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# Evil Becomes Her: Female Trauma and Sexuality Within “La Leyenda de la Mujer Caballo”

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## Abstract

Latina identity is a complex experience that is shaped by culture, experiences, and the impacts of colonialism. Folklore reflects and influences these expectations and plays a key role in how women are viewed and the lessons their trauma is used to push. This includes what is to be learned from women who fall short of their assigned roles with men. Exploring the past to find where these trends and rigid understandings of gender stem from proves to be a path filled with decolonization, deconstruction, queer theory, and anti-racism. “La Leyenda de la Mujer Caballo” is one of many examples of the way that female trauma is exploited and turned into a lesson for men based on colonial concepts of gender, sexuality, and female expression. Similar to other stories that exist in the Latin American world such as “La Malinche” and “La Llorona,” “La Mujer Caballo” exists opposite to figures like La Virgen de Guadalupe that embody divine femininity and concepts like “marianismo” (hyper-femininity) which partner with “machismo” (hyper-masculinity) to create unhealthy dynamics that define womanhood across Latin America. “La Mujer Caballo” instead represents adultery, promiscuity, and selfishness. These are traits that are not to be embodied by the Latina woman. She, therefore, rejects the idea of womanhood that has been deemed appropriate for her and takes on a different role in which she is punished and condemned to be a monster for the rest of her existence. By examining the story closely beside other commentary, I will give an active glimpse into the world that developed these rigid gender norms and how it has manifested into a toxic environment for both men and women today.

These gender roles dictate the lives of women in Latin America and so one must examine the foundations of the culture which includes the everyday stories meant to scare kids and warn adults of the consequences that come with stepping away from what is deemed appropriate for someone’s sex.

**Keywords:** colonialism, feminism, folklore, Latin America, machismo, marianismo, womanhood

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The Story of “La Mujer Caballo” (The Horse Woman) repeats many common themes present within Latin American folklore and media: the normalization of brutalization towards women, the standardized demoralization of female sexuality, and the position of the woman as a warning to men of the consequences of slipping into inappropriate behavior. Folklore shapes the way a culture views concepts like gender roles and expression, and it can therefore be weaponized as a tool of oppression.

By studying the historiography of the concepts of “machismo” (hyper-masculinity) and “marianismo” (hyper-femininity)<sup>1</sup> through the story of “La Mujer Caballo,” I will expose the way that colonialism has shaped the idea of the monstrous female within Latin America. These patterns not only reveal the root of the gender problem but also invites consideration of how other concepts are similar to it. “La Mujer Caballo” is only one of many horror stories told within Latin America. In this story, a beautiful young woman becomes unfaithful to her husband when a handsome stranger comes to town. To punish her lack of chastity, she is tied to a horse that drags her through town until she is disfigured and dies. As a result, she now wanders as a ghost who shows up to drunkards and those who are unfaithful. She initially appears as a beautiful woman, but her head transforms into the head of a horse when men get too close to her. What makes this story stand out is specifically how the brutal murder of the beautiful woman ends with her being a curse to men. Her story surrounds how she can benefit men even after death through the role of a traitor and an example for the roles women around them are meant to fulfil subservient to her husband. This trope, of course, is present in more stories such as “La Malinche,” “La Llorona,” and other monstrous figures. “La Malinche” is our traitor who birthed Mexico for translating for Hernan Cortes and “La Llorona” is our monstrous failed mother who turned against her sex by losing her husband and taking the lives of herself and her children.

Sharing traits with “La Malinche”, she is written as a and she also is written as a tale of caution to other women. Both figures culturally serve as means to scare others that might want to give in to similar temptations. “La Mujer Caballo” may not have the presence that aforementioned does, but she is one of many examples of this trope throughout folklore.

She doesn’t give respect to the patriarchy and then becomes the whore and the other who betrayed her own people for the Spanish (Subero, 7). Through “La Malinche”, we get the idea of what happens to women who choose to reject the patriarchy. Much like her, “La Mujer Caballo” serves as a traitor. By being unable to help herself and engaging in an affair until discovered, she commits an act of betrayal and is punished accordingly (La Leyenda de la Mujer Caballo).

“La Llorona” (The Weeping Woman) has similar results to the story of “La Mujer Caballo”<sup>2</sup>. She reflects similar themes of monstrosity and the reduction to a warning for others

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<sup>1</sup> Marianismo is defined by Evelyn Stevens (1973) as the ideal feminine that is associated with emulation of traits of the Virgin Mary. Some of these traits include piety, virginity, submission, devotion, and adherence to males as authority. On the other end, machismo is a term that has existed in Latin America for quite some time. It is defined by the hyper-masculinity that makes up what a man is meant to be. These traits include sexual prowess, aggression, dominance, and superiority. See Stevens, 315.

