Ana Castillo's Appropriation of the Family Saga in *So Far From God*

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Abstract
Ana Castillo's most critically acclaimed novel So Far From God *(1993) can be considered a recent example of the family saga genre, as it reports the life story of Sofi and her four daughters. However, rather than concentrating on an upper-middle-class white family in a patriarchal setting, Castillo has appropriated the established genre to write a text of Chicana resistance, portraying working-class women as the bearers of spiritual values and social progress. Thus, the focus shifts from male to female characters, who are seen as powerful and independent rather than dominated by men; in fact, Sofi's husband is absent for the most of his daughters' lives. In turn, while all the traditional themes of family sagas, such as the history of a family depicted through several generations as well as romance and marriage, are present in the text, they are depicted in a new context. Finally, instead of portraying the family as striving to use money and property as a means of social advancement, Castillo shows the majority of her characters as caring about their wider community. Thus, this paper seeks to examine more closely which particular changes the author has made within the set of the genre's conventions.*

Keywords
family saga; appropriation; Chicana literature; Ana Castillo; *So Far From God*

Ana Castillo's most critically acclaimed novel of Chicana life *So Far From God* (1993) can be considered a recent example of the family saga genre. However, rather than strictly following generic rules, Castillo has appropriated the established genre to write a text of Chicana resistance. This paper thus seeks to examine more closely which particular changes the author has made within the set of the genre's conventions. First of all, it is to be noted that in spite of the family saga remaining a common and popular literary genre of our time, definitions of the genre often do not take into consideration developments in contemporary literature written on the American continent. As Lori Ween notes, the available critical discussions mainly either concern ancient Icelandic sagas or address the issue as a subdivision of folklore.[1] Chris Baldick adds that "the emphasis on feuds and family histories […] has led to the term's application in English to any long family story spanning two or more generations," but he only provides British examples from the early twentieth century, such as D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*.[2] Even the definition of family saga in Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak's article (2000) on Chicana literature and postmodernism, which I am going to refer to throughout this paper, appends only one representative text written after 1945:

> Family sagas, such as John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* [1922] Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* [1901] and his tetralogy *Joseph and His Brothers* [1933–43] or Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* [1967] provide a genealogical account of a family, tracing its development through several generations over a considerable period of time. The genre operates according to a patriarchal capitalist logic: it displays a concern with social class, specifically with the preservation of the family's lineage,

1 See Lori Ween, "Family Sagas of the Americas: *Los Sangurimas* and *A Thousand Acres*," *The Comparatist* 20 (1996): 111.

2 See Chris Baldick, "Saga," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 197.

> property, propriety, and decorum within the context of upper-middle-class values. These values are brought into operation through business endeavors, and the characters' turns of fortune become a testing ground for their allegiances. Intricately related to business and enterprise are romance and marriage, which are often seen as a means of ensuring or accumulating wealth. Finally, a recurring motif is the house as symbol of the family. This motif allows authors to foreground notions of individual property, and reflect an ideology of domesticity about which Ramon Saldivar writes, "domestic narratives have traditionally delineated the space of the house as a preeminent symbol of the privatized, sovereign, and individual self, plotted and fixed topographically onto a terrain of white male values."[3]

This definition neglects to mention that Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), one of the most popular American family sagas of the latter half of the twentieth century, deals with the history of an African American family. Similarly, in *So Far From God*, Castillo further appropriates many of the characteristics of the genre. A story of Sofi and her four daughters, the text not only rejects white male values, but also portrays the female characters as preserving Chicano traditions and spiritual beliefs. In writing about *So Far From God*, several critics have pointed out Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel *Little Women* as a predecessor, as both of the texts are American novels dealing with the relationships of four sisters and their mother. In particular, Carmela Delia Lanza goes as far as to suggest that "with its playful and ironic style, and its insistence on ambiguity and contradictions, *So Far From God* offers a postmodern inversion of *Little Women.*"[4] Unlike Alcott's, Castillo's fictional world is pervaded by elements of the supernatural, such as the characters' ability to predict the future. Moreover, the living and the dead meet, as the departed tend to make frequent appearances after their deaths. Consequently, Castillo's style has sometimes been labeled as magical realism, like Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*; the author herself, however, refuses this categorization, explaining that: "The women in *So Far From God* are modeled on the martyrs in the history of the Catholic Church. We are made to believe in these miracles. I wasn't making anything up—it's not magical fiction; it is faith."[5] Thus, rather than being used solely for the purpose of playfulness or experimentation, all of the elements of the novel reflect the author's views and beliefs.

