

**Gendered Spaces and Subject Formation in ‘The Moths’
by Helena María Viramontes**

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Postmodern thinking denounces the notion of the human subject as a pre-determined entity to be discovered and instead recognizes the process of subject formation which allows one to “invent” him or herself through a series of experiences and choices. The process is perhaps most remarkable when it occurs in the context of a border culture, especially when it results in a border identity. Cross-border identity and its culture show the fusion of two identities and cultures in a sole person who experiences both cultures and creates a unique fusion using elements from each.

Border crossing with its embedded cultural and gender constructions and personal volition regarding those imposed roles are seen in “The Moths” (*The Moths and Other Stories*, 1985) - Viramontes’ first short story of the namesake collection which the author describes as resulting from her own anger (Dulfano 660).¹ This anger is evidenced in the daily life of the narrator-protagonist, a fourteen-year-old Chicana, who is virtually expelled from her home when she makes no effort to fill the socially constructed gender roles or ‘semantic charters’ assigned to her by her parents – specifically assigned to her by her Chicano father, Apá (Papá), but enforced by her Chicana mother, Amá (Mamá – and sisters and present in the family’s Catholic church and even in the local business: Jay’s market. Regarding the male indoctrination of the

¹ When asked what inspired her to write, Viramontes responded: “*The Moths* was one of my first short stories. I had such an incredible anger that it, in fact, propelled me to write. One of the people that my anger was directed to was my father, who was a real patriarchal individual, a very domineering character. In one particular section of *The Moths* when the father pounds his fists comes straight from my real life.” (Dulfano 660).

protagonist into his social order, the French feminist Irigaray posits in her 1985 book *This Sex Which Is Not One* that:

participation in society requires that [her] body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier, a ‘likeness’ with reference to an authoritative model. A commodity – a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable ‘bodies’: her ‘natural’ body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particular mimetic expression of masculine values. (180)

As the protagonist narrates the story, she crosses bodily and socially into a variety of socio-symbolic structures (home, family, “woman”/“man”,² church/spiritualism, capitalism, society) – each of which represent separate facets of the symbolic contract imposed on her by the patriarchy and each of which prompts unexplained physical reactions in her. As the protagonist crosses the borders into each space, she transitions from an awkward and angry teenager at the beginning of the story into a capable caretaker and knowing practitioner of her own brand of religion.

The settings used by Viramontes in “The Moths” have been explored in various teachers’ editions, encyclopedia entries, and academic articles addressing other works by Viramontes or articles which, in part, address “The Moths.” This story is popularly studied because it is taught to students through the numerous anthologies in which it is included. Viramontes most notably uses setting as technique, and setting is easily accessible to students and provides a point of departure for the discussion of the story. The narrative technique used to open the story is that of flashback. As a 14-year old, the narrator/protagonist gives readers sufficient information to frame

² The terms “woman” and “man” here – and elsewhere “feminine” (or “masculine”) imply the socially constructed gender roles that accompany the biological terms “female” and “male”.

the story before action commences and she tells her own story. What has not been addressed is how these settings represent ‘socio-symbolic structures’ (such as home, family, woman, church, or society-at-large) which enforce ‘semantic charters’ or gendered stereotypes on her nor how, coupled with the narrative technique, the subject formation of the narrator/protagonist takes place. Hence, the spaces are important to the narrator’s subject formation. Literally, each setting takes the narrator to a separate physical space, but each ‘socio-symbolic structure’ also represents exposure to a different set of social expectations within the ‘symbolic contract’ to which she must submit. In the end, the process of subject formation is one in which this young narrator is separated from the ‘socio-symbolic structure’ of the home: her family, prescribed gender roles, their religion, and her ‘place’ in them; but she is united with her grandmother through shared transformational, spiritual experience evidenced by mutually intelligible unspoken speech and spiritual understanding. Thus both females work in concert to “find themselves” amidst a series of spaces and roles and simply choose their own identities.

The borders experienced by the protagonist are spatial ones found in the story’s four settings: the family home, a chapel, Jay’s market, and the home of her Abuelita. There are also four different settings within her abuelita’s home: the porch, the kitchen, the bedroom, and the bathroom – each of which is considered a feminine³ space within the domestic sphere. The role of setting is important in her subject formation as the protagonist moves between them, because she becomes aware of her instinctive bodily reaction to each place and acts defiantly by choosing her preferred location – one which initially felt mysteriously uncomfortable to her but which serves as the site of her spiritual maturation. In choosing her preferred space, she furthers the process of her own subject formation by exercising her own volition. In this way, the physical,

³ Toril Moi suggests “that we distinguish between ‘feminism’ as a political position, ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics...” (Belsey 104)

spatial borders she crosses allow her to experience different aspects of herself and to come to a figurative “place” of self acceptance and belonging. More important, the borders she crosses are more than spatial ones. They also represent ‘semantic charters’ and their imposed psychological limits to her thinking. The budding narrator must independently refuse or accept the gendered stereotypes of each space and become who she will.