<sup>2</sup> “La Llorona” who drowns herself and her children out of the grief of finding her husband to have left her for another woman. As a result of her crime, she is forever doomed to wander through the streets of Mexico crying out for her children.

who might stray away. Her story reflects not only the gender roles that women must fill but also the way that the monstrous female evolves in fiction into figures such as her. Much like “La Malinche” and “La Llorona,” she is demonized for her wrongs and mocked by men for what she represents now. She becomes a horror story to warn people about at night and her trauma is made into something that she is at fault for, making her deserving of her tragic brutalization and murder. She fails to conform to marianismo’s expectations, which in turn damn her to colonial standards and punishments.

The Latin American concepts of machismo (hyper-masculinity) and marianismo (hyper-femininity) trace back to the colonial era and have a large impact on gender norms in Latin America as well as those that deviate from those roles. Marianismo is defined as womanhood by association with features of the Virgin Mary such as piety, loyalty, and submissiveness<sup>3</sup>. Machismo, on the other hand, is defined by sexual power, authority, and aggression. In “Debunking Marianismo,” Tracy Ehlers analyzes the consequences of these concepts. One of the costs of the spread and acceptance of this machismo/marianismo model is that men’s abuse is understood as necessary for women’s “superior” status as semi-divine figureheads (Ehlers, 1). Women’s goals are structured in such a manner that they drive their husbands to a better path. Even in relation to sex, it was a woman’s job to keep men’s sexuality in order (Rodriguez, 38). Therefore, marianismo blames women by associating their husbands’ shortcomings with their inability to serve as proper semi-divine figures and to provide sexually. When women face challenges such as sexual abuse or domestic violence, these problems are therefore seen as deserved or necessary. Marianismo fuels this attitude through its expectations. Sexuality and gender are defined in one way, leaving little room for those that fall outside of it.

“La Mujer Caballo” and her husband go on to represent the way that men exert themselves through machismo compared to what it was meant to describe. In Latin America, machismo was also associated with honor and courage<sup>4</sup> and marianismo was partnered with it to represent strength, perseverance, and flexibility (Ramos et al. 210). Ideas such as self-respect and responsibility to the family as a provider also characterize the much more balanced definitions of machismo (Segrest et al. 17). Its recent developments into something much more violent and aggressive force it into a situation where men demand respect simply because they are men (Ramos et al. 210). “La Mujer Caballo” falls victim to a husband that is seeking machismo that is aggressive. His reaction is seen as justified because he was “blinded by jealousy” and showcases the violent tendencies that he exhibits and will have learned from machismo as it exists now. Honor and respect are not given to his wife. Although it can be argued that she perhaps does not deserve respect, he still does not exhibit any honor in his solution to killing her. These are not the only values of masculinity that he uses against his wife.

“La Mujer Caballo” suffers from her husband’s demand for respect. Though it is not stated in the story, it is implied through his actions and the failures of his wife. She does not

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<sup>3</sup> Coined by Evelyn Stevens in her article “The Prospects for a Women’s Liberation Movement in Latin America\*”, the term marianismo comes from the Virgin Mary. This is very similar in usage to the word “marian”. See (Stevens, 313)

<sup>4</sup> Mirande (1986) goes on to define a type of machismo called the “ethical perspective” which contains masculine traits such as honor, respect, strength, dignity, and protection of the family. See (Segrest et al. 19).

give into her submissive role to him completely and so upon her betrayal, he must cause others around him to see that he will not tolerate disrespect. She fails to adhere to the concept of *respeto*<sup>5</sup> which defines the roles of men and women in marriage. A common occurrence seems to be that love is regarded as an unnecessary part of marriage and other traits, such as submission, are valued above it. This problem creates a dynamic where women serve their husbands and benefit them but gain nothing themselves. This is only one part of the many standards and laws that dictate the role a woman is to play in marriage and in her life. She is subservient to her husband, and he has all the legal right to dictate who she is and how she behaves.

One of the laws in place in Latin America that would prevent “La Mujer Caballo” from existing on her own, separated from her husband, is “*patria potestad*”<sup>6</sup>. The restrictions that she faces make it nearly impossible for her to live as a woman separate from any man. As a result of this law, wives were legally bound to their husbands. Male children were freed from parental control when they married or when the father died, but daughters who married simply transferred to being legally bound to their husbands instead (Dore, 109). Marriage was then not a solution but a transfer of *patria potestad*. The justification for these laws was simple; women were weaker, inferior, and needed to be protected by males. Unable to govern themselves, they were assigned an appropriate male figure in order to maintain themselves. This would only further the difficulty that was present in the struggle for women’s independence and ability to walk away from a toxic environment. “La Mujer Caballo” is restricted from freedom as she is tied to her husband. Her very existence depends on him having power over her because she is weaker. It is as soon as she proves herself to be a figure that her husband cannot control that she becomes a problem. She violates what *patria potestad* puts in place and for that she must be punished.

