

Hopelessly
inadequate: cisneros,
clifton, and the
perception of
femininity



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According to the National Mental Health Information Center, girls are three times more likely than boys to develop body-image problems in their adolescence. From the advertisements on television to the constant glorification of feminine beauty by the media, adolescent women are being peer-pressured into desperately trying to make themselves look perfect. With this cultural message in mind, adolescent girls who possess physical flaws often feel worthless and inadequate because they judge their self-image purely on physical beauty. For example, in *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, Esperanza characterizes herself as inferior to others because she finds her physical flaws appalling. Esperanza's self-esteem is lacking as she struggles to find any beauty in herself compared to the other women in media. Contrary to Esperanza, the speaker in "homage to my hips" by Lucille Clifton expresses her defiance of the cultural definition of femininity by refusing to let her mindset be controlled by others. By doing so, she shows that feminine beauty should empower women, rather than degrade them. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza perceives her feminine beauty as inferior to the standard of beauty that society idolizes, while in "homage to my hips", the narrator defiantly expresses her desire to not let her own femininity be defined by others.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza perceives her feminine beauty as shameful and inferior to the attributes of others, largely based on her preconception that beauty is based only on looks. Esperanza, critiquing the insecurities on her body, says her legs are "skinny and spotted with satin scars where scabs were picked" (Cisneros p. 40). By stating this, Esperanza shows that she perceives herself as ugly and imperfect, further illustrating

Esperanza's feelings of inadequacy and poor self-esteem. Similarly, Esperanza, thinking she is the unattractive daughter in the family, states " I am an ugly daughter. I am the one nobody comes for" (Cisneros p. 88). Esperanza, feeling inadequate because of her physical beauty, harshly judges her attractiveness in comparison to her " prettier" sister, Nenny. By comparing herself to other women, Esperanza shows the insecurity and lack of self-esteem she feels for her own personal beauty.

Similarly, Esperanza later exclaims in desperation that she wants to feel " like waves on the sea, like the clouds in the wind, but I'm me" (Cisneros p. 60). With the phrase " but I'm me", Esperanza shows the reader that she is inferior to the beauty of the " clouds" and " waves". This sense of herself again exhibits her reluctance to embrace her flaws and imperfections as beautiful. Similarly, Esperanza, wanting to be desired by men, states, " I want to be all new and shiny" (Cisneros p. 73). Making this remark, Esperanza states that she wants to become an object of desire by using the diction " new" and " shiny" (PrPP). By desperately wanting to become a sexually-desirable icon, Esperanza again emphasizes how she is not satisfied with her current self and body.

In " homage to my hips", the narrator confidently exposes her defiance of the notion that her femininity is defined by society. The narrator, near the beginning of the poem, states " These hips don't fit into petty places"(Clifton 4-5). By saying this, the narrator expresses that she refuses to let her femininity be diminished down to what society perceives it as. By doing so, she exhibits her feelings of defiance and rebellion. Similarly, the narrator later defiantly proclaims that, " These hips have never been enslaved"
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(Clifton 8). This statement shows that the narrator has never let herself become suppressed or oppressed by the external factors. Thus, the narrator exhibits that she is determined to break free from the cultural stereotypes that could suppress her. Likewise, the narrator continues to express her defiance: "These hips are free hips" (Clifton 5-6). Exclaiming "free hips" exhibits that the narrator refuses to let anything suppress her as a woman (GP). By exhibiting this sentiment, the narrator continues to show how defying cultural expectations empowers her femininity. Analogously, the narrator states that her hips "need space to move around in" (Clifton 2-3). Her defiance evident, the narrator continues to demonstrate how she refuses to let her true feminine beauty be contained or suppressed (AbP).

From flowing hair to radiant skin and trimmed eye-brows, physical attractiveness emblemizes how society defines beauty today. With today's definition of beauty prioritizing air-brushed filters and photoshopped models, young girls are pressured from the media into thinking that feminine beauty is dependent entirely on their sexual appeal. All these young girls desperately aspire to get the "perfect body", eventually realizing somewhere along the way that the body-standards they desire are unattainable. Much like these girls, Esperanza desires to look beautiful and sexually appealing, without understanding what feminine beauty really means. However, she feels that her so-called beauty is inferior to that of the other women in her life and in the media, leading her to feel insecure and depressed about herself as a woman. This then shows how the media has twisted the definition of femininity from empowerment to insecurity. Using Esperanza's struggles to symbolize her message, Cisneros argues that true

femininity is not about physical beauty, but rather about the ability to be confident about and content with yourself as a woman.