Socially constructed borders in this story are presented in the text in each setting. ‘Semantic charters’ dominate each setting and are enforced by authority figures within them who attempt to engender and socialize this young narrator on the verge of the physical and emotional transformation of puberty. These authority figures attempt to expedite and manipulate her maturation rather than allow her a more natural period of discovery; however, in doing so, they actually compel a rebellious spirit in her. Norma Alarcón notes the plight of young women in this position:

Often in [Viramontes’ and Moraga’s writings] this subjectivity takes as its point of departure ‘woman’s’ over-determined signification as future wives/mothers in relation to the ‘symbolic contract’ within which women may have a voice on the condition that they speak as mothers. The female-speaking subject that would want to speak from a different position than that of a mother, or a future wife/mother, is thrown into a crisis of meaning that begins with her own gendered personal identity and its relational position with others. Paradoxically, ... a crisis of meaning can ensue even in the case of a female who may never have aspired to speak from a different position than that of a wife/mother (148).

Thus, enforcement of the gendered social roles within the semantic charters and the expediting of her maturation into said semantic charters actually prompt her rebellion which leads to self exile

from the gender roles intended to be imposed upon young females. Before her exile, the story begins with the young narrator/protagonist in the family home.

The first setting is the family home. There is no physical description of the home; instead, readers see the young narrator's inability to perform 'feminine' duties in the domestic space: "I wasn't pretty or nice like my older sisters and I just couldn't do the girl things they could do." (27) and her use of violence to resolve conflict with her sisters: "I began keeping a piece of jagged brick in my sock to bash my sisters or anyone who called me bull hands" (27). The protagonist narrates her own disrespectful attitude of doubt toward her grandmother even though it was this matriarch who cured the narrator's her hands: "I wasn't respectful either. I even went so far as to doubt the power of Abuelita's slices, the slices she said absorbed my fever" (27). In the home, there are a variety of authority figures who enforce the 'semantic charter' (gender stereotypes) on the young narrator. The first authority figure/group is the mob-thinking sorority. The sisters and the narrator continuously fight. Early in the story, it is the tattletale sisters who enlist the mother to control the narrator's behavior (27) while later in the story, the sisters use guilt with the narrator in order to enforce the position of the father and coax the narrator into compliance by also insisting that she submit to attending church: "Can't you see what it's doing to Amá?" (29)

Also in the first location, the home, the female authority figure that imposes this semantic charter upon the narrator is the mother. In the third paragraph of the story, the narrator tells how the mother has a daily habit of sending her youngest daughter to her abuelita's house in order to avoid conflict in the family home. Her mother does not overtly coerce her daughter into the feminine roles of future wife/mother, but by expelling her from the family home on a daily basis,

the mother enforces the implied gender roles by punishing the youngest daughter's non-compliance.

Finally, in the home, the male authority figure who exerts the most overt and violent coercion is the father. The father endorses religious patriarchal norms and socializes his youngest daughter by demanding that she attend Catholic mass. Because his previous attempts at gendering this tomboy daughter have failed, he now becomes angry, uses profane language⁴, inflicts violence on his tomboy daughter⁵, then addresses the mother and blames her for the perceived failure of his daughter. The father follows the tirade regarding his daughter with his bilingual exclamation: "period. Punto final" (29). Norma Alarcón observes this code switching – speaking in one language while switching to key words or phrases in another language – by a bilingual father in another story and claims that:

By switching to 'mujer', he knows more precisely what his judgment of [the daughter] ought to signify. If he said 'woman', he would be on precarious ground. He is not quite sure what it may mean in Anglo culture, a culture within which he may well feel that he has no authority. Thus, though we may conjecture that [the daughter's] family transacts some of its communication in English, Spanish is employed in this sentence to guarantee parental authority. (29)

Alarcón's observation also holds true in "The Moths" in that the father speaks English, but he uses language to identify the symbolic structure embedded in this Spanish-language expression and pronounce his sentence upon his daughter. In each case, the story examined by Alarcón and this present one, "The Moths", the father's pronouncement is the same: you are a Chicana girl who must submit to the will of the father and comply with his symbolic charter. The father most

⁴ "to save my goddamn sinning soul" (29).

