(RE)CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN SANDRA CISNERO'S
“LITTLE MIRACLES, KEPT PROMISES”

Ivana Aleksić, Komunikološki Koledž Kapa Fi Banja Luka, igerun@gmail.com

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse the path which Sandra Cisneros’s characters from the short story “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” undergo in order to overcome the gap between the demands of the new world which denies their former identities and the tradition which forces them to maintain former patterns and live within the past forms.

The main focus is placed on Rosario and her cyclic path from deconstructing to reconstructing broken identity; the path which makes her fight the battles of rejection, confrontation, understanding and finally acceptance of what was once considered unacceptable.

Keywords: Chicana literature, identity, tradition, deconstruction, reconstruction, mestiza, herstory.

Introduction

Multicultural women writers have seen the issue of identity as an issue of crucial importance not only to women, but people in general, and driven by the idea that “nation is narration” (Bhabha 7) women writers have started telling stories and narrating his/herstories in order to reconstruct past identities within the new framework, rather than force them into it, as dominant discourse has been trying to. According to Linda Hutcheon they “have been among the most contesting and radical in their attacks against white male traditional forms of representation” (16). Their narratives have brought new, multiple voices, layers and perspectives and created a single story of deconstructing the past in order to (re)construct broken identities showing that in the fragmented contemporary world, identity cannot be constructed without reaching past identities, deconstructing and appropriating them to the new world.

Thus, the quest for identity becomes the primary concern of Chicana literature as it has been present in literature in general from its very beginning. One can even argue that literature arose from the quest. While in the past heroes set themselves on journeys in order to
discover their identities, in contemporary literature the quest is undertaken on a *meta* level. Chicana writers reach for known identities in order to reshape or regenerate them. By deconstructing traditional symbols, they give them new meanings and reconstruct them. The path that this paper follows is the path from deconstruction to reconstruction which Cisneros carves in her short story “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” from the collection of short stories *Women Hollering Creek*.

**Reconstructing Identity**

Sometime through the course of a seminar titled “On memory and Imagination,” trying to verbalize all the intricate stories she kept in herself, Sandra Cisneros realized she could not voice them. They would fit none of the available media or tools. None of the literary voices was hers. It hit her that her stories were different from anyone else’s in the seminar. What’s more, she could not relate them to anything that had previously been written. Then, all of a sudden, it dawned on her that she should stop forcing her stories into voices which were not hers and which they would ultimately never fit. She let them out, creating her own literary voice. At first she wrote from her own perspective and then added “many voices as divergent and dissimilar as possible from her own,” as Ganz puts it (6). In his view, Cisneros, along with other Chicana writers, converted “the unyielding forces of gender and ethnicity which had historically muted and bound them into sources of personal and stylistic strengths” (1).

Thus, in the 1980s the US witnessed the emergence of new Chicano narratives which according to Saldivar:

must be understood as different from and in resistance to traditional American literature, yet must also be understood in their American context, for they take their oppositional stance deliberately, in order to offer readers a reformulation of historical reality and contemporary culture that is more consistent with the way reality and culture are actually experienced than do other representations (9).

At the same time Huyssen states that emerging “women and minority artists [...] added a whole new dimension to the criticism of high modernism and alternative forms of culture” (250) while Alarcon indicates that Chicana works engage in revisionary dialogue with older forms of representation (99) and Perez-Torres describes them as
counterdiscursive, noting that “they write through and against, not in place of, dominant and dominating discourses” (34).

In the book *The Literature of Reconstruction*, Wolfgang Funk argues that postmillennial reconstruction is the result of the deconstruction of postmodernism where reconstructive literature appears as a form of filling the gap left behind the decline of postmodernism. In order to describe the characteristics of reconstructive literature, Funk links it to the narratological category of metafiction (2015). It is important to note that this narratological category was established in the 1980s, the decade when multi-leveled and multi-functional narratives of postmodern women writers, Cisneros being one of them, emerged. Werner Wolf further defines metafiction as closely related to metareferential turn in arts and media, defining metareference as:

> a special, transmedial form of [...] self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a “metalevel,” within an artefact or performance; this self-reference, which can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to. Where metareference is properly understood, and at least minimal corresponding “meta-awareness” is elicited in the recipient. (4)

Using above mentioned metareference, literature, as well as media and art in general, renegotiate and deconstruct past forms, patterns and narratives. Somewhere along the process the deconstruction becomes reconstruction.

