

The House on Mango Street: Searching for Identity

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Abstract

This paper studies a Chicana adolescent Esperanza Cordero's search for a "self" that she believes is essential to come out from the prevailing suppression she observes as a woman and as a Mexican-American. She realizes that to achieve her goal she has to establish herself in the society to eradicate her dependency on anyone. In her quest she has found some symbols that gradually helped her to construct her identity. Her imaginary house where she wishes to be alone to nurture her innate ability of writing is her first step toward her identity. Her name given after her grandmother and the sad past of the namesake is another symbol through which she searches for self-definition. Three skinny trees out of Esperanza's window come as a metaphor of her own position in her father's house and clear her perception about belonging and existence. Esperanza's meeting with three sisters from Mexico serves as a turning point of her life. Their prophesy about Esperanza's future enhances her search and ensures that she is in the right track. The three sisters appear as a fairy godmother for Esperanza and guide her toward her search. Through this "self" searching journey, Esperanza matures as a woman and as a writer.

The search for self-definition is a common theme in coming of age novels, also known as *bildungsroman*. Searching for an identity is also a common cry for all human beings. People tend to search for their identities under different conditions and circumstances. This journey of searching "self" defines a person's actions and nature. This sense of self-definition, or in other words self-identity, is more visible among young people. In some cases this search becomes a struggle among immigrant teenagers who can neither locate themselves in the socio-cultural context of their new location or country nor they can connect emotionally and psychologically to their parents. Through this struggle an adolescent eventually matures and fulfills age quest.

The House on Mango Street (1849) by Sandra Cisneros tells us the story of a young girl, Esperanza: the story of her journey towards identity and self-respect. This journey in the novel is narrated in forty-four vignettes the interrelated stories set in a contemporary Latino neighborhood. Each of the stories opens up with new themes, and progresses towards Esperanza's destination. Through this voyage, Esperanza gradually matures as her perception of the socio-cultural context becomes clear and she develops a vision of her own identity that none of the women from her community dare to dream of. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall (1996) says "identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (p. 112). Esperanza progresses towards constructing her identity with her self-knowledge of past in which she is positioned by, as she knows denying her root will only result in shaping a broken "self" definition.

At a very early age, Esperanza realizes that as a Chicana woman in America she is already double marginalized. The double consciousness of her identity as Mexican-American, the racial tension she experiences, and the male domination she observes, accelerate her desire to establish her own identity as a woman and as a poet. Her craving for her own home, "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 108), is a universal desire of all human beings for freedom and belonging.

The sensibility and feelings the narrator expresses about her relation to the world and people around her confirm her search for identity as a part of coming of age. Esperanza's anxiety of

living in Mango Street is the struggle between what she is and what she wants to be (Sultana, 2012). We come to know that Esperanza's alienation stems from her Mexican ethnicity and hyphenated culture. She experiences cultural abuse; at the same time she is surrounded by defeated and worn-out women of the Mexican American community. However, she wants to free herself from all these barriers. As she reaches adolescence, she gradually discovers the meaning of being a woman and a Mexican in America. At the same time, she also discovers her true self, her desires, and learns that she belongs to herself, to other members of her community. She ultimately finds that writing can make her dreams come true.

Sultana (2012) states that Esperanza's desire for a picture-perfect house originates in her family's wondering nature. She always dreams of a beautiful house with "a great big yard", "running waters and pipe that worked, and "at least three wash rooms" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 4). From the narrator's description it becomes clear that the family's experience of living in rented houses was not good as they had to "share the yard with the people downstairs" (p. 3) and had to be "careful not to make too much noises" (p. 3). Nevertheless, Esperanza does not like the new house. The house her parents bought on Mango Street does not match with the description of the house her parents promised her and her siblings. Indeed, this is the last house they would have liked to live in. She says:

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 and the house has only one washroom. Everybody has to share a bedroom—Mama and Papa, Carlos and Kiki, Me and Nenny. (Cisneros, 1984, p. 4)

This house is just the opposite of what she has been told they would be getting. This contrast between expectation and reality stimulates Esperanza to construct a house of her own. Eysturoy (2010) says "the narrating "I" becomes aware of her own subjective perceptions as she begins to differentiate between family dreams and social realities and becomes conscious of her parents' inability to fulfill their promises of the perfect house" (p. 62). She was always ashamed of the raggedy houses she lived in and was always worried on what her friends thought about her living standard. Her anxiety was proven true as Esperanza had once been humiliated by a nun from her school where her family was living in a similar house. Sultana (2012) states that as she was asked by the nun about her home, she pointed at their shabby-looking house on the third floor. The nun's immediate reaction then disturbed her. The nun's sarcastic manner of saying "you live *there*" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 5) clearly underscored the poverty-stricken condition of the house. The socio-economic condition of Esperanza's family became apparent to her teachers and classmates. This expression made Esperanza "feel like nothing" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 5). Her parents' new house on Mango Street reminds her about the past humiliation. Blooms (2010) says that the new house threatens her self-perception as to her it becomes a symbol of poverty and shame.

