

# Agnieszka Gondor-Wiercioch

---

## Ethnic and Feminist Homecoming in "Eyes of Zapata" by Sandra Cisneros

---

Kultura Popularna nr 4 (58), 58-66

---

2018

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Agnieszka Gondor-Wiercioch

# **Ethnic and Feminist Homecoming in “Eyes of Zapata” by Sandra Cisneros**

Sandra Cisneros has investigated the question of her diasporic home in the majority of her texts, but she usually located only some plots of her novels and stories in Mexico. The case is different in her story "Eyes of Zapata" published in 1991, which is completely devoted to the homeland of Cisneros' ancestors. This act of literary homecoming involves facing Mexican past not only by introducing the Mexican Revolution as a background but by re-writing the lives of two historical figures Emiliano Zapata and his lover Inés Alfaro. Thanks to Inés, who is also the narrator of the story, Cisneros manages to reconstruct ethnic counter-history through feminist perspective. In this way Cisneros tries to show what lurks in the troubled immigrants' past and what identification with the Mexican culture might entail. In her first collection of stories *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros made it clear that Mexican-Americans cannot feel at home in the U.S. not only because they feel alienated and rejected by Americans but because they have brought the machismo culture to the new country and they live tainted by this legacy, in "Eyes of Zapata" Cisneros not only locates the roots of machismo in the Mexican history of violence but also pays literary homage to great masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican literature such as Elena Garro, Rosario Castellanos and Juan Rulfo.

"Eyes of Zapata" is the story of Inés Alfaro, seduced by Emiliano Zapata who never fulfilled the promise of marrying her. Both Alfaro and Zapata are historical figures. The main female character gradually moves from the margins of history into its centre when she takes control of the powerful figure of her husband, Emiliano Zapata, who in Cisneros's re-writing of history is not a significant leader of the well-known revolution, but a merciless macho with many lovers and children he pays no attention to. The story is a first-person account of Inés who becomes a powerful witch (*la bruja*) in order to avenge the injustice of the patriarchal culture. I want to prove that Cisneros wisely complicates the ethnic story of looking for one's history and identity proving that literary homecoming of Chicanas is far from reaching idealized Aztlán, but it is a feminist quest for autonomy, not only visible on the level of the content, but the form as well, which to some extent is a homage to oral tradition. Additionally, I would like to examine the function of the indigenous tradition in the story incorporated through magical realist strategies of Cisneros that she inherited from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican literary masters.

To understand the figure of Inés it is necessary to refer to the idea of the witch, *la bruja*, so popular in Chicano/a literature. Tey Diana Rebolledo explains how Chicano writers and poets use this figure and where it comes from. Before I refer to her ideas, I want to stress how important it is to get familiar first with the presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Tonantzin in the Mexican and then Chicana culture. Typically for syncretic religions these two figures are connected with the same place, as the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe was erected on the former site of worship of Tonantzin, but they are very different because the first one is the most important matriarchal figure in Catholicism and the second is a powerful Aztec goddess. This contrast paradoxically disappears in popular folk version of Catholicism in Mexico – for Mexican Catholics the Virgin of Guadalupe lost nothing of her Christian power by residing in Tonantzin's place but even got enriched by Tonantzin's potential.

Rebolledo notices that in contemporary Chicano/a prose and poetry the Virgin of Guadalupe has at least two faces: one that helps us to associate her with one-dimensional victim of patriarchal culture (that of submissive mother always ready for sacrifice) and the other that makes her the symbol of the Mestizo condition. Mythological Tonantzin is also far from being

**Agnieszka Gondor-Wiercioch** is Associate Professor at the Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Teaches Latin American, American and Canadian literature. Recipient of a research grant from the JFK Institute of Freie Universität in Berlin. Interested in the contemporary Latino/a and Native American fiction (transculturalization in literature, reconstruction of history and identity search in ethnic literature, hybrid and heterogeneous literature, syncretic religions represented in literary texts and the clash of incompatible cultural models). Published two monographs; one devoted to the comparative analysis and interpretation of the chosen works by Louise Erdrich and José María Arguedas; the other to the roles of history in contemporary Native American and Latino/a fiction. Author of a couple of articles connected with the abovementioned areas.

a flat figure because she is often identified with Coatlicue, a more dangerous and controversial Aztec goddess who had the power to save and destroy. Tonantzin/Coatlicue has been adopted by Chicana authors as the goddess of love and sin, the one who gives and takes life (Rebolledo 50–51). Additionally, in Chicana tradition the figure of Tonantzin/Coatlicue undergoes various transformations because she often gets deprived of the part of her mythological dimension in order to construct references between her and everyday problems. In this disguise Tonantzin/Coatlicue becomes a very wise and practical modern woman who can draw lesson from historical experience instead of getting trapped by tragic historical perspective.

