

The rebellious and  
independent chicanas  
of so far from god



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Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* explores the ways in which Chicano women are forced to exercise resistance to the existing male and anglo dominated society. In the story, Sofi and her four daughters, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca, as well as other female characters reveal how Chicanas (Chicano women) resist their patriarchal society and gain control and create change in their own worlds. The novel serves to act against "a pervasive stereotype of Chicanas as passive individuals victimized by oppression...by presenting a cast of female characters who resist domination" (Delgadillo 888). They rebel against the norm and seek to escape the submissive and domestic lifestyle traditionally expected of women in Chicano culture. Sofi, Esperanza, and Fe resist a culture that is traditionally patriarchal dominated society and with their own acts of female independence are able to create and control their own futures.

Fe is the third daughter of Sofi, and the most traditional member of the family. She is the one in the family who "longs to shape her life into a success story and to lift herself up from her familia through her work ethic" (Mermann). In order to achieve the American Dream she so desires, Fe utilizes this work ethic to sustain financial means. She is constantly working her job at the bank, a position which she has held since high school, where she is passed up for promotions regardless of her dedication to the job. Most of the friends she has are not other Chicanas, but 'gringas' who she works with at the bank. Part of this American Dream also consists of marrying her high school sweetheart Tom and buying a house for them to live in.

Fe's ultimate goal is to have this picture perfect lifestyle, which is important to her as someone who "maintained her image above all" (Castillo 28).

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Image is so important to her in particular because of how she views her family, seeing them “ so self defeating, so unambitious” (Castillo 28). She deems it vital to separate herself from what she sees as a failure of a family, and create her own family to be defined by. She is readily willing to do whatever is necessary “ to attain the perfect American family even when this means she has to repudiate the tradition of the extended family, including the community” (Gillman). She is ready to abandon all she has lived with and grew up with, in exchange for the perfect American lifestyle. She doesn't fear sacrificing her family and traditions in order to get what she wants.

Though Fe desires a traditional lifestyle, her methods of attaining it are slightly less traditional in that she works so hard at a job to ensure that she and her fiancée will be able to live the life she wants. Instead of remaining passive and inactive, Fe takes necessary measures to achieve the lifestyle she wants. Fe, like her mother and sisters, is portrayed in the novel as a “ Chicana character who actively participates in the construction of [her] own world” (Delgadillo 909). Fe sways from tradition in taking action in order to fulfill her dreams, instead of remaining inactive and allowing a man control over her and her situation.

When Fe is ultimately dumped by her fiancée shortly before the wedding, she becomes absolutely destroyed by the dissolution of all her dreams. She then descends into a year long mourning period consisting of constant wailing and screaming. After the irreparable damage to her vocal chords and her emotions, Fe attempts putting her life back together. Eventually, she is wed to her cousin Casimiro, where for a brief time she has her desired

American Dream, and the “ long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher,  
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microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR...which she had bought herself with her own hard-earned money from all the bonuses she earned at her new job” (Castillo 171). She has gone back to working herself for the lifestyle she wants, working hard to get money to buy the things which she believes will complete her picture perfect lifestyle.

Unfortunately for Fe, her attempts to seek female independence in the patriarchal society, lead to her untimely death of cancer. Fe works endlessly at the Acme plant, working with unknown chemicals without question to continue to financially support her American Dream. Castillo emphasizes how rare Fe’s dedication to her new job is, and how she is so “ intent on moving up quick at Acme International...she took on every gritty job available, just to prove to the company what a good worker she was” (Castillo 178). She is eventually “ promoted” to working with even more dangerous chemicals. She has worked so hard to satisfy her dreams, that “ as she ingested the poisonous fumes from the Acme chemicals, so too she ingested the carcinogenic culture of Anglo dominated capitalist society” (Gillman). Even with all of her hard work and her refusal to remain inactive in achieving what she wants, Fe’s American Dream is unattainable as she pays for her work with her life. It is her drive for the American Dream and her refusal to remain passive in a patriarchal society that lead her to her early grave.

