

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS
FACULDADE DE LETRAS
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS

GERALDO MÁRCIO NOBRE FARIA

TÚ ERES MUJER:

Women Characters' Disempowerment and Empowerment in Helena María Viramontes's

Under the Feet of Jesus and The Moths and Other Stories

Belo Horizonte

2023

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Dissertação de mestrado apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras: Estudos Literários.

Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa

Linha de pesquisa: Literatura, História e Memória Cultural

Orientadora: Gláucia Renate Gonçalves

Belo Horizonte
Faculdade de Letras
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
2023

V813u.Yf-t Faria, Geraldo Márcio Nobre.
Tú Eres Mujer [manuscrito] : Women Characters' Disempowerment in Helena María Viramontes's Under the Feet of Jesus and The Moths and Other Stories / Geraldo Márcio Nobre Faria. – 2023.
1 recurso online (134 f.) : pdf.
Orientadora: Gláucia Renate Gonçalves.
Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.
Linha de Pesquisa: Literatura, História e Memória Cultural.
Dissertação (mestrado) – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Faculdade de Letras.
Bibliografia: f. 126-134.
Exigências do sistema: Adobe Acrobat Reader.

1. Viramontes, Helena María, 1954- – Under the Feet of Jesus – Crítica e interpretação – Teses. 2. Viramontes, Helena María, 1954- – Moths – Crítica e interpretação – Teses. 3. Viramontes, Helena María, 1954- – Growing – Crítica e interpretação – Teses. 4. Ficção americana – História e crítica – Teses. 5. Adolescentes na literatura – Teses. 6. Imigrantes na literatura – Teses. 7. Mulheres na literatura – Teses. I. Gonçalves, Gláucia Renate. II. Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Faculdade de Letras. III. Título.

CDD: 813.54



UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS
FACULDADE DE LETRAS
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS: ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS

FOLHA DE APROVAÇÃO

Dissertação intitulada *TÚ ERES MUJER: WOMEN CHARACTERS' DISEMPOWERMENT AND EMPOWERMENT IN HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES'S UNDER THE FEET OF JESUS AND THE MOTHS AND OTHER STORIES*, de autoria do Mestrando GERALDO MÁRCIO NOBRE FARIA, apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da UFMG, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras: Estudos Literários.

Área de Concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa/Mestrado

Linha de Pesquisa: Literatura, História e Memória Cultural

Aprovada pela Banca Examinadora constituída pelos seguintes professores:

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Belo Horizonte, 26 de maio de 2023.



Documento assinado eletronicamente por Priscila Campolina de Sá Campello, Usuária Externa, em 26/05/2023, às 16:40, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do [Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020](#).

03/06/2023, 10:16

SEI/UFMG - 2252173 - Folha de Aprovação



Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Gláucia Renate Gonçalves, Professora do Magistério Superior**, em 28/05/2023, às 16:00, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020.



Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Antonio Orlando de Oliveira Dourado Lopes, Coordenador(a)**, em 30/05/2023, às 10:14, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020.



Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Jose de Paiva dos Santos, Professor do Magistério Superior**, em 30/05/2023, às 16:19, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020.



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Referência: Processo nº 23072.224337/2023-67

SEI nº 2252173

Acknowledgments

To God, for His spiritual guidance along the way.

To my advisor Gláucia Renate Gonçalves for having opened my eyes to immigrant literature, for your knowledge, your patience with me at the most difficult moments when I “got stuck,” for believing in me, for the good chats about literature that we had throughout this trajectory, and for having guided me through this research.

To Professor Júlio César Jeha for having talked me into doing the master’s degree.

To Professor José de Paiva dos Santos for his classes that have contributed to my knowledge of literary criticism.

To Professor Miriam Piedade Mansur Andrade for her knowledge and opening my world to new authors.

To Professor Priscila Campolina de Sá Campello, for accepting my invitation to the committee, her considerations and suggestions, which have enriched my thesis.

To my colleagues from Poslit-UFMG for having contributed to my knowledge.

Aos funcionários e funcionárias da Secretaria do Poslit pelos esclarecimentos de todas as minhas dúvidas, quando precisei.

Thanks to my family: my mother (a great inspiration), my late father (he would be proud of me today), my sisters Andréa (nossas caminhadas para recarregar as energias e compartilhar minhas ideias e angústias) e Norma (for buying all the books that I needed and for your support), and my brother Vander.

To Zumênia, pelas orações, pelo cuidado e carinho com a minha alimentação e meu lar.

To Jane, for your enthusiastic support and for having broadened my consciousness.

To Priscila, for our fruitful meetings to exchange some ideas.

To my workmates Raquel, Tânia, Iara, Gabriela, and Kamila, for allowing me to schedule vacation time in a very complicated moment at work.

To my colleagues from Artear, for helping me broaden my consciousness.

To Júlia and Clara, for helping me with the “rehearsal” of the presentation for the master’s degree oral exam.

To Jamil and Leonardo, for helping me format this thesis.

To Helena María Viramontes for writing *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories*, which provided me with a broader understanding of the women’s universe, the recognition of the importance of literacy to raise consciousness on many thorny issues discussed in this thesis.

Resumo

O romance *Under the Feet of Jesus* da autora Chicana Helena María Viramontes descreve as experiências complicadas de uma família de imigrantes mexicanos que trabalha nos campos da Califórnia. A protagonista, Estrella, uma garota de 13 anos, passa por um ritual de passagem, da adolescência para a condição de mulher. *The Moths and Other Stories* possui dois contos, “The Moths” and “Growing,” cujas protagonistas também são adolescentes e devem lidar com o processo de amadurecimento. As três adolescentes devem lutar, em suas rotinas diárias, contra desigualdades (raça, gênero, faixa etária, classe e etnia), discriminação e marginalização, as quais as desempoderaram. Analiso como Viramontes denuncia a opressão destas meninas e sugere que elas precisam lutar pelo espaço em suas vidas e para que suas vozes sejam ouvidas. Estas meninas devem desaprender o que aprenderam de seu meio para lidar melhor com suas vidas. Minha hipótese é que estas garotas oprimidas podem vencer suas dificuldades através de dois elementos relevantes para alcançar a própria autonomia: letramento (um processo que engloba tanto ler o mundo ao apropriar de suas histórias de vida e ler a palavra), e uma consciência alargada/uma visão de mundo ampliada (enfocarei a consciência mestiça de Gloria Anzaldúa).

Palavras-chaves: Literatura *latina*. Helena María Viramontes. Adolescentes. Desempoderamento. Letramento.

Abstract

Chicana author Helena María Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* depicts the trials and tribulations of a family of Mexican immigrants who works in the fields of California. The protagonist, Estrella, a 13-year-old girl, undergoes a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. *The Moths and Other Stories* has two short stories, "The Moths," and "Growing," whose protagonists are also teenagers and must cope with their growing up. The three girls must struggle in their daily routines with inequalities (race, gender, age, class, and ethnicity), patriarchal rules and beliefs, discrimination, and disenfranchisement that disempower them. I analyze how Viramontes denounces the oppression of these girls and suggests that they should struggle for their space in life and to make their voices heard. These girls must unlearn what they have learned from their environment to cope better with their lives. My hypothesis is that these oppressed girls can overcome their predicament through two relevant elements to achieve their autonomy: literacy (a process that encompasses both reading the world by appropriating their life stories and the word), and a broadened consciousness/an expanded worldview (my focus will be on Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness).

Keywords: Latina Literature. Helena María Viramontes. Girlhood. Disempowerment. Literacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Latinos/as have left their countries, mainly for economic reasons, to settle in the United States. They have been subjected to the most ruthless exploitation and marginalization in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, which has caused the phenomenon of economic and political displacement in their history. Among Latinos/Latinas, many Mexicans have migrated to the United States to begin a new life there. The reasons for this large number of Mexican migrants in the United States can be traced back to events that happened in the nineteenth century and some that unfolded recently.

The Mexican War of Independence from Spain lasted from 1810 until the day of Independence, August 24, 1821, when the Treaty of Córdoba was signed, and Mexico became an independent constitutional monarchy. Another important event was the Texas Revolution, also known as the War of Texas Independence from Mexico (October 1835 to April 1836), which was a conflict involving Anglo settlers and Mexican troops (“Texas Revolution”). The former group declared independence and founded the Republic of Texas. Nevertheless, Mexico did not consent to this and even severed relations with the United States in 1845 (“Mexican American War”).

In the year 1846, there was a great controversy regarding the border between the United States and Mexico. On the one hand, Mexico asserted that the Nueces River in the country's northern area was the actual frontier; on the other hand, the United States and Texas claimed that the Rio Grande in the southern region was the actual border. Democrats in the U.S. were for war, whereas the Whigs (a political party with more conservative tendencies in the United States) objected to James K. Polk's war policy (Gilley 47). Most Whigs regarded the president's motives as appropriation of land. The author Henry David Thoreau, an abolitionist, was against the conflict and voiced his opposition to the government that “endorsed slavery

and waged an imperialist war against Mexico.” In his famous essay, “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau defended the “private, individual conscience against the expediency of the majority” (“Henry David Thoreau”).

The Mexican American War from 1846 to 1848 was imperialist and culminated with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, signed by Mexico and the United States. The former ceded more than one-third of its territory to the latter in exchange for \$15,000,000, which meant that the U.S. bought areas that are now the states of New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, Texas, parts of Colorado, and Wyoming (“Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo”). Mexicans in these states had to choose between Mexican citizenship, or moving to the South area, which would still belong to Mexico. Approximately 80% of Mexicans preferred to stay in the United States, that is, in the areas previously belonging to Mexico (“Mexican Immigration”).

The U.S. government had then agreed to give protection to the property of those who preferred to inhabit the former Mexican territories and would also accept their religion and culture; nonetheless, as will be further discussed, this was just some promise that they did not honor, and they also faced discrimination. As soon as Texas became a state of the U.S., only three Hispanic people signed the Texas Declaration of Independence (*“Tejano Voices and the Demand for Inclusion”*).

With the Gold Rush in the year 1849, Anglos moved to California and were the majority in the state. The Foreign Miners’ Tax in 1850 was an unfair rule, as Chinese and Latino miners had to pay \$20 monthly to mine in the state, whereas Europeans did not have to (“Foreign Miner’s Licence”). The U.S. enacted the California Land Act in 1851 to “decide who owned land in California.” During this period, many “Mexican Californians had difficulties getting approval of their land surveys,” and “most rancho owners wound up losing their lands” (Bacich).

The late 1890s provoked political and economic instability in Mexico, and many of its citizens migrated to the United States to try and search for better opportunities. According to Henderson, the years of revolution in the 1910s “mark the start of substantial migration from Mexico to the United States. The revolution gave Mexicans plenty of reason to flee their country: horrific violence, epidemic disease, starvation, and runaway inflation” (23). However, what pushed massive migration to the United States was the “available, relatively high-paying jobs in the United States” (23).

The Immigration Act of 1917 introduced rules that would ban not only Asians but workers from Italy, Greece, Portugal, and the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe. Nationalism and xenophobia increased because of war. There was “a veritable mania for protecting the nation’s territorial and racial integrity, which meant that national minorities and immigrants came increasingly to be seen as treacherous organisms that threatened to infect the national bloodstream” (Henderson 30). Due to the labor shortage in the United States, “on May 23, 1917, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson specifically exempted temporary workers from Mexico from the provisions of the 1917 Act, and in the summer of 1918, he extended this waiver to Mexicans working in construction, mining, railroads, and factories” (31). Therefore, Mexicans were, under such circumstances, welcome in the territory of the United States.

The industrial workforce had stabilized at the beginning of the 1920s, whereas agriculture had not followed suit. After World War I, agribusiness was ready to rise; however, the decline of immigration provoked by strict legislation created the conditions for “the threat of a labor shortage” (Ngai 93). By 1923, the U.S. economy had boosted, “and the welcome mat was once again rolled out for Mexicans” (Henderson 33). However, in 1924, the U.S. created the Border Patrol to ban illegal migrants from Mexico.

During the Great Depression years, from 1929 to 1941, there was a growing anti-Mexican feeling due to the shortage of jobs for Americans. There was “the repatriation of

400,000 persons of Mexican descent ... (of which half were estimated to be U.S. citizens) and the internment of 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry during World War II (two-thirds of them citizens)" (Ngai 8). Nonetheless, as World War II (1939-1945) escalated, there was the same native labor shortage in the U.S., given that many of its citizens had once again gone to fight the war. Mexicans were once more recruited to carry out the work of the absent United States citizens. Ngai mentions a Mexican corrido, "Advice to the Northerners," which ironically expresses how Mexicans longed to live in the United States for a better life. Still, at the same time, they had to be subject to exploitation by them:

Let us go to the United States
 To earn good salaries,
 Because the Big-Footed people
 Need workers.

Moreover, Ngai also quotes the American author Américo Paredes's verses (127):

He no gotta country, he no gotta flag
 He no gotta voice
 all got is the han'
 To work like the burro; he no gotta lan '...

Both texts mirror how Mexicans were mercilessly exploited by the U.S., which always acted out of its selfish interests.

The Bracero Program ("bracero" means "manual laborer" in Spanish), a series of laws and diplomatic agreements between the United States and Mexico, was instituted from 1942 to 1964. From 1948 to 1964, there were about 200,000 braceros a year that worked mainly in agriculture (Ngai 138-139). These workers were "welcome" if they returned to Mexico after

they had finished their work. Moreover, Ngai states that "postwar liberals did not view foreign contract labor as a form of imported colonialism but, rather, as a statist solution to various economic and political problems" (139). She also argues that the Bracero Program did not follow what had been stipulated in the agreement: "The fundamental principle of the program, that braceros would not be used to undermine domestic wages or to displace domestic workers, was a fiction" (142-143).

Operation Wetback (the term "wetback" refers to Mexicans who tried to cross the Rio Grande River to reach the United States), in 1954, was another of the United States' rules about controlling illegal immigrants and brought about one of the largest mass deportations of undocumented workers in the U.S (Henderson 77-78). According to Ngai, "critics associated 'wetbacks' with 'misery, disease, crime, and many other evils.'" Furthermore, the term "wetback" was constructed "as a dangerous and criminal social pathogen" that "fed the general racial stereotype 'Mexican'" (Ngai 149).

The Chicano Movement emerged in the 1960s. This movement demonstrated Mexicans and Mexican Americans' resistance to the U.S.'s disregard for "the harsh conditions farm laborers endured. Routinely exploited by their employers, they were often unpaid, living in shacks in exchange for their labor, with no medical or other basic facilities" ("Champions of Human Rights: César Chávez"). César Chávez, a labor activist from Arizona, co-founded with Dolores Huerta the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), later the United Farm Workers (UFW). Chávez took part in "marches, strikes and boycotts" and "forced employers to pay adequate wages and provide other benefits and was responsible for legislation enacting the first Bill of Rights for agricultural workers" ("Champions of Human Rights: César Chávez").

The Hart-Celler Act was executed in 1965 and "raised the annual ceiling on immigration to 290,000, a slight rounding up of the 'one-sixth of one percent' formula" (Ngai

258). However, its allocation was dramatically reduced to “170,000 quota slots to the countries of the Eastern Hemisphere (that is, Europe, Asia, and Africa), according to a hierarchy of preferences for family members (80 percent) and occupations (20 percent) and with a maximum of 20,000 per country” (258). In 1976, the United States Congress imposed country quotas of 20,000 concerning the Western Hemisphere. This Act affected mainly Mexicans and Canadians since they sent most migrants to the United States (Ngai 261).

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 made hiring knowingly undocumented immigrants to the United States illegal. Timothy Henderson argues that businesses and employers benefitted more from this legislation. State and local governments were “mollified by federal subsidies, while liberals, ethnic organizations, and human rights advocates were reassured by stringent anti-discrimination and worker protection provisions, as well as by a remarkably generous amnesty program for illegal immigrants” (114). The United States continued exploiting Mexican employees. Moreover, Henderson states that, despite the decline in border apprehensions for the first three years after it came into force, three years later, illegal migration accelerated once again (115).

The Immigration Act of 1990 contributed to new punitive sanctions and other measures: “The militarization of the border has not stopped illegal entry, but it has made it more difficult and dangerous” (Ngai 266). In the name of “diversity,” this statute also tried to stimulate more immigrants from other countries: Ireland, Great Britain, Canada, and Poland (Henderson 116). It stands out that Mexicans were undoubtedly unwelcome in the United States due to racial prejudice against them.

Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. signed the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement – 1994-1997), an accord to regulate temporary work in the United States. Nonetheless, illegal migrants to the U.S. surged due to the continued economic stagnation in Mexico in the 1990s. Moreover, Operation Gatekeeper (1994) and Operation Rio Grande

(1997) came into force with the same objective: to reduce the number of undocumented Mexican migrants in the United States. The former “pushed illegal entries from the San Diego–Tijuana border area to remote desert sections of California and Arizona, which has increased the likelihood that migrants will die of exposure before reaching safety” (Ngai 266). Moreover, these measures serve to demonstrate that “illegal aliens are at once familiar and invisible to middle-class Americans: their labor is desired but the difficulties of their lives for the most part go unnoticed” (266).

In the 2000s, the United States introduced several Acts that either limited or banned foreign migrants (mainly Mexicans and other peoples of Latin descent) in its territory. Notwithstanding these acts, there was a steady influx of migrants to the United States, many even risking their lives in the process. Donald Trump took office in 2017 and put considerable effort into ascertaining that his administration would build the border wall between the United States and Mexico to prevent illegal immigrants from entering its territory. Despite Trump’s strenuous efforts, the border wall turned out to be a failure. Additionally, Donald Trump's administration had to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the last year of his term of office. Due to constant lockdowns worldwide, there was a decline in the number of Mexicans and immigrants from other countries into the United States.

The United States 2020 Census data (April 1st) show how the number of Mexican and Mexican Americans in the U. S. is significant. The total population of the United States was 331,449,281 citizens. Its Hispanic or Latino one was about 18,9% (*United States Census Bureau*). That means they could be people born in the States, of Mexican descent, and those who migrated to the U.S.

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. took office as the president of the United States on January 20, 2021. He proposed the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021. The main goals of this Act were as follows:

Create an earned roadmap to citizenship for undocumented individuals; keep families together; embrace diversity; promote immigrant and refugee integration and citizenship; grow our economy; protect workers from exploitation and improve the employment verification process; supplement existing border resources with technology and infrastructure; manage the border and protect border communities; crack down on criminal organizations; address root causes of immigration (start from the source, improve the immigration courts and protect vulnerable individuals, and support asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations. (“Fact Sheet: President Biden Sends Immigration Bill to Congress as Part of his Commitment to Modernize our Immigration System”)

Nonetheless, Mexican immigrants across the board decreased due to the Covid-19 pandemic (not only in the United States but worldwide). Even so, Mexicans comprise most Latino immigrants in the United States, “accounting for about 24 percent of the 45,3 million foreign-born residents in the country as of 2021” (Rosenbloom and Batalova).

From the events, acts, and operations mentioned before, one can conclude that the United States has always exploited Mexicans whenever it was convenient for its interests. Mexico provided the U.S. with a cheap and reliable workforce. Therefore, their labor force has always been visible only when the United States benefitted from them. On the other hand, the U.S. accusations of Mexicans “stealing” jobs from their citizens seem unfounded since the population of the United States does not accept the unfavorable conditions of the jobs that Mexicans usually do.

As I have pointed out, Mexicans' exploitation and marginalization in the United States have existed since the events that led to the Mexican American War (1846-1848). These issues have been the subject matter of some works by Chicana writers, such as Ana Castillo, Sandra

Cisneros, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Cherríe Moraga. Among them, one of the most prominent Chicana writers is Helena María Viramontes, whose works *Under the Feet of Jesus* and two short stories from the collection *The Moths and Other Stories*, namely, “The Moths,” and “Growing,” I will analyze in this thesis.

Before I go further, I must provide a brief overview of how Mexican girls were rather vulnerable in their own country in view of patriarchy and religion. Mexican men had power over Mexican women, and older Mexican women had a function as gatekeepers to restrain women. Ultimately, Mexican men and older and younger Mexican women had power over girls. Therefore, girls of Mexican descent were “socialized in a largely uncontested patriarchal world with defined gender boundaries separating feminine and masculine roles and ignoring or ostracizing androgynous, lesbian, homosexual, and other expressions of gender” (Candelaria, “Chicana Girls” 109-110). These girls were trained to be women/mujeres whose standards must hold Catholic and cultural values.

One of the most common Mexican traditions is the quinceañera, that is, when a girl turns fifteen, which is a celebration of “the girl’s transition to womanhood, with emphasis on her conventional feminine qualities and potential value as a wife” (Candelaria, “Chicana Girls” 110). Besides that, the Virgin Mary has a fundamental role in her feminine ideal “based on the Madonna that traditional Mexican American mothers (madres), grandmothers (abuelas), and godmothers (madrinas) put forward as a role model of virtue, love, compassion, and strength through suffering, as in the famous pietà images” (111). Moreover, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, is the most important figure in Mexican American history, inasmuch as she conveys to women and girls her “image of purity, goodness, and nurturance intended to reinforce societal notions of proper feminine conduct” (111). Women and girls are educated in “traditional domestic work like cooking, proper housecleaning, sewing, shopping, babysitting, and related responsibilities” (111).

"TÚ ERES MUJER," from the title of this thesis, is a phrase harshly spoken by an authoritarian father to his fourteen-year-old daughter Naomi in the short story "Growing" by Viramontes. Naomi's father's words were spoken with such absolute certainty that she had no choice but to accept them as a verdict since she could not overturn them. Within this patriarchal context, I will analyze how the teenagers Estrella in the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the nameless narrator in "The Moths," and Naomi in "Growing," from the short story collection *The Moths and Other Stories*, cope with becoming a woman. I have decided to prioritize the analysis of these three girls for the following reasons. Firstly, they are neither children nor mature women since they are teenagers and are in the process of becoming. They are even more vulnerable to exploitation, their process of growing up is rather delicate, and these factors significantly affect their development as women. Secondly, Latina girls are somewhat understudied, and I expect to present some contribution to the field of girl studies through this thesis.

Helena María Viramontes was born in East Los Angeles and grew up in a working-class family with Spanish as their native language. Her parents labored in Buttonville, California, harvesting cotton, and she would also accompany them on their daily routine of picking grapes in Easton, California, usually under a scorching sun. Viramontes portrays Latinas from the viewpoint of a writer firmly committed to the predicament of women at large to make their voices heard. Through her works, Viramontes also provides some critiques of oppression and marginalization. These questions surface in her works, such as *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996), *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), *Beyond Stereotypes: A Critical Analysis of Chicana Literature* (1985), and *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* (1988).

In her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes depicts the trials and tribulations of an immigrant family who lives in California as agricultural laborers in poverty-stricken

conditions in “a shabby wood frame bungalow” (6): the mother Petra, her companion Perfecto, her teenage daughter Estrella, her brothers Arnulfo, Ricky, and her twin sisters Perla and Cookie, whose real name was Cuca. Two other workers in the area, the cousins Alejo and Gumecindo, become acquainted with Estrella's family. Petra’s family and the two cousins are a source of cheap labor, often exposed to harmful pesticides, and remain utterly invisible workers in the United States.

Thirteen-year-old Estrella, at first, is put off by her mother's companion, Perfecto. As time passes, Perfecto's tool chest awakens her interest. One day, Perfecto teaches Estrella the names of his tools and their uses, and "soon she came to understand how essential it was to know these things. That was when she began to read" (26). Alejo, with whom Estrella starts developing a relationship, suffers the impacts of pesticides on his health when a plane spreads them in the crops and contaminates him.

