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From Whispers and Moans to Strong Voices: Recognizing a Matrilineal Heritage in Denise Chávez's *Face of an Angel*

Antonia Domínguez Miguela

Universidad de Huelva

Face of an Angel (1994) is the long awaited tribute by a contemporary Chicana writer to a line of women whose silenced voices have given substance and creativity to Chicana Literature. This tribute to women also becomes the narration of a conflict and its development because these women have also played a paradoxical role as transmitters of a Chicano culture's oppressive patriarchal dictates. Soveida Dosamantes, a waitress at "El farol", a New Mexican restaurant, recovers the stories of pain and endurance of her female relatives. She retells her family's history from a female perspective with a wonderful orchestra of voices that emerge as authentic as never before.

Face of an Angel is at the same time a bildungsroman, the progressive discovery of Soveida's own Chicana self as she explores Chicana women's history, their daily realities, their miseries and virtues. As it happens in other Chicanas's works of fiction, Chavez is quite aware of the necessity to recover women's untold history as a way for the new Chicana to recover women's

bonds and a true sense of self. This is a complex and also painful project as we can see in *Face of an Angel*.

The novel is structured around a process which goes through different stages. We find generation clashes among women caused by the oppressive roles and values that some of them accept while others reject them. Fifteen-year old Soveida does not understand why she cannot go out with boys, why anything related to a woman's body is avoided and silenced, why she is supposed to become a docile and submissive woman, etc. The causes for women's betrayal can only be found in women's stories but until now they were unheard. That is why Chavez brilliantly recovers these stories and gets into their voices which are essential for their daughters, for the new chicana who can understand herself by knowing her mothers first and recovering the bonds that once tied them.

All the women's stories are pieces of information. The story of Soveida's mother is that of a woman condemned by her huge breast, trapped within her own body that she hates for its connection to sex. She would do her best to prevent Soveida's early entrance in the world of sex and womanhood but as in her own case this is impossible: "I tried to keep you a girl as long as I could, just as my mother, Trancha, did with me... I wouldn't listen to her. I started having dreams about what I thought love was when I was only thirteen. Your dad had already been sniffing around me. Three years later we were married" (21).

Mamá Lupita, Soveida's grandmother on her father's side also tries to convince the young Soveida that she should become a nun, to spare her the

sufferings and dangers of marriage and sex, as when she says: "Try and sneak sex on a woman, see what happens. Nine months later there's everlasting hell to pay" (58). The fate of women seem to be fixed through generations mainly because the mothers are the ones who impart the lessons of a feminine identity that the young chicana is compelled to imitate, as it happens to Soveida and as it happened to her grandmother: "It was only much later I found out she never really wanted to become a nun... when her mother looked at her she'd seen the invisible words written on her forehead: Woman. Wife. Mother. Martyr" (63). Women are not allowed to fight against these gender roles otherwise they will suffer even more. Mam† Lupita transmits this warning to Soveida and Mara through the story of Lina, Mara's mother:

She fell in love with your father and followed him when women didn't follow men and men did not want to be followed. She followed him when she was already four months pregnant with you in her stomach.

He stayed in Agua Oscura until you were born and then one day he vanished. Just like that. Forever. And that was when your mother's sex rebelled and she got the cancer that killed her... Just remember what is it to want too much. It can only bring you sorrow and death. (73)

But for them, Mara's mother is not a sinner or transgressor but a victim of roles and machismo. For Soveida and Mara, the older women's teachings seem to be refusals to fight and rejections of those who try to fight. This

apparent betrayal is the main starting point in the conflict between mothers and daughters. Betrayal usually takes the form of mothers controlling their daughter's lives, transmitting their own guilt and curse as women and not supplying the same self-confidence given to their sons. The home becomes a paradoxical site for women: on the one hand it is the source of nurturance and safety that cannot be found outside in a dominant culture that label them as illegal aliens but on the other hand it can be suffocating and manipulative for women. Like Soveida, the new Chicana feels the need to rescue the figure of the mother, to break stereotypes and to revise roles which present women as sexual commodities and servants in the house. Soveida approaches the idea of service from a double perspective: she addresses service as a constraining role paradoxically enforced by women themselves who teach their sons to be masters of their future wives but service is also a source of ethnic nurturance and humanity, a sign of women's spiritual strength to help other people. This second approach is also connected to work and the ethnic community as we see when Soveida begins to work as waitress at El Farol and decides to write the "Book of service" apparently written for waitresses. Women's service is also related to patience and wait. Adult lonely women are always waiting for their men to come back home and most younger women also wait but for a man to escape from their mother's suffocating sphere. When the young Chicanas grow up and experience the same as their mothers, they feel the need to reconcile with them. This is what will happen to Soveida and what it happened to her mother Dolly, as we can see in her interior monologue:

