Esperanza's Quest For Her Own Voice in *The House on Mango Street*

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This paper foregrounds Esperanza's transition from childhood to adolescence, depicted as an endeavor to develop and assert her personality. We see how she, a rather underprivileged Mexican American girl absorbs information like a sponge while assessing the surrounding reality. On the verge of adolescence, Sandra Cisneros' protagonist becomes immersed into an inner turmoil and starts to reflect extensively on what her life should be like. The ethnic background amounts to the inherent uncertainties and insecurities, specific to her age. As a Mexican American girl, Esperanza inherits many distressing stereotypes, feeling more than once ostracized by the mainstream white society. The unheard voice of all women in the barrio propels Esperanza to question the current state of affairs and to emerge as a spokesperson for all those powerless and passive women. Esperanza repeatedly challenges a hostile patriarchal society, where women are eventually imprisoned, their true self being suppressed, annihilated without anyone resisting it. It is concluded that through writing, she comes to grips with her insecurities, trying to create the most suitable place for her to live in. Stretching the wings of an untamed imagination, she flies in the face of adversity, managing to remap her universe.

Keywords: coming-of-age novel; self-discovery; patriarchal society; fighting discrimination; individual versus collective voice; writing envisioned as a liberating means.

Introduction

Sandra Cisneros is an important contributor to Chicano literature. Cisneros was born in Chicago in 1954, the only girl in a family of seven children. Her Mexican father and her Mexican-American mother moved the family between Mexico and the United States a number of times, a phenomenon that drives much of her fiction. In 1976, she earned a B.A. from Loyola University in Chicago and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1978.

Cisneros was shy about sharing her writing until she recognized the significance of her heritage, thus her work focuses on issues that are related to her Mexican roots. She examines, for example, the conflict that Mexican Americans experience on the borderland between two very different cultures. She explores as well the frustration that Mexican and Mexican –American women encounter in a male-dominated culture that demands obedience from its women.

After graduating with an M.A. from the University of Iowa in 1978, Cisneros went to work at Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago. In many respects, the job returned her to her childhood roots. Though the students drained her emotionally, they also provided her with more stories to add to her own memories of coming of age in the city. After that stint, she worked at Loyola University of Chicago as an administrative assistant and counselor to minority and disadvantaged students. When she saw their hopeless situations, she vowed to "give back" in some

way. Armed with her own stories and devoted to telling the stories of her mother, her aunt, and the other Chicana women and disenfranchised people around her, Cisneros began writing *The House on Mango Street*.

She claims that the work emerged from her desire to add perspective to the barrio stories told by men. In her interview with Martha Satz, she recalled:

> "I have lived in the barrio, but I discovered later on in looking at works by my contemporaries that they write about the barrio as a colorful, Sesame Street-like, funky neighborhood. To me, the barrio was a repressive community. I found it frightening and very terrifying for a woman. The future for women in the barrio is not a wonderful one. You don't wander around these "mean streets." You stay at home. If you do have to get somewhere, you take your life in your hands. So I wanted to counter those colorful viewpoints, which I'm sure are true to an extent but were not true for me. "

Her fresh perspective intrigued both critics and readers.

Cisneros' cultural concerns drive the plot of her first novel, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), which takes place in contemporary Chicago and is told from the perspective of a first person narrator, Esperanza Cordero. Cisneros examines the financial limitations of the Cordero family. While the Corderos have achieved the American Dream of owning a house, it is not the home of their dreams. Young Esperanza, whose name means "hope", is aware of this difference. Esperanza spends her free time in the streets of the barrio, where the children play in abandoned cars and spend what little money they have in junk stores. In addition, Cisneros explores the machismo of Mexican culture. Her fiction illustrates how women have limited choices and are often the victims of domestic abuses. Young Esperanza recognizes that she must fight her culture's sexism. At the same time, however, Cisneros reminds the reader of the importance of Esperanza's identity; an old lady, a neighbour of the Corderos, tells Esperanza, "You can't forget who you are." Through her protagonist, Cisneros demonstrates that a woman (even a very young one) has the ability to empower herself.

Chicano Literature[1]

Chicano literature describes the writing of Mexican Americans from the 20th century to the present. People often use the word *Chicano* and *Mexican American* interchangeably, but the term *Chicano* generally refers to the ethnic pride and unique identity emerging from the civil rights movement among Mexican Americans (roughly from the 1940s to the present). The origins of Chicano literature date back to the 16th century Spanish Conquest of Mexico and continue through the colonization of Mexico from the 16th to 19th centuries, including Mexico's independence and the later U.S. annexation of Mexican territory in 1848 under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The year 1848 is an important date because it marks the beginning of Mexican-American literature, when the Southwest region became part of the United States.

