

The Image of the Chicano Male in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

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Abstract

*The House on Mango Street*¹ written by Sandra Cisneros represents one of the major Chicana literary narratives that covers the issues of female Chicana identity and the dilemma of co-existing within the American environment. Cisneros exposes the Chicano main issues as well as she focalizes on the Chicana double subjugation whether in her community or in the Anglo-American context. The novel as well suggests the gender issues in the Chicano community highlighting the image of the Chicano male and its tendencies where Chicana women still keep the submissive position under the control of the Chicano upper hand. This paper seeks to study the gender norms in the Chicano community by revealing the importance of both concepts of Machismo and Marianismo in unfolding such gender scriptures typically limiting the Chicana freedom towards the assertion of her identity.

Key words: Chicano, gender, Machismo, Marianismo, patriarchy, submissive.

Introduction

The House of Mango Street, Cisneros's masterpiece, depicts the reality of Chicanos in the US, and typically goes through the identity crisis they suffer from. The novella, and with its various issues focuses as well on the concerns of Chicanas, as females who confront several challenges from Chicano and Anglo-American men alike. Thus the Chicana is always set in opposition to her male counterpart underlying the gender gap set in the Chicano community. As a matter of fact, Cisneros exposes the image of the Chicano male in her novella working on the notions/concepts of Machismo and Marianismo highlighting by which the reality of the Chicana in the Chicano environment.

1. Definition of Gender

Gender has always been defined as the social and cultural factors that differentiate men from women. These cultural differences which identify the roles of each one become sometimes a hindrance towards equality basis, already cherished and looked for by feminists. In this

¹De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956.

concern, the issue of gender gap is omnipresent in many societies and communities, and many authors and theorists have been tackling it. Judith Butler²once states, “We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it’s a phenomenon that is being produced all the time[...].” (Your Behaviour Creates Your Gender). This saying entails that gender is performative meaning that it is not biological. Instead sex is biological but gender is acquired through social practices and environment.

In her article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”³ she adds;

[...] if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of *substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.(520)

Butler’s understanding of gender indicates that the concept could not be seen as biological but rather as a social and cultural construct based on behavior, repetition and acts.

This goes hand in hand with Simone de Beauvoir’s⁴ saying in her book *The Second Sex*, “one is not born but rather becomes a woman” (167). In the same wavelength, Monique Wittig⁵ in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* presumes that,

For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression, or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes preexisting (or outside of) society.(2)

The gender gap distinction identifies a distinct role for both sexes by which a limitation is set to constrain the interests and desires of the female who cannot transgress her biological bias.

²Butler, Judith. “Your Behaviour creates your gender”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc>

³Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”. *Theatre Journal*.40.4 (1988): 519-531

⁴De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956.

⁵Wittig, Monique. “The Straight Mind and Other Essays”. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.

The female has always been relegated to her “natural determinism” (Niedda 1) ⁶which is but a clear oppression based on her sex and genital organs that are different from man.

1.2 Gender roles in the Chicano Community

As for our concern based on the Chicano community and the Chicano ideas and traditions, gender gap is reinforced within the traditional view with which we perceive every sex. The Chicano culture is based on two major concepts: Machismo and Marianismo.

1.2.1 Machismo

Machismo is referred to as pride in masculinity and virility and it portrays men as those who are virile, powerful, dominant and overpowering. On the other hand, women should be submissive and weak according to the Chicano agenda, and should resemble Mary’s image. According to Valdez et.al,⁷

The construct of machismo was originally conceptualized to typify masculinity in Mexican-origin culture. Both in scholarly literature and in popular culture, machismo is related to the negative characteristics associated with patriarchy, sexism, and chauvinism. Machismo, much like the concepts of hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity has been historically used to malign marginalized men even though hegemonic masculinity and its implications cut across race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, and social stature (qtd. in Valdez et.al 2).

Such a long-inherited concept for generations has produced the cultural and social norms of the Mexican and Chicano societies as well. Valdez et.al develop this idea by saying, “This tendentious conceptualization has resulted in an unwarranted vilification of Latinx masculinity into a monolithic collection of behaviors that uphold societal norms in which men hold all the power and women are largely excluded from it.” (2)

1.2.2 Marianismo

On the other hand, Marianismo is defined as the following ““Marianismo”, a gender role script in Latin America, is the concept that women should be the spiritual family leaders, remain abstinent until marriage, and be submissive to their husbands; it originates from the Catholic Church’s image of the Virgin Mary (Kosmicki 2)⁸. Originally speaking,

The term was first coined by Evelyn Stevens in 1973 to describe women’s subordinate position in Latin American society and to bring attention to the unrealistic and idealized gender-role expectations of women (qtd. in Kosmicki 2).

