

## **Redefining Conquest in Ana Castillo's Sapogonia**

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1492 y 1848 son dos fechas fundamentales en el desarrollo de la realidad étnica y cultural de la comunidad chicana en los Estados Unidos. La primera supuso la colonización de las comunidades indígenas y la masacre física, espiritual y cultural de dichas comunidades. La segunda, representa la apropiación por parte de los Estados Unidos de los territorio del Norte de Méjico, que dará paso a un proceso similar de usurpación de la lengua, cultura y tradición de los habitantes del lugar. Ambos momentos de colonización se han reflejado de forma recurrente en el corpus literario chicano, que en muchos casos ha servido de instrumento de denuncia de esta situación. Este es también el caso de la producción literaria de las mujeres chicanas, quienes evidencian además la colonización interna, derivada de aspectos de género, que sufren por parte de la comunidad manifiéstamente machista en la que viven. Sapogonia, de Ana Castillo, ofrece una redefinición de la relación Conquistador/conquistado a través de sus personajes, Máximo Madrigal y Pastora Aké. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar dicha revisión del concepto de colonización, así como el de observar la importancia de los diferentes espacios en los que se desarrolla la novela para la construcción de sus personajes, reflejo de la historia de los chicanos en general y las chicanas en particular.

The ethnic and cultural reality of Chicanos in the United States has been clearly influenced by two significant dates: 1492 and 1848. The former marked the colonization of the first inhabitants of the country by the Spanish and the subsequent physical, spiritual, linguistic and cultural massacre of the indigenous people of the land. The latter represents the appropriation by the United States of the Northern territories of Mexico, together with a similar process of usurpation of the language, culture and tradition of the dwellers of the area. Thus, conquest, which as defined by the dictionary is “the act of taking possession and control of a country, city etc., by force”, becomes essential when trying to understand the complex, amalgamated, *mestizo* reality of the Chicano community.

The first encounters between the indigenous population of Mexico and the Spaniard conquerors, resulted in the total annihilation of the native customs and traditions by means of the religious and physical control of the population, because “The Spanish earnestly focused attention on the Indians’ minds and hearts. They reasoned that control over the natives’ laboring bodies would be assured after a new ideology was implanted. Their program of implementation, reminiscent of the heated European holy wars and inquisitions, was vicious and effectively merciless (Vigil 1980: 48)”.

Concomitantly, the consequences of the enforced cohabitation of the Anglo and Mexican populations that took place centuries later, also provoked the severe social and cultural discrimination of the inhabitants of the Northern territories of Mexico, descendants of the first colonized, indigenous people. Furthermore, the second colonizing rash originated the emergence of borders that established social differences that are still perceptible in the present day, since,

The treatment received by the socially immobile, dark-looking and Indian-acting Mexicans further emphasized the Anglo attitude that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” (Price 1967: 17). Many of the lighter-hued, Spanish types felt superior to the other Mexicans and “to this day, the don’s (gente de razón, rico) descendents refuse to acknowledge their Mestizo ancestry or to recognize that their grandfathers acquired Mexican, not Spanish, land grants” (Pitt 1968: 290). They were simply practicing an earlier form of inequality. (Vigil 1980: 128)

Nonetheless, this public inequality and subdivision of the society into highly hierarchized groups, separated by untransgressible social barriers, is augmented when the division into socially graded communities is produced considering differences based on gender, which provide the male and female individual distinct roles within the group. In the case of the reality of Chicana women, the aforementioned social and cultural discrimination is aggravated by the naturally assimilated male/female power relationship that the Chicano community relies on to a great extent. The concept of Conquest, thus, is elevated to its utmost category, establishing uncrossable borders between the Conqueror male and the Conquered female, who submissively endures her dominated reality, since “as human beings denigrated by the Spanish Conquest

and alter made invisible and further commodified by North American Anglo dominance, the majority of us don't feel that our own lives have ample influence to make a "political" difference" (Castillo 1995: 142). Nevertheless, contemporary Chicana writers have utilized their creative power to dismantle this clear-cut dividing line, by means of the reinterpretation of the myths that have contributed to the perpetuation of these beliefs, and by giving voice to different female perspectives which propose the re-education of the community into more integrative, (r)evolutionary viewpoints.

