

# Women of Strength: the Revolutionary Role of La Malinche and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Luoran Wang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lives of two remarkable women in Mexican history: La Malinche and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. In the first section, the life of La Malinche is examined, focusing on her service to Hernán Cortés and her pivotal role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Additionally, her revolutionary impact during this tumultuous era is explored, shedding light on her complex legacy. In the subsequent section, the focus shifts to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, delving into her feminist ideals as reflected in her literary works and actions. Sor Juana's revolutionary role as a woman in seventeenth-century New Spain is analyzed, highlighting her enduring influence as a trailblazer for women's rights and intellectual pursuits. Through an exploration of these two women's lives, this paper seeks to uncover their profound contributions to Mexican history and their enduring legacies as icons of resilience, intellect, and revolution.

**Keywords:** *La Malinche, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mexico, New Spain, Women's rights, Feminism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the colonial era in Latin America, the glorification of masculine virtues pervaded societal norms. Predominantly, positions of authority within political, military, religious, and commercial spheres were exclusively occupied by men. In contrast, women found themselves relegated to subordinate roles, their agency in matters of warfare, religion, and commerce severely circumscribed in comparison to their male counterparts.

In the first section of this essay, I will delve into the life of La Malinche, examining her service to Hernán Cortés and her role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico, followed by an exploration of her revolutionary impact during that era. In the subsequent section, I will analyze the life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, delving into her feminist ideals as portrayed in her works and actions, as well as her revolutionary role as a woman.

## 2. LA MALINCHE

La Malinche epitomized the complexities of this historical period. Initially conceived as a symbol of sacrifice, she was subsequently delivered into the hands of the conquistadors as a slave. However,

rather than resigning herself to a fate of mere concubinage under Cortés, she emerged as his indispensable interpreter and confidante, exerting a palpable influence upon the course of the Spanish conquest. Although her legacy remains ensconced in controversy, it behooves us to recognize her profound contributions and enduring significance within the annals of history, particularly in the context of Latin American feminism.

### 2.1 The Enigmatic Figure of La Malinche

To be honest and truthful, much remains unknown about La Malinche, or Doña Marina, her Christian name, including the exact year of her birth. Therefore, claiming absolute truth regarding this woman is not feasible. Among the myriad literary works recounting the history of La Malinche, each attempting to portray her at the discretion of the respective authors, it is advisable to turn to primary sources whenever possible to seek a deeper understanding of the truth about her. Foremost among these sources is Bernal Díaz del Castillo's "Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España (True history of the conquest of New Spain)," generally regarded as the most extensive and accurate account of the Latin American histories of that era.

## 2.2 Recognition by D áz and the Controversy

As a soldier under the command of Hern án Cort és and someone who knew La Malinche personally, D áz penned his memoirs around forty years after the conquest with the intention of correcting the version presented by L ópez de G ómara, the official historian of Cort és, who insisted that Marina was a slave, according to Franco [6]. It was D áz who extolled the greatness of La Malinche to the world; he affirmed that Do ña Marina "was such an excellent woman and a good interpreter" and that "she had great authority and commanded absolutely among the Indians throughout New Spain" [6].

Do ña Marina bore a son with Cort és after he took her as his concubine, named Mart ín Cort és. Cort és subsequently married Marina to a hidalgo, Juan Jaramillo, from whom it is known she had another daughter, Mar ía Jaramillo. However, Marina had to leave her children behind when Cort és took her with him to quell a rebellion in Honduras, once again serving as an interpreter. Because of this, and the significant role she played in the Spanish conquest, La Malinche is widely considered as "la Chingada," the Violated Mother, or the Weeping Woman, terms through which the Mexican nation itself is seen as "the offspring of violation, abduction, or mockery" [7].