Esperanza does not like the house her parents bought for the family. They try to console their children by saying that this is not the end; it is a "temporary move", "for the time being", (Cisneros, 1984, p. 5) a stop on the way to the dream house. The narrator knows the harsh reality though; Sultana (2012) states that the narrator perceives the notion that her parents could not afford a dream house where grass grows "without a fence" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 4). But the narrator does not give up her dream of attaining the desired house. She would not compromise her dreams and would regain her self-esteem because she is the "grass" on the big yard that grows "without a fence" (p. 4). She believes that she must be true to herself to gain self-respect without support. Her desire to be independent gradually gives birth to her dream house where she believes she would be able to settle down and continue her search for her identity.

Esperanza's search for a house is a search for her identity. When she is ashamed of her house, she is ashamed of herself. In the end Esperanza finds strength to construct her identity and accept Mango Street as a part of her. As she grows up she wants a house where she can have some personal space to write. She has come to identify this space as a source of power. Her search for a perfect home is a step toward constructing her identity.

Esperanza's search for individual identity and freedom is apparent from the very beginning of the novel. Not only does she show her dislike for the house on Mango Street as it does not match her dream house, she also expresses her dissatisfaction with her name. Her friends at school find it funny "as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 11). She wishes to have a fashionable name which her friends would not dare make fun of and be envious. She says, "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, 1984, p.11). She wished to have a new name since decoding the meaning of her name would lead her to a new language and cultural context. According to Eysturoy (2010), "Her name is thus a sign of a complex bicultural context that requires her to negotiate among opposing cultural meanings to come to terms with her own self" (p. 66). Her preference for a peculiar name like "Zeze the X" indicates that she wanted a name that carried no contradictory cultural connotation.

Esperanza feels that her name does not match her personality. We come to know that her name represents contradictory meanings in different languages (English and Spanish). Also, the sad past of her namesake depresses her. She is named after her great grandmother who was "a wild horse of a woman" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 11) though she had to spend a lifetime looking out the window, "the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (p. 11). This was a kind of revenge she took against her husband's action of throwing "a sack over her head to carry her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier" (p. 11). Throughout her life she could not accept her forceful marriage and failure of "becoming the things" (p. 11) she wanted to be. Though Esperanza gets her great grandmother's name, she does not want to "inherit her place by the window" (p. 11) and end up as a failure. She finds that in English her name means hope but in Spanish it means sadness and waiting. She refuses to be stuck in a sad life, one in which waiting prevails like her great grandmother's. She is a girl who believes in action and searches for ways of attaining freedom and success. That is why she would like to baptize herself under a new name which she believes will allow her to attain self-determination and identity.

The inexperienced and adolescent Esperanza's illusion about having a new fashionable name expresses her dilemma at being caught between her present condition and what she would like to be. Her desire to leave Mango Street in order to have a house of her own becomes clearer in the chapter "Four Skinny Trees". The four skinny trees which are visible from Esperanza's bedroom are metaphors of her condition. They have skinny necks and pointed elbows like the narrator and these "Four raggedy excuses planted by the city" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 74) are symbols of Esperanza's condition in her father's house on Mango Street. Like the trees she doesn't belong here, although she has a physical presence. Skinny trees and hostile environment have been related similarly in Bloom (2010, p.10). She learns the truth of existence from the trees; as she says, "Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 74). She comes to know that she has to survive with her feeling of not belonging to reach the place where she belongs. Her alienation creates her desire to find her own home where she could have her real identity and where she could grow up healthy. In her essay "In Search of Identity in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*" Valdes (2010) says "Esperanza's survival amidst surroundings that are negative and her rejection of her environs is not a denial of

where she is and who she is, but rather a continuous fight to survive in spite of Mango Street as the Esperanza from Mango Street. At a symbolic level the secret of survival is revealed to Esperanza which teaches her to quest for her identity” (p. 61).

Esperanza’s sense of belonging and not belonging gets a new turn when she meets three sisters from Mexico. The three sisters emerge as fairy godmothers to Esperanza. The appearance of the three sisters in the novel serves a special purpose for the heroine. They present a remarkable gift, 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” (Cisneros, 1984, p 105). The three sisters speak to Esperanza and through their speeches they evoke her spirit of storytelling which ultimately leads her to identity and freedom. Valdes (2010) observes:

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 trail 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 in the intermediaries for all women (Westheim105). 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. At the symbolic level, the three sisters are linked with Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, the three fates. 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 of heroine. In Cisneros’s text, the prophesy of the fates turns to the evocation of self knowledge. (pp. 11-12)

Acquiring self knowledge is crucial for Esperanza as this is a map for her journey towards self construction. The three sisters provide a guideline by reminding her about the power of writing and her sense of responsibility to represent Mango Street.

