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The Patriarchal House as a Physical and Metaphorical Prison in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*

La casa patriarcal como una prisión física y metafórica en la novela de Sandra Cisneros *La casa en Mango Street*

Ileana Molina Espinoza
Universidad de Costa Rica, San José, Costa Rica
ileana.molina@ucr.ac.cr
ORCID: 0000-0002-2567-9166

Abstract
Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros explores in her novel *The House on Mango Street* the construction of the patriarchal house as a physical and metaphorical prison for the female characters that inhabit this text. In this way, the writer highlights the situation of many Chicano women in the United States who struggle, from their *barrios*, to build a place in a society that excludes them because of their ethnic origin and discriminates against them because of their condition as women. This causes a double sense of marginality that imprisons them in the private space of the house.

Key words: literature, Chicana, house, female body, prison

Resumen
La escritora chicana Sandra Cisneros explora en su novela *The House on Mango Street* la construcción de la casa patriarcal como una prisión física y metafórica para los personajes femeninos que habitan este texto. De esta manera, la escritora evidencia la situación de muchas mujeres chicanas en los Estados Unidos que luchan, desde sus barrios, por construir un lugar en una sociedad, no solo xenofóbica que las excluye por su origen étnico, sino también sexista que las discrimina por su condición de mujer. Esto provoca un doble sentido de marginalidad que las aprisiona en el espacio privado de la casa.

Palabras clave: literatura, chicana, casa, cuerpo femenino, prisión

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Women themselves have often, of course, been described or imagined as houses.
Gilbert & Gubar (1979, p. 88)

In her novel *The House on Mango Street*, Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros presents the space of the house as two kinds of female imprisonment, a physical and a metaphorical one. The first part of this article analyzes how the notion of space is constructed upon the private/public dichotomy and its repercussions upon women's lives: the physical enclosure of women inside houses. The second part explores the construction of the female body as a metaphorical cell in which women are confined as biologically pre determined beings. Both prisons are crucial factors in the protagonist Esperanza Cordero's process of constructing a sense of identity from a gendered perspective in the text.

In 1929, Virginia Woolf published her well known text *A Room of One's Own,* which deals with the difficulties women writers face within a male-dominated society. One major point she develops is the great importance of a stable economic situation for women to be able to become writers. As she states in that text:

> Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time Women, then have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own. (1981, p.108)

As the final sentence of this quotation reveals, access to money is not enough for women to write. A "room of one's own," a private space for creation to take place, is also essential. This need for privacy is accentuated by Woolf's suggestion of having "a lock on the door" (p. 105), to be undisturbed while writing. Six decades after the publication of this text, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, first published in 1984, addresses the same fissure in women's reality, the absence of a private room of their own, expressed by Esperanza's wish to have a "house all [her] own" (1991, p. 108). The need to construct a metaphorical and material room for women to develop as human beings and writers is as present today as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is in the denunciation of the absence of this vital space that writers such as Virginia Woolf and Sandra Cisneros join their voices to construct "a feminine space." While Virginia Woolf makes this room visible by acknowledging it in her essay, Sandra Cisneros constructs it through the power of fiction.

Cisneros' novel represents a life-story as experienced by Esperanza Cordero in her process of growing up. In this way, the text recovers and gives value to Esperanza's voice from a gendered and ethnic position, decentering the traditional white, patriarchal, adult construction of the world to create meaning(s) in different, alternative ways. Cisneros makes women "the central focus of the narrative and presents a firmly centered female protagonist who acts, not as what de Beauvoir defines as the Other of a male protagonist but, rather, as a subject who dares to confront lies and to deconstruct myths"

(Gonzales-Berry, 1993, p. 43). The text concentrates on women's experiences of the world, a world shaped by ethnic and racial prejudices and gender misconceptions. Indeed, Cisneros dedicates it "A las Mujeres, To the Women," providing Chicanas with a voice and a space in literature to break the silence and tell their stories

The placement of women in houses is a consequence of the concept of space prevailing Western philosophy which has been historically divided into the private/house, where women are confined passively in domesticity, and the public space, constructed as male territory of action. This division conceals an important power relation since men are the controllers of both spheres, being in possession of the 'door key' to go in and out the house freely, while women find themselves trapped inside.

