
U.S. LATINO LITERATURE

A Critical Guide
for Students and Teachers

*Edited by Harold Augenbraum
and Margarite Fernández Olmos*

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Female Voices in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*

Myrna-Yamil González

SANDRA CISNEROS was born in 1954 in Chicago, Illinois. The daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother, Cisneros was the only girl among six brothers in a family that frequently traveled between Chicago and Mexico to visit her father's family. Since new living quarters had to be found after each trip to Mexico, Cisneros' childhood was spent in a variety of run-down Hispanic neighborhoods until 1966 when her parents purchased a small, two-story bungalow in a Puerto Rican neighborhood on Chicago's north side. These experiences inspired her first book, *The House on Mango Street* (1983), which received the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985.

Cisneros is also a poet. At Loyola University and later at the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop in the late 1970s she began searching for her creative Latina voice and published her first poems in journals and later in several collections: *Bad Boys* (1980), *The Rodrigo Poems* (1985), *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), and *Loose Woman* (1994). In 1991, in a then rare example of a work by a Hispanic woman recognized by a mainstream U.S. press, Random House published *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, twenty-two diverse tales narrated from a female perspective. The work was awarded the P.E.N. Center West Award for best fiction in 1992. *Woman Hollering Creek*, a powerful work of fiction writing, has a heightened gender and cultural consciousness that is true to Cisneros' stated creative goals, according to a 1991 interview: "[I]n my stories and life I am trying to show that U.S. Latinas have to reinvent, to remythologize, ourselves. A myth believed by almost everyone, even Latina women,

is that they are passive, submissive, long-suffering, either a spit-fire or a Madonna. Yet those of us who are their daughters, mothers, sisters know that some of the fiercest women on this planet are Latina women." Cisneros' works have earned her an international reputation and a secure niche in American letters.

ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND FORMS

Poet, essayist, and short story writer, Sandra Cisneros is one of the most celebrated contemporary Chicana writers, with a number of acclaimed publications; her most famous work to date, however, is her first fictional work, *The House on Mango Street*, which presents the life of the young narrator Esperanza through her own experiences and those of her neighbors and her community. The work is dedicated "A las Mujeres—To the Women," all the female characters whose lives have enriched that of the protagonist and who represent a diversity of challenges and perspectives. As the protagonist, Esperanza revises and reclaims her cultural inheritance; Cisneros, the author, proposes a reconsideration of contemporary Chicana inheritance, evident in the voices of her female characters.

A short book comprising 44 brief, finely crafted tales, *Mango Street* is narrated by a Chicana girl named Esperanza Cordero who is presented to the reader over the course of a few years as she moves from childhood to adolescence. Her stories give voice to the people who live in the barrio, the inhabitants of Mango Street in urban Chicago, who have not traditionally been heard in the mainstream culture. They are the experiences of a diverse community that is mainly, although not exclusively, Latino: *Mango Street's* occupants include emigrants from the southern United States, African Americans, and Hispanics from diverse cultures. Some characters are limited to one chapter; others span several. We observe them change—for better or worse—from Esperanza's insightful perspective. The book combines humorous observations with touching scenes that reflect the protagonist's process of maturation.

Esperanza's neighbors are often colorful—her girlish playmates from Texas, a hefty neighbor who refuses to speak English—as are some incidents of her life, particularly those that occur during her first job. Other events are sadder—her experiences with death and sexual assault, for example. As the work develops, Esperanza's youthful voice and her naïve, halting language gradually mature into the graceful expression of a poised and articulate young woman, increasingly more resolute in her female identity. Through it all, however, we are reminded of the protagonist's lament: she desperately desires to leave the small and crumbling

house she inhabits with her family and live in a proper house of her own.

