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A Critical review of *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

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Book Review

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Abstract

Aim: In a coming-of-age Hispanic narrative 'The House on Mango Street' Sandra Cisneros portrays a young girl of twelve 'Esperanza Cordero', grappling with issues like universal theme of self-exploration and the search for empowerment. Her awakening to realities of the women folk around affirms her conviction to be free from patriarchy and to establish a place full of hope against adversity.

Methodology: Sandra Cisneros's "The House on Mango Street" can be analyzed from various thematic perspective. Discovery for self, Gender roles, cultural and ethnic identity shape the characters. Recurring symbols and images such as houses, names, colors, shoes and trees convey themes related to identity, dreams, and the search for home.

Outcomes: Bilingualism and the use of Spanish explore how language contributes to the cultural authenticity in narrative and influences the characters' communication. In the beginning protagonist, Esperanza dislikes her house on Mango Street but at the end she recognizes her roots and heritage. Thus, personal growth, self-realization and resolution for community are the outcomes.

Conclusion: Triumph of female characters by taking liberty with the help of some agencies for self-expression against all oddities in a Hispanic patriarchal society makes the novel appealing. Complexities of assimilation, impact of social expectations on individuals within a specific cultural context, socioeconomic analysis, and fragmented episodes depict Esperanza's evolution for self. Thus, structure and form contribute in conveying overall meaning of the novel.

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Sandra Cisneros is a Mexican-American writer and one of the most prominent figures in Chicana literature. “The House on Mango Street” is her best-known work, published in 1984. The novel, earning high praise for Sandra is a story of a young twelve-year-old girl named Esperanza Cordero growing up in the Hispanic culture of Chicago. The novel is known for its lyrical prose and exploration of themes related to identity, culture, and gender.

Esperanza, the heroine of the novel has come to Mango Street from Loomis with six members- Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, (brothers) little sister Nanny and she. Her father has purchased the house. So, the family is free from the fear not to face tantrum of landlords or other tenants daily in terms of noise, shouts and sharing stairs and washrooms, scarcity of pure running water. On third floor Loomis they faced all these problems: broken pipes, sharing washroom by neighbors, negligence of landlord not to repair the damage and poor maintenance. The house is far from her home town and still not as per her expectation because it is small in space. In Loomis, a nun mocked at her dilapidated house so perhaps the family has shifted here in new one. Some vignettes of the novel have been mentioned in the following paragraphs.

In chapter one ‘Hairs’ she talks about the hair of family members. In Chapter two ‘Boys and Girls’ she talks about gender roles, how girls and boys live separately, Vargas kids and her qualities not to share secret with all. In chapter three ‘My Name’ she reveals Spanish meaning of her name that is sadness. She explains that it was her great- grandmother’s name too, great-grandmother was born in Chinese year of the horse, like Esperanza. ‘Chinese Zodiac Horse’ means even number years like 1930, 1954, 1966, 1990. The people born in these years are very high-spirited, active and energetic lover for power and freedom. All through the novel Esperanza proves it but she accepts negative side and says, ‘both me and grandmom were born female and in both Chinese and Mexican culture, strong women are disliked’. Perhaps that is why grandmom was unmarried all through her life and Esperanza too wants to remain same. Throughout her life grandmom peeped through her window like other married or unmarried women folk in neighborhood. She wishes to inherit her grandmom’s

name but not her place by the window. She questions when Magdalena baptized into Nanny why am I Esperanza?

In chapter four 'Cathy Queen of Cats', Cathy loves all kinds of cat and wants friends for one week only for five dollars, in five dollar she will purchase a bicycle from Tito. Fancies of little girl being cousin of queen of France, talks on Edna, a lady of big building are funny. In Chapter 'Laughter' she talks about Lucy and Rachel, the elder sister of Cathy with whom she used to go to Gil's furniture shop to get some amusement with old toys.

