Esperanza's Development of an Identity in

*The House on Mango Street*

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*The House on Mango Street* is a novella written by a renowned Chicana writer, Sandra Cisneros (1954—), the only daughter of a Mexican-American mother and a Mexican father. The book is based on memories of Cisneros's own life after her family settled into their first house in a poor Chicago neighborhood when she was 12 years old. This was an important time for the development of an identity of a coming-of-age girl because she then began to observe critically the kinds of feminine identity her male-dominated oppressive Mexican American culture could offer. Cisneros found a voice by creating the voice of an adolescent Chicana, Esperanza, which, in Spanish, means "hope".

Consisting of 44 sketches or vignettes, using lyrical yet deceptively simple language, the book portrays an entire class and sex of people—the
poor Mexican American women—stuck in a cycle caused by the ill effects of male oppression and white domination through the eyes of the narrator, Esperanza Cordero, who is desperate to change the life she seems destined to have, but faced with gender, language and monetary barriers. Esperanza learns to shape an identity through self-awareness and art. She learns that in order to escape the constricted life on Mango Street she must shed her dependence on men and struggle hard for self-determination.

House is a symbolic image in the book that represents ideas like independence, pride, a stable life and dreams of a family. But the house on Mango Street that Esperanza's family finally move into after constant moving is not the house like that and therefore is certainly not the house that Esperanza has been longing for. On the first page, she tells the readers her opinion about it: “It's so 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” (Sandra Cisneros, 1984, p. 4). The house on Mango Street she describes is a poetic metaphor for her present life, and possibly her future too. It brings to mind specific images of suffocation, things crumbling and not fitting, discomfort and poverty. The “swollen door” that does not easily open represents the difficulty she faces in carving a separate identity. She cannot simply push open her front door and leave the house, and forever leave behind her poverty and discrimination—the conditions that hold her down. She must work at finding a place in the world, a place that she fits in. When she says that the small windows are “holding their breath”, she seems to be saying that she herself is waiting to breathe, symbolically waiting to live, because a person “not breathing” is a person not living. These images parallel how Esperanza feels about the world. The house does not represent health, comfort or vitality, but something in need of desperate repair and work. She has no control over anything, and she feels very un-
comfortable. The house that Esperanza ideally wants is "a real house... that would have running water and pipes that worked" (p. 4), a house "white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (p. 4). This dream with "big trees" and "growing grass" represents a house full of life and beauty; nothing sounds stunted or sick. More importantly, this is a description of a house without a "fence", without barriers or limitations. This ideal house, therefore, symbolizes Esperanza's hope and existence. She hopes to have an existence without a ceiling; she wants to grow and develop into a free and independent woman. She wants an identity.

While Esperanza is dissatisfied with her lack of place and identity in society, the society that expects women's subordinate dependence on men threatens to keep her from growing and maturing. In order to transcend all kinds of barriers, in order to find her own identity, Esperanza must formulate an image of herself that is not connected to male dominance. And she is doing this by drawing lessons from both negative and positive examples—the women in her family and in her Hispanic neighborhood.

The first example Esperanza encounters is a girl named Marin who dreams of meeting "someone in the subway" (p. 26) that might marry her and take her to "live in a big house far away" (p. 26). "What matters", Marin says, "is for boys to see us and for us to see them" (p. 27). This, in a sentence, is all Marin lives for. Her only goal is to meet boys, to fill the role as a sexual partner and then to get some benefits out of it. At this point Cisneros shows that Esperanza is beginning to understand that nothing will change by clinging to boys. The narrator says, "Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (p. 27). Esperanza knows that Marin is still "waiting", still "singing the same song". These words and expressions imply that nothing has
changed for Marin, and will not change. Marin is not active in her pursuit of change, progression or growth; she is only waiting for things to happen to her, for “someone to change her life”. She does not know how to work and struggle for herself. She is essentially waiting for a miracle, a “falling star”, in a community where everything is stagnant. Cisneros shows that one cannot rely on a man to make anything better, one must act independently.

