

Transcending the Barrio: Towards Identity Formation in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

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Abstract: Existing literature on Sandra Cisneros' *The House on the Mango Street* has read the work as a *bildung* process in which the protagonist develops her personality which, for many Chicano critics, is rather assimilationist. This paper takes a stance contrary to this general view as it strives to show that the barrio is both an imperialist and patriarchal imposition and, as such, Esperanza's transcendence of the barrio is the rejection of an imposed identity which she replaces through the processes of acculturation, deculturation and neoculturation (transculturation). The paper posits that Esperanza Cordero's transcendence of the barrio through the rejection of both barrioisation and barriology is the rejection of an imposed identity which she replaces by constructing a new identity for herself. The postcolonial theory makes it possible for Esperanza's double objectification in the barrio first, as a member of the Chicano community, and then as a Chicana to be brought to the fore. Meanwhile, the identity theories show how the protagonist rejects both the phenomena of barrioisation and barriology as forms of an imposed identity as she strives to form a new identity. Her new identity is transcultural in that it does not conform to the mould of any single culture.

Key words: Barrio, barrioisation, barriology, transculturation, identity, identity formation.

0. Introduction:

Commenting generally on the effects of anglicisation on Chicanas, Irene Blea points out that they “risk becoming more individualistic and less communal, more profit oriented...” (91). Put simply, these women and writers might sacrifice their community at the altar of American individualism and capitalism. This idea recurs in connection to Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* when Juan Rodríguez argues that, by choosing to leave Mango Street and to move away from her social/cultural base, Esperanza has chosen to become more 'Anglicized' and more individualistic (58-67). Rodríguez is thus expressing the general view of Chicano critics according to which Cisneros’ protagonist opts for assimilation by nurturing the American Dream for a house according to mainstream standards. Worse still, the adolescent’s desire to depart from the barrio is read as a rejection of her community and Chicano culture. Meanwhile, from a feminist perspective, Marilyn Chandler observes that Esperanza “rewrites for herself a home where she will have the freedom to tell her story outside the confines of a patriarchal culture” (32). In other words, this critic recognises the fact that it is the need for self-assertion in an environment free of patriarchal dominion that prompts Esperanza to decide to leave the barrio.

While this paper counters the first point of view, it agrees with the second, but adds that Cisneros’s adolescent protagonist does not only strive to break free from patriarchal shackles by planning to leave. She desires to transcend the barrio in order to shake off imperialist control as well. The specificity of the paper therefore lies in the fact that it aims at showing that the barrio is both an imperialist and a patriarchal imposition. Hence, Esperanza’s transcendence of the barrio is the rejection of an imposed identity which she replaces through transculturation. The paper argues that Esperanza Cordero’s transcendence of the barrio, through the rejection of both barrioisation and barriology, is the rejection of an imposed identity which she replaces by constructing a new identity for herself. Two questions will guide the analysis of *The House of Mango Street* in this article: how are barrioisation and barriology respectively imperialist and patriarchal impositions that impose an identity on Cisneros’ heroine and how does she construct a new identity for herself by transcending both cultural realities? The postcolonial and identity theories are used as the conceptual framework in the paper.

I) Clarification of Key Concepts

In their Introduction to *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin assert that the postcolonial theory is concerned with the analysis of a variety of experiences such as gender, migration, racism, slavery, alienation, misrepresentation and ambivalence by subjects of previously colonized nations (3). Viewed from this perspective, the postcolonial theory entails discursive practices that involve colonialist representations of the colonised and the colonised’s acceptance/rejection of these representations. Phenomena such as migration, alienation, mimicry and ambivalence accrue from the colonised’s conscious or unconscious integration of the colonial master’s world view, language, culture and tradition as well as his belief system. Meanwhile, the postcolonial theory as counter discourse expresses the rejection of colonialist views, practices as well as colonialist misrepresentations. The double edges of the acceptance/rejection of the colonial experience foregrounds the ambivalence of the postcolonial subject positionality.

In its postmodern dimension, the postcolonial theory is broadly described as a cultural location that makes room for other voices to be heard and other histories or experiences to be recounted. This presupposes indeterminacy as far as cultural identity is concerned hence the notion of hybridity. As a field that gives a voice to formerly colonised or silenced peoples, the postcolonial theory favours a dynamic, evolving hybrid of native and colonial culture. In effect, it can be said that the postcolonial theory provides formerly colonised people the opportunity to heal from colonial injustices as they express the effects of colonialism, debunk colonialist representations and reconstruct their identity. In this wise, Angelita Reyes states that the postcolonial is all about redefining who/what identities are (2). As such, postcolonial discourse dwells on realities such as new nations, dethroned patriarchies and emerged ethnic groups.

The United State of America's annexation of Mexico in 1848 ended with the US occupation of about half of Mexican territory after two years of war and border conflicts (Johannessen 24). Annexation here entailed the dominion of Mexico by the US. The Mexican Americans who occupied the borderline territory of US Southwest gained the status of second-class citizens (Villa 1). This ushered in discriminatory practices that account for the application of the postcolonial concept of binarism to the literary production of Chicano/a literature hence the relevance of the Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths' claim in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. These critics posit that

Colonialism could only exist at all by postulating that there existed a binary opposition into which the world was divided. The gradual establishment of an empire depended upon a stable hierarchical relationship in which the colonized existed as the other of the colonizing culture. Thus, the idea of the savage could occur only if there was a concept of the civilized to oppose it. (32)

Such binaries include dichotomies such as the self/other and the centre/margin. With respect to the first binary, the term "other" refers to cultural representation as is the case in postcolonial discourse. It is the way the coloniser represents the colonised. In Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Said argues that (in Western literature), the East is exoticised, mystified, and described as having all the dark traits of humanity (Said 1-4). This is because Western literature has long taken the superiority of what is Western for granted and has undermined everything that is not Western (7). The resulting cultural hegemony views everything Western as being the norm hence the idea of the superior "self." Dark human traits are projected by westerners on the non-Westerners and this has "helped to define Europe" by defining what is not considered Western (Said 1). In this paper, the European America (that constitutes the mainstream in the US) is the self; while the Mexican American is the other. Rather than being exoticised as the West does the East, the Chicano/a are barrioided.

This inferiorisation of the Mexican American via the imperial gaze resulted into what Raül H. Villa has referred to as "dominating spatial practices" (4). In other words, using a combination of what the same author has termed the "landscape effect," the "law effect" and the "media effect," the Chicanos have been compelled to occupy marginal spaces as a result of hostile space regulations (Villa 4-5). Called the barrio, these discredited latino spaces constitute the margin in Chicano/a literary works. The result is a "material and symbolic geography of dominance" drawn by the visible hand of urbanizing, mostly anglo-controlled capital. Diametrically opposed to these milieux is the central, well-regulated and constructed Anglo world that poses as the centre. It is worth noting that the construction of this geography of difference is both physical and

metaphorical or metaphysical to engender what Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths have referred to as geographical fixity and fixity of power (*Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*32).

