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# Recreating the image of women in Mexico: a genealogy of resistance in Mexican narrative set during the Revolution

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**RECREATING THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN MEXICO:  
A GENEALOGY OF RESISTANCE  
IN MEXICAN NARRATIVE SET DURING THE REVOLUTION**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

by  
Julia Maria Schneider  
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## **Dedication**

To my mother and my father, and to my sister.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Andrea E. Morris, for her support, insight, encouragement, and guidance. Her patience and motivation is more than appreciated and made writing this thesis a pleasant experience.

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## Table of Contents

DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Feminism, Essentialism, and Poststructuralism: Genealogy as an Alternative Approach.....	11
2. THE IMAGE OF THE MEXICAN WOMAN IN NATION AND LITERATURE.....	19
2.1 The Situation of Women from the Colonial Period to the Feminist Movement of Today.....	20
2.2 <i>Malinchismo</i> , <i>Marianismo</i> , and <i>Machismo</i> as Discursive Concepts in Mexico.....	24
2.3 The Women’s Voice in Mexican Literature and the Current Latin American Feminist Literary Debate.....	30
2.4 Women in Literature of the Mexican Revolution.....	43
3. THE WOMAN AND THE NATION IN ELENA PONIATOWSKA’S <i>HASTA NO VERTE JESÚS MÍO</i> .....	49
3.1 Jesusa Palancares’s Rebellions.....	50
3.2 Elena Poniatowska’s Literary Strategies.....	70
4. THE WOMAN AND THE FAMILY IN LAURA ESQUIVEL’S <i>COMO AGUA PARA CHOCOLATE</i> .....	80
4.1 Tita’s Rebellion Against Maternal Patriarchy.....	82
4.2 Gertrudis and the Life as <i>soldadera</i> .....	96
4.3 Laura Esquivel’s Literary Strategies.....	102
5. CONCLUSIONS .....	115
WORKS CITED.....	122
WORKS CONSULTED.....	132
VITA.....	133

## Abstract

Traditionally, women have been relegated to the margins of society, history, and culture in male-dominated environments. Patriarchal systems have long denied women to play an appropriate role in nation building and to enter the public sphere, as is the case in Mexico. The female participation during one of the country's most critical periods, the Mexican Revolution, has largely been ignored. Through situating their narratives into the context of the Revolution and describing the obstacles and limiting conditions that women experience, Mexican writers such as Elena Poniatowska and Laura Esquivel criticize the status quo of social and gender politics in Mexico and attempt to re-inscribe the female experience into the nation's history.

In this thesis, I use Alison Stone's approach of feminist genealogy to examine women's resistance in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* by Elena Poniatowska and *Como agua para chocolate* by Laura Esquivel. For this purpose, I examine the specific representations of feminine identity and analyze the similarities and differences between the women writers' and protagonists' modes of resistance both on intra- and extra-textual levels while taking into account the different contexts and settings in which female resistance against patriarchal oppression occurs. The investigation reveals the various overlaps of the resistance strategies that the women apply regardless of time and place. Furthermore, understanding their resistance in a genealogical context allows them to establish connections with each other in order to provide mutual support in a patriarchal environment. The analysis also shows that the feminist genealogical approach is useful for women in Mexico and Latin America in general as it helps them to perceive themselves as a coalitional group despite any social, cultural, and political differences and is therefore a constructive way of putting forth the women's movement in the region.

## 1. Introduction

The history of the socialization of Mexican women from the colonial period until present times demonstrates not only the discursive and guiding images with which women and men were to identify, but also the social factors which restricted the opportunities for women in their personal development. In Mexico, social phenomena such as *machismo* and *marianismo*, which exist throughout Latin America, are enhanced with a third component particular to the Mexican context, known as *malinchismo*. Throughout history, however, there have been women in Mexico who attempted, even if at least temporarily, to break away from the patriarchal environment and the social laws imposed on them despite the cultural and social attributions inscribed to femaleness and femininity.

Ever since the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, women have been viewed as the source of evil and, in particular, betrayal. It was La Malinche who made the conquest of the Americas possible by becoming the conqueror's interpreter and companion, thus seemingly betraying her own people and allowing the colonization of an entire region by a foreign force. Women have since been blamed for any mischief for which the male-dominated society needed an origin, and were confined to subordination and to the life of the silent and inferior Other at the margin of society. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is regarded as the most prominent female figure in Mexican history, and some regard her as the first feminist of her time,<sup>1</sup> who, in the 17th century, questioned her male dominated environment and raised her voice against the mechanisms of patriarchy that limited women's access to education and knowledge and condemned those who educated themselves to silence (Ludmer 48). More than three centuries later Rosario Castellanos still decried the lack of writing women and women who 'think aloud' in Mexican literature and

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<sup>1</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was rewarded the title of the first feminist of the New World in Mexico in 1974 (Merrim 11).

society. However, there has since been a rise of various women writers in contemporary times whose works contribute to and aim at the deconstruction of still existing models and images of masculinity and femininity in the Hispanic and, particularly Mexican, world.

The often times fragmented structure of their stories about women and women's lives demonstrates that female history does not follow a linear pattern of development, in fact, the women writers rather depict the terms masculinity and especially femininity as social constructs in a flexible discourse. This opens up new possibilities of interpreting femininity and inscribing new forms of "womanhood" in history. The works by such women writers foster communication and dialogue between women and a society embedded into a patriarchal mindset and norms, which is opposed to the institutionalized silence that women were and still are exposed to as a form of patriarchal violence and restriction of their personal freedom as (female) subject. In her study on *Feminist Literary Criticism of Latin American Women's Writing*, LaGreca points out that the challenge for today's writers and literary feminist critics is to "strive to make [the] feminist discourse sensitive to a demographically diverse feminist readership while continuing to modify patriarchal systems" (380).

Women not only have been forced to refrain from participation in society and politics as individual subjects with their own voice and identity, they have been almost entirely restricted to the domestic sphere and the adoption of roles typically associated with the female sex. As mothers and wives, they are expected to follow cultural, social, and political norms and stereotypes in order to fulfill the role that is imposed on them by society and which affirms them in their femininity. Those stereotyped models prescribe that being a good woman equals being a good mother, wife, daughter, and vice versa. Attempting to break with society's norms and thus developing one's own understanding of 'womanhood' and femininity means trading in social



acceptance and validation for becoming a political and social subject. Thus, a woman who raises her female voice and breaks her silence in order to enter the public sphere and claim public space sees herself confronted with losing her identity as woman and with the denial of her femininity by society. Women can therefore choose to be either a socially accepted woman who is directed by others, or a female Other that is excluded from social acceptance. Both variations keep women from experiencing themselves as subjects with a whole identity of self and gender, of voice and sex. Within the masculine/feminine dichotomy, the woman has similarly also been viewed as a 'non-being', contrary to the man who is 'being' (Guerra, "Las sombras" 134; López González 21).

The negation of female participation has not only been limited on social and political levels, but also in culture and education. As Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Rosario Castellanos observe in subtle and polemic manners, respectively, educated women have not been allowed to speak, and women without education are not able to speak. In other words, women with education have been denied the right to participate in social, cultural, and political discourse, and women who have not had access to education have never learned how to participate, traditionally speaking, at all. Rosario Castellanos points out that in order for men and women to engage in a dialogue, a certain sense of equality is necessary (*Mujer que sabe latín* 175).

Whichever category a woman belongs to, not only is her voice not paid attention to in the patriarchal system in which she is forced to live, it is often not even recognized as such by its masculine members. Women have nothing to say, or write about, and if they attempt to, it is not to be taken seriously. While there have been many social and political changes for women since the beginning of the century and the times of the Mexican Revolution, which include the right to vote and be part of the work force, it was not until recently that women claimed a space in the

Mexican literary world and demanded that their written voice be heard alongside that of men who had already been well positioned in the literary canon for decades, if not centuries (Meyer qtd. in Castillo, *Talking Back* 20). Women's literature, as have been their words as mothers, wives, and woman in general, has mostly been regarded as trivial and was to be understood only as a temporary jaunt into masculine spheres of domination: women wrote poetry or love stories, nothing political or of historic importance (Castillo, "Finding Feminisms" 353).

This has changed with the appearance of writers such as Elena Garro and Elena Poniatowska, who situate their female protagonists within historical contexts and thus allow them not only to occupy a space in history, but also shape and affect historical events. While Elena Garro takes up the notions of time and silence interpreted in a feminine way in her novel *Los recuerdos del porvenir*, Elena Poniatowska writes for and gives voice to the marginalized and oppressed in her works, as it is the case in the fictionalized testimony *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. Whereas both of these women writers have been criticized for their public appearance and activity in political matters, others such as Laura Esquivel have dedicated themselves mainly to writing. However, the women in her novel *Como agua para chocolate*, which is set during the same period in Mexican history, also take on an active rather than a subordinate attitude and defend themselves and their individuality against the rules and norms which the patriarchal society imposes on them. This development shows that the female voice, in writing or spoken out aloud, is in the process of being fully recognized in the Hispanic and Mexican context, in society and politics as well as in literature.

The role of the oppressed has been inflicted on women in the Latin American context in manifold ways. As we have seen, at different times in history, and increasingly throughout the second half of the 20th century, women have denounced the patriarchal system that prevents

them from fully experiencing themselves as political subjects on the one hand and as subjects with a feminine identity on the other. Their dissenting has been expressed in various forms and different contexts, all of which belong to a broader social and cultural platform of discourse and withstanding.

My own investigation aims at contributing to this discourse specific to the Latin American and, in particular, Mexican context and is positioned in the literary field. However, studies about the presentation of women's images in Latin American literature are not new. Several critics have investigated certain aspects of women's representation in contemporary literature and focused on issues of gender and sexuality, power, language, the body, and traditional views on women. Debra Castillo in *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* and Amy Kaminsky in *Reading the Body Politic* explore the usefulness and applicability of foreign theory to Latin American literature and focus on the employment of patriarchal language for feminist topics.

Both Castillo and Kaminsky stress the relationship between language and the roles of gender and sexuality in women's writing. In *Easy Women*, Castillo goes a step further and analyzes the functions of sex and gender in modern Mexican fiction. She focuses especially on the image of the prostitute and tries to determine how Mexican writers have positioned her into their works. Sexuality, power, and the body are also the object of investigation in Liliana Trevizán's *Política/ sexualidad: nudo en la escritura de mujeres latinoamericanas*. In her study of women's fiction informed by the Latin American dictatorships of the 1980s, Trevizán offers examples of practical applications of gender theories to literature and emphasizes the complexity of women's subjectivity through looking at the sexual, racial, political, and social perspectives

from which women viewed their own reality under systems of political oppression. Gender and sexuality thus play a great role in literary feminist criticism.

In her early work *Plotting Women*, Jean Franco, on the other hand, examines more generally the common ground for feminist theory and Latin American culture. She analyzes the struggle of the Mexican woman for interpretative power in relation to Catholicism, the nation and society. Her work spans a period from the 17th century until contemporary times and deals with prominent women writers as well as more marginal figures. Charlene Merithew's *Re-presenting the Nation* focuses only on contemporary Mexican women writers. While also examining the relationships between gender, sex, and the nation in her study, she pays special attention to the representations of Mexican archetypes of feminine identity and emphasizes the women writers' role in the development of theories that show how the patriarchal system manipulates constructed categories of gender in order to subordinate women. The new literary representations of women and their roles in Mexican society are also the subject of María Elena de Valdés's *The Shattered Mirror: Representations of Women in Mexican Literature*. De Valdés analyzes works by male and female writers alike and illustrates the various literary representations of female identity in Mexico.

As becomes obvious, the vast majority of studies on women's representation in Latin American and Mexican literature deal with issues of gender and identity and are aimed at deconstructing the patriarchal mechanisms in power that constrain women in the development of their own feminine individuality. Although works about women's literature that deal with the issues mentioned above are few, even fewer studies have focused on women's experience during certain periods of Latin American and Mexican history. Tabea Alexa Linhard's *Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil War* tries to fill such a gap. In the first half of

her study, Linhard gives a comparative analysis of works on the Mexican Revolution. Her analysis shows that female figures of the Revolution such as the *soldaderas* are often handled as icons, myths, and symbols. She finds that these women's stories have usually been downplayed in literary studies and their particular experiences displaced.

Elizabeth Salas's *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* and Shirlene Soto's *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman: Her Participation in Revolution and Struggle for Equality, 1910-1940* are unique historical accounts of the various forms of women's participation in the Mexican Revolution. Salas primarily examines the image of the *soldadera*, another stereotype of the Mexican woman, in literature, art, music, and film, whereas Soto focuses solely on women's contributions to the Revolution and the accomplishments of the women's movement in the Revolution's aftermath.

My study differentiates itself from these works insofar as it intends to analyze the representations of feminine identity in novels by contemporary women writers who have placed their texts specifically into a time period that is significant to Mexican history and that has largely been written about and interpreted by men. Instead of focusing on broader themes such as gender, language, power, and sexuality, I will concentrate on the various ways in which the women writers depict women's resistance and illustrate differences and similarities among them.

Using a feminist genealogical approach, I will determine whether it is possible to view the writers and women protagonists as a distinct social group based on their forms of resistance. In other words, while drawing on the ongoing and still developing feminist debate in the Hispanic literary world, I am interested in analyzing the various forms of resistance that women apply and live to protest against political oppression, marginalization, and social injustice related to their gender identity in everyday contexts as depicted in the novels set during a time period

crucial to the history of the Mexican nation. The term resistance should here be understood not only in political and revolutionary terms, but rather in a broader sense and with respect to Michel Foucault's notion of resistance as a means of creation (Lazzarato 109).

Resisting a state or condition, according to Foucault, is always connected with the invention of a new form of being. While the term was previously conceptualized only with regards to negation, Foucault thinks that simply saying no is only the minimum form of resistance. In fact, "to resist is (...) a creative process; to create and recreate, to change the situation, actually to be an active member of that process" (*Ethics* 168). Resistance as a process of breaking with discursive practices can take place on all levels of everyday interactions, be it within the domestic or public sphere, and in any given social and political context: "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, *Ethics* 167). In other words, resistance would not be possible if there were no power relations present, and instead of taking on a passive, powerless role, the subject, through its resistance, always takes part in the dynamics of these power relations by actively influencing, changing, and thus recreating them and therefore the overarching system.

The two novels that I have selected for this purpose are written by contemporary Mexican women writers and are set at the beginning of the twentieth century during the Mexican Revolution. Each of the novels is centered on one or more female protagonists and describes their daily struggle and experiences of lived 'womanhood' over the span of their lifetimes. While one of the novels is written in a fictitious testimonial style and portrays the life story of a soldier woman, the other text focuses on the experiences of women in the domestic sphere as mothers, wives, and daughters and illustrate their quotidian efforts as such, dealing with issues of love, family, and tradition within the political context of the Mexican Revolution.

I will investigate the different forms of resistance both on intra- and extra-textual levels. First and mainly, I will analyze the forms of resistance put forth by the novels' female protagonists. In other words, I want to reveal the distinct ways in which the women protagonists take a stance against the system of patriarchy in which they live and try to oppose, and subvert, the mechanisms they deem responsible for their oppression. Their objection to situations and behavior restricting them in developing a complete identity as woman and independently acting subject takes place in various social and political contexts. My objective is to investigate what modes of resistance are present in the selected texts and in which contexts and settings they appear. I will examine against what the women protagonists resist, how and to what extent they claim a voice, whether the (patriarchal) environment recognizes their resistance and if so, how it reacts to it, what resources the protagonists have depending on their background to support their resistance, and, to a certain extent, what role the female body plays in their expressions of resistance on the one hand and feelings of oppression on the other. In relation to this intent, I will determine whether the identified forms of resistance show any overlaps from one situation and one individual to another, or if they are each implemented separately from the other in their own specific contexts.

In addition to this, I will investigate the various strategies used by the authors of these texts in order to depict the female protagonists as 'women of resistance' and disclose the different literary styles and techniques that the writers employ to achieve this end. In doing so, I also intend to look at the women writers' own form of resistance against traditionally male-dominated literary conventions and attitudes: Is it adequate to say that the authors themselves resist against the latter through their very act of writing, and through writing novels of such

purport? In which way and to what extent, on an extra-textual level, do they join the women protagonists in their protest against masculine domination?

Finally, by ascertaining the similarities and distinctions of the women protagonists' and women authors' forms of resistance, I want to find out whether or not, each or together, they can be considered as a distinct unitary group in terms of their exertion of resistance according to the concept of feminist genealogy as defined by Alison Stone. Drawing on her understanding of feminist genealogy as an alternative to the debate between feminist essentialists and poststructuralists, I intend to assess whether or not a genealogical view of resisting women contributes to a change of or within the patriarchal systems and their perception as they are predominant in various social, political, and cultural contexts of Mexico and Latin America in general.

In a less extensive manner, I purpose to detect whether the selected texts include any essentialist views about women and femininity or women and resistance with respect to the different roles traditionally assigned to women, such as mother and wife, among others, and, if present, how these essentialist views are incorporated by the authors and treated by the women protagonists in comparison to views that support an understanding of these concepts as socially constructed.

The introduction includes an outline of the feminist debate between essentialism and poststructuralism that led to the concept of feminist genealogy which I will use as theoretical foundation of my investigation. The second chapter will provide an overview of the current feminist literary debate in Latin America with a special focus on Mexico and describe the situation of women in Mexico from the colonial times until the current feminist debate. It also gives an overview about the Mexican Revolution and the role of women in literature that deals



with this period. The following two chapters will focus on the selected novels and deal with the forms of resistance that the women protagonists apply against patriarchal mechanisms that restrict them in their search for a feminine identity. In each chapter, I will also explore the strategies used by the women authors that aim at depicting the protagonists' resistance and, at the same time, underpin their very own resistance against styles and traditional conventions existing in the—male-dominated—literary world.

Chapters three and four are dedicated to the analysis of the selected texts. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* by Elena Poniatowska deals with woman's resistance within the setting of the nation/state and explores the different strategies that Jesusa Palancares deploys in her life at the margin of the Mexican society after growing up during the times of the Mexican Revolution. *Como agua para chocolate* by Laura Esquivel explores women's resistance within the context of the family and depicts the daily struggles of Mamá Elena and her daughters when confronted with traditional values and the image of woman during the Revolution. While I will concentrate on the specific novel in each chapter, I will reflect on the other novel whenever appropriate. In the conclusion, I will return to the question of how and whether the concept of genealogy can be successfully applied to women living resistance in the Mexican context. I intend to relate the content and setting of the novels with the recent social and cultural history of women's movement in Mexico while making connections to its present state, thereby disclosing overlaps and differences between the various forms of resistance depicted in the novels and the life and work of the women writers, Mexican women themselves.

### **1.1 Feminism, Essentialism, and Poststructuralism: Genealogy as an Alternative Approach**

The concept of feminist genealogy is the result of an attempt to put an end, or find an alternative, to the continuing debate between two different and traditionally very opposed strands

in feminist theory (Ferguson 337). In the following, I will briefly outline these two directions, namely essentialism and poststructuralism or postmodernism,<sup>2</sup> before I go on to explain the theoretical concept that serves as basis for my investigation.

Essentialism can be broadly understood as the belief in natural and inherent qualities of a thing or human being. These essential qualities define, make, or determine what that being or entity is (McHugh 37). The social, cultural, or historical context in which an entity exists is thereby not seen as affecting its essence. However, the properties that are thought to be universal or essential to all women do not need to be biological per se, but can also be socially or culturally constructed. Before second wave feminism, it was mainly assumed that a woman's biological features are essential to her. Second wave feminists argued that the biological sex is different from gender and, recognizing this gap, they set out to identify a set of qualities inherent to every woman that was based on social characteristics which were considered to express femininity. While Nancy Hartsock found those characteristics in the women's accountability for labor in the domestic sphere, other feminists saw them linked to the construction of women as sexual objects, such as Catherine MacKinnon, or their psychological constitution and way of thinking, like Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, respectively.<sup>3</sup> As Gamble correctly notes, there is no singular feminist position on essentialism, however, most of those feminists support the idea that there is something that we can understand as a unique female identity (225). Gayatri Spivak stated that essentialism "is a loose tongue" ("In a word" 159), pointing out the diverse orientations within this strand and thus underlining Gamble's observation.

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<sup>2</sup> Some critics use the terms poststructuralism and postmodernism in feminist thought interchangeably. See Gamble (299), McHugh (102), and Code (397) for more explanations of the use of these terms. In this work, I have chosen to use the term poststructuralism as this branch deals more specifically with (gendered) subjectivity and power.

<sup>3</sup> See Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice*, Nancy Hartsock in *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*, and Catherine MacKinnon in *Women's Lives, Men's Laws*.

However, the idea that there is something universal to all women has largely been criticized insofar as essentialism was “simply false as a description of social reality” (Stone, “Genealogy of Women” 87). One of the first critics of essentialist ideas in feminist theory was the French philosopher and existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, who stated in her work *The Second Sex*<sup>4</sup> that “essence is not some fixed pre-social given but is generated by (...) culture” (McHugh 37). Because of the claim that there is one true, singular essence to all forms of being and concepts, feminist essentialism has especially been criticized for denying the multiplicity of beings, interpretations, and experiences, and thus for neglecting the different contexts that affect and shape women’s lives and lead them to different understandings of femininity, of what it means to be and live as a woman.

After de Beauvoir, anti-essentialist views emerged in the 1970s and started the era of poststructuralist feminism. This feminist strand stresses the plurality of women’s experiences and is, as it resists defining the terms “feminine”, “woman”, or “women”, strongly influenced by works of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan with respect to their ideas about the deconstruction of language (McHugh 102). Likewise, poststructuralist feminists advocate an understanding of the differences of women’s experiences as they result in women’s different locations in social and cultural systems and women’s different forms of being. One of their main arguments is that “universalizing claims about women are always false and function oppressively to normalize particular—socially and culturally privileged—forms of feminine experience” (Stone, “Genealogy of Women” 85). Elizabeth Spelman’s critique *Inessential Woman* takes up this point of view and warns against taking particular women’s experiences as the norm for all women. The

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<sup>4</sup> While her work can be considered more philosophical and descriptive of the society that she lived in than truly feminist or ideological, de Beauvoir is widely made reference to within the feminist discourse. It has been argued that her work is commonly misinterpreted and that she rather intended to describe the social reality of “woman”, “women”, and “femininity” than to develop a feminist theory of her own (Heinämaa, “What is a Woman?” 20, “Simone de Beauvoir” 127; Vintges 142).

danger of those essential views lies in the fact that they reproduce the paradigms of oppression and exclusion between women, the very patterns that feminism intends to refute. In “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism,” Bordo makes appropriate reference to a feminist historian who went as far as calling essentialist “bonds of womanhood (...) a fantasy born out of the ethnocentrism of white, middle-class academics” (133), thus underlining the fact that gender is so thoroughly fragmented by race, class, historical particularity, and individual difference. Poststructuralist feminists thus support the idea that femininity or masculinity, namely gender, is a socially constructed phenomenon and not the outcome of an essential nature which is inert to men and women alike. A socially constructed concept is particular to a social, cultural, and historical context, just like any social characteristics that were previously thought of as essential to all women. This view of femininity allowed for broader, subjective interpretations of “womanhood” and acknowledged the diverse social, cultural, racial, ethical, and political backgrounds that help define women’s understanding and expression of themselves.

Just like essentialism, poststructuralist feminist views have been criticized in manifold ways. The main critique is targeted at the very presupposition that all women’s experiences are distinct, and no one woman is equal to another in any way. This undermines the idea of feminism as a political movement and social critique. Where there is no common ground, no collective activity can be expected and no political goal can be achieved (Bohan 15). In order to avoid some of the difficulties that a poststructuralist feminist position brings about, theorists such as Gayatri Spivak have argued for a so-called strategic essentialism, which allows for a temporary adoption of essentialist views with the purpose of generating a consciousness of women as a collective in order to achieve political action on a common ground. Strategic essentialism can thus be understood as a political strategy and has been applied mostly in postcolonial and third-

wave feminism,<sup>5</sup> which emerged during the 1990s. Spivak stresses that, while acknowledging that essentialism is descriptively false, one “should continue to act as if essentialism were true, so as to encourage a shared identification among women that enables them to engage in collective action” (Stone, “Genealogy of Women” 88).

However, feminist philosopher Alison Stone argues that strategic essentialism, as it is descriptively false, cannot be considered as politically effective either because of the very fact that it is based on an incorrect, presumed truth; it therefore cancels itself out. Besides criticizing strategic essentialism, she points out Iris Marion Young’s concept of seeing women as a series rather than a unified group with commonalities considered as essential to them as another attempt that has been posed to overcome the pitfalls of poststructuralist feminist views. In “Gender as Seriality,” Young argues that women can be considered as a series or a non-unified group whose members show characteristics that are “vast, multifaceted, layered, complex, and overlapping” (728). Women thus may share or not share any attributes, objectives, or experiences in this series, they may be entirely different from another and incorporate the limitations of gender structures in various ways and within various contexts, while they remain passively unified insofar “as the same set of feminizing structures remains a background constraint for them all” (Stone, “Genealogy of Women” 90). Once women have become conscious of their status as a social group in this broad and non-unified sense, they can also become politically active as a collective, according to Young. As logical as this approach may sound, Stone hints at a shortcoming in Young’s explanations. While her idea of seeing women as a non-unified series is intended to avoid essentialist views, Young overlooks that she perpetuates essentialist ideas by “invoking a form of essentialism with respect to the constraining structures

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<sup>5</sup> Third wave feminists embrace the contradictions that are generated by taking a pluralistic approach to the critical analysis of western culture, oppression, masculinity, femininity, class, race, and colonialism. Contemporary media and popular culture are commonly used to generate more feminist activism (McHugh 144-145).

of the social milieu” (Stone, “Genealogy of Women” 90) into which all women situate themselves. These structures all present a central set of expectations about appropriate gender roles, for example, and it is thus assumed that all women are located around the same type of constraints (Young 728-729).

