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Turmoils while establishing a Chicano identity: A reading of Anzaldua's theory of
"Linguistic Terrorism"

Abstract

The paper explores the difficulties of women writers in establishing their tradition and language while articulating with the mainstream world. Women of color and lesbians are often targeted in the literary world of Whites. The paper draws inferences from Anzaldua's essays; "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" and "Speaking in Tongues". Her own autobiographical experiences become the fuel for her writings. These essays unfold her past with special reference to "linguistic terrorism". Language varies from one culture to another and the superiority of language is an illogical concept. The native language often becomes subject to racial attacks in diasporic context. Gloria Anzaldua, born in Mexico, was constantly humiliated for her Chicano culture and Spanish language once she moved to United States. She perceived language as the soul of her existence and a verbal medium to revolt. For Anzaldua writing echoes the inner turmoils of oppressed women and elevates them to a timeless realm. She uses writing as a tool to overcome the tradition of silence.

Key Words: Linguistic Terrorism, Writing, Marginalization, Inter-lingualism.

Language is a communication or interaction system used by people to express themselves. The American linguists Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager defined “A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates”. Language becomes culture specific when it is rooted on one culture or community. For each native speakers, mother tongue is their greatest ancestral, traditional and cultural possession. The Chicanos or Latin Americans are caught between binary linguistic sectors – Mexico and U.S and hence they switch between two languages – Spanish and English.

The Third Wave of Feminism is intended to provide space for Black women, lesbians, Dalits and subaltern. The alienation of these women by men and white women leads to double marginalization. In the literary world, the women writers of color are less privileged and their invisibility is contributed by White Male and White Women world. Likewise lesbian writers of color are not only invisible but do not exist; “we speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane” (Anzaldua 26). The power of the written word is embedded in the language. The attack of one’s language by another is the violation of one’s culture and spirit. The migrants’ use of ethnic languages in foreign lands were subjected to discrimination. Children from Mexico were collectively termed as Chicano children whose native language was Spanish. The racist teachers in the U.S thought all Chicano children were dumb and dirty and hence people speaking Spanish language were subjugated. The White man ordered the colored; “Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed. Don’t cultivate your colored skins nor tongues of fire if you want to make it in a right handed world” (Anzaldua 28).

In the contemporary era the concept of mono lingualism is replaced by multi lingualism and linguistic hegemony. Most of the indigenous languages face the threat of marginalization. In “Key Concepts of Bilingual Education” by Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty, linguicide, or linguistic genocide, is defined as:

The deliberate elimination of a language, without killing its speakers; forcing speakers to give up a mother tongue through “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”; “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” (United Nations International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948, E 793, Articles 2e and 2b); or “prohibiting the use of the [mother tongue] in daily intercourse, or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group” (from the 1948 Final Draft of the above, not part of the Convention)” (2006).

Immigrants and linguistic minorities in European and U.S. face language shift in school and work place. In some cases, the ‘minorities’ are becoming the numerical majority- for example Spanish speakers in the U.S. and Arabic speakers in Europe. Besides the loss of entire language there is also language attrition: the loss of structures, vocabulary, knowledge; as well as the loss of language ability and literacies. Within sociocultural frameworks of language, the term *discourse* is used to highlight the relationship between language and identity. According to Gee, discourse is a way of using language, thinking, and even acting that can be used to position or represent oneself as a member of a group. In other words, discourse is an identity kit. This means that every time a person speaks, he or she is signaling who he or she is in relation to a discourse community, and negotiating a sense of self. Implicated in this kind of identity work is not only the person’s language and discourse use but also his or her gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Norton 2010).

Most immigrants use a bit of native dialect while conversing in English which is an instance of inter-lingualism and Bruce Novoa says; “ Interlingualism is a linguistic practice highly sensitive to the context of speech acts, able to shift add- mixtures of languages according to situational needs or the effects desired” (50). Majority of the Chicanos follow inter-lingualism. The Spanish and English language are blended and juxtaposed with cross

cultural allusions. This linguistic practice rejects the argument of maintaining Spanish and English separate in exclusive codes, but rather it sees them “as reservoirs of primary material to be molded together as needed, naturally, in the manner of common speech” (Bruce-Novoa 50).