As Alejo becomes increasingly sick, Estrella and her mother, Petra, persuade Perfecto to drive him to a clinic where a middle-class nurse mistreats and disdains them. The nurse's appearance and attitude render Estrella more and more conscious of how the nurse’s social status contrasts starkly with hers and her family’s: "She wore too much red lipstick, too much perfume and asked too many questions and seemed too clean, too white just like the imitation cotton. She may fool other people but certainly not her " (141). In one of the most significant scenes of the book, Estrella is enraged at the nurse's prejudice as the former becomes fully aware of her family's invisibility and ruthless exploitation in the United States. In one of their conversations, Alejo told Estrella about the symbols of the tar pits, bones, and fuel, which was crucial for her to understand how her whole family was exploited as workers in the United States:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from

their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her. (148)

Estrella picks up the crowbar and demands the money they paid her for Alejo's consultation. She has an outburst of anger, shatters "the school pictures of the nurse's children," and breaks "the porcelain cat with a nurse's cap into pieces" (149). Estrella feels empowered for the first time after being thoroughly ignored by the nurse. Perfecto drives Alejo to the hospital, where the latter will probably pass away. The final scene in the barn portrays Estrella as a character full of self-confidence and strength. It hints at her being ready to develop her identity and a sense of community as she decides to defend it: "She believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed" (176).

Viramontes depicts in the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories* the disempowerment of the girls and women characters because of widespread discrimination based on their age, gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Therefore, her characters devote much effort to making their voices heard and strongly speak up against discrimination. For instance, in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes traces Estrella's trajectory as a rite of passage from being a girl/an adolescent to womanhood. This process is by no means straightforward. Estrella must deal with sexual and physical maturity and broaden her worldview to strive to give another meaning to her life by building up her self-esteem. The novel's central focus is to highlight Estrella as an agent of the transformation of her life, leaving her invisible existence behind to make her light shine, as her name implies.

In *The Moths and Other Stories*, Viramontes gives full expression to girl and women characters. As the author Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano states in the introduction to the collection of stories, Viramontes's narratives describe girl and women characters who combine their strengths and weaknesses to struggle against their lives of “unfulfilled potential” and their oppression due to their sex (10). *The Moths and Other Stories* comprises eight short stories that explore a conflict between a girl/woman and a male figure, either a father or a husband/boyfriend (Yarbrow-Bejarano, Introduction), or even the omnipresence of God, regarded as a male figure. Furthermore, some of these women cannot even fight against oppression; they either succumb and acquiesce begrudgingly and silently to their oppressors or surrender to utter loneliness. Viramontes examines other relevant themes in her short stories: abortion, murder, guilt over marriage and God, the *curanderismo*, the Latin American legend of *La Llorona*, chauvinism, sexual frustration, obsession with cleanliness, and seclusion.

The short story “The Moths” relates the vicissitudes of the daily life of the 14-year-old nameless girl narrator. She does not comply with the usual standard of girls as she does not do “fineries” that her sisters could do, such as crocheting and embroidery. Moreover, she does not even have her sisters’ “waterlike voices.” To make the narrator’s life even more problematic, her father always screamed at her for not attending church to save her “sinning soul” (27-29). She reaches maturity through the narrator’s bond with her grandmother.

“Growing” also has a 14-year-old girl, Naomi, as the main character. Her father is an authoritarian figure who would demand that her younger sister, Lucía, be her chaperone whenever they went out to read to one of her father’s friends. Her father is the one who shouted “TÚ ERES MUJER” at her because he could not accept that she had any boyfriends.

It seems reasonable to state that Viramontes does not paint a romanticized image of her girl and women characters. Conversely, in both books, she voices their concerns about the

consequences of constant oppression and discrimination, for they are far from equal to men. Viramontes's girls and women characters inhabit the territory of the white men's domain and the Latinos', with which they must comply. Furthermore, religion plays a fundamental role in her works through her criticism that God is male and, hence, women must abide by His norms. The author's precise language also helps to describe women's routines by exposing their silence, solitude, guilt, sexual frustrations, abuse, resentment, anger, and even murder. These are employed throughout Viramontes's works to denounce women's oppression, especially how men's domination prevents them from realizing their full potential.

I aim to analyze Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories* regarding how Chicanas, especially girls, are often discriminated against and have a minor role in their country of origin and the United States. I will investigate how Viramontes denounces the oppression of these girls and suggests that they should fight to make their voices heard and for their space in life, albeit under the most adverse circumstances. I claim that girls are in the process of becoming and suffer much because they are still in this in-between space of incompleteness. Moreover, girls who have assimilated into the traditional gender roles that oppress them have a double task to unlearn what they have learned from their environment to cope better with their lives. Finally, I intend to justify how literature portrays the hybrid combination of Anglo and Latin American cultures that can positively affect girls, despite their most considerable differences.

My focus will be on the three girls from the works under study since they are still growing up and more susceptible to oppression because of their tender age. I will argue that their disempowerment is due to several factors: patriarchy, religion, race, age, ethnicity, legitimization of violence, gender roles, and class. Hence, I will demonstrate how Viramontes has suggested that these oppressed girls can overcome their predicament through two relevant elements to gain autonomy: literacy (a process that encompasses both reading the word and

the world and the appropriation of their life stories, no matter from which culture, class, and personal experiences, according to Paulo Freire's and Magda Soares's perspectives), and an expanded worldview/consciousness.

Literacy, an expanded worldview, and the development of autonomy play a relevant role in analyzing Viramontes's women and girl characters' actions. They are the steps for their metamorphosis from disempowered to empowered women. Literacy is an essential prerequisite, for it is a tool for them to read and re-read their world and understand its full complexities regarding the oppressor's covert ways of domination. Additionally, oppressed girls' literacy is indispensable for understanding their societal role in achieving freedom. Therefore, in a broader sense, acquiring literacy means reading the words and the world critically.

I hypothesize that Viramontes's disempowered girl characters need to fight for their space in an oppressive society by acquiring literacy as a tool to decipher language codes and their reality. Moreover, they must develop a critical consciousness of the stereotypical feminine values and norms they must abide by and make a strong effort to gain autonomy. Thus, these elements will instill confidence and independence for effective resistance and fighting for personal freedom. Moreover, I will examine how the intermingling of Anglo and Latin American cultures may be positive for the girl characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories*. This thesis is divided into an Introduction, Chapters One, Two, and Three, followed by Final Considerations. Chapter One will be my approach to the main theories and concepts I will use throughout this work. Firstly, I will analyze the main particularities of the terms Hispanics, Latino/a, and Chicano/a. Then, I will explain why I have decided to employ the terms Latino/as/Chicanos/as over Hispanics in this thesis. Secondly, I will describe how patriarchy is ever-present, restraining girls' or women's actions. Gerda Lerner's work, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, will be the main basis to support my arguments.

In *Saddling la Gringa: Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers*, Phillipa Kafka enumerates the main themes explored by Latina writers in their fiction: the immigrant experience, the home, and family, inequalities, creating new genres, biculturalism, class rankings by gender and race, violence, Latina authors' current feminist perspectives, economic problems, and gatekeepers. I will show how Viramontes uses these themes in her works, *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories*.

Concerning magic(al) realism, Wendy Faris's *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* will highlight marginal voices and the hybrid nature of postcolonial society. I will show how Viramontes explores this resource in the short story "The Moths" to shed some light on the oppression of the women/girl characters.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* will be the bedrock for discussing resistance, blindness/consciousness, border culture, hybridity, and the new *mestiza* consciousness. Moreover, it will connect these concepts with girls' disempowerment and empowerment in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories*.

In the section literacy, expanded consciousness, and autonomy, I aim to analyze how these concepts are employed by Paulo Freire, Magda Soares, and Paula Moya so that I can present my arguments regarding how the girl characters in Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and *The Moths and Other Stories* must acquire literacy to develop an expanded level of consciousness to struggle for more autonomy in their lives.

Finally, I will highlight the importance of women's *Bildungsroman* when I analyze Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*. I will draw upon the work *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* by Ellen McWilliams to give a brief overview of the *Bildungsroman* and account for some relevant controversies. Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* will be of the utmost importance to support

my arguments regarding the self-discovery narrative and the emancipatory nature of the women's *Bildungsroman*. Annie Eysturoy's *Daughters of Self-Creation: The Contemporary Chicana Novel* will provide me with a more specific explanation of the quest for authentic female self-development in Chicana novels. *Geographies of Girlhood in US Latina Writing* by Andrea Fernández-García will enable me to demonstrate that *Under the Feet of Jesus* is a subversive women's *Bildungsroman*:

As a discursive space that emerges from a dialogue between the colonial and the postcolonial, which brings about the decolonization and redefinition of paradigms and concepts. [Her] conceptualization is based on decolonial and border thinking. ... This line of thought and action aims to question and problematize the structures of power, control, and hegemony that outlived colonialism and became integrated into today's neocolonial, global, patriarchal, capitalist social order, silencing, and subjugating oppressed groups. (18-19)

My aim in this thesis is to discuss the following questions that aroused my interest in analyzing *Under the Feet of Jesus*, "The Moths," and "Growing" from the collection *The Moths and Other Stories*: What are the main causes of oppression in these works and how can the girl characters fight against the beliefs and norms that restrain their lives? Why does Viramontes draw upon magical realism in "The Moths"? How can biculturalism, borderlands, and hybridity be positive for the opening of possibilities in the lives of the girl characters in Viramontes's works under analysis in this master's thesis? How does Viramontes develop the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* as an affirmation of the subversion of the traditional *Bildungsroman*? How can literacy help girl characters from Viramontes's works cope with discrimination, marginalization, and oppression to gain autonomy? These are the questions that informed my investigation of Viramontes's works.

CHAPTER ONE – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Hispanics, Latinos/Latinas, and Chicanos/Chicanas

There has always been considerable controversy over the Hispanic and Latino labels regarding ethnicity as a substitute for diverse cultural group identities in the United States (for instance, Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans, among others). As Suzanne Oboler points out, ethnic labels, like all names, “are by their very nature abstractions of a reality, in many ways, a necessity of speech in a society as large and complex as the United States” (xv). Their usage has always entailed social constructions regarding race, gender, class, or language. Thus, one runs the risk of homogenizing groups of people whose origins, historical experiences, socioeconomic statuses, and identities are utterly diverse.

I will discuss the main problems of using a pan-ethnic label to refer to people of Latin American descent. Furthermore, several relevant considerations must be appraised concerning the U.S. Census questionnaires. Departing from these analyses, in this section, I plan to explain why I will employ the term Latino/a in this thesis instead of Hispanic.

Far from being a consensus, the labels Hispanic and Latino have always brought on a constant dispute. The Hispanic label arose according to the interests of “the media, the U.S. Census Bureau and other government agencies, and politicians on the federal level, rather than from any cohesion of the groups themselves” (Calderón 39) and was seen “as an attempt by the government to assimilate and Eurocentralize Chicanos” (42).

Hispanic derives from the Latin word Spanish. In the 19th century, the United States used the term Hispano to refer to people originally from Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and from Spain. The Latino label also arose in the 19th century and was an abbreviation of Latin American (*latinoamericano*). It was coined for former Spanish colonies to

refer to their independence in the late 19th century (Blakemore, “Hispanic'? 'Latino'? Here’s where the terms come from”). In the 20th century, a growing need for a pan-ethnic or homogenizing label began blossoming due to an influx of immigrants from Latin America to the United States.

However, using a pan-ethnic label creates several problems concerning the Hispanic and Latino/ dichotomy. One needs to be more precise in the terms based on criteria that would classify people with both labels. There is another major hurdle when one tries to lump together Latin Americans. Although they have many similarities, Latin Americans are far from homogeneous due to social, political, economic, historical, racial, and linguistic reasons. Furthermore, each country has its culture, customs, and religious peculiarities.

Until 1960, the term Hispanic was widely employed in the United States. From the early 1960s to the early 1970s, the term Latino/a began to gain prominence, given its activist spheres. In the early and middle 1970s, due to the coalitions involving Puerto Rican and Chicano movement groups, the popularity of the term Latino/a contributed to epitomizing their commonalities and collective action (Calderón 39). This popularity affected other people of Latin America, such as Brazilians, Surinamese, Guyanese, or any other people from the Caribbean whose languages and descent are not Spanish and who do not wish to be referred to as Hispanic. Mexican Americans, on the other hand, favor the term Hispanic over Latino owing to their “history of colonization and internalized oppression within the United States [that] has led many to value Spanish and European aspects of their history and identity while rejecting indigenous and African elements” (Martínez and Gonzalez 371).

The constant need to label people in terms of ethnicity and race is related to how the United States has always discriminated against people who deviated from their standard as white and of Western European descent. Labeling people is a form of control in which stereotypes and distorted assumptions intend to keep them in their compartmentalized territories

regarding class, race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political affiliations, religious beliefs, profession, citizenship, nationality, ancestry, languages, and so on. Labeling becomes patently apparent when considering the U.S. Census Bureau questionnaires.

I have researched the *United States Census Bureau* website, referencing the official questionnaires for the United States Census from 1960 to 2022. The questions suggest general discrimination against people whose descent is not American and European, and they use labels that stress this separation of people from other origins. Therefore, these questionnaires reflect the political and socioeconomic situations of non-Anglos and native people. It is worth mentioning that the “white” term has been employed since the first Census questionnaires. On the other hand, there was an increase in the specificity of racial and ethnic terms, as I will demonstrate in my analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau questionnaires in the subsequent paragraphs.

The 1960 questionnaire inquired about the person’s origin, whether they were born in the United States or any other country. Another question addressed the language spoken by the interviewee before moving to the United States. The following question concerned the origins of the interviewee’s parents. No mention was made of labels (Hispanic/Spanish/Latino) to refer to the interviewees or their families. However, one could perceive covert discrimination based on nationality behind this division between native and foreign people. Ultimately, it was the first time that people could voluntarily identify with a particular ethnic group instead of it being determined by the census-takers (Joseph Ahern “A (short) History of the Race Question on the Decennial Census”): “Is this person – White, Negro, American Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, part Hawaiian, Aleut, Eskimo, (etc.)”?

The 1970 questionnaire introduced the people’s origin, separate from the race question. The options were as follows: Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or Other Spanish, and, finally, “No, none of these.” The question on color or race encompassed

the following terms: White, Negro or Black, American Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, and Other. The 1980 questionnaire introduced the terms Spanish/Hispanic concerning origin or descent, and there was a slight change in comparison to the last decade: No (not Spanish/Hispanic); Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano; Yes, Puerto Rican; Yes, Cuban; Yes, another Spanish/Hispanic origin.

The 1990 questionnaire began to specify the people of other Spanish/Hispanic origins: for instance, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on. The term Latino/a was only introduced in the 2000s in the U.S. Census questionnaire to refer to their origin: Spanish/Hispanic/Latino. 2000, 2010, 2020, and 2022 Census questionnaires allowed people to specify more than one race. Overall, the 2010, 2020, and 2022 Census questionnaires followed the same standards as 2000.

From 2000 to 2022, the latest questionnaires encompassed the most common labels (Hispanic/Spanish/Latino). Those who prefer being called Hispanic favor the mainstream label since it is “politically safer” and widely accepted in the United States (Calderón 41). Those who prefer the Spanish label are the ones whose country of origin is Spain. On the other hand, Latino has been the chosen term for those who identify with their Latin American countries. The potency of the latter term is due to the growth of the Latino/a group and as a political strength to oppose the oppression they suffer daily in the United States. Others have yet to adopt either of these terms and would instead be defined by their nationalities, for instance, Argentinean, Brazilian, Dominican, Haitian, and the like, as have been enumerated in the United States Census questionnaires.

At first reading, one could conclude that the U.S. divided the options into the three most significant populations of immigrants in the country, namely, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Mexicans/Mexican Americans/Chicanos, and the other nationalities could be inferred by the terms Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have almost similar historical

conditions regarding their entry into the United States because there was an integration of the economy of the U.S. with both countries (Gimenez 569). As for Mexicans/Chicanos/as, they have been considered an oppressed minority in the U.S. through immigration and because of the Mexican American War in 1848. As for Cubans, one should consider two different periods of their immigration to the United States. In the 1950s, the first wave of Cuban migrants comprised well-educated, middle-class, entrepreneurial, and professional people who left their country due to Castro's Revolution in 1959 (Calderón 38). Cuban migrants in the 1980s included poorer and less educated people than those who migrated in the 1950s (39). These waves of Cuban migrants show that there is a difference between those who are welcome and those who are not in the United States.

Latin Americans at large immigrate to the United States for the following reasons:

1. Lack of professional and educational opportunities in their countries of origin;
2. Escape from violent conflicts in their homelands (refugees);
3. The possibility of reuniting with their family members who have already migrated to the United States;
4. Gender inequality;
5. Political corruption in their countries of origin;
6. Lack of access to proper health care;
7. Poverty.

From these motives, one can infer that the main reason for migration is usually related to economic and political factors, a common denominator for many Latinos and Latinas who migrate to the United States.

Due to the above reasons, the term Latino assumes overriding importance in the context of immigrants in the United States. According to the United States Census Bureau, a population estimate in July 2022 was 333,287,557 people. From this, 18,9% corresponds to the Hispanic

or Latino population, about 62,991,348 citizens (*Census.gov*). Between 21,5 and 50% of the population of Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Texas are of Latin descent. Most of these Latino immigrants dovetail perfectly with the main reasons presented above. They have common objectives related to a better quality of life financially and their dignity as citizens, like any other in the United States. In this sense, I subscribe to those who favor the Latino over the Hispanic label.

I have chosen to employ the term Latino to refer to migrants from Latin America and their descendants. Moreover, it has been used since the 1960s in activist circles. Despite the presence of other non-Latin languages in the continent (Aymara, Dutch, English, Guarani, Quechua, amongst others), the Latino/a label embraces “all Latin American nationalities, including those which neither have ties to Spain nor are necessarily Spanish-dominant groups – for example, Brazilians; second- and third-generation English-dominant U.S citizens, particularly within the Chicano and Puerto Rican population” (Oboler 4). It also includes “the second and later generations of Latin American descent; English-speaking Panamanians; and various non-Spanish-speaking indigenous groups from diverse Latin American regions” (4).

The term Latino, according to Oboler, “has represented a more organic alternative to the government-imposed term ‘Hispanic,’ coined and used since the 1970s” (qtd. in Aparicio 42) since its fundamentals fit the interests of Latin Americans across the board in search of improved socioeconomic and educational resources in their lives. Ultimately, I acknowledge that the Latino/a label conveys the idea of a group that, notwithstanding their differences, has similarities in terms of a common desire to eradicate the inequalities and oppression that exist among people of Latin America, which were created by a larger society, namely, the most affluent nations in the world, especially, the United States. In addition, education in a broader sense, comprising not only well-educated Latinos/as but also working-class ones, contributes,

according to Portes and MacLeod, to their “heightened awareness of racial inequality and perceived discrimination” (qtd. in Martínez and Gonzalez 374).

Moreover, I should stress the importance of arguing in defense of the Chicano/a label due to the specificities of the ideas expressed by Cherríe Moraga in favor of the two political terms, Latina and Chicana, in stark contrast to the U.S-imposed term Hispanic, since the former ones convey resistance to acculturation and assimilation into the culture of the United States. The term Chicano/a was widely employed in the 1960s and the 1970s to refer to those of Mexican descent instead of the United States-imposed label Mexican American. It conveys political empowerment and pride in their indigenous descent. Moraga expresses this well when she points out that she denominates herself “a Chicana writer,” “not a Mexican-American writer,” “not an Hispanic (sic) writer, not a half-breed writer.” Her words are crystal clear: “To be a Chicana is not merely to name one’s racial/cultural identity, but also to name a politic, a politic that refuses assimilation into the U.S. mainstream. It acknowledges our *mestizaje* – Indian, Spanish, and Africano” (95-96). In conclusion, I should also stress that Helena María Viramontes, whose selected works will be under analysis in this thesis, is a Chicana writer. That is why I express my preference for the labels Latino/a and Chicano/a.

1.2 TÚ ERES MUJER: Patriarchal Beliefs

Men and women live on a stage, on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance. The play cannot go on without both kinds of performers. Neither of them “contributes” more or less to the whole; neither is marginal or dispensable. But the stage set is conceived, painted, defined by men. Men have written the play, have directed the show, interpreted the meanings of the action. They have assigned themselves the most interesting, most heroic parts, giving women the supporting roles. (Lerner 12)

The phrase "tú eres mujer" conveys many disempowering meanings for women. It expresses an unremitting polyphony of beliefs, values, and myths reinforced by domineering men. Additionally, it symbolizes the penetrating voice of patriarchy that immobilizes women and prevents them from acting according to their wills and desires as persons. "Tú eres mujer" is part of an aggressive speech verbalized by authoritarian men who do not want that women have the freedom to make their choices and write their scripts in life. The underlying meaning of the phrase "tú eres mujer" carries a widespread hostility that delimits the territory of women as subordinate beings to men. Therefore, these words sound more like a verdict that women must obey and, as gatekeepers, pass them on to their daughters and other women (Phillipa Kafka xxvii).

Patriarchal beliefs, myths, and norms disempower women insofar as they create an overwhelming imbalance in inequality between the sexes. This asymmetry has been manifested and institutionalized in society since time immemorial. Men have always had power in all the relevant institutions of society. In contrast, due to cultural and religious values and norms, women have been relegated to a secondary or null role. A case in point is the Bible's references to many powerful men in stark contrast to most submissive women in its narratives (Lerner 176).

The emphasis on women's and men's biological differences reflects how they are viewed adversely in terms of culture (Lerner 17). Men's advantages are highlighted through their physical force, their skills in terms of decision-making, and their experiences with tools and weapons (belligerent reasons), while women gain prominence in their subordination to men for being weak, emotional, and passive (Lerner 17). Historically, women have not been granted the right to education but have been expected to fulfill their roles as mothers and nurturers (Lerner 16-17). Women and men are not on equal terms, and this asymmetry wreaks havoc on the

former. Indeed, both men and women suffer the harmful consequences of sexual inequality and male dominance, for they are kept from entering a dialogical relationship in which one wishes the other to have the same rights and encourages their mutual development. Furthermore, due to traditional gender roles, men are not supposed to express their emotions or show sympathy for other men. Finally, men cannot fail at anything since that would mean failure in their manhood (Tyson 83).

Women have been subject to men's commodification of their sexuality and reproductive capacity before the formation of private property (Lerner 8). This issue accounts for how women have been treated as mere objects of desire and as nurturers. Moreover, women have been educated to always be under a man's wing. This constant subordination tends to impede rather than develop their autonomy to stand up for their rights and choices and express their real aspirations as women. Consequently, instead of developing and fulfilling a life of true potential, some women harbor resentment against men. Their inferiority complex smothers them since their inequalities do not seem to diminish.

Since the advent and development of feminism in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, women have questioned many of these deep-seated beliefs, myths, and values of patriarchy. Women have voiced their concerns over the consequences of patriarchy on their lives because these issues have been the means of their disempowerment. Contrary forces have still been strong, yet women have long fought against the traditional gender roles imposed on them. To further complicate matters, there is a wide range of ways for women to internalize their roles as inferior, submissive, emotional, and weak: television shows, literature, films, magazines, jokes, and advertisements. Nonetheless, feminists have vehemently insisted that the fight must be daily to combat discrimination and inferiority. Furthermore, it should be a collective fight for women to conquer their space in a male-dominated world in most spheres.