As we have seen, Stone regards both of these alternative directions as deficient in their theoretical foundation and elaboration. In accordance with Diana Fuss’ claim that “any attempt to intervene in the stalemate produced by the essentialist/ [poststructuralist] stand-off must (...) involve a recognition of each position’s internal contradictions and political investments” (Fuss 119), she, developing Young’s idea further and borrowing loosely from Judith Butler’s theories, instead suggests an understanding of women as a non-unified group with a genealogy as a way to “reject essentialism (...) while preserving the idea that women form a distinctive social group” (Stone, “Essentialism” 136). Her idea of feminist genealogy is derived from Judith Butler’s use of the term which is in line with her understanding of gender as a performative act, an “open-ended process, a sequence of acts or events (...) which is never fully (...) ‘realized’ ” (Butler, *Butler Reader* 90). Gender and sex, moreover, can thus be understood rather as the effects than the causes of institutional practices and discourses (Salih 10). According to Butler, gender is not inert to men or women as a characteristic of them as human beings, gender is rather produced through behavior and activities that are socially construed as typically masculine or feminine. In this sense, gender is inscribed on the body, and the gendered body always needs to be situated in its particular social and historical context. Stone develops Butler’s idea further by saying that the terms “woman” and “femininity” therefore have a genealogy because they have functioned as discursive categories at different times in history (Stone, “Essentialism” 140).

However, in order to understand Butler and Stone adequately, one has to go back to Friedrich Nietzsche's and then Michel Foucault's development of the genealogical concept. In his work *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche states that notions as such of morality change over history. They shape and are shaped by our social experiences, implying that any social phenomenon is a re-interpretation of a pre-existing phenomenon of the same category (Nietzsche 57). Thus, over time, a gradual drift in the phenomenon's meaning takes place, and any multitude of social phenomena that overlap in this way can be understood as having a genealogy. Similarly, Foucault applies the term genealogy to describe his method of tracing the descent of ideas, his "genealogy demonstrates the specific historical contextuality of truths" (Cain 91 and Bailey 103). Both Cain and Bailey consider Foucault's work therefore as appealing to and useful for feminist theories, which is in accordance with Stone's interpretation of Butler's genealogical approach. The role of genealogy, as Foucault states in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History" is

to record [the history of the development of humanity]: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process. (*Language, Counter-Memory* 152)

A feminist genealogy, or a genealogy of "woman," makes possible new ways of anti-essentialist, coalitional feminist politics that assert that women do not have equal characteristics which are essential to their being, but rather share a series of overlapping characteristics and social experiences (Stone, "Toward a Genealogical Feminism" 13). Butler herself states that "gender identity might be reconceived as a personal [and] cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices" (*Gender Trouble* 138). This means that a unitary meaning of femininity or 'womanhood' on which all women agree does not exist. Although all women may identify with some form of femininity, their femininity differs in content without any

exception. As Stone states, women nonetheless remain identifiable as women on a genealogical approach (“Genealogy and Women” 92). The concept of understanding women as having a genealogy is helpful for feminist theory inasmuch as it offers an alternative to the essentialist versus poststructural debate; it permits women to have their very own and subjective experiences and characteristics while allowing the idea of classifying them as a non-unified distinctive social group, a group in which every woman intra- and inter-generationally becomes part of a unique historical chain by interpreting every time anew the socio-cultural construction of ‘womanhood’. In the following, I will give an overview of how the construction of ‘womanhood’ in Latin America and Mexico impacted the lives of women and their writing in the region and what, according to several modern Latin American feminist literary critics, the consequences were of being a woman in the literary world.



## 2. The Image of the Mexican Woman in Nation and Literature

Mexican women are by far not a minority in quantitative terms, however, their social status is still mostly determined by a discursive image of femininity and ‘womanhood’ that is pitted against the patriarchal norm in which a woman’s social position is clearly defined. Because of the economic and social structure of Mexican society, the “desire for freedom by a woman (...) is on a collision course with the designated social responsibilities of a woman as wife and mother” (de Valdés, *Shattered Mirror* 11). Feminism in Mexico, and in Latin America in general, cannot be reduced to ‘women’s problems’ alone, it also needs to be considered as a phenomenon of society in its entirety with respect to the multiple ethnicities, social class differences, and the political circumstances. Jean Franco means exactly that when she says that “género es algo más que ‘problemas de mujeres,’” referring to the fact that gender can and has to play a significant role in the complex struggle for power of the marginalized and oppressed: “La crítica latinoamericana ha hablado mucho de la diferencia de clases y de etnia pero hasta ahora no ha querido incluir el género sexual como productor de diferencias, aunque es uno de los principios básicos de la clasificación social” (“Si me permiten hablar” 118).

Maintaining the balance between their gender identity and the fulfillment of its requirements and their personal needs and objectives brings women into a complex and conflicted situation. This conflict between the social role expectations and the process of personal identification holds, on the one hand, the danger of a crisis within the female subject as to what her status in society is, but on the other hand, it may well offer the possibility of differentiation and the development of personal autonomy. This is true for the Mexican woman as a social and political subject as well as for her status in national arts and culture. Although the feminine voice in Latin America and Mexico has reached a point where it is represented by a

community of writers dedicated to discovering the numerous levels of women's experiences and to challenging the patriarchal system in the domestic and public spheres, women's literature, or literature by women, has often been denied entry into the literary canon and has been repudiated rather than welcomed as a valuable contribution to the literary world. Due to the fact that the prevalent, and mystifying, images of men and women as well as the binary patterns of thought that place them into one-dimensional categories prevent rather than bring about any kind of modification, moving questions about feminist and women's issues into the public space and raising the social awareness is only one step in the process of changing society for the better. The various opportunities for women and women writers to discover, develop, and realize new forms of (gendered) being and writing is the more important part that follows the step of gaining public awareness in order to improve the social environment for both women and men. After explaining the past and present social conditions for women in Latin America and particularly in Mexico, I will continue with an overview of the area's feminist literary debate and introduce some of the main ideas of current prominent feminist literary critics.

## **2.1 The Situation of Women from the Colonial Period until the Feminist Movement of Today**

(...) en este país al menos, las mujeres no elegimos. Nos sentamos pasivamente a esperar que un hombre vuelva sus ojos hasta el rincón que nuestra modestia nos depara y descubra las cualidades maravillosas que nos adornan.<sup>6</sup>

About thirty years ago, the image of women in Mexico was still very much restricted to the function of adornment and commodity of husbands, a role that was clearly limited to the domestic sphere. The overall situation of Mexican women in history as well as in contemporary times is considered to be representative of the history of women in other Latin American countries as well. However, early societies based upon matriarchal systems were not uncommon.

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<sup>6</sup>Rosario Castellanos in *El uso de la palabra*. México: Ediciones de Excélsior, 1975.

This changed with the emergence of the Aztecs, who superseded matriarchies as forms of society in favor of patriarchal structures.<sup>7</sup> Over time, women in the Aztec state were increasingly assigned the role of reproduction. The Aztecs thus clearly differentiated between masculine and feminine spheres. Young girls were prepared for their role of women at a very early age. On their day of birth, their umbilical cord was buried close to the hearth and home, whereas that of a boy was placed outside the settlement in the wilderness; this symbolized the girl's future as a caretaker of domestic responsibilities and the boy's destiny as a warrior (Guerra, *La mujer fragmentada* 14).

Despite the limitations that women experienced during the Aztec period, they were allowed access to education. The Spanish conquerors put an end to that form of life; under their reign, Indians, whether men or women, were considered as a commodity. But especially women lost most of their previous status in the domestic space; they were despised, mistreated, and given away as presents by their fathers in order to show hospitality or seal an alliance with the conquerors (J. Esquivel 69; Franco, *Critical Passions* 74-75). Due to the fact that the conquest of Latin America worsened the overall situation of women, American anthropologist Magnus Mörner states correctly that “the Spanish conquest was a conquest of women” (211). However, the Spanish crown soon realized that women were necessary in the building of a new society. Through passing new laws that aimed at the improvement of the situation of women of Indian as well as Spanish descent, Spain tried to convince its women to move to the Americas as their presence was scarce and they were highly in demand. In the following decades, women contributed to spreading the Spanish language, but were restricted from actively engaging in the

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<sup>7</sup> Some of those early matriarchal patterns of society are still existent today in southern Oaxaca among the Zapotec Indians who live in the area around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In the city of Juchitán, “women do participate in public and ritual life in ways that could be considered unusual in other parts of the country” (Stephen, “Sexuality and Genders” 43). See also Stephen's study *Zapotec Women*.

politics of the colonial society. They were wives and servants, while some Spanish women worked as teachers. When their husbands died, many found themselves in unfortunate situations and had no economic means of survival, which led to their living in so-called *casas de recogimiento*, a form of housing between prison and convent that was established to provide protection for, but more importantly, control over women who were faced with “worldly dangers” (Muriel, *Los recogimientos* 43).

A woman’s proper and acceptable behavior in the colonial world was framed in Spain, where breviaries were edited and sent to the New World. Written by men, they mainly prescribed a way of life determined by modesty, humility, and, above all, chastity. The naturally “evil” woman was considered to find safety only at home or in church. Over the time, many of those breviaries were transformed into biographies of ideal women and written by friars, bishops, and other scholars who used diaries and letters of nuns and highly religious female members of the upper class for their productions (Muriel, *Cultura femenina* 43). They were addressed to women of Spanish descent; Indian women worked mostly as slaves and were not viewed as women of proper decency. The Mexican Marriage Act of 1859 defines accordingly the social, marital, and familial responsibilities of women:

La mujer, cuyas principales dotes son: la abnegación, la belleza, la compasión, la perspicacia y la ternura, debe dar y dará al marido obediencia, agrado, asistencia, consuelo y consejos tratándole siempre con la veneración que se debe dar a la persona que nos apoya y defiende, y con la delicadeza de quien no quiere exasperar la parte brusca, irritable y dura de sí mismo. (Guerra, *La mujer fragmentada* 71)

In the course of industrialization during the 19th century, many Mexican women started working in factories or enjoyed a short education in traditional professions such as nurse and teacher besides fulfilling their marital duties. Under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, women also became involved with oppositional organizations, which marked the beginning of their

participation during the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1920.<sup>8</sup> As we will see in chapters three and four, many women worked as *soldaderas* during the revolutionary period and were able to establish themselves as respected military leaders in some cases. The majority of the *soldaderas*, however, followed the armed troops with the purpose of providing food and comfort to the men.

Nonetheless, inspired by the Revolution, women developed awareness for questions of emancipation and founded women's movements with a feminist background over the next decades. Their engagement culminated in the passing of their right to vote in 1953, and in 1975 the World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City. The first woman candidate for presidency was Rosario Ibarra in 1982. A decade later, the *Convención Nacional de Mujeres por la Democracia* was founded in 1991 with the goal to enable women to participate in national politics with respect to issues specific to the situation of women in the country. Many women underwent profound social and political changes in their personal lives in this era, they started to show solidarity and learned to participate in the public discourse, “supieron del rechazo, del menoscabo, de la manipulación y del silencio que se esperaba de ellas. Y entonces aprendieron también la rebeldía. (...) Entonces se inventaron el feminismo” (Trevizán 157). A milestone in the history of the Mexican women's movement had been the foundation of the feminist magazine *fem* in 1976, which has been published and written by women ever since. The women's movement reached its peak between 1975 and 1985, but remained largely within the realm of urban women and white women of the upper and middle classes. While the movement's activities declined to some extent after this period, Mexican feminist Marta Lamas nonetheless emphasizes in 1987 its importance and achievement as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> Many women supported the Revolution as rural teachers and educators of the poor. See Stephanie J. Smith for an account of a female teacher in Yucatán in 1916 (37).

En un país como México, con una sociedad civil débil, pero fuertemente machista, (...) con una gran influencia de la Iglesia católica, sin organizaciones sociales independientes, con pocos sindicatos no controlados por el gobierno y sin una tradición de movilización, participación y debate de los ciudadanos, la aparición de un movimiento feminista autónoma, por pequeño que sea, y su permanencia por más de 17 años son, en sí, un logro. (19)

The public discussion about gender identity and questions about the social roles and expectations that come with it find increasing acceptance in Mexican society today. However, many women still fear to be called a lesbian and to have their gender identity impugned when they identify themselves as feminist or participate in women's movements. For a long time, in the hetero-normative Mexican society "women activists faced accusations not only of feminizing the masculine but also of masculinizing the feminine. Questioning the demands of *abnegación* quickly earned one the unfeminine label *marimacho*, a tomboy of dubious sexuality, as distinct from a 'genuine' woman" (Olcott 17). In *Reading the Body Politic*, Amy Kaminsky even points out that "to be called 'lesbian' is to be called a 'monster'" (xiv). She as well blames the phallogocentric culture and its will to control women's sexuality for the slow development of academic feminism in Latin America and for the perceived absence of feminist thought in literary criticism and theory. It also remains a fact that in rural areas social structures persist that are shaped by a rigid patriarchal system and prevent the majority of women from developing personal responsibility and autonomy and from leading a self-determined life.

In the following, I will explore the Mexican archetypes for women and the determinants that have shaped the persistent gender dichotomy between men and women in Mexico and strongly influence the society, its language, and public and domestic life.

## **2.2 *Malinchismo, Marianismo, and Machismo as Discursive Concepts in Mexico***

Although existent throughout Latin America, the polarization of reason and emotions, mind and body, culture and nature seem to find their particularly strong manifestation in the

structures of gender identity as they can be found in Mexico. The divergence between masculine and feminine is nowhere as intrusive as in everyday life when it is based on the concepts mentioned above. The patriarchal discourse in Mexico mystifies women and allows them to exist only in certain categories, following the image of La Malinche or the Virgin of Guadalupe, both rooted deeply in the nation's history. The feminine has been viewed as dangerous, obscure, destructive, and wayward, and has thus been very well identified with the concept of nature, or the Other.<sup>9</sup> Let loose, it will inevitably destroy the *machista* culture and the value system that is based on masculine power and requires the control of women. While "man describes himself in his theories and histories of humanity, woman remains in silence. He stands for the normal and for the ideal, she for the deviant" (Heinämaa, "Simone de Beauvoir" 124). The church, a patriarchal institution itself, has had great influence on the proliferation of feminine archetypes and the view of woman as the Other in the past. The Other can be defined as everything that the dominant (male) subject in a society is not, it lacks the qualities of value and exposes all their opposites.<sup>10</sup> With regard to Albert Memmi and his work *The Colonizer and the Colonized* about the history of the conquest of the Americas, Nancy Hartsock points out accordingly that the Other is

pushed toward becoming an object. As an end, in the colonizer's supreme ambition, he/she should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, that is, to be transformed into a pure colonized. An object for himself or herself as well as for the colonizer. The colonized ceases to be a subject of history and becomes only what the colonizer is not. ("Foucault on Power" 161)

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<sup>9</sup> According to Simone de Beauvoir, the woman's identity as the Other derives in part from her body, especially her reproductive capacity: "[de Beauvoir] sees the female body as inherently alienating because it demands so much of women's energy that it saps their potential for engaging in creative *pour-soi* activity. Childbearing, childbirth, and menstruation are draining physical events that tie women to their bodies and to immanence. The male is not tied down by such inherently physical events" (Donovan 123).

<sup>10</sup> According to Josephine Donovan, "Sartre developed the idea of the collective Other as scapegoat or repository for the undesired aspects of the dominant group in society" (121).

The relationship that becomes obvious here between the colonizer and the colonized can be paralleled to the one between the subordinate woman and the dominant man as it exists in a patriarchal nation as Mexico. The Other, or the feminine, stands in contrast to the masculine, which symbolizes the positive side of the gender dichotomy or the attributes that can be found at the center of society, while the feminine Other implicates the negative side, or what is at the margin.<sup>11</sup>

The first Mexican female archetype is symbolized by Hernán Cortés's translator and companion La Malinche and can be compared to the biblical Eve. As Jocelyn Olcott notes, the Mexican nation springs from her "betrayal, tragedy, and exploitation" (15). In her explanations of the history of the nation, she makes reference to Mexican writer and diplomat Octavio Paz. In his work *El laberinto de la soledad*, which was first published in 1950, he outlines why the sons of La Malinche reject everything feminine as devalued, passive, and ill-treated, in short, as *chingada*, as violated, as something or someone who was wronged but has also betrayed; the Mexican man (and woman) is ashamed by the conquest and the violation of La Malinche, the mother of the nation, which has led to the development of an ambiguous subjectivity and identity conflict in Mexico on the personal and national level (Paz 75 ff.). Since she stands for the betrayal of one's own people or culture, La Malinche serves as the female scapegoat for Mexican society. Her relationship with Cortés was neither befitting the social rules nor legitimized by the church, which additionally admonishes Mexican women not to follow her model.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In *What is a Woman?*, Toril Moi lists attributes commonly coded as masculine and feminine in a binary system (103). In a later chapter, she takes up French feminist Hélène Cixous's earlier linguistic approach to such a binary as it was displayed in Cixous's essay "Sorties." See also Moi's dichotomy of sex and gender in line with the idea of nature vs. culture (33).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the traditional views on La Malinche, Jean Franco states in "La Malinche: From Gift to Sexual Contract" to the fact that in view of the migration of many Mexicans to the United States and elsewhere the figure of La Malinche is no longer seen as victim or traitress, but has rather become a "transfigured symbol of fragmented identity and multiculturalism" (66).



The Mexican version of the Virgin Mary is the Virgin of Guadalupe, who represents the second archetype. She is closely connected with the growing awareness for national identity and the nation's striving for independence in the 18th and 19th century. She symbolizes asexual femininity and motherhood and therefore plays a great role in Mexican society.<sup>13</sup> The qualities that can be attributed to her are all those that became almost synonyms for the idealized Mexican image of femininity and motherhood: “*abnegación*—selflessness, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, an erasure of self and the negation of one's outward existence” (Olcott 15-16). The Virgin of Guadalupe represents an ideal that is clearly impossible to reach for every woman born on earth; however, to emulate it in a lifelong journey that includes serving others as a main paradigm guarantees positive feedback and social acceptance, and therefore a place in heaven.

In addition to the two described archetypes of women in Mexico, Charlene Merithew outlines a third one, namely that of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. With reference to all three role models, she states that a “hegemonic society views women either as ‘bad’ and as ‘whores’ as it considers La Malinche, as ‘pure’ and ‘self-sacrificing’ as it views the Virgin of Guadalupe, or as ‘masculi-noide’ or ‘strange’ as it sees Sor Juana” (196), who consciously chose not to marry but to live in a cloister in order to indulge in her studies and education. Many critics think she was therefore a homosexual. Just as those archetypes for women represent an important aspect of Mexico's gender system, the concept of *machismo* plays a crucial role for Mexican men and their understanding of their sexual and gender identity, which in exchange also shapes the social conditions for women.

The Mexican nation seems to have internalized the feeling of inferiority that is also known to other parts of conquered Latin America. The phenomenon of *machismo* can be

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<sup>13</sup> Silvia Marina Arrom suggests that *marianismo* was not a deeply ingrained Latin American cultural trait, but that it was rather introduced to the region in the second half of the 19th century as a variant of Victorianism with respect to women (260).

explained as a strategy to cope with the powerlessness and impotence that arise from the circumstance of being a marionette of foreign interests. Besides Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad*, Mexican philosopher and writer Samuel Ramos has dedicated his work to the ontology of the Mexican nation and analyzed the Mexican prototype of the *macho*. He perceives that the *macho* feeling of helplessness is either repressed or completely negated and replaced with an inappropriate claim for power and its ostentatious exertion in the private sphere.<sup>14</sup> Because the Mexican man is not very assured in his national identity, his sense of self-worth is relatively low, which causes a great amount of anger that he wreaks on the less powerful (57). To be *mu*y *hombre* means in this sense to display aggressiveness, insensitivity, invulnerability, and promiscuity, in short, the “*macho* represents the masculine pole of life. (...) The *macho* is the *gran chingón*” (Paz 81).

The negation and degradation of everything that is not associated with the masculine requires a clear dissociation from all attributes that are related to the feminine. It is self-evident that the *macho* expects women to strictly follow the traditional role that he assigned them and to not make any attempt to “penetrate” the masculine domain. The *macho* man, because he penetrates, stands for the closed, while the woman is considered to be open. The ideal of the *macho* as someone who never backs down, who never allows his environment to “penetrate” his intimacy, explains why women are viewed as inferior in this constellation: by submitting, they open themselves up; their submissiveness is a wound which never heals and makes them weak (Paz 30). The consequences of such a polarization between masculine and feminine, Paz

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<sup>14</sup> See also the explanation of *machismo* from a feminine perspective by the Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Collective which states that “as a response to his own alienation, the Latin American male feels himself to be at least the master of ‘his’ woman, and will often use violence, even physical violence, against her without realizing that by alienating her he increases his own alienation” (8).

concludes, are fatal as they seem to imply that there are no possible alternatives to the relationships between men and women:

To the Mexican there are only two possibilities in life: either he inflicts the actions implied by *chingar* on others, or else he suffers them himself at the hands of others. This conception of the social life as combat fatally divides society into the strong and the weak. The strong—the hard, unscrupulous *chingones*—surround themselves with eager followers. (...) The verb *chingar* signifies the triumph of the closed, the male, the powerful, over the open. (78)

To express feelings and emotions proves instability and unmanliness and is something that is subject to the enigmatic woman. The relationship of dominance and subordination between men and women has been ingrained into Mexican society through the history of the nation and social, political, and economic factors which caused the development of archetypes that befit the masculine and feminine stereotypes, respectively. These artificially created prototypes determine to a great extent the gender identity of the Mexican people and define them in their expression of their sexuality. The world of women has especially been “marginalized, distorted, or negated within various masculinist practices” (Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory” 324).

In a hetero-normative patriarchy such as Mexico, a gender system as such can only be overcome when those who are at the margin move toward the center and appropriate the forms of expression and speech that are culturally and socially accepted in order to be heard and with the purpose of modifying the modes of discourse according to their own objectives and needs. Correspondingly, Monique Wittig points out that the “discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms” (25), in other words, women can only speak when they conform to the rules and codes of the patriarchal language. To speak for the very first time as woman in this system and to resist the inflicted forms of expression, and to then find a form of expression that is particular to the feminine is the

challenge that Latin American and Mexican women and women writers face on their way to establish themselves and their voice in the nation's society and literary world. Women have been "written out of the histories of culture and literature that men have written, (...) women have been silenced or distorted in the texts of philosophy, biology, and physics" (Butler, "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory" 324). As the Other, they have been excluded from the nation's history and cultural archive for too long.

### **2.3 The Women's Voice in Mexican Literature and the Current Latin American Feminist Literary Debate**

The development of a literary canon is not an incidental process developing over the course of history, but rather the product of ideological decisions based on patriarchal perspectives. It is a matter of fact that prior to the 20th century and before women only played a very minor role in Mexican literature, if any. Women wrote poetry at best, but nothing of literary importance that earned the respect of the audience. As in early Europe and North America, women who wrote often acquired a masculine pseudonym in order to gain entry into the literary realm (Guerra, "Las sombras" 138).

Even though early examples of women's writing exist, such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's critical letters and poetry, the beginning of a feminine perspective in Mexican literature is closely connected to the feminist poet and writer Rosario Castellanos, who accurately denounces in *Sobre cultura femenina* that in Mexico "la cultura (...) ha sido creada casi exclusivamente por hombres, por espíritus masculinos" (192). Her name appears in line with other writers of her time such as Elena Poniatowska and Elena Garro, who both worked as journalists and started to write in the 1950s and 1960s. Their works reflect the growing awareness of sociopolitical issues and cultural and gender oppression and their publication marks a turning point in the literature of the nation. New images of womanhood were presented and alternative ways of life for women

depicted. It became obvious that women do have a voice as do others who find themselves at the margins of society and that they have the right to make it heard. In the 1970s, many women writers were inspired by the international and national women's liberation movement. The following decade saw a "boom" of women writers who created texts that described the collective feminine experience through the personal perspective and dealt again and again with the social discrimination of women and other minorities. Literature is an important element in the process of cultural education and a powerful means that can be used to undermine patriarchal ideologies through continuously rising awareness of current social and gender issues in the public space.

Sánchez Prado states that women have been systematically excluded from Mexico's cultural debates before the 1950s. He states that the definition of literature as "viril" in the 1920s led to a devaluation of women's experiences (149). However, according to his explanations "la perspectiva femenina es uno de los elementos cruciales del archivo cultural (...) en la operación de desconstrucción de la narrativa nacional canónica," and novels such as *Los recuerdos del porvenir* by Elena Garro are fundamental insofar as women are transformed into "sujetos semi-públicos cuyas acciones son determinantes para el devenir histórico" (161).

The works by women writers that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s are subsumed under the name "postboom" by Álvaro Salvador, who refers in this sense to internationally renowned works such as *La casa de los espíritus* by Isabel Allende and *Como agua para chocolate* by Laura Esquivel. In his article "El otro boom de la narrativa hispanoamericana: Los relatos escritos por mujeres en la década de los ochenta," he also mentions the significance of another marginalized group, namely that of homosexual writers such as Manuel Puig from Argentina, Severo Sarduy from Cuba, and Luis Rafael Sánchez from Puerto Rico, who along with the women writers express a "crítica profunda a la sociedad patriarcal" (170). This critique manifests

itself in a literature in which the notions of center, order, and hierarchy disappear and experiences of marginality, of minority life at the border and in the peripheries emerge that question the false hegemonies and the power relations in the patriarchal and homocentric system (171). It is important to mention that this kind of new literature is not directed against literature written by men, but that it rather can be viewed as opening up new spaces of expression and mutual understanding. Marta Traba thus locates these new literary forms “ni por encima de la literatura masculina, ni por debajo de la literatura masculina,” but defines them as “una literatura diferente, es decir que su territorio ocupa un espacio diferente” (23).