⁶NIEDDA, MARILOU. “FEMINIST AND QUEER STUDIES: JUDITH BUTLER’S CONCEPTUALISATION OF GENDER”. [HTTPS://CLE.ENS-LYON.FR/ANGLAIS/CIVILISATION/DOMAINE-AMERICAIN/FEMINIST-AND-QUEER-STUDIES-JUDITH-BUTLERS-CONCEPTUALISATION-OF-GENDER](https://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/civilisation/domaine-americain/feminist-and-queer-studies-judith-butlers-conceptualisation-of-gender)

⁷Valdez ,Luis A , Emily C. Jaeger, David O. Garcia, and Derek M. Griffith. “Breaking Down Machismo: Shifting Definitions and Embodiments of Latino Manhood in Middle-Aged Latino Men” *American journal of Men’s Health* (2023),1-12.

⁸Kosmicki, Mia. Marianismo Identity, Self-Silencing, Depression and Anxiety in Women from Santa María de Dota, Costa Rica. *Cuadernos de Investigación UNED* . 9.2 (2017): 202-208.

To elaborate more on Marianismo and its characteristics, Kosmicki adds,

Some characteristics of Marianismo include remaining virtuous, humble, and spiritually superior to men. The main values of Marianismo are centered around the concepts of “familismo” (a woman should be a good wife, mother, and caretaker), “respeto” (a woman should be modest in behavior, not talk about sex, and not engage in sex for pleasure), and “simpática” (a woman should avoid conflicts at all costs and silence the self if necessary to maintain harmony). (qtd.in Kosmicki 2)

This gender distinction is as well relative to religion and to some religious convictions and beliefs through which the Chicano becomes more overpowering and Chicana females become weaker and more submissive. By looking into the intricacies of the Chicano culture, gender gap becomes an admired realm that co-exists with the Catholic traditions which identify and distinguish the Chicano and give him the superior rank. So, Chicana women who aim at deconstructing such traditional structure are not accepted. Then the keeping of gender ascriptions and their sexist appeals become the rule than the exception.

2.The Gender gap in *The House on Mango Street*

The gender gap in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* is distinguished in many episodes in the novel. The Chicano novel that takes the form of vignettes crosses different places and covers the psyches of many characters who live in Mango Street. Cisneros, and through the voice of her protagonist Esperanza, delves into the Chicano community and transmits the concerns of many characters, whether men or women. Esperanza presumably exhibits her own problems when living in a Chicano community interacting with other Latinos and Anglo-Americans as well.

Interestingly, the gender gap issue is plainly exposed at the beginning of the novella in the vignette entitled « Boys and Girls ». Cisneros starts the vignette by saying, « The boys and the girls live in separate worlds ». Esperanza adds, «The boys in their universe and we in ours ». (8) This sentence highlights the gender gap distinction omnipresent in the Chicano community distinguishing its sex by its world and preoccupations. The sentence epitomizes the differences set to differentiate males from females with the insistence on not melting together. The brothers of Esperanza are educated under the societal norms that become a tradition to follow. Esperanza's brothers learned how not to interact with girls, Cisneros writes, « But outside they can't be seen talking to girls. Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friends » (8). The close relationship between the boys underlines the male solidarity and co-operation by refuting the interference of the female world, even if it is their sisters. From this perspective, we can understand that the concept of Machismo starts to be adapted and it takes shape from childhood to which a male should abide. It starts with separation until the acquisition of manhood and virility. It could be deduced from that that the interaction with girls could become a hindrance towards the development of Machismo and the adaptation of manhood.

Machismo takes shape in another vignette in which a true Macho is described. In the episode entitled « Sally », the character who is Sally, indeed, is known for her beauty, « Sally is the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke » (Cisneros 81). The way Sally is described typifies her with an intense femininity that unfolds a typical woman with a dangerous puzzling beauty. Cisneros depicts Sally with imagery focusing on her hair, « her hair is shiny black like raven feathers and when she laughs, she flicks her hair like a satin shawl over her shoulders and laughs » (81). Such a description alludes to the outstanding beauty of Sally which becomes exceptional and extraordinary. The use of simile highlights the way how her hair is beautiful and her beauty is fabulous. Such an exceptional case becomes characterized with danger and threat. In fact, Sally becomes a sort of an exception inside the Chicano community which does not consider beauty as part of femininity but as a means of threat that could endanger the surrounding and inflict a bad effect on the Chicano environment. Such a reading associates women with the bad Mexican archetypes that are inherited for so many generations. La Malinche or La Llorona represent the opposite realm of Mary or the Virgin of Guadalupe challenging by that the Chicano/Mexican status quo. Gloria Anzaldúa⁹ defines them by saying, “*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres*. All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada (Malinche)*, the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *La Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two.” (52)

