



# Holistic Consciousness in Chicana Feminist Thought

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**Abstract**— *As Holism has evolved as a new area of perception, analysis and approach different sets of disciplines become involved in it to come up with new visions and thoughts. In this realm, feminist studies with their various tendencies and concerns share certain principles, yet they differ in others. Chicana feminism, as the construction of feminist aims of the Mexican American women, embraces new concepts and views towards the assertion of the colored woman identity who is different from the white/Anglo American woman. The call for the building up of such a consciousness carries within much cultural heritage. Within this spectrum lies our interest in Chicana consciousness that connects folklore, myth, spiritualism and folk belief. The underlying of such a thought embraces a holistic consciousness that lies within Chicana thought and writings. Along this paper, I am going to unfold the aspects of this holistic phenomenon in Chicana feminism through some examples of Chicana writings. Through the analysis of some examples of Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* as well as other Chicana feminist writers and thinkers I will use a feminist perspective that will reveal this holistic feminist consciousness more clearly. My aims, by the end of this scrutiny, are to come up to the conclusion that the holistic consciousness inherent in the Chicana writings and thought has to address the white Anglo American society and to deconstruct it from within. Chicana feminism is in itself a resistance tool against the mainstream culture and the Western ideals.*

**Keywords**— *Body, Chicana feminism, culture, feminist, identity, resistance, spirit.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Holism and holistic consciousness are of great importance to the understanding of different areas today. As a matter of fact, this philosophical concept could offer various realms to the tackling of Chicana feminism and its components. Then this paper tries to explore holistic consciousness embedded within the Chicana feminist thought and tries to search for the objectives behind the adaptation of such a thought in its structure and bases.

## II. DEFINITION

As a definition, “holistic” that comes from holism means “considering a whole thing or being to be more than a collection of parts” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2005, p.743). Holism, then indicates “the theory that the fundamental principle of the universe is the creation of wholes” (*The Wordsworth Concise English*

*Dictionary*, 1994, p 458), which considers “the idea that the whole of something must be considered in order to understand its different parts” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2005, p.743). Thus to consider something holistic is to view it as a whole without division or partition.

Consciousness, on the other hand, means “the waking state of the mind” (*The Wordsworth Concise English Dictionary*, 1994, p 204) where the individual is “able to use [his] senses and mental powers to understand what is happening” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2005, p. 322). Hence, consciousness “consists of inner, qualitative, subjective states and processes of sentience or awareness” (Searle, 2015, p.3). Then holistic consciousness covers the state of awareness, that is far from being subjective or individualistic, holds another shape to be more open, inclusive putting “all things[...] connected” (McGee, 2015, p. 4).

### III. BACKGROUND OF THE TERM

Before embarking on our topic to see how holistic consciousness is inherent in Chicana feminist thought, let's have an idea about the use of both concepts in several areas and the outcomes they have brought to the fore. In her article "Holism", Shane J. Ratson (2014) gives us an idea about the term in general and the different areas it covers. Ranging from philosophy to pragmatism and postmodernism, Ratson perceives holism as a rich area that needs scrutiny and insists on the priority of the whole than its parts (p.1). By linking holism to other areas of research like Marxism, multiculturalism or politics, she unfolds the manifestation of holism in relation to the area it occupies. For instance, in the field of politics she argues that politics should not be analyzed "into the elements, tiers, or levels" (p.5) but should be understood "as a whole through the lens of the systems model" (p.5). When talking about holism in relation to multiculturalism she reveals that it can hold monistic undertones. In this context, she sets the difference between both saying that though both terms invite plurality and diversity, monism "signifies that a whole community or society must subscribe to as single comprehensive doctrine (worldview) of what is true, right and good" (p.5), which "insist[s] on a repressive and closed political community" (p.3).

In her article "Holistic Consciousness", Merve Ozsoy (2011) exposes the term "holistic consciousness", defines it and sets its manifestations and the outcomes it brings when it is practised. Based on a poem written by Phoe Rose entitled "The Split", she calls into scene the necessity of embracing holistic consciousness. As the world is devastated by scientific development and the ego centralization, there is no space nowadays for thinking about the others or collaborating with them. In this respect, holistic consciousness becomes the tool to regain the order of things and to re-set the functioning of the ego and its relationship with the other. By breaking up the boundary between the "I" and the other, richer outcomes can be filtered out of this to give place to creativity and wisdom (Ozsoy, 2011, p. 8), more sense of reality and intuition. (p.9).

