

**Intra-familial Relationships in Latin American Culture
As represented in *Caramelo* and *When I Was Puerto Rican***

The Latino culture emphasizes the importance of familial relationships in order to foster a sense of support for one another. In both novels *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros and *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago, the relationships between parent and child are highlighted. However, the gender of both the parent and child can have a profound effect on the nature of the relationship. In both novels there is a noticeable initial bond between the protagonist (who are both female) and their respective fathers. In contrast, the relationship between each protagonist and their mother is more complicated and dynamic as the novel progresses. The sibling order for both novels is quite different. While Celaya in *Caramelo* is the youngest of seven, Negi in *When I Was Puerto Rican* is the oldest of seven children. The respective age of each protagonist also affects the perspective that each narrator has on her fellow siblings.

The father-daughter relationship in both novels starts with a strong connection between the protagonist and her father. In *Caramelo*, Celaya's father, Inocencio, takes a special interest in her because she is the only daughter of his. When the Reyes family drives to Toluca, Mexico from Chicago the long trip agitates the children and as a result the youngest, Celaya, gets picked on by her older brothers. However, when Celaya gets upset by the taunts of her siblings, Inocencio comes to his daughter's rescue and says that they should treat her better because "she is your only sister" (Cisneros 18). Throughout the novel this phrase is used by Inocencio in order to protect Celaya from the jeers of her brothers. Inocencio takes a special interest in Celaya and even divulges to her on numerous occasions "Don't tell anybody this, but you are my favorite (Cisneros 353). Although the text does not clarify if Inocencio simply says this to all his children, the grandfather Narciso also tells Celaya this when she refuses to eat her vegetables and

is forced to sit at the table while everyone else has left (Cisneros 74). Celaya does notice that on numerous occasions Inocencio will proudly announce that he is the father of “seven hijos,” taking advantage of the Spanish language’s vague reference to seven children instead of specifying that he has six sons and a daughter. Regardless of the intentions of the father while saying this to his daughter, it is clear that Inocencio holds a special place in his heart for his only daughter and treats her as such.

Similarly in *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Negi idolizes her father while she is young. In the beginning of the memoir, when Negi’s mother tells her to gather kindling for the fire she hopes that her father will ask for her to stay with him while he continues to dig out the nails of the floor of the house (Santiago 8). Negi’s preference to helping her father as opposed to her mother illustrates her fondness for one parent over the other. Negi’s attitude towards her father during her early childhood is one of adoration and admiration. When Negi hears her parents fighting, she often times took pity on her father who had to bear the scolds and lashings of Monín as the children had to during the daytime. Even when Negi discovers the existence of her half-sister, Margerie, the first emotion she feels is jealousy because she has to share her father’s love with yet another sibling. Negi’s unyielding reverence for her father only shatters when she grows older and begins to witness the shortcomings of her hero.

The connection between father and daughter in both these novels are powerful if short-lived. The initial bond that each protagonist forms with her father is magical in its own right. Both novels start when the protagonist is at a young age and therefore not aware of the complicated lives of their fathers. The relationship thrives on the innocence of the child coupled with the father’s desire to please his daughter (this is more evident in *Caramelo*). However, as

the protagonist matures, she becomes aware of the mistakes of her father especially in the context of his marriage with her mother.

Both the fathers in *Caramelo* and *When I Was Puerto Rican* have a daughter out of wedlock before starting a “real family” with the protagonist’s mother. In *Caramelo*, Celaya discovers that her father had another daughter with the washerwoman before he was married to Zoila. This daughter, Candelaria, befriends Celaya much to the dismay of Zoila who erupts with rage when Candelaria gives a paper rose to Celaya. When Celaya hears the true story behind Candelaria, she begins to question her father. Towards the end of the novel, Celaya mentally interrogates her father asking “Why weren’t you a gentleman? I thought we weren’t dogs. I thought we were kings and meant to act like kings, Father. And didn’t Little Grandfather remind you of your responsibility if he was so feo, fuerte y formal?” (Cisneros 427). Although Celaya does not outwardly defy her father, these lines of doubt illustrate the transition from idolization to acceptance of his flaws.

The change of perception is much more drastic in *When I Was Puerto Rican* but nonetheless contain the similar correlation of coming-of-age and witnessing the flaws of a former hero. Negi first sees her father in a different light when she is left at her grandmother’s house for longer than expected. While waiting for her father, Negi begins to understand the sorrows of her mother and sympathizes with the hardships she had to endure due to an absent spouse. While sitting on the steps of her Abuela’s house, Negi thinks about “how many nights Mami had left food warming on the ashes of the fogón, how often she’d sat on her rocking chair, nursing a baby, telling [them] to be still, that Papi would be coming any minute, but in the morning he wasn’t there and hadn’t been” (Santiago 99). The parallels that Negi draws between her disappointment in her father and her mother’s frustration with her husband causes Negi to

appreciate her mother and perhaps even see her as the silent hero. Negi remarks that “A woman alone, even if ugly, could not suffer as much as my beautiful mother did. I hated Papi. (Santiago 104). After this experience with her father, Negi progressively gets more detached from her father. When Negi moves to New York and discovers that her father had pawned off her sibling to family members and re-married, she cuts the last tie to her father and writes that “he is as good as dead to [her]” (Santiago 245). The culmination of this severance with her father concludes with Negi’s realization that her mother was both the father and mother figure of the family. Santiago writes that “we could count on her in a way that we could never count on Papi, Tata or Francisco, who had made everyone happy for a such a short time before dying and becoming a ghost that haunted us all for the rest of our lives” (Santiago 245). With this, Negi realizes that the short-term and somewhat superficial happiness her father gave her pales in comparison to the love her mother had for her, even while disciplining.