While Marin is a girl erroneously believing that women are required to seek out men, Lois in the vignette titled “Sire” is an example of a girl already stuck in a relationship. She, too, is dependent on men, only in a different way. The author writes, “I watch them. She holds his hand, and he[Sire] stops to tie her shoes. But Mama says those kinds of girls, those girls are the ones that go into alleys” (p. 73). This is a crucial instance of the perils of a man-and-woman relationship before the girl Lois has developed a Self. It shows how dependent she is. Although “she's got big girl hand, and her bones are long like ladies' bones... she doesn't know how to tie her shoes” (p. 73). She is holding her boyfriend’s hand, they are linked, as if he were in possession of her. Though they are holding hands together, it is not an equal relationship. The name “Sire”, literally meaning “father”, “ancestor”, or “master”, has domineering and controlling connotations here. It is Sire who must “tie her shoes”. She has not learned a very basic skill, not to mention the skill of making a living herself. And if she stays in the relationship, she will never learn how to do things herself. He has conquered her and she is now a victim of his mercy. She will never be able to think for herself and act for herself. Her learning, self-awareness and growth are non-existent in this relationship. Cisneros says that when a female in the community depends on a man, she loses her self, and she becomes apathetic.

If Marin and Lois choose to rely on men for their present or future life,
Sally chooses to be subordinate and obedient to men in a male chauvinistic environment. Sally is beautiful, but "her father says to be this beautiful is trouble" (p. 81). She is not supposed to dance, to talk to boys, or to play with other girls for a while without permission. If she is ever caught to do so by her father, her pretty face would be "all beaten and black" (p. 92). The father would beat her so hard that "he just forgot he was her father between buckle and the belt" (p. 93). But Sally is always weak and tolerant. She covers up all her "scarred" skin and "at school she'd say she fell" (p. 92). Then Sally gets married when she is still an eighth-grader, "young and not ready but married just the same" (p. 101). Esperanza clearly understands Sally's purpose of this early marriage. "She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape" (p. 101). Sally naively assumes that she can escape her tough father by finding for herself a man and a house, but only finds herself now in the hands of a too demanding and possessive husband. Her husband "won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends... she is afraid to go outside without his permission" (pp. 101-102). Now she can only sit at home, "looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet..." (p. 102). Sally becomes a prisoner in the "walls", a bird in a cage, a woman without freedom. This is an important lesson to Esperanza. She begins to realize that in a male-centered society, women should not rely on men to be their harborage or shelter. Cisneros implies that if a woman expects a man to save her out of a difficult situation, she will find herself jumping out a frying-pan into the fire.

Fortunately, not all women in the neighborhood grew up like Marin, Lois or Sally. Very early on Esperanza also identifies a positive example of a woman defining her own role, despite the suffocating circumstances of the family and society. The narrator says, "Alicia, who inherited her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time
at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in factory or behind a rolling pin” (pp. 31-32). This is a significant discovery for Esperanza. She has found an example of a young woman actively attempting to escape the entrapment imposed by a male-dominated society. The narrator acknowledges that Alicia is working in order to break free from her subordinated position in life. Alicia must transfer buses and trains, which literally expresses the hassles of getting to school. Alicia cannot simply walk to class each morning. The necessity to change trains also represents the need for her to deviate from the direct route; the direct route in the society is one of dependence and servitude. The straight line of “inheritance” invokes images of a continuous line from one generation of women to the next. Alicia is actively bypassing the straight line by taking the buses and trains to school for an education, which will change her and her future life.

It is also symbolically shown that in order to circumvent what is expected of her, Alicia must exert a tremendous amount of energy. Alicia's father says, “... a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with tortilla star” (p. 31). The character's most significant male influence outlines a specific place and livelihood expected of her. The word “sleeping” brings to mind images of someone unconscious, stupefied, inarticulate or pacified—a woman unable to put energy into her own voice. Alicia deals with the hassles of bus transfers to get to school, in order to find a voice and develop an identity, outside of what her father tells her. Alicia may have inherited her mother's rolling pin, but her father was the one who put it in her hands.

While Esperanza is encouraged by Alicia's assertiveness, she is yet unable to completely ignore the fear of opposing male opinion. Esperanza says, “(Alicia) is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers” (p. 32). Fathers are the epitome of male domination; they represent the
person in charge, and all that is controlling and authoritative. Esperanza acknowledges that Alicia is still afraid of Male power, and the fact she voices this fear reflects her own fear. She is still cautious, she still considers men to be powerful.

