The Power of the Rebozo: Sandra Cisneros and her Literary Loom.

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Abstract: For thousands of years, women have defied the social and patriarchal limits by creating art out of simple materials fashioned into objects used for utilitarian purposes. This is true of women from all cultures, from American women, both black and white, who fashioned beautiful art in the form of quilts to the women of many nations, including Mexico, who wove beauty and their stories into their multi-functional rebozos. For some women, the loom is the written word.

Sandra Cisneros is a Wise Latina who has used her literature to subvert the oppressive treatment of the feminine figures and symbols of her culture. She has done this by appropriating former cultural stereotypes, retelling the stories and redefining the symbols long maligned or weakened to suit the agenda of the patriarchy. She uses humor and realism to syncretically infuse much denigrated and misunderstood figures such as The Virgin of Guadalupe, La Llorona and La Malinche intocontemporary characters and roles. In doing so, she reconceptualizes them as powerful source myths. She also lifts up important female symbols and art forms as having agency and cultural significance.

One important symbol of the Mexican and Mexican-American female culture is the *rebozo.*Long thought of as a way for a woman to be modest, demure and maternal, Cisneros presents it as not only an art form but as a form of historic authoethnographic expression. Cisneros likens herself to a weaver, and one way she honors her ancestors is to honor this symbol of personal pride and power. She weaves their stories into her fiction as deftly as her ancestors wove their stories into the multi-colored threads on their looms.

This paper will explain the history of the *rebozo*: how it evolved from a utilitariangarment of the indigenous people into an art form and then into a form of passive resistance to the European invasion.

As the *rebozo* is central to the theme of her novel, *Caramelo*(Caramelo is, in fact, the name of an especially significant *rebozo*),attention will be given to how Cisneros lyrically weaves her magic and cultural pride into the symbol of the *rebozo.*

In *Caramelo*, the young narrator, Celaya, asks her dead grandmother, "Where does the story begin?" "In my day," replies the dead grandmother, "the story tellers always began a story with 'So here my history begins for your good understanding and my poor telling'" (409). Cisneros, like Celaya, is tuned in to these early women storytellers of her cultures, the ones whose stories were, by necessity, oral. In the early years of immigration into the United States (1848-1910), Mexican-American women were unable to read or write unless they came from wealthy families. Formal education for women was notconsidered a necessity for women in these pioneer families, but many were trained in the art of weaving, fine sewing, embroidery etc. Reneé Shea quotes Cisneros as saying, "I've always thought that my literary antecedents were not writers but weavers. Maybe my grandmothers didn't know how to write their names. I think about them sitting with a backstrap loom connected to a hook on the wall or a tree. What is telling a story but keeping track of those threads?" (qtd in Shea 34). ToCisneros, one's destiny is woven like threads into one's life. She envisions La Divina Providencia as a bare-breasted Indian weaver. "If the universe is a cloth," proposes Cisneros, "then all humanity is interwoven with different-colored threads (qtd in Shea 34).

Cisneros, perhaps as a nod to her ancestors, weaves several *rebozos*into her fiction. For Inés, the flying witch woman in "Eyes of Zapata" from the short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek*, the woven shawl or *rebozo*plays a symbolic role in her life as it unfolds. It is into her *reboza* that the young Inés gathers her things to run off with the "great" Zapata, her long-time, often-absent, always-unfaithful lover. It is her *rebozo* that she is forced to sell to feed herself and her children during the revolution. Finally, it is her *rebozo* and both the life and *rebozo* of her murdered mother that she sees restored in her dreamlike vision as she flies through the pre-dawn sky at the end of the story. This story, in many ways, is a precursor to the later, longer *Caramelo*, in that Cisneros has Inés first speak the words, "I'm a story that never ends. Pull one string and the whole cloth unravels" (Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*100). The supernatural perspective that is gained by Inés in flight allows her to see the design of her life that is woven too intricately to see up close, but that Cisneros claims is always there, for all women, with a clear purpose to the pattern.

