

THE CONSTRUCTED CHICANA IDENTITY AND MYTH IN THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with Sandra Cisneros's (1954 –) novel The House on Mango Street (1984) in terms of Chicana feminism, which emerged as a reaction against the male-dominated structure of Chicano Movement. In this sense, Cisneros's novel can be regarded as a narration of how the Chicano society is built upon mythical constructions of gender roles, the paralyzed consciousness of women. The protagonist of the novel, Esperanza becomes aware of these myths in her society by observing the wrongful behaviors of both women and men and realizes these fossilized values, which suppress the women both spatially and intellectually. She sees that the women are treated like commodities and sexual objects and decides to react and find a new way to reconstruct the community.

Cisneros reflects the constructed women images in the microcosmic Mango Street and her stand against this corrupted consideration. As a way of breaking the constructed roles, she implies awareness, remedy, change, and action for the women.

Keywords: Chicana Feminism, Sandra Cisneros, The House on Mango Street, Myth, Woman.

MANGO SOKAĞI'NDAKİ EV ROMANINDA KURGULANMIŞ CHICANA KİMLİĞİ VE MİTİ

ÖZET

Bu makale Sandra Cisneros'un (1954–) Mango Sokağı'ndaki Ev (1984) isimli romanını Chicano Hareketi'nin erkek egemen yapısına karşı ortaya çıkan Chicana feminizm ışığı altında incelemektedir. Bu anlamda, Cisneros'un romanı Chicano toplumunun, cinsiyet rollerinin mitik bir şekilde kurgulanmasının ve uyuşturulmuş kadın bilinci üzerine nasıl kurulu olduğunun anlatısı olarak görülebilir. Romanın kahramanı Esperanza, hem kadın hem de erkeklerin haksız davranışlarını gözlemleyerek toplumunda bulunan bu mitlerin farkına varır ve kadınları yalnızca mekânsal değil, düşünsel boyutta da baskılayıp sınırlandıran fosilleşmiş değerleri görür. Kadınlara mal ve cinsel nesne olarak davranıldığını anlar ve buna karşı çıkarak toplum yapısını yeniden kurmada yeni yollar bulmaya karar verir.

Cisneros, mikrokozmetik Mango Sokağı'nda kurgulanmış kadın imgelerini ve bu bozuk anlayışa karşı duruşunu yansıtır. Kurgulanmış rolleri sonlandırmak adına, kadınlara farkındalık, çözüm üretme, değişim ve eylemi işaret eder.

Anahtar kelimeler: Chicana Feminizm, Sandra Cisneros, Mango Sokağı'ndaki Ev, Mit, Kadın.

*This article is produced from the M.A. thesis written by Gülsüm Tuğçe ÇETİN entitled "Understanding Chicana Feminism: Feminist Elements in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*" completed at Fırat University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Programme of English Language and Literature, in 2014, supervised by Dr. F. Gül KOÇSOY in Elazığ, Turkey.

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Many people that belonged to Mexican-American ethnicity begin to call themselves Chicanos during the 1960s with the aim of identifying their ethnical and political place in the society. Even though there is not an exact concurrence about the peak use period of the word, it works as an umbrella term that collects the 'between' people, who are not really Mexican when being looked from Mexico and not really American since they do not share the same experiences as Americans (Anaya, 1993: 6-7). As Garcia states,

[T]he term Chicano has been chosen by the Mexican-American youth to identify themselves. The Chicano is basically any person of Mexican ancestry who calls himself a Chicano. It provides a sense of identification not given to them by the majority of people in the United States. This word not only furnishes an identity; it carries a whole philosophical meaning. A Chicano is proud of his heritage, a person who is responsible and committed to helping others of his people (1977: 2).

The steady thing is that the term itself is a cultural and political self-identifying word for these people, who live in a dichotomous realm. In other words, this identification is an acceptance of a heritage with all its aspects.

