

## Under Gaze: Pursuit of Women Identity in *The House on Mango Street*

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### Abstract

Growing up in a Mexican-American community, Santra Cisneros, through the character of Esperanza, reveals the struggle of women for pursuing their identity in such a culture-mixed environment which features traditional patriarchal Mexican culture, the new and melted American culture, as well as consuming culture. Esperanza's special identity determines that she cannot choose which side to be on, but act as a medium helping the communication between her own Mexican culture and the intruding American culture via writing. Gaze and consuming culture cast a profound influence upon the forming of women's subjective identity.

**Key words:** Women's subjective identity; Gaze; Consuming culture

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### INTRODUCTION

*The House on the Mango Street* has been attracting critics' attention since it was published in 1984. It has been identified as an example of the growing up story, or *bildungsroman*, which gives birth to a general theme of Chicano and Chicana literature. Maria Karafilis thinks

that *The House on Mango Street* appropriates and revises numerous elements constituting classical *Bildungsroman*, and "ultimately traces the satisfying development of a young woman who not only matures but also attains harmony and a greater appreciation and understanding of her surrounding society: the Chicano community represented by Mango Street" (p.65).

But Cisneros's text differs from the traditional Chicano *bildungsroman*, in which the boy becomes a man by first acquiring self-sufficiency and then assuming his rightful place as a leader in the community. It also differs from the traditional Chicana *bildungsroman*, in which the girl must give up her freedom and sense of individuality in order to join the community as a wife and mother. The goal of Esperanza, this novel's protagonist and narrator, is to fashion an identity for herself, which allows her to control her own destiny and at the same time maintain a strong connection to her community.

It is worth noticing that Cisneros adopts this form, poetic novel to some critics, and chooses to tell the story from Esperanza's point of view, a little girl. Christina Dubb emphasizes the important role of literacy in helping adolescent girls like Esperanza acquire a voice and power to form their own identities. "Adolescent girls can use literacy to 'read' the world around them, find their own narrative voices, and eventually affirm their own places in society by creating their own subjectivities and becoming authors of their own stories"(Dubb, 219). Children see the world as it is, while adults see with lens. In deceptively simple language, and from the point of view of Esperanza Cordero, a preadolescent girl, Cisneros created a miniature of Mexican-American life. *Mango Street* can be found in every corner of the world. The universality of the street can be explored in the all-including *Mango Street* life, where one can find life sour, sweet, bitter, despairing, hopeful and everybody in it never stop struggling. Through the forty-four vignettes or literary sketches, Esperanza, the narrator, straightforwardly speaks

out her own observations about the people and things in this street, which forms a panoramic description of the miniature of world. Children's innocent words reflect the contradiction, malpractice and prejudice in adults' world. It seems that simplicity and complicatedness contradict each other, while this book combines the two in a perfect way; the simple language and expressions construct a best container with four sides transparent from which the readers can see people's half-sweet-half-bitter life without any covering. This book best represents Wordsworth's famous saying: "Child is the father of man."

To see the world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour

*Auguries of Innocence* by William Wordsworth

## 1. BEING A WOMEN IN CHICANO COMMUNITIES

For Esperanza, her family as well as the people living on the Mango Street, they have their traditional culture deep rooted in their collective unconsciousness. Though they have left their motherland, they can never get rid of their own culture and totally adapt to the American culture. They keep struggling in the cracks between the two cultures. This kind of condition can be called hybrid identity which mainly refers to collective identity choice made by some cultural subject between a strong culture and a weak one, which causes intense shock in mind and tremendous tribulation in spirit. Its apparent characteristics can be concluded as a kind of subjective experience combining anxiety and anticipation, suffering and joy (Tao, p. 465).

In this novel, being a Chicana, Esperanza is trapped in a force field where the dual forces pull Esperanza to stay rooted in her cultural traditions on the one hand, and compel her to pursue a better way of life outside the barrio on the other. Due to the heavy burden of raising the family, the men characters are absent in readers' sight, so Esperanza's observance are concerned upon women.

To establish her own identity, Esperanza has been struggling in her growing process between the past of their collective culture and the desire of integrating into American society; between their own culture, the marginal one, and the main-stream American culture. Esperanza, a name means hope in English and sadness and waiting in Spanish. The Spanish meaning of her name can be identified as the painful and sad past of the Spanish people, while America to them is where hope resides. This foretells the struggle between the two ends, and the conflicts meet in one person Esperanza, who is destined to shoulder some responsibility as Cisneros is. The women characters in this novel differ in their attitudes towards their own culture and the intruding American culture.

