

# The sexist prejudices affecting women in the house on mango street

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The Sexist Prejudices Affecting Women in The House on Mango Street In my essay I am going to write about the Mexican gender based prejudices and stereotypes which affect the women of Esperanza's neighborhood in Sandra Cisneros's novel The House on Mango Street. I would like to point out the lives of the main women characters and their dealing with the prejudices in everyday occasions. Furthermore, I want to talk about Esperanza and her attitude towards the surrounding situation and also mention the historical background of the problem. From my point of view, the fact that the women come from the Mexican community has essentially influenced their lives. It has actually predetermined them in a way that the women are not able to set free for the rest of their lives. During the novel the reader gets to know some of the Mexican prejudices in relation to women which all the female characters have to face.

The sexist prejudice is clear from having read few lines of the novel where Esperanza, the narrator, explains the meaning of her name with the connection to the Chinese signs of the zodiac, " I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (Cisneros 10). This tells the reader one important fact. The Mexicans are proprietary towards their women and wives and they tries to take over the women's lives. It is very difficult for the women coming from the Mexican community to live their own life themselves and to be independent of their social background. This observation is confirmed by Elizabeth Coonrod Martinez in her work on the relationships of women with men in the novels based on this phenomenon, " women characters do not initiate events in their own lives; instead they endure poverty and racism from the society at

large and oppression under the men in their lives. They do not get to choose their spouses, and when they do pick a boyfriend, and get pregnant, they are considered bad girls. They do not have choice-before or after marriage” (131).

The author of the book gives a notion what the status of women in the Mexican community in the novel is. They are supposed to stay at home, preferably, “ behind a rolling pin” (Cisneros 31). Moreover, many of the women are locked at home or cannot leave the house without their spouses’ permission. This fact is obvious at many times in the novel. At first, when Esperanza talks about her great-grandmother, she describes her as a woman that had spent all her life on her elbows by the window. At this point, where Esperanza describes her great-grand mother, she also says something about herself, “ I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (Cisneros 11). Later, this fact is emphasized by the story of the woman called Rafaela, whose fulfilment of the life is to sit by the window.

As the narrator reports, “ Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (Cisneros 79). The women are regarded as the property of their husbands or their fathers, never independent. In my oppinion, the situation is even made worse by the fact that the protagonists are living in the United States. The women maybe would have accepted this role if they had lived in Mexico, where they would not see any difference in other women’s lives. That is impossible for them now, to fit in the community rules that are expected to

be obeyed. Instead, some women pretend to be a part of the traditional society on the one hand, but on the other, they are more American than Mexican. This is the case of Sally, a young Mexican girl from the community of Chicanos, with a strict father and brought up in a very strict, religious and traditionally Mexican family.

Sally who must obey her father and accept his way of life and who wants to be an American. For a clearer explanation, her behaviour is described as follows, “ and why do you always have to go straight home after school? You become a different Sally. You pull your skirt straight, you rub the blue paint off your eyelids. You don’t laugh, Sally. You look at our feet and walk fast to the house you can’t come out from” (Cisneros 82). This girl struggles with two different worlds but unfortunately, the vicious one for her wins. She becomes a part of the sad community of women who are locked at home and their only release is in their dreams.

Sally’s fate is deteriorated due to the relationship with her father, who strikes her because she is a girl and her father wants to take over her life, “ until the way Sally tells it, he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt. You’re not my daughter, you’re not my daughter. And then he broke into his hands” (Cisneros 93). The story about Sally is a typical example of the struggle. At the end, Sally gets married and her life turns out to be the same sad story. The narrator comments on this, “ Except he [husband] won’t let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn’t let her look out the window.

And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working. She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission" (Cisneros 102). Sally, like the rest of the women characters, ends up in this kind of relationship with her husband, even if she had the opportunity to escape from her fate, because if she had been more determined in her struggle, she would have succeeded. The narration about Sally is important in the novel because it shows Esperanzas' feelings towards the sexist and racial prejudices she lives in. Esperanza, as the narrator, gives the personal outlook on the women from her surroundings. Esperanza is the exception of all the women characters in the novel. She is aware of the poor situation and even of a poorer shift from it.