In "Sexual Divisions in Law," Katherine O'Donovan analyzes the roles of law as important factors in the construction of the public/private distinction which has placed women in the "illegally unregulated" private world. This world which includes the home, the family and the married couple "is not perceived as the law's concern… verlooking the power inequalities inside the family which are of course affected by structures external to it" (2000, p. 272). O'Donovan summarizes the public and private zones as follows:

> The public sphere is that sphere in which "history" is made ... [and it] is the sphere of male activity. Domestic activity becomes relegated to the private sphere and is mediated to the public sphere by men who move between both. Women have a place only in the private sphere ... [which] raises questions about power in personal relations and in the organization ... [of society]. (p. 269)

Patriarchal laws have perpetuated women's enclosure inside the house, leaving them, at the same time, legally unprotected in the "intimacy" of their homes. As Yadira Calvo states in "Adiós al piropo," in patriarchal society, women experience "la certeza de que el hombre en la plaza y la mujer en la casa no es un refrán sino una ley" [the certainty that man in the plaza and woman in the house is not a saying but a law] [my translation] (1997, p. 20), ultimately the law of patriarchy. The house is, thus, constructed as a paternal space of confinement merely inhabited by women, controlled and administered by men.

Is the house which is constructed by patriarchy a prison, or even worse, a grave where women are buried alive? For literary critics Gilbert and Gubar, the female types that have traditionally defined women have taken their humanity away to transform them into mere stereotypes. Especially as the angels of the house, women are expected to surrender their desires and dreams for others, which eventually produces an annihilation of the self, a symbolic death: "To be selfless is ... to be dead. A life that has no story ... is really a life of death, a death-in-life. The ideal of 'contemplative purity' evokes, finally, both heaven and the grave" (1979, p. 25). In most cases, living in this symbolic *grave* conveys a life of domestic chores, away from the world outside. In "Toward Women's Poetics," Josephine Donovan acknowledges the domestic or private sphere in which women have been confined/ consigned

as a social structure which has shaped women's world views and consciousness: "An important determinant of traditional women's consciousness has been the practice of domestic labor or housework [which] is non-progressive, repetitive, and static" (2000, p.101). The house, then, becomes a prison where many women are enclosed to live as mothers, wives, and daughters away from the world and themselves.

The image of the house as a metaphorical and literal prison has been present in women's writings throughout time and constitutes a revealing element in women's literary tradition. Gilbert and Gubar refer to the recurrent manifestation of imagery of enclosure and escape in women's texts: "anxieties about space sometimes seem to dominate the literature of both nineteenth-century women and their twentieth century descendants" (1979, p. 83). The sense of enclosure is even present in children's books, such as Mrs. Molesworth's *The Tapestry Room* (1879) and Dinah Craik's *The Little Lame Prince* (1886). Similarly, in dozens of novels from this time, "the secret room, the attic hideaway, the suffragette cell came to stand for a separate world, a flight from men and from adult sexuality" (Showalter, 1993, p. 284). As Gilbert and Gubar point out, most women were and still are "locked into male texts" (1979, p. 83), prisoners of patriarchal institutions and gender roles.

In *The House on Mango Street*, we find the duality private/ public space as part of the patriarchal world where Esperanza comes into contact with herself and society. Most women in her community are, indeed, confined to the privacy of their houses. Men, on the contrary, are allowed to walk freely in the public sphere with no restriction. This is part of Esperanza's Mexican, male-oriented heritage. Mexican poet and novelist Rosario Castellanos describes the traditional female role within the Mexican society:

> In Mexico, when we utter the word woman, we refer to a creature who is dependent upon male authority: be it her father's, her brother's, her husband's, or her priest's. She is subject to alien decisions that dictate her personal appearance, her marital status, the career she is going to study, or the field of work she is going to enter… The Mexican woman does not consider herself- nor do others consider her- to be a woman who has reached fulfillment if she has not produced children. (Quoted in Castillo, 2000, p. 9)

For Castellanos, Mexican tradition, law and educational institutions all participate in the construction of a female model where self-sacrifice is considered "the Mexican woman's most famous virtue" (p. 9). The personal and cultural prison that this construction implies is projected upon the image of the house which is constituted as the space where virtue and tradition are preserved from generation to generation.

