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## Varying Effects of Culture in Sandra Cisneros's Caramelo

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### **Abstract:**

*Caramelo is a novel penned by Sandra Cisneros, a unique voice of Mexican American Literature. The novel explores the different cultural aspects experienced and followed by the Mexican American people. The stories in the novel explore the experiences of the innermost domain of the female characters. Besides, the novel explores the Mexican Culture and heritage.*

**Keywords:** Chicano, Rebezo, Latina, Culture, Ethnicity

### **Introduction:**

The novel can be said to be the story of Celeya, the protagonist who journeys through the novel from a little girl into a teenager. The stories narrated explore the inner world of women who struggle with the patriarchal society and also try to balance between the two different cultures. The stories depicted in the novel make the readers aware of Celeya's history and cultural heritage. Through this piece of writing, the writer has made an attempt to bring into focus the various Mexican cultural aspects that have had a huge impact on its people, their way of thinking and living style.

Cooking is one of the best medium to communicate or to express one's feelings to others. It is the most acceptable behavior for a woman in Chicano culture. In the novel there are some characters who express their deepest personal feelings through food. We see that Soledad (the Awful grandmother) expresses her deepest love for her elder son Inocencio through food. For example, on the occasion of her son Inocencio's birthday she wants to prepare his favorite food and so, she personally goes marketing to buy the freshest ingredients to prepare her son's favorite meal. Women are happy to be in the kitchen being the boss of the place within the house a place where she can act independently and nobody is there to question her independence.

For the Chicano's, family comes first. Family is the prime importance and they can sacrifice anything for the welfare of the family. Every year when the Reyes' brothers come to Mexico City in

summer the apartments that have been given on rent to the tenants are vacated by the grandmother for her sons. The Awful grandmother and the grandfather's sources of income are the rents, grandfather's pension and "the little earnings from his tlapaleria which is hardly anything to tell the truth." (47) Further the grandmother's love for her sons is intensified when she says, "But what's money compared to family? The grandmother insists.

\_\_\_ Renters come and go, but my sons are my sons." (47) With reference to grandmother's love towards her sons, Sandra in one of her interviews has talked about love in Mexican culture. She remarks that true love is not between the lovers, but it is between a parent and a child, particularly the intense love between a mother and her son. Mexican model of love preaches intense love for mother in comparison to one's lover or wife.

The grandmother being cruel wishes to hurt everyone in the family and she leaves no chance in trying to break up her son's (Inocencio) marriage. Her strong dislike towards Zoila who is black in color makes her intervene in the fight when Zoila gives an option to Inocencio to either choose his mother or his wife, the grandmother replies, "Let her be. You're better off without her kind. Wives come and go, but mothers, you have only one!" (85) Such attitude and self-belief of the grandmother is due to the culture which instructs one to favor the mother rather than the wife.

In Cuidate (Take care of yourself) Soledad remembers people having told her to take care of herself as she was turning into a youthful lady. She couldn't interpret what is meant by to take care of yourself at this stage. Later in her life she figured out that it all meant to keep her virginity. Everyone advised her same but nobody cleared or even told how to take of herself.

Imparting sexual education to women in those times was minimal. The societal advice on such matters was incomplete and it was left to the females to understand what the society meant. Both Soledad and Celeya are expected to remain virgins giving no information about what it means to lose one's virginity. Both of them are advised to just take care of themselves. Soledad misinterprets the suggestion of taking care of herself to be taking "care of hair and her nails, made sure her underclothes were clean, mended her stockings, polished her shoes, washed her ears, brushed her teeth, blessed herself when she passed a church..." (153) She fails to understand the advice given when she is unable to stop the flood of emotions that she is feeling for Narciso. For Narciso it is a matter of physical love but Soledad considered her affection towards him as sacred love. Here once again the female is physically assaulted which she misunderstands to be pure love.

Celeya who is narrating the story blames the society for the pity conditions of Soledad and all the women. She says that before falling in love she was innocent and as pure as a silk rebozo. The philosophy of sexual education for women was not given an exposure. Celeya argues/ accuses the society for blaming and criticizing Soledad's reckless behavior when their silence towards sexual education is equally reckless. For the Latina woman sustaining her virginity is a cultural expectation

and losing her virginity would bring great disgrace to the family honor. Not keeping it as a personal choice, maintaining her virginity is a cultural norm that has to be strictly followed by the Latina woman.

Sex is a taboo subject for the Latinas. The authors Gil and Vazquez expressing their views while defining human sexuality present two forms of female sexuality that exist in the Latin countries, one is procreation considered to be the heart of femininity and which is an expected role of womanhood and the second is eroticism which is considered as negative and in contrast to the traditional gender role.