In *Mango Street* Cisneros creates a protagonist that is a storyteller and a mythmaker who draws upon old tales and new experiences to create an impressionistic poetics of a culturally diverse Chicago neighborhood; the structure of the narrative suggests the influence of oral traditions and the blending of cultural identities (March 183). The young narrator has internalized the worldview and experiences of her parents, her friends, and the society of which she is a part as she strives to locate her identity. In this regard, her name itself is significant, as Julian Olivares has observed:

Her surname [Cordero], meaning "lamb", operates symbolically in the text. . . . She refuses to sacrifice her gender to a patriarchic society. . . . Esperanza depicts the lonely and imprisoned, the physically and psychologically abused Latinas; and in this way she displays her collective identity with her sisters. But in the endeavor to establish her identity, to fit into her name, Esperanza also undertakes a personal quest to liberate herself from the gender constraints of her culture. ("Entering the House on Mango Street" 213)

Esperanza's name, which means "hope" in Spanish, can also mean a wait (*espera*). She has inherited her great-grandmother's name but must deconstruct it; Esperanza's great-grandmother is a subjugated Mexican woman who had been taken away from her family by force. She therefore embodies a submissive female model that the young Esperanza must reject. But Esperanza would like to go even farther: she would change her name completely to redirect her life away from a possible repetition of her ancestor's sad history. "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do" (11).

Indications of Esperanza's formation as a writer and a hint of her eventual departure from home and Mango Street are found in several stories related to death, among them "Born Bad" in which is found the idea that creativity is not only a means of escaping the confines of Mango Street but also an affirmation of life and rebirth (Olivares, "Sandra Cisneros" 166). In "Born Bad," the protagonist's long-suffering Aunt Guadalupe dies. Esperanza believes that she will go to hell with her friends Lucy and Rachel because they have done something to cause the tragedy. The girls had been playing a guessing game imitating people, among them Aunt Guadalupe, the aunt who liked to listen to the children's stories: "You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (60-61). On the day of the game, the aunt

who had encouraged Esperanza's creativity dies. Writing, her aunt had told her, will lead to her liberation, which, indeed will prove to be true. "It is through writing, through the aesthetic perception of her reality, that Esperanza discovers who she is, affirms her identity, and finds her house. . . . Puzzled once about where to find a house and thinking that freedom could only be encountered outside the physical and cultural space of her barrio, Esperanza is now astonished that freedom can be found in writing" (Olivares, "Entering" 223).

Through her creativity, Esperanza inhabits the house of storytelling. Consequently, the house is a book to be written, blank pages to be filled with her voice and with the voices of women trapped by their economic and cultural restriction. It represents the attainment of identity and the realization of freedom through the space of writing, as expressed in the last story, "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes."

Alternative Female Voices

Curanderas/Seers

Women's lives are circumscribed by cultural values and norms that dictate their behavior and roles; female authors often suggest new roles or imbue existing models with more accessible and more affirming traits and characteristics. Among Chicana writers, many have been inspired by the representation of power and control of such Aztec goddesses as Coatlicue, and the nurturing tradition of the Christian Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. The traditional figure of the *curandera/bruja* or healer/witch has also emerged as a powerful female symbol. The *curandera* has two attributes: a positive one as a healer and a negative one as a *bruja* or witch/seer. The *curandera* possesses intuitive and cognitive skills; her connection to and interrelation with the natural world is part of her ancient knowledge. The fact that the *curandera* has emerged as a powerful figure in the writing of both women and men demonstrates not only her enduring representational qualities as myth and symbol but also the close identification of the culture with her mystic and spiritual qualities (Rebolledo 83-84). Cisneros' *curanderas* in *Mango Street* are of the affirming variety.

In "The Three Sisters," for example, Esperanza comes in contact with *curanderas* on two different occasions. Her first experience is with Elenita, the seer first mentioned in "Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water." Elenita's deeds are performed in the kitchen, the section of the house containing all the implements required for her craft. Among the tasks required of Esperanza is to fill a cup with water in order to attempt to see what Elenita perceives, particularly peoples' faces, but Esperanza sees nothing. Elenita then proceeds to read the tarot cards: "now my fortune begins. My whole

life on that kitchen table: past, present and future" (63). Finally Elenita reads her palms, where she sees jealousy, sorrow, a pillar of bees, and a "mattress of luxury" (63). Esperanza wants to know only about a house, but the only home Elenita sees is in the heart: "a new house, a house made of heart. I'll light a candle for you. Thank you and goodbye and be careful of the evil eye" (64). Esperanza pays her five dollars and leaves, left puzzled by the oracle.

