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## La Sufrida: An Analysis of the Social and Literary Archetype

Meleena Gil  
*University of Central Florida*



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LA SUFRIDA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL AND LITERARY  
ARCHETYPE

by

MELEENA GIL

A thesis completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major program in English—Literature  
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## ABSTRACT

Latina women have been made to believe that their lives and desires are always secondary to the needs of men and children. As a result, many women have developed a martyr complex wherein the measure of their value is how much suffering they can endure in service to their family. There is subsequently a culture of self-sacrifice best exemplified by the archetype known as “la sufrida.” This thesis explores the sufrida role in literature while using the history of the author’s mother—a woman whose life can be “read” as that of a real sufrida— as a bridge between literature and reality. This thesis discusses works of prominent Latinx and Caribbean women writers such as Judith Ortiz Cofer and Nicholasa Mohr and further analyzes the social and religious constraints that instill self-sacrificial mentalities in women. Through the use of womanist and cultural criticisms, this thesis highlights the complex social paradigms that cause so many Latinas to internalize self-limiting thinking patterns. The author’s goal is to expose the sufrida role as valueless for contemporary women.

## DEDICATION

*For my mother, whose endless fight for the benefit of my family has inspired me in more ways than this essay could ever capture.*

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## INTRODUCTION: HOW A SUFRIDA IS BUILT

In a *Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf states that, “a woman writing thinks back through her mother,” a statement that Judith Ortiz Cofer has applied to her work, especially in *Silent Dancing* and that now, I intend to apply to my own (Woolf 97). I was raised by a woman who I have always considered to be a fighter—and by all means, I still do consider her as such—but the older I get, the more I have come to realize that she is much more than that; she is also a product of her culture. I heard the term “sufrida” for the first time in my Latino Literature class. When my professor explained what it meant, I felt that I immediately understood something about my mother that I never had before; it put her into a broader sociocultural context where she could be empirically evaluated outside of the intimate spaces of my mindscape. That was the genesis of my study into the archetypical sufrida women and why they are the way that they are.

A sufrida is a woman who has repressed herself almost entirely in order to comply with her gender role as a wife and mother. Furthermore, her self-worth is measured on a scale of how much suffering she can endure to accomplish those roles—meaning how much is she willing to endure to fulfill her duties—often losing herself in the process. “So, from birth, the Hispanic woman is instilled with the belief that her top priority is to ensure the total well-being of her children, spouse, and other family members with whom she maintains close contact. Failing to perform this predetermined role responsibly can impact deeply on her own sense of adequacy” (Gil & Vazquez 187). In “The Witch’s Husband,” Judith Ortiz Cofer describes this phenomenon saying, “I am a bit appalled at what I have begun to think of as ‘the martyr complex’ in Puerto Rican [and other Latina/Caribbean] women, that is, the idea that self-sacrifice is a woman’s lot and her privilege: a good woman is defined by how much grieving and mothering she can do in

one lifetime” (*The Latin Deli* Ortiz Cofer 43). Culturally, Latinas are expected to sacrifice with some level of resignation and submission. It should be noted that sufridas are not limited to only Latinas or even only women for that matter. Increasingly, there is a social awareness of the sources and outcomes of patriarchal norms, especially those that have woven the fabric of Latin culture.

From what I have found, there are two kinds of sufridas. The first kind is the woman who does not know or acknowledge her status as a self-repressed woman, yet she is still giving even when she is tired and overworked. The other kind of sufrida is the woman who uses her self-sacrifice as means of manipulation. “*Pobre de mi, hago todo para todo el mundo y nadie se importa de mi,*” she cries, “Poor me, I do everything for everyone and no one cares about me.” The intention is most often to incite guilt in another person or persons. Knowing that their situation inspires a certain sympathy—and often resentment—they must maintain that pitiful environment by continuing to bear the brunt.

My thesis then seeks to explore the ways in which this archetype is canonically presented by the women who are or have interacted with other sufridas; furthermore, where does this archetype come from? At the root, the main issues contributing to the role that I will be exploring are gender roles—especially machismo, which is chauvinistic hyper-masculine male pride; and religion, namely the effects of religion on social roles of women and marianismo, which is the template for feminine virtue as prescribed by the Roman Catholic church. In *The Maria Paradox*, marianismo is defined as “the ideal role of woman... taking as its model of perfection the Virgin Mary herself who willfully and enthusiastically bends to the will of God. *Marianismo* is about sacred duty, self-sacrifice, and chastity. About dispensing care and pleasure, not receiving them.

About living in the shadows, literally and figuratively, of your men—father, boyfriend, husband, son—your kids, and your family” (Gil & Vazquez 7). They furthermore define marianismo as “another side to the coin machismo... it is the mortar of holding antiquated cultural structures firmly in place and forms the core of the Maria Paradox” (Gil & Vazquez 6). The Maria Paradox is the in between space where women negotiate their existence as selfless providers with little payoff apart from esteem and sense of adequacy. Part of the problem is that to maintain smooth hegemonic social operations, women cannot achieve a sense of adequacy; what women do can never be regarded as enough or they will stop giving—and men will have to stop taking. The machismo and marianismo roles are symbiotic and part of a larger, more complex patriarchal practice of social mechanics

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My mother’s name is Jackie. She has given up her freedom and happiness for my sisters and me, and now that we’re independent, she has nothing left to fight for. She has made for herself a habitat in which her successes and joys are providing for her family, even when we do not deserve it. Though her story is a tragic one, a lot of her tribulations have not been because of what the universe dished out to her, but because of the choices she made for the benefit of her children based off of how she was expected to perform as a mother. Her inability to let past sufferings go has also contributed to her sufrida status. It is chosen baggage, as in, currently being chosen. Every moment that she spends carrying old pain is a moment chosen to hurt. When speaking to my boyfriend’s mother about my research topic, she told me something incredibly valuable. She said, “ser sufrida es una mentalidad,” meaning that being a sufrida is an attitude,

literally, a mentality, that is reflected in behavior. So, what then does my mother's attitude and the attitudes of the characters that will be analyzed say about them?

They have integrated their pain into her identity. They do not know who they are without it. Pain and suffering are the gauges for her how well the woman has performed as a wife and mother—or how well she has fulfilled her gender role. In my mother's mind, she has done poorly and the only way to redeem herself is to never forgive herself. It is precisely that which makes her a *sufrida*: her decision to carry her baggage with her everywhere she goes, though I have never understood why she thinks she is a failure until now. In *The Maria Paradox*, Rosa Maria Gil and Carmen Inoa Vazquez argue that, "From birth, the Hispanic woman is instilled with the belief that her top priority is to ensure the total well-being of her children, spouse, and other family members with whom she maintains close contact. Failing to perform this predetermined role responsibly can impact deeply on her own sense of adequacy" and furthermore, "the principle of self-denial, and the role of the *mártir* who blames herself for everything, that is the very heart of *marianismo*" (Gil & Vazquez 187; 258). My mother blames herself for our bad decisions. She believes everything we do directly reflects her parenting and not our own volition. She uses this belief to make us feel guilty for whatever "bad" decision we have made. "I never taught you that; why do you do this to me? What have I done to deserve this? Did I not raise you with the principles of the Bible?" Well, of course she did.

Ellen G. White said in her book, *Conducción del Niño*, that God will ask for an account of the children he gave mothers, "Entonces preguntará el Señor: ¿Dónde están los hijos que te di para que los prepararas para mí? ¿Por qué no están a mi diestra?" (544). This is especially important because it singles out the mother, making her solely responsible for every single

decision her child makes. Her fear and over-consuming love for her children is not unfounded, rather, it is biblically founded. Gil and Vazquez define “The Ten Commandments of Marianismo” as:

1. Do not forget a woman’s place.
2. Do not forsake tradition.
3. Do not be single, self-supporting, or independent-minded.
4. Do not put your own needs first.
5. Do not wish for more in life than being a housewife.
6. Do not forget that sex is for making babies—not for pleasure.
7. Do not be unhappy with your man or criticize him for infidelity, gambling, verbal and physical abuse, alcohol or drug abuse.
8. Do not ask for help.
9. Do not discuss personal problems outside the home.
10. Do not change those things which make you unhappy that you can realistically change. (Gil & Vazquez 8).

I interviewed my mother in order to get a better understanding of how she views herself. I specifically asked about how she believes Christianity has impacted the social role of women.

She said:

A base de cómo se defina la mujer en punto Cristiano, la ha programado soportar cualquier tipo de abuso y a impedir que tome sus propias decisiones. Y el temor a fallarle a Dios y a los principios bíblicos te lleva ser una sufrida. Por uno cumplir con esa parte y para lograr eso, es un papel de sumisión.

I did further research on the biblical roles of women and found an overwhelming amount of Christian literature on the topic. These articles were especially interesting to me because they reflect the women who would read them, “El Rol de la Mujer en el Matrimonio,” and the other, “Nuestro Rol Como Esposas” or “Our Roles as Wives,” both of which use the Bible to support their arguments. The Bible states, “La mujer sabia edifica su hogar, pero la necia con sus propias manos lo destruye” (Proverbios 14:1). Such confining rhetoric limits women to act in a specific way out of fear of misdeed. “El Rol de la Mujer en el Matrimonio,” defines this manner as, “edifying,” interpreting that to mean, “si la mujer sabia edifica su hogar, quiere decir que el trabajo inevitable que debe hacer es sembrar – en todos los miembros del hogar—sentimientos de piedad y virtud” (salvemosalafamilia.com). The woman must be the vision and engine of purity and virtue as an example to everyone in her household, but such a vision cannot be achieved without some form of self-sacrifice.

