



Chicano Cultural Identification in Rudolfo Aanya's *Zia Summer* From the Perspective of Magical Realism

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Abstract

Zia Summer was published by the Mexican-American writer Rudolfo Alfronso Anaya in 1995, which presents the theme of cultural identification and survival of Chicano people through the detective Sonny Baca's quest to discover the murderer of his cousin Gloria Dominic. As he investigates deeper into this mystery, Sonny begins to ask questions about the religious cult that is behind Gloria's death, and its shadowy leader, a man known as Raven, whose charisma attracts a variety of followers, who see him as a restorer of order to a world of economic disparity, violence, and ecological devastation. From the perspective of magical realism, this paper reflects the Chicano cultural identification through the interpretation of the three main characters: Gloria, Raven and Sonny Baca, who are the innocent victim, the fanatic defender and the explorer of the Chicano traditions, respectively.

Key words: Rudolfo Anaya; *Zia Summer*; Magical realism; Chicano cultural identification

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rudolfo Alfronso Anaya was born in 1937 in Guadalupe County, New Mexico, where he sets many of his novels. As the "Godfather of Chicano Literature," he has earned numerous prestigious awards in the last fifty years in recognition of his contribution to American literature. As a highly regarded Chicano writer, Anaya has published a large number of novels, short stories, mysteries, plays, picture books and literature collections. *Bless Me, Ultima* wins the Second Annual Premio Quinto Sol award in 1971 and has remained his most celebrated novel. In his works, Anaya employs magical realism, mythopoeitics and folk cultures. Exploring the Chicano experience, he makes a great effort to bring the traditions of Chicano culture to national recognition.

In 1955, literary critic Angel Flores coined the term "magical realism" (as opposed to "magic realism") in English in an essay, stating that it combines elements of magic realism and marvelous realism. Magical realism was born in Latin America, which is the result of Latin American writers' drawing on the creative techniques of European and American modernist writers and exploring national literature for a long time. They often use some mythological allusions, magical imagery, the intersection of fiction and reality, and exaggeration to create a mysterious and dreamy atmosphere, but its foothold is still reality. A large number of ghosts and gods, myths and legends, religious stories and folklore often appear in the works of such writers, using symbolic metaphors, irony and other techniques to show readers a bizarre picture of reality. Among them, the most representative work is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Colombian writer García Márquez.

Under the cover of the detective novel, the detective Sonny in *Zia Summer* is on a quest not only to discover the murderer but also to find his cultural identity. In *Zia*

Summer; Sonny Baca went through a tale of crimes and investigations and seeks to solve the mystery of his cousin Gloria's murder, and in the process, encounters a much larger mystery, one that incorporates themes of political intrigue, multinational business deals, eco-terrorism, and the looming threat of the nuclear holocaust. As Sonny digs deeper into this mystery, he found that Gloria had been murdered by some mysterious people, whose leader is a man called Raven and begins to ask questions about the religious cult that seems to be behind Gloria's death.

The researches on Rudolf Anaya mainly focus on his special Chicano cultural identity, and the narrative style, thematic images, elements of magical reality in his representative work *Bless me, Ultima*. As for *Zia Summer*, Flys-Junquera (2003) talked about the relationship between culture and power, and Turner (2013) discussed about the Role of the Shaman in Rudolfo Anaya's Sonny Baca Novels. However, the researches on *Zia Summer* from the perspective of magical realism are still slightly insufficient.

From the perspective of magical realism, this paper reflects the Chicano cultural identification through the interpretation of the three main characters: Gloria, Raven and Sonny Baca, who are the innocent victim, the fanatic defender and the explorer of the Chicano traditions, respectively.

1. GLORIA DOMINIC--THE INNOCENT VICTIM OF THE CHICANO TRADITIONAL CULTURE

When the inner pain and anxiety cannot be poured out in the real world, the help of the religion or ancient mysterious power will naturally become the first choice for those people who have religious beliefs. Under the oppression and exclusion of patriarchal society, Gloria seeks spiritual enlightenment from a curandero, but did not expect that she was tragically used as sacrifice by the curandero she trusted.

Gloria's whole life was a tragedy. She was born into a declining aristocratic family which has a bloodline relating to the original duke of Albuquerque's mystique. During her childhood, she was raped by her father and brother, but her mother chose to ignore it. In addition, the reason why her husband married her is not only because of her beauty, but also of his plan to take advantage of her royal identity to further his political ambitions. Under these circumstances, Gloria met a Japanese business man who called Akira Morino and had an affair with him. After becoming pregnant, a choice between miscarriage and giving birth to the baby had rendered her in the excruciating pain.

Therefore, she went to seek help from a female curandero called Veronica who is claimed to be able to

administer shamanistic and spiritualistic remedies for mental, emotional, physical and "spiritual" illnesses. However, according to Gloria's mother Delfina: "The woman seemed to have a strange hold over her. She had helped Gloria in one way, only to possess her in another. The last time I saw her she said she had to get away from the woman" (Anaya, 1995, p.41). At the very beginning, the curandero seemed to have cured her depression, but later she grew more nervous.

