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An Analysis of Chicana Women's Way to Speak in Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories from the Perspective of Postcolonial Feminism

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Abstract: Chicana is a term synonymous with Mexican Americans after the mid-20th century. *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* is a collection of short stories by Mexican-American author Sandra Cisneros, depicting how Chicana women, under the double oppression of "gender" and "race," change from silence to gradually voicing for themselves. This paper combines the views of postcolonial representative Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to study this collection of short stories, and analyzes this process of consciousness awakening from a postcolonial feminist perspective, aiming to explore Cisneros's feminist writing in this book within the postcolonial context, reflecting the ideas of women's liberation.

1. Introduction

Sandra Cisneros (1954-) is a highly regarded Mexican-American female writer. Her representative works include *The House on Mango Street* (1984), *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), and *Caramelo* (2002). *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, as a work from her mature period, depicts the life experiences and developmental issues of the Chicana community, clearly showing the author's consciousness of standing on the position of Chicana women, questioning the established hegemonic order, and striving to give a strong voice to the oppressed women.[1]

The historical context of the Chicana ethnicity and its colonial history have created a unique cultural phenomenon of "Chicana." In the 20th century, Mexican immigrants to the United States faced exclusion from mainstream American society, and the oppression of Mexican-Americans in ideological and political life is still a manifestation of colonialism. The poverty in life, oppression in political life, and the "drift" in ideology have brought about spiritual resistance. Their resistance reflects postcolonial colors.

Academic research on *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* within domestic and international scholarship has primarily focused on female growth and immigrant cultural identity. Early studies emphasized its continuity with *The House on Mango Street*, arguing that both works portray the struggles of marginalized communities through the lens of Mexican-American women, though *Woman Hollering Creek* demonstrates a more mature narrative style and more socially

critical themes. Recent research has shifted toward the intersection of narrative form and gender politics. Scholars note that the use of free indirect discourse and free direct speech in *Woman Hollering Creek* explores the protagonists' arduous journey from oppression to self-assertion, reflecting the author's feminist liberatory vision of constructing female independent consciousness.[2] Overall, the research perspectives have evolved from early thematic analyses to multifaceted explorations integrating cultural criticism and formal aesthetics, deepening the understanding of its literary and sociopolitical significance.

Postcolonial feminism, also known as "Third World Feminism," has been an important and dynamic force in feminism since the 1980s, with its criticism directed towards colonialism, imperialism, and Western feminism.[3] Jayati Spivak is one of the representatives of postcolonial feminism. She is the first postcolonial theorist with a complete feminist agenda and is able to constantly adjust her position according to the mainstream evolution of Western cultural and literary critical theory. Therefore, she can be said to be at the forefront of contemporary cultural criticism theory.[4] Gender and social class are her major analytic categories. In her famous work *Can the Subaltern Speak*?, she uses the term "subaltern" to describe the lower layer of colonial and postcolonial society. Special attention is given to the female subaltern whom she argues are doubly marginalized. According to her, as colonized women are almost unheard within their own patriarchal culture, they are doubly unheard under a colonial regime. Chicana women are a typical group of this kind. This paper will combine her main viewpoints to explore from a postcolonial feminist perspective how Chicana women in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* go from silence to gradually finding a path to make their voices heard under the double oppression of "gender" and "race".

2. Before Enlightenment: Chains of Ignorance

In the short stories collection *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* by Sandra Cisneros, Chicana women are metaphorically bound from a young age with the oppressive shackles of "ignorance." Whether it is the patriarchal norms entrenched within their own ethnic communities or the lingering effects of the postcolonial environment they inhabit, these forces conspire to indoctrinate them with a "spiritual opium." This insidious influence curtails their educational opportunities and stunts the development of their independent identities, reducing their aspirations to the narrow confines of becoming a "good wife" and a "good mother".

The portrayal of the protagonist's infatuation with a romanticized television drama during her childhood serves as a poignant reflection of the broader societal influences at play. The mass media, acting as an instrument of patriarchal cultural politics, uses romantic dramas like "You or No One" to assert a form of discursive violence. This violence constructs and controls the behavior and consciousness of women, enforcing a "compulsory identification" that relegates women to a position of secondary importance. It casts them as figures devoid of self, occupying a space in the world only in relation to men, thereby reinforcing the dominion of male discourse. This phenomenon underscores the notion that the greatest barrier to women's enlightenment is the subjugating education they receive.

Therefore, women's lives are mired in a state of compliance and numbness. Gradually, they have forgotten the strength of their own voices and have grown accustomed to adopting male patterns of thought. Subjugated women, often without realizing it, have become accustomed to existing as appendages to men, eschewing the path of independence. Young girls, subjected to relentless indoctrination, become desensitized and, tragically, come to accept the injustices they face: "Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one."(Cisneros 7)

As mentioned in the text, the growth of Chicana girl is likened to an onion. Despite facing a

barrage of gender and racial discrimination, they find themselves voiceless, resorting to wrapping themselves in layers upon layers, an attempt at self-preservation that, while seemingly protective, is ultimately ineffective. Lacking of a strong sense of self and well-established values, they struggle to confront the harsh realities of adulthood. Shattering these onerous chains demands an extraordinary reservoir of courage.

