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The Search for Identity in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless me, Ultima*



Abstract

Rudolfo Anaya is a Mexican – American author. He was born in New Mexico 1937, of poor family. Then, he enters business school. After that, he changed his study to New Mexico University to get a degree in English. As Mexican- American

family, his own family experienced the climax of segregation of an agro pastoral, self- subsistence economy by a wage-labor Market economy. His mother is a catholic who pushed him to adapt the Anglo American world.¹

Key words: Chicano literature, identity, Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima*.

Introduction

Concerning Anaya's study at the university, he succeeded rapidly. This pushed him to register at business school. After that, he completed a degree in

English at the University of New Mexico. He taught at a public school, and his novel *Bless Me, Ultima* took seven years of his time, which later get the

prestigious Quinto Sol Literary Award. This novel was published in 1972 and draw the attention of most of the critics at that time. It is the bildungsroman about the protagonist Antonio and his life with Ultima. This novel talks about New Mexico during the period WWII. It depicts every corner of New Mexican life particularly the landscape. Moreover, it shows the influence of indigenous culture on this country.²

Anaya is an outstanding author, and highly prolific writer. All his writings depict Hispanic traditions and the life in New Mexico and the Southwest. His fame is derived from *Bless Me, Ultima*. This novel wins the PEN Center USA award for fiction in 1993. Anaya takes his share from America also, he gets the National Medal of Arts in Washington, DC in 2001. In 2013 this novel was adapted into a film. He lived in New Mexico, and taught literature at the University of New Mexico. He retired and became professor emeritus of English there. Children's books got a good share in Anaya's

achievements include *Roadrunner's Dance*, *Serafina's Stories*, *The Santero's Miracle*, *The First Tortilla*, and *How Hollyhocks Came to New Mexico*. Other books: *Tortuga*, *Cuentos*, *Zia Summer*, *Rio Grande Fall*, *Shaman Winter*, *Jemez Spring*, and *The Old Man's Love Story*³

Anaya is the father of Chicano literature. The term 'Chicano Literature' is not easy to define, because it arouses controversy. First of all, Chicano refers to people who have mixing currents of Mexican and American life. The Chicano tradition is crossbred or hybrid. Historically speaking, this culture comes into being after the Mexican American war.⁴

Chicano dates back to Spanish conquest of Mexico. Yet, the beginning of this movement is in 1848 (the end of the war between Mexico and America). Therefore, the place is the south west of United States. And the reason of the emergence of this culture is that much cultural heritage of former mother country placed southwest the border, this is due to close

cultural interrelations and migrations.⁵ Chicano as a

With the rise of the Chicano Movement in the 1960s, young militant Chicanos adopted this traditionally derogatory term in a defiant stance of self-assertion; "Chicano" took on ideological meanings and became a term of cultural self-affirmation, celebrating the Spanish, Indian, and Mexican cultural heritage of the people of

There is another term that has a strong overlap with Chicano, sometimes it is used instead, it is "Hispanic". It is a more generic term that denotes people of Spanish descent, while Chicano refers to the people of Mexican ancestry. It is worth mentioning here that all of Hispanics are living in the United States.⁷

The survey of Chicano literature could be summarized as the following: First it starts with oral traditions, the most obvious examples are 'Corridos'. Such genres are narrative ballads. Mainly, they focus on the conflict between the Mexicans and Americans.⁸ The language of these genres is Mexican, but the theme is of sentiment, and

movement rises in 1960s:

Mexican ancestry residing within the United States. It was initially a very radical term and was predominantly used among young people, but it has since gained wider acceptance. However, as a politically charged term, it is still not accepted or used by a large portion of the people it is supposed to denote.⁶

identity conflict. But such kinds of writing declined after the 1930s due to commercialism and over exposure.⁹

Besides the corridos emerges the popular drama that depicts the stories of independence. It is worth mentioning here that the majority of the writers use Spanish language. They also express literal manifestation of cultural identity.¹⁰ In addition to the ballad and drama, there are legends and songs.¹¹

After the 1960s, Chicano literature establishes itself as an outstanding literature. The cornerstone of the writing of this period is the tone of self-assertion, the tone of challenge

to condemn the social conditions in Chicano community, the use of Aztlan which refers to ancient Indian homeland in southwest, and it represents at the same time to the Chicano. Besides, the writings of this period witness the employment of Meztlizaje question (being mixed European and Indian ancestry), as the presenting dual identity.¹²

Concerning fiction, it is mixed with cultural traditions. The novelists describe a culture which emerges at that time and stands against outstanding forces. They depict life where people passed their lives indignity and civility, facing the harsh reality with piosness.¹³