Esperanza, Sofi’s eldest daughter, is the first and only one to go to college, attaining both her Bachelors and Masters degrees. She is known for being intelligent and a revolutionary activist, having worked to get her college to have Chicano studies. Ever a type of Chicana feminist, she “ never feels satisfied with the poor and forgotten status given to Chicanas” (Gillman).  
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Esperanza is aware of the patriarchal society she lives in, and is unsatisfied with it, determined to live outside of its confines, and create and control her own life. However, there does still exist this idea of something missing in her lifestyle of female independence. As an intelligent and independent woman working as a news broadcaster, Esperanza experienced “transitional years where she felt like a woman with brains was as good as dead for all the happiness it brought her in the love department” (Castillo 26). Even though she is independent of a man, living without a husband and actively working to obtain an education as well as a career, there is still the idea of needing a male figure in her life. She attempts to satisfy this need with her on-off relationship with Ruben. Ruben, like the other husbands and boyfriends and men of the story, “share a certain inability to action that the protagonists take on” (Martinez). This creates a contrast in the story between these inactive men and their proactive female counterparts, emphasizing the strength and independence of the women.

When Esperanza is offered a promotion in Houston, she decides to go but is then held back by the return of her lover Ruben. They have formed a new relationship where, “every two weeks she was right there with Ruben, at the teepee meetings...teaching her ...the role of women and the role of men and how they were not to be questioned” (Castillo 36). They would only see each other every two or three weeks, to attend a meeting and then “they went home and made love all day” and she would not hear from him again until the next meeting (Castillo 36). The only intimacy in their relationship becomes the sex; Esperanza wishes she could confide in him more but he has no desire for any further relations. She accepts this and her “inability to

demand more.. stems in part from societal constraints against female self-fulfillment” (Delgadillo 906). Women aren’t expected to have the same desires for fulfilling their life, and knowing she isn’t expected to have these, makes her keep silent in what she wants from Ruben. The relationship is considered a rewriting of Chicana gender roles, where Esperanza remains true to her Chicana heritage and identity, but explores a new area of sexual gratification “ traditionally denied [her] and considered whorish, lacking in dignity and self-control” (Martinez). Her female independence allows her to experience a new type of relationship, a new type of sexuality where she still remains true to her Chicana blood, but while also exercising new rights and freedoms. She has a realization that as a woman she “ does not have to marry to find self respect in her culture” and that she is an “ independent subject whose presence is not dependent on another being, but rather her own actions” (Martinez). It is the ultimate realization of female independence.

After having a reaffirmation of her own independence, Esperanza “ finds her own voice and her own path more meaningful than the relationship she experiences with her lover” and chooses to dump Ruben and accept an offer in Washington (Martinez). Esperanza remembers how hard she worked for her education and career, and realizes that with Ruben, she nearly fell under the traditional patriarchal dominance. She takes control, “ choosing to leave rather than be left, choosing her own role rather than remaining with a whimsical lover” (Martinez). In doing so she creates and controls her own future, averting from the temporary submissiveness she experienced while having their purely physical relationship. Esperanza decides that “ aside

from being a great career break, it was pretty clear to her that there was no need of her on the home-front," with her sisters having healed and her father having returned (Castillo 46). Feeling that that she is no longer needed at home as well as desiring to further her career ambitions, Esperanza heads for Washington.

As with her sister Fe, Esperanza's attempts to create and control her own future outside of the patriarchal dominated society, also costs her her life. Before long, Esperanza returned to her family to inform them she will be sent to the front lines of the war in Saudi Arabia to report on military events. After leaving for Saudi Arabia, Esperanza and her crew are lost, reported missing, and eventually reported dead. She strives for recognition as a Chicano within her own culture as well as the Anglo culture, which serve as the drive behind her determination towards her career. Esperanza, as an activist and supporter of Chicanos studies and cultures, " abandons her own culture to go off and fight a war that is not her own" (Gillman). In trying to resist the patriarchal society and make a name and career for herself as a woman, Esperanza is lost in the war, ultimately paying the price with her life.

Sofi is the strong, independent, and dedicated mother of Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca. She works hard for her family, which " is a rather untraditional family, one that displaces patriarchy and instead celebrates a matriarchal heritage" (Mermann). Unlike traditional Chicano families, it is Sofi, not Domingo, who holds the family together. She is the one who supports them, financially and emotionally. Not only is she the one holding them together, she does it without any man at all, as Domingo is present but

inactive. In order for her family to survive, she must take control of her own future.

