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RE-INVENTING IDENTITY IN GLORIA ANZALDUA'S BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA

AMRITHA VYDOORI S P

Research Scholar, Department of English

University of Calicut

amrithavydoori@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

A constant mixing and merging of different races, cultures, languages and religion has led to a reconfiguration of identities and this identity is continuously invented and re-invented in accordance with the changing cultural context. Migration and crossing of borders also play a significant role in the formation of identity. Borders are the places where the crossing over takes place and therefore these borderlands are in a constant state of transition. On the borderlands different cultures overlap and this results in a gentle coming together of cultures. People who reside in such borderlands create an identity of their own; they accept, reject and form new identities and this gives rise to a new group of hybrid people which engenders a new hybrid culture. This paper attempts to look into how Gloria Anzaldua, a scholar of Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory and queer theory has introduced the concept of mestiza consciousness to position herself and Chicana/o as borderlanders and to create a new consciousness of the borderlands. In her semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands /La Frontera* she envisages the creation of a new culture, a new consciousness - a mestiza consciousness along with her discussion of borders and borderlands.

Key words: identity, border landers, mestiza consciousness, hybridity.

A constant mixing and merging of different races, cultures, languages and religion has led to a reconfiguration of identities and this identity is continuously invented and re-invented in accordance with the changing cultural context. Migration and crossing of borders also play a significant role in the formation of identity. Borders are the places where the crossing over takes place and therefore these borderlands are in a constant state of transition. On the borderlands different cultures overlap and this results in a gentle coming together of cultures. People who reside in such borderlands create an identity of their own; they accept, reject and form new identities and this gives rise to a new group of hybrid people which engenders a new hybrid culture.

This paper attempts to look into how Gloria Anzaldua, a scholar of Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory and queer theory has introduced the concept of mestiza consciousness to position herself and Chicana/o as borderlanders and to create a new consciousness of the borderlands. In her semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands /La Frontera* she envisages the creation of a new culture, a new consciousness - a mestiza consciousness along with her discussion of borders and borderlands. It is a consciousness of the borderlands. *La mestiza*, an Aztec word meaning 'torn between ways' is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. She deals not just with the physical borders but with the invisible psychological,

spiritual, sexual and linguistic borders that exist between the binaries like: man / woman, heterosexual / homosexual, white/ non-white, Latino / non- Latino etc.

Borders are important thresholds; bridges that connect as well as divide places and people. Borders have become a much debated topic of the day as we witness people engaged in clashes and fights in the name of nationalism, religion, caste, ethnicity, race and language. The growing intolerance among people strengthens the divisions and cracks. Border studies as a discipline emerges at this juncture with its focus on cultural, symbolic and other types of social boundaries. A global shift in focus is perceivable in the actual geographical boundaries as it has gone beyond the geography to cover a variety of forms and types of social boundaries, both in their material and symbolic dimensions.

Anzaldua, being a border lander herself could capture the true feelings of the people residing at the borders. She gives a detailed account of the life at the borders. The tortures and the ill-treatments that she has suffered in her life moulded her into a rebel. She grew up into a strong lady, who is capable of creating an identity of her own despite the misgivings of her life. Anzaldua is very critical about the life at the borders as it promotes an erosion of identity. To her, border is a place where overlapping takes place, where new cultures are created, deconstructed and constructed. Anzaldua considers the U. S Mexican border as the place where the third world grates against the first and bleeds. A historical outline of how the Anglos migrated illegally into Texas in the 1800s and how they gradually drove the Tejanos (native Texans of Mexican descent) from their lands is included in order to give a brief account of the mixing, merging and the migration that has taken place.

Anzaldua captures the inner turmoils of *la mestiza* and clearly depicts the position of *la mestiza* in the borderlands. "Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all the three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war."(78) A cultural collision takes place here and a disengagement from the dominant culture

becomes visible in the attempt to cross the border. *La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations from convergent thinking and analytical reasoning to a divergent thinking characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. The collision of multiple cultures gives rise to the formation of an altogether new culture which is unique in itself and even more stronger than the cultures from which it has emerged. In this formative process, nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly. At the juncture where the *mestiza* stands there is the possibility of uniting all that is separate. A synthesis of different cultures takes place here and the self adds a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness, a *mestiza* consciousness which dismantles the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and attempts to transcend the duality. In transcending the binary, a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking takes place in the individual as well as collective consciousness.

Gloria Anzaldua cites her own life experiences as an example for elaborating the *mestiza* consciousness. Being a border lander she has no homeland, but she considers all countries as her own. She is against the biased stand of the culture as well as religion. She considers herself cultureless because, as a feminist she has challenged the collective cultural/ religious male derived beliefs of Indo- Hispanics and Anglos. Yet she is cultured because she participates in the creation of yet another all-inclusive culture.

Anzaldua out rightly rejects the hitherto existing culture; a culture made by those in power – especially males who believe that women are lower beings, carnal, animal and closer to the un divine and are to be protected and subjugated. The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of and commitment to the value system than men. She believes in an all-inclusive culture with its own value systems, images and symbols that connect people together.