Termed “the explicit spatialization of relations between Mexicans and Anglos” by Albert Camarillo, *barrioisation* is “understood as a complex of dominating social processes originating outside of the barrios” (Villa 4). Stated plainly, *barrioisation* refers to all practices by the mainstream aimed at discrediting Chicanos in order to justify discriminatory practices against them as a people, against their culture and their geographical space. Such practices range from urban space regulation to economic and social policies. Considered as second-class citizens, the in-mates of the *barrio* are thus marginalized (geographically and otherwise). Hence, *barriology* emerged as a counter phenomenon by the Chicano “other” to resist the *barrioising* tendency of the mainstream. The term was first coined by associated members of the *Con Sofas* magazine and artist collective in East Los Angeles in the late 1960s (Ybarra-Frausto 98-100). Though it sounded playful, it seriously aimed at promoting the cultural knowledge and practices peculiar to the *barrio* (*ibid*).

Villa proposes a more encompassing and clear definition when he states that *barriology* evokes a whole range of knowledge and practices that form the historical, geographical and social being-in-consciousness of urban Chicago experience (8). Displaced from their Mexican homeland, the Chicano community has created a niche for themselves (the *barrio*) that fosters the attachment to, as well as the perpetuation of Mexican world view and culture. This *barrio* is a milieu that presupposes the acquisition of knowledge as well as participation in practices that fosters the Chicano’s cause. On the one hand, this would mean facilitating the preservation of the displaced Mexicans’ identity, making sure that both their posterity and they do not become aliens in their new urban Chicago setting. On the other hand, it implies communal strategies of survival in an alien and hostile Anglo-dominated world.

Ambivalence is another postcolonial concept that is relevant to the analysis of Cisneros’ work in this paper. When the coloniser’s culture intermingles with the colonised’s culture, various stereotypical perceptions develop. Ambivalence refers to the ambiguous ways in which the coloniser and the colonised regard one another. The coloniser often regards the colonised as both inferior and exotically the “other.” Meanwhile, the colonised regards the coloniser as both enviable and corrupt. In the context of hybridity, this often produces a mixed feeling of blessing and curse (Bhabba66). Homi K. Bhabha states that ambivalence arises from the perception of culture as consisting of opposing perceptions and dimensions. Bhabha claims that this ambivalence (this duality that presents a split in the identity of the colonized other) allows for beings who are hybrids of their own cultural identity and the coloniser’s cultural identity. Cisneros’s protagonist-narrator has been taken to task by many Chicano critics for being too ‘anglicized,’ having embraced the American Dream advocated by the Anglo world through the media and books.

Lene M. Johannessen expresses the susceptibility for the borderline location of Mexican Americans to favour both their alienation to their ethnic culture and the consequent ambivalence that results from this in these words “...the borderland, like all cultural spaces, is involved in a constant process of becoming, carrying in it the memories and legacies of past times and of other earlier processes of becoming” (23). The “borderland” here may doubly refer to both the location of Mexican American communities close to US border with Mexico, as well as the marginal positions of Chicano barrios in US urban areas. The dynamics that result from cross-cultural

encounters following the contact between mainstream culture or the culture of other immigrants and the ethnic culture affect the purity of Chicano culture. Chicano/a therefore find themselves in a constant process of becoming as they judge and integrate the new cultural practices they are exposed to.

Andy Bennett talks of the modern state as a multicultural society, and not a monolithic one. It is a society which accommodates a range of different cultural groups within its borders (10). This applies to the US and the consequent cross-cultural encounters give birth to postcolonial phenomena like transculturation. In "Location of Transculture," Mark Stein lumps the two terms together when he quotes Fernando Ortiz as having coined "transculturation" to undermine the homogenising impact of the acculturation model (Schulze-Engler and Helf 255). In effect, as Hernández, Millington and Borden put it, transculturation is the anti-thesis of the notion of acculturation which implies the supremacy of one cultural system over another (xi). Referring to the multidirectional and endless interactive process between various cultures that are constantly at work, transculturation defies the assumption that cultures develop taxonomically and unidirectionally to borrow from the aforementioned source. In a postmodernist and multicultural context like the setting described in Cisneros' novella, the interpenetration of cultures typical of transculturation is more likely to contribute to Esperanza's identity formation in *The House on Mango Street*.

In connection to transculturation and the process of identity formation (which is the concern of this paper), Wolfgang Berg and Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh note that

The process undergone by the transcultural subject involves firstly learning the rules of the new culture and adapting these rules so that they can engage with the surrounding culture without losing their own individuality and cultural heritage. (11)

Such a process entails fragmentation, integration and the emergence of the new cultural formation. That is what Stein describes as the processes of deculturation, acculturation and neoculturation which imply partial cultural loss for each immigrant group and the concomitant assimilation of elements of other cultures that finally results in the creation of a new culture (255).

Meanwhile, postcolonial feminism makes it possible for this article to shed light on the relegated position of the Chicana in the barrio and Esperanza's transcendence of barriology. The universalist claims based on an assumption of white, Eurocentric privileges made by feminists in Europe and America caused third world women/women of colour to feel unrepresented in what Fredric Jameson termed an "array of theoretical positions" (qtd in Quintana 30). As such, these women have become a suppressed text relegated to the margins of feminist rhetoric. Unlike their Eurocentric counterparts, these women were not discriminated against only because of their sex. They were also prey to marginalisation because of their race and class.

Sara Suleri notes this difference when she quotes Chandra Mohanty as highlighting the difference between these two feminist groups. According to Mohanty, "Western Feminists alone become true 'subjects' in the counter-history" in the context of the irreconcilability of gender as history and gender as culture. Meanwhile, Third World women, never rise above the "debilitating generality of their 'object' status" (hooks 274). Stated plainly, in the striving to clamour for the rights of wronged womanhood in history and culture, white feminists regain agency for

themselves while Third World women continue to be objectified. As such, Mohanty refers here to the fact that white feminist efforts and theories fail to solve the problems of women of colour.

It is in this wise that Chicana feminists have developed what has come to be known as Feminism on the border. As a sub-set of the US Third World women feminist discourse, this brand of feminism exists in a borderland not limited to geographic space but in a space not acknowledged by hegemonic culture (qtd in Sandoval 20-21). Sonia Saldivar-Hull expatiates this point when she observes that the theories of feminism on the border are to be sought in non-traditional places like the prefaces of anthologies, the interstices of autobiographies and in the cultural artefacts of these minorities. This does not conform to hegemonic constructions of where method and theory should be found (qtd in Sandoval 20). Hence, Chicana writers seek authenticity by writing about their lived experiences in peculiar literary forms that express their resistance to the mainstream and patriarchal cultures. They portray the specificity of their selves and experiences both in the content and form of their writings, as well as in the spaces in which they choose to publish these writings as Saldivar-Hull is quoted as noting above.

In addition to the postcolonial theory, the identity theories will be used to show how Esperanza develops a new identity for herself. In the introductory part of the *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, it is noted that this theory is concerned with the different forms of identity content as well as the different kinds of processes by which identities are formed and maintained or changed over time (3). Hence, both a person's/group's process of becoming and the end-product of this process are of interest to this theory. Also, identity theories are closely connected to the different aspects of identity that are individual/personal, relational and collective.

