

## MASSACRE OF THE DREAMERS, ANA CASTILLO'S FEMINIST MANIFESTO

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*Abstract: Feminism still exists. So does femicide. Though many years have passed since the suffragettes began their liberation movement, feminist echoes have not been heard yet in all contemporary societies. And not all women have found a voice of their own.*

*Feminism can be traced back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when white women fought mainly for political equity, but by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1980s and 1990s, what had started merely as a liberation movement was now a cultural ideology concerned with exploring the feminine identity, as diverse and colourful as it was. Hence, feminism became feminisms. Not one, but as many as needed to encompass and reveal femininity in all its multifariousness. Thus, indigenous feminism appeared and women of colour were starting to make their voices heard in a world ruled both by men and by white, middle-class, heterosexual women.*

*The present paper aims at making readers aware of the importance of understanding feminism in all its forms. Nevertheless, our first and foremost interest is that of familiarizing the readers with Ana Castillo's concept of Xicanisma, her special form of feminism, which she theorized in her unconventional PhD dissertation, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, published in 1994. In it she envisioned a brave new world peopled with the multiple facets, the multiple selves of being a woman. Castillo spoke for/of the countryless woman, unaccepted and not belonging to either white men or Chicanos.*

**Keywords: Xicanisma, Ana Castillo, indigenous feminism, feminism, liberation movement.**

Femicide coexists alongside feminism in the same manner in which discrimination, rape and violence still exist in a world characterized by democracy, freedom and political correctness. Though the early buds of feminism sprang at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and hence for most women the battle is now over, others continue to hide their faces, bodies, femininity and selves under impervious shields.

Feminism is generally considered to be structured into three stages (some contemporary feminists even speak of a fourth unacknowledged wave that relies heavily on social media technologies) and it all began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, as well as in USA. It started as a social and political movement, as white middle-class women's transition from margins to a political centre. However, among these women who sought only political and social equity, feminists such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir made their voices heard, speaking for the first time about sexuality, the condition of women as writers and their marginal position in society. According to Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, in order to be a true woman, one must accept herself as the Other, idea stated, years before, by Virginia Woolf:

*Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. [...] For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. (2007: 585-6)*

Little by little, that political centre expanded. It became social, hence starting the second wave of feminism (reaching its peak in the 1960s and 1970s), which dealt with the

peripheral status of different social groups that had been neglected before. After nearly a decade, in the 1980s and 1990s, the centre became cultural and ethnic, making way to the indigenous feminism.

Yet, women realized that by reaching the centre they had in fact to silence their own femininity and identity, and to adapt to masculine values. In other words, the world was still a place only for men, thus, for these women, liberation meant not making their femininity heard, appreciated and respected, but in fact losing it since, on their way towards the centre, women symbolically transformed themselves into men.

From that moment onward, feminism meant not conquering the political, social and cultural centre, but reaching a centre with multiple nuclei. Not inhabiting the One's world, but creating a multi-centred society, with a nucleus for each ethnic group, freely and equally interrelating with each other. In other words, by challenging the old dichotomy between the One (the male, the concrete, the centre of the social system) and the Other (the female, the unseen, the peripheral), feminism began to represent women's struggle to be accepted and appreciated for how they were: different. So feminism became feminisms. Not one, but as many as needed to encompass and reveal femininity in all its colours and shades. It was only then, in the 1980s and 1990s, that women of colour became visible. Black, brown or yellow, indigenous feminists were starting to make their voices heard in a world ruled both by men and by white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Black, brown or yellow, they all had in common the need to rediscover, re-evaluate and reinterpret their female identities, as well as to reshape their own selves.

What followed was the appearance of third wave feminism, still active nowadays, when feminism expanded into an impressive array of feminisms, some more radical than others, of which perhaps the most notable is postcolonial feminism. Coming as a completion of the work done by previous feminists, contemporary women seek to create a new theoretical framework, one that includes all women, not only those from the Western cultures, and embraces multiplicity as well as particularity.

As for the Latina feminism, the core of our interest, its theoretical framework was created during the second wave of the mainstream movement by writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga etc., who built with their own lumber, bricks, mortar and feminist architecture a new Latina identity, one that spoke of and comforted many Chicanas, as Gloria Anzaldúa beautifully put it:

*So, don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures – white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – una cultura mestiza – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (2007: 44)*

Hence, it appeared in the 1970s as a way of making Chicanas heard since the (white) feminist movement that was taking place across the USA at that time did not voice their needs and struggles. In May 1971, over 600 Chicanas met in Houston, Texas, for the *Mujeres Por la Raza* Conference, thus initializing the Chicana Feminist Movement. This came as the result of

the 1969 Denver Youth Conference, in which Anglo women opinionated that Chicanas did not want to be liberated.