In his article "The Interdependent ego and the Power of Holistic Consciousness", Gary Z McGee (2015) reveals the notion of the interdependent ego and its relationship with holistic consciousness. Playing with concepts such as the individuated ego, the self-actualized ego and the interdependent ego, he insists on our need to embrace holistic consciousness. By talking about the individuated ego, McGee thinks that "a robust ego, as it pertains to self-transformation and spiritual development, seeks a healthy transformation, and individuation, from

codependent ego into independent ego" (p.2) calling of course for distancing from "our egocentric culture" (p.2). Later, he introduces the concept of the self-actualized ego by "giving ourselves the freedom to create with the 'materials' (psychological, social, cultural, psychological, existential, etc) at hand" (p.3). Here, "an artistry of self-actualized ego facilitates the crossing of 'the bridge from independence to interdependence'" (p.3), and of course towards the interdependent ego. The interdependent ego then, is "the cosmic self, the deep-down self, the 'wave' of the self which emerges, infinitely connected and self-similar, from the cosmic ocean" (p.4). From this perspective, holistic consciousness means that "all things are connected and that infinity is the rule and finitude is the illusion" (p.4). According to McGee, when the individual reaches holistic consciousness state s/he can achieve "a sense of stillness amidst all the restlessness" (p.5).

In her book *Holistic Consciousness: Reflections on the Destiny of Humanity*, P.D Mehta (1989) defines holistic consciousness and identifies its effects on the human perception and consciousness. When talking about the duality or binary oppositions she thinks that it is "our personal reaction which sets up 'good' and 'evil'" (p.84). This is due, indeed, to the brain's activity that "is structured in and confined to the limited terms of finitude and temporality" (p.86). According to Mehta, to "constitute one of the apogees of human development" (p.86), one has to embrace holistic consciousness to "see the whole world" (p.87), when "the limited self-love of subhuman consciousness has undergone transmutation into all-embracing Transcendent love which rejects nothing but endures everything with infinite patience" (p.87).

Nowadays, we start to reveal the topic of holism and thus holistic consciousness, though history, culture and many old practices were replete with such understanding. For instance, in the pre-Socratic Greek philosophy there was an interest in

an intrinsic unity between the timely and the timeless, between the immediate perceptual world and a world of eternal or infinite meaning, between the individual and the whole, between the timely and the timeless, the immanent and the Transcendent, the human and the divine, the historical and the mythological. (Aanstoos, 2010, p. 24)

Thus, the world was based on “a process” (p.24) rejecting separation and division. With scientific development during the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Lara, 2008, p. 22), a new understanding came to the fore and new perceptions come to split certain entities to be regarded from a different perspective. Descartes’ idea about the resolution of the ego and its centralization on thought at the expense of anything else, and especially that of the body, known as Cogito or Cartesian thought has brought changes to the existence of humankind. From that time on “the gendered and racialized binary construction of body/spirit was exacerbated with colonialism” (p.22). Later, with Freud’s psychoanalysis, the division of ego took another shape as the psyche was divided into id, ego and super ego. As the split becomes more obvious, the interconnectedness between parts becomes weaker and the individual’s psyche becomes more fragmented leading to a loss of self control. For this reason, there is an urgent need to call for holism as “[a] timely defining idea for the future, not merely of psychology but for all the human sciences, and really for the future of humanity” (Aanstoos, p.20).

#### IV. HOLISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND CHICANA FEMINISM

From this perspective then, we are going to see the manifestation of holistic consciousness in Chicana feminist thought. Chicana feminism is a trend expressing ideas, principles and thoughts of Mexican American women who try to call for a place within the mainstream American society and to have a position within the Chicano community. As the Chicano culture is partly Latino, indigenous and African at once, Chicana feminism could not identify with the ideals of the white American culture. And from this perspective, a holistic consciousness is called into scene to offer a new understanding of what a woman of color is in the US.

