

**“The Middle Woman” from *Nepantla*:
Sameness and Difference in the
Poetry of Pat Mora**

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Abstract: The term difference has come to be regarded as one of the major defining factors in the understanding and criticism of literary texts in today’s literary and cultural studies. Within this border term the Chicana authors have negotiated empowerment through difference. Borders, therefore have become the perfect metaphor for their quest. Although traditionally borders have always been regarded as the line of division separating two or more groups, borders can simultaneously be seen as a point of contact through which either side can relate to each other. This article explores the poetry of Pat Mora. Born in 1942 in El Paso, Texas, she is a poet who chooses to concentrate on the potential of borders to unite, heal and communicate. Ultimately, her poetry is in constant negotiation between resistance to homogenization and shared experience between women. It is a borderline standpoint between difference and sameness.

Keywords: Chicana Literature, Feminism, Poetry, Pat Mora

The term difference has come to be regarded as one of the major defining factors in the understanding and criticism of literary texts in today’s literary and cultural studies. This problematic term is further complicated by feminist authors and theoreticians through multiple and often contradictory identity issues. In her classic *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) Gloria Anzaldua identifies the position of feminism on the borders, an open wound for Anzaldua, and it has become a reference point for the representation of Chicana subjectivity. In this book, which is also borderline with respect to genre lays bare how the term “Chicana” in itself is already loaded with grey areas where traditional definitions do not apply. Paraphrasing Norma Alarcon, Sonia Saldivar-Hull writes: “since there is no recognized nation-state ‘Chicana’ or Chicano’, when we invoke *Chicana* as a self-identifier, we invoke race and ethnicity, class, and gender in their simultaneity and in their complexity” (Saldivar-Hull 45). Within this border term the Chicana theoretician can negotiate empowerment through difference.

Indeed, Saldivar-Hull provides a thorough survey as to how dominant literary and feminist theories obscure the relations between the dominant culture and minority cultures. Her work takes difference as the starting point for the Chicana, but she highlights what can be regarded as sameness by her identification of the Chicana alignment with the women of the Third World. As she posits, Chicana “subject position exists in the interstices of national borders. More to the point, we are aligned as women whose specific needs have largely been ignored by most of our own male theorists as well as by many Euro-American feminists. We now engage with other people whose experiences mirror our own” (Saldivar-Hull 55). Likewise, in order to be able to engage in a theory which would accommodate Chicana subjectivity Norma Alarcon in “Chicana Feminism” makes use of French feminist theory with a focus on Chicana women in alliance with native American women. This alliance between women of difference with its implication of sameness, as well as the idea

that borders also unite what they are supposed to separate to begin with, are the premises of this article.

Although traditionally borders have always been regarded as the line of division separating two or more groups, borders can simultaneously be seen as a point of contact through which either side can relate to each other. In the introduction of her book *Mappings*, Susan Stanford Friedman opens up an alternative way of imagining borders. She writes:

Borders have a way of insisting on separation at the same time as they acknowledge connection. [...] Borders between individuals, genders, groups, and nations erect categorical and material walls between identities. Identity is in fact unthinkable without some sort imagined or literal boundary. But borders also specify the liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection, and exchange. Borders enforce silence, miscommunication, misrecognition. They also invite transgression, dissolution, reconciliation, and mixing. (3)

Chicana author Pat Mora is a poet who chooses to concentrate on this potential of borders in her work. Born in 1942 in El Paso, Texas, Pat Mora spent most of her life there and grew up speaking Spanish. At the age of 47, after raising her three children, she moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. Today she still lives there and writes both in Spanish and English. What made Mora interesting for the writer of this article to start with is her vision and work as a teacher who works towards bilingual literacy in her community, as well as her poetry some of which is written particularly for children and young adults. She has taught at high school, community college, and university levels as well as working as an administrator at various posts and makes use of her encounters with young people to inform her poetry. She has collected her experiences in a collection of essays titled *Nepantla* which literally means “‘place in the middle’ in Nahuatl – one of Mexico’s indigenous languages” (*Nepantla* 5). It is an apt choice on behalf of the author as it explores her Chicana heritage as well as her life in Ohio. It not only refers to the actual geographical positioning of El Paso in the borderlands but also to the metaphorical positioning of herself as a Mexican-American. She maintains: “I am in the middle of my life, and well know not only the pain but also the advantages of observing both sides, albeit my biases, of moving through two, and in fact, multiple spaces, and selecting from both what I want to make a part of me, of consciously shaping my space” (*Nepantla* 6). Borders provide pain and possibilities simultaneously. Tey Diana Rebolledo underlines this point when she points out: “I believe [...] that our complexities are infinite: that we have grown up and survived along the edges, along the borders of so many languages, worlds, cultures, and social systems that we constantly fix and focus on the spaces in between” (47).