The “postboom” of women writers in Mexico and Latin America can be paralleled to the boom of the 1960s that was provoked by male writers. However, women’s fiction remains closely related to the social and political context of the area and is less concerned with the experimental type of narrative that the male writers of the boom preferred. It has also been central to feminist criticism, which was especially the case in the 1980s when a debate about the specificity of women’s writing emerged that remains unsolved. North American feminist critic Elaine Showalter calls for a “feminist criticism that is genuinely women centered, independent, and intellectually coherent” (“Feminist Criticism” 184) and identifies two modes of feminist criticism, namely of women as readers and of women as writers (“Feminist Criticism” 182 and 184). Among the questions that this kind of feminist criticism tries to answer are whether and how women can verbalize their experience of subordination in the language of the patriarchal system, and how they can mark their difference and subjectivity in a text. This form of finding new ways of writing also applies to finding to ways of reading a text. As mentioned earlier, women can use their writing from within the patriarchal system to change, modify, or deconstruct it. Since they work from and write about the margins of society, women’s writing

can transgress literary boundaries and explore new textual strategies, styles, and genres, thus gaining authority within the dominant male discourse. This can be supported by incorporating the reading audience into the process. Women writers and readers thus function as a collective with the goal of destabilizing, re-writing, and re-interpreting the phallogocentric system.

One increasing concern of feminist critics in the last decades has been to discover new forms of expressing this feminine voice in a language that is unique to its perspective, a language of resistance and transgression in view of the models of oppression, a language that inscribes the plurality of social languages into the text. I will give a brief overview of this debate in an outline of some of the main tendencies that are current in Latin Americanist feminist literary criticism. These trends are crucial to my investigation insofar as they provide a foundation for my argument and demonstrate an advancement of theory in Latin America while revealing existing shortcomings and gaps. My work intends to fill one of these gaps by building on recent critical thought and incorporating the genealogical approach into the debate.

In *Plotting Women*, Jean Franco confirms that the Mexican feminism of the 1970s was more or less a middle-class movement in alliance with the subaltern classes, but that the critique expressed by women about official nationalism, especially after 1968 and the events of Tlatelolco, made possible a new space for women's writing "of which they took full advantage; first to tell their own side of the story of the family romance and, second, to show the articulation of patriarchy and nationalism" (xxi). She also maintains that women have often had to resort to non-canonical genres such as letters in order to gain interpretative power, or that their writing has been re-appropriated into the public space as traditionally 'male' texts such as hagiographies or national allegories (*Plotting Women* 175).

Aralia López González observes in this context in *Sin imágenes falsas, sin falsos espejos* that in the second half of the 20th century new images of women emerged. The male “discurso de lo femenino” gave way to a “discurso femenino” which was stimulated and maintained by women, and which also led to a “discurso feminista” in the aftermath (11). Gender is to be interpreted by feminists in relation to practices and habits. In contrast to essentialist feminist thought, López supports the view that gender is not fixed but is a changing concept due to socio-historic contexts. One can say that her definition of woman as “posicionalidad” (14) in society, culture, and history hints at Stone’s idea of perceiving women as a genealogy. She further states that the male “discurso de lo femenino” creates an essential and somehow misogynist view of women through which they become desocialized and dehistoricized; it associates them with nature, myth, magic and restricts them to the roles of mother and wife, which strips them of all political power and turns them into objects of masculine sexuality, in short, the woman becomes a “no-ser” (21). While before the 1950s feminist writers and critics in Mexico were rather few in numbers, certain factors changed this situation in the following years: The sexual liberation that came to Mexico and the translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s work *The Second Sex*, the development of mass communication media, ongoing industrialization and internationalization were all aspects that helped women to see themselves in a new light and attempt to break with traditional values. This new social platform enabled women to change the “ser para otros” into a “ser para sí” (31), however, many women saw themselves faced with new problems and loneliness because, despite the social and economic changes, the Mexican society’s frame of mind did not change as fast. López underlines here the importance of Mexican women writers and their narrative in the process of creating new images and identities for women according to the social changes. She observes that in their texts, these women writers already demonstrate a



form of writing that is distinct from the male discourse in that they speak from the women's internal conflicts between submission and liberation, dependence and independence and express the "ambivalencia, angustia, locura, o incluso suicidio, pasando por los sentimientos de culpa y depresión" (39) dealt with during this time of transition. This phase of transgression can either lead to a new understanding of one's female subjectivity or cause dissociation within the woman, which can also be seen in the women writers' texts (46).

In such a situation of transgression, women and women writers should refer to the nation's precursor of feminist criticism, Rosario Castellanos, and her clear statements about the status quo. In various essays in *Mujer que sabe latín*, Castellanos keenly observes the position of women and their role in Mexican society of the 1950s. Giving numerous examples of what it means to, sometimes not even consciously, suffer as a woman from the restrictions and expectations that patriarchy holds for her, Castellanos decries the then existing concepts of beauty, sexuality, and maternity that defined women and their space. They all turn the woman into someone "inválida," which makes it impossible for her to function well except to please and serve the male (*Mujer que sabe latín* 11). According to Castellanos, the male discourse limits women to the following stereotyped roles:

la madre, con su capacidad inagotable de sacrificio; la esposa, sólida, inamovible, leal; la novia, casta; la prostituta, avergonzada de su condición y dispuesta a las mayores humillaciones con tal de redimirse; la "otra", que alternativamente se entrega al orgullo y al remordimiento de haber cedido a los meros impulsos del amor sin respetar las exigencias de la sociedad; la soldadera, bragada; la suegra, entremetida; la solterona, amarga; la criada, chismosa; la india, tímida. (*Mujer que sabe latín* 156)

Women can also be devoted nuns and docile daughters, but whatever the case may be, they are stripped of any form of power over their own lives. Castellanos goes so far as to say that even though woman exists, she does not know herself (*Mujer que sabe latín* 21). Another important aspect of the patriarchal power system that Castellanos takes up is its language as an instrument

of oppression. She makes a crucial point when she states that a dialogue can only exist between those who consider each other to be equal and free. Taking Spanish as the language of the oppressor as an example for the relationship between the Indian and the Spanish speaking population, she shows that a true dialogue is also not possible between women and men (*Mujer que sabe latín* 175).

Language also plays a considerable role for Amy Kaminsky in the feminist discourse. Committed to a feminist analysis that engages issues of race, class, and geopolitics, she emphasizes the intersection of “politics, gender, and sexuality” (*Body Politic* 115) that embody Latin American feminist criticism. Another part of that intersection is language. In *Reading the Body Politic*, she explains that a degradation of the Spanish language also devalues the thinking that is expressed in it, an aspect that is important to note for feminist scholars who work between Spanish and other languages (1). She agrees that a lack of shared terminology at times poses a serious problem to the debate. As becomes obvious from this chapter as well, much Latin American feminist literary analysis is written and published in the United States and strongly influenced by poststructural methods. As “the paradox of imposing an alien theoretical system on an already subordinate group is not lost on feminist theories” (*Body Politic* 3), one has to be careful when adapting North American and European feminist thought to the socio-cultural context of Latin America. Kaminsky mentions Teresa de Lauretis and her “intimation that there can be no internationalist feminist theorizing of gender unless all languages can express the notion of gender in relation to sex” (*Body Politic* 13), thus hinting at the example of translating the meaning of the terms gender and *género* correctly in both English and Spanish: “Like the Spanish *género*, whose primary meanings of genre and grammatical gender make it a false cognate for ‘gender’ as it is used in English” (“Gender, Race, Raza” 8). The linguistic-

geographical differences between English and Spanish thus affect profoundly the meanings of crucial categories of analysis. Working across cultural and linguistic boundaries therefore requires tremendous care, as well as the attempt to apply foreign theory too hastily to completely different social and cultural contexts. But, according to Kaminsky, “it is a gap that can be bridged if we are willing to work collectively. It is (...) simply a bad idea for scholars to appropriate a text from a language or a culture they do not know. On the other hand, it is a very good idea to go into it together with those who do” (“Issues” 226).

Lucia Guerra Cunningham follows her fellow critics in the proposition that women’s writing has long remained in the shadow of men’s (literary) world. She also links the oppression of the feminine and her voice to female body features, parenthood, and social constructions of gender. The female body with its cycles of menstruation and ability to give life is considered to reflect nature; it therefore seems natural for a woman to take on the role of the nurturing mother. Nature is viewed subordinate to culture and therefore to man; this becomes obvious in the fact that men have the power to establish social rules about marriage and motherhood, which keeps women powerless (“Las sombras” 132). Guerra raises an important question with her observation that, in her role as mother and cultural educator, women are actually situated in a position that allows them to bring about a change of patriarchal norms: “La mujer como individuo que en su rol primario de madre ha permanecido en el espacio marginal de la Cultura irónicamente es también la matriz de prolíferas construcciones en su cualidad de Otro” (“Las sombras” 133). Guerra sees the oppression of women mainly based in their biological features, which has differentiated them from other marginalized groups. The exclusion of women in politics, economy, and culture has led to the development of a feminine “sub-historia” in the domestic sphere (“Las sombras” 135).

Again, since ethical values are first proliferated here, the importance and powerful position of this sphere should not be underestimated. Guerra ascribes women their own *génerolecto*, stating that in a patriarchal system women are situated in a diaglossic relationship and forced to move simultaneously between two codes, that of the phallogocentric discourse marked by reason and that of the subordinate, feminine discourse marked by fragmentation and diffusion (“Las sombras” 136). To represent oneself as woman in the patriarchal language systems means to transgress the patriarchal limits in order to immerse in that which is not representable and not represented, namely into the silent zones of the feminine Other: Women’s literature becomes thus a literature that is translated from the shadow where it remained for centuries, women have to translate these shadows in order to know themselves; men do not translate, they are already using the language that has been established by the system (Duras in Guerra, “Las sombras” 142).

Guerra further notes that every text is in dialogue with each other and that all texts constitute a system of relations. Men have contributed texts to that system in which they have written about women, but there have been few texts by or for women. She underlines that when writing, a woman in Latin America takes on a very particular social and ideological role as she engages in an activity that is typical for the dominant group while she herself as woman is located at the margin (“Las sombras” 142-143). Guerra finds the most effective strategy for initially gaining entry to the male dominated literary realm is assuming the discourse ascribed by the hegemonic power. Isabel Allende has successfully applied this strategy with her previously mentioned novel *La casa de los espíritus*, which imitates in topic and style *Cien años de soledad* by Gabriel García Márquez. It is also favorable for women to explore the feelings of the female protagonist in their writing and stress the women’s sentimentality and delicate being in this

context. According to Guerra, Latin American women writers are challenging their male counterparts; they have taken over a political position with respect to a masculine system that is homologous in its relation between men and women and oppressor and oppressed (“Las sombras” 153). From this perspective, women write about silenced topics such as violence, sexuality, and the body, they situate the feminine experience into history and create new spaces of expression.<sup>15</sup> Although critical feminist thinking is still widely perceived as a threat in Latin America, Guerra concludes that feminist theory, whether it be foreign or local, in its

version más positiva (...) aspira a no reproducir las estructuras de poder, a originar una eclosión del sistema binario hombre/ mujer en un plano de igualdad política y social que recién empieza a configurarse al nivel teórico. (...) la anulación de la oposición binaria entre lo masculino y lo femenino no constituye simplemente un gesto filosófico sino la desestructuración de categorías sociales y económicas. (“Las sombras” 158)

That Latin American literature and history need to undergo a re-examination with the help of a literary genealogy that brings women from the margin to the center is also the view of Debra Castillo. She agrees with other critics that the public literary culture is a male culture and that women’s literature has been restricted to certain spaces (“Finding Feminisms” 362). A recognition and re-evaluation of the works by women writers will “pose a healthy challenge to the dominant discourse” (“Finding Feminisms” 363), since, as Castro-Klarén consents, “the study of Latin American literature is ripe for a re-writing of its history” (“The Novelness” 105).

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<sup>15</sup> Guerra finds that gender difference as a critique of the binary patriarchal system is heavily emphasized in the current feminist debate. She highlights two different aspects that are particular to the Latin American context and that need to be kept in mind when foreign theory is applied in this sense. The first deals with the definition of the male as subject and the female as object or the Other; such a relation becomes more difficult when the subject himself is also the colonized Other. Woman in Latin America could therefore be viewed as the “Otro de Otro” (“Las sombras” 155). Correspondingly, since the differences between the social classes in Latin America can be extreme, a woman of the higher social class might become a subject with regards to a woman of a lower social class, which means that within the group of women power is not distributed equally. Secondly, Guerra mentions that some feminist critics have chosen the female body as a discursive strategy and follow the French model of Cixous and Irigaray, not taking into consideration to what extent the characteristics of the (French) body remain valid in societies that experience torture and oppression (“Las sombras” 157). Guerra is of the opinion that the use of the body as a discursive strategy re-approves the patriarchal dichotomy that associates mind and reason with the masculine and the body with the feminine. The usefulness and applicability of foreign theory to Latin American contexts therefore needs to be carefully evaluated.

In line with Guerra, Castillo emphasizes the importance of taking into account the circumstances under which literature in Latin America is created and the divergence from European and North American cultural and political settings: Writers thus often work in exile, they fear censorship and risk torture, imprisonment or disappearance. Theoretical first world approaches to countries of such political contexts are therefore inappropriate at times, but, as Castillo points out, due to the perceived absence of indigenous theory,<sup>16</sup> many Latin American and foreign scholars and critics tend to apply foreign theory in their work. Nelly Richard additionally comments that according to many local feminists, the Latin American scholarly scene needs “más acción que discurso, más compromiso político que sospecha filosófica, más denuncia testimonial que arabescos desconstrutivos” (735). The form and degree of commitment to the theoretical discourse can thus differ greatly across national borders. From Castillo’s point of view, the question is therefore no longer whether or not foreign feminist theory can be applied to Latin American and other third world contexts, but rather how it can be best re-contextualized to serve the needs and interests of Latin American critics in their analysis of literature (“Finding Feminisms” 370).

As we have seen briefly in the introduction, in *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* Castillo explores the possibilities of applying foreign theory to Latin American literature.<sup>17</sup> Since no particularly innovative theories have emerged yet, Latin

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<sup>16</sup> It is inaccurate to say that indigenous theory in the Latin American region does not exist. When Simone de Beauvoir wrote her treatise *The Second Sex* in 1949, many women writers and thinkers in Latin America, most specifically in Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, such as Victoria Ocampo and Clarice Lispector, among others, were creating a feminist theoretical corpus, which has been expanded by more recent theoretical pieces by writers and theorists such as Nelly Richard, Beatriz Sarlo, and Elena Araujo, for example.

<sup>17</sup> More precisely, Castillo discusses strategies of a feminist literary practice and offers sample applications in her work. She examines literary strategies such as silence or the use of ambiguity to soften the critique of the patriarchal discourse; appropriation, or seeing Latin American literature from a different perspective after the lecture of foreign literature and theory; cultivation of superficiality, or embedding the social message into a text that deals with romance; negation or a refusal to be marginalized; writing from a marginalized perspective; and the subjunctive

American feminist criticism either engages in content-based analyses of women's images in traditional texts or makes efforts to recuperate works written by women for the literary canon while utilizing Anglo-European theory. She agrees with Franco and her observation that scholars often seem to come to the conclusion that third world contexts are not a place for theory.<sup>18</sup>

Castillo therefore suggests to take from foreign theory what is pertinent to the object of analysis and enhance it with other complementary approaches while always considering that Latin American women and their literature come from very diverse cultural, economic, and temporal backgrounds and cannot be thrown together (*Talking Back* 8).<sup>19</sup>

It becomes obvious here that Castillo rejects any essentialist views of women and that a feminist genealogical approach seems helpful to overcome the various differences that culture and society bring about. Through seeing Latin American women and their actions as having a genealogy it will be possible to perceive them as a social group that collectively rebels against the circumstances that restrict women in the workplace and private and public spheres where they are perceived as "shadow constructs" whose independence remains a fictional idea (*Talking Back* 10). Castillo makes note of the already mentioned fact that, for women, a "transgression of the norm can be categorized and safely be disposed of as unworthiness, even madness" (*Talking Back* 17); when they cross the traditional limits, women face public humiliation.

Despite the risk of degradation, women have used their feminine identity in manifold ways to protest against the patriarchal order and occasionally even made use of their bodies in order to raise awareness of the system's violence, as in the case of the Madres de la Plaza de

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mode as a form of enunciation (LaGreca 383). Castillo stresses that her six sample strategies for a feminist literary criticism are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>18</sup> Franco makes a distinction between the Western world, the "Metropolis," and areas that she allocates to the third world such as Latin America. According to her observations, the latter is either considered to be irrelevant to theory as a "place of the instinctual," as a land of emotions and practice, or subordinate to Western theory and critical thought ("Beyond Ethnocentrism" 504).

<sup>19</sup> This principle has previously also been postulated by Ludmer: to take from tradition whatever is useful, to borrow from other writers whatever is helpful, and to fill the gaps with one's own thoughts (Castillo, *Talking Back* 36).

Mayo in Argentina. Literally re-conquering the public sphere at the very center of the nation with their bodies and through streetwalking, an activity that traditionally is connected with impure women or prostitutes, has brought them the nickname “*las locas*,” the madwomen of the Plaza.<sup>20</sup> Writing or writing the body, with respect to French feminist literary criticism, can also be seen as an act of resistance. Playing on a structuralist formulation, Castillo argues that writing as women in Latin America is “more than a verb, (...) it is a revolutionary act” (*Talking Back* 20).

She suggests that when examining works by Latin American women writers, critics should explore topics such as the choice of genre, the social function of the texts and their reception, the different nuances of enunciative structures, and the influence of ideological constraints (*Talking Back* 25). Castillo claims that still more texts need to be written by women in order to elaborate innovative theoretical positions. According to her, the development of theory in Latin America is slowed down due to the existing “bias toward a revolutionary rather than a theoretical mode,” as it becomes evident through the pattern of Latin American politics: theory follows practice, and not vice versa (*Talking Back* 32). While the development of regional literary theory and criticism slowly gains momentum, the fear of cultural imperialism continues to exist when foreign theoretical approaches are utilized to examine postcolonial contexts.

As this overview of the current Latin American feminist literary criticism shows, female literary critics and writers confront power and gender issues by making an effort to evaluate, examine, and, hopefully, modify the patriarchal norms that have marginalized them. With respect to Mexico in particular, Charlene Merithew writes that the time has come to closely listen to what women are saying and how and why they are saying it. The increasing production of texts written by women and women’s presence in culture and public media “support the fact that

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<sup>20</sup> In *Las sombras*, Guerra Cunningham lists various examples of women who have used their bodies strategically in the history of Latin America to express their resistance against the political system (160).



women are no longer silent, and that women are voicing a healthy plurality of opinions regarding issues of politics, economics, nationalism, women's rights, history, and culture" (197). To rewrite national history from a feminine perspective becomes especially important for those periods of time during which women have been consistently excluded culturally and politically. Such a period is the Mexican Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century.

#### **2.4 Women in Literature of the Mexican Revolution**

The Mexican Revolution is doubtlessly one of the most critical events in Mexican history. It marks the period between 1910 and 1920 and the end of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, who ruled Mexico during the so-called Porfiriato for almost four decades from 1877 until the beginning of the Revolution. Díaz had stabilized the country after the French invasion and brought foreign investors to Mexico, but he had also disenfranchised many Mexicans in the rural areas who protested against his politics throughout the entire Porfiriato. In 1910, Francisco I. Madero formed a large political opposition against Díaz in order to prevent his reelection. Madero was taken into custody and fled to the United States. From there, he organized a revolt that took place in November 1910 and marked the beginning of the Revolution. From then on, Mexicans took up their arms in the name of Madero along the east coast and in northern part of the country. The Maderistas were supported by farmers in central Mexico, mainly in the state of Morelos, whose leader Emiliano Zapata joined the revolt in March 1911. Mexico's national army was unable to fight back the rebels, and the revolt escalated in northern Mexico, especially in Ciudad Juárez which was besieged by rebel leader Pancho Villa.

After Ciudad Juárez surrendered in May 1911, riots broke out all over Mexico. Porfirio Díaz quickly abdicated on May 21, 1911, and went into exile to France. After his return from the United States, Madero won the elections that were held in October of the same year. However,

he soon lost control over the different political interests of Díaz's supporters, the peasants in central Mexico, and the military leaders of the revolt. While Pancho Villa formed a guerilla movement in the North, Emiliano Zapata proclaimed an agricultural reform in the South that caused confrontations with Díaz's still existing army. Madero's belief that the institutional legality of the Porfiriato would help establish social justice determined his early downfall. During the "Ten Tragic Days" in February 1913, Mexico City's military leader General Victoriano Huerta and his units revolted against Madero. Madero resigned in March 1913 and Huerta became president. Only days after his appointment he murdered Madero along with former vice president José Pino Suárez. Subsequently, Huerta dissolved the Mexican parliament and killed several politicians and opponents.

This brought many rebels up against him, among them Venustiano Carranza, governor of Coahuila, and Pancho Villa. Villa and his *División del Norte* subsequently conquered the states of Chihuahua and Zacatecas in 1913 and 1914, and the United States, which had taken up a stance against Huerta after supporting him initially, occupied Veracruz and blocked Huerta's land supplies. With little scope left, Huerta saw himself forced to leave Mexico in July 1914. After his departure, Carranza moved into Mexico City. The conflicts between the middle class Carrancistas and the rural Villistas and Zapatistas rose when Carranza gave himself the title of "Jefe Supremo del Ejército Constitucionalista." In order to prevent a major crisis, Álvaro Obregón, Carranza's commander-in-chief of the military forces, called a meeting of members of the three groups in Aguascalientes. But neither Carranza nor Villa or Zapata accepted the convention's decisions about a new agricultural reform and a provisional government. Obregón thus saw himself forced to support Carranza and declared war on Villa in November 1914. As a consequence, Mexico went down in chaos in a civil war between the conventionalists Zapata and

Villa and the constitutionalists Carranza and Obregón. While the fighting went on, Carranza successfully secured the workers' and peasants' support by developing social and agricultural reforms and making political concessions, whereas Zapata and Villa were unable to determine joint military tactics and thus experienced great military losses during 1915 and 1916. Although both of them were pushed back significantly, Zapata maintained a small guerilla movement in his home state Morelos until his assassination in April 1919. In March 1917, Carranza was formally elected president of Mexico, but he failed at establishing social justice and peace. The national convention in Querétaro accepted in 1917 the new Mexican Constitution.

Although it essentially confirmed the constitution of 1857, it included substantial reforms with respect to politics of agriculture and the workers' movement. However, Carranza delayed the reforms' implementation until the uprising of Obregón and other opponents in March 1920, which marked the end of his governance and the violent conflicts of the actual Revolution. He fled Mexico City and tried to organize a revolt himself, but was killed in May 1920 in Puebla. Various parts of Mexico remained nonetheless regions of conflict and rebellion until the 1930s, such as during the Cristero Wars from 1926 until 1929. The social improvements of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 were not put into practice effectively until Lázaro Cárdenas administration from 1934 until 1940. It is estimated that the Mexican Revolution from 1910 until 1920 cost the lives of about two million people.<sup>21</sup>

The number of literary works that deal with the Mexican Revolution is enormous. Among the multiple voices that make themselves heard during this period of history are also those of Mexico's women. The feminine discourse, however, has always been dominated or marginalized by the central male discourse. This has led to an exclusion of women from culture and the public

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<sup>21</sup> See Robert McCaa for the demographic costs of the Mexican Revolution. He shows that the Mexican Revolution was a demographic catastrophe comparable to the Spanish Civil War and Mexico's greatest catastrophe since the Spanish conquest (396).

spheres in Mexico as well as from the nation's history. The importance of women's participation during the Mexican Revolution is yet impossible to dismiss. It is certain that the Revolution offered women ways to liberate themselves from traditional restrictions, at least to some extent, and that it enabled them to be more involved in the politics of the nation. Women's words, in written and oral form, in newly founded newspapers and organizations of resistance had a great impact on revolutionary activities (Soto 31).

As *soldaderas*, women also actively fought on the battle fields and reached leading positions in the army; they even formed and led their own units. In "Battleground Women: *Soldaderas* and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution," Reséndez points out the differences in social background, status in the armed forces, and functions between the *soldaderas* as camp followers that provisioned and nursed the male soldiers and female soldiers such as Margarita Neri and Angela "Angel" Jiménez, among others, as women who actually participated in combat. He states that no Mexican army fought without women, but that each of them organized female participation in a different manner (527). According to his findings, most female soldiers belonged to the upper class and were wives or daughters of higher-ranking soldiers, whereas the camp followers or *soldaderas* came from lower social classes and were rather poor. Women became part of the army for various reasons. Some shared the political ideals of their male counterparts, the majority, however, followed the male soldiers in search for protection and economic security and thus often out of necessity. Reséndez makes an important point when he states that "regardless of whether the women served the (...) army willingly or not, they were essential to its functioning" (Reséndez 533). This being said, it is surprising that the participation of women in the Revolution has largely been denied or ignored; in fact, *soldaderas* and female soldiers "were never officially recognized" (Reséndez 546).

As a result of the omission of women's contributions during that time, most of the works and studies about the Revolution have been produced from a male perspective with the outcome that women have been relegated to the margins of history, or that they were not included in it at all. In her study about the Mexican woman, Soto denounces the fact that women and their participation in the Revolution in various forms have been left out of the nation's historical discourse (2). In line with a patriarchal ideology, historians tend to concentrate solely on the feats of male revolutionaries and neglect or ignore the contributions of women, as is also the case in Mexican arts and literature. Women were denied any space in the discourse about history and excluded from the various cultural forms in which artists and writers expressed their experience of the Revolution.

