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The American Dream in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*²

Abstract: Establishing a literary pattern for future works written by Chicana authors, Sandra Cisneros's novel, The House on Mango Street, remains fully devoted to the notion of the American dream, adding to this iconic image of the United States a Chicana feminist touch. This paper analyzes the cultural, psychoanalytical and feminist implications of the main character's daydreams relating to the ownership of a house of her own, which envisage the representation of the American dream in the heart of a young girl living in an ethnic barrio of 20th century Chicago. Throughout the novel, many women of Mexican descent find their own voice, as they have been forced to live with the status of minority both within the Chicano community and the Anglo-American society. When the narrator, Esperanza, finds the creative resources to construct for herself an American individuality, she begins a metaphorical quest for identity, which shifts her status as a woman of color from the marginality of the suburbs to the mainstream culture.

Key words: Chicana identity, American dream, house, feminist space, patriarchal society

Starting from 1848 and until the late 1970s, Chicano literature has traditionally been dominated by male authors. After the feminist manifestations in Europe and in the Americas, Chicanas started to publish their works in the 1980's, more than a decade after the formation of the Chicano movement. In recent years, it seems, however, that the U.S. mainstream actually favors works by Chicana authors and they have been strongly promoted. It is not only their so-called minority status that has kept them from publishing their works; Chicanas have had to confront controversies and to fight oppression also within their own culture. As late as 1973, a special issue dedicated to "Chicanas en la Literatura y el Arte" in *El Grito*, one of the first Chicano journals, acknowledged for the first time the peculiar position of the Chicana within the Chicano movement. Still, works by Chicanas have to a great extent been shadowed by the "Chicano mainstream," being measured against the "classics" such as Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Tomas Rivera and Rodolfo Anaya. In addition, socio-historical analyses of the situation of women in general

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(which, in the case of Anglo women have had a longer tradition) cannot be considered valid for the experiences of Chicanas.

Today Chicana feminism presents itself as a pluralistic movement, ranging from moderate to more or less radical wings, with a strong presence of Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Mirta Vidal, Martha Cotera, etc. Not only did Chicanas suffer from the patriarchal oppression, but they were also criticized and attacked by other women who accepted the traditional hierarchy and thus resented women who stepped out of this way. Only by blurring all the bridges behind them, these women were able to free themselves and, in turn, come to a new understanding of who they were, which, as a consequence helped them to affirm and appreciate their ethnicity.

Rosaura Sánchez considers that “Chicana women are not only important producers of Chicano intellectual and artistic work but also leaders in the forging of a progressive, highly developed cultural production” (69). Sandra Cisneros is certainly one of the primary trendsetters in Chicano literature. The novel *The House on Mango Street* represents the Chicana female desire to break the silence, to find through the text a voice of her own. As Cisneros herself describes in an interview, for a long time, even the author herself did not know what the notion of “voice” meant: “As a young writer in college I was aware I had to find my voice, but how was I to know it would be the voice I used at home, the one acquired as a result of one English-speaking mother and one Spanish-speaking father” (“Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession,” 70).

Most of the accounts from the book are largely autobiographical and the voice she found for herself is reflected in her writing through the combination of two languages, exemplifying the life spent straddling two worlds, also referring to the clash between them (Mexican versus Anglo- American).

Sandra Cisneros has added a Chicana feminist touch to the concept of the American dream. Her individual experience of growing up as a woman in a segregated barrio in Chicago has molded the feminist consciousness of a female artist who breaks the boundaries of U.S. literature. Through her works, *Caramelo*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, and *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros has managed to tell a genuine story of the Other America.

The House on Mango Street is a first person Bildungsroman of an adolescent narrator called Esperanza Cordero, who depicts the life of Chicana women in a series of 44 short stories or *vignettes*. Esperanza begins to write in order to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the neighborhood and also to envisage the hopes and desires of the other Puerto Rican and Chicana women who spend their lives in isolation. Thus, Cisneros’s narrative reiterates one of Laura Gillman’s feminist convictions that “women’s embodied identities are constituted within specific social-spatial/ temporal practices and structures” (8). The novel mirrors a set of cultural dichotomies and intersections which are engrained in the specific socio-spatial borderland between Mexico and the United States: male versus female, Mexican versus American, ethnic versus Anglo-American, the small, ugly house versus a house of one’s dreams, La Malinche versus La Virgen de Guadalupe, and tradition versus modernity. As a young woman and writer, Esperanza Cordero is determined to follow her American dream, oscillating between the previously mentioned ideological constructions.