The word *Chicano* comes from *mexicano* and was first used in literature by Mario Suárez in his 1947 collection of short stories, *El hoyo* (The hole). Initially *Chicano* was meant as a pejorative word; however, Mexican Americans reclaimed the name as an assertive sign of their identity. Mexican Americans, particularly those who came of age during the civil rights movement still use the word to signal their involvement in cultural and political activism. Because nouns agree in Spanish in gender (ending either in *o* or *a*), *Chicano* typically describes male writers or the corpus of Mexican-American literature since the 1940s, while *Chicana* refers to women writers and their writing. The earliest form of Chicano literature consists of the 19th century *corridos* (ballads sung in Spanish), the most popular being "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" from the 1850s. Nineteenth century periodicals in the Southwest also published Mexican-American poetry and essays. The 20th century marks the emergence of such writers as José Antonio Villareal, Josephina Niggli, Sabine Ulibarrí, and Américo Paredes. Niggli's *Mexican Village* was published in 1945, and Villareal's novel *Pocho* was published in 1959. The name *pocho* refers to an individual who has forgotten his Mexican roots and assimilated the values of a white, English- speaking establishment.

Identity conflicts and assimilation problems occur as a theme in Chicano literature of the 1940s and 1950s. Legitimization of Chicano identity through the use of Spanish and folklore drives much of the work written in the 1960s and 1970s. A clear sense of protest populates the literature of that period. Parallel to the African-American and Asian-American civil rights experiences, the Chicano movement looked to literary production as a vehicle for social protest and cultural affirmation.

The 1980s, the "Decade of the Chicana" revealed a publishing frenzy with the literary output of Helena María Viramontes, Sandra Cisneros, Cherríe Moraga, Denise Chávez, Pat Mora, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Bilingual Press and Arte Público Press, for their part,

advanced the critical literary production and creative writing of Chicanas. Years later, the book lists of *Aunt Lute Books* and *Third Woman Press* featured Chicana authors.

Contemporary Chicano writing comes in the form of fiction, poetry, and essays. It addresses themes as varied as immigration, assimilation, and family life, but its essence has remained consistent over time – to validate the experiences of Mexican Americans.

The House on Mango Street. A Coming-of-Age Novella

Sandra Cisneros'[2] *The House on Mango Street* centers on the life of Esperanza Cordero, a Mexican-American girl growing up in a Chicago *barrio*. The 44 vignettes in the novella are so rich in metaphor and pattern that they could also be regarded as prose poems. No matter the genre, *The House on Mango Street* is a coming-of-age story, for Esperanza Cordero is on a quest–for self-knowledge, self-definition, and self-acceptance within her working-class community of Latinos, blacks, and immigrants. While this work conveys the anger, frustration, and embarrassment of its young narrator, more important, it portrays the power of Esperanza's spirit and her ability to overcome obstacles erected through patriarchal and socioeconomic forces.

Before entering the text, readers receive insight into Cisneros' project with her dedication, "A las Mujeres/ to the Women." She dedicates her book in both English and Spanish, reinforcing her own dual ethnic background, to the women in her life. In doing so, she also acknowledges that a large part of her struggle for identity in the barrio was driven by issues of gender.

Cisneros chooses to tell the story in a series of vignettes that occupy their own liminal space. The stories resist assignation to a particular form, floating comfortably between prose poetry, the novel, and journal writing. In many ways, resistance forms the core of the book. Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* resists form, gender stereotypes, cultural norms, and prefabricated futures for the characters it portrays.

The author uses the voice of a child in the throes of puberty to tell her story. This is a savvy choice, allowing Esperanza to observe without passing judgment. Readers, therefore, bring their own cultural associations to the significant details Esperanza presents. Cisneros keeps her authorial intrusion minimal in adopting the girl's voice, thereby resisting the urge to be overtly political.

In writing about Esperanza's maturation, Cisneros includes the collective stories of women in Esperanza's distressed neighborhood, a barrio filled with dilapidated buildings. We see the unfulfilled hopes of so many women around her who are thwarted by economic and gender barriers and dead-end futures. These very women inspire assertiveness in Esperanza, who avows "not to grow up tame like the others who lay their head on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain". The women in her life influence her, including her mother who sighs, her unhappily married grandmother, for whom Esperanza was named, Mamacita, who speaks no English and her close friend, Sally, who flees her abusive father by marrying a man who forbids her to talk on the phone or look out the window.

Writing becomes a strategy in Esperanza's quest for self-expression. It is the transformational nature of writing that empowers her to represent the constraints of her poor neighborhood and its potential to nourish her imagination. Her growing consciousness is a direct result of her storytelling, as is her will to escape being a victim of her environment while simultaneously accepting the barrio as her own space.

Conflicts abound in this book: between the real and the ideal, aspirations and restrictions, freedom and confinement, innocence and experience, boys and girls, men and women, the haves and the have-nots, transience and stability, as well as belonging and alienation. Crafted with simple language and a conversational tone, this work is energized by these binaries and Esperanza's negotiation of them. Sandra Cisneros' style takes us by surprise, breaking canonical patterns. As Ellen McCracken[3] makes it clear:

> "[...] Cisneros transgresses the dominant discourse of canonical standards ideologically and linguistically. In bold contrast to the individualistic introspection of many canonical texts, Cisneros writes a modified autobiographical novel, or *Bildungsroman,* that roots the individual self in the broader socio-political reality of the Chicano community. As we will see, the story of individual development is oriented outwardly here, away from the bourgeois individualism of many standard texts. Cisneros' language also contributes to the text's otherness. In opposition to the complex, hermetic language of many canonical works, *The House on Mango Street* recuperates the simplicity of children's speech, paralleling the autobiographical protagonist's chronological age in the book." (Blooms' Guides, 2010: 63)

Esperanza imagines her departure and her return

to Mango Street in the book's last lines, "I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out."

