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Redefining the Father Figure in Contemporary Chicana Literature

In contemporary Western societies the figure of the father as a cultural role has rested on male dominance and has been consequently linked to the concept of manhood. Male gender identity itself has to a certain extent evolved into a cultural script passed on via the male. David Gilmore corroborates this point in his assertion that "the manhood ideal is not purely psychogenetic in origin but it is also a culturally imposed ideal to which men must conform whether or not they find it psychologically congenial" (4). Fatherhood – and manhood as a powerful component of the paternal figure – has developed throughout history carrying the aforementioned cultural values and traditions that are subject to changes along with society. Therefore, fatherhood should not be considered a fixed, institutionalized identity but a mutable identity whose anthropological assumptions depend on historical and social circumstances.

Contemporary Chicano literary texts show Chicano males, legitimate heirs of a patriarchal Catholic legacy, also affected by the social and cultural circumstances where they play the father's role, which must be considered a clear performance of a pre-established cultural script. It is inscribed within a cultural ground and should not be taken as a perpetual model; rather, it can be challenged, re-defined and finally conformed to the new social and historical situation. Similarly, racial and ethnic backgrounds contribute to the construction of a particular set of gender acts where fatherhood appears directly sustained and influenced by notions of manhood. No unique set of roles and patterns is any longer suitable for all Chicano men, who are presently engaged in a pro-

cess of self-evaluation and re-definition of inherited cultural assumptions on what *ser padre* means and, by extension, *ser hombre*.

The terms *macho*, *machismo* and *machista* behavior all illustrate the complicated map that Latino and Chicano manhood has traveled over the years. As have many other Chicano/a writers and thinkers, Gloria Anzaldúa gives an insightful commentary on these terms when she claims:

> The modern meaning of the word "machismo," as well as the concept, is actually an Anglo invention. For men like my father, being "macho" meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love. Today's macho has doubts about his ability to fit and protect his family. His "machismo" is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchical male dominance. (83)

The connection Anzaldúa makes between *machismo* and *fatherhood* reinforces our view of the close relation between both concepts. To understand the Chicano father one needs to fully understand the implications of what being *macho* is. Chicano and Chicana writers are making a great effort to condemn machismo by speaking the truth about their fathers and about themselves as sons and daughters who will someday become parental figures. As for the sons in particular, they not only question the supposedly negative cultural inheritance associated with machismo (as Anglos would have them believe); they also rescue its positive meanings from historical oblivion by transforming the male heritage they, as fathers, will pass on to their own sons. The new social conditions Chicanos find in the United States along with national policies have necessarily affected the Chicanos' traditional roles within the family.

In the last two decades a number of studies have appeared, rescuing the father from his obscure and sometimes misunderstood circumstances but, as Alfredo Mirandé comments, "family researchers have typically used the Anglo-American family as the benchmark against which other family forms are measured" (1991, 58). Therefore, studies on African-American and Chicano families have found them deficient and deviant from what has been considered standard family structures. Different political, social

and historical circumstances need to be considered in order to deessentialize family studies and provide justice to family patterns which deserve a perceptive and unbiased analysis. To begin with, the Chicano father is a member of a marginalized community. Unlike white fathers, his priorities include surviving in a hostile society that, because of his race and culture, denies him the opportunities and privileges bestowed upon white fathers. Both race and culture become distinguishing features that define him as 'Other' in American society and destabilize his own identity as male within Chicano culture. When social scientists mention the contemporary crisis of masculinity, they usually forget the interaction of racial and social factors. bell hooks in her essay "Men: Comrades in Struggle" calls attention to the fact that the

> poor or working class man who has been socialized via sexist ideology to believe that there are privileges and powers he should possess solely because he is male, often finds that few if any of these benefits are automatically bestowed him in life. (73)

In the same way, Chicano men, as mostly poor men of color, live between two worlds where their manhood is represented and viewed quite differently. Regarding the men's movement, the writer Ray González comments on its lack of connection with the experience of men of color in American society arguing that

> the men's movement has been seen as primarily a white-male cause. The gatherings of men and the issues confronted in the publications are not addressing minority issues, like urban crime, racism, and poverty. They are not admitting there are double standards in the educational system. (xvi)

Indeed, Chicano fathers have been blamed not only for hindering young Chicanos' progress in American society but also for being destructive fathers and abusive husbands. Such assumptions are fundamentally based on cultural stereotypes that seem to confirm the culturally dominant perception of the Chicano 'Other,' but which prove to be mere mechanisms of cultural ethnocentric manipulation

Chicano fatherhood and the interwoven notion of machismo are some of the values that need to be redefined. Many discrimi-

natory practices and prejudices against Chicano culture are frequently based on supposedly negative and even 'pathological' qualities inherent to it. The father not only acts as a complementing parental figure but also transmits ideological and cultural information about gender roles to both sons and daughters. Like the mother in the female sphere, the father is the model figure who provides the model of manhood *(hombría)* that will inevitably affect his son's development into adulthood. Moreover, his conception of being *macho* is related to a cultural value regarding manhood, so *machismo* has become a cultural practice among Latinos. However, as cultural practices, *machismo* and being *macho*, need to be seen at a more global level where many of factors intervene.