In my opinion this connection with Indian mythology and the history of conquest and colonization seen in the construction of female characters is something that Cisneros inherited from the literary masters of 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican literature and filtered through her Mexican-American experience because her female characters manage to control their lives and narratives to the extent that was not within reach of their literary ancestors. Before I go on into more detailed comparative study, I would like to discuss briefly the contemporary variant of Tonantzin/Coatlicue that not only corresponds well with Rebolledo's study but shows the stage to which the character of Inés Alfaro merely aspires. This variant can be seen in the story „Little Miracles, Kept Promises” by Cisneros in which its main protagonist Rosario through a dialogue with Virgin of Guadeloupe unveils its face of Tonantzin/Coatlicue. Rosario tells the goddess:

I wanted you bare-breasted, snakes in your hands. I wanted you leaping and somersaulting the backs of bulls. I wanted you swallowing raw hearts and rattling volcanic ash. I wasn't going to be my mother or my grandma. All that self-sacrifice, all that silent suffering. Hell no. Not here. Not me. Don't think it was easy-going without you. Don't think I didn't get my share of it from everyone. Heretic. Atheist. *Malinchista*. *Hocicon*. But I wouldn't shut my yap. My mouth always getting me in trouble. (...) *Malinche*. Don't you think it didn't hurt being called a traitor. Trying to explain to my ma, to my *abuela*, why I didn't want to be like them. I don't know how it all fell in place. How I finally understood who you are. No longer Mary the mild, but our mother Tonantzin (...)

That you could have the power to rally a people when a country was born, and again during civil war, and during a farmworkers' strike in California made me think maybe there is power in my mother's patience, in my grandmother's endurance. Because those who suffer have a special power, strength don't they? The power of understanding someone else's pain. And understanding is the beginning of healing. (Cisneros 127–128)

This excerpt perfectly illustrates the strategy of re-creating past trauma in order to function in the present. The reference to Malinche is also worth commenting on, because in Rosario's speech this historical figure loses its traditional status of a traitor and a passive victim of Cortés and becomes a woman who has mastered the art of survival to perfection. Rebolledo notices that this

feminist version of Malinche is Chicana's response to the patriarchal version of Malinche's history and myth. Consequently, if Malinche ceases to be seen as just a traitor, the status of her children changes from frustrated bastards into people of new possibilities, just like Rosario who can cast away the bondage and start to develop her own autonomy (Rebolledo, 72–73).

Both the legacy of Tonantín/Coatlicue and Malinche have impact on the construction of the figure of *la bruja*. Inés Alfaro becomes a witch because she happens to be a lover of Mexican *caudillo* who collects women like war trophies and ignores his offspring (the echo of the relationship between Malinche and Cortés is obvious). Zapata from Cisneros story is not just a macho type, but also a hypocrite because he fights on behalf of peasants, against the landowners, but abuses women in the same way the landowners did. His abuses would not be possible without cultural "support"; Mexican women can be either the property of men or they must perish. In order to eliminate the women who are not submissive enough, men ostracize them as *las brujas* and exterminate. This is what happened to Inés' mother who got lynched by her father's people for being too independent. That is why Inés has to become a witch in a more discreet way. The first traces of this new identity of the main narrator Cisneros introduces as hearsay of country people and gradually the signs of Inés' transformation become more and more palpable. As we learn from her story Inés transforms her pain caused by Zapata's infidelity into wings and becomes an owl at nights able to follow her lover everywhere. Thus Inés becomes the figure of resistance and action, leaving the place assigned to her by the patriarchal culture. During the day nothing betrays her magical potential because she is just another single mother who tries to save her daughter and herself from starvation and war, but at night she gains knowledge and sometimes even inflicts punishment on her rivals. The most interesting is the motive of revenging her suffering by capturing Zapata by the spell that always makes him come back to her. In this way Inés moves from the position of the main narrator to the position of the main, although hidden, heroine of history, because it is she who controls the situation and decides about Zapata's next steps. His every failure and success cannot take place without Inés and Zapata from a powerful historical figure becomes a hostage and a puppet of a woman. What is also worth emphasizing, Inés is the character with whom readers can understand because her revenge is dictated by love. She explains it when she addresses Zapata directly:

You married her, that woman from Villa de Ayala, true.  
But see, you came back to me. You always come back.  
In between and beyond the others. That's my magic. You  
come back to me.