Going through the thoughts and the speculations exposed by Gloria Anzaldúa in some of her writings, we can touch the holistic consciousness inherent in her background. Gloria Anzaldúa is a Chicana feminist theorist and writer, famous for her book *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and her mestiza consciousness theory. In her attempt to create a theory for the Chicana woman, she exposes her ideas aiming at deconstructing the ideals of the mainstream culture and the gender structure of her Chicano society. Through the angles of a Chicana woman, Anzaldúa offers us a frame of what a Chicana is, meaning that she is not a simple construct but a blending or a mixture of different entities and cultures. Partly Hispanic, European and Indian, the Chicana can not deny the heterogeneous aspect of her blood as Anzaldúa (2012)

states, “I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory) (p.19). From that perspective, Anzaldúa calls for the resurrection of the indigenous past, its practices, figures and traditions. Above all, she calls into scene the mythological icons and even the demonized ones like La Llorona and La Malinche, as she explains, “La gente Chicana tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: Guadalupe<sup>1</sup>, the Virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche)<sup>2</sup>, the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and La Llorona<sup>3</sup>, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two” (p.52). Here, she takes the myth of La Llorona and re-sets it from anew moving “from the wailing of suffering and grief to the grito of resistance” (as cited in Hartley, 2010, p.140). As a matter of fact, Anzaldúa concentrates on certain details that used to debase the mythic figure and instead she gives her empowerment and agency. By transforming the evil to good, Anzaldúa crosses over the boundary separating both poles to eliminate the difference and break the binary opposition—a basic Western ideal.

By recalling the past and its rich legendary figures such as “the masculinist cosmology of the Aztecs Coatlicue (Earth) and her daughter Coylxauhauqui (Moon)” (Hartley, 2010, p. 138), Anzaldúa does not separate the past from her consciousness and she considers it a major part in the construction of what a Chicana is. By eliminating separation in time, Anzaldúa perceives it as a continuation, and that past, present and future are interrelated and interdependent. Thus a holistic consciousness functions here to gather time phases into a continuing process, “where [...] the limitations imposed by space and time no longer confine [her]consciousness” (Meht, 1989, p. 84). Stuart P Heywood, thinks that this “enable[s] one to go beyond the passive ‘determined’ (dead) past into the ‘actively becoming’ (living) present future higher modes of consciousness: *toward human freedom and participation in evolution*” (p.xxxv).

In her process to heal the wound of decolonization, Anzaldúa portrays herself as “[the] *curandera* of conquest” (as cited in Hartley, 2010, p. 135). The revitalization of her indigenous past such “cosmology, ritual practice, and linguistic patterns” (p.152) intensifies the strong ties she establishes

<sup>1</sup> Guadalupe: It’s another name for the Virgin Mary indicating the mixture of the pagan figure with the Christian/Catholic one.

<sup>2</sup> Chingada/Malinche: Two names for a mythic figure dating back to the Spanish colonial period about a woman who became a traitor to her people (Mexican tribes) since she was the lover of Cortez, a Spanish leader.

<sup>3</sup> La Llorona: Another mythic figure about a woman who killed her children for the sake of her lover.

with her past as well as it reflects “the various modes of connection” (p.152) between all of them. This grows in importance the fact that she, as “a *curandera* of conquest » (as cited in Hartley, 2010, p.135), becomes like a holistic healer performing rituals to her community to eliminate the wounds of the colonizing culture. By telling stories and giving new dimensions to them (for instance La Llorona) she “continues the transmission of healing knowledge in the face of colonial forgetting and erasure” (Hartley, 2010, p. 140). In light of this healing process, Anzaldúa suggests that the sufferer should “embrace the Coatlicue state” (as cited in Hartley, p. 147) which tells about the incarnation of “the indigenous roots of Mexican American culture” (as cited in Hartley, 2010, p. 147). Anzaldúa explains this by saying, “this horrifying ordeal means going down into the depths of the soul in order to cross over to the other shore” (p. 147). Later, “your body mind spirit is the hermetic vessel where transformation takes place” (cited in Hartley, 2010, p. 148). As such, the healing process that Anzaldúa goes through invites the wholeness of the body in its different aspects calling for a state of transformation aiming at liberation. And here we can touch the holistic consciousness played by Anzaldúa as a tool and practice to heal the Chicana from her oppressors.