Along with the development of the story, Veronica was eventually identified as the killer and also Raven's follower. Raven was the spiritual leader of an old hippie commune and the husband of four women who lived together in the mountain compound and regard Raven as the Sun King, the messiah, the progenitor. Sonny found that Dorothy Glass who died one year ago rose from the dead unexpectedly and became one of Raven's wives. Raven killed one wife and chose a new one as the Earth Mother at a time, and this year is Dorothy's turn to be the Earth Mother. Sonny thought that maybe Raven had anointed Gloria to be his next wife and the Earth Mother. "In trying to leave, she had broken the cult's primary rule, and for that she had to pay with her life" (Anaya, 1995, p.337). They killed Gloria and drained her blood to sacrifice for the sun.

Through the descriptions of the magical elements--curandero and resurrection, on the surface, Gloria came from a royal family and had successfully risen to the white upper class, but in reality she was only used by her father and brother as a tool to vent sexual desires and a stepping stone for her husband's political path. Under the oppression and exclusion of the patriarchal society, she finally turned to her own people's traditional spiritual healing methods, but paid with her life. The dross of Gloria's traditional beliefs makes her a double victim of the patriarchal society and the traditional culture, in which she is only a marginal person with no distinct identity.

RAVEN--THE FANATIC DEFENDER OF THE CHICANO TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Raven and his followers are still indulged in the ancient and rustic life of the past, but the sudden modernization has overwhelmed them. They believe in the sun, take protecting the earth as their duty, and defend their religious beliefs at the cost of their own and even the lives of others. Faith, which is supposed to bring people solace and strength, becomes deformed under the over-interpretation and protection of these fanatics.

Raven and his people's religion was a curious blend of mystical beliefs, mostly a misinterpreted Pueblo Indian way of life. The Pueblo Indians, situated in the Southwestern United States, are one of the oldest cultures in the nation. During their long history, the ancient Puebloans evolved from a nomadic, hunter-gathering

lifestyle to a sedentary culture. Though they did not give up hunting, they expanded into an agricultural culture, growing maize, corn, squash, and beans, raising turkeys, and developing complex irrigation systems. Both the earth and the sun are the givers of life; therefore, for people whose survival is based on agriculture, the sun and the earth are undoubtedly their divine faith.

Raven's philosophy included bits and pieces of the Indian lore that he had picked up during the three years when his group was encamped near Taos Pueblo. "He professed a kind of free love, a pro-environment stance that centered around their mission to save Mother Earth from destruction by pollution" (Anaya, 1995, p. 46).

Therefore, on one hand, to appease their Sun God, Raven and his people offer Gloria and other people's blood to the sun as sacrifice. "The Aztecs used blood to feed the sun. They offered blood to the sun to ensure it would rise every day" (Anaya, 1995, p.39). On the other hand, to protect their Earth Mother/God, Raven planned to blow up the truck with the radioactive waste. The Senate had approved the test run of a large truck carrying radioactive waste from Los Alamos to the WIPP facility in a couple of weeks. They have already stored high-level radioactive waste in this state forty years before:

Los Alamos has dumped radioactive water into the Río Grande. Sandia Labs has dumped right into the South Valley.....The DOE and the Defense Department have stockpiled nukes in the Manzano Mountains. All that stuff they're storing and dismantling is seeping into the water! At WIPP the barrels will be corroded by the salt! It's poisoning the earth! (Anaya, 1995, p. 244)

Raven was ready to blow up the truck carrying the nuclear waste and to create a holocaust that would make the world take notice although the blowing and nuclear leaking would kill a lot of people. However, Raven and his people do not think they are murderers; on the contrary, they think they are saving lives. They want an Earth free of nuclear weapons and waste.

Through the descriptions of the magical elements--religious worship and sacrifice, the problems are exposed concerning the inheritance and development of the Chicano traditional culture. As the representative inheritor of the Chicano culture, Raven did not hold a critical attitude towards the beliefs they admired, to take the essence and remove its dross, but absorbed it completely. On the one hand, they believe in the earth and the sun, and pursue the ecological balance, but on the other hand, they use the irrational way of killing people for blood and blowing up trucks with nuclear waste to please and defend their faith. Raven and his followers have lost and distorted their cultural uniqueness in their attempts to establish their own cultural identity. Inheriting traditional culture is the unshakable responsibility of every Chicano, but the distorted interpretation and blind use can make it a potential harm to the society.

4. SONNY BACA--THE EXPLORER OF THE CHICANO TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Under the dual impact of the mainstream white culture and the rapid modernization, Chicano's cultural traditions and identity were gradually marginalized. Sonny Baca's process of finding the killer is actually a process of re-understanding, exploring and reflecting on the culture identity of his own people. As Carmen Flys-Junquera asserts in her discussion of Anaya's fiction, and Sonny in particular, "the learning process he undergoes is that of learning more about his culture, traditions and folklore" (Flys-Junquera, 2003, p.189-190).