Cambridge dictionary defines deconstruction as “the act of breaking something down into its separate parts in order to understand its meaning, especially when this is different from how it was previously understood”, while in the context of literature it is defined as “detailed examination of a text in order to show there is no fixed meaning but that it can be understood in a different way by each reader.” The same dictionary defines reconstruction as “the process of building or creating something again that has been damaged or destroyed” and as “an attempt to get a complete description of an event using the information available, or an attempt to repeat what happened during the event” (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/). The definitions prove that from the very beginning the Chicana writers’ urge was not to reject, discard, annihilate the past, past forms and tradition. Quite the
contrary, the urge was to understand in order to accept. The quest for understanding was everything but easy because the given forms and meanings seemed fixed and revealed nothing new. That is why the quest had to be taken at a metalevel, somewhere beyond or at a higher level. Meta-knowledge and meta-reading of the given forms was needed in order to place a different light on the existing forms which shaped the lives of Chicana women. Thus the urge for understanding led to deconstruction, the urge for acceptance led to reconstruction and the quest itself became the quest for identity.

In order to “stage a dialogue,” as Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak calls it (2), between Mexican and Anglo-American traditions, renegotiate and later reconstruct the past, Chicana writers use different narrative strategies and Cisneros, in particular, uses short story and Mexican-American oral traditions. In the light of narrative strategies, “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” is especially interesting primarily because it does not have a plot nor a narrator, and it lacks linear storytelling. It presents multiple stories instead and thus multiple plots told through different voices of different narrators. Using this polyphony of voices, Cisneros fights the singular and homogeneous representation of Chicano identity in American and world culture. In the fight, she raises multiple Chicana voices and delivers heterogeneity through the multiplicity of worries and burdens in the lives of Chicanas. Each note is a story in itself. Each story is a peak into the Chicana world. Thus the readers are given not one, but multiple doors ajar into that world and it is entirely up to them whether they will enter or stay behind. Cisneros does not want just to tell stories of Mexican culture being heterogeneous rather than homogeneous as it is presented in the dominant culture, but wants the readers to feel the heterogeneity, multiplicity and different layers of Mexican culture. In order to achieve this aim, she uses not only multiple voices and multiple narrations, but also different styles – from literary to slang, different tones – from serious to comic, different concerns – from petty to universal ones, and above all different languages – from proper Mexican, over broken Mexican and code switching to proper English.

Furthermore, Cisneros introduces the readers to the three representations of Chicana womanhood – the Virgin of Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona. As Alexandra Fitts puts it, “Cisneros reevaluates, and in a way revalues, the three most prevalent representations of Mexican womanhood: the passive virgin, the sinful seductress, and the traitorous mother” (par. 1). In *Women Hollering Creek*, Cisneros fights against the established female role models and strives for their acceptance at the same time. In “Little Miracles, Kept
Promises,” in particular, she undergoes a process of rewriting and recreating the image of the Virgin de Guadalupe.

Our Lady of Guadalupe or the Virgin de Guadalupe is the patroness of Mexico and symbolizes virginity. She is a strong image and the embodiment of what a Chicana should be – silent, mild, passive and submissive, or in a word – inactive. However, a modern Chicana finds it very difficult to follow such a role model and ends up being either La Malinche, the betrayer of her culture and heritage or a denied woman, a woman living the archetype, but denying herself. Describing her own resistance to The Virgin, Cisneros writes:

What a culture of denial. Don’t get pregnant! But no one tells you how not to. This is why I was angry for so many years every time I saw la Virgen de Guadalupe, my culture’s role model for brown women like me. She was damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable (1996, 48).