“La Mujer Caballo” continues to suffer from unequal expectations for men and women. Women in her position would not be able to react the same way that men would be able to if she caught him being adulterous and her sins make her a metaphorical Eve. She now represents all of her gender and will be used as a tool of learning. To be better than her is to make up for where she had fault. These unequal standards are present in the way that if caught in the act of infidelity, men could exercise violence on their wives, but wives could not exert violence on their husbands (Sanchez and Perez, 245). We see this done through the story of “La Mujer Caballo”. Her husband does in fact take her life as a result of her infidelity. This wasn’t the only imbalance in consequences. While infidelity could cause shame for a man, it could also push up his masculinity. On the other hand, if a woman was adulterous, she was made a representative for all of her gender and made into a whore (Sanchez and Perez, 246). Here, “La Mujer Caballo” becomes the Eve to our story. She no longer represents just herself but her whole gender. Though concepts such as honor laws are out of date, these dynamics still exist in Latin America and are enforced through gender roles and expectations. These laws would continue to affect the lives of women up into the early 20th century in Mexico and Nicaragua (Dore, 111). These

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<sup>5</sup> *Respeto* (literally meaning respect) is an idea in Latin America that is more than what it seems on the surface. Rather than being about absolute respect for men, it represents emotional presence and dutifulness from women which is valued above the idea of love (Segrest, 17).

<sup>6</sup> *Patria potestad* is a law dating back to 15th century Spain that states that a husband has absolute power in his house; he has authority over his wife, children, and dependents. See (Dore, 108).

laws would in turn affect masculinity as something that is consistently shaped into something more in order to benefit men. It is these laws that would fuel the rampant issue of femicides in Latin America as well.

“La Mujer Caballo” is a victim of femicide. She dies in a brutally violent manner at the hands of a man that took offense to what she had done. Rather than take any other route, her husband leaps to the extreme. He removes the chance for her to ever make up for what she’s done. Regardless of the fact that the man she had the affair with is also killed, he still makes her another statistic to add to the list of growing violence in Latin America. Though femicides did not exist in the past to the extent that they do today, they have been a part of Latin American history<sup>7</sup>. One of the events that sparked what we know now as femicides was the murder of children and poor women in Ciudad Juarez (Lamas, 30). Machista violence is something that feminists within Mexico target due to the increasing problem it poses on the lives of women (Lamas, 31). The lack of care toward women in Latin America is drastic. These problems breed the environment for figures like “La Mujer Caballo” to be brutally murdered and for it to not be seen as something distressing. We know she died a miserable and agonizing death, but we are to treat it lightly and dismiss it as if it is not a horrifying event that displays the flaws of how gender is enforced in Latin America. This is the price that she pays for not falling into line.

“La Mujer Caballo” consistently reveals the ways that she does not fit into the expectations laid out for her through her sexual endeavors. This long-lasting affair that she was a part of would prove to make her into a promiscuous figure in need of correcting. This flaw then becomes the basis for why she turns into the figure she is now. Due to the strong presence of Catholicism within public and educational spaces in Latin America, it is difficult to open up conversations on the subject of sex in Latin America (Edgerton and Sotirova, 35). The sexual behavior seen as in need of correction includes promiscuity, incest, extramarital sex, prostitution, and abortion (LaGreca, 129). The myth describes her relationship with many of the men around her as one where “muchos de los hombres la llenaba de halagos, sin ella hacer caso, pues estaba felizmente casada” / many of the men flattered her, but she did not pay them any mind as she was happily married (La Leyenda de la Mujer Caballo). She is only ever described as a beautiful woman which limits what the audience can understand about her character. Giving into it would distance her from femininity. By establishing the idea that her marriage was a good one, the myth takes away justification for her infidelity. It implies that her act of infidelity was simply due to her inability to control herself sexually. This reflects the attitude in Latin America where a man’s inability to control himself is natural but for a woman, it is a great sin.

There are continuous patterns within Latin America where women’s sexuality and how they are permitted to express it is dictated by men. Motherhood is one of the only ways that a woman can successfully and properly connect with her sexuality. So long as she is reproducing, making a home, or being completely chaste, then she is falling in line<sup>8</sup>. Women are expected to

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<sup>7</sup> These femicides have become such an increasingly alarming issue that the act of surviving in Mexico as a woman is seen as an act of resistance. See (qtd. In Lamas, 37)

<sup>8</sup> This definition of womanhood in Latin America fuels the idea that a man is a sexual being but a woman is to be as asexual as possible or she is a whore (Craske 13). One of the blatant problems with this idea is that not all women are mothers nor wish to be mothers despite this being the most common approach to femininity in Latin America. See (Craske 2).

identify with motherhood in the political sphere, but the same does not hold up for men. They are not expected to take the role of or identify with fatherhood in order to be a man (Craske 10). A woman is only to bear children whereas her husband holds the right to bear arms to perform their gender (Craske 22). This is where “La Mujer Caballo” falls short of her job as a woman. She is happily married to her husband but “la bella esposa no se pudo resistir” / the beautiful wife could not resist” this new man she starts a relationship with (La Leyenda de la Mujer Caballo). The idea of the asexual woman is then to be removed from the woman and instead, she is turned into a whore. This betrayal also makes her incompatible with the image of motherhood that women are expected to conform to.