### **The importance of Rebozo for Mexican women:**

The rebozo acts as a sacred thing which we come across throughout the novel. It acts as a supporting factor to the females who own it by consoling themselves when they are in a state of distress. It acts as a cultural possession which is passed on to the next generation.

The only thing that the Awful grandmother had inherited from her mother was the Rebozo. The rebozo acts as a lifelong companion to the Awful grandmother from her childhood to her ripe age. The grandmother starts braiding and unbraiding the strands of her cherished rebozo, which “calms her, especially when she’s nervous.” The grandmother remembers how the rebozo proved to be a perfect companion in her childhood, when she would tie her wages in a knot in one end of the rebozo, blow her nose with it and sometimes use it as a weapon to defend herself, “muffled her sobs, and hiccupped hot, syrupy tears. And once with a certain shameless pharmacist named Jesus, she had even used it as a weapon. All this she remembers, and the cloth remembers as well.”(254)

The presence of rebozo begins from the beginning of the novel as a beautiful object. It gains its meaning and history in the second section of the novel and acquires its importance/ destination in the final section of the novel. The possession of the rebozo gains its cultural importance which is passed down from the mother (Guillermina) to daughter (Soledad) and from the grandmother (Soledad) to the granddaughter (Celeya). The Caramelo rebozo becomes a cultural symbol. It is the rebozo which consoles the females in the Reyes’ family when they are depressed and nervous. The rebozo helps the females in the Reyes’ to come in contact with their ancestral roots.

Celeya reacts negatively to her menstruation and considers maternity as very miserable. As she faced it for the first time she was totally unaware of it. When she asked her friends about what it was all about nobody could give a favorable answer. This shows that the delicate aspects of femininity are not discussed frankly and as a result the females who face such aspects are left unanswered to their questions because educating on issues such as maternity, seduction, knowledge of sex are considered taboo in the Chicano culture. And so girls like Celeya, Soledad are unaware and illiterate towards such issues which cause a threat in their life.

The beliefs and views of Mexican culture regarding women are further expressed by

Inocencio when Celeya tells her father about wanting to leave the house to be alone. “It’s just that I want to be on my own someday.” Celeya expresses her views of doing something good in life just like teaching people or study Egyptian history at a University. Inocencio’s Mexican culture opposes to Celeya’s view, when he says, “But that’s not for girls like you. Good girls don’t leave their father’s house until they marry, and not before. Why would you ever want to live by yourself?” (359) to which Celeya replies that she wished to be live a life full of independence just like other human beings. Celeya strongly rejects the stipulated roles of a female that a Mexican culture has set up and aspires to be someone different. Inocencio’s over protectiveness towards his daughter advises Celeya as “Always remember, Lala, the family is going to love you when you’re in trouble, *mija*.” He makes Celeya aware of the impending dangers by advising her that if she left her father’s house without a husband then her life would be worse than that of a dog. Celeya is being forced to follow and imbibe the traditional values of her community. Thus it can be inferred that a woman is supposed to carry out her family functions and responsibilities finding no place or self-identity outside her home. She has to painstakingly play the role of a daughter, sister, wife, and a mother giving no scope or liberty to create her own individual identity.

Following culture is also nothing but following the societal norms. There are cultural clashes between people of different ethnicity. This can be found in two cases. One is with Inocencio when the Reyes’ buy a house in San Antonia, on El Dorado Street. Inocencio is surprised and feels insulted when he is addressed by his first name, instead of calling him as “Mister Reyes.” Inocencio comforts himself saying that “We have to forgive the ignorant, because they know not what they do.” But he further critically says, “But if we know enough about their culture to know what’s right, how come they can’t bother to learn about ours?” (308). Inocencio finds the clash of culture where the Americans are not willing to adjust, compromise, and accept the other cultures. Inocencio believes his Mexican culture to be polite and not rude like the Americans.

Chicano women become visible and invisible according to their age and completion of their assigned responsibilities. For instance if we take the case of Soledad, when she was a child her father remarried and that was the first time she became invisible, no one cared about her feelings and then again when she was sent to Aunt Fina’s house against to her wish, felt lost among Aunt Fina’s tribe, before Narciso noticed her and rescued her from that mad-house. Soledad was visible in the sense she received attention only, “When her body changed and garnered the trophy of men’s attentions.” The Chicana women were considered only as an object of sex and for producing children. This becomes clear in Soledad’s case. She becomes invisible when her “body shifted and slouched into disrepair after the birth of each child. And then when she no longer was vain and cared about taking care of herself, she began to disappear.” (347) Once a woman’s role of mothering is completed no one pays any attention towards her. Men no longer look at her and society no longer

give her much importance after her role of mothering is fulfilled. A woman becomes a tragic figure after she fulfills her assigned responsibilities. She is no longer required by the society or by its members.