Dios hizo a la mujer con el propósito de ser ‘ayuda idónea para él’ (Génesis 2:18). La Biblia deja claro que este propósito divino en la creación de la mujer en ninguna manera la hace a ella un ser inferior. La mujer cristiana debe ser una ayuda a su marido físicamente, emocionalmente, mentalmente y espiritualmente.

(coalicionporelevangelio.org)

This states that she is not inferior, on the contrary, her divinity is meant to assist and inspire others. It is partly for this reason that women have become small-scale martyrs meant to follow in the holy footsteps of the Virgin Mary, giving up their freedom and their bodies in the name of celestial creation, and the importance of her role. Images of virtue are contrasted with fearmongering and whore-shaming language: “The whoredom of a woman may be known in her

haughty looks and eyelids. If thy daughter be shameless, her in straitly, lest she abuse herself through overmuch liberty... A shameless woman shall be counted as a dog; but she that is shamefaced will fear the Lord” (Ecclesiastes 26: 9-10; 25). Shame, therefore, is a virtue for a holy woman. An image can now be clearly seen of a “good woman:” she must be a sinless edifier of her home, somber, submissive, and shamefaced. The line that emphasizes this image the most is buried within the same verse: “A silent and loving woman is the gift of the Lord: and there is nothing so much worth as a mind well instructed. A shamefaced and faithful woman is a double face, and her continent mind cannot be valued” (Ecclesiastes 26: 14-15). This quote is worthy of isolation as it distinctly paints the picture of a “silent and loving woman” as the gift of the Lord to mankind, but she must be “well instructed” with discipline and grace.

In *Silent Dancing* by Judith Ortiz Cofer, the biblical effects on the sufrida are further evidenced. There is a sense of community that the women in the memoir have, united by storytelling as a means to teach each other what womanhood is and how to perform it. Religion is a major motif not only in the stories that they share, but also in their decision-making. Mamá, the supreme matriarch of the family, tells a story that “spoke of a mother’s despair: ‘that woman climbed the church steps on her knees every morning, wore only black as a *promesa* to the Holy Virgin in exchange for her daughter’s health’” (*Silent Dancing* Ortiz Cofer 20). The despair of the mother and her dedication to La Virgen shows her desire to emulate the Madonna through her self-sacrificial rituals.

Motivation to emulate the Madonna is not only influenced by the desire to be the pinnacle of rectitude, but also by what that holiness can lead to. “It was a man’s world, and a man’s heaven. But mediation was possible—if one could only get *His* attention,” and the way to

get God's attention is to be as close to La Virgen as possible (*Silent Dancing* Ortiz Cofer 44). However, not all sufridas appear to be as sanctified as Ortiz Cofer's grandmother. In *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros, Soledad, also known as the awful grandmother, is considered evil for a reason. Her obsessive reverence of her son creates a tremendous divide within the family. A Latina mother's unparalleled dedication to her children is a direct result of sufrida culture. "But it's precisely because she loved him so much that he was destined to be her cross," because she has given up her identity for her family, her family becomes her identity—they are something precious that needs to be preserved, even at her expense (Cisneros 205).

In *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgen de Guadalupe*, Jeanette Rodriguez writes in "Guadalupe: The Feminine Face of God" that, "The significance of Our Lady of Guadalupe in popular religiosity must assume a dialectic posture with contemporary Catholic theology, and so we look at the insights that feminist theology has given us in terms of the maternal or feminine face of God" (25). This refers to the evaluation of the feminine must be simultaneously discussed as the divine. Rodriguez goes on to discuss the translation of maternal divinity from God to the Virgin Mary saying, "It is easy to perceive Our Lady of Guadalupe as the maternal or female face of God, because she evokes an unconditional love, solidarity, and a never-failing presence at the affective level" (Rodriguez 26). This representation of the Madonna as having "compassionate womb-love for all of God's children" is not far from the description of *la abuela* in "The Witch's Husband," a short story in *The Latin Deli* by Judith Ortiz Cofer (Rodriguez 29).

*La abuela* is described as the all-time champion of martyrhood, "her life has been entirely devoted to others. Not content to bring up two sons and three daughters as the Depression raged

on, followed by the war that took one of her sons, she had also taken on other people's burdens" (Ortiz Cofer 43). She epitomizes the *sufrida* complex, performing as a living Madonna. My mother has similarly acted. When I was a child, my father had gotten laid off from work during the 2008 recession. He had been the main bread-winner in my household, and with three kids and a mortgage payment, we had no idea how we were going to make it. My mother took the initiative to start a house cleaning company. Alone, she managed to drop my sisters and me off at school, clean two to three mansions a day, pick us up, and pay the bills. In the midst of all of this, she also allowed her mother from the Dominican Republic, and her dear friend Quisqueya, both of which were too old to work, to live with us despite resources already being scarce.

In "The Myth of the Latin Woman," Ortiz Cofer says that "...Latina women working at menial jobs who must put up with stereotypes about our ethnic group such as: 'They make good domestics.' This is another myth of the Latin woman in the United States... Work as domestics, waitressing, and factory jobs are all that's available for women with little English and few skills" (Ortiz Cofer 152). I could see this exemplified in my mother, who despite having received her Bachelor's in Social Work from the most prestigious university in her country, was left with no other choice but to clean houses to maintain our family. The physical exertion degrading her body acting concurrently with the emotional drainage of being a mother to anyone in need of care has tired her out, but this work has become so integral to her identity that it is unforeseeable for her to be anything other than the always-working woman.

The fear then becomes what will happen if she never stops working? In the aforementioned story, the narrator says, "I have been called in to convince *la abuela*, the family's proud matriarch, to step down—to allow her children to take care of her before she kills

herself with work” (Ortiz Cofer 42). It is impossible to tear away these women from work because it gives them purpose, to provide for others is to have purpose, “to *una doña perfecta*, emotional overload, even physical collapse, is preferable to that gnawing *marianista* guilt of not having fulfilled the caretaker role” (Gil & Vazquez 188-189). In *Nilda* by Nicholasa Mohr, Lydia, Nilda’s mother, is not so fortunate. She ends up dying the death of a true *sufrida*. On Lydia’s deathbed she says, “Do you know if I were to get well tomorrow... what I would do? Nilda? ... I would live for the children I bore... I guess... and nothing more. You see, I don’t remember any more what I did want” (Mohr 276-277). The loss of identity is so complete, that even in death, even with a second chance at life, she would continue to fulfill her gender roles. That is the danger of *sufrida* culture: the absolute loss of individuality. The woman gives up so much of herself that she no longer belongs to herself. Lydia continues on saying, “I remember a feeling I used to have when I was very young... it had only to do with me. Nobody else was included ... How is that possible? That there is this life I have made, Nilda, and I have nothing to do with it? How did it all happen anyway?” What Lydia asks is precisely what I seek to answer (Mohr 277).

The goal of my thesis is to further explore the representation of the *sufrida* within the Latinx literary canon. Through the use of womanist and culture criticisms, I intend to evaluate the source of this mentality. It is through understanding the social and literary archetype of *sufridas* that we can learn to counteract the oppressive effects of religious and sexist ideologies.

## CHAPTER 1: RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

The origins of the rigid binaries that Irene Lara identifies as the “Virtuous Virgen and Pagan Puta” in her article “Goddess of the Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary” are traced back to Spanish colonialism when Catholicism was, in effect, imposed onto indigenous groups. Lara recounts how this came to be by tracing the evolutions of native goddess myths as they were manipulated by patriarchal Christian beliefs, “In the colonial period, Christian beliefs about paganism, the devil, and female transgression as symbolized by Eve merge into depictions of Tonantzin and related goddesses...Although some Spanish priests encouraged this ‘identification of Christian saints with native deities’ as part of the colonial strategy of conversion and assimilation, the figure of Tonantzin has largely remained marginalized in modern scholarship” (101). Furthermore, representations of the Madonna as a spiritually pure mother separate her from her sexually liberated indigenous predecessors who were associated with dangerous spirituality.

Additionally, Lara cites the example of Malinche, the “physically defiled concubine” who was a captured princess made mistress, translator, and guide for Cortés, the Spanish conquistador who colonized Mexico (99). She details how the contrasting figures of the Virgen Maria and the “fucked” mother of the first mestizo work as frames to understand proper female comport within the Spanish Christian discourse:

To advance a non-dichotomizing ‘decolonial imaginary’ now, I refer to the conventional binary between proper and deviant female sexual behavior as one between a virtuous *virgen* and pagan *puta* in order to underscore how its disciplining of sexuality interweaves with its disciplining of spirituality. Healing this dichotomy, I argue, entails

deconstructing the ways it simultaneously regulates spiritual and sexual practices.