Anzaldúa brings in the imagery of corn to highlight how *mestiza* is designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. *Mestiza* is tenacious and tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the Earth- she will survive the crossroads. The imagery exemplifies how the *mestiza* is designed to withstand the odds in life with a firm determination

In the *mestiza* way – a conscious rupture with all the oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions takes place. She communicates that rupture and documents the struggle that the Mexicanos have undergone to survive. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. Anzaldúa claims that the first inhabitants of the land were Chicanos who were the ancient Indian ancestors found in Texas. She argues against the Anglo notion that the land belongs to the descendants of European families. Furthermore, she goes on to explain how the Anglos deprived the indigenous people of their land; their culture and community. They were considered transgressors and aliens in their own land. They used the notion of ‘White Superiority’ legitimizing only those who are white as owners of the land. This illegal invasion into their life and the severe oppression that they have suffered forced the Mexicanos to fight a war to keep their boundary, life and culture. Many Chicanos lost their life in the U S – Mexico war, many of them had to flee their land. This led to ‘*la crisis*’ which was aggravated by the devaluation of the peso and Mexico’s dependency on the U S increased. ‘*La crisis*’ led to ‘*la travesía*’ and for many Mexicanos the choice was to stay in Mexico and starve or move North and live. In their illegal crossing into the U S, they had to withstand many challenging situations and sometimes it may be at the risk of their own life. The migration of women is more dangerous as they are at the risk of being abused and raped as well as deported. Some of them have to work as a live-in maid for the white, Chicanos or Latino households under inhuman conditions.

Anzaldúa gives an account of homophobia and accepts the meaning given to it as “the fear of going home after a residency” and of not being taken in. She validates it by her explanation as a fear possessed by those who are afraid of being

abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty or damaged. To avoid the rejection that comes as a result of this, some are ready to conform to the values of the culture and push their ‘unacceptable’ aspects into shadows and remain in the dark for the rest of their lives.

Anzaldúa challenges the social norms of her culture in various ways. She was the first one in six generations to leave her family; yet she took with her many aspects of her home. She says, “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry home on my back”. She abhors her culture which cripples its women; they are denied the freedom to carve and find a place of their own. A woman who breaks the shackles and moves on her own is branded as a bad woman, a ‘*mujer mala*’ (17). She criticizes how her culture makes macho caricatures of its men. For men like her father, ‘*macho*’ meant being strong enough to protect and support the family, yet being able to show love. But today’s macho has doubts about his ability to protect, feed and love. What they have now is a false machismo which leads them to look down upon women and even to brutalize them. They are the victims of hierarchical male dominance. Anzaldúa aims to bring about an end to the oppression meted out to the females by these false machismos.

Anzaldúa discusses the cultural practices followed by the Chicanos. She describes the symbolism of the snake “*la vibhora*” which is one of the main symbols of Mexican mythological culture. The *Coatloapeuh* is the Indian name of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, one of Catholicism’s pagan entity. *Coatloapeuh* is descended from earlier Mesoamerican Fertility and Earth Goddess. The earliest is *Coatlícue* or “Serpent Skirt”. *Coatl* is the Nahuatl word for serpents and *Lopeuh* means one who has dominion over serpents. In the *Coatlícue* state there is a fusion of the opposites: eagle and serpent, heaven and underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror. She describes the *Coatlícue* state as having duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective, something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality. The serpent represents a woman’s ability to hold power and property, and also, the view that royal blood is passed through the maternal line. She is the incarnation of cosmic processes. However, the

male- dominated Azteca- Mexican culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female self and the female deities much in the same way as Indian Kali was disempowered.

Anzaldua, lived through the difficulties for not having a home language. In the absence of an exclusive language to be claimed as their own, to express themselves or to communicate within their group, the Chicanos developed a border tongue which was a combination of several languages and dialects. It is a language with which they can connect to their identity, a language they can call 'home'; a language with terms that are neither *espanol ni ingles* – neither Spanish nor English but both. But, the Chicanos were ashamed of speaking Chicano Spanish language as they considered it an illegitimate bastard language even though it is their home language. Anzaldua herself is a multilingual personality who is capable of speaking a variety of languages and dialects. But at the same time the absence of a language of one's own has created a frustration in her to such an extent that she expresses it in her writings. She has used both English and Spanish to express the frustration that she herself has felt for having a confused language and identity. She dreamed of making Chicano Spanish a legitimate language because it is from the language one speaks that his/ her identity is revealed and it plays a pivotal role in framing the personality and selfhood of an individual. She wanted literatures to be written in their language in order to identify them as a distinct people and to make them feel connected to each other. The publishing of *I am Joaquin* and the formation of *la Raza Unida party* were real milestones in the Mexican history. The fragmented pieces began to fall together; they started to get a feeling of togetherness.

Through her work, Anzaldua aims to bring about a new cosmic race, "*una raza mestiza*", a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. The inspiration provided by Jose Vasconcelos' concept "*una raza mestiza*" has persuaded her to work towards such a goal which could eventually bring harmony and peace to this divided world and voice to the people of the borderlands. Both the physical

borders as well as the invisible ones are discussed here. She explores her own homosexuality and male/ female identity. She inspires us to overcome the struggles of borderland and come to terms with our own selves and to accept people as they are despite the colour of skin, religion, nationality, caste or gender.

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