinist attitudes are present in the origination of the Medea-Malinche-Llorona paradigm" (20). Along these lines, Eve and La Malinche appear to be backdrops of sin, one in the general "universal" cultural realm and the other in the more specific Latin American understanding of its history and its societies, respectively.

Considering the "universal"/localized connection between La Malinche and Eve, Messinger Cypess explains: "[t]he placement of La Malinche in the Eve paradigm not only identifies her as the primary instigator of the fall from Paradise, but she also becomes linked to the punishments of Eve, including her inferior status within the patriarchy" (17). Moreover, they are both depicted as responsible for disrupting an order that otherwise would be "pristine." One might ponder: whose Paradise was it, and was it ever? It is an order that is made to appear as if it pre-dated women; an illusion that is echoed and enforced in familial voices as when Ana's Tía Olga tells her: "we women all say the same thing. But in the end, no one asks us what we want, or don't want" (14). Coincidentally, no one ever consulted with Ismael the switch to his new identity when he was adopted. It was all decided for him. Like La Malinche and Eve, both Ana and Ismael were framed by patriarchal power or privilege. Adding Ismael, a male, to the picture is a bold move toward gender emancipation, since it demonstrates how a social, cultural, and epistemological ethos based on patriarchal dynamics, affects both sexes nonetheless.

The order that these women appear to disrupt is based on their own subordination to a hierarchical power that goes by different names while they all convey the same pattern of subjugation: the normalization of the masculine, the Law of the Father, or reign

of the male. Referring to La Malinche, Deena González raises a fundamental point of analysis: "[i]f we inquire about how much decision-making power she had (or see her as a slave or mistress), we are really asking about her relationship to and around men" (8). The same applies to Eve, to Hagar, to Jocasta, and to Ana Calderón. How she becomes a *post-curse Jocasta* is the result of a progression of that gap in the decision-making process as presented (or not) to her from girlhood to womanhood. Early on, the women in her family acknowledged (without any hint at challenging those dynamics) that major decisions are made for them and they have no say in the process. It was Ana's father who called her a "whore" and who rejected her if for no other reason than her being female. It was Octavio who not only stood her up on the day they were supposed to get married, but it was him who took Ismael away from Ana, only to end up putting him up for adoption. Thus, unsuspectingly, Octavio was setting the scene up for confusion and a tragedy that need not have occurred had he not forcefully carried out the patriarchal privilege that fueled his actions when he took Ismael away from his mother.

Like the other three icons, Jocasta is generally read in terms of the men in the narrative where she appears to be framed. In Sophocles play, "Oedipus remains the undoubted protagonist. The thoughts or the feelings of Jocasta are important only insofar as they affect her son/husband" (Colakis 217). Indeed, when applied in the psychoanalytical realm, Oedipus appears as "dogma" (Deleuze and Guattari 51). While the intent here is not to delve into the specifics of psychoanalysis as a field, the dogmatic view of this myth --noting it has been widely applied in some areas literary analysis-- is consistent with the patriarchal ethos that encircles the narratives of the "sinning" women in question.

"Sacred writings serve to indoctrinate people into a particular belief," points out Teubal (xxiv). Myths, like Oedipus or Jocasta, also serve this purpose and this is why a re-signification of them, shedding all forms of gender subordination, is a necessary endeavor of cultural and literary relevance. In Graciela Limón's text, for instance, the focus of the Oedipus myth shifts from Ismael to Ana, since at the time of his death he was completely oblivious to the tragedy in which he had unknowingly participated; a tragedy that was facilitated by his own father. In this light, Ismael, an adopted child, can

hardly be read in the traditional patriarchal manner in which Oedipus tends to be approached. In any case, the main focus is not on him but on Ana, who now has to undo herself of the narratives of "problematic" or "sinning" women imposed on her so that she can begin anew[4].

Conclusions

Before she is able to own her personal history via her own narrative, all of Ana's familial relationships appear to be wounded, but it is not because she is a woman, but rather because of how she is valued (or rather, undervalued) as a woman. As a *neo-Malinche* or *post-curse Jocasta*, and mainly as Ana Calderón the character herself, this protagonist is able to reclaim a narrative of her own and understand her own worth as a woman and as a person. At the end, Ana discovers that there was no curse, no original sin, in her being who she was. The so-called "curse" was scripted for her. It was a self-negating/ patriarchal-fulfilling prophecy she was not invited to have a say in its crafting process.

Her own words at the end of her own account express the self-worth gained: "I was at peace because now I understood that I had lived and loved, and that I had discovered the value of who I am" (Limón 199). Thus, Ana challenges the master narratives projected onto her, and liberates herself from them while elaborating her own.

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NOTES

[1] Although La Llorona is not one of the four icons I concentrate on in this analysis, it is certainly a related icon to the general discussion of woman as a rebel or *mujer mala* as Anzaldúa would note. In Carbonell's words: "Despite the negative portrayals of La Llorona and Cihuacoatl, depictions of La Llorona as a resistant maternal figure who confronts the unjust race, class, and gender hierarchy of colonial Mexico also emerge from folkloric literature" (56).

[2] About the way Hagar is depicted in the Bible, Savina Teubal explains: "we turn to the traditionally subordinate women in the Genesis narratives –the handmaids, concubines, or slaves—in an effort to recreate their experience. (…) [T]he conventional concept of 'female slave' must be correlated with the function of the 'handmaids' described in the Genesis narratives, and with Hagar in particular" (xxiv).

[3]Lolliannette Emannuelli raises a very pertinent question: "¿quién traicionó a quién verdaderamente? No sería ilógico pensar que Malinche se percibiera a sí misma frente a sus experiencias como una mujer traicionada y maltratada por los mismos de su raza" (51).

[4]In her discussion of modern expressions of the Jocasta myth in theater, Marianthe Colakis points out (referring to Michèle Fabien's *Jocasta*): "While her unique situation remains, Jocasta also becomes Everwoman struggling to tell her story apart from men's narratives" (229).