DECIPHERING THE MYSTERIES OF THE CHICANO CULTURE IN RUDOLFO ANAYA'S BLESS ME, ULTIMA

Oana-Andreea Ghiţă-Pîrnuţă
Lecturer, Ph.D., „Transilvania" University of Braşov

Abstract: The present paper aims at deciphering the mysteries of the Chicano culture, full of beauty and richness, as it is presented by Rudolfo Anaya in his novel entitled "Bless me, Ultima". The emphasis is laid upon the multifarious cultural aspects of the Chicano context, such as: nature, family, religion, the past, the quest for identity as well as Anaya's dichotomy: good vs evil or sacred vs profane. The novel epitomizes the perfect example of a mentor, Ultima, who guides Antonio in life helping him to discover himself. Ultima is a curandera, the elderly folk healer, she cures with herbs and magic. She personifies goodness, her sympathy for people helping her to overcome all obstacles. Ultima shows Antonio the right path in life helping him to find the key to the magical secrets of the Chicano past. Chicano folklore is the most important feature of the Mexican Americans highlighting the diverse aspects of their lives including ethnicity, heritage, traditions, customs, rituals and beliefs.

Keywords: Chicano, culture, nature, religion, identity, good, evil.

1. Introduction

The American continent has been settled mainly by the Spanish, the Portuguese and the English speaking peoples. The Spanish have been in search for the so-called *Promised Land*. They have started their quest for gold setting out from *Tenochtitlán*, the city known as the capital of the Aztec Empire in the 15th century. The Chicano culture is related to the famous *Treaty of Guadelupe Hidalgo* when Mexico ceded to the United States the territory situated in the northern part of Rio Grande. Thus, a new minority came into being, the Mexican Americans known as Chicanos. Many Mexican immigrants have entered the so-called *Aztlán,* the ancestral home of the Aztec peoples. They were permitted to preserve their own language as well as their traditions and customs, but they were caught in between the Mexican and American cultures. The Chicano literature is different from the Anglo-American one and there are also certain minor dissimilarities with the Central Mexican one. This type of literature expresses the Chicanos' perspective on society. The main topics of Chicano literature are those related to the past and the quest for identity as the Chicanos try to define themselves.

2. Multifarious Chicano Cultural Aspects in Rudolfo Anaya's Bless me, Ultima

One of the most important Chicano writers is Rudolfo Anaya and his novel entitled *Bless me, Ultima* can be considered a landmark of Chicano literature. In a nutshell, the novel is about Ultima, *the curandera*, who teaches Antonio, guiding him in life. She personifies goodness being, according to Antonio, the only person defeating evil where all else had failed (p.255). Her sympathy for people had overcome all obstacles. This novel epitomizes multifarious aspects of the Chicano culture: family, nature, religion, past, quest for identity laying emphasis upon clear-cut distinctions, such as: good vs evil, the sacred vs the profane, magic vs church.

2.1 The Family in the Chicano Context

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Family is very important in the Chicano culture. The Chicanos are community people. They are connected to nature. Las Pasturas is the land of Antonio's birth. Antonio's father, Gabriel, is a man of the *llano*, he has been a *vaquero* all his life, he is a Márez. Antonio's mother, María, is the daughter of a farmer, she is a Luna: *The men of the llano were men of the sun. The men of the farms along the river were men of the moon* (p.27). Antonio's parents come from distinct worlds and even though they are completely different they build up a happy family. Antonio is wondering *why two people as opposite as my father and my mother had married I do not know. Their blood and their ways had kept them at odds, and yet for all this, we were happy* (p. 29). Antonio is partly a Luna and partly a Márez. The Lunas are quiet coming from El Puerto, a peaceful village with adobe houses. The Lunas settled in this valley which is considered to be *the door through which the moon of each month passes on its journey from the east to the west* (p. 90). The Lunas *planted their crops and cared for their animals according to the cycles of the moon. They lived their lives, sang their songs, and died under the changing moon. The moon was their goddess* (p.90). The Márez are wild, their blood is restless, like the sea. They are just like the storms, the wind being the voice of the llano. *The llano can be the most beautiful place in the world – but it can also be the cruelest. It changes, like a woman changes* (p.191). The present novel shows the main aspects of the traditional life with its rituals, beliefs, customs, myths or supernatural powers as well as the Chicano family highlighted within the framework of the Mexican American context.

