

Intersectionality of Indigeneity and Womanhood: Understanding the Quest for the Feminine in *Hombres de maíz*

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ABSTRACT

The present work critically examines the intersectionality between indigeneity and womanhood in *Hombres de maíz* by Miguel Angel Asturias. The article argues that the intersections of indigeneity and womanhood in *Hombres de maíz* highlight the relationship of an indigenous woman with her community more comprehensively than portrayed within the European framework within which indigenous woman is posited as more marginalized because of her indigeneity. The objective of the present work is to critically examine this above-mentioned intersection in the light of indigenous and European epistemologies. Whether the marginality of indigenous women is influenced by the fact that they belong to indigenous communities who are themselves considered marginalized is the work's central topic of inquiry. It seeks to inquire into the generally held notion of double marginalization suffered by the indigenous women. Though *Hombres de maíz* is not the first indigenous novel that highlights intersectionality between indigeneity and womanhood, it is an ideal work for a comparative examination to assess the notion of intersectionality between the indigeneity and womanhood existing both in western and indigenous epistemologies. It is the best version that discusses indigenous knowledge and informs the indigenous communities' relationship with the indigenous women. This intersectionality is often seen in a negative light in western discussions on the subalternity of women can be better understood with its merits by studying *Hombres de maíz*, which addresses indigenous womanhood from a non-Eurocentric perspective.

Key Words : Indigeneity, Womanhood

INTRODUCTION

A community or an individual is often considered marginalized due to its disadvantages concerning other groups and individuals in a society. Both indigenous people as a community and women as a social category are considered marginalized sections of the society. While the indigenous communities are marginalized due to the discrimination they face at the hands of the non-indigenous dominant population, the women are considered a marginalized social category for their historically unequal and unfair treatment in contrast to their male counterparts. Feminist discourses from the West seek to inquire into the status of an indigenous woman in indigenous society and other non-indigenous societies as an indigenous

woman. Moreover, they are interested in understanding the marginalization of women who suffer due to their socio-ethnic backgrounds. It is necessary to understand that such inquiries into the status of women as one of the social categories are important; they are often influenced by knowledge prevailing in the locus from where these inquiries originate. Many theories view inquiries into the double marginalization of women skeptically. They express their suspicion about the reasons for creating sub-marginalized categories within the existing marginalized groups.

The voice for women in marginalized societies comes from the western locus, which understands the marginality of women based on the notions and principles derived from their knowledge and experiences. While

such inquiries undeniably have irrefutable merits, it is often contested that they do not portray a fair and unbiased analysis of the status of women and are often times limited in scope and depth. Moreover, critics have challenged these inquiries who see a design in such a kind of theorization. Nevertheless, western knowledge and conceptualization cannot be shunned altogether as it offers another perspective. The question is: Is it possible to have a thorough conceptualization of indigenous womanhood through Eurocentric research and analysis? We will see in the work that the European conceptualization of the third world (that includes indigenous women) suffers flaws in methodologies and practices when placed in contrast with the conceptualization of indigenous women through indigenous ways of knowing.

Conceptualizing indigeneity:

Indigeneity is a highly contested term. On various grounds, groups across the world seek recognition as indigenous people. However, the lack of common consensus on concrete markers to identify indigenous people makes it difficult to have a universal conceptualization of the criteria and conditions of indigeneity.

Meran defines indigeneity in terms of the shared situation of indigenous communities across the world: “In recent decades, this concept has become internationalized, and “indigeneity” also has to presuppose a sphere of commonality among those form a collectively of indigenous people in contrast to their various others” (303).

However, in the context of Latin America, the idea of indigeneity is simpler to conceptualize. It is generally considered that all groups residing in Latin America before 1492 who post-discovery managed to continue their pre-Columbian way of life are indigenous people. Indigeneity, however, becomes difficult to conceptualize as groups calling themselves *mestizos* or *Ladinos* often claim indigeneity while denying association with indigenous people.

In order to prove that the Pre-Columbian population that the conquistadores met were not the first inhabitants of the New World, the land had been inhabited for thousands of years before the advent of the people who claimed themselves to be indigenous, several types of research were carried based on science.

The idea of indigeneity springs from the presence

of the other groups around. In many ways, it is a protective idea created to safeguard one’s values, properties, and culture from the so-called ‘adventitious groups’—most claims of indigeneity rest on the notion of being the first or the oldest inhabitants.

The above remarks on the origin of the idea of indigenous people explain why colonialism is a major force that influences the idea of indigeneity. The colonial modernity endangers much of what the indigenous groups practice. The colonizer brings in and enforces a set of norms and values alien to the indigenous way of life. Values of modernity are often in sharp contrast with indigenous values.