The image of this prison/house permeates several vignettes in Cisneros' novel. In "Louie, His Cousin and His Other Cousin," this division of space based on gender criteria is clearly represented. Louie's first cousin, Marin, is a girl a little older than Esperanza who "can't come out- [because she] gotta baby-sit with Louie's sisters"

(1991, p. 23). Louie's male cousin, on the contrary, is out in the streets with his male friends. He has a big yellow Cadillac and even drives Esperanza and her friends around the neighborhood. Because she is female, Marin is not only enclosed inside a house with other girls but is also obliged to baby-sit, a traditional, "natural" female duty. Louie's male cousin, on the contrary, has the freedom to leave the house at his will. This clear division of space which regulates men's and women's roles and access to the public sphere is part of Esperanza's life in a Mexican American society.

In this society, we encounter several references to women literally locked inside houses by figures of patriarchal authority, such as husbands and fathers. This is the case of Rafaela in the vignette "Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut and Papaya Juice on Tuesdays." Every Tuesday, Rafaela "gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid [she] will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (p. 79). In her prison-house, Rafaela drinks sweet fruit juices, "not bitter like an empty room" (p. 80), where she is secluded to watch the outside world from her window. Together with the imagery of enclosure, there are references to the desire to escape. In her confinement, Rafaela dreams she is Rapunzel, the fairy tale character who had such long hair that she could use it as a rope for her savior to rescue her from the cell where she was trapped. Ironically, in Rapunzel's story it is the prince who saves her from the cell, while in Rafaela's he is the jailer: "Are the fairy tale castles all that they promise to be, or are they prisons?" (Gonzales-Berry, 1993, p. 44). The irony between fiction and reality manifests the great gap many women encounter when they confront their fairy tale expectations about men and women's relationships with reality. In her loneliness, Rafaela also wishes she could be like other women who "open homes with keys" (Cisneros, 1991, p. 80), having access to the external world. Unfortunately, she can only sit by the window drinking fruit juice, dreaming of a "sweeter" life outside those suffocating house walls.

In "No Speak English," the character Mamacita becomes another victim of patriarchal confinement. Her very name reveals the power imbalance which determines her life as a prisoner. The use of the diminutive "cita" attached to the generic name Mama relegates the character to a subordinate position in relation to her husband and to society in general. In fact, the ending "ita" or "ito" is usually used in Spanish to reduce the size and/ or importance of nouns. So, the attachment of "cita" to Mama's name clearly manifests a diminution of this character. Besides, the name "mamacita" is overcharged with sexual connotations in Spanish which identifies this character in terms of her relationship to men and biological function as a sexual object. Mamacita is brought to the United States by her husband to inhabit his house and be his wife. Unfortunately, she is not able to adjust to the new country and isolates herself inside the house: "She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull" (p. 77). Even though the husband does not explicitly forbid Mamacita to go out, his selfishness and lack of understanding towards his wife's fears and

uncertainties in a foreign country become a way to imprison Mamacita inside herself and the house. When Mamacita is sad and talks about returning to her homeland, the man "gets disgusted" and "starts screaming"! Ay caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay" (p. 78). The use of the personal pronoun "I" manifests Mamacita's husband's main concern: himself. Like Rafaela, Mamacita finds herself trapped inside a house, inside a patriarchal system where male needs and desires are the priority.

In the case of Sally in the vignette "What Sally Said," we find the imprisonment of a girl by her father because she is a daughter. Her situation is part of an oppressive patriarchal tradition, reflected in the father's remembrance of his sisters: "He remembers his sisters and is sad. Then she can't go out. Sally I mean" (p. 81). Functioning as a patriarchal guardian of order, the father controls his daughter, the same way he controlled his sisters in the past. For him, women are to be kept under his command. Similar to the husbands portrayed in the previous vignettes, the father figure is possessive, dominant and oppressive. As a consequence, Sally lives a miserable life: "You don't laugh, Sally. You look at your feet and walk fast to the house you can't come out from" (p. 82). In the paternal prison/ house, Sally waits for something to arrive and change her life. She is already trapped in her father's image of herself and doomed to inhabit another man's house.

