

Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera*: The Deconstruction of Phallogocentric Narratives

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Abstract

Poststructuralist theorist Derrida urges a need to break the binary positions in phallogocentric narratives. Following his idea, poststructuralist feminists like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous also say that women need to be themselves while writing so that they are free from the phallogocentric influence. They also say that female authors write in a way to deconstruct the male narratives of history, religion, language, and even identity. Another poststructuralist theorist Judith Butler clarifies that to deconstruct does not mean to dismiss the previous meaning but to question that meaning. Gloria Anzaldua's text *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) is used in this paper to explore how her book is a reflection of the multifaceted identity of a colonized people like Chicana natives. In this book, Anzaldua mingles genres and languages to delineate how the colonized and colonizing cultures blur at a point and become a means to celebrate. This paper attempts to show how Anzaldua is not only deconstructing the binary opposition found in phallogocentric narratives but also recreating new narratives which are both feminine and masculine.

Keywords: identity, deconstruction, phallogocentric narratives, fragmentation, schizophrenia, chora

Narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.

(Ronald Barthes 79)

It is by writing, from and toward woman, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.

(Hélène Cixous 296)

This paper will explore how Gloria Anzaldua deconstructs the phallogocentric narratives in her semi-autobiographical and multi-lingual book called *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Gloria Anzaldua, in her fiction *Borderlands/La Frontera*, creates a new possibility of the multi-faceted identity of a woman who embraces femininity and masculinity as well as many other plural identities within herself. Anzaldua divides her book into two parts; one is in prosaic form and the other is a cluster of poetry. She further divides these two parts into different subtopics giving emphasis on each different phase of her life. Moreover, in the second part of her book she re-writes her life in poetic language, breaking and bridging the boundaries of her life to deconstruct every kind of binary opposition. Before the textual analysis, it is important to explain what is meant by the deconstruction of phallogocentric language.

This paper reads how Gloria Anzaldua is deconstructing the phallogocentric language in the light of poststructuralist feminists who are following Derrida's notion of deconstructing the phallogocentric texts. Throughout his book *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida suggests a new way of reading texts where one should deconstruct the binary oppositions ingrained in the language. He also suggests that each word can create a new meaning and the reading of a text should be



subjective as each reader has a unique background while reading the same text. He further states that one should not stop only at deconstructing a text but also should create new meanings of the text by breaking the binary oppositions. Derrida criticizes that Western theories are phallogocentric as they are more male-centered where males are seen as the norm and woman as the “other.” He says that one ought to deconstruct the phallogocentric narration or language.

Then poststructuralist feminists also denote a space for the accommodation of multi-narrations, dichotomies, and the mixture of genres to deconstruct the phallogocentric literature by reflecting the fragmented sexual identity of women in their creative writings. To further clarify how this paper is reading Anzaldúa's work as a deconstruction of phallogocentric narratives, Judith Butler's explanation on deconstruction can be noted. She explains in her essay “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,” that to “deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term, to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized” (397). And Julia Kristeva says that any poetic language is feminine because it reflects the identification with the maternal body during the chora stage. She points out in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* that every literary text consists of phenotext and genotext. Phenotext is the physical text that we read and the genotext is the emotions, drives, desire, repressions that created the text. The phenotext tries to create an order of the genotext but the chora, the repression that occurred in the pre-linguistic stage, comes up and creates a “schizophrenic” nature in the texts. Kristeva also claims that this is why all the experimental texts are a deliberate fragmentation of the order. As language is unconscious according to Kristeva and, as she also says that a text can be read in two ways as phenotext and genotext, I will talk about both the style and background of the author. In her book, *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa is not only deconstructing the phallogocentric narratives but also suggesting a new way to craft narratives by rewriting the history, religious genealogy, and by creating a new language.

Gloria Anzaldúa was born in a Chicana community which had been repeatedly colonized by white nations in such a way that Chicana traditional culture and language now blends with those of the colonizers. So she believes that people who live in a borderland like her need to go beyond the binary oppositions of the phallogocentric narratives. She is a Chicana writer with hardly any Chicana literary genealogy to follow. Since the first self-identity formed in a baby is very fragmented and chaotic (Lacan) and poetic language reflects the splitting identity of the chora stage (Kristeva), Anzaldúa is using the “creative schizophrenia” to delineate the identity of women which is also very fragmented and schizophrenic. Simon Gikandi, a postcolonial scholar, says:

The writer who operates in the space between cultural traditions draws inventive energies from ‘creative schizophrenia’: speaking in an androgynous idiom, this writer does not have to choose between self and community, between private discourse and a national language, or even between the subjective experience and historical traditions. (11)

Gikandi's term reflects perfectly on the writing style of Anzaldúa as she does not take any binary position of identity and rather uses all her identities, languages, genres to celebrate the plurality of Chicana women. In this fiction, we find that the author is going beyond the dichotomy of man and woman and deleting the binary line crafting a new method of narrating history.