Bless Me, Ultima reflects the life of its author. Though it has been rejected by many publishers at the beginning, it becomes the classic of Chicano literature and wins the Premio Quinto Sol Award.¹⁴ It is the best sellers Chicano novel. It focuses on the theme of identity, appreciation of land which is spiritual pond of New Mexico for Anaya, indigenous myths,

legends, cultures, bilingualism, and the search for knowledge.¹⁵

The story of *Bless Me, Ultima* centers around Antonio who is six-year old. He lives in the countryside in New Mexico after the period of WWII. He witnesses all the manner of grace and bloodshed. His parents belong to two different families and origins. Each one of them plans for Antonio's future. The story starts to be complicated when his older grandmother (Ultima) comes to live with them. His mother supplies him with too much Catholicism. She is a devoted catholic and wants her son to be a priest, while his father is anti-religious. He wants Antonio to become a farmer without religion. He ridicules the priest. On the other hand, Ultima provides Antonio with mysticism since she has a magical power and knows the secrets of earth. She is the protector and guider of Antonio. This woman narrates stories and legends about Antonio's ancestors. She makes him appreciate his history and culture.¹⁶

Therefore, his father wants him to follow Marez tradition while his mother wants him to follow her Luna (Luna is farmer that devoted catholic) family tradition and working to be priest. This is Antonio's dilemma, which heritage shall he consider? The character of Ultima is of significance. People consider her as witch, but in fact, she is a wise woman who appreciates tolerance and understanding. Because of this woman, Antonio solves his big problem and reaches to this conclusion: the multi-religious systems and the inter- cultural backgrounds are

merit not demerit. This can produce equal ways of understanding the world.¹⁷

The Search for Identity

Antonio suffers from mixed – raced identity. Throughout the course of the novel, he quests for personal and cultural identity. The theme of identity is elaborated extensively in *Bless Me Ultima*. It is presented in Antonio's internal conflict in choosing the future that his parents want. He is obliged to make decision between his two family's backgrounds:¹⁸

-Then maybe I do not have to be just Marez, or Luna, perhaps

I can be both- I said

-Yes, he said, but I knew he was as proud as ever of

being Marez

- It seems I am so much a part of the past - I said

Ay, every generation, every man is a part of his past. He-

cannot escape it, but he may reform the old materials, make

something new -

Take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea -

God and the golden carp-and make something new, I said

to myself. That is what Ultima meant by building strength

from life. Papa, I asked, can a new religion be made
Why, I suppose so, he answered
A religion different from the religion of the Lunas, I was
again talking to myself, intrigued by the easy flow of thoughts
and the openness with which I divulged them to my father
The first priest here, I nodded towards El Puerto, he was
the father of the Lunas wasn't he-¹⁹

Concerning indigenous cultures and the search for identity, Anaya himself expresses his, saying:

his attitude clearly in one of his
assa

I enjoy the variety that fills your pages, but wonder if at some point you might not consider a subject issue. An old but still important topic is the loss to humanity as indigenous cultures are forced out of their lands and ways of living. Western civilization has long insisted on dominating the globe, and its monolithic way of thinking and its insistence on dominance have led to the death of many indigenous cultures. For example, in Mexico Profundo Bonfil Batalla presents a penetrating analysis of the impact which European

colonization had on the Mexican Indian cultures. Five hundred years later, indigenous cultures such as Chiapas still resist. We are busy preserving species of animals from extinction, but little attention is paid to the loss of cultures which have so much to teach us. Revisiting colonialism in the Americas would help us learn more about our indigenous cultures, contribute to an understanding of social /political problems today, and hopefully create a dialogue to help stop the loss of human lives.²⁰

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Bildungsroman dominates the narrative of *Bless Me, Ultima*. It deals with personal identity issues which is essential topic in Chicano literature as well as in Chicano movement (a movement appears in 1960s and tackles the problems of indigenous past, identity, and cultural duality).²¹

Furthermore, the elements of personal/ ethnic identity could be seen also in this novel as Marta Caminero –Santangelo diagnosis by saying:

A submerged subtext concerning hybrid, *mestizo* identity lies beneath the plot of Antonio's family-based identity conflict, but obscuring this subtext within the narrative is thematically significant and has been overlooked too long. The novel actually concerns the cultural pressures that caused Mexican Americans to deny their Indian heritage in the decades—and even centuries—before the Chicano movement (after

all *Bless Me, Ultima* is not set during the '60s and '70s of the Chicano movement but during World War II). Structurally, *Ultima* mirrors those pressures by suppressing issues of Native American heritage and masking them with the father-mother conflict.. In a parallel to Antonio's learning process, readers must follow the traces of "Indian-ness" "and unearth what has been repressed."²²

One might note that the religious struggle is depicted strongly in the novel. It is between Christianity as represented by catholic church and Antonio's mother on the one hand, and paganism as associated with indigenous beliefs. However, for Ultima, Antonio, as well as Anaya, the two beliefs can be mixed to form new hybrid religion. This appears clearly in the novel, in the scene where the children demand the non-believer when he confesses his sins and submits to Catholicism.²³

"Give him a penance! Make him ask for forgiveness for

those terrible things he said about God ! " Agnes insisted.

