

ALMA LUZ VILLANUEVA'S JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY IN LUNA'S CALIFORNIA POPPIES

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Abstract: Alma Luz Villanueva's novel Luna's California Poppies (2002) is a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story of a Latina girl living in an unfair and oppressive world. It is a successful tale of self-discovery, Luna managing to come to terms with the harsh patriarchal reality that surrounds her, with herself and also with God. Still, the novel is more than a bildungsroman since Villanueva's life is well hidden under the mask of fiction, and thus Luna's story is her own story of becoming. My reading of the novel highlights the autobiographical elements from the novel, and also the fact that Villanueva plays with form, genre, narrative technique and even typographic representation to write a feminist bildungsroman.

Keywords: Latina feminism, Alma Luz Villanueva, Third World, bildungsroman, autobiography

Alma Luz Villanueva was born in Lompoc, California, in 1944. She grew up in poverty in the Mission district of San Francisco, home for Hispanic immigrants, being raised by her maternal grandmother, Jesús Villanueva, a Yaqui Indian *curandera*, who played a crucial role in the life and later on in the writings of Villanueva. She never knew her father, of German ancestry, and at eleven years old, after her grandmother's death, she was raised through her adolescent years by her mother, with whom she did not have a healthy mother-daughter relationship, and her aunt. Her mother failed to offer her a loving and caring environment, and so Villanueva dropped out of high school at the age of 15 to have her first child. She confessed that the period of time spent with her mother was "an early drama, quite a challenge to survive. So I didn't write anything from age 13 to 25 because I was struggling for survival." (Schober et al., Web)

She started writing at the end of the 1960s, when she was just a young mother in search of herself (her first published work was a collection of poetry, *Bloodroot*, 1977), and she keeps writing, confidently stating in one interview that "I will write until I leave this body. Of course, I'm grateful for every book I've published, and I wait for *la vida* to surprise me, as it always does." (Aldama 2006: 293)

Similar to Esmeralda Santiago, she also experienced an epiphany when her daughter was 15, the same age Villanueva was when she had her, that determined her to start writing. She explains in an interview how she felt a click went off in her at that moment, “the feeling of a volcano erupted within me. And what I knew I had to do was sit and write. To sit and try to write” (Hernández Web). Thus, at about 30 years old, when she was overwhelmingly busy with being a mother, she felt this “volcano of words” erupted within her and she started writing. She further confesses that the first stage in her trying to write “was locking myself in the bathroom” since she lacked the privacy of a room of her own. Villanueva, who teaches Creative Writing in the Master of Fine Arts program at Antioch University in Los Angeles, ends the interview in an instructive manner, urging women to start writing in order to reach their true selves: “That’s how you have to start to write if you have children [...] and this volcano goes off in you, even if you have to lock yourself in the toilet, do it because that is how we women often have to seize our time.”

Though not a writer of memoirs, Villanueva’s work, be it poetry, novels, short stories or essays, is highly autobiographical, yet her life is well hidden under the mask of fiction as “many details of her life enter into the texture of Villanueva’s writing” (Madsen 2000: 167). Everything she writes is a mirror of herself and a bridge both to herself and the world. She thus becomes first and foremost a healer, not one in the traditional way, even though her grandmother came from a long line of herbal healers, and her four children are all healers – as she proudly confesses in one interview:

My grandmother was an herbal healer (as was her mother and her mother), and to see my daughter now as a healer, as well as my sons, the family intent continues. My thirty-seven-year-old son, for example, teaches high school chemistry and is also a family counsellor [...]. And my youngest son [...] is now a journalist with a passion for the oppressed, to tell their stories. (Aldama 2006: 292)

Hence, Villanueva is a healer of souls, of her own and of others, and her healing powers transpire from every piece of her writing, including her third novel *Luna’s California Poppies*, published in 2002. Though not a memoir, it is Alma Luz Villanueva’s portrayal of her own story of becoming, her coming-of-age tale, since Luna, the protagonist, mirrors Villanueva’s life. The novel starts after the death of Luna’s grandmother, yet we soon learn, from Luna’s recollection of the past, that her *Mamacita* was a Yaqui Indian *curandera* from Mexico, who happily raised Luna. After the death of her grandmother, being neglected by her mother Carmen, she meets Darling, a white woman who takes her in her home and brings Luna the

peace she so desperately needed. On the first night spent in Darling's house, Luna has a flying dream, the kind she used to have when she lived with her *Mamacita*:

And I really REALLY like this DARLING lady Virgen, I REALLY REALLY do. Even if she is a White Lady – but she has green greener eyes just like a CAT like the way a CAT looks at you right? So I spend the night and for the first time in a million years I wake up in sheets that are kinda stiff and kinda smell like the WIND out side and I had a Flying Dream like I used to when I was little with Mamacita, and I wish I could tell her this one cause every where I looked was LIGHT lots brighter than even the SUN. (Villanueva 2002: 11)