*Sapogonia*, published in 1990 by Ana Castillo, Chicana writer and critic, is a clear example of the revision of the Conqueror/Conquered relationship, which is deployed as a twofold one: on the one hand, Castillo portrays colonization in its more wide known expression, as it is the geographical one. On the other hand, the author endeavours to portray the effects of the colonization of women by their male counterparts, a type of relationship which is personified in the two protagonists of the novel, Pastora and Máximo. Nonetheless, Castillo masterly manages to present both types of colonization as a unique, global one, suffered and endured by Chicana women throughout the ages.

Territoriality, and consequently, the conception of space, is one of the most relevant aspects of the definition of a Chicano identity, for "the experience of being displaced in multiple ways from a perceived homeland has been an essential element of Chicano's social identity in this country" (Homero 2000: 1). As inferred from the idea that Vigil proposes in his words, the usurpation of the territory has painfully conditioned the reality and posterior development of the Chicano community. The connection to the land that the first, indigenous inhabitants of Mexico understood as sacred and crucial for their existence upon the earth, was violently violated by the white invaders, and subsequently, ravaged as a result of the Anglo appropriation of the land. As a consequence, the regaining and worshipping of the territory as a symbol of the development of a communal identity has become essential for the Chicano plight in contemporary days, because

... for ethnic Americans, place can be a tangible reminder of difference, a locus of estrangement and displacement as lands and homelands are subject to colonization. In response to alienation, ethnic American authors identify and evoke the ambivalences contained in the more tangible concept of place

and setting. (...) The rendering of place thus becomes intimately implicated in the process of claiming identity, both in the continual dialectic between external pressures and internal desires. Therefore, with physical colonization comes a threat of internal displacement and disembodiment (Lynch 2001: 121-122)

Accordingly, the historical absence of a Chicano space has contributed to the current need of the definition of a Chicano territory, a borderland terrain that stands for the cultural and social amalgamation of the Chicano community. The constant crossing and migration of individuals as well as of ideas from one cultural space to the contiguous one renders the Chicano community with an identity with merges diverse cultural and social traits.

As a literary example of the idea of the creation of a Chicano border space, we could state that one of the most relevant and striking aspects of the development of the narration of Castillo's novel in terms of geographical spaces is the creation of an imaginary country called Sapogonia, "a distinct place in the Americas where all mestizos reside, regardless of nationality, individual racial composition, or legal residential status (1990:5)". The Sapogón, "may, by affectation, acquire the mannerisms and the idioms of the North American with the intent of assimilation, his genetic make-up sets him apart, for his European ancestry, which may be either Spanish or French with the invariable contribution of indigenous blood, makes him shorter in stature with dark features not characteristic of the Aryan or Anglo" (1990:5).

The male protagonist of the novel, Máximo Madrigal, a citizen of Sapogonia, becomes thus the symbol of the Sapogón/Chicano who embodies the diverse racial information that defines the Chicano as a *mestizo*, the product of the historical racial miscegenation and cultural amalgamation of his community. Máximo, discontented with his social situation, chooses to flee his country and look back to his ancestors in Europe in an attempt to avenge his community for the colonization it once endured. Nonetheless, his macho attitude reproduces and symbolizes this colonization through the abuse of several female characters in the novel. The relationship between the geographical colonization and the gendered-base one is thus clear and present in the overall development of the text, and the overcoming of his domination by Pastora, who becomes his antagonist and the unique being that dismantles his sense of superiority, as well as of Máximo's hegemonic attitude towards

women, stands for a call for Chicanas to free themselves from the patriarchal tradition they have been subjected to, at the same time that it epitomises the political and cultural dismantling of the colonization of the overall community, since,