While the inter linguistic practice existed in theory and on paper, in the real world Chicanos continued to be discriminated while using native dialect. Anzaldúa comes up with the answer why Chicanos were still humiliated on linguistic grounds. Like whites’ constructed stereotypes of Blacks as slaves, domestic subjects and immoral, Chicanos were also attributed the same stereotype. Chicanos grew up speaking Chicano Spanish and internalize the notion that they speak poor language. Anzaldúa explains how their identities are affected by what she calls “linguistic terrorism”— the suppression of the mother tongue while crossing cultural and linguistic borders: “Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language ... Pena. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives “(80). This idea is best captured by her words: “I am my language” (81). The dominant culture impose wrong notion within mind and repeated attacks of native tongue diminish sense of self:

Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex Mex and all the languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish...as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (81)

Through her experiences, Anzaldua has the realization that language is a male discourse. She has been branded as “Pocho” – a cultural traitor by Chicanos for speaking oppressor’s language:

And our tongues have become
 Dry the wilderness has
 Dried out our tongues and
 We have forgotten speech

(Irena Klepfisz)

As a child Anzaldua was subjected to language discrimination. On one occasion she was caught for speaking Spanish and even sent to the corner of the classroom by Anglo teacher. She scolded; “If you want to be American, speak American. If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong” (75). More over the Chicano students were required to take speech classes to overcome their native accents. Chicano Spanish is often considered as mutilation of Spanish that is border tongue – a living language.

Anzaldua’s position is neither Spanish nor English. She does not belong to a country where Spanish is spoken as first language nor to a place where reigning language is English. In this situation she develops a language through which she can connect her identity and communicate the realities that originates. Chicano Spanish is the variation of two languages. The outsiders and elderly people of the culture cannot understand it. It becomes the language of the rebellion, both against standard Spanish and standard English – their secret language. Anzaldua is not ashamed of her existence. She is assertive of her voice – woman’s voice, sexual voice and a poet’s voice. She will overcome the tradition of silence. She believes that being Mexican is “a state of soul- not one of mind, not one of citizenship” (84). This forced alienation leads to psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity. They don’t identify with the Anglo American cultural values nor Mexican cultural values. They are the synergy of two

cultures with varying degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. To cope out they call themselves “Mexican” referring to race and ancestry, “Mestizo” when affirming Indian and Spanish, “Chicano” when referring to a politically aware people born or raised in US and “Tejanos” to refer Chicanos from Texas.

The prevalent notion undergoes a significant transformation when it comes to the Third World Women who have acquired a status in the literary world and who no longer remain silent to denial and racial atrocities. They are tired of becoming “sacrificial lambs and scapegoats” (Anzaldua 28). For the woman like Anzaldua, writing and language saves her from the fear of racism and keeps the spirit of her revolt and herself alive. She has created a liberated world through her writing and it compensates for what the real world doesn’t give her:

By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetite and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. ...And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally I write because I’m scared of writing but I’m more scared of not writing. (Anzaldua 30)

The act of writing is the act of making soul. It is the quest for the self and writing becomes a tool to pierce the mystery surrounding the marginalization, alienation and is a medium that accelerates the spirit of survival. Nellie Wong, Chinese Immigrant poet calls writing in *Radical Woman Pamphlet* as; “the three- eyed demon shrieking the truth”. Further she declared her feminist socialist perspective “the more I see some people fighting back, the more I see everyone acquiring the strength to fight back”. Wong is of the opinion that

women's liberation is necessary because "When women rise, everyone will rise" (Radical Pamphlet).

Writing is the reflection of fears, angers and strengths of women under oppression. The very act reflects their survival because a woman who engages herself in writing has power and such a woman is always feared by society. Further writing pushes one to a timeless or infinite place. In the process the writer forgets oneself and feels she herself is the universe. Anzaldua states:

Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truth sayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief. We are not reconciled.

(34)

Language, therefore, is a critical variable to one's sense of identity because, as Rosaura Sánchez points out, language is for Chicanos/as "a sign of community, a product of the community, a reflection-refraction of the material culture of the community" (Chicano Discourse 17-18). Overcoming "linguistic terrorism," will, then, be possible when educators are trained to be culturally and linguistically sensitive and literate. With this recognition, Chicanos become a distinct people with a name and a language – Chicanos and Chicano Spanish. The struggle of the identities and borders will continue. She hopes that the struggle will come to an end on one day and a true integration will take place. When other races have given up their language Chicanos cling to their own. They are "stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders as unbreakable" (86). Their spirit will remain for ever as indomitable.

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