Esperanza then encounters three mysterious sisters, describing them as "one with laughter like tin and one with eyes of a cat and one with hands like porcelain. . . . They had the power and could sense what was what" (103-4). One of them, "the old blue-veined" sister, asks her name. When Esperanza replies, she is told it is a good name. The one with cat eyes tells the others to look at Esperanza's hands, and they inform her that she is special and foretell a future in which she will go very far. Esperanza is told to make a wish, and when she does so they assure her it will come true. The sister with the porcelain hands calls Esperanza aside and remarks, "When you leave you must remember to come back for the 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" (106).

Critics have had various responses to the visit by the "three sisters." Jayne March regards it as the catalyst that finally impels Esperanza to find a house of her own (184). Leslie Gutiérrez-Jones considers the fact that the sisters recognize Esperanza's special qualities; the idea that "that she'll go very far" is a recognition of her responsibility to herself and her talent, a responsibility that will necessitate her packing "her bags of book and paper." Esperanza finally realizes the implications of her talents and acknowledges in her final vignette that she will indeed go far (Gutiérrez-Jones 302). Olivares adds,

[T]hese women appear at critical junctures to advance the narrative and assist the heroine in her quest. . . . the sisters' intervention is related in the combination of the characteristic prose-poem form with an extended dialogue sequence. On the level of the plot, the elderly sisters, who appear like fairy godmothers, bring revelation and the gift of self to Esperanza. Esperanza begins to assume her name and identity. The three sisters now appear on the symbolic level as the Three Fates who determine the heroine's destiny and leave her with the prophecy of self-knowledge. . . . Three mysterious women embed in Esperanza's psyche a cultural and political determination that will find expression in her vocation as a writer. ("Entering" 223-25)

For Tey Diana Rebolledo, the *curandera* is a compelling figure in Chicano literature precisely because she is a woman who has control over her own life and destiny as well as that of others. The *curandera* has a

special relationship to the earth and nature—she understands the cycles of creation, development, and destruction, unifying the past, present, and future. Incorporating intuition and rationality, the *curandera* bends or harnesses power; she takes an active role in her environment. She listens carefully and thus understands collective as well as individual psychology embedded in ethnic beliefs and practices and can be perceived as a cultural psychologist or psychiatrist. Individual human behavior is always weighed against communal good. The *curandera* intimately understands community (Rebolledo 87–88).

Mujeres malas/"Bad" Women

Mujeres andariegas (wandering women) and *mujeres callejeras* (street women) are terms that imply both restlessness and wickedness. These are women who do not stay at home tending to their husbands, children, and parents. Unbound by socially construed morals or cultural practices, they must therefore be, by implication, wicked: *putas*, or loose women. The negative cultural stereotypes placed on *mujeres andariegas* result from a patriarchal culture that wills women to be passive, self-denying, and nurturing.

Another perspective, however, is to view these literary and real women as *mujeres de fuerza*—strong, independent women, who are self-sufficient; they thrive and prosper in spite of the possible consequences of their actions (Rebolledo 183). The cultural ideal of the self-sacrificing girl who stays at home and lets others control her body—the Virgin of Guadalupe ideal—and its opposite, the woman who controls her own sexuality and destiny—the powerful pre-Columbian Aztec goddess ideal—are both elements of the Chicana cultural and literary heritage. So too are the women who dare to speak out on public issues, often defined as troublemakers for actively seeking change and seeking justice, a common theme throughout Chicana literature (Rebolledo 189–90). The "bad girl" image, another common theme, is associated with the female awareness of sexuality, the desire to understand the erotic self and sensual capabilities that clash with the cultural norms of a strong traditional family, and the limitations imposed by the Church and a male-oriented society (Rebolledo 192).

In *Mango Street*, Esperanza risks censure by defying convention. "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (89). In her fantasy, when she is grown, she will be like the woman who is "beautiful and cruel . . . the one who drives men crazy and laughs at them all the way. Her power is her own. She will not give it away" (89). This, however, is an idealized desire; it ignores the possibility that being wicked or defiant does not exempt women from suffering.

For many female characters in *Mango Street*, an awareness of sexual

desire is accompanied with violence. In the chapter "Sally," for example, the girl must deal with her father's abuse and restrictions. She is precluded from dancing and staying out after school. According to her father, being beautiful is trouble (81). Sally is physically abused by a father who fears that she will run away like her sisters did. She rationalizes his actions by claiming that he never hit her that hard. Eventually Sally frees herself from the abusive situation only to discover yet another: she marries a controlling husband who prohibits her from using the phone or looking outside the window or receiving visitors. In "Marin," the young girl is also prohibited from leaving the house. She stands by the doorway and dreams of meeting someone who will marry her and take her away. "What matters is for the boys to see us and for us to see them" (26). Alicia in "Alicia Who Sees Mice" is afraid of mice and of fathers; Rafaela, the protagonist of another vignette, "gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (79).