As far as Latin American immigrant women in the United States are concerned, these issues become even more convoluted since they are triply discriminated by white men, white women, and men of color, not only in terms of gender, but race, and the fact that they are immigrants. In addition, I must point out three fundamental concepts that apply specifically to Latinas regarding three discourses that reinforce patriarchy, according to Andrea Fernández-García, namely, *Machismo*, *Marianismo*, and *Malinchismo*. Underlying these three conceptions are the cultural scripts for Latina girls and women: the dichotomies of good girls/women versus evil girls/women.

Machismo and *Marianismo*, with origins in Spain and their introduction to Latin America by conquest, mean ideological constructions representing gender relations (Fernández-García 14-15). They are intrinsically related to one another, and both have been present "in U.S. social literature to describe prototypical gender roles among Latinx, which prescribe women's unequal position in relation to men" (14). *Machismo* involves a way of thinking that enforces the "notions of 'proper' womanhood" for women. *Marianismo* is an imposed behavior towards women since they are expected to venerate the Virgin Mary (15). Moreover, it also implies the following expectations from women: "premarital chastity, postnuptial frigidity, subordination, suffering, selfless devotion to family and children, and responsibility for all domestic chores" (15). *Marianismo* can only be comprehended in connection with *macho* masculinity (15). In sum, both ideological constructions curtail women's freedom.

Malinchismo comes from a significant Mexican historical figure, *la Malintzin*, or the most popular name *La Malinche*. According to Naomi Quiñonez, *La Malinche's* mother sold her as an enslaved person when she was eight. When she was fourteen, she was given to the conquistador Hernán Cortés as one of twenty enslaved people. *La Malinche's* language skills helped her with the task of being an interpreter and concubine to Cortés. *La Malintzín/Malinche*

was both respected and despised by her people. Her unsavory reputation was built due to the consequences of violent conquest, and her name became associated with a crushing defeat for Mexicans. They began cursing and blaming her for the deleterious effects of war against their country (139). Therefore, the figure of *La Malinche* takes on negative aspects since she has deviated from her expected passive and subordinate role.

Fernández-García stresses that *La Malinche* is used to defame those Latina women and girls who deviate from "the realm of patriarchal control, establishing clear differences between 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' feminine behavior" (14). Thus, if girls and women do not abide by the principal ideals of *Marianismo*, namely, purity, self-sacrifice, and passive endurance, they are inevitably labeled as "the treacherous Malinche." They are condemned to social ostracism. Feelings of shame are inculcated in them for disregarding the preestablished rules girls and women are expected to obey (17).

Once *La Malinche* adapted herself to the historical circumstances of her time, she fiercely opposed the social roles expected of her (Candelaria 6). Therefore, *La Malinche's* function has a more positive aspect, which mirrors postcolonial literature in that it has some key elements, such as adaptation, interpretation, and resistance (Quiñonez 138).

Cordelia Candelaria, in her article "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype," suggests how *La Malinche* "embodies those personal characteristics - such as intelligence, initiative, adaptability, and leadership" (6). *La Malinche's* qualities highlight how she is a woman whose strength contributes to her empowerment. Also, her attributes show that she is in a position of full equality with men.

My analysis of Viramontes's works will regard how oppressive patriarchal beliefs and rules have their fundamentals on cultural, social, and religious factors, along with the features of *Marianismo*, *Machismo*, and *Malinchismo*. *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories* illustrate these resources strikingly.

1.3 Latina Writers' Themes

According to the scholar Phillipa Kafka, Latina writers draw on ten essential themes and aspects in their works (xvii-xxviii). They reflect problematic and relevant issues in Latinas' lives and works. Helena María Viramontes employs them in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories* to critique how her girl and women characters have been negatively affected by those factors.

1) **The Immigrant Experience:** In their works, Latina authors employ their women characters' experiences as immigrants and how they have negative and positive consequences in their lives. They also address issues regarding women living in a patriarchal society where they are viewed as foreigners or oppressed residents (xvii). Phillipa Kafka's concept of "enforced psychic tourism" means that there is a "traumatic cultural displacement that occurs after enforced immigration into the second culture of the United States" (xi). Latina writers' role, then, is to illustrate in their works these women whose suffering has "forced [them] to be other in an alien culture and triply alien and alienated because of gender and race" (xvii). This experience as immigrants renders women subject to unequal power relations: class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation, amongst others, which are "a source for multitudes of voluntary and enforced migrations globally" (xvii).

2) **The Home and Family:** When Latina feminist writers become aware of "enforced alienation," it is their purpose to impede that there is the perpetuation of a traditional "feminine world" in their native culture and the colonizing culture (Phillipa Kafka xvii). Latina authors also depict women's adoption of 'nontraditional' ways of love, their urge to fight against patriarchal Latino and Anglo cultures, and their violation of the rules and beliefs imposed by the Catholic religion. Vargas states that there must also be a feminist "reinvention

of children's tales" (qtd. in Phillipa Kafka xviii). Instead of focusing on a male-centered family, Latina authors prefer to highlight, as reported by Horno-Delgado et al., "a woman-headed and woman-populated household" (qtd. in Phillipa Kafka xviii). That does not mean they want to express a new world order, but rather that they describe reality as it is with its traditional patriarchal values underlying it. As supported by traditional religious beliefs and "secular law," the family is the target of criticism by Latina writers (xviii). The family is not a complicated issue, but inequitable gendered power relations cause women's oppression and marginalization (xix). It is worth mentioning that there is men's domination in the sphere of the home and outside institutions to reinforce women's role as submissive.

3) **Inequalities:** The focus on women's inequality in native and Anglo cultures is present in Latinas' works, be it class, gender, or race. Their works voice their criticism against distinct oppressions (racism, sexism, class rankings) and they focus on equality for all women. Latina authors are also concerned about patriarchal rules, for they silence and subjugate women, turning these into inferior beings to men. Most importantly, Latina writers fight for women of color's equality with white women as far as their sexuality is concerned. Their works also stress the need for women across the board to "become ever more global" because they should fight together, and not separately, for their rights as women (Phillipa Kafka xx). Their target should be their similarities, "regardless of divisions along lines of privilege, or apparent privilege" (xx).

4) **Creating New Genres:** According to Horno-Delgado et al., Latina writers create new genres "between poetry and fiction, blurring the line between the short story and the novel, between conversation and literary discourse" (qtd. in Phillipa Kafka xxi). Other genres allow for a revision of legends, myths, and traditional children's tales from a feminist perspective (xxi). I must add the novels structured through a series of vignettes, such as Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*.

5) **Biculturalism:** Latina writers depict their women characters' exposure to Anglo and Latina beauty standards of both cultures in conflict. Anglo culture inculcates its beauty values into Latinas by showing that the former is superior to the latter (xxi). Phillipa Kafka underscores that readers may notice an ambivalent quality in Latina writers' works, despite their refusal to accept the cultural constructions of their native and Anglo cultures, being "enforced psychic tourists" in two different cultures (xxi). Women of color are also subject to this obstacle when they must go through both cultures. Due to being bicultural, Latina authors propose hybridity and syncretism as solutions to the issue of assimilation (xxii). Latina writers counter the "assimilation or acculturation models by depicting their heroines' torturous quests to find personal meaning and fulfillment in their lives through their insistence on retaining their cultural identity" (xxii). Therefore, biculturalism has both positive and negative aspects concerning Latina women.

6) **Class Rankings by Gender and Race:** Phillipa Kafka states that "Anglo culture reinforces in Latinas their original culture's construction of power relations through class rankings by gender and race" (xxiv). Latina writers, because of their experiences of inequitable gender power relations, explore how patriarchy affects women's lives and counter this domination whenever it occurs. Latina authors present their women characters in settings that underscore their intimacy in the most diverse environments, "bored in rooms that confine them, in factories, fast-food restaurants, or domestic spaces, for the most part" (xxv), to stress their oppression under the most adverse circumstances. Funnily enough, Latina writers never depict their women characters in boardrooms (xxv), insofar as they symbolize a place of power, a space where company directors have meetings, that is, it is a place reserved only for men. Latina writers incorporate in their narratives the enforcement of inequitable gendered power relations through the description of how the gatekeepers have indoctrinated the girl characters to comply with a set of rules dictated by the ones in power; usually white men and men of color, be it at

home, at school, at work, and even when they migrate to the United States (xxv). Therefore, they are “faced with and forced to conform to racist, sexist, and class oppression all their lives” in their native and Anglo cultures (xxv).

7) **Violence:** Violent characters, images, and scenes are the means writers from oppressed groups, especially feminist writers, deploy to vent their anger towards a system controlled by men and reinforced by gatekeepers to oppress them (xxv). Moreover, Latina writers draw upon revenge narratives to disclose patriarchy in all its forms, and as stated by Vélez, avenge “at least some of the wrongs done to women in its name” (qtd. in Phillipa Kafka xxvi). Ultimately, Latinas’ works evoke their indignation at their oppression (or their women characters) through irony, satire, and allegory (xxvi).

8) **Latina Authors’ Current Feminist Perspectives:** They adopt a different perspective from their characters, male or female, in that they reflect the moment they are writing, which is different from their “troubled characters” (xxvi). The writers’ perspective is current and feminist, insofar as they condemn “inequitable power relations in terms of class as grounded in and emanating from cultural gendered and raced constructions” (xxvi). Latina authors voice criticism about their past, both their original Latino and their recent Anglo cultures because they have restricted women’s freedom (ethnic women and women of color) (xxvi). It is through their feminist view that they can struggle for women’s equality in a world almost entirely dominated by men.

9) **Economic Problems:** Poverty is ever-present in Latina women's lives, and Latina authors critique these women's underprivileged conditions. This factor is also one of the leading causes of women's oppression, which means they depend on men's financial support. Viramontes in *Under the Feet of Jesus* contrasts the Anglos' world of plenty with the Latino migrants' lack of basic needs, such as food, health care, safe drinking water, education, and home.

10) **Gatekeepers:** They are the "cultural collaborationists," and their primary function is reinforcing the "appropriate female gender roles" that young girls and women should adopt. Philippa Kafka denominates the former as "their custodians, like vigilant watchdogs" (xxvii). Gatekeepers are comprised of "older women-mothers and grandmothers, aunts, teachers, nuns, family members, friends, and neighbors [who] form loyal cadres of volunteers who train children to be obedient to and serve all the interconnected institutions of traditional patriarchy" (xxvii). Moreover, Latina writers reinforce through the gatekeepers their role of "simultaneously nurturers to their culture's female children while serving them as cultural censors and guides into the prisonhouse of adult womanhood in a dystopic patriarchy" (xxvii). Thus, there is always some vigilant woman to keep every girl (as a path to womanhood) under strict rules that do not allow them to break free. In *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Viramontes, Petra reproduces this gatekeeper's role when she worries about Estrella's relationship with the young boy Alejo for fear of her daughter's budding sexuality and teenage pregnancy.

Code-switching and Spanglish: Even though Philippa Kafka has not mentioned these resources, Latina writers usually employ them in their works. I must point out that it is a way for them to consider several aspects of their cultural identities, especially their native and second language(s). Far from being just a stylistic use of two different languages, Latina writers acknowledge the relevance of their biculturalism, their opening to two different codes of expression that constitute their life stories.

There was an evolution as far as code-switching is concerned. It has become more than simply switching from one language to another. Its process has included, among other things, "changing behaviour, appearance, mannerisms, and/or language to conform to societally appropriate standards for a specific context" (*Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion* 7). Nowadays, code-switching has been used by "members of marginalized groups to avoid being stigmatized and associated with negative stereotypes of their group" (*Canadian Centre for*

Diversity and Inclusion 7). Therefore, code-switching can be both a means of expression of a bicultural speaker and assimilation as one of its fundamentals due to the need for an implicit wish to be accepted in the Anglo culture.

As far as Spanglish is concerned, the linguist Ana Celia Zentella argues that Spanglish has the following main elements: “some adapted and unadapted English loan words inserted in Spanish, some Spanish loans in English, loan translations, a few borrowed structures, and switches between Spanish and English, usually at sentence boundaries but also within a sentence” (31-32). The keyword in this definition by Zentella is “adaptation,” which hints at the ability that bilingual speakers must move from one language to another. Metaphorically speaking, it can also be related to their adaptability to changes once they have contact with different cultures. In Zentella’s words, it is an act that “reflects our dual worlds” (31). Moreover, some speakers who are not natives had to move from one country to a new one. In Latina/o communities, Spanglish is the realm “for the defense of *el habla del pueblo*” (28). I would also flesh out that Spanglish conveys a mixture of affectionate languages, the mother language, Spanish, and English. Thus, they have relevance in the speakers’ speech due to their being bicultural people and the psychological effects that influence their usage.

Hence, employing code-switching and Spanglish means that bilingual speakers reveal aspects of their bicultural identities, not only in a positive sense of opening to new ways of thinking. It can also have a negative sense when one considers the assimilation of another culture to the detriment of his/her own.

1.4 Magical Realism

Viramontes’s “The Moths” has been featured in several anthologies and has been one of her most analyzed short stories. This work addresses the issues of a girl on her path to

womanhood and her conflicts with an authoritarian father. Due to Viramontes's influence from the works *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez and *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo, she drew on magical realism to write the short story at issue ("Helena María Viramontes: Social and Political Perspectives" 231). Firstly, it is of the utmost importance to give a brief overview of this genre to show how Viramontes skillfully weaves the dialogues, characters, and settings of her short story to provide a critique of women's disenfranchisement and marginalization. Firstly, I will present the concept of magical realism and enumerate its five main characteristics. Secondly, I will explain why magical realism takes on a multicultural angle in the short story "The Moths" as a means of decolonization. Finally, I will illustrate the relevance of magical realism for women's voices to emerge, that is, as a form of verbalization of their oppression in a peripheral environment.

The concept of magical realism may initially seem illogical, for it is a literary genre that has as one of its main characteristics the combination of contradictory words (oxymorons). One could define it as a genre that combines realism and the fantastic "so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (Faris 1). As far as its five dominant characteristics are concerned, they are as follows, according to Wendy Faris (7-42): 1) the "irreducible element" is something that cannot be proved empirically and does not follow the laws of the universe; 2) the existence of the phenomenal world contributes to the realistic tone of the descriptions in a literary work. The fictional world is described in a way that it seems like the real world. 3) magical realism throws readers in "unsettling doubts" as they are uncertain of the nature of the events in the narrative due to its two contradictory views of what is happening in the plot; 4) there is the simultaneous "closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds," within the narrative; 5) Time in magical realism is not usually linear like in ordinary realism. Regarding space, magical realistic narratives address ordinary and almost mythical spaces that look like "near-sacred or ritual enclosures, but these sacred

spaces are not watertight; they leak their magical narrative waters over the rest of the texts and the worlds they describe, just as that exterior reality permeates them" (24). It is like a contrast between the space of the real and the magical. Yet, it shows the possibility of their coexistence in the literary realm. Concerning identity, one can sense that "the multivocal nature of the narrative and the cultural hybridity that characterize magical realism extends to its characters, which tend toward a radical multiplicity" (25). This multivocal nature of the narrative hints that other people's voices and influences are in each other's heads, stressing, thus, how identities are formed because people are in contact with others. Therefore, one is formed by this plethora of voices of the world. Thus, magical realism is used when mainstream realism is limited to expressing certain situations that demand other perceptions of reality. However, they are connected to the real world. The focalization in magical realism differs from realism in that the former is indeterminate and has indefinable perceptions and unlocatable origins of those perceptions (43). This indeterminacy of its narrative space makes readers puzzled since explaining what is being portrayed becomes hard. Readers experience it through its two contradictory realms (43).

Due to the peculiarities of magical realism, Faris has coined the term "defocalization" to account for how its narrative is formed by two completely and simultaneously different perspectives (43). Faris argues that it is necessary to broaden "the sense of focalization from its usual designation of individual perspectives within a narrative to characterize the way in which magical realism constitutes a particular way of focalizing as a genre, irrespective of the particular perspectives and narrators in individual texts" (43). In this sense, *defocalization* means expanding the possibilities of reading a text from more than one perspective, seeing that mainstream realism, as its name suggests, is attached to its literal and accurate focus on reality. On the other hand, the perspective of *defocalization* is more like an attempt to report "in

modified narratological terms the strangely indeterminate nature of magical realism's generic narrative stance" (43).

Zamora and Faris underscore that the subversion of the magical realist texts is owing to "their in-betweenness, their all at oneness" in that they provide means of resistance to "monological political and cultural structures," which most postcolonial and women writers have embraced in their fiction. Moreover, it explores and transgresses ontological, political, geographical, or generic boundaries (qtd. in Bowers 64). Therefore, since it explores several spheres, it opens the possibilities for criticism and, consequently, ruptures the established order of the world. Faris argues that magical realism and marginality are interdependent (*Ordinary Enchantments* 150). She also points out that there is "the integration of a world of spirits into ordinary reality," (154) and the importance of this interchange can be found in postcolonial societies. Magical realism allows authors to express the voices of this subordinated group through a counterdiscourse (154-155). Hence, it should be stressed that magical realism's decolonizing effect is one of its positive aspects, for it provides some criticism of several conditions of ordinary reality and enables changes to occur to the lives of marginalized and oppressed people in peripheral environments.

Magical realism is more than a mere resource for writers to combine reality and strange or even eerie events to develop fictional narratives. It has a relevant function in creating a fictional world with some description of magical details to critique the social, cultural, and political context in which the characters are placed. Magical realism has become a relevant literary genre, mainly in peripheral lands, owing to its power to create a space for those whose voices, especially people from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and other countries of Oceania, have been smothered by the dominance of Western Europe and the United States.

The importance of Faris and Bowers's theoretical framework mentioned above will support my arguments to analyze the short story "The Moths" by Helena María Viramontes,

for it employs heavily magical realism. I aim to analyze why and how Viramontes relies on this mode to express the nameless narrator's plight through her "big hands" and the final passage in which she prepares her grandmother's body for the funeral. Furthermore, I will analyze why Viramontes employs the moths as an allegorical element at the end of the narrative.

1.5 Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*

To live in the borderlands means you
 are neither *hispana india negra española*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
 caught in the crossfire between camps
 while carrying all five races on your back
 not knowing which side to turn to, run from;
 [...]
 To survive the Borderlands
 you must live *sin fronteras*
 be a crossroads.

(Anzaldúa 216-217)

In Anzaldúa's seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, she draws on various essential concepts and Mexican cultural symbols to underscore oppression and the possibility of metamorphosis. She refers to exclusion/inclusion, deviance/subversion, blindness/consciousness, identity, invisibility/visibility, amongst others. Moreover, she views writing as "a sensual act" and an agent of transformation. These aspects are relevant to analyze Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories*, insofar as the girl characters in both works must deal with oppression and fight back in their daily routine. They

must undergo a rite of passage from unconsciousness to gain consciousness as a path to womanhood.

Anzaldúa underlines her stories and writing as part of her life, as they constitute her resistance to inaction and oppression: “My ‘stories’ are acts encapsulated in time, ‘enacted’ every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and ‘dead’ objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works)” (89). Anzaldúa argues that a literary work has an identity and the exact necessities of a person, for it needs to be “fed,” *la tengo que bañar y vestir*” (89). Writing for her is a vital activity that she cannot do without owing to its transformative effects; otherwise, she becomes “ill”: “In reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make ‘sense’ of them, and once they have ‘meaning’ they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy” (92). Ultimately, writing for her involves all her senses in such a transcendental experience in which she symbolically creates herself and her own body, like building a home to call her own:

When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else. (95)

Anzaldúa’s border/borderlands serve “as a metaphor for all types of crossings – between geopolitical boundaries, sexual transgressions, social dislocations, and the crossings necessary to exist in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts” (Cantú and Hurtado, *Introduction* 6). Therefore, border/borderlands comprehend these meanings to convey the idea of opening to possibilities; it means broadening life perspectives due to multiculturalism and hybridity.

One of the most significant concepts by Anzaldúa is “the new *mestiza* consciousness” (99). Anzaldúa draws upon some approaches by Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos to

create her theory. Vasconcelos asserts that the *mestiza* is a cosmic race and a *raza* of inclusion, for it is “a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world” (qtd. in Anzaldúa 99). Instead of giving rise to an inferior being, a hybrid species emerges more potent than before, owing to its mutability and malleability (99).

Resistance in Anzaldúa has a political connotation, for it involves rescuing Chicanas, Latinas, and women of color’s dignity once they suffer from the stigma of oppression and marginalization so that they can develop their potential as “writers, poets, artists, teachers, and productive members of society (Cantú and Hurtado, *Introduction* 9). Hence, her focus on resistance demonstrates the importance of fighting against oppression, no matter which kind, to combat social injustices (Cantú and Hurtado, *Introduction* 9).

For Anzaldúa, a new *mestiza* consciousness is “*una conciencia de mujer*,” “a consciousness of the Borderlands,” and “from this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-polinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making” (99). Her concept allows for Vasconcelos’s mixtures of races that connote the hybridity, mutability, and malleability of a species “with a rich gene pool” (99). Her *mestiza* includes the possibility of a woman of color creating her own home to feel at ease with herself no matter what race, class, sexuality, or any other characteristics. Therefore, *mestiza* consciousness does not arise overnight but must be built every day:

I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (44)

The new *mestiza* aims to develop a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity (101). She can have a plural personality and “be an Indian in Mexican culture, [be] Mexican from an

Anglo point of view” (101). The *mestiza*’s focal point “is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs” (101). For this reason, a *mestiza*’s consciousness, albeit dominated by intense pain, has its energy “from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (102). Anzaldúa endorses that the *mestiza* alternates between two or more cultures (102), with her freedom to act according to her beliefs, values, and potential. The *mestiza* way also entails new interpretations of history through “using new symbols” in that she can shape “new myths” (104). The *mestiza* follows different perspectives regarding the dark-skinned, women and queers.

Once the *mestiza* changes her perception of reality and how she perceives herself as a flexible human being, her new consciousness arises (102). The *mestiza*’s change begins when she is willing to overturn dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness so that it becomes the onset of a long struggle (102). A collective consciousness must be the target for a broader understanding of reality to bring “the end of rape, of violence, of war” (102). Thus, consciousness for Anzaldúa calls for a collective experience to change not just oneself but all those who face oppression, no matter which kind.

In chapters 2 and 3, I will demonstrate how the main concepts discussed in this topic (border/borderlands, resistance, blindness, the new *mestiza* consciousness, writing as an act of resistance, and rigidity) are present in Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories*. I also aim to demonstrate how Viramontes identifies and elaborates on these issues in her narratives. Moreover, I will explain how Viramontes portrays her girl characters, despite their limitations, going through their path to womanhood.

1.6 Literacy, Expanded Consciousness, and Autonomy

The silence of illiteracy is when one has no voice to express one's thoughts and has no consciousness of one's power to act, resist, negotiate, change, and break the voicelessness of oppression. I will examine some of the main theoretical points of Magda Soares, Paulo Freire, and Paula Moya concerning literacy, *conscientização*, and expanded literacy/consciousness.

Conscientização (conscientization), as Freire examines in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is a critical term that “refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Preface 35n). *Conscientização* implies being aware of the mechanisms of how society works and acting against the injustices of this world. Its central importance relates to the issue of “the awakening of critical consciousness” (36). Indeed, it means to read reality and its intricacies that try to impede human beings' progress. It is when humankind leaves the nebulous territory of certainty, ignorance, and blindness to intervene critically in reality. It is when people “emerge from their *submersion* and acquire the ability to *intervene* in reality as it is unveiled” (109). This intervention means that one has become aware of reality and has reached “*conscientização* of the situation” (109). One becomes aware of how the world functions and the emergence of a situation, and ultimately changes their way of thinking through reflections that lead to a better understanding of reality itself and the awareness of one's role in this world as an active person. Therefore, *conscientização*/conscientization entails overcoming obstacles to men's humanization (119). In my view, *conscientização* seems to be a process when one achieves literacy in a more complex way, as I will further explain.