Individual/personal identity refers to aspects of a person's self-definition as an individual. This involves the person's goals, values, religious and spiritual beliefs, standards for behaviour and decision-making, self-esteem, self-evaluation as well as desired, feared and expected future selves (ibid). It is summed up as being a person's overall "life story." This identity category is based on the subjective understanding/experience of individuals (Schwartz, Luyckx and Vignoles 9). It is this aspect of identity type that Erik Erikson's identity status paradigm and most perspectives in self-psychology have tended to focus on, as well as on the processes through which the individual develops his/her identity. Here, the agentic role of the individual is emphasized in the process of identity formation. This strand of identity is relevant to the analysis of *The House of Mango Street* in this article that aims at showing how Esperanza Cordero personally and socially constructs her identity. In the process of doing so, she discovers her flair for writing and this accounts for the paper's interest in Cisneros' identity as a writer. Incidentally, Erikson's seminal theory emphasizes identity development as the most developmental task of adolescence.

Collective identity is diametrically opposed to individual/personal identity. This identity type refers to people's identification with the groups or social categories to which they belong; the meanings that they give to these social groups and categories, and the feelings, beliefs and attitudes that result from identifying with the groups/categories (Schwartz, Luyckx and Vignoles 3). Theoretical approaches to collective identity is concerned with ways in which moment-to-moment changes in inter-group contexts can shape the way people view themselves and how this change can cause them to change from seeing themselves as individuals to seeing themselves as members of the group. Collective identity can therefore refer to ethnic identity which Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor defines as identity that develops as a function of one's ethnic group membership

(792). Collective identity, in Cisneros' novella, can be viewed from the perspective of her being part of the barrio community as well as a Chicana.

Relational identity is another aspect of identity that is of interest to this analysis as it captures one's role vis-à-vis other people (Schwartz, Luyckx and Vignoles 3). Hence, it sheds light on ways in which Esperanza's interaction with the nuns, her parents, childhood friends, the other females in the barrio and the street boys contribute to her identity formation. This dimension of identity is vital because a person's claim to any identity cannot be established on his/her own. The identity must be recognised by a social audience to be secured. That is why many approaches to identity theory hold that "identity is defined and located within interpersonal space; within families or the role played within a larger system" (ibid). These two perceptions that go beyond the individual self highlight the interpersonal construction of Esperanza's identity as well as portray her identity as a sociocultural product.

It is evident from these different angles from which identity is viewed that, whether identity is perceived as discovered or constructed, identity formation by a person/people is multi-dimensional and integrative. This same integrative approach applies to the definition of identity in this paper. The combination of the different perspectives from which identity is viewed above yields the definition of identity as consisting of the confluence of the person's self-chosen or ascribed commitments, personal characteristics, and beliefs about oneself; roles and positions in relation to significant others; and his/her membership in social groups and categories (including the person's status within the group and the group's status within the larger context); as well as her identification with treasured material possession and the person's sense of where he/she belongs in geographical space (Schwartz, Luyckx and Vignoles 8-9). Apart from the individual, collective and relational aspects of identity perceptible in this definition, there is the input of material artefacts. This concerns the way things like clothes, house, car and bank accounts define a person. Both the occupation of space in the urban Chicago setting in Cisneros' text and the type of house lived in play an important part in determining identity in the text. At this point, the paper examines barrioisation and barriology as means through which society imposes an identity on Cisneros' protagonist.

I- Barrioisation/Barriology: Living on the Borderland

Villa notes, in *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Literature and Culture*, that consequences of geographical displacement loom large in Chicano historical memory characterized by "land loss, shifting and porous national border, voluntary migrations and disparate impacts of urban developments" (1). Both the Mexican-American war and the American annexation of Mexican territory (earlier mentioned) entailed the loss of land to the US. Regular border conflicts and the decision to immigrate into the USA were two other realities that pointed to concerns about land to be conceded or occupied in the first place, and land to be possessed and used in the second. Finally, according to Villa's remark mentioned above, the Chicano immigrants who have settled in urban areas (in States like California) have affected the urban landscape in ways that are quite distinct from the Anglo mainstream architecture and urban space regulation.

Sandra Cisneros captures both the barrioisation and barriology that emanate from the conflict between the dominant Anglo world and Chicanos in urban areas in *The House on Mango Street*. While hostile space regulation seeks to banish Chicanos from the urban landscape, the Chicano resist this geography of dominance by settling in communities that bespeak of a distinct Chicano

geographical identity. To counter this Chicano resistive tactic, Anglo discriminatory spatial, cultural, political and economic practices continue to militate against the existence of Chicano occupation of urban space. It is therefore not surprising that Cisneros presents Chicano barrios that are in the peripheral parts of the city. Esperanza mentions barrios such as Mango Street, Loomis, Keeler and Paulina (Cisneros 3). It is obvious that such localities are devoid of certain amenities. Esperanza mentions the fact that, in Loomis, their house had broken water pipes and they had to fetch water in milky gallons. These neighborhoods are likewise far from educational facilities like universities— the university Alicia attends is so far that she needs two trains and a bus to get there.

The type of houses built in barrios are pointers to the fact that these areas are slums. The houses are generally poorly constructed and in a state of dereliction: peeling paint, floors that slant, improvised wooden bars on windows, some rooms that are uphill while others are down in the same house, disjointed steps, swollen floor boards nobody fixes, and greasy boards. Such arbitrary constructions are justifiable given that everybody seems to be a builder in the barrio. Esperanza's father, Cathy's father and Meme's mother all try their hands at either the repair or the construction of a building. Hence, the observation that "spontaneous settlements such as 'favelas' or 'invasiones' have developed in most Latin American cities" is applicable here (Hernández, Millington and Borden X). Spontaneity here connotes neglect because of the lack of urban planning for these communities. Like their brothers in Latin American cities, the Chicanos in Cisneros' urban setting are abandoned to themselves by Anglo urban authorities.

That probably explains why there are signs of anarchy and decay in these neighborhoods. Several apartments are in the basement and these sites offer little attractions with their junk stores and drug stores. In Mango Street, even the garden that used to harbour Monkeys and served as an attraction site is abandoned after the owners of the monkeys move to Kentucky. The garden is overgrown and infested with blind pale worms and yellow spiders. Dizzy bees and bow-tied flies fly about and the place smells of rotten wood, damp earth and dusty hollyhocks (Cisneros 95). Cisneros compares the smell of these hollyhocks to the "blue-blond hair of the dead" (ibid). Abandoned vehicles can be seen here and there. Thus, barrio life is not only uncomfortable because of the unappealing scenery it offers, but also because of the stench of the place.

Despite this ghettoish state of the barrio, the barrio is somehow a haven to the Chicanos because— outside the barrios— "the city is an unknown and hostile place" (Martín-Junquera 18). In effect, barrio residents get little or no attention from the city's authorities. The best they get are four skinny elm trees that the city authorities plant by the curb. These trees are supposed to beautify the place but are obviously planted in an environment that is not very favourable for their growth. But then the tree that is found inside the barrio grows wildly and has tall branches that harbour squirrels. Unfortunately, instead of beautifying the place or offering shelter, fruits or other such benefits, the tree works against the people who try to put it to use. Although Meme wins in the First Annual Tarzan contest organised on the tree, he loses both arms in the process.

Insights into the city world beyond the barrio definitely does not favour the Mexican American. At school, Esperanza is discriminated against. She starts off by shedding light on the awkward way in which even her name is pronounced. She states that, in school, her name is said "as if the

syllabus were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth” (Cisneros 11). Language features here as a place of struggle to borrow from bell hooks (278). Esperanza contrasts this with the way the same name is pronounced in Spanish when she remarks it is a “softer something.” Since the feel of “tin” (which is hard) on the roof of the mouth can only hurt, the way Esperanza’s name is pronounced— probably by the Anglo staff and Anglo class-mates suggests her estrangement and consequent alienation in the school environment.