Moreover, I use the Spanish words for virgin and whore to emphasize the specific cultural contexts at play in the colonial-modern imaginary of the *Américas* whose legacy persists. (Lara 99-100)

The legacies that Lara references are reflected in the identities of *sufrida* women whose behaviors and characters will be dissected.

I posit that because sexuality, spirituality, and how men and women behave within those frameworks are not at all mutually exclusive, any deviation from the divinity that manhood—at least within this cultural and religious context—allows to their female counterparts, results in the potential ruin of the woman and/or her family. Because it is through the woman that penetration occurs and because she is the one who can be entered, evil may enter through her; conversely, deliverance—the action of being set free— can be brought forth through the male who can externally ejaculate and “set free” his sexual desires. Eve brought sin into heaven through consumption of the apple, in effect, putting sin into her body: “Of the woman came the beginning of sin, and through her we all die” (Ecclesiastes 25:22). According to Jewish myth, before Eve, Lilith resided in the garden of Eden and brought ruin to the holy place via sexual wantonness and promiscuity (demanding sexual parity from her partner and resistance to Adam’s advances) and was henceforth removed; because of Eve and Lilith’s transgressions, women have been “imprisoned upon a pedestal” (Lara 115-116). Proper behavior will grant the woman divinity, lest she cast herself and her family out of the garden of Eden, or heaven, for eternity. The model of proper behavior then is Mary, who submissively obeyed the word of the lord and committed herself dutifully to her son, the son of God, in passive motherhood. Lara uses the first

line of the Mexican rosary to elucidate the Madonna's purity, "Ave María, sin pecado concebida," conceived without sin but who is allowed to be divine and pure and kept so by "her association with a male God and and the Son of God" (Lara 113; 104).

In "Virgencita Give us a Chance" by Liliana Valenzuela, the Virgen is humanized, not only physically, but sexually as well. When Camila asks her "were you really a virgin when you had baby Jesus?" she responds saying, "Camila, I was a woman just like you, with desires, like, with what they now call a natural desire quite in blossom" (qtd. in *Goddess of the Americas*, Valenzuela 93). Lara calls this rhetoric transformative and healing as it dispels the myth of her hyper-purity and humanizes her, creating a bridge between the virtuous *virgen* and pagan *puta*; furthermore, Lara says that "Such erotic imagery counters the body-loathing ideology in Christian theology that treats sexual desire as a human weakness in need of constant surveillance" (113-114).

These concepts are comparable to the North American women's "Cult of Domesticity" that dominated the nineteenth century. Munro describes the movement, saying "... the 'cult of domesticity' and its corollary, 'teaching as women's true profession,' suggested that women's role as educators, as knowers, was to be indirect, it was to represent influence, no actual power, and it was to be exerted through others and for others" (qtd. in "Female Leadership and the 'Cult of Domesticity' 128). The primary difference between the movements is that for the most part, the cult of domesticity has phased out of popular discourse, whereas the sufrida complex and marianista thinking is an heirloom passed down generationally that is still very much alive. Gil and Vazquez say that "*marianismo* insists you live in a world which no longer exists and which perpetuates a value system equating perfection with submission" (Gil & Vazquez 7). The world

does, however, exist. It is self-created by the women who constrain themselves with “Old Country” thinking and ignore the wealth of opportunities that are open to them. In Latinx culture, it is understandably more difficult to break away from the social mechanics which are so widely practiced and accepted, although it may be of great benefit for the oppressed sufridas.

## CHAPTER 2: ANALYSIS OF WORKS BY JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

We learn from our parents who and how to be. The feminine identity that is traditionally passed down within the Latinx culture, is a good representation of the performance of gender identity. In *Silent Dancing* by Judith Ortiz Cofer, she explores the transmission of gender roles and how those initial teachings are enforced by society. Furthermore, throughout the book, Ortiz Cofer represents the integration of gender roles through various means, namely storytelling, gossip, and example.

In Latinx culture, being a woman is defined differently than in hegemonic U.S. society. There is more restriction on the Latina. “Decent girls never look you directly in the face. *Humilde*, humble, a girl should express humility in all her actions” (Ortiz Cofer 95). A woman is taught to be *una ama de casa*. She is supposed to perform “con plomo.” This is something my mom trained me to do as well and I never could define it, except that it meant “act accordingly,” be smart, frugal, work hard, behave, be decent, always keep yourself busy, empty hands invite sin. Likewise, Ortiz Cofer discusses how she was socialized to perform: “It was on these rockers that my mother, her sisters and my grandmother sat on these afternoons of my childhood to tell their stories, teaching each other and my cousin and me what it was like to be a woman, more specifically, a Puerto Rican woman” (Ortiz Cofer 14). As she grew into her role as a woman, she was taught that “At home my mother constantly reminded me that I was now a ‘señorita’ and needed to behave accordingly; but she never explained exactly what that entailed” (Ortiz Cofer 125).

Initiation into womanhood in Latinx culture is treated with discretion and is taught through example. There is a sense of brutality as well, if a woman does not perform a certain

way, she will be cast out of favorable view by her fellow women. “In a culture that places such a high value on chastity, marriage, and motherhood as the primary goals to which women should aspire, a young woman must tread carefully through adolescence because the consequences of succumbing to one's own desires could prove too great a price to pay” (Montilla 207). Moreover, a woman’s duties are to be solely dedicated to her husband and children. Her success as a woman depends on how well she can fulfill their needs, not her own. “But everyone knew that a Puerto Rican woman is her husband’s satellite; she reflects both his light and his dark sides” because her job is to dedicate herself to the men in her life: father, husband, children (especially sons) (Ortiz Cofer 64). Ortiz Cofer is a contemporary woman sharing the stories of other contemporary women, meaning this is still an expectation that many Latinas are held to.

The script of femininity is passed down from mother to child and enforced by society. In an article released by the *Journal of Latino/a Psychology* entitled “The Marianismo Beliefs Scale: Validation with Mexican American Adolescent Girls and Boys” the researchers assert that, “For Latinas/os, the immediate and extended family can play a central role in exposing adolescents to values and cultural norm expectations (e.g., gender roles)” (Piña-Watson et al. 114). Ortiz Cofer received this transference primarily through her grandmother, the matriarch of the family. She addresses the socialization of women when she says:

To a child, life is a play directed by parents, teachers, and other adults who are forever giving directions: ‘Say this,’ ‘Don’t say that,’ ‘Stand here,’ ‘Walk this way,’ ‘Wear these clothes,’ and on and on and on. If we miss or ignore a cue, we are punished. And so we memorized the script of our lives as interpreted by our progenitors, and we learned not to extemporize too much: the world—our

audience—likes the well-made play, with everyone in their places and not too many bursts of brilliance or surprises. (101)

One of the main mediums of socialization for Ortiz Cofer is storytelling. She says that, “It was under the mango tree that I first began to feel the power of words. I cannot claim to have always understood the point of the stories I heard there” (Ortiz Cofer 76). It is through those cuentos that she learned what feminine performance means, for example, when her mother tells her the story of Marino, the man who was forcibly dressed as a girl during his formative years. Marino conducted himself within the traditional confines of Latin femininity. His story shows that gender is learned and performed, not inherent. Mamá’s stories always exemplify the role of the woman, showing what a woman should be, or describing the perils of performing outside the accepted norm, as Montilla deftly points out:

The protagonists of Mama's stories stay within the social framework of the island without dismantling the expected female roles of the time. Maria Sabida does, after all, fulfill her role as a wife and mother, and Maria la Loca is chastised for her failure to accomplish hers. At the same time, however, these stories provide insight into how women learned to protect and enable themselves within the patriarchal order by disclosing the dangers of losing one's sense of self and depending on another for love and happiness. (Montilla 208)

La desgracia de las otras mujeres opened the doors to teaching how not to act in order to save yourself from the same kind of criticism. Their judgement of Maria la Loca, the woman who foolishly gave herself away for love, and Providencia, the woman who never closed her legs, are good examples of this. The time the women spent together, “a time when the women sat in the

kitchen and lamented their burdens, while the men feasted out in the patio” was integral to their socialization, as it was through their gossip that they taught what was acceptable behavior, and equally as importantly, what was not (Ortiz Cofer 26-27).

Simply talking about other women is not enough to teach a girl how to be a woman; they must also *show* her. Mamá, through her matriarchal prominence, shows what it means to be hardworking, hands always engaged, and virtuous, “she followed a routine of labor and self-sacrifice into her old age” (Ortiz Cofer 141). Her arts of labor and self-sacrifice served as a template for her daughters and grandchildren on how to negotiate life in a man’s world. With a woman’s duty to serve her husband and children, a woman loses much of her identity; to be a woman in Latinx culture is to not belong to yourself. Ortiz Cofer’s mother is a good example of this, “She would soon get used to both facts of life: that every one of her waking hours would belong to me from then on, and this solemn stranger—who only resembled the timid young man she had married two years before—would own her nights. My mother was finally coming of age,” meaning, she was finally becoming a real woman: someone who belongs to her gender role and not herself (Ortiz Cofer 47).