Later she elaborates on this cultural framework and tradition by saying,

Guadalupe has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indian and mexicanos and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted-*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *La Llorona* to make us long suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgin/puta* (whore) dichotomy. (53)

This understanding of the female archetypes that become female paradigms in the Mexican/Chicano culture are embedded in the Mexican /Chicano culture and through which the gender distinction is identified. Women should belong to one of the icons in the spectrum to have an identity, and the gender gap bases its distinction on the most appreciated paradigm (like the Virgin of Guadalupe) as it serves the Chicano male authority and dominance and sustains its masculinity.

Then women’s beauty becomes a threat and danger that destabilizes the Mexican/Chicano masculinity. This fact is underlined through Cisneros’s statement when she says, « Her father says to be this beautiful is trouble » (81). The father’s fear emanates from his perception of his daughter’s beauty, it’s not a blessing but a curse. Then the father has to restrict and control this beauty to set its boundaries and identify its circle; Cisneros writes, « Then she can’t go out » (81). The father’s control showcases the extent to which women are submissive and feared at the same time. As Sally’s father doubts that his daughter’s beauty could be dangerous, he tries by all means to control her and nullify her desire and her intentions.

⁹Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007.

Cisneros makes a hint to his sisters by saying, « He remembers his sisters and is sad » (81). Having lived a bad experience indicates that he struggles against the reproduction of such an episode and wants to maintain the traditional status quo by subjugating his daughter. Women's liberation and freedom could be seen as promiscuity and sexual debauchery which are not appreciated in Chicano /Mexican mindset. Thus the image of the father here in this context neither exhibits an image of protective father nor a loving parent, but rather of a male Chicano who is afraid of having his machismo eroded.

In another vignette entitled « What Sally Said », Esperanza, the protagonist revokes her friend Sally insisting on the type of relationship between Esperanza and her father. The relationship becomes more intense when she starts to communicate with another male but her father; Cisneros writes, « Until one day Sally's father catches her talking to a boy and the next day she doesn't come to school. And the next. Until the way Sally tells it even the buckle and the belt » (93). The change that appeared on the behavior of the father translates the extent to which he wants to restrict the world of Sally, and thus her femininity. Sally appears as subservient to the male world living under its orders. The violent image of the father indicates the extent to which the rage can overwhelm him when he feels that his masculinity is threatened by the rivalry of another male figure. Accordingly, violence makes part of the macho behavior which comprises this aspect as basic and fundamental of its constituents.

In another vignette entitled « The Monkey Garden », Esperanza goes through an experience with the other male world that provokes her feelings and torments her emotions. Cisneros places her character in a direct confrontation with the male world as a way to reveal the outcomes of such a meeting. The Monkey Garden which is depicted as a deserted place where children can play together becomes later a dangerous place where the traits of innocence were removed. Esperanza goes through a maturity process when she enters the garden as a child who wants to enjoy her moments with some boys of her age; however, the place reveals another shape regarding the other facets of those boys who become robbers of innocence and virginity.

The place, and from the onset of the episode sounds weird, « The monkey doesn't live there anymore. The monkey moved to Kentucky and took his people with him (Cisneros 94). The abandoned place changes and becomes more savage and threatening; Cisneros writes, « Yellow spiders ran when we turned rocks over and pale worms blind and afraid of light rolled over in their sleep. Poke a stick in the sandy soil and a few blue-skinned beetles would appear, an avenue of ants, so many crusty lady bugs » (95). This description underlines an atmosphere of fear, horror and threat as well as danger. It alludes to a place full of ambiguity and chaos. The imbalance of order alludes as well to another outcome. The children who are supposed to be innocent enter the Monkey Garden and start to have new intentions. The supposedly innocent games become redundant with sexual allusions and novel tendencies. This is why the aforementioned description hints at the dangerous, savage and alarming signs of the place and its content. Esperanza who enters the garden to play gets raped and her innocence and that of the other children become abused. The shocking event has its impact on Esperanza who endures the fact but felt a lot of change regarding her personality and her shape. Several changes were felt on her body and psyche, Cisneros writes, « I wanted to will

