

# Feminism as expressed through chicana literature



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Feminism often takes many forms depending mainly upon intersectionality. Being a straight white woman and being a gay black woman means two entirely different things. Thus is the case with Chicana women. They have had experiences unique to them, which makes their form of feminism different than all others. They simply didn't "fit in" to the movements which they wanted to be a part of. During the Chicano movement, many were told to suppress their feelings of gender discrimination and oppression because only one issue could be tackled at a time, and this movement was centered around racial inequality. During the Anglo feminist movement, the Chicanas did not participate because many others involved in the movement refused to acknowledge the racial inequality which was glaringly present. This is where the issue of intersectionality explicitly comes into to play. These Chicana women did not think that they belonged in either one of these movements because a piece of their identity is suppressed in both cases. This caused the Chicana feminists to take a different approach: literature. There are numerous, beautiful pieces of literature that are both explicitly and implicitly feminist. This literature is their movement, their expression of oppression and inequality of all aspects of their identities. They are not bound by one identity or another, they are allowed to freely discuss any and all parts of their identities as they please. This gives them something not easily taken away: power.

While Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" isn't inherently feminist, the fearless, powerful tone with which she supports her argument shows her personal strength. This essay is a commentary on the way bilingual education is being treated in the American school system. She does

however, discuss the problems and sexism within the Spanish language. Anzaldua explains that “ We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (76). She draws this conclusion because in the Spanish language when one is addressing a group of people, the male ending of the word is used. Anzaldua feels that this “ robs” Chicana females of their identities because they are not being accurately addressed as women. She feels betrayed by her own people as even they do not fully understand and represent her correctly. Accurate representation of language is extremely important to Anzaldua. In fact, she states that “ So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (81). To Anzaldua, her linguistic identity is just as important to her as her ethnic or gender identity. Thus, when someone misrepresents it or just downright insults it, she is rightfully offended. This is not an uncommon issue. Many Chicana women also feel that their linguistic identity is very closely tied with their identity as a whole. They refuse to let go of this part of them, or change it.

A very prevalent issue all women face regardless of their identities is sexual assault. Some feminist writers tackle this issue in a romanticized or upsetting way, which can do more harm than good in the end. Sandra Cisneros, on the other hand, gives survivors hope and power with her collection of short stories entitled *Women Hollering Creek*. In the short story with the same title, she addressed the issue of domestic violence however, she doesn't romanticize the story at all. She tells it the way it often goes, the painfully familiar story. Cisneros starts with the denial that many survivors of

domestic violence typically feel, “ She had always said she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her. But when the moment came...she didn’t run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the telenovelas” (47). Many survivors share this same situation, that initially swore they would never allow themselves to be victims. But, until one is placed in that situation, they have no idea how they would react. The most frustrating thing about this is the confusion that those on the outside seem to have. Questions such as “ why didn’t you just leave?’ are not only upsetting but ridiculously insensitive. On average, it takes 7 times to leave an abusive partner, and many survivors fear for their lives afterward. The story thankfully ends on a refreshingly positive note. Cleófilas, the narrator, has to go to the doctor’s office to check on her baby. When she is getting a sonogram, her nurse notices all of her bruises. She then calls one of her friends who helps Cleófilas and her son escape from her abusive husband. Felice, her getaway driver, so to speak, is the freest woman Cleófilas has ever seen. She is shocked. As they drive over the creek which ran behind her house, Felice gleefully hollers. Cisneros describes her yell as “...a yell as loud as any mariachi” (55). Cleófilas is given hope as she sees for herself that women can have freedom and power. Cisneros executes this story with the perfect amount of painful truth and hopefulness for the future. This is a very important yet underrepresented part of being a survivor, the fact that it will get better. Some writers simply choose to ignore this for artistic purposes, however the addition of it by Cisneros makes her story that much more powerful to the reader.

Unfortunately, women are commonly known for their passivity. In Ana Castillo's poem "Women Don't Riot", Castillo attempts to call on women to take charge and address the issues that they face on a daily basis. The implication of the word "riot" is that these women have stayed quiet for so long that they deserve a violent revolution of sorts. Certainly this is over-exaggerated, but the point is clear; it is time for women to speak up. Castillo speaks of women as a whole group, regardless of intersectionality, stating that "Women don't riot.../not of any color,/ any race, not the rich, poor,/ or those in between" (lines 10-13). This is somewhat of a unifying factor, that ALL women avoid this no matter what other identities they have, it is a universal truth that women do not riot. Castillo uses somewhat of a call to action in the middle of the poem. She calls on the women who have been sexually assaulted, which she describes as "every last one sooner or later" (line 29). She pleads with them, emphasizing that "women who've defended themselves/ and women who can't or don't know how/ we don't—won't ever rise up in arms" (lines 30-32). At this point she expresses confusion as to why these women have not spoken out against the horrible things that have happened to them. She calls on them to speak up, to tell their stories. She is desperately trying to tell these women that they do have power and that they should speak out, riot, oppose the injustices that they face on a daily basis. She attempts to empower these women by telling them that they do indeed have the ability to tell their stories, and that people will care and listen to what they have to say.

The commonality between these three writers is that they take the power back and claim it as their own. Anzaldua reclaims a language that can

sometimes be used against her. Cisneros shows the power that women can find even through adversity. Castillo calls on the women to use the power and speak up for themselves. Although the topics of these pieces are different, one essential thing connects them: gaining power. These various feminist works of literature are an integral part of the Chicana movement. This power is cemented into these works and can never be taken away from these women, and thus, the Chicana women as a whole. This is their movement, their riot. They used their intersectionality to their advantage, and this was essential in their triumph. They are Chicana women and they demanded to be heard, and they were.