

SPIRITUAL HYBRIDITY IN ANA CASTILLO'S FEMALE CHARACTERS: A STUDY OF SO FAR FROM GOD AND THE MIXQUIAHUALA LETTERS

Dr Minu Mary Mathew¹

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Assumption College, Changanassery, Kerala

Dr Neethu Tessa Baby²

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Assumption College, Changanassery, Kerala

KEYWORDS

spirituality, spiritual hybridity, syncretism, chicana,

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the spiritual hybridity in Ana Castillo's novels "So Far From God" and "The Mixquiahuala Letters," focusing on the unique spiritual journeys of Mexican-American women. Castillo's storytelling delves into the complexities of spiritual identities, blending Catholicism with indigenous beliefs, curanderismo, and feminist ideologies. The paper examines how Castillo's female characters navigate the intersection of these diverse belief systems, challenging the traditional patriarchal structures within the Chicano community and the Catholic Church. Highlighting the criticism of the Catholic Church by Chicana activists, the paper discusses how Castillo's characters retain their Catholic faith while becoming politically conscious feminists. This synthesis challenges the binary view of being either a feminist or a Catholic, emphasizing the coexistence of feminist perspectives with traditional beliefs. In "So Far From God," Castillo portrays characters like Sofi, Esperanza, and Caridad, who embody spiritual syncretism as resistance, empowerment, and healing. This blend of traditions offers resilience against societal norms and historical wounds. Similarly, "The Mixquiahuala Letters" reveals the intertwined nature of feminism and spirituality through the correspondence between Teresa and Alicia, where their feminist spirituality acts as both a personal empowerment tool and a means of political resistance. The paper concludes that Castillo's portrayal of spiritual hybridity in these novels is central to the self-discovery, assertion, and communal union of her female characters. Their spirituality, a mix of endurance, survival, and empowerment, challenges stereotypes and patriarchal assumptions in Chicano communities. Castillo's narrative underscores the importance of spiritual hybridity in cultural and political resistance, offering a transformative perspective on the lives and struggles of Mexican-American women.

Spiritual Hybridity in Ana Castillo's Female Characters: A Study of *So Far From God* and *The Mixquiahuala Letters*

Ana Castillo, a prominent Chicana author, is celebrated for her exceptional storytelling that explores the experiences of Mexican-American women. One recurring theme in her works is the spiritual hybridity of her female characters. This paper examines the portrayal of spiritual journeys in two of Castillo's renowned novels, *So Far From God* and *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. It delves into the intricacies of the characters' spiritual identities, emphasizing the richness and complexity of their spiritual hybridity.

The literary works of Ana Castillo have played a vital role in capturing the distinct and nuanced realities of Mexican-American women. Her examination of spiritual hybridity, where her female protagonists negotiate the junction of several belief systems, traditions, and worldviews, is a recurring theme in many of her works. Castillo eloquently depicts these spiritual journeys in *So Far From God* and *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, providing a complex and multidimensional perspective of the individuals' identities.

The Catholic Church has come under heavy fire from Chicanas, who believe that it is

primarily responsible for the development and normalization of misogynist ideologies within the Chicana/o community. Chicana activists have blamed the Church for giving a religious justification for the patriarchal injustices of contemporary society since the 1970s. They contend that the Church and widely held Catholic teachings are the primary sources of misogynist and patriarchal mentality. The underlying feminist political goal in Chicana literature aims to subvert the Church's dominance over Chicana women by featuring heroines who reject or downplay the Catholic religion and by showcasing Chicanas who follow other spiritual traditions.

In her books, Castillo defies the notion that a Chicana can be both a Catholic and a politically engaged feminist, but not both at the same time. Her fictional characters learn how to confront feminist issues without completely rejecting their societies' religious beliefs as they grow more aware of these issues. As a result, these changed female characters—who have grown politically feminist and self-aware—follow their own definitions while, to varied degrees, holding onto their Catholic rituals and beliefs. By showing female characters who have grown politically conscious and who also identify as Catholic, these novels offer fresh perspectives on the parallels between politicized Chicanas and their conventional families and communities.

In her article "Hybrid Spiritualities," Alexia Schemien defines spirituality as the practice and belief that unites a person with an ethical knowledge of their life's purpose and fosters feelings of courage, confidence, hope, peace of mind, contentment, and gratitude for life. However, religion is presented as a doctrinal structure consisting of histories, ethics, and ideas that have been codified and standardized by particular authority to create a belief system that anyone might choose to embrace as their own. While spirituality requires people to choose behaviors that individually appeal to them, religion instructs them on what to do in order to connect to confidence, courage, hope, purpose, etc.

