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Tomi Clark

Shatter the Glass

Eyes gaze out of a window, looking onto a street with dilapidated houses, boarded up windows, and unkempt yards. A second pair of eyes also peer out, except her eyes are closed; she looks out of the window, but there is nothing for her to see except fiction from imagination. The motif of a glass window in Sandra Cisneros' novel, *The House on Mango Street*, represents the feeling women experience of being trapped within tradition, gender roles, and racial inequality. It also serves to depict their dreams of an unattainable future. The idea of a woman being trapped behind a glass barrier can be juxtaposed with the idea of women "breaking the glass ceiling."

The metaphor of an invisible glass ceiling represents the obstacles a given demographic faces, which prevents them from rising beyond a certain hierarchical status. The demographic is typically associated with minorities and females, and there is a "systematic racism that creates a glass ceiling" (Chasmar). The idea applies in a workplace environment and represents the difficulties women encounter in climbing the corporate ladder; this especially affects minority women because of where they stand in the intersection between the marginalized groups of women and people of diverse race (Crenshaw 1). The term "glass ceiling" was most prevalent in the mid-1980s (Vargas), which was also the time period when *The House on Mango Street* was published. In writing this novel, Cisneros did not only break the glass ceiling, but she demolished it.

In the novel, there is the repeated image of a woman trapped by her window; she is able to stare out but is unable to leave her position by the windowsill. The women in Cisneros' novel

are unable to “break the glass ceiling” because male figures in their lives prevent them from leaving their homes to attain independence and a job. They cannot even begin to look at the prospect of earning their own income because they do not have the opportunity to begin with. Likewise, these “trapped women” are placed into a box with labels such as: housewife, Mexican, and mother. The description of “independent” and “employed” are not any of the labels on this box.

Cisneros’ motif of a glass window is opposite from “breaking the glass ceiling” because in that the goal is to fracture it, while the motif in Cisneros’ novel has the opposite goal. The motif in her novel symbolizes a woman’s hopes and aspirations, but ones that are unattainable in her current state of affairs. The goal behind Cisneros’ window is to keep it unbroken for as long as possible. One of Esperanza’s neighbors, Minerva, manages to keep hers in one piece until her husband intervenes and shatters it.

Minerva’s husband shatters her dreams with a “big rock through the window” (Cisneros 85). Most women are able to use their windows to dream of a life beyond Mango Street, even if it’s a future that will always only be fiction to them, but Minerva is deprived of that liberty. Minerva is a trapped woman most similar to Esperanza in that she shows a dangerous possible future for Esperanza.

Conversely, Esperanza is unlike Minerva because she is equipped with the wisdom of her neighbors’ experiences, which allows her to see the fate that many women share on Mango Street. With this knowledge, Esperanza realizes that she does not wish to “inherit [their] place by the window” (11). In order to take her fate back into her own hands, Esperanza acknowledges

that she cannot accomplish that without the strength to leave Mango Street. In doing so, she can escape a vicious cycle of society's expectation for her to become a trapped woman by a window.

Minerva also shares her name with the Roman goddess of wisdom and battle strategy (Cartwright). Names are apparent throughout the novel, and there is no mistake that Minerva is given this name because she most resembles Esperanza. Her name foreshadows Esperanza's success because Esperanza acquires the wisdom to piece together what she wants for herself, creates a strategy to find her way out, and possesses the strength to finally seize it.

The reason the women on Esperanza's street do not attempt to desert their place by the window is because there is also a protection they find behind it. From a window, they can only observe through the aspect of sight, but it also serves as a barrier to shelter them from the unknown elements of the outside world. They simultaneously want what is beyond the glass, but are hesitant to capture it because of the "protection" they find within. There is the mentality of – if Mango Street is this harsh of a reality, imagine what the world beyond it will be like – which leads to the illusion of protection.

Sally is a paradigm of this deceptive protection. She allows herself to once again be trapped within a cage, only her new cage is a gilded one. Her husband "doesn't let her look out the window" (Cisneros 102), but his controlling behavior is disguised by his sweet "marshmallow salesman" (101) façade and his nice house that is *not* on Mango Street. This demonstrates that men in these women's lives are oppressing their dreams because those dreams do not align with their husband's expectations.

Esperanza predicts Sally's marriage, which is supposed to represent a new journey that's exhilarating and new, but for Sally it becomes another form of an elaborate trap. Within her

home, Sally looks at, “linoleum roses on the floor” (102), and a, “ceiling smooth as wedding cake” (102). The physical details in her home epitomize her emotional reality. A red rose symbolizes love and passion, but she only has linoleum ones, which are superficial, flat, and not real. Instead of bathing in the bliss found in a marriage and a wedding cake, she finds herself staring at her ceiling. Her ceiling is an imposed limitation that serves as her personal “glass ceiling,” of which she will never be able to break through; she will not have the opportunity to even reach it, let alone crack it.

Her husband also “once broke the door where his foot went through” (101). He not only puts her back by the window, but he breaks the door of their home. A door represents a true escape because with one twist of a door knob, the door opens and provides liberation. The breaking of the door represents the end of her cherished hopes and the final barrier that she will never overcome. Since he was her ticket away from her abusive father, she found an illusion of protection with him and would rather withstand being trapped than walk into the world alone; thus, Sally entered herself into the vicious cycle.

Mango Street encapsulates what Esperanza is battling: socioeconomic status, stereotypes, racism, and gender inequality. She must overcome this adversity just to have a *chance* at breaking a glass barrier that is *not* a window.

The three sisters, who resemble The Fates from Greek mythology, recognize that Esperanza is strong enough to escape on her own, but they tell her that “when you leave you must remember to come back for the others” (105). In the end, Esperanza reveals that she has “gone away to come back” (110), which illustrates her resilience and selflessness. It requires strength to leave an unpleasant situation, but it requires tenfold the strength to return to it. When

Esperanza takes her fate back into her own hands, she asserts that she does not need to be an accessory on a man's arm in order to be successful.

Esperanza experiences inequalities in the world at a young age, both through her own experiences and through those around her. She is forced to grow up too fast, but in doing so she is able to learn the way of the world quicker than most, which allows her to avoid the brunt of society's expectations for women. In doing so, she becomes the antithesis of her neighbors and the embodiment of a woman who "breaks the glass ceiling."

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