Literacy is one of the most relevant concepts related to people's learning process of their mother tongue or other languages. According to Magda Soares, literacy or “*letramento*” is “the result of the act of teaching or learning how to read or write: it is the state or the condition that

a social group or an individual acquires as a consequence of having appropriated the writing process” (my trans. 18).¹

Soares also adds that one should regard two dimensions of literacy: the individual and the social. The former is based upon the personal attributes of learning and writing; on the other hand, the latter considers literacy as a cultural phenomenon, “it is a series of social activities that encompass the written language and social demands of the use of the written language – my trans.” (66).² Soares argues that the concept of literacy involves several aspects that include “individual skills and knowledge, social practices and functional competence, and ideological values and political aims” (my trans. 80-81).³ Therefore, literacy should be considered in its broader sense, for it involves more than personal knowledge. Literacy encompasses a complex worldview since it, according to Freire, is a concept that frees people in that it provides people with the skills of writing and reading to become aware of reality and, thus, to transform it (qtd. in Soares 76).

Another relevant aspect that one should consider concerning literacy is dialogical practice. According to Freire, it means recognizing “the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing” (qtd. in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Introduction* 17). One could infer from Freire’s notion of dialogical practice that saying a true word (and, for that matter, to name the world) is everyone’s right to communicate, and words should be used among people to create a dialogical relationship, even if there is any

¹ In the original: “o resultado da ação de ensinar ou de aprender a ler e escrever: o estado ou a condição que adquire um grupo social ou um indivíduo como consequência de ter-se apropriado da escrita.”

² In the original: “um conjunto de atividades sociais que envolvem a língua escrita, e de exigências sociais de uso da língua escrita.”

³ In the original: “habilidades e conhecimentos individuais a práticas sociais e competências funcionais e, ainda, a valores ideológicos e metas políticas.”

disagreement. Thus, the word becomes a collective act inserted into a social, political, and cultural context.

By analyzing dialogue, one becomes conscious of its essence, the word, which encompasses reflection and action to achieve positive transformation. Otherwise, reflection becomes impossible to exist if it is destitute of action. It turns into mere ‘verbalism.’ In contrast, if the emphasis is on the action, and if there is the sacrifice of reflection, it turns into sheer ‘activism,’ or as Freire states: “action for action’s sake ... negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 87-88).

Paulo Freire also underlines that dialogue can only exist if there is “a profound love for the world and for people” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 89). Freire stresses that love (not sentimental, but with some sense of commitment) is the basis of dialogue and dialogue itself. Love is “an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others” (89). Oppressed people can only achieve freedom if they have love as a “commitment to their cause” (89). This commitment, which should have love as one of its most essential elements, is dialogical. Freire calls attention to the fact that one should love the world, life, and people to engage in dialogue (89-90).

Dialogue and humility are closely connected. Arrogance impedes naming the world, which constantly involves recreating the world. It demands that people have “an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all)” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 90). Therefore, a lack of humility is an obstacle to entering a dialogue.

Hope is also imperative because it is founded on “men’s incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others” (91). Hopelessness, Freire claims, means silence, the denial of the world, and a flight

from it (91). Any dehumanizing act must not bring about hopelessness; quite the opposite: hope, which is what leads one to fight for justice.

The final element of authentic dialogue is that people should engage in critical thinking:

Thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 92)

Critical thinking is dynamic because it means appropriating reality, and it conveys the idea of constant movement and change. It demands evaluating and re-evaluating the events that occur in the world. Critical thinking is intrinsically connected with the transformation of the world in which we live. Hence, it calls for a constant update on how we perceive reality and interact with others.

Reality has a universe of “ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites, striving towards plenitude” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 101). People may assume contradictory positions. Some wish to keep the structures as they are, and others aim to change them (101). Education (and literacy, for that matter) is a case in point, as it is also subject to these contradictions. The importance of renovating literacy lies in having a critical and dynamic worldview to “unveil reality, unmask its mythicization, and achieve a full realization of the human task: the permanent transformation of reality in favor of the liberation of people” (102). Hence, education will only bring freedom if it is open to a constant curiosity to see the world critically.

Literacy for Paulo Freire is a double-edged sword. It can either disempower or empower people. In this sense, literacy reproduces “existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change” (*Literacy: Reading the Word,*

and the World 98). For Freire, literacy means more than just the mechanical domain of letters and words; it must be analyzed through power relations as one of its main elements, inasmuch as it is a political phenomenon.

Moreover, one must consider literacy to understand its social and cultural reproduction and production. Cultural reproduction means that collective experiences follow the interests of the dominant class and disregard the interests of the oppressed people. Cultural production is related to “specific groups of people producing, mediating, and confirming the mutual ideological elements that emerge from and reaffirm their daily lived experiences” (*Literacy* 98-99). Thus, the fundament of these experiences is “the interests of individual and collective self-determination” (99).

Freire points out that literacy should be comprehended as a relationship that learners have with the world, in which there is a negotiation “by the transforming practice of this world taking place in the very general social milieu in which learners travel, and also mediated by the oral discourse concerning this transforming practice” (*Literacy* 74-75). Therefore, the key elements of literacy are how the learners relate to the world, how the transforming practice occurs in this world, and having oral discourse as the means of expression to transform their daily experiences.

Ultimately, one acquires autonomy when one reflects on how the world functions and has a critical consciousness to understand its intricacies and possibilities. One is aware that we are all in the process of becoming (there is no such thing as completeness). One also realizes life's aesthetic and ethical values, risks, and opening to the new. Autonomy demands humility, hope, joy, curiosity, tolerance, generosity, commitment, freedom, authority (not to be confused with authoritarian attitudes), listening to oneself and others, and dialogue (*Pedagogia da Autonomia*). Autonomy is, above all, built around humility to learn that life is in constant

movement, and so is our way of thinking. Autonomy means a daily fight to stand up for one's right to be free, despite adversities.

The scholar Paula Moya points out the notion of expanded literacy in her analysis of Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Moya brings up the same idea as Freire when she considers the reading process as a skill that entails "a human agent's total engagement with the world" (175). In her view, Viramontes's expanded notion of literacy suggests "a person's ability to 'read' as a precondition for effective human agency" (175). Words as tools, one of the essential tropes of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, is undoubtedly a point of departure for her analysis regarding the expanded notion of literacy since Viramontes elucidates the connection between understanding, interpretation, and agency (175). I aim to shed some light on this issue in my analysis of Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* and go one step further. Besides an expanded literacy, I propose that one of Estrella's positive characteristics is her curiosity, which is still in the formation process. Estrella is naturally curious about the world, which has not been curtailed yet. Moreover, her beliefs and norms regarding womanhood still have not been deep-seated. In sum, a girl's maturity process still involves uncertainties and unexpected changes that differ from those of grown-up women.

Therefore, literacy is one's tool to fight to break the silence, reach consciousness, and become the real builder of one's freedom. From this view, I will analyze Estrella's literacy process in *Under the Feet of Jesus* as an emancipatory learning due to her expanded literacy, and her opening to unlearning to learn to be a free woman with complete autonomy.

1.7 The women's *Bildungsroman*

My main interest in exploring girlhood relates to the fact that the representation of Latina girls in literature has received little critical attention so far. I hope this thesis will contribute to

the field of Latina girlhood studies. To develop this investigation, I will shed some light on how the women's *Bildungsroman* is one of the resources that Viramontes employs in her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* to depict Estrella's process of growing up as well as to denounce the marginalization and exploitation of a 13-year-old girl in many labor-intensive agricultural tasks.

Chris Baldick defines the term *Bildungsroman* as "a kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity" (27). Its origin traces back to the end of the eighteenth century when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* was published in 1795-1796. According to Childs and Fowler, "Goethe's attention to the gradual growth to self-awareness of his protagonist depends on a harmonious negotiation of interior and exterior selfhoods, a reconciliation that involves the balancing of social role with individual fulfilment" (18). Initially, most *Bildungsromane* centered on male protagonists. The women's *Bildungsroman* does not follow the same standards as the male, for the former features women in a more complex development process. Unlike men, women's *Bildungsromane* deal with oppression and marginalization; it is not just a matter of adapting to society. Women will usually have to go against the mainstream norms and roles expected of them, not only patriarchy but also gender, race, class, and ethnicity issues.

Ellen McWilliams accurately defines *Bildungsroman* in that it considers several aspects of one's life: "the most useful, inclusive definition of *Bildung* can be taken as a physical, intellectual, or indeed spiritual process of cultivation and transformation. This extends to definitions of the *Bildungsroman* as a literary term and underpins most interpretations of the genre" (8-9).

Notwithstanding, feminists and other readers have objected to using the term *Bildungsroman*, owing to its close connection with male and bourgeois ideologies (McWilliams 9). James Hardin puts forward an argument against using the term *Bildungsroman*; another

should substitute it, one which does not have the same ideologies of the past (qtd. in McWilliams 9). In this sense, the original male *Bildungsroman* in the 19th century, as reported by Todd Kontje, presented “the organic development of the hero toward maturation and social integration,” reproducing, thus, “in miniature the movement of German literature towards its maturity, and this literature in turn, is to inspire the unification of the German nation” (qtd. in McWilliams 6).

The *Bildungsroman* is, however, a necessary genre, despite some critics’ opposition. Ellen McWilliams contends that although some critics object to the usage of “the term as a shorthand for novels that investigate human development and transformation is to risk causing further confusion, it may also be appreciated – particularly, perhaps, in a postmodern context – as a flexible and valuable tool for investigative, exploratory purposes” (11). McWilliams also argues that the *Bildungsroman* has developed so that a female version has emerged, becoming one of the most relevant forms of expression for contemporary women writers (12).

Rita Felski stresses that the traditional male *Bildungsroman* is essentially a conservative genre (137). In contrast, the feminist *Bildungsroman* is far removed from the former because its trajectory is different: “The journey into society does not signify a surrender of ideals and a recognition of limitations, but rather constitutes the precondition for oppositional activity and engagement” (137). Furthermore, Felski underscores how the feminist *Bildungsroman* unites the analysis of subjectivity with a dimension of group solidarity, “which inspires activism and resistance rather than private resignation, and makes it possible to project a visionary hope of future change” (139). Moreover, women writers have employed the *Bildungsroman* to highlight gender, age, class, ethnicity, and nationality since these are the leading causes of women’s disempowerment and, thus, a point of departure for some criticism that posits social change. Therefore, the feminist *Bildungsroman* has an emancipatory character as a way for women

writers to articulate empowerment and self-development of the women characters in their works.

The *Bildungsroman* also flourished among Latina writers. The scholar Andrea Fernández-García asserts that U.S. Latina literature (and, for that matter, the *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age narrative) approaches Latina girls in their development as women. In her work, *Geographies of Girlhood in US Latina Writing*, Fernández-García addresses girls' issues connected with colonial power structures, "such as undocumented immigration, displacement, and racial and gender discrimination" (1). These questions demonstrate how colonial structures of power guide women's lives in a negative way. Moreover, Fernández-García views the Latina *Bildungsroman* as a decolonial space in which unheard voices are exposed owing to its "subversive action" to show the capacity of Latina youth to build and rebuild their lives (18).

Fernández-García contends that Latina writers' *Bildungsromane* function as "a discursive space that emerges from a dialogue between the colonial and the postcolonial, which in turn brings about the decolonization and redefinition of paradigms and concepts" (3). Her conceptualization rests on decolonial and border thinking. Moreover, Fernández-García states that it is necessary when analyzing Latinas' *Bildungsromane* "to question and problematize the structures of power, control, and hegemony that outlived colonialism and became integrated into today's neocolonial, global, patriarchal, capitalist social order, silencing, and subjugating oppressed groups" (18-19). In this context, the *Bildungsroman* is a genre that many Latina writers employ to give prominence to marginalized voices from a decolonizing point of view.

Annie Eysturoy emphasizes the Chicana *Bildungsroman*, which portrays the process of women's self-development. She regards it as "an exploration and articulation of the process leading to a purposeful awakening of the female protagonist" (3-4). As far as the child and the adolescent protagonist are concerned, there is "an emphasis ... on social and environmental influences on her rite of passage ... [and] on the education of the self emerging from the

interaction between the self and the world” (4). Furthermore, the end of the *Bildungsroman* usually has a positive message, as the protagonist reaches “a certain stage of selfhood, is ready to profit from her *Bildungs* process and shape her own life in accordance with her awareness and desire for authentic self-fulfillment” (4).

Eysturoy highlights another relevant point regarding the male *Bildungsroman*, in which the male quest for identity is socially and culturally sanctioned. In contrast, the female version is dominated by the tension between women’s evolving selves and the role imposed by society on them (16). Additionally, there is the issue of patriarchy, against which women should fight. Finally, Eysturoy stresses the issue of breaking the silence since Chicanas have been restrained by the patriarchal cultures and the dominant culture’s stereotypes concerning their identities: “The Chicana has been defined and confined within the mother/virgin/whore stereotypes of the past, both within her own Chicano culture and the larger American cultural context” (24). It is their responsibility to cope with this and create their own story from the motives of their disempowerment. The Chicana *Bildungsroman* mirrors “the process leading to selfhood and creative self-assertion with an increasing awareness and assertion of Chicana authenticity.” Therefore, these novels expand Chicanas' notions of the female maturity process (28).

Under the Feet of Jesus by Helena María Viramontes is a *Bildungsroman* that is more than a rite of passage of a 13-year-old teenage girl. It depicts her maturity process but does not present a romanticized view of Estrella’s adolescence. It discloses Estrella’s plight as a girl of Mexican descent and an exploited farmworker. I will analyze Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* to show that it is a subversive work with tension and struggle as its main elements. Viramontes depicts the trials and tribulations of the teenage girl Estrella as a form of activism and resistance to oppression and marginalization so that she can struggle for social change. Ultimately, Viramontes seems to posit the idea of decolonization in the sense that girls and women must unlearn what oppresses them to learn new and emancipatory ways of thinking.

CHAPTER TWO: *UNDER THE FEET OF JESUS: AN ANGEL ON THE VERGE OF FAITH*

I will examine *Under the Feet of Jesus* by considering the theoretical framework I discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One of this thesis. My analysis of Viramontes's work in connection with the previous ones will present new theoretical perspectives.

Under the Feet of Jesus is a women's *Bildungsroman* in which Viramontes portrays the trials and tribulations of a poverty-stricken family of farmworkers who have seasonal jobs in the fields of California. The narrative explores how issues of unequal power relations (gender, class, ethnicity, age, and race) influence the lives of its women characters. Viramontes also approaches the themes of the immigrant experience in the fields, biculturalism, violence, economic problems, code-switching, and Spanglish. She also highlights Mexican food to give due prominence to the identities of her characters. Viramontes emphasizes "nature appreciation, environmental awareness, toxic exposure, and food justice" (Wald et al. "We Carry Our Environments within Ourselves" 164) to criticize these subjects. Through this, she suggests that there needs to be a fight for social change.

As women's *Bildungsroman*, Viramontes proposes in *Under the Feet of Jesus* that the 13-year-old Estrella's maturity process implies a rebellion against the social and cultural, gender, class, ethnicity, and race issues in her life. Estrella must cope with two cultures' values, assumptions, and norms to shape her identity in her rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. The obstacles throughout the narrative mean how a dominant Anglo culture tries to efface her individuality through relentless oppression and discrimination. Additionally, I aim to examine how Viramontes explores the subjection of Estrella and immigrants at large to coercion in a callous labor market in which immigrants' bodies are reified through a relation of use and abuse. Ultimately, it is my hypothesis to demonstrate how necessary it is that Estrella

comprehends the reasons for her suffering concerning her ignorance/illiteracy about norms and rules of patriarchy, the inequalities in all spheres of her life, and the whole universe of oppression and marginalization. My focus in this analysis will be on how Viramontes's Chicana feminist perspective depicts Estrella's quest for authentic female self-development or her process of maturity so that she can deal with setbacks along the way. Anzaldúa's notions of hybridity, resistance, and the new *mestiza* consciousness are also relevant in my analysis since they involve a conception of a free woman. Ultimately, it is my claim to demonstrate that Estrella's literacy, according to Paulo Freire, Magda Soares, and Paula Moya, is the first step for Estrella's change so that she can be an autonomous and free woman.

2.1 What's in a name?

Viramontes's name of her protagonist, Estrella, was not a random choice. Estrella in English means "star." The underlying symbolism of her name conveys the idea of "a light shining in the darkness," or more precisely, it "is a symbol of the spirit" (Cirlot 309). Cirlot highlights that the star "stands for the forces of the spirit struggling against the forces of darkness" (309). Furthermore, the idiom "reach for the stars" means "to attempt to bring about the apparently impossible" (Biedermann 323). Stars are also associated with the Hindu Goddess Sarasvati, who embodies fertility, giver of the essence, knowledge (as "the antithesis of the darkness of ignorance"), learning, power, and intelligence (Harshananda 78-82).

Estrella can also be associated with Aztec mythology, in which *Coatlicue* means she of the serpent skirt, "the incarnation of cosmic processes," and "activity (not immobility) at its most dynamic stage" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 68-69). Anzaldúa also spells out that the *Coatlicue* state "is a prelude to crossing," connecting it, thus, with the notion of Estrella's rite of passage. More importantly, Anzaldúa illustrates that "every step forward is a *travesia*, a

crossing” (70) for acquiring consciousness. Estrella’s trajectory in the novel is not smooth since she is “an alien in new territory” of the unknown. That means “if [she escapes] conscious awareness, [escapes] ‘knowing’ ... [and] knowledge makes [her] more aware, it makes [her] more conscious. ‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens [she] can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. [She is] no longer the same person [she] was before” (70). These words reinforce the idea that consciousness is indispensable for Estrella so that she can change her life more critically.

Throughout the narrative of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Estrella (“Star”), a daughter of Mexican immigrant parents living in the United States, a girl on her path to womanhood, must gather strength to fight against the so-called forces of darkness (ignorance and inequitable power relations) that disempower her. Although she was born in the United States, Estrella’s skin color gives her descent away. Owing to this, in an undisguised way, only those whose skin tone is white are considered legitimate citizens of the United States. Therefore, Estrella suffers discrimination for the most diverse reasons: her color, ethnicity, age, class, and gender. This intolerance, in several senses, contrasts with her inner resilience to impose herself as a citizen whose dignity is, above all, her most precious quality.

Nevertheless, life is more complex for an adolescent going through one of the most challenging periods of life. She is in this in-between space where she is no longer a child or a mature woman. Despite this, Estrella’s curiosity and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge are the points of departure for her to acquire literacy and develop a critical consciousness of the world.

Although the character Estrella is the focus of my analysis, I should acknowledge that her mother, Petra, her stepfather, Perfecto Flores, and her boyfriend, Alejo, are key characters who contribute to Estrella’s consciousness-raising. For this reason, I will also shed some light on their names.

Petra's name at first would bring to light the idea of "stone." This element suggests fixity, which connects with her resentful nature due to being abandoned by an abusive husband and her attachment to superstition. Stones, however, have the characteristics of "durability and permanence" and have a symbolic religious significance, conferring a "symbol of divine power" to her (Biedermann 326). Cirlot states that stones symbolize "unity and strength" (313), which applies to Petra since she is the one who keeps the whole family together and cares for everybody, including the young farmworker Alejo. Despite not being a member of the family, "Petra took care of Alejo, not because of who he was, but because she was a mother too, and if Estrella was sick, or Ricky and Arnulfo were sick in the *piscas*, she would want someone to take care of them. And of course, she did it for the love of God" (*Under the Feet of Jesus* 124). Petra's compassion is one of her greatest virtues because she talks Perfecto into driving Alejo to the clinic and to the hospital. Her virtue rubs off on Estrella, who also begs and pleads with Perfecto to drive Alejo to the clinic and the hospital. Cirlot also reminds us that stones, when "shattered, [signify] dismemberment, psychic disintegration, infirmity, death and annihilation" (313). Petra's broken faith at the end of the novel, illustrated by the fall of the statue of Jesucristo, corroborates this latter meaning.

Perfecto Flores is Estrella's stepfather. As his name suggests, he repairs things perfectly. One of his main characteristics is his meticulous care and remarkable skill with his tools. He instills an interest in Estrella by showing her the uses of each of his tools, and that is when she begins to read. His surname "Flores" (flowers) also discloses "the flower [as] an image of the 'Centre,' and hence an archetypal image of the soul" (Cirlot 110). He is a compassionate man who suffers in silence. He wishes to abandon Petra and the family and return to Mexico because he has lost most of his physical strength as a farmworker due to old age. Moreover, he cannot stand the thought of being exploited in the United States as a farmworker.

Alejo's name stems "from the Spanish verb *alejar*, meaning to distance oneself from something, to move away, estrange, or alienate" (50). Dennis López adds that his name "denotes both Alejo's present situation and his foremost wish." He is away from his hometown in Texas. López argues that "Alejo's name also signals his deep longing to escape the constraints of his working-class community, to free himself from brutalizing and dehumanizing labor, a possibility he associates with education and the *move away* from manual labor it can provide" ("You Talk 'Merican" 50). Alejo's alienation is due to his blind faith in the American Dream, an ideological concept that turns him into an enslaved person, for he believes in its ideals of liberty, equality, and individual prosperity. He wishes to graduate in geology and give up his hard life as a farmworker. However, his bitter reality prevents him from understanding that his dream is a sham. Instead, he falls ill from pesticide poisoning, which figuratively corresponds to the shattering of his dreams of thriving in the United States.

Despite his tragic fate, Alejo, as Estrella's boyfriend, is a major influence on the development of her consciousness, inasmuch as they have a relationship as part of Estrella's maturity as a woman. In one of her interviews, Viramontes states that:

One reason she loves him is because he brings to her something from outside her environment. He brings to her another world that she knows is out there but that she both desires and fears as dangerous. For him, that world is all about dreams and accomplishments. But Estrella has never thought in terms of dreams and accomplishments, and they're beautiful to her. In my mind, Alejo becomes her best friend—something she's never really had. (Wald et al. "We Carry Our Environments within Ourselves" 167)

As mentioned before, Alejo introduces the image of the tar pits in one of their conversations. Notwithstanding that, Alejo, owing to his illness, seems to be on the brink of death at the end of the narrative. In contrast, Estrella appropriates this image of the tar pits and applies it to her life when she becomes aware of her exploitation as a farmworker.

In sections 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4, I will approach several relevant events in the narrative that apply to the farmworkers. Since they are mostly represented as a mass of undefined sexes and ages, my analysis of them also applies to Estrella.

2.2 The Siren Song: Consumerism and Dehumanization in the U.S.

Viramontes deliberately presents a wide array of products and stores throughout the narrative to highlight how consumerism in the United States contrasts the opulence of the middle and upper classes with the poverty-stricken family of Estrella and the farmworkers. In this world of bountifulness and scarcity, the farm workers are on the bottom rung of the ladder and stand for the exploited class. Estrella is immersed in this world of consumerism, although her family cannot afford most of the products “advertised” in the narrative.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the products and the stores have names with capital letters, as if they had an identity. On the other hand, Viramontes refers to farmworkers as “*piscador(es)*” with lower cases as a form of criticism of their minor significance compared to the produce they harvest and the products they can barely afford. Viramontes even resorts to their dehumanization to convey the disdain for those who control the means of production and exploit them daily, treating them as if they were animals: “The truck finally stopped, and everyone stretched and gathered up their muscles. The driver released the bolt of the back door, and the first of the *piscadores* were herded out of the corraled flatbed” (67). By the same token, in another simile, Viramontes compares them to “loose change in a pocket” (67) to criticize the paltry sum of money that the farmworkers represent for the capitalist society.