In Chapter 'Louie, His Cousin', Louie is friend of her brother and his cousin Marin is her friend. This Puerto Rican family has another cousin with big yellow Cadillac but this man because of illegal acts finally gets handcuffs. Marin too represents strippers of the area. The parents of Louie and Marin live abroad and these kids are with their aunt and Uncles.

In chapter 'An Old Woman with Many Children' Rosa Vargas represent women in developing countries, without education, proper love, care and facilities these are drudgery to look after legitimate and illegitimate children. On the contrary there is Alicia in chapter 'Alicia Who Sees Mice', she is a hard-working girl, inherits virtues from her late mother, and excels in study to get rid of petty factory job.

Page 51, chapter 'Hips' witnesses rhyming poetry, even the chapter starts with poem. On page 56, reference of Beatles: rock group from Liverpool who gave hit songs from 1962 to 1970, reference of Marilyn Monroe who was American actress and model, Marlon Brando who was American actor and director from 1924 to 2004, reference of Babushka means old grandmom with headscarf tied under chin in Russian tradition, reference of Tennessee that's a state in south US famous for music and museum are examples of writer's wide knowledge of different traditions and cultures all over the world.

Vargas means Brazilian boys, Marimbas means big xylophone of South America, Cadillac means a large luxury car in US, Frijoles means Mexican cooking beans, Tamale means Mexican dish of meat and maize flour, baked in

maize husks. On chapter 39, games of girls like, double- Dutch rope means hopscotch, tee-tottering a play on a board that is a balance on fulcrum.

On page 45 we get sir name of Esperanza ‘Cordero’ as her mother undersigns application with this sir name. On page 46 Spanish word ‘Chanclas’ is used which means slipper. On chapter 50, words like ‘hoochi-coochie’ means stripper and ‘heebie-jeebie’ are used to show skin trade and nervousness of young girls. ‘Merengue’ Caribbean dance music, on page 56, Spanish word ‘Abuelito’ that means ‘grandfather’, ‘Esta Muerto il’ muyeto’ means ‘he is dead’ imparts native color to her writing.

‘Voodoo’ word is used many times, it is a religious practice in Caribbean south US, combining elements of Roman Catholic with traditional African rites like sorcery and spirit possession. ‘Cumbias’ means ‘Colombian dance’, ‘Salsa’ means ‘Latin American dance’, ‘Rancheras’ means Mexican music on guitar and horns these examples captivate us to Latin American culture. Repeated usage of ‘Fuchsia’ that means two color shrubs in US and ‘four skinny trees’ shows Esperanza’s love for Nature, she takes shelter in Nature and Nature consoles her in sadness.

‘Mamacita’ character is a metaphor to present the contemporary mindset of locality for woman. Sandra writes, “Mamacita is fat, can’t face three flights of stairs and can’t speak English that’s why she hardly comes out of the house. Throughout the day she sits on the window, plays on Spanish radio and sings sad songs in her local language.” Last chapter ‘Mango says Goodbye’ tells, ‘I will come back if I leave this place to support the oppressed to be voice of those who remained unheard’. ‘A House of My Own’ means she wishes a house in her name without patriarchal interventions. In this chapter she talks about ‘Petunias’, a South American plant of white and purple funnel shaped flowers means she wishes white, unsullied house. She wishes porch in her house. In chapter ‘Talking on Edna’s Steps’, we come to know from Alicia that Esperanza’s house number is 4006 Mango. She writes, ‘The idea that Mayor will come to Mango Street to improve it makes me laugh out loud’. It means LOL word was floating in 1980s too.

These are Hispanic contribution to the world literature. As a child Esperanza wants to escape mango street because it is crowded, segregated racially and economically and has no privacy for a growing girl. She resolves that she will someday have her own big house.