Some choose to stay in the weak Mexican culture like Mamacita.

Mamacita goes to America because of her husband. Her husband worked two jobs and saved money to bring her to this place where everyone is believed to dream to go. But it's the dreaming place for her husband, not for her. She does not want to leave her country and step into a totally strange place. After she arrives at the place, she refuses to get off the taxi which has brought her to the house. "The man had to pull her, the taxicab driver had to push. Push, pull. Push, pull. Poof"(p. 243)! After she has settled down, she refuses to go downstairs. Somebody says that's because she cannot speak English, just eight English words. It's not because she cannot learn it, instead, she does not want to learn. Moreover, she does not allow people visiting her family speak English; "No speak English" becomes the one sentence she is good at of. "Whatever her reasons, whether she is fat, can't climb the stairs, or is afraid of English, she won't come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull." Mamacita creates a homely place in her house by listening to Spanish radio, and the homesick songs, and she stays in this limited space. She wears pink shoes, and the colour "pink" means home. "Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as a hollyhocks with lots of startled light. 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." Although she has painted her house pink, she clearly knows that this is not her country, this is not her home. She is so stubborn, and some conflicts happen between her and her husband. Passively sticking to her traditional culture, she does not know it's no use trying to separate her family from the strong American culture. When she finds out that her baby boy, who has just begun to talk, starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on T. V., she heart is broken forever.

While, some others choose to integrate into strong American culture like Alicia. Alicia studies very hard every night and finally becomes the first one in the community to go to university. Unlike other women who choose to play the traditional role of women as wife, mother and sacrifice their own life, she chooses to pursue her own life out of the circle and receive the education given by the white culture. Mango Street is like: here there is too much sadness and not enough sky. Butterflies too are few and so are flowers and most things that are beautiful(p.186). "No wonder everybody gave up..." (183).

The identity of being women: Cisneros struggles to find her identity as an independent entity instead of those women proved existent by depending upon men. Women, as thoughtful individuals, should hold their own dreams, and try their best to realize their dreams, not being

closed and staying at home playing the traditional family as well as social roles. The ones compromised to women's traditional role: Older Esperanza, Marin, Sally. Older Esperanza is a horse woman, and the Mexicans don't like their women strong. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder is 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. Unlike her grandmother who compromised to the tradition, Esperanza makes up her mind not to repeat the sad and selfless life.

## 2. UNDER THE GAZE OF OTHERS

The forming of women identity in the novel is, to a great degree, through others' gaze. Others' gaze: the feeling of losing oneself and pleasing others by consuming self under others' eyesight (Sartre, 56). Being comes before essence, and the essence of man means that what kind of man he wants to be, which totally depends on how the person chooses to act. But people's choice would be influenced by others' gaze. The appearance of others decentered our positions. And our role in the action of gaze would be changed sharply from "subject-I" to "object-I", hence, others' gaze is the deciding force in building our subjectivity, adapting ourselves to the objects in the gazers' eyes by self-examining and innerizing their gaze.

When "eyes" as an observing subject are confronting the objective world, they may find that their objects can reflect their eyesight in some way; This kind of reflected eyesight from the objective world is gaze which "belongs to the side of the objects that is to say the objects are looking at me" (Lacan, 109).

In the tale "Those Who Don't", "we" feel safe among brown people, because during the interaction of gaze, "we" find no difference among "us", while when "we" are gazed by white people, "we" self-examine "us" and innerize their gaze as some great unstable pressure shrouding "us" and unsafe feelings. Vice versa (pp. 180-181). "Those Who Don't", consisting of three short paragraphs, is about alienation and fear in a hostile society, but it is only fourteen lines in total. It begins with a direct statement about life as she sees it: "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." The second paragraph, five lines long, begins with the "we" that is the implicit opposite of the "they" of the preceding paragraph. "But we aren't afraid. We know the guy. . . ." With the economy of a well-written sonnet the third five-line paragraph brings the "they" and the "we" into an inverted encounter: "All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive

into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakily-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes." The description has been that of a keen observer, the composition is that of a poet.

