



ANALYSIS ON CROSS-CULTURAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN CAMELO FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HOMI BHABHA'S HYBRIDITY THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Sandra Cisneros, a Mexican American woman writer, wrote *Caramelo* which depicts the economy, life and identity dilemma faced by Mexican immigrants as the "Other" in the American white supremacy society. In this novel, she conveys the idea of opposing ethnic marginalization and gendered other and pursuing identity. Based on her main viewpoint, this paper discusses the identity confusion undergone by Mexican immigrants in the novel from the perspective of Homi Bhabha's Hybridity Theory and offers inspiration for how to deal with the identity crisis faced by immigrants and ethnic minorities in the new cross-cultural context.

Key words: Cross-culture, identity, hybridity, third space

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction of Sandra Cisneros and *Caramelo*

Sandra Cisneros is a famous contemporary Mexican American female writer. In 1954, she was born in a poor working family where her parents were Mexican immigrants in Chicago. Her childhood is marked by the assumption that men are superior to women, and she experienced discrimination and isolation in later conduct of the study due to her Mexican American identity. The discrimination from the white group and the huge cultural difference and identity confusion that followed made her literary creation deeply concerned about the minority culture, especially the issues of gender, race and class. In addition, her particular Mexican identity and cross-cultural background also contributed to her increasing realization of the value of preserving her native culture and remaining true to her ethnic and gender identity. In 1984, her novel *The House on Mango Street* was warmly welcomed and won the American National Book Award in the following year, thus establishing her status as a mainstream American writer. From this novel to *Caramelo* which was published in 2002, readers can easily perceive Cisneros' concern of and inquiry into the identity, growth and plight of women from ethnic groups.

Caramelo is her first full-length novel, which tells the family history of Mexican immigrants and immigration changes. The protagonist in this novel is a Mexican American girl named Lala, who returns to Mexico with her parents every year to visit her Mexican relatives. Cisneros describes Lala's growth experience with extremely delicate strokes. As she grew, the knowledge and experience of her parents, grandmother, and aunt leads her to frequently examine her situation and provided her with a wealth of helpful advice. Meanwhile, after

returning to Mexico, realizing the culture and history of her home country and experiencing the collapse of love, Lala gradually comes to understand the uniqueness of her own nation, class and identity. She grew into a thoughtful and ambitious woman as a result of all these experiences in the new period.

1.2 Literature review

Since its publication in 2002, the novel has attracted extensive attention from scholars at home and abroad. Due to Cisneros's unique narrative characteristics which has the ability to cross supernatural, spatial, and narrative boundaries, some scholars concentrate on the narrative method of the text. There are some critics who draw their attention to the space in *Caramelo*. They analyzed the importance of the Mexican Chicago which provides the Reyes' family with the chance to make a living and other possibility. The city defines the social class of the characters and provides them with significant sights and views through which they understand the world. Some critics have also explored identity construction in the text, involving perspectives such as mixed culture and Chicana feminism. However, few scholars have conducted detailed and specific discussions on the identity construction of the characters from the perspective of Homi Bhabha's hybridity theory. In fact, the family members of the protagonist Lala in the novel face various identity crises. As a result, based on Homi Bhabha's hybridity theory, this paper will reveal the identity dilemma faced by ethnic minorities in *Caramelo*, and explore the implicit solutions that Sandra Cisneros provides in the text, in order to achieve the identity construction of ethnic minorities.

2. Hybridity Theory

As the first post-colonial theorist to introduce the term "Hybridity" into literary research, Homi Bhabha attacked vehemently the system of binary opposition from the perspective of post-colonial cultural criticism. His hybridity theory advocates dismantling the colonial hegemony culture by firstly identifying the subtle conflict between the "subject" and the "other", which will then dissolve the unfair opposition between the two sides. Bhabha's Hybrid Theory is a crucial component of post-colonialism criticism and also plays an important role in the whole post-colonialism theory.

