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Women Who Kill: Performing Feminist Resistance in 20th Century American Multiethnic Women's Literature

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WOMEN WHO KILL: PERFORMING FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN 20th CENTURY

AMERICAN MULTIETHNIC WOMEN'S LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Women Who Kill: Performing Feminist Resistance in 20th Century American Multiethnic Women's Literature

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Abstract:

This research dissertation critiques literary works containing women who kill and seeks to understand the power, message, and meaning of such acts of violence within the context of a larger cultural, political, and historical backdrop. Read with feminist and performance theories through a postmodern lens, the woman who kills offers a rich analysis of cultural history and gender constructions. This project juxtaposes literary accounts of women who kill, citing commonalities, but also charting the changes and evolution from classical to modern and postmodern literature (with a particular focus on women who kill as imagined by twentieth century American multiethnic women writers). This project analyzes literary imaginings of the woman who kills as they fall into the categories of a male authored system of containment, a counterpart of the manmade myth of feminine passivity or a narrative of resistance, a tortured, but bold enunciation of feminist assertion—the latter being the primary area of inquiry .

Twentieth century multiethnic women writers create female characters whose acts of murder mark a resistance to multiple systems of oppression including rape, slavery, racism, economic marginalization, and years of domestic abuse and neglect. Through multiple genres—plays, short stories, and novels—these writers envision murder by women as a radical protest, an act of resistance inscribed in the flesh. Modern craft and techniques enable these writers to

create works of fiction that ultimately present complex and sympathetic renderings of the woman who kills. Furthermore, this dissertation establishes a link between the female murderer and the feminist—both existing beyond the edges of prescribed gender norms and challenging the limits of society. In these multi-genre works, acts of murder reflect a violent chaffing against patriarchal, hegemonic, and oppressive systems deeply embedded in numerous aspects of human life. However brutal and disquieting the act of murder may be, an examination of these literary women who kill reveals daring narratives of feminist resistance and assertion of the female self.