Family Relationships in the Fiction of Helena María Viramontes

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In order to understand why the representation of the Chicano family plays a central role in the fiction of Helena María Viramontes, it is first necessary to analyze the context in which Chicanos live, which is both diasporic and patriarchal, and how these two elements affect the Chicano conception of family and the relationships within this family.

The term *Chicano* refers to Mexican-Americans who live in the US, born either there or in Mexico, and involves a political awareness of the history of Mexicans and Chicanos. This history started in the 16th century with the conquest by the Spaniards of the lands which are now Mexico, and their further colonization which only ended in the beginning of the 19th century. The independence of Mexico was immediately followed by the annexation of almost half of its territory by the USA, turning all the Mexican population who lived in this part of the land into foreigners in their own land (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 27-29). Since then, the Mexican history has been marked by transnational migration to the US, where nowadays there are approximately 25 million inhabitants of Mexican descent, representing around 9% of the whole North-American population (RAMIREZ, n/d). This brief historical account shows that Chicanos

> are both postcolonial and neocolonial subjects: post-Spanish colonialism and neo-U. S. colonialism. Thus, [their] identity in the United States is a product of a creative process of understanding the self in relation to paradoxes and contradictions caused by conquest, annexation and migration (ARRIZÓN and MANZOR, 2000: 12).

Furthermore, if we take into account the broad definition of the term *diaspora* given by anthropologist James Clifford in his essay "Diasporas", the Chicano subject can also be considered a diasporic subject. According to him, the main features of diaspora are: "a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity

importantly defined by this relationship" (CLIFFORD, 1994: 305). Therefore, although Chicanos live in a territory which was originally theirs and many of them have never experienced displacement, they are also diasporic subjects.

As such, Chicanos are usually caught between two cultures: the Anglo-American values of modernity and consumerism and the Mexican values of patriarchy and family union. As a consequence, the Chicano subject frequently does not know whether to acculturate or to maintain his/her ancestors' heritage. This dilemma helps explain why the Chicano national movement – started in the 1960's with the objective of resisting Anglo-American oppression – based its project of cultural survival on an emphasis on family union. The family thus became a source of cultural resistance and a source of strength against the discrimination experienced by Chicanos in American society (MOYA, 1997: 142).

However, if "it is in the home where working-class women may find support, (…) it is also there where their caretaking and domestic activities destroy their sense of the self and silence them" (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 141). In other words, for the Chicana woman, the family is not only a source of strength but also of gender oppression, since the maintenance of the family unity is based on the sacrifice of women´s aspirations to self-fulfillment as anything other than being a wife and mother. As Viramontes states in her essay "Nopalitos":

> Family ties are fierce. Especially for mujeres. We are raised to care for. We are raised to stick together, for the family unit is our only source of safety. Outside our home there lies a dominant culture that is foreign to us, isolates us, and labels us illegal alien. But what may be seen as a nurturing, close unit, may also become suffocating, manipulative, and sadly victimizing. As we slowly examine our own existence in and out of these cultures, we are breaking stereotypes, reinventing traditions for our own daughters and sons. (VIRAMONTES, 1989: 35).

Viramontes's last statement in the quotation above points to a third possibility in that dilemma between acculturation and tradition, which Stuart Hall calls "translation". He uses this term to refer to the subjects who, like the Chicanos, are products of the new postcolonial diasporas and "are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely" (HALL, 1992: 310).

Viramontes, as a *translated subject,* already stands on an ambivalent position regarding not only Anglo-American but also Mexican/Chicano values (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 135). According to Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano in her introduction to Viramontes's collection of short stories *The Moths and Other Stories,* published in 1985 and from which all the short stories analyzed here have been selected, "at the same time that [Viramontes] recognizes her collective and familial history as a source of strength, she challenges values which continue to oppress women within the Chicano family and culture" (YARBO-BEJARANO, 1985: 10).