"If there is one villainess in Mexican history, she is Malintzin<sup>1</sup>. She was to become the ethnic traitress supreme" [5]. A popular opinion about La Malinche is that she is a traitor for allying with the Spanish against her own people and thus becomes "the scapegoat"; however, it is crucial to consider the full picture, especially when the accused is not here to tell her own story and defend herself. Candelaria claims that essentially, it was a sequence of occurrences whose collective impact has led to what is now an enduring reality [1]. La Malinche is not solely responsible for the success of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, Moctezuma's authoritarian regime had already set the stage for the Aztec Empire's decline. This was primarily due to the Aztec's extensive taxation on goods and services, including the sacrificial use of human lives for religious purposes. Consequently, Moctezuma's oppressive governance instilled

---

1. The name "Malintzin" likely originated from the Nahuatl language. It is believed to be a combination of the Nahuatl word "Malinalli," which was La Malinche's original name, and the honorific suffix "-tzin," which was commonly used in Nahuatl to denote respect or nobility. Therefore, "Malintzin" can be interpreted as a respectful or honorific form of her original name, "Malinalli."

widespread fear and animosity toward him and the Aztec populace across An áhuac [1].

## 2.3 Life and Legacy

In examining La Malinche's actions, it is essential to delve into her background to understand the complexities surrounding her role. Only then can one truly discern whether she acted as a traitor to her own people or simply doing what is necessary to live a less miserable life under the circumstances.

La Malinche was born around the year 1500 in Coatzacoalcos with the name Malinalli, on the day of her birth in the Aztec calendar. D áz records that Do ña Marina's parents were lords and leaders of a town called Painala. When Do ña Marina's father died, her mother married another leader, and they had a son, whom they intended to inherit the leadership. Marina's mother and stepfather gave her away to some indigenous people from Xicalango, later telling people that she had died. In Aztec society, given the prevalent polygamous system among indigenous people, it was neither strange nor dishonorable for noble lords to give their daughters to the conquerors knowing very well they would be their concubines.

## 2.4 Defying Societal Norms

Given the societal norms where women were considered inferior to men and were stereotypically seen as weak, domestic, and obedient, it is important to note how Do ña Marina completely defied the behavioral norms of Mesoamerican women. In the Aztec Empire, women were forbidden to speak in public, especially at public events. Anyone in the presence of the Aztec emperor had to avert their gaze from him. However, Do ña Marina spoke directly to Moctezuma on behalf of Cort és and always conducted herself with nobility. Jean Franco asserts that "for the indigenous people who represented her in their codices, La Malinche was evidently a woman 'unique in her kind.' She was frequently depicted in encounters between Cort és and Moctezuma standing between the two men or gesturing vigorously as if to emphasize that she, like Cort és, was in charge of the situation" [6].

Furthermore, La Malinche also demonstrates her cunning intellect. When her mother and brother arrived in Guazacualco, where Cort és had taken her to evangelize the inhabitants of the town, she told them that she had forgiven them and that she preferred to be the mother of Cort és' son and the wife of Jaramillo rather than a chieftainess of the Aztec empire. She expressed gratitude for being handed

over by her parents because she was happy to be a Christian, according to Díaz [3]. This demonstrates that she was a remarkable woman who did not succumb to fate but instead strived to find a way to make the most of it and embrace it with dignity. In addition to her wit, she also possessed empathy, tolerance, and compassion. Not only did she not seek revenge against her mother, but she also forgave her. If it weren't for her role as an advisor to the Spanish on diplomatic matters with the Aztecs, the conquest would have been much bloodier for both sides. Many indigenous people converted to Christianity thanks to the work of Doña Marina. Therefore, Marina is not only an interpreter and translator but also the paradigmatic figure in the conversion process of the conquest into an empire [6].

### 3. SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz also emerges as a representative figure of feminism, a trait evident both in her actions and her literary works. She emphasizes the wealth of thought over worldly riches, a stance that permeates her oeuvre. Born in circumstances deemed unfavorable, she nonetheless pursued knowledge and truth, albeit ultimately met with tragedy.

#### 3.1 A Scholarly Journey

Juana Inés entered the viceregal court where she gained recognition and appreciation from the vicereine, Leonor de Carreto, who became the tutor of her daughter due to Juana Inés' intelligence and sagacity. Driven by her thirst for knowledge, she soon became a Hieronymite nun. In addition to pursuing wisdom and advocating for women's right to education, she is considered the first feminist writer in Latin America. Her most significant literary contribution is *Primero Sueño* (First Dream) (1692), among a total of nine hundred and seventy-five works. This masterpiece encapsulates the lifelong desire of the poetess: the intellectual potential of humankind. Sor Juana wrote an extensive array of poems, including romance, lament, rondel, lyre, *décima*, and sonnet. The themes explored in her works align with those of Spanish Baroque: the illusory nature of meaning, the brevity of life, love, the fleetingness of materiality, etc. Regarded by many as the "La *Décima* Musa (The Tenth Muse)", she stands as a great poet, writer, and playwright.

