FEMALE CHICANA VOICES STRIKING FAMILIAR CHORDS: SWITCHING IDENTITIES AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN ERIKA SÁNCHEZ'S FICTION

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Abstract: The present study aims at presenting the comparison between the two sisters in Erika Sánchez's novel entitled "I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter". Sisterhood shares both the light and dark parts of the journey throughout the novel. The two sisters, Olga and Julia, are strongly compared by Amá, but also by the family members, who considered Olga to be the perfect sister and Julia the so-called 'malcriada'. At the beginning, the two girls are compared regarding their gestures and mentality, but also by the way they dress or by their future plans. The title of the novel can be perceived as being ambiguous as we do not know which of the two girls considers herself to be imperfect: Olga with her secret life or Julia who cannot become like her sister. The two girls are compared even by their friends who refuse to believe that the educated Olga could actually be different from Olga in her private life. Just by reading the novel, one can notice Julia's feelings when all her actions are strongly criticized, even by the one who gave her life.

Keywords: sisters, comparison, perfect, Mexican, daughter, secret, feelings.

Contemporary Mexican American women novelists have created very exciting writings and Erika Sánchez is a perfect representative for the contemporary Chicano female writers and a very good illustration of such a writing is her novel entitled *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*.

During the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, "writing by Mexican American women displayed such a concern with self-identity, a concern that was deeply rooted equally in their self-awareness as marginalised women of color in the USA and in their awareness as women within their own profoundly masculinist Mexican American community (Jacobs, 2006:1).

Erika Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* is a Chicano book. The Chicanos or Mexican Americans "have always had battles to fight, stereotypes to break, prejudices to disprove, and stigmas to overcome. (...) The Mexican culture is full of life, full of color, and full of beauty" (Longoria, 2022:XIV).

Sánchez's book makes us realize that the bond between children and parents is so strong and no matter how many obstacles and conflicts there are between the family members, when a loved one suffers something or goes to college, as in Julia's case, something breaks within us. While following the story, the focus is laid upon the comparison between the two sisters, Julia and Olga, who are similar in a way but, at the same time, so different and distant from each other.

The Chicano voice should be heard as it is a very strong one. According to Elba Rosario Sánchez, "My Chicana voice is singular or unique by its 'Chicano' definition, its socio-political and historical context. At the same time even in its Chicananess, my voice may strike a familiar chord with those who on a daily basis switch and juggle identities and tongues and tangle with cultural conflicts, as they skillfully maneuver making a living, being with family, having a personal life, y todo lo demás" (quoted in Arredondo, Hurtado, Klahn, Nájera-Ramírez & Zavella, 2003:21-22).

Right from the beginning of the novel, not only the pain of Amá can be felt at losing Olga, but also her refusal to accept Julia as she is. Amá is disappointed by Julia's behavior every time she does not act like a perfect daughter, "Como te gusta la mala vida" (Sánchez, 2022:7). There is a great deal of tension between Amá and Julia after Olga's death because instead of strengthening their own bond, the two are in a constant conflict. Sometimes, we may feel that Amá would have wanted Julia to die instead of Olga. When Amá says that "Olga was the clean one" (Sánchez, 2022:14), she refers to Julia's behavior which is miserable and that she cannot show proof of education as Amá taught her. We can feel the anxiety and disappointment when Julia told them that now she only has her as if it were the last version: "Olga's gone now" (Sánchez, 2022:14).

Amá is careful to emphasize that everything she does now is not for Julia but for Olga: "I never got to give Olga a quinceañera" (Sánchez, 2022:16). Amá tries to give Julia everything she could not when Olga was alive, although Julia's day has passed and they did not do anything special for her birthday.

Julia knows that her mother loves her, but her favorite was always Olga: "I know Amá loves me and always has, but Olga has always been her favorite" (Sánchez, 2022:21) and this cannot change even if now she is the only child in the family. Usually the youngest child in the family is the one who is a little more spoiled than the others, but not in this family. She criticizes Julia every time she has the opportunity and does not prefer to encourage her to become a better version of herself: "'If you're going to do something, you have to do it right, or else you shouldn't do it all' (...) 'Olga's were always so nice and round'" (Sánchez, 2022:33). It is interesting how a mother can compare her children as if they are not both hers. The father, who is quite absent from Julia's upbringing, also feels that he is losing Olga, but he prefers not to verbalize this. Olga always massaged his legs when he came tired from the factory; Julia, on the other hand, preferred to encourage him verbally.

