

The Women Figures and the Notion of 'Home' in Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street

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Abstract: Sandra Cisneros is one of the most prominent writers of American and Hispanic literary world. Her successful novel titled *The House on Mango Street* recounts the life, the milieu and the compelling experiences encountered by women from the eyes of Esperanza, the protagonist of the novel. However, there are a large number of resemblances between houses and the women figures. Esperanza thinking that she does not belong to there at the beginning of the novel is determined to make the women on Mango Street educated and optimistic about their future.

Keywords: Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, The Notion of Home, Feminism

Sandra Cisneros'un *Mango Sokağı*'ndeki Ev Adlı Romanında Kadın Figürleri ve 'Ev' Kavramı

Öz: Sandra Cisneros Amerikan ve Latin edebiyat dünyasının önemli yazarlarından biridir. Ünlü eserlerinden biri olan *Mango Sokağı*'ndeki Ev adlı romanında Esperanza adlı küçük bir kız çocuğunun gözüyle çevreyi ve hayatı tanımasını anlatır. Ancak yaşadığı çevre ve evler karakterlerle aynı kaderi paylaşmaktadır. Romanın başlangıcında yaşadığı bölgeye ait olmadığını düşünen başkahraman sonlara doğru gelişimini sürdürüp bölge kadınına eğitime ve onlara daha iyi bir gelecek hazırlama telaşına girmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sandra Cisneros, *Mango Sokak*'ındaki Ev, Ev Kavramı, Feminizm

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Introduction

Sandra Cisneros living in the US is one of the distinctive Hispanic authors of modern American literature. Ganz defines the author as “a fresh voice, a new presence in the spectrum of contemporary literature” (1994: 20). Needless to say, dealing with the circumstances of émigré women living in America, Cisneros manages to well depict these women towards non-Chicano citizens of America. *The House on Mango Street* written by Cisneros is a bildungsroman concerning about a girl named Esperanza and her experiences on Mango Street. As Olivares states that Esperanza “recounts her growth from puberty to adolescence within the sociopolitical frame of poverty, racial discrimination, and gender subjugation” (1996: 209) on Mango Street. The protagonist of the novel can be regarded as an instance of a young girl living in barrios. In other words, Esperanza is a prototype of Chicano literature as the critic demarcates as “an imitational saga” (Muhz, 2006: 23). By depicting so, Muhz emphasizes the novel’s and the author’s prominence in both American and Hispanic literature.

First of all, Esperanza recounts her experiences on Mango Street. The district where the protagonist perseveres is highly distinctive for giving hints about her class, society and lifestyle Kaup purports that the notion of ‘house’ is an insigne representing a person’s life and society, stating. “Buildings and cities express social aspirations and values; they function as barometers of social permanence and change” (1997: 361). In this sense, in Mango Street, where Esperanza spends her life is an indicator symbolizing her social status and the relationship between her family members and other individuals. However, while Eysturoy summarizes the novel, she states that the main theme shuttles between the protagonist’s home and her neighborhood. With this limited milieu, the protagonist manages to ascertain her progression and destiny. Eysturoy reflects this idea as:

As the title indicates, both “the house” and “Mango Street” are central symbols throughout the novel. Mango Street and the house Esperanza lives in constitute her world, the world she has to come to grips with as she grows up. It is her response to this particular environment, the interplay between psychological and social forces, that determines the direction of her *Bildungs* process. (1996: 90)

I. The Notion of ‘Home’

The woman perceived in the Hispanic society is a very important issue in understanding the novel. The dialogue between the protagonist and her friend Lucy, gives the extract of way of comprehension in the lower class. “There ain’t thirty different kinds of snow, Lucy says. There are two kinds. The clean kind and the dirty kind, clean and dirty. Only two” (Cisneros, 1991: 35), which implies that you are either white or black, Lucy does not assent to have the probability of being grey. In fact, the women’s life in the novel is just the same as the one depicted by her. Moreover, believing in Lucy’s sentences, Cota-Cárdenas repeats the same expressions. Exemplifying the religious archetypes, she states as;