We understand *hombría* (manhood) as a very general term which includes cultural constructions of masculine behavior, something very similar to David Gilmore's statement that "the manhood ideal is not purely psychogenetic." However, in Latino cultures, to be *macho* refers to the particular behavior expected from a 'real' man. Unfortunately, this term seems to have been misinterpreted and manipulated in English, since in Spanish it means "brave, spirited, enterprising, strong, and robust."[1] One of the best-known Chicano writers, Rudolfo Anaya, comments on the term saying that a "far greater percentage of men of the barrios went about their work, raising families, trying to do the best they could for them. Macho means taking care of *la familia*. Perhaps this is the most important definition of macho, the real, positive meaning of the word" (González 66). As we can see the positive connotations of the word contrast with the meaning it has acquired in English: "aggressively masculine: *He thinks it's macho to drink a lot and get into fights*" (*Oxford Advanced Dictionary* 748).

1 According to the *DRAE (Diccionario de la Real Academia Española)* the word macho means: "1. Animal del sexo masculino [?] [...] 14. Fuerte, vigoroso. 15. Valiente, animoso, esforzado." Besides, Maria Moliner's *Diccionario del uso del español* includes no negative or derogative meanings for the word *macho*, either.

Furthermore, we need to distinguish between the positive concept of *macho* and the negative concept of *machismo* that refers to a degeneration of masculine behavior which includes exaggerated masculine traits and discriminatory attitudes towards women.[2] This concept has a similar meaning in both Latino and Anglo cultures. However, in English it has replaced the more general concept of Chicano manhood (*macho* behavior). To be a *macho* in the U.S. is something clearly different than being a *macho* in Spain or in Latin American countries. Therefore, this is an obvious case of cultural manipulation of a foreign term that shows how American society not only lacks knowledge about Chicano culture but it also reinvents its values and cultural notions for the oppressor's benefit.

Rudolfo Anaya also supports the idea that there is a need for revision and reinforcement of Chicano male values so that young Chicanos don't grow up with mistaken ideas about themselves:

> There is a lesson to be learned here. Let us *not* repeat the loss of the prior generation, a loss we see today in the streets. Let us *not* be "powerless" as men. Let us *not* act out negative behaviors. We have within us the power to change. We have the future of our community at stake, so macho behavior has to be used positively for the community. (González 65)

A whole transformation is required for the internal benefit of the community, as well as for the revaluation of the image of Chicano men in mainstream society. They have already put up with many stereotypes and labels related to their manhood such as their chauvinistic character and their violent behavior as "rey de la casa."

The Chicano male not only needs to fight against those stereotypes originated in American and Chicano cultures, but he also needs to redefine and reconfigure his own role as man and father. Notwithstanding women's entrance in the labor market and their increasing economic independence, the male is still considered the family's principal provider. Therefore, male salaries have been regarded as family wages, out of which a family had to

2 *DRAE*: "Actitud de prepotencia de los varones respecto a las mujeres."

be supported. In the United States socio-historical circumstances undoubtedly influence the development of the traditional family structure and generational interaction where the father becomes paradoxically a loving and hated figure. Contemporary Chicano writers attempt to demystify some basic assumptions on manhood and masculinity by addressing some of the prescriptive features desired in a man but which happen to be unsuitable for the present experience of the Chicano population in the United States. Issues of class, language and race are fundamental to understand the role of Chicano fathers and also father/son and father/daughter relationships. In order to cope with such differences, an effort is required from both parts though confrontation is most times unavoidable. As the first and most difficult stage of recent migration is overcome, the new generation or U.S.-born Chicanos have easier and longer access to education. Consequently, they are more exposed to the new world view and system of values that American society offers.

Many contemporary male authors such as Arturo Islas, Richard Rodríguez, Ray González and Victor Martínez are trying to come to terms with their own Chicano manhood and with their own fathers. Due to space restrictions we would like to concentrate on the figure of the father from a female perspective and explore father/daughter relationships since little has been said about this relationship in comparison to mother-daughter links. A separate study has been devoted to male writers' response to father/son relationships and the evolving concept of manhood in the Chicano community (Alonso and Domínguez).