Another phenomenon that differentiates *So Far From God* from *Little Women* is Castillo's concern with political issues. While Alcott's domestic space is for the most part politically neutral, the home in Castillo's novel becomes a place of political resistance where women of color grow and develop politically and spiritually. The characters' political development is best manifested in Sofi's becoming an unofficial mayor of the New Mexico town of Tome where the story is set, her motivation being to improve the living conditions of her community. Also, in the course of the novel, Sofi divests herself of her property by turning her *carnecería* over to the sheep grazing and wool weaving cooperative that she forms. These acts make clear that Sofi opposes capitalist, materialist value structures. Unlike in the definition of family saga quoted above, the novel does not operate according to a patriarchal capitalist logic; on the contrary, the text becomes a manifestation of resistance against it. Thus, the novel redefines the characters' concerns with social class, a typical

3 Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, "Gritos desde la Frontera: Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Postmodernism," *MELUS* 25.2 (2000): 103.

4 Carmela Delia Lanza, "Hearing the Voices: Women and Home and Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*," *MELUS* 23.1 (1998): 66.

5 Qtd. in Kamala Platt, "Ecocritical Chicana Literature: Ana Castillo's Virtual Realism," in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 155.

trope of the family saga genre, as an interest in the well-being of their wider community. While in her discussion of José de la Cuadra's *Los Sangurimas* (1934) and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) Ween observes that the families in both of these sagas find themselves isolated from their communities exactly *because* of their wealth and power,[6] Sofi uses the little power she has to connect to others. Even though Sofi's creation of the wool cooperative may seem idealistic and impracticable, Kamala Platt explains that the model for Sofi's cooperative is a real life venture, the Ganados del Valle community in northern New Mexico, which aims to limit environmental racism and promote environmental justice.[7] In addition, while Ween suggests that a reliance on orality in their register and organization is typical of family sagas in general,[8] the narrative voice Castillo uses throughout the novel also shows her concern with class and community. The omniscient narrator represents a feminine working-class voice, in Renny Christopher's words "a wise-cracking presence who doesn't always use Standard English and who freely inserts her opinions and items she marks as hearsay into the narrative."[9] In addition, the narrative voice often uses Spanish expressions, reflecting the Chicano identity and heritage of the community it represents.

Among the critics who have written on *So Far From God*, it is Christopher who has emphasized that the issues of class are just as important as those of race and gender throughout the novel. While the March sisters in *Little Women* are white and middle-class, Sofi's daughters are working-class women of color, just like Castillo, who identifies herself as "a mestiza born to the lower strata."[10] Thus, Sofi's daughters can hardly be characterized as concerned with decorum in the context of middle-class values; however, that does not mean that they are not, at some point in their lives, concerned with their reputation and the way their family is perceived in the outside world. This is most striking in the case of Fe, the third oldest of the sisters, who longs for upward mobility and material gain. Fe, who "since birth acted like she had come as a direct descendant of Queen Isabella,"[11] is described as light skinned, even though, in the narrator's words, "not nearly as white as she thought she was."[12] Whereas Sofi's home is described as slightly chaotic, with lots of people and domestic animals moving freely around, Fe aims for a stable and organized way of life. At the beginning of the novel, at the age of twenty-four, she works in a bank, as she has done so since high school graduation. Fe hopes to save money, get married and buy her own house: "She kept away from her other sisters, her mother, and the animals, because she just didn't understand how they could all be so self-defeating, so unambitious."[13] As she sees no desirable ambitions within her family and community, she correspondingly rejects her ethnicity and her social class. When Tom, Fe's boyfriend, dumps her shortly after they become engaged, Castillo uses one of her

6 See Ween, "Family Sagas of the Americas," 117.

7 See Platt, "Ecocritical Chicana Literature," 151.

8 See Ween, "Family Sagas of the Americas," 111.

9 Renny Christopher, "A State of Courage and Wisdom…Not an Uncontrollable Participation in Society: Ana Castillo's Novel of Feminist and Working Class Resistance," in *A Class of Its Own: Re-Envisioning American Labor Fiction*, ed. Laura Hapke and Lisa A. Kirby (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 190.