" Esperanza is handicapped by her Hispanic background and the family's modest financial means" (Szadziuk 115). She observes the world around her and feels lonely in her feelings, nobody shares her thoughts, her ideas. She feels like the trees down the street and as she admits, " four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city" (Cisneros 74). Like a struggling tree, Esperanza copes with obstacles that would suppress her, and her inner strength will help her reach towards a better life. This young girl is the only woman in the novel who is deeply determined to change her life, to set free and to be on her own. She might seem naive in her way of achieving it, " Not a flat.

Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own" (Cisneros 108). Nevertheless, the escape from it will not be as easy as thought at first. Once is Esperanza told by her friend, " 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 forget who you are" (Cisneros 105). The circle is closed and fulfilled. Even if Esperanza escapes, she will not be free of her background. In comparison with other women characters in the novel, Esperanza has the support of her family, especially the support of her mother who encourages her and her siblings to be determined and to be strong in gaining their dream. The mother's support is based on her own life and unhappiness, " shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down.

You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains" (Cisneros 91). Mother who suffered from discrimination is now resolved to protect her children from having a similar experience. Unfortunately, Esperanza experiences some oppression anyway and she describes it, " Those who do not any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake" (Cisneros 28).

Little Esperanza learns about a hardship very early in her life. She does not understand it at first but afterwards she fully realizes what means the arrogant voice of nun who asks her where she lives. Esperanza, unaware of anything, points to her house. Just later she realizes how important for her is to escape from this social oppression and racial discrimination and longs for her own house, a house she would not be ashamed of, a house she could

point to when someone asks where she lives. Furthermore, the women characters and all Mexican immigrants living in the United States in general suffer from a particular feature typical of the immigrant community. Their poor situation is made worse by it. That is the homesickness.

This is very difficult to explain because in this case it has a historical connection to 1848 when the former Mexican lands became American property and millions of Mexican citizens suddenly lived on American territory. For an illustration of this event: Chicanos and Chicanas have always been in New Mexico, Texas, California, Colorado, Illinois and other North American states. The Gonzalezes, the Dominguezes, the Garcias, the Fernandezes have lived in these states ever since they can remember. Their great, great grandmother had a house in San Antonio, or in San Diego, or in Sante Fe, long before 1836 and 1848 when these territories became American. (Poniatowska 39) From the citation of Elena Poniatowska it is obvious that the Mexicans are not initially responsible for the problems of the Mexican community in the United States nowadays. They miss their native country so they try to compensate the sorrow for living more culturally orthodox life abroad. In the novel, the problem of homesickness is portrayed mainly in the story of Mamacita, a mother of one of the inhabitants of Mango Street.

Even if she is not a one of the descendants of the immigrant family but actually a Mexican citizen, Mamacita comes to Mango Street to live with her son, who sees his future in reaching the American dream. As she does not speak English, the difference between the Mexican and the

American culture is much more visible. Mamacita represents the old, initial kind of immigrants, who long for going back to their native country whereas her son presents the young, Americanized population of the Mexican community. Two different worlds which can never be united. The reader learns more about it through the eyes of Esperanza, as she reports, " She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull" (Cisneros 77). Mamacita is unwilling to adjust and wants to go back to her native Mexico even if life can be harder and poorer there. Esperanza continues, " Ay, she says, she is sad.

Oh he says, Not again. Cuando, cuando, cuando? She asks. Ay, caray! We are are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English.

Christ" (Cisneros 78). Mamacita and her son are examples of eternal fight for the unity of two different worlds which can never link up the gap between each other. In conclusion, the racial, gender based and social prejudices in the Mexican community in the novel are very essential. In every story the reader may see the stereotypes which affect the protagonists. Each of them deals with it differently but with the same result. They are not able to set themselves free from their social background and their origin pursues them all their life. Nonetheless, some of the women characters chose this way of living from their own choice, voluntarily.



Specifically, the words of Elena Poniatowska point this out, " To say that Mexico abandoned its people would not be false, because Mexico abandons all poor Mexicans. The poor choose the American dream and the American way of life on the other side of the border, because they don't see a future for themselves in their own country" (Poniatowska 41). Whether the immigrants have chosen to live on the margin of society in the foreign country of own accord or not, their cultural heritage follows them all the time. Works Cited Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1984. Martinez, Elizabeth Coonrod.

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