The House on Mango Street articulates a complex poetics of space, in which the house as a symbol for one’s identity also becomes the symbol of the American dream. In Western philosophy, the image of the house draws its rich symbolism from Gaston Bachelard’s

analysis from *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. Bachelard discovers in the house a metaphor of humanness, as well as an umbrella-term to explore new metaphors of imagination (lockers, nests, shells, corners, drawers, chests, etc.). For Bachelard, the oneiric house has three floors: the middle one is the stage of everyday life, the attic is the depository of pleasant memories, and the cellar represents the fears of the subconscious. Correlating the image of the childhood home with that of ordinary houses and the sense of selfhood, Bachelard argues: "The house, even more than the landscape, is a psychic state, and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy" (72).

From a cultural viewpoint, a house of one's own bespeaks both intimacy and a social status which equates the achievement of the American dream. In this respect, Monika Kaup remarks:

In the United States in particular, the home is more than just shelter; it is a national institution almost as sacred as the American flag. In home ownership, the American Dream and the American Way are manifest: the civic values of individualism, economic success, and self-sufficiency are asserted (361).

If we interpret the image of the house in this key, we may infer that the main character (Esperanza), fluctuates permanently between the house she lives in and the house of her dreams, which points to an identitarian quest taking place between the limits of the barrio and the center (mainstream culture). In Chicano literature especially, the house is closely related to a specific perception of the land and of Aztlán (the Chicano homeland) associated with the reasons of dwelling and being.

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator confesses: "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot" (Cisneros 1). This constant moving in and out of houses suggests Esperanza's ambiguous sense of identity, as well as the impossibility to have a room for herself.

The house on Mango Street is situated in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in Chicago. It is the house of Esperanza's childhood memories, but still it is far from being a warm, comfortable place. An ugly, little red house is not only too small to accommodate the imagination of the narrator, but also incapable of fulfilling the dreams of the other family members. The author confesses:

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(...) There is no front yard, only four little elms the city planted by the curb... There are stairs in our house, but they're ordinary hallway stairs (...) Everybody has to share a bedroom – Mama and Papa, Carlos and Kiki, me and Nenny.

Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front. (...) Where do you live? She asked. There, I said pointing up to the third floor. There? You live there? I had to look to where she pointed – the third floor, the painted

peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing (...) I knew then that I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go (Cisneros 5).

The fact that each family member has to share a bedroom with someone else suggests that their destinies are, for the time being, interconnected and collective. From the description, one can deduce the feeling of claustrophobia which the interior generates. The nun's remark is obviously grounded on ethnic stereotypes when the child points to the third floor apartment of a dilapidated house, painted in vivid colors. This incident also highlights the sharp contrast between the white middle-class American families and the Latino experience in the middle twentieth century Chicago. The narrator's use of the cognitive verb "to know" asserts that she has self-consciousness and that she is aware that the house on Mango Street is a place she has to leave.

Esperanza contrasts the architecture of the real house with the one of the dream house she constantly imagines throughout the novel. A momentous part of the process of ethnic American identification has always been the immigrant's relationship with the inhabited space. The ideal house is the middle-class American home, standing for material comfort; while the aspect of the house on Mango Street, with its colorful façade, alludes to the brown skin of the inhabitants and marks it as a non-white residence.