The implicit deconstruction of the patriarchal order, which appears as the novel's political unconscious in the temporal/spatial break in between the signs, the said and the unsaid, this caesura that reveals Maximo's disjunctive experience and is the place of a possible utopian counterhegemonic revision, is based on female agency, a (mythical) revaluation of woman's life-giving powers, a rendering visible of the female body and mind as text, as discourse that reclaims the indigenous matriarchal social structure and way of thinking and asserts/demands a radically new male and female consciousness and subject-position. The strong images of the two earthy women suggest not only that a new mestiza consciousness has already emerged but also, and most importantly, that this consciousness carries a potential for change—a change of ideology and culture, that is, lived hegemony. (Walter 1998)

His first move from the country of Sapogonia is aimed towards the “conquering” of Europe, of France, in particular. As in the case of all the multiple geographical movements that he goes through along the novel, his attitude is that of the Conqueror, who presupposes his own superiority, which as he cannot achieve in the social/economical sphere, he tries to accomplish by the use and abuse of local women, in a way reminiscent of the kind of relationships that occurred between the native women of America and the white invaders. As described by Deborah L. Madsen, “early in the novel Máximo tells of his compulsion to conquer women who do not want him and destroy those who reject him. (...) Sexual rejection is a denial of male selfhood and must be punished; the confirmation of the male self that arises from the act of violence is then in some ways the same confirmation that is obtained through sexual conquest” (2000: 90) This is the case of Sophie and Caroline, a mother and daughter with whom Máximo and his friend El Tinto start living after their arrival in Paris. His approach to both women is a purely physical, sexual one, trying to “conquer” them both from the very beginning.

His stereotypical, macho attitude collides frontally with that of his friend Tinto, who starts a relationship with Sophie, the mother, based in a mutual affection and love. In an opposite way, Máximo fulfils his need for conquest by having a sexual encounter with the still virgin girl.

In a second movement, Máximo travels to Spain, in an attempt to find his father, who once also abandoned his “native” mother and his newly born son. The symbolical importance that the need of Máximo to find his father acquires for the development of Castillo’s criticism to the male/colonizing attitude of Chicano men is extremely relevant. The women of the novel, personified in Pastora and Máximo’s grandmother, Mama Grande, stand for the feminine connection to the land and the indigenous roots of the Chicano community. Thus, Pastora and Mama Grande epitomise the first colonization of the community, the connection to their ancestral roots and spiritual lineage, whereas the figure of the male conquistador, embodied in the characters of Máximo and his father, stand for the image of the Spanish colonizer, who show an absolute detachment from any kind of spiritual bond with the other members of the community and their land. In his quest for his lost father, Máximo shows his conscious rejection of his female heritage and fights for the supremacy of his male/conqueror cultural and physical attributes, which he attempts to achieve by a potent sexual activity, by means of which he castrates any possible emergence of his feminine inheritance, because as explained by Joy M. Lynch,

Madrigal addresses his physical dislocation not as a historical or political fact to be attended to directly, but sexually, where he experiences it as a disruption at the core of his identity. (...) In his migrations from Sapogonia to Spain, to France, to the United States, to Mexico and back to each of these countries, Madrigal concentrates on his sexual performance and his creations of sexual fetishes through which he manipulates a fantasy of an imagined identity (2001: 133)

As explained by Lynch, it is only through his male sexual activity that he manages to overcome his lack of a stable identity. After the encounter with his father, and the “failure” of his European Conquest, Máximo decides to travel to the United States, where he will once again try to fulfil his need of personal expansion. The entering in the United States will put him in a situation of exile and social inferiority, which he will try to surmount by

means of his supposedly European heritage and thus, his racial superiority, as inferred in the following words:

In my best English I tried to explain that I was Spanish, not Mexican, but I had no identification. The merchant's visa I had entered the country with had expired. "Spanish, Mexican... It's all the same shit!" came the reply from the migra official. I looked in the eyes of the dark man that had come in first, who had to have also been Latino, maybe Chicano. It was an instant of mutual recognition before he threw me into the wagon. (1990: 90)

