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Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*: A Study in Female Bildungsroman

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Abstract

Bildungsroman is a kind of novel that follows the development of a hero from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity. In a *Bildungsroman*, the goal is maturity, and the protagonist achieves it gradually with difficulty. The genre often features a main conflict between the main character and society. The term Female *Bildungsroman* is to defend the representation of women's experience in writing a necessary means to fulfill the goal of finding a new female *Bildung*. The central theme of contemporary women's fiction is the quest for authentic female self-development. It starts from the adolescent protagonist's coming-of-age or as the mature woman's awakening to reality of her social and cultural role as a woman and her subsequent attempts to re-examine her life and shape it in accordance with her new feminist consciousness. Sandra Cisneros is a well-known American novelist, short-story writer, essayist and poet. She is one of the first Hispanic-

American writers, lauded by literary scholars and critics for works which help bring the perspective of Chicana (Mexican-American) women into the mainstream of literary feminism. In *A House on Mango Street* (1985), Cisneros creates the character Esperanza, a poor, Hispanic adolescent who longs for a room of her own and a house which she can be proud. Esperanza ponders the disadvantages of choosing marriage over education, the importance of writing as an emotional release, and the sense of confusion associated with growing up. The paper focuses on 'the Female Bildungsroman' issues like friendship, ordeals of love, alienation, self-identity, oppression, race, culture, gender issues and society.

Keywords

Female Bildungsroman; Self-Identity; Gender Issues; Sandra Cisneros; *A House on Mango Street*.

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literary scholars and critics for works which help bring the perspective of Chicana (Mexican-American) women into the mainstream of literary feminism. She wrote two fictions as *The House on Mango Street* (1983) and *Caramelo*; a collection of short stories *Women Hollering Creek* (1991). She was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985 for *The House on Mango Street*.

Cisneros took nearly five years to complete *The House on Mango Street*. She creates the character Esperanza, a poor, Hispanic adolescent who longs for a room of her own and a house which she can be proud. Cisneros writes in the voice of adolescent Esperanza and creates a series of interlocking stories in poignant nature of language. Esperanza ponders the disadvantages of choosing marriage over education, the importance of writing as an emotional release, and the sense of confusion associated with growing up. Most of the characters in the novel are really encountered by Cisneros in her lifetime. She shows the development of the protagonist from her childhood to adulthood – as female Bildungsroman.

The House on Mango Street covers the life of Esperanza, a Chicana (Mexican-American girl), who is about twelve years old when the novel begins. The house is a huge improvement from the family's previous apartment, and it is the first home her parents actually own. But the house is not as Esperanza expected and dreamed of, because it is run-down and small. The house is in the centre of a crowded Latino neighborhood in Chicago, a city where many of the poor areas are racially segregated. Esperanza does not have any privacy, because "Everybody has to share a bedroom-Mama and Papa, Carlos and Kiki, me and Nenny" (*HMS* 4). She resolves that she will someday leave Mango Street and have a house all her own in her future.

Esperanza starts to find the meaning of her name "Esperanza". It is named after her great-grandmother and she has two meaning for her name the first in English, it means "hope" and in Spanish it means "too many letters" as

well as “sadness” and “waiting”. Both Esperanza and her grandmother were born in the Chinese year of the horse. It is strength to a person who is being born under this sign but is supposed to be bad luck for women. But she rejects this superstition and believes both the Chinese and Mexicans discourage women from being strong. Esperanza’s grandmother never wants to get married but was forced into marriage and never forgave her husband. She is trapped by the male society and becomes a victim by losing her own identity. This marks the clear evident for the suppression of women in all the countries. She spent her life gazing sadly out the window. Esperanza says that “I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (*HMS* 11). She wants to change her name to express her true self as Bildungsroman.

Esperanza learns the gender variations in the society which is very common in her place. She notes that boys and girls do not entertain with each other in the neighborhood. Though she talks to her brothers, Carlos and Kiki at home, they refuse to talk to her outside. Esperanza tries creating a good rapport with her younger sister Nenny, who is very young to understand the feelings of her. She suggests that “She is just my sister and that was not my fault” (*HMS* 8). She is really in need of good friend who belongs to her own age group to understand her better. Without friends she longs and compares herself to a “red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor” (*HMS* 9). She gets the feeling of alienation in her own family.