For readers young and old, Esperanza Cordero personifies the saying that what does not kill us will make us stronger. In this regard, Cisneros' story shares literary terrain with other Latino coming-of-age stories, namely Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) and Julia Alvarez' *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). Within a broader context, Cisneros' novella can be read as one of the most popular contributions to Chicano literature.



The Story Behind The House on Mango Street

We might wonder how such an unusual and touching work like Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* has come into being, catching both readers and critics' attention within a relatively brief period. It has been the very author who has satisfied our curiosity, by elaborating on those particular circumstances that have sparked her interest in writing, in committing her ideas to paper in order to portray an immigrant's reality from a different angle. Undoubtedly, gaining all these insights into how the novel has been taking shape will allow us to pose the most appropriate questions when reading the novel.

It's been ten years since *The House on Mango Street* was first published. I began writing it in graduate school, the spring of 1977, in Iowa City. I was twenty- two years old.

I'm thirty-eight now, far from that time and place, but the questions from readers remain. Are these stories true? Are you Esperanza?

When I began *The House on Mango Street*, I thought I was writing a memoir. By the time I finished it, my memoir was no longer memoir, no longer autobiographical. It had evolved into a collective story, peopled with several lives from my past and present, placed in one fictional time and neighborhood – Mango Street.

A story is like a Giacometti sculpture. The farther away it is from you, the clearer you can see it. In Iowa City, I was undergoing several changes of identity. For the first time I was living alone, in a community very different in class and culture from the one where I was raised. This caused so much unrest I could barely speak, let alone write about it. The story I was living at twenty-two would have to wait, but I could take the story of an earlier place, an earlier voice, and record that on paper.

The voice of Mango Street and all my work was born at one moment, when I realized I was different. This sounds absurd and simple, but until Iowa City, I assumed the world was like Chicago, made up of people of many cultures all living together- albeit not happily at times but still coexisting. In Iowa, I was suddenly aware of feeling odd when I spoke, as if I were a foreigner. But this was my land too. This is not to say I hadn't felt this "otherness" before in Chicago, but I hadn't felt it quite as keenly as I did in graduate school. I couldn't articulate what it was that was happening, except I knew I felt ashamed when I spoke in class, so I chose not to speak.

I can say my political consciousness began the moment I recognized my otherness. I was in a graduate seminar on memory and the imagination. The books required were Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak Memory*, Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, and Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. I had enjoyed the first two, but as usual, I said nothing, just listened to the dialogue around me, too afraid to speak. The third book, though, left me baffled. I assumed I just didn't get it because I wasn't as smart as everyone else, and if I didn't say anything, maybe no one else would notice.

The conversation, I remember, was about the house of memory- the attic, the stairwells, the cellar. Attic? My family lived in third-floor flats for the most part, because noise traveled down. Stairwells reeked of Pine Sol from the Saturday scrubbing. We shared them with the people downstairs; they were public zones no one except us thought to clean. We mopped them all right, but not without resentment for cleaning up some other people's trash. And as for cellars, we had a basement, but who'd want to hide in there? Basements were filled with urban fauna. Everyone was scared to go in there including the meter reader and the landlord. What was this guy Bachelard talking about when he mentioned the familiar and comforting house of memory? It was obvious he never had to clean one or pay the landlord rent for one like ours.

Then it occurred to me that none of the books in this class or in any of my classes, in all the years of my education, had ever discussed a house like mine. Not in books or magazines or films. My classmates had come from real houses, real neighborhoods, ones they could point to, but what did I know?

When I went home that evening and realized my education had been a lie - had made presumptions about what was "normal", what was American, what was valuable- I wanted to quit school right then and there, but I didn't. Instead, I got angry, and anger when it is used to act, when it is used nonviolently, has power. I asked myself what I could write about that my classmates could not. I didn't know what I wanted exactly, but I did have enough sense to know what I didn't want. I didn't want to sound like my

classmates; I didn't want to keep imitating the writers I had been reading. Their voices were right for them but not for me.

Instead, I searched for the "ugliest" subjects I could find, the most un-"poetic"- slang, monologues in which waitresses or kids talked their own lives. I was trying as best I could to write the kind of book I had never seen in a library or in a school, the kind of book not even my professors could write. Each week I ingested the class readings and then went off and did the opposite. It was a quiet revolution, perhaps a reaction taken to extremes, but it was out of this negative experience that I found something positive: my own voice.

The language in Mango Street is based on speech. It's very much an anti-academic voice- a child's voice, a girl's voice, a poor girl's voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican. It's in this rebellious realm of anti-poetics that I tried to create a poetic text with the most language I could find. I did it neither ingenuously nor naturally. It was as clear to me as if I were tossing a Molotov.