⁵ "He would grab my arm and dig his nails into me to make sure I understood the importance of catechism. Did he make himself clear?" (29).

likely fears his daughter for the power she wields in pushing the border of his symbolic sphere further from his central position in it. Feminist Theorist Toril Moi posits that, “If patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the limit or borderline of that order” (Moi 167). The narrator resists this marginalized place and its imposed rules by growing clumsy in performing ‘feminine’ duties with what she calls her “bull hands” that cannot perform feminine duties. Despite her “bull hands,” the father fails to note this as her physical aversion to their home. He views his youngest daughter as the limit of the world/home he creates, and he attempts to rein her in by sending her to church.

The second location in the story is the chapel whose denomination is unknown, but it is not the Catholic church of the family. The protagonist departs from the deep-seated tradition of the Catholic Church in entering this chapel alone. Despite having chosen this chapel, she equates both this chapel as well as Catholic churches as cold and lonely. In the seventh and second shortest paragraph of the entire story, the narrator describes her experience in this local chapel. She elects to enter the chapel since it is across from the market she is to visit. She intends to light a candle for her dying grandmother, but upon entering, she notes the lack of candles and instead sits on a pew. In a remarkably matter-of-fact way, she describes the chapel:

Across the street from Jay’s market there was a chapel. I never knew its denomination, but I went in just the same to search for candles. I sat down on one of the pews because there were none. After I cleaned my fingernails, I looked up at the high ceiling. I had forgotten the vastness of these places, the coolness of the marble pillars and the frozen statues with blank eyes. I was alone. I knew why I had never returned. (29)

The narrator feels no connection to this religious site nor to the one of her family. In this place, her hands are not “bull hands” as before in the home. Instead, in this “cold” space, she feels compelled to clean her fingernails. This cleaning is an obvious physical representation of the purging and cleansing encouraged in the church; but afterward, she concludes that she is not satisfied in this place. This acknowledgement is followed by the narrator’s memory of her father’s stance on religion.

Following the father’s violent pronouncement upon his youngest daughter regarding attending church, the narrator dresses for mass and walks to the church, but instead of entering, she continues directly to the grandmother’s house. She gives a detailed description of the house and an event with her grandmother, and then following paragraph opens, “I left the chapel without blessing myself and walked to Jay’s” (30). This spatial and chronological lapse can be explained a few ways,⁶ but the outcome is the same: the narrator avoids both attending mass and describing it to her readers. This omission of an explanation of an apparent chronological lapse in the narrative is striking, because it reiterates the narrator’s rejection of Christian patriarchal authority over her and the accompanying socio-symbolic structures. In fact, the structure of the text and the use of the word “chapel” following an episode at her grandmother’s house invoke the idea of practices as ritual and grandmother as deity. The narrator leans toward her abuelita’s personal brand of religion much more than the Catholicism of her father.

The third location in the story is Jay’s market; it is mentioned once before being described. Jay’s market represents its own ‘socio-symbolic structure’. It is not that of the home

⁶ : Possible explanations of the chronological lapse include: first, that the narrator has supernatural mastery of bilocation but allows readers to experience her preferred location of the two spaces she inhabits (perhaps the narrator herself neglects to listen to and describe what happens in the church); second, that the narrator is simply not describing all of the events in a true chronological manner (she went down Lorena to First to Evergreen – perhaps the chapel lies somewhere between the family home on Lorena and abuelita’s on Evergreen); or third, that the narrator really skips Mass and proceeds directly to her grandmother’s house. Any of these options might satisfy an instructor’s need to tie the story together for students.

or religion; but it is the role that she, as a Chicana young girl, must fill for society: capitalist consumer. Jay's market has second quality items for sale, but she has no adverse reaction to these items. In fact, in this public, secular place she is successful with her hands, "I picked up what I needed" (30). But, when the narrator appears to have forgotten the money to pay for the items, "At first Jay got mad because I thought I had forgotten the money. But it was there all the time, in my back pocket" (30). The narrator's bodily reaction to the transaction involving exchange values in this space is one of forgetting her own past in financial preparation for the transaction and forgetting her own body in relation to the placement of her money. She appears unprepared and out of sorts. Jay's reaction to her proves that he expects a low exchange value from this young female patron, but she overcomes Jay's expectations as well as her own bodily aversion and pays for the goods.

