

1. Introduction

The research study is entitled ‘Undefined Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture and Resistance in Selected Works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros’. The thesis is outlined into five chapters which discuss at length how post- colonial critic Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of cultural Hybridity, and concepts such as liminality and Third Space can be employed to explain the fluid, non-dualistic, ambivalent nature of ‘self’/identity presented in the works of Chinese American, Maxine Hong Kingston and Chicana¹, Sandra Cisneros.

The two writers taken up for study, Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-) and Sandra Cisneros (1954-), belong to different ethnic backgrounds and have experienced the dilemma in getting along with dichotomous cultures, both the Euro-centric American culture and their ethnic cultures (Chinese and Chicano/a²). They have tried not to confine the ‘self’ within boundaries defined by rigid cultural and gender norms, set by both ethnic communities and the dominant American society, and have shown an effective resistance towards generic conventions in their works . Rigid notions on gender, culture and genre have been abandoned in their search for a viable sense of identity.

Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) and *China Men* (1980) and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and *Caramelo* (2002) are closely analyzed in the thesis, as these reveal how both Kingston and Cisneros come to terms with the fluid nature of their identity and how they keep on evolving themselves into something new in a ‘Third space’ as visualized by Bhabha. These works are selected for their multiplicity of experiences, and show how they arrive at a sense of self, which is hybridized in nature. The

concepts of gender, culture, and the resistance towards generic conventions are the paradigms chosen, for an in-depth analysis of the selected works of these two writers.

Published to wide critical acclaim, the above-mentioned works have caused intense debates about such issues as genre and feminist writing. Recipients of several awards and recognitions these two accomplished writers have attracted a lot of critical attention individually but have been analyzed together along with Alice Walker only in one paper titled *Breaking the Silence: Women of Color and Issues of Voice and Cultural Identity* written by Jennifer Hue which points out how language, for women of colour, becomes a powerful means for defining their identity. A comparative analysis of this kind using the parameters of gender, culture and genre has not been attempted before.

2. Blurring Boundaries: Ethnicity, Multiculturalism and the Hybridized ‘Self’ in the Third Space

The first chapter of the thesis is entitled ‘Blurring Boundaries: Ethnicity, Multiculturalism and the Hybridized ‘Self’ in the Third Space.’ It examines how much of ethnic American literature is preoccupied with the desire to make sense of self due to the confusion that arises as a result of the influence of disparate cultures on one’s identity. Words like ‘authenticity’ and ‘essentialism’ are to be dispensed with when analyzing the work of an ethnic American writer even though the term ‘ethnicity’² itself assumes narrow conceptions of a pure and authentic self. Ethnic American literature focuses on depicting the cultural specificity at the same time hybridity of different ethnic groups of America-Asian, African, Native and Chicano/a. The chapter also discusses how far the theory of multiculturalism is relevant to the study of ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism of America and its literature. Multiculturalists uphold their

particular cultures and heritages and at the same time, are aware of the composite nature of their cultures, its heterogeneity. It denies the existence of a pure culture or cultural tradition in any society.

Bhabha's theory of the Hybridized 'Self' in the Third Space, fosters the larger goal of multiculturalism while acknowledging cultural differences. Commenting on the post colonial condition, Bhabha contends that a new hybrid identity or subject position (other subject positions being that of colonizer and the colonized) emerges from the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized challenging the validity and authenticity of any pure cultural identity. He is of the view that hybridity which represents cultural difference is positioned in-between the colonizer and the colonized. It occupies an in-between space neither completely that of the colonizer nor that of the colonized. He defined hybridity as what is 'new', which emerges from a Third Space. Bhabha considers hybridity arising from a liminal or in-between space which he terms as the Third space. This is a space intrinsically critical of essentialist positions of identity. Bhabha's Third Space represents a location/ space where new cultural meaning and production occurs blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorizations of culture and identity. According to Bhabha, this hybrid Third Space is an ambivalent site (mental and emotional states of perplexity arising from a clash of voices results in an ambivalent state according to Bhabha) where cultural meaning and representation have no unity or fixity. He explains liminality/ Third Space as the middle state, a stage of transition or a border zone. Bhabha employs the image of a staircase to explain liminality. The stairwell connecting two floors is the liminal space, in-between different identities, in the present context between dominant Euro-centric and ethnic cultural identities. Ethnic Americans, positioned as they are in-between two cultural traditions, that of their ethnic

background and of American dominant culture possess hybridized selves in a Third Space. The pluralistic nature of their identity is recognized in the Third space or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “the third element” (*Borderlands*102) where it develops a tolerance for contradictions. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. In this space, boundaries set by both cultural traditions are ignored and allowed to form something new. Cisneros and Kingston are situated in that liminal state/ interstitial passage due to their ethnic background and the culturally divergent environment they inhabit. How they locate themselves or create comfortable zones/ spaces for themselves is addressed in the thesis.

The history and major issues of two specific branches of ethnic American literature, Asian American literature and Chicano/a literature to which the selected writers belong, are discussed in order to position them in the right perspective. A detailed analysis of the selected works of Kingston and Cisneros is also attempted in the first chapter.

3. Transgression of Gender Boundaries in Search of a Viable Female Self

The second chapter is entitled, ‘Transgression of Gender Boundaries in Search of a Viable Female Self’. Notions on gender and the resultant patterns of behaviour prevailing in the ethnic cultures of Kingston and Cisneros have prevented them, at first, from realizing their true selves. The influence of the dominant Euro-centric culture and its concept of femininity also further confuse them. They learn to undermine the crippling effects of their ethnic culture and the dominant white cultural ethos on their psyche. The selected four works of Kingston and Cisneros show how assigned gender roles can be subverted or reversed in order to find viable female selves occupying the third space or the in-between space.