Every act of colonialism brings in some discriminatory practices with it. In a classic colonial setup, the autochthonous groups suffer the disadvantage of not being associated with European modernity. In Latin America, Indigeneity is associated with people who follow traditions and practices that existed before the conquest of Latin America and who, to this day, continue to practice or wish to continue to practice them. Indigeneity is also claimed in the form of descent from inhabitants that lived in the land before the conquest.

Conceptualizing the indigenous women:

The project of conceptualizing the third-world women (indigenous is a part) through a Eurocentric framework is as old as colonialism itself. Feminist theorists from Europe have intended to extend their experiences to the third world to help them conceptualize their position in society. However, many critics consider this project divisive and supremacist due to its adherence to the colonial methodologies for conceptualizing third-world women. Morton summarizes this discontent of the third-world scholars:

Alongside feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Nawal, El Saadawi, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Spivak has also persistently been critical of western feminist thinkers’ historical complicity with imperialism and the tendency of some western feminist thinkers to ignore the specific social, cultural and historical circumstances of non-western women’s live (quoted in Ouardi and Sandi, 130)

Anzaldúa, too criticizes western feminism for its universalism. As Ouardi and Sandy underline, “For Anzaldúa, Western ideology perpetuates the subordination and the inferiority of third world women through the philosophy of ignorance and trivializing the cultural legacy

and aspects of others in general and Third World women in particular” (133).

We can extrapolate from the opinions of the above critiques that the long western tradition of universalizing women as a social category is under intense criticism. Western feminism has overlooked many essential aspects of an indigenous woman by conceptualizing her from western cultural perspectives. As a result, new ways of conceptualizing indigenous women are being devised to represent and empower them fairly.

Indigeneity in *Hombres de maíz* :

As an *indigenista* novel, the central idea of *Hombres de maíz* is to focus on indigenous people’s psychosocial, religiopolitical, and socioeconomic struggle in a colonial setting. The novel stands out from the rest of the novels of the same genre that precedes it in how it focuses on the representation of the indigenous people. The indigenous community in the novel is represented with their indigeneity attached. Other *indigenista* works which sought to raise indigenous problems from a humane perspective could not rid themselves of concerns that Eurocentrism mainly informed. *Hombres de maíz*, on the contrary, reversed the way of representing the indigenous character from outward-inward to inward-outward. As readers, we now know what goes inside an agitated indigenous mind, a confused one, a troubled one, a deformed indigenous body, and a searching indigenous soul. We knew about cultural heritages that motivate them, that inspire them. The novel accentuates the indigenous ways of knowing and reasoning that guide them in a conflictive colonial setting. The indigeneity in *Hombres de maíz* is uniquely underlined because the novel does not try to represent the indigenous ways of being and knowing as a binary opposite to mainstream ideas. Although shown in a colonial setting in nature, the indigenous people exist and advance in their own right. They are never portrayed from those perspectives, possibly undermining their representation as a different set of people and not as the exact opposite “other” of Eurocentric imagination. The application of indigenous myth is one of the central highlights of the novel. The novel, breaking away from the mainstream idea of myth, presents myths woven with the indigenous realities. Myth is presented as the indigenous ways of associating with nature. It marked a departure from the Eurocentric view of myth as one of the unreasonable aspects of indigenous life.

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Women in *Hombres de maíz* :

Women are portrayed in different situations with different misery and different response. In Nana Yaca, we find the evil women, coquetious and harmful, disposed to take people’s lives for her profit. She is the one who poison’s Gaspar. She is the one who relates the news of the fleeing of Piojosa Grande in a manner that it may seem that Piojosa has betrayed the cacique. She epitomizes evil. Nana Yaca, though, is not an indigenous woman. She is married to an indigenous man (who has betrayed his ancestor by breaking their law). She means the destruction of Llóm and the indigenous way of life. She misuses the occasion of sacred indigenous social gathering by treacherously poisoning Gaspar’s food. She neither possesses the values of indigeneity nor is she interested in incorporating them now as a member of the community. In the same chapter, we are also introduced to Asturias’s Piojosa Grande, the wife of Gaspar Llóm, the cacique, and the mother of the cacique’s child. Piojosa Grande is not only an obedient wife of the cacique but also a faithful member of her community. Later in the novel, when Nicho Aquino descend to the inframundo, he is told by the wizards that the legend of Maria Tecún is not Maria Tecún but Maria la Lluvia, Piojosa Grande. Calendria Rosa, the girlfriend of Machojón, is a young woman. She suffers the shock of her boyfriend’s disappearance and never marries. Maria Tecún is the wife of Goyo Yic. She is that ideal woman who bears all hardships of life stoically till she decides to leave Goyo Yic and runs away. For most of the novel, she remains present in her absence after her fleeing away. She becomes a point of reference to some so much that, as Dorfman indicates, she becomes “a proper noun” the Tecúna.