Historically, the images of the Chicana (or Hispana) in literature can be divided into two categories: the “good” woman (with the archetype of

the Virgen de Guadalupe or Maria-AVE) and the “bad” woman (with the archetype of La Malinche-Cortes’ Aztec interpreter who symbolizes the archetypal traitress-or EVA). (1981: 13)

One must pay attention to the characters in order to understand the concept of ‘house’ or ‘home’. There are several numbers of traditional woman characters endeavoring to be good girls who are unfortunately called as bad girls by their society in the novel. Their family members and friends submit the hegemony of the man and the society by which they are compassed. Moreover, the women consent to their destiny when considered from the feminine point of view. For example one of the protagonist’s friends chooses the same destiny. The critic purports: “Although given these opportunities, she was expected to stay with her family in Chicago, to marry, and to become a mother, like a traditional Mexican Catholic daughter. However, Cisneros successfully avoided this tradition” (Kevane, 2003: 48). Furthermore; the minor characters regarding marriage as an independence or escape from home will confront with worse incidences in their life. Instead of the strife against the wishes of either the society or the family, the women in the novel accept all the limitations and obstacles. Martinez concerns about the situation of the Hispanic women who cannot express their emotion for the fear of being considered as a bad girl. She states as;

With the exception of Esperanza, the protagonist, women characters do not initiate events in their own lives; instead they endure poverty and racism from the society at large and oppression under the men in their lives. They do not get to choose their spouses, and when they do pick a boyfriend, and get pregnant, they are considered bad girls. (2002: 131)

To make an exemplification; from the beginning of the novel to the end, the protagonist’s grandmother is an important figure representing the traditional Chicano women in order to clearly understand the protagonists and her family. Her attitude – sitting on her elbow and looking out of the window– symbolizes the acquiesces of the destiny and men’s superiority. However, she stands as a prototype for the indication of the contradiction between her and Esperanza. When compared to the grandmother, Esperanza, of course, can be regarded as a modern woman avid to change. Inheritance of her name does not mean the procurement of her destiny as Esperanza states;

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. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn’t be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window. (1991: 11)

Unlike the other characters penned by Cisneros, Esperanza is very different from an expected traditional woman. Her body even rejects to be limited and dependent on someone else. For instance, “... me, my hair is lazy. It never obeys barrettes or bands” (Cisneros, 1991: 6). However, her characterization is a revolt against the tradition and the

hegemony of masculinity. Furthermore, the inclination to independence and the desire to write something about her past and future make her exceptional among others. The consciousness-raising of women in both novel and her real milieu are other beneficial factors which make Cisneros different from other women authors. The young Esperanza is aware of her responsibility for her family and society.

The name given to her is another stimulating situation reflected by Cisneros. While it means 'complication' or 'chaos' in Spanish, it means 'faith' and 'desire' in English language. The meanings of name are very prominent to indicate the author's perspective to both her own homeland and the USA. The author prefers 'hope' to realize her ambitions and dreams. Adumbratively, the reader deduces from Esperanza's thoughts and behaviors. In the novel, Esperanza says;

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters.
It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy
color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings
when he is shaving, songs like sobbing. (1991; 10)

The repetition of the bad characteristics in Spanish is the dreariness and monotony of her milieu. On the other hand, Esperanza, the voice of Chicano women is a very different character who is conscious about what is going on. In the novel she clearly attests to be a spokeswoman of her society. The protagonist's awareness is distinctive when assessed from feminine perspective. However, towards the end of the novel, her progression reaches its climax and she decides to come again and educate the women living there.

On the one hand, recounting the novel from a child's point of view makes the novel more attractive and readable. On the other hand, oral storytelling is another important element used in the novel. For instance; the protagonist communicating with no characters in the book speaks to her reader. "I used to write children's books once, did I tell you?" (Cisneros, 1991: 69) By doing so, Esperanza never gets bother her readers. To illustrate, "The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it's not the same you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries. I would" (Cisneros, 1991: 71). With this context, it can be concluded that Cisneros endeavors to make her novel attractive and lively especially for her Chicano readers who are not on good terms with English language.