The tension between the family home and Esperanza's dream of a house of her own derives not from aspirations of cultural assimilation, but from a feminist perspective on women's roles, their duty to take care of the younger members of the family and their confinement in domestic spaces. A portrayal of women in the novel offers a more insightful glimpse into the status of the Chicana in the Anglo-American society. Brothers and sisters talked to each other inside the house, while outside they were not allowed to. As the elder sister, Esperanza is supposed to look after her younger sister, Nenny: "You don't pick your sisters, you just get them and sometimes they come like Nenny. (...) And since she comes right after me, she is my responsibility" (Cisneros 6). Another friend, Marin, is not allowed to get out until her aunt comes back from work, and is dreaming of getting a real job downtown, "because that's where the best jobs are, since you always get to look beautiful, and get to wear nice clothes, and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away" (Cisneros 6). Marin projects her dreams of escape from the barrio on men. Rosa Vargas, a woman with many children who was abandoned by her husband, is "tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and cries every day for the man who left" (Cisneros 6). Mamacita, the woman living across the street, has not come out of the house since she moved in the neighborhood, because she is afraid to speak English. Her story is entitled "No Speak English" and it differs from the general experience of a female immigrant in the United States. Mamacita came to Chicago to pursue her husband's American dream, who has two jobs and saves money for his family. As a traditional woman, she takes the role of *la vendadera*, that is, the woman who always looks out the window:

Whatever her reasons, whether she is fat, or can't climb the stairs, or she 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 (Cisneros 9).

Her case is a classic example of cultural dislocation. Her homesickness is so intense that her husband paints the walls of the house pink, like the house in Mexico, which they left behind. Mamacita is at the disposal of her spouse's desires because she must live wherever he dictates. When her baby boy starts speaking English, she is once more terrified by the new culture and she slowly realizes that her detachment from the old ways is irreversible.

Like Mamacita, Esperanza herself feels trapped in the family space, unable to get out, "like a balloon tied to an anchor" (Cisneros 9). The metaphor of the anchor here clearly stands for the character's Mexican and female heritage, while the balloon alludes to the American individualism and the freedom every immigrant is supposed to acquire.

All these accounts demonstrate the marginal position of the Chicana subject, who suffers from a double oppression: one within the patriarchal Chicano community which sticks to Mexican traditionalism, and one within the Anglo- American society, which, due to racial prejudice and misinterpretation of otherness, treats Chicanos/as as outsiders. As Esperanza shows later on, Anglos never came to their barrio: "Those who don't know any better come to 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" (Cisneros 29).

Therefore, a large part of Esperanza's struggle for identity in the barrio is driven by issues of gender. Being a woman of color is never easy in the suburbs of Chicago. Cisneros herself recalls in an interview with Martha Satz:

To me the barrio was a repressive community. I found it frightening and very terrifying for a woman. The future for women in the barrio is not a wonderful one. You don't wander around these 'mean streets.' You stay at home. If you do have to get somewhere, you take your life in your hands ("Returning to One's House. An Interview with Sandra Cisneros" 167).

Both the house and the barrio are under patriarchal control. For Esperanza, writing has an ontological and cathartic function, but it also represents an archive of the worlds of those in the barrio, who remain invisible, powerless, silent.

Moreover, the common perception of women in Latin American cultures is based on the duality La Malinche/ La Virgen de Guadalupe; that is, women are not seen as unique individuals, but are labeled as either good women or bad women, corresponding to the cultural archetypes. Gloria Anzaldúa reinforces this cultural stereotypy in her book, *Borderlands/ la frontera. The New Mestiza*:

If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to

the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons (17).

It is from this cultural embedding that the Chicana woman/ writer wants to escape, to create a “room for her own.” Cisneros’s description of the ethnic house parallels Virginia Woolf’s modernist denunciation of Victorian houses, as metaphors for the confinement of women. However, the house she envisages towards the end of the novel reflects Esperanza’s commitment to the American dream and it conforms to modern generational mobility: “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a place for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (Cisneros 108). The latter assumption, “clean as paper before the poem,” points to the fact that her future is still unwritten and that an ethnic woman’s power resides in her creativity. Esperanza’s projection of an ideal house constructs the image of a “felicitous space” (in the sense of Gaston Bachelard) she would eventually dominate and control with her feminist tools, or, as Gloria Anzaldúa would say, “with my own feminist architecture” (22). Bachelard furthermore argues that this space “may be grasped, may be defended against adverse forces” and it is a space we love. The felicitous space has a protective value and it is thus a “eulogized space” (36). Unfortunately for Esperanza, this space is never materialized; it remains mainly an image of her daydreams and of her writing.

