

## From Oppressed to Oppressor: Racism and Patriarchy in *The House on Mango Street* and *Little House on the Prairie*.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the connection between racial oppression and the manifestation of patriarchy by examining male figures in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. Men are often characterized as aggressive in society due to inherent mindsets. However, this study suggests that the historical oppression of Mexican American men by white Americans based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class is an exposure to extreme gender violence. This violence is viewed as a displacement of outer racial and social powerlessness onto women within the domestic sphere. To strengthen this argument, the paper contrasts the male figures of both novels. It shows that White Americans, as members of the dominant group, exhibit significantly less domestic aggression. Ultimately, it reveals that the violent patriarchy depicted in *The House on Mango Street* is not only an inherent trait but a response and manifestation of systemic racial oppression. The paper employs an interdisciplinary analysis through qualitative research, applying critical race theory, Sigmund Freud's defense mechanisms and Henri Tajfel's social identity theory. The paper utilizes Alfred Adler's theory of the inferiority complex to demonstrate how feelings of racial and social powerlessness fuel patriarchal behaviour. By intertwining these theories, this study offers a new angle on patriarchy, discovering it as a direct consequence of racial oppression.

## INTRODUCTION

Is patriarchy merely about male dominance or is it shaped by long-standing historical, racial, social patterns of exclusion and marginalization? Although Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* is a bildungsroman, the majority of female characters of this novel are somewhere subjugated by men. They are subjugated to such an extent that every house has an oppressive father or husband. On the other hand, the husband and father figures of *Little House on the Prairie* are not aggressive and abusive like them. So the question arises that why particularly the male figures of *The House on Mango Street* have a tendency to suppress women. Undoubtedly, they feel inherently superior but it seems that the men in the Mexican community are more pronounced patriarchal behavior than other men. So the goal of this paper is to find out if there is any more reason behind their oppressive tendency except their inherent traits.

This paper employs an interdisciplinary analysis, arguing that racial profiling and the social white hegemonic tendency propel Mexican men in *The House on Mango Street* to be oppressive towards women. This notion seems to be structured by the historical reality of Mexican-American men having their masculinity "structurally disempowered" by the dominant culture, leading to the displacement of this frustration in home (Mirandé 6). Applying Albert Bandura's social learning theory, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis of defense mechanisms, and Alfred Adler's theory of the inferiority complex, this research highlights the link between social marginalization and domestic aggression. Specially through character analysis and textual study, the paper utilizes Adler's theory of the inferiority complex to show how feelings of racial and social powerlessness fuel patriarchal behavior. Focusing on his claim that "the feeling of inferiority is not a disease; [rather] an incentive" the paper examines Mexican men's behavioral pattern (Adler 67). Furthermore, the analysis focuses on Henri Tajfel's social identity theory to examine how men, segregated from the dominant group, strengthen their status within their domestic sphere to fulfill the psychological need, affirming positive social identity (Tajfel and Turner 255).

Comparing these men with the men of *Little House on the Prairie* clarifies the argument. While *Little House on the Prairie* presents an idealized version of masculinity through showing white Americans as responsible, kind and caring over women, the men of *The House on Mango Street* embody a more aggressive and patriarchal form of masculinity showing the disempowerment of Mexican-Americans by the dominant White Americans. The literary critic Mary Pat Brady supports this perspective, arguing that the Chicano home becomes often a place for gender confinement, reflecting the community's experience of displacement and exclusion (75). Overall, this paper aims to prove that the patriarchal dominance in *The House on Mango Street* is not a mere product of traditional gender roles but a manifestation of the historical and racial oppression faced by Mexican-Americans by white dominants. Instead of justifying patriarchal domination, this study seeks to examine underlying causes, including power structures, racial domination, historical oppression, and economic exploitation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*The House on Mango Street* and *Little House on the Prairie* are two widely popular novels that have garnered the attention of many critics. At the same time, these pieces have been dissected by many scholars in different viewpoints. In 2018, Matava Vichiensing explored how particularly Latino characters were treated as “others”, inhuman and the burden of the society by dominant white Americans in *The House on Mango Street* only because of their race and identity. Vichiensing mentioned “[O]thering creates an exclusion. It also breeds inequality ... members of the two groups” (52). Another literary scholar Regina M. Betz focuses on the belongingness of Chicana community in America. According to her observation:

The male figure is expected to financially provide for his family, and Esperanza’s father fails at this. The audience recognizes this because the family is always moving around to places as dilapidated as their house on Mango Street. It is an example of instability and insecurity within the family infrastructure. (25)

This instability can be viewed as an outcome of external racial oppression which fuels their lifetime struggle to ensure an inhabitation. Both scholarly articles establish the context of pointing out several ways of oppressions and othering of Mexican-Americans through shedding lights on socioeconomic inequality, powerful linguistic features, racial stereotypes.

A similar theme of racial prejudice and exclusion is evident in the analysis of *Little House on the Prairie*. Complying with the same ideology, Philip Heldrich investigated the dominance of white Americans and their prejudice towards Native American. He claimed that “Ma's attitude toward the Indians, an attitude clearly shaped by her predisposed racism that has signified the Indians as inhuman and threatening” (Heldrich 101). Following the same assumption, another scholar Donna M. Campbell argues that the term “wild men” is used for Native Americans to examine the idea of “otherness,” which encompasses the conflicting portrayal of other races biasedly by non-white cultures (111-112). Here, they clearly highlight the racial discrimination, inequality and social exclusion of Native Americans for their ethnicity, positioning white Americans as controller and decision-maker of society.

While Vichiensing and Heldrich address racial oppression, other scholars have focused exclusively on patriarchal domination and gender inequality in *The House on Mango Street*. Welen Friade Sinaga, Pioro Benevolent Lariesto and Putri Helentina Marpaung discussed the absence of familial bonding and support in *The House on Mango Street* portraying men’s aggressiveness and women’s subjugation in one of their articles. They examined how “Esperanza observes the fate of women like her friend Sally, who marries at a young age to escape her abusive father ... trapped in another oppressive relationship” (Sinaga et al. 107). Taking similar stake, Shaojun Duan investigated that “In the patriarchy society,

women are regarded as men's accessories, and the women don't enjoy the equal rights like the men. In the *Mango Street*, the women suffering the oppression of patriarchy can be found in everywhere" (265). It clearly present men as abusers, controllers and the decision-makers of women's life considering women as inferior and second gender. However, Ileana Molina Espinoza pointed out this issue as well in her paper with this significant observations:

[T]he house, where women are with-fined passively in domesticity, and the public space, constructed as male ter-ritory of action. This division conceals an important power relationship since men are the controllers of both spheres, be-ing in possession of the 'door key' to go in and out the house freely, while women find themselves trapped inside. (3)

It indicates women's never ending cycle of oppression where they neither get equal rights nor acknowledgement for their contribution. In contrast, Julie Tharp and Jeff Kleiman argued that the missing gender equality and familial support in *The House on Mango Street* actually achieved its harmony in Little House on the Prairie through a strong family bonding. They proved "Pa and Ma are the all-knowing, capable [and equal] heroes [of their family]" (Tharp and Kleiman 57). Similarly, Kristin Sargeant noted that "Eventually, [Ma] replaces Pa as the key figure in Laura's life" (41). It clearly indicates the notion of gender equality in this novel.

Though these studies are insightful, but they mostly treat race and patriarchy as separate systems of oppression. In a way, they still they overlooked the intertwined connection between white hegemony and roots of patriarchy. The roots of patriarchy and white hegemony are intertwined which is not addressed previously by any scholar. While existing scholarships separately talk about race and patriarchy, the goal of my paper is to associate these two different concepts. Through unlocking patriarchal domination as an exposition of racial and historical oppression of men, my paper comes to fill the gap. By analyzing how racial oppression influences male behavior and power dynamics, my paper reveals women's marginalization is not only a mere product of patriarchy rather the manifestation of men's racial and historical domination.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology to examine the underlying causes of patriarchy, focusing on power structures, racial domination, historical oppression, and economic exploitation of Mexican Americans. The research involves close reading and comparative analysis of the primary texts. It utilizes both novels to select passages systematically, scrutinizing male-female interactions, gender roles, and community status from both primary texts to unlock the fabricated idea of patriarchy. The selected textual evidences have escalated the interpretation of characters and events through the lens of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks like Adler's inferiority complex, Tajfel's social identity theory and Freud's defense mechanisms. These theoretical