Cisneros could not accept the Virgin as a woman, as someone she could relate to, respect or admire, let alone be. She fought the image and while fighting it she came to a surprising revelation that the Virgin was much more than the image of the Virgin. Cisneros understood her not only as the mother of God, but God herself, “a face for a god without a face, an indígena for a god without ethnicity, a female deity for a god who is genderless” (1996, 50).

Gloria Anzaldúa draws attention to the importance of such reinterpretation of the Virgin. Although she understands the danger of such a role model, she cannot disregard the power it has. Thus, Anzaldúa sees the Virgin as “a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races of our psyche, the conqueror and conquered” as well as “the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess” (30).

The reinterpretation is significant not merely because it redeems the tradition and established female icons, but because it modernizes them and adds nuance to their legends and their legacy, which “allow(s) for the past while opening up the future” (Fitts par. 1).

**Little Miracles, Kept Promises**

Cisneros’s “declamadores” bring 23 stories in the form of 23 letters or notes on the church walls. The stories function as a tool for
breaking down the paradigms and creating a new culture. The first part focuses on promises, thank-you-notes and prayers which, different as they are, create a polyphony of voices that combine into a vivid and true-to-life representations of Chicano and Chicanas. The notes bring stories of poverty, cultural and social suppression, self-identity and self-acceptance, sexuality, gender roles, repression and the Other. Above all, they bring stories of women being double marginalised – first being Mexican and then being women in a male dominated society. Women are Cisneros’s primary concern since, as Katherine Payant points out “she speaks for people like herself or whom she has known – Mexican and Chicana girls and women who grew up on the borderlands,” and speaking for them she writes about the ghosts inside that haunt her, the ghosts being the myths and legends that hold Chicanas back in their quest for self-identity (Payant 95).

Thus, the readers meet Adelfa who prays that her daughter Zulema comes to some senses: “Zulema would like to finish school but I says she can just forget about it now. She is our oldest and her place is at home helping us out I told her. Please make her see some sense. She’s all we got” (Cisneros 1992, 117).

Cisneros not only tells the story of Zulema being restrained by family duties, but by using Zulema’s mother as a narrator denies Zulema voice, which further emphasizes her position of a silenced girl who is denied her dreams, life and future.

The readers are then introduced to Barbara who, despite being “too intelligent, too powerful, too beautiful, too sure of who [...] she is” links her destiny to a husband and feels desperate because she cannot find “a man man” who “at least can pronounce his name the way it’s supposed to be pronounced” (Cisneros 1992, 117), to Corpus who feels trapped in a marriage with a man she does not love and wishes to be taught to love him again (Cisneros 1992, 118), to Teresa who wants to break free from the imposed gender roles, not wanting to live the lives of her Tia Perla or Tia Enedina and not wanting a man in her life: “So what is it I’m asking for? Please, Virgencita. Lift this heavy cross from my shoulders and leave me like I was before, wind on my neck, my arms swinging free, and no one telling me how I ought to be” (Cisneros 1992, 122).

Finally, the readers are introduced to Rosario who becomes the archetype for all Cisneros’s women. The story of Rosario is the only one which could fit the known form of a story and in a way serves as the theme for all other women’s stories of Cisneros’s. Rosario’s struggle with embracing her identity can be equated with every Cisneros’s woman’s struggle. Thus Cisneros uses Rosario to give voice
to all Chicanas letting her pronounce what has been unpronounceable until then. Moreover, Cisneros sets Rosario as a role-model for all, not only Chicanas nor even women, but human beings in general.

Rosario starts her struggle with rejection. She refuses to accept traditional patterns that she is supposed to live by. She cuts off her hair, the hair she has “never cut since the day (she) was born” and “shed(s) it like a snakeskin” (Cisneros 1992, 125). Thus, she breaks free from the burdening traditions and just like a snake which sheds its skin in order to remove parasites that might have grown onto the old skin, Rosario sheds her hair which has all the unbearable, restraining remarks in it:

- It's not good to spend so much time alone.
- What she do in there all by herself? It don't look right.
- Chayito, when you getting married? Look at your cousin Leticia. She's younger than you.
- How many kids you want when you grow up?
- When I become a mommy ...
- You'll change. You'll see. Wait till you meet Mr. Right.
- Chayo, tell everybody what it is you're studying again.
- Look at our Chayito. She likes making her little pictures. She's gonna be a painter.
- A painter! Tell her I got five rooms that need painting.
- When you become a mother ...