This ambivalent position can be recognized in Viramontes's short stories that will be analyzed here. In "Growing", Naomi, the young protagonist, discovers very early in life that being *mujer* in the Mexican/Chicano culture is seen as a curse. As Naomi's father makes her take her younger sister Lucía wherever she goes, Naomi cannot understand what she has done to make her father so distrustful, not realizing that the simple fact that she is a woman is enough. His only argument is *Tu eres mujer*. Being *mujer* is therefore not simply a truth but a verdict imposed on all Chicanas (ALARCÓN, 1996: 221)[1].

It is not by accident that her father switches codes from English to Spanish when he says *tu eres mujer*, instead of *you're a woman*. Saying the sentence in Spanish is a way he has to guarantee his parental authority. According to Norma Alarcón,

> By switching codes to "mujer," he knows more precisely what his judgement of Naomi ought to signify. If he said "woman," he would be on precarious ground. He is not quite sure what it may mean in Anglo culture, a culture within which he may well feel that he has no authority. Thus, though we may conjecture that Naomi's family transacts some of its communication in English, Spanish is employed in this sentence to guarantee parental authority (ALARCÓN, 1996: 221).

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[1] This verdict can be explained at least partly by the historical and mythical myth of La Malinche. *Malintzin Tenepal* - or La Malinche - was given as a slave to the Spanish and became Hernan Cortés's lover, translator and advisor, thus helping him conquer her own people (FITCH, n/d). Therefore, although she is considered the symbolic mother of all Mexicans – since her son Martín Cortés was the first *mestizo* – she is also seen as a traitor, the mother who sold her children to a foreign people, and she is often referred to as *la Chingada* – the fucked one (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 44). The participation of this paradoxical character in the Spanish Conquest can help explain why women in the Mexican culture have always been associated with distrust and betrayal.

Naomi too learns that being *mujer* is different from being a woman and, although she now lives in the USA, she is still oppressed by the patriarchal values of her parents' culture. As James Clifford points out in "Diasporas", "the lived experiences of diasporic women involve painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds" (CLIFFORD, 1999: 314).

Despite her realization that being *mujer* is different from being a woman, Naomi still tries to appeal to her mother by reminding her of the fact that in the USA girls do not need chaperones and parents trust their daughters. But all her mother says is "you have to ask your father" (35), showing that this mother is as oppressed by the patriarchal power as her daughter. Moreover, she is not only oppressed but also oppressor, since mothers are the ones who pass these traditional values on to their children. Susan Rubin-Suleiman calls these mothers who reproduce the conventional role previously determined for women within the symbolic system "patriarchal mothers", while Julia Kristeva refers to them as "phallic mothers" (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003:185-186).

The nameless fourteen-year-old protagonist and narrator in the title story in the collection, "The Moths", also has to go through this difficult period in life while coping with an assenting mother and an oppressive father. To make matters worse, his power is even reinforced by the presence of her older sisters, who are perfect examples of the prescribed model of femininity, whereas the protagonist is not pretty or nice like them and cannot do the "girl things" they can do. Her hands are too big to handle the fineries of crocheting or embroidery, making her sisters call her "bull hands". However, when she denies that she fits in this prescribed model of femininity, the narrator is not simply lamenting her difference from her sisters. She is in fact showing how she, although perhaps subconsciously, resists the patriarchal oppression imposed by her culture. Furthermore, the narrator is not as respectful as her sisters and constantly defies the orders of the father when he tells her to go to church. At these moments, the father turns his anger to the mother, blaming her for the way she has

raised her daughters. When he does so, the sisters, in an attempt to defend their mother, immediately turn against the protagonist, which shows how women can be both victims of patriarchal values and the ones who reinforce them (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 133).