2.1 Hybridity and Construction of Hybrid Cultural Identity.

Homi Bhabha brought the term "Hybridity", which originated from biology, to literary research in an effort to use a hybrid model to cause the colonial discourse to fall apart from the inside. He makes the definition of hybridity as "a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effect of the colonist disavowal, so that other denied knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority-its rules of recognition" (Bhabha 114). By obscuring the rigorous binary opposition in its essence, "hybridization" enables the subject and the other, mainstream and weak cultures to merge and then to create a new cultural form. Bhabha believed that when the colonists' admonitory discourse tried to objectify itself into a kind of generalized knowledge or normalized hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy opened up a space for negotiation. While neither collusion or assimilation, this kind of negotiation is useful to break the binary opposition. The third space, "space-in-between", which is constructed by the process of hybridity, will cross the dividing line of binary opposition and start to seek a new critical point with the reconstruction of discourse and identity.

Identity serves as a marker for separating individuals from one another. It is an innate and permanent hallmark as an individual represents a sense of identity and belonging for the national culture. The identity that has been imposed on the oppressed and powerless marginal people must be questioned and renegotiated. Therefore, these marginalized groups, such as immigrants and ethnic minorities, cannot be weak, or they will gradually lose their cultural identity. Reconstructing one's own national identity and hybrid cultural identity is a long-lasting process, which should be carried out in a specific environment. According to Bhabha, "the new hybrid identity will be produced by the fusion of the characteristics of the colonizer and the colonized, and this new identity will threaten and challenge the authority and the validity of any original identity" (87). The construction of hybrid cultural identity will blur the identity boundary, produce different identities in both new and old cultures alternately, thus breaking the binary opposition, eliminating the uniqueness and fixity of

identity, and making the identity multiple and inclusive. And only when the hybrid identity is constructed can people accept and absorb diverse cultures, simplifying and facilitating the cross-cultural coexistence and communication.

2.2 Third Space

According to Homi Bhabha, hybridity brings a new transitional space that is both contradictory and ambiguous. Along with the hybridity, two or more cultures collide with each other, forming an “interstitial space”, which transcends the traditional concept of binary opposition and become more inclusive as it emerges in the “between” of contradiction and ambiguity. Bhabha referred to it as the “Third space”. There is no hierarchy and hegemony in the third space, and all different cultures can communicate equally. Bhabha also points out that as an interstice or connection between two cultures, the third space “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, 5).

The subject, due to the interstitial nature of Third Space, is viewed as an anomaly by both sides, in which he is regarded as the other within his own ethnic group, also known as the other inside another ethnic group. Correspondingly, the subject living between these two cultures needs to construct a dual identity as the other. In other words, the ideal identity that the subject aims to obtain should be a blending identity in that the subject itself is situated in such a cultural gap and has unavoidable dual or multiple identity characteristics. In order to acquire identity, these two attributes possessed by the subject must be balanced simultaneously. According to Bhabha’s Third Space theory, one-sided acceptance or rejection to the identity cannot effectively address the crisis of identity, and the subject must determine their own identity in the context of two cultures. As a result, the purity of identity is eliminated, also fundamentally removing the possibility of any cultural discourse gaining hegemonic status. By devastating the authority and purity of the Western dualistic culture, the third space makes it possible to gradually weakening the extreme polarity of egotism and nationalism and finally terminating the Western cultural hegemony.

3. The Identity Crisis in *Caramelo*

With the passage of time and the assimilation of American social culture, the identity of ethnic minorities living in the United States has altered. At the same time, their traditional national culture has also been steadily preserved throughout the course of history. A crisis of identity construction in ethnic minorities was inevitably brought on by the blending and colliding of two separate cultures. In this chapter, the identity crisis that some major characters in the novel are suffering with will be examined from three aspects: the lack of discourse power, the ethnic marginalization and the gendered other.

