

## ANA CASTILLO'S *SO FAR FROM GOD*: A STORY OF SURVIVAL

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The reality of the Chicanas prior to the decade of the 70s, when the first steps towards the dismantling of the personal confines that limited and displaced them from their community and the mainstream society were taken, can be depicted as one of resistance to a three-fold oppression. Discriminated against for being members of a «minority» group within an anglo-ruled macrosociety, enduring the universal «colonization» of women and furthermore, deprived of many personal rights by their male counterparts, they lived in a situation of constant survival. These circumstances deconstructed their quest for a freed identity, thus provoking a state of self-denial and personal insecurity in them. Women writers, insofar as they are representatives of the women of their community, have used their creations to combat and revision the negative stereotypes associated with Chicanas, which had facilitated and sustained the existence of the aforementioned discrimination.

This is the case of Ana Castillo, Chicana critic and writer, who, in her novel *So Far From God* (1993), chronicles the lives of five women, members of the same family. It narrates the story of Sofia and her four daughters, Esperanza, Fe, Caridad and La Loca, whose circumstances lead them to survive in life, and resist the adverse situations they experience as women, lovers, workers etc. Presenting five distinct but exemplary characters, Castillo attempts to portray diverse life situations and different procedures to preserve one's own identity intact, overcoming the deleterious influences the prevailing socioeconomical order exerts upon each of them. In this regard, she calls for her readers to resist and survive in a similar fashion.

The story is presented in the form of an epic novel, divided into sixteen episodes, whose titles are reminiscent of the narrative of the medieval tales: thus,

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Chapter One is entitled «*An Account of the First Astonishing Occurrence in the Lives of a Woman Named Sofia and Her Four Daughters; and the Equally Astonishing Return of Her Wayward Husband*», Chapter Two, «*On Caridad's Holy Restoration and Her Subsequent Clairvoyance: Both Phenomena Questioned by the Doubting Tomases of Tome*» etc. The effect such titles have upon the reader may well be one of expecting a quixotic-like hero/protagonist, whose adventures and vicissitudes will be narrated in the story. Nonetheless, Sofia, an independent woman, head of her family, who has committed herself to the education of her four daughters, may be considered a heroine in the terms Carmen Salazar Parr and Genevieve M. Ramírez explain:

We have found that in these female-authored works women exhibit the same heroic qualities as men, (...). The «dragons» challenged by women are the conventions created in a male-dominated world. Perhaps the foremost heroic achievement resides in the assumption of those heroic qualities, possible only in the conscious deviation from the traditionally feminine characteristics imposed by men. Our women heroes do not, however, seek superiority and dominance but rather parity and equality of stature, respect, and opportunity. Clearly, they are neither the traditional heroes in positions of power nor the traditional heroines whose roles support the heroic achievements of men (1985:59).

Sofia is depicted as an independent-from-men woman, and therefore, as stated above, disclaims the stereotypes and roles men have imposed upon women. On being abandoned by her husband, she becomes a strong woman, who adopts the «male role» of provider of the economical stability of the family unit, and, concomitantly, continues to be the transmitter of cultural heritage and values for her daughters. Nonetheless, albeit these women have been taught how to survive away from a dominant male figure by their mother, and resist its control, they come into contact with several men, all of whom lead them to negative situations and consequences. Esperanza, representative of the contemporary Chicana, who has attended college and has actively participated in the Chicano Movement, after the break up with her boyfriend Rubén, who Castillo describes in an ironic way («*During that time, she had lived with her boyfriend Rubén, who, during the height of his Chicano conciousness, renamed himself Cuauhtemoc*», (1993:25), chooses to leave the country to cover a war as a reporter, where she is subsequently killed. Castillo strongly criticizes men, who, like Rubén, committed to the plight of the Chicano people, are incapable of valorising and respecting the women's fight for their personal liberation, even pushing them to a situation of self-denial and social transparency.