In *Easy Women*, Castillo remarks that "the great bulk of fiction about the Mexican Revolution" has been written by and about men, and although the "war's multiple traumas have been discussed obsessively in Mexican literature since the 1920s," women and their works have found little mentioning besides male writers of the Revolution such as Mariano Azuela (*Los de abajo*), Carlos Fuentes (*La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *Gringo Viejo*), Martín Luis Guzmán (*Memorias de Pancho Villa*, *La sombra del claudillo*, *El águila y la serpiente*), Gregorio López y Fuentes (*Mi general*), Mauricio Magdaleno (*El resplandor*), Rafael Muñoz (*¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!*), Juan Rulfo (*El llano en llamas*), and Francisco L. Urquiza (*Tropa vieja*). As the only exceptions to that she names Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* and *Manos de Mamá*, in which the writer recounts her experience of the war when she was a little child (5). With respect to the texts produced by male writers about the Revolution, Ileana Rodríguez goes even a step further in her observations. She states that

los conceptos excluían de las topografías de las narrativas revolucionarias a las mujeres 'reales', y que lo femenino, como representación de la Mujer, 'aquello' que permitía la

‘contemplación’ masculina, experimentaba un tratamiento confuso, una simbiosis en la Montaña, como sitio de producción patriótica y metáfora de relación erótica. (156)

The writers whose works have been selected for analysis in this thesis all make an effort to rewrite the nation’s history from a feminine perspective by centering their works around women protagonists whose life stories, attitudes, and actions offer an alternative to the dominant national discourse and the traditional image of woman in a patriarchal system. They recuperate women’s space in the nation’s history by situating their texts into the very period from which women have been omitted, namely the Mexican Revolution from its inception to its aftermath. In the following chapters, I will examine the ways in which the women protagonists are depicted and explore the similarities and differences of the forms of resistance that they employ to challenge patriarchal norms and expectations.

### 3. The Woman and the Nation in Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*

The invisible and silenced at the margin of society are the topic of Poniatowska's most prominent works. Her testimonial novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) deals with the life story of Jesusa Palancares, a peasant woman who fought in the Mexican Revolution and survived its hostile aftermath. The novel has been translated into English, French, and German and won the *Premio Mazatlán de Literatura* in 1970. Poniatowska's first novel was widely recognized internationally and helped her establish herself as a respected and renowned writer in Mexico. The work has been widely criticized due to its complex status as *novela testimonio* since the main character and her life story are based on the real-life experiences of Josefina Bórquez (1900-1987). Poniatowska interviewed Bórquez over several years at her home in Mexico City where they met every Wednesday afternoon on Bórquez's only free day. Bórquez had caught Poniatowska's attention with her loud voice and outspoken behavior when they first saw each other in a Laundromat.<sup>22</sup>

Although Bórquez was reluctant at first, she agreed to meet with Poniatowska on a regular basis to tell the writer about her life, her childhood and youth during the Revolution, and about the years that followed when she lived as an adult in the slums of Mexico City. Bórquez never completely gave up her hostile attitude and suspicions towards Poniatowska and insisted on a pseudonym when the novel was published in order to protect her privacy.<sup>23</sup> She even rejected the book initially, saying that the entire text was a lie: "Usted inventa todo, son puras mentiras, no entendió nada, las cosas no son así" (Poniatowska, "Testimonios" 160). Despite all differences between them, Poniatowska and Bórquez developed a friendship that lasted until

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<sup>22</sup> See Elena Poniatowska's "Testimonios de una escritora: Elena Poniatowska en micrófono" for an account of the beginning of the interview process.

<sup>23</sup> Poniatowska explains in an interview with Cynthia Steele how she chose Bórquez's pseudonym: "Lo de Jesusa porque me gustó, me pareció muy mexicano. [...] Y Palancares lo escogí porque había un director del Departamento de la Reforma Agraria, Norberto Aguirre Palancares, por quien sentí mucha simpatía" ("Entrevista" 93).

Bórquez's death in 1987. Since then, Poniatowska has published various essays in which she comments on the relationship with Bórquez and on the novel itself, such as in "Vida y muerte de Jesusa," which also contains rare photographs of Bórquez and the writer.<sup>24</sup> Bórquez's real-life account presents the basis for a text that impressively describes the social and psychological development of its protagonist and the history of a nation from the perspective of an individual who is disadvantaged in manifold ways, above all by class and gender constructs. First, I will analyze the various forms in which the fictional character Jesusa Palancares resists her social and political environment. I will then go on to describe the literary strategies that Poniatowska used to shape this resistance and, using the genealogical approach, point out parallels between the writer, the protagonist, and the real-life person Josefina Bórquez.

### **3.1 Jesusa Palancares's Rebellions**

The novel is divided into twenty-nine sections that recount in roughly chronological order the life story of the protagonist. The aged Jesusa looks back and recalls events and people while the reader follows her on her journey through times and places from her early childhood to her present life in Mexico City. Born in the state of Oaxaca, Jesusa has always lived in an impoverished environment. Her mother dies when she is very young, and although Jesusa has few memories of her, she remembers the day of her death very well. It is then that the carefree play of her childhood stops. She follows her father into the Mexican Revolution and spends the rest of her childhood and youth among the *soldaderas*; her short marriage to a general is marked by violence and abuse. After the fighting stops, Jesusa is forced to stay in Mexico City, where she experiences enormous hardships during her adult life and lives in great poverty. However, her spirituality and belief in reincarnation help the aging Jesusa survive the everyday struggles in the capital.

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<sup>24</sup> The essay was published in Poniatowska's book *Luz y luna, las lunitas*. México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1994:37-55.



From an anti-essentialist standpoint, it is arguable whether or not Jesusa may be considered representative of vast numbers of women with other social, cultural, and political backgrounds. However, female readers of all kinds of backgrounds are able to relate to Jesusa, at least with respect to gender issues. Despite the various differences that might exist between the protagonist and the members of her audience, women can take Jesusa as a role model who demonstrates ways to resist against social, political, and sexual constraints. Even if specific constraints depend on every woman's own situation, Jesusa's life story can encourage all of them and motivate other women to stand up for themselves and try to actively change the restrictive conditions under which they live. In precisely this context, women can be viewed as connected with each other according to the concept of genealogy.

In order to better understand Jesusa's modes of resistance, it is important to have a look at her unique character. The narrator-protagonist Jesusa demonstrates an extraordinary degree of self-control throughout her life. As a representative of the lower social class, she experiences never ending threats to her survival. She is courageous, aggressive, fearless, and strong both physically and emotionally. Jesusa is ready to defend herself at all times and meets violence with violence. She counters her hostile environment with the attitude of a hard worker and self-reliant loner. Although she has many drinking friends and acquaintances, she is careful not to get too attached to other women, men, and children. Throughout her lifetime, she embodies qualities that are traditionally valued in men, and often times she conceals her femininity on purpose, especially when it comes to her emotional side. As an illiterate peasant woman, she gives the account of a rebel who has come to terms with herself and her past but not with society toward the end of her life. Jesusa rebels on many occasions against different social and political institutions and resists her own emotions as well as the abusive behavior of others. One can say

that in Jesusa's psychology, the effects of the social and material deprivations manifest themselves insofar as surviving has been the main imperative in her life. She has thus relegated feelings and emotional needs—consciously or unconsciously—to the margin of her perception in order to confront the everyday limitations with more success and power.

Several forms of resistance become evident in the text that expose the range of Jesusa's conflicts with her social, political, and emotional environment, with gender constraints and sexuality, national authorities and the official version of Mexican history. To a greater or lesser degree of success, Jesusa develops various strategies to confront and deal with her environment. The early quarrel with brutality and egoism have shaped her strong character and longing for independence in her later years. On the one hand, her growing resistance to her living conditions and the double standard of the patriarchal society in which she lives leads to her own segregation; on the other, it helps her establish a certain amount of freedom. Her early awareness of her limited opportunities of leading a publicly respected life and her objection to "feminine" tasks and obligations, as well as her preference for boys' games, indicate a future revolt. Due to her mother's death and her father's absence, Jesusa was often left on her own and grew up roaming around alone. She almost always initially refused to learn things that belonged traditionally to women's chores, emphasized her physical and psychological strengths, wore men's clothes and was inclined to fighting:

Yo era muy hombrada y siempre me gustó jugar a la guerra, a las pedradas, a la rayuela, al trompo, a las canicas, a la lucha, a las patadas, a puras cosas de hombre, puro matar lagartijas a pedrazos, puro reventar iguanas contra las rocas. (...) No entiendo cómo era yo de chica. (Poniatowska, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* 19-20)<sup>25</sup>

The quote shows that the aged Jesusa in her function as narrator-protagonist finds herself at some points at odds with her younger self. According to Jörgensen, "Jesusa is not one but

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<sup>25</sup> Quotations from the primary text will in the following be marked through (PH page number).

many subjects in constant conflict with her own past and present selves” (31). One of these conflicts lies in the rejection of her feminine side. Since she moved around with her father and only lived on an irregular basis with female attachment figures, she was strongly attuned to his attitude and the behavior of other men, whose values and perspectives she slowly adopted. In order to survive her childhood and youth and the violence she encountered in her marriage, Jesusa assumed the boisterous conduct of the traditional male and became herself “perversely *macha*” (Sommer 916): “Y con los años me fue aumentando el instinto de dar antes de que me den. El que me tira un jijazo es porque ya recibió dos por adelantado. (...) Supe defenderme desde el día aquel en que me escondí la pistola en el blusón. Y le doy gracias a Dios” (PH 102).

Dominant male figures such as her husband were able to force her into the traditionally passive, submissive feminine role for only a while. However, when Jesusa took over the men’s attitude, she also internalized a patriarchal perspective with respect to other women. Throughout her story, she makes evident that she often looks down on other women and emphasizes the ways in which she distinguishes herself from them. One of the consequences of her self-liberation is therefore a lack of solidarity with other females. She rarely has any friends and much less wants to be associated with the gossiping women in her neighborhood: “Yo no tengo amigas, nunca las he tenido y no quiero tenerlas” (PH 182). This statement is not quite accurate, as Jesusa lived together with other women as an adult and had a relatively close relationship with Sara Camacho, for instance. Sara dressed and acted as a man, the people in the neighborhood therefore thought that she was a lesbian and called her Sara Quemacho (PH 261). The fact that she did not present a traditional woman appealed to Jesusa, who scorns typical feminine behavior. Her cynicism is born from bitter experience. The only woman she accepted during her childhood was her stepmother Evarista, who gave her regular and heavy beatings. Nonetheless,

Jesusa owes her respect for everything she taught her, because Evarista was a strong and fierce woman herself; she even wanted to send Jesusa to school. Jesusa stayed illiterate though throughout her life because her father Felipe rejected a formal education. With the exception of Evarista, Jesusa despised all his female companions and used physical violence to drive them away: “Mi papá era hombre, a fuerza tenía que ser enamorado. Siempre tuvo sus mujeres y eso sí, yo siempre les pegué porque eran abusivas, porque eran glotonas, porque se quedaban botadas de borrachas, porque se gastaban el dinero de mi papá...” (PH 67-68).

Despite her status as a role model of feminist resistance, Jesusa has many essentialist views both on men and women. In her opinion, women live for their jealousy and are sexually provocative: “Se lo dijo una mujer, cuándo no, si así son todas: cuando no andan culeando, se meten al chichichaque, al chimiscolee, a ver quién arruinan con sus embrollos” (PH 100). She does not understand how men can fall for all these fussing women, since, “hablando feamente, lo mismo que tiene una tiene otra. Todas tenemos el tafiruche igual” (HP 108). Unlike the other women she meets during her life, Jesusa believes that romantic as well as sexual relationships between men and women are only short-lived and not authentic. Women who believe that men are motivated by love when they pursue them are therefore stupid: “¿Cuál amor? Puras habas. Esas mujeres son como las gatas en brama, que no saben que van a tener gatitos y andan allí arrastrándose con la cola de lado” (PH 105). According to Jesusa, women themselves are at fault when they end up with a lot of children due to their gullibility. She does not understand how women can continue to offer themselves to men who abandon them and treat them badly, and much less how they can cry over a lost love. Jesusa clearly states that her excessive drinking started as part of a bet and soon became a business, whereas most other women only drink out of sadness (PH 89). If we believe Jesusa, it almost seems that women are grateful for someone who

marries and mistreats them. She condemns every form of sexual exploitation that she witnesses, especially during her career as bar woman. While various men seek her out and want to become sexually involved with her, she refuses to return their generosity by allowing them to touch her body: “Denme harto que comer porque me gusta comer y tomar, pero eso sí a mí no me digan que les pague con lo que Dios me dio. Eso sí que no” (PH 153). This is in contrast to the other foolish women she describes. Jesusa observes that “si ya compraron la esclava para nomás ponte y te lo finco cuantas veces se ofrezca, de guajes se van a andar con adulaciones” (PH 154).

Jesusa objects to all kinds of mistreatment and develops a strong opinion about the victims of abuse. It is interesting that she does not take the side of her female companions, but rather employs the patriarchal view that she adopted when she was a child. In her eyes, women who let themselves be used should be penalized for their weakness and submissiveness:

“Relativamente mientras más se deja uno, más la arruinan. Y las que se sigan dejando, pues eso y más se merecen, que las pongan como burras enquetitadas...” (PH 154). She goes even as far as to condemn submissive women eternally when she says that “yo creo que en el mismo infierno ha de haber un lugar para todas las dejadas. ¡Puros tizones en el fundillo!” (PH 101).

While Jesusa herself is boisterous and was forced to learn to stand up for herself, it is difficult for her to accept the passive attitude that other women display in the face of the harsh circumstances and the suffering that surrounds them. In fact, women who accept their fate and abusive men without fighting, because they either don't know any better or have given up on themselves, make her very mad, as is the case with Refugio's mother, whose helplessness in light of his sickness lead to her son's death and thus Jesusa's loss of her god child (PH 121). Because she rejects traditionally feminine behavior and displays more masculine than feminine traits throughout her life, it is difficult to assign her a certain gender role. John Hancock finds that

Jesusa's portrayal represents a "drastic change from the traditional stereotype of women in literature; she is neither the 'sex goddess,' nor the 'castrating bitch,' nor the 'mater dolorosa,' nor the *abnegada mujer mexicana*" (354). Jesusa gives an impressive account of her neighbor Felicitas Vidales in this context, who resembles the perfect *madre abnegada*: She has ten children, a useless husband and thus does all the work herself, but she never stops laughing and gossiping and playing around with her children. As we learn, Felicitas later dies of exhaustion, which may have been prevented if her husband had considered notifying a doctor (PH 271 ff.). Such a life is unthinkable for Jesusa, who would never submit to such conditions. The reader thus may perceive her rather as an androgynous figure, someone between a man and a woman. It is important to note that Jesusa's character is quite contradictory and that she, despite her rejection of everything feminine especially at a younger age, exhibits qualities that are valued both in men and in women, even though she would rather suppress the latter. It is no surprise that the aged Jesusa admits that "yo me visto a veces de hombre y me encanta. (...) de gustarme, me gusta más ser hombre que mujer" (PH 186).

Although Jesusa favors being a man over a woman and values masculine strength, she is not uncritical towards macho behavior and finds herself at more distance with the patriarchal order when she looks at her life in retrospect. She avoids a premature identification with men and sees in them more the oppressor than a role model. Just like Octavio Paz in his elaborations on machismo in *El laberinto de la soledad*, she, the illiterate and poor peasant woman, identifies this Mexican disease in men as inferiority complex: "Los hombres son siempre muy abusivos. Como si eso fuera ser hombre. Esa es la enfermedad de los mexicanos: creer que son muy charros porque se nos montan encima" (PH 178). Although, generally speaking, she gets along better with men than with women and spends more of her free time with them, such as with

Raimundo and Valentín Flores who are both troublemakers like her—“muchos amigos tuve y no me arrepiento, porque fueron derechos” (PH 153)—, she is careful to not get too close to them. One of her essentialist views is that men only take advantage of everyone and are driven by what is convenient for them, and in the end “todos pegan igual. Todos le dan a uno. (...) Así son los hombres. Apenas la tienen a uno, y adiós Tejería” (PH 173). Her observations lead her to more reflection and she starts to question masculine behavior especially with respect to sexuality: “Dicen que nosotras somos putas, pero ¿a poco los hombres no son putos siempre con el animal de fuera, a ver a quién se lo meten?” (PH 78).

Her deep rejection of men and their attitude has its roots in the violence she experienced during her marriage. The cruelty and indifference with which her husband treated her have made a long-lasting impression on Jesusa that keeps the young widow from remarrying for the rest of her life: “Sufro como todo el mundo pero no en comparación de lo que sufrí cuando tenía marido” (PH 97). She prefers to be poor rather than married and rejects proposals of various men, be they foreign or well-situated such as the Chinese shop owner and the banker she meets at the bar where she works. Jesusa has seen too much brutality that prevents her from naïvely giving in to the men’s courting; instead she fights them off. The reader will blame mostly her husband Pedro and the other soldiers for her aversion. Jesusa was not the only one who suffered from beatings and physical as well as mental abuse during the years of the Revolution. She points out that the soldiers treated their wives poorly because “el caso era traerlas a mal traer. Pedro agarraba y me daba con la cachapa de su pistola en la cabeza y a mí me hervía la muina por dentro, pero no le decía nada; ni me tallaba siquiera para que no viera que me había dolido” (PH 97). One of her strategies to resist life’s harshness is to endure her misery silently while letting her scorn and rage grow inside. Her reluctant character also helps her to survive her adolescent

years and Pedro's sadism. Jesusa is ready to die and doesn't care much about her own life any more after he has threatened to kill her on various occasions. It is precisely at this moment when her inner resistance reaches its culmination. Jesusa raises a gun against her husband when he attempts to kill her in an open field. God himself tells her to take a stance against her torturer and it is with his help and out of desperate scorn that she dares to challenge Pedro. Leading the life she leads she has nothing to lose. Her opposition causes Pedro to throw off his guard, and from that day on he treats her with more respect:

Pedro se volvió más bueno desde que lo balacé... De por sí, yo desde chica fui mala, así nací, terrible, pero Pedro no me daba oportunidad... Cuando Pedro me colmó el plato ya me dije claramente: "Me defiende o que me mate una vez." Si yo no fuera mala me hubiera dejado de Pedro hasta que me matara." (PH 101)

It becomes obvious here that her understanding of herself as being bad since birth and the violent environment of the Mexican Revolution have helped her defend herself and thus, paradoxically, save her life. Transgressing the traditional gender norms and acting inappropriately as a woman in the traditional sense can sometimes help break the cycle of victimization. Jesusa's example shows that women's behavior that does not comply with the traditional social expectations of what it means to be feminine might be considered as indecent or unsuitable not only by society, but even by the woman herself, and this although it might lead to more personal freedom and the end of masculine oppression. Jesusa's resistance reaches its peak when she is about to die, that moment of liberation allows her to openly oppose her adversary. The event causes a transformation of Jesusa, because from then on she remains a victim of the dominant social class, but no longer one of men, of her husband, father, or violent brother. One can say that this instant bears a newborn Jesusa and leads to a recreation of her self, which is in accordance with Foucault's view of resistance as form of creation.



Jesusa's relationship with Pedro remains conflicted. She never found out whether Pedro truly loved her or not. In fact, despite his cruelty, he took care of Jesusa when she was crippled from walking too long in the snow (PH 112) and he often read to her (PH 114), which she enjoyed very much. He also didn't want to share her with anyone else. For that reason, he forbade her to bathe regularly and made her look ugly. Pedro himself kept cheating on Jesusa, which is natural as she says, because "era hombre; era hombre y andaba en la paseada" (PH 102). Taking his cheating for granted and essential to his manliness, she excuses her torturer's behavior to the disadvantage of other women: "Yo luego caí en la cuenta que él no tenía la culpa; cumplía como hombre porque las mujeres lo perseguían a propósito. (...) las culpables eran ellas" (PH 104-105). Again, this clearly shows that Jesusa holds women responsible for their husbands' cheating, however cruel the men themselves might be. Being sexually provoked, "[a Pedro] como hombre no le quedaba más remedio que cumplirles" (PH 105).

Jesusa, who is so liberated in certain ways, who is a "blend of male and female traits, an androgynous figure who embodies a multiplicity of dimensions that are not determined by conventional sex-role stereotypes" (Hancock 355), succumbs to traditional patriarchal thinking and essentialist views of gender and sex. This underlines her contradictory character and shows to what extent the adoption of masculine behavior and perspectives liberated as well as constrained her. Nonetheless, Jesusa unmistakably distances herself from men: "A mí los hombres no me hacen falta ni me gustan, más bien me estorban aunque no están cerca de mí, ¡ojalá y no nacieran!" (PH 173). The only man she has a deep connection to is her father Felipe. At the end of her life story the reader learns that Jesusa was never sure of her father's love, even though he took great care of her when she was a child. One can question whether some of Jesusa's comments even suggest that she had an incestuous relationship with her father. They

shared a bed together and she admits: “mi papá dormía acostado junto a mí; siempre se tiraba junto a mí” (PH 69).

Apart from her objection against men and women, Jesusa tries to resist development and present time. She dislikes the state of Mexico’s present customs and postulates that many things were better in the past. Whether it is popular culture such as dancing (PH 158) and cinema (PH 145), hairdos (PH 156), food (PH 147), or education (PH 49), according to her, “en México todo lo descomponen” (PH 158). Jesusa doesn’t believe in the advancement of modern medicine and technology, nor does she support the theory of evolution (PH 307-308). Quite the opposite, she is critical of the fact that people were more pious when she was younger and that they had more respect for each other (PH 49). She feels that the end of the world is near because the people do not believe in God (PH 307). In her opinion, more regard and protection existed during the Porfiriato, even though she acknowledges that there had also been more fear (PH 134).

Jesusa is especially discontent with the major institutions and Mexican authorities. She considers that in comparison to the Revolution, the Mexican soldiers of today are worthless (PH 238) and have forgotten how to fight. Jesusa’s situation demonstrates now that the Revolution itself has not brought significant improvement for the peasant population. For many years during her life as a worker in Mexico City, Jesusa had been a Union member. However, her hopes for better living and working conditions are disappointed when she comes to the conclusion that the Unions are nothing but fake: “Con eso de los pinches sindicatos lo han arruinado a uno para todo. (...) ¡Ni siquiera le ayudan a uno! Al contrario, lo arruinan” (PH 235). Without further ado, Jesusa leaves them and seeks her fortune on her own. This is not the first time that she speaks up against public authorities. Jesusa openly rejects her teachers’ efforts when she has to enroll in a

biology course for her work as a nurse (PH 201). She prefers to learn how to read and write and ironically accuses the educators of ignorance.

After Pedro dies on the battlefield and his company is taken into custody on United States' territory, Jesusa confronts a military officer of high rank who deserted across the border in front of his company (PH 129). And stranded in Mexico City, she even argues with President Carranza himself about her widow's pension<sup>26</sup> and calls him a thief (PH 136). Jesusa is not afraid of making herself heard and expresses disapproval of her social and political environment. However, she realizes that this must hold the reason for her loneliness: "Por eso yo soy sola, porque no me gusta que me gobierne nadie" (PH 153). As a consequence, Jesusa doesn't feel connected to Mexico and its people. She states:

...yo no tengo patria... No me siento mexicana ni reconozco a los mexicanos. Aquí no existe más que pura conveniencia y puro interés. Si yo tuviera dinero y bienes, sería mexicana, pero como soy peor que la basura, pues no soy nada... Soy basura a la que el perro le echa una mirada y sigue adelante... Soy basura porque no puedo ser otra cosa. Yo nunca he servido para nada. Toda mi vida he sido el mismo microbio que ve... Aquí se me ha dificultado mucho la vividera. Pero no estoy triste, no. Al contrario, vivo alegre. Así es la vida, vivir alegre. (PH 218)

Jesusa displays one of her strategies in this quote. She negates and suppresses her disappointment about her situation by reassuring herself and others that everything is fine, that the circumstances might be hostile, but that she as a person is doing well. She appropriates and affirms the general public opinion about the poor population and thereby does not allow her living conditions to be used as an insult against her. In contrast to the reader, she claims that she is nothing, just like Josefina Bórquez might have seen herself in view of the writer Elena Poniatowska and her upper class status. Jesusa, the narrator-protagonist, only mentions briefly that her father's family owned property, which she could have inherited if she had not rejected it

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<sup>26</sup> In *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military*, Elizabeth Salas states as a fact that many women had to live in great misery after fighting in the Revolution, because the Mexican government withheld their pensions and treated them with indifference (50).

(PH 220). Besides the possible higher social status of Jesusa, another parallel to writer Poniatowska becomes evident with regards to family. Both have French roots, and both deny or reject to some point their bourgeois heritage. In addition to that, Jesusa, or Josefina, says that she doesn't like Mexicans, which might be the reason why she opens up to someone with a foreign ancestry such as Poniatowska. In any case, Jesusa's statement makes evident her rejection of the nationalism that is prevalent in Mexico.

Her account also subverts the official version of Mexican history with respect to the heroes of the Revolution and the participation of women. Throughout the description of her life, the reader finds various references to historical events. Jesusa, her father and husband all fought for the Carrancistas and moved from one place to another, fighting against Zapata's and Villa's armies. Although Zapata was a peasant leader, she states that the peasants hated him since his army stole and caused a lot of damage to the towns it moved through (PH 67). General Zapata himself is described by Jesusa as a good man who maintained his decency. She met him personally when she and some other women were caught by his army and he returned them to their company without harm (PH 78). General Villa, on the contrary, was a bandit. Jesusa remembers his war crimes and uncourageous behavior with respect to the women in the army.<sup>27</sup> Villa's famous Division of the North "hicieron picadillo de cristianos" (PH 127), they blew up passenger trains and killed and stole money from civilians. She therefore hates Villa more than anyone else and cannot understand how the present Mexican state builds monuments in his honor (PH 95). Jesusa is grateful that she never met him in person: "Nunca lo llegué a ver de cerca, nunca, y qué bueno porque le hubiera escupido la cara" (PH 95). Jesusa exposes the later

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<sup>27</sup> In the same work, Salas gives also an account of the hostility and violence against women in the army during the Mexican Revolution. The brutality reaches a peak in 1916 when Villa orders his troops to execute dozens of *soldaderas* and their children for an attempt on his life by one of them (39). According to Salas, Villa, who didn't like women in the army and was very macho, even rode his horse over the dead bodies to express his contempt (45, 47).