Cisneros' novel portrays several female attempts to escape patriarchal control through the social contract of marriage. In "Linoleum Roses," Sally gets married "like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same" (p. 101). As Esperanza says, "[Sally] says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape" (p. 101). In marriage, Sally finds a way to escape her father's physical abuse and excessive control. In "Marin," the protagonist also hopes to find in marriage a solution to her problems. Marin fits the role of the traditional woman who is "waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (p. 27). She dreams of getting a job downtown, not to improve her economic situation and life in general, but to "wear nice clothes and meet someone in the subway who might marry [her] and take [her] to live in a big house far away" (p. 26). Similarly, the story "Edna's Ruthie" introduces Ruthie, one of Esperanza's neighbors, who "could have been ['many things'] if she wanted to ... She had lots of job offers when she was young, but she never took them. She got married instead..." (p. 69). However, marriage does not represent any freedom or life improvement for the characters. On the contrary, it constitutes a social transaction in which the woman moves from the father's house to the husband's to maintain a subordinate position.

Marriage is not an escape from the paternal house, but rather the perpetuation of it. Adrienne Rich refers to "the lie of the 'happy marriage' of domesticity" in "On Lies, Secrets and Silences." She claims that "we have been complicit, have acted out the fiction of a well-lived life, until the day we testify in court of rapes, beatings, psychic cruelties, public and private humiliations" (2000, p. 446). Accordingly, most married women in the novel find themselves confronted with

a bitter reality which contrasts with their expectations. Most husbands are presented as selfish, possessive, abusive people who abandon, hit and/ or ignore their wives and their needs. Fathers are merely replaced by husbands who become the new guardians of the house, the private space where women are confined to live but which they are never entitled to own. In relation to this power transference Sandra Cisneros says, "as Mexican daughters we're not supposed to have our own house. We have our father's house and then he hands us over to our husband's ... you're a guest almost, or you're the caretaker, the *criada,* but it's not really your house" (quoted in Rodriguez-Aranda, 1990, p. 73). The same situation is experienced by Sally, who "has her husband and her house now" and who "likes being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money" (Cisneros, 1991, p. 101). Like Sally's father, her husband has absolute control over her space and life. As a matter of fact, "he won't let her talk on the telephone ... 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" (p. 102). Again, Sally finds herself trapped in the house of patriarchy, a house she herself has assimilated and accepted as her own, sitting "at home because she is afraid to go outside without [her husband's] permission" (p. 102). In her new prison, Sally entertains herself by looking at all the things that she and her husband have, "the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes" (p. 102). Having material objects partly alleviates and compensates for the emptiness of Sally's life. Like the home appliances she sees around her, Sally has just become another object in a man's house. The house, as Cisneros' novel reveals, becomes a space of control and confinement, a prison-house ruled by fathers and/or husbands. Most women have assimilated this reality as part of their condition, accepting a tradition of silence and subordination and denying themselves the right to have "a room of their own."

Interestingly, the novel also presents an imaginary and real border that separates the private space from the public. This border is represented by images of windows and doorways. In several stories, Esperanza sees women living by this border, watching life continue its course outside their prison-house. The image of the window reinforces the sense of enclosure because it reveals the prison-like nature of the house. Quoting Francisco Amighetti, "con la ventana no estaríamos del todo presos... hasta a los seres recluidos en las cárceles se les concede un pedazo de cielo y una ración de luz" [with the window, we would not be completely imprisoned... even people secluded in jails are granted a piece of sky and a ration of light] [my translation] (Amighetti, 1989, p. 87). Prisoners of the house, women are granted their ration of light sitting by the window or standing by the doorway. "This image synthesizes all the impressions of the many female bildungsroman in which young female characters, instead of maturing and achieving knowledge of the world, end up trapped in second childhoods, passive and dependent on husbands or lovers" (Gonzales-Berry, 1993, p. 41). Sitting within the window frame, women become static, voiceless, beautiful portraits, part of the house

decoration. Still, for many women, this *border* constitutes the only possibility for establishing some contact with the outside world, even if it is from a distance.

The existence of this border is introduced by Esperanza's great-grandmother's story, "My Name," which manifests a patriarchal tradition of oppression and dominance. Esperanza describes her grandmother as a "wild horse of a woman" who was literally taken by her great-grandfather "as if she were a fancy chandelier" (Cisneros, 1991, p. 11). Esperanza narrates that after her great-grandmother was deprived of her freedom in such a violent way, "she looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (p. 11). From her innocent experience of life, Esperanza wonders if her grandmother "made the best with what she got or [if she] was sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be" (p. 11). The fact that Esperanza is named after her grandmother is connected to the concept of family within the Mexican culture, linked to a male tradition where women are destined to inherit "a place by the window" that separates them from the world.

