

ESPERANZA'S TRANSCENDENCE: SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN CISNEROS'
*THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*¹

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(Resumen)

Los numerosos estudios que la novela de Sandra Cisneros *The House on Mango Street* ha generado tienden a considerar como positiva la trascendencia personal y social del personaje principal, Esperanza Cordero. En este trabajo voy a centrarme en esa trascendencia analizando el comportamiento de Esperanza con respecto a su comunidad. Lo que pretendo demostrar es que, en contra de los que hasta ahora consideraban el viaje de Esperanza hacia la libertad como algo positivo, éste viaje también conlleva aspectos negativos. De esta manera, mi objetivo es evidenciar que la trascendencia de Esperanza se puede asociar a la huida del 'Barrio' y al fracaso de la idea de comunidad en dicho personaje.

I didn't know what I was writing when I wrote *House on Mango Street*,
but I knew what I wanted. I didn't know what to call it, but I knew what
I was after. It wasn't a naive thing, it wasn't an accident.
(S. Cisneros to Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 1992: 305)

We all moved away to success
and told stories endlessly
to our children
of their Spanish heritage
that loved them
waited for them
in the ghetto.
(Carmelita Grant qtd. in Rebolledo 1983: 151)

1. INTRODUCTION

Chicanas, as descendants of Mexican women and Mexican culture, have always been subjected to and, up to certain degree, tamed by a male chauvinist society that has relegated them into a secondary position. Removed from the power organs, they have been forced to

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accept the rules imposed by men. This is the society we find in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*.² From all those women submissive to the patriarchal domination that the book exposes, one, Esperanza Cordero, the main character, rebels against the servility Chicano males have forced upon her gender. This rebellion against the culture she belongs to has been felt by most feminist literary critics as positive, and as an example for most women in the 'barrio.'³ But Esperanza's self-affirmation, as a woman emancipated from the dominant male structures, also conveys negative aspects hidden by those critics: the abscond of the 'Barrio' and the failure of the idea of Community.

Before getting to the content, it is necessary to point out that, rather than an literary analysis of Cisneros' work, this article tries to present a cultural monitoring of Esperanza's emancipation throughout the different vignettes that make up her story. Her transcendence toward liberation represents a triumph over the Latino 'barrio' in Mango Street and has been taken as an example for many Chicanas and Mexicanas. But her victory requires the confrontation between her Mexican heritage and the new possibilities offered by the Anglo world. The (open) end leaves the reader with Esperanza defying her culture, challenging her tradition and winning over them. The author, then, gives through her character HOPE (in the English sense) to the reader, while ignoring the split between the two worlds, the Chicano and the Anglo, and those who experience it every single day. More than leading to a victory, Esperanza Cordero's transcendence leads to a cultural defeat.

2. ESPERANZA'S EMANCIPATION: TRIUMPHING OVER MANGO STREET

The 70s meant for Chicano Literature a defining moment when several major talents suddenly emerged. Rudolfo Anaya, Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa, or Miguel Méndez, under the influence of 'El Movimiento,' became the 'founding fathers' of Chicano Literature as well as politically and socially involved writers. Their characters were women and men facing the tragedy of assimilation and cultural resistance in an Anglo dominated society that rejected them. Economic, social, political and cultural discrimination were the everyday situations the former authors made their character go through. These character's flight from prejudice and racism was placed in the family, the community, 'el barrio,' and 'La Raza.' If there was hope for the characters, it was found within the group. Outside the community, in the Anglo world, only a few Chicanos could survive: those willing to commit cultural suicide.

The tendency to portray Chicano reality through literature was continued in the 80s by a group of strong, younger Chicana writers. These new authors also wrote socially and politically involved books, "[but] the social and political involvements of the younger women writers [were] often considerably different" (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 1992: 287).⁴

2. Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1991. All subsequent quotations will refer to this edition.

3. In that sense, Ellen McCracken (1999: 180) states that together with the feminist theme underlying in Cisneros' artistic production, the author is able to give a sense of unity "between the discourses of feminism and ethnicity."

4. "While recognizing her Chicana cultural identity and affirming her solidarity with all Chicanos... to combat racial and economic oppression, the Chicana feminist also

However, the idea of community remained in their works for the most part.⁵ In this generation we find 'escritoras' such as Ana Castillo, Denise Chávez, Gloria Anzaldúa, and--most prominently-- Sandra Cisneros. Born in Chicago, 1953, Sandra Cisneros grew up in a Latino community--predominately Puerto Rican--far away from the Chicano centers of the Southwest. That was the milieu where she got her experiences to write her books. Since the early 90s, Cisneros has been "the most powerful of the young Chicana writers, the one who has produced work that can clearly stand with the work of Anaya and Hinojosa" (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 1992: 287).

Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* has been described as a revealing work. As critics Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo have pointed out, Esperanza, the main character, fighting against the socialization process imposed on Chicanas, "breaks from the tradition of the female *bildungsroman* by constantly rejecting the models presented to her and seeking another way to be Chicana" (qtd. in Elías 1992: 80). In writing stories about herself and the people of her community, Esperanza "challenges the dominant male concepts of cultural ownership and literary authority, ...reject[s] the dominant culture's definition of what a Chicana is, ...[and] refuse[s] the objectification imposed by gender roles and racial and economic exploitation" (Yarbro-Bejarano 1988: 141). To Norma Alarcón, this kind of writing that challenges male cultural ownership means a "...significant evolution of the Chicana as 'speaking subject,' one who brings within herself her race, class and gender, expressing this from a self-conscious point of view" (qtd. in Rebolledo 1988: 134). Esperanza, being a 'speaking subject,' defies racial, economic, and sexual exploitation (objectification imposed by males). So, she could be included within the group of Chicano female characters aware of her race, class, and gender.⁶

Moreover, Esperanza's behavior "...elicits a political sense of community as well as a positive relation between her adolescent desire for a room of her own and her writerly need for solitude and introspection" (Candelaria 1993: 138). Then, the self Esperanza is looking for is not "...merely an individual self, but a collective one" (Yarbro-Bejarano 1988: 141). That collective self, associated to the Mexican women of Mango Street, may be, as Sandra Cisneros recognizes, "...victimized, but they [the Mexican women] are still very, very fierce and very strong" (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 1992: 300). However, the community determination and strength these analyses imply contradict what is explicitly displayed in the

spearheads a critique of the destructive aspects of her culture's definition of gender roles. This critique targets heterosexist as well as patriarchal prejudice" (Yarbro-Bejarano 1988: 140).

5. The Chicana writer, says Yarbro-Bejarano (1988: 141), "finds that the self she seeks to define and love is not merely an individual self, but a collective one. In other words, the power, the permission, the authority to tell stories about herself and other Chicanas come from her cultural, racial/ethnic linguistic community."

6. To Ellen McCracken (1999: 180), Cisneros, in her collection of vignettes, "found it imperative to emphasize the gendered construction of ethnicity and its corollary, the ethnic construction of gender." And, as Ramón Saldivar (qtd. in McCracken 1999: 180) has explained, Cisneros engages in "a clear-sighted recognition of the unavoidably mutual over determination of the categories of race and class with that of gender in any attempted positioning of the Chicana subject."

book: that the women in Mango Street are weak and humble, and that only Esperanza is able to transcend the place and its culture.

Esperanza Cordero sees how the women in Mango Street are culturally submissive to men and afraid to react against servitude. They have grown up in a culture, the Mexican, or Mexican-American, where their sole role is to satisfy their husbands; where men's authority and power cannot be questioned: "...a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs hide behind the sink, beneath the four-clawed tub, under the swollen floorboards nobody fixes, in the corner of your eyes" (31). Men, as portrayed in the vignettes, do not allow their women to gain any authority, since that would undermine their own control. Female Mexicans cannot reach any power sphere because they are considered weak and not able to decide by themselves.

Women in Cisneros' book are metaphorically presented spending their lives leaning out their windows. These windows are the worlds their husbands have created for them. Thus, the Mexican/Latino Barrio becomes the beginning and the end of three characters, Sally, Rafaela, and Esperanza's grandmother, imprisoned by men in their houses. Sally, Esperanza's friend, is depicted as submissive to her father, and also to her husband who "...doesn't let her look out of the window... She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission" (102). She is not allowed to see the world through her own eyes. She only sees life through a window. Likewise, Rafaela, who is "still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (79). And even Esperanza's grandmother also spent her whole life "looking out the window" (110). The three characters are not strong enough to break out of a culture that keeps them docile.

In contrast, Esperanza rejects "the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (11). She has inherited her grandmother's name, but "I [Esperanza] don't want to inherit her place by the window" (11). She wants to act like a man because men have power in the cultural environment she has grown up: "I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (89). She rebels against the traditional role that men have assigned to women, that is, to be their 'slaves.' Esperanza wants to be free and strong like men. She does not want to be weak like the women in Mango Street. Her name in "English ... means hope" (10), hope of being free, untamed. In Spanish, her name means "sadness, it means waiting" (10). Waiting for a future, probably in English, in which her rights as a woman will be recognized. Thus, denying her Spanish name, she "traces the reason for the discomfiture with her name to cultural oppression, the Mexican males' suppression of their women" (Olivares 1988: 163).