Mexican president Carranza as coward who fled the battlefield and deserted his company (PH 136).

Above all, former *soldadera* Jesusa unmaskes the Mexican Revolution as a farce. She describes the disaccord and opportunism among the soldiers and states that nothing has changed on the political stage in the meantime: “Así fue la revolución, que ahora soy de éstos, pero mañana seré de los otros, a chaquetazo limpio, el caso es estar con el más fuerte, el que tiene más parque... también ahora es así” (PH 71). Jesusa relates impressively the chaos of the Revolution and emphasizes that many people were killed out of blank stupidity. She thinks that it was

una guerra mal entendida porque eso de que se mataran unos con otros, padres contra hijos, hermanos contra hermanos; carrancistas, villistas, zapatistas, pues eran puras tarugadas porque éramos los mismos pelados y muertos de hambre. Pero ésas son cosas que, como dicen, por sabidas se callan. (PH 94)

The Revolution has not changed much for the poor, concludes Jesusa, as they are still dying of hunger. Formerly ordinary soldiers such as Lázaro Cárdenas, who should know better, make the life of the poor even harder. While he is officially known for his support of the working class and organization of trade unions, Cárdenas gives during his presidency order that the slum Magueyitos where Jesusa lives be vacated (PH 265 ff.). The slum population initially protests, but eventually has to retreat and is relocated. By telling her life story, Jesusa offers a different perspective on the events and people of the Mexican Revolution and thus subverts the official historical discourse in Mexico, pointing out that the poor population is suffering today in the same way as it has in the past. Another institution that is crucial to Mexican nationality and culture and against which Jesusa expresses her opposition is the Catholic Church. As a witness of the Cristero War,<sup>28</sup> she applauds Benito Juárez for his merciless prosecution of indecent

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<sup>28</sup> The anticlerical politics of Elías Calles, successor of Álvaro Obregón, led to a revolt of the *cristeros*. They went into battle shouting “¡Viva Cristo Rey! ¡Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe!” in order to protect the church against Calles

activities on the part of the priests and other clerics in the 19th century (PH 208 ff.). Priests do not represent an exception to her essentialist views on men and their sexuality; she has experienced herself that they are ordinary men who are hungry for women and satisfy their needs whenever possible. Jesusa makes reference to the many documented abortions that the nuns in the convents had to undergo in order to conceal the truth about the sexual activities in the clerical institutions. As an alternative to the Catholic church, Jesusa gets involved with the *Obra Espiritual*<sup>29</sup> (PH 160). The importance of the *Obra* in her life becomes obvious right at the beginning of the novel when Jesusa talks about her belief in reincarnation.<sup>30</sup> When she is introduced to the *Obra*, Jesusa resists at first and is suspicious. Once her suspicions have been eliminated, she becomes a medium herself and serves along with other mostly female priests in her community. One of the main figures in the *Obra*, Franz Anton Mesmer, becomes her personal protector and mentor, and Jesusa is henceforth able to spiritually influence her environment and the higher world. Her role in the *Obra* and the power and authority she assumes through her position as well-respected medium—“A mí la gente que me ha visto trabajar no me quita los ojos de encima” (PH 302)—help her deal with the extreme poverty and harsh living conditions. Jesusa, who identifies herself as garbage, feels important when she is baptized

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and his people. Subsequently, the number of priests was restricted and the cassock forbidden. Calles founded the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), which became later the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

<sup>29</sup> The temples of the spiritualist sect with the name *Obra Espiritual* are a place of refuge for the Mexican slum population. Within the spiritual community, the members experience emotional support and alleviation of their physical and psychological suffering. Roque Rojas, who became Padre Elías in 1866, founded this form of spiritualism that consists of different doctrines of the world religions. A spiritual cleansing is initiated in group sessions, during which the members are possessed by their spiritual protectors: “Al lado de él [Padre Elías] y de sus portentosos milagros, Jesucristo palidece. Además Roque posee, penetra a su rebaño. Cuando entra en ellas, después de una tremenda sacudida, las mujeres y los hombres discurren en voz alta, en estado de trance, los ojos cerrados y el cuerpo recorrido por espasmos y se desahogan, en catarata brotan los conflictos, las frustraciones, la impotencia del marido, el miedo a la vejez, el odio a la vecina. Después los fieles se van a su casa sintiéndose muy livianitos.” (PH 249)

<sup>30</sup> Elena Poniatowska describes in her essay “Hasta no verte Jesús mío” the tension between her and Josefina Bórquez when she talked to her about the *Obra Espiritual*: “La *Obra Espiritual* siempre me resultó oscura, a veces incomprensible y ella se disgustaba cuando yo le hacía repetir alguna idea: ‘Pues ¿qué no ya se lo platicué? ¡Cuántas veces voy a tener que contárselo!’ (7).

through the Obra. Her belief in reincarnation increases her ability to cope with the daily deprivations as she is convinced that she must pay with her present life for the evil deeds she committed in a past life. Jesusa justifies the idea of the Obra and its practices when she states that president Madero was known for his involvement in spiritualism. Jesusa only leaves her community when the jealousy of the other media becomes unbearable, but in the end she is glad to be back on her own since over the years the Obra has become a business and has nothing to do any more with helping the people (PH 303).

Besides reading Jesusa's dedication to the Obra and to spiritualist beliefs as a resistance to national Catholicism and patriarchal institutions such as the church, her faith provides her with an opportunity to face obstacles with more strength and to give her life a meaning. Moreover, instead of understanding her spiritualism as surrender to superstition, one can interpret the spirits that she sees and is possessed with as a reification of her internal voice. It is her strong will that presents itself to her in form of her brother Emiliano and her father Felipe and advises her to stop drinking and cursing. Whether one believes in spiritualism or not, the Obra is a powerful means for Jesusa to establish herself as a subject in an environment that denies her any kind of authority.

The most prominent strategy that Jesusa employs in order to survive as an older woman is negation. She constantly downplays her skills, looks, and intellectual abilities. By "casting herself as outsider to everything—country and kin and kindness—Jesusa (...) has nothing to lose" (Sommer 931). Despite the fact that she is illiterate and never went to school, she learns various trades and is able to provide for herself at a very young age. The trust that her employers have in her and the responsibilities that she is given are best demonstrated through her jobs as housemaid and bar woman: In one of the houses, Jesusa is responsible for locking in the fellow

servants, many of whom are older than she, and when bar owner Doña Adelita goes on a trip, she leaves Jesusa in charge of her establishment. Jesusa manages not only to increase the income and raise the waitresses' salary during Doña Adelita's trip, but also shows her business skills by subletting the empty rooms to a tradeswoman. As a child, Jesusa heals herself from smallpox out of helplessness with nothing but sand and water. Her medical knowledge increases when she works in a women's hospital and learns from pharmacist Teófilo how to treat various illnesses. These skills earn her later respect and make her a valuable member of her community.

Although Jesusa has indeed much to offer for someone in her social and material position, she refuses to interact with other people or even establish relationships: "Yo no soy querendona, no me gusta la gente. Mi carácter ha sido muy seco. Nunca me aquerencié con nadie. Soy muy regañona, hablo muy fuerte" (PH 282). Whenever she can, she emphasizes her strong and independent character: "Yo era fuerte, de por sí soy fuerte. (...) El coraje, eso me sostenía. Toda mi vida he sido mal geniuda, corajuda" (PH 109). The rage she refers to in this quote exposes the source of energy that kept her going and helped her survive every hardship. Jesusa is proud of her life as a fighter. As a strategic move, she thus turns a necessity into a virtue. When she gets older, she conceals her physical weakness with a better understanding of herself: "Yo era rete fina para pegar. Ora ya no, ya no pego. Ya se me quitó lo peleonera porque me di cuenta de que no es bueno pelear" (PH 150). It is not clear whether the old Jesusa has actually recognized her misbehavior as wrong or whether she is too proud to admit that she cannot keep up with her younger self.

At all stages in her life, Jesusa rejects any form of sympathy and underlines that she is happy because she never accepted directions from anyone: "Yo nunca le dije que fuera triste, le dije que fuera triste la vida que he llevado, pero yo, no. (...) Soy muy feliz aquí solita. Me



muerdo yo solita y me rasguño, ma caigo y me levanto yo solita. Soy muy feliz. Nunca me ha gustado vivir acompañada” (PH 295). The reader gets the impression that Jesusa is not quite telling the truth as she has to repeat her statement about happiness several times as if she needed to prove to herself its validity. Her declaration is also contradictory insofar as Jesusa has taken in several children throughout her lifetime and thus displayed care and need for belonging.

Unfortunately, the boys she takes care of either leave her or pass away, and Jesusa experiences great emotional loss. Instead of admitting her grief and disappointment, Jesusa finds stability in denying her true feelings and dismissing affection for children in general: “A mí los niños nunca me han gustado. Son muy latosos y muy malas gentes” (PH 28). She is bothered by the fact that “...esta vecindad está llena de criaturas, gritan tanto que nomás me dan ganas de apretarles el pescuezo. Lo malo es que como en todas partes hay niños, yo no puedo acabar con ellos. Pero ganas no me faltan” (PH 173). Despite the aversion that she expresses toward children and her own feelings, she keeps her foster child Angel’s shirts as a memory.

After so many disappointments, Jesusa justifies her lack of feelings with the fact that she has felt too much loss and grief in her life: “De tanto que siento ya no siento” (PH 256). All that she fears at the end of her life is God. She resists love, care, and sympathy and refuses to connect with anyone. Her ultimate statement of resistance against human affection is most prominently expressed in her wish to be left alone at the end of the novel: “Ahora ya no chingue. Váyase. Déjeme dormir” (PH 316). Besides her articulated repugnance, the fact that she wants to sleep hints additionally at her resignation.

When talking about Jesusa’s repression of her feelings as a strategy of survival and resistance, it is indispensable to mention also her repressed sexuality, since the violent experiences with men and the resulting denial of her sexual desires immensely shape her gender

identity. When Pedro and she were intimate, he forced her to leave her clothes on and was very practical:

Yo nunca me quité los pantalones, nomás me los bajaba cuando él me ocupaba, pero que dijera yo, me voy a acostar como en mi casa, me voy a desvestir porque me voy a cobijar, eso no, tenía que traer los pantalones puestos a la hora que tocaran: “¡Reunión, Alevante!,” pues vámonos a donde sea... Mi marido no era hombre que lo estuviera apapachando a uno, nada de eso. Era hombre muy serio.” (PH 86)

Pedro “satisfied his urges” with Jesusa when there were no other women around. He never caressed her or showed any form of affection. Jesusa therefore expresses how uncomfortable she feels at the sight of young people who publicly kiss: “No estoy acostumbrada a los besuqueos pues solo Judas besó a Jesucristo, y ya ve lo que resultó. ¡Qué figuretas son ésas! ¡Qué hagan lo que tanto les urge pero que no lo adornen!” (PH 108). She makes it very clear that unlike the many other women with whom her husband shared the bed, she never offered herself to him. As a result, she concludes: “Por eso no reconozco cuál es el amor, nunca tuve amor, ni sentí nada, ni Pedro tampoco. A él lo que le interesó era infelizarme y ya. Vivía yo feliz cuando no venía” (PH 108). Although Jesusa rejects physical love, she has felt strong platonic emotions for her friend Antonio Pérez. Her oppressed sexuality also manifests itself in her dreams. Jesusa feels sexual desire for Luz de Oriente, one of the spirits of the *Obra Espiritual*, and is obviously aware of his sexual interest: “Nomás que Luz de Oriente me mira con mucha hambre. Tiene hambrosía en los ojos a todas horas. Y me deja pensando” (PH 14). In another dream, she marries a bullfighter, a macho figure par excellence (PH 188). Freud’s theory of dreams as the symbolic fulfillments of unconscious desires can readily be applied to Jesusa. Her denial of sexual activities is questionable insofar as she falls sick with syphilis as adult (PH 294). In general, with respect to her sexuality Jesusa employs the same strategy that she uses for everything else that concerns her emotional and private life. She does not speak about anything to anyone.

Her refuge and resistance lie thus in the use of her outspoken language, the belief in God and spiritualism, and in defiance and silence. It is the more impressive and surprising that Jesusa decides to break her silence at the end of her life. In her earthy and unacademic language, she states that she has lived through many hardships: “No tengo don de lenguas, pero he atravesado muchos precipicios” (PH 12-13). Through telling her story, she constitutes herself as subject.

Claudette Williams explains the purpose of Jesusa’s story as follows:

The entire narrative is centered on her ego. Hers is the vantage point from which the story is told, hers the consciousness that controls the discourse; hers are the world view and sensitivity that inform the work. Jesusa is a ‘self-reflexive’ protagonist-narrator: in recounting her life experiences she is also concerned with defining herself and establishing the authority of her narrative voice. (Williams 216)

Silence as a form of objection to oppressive structures has been well analyzed. Ludmer states accordingly that “silence constitutes a space of resistance before the power of the others” (qtd. in Castillo, “Finding Feminisms” 50). Nonetheless, it ultimately must be overcome in order to change the system and improve the oppressed individual’s condition. As part of her literary analysis, Castillo examines silence in texts. Initially a reaction to the pressures of the dominant social order, silence was not a response but rather a condition imposed from the outside environment. While the dominant can choose whether to speak or be silent, the choice is always contingent upon the subordinate’s silence. Castillo sees a revolutionary response to this silencing in resemanticization: silence can be used as a weapon or be broken with hypocrisy (*Talking Back* 38-39). Jesusa does that when she refuses to speak about her pain to others in order to avoid further humiliation. Women can use the distance that comes with silence to their advantage in order to create their own intellectual space. Trinh maintains that silence as a “language of its own has barely been explored” (73-74). The tactics of speaking between the lines and carefully withholding speech have already been examined by Ludmer with respect to Sor Juana Inés de la

Cruz's letters and her manipulation of rhetoric regarding the use of "saber", "decir", and "no". However, silence as a political strategy or basis for theory is of little use, according to Castillo. The oppressed must eventually break their silence and write or speak. Jörgensen claims that in Poniatowska's novel, the act of narrating is a basic structural element and can be understood as "self-creation and self-salvation" (36). Through retrospectively recreating herself, Jesusa produces a powerful testimonial that can be read as the life of millions of Mexican and Latin American men and women "who live and die without hope, trapped in the eternal cycle of poverty and political oppression" (Williams 215).

### 3.2 Elena Poniatowska's Literary Strategies

Poniatowska's testimonial novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* has been intensely criticized and analyzed especially since it challenges the prevalent systems of textual classification. Her writing can therefore be viewed as writing "on the borderline" (Jörgensen 53). It is important to have a closer look at the role that testimonial literature<sup>31</sup> plays in the Latin American context in order to understand better the impact that *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* had on critics as well as on the public audience. In "Voices for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin America," Gugelberger and Kearney state that testimonial literature is a new genre with a strong female-

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<sup>31</sup> In *Huellas de las literaturas hispanoamericanas*, Garganigo et al. classify the *novela testimonial* under post-boom and postmodern literature. I quote their definition in full length: "La novela testimonial—que sigue el modelo establecido por el cubano Miguel Barnet con su *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966)—llega a convertirse en una de las formas más cultivadas y críticamente reconocidas. En palabras de John Beverly, "un testimonio es una narración—usualmente, pero no obligatoriamente del tamaño de una novela corta—contada en primera persona por un narrador que es a la vez el protagonista (o el testigo) de su propio relato. Su unidad narrativa suele ser una 'vida' o una vivencia particularmente significativa (situación laboral, militancia política, encarcelamiento, etc.)" (173). Lo que distingue al testimonio de formas autobiográficas tradicionales es la presencia de un editor solidario con la causa del pueblo que sirve de intermediario entre el testigo y el público lector. Entre estos textos se destacan por su originalidad, valor humano y estético, los siguientes testimonios: *Si me permiten hablar* (1977) de la boliviana Domitila Barrios de Chungara (ed. Moema Viezzer), *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) de la guatemalteca Rigoberta Menchú (ed. Elizabeth Burgos) y las novelas testimoniales *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) de la mexicana Elena Poniatowska (1933- ), *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* (1983) del nicaragüense Omar Cabezas Lacayo y *Un día en la vida* del salvadoreño Manlio Argueta (1935- )" (670). See also Elzbieta Sklodowska's article "Spanish American Testimonial Novel: Some Afterthoughts" on the recognition of the *novela testimonial* as its own genre.

gender orientation that is closely related to revolutionary developments; it can therefore be placed into Third World literature or resistance literature (10). Forming not only on the periphery of the colonial context, but also on the boundaries of the spoken and written word, it challenges conventional literary forms for the representation of the subaltern with the major objective to rewrite and retell official Latin American history and to correct it from the people's perspective (11).

One of the complex problems of testimonial literature derives from its double authorship. The circumstance that texts such as *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* represent a "compositely authored work" (Franco, *Plotting Women* 178) can lead to a great confusion about the authentic producer of the text, not only among the audience, but also among the co-writers themselves. It has been reported that Rigoberta Menchú subsequently accused Elizabeth Burgos of claiming, or receiving, the credit for her story. Josefina Bórquez initially rejected Poniatowska's final version of the text with the accusation that it was nothing but a "sham, a lie" (Kerr 377). Subjectivity and the notion of truth therefore constitute important aspects of this genre. The authority of the subject in a testimonial text results precisely, although paradoxically, from the denial of its authority elsewhere, namely the social, political, or cultural environment. At the same time, one has to take into account that the narrator-protagonist, here Jesusa, or the textualization of the person Josefina Bórquez, is a "figure that remains subject to the authorizing gestures of another figure" (Kerr 387), such as the author or editor. Kerr reveals that in the case of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, Poniatowska insists "upon the novel's origins in historical and biographical fact, in social and cultural history, in the life, memory, and discourse of its own narrator-protagonist" (374). Cynthia Steele, who was given access by the author to the original interviews between 1988 and 1989, confirms this declaration: "Lo que revelan estos materiales es que, en el libro,

Poniatowska se mantuvo extremadamente fiel tanto a la historia de su informante como a su lenguaje” (“Testimonio” 159).

With respect to Poniatowska and Bórquez, de Valdés speaks of a symbiotic relationship that developed between the writer and the informant when the “two women pushed back the boundaries of illiteracy, the orality of life stories, [and] the oppression of sexism” (*Shattered Mirror* 115) and helped transform Latin American testimonial biography into testimonial fiction.<sup>32</sup> This circumstance indicates their functioning as a collective across the boundaries of class, age, and origin and fits the genealogical concept with which women can be viewed as having a different history and background while pursuing a common goal or being involved in the same activity at once. With *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, Poniatowska and Jesusa-Josefina jointly resist the oppression that they are faced with through the patriarchal system: the first through writing, and the other through telling her story. Both need and depend on each other in order to realize this project. It is arguable to what extent the real person Josefina thought of the interviews as part of a process with a mutual objective, since she rejected the person Poniatowska initially and often hindered the sessions with little errands that had to be run.

However, for Poniatowska, the realization and publication of the novel based on Bórquez’s accounts was crucial to her development as a writer and her political and social commitment in Mexico. In line with Chevigny, it is valid to say that in Poniatowska’s case, the venture of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* presented a “sort of symbiosis in which the author explore[d] through the presentation of the subject her (...) own potential strengths and weaknesses” (53) as a woman in a patriarchal environment.

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<sup>32</sup> In *Women as Witness*, Linda S. Maier explains that the Spanish terms *testigo* and *testimonio* derive etymologically from the Latin word *testes*, and since there is no female form of the Spanish noun, women are referred to as *la testigo* when they are witnesses. It follows that since they don’t have testicles, they cannot really be qualified to testify. In consideration of women’s generic exclusion from testimonial discourse, their appropriation of the genre and ascendancy appear thus all the more noteworthy. (3)

Poniatowska has dedicated herself through journalism and fiction writing to giving a voice to those that are oppressed and excluded from the social discourse, such as women, peasants, workers, or students. The urge to make those visible that remain on the margins of society derives from her aristocratic roots and her “guilt feeling of the bourgeoisie” (García Pinto 178). Born in Paris in 1933 to a Mexican mother and a French father of Polish ancestry, Poniatowska moved to Mexico when she was nine years old.<sup>33</sup> Since her mother was mostly absent and her father fought in the Second World War, family circumstances that she shares with the narrator-protagonist Jesusa, she was mainly raised by the housemaids who taught her Spanish, which is why she was able to understand the Spanish of the working class woman Bórquez very well. Poniatowska has no academic formation, which resembles a parallel to Jesusa and the De la Garza sisters in Laura Esquivel’s novel *Como agua para chocolate*. She nonetheless was the first woman to win the National Journalism Prize in 1978. Poniatowska has held workshops for and about women writers and refers to herself as feminist: “I feel considerable solidarity with women, and I want women to have the same opportunities men have with their bodies and with their work” (García Pinto 180). In honor of her work in support of women and women writers, she was named Mexican Woman of the Year and recognized with the *Coatlícue* prize by the Mexican magazine *Debate Feminista* in 1990. Kay S. García states that her controversial works help establish a dialogue between the classes in Mexico (246). One of the reasons why her writing appeals so much to Mexican society is, according to Chevigny, that it engages the “the feelings and curiosity of the reader because of her mixture of modes of knowing—investigative and empathetic—and of ways of telling—novelistic, testimonial, journalistic and confessional” (61).

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<sup>33</sup> See *Women Writers of Latin America* by Magdalena García Pinto and “Elena Poniatowska: Search for the Voiceless” by Kay S. García in *A Dream of Light and Shadows: Portraits of Latin American Women Writers*, ed. by Marjorie Agosín, for more information about the writer’s biography.

Poniatowska most prominently writes about the events and the people that are situated at the periphery of society. Castillo outlines in *Talking Back* an important and powerful literary strategy that obviously can be applied to many of Poniatowska's works, including *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. It is based on marginality, which is a significant aspect of women's writing, as women such as Poniatowska write from, of, or for the margins. In contrast to other regions, women writers in Latin America are in a privileged position since they have access to the cultural and social peripheries and can act as mediators for marginalized groups such as indigenous people and members of lower social classes while they present an oppressed group themselves. It is one of the Latin American women writers' tasks, according to Castillo, to "force the dominant culture to recognize these regions" (*Talking Back* 58) and to associate themselves publicly with them through their writing, which creates solidarity among everyone involved. Poniatowska does exactly that through political activism and works such as *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, whose structure offers a critique of the social institutions and a role model for rebellion. Richard Cándida Smith observes that the novel refuses to idealize the Mexican Revolution and criticizes social structures that developed in its aftermath. What is quite different from other novels that deal with the same issues is that "this critique is made from the viewpoint of a working class woman" (75) and thus offers a perspective from the poverty-stricken social periphery.

Writing for and about the margins of society and blurring the boundaries between literary genres are thus important strategies that Poniatowska employs in her work as woman writer. With respect to the *novela testimonio*, she has helped create a new form and space of expression within the patriarchal literary system.<sup>34</sup> Most importantly, through situating the feminine

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<sup>34</sup> A comparison between Elena Poniatowska and Cuban writer Miguel Barnet in this context is interesting. While Poniatowska focuses on the accounts of one woman only in order to produce *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and remains



experience in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* in a period that is crucial to Mexican history and the formation of the state, namely the Mexican Revolution, she helps subvert the official patriarchal historical discourse and brings out the involvement and participation of women in Mexico's history. When the novel was published, the women's movement started to slowly raise awareness in Mexico for women's issues, and the student protests and violent confrontations between police and civilians showed the growing disagreement of society with the government's politics of repression.

In her essay "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers," Gloria Anzaldúa asks: "Does not our class, our culture as well as the white man tell us writing is not for women such as us?" (81). Through her writing, Poniatowska also speaks to underprivileged women and motivates them to actively resist the oppressive structures that limit them in their self-realization. She does this by giving them a role model such as the outspoken Jesusa, whose hallmark is her very own and strong language. Jesusa often talks as if she had "balls" (PH 137) and curses quite frequently. John Hancock states that Jesusa's "vocabulary exhibits a lexical diversity incorporating regionalisms and colloquialisms, as well as words that are of Indian origin, archaic, or simply invented. It is a language which, like her personality, contradicts notions of what is 'feminine' expression" (357). Poniatowska made a conscious decision about how to incorporate her informant Bórquez's language into the novel and was well aware of the effect it would have on the readership. In her essay "Hasta no verte Jesús mío," she explains:

Para escribir *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* se me presentó un dilema: el de las malas palabras. En una primera versión, Jesusa jamás las pronunció y a mí me dio gusto pensar en su

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quite faithful to Josefina Bórquez's original story, Miguel Barnet interviewed many different women, all of whom remain anonymous, and used their various life stories to create one fictional character for his novel *Canción de Rachel* (1969). Contrary to Poniatowska's text, his tone is very judgmental. Women are mainly portrayed in a negative way as promiscuous and dishonest, for example. Andrea Morris observes Barnet's style and attitude in more depth in her article "The Testimony of the Displaced: *Rachel's Song* and the Performance of Race and Gender." His writing as a man differs thus greatly from Poniatowska's feminine approach to creating a *novela testimonio*.

recato, su reserva; me alegró la posibilidad de escribir un relato sin ellas, pero a medida que nació la confianza y sobre todo al regreso de un viaje de casi un año a Francia, Jesusa se soltó, me integró a su mundo. (9)

It is interesting to see here that Poniatowska consciously thought about whether or not to incorporate any type of foul language. Her initial omitting of strong words and expressions might be the result of her own reservation as a member of the upper social class. Therefore she might have felt a certain liberation after incorporating “las malas palabras” into her work. The quote also makes evident the strong connection she felt to the character Jesusa as she refers to the protagonist as a real person. Above all, the use of language is, according to Castillo, another important aspect of women’s writing. In order to distinguish their texts from those written by men, women have to invent their own language or appropriate the language that the dominant discourse offers them and use it according to their needs. Jesusa uses her language not only to openly express rage and discontent in a way that is perceived as typically masculine, but she also employs it to raise her voice against her oppressor; and through her choice of that language, Poniatowska writes against the patriarchal order on the extratextual level.