Aunt Nena also displays the selflessness involved in womanhood. After marrying the “ignorant and abusive widower whose main interest in life was accumulating wealth,” she became a “sadder woman” whose “life was dimming” because she was losing herself to a parasitical marriage (Ortiz Cofer 18-19). Part of the disadvantages of being a Latina is that such deep reverence and dedication to her husband and children also means accepting the abuse of the people she is meant to care for. Her job as a woman is to serve her family at all costs.

Ortiz Cofer, however, grew into a different ideology of womanhood, saying that, “My trouble with Mother comes when she and I try to define and translate key words for both of us, such as ‘woman’ and ‘mother.’ I have a daughter too, as well as a demanding profession as a teacher and writer. My mother got married as a teenager and led a life of isolation and total devotion to her duties as mother. As a Penelope-like wife, she was always waiting, waiting, waiting, for the return of her sailor, for the return to her native land” (Ortiz Cofer 152). Cofer’s deviance from the prescribed gender norm started early on, however. Her daring attempt to kiss Angel Ramón behind the house was an act performed outside of the appropriate behavior of a lady. She knew that such behavior would have been reprimanded, and though fearing humiliation afterwards, that did not deter her from leaning in. Despite how young she was at the time, she still defied cultural norms. “La autora se sustrae a nociones de pureza cultural así como al papel tradicional de la mujer de Puerto Rico como transmisora y archivo de la cultura nacional. Postulo que *Silent Dancing* escenifica el distanciamiento de la autora del modelo de mujer puertorriqueña personificado en su madre y en su abuela materna como resultado del rechazo de Ortiz Cofer a la ideología patriarcal subyacente en dicho modelo” (Quintana Millamoto 118).

Ortiz Cofer had other representations of women in her life that may have influenced her. María Sabida, for example, is considered the folkloric template for what it takes to be a good woman, but a lot of her attributes are not in alignment to traditional gender roles. Her cunning and worldly knowledge set her apart. “Her main virtue was that she was always alert and never a victim. She was by implication contrasted to María La Loca, that poor girl who gave it all up for love, becoming a victim of her own foolish heart” (Ortiz Cofer 76). In an interview, however, Ortiz Cofer stated that, “the character of Maria—la Loca—attracted me because I have often felt

like the oddball myself” (Acosta-Belén 89). This is because her vision of womanhood does not align with the overarching view of women in Puerto Rico.

Vida, one of the characters inhabiting her girlhood in New Jersey, was also a big influence on Ortiz Cofer. Her portrayal provides another version of “woman” because of her independence, street-knowledge, and daring personality. Vida was able to navigate the world, using her intelligence and beauty to survive, and even thrive, in a foreign country. Ortiz Cofer’s relationship to Vida most likely contributed to her later emancipation from the Latinx version of “womanhood.” Ortiz Cofer’s fixation with Vida and later with Providencia further illustrates how differently she views women who deviate from the accepted role. Providencia is painted as a real Madonna because she represents the potential loss of identity caused by prolonged and unreachable expectations of women’s behavior. However, Providencia’s sacrifices earned her the title of “desgraciada” by her fellow women because Providencia’s means of fulfilling her gender role (i.e. providing for her family) are unacceptable for a “good woman.” A woman can only be una mujer decente if she is married. Men give women status and an acceptable means of having children. Yet, Providencia still fights for her children, to the point of delusion and derision.

Additionally, Felícita provided Ortiz Cofer with still another definition of “woman.” She left home for a while and ran off with a man that her parents did not approve of. She lived a very “indecent” life before returning home; yet, she is still portrayed as fabulous and caring, meaning that a woman can be independent—live for herself—perform in other ways, and still be a good person. Furthermore, Marino portrays the absolute performance of womanhood—a performance that gave Ortiz Cofer and her mother a platform on which to find common ground, “I looked at my mother and she smiled at me; we now had a new place to begin our search for the meaning of

the word *woman*” (Ortiz Cofer 160). Ultimately, people and characters outside of her family give Ortiz Cofer another avenue with which to regard femininity, “Specifically, they challenge the notions that a woman's role as a wife is to provide her husband pleasure and children and that the female body is strictly a life-giving vessel” (Montilla 208). Ortiz Cofer exemplifies the contemporary Latina who can successfully break the molds of a stifling, self-perpetuating gender dynamic which benefits from the subjugation of women.

The time Ortiz Cofer’s spent on “the Mainland” was also a contributing factor to her distance from the traditional role of women. Due to her exposure to another version of the gender role, she was able to build her own identity apart from the hegemonic Latinx culture. Marisel Moreno states that, “the narrator engages in a voyage of discovery in search of a space where she can belong. In the end her search for such a space proves to be futile because, unable to feel at home in either of the two cultures, she recognized that it is the process of movement itself that defines her identity” (441). Ortiz Cofer’s displacement, though damaging to her development of a full identity, allowed her to recreate notions of womanhood.

Girls are primed by the women in their lives to continue the traditional modes of comport, as Woolf states, “Masterpieces are not ‘solitary births,’ ...they require preparation, foreground, and female models and mentors” (Woolf qtd. in Doyle 91). Ortiz Cofer needed to experience different versions of womanhood performed in order to develop her own ideas of what it means to be a woman how it should be performed. Her depiction of the process of learned behavior—through cuentos, gossip, and socialization— allows her to later parse out how the definitions of “woman” differ.

Ortiz Cofer's other works similarly focus on the development of Latina women during and after conventional indoctrination. In "By Love Betrayed," a story within *The Latin Deli*, Eva recounts her experiences at home, watching her mother perform the role of a woman. She mentions an important role that society plays in maintaining the constraints on women—"I was allowed to stay up for the early [telenovela]: *Traicionado por el amor: By Love Betrayed*" (24). Telenovelas portray dramatic women who typically either are exemplifications of the pure virgencita, or conniving women who plot evil. Latin American media often centers around heart break. Heart break is an integral part of the gender dynamic; without it, the sufrida cannot assume her role as woman in pain.

I was raised watching novelas. I remember distinctly the beautiful protagonists that were always difficult to "conquistar." It never struck me how debilitating and graphic that word was, and how common. To capture a woman is the goal of the macho, so he may use and abuse her as he sees fit, and she will endure whatever torture he submits her to because that is her duty. This dynamic can be seen in the story when Eva watches her mother's abuse at the hand of her father, "Another time I heard a sound like a slap, but I did not know who hit whom, because my mother always cried, and he always left" (*The Latin Deli* Cofer 24). Her father cheats on her mother and abuses her. Toxic displays of unhealthy codependence are not uncommon and are furthermore inherent in Latinx relationships where the woman is expected to be steadfast and endure, and the man is allowed to be—almost expected to be—a maltratador. The well-known saying "mujeres son de la casa, hombres son de la calle" shows this dynamic. Latinx gender roles are thus symbiotic: in order to fulfill their duties, men need to act out and women must endure so they can be "good women" and men can be good machos.

Eva says, “I learned my fighting words in Spanish then: the words to hurt and also the words of the church that my mother taught me so that I would not turn out a sinner like my father” (*The Latin Deli* Ortiz Cofer 25). Eva was taught purity and the toxicity of marianismo simultaneously as they run through the same vein, and in practice the reality is rotten. Eva is forced from a young age to mediate representations of masculine dishonesty and feminine righteousness. Even the title of the story reflects the toxic symbiosis of Latinx gender roles—“By Love Betrayed” is a nominal reference to the telenovelas and more so describes the fate of female dramatics. Betrayal feeds the sufrida’s need to be emotionally injured, as it is her need and her right to be portrayed as melancholic because above all else, suffering is redemptive. Eva’s mother is absolved from all personal fault because she is a woman in anguish who cannot be blamed because she is a hard-worker with an abusive husband. Sufridahood allows women to no longer be perfect, rather, she is now allowed to be as perfect as she can be provided the circumstances. Though her mother does not seem to intentionally be a bad parent, her tyrannical devotion to Eva’s father is as calculated as his infidelity.

In “Knowledge of Good and Evil: Teaching Judith Ortiz Cofer’s ‘By Love Betrayed’” by April C. Kilinski, the religious metaphors of the story are further explored. Kilinski argues that “The narrator’s mother and her ‘intense’ Catholicism are similarly oppressive [to Cofer’s upbringing], and they construct the narrator’s father as a kind of forbidden fruit” (49). This is indispensable when constructing a *pied-à-terre* garden of Eden. Eva (whose name should be taken note of), plays with a statue of The Virgen Mary crushing a black snake “[pretending] to take the snake out” despite her mother forbidding it (Ortiz Cofer 25). “In Catholic iconography, Mary as the mother of Jesus steps on the serpent’s head... In the religious metaphor of the statue,

then, she tries to rescue the devil from God's punishment. The narrator's sympathy for the serpent mirrors her feelings about her father as a victim of her mother's religious oppression" (Kilinski 49-50). This becomes even more convoluted when Eva discovers her father in the act of adultery. She is then tempted by her father, the embodiment of the devil in the context of this analogy, to be complicit and keep his secret, "like Eve, the narrator eventually succumbs to temptation" (Kilinski 50). Here, Tito seals their mutual silence with food "Today we decide everything by ourselves. Deal?" which Kilinski also points out, is how the Devil tempted Eve, with forbidden food (Ortiz Cofer 27). Thus, we enter into the conversation of consumption and how women (and girls) are responsible for what enters their physical and mental orifices. Eva chose to stay home from school to follow her father, despite her mother's attempts to protect her from the truth. Eva's subsequent fall from innocence is paradigmatic as Adam and Eve "incurred their punishment of expulsion from the Garden for their disobedience" (Kilinski 51).