Chicana/o literature upsurged in the late 1960s, as a part of Chicano Movement. Therefore, in order to have a clearer understanding, the movement should be examined in first place. Chicano Movement is the production of the political relations of the 1960s. Influenced by the same period's similar movements and experienced discrimination and structural inequalities in Anglo-American society, Mexican-Americans coalesced and composed their own ethnic nationalist movement in the 1960s. The movement was a multi-headed improvement act that aimed to change and improve the issues such as equality, education and political autonomy for the Chicano society. In this sense, student organizations had a major role in the awakening of the people. As a result of the declarations that were announced in the organizations, people were enlightened and unity was tried to be provided against the assimilation by the white world. All efforts shared the sense of pride of being Chicano, a dedication to the Chicano history and culture and a desire to improve the social place of the Chicanos in the United States. The individuals and the organizations constituted the movement's base and they shared the sense of pride of being Chicano, a dedication to the Chicano history and culture, a desire to improve the social place of the Chicanos, and a willpower to change the American mind about the Chicanos. However, this change was not a simple process since this situation was a result of centuries. As Cherríe Moraga stated: "... Anglo America proffers to the Spanish surnamed the illusion of blending into the 'melting pot' like any other white immigrant group. But the Latino is neither wholly immigrant nor wholly white; and here in this country, 'Indian' and 'dark' don't melt" (1993: 57).

Chicano Movement undoubtedly provided a voice for Chicano society; however, the general structure of the movement was male-oriented. Equality was the most essential issue for the Chicanos in the society they lived. However, when Chicanas, the Mexican-American women as they called themselves, demanded equality for themselves in the movement, they faced hypocrisy, because the men had ignored the Mexican women. Their



anti-sexist criticism was perceived as hatred of men. This process was not easy to overcome because Chicanas had to stand up to the accusation “*vendidas*” (sell-outs) (Nieto-Gomez, 1974: 35) by their own society, above all. Now, the women had to fight against sexism, as it had been throughout history, besides racism. The Mexican-American men had the fear that the women could divide the movement and could weaken the nationalistic demands and aims. In other words, they believed that women might sidetrack the focus of the movement. In fact, Chicanos could not understand that Chicanas never separated from nationalistic spirit. As Nieto suggests cogently, “The Chicana must tell her brother, ‘I am not here to emasculate you; I am here to fight with you shoulder to shoulder as an equal. If you can only be free when I take second place to you, then you are not truly free – and I want freedom for you as well as for me’” (2014: 210). Unfortunately, these women were not supported by their brothers and they were demanded to postpone their ambition. Chicanas could not find a front place for themselves within the movement. So, they had no other choice but to separate from this patriarchal organization, since they believed that there should not be any hierarchy between the struggles. It was unacceptable to separate the struggles in a hierarchical list of priorities and it was also unacceptable to ask a Chicana to ignore her struggle as a woman.

Separation from the Chicano Movement became the starting point for Chicana feminist understanding in the 1960s and 70s. During these years, Chicana feminist thought emerged against the gender oppression that they were exposed to in Chicano Movement and Chicana feminism focused on the specific aspects that have influenced Chicanas’ lives as women of color in the U.S. (Garcia, 1989: 217). These women were searching for a place in their own society, and they wanted to be respected by their sex as well. In this respect, Chicanas were three times ‘the other’ in American society and they had to fight against racism, sexism, and racial sexism. As part of a brown society, they were not fully native in the United States, so they were not accepted by the white world. As they are traditionally seen as the biological and cultural symbol of the Chicano society, they were supposed to obey the male dominance and for centuries they have been supposed to serve men, need men, and be protected by men. They thought of themselves as the women of illiterate brown society and were not regarded as valuable or worth equality in the sight of the white American women. Even the *educated* white women had not entire equality with the men, so the *illiterate* brown women had to struggle more stubbornly to get rights both in their own society and in the American society. As Roxanne Dunbar stated: “We live under an international caste system, at the top of which is the Western white male ruling class, and at the very bottom of which is the female of the non-white colonized world” (2000: 489). As a product of the brown and colonized world, the challenge of Chicanas is to destroy the man-created myths limiting them as human beings.