frameworks have helped to detangle, all the issues regarding the oppressive nature of men in the name of masculinity and its impact on women's lives. For developing this research paper, I have read some scholarly articles and books written by renowned scholars from authentic journals along with my primary source. Secondary sources are integrated to provide historical context and theoretical grounding. This research determines to do some library and archival research as well as online research to use relevant quotations from authentic sources like Jstor, Purdue University press to make my paper more appealing and argumentative. Actually, to ensure academic rigour and credibility, the analysis is supported by online sources such as books, articles, journals, and research papers. Hence, all the secondary sources have backed up the primary conception of the primary text *The House on Mango Street* and *Little House on the Prairie*. Thus, this paper has become an amalgamation of patriarchy and racial oppression. Therefore, it explores the theme of patriarchy from a novel perspective, revealing broader dimensions of societal inequality. Lastly, this research will lead the reader to rethink about the underneath root of patriarchy and instigate them to raise voice against it. This qualitative approach merged textual evidence with theoretical frameworks to argue against the notion of patriarchy as a purely innate concept.

## DISCUSSION

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros critically explored the harsh and challenging lives of immigrant Mexican American men through delineating their sufferings and treatment in every sphere of life. Mexicans were driven by a history of immense struggle and opportunity because they migrated to America in the late 19th to 20th century to escape the violence of the Mexican revolution. Besides, many people were displaced because of the Mexican-American war. Within this historical context, America was largely standardized by the system of white hegemony because they were the dominant and ruling group of people. The Mexican people, especially the Latino community were frequently perceived as other and often characterized as uncivilized and burden of society.

The literary critique Antonio L. Estrada supports this perspective arguing this otherness as a source of disparity between two communities. According to him "Mexican-origin individuals have had a 500-year legacy of domination and subordination by European powers" (332). Mexicans were labeled as inferior to show as if white American men took the responsibility of civilizing them. However, it was a complete pretentious act to misuse Mexican men as free laborers to build up the American economy. In the name of civilization and rehabilitation, Mexican men were always mistreated and oppressed. This novel is clear evidence to show how Mexicans have been racialized in America in terms of their skin color, education, law and justice, workplace and social interaction. They used to live there as second class citizens there and were tortured by white Americans. They have always been thought of as smugglers.

Skin color was the key marker to identify Latino or especially Chicana people. Vilma Ortiz and Edward Telles documented a historical report and showed that Mexicans were not even called out by their names. They were named by their skin color as if black were referred to as something uncleaned or impure. White Americans used to call them as unclean, wetback, savage and the burden of the society to justify their unfair status (13). In the same way, Latinos were called “[B]lack man” in the novel which showed white Americans’ racist mindset (Cisneros 20). Again, Meme’s usage of his false name to hide his Mexican identity shows the structured oppression. As Mexicans were not accepted and welcomed so he wanted to hide his real name. To show their identity crisis and social status as a second class citizen in America, the novel highlights the character of Geraldo who had “[N]o address, no name” (Cisneros 66). His identity was so insignificant that nobody even cared to remember him.

Moreover, white Americans had been considering them inherently wild and threatening for their ethnicity and culture that they used to be scared of Mexican neighbors. They did not want to mix with them as if Mexican people might kill them “[W]ith shiny knives” (Cisneros 28). It critically shows their prejudice about Mexicans, considering them inherently barbaric, hostile, ferocious and violent. So it became a barrier for Mexican people to conduct an inclusive communication with others in the society. Ultimately, they became isolated and alienated from mainstream society for their skin color.

