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## DIASPORIC SISTERHOOD: ACCULTURATIVE STRESS AND THE REORIENTATION OF CHILDHOOD FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS IN LATINO WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** In his essay, “Embodying Belonging” Taki Suzuki proposes that the process of localisation of the diasporan identity encounters two main steps – “racialisation” and “cultural citizenship” (Suzuki, 63). In the process of localisation, patriarchal systems from two cultures – the ethnic cultures of the native land and the dominant cultural practices of the host land influence the diasporan child. Girlhood, especially, is dictated by appropriate gendered expectations of the ethnic culture that contributes to “racialisation”, but is experienced within an alternate spatiality of the host culture where the girl child attempts to find belonging through “cultural citizenship”. The resulting traumatic spatiality of experience – as the diasporan girl child navigates imposed internal and external cultural markers of feminine expression – causes acculturative stress in the process of localisation.

The two Latin American Diasporic narratives - *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez transcribe the resulting acculturative stress by exploring personal and cultural diasporic identity in the girl child's psyche. I will be analysing female relationships that evolve during the acculturative stress caused within the process of localisation of the respective Latino diasporas – Sandra Cisneros from the Mexican-American perspective and Julia Alvarez from the Dominican-American perspective. The study of female relationships within this spatiality proposes that a diasporic sisterhood emerges within these spaces of dual patriarchal cultural imposition. This diasporic sisterhood aids the mental and social re-orientation of the diasporic female individual in the process of acculturation and flows into the writing of their stories. The evolution of the diasporic sisterhood sheds light on the double consciousness of the female diasporan experience as being different from the male diasporan experience. It also reveals

the dualities of patriarchal cultures that affect the diasporan woman's psyche, writing and texts. (294 words)

**Keywords:** Diaspora, acculturation, sisterhood, Latino literature, women's writing, girlhood.

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## **Introduction**

The idea of sisterhood within diaspora studies as a system against gendered diasporic experience is examined very widely in African American literature. However, in Latino literature, such a conclusion is implied in select texts, but not established. This paper seeks to closely examine two different patterns of localisation within the female diasporic experience to study the effects of such dual cultural impositions of patriarchy – whether it leads to a formation of a sisterhood, and if it does, in what way this comes through within the writing and psyche of the narratives.

The paper will examine the movement from girlhood to womanhood within the character's diasporic spatiality, culture and formation of sisterhood.

## **The Movement from Childhood to Adolescence**

### **1.1. Racialised spaces and cultural placing of selfhood.**

In *House on Mango Street* there are two kind of spatialities. One – the physical, racially segregated Chicano community, where Esperanza lives. Two – the mental, private spaces where she is contemplating her growing identity as a Chicano girl. Cathy, a new friend and neighbour tells her that she will be her friend only till Tuesday because she will be leaving soon (Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* 15). These comments and subsequent departure are coloured by her knowledge of the locality considered "unsafe" and populated with the likes of her kind. This is indicative of "racialisation" as explained by Taku Suzuki (Suzuki 64).

However, her navigation of this space is also driven by the need for a diasporic belonging. This is where her consolidation of cultural citizenship occurs within her private and public spaces. In the community itself, she makes friends with Lucy and Rachel, and share the ownership of a bicycle with them and her sister. This drives against the racialisation that is imposed by the host culture – exhibited by Cathy. Her conceptualization of the space is also derived to the understanding of her racial origin or native origin. She exclaims that it was

a "house like Mexico (18)" and although she is friends with Rachel and Lucy, they fail to see that re-construction. Only Nenny who shares this Mexican ethnicity sees it.

The need for cultural citizenship within the private space of her selfhood and identity is coloured by her memories of her grandmother – a link to her racial past. Her understanding of her grandmother's forced marriage and the image of the grandmother sitting by the window, the way "so many women sit their sadness on an elbow (Cisneros 14)" is an acute awareness of the way in which these spaces of solitary-ness are coloured by gendered expectations – of the patriarchal home culture that has dictated the diasporic space.

This forms her own assertion for the need of an independent feminist cultural citizenship within this diasporic spatiality. She declares that she will one day have – "A house all of my own. A space for myself (Cisneros 78)."