The ideal of motherhood being the definitive along with female asexuality is not a new concept and its roots are present in recent history. We see it in the mentioned figures of “La Llorona”, “La Malinche”, and La Virgen de Guadalupe<sup>9</sup>. One becomes an evil mother, one is a betraying whore, and the last is the divine feminine. “La Mujer Caballo” finds her role as much like that of “La Llorona” and “La Malinche”. She is a treacherous woman who turns away from femininity and is cursed to represent that forevermore. Female asexuality is the only means in which a woman can escape her role as a homemaker. Therefore, “La Mujer Caballo” cannot find liberation from what is decided for her. She must cave in and when she doesn’t, it means that she must serve as a figure for other women to steer away from. This holds that La Virgen de Guadalupe does not end with this comparison. In fact, the grip Marian femininity has on expectations for women continues in many other forms in order to prevent promiscuous behavior.

The behavior exhibited by “La Mujer Caballo” is a type of promiscuity that is not welcome in Latin American culture. She takes a selfish route by doing so and completely disregards the idea that women do not enjoy or engage in sex unless it is for the benefit of a family or their husband. One of the initiatives taken in order to prevent promiscuity from women and divert them from giving in to evil temptations was the cult of the Virgin Mary in the 19th century<sup>10</sup>. Emulation of the Virgin was considered the best way to preserve female asexuality. It pushed an idea of encouraging love for and obedience to the father or husband, and performing the role of faithful and docile servant within the family (LaGreca 134). Through the development of the cult, women were both hypersexualized and made into asexual beings based on how they reacted to the push to emulate the Virgin Mary. In the case of “La Mujer Caballo”, she denied her husband her role of the docile servant. By entertaining another man, she becomes disobedient and therefore even more sexual than she is.

We can see the continued examples of “La Mujer Caballo” falling short of her womanhood. This failure is made especially visible through comparisons and contrasts of her to the Virgin Mary. La Virgen de Guadalupe in Latin America specifically embodies the ideas of virginity, piety, helpfulness, forgiveness, goodness, and devoted and selfless motherhood’

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<sup>9</sup> La Virgen de Guadalupe is considered the mother of all Mexicans and direct emblem of the notion of Marianismo. See (Subero, 12). Her presence has sparked a culture within Latin America where she upheld and heralded above other figures in the Bible. She is an example of the Virgin Mary that combined with indigenous practices in order to preserve culture under colonial rule.

<sup>10</sup> Two major institutions came into place in order to cultivate the cult — the Primera Conferencia del Inmaculado Corazón de María (First Conference of the Immaculate Heart of Mary) in 1859 and the Congregación de las Hijas de María (Congregation of the Daughters of Mary). See (LaGreca 134).

(Subero 6). These are the traits that are expected of women to emulate and there are different concepts that are introduced for those that threaten the structural order of the cult of the Virgin Mary. Women are figures that hold the power to either be complete sexual beings or to be divine-like and associated with La Virgen. This is then the only power that they are able to obtain and even then, it is one that falls into the madonna-whore dichotomy where a woman is either good and chaste or she is a temptress seeking to destroy the lives of men. The phrase “De la polilla a la virtud” (from moth to virtue), for example, was coined to describe the transformation from a moth that consumes and ruins fabric (men) for a virtuous and good woman (LaGreca 133). “La Mujer Caballo”, through her actions, falls into the image of the moth that ruins men<sup>11</sup>. Her infidelity has not only destroyed the man that she was married to, but has also stained the man that she had an affair with. She caused his death, and a woman is never to be the reason that a man dies. It is not within her power to do such a thing. By leading to both of their deaths, she commits the forbidden action of punishing a man for his sexuality.

