

Exploring the gender and ethnicity issues of the novel



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In Sandra Cisneros' work *The House on Mango Street*, young Esperanza must face the trials and tribulations that accompany growing up. This daunting task is made all the more difficult by society's views of her race and gender. As a teenage Latina girl living on Mango Street, Esperanza is expected to become a cookie-cutter version of the women she is exposed to on a daily basis. This, however, is not the life that Esperanza has in mind for herself. Three prominent issues seem to plague the women of Mango Street: an excess of loneliness (which in turn leads to other excesses), the complete loss of potential, and an extreme distrust of men. These problems seem to give Esperanza even more motivation to leave Mango Street and follow her own path.

A dominant issue that seems to affect several women on Mango Street is an extreme feeling of loneliness. This is fueled by several factors. One of these factors is abandonment. Rosa Vargas must deal with this horrible feeling every day of her life due to her husband's running out on the family: "They are bad those Vargases, and how can they help it with only one mother who is tired all the time...and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come" (Cisneros 29). She is forced to raise all her children alone. One cannot help but feel lonely after a situation such as this has occurred in their life. Another minor character that shows a tell-tale sign loneliness is Cathy, the "queen of cats" (13). She has something negative to say about everything and everyone on Mango Street. She has no friends, and seems to overcompensate for this lack of companionship with an abundance of cats. This further reveals that

though one can put on a façade of contentment, there just might be some deep-down issues that need to be resolved within that person.

Yet another handicap that gender and ethnicity place on the women of Mango Street is the complete loss of potential. This is apparent in the lives of Ruthie and Esperanza's mother. Ruthie is very talented in the performance arts: "Not only is she a good whistler, but she can sing and dance too" (68). In the past, she has been offered several jobs, none of which she took. She got married and moved outside the city, yet somehow always seems to come back to be with her mother Edna on Mango Street. It would appear that this street has a hold on her from which she cannot break free. This makes Ruthie come off as nothing more than "the only grown-up we know who likes to play" (67). But perhaps the greatest loss of potential reveals itself in the form of Esperanza's mother in the vignette titled A Smart Cookie. In this episode, Esperanza's mother is described as a very well-rounded woman, fluent in many different areas of practical knowledge. She is discontent with her life because she had to drop out of school at an early age. She vocalizes this sense of regret in her statement, "I could've been somebody, you know?" (90). She disgustedly explains to Esperanza that the only reason she had to drop out of school was because of her lack of nice clothes. One cannot help but feel for her in this situation; because of circumstances she could not control, she was forced to give up her formal education. This even further illustrates the socioeconomic struggles due to ethnicity and class.

The third, and seemingly most pertinent, issue faced by the women of Mango Street is the complete distrust and, to an extent, fear of the male gender.

This theme seems to affect almost every little girl, teen, and woman on the <https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-gender-and-ethnicity-issues-of-the-novel/>

street. Husbands, fathers, co-workers, and other men are all portrayed in a negative way throughout the novella. Husbands keep their wives under lock and key, as in the case of Rafaela who “ gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (79), and Sally, who “ sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without [her husband’s] permission” (102). Fathers abuse their daughters: “[Alicia] Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers” (32). Esperanza can’t even work or have fun without something happening to add to a reasonable sense of unease when dealing with the opposite sex. Her incident with the Oriental man at her job, coupled with the alleged molestation by the red clowns at the carnival, is more than enough to make Esperanza have a distrust of men. Women are seen as nothing more than objects that men can use however they please.

Through all of these issues, though. Esperanza remains strong-willed. She refuses to bend to the social and economic barriers that have held so many of her elders back. She even refuses to act in the same manner as those she has been exposed to: “ My mother says when I get older, my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (88). In this statement, she turns away from the belief that she cannot accomplish anything in her life and refuses to become a defenseless housewife. In her own way, she is attempting to break down the stereotypes and three main issues associated with Mango Street and its female inhabitants. Madeleine K. Albright once said, “ There is a special place in hell for women who do not help other women.” That being said,

Esperanza's actions should certainly fill other women with a massive feeling of esperanza.