They were gathering behind me now, I could feel their presence and their hot, bitter breath. They wanted me to be their

leader; they wanted me to punish Florence.

"Make his penance hard," Rita leered.

"Make him kneel and we'll all beat him," Ernie suggested.

"Yeah, beat him!" Bones said wildly.

"Stone him! "

"Beat him!"

"Kill him! "

They circled around me and advanced on Aorence, their

eyes flashing with the thought of the punishment they would

impose on the non-believer. It was then that the fear left me and I knew what I had to do. I spun around and held out my

hands to stop them. (213-214)

In this part of the novel, Antonio refuses to play the role of punishing religious man, and the kids yell: "Give him the Indian torture!" (214). This scene has historical implication, it alludes to Spanish colonizers who make diversion of the native citizen of New Mexico. Indian torture is marvelously obscure term; in

spite of the fact that; the kids know that "Indian torture" is torture managed by Indians, what they do represents old tortured history of Indians. The protagonist refuses the dogmatic levy of religious commitment. Consequently, Florence says to him: "You could never be their priest" (215). Instead, by the end

of the novel, Antonio pick out religious hybridity; he discovers that he can take "God and the golden carp—and make something new" (247) Antonio fails utterly to recognize that the sort of religious syncretism that he imagines as a solution to his dilemma has already taken place. It is clear that a hybrid religion is a reality for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, who routinely incorporate aspects of belief systems inherited from Native American ancestors with the Catholicism imposed by the Spanish conquerors. In one of

Antonio's dream, the ethnic religious conflict is linked to the familial conflict as he begs, "Oh please tell me which is the water that runs through my veins," and his parents give opposing responses, "It is the sweet water of the moon, my mother crooned softly, it is the water the Church chooses to make holy and place in its font. It is the water of your baptism. Lies, lies, my father laughed, through your body runs [. . .] the water that binds you to the pagan god of Cico, the golden carp!" (120).²⁴

By hybrid religion, it means the cooperation and harmony of the Spanish conquerors' Catholicism with the inherited belief systems of Native American ancestors.²⁵

Anaya's writings, especially *Bless Me, Ultima*, attract the attention of the readers and the critics, and have the lion's share

of interpretation and criticism of any work by Chicano/a authors. This novel can be read from different corners. It is a very rich novel that sheds light on social updates, cultural conflict, religious debates, psychological maturation, racism, and many other points. At one level, *Bless Me, Ultima* the reader can touch the elements of romance. Mainly

in the use of myth. At another level, It can be analyzed from cultural nationalist point of view. It resolves the historical struggles between the rural people and focuses on United States' the racist ideology.²⁶

Moreover, this novel focuses on duality of culture (Chicano/Mexicano). *Bless Me, Ultima* is a fruitful novel for interpretations. Everything has another meaning behind their symbolisms: the names of the characters, figures, and the objects of protagonist's world. The novel bears different interpretations. As far as imagery concern, Anaya uses powerful images to arouse different responses from his readers. The novel involves prophetic dreams, episodes for children, idyllic scenes of harmony, violence and death scenes, and scenes of mystical dynamism. All these things are presented in detailed and make readers close to the characters' mentality and to the natures' forces.²⁷

It is worth mentioning here that this novel has opposition technique to arouse struggle.

Antonio has parents who are opposed in everything; their backgrounds, their visions, their aspirations, and in their religious affiliations. Wild forces and nature are opposed to represent good and evil inside human being; sometimes they appear as quiet, fertile, peace, and purity. Other times, natural manifestations are harsh, dry and dangerous. Concerning the conflict, the reader touches it in different levels; it is cultural, physical, social, and psychological conflict. One can say that the conflict is extensive in this novel. Additionally, the author tends to use tripartite form in this novel. Therefore, things appear in form of "threes.": three cultures, three disclosures of Ultima's identity, three brothers, three prophetic dreams, three Trementina sisters, three occasions where Ultima interferes in others' destinies, three Comanche spirits, ...etc.²⁸

Conclusion

The search for identity is not a new theme in the world of fiction, but what is new is the solution that Rudolfo Anaya

supplies his reader with. Anaya makes the character of Ultima a guide for Antonio and for everybody who suffers cultural struggle or loss of identity. Under her guide, Antonio (the sympathetic character in the novel) understands the lesson, he can satisfy his parents and find himself at the same time despite of the differences in the attitudes of his family. This is clear when she asks him to listen to the voice of land. By land, she means the belongness or the relatedness of Man regardless of the religion,

politics, or other barriers. She makes him feel as a Chicano person and accept his reality away from prolong cultural/religious struggle in his country. The author wants to advise his reader to accept the differences and consider them as a normal case. In Antonio's case, and with the aid of Ultima, he is going to satisfy both his parents and himself. In addition, the author gives priority to the land and cultural traditions on politics and religion.