In the very first chapter of her book *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa deconstructs the Americanized history of Mexico by tracing the ancient history of her nation. Anzaldúa condemns how American

historians are referring to Chicana people as immigrants or intruders when the first historical traces of Chicana people in Mexico can be traced from 3500 BC. She gives a traditional history of Mexico and before condemning the Anglo-American historians as dominating and patriarchal, she condemns her own ancestors for creating the first world of discrimination and binary oppositions. Huitzilopochtli was seen as a God with an eagle with a serpent in its beak. Later, he was seen with the eagle only. Anzaldúa says “The symbolic sacrifice of the serpent to the ‘higher’ masculine powers indicate that the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America” (27). The Chicana culture holds the history of a place where women were treated equally as men and living without the patriarchal violence. She condemns the ruling elite of the Aztec nation because it had “subverted the solidarity between men and women and between noble and commoner” (Anzaldúa 56). Thus, throughout the book, she tries to undo any binary line constructed between man and woman, or class or race distinction that has been created by patriarchal narratives.

Anzaldúa also deconstructs the Anglo phallogocentric narrative of racial purity of Americans. Coming from a working-class background of a minor ethnic group, she boldly refutes the American culture of institutional religion and absolutism of patriarchal power. In her book, she delineates the “cultural assumptions and a worldview which contrast sharply with those underlying most non-Indian literature” (Dyke 339) of American or the White canon. Anzaldúa rather follows the philosophy of José Vasconcelos, a Mexican philosopher’s view on racial identity. Vasconcelos believes in the “inclusivity” of racial identity and opposes the “racial purity of white America” (Anzaldúa 99). She goes on to say that the “mixture of races’ provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool” (Anzaldúa 99). Thus, Anzaldúa makes a connection to all her fragmented identities which are derived by the multiple colonization of her Chicana culture and the new borderlines created as an effect of colonization.

Religion is another totalitarian ideology that imposes patriarchy. This is why Anzaldúa has spent a good number of pages talking about the influence of religion in the construction of the identity of their women to deconstruct the phallogocentric religious narratives. Religion first crafted the identity for Chicana women, according to Anzaldúa. As in all indigenous cultures, for a Chicana woman too, religion and culture blur at a point. For her, religion is more like a mythology as Malinowsky observes “mythology is the sacred tradition of a society ... a body of narratives woven into their culture, dictating their belief, defining their ritual, acting as the chart of their social order and the pattern of their moral behavior” (249). Anzaldúa condemns the patriarch of Aztec rule for empowering male deities over female ones because during the reign of female deities, the society was more egalitarian and there was less violence in the society. She recalls, “The tribal God Huitzilopochtli killed his sister, the moon goddess Malinalxoch, who used her supernatural power over animals to control the tribe rather than wage war” (Anzaldúa 54). Anzaldúa shows how patriarchy, even in the pagan religion, discriminated women and by doing so subverted the peace of the society.

She also mentions how the ancient religion, before Aztecs became patriarchal, was not phallogocentric. Before the Aztec rulers became powerful and tyrannical, “people worshipped the Lord and Lady of Duality, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl. Before the change to male dominance, Coatlicue, lady of the Serpent Skirt, contained and balanced the dualities of male and female, light and dark, life and death” (Anzaldúa 54). The religion and deities were androgynous. She complains



“the true identity of three [goddesses] has been subverted – Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada (Malinche) to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and la Llorona to make us lone-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the virgin/puta (whore) dichotomy” (Anzaldúa 53). She demands that to be a feminist “the first step is to unlearn the puta/virgin dichotomy and to see Coatlalopeuh-Coatlicue in the Mother Guadalupe” (Anzaldúa 106). Anzaldúa believes in the “plural personality operating in a pluralistic mode” (101) and thus urges her people to accept Guadalupe, the version of Coatlalopeuh, brought to Aztec Indian culture by Spanish rulers “who is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and the culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered” (Anzaldúa 42), a fusion of multi-dimensional symbol of Chicana people. Thus, while accepting Guadalupe she reconstructs the harmony between oppressed and oppressor, native and foreign culture, the old and new world; by accepting the raped mother (la Chingada) and the mad mother (la Llorona) who first kills and then seeks her lost children, she accepts the plurality, the schizophrenic identity that exists in a woman.

