

**“If she is to Write Fiction”: Buchi Emecheta and Sandra Cisneros  
Revisit Virginia Woolf**

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**Abstract**

Woolf’s strong commitment towards female education and female writers’ rights, present in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), is still a significant topic in the writings of many contemporary female writers. This article analyses Chicano writer Sandra Cisneros and Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta as inheritors of Woolf’s vindications. Despite the different periods, distant geography, the existence of categories such as race and ethnicity, and the fact that both authors have experienced postcolonialism in different ways, these contemporary writers seem to share with Woolf similar class and gender concerns. It is my intention, hence, to analyze their concern for the needs of women, in general, and female writers, in particular, while they emphasize the lack of opportunities offered to become a female writer. Moreover, their respective female characters –who are writers themselves– help both Cisneros and Emecheta to address the establishment or recovery of a female literary tradition, each in her own way, which presents female writers’ political role as *aunts* who highlight the readers’ social responsibility.

**Keywords:** Woolf, Cisneros, Emecheta, female writers, social responsibility, literary tradition.

**Resumen**

El compromiso de Woolf con la educación femenina y los derechos de las escritoras, presente en su ensayo *Una habitación propia* (1929), es aún un tema relevante en las obras de muchas escritoras contemporáneas. Este artículo analiza a la escritora chicana Sandra Cisneros y a la escritora nigeriana Buchi Emecheta como herederas de las reivindicaciones de Woolf. A pesar de las diferencias de periodo, espacio geográfico y a la inclusión de categorías relacionadas con sus

contextos, como raza, etnicidad y factores postcoloniales, estas escritoras contemporáneas parecen compartir con Woolf sus ansiedades sobre cuestiones de y género. Es mi intención, por tanto, analizar su preocupación por las necesidades de las mujeres en general y de las escritoras en particular. Más aún, estos personajes femeninos –que son a su vez escritoras– ayudan a estas autoras la escritora a abordar la creación o recuperación de una tradición literaria femenina, lo cual confiere a las escritoras un papel político de *tías* que les recuerdan a sus lectores su responsabilidad social.

**Palabras clave:** Woolf, Cisneros, Emecheta, escritoras, responsabilidad social, tradición literaria.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Considered as a key figure in the struggle for women's rights, Virginia Woolf is regarded as one of the most influential feminist writers in the Western world. In one of her most famous works, the essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf addresses the difficulties women have to confront in relation to the categories of gender and class, while she pays special attention to the obstacles faced by women in accessing education, climbing the social ladder, and becoming writers. As time has gone by, women's concerns have drastically changed, and, as a consequence, the needs Woolf established as basic may seem outdated for many contemporary women. However, one should consider whether the obstacles present in Woolf's essay differ from the ones contemporary women from different backgrounds face today.

Woolf's commitment led her to be described as having "raided the patriarchy and trespassed on male territory, returning to share her spoils with other women: women's words, the feminine sentence, and finally the appropriate female form" (Marcus 1981: xiv). Her role as a writer and, more importantly, her use of a female narrator who unapologetically addresses her readers, helps to disseminate her political ideas and claims throughout her writings. This paper argues that this role is still present nowadays in other female writers who do belong to opposite contexts. Echoing Gayatri C. Spivak's words, both Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros, and Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta

find themselves “in the context of colonial production, [where] the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, [and where] the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 1994: 82-83). However, as we will try to show, they seem to share Woolf’s concerns regarding female inequality.

Jaqueline Doyle’s analysis of Chicana writers highlights the different problems these authors must confront in comparison to many American feminists who “have expanded the literary canon [...] [but also] have ignored the questions of race, ethnicity, and class in women’s literature” (Doyle 1994: 5). In the 1960s, the Chicano civil rights movement saw how Chicanas’ discourse was socially oriented, yet Chicanas were not only concerned about the problems of their communities in the Anglo world, but also about “their own needs as women” (Cotera 1997: 229). In the following decades, their literature showed a critique of women’s subaltern position within the Chicano society. That is, these Chicano women -whether in real life or in fiction- questioned the submissive role that was expected from them be it as daughters, wives, or as mothers, who are to fulfil their duties to perfection: “to be the hearth of the home; to be chaste, modest, honorable, clean and more importantly, to minister to the needs of [their] husband and children” (Mirandé and Enríquez 1979: 98).