Mexican culture propagates men to be strong and women to be weak. If a woman crosses her boundaries set for her then she will have to face a great danger. Same is with Celeya when her father questions her, “How will you live without your father and brothers to protect you?” This attitude demonstrates that a woman has neither her identity nor she can safely live on her own without any man’s assistance.

As readers we know that all the men from different generations freely exploit the females but that did not bring any disgrace to their family for the only reason that they were all men of a patriarchal structured society. But the same thing done by Celeya by running away with Ernesto brings dishonor to the Reyes’ family. Thus it portrays a society where rules framed vary for males and females.

Girls like Celeya even though they want to get freed from such varying values are not able to escape from the guilty feelings. Celeya is the only female character in the novel who wishes to have her identity, freedom outside her community. Being such a free-minded person, Celeya too is caught in the clutches of the values of society. She feels ashamed of losing her virginity. It can be speculated that the effect of culture is very deeply enrooted in the minds of the people who reluctantly take it as guilt and not a freedom from the set values. The dishonor falls on Celeya and not on Ernesto while Ernesto is equally no longer pure.

The tradition of silence is inherent in Mexican culture. Celeya’s father keeps the secret of his illegitimate child Candelaria. Celeya observes the tradition of secrecy in Mexican culture by not questioning about her father’s secret child because, one is not supposed to ask about such things as such stories are not to be narrated. Celeya analyses on what all are unsaid. It may be about Celeya and Ernesto’s relation which Celeya’s father maybe does not wish to hear, or ask about it. It can be observed through this narration that the Mexicans keep much of their secrets and feelings untold which is a part of their tradition and culture.

The food in the novel is considered as an identity of culture. Mole is a Mexican dish made from avocado. The grandmother prepares the mole “a recipe as old as the Aztecs.” on Inocencio’s birthday. The mole is eaten, relished by the Reyes’ sons and other members. But Celeya’s reluctance to eat the mole shows her rejection of the mole and her culture. The second incident in which Celeya refuses to eat the mole is in the story Equisita Tamales where she escapes the meal of mole by excusing herself to be sick from her menstruation cycle. Thus Celeya’s strong refusal to eat the ‘mole’ which is considered to be an identity of Mexican food symbolizes her refusal to Mexican culture. The strong urge and craving for Manila Mangos by the grandmother, shows her attachment

towards her homeland Mexico. Metaphorically the craving of the grandmother for the mangos can be compared to the state of the immigrants who crave for their 'home' in the United States. To make it clearer the grandmother's craving for the Manila mangos in the United States is paralleled with the immigrants wanting for a 'home' in the United States. Thus the mole and the Manila Mangos represent the Mexican culture.

Zoila too chooses the medium of food to express her feelings for her husband as she has the difficulty of communicating in Spanish. Food becomes the best channel of communication and expression of one's feelings to Zoila. Zoila who was uncomfortable in speaking Spanish, expressed her feelings through the food she used to prepare, which is the best medium to touch the heart of the loved ones.

Whether it is food or stereotyped life of a girl, Celeya resists to such restrictions by seeking a different life and framing her identity. She struggles with the traditional Mexican values in order to seek a new life in the United States. She chooses to live a modern life of the United States rather than following the restricted Mexican life. She opts for a life which no women in her family had chosen.

### **Conclusion:**

The story of Caramelo is an attempt made by Sandra Cisneros to give voice to the voiceless. The oral history/stories told by the ghost of the grandmother to Celeya pave the way for the one who has remained silent. It is the story of all those Mexican women who have remained silent by giving voice to the voiceless.

The term culture relates to a common group's values, ideas, social behavior, attitudes, language, history, and so on. Our values, ideas, behavioral attitudes are all determined by the culture which we follow. In brief it can be believed that culture is a set of behavioral expectations which are supposed to be essential for group welfare. Thus the novel Caramelo represents the varying culture that encompasses modes of behavioral patterns, roles specified to the members of the society and also the gender roles assigned as well as the ethnicity.

The writer reveals to the readers how a female's image is falsely represented in the Chicano culture. The stories portray the plight of Mexican American women who are mercilessly torn up between two cultures.

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