Poniatowska also touches on other topics that present important issues for Mexican women and minorities in general, such as prostitution, race, the image of the *soldadera*, and the preparation of food, which is traditionally considered as part of the domestic and therefore feminine domain. The incorporation of these topics into the text shows a parallel between *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and *Como agua para chocolate* that will be discussed in this thesis. Jesusa thus finds work in the “hospital de las podridas” (PH 202) and describes in detail the various sicknesses and conditions that the prostitutes have, sometimes to the point where the reader and Jesusa are shaken with disgust. This shows that Poniatowska is not afraid of including the body and its functions and defects in her writing, which is also considered to be part of typical

women's literature. She also discusses racial issues in her text. The reader can tell that as a *mestiza*, Jesusa displays an unconscious rejection of the Indian side of her ancestry. When she traces her family history, she dwells on the French origins of her father while she euphemizes the Indian roots of her mother (PH 220-21). Her "racial self-hatred" (Williams 218) becomes obvious when Jesusa is eager to mention that she is light-skinned, unlike her sister: "Petra era trigüeña, más prieta que yo. Yo tengo la cara quemada del sol pero no soy prieta, pero ella sí era oscura de cuerpo y cara. Salió más indita que yo" (PH 31).

Poniatowska stresses women's participation in the Revolution through the notion that Jesusa loves fighting. With respect to the *soldaderas*, the novel hints at the disrespectful treatment that they received when Jesusa is arrested and mistakenly considered as prostitute, a so-called "señora de batallón" (PH 229).<sup>35</sup> However, the writer also includes descriptions of women as *soldaderas* of high rank and esteem such as Señorita Lucía, who scares her male companions and who calls the young Jesusa her *compañera* (PH 80-81).<sup>36</sup>

Poniatowska also leaves significant room for Jesusa to speak about food and its preparation in between her historical accounts. Laura Esquivel appropriates this important part of Mexican culture and women's domain in a more obvious manner into her novel *Como agua para chocolate*. A final note about Poniatowska's literary style and strategies is directed at a major trend of the period in which her novel was published. The disjunctions of time and place—Jesusa tells her story in retrospect—and Jesusa's "belief in spirits blend fantasy and reality in ways

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<sup>35</sup> Salas states that many townspeople judged the *soldaderas* as prostitutes; in popular culture they were later idealized in a combined role as "mother, war goddess, warrior, tribal defender, sexual companion, and domestic servant within the context of army life" (44).

<sup>36</sup> In *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman*, Shirlene Soto explains that many *soldaderas* remained virtually anonymous, while a few achieved some recognition, such as Margarita Mata, María Aguirre, María Luisa Escobar, and Margarita Neri from southern Mexico: The latter led 1000 men in 1910 north, "vowing to decapitate Díaz with her own hands. It is reported that when he heard that she was approaching, he had himself shipped from the state" (45).

comparable to ‘magical realism’” (Cándida Smith 74), for example with respect to her encounter with a *nagual*, a half human, half animal figure in Mexican popular myth (PH 123).

We have to return to the aspect of symbiosis in order to apply the concept of feminist genealogy to the women Poniatowska, the writer, Jesusa, the protagonist, and Josefina Bórquez, the authentic informant. Jesusa, and probably Josefina, did not feel connected with her nation and people, and neither did Poniatowska at the time when the interview process started. However, contrary to the informant-protagonist, Poniatowska had always felt a strong desire to belong to the country that she lived in. Chevigny points out that through “finding Jesusa’s strength, she could begin to cultivate her own” (56), and Josefina Bórquez became for her a “model and inspiration for national pride as well as for unfettered womanhood” (Sommer 930). What we see here is the realization of what Stone describes as a genealogical effect; due to the differences in class, age, and origin, both women are situated at different positions in a historical chain of women and have relatively little in common. Nevertheless, the action of one of them influences the life and the attitude of the other, and the change of her personality and the intensified interest in social and political issues subsequently affect an even greater number of women.

Jørgensen has observed that “the writing of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* was a crucial moment in [Poniatowska’s] engagement with Mexican society, a hinge between past and future, between not belonging and belonging, between observation of and participation in her nation’s life” (65). In the aftermath of the novel’s publication, Poniatowska and Bórquez develop a close relationship that resists the public and traditional opinion that friendship over class and age differences cannot exist. Both women are thus connected through Stone’s genealogical chain of women and through their expression of resistance. They both have a major effect on each other’s

lives, they both need and help each other in order to postulate an act of rebellion against the national oppressive structures. Together they create a whole and make an impact on Mexican society, because, as Poniatowska says with respect to Mexican women and women writers, “they all know that if one of us triumphs, everyone does, because it raises the possibility that bigger doors will open for all of us” (García Pinto 181).

#### 4. The Woman and the Family in Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate*

Laura Esquivel's first novel *Como agua para chocolate* (1989) is without a doubt one of the most widely known Mexican works on an international level. Originally a screenwriter, Esquivel decided to write literature after many years of experience in the world of cinema and television, and her text is clearly marked by cinematographic elements. It is not surprising that she herself wrote the film version after the novel had received international critical acclaim, especially in the United States. *Como agua para chocolate* has been translated into more than thirty languages and was awarded the American Bookseller Book of the Year Award in 1994. Esquivel was the first foreign writer to win this prize. Subsequently, the film version (1992), realized together with her husband at that time, Alfonso Aráu, became one of the largest grossing foreign films ever released in the United States. In Mexico, it received a number of *Premios Ariel* awarded through the *Academia Mexicana de Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas*. Since then, Esquivel has established herself as one of the most prominent Mexican women writers and published several novels that notably contributed to Latin American literature.

The unprecedented popularity of *Como agua para chocolate* can be ascribed to various factors. The novel's theme and structure as well as the incorporation of the supernatural all add to its unique mix of popular elements and social critique. Due to its combination of different genres and its status as a romance novel, the text has been criticized as a weak imitation of the male-dominated literary canon and, moreover, as parody. However, parodic elements and exaggeration play an important role in the novel insofar as they add to its playfulness while at the same time allowing the writer to point out the flaws of Mexican patriarchal society and culture. Set against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution, the imaginative combination of romance novel and cookbook explores the relationship between men and women and society through the

history of the De la Garza family. Food and its preparation play an important role in the novel, and it is through the culinary world and cooking that the reader learns about the trials and difficulties suffered by the De la Garza sisters.<sup>37</sup> In the novel, the kitchen emerges as the most significant part of the house and becomes the source of knowledge and understanding of love and life. Along with the recipes that are presented in each of the twelve chapters, the story of Tita and the other members of the family is told by an omniscient narrative voice.

The narrative unfolds along the personal experiences of Tita, her sisters, and their mother, who takes on the role of family patriarch after her husband dies. The conflicts that arise between the protagonists are centered on the rebellion of the two younger daughters, Tita and Gertrudis, against their mother's authority, which can be understood as the result of the domination of patriarchy in Mexican society. The fact that the daughters resist their mother's authority not only represents the liberating spirit of the Revolution with respect to the traditional role of women, but also the relationship between women and the predominant social discourse on gender roles at the time when the novel was published. Unlike in the 1960s when *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* was written, the feminist movement had already established itself to a certain extent in Mexican society and allowed the feminine voice to question the patriarchal order.

Each woman in the De la Garza family represents a distinct version of femininity and has her own way to deal with the obstacles presented by tradition and patriarchy. In the following, I will analyze the ways in which Tita and Gertrudis resist the traditional values that their mother imposes on them and the distinct ways in which they respond to her domination. The differences in how they resist present the vantage point from which Esquivel reevaluates the traditional roles of women. While Tita's rebellion manifests itself within the culinary world of the kitchen, a

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<sup>37</sup> According to Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba, *Como agua para chocolate* "not only [became] a megahit movie, but also inspired restaurants in the United States, Europe, and Mexico to reproduce that novel's meals on their tony menus" (62).

space traditionally associated with women, Gertrudis more openly subverts the patriarchal ideology when she breaks out of the limited world in which tradition and society place her and participates in the Mexican Revolution. After outlining the sisters' forms of rebellion, I will go on to examine Esquivel's use of literary strategies in *Como agua para chocolate* to subvert the patriarchal discourse herself. Through comparing her work and protagonists to Poniatowska's novel and the character Jesusa, I will point out differences and parallels between the women writers and women protagonists and reveal how they are all connected by a genealogy of resistance.

#### **4.1 Tita's Rebellion Against Maternal Patriarchy**

The youngest daughter of Mamá Elena and main protagonist of the novel, Tita, was born and raised in the kitchen. The maid Nacha playfully introduced her to the culinary secrets of her ancestors and taught her what she knew about life and love. Tita sees the outside world through culinary eyes and has a strong connection to food. Her emotions are thoroughly linked to the pleasure and joy of eating and cooking, and it is through the preparation of meals that she best expresses her inner life within her environment. Over the course of the novel, Tita learns to make a virtue out of a necessity and uses her culinary expertise as a vehicle to communicate with society and, most of all, her lover Pedro. The kitchen becomes the site of her subtle rebellion against patriarchy and tradition, both of which are represented by Mamá Elena.

An early episode from the sisters' childhood already serves as future outlook on their dealing with Mamá Elena's rigid authority. Tita tries to introduce her sisters into her world by playing with them in the kitchen. Together, they let water drop on the griddle and see it dance on the hot surface. While Rosaura, the oldest, fearfully keeps her distance and burns her hand,



Gertrudis enthusiastically participates in the game and is not afraid of the heat and movement (Esquivel 6).<sup>38</sup>

Mamá Elena's sense of order and will to follow tradition most severely affect Tita. As the youngest daughter, she is expected to stay with her mother and take care of her until she dies and is therefore not allowed to marry.<sup>39</sup> Trying not to give up on her love to Pedro, who responds by marrying Rosaura in order to stay close to his real love, Tita finds herself forced to obey her mother's rule. This causes many conflicts during which Tita grows in her willpower and confidence until she finally speaks out against her mother.

It is important to have a closer look at the patriarchal elements in *Como agua para chocolate* to better understand Tita's oppressive environment. As head of the family, Mamá Elena personifies the patriarchal order. Her family and ranch can be understood as a microcosm of Mexican patriarchy in which the daughters try to mold their feminine identity. Obedience is highly important, and questioning the parental authority leads to severe penalties and disapproval. The patriarchal mechanisms at work against which Tita resists become evident in the novel in several ways. Esquivel uses a range of methods to show how the patriarchal environment shapes the sisters' life. Most prominently, Carreño's *Manual of Etiquette* prescribes the daughters' behavior and is cited in various instances.<sup>40</sup> Since women who disobey men and their parents end up "revolcadas en el arroyo inmundo de la vida galante" (EC 127), the only way for them to lead a decent and respectable life is to serve father and brothers and then

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<sup>38</sup> Quotations from the primary text will in the following be marked through (EC page number).

<sup>39</sup> The relationship between Tita and her mother resembles a parallel to Señora Fortunata and her daughter Evarista in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (38). Both Evarista and Tita are expected to stay at home and help their mothers. However, Evarista is allowed to marry and continues her life in her mother's house at her own will.

<sup>40</sup> The *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras* is an authentic document that was published in 1853 by the Venezuelan Manuel Antonio Carreño (1812-1874). In *Plotting Women*, Jean Franco states that both novels and journals designed for women were often published by men in the 19th century, thus allowing male ideals to control both the public and private sphere (82).

husband and sons in humility within the social prison of family and marriage.<sup>41</sup> Men on the other hand can evade those restrictions and even manipulate the patriarchal order at the expense of others. This double standard becomes obvious when Pedro comments on his marriage to Rosaura: “Logré con esta boda lo que tanto anhelaba: estar cerca de [Tita], la mujer que verdaderamente amo” (EC 37).

The patriarchal repression of female sexuality is another factor that limits the daughters in their personal freedom and is exemplified through the bed sheets that are made for Rosaura’s and Pedro’s wedding night. Instead of allowing the couple to freely caress each other, the sheets only have a small opening, “destinado a mostrar únicamente las partes nobles de la novia en los momentos íntimos del matrimonio” (EC 31). Women, even when they are married, are supposed to remain decent and available for the man, who himself can act arbitrarily and inflict his sexuality upon the female whenever he wants. The servant Chenchá is thus extremely worried to find a husband that values her after she has been raped by revolutionary soldiers: “Ya ves cómo son los hombres. Toditos dicen que plato de segunda mesa ni en otra vida, ¡menos en ésta!” (EC 135). The psychological effects of the patriarchal discourse are clearly demonstrated through the example of Tita’s teacher Jovita, who lives in celibacy and works day and night. Tita remembers: “Con los años, fue perdiendo la razón. Trabajaba día y noche para poner coto a los malos pensamientos. Su frase preferida era ‘La ociosidad es la madre de todos los vicios’” (EC 221). Jovita has internalized the patriarchal belief that women need to be kept occupied because otherwise they would have indecent thoughts or develop subversive ideas.

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<sup>41</sup> Jo Freeman explains in “The Social Construction of the Second Sex” the difference between men and women in this context: “With sons, socialization seems to focus primarily on directing and constraining the boys’ impact on the environment. With daughters, the aim is rather to protect the girl from the impact of the environment. The boy is being prepared to mold his world, the girl to be molded by it” (131).

In addition to giving them never-ending work, society's constant observation of women's behavior and actions assures that they act in line with the patriarchal expectations. One of the neighbors of the De la Garza family, Paquita Lobo, functions as scout and guardian of the dominant order at social events. She curiously inquires whether Tita is drunk or pregnant and asks about her future living arrangements after Esperanza's wedding and Rosaura's death: "¿Y ahora qué vas a hacer? (...) Sin Esperanza en la casa ya no vas a poder vivir cerca de Pedro" (EC 241). Besides her role as protector of the social etiquette, Paquita resembles the typical gossiping woman that is controlled by envy and curiosity. Tita's suffering gives her some form of satisfaction in her own limited world, and just like other members of the dinner and wedding parties at the De la Garza ranch, Paquita is eager to see Tita fail to fulfill the official script of obedient and decent daughter in order to justify the righteousness of her own submissive existence. This is in line with Hélène Cixous's observation that the primary enemy of a woman is not necessarily a man, but other women who attempt to eliminate and put into place those who openly express their femininity and cross the boundaries that the male-dominated society confronts them with, thus endangering the patriarchal concepts of feminine and masculine.<sup>42</sup>

The strongest element that Esquivel includes in *Como agua para chocolate* to depict patriarchy is Mamá Elena herself. She is a strong and self-reliant woman who does not accept challenges to her tyrannical rule and leads her house with an iron fist. Mamá Elena rigorously forbids Tita to express her feelings as well as her own point of view about the family tradition: "¡Tú no opinas nada y se acabó! Nunca, por generaciones, nadie en mi familia ha protestado ante esta costumbre y no va a ser una de mis hijas quien lo haga" (EC 9). The young Tita wonders in

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<sup>42</sup> See Hélène Cixous's essay "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/ Forays" for a more detailed elaboration on this idea. In another essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous outlines the idea of the woman as Medusa who jeopardizes the patriarchal system with her "evil" thoughts and behaviour. This is precisely the image that Tita's teacher Jovita tries to avoid by keeping herself permanently occupied.

silence about the origin of such a tradition and its usefulness. She suffers greatly from Mamá Elena's beatings and reprimands. Her mother is described as a professional when it comes to dividing, dismantling, desolating, and destroying things: "Mataba, así, de tajo, sin piedad. (...) Con [Tita] había hecho una excepción, la había empezado a matar desde niña, poco a poquito, y aún no le daba el golpe final" (EC 48). Mamá Elena always finds fault in how Tita prepares the meals or cares for her, an indication that it is quite impossible for a woman to measure up to patriarchy's ideal. Unlike Jesusa, Tita is not grateful for the harsh treatment that she receives in her early life, as it is not her mother who teaches her valuable skills.

Tita knows that her personal freedom depends on her mother's death; she therefore has an ambiguous relationship with her. When the revolutionaries attack the ranch, Tita prays that nothing happens to Mamá Elena, and at the same time she hopes that she will find her dead (EC 93). Because it is the only place she knows well, Tita retreats into the culinary world to find comfort and to counteract the everyday assaults on her existence. It is not until her nephew Roberto dies that she finds for the first time the strength to openly resist her mother and the forced repression of her feelings. When news of the child's death reaches the kitchen, the only place that provides Tita with safety, her mother informs her that she does not want any tears over the loss of the baby. Tita, who cared greatly for Roberto,

enfrentó firmemente la mirada de su madre mientras acariciaba el chorizo y después, en lugar de obedecerla, tomó todos los chorizos que encontró y los partió en pedazos, gritando enloquecida. —¡Mire lo que hago con sus órdenes! ¡Ya me cansé! ¡Ya me cansé de obedecerla! (EC 100)

Tita is immediately penalized for talking back and, since the kitchen is occupied, takes refuge in the dovecote on top of the house, a place that her mother never visits. As an immediate reaction to her emotional outbreak and the subsequent violent reprisal, she withdraws from the life on the ranch and remains in silence until Dr. Brown comes to her rescue. He finds her naked, with a

broken nose, and covered in dirt. It seems that Tita's disobedience results in a mental breakdown, giving her mother an excuse to send her to a mental home.

Although her condition can be understood as patriarchy's penalty for improper behavior, it makes more sense to view her radical withdrawal and subsequent insanity as a response to the lifelong oppression of her desires and emotions. Ironically, this is best understood by a man. Dr. Brown therefore brings her not to an asylum, but takes her with him to cure Tita himself. This happens against her mother's command and is another instance in which a male figure breaks with the patriarchal order and acts on his own will. The fact that Tita is taken away from her life on the ranch by an outsider shows that she herself is not successful in resisting her mother's rule. As Castillo mentions in *Talking Back*, silence and withdrawal as strategies of rebellion are only partially effective (42). The episode also shows that it takes both man and woman, masculine and feminine knowledge and expertise to free a woman from her constraining environment and open up new spaces of emotional recovery and self-realization. While Dr. Brown provides her with a new environment, he alone and his modern medicine do not succeed in curing Tita and bringing her back to life. This is only achieved when she tastes the soup that Chenchu prepares according to Nacha's recipe. The strong connection that Tita has to both food and Nacha gives her back her strength and will to live.

However, Tita is so tightly integrated into the patriarchal structures and her mother's strict rule that she is left with a strong sense of responsibility and a feeling of guilt for her misbehavior, which causes her to return to the ranch and care for Mamá Elena after soldiers of the revolutionary army injure her. Mamá Elena, now indisposed and vulnerable, fears Tita's revenge and suspects she has tried to poison her. In the end, it does not take Tita's action, but Mamá Elena's own suspicious behavior to bring about her death: she dies after consuming too

many emetics (EC 137). The fact that Mamá Elena rejects all other cooks after she is convinced of Tita's harmful intentions demonstrates once more that patriarchy's concept of ideal femininity can hardly be reached. It is also interesting to note that the fear of her daughter's liberation leads to Mamá Elena's death. Esquivel illustrates here the concern of the dominant rule according to which a woman's intention to move toward self-realization and personal freedom will endanger or destroy the patriarchal order. However, it is not Tita at whose hands the family patriarch dies, but the patriarch and her own beliefs. Esquivel thus clearly outlines the potential of self-destruction that oppressive structures of all kinds imply for those who exert them.

Another aspect that undermines the idea of the patriarchal order and highlights not only its double standard, but also the helplessness and victimization of a woman trapped in its inflexible, traditional structures is revealed when Tita finds her mother's love letters. She learns that Mamá Elena's family was opposed to her relationship with a mulatto and forced her into marriage with Tita's father. Mamá Elena, however, secretly continued the romance and had an illegitimate child, Gertrudis. When her husband found out about the affair, he died and left Mamá Elena with a bad conscience. Tita thus not only learns that under the surface her mother was capable of loving another person in the same way that she loves Pedro, but also that they both are victims of patriarchal values and tradition.

However, instead of understanding her daughter's desires and supporting her in her attempts to break with the rules that are imposed on her, Mamá Elena perpetuates the patriarchal order in an even stricter manner to make up for her own presumably inappropriate behavior in an attempt to save her daughter from society's disapproval.<sup>43</sup> In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich poignantly explains in this context that

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<sup>43</sup> In her essay "The Myth of the Latin Woman," Judith Ortiz Cofer states that customs, tradition and the "church structure could provide a young woman with a circle of safety" in her small world (112). It is arguable whether this

it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations. The anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed 'mothering' even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive. (243)

Seeing her mother in a new light, Tita swears in front of her tomb that she will never renounce love and therewith openly expresses her resistance against anything that oppresses her in the free expression of her feelings (EC 140).

Nonetheless, Mamá Elena's death does not lead to Tita's liberation, since her sister's marriage to her lover Pedro prohibits any form of public encounters between the two lovers. The patriarchal order is again perpetuated through Rosaura, who imitates her mother after her death. Unlike Tita, Rosaura never questions her mother and submissively accepts any imposed regulations on female behavior. Since "Rosaura no tenía carácter, le importaba mucho aparentar en la sociedad" (EC 188). It is vital to her to maintain the appearance of a splendid marriage, and society and her reputation are more important to her than personal freedom and feelings. She therefore makes a pact with Tita and Pedro once it is clear that their romance can no longer be contained: As long as no one finds out, Pedro and Tita "pueden hacerlo cuantas veces quieran, (...) pero eso sí, en esta casa [ella va] a seguir siendo la esposa" (EC 214-215). The pact forbids Tita to have an illegitimate child, but Rosaura is willing to share the responsibilities for her daughter Esperanza, with Tita being in charge of the child's alimentation and herself of her education (EC 238). The love triangle between Rosaura, Pedro, and Tita continues until Rosaura's death and the wedding of Esperanza almost two decades later. It is only then that Tita and Pedro are able to develop an indifferent attitude toward the public opinion about their relationship.

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presumable safety serves the patriarchal order in constraining women in their personal freedom rather than in protecting them.

Whether it is out of respect for her sister or fear of society's repugnance, Tita remains unable to completely leave the limiting structures that prevent her from freely expressing herself. Her resistance is therefore not truly successful as she continues to accept to a greater or lesser extent the rules that the dominant order dictates. As long as her desires are partially fulfilled, she is inclined to tolerate certain restrictions and takes on a passive role. Nonetheless, Tita succeeds in retrospectively freeing herself from her mother's tight grip and suffocating observance. The strong impact that her mother's attitude has on Tita continues after her death when she appears to her as a ghost and denounces her feelings for Pedro. Although Tita "físicamente tampoco tenía madre, (...) aún no podía quitarse de encima la sensación de que le caería de un momento a otro un fenomenal castigo del más allá, auspiciado por Mamá Elena" (EC 199). Despite her fear, the temptation grows inside her to resist the rigid rules that her mother imposed in household and life. The tension between Tita and Mamá Elena reaches its peak when mother confronts daughter from the afterlife with the utmost accusation of indecency:

¡Lo que has hecho no tiene nombre! ¡Te has olvidado de lo que es la moral, el respeto, las buenas costumbres! No vales nada, eres una cualquiera que no se respeta ni a sí misma. ¡Has enlodado el nombre de toda mi familia, desde el de mis antepasados, hasta el de esa maldita criatura que guardas en las entrañas! (...) ¡Lo maldigo yo! ¡A él y a ti, para siempre! (EC 173-174)

Tita's pregnancy turns out to be a phantom, just like her mother is one now. Realizing once and for all that Mamá Elena has no means to inflict her power on her any longer, Tita speaks up against her mother's ghost and confronts her with her own indecency, revealing her true feelings for Mamá Elena:

La que se debería de ir es usted. Ya me cansé de que me atormente. ¡Déjeme en paz de una vez por todas! (...) Me creo lo que soy! Una persona que tiene todo el derecho a vivir la vida como mejor le plazca. Déjeme de una vez por todas, ¡ya no la soporto! ¡Es más, la odio, siempre la odié! (EC 200)



One can see here a clear parallel to the turning point in Jesusa's life and marriage. Both Tita and Jesusa are able to speak up most vehemently when they find themselves in extreme situations, one faced with death, the other with malediction. This quote also shows that Tita has grown to understand her value as woman when she declares her right on independence and self-realization. It is then that Mamá Elena's ghost leaves her forever in peace as Tita is no longer bound by patriarchal rule. Esquivel shows here that it is necessary and important for women to develop self-consciousness in order to take a stance against the oppressive order. While at an early age Tita condemns Carreño's etiquette manual (EC 57) and questions patriarchal values and presumably indecent behavior (EC 176), she only does so in silence until she develops a deeper understanding of herself.<sup>44</sup>

As we have seen, Tita, the youngest, is the only one who openly speaks up against Mamá Elena's arbitrary rule, but she only escapes the dominant order temporarily when she loses her mind after her nephew's death. Silence and withdrawal prove to be ineffective as completely liberating strategies, and it is only when those who impose the patriarchal order die that Tita can openly live as she pleases. Until then, she is forced to live a compromising life. However, Tita finds a way to affect and communicate with the world around her through her cooking. Esquivel thus lays bare a weakness in the dominant structure. Patriarchy cannot subdue what has been established by its own ideology as a woman's realm, namely the kitchen. It is from here and through appropriating this space and filling it with new meaning that Tita, although she remains within the traditional structures, is able to subvert and affect the outside world to a certain extent, finding her very own form of subtle resistance in addition to finally speaking up.