Anzaldúa's use of language in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* also reconstructs a new language which is beyond phallogocentric. Anzaldúa recalls how she was punished for speaking Spanish in her school and she also had to take two speaking classes in the university to learn how to speak English like Americans. According to Anzaldúa, not only the English language but also the Spanish language is discriminatory to women. The language used by colonizers has many derogatory words for women who try to be different and independent. So Anzaldúa suggests creating a new kind of language. She wants to reconstruct a language which is beyond any binary opposition and thus is spoken by people of all nations. She lists at least seven types of languages which she uses to write her book, *Borderlands*. She says “The switching of ‘codes’ in this book from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language – the language of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa 20) which is beyond any binary opposition. Then, due to code switching, the text becomes difficult for a monolingual person to follow. Even for me analyzing the book completely was not possible since I do not know Spanish. Anzaldúa proclaims that “Chicanos no longer feel that [they] need always to make the first overture – to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos, apology blurring out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you from the new *mestiza*” (Anzaldúa 20). Thus, this language that Chicana writers are using, stand on its own as the writers are not only accepting the violation of their original language but now also are using the best out of that violated language which has become their very own language with time.

Anzaldúa neither internalizes the phallogocentric narration or concept nor does she throw away phallogocentric identity to establish fragmented or multiple identities. She celebrates “mestiza” which in Spanish means someone who is beyond binary lines. Since Chicana culture is not monolithic and whole but a mixture of many other cultures, Anzaldúa accepts her mixed culture, language, and identity. To depict this “mosaic of cultural fragments” (Craw 91) of Chicana culture, Anzaldúa embeds a portion without any punctuation in the chapter called “The Coatlicue State.” She writes another poem “Cihuatllyotl, Woman Alone” in the same manner with run on lines not maintaining the semantic structure of a sentence. So, the visual presentation of Anzaldúa's writing portrays the fragmentary schizophrenic nature of a Chicana woman's sexual identity.

Anzaldúa further deconstructs the phallogocentric narrative of sexuality by showing the horror of sexual exploitation through her poems. She not only writes about female sexuality but also spends

lines on male sexuality the way Butler sees the relationship between America and Iraq as a relation between a patriarchal man and a woman (Butler 294). Anzaldua too sees the colonized men as victims of patriarchy. She writes a whole poem about witnessing the sexual assault on a colored man by colonizers in the poem “Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av.” The narrator of the poem says, “I wade through the thick air thinking/That’s as close as they let themselves get/To fucking a man, being a man” (Anzaldua 167). Anzaldua sees male oppression as more Anglo than general and says, “Machismo is actually an Anglo invention” and thus the “Anglo, feeling inadequate and inferior and powerless, displaces or transfers these feelings to the Chicano by shaming him (Anzaldua 105). And then Anzaldua depicts the horror of rape of a woman by colonizers in her poem “We Call Them Greasers.” So, in Anzaldua’s poems we find the gruesome reality of helplessness. This reflects what Derek Walcott ponders in his essay “The Muse of History”: “the great poetry of the New World does not pretend to [...] innocence, its vision is not naïve. In such poetry there is a bitter memory and it is the bitterness that dries last on the tongue” (372). Moreover, Anzaldua also writes the body with new vocabulary. She uses poetic language to express her thoughts. It seems that the only way equality can be met is through same sex intercourse where neither one is more powerful. She beautifully expresses the lovemaking between two women with new images:

A cool tendril pressing between my legs
entering,
Her finger, I thought
but it went on and on.
At the same time
an iciness touched my anus,
and she was in
and in and in
my mouth opening
I wasn’t scared just astonished
...
Looking down my body I saw
her forearm, elbow and hand
sticking out of my stomach
saw her and slide in
I wanted no food no water nothing
just her – pure light wound inside me. (Anzaldua 172)

Therefore, Anzaldua’s novel goes back to the chora, the displaced, fragmentary identity that one should embrace. Anzaldua repeatedly stresses on going back to the past to identify oneself with the power of female deities. By being subjective towards her choice of literary tools Anzaldua is representing the idiosyncratic women in her text and thus deconstructing the phallogocentric narratives of religion, history, language, and identity. Closely looking at Anzaldua’s writing style tells us now that she is trying to deconstruct the phallogocentric language and genre to give a new space for women with plural identity. Furthermore, while writing her history she is also writing the history of her culture and nation by creating a new way of narration beyond phallogentricism. This may infer that while the patriarchal society has created the myth of heteronormativity, these new ways of narration may change the hegemonic perspective on the constructed identity of women.

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