

“Only Daughter”: A Perennial Message for Empowerment of Females

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Abstract

Women perform their works from domestic to any outer world. In spite of being active within the territory of their household works, they have set several significant examples in political, economical, social, literary and other fields. In this context, Mary Wollstonecraft, Lydia E. Pinkham, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sandra Cisneros, Susri Parijat and Anuradha Koirala are a few examples of women activists who have contributed to the society and nations performing their best works in their respective fields. Their involvement, perhaps, was not as easy as we understand today; they must have undergone several complicated circumstances to work with patriarchal society. Such action and result oriented females' strategies and contributions/works can be fruitful for empowerment of women even today. This paper tries to find out how Sandra Cisneros' work "Only Daughter" initiates for the empowerment of women these days, for it raises the issues of "subject matter as well as a desire for justice and a belief in the power of education to change our society for the better" (Tyson 116).

Keywords: feminism, empower, discrimination, isolation, perennial

Introduction

Sandra Cisneros was born in a family of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother on 20 December 1954 in Chicago, Illinois. She was the only daughter in a family of six sons. She spent her early days in Chicago and Mexico City. She was interested in writing at her young age. As a female who belonged to a working-class family of nine, Cisneros' early life was not as comfortable as others in American.

She completed her Bachelor of Arts degree from Loyola University Chicago in 1976 and Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1978.

Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street* was published as her first work in 1983. In 1991, she got her short story collection, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, published. Her novel, *Caramelo*, was published in 2002. Cisneros also has the collections of her poems to her credit.

Methodology

This research article concentrates on Cisneros's understanding regarding how females are treated in Mexican society at home and outside (even in the United States where Mexicans live as immigrants). This study has applied Feminism as a theory to deal with Cisneros' experience from the age of her childhood days to her maturity as depicted in her essay "Only Daughter." The essay deals with how females are taken in the society even in this modern age of science and technology when individuals are free and show their talent in their respective fields. Although "there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, civil servant - there are many phantoms and obstacles" (Woolf, "Professions for Women" 168-69). Because feminism explores the condition of females and their rights to live equally in harmony with males, "Only Daughter" is the text that raises some of the significant issues pertaining to the women's voices. Furthermore, this essay is one of the examples that explores "what women have felt and experienced" (Showalter 1227). The researcher has adopted qualitative research methods in analyzing the text.

Analysis

Cisneros' "Only Daughter" was originally published in the magazine *Glamour* in 1990. She minutely and sincerely presents her predicaments just because of being a daughter among six sons in a Mexican-American family in the United States. In spite of being a short essay, the text deals with several themes related to the identity of a female: her experiences and obstacles. It encompasses several themes related to the issues of identity of females: isolation, discrimination, lack of educational opportunity, poverty, nostalgia, resistance, positive thoughts, inspiration and realization. Cisneros explains how being born as a daughter in a male dominated society or family infringes the rights and opportunities of a female. Her story articulates how a female character encounters "many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome" (Woolf, "Professions for Women" 168)

Isolation and Discrimination

To begin with, the speaker of the essay recollects her bygone days when she was asked to mention her "own contributor's note for an anthology [she] was part of." Cisneros mentions that she wrote, "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. *That explains everything.*" Now she realizes that she should have also mentioned about her parents identity and their economic status: "a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother" who belonged to "a working-class family of nine" ("Only Daughter" 111). These information, strategically, articulate the speaker's feelings and mindset which were

deeply rooted in her conscious as well as sub-conscious mind. She systematically communicates her feelings and carries them further with her writings. Through her writing, Cisneros "perpetually question[s] and examine[s]" (Woolf, "Professions for Women" 169) the difficulties of isolated females in the society.

The speaker repeatedly mentions her identity as "only daughter" among six sons to persuade the readers to understand her situation from the beginning of her life in her family. Her isolation is due to discrimination that begins when her own six brothers do not show any interest to play with her thinking that they would be taken as weak persons to play with a girl, "Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a *girl* in public" ("Only Daughter" 111). This explains how Cisneros was isolated in her own family in her childhood days. Even her own brothers do not value her and they do not include her to play with them: a bitter experience of an innocent girl being isolated. "[I]t is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by other sex" (Woolf, "A Room of One's Own" 824). And such patriarchal values discriminate and force the females even in their childhood to remain in isolation.