Ortiz Cofer shows us the destiny of the *sufrida* in the following story "The Witch's Husband." Here, the narrator is asked to "convince *la abuela*, the family's proud matriarch, to step down—to allow her children to take care of her before she kills herself with work" (Ortiz Cofer 42). Work is an integral part of the noble Latin woman's identity, as is previously exemplified through Mamá in *Silent Dancing*, and will continue to pervade the Latinx literary canon. Labor and self-sacrifice mark the true value of a *marianista*. My mother used to tell me "mente ociosa, taller del Diablo," a phrase that means that leisure often leads to sin whereas responsibility leads to ascendancy. This differs from the English version "idle hands are the devil's workshop." The Spanish version emphasizes keeping a pure mind while the English version emphasizes a restless work ethic; in either case, divinity is found in preoccupation. If

Eve is the paragon of sin, it is through unfocused work ethic that the Devil was able to enter her mind; case in point, a woman must direct her energy accordingly. This story, however, deviates from the archetypical sufrida narrative because narrator's abuela claimed some pro tem freedom in the days of her youth.

Abuela reveals that she ran away twice, was once found, and a second time was allowed freedom by her husband. It is important to note that when she declared her own freedom, she was recovered and forced back into the confining roles of womanhood. It was only when her overseer, or husband, allows her a year of freedom, that she was able to obtain her furlough. But this hoydenish act was not licensed, especially at the time. The narrator's grandfather indulged her abuela, and in return, she devotes the last of her days to him, though not without displeasure, as it is revealed in the exposition that "[her] heart is making odd sounds again in her chest" (Ortiz Cofer 56). After learning that her heart was her first reason abandoning her family, this becomes a sign of her distress. Abuela's act of selflessness can no longer be taken as a loving deed of martyrdom, rather, as restitution for her year of "witchcraft," or social profligacy.

The bruja versus virgen duality is one worth exploring. Abuela shares a story with the narrator about a clan of witches who go out in the night without their husbands to have a feast in a castle. The ritual that the witches partake in is the most exceptional part of the story. Before they can leave their house, they must first say "*I don't believe in the Church, or in God, or in the Virgin Mary*" (Ortiz Cofer 58). Because these women are acting outside of the allowed conduct for their gender, they must first denounce the structures that enforce those precedents—meaning God and especially the Virgin Mary who is the apotheosis of womanhood. Declaiming the

church suggests that God and freedom cannot—at least for the Latin woman—exist in the same paradigm.

Irene Lara quotes Cherríe Moraga in her analysis of the “Virtuous Virgen/ Pagan Puta dichotomy,” where she states that, “if sexuality and spirituality have been combined for [women’s] repression then obviously they have to be combined for [their] liberation” (Lara 106). The combination of religious ideology and patriarchal norms are at the root of Latin women’s oppression. In order for female liberty and equality to exist alongside evangelism, the rules need to be rewritten or entirely ignored—as is the case in the story. When abuela and her fellow brujas take flight into the night naked, they embody all of the carnal acts which the church finds so deplorable. Flight itself is a motif of liberation, and to do so completely unconstrained even from the subjugation of clothing is the height of radical femininity—they are serving their flesh before God. Furthermore, they break into a man’s home, breaching the sacred masculine space to exhibit all of their organic, primitive, and anti-virile glory. These women are not just brujas, they are Gods unto themselves, serving themselves and their desires in a self-defined spirituality. In the castle—their effeminate heaven—they feast. The act of consumption is ever-present alongside female sin, “Christian beliefs about paganism, the devil, and female transgression as symbolized by Eve” who let sin into her body through nutriment (Lara 101). Eating is not only the marker for the present devil, it also symbolizes indulgence and self-gratification, dangerous terrain for women of God; however, these are not women of God, these are witches, and they flee at the mere mention of God who interrupts their memorialization of female freedom with parenthesis of social obligations. It is this story that abuela chooses to use as a citation for her

socially-tumultuous past, indicating that she acknowledges her past actions to be outside of the accepted social model as they were heathenish, profane, and impious.

Abuela pays for her anterior freedom and is absorbed back into the sufrida lifestyle. Her suffering is redemptive in a way. She returns because she misses her family and the only way to access them is to atone for her earlier actions by serving her husband and community dutifully for the rest of her days. She must renounce her past ways completely, no questions asked, only then can deliverance be negotiated—a phrase that is mimicked in *Silent Dancing*, “It was a man’s world, and a man’s heaven. But mediation was possible—if one could only get *His* attention” through piety and selflessness (44). Abuela’s service to others is not altruistic or charitable, it is castigation for her own immorality. There can be no resolution for her then, apart from living out her final sentence: to die a sufrida, serving her husband until the end because it is her duty to do so.

### CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS OF WORKS BY NICHOLASA MOHR

According to “The Marianismo Beliefs Scale: Validation With Mexican American Adolescent Girls and Boys” there is a cognitive enculturation of values such as familismo that are the foundations of The Family Pillar (borrowed by Castillo et. al study “Construction and Initial Validation of the Marianismo Beliefs Scale” and elaborated upon) which:

[Designates] that Latinas should maintain family harmony and child rearing. This factor is strongly rooted in the tenant of familismo. Two other factors of Marianismo are Virtuous and Chaste and Subordinate to Others. The Virtuous and Chaste factor describes how a Latina is expected to maintain her virginity until marriage, respect her body, and be mindful of avoiding sexual content in conversation and action, whereas the [Subordination] to Others factor reflects the belief that Latinas should show obedience and respect for the Latina/o hierarchical family structure. Both factors are based on the tenant of respeto, which is a cultural script that represents the obedience, duty, and difference of an individual’s position in the hierarchical structure. The fourth factor, Self-silencing to Maintain Harmony, describes the belief that Latinas should keep confrontation and discomfort to a minimum within interpersonal relationships. This is based on the tenant of simpatía, a cultural script that emphasizes the expectation to act in ways that promote smooth and pleasant social relationships (Castillo & Cano, 2007). The final factor is the Spiritual Pillar, which describes the belief that Latinas should be the spiritual leader of the family and have a responsibility for their religious education of their family. (Piña-Watson et al. 115)

These pillars can be used to evaluate the protagonists of Nicholasa Mohr's novels. In *Rituals of Survival: A Woman's Portfolio*, Mohr creates a collection of vignettes that give insight into the lives of different Latina women. In "Aunt Rosana's Rocker (Zoraida)" we explore the life of a seemingly feeble woman. Zoraida is described as "a little sick sparrow flirting with death and having the upper hand" (Mohr 17). And she does have the upper hand, Zoraida holds the power of sexuality which cannot be arraigned by her husband or family. Zoraida performs the role of woman to near perfection, "make no mistake, Casto assured them, Zoraida remained a wonderful housekeeper and devoted mother. Supper was served on time, chores were done without fuss, the apartment was immaculate, and the kids were attended to without any problems," but she is able to liberate herself in other ways (Mohr 12). In her sleep, she realizes her unconscious fantasies of pleasure. Her husband, Casto—whose name unironically appears short for "castrate"—is angered by her displays of sensuous overture, which mark both her sexual liberation and his impotence. The value of a woman is her mental, sexual and spiritual devotion to her husband and children, and her fulfillment as mother and housekeeper; though Zoraida executes these roles to near perfection, the narrative is corrupted by her sexual deviance, effectively breaking the Virtuous and Chaste factor pillar.

Zoraida does, however, uphold the other pillars. Her demure demeanor becomes a point of contention with her husband and family later, but it reflects the tenant of Self-silencing as a necessary means of maintaining harmony and minimizing discomfort. She stays quiet and reserved. She maintains family harmony and child rearing, notwithstanding how emotionally taxing and detrimental it is to her health: "Even after this recent miscarriage, Zoraida appeared to recover quickly, and with her usual amazing resiliency, managed the household chores and the

children all by herself. She even found time to assuage Casto's fears of sickness and prepare special foods for him" (Mohr 18). Despite the fact that her body is recovering from the intense loss of a child, she manages to serve others in order to maintain familial harmony and cohesion. Resilience is an important value in the marianista. She cannot let her suffering keep her from fulfilling her roles, lest she become a bad woman and bring ruin to her family, in other words, she is—to quote Irene Lara once again— “imprisoned upon a pedestal” (116). The fight that the family has over her, or rather, over her body, illustrates the imprisonment that Lara describes and the commodification of Latin women: “Look, I'm only human, you know? And she... is denying me what is my right as a man and as her husband” (Mohr 26). The “right” which Casto speaks of, is the culturally enforced notion that women are meant to serve their husbands hand and foot and sex. His “humanity” is valued over her needs despite the fact that she too is a human. This is further demonstrated by Zoraida's mother when she says, “You have to humor men; you must know that by now. After all, you are no longer a little girl. All women go through this difficulty, eh? ... that's just the way it is for us” (Mohr 30). Such rhetoric exemplifies the submissive nature of the sufrida. The pillar of Virtuous and Chaste and Subordinate to Others are meant to protect the tenants of familismo, not for the woman's pleasure. Gil and Vazquez argue that one of the ways to identify a marianista is if she “[Lets] a man take sexual liberties with [her], even when [she does not] really want him to” (Gil & Vazquez 31). This is unfortunately a common practice and Zoraida's interaction with her mother serves to illustrate the transference of gender roles from mother to daughter. She is teaching her the proper way to be a woman; she is teaching her submission.