In one of the passages of the novel, Estrella plays with her siblings with a box of Quaker Oats oatmeal: “Estrella grabbed the chubby pink cheeks Quaker man, the red and white and blue cylinder package and shook it violently and its music was empty” (18-19). Viramontes

highlights the colors of the flag of the United States and the model of a white citizen: the Quaker man. These associations underscore how Estrella engages in a playful fight with the box of the Quaker oatmeal, which seems to suggest her repressed resentment due to the exploitation to which she and her family are subject as workers in the United States: “Estrella drummed the top of his low crown hat, slapped the round puffy man’s double chins, beat his wavy long hair the silky color of creamy hot oats” (19).

Even Estrella’s readings entail absorbing advertising slogans of products she and her family could barely afford or needed: “*Clorox makes linen more than white ... It makes them sanitary, too!*” (31). The emphasis on “white” and “sanitary” hints at more than hygiene and health when one acknowledges that Estrella and her family have brownish and darker colors and lack access to essential health care. As for “*Swanson’s TV Dinners, closest to Mom’s Cooking*” (Viramontes 31), Paula Moya contends that “TV dinners are useless to someone who has no oven” (197). The suntan lotion sounds ironic for “someone who is already brown and for whom the sun is associated not with leisure time and lolling on the beach, but with sunstroke and an unquenchable thirst” (Moya, *Learning from Experience* 197).

Moreover, as far as reading is concerned, the white farmworker Maxine Devridge makes friends with Estrella. Maxine is illiterate; however, she has many magazines, including the comic *Millie, the Model*. Estrella is fascinated by Maxine’s collection of magazines and begins reading them to her. On one occasion, when they were together basking in the reading of the above-mentioned glossy magazine, Maxine wore a dress that “had a faded print of yellow corncobs with kernels falling and the corn kernels tumbled to her ankles” (30). As she stood on the step, she seemed taller. This passage seems to hint at a product that reinforces the idea of consumerism permeating every activity of the farmworkers, even in their leisure time: “the Argo woman on a box of corn starch” (31). An Argo Corn Starch Wall Advertising T-Shirt made by J Laughlin, from Fine Art America, features an indigenous woman whose body is a

corncob. The sacred and the profane are accentuated in this image of a woman who resembles a saint in her vestment and, at the same time, has some sexual innuendo with its slogan “best for all purposes.”

Cars are also objects of pride and joy in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Right at the novel’s beginning, Estrella and her family arrive in a “Chevy Capri station wagon” (3), one of the most popular vehicles in the 1960s and 1970s. However, Perfecto’s car is dilapidated and moves noisily along the roads and highways. In another passage, Estrella, her mother Petra, and her children are trying to cross the highway when “a Ford pickup with a dented headlight rambled by” (104). The car brand ironically suggests that Estrella’s family cannot “afford” it. Curiously, the Ford pickup appears in another passage and serves for the farmworkers to heat their food: “Piscadores placed their burritos on the dented hood of the Ford pickup truck to heat them” (83). Using the verb “ramble” contrasts the aimless movement of the car and its owner on the highway with Estrella’s family’s intended destination, going to the store to purchase food.

Later, before entering a store, another car draws the family’s attention: “a lime green Bermuda with a white top and white wall tires” (104). Petra feels jealous as she peruses the vehicle with its “plump seats” and “the white plush carpeting was so white” (105). Once again, the white color gains prominence as a symbol of status, power, and prestige, stressing that only a white person can own such an impressive automobile. Remarkably, even the Bermuda man is depersonalized and at the mercy of consumerism since he stands for the affluent in the United States who can purchase such an imposing vehicle.

Petra feels awkward before the Bermuda owner. In Paula Moya’s words, “the asymmetry in economic relations is reinforced by ideological narratives that reinforce the relation of inequality” (Moya, “Reading as a Realist” 193). Due to Petra’s inferiority complex, she imagines that the Bermuda owner knows things that she does not. Nevertheless, she does not seem to perceive that “she knows things he might not, such as what it is like to be a woman

abandoned with her children, or what the highway looks like to someone who travels it by foot, she imagines *him* as someone who ‘knows’ things” (“Reading as a Realist” 193). Due to Petra’s limited understanding, she thinks that “to know” means only the knowledge of the world of comfort that the capitalist world provides for well-to-do people.

A plethora of products permeates the novel as a kind of enunciation for the consumerist society, and it shows us that the most diverse factors mirror how people interact with the world as consumers. As Sassatelli contends, when we act as consumers, “we deploy cognitive and normative frameworks which we have developed throughout our lives, starting from the particular position we occupy in the social structure, negotiating with a variety of roles which are not reducible to our experiences as consumers” (84). Thus, our identities as consumers involve our relationship “with other social identities and relations” (84). It is in this relationship that we develop with commodities that we are shaping “ourselves as particular consumers but also express and stabilize our different identities and cultural orientations linked to gender, ... to sexuality, ... to age, ... to ethnicity, ... and to class and education” (84). Therefore, when Viramontes presents each product in the narrative, they symbolize intrinsic ideological values in connection with how her characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus* react regarding gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, class, and education.

For instance, when Viramontes depicts Alejo in one passage that he “whispered between the toes of his Concord tennis shoes” (10), the supersonic airliner Concorde may come to mind, associating, thus, the tennis shoes with speed and age and in this sense, they would come in handy for Alejo to run away as fast he could in case the Foreman catches him and his cousin Gumecindo stealing fruits. A brand of coffee, Nescafé, also appears in the narrative to illustrate more than just a beverage, more like an indicator of the class with whom it is associated: the Bermuda man knew “where the Nescafé coffee jars in the stores were located” (105). His vehicle and the nurse’s “Timex wristwatch” (137) disclose their social status. In stark contrast

to these two characters and their brand products, Estrella's brother, Ricky, with "his arms clasped over his stomach," craves "a Blue Bell ice cream sandwich, artificially flavored" (55).

Capitalism and its consumerist ideology overshadow the mechanisms of how Estrella, her family, and the other farmworkers are exploited as a labor force and are led to believe that if they do not participate in this insane consumer world, they are lesser people. Due to their unconsciousness of these intricacies, they could not comprehend that "commodities incorporate a certain amount of work and that their prices are an abstract and structurally biased calculation of worktime. Market value is therefore nothing but a relation between people; nevertheless it is 'a relationship that is hidden behind things'" (Sassatelli 75). Thus, their labor force seems to be camouflaged in the production of the commodities that take on the role of fetishes and even seem to have a life of its own; however, "they are only the shadow of the social relations of which they are expressions" (75).

Some food products have an affectionate sense in which a bond is rescued, like when Petra prepares the Mexican tortillas with ingredients made in the United States, such as "Clabber Girl baking powder," "La Pina flour," and "Rex lard" (119). They evoke:

The fictional desire to feed one's soul as well as the souls of others. Culinary creativity flourishes in a disorderly kitchen, while the bond between individuals undergoes kneading, grinding, seasoning, simmering. Food, ultimately, to an extent regulates the approximation and the distancing between individuals and between the individual and the environment. (Gonçalves 52)

The brand names become secondary in this representation. Food here stresses its diasporic and hybrid character. I should highlight that Petra's preparation of the tortillas does not mean "a nostalgic desire to return, but rather it encompasses a form of 'culinary citizenship,' as Anita Mannur has put it, a 'form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food'" (qtd. in Gonçalves 53).

Other food products mean that Petra must “make a mental calculation” to check which ones she can manage to buy to feed her family: “El Pato Tomato sauce,” “a can of Carnation Milk,” “a jar of Tang,” “four cans of Spam” (109). Most of these products are artificial, canned with plenty of preservatives, and have a high percentage of salt or sugar, which may cause health problems. Hence, they contrast with the fresh produce that Estrella and her family harvest as farmworkers, which they can barely afford.

Several iconic figures are scattered across the store where Petra and her children purchase food: “the holy Virgen, Our Lady of Guadalupe,” “Elvis Presley,” “Marilyn Monroe,” and “Cantinflas” (108-110). At first, the holy Virgen could be associated with the profanity of the sacred in that its poster is alongside the ones by Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and Cantinflas. As mentioned above, concerning food, we have a diasporic world in which the local and the global coexist, albeit with cultural and social differences.

By a cruel irony, “the orange Union 76 ball” (151) seems to summon the image of the ubiquitous scorching sun under which Estrella and her family must work daily. Moreover, it puts forward the year 1776, the United States Declaration of Independence (“History of the 76 Gas Station”), and, paradoxically, the United States has now been viewed as a colonizer exploiting Estrella and the farmworkers through their cheap labor.

Ultimately, differently from the other mentioned symbols above, there is a positive sense in the image of the sweet “Eagles’ condensed milk” (99), which evokes Estrella and Alejo’s sensual kiss. Furthermore, the “Eagle” symbol has a political connotation insofar as it conjures up the United Farm Workers, which César Chávez and Dolores Huerta founded. In one of the passages of the narrative, the drivers distributed “white leaflets with black eagles on them,” and “Estrella received one, folded it in half carefully and placed it in her back pocket for later reading” (Viramontes 84). According to Sarah Wald, this reference “connects the novel

to a broader struggle for farm workers' rights. The UFW ... provides the only visible outlet of collective worker resistance in the novel" ("Visible Farmers/Invisible Workers" 576).

2.3 Work in the Fields: A Phantom of a Man

The objectification of Estrella and the farmworkers' bodies corroborate how racialized and gendered inequalities contribute to efface their individuality due to their exploitation in a mercenary capitalist society. Viramontes's "tar pits," "energy money," "energy matter," and "bones" (148) and the analogy of "the phantoms in the field" (60) buttress this dehumanization caused by strenuous work, scorching sun, pesticides, environmental racism, and the like. She posits that consciousness of this whole process and agency are the way out for Estrella and the farmworkers not to be engulfed by the constraints of capitalism. Strikingly, Viramontes mixes Estrella's body with the other farmworkers' to underline that they are a compact mass of undifferentiated physical structures, be it boys, girls, women, or men: "The hot soil burned through her shoes as she made her way to the other side of the row. There she saw the bend of a back, and at first could not tell whether it was female or male, old or young" (56).

One of the first images at the beginning of *Under the Feet of Jesus* highlights the barn and its surrounding silence and clouds. These latter elements are not incidental insofar as they overlap the layers of oppression and marginalization of Estrella and the other farmworkers' bodies. They represent a relentless and silent mechanism that encompasses their lives through the routine of work: "It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing" (4). The emphatic use of the word "nothing" discloses their limitations before the unpredictability of life in all aspects and their

lack of freedom in a hostile environment in which their bodies were sheer instruments at the mercy of greedy employers.

Viramontes juxtaposes several elements that underscore the repetitiveness of hard work as a means that blind farmworkers and keep them doing the same work, again and again, every day under the most strenuous conditions and the most sizzling sun: “the sun burned their feet, their heads, their eyes” (84). It is a vicious circle that repeats itself (it is no wonder the words “sun” and “sunlight” appear more than 40 times in the narrative!) throughout the day with the ubiquitous sun, causing stroke and damage to their skin: “He asked in a whisper, as if the sun had sucked out even the energy to speak in a normal tone” (86), “even the birds wavered on the crest of the heat waves” (49), “the white light of the sun worked hard” (49), “Estrella remembered the mother trying to keep her awake, but the days were so hot, and the sun wanted her to sleep so badly, she became cranky and angry” (52). These passages disclose how the sun hovers over the characters’ heads, their spirits sagging from overwork, turning them into mere spectrums in the middle of the fields. The silence of the sun’s omnipresence, almost a real character in the narrative, steals their energies and prevents them from becoming aware of how their employers took advantage of them.

Interestingly enough, the *piscadores* become a real mass of workers whose sex and age cannot be identified: “he tipped his water bottle and wet a kerchief, dabbing his face which was the color of worn leather and which made him look older than his thirty years” (64), “it’s not fair, Estrella said. Except for the dress she’d pulled over her work clothes, she resembled a young man, standing in the barn’s shadow” (74), and “he looked old, but the nature of their lives had a way of putting twenty years on a face, so that a man of fifty looked like he was seventy, and perhaps she looked fifty herself, though she was only thirty-three at the time” (111). Overwork also takes its toll on Estrella’s body: “the muscles of her back coiled like barbed wire” (53), and “for a moment, Estrella did not recognize her own shadow. It was

hunched and spindly and grew longer on the grapes” (56). Therefore, it does not matter whether one is young or old, male or female; they are all the same in the world of blatantly impersonal capitalism, as long as they generate profits for their employers.

One of the most iconic passages in *Under the Feet of Jesus* is when Estrella contrasts with the idyllic sun maid raisin on the box sold in supermarkets and stores. The Sun maid wears “a fluffy bonnet” (49), has “ruby lips,” and a smile on her face while she holds a basket full of grapes, and a burst of fake sunshine gleams right behind her. On the other hand, Estrella feels the weight on her muscles, “the sun was white and it made Estrella’s eyes sting like an onion” (49-50). Estrella is lethargic from inhuman working conditions: “The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil, and she did not know how to pour the baskets of grapes inside the frame gently and spread the bunches evenly on top of the newsprint paper” (50). The image conveyed by the Sun maid is one of a person who has no idea of “creaking knees, the bend of [Estrella’s] back,” doing the same repetitive tasks again and again: “[she would] set down another sheet of newsprint paper, reset the frame, then return to the pisca again with the empty basket, row after row, sun after sun” (50). Estrella wonders to herself if the “woman’s bonnet would be as useless as [her] own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins” (50). The black raisins suggest Estrella’s toasted body under the blazing sun.

The Sun maid’s pastoral image, or in Sharla Hutchison’s words, “the myth of California agriculture as the new Eden” (974), turns real farmworkers into invisible human beings and represents a distorted view of their reality: too much exposure to sun and pesticides, racial discrimination, low wages, physical harm, and no access to proper houses, running water, and health care. Visual artist Ester Hernández was a critic of this fake image of farmworkers. She is an activist, and one of her serigraphs has the Sun Mad woman. In Hernández’s work, one can see how she depicts the latter “as a messenger of death to her viewers” and shows the woman

as “a skeleton wearing the trademark red bonnet [replacing] the healthy maid, and the text on the red box informs consumers that the grapes she offers are grown ‘unnaturally’ with ‘insecticides, miticides, herbicides, [and] fungicides” (Hutchison 981).

Pesticides play a relevant role in Viramontes’s novel in that Estrella’s, and the farmworkers’ lives, only mattered as a means to an end: production and large profits for the employers. Estrella and Maxine bathed in the river at risk of pesticide contamination. In another passage of the novel, Estrella wears a bandana “to protect her lungs on days ... when the fields were becoming dust-swept” (55). They were exposed to the hazardous effects of what the Reverend Benjamin F. Chaves Jr. has coined as “environmental racism”:

Environmental racism is a racial discrimination in environmental policy making. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decision making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. (qtd. in Grewe-Volpp 61)

As Grewe-Volpp argues, “poor, mostly urban communities of color are disproportionately subjected to pollution, toxic waste dumps, and unsafe working conditions” (61). It is not even advisable to spray pesticides on very hot days, with temperatures above 90° F, since “the active ingredients in some pesticides can vaporize and drift onto non-target surfaces” (“Using Pesticides Safely and Correctly”). Most of the time, the temperatures in the fields where Estrella and her family worked were above 90° F, and they did not know when biplanes would spray pesticides. The World Health Organization advises that “risks to vulnerable populations should always be considered” (“International Code of Conduct on

Pesticide Management” 12); however, this does not happen in the novel. The presence of “poisons and pollutants” close to the farmworkers’ households discloses the total neglect by the employers for the former’s lives. It accentuates how their labor force matters more than their living conditions. After all, if one farmworker passes away, there will be thousands of others to do his/her humdrum, menial, and repetitive work.

The tar pits represent another significant icon in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, depending on who the focalizer is: Alejo or Estrella. Alejo remembers them as the biplane sprays pesticides, and he is exposed to the “slight moisture until the poison rolled down his face in deep sticky streaks” (77). Alejo imagines himself engulfed by the tar pits: “Black bubbles erasing him. Finally the eyes. Blankness. Thousands of bones, the bleached white marrow of bones. Splintered bone pieced together by wire to make a whole, surfaced bone. No fingerprint or history, bone. No lava stone. No story or family, bone” (78). Alejo’s blind catholic devotion prevents him from perceiving that stealing peaches is not the reason why he is being “punished.” The continuous repetition of the word “bone” stresses how capitalism undermines Alejo’s body. His destiny would have been quite different if he had understood the real meaning of tar pits.

Nevertheless, Alejo’s talk about the oil and tar pits is one of his positive influences on Estrella’s consciousness-raising when she realizes that the nurse’s high standard of living, and for that matter, any other middle-class and upper-class people, relied heavily on not only her exploitation, but her family, and the farmworkers’ labor force:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse’s car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn’t

the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her. (148)

In this sense, Estrella's view of the tar pits, in stark contrast to Alejo's, enables her to act instead of surrendering to their harsh reality. She makes her voice heard by the nurse once the former smashes the table with a crowbar owing to her understanding that "the nurse owed them as much as they owed her" (148). Estrella, therefore, does not accept being submerged in the tar pits. Conversely, she feels she cannot be swallowed by what disempowers her. Instead, she prefers to keep her head out of the tar pits to fight against her oppression and for her community.

Two images in the novel serve as influential icons for the ghostlike figures of the farmworkers, which also include Estrella: "the floodlights aimed at the phantoms in the field" (60) and "his body like a phantom of a man once made of hearty flesh" (Viramontes 117). They seem to conjure up pictures of the oppressed and marginalized farmworkers and immigrants whose labor force help, above all, to provide material comfort to those on the higher rungs of the ladder. Dennis López expresses it well in "Ghosts in the Barn" when he points out that *Under the Feet of Jesus*'s "persistent spectral tropes speak to the very antagonisms and contradictions inherent in the discrete social relationships and economic activities composing the labor regime that is [Viramontes's] central subject matter" (309). That means the farmworkers' labor is carried out invisibly, without any identity that dignifies them. On the contrary, as López illustrates, those spectral allusions "evoke the oft-concealed realities of pesticide poisoning, birth defects (sic), and infant and childhood mortalities in the fields" (309). It is no wonder that once owners of a "hearty flesh," they have become effaced farmworkers who toil away in "the vast fields of grapevines ... without beginning, without ending – always the same to the piscadores and then to their children" (*Under the Feet of Jesus* 50).

2.4 Contrasts as Marks of Social Exclusion

The contrasts throughout the narrative uncover the gender, race, class, and ethnic inequalities that mark the farmworkers' social exclusion in the United States. The novel delineates the boundaries of social disparities by highlighting the pairs of cleanliness/filth, brown/dark and light skin, plentifulness and scarcity, women and men farmworkers.

The notion of cleanliness is contrasted with filth to delimitate the symbolic territories connected with the social division of farmworkers and their employers. There is a clear distinction between these when considering the division between blue-collar and white-collar workers. The former usually refers to physically exhausting manual labor, whereas the latter generally encompasses work done in the environment of offices and management roles. Ironically, farmworkers are considered blue-collar since the color is often associated with "a symbol for things of the spirit and the intellect" (Biedermann 44). Farmworkers must carry out tasks that demand too much of their physical strength and perform no intellectual activities. Their labor represents, thus, the filthy end of the spectrum. As for the white-collar workers, most of them are not even aware of the employees' poor working conditions. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the figure of the nameless Foreman (there is only a nickname: Big Mac, a reference to the multinational fast-food chain) acts as an intermediary between the farmworkers and farm owners. However, he is also a victim of exploitation because he is more like a sentinel that acts according to the interests of his employers. Although his job does not entail physical strength, he is under psychological pressure because he will be dismissed from his post if he does not comply with regulations.

The Western symbolism of the white color links it to "either the undisturbed innocence of prelapsarian Eden or the ultimate goal toward which all imperfect mortals strive - purification and a heavenly restoration of that 'lost' innocence." Biedermann states, "In many cultures, white or simply uncolored garments are priestly vestments, associated symbolically with purity

and truth” (380). This representation discloses the underlying truth of purity and purification; when considered in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, it brings to the fore the notion that the white race rules while the “blue” of the blue-collar laborers is tinged with inferior connotations.

This distinction between white and non-whites becomes clear when Viramontes stresses the notion of filth, the latter of which is associated with the farmworkers or immigrants at large (blue-collar workers), to highlight race inequalities. Estrella, whose complexion is “brown like wheat bread crust (100), is a victim of prejudice in the schools she attended. Most of her teachers prioritized her hygiene over adequate education: “the dirt under her fingernails. They inspected her head for lice, parting her long hair with ice cream sticks. They scrubbed her fingers with a toothbrush until they were so sore she couldn’t hold a pencil properly” (24-25). Estrella even got hurt by the nasty remarks of her teacher Mrs. Horn: “How come her mama never gave her a bath. Until then, it had never occurred to Estrella that she was dirty, that the wet towel wiped on her resistant face each morning, the vigorous brushing and tight braids her mother neatly weaved were not enough for Mrs. Horn” (25). Notwithstanding that, this is one of the illuminating passages of Estrella’s life, for she becomes aware that words could hurt people, too.

Another revealing passage shows Estrella’s awareness of her dirt compared to the nurse’s sanitized image. Since Perfecto’s car got stuck in the mud, Estrella had to help him move the car. Her arrival at the clinic made her notice how unclean she was: “Dirty face, fingernails lined with mud, her tennis shoes soiled, brown smears like coffee stains on her dress where she had cleaned her hands” (137). Conversely, the nurse’s perfect image reinforces class and race inequalities: “The nurse’s white uniform and red lipstick and flood of carnations made her even more self-conscious. It amazed Estrella that some people never seemed to perspire while others like herself sweated gallons” (137). These contrasting passages disclose how

discrimination occurs in the implied sentence, “the darker the color the greater the unquestioned assumption of inferiority” (Phillipa Kafka 33).

The Bermuda man in his luxurious vehicle reinforces the same values and concepts of class and race represented by the nurse. Although there is no mention of his color, several elements in the narrative indicate that he is a white, upper-class man. Even the reflection of the sun on the Bermuda owner’s face is different in the way it throws back light to Estrella and her family: “The Bermuda man looked at her over the hood of his lime green car, and the sun reflected wavy green on his face” (106). His air of superiority over Petra and her children is especially highlighted when he “snapped a blue paper towel from a silver box and buffed the chrome of his car” (106). The emphasis on the words “silver box,” “buff,” and “chrome” gives his affluence away.

The notion of plentifulness and scarcity, associated with social and economic differences, portrays how farmworkers must work strenuously in the large field crops to provide the middle-class and upper-class people in the United States with proper food, like the nurse and the Bermuda man. The produce that farmworkers like Petra must make do with fruits and vegetables that “hardly resembled the crops harvested days before” (109). The produce in the store consisted of “squished old tomatoes,” “bruised apples,” “blotchy oranges,” and “the white onions [that] reminded Petra of eggs” (110). Furthermore, Petra spends her time in the store calculating how much she can spend on buying canned products.

To further complicate matters, Phillipa Kafka contends, “Even in cultures where men of color rule, women of color are situated in subordinate positions in real life, as well as depicted as subordinate to male characters in their literature” (xxv). This issue highlights Petra and Estrella’s double shift, inasmuch as they have to do the house chores and take care of the children after working strenuously during the day: “Today had been wash day. She had used the last of the ground yucca roots for soap and had to grind more stiff root which meant more

work. Her knuckles were raw white against her coffee skin. The mother used the remaining rinse water to bathe the twins” (61). In this sense, Petra and Estrella are doubly oppressed, in terms of class and race, during the day as farmworkers, and at night or on the weekends, as regards their gender.