This “White Lady”, as Luna calls her, highlighting the fact that she was used to seeing ethnicity as a barrier never to be crossed and to being treated badly by white people, gave Luna not only food and a clean space to sleep, but she also helped her get closer to her deeply hidden self. She taught Luna to speak proper English and encouraged her to read and to write; she used to give Luna four words every week, which she had to look up in the dictionary and write a poem or a paragraph with them. And so Luna started writing poems about herself and her life as a young girl; she started writing her story of becoming. Moreover, Darling helped Luna get closer to nature, thus get closer to her own nature, and also shortly feel the presence of a paternal figure in her life, when Danny the Dane came to visit Darling: “Then D.T.D looked at me kinda like the way I think a father might look at you if he really likes you a lot right Virgen?” (90)

However, when Darling decides to adopt the thirteen-years-old Luna, she suddenly stops writing and the novel now divides into two parts, one with Luna the child and another one when Luna is 28 years old. She starts a new diary after her daughter discovers her childhood diary. We now meet an adult Luna, a mother of three children, and we learn from her that Carmen did not allow Darling to adopt Luna, so she had to return to her miserable life with her mother.

As an adult, Luna tells *La Virgen*, the recipient of all her letters, how her life has been since last writing to her, how hard it was for her and how many obstacles she had to overcome, yet “I SURVIVED just about everything” (159). When living back with Carmen, she was fortunate enough to have Whitey as neighbour; he took good care of her and was a substitute for the father she never knew. When he died, Whitey left Luna enough money to buy a farm, her first true home, where she had more obstacles to overcome. Now, Luna, a teacher in Sebastopol, with one of her poems having been published, has made this farm into her Secret Crystal World, populated by all the people she has met throughout her intense life. She has

survived everything and so she ends her becoming story as a changed woman. She is at peace with her self and the world:

I very quietly opened the back door and as I stepped out onto the damp earth, the early morning sun seemed to create mirrors of light on every wet leaf, hundreds of them, everywhere. Surrounding me. And the silence, the perfect beauty as far as I could see, the SMELL of the damp earth made me weep with a weird kind of happiness. I really don't know why I felt so happy, Virgen – I just felt, suddenly, perfectly happy. Right then. Right there. (174)

Having all these in view, one can easily see *Luna's California Poppies* as a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age narrative of a young woman in search of her self. Yet, it is a modern feminist coming-of-age tale, having a hybrid form. It is a diary divided into two parts, one part written by a child Luna and another by her as an adult mother. Still, it is not a traditional diary either, as Luna promised it to be in the beginning of the book:

NOTICE TO BURGLERS AND SNOOPS – THIS IS A PRIVATE DIARY, AND IF YOU READ THIS WITHOUT MY (LUNA LUZ VILLALOBOS) PERMISSION I WILL PUT A HEX ON YOU LIKE THE PYRAMIDS, LIKE YOU WILL DIE A SLOW DEATH [...] SO BEWARE – BEWARE AND CLOSE THIS NOW! [...] THIS DIARYS NONE OF YOUR BEES WAX!!!! (1)

The book is in fact a collection of letters addressed to *La Virgen*, which Luna transforms into “THE LAND OF LUNA LUZ VILLALOBOS Y LA VIRGEN OKAY?” (4). The beginning of a book is usually very inviting and polite with its readers, but here readers are not welcomed and are warned that if they continue reading, something very bad is going to happen to them. In fact, what Villanueva does is to intrigue the readers more, and so the book becomes a sort of forbidden fruit. Moreover, the first page of each chapter is handwritten and written on notebook paper. These change in the second part of the book – the handwriting and even the notebook are different – to highlight Luna's evolution. Hence, Villanueva plays with form, narrative technique, typographic representation and she even blurs the borders of genre, all to better portray this little girl's tale of becoming, as she confesses in one interview:

Luna had its own particular challenges because it's largely written in the voice of twelve-year-old Luna, so I had to give up total authorial control to embrace this kid's point of view: how she really thought, talked, and spelled. I haven't been twelve in a long time, but I loved remembering that spirit. (Aldama 2006: 291)

The novel has elements of a bildungsroman and matches the definition of the genre as seen by Barbara A. White: “The hero rejects the constraints of home, sets out on a journey

through the world, obtains guides who represent different world views [...] and meets with many setbacks before choosing the proper philosophy, mate and vocation.” (White qtd. in Eysturoy 1996: 11) Likewise, by constantly remembering what kind of person her grandmother taught her to be, Luna rejects the violent, abusive and male-dominated world Carmen has to offer. Also, she accepts Darling’s help and sets out on a journey through Darling’s world, one in which she learns about education, responsibility, love and return to nature, and in which she begins to discover herself. In the end of the novel, after facing almost everything there is to face in a patriarchal, sexist and racist world, and surviving “just about everything”, Luna reaches a phase of serenity. She comes to terms with herself, her mother, men and even God, and she thanks *La Virgen* for that and for sending her all the ‘guides’ she has met throughout her journey: “[...] there were times I didn’t want to survive. There were times I was at the bottom, the very bottom, of the darkest well, and the walls were slick and mossy. No Hope. None. Nada. Then suddenly, a kind voice. A kind hand. A kind heart. Kindness. You’ve sent me so many kind people.” (Villanueva 2002: 162)

