

# Medical (In)Justice of Mexican-American Migrant Workers in *Under the Feet of Jesus*\*

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**Abstract**—Helena Maria Viramontes’s representative fiction, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, explores the oppression and resistance of Mexican-American migrant workers (Chicanos) by revealing racial and gender problems. This article will first demonstrate the contamination of Mexican-American migrants’ working environment in this novel. Furthermore, drawing on medical ethics and other interdisciplinary studies, it will argue against the medical injustice regarding the mistreatment of Mexican-American migrants’ bodies because of the white class’s supremacy, and will state Chicano workers’ resistances and pursuits in facing unfair medical systems. On top of that, this paper would like to propose that empathy and mutual kindness from community members are the key solutions to show resistance to medical injustice.

**Index Terms**—*Under the Feet of Jesus*, medical ethics, environmental justice, Mexican-American migrant workers

## I. INTRODUCTION

Helena Maria Viramontes (1954~) is a Mexican-American novelist, professor and feminist, who has received John Dos Passos Prize for Literature and the Luis Leal Literary Award. Because of her Mexican-American background, Viramontes’s life experience was a witness to racial, class and gender discrimination and marginalization. Therefore, her works, including *Under the Feet of Jesus*, *Their Dogs Came with Them*, and *Paris Rats in E.L.A.*, are concerned with Chicanos’ living dilemmas under hierarchical oppression in America. Viramontes’s novels build a window to let readers have a deep perception of Mexican-Americans’ miserable lives, native culture, and their resistance to various injustices. Her literary works with a sociopolitical focus place her as the main figure in the Chicana literary tradition.

Viramontes’s debut novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996), narrates the hardship of a Chicano family. This novel describes Mexican-American migrant workers’ lives in the borderland of the United States of America suffering from oppression and displacement, and narrates how the protagonists, Estrella’s family members, try to survive and search for medical help in California. Studies allow for an ample spectrum of critical frameworks in explanations of *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Some scholars mainly emphasize the growth of Chicana’s independent consciousness, racial discrimination and other issues. This fiction is political to explore various injustices such as migrants’ illegality, child labor, pesticide poisoning, environmental injustice, poverty, racial discrimination and identity crisis.

Medical ethics are concerning ethical standards and norms in the medical industry, which demand that medical services should alleviate suffering and “the severity of illness through supportive measure” (Hollingsworth, 1983, p. 327). Medical justice is one of the most essential principles of medical ethics considering the state of human’s physical, mental and social well-being. However, because of racism and capitalism, there are a certain group of people in America who are more vulnerable and accessible to certain diseases, causing medical injustice and deeper economic, political, environmental and cultural problems. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, medical injustice includes easy access to certain diseases, medical discrimination, social indifference and environmental injustice.

With the development of ethical criticism and medical narration, literary works are more involved in medical ethics. Some scholars argue that “testifying to illness as a communicative body may be an individual moral choice, but this testimony implies a social ethic” (Frank, 1995, p. 145). The medical ethic has been one of the frameworks being involved in moral standards in literary works. Medical justice has been one of the major social issues throughout American history, requiring equality of treatment. Ethics and justice will be constant refrains throughout history.

This article will employ an interdisciplinary perspective to investigate the medical injustice of Mexican-American migrant workers in *Under the Feet of Jesus* according to medical ethics. Chicano’s illness is caused by environmental injustice and the neo-slave working system. Harsh working environments, incompetent medical workers, poor health

\* Funding This work was supported by the Discipline Team Support Program of Beijing Language and Culture University under Grant (JC201906). Supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, and the Research Funds of Beijing Language and Culture University, No. 22YCX021.

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care, rampant commercialization of medical services and unhealthy workers' bodies are documented in this novel. After catching the disease, those marginalized workers cannot receive equal medical treatment, which violates medical ethics and moral standards. An engagement of medical ethics, environmental injustice and other disciplines will be done in investigating this fiction to find out medical injustice and resistance of Mexican-American migrant workers. Apart from violent rebellions, this essay wants to demonstrate that empathy and mutual kindness in community building and helping each other are key methods and solutions to destabilize medical injustice.

## II. ILLNESS: ENVIRONMENTAL TOXICATION AFFECTING CHICANOS' BODIES

The loci of environmental contamination are triggered by various factors, such as viruses, contamination, toxication, and so on, which seriously worsen human living standards. Medical justice is closely concerned with the quality of the human workplace and living environment. Because of the marginalized positions of Mexican-American migrants in America, their exposure to a noxious environment causes more physical illness than the white upper class, which shows the discrimination against women, children, people of color and indigenous peoples. Environmental injustice is the cause of Chicanos' illness and other medical problems. The scale of analysis in this part will do the point cut of medical injustice from the standpoint of working inequality and environmental injustice.