This structure operates through a conceptual back and forth movement of images, like the action of the shuttle in the loom. An image appears which moves the reader forward, following the woof of the first-person through the warp of referential world, but as soon as the image takes shape it is thrust back toward the enunciator. The process is repeated again and again slowly weaving the tapestry of Esperanza's Mango Street. For example, in "Those Who Don't," the initial image is about the others, "Those who don't know any better," but it reaches culmination with the observation that "they think we're dangerous." The counter-move is that "They are stupid people." The new thrust forward is the reassurance of familiarity with the ostensible menacing scene that greeted the outsiders and led them to fear they would be attacked. But, when the shuttle brings back the narrative thread, it presents the inversion. The "we" are the "they" in another neighborhood. The movement back and forth will go on, the narrator says, "That is how it goes and goes." The colour of the warp is different in each community, the woof keeps them next to each other, but their ignorance and fear keeps them separate. The tapestry that is being woven by this constant imagistic back and forth movement of the narrator's perceptions and thoughts is not a plotted narrative, but rather a narrative of self-invention by the writer-speaker. The speaker and her language are mutually implicated in a single interdependent process of poetic self-invention.

In writing about the relationship of men and women, boys and girls, "gaze" is a powerful force for establishing the subjectivity of the females. Many women, including Older Esperanza, Mamacita and Refaela, sit all day by the window. They are always the object of being gazed, and under the oppression of the paternal society of Mexican culture. Marine always wears make-up and admires the glamorous life with beautiful things. She does this so as to be gazed by men, waiting for a man to marry her and live a good life. Sally lives in an old-styled family, her father thinking beauty is of trouble, limiting her actions and even beating her. Positioned under the action of gaze, being the "object-I", they lost their subjectivity.

House is a very important image in this novel. The dream of house symbolizes the ideal "I". This novel begins with the description about the Corderos's house on Mango Street. But this is not the house Esperanza as well as her family dreams of. This is a house she is a shamed of pointing to and a house she doesn't want to belong to. As a little girl, Esperanza wants to get out of Mango Street where her culture roots located and steps into the outside world. However, through her observance of the

people and things in this street, she falls into the dilemma of going out or staying in. "Because we moved so much, and always in neighborhoods that appeared like France after World War II—empty lots and burned-out buildings—I retreated inside myself."

### 3. SUBJECTIVITY ESTABLISHED THROUGH WRITING

It seems that Esperanza has been seeking for the answer to the question: "What is my position? What am I?" Through her observing and the gaze she gets from the people she observe, she finally finds the way to get out of the trap and get freedom. "A house made of heart", said by the witch, implies that Esperanza has to resolve to her own inner heart in order to establish her identity. Writing, a media of her thoughts, will keep her free, for by doing this she introduces the life of her people to the outside world and brings the marginal culture into people's view. With the help of the language of the main stream society, English, Esperanza creates her own literary works, giving prominence to her own culture in the background of western culture and showing the cultural traditions and customs which bear obvious differences to the main stream society so as to ascetically encode her people's living condition based on the writer's own understanding and experience of the world.

The highly lyrical presentation of "The Three Sisters" evokes the fairy godmothers of fairy-tale lore, each with a unique image and gift for the heroine. Their gift is the gift of self: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are" (276). This poem-piece is unlike any of the others in form because it combines the prose-poem quality of the rest of the book with the most extended dialogue sequence. The three sisters speak to Esperanza. The speaking voices are of crucial importance for through their enunciation they become full participants in the story-telling evocation with Esperanza.

At the level of plot the sisters serve as revelation. They are the narrative mediators that enter the story, at the crucial junctures, to assist the heroine in the trial that lies ahead. It is significant that they are from Mexico and appear to be related only to the moon. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, the lunar goddesses, such as Tlazolteotl and Xochiquetzal, were the intermediaries for all women. They are sisters to each other and, as women, sisters to Esperanza. One has laughter like tin; another has the eyes of a cat, and the third hands like porcelain. This image is,

above all, a lyrical disclosure of revelation. Their entrance into the story is almost magical: "They came with the wind that blows in August, thin as a spider web and barely noticed," for they came only to make the gift to Esperanza of her selfhood. At the symbolic level, the three sisters are linked with Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, the three fates. Catullus depicts them weaving their fine web of destiny: "These sisters pealed their high prophetic song, / Song which no length of days shall prove untrue." The tradition of the sisters of fate runs deep in Western literature from the most elevated lyric to the popular tale of marriage, birth, and the fate awaiting the hero or heroine. In Cisneros's text, the prophecy of the fates turns to the evocation of self-knowledge.

In the end, she realizes that she does not need to make a choice between the binary contradictions. As Kelly Wissman (p.18) writes: "With her acute sensitivity to the limitations placed on the women around her and her relentless struggle to construct new possibilities for herself, Esperanza, as her name suggests, is indeed a figure of hope, a 'fierce woman' on a complex pursuit for personal and community transformation." All she has is a house of her own, which will not be marked with Mango Street or outside world, Mexican or American, instead, just like the four skinny trees "whose only reason is to be and be".

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