Furthermore, *Luna’s California Poppies* starts with Luna being a child and, according to Annie O. Eysturoy, “in the case of the child and adolescent protagonist, the emphasis is on social and environmental influences on her rite of passage.” (Eysturoy 1996: 4) While reading the novel, one can easily forget that the protagonist is a Mexican-American young woman. At times, Luna evidently experiences the humiliation of being discriminated by white people on account of the colour of her skin or by her own people who call her *Gringa*, yet one is constantly reminded that this is a story about the becoming of a poor girl in a rough world dominated by men, as Sánchez observes:

Since her closeness to her grandmother is part of her childhood, her Chicana, or Mexican-American, identity plays a minor role in her adult poetic persona, which lies more within a community bounded by gender than within one bounded by race or ethnicity. [...] Villanueva shows the least awareness of a Chicana consciousness. Her solution of the dilemma of being both a woman and a Chicana is to respond primarily as a woman to the dominant masculine society. (Sánchez 1992: 25)

To put it differently, Luna being a *mestiza*, a girl of multi-ethnic ancestry – “I’m Yaqui Indian, Spanish and German” (Villanueva 2002: 18) –, the novel is more about the constraints a woman faces in a male-centred universe, than about ethnic discrimination and Latina women being oppressed by white people. After all, Luna is most helped in her journey of self-discovery by white people – Darling, Whitey and Sally. In addition, at some point in the novel, Luna

confesses that “heres the truth... I HATE BEING POOR WORSE than being a girl and even worse than being called a Gringa” (36), which once more shows that the focus is on poverty and womanhood rather than on ethnicity.

When discussing the elements of the modern feminist coming-of-age novels, Eysturoy opinionated that the feminist movement had the following effects on the bildungsroman: the “inclusion of sex, modern feminist consciousness, lesbianism, and other issues of the feminist movement.” (Eysturoy 1996: 17) Thus, with these arguments in mind, one can read *Luna's California Poppies* as a feminist response to the traditional patriarchal society.

After being raped at the age of seven by a man who pretended to be a policeman, hence a symbol of male power and authority, Luna kills her femininity, became a tomboy and hated everything male: “And then you know how I never ever let any one kidnap me again or even touch me (Like a man.) And you know how I started to look and talk like a boy so maybe I wouldn't be DOOMED.” (Villanueva 2002: 67)

Moreover, she hates the idea of being with a man and getting married as much as she dreads the idea of menstruating that she constantly prays to *La Virgen* to postpone her becoming a woman: “I don't want to be a WOMAN or have BABYS or BLEED in my pants and wear a DIAPER like I don't even like to play with dolls.” (19)

Even though her solutions to not being hurt anymore are to suppress everything vulnerable in her, hence feminine, and to start acting and talking like men – “my boys voice” (24) –, Luna still wants equality between men and women, and hates to see when boys and girls are treated differently; to see that her femininity is perceived as a flaw which makes her inferior: “so this Girl Stuff is really really weird and I don't want to be a girl yet, like I know I'll be a girl eventually right? But if I look like a girl now it means theres a TON of stuff I can't do cause girls don't do it like climb buildings and hop the trolley to the zoo.” (29-30)

Luna's hatred toward everything male is so powerful that she even rejects God, whom she perceives as the supreme symbol of male authority and as a vengeful paternal figure, who has abandoned his son – “God doesn't even give a shit cause his Only Son died for OUR SINS” (62) –, so she refuses to pray to him and turns to *La Virgen*. Her grandmother used to pray to her too, *La Virgen* also being an element that unites the grandmother and granddaughter, long after *Mamacita's* death. Also, Luna prefers Buddha over God because “Buddha is kinda fat but he looks pretty happy like hes not smiteing any one and all of Creation right?” (62)

Having all these in view, *Luna's California Poppies* is a coming-of-age novel about a poor girl who strives to find her self in a world dominated by patriarchal values. She struggles

to find her voice and claim her place in an aggressive society. And she succeeds. She becomes an independent woman, with a rifle hanged over her back door, who can take care of herself. She finds peace. She comes to terms with the world and her self; her femininity – “Tania taught me how to love my ‘girl self’” (220) –, her mother and even God “say hi to God for me... It’s okay since I (now) imagine God as a beautiful young man, every race mixed into him, every human possibility – and he has no interest in smiting anyone.” (237)

She becomes a spokesperson for other abused women, beaten and raped by their husbands, as we find out about her in the second part of the book. Luna shares her story to encourage other women, just like her, to hope for a better future; to help them fight against an oppressive world, and to teach them how to reach and search for their selves. Hence, through her coming-of-age story, Luna strives “to create from concrete experience a personal myth of a universal womanhood.” (Sánchez 1992: 28) The I becomes we.

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