It is a strange feeling for us to see a wonderful girl like Julia being criticized for not being as submissive as her sister. Not only parents make this comparison between girls, but also the relatives. Aunt Paloma always criticized Julia's style and adored Olga's: "She is always sucking her teeth at what I'm wearing or making some comment about my weight, even though she's more floppy and misshapen than a sack of laundry. She loved Olga, though. Everyone did" (Sánchez, 2022:79).

Everyone is unique in his or her own way; it is very interesting that the relatives prefer Olga to Julia, who did not do anything to attract so much attention to her negativity. Everyone expects Julia to become Olga's copy after her death, as if everything that was Olga was transferred to Julia's body: "And now that you're older, you have to learn how to be a nice señorita just like your sister, may she rest in peace" (Sánchez, 2022:83).

Amá's refusal to accept that Olga is dead and that Julia now deserves all their attention is firmly maintained, even close to the end of the book when Julia manages to fulfill her dream. Amá harshly criticizes Julia's actions, and Olga is constantly brought up as if she were a perfect and holy daughter: "It's like I don't even deserve the dignity of eye contact" (Sánchez, 2022:89).

Amá's inability to accept that her daughter is different, not only from Olga but also from the other Mexican girls who do not fight for their future, makes their relationship hanging by a thin thread. Amá wants Julia to study with her, not to fulfill her dream of becoming a writer but to overcome her condition. She prefers to offer the same alternative that Olga used when it came to college: "You can live here and go to college, you know? That's what Olga did" (Sánchez, 2022:90).

Amá does not see Julia's poetic and libertine nature, nor does she accept it; she prefers to impose on Julia how to live, just like her sister: "She was always so comfortable here at home, spending time with her family" (Sánchez, 2022:90). Of course, the sudden death of her

sister follows Julia; she feels left behind and misunderstood, and because of this, she cannot adapt. Even the simple things, such as cleaning, are criticized if they are done by Julia. Amá knows that Olga helps her out of pleasure; on the other hand, Julia is obliged, and Amá does not miss the opportunity to remind Julia that she is not as jumpy as her sister: ”That would not be acceptable, especially since Olga, my angelic sister, was our mother’s reliable helper” (Sánchez, 2022:98).

Amá is not able to understand her own daughter and she is trying too hard to shape her after Olga without realizing that she is hurting Julia’s feelings and further distancing herself from her. The word ”weird” is not exactly the right word for your daughter because you will make her feel uncomfortable and think that she is actually the problem: ”You’re the weird one, you know that?” (Sánchez, 2022:103). Julia is too intelligent and easily notices what Amá is doing. She really tries to change and get rid of her sister’s ghost, but she does not succeed because she is criticized by Amá. A mother should support her daughter in all the small steps they take.

It is interesting how Julia finds out who her sister is in her secret life, but she prefers to fight those things by herself. Julia does not want to disappoint her parents. She does not want her parents to see the real Olga, who has managed to fool her parents into thinking she is an extraordinary daughter. Julia’s pain is accentuated even more when all the family members compare them, especially when they were babies: ”Everyone in my family tells me what a difficult baby I was compared to Olga” (Sánchez, 2022:116-117).

Julia is forced to have a party because her parents did not do it for Olga due to lack of money. All the family members expect her to behave nicely at this forced party because Olga is on a cloud and they are looking at her: ”You have to be pretty for your family. What will your sister think when she looks down on you from heaven?” (Sánchez, 2022:123). A party is a reason for joy, especially for a girl, but not for Julia, who is forced to participate in the preparations for the party and look happy for her. Normally, mothers help their daughters choose their dress, hair, and makeup so that they look divine on the day of the party. But Amá prefers to choose a color that does not favor Julia, but the peach color suits Olga and that is why she chose it for Julia. ”Amá even chose the worst color imaginable for my skin - peach. It’s as if she did it on purpose” (Sánchez, 2022:153). We can imagine the pain of a mother when she loses a child, but why should the mother forget that she must also be a mother for the child she has now?

The two sisters are very different, and Amá never misses an opportunity to remind Olga of how kind, respectful and happy she was to live near her family. Julia and Olga did not have a very close relationship, but when they were little, Olga protected Julia from the dark, or they hid to eat sweets secretly. What changed the relationship between the two? ”I remember the stupidest things” (Sánchez, 2022:182). Whatever Julia does, no matter if it is good or bad, Amá always finds a goal to mark the difference between the two: ”Olga never wanted to go anywhere. Work, school, home. That’s it” (Sánchez, 2022:195). Actually, we do not know if Olga were really that excited about her life with her family; we only know that Amá thinks that Olga was a perfect daughter.