Esperanza befriends Lucy and Rachel, two Chicana girls who live across the street. She is very happy to have good friends. They involve in many adventures in Mango Street. When she attains puberty, she likes to dance and enjoy the dreams. She is very interested to know about boys and learns many exciting stories about boys from a young woman named Marin. The change of physical appearance is seen when she walked in high-heeled shoes or kissed by an older man at her first job. The growth of a girl makes a great change in their life. She can never go back to her childhood again in her life.

Esperanza develops her first crush on Sire. She likes to see Sire and she boldly looks at him to show that she never fears for anything. On knowing this Papa says that “He is a punk and Mama says not to talk to him” (*HMS* 73). Her parent guides her to follow the traditional life which they use to follow. Later she learns that he has got a girl friend Lois. Though she knows it she compares herself with Lois when she meets her in Mr. Benny’s grocery shop. She saw her “barefoot baby toenails all painted pale pink, like little ink seashells, and she smells pink like babies do” (*HMS* 73). She fulfils her desire of Sire in her dreams. This makes Esperanza to feel for Sire and it ends as the ordeal for love in bildungsroman.

Esperanza befriends Sally from her school days, a girl of her age, who is more sexually mature than Lucy or Rachel. Sally is very beautiful and uses boys and men as an escape route from her abusive father. Meanwhile, she has her own agenda. Esperanza is not comfortable with Sally’s sexual experience with group of boys. Esperanza saves Sally from the mischievous happening by creating violence to her. When Sally’s father knows about Sally’s behaviour he uttered “You’re not my daughter, you’re not my daughter” (*HMS* 93).

A group of anonymous boys assaults Esperanza; she directs her anger toward women and society instead of the specific boys responsible. She rages at Sally for not being there and not telling her what sex is really like, and at society for not debunking the myth that sex is connected with love and romance. Sally has proven to be an unreliable friend, always choosing boy’s attention over Esperanza’s friendship and Esperanza now pays the price for her loyalty. Esperanza thinks any man or boy could have been guilty, but women are the one responsible for keeping each other safe. She has matured a great deal over the experience which renders her helpless and scared. She expects to know about ‘sex’ in “All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong” (*HMS* 100). She blames that her attackers possess a good strength and she has not yet developed.

Esperanza shares her traumatic experiences with the older women in her neighbourhood. She also informs her desire to escape from Mango Street to have her own house. While she finds herself emotionally ready to leave her neighbourhood; she discovers that she will never fully be able to leave Mango Street behind and after she leaves she'll have to return to help the women she has left. At the end Esperanza remain on Mango Street, but she has matured extensively and achieves her house of her own. Stating that "Mango says goodbye sometimes... Friends and neighbours will say, What happened to that Esperanza?... They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind" (*HMS* 110).

Esperanza has a stronger desire to leave and understands that writing will help her put distance between herself and her situation. She thinks writing helps her to escape only emotionally, in the future it may help her to escape physically as well. As the female Bildungsroman develops the young protagonist to learn and become mature in the adulthood stage. First she makes friends, grows good in dancing and singing, develops her crush, endures sexual assault, and begins to write as a way of expressing herself and as a way to escape the neighbourhood.

As postulated by Pratt, "the quest of the youthful self for identity... the mysteries of adulthood... to learn his or her own identity... the young hero or heroine sets forth into the world to seek his or her fortune"(13). Sandra Cisneros creates an innocent young Latin girl to face problems directly, gain experience and at the end she becomes an experienced adulthood. It relates to her upbringing, including divided cultural loyalties, feelings of alienation and degradation associated with poverty. Cisneros also explores the female Bildungsroman genres like friendship, ordeals of love, alienation, self-identity, oppression, race, and culture, gender issues and society. Thus, Sandra Cisneros *The House on Mango Street* clearly fits into the concept of Female Bildungsroman.

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