

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal

**NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW TRENDS IN
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

(NACTELL - 2019)

March 29, 2019

Organized by



**Department of English & Research Programmes
NOORUL ISLAM CENTRE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

Deemed to be University u/s 3 of UGC Act 1956
(Accredited by NAAC with "A" Grade)
Kumaracoil, Thuckalay - 629180
Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu.

Jointly organized by



KANYAKUMARI CHAPTER

Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2019

Elza Therese Levin,
Ph.D Research Scholar,
Holy Cross College (Autonomous),MS University,
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India
elza.levin@yahoo.com

Dr. Selva Mary Gokila,
Research Supervisor,
Holy Cross College (Autonomous),MS University,
Tirunelveli. Tamil Nadu, India
bienselva@gmail.com

‘Bicultural Reality’: A Reading of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*

Abstract

Sandra Cisneros is one of the most important influential Mexican writers settled in America. She has an uncommon gift for writing about common people without exaggerating their dullness for effect. Her novella, *The House on Mango Street*, short-story like vignettes, dramatically chronicles the tale of a young Latino woman named Esperanza Cordero in the neighborhoods of Chicago. The term ‘Culture’ poignantly refers to the ideas, and customs and social behavior of a particular people or society. Cultural conflict occurs when different cultural values and beliefs clash. Cisneros novella deals with the issue of Mexican American’s fractured identity in a multi-ethnic society. The present paper aims to analyse in depth, the construction of spatio-temporal

identity of the settlers in host land and shows how they amalgamate into mainstream culture and generate identities distinct from the cultural identity they previously detained.

Key Words: Biculturalism, Multiculturalism, Identity Crisis, Cultural Pluralism.

‘Bicultural Reality’: A Reading of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*

Sandra Cisneros is a Mexican-American, who has proved herself as a powerful Chicano writer with the publication of her novel *The House on Mango Street*. The novella is a judicious appendage to her other popular oeuvre of fiction writing, including, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, and *Caramelo*. Cisneros, herself being an immigrant, has unveiled the plight of marginalized Latinos and their constant struggle to survive in a dominantly White country. Standing on the threshold of modernity, Cisneros provides a window into the feminine psyche besieging to assert the role of a woman in the patriarchal society.

America has been traditionally referred to as a land for immigrants. It is a pluralist nation where people of diverse ethnicity and language co-exist. For centuries, people from all corners of the world migrate to U.S in pursuit of a better life. As they migrate into the host land, unconsciously they adjust themselves to the cultural context of the immigrated land, hence making a pathway for the multiculturalism in their structural living patterns. Mexico has been the single largest source of immigrants in the United States for the longest period of time. The Chicanos are the descendents of Mexico, and they were under the Spanish colony for almost three centuries. These Spanish people Mexicans became American Citizens when the U.S.A annexed the Mexican provinces. This mass migration evokes in the immigrants, to face the issues such as desolation, estrangement, identity crisis and communication barrier. Cisneros’s *The House on Mango street* scrutinizes the predicaments and tribulations of Mexican Americans and

brings into lime light the characters realizing their duo cultural standards in the multi-ethnic society.

‘Culture’ can be defined as the ideas, customs and social behavior of a particular people or society. Cultural conflict occurs when different cultural values and beliefs clash. The present paper analyses in depth, the construction of hyphenated identity of the settlers and shows how they amalgamate into mainstream culture and generate numerous identities distinct from the cultural identity they previously held. The term biculturalism represents “comfort and proficiency with both one's heritage culture and the culture of the country or region in which one has settled” (Schwartz and Jennifer B. Unger). Cisneros’s *The House on Mango street* skeptically analyses the existence of cultural integration among the Mexican immigrants. Through the fictional Character Esperanza, Cisneros reveals the struggle of a Mexican-American woman in a culture mixed ambiance that features traditional patriarchal Mexican culture, the new and melted American culture, as well as consuming culture. The narrator’s gradual acceptance of biculturalism in her day to day life is also highlighted.

Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, the short-story like vignettes, akin to prose poems, dramatically chronicles the tale of a young Latino woman named Esperanza Cordero in the neighborhoods of Chicago. Esperanza and her family settle in a house on Mango Street. Though Esperanza doesn’t like her new ambiance, she befriends Lucy and Rachel Guerrero and together sets out many adventurous ventures. She also strikes up a companionship with Sally, whose makeup and clothing are beyond her age.

Sally has an abusive father who always warns that her good looks and exquisiteness would get her into trouble. Although Esperanza and Sally share the same age, Sally’s sexual nature makes Esperanza uncomfortable. Sally abandons Esperanza for a boy at a carnival, and

Esperanza being all alone was sexually exploited by an unknown man. Esperanza has an intense desire to leave the street because of awful incidents. Along with her need to escape, she also holds onto a resolve to return one day to help others. In spite of the distressing events in her life, Esperanza sees hopefulness and optimism in *Mango Street*, and as well, she feels it has set her free.

