



Bless Me, Ultima: A Scrutiny on Cultural Mosaic Society and its Impingement on Chicanos’ Individuality

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Abstract

A ‘cultural mosaic’ is a term that describes a nation that considers the different races, ethnicities and otherness of its citizens essential to its existence. The mosaic is often contrasted with the ‘melting pot’, which requires all of those differences to meld together in assimilation. When people have clearly defined differences, languages and values, it can lead to biases and assumptions remaining the same because it can be difficult to relate to people who are so different. Cultural Mosaic is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society

There are many different types of ethnicities throughout the world, all of which have their own system of living, praying, and joining with one another. We as humans refer this as culture, culture tells

us everything that we do as citizens or do differently as persons in one word. This word is used all over the world to give people what they deserve, their own way of living.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Identity Crisis, Salad bowl, Cultural Mosaic, Migration, Ethnicities.

This paper is an attempt to define the term Multiculturalism in the social, cultural and political context of the people of Chicano region. It is necessary to explore the socio-cultural background of multiculturalism to foreground the pragmatic implications of the term in literary context.

The term “Cultural mosaic” is a phrase which is also called as ‘Salad bowl’ is used to describe the mix of ethnic group, languages and cultures that coexist within society. The idea of a cultural mosaic is intended to champion an ideal of multiculturalism, differently from other systems like the melting pot. A cultural mosaic is a theory that suggests that society should encourage ethnic groups to maintain their ethnic diversity and identity. These groups of people have tried to give themselves a new way of life by moving to a new habitat and circumstances. No one give up their traditions or beliefs, but all have made the agreement that they are different from each other. These cultures recognize that they would have to understand each other in order to live their lives in the area which they have chosen to settle.

One of the major problems in a mosaic society is religious differences. Understanding other religions can be a very difficult obstacle to overcome. Generally people are very passionate about their religious beliefs. Acceptance of another religion, especially a religion that is not understood, can be a difficult if not impossible task.

In countries like Canada, India people from various parts of America also settled in the City of Mexico. They are called as Mexican- Americans or Chicanos. People in this region follow a mixed culture. They have their own traditions, customs, religious beliefs, etc., Rudolfo Anaya the writer of this novel *Bless me, Ultima* is influenced by a variety of things. In the early 1960’s while he was pursuing his degree in literature at the University of New Mexico. He finds his own voice and style in his writings. He realized the oral traditions, beliefs of his own community and he has got influence from his

own traditions. Anaya says that writers are influenced not just by other authors but by a multiplicity of things. He portrays many new perspectives in the novel based on culture bias which gives a new way of understanding to the readers.

Antonio Marez is the protagonist who belongs to both race of farmers who live in El Puerto de Los Lunas and Vaqueros live in the plains of Las Pasturas in Guadalupe in New Mexico. From his childhood he is serious, thoughtful and have the tendency to moral questioning. His experiences forces him to face difficult issues in understanding the blur between right and wrong. He is in the state of dilemma to choose his path. Antonio's mother Maria wants him to become a Priest or a farmer from her Lunas origin. His father Gabriel wants him to become a Vaquero. Antonio is confused and he doubts both traditions. Ultima helps Antonio by teaching him everything. Antonio not only has dilemma in the choice of his responsibility but also he has many diverged ideas of Good and Evil, spirituality, humanity, etc., Some incidents in his life leads him towards all his queries.

At first Antonio's innocence is threatened by the death of Lupito. He looks his father as one among the mob who kills Lupito and he also takes Communion in the Church. Later when his brothers return home from war, his father is very happy and he starts planning to move to California for their better settlement, but his brothers never mind about his father's wish. They always used to drink and spend many hours in Rosie's Whorehouse. This also shakes Antonio's in belief in the religion and tradition.