Chicana feminists developed a feminist consciousness that was against social gender injustice. As Alarcón mentioned, Chicana feminists were not in the search of belauding the sex but in search of equality (1990: 28-39). They were the bright side of their society that transforms their culture into that of the contemporary United States. Chicana feminists were in search of ‘a room of their own’ (reminiscent of Virginia Woolf) in the Chicano



Movement (García, 1997: 1). This understanding caused in posing questions about their places in the Chicano Movement and they were regarded as “a colony within a colony” (Rowbotham, 1974: 206). As Nieto Gomez states, “Chicana feminism is the recognition that women are oppressed as a group and are exploited as part of *la Raza* people. It is a direction to be responsible to identify and act upon the issues and needs of Chicana women. Chicana feminists are involved in understanding the nature of women’s oppression” (1976: 10). As the members of the Chicano community, which is referred by *la Raza*, Chicanas were used in the name of gaining equality in the outer world. However, the inside of the community was not as equal as it was reflected. When Chicanas realized that they were exploited and unseen within their own community, they awakened to a new consciousness and so, that feminist understanding was the only way out.

Chicano society was constructed with cultural narrations. Chicana identity was one of these stories, which was transferred from generation to generation. The aim of this patriarchal society was to create a modest, meek, and innocent essence in the name of womanhood (Moi, 1986: 209). Rising of the women was seen as weakening the male ego, so Chicanas were expected to obey their social institutions. Chicanas were under pressure to be seen as the designated producers of culture and Chicana feminists reacted against the ‘ideal Chicana’ image that represents them as strong, patient and the ones who keep the family together and in this way fulfill the ideal and cultural survival. As Nieto suggests,

Some Chicanas are similarly praised as they emulate the sanctified example set by [the Virgin] Mary. The woman par excellence is mother and wife. She is to love and support her husband and to nurture and teach her children. Thus, may she gain fulfillment as a woman. For a Chicana bent upon fulfillment of her personhood, this restricted perspective of her role as a woman is not only inadequate but crippling (2014: 208).

The image and myth of ‘Angel in the house’ is strictly criticized by the Chicana feminists. If a Chicana really wants to fulfill her individuality and explore herself as a free individual, she must oppose the constructed myths, which restrict the women to the roles of the devotees of men.

Even though it is difficult to gain freedom in such a tradition, which does not support the liberation of women and even does not believe that women need it, Chicana feminists realize that this oppression is a collective problem and should be solved in the Chicano society and organizations. In order to save themselves, they have to work together. In this respect, the rising feminist understanding in the society would become an exit for the Chicanas, as Cotera states poignantly, “There has always been feminism in our ranks and there will continue to be as long as Chicanas live and breathe in the movement ... Chicanas will direct their own destiny” (1977: 12). It is obvious that freedom is an indispensable factor for the Chicanas, so literary writing begins to serve for changing the decadence within their community. In this sense, Sandra Cisneros (1954 –), who is a praised poet, essayist, and novelist and accepted as the first Chicana writer entering the American literary canon, crosses the border



successfully and becomes a part of this practice with her awarded novel *The House on Mango Street* (1984). She says of her writing:

When I was eleven years old in Chicago, teachers thought if you were poor and Mexican you didn't have anything to say. Now I think that what I was put on the planet for was to tell these stories. Use what you know to help heal the pain in your community. We've got to tell our own history. I am very conscious that I want to write about us so that there is communication between the cultures. That's political work: making communication happen between cultures (qtd. in López: 1993, 155-156).