Sonny saw through Raven's plot to murder Gloria and did his best to stop Raven from blowing up the truck, because he knows that Raven's evil deeds came from a distorted interpretation of the traditional culture. However, unlike Raven's irrationality, Sonny Baca did not completely deny or accept the Chicano culture, and with the help of his old neighbor Don Eliseo, girlfriend Rita and curandero Lorenza, he had a sober and objective understanding of the Chicano faith and culture.

The 1990s is a time of rapid growth in the Western world and changes in New Mexico were also inevitable. Don Eliseo lives in the old Mexican and Indian ways, but his sons had gotten educated and left the valley, married Anglo women, and joined the great American dream in a Northeast Heights homogenized culture. Not speaking Spanish, they live up in the Heights with gringa wives who just do not cook Mexican food. It was happening all over, the change to an Anglo lifestyle, the attention to work and green lawns on the weekend, and kids in soccer or music lessons. In the process they forgot their Spanish language, growing ashamed of the old traditions. Sonny's father used to take him and his brother to the dances in Bernalillo in August, when the village celebrated the fiesta of San Lorenzo. "Not until the last person forgot the dance of the matachines would their way of life end" (Anaya, 1995, p.144).

Don Eliseo, an Albuquerque old-timer, connects Sonny with his cultural past and teaches him respect and love for the beliefs and ways of his Mexican and Indian ancestors. Becoming aware of his Hispanic past, Sonny comes to understand Gloria's murder as a symptom of the loss of a sense of unity with nature, brought about by modernization and misappropriation of the ancient cultural symbols by a new power-thirsty elite.

Sonny Baca received a good modern education and taught in a school after graduation, but out of respect for his detective grandfather and a sense of mission to help find the murderer of his cousin Gloria, he resolutely joined this difficult journey. During this journey, he had an unprecedented understanding and experience of the traditions of his own nation--from shallow to deep, nothing to something, being outside to being inside.

After Gloria's death, Sonny has always felt that her soul has been haunting him in dreams or real life, and he can feel the pain and unwillingness of her soul, which also makes Sonny feel very painful. His girlfriend Rita thought Gloria's spirit was haunting or even in Sonny and she called this magical phenomenon--susto. Susto is a mental illness primarily among Latin American cultures. It is described as a condition of chronic somatic suffering stemming from emotional trauma or from witnessing traumatic experiences lived by others.

At Rita's suggestion, Sonny comes to ask for help from a curandero--Lorenza who told Sonny that Gloria's soul/spirit has gotten into his and it has to be cleaned away through a *limpieza* (a spirit cleansing ceremony). Gloria was the first woman Sonny loved and the one to have taught him love. However, Lorenza said, "No matter how much we love the person, when they die the soul must move on. The soul is on a journey, seeking its own light, its own clarity" (Anaya, 1995, p.218). Lorenza has the same or close philosophy with Don Eliseo who thinks the soul has to leave, but for some reason (maybe for revenge), Gloria's soul did not want to continue on its natural journey and had fastened him. As Gloria's cousin and the one who loved her deeply, Sonny wanted to pacify her soul and help her to enter the journey of life smoothly.

Lorenza also told Sonny that the coyotes are watching over him, which are his animal spirit/energy. "When the animal spirit appears, it means they come to help" (Anaya, 1995, p.217). Lorenza said that there was a strong animal spirit acting against Sonny. "In the old teaching, the *nagual* is the animal energy of a person. We all have it. Someone is using their animal energy against you" (Anaya, 1995, p.218). *Nagual* is the personal guardian spirit believed by some Mesoamerican Indians to reside in an animal, such as a deer, jaguar, or bird who comes to protect when the danger is approaching. However, these despicable extremists use the animal spirits who protect human beings to do evil deeds.

Through the descriptions of the magical elements—the haunting spirit and the guardian spirit as well as the traditions that had passed or is about to pass away, Anaya brings the forgotten traditional Chicano culture back to the public eye. Sonny's mission then is not only to solve the crime and restore harmony by allowing

Gloria's soul to her natural journey, but also to serve as a conduit for large-scale cultural reformation through the reestablishment of excellent spiritual practice and belief. He believes that there are a lot of good spirits who are still protecting them.

CONCLUSION

With the analysis of the three characters, namely, Gloria, Raven and Sonny Baca, this paper reveals the complicated interaction of the magical elements and the social reality in the Chicano cultural identification. While the traditional culture of the Chicano is gradually forgotten by some people, it is also used by a group of extremists to demagogue people's minds and endanger social order and the environment in order to achieve their own goals. Nevertheless, such successors and guardians as Sonny have begun to awaken their cultural consciousness and pass on their culture rationally in the course of identifying with it.

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