

Devotion, Divination, and Defiance in María Amparo Escandón's Esperanza's Box of Saints

Latina narratives have celebrated the "good" and the "bad" Latina woman in an array of literary spaces. The good woman is stereotypically: the religious woman, a morally and socially upstanding woman defined by social norms, the abnegated one, the self-sacrificing one, and so forth. The "bad" woman then constitutes the opposite; a woman who is loose, who defies, who has a big mouth, the witch, the prostitute, and so on. In Latina narratives, whether it be the "good" or the "bad" woman, the protagonist flourishes as a result of a process of self-discovery and consciousness rising. Often these transformations are induced by chaos, crisis, or restlessness in the lives of these women. Nonetheless, the evolution of character as one that survives, one that transforms into a political being, one whose consciousness is awakened, is formed by feminist's acts that liberate and unleash reinvented women.

Space and Locality Transform Identity

The understanding of who Latinas are and how they denounce or reconfigure the notion of good and bad women are central to their identity. Latina narratives explore the multifaceted construction of identity based on moral fiber and cultural constitution. Space and locality play an important role where these identities are unfolded. The transcending, blurring, and catapulting of borders, assist to conceive new consciousness for Latina protagonist in telling the story of how they have resurrected as Gloria Anzaldúas celebrated new mestiza women. Esperanza's identity is challenged by activities of a newly confronted urban space of Tijuana and Los Angeles. Unlike her rural surroundings of her small town her identity undergoes transformation if she is to survive and find her daughter. The movement through geographic space and the events encountered by Esperanza allow her to shed a constricted image of herself in her rural town and then flourishes as a transformed image via an urban experience.

The street-scene, as interpreted by María Herrera-Sobek, is the cradle of the public domain, which alters every-day experience for Latinas and the locality where images originate challenging conventional stereotypes of Latinas. She proposes that, the street, "serves as a metaphor to represent [Latinas] 'going-out-into-the-world'." (148) Latinas venture out into the world on a quest, a search for identity which envelopes the role of Latina, woman, and human being.

The street, therefore, provides the space under which this identity unfolds, is processed, and matures. Taking part in the activities of society and crossing taboo spatial boundaries attain a self-fulfillment and transformation by exploring the world. The outside world or the street scene is a vulgar and violent place, a reserved male domain. The inside world is the protected and discrete realm of the woman. Our protagonist, Esperanza, encounters those crossroads where she is caught between worlds—the familiar and unfamiliar. She is beckoned by the street life in order to find her daughter and in the process she evolves as a Latina who breaks with traditional roles, first as a woman who must find her daughter then as a human being confronting loss and crisis.

In the spirit of a feminist reading of Esperanza's *Box of Saints* I will depict Esperanza as a woman whose character evolves and transforms into a woman whose actions have proven to be feminist yet loyal to the paradigms of her religious belief system, her spirituality and to her cultural mores. However, that is not to say that throughout her reconfiguration as woman and mother she doesn't challenge, question and test what she knows as part of her spiritual/religious, emotional and psychological make-up. This essay will review the aspects of devotion, divination, and defiance as the elements by which Esperanza is transformed as a woman. Above all, her journey is one filled with choices she must face, acts that challenge her traditional moral fiber, and a human spirit those triumphs in the midst of tragedy and crisis.

Devotion and Divination

As a cultural marker, religion plays a focal point in many Latina narratives whereby traditional and non-traditional elements of religious culture give solace and strength to the protagonists. The pragmatic use of religion, whether popular or official, is a point of departure for Latina women who seek to shape a functional and real use of their religion intertwined with their spirituality. Latinas have long endured a hierarchical and patriarchal institution and rigid indoctrination of Catholicism. While Latinas have been the gatekeepers and practitioners of Catholicism they have also been defined and restrained by religiosity. The mission of the Church has been to protect and preserve the feminine condition as the Church sees fit. Essentially the Church has been a form of domination over the feminine condition of Latinas. Furthermore, the Church has manipulated a very finite identity for Latinas to fulfill. For Chicanas, for example, their outlook and questioning of the Catholic Church's domination over the role of

the woman came to focus when they questioned the sexism the Chicano Movement generated. As Latinas aspire to a spiritual and material level, they look toward the notion of Liberation Theology as the site for practicing a religion that is more gender-friendly. However the practice of Liberation theology is a blend of Marxists and Christian beliefs - both male centered. Under the Chicano cosmic conscious, as Ana Castillo describes, "woman was defined by the Religiomythology of the Mexica pantheon [Gods of the people]" (96). Thus male and female activists adopted Mexican models which defined woman on religious terms. Latinas seek to challenge the principles of Liberation Theology to fit a female condition and to actively change Catholic thinking. Moreover, to encase a reality and the use of religiosity which challenges a Religion that in the past has constricted and manipulated by using shame and guilt.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango are theologian scholars who have brought forth the notion that Hispanic [Latina] Women's Liberation Theology is changing the face of Christianity. Religion for Latinas is a significant structure in their lives. Castillo contends one does not need to denounce her Mexican identity if she dismisses the influence of the church. So while Religion and culture are intertwined they can be separated in order to redefine the identity of the Latina. Latina Women's experiences becomes Latina Women's Liberation Theology by adapting popular religiosity to their realities. One does not need to forfeit religion as part of their identity yet they can understand their spirituality through their experiences. Latinas' feminism facilitates a religion that is more gender inclusive as a source of inner strength through her religiosity. As a universal woman condition that the personal is political developing a theology that is appropriate for Latinas is part of their feminist reality.

