

Establishing Sisterhood: A Budding Poet's Responsibility in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study Esperanza, the Chicana protagonist of Sandra Cisneros's novel The House on Mango Street, who desires to establish her identity as a woman and a poet to represent the marginalized women of her community. She believes that she needs to come out of the role imposed on her by society to establish herself as a writer and to proclaim her true female identity. Esperanza searches for self-respect. In doing so, she discovers the reasons behind women's confinement and the sources of patriarchy's hold over women. She understands that social conditioning plays a vital role in holding women back. In her quest for identity as a Mexican American, she also tries to create a space in literary tradition as she feels a strong desire to speak out for those women of her community who cannot come out of their social imprisonment. She realizes that she must do something for them and finds that writing their untold stories could be a way of paying tribute to them. She has intensely observed their pain, suppression, and unfulfilled desires. So she takes the initiative to break the barriers of patriarchal control to ensure women's rights in her society. Thus she feels the necessity of establishing a sisterhood to break the patriarchal web and to give due credit to women's contributions to society, which would allow her and her fellow women to come out of internment and find the route to freedom.

Weaving together a series of vignettes or literary sketches, *The House on Mango Street* tells the coming of age story of Esperanza Cordero, a pre-adolescent Mexican American girl who lives in the United States. The novel opens with the description of Cordero's small and cramped family house on Mango Street. Despite its limitations, the house is an improvement from the family's previous apartments. This is the first house the family has owned. However, Esperanza does not like her new house which is in the center of a crowded Latino neighborhood, because she feels threatened to identify herself with the shabby house as it clearly exposes her socio-economic condition. Initially, she does not want to stay in her new house and is ashamed of it. But as she matures, she realizes that Mango Street has been her home and the denial of living in the place means the denial of her own existence. While she grows up as a woman, she attempts to understand the place. She realizes that Mango Street is crowded with women who have different stories of hope and are desperate to narrate their stories. These untold and unheard stories are the inspiration for Esperanza to set out and achieve her goal of freedom for herself and for other women.

After moving to her new neighborhood, Esperanza matures in terms of age and experience. In the course of the novel we see that she develops friendship with teenage girls and scrutinizes them carefully for clues about becoming a woman. Unfortunately, most of the women she encounters in Mango Street are defeated, torn, and trapped under patriarchal authority. The hegemony of patriarchy is so deeply rooted in their psyche that they have never thought about

rebellious against men or calling for them to change. While searching for a perfect home and struggling to construct her identity, Esperanza feels that she has to take some responsibility for the confined women of her locality. She recognizes the importance of establishing a sisterhood to counter patriarchy. Esperanza promises that even if she leaves Mango Street, she will continue to take responsibility for the women in her neighborhood. She deeply feels the responsibility and finds writing as a way of fulfilling her promise.

In the forty-four vignettes of *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros presents haunting images of women in a Mexican community in America. We come across many trapped women: a young woman who is locked up in her own home because her husband fears she would run away as she is "too beautiful to look at" (79); a young girl who cannot come out of her home and goes to school with marks on her body because her father beats her, thinking she will elope; a young woman pursuing dreams of higher education with fears of "four-legged fur. And fathers" (32); and women who "sit their sadness on an elbow" (11) and wish for different lives. These stark realities of women living on Mango Street are shaped by male customs, behavior, and violence. Thus, through Esperanza, a young girl who lives in a working class Latino neighborhood in Chicago, Cisneros not only tells us of the sufferings of women in such a suffocating environment, she also shows vibrant women with imaginative and inventive attitudes who try to alter their reality and search for a new space. This sharp contrast observed by Esperanza as she grows up brings hope and creates scope in paving her path.

In an interview, Cisneros has said that in her work she writes against the stereotypes circulating about Latinas and focuses on the "fierce" nature of women who are strong despite adversity. She says:

I have to say that the traditional role is kind of a myth. I think that the traditional Mexican woman is a fierce woman. There's a lot of victimization but we are also fierce. We are very fierce. Our mothers had been fierce. Our women may be victimized but they are still very, very fierce and very strong. I really do believe that. (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 300)

Esperanza is one such "fierce woman," full of optimism but conscious of the limitations that the male-constructed society places around her and other women. In her continuous struggle to construct a new space and open up possibilities for herself, she speaks up for the confined women attempting to find routes to freedom.