Mexican-American migrant workers who have crossed national borderlands are troubled by illegality. One of the main concerns related to Chicano working injustice is the neo-slave working system. The characterizations of neo-slave working conditions are: "1. being subjected to forced labor; 2. being subjected to long working hours; 3. being subjected to poor working conditions; 4. movement restrictions, by any means, due to debt towards the employer or representative" (Garreto et al., 2019, p. 182). Mexican-American migrant workers in this working system do not have health insurance, which leads to "plane-loads of avoidable deaths, injuries, and treatment-induced illnesses" (Light, 2004, p. 2). In the novel, piscadores' works were under the supervision of the Foreman, who "produced a tablet of tables and columns of numbers, scribbled rows completed, names, erased calculations" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 45). Foreman only cared about piscadores' outcomes without considering their health problems. This employment relationship imposed on Chicano workers is based on class exploitation.

Human health "includes the right to health as well as other rights that relate to conditions necessary for health—such as nutrition, rest, and access to medical care" (Sönmez & Apostolopoulos, 2011, p. 26). These systematic working assurances guarantee people's health and medical justice. Health is the basic right of human beings to be given enough medical treatments without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition. However, Mexican-American migrant workers suffer from the condition of health vulnerability due to their participation in "3-D jobs: dirty, dangerous, and demanding (sometimes degrading or demeaning)" (Moyce & Schenker, 2018, p. 356). They are at a high rate of occupational injuries and illness. In the novel, Estrella's family and other piscadores did field works in California: in hardship, monotony and heat, and with "minimum wage, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, overtime pay and child labor that afford little or no protection for migrant farmworkers" (Mull, 1998, p. 6). There was no basic labor protection, and Foreman did not provide working security so that Petra, the mother in the Chicano family, suffered from various diseases without medical treatment.

What's more, the working environment, directly and indirectly, affects people's health. People's illnesses can be further illustrated as the result of environmental injustice. Environmental justice enables "social justice and sustainability" (Volpp, 2005, p. 62), and puts "environmental concerns into Chicano discourse and action" (Volpp, 2005, p. 63). It should be supposed to guarantee human equal health rights without considering class, race and gender. However, Mexican-American migrant workers are living in segregated communities, barns, and even vans where their health could not be guaranteed. They are suffering from the aftereffects of environmental injustice.

An unsanitary working environment that only lower-class workers can get access to is a key villain to trigger disease and illness. In the novel, Chicanos were forced to work in the field, and migrant laborers' diseases were related to the harsh natural environment. According to statistics, "working in agriculture is considered to be one of the most dangerous occupations globally... involving serious injuries associated with machinery, health impacts of pesticides, extreme weather conditions and agrochemical uses as well as precarious working conditions" (Shortall et al., 2018, p. 471). Piscadores were forced to work in the Californian vineyards and orchards. The agricultural environment is the embodiment stimulating health problems, therefore, Chicanos are at risk of catching several illnesses. The exposures in the field disproportionately affected poor and minority communities.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the anomie of medical ethics is engaged with environmental injustice. Environmental injustice is defined as racial and class discrimination "in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal...in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color" (Chavis, 1993, p. 3). For Chicanos, failing to live in a sustainable and healthy environment hinders the quality of their lives and the health of their later generations. Chicanos' working and living environments are contaminated because of waste disposal and pesticides. Human diseases are intertwined with the deterioration of environmental health, which causes pathological effects on human bodies. Estrella, Petra, Alejo and other workers had to endure their diseases because of the access to the harsh working environment. They earned money at the cost of their health.

The poisonous environment is one of the ramifications of Mexican-American migrant workers' illness. In the context of environmental injustice, one of the most important issues in *Under the Feet of Jesus* is the scattering of pesticides, or

the abuse of chemicals. Chemicals are essential in the modern agriculture field. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the main pesticides and herbicides were DDT, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), Dioxins and other by-products. A scientific definition illustrates pesticides' functions: "any substance or mixture of substances intended for preventing, destroying, repelling, or mitigating pests...Pesticides are usually divided based on their target. The major classes are insecticides, herbicides, rodenticides, and fungicides" (Costa LG, 1997, p. 251). When used properly, those chemicals will contribute to improving the quantity of agriculture production and the quality of people's lives.