Like fairy tale godmothers, the three sisters help Esperanza find her identity. They advice her to remember who she is and where she is from since the rejection of her past may lead her away from self-knowledge. Her self-knowledge about her past and present will shape her identity through her storytelling. She is blessed with the power of writing and thus has the opportunity to retell her past. Her power of writing will allow her to find ‘a new identity’, something she is desperate to have. The three sisters understand this quest since they feel “she’s special” (Cisneros 1984, p. 104) and guide her to the right way by stressing the importance of self-knowledge. However, their prophesy, “yes, she’ll go very far” (p. 103) will come true when she will be able to retell her past and with her metaphoric return to Mango Street, where she is positioned by her past.

The word ‘house’ has a specific resonance for Esperanza. To her a house is not only a place to live in, eat, and sleep, but a place to belong and to bloom. We come across constant comparisons between the house on the Mango Street where she lives and her dream house. Valdes (2010) observes –

The imagery of the house is in a constant flux between a negative and a positive, between the house the narrator has and the one she would like to have. On the level of the narrative voice’s sense of belonging and identity, it is clear from the first place that the house is much more than a place to live. It is a reflection, an extension, a personified world that is indistinguishable from the occupant” (p. 12)

Esperanza conceptualizes house as a self reflecting space. Thus her journey towards constructing self-identity and search for a perfect house are inseparable.

Esperanza's dream house becomes the extension of her own persona. She deliberately denies the existence of her present house to one of her friends and reveals to her that she never developed any feeling of belonging for the house:

No, this isn't my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I've lived here. I don't belong. I don't even want to come from here..... I never had a house, not even a photograph... only one I dream of. (Cisneros, 1984, p. 106)

She knows that she does not belong to the hostile ugly world she lives in. Her rejection of the house on Mango Street is a rejection of social confinement and cultural hostility.

Her dream house is the projection of her idea about being a "self". This is a place where she can belong freely, having no patriarchal domination, no sexual harassment, no racial marginalization and no class conflict. Initially, her dream house appeared in the story with its lucrative external features. She thought that would save her from social humiliation of her parents' inability to belong to a much accepted social class. She wants "a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 86) where her father works. She used to visit the house on holidays but now she feels ashamed to go there since she understands the harsh reality of their economic and social condition that would never allow them to possess a house like that one. She explains her disappointment by saying "all of us staring out the window like the hungry. I am tired of looking at what we can't have" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 86). Her expression of disappointment that they "can't have" a luxurious house signifies her deep understanding regarding the socio-economic and socio-cultural fact that being a part of a marginalized community she can only dream of such a house but will never be allowed to possess one.

Still, she is optimistic about having her own house where she will offer 'Bums' (vagabonds) a place to come in and stay. She describes her dream house as a place of wish- fulfillment. The chapter "A House of My Own" expands the threshold of the promised house of her dream, evoking Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* intertextually. Esperanza feels as she grows up that the interior of the house is more important than the exterior: "Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 108). Her description of the dream house changes at the end of the novel and she describes her dream house not as a luxurious one with gardens on the hills but a place where her "pretty purple petunias", "two shoes waiting beside the bed", and her "books and stories" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 108) invite her to write down her unwritten stories. Valdes (2010) says "the house is now a metaphor for the subject and, the personal space of her identity" (p. 12). The described house is the symbol of her self-defined identity where Esperanza can discover her power of writing.

Symbolically, Esperanza's dream house personifies her existence. This is the house she wants to belong and settle down. But the problem is that the rejection of her presence in Mango Street will be the rejection of herself and of her identity. Hall (1996) says that cultural identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (p. 12). Her identity will gain strength when she will learn to retell her past through the act of writing since her future identity of 'being' depends on her past, that is to say, her ethnic root. Her power of writing will help her gain control over her gloomy past and will create a future where she will be free and to which she can belong. Valdes (2010) says "Mango Street will always be part of this woman, but she has taken the strength of trees unto herself and has found the courage to be the house of her dreams, her own self- invention" (p. 15). As a Mexican American, her lesson of survival and winning freedom to achieve her self-defined identity through writing is to progress towards nonconformity and to protest against mainstream culture and patriarchal narration.

Her protest against the orthodox accelerates her search for her own self and helps her find her identity. The three different elements of her life: her father's ragged house, her name with conflicting meanings in different languages, and her realization about belongingness and existence through observation (three skinny trees), are the passage to her identity. Her search for identity and "self" comes to an end as she gains control over her power of writing and representation. The capacity of writing helps her belong to her bittersweet past in Mango Street as well as allows her to belong to the present and hope for a better future.

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