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, advised women to "think back through our mothers" (79) in order to establish a literary canon in women's literature. In her essay "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," Luce Irigaray offers the same advice. She questions the validity of a culture and a society where people forget their mother's contribution and marginalize and suppress them. She also wonders about the social conditioning of a man that lets him forget his mother: "he should make progress, advance, go outside and forget her" (418). She questions the representation of mothers; in other words, the representation of women in western culture: "And the relationship with the placenta, the first house to surround us, whose halo we carry with us everywhere, like some child's security blanket, how is that represented in our culture?" (418).

Despite the patriarchal society's constant attempt to ignore our mothers' contribution, young Esperanza had found safety in her mother's lap. In the chapter "Hairs" in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, while describing her family members' hair, she praises her mother's that looks like "little candy circles all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pin curls all day" (6). She breathes the sweet smell of her mother's hair when her mother holds her close: "holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin" (6-7). She finds the space next to her mother the safest place in the world and gets her inspiration from it. Her subjective description of "I" becomes a collective "you" in the course of narration as a mother's lap is the most secure shelter for a child. She understands this universal truth before she becomes corrupted by the established male dominated socio-cultural norms.

Woolf's statement "think back through our mothers" (79) to establish a sisterhood surely encourages Cisneros and this encouragement is evident in the chapter "A Smart Cookie." By "mothers," Woolf means the neglected female poets and authors of the literary tradition. For Cisneros, these mothers are not only the poet or author-mothers that Woolf suggests but also the mothers she came into close contact with in her everyday life. Doyle says that "for both Alice Walker and Sandra Cisneros, these mothers include women outside the 'tradition'" (25). These anonymous mothers outside the "tradition" continuously "handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see" (Walker 240).

Esperanza's mother's "encouragement" (Doyle 24) guided her development as an artist. "A Smart Cookie" opens with the mother's advice to her daughter: "I could have been somebody, you know?... Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard ... Got to take care all your own" (Cisneros 90-91). Esperanza's mother wishes her to be somebody that she herself could not become. Esperanza's tribute to her mother starts with a list of her talents, "She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a TV ... She used to draw when she had time" (90) and ends with a list of her unfulfilled desires: "Some day she would like to go to the ballet. Some day she would like to see a play" (90). But in reality all her talents were wasted and culminated in the kitchen. She does not want her daughter to inherit her fate or the fates of her *comaders*, women like "Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead" (91). Esperanza's mother's advice acts as a guiding force in shaping and developing her future. Esperanza's achievement of dreams is an extension and compensation of her mother's losses. The mother sees her daughter's success as an elaborate achievement of her own wasted talent.

Esperanza tries to link her rebellious desire of writing against the established social norms to represent the fate of women constrained by male brutality in her culture, echoing her great-grandmother's rebellion against her husband's forceful marriage and against the social conformity of women's confinement. The grandmother had rejected her marriage: "And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window all her life" (Cisneros 11). Esperanza is named after this strong woman, her Mexican great-grandmother; she also inherits her rebellious spirit and is linked through her with her cultural past, "to her identity as a woman within a particular socio-cultural context" (Eysturoy 67). However, although her great-

grandmother was a strong and rebellious woman, she protested against her confinement silently and had to accept patriarchal control. This makes Esperanza conscious of the position she upholds as a woman in her cultural framework. She understands that this framework prevented her great-grandmother from being "all the things she wanted to be" (Cisneros 11). Esperanza is given her great-grandmother's name. However, she decides to be even more rebellious since she does not want to inherit her great-grandmother's fate. As she puts it, "Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (11). Eysturoy notes "Esperanza links her great-grandmother's fate, her confinement, her sadness and lost hope, with her own name, that is, her self, making her name tantamount to her culture's definitions of gender roles" (67). Like her great-grandmother, she will not adapt the role that her culture fixes for her. She refuses to accept "a heritage of female confinement" (Eysturoy 67) and carries a legacy of rebellion against patriarchal confinement and control that prevent women from pursuing their dreams.