Cisneros’s vision of the American house is also a vision on the interpretation of identity. The house becomes a metonymy of Chicana female identification, as it connects to the shame that ruins her self-esteem. The poor house reflects the immigrant situation of its inhabitants, it triggers Esperanza’s psychological rejection and her desire to get out of this “sad red house” (Cisneros 101) she does not belong to. The narrator revises some preconceptions, changing the perception of the female identity as a permanent thing, a natural trait produced through generational succession, and long residence in the home(land), to a recognition of identity as architecture, (wo)-man made, and therefore always subject to demolition, reconstruction, and reinvention. Esperanza’s desire is to reconstruct herself, also giving her ethnicity its rightful place in the house of memory. Walking away from her culture is an illusion. When the three women, *las comadres*, ask Esperanza to make a wish, they immediately guess that she wishes to leave Mango Street, and they tell her:

When you leave, you must remember always to come back... When you leave, you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, you 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. You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you... I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish (Cisneros 105).

In her development, Esperanza must integrate the hope and the ability to break out of the cycle of oppression Chicanas often experience. An important chapter in the narrator’s evolution, from a feminist viewpoint, is “Hips.” Esperanza and her friends are skipping

rope, talking about hips. Rachel claims that hips are good for holding a baby while cooking; Lucy suggests they are good to dance. Nenny, the younger sister, claims that without hips a girl becomes a boy. Esperanza claims that she is the only one who can speak with authority because a scientific explanation is that they allow a woman to give birth to a baby (Cisneros 50). In addition, she remarks that a woman must know how to walk with hips, implying that womanhood is something which needs to be learned. But the imminent question is whether a woman wants to have hips and she is ready for them, reflecting the insecurities about adopting a feminine body /role.

In another sequence, "Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water," Esperanza goes to a fortune teller to have her palm read. Elenita is a local witch-woman with a messy house, with noisy children and plastic-covered furniture. In her house full of candles, crucifixes, tarot cards and voodoo objects, the Catholic faith and ancient Mexican superstitions coexist. The narrator is more attracted by the Bugs Bunny cartoon on TV than by the witch's sayings. When she asks if she will have a house in the near future, Elenita tells her that she sees "an anchor of arms" and "a home in the heart" (Cisneros 64). The anchor relates one more time to the importance of the Chicano community in her life and the home in the heart suggests that the desire to have a house she could be proud of will manifest itself in the imagination before she possesses the physical house.

"Bums in the Attic" reveals the generous side of Esperanza's personality. When her father takes her on a Sunday ride to see the gardens of the rich people he works for, she feels disappointed to watch all the nice things they cannot have. Her mother's hope that they would win the lottery and afford to buy a new house seems unattainable for the girl; she appears in the narrative now as too mature to believe in such ideas as gambling or some divine intervention. She considers that rich people living in nice houses are too affluent to think of the needy. In Esperanza's fantasy house, there will be enough places in the attic to shelter the homeless: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from" (Cisneros 107). Drawing from Bachelard's psychoanalytical interpretation, we can argue that the attic is not randomly chosen here as a place to accommodate the homeless. Bachelard asserts that the attic represents "ascension to a more tranquil solitude." In addition he confesses: "When I return to dream in the attics of yesterday I never go down again" (Bachelard 26). Esperanza's humanitarian thoughts are directed towards the poor who, like her, need a safe place like the attic to dwell.

In opposition with the attic, as a comforting space, the basement of another house on Mango Street is a space where secret things happen. There lives "the Earl of Tennessee," in Edna's building, in a basement apartment and works late at night. He only interacts with Esperanza and her playmates when he tells them to be quiet. They are afraid to go down the stairs to the basement and play instead next to the flower pots on the ground floor. Earl brings prostitutes at home, which makes Esperanza think he has many wives. His blinds are always shut during the day.