Mango Street consists of forty-four vignettes called 'lazy poems'. Each vignette can be regarded as an independent short story and the subjects may seem not clear but, when read together, they all create a narrative of a young Chicana, who desires to find a social place for herself. The novel welcomes the reader with a dedication in two languages, "A las Mujeres / to the Women." Cisneros emphasizes her dual ethnic background by using both Spanish and English and she dedicates the book to all women in her life. By doing this, she reveals that her main struggle is gender issues. It maintains a stance against gender oppression, women stereotypes, persecution, and cultural norms.

The novel is narrated from the perspective of Esperanza, who is about twelve years old. In this way, the complicated process of the building of the gendered issues is represented from a pure childhood view. All of the stories, even if they seem irrelevant to one another, form the protagonist's voyage of self-exploration and self-definition. Esperanza criticizes gender injustices throughout the novel. In this respect, as Olivares indicates, Cisneros "breaks the paradigm of the traditional female bildungsroman" (1996: 213), which dismantles the patriarchal, Western, and fairy tale like realization of women's lives, which are intertwined with waiting for a man's hand and after that a happy ending. Cisneros portrays the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the world of her place. She also aims to establish a communication between the cultures, which she thinks political. By skipping from one topic to another and from one character to another (there are dozens of characters, some of whom are introduced only once or twice), Cisneros does not give too much importance to any event or person. She introduces many characters and events, paints the structure and emphasizes the mobility of the *barrio*, the slums. In the *barrio* and on the pages no one has much space; stories are told and there is no much importance if the story has an end or not, since in the *barrio* nothing is certain. While the novel scrutinizes the roles of racial conditions of oppression, it also questions the sexual discrimination in working-class Chicano neighborhood.

In this unreliable world, Cisneros discusses sexism as an ideology that constructs the expected Chicana identity. As sexism is defined as an ideology, which advocates male supremacist values, women are identified as naturally dependent, childish, neurotic and always in need of authority, while men are identified as naturally stronger,



more logical and rational and they can support the women financially. So, man is identified superior to woman by nature. In this sense, Cisneros reflects these constructed women identities in her microcosmic novel and while giving articulation to the repressed voices, she narrates the rising against the organized ideology. She illustrates the difficulties of a conscientious female child, growing up in a male-dominated and inner-city Mexican neighborhood in the 1960s.

The women and men in the novel have separate worlds in the novel. Even though they live in the same atmosphere, condition, and culture, their perceptions are different. The tradition gives them an identity and this construction begins from the beginning, from childhood even in the same house. The protagonist Esperanza and her siblings are all well in the unseen four walls of the house, they speak to one another, but outside, the boys have their own lives and do not communicate with the girls. Esperanza says, "They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls" (Cisneros, 1984: 8)³. In these lines, Esperanza explores the differentiation between women and men in her own family, as she herself will explore and experience in other spheres in the future. This condition can be regarded as a micro representation of the adult world. The boys ignore the girls and have shame when other people see them together. So, the outer world does not accept the equal sharing of life. In this respect, this constructed sexist world, which is described by using children, indicates that stereotypes ruin innocence true to children. Esperanza by experiencing the division between the male and the female loses her innocence about sexes and learns that they are different and the female are the inferior one.

In such a patriarchal society, in which women are ignored but men are glorified, the women are the victims of the traditional way of living. In this culture, women can be bought or sold metaphorically, and even stolen like a commodity. Esperanza introduces her great-grandmother and her story of marriage. She narrates how her great-grandmother is abducted "as if she were a fancy chandelier" (11) and forced to marry; she cannot forgive her husband and spends her life looking out a window, in "the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (11). The woman as an individual does not mean anything, but she is only a physical entity dependent on a man. In *Mango Street*, the houses are not the places of rest or peace; they are chaotic and prison-like cold bricks. Rafaela, in one of the houses, is a young woman "too beautiful to look at" (79), so her husband locks her inside the house in order to prevent her from escaping. She is locked like an object in a museum and out of the window she can watch the children playing outside and asks them her favorite drink; only on Tuesday nights, because her husband is out with his friends on those nights and the days become a bond between Rafaela and the exterior world. The window is like a showcase, which she can see outside and the other people can see her. Rafaela must be kept inside, like Malinche⁴, because her sexuality is regarded as a threat that must be contained (Petty, 2000: 125). The culture constructs the myth of weakness of women, therefore, they must be controlled and protected

³ The references to *The House on Mango Street* will be given only with page numbers henceforth.