2.2 Nature wthin the Chicano Culture

Nature is one of the most important elements in the Chicano culture. Both the land and the water are well represented in the novel*: the land of the llano was not good for farming, the good land was along the river* (p.10). The llano and the river fill Antonio with their beauty. The juniper tree can be perceived as a recurrent element throughout the whole novel, the focus is also laid upon the mesquite, cedar or tamarisk. The owl is another recurrent motif and there is a certain connection between the juniper and the owl: at the big juniper tree Antonio heard Ultima's owl sing, her owl used to sing in daylight (p. 56), this special owl standing for Ultima's spirit (p. 256). Antonio used to walk together with Ultima in the llano as well as along the river to gather herbs for her medicines. He was happy with Ultima who used to teach him everything she knew. She taught him *the names of plants and flowers, of trees and bushes, of birds and animals … to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time* (p.15). For Ultima even the plants had a spirit. She made Antonio speak to the plant and tell the herb why they pulled it from its home in the earth. They used to lift the herbs to make out of them good medicines. She taught him many things about the common herbs they shared with the Indians, the ancient medicines of the Aztecs, Mayas and Moors. Antonio learned from Ultima that there was beauty and peace: beauty in the time of day and night as well as peace in the river and the hills. Antonio's soul grew under Ultima's guidance. Antonio was afraid of the awful *presence of the river*, but Ultima taught him that his spirit shared in the spirit of all things. Ultima holds the secret of Antonio's destiny. Ultima makes Antonio understand the truth. According to Antonio's father, he was not baptized in the holy water of the moon, but in the salt water of the sea, through Antonio's body runs the salt water of the oceans. According to his mother, it is the sweet water of the moon, the water the Church chooses to make holy, the water of baptism. According to Ultima, the waters are one: *the sweet waters of the moon which falls as rain is the same water that gathers into rivers and flows to fill the seas. Without the waters of the moon to replenish the oceans there would be no oceans. And the same salt waters of the oceans are drawn by the sun to the heavens, and in turn become again the waters of the moon. Without the sun there would be no waters formed to slake the dark earth's thirst* (p.121). She tells Antonio to look beyond into the great cycle which binds us all. Anaya succeeds in creating powerful images introducing the readers into the depth of the tale, illustrating a wide range of scenes from harmony and mystical dreams to violence and death.

2.3 Past, Identity and Family

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The reader of Anaya's novel is somehow forced to make a step in the past in order to be able to imagine the cultural issues as well as the economic problems which existed within the framework of the Chicano community. Antonio is searching for identity. *For only a quiet man can learn the secrets of the earth that are necessary for planting – [the Lunas] are quiet like the moon – And it is the blood of the Márez to be wild, like the ocean from which they take their name, and the spaces of the llano that have become their home… Now we have come to live near the river, and yet near the llano. I love them both, and yet I am of neither. I wonder which life I will choose?* (p. 41). The Márez blood draws Antonio's brothers, León, Eugene and Andrew, away from home and parents. The war had changed them. But even stronger is the inner war. They needed to live and lead their own lives. Eugene is the youngest and he had always been the leader. León is the oldest of the three. Andrew liked to be his own man. Due to the Márez blood, they have *the urge to wander, like the restless, seeking sea* (p.66). All their lives they had lived with their parents' dreams, their father seeing them moving to California whereas their mother wanted to see them settle along the valley. They consider that they cannot build their lives on their parents' dreams and because they are men, not boys anymore, they cannot be tied down anymore to old dreams. They just want to live their own lives. Antonio has two sisters: Deborah and Theresa. Deborah has good manners. Antonio's mother said that there was too much Márez blood in Deborah. *Her eyes and her hair were very dark, and she was always running. She had been to school two years and she spoke only English. She was teaching Theresa* (p. 11). Antonio wanted to be a good son, but his mother's dreams were opposite to his father's wishes: *she wanted a priest to watch over the farmers of the valley; he wanted a son to travel with him to the vineyards of California* (p. 74). Anaya's novel plays an important part in the evolution of Chicano literature as it can be perceived as an important contribution to identity literature due to the fact that it presents a world of ethnic relations exploring the mythical powers which might influence people.

2.4 Religion in the Chicano Context

Religion is very important in the Chicano context. Within Antonio's family, his father was not a strong believer in religion. *When he was drunk he called priests "women" and made fun of the long skirts they wore… the Márez clan was full of freethinkers* (p. 29). Antonio says about her mother the following: *my mother dreamed of me becoming a priest, because there had not been a Luna priest in the family for many years. My mother was a devout Catholic, and so she saw the salvation of the soul rooted in the Holy Mother Church* (p. 29).

