

What Role Does Esperanza's Community Play In Shaping Her Identity?

In her novel, *The House On Mango Street*, Cisneros spotlights challenges facing women in a male-dominated society through the observational writing and most importantly the life of her protagonist, Esperanza. As an adolescent female, Esperanza continually struggles to gain identity in the patriarchal community in which she lives. Since children can shape their character through their experience, Cisneros chose to base her story from the perspective of an adolescent. In the first chapter, Esperanza introduces the six members of her family- her papa, her mama, Nenny her younger sister and Carlos and Kiki her younger brothers but doesn't present herself as she is still struggling to come up with a name and an identity for herself (Cisneros 3). At this point, the story she tells us more about her memories and observations.

The major problems that Esperanza observes and writes about throughout her life include abuse, oppression, and victimization which result from the male-controlled values that are present in her community. These experiences fuel her writing consequently enabling her to find her own identity. Bloom, through his scholarly article that analyzes *The House On Mango Street* approves this idea when he states that "It is from these experiences of the lives of her fellow Chicanas that Esperanza was able to evade this fate as she matures" (96). As an adolescent, Esperanza is unable to detach herself from the culture entirely. However, she was able to resist the patriarchal values and eventually gains the ability to withstand unjust treatment. To her, the experiences from her fellow Chicana's enabled her to understand that, for her to be free from the patriarchal limitations as an adult, this woman had to resist this culture. When Esperanza says that she would tell us a story of a girl who didn't want to belong (Cisneros 109), she vows to narrate her life's story, her experiences, her quest for identity as well as her

maturation. As a girl, Esperanza knows something is wrong, and for that, she does not want to belong.

Esperanza's unwillingness to conform to the culture of the community she lives in results to her struggles in finding her identity. Her battles in the text are as a result of her unwillingness and inability to accept the challenges that come with living in the male-controlled community. Her failure to resonate with the customs of her culture denied her the opportunity to self-identity. Esperanza ended up being alienated. The sense of isolation is exacerbated because racially she is a Mexican, although intellectually a Mexican American; she is a young adolescent encircled by abused, worn-out and defeated women, but she must be a free woman (Valdés 57). The numerous examples of abused and defeated women sparked Esperanza's desperate feeling for the need to be free. In her feelings of loneliness, Esperanza ponders about the fact that there is no one around her that she relates to, and she yearns for the day that she shall meet someone to who she can connect. Esperanza expresses that, until she meets that person she can relate to she will be a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor (Cisneros 9). Esperanza also contemplates of changing her name, "a name like the real me, the one nobody sees" (Cisneros 10). This quote not only suggests her loneliness but also her desire for the opportunity to be more like herself, that person in her seen by no one as it is atypical of her community's culture. Esperanza acknowledges the fact that she is different from other females in her town and she feels that it is because of this that no one understands her. It is also clear that Esperanza's lack of friends is not because she can't make any but because she struggles to relate to them. She refuses to become a victim of abuse, victimization, and oppression like the rest of the women portrayed in the text.

Majority of the men in the text are depicted as cruel, manipulative or repressive. While women are contrastingly portrayed as dupes; they are abused both physically and mentally. The

abuse doesn't not only affect the women physically but emotionally as well, and its effects are equally devastating. An example of emotional abuse in the novel is the instance when Esperanza recounts a woman named Minerva. Minerva has many problems the biggest one being his husband who has already and kept leaving (Cisneros 84). Minerva's mother also experienced the same difficulties that Minerva is currently experiencing. As indicated in the text, Minerva's mother raised the kids alone, and it's very likely that her daughter will have to go the same way as well (Cisneros 84). In an attempt to end the emotional abuse, Minerva tries to rid herself of her husband, but she fails. However, she one day manages to let her husband know that enough is enough, as per the text, but after husbands apologize, she opens the door again (Cisneros 85). This exemplifies the idea of the abuse cycle. "The next week she comes over black and blue and asks what can she do" (Cisneros 85). No matter how hard Minerva wants to free herself, it becomes hard for her. Out of hopelessness that Minerva feels, she declares that there is nothing she can do.

Minerva is a victim of abuse in the male-controlled Hispanic culture. As suggested by the text, the abuse of women is not only limited to wives but also daughters and little girls. An example of this idea in the novel is Esperanza's observation of the life a girl named Sally. Because Sally is afraid of telling the truth about her abusive father, she ends up making excuses regarding him. As Esperanza writes, Sally says, "he never hits me hard" (Cisneros 92). In this quote, although Sally admits being hit by her abusive father, she still defends him. The action of the mothers in the text is inappropriate. The mothers attempt to ease the pain and cover up the evidence instead of taking the right course of action and stop the abuse. An excellent example from the text is when Sally's mother rubs lard on all the hurting places (Cisneros 92). Women are afraid of standing up to men for their children and their sake as well. As the text suggests,

abuse of women is a disturbing issue within the confines of the Hispanic community. As a result of not being valued nor respected, women in the text feel like hopeless victims.

The first step to Esperanza's declaration for her freedom is marked by Cisneros letting her write about her experiences. However, Esperanza responds positively to these challenges as she writes about her experiences. She instead uses the lessons to fuel up her maturation. To Esperanza, allowing herself to be a subject of those abusive experiences was not an option for her at any given moment. Upon reflecting on the human brutality and hostility of wife-beating, Valdés agrees that it is not with hatred or violence but with an undoubtedly firm determination to describe and to evade the cruel circle of abused women. It is a result of the way women in the text are treated that Esperanza behaves the way she does especially when responding to attention that she receives from boys.