3.1 “Aphasia”—Lack of Discourse Power

There are various voices in this novel. Children’s cries and chats frequently surround the whole family of the protagonist, Celaya. It seems to be an ordinary and animated family portrait, yet the noise that is there on the outside covers the silence that is present inside. The limitations of situations and environment cause discourse to lose its original function and significance, leaving the characters who should be speaking in endless silence. Celaya’s family has six sons, while she is the youngest daughter. Younger kinds often can’t tell the full name of the eldest child, so Celaya is called “Lara” by her family. Since she was young, Lala has been without a voice. The entire family is permeated with the notion of male dominance and female inferiority. Adults in this family frequently reprimand her for speaking disorderly and noisily and disregard her speech. Lala gradually got into the habit of remaining silent, and even in the face of scolding and insults from her classmates, she refused to approach her family and shouted “Asshole! I scream at the top of my lungs, but out here, with all the cars rushing about, the word flutters away like paper. I plunk myself down on the guardrail, and then I just bust up like a little kid, puking up tears, my chest heaving and heaving them up” (Cisneros, 356). Lala made the decision to endure every hardship in silence, but she still has dreams and a peaceful place in her heart: she loves reading. Though the mouth is deprived of the right to speak, other sense organs will speak replacing her mouth. Lala withdrew to the readings while listening attentively to her inner voice. Her awareness of the outside world was

clear and distinct thanks to her eyes, her nose and her ears, which more than made up for her inability to talk. She therefore aspires to be a female writer who also advocates for “the aphasic”.

Experiencing the death of her mother, Lala’s grandmother Soledad was abandoned by her father at an early age. Such a miserable childhood accompanied her with only a big shawl that her mother could not finish. Soledad resides in a brand-new nation that advocates for new things and rejects customs, experiencing discrimination in Mexico at the time because of her typical Indian brown skin. The oppression from the patriarchal society and her own bloodline has led to a lack of clarity with her identity. Despite her traumatic childhood and her husband’s betrayal after marriage, Soledad chose to remain silent and endure the so-called “suffering” that a Mexican woman must undergo. She was so lonely that all she could do was braid silk strands, untangle them, and then weave them again. It is the fact that in a world where women have no discourse, she can only express themselves via the ceaseless weaving of shawls.

It can be seen that the absence of words can convey profundity and strength in a silent manner when the words’ initial effect has been lost. When the characters lose their ability to speak for a variety of causes, they are left with little choice but to tolerate everything and seek other means to express themselves.

3.2 The Ethnic Marginalization

The descendants of Latin American immigrants frequently face discrimination, and cultural obstacles as a result of the political, economic, and cultural inequities present in American society. The fact that Mexican Americans are constructed as the “Other” and defined as “marginal people” can be found in their working and living environment. For instance, Lala’s father, Inocencio, arrives in this new country for the first time without any money and is only able to find works that are both demanding and low-paying. This is not an exception where the majority of Mexican Americans are engaged in menial and unpromising professions in this society of white dominance. To escape poverty and attempt to survive in this new culture, they immigrated to the United States. They did not anticipate, however, that the white supremacist society in the U.S. would leave them so few opportunities. They are challenging to integrate and will always be considered the outsider in this country. Although they were still immigrants to the United States when the Lala’s family moved to San Antonio which is very close to the border, they were far away from the main immigration areas. The city where they’re settled is a severely water-scarce place “in the middle of nowhere”. As a result, the terrible environment and distance from their hometown make them feel uneasy, and their spiritual home is similarly in a state of water scarcity and dryness. Minority Americans have distanced themselves from their own culture and are now marginalized within the mainstream culture. Thus, in this identity crisis, the fragmented racial identity urgently needs to be reconstructed.