This similar racial mindset of white men is visible in *Little House on the Prairie* where white settlers used to call Natives by derogatory terms like brown, black and papoose as if they were the distinct weird creatures to be afraid of. As Sharolf Smulders noted “Pa, like Mrs. Scott views the Indian as inhuman” which showed their unsafe feelings living around with so many Red Indians (196). It represents a clear colonizing mindset to displace the Natives from their own place. Ironically, the white settlers went to Native’s land to build a new life with prejudices in their mind. Not only the government but also the white settlers started to believe native as inherently hostile, savage, uncivilized and violent because of their physical outlook, language and culture. In this novel, Natives physical description shows how they have been marginalized by the white dominants. As Laura mentioned “They were tall, thin, fierce-looking men ... Their eyes were black and still and glittering, like snake’s eyes” (Ingalls 72). Her description was so graphic that their skin texture and eyes were compared with snakes. In this way, whiteness gradually became the standard of beauty and purity promoting Eurocentrism. A clear racist treatment is visible in Ma, Pa and Mr. Scott’s and other white settler's attitudes who used to judge black people groundlessly. This inequality created a border between two communities in the society and made the white Americans superior in both novels.

However, in *The House on Mango Street*, Mexicans men were indiscriminately exploited at their workplace and were inhumanely tortured. As critical race theory claims the idea that social structures are built on racial

hierarchy (Delgado 16). Similarly, in this context, they used to accept and tolerate those subjugations by becoming a part of hierarchy only to save their job for their survival. As Ortiz and Telles documented in their paper that “[Mexicans] were not hired for jobs based on their racial appearance” (13). They also clarified that Mexicans were not even paid enough wages. It provides a clear sign of how Mexican men have been discriminated in the workplace by not being hired for any job. In a similar way this novel portrays the struggle of Esperanza’s fathers to secure a stable shelter for them showing the struggle of immigrants to secure inhabitation. He was even so scared of losing his job that he left for Mexico to see his dead father at dawn. It depicts their fragile economic condition in American society. Though they were tortured and discriminated at their workplace still they badly needed a job to run their family. So the novel highlighted Marin’s boyfriend's struggle at the workplace by mention that “[H]e did not get any job yet” (Cisneros 26). Therefore, showing their economic instability and powerlessness in monetary section, Cisneros consistently described their lifetime struggle in America. As they used to be the undocumented labor, white people used to hire them only for lower class jobs. These evidences specially highlight the struggle of Mexican men as at then they were the most outgoing people looking for a job and stability to support the whole family alone.

Apart from that, Mamacita’s struggle to adopt American culture and the barrier to speak English illustrate how Mexicans have been racialized because of their language and accent. It clearly shows their cultural and linguistic isolation of Mexicans. They were unable to conduct any social interaction with White Americans for the language barrier. White people did not want to mix with them in any social gatherings. They even refused to sit with Mexican men in the restaurant and the employees denied to serve them at any place. Not only that, the school segregation was extensive because the Mexican children like Esperanza used to be sent to inferior or separate schools to show them as a separate community of America. All these evidences crucially prove that immigrants in America were treated as outsiders and they have been treated as other in every space.

This discrimination, hardship and cultural displacement show how the social identity of men in *The House on Mango Street* was constantly challenged by the dominant white Americans. This social and cultural shaping can be examined through Henri Tajfel’s social identity theory where person's sense of self is not only driven by personal identity but also from social groups (102). Following this statement, this paper argues that Mexican men used to see themselves not only based on their identity rather through the lens of white hegemonic society. Keeping these external feelings in their subconscious mind, they started to sense some sort of inferiority complex which was expressed as frustration and anger inside their house. They were the marginalized groups and the victims of white American society’s power dynamics culture. As a result, they somehow adopted the dominant’s procedure of marginalizing inferiors aggressively to feel superior. Subjugating women became a reflection of their observation as men generally