Needless to say, one of the prominent characteristics of protagonist is her storytelling. As aforementioned, her writing children books put her for forefront of her friends. The creativity in her inside stimulates her feeling of independence and the lack of responsibility such as taking care of family and a husband. Furthermore, trapped in this milieu, the protagonist looks for a solution which will help her flee from there. González believes that the practice of writing assists Esperanza to educate herself and know exactly what she should do for her milieu. The critic relates the house with her writing;

Through her creativity, Esperanza inhabits the house of storytelling.
Consequently, the house is a book to be written, blank pages to be filled
with her voice and with the voices of women trapped by their economic

and cultural restriction. It represents the attainment of identity and the realization of freedom through the space of writing, as expressed in the last story, "*Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes*." (the author's emphasis, 2000: 104)

Also the individuals living in Mango Street are examples of both Chicanos and the protagonist Esperanza. The experiences with which they encountered enhance their maturation; hence, this energy gives power to endure men's hegemony and the social pressure. Besides, confronting with these obstacles, Esperanza gets acquainted with the women's problems which she deals with after returning to Mango Street. "Esperanza's critical eye notices all too well the fate of the women who decide to stay within the confines of Mango Street" (Rivera, 2003). Hence, it is a contribution to the protagonist who is exposed to the lamentable experiences. Although Esperanza is restrained with her house, she keeps on ameliorating her milieu. Karafilis, dealing with this issue, states that the incidences are compulsory for her effloresce.

In many ways, the Chicano community in her Chicago barrio serves as an extended family, and Esperanza learns about herself and her complex position as a working-class Chicana in the urban United States through the stories of her neighbors. Many chapters in the novel narrate incidents in the lives of others and constitute some of the "experiences" that shape Esperanza and her maturation. (1998: 66)

In this sense, the houses depicted in the novel give the almost every detail of the characters in the novel. "My family lived in third-floor flats for the most part, because noise traveled down. ... they were public zones *no one except us thought to clean*" (my emphasis, Cisneros, 1991:4). They have their own perspective regardless of others' thoughts and customs. The differences between them and the people living in better places can be easily come out. The house in which Esperanza and their family live represents their class and social status.

Furthermore, the home becomes a symbolization of shame and dishonor according to those who live in barrios: "You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there. I nodded" (Cisneros, 1991: 5). Furthermore, the elaboration of others starts with this shame. Owing to Esperanza's young age, it is a normal feeling for a child who lives in hard conditions because of poverty. Thinking that her friends come from real houses and milieu, Esperanza cannot freely express what she thinks and feels confused in front of her friends. The feeling of being ashamed of oneself turns into the concealment of identity. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Esperanza is ashamed of her name. "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do" (Cisneros, 1991: 11). Afterwards, thanks to good observations and experiences, Esperanza becomes distinctive from others and determined to change the destiny of women living on Mango Street.

The home is regarded as the rotor of traditions which limits what the women are able to do the way they behave. Her mother's statement "I could've been somebody, you know?" is a kind of self-sacrifice for her family. However, when looked from the feministic point of view, it is a social constraint made by both the society and the men. A border drawn by the husbands cannot be slipped across by the wives. On the other hand, Esperanza is determined to change herself and the women in her milieu. The home depicted here is again a kind of prison which isolates women from their own society. For example, the women characters who regard the marriage as a sanctuary confront with a worse 'house' segregating them from their family and friends and forcing them to work like slaves. As Casal purports, she does not prefer to be one of the ordinary wives. She states;

As Latina daughters of women whose options were limited or fixed by others, we experience "home" as an ambivalent, threatening space that punishes women and compromises their freedom to act. It is the witnessing of our mothers' lives that makes us think to ourselves growing up: "I don't want a life like hers." (1998: 338)

Doubtlessly, Esperanza is absolutely connected with Mango Street. The house symbolizes the characteristics of Esperanza and the young girls. Furthermore, there is no female autonomy which Esperanza wishes to create. For instance, Esperanza is primarily ashamed of her home and milieu. Encountering many incidences, Esperanza gets effloresced and through the novel she is determined to educate her milieu. In this respect, it is clear that Esperanza becomes a stereotype of Mango Street, dominated by men and the society. Olivares emphasizes the gender and the symbolization of female in the article. She states as:

The house on Mango Street is an extension of Esperanza Cordero's identity. While not as dilapidated as her previous house on Loomis Street, for her, its poor state is a sign of her poverty and shame. As her character develops in the work and she becomes more aware of her gender constraints, the wish for a pretty house becomes a desire for unfettered female space. At the conclusion, the house becomes a metaphor for the space of writing. (1996: 214)

On the other hand, Esperanza is distinctive from others and she clearly manifests herself from the beginning of the novel to the end. The creation of ideal 'home' becomes dissimilarity from others. There are a great number of examples such as the phrase of "But I know". This phrase reflects the protagonist's consciousness and sensibility. It also "indicates the emerging consciousness of the protagonist, that her passage from childhood innocence to knowledge has begun, a development that marks the beginning of her *Bildungs* process" (Eysturoy, 1996: 90). Her progression possesses the feature of perpetuity. Knowing that she cannot improve herself well by following her family and society imprudently, Esperanza is well aware that she will be unable to manage to have her own home or freedom if she does exactly what the others do. The same critic continuing on the same issue states; "Through her own interpretative agency she now

knows that she cannot rely on what her parents tell her and that they will not be able to provide her with the house that she needs" (1996: 90).

On the other hand, Esperanza well knows that her roots and culture flourish her background and the thing what Esperanza/Cisneros does Esperanza/Cisneros is their milieu. The house and Mango Street shape Esperanza's identity which is completely distinctive from others. With this respect, the main cause of her progression is her way of perception of the house and milieu. As González states all obstacles encountered and cultural heritage figure her voice:

All the female characters whose lives have enriched that of the protagonist and who represent a diversity of challenges and perspectives. As the protagonist, Esperanza revises and reclaims her cultural inheritance; Cisneros, the author, proposes a reconsideration of contemporary Chicana inheritance, evident in the voices of her female characters. (2000: 101)

Esperanza's desire to have their own house turns into a kind of obsession as it will be a place where she can freely express and do, no matter what she wants. Having a space no men dominate is one of the main themes of the novel inspired by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The critics deal with the inclination. Casal deliberately or inadvertently implies Woolf's short story: "Leaving Mango Street and finding a new home becomes a political project inspired by feminist desire. Esperanza doesn't want a house where she will continue to exist as the traditional Latina daughter and wife. She wants *a house of her own...*" (my emphasis, 1998: 340). On the other hand, home representing a prison and a center for suffer is then idealized by the protagonist who wishes to have her own house: "As the author's alter-ego, Esperanza knows she requires a space for autonomy in order to create her fiction and herself apart from the traditional role of women in her culture" (Martinez, 2002: 131). A space deprivation for women means the laceration of traditional women figure narrated in the novel. On the other hand, other critics think that it is an incidence which Esperanza attempts to metamorphose in her milieu. While the concept of 'home' is just a kind of physical object at the beginning of the novel, it becomes a place to freely live and express her thoughts and emotions. Instead of being nobody, she tries to be somebody. Olivares again purports:

The house on Mango Street is essentially the narrator's first universe. She starts here because it is the beginning of her conscious narrative reflection. Her description of the house is a metonymical description and presentation of herself. The house is much more than a place to live; it is an extension of her identity. (1996:215)

Furthermore, the depiction of ideal house is underlined by both the author and the critics. Attempting to realize her ideal home, Esperanza handles the problem from the feministic point of view. While the other women characters regard the home as a prison, the protagonist thinks that it can be a rest home or a shelter. "Esperanza dreams of a home that serves as refuge and sanctuary for female autonomy" (Casal, 1998: 340). On the other hand,

McCrossan depicts the ideal home as “It would be a house in a Chicano barrio like houses in the neighborhoods where Cisneros had spent her childhood, and it was the type of book no one else had written” (2000: 60). The phrase of ‘no one else had written’ is a symbol for women who wish to be only one and not to be classified by anyone. On the other hand, the protagonist knows what she wishes for herself and society. The idea of returning to the same street is a result of her repletion and the possibility of being able to educate the society. “Through naming herself and her community, Esperanza returns both to accept and to alter her inheritance. Her most conspicuous alliances when she constitutes herself as speaking subject are ethnic and local” (Doyle, 1994: 22). As Doyle states, Esperanza deals with t only Hispanic women, which reminds the readers of the immigrants living in America.