This discriminatory behaviour that he acknowledges when entering the country foreshadows the metaphorical dismantling of his power, that he later on will experience when first meeting Pastora. Even though the character of Pastora is introduced at the beginning of the novel in a parallel way to that of Máximo, it is interesting to see the way the male protagonist acquires relevance in the first part of the work. However, Máximo's thoughts and experiences predict that Pastora will be responsible of breaking the myth of the Conqueror in the gender relationship. Thus, their first encounter is expressed in the following way: "Was it possible to castrate a man with a glance? She had looked up at me and at once chewed my existence and spat me out. I shuddered. I knew she had noticed I stood out from the crowd of garish idiots and she had spitefully chosen to reject me" (1990: 25)

Máximo the Conqueror, who may well be considered as the fictional depiction of the personal colonization of Chicana women by their male counterparts in the name of the patriarchal order, is defeated at a first glance by a woman who will soon become his obsession. Nonetheless, the male protagonist, too proud to admit the woman's dominance over his persona, chooses to spread his colonizing power over other women, whom he abuses economically and personally, in an attempt to regain the confidence that his submission to Pastora has provoked through her rejection and indifference. Pastora, on the other hand, acquires for Máximo diverse attributes, which many times describe her as a witch, a powerful woman who is able to control and manipulate a man's life. Nonetheless, one of the aspects that Máximo most fears subconsciously from Pastora is the fact that she represents the female heritage that he wants to reject and abort, as a means of survival and expansion of his role of conqueror. Pastora, thus, symbolises the Indian roots

that her grandmother tried to pass on to him, the connection to a spirituality that clashes directly with his need of assimilation of a capitalist/occidental/male supremacist attitude. From the beginning of their first encounters, even though Máximo consciously tries to annihilate his Indian roots, he describes her as Coatlicué, “a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (Anzaldúa 1987: 47), who has the capacity of giving and taking life simultaneously, as inferred in the following words:

The telephone rang. It was Friday. It had to be a friend inviting him out to drink. If not, with any luck, it was a woman who would have him to dinner or to drinks and once at her home, he would help himself to her food. He would persuade her to prepare something for the devoted artist who so deserved the compassion of the public. But all these musings ended when he realized it was not a friend or a woman in the ordinary sense of the word, but Coatlicué a.k.a. Pastora (Castillo 1990: 143)

Feared and at the same time respected, Pastora represents the unconquered space that the male conqueror, Máximo, desperately endeavours to control.

The incapacity that he experiences when approaching Pastora will lead him to a state of anxiousness that he will aim to surmount by the voracious colonization and abuse of other women, whom he exploits economically and personally. He uses his creative power as an sculptor to create and shape at his own wish a reproduction of Coatlicué, Xalaquia, in an attempt to possess what he cannot conquer in his real life. The frustration that the fact of not being able to find the balance between the possession of the woman and the fulfilment of his own masculinity, will drive Máximo to destroy her, because

Her subversion of the ideology of feminine submission is the occasion of her death: Pastora transforms passivity into an aggressive act to which Máximo responds by murdering her. In their final encounter Pastora forces Máximo to acknowledge that his need for her is greater than her need for him: this is an inversion of the power relationship that Máximo, or any machismo, cannot tolerate, and so he is compelled to destroy her. (Madsen 2000: 89-90)



The tragic ending of the novel epitomises the impossibility of the male conqueror to accept his defeat and the need that he once feels for the regaining and acceptance of his feminine, spiritual connection to a woman who symbolises the unconquerable, rebellious woman, eager to transform and reinterpret the conqueror/conquered relationship and consequently, the gender relationships in the community. The ultimate choice of the assassination of the object of the conquest represents his utmost defeat, as well as the development of the idea that Castillo makes explicit throughout the novel that Conquest may be redefined and the power relationships that it produces altered and redescribed.

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