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Gender Roles and the Emergence of a Writer in Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986)

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Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* was published one year after Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Helena María Viramontes's *The Moths and Other Stories*. The three books deal with the childhood and youth of women who, in the end, turn to writing the text readers are about to leave behind when they have reached that point in the story. Sandra Cisneros deliberately included her work in the rapidly growing corpus of feminist literature by dedicating it "A las Mujeres / To the Women." If we understand this literature very generally as art which "speaks to the reality of women" (Yarbro-Bejarano 7), *The Last of the Menu Girls* certainly belongs in this category. Nevertheless, such a broad definition quite frequently results in interpretations to which Huck Finn's qualification of his *Adventures* as "mostly a true book; with some stretchers" would apply. To make distinctions within the mass of recent products claiming this label or receiving it from critics we have to examine the relative emphasis accorded to feminist themes in each of them.

This means that we should question whether in *The Last of the Menu Girls* the protagonist's struggle with gender roles is indeed one of Denise Chávez's main objectives. I am suggesting that the final status of Rocío Esquibel as a writer dominates her record of the past to such a degree that the immediate effects of experience on the adolescent become more or less preliminary exercises for her eventual profession. Therefore the results of the various acts of liberation receive more attention than the process of struggling with prescribed models. Moreover, writing as the ultimate achievement cannot be considered an exclusively female domain. To a large extent the author's handling of perspective is responsible for this particular focus. A passage from the chapter "Evening in Paris" is one of the rare moments in which she succeeds in separating the various roles of the "I" completely: "Down the aisles of Woolworth's with my other self ..." (69). These assumptions will be substantiated by close readings of the first, third and the two concluding stories.

In the title story Rocío Esquibel, at the age of 17, becomes a work-study aide at Altavista Memorial Hospital for three months. From the beginning she complains about her job even though she is excellently qualified for it, since she has had some previous experience as a nurse within her own family. The coincidence makes her suspect that she has been destined for a life-long career of nursing the sick and the dying. This causes her urgent desire to leave that place when, shortly after her three months, she returns to the hospital as a patient. For the same reason, she refuses to write a final report. She obviously does not want to be consumed by this temporary experience and does not accept it as formative from her present fairly detached position as a writer and narrator looking back on her life and communicating with others at 18, a situation completely different from what she is recording.

The summer job and looking after her aunt Eutilia provides Rocío with some insights into the nature of women's suffering. She projects herself into two rather extreme roles to cope with this segment of reality, both of them somewhat escapist. At the bedside of Aunt Eutilia, Rocío is all of a sudden overcome by the desire to set her own youth and health against her aunt's suffering and pain:

> I danced around her bed in my dreams, naked, smiling, jubilant. It was an exultant adolescent dance for my dying aunt. It was necessary, compulsive. It was a primitive dance, a full moon offering that led me slithering into her room with breasts naked and oiled at thirteen. ... Down the steps I leaped into Eutilia's faded and foggy consciousness where I whirled and danced and sang: I am your flesh and my mother's flesh and you are ... are ... Eutilia stared at me. I turned away. (14-15)

Already in this episode she perceives kinship as a bond relating herself to others. She feels encouraged by the sick woman's wish to escape from her predicament. On both sides the narrator traces an element of ignorance typical of young girls, implying that the old woman has regressed into childhood attitudes:

> She was a little girl in tatters in her metal bed with sideboards that went up and down, up and down. ...
> The young girls danced they played they danced they filled out forms. (15)

In the hospital Rocío wants to perform such a ritualistic dance for Elizabeth Rainey, the only patient to whom she is willing to offer more than her routine services. This woman obviously represents an ideal combining beauty and suffering:

> She looked fragile, and yet her face betrayed a harsh indelicate bitterness. ... She was a beautiful woman, fullbodied, with the translucent beauty certain women have in the midst of sorrow—clear and unadorned, her eyes bright with inexplicable and self-contained suffering. (26-27)

Though Mrs. Rainey rejects her quite rudely, Rocío invests her whole person into this relationship,

> ... for in her I saw myself, all life, all suffering. What I saw both chilled and burned me. I stood long in that darkened doorway, confused in the presence of human pain. I wanted to reach out ... I wanted to ... I wanted to ... But *how*?
> ... I would have danced for her, Eutilia, had I but dared. (27-28)

At 17 Rocío feels but cannot accept love and rejection, joy and suffering, strength and weakness as combined realities of human life. She is attracted to her ideal but does not possess the courage to communicate and identify spontaneously.