Roles of Husband and Wife are performative in nature, and though roles of macho or caballero are symbiotically linked to the roles of the sufrida or marianista, men are given preferential treatment. Their desires are regarded as the best possible decisions for their families, regardless of how costly to the woman: “Look, I’m only human, you know? And she... is denying me what is my right as a man and her husband” (Mohr 26). Her body is his right, whether or not it is her desire. Though Zoraida’s family and husband look at her as if she were a pariah, the real issue is Casto’s impotence: “Casto remembered how she always urged him to hurry, be quiet, get it over with, on account of the children. A lot she cares about him tonight! ... Casto shook his head, how humiliating and so damned condescending” and now she was behaving like “an alley cat in heat” (Mohr 13). Her prowess directed at a force that was within herself and outside of his control infuriates Casto, he projects his feelings of impotence onto Zoraida which manifest in insults and violence as he calls her a “Put a! Whore!” and wants to “rush in and shake Zoraida, wake her, beat her” (Mohr 13; 14). This is further elucidated when Casto says to her, “You’ll find something else, right? Another lover, is that what you want, so you can become an animal? Because with me, let me tell you, you ain’t no animal. With me you’re nothing” (Mohr 20). Casto’s tone is accusatory, as if the issue is that she is nothing when the real issue is that he cannot manifest that reaction from her or fulfill her needs. She instead leaves their consecrated marital bed to rock back and forth on a wooden chair by herself—a gyrational and sensuous movement indicating self-pleasure (on a wooden chair nonetheless): “Zoraida used to rub her hands against the caning and woodwork admiringly, while she rocked, dreamed and pretended to her heart’s content. Lately it had become the one place where she felt she could be herself, where she could really be free” (29). It is during these sessions of self-

pleasuring that her roles as wife and mother are interrupted by orgasmic self-liberation—to put it plainly, he cannot pleasure her the way she can pleasure herself, and he cannot stand that.

Irene Lara had outlined the virtuous virgen/ pagan puta dichotomy saying, “This gendered and racialized othering process links indigenous deities and women to a particularly dangerous sexuality associated with paganism, that is, with dangerous spirituality” (102). Dangerous sexuality is sex performed outside of the conventional control of the husband for the sole purpose of producing children. Dangerous sexuality is sexuality that is controlled by the woman as the devil enters her body; Zoraida, therefore, is a vision of dangerous sexuality, deviancy, and paganism: “there was an evil spirit in you that was turning your thought away from your husband, so that you could not be a wife to him” (Mohr 27). Zoraida’s family regards her as a possessed one who cannot be a proper woman; she is defective, a “Sinvergüenza!” (23). The “impossible ideal of virgin mother for women to emulate... [an] idealized *pure* virginal motherhood of Guadalupe as a Marian figure whose spiritual powers originate from her association with a male God and the Son of God” is a standard which Zoraida cannot reach (Lara 104). Her dangerous sexuality corrupts the necessary purity to make her una mujer decente.

Carmela is the protagonist of another short story within the collection “A Time with a Future (Carmela)”. She offers a subverted narrative to the typical sufrida manuscript. After her husband passes, she is provided a newfound freedom, and to her children’s utter shock, she opts to move to an apartment alone and take care of herself, but before that, her children stay with Carmela, assuming they know what is best for her: “Carmela had to make the daybed in her room, share her own bed with one of her daughters, find more sheets, towels, dishes and all the extra work that was part of caring for others. She had not been able to rest; not as she should, by

herself, alone with her private grief and deep sense of relief” (Mohr 36). Relief is an important concept here. She describes feeling relieved after he passes away because, though she may have loved him or even resented him, she still had to take care of him. Put simply, he was a burden. In love, there is an unspoken tinge of resentment because there is a stifling patriarchal confinement that women are not supposed to challenge. At one point, while their child, Freddie, is sick she asks him to take care of the kids and the house while she stays with Freddie at the hospital. Benjamin responds saying, “I can’t be here with the kids, cooking, washing, and doing your housework” (Mohr 38). He separates their roles, prioritizing his role over hers because he is conditioned to be the breadwinning macho and she is conditioned to oblige.

This story is especially noteworthy because it shows the toxic symbiosis of machismo and marianismo: “Carmela had hidden her resentment and put aside her hatred. Instead, she responded as always, to the unspoken bond that existed between them, that dependency on each other... This pact, built on survival, was what held them together” (Mohr 41-42). Their roles tie them together, in spite of how unhappy Carmela is alongside him. She stays with him begrudgingly to take care of him for years, even respecting his wishes to die at home under her care after he told her to leave Freddie in a hospital where he ultimately died alone. This harkens back to the Piña-Watson study which found that the tenants of marianismo include subordination to others and Self-silencing to Maintain Harmony. I postulate that these two tenants are the most important to a good marianista as these motifs are recurrent in sufrida characters and they encompass the true essence of the effects of misogyny and sufrida martyrdom. Carmela hints to this as well when she says, “she had wished she had been born a boy, to be able to travel

anywhere, to be part of that world” (Mohr 53). This reinforces the idea that *mujeres son de la casa y los hombres son de la calle*.

Carmela and Benjamin’s codependence is referred to multiple times, but her subsequent freedom is the most important facet of the story. She is given the opportunity to break the mold and she seizes it. She tells her kids that she will not move in with any of them and asserts her freedom, saying “I took care of all of you once, and I took care of him... now, I want the privilege of taking care of myself!” (Mohr 50). Self-care is seen as a privilege rather than the absolute right of the individual. The dangers of *sufrida* culture are that the identity of the woman can get lost in her role. Luckily, Carmela is not one of these cases. Though she does touch on the general restrictions on women, she enjoys the simple act of being with herself. She says, “She looked out from her terrace at the river, and a sense of peace filled her whole being. Carmela recognized it was the same exhilarating happiness she had experienced as a young girl, when each day would be a day for her to reckon with, all her own, a time with a future” (Mohr 53).

Not all women are as fortunate as Carmela. Lydia, the *sufrida* mother in Nicholasa Mohr’s novel *Nilda* lives a much more fatalistic life. Cast between the years of 1941 and 1945, *Nilda* is situated in Spanish Harlem, or El Barrio, at the crux of World War II as violence and criminal activity are on the rise. The family faces many hardships including poverty, drug addiction, death, and birth. Lydia is the pioneer, navigating the family’s responses to these unexpected afflictions, often without assistance apart from bringing her daughter, Nilda, along with her. Lydia is, insofar as this essay assesses, the clearest example of a *sufrida* and shows how the role can, as Lara says, “[imprison women] upon a pedestal” (116).

Lydia faces the humiliations of poverty with a strong and relentless will. She fights for her family, making sacrifices and space for people where there was nothing to give. When her family faces financial instability, for example, she pays a visit to the Welfare office in order to find the means to provide. She meets the social worker's blatant disrespect and prejudice with grace and politeness, even as the woman admonishes Nilda for her dirty demeanor, giving her a nail file and asking if she knew what it was. But the circumstances that drove Lydia to that office are of interest as well. Her husband, who is supposed to be the bread winner, has a heart attack and is no longer able to work. The schematics of the household change, and as women are expected to do: Lydia rises to the occasion. Apart from visiting welfare offices, she supplements food shortages, and never says no to adding another mouth to her already full table. She is a caregiver, a matriarch, and a marianista.

Lydia upholds traditional gender roles and passes them down to her children. She indoctrinates them with proper gender comport, telling Nilda: "'You are too old! A señorita does not behave like that!' her mother would say, or, 'Nilda, come away. What are you doing with all those boys?'" and 'Don't sit with your knees apart. What kind of way to is that for a young lady to sit!'" (Mohr 198). She furthermore makes an example of Nilda's friend, Petra, who gets pregnant at a very young age: "You don't disgrace me. You don't bring shame. Nilda! When you want to fool around, think of that girl, think of Petra. What kind of life will she have? Finished, no more school, no more fun—no more nothing!" (Mohr 259). She uses this to show Nilda that when she has kids, her life will no longer belong to her; that her individual needs and desires will become "nothing." These fear tactics are meant to stifle the woman's freedom but also to protect her. As Gil and Vazquez assert, "Women end up in this position because the dark side of *machismo*

mandates that men have options, and women have duties. It means that a man's place is *en el mundo*, in the world, and a woman's place is *en la casa*, in the home" (Gil & Vazquez 6). The purpose of keeping young girls chaste is to protect them from the men of the world who will ultimately abandon them for the sensual fulfillment, or "options" the world provides.