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<sup>44</sup> Tita's inner opposition against tradition and patriarchy already become evident at a young age when she prepares her sister's wedding to Pedro. During the entire preparation, Tita is scared of and physically blinded by the color white, which resembles purity, the Church, and tradition (EC 32-33).

Since Tita understands the world through culinary experiences, she relates almost all of her feelings to food. The kitchen is the only space that she can dominate, hence her strong identification with it. Her emotional life is strongly linked to how various ingredients “feel” when they are prepared for the daily meals, the culinary world thus allows her to express sadness: “¡Se sentía tan sola y abandonada! Un chile en nogada olvidado en una charola después de un gran banquete no se sentiría peor que ella” (EC 57); sexual arousal: “Giró la cabeza y sus ojos se encontraron con los de Pedro. En ese momento comprendió perfectamente lo que debe sentir la masa de un buñuelo al entrar en contacto con el aceite hirviendo” (EC 15); and anger: “Tita literalmente estaba «como agua para chocolate». Se sentía de lo más irritable” (EC 151).<sup>45</sup> As Regina Etchegoyen states, “la comida le ofrece lo que la realidad le niega: expresar su sexualidad y su amor” (120). Tita is not only able to best express her feelings through food, but also to induce sadness and physical discomfort in others that enjoy her meals. The closed and constrained kitchen world paradoxically connects Tita with her social environment and reality. Her cooking controls the pattern of living of everyone else in the household because the “food she prepares becomes an extension of herself” (de Valdés, “Verbal and Visual” 81). Tita becomes one with the food when her tears, milk, and blood dissolve in it and carry her emotional properties. In this sense, the kitchen becomes the ideal site from which to contest the patriarchal power as cooking becomes a powerful language for Tita that is geared toward liberating her feminine expression. Doubly marginalized as woman and youngest daughter, she finds in food the only way to escape and shape reality, though she remains within the traditional structures.

The resemblance between cooking and life for Tita becomes evident when she remarks: “Si pudiera recordar cómo cocinar tan siquiera un par de huevos, si pudiera gozar de un platillo

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<sup>45</sup> The term “*como agua para chocolate*” (“water at the boiling point”) is used in Mexico as a simile to describe any event or relationship that is so tense, hot, and extraordinary that it can only be compared to scalding water on the verge of boiling (Zubiaurre 79).

cualquiera que fuera, si pudiera... volver a la vida” (EC 124). Moreover, food not only allows Tita to express her emotions, but also serves as “código nuevo de comunicación” (EC 51) with her environment and her lover. Becoming one with her meals, Tita is able to make love to Pedro:

Tal parecía que en un extraño fenómeno de alquimia<sup>46</sup> su ser se había disuelto en la salsa de las rosas, en el cuerpo de las codornices, en el vino y en cada uno de los olores de la comida. De esta manera *penetraba* en el cuerpo de Pedro, voluptuosa, aromática, calurosa, completamente sensual. (EC 51, emphasis added)

Through her cooking, Tita literally penetrates Pedro and the other members of the family with her feelings and takes on an active role, while Pedro as the traditionally active male turns into the passive receiver. In this episode her cooking also has a great impact on her sister Gertrudis, who subsequently leaves the ranch in an act of sexual liberation. Tita’s cooking thus affects her sister’s life greatly as her subtle resistance stimulates Gertrudis’s break with their mother’s authority. In addition to the familial connection, the genealogical connection between the sisters is therefore obvious, especially because they stay connected throughout their lives and continue to support each other, for example when Tita packs a suitcase with clothes for her sister (EC 70). Tita wishes more than once that she had Gertrudis’s strength to actually leave the ranch. Instead, she prepares quail in rose sauce each year in tribute to Gertrudis’s liberation. Moreover, Tita starts to write a cookbook as additional connection to Gertrudis and another form of liberation.

While she is unable to openly object to her mother, cooking and writing become her emotional and subversive outlets. The parallel between cooking and writing becomes evident when the narrator compares Tita with a poet: “Como un poeta juega con las palabras, así ella jugaba a su antojo con los ingredientes y con las cantidades, obteniendo resultados fenomenales” (EC 69). As “to cook (...) is to create is to love is to write” (Zubiaurre 34), writing also becomes

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<sup>46</sup> Maite Zubiaurre elaborates in “Culinary Eros in Contemporary Hispanic Female Fiction: From Kitchen Tales to Table Narratives” on the kitchen as a laboratory of the alchemist and refers to Tita as witch and sorceress (30-31).

a way of expression of the self for Tita and therefore a form of resistance against the patriarchal order that denies her expression of feelings.<sup>47</sup> In fact, it is through writing that Tita starts to communicate again with the outside world after her temporary insanity. It is important to note that once again a man, Dr. Brown, helps her in this liberating moment when she declares in written words: “Porque no quiero” (EC 119). The written word serves as first step toward her self-understanding and allows her to manifest her objection against heteronomic structures. Along these lines, Margaret McLaren notes that “self-writing is a practice of the self that contributes to the self’s active constitution” (148) and can therefore be understood as act of resistance.<sup>48</sup> Tita’s writing of the cookbook itself can thus be viewed as a revolutionary act, as she appropriates a traditionally masculine domain and uses it for her own purpose, filling it with new meaning and content.

Through allowing Tita to express her resistance through cooking on the one hand and writing on the other, Esquivel connects both traditionally masculine and feminine activities and puts them on the same level of importance: If a woman knows how to cook, she also knows how to write. Regina Etchegoyen makes an interesting observation with respect to cooking, writing, and a woman’s hands to underline this point:

Las manos poseen una doble función simbólica y paradójica: atrapan, puesto que se ven forzadas a realizar actividades domésticos impuestas; por otro lado, liberan, pues le permiten a Tita desahogar sus más profundos sentimientos en la escritura de su recetario/ folletín. Escribir, actividad tradicionalmente masculina, se entrelaza con tejer y cocinar, actividades tradicionalmente femeninas. De este modo, Tita se autoafirma como mujer capaz de penetrar el mundo masculino de la escritura. (121-122)

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<sup>47</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz already recognized the strong connection between food and writing. She understood cooking not only as a source of knowledge, but also as stimulating for the writing process: “Bien dijo Lupercio Leonardo, que bien se puede filosofar y aderezar la cena. Y yo suelo decir viendo estas cosillas: si Aristóteles hubiera guisado, mucho más hubiera escrito” (65).

<sup>48</sup> McLaren’s theory can also be applied to Jesusa and the real person Josefina Bórquez. She states that “in addition to writing, individualization may also take place through speaking, notably in the case of confession” (149), which means for example in form of a testimony.

In fact, Tita realizes her own potential for the first time when she consciously looks at her hands. No longer living on the ranch, she is unsure about how to put them to use as they only have fulfilled other people's orders: "Al verlas ahora libres de las órdenes de su madre no sabía qué pedirles que hicieran, nunca lo había decidido por sí misma. Podían hacer cualquier cosa o convertirse en cualquier cosa" (EC 109). Esquivel here implies that, like men, women can become or do whatever they want once they are freed from patriarchal structures and have become aware of their own potential. At the end of the novel, Tita does exactly that when she follows her lover Pedro into death, making this decision at her own will.

Again, it is questionable whether Tita's final act can be viewed as a successful form of resistance since she only finds true liberation when she dies. What Esquivel demonstrates through the example of Tita is that women do have the potential to affect and shape their environment. On the one hand, through filling traditionally negated space, here the kitchen, with new meaning and using it as a site of rebellion from within the system, and on the other, through appropriating forms of expression that they have been traditionally denied and using them for their own ends, here writing. When one takes a closer look at Tita's character, one may find that her resistance, although she is successful in finding new ways of expressing herself, does thus not truly provide her with the freedom that she desires, but it does engender a new generation of women who achieve the liberation that Tita imagined for herself. In the same way that Tita's cooking provokes Gertrudis's break with the oppressive structures on the ranch, her caring for her niece Esperanza allows the girl to live a life in more freedom, receive a formal education, and marry whom she wants.

The three women can therefore all be placed in a genealogical chain through which they and their actions are connected and affect each other. This chain goes even farther back and

includes also the maid Nacha and her ancestors, thus crossing barriers of race and class, as Nacha is the one who teaches Tita her culinary skills: “Tita era el último eslabón de una cadena de cocineras que desde la época prehispánica se habían transmitido los secretos de la cocina de generación en generación” (EC 46). The genealogical connection is additionally emphasized through the similarities in character and preferences that Tita shares with her niece Esperanza, and then with her grandniece, the omniscient narrator of the story who inherits Tita’s cookbook: “Soy igual de sensible a la cebolla que Tita, mi tía abuela, quien seguirá viviendo mientras haya alguien que cocine sus recetas” (EC 248). In this sense, Tita indeed triumphs in her rebellion.

#### **4.2 Gertrudis and the Life as *soldadera***

Gertrudis, the illegitimate child of Mamá Elena who “tenía en sus venas sangre negra” (EC 138), symbolizes a rupture with the patriarchal traditions that have been imposed on women and serve to limit their rights. While Tita places her rebellion within the space of the home and does not leave the patriarchal structures that oppress her, Gertrudis breaks entirely with Mamá Elena’s environment and leaves the ranch. Contrary to Tita, she never challenges her mother, but instead she freely responds to her emotions and passions and lets her body and her physical desires guide her actions. Gertrudis’s body becomes the place and expression of Tita’s resistance and sexual desire when she eats the dinner that Tita prepares: “Parecía que el alimento que estaba ingiriendo producía en ella un efecto afrodisíaco pues empezó a sentir que un intenso calor le invadía las piernas” (EC 50). Gertrudis thus becomes the outlet of expression of Pedro’s and Tita’s sexual relationship. The inner heat that she feels and the sexual arousal cause her to run naked into the field where she decides to flee with a revolutionary soldier.

Gertrudis’s participation in the revolutionary movement highlights woman’s need to redefine her role in modern society in order to develop her full potential. Therefore, she

embodies the break with the traditional stereotype of femininity that prescribes and limits women to the private sphere.<sup>49</sup> Her escape from the ranch and Mamá Elena's order thus represents not only a rupture with the De la Garza family tradition, but also the search for a new model of femininity that expresses more faithfully the condition of the woman in the current society. Her flight also questions the masculine tendency to relegate women to subordinate positions in order to remain in power. However, just like Tita, Gertrudis depends on the help of the soldier Juan to escape the dominant order, which means that men and women have to join each other in order to create an alternative social system. She also depends on Tita's help, which suggests that women, instead of perpetuating the patriarchal ideology, should support and join each other in their expression of resistance.

The image of Gertrudis fleeing naked from the ranch represents the rejection of the traditional image of the decent woman and the opportunity to reevaluate her role in society:

Desnuda como estaba, con el pelo suelto cayéndole hasta la cintura e irradiando una luminosa energía, representaba lo que sería una síntesis entre una mujer angelical y una infernal. La delicadeza de su rostro y la perfección de su inmaculado y virginal cuerpo contrastaban con la pasión y la lujuria que le salía atropelladamente por los ojos y los poros. (EC 54)

As this quote shows, the patriarchal images of the angelical and diabolical woman are united in Gertrudis and form a new image of woman free of any stereotypes or archetypes. Gertrudis's naked body, in this sense, resembles a *tabula rasa* that calls for a new beginning: Taking off her clothes, Gertrudis rids herself of the patriarchal norms to which women have to conform.

Her wild love making with the soldier on the horse during which “el movimiento del caballo se confundía con el de sus cuerpos mientras realizaban su primera copulación a todo galope” (EC 55) and her subsequent work in a brothel symbolize Gertrudis's sexual liberation. Her sexual independence and openness remain evident over the course of the story. At a party

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<sup>49</sup> A Spanish proverb illustrates this idea well: “La mujer en la cocina con la pata rota.”

that they have on the ranch when Gertrudis visits years later, she openly expresses her sensuality: “Con livianidad, se levantaba la falda hasta la rodilla, mostrando gran desenfado” (EC 181).

Unlike Rosaura, Gertrudis does not care about the public opinion about her presumably indecent behavior and enjoys herself without paying attention to the moral judgments of the other guests and Mamá Elena, who declares her daughter dead when she learns from the local priest that she has become a prostitute.<sup>50</sup> Tita instead understands her sister’s prostitution as an act of sexual liberation and personal fulfillment, especially when she receives a letter from Gertrudis:

Si caí aquí fue porque sentía que un fuego muy intenso me quemaba por dentro, el hombre que me recogió en el campo, prácticamente me salvó la vida. (...) Me dejó porque sus fuerzas se estaban agotando a mi lado, sin haber logrado aplacar mi fuego interior. Por fin ahora después de que infinidad de hombres han pasado por mí, siento un gran alivio. (EC 126)

Esquivel hints here at the liberating momentum that the sexual act can imply for a woman. While Tita is able to express herself through cooking, Gertrudis does so through her sexuality, displaying unquenchable urges that the men are unable to match. Both the kitchen and the bedroom can thus be domestic spheres in which the woman can exercise control and express her personality. Due to her sexual strength, Gertrudis remains the dominant sexual partner throughout her life and marriage and as a mother. Esquivel demonstrates through her example that a woman is not obliged to renounce her sexuality because of age, social norms, or motherhood, but that sexuality rather belongs to and is part of a woman’s fulfillment in life.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Tita wonders how the priest himself learned about Gertrudis’s fate: “que quién sabe cómo se enteró” (EC 58). One might assume that he himself is a frequent visitor of the brothels, just like the priests that Jesusa denounces in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*.

<sup>51</sup> Kristine Ibsen comments on Gertrudis’s prodigious sexuality in her article “On Recipes, Reading and the Revolution: Postboom Parody in *Como agua para chocolate*” in the following way, alluding to the parodic elements that are included in the novel: “Esquivel plays with the supernatural sexual potency that García Márquez and others have imagined for their protagonists but also the consecrated—and highly masculine—tradition of literature and cinema of the Mexican Revolution” (136): José Arcadio in *Cien años de soledad* is magnificently endowed, and Tomás Arroyo’s genitalia in Carlos Fuentes’s *Gringo Viejo* are described as enormous.



Political and sexual liberation come together in the figure of Gertrudis when she joins the revolutionary army and changes “spatula for revolver, kitchen for battlefield, and tradition for change” (Dobrian 62). Besides realizing her female potential through her sexuality, Gertrudis,<sup>52</sup> like Jesusa, participates in the Mexican Revolution and actively fights for the improvement of social conditions in Mexico. Through Gertrudis, Esquivel incorporates the image of the *soldadera* into her novel and presents it in a new light while emphasizing the role of the participation of women in the movement. Gertrudis’s decision to leave the brothel in order to become a *general* subverts the stereotyped image of the *soldadera* as prostitute<sup>53</sup> and submissive companion of the male soldiers. The fact that Gertrudis succeeds on the battlefield and earns a high rank in the army additionally underlines her potential as woman and highlights the role that she can play in society, which is represented by the army.

When Gertrudis returns to the ranch to show Mamá Elena how she has triumphed in life, the reader learns that the *general* fights like no one else on the battlefield, “en la sangre traía el don de mando, así que en cuanto ingresó al ejército, rápidamente empezó a escalar puestos en el poder hasta alcanzar el mejor puesto, y no sólo eso, regresaba felizmente casada con Juan” (EC 180). Her marriage to Juan illustrates here the transformation from a prostitute to a traditionally decent woman. This means that self-realization is possible for women and does not have to be based on sexual purity, which frees them from the fear of society’s repugnance expressed by Chenchá after she is violated. Gertrudis’s visit to the ranch and her desire to show her mother, who embodies the patriarchal order, her achievements in life can be viewed as the proposal of an alternative model of femininity that may help promote the feminist movement in Mexico. It is

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<sup>52</sup> The name Gertrudis has Germanic roots and actually means “spear” or “strength.”

<sup>53</sup> Shirlene Soto explains that *soldaderas* were often referred to as cookies or *galletas* (43).

interesting that Esquivel's description pays little attention to Gertrudis's social status while it emphasizes her career and performance in the public domain.

Gertrudis's successful resistance is rooted in her realization that one has to become the master of one's own fate and engage with the environment in order to be successful. Through an opportune comment, she thus enables a conversation between Tita and Pedro about Tita's presumed pregnancy (EC 191). Most importantly, she has become aware of the fact that there is no one single truth, but that the truth rather depends on everyone's own perspective: "¡La verdad! ¡La verdad! Mira Tita, la mera verdad es que la verdad no existe, depende del punto de vista de cada quien" (EC 190). Her statement undermines the validity of the official discourse on gender roles in Mexican politics and society.

Another strategy that leads to her successful self-realization is the appropriation of the public and masculine sphere. Like Jesusa, she adopts masculine behavior whenever it serves her ends, but she maintains her femininity. She thus smokes and talks like a man and enjoys the admirers that listen to her war stories. Like Poniatowska's female protagonist, she likes sweat, mud, and danger, which brings her into a close relationship with nature in general and human nature in particular. Gertrudis commands the men of her troop with confidence and fearlessly rescues Pedro: "Lo alcanzó, se arrancó de un tirón la falda de su vestido y con ella cubrió a Pedro, derribándolo sobre el piso" (EC 201). Most prominently, Gertrudis does not know how to cook and reads recipes "como si leyera jeroglíficos" (EC 192), which is in contrast to Tita, who appropriates the kitchen and culinary knowledge for her needs.

However, Gertrudis does not repress her feminine side like Jesusa. She keeps her sensuality and shows her emotions openly, becomes a mother, and enjoys talking with her sister Tita in the kitchen. In fact, her returning to the ranch originates from her longing for her maternal

home: “La vida sería mucho más agradable si uno pudiera llevarse a donde quiera que fuera los sabores y olores de la casa maternal” (EC 179). The combination of masculine and feminine qualities in Gertrudis’s character also becomes obvious toward the end of the novel at Esperanza’s wedding. Gertrudis gets all the attention when she arrives in a sports car and wears the latest fashion. She is the one driving, not her husband, but despite her interest in speed and technology, she is also concerned with clothing trends. On top of that, the *ex-soldadera* is the mother of several children,<sup>54</sup> of whom the oldest develops into a “mulato escultural” (EC 235). The positive perception of both Gertrudis and her son shows that not only a mixture of masculine and feminine qualities, but also of white and indigenous or African features is valuable.

In the end, Gertrudis is the only woman in the family who survives. Her resistance against the patriarchal order and its oppressive structures is therefore successful insofar as she liberates herself completely from public restraints and opinion and proposes a new image of woman in contemporary society: A woman that can have a family, a career, and sexual freedom. While her sister Tita is only able to resolve her struggle in death, Gertrudis resists the prescriptive social constraints and enters the public sphere, where she finds her space and establishes herself as flourishing woman. Her rebellion and subsequent self-realization therefore represent a positive example of a woman’s emancipation.

From a genealogical point of view, Gertrudis and Tita remain attached during their entire lives. Although both move in different domains and implement their rebellious activities in different manners, they do not lose their connection to each other. Quite the opposite, they continue to support each other in their struggle for freedom and liberation. At several moments

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Salas notes in *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* that Toci, the oldest of the Earth Mother goddesses from the Valley of Mexico, was often depicted with a broom in one hand and a warrior shield in the other (2). Contrary to modern discourse, the women as mother and fighter was already known and respected at ancient times.

they confide in each other and Tita longs for Gertrudis's strength. From her domestic sphere, Tita sends a suitcase with clothes to Gertrudis, and Gertrudis provides Tita with knowledge and advice from the public sphere. Before she departs from the ranch,

Gertrudis le agradeció los momentos tan felices que había pasado a su lado, le aconsejó que no dejara de luchar por Pedro y antes de despedirse le dio una receta que las soldaderas usaban para no embarazarse: después de cada relación íntima se hacían un lavado con agua hervida y unas gotas de vinagre. (EC 203)<sup>55</sup>

This instant underlines the concept of genealogy in which the two women can be placed, as they not only both struggle with the oppressive system, each in their own way, but also help each other, exchange advice and knowledge, recipes for kitchen and life, and thus affect each other's life and outcome.

### **4.3 Laura Esquivel's Literary Strategies**

Like *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, Esquivel's first novel *Como agua para chocolate* has been widely criticized and analyzed due to its success in the literary world. The primary critical reaction dismissed the text as a weak imitation of the male-dominated literary canon and labeled it due to its content and structure as simplistic and immature. Nonetheless, one has to appreciate the pleasure of the work and its playfulness to truly be able to interpret it, since "underlying the *appearance* of conventionalism may be detected as playfully parodic appropriation that serves not only to undermine the canon but (...) to redirect its focus to an aesthetic project in which such binary oppositions as 'high art' and 'popular' literature are overturned" (Ibsen 134, original emphasis).

A parody is a work that has been produced to mock or make fun of an original work or parts of it with the help of humorous or ironic imitation, which happens "not always at the expense of the parodied text" (Hutcheon 7). Simon Dentith defines a parody as "any cultural

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<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, the English translation of *Como agua para chocolate* speaks here of prostitutes instead of *soldaderas*.

practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (9). A major characteristic of a parody is the exaggeration of elements that are displayed in the original. Esquivel mocks the typical romantic aspect included in the novel by describing it as overly ardent, explosive, and immensely satisfying. She does so especially at the end when the couple sets the entire ranch on fire through their lovemaking but, instead of getting happily married, dies in a passionate fire. Esquivel’s “erotically charged parody of the Cinderella myth ‘a la mexicana’” (Zubiaurre 32) negates thus the formulaic happy ending of the romance novel.<sup>56</sup> Although *Como agua para chocolate* can be considered as a romantic love story, its generic hybridization and the parodic stance distinguish it from the restricted and hermetic formulas that structure a typical romance novel.

Dobrian identifies the different genres that compose Esquivel’s text and make it a pastiche of genres: “It is all-in-one a novel of the Mexican Revolution, a cookbook, a fictional biography, a magic realist narrative, a romance novel, and serial fiction” (56). More precisely, Esquivel parodies the nineteenth century prototype of a magazine for women, better known in Mexico as calendars for young ladies. According to de Valdés, this Mexican version of women’s fiction was published in monthly installments with recipes, home remedies, poems, ideas for home decoration, dressmaking patters, and a calendar of church observances. Despite its popularity among women readers, it was never perceived as valuable literature by the dominant masculine discourse (“Verbal and Visual” 78).

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<sup>56</sup> In her article “On Recipes, Reading and the Revolution: Postboom Parody in *Como agua para chocolate*,” Ibsen makes reference to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who “notes that in the nineteenth-century European novel death is the prescribed ending for characters with an ‘inappropriate relation to the ‘social script’ or plot designed to contain her legally, economically, and sexually’ (...). In women’s fiction of the twentieth century, however, death becomes more explicitly identified as ‘the vehicle for affirming the necessity for critique of the conventions governing women and narrative structures’” (141).

It is possible to say that Esquivel parodies this type of women's fiction in the same manner in which Miguel de Cervantes parodies the novel of chivalry. His famous work *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* emulates the traditional knight errant tales and is much better known than the novels that served as model, such as *Amadís de Gaula* by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo. *Como agua para chocolate* is thus a composition of several genres that, through the appropriation and exaggeration of their specific characteristics, undermines the conventions of traditionally accepted and valued literature. With her intriguing literary hybrid, Esquivel dissolves the borders between canonized and popular literatures<sup>57</sup> and subverts the hierarchy that governs the distinctions between them, just as Poniatowska does with the combination of oral and written discourse in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*.

The appropriation of genres resembles one of the literary strategies that Castillo outlines in *Talking Back* with respect to women's writing (45). Through readings of other literature and criticism and the adoption of styles and literary modes that are part of the male-dominated literary canon,<sup>58</sup> women can invent themselves by means of self-distancing and better observing traditional practices after they have been sensitized to the literary differences through the reading of various texts. Everything that seems useful for the development of one's own work and critique can be appropriated. As we have seen, Esquivel not only imitates the structure and content of the texts that serve as model—the novel's subtitle is actually a direct copy from the original—, but she also incorporates a variety of works into her text that are specific to the Mexican context. Her use of traditional popular songs such as the polka *Jesuita in Chihuahua*

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<sup>57</sup> The events in Esquivel's novel describe the life along border of the United States and Mexico at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Historically, the time from the 1850s until the narrative time is marked by a period of constant border crossing. Esquivel's situating of the plot in this region not only hints at the protagonists' crossing of patriarchal constraints, but also resembles a parallel to her crossing and mixing of literary genres.

<sup>58</sup> Various critics have commented on Esquivel's appropriation of magical realism, which has become part of the male-dominated literary canon. Etchegoyen observes that adding "matices de realismo mágico a la novela" helps Esquivel create its "estilo ligero, innovador y sensual" (120).

(EC 181) and *Estrellita* by Manuel M. Ponce (EC 201), Mexican folklore such as the myth of La Llorona, and, most importantly, Manuel Antonio Carreño's *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras* are prominent examples of intertextuality. This underlines Guerra's previously mentioned assumption that every text is in dialogue with another and that all texts constitute a system of relations.

Esquivel's appropriation of elements of the popular discourse, with its emphasis on such 'feminine' activities such as cooking and story-telling, is thus a "means of undermining the patriarchal system" (Showalter, "Feminist Poetics" 131). Ibsen states that Esquivel "'feminizes' her novel through the exaggeration of traits traditionally associated with women such as irrationality and sensitivity" (135). She achieves this feminization also through centering her novel on an amorous relationship and the extensive writing about the female protagonists' feelings, which Guerra understands as a typical method in women's writing. Those styles have traditionally been rejected by the dominant discourse and described as superficial. However, it is precisely this presumed superficiality that Castillo identifies as another literary strategy in women's writing.