“La Mujer Caballo” not only represents a woman that is a metaphorical moth ruining men like cloth, but she also represents the results of the hatred women of color (WOC) face from men of color (MOC). “La Mujer Caballo” is an example of a woman who has been failed by her male counterpart. Rather than approaching the affair and its reveal rationally, her husband’s immediate jump is to have her killed violently. This act of violence serves as a parallel to the systemic violence that women face daily. The woman is not offered any other options, nor is she written with much of a character to defend herself. All that is understood by the reader is that she was beautiful, she betrayed her lover, and for her betrayal she was killed. Ali Lara’s commentary on brown men’s approaches to brown women is filled with desperation, anger, and despair. Lara describes a phenomenon within Latin America where brown men are indifferent to the systematic violence against women as well which causes them to reject and hate brown women (Lara 110). He delivers a message that Latino men have failed Latina women and makes an impassioned plea to Latino men, declaring “We Brown men made Brown women pay for our frustrations. Like cowards. Like traitors. Like men.” (Lara, 113). This points out one of the largest problems with misogyny in Latin America which is that brown men turn their backs on their own women whether it’s through violence, indifference, or institutional subjugation. Drawing more conclusions from this information provided requires understanding the other problems that women in Latin America face.

“La Mujer Caballo’s” story, though short, continues to provide different ways to interpret her fate. By looking at colonialism and the effects it has on the mind, we can understand that her husband used her as a means of expressing his frustrations and hatred of his wife. Lara argues that if violence is “naturally occurring” in men, then it is because of a “historical process of racialization and gendering that has homogenized the expressions of violence that reproduce gender inequality among people of color” (Lara, 120). “La Mujer Caballo” faces the consequences of colonialism through her husband’s violent behavior. Colonialism has told him that his desire to kill and his contempt are things that he should

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<sup>11</sup> Her adulterous relationship with the man caused her husband to be “cegado por la ira y celos”/ blinded by anger and jealousy. See (Leyendas de Aguascalientes: la mujer cara de caballo que se aparece a los infieles). She thus ruins him like the moth to fabric. She acts as a woman that caused a man to fall from grace.

exhibit and that they are naturally occurring. Thus, he projects his hatred through the very violence he is taught is natural.

The idea of what is natural in Latin men's interactions with women is complex. Robert McNicoll describes the pursuits of Spanish men and states that they "convince themselves and others that they were irresistible conquerors of women" (qtd. Hardin, 4). Through conquering women, they push a colonial desire for dominance and violence that results in men having the desire to kill, be contemptuous, the desire for rape, bigotry, desire to exterminate, and the desire to colonize (Lara, 119). "La Mujer Caballo" and her death become more representative of this colonial desire to conquer. She is a woman for her husband to put in place and rule over. In her story, it's stated that "el hombre, cegado por la ira y celos, ató a la mujer a un caballo"/ The man, blinded by anger, tied the woman to a horse (Leyendas de Aguascalientes: la mujer cara de caballo que se aparece a los infieles). By reacting out of blind rage, her husband gives in to the idea of being a conqueror of women. It is how he establishes authority over her as she has wronged him. It is emasculating for her to be able to commit this wrong with no punishment. Colonial views lay down the belief that a man is to triumph over his wife and react with violence if she does not conform. That is precisely what the husband does. By conquering her, shaming her, and making an example of her, he solves the problem of being weak in his masculinity. He becomes the man that he is expected to be and as a result, European masculinity wins.<sup>12</sup>

The colonial era had more effects than just violent tendencies in men. It also resulted in brown women facing the frustrations of their male counterparts. This would continue to be the case with "La Mujer Caballo" as she becomes a target for her husband. As women of color tried to survive in these harsh times, they faced attacks on all fronts. They were robbed of their womanhood for not being white and yet they still faced misogyny and racism because they were not men (Lara, 111). This created an entirely new level of oppression that they could not escape. On top of these abuses, they face a unique type of abuse from men of color (MOC) as they make WOC the targets of their gripes and frustrations with the violence from the colonial era (Lara, 110). The brutal acts of violence that they would inflict on brown men would become a means for them to establish their authority and dominance over brown women. As a result, "La Mujer Caballo" becomes another story in the pattern of abuses that WOC face. She becomes the release for her husband's violent frustrations that manifested through the generational trauma of colonialism.

Of course, the colonial impacts on gender and the understanding of it do not end here. "La Mujer Caballo" continues to show us the way that concepts such as the caste system impact the way men's relationships with women manifest. Michael Hardin opens up a discussion of the ways that the caste system impacts the way that women are viewed. Indigenous women, for example, suffer on many fronts due to the beliefs of the Spanish that they are entitled to rape and abuse indigenous women (Hardin, 16). In turn, having a white wife was a sign of elite status and a form of displaying power due to association with whiteness (Hardin, 17). In this way,

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<sup>12</sup> It is argued that machismo is a sign that European masculinity won. See (Hardin, 14). If we take a look at the colonial era, we can observe the different traits and events that led to the current construction of machismo. Through its definitions and expectations, we can look at the way that men in Latin America behave now and what they feel entitled to. The very presence of their violent acts towards women suggests that the Spanish were successful in enforcing their ideas of manhood and masculinity in the indigenous population which carried on and manifests the most through the mestizo population.