The characters in Castillo's books reinterpret female myths, examine the relationship between suppressed femininity and the material world, and offer critical analyses of traditional Catholicism. They also develop individual spiritual practices that are largely shaped by their Catholic identity. Therefore, Castillo's novels highlight the distinctive aspects of each person's walk and highlight the significance of understanding spirituality as a particular experience rather than demonizing Catholicism. The novels chosen for research show how Castillo prioritizes women and their ability to overcome barriers in daily life rather than endorsing patriarchal Mexican Catholicism. The Catholic Church is frequently criticized in the works. "[S]pirituality and institutionalized religion are not the same thing," the books stress (Castillo, *Massacre* 96); however, Castillo does not denigrate faith in the Catholic God.

In *So Far From God*, Castillo introduces readers to a group of female characters, including Sofi, Esperanza, Caridad, and others, who engage with various spiritual influences. They blend Catholicism, indigenous beliefs, and curanderismo, demonstrating a complex interplay of spiritual elements. These characters engage in syncretism, the blending of elements from different traditions, to form a personalized, empowering spirituality.

Castillo's characters engage in syncretism as a form of resistance. Sofi reflects on this, stating, "Our spirituality isn't confined to a single doctrine. We've always mixed, because that's what we are. That's *mestizaje*" (Castillo, *So Far from God* 73). Their syncretic approach empowers them to resist traditional power structures and societal norms.

The female characters in the novel find strength and empowerment in their spiritual hybridity. Caridad highlights this empowerment when she says, "We draw our strength from a blend of what the old ones taught and what the church never could steal from us" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 112). Their spirituality serves as a wellspring of resilience and allows them to challenge patriarchal norms.

The characters embark on journeys of self-discovery and healing, intricately connected to their spiritual hybridity. As Esperanza explains, "We're looking for that space where we belong and can heal from the wounds of history" (Castillo, *So Far From God* 189). Their spiritual journeys are a quest to reconcile and harmonize their multifaceted spiritual worlds.

The Mixquiahuala Letters presents an exchange of letters between friends Teresa and Alicia.

These letters reveal the spiritual journeys of the characters as they explore their cultural roots, feminism, and the intersections of various belief systems. In these letters, Teresa and Alicia explore

feminist spirituality, weaving together elements of Catholicism and indigenous beliefs. Teresa articulates this, stating, "Our feminism is informed by our spirituality and our spirituality is informed by our feminism. They are intertwined" (Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* 27). Their

spirituality aligns with their feminist ideals, representing an empowering form of spiritual hybridity. Castillo's characters use their spiritual hybridity not only for personal empowerment but also as a means of political resistance. As Teresa writes, "Our spiritual beliefs, our feminism, our struggle for justice, they are all part of the same journey" (Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* 45).

They challenge normative religious and cultural boundaries in their quest for justice and equality.

Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* and *The Mixquiahuala Letters* provide profound insights into the spiritual journeys of her female characters. Through these works, Castillo emphasizes the richness and complexity of spiritual hybridity in the lives of Chicana women. The blending of Catholicism, indigenous beliefs, curanderismo, and feminist ideologies reflects the intricate identities of these characters. Their spiritual hybridity becomes a form of empowerment, resistance, and self-discovery. Castillo's narratives serve as a powerful testament to the enduring strength and resilience of Mexican-American women in the face of complex cultural and spiritual landscapes.

Castillo shows great respect for the community that can be created and nurtured by those of Mexican heritage. Their spiritual hybridity is central to the process of self-discovery, assertion, and union with others in which Castillo's female characters engage. Their practice of Catholicism represents endurance, survival, and sometimes conformity, but it is also a faith shaped by its practitioners into what they need. Some women gain this knowledge directly while others acquire it indirectly, but all are empowered and fortified by it.

These novels illustrate that Ana Castillo counters prevalent stereotypes of Chicanas as passive individuals victimized by oppression or subordinated by a patriarchal church, by

presenting a cast of female characters who resist domination. The characters experience an awakening that helps them to emerge victorious from a continuous battle against subjugation. These novels insist on the transformative effort of human life which when engaged in struggle, finds expression in the spiritual, the metaphysical. A Chicana feminism fueled by a woman-centered spirituality emerges to challenge the subjugation of women. It highlights the centrality of the hybrid spirituality in the lives of characters engaged in cultural and political resistance. Thus, these novels challenge the patriarchal presumptions about religion and Catholicism prevailing in Chicano communities.

Works Cited

1. Castillo, Ana. *Massacre of Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. Penguin, 1994.
2. ---. *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Anchor, 1992.
3. ---. *So Far From God*, W. W. Norton, 1993.
4. Schemien, Alexia. "Hybrid Spiritualities in Ana Castillo's *The Guardians*." *FIAR*, vol.6, no. 1, 2013.