2.5 A Broken Faith and the Barn as a Potent Symbol of Religion

Under the Feet of Jesus discloses one of Viramontes's significant concerns regarding cultural and social terms in its title. Her work suggests that orthodox religion, far from being a motive of freedom for women, makes them feel imprisoned in their beliefs, morals, and rules. The two main women characters in the novel, the mother, Petra, and her 13-year-old daughter, Estrella, have trajectories in the narrative that guide them in divergent paths. Petra shows enormous devotion to Catholicism and will have her faith shaken at the novel's end, whereas the young Estrella will tread a different path due to her awareness-raising.

Petra's adherence to catholic symbols is expressed in the “white plastic rosary” (6), the “altar with Jesucristo, La Virgen Maria y José” (8), her children's “birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus,” (63) and “La Virgen's glossy downcast eyes” (110). Petra must carry the burden of guilt because she and her first husband consummated a confidential marriage due to her four-month pregnancy. Their turbulent relationship ended in extreme pain. Without the typical patriarchal figure, Petra takes on her role as “a woman-headed and woman-populated household,” in Horno-Delgado's words (qtd. in Phillipa Kafka xviii). Nevertheless, she has assumed her role as a “passive recipient,” “obedient to the decrees as sacrosanct” (Phillipa Kafka 6), becoming, thus, an oppressed victim due to her strongly held belief in catholic norms. As Phillipa Kafka points out, other women propagate beliefs and rules:

For the purpose of religio-social-cultural indoctrination and brainwashing. They serve in the cause of perpetuating the culturally constructed models for female and male conduct by specifying the necessary requisites, terms, and conditions for the built-in superiority of men and the inferiority of women as a class. (10)

Hence, Petra assumes and perpetuates her role as a gatekeeper who tries to instill these beliefs and norms into her daughter Estrella.

This role of gatekeepers is institutionalized among women as a form of control of their freedom by following the scripts of patriarchy. The same pattern repeats when other women in the camps and Estrella's godmother advise Petra not to abandon her ex-husband because he would kill her. Estrella's godmother's other words disturbed Petra even more: *"You'll be a forever alone woman, ... nobody wants a woman with a bunch of orphans, nobody. You don't know what hunger is until your huercos tell you to your face, then what you gonna do"* (13)? These profoundly ingrained morals in women's minds lead them to accept abusive relationships for fear of not being "attached" to a man.

Estrella spends her childhood "learning" what a relationship is about in this environment of abuse and patriarchy. Her earliest childhood memory is when her twin sisters "started calling her mama" (13). Moreover, the recollection of her parents' failed marriage has, without a doubt, left some permanent emotional scars on her mind:

What she remembered most was the mother kneeling in prayer or the pacing, door slamming, locked bathroom, the mother rummaging through shoe boxes of papers, bills, addressed correspondence, documents, loose dollars hidden for occasions like this; the late-night calls, money sent for his return, screaming arguments long distance, bad connections, trouble at the border, more money sent, a sickness somewhere in between. Each call was connected by a longer silence, each request for money more painful. She remembered

every job was not enough wage, every uncertainty rested on one certainty:
 food. (13-14)

Images connected with Catholicism permeate Petra's life as mere repetitive acts without any questioning: "She rolled the beads of the rosary between her fingers, made the sign of the cross, stopped his promises from flooding into her head and her mouth desperate, desperate for air" (17). Even her hopes of a healthy relationship seem to follow the path of the beads of her crucifix: "But the beads rolled on, fast howling shrieks of sharp silver pins just inches away from her (19). What these simple and repetitive acts seem to obscure are "the cultural decrees and constraints that create unequal power relations between men and women of their society" (Phillipa Kafka 18). Petra's blind faith prevents her from understanding that "rules were made by mortal men and perpetuated by mortal women like herself, colluding with men" (24). Nonetheless, she seems to ponder on a different future for her daughter: "Estrella cradled a watermelon like a baby and this vision saddened her ... She wanted her children to stay innocent and honest, wanted them to be as content as when they first arrived somewhere; but she forced them to be older for their own safety. ... Petra watched her daughter growing right before her eyes." (*Under* 40).

In another passage, Petra overhears Estrella and Alejo talking, which makes her fear her daughter's budding sexuality: "Petra heard the shifting of bodies. Was Estrella squeezing against Alejo, as she was doing with Perfecto? Petra stared at the sheet. How blind could she have been? Hadn't she learned something in her thirty-five years? Is this what it was all about, healing Alejo so that he could take Estrella" (117)? Petra's unconditional love for Estrella reflects her inability to accept that her daughter is growing up.

At first, Petra's relationship with Perfecto follows a different path. However, as the narrative develops and Perfecto perceives that he is beginning to feel his age, he cannot stand the thought of working strenuously in the United States for good. In one of his daydreams, he reminisces about this "young woman and it thrilled him because this was the woman who he

had loved boldly in the canyon right under the cataract eyes of God” (79). Perfecto’s *machismo* rears its ugly head as the typical stereotype of a man who is only happy if he has a relationship with a young woman.

Meanwhile, Petra, stuck in her role as a mother, worries about caring for her children and unborn baby: “Petra knew she could never turn her back on the children” (96). Perfecto does not feel prepared for parenthood at his age. Nonetheless, his complete silence reveals his patriarchal attitude towards Petra as he entertains the thought of abandoning her and the family. Their relationship further deteriorates when Perfecto objects to driving Alejo to the clinic and the hospital. Eventually, he does consent, but he has already changed due to his disillusionment regarding his work in the United States and his inconsiderate feelings for Petra’s pregnancy. He seems to be torn between abandoning her or not: “He knew the ghosts were working in the dream world to tell him something, yet each night that he lay next to Petra, he prayed that the spirits would keep quiet and let him enjoy the tenderness of a woman who wore an aura of garlic as brilliant as the aura circling La Virgen” (100-101). Nonetheless, he keeps telling himself that “it was too late, too late. He was too old to support this family, and who did he think he was, and on Saturday, he dreamt of keys and the moon and that Petra was pregnant” (101).

In another passage, Petra shows signs of their relationship falling apart, although she does not acknowledge that patience is insufficient to repair it. She still has some hope of rekindling their relationship, but it soon brings her back to reality:

Love ... came and went. But it was loyalty that kept them on the tightrope together when it was gone, ... Hadn’t she learned that love would return if she were patient enough? Just keep your balance ... [and] wait. She felt Perfecto grab her hand ... then push it away, in a gesture that was ... just definite. (118)

Petra just wants some affection from Perfecto to live together as a family. However, deep down, she believes in what Phillipa Kafka states: “Women are burdened forever with the

complete responsibility for their family. This is entirely a role indoctrinated into women for many centuries in most cultures globally, not only in Latino culture” (50).

Petra’s only escape is to cling to religion until Alejo’s mistreatment at the nurse’s clinic, when her faith begins to shake. It is no wonder that the symbolic passage of the fall of the statue of *Jesucristo* comes as a bitter blow to her: “Her reflexes were no longer fast enough to catch a falling statue; she could almost see the head splitting away from the body before it even hit the wood planks of the floor. The head of *Jesucristo* broke from His neck.” Petra’s first sign of consciousness looms large: “His eyes stared up at her like pools of dark ominous water, she felt a wave of anger swelling against her chest” (167). Nevertheless, Petra’s relentless passivity prevents her from acting, and she just “[replaces] the headless statue on the long tread of crocheted doily, [crosses] herself and [kisses] *Jesucristo*’s feet. She [holds] onto the head” (168). Petra is unable to transform “silence into (an)other Alphabet” (*Making Face* 178), in Anzaldúa’s words. Instead, she succumbs to the shackles on her feet, as Janice Mirikitani states: “The strongest prisons are built with walls of silence” (*Making Face* 199). Ultimately, Petra seems to adapt to her role as “a gatekeeper, a conservator of her culture’s model of housewife-woman” (Phillipa Kafka 102). Her submission to the beliefs and regulations of a patriarchal society prevents her from understanding, in Vélez words, that “naming the problem is the first step to its solution” (qtd. in Phillipa Kafka 53).

In contrast to Petra, Estrella chooses an alternative space to cope with her identity away from a hostile environment dominated by inequitable power relations, oppression, and discrimination: the barn. It takes on a broader religious sense for her. Religion originates in Latin, *religionem*, and conveys the senses of “respect for what is sacred, ... conscientiousness, sense of right, ... a faith, ... worship, ... holiness.” Moreover, it hints at the Latin word *relegere* or “go through again in reading or in thought” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). This concept conveys a sense of awareness with analysis permeating it. I want to demonstrate how Estrella’s

choice of a space, in which she does not follow an orthodox view of religion like her mother, differentiates her and how she copes better with her identity issues and will search for a life full of potential.

Right at the beginning of the narrative, Viramontes suggests the importance of the barn as a numinous space for Estrella: “Had they been heading for the barn all along? The barn had burst through a clearing of trees and the crate reminded her of the full moon” (3). The reference to the barn and its resemblance to the moon reflects the symbolism of the latter and its connection with the feminine principle: “the physiological cycle of woman” (Cirlot 214). Moreover, the moon also evokes alchemy, in which “the moon represents the volatile (or mutable) and feminine principle, and also multiplicity because of the fragmentary nature of its phases” (Cirlot 216). In this sense, the barn as an alternative space enables Estrella to develop new perceptions of reality and contributes to changing her life.

Estrella is enthralled by the barn: “[she] looked at the barn way back to the side of the bungalow. She couldn’t wait until morning to investigate and began running again. ... Estrella came upon the barn first” (9). However, it is also a space that Perfecto forbids her to enter: “The boys ran to the barn to hear him scold Estrella. —Are you blind? Can’t you see the walls are ready to collapse? You could’ve hurt the girls” (15). The barn draws her attention as it looks like “a cathedral of a building” (9), albeit not in an orthodox way, as was demonstrated at the end of the narrative. Estrella’s curiosity encourages her to explore it: “The barn seemed so strangely vacant; the absence clung heavy and the wind whistled between the planks. She noticed a chain suspended from the ceiling. Thick-linked, long and rusty, it swayed like a pendulum, as if someone had just touched it and ran off” (10). It is no wonder that Estrella has chosen it as her space, inasmuch as the rooms of the bungalow she and her family inhabit were divided by sheets with no privacy whatsoever.

The figure of the barn assumes different meanings but is always connected with the possibility of the new arising. Abigail Manzella highlights the various dimensions of the barn as this element, almost like “a living entity.” It conjures up the Christian tradition as it is “the place of Jesus’ birth.” As far as agriculture is concerned, Manzella associates barns with “the storehouses for food and animals” and “fertility” (182). In Aztec symbology, the barn can be compared to the “cave-like spaces of worship and the symbolic cave space of rebirth. In the novel, it is also an internal space for reflection and a sanctuary” (182). Moreover, Manzella suggests that the barn conveys the sense of “a womb-space tying the *Nepantla* idea of rebirth to the pre-Conquest time of Coatlicue” (183).

Little by little, the barn takes on outstanding importance in Estrella’s life. It becomes the space she craves for respite after a strenuous day working in the fields: “She closed her eyes and pulled in the memory of the cool barn, its hard-packed clay floor where she had gathered straw to sit, her knees to her chin. The swallows ticked their claws against the slope of the roof, the breeze wheezing between the planks like wind blowing over the mouth of a crater” (*Under* 53-54). The barn is more than a space for privacy. It is where Estrella can connect with her inner strength and feed her soul to fight against oppression. Moreover, the barn’s silence differs from the one of the oppressive hard-working days in the fields. Estrella longs for it to organize her thoughts and nourish her hopes and dreams of a fairer existence.

In another relevant passage, Perfecto talks Estrella into tearing down the barn as they would need extra money for gasoline. His secret wishes to abandon Estrella’s family hover in the air: “The salvaging of the barn would bring in some good money. At least he could purchase a new battery and have enough left over to leave them some” (*Under* 102).

Manzella highlights Estrella’s description of the barn as “a living entity” (182) that would suffer severely in its very body as it would be torn down:

She looked up at the barn as she had done when they first arrived, and tried to imagine herself with the ball of a hammer, pulling the resistant long rusted nails out of the woodsheet walls. The nails would screech and the wood would moan and she would pull the veins out and the woodsheet wall would collapse like a toothless mouth. Nothing would be left except a hole in the baked dirt so wide it would make one wonder how anything could be so empty. (*Under the Feet of Jesus* 74-75)

Estrella's first kiss symbolizes one stage of her consciousness-raising regarding one aspect of her identity: her sexuality. Their kiss opens her eyes to experience an area that has been kept from her like the teachers used to do at school by not providing her with knowledge. As gatekeepers educated in a patriarchal society, her mother and Perfecto prevented her from expressing her sexuality. Estrella's first kiss, in this sense, represents the appropriation of her body through the experience of sexual pleasure:

She did not resist, unaware of where he was taking her or how. ... His mouth pressed against the center of her palm and his lips, ... Her fingers closed on his chin gently like the tentacles of a sea anemone. He then pressed his cheek against the nakedness of her palm and his bristles tickled and she smiled in her darkness, until Alejo kissed her again, but this time longer, damp and pleadingly and still. Her oiled handprint, the shape of her fingers, imprinted onto his face. And that was all he had to do. (88-89)

Furthermore, the barn functions as a space for Estrella to express her joy after she and Alejo first kiss since she has no friend with whom she can share her experiences. She runs straight to the barn in a flush of excitement to relive that moment spiritually. The images in the barn underscore her delight due to the discovery of her sexuality: "the musk hot scent of manure," "beams of sunlight," "the flow of sun," "the laser heat slowly penetrate her palms he had kissed," "the blood of her body, a brilliant reddish pink rose," "the safety pins on the cuffs

of her sleeves glimmered like diamonds” (89-90). All these images evoke sensual impressions and symbols that express Estrella’s joy and pleasure.

Estrella’s discovery of sexuality connects her with the initial image of the moon as her femininity blossoms. Unsurprisingly, she feels strong enough to walk to the “center of the barn” (90) as a representation of her newly discovered world. Her entrance into the barn symbolizes this personal empowerment on the grounds of her achieved a sense of belonging: “Everything else belonged: the stalls, the thick scent of damp hay, the straw spread on the flattened earth, the rusted pitchfork leaning against the deep grooves of weathered sheet wood, everything except the chain” (90). She moves around consciously and becomes even more inquisitive as a sign of her thirst for further knowledge and experience inside the barn. Her questions arouse her curiosity as she wants to comprehend every part of the barn with her senses:

Why was the chain there? Was it part of a grain shaft of some kind? She noticed a trapdoor, squared by the sunlight near where the chain hooked the ceiling. She took hold of its end, yanked it like a bell ringer, lightly at first to test it, then jerked it with all her muscle, then jumped out of the way in case the chain was not hooked securely. (90)

Another relevant passage to Estrella’s empowerment is when she confronts the nurse’s indifference to Alejo and her family in the clinic. She expressed her disbelief in conventional religion with a deep sigh: “If only God could help” (147). Two other images are very significant in expressing Estrella’s lack of faith in religion: “Alejo’s body resisted, and she did not want to think what she was thinking now: God was mean and did not care and she was alone to fend for herself” (139) and “the rosary dangled from the rearview mirror” (151) of Perfecto’s vehicle.

The iconic tar pits, about which Alejo once told Estrella, made her realize that “the nurse owed them as much as they owed her” (148). The act of slamming the crowbar down on the nurse’s desk meant that there was no way for the nurse to hear them unless Estrella resorted to violence. Due to her oppression and marginalization, Estrella’s extreme act contributes to her

consciousness-raising and empowerment in a moment of total contrast between the submissively blind Estrella and the illuminated Estrella by the beams of light of her consciousness: “She did not feel like herself holding the money. She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money” (150).

In the final passage, the barn stands for Estrella’s pinnacle of transformation, in which a strong sense of community emerges. At this moment, all elements (air, fire, earth, and water) combine to give her strength. It is her moment of a new consciousness, or the *mestiza* consciousness, which Gloria Anzaldúa stresses:

La mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to? (*Borderlands* 100)

As a bicultural girl/woman, Estrella is in this state of in-betweenness. She has characteristics of her parents' native culture of Mexico and her native culture of the United States. Once she lives in another culture, she gets “multiple, often opposing messages” (Anzaldúa 100). Estrella, as this *mestiza*, has elements of the oppressor’s culture (the United States) and the oppressed one (Mexico). Most importantly, Anzaldúa underscores that “at some point, on [Estrella’s] way to a new consciousness, [she] will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that [she is] on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes” (100-101). Estrella is the new *mestiza*, by adopting two contradictory elements in her life, her “self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness – a *mestiza* consciousness” (101-102). By gaining *la mestiza* consciousness, she becomes aware of her and

the farmworkers' exploitation, and Estrella's worldview broadens. Only through this *mestiza* consciousness Estrella can bring about:

A conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. . . . she strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. (Anzaldúa 104)

Only through this act of deconstructing to construct the new can Estrella have an expanded *mestiza* consciousness to change not only her life but of those oppressed farmworkers as well.

The final passage of *Under the Feet of Jesus* depicts an empowered Estrella, ready to explore the sacred space of the barn as a sign of her rite of passage from an innocent and exploited girl to a conscious woman. Entering the barn is part of this ritual, which neither her mother nor Perfecto can prevent her from doing. As she enters it, she is unafraid of the darkness. The combination of darkness and light, two opposing forces, does not prevent her from exploring the barn and its chain. The latter gains a more positive sense: meticulous care in her exploration and not shackles on her feet. Again, the image of the two Estrellas gains prominence when she says "okay" to her other self to demonstrate her resilience to hoister herself up and confirm her confidence in herself. The chain is not an obstacle; quite the opposite, it gives "her added support" (173) in her endeavor to reach the barn ceiling. The more she reached the higher places, the more she "stood bathed in a flood of gray light. The light broke through" (175). This light also conveys the sense of Estrella's blossoming consciousness-raising in her spiritual experience in the barn. Estrella feels that she relates to herself and can connect with the oppressed people of her community. Her unshakeable faith in herself leaves her "as immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she

believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed” (176). Due to her mestiza consciousness, Estrella's empowerment is the foresight for a broader change: social justice.

2.6 Literacy: The ‘House of Words’ as a Tool against Oppression

The achievement of literacy is the most significant milestone in Estrella’s life. Her transition from ignorance to literacy leads to her consciousness-raising. Estrella’s development as a person provides her with more than individual progress. Through her “expanded literacy” (175), to quote Paula Moya’s words, she develops a sense of community based on her critical view of the world. Estrella's empowerment in this thesis regards her awareness of her identity as a destitute *mestiza* 13-year-old girl of Mexican descent. She goes through a hard life as a farmworker in the fields of California. Her maturity process involves the transcendence of this life of marginalization and discrimination in search of her achievement that will lead to a more complex sense of community. Therefore, my hypothesis in this thesis is that Estrella’s literacy paves the way for her to develop consciousness in most spheres of her life. I will describe how Estrella’s gradual literacy process in the novel contributes to her empowerment.

Moved by her intense curiosity, inspiring creativity, and insatiable thirst for knowledge, Estrella follows a different path for literacy since most of her teachers at the schools she attended were far more concerned with hygiene than with her learning. Her literacy development entails being in contact with her stepfather's tools, her mother's special and loving care and support, her relationship with the 15-year-old boy Alejo, and, most importantly, her sensitivity to perceive the world. It is no wonder that Estrella is, first and foremost, self-taught through reading and intense curiosity. Estrella’s trajectory in *Under the Feet of Jesus* demonstrates how the power of her self-education is liberating insofar as she first learns to read

her world and, consequently, reads the words to better understand her role as a 13-year-old girl native of the United States with Mexican descent.

The first images in the narrative delineate how clouds dominate the site in which Estrella and her family will live: “They were seven altogether – their belongings weighed down an old Chevy Capri station wagon, the clouds above them ready to burst like cotton plants” and “sunlight weaved in and out of the clouds” (3). Right at the beginning of the narrative, the most significant sentence, “the silence and the barn and the clouds meant many things” (4), creates the conditions for our understanding of how silence and clouds hint at the blindness that involves lack of knowledge and unconsciousness of the world. On the other hand, Viramontes’s use of the image of the clouds bursting like cotton plants puts forward the idea of the possibility of the new arising from this veiled world. *Under the Feet of Jesus* proposes a non-traditional view of literacy for Estrella to develop her consciousness of the world she inhabits.

One of the first symbols in the novel that will have several meanings depending on the context is the barn, which I have examined in the last section. The barn is like a character in the novel. For instance, as soon as Petra, her family, and Perfecto arrive in the bungalow, the barn lures Estrella, but she gets a scolding from Perfecto, who prohibits her from entering it. Keeping the same tone, he admonished her for not helping her mother instead. In this passage, Estrella is dismayed by words. As observed in other passages in the narrative, words provoke specific reactions in Estrella, inasmuch as they are some of the factors of her literacy. Words are not mere symbols on a book or magazine page. They are part of a broader universe and only make sense if they relate to Estrella's life. So, her initial astonishment discloses some pure expression of her ignorance. Owing to this, she did not have any questions, just instinctive reactions: “She flipped a few strands over her ear and stared at him and bit her lower lip. Finally, her cheeks as red as hot embers, Estrella stomped away” (15). The same reaction occurs in another passage when Alejo keeps asking Estrella many questions, and she feels intimidated and does not bother

to reply. Even the idiom “bite the lip,” which means “to prevent yourself from showing your reaction to something by speaking/laughing,” does not mitigate Estrella’s reactions on both occasions.

One passage in *Under the Feet of Jesus* reveals how Estrella can extract music from the empty box of Quaker Oats. Estrella’s creativity comes to the fore when they have nothing to eat in their cabinet. The box of Quaker Oats turns into a toy to cheer her twin sisters. Even when she tries to extract some music from her new “toy,” it is empty. However, this emptiness contrasts with Estrella headlocking “the Quaker man’s paperboard head like a hollow drum” (19). She slaps the “round puffy man’s double chins, beat his wavy long hair the silky color of creamy hot oats” (19). Estrella dances “like a *loca* around the room” (19). What strikes in this passage is Estrella’s ability to build music out of the emphatic nothingness of the pervading objects in the room and Estrella’s attempt to feed the children with noise. This innocuous event stresses that Estrella can create some fun with elements of her world by “dancing loca with the full of empty Quaker man” (20). Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo point out that “reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected” (*Literacy* 20). This passage shows that Estrella’s appropriation of her world is crucial for learning to read.

Estrella’s first contact with her stepfather Perfecto’s red tool chest brings back the image of her ignorance since she is dominated by anger due to his role as a substitute for her father. Interestingly, the tool chest, “like a suitcase near the door” (24), represents her mother’s relationship with a stranger who is not her father. Due to her intense irritation, Estrella sees the tools as “jumbled steel inside the box, the iron bars and things with handles, the funny-shaped objects, seemed as confusing and foreign as the alphabet she could not decipher” (24). Hence, her blindness prevents her from viewing the tools as objects that have some proper function.

Nonetheless, I should underline that there is some sign of Estrella's incipient wish not to remain in ignorance, and the subsequent passage uncovers how she "hated when things were kept from her" (24).

