

“A Mexican Medea”: Challenging Western Literary Tropes in Cherríe L. Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman*

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Abstract: In her 1995 play *The Hungry Woman*, Cherríe L. Moraga imagines a new future for the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s. In her dystopia, national borders are strict and Medea is exiled (along with her lesbian partner and son) for engaging in a homosexual relationship; however, Moraga juxtaposes this Latin American movement against the backdrop of Euripides’s *Medea* and alludes to the Gothic trope of the mad ex-wife. This juxtaposition of Western allusions and Latin American mythology reflects the play’s overarching themes of patriarchal resistance and the fight to keep culture alive. In this essay, I argue that the play uses Euripides and the Gothic to challenge Western literary traditions and subsequently mirror the patriarchal binaries imposed on Moraga’s characters.

In their 1979 book, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, theorists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar emphasize the effects of the patriarchy on the feminine literary canon. Just as women are often ostracized for rejecting domestic roles, so too is the female writer torn between writing domestic angels or rebellious monsters: “If the vexed and vexing polarities of angel and monster ... are major images literary tradition offers women, how does such imagery influence the ways in which women attempt the pen?” (Gilbert and Gubar 1842). The trope of the “mad” ex-wife is a classic embodiment of this polarity, particularly present in the Gothic tradition. Gothic writing combines horror and death, often introducing romance and characters suffer-

ing from some form of mental illness. Its roots as a literary genre trace back as early as the eighteenth century. In her 1995 play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, Cherríe L. Moraga challenges the conventional use of the mad ex-wife. *The Hungry Woman* imagines an alternative future for the 1960s Chicano movement, a civil rights movement wherein Mexican Americans fought to increase their social rights. This play blends together allusions to the Western literary canon—particularly Euripides’s *Medea* (431 BCE) and canonical Gothic texts such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847)—with Latin American mythology, creating a new form of Gothic mythology that subverts Western conventions. *Medea* represents the Greek foundation on which the English canon is built, and the Gothic allusions represent the patriarchal binaries forced upon women that turn them into monsters. In the original story, Jason leaves Medea for the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. In retaliation, Medea murders Creon, his daughter, and her own two sons by Jason. Moraga’s Medea, however, is in the midst of a divorce and custody battle with her husband, Jasón (who wants to marry a younger woman), over their son, Chac-Mool. In her dystopian play, Moraga evokes this well-known Western myth within a Latin American context to challenge the preconceived notion that any woman who rejects domestic complacency is inherently evil.

Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, a foundational text in the English and Gothic literary canons, embodies the same themes as *The Hungry Woman* through one of the most famous portraits of the “mad” ex-wife in the Western canon: Bertha Mason. Bertha is isolated in Mr. Rochester’s attic, and her existence is hidden from the rest of the residents of Thornfield Hall, though she often escapes from her confines during the night to torment Jane and the other residents. Bertha’s madness ultimately culminates in her suicide and the arson of Mr. Rochester’s home, which leaves him blind. Since Mr. Rochester and Bertha are still married (though estranged), her death allows the novel to fulfil the conventional marriage plot and enables Jane’s transition into a domestic, wifely role. Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), however, imag-

ines the factors leading to Bertha's instability, implying that her mental condition can be attributed to childhood trauma, thus encouraging the reader to sympathize with Bertha and challenging the Western convention of the madwoman. Moraga's play echoes this tradition by reimagining a fictional future for the Chicano movement. While Medea's murder of Chac-Mool could arguably be seen as an act of spite (akin to Bertha's attempt to murder Jane), I argue that the murder is an act of both patriarchal acceptance and simultaneous rejection. By evoking the Gothic image of the "mad" ex-wife, Moraga challenges the convention that a woman scorned is necessarily unfeminine and evil.

Evoking Gothic conventions is uncommon in a play of *The Hungry Woman's* genre. In her 2007 article, Tanya González elaborates on this genre blending:

[R]eading Chicana/o and Latina/o writing in the context of a Gothic or American Gothic tradition is not a common practice. In most cases, when ghosts or supernatural occurrences appear in these texts, the first association made is with Latin American magical realism. Nevertheless, there is a connection.... (46)

González calls the Gothic an "aesthetic space where authors could comment on the socially and culturally aberrant" (47). Indeed, the entire history of the Gothic is based on that which is "radically excluded" (Savoy as cited in González 46). Moraga's Medea is radically excluded from Aztlán and torn between her desperation to return and her refusal to adhere to their values. Moraga, by blending this Gothic trope with a Latin American character, challenges the assumption of the non-domestic woman as evil, presenting instead a complex portrait of a woman exiled by the dominant socio-political world. Should Medea choose to abandon her partner, Luna, she and her son can return home; however, Medea chooses to stay despite her unhappiness, ultimately preventing Chac-Mool from returning as well. Indeed, she struggles to keep him from adhering to the Aztlán values.