Mother, my mother, was never one for words... She grew up in a house of silent innuendo.. She was a cold woman. When I see what she had to endure, I understand her coldness... Mother staring out the window ... Waiting for my father to come home... What she didn't know was that one day he would be gone and that she would become the mother, father, lover to herself... I can understand Mother, my mother's coldness. Our house was a house of women. Women waiting." (23-26)

Right after this, Dolores and Luardo's monologue get mixed up in a sort of dialogue where Luardo speaks the terrible truth that is at the basis of this conflict. He says: "'That's all you wanted me for, to escape your mother- that old woman. She couldn't feel either, that's why you are the way you are.' (27). Soveida's ancestors had no voice but for their daughters, as it appears in the chapter called "Whispers". Trancha, Dolores' mother transmits feelings of guilt and insecurity through hard unpleasant words. Trancha passes on her own rage and pain to Dolores as Soveida realizes :

She didn't punish her or hurt her, except with her words... The high sharp Psst! of Trancha's voice snapped the desert air... They were damaging and remembered words... Cold disturbing words from one woman to another, one who knows your most intimate smell. Words from a woman who sees you as the man who makes love to you would. A mother. (123)

Soveida remembers Mamá Lupita was also a good whisperer: "I even heard Mamá Lupita whisper to Dolores, 'Luardo's always been a good boy. A blessing to the women of this family.' And then she coughed to resume the lie. I looked at Mamá, a gentle, tender, and honest woman, and I thought to myself: How long can we carry these burdens? At once I knew the answer. If we want, forever" (127). But Soveida is going to break away with this, she cannot whisper and that means she won't whisper feelings of guilt, pain or passivity: "I never learned to whisper. My mother, Dolores could have taught me how. She herself had learned to whisper from her mother, Do-a Trancha...I am the only one of Mamá's grandchildren who can't whisper. I consider it a blessing" (123).

Soveida's cousin, Mara also suffers from other women's rage and passivity. She is rejected within her family because she defied cultural and family rules by eloping and getting pregnant but her story has a cruel past of rape, of silence and lack of communication with her female relatives. When Mara tells her cousin her own story, Soveida realizes she has to retell her family's story, to recover the real lives of women, those still trapped in a tradition of betrayal and submission and those rebelling against it, as we can see in this passage:

'Dolores and Mamá Lupita were my boogeywomen, Soveida. I had my boogeyman too, hell, and he had me. Luardo would come into my room

and touch me. I wanted to scream. I had nightmares that Dolores would find out. That she would tie me to the bed and beat me. She knew... It's that way for all women, Soveida, so wake up! I hate to see you play the same damn role that your mother played, Soveida, bowing to all the men who come into your life and then scraping up their crusty filth and saying thank you, sir.' I knew what Mara was talking about. We were a family without a real history. Ours was a history of lies. Someone's invention of what a family should be. And yet, Mara, I wanted to tell her, we are undoing the lies, you and I." (53)

Together with Mara, later in her life Dolores will break with her past divorcing Soveida's father, Luardo. She is a new woman and wants to be called Dolly. She meets an American man and though we can imagine that she may have been considered a Malinche within her Chicano community, for Soveida she becomes a source of strength and energy to fight for herself. Both of them will try to break the perpetuate silences between mothers and daughters. After having a series of frustrating encounters with sex, love and marriage she begins to find her true self loving herself and the women around her. It is by recovering the stories of the women in her family that Soveida begins to understand the reasons for women's betrayal to daughters but she also recovers the bonds that will always unite them. Oralía, a maid at Mamá Lupita's house is one of the main storytellers and an essential figure in the development of Soveida. Introduced as a strong hardworking woman surrounded by her

plants and herbs, she embodies the figure of the healer, the curandera. Among the stories she tells Soveida we can find the sad story of María the lover of Soveida's grandfather. Maria is abandoned by Profetario and she is ostracized from her community as a witch and later she lets herself die from cancer in the blood, after telling her whole story to Oralia. Oralia tells this and other stories to Soveida in an attempt to break the silences as we can see in this passage:

Unless you heal yourself of memories when you are alive, there is no telling what death will bring. That poor woman never had anyone to talk to, it's no wonder her blood is hot and full of worms... Promise me, Soveida, that you'll listen to the stories of women tell you. They are the ones you should remember. Otherwise, how will you ever expect to understand the human heart? (137)

As she rediscovers her own self and becomes independent, she also feels the need to find her ethnic identity within her community and at home. She asks Oralia to tell her stories about her family and ancestors in an attempt to recover her cultural Chicana roots. Now a woman in her forties, she needs to come back to the only source of true love and relieve she has known, female relatives. She is now full of a woman's pains such as endometriosis, an illness which affects women's genitals. These pains (physical and psychological ones) have men as direct causes as Soveida points out: "The second year we were married, I bled intermittently... That was the year Ivan had his first long-term

affair... As he began to thrust himself inside me, the angry bile would spill out. That's what it was, my bile and rage. I felt dirty, and it was because of him that my sex bled (365). Pain, Soveida points out, has been accepted and hidden by women as another part of themselves:

For too many women, pain is a career, their sole career. I know. Our mothers lived with it every day, because they were too ashamed to admit they hurt "down there." They've masked their itches, their burns, their flows. They've said it's nothing, but the pain wouldn't go away. They'd try to forget their curse, for that is what it is when pain goes on too long. They would say everything is fine, when it wasn't." (367)

There is no better way to heal Soveida's pain than surrounded by the women who understand that pain: Mamá Lupita, Dolly, Oralia, Mara. Her mother becomes her best ally when they talk about their lives, their mistakes, their needs and pains as we can see in this passage:

'You're like me, Soveida,' Dolores had once said. 'Men are afraid of us, sweetheart. We want too much. We aren't embarrassed to ask. Your father prepared me for the world, for all men... The story he tells of us isn't the story I know, the story of our life... I haven't loved myself for so long. All my love mistakenly went to someone else when it should have come to me. Nobody can love us the way we need to love ourselves. Especially for women like us' (373).

In the last chapters we hear the inner voice of these women. They return to their early memories such as when women combed their mother's hair and they felt full and complete. When Mamá Lupita thinks she is dying she prays for a return to the origins of women when all her pains are healed: "Thank you for my mother and for my youth.. if heaven is a goingback, take me to the days I combed my mother's hair, my three sisters in the next room... I want soft kisses in my old age. I don't want kisses like my husband Profe's hard purple kisses-kisses like a slap... I want to think about women tonight. My mother's brown eyes soft with cataracts. My mother's hand o my knee, comforting me somehow. My mother's embrace -thick, rooted, her large bosom surrounding and sealing me in "(396). Dolly is afraid of losing Soveida's love because she is getting married again but Soveida has returned to her after realizing her mother's real value and feelings:

Dolores has always felt sorry for herself. When I was growing up, I hated her need, her pain. Now that she is happy, neither mam† Lupitanor I recognize her. I wnat to wish her happiness. The same thng I want for myself... My first role of server was to my mother and her needs. Dolores was my training for service... After years of kneading, punching, popping, htting, rubbing, and rolling her inplace, I wa tired of it all. And yet now I would like to sit down with Dolly and roll her hair the way I used to. (398)

Oralia's illness is the event that finally brings all the women together around her, back in their home. The roles reverse and now it is Oralia who is nursed and served by the three women. All of them find a new source of strength in recovering the bonds, healing their wounds. The reconciliation will be embodied in the future when Soveida gets pregnant and decides to become a single mother. Her face now reflects her life, her sorrows and her female inheritance but also all her strength as Mamá Lupita tells her: "M'ija, we've all been taught to hide what we truly feel behind our faces. Some of us eventually wake up to see the masks our faces have become... But we are more than this change, more than this face, Soveida. We become our mothers, our grandmothers. And when we see people who wear their 'antepasados' in their face, it is a relief, and a blessing to know the ancestors are near" (449).

Soveida and her baby become the hope for the future. The book of service Soveida has been writing and intermingling with her family's stories, is not only dedicated to the new waitresses but to all female readers. Female service is something more than serving men, it is a source of strength for your own self. The book as *Face of an Angel* becomes a book of service for all women as she tells Dedea, the new waitress at El Farol:

The handbook is about more than serving food. It's about service. What it means to serve and be served. Why is it that women's service is different from men's? I grew up with hardworking women. All my life I have appreciated the work they do... I wish someone had handed me The

Book of Service when I was a young waitress. It would have saved me time, worry, and pain. Never forget who you are, and where you come from. Never forget that the work you do is important and full of lessons." (451)

At the end of the novel Soveida acknowledges her role as a writer and transmitter of female knowledge. Oralia and the other women whose voices are heard telling stories are acknowledged as representatives of the only available female literary tradition. It is an oral female tradition which takes place inside the home in clear opposition to men's history outside the home. It is among these women that the Chicana Writer finds an authentic creative voice as her literary source. Denise Chávez has been able to hear those silenced voices and this makes her voice/self stronger as the novels' epigraph points out: "My grandmother's voice was rarely heard, it was a whisper, a moan. Who heard? My mother's voice cried out in rage and pain. Who heard? My voice is strong. It is breath. New life. Song. Who hears?".

As we have seen *Face of an Angel* represents a second stage in the development of the contemporary Chicana writer through the reconciliation and tribute to her female heritage. Soveida's creative voice comes from the unheard female voices of storytellers, and her creativity finds a way out in her giving birth to a baby/book who embodies hope for a better future.