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Being a Barbie or Barbie-Q

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Abstract

Sandra Cisneros has become one of the well known and respected Chicana authors by addressing themes of otherness, identity, poverty, and gender in her works. These themes are presented in her short story Barbie-Q with which she also questions the values of the American society. In this story, the ideology of superior perfect American woman which is in the in-group and inferior Mexican American woman which is in the out-group is given through the symbol of Barbie. While doing this, she uses “yours vs. mine” and “your vs. my” comparisons to show how society others Mexican American people, and effective narrative style that makes the reader an observer. The aim of this paper is to analyze how a Mexican American woman writer Sandra Cisneros challenges the hegemonic ideology that tries to manipulate and subordinate the minorities marginalized by the dominant class, and the inbetweenness, being caught between Mexican and American cultures, by focusing on her language usage and narrative style in her short story Barbie-Q.

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In American Literature, there are many literary products that belong to different ethnic backgrounds as America is a multicultural society. Sandra Cisneros has become one of the well known and respected Chicana authors by addressing themes of otherness, identity, poverty, and gender in her works. These themes are presented in her short story Barbie-Q with which she also questions the values of the American society. The aim of this paper is to analyze how a Mexican American woman writer Sandra Cisneros challenges the hegemonic ideology that tries to manipulate and subordinate the minorities marginalized by the dominant class, and the inbetweenness, being...
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Norman Fairclough (1989) in his book Language and Power states that “There are power relations between social groupings in institutions, ... there are power relations between women and men, between ethnic groupings, between young and old which are not specific to particular institutions” (p. 34). The power of dominant group takes the form of what Antonio Gramsci called “hegemony” and it can be appear in forms such as class domination, sexism, and racism. By putting Barbie as the symbol of white Anglo Saxon American female in in-group and the burned Barbie (Barbie-Q) as the symbol of Latinos in out-group, Cisneros shows the hegemonic ideology that tries to subordinate and dominate the social groups marginalized by the dominant/powerful class.

When the title is taken into consideration, Sandra Cisneros’ powerful usage of language shows it’s self. Cisneros’s language, as John Fiske (1989) states, “does more than allow a linguistic reexperience of social difference; it also misuses ‘their’ language. It is a refusal to submit to linguistic discipline, a momentary tactic by which the linguistic system is raided and used ‘trickily,’ disrespectfully” (p. 108). Therefore, her first transgression can be seen in the story’s title: “Barbie-Q.” Cisneros opens the language to alternative meanings by redirecting the power that the word originally suggests and the concepts that Barbie connotes. She not only represents the reader a different reading by giving Barbie a new meaning which can be a representative of the dark skinned Mexicans but also makes reference to the understanding of the ideal women. In other words, she creates alternative readings that can challenge the connotations that the dominant class has imposed onto the women by means of a toy. Therefore, Cisneros’ language goes against the norms dictated and embraced by the dominant class. She rebels against the content of the dominant class’ hidden discourse. In the text, Cisneros’ (1991) rebellious manner is seen by her disregard for punctuation “[k]iss kiss kiss” (p. 14), by the improper conjugation of verbs “Everybody today selling toys” (15), by reproducing the vernacular language of the lower class “On the outside you and me skipping and humming but inside we are doing loopity-loops and pirouetting” (p. 15).

In his book Understanding Popular Culture, John Fiske (1989) states “all commodities can be used by the consumer to construct meaning of self, of social identity, and social relatives” (p. 11). So, it can be said that every object shows the values and thoughts of the society that it belongs to. The semiotic meaning by forming the text around a toy Barbie then gains importance. By taking Barbie as a symbolic object, Cisneros focuses on the feminine model that is owned by most women and men in a specific culture and society in which this ideal is mostly accepted. By focusing on Barbie, she also takes attention to the class distinction as Barbie is an expensive toy to have and the girl telling the story is from the lower class. Therefore it is Barbie’s role in the story to highlight the binary tensions. Her narrative style is the direct narrative which makes the reader an observer.

In her six paragraphs story Barbie-Q, Cisneros in the first five presents us two little girls and their Barbies. One of the unnamed girls is the narrator and she describes Barbies as “Yours is the one with mean eyes and ponytail. Striped swimsuits, stilettos, sunglasses and gold hoop earrings. Mine is the one with bubble hair. Red swimsuit, stilettos, pearl earrings, and a wire stand. But that’s all we can afford, besides one extra outfit piece” (p. 14). The mean eyes can be the reference to the in-group members’ interactions to the out-group members. As the dominant group ostracize the other group, the little girl may expose to these belittled looks. The reader also gets the information about how they played with Barbie, how a fire at the Maxwell Street opens a way to these little girls to buy damaged-burned Barbies. In the sixth and final paragraph, Cisneros shows the damaged Barbie’s reflections upon the girls. While describing her Barbie, the girl talks about her clothes as “Red flair, sophisticated A-line coatdress with a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat, white gloves, handbag, and heels included” (p. 14), or as “Career Gal’ assemble, snappy black-and white business suit, three-quarter length sleeve and matching hat included” (p. 15).