Heteronormativity and patriarchy dominate Aztlán: "A woman is nothing in Aztlán without a husband" (Moraga

68). Aztlán society villainizes women who do not conform to their standards. In keeping with Gilbert and Gubar's assertion that writers must challenge the feminine images present in Western literature, Moraga writes women who are "deprived of the feminine colonial passivity imbued by the dominant male discourse" (Ráez-Padilla 205). Indeed, though all the characters seem trapped within this male discourse, they recognize the flaws within the system and actively strive to rectify them. In the play, Mama Sal states, "When you're a girl, hija, and a Mexican, you learn purty quick that you only got one shot at being a woman and that's being a mother" (50). By killing Chac-Mool, then, Medea gives up that which makes her feminine in this patriarchal discourse, instead becoming a monster in both her own eyes and the eyes of society. Moraga showcases the desire to escape this male discourse. Her characters struggle against it, even if their actions seem fruitless to them during the play. Medea tries to keep Chac-Mool from learning and embodying patriarchal values by keeping him from Jasón. She is horrified at the idea of him adhering to what she sees as the cultural norms for men, as she makes clear when addressing Jasón:

[M]y son needs no taste of that weakness you call manhood. He is still a boy, not a man and you will not make him one in your likeness! The man I wish my son to be does not exist, must be invented. He will invent himself if he must, but he will not grow up to learn betrayal from your example. (69)

Jasón embodies the idealized masculinity prized by Aztlán; however, Medea's exile based on her sexual orientation allows her (and subsequently the audience) to realize the oppressive nature of a society that values this form of hypermasculinity. While Medea tries to keep Chac-Mool from adopting Jasón's values, she is continually thwarted. When discussing Chac-Mool's living situation, Jasón says, "you're the slave, Medea, not me. You will always be my woman because of our son. Whether you rot in this wasteland of counter-revolutionary degenerates or take up residence in my second bed" (Moraga 69). This declaration forces Me-

dea to confront the truth about Aztlán's patriarchal values, understanding the implied ownership that men feel toward women. It is when Medea realizes the inevitability of Chac-Mool's maturation and assimilation into this patriarchy that she chooses to kill him. While the allusions to the Greek *Medea* and Gothic "mad" ex-wife would suggest that she murders Chac-Mool to spite Jasón, Medea's explicit acknowledgement of the social, patriarchal binaries suggests that the infanticide is both an act of acceptance and resistance of the lifestyle being forced upon her.

While *The Hungry Woman* is riddled with allusions to classic Western literary images, the introduction of Mexican mythology allows Moraga to challenge the assumptions of said Western conventions. In the same 2017 article, González recognizes the interaction between the figures to which Moraga alludes:

Moraga wanted to bring into focus the abject figures of Medea, La Llorona (the wailing woman who violently kills her children), and the pre-Colombian creation myth of the Hungry Woman by creating a drama that forced the reader and the audience to come to terms with Medea's violence as something other than jealous rage. Indeed, Moraga allows her play to speak back to the many versions of the tale that only replicate false notions that a woman would sacrifice a child to simply spite a partner. (48)

The introduction of La Llorona during a conversation between Chac-Mool and Mama Sal allows Moraga to juxtapose the image of the killer mother and "mad" ex-wife within the two cultures: "This hybrid approach is inherent to the Aztec mythology on which Moraga relies in order to transcend Manichaeistic resolutions and probe the social, political, and gender reasons leading a hungry mother to commit infanticide" (Ráez-Padilla 205). While La Llorona as a killer woman is typically a frightening image, Chac-Mool admits in act 1, scene 6 that he has never been afraid of her. Even when Mama Sal asks, "Not even when you was a little esquincle?" Chac-Mool replies, "No, I felt sorry for her, not scared" (Mor-

aga 37–38). Certainly, introducing La Llorona, a mother who kills her children, foreshadows Medea’s murder. Moreover, it foreshadows Moraga’s sympathy for Medea. Chac-Mool’s reaction transcends the conventional reaction to the wailing woman by suggesting that the reader should not fear the women in the Western Gothic canon who are portrayed as monsters; rather, they should sympathize with them and the factors that drove them to infanticide. Indeed, the allusions to these tropes force the reader to reflect on the binaries forced on women in Aztlán’s heteronormative society, as La Llorona is a “paradoxical [figure] that symbolize[s] both maternal betrayal and maternal resistance” (de Oliveira as cited in Ráez-Padilla 207).

Ultimately, *The Hungry Woman* is a play wherein Moraga explores the binaries forced upon both women in society and women as writers. Moraga’s new rendition of the classical *Medea* myth alludes to the very real stereotypes thrust on woman in both literature and reality: “It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (Gilbert and Gubar 1848). Indeed, by alluding to the foundations of Greek and Gothic literary tropes that often present women (particularly “scorned” ex-wives) as unfeminine and evil, Moraga successfully transposes the idea with Latin American imagery and merges the two ideologies. By blending the mythologies of the two cultures, Moraga creates “an alternative mythology in order to work out a potentially more liberatory space for women” (González 48). Indeed, in this play, Moraga proposes an alternative way to view the binaries forced on women, suggesting that readers should feel sympathy rather than fear.

Works Cited

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