Thoughts on Sandra Cisneros’s *Loose Woman*

Gwendolyn Diaz-Ridgeway

In reference to the comments about the cover of her poetry collection *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), Cisneros states:

I’m surprised that some feminists said “How could you, a feminist, pose like lewd cheesecake to sell your book?” After I thought about it I said: “So why can’t a feminist be sexy? Sexiness is a great feeling of self empowerment.” (Rodriguez-Aranda)

So why can’t a feminist be sexy, I ask? By the time Cisneros published *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* in 1987, the days when feminist believed they should burn their bras and be like men were coming to an end. In “Women’s Time”, Kristeva describes three stages of Feminism, the first was of a political nature, the second focused on gender roles from a psychoanalytic stance and the third, her innovation, was the stage she considered androgynous or devoid of sexual difference, what she calls “demassification of the problematic of difference” (“Women’s Time”). Cisneros’ work begins where Kristeva’s third stage of feminisms end. In fact Cisneros portrays a fourth stage that differs from Kristeva’s androgyrny thesis and is closer to Jane Gallop’s idea of feminine jouissance (or enjoyment). In “The (M)Other Tongue: Finding the Other in the Mother”, Gallop posits female sexuality as an end in itself and constructs female identity in relation to her sexual self. To do so, she concludes that women must find the Other in the (M)other, by that she means that women have traditionally been viewed as mothers or daughters but not as individuals in their own right. Patriarchy has limited women to their reproductive function. Thus, Gallop contends that women must appropriate their right to exist for themselves and not in function of others.

Cisneros has often reflected that she has chosen to not be a mother because she wanted to be a writer first and foremost and since she was not financially solvent as a young writer she could not do both. She has always been fiercely independent and has rejected the idea of marriage as well. A product of the sexual revolution of the sixties, she is not afraid to depict sexual desire in her work. The very titles of her poetry collections: *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* and *Loose Woman*, defy the conventional and restrictive sense of morals and propriety expected of women by the male dominated society.

My contention is that Cisneros relishes in debunking the myths of female propriety imposed by both the patriarchy and the Hispanic phallocentric culture, and in so doing, rebels against the prototypes of Virgin/Malinche, Madonna/Prostitute perpetuated by the symbolic social contract. She carves out for herself, for Chicanas and for women in general, a new woman’s space, free of taboos and judgments that relegate a woman to a sub-class in the social contract or to her reproductive roles.

Cordelia Chavez Candelaria posits the concept of the “Wild Zone” in Chicana literature a paradoxical space created by the Chicana writer that both explores an unrestricted, unconquered existence, free of imposed gender roles, and challenges the existence of the restricted woman’s space as defined by patriarchy. What’s important about the exploration of this “wild zone” is that it engenders a space where Chicana expression is defined from within Chicana experience itself and not in relation to the dominant hegemonies. In her poetry, Cisneros sets out not only to re-appropriate Chicana female sexuality, but also to re-appropriate and re-define religious beliefs and iconography. Doubly marginalized, female and Chicana, she subverts the symbolic order of the hegemonic patriarchy and re-appropriates it in her own terms in a bold act of self-affirmation and empowerment colored in brown skin tones, code-switching dirty talk, culture-crossing metaphors, and daringly erotic scenarios.

To begin with, there are the titles. Cisneros intends to as up-front, in your face as possible from the start. By titling her first book of poems *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* and her second *Loose Woman*, she is making a clear statement that she intends to subvert the existing social sanctions on female sexuality by making an asset out of a sanction. She flaunts her sexual self in the face of a social structure that denies women their sexuality and in so doing empowers herself. In this context, “wicked” and “loose” mean sexual and empowered, free and self-determined, and her poems portray both. The same is true of the book covers. In “Wicked” the sexy, red lipsticked, wine drinking Sandra on the cover was not just aploy to sell books, as the “feminists” argued, it was an image that was cogent with the theme of the book: an assertive woman, who is free from patriarchal stricures, is free to assume her sexuality. In *Loose Woman*, we see a collage of Mexican iconography that prominently features a photograph of Sandra with slicked hair, dangling earrings, dark lipstick and dress cut low in the back.

The poetry of *Loose Woman* portrays differing aspects of female sexuality and is reflective of Cisneros’ attempt to subvert conventional morays and re-appropriate for the female that which has been denied to her. Four poems of this collection stand out as most defiant. One of my personal favorites is “I’m So in Love I Grow a new Hymen” (16). This poem manages to subvert the patriarchal idealization of virginity by suggesting that the female voice’s desire for the man is so strong that she will grow a new hymen if that is what it takes to have him. Yet her sexual yearning, far from naïve, is compared to a conflagration, a terrorists’ passion, an explosion, a spiritual high, a triumphant march. With imagery of imagery of the “straights” of Gibraltar, Euclidean geometry and “Gaudi’s hammer against porcelain plates” the voice in the poem refers to the physical sensations of penetration not as someone being possessed, but rather as the one whose role is dominant in the act of intercourse, the poetic voice guides the other in the act to the precise Euclidian geometric place of her desire.