Caridad, on the other hand, may well be seen as the personification of the traditional Chicana who abandons her personal quest for identity and self-development due to her love for a man, Memo, adopting the feminine stereotype described by Mae Henderson: «Women are supposed to live stably and provide stability for others» (1995:34). When he rejects her, she loses her personal and emotional stability, and chooses to act in a way that diametrically opposes her role of virginal, good woman, becoming a «bad» woman who indulges in sexual intercourse

with several men. The consequences are as well tragic, for she is violently beaten up by a group of men outside one of the bars she now frequents. Notwithstanding, this deviation from the norm into the realm of the «outside,» masculine society, articulates the future creation of her identity, and is revised as positive by Rosaura Sánchez, who posits that

The «good,» socially accepted woman, it follows, embodies the qualities of the Virgin; purity, selflessness, mysticism, and respectfulness. The «bad,» unacceptable woman, who is viewed suspiciously, actually demonstrates more independence, assertiveness and is more socially mobile, moving towards self-determining behaviour (1977: 41).

Caridad, after being a «bad» woman, thus rejected by her own community as a consequence of her having challenged the static and constraining moral code of the group, adopts a more «positive» stance and embarks on adventure into the world of spirituality and inner-reflection. «Fe, the third of Sofi's daughters, was fine. That is, twenty-four, with a steady job at the bank and a hard-working boyfriend whom she had known forever; she had just announced their engagement» (Castillo 1993:26). Tom, her boyfriend, also leaves her, and Fe suffers a severe nervous breakdown.

As portrayed in these four characters, their reality is continually shaped by the interlocking presence or the absolute absence of men around them, and it is this (non)presence which places these women in a situation of survival and resistance. However, women who do not experience male control, personified in the figure of Sofia, have to fight against the constant negative intervention of the community in their lives. The hero of Ana Castillo's novel, nevertheless, manages to escape this manipulation and even succeeds in penetrating the «male-world.» She runs as a mayor for the elections in Tome, her hometown, and is determined to forge ahead in her political career, therefore, occupying positions rendered as masculine:

Then why stop at mayor? Why not elect herself la juez de paz or la comandante of Tome as they had had in the old days? Why not be Queen of Tome for that matter? (Castillo 1993: 137)

When women have to resist the male influence and dominance in their lives, however, the consequences, as seen before, are negative, and even tragic. Men, in the novel, drive women to situations of self-denial and self-destruction, and only when they free themselves from them, are they portrayed as ready to actively choose their own path and reconstruct their individual identity. Accordingly, to resist the masculine colonization of the female self is, as portrayed by Castillo, the only way to survive within the male-orientated and ruled Chicano community.

The colonization exerted upon women by Chicano men, nonetheless, does not only affect them in terms of personal identity and personality. The women in the novel are also victims of the external organization of a society controlled by men, in which

they have never had the chance to participate. War, for instance, just like politics in general, is considered a masculine subject, for it involves men taking decisions alongside other men and men participating actively in military operations. Throughout the years, the role of women in times of war has been the one of companion, cook, nurse etc., a role reminiscent of the one attributed to women in the overall functioning of society in general, and of the Chicano community in particular. Esperanza's job as a reporter during the Saudi Arabian war conveys the idea of the need to observe and report things through a feminine eye, in order to reinterpret them in a more universal and integrative fashion. On the other hand, Esperanza, just like Sofia, her mother, attempts to penetrate the male world, thus amalgamating in her persona the male and the female roles, strongly connected to the fact of telling stories and transmitting them to the rest of the community. As opposed to Sofia, who succeeds in the overcoming «male/female role» divide, Esperanza does not achieve it, and meets with a tragic end, for she dies in the war.

On the other hand, Castillo strongly criticises the negative effects of male dominance and the colonization of each woman's identity, which implies manipulation of the woman's reality within the male world, as a consequence of the effects a capitalist, production-oriented, male-ruled society exerts upon women in particular. Fe, who personifies the Chicana who wants to assimilate the Anglo, capitalist culture and system, starts to work in a factory, which paradoxically enough works with the Pentagon, and produces high-technology weapons. Once again, just as in the case of her sister Caridad, the outcome of this attempt is extremely tragic, for she dies as a result of the inadequate working conditions in her place of work:

Being so good at utilization and efficiency, the queen of it, you could say, there at Acme International, she was on to bigger jobs and better pays in no time. She worked hard no matter what, even though, for instance, she did not like the last cleaning job she was given. It's not like she had complained about it or nothing, but three months of working in a dark cubicle could get to anybody. The results of working with a chemical that actually glowed in the dark and therefore you could work it in the dark, with special gloves and cap (and why you did, as a supervisor explained, was able to detect if any fingerprints or hair got on the parts) was this red ring around her nose and breath that smelled suspiciously of glue.