In boys, Esperanza shows very little interest centrally to the other girls in the text that she observes. Many of the other girls long dearly for attention from boys and are very concerned about how they look. In the script, one of the girls says that the boys seeing the girls and the girls seeing the boys is all that matters (Cisneros 27). As it appears in the text, women's aspirations are limited to marriage, since to them marriage likens to stability and security; in other words, through marriage women are well attended. The same girl referred to above is again described by Esperanza as seen dancing under the streetlamp, "waiting for a car to stop, star to fall, someone to change her life" (Cisneros 27). Hoping a man will come and take her with him, this young girl waits around. The behavior of this girl can be attributed to what she has been taught to think of males through her observation of the patriarchal culture. As Esperanza describes an old lady named Ruthie, she states that Ruthie could have been anything she would have wanted to (Cisneros 68). It is for the sake of her marriage the Ruthie gave up her dreams as Esperanza

explains and instead got married to and moved away to a lovely home away from the city (Cisneros 69). According to the text, this is one of the major problems of the Hispanic culture and its one which Esperanza potently resists. By conducting herself in a way that typically contrasted to the woman in her community particularly in the way she heads for a direction that entails independence, Esperanza was able to resist the patriarchal culture efficiently.

Raising children and taking care of the home is what is believed as the primary responsibilities of a woman in the patriarchal society consequently making women depend on men financially. As an appropriate response to this, Esperanza recognizes the need in getting a job at an early age. She takes the initiative gets a job at a young age and is hence able to take care of herself. The text, all the same, suggests that it wasn't easy for her to find a job. She says that "It wasn't as if I didn't want to work. I did. I had even gone to the social security office the month before to get my social security number" (Cisneros 53). This illustrates Esperanza's great eagerness and desire of wanting to get a job. Majority of the women that Esperanza observes are almost entirely dependent on men. Unlike many women who are financially at the mercies of men, Esperanza takes a big leap towards independence.

The steps of Esperanza towards independence are primarily influenced by her experiences in the community in which she lived. She finds her identity as she writes about the various observations she had in her city. Out of these experiences, Esperanza was able to grow. The idea is supported by Christina Rose Dubb (220) when she states that the text is like a chronicle of a few years of the life of Esperanza in her Chicano community as she transforms from the naivety associated with childhood to the shocking understanding of injustices resulting from sexual inequality, socioeconomic disparities, and violence. Esperanza is no more of a naïve and lost girl. Instead, Esperanza is growing up and understanding the importance the problems

surrounding her. She was able to grow into her realization as a young teenager. Through her writing, she could get an escape. All these experiences that were coming to her as an adolescent gave her the power to free herself and give shape to her identity.

There are much promise and power that comes from being young, and that's why Cisneros chooses her protagonist as an adolescent female while writing her novel. Esperanza's interactions with and observations of the Hispanic community which she lived in enable her to grow through her childhood to maturity. Through her connections with other people, Esperanza's was able to learn herself as well as her culture (Karafilis 66). Through freeing herself from the victimization typical to her community through her writing, she can be able to free other women. Her experiences through writing and observations will see her mature into an adult well-armed with knowledge and experience that will eventually allow enabling her to bring in a change.

After an in-depth observation of the Hispanic culture that she is brought up in, Esperanza concludes that she won't for any reason follow the footfalls of the women in the community. Esperanza refuses to conform. Esperanza explains that she is the one who leaves the table like a man, she takes no bother of putting the chair back or even picking up the plates (Cisneros 89). Unlike any other woman portrayed in the text, Esperanza refuses to restrain herself to patriarchal standards, for example, taking care of the home. She says that "I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (Cisneros 88). The word wait as in the above quote is of great importance as it suggests that they wait "for the ball and chain." They wait because they have grown and owned the belief that they have to do so. They openly own the idea that it's only a man who can come in and take care of them. Through her observation and maturation, Esperanza knows that she has to wait for no one she doesn't expect any man to step in for her rescue as other women do. The "ball and chain"

reference further exemplifies the momentousness of the situation; this representation signifies that the Hispanic women in the novel are hostages of men. They suffer abuse and oppression; the patriarchal culture has tamed them.

Esperanza realizes her strength towards the end of the novel. She now gets to understand that she has the power to do anything she desires. Esperanza comprehends what her maturation, as shaped by her community and her observations and writing, has prepared her to face. In the novel, Esperanza declares that someday she shall pack her bag of books and papers and wave Mango goodbye. Esperanza says that this woman is too strong for Mango to keep around forever (Cisneros 110). Esperanza doesn't only acknowledge her freedom but also understands what she must do something with her books and paper. Esperanza appreciates the power of her writing. Esperanza realizes that writing would enable her free other women the same way she freed herself. In the text, she says that "They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones, I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out" (Cisneros 110). Obviously her community won't immediately understand why she has left; on the contrary, it is necessary to note that Esperanza is mature and she fully understands the power of her. Most importantly, Cisneros recognizes the power she bestows in creating a teenage protagonist to tell her story.