Chicana writers collaborate in the project of revising the father figure in Chicano culture. They do so by addressing father-daughter relationships from a new perspective. When Chicana writers began to write, father figures were either ignored or depicted as dominant and sometimes violent patriarchs. This is the case of groundbreaking Chicana works like Cherríe Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* and *Shadow of a Man*, Sandra Cisneros's *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* and Helena María Viramontes's *The Moths and Other Stories*. These writers' purpose was clearly to attack the father as

representative of a repressive ideology that perpetuated strict gender roles. Ana Castillo's epigraph to her famous work *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) substantially summarizes this point: "I quit loving my father a long time ago. What remained was the slavery to a pattern." In this first stage, Chicana writers tried to deconstruct the heroic figure of the father through disorientated or unbalanced characters, challenging traditional assumptions about their deserved authority.

However, a new tendency alludes to a more complex understanding of Chicano fathers in contemporary American society that takes into account their social circumstances and decaying role within the family. The heritage of machismo accompanies the immigrant father to a hostile environment where his manhood is threatened and unacknowledged. Unfortunately, a man relegated to poor working conditions or unemployment who becomes a victim of racist and discriminatory practices is a potential family assailant. He becomes a silent man whose only way to recover his hurt manhood is by exerting power in the private sphere over those who are even more oppressed or unprotected such as women and children. Socioeconomic conditions are powerful forces in shaping the father's role and it directly affects the parent-child relationship: a father who in his need for power displays authoritarian, dominating behavior at home is only increasing the already existing climate of oppression. Alcohol or domestic violence becomes the outlet of all the accumulated tensions and pressures on the Chicano father unable to 'perform' the macho qualities expected within the Chicano community and becoming a negative model for his son and daughters.

The issue of silence and service is very connected to daughters. As the Hispanic saying ("Women speak when chicken go to pee") implies, daughters, like mothers and wives, are silenced in the patriarch's presence unless allowed to answer their requests. Therefore, communication problems abound around the father, especially a working class father. The realm of the feminine and the emotional seems to be reserved for women. Detached from this feminine space, fathers are obliged to 'perform' their role of masters, rational and cold males who hold all decision power.

However, this apparently powerful position frequently hides a disempowered and fearful man who carries the burden of many demands upon his manhood. He is a disguised agonizing Chicano patriarch trapped within the annihilating experience of migration and racism.

Fathers are supposed to be tough men, enduring figures that never show their feelings and emotions, while daughters have been taught to respect their fathers and pay a life-long homage of service. Helena Maria Viramontes has been one of the most outstanding critics of patriarchy within Chicana Literature. In her first work, *The Moths and Other Stories,* the father figures are predominantly negative portrayals of patriarchal authorities. In "Growing" the father forces Naomi, his adolescent daughter, to be chaperoned by a younger sister though this proves to be an obsolete custom in the States where girls have more freedom:

> the idea of having to be watched by a young snot like Lucía was insulting to her maturity [...]. There seemed to be no way out of the custom [...]. Amá, Naomi said, exasperated but determined not to cower out of this one, Amá, the United States is different [...]. "You have to ask your father." [...] It was Apá who refused to trust her, and she could not understand what she had done to make him so distrustful. TÚ ERES MUJER, he thundered like a great voice above the heavens, and that was the end of any argument. (36)

Indeed, women's sexuality and the obsession about a girl's purity/virginity is one of the most common troubling issues around father-daughter relationships. Fathers have been frequently depicted as dictators at home, masters and chauvinist guardians of their women's dignity/honor. This apparently does not clash with the double standard applicable to men. They worship their mothers as saintly, pure images and want their wives and daughters to be the same; however, they can openly reassert their manhood womanizing as they please.

Women writers like Denise Chávez continue attacking such double standards and reclaiming their right over their bodies and sexuality. *Face of an Angel* is a harsh critique on the patriarchal domination through a revision of the line of fathers in Soveida's family. They are womanizing, abusive men, but they are also

"weak" and powerless men trying to deny what is obvious. The novel also alludes to women's and mother's role collaborating in women's victimization as can be seen in the chapter "Mothers Teach Your Sons." As Anaya reminds us: "Oedipal complexes and fears aside, we are our mother's creation, and so early macho behavior will be shaped actively and by nuance by the mother" (68). In *Face of an Angel,* Soveida overhears her brother's comments about another girl and goes mad when her mother justifies him:

> "She has the face of an angel and she likes to fuck." I can't remember if he said "and" she likes to fuck or "but" she likes to fuck [...]. "He's that way," Dolly says. "Your brother's *that* way, Soveida." "*That* way? How did he get *that* way?" I ask. "Weren't you around back then, Dolores, to see that he didn't become *that way*?" (376)

Mothers not only have encouraged *machista* behavior and control of women's sexuality but they have endured male violence, as we will see further on. It is necessary to realize that this pattern of violent behavior is surreptitiously encouraged by white men in power since Chicano aggressive behavior perpetuates the racist stereotype that discriminates him in society and distracts him from criticizing sexism or capitalism. Young Chicano males are increasingly aware of this social problem, sharing their efforts to fight against cultural gender constructions no longer suitable for hard daily life in American society where both father and mother, wife and husband, have to fight to get a place in society and a future for their children. The father, as head of the family is usually responsible for its welfare. However, in the last decades statistical studies showed an increasing number of Latino fathers who abandon their families, provoking the dismemberment of whole families and bringing further poverty to those who struggle to stick together.

