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Her Own Sense of Belonging: Viramontes' and Olsen's Cultural Landscapes

In their short stories, *The Moths* and *Tell Me a Riddle*, Helena Maria Viramontes and Tillie Olsen illustrate the feminist idea of women as beneficiaries and agencies of change. Both authors write of people living on the margins, who, because of their class, sex, or race, have been denied opportunities to express and develop themselves. This paper examines the importance of “place” in creating a sense of connection and security within a society. An analysis of the condition of diaspora in the Chicana literature of Viramontes and the power of cultural memory and revision in the immigrant writing of Olsen is also explored. Also, the traditional role of women as mothers and daughters is examined as being both nurturing and repressive.

Although Viramontes and Olsen come from very different cultural backgrounds, the quest for finding dignity and meaning in one's life is a powerful common theme. The dualities of speech and silence are important to an understanding of the female characters' sense of self as they struggle for personal expression within societal bounds. These two short stories are fine examples of works that express a class consciousness and feminist consciousness that is worth examining. The women in both stories reject the trappings of traditional roles for women, particularly religion, within their cultures, but respect and cling to the cultural landscapes of their heritage as they strive to find a sense of dignity and control over their own destinies.