Instead of stressing difference such a standpoint implies Pat Mora opts for turning her unique position to her advantage. Her borderland position instills a sense of worth, a right to cherish and be cherished for every human being, children in particular. Mora deems this to be a vital strategy as she holds: “Pride in cultural identity, in the set of learned and shared language, symbols, and meanings, needs to be fostered not because of nostalgia or romanticism, but because it is essential to our survival. The oppressive homogenization of humanity in our era of international technological and economic interdependence endangers us all” (*Nepantla* 36). The myth of safety in uniformity is rejected outright by the author. This rejection can be identified as Martin has posited: “Metaphors for the United States turned away from the “melting pot” and instead became the “salad bowl” or the “mosaic”, allowing individuals to retain their ethnic differences yet still operate together to form a

cooperative whole” (5). Likewise for Mora, the metaphor of the melting pot is not legitimate and should be questioned. Hence, she opens up ways for the reader to imagine identity as diverse, multiple and definitely not hierarchical. Ultimately, her poetry is in constant negotiation between resistance to homogenization and shared experience between women. It is a borderline standpoint between difference and sameness.

A vital component in Pat Mora’s poetic journey towards multiplicity through borderlands is the importance of awareness of belonging and the immediate necessity of natural conservation. Within such a framework, her poems have the sense of having actually emanated from the earth. In the poem “A Secret” from the volume of poetry titled *My Own True Name* she identifies the roots of her poetic creation in floral terms. She is literally digging for roots. Mora writes:

The clever twist
is pouring the tears
into a tall, black hat
waving a sharp No.2 pencil
slowly over the blue echoes
then gently, gently
pulling out
a bloomin’ poem. (7)

The image of the poet pulling the poem out of the tall black hat of the magician alludes to the magical and illusive powers as well as drawing the attention of the reader to the organic nature of poetry in general. Such an understanding serves as one of the foundation stones in her career and can be explained better by the Aztec term for poetry which is “in xochitl in cuicatl”. The term can be translated as “flower and song” and captures the essence of Mora’s poetry with its connection to nature and the joy of singing. It is also a term used by Mora herself to highlight the floral, hence feminine aspect of her work. Her poems, however, have neither roses nor lilies; instead, they are covered by flowers indigenous to the desert.

The imagery of the poem emanating from the earth is further explored in the poem “Marriage II” from the volume *Borders* when she writes:

What do you dig
for, dig for, dig
for? What do you
dig for, poet friend?

I dig for blooms,
still soft and fragrant.
I dig for petals
sweeter than wine.

Let’s dig together,
lone one, lone one,
scent all our rooms
with flower and song. (67)

“Marriage II” with its musical and repetitive tone reminds the reader of a nursery rhyme for children. It is an apt starting point for the poet to establish a connection with the reader and to assume a guiding position. This is an important concern for Mora as she is aware that Chicanas are “labeled a double minority” (*Nepantla* 56). Chicanas are

marginalized *de facto* as women and also as women of Mexican origin. However, their bondage is stronger as they are shunned not only by the American culture, but also by the Mexican culture of origin. Hence, the need and support of each other in the binding dilemma in which they find themselves. In the poem “Legal Aliens”, from the volume *Chants*, this space of no man’s land is highlighted:

viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
perhaps inferior, definitely different,
viewed by Mexicans as alien
(their eyes say, “You may speak
Spanish but you’re not like me”)
an American to Mexicans
a Mexican to Americans. (52)

