

The significance of language adaptation in Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*



The House on Mango Street written by Sandra Cisneros is a novel which raises many issues worth mentioning. This essay, however, discusses the importance of adapting to the new surroundings, especially to the use of language. Throughout the book the protagonist Esperanza tries to distance herself from her Hispanic tradition; she wants to escape Mango Street, misery, poverty, and Chicano community which damages women beyond repair. She wants to accomplish the “ American Dream” and have the house of her own “ like the houses on T. V.” The Mexican house on Mango Street is not it; she yearns for an American one. In her pursuit of doing that, she must choose one culture over the other. The same goes for language; Esperanza has to separate herself from her Hispanic roots and Spanish tongue, so she can truly free herself from Mango Street.

Although Esperanza grew up in a Spanish-speaking community, she favors English language and voices a slight aversion to her culture. She implies this when she says, “ In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting.” (Cisneros 10). The English meaning is positive and pleasant, whereas the Spanish one is gloomy and does not give her any hope. Characters in the novel are portrayed similarly; the ones who are bilingual are presented in a positive light when on the other hand the Spanish speaking individuals are sympathized or even made fun of (Betz 20).

The vignette “ Geraldo No Last Name” shows us of how little significance death of “ just another wetback” is. Nameless Geraldo dies before anyone can identify him. Marin gets tired of describing what has happened and as well “ can’t explain why it mattered, the hours and hours, for somebody she

didn't even know." (Cisneros 66) It is explicitly shown how "[a]nonymity becomes a marker of one's disposability" (Burcar 56). He was just "another brazer who didn't speak English" (Cisneros 66). He did not matter and was yet one more stereotype of a migrant worker. He was not important enough for the doctor to be disturbed, as there was "[n]obody but an intern working all alone" (Cisneros 66). Since he does not speak English, Esperanza portrays him as a redundant human being. There is no translation of the word "brazer" and the readers consider the boy to be "just another foreign, distant object" (Betz 22).

Cisneros in "No Speak English" shows us precisely just how important acculturation is. Everybody notices the arrival of "huge, enormous, beautiful" woman Mamacita, who soon becomes rather invisible. "Somebody said because she's too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn't come out because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words" (Cisneros 77).

Mamacita due to her limited knowledge of English isolates herself and does not want to leave the apartment. Homesickness provoked by her "linguistic and geographic displacement" (Martin 63) makes her miserable and the desire to go back to her true home is tremendous. She does not belong and is not willing to assimilate, for she is afraid that with the use of the English language she will further distance herself from her culture and forget about her roots. The only connection with the Spanish language is the Spanish radio show, which she listens all the time, because even her husband yells at her in English. "¡Ay, caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!" (Cisneros 78) Thus, Mamacita <https://assignbuster.com/the-significance-of-language-adaptation-in-cisneros-the-house-on-mango-street/>

cannot find comfort in him, nor in her baby, who “ starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on TV” and consequently “ breaks her heart” (Cisneros 78). Because of the loss of her “ linguistic identity” and “ dislocat[ion] from her own house of memory, Mamacita has become another of the watching, waiting women of Mango Street” (Martin 63). In other words, she has lost the ability to express herself in the language she was raised which is the source of her anguish and alienation.

The struggle of having to assimilate to the new language is also presented through Esperanza’s father. “ My father says when he came to this country he ate hamandeggs for three months” (Cisneros 77). Not being able to speak English, he was forced to constantly eat the dish he did not even like.

Although he had to learn the dominant language, the use of Spanish can be seen in “ Papa who wakes up tired in the dark”. “ Your abuelito is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. Está muerto, and then as if he just heard the news himself, crumples like a coat and cries, my brave Papa cries” (Cisneros 56). Spanish words have an emotional connotation and display a certain level of intimacy in this particular event, as the father reaches for comfort in the familiarity of his native language. Betz notes that Esperanza sees her father as fragile because he decides to speak Spanish. He, like Geraldo and Mamacita, is a figure to be pitied (25).

People of the community believe that they cannot leave Mango Street because of the language barrier, but once they accept and learn English, they are no longer limited and anything is possible. Compared to the first sections Esperanza towards the end of the novel uses less Spanish phrases, which may indicate that she successfully accomplishes her dream of moving <https://assignbuster.com/the-significance-of-language-adaptation-in-cisneros-the-house-on-mango-street/>

away (Betz 22). To escape the barrio, poverty, and pursue the “ American Dream” one must acquire English and accept it as it was a mother-tongue. The environment will not adapt to one’s needs, it is up to individual to adapt to it.

Works Cited

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