Another major aspect of holistic consciousness in Chicana thought lies in the disruption of binary oppositions and the revival of spirituality. Being victimized by the Western thought and ideologies, many of Mexican cultural beliefs and principles have been eroded and set in a constraining frame such Virgin/whore and *curandera*<sup>4</sup>/*bruja*<sup>5</sup> dichotomy. This prevailing thought has the aim to erase the indigenous past of the Chicano community for the purpose of serving “the interests of the patriarchal Church, state, and family” (Lara, 2005, p. 11). Thus, la bruja (the witch), for example, one of the major spiritual figures that has been always suspected and feared, is put under the realm of “otherization” (Lara, 2005, 11) In a typically Western fashion, the bruja should be excluded from any context because she does not correspond to the internalized set of beliefs propagated by the colonial legacy, i.e split between body, mind and spirit, between spirituality and sexuality, and bad and evil. The bruja, then “is associated with ‘superstitious’ and ‘primitive’ Indian and African beliefs and practices” (Lara, 2005, p. 12) “who practices “spiritual, sexual, and healing

knowledges” (12). As “a practitioner of sexual magic” (13) she is able to fly (24) and take other shapes (cited in Lara, 2005, p. 25.). Based on this assumption, Chicana thinkers and theorists try to remove the bad connotations revolving around the image of the bruja and to connect her with the *curandera* (healer) as they construct the world of spirituality. Ana Castillo, for example, thinks that “both are valuable healers” (cited in Lara, 2005, p. 15) In this respect, Castillo breaks the binary opposition between a *curandera* and a bruja insisting on the spiritual belief system appropriate for the Mexican folk belief. Tey Diana Rebolledo goes further by saying that “the *curandera* is always also the witch, that is, she has the power to become one, *but* she may never choose to do so” (cited in Lara, 2005, p 15.) By blurring the distinction between the two, both figures incarnate “knowledge about creation, procreation and sexuality” (Lara, 2005, p.23). This leads to knowledge about the erotic (p. 23) which Audre Lorde sees as “a transformative energy that bridges the spiritual with the sexual/sensual and facilitates a sense of wholeness and connection with one’s being as well as with others across similarities and differences” (cited in Lara, 2005, p. 23) Under this logic, the bruja connects body, mind and spirit and functions with “a holistic perspective bridg[ing] the spiritual with the physical world” (p.25). In a parallel observation, the bruja stands as a resisting cultural tool and “an appropriate symbol for ‘a methodology of the oppressed’ ” (cited in Lara, 2005, p 25) as suggests Chela Sandoval. Morales also develops the idea by saying “a politics of holism includes discerning the oppressive machinations of power” (cited in Lara, 2005, p. 25).

Another aspect of holistic consciousness that is apparent in the Chicana belief is epitomized through borderland-mestizaje feminism<sup>6</sup>. The concept itself tells about a distinctive set of ideas adopted by Chicana feminists. Along their struggle for self-definition and self-positioning, Chicana feminists “create *nevas teorías-teorías* that reflect [their] understanding of the world and how to critically transform it” (cited. in Saavedra and Nymark, 2008, p. 225). Refuting the border construction advocated by the Western hegemonic discourse aiming at separation and division, Anzaldúa proposes an area of dialogue, negotiation and interaction called borderland where she “placed her Chicana feminist lesbian subjectivity, body and material condition at the forefront of her scholarship” (Saavedra and Nymark, 2008, p. 256). By deconstructing dualistic thinking and binary oppositions, Anzaldúa embraces “a mestizaje metología that attempts to uproot dualistic thinking, welcoming ambiguity and

<sup>4</sup> Curandera : A Spanish word meaning folk healer. The word holds high significance in Mexican culture since the healer is endowed with an ability to cure people. He/she can use herbs and massages.

<sup>5</sup> Bruja: A Spanish word meaning witch. In the Mexican/Chicano culture the figures of witches are omnipresent to highlight the world of magic inherent in the practices and thoughts of Mexicans and Chicanos.