The inter-generational relationships in both *Caramelo* and *When I Was Puerto Rican* are also similar in the context of in-laws. In both novels there is a strong connection between the father and his mother (grandmother) despite the complicated nature of the relationship. Both the grandmothers overlook the past infidelities of their sons and unconditionally shower them with love regardless of their indiscretions. In *Caramelo*, the Awful Grandmother even uses the existence of Candelaria to her advantage in order to enrage Zoila by reminding her of her husband’s affair. The tension between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law reaches its breaking point in Acapulco when the two engage in a fierce argument that ends with Inocencio being forced to decide between his mother and his wife (Cisneros 86). The constant adoration of a Latina mother by her son is quite stereotypical and Cisneros uses this in order to highlight the complex relationship between Inocencio and the women in his life. Cisneros almost seems to be

portraying Inocencio as an “innocent” man caught between two strong women with conflicting interests vying for his affection. In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, the relationship between Negi’s father and his mother is developed to a lesser extent but there is still a degree of understanding and affection between the two. Although the Abuela does not approve of her son’s unfaithfulness, she still tolerates him. However, the relationship between the Abuela and her daughter-in-law, Monín, is different from the relationship seen in *Caramelo*. The Abuela understands the anguish Monín feels and even encourages her to actively do something about her situation. When Negi’s mother comes to the Abuela’s house to pick Negi up after her father doesn’t return, the Abuela imparts valuable advice to Monín that the reader glimpses in pieces: “always been that way...upsets the kids...think of yourself...alone with children...make it work...don’t know how...” (Santiago 103). This closer relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is probably due to the fact that the Abuela empathizes with her wife of her son and recognizes the powerlessness of women in her culture. The Abuela probably experienced a similar form of subjection and is interested in helping Monín learning from her mistakes. This motivates Negi’s mother to get a job and support herself without depending on her fickle husband.

The difference in attitude of the grandmothers in both books is perhaps due to types of each work. Since *Caramelo* is fictional, Cisneros has more freedom to exaggerate the personalities of her characters in order to fit the overall message that she is trying to depict. The beginning of the novel even begins with the phrase “Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una merita,” which, in English, means “Tell me a story, even if it’s a lie” (Cisneros 1). This disclaimer warns the reader that whatever he or she is about to read is fictional and exaggerated. Even though the detailed descriptions may cause the reader to forget the fictional aspect of the novel, Cisneros

mentions that many of the features of her writing are intended simply to make the story more interesting. On the other hand, Santiago is not afforded the same kind of literary freedom as her work is a memoir and based on personal experience. Her book is based on real life experiences and the interactions between her family members such as the relationship between her mother and grandmother are more realistic.

Another key difference in both books is the ages of each protagonist with respect to her other siblings. As the youngest of seven children, Celaya's perspective is very different from Negi in *When I Was Puerto Rican*, who is the oldest of seven children. As the youngest daughter, Celaya has the freedom to choose her own identity especially when she is in her early years. Since she is around six brothers, Celaya can partake in the traditionally "male" activities of playing sports outside, and getting "dirty" while at the same time being appreciated for the fact that she is a girl. Celaya's mother confides in her since she thinks that Celaya would be able to understand the woes of her life. On the other hand, Negi feels responsibility and at times even grief for being the oldest sibling. With only one consistent parental figure, Negi is required to take on more responsibility at a younger age. This role that is forced upon her causes Negi to sometimes resent her family. Unlike Celaya, Negi is not granted the same type of freedom due to her role in her family.

Both the books *Caramelo* and *When I Was Puerto Rican* effectively illustrate crucial familial relationships in Latin American culture. There are numerous parallels between the father-daughter relationship in both books and even show similar transitions as the protagonist matures and begins to change her perspective on her former idol. The relationship between the protagonist's father and his mother are also similar in both books, but their effect on the relationship between the grandmother and her daughter-in-law (the protagonist's mother) is

different in each work. While *Caramelo* has the freedom to exaggerate and even at times stereotype, *When I Was Puerto Rican* stays true to a real life experience. The last comparison in each book arises from the sibling order of the protagonist. While Celaya is the youngest of seven in *Caramelo* and has the freedom to more or less define her own identity, Negi in *When I Was Puerto Rican* is not given the same luxury due to her role as the oldest of seven children. Both works highlight such familial relationships in a significant way and keeps true to a fundamental Latino value that centers on family. Both Santiago and Cisneros understand the importance of family relationships, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, as reflect this in their books.

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