However, the side effects of chemicals can lead to intentional and unintentional poisoning, which does harm to human health and the environment. Pesticides can be carried into the food chain and accumulated in human bodies. In the novel, Estrella was aware of the lie "about the pesticides not spilling into the ditch; but the water seemed clear and cool and irresistible on such a hot day" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 31). Then, Estrella questioned the purity of water because "our babies are gonna come out with no mouth or something" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 32). However, Chicano farmworkers have had no choice but to drink polluted water for many years. Some chemicals can accumulate toxins in the field, water or air for several years. Therefore, Chicanos were exposed to various chemicals every day through food consumption, water contact and air inhalation, through which those chemicals can be integrated into "human tissues and induce health problems" (Ming & Tsunoda, 2011, p. 42). Pesticides indiscriminately exterminate both targeted insects and human beings. Chicanos were incapable of avoiding drinking the polluted water, eating toxic food and being tainted with pesticides, which caused genetic disorders from generation to generation.

Toxicology is an interdisciplinary approach that delves into the pernicious effects of agricultural chemicals on human biological systems. It investigates that "the toxic threatens human pulmonary function, environmental estrogens on reproductive function, and pesticides on neuronal function, and the deleterious effects range from mild skin irritation to liver damage, birth defects, and even death" (Frumkin, 2010, p. 50). The side effects persist for a long period, such as birth defects, reproductive dysfunction, and splintered lips mentioned in this novel. Environmental injustice caused by race and gender oppression affects Chicano's health and well-being.

Women and children represent the more vulnerable group when exposed to toxic materials. *Occupational and Environmental Health* states that "women who work in agricultural occupations, especially if they mix and apply herbicides or fungicides, have increased rates of fertility problems" (Levy et al., 2011, p. 449). There are widespread mistreatments of women's bodies in the novel, such as abuse, abandonment, concealment, humiliation and carelessness. What's more, women in the agriculture field are at a high risk of miscarriages because of oppression, hard work and environmental pollution. The fiction shows that the release of toxic chemicals into the environment that Chicano lived in would result in women's reproductive damage such as birth defects, child mortality, and other permanent disabilities. These are the representatives of environmental injustice.

Chicano Children's rights and medical health are under exploration in this novel. Theoretically, children are not "little adults" and they should be protected from unequal treatment. A born child's physical and mental defects are "based on pre-birth or other early environmental exposure" (Westra, 2006, p. 3). For example, in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the long-term side-effects of pesticides were children's harelips. From a biological perspective, children's "immune systems and detoxifying organs are still developing and are not fully capable of responding to environmental toxins" (Friis, 2019, p. 8). Therefore, children are more vulnerable to contracting chemicals and injuries. The exposure to a contaminated environment would cause an increasingly baleful impact on children's health conditions. Because of the immature body system, Alejo, as a teenage boy, was more likely to get illness and the symptoms were severer after being affected by the pesticide.

The symptoms after being affected by pesticides can sometimes occur directly. The novel depicted the symptoms of Alejo's illness after being infected by the pesticide: weak, fever, chemical choke, incapable of exhaling, "the spit in his throat felt like balls of scratchy sand" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 58), "the pressure of tar squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 59). According to Toxicology, the skin represents the key route and medium of toxin invasion. Chemicals readily penetrate the skin and enter the bloodstream. Adverse health effects can range from "mild allergic reactions to death" (Theodore & Dupont, 2012, p. 169). In the novel, the pesticide on Alejo's skin made an immediate effect on him, "his skin absorbed the chemical and his whole body began to cramp from the shrinking pull of his skin squeezing against his bones" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 59), fevering him at a short time. Mexican-American migrant workers suffer from illnesses and disorders because of environmental contamination and injustice.

The vicious circle is in accordance with the retroaction between human illness and environmental toxication. Viramontes utilized the paradigm of toxic discourse to unearth that because Chicanos lived in a contaminative environment, agricultural mechanization and technology caused diseases affecting Chicanos' bodies, and thus ecological deterioration. The natural environment, especially minorities' working and living places, is sacrificed when it is conflicted with capitalist economic development. "The plane dusted the crops with long efficient sprays of white cloudy chemicals, then ascended to dust another row farther away on the horizon. The birds, with their blank and nervous eyes, began to caw" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 38). Industrialized technologies' indiscriminate sprays of pesticide pollute the field, accelerating people's and animals' illnesses. Not only are human bodies gotten affected, but also animals are inevitably infected and poisoned by chemicals and vicious effects. The destruction of the environment either directly or indirectly causes people's illness, and stimulates other side effects: water pollution, species extinction, then returning to human disease and environmental illness.