Two other instances of discrimination that have been the subject of much discussion in scholarship are when nuns snob her because of her house. In the first case, the nun enquires where her house is when she comes across the adolescent in her neighborhood. Esperanza detects the nun’s contempt for her in the way the latter echoes the adolescent’s “there” (Cisneros 5). The second instance is when sister Superior obliges Esperanza to agree that “a row of three flats” that even the “raggedy men” will be ashamed of is her house (Cisneros 45). Sister Superior dismissively presumes that Esperanza can only live in such houses because she is a Chicana. It is patent that the school is a site for discrimination against ethnic minorities. Esperanza mentions the special kids with keys around their necks who can eat in the canteen while Esperanza cannot.

The school, as an Anglo institution, is a site for discrimination against ethnic minorities by both staff and students. The note sent to sister Superior by Esperanza’s mother is waved aside and the adolescent is asked not to come back to the canteen because it is restricted to those whose houses are “far.” These are the “special kids” who, from the way they stand and watch Esperanza cry, show they have nothing to do with her. Hence, the school seems to serve the purpose of offering the down-trodden glimpses of the culture and the opportunities of the mainstream. These cultures and opportunities which, however desirable, continue to elude them. The school is probably made accessible to these minority groups only so that they can be stripped of what little money they make. Esperanza does extra work to meet up with the financial demands of the Catholic High School fees because her father is convinced that going to a public High School is a waste of time.

Occasions during which barrio inmates encounter the enviable and elusive Anglo world is rife indeed. Apart from the school, the TV and books are other channels through which they access mainstream culture. The “coloured-TV” motif is recurrent in Cisneros’ work. Nenny does not consider eating at the canteen because she prefers to follow her friend to the latter’s house where they watch programs on a coloured TV. Kiki and Carlos do not mind acting as patrol boys in the school even if it means standing in the rain because they watch the actors of the movie *300 Spartans* do so. Esperanza, Lucy and Rachael play at mimicking the Beatles, Marilyn Monroe and wonder women— characters that feature in TV programmes. In the same vein, Esperanza and her uncle dance “like in the movies” at the baptism party (Cisneros 47). Even Mamacita’s baby boy starts speaking English by imitating TV commercials. Unfortunately, this mimicry does not guarantee integration into the mainstream. Thus, the Chicano community remains on the borderland.

From the point of view of barriousing Anglo forces, the barrio is not just a geographic location or a way of life. It is also a linguistic denomination. Chicano English, the variety of English spoken in the barrio, has been variously defined in scholarship. Fought Carmen notes that it is the English spoken by people whose first language is Spanish and whose Spanish introduces

mistakes into their English (3). That is the case for Esperanza's father and Mamacita whose first language is Spanish. On first arriving the US, the former eats ham and eggs for three months because those are the only English words he knows. Meanwhile, insertion into her new environment is difficult for Mamacita because she neither speaks English nor does she want to learn it. She always stays indoors while at the barrio and pines away, wanting to go back home to Mexico. These handicaps (that result from the inability to communicate in the language of the mainstream) exclude ethnic minorities.

When Chicanos finally have a certain grasp of the English Language, they often speak Chicano English that is considered as being sub-standard. Obviously influenced by Spanish, it has low prestige in certain circles (qtd in Fought 1). Cisneros captures the usage of Chicano English by barrio inmates in *The House on Mango Street*. Fought identifies the usage of the non-standard forms in the pronoun systems in Chicano English and this is discernable in Cisneros' novella. In "Our Good Day," Lucy tells Esperanza that "we come from Texas"— and adds in connection to Rachael— "Her was born here but me I'm Texas" (Cisneros 15). Lucy uses the personal pronoun object "her" in the place of the personal pronoun subject "she" in this statement. It is worth noting that the shortened form of "am" used here is a non-standard verbal form used in the place of "was born." Another instance in which the non-standard form of the pronoun is used when Esperanza refers to Lucy and Rachael as "Yous" in the vignette titled "And Some More" when she orders them to leave the yard before she calls her brothers (Cisneros 37). The second person plural of the personal pronoun, "You," does not take an "s."

The barrio is further barrioided by the fact that it is considered as being a dangerous place by both the Anglo mainstream and other coloured people. When Louie's cousin drives into the barrio in a plush car, the cops come after him while he is giving the barrio kids a ride. He finally collides into the lamp post with the car and is arrested right away despite his bruised forehead and cut lip (Cisneros 24). No stated charges are levelled against him. It can be deduced that the mainstream presumes he cannot afford such a car being a Chicano: he must have committed a crime to have it. Cisneros' adolescent narrator observes that those who come into their neighborhood are afraid that they will be attacked with "shinny knives." In connection to this, Cathy says that— although they just came into Mango Street— they will soon leave because the neighborhood is "becoming dangerous." Esperanza adds that the Chicanos are just as afraid when they move to other neighborhoods. It can be concluded that the mainstream does not only succeed in labelling urban Chicano communities "dangerous," but have successfully sown fear and mistrust for each other among the different ethnic minorities.

The foregoing has established the peripheral position of Chicano urban communities in the US. The barrio is an undesirable space occupied by a marginalised group of people. These barrios are neglected by the city authorities as much as their inhabitants are thought of only when their services are needed in petty jobs or when there is need for them to be eliminated as threats. Thus, as Peter Kellett remarks in "The Construction of Home in the Informal City," a person's place in society is determined by his/her home. As Dovey is noted as saying, the home is a "highly complex of ordered relationship with place, an order that orientates us in space, in time and in society" (Hernández, Millington and Border 24). The economic and social positions of Chicanos in contemporary US society as represented in this novella is quite clear. They are the underdogs in society and have the status of second-class citizens.

To counter this domination by the mainstream, the Chicano community comes up with *barriology*. Elizabeth Careré observes that the root term “barrio” has been combined to the Latin suffix “logos” to designate the popular associations of popular space with elite connotations of academic disciplines (Martín-Junquera 7). Besides referring to all the knowledge and practices that define the Chicano in the US urban space as earlier stated, *barriology* (derived from the combination of the two terms above) also alludes to the Chicano resistive tactics in the face of the exclusion and domination by Anglo hegemonic forces. This part of the paper looks at the *barrio* as a Chicano creation that serves as the location for the Mexican world view, cultural practices and way-of-being in Urban America.

Despite the depiction of the houses in Mango Street as sub-standard, and the whole *barrio* as a “spontaneous settlement, wanting in architectural appropriacy, attraction and cleanliness,” the *barrio* houses “respond to purposeful decisions and actions which are based on culturally constructed images of what dwellings and settlements should be like” (qtd in Hernández, Millington and Border 23). In this wise, the houses that Cisneros presents have small windows, doors that do not function properly and the staircases are narrow and crooked. It is noticeable that these are threshold spaces that Chicanas, whom the patriarchal structure confines to staying in-doors, generally occupy. Esperanza’s great-grandmother, Rafaela and Sally all spend their time by the window all day to escape from the confinement that patriarchy has reserved for them. Careré asserts that “the place within the homes that best describes the conflicts and relations between women and their homes is the threshold: window, doors, and staircases” (Martín-Junquera 16). The little space of these parts of *barrio* houses or their inability to function properly can be construed as attempts made by patriarchy to keep their women indoors.