The title is ambiguous as we are not sure who is being addressed, Julia or Olga. Olga has many secrets and Julia is different from her sister. Julia prefers to say what she wants and never hesitates to remind her mother that she is not and will never be like Olga, although she tries to change her.

In fact, even Olga did not have such an open relationship with Amá that she could tell her about her private life; otherwise, Amá would have known that Olga is in a relationship with a married man and that she is pregnant. When Amá found Olga’s things in Julia’s room, she immediately judged her without letting her explain why those things were there. If Julia had told her mother who those objects were, Amá would not have believed her but Julia would also

have been accused of defaming her sister's image: "I always knew you would do something like that. Ever since you were little, you've given me so much trouble, even before you were born" (Sánchez, 2022:203). Even at that moment, when Amá is not able to see or let Julia accept that those are not Julia's things, she brings Olga into the discussion, as if all of Julia's actions must have Olga's approval: "What must your sister think of your right know? What a disgrace!" (Sánchez, 2022:204).

Amá is too harsh with Julia. She wants Julia to have all of Olga's features and be exactly like her. She feels betrayed by her parents who do not accept her as she is. She feels inferior and realizes that she will never change into her sister because she is unique. Her own parents are not able to accept that one daughter has died and the other one is living and needs love and support: "My parents want me to be a person I don't want to be" (Sánchez, 2022:216).

It is interesting how in the beginning she is very focused on trying to make Julia become like Olga, and from the middle of the book on, she just prefers to subtly attack her to make her feel guilty that she does not study at a community school like her sister: "You can go to community college, just like your sister" (Sánchez, 2022:229).

It is painful to blame your child for something he/ she did not do. It is painful to think that you can change your own child because you have a favorite one. Does Amá not love Julia at all? "The thing is that Olga was perfect to her. How could I tell her that she wasn't?" (Sánchez, 2022:235).

Julia feels that she does not fit into the family she is in; she feels that her parents are blocking her access to the life she wants. She feels that Olga's death has made her too involved in a family life that she does not want. She does not want to at all. All the accusations that Amá makes about Julia make her feel inferior, anxious, and even overwhelmed by the situation. She does not understand why she cannot be accepted the way she is. Why does Julia have to be like Olga? Why is Olga seen as the perfect daughter, without sin, and Julia as a poorly raised daughter because she wants to overcome her condition?

Julia knows that her parents will never understand her and thinks that it is better to hide things from them than to tell the truth. Hiding things is a way Julia can be who she wants to be, just like Olga: "My parents don't understand anything about me. And my sister is gone" (Sánchez, 2022:236). "I want her to be less than perfect, so I didn't feel like such a fuck-up?" (Sánchez, 2022:237).

When Julia learns the truth about her sister's life, she realizes that all her life she was considered the bad daughter in the family when, in fact, Olga made fun of Mexican women and had an "American" life in parallel. This is actually the reason why Olga did not want to study elsewhere, and she did not want to do anything else but stay with her family at home. Maybe Olga would have wanted another life if she had not already had one with the married doctor. Julia is amazed at how her sister was able to hide her life so well and not suspect anything: "My whole life I've been considered the bad daughter, while my sister was secretly living another life, the kind of life that would shatter Amá into tiny pieces. I don't want to be mad at Olga because she's dead, but I am" (Sánchez, 2022:240).

Another reason why Amá prefers Olga is that she looks a lot like her, physically, but Julia inherited her thinking and way of acting. Amá is afraid of Julia because she, too, desired a life other than this one. Amá was rebellious like Julia and determined to take her own decisions into her own hands, and she does not want Julia to end up like her. Maybe that is why she wants to transform supervised by bad decisions: "She looks exactly like Olga. Or Olga looked exactly like her" (Sánchez, 2022:251).

And Amá has her own secrets; she never talked about her life or the fact that Apá has a wonderful talent for drawing. These aspects of their lives remained hidden because they, in turn, wanted to overcome their position as Julia but, due to other factors, did not succeed. During the visit to Mexico, Julia wonders if her aunt has ever compared herself to Amá. Even

involuntarily, Julia compares herself to Olga. Olga was liked by everyone; she was a delicate being, and she was the reliable help in the house, but they did not know about Olga's private life, which was more rebellious than Julia in a way: "Did tía always compare herself to her? Was she jealous?" (Sánchez, 2022:271).