In “Extreme Unction” the poetic voice is that of a woman who has concluded that taking a husband is akin to taking her life, hence, the concept of the last rights of extreme unction (12). She wonders what it might have been like to have “braved” a marriage, or “belied his child”. But ultimately she concludes that a husband would be like a “balm for the occasional itch” and being a wife means a “seamed tongue”, Love, she concludes, would not last as wife, but rather as witch. Though by witch she means a woman on her own left to her own devices and not subsumed by the role of wife, or other of the man.
In "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" the female poetic voice is that of a woman who yearns for her lover to return to her. In the monologue she directs to him she says "If you came back/ I'd give you parrot tulips and papayas/ laugh at your jokes/ Or wouldn't say a word" (74). She worries that after she has again "savored you like an oyster" he'd grow tired and part for Patagonia or Laredo. But meanwhile, she "will have held you under my tongue/learned you by heart". And here is the punch line: "So that when you leave/ I'll write poems". She will have what she wanted, food for thought, food for writing, experience to render into poetry. While the poem is about her desire for him, it is also about her desire of rendering experience into poetry, ultimately privileging her craft over her man.

The title poem, "Loose Woman" is an inversion of the idea of the male on the prowl, the sexual beast whose desire conquers all (112). Here the voice is that of a woman who assumes her sexuality without guilt or shame. "They say I am a beast/ And feast on it. When all along/ I thought that's what a woman was." Like man, woman too is a sexual being and as such she takes pride in her sexual prowess. She is not afraid to say what she thinks whether "Diamonds and pearls tumble form my tongue" or "toads and serpents" describe her mood. "I like the lich I provoke", she says. Her daring attitude confronts the mob that "arrives with stones and sticks to maim and doom and do me in." But she has "built my little house of ill repute/ Brick by brick. Labored/ Loved and masoned it". And she is not about to shy away from the power that being sexual affords her: "I live like so./ Heart as sail, ballast, rudder, bow." This self empowered woman sails ahead, like Pancho Villa taking rightful ownership of Mexican lands. As Villa defeats Porfirio Diaz, she defeats the male prerogative in sex. "By all accounts I am/ A danger to society [patriarchal society]/ I'm Pancha Villa." She concludes, a revolutionary in the land of men.

Her re-appropriation of female sexuality expands into the arena of religion as well. In her essay "Guadalupe, the Sex Goddess", Cisneros confronts the patriarchal construction of a sexless virgin, reinventing the image as "La Lupe", a strong, sexualized woman who is God rather than the mother of God. Cisneros says that "when I see the Virgin of Guadalupe, I want to lift her dress as I did my dolls and look to see if she comes with chones (underwear) and does her panocha (vagina) look like mine." For Cisneros the sanctity of the virgin must be redefined to include her sexuality in order for modern woman to identify with her (McCracken, 173). What Cisneros is doing here is re-defining the virgin in terms of what women are truly like in order for the virgin to become real to women. Thus she re-appropriates traditionally patriarchal religious symbols and re-define them in women’s terms (McCracken) by conflagrating the sexual with the religious.

According to Ellen McCracken, the publishing industry in recent years has commodified the Latina as an exotic sexual being, hence the broad commercial appeal of Latina literature in the last few years. McCracken notes that many Latina writers have played to this commodification in order to get published. However, I contend that this is not the case of Sandra Cisneros, whose poetry is all about the rejection of patriarchal constructions of the female, of anglo perspectives of Chicano otherness and of religious misogyny. Cisneros’ poetry is about female empowerment through assuming her sexuality as woman, Chicana and religious.

To conclude let us consider Cisneros’ statement about the cover of her Wicked, Wicked Ways. She says that the cover portrays “a woman appropriating her own sexuality. In some ways that’s also why it’s wicked; the scene is trespassing that boundary by saying ‘I defy you. I am going to tell you my own story’ (Aranda interview). And that indeed she does.

WORKS CITED

GWENDOLYN DÍAZ-RIDGEWAY, born in the US and reared in Buenos Aires, holds a Ph.D. in Spanish Language and Literature with a concentration in French from the University of Texas at Austin. She is a Professor in the English Department of St. Mary’s University where she teaches comparative literature and is the Director of the Graduate Literature and Language Program. She has published six books, including Luisa Valenzuela sin máscara (Buenos Aires: Feminaria, 2002) and Women and Power in Argentine Literature (University of Texas Press, 2007). In 2015 she published her first book of short stories, Buenos Aires Noir. Her awards include a Fulbright Award to teach and research at the Universidad Católica in Buenos Aires, a Carnegie Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship, the St. Mary’s University’s Distinguished Professor Award and an Honorary Professorship from the Universidad Católica de Salta, Argentina.