Mexican immigrants are stereotyped by white people. The white believe that these immigrants are deplorable and inferior from birth. Most Mexican Americans can only fit in a small house since there are unsuitable jobs available, little pay, and their terrible economic condition. The situation in Lala’s house is like this, “there was never enough for a house” (419). The strange furnishings and items in the room reinforced the stereotype of white Americans. Lala, the protagonist, was born in the United States and speaks English fluently. Although she believes herself to be an American, the alien eyes she is surrounded by make her uneasy. As she was completely unfamiliar with her ethnic identity in Mexico, she was unable to connect to it. She fell into a kind of confusion. Her ethnicity as a Mexican was rejected by herself, and her cultural identity as an American was denied by this white-dominated society. She experienced an identity crisis after moving into an “in-between” state.

3.3 The Gendered Other

In a society where male predominate, men’s existence is seen as an inevitable, whereas women are seen as men’s appendages. The dominant position of men is established through the existence of women, while women are constructed as the other relative to men. In general, fathers have the highest decision-making power in family life, thereby maintaining their authoritative status. Women therefore exist as members of the family who are controlled and restricted. The image of gendered other is fully reflected in the story of Lala’s

grandmother, Soledad. Following the rules of a patriarchal society, she should only be obedient and loyal and take care of her husband and children where she therefore attributed her meaning and purpose of life to her spouse and son. Soledad never lived for himself; instead, he dedicated his entire life to become a mother, a wife, and a daughter until she died. As a gendered other, Soledad lost herself over time and became accustomed to being ignored living under the oppression of the patriarchal society. She had little time to enjoy her own life because she was so busy serving family members. Finally, she came to terms with seeing herself as the other female.

Growing up in a noisy and crowded home, Lala witnessed the passive position of women in the patriarchal culture. After her mother discovered that her husband had an illegitimate child before they were married, she got furious and wanted to leave home. She was even sparking a heated argument with her mother-in-law who was defending her son when Lala thought sadly: "But where can Mother go? She doesn't have any money. All she's got is her husband and kids, and now she doesn't even want us" (83). In addition, overly strict family rules make taking a daughter for a walk to the restaurant a sneaky thing, so Lara's mother shouted: I can't stand it anymore, I'm getting the hell out of here. I can't even open the refrigerator and eat an apple if I feel like it (66). Such family values have been ingrained in Lala since childhood, making it easy to lose her gender-identity as a woman.

4. Solutions to the Identity Crisis in *Caramelo*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in *Caramelo*, the Mexican Americans are faced with the identity crisis of lacking the discourse power and being the ethnic marginalization and gendered other. The protagonist Celaya once made an attempt to overcome his identity dilemma, but ended in failure. In general, the binary opposition of identity must be fundamentally subverted, so as to seek a dynamic identity in the third space, and a hybrid identity should be constructed during the process of searching for and identifying one's self. Therefore, this chapter will focus on practical solutions to major characters' identity crisis based on Homi Bhabha's Hybrid Theory.

4.1 Break the Binary Opposition and Construct the Hybrid Cultural Identity

Identity construction is the process of reconstructing of the identity of the weak parties in order to gain the equal position, eliminate the hegemonic discourse and remove the Other identity. Therefore, accurately positioning themselves, obtaining identity and answering the confusion of belonging are the necessary conditions for the growth of every marginal person and ethnic minority.

Lala, when she is in high school, feels not confident about her appearance and wants to dress like her classmates. The fact that a girl has a poor self-esteem and a strong desire for recognition indicates that her self-awareness is rising, but complete independence and confidence are still lacking. She therefore yearns for other people's respect and concern, believing that receiving attention from others, especially those of the opposite sex, is a sign of her own value. As for who that guy is, she doesn't care at all. In fact, Lala doesn't all that crazy about Ernesto. She mocked his appearance, despised his height, and thought of his personality as the likable. Nevertheless, Lala still chose to remain with Ernesto, in part because Ernesto made her feel cherished and appreciated. In an effort to shed her gender other identity, Lala indulged in Ernesto's affectionate words, hoping to gain a sense of presence through Ernesto's attention and love. Lala's decision to stay with Ernesto is also heavily influenced by the fact that she and Ernesto share a common Mexican origin, which means Lala won't be regarded as an ethnic other in front of Ernesto who has the same experience with her.