⁴ The Aztec woman, who helps Hernan Cortes (Spanish conqueror) as a translator, guide and is his mistress. Therefore, she is identified with the evil woman, the stereotype of *femme fatale*.



from the external hazards and this protection can be done with a male hand. According to her husband and the culture, there is nothing wrong with this behavior, he has the right to lock up his wife in the name of 'protecting' her from other men in a 1960s Chicago barrio. Rafaela is one of the princesses waiting for a miracle, but in Mango Street, the princes do not rescue but imprison.

Another beautiful victim of the commodified woman essence is Sally. She has "eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke" (81), which make her on the focus of the boys. In such a world being a woman is hard, being a beautiful woman results in greater difficulty, as her father says "to be this beautiful is trouble" (81). Thus, her father does not let her out of the house, she is prisoned by a man, not by a husband, but by a father. This patriarchal domination brings physical abuse together since her father thinks that violence is a solution to protect her daughter's virtue. As Petty indicates, "like la Malinche, Sally's sexuality is doubly threatening to her father's masculinity" (2000: 127), because her beauty may cause in rape or she could betray her father by being promiscuous.

In Mexican society, as Anzaldúa points out, "males make the rules and laws" and women merely "transmit them" (1987: 38). While it is reflected as a protection for the women, it is a clear oppression of men. So, she adds, "La gorra, el rebozo, la mantilla are symbols of my culture's 'protection' of women. Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually, it keeps women in rigidly defined roles" (1987: 39). The garments, which make woman protected from the exterior dangers – cap, wrap and shawl – are used in order to keep the women meek. As the change starts form the head, in the Mexican culture, patriarchy tries to warp the women's heads. Protecting women is based on their being disguised or unseen, whether it is provided with a piece of cloth or a closed door. Sally, a young girl of the neighborhood, is 'protected' behind the closed doors, however, when she is seen with a boy, her father "just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (93). She is dreadfully beaten by her father that the purple spots become the other way of 'protecting' her. In this scene, there is no place for Sally's mother on the pages, because as a woman, she cannot interfere with her husband. She is not mentioned, neither dead, nor divorced, but she is disabled in her daughter's destiny.

In such a dark atmosphere of the neighborhood, most of the things are either black or white, there is no place for gray. As Norma Alarcon states, "Insofar as feminine symbolic figures are concerned, much of the Mexican/Chicano oral tradition, as well as the intellectual, are dominated by la Malinche/la Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe ... The Mexican/Chicano cultural tradition has tended to polarize the lives of women through these national (and nationalistic) symbols" (1981: 189). While la Malinche infers the bad/dirty, Virgin of Guadalupe infers the good/clean. In this sense, women are locked or tried to be controlled in order to insure their 'cleanliness'. The myth of being clean or dirty is constructed in order to block the women's desires, ambitions, and visions. The women are forced to sacrifice their future in order to resemble the Virgin de Guadalupe. The women are forced to live between these two labels. Since the Virgin of Guadalupe represents



the Holy Mother and la Malinche represents the violated woman, female roles in Mexican culture are sharply defined based on their physical sexuality and nothing more (Petty, 2000:120). As Cisneros herself indicates in an interview “Certainly that black-white issue, good-bad, it’s very prevalent in my work and in other Latinas. We’re raised with a Mexican culture that has two role models: La Malinche y la Virgen de Guadalupe. And you know that’s a hard route to go, one or the other, there’s no in-betweens” (Cisneros in Rodriguez-Aranda, 1990: 65). It is obvious that the Mexican society is rigid in defining gender distinctions.