As the meaning of her name in English indicates, HOPE, Esperanza has been elected to awaken to a new order, to a new world. She will have, as the old 'curandera' says, "a new house, a house made of heart" (64). This house made of heart will bring the possibility, the hope of changing her destiny. However, to achieve this new order, she has to get out of the world she lives in. She has to sacrifice metaphorically her culture and race. Esperanza is appointed as the lamb (Cordero) ready for immolation (transcending Mango Street) to save those who had not the strength to escape the 'Barrio' and its culture. She has been elected to rebel against Mango Street. And she will be free as she wants: "I [Esperanza] write it down and Mango Street says good-bye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She [Mango Street, Esperanza's culture] sets me free" (110). Nothing can prevent Esperanza from

achieving her goal: to have a house of her own, to be free and strong, to triumph over Mango Street.

Esperanza Cordero does not represent the typical Mexican-American woman in Mango Street. Learning from the experiences of these women, she is able to gather the strength to "reject the imposition of rigid gender roles predetermined for her by her culture" (Yarbro-Bejarano 1988: 143). She is vigorous, "I am the only one who can speak with authority" (50), and she knows exactly what she wants: to get out of Mango and be an independent woman. She recognizes herself different to the rest of the female Mexican Americans 'tamed' by men and by the Mexican culture; a culture that keeps ruling the streets and people of the 'Barrio.' Esperanza does not want to be tamed: "I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (88). She wants to get out of that culture, out of the Mexican house where she lives, and to have a house of her own. Her quest to be an emancipated woman and her triumph over Mango implies, however, choosing between the Mexican culture of Mango Street and the 'encouraging' culture of the outer Anglo society.

3. THE MEXICAN HOUSE VS. THE AMERICAN HOUSE

In his review of *The House on Mango Street*, Juan Rodríguez states that Esperanza "chooses to leave Mango Street, chooses to move away from her social/cultural base to become more 'Anglicized,' more individualistic" (qtd. in Olivares 1988: 168). What Cisneros' book presents, then, is the traditional ideology that happiness comes with the accomplishment of the 'American Dream.' The process of 'Americanization,' of becoming 'Anglicized' is epitomized, in Esperanza's case, as having a house of her own, an American house. A house that will eventually help her to be free. Consequently, choosing between the American house and the Mexican house means discriminating one society/culture against the other.

The house on Mango Street is a heavy burden Esperanza must carry. She is ashamed of it because the house is "small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath" (4). It is a house that, according to the description above, seems not to let Esperanza develop her personality freely as she recognizes: "Everything is holding its breath inside me. Everything is waiting to explode like Christmas..." (73). But the tiny windows of the house are preventing her from exploding, from being "all new and shiny" (73). The small house she dwells in is not her house, "it is only a temporary house ... This is a house that constrains, one that she wants to leave" (Olivares 1988: 162). She knows that one day she will have another house, a "real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it" (5). Esperanza's house is a "sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to" (110). She rejects her house in Mango Street longing for a house of her own. A dwelling she does not associate with the world of Mango Street.

Esperanza identifies her family's house and the houses on Mango Street with Mexico, and its patriarchal culture: "Look at that house, I said, it looks like Mexico... Yes, that's Mexico all right..." (18). But she refers to her roots, to Mexico, as something strange to her, as "...that country..." (56). She does not like the Mexican traditions and culture brought to the United States and settled in Mango Street together with the small red Mexican houses. The 'Barrio' metaphorically represents a mooring Esperanza is tied to: "I am a balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor" (9). She wants to take her own decisions, and choose her own way of living.

But she cannot do it in Mango Street. She wants to be free, and that is why she wants to, and eventually will, get out of Mango Street, out of the traditional servile role that Mexican/Mexican-American men have imposed on their women. She wants to break with a past that is not concerned with her role in society. The past and the culture she denies only shows up in one place: Mango Street. Her new house cannot be there.