It is clear, however, that Lydia raises her boys to be good "machos"; not the kind who leave their women, though one of them does. She attempts to curb any other familial indiscretions by offering a different prescription of behavior to her boys: "Mira, Frankie, in Puerto Rico, you know what a boy who is going to be sixteen is? A macho! Yes, and taking care of a whole family, not running around like everything is a party. They don't go to school and have your privileges. You get too smart with me, and you can come back and stay in all evening and not go to that meeting at all!" (Mohr 221). It is important to note that she does not disallow Frankie to go out, rather, she threatens his ability to exercise his freedom. Lydia's focus is to enforce familismo. She condemns her son, Victor, for leaving his girlfriend after he impregnates her. Lydia takes the girl and her child in despite their already lacking resources. Evelyn P Stevens speaks to this phenomenon when she says, "No self-denial is too great for the Latin-American woman... No limit can be divined to her vast store of patience for the men in her life... but far from being an oppressive norm dictated by tyrannical males, *marianismo* has received considerable impetus from women themselves. This makes it possible to regard *marianismo* as part of a reciprocal arrangement, the other half of *machismo*" (qtd. in *The Maria Paradox* Gil & Vazquez 7). Lydia perpetuates the system that oppresses her by instilling in her boys the virtues of machismo.

As alluded to before, the Piña-Watson study found that one of the tenants of marianismo is self-silencing to maintain harmony (115). This is not, however, always the case. In order to protect the family, confrontation must occur. This can be seen when Lydia argues with her husband over Victor's girlfriend and her child living with them: 'Your love of common people is that you deny my grandchild a home? Like our Virgen María and Niño Jesús they will have no place to go. Well, they stay and this is their home right here! That's final! Ya basta! Dios mío sagrado,' and she made the sign of the cross" (Mohr 74). The best interest of the family takes precedence over the hierarchical structure of the household; this allows women the space to counter the dominant voice of men. As it is, the girl and child move in with them.

The Piña-Watson study also delineates the "Spiritual Pillar, which describes the belief that Latinas should be the spiritual leader of the family and have a responsibility for the religious education of their family" (115). Lydia is the manifestation of this. Her husband, a devout communist, denounces the establishment of the church: "Bunch of shit, filling her head with that phony stuff. Fairy tales to oppress the masses" (Mohr 20). It is Lydia's duty to establish the good Christian beliefs that keep functions harmonious. This spiritual pillar is part of the female gender role that Lydia attempts to instill in Nilda: "They are boys, Nilda; what does it matter? But you, you are a girl. For you it is essential. Oh yes." (Mohr 20). This speaks to the worldliness that men are allowed to personify. Women must keep the familia sagrada, after all, it is she who will be held responsible for their destiny: virtue or downfall.

Lydia embodies the true catastrophe of sufridahood. She dies without ever having the opportunity to live for herself: "I have no life of my own, Nilda... I have never had a life of my own... yes, that's true, isn't it? No life, Nilda... nothing that is really mine... that's not fair, is it?"

That's not right... I don't know what I want even... Do you know if I were to get well tomorrow... what I would do? Nilda? ... I would live for the children I bore... I guess... and nothing more. You see, I don't remember any more what I did want" (Mohr 276-277). The fear of sufrida culture is that she will submit herself to the will of others so much, she will lose her identity entirely. As Gil and Vazquez point out: "to *una doña perfecta*, emotional overload, even physical collapse, is preferable to that gnawing *marianista* guilt of not having fulfilled the caretaker role" (Gil & Vazquez 188-189). For this reason, Lydia would continue to perform as a sufrida given the chance.

On her death bed, Lydia calls Nilda in specifically because it is through the woman that the family is created, and it is through the woman that the family is maintained. It is Nilda's duty to perpetuate their lineage. Lydia, though conflicted, gives her daughter a bit of unconventional advice: "Don't have a bunch of babies and lose your life" and continues saying, "I know you have something all yours. Keep it... hold on, guard it. Never give it to nobody... not to your lover, not to your kids... it don't belong to them... and... they have no right... no right to take it. We are all born alone... and we die all alone. And when I die, Nilda, I know I take nothing with me that is only mine" (Mohr 275; 277). The typical sufrida role dictates that a woman cannot belong to herself. To be a good martyr— a good household Madonna— she cannot practice independence. For Lydia to tell her daughter to break that mold shows her frustrations with the social conventions that have deprived her of her ability to have dominion over herself.

Daniel Arbino, in his essay "Through a Child's Eyes: Latin@ Resistance and Assimilation in the Works of Nicholasa Mohr" points out a very important intersection in

Lydia's identity. She is a monolith of a good Latin woman, but she is also an immigrant in the U.S. Arbino argues that:

The nameless disease indicates a metaphor for cultural displacement that is expanded via the climatic differences between Puerto Rico and New York. Mohr appropriates illness as a metaphor to highlight the "dis-ease" (to borrow Hron's term) that immigrants suffer from as they attempt to adjust to a new culture. For her, a balance must be found between assimilation and total rejection. Those that do not find equilibrium face grave consequences. For Mohr, it is North American culture and not the immigrant that is metaphorically the invasive disease. It is worth mentioning that like Little Ray, Nilda's mother also dies of an unknown disease. By inverting this stigma, she characterizes cultural differentiation as healthy and assimilation as unhealthy. Therefore, she takes an oppositional stance to assimilation and calls for otherness. (Arbino 6)

To build on Arbino's argument, the role of the marianista already casts her as secondary. The "dis-ease" of a woman is a lifelong tension. To be a social outcast in a country that she is technically already a part of only adds to the sense of Otherness that a woman already carries. I posit that her unmeetable gender requirements contribute more to the "dis-ease" that killed her than North American culture. Her self-eulogizing speech is a manuscript of her enduring pain and feelings of deficiency. She clearly understands that she was conditioned to be her family's servant, and given the opportunity to live for herself, she would not take it because that is uncharted and unethical territory. This is further exemplified when she states, "and they will kill you in the process, slowly robbing you of your home, so that after a while, it is no longer yours" (Mohr 276). She is being killed by the process of being a woman, and she knows that. She tries

to prevent Nilda from following her footsteps and effectively stops the chain of marianista thinking. She tells Nilda “You are a woman... You will have to bear the child; regardless of who planted the seed, they will be your children and no one else’s. If a man is good, you are lucky; if he leaves you, or is cruel, so much the worse for you... And then, if you have no money and little education, who will help you, Nilda? Another man? Yes, and another pregnancy. Welfare? Yes” (Mohr 276).

If anything, North American culture interrupted the socialization process which would have resulted in Nilda becoming a marianista. We get a hint at the end that Nilda will heed her mother’s advice and pursue artistry over classical women’s house roles. At the very least, Lydia offered her daughter a counternarrative, an option, a way out of the social expectations afforded to women in Latinx culture. This is not to discount Arbino’s point, but the layered experience of an immigrant Latina sufrida woman goes beyond the “dis-ease” of being an “Other” in your own country. Her experience encapsulates sentiments of inadequacy and enslavement which cannot and should not be ignored.

## CONCLUSION: MY MOTHER'S STORY AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

These women are not just figments of their author's imagination fleshed out in twelve-point font; they are reflections of real women. My mother is a *sufrida*. I watched her silently swallow her pain for years: endure my father's abuse and still make dinner for him every night. When I began writing my thesis, I interviewed my mother, forcing her to reflect on her unsavory history—two failed marriages, raising three daughters basically alone in a foreign country, and cleaning houses for a living. One night, after an especially heated argument with my father she came to me and said, “¿Quién se siente triste por ayudar a otra gente? Yo. ¿Que yo le soporte todo la mierda y me quedé ahí como una mujer santa? ¿Para mantener un hogar para las apariencias? ¿Para decir que yo estaba casada por veinte años?” Gil and Vazquez argue that “*marianismo* insists *en mantener las apariencias*, on keeping up appearances, at all costs” (Gil & Vazquez 163). Appearances constitute a large part of the *sufrida* image because part of her divinity is how others perceive her actions. Being a *sufrida* is a performative role that depends on others for its performance; it is not self-reliant. If her sacrifices are not noticed by others, then they are performed in vain. A martyr with no audience has suffered ineffectually.

I spent many late nights catching up with my mom. She told me things about the background happenings of my childhood that I never knew or understood. She told me about my abusive father's affairs, his gambling and gaming problem, and how we almost lost our house on multiple occasions due to his irresponsible spending. At one point, my father was jailed for undisclosed reasons. My mother became sole provider of my sisters and I for three years, her only income being as a house cleaner and nanny. I remember how she would pick us up between jobs and we would go with her to nanny after school. She raised us and her client's children in

conjunction. Back then, I thought they too were my sisters and I did not understand how or why we did not lead the same lavish lives that they did. We never saw my mother crying alone in her room. We never saw her pray against her bedframe every night asking God why he brought her to this foreign country to suffer. But her suffering began long before she came to the U.S. In the Dominican Republic, she was a pioneer in the field of Social Work, laying down a lot of the ground work that people are still benefiting from today. Having studied in the best university in her country, she found work easily. She often provided for patients using her own resources when government funds were lacking. One day, on her way to work, the taxi she was in took a tight turn and, in attempts to avoid an oncoming vehicle, ended up in a ditch. The driver was killed on impact while my mother was left with five fractured bones. As a result, they were going to amputate her legs and they told her she would never have children. Somehow, miraculously, she kept her legs and had twins and later on, me. Their father, however, found more enticing engagements with a woman in Colombia and soon left my mother. She came to the US using her sister's visa, leaving my sisters in D.R. while she established herself in the states. They stayed in D.R. without her for almost two years.