Gloria Anzaldúa explains the manner in which Chicanas are oppressed by the cultural imperative that women remain silent and invisible within traditional Chicano culture. Even the

language that is available to these women expresses masculine rather than feminine consciousness: “Chicanas use *nostros* whether we’re male or female. We are robbed of female being by the masculine plural” (*Borderlands/ La Frontera* 76). Maxine Hong Kingston makes the same point in *The Woman Warrior* when she explains that the word for ‘female *I*’ is also the word for ‘slave’: “There is a Chinese word for the female *I* – which is “slave”. Break the women with their own tongues!” (*The Woman Warrior* 47).

Kingston and Cisneros reject set patterns of gender identity drawn by both their ethnic cultures and the dominant culture. They refuse to be turned into American feminine or to embrace the concept of femininity ascribed by ethnic cultures. What they strive for is a middle state or the in-between space, dangling between two cultural ideologies.

4. Transgression of Cultural Boundaries: Cultural Identity in Transition

The third chapter of the thesis is on ‘Transgression of Cultural Boundaries: Cultural Identity in Transition.’ It is an in-depth analysis of how Kingston and Cisneros negotiate with the pull of different cultures. They deny the stereotypical images of Asian and Chicano/a identities determined by their ethnic cultural codes and as was anticipated by dominant culture. They refuse to confine themselves within boundaries drawn by others. Both inter- and intracultural understanding should be taken into account when analyzing the works of these ethnic writers. ‘Intracultural’ means within their own cultures, that is, Chinese and Chicano/a cultures. ‘Intercultural’ is about how they relate with the dominant white culture. This dichotomous view is considered when making a study of their growth, using the parameter of culture, into a consciousness of their hybridized identities.

5. Transgression of Generic Boundaries: Resistance towards Narrative/ Generic Conventions

Chapter four of the thesis is on the ‘Transgression of Generic Boundaries: Resistance towards Narrative / Generic Conventions.’ It is a detailed study of how new forms of telling stories are invented, and how generic conventions are broken by Kingston and Cisneros in order to come to terms with their in-between state. The narrative strategies adopted by Kingston and Cisneros challenge the generic models of the *Bildungsroman*, alongside the historical novel, autobiography and other salient genres. The resistance shown towards acceptable generic conventions reveals the ambivalent state of their identity.

The selected works of Kingston and Cisneros defy rigid classifications concerning autobiography, novel, poetry, memoir, short story and history. These much popular novels exemplify Edward Said’s claim that “exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms (225)”. Just as constructs of cultural and gender identities are dismantled and allowed to form new hybridized selves in a Third space, these writers experiment with techniques, and several genres are mixed together to form something new. An overlapping of boundaries of different genres occurs in their works challenging age-old concepts of writing novels. They break up time just as they break up the usual distinctions between fact and fantasy, separating their books from more traditional, chronological autobiographies at the same time mixing enough ingredients, realistic details to make the status of these novels questionable. In a way the uniqueness of genre seems to illuminate Kingston’s and Cisneros’ concept of identity, selfhood.

6. Conclusion

The last chapter attempts a summary of the findings and concludes the thesis. It focuses on how Kingston and Cisneros trace their roots in the selected works to find their positions in their new cultures. This self-encounter is determined by self-analysis and self-interpretation that tend to result in the recognition and creative realization of the different cultural influences that shape the self in space- a possible Third Space between faraway homes and the present home.

Kingston and Cisneros give voice to what it meant to be a hybrid, a mixture, a *mestiza*³. The feeling of being aliens in their ethnic culture and dominant culture, the sense of being caught between interstices, spaces between the different worlds they inhabit is acutely felt by both of them as is evident from their works. They manage to confirm this painful sense of marginality, at the same time provide alternative ways of tackling these issues. They offer viable models to emulate for those who are caught in the state of being betwixt and between. Due to their deep understanding of boundaries or border lands, these writers teach America, a land of immigrants, how to be American. They teach how to be a new kind of human being who is capable of dealing with the confusions and contradictions of existing in boundaries, which in a larger sense is the state of every human being alive today, not only that of immigrants and minorities due to globalization which brings the immigrant experience beyond borders and brings the collision of cultures a reality everywhere because “we are all living in a society where these borders are transgressed constantly”(*Borderlands/ La Frontera* 233).

The purpose of the thesis is to show how Kingston and Cisneros break the barriers set up by their ethnic cultures and Euro-centric American culture in order to create spaces whereby they could emerge as wholesome individuals. Attempt has been made to stress how they come out as

powerful women writers after sifting through, and imbibing disparate experiences. They teach the world through their writings that the individual cannot compartmentalize his/her self and exist in a vacuum untainted by different cultures, movements or by powerful men and women. It is essential that we understand the composite nature of our personalities, or else ideas like ethnic purity, authenticity, etc. would lead to the kind of ethnic cleansing carried out by Hitler. By addressing these issues again and again Kingston and Cisneros stress their significance in the present scenario. It is imperative that such efforts to make the world a better place should be acknowledged, and research in related areas should be continued.

Notes

1. Chicana (female) and Chicano (male). Chicano/as are people residing in the United States who trace their ancestry to Mexico.
2. Ethnicity refers to the character or quality of a particular cultural group.
3. *mestiza* is the Spanish word for 'mixed'.

Works Cited

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