It is too complicated to digest that a six years old boy has his vision towards the social practices and activities that happen in his society. Rudolfo Anaya has given his own nature through the character of Antonio. Antonio has a diverged ideas in choosing his path by the varied wishes of his parents. Being a person from the origin of Lunas, Antonio's mother Maria wants him to be as a Lunas priest. Antonio's statement about his mother's wish is

“My mother was not a woman of Ilano, she was the daughter of a farmer. She could not see beauty in the Ilano and she could not understand the coarse men who lived half their lifetimes on horseback. After I was born in Las Pasturas she persuaded my father to leave the

Ilano and bring her family to the town of Guadalupe where she said there would be opportunity and school for us” (2)

The beginning stage for all his confusions about the tradition and religion is from his family itself. As it is defined earlier, Antonio’s mother is the daughter of a farmer from Lunas origin. She too does not like the culture of Ilano people. Being a women from a land of peace she does not want her son to be brought up as one among the Vaqueros. She not even likes the men in Ilano who always used to live half of their life time on horseback and roam here and there in the mountains and plains as nomadics. So she often tries to convince her husband Gabriel to leave Ilano and she wants to settle her family to the town of Guadalupe which is near to her homeland. Maria as a mother also thinks about her son’s future. She wants to educate him in the school and wants to make way for many opportunities for the betterment of Antonio’s life.

Usually people have an extra room or a separate place in their house for providing to their friends or some strangers who come to the house. They give and facilitate the guest with what they have in their house. Especially everyone has a special concern about old and sick people. Antonio knows that his father and mother will do good by providing home for Ultima. In both their heritages it is the custom to provide food and shelter for the old and sick people. Being strong followers of their traditions they accommodate Ultima in their house.

Anaya projects Ultima as a healer, a miracle worker in the entire novel. He justified her character in all the situations through many incidents. Antonio and his family knows that Ultima has some miraculous power. She can also lift the curses and exorcise evil spirits. Many people in the surroundings believe Ultima and they are helped by Ultima. Some people do not believe in her and call her as a witch. They think that Ultima itself curses and haunts people and she itself help them to get relief from evil. They say that she itself practicing witchcraft towards people.

Anaya has used dream as his tool to bring out the queries which raises in the mind of Antonio. In the entire novel Antonio dreams a lot. He sometimes tries to investigate or interpret his own dreams with the help of Maria.

“I drifted into the time of dreams. Once I had told my mother about my dreams, and she said they were visions from God and she was happy, because her own dream was that I should grow up and become a priest. After that I did not tell her about my dreams, and they remained in me forever and ever. . .” (4-5)

Antonio has several dreams and he always wants to get interpretations for all his dreams. When he exposes it to his mother she has started to interpret in her own way by highlighting her wish. Antonio realizes that his choice is not given importance and he starts to hide everything within himself.

“The colony had first settled there under a land grant from the Mexican government, and the man who led the colonization was a priest, and he was a Luna. That is why my mother dreamed of me becoming a priest, because there had not been a Luna priest in the family for many years.” (29)

Anaya also point out the religious disbelief which some group of people framed in their mind. There may be some clashes within the family itself because of the religious practices.

“On Sunday morning I always stayed in bed and listened to their argument. They always quarreled on Sunday morning. There were two reasons for this: the first was that my father worked only half a day on Saturdays at the highway and so in the afternoon he drank with his friends at the Longhorn Saloon in town.” (28)

Anaya traces the religious dominance in that particular period. There are several movements started and they protest against immoral activities of priests of that period. Anaya portrays the dominance of the Catholic priests in the novel itself.

People blindly believe that they can get the salvation only through the priest. They consider priest as next to God. They think that they all should live under the control of a priest and Antonio’s mother Maria is a fine example for the ignorance of people. So Maria wants her son to become the priest to save the people.

People in the world can be differentiated in to two categories. One is people who are very quiet and work towards the success. The other is people who are very wild and furious who are always struggle and learn lessons through their follies. In this novel Anaya differentiates Marez and Lunas based on their circumstance, heritage and their generations.

Ultima here makes it clear that Antonio's future is becoming a priest who concerns about people. As a mentor she teaches him a lot about the world and the nature of people. She compares the people of Lunas to the moon. The nature of the moon is it seems to be very quiet and it gives light to clear the darkness. Likewise the nature of the people of Lunas is also being very calm and quiet and they always want to remain in a peace. Ultima compares Marez people to the ocean. The nature of the ocean is that it always remains sound and wild. The sound of the waves lasts for a long distance. Likewise, the Marez people are also very wild and furious. They always roam and wander to occupy the places of Ilano. They do not have a proper home. They make the places which they occupy as their homes. They always fight with the other races and they dwell in a loud circumstance.