At one time or another, we all have felt other. When I teach writing, I tell the story of the moment of discovering and naming my otherness. It is not enough simply to sense it; it has to be named, and then written about from there. Once I could name it, I ceased being ashamed and silent. I could speak up and celebrate my otherness as a woman, as a working-class person, as an American of Mexican descent. When I recognized the places where I departed from my neighbors, my classmates, my family, my town, my brothers, when I discovered what I knew that no one else in the room knew, and then spoke it in a voice that was my voice, the voice I used when I was sitting in the kitchen, dressed in my pajamas, talking over a table littered with cups and dishes, when I could give myself permission to speak from that intimate space, then I could talk and sound like myself, not like me trying to sound like someone I wasn't. Then I could speak, shout, laugh from a place that was uniquely mine, that was no one else's in the history of the universe, that would never be anyone else's, ever.

I wrote these stories that way, guided by my heart and by my ear. I was writing a novel and didn't know I was writing a novel; if I had, I probably couldn't have done it. I knew I wanted to tell a story made up of a series of stories that would make sense if read alone, or that could be read all together to tell one big story, each story contributing to the whole – like beads in a necklace. I hadn't seen a book like this before.

Am I Esperanza? Yes. And no. And then again, perhaps maybe. One thing I know for certain, you, the reader, are Esperanza. [4]

Why Leaving Behind Chicago?

Sandra Cisneros admits to the fact that she hasn't perceived Chicago, her native city, as a safe place where she could lead a fulfilling, creative life. She confesses, during an interview[5] conducted in San Antonio, Texas, in March of 2007, by Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak and Nancy Sullivan that Chicago, her childhood city, has not been an option as to ensure that her literary aspirations would be nourished, or her daily safety guaranteed.

EMJ: *So much of your work seems to emphasize spaces. There is obviously your much publicized reaction to Bachelard's* Poetics of Space *in* Mango Street. *I just finished rereading* Caramelo, *and there are the internal spaces, the homes, the apartments, the houses, and the urban spaces of Chicago, Mexico City, and San Antonio. What is it about these spaces that intrigues you?*

Sandra Cisneros: I think every space either frightens you, makes you ill because you have to clean it, or liberates you. Spaces give you a feeling, no? When I was a child, being in a tree was the most magical place I could be; I always felt happy in a tree. I could read there, I had privacy. Nobody could find me. Of course, I had to go to the park to get a tree. In my house, there were always a lot of things to do. But my mom was pretty good; if I had a book that was a pretty good excuse. But I feel as if still I'm very sensitive about ugly spaces or spaces that make me frightened, and there are so many urban spaces that frighten women and children. I felt very frightened in Chicago. Different towns have different emotions for us. Chicago still fills me with fear and dread and sadness every time I go back.

EMJ: *Why is that?*

Sandra Cisneros: I just don't feel happy there. If I go to some happy place, I think, "Oh, I wish everyone could come to this part of town," but they're busy in the basement cleaning this building. They're the ones that have to take three buses and a train to get here. Or they have to drive a jollop or spend hours on the expressway to be able to come here, so they're too tired. That's what I think when I am in a beautiful place in Chicago. It's a very disquieting feeling, to be there. I just came back from Buenos Aires and I had that same scary feeling. Everyone said, "Watch yourself, be careful!" It reminded me of being in Chicago when at any minute you could be happily sitting on a bus, and somebody could get up and machete you just because they are insane- that feeling that anything could happen. It would be a great violation; it could kill you or kill your spirit. It could frighten you at any moment- that has happened to me in Chicago, that feeling that any moment you could be victimized. It's not a pleasant feeling; you can't daydream or imagine or create when you are under that kind of *susto*. I'm

very sensitive about spaces, and I like to create a space even when I'm in a hotel that makes me feel peaceful and happy. That's why in my home and my office I work so hard to make it a refuge for the spirit so I don't have to worry when I get in the car and get out of the car or think about walking from my car to my door. I can think about the stupid things I think about.

[...] NS: *When you think about Chicana identity and Chicana writing in the twenty-first century, are there certain expectations tied to that, a certain radicalism, for instance?*

Sandra Cisneros: We are all different types of Chicanas; we have very different experiences. We all come from different parts geographically. I don't know Pat [Mora] that well. I know Denise [Chávez] really well, and we can sit down and talk with each other. I know Ruth Bahar, the Cuban writer. There are other writers that I am close to. We all do different things. It happened very early on when I was a young writer that I wasn't Chicana enough. People felt that I wasn't writing Chicano poetry because I was writing about love. I wasn't writing Chicano themes. But I always have dealt with my own themes, and I am a Chicana writer and that *is* who I am, I don't have any questions about what I am doing or why I am doing it. It's not an issue. I know who I am. There's always somebody who wants you to be their way of being a Chicana writer. But they don't know me and what I am doing. I do think that the women are very polite and supportive of each other.

Being an Inhabitant of the Barrio

A sense of despair, of silent resistance runs through Sandra Cisneros' novel. Within the first chapter, Esperanza immediately indicates the gap between the white middle-class families portrayed on television and the Latino experience in the barrio of Chicago. The white world has three bathrooms to the Cordero's one and enough bedrooms for every child to have his or her own. Esperanza also recognizes that, in order to participate in the broader white American world, she needs to inhabit a house that is a visible manifestation of success and assimilation.