As part of the legacy of the decolonial imaginary initiated by Chicana artists, like Judith F. Baca, Alma López and Yolanda López,<sup>1</sup> for the past decades Chicana critics and writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Norma Alarcón and Cherrie Moraga, among others, have established decolonial feminist practices that are political acts of transgression not only against the dominant US, but also against Chicano patriarchal values. Sandra Cisneros (b. Chicago, Illinois, 1954) has become one of the most representative Chicana writers because she highlights the strength of Mexican and Chicano women to the extent that her writings are populated with female characters who embody this archetype: “The traditional Mexican woman is a fierce woman [...] Our mothers had been fierce. Our women may be victimized but they are still very, very fierce and very strong” (Jussawala and Dasenbrock 1992: 300). Therefore, Chicana authors have addressed women’s traditionally established roles, while they allow them to escape from patriarchal portrayals of silence and suffering, in order to present the

reader with the image of women who are usually misrepresented and whose identity as individuals is frequently restrained by society.

In a similar line of thought, Márcio André Senem's essay "O Feminismo de Virginia Woolf e a Literatura Pós-Colonial" (2008), raises the question of Postcolonialism and compares it to Feminism. Senem establishes then similarities between the silenced women Woolf addresses in her struggle for female emancipation, and the colonized woman who is silenced by both the patriarchal and the colonial powers. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that, when the woman is colonized, "both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant" (Spivak 1994: 82). In fact, Itai Muwati's and Zifikile Gambahaya's studies on the social role of African women emphasize that the influence of colonialism has helped to establish a "limited construction of the woman [which] has been adopted by African men and women in their debauchery of the latter" (2012: 102).

This negative image of women appears in early representations of African women by African male authors. Just to name a few, writers like Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, and Cyprian Ekwensi<sup>2</sup> all tend to offer a stereotypical and empty appearance, an "ideal female character [...] [that] often acts within the framework of her traditional functions as wife and mother, [...] sentenced to a life of insignificance and subsidiary existence" (Agho and Oseghale 2008: 603). In so doing, the women described were hence "dewomanized" (Sofola 1998; quoted in Muwati and Gambahaya 2012: 102) or, to put it in other words, the reader is led to construct an incomplete representation of women which significantly differs from reality.

In the 1960s and 1970s, after the independence of most British colonies in Africa, the image of female characters does not change significantly. Interestingly enough, some male writers "portray the African woman as a free woman, a courtesan or prostitute [which] further denigrates the image and status of the female folk in the African novel" (Agho and Oseghale 2008: 604). These incomplete and derogatory representations led African female writers to challenge male writing and struggle to alter the image of women as commodities: first, their fathers' property, and later that of their

husbands and sons (Olufunwa 2003). These African female writers struggle with the position of women in society, emphasizing that not only gender matters, but that “the junctures of race, class, caste [...]; nation, culture and ethnicity; age, status, role and sexual orientation” (Ogundipe-Leslie 2007: 548) have to be taken into account.

It is in this context that Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017), who belongs to the second-generation of African female writers, becomes relevant as a defiant voice and a precursor in the struggle against patriarchal African oppression. As Sandra Cisneros did in her college years, Emecheta decided to “write about something [their] classmates couldn’t write about” (Rodriguez Aranda 1990: 65). Thus, through her writings Emecheta draws female characters who can achieve the dreams which some of first-generation writer Nigerian Flora Nwapa’s female characters just glimpsed years earlier.<sup>3</sup> Above all, Emecheta’s female characters are influenced by their experiences in exile and by their daily struggle against the communities and families that constrain them. This constant tension only helps to increase their resolution to contest any obstacle that might be in their way, preventing them from running their own lives, re-gaining their own self-esteem, and reaffirming their own identities.

