

# Gender roles in "the house on mango street"



Gender roles are a significant component in *The House On Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros. From the outset of the novel, Esperanza faces an identity crisis as she develops from a girl into a woman. Throughout her life, Esperanza experiences the differences between genders, specifically after moving in.

She observes the girls and women living in her neighborhood and begins to internalize the social standing of women compared to that of men.

Throughout her life on Mango Street, Esperanza crosses paths with a variety of female role models including Marin, Minerva, Rafaela, and Sally, who are each going through their own crises. Unlike these four women, Esperanza resists these gender norms that are rooted in the community.

At the beginning of the novel, Esperanza realizes the differences in social standings between males and females. At a young age, she already witnesses that the boys and the girls live in separate worlds because her brothers refuse to be seen talking to Esperanza and Nenny outside the house (Cisneros 8). The brothers are afraid that if the other boys in the neighborhood see them, they will be judged or mocked, which is the first sign Esperanza recognizes that portrays the differences in gender.

Even though Esperanza was raised in the same culture and community as the other women on Mango Street, she does not wish to follow in the footsteps of the women in her family. Esperanza goes against this gender norm by refusing to inherit her [great-grandmother's] place by the window and does not want to be trapped like her grandmother once was (Cisneros 11). Also, she believes that the myth that it was bad luck if someone was a

horse woman was because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong (Cisneros 10). Her observations about gender expand to a cultural aspect, believing that men in certain cultures refuse to allow the women to be strong, like her grandmother once was. It is clearly seen that man's machismo [is] solely responsible for the Mexican-American women's domestic entrapment because before Esperanza's grandfather forced her grandmother to marry him, she was an independent, wild woman, who had a sense of freedom (Burcar 121). Afterwards, she looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow (Cisneros 11). Due to this confinement, her grandmother was never allowed live life the way she wanted to and lost her own identity to her husband.

Esperanza encounters Marin, who is a young girl Puerto Rican immigrant who left her family in order to come to Chicago and take care of her Cousin Louie's family. Marin is a story that is reflective of the predetermined attitude that has been instilled in the mind of many young women because her main thoughts focus on duty, boys, and marriage, which is something very common amongst the female roles in Esperanza's life (Alfaro 18). Marin is not allowed a regular childhood because, as a female, she is forced to take care of the children in the household: She can't come out gotta baby-sit with Louie's sisters but she stands in the doorway, a lot, all the time singing (Cisneros 23-24). Not only is Marin obligated to taking care of Louie's sisters, but she is also forced to see the other kids enjoying their childhood outside, unlike Marin who is forced to confinement. However, even when her aunt comes home, Marin is still not allowed outside the front yard. She is

restricted to the house and therefore lacks the sense of freedom, just like most women in the neighborhood.

Since Marin's life in Chicago is valued solely upon the role as a babysitter, she relies on her physical appearance to attract the attention and appreciation she yearns:

What matters, Marin says, is for the boys to see us and for us to see them. And since Marin's skirts are shorter and since her eyes are pretty, and since Marin is already older than us in many ways, the boys who do pass by say stupid things like I am in love with those two green apples you call eyes, give them to me why don't you. And Marin just looks at them without even blinking and is not afraid. Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life. (Cisneros 27)

Marin's perspective on life and the future was implanted in her mind growing up in a male dominated community, both in Puerto Rico and on Mango Street. She was raised in the belief that a woman needs the attention of a man to fulfill her life and therefore behaves as if she was an object for men to take away. She is mainly concerned for her physical appearance as she dresses not for herself, but rather to receive the attention of males passing by. She purposely wears a short skirt and makeup to get men to notice her. Marin assumes that if she does not stand outside, with an attractive appearance, then she will never find a husband on whom she must depend on.

Marin also talks about getting a job downtown, something that Esperanza has always wanted. However, Marin does not get the job for a sense of responsibility, but instead she will always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone on the subway who might marry [her] and take [her] to live in a big house far away. (Cisneros 26). Again, Marin solely relies her daily choices on finding a man to marry and to take care of her. Meanwhile, Esperanza does not see it this way, because she has always dreamt of living in a big home to call her own, therefore Esperanza strives to be like Marin, and leave Mango Street one day.

Minerva is a young mother, not much older than Esperanza, who has two children, with an abusive husband who constantly leaves her and beats her black and blue. By Minerva raising her two children alone, she is following in her own mother's unstructured lifestyle, which females were usually expected to do (Alfaro 40). However, she keeps letting her husband back into her life once he apologizes, which displays the control men had over women and how women believed they were weak without a male in their lives. Esperanza and Minerva bond over their shared interest in writing poetry, but Minerva's poetry saddens Esperanza, who realizes that she is not the only one on Mango Street who feels trapped. Like Esperanza, Minerva's writing is a way to escape the harsh reality of her life. She folds her poems up over and over and hold[s] them in her hands for a long time, just like the emotional distress she keeps bottled up (Cisneros 84). She never gets to fully express her emotions about her life due to the fact that she is basically a single mom who is always busy with either her children or housework.