Environmental injustice illustrates environmental hazards, vulnerability, inequities and disparities under the development of technology and capitalism. The main sources of pollution and toxication include agricultural wastes, pesticides and other chemical substances that damage Mexican-American migrant workers' health. Poor groups and individuals are dogged by environmental injustice that directly affects their lives and prospects for survival. Environmental injustice will cause a vicious circle: a hazardous natural environment is intertwined with economic exploitation, followed by people's poverty, impossible to search for medical treatment, which leads to the American medical system becoming powerlessness. Poverty and lower status have made Chicanos have no capacity and right to rebel against environmental pollution and racial marginalization. Their illness because of the exposure to pesticides nests in the oppression of class, race and gender.

Chicano's illness is the result of certain environmental injustices under white Americans' exploitation. They are more vulnerable to disease by living in a polluted environment. Indiscriminate destruction of the environment and the oppression of other groups will turn back into medical and social problems. Once becoming ill because of environmental injustice and illness, Chicano workers suffer from severe and unfair medical treatment. The environmental injustice caused by Americans' discrimination against Chicanos is concerned with medical and health injustice.

### III. TREATMENT: ANOMIE OF MEDICAL ETHICS IN THE CLINIC

Medical ethics deal with moral standards and codes of medical practices. *Ethics, Medical Research, and Medicine* represents that "medical solutions should be found for even aging and environmentally-caused illnesses" (Thompson & Temple, 2001, p. 2). It highlights that the treatment of environmental-caused illnesses should be involved in medical ethics. American Medical Association illustrates the definition of medical ethics, alleging "matters involving moral principles or practices and matters of social policy involving issues of morality in the practice of medicine" (Madara et al., 2005, p. 1). Providing an overview, medical ethics question medical workers' professional behaviors and moral understandings. It develops awareness about everyone's equal medical treatment and care. The scale of analysis in this part is changed from large issues to everyday medical practices.

Medical ethics articulate a set of principles about health care that emphasize the "respect for persons, beneficence, competency, respect for autonomy, and justice" (Beauchamp & Childress, 2008, pp. 42-50). The basic framework for judging medical practices is patients' interests. "A physician shall, in the provision of appropriate patient care, except in emergencies...while caring for a patient, regard responsibility to the patient as paramount" (Madara et al., 2015, p. xv). Being beneficial to patients physically and psychologically is a doctor's or nurse's working standard. Medical workers including doctors and nurses should dedicate to providing competent medical care with sympathy and respect for human dignity, privacy and rights objectively and effectively.

Drawing on the approach of medical ethics, medical care should "provide the best clinical care for every sick patient who could pay, to develop scientific medicine to its highest degree, to preserve the autonomy of the physician, and to increase the dominance of the medical profession" (Light, 2004, p. 12). However, this novel illustrates "how the Chicanos/as are nothing but an anonymous mass whose workers are treated as animals" (Volpp, 2005, p. 70). American medical system could not protect those marginalized groups' health rights. What's more, medical care under the white class's manipulation has different connotations in ethnic minority communities. Various medical discrimination and carelessness happen in Mexican-American communities so that Chicanos are in difficulty in gaining health care, medical assistance, training and other basic services. Though hard-working, Mexican-American workers in the fiction did not get what they earned. As a group of ethnic minorities sustaining double oppression, receiving equal health care was beyond their imaginations. Attention is paid to the claim that illness and medical treatment are socially constructed by racialism.

Prior to medical care, several diseases have been mentioned in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, such as Alejo's illness, the child with a harelip, miscarriage, varicose veins, cataract eyes, and overweight. Human bodies are carriers of diseases, recording and conveying hurt and pain. In the novel, Petra and other farmers' bodies constantly suffered from illness without being provided with medical facilities. Chicano workers' bodies were physical media carrying agricultural injuries, illnesses, and health disparities, and experiencing systematic exploitation, mistreatment, and discrimination without owning "health, nutrition, or advocacy resources" (Scribani et al., 2018, p. 845). Their basic medical rights cannot be fulfilled in California.