Esperanza learns the necessity of putting away her fears of male doctrine in order to find a self through art in the vignette “A Smart Cookie.” Esperanza’s mother represents one whom is aware of her oppression, but also knows how to avoid it. Esperanza says of her mother, “She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera... But she doesn’t know which subway train to take to get downtown. I hold her very tight while we wait for the right train to arrive” (p. 90). This is how Esperanza learns how to define her self. Esperanza has a mother who can lead her out even while being barred in. Her mother is a specific example of a woman interested in arts, in activities that are above the daily rituals of survival. Her mother can sing “opera”, thus, she is an accomplished artist. She is a woman who can “speak” more than one language, and this is important for her to communicate. It is a symbol of how she is able to articulate aspects of her own identity within the confines of her environment. She strives to grow and appreciate art. However, “Now she draws with a needle and thread” (p. 90). Somewhere along the way the mother has given up art, given up the internal quest to determine what is important, what is fundamental, in order to serve as a housewife. Nevertheless, Esperanza still learns from her mother’s examples that art is self-expression, and self-expression only comes from a person with an assured self, independent of any oppressive, external influences.

In this vignette, Esperanza says, “shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down” (p. 91). People feel shame by not being confident in themselves. Esperanza learns the importance of confidence. It was a form of shame, a feeling of inferiority, when Esperanza acknowledged that “Fa-
thers were something to fear” in Alicia’s story. Shame is close to guilt. Esperanza saw the shame of ignoring the father, the guilt of not obeying him. At the time ignorance was the easiest solution, “Close your eyes and they'll go away, her father says, or you're just imaging” (p. 31). The symbolic image is that if you close your eyes to the oppressive nature of housework, of servitude, it will not exist. Or, it is not relevant unless someone speaks his or her opposition to it. According to males, there is just an imagined problem, it is not real, and it is not significant. The shame is felt and seen by both Alicia and Esperanza when they persist that a problem does exist. They cannot close their eyes, or stop believing that there is more to life than barriers and confined spaces. And that is what Esperanza’s mother tells her, when she speaks to her of shame, that one must disregard it. It was shame that trapped the mother into abandoning art and thus abandoning an identity.

In the Minerva vignette, Esperanza shows that she has accepted art as a means to an identity, but that male dominance must still be avoided in order to have room to develop this identity. Esperanza shows that she has all the tools to succeed, to decipher what is positive and negative, and to break free of the barriers that hold back most of the women in her community. She says of her neighbor, “... she writes poems on little pieces of paper... she lets me read her poems. I let her read mine” (p. 84). This passage shows that Esperanza has found someone else who finds solace in art, who also writes. She shares her poems with Minerva, this reflects the communication between two women, sharing their emotions and feelings through the art form of poetry. Esperanza is identifying with others who can analyze their internal state. However, Esperanza says, “(Minerva) is always sad... she has many troubles, but the big one is her husband who left and keeps leaving” (pp. 84-85). Minerva represents both sides, both possibilities. Her husband is a constant problem and she doesn’t have the
strength to push him away. Minerva wants to transcend her walled-up life, with poetry, and self-understanding, but she also wants to hang on to her male counterpart. Her husband “keeps leaving”, which implies that she keeps taking him back. It’s Minerva’s choice, and Esperanza knows it. “Next week (Minerva) comes over black and blue and asks what can she do. Minerva, I don’t know which way she’ll go” (p. 85). Esperanza says there are two ways, one of independence, and one of slavery. Minerva may not fully understand the need to stand up as an individual woman, but the narrator, at this point, does. And that is why she has finally grown to a point where she can act.

Esperanza realizes that there are choices to be made. She must decide what kind of person she will become and what kind of life she wishes to live. The life experience of the women around her tells her a great deal. Marin has been dreaming of meeting a rich man who will take her hand to live in a big house, but is still waiting in the same place; Lois allows herself to be controlled by a seemingly caring boyfriend, but will eventually find herself deprived of living skills, real love and freedom; Sally naively believes that a husband could save her from her father’s cruel “buckle and the belt” (p. 93), yet ends up in an equally or even more controlled and dominated situation. From Alicia’s example Esperanza learns about the importance of education and knowledge; from her mother’s story she realizes she must be persistent in her pursuit of art; with Minerva she finds their shared love for poetry. But more importantly, she understands that she must do better than them by overcoming, defying, and transcending their fear of men and the confinements of society. She has learned that one can seek an identity through art, but that art alone isn’t enough. A woman must form an identity without the interference of men. It is necessary in Cisneros’ “House on Mango Street”, for Esperanza to escape the thick walls of servitude as a second-class citizen. Cisneros says that women must nurture an
independent and unique identity in order to free themselves of male societies’ imposed limitations. She proposes that Esperanza’s identity can be attained by self-awareness, self-expression and self-analysis through art, but that it can only mature if it is free of negative male influences. Only as an independent woman can Esperanza truly discover who she is. Cisneros implies that it is optimistic that Esperanza will be able to develop an identity through art and independence because this is exactly what the name “Esperanza” (hope) symbolizes.

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