In order to maintain the cleanliness of a woman, marriage would be the last destination. In this sense, Sally, chooses this way in order to escape from the fear of being defiled, beaten and not to be identified as La Malinche. However, marriage is not the garden of heaven in Mango Street. She exchanges one patriarchal prison for another. Even though she says she loves her husband, he has also violent tendencies like her father. She is forced to live in a house, where she cannot talk on the telephone, no friends may come, nor can she look out of the window. Sally does not have any difference from a refrigerator at home, she just “sits home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission” (102). This “crossing from one extreme to the other of the good/bad dichotomy that classifies Chicana women” (Petty, 2000: 127) does not serve for salvation for Sally, but she fulfills the ideal woman image in order to contain her sexuality within supposed cultural rules.

In a male-oriented world, becoming and being a woman is also problematic. For the young girls on the way of maturing, exploring their senses and bodies may cause trouble for them. The three girls of the Mango Street – Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel – experience this complex situation while they are given a bag of old high-heeled shoes. The girls are amazed at those shoes because this is a chance for them to feel like ‘Cinderella’, as it is told in the fairy tale. When they put on the shoes and see that they have good to look woman-like legs, they get the first warning from the grocer. He says that such shoes are not proper for the young girls and adds “take them shoes off before I call the cops” (41). The grocer becomes the signifier that embodies the role of a protector of chastity in the society. This role shows how women’s discovering their sexuality is often controlled and interfered by both neighborhood residents and security forces serving as a tool of repression (Saldivar, 1990: 96-97). Even though they can ignore the man’s warning, they hear the boys’ crying out on the other side, “Ladies, lead me to heaven” (41), which make them uneasy. However, the last harassment coming from a drifter asking a kiss in exchange for a dollar makes them feel much uncomfortable and they give up ‘being a woman’. They are treated as a commodity, which can be desired, bought, and possessed by the men.

The issue that a woman is a freely used-to-be object is criticized in the novel. In a community, where patriarchal understanding is dominant, men are the subject, while women are the only objects, who are thought to be used at men’s pleasure. When Esperanza goes to work for her school fee, she meets an old man, who makes Esperanza happy since she finds someone to eat lunch together. The man asks her to give a kiss because it is his birthday. She thinks there is no harm in kissing, but as she moves to kiss, the man grabs her and forces her to kiss his mouth. Esperanza's innocent kiss turns into an assault by the old man. Here, a kiss, thought as innocent,



transforms itself into sexuality, physical violence, and oppression. She is oppressed and deforced as if she is only an object to serve for a man. This exploitation conduces Esperanza to realize the dark and decayed side of her male-oriented community.

While some women in the novel reject the role, in which sex becomes their primary interaction and currency with men, the others accept the situation and lose their hope for any other choice that could be better. As a matter of fact, this dulled understanding is a consequence of layered experiences in the community. This situation becomes apparent when Tito and other boys disturb Sally, when she was not married, and want to kiss in turn of giving her keys. According to these boys, there is not any trouble in manipulating Sally as an object, and she allows to be manipulated by the boys. Since she has grown up witnessing the oppression of men, she has been accustomed to the superiority of one sex to the other and to complying with their demands. Esperanza is very upset by this and goes to Tito's mother in order to get a help for stopping this. However, she receives the mother's answer with sorrow, because she does not find this situation bizarre. As a part of patriarchal Chicano community, the mother internalizes the superiority of males – boys or men. She normalizes the exploitation of Sally and even enjoys her son's acts. Esperanza is disappointed with the women's turning a blind eye to male oppression in Mango Street. The men and the boys can act as they want because the women do not help one another but support it by keeping silent. However, the point that Esperanza is demolished is when Sally does not want Esperanza's help in saving her from the boys' manipulating and abusing her. Sally legalizes and confirms the boys' acts. Esperanza's vain effort to save Sally indicates her temporal loss of hope for their own future as women.