The plight of the immigrant explored in this poem is further explored in “La Migra”, but this time with a more threatening tone. The poem depicts the encounter between the border patrol and the illegal immigrant through play imagery as she writes “Let’s play La Migra”. The first section of the poem is written from the viewpoint of the border patrol emphasizing the material and physical power of the man. The second section, on the other hand, is through the eyes of the immigrant woman. Although she does not have the physical power of the border patrol, the man withers as he is out of his element in the desert. Moreover, her spirit and sense of community keeps her strong. We read:

I know this desert,
where to rest, where to drink
Oh, I am not alone.
You hear us singing
And laughing with the wind. (*Agua Santa* 105)

If there is any hope for the double bind of the Chicana to be broken, it lies in centralizing their concerns and trying to instill a sense of pride and joy in their own selves. Mora describes women like herself in the poem “Desert Women” from the volume *My Own True Name*:

Desert women know
about survival.
Fierce heat and cold
have burned and thickened
our skin. Like cactus
we’ve learned to hoard, to sprout deep roots,
to seem asleep, yet wake
at the scent of softness
in the air, to hide
pain and loss by silence,
no branches wail
or whisper our sad songs
safe behind our thorns.

Don’t be deceived,
When we bloom, we stun. (55)

“Desert Women” was published in the volume titled *My Own True Name: New and Selected Poems for Young Adults*. This heading clearly summarizes Mora’s struggle to instill self-respect in young women of her ethnic origin. Another important way to achieve this is to strengthen the sense of community for her people. In the poem “University Avenu” from *Borders*, she exhibits the necessity of imagining a strong sense of community. She does this by invoking her ancestors through the floral and song-like pattern of poetic creation. She writes:

We are the first
 of our people to walk this path.
 We move cautiously
 unfamiliar with the sounds,
 guides for those who follow.
 Our people prepared us
 with gifts from the land,
 fire
 herbs and song
 hierbabuena soothes us into morning
 rhythms hum in our blood
 abrazos linger round our bodies
 cuentos whisper lessons en espanol.
 We do not travel alone.
 Our people burn deep within us. (19)

Although Chicana identity is in the centre of Mora’s poetry, I argue that shared experiences by women inform her writing. As Rebolledo argues “it is clear that Chicana writers are strongly motivated to expand their personal worlds of human understanding. Chicana feminism and Third World feminists can know no borders” (102). Hence, the need for a maternal genealogy is common for the feminists, Anglo-American and Chicana as we read in “Strong Women”:

They sing brave women, sisters we revere
 whose words seeds bursts of light that us unite.
 Some women hold me when I need to dream.
 Strong women, teach me courage to esteem. (Mora in Waldron xv)

The sense of worth in one’s self cannot be complete with a sense of community. This is in line with one of the vital projects of feminism which has been the creation of a maternal genealogy. By looking to the worlds and words of other Latinas, young girls and women find ways in which to identify and validate their own position. This is a point which is strongly argued by Rosi Braidotti who regards maternal genealogy central to women when she contends:

In order to make sexual difference operative within feminist theory I want to argue that one should start politically with the assertion of the need for the presence of real-life women in positions of discursive subjecthood, and theoretically with the recognition of the primacy of the bodily roots of subjectivity, rejecting both the traditional vision of the subject as universal, neutral, or gender-free and the binary logic that sustains it. (90)

Adrienne Rich also believes in the urgency of unearthing women whose lives would be instrumental in establishing a history through which women can relate to each other. In her influential collection of essays *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* Rich maintains:

For spiritual values and a creative tradition to continue unbroken we need concrete artifacts, the work of hands, written words to read, images to look at, a dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before us. In the false names of love, motherhood, natural law -false because they have not been defined by us to whom they are applied- women in patriarchy have been withheld from building a common world, except in enclaves, or through coded messages. (204-5)

Pat Mora's quest in this direction starts with giving voice to the historical figure of La Malinche who plays an instrumental role in the conquest of Mexico. Given as a slave to Hernan Cortes, commander of the Spanish army, when the Spaniards came to Mexico, in time she became his interpreter and made communication between him and the indigenous people possible. At times she is loved and regarded as a woman with no control over her destiny. At other times she is a hated figure blamed for being a traitor against her own people. The choice of La Malinche works well for Mora as she can be considered to be the woman who gave birth to a son who is considered to be one of the first *Meztizos*. She is also the double-faced woman who stands on the border between two entirely different cultures. In an excerpt from her autobiography, Gloria Anzaldua discusses this hugely controversial female figure within the context of religious/spiritual borders. She argues how La Malinche, or La Chingada, found it extremely difficult to dissociate her spirit from her body as required by Christianity; instead, she becomes the woman who struggles to stand in balance on the border between body and spirit. Anzaldua holds: "She had found that she could not divorce her body from her spirit. [...] And her people, the offspring of La Chingada, the india, must achieve that balance again, must acknowledge the existence of two on the same plane" (2009, 70).