Lack of Educational Opportunity

The speaker in the story encounters another hurdle when she thinks about her academic career. In a society where the girls are supposed to be just a wife of somebody else to serve him in future, the parents/guardians raise them accordingly. Obviously, Cisneros knew that her father supported her desire to join college in future with some hidden motif, "Being only a daughter for my father meant my destiny would lead me to become someone's wife. That's what he believed" ("Only Daughter" 112). This means any patriarchal communities suppose the girls as if they have no destiny of their own; they hardly require academic degrees or experiences. The situation speaks their dependency on male counterparts neglecting their innate potentiality to come up with as equal strength as their husbands or any other male figures in the society. In Woolf's words the women are supposed to be "the Angel in the House" and remain "intensely sympathetic," "immensely charming" and "utterly unselfish" (Woolf, "Professions for Women" 165). But Cisneros was determined to establish her own destiny and move forward accordingly.

She managed to join the college getting support from her father who was confident that she would find her suitable match among the boys in the college. In contrast, she was planning in her own ways observing all the circumstances. She remembers, "What I didn't realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a

husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education" ("Only Daughter" 112). Her aim was to educate herself at any cost to "dismantle the existing" (Mohanty 351) thoughts of patriarchal systems working in the society. In spite of the lack of educational opportunity, Cisneros figures out the ways to achieve her goal because she "had an unconscious need to prove" (Katrak xvi) the identity of female as an independent person.

Poverty

Poverty, in a family, is one of the main issues that creates hindrances in the life of people when they economically suffer from good quality of life. The situation becomes more terrible so far as females are concerned, for their status is already in vulnerable position due to discrimination seen in upbringing or raising them along with the sons. In the case of Cisneros, she belongs to "a working-class family of nine" ("Only Daughter" 111) and although her family members do not have the problems of hand to mouth, there are several evidences regarding how poverty handicaps her life directly or indirectly.

First of all, as a daughter of a working-class family, economic situation did not allow her to spend in accordance with others in the society as per her necessity. Moreover, "Cisneros's childhood in Chicago was often interrupted by extended trips to her grandfather's large home in Oaxaca, Mexico. While these trips offered a welcome respite from cold winters and crowded apartment living, they also created instability in her life" (Jago 2). Naturally, frequent travel needed more expenses and she along with her family members were bound to compromise with poverty. Their repeated movement to Mexico was owing to her father, "He suffered bouts of nostalgia. Then we'd have to let go of our flat, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches, and head south. To Mexico City" ("Only Daughter" 112).

They again had to search for another flat in Chicago and continue their regular respective routines: work, study and others for their survival. Such circumstances indirectly affected their life. Jago further indicates their obstacles, "On their re-turn to Chicago weeks or months later, the family would move into one more ramshackle apartment in yet another run-down neighborhood. The children would be enrolled in one more Catholic school to take up their U.S. lives where they had left off" (2). Their to and fro movements from America to Mexico indirectly indicate about how their incomes as well as income sources were affected. The result was waste of time in search of next Catholic school and after every return to America her "father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast" that he had "seven sons" ("Only Daughter" 112). Had poverty not stricken them, her father would not have pleaded for

"tuition break" and mentioned the large number of children. From Marxist point of view "it is a product of socioeconomic and hence ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written, whether or not the author intended it so" (Tyson 66).

Poverty in Cisneros' family is evident when she remembers her father's communication with her and her brothers to encourage them to use mind rather than hands to achieve success in economic field. She recollects her bygone days:

When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled my father's dream that we study hard and use this — our heads, instead of this — our hands. Even now my father's hands are thick and yellow, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs. "Use this," my father said, tapping his head, "and not this," showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it. ("Only Daughter" 113)

Cisneros critically judges the dream of her father who had thought that his dream would be fulfilled by his elder son. He knew his hard labor and his effort to educate the children. After his one of the sons graduated in medical field, he was overwhelmed and began to express his sentimental feelings. His "thick and yellow" hands with tired physical appearance seen on his face spoke how he in his difficult and harsh economic situation managed to raise and educate them.

Resistance and Positive Thoughts

Cisneros persistently face patriarchal dominations in her family and her resistance always remains on the ground of positive thoughts and activities, no matter how challenging and problematic they were. Even in her childhood days she was very conscious to "cultivate the understanding" (Wollstonecraft 398) with dominant Mexican cultural practices among her family members. When her own brothers did not play with her in her early days, she never complained her being in isolation. Instead, she utilized those hours in creative activities. She remembers, "But that aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be writer — it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself" ("Only Daughter" 111-12). It might be horrible moments for others who are interested in revolting against the circumstances in which they are forced to remain alone, but for Cisneros, those hours were the opportunities to engage herself in reading and prepare herself.

It is an irony that her father thought he was mistaken to send her to college, for she remained unmarried even after spending six years there. Cisneros rhetorically questions, "Wasn't college an investment? And hadn't I spent all those years in college? And if I didn't marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be

poor? Especially someone who had always been poor" ("Only Daughter" 113). Unlike her father, Cisneros thinks sending the daughters to college means a kind of investment that would return massively in future. In this way, she, without creating any disturbances, resisted and challenged "the ways in which patriarchal assumptions about gender and gender roles continue to oppress women" (Tyson 108) in a family and society.