المستخلص

الارض فقد عنت بالأرض انتماء الانسان بغض النظر عن الدين او السياسة او العوائق الاخرى. جعلته يشعر كشخص شيكانو Chicano و يقبل واقعه بعيدا عن النزاع الديني / الثقافي المطول في بلده. اراد الراوي نصح القارئ ان يقبل الاختلافات وبعدها حالة طبيعية. في حالة انطونيو وبتأثير من التما سوف يرضي كل من والداه ونفسه. كما ويعطي المؤلف اولوية للأرض وللمواريث الثقافية على حساب الدين والسياسة.

البحث عن الهوية ليس بالموضوع الجديد في عالم الخيال الادبي. لكن ما هو جديد هنا هو الحل الذي زود به رودولفو انايا قرائه به. حيث جعل من شخصية (التما) مرشد لشخصية (انطونيو) و لأي شخص يعاني من نزاع ثقافي او ضياع الهوية. في ضوء ارشاداتها , فهم انطونيو (الشخصية المتعاطفة) الدرس, فبالإمكان ان يرضي والديه ويرضي نفسه في نفس الوقت بالرغم من وجود فوارق في اتجاهات العائلة. يتجلى هذا عندما طلبت منه الاصغاء الى صوت

Notes

¹Lindsay Parnell, "Rudolfo Anaya: Father of Chicano Literature", *Culture Trip* (14 December 2016), <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/new-mexico/articles/rudolfo-anaya-father-of-chicano-literature>, (accessed in 28/1/20018).

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Matt Reimann, "Rudolfo Anaya and Chicano Literature", *BOOKS* (Oct 30, 2015. 9:00 AM), <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/rudolfo-anaya-and-chicano-literature>, : 5, (accessed in 28/1/20018).

⁵Annie O. Eysturoy and Jose Antonio Gurpegui, "Chicano Literature: Introduction and Bibliography" *American Studies International*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (April 1990): 48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41280533>, (accessed in 18/11/2017).

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid. : 4.

⁸Ibid. : 7.

⁹Raymund A. Paredes, "The Evolution of Chicano Literature" *Oxford Journals*, (July 23, 2015), <http://melus.oxfordjournals>, (accessed in 18/11/2017): 77.

¹⁰Annie O. Eysturoy and Jose Antonio Gurpegui , : 53.

¹¹Raymund A. Paredes, : 75.

¹²Ibid. :8-9.

¹³Ibid. : 87.

¹⁴Bill McMahon, *Teaching Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima from Multiple Critical Perspectives*, (Prestwick House, Inc, n.p), 6.

¹⁵Bruce Allen Dick, "Books Reviews" *Great Plains Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer 2001): 253, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23532643>, (accessed in 18/11/2017).

¹⁶Peter Rainer, "Bless Me, Ultima' has moments where its magical realism shines" *The Christian Science Monitor*, (February 22, 2013), <https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2013/0222/Bless-Me-Ultima-has-moments-where-its-magical-realism-shines>, : 4, (accessed in 18/11/2017).

¹⁷Chelsea Bowers, "Bless Me Ultima" Prezi, (7 March 2011), <https://prezi.com/m6jkdbdtqqvf/bless-me-ultima/>, (accessed in 18/1/2018).

¹⁸Peter Rainer: 4.

¹⁹Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima*, (California:A Time Warner Company , 1972), 247. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and will be given parenthetically henceforward.

²⁰Rudolfo Anaya, "Indigenous Cultures " *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Winter, 2002), :108, (accessed in 28/ 1/20018).

²¹Marta Caminero-Santangelo, "Jasón's Indian": Mexican Americans and the Denial of Indigenous Ethnicity in Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (07 Aug 2010.), : 115 , 10.3200/ CRIT.45.2.115-128, (accessed in 28/ 1/20018).

²²Ibid. : 117.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid. :118.

²⁶ Rubén O. Martinez, *Bless me, Ultima Notes*, (Colorado: Lincoln Nebraska, 1995), 38 .

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 39.

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