Mora uses this ambiguous woman in her writing to explore the idea of simultaneous difference and sameness. In the poem "Malinche's Tips: Pique from Mexico's Mother" from the collection *Agua Santa/Holy Water*, La Malinche shares her experiences with other women across centuries. She assumes a position of authority as she instructs and warns her companions as follows:

...
Tip 1: In an unfriendly country,
wear a mask.
You will see more.

...
Tip 2: Write
your own rumors
or hire your own historians.

...
Tip 4: Alter
the altared women.

...
Tip 7: Watch your tongues.

I try to hold you,

to wrap my arms and hair
 around my children to say, I am
 a daughter, abused
 woman, abuser,
 no saint, human,
 sold, slave, sexual
 woman, raped
 woman, invisible
 translator, mother
 but, no virgin,
 never immaculate
 enough, never
 fleshless enough,
 never silent
 enough, my eyes-
 Mexico's troubled,
 buried mirror.

Tip 8: If you remove your mask,
 mirror, mirror won't lie.

Look. Do you see? We.
 Inseparable. (64-9)

The excerpt from the long poem "Malinche's Tips" covers the issues that need to be addressed in order to be able to move towards self-respect and joy. Not surprisingly the first step that she advocates is the necessity of wearing a mask. Masks are essential to the survival of women in patriarchal societies. Women have internalized the idea of wearing a mask and find it extremely difficult to shed it. Mora problematizes this issue in the poem "My Mask" from *Borders*:

Leave it by the bed.
 I wear it everywhere.
 It's just that your fingers
 Stroked so slowly, so warmly
 I didn't even notice when
 you eased it off. My face
 must be pale, frightened.
 Yours is.

I'll fling the mirror you hand me
 against the wall.
 No, I won't look
 At a woman who hides nothing. (58)

The compulsion to wear masks and mould oneself according to the prescriptions of the society is one that is close to the hearts of women. Patriarchal societies demand that women fit themselves into the traditional norms and expectations. The idea of woman catering to the imagination of man could be quite desirable with social rules, but it is equally tormenting for woman. The speaker in the poem has become used to wearing masks very successfully and the mask has almost become a part of her self. It also defines the borders of her existence. She feels scared and uncomfortable to confront her face and has

come to prefer the mask. Indeed she would, as it is much more comfortable and less problematic to exist within one, as Malinche supports. However, I think Malinche's advocating of masks is a temporary measure because when her following tips are taken into consideration it can be seen that she is aiming for deeper change. By altering the "altared women", who have been placed upon an altered to be worshipped only when dead, she talks about shedding the received notions of womanhood.

Pat Mora chooses the term Latina to describe herself, and as a Latina writer she centralizes the traditionally marginalized life and experiences of Latina women. This is a characteristic which cannot be overlooked when we read her poetry. However, there is a streak in her writing which makes it interesting for the Turkish author of this article as a reader who is separated from her as can be both geographically and culturally. This streak is her treatment of the common experiences shared by all women which is where her strength as a poet lies.

I began the exploration of Mora's poetry within the framework of borders and their potential of serving as points of contact, exchange, communication and understanding. Such a standpoint goes against the traditional definition of borders as markers of difference. Isolation of difference as the defining principle results in the loss of the collective among women. Susan Stanford Friedman argues that there has been a shift in understanding and exploration of difference from constituting *a* project to becoming *the* project of academic feminism. She posits that difference has developed into *the* privileged or the only legitimate lens through which to examine the cultural and material meanings of gender and asks: "what gets lost, forgotten or suppressed in the exclusivity of the project of difference?" (71). These ideas, of course, do not advocate a return back to a blanket term of woman advocating universal womanhood, but involve a restoration of the concept of sameness as well as shared experiences into the consideration of difference.