> "But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in. There is no front yard, only four little elms the city planted by the curb." (Cisneros:3) [6]

For her, the home is a way to assume a public persona and eventually a place wherein she might assume an identity for her community. Her identity becomes inextricably interconnected with her home environment.

> "Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front. [...]
> Where do you live? she asked.
> There, I said pointing up to the third floor.
> You live there? There. I had to look to where she pointed – the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there. I nodded.
> I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go."(Cisneros: 3)

In the chapter titled "Boys & Girls," Esperanza continues her observations in regard to gender and family. She points out that in the Cordero home, her siblings all speak to one another, but outside it, the boys have their own lives and never interact with the girls. This segregation mimics the lives of the older people in the community and reinforces the gender stratifications that exist outside marriage: "The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside, they can't be seen talking to girls. Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friend...not ours."[7]

Esperanza's observations of cultural disparity continue as she critically examines her name in "My Name." In the United States, it means *hope*; in Mexico, it means *sorrow.* To Esperanza, it means bad luck, ill fate, and the sounds of her father's Mexican records. She associates grief and bad luck with her Spanish name due to her namesake, her great-grandmother, who like her descendant was born "in the Chinese year of the horse-which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female." Esperanza does not believe this, insisting it is yet another story meant to keep women oppressed and powerless. She says, "I think this is a Chinese lie, because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their woman strong." This observation pinpoints Esperanza's awareness of what kind of life the women lead within her community. She resists the idea of women being powerless, preferring instead

the legends of her wild grandmother who refused to marry. Esperanza explains further how her willful grandmother was abducted and forced to marry. She tells the reader how her grandmother was carried off "as if she were a fancy chandelier."

This story teaches Esperanza that to be a woman is to be a commodity, one that can be bought, sold, and even stolen. She continues the story, claiming that her grandmother never forgave her grandfather; instead, she spent the rest of her life looking out a window, "the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow." This image of women staring out windows pining for some sort of freedom or independence from their husbands or fathers is one that returns throughout the book. For Esperanza, it figures as a prison with a princess hidden away never to come out. In her world, princes do not rescue but imprison the princess.

> "In English, my name means *hope*. In Spanish, it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. [...]
> It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse- which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female- but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong. My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.
> And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow."(Cisneros: 4)

Esperanza directly addresses race and ethnicity and their relation to inclusion and exclusion in "Those Who Don't." She watches people come into her neighborhood, scared that they will be attacked. Here, "All brown all around," there is no difference to fear. She knows every strange figure in the neighborhood. Even when Louie's cousin returns with his stolen car, the children greet him as a friend, because of his relation to the neighborhood. With knowledge comes lack of fear and, with that, a kind of power. Still, she recognizes that white people are not the sole perpetuators of racial distrust. She notes that her family also rolls the windows up tight in a neighborhood "of another color." She muses that this is "how it goes and goes."

> "Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake. But we aren't afraid. [...] All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight."(Cisneros:6)

In "The Family of Little Feet," the girls have another collective experience when they receive a bag of shoes from a family in the neighborhood. The multicolored shoes are exciting to the girls, offering them the chance to pretend to be Cinderella, or an older girl who attracts men like flies. As they swap shoes and try them on, Lucy orders them to take their socks off, and when they do they realize that they have legs like the older girls, the kind that potentially draws the attention of men. They walk down the street to the grocery store. Around them, the men are abuzz, some indignant and wanting to protect the girls from growing up too quickly, others filled with lascivious intent.

Their sense of empowerment dies, however, when they meet a homeless man who compliments them and offers a dollar for a kiss. Suddenly, the male attention that brought so much pleasure is now rife with potential violence. The girls run from him and decide they are tired of being beautiful. For the first time, they encounter the hungry gaze of the male sexual predator, and the experience so frightens them that when Lucy's mother throws the shoes out a few days later, none of the girls utters a whisper of complaint.

> "Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly, and we laugh at Rachel's one foot with a girl's gray sock and a lady's high heel. Do you like these shoes? But the truth is it is scary to look down at your foot that is no longer yours and see attached a long long leg.
> [...] We are tired of being beautiful. Lucy hides the lemon shoes and the red shoes and the shoes that used to be white but are now pale blue under a powerful bushel basket on the back porch, until one Tuesday her mother, who is very clean, throws them away. But no one complains." (Cisneros:8)

"A Rice Sandwich" chronicles another epiphany for Esperanza. Everyday she goes home for lunch, envying the children who remain at school to eat in the cafeteria. The cafeteria or "canteen" as she calls it, becomes a fixation for Esperanza; she wants to know what goes on there and convinces her mother

to write a note to school explaining that Esperanza is too weak to walk to and from school in the middle of the day. The nun allows her to stay at school for one day, so Esperanza gets her wish. She goes to the canteen but only after meeting with Mother Superior who questions her until Esperanza is in tears.

The experience reveals for Esperanza the nun's beliefs concerning the possibilities for Mexican families.