One of the medical ethical principles regulates that health care should be open to all patients. Receiving enough medical treatment is a patient's basic right. This novel uncovers medical injustice by sketching Chicano's illness without enough medical care. Mexican-American migrant workers do not get enough money to treat their unhealthy bodies through hard-working. For instance, the pernicious consequences of long-time labor resulted in Petra's multifarious diseases. She had no extra money to deal with her diseases but only ate "five cloves of garlic pickled in vinegar every day to loosen her blood and ease her varicose veins; without the garlic, her veins throbbed" (Viramontes, 1995, p. 48). Mexican-American workers are restricted from seeking medical treatment because of poverty. The bodies of women, people of color and those with disabilities are Othered, dangerous, exotic, and sinful.

Another trajectory on medical ethics in *Under the Feet of Jesus* underlines medical charges. American Medical Association regulates that "a physician's fee for medical services should be based on the value of the service provided

by the physician to the patient” (Madara et al., 2015, p. 202). In short, medical services should not charge or collect an illegal or excessive fee. However, Mexican-American migrant workers are always vexed about medical charges, because they “frequently do not have health insurance or enough cash to pay for medical care” (Baker, 1995, p. 171). In the novel, Estrella’s family could not afford medical institutions’ charges to have comprehensive medical checks on common diseases and Alejo’s illness, so the first choice they asked for help was a clinic rather than a comprehensive hospital. However, the nurse in the clinic still charged ten dollars for just making the usual checks on Alejo’s body. High medical fees were beyond their financial capacities. They suffered from medical injustice and were eager to commit resistance to inequality.

Distinctions between comprehensive hospitals and clinics are divided into several aspects. A hospital points to an institution where the sick or injured are given comprehensive medical or surgical care after a preposition. A hospital is more advanced, with emergency rooms and operating facilities. Viramontes just sketched the hospital in Corazón: “hospital room where the vinyl couches were worn and darkened” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 114). A hospital was not caught so much attention in the novel because it was not Estrella’s family’s best choice. Whereas a clinic and self-treatment were more suitable for them.

Compared to a comprehensive hospital, a clinic is a medical instruction that is less authoritative and just for basic checkups and flu shots. What’s more, with racial and class segregation, “clinics designed for migrant use may or may not offer evening and/or weekend hours, and are usually located far from the migrant camps, making transportation a problem” (O’Brien, 1983, p. 895). The inadequacy of clinics’ functions for migrant workers does not provide enough medical treatment.

The clinic was understaffed and under-equipped because of lacking financial supports in *Under the Feet of Jesus*:

There was a row of glass jars filled with flat tongue depressors that reminded them of fat ice cream sticks, gauze pads and cotton swabs on skinny wooden sticks that looked like the legs of ballet dancers in tan nylons and white shoes; thermometers in a glass tube and a big jar of cotton balls. Cookie picked up a rubber mallet that lay on a silver tray and Perla tattled on her. (Viramontes, 1996, p. 94)

A clinic without professional doctors and basic medical practices actually runs counter to medical standards and justice in the treatment of patients. Inadequate facilities and negligent care are in medically underserved clinics. In the novel, the clinic was empty without any physicians and nurses at the first glance. It smelled of strong disinfectant and bad plumbing, and was decorated by two frisky kittens and nearly worn rotating fans. Furthermore, the nurse in that clinic was not professional, with “a fresh coat of red lipstick, and the thick scent of carnation perfume...and Timex wristwatch” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 95). The white nurse was in fashion, who did not treat her job seriously at all. She looked “surprised and distraught” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 95) when she saw Estrella’s family. She was surprised because she did not expect migrant workers could have the ability and money to come to doctors, while she was distraught because Estrella’s coming postponed her time of leaving. The nurse just “moved the weights on the scale, jotted it down on the paper, pointed her pencil to the examination table, then slipped the pencil behind her ear” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 97). Her mechanical behaviors became the last straw that made Estrella realize that medical injustice legally existed.

As for medical ethics, the basic standard for a clinic is to recruit general physicians and nurses to check patients, give medicine for diseases and refer people to hospitals if they need it. The patient-physician relationships comply with the principle that a patient has the right to receive information and adequacy of health care. In this novel, the nurse cannot be tagged as a real physician or doctor, and Alejo had no right to know his illness. Actions like “jotted it down”, “slipped”, and “not wanting to transgress the medical protocol of the clinic” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 97) indicate that the nurse only mattered when she would be time off. The nurse “waved her (Estrella) off, unlocked a tin money box, and removed a receipt book from inside” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 100). The anomie of medical ethics is that except for money, nothing would catch the nurse’s eyes, even a person’s life. In a society full of class and racial discrimination, medical ethical principles do not work to guarantee medical justice.