Seen from this perspective, the substandard *barrio* houses can be said to be culturally constructed. Since the place of the woman is inside the house, the little red house in Mango Street (for example), has tight steps, small windows that makes one think they are “holding their breath” and a swollen door that has to be pushed hard for it to open (Cisneros 4). While the door that needs a hard push to open suggests that the patriarchal Chicano culture thus seeks to keep all the females of Esperanza’s household indoors, the “tight steps” and poorly aerating windows could mean that these Chicanas are not even welcome to use these thresholds to access the external world. The above view is further confirmed by the fact that Esperanza states at one point that, as she walks past the houses in Mango Street, they remind her of the houses she had seen in Mexico (Cisneros 17). It can be concluded that the ‘woman-unfriendly’ *barrio* architecture has indeed been imported from the homeland and conforms to the exigencies of the patriarchal Mexican culture that advocates the confinement of the woman.

Barrio life is indeed characterised by what Paul Allatson has termed “gender *barrio* divides” (113). While the women live in confinement in the houses, the men occupy the public spaces. Fathers and husbands alike confine their wives and daughters in the house. Sally’s father, Esperanza’s great-grandfather and Rafaela’s and Sally’s husbands are some cases in point. The dichotomy is established between the young Chicano and Chicana early in life. Kiki and Carlos do not talk to Esperanza and Nenny when they are outside the house because they cannot be seen talking to girls. The culture is equally confining in that it ascribes child-bearing, child-rearing, and house-keeping to the woman. Rose Vargas has to cope with her too many children all alone

and is all the time tired from “buttoning and bottling and babying” while her husband has chosen to walk away (Cisneros 29). Minerva also suffers the same lot and her husband comes back from time to time only to commit other atrocities like sending “a rock through the window” or beating her “black and blue” (Cisneros 84-85). It is clear from this that the Chicana suffer from double marginalisation.

Unfortunately, life in the barrio offers the Chicana no alternative to the life of wifedom and motherhood. As Alvina Quintana notes in *Home Girls: Chicano Literary Voices*, that is probably why “women think their very existence depends on how they prepare themselves for the male gaze” (69). Marin has a boyfriend back in Puerto Rico whom she is saving money to marry; dates Geraldo (a wet-back) who gets killed in an accident, and lives with the dream that she might meet someone in the subway who will marry her and take her to go and live in a big house, far away. Sally nurtures the same dream of marriage and she finally achieves it by getting married in a State that permits marriage before eighth grade (Cisneros 101). She does so because she thinks she will thus escape her father’s dominion. Unfortunately, she soon realises that she has just swapped her father’s control for her husband’s. Another salient example is Esperanza’s great-grandmother who was subjected by the grip of patriarchy: her husband forcefully threw a sack over her and forcefully carried her off to be his wife (Cisneros 11). And for all her strong personality, she spent her life pining away at the window. This patriarchal subjugation of the female caste is a legacy from Mexico. Julio C. Serrano states that Esperanza “does not like the Mexican traditions and culture brought to the US and settled in Mango Street together with the small red Mexican Houses” (106).

It is clear from this quotation that the barrio, as resistive tactic against the Anglo world, imports and integrates Mexican culture in the quotidian life of its inmates. Hence, Mexican cultural practices that pertain to death and burial rites, or the consultation of soothsayers are part of barrio life. When Esperanza’s father loses his father, he follows the Mexican procedures of telling the eldest child (Esperanza) and the latter in turn has the responsibility of informing her younger ones of their grandfather’s death and of instructing them not to run and play around because they are mourning. When Lucy and Rachael’s baby sibling dies, the mourners kiss its little body, bless themselves and light a candle. Meanwhile, Esperanza consults Elenita to know about her future. She is fortunate to be foretold that future by the three elderly women whom she calls “the three sisters” at Lucy and Rachael’s. Life in Mango Street is rooted in Mexican lore indeed.

It is significant that Cisneros chooses the name of a fruit, “Mango,” to name her barrio in this text. This is more so because Cisneros chooses to give this name to an anonymous street. Gonzales-Berry is quoted as averring that

Esperanza’s world on Mango Street is a world into its own, an Hispanic barrio of a large American city, yet unspecified in respect to its geographical and its historical setting, a symbolic “microcosm for the larger world” that lends a universal quality to this Chicana Bildungsroman. (qtd in Esturoy 67)

The fact that the barrio presented in *The House on Mango Street* can neither be located in space nor in time, means that it is a fictitious location. Cisneros creates this site to shed light on the plight of a marginalised people and, more especially, of a marginalised female caste of an ethnic

minority in urban US area. The scenario that unfolds in Mango Street takes universal overtones because it is representative of the lot of ethnic minorities and their women folk.

However, the choice of the name “Mango” to name such a street suggests the author’s wish to get her readership establish a link between the events in the book and Mexico/Mexican Americans. The mango is read as “a symbol of cultural survival”; a fruit that elicits nostalgia in the city dwellers because it is “a symbol of the tropics and of Mexico” (qtd in Chandler). Added to this is Thomas Friedman’s insight in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Friedman is quoted as opining that trees “represent everything that roots us and locates us in the world— whether it be belonging to a family, a community, a tribe, a nation, a religion or, most of all, a place called home” (Chandler 25). Mango Street, a pun on mango tree, therefore evokes the fact that the Chicano community who inhabit this barrio have immigrated from Mexico with their lores and mores and are presently getting rooted in Urban America. Mamacita’s husband exemplifies the immigrant who is determined to make Mango Street home, a home that supplants Mexico. He works at two jobs to get his wife and son to Mango Street. And when his nostalgic wife pines away because she misses their pink house back home, he gets the house painted pink and urges her to learn English so that she will quickly adapt. He equally insists that Mango Street is home when she continues to insist on going back to Mexico.

Meanwhile, the same critic (Chandler) refers to Esperanza as displaced and replanted somewhere foreign and uninviting (24). The barrio is indeed not a desirable milieu for the young Chicana that she is. The ambivalent feelings Chicanos have about barrios are captured when Villa describes the barrio as “a place of familial warmth and brotherhood” but also one of “poverty, crime, illness, and despair” (5). As earlier established in this section, the barrio (as a reaction to barrioisation and a cultural exportation of Mexico (the motherland)) binds its inhabitants together, hence the warmth and brotherhood. But the ills mentioned in the quotation above plague the barrio. As a female, Esperanza’s plight is worse for she is prey “to race, class, and gender oppression” (Quintana 60). She features as a barrio inmate who endures marginalisation because she is Chicana (ethnicity), is poor (working class) and is female (gender). And this is the lot of all Chicanas resident in the barrio. That is probably why, as Cristina Herrera notes, Cisneros writes about Chicanas who struggle with racism, classism, and sexism and these often combine with oppressive home environments that make women vulnerable to male dominance and even physical and sexual abuse (91). It is this identity that Esperanza attempts to shed off as she reconstructs herself in Cisneros’ novella. The second part of the paper examines how she transcends the barrio to do this.