Not much is revealed about the wife of Nicho Aquino, who only appears in the name. When Nicho Aquino arrives and does not find her, she is declared a Tecúna.

The intersectionality of indigeneity and gender in *Hombre de maíz*:

The idea of woman’s rights is not new. It has been in vogue for centuries. At the core of indigenous societies, unlike most modern societies, the woman is not treated as a separate social category. *Hombres de maíz* is exalted for taking up the theme of an indigenous woman. The disadvantages women suffer within indigenous societies are quite different from those of women in adventitious societies.

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Moreover, the parameters for identifying discriminatory practices mostly spring from modern societies' concepts, ideas, and practices. What may constitute discrimination against women in modern society might be considered a normal practice within the indigenous society and likely be endorsed by the indigenous women themselves. In the novel, we come across five main female characters, la Piojosa Grande, Nana Yaca, Calenderia, Maria Tecún, Isabra (Nicho Aquino's wife).

Although the first chapter of the work focuses exclusively on Gaspar Llóm, Piojosa Grande exerts her importance stealthily in the background. The night before, Gaspar Llóm finally decides to drive the *macieros* away; he tries to relieve his anxiety by making love with Piojosa Grande. Later in the face of defeat, Piojosa Grande tries to flee with Gaspar's son without informing him. This unilateral decision is taken as a sign of betrayal by Gaspar, and he crosses her path, intending to end her life. However, when he sees his son in her arms, he understands the reason for her decision and lets her leave. Gaspar's letting her go and his subsequent suicide are not decisions taken in the heat of the moment. On the contrary, letting her go and taking his life is pragmatic.

The death of all his men is a clear sign of imminent defeat. He knows that his work is over as a cacique. The posterity will carry forward his resistance. His suicide is not a cowardly act. His trust in Piojosa Grande is that she would manage to continue the indigenous lineage against all the odds. Many vital clues can be extrapolated from Piojosa Grande's decision to leave, and Gaspar lets her. Why does she want to leave? Is she afraid of her death, or does she leave with a bigger idea in her mind? For this, we need to understand the idea of death in an indigenous belief system. In a situation where the community is in peril, death has no meaning. So, does she flee to betray Gaspar and, in turn, the whole community? If it were only for her life that she was fleeing, she could have left her child behind, making her escape faster. Apart from the motherly love that made her escape with her son in her arms, she certainly has some other communal motives. The proximity of the military and imminent defeat mean danger to her child's life, who is vulnerable because of being the son of the cacique against whom the government has deployed a whole regiment. It was also about the life of the cacique's son with the invading military that would probably show no mercy.

While Gaspar sacrifices his life for the sake of the community, the woman's sacrifice lies in continuing to live the continuance of their indigenous lineage. Her sacrifice lies in living through the sufferings of the post-disaster period. Her son will grow to continue the indigenous way of life; in her son, she knows that the community's hope lies.

Gaspar thinks no differently than his wife. Upon receiving the news of her escape, his fury comes as a natural sense of betrayal and from having left the community during the hard times. Gaspar is sure that Nana Yaca would bring him up even in his absence, maintaining the cultural continuity. While the men take up the role of protector and provider, women, apart from acting as protectors and providers, take up the additional role of preserver in the hours of need. It does not signify that women are solely assigned to raise children, an opinion to which western feminism is starkly opposed. However, we notice in the novel that the fleeing women run away with their children, which implies that it is not the community forcing her to take the children along. The indigenous woman is confident of her abilities as a mother; she is sure of raising her children well to the best of her abilities amidst all the hardships due to the disintegration of the indigenous social structure. It is not a duty imposed upon her by the indigenous community.

The restlessness of all men victims of the "Tecúna" is not sexual in nature. On the contrary, Callan says, "a man generally expresses in anima through the women he loves or through the idealized figure such as Hilario's Miguelita (Asturias and Martin, *Men of Maiz*, 1993). In the presence of this absence, the novel finds its continuity. It is a search for men's better half. To understand the separation and understand women's equal role in indigenous social life, we refer to the instance of lovemaking between Gaspar and Piojosa Grande. La Piojosa Grande manoteó bajo el cuerpo del Gaspar... más allá de él, más allá de ella, donde él empezaba a dejar de ser solo él y ella sola ella y se volvían especie, tribu.