Even though there are generally accepted ethical principles and rules in medical care, some scholars declared that:

“Most health care in the U.S. is organized around the economic concept of profit for health providers and health institutions within a free enterprise system...the profit motive discriminates against those who cannot afford it financially, encourages the unnecessary duplication of many services, and introduces a dehumanizing factor to the provision of a service intended to be humane” (Cockerham, 1981, p. 242).

American profit-oriented medical system results in marginalized groups’ being in exclusion, which is opposite to medical justice. In the novel, what Estrella’s family really wanted was to get equal medical treatment for Alejo’s illness. When they came to the clinic, they embraced the hope that a patient had the right to get basic medical care and treatment no matter whether he was an ethnic minority or not. However, the medical carelessness on Alejo’s body proves that medical injustice still exists in America.

Medical carelessness is happening in Chicano groups. For migrant workers, “health inequality experienced by blacks and the poor was a dialectic of neglect and surveillance” (Nelson, 2011, p. 186). As a medical worker, the nurse had a responsibility to direct a clear treatment and show humanistic care, but in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the sentences that the nurse said most were indifferent “I’m gonna have to lock up real soon” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 101). The nurse did not take the poor’s health, autonomy and mind seriously. Medical carelessness and neglect violated the principles of nonmaleficence and beneficence.

Considering human health and illness, medical justice is consistent with social health, which “links medical services to a program of societal transformation” (Nelson, 2011, p. 12). Workers in low socioeconomic status and contaminative environments have higher levels of pain intensity, psychological distress, disability, and health problems compared to average people. The family in the novel did not have adequate access to health care. The social and workplace injustices are concerned with the discussion of the anomie of Mexican-Americans’ medical, environmental and health ethics. Marginalized figures do not get dividends brought by industrialization and economic development, but suffer from a vicious circle of poverty, disease and ecological destruction.

Despite legislative regulations and ethical standards on medical care and justice, Mexican-American migrant workers remain tenuous as marginalized groups without efficient and professional medical treatment. Chicano workers’ medical care is in a social discourse that is related to racial hierarchy and marginalization. Like other ethnic minorities, Mexican-American migrant workers are treated as the other without equal medical rights, violating the code that doctors are obliged not to harm or ignore patients intentionally or negligently. Patients’ inferior situations are based on gender, race, class and other social performance in discussing the issues of medical ethics and justice. Viramontes revealed the medical injustice in this novel from environmental and medical perspectives. However, exposing problems is not the ultimate goal. The next part will demonstrate that the key solutions are empathy and mutual kindness in building a strong community and helping each other for resisting against medical injustice.

#### IV. EMPATHY: THE RESTORATION OF MEDICAL ETHICS

The key to the restoration of medical ethics and the relationship between patients and others lies in rebuilding the social relationship. Empathy and mutual kindness are ways to repair the damaged ethical relationship under the social system of medical injustice. Empathy refers to connecting the self with others through common emotions, and feeling others’ sufferings. It respects the particularity and differences among others, cares for others emotionally, and helps others in practice.

Behavioral, emotional, and health factors within the environment are more involved in analyzing medical ethics, including “residential, occupational, educational, recreational, public, and virtual places” (Frumkin, 2010, p. 139). In environmental psychology, health and well-being are the results of proper and mutual support between places and people. Before tackling mutual help among Chicanos, the psychological anxieties of calling for others’ empathy to face medical injustice will be first analyzed.

An environment contaminated by pesticides is a stimulus arising from Alejo’s unhealthy psychological conditions in the novel. Three progressive psychological levels after being ill are under discussion. First is fear and shame because of sickness. When first realizing being infected, Alejo “panicked clamped his neck with one hand...afraid he would fall long and hard, like the insects did” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 58). A person’s vulnerability comes from the fear of disaster and illness. Alejo’s fear was the aftereffect of the spraying of pesticides and environmental toxication. The natural response to fear is the disintegration of one’s self-esteem.

In severe illness, shame was Alejo’s another psychological representation when Petra was going to clean his body: “In a daze of sleep and ache and loneliness, he felt Perfecto struggling to pull his pants off...and only realized when he felt the soothing warm water between his thighs, that he had soiled himself and they were cleaning him and he felt too pitiful to be ashamed. He hoped Star was far away” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 72). Burdened by a humble body, shame was represented by Alejo’s lost mobility and subjectivity. Medical ethics reinforced patients’ innocence, however, Alejo still blamed himself for his uselessness and uncleanness. He did not want his disease to be exposed by others, especially by a girl he liked.