Sire's girlfriend, Lois, in "Sire," on the other hand, does things that Esperanza's mother does not approve of: "those girls are the ones that go into alleys" (73). Esperanza wishes she could follow Lois' example: "I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt" (73). Lois is an example of wicked girls, *malcriadas*, girls brought up in the wrong way. The responsibility for being *malcriada* rests on parents and the immediate family, an attitude that places pressure on families who, in turn, pressure their daughters not to transgress (Rebolledo 192). Bad girls grow up to be wicked women. To be wicked, then, is to have sinned against the Church and society's norms. To sin is to expose your body, to have unsanctioned sexual relations, to expose your private self in a public way. To sin is to penetrate male space, the transgression of public spaces as opposed to the space of the house (Rebolledo 193). The women in *Mango Street* believe they have only one solution to their dilemma: await the arrival of the prince who will hopefully take them away, "lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (88).

Defining *Mango Street's* genre has been problematic because the work incorporates a generic diversity. Described as a novel, novella, collection of prose poems, vignettes or literary sketches, *historia*, *testimonio*, lyrical narration, *cuentos del corazón*, or stories from the barrio, *Mango Street*, according to Sonia Saldívar-Hull, is both lyrical and realistic with the rhythms of poetry and the narrative power of fiction. The difficulty critics have faced in categorizing *Mango Street* may be due to the fact that it represents *un género nuevo*, a new genre (Saldívar-Hull 93).

The image of the house is essential to the work; it is an extension of Esperanza Cordero's identity. As her character develops and she becomes more aware of gender constraints, the wish for a pretty house

becomes a desire for unfettered female space which she ultimately creates for herself through her writing (Olivares, "Entering" 214). By the work's end, Esperanza has created a home in the heart (Gutiérrez-Jones 296). Cisneros herself describes the house as metaphor from a very personal perspective:

My consciousness of growing up, the consciousness of myself, the subjects that I write about, the voice that I write in. . . . The madeleine—to use Proust's term—was Bachelard's poetics of space. The house. The house! Everyone was talking about the house the way they'd always been talking about everything. It was that moment that I realized. "I don't have a house—these things don't matter to me!" I don't have a house, how could I talk about a house! With people from my neighborhood, you'd be talking about a very different house than the one Bachelard was talking about—the wonderful house of memory. My house was a prison for me; I don't want to talk about house. (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 301-2)

But she does write about it, and in so doing arrives at the realization of the possibility of escape through the space of writing, as well as a determination to move away from Mango Street. "On the higher plane of art, then, Esperanza transcends her condition, finding another house which is the space of literature. Yet what she writes about reinforces her solidarity with the people, the women, of Mango Street" (Olivares, "Sandra Cisneros' " 167). Esperanza creates new stories, new myths, that will free herself and possibly others as well. By the end of the book, she has become an assertive yet tolerant figure who consciously accepts the difficulties of her life as part of her development as a writer. Esperanza's experiences suggest that, despite the forces of discrimination and class difference that continue to operate, she can create a sense of herself that, in its integration and ambivalence, is different. In a way, Esperanza discovers that her "homeland" is mythical, and spiritual, not necessarily tied to one locality (March 184).

Mango Street also explores a world where women are betrayed by the ideology of "home," a world where girls are raised to believe that marriage to the "right man" can liberate them from poverty and the rule of fathers, and a world where young girls learn to fear sexuality because the realities of rape and incest further complicate the fact of living in poverty (Saldívar-Hull 103). Esperanza, the storyteller, speaks from and for the marginalized. She creates and chronicles her developing identity not through self-absorbed introspection, but by noting, recording, and responding to the lives around her—those lives about which almost half of the collection's 44 stories are named, such characters as Lucy and Rachel, Esperanza's friends, or Marin, who hopes to find someone who will change her life. The character of Esperanza moves from early dis-

satisfaction with her identity and life situation through a series of experiences that reveal the nexus of pressures on her, including sex-role expectations, race and class discrimination, and the blending of the spiritual and the material worlds. These factors underlie the main stresses in Esperanza's development: the desire for a satisfying home, the questioning of personal identity and gender roles, and especially the search for a good friend who can provide acceptance and understanding (March 179).