She married my father for papers. She stayed with my father for me, for appearances, and so that my sisters and I could have at least some semblance of a father, though I would hardly call him that. I was the product of my mother's sexual assault. I have always hated myself for being born of a sin while my father has lived unpunished and unprimanded. After all, she is his wife, and it is a wife's duty to perform and provide. She was forced to suffer in silence. She managed to raise us, never failing to emphasize the importance of Christian virtues and good education. I finally understood why my mother was such a devout follower of God: when she

had absolutely nobody else to help her take care of us and pay the bills, all she had to cleave to was God and her Bible. And, yet, my father still lives with her, sucks her dry of every resource she has to offer.

Her body has withered from over twenty years of cleaning houses. Her heart has withered from over twenty years of emotional abuse at the hands of my father. Listening to my mother broke my heart, more so because I know that nothing will change. She will continue to endure whatever abuse he gives her because that is the only thing she knows to do. As Gil and Vazquez outlined in the marianista ten commandments, a good marianista will not “change those things which make [her] unhappy that [she] can realistically change” (Gil & Vazquez 8). The tragedy of the Latin woman’s silent subjectivity is not lost on me. I have watched my mother uphold the marianista ten commandments like they were her Bible, and in a sense, they are. Leviticus goes in-depth explaining the woman’s role ranging from menstrual practices to calling for daughters to be burned with fire if she plays the whore (Leviticus 21:9). Ecclesiastes goes even more in depth about proper female comport and does not fall short of the slut shaming rhetoric that confines women in a “shamefaced” and silent subservience.

Chaste-idolatry and obedience make a woman “virtuous,” but at what cost? “Anzaldúa suggests, unlearning the virtuous virgen/ pagan puta dichotomy is nothing less than healing patriarchal and colonized constructions of female sexuality and spirituality” (Lara 110). There can be healing, but first there must be understanding of the system that built this convenient inequality. The Watson study outlines:

Caballerismo view of women may be considered a benevolent form of sexism, in that chivalry and honor is expressed toward women who fulfill traditional gender role

expectations (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Gender role values have a particular salience for Latina/o culture, in that both men and women place importance on the maintenance of traditional gender role scripts as a means of ensuring continuation of other cultural traditions and values (Dion & Dion, 2001; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). Marianismo and machismo have been conceptualized as being different sides of the same coin, often directly opposite in expectation. (Watson et al. 117)

The traditional roles of men and women as macho and marianista respectively, are symbiotic. In order to perpetuate each other, they need to be acting catalysts. Men must embody the strong and destructive prowess that can protect their woman's chastity while conquering others. Women must be silent in their submission to their men's whims and withstand their abuse in order to be good women. Both are strong in their own right. While men are expected to display outward strength that can protect them out in the world while women are expected to foster an inner strength: a fortitude that allows them to protect their family from the dangers of the world. Men are allowed to be dangerous forces, as they are expected to go out to provide for their family, and they bring those dangers home with them, often expressing worldly sin in alcoholism and domestic abuse. Not all men are like this, and not all women are sufridas, but it is an indisputable cultural norm. The dangers of toxic masculinity are seen in men who exert dominance in devastating ways and women who have been trained to be good victims. According to a study by Nuñez's team, "The endorsement of machismo ideology is not exclusive to men since women are often socialized to show respect for male authority and are expected to internalize and normalize patriarchal values. Likewise, marianismo is relevant to both genders as men are expected to be dominant and to

engage in protective paternalism, which reinforces the marianista belief that women should be submissive nurturing figures in need of male protection” (Nuñez et al., 205).

The characters that have been analyzed in this text who live and die as sole providers show the contraposition of women in subjectivity. From the stories in *Silent Dancing* to *The Latin Deli* to *Rituals of Survival* to *Nilda*, we can make a composite image of women taught, and teaching the next generation, to be the silent submitter in a home that is male-oriented, and how some women challenged those proposed norms. Zoraida does not allow herself to be the sexual subject of her husband, and Mamá effectively claims some extemporaneous freedom and shuts her husband out of her worldly activities, forcing him to trust her (Mohr, *Rituals of Survival: Cofer, The Latin Deli*).

In “Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community” edited by Vicki Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, they show how some radical Latina feminists have diverged from the gender binary successfully. The story of Luisa Capetillo is especially noteworthy. This story recounts the life of Luisa Capetillo, a social activist who with her mother’s help was able to be a mother to her own child while being politically engaged in the communist movement. Motivated by her failed relationship, Capetillo chose to pursue activism over nuclear familial settlement. Her relationship with her mother and her child shows the inculcation of a mentality of feminine freedom as a virtue as opposed to maintaining a status quo. Furthermore, Capetillo chose to harness her grief over her failed relationship in productive ways rather than the destructive baggage of the *sufrida*. Stories such as this give us an alternative narrative for female comport that is successful in challenging cultural norms while giving us insight into the performance of womanhood and

motherhood. Women can be good women without suffering. Women can be good mothers while still retaining a sense of agency.

I never wanted to be like my mother because she stayed with a man who was revolting; a man I can never accept as my father—at least not in the performative sense. He will always be the man that fathered me, that remains uncontested; but he will never be an acceptable or satisfactory paternal figure. I did not want to be like my mother because I did not want to force myself to tolerate someone else's indiscretions. I became a feminist because my mother did not know how to value herself. I obsessed over the power of the woman as a god because my mother did not know her worth. All my life, when asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said “happy,” because that is exactly what my mother was not. I pitied her for it. I was angry at her for it. Her lack of happiness was infuriating to me. I wanted to be nothing like her. It was only through writing this that I found that I too am a sufrida. How could I not be? I was taught by one how to be a woman, to be demure, small, not large enough to take space away from a man, and to always remain inoffensive—nonconfrontational. I thought myself above this mode of thinking. I thought that I was willing to make my voice heard and not recoil in the presence of any man. But when anybody hurts me, I see myself shrink in size. I see myself fold the hurt into a tiny square and lock that piece of origami emotion in a place where their eyes could never see it. I never learned how to say no, and I do not bother trying to teach myself. I avoid confrontation at all costs and will subject myself to any amount of internal torture in order to please and provide for the people I care about. I take on too many hours at work, take on responsibilities outside of my capabilities knowing that I will do whatever it takes to please others. All my life, I wanted to be nothing like my mother, but I am so much like my mother. The important

difference, however, is that I am aware of my status as a sufrida. In that way, I can dismantle the complexes that I was indoctrinated with. My self-awareness means that I can begin to reverse those schemas, and that means that already I am no longer a sufrida. Self-awareness is a preemptive power—an emancipatory power. I am not doomed to perpetuate those patterns and behaviors which are so debilitating to sufridas.

A sufrida's life is never her own: it is her father's, her husband's and then her children's. She never belongs to herself. She may very well die not knowing what it means to be a self-actualized, to be free to act of her own volition without fear of reproach. The catastrophic ending of *Nilda* in which her mother gives her the fatalistic speech of the meaning of womanhood is the obelisk of the worst-case scenario outcome of sufrida culture. According to the study “Machismo, Marianismo, and Negative Cognitive-Emotional Factors: Findings From the Hispanic Community Health Study/ Study of Latinos Sociocultural Ancillary Study” by a team led by Nuñez:

Several studies in psychiatric epidemiology have shown that women experience nearly twice the rate of depression as men (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2008; WassertheilSmoller, 2010). The same pattern holds true in Hispanics (NIMH, 2008). However, explanations for these gender differences in depression are unclear. Some researchers have stated that the lower prevalence of depression among men may be explained by gender differences in the expression of depression (Oliffe & Phillips, 2008; Winkler, Pjrek, & Kasper, 2006) and that gender socialization may play a role in the willingness to report emotions and psychological health needs (Good & Wood, 1995; Oliffe & Phillips, 2008). (Nuñez et al., 203-204).

Their study further asserts that Latino immigrants who are less acculturated in American society score higher in Depression, Anxiety, and Anger and this correlates directly with Machismo gender role beliefs especially in the covariate categories of age (older) and education (less), meaning the largest demographic suffering from the negative effects of marianista culture are older, less educated women; however, I, a young American woman in my twenties, see the residual effects of my patriarchal cultural upbringing. The study speaks to this when they state: “findings suggest that endorsement of traditional gender roles relate to worse psychological health across a diverse sample of Hispanics, regardless of sex, level of acculturation to U.S. mainstream society, and Hispanic background group” (Nuñez et al., 213). The purpose of both the Nuñez study and my thesis is not to perpetuate stereotypes or to admonish a cultural practice, rather, it is to bring to light the effects of rigid gender constructs and how they have been represented— and challenged— in canonical literary texts. My goal has been to bring attention to this issue and open up discussion. What is done to promote gender equality and eliminate the parasitical effects of patriarchal norms on women is left to the responsibility and leisure of the reader and author. We cannot be silent bystanders.

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