my blood to stop, my heart to quit its pumping. I wanted to be dead, to turn into the rain, my eyes melt into the ground like two black snails ». This episode that intensively highlights the change that occurs in Esperanza's personality shows from another perspective the effect of the male world and typically machismo on her. Esperanza feels limited by her gender identity totally being submissive to the male desires and wants that are exposed in a savage place. She has been the prey of the boys who want to fulfill their promiscuous thirst. Thus Cisneros, and through Esperanza's rape unfolds the desire of the male world which is limited to its libido desire, telling through the female identity which is under the control of the male gaze and dominance. Machismo as such perceives the female with a limited view orchestrating its power and will over the female body and will. The fact of seeing Esperanza typically overwhelmed and tormented by the end of the chapter underscores the effect of male control and power over the female body; Cisneros writes, « I looked at my feet in their white socks and ugly round shoes. They seemed far away. They didn't seem to be my feet anymore » (98). Such a reading of the Chicano female body becomes an attempt at taming the Chicana by overpowering her body and desire. Rape, and when it is placed over the female body, becomes nullification and a taming of her sexual desires and wants. It is only the male sexual desire which is listened to in this context. It is at the same time a call for the Chicana to identify with Marianismo and forget about her sexual desires and wants. The sexual will is typically orbited to the Chicano male mindset and culture. It is the orchestration of male violence embedded in Machismo.

In another episode, Esperanza recalls her friend Sally who used to live under the control of her father. In the vignette entitled « Linoleum Roses », Sally lives a new condition as she has been married; Cisneros writes, « Sally got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same » (101). Esperanza's view of Sally's marriage seems to be critical since she understands the reasons behind such a decision. The change is at the root of finding liberation or escaping the father's dominance and control, Cisneros writes, « She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape » (101). Sally's thirst for independence is ironic as she thinks she can have her own things and buy her own things but ultimately she fell under another male control. The male whose transgressive behavior reaches violence and aggression becomes another version of her father, « She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay » (101). The violence performed by the husband is but an explanation and definition a real and true machismo; Cisneros writes, « Except he 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 » (102). Then Sally who aspires for freedom through marriage finds herself entangled within the doctrines of her husband who is a macho himself. This trap in which she falls becomes a redundancy that Chicana women live and continue to submit in their existence. The fact of finding Sally entrapped in the house without having the freedom to go out without the permission of her husband, and she can't even look outside the window transmits the image of a weak and relegated Chicana who resembles the other women in Mango Street. Chicanas from different generations follow the same fate without change. Sally's fate is concluded like all the other women of the neighborhood

submissive and controlled by the male authority. In this context, HEND HASSIN JAMAL¹⁰ comments,

All the female characters in the novel share the condition of being oppressed by male figures, a father and/or a husband, and this has its drastic effect on their behaviors, psyches and identities, as they are all trapped in the same limited stereotypical spaces forced upon them by their culture. (33)

2. New Machismo

From another perspective, machismo is seen from a different angle when Esperanza presents her father during an event (his father's death). In fact, instead of depicting him with the old-fashioned view with which we see Chicano men, Esperanza's father is seen with an emotional and sensitive side, Cisneros writes, « [he] crumples like a coat and cries, my brave Papa cries. I have never seen my Papa cry and don't know what to do » (56). This side depicted in the father's image tells about an emotional side which is omnipresent in every person. Cisneros, and throughout Esperanza's father, wants to highlight the human side found in the male in general and precisely in the Chicano man. The Chicano man is not always the domineering figure who lacks emotions and sensitivity. He is like any human being able to interact, purge his feelings and externalize his emotions. Esperanza's attachment to her father is underlined to show the special relationship that should be between a father and his daughter. She absolutely concentrates on the intact that focuses on the familial sacred bond.

Esperanza's description of her father physically tells about this link that correlates love, respect, shelter and protection; Cisneros writes, « My Papa, his thick hands and thick shoes, who wakes up tired in the dark, who combs his hair with water, drinks his coffee, and is gone before we wake, today is sitting on my bed (57). Machismo from this perspective is represented through the father, the only breadwinner, the protector and the Esperanza's feelings become more intensified in this sequence as if what she knows earlier about her father intersects with the concept of Machismo but with a positive standpoint. Machismo here and instead of being the old-fashioned version related to domination and the interest in masculinity turns out to be more a new concept related to protection and reliance. In this context Gloria Anzaldúa defines new Machismo by saying, «The modern meaning of the word 'machismo', as well as the concept, is actually an Anglo invention. For men like my father, being 'macho' meant being able enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love.» (105).