machismo became a courting ritual in which the best man found the best wife (a white woman). This makes machismo a partner to mestizaje which consistently pushes for a more European race<sup>13</sup>. While the race of the woman is not provided, we can make assumptions based on the expectations of women by their race. It is most likely that she was mestiza. Being white would make her the absolute desirable but higher-class women are less likely to face systemic violence and this removes the impact of the colonial developments of gender that are present in the story. While being indigenous would make it so that she is most likely to face the consequences of colonialism and system violence, she would not be deemed desirable by the caste system and the gender roles she is restricted to would change. She is described to have “una belleza extraordinaria” /an extraordinary beauty and it is through this line I interpret the way her race and gender might have been intertwined (La Leyenda de la Mujer Caballo). Therefore, being mestiza allows us to continue to analyze the violence inflicted on her by her male counterpart through a colonial lens and also allows her to maintain a level of desirability according to the caste system. This then leaves room for us to look at the differences in machismo among mestizos compared to indigenous men.

As stated, if “La Mujer Caballo” is indigenous, it removes her desirability and also changes the structure of the gender roles she would be confined to. This change is because machismo, as it exists in Latin America, does not exist in indigenous communities the same way. This difference also means that if her husband is indigenous, it removes the aspect of colonial impacts on his masculinity. The husband in this story, we can assume, is mestizo due to the reaction he has upon discovering his wife has been unfaithful. He re-establishes his dominance as a man by tying his wife to that horse and killing her. However, this is not limited to his wife. According to the story, “El esposo descubrió el engaño y asesinó a ambos traidores.”/ the husband discovered the deception and killed both traitors (Leyendas de Aguascalientes: la mujer cara de caballo que se aparece a los infieles). By doing so, he establishes his dominance over not just his wife but another man. He is triumphant in the aggression that he enacts on the two and therefore becomes the better example of machismo that is present in mestizo circles. He is stronger and able to push down the man his wife had an affair with and can be the “alpha” or stronger man. Where mestizos have machismo that is characterized by beings who are aggressive, oppressive, narcissistic, insecure, loud-mouthed, womanizers, massive drinkers, and persons who have uncontrollable sexual prowess”, Indigenous communities in Latin America view sexuality through a much more nuanced way<sup>14</sup> (qtd. Hardin, 3). This is not to say that there was no presence at all of ideas of weak masculinity. These ideas can still be found in indigenous cultures through the ideas of active (penetrating) and passive (penetrated) in regard to sexual intimacy (Hardin, 8). However, they were not as strict as European definitions of gender. For example, a passive person could still live a long and fruitful life. Rather, this view of

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<sup>13</sup> Seymour B. Liebman (1976) traces the origin of machismo to the convergence of multiple ethnicities, the mestizo, and then concludes that this makes the Latin American male “confused”. See (Hardin, 3) As a result of this convergence, machismo as it exists in Latin America, is tied to mestizaje and the idea of “mejorar la raza” (better the race) which push for mestizo men to “purify” their lines by seeking out the Latino elites (white Latinos) to marry and have children with. This is the best outcome for a Latino man in regards to his relationship with women.

<sup>14</sup> These communities not only viewed sexuality in a more balanced manner but carry concepts currently such as “two-spirit”, a concept all across North and South America, which describes the experiences of indigenous people who exhibit both male and female energies. See (Hardin, 10).

masculinity feeds into a dynamic that isn't found in current representations of masculinity within Latino males. The current expectations of men are based on standards imposed on indigenous people rather than having always existed in these regions. As a result of the evolution of gender, we get situations such as with "La Mujer Caballo" where her husband asserts his masculinity by taking his rage out physically on her and her partner.

The limits on what women are able to do is not limited to their sexuality and this is present in the analysis of "La Mujer Caballo" and her role in relation to her husband. A woman's role is to be "semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (Stevens, 315). As a result, motherhood is held up as being sacred, women's only fulfillment once married comes from parenthood<sup>15</sup>. We understand this as it comes with the concept of marianismo that is present in all aspects of a woman's existence in Latin America. This problem then leads to seeing other reasons that "La Mujer" Caballo fell short of what she was meant to be. The idea of a trophy wife is not something that would be fulfilling to a man that exhibits machismo. He would want a wife that provides a family. The lack of children in the story of "La Mujer Caballo" then implies that she has yet to complete her full purpose in the eyes of the patriarchy. It is much easier for her husband to then react in a violent manner if she has already failed at meeting the ideal definition of womanhood in some manner. This failure also makes it so that her affair serves to make her an egotistical woman. She is chasing after what she wants rather than what she is to provide. After all, an egoist man is seen as being strong, powerful, and even a leader while an egoist woman is seen as a repulsive being (de Fanning 37). Her selfish pursuits taint her womanhood and prevent her from fitting into the cultural expectations.

