

Socialization of Sex in Latina Culture

Through the works of film director Patricia Cardoso and author Sandra Cisneros, we see two coming-of-age stories surrounding the protagonists Ana, in *Real Women Have Curves*, and Celaya, in *Caramelo*. Both Ana and Celaya struggle with the extent to which their roles as Latinas govern their future. Both works explore questions of purity, self-empowerment, and self-image. The protagonists know that the female role is governed by strict norms in the Latina culture, but both Celaya and Ana act against it, asserting themselves through their relationships with Ernesto in Celaya's case and Jimmy in Ana's.

In *Caramelo*, religion and tradition play important roles in the values of the Reyes family. These family values influence Celaya's development as the only daughter in the family. Celaya is expected to remain "pure," because she is a female. Her father, Inocencio, tells her, "If you leave your father's house without a husband you are worse than a dog" (Cisneros 360). However, the reader knows that Inocencio had slept with a woman out of wedlock, because Candelaria is his illegitimate daughter. It seems to be a common theme in the book for men in the Reyes family to have sex out of wedlock. We learn that Narciso's father, Eleuterio, went to Mexico and impregnated Narciso's mother, Regina, then went back to Spain. Celaya's brother also impregnated his fiancée before they were married. In all of these cases, the shame doesn't come close to the shame that the family felt when Celaya ran away with Ernesto. It seems that the Reyes family values honor above all else, and for them, it is more dishonorable for a female to lose their virginity before marriage than it is for a male. Inocencio, for example, regrets his

infidelity, but takes no action to make amends. In fact, he pretends to have no connection with Candelaria. Inocencio wants Celaya to remain pure not primarily for her own wellbeing, but more for her honor. If she sleeps with a man before marriage, she will be called a “Prostituta. Puta. Perra. Perdida” (Cisneros 360).

Similarly in *Real Women Have Curves*, Ana is expected to remain pure. Her mother, Carmen, encourages her to marry and even prays that she will find a husband, but does not want her to have sex before marriage. Thus she wants her to find love, but in the socially acceptable way for her culture. For Ana, she feels that she is worth more than sex, and so it doesn't matter when she has sex or whom she has it with. Ana isn't really ever told what marriage *is*, just that she should find a husband. We know that she probably doesn't learn about sex because even her mother doesn't know how a woman's body works. Carmen, comically, believes she is pregnant because she doesn't get her period and she is completely ignorant of what menopause is. So anything that Ana does know, she would have to learn on her own.

Celaya must also learn about sex on her own. Young women in both works are expected to remain virgins because it is what their culture asks of them, but they are given no information about what it means to lose their virginity. Both Soledad and Celaya are told that they should take care of themselves. This presumably means they shouldn't have sex, but neither is really ever educated as far as sex goes. So there really isn't a personal will keep one's virginity because everyone is told just to stay a virgin to keep from bringing shame to one's family.

The question of how to assert oneself becomes a problem in both *Real Women Have Curves* and *Caramelo*. From the audience, both Celaya and Ana come off as

juvenile in their attempts to assert themselves. Celaya runs away with Ernesto and Ana sleeps with Jimmy. Both acts seem immature to the audience, but when one considers the kind of sex education that both Ana and Celaya received, it seems more reasonable. Both characters are left to deal with their coming-of-age on their own. Celaya doesn't really have anyone in her family to relate to, save Soledad, who seems to have a special relationship with her. Soledad, however, also pushes the same pressures regarding sex on Celaya that she herself faced. Ana also seems to have no one to relate to. Her mother is made a mockery of, and her sister is more concerned with work than relationships. Thus Celaya turns to idealizations of relationships to build her own with Ernesto, and Ana completely rejects the importance of sex, and only uses it (and Jimmy) to better her self body image.

Celaya runs away with Ernesto not necessarily in rebellion, but more in a naïve act of self-assertion. She is asserting that she can love someone. This plan backfires when Ernesto goes to a church and talks to a priest who says that Celaya is no longer pure and Ernesto should not be with her. She says, “I *should* be ashamed . . . How come I’m not?” (Cisneros 385). Celaya isn’t ashamed because she knows that she shouldn’t have sex, but doesn’t really know why. For her, there is no meaning to staying a virgin because she is simply told without reason to remain a virgin. She doesn’t feel wrong because for her it was the right time. Though Ernesto is also no longer pure, the shame of the affair falls on Celaya. Thus being a woman dooms characters in *Caramelo* to being the ones who carry the burden of infidelity.

Ana seems to know that it is women who will take the shame for out of wedlock sex. She says that there more to her than just what is between her legs. She knows that

too often, women are used as objects for sex, love, and marriage. Ironically, she gains self-empowerment by having sex with Jimmy and by showing him her naked body. The question remains how someone who *knows* that sex does not define her still falls into the trap of needing the approval of a man to boost her self-esteem. Though she does seem to need Jimmy's approval to feel better about her own body image, she still uses him mainly for this rather than actual love.

Jimmy and Ernesto are quite different in how they deal with Ana and Celaya's acts of self-assertion, but they are both "used" in the process. Ana uses Jimmy to gain her own self-confidence. She wants Jimmy to see her naked because she needs some kind of approval. Similarly, Celaya uses Ernesto to run away and live out the idealized relationships she sees on *telenovelas*. She, in a sense, manipulates him into asking her to run away by telling him "You've got to ask my parent for their permission [for marriage]" (Cisneros 372). He ends up obliging, "Okay, I guess" (Cisneros 373). Eventually this leads to them running away together, but it was Celaya's idea in the beginning. Thus it is again Celaya controlling their relationship; she decides that they must do this. In the end, he leaves her with a note and money for a bus because he decides that he cannot marry her because she is not a virgin. So while Jimmy seems perfectly content being used, Ernesto cannot deal with Celaya's self-assertion. He, as a fellow Latino, carries too much weight with purity of women to stay with Celaya.

Throughout *Caramelo* and *Real Women Have Curves* we follow the coming-of-age stories of two Latinas who don't understand or necessarily want the gender roles placed upon them. Both protagonists reach a pivotal point in their maturation when they have sex. In Ana's case, she uses Jimmy to assert herself through sex in order to prove

that there is more to her than just her vagina. Celaya uses Ernesto to live out the idealized love story she thinks she must have as a woman, perhaps from the idealized relationships she sees on *telenovelas*. Both girls have sex out of wedlock but do not feel shame for doing so. Cisneros and Cardoso show these two girls as paradigms of young women who are more and who feel more than they are supposed to. Latinas face the battle of not complying with cultural norms and are not necessarily “destined” to fit the roles defined for them.

Works Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *Caramelo*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Real Women Have Curves. Dir. Patricia Cardoso. Prod. George LaVoo, Effie Brown,

and Marilyn Atlas. With America Ferrera and Lupe Ontiveros. HBO, 2002.

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