The female reader has traditionally been regarded as careless, superficial, and emotional, and lacks the ability to understand deeper meaning in a text. Women supposedly read for enjoyment, which is reading in a "morally deficient manner, is reading woman" (Castillo, *Talking Back* 49). Nonetheless, women reading and writing can constitute an alternative to the dominant cultural mode if the works by women writers are considered as different, but at the same time as complementary to the already established corpus of literary works. Castillo points out that such "superficial" topics as romance and love are indeed restrictive elements in women's literature due to their limited social agenda, but they permit a certain space for resistance against

patriarchal norms: The once idealized and passive woman of the *novela rosa* can be ascribed authority through her “emotional sway over a powerful man” (*Talking Back* 53) which she uses to invert the system. Cultivation of superficiality thus means the embedding of a social message into a text that is filled with or structured around romantic embellishment, which is here represented through the love between Tita and Pedro.

Jean Franco remarks that a common theme of romance novel and *telenovela* is that of women faced by “rules she has not made and over which she has no control” (“Incorporation of Women” 123). Esquivel inverts that theme through presenting on the one hand Gertrudis, who breaks out of the ruling structures, and Tita, who remains interwoven with them but gains a certain control over her oppressive environment through her cooking, a typically feminine and thus seemingly superficial activity. Food and its preparation as well as the kitchen as woman’s space play a prominent role in *Como agua para chocolate*. The recipes at the beginning of each chapter and at the end as outlook for the next month not only serve as structural element, but also connect the narrative with the moment of narration in which the omniscient narrator, Tita’s grandniece, relates the story. In line with the concept of genealogy, they therefore represent a spatial and temporal link between the past and the present and the women protagonists. This link is most evident in the reoccurring image of the onion which frames the story from beginning to end and establishes a relationship between Tita and her offspring.<sup>59</sup> The cyclical representation of time that goes back and forth between present and past which is used in both Esquivel’s and Poniatowska’s works is strongly associated with the feminine and feminine modes of writing (Hurley 29).

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<sup>59</sup> Dianna C. Niebylski legitimately questions in this context whether women in general, and specifically “the young woman whose memories frame [the] novel, and who is surely our contemporary, have an existence independent of the kitchen or [are] still depending on food and tears as [their] only weapons in what may still be a man’s world” (189).



Dobrian argues that, “by literally providing a culinary recipe at the beginning of each chapter and a promise for a new one in the next, Esquivel foregrounds the prescriptive element of socially determined femininity” (58). This is counteracted by Tita’s view of food as a symbol of life. In line with the observation that “la vida es un recetario en el que todos somos ingredientes” (Etchegoyen 125), the importance of food underlines the significance of women not only in the kitchen, but also in life and thus in society. It becomes clear that community and cooking foster the telling of personal narratives in which vital questions of health, illness, pregnancy, and sexuality are attached very directly to the body’s physical and emotional needs.

The kitchen and the cookbook that Tita writes resemble a “women’s creation of space that is hers in a hostile world” (de Valdés, “Verbal and Visual” 80). Glenn thus correctly affirms that “Esquivel subverts the tradition by ennobling a ‘domestic skill’ and turning it into an art form” (41). She thereby transforms the “kitchen from an invisible, non-productive domestic space into an aesthetically and ethically productive sphere” (Saltz 31). The kitchen is no longer represented as a silenced space that lacks meaning and value, but rather as a pedagogical institution and therefore a place of education. The secrets of cooking are neither innate women’s wisdom nor sudden female inspiration, but are taught from one woman to another until they become the learner’s expertise. Esquivel additionally eroticizes the kitchen through connecting Tita’s meals with her sensual emotions, subverting once again the traditional association of kitchen with women’s subjugation.

The narrative voice in Esquivel’s novel moves effortlessly from first to third person. Just like Jesusa, the omniscient narrator addresses the reader directly and, “with her colloquial language and tone, simultaneously introduces three generations of women who have shared recipes, and invites the implied readers, ‘ustedes’, into the kitchen to participate in this activity”

(Jaffe 222), which provokes a feeling of solidarity and inclusion. The women writers are thus able to establish a direct relationship between themselves, their protagonists, and the female (or male) reader, which makes it possible to view them as part of a genealogy since they all engage in the processes of writing, reading, and cooking, which are themselves, as we have seen, related activities. To underline the feminine side in the use of her language, Esquivel occasionally chooses melodramatic and overwrought prose, as becomes obvious when Tita curses the patriarchal conventions: “¡Maldita decencia! ¡Maldito manual de Carreño! Por su culpa su cuerpo quedaba destinado a machitarse poco a poco, sin remedio alguno. ¡Y maldito Pedro tan decente, tan correcto, tan varonil, tan...tan amado!” (EC 57). This language presents a strong contrast to the obscenity and assertiveness of Jesusa in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, which is perceived as more masculine.

Like Poniatowska, Esquivel touches on issues of race and brings the traditional devaluation of indigenous members of society and their customs and knowledge to the reader’s attention, employing Castillo’s literary strategy based on marginalization. She inverts their negative image through the representation of Gertrudis, who is the child of Mamá Elena and her Afro-Mexican lover. According to Esquivel’s portrayal, her mother’s “negro pasado” (EC 181) provides Gertrudis with a variety of qualities, such as her rhythm and sensuality, which contribute to her empowerment later in life.

Moreover, in *Como agua para chocolate*, the “kitchen becomes a site for the production of discourse of the triply marginalized—the Indian, the servant, the woman” (Lawless 264). Tita shares the kitchen with Nacha, the indigenous maid, whom she regards as mother figure. After her death, Nacha guides Tita various times with her voice in precarious moments and helps her to successfully master difficult situations. Her knowledge becomes more valuable than the

formal education that Tita received in school when Rosaura is in labor: “En las horas que pasó al lado de su hermana aprendió más que en todos los años en la escuela del pueblo. (...) De qué le servía en ese momento saber los nombres de los planetas y el manual de Carreño de pe a pa si su hermana estaba a punto de morir” (EC 72). This shows that oral, indigenous knowledge can become superior to the written knowledge of the dominant discourse. The narrative thus clearly privileges ancient oral tradition of female knowledge over artificial rules of patriarchal conduct that were implemented to control and civilize society.<sup>60</sup> Another example of the superiority of oral, indigenous, female knowledge over the dominant discourse is illustrated when Dr. John Brown’s grandmother, the Kikapu Indian Morning Light, heals her father in law and becomes not only the family’s doctor, but also receives wide acceptance in the modern North American community (EC 114). Furthermore, language as it is prescribed and used by the dominant discourse seems to lose its value for marginalized groups such as women and indigenous people since Tita is able to understand John’s grandmother without speaking.

This additionally underlines and points at the alliance and mutual understanding and respect that marginalized groups can develop for each other in their resistance against the dominant order.<sup>61</sup> The positive effect of the combination of white and indigenous knowledge and the strong connection between equally marginalized groups becomes most evident in the following quote: “Tal parecía que era la misma Nacha la que en el cuerpo de Tita realizaba todas estas actividades: desplumar las aves en seco, sacarles las vísceras y ponerlas a freír” (EC 48).

Despite their different social and racial backgrounds, Nacha and Tita become one and work

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<sup>60</sup> One might argue that Nacha’s indigenous and oral kitchen wisdom is later appropriated by the dominant white discourse and therefore further oppressed when Tita starts to write her cookbook.

<sup>61</sup> Esquivel does not present indigenous people only in a positive light. Chenchá for example resembles the gossiping stereotype of the Indian maid (EC 174). On top of that, she uses lying as a strategy of survival, another negative aspect that is strongly associated with indigenous servants: “Para ella mentir era una práctica de sobrevivencia” (EC 127). However, it is Chenchá and her statement through which Esquivel further undermines the official version of the patriarchal discourse: “Total todo podría ser verdad o mentira, dependiendo de que uno se creyera las cosas verdaderamente o no” (EC 128).

together to achieve a common goal, namely a perfect meal. The unifying moment in which the two protagonists are presented here hints at the usefulness and value of the genealogical approach in feminist movement and theory.

In line with Poniatowska, Esquivel adds political charge to her novel by situating it during the time of the Mexican Revolution. She thus “forges the underlying theme of rebellion, change, and momentum in the gender politics of the novel, and confronts Mexican popular myths of femininity” (Dobrian 57). The revolutionary background not only suggests Tita’s and Gertrudis’s revolt and liberation, but also allows Esquivel to retrieve the widely forgotten variety of female participation in the conflict. Gertrudis in her representation as *soldadera* is a vehicle for the subversion of the dominant historical discourse. As a member of the bourgeois class,<sup>62</sup> she stands for *soldadera* women of all social classes and enables Esquivel to recuperate the history of Mexican women with various social and racial backgrounds into the public discourse. While *soldaderas* have become popular characters in Mexican *corridos*, folklore, literature, and art, they are mostly depicted as self-sacrificing and heroic camp followers or as the sweethearts of the troops. Salas notes that literature written by men that deals with the Mexican Revolution portrays the *soldadera* either as evil, vulgar and primitive, such as La Pintada in *Los de abajo* (1915) by Mariano Azuela, or depicts her in a strongly romanticized version, such as in *Gringo viejo* (1985) by Carlos Fuentes (86-88).<sup>63</sup> Through representing Gertrudis in a quite opposite way, Esquivel “recovers a historical reality of women in the Mexican Revolution that has

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<sup>62</sup> Besides the women writers and the other female protagonists, Jesusa and Josefina Bórquez are the only members of a lower social class.

<sup>63</sup> Salas further notes that this is not only the case with male Mexican writers. The American journalist John Reed displays a strong masculinist view of the *soldaderas* in his work *Insurgent Mexico* (1914), in which he depicts the women as self-sacrificing and silent (67). As we have seen in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, female writers such as Poniatowska clearly oppose this portrayal: Jesusa raises a gun against her husband to put an end to his violent and abusive behavior.

disappeared within the mythologizing and romanticizing of the male revolutionary figures” (Dobrian 63).<sup>64</sup>

Besides incorporating the image of the *soldadera* into her work, Esquivel hints on various occasions at the cruelty and crimes of the revolutionary armies in her novel. In agreement with Jesusa’s comments on Pancho Villa and other prominent figures of the Revolution, she challenges the heroic way in which the official historical discourse depicts its male heroes. Chenchá, who is later violated by a group of Villista soldiers (EC 130), tells how “a Pancho Villa le llevaban los corazones sangrantes de sus enemigos para que se los comiera” (EC 69). The violence and barbarity with which the revolutionary soldiers are described in *Como agua para chocolate* put into question the merits of the Revolution and oppose the way in which male writers depict the historic events while focusing mainly on the participants’ heroism.

An important parodic element and subversive strategy that Esquivel employs in her novel is the reversal of typically male and female roles, in short, gender inversion. *Como agua para chocolate* inverts the cultural constructs that prescribe the paradigm of the ideal female as domestic, submissive, self-sacrificing, and disempowered and depicts the female characters as stronger and more decisive than the male protagonists, who are only of secondary importance. The novel thus shows that women may have attributes considered traditionally masculine and vice versa. Like Jesusa, Mamá Elena does not depend on masculine guidance: “Nunca lo he necesitado para nada, sola he podido con el rancho y con mis hijas. Los hombres no son tan importantes para vivir” (EC 82). The hyperbolic nature of sexuality is not transferred to a male character, but to Gertrudis, who becomes a prostitute and literally wears out all men that enjoy

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<sup>64</sup> Dobrian makes an interesting comment that demonstrates how the role of women in the Mexican Revolution is still concealed and negated in public discourse today. According to her findings, the yearly celebration of the defeat of the French in the Mexican city Puebla largely by *soldaderas* ironically permits only men to participate in the reenactment of the battle, during which, more surprisingly, the male actors dress as *soldaderas* (64).

her service. As a typically male gesture, she has to take a shower after eating Tita's meal to cool down her sexual desire. Neither Gertrudis nor Rosaura know how to cook. Rosaura's and Mamá Elena's estrangement from their essential 'female' nature is additionally underscored by their inability to care for their own children. Those who want to be the better women in the traditional sense are actually depicted as unfeminine.

The masculinity of the male protagonists is minimized as well. Juan, who helps Gertrudis escape from the ranch, is despite his typical macho name not a knight in shining armor, but a ragged revolutionary. While searching for a traitor, Sergeant Treviño wins the prostitutes over through a typical feminine activity, namely talking, and he also excels in cooking. With his kind, selfless, and understanding behavior and especially when he gives up Tita to her lover Pedro, Dr. John Brown resembles the perfect *mujer abnegada mexicana*. The greatest gender inversion experiences the character Pedro. Unlike a traditional romance hero, he rides a bicycle and is unable to free Tita from her mother's rule because of his weakness and passivity. Moreover, he is not at all "muy dado a los excesos sexuales" (EC 171). He and Rosaura have separate bedrooms, and when Pedro sees himself finally obliged to exercise his marital duties, he only does so reluctantly: "Señor, no es por vicio ni por fornicio sino por dar un hijo a tu servicio" (EC 39). In the end, like a stereotypical woman he dies of strong feelings and not on the battlefield.

Esquivel also redefines the concept of family. Instead of Rosaura, it is Tita who resembles the perfect companion and mother for Pedro and his child. Through her, Esquivel mocks the traditional and highly esteemed image of the virgin mother, which suits the patriarchal ideal most. Pedro is not in the least surprised when he sees Tita feed his son with milk, on the contrary, to him Tita "era en ese momento la misma Ceres personificada, la diosa de alimentación en pleno" (EC 77).

Taking into account Esquivel's background as screenwriter, his view of Tita evokes the idea of the male gaze as outlined by film theorist Laura Mulvey.<sup>65</sup> Besides other cinematographic elements that are included in the novel, such as the literary cuts and fade outs that feature the cooking episodes, the way in which the male protagonists view Tita and Gertrudis on various occasions is strongly linked to Mulvey's concept, according to which the camera is "often looking at women as passive objects" and guiding the "gaze of the spectator who is presumed to be male (...) and voyeuristically watching women acting often in stereotypical ways" (Penley in Humm 347). Juan thus perceives Gertrudis as "una síntesis entre una mujer angelical y una infernal" (EC 54), Pedro looks at Tita's breasts with relish (EC 67), and Dr. John Brown indulges in Tita's beauty (EC 75 and 79). The connection between cinema and literature and thus another crossing of genres and art forms is also implied in the little "cinito" or "zootrope" (EC 167) that Nacha gives Tita as a present.

In *Como agua para chocolate*, Esquivel examines the possible roles that women can assume in a patriarchal society. According to Ibsen, "the fact that Esquivel has chosen discourses not just outside the canon but specifically associated with women's values and experiences allows her to set forth an alternative to the hegemonic standard, based upon real women's lives" (143). She is able to establish a genealogical connection between her characters and the readers since, as the great international recognition of the novel shows, women from other cultures and languages are able to develop a compassionate relationship with the female protagonists, their lives, and their resistance against oppressive structures. De Valdés states poignantly that "the intertext of women's magazines and the loves, trials, and tribulations featured in the stories they published is used by Esquivel as a discursive code that transcends whatever regional differences may exist" ("Visual and Verbal" 81).

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<sup>65</sup> See Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" for more details on this concept.

The concept of genealogy becomes not only evident with respect to women, but also to other women writers and their literature. Maite Zubiaurre notes that Esquivel's novel resembles the basis of a literary trend that has developed into a sub-genre in Hispanic women's fiction. She finds that daughter narratives such as the Catalan story "Ligeros divertimentos sabáticos" (1990) by Mercedes Abad, Chilean writer Isabel Allende's novel *Afrodita: cuentos, recetas y otros afrodisíacos* (1992), Mexican writer Rosa María Roffiel's *Amora* (1997), and Argentinean Ana Sampaloesi's story "Pachamac" (1997) all contest in one way or another the foundational text *Como agua para chocolate* (30). Even though Tita, as my analysis has shown, is not entirely successful in breaking with the constraining patriarchal structures, she nonetheless makes this possible for others that are connected with her in a genealogical chain: "Foundational texts [such as *Como agua para chocolate*], (...) can put the seed of rebellion [not only] in their daughter narratives" (Zubiaurre 47), but also in every woman who reads them.



## 5. Conclusions

Women in Mexico and Latin America have been faced with great obstacles that need to be overcome in order to form a society in which both men and women represent political subjects of equal rights and recognition. As the various images of women as outlined in the first part of this thesis have shown, power and culture have traditionally been strongly associated with the male and masculinity.<sup>66</sup> Jane Flax points out that within contemporary Western societies gender relations have been ones of domination; the task is therefore “to recover and explore the aspects of social relations that have been suppressed, unarticulated, or denied within dominant (male) viewpoints” and to rewrite the “histories of women and their activities into the accounts and stories that cultures tell about themselves” (641). Fictional narrative as explored in this thesis is one of the possibilities through which the position of the woman can be re-inscribed into the public awareness and current society. With respect to the context of Latin America and the manifold social and racial factors that shape and constitute women’s lives in this region in addition to issues of gender, Nancy Hartsock concludes that “when the various ‘minority’ experiences have been described and when the significance of these experiences as a ground for critique of the dominant institutions and ideologies of society is better recognized, we will have at least the tools to begin to construct an account of the world sensitive to the realities of race and gender as well as class” (“Foucault on Power” 172).

One of these tools is literature written by, about, and for women. Raising the woman’s voice in literature and nation, motivated by the feminist movement, has thus been a notable undertaking of women writers in the last decades in Latin America and Mexico. Unfortunately,

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<sup>66</sup> This observation does not only apply to the context of Latin America. The American anthropologist Sherry Ortner elaborates in her 1972 essay “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” on this gender-culture dichotomy, which demonstrates that the experiences of women in other parts of the world relate to some extent to the feminine experience in Latin America. This emphasizes Alison Stone’s idea of perceiving women in a genealogical concept.

the emancipation of the Mexican woman remains complicated as long as in the social, cultural, and historical discourse stereotyped images of women dominate that have been promoted by the patriarchal ideology and reduce women to the roles of selfless mothers or submissive wives. Only through inscribing the diverse experience of women into the official discourse will it be possible to integrate the woman into history in a way that allows the reevaluation of her traditional roles and the realization of her true potential in contemporary society. Before the sudden increase of women writers in the 1980s, their work was mainly rejected with the argument that women do not write, especially not narrative; the exception to this maxim were, according to Castillo in "Finding Feminisms," Western-trained and European-oriented women who represented a privileged minority in the history of literature due to their advantages of birth, education, or affluence (354). The traditional codes of patriarchy have left women silent and remote; nonetheless, as Ludmer states, "silence constitutes a space of resistance before the power of the others" (50).

Mexican women writers such as Rosario Castellanos in the 1950s and then Elena Garro and Elena Poniatowska in the 1960s have contributed to making first significant steps toward breaking this silence, which proved to be ineffective as a long term strategy of resistance, and to giving women's experience voice and space in the official national discourse. The time during which their most important works were published coincides with a period of growing awareness about feminist issues not only in the Western world of the United States and in Europe, but also in Mexico. Women writers such as Laura Esquivel and Ángeles Mastretta continued the social critique that their predecessors integrated in their works in a more playful way and less politically charged during the so-called "postboom" of Latin American women's literature in the 1980s. Their novels give room for the marginalized voice of the woman and recuperate her

experience in Mexican history while undermining the social stereotypes and constructs that limit women in their possibilities to establish themselves as completely integrated feminine subjects in Mexican society.

In this thesis, I have tried to confirm the necessity of the deconstruction of images of women as the oppressed in order to create new models of femininity in the social discourse that are more capable of representing the true potential of the Mexican woman. Drawing on the feminist concept of genealogy, my objective has been to establish a relationship between the fictional characters of the novels discussed in this thesis and the women writers with respect to their modes of resistance against the patriarchal order, each within their narrative and yet all in a symbiotic relationship to another. I was able to identify overlapping literary strategies employed by the writers to construct their narratives, such as the appropriation of other genres for their own purposes, the inclusion and subversion of important stereotyped or romanticized images of women that are part of the Mexican culture, as is the case with the image of the *soldadera* in both selected texts, and the notions of typical feminine writing as outlined by Guerra and Castillo, for example with respect to the cyclical use of time and the shifts between present and past that are evident in the narratives.

In addition to the writers, the resistance strategies of the women protagonists also show significant overlaps. Both Jesusa and Tita use silence and the repression of their feelings to counteract the rather violent subjugation that they experience in their environment. Just as Poniatowska and Esquivel appropriate the masculine literary domain, Jesusa and Gertrudis take over masculine attitudes and points of view as a means of self-realization and in order to gain space in the public sphere. While Jesusa is a member of the lower social class, the De la Garza sisters as well as both of the writers represent members of the upper social classes. However,

their diverse social backgrounds do not cause major differences in the way in which the protagonists and writers resist and try to subvert the patriarchal order; neither are the constraints from which the women try to liberate themselves very different. Both writers, even though several decades apart, thus dedicate themselves to Mexican national politics and the improvement of social and political conditions for women.<sup>67</sup>

My analysis shows that the women writers and protagonists can therefore justifiably be placed into a genealogy with respect to their experience and employment of resistance against the male-dominated order and constraining structures of patriarchal ideology as they were present at the time of the Mexican Revolution and, to a lesser extent, still are today. It further demonstrates that the women protagonists and women writers and their actions affect and shape the lives and actions of the other women with whom they are connected through Stone's genealogical chain over time, space, race, and social classes. Extra-textually, the works of writers such as Garro and Poniatowska stimulated other women to express themselves in literature, which led to the "postboom" at the end of the twentieth century and, in Esquivel's case, the creation of a new sub-genre in women's writing that soon found followers. Intra-textually, Tita's resistance expressed through cooking leads to Gertrudis's breaking away from the dominant order and the engendering of a new generation of women who enjoy more rights and social and personal freedom. In an intra- and extra-textual combination, the interviews with Josefina Bórquez and the writing of Jesusa's experiences in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* helped Poniatowska develop a stronger identity as woman and as Mexican, which itself led to her intensive dedication to feminist issues in Mexico that subsequently affected the views and lives of many other women

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<sup>67</sup> While Poniatowska participates in major national and international conferences about women's issues and promotes women's contribution to Mexican literature through workshops and lectures, Esquivel ran in March 2009 successfully as preliminary candidate of the Local Council in a district of Mexico City for one of the four main political parties in Mexico, the PRD (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*).

in and outside of Mexico. The texts of contemporary Mexican women writers are thus an important element of Mexican society. They affect both women as a group and national society as a whole. As Merithew states, “by expressing dissatisfaction with the society in which they live, and by investigating the construction and use of gender as a category and basis for division in everyday national life, these writers are giving voice, or agency, to women” (195) of all kinds of social and racial backgrounds. The women writers stimulate the citizens’ political action with the objective to eventually change patriarchal society when they “not only express the politics of gender, but also the politics of the nation and of history” (195) in their works, as do both selected women writers when they situate their texts into the Mexican Revolution, an important period of nation building. Women’s significance for and participation in this period becomes therefore more than obvious and subverts the official historical discourse from which they had been eliminated.

The concept of feminist genealogy as described by Stone is also useful for the Mexican context, and Latin America in general, in another important way. Feminist debate regarding Latin America has highlighted the need to focus on issues of gender as well as class and race since these factors affect the majority of Latin American women who, being indigenous and poor, find themselves doubly or triply marginalized. Guerra has previously emphasized that when writing, the Latin American woman takes on a very particular social and ideological role as she engages in an activity that is typical for the dominant group while she herself as woman is located at the margin (“Las sombras” 142-143). De Valdés confirms the “strong and open cultural links between Latin American women” (“Visual and Verbal” 81), which hints at the usefulness of viewing them in a genealogical chain. Due to the manifold differences between Latin American women, the Latin American and Mexican feminist movements, by incorporating

the concept of genealogy, can encourage feminist social critique and political activism rather than impede it. Stone states that those who maintain a genealogical approach usually support a coalitional politics. For the Latin American and Mexican woman this means that she can herself group with her fellow countrywomen and exercise resistance in a non-unitary mode of collective activity, since

there will be many other women with whose experience her own has no direct overlap, yet to whom she remains indirectly connected through the whole web of overlapping relations between women. She might, therefore, seek to act in concert with such women because improvements in either of their situations could be expected, indirectly, to have positive repercussions for the other. (Stone, "Genealogy of Women" 94)

We have seen these positive effects with respect to literature in various ways in my analysis.

Long before Stone outlined her concept, Nancy Burr Evans recognized that "women's literature felt and learned can affect social change even if it is as small a step as finally writing a term paper on what you want" (314). Every single contribution by women to the social, cultural, and political discourse is therefore of value. The most important task for the future of women in Mexico is the development of the awareness of the significance of women in the process of the history and nation building period. I have tried to emphasize this necessity through choosing texts for my analysis that deal with the Mexican Revolution.

The importance of the unified action on the side of Mexican and Latin American women should not be underestimated. De Valdés underlines that in Mexican and other societies of the so-called "third world"

women must understand that a woman's freedom in individualistic terms is utopic and of little value even as fantasy. The only freedom of consequence cannot be hers alone; it will have to be the freedom of the whole. Individual freedom is meaningless if the society in which one lives is denied human rights [and women's rights], this must be the supposition behind third world feminist criticism of society in and through literature. (*Shattered Mirror* 11)

In agreement with her statement, I would like to emphasize the meaning of literature in this process. As Castellanos already observed, the establishment of a dialogue between the dominant and oppressed groups is important, but in order to be heard one must listen as well as speak. This requires a level of equality among both groups and their active participation. Through my demonstration of the usefulness of the genealogical concept for feminist ends, I therefore support de Valdés in her opinion that “literature as the expression and continuation of the identity of a community is a major area of work for women” (*Shattered Mirror* 193) in the future. Writing is closely related to speaking, and therefore an important means for women to establish themselves in and gain entry to the public sphere in order to reinvent themselves and subvert the patriarchal order. French linguist Émile Benveniste highlights the importance of language for the process of self-realization when he says that “it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ego in reality” (224). I would like to close with Foucault’s words on relationships of power to confirm the possibility of resistance for Mexican women, be it in and through literature or elsewhere: “We always have possibilities, there are always possibilities of changing the situation. We cannot jump *outside* the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it” (*Ethics* 167, original emphasis).

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