<sup>6</sup> Borderland mestizaje feminism: a concept that refers to the theory of Gloria Anzaldúa and her feminist theory that calls for blurring the borders between differences.

engendering an oppositional consciousness” (cited in Saavedra and Nymark, 2008, p. 256). In a similar occurrence, breaking up separations initiates the opening up of the borderland to various beliefs, understandings and cross-readings, as Saavedra and Nymark put it, “Borderland theorizing seeks social transformation not only for Chicana (o) people but for all those whose voices have been silenced [...] and for those whose bodies have been policed, regulated and medicalized through western lenses and ultimately produced colonized *mentes and cuerpos*” (p.256). Within this realm Chicana feminists reconsider their relationship with their bodies trying to reopen a reconciliation between them and their bodies. Being condemned by a strict set of beliefs and dualisms, Chicanas were educated to hate their bodies because it is a source of evil. Legendary figures such as La Llorona and the Malinche become the emblems of female uncontrolled sexuality and desire, which in turn have affected the Mexican and the Chicano gender structure. To have a future of her design, the Chicana comes to revise these representations and set them from anew. In such a context, Anzaldúa traces her identity of struggle and resistance back to the body of “*la mujer india*” (Saavedra and Nymark, 2008, p. 259), as she says, “Like La Llorona, the Indian woman’s only means of protest was wailing” (p.43). This reading exemplifies both the revival of her cultural heritage and the glorifying of the female body. In the same vein, Naomi Quinonez defends La Malinche and says that she “embodied the survival skills that are relevant to Chicana feminist writers” (Saavedra and Nymark, 2008, p. 259). Thus the Chicana has restored her relationship with her body, Anzaldúa argues for that by saying, “The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer” (p.44). Stripping herself from this guilt, the Chicana starts to celebrate her relationship with her body as Anzaldúa states, “The Chicana feminist voice, in order to be heard, must first listen to her body” (qtd.in Saavedra and Nymark, 2008, p. 262). Hence, here comes a fusion or “[a] bifurcation of the mind and the body” (p.262) that should be “sew[ed] together” (p.262).

Following this saying, the disruption of the dualism exposes a novel set of beliefs that strengthens the borderland-mestizaje feminism “negotiat[ing] an empowering racial, gendered, working-class, political terrain we also call mestizaje (cited.in Saavedra and Nymark, 2008, p. 261). These reflections become the source of Chicana writings, bringing out texts replete with issues of sexuality and sexual orientations. Saavedra and Nymark argue here that “Latina feminists from various disciplines begin to include their own experiencias, spaces and bodies in their work in order to reclaim self/space and

body/mind-an anticolonial strategy” (p.266). By putting the body at the forefront of Chicana writings, Chicana feminists listen and voice body and desire (cited. in Saavedra and Nymark, 2008, p. 266). The body and sexuality that were a source of shame and betrayal become now the subject and the field of writing and creativity. The third space where the Chicana dwells (borderland) stands as the negotiating area of her history, culture and self where she exposes a new set of de-colonial strategy, holistic and totalistic mechanism aiming at eradicating the eliminative view of the Western discourse.

Going through such examples of holistic consciousness in the Chicana thought and writings we can see that a whole strategy is incarnated by these feminists in order to break the structure of the Mexican/Chicano gender structure and the colonial imperialist mindset based on exclusion and elimination. To fit the scattered puzzle of her identity, the Chicana should not be in a disavowal state where she can give up her indigenous heritage or her Mexican one. To set up a frame for herself is to be whole, a totality and throw a holistic consciousness that can resist the invading elements aiming at debasing her. Without being so, she can lose her feminist self who draws the special concerns of her race and culture. The holistic consciousness inherent in the Chicana feminist discourse is but a resistance tool against the hegemonic western discourse that aims at separability and division.

## V. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, we can say that holistic consciousness is a broad concept that identifies an understanding performing totality, interdependence and wholeness. The presence of such a concept in feminist studies is of high significance revealing the importance of the area in several domains and especially in Chicana feminism. Holistic consciousness becomes a corner stone in the construction of the Chicana feminist thought and its basics, and by which Chicanas can eradicate the hegemonic Western discourse and set up a new framework for them. Left to detect the concept of holistic consciousness in other areas where other issues would be at stake.

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