II- The Barrio Transcended: Towards a New Identity

The preceding section has examined the phenomena of barrioisation and barriology in Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* and has shown how living in a barrio confers the Chicana with the identity of an underdog amongst underdogs. As such, it is obvious here that space is instrumental in determining identity. Wolfgang Berg and AoileannNíEigeartaigh observe that a person’s identity is formed because of the different spaces through which the person travels, and not because of the cultural and national values and the history one has inherited (9). That is probably why Michel Foucault opines that “the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition” (22). In *The*

House on Mango Street, Cisneros' protagonist strives to divest herself of the identity bestowed on her by both the Anglo mainstream and Chicano culture as a barrio inmate.

Esperanza Cordero, Cisneros' heroine, is an adolescent. Mark H. Chee remarks that "The adolescent years are typically marked by the exploration of different roles and lifestyles in an attempt to find a right fix" (17). It is this exploration that Esperanza undertakes and presents barrio life both from the perspectives of the white hegemonic world and the Chicano community as shown in the first section of this paper. These diverse delineations are suggestive of the different identities that she has been given. She, however, traverses these different representations to forge a new identity for herself. And she thus "find[s] a right fix" to borrow from Chee. This section of the paper is consecrated to the analysis of the way in which she does so.

Esperanza takes cognizance of her identity at personal level. The relational dimension of her identity sets in because she defines herself in relation to other members of her family and community. In this wise, she reconsiders her name: its significance in English, in Spanish, and her ancestor after whom she was named. She thus establishes the contrast between the positive connotation of her name's meaning – "hope" – with the deferment suggested by its Spanish meaning, "sadness" or "waiting" (Cisneros 10). Yet, even the flicker of optimism evoked by the protagonist's name in English is affected by the way the name is pronounced in school. The fact that the pronunciation of her name is adulterated when pronounced in the hegemonic Anglo context and language suggests that there is really nothing to hope for as a Mexican American, a woman and a barrio in-mate.

Quintana thus notes that Esperanza attempts to reinvent herself in the vignette titled "My Name," overturning what this critic refers to as the "customary nostalgia sentiment that associates grandmas with positive cultural nourishment" (60). Quintana says this because Cisneros' heroine wishes she could have a new name. According to her, names like Lisandra, Maritza, and Zeze the X are "more like the real [her]" (Cisneros 11). By expressing this wish, Esperanza attempts to redefine herself by disconnecting herself from her great-grandmother whose acceptance of patriarchal subjugation she also seeks to reject. She says in connection to her ancestor that "I have inherited her name, but I don't want her place by the window" (ibid). The same critic reads the Spanish verb *esperar* (to wait) as an ideological shift that derives from the noun "Esperanza" that is a noun and means "hope" (62). It is also the passivity suggested by the act of waiting that Esperanza is rejecting. In fact, the desire to have X as part of her name points to her desire to identify with black activists like Malcolm X (Quintana 60). This wish is indicative of her self-assertiveness. Malcolm X, a fervent and devoted activist of the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, is still very much celebrated amongst Blacks in the US today.

Other factors of personal identity that the narrator evokes are her birth date, the color of her hair and their house. She ascribes the ill omen associated to her birthdate to the fact that her ethnic group, like the Chinese, do not like their "women strong" (Cisneros 10). The author equally gets her heroine to deconstruct the view that physical features such as hair, eyecolour and complexion determine one's race or ethnic belonging. She states that "Everybody in our family has a different hair" (Cisneros 6). This bears on identity as "a catch-all label for biological characteristics, psychological dispositions and/or socio-demographic positions" (Schwartz, Luycler, and Vignole 2). In other words, in as much as members of a family can sometimes be identified by their similar physical looks, their thought patterns and/states of minds and where

they live, Cisneros seems to prepare the reader for the fact that Esperanza defies her socio-demographic position. She physically transcends the mould reserved to the Chicana because she refuses to submit to the prescriptions of her people's cultural practices.

From the perspective of her socio-demographic position, Esperanza is ashamed of their little red house in Mango Street and wishes to have a more befitting house. This decision does not just proceed from the consciousness of the contemptuous gaze of the nuns who represent the mainstream. Esperanza's parents also harboured dreams of having a proper house. In "Home, Streets, Nature: Esperanza's Itineraries in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*", Careré quotes Monica Kaup as averring that, for the Anglo-American culture,

The home is more than just a shelter; it is a national institution almost as sacred as the American flag. In home ownership, the American dream and American way are manifested: the civic values of individualism, economic success, and self-sufficiency are asserted.

(qtd in Martín-Junquera 15)

The home here is therefore more than a dwelling. It serves as a compass that makes it possible to distinguish one individual from another; is indicative of a family's opulence and is expected to give its inmates all they need for their fulfilment. Kaup probably equates the flag's sacredness to Americans to the sacredness of the flag to the nation because, as the latter is bearer of the nation's identity, so is the home bearer of the family's.

Esperanza's parents have imbibed this American view of what home ownership represents and so have their children, especially Esperanza. That is why Esperanza's father and mother declare that the house on Mango Street is temporary. However, as a working-class immigrant and a Chicano, her father can only hope to own such a house by winning the lottery. Meanwhile, the best his wife can do is to integrate the idea/dream in a quotidian and dreary task of a wife and a mother. It becomes a part of the bed-time stories she tells their children. Esperanza's process of identity formation involves being able to discern that her parent's dream and wish are all vain. She stops listening when they start talking about it and refuses to join the family when they visit the house where her father works. She decides to dream of a house of her own. This desire for a personal house "conditions her subject formation at every point" (Cutler 133).

Jean S. Phinney and Doreen A. Rosenthalopine that racial and ethnic minorities have an added dimension to their identity development because youths of these minorities are faced with the challenge of not only developing their personal identity, but of also integrating their identity as an ethnic group member with their identity as an American (Adams, Gulotta and Montemayar 145-172). To integrate this dimension of her identity, Esperanza undergoes Phinney's three-stage model of ethnic identity development. At the first stage, which is exploration, she increases her understanding of her ethnic group and ethnic culture through exposure to her people in the barrio community. The representations of the barrio from the points of view of barrioisation and barriology in the first section of this article are perceived through Esperanza's eye. Chandler states that Cisneros uses a beguiling tool, Esperanza Cordero, who tells her story and can critique both the Anglo world and patriarchy, and get away with it (22). Yet, more than telling the story, Esperanza is carrying out an act of self-discovery and self-creation (ibid). In other words, she forges her identity through what she observes in her environment in and out of the barrio.

The choice to get Esperanza, the woman-child, to write on behalf of Chicanas as a doubly marginalised caste fits in the mould of Adrienne Rich's "revision" (Quintana 61). She describes this as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (qtd in Quintana 61-62). Rich is convinced that women cannot break the grip of the past over themselves if they do not first of all understand it in a way that is different from patriarchal and mainstream representations of their experiences. Through Esperanza, Cisneros thus rewrites literature by talking about women's lived experiences. This rewriting does not just entail recounting the cultural events that characterise the Chicana's life, but as Quintana notes she makes additional moral, ideological and even cosmological statements as she does so. These statements shed light on alternative perspectives from which Chicanas' lived experiences can be perceived. The construction of this new narrative entails the reconstruction of the Chicana's identity, hence the reconstruction of Esperanza's identity.