"Filling out forms," the metaphor quoted earlier, aptly describes Rocío's next effort to master her job. A painting of Florence Nightingale in her characteristic pose serves as another form to be filled out.

> There was a beauty in that woman's face whoever she was. I saw myself in her; helping all of mankind, forgetting and absolving all my own sick, my own dying, especially relatives, all of them so far away, removed. (17)

By her attempt to relate to this model, Rocío tries to brighten up the darkness of her reality: "I wanted to rescue souls, not play attendant to this crippled, dried up specimen ..." (18). But the subjective emotional involvement prevails, though oddly disconnected from the summary characterization of her job:

> We rolled up the pain, assigned it a shelf, placed it in the hardened place, along with a certain self-congratulatory sense of wonder at

> the world's unfortunates like Mrs. Daniels. We were embarrassed to be alive. (31)

Rocío does not succeed in gaining the necessary degree of detachment from what she is doing although she tries hard to preserve the freedom of choice and of development into other fields, a theme dominating her adolescence:

> I want to be someone else, somewhere else, someone important and responsible and sexy. I want to be sexy. (34)

Rocío's three months as a study aide are characterized by her experiments with closeness and detachment. This is also reflected in the style of narration. The rigid structure of the application and the report forms is again and again destroyed by the renderings of emotional outbreaks. The autobiographical narrator obviously has not yet found a method of presentation which keeps her materials in constant control. Rocío is still in the process of finding the proper distance to experience: "I had no business in the job. I was too emotional" (35). So the narrator and the nurse share the same problems of commitment and non-commitment to a role, to one's person, to other people and life in general. Both are "filling out forms" without yet being able or willing to finally define their own spaces.

In "Shooting Stars," the third story, Rocío restricts her exploration of her potential future to the nature of womanhood:

> What did it mean to be a woman? To be beautiful, complete? Was beauty a physical or a spiritual thing, was it strength of emotion, resolve, a willingness to love? What was it then, that made women lovely? (53)

Rocío examines four women, Eloisa, Diana, Josie, and her elder sister Ronelia from the rather detached point of view of "the monitor of women's going forth. Behind the mirror, eyes half closed, I saw myself, the cloud princess" (64).[1] However, her preoccupation remains a very

[1] See also 62-63: "... I became ever more the solitary observer of my changing womanhood. I was jealous of those women who had effected the change from girlhood to womanhood with ease. I was at the far end of a crystal punch bowl.

disconcerting one, as she anxiously avoids calling the "going forth" a growing older: "I never spoke of growing old, or seeing others grow older with any sense of peace. It was a subject that was taboo, a topic like Death" (64). As an extreme contrast, Rocío's investigations are accompanied by the recurring desire to shrink, even to disappear (see 54 and 57). At the same time she feels an undefined urge to continue her quest. Twice she compares herself to "a lone coyote" who "calls out to the moon, her mother" (56; see also 55).

The story progresses from a fairly traditional, superficial and narrow to a more stable and open image of women, encompassing the concept of time and change. Time will also determine the function of the models examined:

> Women ... Let them go ... They were clouds, soft bright hopes. Just as quickly as they were formed, they dissolved into vast pillows. Their vague outlines touched the earth and then moved on ... all those women, all of them, they rise, then fall. Girls, girls, the bright beautiful girls, with white faces and white voices, they call out. They are shooting stars, shooting stars ... They are music, the echo of sound, the wind. (65)[2]

Here the adult narrator points out that the images of women and young girls have become fleeting reflections and mere fragments of something more enduring and larger and that human beings are subject to constant change. Therefore, imitating these models cannot replace the construction of one's own identity in the flux of experience. These final insights of the adult narrator are prepared within the story by individual case studies. When Rocío, for example, recalls her relationship with Diana, she confesses that at first she had deliberately given her the place of her elder sister Ronelia who stood for an aspect of womanhood eagerly dismissed by Rocío: "Diana was my older sister when my older sister married and was continually birthing nieces and nephews for me" (58). Alongside Rocío's naive attraction to these women there is always the suspicion that something is missing: "Something seemed to be lacking in each of them.