The relationship the girl has with her assenting mother is one of total alienation and emotional estrangement. The mother is so incorporated within the patriarchal strategies of domination that she cannot bond with her daughter. Although they are victims of the same oppression and in a way dependent on each other, they are incapable of communicating with one another. Here Viramontes raises the reader's awareness to the fact that, as the patriarchal power robs women of their subjectivity, it stops mothers and daughters from being able to speak to each other. (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 186).

However, as Saldívar-Hull affirms, "Viramontes refuses silent complicity with the women who sustain the patriarchal family structure" (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 133) as she presents an alternate possibility to the girl in the character of the grandmother. The *abuela* lives alone, away from the family, despite her old age and illness, showing the girl and the reader that it is possible to have some measure of independence from that Chicano family unit, even if this comes to the grandmother only in her old age.

Furthermore, Viramontes also "advocates the possibility of women's spheres separate from patriarchal impositions" (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 137) as the grandmother's house is also an alternative space for the girl. Instead of going to church, a patriarchal space, the protagonist finds refuge from her father's brutality in the *abuela's* house. There she uses her "bull hands" to help the grandmother plant vegetables and herbs, learning the value of what she *can* do well with her big hands. In the words of Saldívar-Hull:

> She does not realize that by claming the bull, she can save herself from incorporation into the economy of trade in women. Rather than excel at culturally sanctioned girl things, the narrator practices her indigenous artistry with hammer and nails as she helps her abuela. (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 133).

In this alternative space, the value of a forgotten indigenous heritage is recognized and opposed to the Catholic patriarchal values of the father. It is not a coincidence that while she works on the garden, the girl feels "in a strange sort of way, safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel" (28) whereas at church she feels alone in the *vastness* of the place, emphasized by the "*coolness* of the marble pillars and the *frozen* statues with *blank* eyes" (29, my emphasis). Therefore, the *abuela's* house, as described by Oliver-Rotger is "a specifically female, healing pre-symbolic space" (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 188) where both the Anglo-American and the Mexican values can be resisted.

More importantly, this alternative space is also the place where a strong bond of solidarity develops between grandmother and granddaughter, when the former asks the latter for help as she is dying. In helping her *abuela* in her passage to death, the girl is also helped by her grandmother, since she learns an important lesson. Although their bond is a silent one, silence does not stop the girl from understanding the lessons the *abuela* taught her through her example (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 135). This silent communication shows a desire for a language that is outside the existent socio-cognitive language of patriarchy, and the magical-realist image of the moths coming out of the *abuela's* mouth after her death may be seem as the representation of this bond and this language (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 190). Moreover, they can also be read as a warning the *abuela* gives the girl not to let moths eat her aspirations of becoming something more than a wife and mother, as they have done to the grandmother (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 137).

"The Broken Web" is the story of three women linked through the same man, Tomás, in the web of the title: his nameless wife, her daughter Martha, and Olivia, Tomás's lover. The web is broken when his wife shoots and kills Tomás during an argument after she finds out about him and Olivia. As they argue, we learn that Tomás feels he is entitled to being unfaithful to her, since she was already pregnant with another man's child when he married

her. As he says "Don't I have the right to be unfaithful? Weren't you? Vete mucho a chingar a tu madre, más cabrona que la chingada…" (59), the use of code switching from English to Spanish emphasizes the analogy between the historical *La Malinche* (known as *la Chingada*) and a wife who has practiced unlawful sex (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 191), echoing almost five hundred years of oppression imposed on women in Mexican history. In his accusation, Tomás even doubts the paternity of his other children, which also points to the distrust associated to women in the Mexican culture. More importantly, this passage points to the injustice of men's property of women's bodies and sexuality (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 138) and the tragic consequences it may bring when women's resignation bursts into violence.