You visited me again Thursday last. I yanked you from  
the bed of that other one. I dreamt you, and when I awoke  
I was sure your spirit had just fluttered from the room.  
I have yanked you from your sleep before into the dream  
I was dreaming. Twisted you like a spiral of hair around  
a finger. Love, you arrived with your heart full of birds.  
And when you would not do my bidding and come when  
I commanded, I turned into the soul of a *tecolote* and kept  
vigil in the branches of a purple jacaranda outside your  
door to make sure no one would do my Miliano harm  
while he slept. (Cisneros 99)

The story „Eyes of Zapata” is additionally a homage paid to oral tradition (Inés speaks in a voice that is a combination of folklore and Indian storytelling) because Inés’ relation is a desperate attempt of entering into a dialogue with Zapata who remains deaf despite the fact that Inés repeatedly uses the second person. Cisneros also constructs a form of hybrid between English and Spanish because she not only introduces some Spanish words in the English text but also changes the English strict sentences order into free Spanish one, like in the sentence: „You visited me again Thursday last”. The Indian and Mestizo inspiration can be detected in magical-realist strategies which uncover animist spirituality and the power of human-animal transformations. In other fragments we can also see references to the Indian past of Mexico: „And I see the ancient land titles the smoky morning they are drawn up in Náhuatl and recorded on tree-bark paper – *conceded to our pueblo the 25<sup>th</sup> of September of 1607 by the Viceroy of New Spain* – the land grants that prove that land has always been our land.” (Cisneros 112)

Inés remains faithful to the Indian tradition because she feels that this tradition empowers her, it helps her to create a counter-narrative to the official history in which there is little place for Indians and Mestizos and almost no place for women. Thanks to Indian/Mestizo gift Inés can see past and future simultaneously. She predicts Zapata’s death and sees the future life of her children. She has the power to get outside of chronological time and enter the space and time of a myth, as she explains: “I rise high and higher, the house shutting itself like an eye. I fly farther than I’ve ever flown before, farther than the clouds, father than our Lord Sun, husband of the moon. Till all at once I look beneath me and see our lives, clear and still, far away and near.” (Cisneros 110) Inés is not just the narrator of one-dimensional story, but she transforms the time and space in her story-telling ritual, legitimizing in this way the Indian presence in Mexican culture and history. The life of Zapata ends on earth, but never ends in Inés’ story. Although Inés’ earthly life was full of suffering, her legacy of a witch enables her spiritual development that compensates for the losses she experienced while being one of Zapata’s lovers. Therefore from the chronological space of historical realism we move into the mythical space created or discovered by Inés in which words have creative potential. In the historical space Zapata was always escaping Inés and in the second she gains control over him because he remains always alive in her memories and cannot be taken by war or other women. Inés explains: „My sky, my life, my eyes. Let me look at you. Before you open those eyes of yours. The days to come, the days gone by. Before we go back to what we’ll always be.” (Cisneros 113)

There is no denying that the character of Inés resembles famous female characters from Mexican fiction. There are many similarities between “Eyes of Zapata” and *The Recollections of Things to Come* by Elena Garro (1963) and some similarities between Cisneros’ story and *Pedro Paramo* by Juan Rulfo (1955) and *Balún-Canán* by Rosario Castellanos (1957). I would like to argue that it is not just the ‘diluted’ Indian background that these texts have in common but, first of all, it is the construction of female characters who have the potential of *las brujas* through which they influence or sometimes try to shape the patriarchal reality. What is worth noting, is that not all of these characters are of Indian origin, but all of these literary figures are female rebels or trespassers of tradition who stand in sharp contrast to the reality created by Mexican men, the reality ruined by war.