Similar to Esperanza's great-grandmother, the novel presents other women who find in the house windows a possibility of being in contact with the world outside. In "No Speak English," Mamacita "sits all day by the window" (p. 77), dreaming of returning to her homeland. Rafaela, who is still young and beautiful, is "getting old from leaning out the window" (p. 79), while her husband is out playing dominoes. In the case of Sally, any possible access to the exterior world is totally denied by her husband who "doesn't [even] let her look out the window" (p. 102). There is one main reference to the border as the doorway which appears in "Louie, His Cousin and His Other Cousin." In this story, Marin is not allowed to go outside the house, "but she stands in the doorway" (p. 23), where she can see people and the streets.

In all these stories, there exists a sort of neutral terrain in-between the public and the private space where women are allowed to be. However, this terrain is usually controlled by men, like in Sally's story. Still, for most women this part of the house constitutes the only possibility of establishing some contact with the public space, and to have some connection with the outside world, without crossing the threshold of the home. In her process of growing up, Esperanza observes and rejects those paths taken by other women in her community. They serve as examples she does not want to follow. Instead, she has decided not "to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and a chain" (p. 88). Esperanza realizes that waiting on the threshold or sitting by the window will eventually bring chains to her life, leading her to Rapunzel's prison tower.

Cisneros' text also presents a direct, revealing connection between the concept of the prison/house and the female body. In the same way that women have been imprisoned in the private space of the paternal house, they have been confined in their female bodies, which constitute the inner-space where women's selves metaphorically dwell. In the introduction to *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard states that "the house image would appear to

have become the topography of our inmost being" (1994, p. xxxvi). Traditionally, patriarchy has enclosed women in their bodies, defining them as prisoners of their hormones and nature, due to their biological capacity to procreate. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir refers to the biological trap constructed around the female body:

> Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands such as testicles, and that they secrete hormones… he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison weighed down to everything peculiar to it. (1989, p. xxi)

The concept of the female body as a metaphorical prison has been assimilated by most women since the Greeks: "The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities," said Aristotle. Women's destiny, then, has been historically predetermined by their cave-shaped anatomy" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 94). The womb becomes a symbolic tomb where the female self is buried because "to become literally a house, after all, is to be denied the hope of that spiritual transcendence of the body which makes humanity distinctively human" (p. 88). Women have apprehended and constructed themselves as mere objects/houses because they are "conditioned to believe that as a house [they are] owned (and ought to be inhabited) by a man" (p. 88). In "Sexual Divisions in Law," Katherine O'Donovan echoes Gilbert and Gubar's references to "female biological deficiencies" by stating that:

> The insistence on the idea that women belong in the private sphere is part of the cultural superstructure which has been built on biological foundations. Identifying these elements and disassembling the whole gave rise to the important insight that gender is socially constructed. Conceptually, the distinction between sex and gender brought out the distinction between biological sex and social and cultural expectations and roles based on gender. (O'Donovan, 2000, p. 273)

The confinement of women to a private space becomes a direct consequence of patriarchal gender roles determined by biological sex. The material house becomes a projection of a deeper, internal imprisonment, the prison within, the female body.

Esperanza, like many other women, is a victim of physical abuse by men who use her body to satisfy their sexual needs and validate their control. In relation to the female body de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* states that "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is simply what man decrees, thus she is called 'the sex,' by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being" (1989, p. xxii). This construction of women as sexual objects is represented in Cisneros' text through Esperanza's experience of the world. In "The First Job," Esperanza is sexually harassed by a workmate who takes advantage

of her naivete. As a consequence, she remembers her first day of work as a frustrating and shocking event, associated with the abuse she suffered. She says: "just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek [and give him a birthday kiss], he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (Cisneros, 1991, p. 55). This experience of abuse is also present in "Red Clowns." In this story, Esperanza is raped by a group of boys at a carnival: "I couldn't 't make them go away. I couldn't 't do anything but cry. I don 't remember. It was dark. I don 't remember. Please don't make me tell it all" (p. 100). Ironically, the title of the story is associated with circuses and carnivals, festive events where people get together and enjoy themselves. These events are also related to magic and fantasy, to the world of make-believe experienced especially by kids. However, for Esperanza the carnival symbolizes exactly the opposite. It is a very traumatic, painful event which causes the loss of her innocence and entrance into a dangerous and sometimes unfair reality on her journey to womanhood. These disturbing experiences teach Esperanza that she lives in a dangerous society where sexual abuse is likely to occur.