The silence of the women in Mango Street, which is criticized by Cisneros, is also criticized as a cultural imposition in the Chicana society. She declares that silence prevents both knowledge and true solidarity among Chicana women. She states in her essay that she is "overwhelmed by the silence regarding Latinas and our bodies" (1996: 44). According to her, silence is in "the guise of modesty" (1996: 43), and she blames the men-dominated culture, which promotes the 'silence' of women in the name of being a 'clean' and 'good' representative of Virgin la Guadalupe both in the house and society. She says:

How could I acknowledge my sexuality, let alone enjoy sex, with so much guilt? What a culture of denial. Don't get pregnant! But no one tells you how not to ... This is why I was angry for so many years every time I saw la Virgen de Guadalupe, my culture's role model for brown women like me ... Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus? I never saw any evidence of it. They were fornicating like rabbits while Church ignored them and pointed us women toward our destiny – marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was *putahood* (1996: 44-45).



Anything, except being a wife or mother, is identified with being a fallen woman in the Chicano community. In this sense, religion and the church's stand have a great effect in constructing the gender identifications. The myths that confine women are supported by the religious discourses, therefore inequality is created between the sexes. Cisneros questions the reasons behind the myths that used to shape the society and create a hierarchy. While women have to obey the cultural and religious myths that try to embody the Virgin Mary in the bodies and minds of the Chicanas, there is not any matching between the men and Jesus. Chaste character should be true for both of the sexes, according to Cisneros. Because of the image of Virgen de Guadalupe, women dare not speak of any sexual issues, which might be associated with being 'dirty' or 'bad'. As, Maria Herrera-Sobek indicates, this culture is intertwined with a "conspiracy of silence" (1987: 178). Cisneros confesses in the interview that she desires to reject some aspects of her culture that she does not like, and redefine them free from cultural dogmas, which should be fine for women (in Rodriguez-Aranda, 1990: 66). Anzaldúa also has desire to reject some aspects in Chicano culture in order to construct a new Chicana identity. If this is possible, then the Chicanas can find a place in their culture to evaluate things free from men's domination. In this sense, she notes:

Conozco el malestar de mi cultura. I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, *como burras*, our strengths used against us, *lowly burras* humility and dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue. I abhor how my culture makes *macho caricatures* of his men. No, I do not buy all the myths of the tribe into which I was born (1987: 44).

Anzaldúa does not accept the myths that construct an identity for the Chicana women in order to easily rule and control them, and make them nothing but only stupid creatures. The myths not only serve for dominating women, but also make them believe that their highest virtue is to serve men. The definition of womanhood is made upon the services for the men, she adds that Mexican men are also caricaturized through exaggerated masculinism. Anzaldúa, like her contemporaries, refuses to "glorify those aspects of [her] culture which have injured [her] and which have injured [her] in the name of protecting [her]" (1987: 44).

From the very beginning of the novel, Esperanza starts to realize in various ways that women and men live in separate worlds. She starts to discover the power of words and narration while she reveals her name and its story. We learn that her name means "hope" in English, but in Spanish, it means "sadness" and "waiting". While her current state is sad and she longs for escape, she is also hopeful and strong. The name is a heritage from her great-grandmother, and they both are born in the Chinese year of horse, which is believed to be bad luck if you are a woman. As she states "I think this is a Chinese lie, because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their woman strong" (10). Her understanding of the gender issues in her community is keen. In this respect, as a Chicana, Esperanza realizes the constructed myths and narrations that try to hold the women mild and she decides to have a stand against this constructed structure.