The second level is anxiety which highlights core psychological issues. When in the situation of illness, a person was eager to have someone accompany him, which is the psychological neighborhood. Alejo was wavering between life and death during the illness. In the hospital, Alejo thought he was going to die, but he did not want to die alone. What he wanted was “just stay with me for a while” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 114). He wondered whether he could be cured and back to his homeland. Anxiety is the common psychological statement when someone is in an illness with uncertainty. As the disease worsens, the sense of anxiety escalated to the feeling of loneliness.

The third level is the sense of loneliness and abandonment. In psychoanalysis, fear of abandonment is “the unshakable belief that our friends and loved ones are going to desert us (physical abandonment) or don’t care about us (emotional abandonment)” (Tyson, 2006, p. 16). His physical and psychological fragility indicated that Alejo needed a companion and emotional support. However, in the novel, he felt a sense of loneliness and abandonment more than one time. When he was with piscadores, “he had been left alone for many days while the others went off to work, leaving him breathing in the smell of foul socks and loneliness” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 71). Piscadores “looked at one another, stared at Alejo who sat embracing his belly and they squeezed away from him as if bad luck was as contagious as any illness” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 61). Alejo suffered from abandonment by his community, and this abandonment turned into a sense of loneliness. The long-term mental stress caused by illness and the non-empathy of others prevented him from sharing his illness with his friends and community.

Medical ethics points out that doctors should not abandon desperate patients. In the novel, the nurse’s indifferent words make Alejo feel abandoned even more. She just “picked up the paper she had penciled, and fanned herself with it” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 96) so Estrella confirmed that “this clinic business was a racket” (Viramontes, 1996, p. 96). The

nurse kept urging Estrella's family to search for help in the general hospital because she "checked her watch a third time, a pile of keys in her hand" and said she was "gonna lock up real soon" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 101). The neglect and abandonment in the novel violated the principle of respecting and not giving up patients in medical ethics.

Furthermore, when Alejo was taken by Petra and went to the hospital, Perfecto persuaded other family members to leave him alone. This actual abandonment and indifference from Perfecto increased his feeling of loneliness. Accordingly, people suffering from illness are "exempt from normal social roles" (Cockerham, 1981, p. 235). The exclusion of patients means the illness-based marginalization. Illness was not welcomed among people so that Alejo was excluded from his community and Estrella's family. People's indifference to illness revealed the medical dilemma and psychological illness.

Residential segregation "leads to disproportionate exposure to environmental risk factors...that adversely affect health and lead to health disparities" (Levy et al., 2011, p. 88). On top of health disparities, community segregation and marginalization are reasons that should be highlighted to illustrate why the community remains indifferent to illness and the failure of medical ethics occurs. As mentioned before, Chicanos have no stable working environment and platform, but only drift from one field to another orchard by trucks. What's more, they have no stable house to live in, but in "camp in a blue pickup, its rattling panel wood boards jostling the men who rested their heads against its rhythm" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 93) with collapsed walls, loose barn doors, rusty hinges, dead animals in corners, cobwebs all over the house. Chicanos live in segregated communities with isolation, poverty, limited resources, low-quality social services, harsh environment and weak medical care. They are more vulnerable resulting in social isolation. Racial segregation and marginalization lead to the failure of mutual connection, therefore, Mexican-American migrant workers are lacking the ability to prevent, endure and recover from environmental pressures and illness. The living and working environment proved Chicano's oppressed physical and psychological status with no stable health conditions and justice.

Fundamentally speaking, the solution to medical injustice in the novel is to rebel for own medical rights. Facing the unfair medical system, ethnic minorities chose to rebel. In the novel, Estrella's family spent all their savings of \$10 in the clinic, but did not cure Alejo's illness. After the nurse kicked the family out, Estrella chose to return to the clinic, breaking the clinic facilities and threatening the nurse to return their \$10: "Estrella slammed the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse's children, sending the pencils flying to the floor, and breaking the porcelain cat with a nurse's cap into pieces" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 103). She just wanted her money back instead of taking more money. Her rebellion showed the Mexican-Americans' dissatisfaction with the current medical system that is against medical ethics. The indifference and non-empathy of authorities violate the principles of medical ethics, while ethnic minorities choose extreme ways to save their lives and search for justice.

In order to achieve actual medical justice, the first thing they should do is to unite together to build a strong community to help each other physically and psychologically. For patients, emotional comfort is as important as medical treatment. In this novel, Estrella's emotional support for Alejo gave him great comfort and courage, which can empathize with his pain. Though Alejo was still in great weakness, he "perked up, rinsed his mouth, rubbed the mucus from the corners of his eyes" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 87) when noticing Estrella was back home. This kind of spiritual support can overcome fear and support him to face illness. In the face of medical injustice, empathy and the help from others are also supporting treatments to a certain extent.