10 Qtd. in Deborah Marsden, *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 80.

11 Ana Castillo, *So Far From God* (New York: Norton, 2005), 157.

12 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 157–58.

13 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 28.

effective hyperboles and makes the desperate Fe start "letting out one loud continuous scream that could have woken the dead"[14] and eventually lasts a year. In this way, the narrator satirizes Fe for her distance from her family and anxious concern with appearances. Interestingly, in her discussion of *Los Sangurimas* and *A Thousand Acres*, Ween notes that both the families in both novels "are plagued by an obsession with honor and appearances, which ultimately destroys both families and ironically damages their reputations with the people of the town."[15] In comparison, the importance of appearances and reputation is considered far less important by the majority of characters in Castillo's family saga.

Fe's relationship with Tom is not the only case in the novel in which romance fails as a means of ensuring or accumulating wealth. In fact, even when Fe does marry later in the novel, to her cousin Casimiro, her longing to "have a life like people do on TV"[16] is not to be satisfied. As Platt aptly notes, Fe is "the compulsively conventional daughter for whom things never work out conventionally."[17] At first, Casimiro, who is known under an anglicized form of his name, Casey, seems a great catch; he studied accounting and has a career in the cement business. However, soon, Fe discovers a more problematic side of her husband, one related to his coming from a prestigious sheepherding family: "Over seven generations of sheepherding had invariably gotten into Casey's blood, so that even though nobody would ever admit it, and it was hard to actually prove—since Casey was such a soft-spoken man to begin with—Fe was certain that her fiancé had somehow acquired the odd affliction of bleating."[18] In this passage, Castillo laughs at Fe's quest for an ideal husband and ideal future. In addition, the reason for Casey's bleating supposedly stems from his being "affected by the many generations of males in isolation."[19] As mentioned by Mermann-Jozwiak, this fact is important with respect to the interest of traditional family sagas in male genealogies,[20] a subject that Castillo mocks at several other points throughout the novel. For instance, Francisco, one of her other sister's suitors, "was the seventh son, but not of a man who was the seventh son of his family;" rather, his bloodline is "crooked."[21] Moreover, females rather than males are seen as passing their knowledge on within their families, as Doctor Tolentino is said to have learned his *tratamiento* from his mother.[22] Overall, these examples emphasize Castillo's matrifocal resistance to a patriarchal view of society.

Yet, Casey's bleating is not the worst of tragedies in Fe's life. Because she has damaged her voice by the year-long screaming, she is no longer fit to deal with customers in the bank and is dismissed. Soon, she accepts a blue collar job in a new factory established by a global corporation. Because she longs for a future of material gain, she is willing to do anything the company asks her to, including cleaning machine parts with a solvent which she is told is ether. However, this

14 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 30.

15 Ween, "Family Sagas of the Americas," 112.

16 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 189.

17 Platt, "Ecocritical Chicana Literature," 146.

18 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 175.

19 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 176.

20 Mermann-Jozwiak, "Gritos desde la Frontera," 104.

21 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 95.

22 See Castillo, *So Far From God*, 227.

solvent actually proves to be an illegal substance which gives her cancer. She dies "right after her first anniversary. But not, however, before [she] got the long dreamed of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR."[23] Thus, Fe becomes a victim of environmental racism as well as of her own belief in the American dream of hard work leading to material wealth. It also shows Castillo's concern with working class people and their living conditions. With respect to that, Platt points out that the real town of Tome, New Mexico, is located seventy-five miles downstream from Los Alamos, where there are multiple sites of toxic contamination involving such substances as plutonium, tritium, strontium 90, mercury and lead.[24]