Esperanza's observations of the way in which these spaces adversely affect and impose upon the safety and autonomy of her and other women in the neighbourhood have a crucial role to play within her own self-conscious development. Her description of Sally (68) and Alicia's (28) abuse, her own experience at the dance, and experiences of women during and after marriage in this diasporic space contributes to her realisation that women will need to get married and "accommodate" both children and themselves, in the neighbourhood and within their own private bodies (39). Thus, the spatiality of the diasporic neighbourhood – imposed by these cultural markers start to become points of origin for acculturative stress.

## **1.2. Acculturative stress in diasporic self-identification**

The previous sections' analysis hints at diasporic spatiality of the neighbourhood being the locus of racialisation and cultural citizenship in Esperanza's experience. As she grows, Esperanza's observation of women in the neighbourhood (within their homes and outside) depict the impositions of home culture and subversion of the same through internalisation of host culture. When she is curious about boys and sexuality she turns to Marin – "she was older and knows a lot of things (24)" Marin as a character, fights the traditional imposition of Mexican home culture – where such knowledge is not displayed in public.

Another instance of the way in which host and home cultures clash comes in the girls' fascination for red shoes. It begins as an innocent need to probe the idea of "beauty and womanhood" but leads to an understanding that "red shoes" are a marker of inappropriate sexual behaviour – and betrays wanton behaviour in the home culture which is racialized by

the host cultural space. (Laurie 382). The undercurrent of traditional assumptions about women as objects of desire are intuitively observed in the incident of the red shoes.

It gets expanded into the patriarchal double imposition of the conceptualisation of women as carers of men, children and other dependent realities other than as independent breadwinners (Wolff 141). She describes Rose Vargas – “too many babies and the man had left (Cisneros 27)” so much so that, her independent self is even unable to register the death of her mother – she is caught up within the caring of the babies. Esperanza notices the private impositions of the ethnic patriarchal culture in Sally’s experiences. Sally is brought up in patriarchal confinement and inhibition, within her home. Her father says to her that “beautiful is bad” in a woman (62) Later, when Sally gets married, she describes her thus – “She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceilings smooth as wedding cake (Cisneros 74).”

These instances, compared to her own experiences within the private and the public diasporic spaces leads to her confusion about sexual experiences, marriage and movement from girlhood to womanhood. She asks– “who decides who deserves to be bad (45)?”. In the diasporic space, this functions as a self-aware anxiety of not knowing how to conceptualise her or other women's actions within this cultural nexus (Tally 66). This is the locus of the clash in imposition of host and home patriarchal cultures. This is where we locate acculturative stress within cultural citizenship and racialisation in the diasporic female experientiality.

### **1.3. Sisterhood: Pasts and Presents against diasporic patriarchies**

In the previous section we located acculturative stress within the process of diasporic localisation in Esperanza’s self-awareness of women’s experientialities of the public and private spaces in the Chicano neighbourhood. Cisneros’ writing betrays this acute female self-awareness. In her short story “Eleven”, she describes an emotional relationship with a red sweater (Cisneros, *Women Hollering Creek and Other Stories*). In the chapter, “Boys and Girls” on one hand, there is a need for companionship; but beyond that she conceptualizes herself as red balloon tied to an anchor (Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* 13). This “red” is a marker of feminine sensibility. And the anchor is a need for something that can break free the spirit of female sensibility in asserting independence and freedom against dual patriarchal imposition within the diasporic identity and spatial experientiality. And often, this assertion

comes through a recognition of othering/ otherness in fellow women/ girls of the neighbourhood

This recognition of otherness is a result of shared diasporic identity. Her relationships with Alicia, Marin and Sally are largely created and sustained by a recognition of this diasporic otherness. This leads to two patterns of forging sisterhood and means of understanding women as a collective and their issues within the community.

On the hand, she discovers meaning in feminine experiences within her own home. Very early on, she says that her grandmother is a horse woman just like her (14). This also forms the troubled hierarchical relationship she forges with her sister, Nenny (19).