Esperanzas's dream house is outside the 'Barrio.' She dreams of a "white house with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (4). She claims a 'white house,' like the houses owned by 'Anglos,' "people who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth" (86). Esperanza also wants a "house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works" (86). Her house will have "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 open the little window latch and gave it a shove, the windows would swing open, all the sky would come in. There'd no noisy neighbors watching, no motorcycles, no sheets and towels and laundry" (83-84). A perfect and clean house. But these houses are not found in a Latino neighborhood. They are not part of Mango Street. These houses outside Mango Street, in the outer Anglo society, are "tantalizing, tempting and forbidding" (Medina 1974: 30). Going out of Mango Street means going to a world of freedom, where she can act freely as a woman and have "...a house of my own..." (108). A place that will allow her to accomplish her American dream of possessing a house. She knows that in order to get this house, she must exit the world in which she lives. For Esperanza, according to Julián Olivares (1988: 162), the 'Barrio,' what he calls the inside or the here, can be confinement and a source of anguish and alienation.

Choosing to have a new house outside Mango means Esperanza's assimilation into the Anglo mainstream. It suggests a rebellion against the confinement imposed by men, and the achievement of her American dream. Esperanza does not see her future "leaning out of my window, imagining what I can't see" (73). In her new white house she will transcend the traditional role of women in her community. But choosing to abandon the 'Barrio' also means the abandonment of her Mexican culture, values, and people. Once cultural exchange and internalization of Anglo values increases, Chicanas, as Irene Blea (1992: 91) points out, "risk becoming more individualistic and less communal, more profit oriented, more competitive, and less willing to share what they have attained." Fleeing the 'Barrio' implies leaving behind those women who are not strong enough to escape. In her search for spiritual and social transcendence, Esperanza forgets her own people, her community. A community she is not part of: "I don't belong. I don't ever want to come from here" (107). Esperanza's transcendence is individual, not collective.

4. FAILURE OF THE IDEA OF COMMUNITY

Most Chicano and Chicana characters look for an individual transcendence. However, their sense of community, of collectiveness is stronger than in Cisneros' character. Tomás Rivera's unnamed protagonist of *...Y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the earth did not devour him*, whose feminist replica is, curiously, *The House on Mango Street* (Lomeli 1993: 105), reassesses traditional culture, historical self-consciousness, and, specially, develops a sense of group solidarity (Calderón 1991, 102). Rivera's anonymous character represents the whole community "through a non individualistic form of narration which culminates with the

recognition of both personal and collective identity" (Calderón 1991: 102). Being a collective 'I,' the character shows his 'Mexicanness' and his concern with the Mexican American people by presenting issues related to race, class, and gender. The novel portrays the main character's life fitting "within a collective class pattern of solidarity" (Saldívar 1991: 174). This unnamed character emphasizes the problems of racial and sexual discrimination that all Chicanos and Chicanas have to overcome in their daily lives.

In her poem "Sueño de las flores" (qtd. in Lomelí 1984: 114), the Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes affirms:

Sometimes She is my mirror:
 la mexicana who emerges con flores,
 con palabras perdidas,
 con besos de los antepasados.

Somewhere in a desert of memories
 there is a dream in another language.
 Some day I will awaken
 and remember every line.

In this poem, as Francisco Lomelí (1984: 114) states, "Cervantes probes her 'Mexicanness' as an element of identity, although she is not completely acquainted with it." She is conscious of a collective identity that is being lost because of external (Anglo) pressures (i.e. the loss of Spanish, "...there is a dream in another language..."). As the character in Rivera's novel, Cervantes defends the idea of collectiveness, of community (the Mexican woman who emerges "...con besos de los antepasados"). She is conscious of her race and heritage, one that is being lost in a 'desert of memories.' When she will awaken she will remember every single line of her past and she will come back to that past, to 'la mexicana' that she is. Her return will be communal and unselfish.

Esperanza's poems, on the contrary, show her egocentric transcendence:

I want to be
 like the waves on the sea,
 like the clouds in the wind,
 but I'm me.
 One day I'll jump
 out of my skin.
 I'll shake the sky
 like a hundred violins. (60-1)

She will be able to act, to take decisions. She knows she will go beyond Mango Street, out of her culture, out of her 'Mexicanness,' out of her community, "out of [her] skin." She can be moved by winds and seas, endlessly. However, she is prevented from being 'her,' a 'Mexicana' who will rebel against heritage and tradition. And yet, she has been elected to shake the sky, to change things in Mango Street. But HOPE (in the English sense) only appeals to herself, that constant 'I' that distinguishes her from the rest of the 'barrio.' Hence, Cisneros' character only fights for herself, only sees hope in her purification--reached through

the process of making "a story for my [Esperanza's] life, for each step my brown shoe takes" (109). It seems Esperanza's concern is her own story, and not the worries of her own people, both male and females.