consider women inferior than them. Sufferings and mistreatment of women have become very apparent in this novel through focusing on patriarchal domination. However, the oppression and hardship of men remain unmasked behind the veil of patriarchy. Though marginalization of men is not directly acknowledged in this novel yet it can be realized through analyzing their social status, family structures, economical condition and power dynamics in the US history. Gradually, it became a chain of oppression transforming it into patriarchal dominion but the actual root of this matter remained undiscovered.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros critically examines the subjugation of women by depicting numerous oppressed fathers and husbands which can be analyzed through the lens of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Kevin O'Rourke explained about Albert Bandura's social learning theory in one of his papers asserting that people learn behaviors by observing and imitating others (72). In case of all the male figures of this novel, it can be particularly seen that they are presented as controlling, aggressive and violent towards women. They tried to establish their superiority at home as they were the inferior one outside. They could not accept themselves as inferior outside so out of this inferiority and frustration they started to become violent and abusive towards women. It was not out of their inherent masculinity; rather it was shaped by their observation. As at that time, women mostly were dependent on them, they took advantage of women's helplessness. Each and every chapter shows how they used to treat women as a secondary and inferior gender. They were othered and dehumanized by men because men were the decision maker of the family. However, they started exerting their power over them to subjugate women to establish an identity of power and control which was reinforced by historical domination. Esperanza witnessed various incidents like this in her neighborhood. As Dr. MHD Noor Al-Abbood pointed out that "[S]he annuls the patriarchal expectations ... [Her] desire for a house of her own is motivated by the [sic] gender oppression" (6). His observations strengthen the point that men used to torture and abuse women physically and mentally.

Ironically, men's external powerlessness was expressed through domestic abuse against women which made them to feel superior. they used to mistreat their wives and daughters to pose their power. Like, Esperanza's grandfather forcefully married her grandmother which showed the authoritative mindset of men. Again, Rafeela, one of the neighbors of Esperanza was never allowed to go outside because his husband used to isolate her from society. Even Sally's dependency over her husband opened a new way for her husband to abuse her. She said "[H]e never hits me hard" (Cisneros 92). This statement proves that her husband used to beat her. Her husband was controlling and limited her contact with her friend and outside which was a clear notion of alienating women and snatching their freedom from the outside world. Besides, Cisneros showed that "[Earl] holds [his wife's] tight by the crook of the arm" to show Earl's violent attitude over his wife (71). Furthermore, Mamacita's husband utterly wanted her to learn proper English which could be seen as a forced language assimilation.

When she denies the English language and views America as the distant road away from the home rather than assimilating or accepting her newfound double-identity her husband started to oppress her (Betz 24). These evidences illustrate a scenario of how women have been treated in their family throughout history.

Not only the husband but also the father characters were also abusive in this novel. As Sally's father used to beat her and so she decided to get married to get the freedom. Unfortunately, she was trapped by the chain of oppression again by marrying an abusive and male chauvinistic guy. Apart from that, Alicia's father was strict and commanding, who was never shown affectionate towards his daughter. She confessed that "[She was] afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers" (Cisneros 32). It indicates that the father is abusive and they do not have a lovable father-daughter relationship. Through these incidents, the violent and aggressive nature of patriarchy can be identified which actually limits women's freedom and basic rights to live in the society equally. There was no familial bonding rather relationships of men and women were full of domination and disrespect. They did not need to provide any justification for their acts as society always refers masculinity with aggressive and rough behavior. They used to behave aggressively inside the house to show them as masculine because masculinity is something connected with their identity. For this patriarchal behavior, their house remained incomplete and they could not turn it into a home.

However, this behavioral pattern of Mexican men in *The House on Mango Street* led to a significant inferiority complex because of their external oppression. As Alfred Adler argues, a person develops an inferiority complex when they feel a gap between what they are expected to do and what they believe they are capable of doing (Ansbacher and Ro wena 50). It is the fear of confrontation and it evokes the tension of losing an image in front of other people. This feeling was formed when Mexican men could not reach the level in the society that they wanted to be. Their subconscious mind started comparing them with white Americans. However, they found them inferior which created a sense of helplessness, insecurity, rejection and worthlessness to adjust in the social structure. As a result, they became desperate to assert power in any way possible somewhere or to someone inferior to find a feeling of superiority which was a method of turning their inferiority complex to superiority complex. They started suppressing women to prove that not men rather women were the subordinate status. This turning point can be connected with Sigmund Freud's defense mechanisms of displacement and reaction formation which unconscious strategies humans use to cope with anxiety and stress. Ann B. Dobie analyzed Freud's idea one of in his books that displacement is redirecting a person's feelings for any particular issue towards another inferior object or a person (59). In the case of this novel, all men formulated an unconscious feeling of being weak or inferior outside and they displaced their outer frustration and anger of being powerless to their wives and daughters. It was a safer side for them to assert

power and grudge as most of the women were unable to fight back for their rights at that time.