The novels selected for the present study, Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), along with its sequel *In the Ditch* (1972), and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1984), deal with a feminist agenda to the extent that some of the aims and anxieties Emecheta’s and Cisneros’ works reflect seem to echo those of Virginia Woolf, especially those related to the difficulties in accessing to get an education, or a career as a female writer.<sup>4</sup> Considering that the Postcolonial condition of both Chicana and African authors involves other junctures, this paper will analyze to what extent Woolf’s ideas on class and gender can be applied to their works. I will first pay attention to the features of education and writing, to later analyze whether the lack of opportunities to become a female writer have changed in a period and a background that differ radically from Woolf’s. I will also try to show whether Emecheta’s and Cisneros’ female characters are represented vis-à-vis categories unexplored by Woolf, such as race, ethnicity and/or a postcolonial context. Secondly, I will consider the role of literature as a tool to portray and sometimes criticize social

values. It is my purpose to analyze Emecheta's and Cisneros' respective female characters –who are writers themselves– in order to examine how they help the writer to address the establishment or recovery of a female literary tradition, and therefore to present female writers' political role as *aunts*<sup>67</sup> who remind their readers of their social responsibility.

## 2. EDUCATION AND WRITING

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf refers to the difficulties that obtaining an appropriate education and earning a living entail for women. This is emphasized when her unnamed female narrator asks herself three relevant questions: “Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? [and] What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?” (Woolf 1945: 27). As Woolf claims in her essay, “to earn money was impossible for [women], and [...] had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned” (Woolf 1945: 24). In fact, it was not until the *Married Women's Property Act* of 1882 was passed that a married woman in England was “capable of acquiring, holding and disposing, by will or otherwise, of any real or personal property as her separate property, in the same manner as if she were a feme sole, without the intervention of any trustee” (Manchester 1980: 372; quoted in Brody 2012: 8).

Woolf's narrator escapes this uncertain situation when she inherits some money from an aunt of hers; this inheritance, as the narrator expresses, “reached [her] one night about the same time that the act was passed that gave votes to women [...] Of the two—the vote and the money—the money [...] seemed infinitely the more important” (Woolf 1945: 38-39). In fact, the importance of the money is not simply that it gives her the freedom to write, but also that she is also free “to think of things in themselves [...] [it] substitute[s] for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman [...] a view of the open sky” (Woolf 1945: 40).

Contrary to Woolf's narrator, Emecheta's and Cisneros' characters do not have any legacy to ease their way towards writing. As Spivak notes “not all the world's women are literate” (Spivak 1993: 192), a fact

that explains that apart from gender and class, illiteracy has to be considered in both African and Chicano contexts. Emecheta's main character in *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah, is a resolute girl that makes an important decision in life: "the thought suddenly str[ikes] her. Yes, she [will] go to school" (Emecheta 1994: 4). This resolution to get an education is almost frustrated when some years later Adah sees how the possibility of continuing her studies is lost following her father's death. As tradition dictates in her community, both she and her mother are inherited by her uncle, her father's brother. Although her father had always allowed her to study, under the colonial influence "women's contributions to communal matters centered around singing, dancing during ceremonies, procreation and other domestic duties. Hence, their education is not considered worthwhile" (Agho and Oseghale 2008: 605). And this might have been the case for Adah, had she not persevered. In fact, even Adah's mother, when referring to her daughter's education, claims that "[a] year or two would do, as long as [Adah] can write her name and count" (Emecheta 1994: 3).

When trying to challenge societal expectations and an arranged wedding, Adah marries a young student who would allow her to pursue the dream that had "lived with her, just like a Presence" (Emecheta 1994 11), her dream of studying and moving to the United Kingdom. This personification of her dream becomes more and more relevant, to the point that it smiles and talks to Adah, encouraging her to continue her studies: "You are going, you must go and to one of the very best of schools; [...] you're going to do well there" (Emecheta 1994: 15). Unfortunately for Adah, once she marries, she ends up embracing her established social female role.