Gradually Esperanza matures sexually and emotionally, she makes friends, develops crush, faces sexual assault and begins to express her longings to escape the neighbourhood. She is friend with Lucy and Rachel two chicana girls who live across the street. These three ladies along with Nanny (her little sister) do many adventures. They buy a bike, learn exciting stories about boys from a young woman named Marin, explore a junk shop, do intimate conversations while playing Double Dutch (jumping rope). These girls on the edge of puberty sometimes find themselves sexually vulnerable. For instance, one day Esperanza was walking in high-heeled shoes, an old man during her first job kissed her. At school she feels ashamed about her family's poverty and her difficult pronunciation of her name. For solace she secretly writes poems and shares only with older women of her trust.

Esperanza expresses her dissatisfaction with her name early in the novel. She wishes for a name that reflects her true identity, something more poetic and significant. This desire symbolizes her yearning for a stronger sense of self. Throughout the novel, Esperanza shares her dreams of escaping the poverty and limitations of Mango Street. Her desire for a different life is a step for self-discovery and envisions a future beyond her current plight. Esperanza grapples with her evolving understanding of gender and sexuality. She observes the limitations placed on women in her community and expresses a desire for independence. Her reflections on the experiences of other women contribute to her growing awareness of gender dynamics. Esperanza's relationship with friends Cathy, Sally, Marin plays a significant role in her self-discovery. She learns about trust, betrayal, the complexities of human relationships and the world around. Esperanza discovers the power of writing as a means of self-expression and empowerment. The act of narrating her story becomes a form of agency, allowing her to define herself on her terms. Esperanza reflects on societal standards of

beauty and how they impact on her self-perception. She grapples with her physical appearance and the expectations placed on women to conform certain ideals. These reflections help her in understanding identity beyond superficial standards.

The novel is set in a Hispanic society in Chicago and provides a glimpse into Mexican-American culture. The characters navigate a world that is influenced by chicana traditions, family values, and community ties. The characters in the novel often switch between English and Spanish, reflecting the bilingual nature of many Mexican-American households. This linguistic duality is an integral part of the cultural identity portrayed in the story. The novel explores traditional gender roles within the Chicano culture. Esperanza observes the expectations placed on women in her community, addressing issues related to domesticity, marriage, and the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. The setting of Mango Street provides a close look at barrio life—the vibrant, tight-knit, and sometimes challenging environment of a predominantly Hispanic neighbourhood. The novel depicts the struggles and joys of everyday life in this community. Various cultural symbols and rituals are woven into the narrative, such as the music, food, and celebrations that are specific to the Chicano experience. The novel touches upon the immigrant experience, as many characters or their families have migrated to the United States from Mexico. The challenges of adapting to a new culture and the longing for homeland are themes explored in the context of immigration. The cultural context includes a consideration of poverty and social issues too within the Chicano community. The characters in the novel grapple with issues of cultural pride and identity. Esperanza, in particular, reflects on her heritage and the significance of being both Mexican and American.

The novel depicts traditional expectations placed on women, they are supposed to fulfil traditional roles of wife and mother and their value is measured by their ability to conform to these expectations. Esperanza, the protagonist, becomes increasingly aware of these follies in her community. She observes the struggles of the women around her, including those of her mother, and reflects on

her desire for independence and self-determination. Marriage is portrayed as a significant expectation for women in Mango Street. Esperanza witnesses the challenges faced by married women and expresses a desire for a different path that allows her to define her identity beyond the confines of traditional gender roles. Esperanza observes the ways in which women are often vulnerable to exploitation, mistreatment, and unequal power dynamics in a patriarchal society. Sally her friend is live example, Sally's early marriage and subsequent abusive relationship highlights the challenges faced by women though conforming societal expectation but without agency. The novel portrays the importance of female friendship as a source of support and understanding for Esperanza. Her relationships with other women and girls in the neighbourhood provide a sense of solidarity in the face of shared challenges related to gender expectations. The garden that Esperanza dreams of symbolizes her desire for growth and independence. It represents a space where she can nurture her individuality by being free from the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles. By exploring concept of self-Identity, cultural dimensions and gender roles Sandra Cisneros provides to readers a nuanced understanding of strength and resilience of female characters who faces challenges, joys, and complexities of Chicano life in the United States.

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