Rafaela is a young woman, who sacrificed her freedom for love. She is married to an oppressive man who is afraid that Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at (Cisneros 79). Therefore, scared that she will find someone better, he locks Rafaela indoors and forces her to be confined to their apartment as a prisoner. Hence Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow, unhappy with her situation Rafaela wishes for a better lifestyle than the one she has now. The only thing she can do is stare out the window and yell for the children, who are her only means of communication with the outside world. However, even if Rafaela escaped this bitter reality, she would still end up finding a man who is controlling because there is always someone offering sweeter drinks, someone promising to keep them on a silver string (Cisneros 80). At first, a man might seem kind and sweet, however once they have the woman, they turn into a sour and cruel human being. Rafaela just wishes to come and go on her own terms and to be able to open homes with keys, but instead she is a prisoner in her own home without the opportunity to live life(Cisneros 80).

Esperanza notices Sally for her eye makeup and dark nylons and is drawn to her due to her physical appearance. The first description of Sally is that she has eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke. (Cisneros 81). As most girls do not wear as much makeup or as dark nylons, Esperanza is clearly drawn to outliers who stand out from the others. She also notices that all the boys at school think her's beautiful because her hair is shiny black, but not because of her inside beauty, but rather for her physical qualities (Cisneros 81). Sally wears black, which can be predetermined as a color that shows confidence and attractiveness. However, Esperanza's mother says to wear

black so young is dangerous (Cisneros 82). Afraid that her daughter will attract the attention of men, Esperanza's mother refuses to let her wear such a bold and confident color that would only cause destruction in her life.

Sally also tells Esperanza about her father, who is an abusive and controlling male figure. He believes that to be this beautiful is trouble and forbids Sally from going out. Confining his daughter because of her physical appearance is similar to what Rafaelar's husband did to her, which is a constant recurrence in the female life. At the end of each school day, Sally pulls her skirt down, rubs the makeup off her eyes and hurries back to the house [she] can't come out from. (Cisneros 82). Sally is trapped in her house by her strict, conservative father, similarly to how the rest of the women of Mango Street are trapped in their homes. Sally's father beats her when she doesn't obey his strict rules, and her mother doesn't stop him. Instead, her mother rubs ointment on all the places it hurts, trying to hide and protect the fact that her husband is beating their daughter (Cisneros 92). Yet, Sally continues to defend her father to Esperanza, constantly saying that he never hits [her] hard, neglecting the fact that his actions are wrong. The girls and women tend not to rebel against the men in their lives and choose to persist through the men's unacceptable behavior. Even when Sally tries to run away and stays with Esperanza, her father apologizes and Sally accepts right away. The next day, she is caught disobeying her father's rules and he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt (Cisneros 93). Similar to Minerva, Sally forgives her father quickly, thinking he will change, but the men do not change their actions towards the females in their lives no matter what.

In an effort to escape her abusive father, Sally's only option was to marry young. At the beginning of the marriage, Sally displays a happy demeanor when speaking about how she has her husband and her house now, her pillowcase and her plates, but her happiness seems to stem more from the material possessions she now has, rather than the actual love she has found. Now that Sally obtains all these inanimate objects that she can have control over, she finally feels like she has control over her own life. However, not far along into the marriage, her spouse becomes the man that she was originally trying to flee from. At a certain point he becomes so violent that once he broke the door his foot went through (Cisneros 101). Little by little, Sally's husband is becoming just like her father. He becomes extremely controlling and doesn't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window and nobody gets to visit her (Cisneros 102). Unlike the other women throughout the novel, Sally is not allowed to look out the window, which shows the different levels of captivity women endured. However, Sally, like other women throughout the novel, loses her freedom quickly to a man she assumed would save her.

Throughout the novel, mistreatment of women is seen in various family situations, and it is believed that girls will follow in the footsteps of their female ancestors. However, Esperanza's mother refuses to let her daughter make the same mistakes she did and tells her to go to school and to study hard. Her mother had a successful past with many talents in the liberal arts, yet, she quit school because [she] didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but [she] had brains (Cisneros 91). Women are not judged by personality or smarts, but rather they are categorized based on appearance, which can



make them feel self-conscious and lead them into an unhappy lifestyle, like Esperanza's mother.

Towards the end of the novel, Esperanza's actions and words rebel against the idea of belonging in a male dominated household. She refuses to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain, instead she will be the one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate (Cisneros 88-89).

Esperanza does not want to end up like the rest of the women on Mango Street, who are stuck and cannot escape the wrath of patriarchy, therefore she makes the decision to follow in her own footsteps instead of her mother's. She does not sit around and wait for a man to change her life, instead she changes her own life and becomes independent. Esperanza expresses that she desires a house of her own, not a man's house. Not a daddy's, but a house she earned herself in which she does not have to listen to a man's rules and can live her life freely (Cisneros 108).

All of the women and girls on Mango Street are stuck, each with their own troubles and crises. Unlike Esperanza, Marin, Minerva, Rafaela, and Sally are waiting for someone or something to change their lives and take them away from Mango Street. The females of Mango Street are stuck, waiting for the decision as to which path they will take. At the conclusion of the novel, Esperanza makes the decision to leave Mango Street for those who can't and escapes the traditional values that are forced upon women in the Mango Street community.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. 25th ed., Vintage Contemporaries, 2009.

Alfaro, Melissa. *The Oppression and Deliverance of Women in Sandra Cisneros The House on Mango Street*. Texas Woman's University Library, 2006, <https://twu-ir.tdl.org/handle/11274/9047?show=full>, Accessed 4 December 2018

Burcar, Lilijana, *Ethnicizing in Women's Domestic Entrapment in Sandra in Sandra Cisneros Anti Bildungsroman The House on Mango Street*. *Fluminensia: Journal for Philological Research*, 2017, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/282741> Accessed 3 December 2018