It takes another pattern with the other girls of the neighbourhood. Initially, she describes Alicia thus – "she is stuck up since college", "she used to like me (15)." But later on, Esperanza finds a comfort level with renewed expressions of comradeship. She then says, "Alicia is a good girl. She is my friend (28)." This extends into her observations of Alicia's life influenced by gendered cultural impositions and the trauma it evokes – in the description of her as someone who is sees mice when there are none and someone who is capable of anything except her fear for her father (28). This extends to forged cultural citizenship when Alicia is "listening to my sadness for not having a home (77)", The diasporic discovery of home is displaced at best and when she understands the culturally situated conflict (acculturative stress), she creates a crossover space in which sisterhood can be forged (Caraway 192).

This crossover space facilitates a movement between the pasts and the presents, to coalitions and distinctions within their shared experientiality of womanhood or growth in girlhood to adolescence (Caraway 197). This sisterhood, formed by the acculturative stress, seeks both to address and contribute to acculturative localisation – when Esperanza herself is having her sexual experience and not comfortable in it, she says to Sally – “why didn't you tell me, why did you leave me all alone (Cisneros 73)."

This sisterhood forged on the shared recognition and despising of patriarchal dual cultural imposition, flows into the psyche and writing of the novella. Towards the end, Cisneros and Esperanza are making promises to returning to (Mango Street) - "for the ones who cannot out (78)." These are the “ones” who form that distinct diasporic sisterhood.

### **Retrograde from Adulthood to Adolescence**

While the previous novel compares and contrasts acculturative stress born in the spatialities of a Chicano neighbourhood and the personal self-awareness and experientiality of the protagonist – Esperanza, in the second text the acculturative stress is born of geographically distinct spatialities. In Alvarez's novel, there is a movement of the members of a single family of girls between the spatialities of home culture in their native – the Dominican Republic and of the host culture in their diasporic spatiality within the US.

### **2.1. Juxtaposed spatialities of dual cultures**

In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, the four sisters (and the mother) are constantly navigating spaces which are alternately imposing patriarchal violence – influenced by host/home culture. This takes on different patterns for each of the girls.

For Carla, it occurs when she is sexually harassed by a man on the way to school. Her awareness of physical and sexual growth as a woman is clouded by the trauma of this gender-based violence. In the interrogation with the police officers, she is simultaneously preoccupied with thoughts of hair on her legs and the way men react to sexual offences. However, when her mother starts to accompany her to school the bullies at school stop disturbing her (158). Within these racialized spaces of gender-based violence she navigates; she is comforted by the "world still peopled by those who love her (165)."

In the experientiality of these sisters, the private sharing of space becomes the locus of cultural citizenship. The public spatiality – of the home and host country are constant sources of imposed patriarchy and corresponding trauma (Fenster 473). When Yolanda, the third sister goes to her home country, her aunt tells her, "a woman does not travel alone in this country, especially these days (Alvarez 9)." As a Latino returnee, the native land offers a hope of mental comfort, so she takes on a trip within the countryside and experiences a momentary fulfilment in feminine self-expression and belonging (12). However, her aunt's words and the sudden intrusion by strange men in the place where she seeks comfort, creates a hostile public spatiality (much like the host country, for school-going Carla) The resulting affectation –

"...both in front of her on the road, blocking any escape...Not that she can move, for her legs seem suddenly to have been hammered into the ground beneath her.... But her tongue feels as if it has been stuffed in her mouth like a rag to keep her quiet (19-20)."

reveals the existence of a traumatic past that may have been caused by diasporic racialisation in her host country of the US. In both these cases, it is different impositions of culture that creates threatening spaces.

Much like Carla, it is only the private spaces of her American home, that give her solace. The shared presence of her sisters in her diasporic home comforts her –

"it gives solace to the third daughter who is always so tentative and terrified and have such troubles with men. Her sister's breathing in the dark room was like having a powerful tamed animal at the foot of her bed ready to protect her (28)."

The ethnic cultural imposition in the homeland constantly clashes with the cultural markers of the host country, for these girls. In the Dominican Republic, the girls are always accompanied by boy cousins on any trip to town. This is an imposition propagated by the cultural belief that a woman in a public space of leisure, unaccompanied by a "husband" or "other suitable male" is considered a prostitute (Wolff 23). The hegemonical patriarchal imposition of culture is also observed when Manuel states that Fifi is not allowed to wear pants in public, go out without permission or even read books (another primitive social male order that excluded women from spheres of learning, politics or education (Wolff 23)).