The bullet that kills Tomás ironically also destroys a statue of Jesus. With this "double death blow", Tomás's wife breaks not only with his rule but also symbolically with the rule of the patriarchal Catholic church, only to learn after his death that she still feels dependent on him. Tomás is now "an invincible cloud of the past", "a coiled smoking ghost". However, he seems "more alive. No. More real than anything, anyone around her" and she feels close to him, "equally dead, but equally real" (60). Therefore, more than having to face the practical consequences of killing her husband, Tomás's wife has to face the realization of her inescapable subservience to patriarchal norms and of her consequent interior death as a woman. (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 190, 192). This had already been signaled in a previous passage as she affirmed that "only in complete solitude did she feel like a woman" (56) and will be reinforced by her affirmation that she gave up being a woman to marry Tomás (60). This realization of the character calls the reader's attention to the fact that being a wife and mother can deny women their status as women. According to Oliver-Rotger, "these women's interior deaths are caused by the impossibility of seeing their romantic expectations come true if they follow the conventional roles of wife and mother" (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 192). Self-fulfillment and self-ownership are not attainable as long as family relationships are

envisaged around the traditional models of motherhood, domesticity, and beauty which have disempowering consequences for women (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 193).

The last section of the story introduces another character, Martha's old aunt, her mother's sister, who tells her the story of her mother's youth and her premarital affair with another man. As her speech reproduces many of the cultural conventions and preconceptions about women and women's "proper place", Viramontes reminds us of the power of women's story telling as crucial in the preservation of tradition (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 194). One of the myths perpetuated by the aunt – which had in turn been passed on to her by her mother – is the mention to the crickets, "the souls of condemned people" who wail and "conduct the mass of the dead only at night" (62). This reference to the divine justice against those who defy the patriarchal values of the Church is subtly followed by an invitation for Martha to say a rosary with the aunt. In this very last scene, Martha is then reincorporated by her aunt into that which her mother had defied (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 141).

Olga Ruiz is another woman whose inner death is focused on by Viramontes in "Snapshots". After having devoted thirty years of her life to being an exemplary wife and mother, the protagonist realizes the nonsense of her existence only after she is no longer needed either by her daughter, who is now grown and married herself, or by her husband, since they have divorced. She consequently goes into a state of depression in which she just sits around and does nothing, perturbed by the waste of time her life has been. According to Saldívar-Hull, what neither her daughter nor her ex-husband realize is that her depression in fact reflects an incommunicable anger over the time she wasted improving a career without monetary value in a capitalist society. "The story, then, is a scathing critique of the politics of housework, of unpaid domestic labor. Olga emerges as the alienated laborer whose usefulness has expired. Once the machine of the institution of marriage, she is now obsolete" (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 142).

In her depression, Olga goes through her family's photo albums in search of some meaning to her existence but the snapshots of her past only remind her of how much "had passed unnoticed" (101), how much time she had wasted. What also depresses her is the cynical awareness that her family life was nothing but a parody of the ideal snapshot of the bourgeois family with "the cherub baby in a pink day suit with newly starched ribbons crawling" to the husband as he gets home from work "and his wife looking at him with pleasing eyes and offering him a cupcake" (100). However, despite all her effort to stage this perfect snapshot, what Dave found were "burnt cupcakes" and "Marge blubbering all over her day suit" (101). (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 199).

Among these snapshots, there are two – one of young Olga and her parents and another of Olga, Dave and young Marge – whose uncanny similarity suggests that Olga's life was nothing but a replica of what her mother's life had already been, pointing to the freezing power of patriarchy which deprives women of any substantial personal history and identity (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 201-2). According to Norma Alarcón,

> In a sense, (these snapshots are) like that of the Holy Family triad – father, mother and child – except that the child is a girl, and indeed that is what problematizes the "snapshot". The girl-child does not have a sublime transcendent story. Her story (…) is to duplicate the wife/maternal tale" (ALARCÓN, 1996: 221).