A second stage in Latina literature about fathers is concerned about the need to recover male relationships in Latinas' lives and engage in a thorough exploration of the father figure and his circumstances. Notwithstanding her critique of Soveida's father's *machista* behavior, Denise Chávez also provides a new demythologized image of the father as a weak, insecure male who con-

stantly dreams about suckling women's breasts. At his deathbed, Soveida acknowledges the positive lesson her father represents, a model not to imitate:

> I had wanted to say so many things to Luardo, to tell him that I knew he loved me, as he knew I had loved him; that I never agreed with him, the way he lived his life; that I never wanted to be like him. Sin Juicio. And yet he was my father [...]. He taught me what love was through his lovelessness, and what loyalty was, and yes, trust, through his lack of both. Perhaps we learn the most valuable lessons from those we've ceased to understand. (403)

In Viramontes' "The Jumping Bean," we find an attempt to rescue and understand the circumstances that may provoke tension and violence within families. While abusive fathers and husbands had been previously seen from the only perspective of *machista* authoritarian ideology, Viramontes makes us reflect on the experience of these fathers as a way to see the true causes of violence. After being humiliated and mocked at as a *spic* at work, a father almost strikes his daughter when she challenges his authority in front of her siblings:

> Papa's temper rose like his nostrils. As of today, he was unemployed, had a sick wife, now couldn't even win over his children's forgiveness without being accused of something. He raised his hand at her insubordination, but before he could strike her, before the children began their screaming and crying again, she caught his raised hand in mid-motion, and it stunned him, this betrayal of her nature. (110)

Viramontes rescues the father by giving him a voice (or at least an inner voice), which indicates that a Chicano father's unspoken words reveal his own tragic position within and outside his own home:

> "Go ahead," she said, a tear streaming down her cheek, "If it means that much to you, keep it." "Go ahead and what?" He thought. What was he supposed to do? He had to make of her an example for the rest of the children. If he let the caterpillar go, she would certainly feel she had won, which would only be the beginning of her rebellion. If he killed the caterpillar, let it bang itself inside the brown bean, something else would die as well. He just couldn't figure out what. (110)

In "Only a Daughter," Sandra Cisneros also exemplifies this evolution from an initial feeling of resentment towards a sympathetic understanding of her Chicano father. As she states: "I was/am the only daughter and *only* a daughter" (Cisneros 1997, 119). When her Mexican father mistranslates "hijos" for "sons" the subtle privilege bestowed upon sons is foregrounded: "somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve and whisper: 'Not seven sons. Six! and *one daughter*'" (121). She has to wait many years to hear her father's admiration for her work even though she didn't do what he expected her to do, get married. His final recognition of her worth after reading one of her stories published in Spanish is enough to recover the emotional bonds that always existed but were veiled until now:

> In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words [...]. When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked: "Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?" Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the most wonderful. (122)

In Helena Maria Viramontes' "The Jumping Bean," the story becomes homage to a father's endurance and resistance in a racist, humiliating world. What María de la Luz once thought was an apparent lack of interest and love for his children is now reexamined from a multiperspectival focus; consequently, her father's experiences are validated as a history of hard work and pain. His casual violent reactions are somehow justified by the narration of his own defeat and oppression in American society. He has had to cope with too much humiliation and racist comments at work and he desperately needs to recover a minimum of the power lost in the public sphere. Viramontes' fatherly figure represents the castrated fearful Chicano father who is mocked at by fellow workers and who, at the expense of his own manhood, lowers his head and breaks his back working.

Similarly, Pat Mora evokes her father's voice after his death as a symbol of her heritage of resistance and cultural strength. While she acknowledges his influence, she will follow a different path, with a firmer pace. For her, he is "the mind that had been able to

make sense of the country of his birth and the country of his life, that in the end lost its way in some internal labyrinth where we could not follow" (83).

As we have seen, the project of redefining Chicano fatherhood is still in process. Studies on masculinity and its crisis in mainstream and minority cultures are still too private and personal. Even though literary works collaborate in this challenging project, more reactions and new views on the fathers are still to come. A new and challenging concept of fatherhood is being proposed by Chicano/a writers and their works will surely gather some of the most interesting reflections by contemporary ethnic men and women. The fruit of their reflections, and their updated picture on Chicano manhood and fatherhood should not fall on deaf ears.

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