I heard the faraway music, saw all the colors and the lights, and yet, I was unable to join the dance."

[2] See also 58: "Nor could she see the possibility of betrayal. In this assumption of hers and mine lies all the tragedy of young womankind."

The same thing that was lacking in me, whatever it was" (62). She knows by now that the influence of these women "was so blinding, powerful" (62). Diana, for instance, "fogged all consciousness" (58), a metaphor already used in the title story in connection with her dance for Aunt Eutilia. Speech eventually destroys the ideal:

> In observing Diana, I observed myself. I wanted physical beauty, and yet, I wanted to speak clearly, to be understood ... Diana now too, was lost, but in words, words, the flow and sound of words. Her music was confused, jangled, unsure. Her thoughts were half syllables, monosyllabic utterings of someone dependent upon the repetitious motions of work, the body and its order. (58-59)

Rocío as narrator obviously changes the qualifications for her ideal. She insists on a rational mode of communication. The shortcomings of all three images make her build one to which she can vaguely relate her own potential:

> Behind all the work of growing up, I caught a glimpse of someone strong, full of great beauty, powerful, clear words and acts. The woman's white face was reflected in the fierce, mid-day sun, the bright intensity of loving eyes. Who was that woman?
> Myself. (63)

Cast back on herself Rocío finally examines her elder sister Ronelia and immediately places her into the chain of women in her family: "To see her, was to see my mother and my grandmother, and now myself" (63). Kinship makes it possible to draw some tentative outlines of a picture of herself in time: "Could I imagine the me of myself at age twenty-one and thirty-one and so on ..." (64). As a result the yet undefined Rocío can identify with a concept of womanhood which does not exclude communication, solidarity, the acceptance of change and pain:

> I turned the mirror to the light. The loveliness of women sprang from depthless recesses; I thought, it was a chord, a reverberation, the echo of a sound, a feeling, a twinge, and then an ache ... Always there is the echo of the young girl in the oldest of women .... (64-65)

Relating herself to her grandmother, "On my dream canvas my grandmother pats her hands and says, 'Someday, someday, Rocío, you'll get this way'" (65), makes all previous models of women and young girls

obsolete and persuades her to strive for closer, individual ties with the essentials of womanhood. By placing herself into the chronology of women in her own family, Rocío combines singularity and relatedness, growth and decline, closeness and detachment, a position making her independent of the overpowering impact of personifications of only small parts of a composite picture of universals and particulars.

From this point of no return to childhood Rocío moves on to demonstrate the dangers of naive transgression into the territory of adulthood which to her is a world of "objects and playthings" (72) beyond the realms of growth and change. In "The Closet" she adopts a point of view from which objects signifying life already lived no longer oppress her. She even tries to define herself in spatial images of closets, rooms, and houses connected with the history of her family. So in the two stories succeeding "Shooting Stars" Rocío prepares herself to conquer a space for herself circumscribed as "a universe of change, ... the No Place of dreamers who do not dream" (91).

In the final two stories of the book, "Space Is a Solid" and "Compadre," Rocío is provided with the tools she is already applying while writing down these recollections. As early as in "Willow Game," the second story, she has suffered from her inability to communicate: "A child's sorrow is a place that cannot be visited by others. ... What can I say to you? All has been told" (49). It is significant that this early story breaks off in the middle of a phrase and that throughout the story the narrator struggles for the proper words and for complete syntactical structures. And we have to recall that, even earlier, in "The Last of the Menu Girls" Rocío does not find the form sheets sufficient enough to contain her past. Only in the final two stories has she learned to occupy her own territory and to translate experience into appropriate words and paragraphs.