Importantly, it is shortly before her death that Fe returns to her mother's home. At this point, the chaotic home she has been trying to escape from "became a sanctuary from the even more incomprehensible world that Fe encountered that last year of her pathetic life."[25] Thus, even for her, the home finally becomes a shelter against the outside world. However, unlike the other sisters who also die throughout the narrative, Fe makes no appearances at her home after her death, as she was too estranged from it in her lifetime. All the other sisters frequently appear in spirit simply around the family house or on important occasions such as weddings. Thus, unlike Christine Bridgwood, who in her discussion of three family sagas that seek to empower women—Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* (1977), Susan Howatch's *Penmarric* (1971), and Catherine Gaskin's *Family Affairs* (1980)—suggests that "femininity is placed in the text as a site of social change and it is made clear that the pull of the homeland must be resisted to achieve this change,"[26] Castillo stresses the importance of the homeland for her female characters' identity and self-acceptance.

The other sisters' life stories defy the conventional marriage plot to even a larger extent than Fe's. Esperanza, the oldest sister, is upwardly mobile like Fe thanks to her education, but stays much closer to her family. In fact, her first degree is in Chicana studies, which shows that she embraces her heritage. While Castillo clearly believes in the importance of accepting one's heritage, she also ridicules showy and temporary dalliances with social and political issues in reporting that Rubén, Esperanza's then boyfriend, "during the height of his Chicano cosmic consciousness, renamed himself Cuahtemoc,"[27] only to discard the name a few years later. After Rubén leaves Esperanza for another woman, she gets a second degree, this time in communications, and eventually becomes a news broadcaster at a local New Mexico TV station. Thus, Esperanza has a successful career, but feels like "a woman with brains was as good as dead for all the happiness it brought her in the love department."[28] After some time, Rubén reconnects with her, but soon she realizes he only thinks of their relationship as a casual friendship from which he benefits financially: "A casual friend who accepted her gifts of groceries, the rides in *her* car with *her* gas, all up and down the Southwest."[29] Because of this realization, Esperanza decides to tell Rubén they should not see each

23 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 171.

24 See Platt, "Ecocritical Chicana Literature," 147.

25 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 171–2.

26 Christine Bridgwood, "Family Romances: The Contemporary Popular Family Saga," in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Jean Radford (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 174.

27 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 25.

28 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 26.

29 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 39.

other anymore. After that, she accepts a post as an anchorwoman with a major television station in Washington D.C. However, soon after she begins work there she is sent to Saudi Arabia, where she eventually dies as a prisoner of war. Nevertheless, even though she died far away from home, Esperanza, unlike Fe, had always considered her home and family important, and she makes frequent appearances among the surviving family members after her death.

Caridad, the third of the four sisters, has arguably the stormiest life, full of tumultuous changes. When Caridad finds out that Memo, her husband with whom she is pregnant, is still seeing his ex-girlfriend, she has an abortion and the marriage is annulled. After this bitter disappointment, Caridad, who works as an orderly in a hospital, starts to live a wild life of immoderate drinking and random sexual intercourse: "Three abortions later and with her weakness for shots of Royal Crown with beer chasers after work […], Caridad no longer discriminated between giving her love to Memo and only to Memo whenever he wanted it and loving anyone she met at the bars who vaguely resembled Memo."[30] One night, she is left for dead by the side of the road. No attacker is even detained as a suspect; because of Caridad's reputation, the police make no effort to find the perpetrator. It is later revealed that she was attacked by a *malogra*, an evil spirit. Interestingly, in her discussion of gender issues represented throughout the novel, Theresa Delgadillo suggests that the *malogra* stands for sexism itself:

> For what is so destructive and evil, always present yet not always easy to pin down, but the sexism of our society? […] Castillo's *malogra* metaphorically describes the force of the institutionalized patriarchal relations that foster disregard for women at every level of society. When these ideas take hold of individuals and then are practiced by them, they can create the kind of violence against women experienced by Caridad.[31]

Indeed, this interpretation seems fitting in the context of gender and social issues and their presentation throughout the text.

After she recovers Caridad becomes a healer under the guidance of Dona Felicia, the town *curandera* and an old friend of the family. Unlike Fe, Caridad now concentrates on her spiritual and emotional betterment and satisfaction rather than on material gain. While Fe aims for the conventional pattern of a heterosexual bourgeois marriage based on financial advancement, Caridad shows no interest in finding a new male suitor and eventually falls in love with a woman named Esmeralda. Finally, Caridad and Esmeralda free themselves from the oppressive society by leaping from the top of the mesa at Acoma. As this is the only way the women can escape sexism and homophobia, Castillo makes another strong point in her critique of society.