3. Disillusioned in Marriage: The Weight of Silence

In the story *Woman Hollering Creek*, the Mexican bride married with joy into a small town on the America border, fantasizing about a blissful married life. She saw for the first time the creek that flowed beside her new home, named Woman Hollering Creek. The river named "Woman Hollering Creek" is an entity with dual metaphorical meanings. On the one hand, it has witnessed the oppressed lives of countless Chicana women, symbolizing the suffering they have endured. On the other hand, it has also witnessed the attempts at resistance by women like the protagonist. The creek flows on endlessly, moving towards a distant place full of infinite possibilities, symbolizing the path for Chicana women to break free from the constraints of patriarchal and colonial discourses and achieve self-independence and liberation.

In *Can the Subaltern Speak*?, Spivak believes that special attention is given to the female subaltern whom she argues are doubly marginalized. “Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence.’ It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of speak, the colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow....”(Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 28) According to her, as colonized women are almost unheard within their own patriarchal culture, they are doubly unheard under a colonial regime. As a cross-border bride, she faced the double oppression of "race" and "gender." She endured marginalization in culture and language; no one understood her language, making communication difficult, let alone advocating for her own needs. Chicana women must rely on the Western discourse system, leading to the loss of their cultural subjectivity and the possibility of expressing their unique experiences. Apart from playing the role of a virtuous wife and mother at home, she couldn’t realize her value anywhere. It’s undoubtedly a form of cognitive violence.

The long-term beatings by her husband were the most obvious manifestation of "gender" oppression: "But when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again, until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the telenovelas." (Cisneros 47)

At first, due to her timidity and fear, she still dared not to resist, even when pregnant, and dared not to speak out for her unfair fate. Because in Mexican culture, a married daughter returning to her parents' home is considered a shameful act of being abandoned. The "family honor concept" in Mexican culture constitutes a form of invisible symbolic violence: a married woman returning to her family of origin is regarded as a "returned defective product," and this cultural logic completely ties a woman's worth to the institution of marriage. This reflects the dilemma faced by Chicana women under the oppression of patriarchy.

4. Speaking Out: Journey to Self-Liberation

In the end of *Woman Hollering Creek*, Sandra Cisneros constructs a path for speaking out that transcends the dual oppression of colonialism and gender through the encounter between the female protagonist, Cleofilas, and two American women. Felice not only helped Cleofilas cross the border

between the US and Mexico but also helped her cross the gender boundary, opening up new modes of life and thinking.[5] This process not only confirms the core contradiction of Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory—that is, the dual violence of colonialism and patriarchy makes Third World women the "silenced other"—but also provides a literary imagination of the possibility for subordinated women to break through structural violence.

As mentioned earlier, the female protagonist is in a dilemma, and Felice's intervention breaks her silence. It is worth noting that what Cisneros constructed was not a global sisterhood between women of the "first world" and "third world".[6] Felice's rescue action is not the typical "white savior" narrative of Western feminism: her Spanish name, mixed language ("Spanish pocked with English"), and economic independence ("The pickup was hers") make her a "cultural hybrid" as described by Homi Bhabha. It is this cross-border identity that dissolves the power hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized.

Spivak once pointed out that the voices of subordinated women always fall into the mechanism of incorporation by the dominant discourse.[7] However, the ending of *Woman Hollering Creek* provides a literary solution to this theoretical dilemma through the construction of a female community. Cleofilas' final laughter has a phenomenological breakthrough: her laughter is no longer just a personal venting but has been transformed into a voice representing the resistance of subordinated women.

The collective nature of this practice of speaking out is confirmed in the details of the text: Felice emphasizes that "there is nothing here named after a woman," which not only reveals the systematic erasure of women's contributions in colonial history but also implies the political struggle behind the competition for naming rights. The two women crossing "Woman Hollering Creek" together metaphorically represents a new political possibility with the inclusion of women's voices being created by a united female collective.

5. Conclusion

This paper, from the perspective of postcolonial feminism and in conjunction with the text of *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, conducts an analysis of the work. The paper divides the journey of Chicana women's speaking out into three stages: ignorance, silence, and liberation. Each stage contains complex reasons and thought processes, reflecting the spirit of Chicana women's resistance to oppression. When Cleofila’s laughter finally merges into the soundscape of modernity, this individual awakening not only tears apart the dual structure of violence but also heralds a new direction for postcolonial feminist theory—amidst the cracks of cultural hybridity, the sound waves of subordinated women will eventually find a resonant frequency.

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