Through "La Mujer Caballo," we can observe her chasing her sexual desires and analyze what it means in regards to her sex life as a married woman. Within their marriages, women are not expected to even enjoy the act of sex and there is an increased value placed on their virginity when entering a marriage. The belief that exists in Latin America is that a woman does not enjoy sex, but she endures it for her husband (Stevens 11). Sex is another service that women are expected to deliver upon the traditional expectations of a homemaker and submissive wife. The wife exists for her husband's convenience and pleasure. This male-centered mentality in turn also impacts the way that women view their own bodies. Some receive surgical procedures in order to repair the hymen for the pleasure of their husbands (Stevens 11). While "La Mujer Caballo" does not turn to bodily modifications in order to please her husband, she does commit the crime of not existing solely to please him and only him. "La Mujer Caballo" has a long-lasting affair with the new man, showcasing her divergence from existing solely for the benefit of her husband. As she leaves behind said expectations, she steps into a new role as a woman that is separated from being solely a wife. She does not step away from being surrounded by the idea of a man as she does go to another one, but she does separate herself from the wife role. She enjoys the act of sex instead of it being a service for her husband and therefore, she continues to reject what it means to be a woman culturally.

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<sup>15</sup> Even with concerns about the education of a woman, her education is seen as something that should benefit her role as a mother. See (de Fanning, 37). Her pursuits must always follow the family and it is best seen through the continued devotion to this idea of the family.

Divorce, while something present in Latin America, would not have benefitted “La Mujer Caballo” in her path to self-actualization. Despite divorce laws having existed in places like Mexico since the early 19th century, many women choose not to take advantage of them due to strong Catholic influence that values the family above all else. Strong laws were created as a result of the presence of the Catholic Church in order to stifle or channel women’s sexuality through marriage laws, education, recreation, and dress codes. (LaGreca, 148). A woman who divorced her husband risked facing opposition from all of her relatives who would rather see her dead than divorced as is present in concepts such as “la mala vida”<sup>16</sup> (the bad life) (Ehlers 1). The idea that a woman would willingly leave a position where she fit the ideal image of a woman seems foreign. Even in cases where women would have every right to leave (e.g. domestic abuse), women stay with their husbands to avoid the shame that came with divorce. A woman who is already married seems to be seen as someone that is used sexually and therefore cannot fulfill the role she is required to if she seeks a new husband. Because “La Mujer Caballo” opted have an affair rather than divorce her husband, she runs into the problem of being seen as a sexual deviant that breaks away from the family role that Catholicism and the community enforce. However, even if she had divorced her husband, she would have been treated as spoiled goods and would have been rejected. She is then left with no other conclusion than to be made into a sexual figure that could not help herself.

As the husband of “La Mujer Caballo” is an aggressor, it can be assumed that there was a level of violence that was seen as acceptable in his marriage with the woman. Domestic abuse in Latin America reflects the culture in which women are expected to stay in and maintain. The family dynamic is the center of a Latina’s identity and impacts the way that she is meant to interact with the world around her (Ramos et al. 210). This influences the way that domestic abuse is perpetuated and viewed in Latin America. Machismo, as previously discussed, is defined as an archetype of hyper-masculinity. In the family dynamic, he is the breadwinner and authority figure in the household. These gender roles result in a situation in Latin America where women do not report the abuse that they face because it is not seen as domestic abuse. “La Mujer Caballo” would have no outlet to discuss what she is dealing with as her marriage would have been seen as acceptable as it was. Just as her husband killing her is justified within culture, any violence inflicted on her would have been justified by the fact that her husband is to have power over her. As a Latina woman, her options are limited and therefore, no matter what path she took when it came to finding interest in another man, she would have faced lack of support and shame for her actions. This presence of likely shame leaves her in a position where she stays with her husband in order to preserve appearances.

These are not the only possibilities for why she chooses to stay with her husband despite the aggression present in his personality. Some of the most common reasons that women stay in relationships where they face domestic violence is because of a lack of viable economic alternatives, cultural focus on the family, and child-related concerns. (Ramos et al. 215). This leads to Latina women becoming more tolerant of abuse than their non-Latina

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<sup>16</sup> This phenomenon is one that occurs when women place themselves in a domestic safety net in order to survive. See (Ehlers 3) As a result, women remain in unhappy relationships. There is the idea that a man is like an avocado, he is hard to find. See (Ehlers, 1). Women have been abandoned by their husbands, some are abused, but still remains the idea that they are better off having been with a man than never having been with one at all. Life is about endurance and happiness and love are not prioritized.

counterparts. Community, as stated, has a large impact on the ways that Latinas view their options when facing domestic violence. With community being a prominent part of Latino culture, it makes sense that the first people to hear about domestic violence and disputes would be that very community. However, this does not always work in favor of the woman facing these problems. Oftentimes there are other problems present such as environments encouraging problems to stay behind closed doors and victim blaming (Ramos et al. 216). Lack of community seems to be the reason that applies best when looking at “La Mujer Caballo”. She is only described as having the attention of other men which restricts her to simply being someone to observe and not a part of the community. Without anybody to fall back on, she would not have any way to leave her husband. Even if she did, the problem of victim blaming would come to play. As her role is to serve her husband and lead him to a better path, leaving him would indicate failure to do so. This could then be used to justify his treatment of her by stating that if she had been a better wife, he would not have reacted the way that he did. This especially applies to her death where the violent manner in which she is killed is seen as a proper punishment for adultery.