> "You don't live far, she says. You live across the boulevard. That's only four blocks. Not even. Three maybe. Three long blocks away from here. I bet I can see your house from my window. Which one? Come here. Which one is your house?
>
> And then she made me stand up on a box of books and point. That one? She said, pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn't my house and started to cry." (Cisneros: 9)

"Hips" is a pivotal chapter because Esperanza emphatically articulates the chasm caused by age and knowledge between herself and her sister, Nenny. The girls, excluding Nenny, are now well on their way into puberty and with that comes the acquisition of a certain set of culturally derived expectations, based on gender and socioeconomic status: "Nenny, I say, but she doesn't hear me. She is too many light-years away. She is in a world we don't belong to anymore. Nenny. Going. Going." [8]

The notion of respect carries into the vignette entitled "Born Bad", as Esperanza relates the most evil deed she has ever committed. The chapter begins with her mother praying for Esperanza because she was born on an evil day. Her friends Lucy and Rachel pray, too, for forgiveness for what they and Esperanza did to Aunt Lupe. Lupe is Esperanza's aunt, a woman formerly beautiful and vibrant, who has been laid low by disease.

During one visit to Aunt Lupe, the girls decide to include the ailing woman in a game they play. In the game, they select a famous person to imitate until someone guesses the identity correctly. On this day, the girls decide that it would be fun to choose people from around the neighborhood to imitate rather than celebrities. They decide to imitate Aunt Lupe. Esperanza experiences conflicting feelings because she loves her aunt. Lupe is the only person who listens to every word she says. Esperanza would bring library books and read them to her. When she finishes reading, her aunt compliments her, and though she is tired, she gives Esperanza the advice that she clings to all her life: to keep writing in order to maintain her freedom.

Aunt Lupe becomes an iconic figure for Esperanza. Lupe is one of the few women who encourage her to be self-reliant and independent, which makes Esperanza's guilt nearly overwhelming when she and her friends decide to do impressions of her.

> *"I want to be like the waves on the sea, like the clouds in the wind, but I'm me. One day I'll jump out of my skin. I'll shake the sky like a hundred violins.*
>
> That's nice. That's very god, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant." (Cisneros: 12)

In the chapter "Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water," Esperanza goes to the home of the local "witch woman" to have her palm read. Much of the expected mysticism of a fortune teller is missing in this home as Elenita is still a woman with a messy house, needy children, and plastic-covered furniture. Elenita takes Esperanza's hand, looks into it, and closes her eyes. She begins to tell Esperanza what she sees. The most important revelations are the last two: "an anchor of arms" and "a home in the heart." With the anchor, she predicts community to be a part of Esperanza's identity as an adult. With the home in the heart, she predicts that Esperanza's desire to have a house she can be proud of will manifest itself on the interior before she possesses the actual physical structure.

Her house is built by the stories and experiences of those around her and by her own compassion and belief in bearing witness to them.

> "My whole life on that kitchen table: past, present, future. Then she takes my hand and looks into my palm. Closes it. Closes her eyes too.
>
> Do you feel it, feel the cold?
>
> Yes, I lie, but only a little.
>
> Good, she says, *los espíritus* are here. And begins. This card, the one with the dark man on a dark horse, this means jealousy, and this one, sorrow. Here a pillar of bees and this a mattress of luxury. You will go to a wedding soon and did you lose an anchor of arms, yes, an anchor of arms? It's clear that's what that means.
>
> What about a house, I say, because that's what I came for.
>
> Ah, yes, a home in the heart. I see a home in the heart.
>
> Is that it?" (Cisneros: 12)

Esperanza sees her future if she gives into her

urges: she will have a boyfriend and she will have the freedom of her newfound maturity, but she will be classified as bad. She also believes that with these newly found sexual urges, she will become a whole new person, as if the first years of her life were simply a rehearsal for the divine being she is to become, Still, perhaps being labeled as bad would be better than the intense longing she feels: "Everything is holding its breath inside me. Everything is waiting to explode like Christmas. I want to be all new and shiny. I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not this way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out my window, imagining what I can't see." [9]

In "Four Skinny Trees," Esperanza pays homage to the trees that constitute her confidantes. She relates to them believing that they, like her, are misplaced in the city. They speak to her at night through the window, but it is a special secret because her sister, Nenny, sleeps through the whispers. In an act of intense identification, Esperanza describes the trees as having secret strength. She admires their fierceness and wants it for herself, a sustaining desire that will help through her shame of living on Mango Street and maintain her desire for a real house. The trees represent sheer perseverance against the harsh challenges of the city. Their lesson is determination, and when Esperanza fears that she will forget to stay true to this family and their message, she stares at the branches that continue to reach into the sky despite their surroundings.