La Loca, the youngest of the sisters, experiences a resurrection at the age of three, which is simply diagnosed as an epileptic attack by the secular white society. However, Loca comes back from the dead changed, unable to bear human touch unless she is the one who initiates it. Rather than being surrounded by people, she prefers to spend her time at home with the family's animals. Similar to Caridad, she also cultivates her spirituality and learns from the town *curandera.* The absurdity of her life in a society that does not accept her is accentuated by the fact that even though

30 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 27.

31 Theresa Delgadillo, "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 44.4 (1998): 907.

she abhors human contact, she eventually dies of HIV/AIDS. The narrator challenges the society's narrow perception of La Loca by stating that "for a person who had lived her whole life within a mile radius of her home and had only travelled as far as Albuquerque twice, she certainly knew quite a bit about this world, not to mention beyond, too."[32] This account again reflects how in *So Far From God*, death is not the definitive end.

Even though all four of the sisters die by the end of the novel, the narrative does approach an optimistic rather than tragic note. Beside the fact that they still spiritually communicate with her mother after their deaths, Sofi becomes the founder and the first president of an organization called M.O.M.A.S. (Mothers of Martyrs and Saints), which will eventually become known worldwide. During the organization's annual conference, Sofi and the other members' deceased daughters and sons bring "all kinds of news and advice that was, as part of the bylaws, generously passed on to relatives, friends, the petitioning faithful, and community agencies, as well as to relevant local or federal governments," even though the last organizations mentioned never accept the advice "without some obvious skepticism."[33] Thus, the divide between the local spiritual and natural world and the larger political world still persists, but may be overcome in the future. In the final chapter of the novel, the narrator also briefly touches on the issue of sexism, arguing that while people have said that you had to be "the mother of a *daughter* to be even considered" to be allowed to become a member of the organization, the ratio between male and female saints and martyrs would eventually become "about fifty-fifty."[34] Thus, while throughout the novel Castillo has portrayed a world where women frequently have to face sexism, she closes the text by imagining an alternate world of equal opportunity for both genders.

While Castillo's novel is thus shown to focus on female characters, with respect to the received conventions of the family saga it is also important to examine the author's treatment of Sofi's husband Domingo, her daughters' father. Importantly, Castillo redefines each of the following characteristics of patriarchy within the family sagas that Ween provides in her discussion of *Los Sangurimas* and *A Thousand Acres*: "The importance of a patriarchal space within the family saga, the mythification of an all-powerful figure controlling the family, the machista imposition of the masculine world over the feminine, incest as an overt theme in the text."[35] In *So Far from God*, Domingo's authority is challenged by the fact that he leaves his family and does not come back in many years, during which he only sends Sofi one letter containing five ten-dollar bills. Even after his return, he simply sits in his chair in the living room rather than makes any important decisions about his family. Moreover, unlike the daughters, who are mythicized as martyrs and saints, for a considerable part of the novel Domingo is simply not spoken about by the women at all. In fact, early on in the novel, we learn that after a year of Domingo's absence, "Sofia was so mad, she forbade anyone to even mention his name in her presence."[36]

Moreover, while the characteristics quoted above tend to define the patriarch in family sagas as an overtly negative tyrannical figure, Castillo's treatment of Domingo eventually becomes

32 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 245.

33 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 251.

34 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 247.