Praying plays an important part within the framework of the Chicano family: *After supper we always prayed the rosary…My mother had a beautiful statue of la Virgen de Guadelupe…There was no one I loved more than the Virgin. We all knew the story of how the Virgin had presented herself to the little Indian boy in Mexico and about the miracles she had wrought. My mother said the Virgin was the saint of our land…It was hard to say the rosary because you had to kneel for as long as the prayers lasted…The Virgin always forgave. God had power* (pp.43-44).

The power of God is known by the Chicanos and the significance of the cross, as well: *The power of God is so great. All you have to do is to lift up your right hand and cross your right thumb over your first finger in the form of the cross. No evil can challenge that cross, and the swirling dust with the devil inside must turn away from you* (p. 55). Ultima teaches Antonio not to judge who God forgives and who He does not.

Antonio's mother wants for her son, for Antonio, the best. She does not want to see him wasting his life and she addresses her son as follows: *you must make something of yourself, you must serve the people. The people need good leaders, and the greatest leader is a priest* (p.179).

Antonio was reciting his catechism while his mother was cooking or ironing, she arranged for him to start catechism with the *padre* at the church and on Easter Sunday he will make his first holy communion. His mother told Antonio: *just think, Antonio, for the first time you will hold God in your mouth, in your body, in your soul - you will speak to Him, and He will answer* (p. 179).

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Father Byrnes went to the altar, the altar bell rang, the mass began and Antonio started praying the ceremony changing the bread into flesh and the wine into blood. Antonio knew that soon He would be with him, in him hoping that He will answer all his questions.

The Voice within Antonio is very important. He says: *I closed my eyes and concentrated. I had just swallowed Him, He must be there! ...A thousand questions pushed through my mind, but the Voice within me did not answer. There was only silence… I called again to the God that was within me, but there was no answer. Only emptiness. I turned and looked at the statue of the Virgin. She was smiling, her outstretched arms offering forgiveness to all* (p.221).

Antonio wants to know the mysteries of God, he wants to have Him answer his questions. Antonio took the holy communion he was in search for certain answers to his questions on life and death. He was looking for understanding but Antonio's father told him that understanding does not come that easy: *understanding comes with life as a man grows he sees life and death, he is happy and sad, he works, plays, meets people – sometimes it takes a lifetime to acquire understanding, because in the end understanding simply means having a sympathy for people* (p. 248).

Ultima teaches Antonio in her own way: *a curandera cannot give away her secrets … but if a person really wants to know, then he will listen and see and be patient. Knowledge comes slowly* (p34). La Grande gives Antonio a very important piece of advice telling him that as he grows into manhood he should find his own truths (p. 119).

It is worth to mention Antonio's experience of the golden carp. The carp made his home in the waters of the river and he was sacred to the gods. It is a sin to catch this fish and even a worse offence to eat the fish: *when the gods had turned the people into carp, the one king god who loved the people grew very sad. The river was full of dangers to the new fish. So he went to the other gods and told them that he chose to be turned into a carp and swim in the river where he could take care of his people. The gods agreed. But because he was a god they made him very big and colored him the color of gold. And they made him the lord of all the waters of the valley* (p.80-81).

It is the golden carp who sent the people a prophecy according to which *the sins of the people would weigh so heavy upon the land that in the end the whole town would collapse and be swallowed by water* (p.118). The golden carp is perceived as a god ruling the new waters warning the people that the land will eventually sink as the land cannot take the burden of people's sins. Antonio thinks about the sins of the town and how the golden carp will punish the sinners, by drowning them *in clear, blue water* (p. 137). This novel explores the spiritual forces according to which many Chicano people live their entire lives.

3. Anaya's Antithesis: Good vs. Evil

Rudolfo Anaya uses the antithesis throughout his whole novel. He lays emphasis upon a very important dichotomy, that is, good vs evil in order to create different conflicts in his story - cultural, social, religious or even psychological oppositions, such as: children vs adults, healers vs. priests, vaqueros/ cowboys vs farmers, maternal vs paternal families.

3.1 Good vs Evil

Even if the novel highlights the dichotomy good vs evil, it is clearly highlighted the fact that good is much stronger than evil and this is one of the greatest teachings of Ultima who shows Antonio the right path in life: *Good is always stronger than evil. Always remember that, Antonio. The smallest bit of good can stand against all the powers of evil I the world and it will emerge triumphant* (p. 98).

