

Malintzin's choices essay



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Malintzin, also referred to as Malinche and Dona Marina, remains a significant conundrum in the history of the conquest of Mexico. Commonly viewed as a traitor by the indigenous people and their descendants, her name has been tarnished and continues to yield a negative connotation. With minimal and, often, conflicting documentation of Malintzin's life, historians have found it difficult to piece together her true involvement in the conquest of Mexico. With zealous effort and passion, Camilla Townsend attempts to shed some light on this enigma in her novel, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*.

In many ways, Townsend retells the conquest through the eyes of the indigenous people, more specifically Malintzin. Through her integration of Spanish and indigenous sources, Townsend argues that Malintzin was not simply a traitor and mistress to Hernando Cortes, but a brave, resourceful survivor who faced complicated choices. Upon reading *Malintzin's Choices*, one first notices the unique style of narration and integration use of sources. Townsend meets a colossal challenge in her efforts to narrate the conquest of Mexico with specific emphasis on Malintzin's role.

Most modern conceptions of the conquest are derived from Spanish documents. Townsend combines sources from both varieties (Spanish and indigenous) and focuses on the historical context to propose new ideas regarding the indigenous role in the conquest. "What I have tried to write, then, is a book about contexts. In effect, despite the focus on Malintzin, it is more than the story of one woman's life; it is an exploration of indigenous experience in her era" (8). Her novel reads like a story, but also a historical text packed with captivating details surrounding both sides of the conquest.

When evaluating historical contexts, Townsend does not simply state her analyses as facts. Instead, she explores practical explanations and examines potential biases based on her sources. This thorough, thought-provoking method of narration delivers an enjoyable read to Townsend's audience and provides fresh perspectives for scholars to consider. Townsend's primary argument suggests that Malintzin deserves admiration, not resentment, for her integral role in the conquest. First, it must be addressed that Malintzin fell into the hands of slave traders at a young age.

Although difficult to determine the exact circumstances of Malintzin's enslavement, Townsend analyzes multiple situations in which female slaves were commonly sold or captured. "Almost certainly, there were those among her own people who had been complicit in her being taken" (22). This certainly helps refute the belief that Malintzin owed complete loyalty to her former people. Even if the Nahua people did not play a role in Malintzin's transition into slavery, she was removed from the culture at a rather young age.

Townsend also highlights the danger and unpredictability of Malintzin's predicament as a slave in strangers' hands. Malintzin could not have predicted the intentions of the Spanish in respect to her future. Hoping to preserve her life and possibly improve her quality of life as a slave, Malintzin made herself useful to the Spanish. Utilizing her knowledge of indigenous language, she audaciously stepped forward to translate between Cortes and Moctezuma, the Aztec ruler. "Malintzin could have remained silent. No one expected her to step forward and serve as a conduit.

But by the end of that hour, she had made her value felt" (41). Malintzin's boldness not only protected her from the Spanish, but also raised her status to that of the nobles. The Spaniards even granted her the respectful title, Dona Marina. Townsend holds that Malintzin made, not only, a rational decision, but an intelligent one as well. " She did what almost anyone in her situation would have done" (42). Townsend further validates her opinion of Malintzin by stressing Malintzin's desire to protect the indigenous people.

Several times, after Moctezuma's death, Malintzin urged the Nahua people to make peace with the Spaniards. She feared and realized that the Spanish could easily decimate the Aztec population if the warring continued. " In either case, it was Malintzin, as usual, who actually exhorted the Indians to make peace and save their own lives..." (104). One indigenous source records Malintzin's irate response to Moctezuma's replacement ruler. "' Is he so irresponsible, so uncaring? ' She goes on to explain: ' He has no pity on the children and women; the old men have already perished'" (105).

Even after Malintzin's death, the Spanish recalled her advising the indigenous people against continued battle (106). Perhaps a woman who demonstrated such concern for the Nahua people cannot be called a traitor. Instead, Townsend portrays Malintzin as a brave woman who attempted to make the best of a complicated situation. Although rival documents paint contradictory pictures of Malintzin's role in the conquest, Camilla Townsend utilizes historical clues to create a realistic, enlightening synthesis of the events.

She asserts that the prevalent view of Malintzin requires revision, that Malintzin was not a traitor at all. Instead, she contends that Malintzin made a series of intelligent decisions when placed in a problematic situation.

Malintzin's people likely played a role in her entry into slavery. Her allegiance to the Nahuas could have justifiably ended at that moment. In addition, Malintzin found herself in the possession of potentially dangerous strangers.

To protect her life, she made herself useful to the Spaniards, a decision consistent with the design of human nature. Finally, Malintzin demonstrated genuine concern for the indigenous people and feared their possible annihilation. She fought for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, attempting to save indigenous lives. This woman does not deserve to be an object of hatred and resentment for the Nahua people and their descendants. Camilla Townsend is a revisionist, and in her novel, *Malintzin's Choices*, she defends her admiring view of the brave Dona Marina.