Furthermore, the stigmatization and belonging to somebody or somewhere are the things from which the Hispanic women refrain.. When Esperanza recounts her ideal house to her friend, Sally, she uses these kinds of sentences. On the other hand, Esperanza and the author herself think that women are forced to stay in the boundaries of men and the society. In the novel Esperanza clearly juxtaposes the characteristics of her ideal home:

Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn't have to go home? Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for you to climb up two by two upstairs to where a room is waiting for you. And if you opened the little window latch and gave it a shove, the windows would swing open, all the sky would come in. There'd be no nosy neighbors watching, no motorcycles and cars, no sheets and towels and laundry. Only trees and more trees and plenty of blue sky. And you could laugh, Sally. You could go to sleep and wake up and never have to think who likes and doesn't like you. You could close your eyes and you wouldn't have to worry what people said because you never belonged here anyway and nobody could make you sad and nobody would think you're strange because you like to dream and dream

What's more, unlike the traditional Hispanic women characters, there is also a modern and hopeful and auspicious figure like Alicia. Alicia keeping house for her family studies at the university. Reconciled with both herself and family, Alicia becomes a prototype for the girls of the same age similar to the protagonist Esperanza. “I like Alicia because once she gave me a little leather purse with the word GUADALAJARA stitch on it, which is home for Alicia, and one day she will go back there” (the author's capital, Cisneros, 1991: 106). The protagonist also exemplifies Alicia who schools herself and settles with her society. However, not only does the depiction of these kinds of figures towards the end of the novel represent the rightness of the protagonist, but also it may as well be a prototype for the émigré women.

On the other hand, the collaboration and mute consensus with each other provide them the power and endurance against the society and men. Anticipating the protagonist's

future, Alicia “also reminds Esperanza that Esperanza is Mango Street and will one day return” (Klein, 1992:24). In this way, we understand that not only is Esperanza avid to make the girls change and see a better world but also her progression and alteration are observed by her milieu like her friend Alicia.

Conclusion

Cisneros dealing with the Hispanic women in the USA and their problems proves her relevancy with the issue. Resembling the protagonist Esperanza, Cisneros takes the mission of education of her students. In this way, Cisneros starts to take the responsibility of Chicano women. In one of her speeches, when she is asked, she indicates about her teaching experiences. She recounts to interrogate herself by thinking what she can do for them. She states: “Or, how can I change these girls’ lives? They are my students. They have so many more troubles than I have. I was really a wealthy girl compared to them. In *Mango Street* I felt my own outrage and my responsibility” (Kevane and Heredia, 2000: 49). Also in the novel, she directly expresses her feelings and she says that she cannot educate the women without home. “One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house” (1991: 87). In this sense, both the narrator Esperanza and the author Cisneros have the parallel characteristics which resemble each other.

On the other hand, as aforementioned, the individuals and life are categorized as bad or good in the novel. However, Esperanza pioneers the new model for her contemporaries. In this context, the novel draws Esperanza as a person who helps the women suffering from the social constraints and family burdens. Furthermore, there is a slight progression from dependency to independency, from cultural limitations to self autonomy. As Petty states that she will become totally a prototype for her contemporaries:

Therefore, Esperanza transcends the good/bad dichotomy associated with these archetypes and becomes a new model for Chicana womanhood: an independent, autonomous artist whose house is of the heart, not of the worshiper, nor of the conqueror (2000: 123).

Furthermore, the home and the Mango Street represent the inner life and psychology of the protagonist. Moving to a better district or barrio is a kind of “the struggle of the Chicano/a people to find identities that are true to themselves as individuals and artists but that do not betray their culture and their people” (Klein, 1992: 23). Hence, it can be concluded that both symbols, the house and the Mango Street, have great importance in order to understand Esperanza and other women figures.

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