

Power Dynamics and Role Reversals of Women: An Experimental Critique of Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*

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Abstract: Sandra Cisneros is an American writer of Mexican origin. Her novels dramatically chronicles her groundbreaking evocation of Mexican American life in Chicago. Cisneros's *Caramelo* unveils the life story of three generations of Reyes family caught in the dynamics of power conflicts and how the characters cope up with the stereotypical strands and decenters the notions imposed on them under the pretext of gender. Women were silenced in the patriarchal society from time immemorial. However the situation of a women can change if they resist the dominant group and deconstruct their role. The present paper analyses in depth the deconstruction of the roles of females and how they attain a prominent position in the society through empowering themselves via education.

Keywords: Culture, Deconstruction, Gender, Machismo, Patriarchy.

1. INTRODUCTION

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Sandra Cisneros is a Mexican-born American author. She is one of the most emblematic figures in the Chicana Movement. Chicana Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s in America prompts to destabilize the widely acknowledged social roles of the female as cook, mother and wife. This movement fights against racial and ethnic prejudice and emphasizes on female inequality. Chicana activist, Jennie Chavez states that women: "traditionally, have been tortilla-makers, baby-producers, to be touched but not heard" (Garcia 37). The movement not only advocates social inequality but also discourses on the discrimination women encounters within the culture.

Cisneros's *Caramelo* delves large into the traumas which is encountered by the Mexican American women due to gender disparity. The novel becomes a voice for those women who were rejected, neglected and avoided from social order due to the patriarchal hegemony. The author tries to convey the issue through the character Lala, "Women in her novels struggle to eradicate social inequality while at the same time advocating female empowerment to destroy the gender, racial, class and cultural stigmas which have characterized Chicana consciousness for generations" (Alonso 26).

Machismo culture abounds large in the Mexican society. It encourages male domination, male leadership and male power. It is a system in which women are subjected to economic dependence, violence, domestication, and the peripherals of decision-making. Cisneros has highlighted this patriarchal culture in the novel through the character Lala. Families in Mexican society gives importance primarily for men. Men appears to have higher authority over women. He serves as the family's financial provider, manages the household and takes important decision on the family's wellbeing. Men and Women were attributed with certain qualities in the Mexican society. Men are expected to be masculine, self-reliant and dominant, whereas women were expected to lead a subservient role in the society. In Mexico, the ideal for women is heavily

influenced by the iconography of Roman Catholicism. Mexican women are expected to emulate and uphold the feminine ideal represented by the Virgin Mary (also known as the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe). Women are expected to devote their time to the family and they take up the position of homemaker in the household.

Cisneros has highlighted these type of stereotypes through Reyes family. Women in the household of Reyes are anticipated to lead a secondary role in the family. They are expected to live under the shadow of men at any cost. In the novel, Lala, the third generation expat, always have the desire to lead an independent life. When she reached the adolescent stage, she expressed her intention to live alone to the family. However her father disagreed with her choice to live apart from the family. Her father instantly resists her idea and sturdily says that, "Good girls don't leave their father's house until they marry and not before" (359).

Lala, being a third generation Mexican American expat, does not conform to the predetermined roles given to the females. She inhabits in a society where a woman is respected and valued only for the role of a mother. Lala's mother tells her that, "If you leave your father's house without a husband, you are worse than a dog. You aren't my daughter, you aren't a Reyes...If you leave alone you leave like, and forgive me for saying this but it is true, *como una prostituta*. Is that what you want the world to think?" (360).

Lala, on the other hand, breaks the stereotypical role of a daughter by eloping with her boyfriend since she is not yet fully prepared to live a subservient life. She attempts to defy the standards of her culture by running away with her boyfriend, "Nobody mentions my 'abduction.' The more they don't mention it, the more it's obvious...I feel like I'm dragging around a clubfoot. Everybody refuses to look at me, and that just makes it worse (399). Cisneros through the life of Lala unveils to the readers of how traditional attitudes surrounding the ideals of women are shifting.

Mexican parents frequently have different opinions on their sons and daughters. Cisneros has brought the double standards of Mexican parents through the character Soledad. Soledad is the grandmother of Lala and she is introduced to the readers during the annual visit of Reyes family to the Mexican city. She is depicted as an archetypal mother who prioritizes her sons over her daughters. Lala observes the gender inequality in Reyes family, after going to the house of Soledad, "their mamas are the most devoted of mamas....when it comes to their sons" (195).Lala observes a society in which Mexican mothers extol their sons despite of their bad behavior.

Role reversal is a psychological approach that vividly and directly depicts the inner problems of a protagonist in psychodrama. This method is possibly the most significant and successful method used in psychodrama. In the novel, the generation gap contributes to the reversal of roles. Awful Grandmother is rather conventional and pious person in the family, where as her daughter-in-law, Zoila is not a religious woman. Zoila's lack of religious fervor is evident when she refuses to hang the framed portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe on her bedroom wall. In Mexican society, daughters-in-law are expected to remain flaccid at any instance. Their opinions are ignored and disregarded in the household. However in the novel, readers could witness the women characters of Cisneros, breaking the typecast that has been levied on them from the dawn of time. In the novel, Zoila by refusing to mount the picture frame subtly dispels prejudices about women. Zoila is no longer a submissive woman; rather, she welcomes change.

Soledad, being the family's matriarch and the oldest member, is aware that her family as a whole is going through transformation in every facet of their lives. Soledad acknowledges the change and her acceptance is evident in many instances. When the entire family members insists Lala to wear the rebozo, Awful grandmother objects stating that things have changed.

No use spending on something she can't even wear till she grows up. And what if she grows up and doesn't even want to wear it. Then what, eh? So that she can save it for her funeral? Over there on the other side do they even wear them? I don't think so. They're too modern. In another generation they'll look on them as rags, barbarities, something to spread on a table or, God forbid, a bed. If you find a real silk one, better buy it for your mother. I'm the only one who knows the true worth of a silk rebozo around here. (39)

In the above lines, grandmother opines that, new generation nowadays are eschewing customs and moreover she feels that the role and the identity of women in the Reyes family have changed drastically since her time. She realizes as an older person that Lala is not the only person to endure change, but the society as a whole is on constant change. Eventually, Cisneros's *Caramelo* brings into limelight the notion that identity is not simply something that is culturally or biologically

given but rather it is something sought for, developed and discovered. Women characters in the novel create their own identity. They no longer remain subordinate to the distinctive roles attributed to them instead they hunt for adventure and ramble in contrast to the traditionally drawn roles of women.

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