Despite Esperanza's positive decision of being free, she acts selfishly toward her community. She knows she is awoken to a new reality, and does not attempt to awake the rest of the women while she still lives in the 'Barrio. The main character does not look for union either, she just tries to impose an individual transcendence on each minor character: "You gotta use your *own*' song" (52). She acknowledges women's servility, but, as she recognizes, "There is nothing I can do" (85). She cannot, or does not want to help the women of Mango Street. Whereas Esperanza is triumphant, others, like Marin, wait "for a car to stop, a star to fall, so to change [their lives]" (27). Their hopes of changing has nothing to do with escaping from their community, from breaking with the past. Thanks to her strength-- "I am too strong for her [Mango Street] to keep me here forever" (110), only Esperanza has the possibility of changing the situation all women have to bear on Mango Street. However, during the time she is part of Mango, she does not think of helping those women. She is the sole 'I' with hope, "I am always Esperanza" (11). She is not a Collective 'I,' she is an individual 'I.'

Yet, Esperanza is designated by three old sisters as the one who will get out of Mango Street. These Three Sisters, who allude to the three Fates, the Greek 'Parcae,' remind Esperanza of her mutual binds with the other Mexican women in Mango Street: "When you leave, you must remember to come back for the others... For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you" (105). But they also advise her she is part of Mango Street: "You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are..." (105). Through this warning, they awake in Esperanza's character a promising feeling of solidarity with the rest of the community, specifically, with its women. This promising feeling is partially fulfilled when moving towards freedom she claims she has "...gone away to come back" (110). Esperanza promises to come back to help those 'mamacitas' who have been forced to accept their roles in Mango Street, being too afraid, or too weak to transcend their metaphorical windows.

Cisneros' character is not the first Chicana who leaves her 'barrio.' There are many Mexican American women who think they are stronger than 'their' Mango Streets. These women believe that, fleeing the 'barrio,' they will one day come back as saviors of their gender. But this return is not so promising. As an example, the social study *Honor and the American Dream* (1983) by Ruth Horowitz presents the real life of a Chicano/Latino neighborhood in Chicago. The author reports in her work the stories of several Chicanas who left the 'barrio.' But the one that resembles more Esperanza's story is that of Linda, a young Chicana "aware she was different from the other community residents" (Horowitz 1983: 199). This girl had to fight against a culture, the Mexican culture, which saw as irresponsible and morally wrong her decision of living alone--having a house of her own,--and attending college when she was expected to help her family. After hard work, and lack of family support, she graduated and decided to come back to the 'barrio' as community worker.

Linda's return, however, reflects the conflict between the Mexican world and values she left behind, and the new Anglo world and values she embraced while being away. Most of these new values were strange and unacceptable to the majority of the Chicano community. Thus, Linda experienced some tensions with other members of her community. Her younger

sisters did not accept the way she talked or behaved, and Linda was perceived as constantly violating sex role expectations. While she remained in her neighborhood, "Linda was continually confronted by how much her standards differed from those of the community..." (Horowitz 1983: 199) she had once belonged to. After several years, the tensions generated by her Anglicized standards and the Chicano values of the 'barrio' forced her to stop working in the community and look for an apartment outside the neighborhood.

In Cisneros' book, it is unclear whether Esperanza will ever come back to Mango Street once she gets her own house: "No, Alicia says. Like it or not you [Esperanza] are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too... Not me. Not until someone makes it better" (107). If she finally decided to come back, she would have to face the same problems Linda encountered upon her return. Both Linda and Esperanza no longer belong to the culture they left behind. The only way Esperanza had to attain her American dream of freedom was to run away from her neighborhood. However, returning, as in Linda's case, would place her between two worlds, the Anglo and the Chicano, with completely different values. It is expected that after her return, Esperanza, as may other Chicanas have experienced before her, "... [i]nstead of full membership in either world [will be] between two sometimes conflicting worlds, each with its own expectations and social relationships" (Horowitz 1983: 201). Linda's solution to avoid these conflicts was leaving the 'barrio' for good. And that is precisely what is left for Esperanza if she wants to come back after leaving Mango Street. Is there, then, any point in coming back if she cannot share her new-found experiences and freedom with the rest of the women? The answer is uncertain and left to the reader to decide.