The fourth location in the story is the grandmother's house on Evergreen. The symbolic name of the street is ironic in that the grandmother is dying on a street whose name indicates perpetual life. This street name alludes to the welcoming refuge provided there, and the words chosen by Viramontes to describe this house demonstrate the organic nature of it and the nurturing found therein. Within this location, there are four distinct sub-locations.

The first sub-location in the Abuelita's house is a so-called feminine, exterior space: the porch. The narrator describes the vines on the porch as "making her small brick house look like it was cradled within the vines that grew pear-shaped squashes ready for the pick, ready to be steamed with onions and cheese and butter. The roots would burst out of the rusted coffee cans and search for a place to connect. I would then feed the seedlings with water (28)." Like her, the vines wish to connect. Also, the narrator herself has a role in this place which she accepts: she feeds the plants. The second description of the porch is less figurative, "I liked her porch because

it was shielded by the vines of the chayotes and I could get a good look at the people and car traffic on Evergreen without them knowing” (29). This place gives her private insight and wisdom. From the porch, she moves into the second sub-location in the grandmother’s house: the kitchen.

The second sub-location in the Abuelita’s house is the obviously feminine space of the kitchen. Upon entering the grandmother’s house, she catches “the gagging scent of toasting chile on the placa.” (29) and they make the narrator’s eyes water. This scene awakens the senses and is reminiscent of a confession, one in which the confessor speaks and cries, but the priestess listens and soothes. The three longest paragraphs in the story are paragraphs 9, 14, and 16. Paragraph 9 is the scene above, paragraph 14 is a scene in the bedroom, and scene 16 is in the bathroom. Interestingly, the longest and most descriptive parts of this story take place here.

The third sub-location in the Abuelita’s house is the intimate feminine space of the bedroom. When the grandmother’s physical condition deteriorates, the narrator describes a scene of putrid human smells including: “Pine Sol and vomit” (31) and feces as well as a need for cleansing here. This is a scene in which the narrator prepares for the cleansing ritual as if she herself were now converted to serve as the priestess for her grandmother. There is an unspoken communication between the narrator and her grandmother as the former finds the dead body with “her mouth remain[ing] open and speechless. I heard you.” she responds (31). It is at this moment that the soup the narrator was preparing for abuelita boils over onto the stove. This mundane event marks the maturation of the narrator. She too had been confined, but now she “boils over” in the fullness of one who knows where to go and what to be. Next, readers witness the narrator preparing to take the grandmother’s dead body to the bathroom.

The fourth and final sub-location in the Abuelita's house is the primarily female occupied space of the bathroom. In the last paragraph, the narrator enters the bath waters with the body of her dead grandmother. The narrator communicates with her dead grandmother by assuring her again saying to her, "I heard you." (32) while the water overflows the tub and pours onto the tile floor. This water is the birth water of them both. Abuelita transcends death and is reborn into the second life as the mystical moths depart her body, and the narrator is being baptized/born into the new identity she chooses to be in this new brand of religion she will practice – one that nurtures her, does not produce bull hands, and allows her to avoid church.⁷ Most importantly, it is a religion that allows her to cultivate organic, individual rather than socially constructed practices and thereby does not inflict uncontrolled physical reactions in her. About this religion, Kristeva says:

I call 'religion' this phantasmic necessity on the part of speaking beings to provide themselves with a representation (animal, female, male, parental, etc.) in place of what constitutes them as such, in other words, symbolization – the double articulation and syntactic sequence of language, as well as its preconditions or substitutes (thoughts, affects, etc.). The elements of the current practice of feminism that we have just brought to light seem precisely to constitute such a representation which makes up for the frustrations imposed on women by the anterior code (Christianity or its lay humanist variant). The fact that this new ideology has affinities, often revindicated by its creators, with so-called matriarchal beliefs (in other words, those beliefs characterizing matrilinear societies) should not overshadow its radical novelty. This ideology seems to me to

⁷ In a 1993 interview with Viramontes, in a question about "The Moths", she said she "chose the grandmother figure instead of the mother figure because she has more time to take care of the spirituality of the children. The mother figure is too close a generation to relate to her rebellious daughter." (Heredia and Pellarolo 172).

be part of the broader anti-sacrificial current which is animating our culture and which, in its protest against the constraints of the socio-symbolic contract, is no less exposed to the risks of violence and terrorism. At this level of radicalism, it is the very principle of sociality which is challenged. (Kristeva 208)

In “The Moths,” Viramontes uses setting to expose the adolescent narrator to a variety of socio-symbolic structures and the semantic charters conveyed therein in order to reveal the narrator’s rejection of them. In the end, she crosses from one space to another and creates herself anew.

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