Strikes, manifestoes, (radical) activism and many wanting-to-be-different actions followed. Anything that would have made their voices heard and lessened their sense of invisibility. Anything that would have helped them, as Victoria Alegría Rosales, a Mexican-American poet and writer, stated, “have a goal instead of an abusive husband and a child every year. I wanted to go to school instead of Church. I wanted to be myself, find someone, raise my children, live in peace” (qtd. in Castillo, 1995: 140).

Victoria Alegría Rosales’ statement also pinpoints the fact that the Chicana Feminist Movement challenged not only mainstream feminism, but also the Chicano Movement, reason for which they have been seen as traitors by their male community (but also by some Chicanas who did not have the power to stand for their rights and did not ask for liberation). For their struggle to resist and to make themselves heard, their men labelled them as being anti-cultural, anti-family and anti-man. However, at the same time, the Chicano movement ignored their requests and refused to include them into their manifesto, considering racism more important than sexism. They were not ready yet to accept their wives as their equals. Subsequently, Chicanas had to resist being assimilated, absorbed by someone else’s voice.

Moreover, the accusations coming from their fathers, husbands and sons were without grounds since Chicana feminists are not men-haters. Nor all of them lesbians. Nor *mujeres malas*. In fact, as Ana Castillo put it in *Massacre of the Dreamers*, “Men are not our opposites, our opponents, our ‘other’. Many of us are alienated from our true ‘feminine’ spirit as men are”. (1995: 226) All women wanted (and still do!) was to express their self and to revolt against all kinds of oppression, and so they needed to distinguish themselves from the Chicano Movement because it did not truly articulate their experiences. Still, this does not mean that they did not understand the reasons behind their husbands’ aggressive behaviour, this explaining why many Chicanas still do not take attitude towards their position and role as wives and mothers.

Chicanas perceive their men’s oppressive attitude as the result of losing their self-esteem, dignity and respect, and, as Gloria Anzaldúa clearly explained, “in the Gringo world, the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation. Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort.” (2007: 105). Hence, how else can men cope with their not belonging to any culture?! How else can they face their loss of masculinity if not by treating their wives and daughters violently, the most vulnerable human beings in the contemporary American society?!

Hence, from resistance and revolt, sufferance and violence, companionship and love, their voice emerged. A brown one; sensitive, yet very powerful. Thus came the time for confessions; the time to let everyone know who they are and what their struggles are. To be recognized and cherished, and to forge their own language, voice and self-consciousness. To shape new myths and to cross new boundaries.

She, the Chicana woman, after facing the unfaceable in herself as well as in others, has become the architect of her soul, and she moulds it according to her will and her own perception of it. After reaching this bursting with energy multi-nucleus centre and claiming her place in it, she needs, in order not to be assimilated, to create her own *camino*, her own

path. To do so, she must search within herself. For Anzaldúa this journey into her self is called “*el camino de la Mestiza/the Mestiza way*”, Ana Castillo names it “Xicanisma”, but no matter of its title, this crossing over, this deconstruct-construct movement is Chicanas’ liberation.

A Mexican-American writer, born and raised in Chicago, Ana Castillo speaks for the women of colour. Her work contains poetry, novels, short stories, essays and plays, and she started her career as a visual artist – making her voice heard through different means. But above all, she recommends herself as a brown woman, as we are welcomed by the first sentence in her unconventional PhD dissertation: “I am a brown woman, from the Mexican side of town – torn between the Chicago *obrero* roots of my upbringing and my egocentric tendency toward creative expressions. Characteristically, as a poet I am opinionated and rely on my hunches”. (Castillo, 1995: 1)

Feeling, as many other Chicanas, that mainstream feminism failed to tell her story, she invented the term Xicanisma (a combination of Chicana and feminista) for a better representation of her experiences. As declared in an interview on television, she sees Xicanista as “una persona que tiene la concientización, who understands who she is, understands where she fits in the big scheme of our society, and who’s got the guts to make some changes in her community”. Hence, Xicanistas are strong and beautiful women who believe that being different is not a scarlet letter or a sin, but a symbol of pride, a gift; as women who fight against an all-encompassing, all-assimilating and egocentric United States of America.