However, although the daughter is a reduplication of the mother, as it is evoked by the snapshot of Olga and young Marge in which "both woman and child are clones: same bathing suit, same pony-tails, same ribbons" (104), they are also distant and strangers to each other, as Olga herself had felt in relation to her own mother. Of her mother Olga says "(she) always smelled of smoke and vanilla and that is why *I stayed away from her*" (102, my emphasis). Her daughter Marge is in turn incapable of understanding her depression and only tells her she should keep herself busy, to which Olga's "only response (…) is to give her *the hardest stares*" (99, my emphasis). In reality, the fact that mother and daughter are so similar is

exactly what causes this estrangement and anger between them, because in this patriarchal tradition, the daughter only exists as future mother or mother. She has no position in the Holy Family or Oedipal triad and is, therefore, denied a voice of her own. For that reason, the mother-daughter relationship in this patriarchal culture is marked by silence and distance (ALARCÓN, 1996: 229). Furthermore, the lack of understanding of each other also makes them release their rage at one another instead of at the culture that prescribes their roles in society (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 200).

Another aspect of this patriarchal society called to our attention by the two snapshots mentioned above is the split of the sexes into men who take pictures and women whose pictures are taken, that is, into men's active role and women's passive role in that tradition. Although the father is present in both photos, in the first one he is the one holding the baby and pointing to the camera while the mother just stands there and "*looks straight ahead at the camera*" (my emphasis). Moreover, "his sleeves are pulled up, his tie undone, his hair is messy" whereas the mother is "tall and long" in her "plain black dress" and "thick spongelike shoes" (102). Therefore, whereas the father has an active role in the picture taking, the woman is merely an immovable object being photographed, a willing objective of the camera's gaze. In the second snapshot, the woman is again "*looking directly at the camera*, but the man is *busy* making a sand castle for his daughter. *He doesn't see the camera or the woman*" (104, my emphasis) (ALARCÓN, 1996: 224).

These snapshots not only reflect this fissure between the sexes but also remind us of the "patriarchal disciplinary gaze over woman's body" and its paralyzing effects over women's lives represented in the story by the paralyzing effect the camera operated by men also has over them (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003: 198). In the last scene in the story, Olga has a flashback of her childhood, of the first time she ever saw a camera. This was won by her grandfather, who immediately went over to her house to photograph her and her family. As

her grandfather did not know “two bits about it”, “he touched the knobs and buttons to find out how the camera worked while *the men* began milling around him” (105). Her grandmother in turn was very upset, because she believed “snapshots steal the souls of the people” and she did not want to allow Olga’s picture to be taken. However, her grandfather “pushed her aside” (106) and took the picture anyway. In this apparently simple scene, Viramontes calls the reader’s attention not only to the power of decision men have over women in patriarchy but mostly to the power patriarchy has to steal women’s souls, as it frames them into cultural expectations that deny them a sense of personal history and identity. However, Olga’s grandmother tried to protect her from a bad omen by cutting a piece of her hair and, in fact, the picture never came out. In this case, Olga might have been saved from having her soul stolen if she herself had not colluded with patriarchy. This complicity with patriarchal oppression points to the share women have in the responsibility for their own inner deaths (ALARCÓN, 1996: 224).

In her testimonial essay “Nopalitos”, Viramontes affirms that “as women, we have learned to listen, rather than speak, causing us, historically, to join with others who maintain we have nothing to say. Only now we are discovering that we do. And those who do not seem interested in knowing our voices are just plain foolish” (VIRAMONTES, 1989: 36). In her stories, as we have seen, she therefore gives voice to these women who have long been silenced by tradition and in doing so, she criticizes the power of patriarchy to rob women of their subjectivity. Nevertheless, she does not mask some of these women’s own collusion with the values that reproduce male privilege. Moreover, she exposes the fallacy of the Chicano family unit disseminated by the male Chicano national movement as the only way of resisting Anglo-American control and offers alternative possibilities to Chicana women, by relocating Chicano families “from secretive, barricaded sites of male rule to contested terrains where girls and women perform valued rituals that do not necessarily adhere to

androcentric familial traditions or to more (norte)Americanized, assimilative behaviors" (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 132).

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