> "They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city. From our room, we can hear them, but Nenny just sleeps and doesn't appreciate these things.
> Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.
> Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.
> When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be." (Cisneros: 14)

The decision Esperanza makes in "Beautiful and Cruel" is part real choice, part fantasy, and part compromise. Ultimately, she decides not to follow the accepted, culturally sanctioned example of such women as Rafaela, Minerva, *Mamacita*, Rosa Vargas- even Sally, Marin, and her own sister Nenny, who are waiting for someone to take them away from their childish dependency into what seems to be only an adult dependency. To Esperanza, if this is what "acting like a woman" amounts to, then she will begin to practice "acting like a man," which means in part that she will start letting somebody else carry out her dinner plate for her. But the way Esperanza reaches this decision is interesting. She tells herself she is "ugly" and will not be courted. In part, she may believe this because she fails to meet her culture's standards of "beauty"- she is "skinny."

> "I am an ugly daughter. I am the one nobody comes for.
> Nenny says she won't wait her whole life for a husband to come and get her, that Minerva's sister left her mother's house by having a baby, but she doesn't want to go that way either. She wants things all her own, to pick and choose. Nenny had pretty eyes and it's easy to talk that way if you are pretty.
> My mother says when I get older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean [...].
> In the movies, there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away.
> I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate."
> (Cisneros: 16)

On the verge of adolescence, Esperanza starts observing the way people interact in order to gain awareness of the complex and unfair gender roles dynamic. The women in the *barrio* succumb to a patriarchal oppressive system, lacking either the power or the will to escape such traditional behavioral patterns. Mary Patterson[10] reinforces the recurrence of the theme of love throughout the novel:

> "The theme of love as power [...] appears even in *The House on Mango Street,* in the lives of Esperanza's acquaintances and in her own youthful experience. Rafaela, Minerva, *Mamacita,* and Sally- after her marriage- are all overpowered by their husbands, physically or otherwise, as a matter of course. Whatever the relationship between her own parents, it seems

> that Esperanza sees a normal love-and-marriage relationship as one in which the man holds and exercises complete power over "his" woman. The only alternative, she believes would have the woman holding complete power. In "Beautiful and Cruel", she decides that she prefers that option, but a possible relationship in which power is held equally by both partners, a more-or-less equal give-and-take relationship, or even one in which power is *not* a major factor (or weapon) seems not to occur to her." (Cliffs Notes, 2001: 89)

I think that Sandra Cisneros portrays Esperanza as somebody who chooses to pursue self-definition, self-discovery over settling for a less demanding destiny and for a more conventional existence, overshadowed by someone else's (a boyfriend, a brother, a father, or a husband) authoritarian decisions. Consequently, she refuses to be denied the right to decide what is best for herself, choosing to enjoy life without incurring the risk of being objectified, without her willingness being infringed upon. Myrna –Yamil Gonzáles[11] also underscores Chicana writers' preoccupation with becoming vocal about their own rights.

> "In many ways, Cisneros' work reflects the concern of contemporary Chicana feminism which combines the question of gender and sexuality with issues of race, culture, and class... Perhaps the most important principle of Chicana feminist criticism is the realization that the Chicana's experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and an ethnic subculture...The fact that Chicanas tell stories about themselves and other Chicanas/Latinas challenges the dominant male concepts of cultural ownership and literary authority and rejects the dominant culture's definition of what a Chicana is. In writing, they refuse the objectification imposed by gender roles and racial and economic limitations." (Bloom's Guides, 2010: 74)

Esperanza is vulnerable, yet aware of what she has to do to gain strength and to turn into a self-reliant person. She wants to defy her circumstances, to be in charge of her destiny, overcoming all obstacles that might prevent her from reaching that "home in her heart" that Elenita, one of her neighbors, tells her about.

Being in the pursuit of understanding how she can escape all those limitations that have burdened her family's shoulders, making them shake quite often, Esperanza closely watches her neighbors' life, entering a maze of reflections, interrogations and revealing answers. If she truly wants to escape the traps that a vicious circle of predator *versus* prey implies, of men arbitrarily making decisions on behalf of their silent sisters, daughters and wives, and those women, sometimes complacently accepting this for fear of being deserted, then she has to stand up for what she believes. The women in the *barrio* are teaching Esperanza lessons about what path not to take in order not to become another immigrant woman with a miserable life, whose hopes for a better life have all vanished in the thin air, a woman who does not own a voice of her own. Bridget Kevane[12] claims that by closely observing how life passes within the *barrio*, Esperanza draws her own conclusions and begins to make her own decisions in what regards the future.

> "The creation of the *barrio* characters pays tribute to Cisneros' roots. The *barrio* is Esperanza's place of origin and, thus, synonymous with the origins of her identity. Esperanza observes, in both subtle and not so subtle forms, patriarchal oppression, domestic abuse, sexism, intolerance, oppression, bigotry, and poverty. Her sense of self will be derived from these observations; she realizes that she can potentially become any of the women she observes. That she survives, like the four skinny trees outside her window, is tribute to her strength, the strength of a young girl who already knows she does not want to inherit a place by the window." (Bloom's Guides, 2010: 95-96)

Sandra Cisneros' literary approach strikes me as a very challenging one, rather unconventional, where several genres blend into an emotional chronicle of Esperanza's coming-of-age. As Deborah L. Madsen[13] puts it:

> "The narrative techniques of her fiction demonstrate daring technical innovations, especially in her bold experimentation with literary voice and her development of a hybrid form that weaves poetry into prose to create a dense and evocative linguistic texture of symbolism and imagery that is both technically and aesthetically accomplished..." (Bloom's Guides, 2010: 76)

Life teaches Esperanza some cruel lessons like not trusting her friends, not believing what they say about love. Being sexually assaulted, Esperanza stops deceiving herself about the nature of such relationships. She grows extremely vulnerable, yet she proves to be capable of leaving the dramatic events behind. Patsy J. Daniels[14] underscores the suffering inflicted on Esperanza when her naivety and

inexperience turn her into an easy prey.