In many ways Cisneros' work reflects the concern of contemporary Chicana feminism which combines the question of gender and sexuality with issues of race, culture, and class. As Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano explains in "Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective," Chicana feminists have spearheaded a critique of the destructive aspects of the Chicano culture's definition of gender roles which targets heterosexual as well as patriarchal prejudices. But perhaps the most important principle of Chicana feminist criticism is the realization that the Chicana's experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and an ethnic subculture. "The Chicana confronts the damaging fragmentation of their identity into component parts at war with each other. To speak about being women in distinction from speaking about being Hispana, Black, Jewish, or any other is an invitation to silence" (Yarbo-Bejarano 733). The fact that Chicanas tell stories about themselves and other Chicanas/Latinas challenges the dominant male concepts of cultural ownership and literary authority and rejects the dominant culture's definition of what a Chicana is. In writing, they refuse the objectification imposed by gender roles and racial and economic limitations. The Chicana writer finds that the self she seeks to define is not an individual self but a collective one. In other words, the power, the permission, the authority to tell stories about herself and other Chicanas come from her cultural, racial/ethnic, and linguistic community, a community with a literary tradition. The Chicana writer derives literary authority from the oral tradition of her community, which in turn empowers her to commit her stories to writing (734).

Esperanza is aware of the racial and economic oppression her community suffers, but it is the fate of the women in her barrio that has the most profound impact on her. Besides finding her path to self-definition through careful observation of the victimized women around her, Esperanza also encounters positive models who encourage her interest in studying and her creativity (the university student Alicia, for example). As Jayne E. March observes, writing is essential in connecting Esperanza with female power; her promise to share that power with other women is fulfilled by the text itself.

In *The House on Mango Street*, therefore, Sandra Cisneros presents a

diversity of female voices from the marginalized perspective of the Chicana/Latina experience. Her house and its environment symbolize women's spaces and afford the protagonist an identity with her immediate and extended barrio family. Ultimately, however, Esperanza's true identity and freedom will be found in her writing; there she discovers the recipe for achieving her goals while never forgetting her origins. Her writing helps her—and us—make sense of the world around her and the women who are a part of that world. It is offered to "the ones I left behind . . . the ones who cannot out" (110) and it offers the possibility that a woman can achieve anything in life if she can locate the strength and courage to leave confining situations and discover who she truly is.

TEACHING THE WORK

1. Numerous studies on Chicana literature would be helpful in contextualizing the text. Comparisons could also be made to Latina writers from other Hispanic cultures, such as Esmeralda Santiago, Cristina Garcia, and Julia Alvarez. Students could examine how themes and experiences may vary according to one's cultural group (Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Dominican) or by region of the United States. Issues of social class should be included in this analysis, especially when comparing such authors as Cisneros and Santiago to Alvarez and Garcia. Is one's cultural group as significant as one's social class in forming one's identity?

2. Compare male authors who have written in this coming-of-age genre. How significant is gender in creating the tensions faced by a young girl in our society? How does ethnicity complicate the issue? Are Esperanza's experiences similar to those of other young people in the larger U.S. society? The female bildungsroman has been studied by such authors as Esther Klein Labovitz in *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* (1986); other critics have examined the writings of the genre by women of U.S. ethnic and racial minorities. How do their female expressions of this genre differ?

3. Use the text to discuss literary genres given the style and the various approaches used by Cisneros. What makes the work difficult to define? How might each of the categories critics have assigned to it be validated?

4. Compare Cisneros' poetic work to her prose. Are themes similar to those found in *Mango Street* found in her collections of poetry?

5. Explain why Esperanza wants to have a house but not the one on Mango Street. Compare it with the one you lived in while growing up. How does the neighborhood compare to your own in terms of the ethnic makeup of the inhabitants? Did any of your neighbors have a strong impact on your life?

6. Identify the nationality of some of the characters in the textbook, relate their historical experiences, and prepare a brief essay comparing

Chicano history in the United States with that of other Latino communities, for example, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Dominican.

CRITICISM AND FURTHER READING

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