Juana Inés de Asbaje entered the world in San Miguel de Nepantla, Mexico, a region under Spanish colonization. Hailing from a family of Spanish

descent, she, along with her mother and siblings, were criollos, born in the Americas. Although concrete information about Juana's mother and grandmother is scarce, Ann Yugar's dissertation sheds light on their influential presence in shaping Juana's upbringing. From a tender age, Juana believed that women possessed equal capabilities to men, both in public and private realms. This outlook was instilled by her mother, Doña Isabel Ramírez, who served as a beacon of inspiration. Throughout her life, Doña Isabel meticulously tended to the well-being of her children while managing two estates leased to her family by the Church, a responsibility she shouldered for an impressive span of over thirty years [8].

#### 3.2 Challenges and Determination

Juana loved to read and study from a young age, displaying great aptitude for learning. According to her *Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz*<sup>2</sup> (1691), she took no more than twenty lessons to learn grammar (Latin). Nevertheless, Sor Juana's illegitimate birth carried adverse ramifications within the confines of seventeenth-century New Spain. In the patriarchal structure of society prevalent during that era, her status as an illegitimate child cast a shadow upon her standing as an elite woman. Legitimacy was closely intertwined with notions of virtue and honor in colonial society, thereby placing Sor Juana at a disadvantage due to her perceived lack of legitimacy. This societal stigma underscored the challenges she faced in navigating the intricacies of her environment, reinforcing the barriers she encountered in her pursuit of intellectual and social recognition [8]. Additionally, she lived in a society where women were oppressed and controlled by social rules, experiencing disdain and marginalization, relegated to the home without the right to exercise their freedom and pursue their own projects.

Despite this, Juana Inés refused to conform to female stereotypes. She states in *Respuesta* that she did not wish to marry because she wanted to live alone and did not want to have any obligatory occupation that would encroach upon the freedom of her studies [4]. She only wanted to dedicate herself with all her heart and soul to her studies and writings. In this sense, "true to her neoplatonic conception, Juana adopts the maxim 'souls have no gender'" [4].

---

2. The response of the poetess to the very illustrious Sor Filotea de la Cruz.

Therefore, she first entered the aristocratic convent of the Carmelites, assuming it would be a safe haven for women, but she left it due to the extremely rigid rules that prevented her from studying, which even led to her falling ill. Then, she joined the Order of Saint Jerome, where she was allowed to study and write. This time, she was assigned to work in the kitchen, but she did not give up; instead, she turned the kitchen into her own space and continued writing, even teaching men in the kitchen. However, her confessor, Father Antonio Núñez de Miranda, was very angry with her because she was occupied with worldly matters, as well as the frequent visits of the highest personalities of the time due to her great intellectual fame. Juana continued to pursue her passion for studying the sciences and humanities despite Father Núñez's anger and that of other prestigious men.

### 3.3 Confrontation with Misogyny

In her "Carta atenagórica"<sup>3</sup> (1690), Sor Juana rebuts what she considered to be erroneous theses of the highly prestigious Jesuit preacher António Vieira, which was published by the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, under the pseudonym Sor Filotea. He warned that no woman should learn or converse about philosophical topics and recommended that Sor Juana stop dedicating herself to "human letters" and instead focus on divine matters. Faced with the bishop's reproach following her criticism of Vieira, Sor Juana does not refrain from responding to the hierarch. In her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, the freedom of thought and comments of the poetess nun is apparent, as well as her wit and her obsession with studying and writing, in her personal and dynamic style. She also defends the rights of women to study.