The first example might be Julia Andrade from Garro’s novel, the lover of the *caudillo* Francisco Rosas. Although Julia depends completely on her man

(he kidnapped her from her family home and put her in a brothel as a trophy for his private abuse), Julia becomes his obsession even though she never returns his affection. Every thought and step of Rosas is connected with this unrequited love and when Julia disappears, many people believe (including Rosas himself) that she escaped with her lover helped by the townspeople of Ixtepec who hated Rosas. Julia is responsible, to some extent, for the gradual downfall of Rosas who is not able to love any other woman after her disappearance and becomes a loser. Although Julia is a victim of the patriarchal world, her presence in Garro's novel is really haunting and powerful. Despite the fact that she remains elusive till the end, the reader can identify with her thanks to the narrative of the city. Ixtepec is the animated space with its own voice that represents the dispossessed and marginalized victims of history. The voice of the town reflects the dialect of simple people; it is sometimes ungrammatical, but always sincere and full of lyrical quality and it partially reflects an Indian perspective (Zamora 528–529). What is also similar between Cisneros and Castellanos, is the reference to authentic historical figures from the Mexican Revolution (Zamora, 522–523).

In Rulfo's novel we can see a similar combination: there is a character of Susana and her obsessed lover Pedro Paramo. His tragedy is again connected with the fact that he can have all women (like Rosas) but he is not loved by the only one he cares for. Rulfo's masterpiece might have been a model for Garro also because in both cases the women who have the mysterious influence on their *caudillos* have symbolic functions; they represent the fates of the places they come from – Susanna is like Comala ruined by Pedro and Julia is like Ixtepec destroyed by Rosas. And they mysteriously ruin their men becoming empowered victims of machismo. Both novels are polyphonic and the voices they contain belong to simple people who speak in a dialect full of poetic overtones. Rulfo's and Garro's narrators made it clear that they speak on behalf and in defense of all victims of the abuse of power: peasants, Indians, women. As Camayd-Freixas notices, women are not only submissive victims of men but are also powerful symbolic figures that connect the lost Juan Preciado with a broader context of Mexican history (236–240). The critic points out that Preciado has in fact four mothers in this novel; after the death of Dolores, his biological mother, other women take on her role and these women are Eduviges, Damiana and Dorotea, all from Comala. They not only speak to Preciado about Comala's history, but represent four symbolic mothers who have deserted Mexico and the place got devoured by illusions. The first is Pre-Colombian Mother, who together with other Indian gods, left her children at the mercy of the conquistadors. The second is Colonial Mother, a kin to Mary, Mother of God, who had promised Christian salvation, but preferred to stand on the side of the landowners. The third was Independence Mother, embracing Mexicans as a nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; she also was a disappointment because she quickly excluded her Indian children from the privileges promised during fight. The last one was Revolution Mother, exemplifying another broken promise, because Rulfo's characters witness only bloodshed of the Cristeros wars (which was an outcome of the Mexican Revolution) and again remain unprotected. Thus Mexicans are left to themselves and their nightmares moving perpetually in the haunted space which partially resembles Purgatory from the Christian tradition and partially, an Indian afterlife in which all the suffering from the earthly life gets tragically repeated. It is the landscape in which violence comes back in a cyclical pattern (Pedro Paramo gets killed many times by his son Abundio) and it is

the only home they have. No mother can save Juan Preciado, but at least all of the women cared for him and we cannot see any signs of fatherly affection in Pedro Paramo. The latter is best described by his name, an emotional desert obsessed about a woman without feeling (“Pedro” comes from “stone” and “paramo” means “flat terrain”), so there is no wonder that after his death the powerful *caudillo* turns into a heap of disintegrated stones.

Another character from Mexican fiction that I find worth mentioning in this context is the nameless Indian nanny from Castellanos’ *Balún Canán*. The nanny does not belong to any *caudillo*, but there is no denying that her function in the novel is similar to that of Julia and Susanna because she is at the same time the victim of the patriarchal culture and white ruling class and she is magically empowered to challenge the world possessed by violence and injustice. She is armed with the power of the spoken word (Indian legacy) and thanks to her prayer-spell she saves the daughter of the landowners from death but does not protect their son and the patriarchal tradition gets disrupted. It is worth mentioning that nanny’s mission is connected with the message of Maya-Quiche *Popol Vuh*, the excerpt of which is quoted by Castellanos at the beginning of the novel. The narrators of the famous Mayan ‘bible’ ask for remembering them and nanny’s narrative is a post-Colombian syncretic story of those who survived the contact with the white men. Her voice is a counter-narrative clashed with the voices of the white ruling class and she represents a collective experience of the Indians who are in such a unity with the place (Balún-Canán/Coctajal) as were Julia with Ixtepec and Susanna with Comala.