Any sort of question in regards to the sexuality of “La Mujer Caballo” would have been dismissed quickly as it would be deemed inappropriate due to the culture surrounding Latin America. Leaving her trapped in this cycle of what womanhood is meant to be, she finds no way to explore herself and her desires in a healthy manner. This makes it impossible for her to possibly find an outlet for what was going on in her life. This presence of Catholicism in Latin America has an impact on the way that sexual-based domestic abuse is perceived as well as on the ways that victims are presented and represented. This includes the way that we interpret and understand “La Leyenda de la Mujer Caballo”. Catholicism breeds an environment where talking about sex is taboo and consequently, has historically had an impact on legislative change in Latin American nations (Jelin 76).

This also means that victim blaming is quite a common occurrence in Latin American culture. This trend of throwing the blame onto the victim<sup>17</sup> presents itself through the way that “La Mujer Caballo’s” story ends. As a result of these standards, the only time a woman would receive justice for sexual abuse is if she was considered a “decent” woman, meaning that she fit into the ideals set forth by the culture around her and that her attacker was not her husband or father (Dore 109). If she was deemed an “honest” woman by the courts, the family of a woman that was raped had the right to kill her attacker (Dore, 109). However, if the attacker was at a higher class than the woman he attacked, it was unlikely that she would receive justice (Dore 110). There are no equivalents to these expectations for men. The fact that the chances for a woman to gain justice after facing a brutal attack were limited and invalid in cases of marital rape shows a great imbalance that favors men and leaves abused women without many options. “La Mujer Caballo” then exemplifies the way that Latin American women hardly receive justice. In her case, she does not fall under being a “honest” woman as she does the unthinkable by being a sexual being outside of marriage. Therefore, even after her death, she will not receive justice for what her husband did to her. He will receive no punishment for

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<sup>17</sup> In many cases where rape is in question, the idea that the woman is to blame comes to play and she is asked what she did to incite the rape or told that it is the consequence of having a careless sex life. See (Jelin 76). There is doubt that a woman could face something as awful as rape or abuse if she did not in some form encourage it.

taking her life and she will be doomed to be made an example of to scare other women into place.

Folklore has a large impact on the way that gender and sexuality are perceived. Lessons are taught, characteristics are made, and tropes are created. In the case of La Virgen de Guadalupe, we get the ideal feminine which creates marianismo to partner with machismo. For “La Malinche”, we get an understanding of the “betrayal” that led to the creation of Mexico. As a result of this creation, we understand her story as a warning to not be the whore that will be hated. There are many other figures to compare and construct with “La Mujer Caballo” and all of them provide new insight to her limited character. “La Mujer Caballo” is an example of the way that men view and use female trauma and sexuality against women. In some cases, this usage is seen as a threat. She is made an example of and now she wanders targeting others who make the same mistakes as her. Her story shows us the effects of how gender and sexuality are defined within Latin America and what the consequences are for women who step out of what is defined as their role in society.

“La Mujer Caballo” embodies the nature of female monstrosity and the way that it has developed as a result of colonial impacts on the idea of gender and female sexuality. Domestic abuse is dismissed as a problem that is not worth being concerned about, courts have in the past had the rights to subjugate women further. The problems that arise from the evolution of gender expectations are plentiful and they all tie into the idea of what “La Mujer Caballo” represents. She represents the way that women are treated but also how they are written when they fall short of the perfect ideal. Folklore and media will continue to have a strong effect on the way that gender and sexuality are perceived by the average population. This is only even more true when applied to the structures in place in Latin America. Each story provides insight to the ways that women are expected to function in the face of hatred, violence, and inequality. Women cannot express sexuality, they must remain submissive and docile, and they must not want anything more than a life revolving around a man in their lives. All of these things isolate “La Mujer Caballo” from her purpose as per cultural norms. She suffers from all aspects of misogyny and gender differences in Latin America. She is a victim to femicide and in the end becomes someone to punish other men. Her purpose even in death does not change from having to surround men and their needs. She still must act as the semi-divine woman. Therefore, she is not just a lesson to instill fear in men but a victim to the patriarchy instilled by the Spanish, leaving her to be made into another monstrous female.

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