With these thoughts in mind, I return to Mora's poetry through which the reader can imagine and create outlets for connection regardless of her ethnic origin. The poem "Diagnosis" from *Borders* is a good example for Mora's treatment of an experience which is not defined by ethnicity but womanhood. It deals with the conflicting emotions and fears brought about by hysterectomy. In the traditionally patriarchal societies womanhood of the female is defined by and limited to her reproductive function. Therefore, the removal of the womb inevitably signals the end of womanhood for someone whose only access to creativity and respect in society has been through the production of children via her body. Although the woman in the poem has already given birth to eleven children she finds it difficult to imagine her self and her body without the womb. As her sexuality is defined solely through her reproductive function she is terrified:

She fears her man
 will call her empty,
 fears he'll stop breathing
 hard when he hugs her
 late at night.

...

She slides her finger where the scar
 will be, fears her laughter
 will now sink into that vacant space.

The doctor's blue eyes frown
 At such fuss over a useless uterus. (25)

Although the poet only highlights the blue eyes of the doctor, and therefore Anglo-Saxon, somehow this reader assumes that the doctor is a man. Even so the experience is not isolated and it deals with both the notions of difference and sameness simultaneously. The woman in the poem feels different and doubly estranged because she is Latina, but she is ultimately frowned upon as a result of her womanhood. Identification with a group and belonging to that group requires a common ground and sameness as well as being different than others at the same time.

As a Latina writer Mora advocates the understanding of borders within the perspective discussed here. She does not have reservations about regarding white women poets as her mentors. Adrienne Rich is one of these mentors as two women share a belief in female collectivity. When Rich won the National Book Award for her volume of poetry *Diving into the Wreck* in 1974, she rejected the award as an individual. However, she accepted it together with the other two women nominated who were Audre Lorde and Alice Walker. In her speech she said:

We [...] together accept this award in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain ... We symbolically join here in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can for women. (Gelpi 204)

The following line in this speech is quoted by Mora herself in *Nepantla*: “We believe that we can enrich ourselves more in supporting and giving to each other than by competing against each other” (136). She refers to Rich, along with Denise Levertov as her “unseen teachers” and points out: “my unseen mentors teach me not only about rearranging words: they teach me about rearranging a life” (136).

Mora is a poet acutely aware of her borderlands. In an unpublished poem Mora refers to herself as follows: “I am the middle woman,/not my mother, not my daughter” referring to her unique border position geographically and culturally (*Nepantla* 5). She, however, not only embraces her borders, but also uses them as a point of contact as she discloses “I learn from the women who border me” (6). She seems to share the vision of Audre Lorde: “The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference” (in Friedman 67). This seems to make sense for Pat Mora as she has declared: “I’m really interested in how we construct wholeness [...] In a way it is an issue that incorporates ethnicity or gender or class, but it also includes the challenge of being human” (in Merman-Jozwiak 42). Mora’s work, therefore, can be explored as part of her Latina heritage and through a wider perspective such as that of the Turkish academic who is interested in women’s poetry, its potential and consequences.

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Özet

Nepantla Kadını: Pat Mora'nın Şiirlerinde Aynı ve Farklı Olmak Kavramları

Günümüzde edebiyat ve kültürel araştırmalar alanlarında tanımlayıcı terimler arasında en önemlilerinden biri farklılık olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Sınır kavramını da içine alan bu terim Latin Amerikalı yazarlar tarafından farklılıkları ile güçlenmek amacıyla kullanılmıştır. Bu amaç içinse "sınırlar" en uygun metafor olmuştur. Geleneksel olarak sınırlar daima iki veya daha fazla grubu ayıran çizgi olarak görülse de, bu çizgi bu grupların birbiri ile iletişime girebileceği bir kontak noktası olarak da düşünülebilir. Bu makale 1942 El Paso, Texas doğumlu yazar Pat Mora'nın şiirlerini bu çerçevede incelemektedir. Sınırları ayırıcı olarak görmek yerine, onların birleştirici, iletişime olanak sağlayıcı ve iyileştirici potansiyelini göz önüne almaktadır. Şair farklılık ve aynı olmak arasındaki sınırı incelemektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Latin Amerikan edebiyatı, Feminizm, Şiir, Pat Mora