Another mode of empathy is mutual kindness and help. The restoration of ethical relationship in fighting against medical injustice lies in mutual caring and assistance, which means not only sharing feelings with others, but also giving helps and cares to others. In suffering from poverty and racial discrimination, Petra took care of Alejo for nothing, taking Alejo to the clinic for medical treatment and sending him to the hospital. Petra once said that: "If we don't take care of each other, who would take care of us? We have to look out for our own... It's not good to leave people behind" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 70). This is the spirit of mutual kindness and assistance engraved in Petra's bones, and it is also the key to the restoration of ethical relations.

Health and happiness are the results of mutual support among people in places. Patients are eager for companionship and help, which are essential in strong community relations and support. Mexican-American migrant workers can form a community or neighborhood to live and work together by supporting each other. The neighborhood considers the interconnectedness among environment, health and society, and it "plays a central and meaningful role in determining individuals' physical and psychological well-being and quality of life" (Frumkin, 2010, p. 147). Besides, the neighborhood is under the paradigms of sociology, health condition, and environmental psychology. Realizing empathy requires the subject to recognize and accept each other.

Female power and tenderness are emphasized in this novel to show the restoration of medical ethics in the construction of companion relationships and communities. In the novel, Petra gave practical and spiritual support to other's illness, not because of his or her social status, but because "she was a mother too, and if Estrella was sick, or Ricky and Arnulfo were sick in the piscas, she would want someone to take care of them. And of course, she did it for the love of God" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 88). With the help of Petra's family, Alejo felt the kindness from others, thus supporting himself to overcome the sufferings caused by social injustice. Estrella and Petra's help is a sustainable way to fight against medical injustice and restore medical ethics. Sustainability and mutual kindness are keys to build a community supporting each other. People's indifference to other people's diseases reveals ethical and social dilemmas, while the repair of medical relations requires empathy and mutual assistance.

Viramontes built a holistic view of the current situation in the novel: the love and mutual assistance among people to treat patients in a maximized and supportive way. In the case of medical injustice, empathy and mutual assistance are helpful to establish a good ethical relationship. Therefore, at the end of the novel, Estrella was significantly connected with nature, showing her tenderness to embrace all differences and holistically offering her kindness. This is called mutual kindness: mutual help, love and friendship to resist medical injustice and pursue health equality. The author hopes that Mexican-American migrant workers will support each other and build a strong community to appeal for the restoration of medical ethics and social justice.

## V. CONCLUSION

Human rights and justice are used to “open authoritative institutions like medicine, and to challenge their entrenched hierarchies of power” (Yamin, 2008, p. 52). On a larger scale, to achieve medical and environmental justice needs social support to challenge the existed oppressive framework: offering physical and psychological interactions between individuals or groups. Chicano bodies can be a resource for resistance against medical injustice and for restoring medical ethics. Mexican-American migrant workers need their community’s support and larger social units’ offers to pursue medical justice.

The author bases her ideas on an extensive review of studies carried out in this novel. A comprehensive approach to understanding the medical, environmental, psychological and social impacts of an individual’s illness was emphasized. Mexican-American migrant workers’ illness was caused by environmental injustice. However, they cannot get adequate treatment because of medical injustice violating several ethical codes. Multiple factors and joint influences on medical justice in this novel should be considered. Facing injustice, the author emphasized the restoration of medical ethics in society: empathy and mutual kindness for building a strong Chicano community.

As for medical, environmental and social justice, this paper argues that sustainability is a way to solve the current dilemma, and “to eliminate or control environmental hazards and protect human health, society may undertake a wide range of actions” (Frumkin, 2010, p. LI). This paper adopted interdisciplinary knowledge such as medical ethics, toxicology, environmental justice, psychological analysis and other perspectives in investigating the oppression of Mexican-American migrant workers. Finding a place of resistance to medical, environmental and social oppressions, and reclaiming health rights and support are served as core issues.

Racial and class health disparities are priorities in discussing medical injustice. Viramontes suggested that a new model of female empowerment and mutual strength can replace the traditional ethnic strategy of prayer and recourse of protection from a deity. Under the situation of medical inequality, the promotion of sympathy and the practice of mutual help are needed. The author hoped that Mexican-American migrant workers ought to bear empathy and tenderness just like female characters in the novel to support each other. This is a key step for rebelling against medical injustice under the current medical and social system.

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