The common factor in every man is that one cannot stand in a decision at all the times. It keeps changing and remains in oscillation. As a boy Antonio belongs to both the heritage, he loves both cultures. As a man who loves both the culture he does not want to neglect any one. Even though his father and mother belongs to two different race, nobody has seen Antonio in the eyes of enmity. Instead both groups of people loves Antonio and takes care on him.

The author's view about Antonio is that he is not grown and bold enough to express his views to others. "I said, "every day I grow older". "True," she replied softly. She understood that as I grew I would have to choose to be my mother's priest or my father's son." (41) In a conversation between Antonio and Ultima, Antonio says that even though he is growing older he has not attained the stage to choose his career. He asks Ultima about his future. Ultima replies and advices him not to chuckle with those thoughts and she also tells that he has plenty of time to find.

Anaya projects the life of Marez people through the brothers of Antonio. When the war comes to an end, people in Guadalupe are eagerly waiting to receive their family members who take part in the war. This shows the routine life of wanderers of Marez.

“It’s that Marez blood itching,” Andrew laughed. Andrew listened to them, but he would not necessarily be led by Gene. Andrew liked to be his own man.

It was true, I thought, it is the Marez blood in us that touches us with the urge to wander. Like the restless, seeking sea. (66)

Antonio is shocked to see the attitudes of his brothers. Andrew says that it is the Marez blood within them and they should wander in the streets like the other Vaqueros. Even though his utterance is not acceptable, it is the real fact that a Vaquero do. The urge of every Vaquero to wander, eat and spend their time in Whorehouse. They do not care for their household duties. It is because, they spend half of their life span in war field. They live in the land of blood soil. They do not know anything apart from pistols and revolvers. This attitude leads Antonio’s brothers to move away from their family. They leave their home and search for some other jobs in the cities like Las Vegas, Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

The author frames the character of Antonio that he has to progress towards his own moral independence and to choose his destiny. Antonio is forced to endure more difficult experiences too earlier in his life and it causes to lose his innocence in his prematured level. He is overwhelmed with a multiples of spiritual questions. His experiences continually call his basic beliefs into questions. To find the key for all his questions, he must undertake a metamorphosis.

Anaya here makes Antonio to understand some happenings through his friends too. Antonio along with Samuel used to play with his friends. They all are brought up in the faith in Christianity. So they plan to play confessing their sin to the priest. To have a priest for their confession they all tell Antonio to be as the priest. Antonio is not interested to be as a priest because of his confusions. But they all shout Antonio to be the priest. They all have surrounded Antonio and started to dress him like a priest. They all take off their sweaters and jackets and they tied in around his waist and neck. They all

have started to sing and dance around Antonio. Antonio feels that the costumes are too weight and he struggles to carry. Then he accepts to act as the priest. Then they all have started to play by confessing the sins to Antonio. This also leads Antonio to think about his way that he needs to travel.

“I am the priest!” I shouted back, “and I have absolved him of his sins!” I was facing the angry kids and I could see that their hunger for vengeance was directed at me, but I didn’t care, I felt relieved. I had stood my ground for what I felt to be right and I was not afraid” (214)

Anaya wants to highlight the idea that not a single religion and its theology can fulfill the needs of a common man and makes him to remain in peace. Every religion has its own principles and doctrines and they all suggest good things. As these people live in a mosaic society, there are many different kinds of people following different religion. But some dominant religion suppress the people who are against their principles. Anaya wants to make it clear to the readers through the character of Antonio. “On the altar the priest began the ceremony of changing the bread into flesh and the wine into blood. The body and blood of the risen Christ. Soon He would be with me, in me and He would answer all the questions I had to ask.” (219)

Throughout the novel, Antonio battles within himself and his family to find his true destiny. Will he be a Luna priest, satisfying his mother, or a Marez wanderer, emulating his father? The two sides of his spirit battle continuously during his young life, pulling at him until he questions everything, including his religious beliefs. In the end, the novel raises the question of destiny. How much of one’s future and choices are dictated by birth, fate, and chance, and is it a possibility to choose one’s own path? Though Anaya offers a different dilemma than Rivera or Villarreal, he stays true to Chicano literature by showing that a single, pure identity can be composed of many different selves. Like the other Chicano novels, *Bless Me, Ultima* is a book which is greatly concerned with religion and its changing meaning for youth as they grow and learn. Antonio faces struggles and backlash when it comes to his understanding of God in the whole part of the novel.

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