Likewise, Woolf is concerned with women's compliance to a system that does not provide them with equal economic and educational opportunities. In fact, familial and social systems seem to use "women blindly, 'not for what they are, not for what they are intended to be, but for what it wants them for [...]. If it wants someone to sit in the drawing-room, that someone is supplied by the family, though that member may be destined for science, or for education' (404)" (Gan 2009: 70). Similarly, Emecheta presents her female character as somebody who is "laying the golden eggs" for her husband and her family-in-law (Emecheta 1994: 40). Not only is Adah

having children, which honors the family, but she is also supporting them, since she spends all the money she earns to provide for her husband and his family, which includes the school taxes of her sisters-in-law. As a matter of fact, her financial status is the main reason that stops her husband Francis “from walking out on her” (Emecheta 1994: 40). Nonetheless, Emecheta’s character is determined not to accept the life that has been arranged for her. As she puts it: “Who were these people anyway? Illiterate parents, who thought they knew a great deal of a curious kind of philosophy by which she was not going to bring up her children” (1994: 24)..

Once in London, Adah obtains what she calls a “first-class job” (Emecheta 1994: 43) at a library, which contrasts with the jobs her husband and migrant neighbors expect her to find. According to the migrant society that surrounds her, due to her role as a poor migrant woman, Adah can only fit in a job as a factory worker. While her husband pretends to continue his studies, she is expected to pay a white family to raise her children. This is the reason why Adah rejects her husband’s expectations, finds a better job, and is able to take care of her own children just by herself. Adah is repeating the same pattern she performed back at home in Nigeria but, in the eyes of her London community, her behavior is presumptuous.

Despite the fact that Adah’s job is presented as a “stepping stone” (Emecheta 1994: 179) to her future life as a writer, her time as a worker and, more importantly, her duties as a wife and a mother, prevent Adah from enjoying much free time, if any. It is not until Adah has to quit her job due to her fourth pregnancy, and economic problems arise that she establishes a timetable, and [finds] that she [can] manage to have three hours of quiet each afternoon” (Emecheta 1994: 172). Significantly, Emecheta makes use of her pregnancy – part of Adah’s female duties—, to provide her character with the time and space she needs to recover her old dream and become a writer. At this point Adah asks herself “Why not attempt writing? [...] and [she] wrote the manuscript of a book she was going to call *The Bride Price*” (Emecheta 1994: 172). Once the importance of writing is addressed, Emecheta highlights it by exposing her character to the destruction of her novel. Adah’s husband sets her first novel on fire, “[t]he story that she was basing her dream of her becoming a writer upon” (Emecheta 1994:

181), and this signals the moment when Adah finds the courage to abandon him because now that “her first story had been completed. She could not go back” (Emecheta 1994: 179).

In the sequel to Adah’s story, the novel *In the Ditch*, Adah’s problems remain very much the same: “[h]ow to study, keep her job and look after her kids” (Emecheta 1983: 20) just by herself. Although Adah works at a museum and manages to have time for herself, her role as a sociology student, attending her classes in the evening, and looking after her five children as a single parent, become hard and time consuming. Once again Emecheta presents a predicament in which class and gender, mingled with race issues, seem to prevent Adah from reaching her goals. Even though her decision to resign from her job means a step backwards and she cannot confront the idea of abandoning her dream of living “by writing African short stories” (Emecheta 1983: 37), Adah retains her self-esteem and her determination: “I may still become a writer, a writer of a best-selling book, I may still become a qualified social scientist who may one day be an Adviser” (Emecheta 1983: 38).

Similarly, in *The House on Mango Street*, a novel narratively constructed around brief chapters or vignettes, Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros addresses the issue of getting an education for women like herself. To do so, she employs a girl character, Alicia, –who has to do the housework, and then take two trains and a bus to go to university “because she doesn’t want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin” (Cisneros 1991: 31-32). This character and the narrator herself, the twelve-year-old Esperanza, highlight that Chicana girls and women could always find jobs in assembly lines. In fact, this type of job work is the one Esperanza is offered by her aunt, who sets her up “at the Peter Pan Photo Finishers where she [herself] work[s],” and where Esperanza has to lie by “saying [she] [i]s one year older” (Cisneros 1991: 54) if she wants to secure the job.

Even though school is present all throughout the novel and there are references to Esperanza starting high school, the general image provided is that of young women who leave their studies and get married. It is common to find characters like Ruthie, a young girl who “had lots of job offers when she was young, but she never took them.

She got married instead” (Cisneros 1991: 69). In fact, Esperanza highlights Ruthie’s estrangement from education after getting married: “Books are wonderful, Ruthie says ... but I can’t read anymore. I get headaches” (Cisneros 1991: 69). Esperanza’s friend, Sally, also repeats this same pattern and marries “in another state where it’s legal to get married before eighth grade” (Cisneros 1991: 101). In both older and younger generations, from Esperanza’s great-grandmother to Sally, there are examples of women who cannot escape their everyday realities, women who look “out the window [their] whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (Cisneros 1991: 11). Cisneros, like Woolf and Emecheta, writes “with strong doses of feminist ideology and social protest” (Herrera-Sobek 1995: 23). Through her female characters, she not only criticizes the roles many women are forced into but she claims the existence of other possibilities. Contrary to Adah’s mother in Emecheta’s novel, Esperanza’s mother presents herself as a model her daughter should not follow: “I could’ve been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard [...] Got to take care all your own” (Cisneros 1991: 91).

Despite the differences in periods and backgrounds (Nigeria, London, the US) the shared difficulties these novels point out are explicit. That is, the serious quandaries women have to confront when they try to find a job, get an education or rely on having enough money enough to write. These difficulties resemble substantially the three questions Woolf poses in her essay, preventing Chicanas or African women from achieving the stability required to become writers. Moreover, without an economic and political empowerment, these women will not be able to “contribute to the advancement of other women educationally and liberate them from the bondage of ignorance” (Oseghale and Oriahi 2006: 237-238), which according to Jane Marcus Woolf did (Marcus 1981: xiv).

### **3. THE ROLE OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS**

In her essay, Woolf claims that “early nineteenth-century [female] novelists[,] when they came to set their thoughts on paper[,] had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little

help” (Woolf 1945: 76). This lack of female references, together with the lack of opportunities female writers had, prevented many women from entering the literary world. In fact, Woolf makes reference to the connection that writers establish with the previous generations. She not only claims that “books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately” (Woolf 1945: 79), but she also considers that “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers” (Woolf 1945: 96).

Mary Jean Corbett notes that, the author notes that “Woolf herself returned repeatedly in the first decades of her career as a professional writer to preoccupations and problems that had exercised two prior Victorian generations of writers” (Corbett 2014: 27-28) and, as a matter of fact, in *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf delves into the influence of authors like Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot, “considered of a great importance as they leave their marks on the beginning of feminine literature” (Filimon 2009: 27). Moreover, Marcus insists on Woolf’s threefold identity:

...her roles as artist, feminist and socialist were subtly intertwined in what she called ‘the triple ply’, to assert that fiction had long been female territory, but, more than that, that each generation of women writers influences each other, that style evolves historically and is determined by class and sex. [Thus,] [s]he expected her literary ‘daughters’ to take up where she left off. (Marcus 1981: 8).

As regards this important point that Woolf defends in her essay *A Room of One’s Own*, Emecheta and Cisneros have lacked a long tradition of female writers in African and Chicano literatures. However, the importance of a few women they describe as *aunts* has always been present in their writings, which has helped them to establish a tradition by themselves and prove the new generations of readers that they could also write. Grandmothers or *aunts* have been acknowledged both as an influence and as an inspiration in the writings of many African women writers (See Chiavetta 2004; Nnaemeka 1997). This is due to the traditional role that oral tradition and storytellers have among both African men and women. In fact,

this connection that most acclaimed writers establish contributed to a feeling of continuity between the past, the present, and the future of female writers, and it also helped to settle a female “literary tradition [that had] its own rules, themes, and objectives” (Chiavetta 2004: 69). Emecheta’s novels highlight the need of this continuity when the main character, Adah, admits to not knowing “any black writers apart from the few Nigerian ones, like Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa” (Emecheta 1994: 160). As a matter of fact Adah “did not know that there were any other black writers” (Emecheta 1994: 160). This concern continues in the novel’s sequel, where Adah is now “known at her local library, [and] she now looked on kids’ school as an extension of her family” (Emecheta 1983: 102).

Adah’s husband Francis burns her first novel, and this becomes relevant not only as a stimulus for her individual identity, but it also highlights the role of Adah in the novel as Emecheta’s statement to the readers. For Adah, the story is a way of showing her children and grandchildren what she was able to do in the most adverse situation: “She was going to tell them [...] ‘Look, I wrote that when I was a young woman with my own hand and in the English language.’ And she was sure they were all going to laugh and their children were going to laugh too and say, ‘Oh, Granny, you are so funny’” (Emecheta 1994: 181).

In her desire to enlighten female readers, Adah encourages women to struggle for their rights, but she knows that their lack of knowledge keeps them in ignorance and servitude when she states: “Women in the ditch were always too ignorant or too frightened to ask for what they were entitled to” (Emecheta 1983: 114). As a matter of fact, Adah puts her theory into practice when she considers her decision to strive for a better life, and she encourages herself to do so: “I suppose I have to go. I have to be out of the ditch sometime, I have to learn to make my own decisions [...] It was time she became an individual” (Emecheta 1983: 148-149).

As regards Chicana cultures, as Denise Segura and Jennifer Pierce note, “closeness between Chicanas and their grandmothers is described by many social narrators” (Segura & Pierce 1993: 75). These critics insist that “Chicanas are sometimes as close, if not closer, to

grandmothers [,] godmothers [or aunts] as they are to their own mothers” (Segura & Pierce 1993: 76). In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza (Cisneros *alter ego*) does not refer to famous writers, as Emecheta does, but Cisneros introduces several characters whose role is to help Esperanza to pursue her literary aims. The first of these characters is Esperanza’s old aunt, Aunt Lupe, who encourages her to keep writing: “You must keep writing. It will keep you free” (Cisneros 1991: 61). However, only when she dies does Esperanza start to realize the importance of Aunt Lupe’s words: “And then she died, my aunt who listened to my poems. And then we began to dream the dreams” (Cisneros 1991: 61).

The second character is one of her neighbors, a woman who “writes poems on little pieces of paper that she folds over and over and holds in her hands a long time [...] She lets me read her poems. I let her read mine” (Cisneros 1991: 84). Through her problems with her husband and her anxieties, this neighbor makes Esperanza question if there is something she can do to help her community, although at this point of the novel she believes is skeptical: “There is nothing *I* can do” (Cisneros 1991: 85, emphasis in the original). The third character comes in the figure of three sisters who function as symbolic godmothers to Esperanza. She describes them as “the aunts, the three sisters, *las comadres* [‘the godmothers’]” (Cisneros 1991: 103). These women can foresee something special about Esperanza’s, and let her know about her future:

Look at her hands [...] And they turned them over and over as if they were looking for something. She’s special. Yes, she’ll go very far [...] Esperanza. [...] When you leave you must remember always to come back, she said [...] to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are [...] You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you (Cisneros 1991: 104-105).

The three sisters, a clear reference to the Aztec cycle of life and death, connect Esperanza to her origins and to the idea of helping her

community to seek for a better future. Therefore, in their role as *aunts*, they encourage her to keep on writing, and leave the neighborhood to later on return and promote a change, a rebirth, in her community.

Through their writings, Chicana critics and authors, like Cherrie Moraga, Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, María Herrera-Sobek and Helena M. Viramontes, struggle against the roles imposed on women, roles that define them either as passive mothers and delicate females or as the inheritors of the ‘treacherous’ Malinche.<sup>6</sup> Rita Sánchez asserts that

[c]ourageously, La Chicana writer, by understanding the condition of colonization under which she was born, the images of betrayal that surround her, and the forces of racism that still exist for her, has exhibited her strength by the very denial of these impositions [...] she has transcended the bounds of tradition, made a choice to determine her own life, and finally, has become the revolutionary voice. (1997: 66)

Quite similarly, in her analysis of Woolf’s essay, Elena Filimon highlights the fact that “[t]his is a time in which women might be able to make contributions that are only possible because they are women” (Filimon 2009: 28). Marcus’ vision of Woolf’s essay as a space where “[w]e are to see ourselves as part of a collective audience” (Marcus 1981: 10), emphasizes the sense of union present in the texts of the three authors analyzed here, Woolf, Emecheta and Cisneros. However, I do not believe that in Woolf’s essay “[w]e are forced to lay down our weapons as readers” (Marcus 1981: 9), but quite to the contrary, Woolf’s essay and narrator have a clear political component that stresses the importance of taking action and provides the readers with examples of what they could do to bring change to their communities.

In his analysis of the subaltern, Jay Maggio shows his concern with the “enlightenment” the West could experience thanks to an agent of the subaltern. For him, “[t]he native informant, though useful, offers only a dead end [...] In fact, regardless of how benevolent the native informant or the postcolonial critique is, he/she is always seen, to a

certain extent, as an exotic other. Or, as Spivak suggests, the subaltern remains an inaccessible blackness” (Maggio 2007: 427). Following this same thread, Maggio questions Spivak’s role as a subaltern, and analyzes how her “autobiographical style itself solves the problem of the subaltern speaking [...] Yet this ‘solution’ ignores Spivak’s [...] role as a self-aware ‘native informant’” (Maggio 2007: 429). In my understanding of *A Room of One’s Own*, *Second-Class Citizen*, *In the Ditch* and *The House on Mango Street*, whether they are set in a postcolonial context or not, this self-aware native informant is clearly present in the form of the three female narrators. Spivak’s theory of the subaltern and her autobiographical style bring to light that the most relevant role that Woolf, Emecheta, and Cisneros consciously play as writers through their characters is political.

Woolf’s narrator addresses the readers to remind them “that men and women can be useful to one another because they are so very different and that they should take benefits from this major distinction, in a positive way” (Filimon 2009: 28), at the same time that she encourages female writers to pursue their literary career. Likewise, in the closing vignettes in *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza addresses the reader self-consciously as the writer of the story: “I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong” (Cisneros 1991: 109). Significantly, the lines that follow coincide with the first paragraph of the novel, thus providing a circular, cyclic, structure. However, there is an alteration in the paragraph whereby Esperanza’s original allusion to moving frequently is replaced now by a reference to Mango Street. In so doing, Esperanza establishes an evolution from the character she was at the beginning of the novel to the character she becomes at the end, a character that finally belongs to a community. Similarly, Esperanza establishes a difference between what writing could mean for an individual and what it could mean for a community. Esperanza refers to writing as a way of escaping reality, as a therapy for her, so that when she “put[s] it down on paper [...] the ghost does not ache so much” (Cisneros 1991: 110). By contrast, in her political role, she appropriates the words of her godmothers and *aunts* and encouragingly reminds the readers how writing is a way to change reality: “One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango [...] They will not know I have gone away

to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (Cisneros 1991: 110).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Literature can be understood as a tool that enables writers to address their readers. To put it differently, “[w]e live and tell our lives through narrative. In doing so, we are faced with viewing a life—a human condition—in its entirety” (Langer 1995: 7). In this sense, Woolf’s narrator in *A Room of One’s Own* expresses her concern about how “[i]t is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death” (Woolf 1945: 102-103). Woolf addresses female writers’ problems and, despite critics like Michèle Barrett, who observes that Woolf “retains the notion that in the correct conditions art may be totally divorced from economic, political, or ideological constraints” (Barrett 1979: 17), this essay has proven the importance of Woolf’s political concerns and her insistence on the necessity of a room and five hundred pounds a year “if [a woman] is to write fiction” (Woolf 1945: 6).

In my analysis of education and writing and the role of *aunts* in Emecheta’s and Cisneros’ novels, respectively, Woolf’s struggles in relation to class and gender need to be recontextualized with factors like race and the concept of the subaltern, inherent to the postcolonial framework. The dialogue between Woolf’s and Spivak’s concerns as writers, –central to analyze Emecheta and Cisneros as inheritors of Woolf’s gender vindication at a different eras, –have brought to light the importance of their political role. Like Woolf, Emecheta and Cisneros also make use of their female characters to highlight the importance of financial independence for women to be able to write creatively. As “[t]he female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (Spivak 1994: 104), Emecheta and Cisneros have established their respective traditions by themselves and their political and social novels have been used as a tool to show to the new generations of female readers that earning a living by writing is not only a possibility that

exists but it is a responsibility towards their community. In fact, considering that the “[r]eflection in [the writer’s] tradition, is the movement toward the very core of being [and] it is the recovery of the past that makes the future” (Valdez 1992: 71), the three authors have crossed global and chronological boundaries, becoming *aunts* for other writers. In so doing, they have opened up the possibility for other female authors to write political and social novels, by remembering the past, and struggling for a new future.

In *Envisioning Literature*, Judith Langer claims that literature “sets the scene for us to explore both ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be” (Langer 1995: 5). Considering that this idea can be understood if applied both to the role of readers and writers, one can assume that Virginia Woolf, Buchi Emecheta and Sandra Cisneros allow the reader to discover, extract, and interpret their words through their narrators and characters in their respective novels. This paper has therefore considered literature as a way of opening the doors of politics at an individual level as well as sharing politics with a wider audience. The three female characters, who seem to be submissive and passive incapable-of-taking-action figures –a woman in the early twentieth century (Woolf’s unnamed narrator), a female African migrant (Adah), and a Chicana girl (Esperanza) in the Anglo world–, appropriate their own space and voice for themselves and offer other women the possibility of finding their own voices, leaving the domestic spheres and telling their own stories.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Judith F. Baca (b. Los Angeles, California, 1946), Alma López (b. Mexico) and Yolanda López (b. San Diego, California, 1942) are three well-known Chicana artists whose works focus on the experience of Chicanos/as, challenge ethnic stereotypes and empower women.

<sup>2</sup> Nigerian writers Amos Tutuola (1920-1997), Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), Elechi Amadi (1934-2016) and Cyprian Ekwensi (1921-2007) are often accused of providing an incomplete vision of African women. Achebe himself recognized in an interview that male writers “have been ambivalent, ... deceitful even, about the role of the

woman ... We have created all kinds of myths to support the suppression of the woman, and ... the time has come to put an end to that” (Achebe and Rutherford 1987: 3-4).

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the first generation of African women writers, second generation writers like Buchi Emecheta, who started publishing in the 1970s and 1980s, were able to reach a certain level of international visibility and critical attention.

<sup>4</sup> The three novels’ shared concern regarding women’s needs for a private space for women to write, which has been addressed elsewhere (see Gil-Naveira 2017 and Martin 2008).

<sup>5</sup> *Aunts* or “other-mothers” are usually older and wise women who pass their knowledge from one generation to the next through storytelling (this can be applied to the African, Chicano/a and Native American communities). Here I understand *aunts* –addressed as *grandmothers* by some writers–as the previous generations of female writers that address their readers with the intention of arousing a sense of belonging and continuity.

<sup>6</sup> Malinche is a historical figure who is considered both the mother and the traitor of the Mexican Indians. On the one hand, the son she bore to conqueror Hernán Cortés, Martín (b. 1531) is considered the first ‘mestizo’; on the other hand, Malinche’s job as translator for Cortés transformed her into a traitor in the eyes of the Mexican population. Today she is a controversial iconic figure, hated by the most conservative sector and idolized by revolutionary Chicanas, who are proud of calling themselves ‘the Daughters of la Chingada’.

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