Intimately connected to the idea of women as "the sex" expressed by de Beauvoir, we encounter the theme of beauty as an important factor in the patriarchal construction of the female body as a prison. In the novel, many women are trapped in houses because of their physical beauty. In this way, their confinement is a direct consequence of an external feature expressed/contained by their bodies, which are perceived as a source of danger and temptation to men. Sally, for instance, is forced to stay home after school because her father thinks that "to be this beautiful is trouble" while Rafaela is locked inside her house by her husband who "is afraid [she) will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (p. 79). In another story, Marin, admired by Esperanza for her beautiful eyes, is going to be sent back to her homeland "with a letter saying she's too much trouble" (p. 27). In these cases, the concept of beauty is constructed as a negative feature because it makes women desirable. Therefore, they are perceived as dangerous or problematic.

Esperanza refers to the power concealed in beauty as a weapon for women to develop self-confidence and to be assertive in a world which denies them another access to empowerment. In "Beautiful & Cruel," Esperanza describes with admiration the "femme fatal" sort of woman usually portrayed by Hollywood cinematography: "In the movies there is always one with red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. *Her power is her own* [my emphasis]. She will not give it away" (p. 89). For someone like Esperanza, who is looking for female role models of power, beautiful actresses are the only people who develop some sort of empowerment, even if it is based on an external physical trait. Moreover, female beauty can be associated to 'sexyness," a feature exploited by movie stars. As Sandra Cisneros states: "sexyness [is] a great feeling of self-empowerment" (quoted in Rodriguez-Aranda, 1990 p. 69), which threatens patriarchy's construction of women. By confining beautiful women in houses, the guardians

of patriarchy may finally feel in control of the potential power contained in the female body.

Additionally, the novel presents many stories where women are abandoned by their partners, leaving them behind with a lot of children to take care of alone. In these cases, women's bodies are only used for procreation, fulfilling their "natural" role as mothers. Men, on the contrary, are part of the procreating process but do not assume their paternal responsibility. The clearest example of this reality is represented in "There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do." This story narrates Rosa Vargas' difficult situation as a single mother who lives in poverty raising her children. Esperanza thinks that the Vargas children do not behave properly. However, she excuses them because she understands that their behavior is partly a consequence of their precarious economic situation and the absence of a father figure in their family: "They are bad those Vargases, and how can they help it with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and babying, and cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come" (Cisneros, 1991, p. 29). The abandonment of fathers and husbands contributes to worsen women's unstable economic situation, increasing their marginality and isolation, forcing them to assume the responsibility of raising their children by themselves.

Another example in the novel is the case of Minerva. In "Minerva Writes Poems," Esperanza introduces this character who is "only a little bit older than [herself] but already has two kids and a husband who left" (p. 84). Minerva's mother also raised her children alone and Esperanza thinks that "it looks like her daughters will go that way too" (p. 84). These stories manifest the fulfillment of a "silent" tradition passed from mother to daughter, characterized by an assumed female role of victimization and an accepted pattern of male irresponsibility and lack of commitment.

In the vignettes analyzed, the female body is represented both as a source of male temptation because of its beauty or as a biological trap that keeps women confined, away from the spheres of power and action. In most cases, women contribute to the construction of this metaphorical prison by assuming a role of victim unable to reach beyond the vicious circle of oppression. As Adrienne Rich says: "We have had the truth of our bodies withheld from us or distorted, we have been kept in ignorance of our most intimate places. It has been difficult too, to know the lies of our complicity from the lies we believed" (quoted. in Jackson, 2000, p. 446). In the end, most women become accomplices to the stories fabricated around the female body.

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* exposes the situation of many women in Esperanza's neighborhood. In her novel, Cisneros shows that homes for many Mexican- American women are prisons. The image of the house is constructed as a place of control and confinement for the female characters who are trapped by fathers and husbands in this domestic sphere. Similarly, the female body functions as a metaphor of a house too in which women are also imprisoned by social roles, expectations, and bodily functions.

Fortunately, Esperanza, which means *hope* in Spanish, can break free from these destructive patterns. By learning from other women's negative experiences and by choosing to study and become a writer, Esperanza finally accomplishes her dream: to build a place of her own. The vignette entitled "A House of My Own", placed almost at the end of the novel, summarizes this experience of accomplishment and empowerment for the protagonist:

> Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (p. 108)

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