In "Space Is a Solid" she remembers episodes in which as a teacher she has advised others to define their personal spaces: "Find a space that's *yours,* belongs to *you* and close your eyes" (101). So, the narrating Rocío is eventually doing what she told others to do in the past; past and present draw nearer to each other. Towards the end of the story Rocío's friendship with her theater student Kari Lee Wembley fails but becomes the subject of a story Rocío starts to write, the story we are reading. From a detached point of view Rocío is now able to treat the subject of the failure

of a friendship. Her newly acquired skills are demonstrated by the sophisticated handling of perspective which alternates between various characters. Rocío's closeness to playacting, the arts of camouflage and illusion seem to have supported this development. While watching her hands, she remarks: "They are the hands of an artist, the creator of worlds" (105). The story told has become Rocío's solid and fertile territory of her own, in which she can even yield space to others.

The final "Compadre" takes up some familiar themes: closeness to and detachment from experience, the concepts of serving and of identity. Some of its sections are set one year before Rocío's hospital period, others much later, so "Compadre" extends over a larger time span than most of the other stories. All this makes it the most conclusive section of the book. The themes also refer to Rocío's present activity, reconstructing as a writer her New Mexico and Texas past at her desk somewhere up north to the utter disappointment of her mother who would have preferred that her daughter serve the family right on the spot (see 140). Some of the basic tensions of the title story are echoed here hinting at the circular structure of the text.

The ideal of human interrelationship is found in the concept of "compadrazgo" which Rocío's mother characterizes as follows:

> The warmth of a family is something you can't deny, but compadrazgo is different, Rocío. It allows the best of a family's qualities to shine through, yet there's a certain honest detachment. To be a compadre is to be unrelated and yet related, and yet willingly to allow the relationless relation absolute freedom within limits. (168)

Rocío is attracted to this concept since it comes close to her general idea of individual freedom restricted by the social virtues of human compassion and charity. Therefore she insists on the provisional character of fixed human relations and stresses the aspect of detachment and individuality within this value system.[3]

Rocío obviously tries to evade prescriptions though she does not fundamentally contradict their teachings. At the end she is serving her family of her own free will, thus fulfilling her mother's intentions though

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[3] Ironically, some of these discussions take place on Independence Day. See 180.

in the quite unexpected and more communal role of a writer dealing with her personal experience, the house, the family, parts of the larger community—serving it from the detached perspective of someone removed in time and place. In contrast to her role as a menu girl, she has finally found her serving job by writing about the gradual process of her liberation from the predetermined roles offered by her environment. Memory and writing seem to provide an ideal position to keep closeness and detachment in check. From this position she is able to fix even the spontaneous, the unaccounted-for. In contrast to the first story, where she anxiously tries to hold on to the rigid frame of form sheets as basic structuring devices, she is now able to provide space for others. Consequently, "Compadre" is also a story about Regino Suárez, the neighborhood handyman, and his attitudes towards closeness and detachment.

According to the details passed on in *The Last of the Menu Girls,* Rocío Esquibel spent a fairly passive youth. The action of the book is largely mental. The narrator obviously selects those episodes from the past which directly contributed to her acquisition of the craft of writing. Looking back on the stories, we can say that writing is defined as the act of meaningful communication from a particular, isolated point of view, as transgression of the borders of the individual self, as a service to oneself and the community, and as a territory of freedom checked by responsibility. The liberation from set gender roles is only one aspect of Rocío's progress as a producer of fictions of human interrelations and of herself. Denise Chávez's decision to make this her central theme and her choice of perspective quite accidentally create a text which realistically renders the mind of an adolescent who rejects all kinds of prescriptions without examining their contents exhaustively. Therefore the focus of the text is on the many departures and not on the various models themselves. This evaluation certainly confirms the many links which have been discovered between the works of Denise Chávez, Sandra Cisneros, and Helena María Viramontes. By calling "gender roles" a subtheme in *The Last of the Menu Girls* we are mostly telling the truth about this book with only some minor "stretchers" which critics need in order to establish their subjective perspectives.

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