Another inspiration for Esperanza is her Aunt Guadalupe who encouraged her when she started writing as a young poet. She listened to every poem that Esperanza wrote, even if they were immature and childish. She understood the desire of this budding poet for freedom and was concerned about that her soul may become exhausted within the congested socio-economic conditions. Esperanza's tribute in "Born Bad" tells us that Aunt Lupe was once a swimmer whose strength she had admired before her aunt became paralyzed and blind: "Hard to imagine her legs once strong, the bones hard and parting water, clean sharp strokes, not bent wrinkled like a baby, not drawing under the sticky yellow light" (Cisneros 58). Even when she became very sick and almost blind, she would ask her niece and her friends to come and visit her. As Esperanza notes "We liked my aunt. She listened to our stories. She always asked us to come back" (60). Esperanza also liked to visit her as she could express her poetic self to Aunt Lupe without any fear of being criticized: "She listened to every book, every poem I read her. One day I read her one of my own" (60). Aunt Lupe cheered and complimented her "That's nice. That's very good" (61). Her advice to her young niece was to "keep writing. It will keep you free" (61). This inspiring advice helps her to focus on her poetic spirit. She confesses that at that moment she did not understand what her aunt had tried to say, but as Esperanza grew up, she found that her desire to tell stories and give shape to what she saw came from her aunt's inspiration. Aunt Lupe stimulated her inner spirit and she feels that it is her duty to write about her aunt, and to tell everybody how she found her bond of sisterhood with the women she would meet.

In her essay "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother" Luce Irigaray says that we must recall our "umbilical bond" (420) with our mothers: "if it respected the life of the mother – of the mother in all women, of the women in all mothers – reproduce the living bond with her" (420). She calls this process of remembering our bond with our mother as a "rebirth" (420), something she believes is necessary for every woman. Esperanza unknowingly did so by accepting her aunt's advice and expressing her gratitude through her writing. She finds it important to recall her relations with the women of her community. Not only did she strive to establish her "umbilical bond" (Irigaray 420) with her cultural mother and co-mothers in the

manner that Irigaray suggests, she also finds it necessary to talk for them and to acknowledge the sadness that they themselves could not talk about.

The friendship between Esperanza and Sally shown in *The House on Mango Street* helps Esperanza to explore the mythical lies of womanhood that prevent women's progress. Esperanza admires her friend Sally because she had "eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke" (81). The adventure of having a different eye color which makes her look attractive becomes a dangerous obstacle for her life; as her father says, "to be this beautiful is trouble" (81). She is physically abused by her father. She endures the cruel gossip of the boys in the coatroom and has an unhappy marriage even before she reaches eighth grade. She elopes with a marshmallow salesman whom she met at a school bazaar. Though Sally says she is in love, sensible Esperanza guesses why she really eloped: "she did it to escape" (101). She understands her friend Sally more than Sally's father does his own daughter. She wishes Sally a beautiful home with flowers and windows where all the sky would come into her room. She would have Sally escape the cruel reality of Mango Street but not in the manner she has chosen. She knows that Sally's elopement could not help her to escape the kind of male brutality which she experienced in her father's home or enable her to acquire the freedom she longs for. Although Esperanza tries to help Sally, the latter refuses since she had already accepted the male-defined "women's function and social role" (Irigaray 415). When Sally refuses Esperanza's attempt to save her from Tito and his friends who have entrapped her in a situation where she must kiss each of them to get her key back, Esperanza feels betrayed. Doyle says "the grief-stricken Esperanza loses the Edenic innocence of her girlhood" (30):

I looked at my feet in their socks and ugly round shoes. They seemed far away. They didn't seem to be my feet anymore. And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn't seem mine either. (Cisneros 98)

She understands that Sally has conceded to patriarchal domination and fallen into the trap of delusion projected by men.