It is obvious that the exploration of her people's, and fellow Chicana's, plight enables Esperanza to discover herself. She explores the course charted for the young Chicana in concrete ways. As she grows up with her peers, she learns to wear high-heeled shoes and to sway her budding hips. The growing girls even have an older Chicana who mentors them in what is expected of them as women. Sally tells them what made Davey pregnant and how to know how many boys are thinking of them. She even initiates them into the art of seduction. She also plays the role of instructor as she re-enforces what the story books and movies say about romance and the first sexual act. This therefore gives Esperanza the opportunity to follow the course charted for her by her ethnic group. The community, school and home all work together to carve out an identity for her.

The exploration is not limited to the cultural practices of the barrio but extends to the space (as earlier shown), the flora and the fauna as well as the cosmos. Apart from the unappealing houses, the garden is "a site of oppression and violation for Esperanza and other girls" (Chandler 26-27). Both Sally and Esperanza serve as sex objects to the boys in the garden. The hostility of the city is evident in Esperanza's interaction with the nuns. Even the flora (in the case of the huge tree in the barrio) seems to militate against the Chicano as exemplified by Meme's loss of his two arms. As fauna, the indifferent squirrels choose to stay on the tree's tallest branches. Even the four elm trees with which Esperanza identifies are subject to adverse conditions. They manage to survive because they send their roots deep into the ground. Esperanza notes that, in the barrio, "there is too much sadness and not enough sky. Butterflies too are few and so are flowers and most things that are beautiful" (Cisneros 33).

Having thus explored her barrio universe, Esperanza gets to the second stage called "commitment" or "resolution." At this stage, the adolescent (Esperanza) understands what her ethnic group means to her and the extent to which it plays an important part in her life. She realises that she cannot assert herself in the suffocating environment of the barrio or as a member of the Chicano community. Hence, she stops listening to her parents when they talk about the dream house because they cannot be models whom she can emulate nor can her great-grandmother. In fact, all the older women who accept the status quo (Sally, Marin, Rafaela) and even the much younger Minerva pose as counter examples whom she must not take after. Cisneros' young rebel is not rejecting her women folk for the sake of doing so. It is the whole of her "culture's idealization of female suffering that she is critiquing" (Herrera 119).

She becomes more expressive of her rebellion when she states that “I have decided not to grow tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (Cisneros 88). The terms “tame” “lay” and “necks on the threshold” is suggestive of the sacrificial lamb that willingly gives up itself as it co-operates with those who want to sacrifice it. The “threshold” here can be linked to the guillotine or the slaughter house. Thus, Esperanza dissociates herself from all the past and present generations of suffering Chicana women. She refuses to accept the culture of suffering as a legacy bequeathed to her by other women who think that they need to be sacrificial lambs for the well-being of their husbands and sons; she rather accepts to be another kind of sacrifice. Serrano comments, in connection to this, that “Esperanza is appointed as the lamb (Cordero) ready for immolation... to save those who have no strength to escape the ‘Barrio’ and its culture” (105). Stated otherwise, Esperanza accepts to be the sacrificial lamb that will risk defying the Chicano culture for the redemption of the women folk.

As an adolescent, she starts off by challenging the status quo. She begins what she terms “her own silent war” (Cisneros 89). This consists of leaving the table “like a man” without putting back the chair nor picking up her plate. She deems it necessary to report Tito to the latter’s mother when Tito and his friends lure Sally to a section of the garden where they can have sex with her. She even arms herself with big sticks and a rock to go to Sally’s rescue. Unfortunately, neither Tito’s mother nor Sally are ready to side with her. They have been too subjugated by patriarchy to consider questioning the status quo. The negative experience causes Esperanza to despair and wish she would die or would become the rain. This confirms the view that negative experiences by the ethnic minority groups such as ethnic discrimination are associated with negative psychosocial functioning outcomes such as anxiety and depression (Szhwartz, Luyckx and Vignoles 793).

Esperanza’s desire for a house “all her own,” away from Mango Street, accrues partly from the disappointments and frustrations endured in the barrio as a Mexican American and a barrio inmate. At this point, she has internalised some Anglo ideologies and succumbs to the allurements of the American Dream promoted by the TV and the more privileged way-of-life of European Americans. Maria Elena de Valdés has been quoted as stating that the house Esperanza seeks is her own person (qtd in Petty 128). In other words, more than a geographical space, Cisneros’ narrator protagonist needs liberation from the suffocating environment of the barrio. This freedom is especially necessary because, in the process of self-discovery, Esperanza discovers her flair for writing. In fact, both the acts of going to school and of writing pose as means through which Chicanas can free themselves from the bleak life of the barrio as well as the grip of patriarchy. Esperanza’s mother encourages her daughter to study hard while Alicia works hard studying at the university and taking care of her father to escape from working in the factory or knitting with a rolling pin. Thanks to literacy, Esperanza can both read books and write poems. The dying Aunt Guadalupe also emphatically urges her to keep on writing because it “will keep [her] free” (Cisneros 61). This is how Esperanza’s description of her desirable house reads:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in the 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 after.

(Cisneros 108)

The first four sentences of this citation clearly state what Esperanza does not want. Her exploration of the barrio has enabled her to establish the fact that she does not want the barrio kind of house nor anything that is male. She then proceeds to allude to the objects she desires to be part of her dream house; objects that bespeak of liberating space, rest, beauty and literary creation. Lastly, she makes it clear that the onerous tasks of motherhood and wifehood are not part of this desired space. That is probably why many critics have condemned Cisneros's heroine for being individualistic and anglicised.

Reading Esperanza's identity from the desired geographical space she presents portrays her as Sandra Cisneros' pseudo-self. Cisneros' declaration to the singer and song writer, Shawn Colvin, that "Cisneros is nobody's wife and nobody's mother" is evocative of Esperanza's observation in the excerpt above (qtd in Cutler 120). It is also this congruence that has prompted critics to associate Esperanza's longing for a house to Virginia Woolf's longing in *A Room of One's Own*. Saldivar Ramon states about this that Cisneros' narrator echoes the feminist plea for "a room of one's own as a site of poetic self-creation" (183). As such, the association of Esperanza's socio-demographic space to her artistic creation echoes Cisneros' personal experience during a writing class at Iowa. The writer thus relates her experience

During a seminar titled "On Memory and the Imagination" when the class was heatedly discussing Gaston Bachelard's *Poetic of Space* and the metaphor of house – a house, a house, it hit me. What did I know except third floor flats. Surely my class-mates knew nothing about that. That's precisely what I choose to write about: third floor flats, the fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible. And this is when I discovered the voice I'd been suppressing all along without realizing it. (72-73)

It is from her marginal position as a Chicana from a working-class family that Cisneros writes her masterpiece. In the quotation above, she explains how she sets out to choose the subject matter of her book. It is what ought to be a handicap (the fact that she has never lived in a real house as an under-privileged person) that prompts her to write about that 'difference.' The subject matter of *The House on Mango Street* does not just prove her distinct position at Iowa. It also distinguishes her from other American writers, in general, and Chicano writers, in particular. Quintana remarks that "Cisneros defies tradition by writing about censored topics" (67). Writing about "third floor flats, the fear of rats, drunk husbands sending rocks through the windows" has been done in defiance of her community and patriarchy. By doing this, she makes public some unsavoury realities of life in the barrio. She succeeds in clothing the "mundane and unromantic activities of women" in the barrio in a unique form. That is probably why "her voice is constituted as much by content as by form" (Cutler 132).