In contrast, the male figures like the husband and the father of *Little House on the Prairie* were shown as heroes in both the cases outside and inside. They can maintain gentle patriarchy because of their external power and kindness at home is the privilege of this novel. Their masculinity was somehow intertwined with land ownership. They used to define their masculinity in a sense of duty towards family, wife and children rather than dominating women. The literary scholar, Charles Frey discussed that "Her story is so interesting in part because she lives her life so fully, with such strength" (126). Hence, the traditional patriarchal mindset was not present in the Ingalls family as they were equally respectful towards each other. Pa and Ma were both the protectors and providers of the family. For instance, they used to take responsibility equally like "Pa kept pouring more hot water into the tub in which Ma's foot was soaking" (Ingalls 35). It shows Pa's caring nature towards his wife and he used to treat his wife as an ideal partner and companion. Unlike patriarchal parents, they were also gentle and kind towards their daughters as Pa always encouraged Laura's curiosities and questions and tried to answer them. Pa said to Laura that "[N]o harm will come to you" (Ingalls 77). It depicts Pa's reassurance of providing safety to his family. Despite having so many challenges, they proved that people could make a home anywhere only with the support of their family members. Male ego or male chauvinism was not evident in Pa's character; rather he maintained an equal partnership with his wife. He had pride in his resilience and family bonding. He portrayed the idealized version of patriarchy and an overall view of white American family.

Actually, they were the white people who were empowered in society at then. They had proper identity, social status and opportunities to contribute to society so they did not have to go through any oppressive period throughout US history. They were privileged than others and that notion made them feel superior outside. They were acknowledged as someone important in the land. This made them feel empowered and respected in front of others. The satisfaction and good treatment they received from outside sources influenced their attitude inside home. They never felt the need to target or suppress anyone to assert their superiority because they got proper right honor and dignity outside. So they never consider women as their inferior or competitors rather, they used to believe in partnership. This thing made their familial bond stronger and imperishable, rejecting the traditional form of patriarchy.

This comparative analysis evaluates all those domestic oppressions not only a role of patriarchy but investigates its root in the actual history. Both novels depict the white dominance over Natives and immigrant men and the pathetic consequences of racism. Those voiceless men found their target inside home to express their voice which was a manifestation of external oppression. This paper does not support the violent attitudes of men in anyways but aims to unpack the

concealed reasons behind that. However, the goal of this paper is to establish the idea that patriarchy was just a part of an extensive chain of oppression. This white dominance not only created barriers between two communities outside rather formed a wall between two genders. The root of oppression over women does not come from only patriarchal society; rather patriarchy is one of the beads on the chain of historical and racial oppression. If it was the only outcome of patriarchy or showing masculinity then, white American men in *Little House on the Prairie* might have been seen as rude and aggressive towards women as Mexican-American men. Surprisingly, this was not the case in this novel; rather the scenario was entirely different. It represents a stark contrast between white American and Mexican-American men because their attitude and mindset towards women seem completely different. Moreover, racism, historical oppression and patriarchy were always intertwined and patriarchy was not the origin of oppression. Rather, it is one part of a long, interconnected history of racial and societal subjugation of men which was never acknowledged.

## CONCLUSION

In comparing *Little House on the Prairie* and *The House on Mango Street*, it becomes evident that the forms of masculinity represented in each novel are shaped by distinct racial and historical contexts. Both novels depict the systematic racial oppression of groups such as Natives and Latinos, which contributed to the development of patriarchal domination. These two novels reveal power dynamics and social empowerment of white Americans who used to consider other humans as inferior to them. Perhaps, white American men might portray the idealized version of patriarchy but they were the actual oppressors in society to dehumanize Natives or immigrant people. They were the racist and judgmental ones in society who reinforced the chain of patriarchy among Mexican-American people. The racial and economic exploitation were the key factors behind framing the patriarchal mindset of immigrants. The patriarchal domination was the actual reflection of their marginalization, powerlessness and disempowerment in the society. Understanding these deeper roots is essential not to justify such behaviors, but to challenge and resist broader systems of inequality.

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