After being seduced by Domingo, marrying him against her family's wishes, bearing his children, losing her land and money to his gambling habits, and then being abandoned by him, Sofi " must act as an agent of survival for her family, her community, and her culture" (Gillman). She is the epitome of strength, always struggling to keep her family whole, even when misfortune after misfortune strike her daughters and herself. Being a single mother, Sofi is forced to be the sole financial support of herself and her four daughters. She ends up running Carne Buena Carneceria, raising, butchering, and selling the meat all on her own, a job generally considered to more appropriate for men. However, this does not matter, as survival is a necessity and Sofi does what she needs in order to help her family.

When Sofi's youngest, La Loca, dies and is reincarnated at her funeral, Father Jerome questions it being work of the devil. By Father Jerome's linear thinking and the dichotomy allowed by a patriarchal Christian Church, " La Loca can either be a devil or an angel, a virgin or a whore" (Lanza). Sofi yells at him " Don't you dare start this about my baby! If our Lord in His heaven has sent my child back to me, don't you dare start this backward thinking against her; the devil doesn't produce miracles!" (Castillo 23). As a man of the church, many witnesses consider Sofi's acts blasphemous, shocked at her audacity to address and hit a priest in such a manner. To her, it is necessary, and she refuses to give in to the patriarchy of the church when it intends to condemn her newly resurrected child. Either she must act and defend her child, or she loses control.

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Sofi's big realization of independence comes when she realizes one day that "If that Domingo doesn't fix the screen door this week, I'm gonna have to do it myself; then I'll throw his butt out for sure; what do I want him for then anyhow?" (Castillo 130). She realizes her own ability to take control and decides "to run for la mayor of Tome and make some changes around here..." (Castillo 130). She asserts her capabilities as a woman of action, and instead of waiting for what the males of such a patriarchal society should do, takes matters into her own hands. It is here where Sofi decides her dedication "to work for community improvement" (Castillo 138). Sofi essentially becomes a mother figure to the community, adding to her image as the strong mother, the matriarchal figure. Prior to Sofi's actions towards strengthening the community, "there were no other roles for women beyond the wife/mother or abandoned wife/mother" and it is Sofi who creates "new roles for women in which she and others could be appreciated for something other than being a wife/mother" (Delgadillo 910). Sofi has changed the role for women, allowing women to become a stronger figure within the culture that seeks to make them submissive and her resistance proves to be "a public effort to include women fully in communal governance" (Delgadillo 910). She takes action to create and control the future of herself, her family, and other women in her community. Sofi is not only empowering herself as a mother; she is empowering her entire gender.

Sofi comes to acknowledge Esperanza's beliefs of activism and that "the only way things are going to get better around here, is if we, all of us together, try to do something about it" (Castillo 144). She has begun to understand the importance of community and the strength that a community

can possess. After campaigning and gathering support, the mission becomes more about saving Tome and less about Sofi being mayor. The community works diligently, planning and organizing, and “Sofi’s vecinos finally embarked on an ambitious project, which was to start a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise” (Castillo 146). Due to Sofi’s efforts and the cooperation of others in Tome, after the first year this enterprise allows twenty-four women their own financial stability. As a result of Sofi’s actions in bonding the community and showing women their own strength, women discover their own power and capabilities within their patriarchal society. After Sofi’s strong efforts to improve the community, she becomes informally known as La Mayor Sofi. Even after all she has suffered, Sofi “emerges as a phoenix, rising above the destruction of her daughters and Tome’s stagnation to recreate self and empower community” (Gillman).

As a whole, Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God* epitomizes the changes women face in attempts to rebel against the patriarchal norms within their Chicano culture. Fe is the more traditional daughter, but refuses to sit by and wait for the life she wants. She refuses to be passive and works for her desired American Dream, no matter the cost. Esperanza, always the revolutionary activist, rebels against a society that would rather her submit to its confines and follow the domestic and submissive traits expected of women. Sofi is the hardworking matriarchal figure, acting as mother both to her family and her community. She asserts her independence as a female and becomes active in an effort to create and control her own future. These women refuse to remain passive showing “the strength of the female subject as its own entity is demonstrated, with action as well as presence” (Martinez).

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