> "Cisneros makes clear the need for a change in society. As Cisneros' adolescent protagonist, Esperanza, grows up, she learns that there is a difference between appearance and reality. The patriarchal system she and her community live under covers up the truth and romanticizes women's role so that the women will accept their roles as either whores or wives. For example, the system romanticizes sex, but Esperanza finds out through her violent and humiliating initiation to sexual intercourse that there is nothing romantic about sex. Esperanza blames her rude awakening not only on her individual friend, Sally, who knows about sex already and who has failed to either inform or rescue her, but also the whole system." (Bloom's Guides, 2010: 82-83)

I highlight the fact that the unheard voice of all women in the *barrio* propels Esperanza to question the current state of affairs and to also emerge as a spokesperson for all those powerless and passive women. Esperanza repeatedly challenges a hostile patriarchal society, where women are eventually imprisoned, their true self being suppressed, annihilated without anyone resisting it.

In my opinion, Esperanza makes sure that what one conventionally considers his/her *home* has to be a place devoid of any constrains, a place meant to reinforce one's identity and where a sense of freedom floats, therefore a place exhaling self-confidence along with self-respect. Only a place meeting such criteria could possibly make for a woman's *home,* instilling an unchallenged sense of belonging in her. Helena Grice[15] emphasizes the multiple significances that *a house* acquires in Sandra Cisneros' work, a semantic multiplicity also mirrored by their feminine inhabitants' horizon or lack of it.

> "If the idea of a home represents freedom for Esperanza, then she is equally aware that the house can be a confining space for women. The house, as the realm of patriarchal control, can become a more hazardous place for women than the *barrio* outside: women are often depicted as locked in (like the woman Rafaela), abused (like Esperanza's friend, Sally), or confined by domesticity (like Esperanza's mother). Learning this too, Esperanza's dream home becomes a female-only space." (Bloom's Guides, 2010: 90)

Conclusions

Esperanza embodies a whole array of aspirations. Sandra Cisneros depicts her as a more mature person than we would expect a 12-year-old girl to be. She is not afraid of challenging rules and barriers, always seeking answers to match a wealth of questions that the transition from childhood to adolescence entitles Esperanza to ask.

Her family's precarious financial conditions exert an unquestionable influence on how the child on the path of turning an adolescent envisions her future. Through all the hardships that her family and she go through, she acquires a broader perspective on how things are working in the world. *The House on Mango Street* has been thought as a demystifying exhibition of the way people really lived within one of the Hispanic immigrant's enclave, therefore within a multiethnic perimeter where dangers used to lurk around all corners.

In terms of race and ethnicity, in the protagonist's mind, it was safer to face the already acknowledged weird persons, potentially dangerous than to just venture outside one's *barrio* borders and wake up in the middle of a different, therefore hostile ethnic community. Consequently, discrimination is portrayed as a multi-lane highway.

We see how Esperanza embraces the needs of an entire community of women to later project them into a genuinely demanding life outlook, a sort of vengeance for all the sufferings these women have endured within an oppressive patriarchal society.

The protagonist of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* gets inspiration mainly from the women around her, whose house is far from a proper home as it fails to liberate them; instead, most women whose acquaintance Esperanza makes throughout the novel live imprisoned in an alienating house, entirely isolated, overwhelmed by a lack of freedom and utterly engulfed by their solitude and sadness.

How defiant of a patriarchal society is Esperanza? She won't accept to be silenced; she won't tolerate to be ignored just because she is a girl, therefore weaker than men and also bound to be obedient. Eventually, she sets an example of resilience thanks to her determination not to be a victim, not to let life bully her, and by not abandoning herself to despair. Even when she faces difficulties, real turning points in her life, Esperanza finds the inner strength to resume efforts and continue struggling for a rewarding future.

Quick-witted, critical, willing to learn, to understand, to discover, to evolve, Esperanza comes across as an *agent* in her life instead of a mere *patient*, always unheard and unseen, living subject to others' whims.

Writing enables Esperanza to largely open a

window in order to get a glimpse of a better world, a more balanced one where hopefully she won't be discriminated against because of any number of reasons.

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1. Luz Elena Ramirez, *Encyclopedia of Hispanic –American Literature.* New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2008, pp. 71-73
2. *Ibidem,* pp. 161-162
3. Ellen McCracken, *Cisneros' Place In The American Literature Canon*. In: *Bloom's Guides: The House on Mango Street. New Edition*, editor Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010, p.63
4. http://bookzz.org/book/838132/fceb6c, Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*, retrieved February, 20, 2015, pp. 1-3
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