It is within these spaces of public/private hegemonic patriarchal imposition that the girls attempt to localise themselves as Latino women. However, racialisation and cultural citizenship are reversed because of the clashes in cultural imposition – further leading to trauma of displaced selfhood. Yolanda's aversion to her own name (Alvarez 82-3) during a breakdown is a result of trauma born of diasporic dislocation – not knowing your cultural citizenship, identity or existence.

## **2.2. Internalised racialisation and trauma of cultural imposition**

In Cisneros' novella, there were clear distinctions in public and private impositions of home/host culture. Here however, the home culture imposes not only in public spatialities, but also threatens and reduces the autonomy within private spaces, because of internalised patriarchy within this Latino family.

The Island of the Dominican Republic is suffocating in its patriarchal impositions and disconcerting glorification of machismo, which subjugates their girlhood (Fenster 469). On the other hand, although the other offers them freedom as individual girls, in the secular and modern world of the host culture, the ethnic culture easily invades. Moral policing by

parents' questions and forbids their use of hair removal creams and reading of books like *Our Bodies, Our Selves* – a feminist perspective on female sexuality, body image and lesbianism (Alvarez 110).

Even when there is an attempt to transpose their host country's cultural citizenship in their native land – when the girls say that "Women also have rights in this country (122)." Their cousin replies saying "Yes, but men wear the pants (122)." Even if the political system has a spatiality for women's independent expression, unspoken laws of ethnic patriarchal culture impose total surrender of female existence (Fenster 471). Navigating this dual patriarchal imposition within the spaces of "American teenage good life" and of the Island creates the locus of acculturative stress. And cultural citizenship in the diaspora feels incomplete.

In the host country, the patriarch of the family makes sure of dislocating experiences of racialisation as well, through imposition of patriarchy. When Sofia gives birth to a son and names him Carlos after her father; she is considered to be creating "good blood" and righting the wrong of the "bad choice" she made in running away and getting married (Alvarez 26-27). Likewise, when her father finds out about her previous relationship, he clearly invokes the patriarchal hegemony of the home culture (Laurie 382), by stating things like, "I don't want loose women in the family (Alvarez 28)".

The girls respond to these measures of cultural imposition through the coalition and affinity process – they take turns at bailing each other out and struggling collectively for their independent freedom.

### **2.3. Sisterhood: Choice and Inherence in diasporic (dis)localisation**

The formation of sisterhood is not a given in these spaces, very often it is a conscious choice made in order to form an ally with the girl/woman which is born out of a situational circumstance within the double-culturally imposed spaces. These expressions also describe the way in which gaps in age can be bridged and erased, through the choice to forge the coalition and/or affinity to the fellow woman/girl in distress (Caraway 192). Esperanza's friendship with Alicia and Sally takes this pattern. In *Garcia Girls*, the sisters themselves mostly have a close affinity through shared experience. However, their relationship with their mother is subject to home-land cultural politics within the private space (Godin 157).



Yolanda locates this lack of female affinity in her mother's assessment of her daughters' work. In the poems that she writes, Yolanda knows that although her mother praises her as a writer, she cannot bring herself to believe in "sex for girls (Alvarez 46)". The host land offers a sexual independence for women, but the homeland culture forbids and discredits it (Godin 156).

This inability to understand and be sensitive towards the needs of her girls, is located in a cultural imposition that does not let her perceive the difference in the girls' upbringing within the States, as opposed to her own, within the homeland. In the Island, such impositions in upbringing (moral policing, stingy spending of money, lack of understanding in generational gap, etc) would either not arise, for the lack of situation or be accepted because there is no alternative norm. When the doctor at the psychiatric ward asks her if Sandi has any siblings and if their relationship was close or rivalrous, Laura de la Torre replies simply that, they were sisters, they were siblings, (53). This displaced association with home-land culture is embodied in social comprehension (Dudley 281).

However this dislocated association with cultural imposition in an imaginative space makes her an "imagining oppressor" who is unable to see the emotional variants of speech/lack, anger and confusion which underlies the oppression Sandi – her daughter – whose material reality is shaped by the diasporic cultural citizenship (Caraway 197).