Well, the odor of all those chemicals in that open area as well as throughout the whole plant was enough to make anyone nauseated at first, but after about an hour of being there every morning, you would swear there was no smell at all. So Fe had no idea that her body had actually absorbed the smell until one evening Casey asked her, tactfully of course, if she was not doing something on her lunch hour that she shouldn't. (Castillo 1993: 181)

Her role in the factory is a female one, that of cleaning. In keeping with the general tone of the novel, Castillo depicts it in a very ironic way, but, once again, the outcome of it is serious and destructive. Criticizing war in a ferocious way for a

second time, as well as the figure of the male-warrior-hero, the writer calls for the vindication of the hero symbolized by Sofia. A person who is able to integrate herself into the society, she maintains her identity in a pure state and is able to coexist within the female/male polarity that builds strong frontiers for the women, who, attempting to trespass them, suffer a complete disintegration of their selves, for they have crossed what Cordelia Candelaria describes as the «Wild Zone»:

The «wild zone» thesis thus identifies a fundamental paradox of female identity: on the one hand, a distinct female experiential, cultural space derived from an unrestricted («wild») existence unmediated by inimical, imposed definitions of identity, and on the other the restricted women-space defined by and located within the engulfing historical patriarchy without recognition of women's human potential or achievement. (1993: 23)

Just as has been observed in the examples of three of Sofia's daughters, the attempts to penetrate and survive within the male world are only positive in the case of Sofia, who unquestionably, becomes the heroine of the novel. La Loca, another of her daughters, resists and survives the negative male colonization, but she chooses to disassociate herself from the «mainstream» community, in order to find her own space within the «wild zone» which liberates and at the same time encloses women. Madness, or a total deviation from the moral values and rules, becomes the way to escape reality, and allows her to reinterpret all the community values, in a bid to make them valid within her self-chosen constructed reality. Becoming the «Other», La Loca is allowed to deviate from the male stereotype of how a woman should be, and therefore, survive within their society. Castillo herself explains this fact in her «Brujas and Curanderas. A Lived Spirituality» in the following terms,

The bruja and curandera might associate the fundamental betrayal of the church with her womanhood, with her devout Catholic mother. She, therefore, may be inclined toward her grandmother's beliefs, or the teachings of a community elder. Creating some distance from the last generation, from who she is unlearning many lessons that have felt harmful to her well-being, allows her to recapture some of her spiritual orientation, and to adapt it to her own needs while still operating within her own culture. (Castillo 1995: 152)

La Loca, as stated in the quotation above, is the only one of Sofia's daughters who does not have an allegorical, religious name. Rejected by the community after she was born for having suffered an epileptic attack, which was interpreted as an anomalous, supernatural gift of the baby, she shuts herself off from those around her, cultivating her spirituality, and learning from the town *curandera*, Doña Felicia. Isolation and a rich inner world are presented by the writer as the only ways of surviving within the male community. Caridad, too, after being assaulted by a group of men, also commits herself to self-reflection and analysis, and flees from her

community to live in a cave. Esperanza, on the other hand, after disappearing in the war, is seen in the form of a spirit by many of the inhabitants of Tome. In a very comical, ironic way, the author revives and reinterprets the image of La Llorona in the persona of Esperanza, when she says: «But all of this, as I said, was postponed, indeed, nearly forgotten after Esperanza's family got the message she had sent to them via La Llorona, Chicana international astral-traveler» (Castillo 1993:162). La Llorona's and Esperanza's fate is, in an attempt to survive, to wander through the ditches of the town in the form of a spirit. Women, just like Esperanza, have to be invisible and transparent, committed to their spiritual cultivation so as to be accepted by the male, materialistic society. As Tey Diana Rebolledo explains,

Many stories written by Chicanas chronicle the world in which the female hero's expectations conflict with the dictates of the surrounding society. Chicana heroes desire freedom to be themselves, in all of their abilities and aspects, a freedom often denied by a culture that would have them toe strict norms of behavior for young women (1995:111).

Castillo's objective, in conclusion, by means of using an ironic tone, is to denounce the difficulties women encounter in their struggle for survival within the male-dominated community, and at the same time, to resist the colonization of their real identity. Women, as portrayed in the deaths of Sofia's daughters, can not bear the negative pressure of male control, and find in madness and deviation from the norm the only way to find their own, liberating «wild zone.»

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