Castillo explained that she needed to invent a new word since she (and other women like her) failed to find herself represented by the mainstream feminist movement or by the Chicano movement. Moreover, she felt that the term Chicana limited her experience:

*For the brown woman the term feminism was and continues to be inseparably linked with white women of middle- and upper-class background. [...] Feminism, therefore, is perhaps not a term embraced by most women who might be inclined to define themselves as Chicanas and who, in practice, have goals and beliefs found in feminist politics. [...] Along the same lines, many women of Mexican descent in the nineties do not apply the term Chicana to themselves seeing it as an outdated expression weighed down by the particular radicalism of the seventies. (Castillo, 1995: 10)*

Through her entire work she hoped to “rescue Xicanisma from the suffocating atmosphere of conference rooms, the acrobatics of academic terms and concepts and carry it out to our work place, social gatherings, kitchens, bedrooms, and society in general” (Castillo, 1995: 11). She hoped to help women of colour become aware of their selves and create their own movement towards liberation by making them realize that mainstream feminism was not expressing their experiences.

In *Massacre of the Dreamers* she envisioned a brave new world. One peopled with the multiple facets, the multiple selves of being a woman, of being different. Castillo spoke for/of the countryless woman, unaccepted and not belonging to either gringos or Chicanos. She spoke for/of saintly mothers and soldiers’ whores, for/of *la macha*, *brujas* and *curanderas*, mothers and daughters, motherless daughters and motherless mothers, lesbians, activists. She spoke for/of all her female characters. For/of herself.

She taught them how to be true to themselves, how to believe in their beauty and femininity. How to be good lovers, wives and mothers, showing them how to take care of their children (one of the subchapters is entitled “Motherguides preparing the next generation”). She gave them confidence, strength, wisdom and reason to believe in themselves. She gave herself to them. Told them her story. Shared her experiences as a single mother. A Chicana single mother in a white world.

When envisioning her resistance to the dominant society, she felt her mission closer to the Black Power Movement than to the Chicano one, feeling that “while I have more in common with a Mexican man than with a white woman, I have much more in common with an Algerian woman than I do with a Mexican man”. (1995: 23) Thus, Xicanisma, seeking equality for all people and discussing the issues of racism, sexism, homophobia and poverty, is close to ‘womanism’, a term coined by Alice Walker to describe the Black Feminist Movement. She believed that the term comes from ‘womanish’, which is opposed to ‘girlish’, frivolous, irresponsible. According to her, womanists are outrageous, audacious, courageous women who want to know more than is considered ‘good’ for one. Walker also stated that womanists are women who love other women, sexually or/and non-sexually; women who appreciate women’s culture, emotional flexibility and strength. Last but not least, she believed that womanists are committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female.

Like Alice Walker, Castillo spoke of women’s refusal to submit to any kind of oppression, of lesbianism not as a reaction to male dominance, but as woman’s recognition of her true nature, and of a return to her indigenous roots and a reawakening of her female energies:

*In a similar nationalist spirit as that of the Black power Movement [...], we refused to cut our long braids, to conform to standard English for the sake of being tokenized in the job market. We gave our children pre-Conquest barrios and started health clinics and daycare centres. To affirm our mexinidad and to give us courage we resurrected every pre-Conquest and Catholic icon, ritual, symbol possible – from the Aztec calendar to the Virgen de Guadalupe banner. (1995: 94)*

All in all, Ana Castillo dreamed of a resurrection of the dreamers. Of women powerful enough to search within themselves; to “grapple with misogynist, racist, and classist that has been planted in our own minds”. (Castillo, 1995: 148) And she made it a manifesto:

*What we have been permitted to be without argument in society is the compassionate, cooperative, yielding, procreator of the species, india fea, burra beast of burden of society. Viewed as ugly and common as straw. We know that we are not. Let us be alchemists for our culture and our lives and use this conditioning as our raw material to convert it into a driving force pure as gold. (Castillo, 1995: 226)*

A manifesto, or, as Rosaura Sánchez sees it, a “jeremiad”, since “assuming an exhortatory style at times [...], the book essays seek to fashion a modern myth of ‘Xicanisma’, which, with its blend of feminism and *indigenismo*, will counter the defunct ‘American dream’ and provide spiritual direction for Chicanas”. (1997: 365-7)

Though we see it more as a manifesto or as the sheer need to make her voice heard and to finally rebel against all oppressions, *Massacre of the Dreamers* is Ana Castillo's cry for liberation; her mission to help brown women escape oblivion, become conscious of their indigenous roots and live modern lives, without fearing their spiritual and sexual needs.

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