This new understanding of machismo becomes an explanation of the outcome of the contact zone between two cultures where old Mexican concepts start to be shaped and altered. Machismo could no longer be the same old-fashioned concept as represented originally on the Mexican society but it becomes more fluid and flexible. The contact zone of the borderland

¹⁰Samy Mohamed Gamal El-Din, HEND. «The House and the Window Motifs I n The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros ». https://salsu.journals.ekb.eg/article_344614_ad40782cd03427b84f58856d27e12c69.pdf?lang=en

tells about this continuous change in which Mexican and Anglo American concepts are « in a constant state of transition» (Anzaldúa 25)

In general, Cisneros has traced the image of the Chicano male in the novella exemplifying the Machismo concept deeply rooted in the Mexican culture as well as the Chicano one. The change in the concept that we felt throughout the protagonist's description of her father could be linked to the geographical movement and the cultural context that render the Chicano male more versatile. The reality of the Chicano male in the borderland as Anzaldúa labels it endorses a new context where the reality of concepts becomes more open and less rigid. The Chicano male when placed in the Anglo American terrain becomes both influenced by the borderland area and influential at the same time on his environment. This space which is called borderland offers flexibility and smoothness at the same time. It is the area where both cultures exist and correlate. It is where the Chicano is torn between preserving his Mexican rituals and assimilating into the American society. This cultural dilemma has tremendous effects on his behavior, and this is how the concept of Machismo is questioned. It is as Anzaldúa explains: «The loss of a sense of dignity and respect in the macho breeds a false machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalise them» (105). His behavior when he is facing the Anglo American community is rendered more aggressive due to the impact of racism and discrimination that he goes through on daily basis. Thus his behavior towards the Chicana female becomes more intensified as he is not able to transgress the secondary position in which he lives. The violent behavior of the Chicano could thus be explained by the pressures he lives under in the Anglo-American society.

From another standpoint, the Chicano male could be influential because he starts to depart from the old Mexican customs and traditions. Being exposed to the American society can create of him a new figure that needs to go through a new process in order to accommodate and assimilate himself. The flexible mood that overwhelms him can make of him a novel Macho with a new reading. Then automatically the Chicano male cannot behave as the Mexican man, but new traits could be felt within his personality. He becomes a new person open up with a new vision towards the female Chicana.

Such readings in Machismo within the novella show the importance of such a concept in the making of the gender relation between Chicano males and Chicana females. It is undoubtedly an interest in the position of Chicana females vis-à-vis the male counterparts. Chicana females who look for a way to redeem their position and voice themselves should transgress such confining notions of Machismo and male domination and set their own agenda and write their history. Chicana females should develop a feminist awareness as Aida Hurtado states,

Chicana feminisms were born out of acts of disruption[...] to create spaces of resistance to patriarchy in general and patriarchy in their own ethnic/racial groups.[...] Chicana feminisms are characterized by finding absences and exclusions and arguing from that standpoint. (qtd.in Got 2)¹¹

¹¹Got, Monica. "TOWARDS A GEOGRAPHY OF TRAUMA: FROM EL PLAN ESPIRITUAL DE AZTLÁN TO THE BIRTH OF CHICANA SPIRITUAL FEMINISM » *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 81 (2020). 133-152.

Chicana females should « refuse the objectification imposed by gender roles and racial exploitation » (Yarabaro-Bejarano 141)¹². Then the aim of Cisneros behind this presentation is to destabilize the gender norms and fixed stereotypes in order to set a new female Chicana identity who can enjoy freedom and liberation. By deconstructing the old stereotypes and liberating themselves from the cultural paradigms they need to adhere to, Chicana women can yearn for gender equality.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, we have seen how the presentation of gender norms and relations in the Chicano community aim at relegating Chicana women to a submissive position. Cisneros, and throughout her novella, yearns for redeeming the Chicana position and giving her an identity by liberating her from the old stereotypes and ascribed agenda that she used to live in. Esperanza, as the voice of the new Chicana traces new horizons where Mexican and Chicana women alike could acquire dignity and equality in their societies and adapt a feminist call through which they voice themselves to guarantee a more egalitarian treatment.

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¹² Yarbro-Bejarano, Y. (1991). "Chicana Literature From a Chicana Feminist Perspective." Retrieved July 23, 2022, from Semantic Scholar: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Chicana-Literature-from-a-Chicana-Feminist-Yarbro-Bejarano/138e1dd1a4a73b19263dc6bab0cc0fe26c8d6cb6>

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