If we allow for a literary space to interpret such notions as Latina Women's Liberation Theology Escandon's narrative provides that space. If we go back to the idea of good versus evil woman we can appreciate that this dualistic principle is based on Christianity. Even more so, this polarization, which characterizes women's identity, inhibits her from leading a fulfilled life due to the suppression of the human spirit. Esperanza chose to defy and cross her religious and cultural limits in order to rescue her daughter; in doing so she found her human spirit. She also discovers that she need not give up her moral character in the process. Latina narratives have explored a religious perspective that allows a sense of social ethics and new moral ethics, which challenges orthodox

religion. By using popular religious practice and re-reading of official doctrines and rites religion is analyzed and reconfigured.

Esperanza is a traditional Mexican woman who has lived a sheltered life in her town of Tlacotalpan, Veracruz. After the loss of her husband, she has led a life, which revolves around her pre-adolescent daughter. When she is faced with the untimely and tragic loss of her daughter she is faced with many changes in her life. For Esperanza, religion has been a coping mechanism, which has allowed her to ease the pain of loss. Her daily ritual of lighting candles, saying prayers, and belief in a higher power has maintained her in an orthodox state of mind. When she supposedly loses her daughter to a mysterious illness after having gone in for a routine tonsillitis, her religious/spiritual world is confronted. While Esperanza uses her faith and devotion to guide her through her search for her daughter, religion is merely a pragmatic vehicle for a greater outcome in Esperanza's transformation of the self.

The practice of religious rituals is subject to interpretation depending on a Western or a Non-Western analysis. While some see these religious practices as superstitious and magical, its practitioners truly believe in its powers. For Esperanza, an apparition of San Judas Tadeo fuels her drive and belief that her daughter is alive and kidnapped, saint for desperate causes. For Esperanza, this apparition is her reason to believe that her daughter is alive after having heard "Blanca is not dead" (245). In her desperation to find her daughter the message from San Judas is not completed. Based on these four words Esperanza embarks on a journey to find her daughter at all costs. Divination as characterized by anthropologist Omar Khayyam Moore "[supplies] a chance mechanism, directs some human activities toward randomness and may thereby serve a useful role in avoiding regularity where such regularity may be disadvantageous" (462). The apparition as an element of divination becomes an apparatus to manipulate and construe what Esperanza hopes to be a favorable outcome.

Divination, then, becomes a chance mechanism, a magical practice by which Esperanza faithfully accepts as a message from God that her only daughter is alive.

Esperanza's religious practices and faith while on this journey are applied in a very pragmatic way. Esperanza as an altarista constructs her faith in a very mobile and constant-changing manner. Depending on her needs she offers prayers to her saints on her transportable altar never forgetting the need for offerings even under peculiar surroundings and events. By building her altars and paying tribute to many saints she recreates her religious experience and transforms her religious

space to one that must suit her disposition. Driven by the force of motherhood and maternal instinct, Esperanza set out to search for Blanca believed to have been abducted for child prostitution. It is here while searching for Blanca that Esperanza discovers a new woman and transforms herself into a political being of new consciousness.

Esperanza finds herself in peculiar situations driven by her search and desperation to find Blanca. It is through these incomprehensible acts, as seen by others who know Esperanza, that she tests and redefines her faith and destiny. Esperanza suspects child prostitution, therefore she decides to infiltrate a brothel in Tijuana where she becomes a "bad" woman in the form of prostitute. An immediate assumption by the reader is that Esperanza becomes a prostitute, a woman who sells herself for sex. However, I challenge this notion by suggesting that Esperanza maneuvers herself by using her charm, wit and resourcefulness to fool those around her as a prostitute. In fact, she befriends a judge who seeks her out as for her companionship and her nurturing and caring qualities—extending those maternal instincts, which she innately offers, to this stranger later turned friend and ally. The point here, is that she never falls prey to selling her body rather her attributes as a compassionate and caring woman are transferred to those she comes in contact. The same compassion and tenderness of her emotional make-up co-exists by her values and morals, which she consistently displays throughout her escapades and never, compromise her religious beliefs or morals.

As Esperanza makes her way to Los Angeles, the next designated search and rescue location, she once again is faced with compromising her morality for the sake of answers. She becomes an "actress" at the Fiesta Theater where she performs in a room where mostly men enjoy a voyeuristic show through peepholes. She performs simple acts like painting her toes nails or caressing her body with lotion dressed in small outfits. Esperanza unleashes a sexual self never discovered before. This part of her unravels her womanhood and her sexuality unawakened since she became a widow. Discovering her sexuality as an apparatus of controlling and overpowering men as a means to her ends is yet another facet of her self-discovery in her journey.

In the end Esperanza learns that the words of San Judas Tadeo were not complete, given the opportunity for him to finish his sentenced Esperanza would have heard " Blanca is not dead...Blanca is not alive" (245). While bathing in her tub, Esperanza experiences yet another apparition. This time it is Blanca who appears to Esperanza. Blanca is resurrected as her mother's own santita providing longevity to their mother-daughter relationship and becoming a source of solace and

strength once again through Esperanza's devotion and belief of divination.

While engulfed in the foreign and obscure world of prostitute, voyeurism, pimps, and carnal pleasure Esperanza's saviness and astuteness make her a survivor. Her constant religious practice of prayers, offering to the saints, and altar-building nourishes her faith and devotion that she trusts will lead her to Blanca. Esperanza has discovered a part of herself foreign to her – the ability to survive circumstances, which call upon her strength and determination and never losing sight of her moral values. Simultaneously she empowers herself to be a survivor because lives change and circumstances call for adaptation.

Esperanza's Box of Saints not only provides its audience with an interpretation of a new Latina identity but also contribute to the many Latina narratives that endeavor to represent the good and the bad woman as transforming women. Society should not be blind-sided by adapting constricting women identities rather understand the paradigms and circumstances under which these women find themselves. Most of all, these women represent a literary discourse, which reconstructs the bad and good woman into a valiant and triumphant human spirit.