35 Ween, "Family Sagas of the Americas," 118.

36 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 21.

far more sympathetic. For instance, while the community believes he will never make a good husband because of his gambling, he certainly respects Sofi and is never abusive towards women. Moreover, Domingo seems to have a genuine affection for his daughters. After Caridad recovers from being attacked by the *malogra* and goes missing once again while she is looking for Esmeralda, her family does not even bother to ask the police to help them find her. At this point, Domingo is the first one to realize that the police

> probably would do little more than a routine hospital and jail search for Caridad, such had been her reputation. Domingo had heard many insulting stories about his daughter and had defended her honor more than once in Valencia County bars when it was suggested that she had 'asked for it' when she was attacked.[37]

With respect to this assessment, Christopher notes that while Domingo does not suffer from sexism like his daughters, he has to deal with the same issues of class as do they: "If Caridad's family had been middle or upper-middle-class, people would still have spoken badly of her as a 'loose woman,' but her family's power and influence would have been brought to bear on the law enforcement agencies that might have helped to look for her."[38] As he cannot count on the police, Domingo goes to look for Caridad himself. Just like he is concerned with what happened to Caridad after she disappears, Domingo is also worried about Esperanza when she announces she is going to Saudi Arabia. Later on, he again acts as a dutiful parent when he tries to help Sofi obtain all the accessible information about Esperanza after she is taken prisoner. Moreover, Castillo includes Domingo among the characters that convey social criticism in the novel: "Call him a pacifist or a chicken, Domingo did not believe in war, which he felt only benefitted los ricos."[39] Thus, Domingo is highly critical of the organized violence which profits solely the wealthiest segments of society.

Nevertheless, Domingo remains a compulsive gambler throughout the novel. After he learns that Caridad is capable of predicting the future, he uses her ability to win in the lottery. This act makes him seem rather resourceful, even though the narrator also slightly mocks his attitude by saying that "in a household such as Sofi's it was becoming increasingly difficult for her husband to determine what was a definite 'sign' to play a hunch on and what was just part of its daily activities."[40] More importantly, towards the end of the novel, Domingo loses Sofi's house in a bet at a cockfight. Ironically, the person who wins the dwelling is a judge, who, when Sofi reminds him that cockfights are illegal, threatens her with putting Domingo in jail, embodying the omnipresent corruption the family has to deal with. While other family sagas may emphasize the house as a symbol of the family and their distinct possessions, in *So Far from God*, the family ends up renting a property built by Sofi's own grandparents. Consequently, in Castillo's novel, individual property is no guarantee of security; in fact, it is only because Sofi has sold shares of the butcher shop to the community that her family has anything left.

Thus, losing their house does not bring the family's downfall, since in the novel familial space extends to larger community. There are several characters of various backgrounds who

37 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 83.

38 Christopher, "A State of Courage and Wisdom…," 194.

39 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 48.

40 Castillo, *So Far From God*, 58.

are not related to Sofi's family by blood, but are nonetheless extremely close to them. The most important of these is probably Dona Felicia, a strong mother figure who has lived through many events during most of the twentieth century. For instance, her first husband died in Emiliano Zapata's army, and during World War II she was sent to Europe as a nurse and lived in France. In her speech, she mixes English, Spanish, and French, and her religion is a mixture of Catholicism and a strong sense of the power of nature. Similarly, Doctor Tolentino is a family practice doctor who delivers all of Sofi's daughters; he also has a talent for psychic surgery which he learned in his homeland, the Philippines. In consequence, while Mermann-Jozwiak notes that traditional family sagas such as Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* "portray outside influences as threatening to the family's integrity,"[41] *So Far From God* depicts the divide between the family and the outside world as highly permeable. In addition, people of various backgrounds and life experiences are freely accepted. It is only the ethically corrupted world of global political and economic forces that presents a threat to the family's integrity.

In *So Far From God*, Castillo has written a witty, yet profound family saga that speaks to both the issues of its day as well as to the author's life experience. Instead of giving the reader conventional romance and marriage plots, she provides several tragic, but hopeful life stories. Rather than replicating patriarchal and the dominant white culture's views of family and society, she focuses on the contemporary Chicana experience and sees women as the bearers of spiritual values and social progress. Also, while the traditional family sagas feature upper-middle-class settings, Castillo's characters come from a working-class background. Thus, her novel may be seen as transcending the Chicana experience, as many of the issues she criticizes such as classism and global corporations are not phenomena that only Chicanas or women in general have to face. Finally, she does not oppose the domestic and the outside world. Rather, she replaces the emphasis on a narrowly defined family unit overly concerned with reputation and private property by stressing the larger community, one where every well-intentioned individual is welcome to join regardless of their background.

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41 Mermann-Jozwiak, "Gritos desde la Frontera," 104.

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