Sally had wished for a fairytale escape where her marshmallow salesman prince would snatch her from her monstrous father, erasing her poverty and sadness. In contrast to Esperanza, Sally does not understand that such fairytales are basically concocted by men to dominate women. Sally falls into a trap; she allows Tito and his friends to take advantage of her and ends up marrying a person who does not allow her to talk on the phone or "let her look out the window" (Cisneros 101). The situation is quite ironic as Sally believes she is saving herself from a patriarch, forgetting that men share a common understanding of their authority.

As a close observer of the tension between social reality and women's conditions, Esperanza finds that "all the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong" (Cisneros 100). She understands at a very young age that the luck of women on Mango Street would never change as long as they believed in the false promises made by men about marriage and courtship. She recognizes that marriage could not be an escape from the harsh realities of Mango Street since she had seen her fellow women being trapped and emotionally buried by their husbands. Along with her friends and sister she had tried to be "Cinderella" by wearing high heels.

They had cheered “we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly” (40), but their excitement turns into an unpleasant experience as a drunken “bum man” offers to kiss them for a dollar. They sense that something is not quite right as they are not yet old enough to understand the implications of the man’s actions but they are relieved to be rid of the heels after this experience, perhaps unconsciously knowing that physical beauty offers nothing but the kind of sexual assurance which provides no freedom or space.

The male figures in most of Esperanza’s story are either threatening or absent (Doyle 31). Either they perform their duties as guardians perfectly by keeping the women under control or evade their responsibilities, leaving their women to it. Sally’s father beats her and makes sure she does not talk to the boys. Later, her husband forbids her from going out of the house without his permission. Rafael’s husband keeps her under lock and key, allowing her to only look out through the window. None of them are allowed to socialize in the absence of their guardians who are either their fathers or husbands. On the contrary, Minerva’s “mother raised her kids alone and it looks like her daughter will go that way too” (Cisneros 84). Minerva herself has two children and her husband “left and keeps leaving” (84). Edna’s daughter Ruthie stays with her mother and sleeps on a couch in her living room. She says, “she’s just visiting and next weekend her husband’s gonna come back to take her home, but the weekends come and go and Ruthie stays” (69). One of Esperanza’s godmothers’ husbands had left and the other had died. Esperanza observes that these women are entrapped by patriarchal society and imprisoned by their so-called princes. She portrays the beastly nature of the “princes” and shows how they repress women. She feels it necessary to rethink the issue of violence done to women and to make them aware of their condition.

On Mango Street, “most of the women yearn for different endings” (Doyle 31). They long for a different life and try to find ways of escaping confinement. Minerva writes poems secretly when her children are asleep. She shows her poems, written on small pieces of paper, to Esperanza. She takes a short escape from her “unlucky” (Cisneros 84) life by writing them. From her locked room Rafaela lowers a paper shopping bag on the clothesline on Tuesdays so that children could send papaya or coconut juice up to her, not unlike Rapunzel. She wishes for a sweeter drink, “not bitter like an empty room, but sweet like the island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys” (80). Like Rapunzel’s long hair, the shopping bag on the clothesline is her only way of communicating with the outer world. It allows her some consolation, some scope to meet “someone offering sweeter drinks” (80). Marin also wishes for a way out – a job downtown, nice clothes and “someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away” (26).

Esperanza is very different from the other women represented in the novel. She has learnt from their conditions and is careful to avoid their mistakes. She refuses to be trapped and imprisoned like the women around her. Being different from these women, Esperanza understands that women’s lives on Mango Street will never change until they themselves become aware of their condition and learn to fight for their rights. She feels that her act of writing can be a way of liberating the women around her from “the tyrannies of male houses

and male plots” (Doyle 33). In return for the women’s love and company, she intends to ask for justice on their behalf. As a conscious observer and a budding writer, she realizes that she will get the ultimate autonomy only when she can spread the thirst for freedom among all women and make a collective move towards the desired destination.

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