Ruth Horowitz (1983: 201) recognizes that when a group is highly socialized into a traditional value system, it is very difficult to change it. That is the case of Mexican American society. It is a society immersed in a patriarchal-based culture, where women are subjugated to men. A society where women and men are brought up perpetuating the sharp sexual distinction between both groups. The solution most Chicanas have taken, knowing they would be unable to change the culture of the 'barrio' suddenly, has been to improve their situation in it. They become activists in order to obtain recognition both as Chicanas and women, like the poem by Lorna Dee Cervantes previously mentioned. So, these Chicanas, admitting their cultural identity and background, chose political activism over the American dream of individual economic and social success (Horowitz 1983: 211; Yarbrow-Bejarano 1988: 140). Besides, they understand that the Anglo world does not support a young woman who belongs to a different social, economic and racial group. The solution, for them, is not leaving their neighborhood. They remain in their 'barrios' reinforcing their solidarity as a group, and fighting against gender and social discrimination from within.

Esperanza Cordero decides to leave Mango Street instead of fighting for (and together with) those who remain in it. Fleeing her Chicano/Latino 'barrio' she will probably become 'Anglicized,' and will obtain her reward: to have a house of her own. However, relinquishing her heritage and culture constitutes a sell-out, because being a Chicana she is racially identifiable and subject to discrimination. All she can accomplish, like many others before her (Sotomayor 1977: 60), is the loss of her identity. Esperanza lacks the idea of community, loses her identity, and transcends her house on Mango Street journeying towards freedom, alone.

5. CONCLUSION

The House on Mango Street tells the story of a girl “who didn’t want to belong...” (109). The feminist approaches to Cisneros’ work have focused on Esperanza’s positive self-affirmation as a character and as a woman. They have seen in Esperanza a Chicana champion of the Mexican ‘barrio’ in the United States. A woman who is able to transcend the chauvinist society ruling Mango Street. Esperanza’s personality is so strong, that she does not want to belong to a community constantly stopping her from reaching her goal: to own a house, to have her own personality.

To be herself, Esperanza needs to leave her community. The tiny red house she lives in oppresses her. Her personality is too big for the small house. Thus, she opposes her real house to the house she would like to own: a big white house that would only belong to her. Her dream house, however, is not found in Mango Street. It is outside, in the Anglo world. Choosing one house over the other implies choosing between two cultures, the Mexican/Chicana or the American. And Esperanza blindly goes for the Anglo one. She escapes from the ‘barrio’ leaving behind those women who are not able to run away with her.

By leaving her ‘barrio,’ Esperanza fails the community. Instead of staying and resisting, she prefers to abandon it. Her promise of coming back will never be fulfilled. And, if one day, she decides to return, her new Anglo values will conflict with the values of Mango Street. Once she flees Mango, she no longer belongs to it. Her transcendence towards freedom is not collective, but individual. She does not help the other women to get what she has: strength. The only female character in the book who attains her dream is Esperanza. The rest of the women remain in Mango, waiting for another savior who, this time from within, really changes their lives.

Seeing Esperanza’s transcendence as a positive attitude is not completely correct. Esperanza has the right to criticize her community as she knows it and lives within it. But she condemns a society she wants to escape from without giving any solution to the problems she perceives. To be fair with those who cannot run away, Esperanza should take a stand and fight sexual and social discrimination from within the streets of the ‘barrio.’ To criticize is very simple; to recognize one’s duty towards his/her community is much more difficult.⁸ Esperanza’s criticism should have gone hand in hand with a real hope (‘esperanza’), a real attempt to change the situation of women in Mango Street. But Esperanza’s sometimes exaggerated individuality forces her to flee the ‘barrio’ without thinking about the women she leaves behind.

It is not far-fetched to say, then, that *The House on Mango Street* could be re-described within a group of works weakened by:

un yoísmo pernicioso que da cabida a héroes románticos (héroes narcisistas que se colocan sobre el pueblo) o héroes existencialistas (héroes masoquistas autodesterrados del mundo) cuya exagerada individualidad se vuelca en escapismo

8. Michael Walzer (26), affirms that the contemporary social writer and critic “...participates in an enterprise that is no longer his alone; he agitates, teaches, counsels, challenges, protests from within... [Social critics] can’t just criticize, they must also offer advice, write programs, take stands, make political choices, frequently in the harshest circumstances.”

o ensimismamiento autocomplaciente... (Rodríguez 1979: 175)

Sandra Cisneros' character, praising her individual 'I,' stands above the rest of the Chicanas (and Chicanos), forgetting the 'We.' This individualistic attitude destroys, then, the idea of community, and it even denies her own race.

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