The girls’ outfit for the toy is the representation of the norms dictated by the dominant culture. As Phelan (2001) puts it “in desiring Barbie, her outfits and what they represent, she is of course taking on some of dominant culture’s message about femininity and the good life” (p. 214). although they are faced with the economic problems they form the clothing according to the in-group. At this point, the reader is able to understand how the ideology of the powerful part has managed to manipulate the dominated class. As a consequence, the toys are presented as “a dress invented from an old sock when we cut holes here and here and here, the cuff rolled over for the glamorous, fancy-free off the shoulder look” (p. 14).

As Barbie symbolizes the cultural norm for the perfect women, the damaged Barbie, that the young girl in the story finds, represents that she cannot be the perfect women as she is from intercity Chicago, shops at the flea
market, she is very poor and she is Latina. Although there are Barbies with physical characteristics of different minorities in the market today, it is crystal clear that the one and only Barbie is the one which is white, Anglo-Saxon mainstream American woman with perfect body measures, beautiful blond hair, blue eyes and fashionable clothes, symbolizing her richness.

The narrator, young girl, cannot be like Barbie because she does not have the look of a Barbie doll. Barbie is not Latina with black hair and dark skin. The damaged Barbie toy that the narrator finds at the flea market is representative of the young girl and how the in-group sees the Latin American individuals. The damaged Barbie when she says “so what if our Barbies smell like smoke when you hold them up to your nose even after you wash and wash and wash them” (p. 16) symbolizes the common thought in American society that Latin Americans have a kind of scent. As Cisneros introduces the idea as “no matter how many times she washes the doll, the smell never goes away” to symbolize the idea that no matter how much time the narrator wants to be like a Barbie, she will always be a Latina.

The reader can easily understand from the narration that the young girl is familiar with downtown living. By giving every little detail in the first person narration, the reader gets the idea that the first thing holding back from a life like that of Barbie, is that she is from an poor neighborhood in downtown Chicago. So, second transgression consists of taking Barbie out of her place and placing her in the space of the flea market or the second hand store. The flea market where the little girl is shopping is not like a nice mall in the suburbs of Chicago. The narrator describes the other items that are for sale as “lying on the street next to some tool bits, and platform shoes with heels and squashed, and a fluorescent green wicker waste basket, and aluminum foil, and hubcaps, and a pink shag rug, and a windshield wiper blades, and dusty mason jars, and a coffee can full of rusty nails” (p. 15) which gives the idea that it is not a luxurious place to buy something. She emphasizes the types of common and certainly not fancy items that can be found at the flea market as she depicts, “next to the boxed pies, and bright orange toilet brushes and rubber gloves and wrench gloves and bouquets of feather flowers and glass towels racks, and steel wool, and the Alvin and the Chipmunks records” (p. 15) as items near to dolls she admires. The flea market is not the place you would expect to find good condition items like Barbie dolls right of the toy store itself. These objects, which surround Barbie, ridicule Barbie’s beauty and the values that she represents. Having brought Barbie into the context of the lower class, Cisneros also questions the American dream.

Barbie’s outfits, her physical appearance, and the need to acquire new clothes for her as well as to buy the other characters that dwell in this imaginary world (Ken, Skipper, Midge, Tutti and Tod) do not reflect the social, economical and political reality in which they live, but rather the one to which they aspire. Cisneros contrasts the world guaranteed by the American Dream with the reality encircling the marginalized. The girl cannot afford to buy Ken; so she pretends to have one. On the other hand, she cannot have the new clothes for Barbie and the only way to have them is to wait for Christmas: “only Ken is invisible, Right? Because we don’t have money for a stupid-looking boy doll when we’d both rather as for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas. We have to make do with your mean eyed Barbie and my bubblehead Barbie and our one outfit apiece not including the sock dress” (p. 15). It does not matter for them to have their Barbies “in nice clean boxes and had to buy them on Maxwell Street, all water-soaked and sooty” (p. 16). By saying “water-soaked and sooty” the narrator makes reference to the damaged Barbie implying poverty and desire for dominant culture’s items.

At the end of the story, she says “And is the prettiest doll, Barbie’s MOD’ern cousin Francie with real eyelash brush included has a left foot that’s melted a little--- so? If you dress her in her new “Prom Pinks outfit, satin splendor with matching coat, gold belt, clutch and hair bow included, so long as you don’t lift her dress, right? --- who’s to know?” one can detect the sarcasm in the voice of the narrator as she says this. It would be hard for anyone handling the Barbie not to notice that the leg was melted, just as anyone who knows the narrator would know that she is Latino no matter what she wears. She cannot be Barbie, which is in perfect condition and still in the box. Cisneros is implying that the current American society not only rejects different people, but also forced them to reject themselves.

To conclude Sandra Cisneros has been unique in reflecting their own identity, culture and traditions. She has achieved this through her language usage, style and characters by challenging the hegemonic ideology that tries to manipulate and subordinate the minorities marginalized by the dominant class. Cisneros takes attention to the prejudices, injustices and the norms of the society by breaking down and analysing norms, stereotypes of the dominant group.
References