In Mango Street the constructed myths are used in order to stick the women in their houses; the case of Alicia is another example. She is one of the girls, who tries to break the tradition as she goes to college, but has to do all the chores of the house because her mother died. She has to care for her young siblings and wake up early to make tortillas for their lunchboxes. Even though she tries to resist the cultural destiny in order to improve her life, she is trapped by patriarchal traditions and is supposed to be the substitute for her mother as the society believes girls should. Her father says, “a woman’s place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star” (31); the star is a cultural usage for morning star making her remember the tradition-based duties. Olivares states, “Here we do not see the tortilla as a symbol of cultural identity, but as a symbol of subjugating ideology, of sexual domination, of the imposition of a role that the young woman must assume” (1996: 237). In fact, the thing that Alicia has to inherit is not the responsibility of taking care of her siblings, but the modesty, meekness, and acquiescing what is told her to do as a young Chicana girl in the Chicano community. She is supposed to embody and actualize the ideal image of woman. This kind of traditionally constructed myths form the anchor point for the domination related to gender.

Through Esperanza’s narrative voice Cisneros gives self-expression for the oppressed women of Mango Street. While the constructed Chicana identity in the Mexican-American culture is the result of the many layered years, it is not accepted by the contemporary Chicanas. With this reaction against the myth of the male dominated society, the Chicanas are “making a new culture – *una cultura mestiza* – with [their] own lumber, [their] own bricks and mortar and [their] own feminist architecture” (Anzaldúa, 1987: 44). The reflection of idealized women in Chicano community identifies Esperanza’s refusal of praising the damaging characteristics of her community, which have been wounded the Chicana women for years. She is the narrator of voiceless women and the possibility of women’s salvation.

As a woman, who opposes the traditional lifestyle, Cisneros defines new Chicana voices, who can also dream about withstanding the cultural expectations. While Esperanza witnesses all the voiceless women of her neighborhood, she develops a liberal understanding of life on the way to becoming a Chicana. As she does not accept the oppression of women, she cannot make sense of the women’s obeying these rotten and created structure of the society. In this sense, Esperanza internalizes the understanding of freedom as she witnesses and examines her own society and neighborhood. She is a candidate of a role model for the young Chicana readers, who do not know anything behind the cultural dictates, which are promoted as the virtues of being an ideal woman. Chicanas are under such a pressure that they cannot think of finding a way of liberation. Therefore, Rafaela and Sally internalize patriarchy and suffer from inertia, in fear of being punished physically or morally (being labelled as la Malinche in their society) and they make way for this decayed order. They contribute to patriarchy not only being silent but also accepting the vicious behaviors. By mirroring these women’s lives, Cisneros explains their own faults while reflecting the decayed structure of the community. On the other hand, Alicia is different as she does not fully obey the myths of the men-oriented tradition. She is determined in going



to college in order to find a way to change her life and become the representative of the reaction to the imposed culture. So, she can be regarded as the representative of the new, modern Chicana woman.

As a consequence of her experiences in the Mango Street, Esperanza does not accept the conventional woman roles and aims to break the chain by going away, she does not want to add a new story within this unnatural and inhuman understanding of patriarchal construction. She realizes that in order to be powerful in the life and to decide her way on her own, she must begin to “[her] own quiet war” (89) to have a stand against the patriarchal structure. With the embodiment of Esperanza, Cisneros reflects the way of the creation of Chicana feminist understanding and her hope for the future of the Chicanas. As a result of Esperanza’s pains in Mango Street, she develops a new understanding and perspective of life. Towards the end of the novel, when she is asked to make a wish from three sisters, who are seemed to have supernatural powers, they give an advice to her after saying her wish will come true, “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will 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” (105). They nominate her for the duty of helping her women friends. According to Esperanza, in order to create an independent space for herself and reconstructing herself, the first thing is to leave the constructed patriarchal community and to come back stronger to support them. In relation to her protagonist’s decision, Cisneros has a stand for the reconstruction coming with deconstruction of the solidified myths and the degenerated values of patriarchal community.



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