Estrella's reminiscences about the schools she attended corroborate how her teachers never gave her "the information she wanted" (24). Despite Estrella's curiosity and wish to learn, her teachers showed more concern for her hygiene. They also did not allow her to "take picture books outside of the classroom" (30-31). Instead, they resorted to sarcastic remarks to show their prejudice against immigrants: "They said good luck to her when the pisca was over, reserving the desks in the back of the classroom for the next batch of migrant children" (25).

Memory played a relevant role in Estrella's understanding of how her teachers mistreated her at school. One of her teachers, Mrs. Horn, uses words to hurt her bitterly: "How come her mama never gave her a bath" (25). Although hurtful, these words made her become aware for the first time that "words could become as excruciating as rusted nails piercing the heels of her bare feet" (25). Estrella's reading of her reality contributes to her comprehension of how society in the United States views immigrants as "dirty." Most importantly, Estrella's reading in these examples reinforces the idea of the schools as sites of discrimination for immigrants, instead of a place that would provide "a language of hope and transformation for those struggling in the present for a better future" (Giroux, *Introduction: Literacy and the Pedagogy of Political Empowerment* 4).

Despite all these adversities, it was her stepfather Perfecto, whose name was used by everyone to mean "a job well done" (25), who helped Estrella to enter the world of "expanded literacy," to quote Paula Moya's words: "that figures 'reading' as a skill involving a human agent's total engagement with the world" (175). Perfecto assumes the role of a conscientious teacher who introduces Estrella to this broadened universe of his tools. He asks her to catch

each one of them and explains their use. Watching each of the tools and what they are for make Estrella aware of the importance of learning to read:

Perfecto Flores taught her the names that went with the tools: a claw hammer, he said with authority, miming its function; screwdrivers, see, holding up various heads and pointing to them; crescent wrenches, looped pliers like scissors for cutting chicken or barbed wire; old wood saw, new hacksaw, a sledgehammer, pry bar, chisel, axe, names that gave meaning to the tools. Tools to build, bury, tear down, rearrange and repair, a box of reasons his hands took pride in. She lifted the pry bar in her hand, felt the coolness of iron and power of function, weighed the significance it awarded her, and soon she came to understand how essential it was to know these things. That was when she began to read. (26)

Outside of an institutionalized educational site, Perfecto adopts one of the most essential strategies to bring Estrella to the literacy world. Both have a dialogical relationship in this process. As Paulo Freire states,

Every human being, no matter how "ignorant" or submerged in the "culture of silence" he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. Provided with the proper tools for such encounter, the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it. In this process, the old, paternalistic teacher-student relationship is overcome. A peasant can facilitate this process for a neighbor more effectively than a "teacher" brought in from outside. "People educate each other through the mediation of the world." (*Pedagogy* 32)

Perfecto's ability to explain clearly brings Estrella in close contact with her world. No wonder it is the moment "when she began to read" (26). It is through their dialogical relationship

in which both receive each other that it is possible for learning to occur. It creates the conditions for Estrella's reception of Perfecto's teaching about using his tools. Although not mentioned in the narrative, Estrella has understood the similarity between Perfecto's tools and the "confusing and foreign ... alphabet she could not decipher" (*Under the Feet of Jesus* 24).

Similarly, Paulo Freire reports his personal experience and underscores that "the texts, the words, the letters of [the] context were incarnated in a series of things, objects, and signs. In perceiving these I experienced myself, and the more I experienced myself, the more my perceptual capacity increased. I learned to understand things, objects, and signs through using them in relationship to [my family] (*Literacy* 20). The most relevant word here is "experienced," since learning for Estrella means more than just joining words. Learning to read entails connecting with her world through her experiences and senses to decode the signs of the world around her.

Despite Perfecto's insistence on telling Estrella not to enter the barn, she helped him by dividing the bungalow's "rooms" with sheets. Estrella paid much attention to how he used each of his tools and how he thought about every necessary task undertaken: "plugged a hole the size of a hand where the field mice came and went" (26), "the hammering was rhythmic, slow," "he then placed a bucket in the corner for the weak bladders of the twins who refused to go outdoors in the night" (27). What grabbed her attention was how Perfecto "pushed his bifocals up to inspect his repair" (27). His acts show her how he carries out his tasks with meticulous care and, thus, he becomes a positive influence on her, unlike Estrella's ex-teachers.

Since Estrella could not afford books or borrow any from the schools she attended, her initial readings consisted mainly of the farmworker Maxine's collection of magazines, the catechism chapbook, "the newspapers thrown in trash cans at filling stations, or oatmeal instructions" (31) and billboard signs whose advertisements announced products that she could not purchase or even needed. The quality of these readings reflects her need for more critical

consciousness to select books and other reading materials. Indeed, Estrella had no choice but to read what was available to her. However, on one occasion, when Estrella and the other farmworkers were resting in the shade after lunch, the drivers, as soon as the Foreman left, handed out “white leaflets with black eagles on them” (84). As I have already mentioned, the black eagle was the symbol of the Union Farm Workers, founded by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. Estrella kept one of the leaflets for later reading. Her act is significant as it shows that she is interested in its content. Viramontes puts forward that it is some indication of Estrella’s incipient interest regarding political consciousness in a broader sense; that is, it creates conditions for Estrella’s view of her community.

In another passage, one of Estrella’s youngest brothers, Ricky, has a fever, and she notices he is not wearing a hat to protect him against the sun. She knows it would be in vain to try and walk back home when the sun is blazing down. Ironically, Estrella tells him to “*sit until [he hears] the trucks honking, go that way*” (53) since they are before the immensity of “the flatbeds of grapes she had lined carefully, sheet after sheet of grapes down as far as she could see” (53). Through this distressing experience in the fields, Estrella concludes: “Morning, noon, or night, four or fourteen or forty it was all the same. She stepped forward, her body never knowing how tired it was until she moved once again” (53). Therefore, Estrella becomes more conscious of her hard life in the fields and reminisces about the “cool barn” as a sign of her need for spiritual respite. In Freire’s words, Estrella begins to understand the harsh reality that she and her community of farmworkers face:

[This] consciousness is generated through the social practice in which we participate. But it also has an individual dimension. That is, my comprehension of the world, my dreams of the world, my judgment of the world—all of these are part of my individual practice; all speak of my presence in the world. I need all of this to begin to understand myself. But it is not sufficient to explicate my action. In the final analysis, consciousness is

socially bred. In this sense, I think my subjectivity is important. But I cannot separate my subjectivity from its social objectivity. (*Literacy* 32)

Estrella's fear becomes evident when she is on a baseball playing field. Despite being born in the United States, she acts like an illegal immigrant being persecuted by the border patrol. This passage is quite revealing in some of its details, with emphasis on one of the players' "bleached white uniform," "the sheets of high-powered lights beamed on the playing field like headlights of cars, blinding her," "sharp white lights burned her eyes" (58-59). These descriptions contrast white and light with Estrella's "complexion brown like wheat bread crust" (100). Estrella falls into despair and leaves the place in a hurry; fearing being caught by *La Migra*. As soon as she arrives home, she goes straight to Perfecto's tool chest and grabs the pry bar, which will have a relevant use when the family is at the nurse's clinic. Indeed, Estrella has internalized the oppressor's voice, and she still has not been able to deal with her dread, one of the main obstacles to her consciousness, owing to its power to limit her worldview. Fear paralyzes her and prevents her from grasping reality as it is.

In another passage, after *Alejo* has asked Estrella too many questions about her origins, she feels awkward and bites her lip, which is a sign of her anger. *Alejo* apologizes for his behavior, and Estrella cannot express how good she feels about being close to him. All Estrella could ever do was grab the bottle, from which both drank the water and she "dunked her top lip on the spout and placed her thumb near her lip and grooved a breath into the hollow and it sounded full of longing" (71). That was her way of expressing how good she felt because "she ... didn't know how to build the house of words she could invite him into. ... build rooms as big as barns" (70). Estrella is aware of her difficulty describing her feelings for *Alejo* in this passage. It shows that she is still inexperienced as far as a relationship is concerned. This trope of building "the house of words" shows Estrella's recognition of her limitation in the scope of dialogue. However, her humility is a step to advance in her constant search for broadening her worldview. As Freire points out, "Dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the

world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 90). Hence, it is unsurprising that Alejo became one of Estrella's most significant influences.

One of the most relevant passages in the novel is when Alejo, after having been contaminated with pesticides, speaks to Estrella about the origins of oil. He tells her about the tar pits:

Imagine bones at the bottom of the sea ... The bones lay in the seabed for millions of years. That’s how it was. Makes sense don’t it, bones becoming tar oil? ... Once, when I picked peaches, I heard screams. It reminded me of the animals stuck in the tar pits. ... Only one ... in the La Brea tar pits, they found some human bones. A young girl. (87-88)

Alejo’s words stick in Estrella’s mind, and she will remember them when they are at the nurse’s clinic. In a fit of anger, Estrella demands that the nurse give them the money paid for the consultation back, inasmuch as she becomes aware of the nurse's exploitation for her inaccurate diagnosis of Alejo's illness. Estrella comprehends that the comforts of the middle-class nurse are a result of her family's exploitation, which contributes to their invisibility as farmworkers in the United States. Estrella’s emphasis on the words “energy money,” “energy matter,” and “bones” represents the frames of Estrella and her family’s bodies that are exploited for the well-being of the middle and upper classes in the United States. Estrella perceives that they are a mere means to an end; that is, the farmworkers’ degrading working conditions and poor wages provide the middle and upper classes with wealth and privilege.

Estrella’s consciousness of her dirty appearance compared to the nurse’s “fresh coat of red lipstick, and the thick scent of carnation perfume” (137) reveals their disparities in terms of social class. Estrella had helped Perfecto with the car stuck in the mud, and “[her] dirty face, fingernails lined with mud, her tennis shoes soiled, brown smears like coffee stains on her dress

where she had cleaned her hands” (137). Their contrast evinces Estrella’s inferiority complex as she becomes aware that “some people never seemed to perspire while others like herself sweated gallons” (137). What irks Estrella most is the nurse’s ironic remark, “Some people have all the luck” (137), and her constant gaze at her Timex wristwatch, symbolizing her social status.

Everything about the nurse irritates Estrella, even her pronunciation of Alejo’s name as “Alex-hoes” (138), a cruel irony to refer to someone who is a poor farmworker. The nurse’s attitude of indifference towards them does not seem to end. She begs Estrella to tell Alejo to stand on the scale. Estrella’s reply to the nurse could not be more precise for the situation: “He’s the spelling bee champ of Hidalgo County. He understands English” (139). The Hidalgo County is a blatant reference to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that sealed the agreement between Mexico and the United States at the end of the war in 1848, in which the former ceded one-third of its territory to the latter.

Furthermore, the nurse’s fake appearance, displayed in each detail, puts forward her lack of skills as a professional, inasmuch as she has not made a proper diagnosis of Alejo’s disease. The whole family is appalled by how much the nurse charged them for her “services.” Perfecto and Estrella insist on offering their services in exchange for the money they would have to pay for the consultation. Nonetheless, the nurse is reluctant and “stubborn.” Estrella loses her patience with the nurse as she remembers Alejo’s words about the tar pits.

The whole passage sets Estrella’s teeth on edge. She leaves the clinic, goes straight to Perfecto’s vehicle, grabs the crowbar, returns, and demands their money back. The nurse pretends not to understand what she hears. Estrella slams “the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse’s children, sending the pencils flying to the floor, and breaking the porcelain cat with a nurse’s cap into pieces. The nurse dropped her purse, shielded her face with her hands” (149). This passage reveals Estrella’s transformation from an obedient

and superstitious girl into a powerful woman: “They make you that way, she sighed with resignation. She tried to understand what happened herself. You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick up a crowbar and break the pictures of their children, and all of a sudden they listen real fast” (151). Estrella comprehends that there is no other way for the nurse to listen to them. The use of violence in this scene is Estrella's way of venting outrage because of discrimination on the nurse's part. In a broader sense, Estrella's act represents her protest against how she, her family, and her community of farmworkers were disdained for their class and race by people like the nurse. Unlike Estrella, Alejo, Petra, and Perfecto are afraid of the nurse reporting them to the police. Their reaction underscores their fear of *la Migra* and discloses how they are unaware of discrimination as a form of violence against people. In their minds, Estrella acted against the law and may be punished.

Perfecto drives Alejo to the Corazón Community Hospital, and Estrella thanks him for that before leaving Alejo there. Estrella's act makes Perfecto ponder over how “he had given this country his all, and in this land that used his bones for kindling, in this land that never once in the thirty years he lived and worked, never once said thank you, this young woman ... had said the words with such honest gratitude, he was struck by how deeply these words touched him” (155). As soon as Estrella leaves Alejo at the hospital, she returns, and as her twin sisters see her, there is a passage with some touch of humor as if suggesting that Estrella has superpowers:

Lifted her arms, her palms up and then spread them wide and the twins watched as she stepped forward and the glass doors split open before her as if obeying her command. Perla turned to Cookie and Cookie turned to Perla. Estrella parted the doors like a sea of glass and walked through and the glass shut behind her and they couldn't for a minute believe what they saw. (156)

Estrella's twin sisters were proud of her, feeling “amazed” that Estrella “had the magic and power in her hands to split glass in two” (156).

Estrella's literacy process is far from straightforward. She must deal with her initial blindness, fear, anger, indignation, and hopelessness. Only when she begins to be aware of the importance of reading through Perfecto's help does her "conscientization" blossom. Dialogical practice is also indispensable in this process of consciousness-raising. Estrella perceives that she needs to count on the people to whom she is close: Perfecto, her mother, Alejo, and the other farmworkers.

Moreover, despite its hardships, she commits to her world: the harsh reality of a farmworker, the innocence regarding love and the development of her sexuality, the understanding of being exploited, prejudice, discrimination, and violence to make herself heard. Despite all these difficulties, Estrella is determined to commit to her cause as a conscious woman ready to fight for her space in the world and social justice. Her critical thinking does not turn her into a bitter person; conversely, every time she enters the barn, it provides her with spirituality through being in contact with herself. It is the only site that gives her fresh hope to tackle the world's complexities with its intrinsic power relations. As is suggested in Estrella's final entry into the barn, she will rise like a new woman. However, her journey will not be uncomplicated for a 13/14-year-old girl on the brink of womanhood.

The final passage of *Under the Feet of Jesus* is Estrella's epiphany in the barn. As I mentioned in the last section, Estrella enters the barn, and her determination shows an empowered woman ready to take on a new role in her life. The barn functions more like a symbol of her spirituality with its many components that convey the consequences of her literacy. However, Viramontes does not give us clues as far as gender issues are concerned. The only positive point regards Estrella's sexuality. Not much is suggested regarding women's disempowerment in terms of gender. There is the question of women's double shift after a hard-working day in the fields or even women's roles as taking care of children: "She waved Estrella in and Estrella bundled up Perla and carried her into the bungalow while Perfecto carried

Arnulfo because Ricky was too heavy for him now, and the mother carried Ricky, heavy or not” (160). Moreover, one is left wondering about the fact that probably her two twin sisters, Perla and Cuca, like Estrella, will have to work in the fields.

Since Estrella’s life has been dominated by her constant involvement with her whole family, she has absorbed traditional and religious values that permeate women’s social roles. One is also led to think about Estrella’s conceptions of woman, mainly if one considers her interest in Maxine's glossy magazine *Millie the Model*, which features beauty standards for middle- and upper-class women in the United States. In this sense, we do not know whether Estrella’s critical consciousness will contribute to her unlearning the mainstream concepts and norms of womanhood to become free.

CHAPTER THREE: *THE MOTHS AND OTHER STORIES*

3.1 “The Moths”: *With the Sacredness of a Priest*

In the short story "The Moths," Viramontes depicts the predicament of her nameless 14-year-old narrator in a house where she suffers oppression from her authoritarian father and her gatekeeper sisters, Teresa and Marisela. The narrator deviates from the standard expected from women. She “wasn’t even pretty or nice like [her] older sisters,” and she “couldn’t do the girl things they could do. [Her] hands were too big to handle the fineries of crocheting or embroidery” (27). Her sisters routinely bullied the narrator: “My sisters laughed and called me bull hands with their cute waterlike voices” (27). The narrator’s mother is the only person in the house who helps the narrator avoid all the suffering at home by sending her over to her grandmother’s house to care for her, whom the narrator affectionately calls “Abuelita.” Amá, the narrator’s mother, would also be tormented by her chauvinist husband “for her lousy ways of bringing up daughters, being disrespectful and unbelieving” (29). The narrator resorts to violence to defend herself against her sisters’ constant bully: “So I began keeping a piece of jagged brick in my sock to bash my sisters or anyone who called me bull hands,” “I hit Teresa on the forehead,” and “I would deliver one last direct shot on Marisela’s arm and jump out of our house” (27-28).

Viramontes presents us with an alternative to this patriarchal family in which the father reigns supreme in the house and still has his older daughters’ support. The narrator’s transition from girlhood to womanhood entails her:

Agreeing to care for her dying grandmother, by attending to the body immediately after her grandmother’s death, and by *realizing* – both in the sense of ‘comprehending’ and in the sense of ‘bringing to fruition’ – the

importance of certain values and practices normally associated with the activity of mothering. (Moya, *The Social Imperative* 82)

The short story takes place in four settings: the narrator's house, a church, Jay's market, and Abuelita's house (Colón 3). Apart from the latter one, the narrator does not feel at ease in either of the three. At the house, the narrator must stand her sisters' constant harassment; her father "would pound his hands on the table, rocking the sugar dish or spilling a cup of coffee and scream that if I didn't go to Mass every Sunday to save my goddam sinning soul then I had no reason to go out of the house, period. Punto final" (29). He even resorted to violence against the narrator: "he would grab my arm and dig his nails into me to make sure I understood the importance of catechism. Did he make himself clear" (29)? To add insult to injury, the narrator's sisters "would pull [her] aside and tell [her] if [she] didn't get to Mass right this minute, they were all going to kick the holy shit out of [her]" (29). The narrator's mother, Amá, does not know how to free herself from the patriarchal domain of her husband.

On her way to Abuelita's house, the narrator goes to a chapel whose denomination she never knew: "I went in just the same to search for candles," and "sat down on one of the pews" (29). The narrator looks at the vastness of the place and feels she does not connect with it due to its "frozen statues with blank eyes. I was alone. I knew why I had never returned" (29). In this sense, this passage discloses that traditional religion does not solve the narrator's problems. Conversely, as Saldivar-Hull states, "God is indeed dead for the unincorporated Chicanas of Viramontes's world, at best he is but an absentee landlord who allows his agents to deceive people into passivity" (133).

Jay's Market is also a setting that conveys the narrator's uneasiness. It is a place that usually "didn't have much of anything" (30) with its soft tomatoes and rusty cans of Campbell soup. The grocery store reminds us of the one Petra, in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, who would go to buy food, and none of the products were of good quality. The narrator also feels uncomfortable with the dirt of the place. That is why she would immediately pick up what she

needed and leave the market. Jay, the grocery store's proprietor, disrespects her: "At first Jay got mad because I thought I had forgotten the money. But it was there all the time, in my back pocket" (30). Paula Moya perceives prejudice in Jay's attitude toward the narrator: "It is hard for us to know whether the narrator is subject to this unmerited disrespect because of her age, her race, or her gender – or a combination of all three" (*The Social Imperative* 85). Moya also adds that "it is clear that Jay feels entitled to treat her poorly; he feels no compunction about taking out his aggression, resentment, and frustration – whatever their true source – on her" (85).

Only at Abuelita's house does the narrator feel free to be herself. The narrator's green fingers provide her "bull hands" with enjoyable activities at Abuelita's house. The neighborhood where Abuelita lives, Evergreen, is suggestive. Its meaning conveys the idea of something that retains freshness and interest. Moreover, evergreen encompasses the trees whose foliage remains green during all seasons. There, the narrator's hands give life to plants and herbs as she uses tools, like the character Perfecto in *Under the Feet of Jesus*: "I'd gladly go help Abuelita plant her wild lilies or jasmine or heliotrope or cilantro or hierbabuena in red Hills Brothers coffee cans" (28). Saldívar-Hull contends that "the earth under her fingernails comes from Abuela's garden, and with this oppositional spiritual act she signals that indigenous resistance is incompatible with the Catholic Church" (134).

Abuelita becomes the narrator's closest relative in whose house she can exercise her skills as a gardener and not follow an expected role of femininity, unlike her sisters. Abuelita's legacy to the narrator links her "to an indigenous culture no longer valued in an urban setting [that is] represented by images of the women planting herbs, flowers, and vegetables" (Saldívar-Hull 134). Most importantly, Abuelita passes on to the narrator "the appreciation of a heritage in which the earth itself is a source of spirituality as well as a counterhegemonic reclamation of a discarded indigenous culture" (134). The guidance that the narrator receives from her

grandmother has the power to transform her ‘bull hands’ into healing hands, “rubbing her caving body with alcohol and marihuana, rubbing her arms and legs, turning her face to the window so that she could watch the Bird of Paradise blooming or smell the scent of clove in the air” (“The Moths” 28).

Abuelita’s house is also a place where the narrator feels like she is being affectionately embraced and protected, and this is conveyed by how the plants twist and turn around the house:

Prickly chayotes that produced vines that twisted and wound all over her porch pillars, crawling to the roof, up and over the roof, and down the other side, making her small brick house look like it was cradled within the vines that grew pear-shaped squashed ready for the pick, ready to be steamed with onions and cheese and butter. The roots would burst out of the rusted coffee cans and search for a place to connect. I would then feed the seedlings with water. (“The Moths” 28)

In Paula Moya’s words, the grandmother’s house “is a woman-centered sanctuary in which the young girl participates in the making of an alternative sociality” (97). There, women’s daily chores “are transformed into sacred practices full of meaning.” It is a relationship of exchange between both women in which “the young girl nurtures her grandmother’s plants, and is nurtured in return by gaining a sense of worth, efficacy, and power” (*The Social Imperative* 94).

It is not just the house that makes the narrator feel free to be herself. Despite her illness, Abuelita is the only person who seems to understand the narrator’s oppression. Furthermore, Abuelita’s house is filled with rich smells of food and herbs that cause good sensations in the narrator. However, on one occasion, as the narrator prepares food, this brings back bad memories, probably from the oppressive environment of her house where her father and sisters would usually torment her. Preparing food transforms into a traumatic chore as she tries to get

rid of her feelings of guilt instilled by her father and sisters. In the end, the narrator's act functions to assuage her guilt and her inferiority complex due to her bull hands:

I peeled the skins off and put the flimsy, limp-looking green and yellow chiles in the molcajete and began to crush and crush and twist and crush the heart out of the tomato, the clove of garlic, the stupid chiles that made me cry, crushed them until they turned into liquid under my bull hand. With a wooden spoon, I scraped hard to destroy the guilt, and my tears were gone. (30)

Abuelita's perception of these feelings makes her draw the narrator's attention by touching her hand, and the latter would finally eat and feel "a fine Sunday breeze [entering] the kitchen and a rose petal calmly feathered down to the table" (30).

Spirituality through the role of the *curandera* gains prominence in the figure of Abuelita. The *curandera* is "a woman whose life is devoted to healing, curing, helping - again attributes commonly associated with the Virgin Mary," "possesses intuitive and cognitive skills, and her connection to and interrelation with the natural world is particularly relevant. She emerges as a powerful figure seen throughout Chicano writing" (Rebolledo 83). The importance of the *curandera* in Chicana Literature discloses her as "a woman who has control over her own life and destiny as well as that of others" (87-88). Moreover, she is a mix of healer and an attentive listener who:

Understands the cycles of creation, development, and destruction, thus unifying the past, present, and future. She incorporates intuition and rationality; she studies power and bends with it or harnesses it; she takes an active role in her environment. ... she listens carefully, thus understanding human as well as animal behavior. (88)

As a figure in Chicana writers' works, the *curandera* is a complex woman "who fulfills ... desires to seek justice against those perceived as more powerful" (88). In this last

sense, one can feel how it is crucial to Abuelita's sympathetic and nurturing reception of the narrator in her house so that her father and sisters would not harass her.