Throughout the novel, Amá seems to be distracted about the fate of her daughter, Julia. Amá only wanted her to study and do the same activities as Olga. Amá never tried to wonder if her perfect daughter could have another life. Or think about how a teenager might want to stay with her family instead of living for college. We did not expect Amá to confess to Julia that she loves her and that she is proud of her. We thought that there was no more room left for Julia in her heart, but we were wrong. Amá gradually changes her attitude towards Julia and does not bring Olga up as often: "I know you hate me, but I love you with all my heart" (Sánchez, 2022:283).

Amá even admits that it was not Julia's fault that Olga died and that she loves her as much as Olga. Perhaps Amá's mind was preoccupied with the loss of a child, and she did not consider the feelings of others. Maybe the loss of her second child made Amá realize that life is thin and that she is very close to losing her second child: "I know what happened to your sister was not your fault. I never should said that" (Sánchez, 2022:284). "I'm sorry I hurt you" (Sánchez, 2022:285).

The comparison between the two is very strong; Amá always manages to sneak Olga into the discussion, even when Julia tries to be a better daughter. At church, she addresses Julia as "my beautiful daughter", a compliment for which we have been searching since the book started. Amá claims that Julia is smart, strong and different, but she does not manage to have the type of relationship that Amá would like. Involuntarily, Amá says that Olga would have preferred to stay at home with them, while Julia barely manages to sit in a place: "And Julia here, my beautiful daughter, I love her so much, but she is so, so different. I know she's a special kind of person. I know she's smart and strong, but we don't always understand each other. Olga, for example, always wanted to be at home with us, loved to be close to her family, and Julia can't ever sit still" (Sánchez, 2022:289).

Julia decides to apologize because she does not meet her mother's expectations for a good daughter and emphasizes that she will never be like Olga. Julia reminds her mother of her poetic nature and her desires. She does not want to be like other Mexican girls; she wants more from her life. She is ambitious and feels that she can succeed: "I'm sorry that I'm not Olga and I never will be" (Sánchez, 2022: 289). It is interesting how Julia's friends saw Olga as perfect, and they did not think that she could have a double life and break Amá's rules. No one but Julia is able to see Olga's true face. Maybe if Julia had not had the evidence, she would not have believed that her sister would have another life either: "You know Olga never wanted to leave your parents. She would have done anything for them. She always wanted to be a good daughter" (Sánchez, 2022:295).

Maybe at the beginning Julia seems to be ignored by her parents or her parents do it voluntarily, but along the way they try to accept her as she is. Julia, for her part, tries to accept that her parents love her, perhaps not as much as Olga, but he would not want to lose her: "Do you want to teach me how to cook instead?" (Sánchez, 2022:333). Julia was blamed and criticized for not being at all like her sister. The fear of losing another child makes her parents be more attentive to Julia, and create all the conditions for her to do what she wants.

The ending is very emotional; Julia's departure marks her maturity, but also the parents' maturity to trust her and support their own child. The parents' trauma of losing a child did not go away, but it poured out in love for Julia. And Julia, for her part, feels that she is leaving a part of herself at home and feels a huge regret when she leaves her parents alone at home: "How can I leave them like this? How can I just live my life and leave them behind? What kind of person does that? Will I ever forgive myself?" (Sánchez, 2022:338). It is interesting how the

relationship between Julia and Amá has changed, but also how Amá tries to listen and help Julia. However, Julia becomes mature when she decides not to tell her parents about Olga's pregnancy. It is not just that it changed their opinion about the perfect daughter, but it would have brought them even greater sadness when they found out that their grandson had died.

In conclusion, considering these characteristics as well as those stated above, we can say that this comparison between sisters made us see a different perspective on a family with two or three children. It is interesting to see the evolution of the relationship between Amá and Julia. Amá changed when she stopped comparing her younger daughter with the elder one and tried to understand her as well as make her feel loved.

This is a current problem in the present-day society in which the notion of border has been used as a leitmotif: "If the U.S. theoretically conceived border serves as an objective correlative for discussions of U.S. dominant culture and its resistant spaces, the Mexican border region, in a parallel manner, helps address the question of how and where to relocate discussions about mexicanidad" (Castillo, 2002:3). The so-called 'Mexicanidad' deserves a lot of attention just like the Mexican American literature, which is very rich in interesting issues that should be under in-depth analysis. Erika Sánchez's novel entitled *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* takes us to the heights of ecstasy and makes us realize the position of a child in a traditional family to accept other changes.

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