According to Yugar, Núñez de Miranda was an infamous misogynist in Mexico City, openly criticizing Sor Juana and branding her as scandalous. Similarly, Fernández de Santa Cruz held misogynistic views, considering women to be the root of all evil and refusing to acknowledge their existence. Despite recognizing Sor Juana's literary talent during her youth, he harbored animosity towards her, feeling threatened by her intellect even after she became a nun. The two always put Sor Juana in a difficult position with the Church and the Inquisition.

---

3. "Atenagórica" comes from the classical expression Athena agoraea (Ἀθηνᾶ ἀγοραία), whose epithet agoraeus (ἀγοραῖος) was generally applied to certain Greek gods who were considered protectors of assemblies of people (agora), such as Zeus, Athena, Artemis, and Hermes. ([https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carta\\_atenagórica](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carta_atenagórica))

### 3.4 A Voice of Women

Suffering from constant persecution due to her talent and rebellion, Sor Juana was likely one of the most aware of the social position of women in her time, as well as the hypocritical and selfish stance of men towards women. She openly criticizes machismo and female discrimination in the poem "Hombres necios que acusáis," [Foolish men who accuse] [2] which is unprecedented and undeniably a bold action that shows her uniqueness and feminist spirit: "Siempre tan necios andáis / que con desigual nivel / a una culpáis por cruel / y a otra por fácil culpáis<sup>4</sup>." [2] Thus, she makes her disagreement clear with the force of her words.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Despite being a historical and mythological figure who left no written document and therefore has no voice of her own, La Malinche has appeared in chronicles and literary works since the conquest of New Spain, and authors have debated her role and identity. Consequently, she is a product of historical reconstructions. Some call her a shameless traitor and the Chingada, while others see her as the mother of a new race. Although she has been the scapegoat of the conquest of Mexico for so long, La Malinche was a valuable translator and an extraordinary woman. She was renamed Doña Marina, elevated from a slave to a respectable lady who broke all the stereotypes of women of that time with her intelligence and courage, becoming a feminist prototype.

In a society where marriage was considered the destiny of women, and the home was where they belonged, Sor Juana did the opposite of stereotypes. She constantly fought for her longing and passion for knowledge. She was never a domestic woman; instead, her attitude was so rebellious that it transcended time and space. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is remembered in history for her wit, talent, and unwavering conviction of women's rights to education in her time and is undoubtedly the first feminist in Latin America.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Candelaria, Cordelia. "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype". *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol 5, no. 2, 1980, p. 1. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/3346027.

---

4. Author's translation: You always act so foolishly / that with unequal measure / you blame one for being cruel / and another for being easy.

- [2] De la Cruz, Sor Juana Inés. “Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz”. *Voces de Hispanoamérica*, Chang-Rodríguez, Raquel, and Malva E Filer, 5th ed., 2015, pp. 86-87. (In Spanish)
- [3] Díaz del Castillo, Bernal. “Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España”. *Voces de Hispanoamérica*, Chang-Rodríguez, Raquel, and Malva E Filer, 5th ed., 2015, pp. 45-46. (In Spanish)
- [4] Femenías, María. “Oí decir que había Universidad y Escuelas: Reflexiones sobre el feminismo de Sor Juana.” *Orbis tertius: revista de teoría y crítica literaria*, vol. 1, Issue 2-3, 1996, pp.65-66. [www.orbistertius.unlp.edu.ar/article/view/OTv01n02-03a04/pdf\\_286/](http://www.orbistertius.unlp.edu.ar/article/view/OTv01n02-03a04/pdf_286/) (In Spanish)
- [5] Fehrenbach, T.R. “Fire and blood: A history of Mexico”. East Bridgewater, NJ: Replica Books, 1996, pp.131
- [6] Franco, Jean, and Gloria Elena Bernal. “La Malinche: Del Don Al Contrato Sexual.” *Debate Feminista*, vol. 11, 1995, pp. 251–270. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/42625352](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42625352).
- [7] Paz, Octavio. “Hijos de la Malinche”, *El Laberinto de la soledad*, Stanton, Anthony, Manchester University Press, 2008, Manchester, UK, p. 187. (In Spanish)
- [8] Yugar, Theresa Ann. "Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz: Feminist Reconstruction of Biography and Text." Order No. 3549760 The Claremont Graduate University, 2012. Ann Arbor: ProQuest.