The sense of belonging is a strong theme in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. The novel revolves around the issues of worldwide identity and the struggle of an immigrant, especially within the liminal, 'Third space' created by the immigrant. In the novella, Esperanza, the protagonist and narrator, fashions an identity for herself, which allows her to control her own identity and at the same time maintain a strong connection to her community.

Esperanza and her family members juggle with several identities which society, family, and history superimpose on them. The family of Esperanza has their own traditional culture, which is deeply ingrained in their collective subconscious mind. Though they migrate to America, the members were not ready to give up their own culture and at the same time explicitly adapt themselves to the American Culture. They keep straddling between the two cultures. In the novel, Esperanza finds herself to be trapped between both the cultures. She was forced to stay rooted in her cultural traditions on the one hand, and was also equally compelled to pursue a better way of life outside the barrio on the other.

Throughout the story, the female protagonist's search for identity is highly visible. Despite living in Spanish speaking community, Esperanza feels comfortable to converse in English, the language which she received from a Catholic School. Growing up in multi-cultural Chicago, Esperanza believes that the language of English has more positivism when compared to Spanish. For instance, she says. "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It

means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine” (10). The Spanish definition reveals a negative implication to her identity, while the English meaning is motivating and optimistic. However, Esperanza finds hard to demarcate her language to the ‘Outer group’.

The terminology ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ was coined by a Polish social psychologist Henri Tajfel. ‘In-group’ is a social group, where a person identifies himself as a member, while the ‘out-group’ refers to a social group where a person doesn’t identify himself because of indifferences in race, culture, gender and age. Esperanza defends in many aspects the people of her race with the outsiders. In one instance, she says “All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake.... That is how it goes and goes” (28). The outside group is something unfamiliar and creepy to the inmates of the Mango Street. These lines of Esperanza reveal the insecure thoughts of Chicano community as an entity. However Esperanza gives a feasible implication in the novel to break the disparities. She analyzes that, the language of Mexicans acts as a barrier to intermingle with the outside group. And once Mexicans are trained in English language, then certainly there would be more scope in future to eliminate physical and social boundaries.

Cisneros has a plethora of female characters. The most significant character who expresses her extreme angst over cultural pluralism with outer group is Mamacita. Mamacita migrates to America and settles in Mango Street for the sake of her husband. Being a Spanish woman, she finds English language and the people outside the Mango Street to be threatening. She often secludes herself within a self imposed barrier. She creates a homely place in her house by listening to Spanish radio, and the homesick songs, and stays in this limited space. She never allows any foreign intruders in her house. She even expects the visitors to speak with her only in Spanish “No speak English” (77). However Mamacita understands that cultural pluralism is

inevitable through her son. On one occasion her baby boy, who has just begun to talk, starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he hears on T.V. And this incident lets Mamacita to be broken forever.

Unlike Mamacita, there are other women who choose to assimilate into the strong American culture. Alicia lives next to Esperanza's house. She is an outspoken, determined and intellectual person. She practically thinks of the various possibilities to enrich herself from shackles of poverty in life. Mango Street is like "Here there is too much sadness and not enough sky. Butterflies too are few and so are flowers and most things that are beautiful" (33). Unlike other traditional women, she doesn't take submissive roles instead breaks herself from all the barriers that her community has imposed on her. She studies hard, day and night, and becomes the first woman in her community, to pursue an Education from the University.

The formation of the women identity in a work of fiction, according to Sartre is, "to a great degree, through others' gaze. Others' gaze: the feeling of losing oneself and pleasing others by consuming self under others' eyesight." (56) Eventually all the women characters in the novella undergo the trauma of accepting both the cultures, imposed and inherited, in their living structural pattern. Esperanza even tries to uncover the answer to the query that she has been elevating in her mind, 'What am I?'. After much self introspection, Esperanza realizes that her inherited culture was tainted due to American culture. And she resolves the conflicts with the help of main stream language. She creates her own literary works with the main stream language, and gives significance to her own culture with the background of western culture. Thus Esperanza accepts her hyphenated identity and creates her own 'self'. Ultimately Sandra Cisneros, through her work stresses that multiculturalism is unavoidable in any instance. U.S.A

would be still labeled as a multicultural nation even if any immigrant is thrown out of the country and populated with natives.

Works Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage, 2009.

Sartre, J. P. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by E. B. Hazel, Washington Square Press, 1969.

Schwartz, Seth J. and Jennifer B. Unger. "Biculturalism and Context: What Is Biculturalism, and When Is It Adaptive?." *Human Development*, vol. 53, no.1, Mar.2010. *Karger*,
doi: 10.1159/000268137.