Cisneros writes in poetic and melodious language indeed. She thus succeeds in creating her own style that deviates from the conventional. Midway between poetry and prose, *The House on Mango Street* incarnates the blurring of genres. Cisneros is quoted as observing that

For me each of the stories could have developed into poems, but they were not poems. They were stories, albeit hovering between that grey area between two genres. (qtd in Quintana 56)

Thus, the vignettes that make up the novella can as well be considered as being independent narratives, but they are interrelated. Moreover, they are written in sentences that are not standard and complete but look like poetic lines. They are very lyrical. For instance, Esperanza thus ends the description of her house “only a house quiet as snow, a place for myself to go, clean as paper before the snow” (Cisneros 108). Though written as a sentence, this excerpt sounds like 3 lines of poetry that has two caesurae that are preceded by words that rhyme. The lines are also rhythmical and the imagery, that suggests serenity and coolness, is conjured by dint of the use of poetic devices like simile and metaphor. This blend of prose and poetry is recurrent in the text and corroborates the assertion that Cisneros writes from a place of difference. That is what she probably refers to as having found her “voice.”

Experimentation at the level of form is not limited to the blurring of genres. The novella also bears the imprint of other art like music and painting. Cisneros “attempts to do what she sees in art museums, art exhibits, concerts and dance in her writing” (Herrera 107). The brevity of her vignettes that sprawl on single or a few pages are reminiscent of strokes of paint or musical notes. Meanwhile, the artful composition and consequent lyricism of her narrative are typical of these other art forms. John Cutler notes that her work is made up of “short, lyrical prose chapters.” To these, she adds the traits of oral tradition. It is obvious that Esperanza’s story-telling derives from skills learnt while her mother told them bed-time stories hence Debora L. Madson’s claim that Cisneros “rejects the logic of patriarchy in favor of a more provisional, personal, emotional and intuitive form of narrative” (131-134). Though her work portrays some progression by highlighting Esperanza’s “rite-of-passage” as a female, Cisneros’ woman-child shuns the linearity, logic and claims of universality that is typical of narratives written by men. Her novella ends with the words with which it begins. As such, progression is achieved through Esperanza’s growth and maturation rather than through the events related in the book. Cisneros is quite unique in her approach to both form and content on the Mexican American literary landscape.

Like Esperanza, her pseudo-self, Cisneros is able to blend her yearning for individual fulfilment with militancy for the communal cause. In conformity with the third stage of the ethnic identity process called “affirmation,” Esperanza ends up feeling positively about her ethnic group membership. The consequent positive social identity changes her attitude towards the community. The change of attitude is first of all prompted by her interaction with Alicia. When Esperanza claims that she does not have a house because she feels no sense of belonging to the house on Mango Street, although she has lived there for a year, Alicia reminds her that “Like it or not, you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back too” (Cisneros 107). It is patent that this identity that derives from her socio-demographic location is an integral part of her. She can not get rid of it simply because the place is not good enough. The second time, she is reminded of the impossibility to dissociate from Mango Street by one of the three sisters. This time around, Esperanza becomes conscious of her selfish individualism and is ashamed of herself. She echoes one of the elderly women in the extract below

When you leave you must remember to come back for 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... you must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. (Cisneros 105)

Hence, in unambiguous terms, the old lady makes it clear that Esperanza's life in the barrio, her community as well as her fellow Chicana have indelibly impacted on the adolescent's identity. This is the dimension of her ethnic identity and it is interesting to note that, once more, the adolescent is guided into this by two older Chicana— Alicia (who incarnates the modern Chicana as a university student) and the old woman who stands for tradition with her art of fortune telling. Whatever way Esperanza looks at it, therefore, she cannot strip herself of her Chicano heritage. Evidence that she integrates this ethnic dimension can be found in the vignette titled "Bums in the Attic." Although this vignette precedes the youth's encounter with the older Chicanas, it is evident from it that Esperanza is not totally anglicised. She expresses her wish for the Anglo-American dream house, but adds that she will accommodate "passing bums" in the attic of her house. She adds that she will not be content "to live on the hill" like the mainstream because she won't forget who [she is] or where [she] came from" (Cisneros 87). The sense of communality expressed by Esperanza's envisaged charity radically deviates from Anglo-American individualism. It serves as a prelude to the decision to come back to the barrio for her fellow Chicanas after Alicia and one of the three Sisters raise her consciousness.

Like Esperanza, Cisneros identifies with her people. She is quoted as noting that it is at Iowa that she felt "her home, family, and neighborhood" unique and worthy of being written about, thus discovering her own voice as earlier mentioned. Through Esperanza, she gives a voice to girls and women (of the barrio) by recording their lives and retelling their history. Chandler states that this links her positively to her community and to women who find their own liberation through this means (30-37). Cisneros/Esperanza makes her experience the collective experience of Chicanas. And while doing so, she adopts a form that "embodies a quest for freedom" (Madson 236-237). The loose and associative logic as well as the fragmented structure embody a "genuine liberation that resolves rather than escapes the conflicts faced by the Chicana subject" (ibid). De Valdès reiterates this idea when she describes the way Cisneros' narrative technique relates to the theme of feminist resistance. According to her, the open-ended reflections are suggestive of Esperanza's search for an answer to her predicament: she both feels the need to get rid of the house at Mango Street and, at the same time, she must belong to it (55). The story is a powerful tool that fights for the Chicanas' cause.

Cisneros alludes to the power of a story in an interview with Gayle Elliot. She opines that the power of a story is that it makes people to shut up and listen. After listening, they remember it and retell it and it affects their lives such that they will never look at something the same way again (97). The Chicana's story that is told from another point of view empowers these formerly silenced group. They are given a voice for Cisneros acts as their mouth-piece through Esperanza. As such, their plight and suffering as people who live on the borderline is not only made known to the world, but is made known from their point of view. Their feelings, thoughts, apprehensions and wishes can therefore be voiced. Thus humanised, they become the centre of attention. In effect, Amy Sickels is quoted as remarking that only a few Chicano writers were known in the United States before ArtePùblico Press published *The House on Mango Street* (qtd in Bloom). But today, there are many other known Chicana writers and *The House on Mango Street* is read in universities, colleges and other circles. Each time the book is read, it is the

Chicana's story that is being told. Both Cisneros and her pseudo-self therefore pose as revolutionaries who successfully fight for the cause of the silenced Mexican American female.

It is clear from the analyses above that Esperanza's transcendence of the barrio is not tantamount to anglicisation and the rejection of her people. Rather, like the writer's, Esperanza's identity is the result of a "multiplicity of cultural connections" (Schulze-Engler and Helf 8). She is the product of a mixture of the Chicano and Anglo cultures, as well as the culture of other ethnic groups (like Cathy's) that live in the neighbourhood. To borrow from Amy Gutman, she is multicultural because she is shaped by more than a single culture (qtd in Schulze-Engler and Helf 8). However, the transcultural formation of Esperanza's identity does not imply the rejection and betrayal of her people. It is rather the consequence of her rejection of an imposed Chicana identity by both the Anglo mainstream and the patriarchal Chicano culture. This new identity makes it possible for her to fight for the cause of all Chicanas.

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