Abuelita is the one who pulled the narrator through “the rages of scarlet fever by placing, removing and replacing potato slices on the temples of [her] forehead” (27). The narrator, however, is skeptical about Abuelita’s power: “I even went so far as to doubt the power of Abuelita’s slices, the slices she said absorbed my fever” (“The Moths” 27). Abuelita is this mix of *curandera* and *bruja* with her “pasty gray eye beaming at [the narrator] and burning holes in [her] suspicions” (27). The narrator feels Abuelita’s constant gray eye on her: “You could see her gray eye beaming out the window, staring hard as if to remember everything” (28-29). However, Abuelita’s look was just a reflection of her eye condition and not any expression of anger or vengeance.

The narrator realizes that her Abuelita is dying when the sun is setting. Viramontes transforms her death into a sublime moment, marked by contrasts in which the idea of rebirth gains prominence. Paula Moya stresses that the verb tense in this passage is not a past tense “but rather transforms the present into a mythic temporality that is both timeless and prophetic. It does this through the use of a formulaic phrase that is repeated twice, each time with a slight difference: ‘There comes a time,’ and then, ‘There comes an illumination’ (*The Social Imperative* 88). It occurs exactly at the time of Abuelita’s death. Moya denominates this as “the time of the possible self,” “the temporal mode in which the dreams, hopes, and illusions of the narrator begin to be expressed” (88).

The paragraph is richly described with its images of transition “from one mood to another, one season to another, one color to another, day to night, life to death, light to dark, death to rebirth, defiance to resignation, natural to artificial light, closed to open” (Moya, *The Social Imperative* 88-89). This transition paves the way for the narrator’s transformation:

There comes a time when the sun is defiant. Just about the time when moods change, inevitable seasons of a day, transitions from one color to another, that hour or minute or second when the sun is finally defeated, finally sinks into the realization that it cannot with all its power to heal or burn, exist forever, there comes an illumination where the sun and earth meet, a final burst of burning red orange fury reminding us that although endings are inevitable, they are necessary for rebirths, and when that time came, just when I switched on the light in the kitchen to open Abuelita's can of soup, it was probably then that she died. ("The Moths" 31)

The final passage of the short story shows the narrator's numinous experience, empowering herself as she takes care of her deceased grandmother's body as if she were a priest. The "bleached white towels" (31) and water symbolize the act of purification. The narrator removes sheets and linen from her bed and towels Abuelita's face, shoulders, and breasts. Cirlot states that "immersion in water signifies a return to the preformal state, with a sense of death and annihilation on the one hand, but of rebirth and regeneration on the other, since immersion intensifies the life-force" (365). When the narrator finishes her ritual, the act of cleansing and empowerment is highlighted: "I washed my hands, turned on the tub faucets and watched the water pour into the tub with vitality and steam" ("The Moths" 31).

One of the most significant elements that stand out in "The Moths" is the presence of magical realism. The first passage is at the beginning of the short story when the narrator seems skeptical about Abuelita's powers to heal her fever. Abuelita shows her anger by saying, "You're still alive, aren't you" (27)? The narrator feels her hands begin "to fan out, grow like a liar's nose until they hung by [her] side like low weights" (27). Notwithstanding that, Abuelita's anger evaporates as she tenderly makes "a balm out of dried moth wings and Vicks and [rubs] her hands, shaping them back to size" (27).

In the final passage, when Abuelita passes away, the moths rise again: “Then the moths came. Small gray ones that came from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light, circling the single dull light bulb of the bathroom” (“The Moths” 32). Moths are said to be nocturnal, which connects them to Abuelita, Mama Luna (“mother moon”), as the feminine side. According to Saldívar-Hull, the moths in the short story represent a dual role of not submitting to the rules of patriarchy. Through their flight toward the light, they stand for the possibility of finding an alternative way of independent life:

Even after her death, the abuela warns her granddaughter of the dangers of submitting passively to incorporation; she urges her granddaughter to recognize the need to rip apart patriarchal versions of the real, of what constitutes necessity for women. While moths may have eaten the grandmother’s youth, her ability to retain a measure of independence in her old age and final illness allows the abuela to communicate alternate possibilities to her granddaughter. (137)

Magical realism in these two passages discloses Viramontes’s expression of “mystical folk images as harbingers of feminist messages.” It is her way of subverting “dominant versions of reality” and offering “hope for a new vision of family in this grandmother-to-granddaughter story” (Saldívar-Hull 137). Therefore, magical realism allows that “women, like subalterns generally, can be understood to act through magic because other routes may be closed to them. In addition, a female voice may be able to transmit the ineffable because of its marginal position within the discourses of reason and realism that have tended to mute that mystical sound” (Faris 178).

The narrator’s empowerment in the final passage is only possible because she “learns to garden and cook alongside her *abuela*,” so that she “learns to be a creative spiritual force, capable of transforming her inner and outer worlds” (Lopez 180). Interestingly, the narrator’s ritual of cleansing her grandmother’s body provides the former with the consciousness of the

“narrative arc of her grandmother’s life: its beginning (birthmark), middle (stretchmarks), and its gradual move toward an end (sporadic, vaginal hairs)” (186). In the end, the narrator's ritual and her act of crying represent the awareness of her grandmother's narrative through her body, but also it is the moment that her tears evoke her suffering. Lopez stresses that “the seemingly unending circles, indicated by the repetition in her expression of ‘circles and circles’ (Viramontes “Moths” 32), reflects the cyclical violence in which her own suffering is situated alongside that of her mother and grandmother” (189). Viramontes suggests that this relief and rebirth can only be reached through women’s bonds to overcome oppression in patriarchy. In a sense, I can compare Estrella's numinous experience at the end of *Under the Feet of Jesus* with the final scene of "The Moths" in that they undergo a transformation that entails not only themselves but involves more collective consciousness, more like a sense of community of oppression. In the first case, it is related to the farmworkers, whereas, in the latter example, it is a community of oppressed women.

3.2 “Growing”: TÚ ERES MUJER

In this short story, Viramontes depicts the predicament of a 14/15-year-old girl, Naomi, whose family consists of immigrants from a Latin American country, probably from Mexico. The story is far from a straightforward growing-up, quite the opposite, it evolves “into complex representations of ethnic social relations. It is ... a result of examining complex situations the young [narrator does] not understand – situations that often deal with societal rejections – that the [narrator begins] to understand what it means to be a woman, or what it means to be a Chicana” (Rebolledo 108). The story revolves around Naomi’s “struggle with a body in transition from childhood to adolescence” and she also “has to struggle with the cultural transition that her family must undergo in a new country” (Saldívar-Hull 142).

Naomi's father, like the one in "The Moths," is an authoritarian figure who forbids her to go out by herself due to puberty. She can only leave the house with her younger sister Lucía, who functions as a young gatekeeper. Despite her innocence, Lucía tells the father everything she and her sister Naomi have done when they go out. On one occasion, due to her "bad behavior," Naomi was grounded for "three months, twelve Saturday nights and two church bazaars" (36).

Naomi does not confront her father directly in the narrative. However, her father's attitude provokes her indignation against him and the values and norms that he defends. She even insists on telling her mother, "Amá, the United States is different. Here girls don't need chaperones. Parents trust their daughters" (35). Nonetheless, her mother, unable to deal with her own oppression, "as usual ... turned to the kitchen sink or the ice box, shrugged her shoulders and said: 'You have to ask your father' (35). Amá's words reveal her total submission to her husband's orders. Naomi, however, expresses her vehement opposition: "But, Amá, it's embarrassing. I'm too old for that. I am an adult" (35).

She cannot understand why her father does not trust her. Apá's presence is felt in his certainties and norms in which his exacerbated *machismo* resonates in Naomi's mind: "TÚ ERES MUJER, he thundered like a great voice above the heavens, and that was the end of any argument, any question, because he said those words not as a truth, but as a verdict, and she could almost see the clouds parting, the thunderbolts breaking the tranquility of her sex" (36). As Norma Alarcón states, "in his view her subjectivity has been decided *a priori* by what is perceived as the body of a woman" (148). Viramontes's critique of patriarchal rules that manifest in Naomi's father's words stresses how these Mexican values and norms are natural for men and there is no question about them. The fact that they are not living in their homeland anymore is insufficient for Apá's behavior. When he speaks in Spanish, TÚ ERES MUJER (instead of YOU ARE A WOMAN), it shows his authority and leaves no doubt about it. If he

had uttered those words in English, they would not assert his authority in the same way as in Spanish: “By switching codes to ‘mujer,’ he knows more precisely what his judgment of Naomi ought to signify. If he said ‘woman,’ he would be on precarious ground. He is not quite sure what it may mean in Anglo culture, a culture within which he may well feel that he has no authority” (Alarcón 148). In this sense, *Apá* reigns in the strict space of the home.

Unsurprisingly, both *Apá* and *Amá* have no names. They are presented in the narrative with their roles of husband/father and wife/mother, which each knows. Although not physically present, *Apá*’s words are concrete in the girl’s and the mother’s minds. His physical presence is unnecessary, insofar as the tone of his voice and the content of his phrases resonate in women’s minds as if defining their fields of action.

Naomi’s indignant behavior does not prevent her from showing some obedience to religious rules: “The idea of having to be watched by a young snot like Lucía was insulting to her maturity. She flicked her hair over her shoulder. ‘Goddammit,’ she murmured, making sure that the words were soft enough so that both God and Lucía could not hear them” (35). This banal scene demonstrates that Naomi has internalized oppression as a social and religious construction.

Naomi’s question, “So what’s wrong with being a *mujer*,” (36) leaves her baffled. She tries to take it out on her chaperone sister Lucía. However, deep down, she knows that her sister’s education also follows this idea of woman/*mujer* as being an inferior being who should submit to men and follow all the rules and norms imposed by a male-oriented society and, therefore, that her little sister is destined to face the same fate.

In another passage, Naomi and Lucía cross a street, and “a homely young man with a face full of acne honked at her tight purple pedal pushers” (36). In a male-dominated society, men feel they have the right to harass women to prove their masculinity. Nevertheless, Naomi snaps back to show her opposition to him: “GO TO HELL, goddamn you” (36)! The boy does

not seem to care about her and repeats the exact words from scripts that men use when they refer to women: “Don’t be mad, my little baby” and “You make me ache” (36).

Naomi’s budding sexuality makes her convince her sister Lucía to go on two rides on the Ferris wheel while she and a boy, Joe, kiss behind the gym. Nonetheless, her little sister vomited all she had eaten. Naomi was in trouble when they arrived home as Lucía told her father about the whole event. Again, he raises his voice, asking where Naomi was then. Lucía’s “I don’t know” means more grounding for Naomi: “She had just committed a major offense, and Joe would never wait until her prison sentence was completed” (37).

As the two sisters walk through the neighborhood to go to Jorge’s house, Apá’s friend, to read to him, they meet her friends playing stickball. Naomi is excited, but soon she becomes aware of her age: “My, my. It wasn’t more than a few years ago that she played baseball with Eloy and the rest of them. But she was in high school now, too old now, and it was unbecoming of her. She was an adult” (38). Naomi’s consciousness of her age contrasts with her further thoughts that “she enjoyed the abandonment with which they played. She knew that the only decision these kids made was what to play next, and for a moment she wished to return to those days” (38). This in-between phase of her life is like a question mark as regards the expected behavior at her age. After reprimanding herself, Naomi decides to join the children in the stickball game: “She was no longer concerned with her age, her menstruations, her breasts that bounced with every jump. All she wanted was an out at home plate. To hell with being benched” (41). Her act shows that, at least for a while, she does not succumb to some expected behavior of her age and enjoys her moment of freedom: “Naomi felt like a victor. She had helped once again. Delighted, she giggled, laughed, laughed harder, suppressed her laughter into chuckles, then laughed again” (41).

As soon as the stickball game is over, Naomi becomes aware again of her age, and is overwhelmed by a feeling of guilt and she just wondered:

Why things were always so complicated once you became older. Funny how the old want to be young and the young want to be old. She was guilty of that. Now that she was older, her obligations became heavier both at home and at school. There were too many expectations, and no one instructed her on how to fulfill them, and wasn't it crazy? (42)

She senses that her life has changed as she is not a child anymore; her body has also changed, and so have her responsibilities. Nonetheless, there is no one to help her understand these things. She feels at the mercy of expectations that she could not even live up to. There are no signs that Naomi will feel at one with herself. She is intrigued by how people began "treating her differently and wasn't it crazy? She could no longer be herself, and her father could no longer trust her because she was a woman" (42). At least, Naomi "has learned that 'woman' is different from 'mujer.' As a result, she attempts to assert her difference from what is expected of Mexican/Chicana girls by appealing to the Anglo code. Thus, Naomi notes that for the girls 'in the United States' experience is different" (Alarcón 148).

Being a woman in a patriarchal society means a heavy burden for Naomi because it is mainly related to the woman's body. Her father and the male world see the woman's body only through its sexual/maternal function: "As a result, Naomi feels increasingly imprisoned by the concept '*mujer*,' which her father wields as a weapon against her. Yet, she is hard put to fight him because his evidence for her meaning as 'woman' is her own changing body, that is, menarche and breasts" (Alarcón 149). Thus, Naomi's reading of her reality will involve more problematic awareness-raising of the concept of woman/mujer. As Rebolledo states, this process needs "the realization of being silenced or being marginalized because of ethnicity and gender" (109). A significant obstacle for Naomi's life as an adolescent on the path of womanhood is the "conflict with the dictates of the surrounding society. Chicana heroes desire freedom to be themselves, in all of their abilities and aspects, a freedom often denied by a culture that would have them toe strict norms of behavior for young women" (111). They want

to develop their full potential in all areas of their lives: “the freedom of the road, to travel, to leave home, to have meaningful work, and especially to be respected for and to use their intelligence” (111).

Moreover, they long for a life in which they can explore their sexuality without the constraints of norms and values of a moralist, male-oriented, and religious society. The resounding words of a father, TÚ ERES MUJER, need to take on another meaning so that Naomi can enjoy that she is a woman with her hopes, fears, and needs and whose body is something that provides her with pleasure and well-being and not guilt. In this sense, Naomi’s literacy involves fighting against conceptions and beliefs that reduce her to an inferior body dominated by a male-oriented society. Furthermore, she must unlearn the limitations imposed on her life so that she can learn to be at peace with herself and free to be a woman who can re-signify the phrase “Tú eres mujer” in an empowering way.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This thesis has aimed to investigate the causes of disempowerment of the women characters in Helena María Viramontes's works *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *The Moths and Other Stories*. My focus was on the Latina/Chicana girl characters Estrella in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the nameless narrator in "The Moths," and Naomi in "Growing," from the collection of short stories *The Moths and Other Stories*. Their passage from girlhood to womanhood has deserved special attention insofar as they suffer the consequences of discrimination and marginalization due to their age, gender, class, ethnicity, and race. Moreover, patriarchal rules and beliefs permeate their lives as a form of control. These issues impact their lives once they have left their homeland to dwell in the United States, like the nameless narrator in "The Moths" and Naomi in "Growing." Although Estrella from *Under the Feet of Jesus* was born in the United States, she still suffers the effects of the fact that she is a daughter of Mexican immigrants.

Throughout this work, I hope to have made clear that the way out for the disempowerment of the girl characters in Viramontes's works under analysis has been influenced by a series of factors, including, but not exclusively: sexuality, class, race, age, nationality, historical context, gender, location, and social status. My hypothesis is that literacy in its broader sense, as addressed by Paulo Freire, Magda Soares, and Paula Moya, is a relevant point of departure for the girl characters to overcome oppression and marginalization. Literacy enables these girl characters to raise the consciousness of their predicament and how to cope with it to gain autonomy.

The path to womanhood for Estrella in *Under the Feet of Jesus* demands too much from her since she must fight against "several oppressions simultaneously" (Philippa Kafka xx): inequalities, patriarchy, class rankings by gender and race, economic problems, discrimination,

and marginalization, so that she can struggle for her autonomy. Estrella's development of spirituality, through her daily entry into the barn, contributes to her gathering strength to fight oppression. Seeing that Estrella has incorporated the oppressor's voice, she must oppose this force to be free.

Estrella's process of growing up throughout the narrative contributed to her literacy to achieve autonomy. This process required her determination and also that she regarded her world as a girl whose body was changing due to adolescence, her life (and for that matter, her family) as oppressed, her curiosity, her humility to recognize that she still needed to learn many things, her hope, her ability to listen to people (mainly her family and her boyfriend *Alejo*), and commitment to developing her consciousness.

Therefore, Estrella learned to tackle both her cultural origins: Mexico and the United States. Viramontes suggests that Estrella understands the possibility of hybridity, biculturalism, and borderlands in her life. She also learns that home is not a geographical location but "she participates in the construction of yet another home which is first based on a new consciousness and then, at least potentially, on the power of language to help create a new environment which conforms to the principle of environmental justice." Moreover, it is "a home that respects anthropocentric and ecocentric concerns because, as the issue of toxicity has made clear, social justice and ecocentric ideals go hand in hand" (Grewe-Volpp 75). In this sense, Estrella's construction of a new conception of home is based on the consciousness of someone whose worldview has broadened.

Estrella's gender issues in the novel are problematic. For instance, she has absorbed the values and concepts of her mother's stormy marriage. Even after her mother splits up with her father, her role at home is that of a woman who must take care of children and has double shifts (working in the fields and doing the household chores). In this sense, she will have to unlearn

these conceptions to learn again in a way that she can create a new form of relationship and share the household chores.

Regarding the short story “The Moths,” I concluded that patriarchal rules and beliefs are the main reasons for the nameless narrator’s disempowerment. She cannot be herself in the domestic sphere. The narrator deviates from the expected roles of women, and she also confronts the father by not going to church. Her actions demonstrate that she, unlike her sisters, has a different worldview. Despite her mother’s fear and submission to her husband, the former can sense how her daughter suffers. She sends the narrator over to the grandmother’s house to care for her.

I underlined the importance of the curandera in “The Moths.” She embodies alternative modes of healing and therefore stands for the hybrid element. She could be regarded as a “cultural psychologist or psychiatrist because individual human behavior is always weighed against behavior for the good of the community. And she understands the community” (Rebolledo 88). This could be interpreted as the community of oppressed women as she functions as a link between them. Moreover, Abuelita stands for a wise curandera who hardly ever speaks, but her silence is reassuring and calms the narrator. It is no wonder that “one of the most important powers that the curandera/bruja has is her ability to transform” (Rebolledo 92). The narrator’s rebirth at the end of the short story brings to light the curandera’s power to transform her consciousness. Therefore, “she becomes recipient to a sacred knowledge of intersubjectivity uniting her with her grandmother and mother” (Lopez 176).

Another relevant point I have analyzed is related to the presence of magical realism in the short story. This style of literary fiction is used to deconstruct “the stereotyped visions of superstitious, mystical Latinos” (Saldívar-Hull 136). Using this literary device, Viramontes undercuts “dominant ideologies and make palpable the material conditions of border subjects that magical desires cannot erase.” At the end of the narrative, the moths function as “agents of

reality for women in the traditional patriarchal Chicano family” (136). Thus, magical realism in the short story creates conditions for feminist ideas to be expressed so that the female-subaltern voice “encourages the development of individual ethnic literatures that serve a decolonizing function within their own societies and that are also linked to each other within a multicultural world” (Faris 172).

Ultimately, concerning literacy, the narrator in “The Moths” develops her consciousness. She re-signifies her life since her ritual of passage, symbolized by taking care of her grandmother’s body, contributes to her reading her world of oppression and understanding the oppression that she, her mother, and her grandmother suffered. Thus, the passage that describes the moment of Abuelita’s death reinforces this idea of the inevitability of endings since “they are necessary for rebirths” (The Moths 31). The final scene represents the narrator’s transformation into a new woman, aware of patriarchal oppression and the importance of women’s bonds to create this sense of community of oppressed women who can grapple with the forces that put them down.

The short story “Growing” is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, the phrase, TÚ ERES MUJER, is spoken by an authoritarian father to his daughter Naomi and is part of this thesis’ title. Secondly, the effect of those words thunders on Naomi’s mind. Like the two other protagonists, Estrella from *Under the Feet of Jesus* and the nameless narrator in “The Moths,” Naomi is also a teenager whose body is changing and suffers at the hands of her father for being a *mujer*. Her father does not have a speech in the narrative, insofar as he stands for the voice of patriarchy resonating through Naomi’s mind.

Naomi must fight not only against her father’s patriarchal norms and beliefs but also against the cultural transition due to a new life in the United States. Naomi, despite being baffled by her father’s words, understands the difference between a woman and a *mujer*: “So what’s wrong with being a *mujer*” (“The Moths” 36). As Norma Alarcón points out, in her father’s

view, “her subjectivity has been decided a priori by what is perceived as the body of a woman” (148). Naomi’s father sees women as submissive, and the fact that they can become pregnant is, in his view, a limitation of their sexuality.

Although Naomi understands the difference between being a woman and a *mujer*, she still cannot cope with her budding sexuality and transition from a child to a woman. She is torn between playing with the children on the street and enjoying her meetings with the boy Joe. She knows that her body has changed, and so have her responsibilities as well. One of the problems in her life is the fact that nobody has taught her how to fulfill the expectations that her family and society have of her. Naomi’s central conflict concerns accepting that she is not a child anymore. I should argue that she is still in a state in which she is not entirely aware of the changes that have occurred since she left her childhood. Naomi still cannot comprehend the limitations of her life as a woman. Unlike Estrella in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and the nameless character in “The Moths,” Naomi does not undergo a fundamental transformation regarding her role as a woman because she is still afraid to fight against the conceptions and beliefs that constrain her life as a woman. Out of the three characters at issue, Naomi is the only one whose consciousness seems to be in its incipient stage. My hypothesis is that she lacks any bonds so that she can share her anguish, fears, and oppression to broaden her worldview, enabling her to change for the better.

From the analysis of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the short stories “The Moths,” and “Growing,” I concluded that literacy, that is, reading the world and the word, is essential for the girl characters’ consciousness-raising and to the creation of a new world in which they can be autonomous with their convictions and resolutions.

I should also spell out the possibility of biculturalism, borderlands, and hybridity as positive features in the girls’ lives. Due to their exposure to two different cultures, they can be viewed, according to Lourdes Rojas, “as culturally and socially, rooted in an integrated

plurality ... a cohesive and meaningful voice for the powerful heterogeneity of ... immigrant women” (qtd. in Phillipa Kafka xxiii-xxiv). I do not mean that they acculturate or assimilate, but rather that they can live in two worlds at once if there is critical thinking. Moreover, as far as borderlands are concerned, these three girls can metaphorically and physically cross two territories to encompass “a constant state of transition” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 25). Hybridity means the possibility of their *mestiza* consciousness, this mixture of “racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-polinization” (99).

I hope this thesis has contributed to the field of Latina girl studies from the perspective of literacy and consciousness-raising, and autonomy as liberating resources for the girl characters to go through adolescence, being in contact with beliefs and values from two cultures. It is of the utmost importance that further studies focus on this topic because of this globalized world in which the number of immigrants and refugees has increased considerably, not only in the United States but in the whole world. It is my intention to approach a more encompassing analysis of the issues of literacy and consciousness-raising regarding girls’ and women’s oppression in the field of Latina literature.

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