But unfortunately evil exists and it can be associated with many things: e.g. laying evil curses: *it was not wise to mention the names of witches without warding off their evil with the sign of the holy cross* (p. 86), with the Black Mass which is *conducted in honor of the devil* (p. 87), with

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evil spirits – after beating the death spirit, the *evil spirit* has to be let to come out (p. 100), evil places – one needs *courage to approach the evil place alone* (p. 105), evil eyes vowing revenge (p. 141), the evil in the wind is mentioned by Ultima who gives and item of advice to Antonio: *take care of the evil in the wind* (p. 149), evil things – *there were rumors about the evil things happening on the Agua Negra ranch. A curse had been placed on one of the families of the Agua Negra* (p. 224).

According to Antonio's uncle *evil begets evil* (p. 89) and it seems that this saying has its source in the Bible, meaning that following the evil often results in more evil. Curses can be lifted by holy water: *the curse was lifted when the priest blessed the house with holy water* (p. 225). There are many ways to keep one safe, for instance, the scapular which protects one from all evil*: a small pouch of helpful herbs … it will keep you safe* (p. 124).

Ultima is known as the *curandera* having the ability to lift curses (p. 93), thus the *curandera* works cures (p. 92), she must work *the magic beyond evil, the magic that endures forever* (p. 94). Ultima does not fear when she is threatened, her powers were given to her by *el hombre volador – a great healer from Las Pasturas* (p. 94).

The following quote - *But how could the blessing of Ultima be like the whirlwind? Was the power of good and evil the same?* (p.55) – highlights the moment when Antonio becomes aware of Ultima's future blessing.

Rudolfo Anaya examines the cultural powers and spiritual forces which influenced the Chicanos' lives highlighting the dark side of witchcraft and sorcery by making a clear-cut distinction between good and evil.

3.2 Magic vs. Church

It is worth to mention the dichotomy between magic and church: *the power of the doctors and the power of the church had failed to cure [Antonio's] uncle. Now everyone depended on Ultima's magic. Was it possible that there was more power in Ultima's magic than in the priest?* (p. 99). Even if the power of the priest failed – *so again the power of the priest has failed. [Antonio] thought. Why can't the power of God work against the evils that beset the family of Téllez? Why is it allowed to continue?* (p. 226) and evil is not easy to destroy – *one needs all the help one can get* (p. 89), Ultima, who was many times accused by witchcraft – *la mujer que no ha pecado es bruja* (p. 130), is the one who says that *all evil can be stopped* (p. 227) and the work of la Grande is *to do good, to heal the sick and show them the path to goodness* (p. 260). Ultima was taught her life's work by a wise old man, a good man. He gave her the owl and told her that the owl was her spirit, her *bond to the time and harmony of the universe* (p. 260). But she did not have the right to interfere with the destiny of any man. *Those who wallow in evil and brujería cannot understand this. They create a disharmony that in the end reaches out and destroys life* (p. 260). She accepted her death as she accepted to work for life.

4. Conclusions

Ultima teaches Antonio about life, she gives him as a great piece of advice to gather strength as he grows into manhood: *life is filled with sadness when a boy grows to be a man. But as you grow into manhood you must not despair of life, but gather strength to sustain you* (p.245). She tells him to be prepared to see things changed as he is growing and growth means change. She advises him to accept the change and make it part of his strength. He understood from what Ultima meant by building strength from life to *take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea. God and the golden carp – and make something new* (p.247). Eventually Antonio understood that Ultima tried to teach him that *the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart* (p.249).

The title of the novel is explained at the end when Ultima blesses Antonio: *I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio. Always have the strength to live. Love life, and if despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills. I shall be with you* – (p.261). Antonio is seen growing throughout the novel

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under Ultima's guidance. At the end of the novel Antonio confesses the following: *sometime in the future I would have to build my own dream out of those things that were so much a part of my childhood* (p.261). Ultima's arrival in Antonio's life marks the beginning of a new life for him, a life in which he is taught by her all kinds of important things about nature, life and beauty and thus he starts to understand the unseen of the Chicano culture. Ultima's death at the end of the novel marks Antonio's change, especially a social and cultural one, facing the Western development. Under Ultima's wise wing, under her guidance, Antonio deciphers the mysteries of the Chicano culture discovering the hidden significances of good vs evil thus finding the keys to the magical secrets of the Chicano past.

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