Therefore, in an attempt to establish a pure identity, she had chosen to rely on Ernesto, who was of Mexican origin. However, the failure of this relationship taught her that it was not feasible to find a resonance with others as a marginal person. Lala matured as a result of Ernesto's leaving and came to understand how interconnected all humans are. Like the thread on the "rebozo", if one of them breaks, the whole rebozo would too. She began to accept everything of what had occurred to her. She was no longer obsessed with figuring out whether she was an American or a Mexican, or with having to choose between the two identities.

Additionally, Lala's growing journey has given her the opportunity to move back and forth between her native culture and American culture, offering her new ways to think about who she is and where she belongs in the world. In the process of tracing the past, Lala discovered that her family's history, and even the history of every Mexican family, was replete with hybridity. Through integration and development, several generations of individuals from different regions have eventually become a close-knit family. She no longer adheres to the rigid dualistic logic of identity. On the contrary, she has a more developed sense of who she is. She starts to embrace the diversity represented by various cultures, accepts her two distinct identities, be self-assured in who she was, and comes to terms with her identity as a mixed-blood.

Lala abandons the dualistic logic of identity and opts for multi-culture, which also gave enlightenment to the prominent immigration issue today. In the face of a society with different or even diametrically opposite cultures, immigrants seek to actively integrate into the dominant culture while also maintaining their own ethnic traditions, whether consciously or unconsciously. Immigrants are anxious and uncertain of their own identities as a result of this "in-between" state. Maybe they can adjust their viewpoint, embrace the multicultural society, discard the belief that the identity must be single and pure, and construct a blended identity.

4.2 Subvert the Stereotyped Images and Gain the Real Identity Freedom

In order to overcome the identity crisis, it is necessary to resist the stereotype that dominant culture has imposed on these immigrants. Symbolizing a brand-new image, Lala personifies a "rebellion" spirit of shattering the stereotypes. Due to the stereotype from American white people, she used to feel inferior and helpless. Her figure differs from the usual gentle and slender figure of women in that she is tall and strong, and she struggles with some things that women are expected to conduct. But more importantly, she's constantly thinking up some novel and adventurous ideas. She fantasizes about traveling, acting in movies, and designing houses one day. She is keen to engage in a variety of exciting activities. Like her grandma, Lala doesn't want to be a stereotyped and fixed female role. Her seemingly "deviant" actions and thoughts are actually her attempts to break free from the gender stereotype and forge her own independent and brave female identity.

Besides, Lala's father and aunt provided her with support and guidance as she grew. Inocencio, had nothing when he first arrived in this new country, yet he always approached life with optimism. He taught Lala how to work with dignity and how to spend every day without regrets. When Lara wanted to leave home and live alone, Inocencio warned her that no matter what difficulties she encountered, her family would never abandon her. It was also her father's words recalled around Lala When she was separated by her boyfriend and plunged into loneliness and helplessness, which gave Lala the courage to face the pain of love and bravely grow into an independent and mature woman. Moreover, even if suffering prejudice and unfairness in the United States, Lara's father always takes pride in his Mexican identity and puts traditional Mexican values into practice. Thanks to her father, Lara gradually understood the significance of Mexican parentage for Mexican immigrants. Aunt Light-Skin is a native Mexican woman, whose real name is Norma. She nonetheless maintains her optimism and bravery in the face of her husband's horrible betrayal, yearns for independence, and believes that Mexican women are capable of shaping their own futures. Like Lala's father, the aunt also has a deep sense of identity as a Mexican. From her aunt, Lara saw traditional Mexican virtues that she could take pride in—optimism and the courage to love and hate. It was her recognition of these values that helped Lala strengthen her own sense of identity.