In the interpretation she gives to her name, Esperanza recognizes her mestiza heritage: "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (Cisneros 8). It is connected with bad luck, sorrow and with her father's Mexican records. Thus she overtly manifests her desire to undermine the burden of tradition. "Esperanza" is a name she inherited from her great-grandmother, who was born in the ill-fated Chinese year of the horse and was forced by cultural and social norms to marry

a man she did not love. After that, she spent her life in seclusion, looking out of the window her whole life. The narrator confesses:

I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window [...] I want 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. Something like Zeze the X will do (Cisneros 8).

The rejection of her name is for Esperanza a rejection of her Mexicanness. She opposes the idea of women being passive, preferring instead the story of her wild grandmother who refused to marry. Like the house, the name represents a marker of identity and only by changing or reinventing both of them she could assume a public persona.

Besides illustrating the aches of the process of maturation, the book highlights Chicanas' inner conflict of belonging to a border culture. Gloria Anzaldúa has astutely remarked the duality of a woman living in the frontiers:

Woman does not feel safe when her own culture and white culture are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. Alienated from her mother culture, « alien » in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits (20).

The conflict of belonging more to Mexico than to the United States is visible not only in Esperanza's destiny, but also in her mother's. The narrator portrays her mother as a home-bound woman, trapped in the domestic role of child raising. She associates the smell of bread with her mother's hair and speaks of the way she lies in the bed to make room for the children when they are scarce. Moreover, she remembers the sound of the raindrops falling and her mother holding her tight, while her father sleeps peacefully. In another passage, Esperanza characterizes her mother as an intelligent and learned person, who might have reached a better social position if she had not responded to cultural norms. Mrs. Cordero sings opera, speaks two languages, knows how to knit or fix the television, but outside the house she cannot manage on her own, as the city overwhelms and intimidates her. For this reason, she encourages Esperanza to study hard and succeed on her own, giving as example other women who got married and are mistreated or left by the husbands.

The image of the father appears concisely in a vignette where he finds out about the death of his parent, Esperanza's grandfather. This is also the first time when the girl sees her father crying, which is very unusual for a man who works hard and leaves home early in the morning, before the children get up. Esperanza imagines him travelling to Mexico where he would meet the extended family and they will perform the traditional burial rituals. She refers to Mexico using the deictic expression "that country," proving her estrangement from the old ways, but, at the same time, the narrative shows that even living in America, the culture of origin still affects the life of those who fled away.

From a cultural point of view, the ownership of a decent house stands for every immigrant's desire to acquire a social status, to move from ethnic marginalization to public visibility. Esperanza's wish is not to pass "from rags to riches," but to have a place of her

own in the Anglo-American society. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the house on Mango Street relates to a “psychic state” of insecurity, claustrophobia and repressed desires, which, like Freud’s superego, constantly reminds the Corderos who they are and strengthens their impossibility to grow. From a feminist viewpoint, the house, like the barrio, is a space where gender roles are fixed, petrified by tradition, where the woman is submissive and muted by the patriarchal ideology which has everything under control.

The hybrid range of aspirations and promises coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 under the umbrella-concept of *the American dream* originated from a common ground of national beliefs and has generated an impressive number of cultural stories. In *The Epic of America*, Adams described a core aspiration and often an achievement of the American thought, which is “a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (404).

Chicano/a literature could not have ignored the national ideal of the American dream, partly due to the whole history and mythology attached to it, and partly due to the cultural border which separates Mexico from the United States. As a literary theme, the American dream is a very dynamic presence in Chicano /a literature; it is neither depicted as a failure of the American system, nor as a thundering success, but rather as a quest for identity, still filled with unanswered questions for Chicanos/as about how to situate themselves in an inter-American space (i.e. Latin American and North American).

Cisneros’s simple and concise style, situated somewhere between prose poetry and journal entries, with the treatment of the house as a social need has taken the form and content of a postmodernist realism. Postmodernist because, even in the Chicana/o literary canon, it departs ideologically and stylistically from the dominant discourse, voicing, through innovative narrative techniques, the “I” of an ethnic female writer. Realistic because it joins, like in a puzzle, fragments of lives and identities of Chicana women anchored profoundly in the harsh reality of the ethnic experience in the United States, in order to finally demonstrate that the American dream has been a dream fulfilled for the chosen ones and deferred for those who are “misfit.”

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