Cisneros always used to get irritated whenever her father spoke in front of people, "I have seven sons." She felt her identity as a daughter was completely lost. Although she was a not grown enough to resist, she could not remain silent and used to respond very carefully whenever she encountered such occasions. Cisneros writes, "My papa. He didn't mean anything by that mistranslation, I'm sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve and whisper: "Not seven sons. Six! and *one daughter*" ("Only Daughter" 113). She was determined not to remain a weak figure as a daughter but bold enough to get rid of the clutches of patriarchal dependency. She "cannot be objectively defined through [the] world" (Beauvoir 998) of men but of her own. These instances demonstrate that Cisneros' resistance and protest are profoundly humble to achieve her goal for the establishment of her own identity among her six brothers.

Inspiration and Realization

Inspiration and realization are the results of isolation, discrimination, lack of educational opportunity, poverty, nostalgia, resistance and positive thoughts in the text "Only Daughter." The speaker in the text takes her isolation and discrimination as the occasions of opportunity and patiently begins to utilize every complications that she encounters in different intervals of time. She performs her activities realizing the position of a daughter in her family. And she, throughout the story, uses every moments so latently that no one gets hurt because of her behaviors and activities.

Cisneros' father was disappointed when she was without husband "[a]fter four years in college and two more in graduate school" ("Only Daughter" 112). He, in the beginning, could not understand the good consequences of educating the daughter. Metaphorically speaking, Cisneros, in course of her life, was able to have her "own room" (Woolf, "Professions of Women" 169). Ultimately, "after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards started to trickle in" ("Only Daughter" 113). She also achieved the Arts Fellowship and a guest professorship at the university of California. Now, she enabled herself to show "what a woman is" (Woolf, "Professions of Women" 166).

After earning a solid reputation of her own status and identity as one of the successful woman writers, Cisneros, once, at Christmas, headed towards her home in Chicago to show her father one of the stories published in an anthology of Chicano writing in Spanish Language. Although he was watching the actions and songs of his favorite Mexican actor, Pedro Infante, who was about sing a song, he muted the movie and began to read her story. Cisneros narrates, "I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places and read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: "Is this So-and-so?" "Yes," I said. He kept reading" ("Only Daughter" 113). Both inspiration and realization are understood in this narrative. A daughter is inspired to see her father reading her story interestingly on the one hand, and a father is inspired to see his daughter as a famous writer on the other hand.

They experience extraordinary achievement at that moment for which a small Mexican-American girl named, Sandra Cisneros, had imagined to achieve once upon a time while being isolated among her own six brothers. Now she was able to present the evidence in front of her father that there was not any waste of time, money and education as her father used to blame her when she had been still unmarried after completing her college life. Both daughter and father feel proud "of her subjectivity, her autonomy [and] her creativity" (Gilbert and Gubar 1236) after he finished one of the stories. Furthermore, he showed his intention to purchase other pieces of the anthology to distribute to his relatives. Now, Cisneros realizes that her father acknowledges her education and she feels inspired to hear her father's query, "Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?" ("Only Daughter" 114). It was "the most wonderful" occasion in her life and such occasion is achieved through consistent devotion to her determination to show "the values of women" to challenge "the masculine values that prevail" (Woolf, "A Room of One's Own" 824) in the society in general and in her family in particular.

Conclusion

Cisneros' "Only Daughter" articulates a long journey of a female to create her identity in patriarchal society . The journey, from the beginning, had several challenges: isolation, discrimination, lack of educational opportunity and poverty etc. She spent her childhood days in isolation in spite of being among six brothers in her own family to play with. Patriarchal mindset in Mexican culture could not permit a girl to play with the boys to maintain their superiority. Such isolation accelerated discrimination and subjugation simultaneously in her life. But she was fortunate enough to channelize her obstacles towards creative works of writing and enjoying in her own world. She developed positive attitudes towards masculine environment and moved ahead with unshakable

determination to figure out the ways to establish her values in this world. She utilizes every occasions or opportunities that came along with her journey and strengthens herself accepting such supports. Instead of fulfilling her fathers' intention to find her husband in college, she achieved knowledge, degrees and awards from the respective institutions and organizations. At last she holds significant position in the society. She becomes a guest professor at the University of California and a famous Mexican-American writer. But she does not complain any patriarchal agents in spite of their unfavorable treatment with her. She patiently marches ahead to reach her destination. Cisneros positively faces every obstacles and gains success. Her way of achieving success sets an example for women to overcome any difficulties that come in their life.

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