They are not just two individuals; their togetherness makes one complete person, their generation complete, and one entire tribe. In their union, they realize the true essence of indigenous existence. The men and women together have built the foundation of the indigenous society, and they must continue to be together to continue their ancestors' way of life. Now the question is, if the indigenous society only functions when men work hand

in hand for the common social goals, why is it that the indigenous women who are supposed to be with their men to ensure the indigenous way of life flee? Are they disturbed by the patriarchal system and domestic violence? The violence of Goyo Yic is not a result of a gender bias but a product of poverty in a class-based society. His blindness frustrates him. He feels alienated. He certainly ill-treats Maria Tecún, and we know this by the whispers of those women who Goyo Yic for not treating her in a gentlemanly way. We notice that his *nahual* remains by his side all time, even in his bad fame, because regardless of the violence and frustrations that arise from his socioeconomic situation, which affects psychosocial behaviour, he is pure from inside. His love for Maria Tecún is true. His *nahual tacautzin* remains with him as long he searches with Maria Tecún with true love. However, upon gaining his sight when he commits adultery, his *nahual* lives him. It is a sign that he has betrayed Maria Tecún but also his ancestors. While Goyo Yic tries to make sense of his lonely life by getting involved in picaresque adventures, María Tecún (indifferent to her defamation) raises her children. She follows in the footsteps of Piojosa Grande. One may interpret it as categorically cruel for indigenous women to leave their husbands in times of adversity. While the men left behind are sure to suffer in the absence of their wives, imagining that the “Tecúnas” who leave, leave with a desire for a better life for themselves is absurd. To leave the safety of one’s home and venture into a danger-ridden class-based society is a risky affair, and one would not take these extreme steps for material gains. We note that in the end when María Tecún meets Goyo Yic, the latter asks her the reason for her running away and she puts it plainly “Te dejé, no porque no te quisiera, sino porque si me quedo con vos a estas horas tendríamos diez hijos más, y no se podía: por vos, por ellos, por mí; qué hubieran hecho los patojos sin mí; vos eras empedido de la vista...” It was all for survival, and it was all for continuity. She did it for everybody’s welfare. The vice of drinking that infests the men of the runaway wives portrays the times of the *conquista* when the indigenous social structure was destroyed their women were enslaved and taken away. All these men relive the agony that their ancestors lived after the conquest. This desolation, more than circumstantial, is historical. It references the time when the invaders separated indigenous men and women. Hapless and desolated men took to alcohol, which they used for recreation in the

indigenous society before the conquest. Drinking became a vice common among the indigenous communities, which concerned Asturias, mentioned in his thesis. The perpetual fear of women has its roots in colonial history. The aspersion that women like Maria Tecún acquired in society can be understood in the light of the disconnect from the past.

The gender imbalance is not strictly related to modern societies. Various forms of discrimination have been identified within indigenous societies. To say that discrimination against women is a result of colonialism would be flawed, given that women within the indigenous societies have been subjected to discriminatory practices.

Conclusion:

We notice that there are several ways Asturias’s work debunks the western conceptualization of indigenous women as the feminine other. However, this debunking does not seem to have been done by him. It is apparent by the absence of any directly conspicuous criticism of Eurocentrism that the author’s intention is far from creating an essentially anti-Eurocentric work. Instead, his representations of the various aspects of indigenous women’s lives have been truly established based on indigenous ways of knowing.

He represents this intersectionality of indigeneity and womanhood not as an answer to western feminist discourse (which, in the guise of rescuing the marginalized third-world women, often tries to create a form of a divide between the men- woman dynamics of the third-world country) but in its own right. Moreover, this intersectionality flows unperturbed even in the colonial setting in which the work is situated. Eurocentric interventions remain virtually absent, and modernity is presented as a disturbing external force though not powerful enough to obliterate or override the indigenous impressions.

To say that this intersectionality between indigeneity and womanhood is represented in the novel independent of Eurocentric experiences will not be accurate. The main idea of the Eurocentric framework is to research and analyse the woman of the third world and other marginalized groups to classify groups within the larger group to address the marginality of non-western women in the third world exclusively. The novel fills the gap in the European knowledge of indigenous women, underlining the conventionally ignored elements of the indigenous. Therefore, in a way, the novel also tries to

educate the Eurocentric framework on conceptualizing indigenous women by highlighting the contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the Eurocentric framework. While doing a literature review in order to make recommendations for a new inclusive education policy to meaningfully prepare a Curriculum that addresses the need of her First-Nation students, Battiste points out the independent existence of indigenous knowledge and the problem of understanding it within the European framework “The problem with this approach is that indigenous knowledge does not mirror the Classic order of life. It is a knowledge system in its own right with its internal consistencies and ways of knowing, and there are limits to how far it can be comprehended from a Eurocentric point of view” (Marie Battiste, para 2).

Appropriating the marginalized third-world women in the western feminist experiences has drawn criticism from the third-world feminist theorists, as already discussed in the article. However, it is proposed herein to conclude that more studies coming from indigenous spaces on indigenous women can help review the European framework for conceptualizing indigenous women and help correct the failures and contradictions

of the past. In a nutshell, the novel’s example can be followed to develop a theoretical frame to understand better indigenous knowledge and indigenous ways of knowing and positioning femininity in the indigenous world view.

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