The sisters are able to form a different bond, because of the very forced dislocation that was imposed on them (Dudley 280). However, just a placement difference reiterates ethnic cultural imposition: as in the case of Fifi – who accepts patriarchal dominance when she moves to the Island for a while – betrays the displaced racialisation caused by their forced dislocation to the diaspora. Therefore, they mock and mimic the aunts and the cultural discourses of the Island, before their every trip – so that they remind themselves of their subsequent diasporic localisation. This performance through sisterhood is a way subvert "the people who would have power over us all summer (Alvarez 111)."

In the same manner, there is a coalition mechanism involved in dispensing affinity through sisterhood (Caraway 192). When the packet of Marijuana is found in their bedrooms, all four of them take responsibility for it, in order that one of them do not get into trouble (197). This comes from the bond formed through diasporic sisterhood. Since the equation of the mother is different, within the familial structure, there is no such coalition or affinity formed, until later. In this space, the naturally ingrained cultural imposition of the woman –as

primarily carers of men, children and other dependent realities are foregrounded (Davis 120). Accordingly, Laura is considered to be

“a good enough Mami, fussing and scolding and giving advice but a terrible girlfriend parent, a real failure of a Mom (Alvarez 136)”

This also reveals the inherent marker of cultural difference that comes within the cultural markers of the ethnic space vs the host space in the two worlds – “Mami” and “Mom.”

However, there is an inversion in the pattern of her treatment/confrontation in the case of the discovery of Marijuana – when she agrees to not let their father know about their collective involvement and subsequent sending away, back to the Island as punishment. This is revealed to be because

“...Mami had her own little revolution brewing, and she didn’t want to blow whistle on her girls and thus call attention to herself.

Recently she had begun spreading her wings, taking adult courses on real estate and international economics and business management, dreaming of a bigger-than-family-size-life for herself. She still did lip service to the old ways, while herself nibbling away at forbidden fruit (116).”

The need for her to break away from this tradition and to be seen independently in terms of her learning and choices that does not involve patriarchal imposition and invasion is courageous. Here, the mother is also influenced by the cultural changes and possibilities offered by the host land.

Even in the absence of incentive (hiding her educational pursuits from the husband) Laura exhibits this “sisterhood” for her daughter, Yolanda. As a little girl, her father mocks Yolanda’s childish method of borrowing from Whitman and forbids the speech. Laura, conscious that she would prefer to be an “independent nobody” in the States, than a “high-class houseslave” of the Islands, (Alvarez 144), rebels against his imposition. In the ensuing rage, Carlos tears apart the speech but Laura makes amends by sitting down with Yolanda and helps her make a speech. This is proof that the need to form bonds of coalition through sisterhood is a reorientation of female relationships in the aftermath of the acculturative stress caused by the diasporic experience.

## **Conclusion**

Our study has explored navigation of women in culturally imposed spaces of the public and private social make-up. In writing these novels, both Cisneros and Alvarez derive from personal memories of growing up as Latin American Diaspora. For Cisneros, writing is all about the moment of recognition of the self's otherness. She says that, writing *The House on Mango Street* was enabling in celebrating her otherness – “as a woman, as a working-class woman and an American of Mexican Descent (Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* 6).” These three markers of otherness are the very same that we have conceptualised as spatialised cultural impositions, acculturative stress and formation of sisterhood in the childhood to adolescence navigations of Esperanza's life as a diasporan. Similarly, Alvarez writes *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* form her own memorial relations with the Dominican Republic, growing up and states that the function of story-telling for her, is to be able to help someone – could be, yourself, others or generally people (Tabor, Sirias and Alvarez 151-152).

Women's writing from the confluence of the old “home land” and the new “host land”, tread deeper into the questions of selfhood and re-meaning, within these spatial (public and private social spaces) and temporal (growth and cultural impositions) sites of diasporic localisation – as explained by Taku Suzuki. Spatiality, according to Jameson, functions as “cognitive mapping”. It departs a power of imagination that projects a meaningful ensemble, which is used to aid the navigation of social spaces (Jameson 350). Within this context, this study recognises sisterhood in the diasporic spatiality as cognitive “re”-mapping. In the Latin American diasporic localisation, the acculturative stress caused by clashes in host culture and ethnic culture affects “racialisation” and cultural citizenship. Here, sisterhood redefines female friendships formed within girlhood to navigate the establishing of the Latin American diasporan identity.

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