Lala's father was not bound by the stereotypes imposed on him, but instead relied on his own hands to strive to improve the living conditions of the family and ultimately possess their own house; Aunt Norma educated Lala through her own painful and unfortunate experiences, guiding her to become an independent and brave woman. Whether it is Lara herself, or her father and aunt, they all embody the strong, brave, and optimistic characteristics of the Mexican people, in stark contrast to the stereotypes given to them by the dominant white culture.

4.3 Preserve the National Culture and Accept Multi-culture

Homi Bhabha advocates the establishment of a third space where different cultures can negotiate with each other. In such a space, marginalized individuals can engage in equal dialogue with those in mainstream culture, thereby deconstructing the latter's dominant authority. Since the third space calls for the integration of different cultures, a hybrid technique can be used in its building. As a result, the dominant culture can be rewritten, and different cultures can coexist harmoniously through hybridization. Establishing a third space is the ultimate goal of subverting the Binary opposition of different identities, as advocated by Homi Bhabha and Sandra Cisneros. To build the hybrid third space, it is critical for the marginalized to actively embrace the new culture, but the most basic thing is to adhere to their own national culture.

The "rebozo" serves as the most significant symbol throughout the whole story. A traditional Mexican handicraft, the shawl is both beautiful and practical. The exquisite silk shawl has evolved from generation to generation to represent the kindness and hard work of Mexican women as well as the connection between Mexican women's emotions. The shawl in the novel was first seen by her grandmother, who "plays at braiding and unbraiding the unfinished strands, pulling them straight with her fingers and then smoothing them smooth." (254) This shawl, treasured by Grandmother Soledad, was left to her by Soledad's mother, and later passed on to Lala. It is a relay of women's relationship and a continuation of women's story. Soledad would frequently stare and stroke the shawl when she was going through tough times or disappointments, recalling the hazy memory about her mother and feeling warmth from her mother, because "it calms her, especially when she's nervous" (254). Such a beautiful shawl implied a maternal emotion. Like a bond, it runs through a maternal culture, which binds Mexican women together and forms a relationship network. On the other hand, the shawl culture connects not only the native Mexico, but also the Mexican people in the United States. The Reyes family in *Caramelo*, one in Mexico and the other in the United States, are separated from the north and the south, yet such a shawl links the scattered branches together, binding them like a family tree that is tightly tugged by the main body and carries a collective family history and memory.

Immigrants from various ethnic groups should do a good job of passing down the "rebozo" culture when confronted with the dilemma and marginalization as the other, and the marginal items that have been overlooked should also be valued and be given new meaning, like the "rebozo" in this novel. The brown shawl of the Reyes family flowed from Mexico to the United States and was eventually inherited by Lala, which is a symbol of the expansion of shawl culture. This kind of culture contains a kind of relationship map that cannot be discarded, whether in the past or in today, an increasingly interconnected era. In the process of migration and inheritance, immigrants and other ethnic minorities should pass down this traditional culture and ensure that it continues to reflect a profound and authentic cultural brightness so that they can find a sense of identity construction and belonging with in cultural memory of historical precipitation.

5. Conclusion

Based on Homi Bhabha's Hybridity Theory, this thesis analyzes the identity crisis in *Caramelo*, and concludes that the best ways for cross-cultural immigrants to overcome identity confusion and liberate themselves from the identity crisis are to break the binary opposition of identities, regain the right to speak freely, and actively accept and embrace multi-culture on the basis of preserving the national culture. The protagonist Lala is an image of someone who has the courage and determination to pursue their ethnic identity. She represents the feminine group and speaks for the majority of bewildered immigrants who are eager to fit in with their new situations. It can be seen from her how identity is not single but rather changes and alternates between new and old cultures. And it can be said that the construction of hybrid identities can break the confines brought by the binary opposition of identity. Today, with the deepening of globalization and the aggravation of immigration issues, harmonious multi-culture can only be integrated and developed by removing the boundaries between different cultural identities, securing equal discourse rights, and constructing hybrid cultural identities.

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