In her desire to reject them, she does not count on the fact that the symbols she is trying to annihilate are inside her and that she cannot renounce her mother or her grandmother no matter how desperately she wants it. The desire for rejection then leads to fury because of being forced to accept that she is those traditions, that she is “(her) own history and (her) future; all (her) ancestors' ancestors inside (her) own belly; all (her) futures and all (her) pasts” (Cisneros 1992, 126) and if she wants to break free she needs to understand them first.

In the quest for understanding, she reaches deep in the past, uncovers the traditional symbols and icons, examines not only what they mean, but what they could possibly mean and comes to the revelation that “there is power in (her) mother's patience, strength in (her) grandmother's endurance” (Cisneros 1992, 128), that suffering is not weakness, but strength as well, that “those who suffer have special power [...] the power of understanding someone else’s pain and (that) understanding is the beginning of healing” (Cisneros 1992, 128).
Realising that the past that burdens can also set free, Rosario embraces her Self fully, no longer ashamed to be “(her) mother's daughter, (her) grandmother's granddaughter, (her) ancestor's child” (Cisneros 1992, 128).

The path that Rosario underwent might seem easy, but it was excruciating on two levels. Firstly, it took time and a lot of pain to realise and accept that she was different from the ones she ought to have looked like and that she wanted what no other woman in her family wanted. Secondly, it took a lot of courage to speak up and fight for her true self, all the way having to “steel and hoard and hone (herself)” (Cisneros 1992, 126). In the end, the reward came. The hair she cut as a symbol of rebellion, rejection and shame has become a symbol of reconciliation and acceptance, a little miracle to be pinned by the statue of the one who represented nothing but self-sacrifice and silent suffering and who grew to represent power, understanding and healing.

**Conclusion**

Discussing the central theme in much of Chicana writing, Payant draws attention to Gloria Anzaldua description of a *mestiza* – a woman of mixed racial and ethnic ancestry – as:

a hybrid creature, not Mexican, not Anglo, not Indian, but something different than all three, a person at the crossroads, full of energy whose "future depends on the breaking down of paradigms". A *mestiza* must know her history; she must cross linguistic barriers and straddle several cultures, in fact, creating a new culture. She must not be bound by rigid, linear ways of thinking and behavior, by traditional subject-object dualities, or prescribed methods of reaching her goals. A *mestiza* copes by "developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to juggle cultures. [...] Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else (Payant 2).

Cisneros’s Rosario emerges as a true embodiment of Anzaldua’s description. Restrained by tradition, she did develop tolerance for its ambiguities, she did break down the paradigms, she did learn to juggle cultures and she did turn the ambivalence into something else – she turned her history into herstory.
Moreover, she broke up the monolithic image of traditional role models, Virgin Mary in particular, and gave them new meanings enabling them to function in the new world. The re-examination that Rosario performed during her cyclic journey brought her back to the starting point, where empowerment awaited, not only Rosario, but all Chicanas who now had a past that they could relate to.

Works Cited:


Rad se bavi analizom puta koji junaci kratke priče Little Miracles, Kept Promises Sandre Cisneros prelaze kako bi prevazišli jaz između zahtjeva savremenog svijeta, u kome njihovi identiteti ne funkcionišu, i tradicije koja ih primorava da žive u okviru prošlih okvira i šabiona.

Glavni akcenat stavlja se na junakinju Rozario i njeno ciklično putovanje od dekonstrukcije do rekonstrukcije fragmentiranog identiteta; putovanje na kome prolazi kroz procese odbijanja, sučeljavanja, shvatanja i konačno prihvatanja onoga što se na početku njenog puta činilo neprihvatljivim.

Ključne riječi: Čikana književnost, identitet, tradicija, dekonstrukcija, rekonstrukcija, mestiza identitet, njena priča (herstory).