*Caramelo*gets its name from a type of woven *rebozo.* In this novel, the young storyteller, Celaya, is fascinated with the death of her great grandmother. Her death lefther young daughter, Celaya's grandmother, with no mother and no training in the art of weaving that had historically been passed down from mothers to daughter, thus creating another kind of interlocking and doublelooping pattern. Celaya's grandmother was, thus, left "unfinished" like the final shawl that was started by the great grandmother but never finished. It was given to the daughter as a toy, as it was deemed unsellable and, therefore, worthless. The shawl is described as an

> exquisite *rebozo* of five *tiras* [stripes or bands], the cloth a beautiful blend of toffee, licorice, and vanilla stripes, flecked with black and white, which is why they call this design a "caramel." The shawl was slippery –soft, of an excellent quality and weight, with astonishing fringe work resembling a cascade of fireworks on a field of sunflower. (94)

The grandmother, whom Celaya calls the "awful grandmother" (meaning fearsome, imposing) remains fearsome even after her own death. She speaks to "Lala" about being "lonely like this, neither dead nor alive, but somewhere halfway, like an elevator between floors…I'm in the middle of nowhere" (408). The grandmother speaks of needing forgiveness in order to cross over into the afterlife, but in terms that are reminiscent of the fringe on the rebozo, she has made too many knots out of her tangled life (408). Lala is a storyteller who tries not to put on "that ugly squashed hat of despair" (Sayers 3). Instead, she sets out to tell the story of her family, and it is her grandmother's caramel *rebozo* that sustains her.

This *rebozo,* though it spends most of the novel wrapped up and stored in the grandmother's armoire, serves to weave together many aspects of the story. The grandmother finds its touch soothing, as though it brings back the touch of her mother. Lala finds comfort in braiding and unbraiding the fringe. This braiding action also foreshadows the identification of Candalaria, the washerwoman's daughter, as the biological sister of Lala, the illegitimate daughter of Lala's father, and thus also a great granddaughter of the weaver. When Candalaria weaves a rose for Lala out of strips of braided palm fronds, Lala asks where she learned how to do that. "This?" asks Candalaria, "I don't know. My hands taught me (77). This "secret sister: will prove to be an important element in Lala's life, just as Cisnero's "secret sister," one who died in infancy, will prove to be an important element in the life of the author.

Cisneros explains in a footnote to *Caramelo*that the *rebozo*itself is like the Meztizas in that it was born in Mexico but came from everywhere. It evolved from Indian cloths used to carry babies, is decorated with fringe from Spanish shawls, and is made of silk from China imported to Acapulco (96). Because they were created when mestizas were prohibited by the Spanish from wearing Indian dress, the *rebozo* could be interpreted as a form of "authoethnographic expression," as defined by Mary Louse Pratt as "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms" (7).

Yet, as Tey Diana Rebolledo points out, "This form of expression is one that 'involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror, but which at the same time functions as a form of resistance'" (118-19).

Chicana writers, like Cisneros, thus perpetuate the heritage of their foremothers and their indigenous past by making the *rebozo* what Mary Louise Pratt calls a "contact zone" between cultures. Rebolledo writes that "Chicana writers embroider, delineate, transform, and overlay the paper with personal images springing forth from their own cultural heritage" (148). This "muscle memory" in their hands is the same as that which teaches Candalaria's hands to weave roses out of simple palm fronds. Cisneros, like Celaya, was perpetually displaced as a child, travelling between her two "homelands" of Mexico and various cities in the United States. "Her Mexicanness as well as her Americanness unveil an admixture of home and homelessness that lead her to ceaselessly remodel her subsequent Mexican and American identity into a new, inter-American one"(Cristian 7). Celaya emphasizes that each year when she crosses borders "it's the same—my mind forgets. But my body always remembers"(qtd in Cristian 7). As Cisneros weaves her stories, perhaps she is channeling the muscle memory of the generations of women weavers who came before her.

References

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