Additionally, Castellanos, similarly to Cisneros, Garro and Rulfo is interested in giving us access to the histories of other women silenced by history. Another crucial narrator is a nameless seven year old girl. Nameless, because the representatives of the patriarchal culture such as her father, Cesar Arguello, prefer to ignore her. Her brother, the only male heir, has a name. In Castellanos’ novel though, it is the girl who is more important because, just as her nanny, she is aware of the power of words and as a gifted observer, she gives us access to the whole story. At the same time the girl represents other sensitive children who have managed to keep their autonomy in the world of cruel conventions and she has to pay the high price for this when she loses her brother.

Another woman narrator that is ignored by men around her and rescued from oblivion by Castellanos is the wife of Indian rebel Felipe. The woman is punished by her husband and the Indian community for not bearing children. Castellanos includes her perspective in order to make us aware that the Indian culture is also flawed by the patriarchal order and cruelty. Felipe is not only the leader of the Indian rebellion (historical context is the presidency of Cardenas who ordered landowners to educate their Indians and they disobeyed; Felipe fights for Indian right for literacy), but he is also an Indian historian. Although the history of Chiapas Indians that he narrates is told from a collective perspective, at one point he reveals himself as the author. Thus he is not only a man of action in history but its chronicler. Of course he never mentions his wife and never comments on the role of Indian women, who play a very important role, because they not only protect household, but are gifted story-tellers who can compete with Felipe as author. We know this because, through polyphonic strategy, Castellanos gives women voice and de-centers the position of men, showing “nooks and crannies” of the houses, peripheries of history, registered by women such as the nanny, the daughter of the landowners and Felipe’s wife.

All these female characters inhabit homeland they love and hate at the same time. They have no choice because they cannot leave their places (we do not learn if Julia really escaped from Ixtepec; she might have just as well been shot by one of Rosas' people). Their fate to much extent echoes that of Malinche, but in contrast to her they have more autonomy because they cannot be fully subjugated, and they inflict powerful influence on their oppressors. I introduce this comparative context in order to prove that Cisneros not only came back to her ancestors' literary home but that she transformed the Mexican tradition. Her Inés is the first woman who literally can fly and takes control of the narrative by writing her own counter-history. At the same time she remains the guardian of her tragic home and finds a way of protecting the ones she loves without self-sacrifice inspired by the Virgin of Guadalupe. She is a modern witch, trespasser of boundaries and a constant rebel. I think it is connected with the background of Cisneros who through this character not only pays homage to Mexican literature but to the potential of the New Mestiza (from Gloria Anzaldúa's definition) that rises like Phoenix from the ashes of her predecessors.

The last point of reference I would like to mention is the character of *la curandera/bruja* from Rudolfo A. Anaya's novel *Bless me, Ultima*. The founding father of the Chicano fiction created the female protagonist, Ultima, who has power to reconnect New Mexican Hispanos with their Mestizo tradition, particularly religious syncretism. Even though Cisneros' Inés seems to inherit some qualities from the most famous *bruja* of the Chicano Renaissance, the difference is Cisneros' feminist quest which is absent in Anaya's novel. Ultima does not fight the patriarchal system, but she is a part of it, her struggle is for Mestizo condition and for syncretic popular Catholicism which respects both European and indigenous tradition. In *Bless me, Ultima* no woman questions the patriarchal culture, even though it is presented as full of violence and destruction. On the contrary, Garro, Rulfo and Castellanos introduce female protagonists who do not feel comfortable in the world of machos and they protest against patriarchy; some are even ready to pay with their lives for their rebellion. In my opinion Cisneros comes back to this tradition of female resistance and similarly to her Mexican masters, she has managed to give her heroines voice and agency and she lets them trespass the confines of the Chicano masculine tradition where even *brujas* were, first of all, devoted grandmothers, guardians or sometimes servants of their sons and grandsons.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. [in:] Keating Anna Louise (ed.) (2009) *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Camayd-Freixas, Eric. (1998) *Realismo mágico y primitivismo: relecturas de Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo y García Márquez*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Castellanos Rosario. (1992) *Balún-Canán*, trans. Irene Nicholson. London: Readers International.
- Cisneros, Sandra. (1991) *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York: Random House.
- Garro Elena. (1969) *The Recollections of Things to Come*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Rulfo Juan. (1959) *Pedro Paramo*, trans. Lysander Kemp. New York: Grove Press.

- Parkinson Zamora, Lois. (1995) *Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction* [in:] Parkinson Zamora, Lois and Faris, B. Wendy. (ed.) *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*. Duke University Press. Durham & London.
- Tey Rebolledo, Diana. (1995) *Women Singing in the Snow. A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature*, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson.