RICE UNIVERSITY

The Construction of Chicana Identity in
The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

by

Christine C. Cepeda

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Master of Arts

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Beatriz González Stephan, Professor, Hispanic Studies

Maarten van Delden, Associate Professor, Chair, Hispanic Studies

Jose Aranda, Associate Professor, English

HOUSTON, TEXAS

MAY 2006
INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI

UMI Microform 1435715

Copyright 2006 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346
ABSTRACT

The Construction of Chicana Identity in
*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

by

Christine Cepeda

Two powerful Mexican female archetypes, La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche, have had a powerful impact on the identities of Mexican American women for many generations. I will focus on the theories of Octavio Paz, a male Mexican intellectual, and Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana feminist, among other critics, in order to unmask the limitations that these archetypes have imposed on women of Mexican heritage. In *The House on Mango Street*, the young protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, observes the women in her family and in her inner-city neighborhood as her only available role models. She observes their inability to defy traditional roles for women of Mexican heritage and experiences the effects of those patriarchal constructions in her own life. This analysis explores how one Chicana adolescent goes from childhood to womanhood while living on Mango Street and her refusal to accept those Mexican archetypes in an effort to construct her identity as a Chicana unwilling to conform to those ideals.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have completed this project without the help of many friends and family members who were supportive during the past year. I am especially thankful for the love and support from my parents and my older sister during all those busy days and nights of reading, writing and re-writing.

I want to thank my advisor, Beatriz González-Stephan, for being the source of inspiration for my interest in Hispanic feminine studies and for her constant support, encouragement and patience in every step of this project. Also, the efforts of my other thesis committee members, Maarten van Delden and Jose Aranda, were indispensable in the completion of this thesis. Both of their careful readings were extremely helpful.

I also want to give a special thanks to Casey Bonfield, for his moral and intellectual support throughout the year, and especially in the last couple of months while completing this thesis.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank the Department of Hispanic Studies—all the professors and fellow grad students—for offering a great environment in which to work.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION...........................................................................................................1  

CHAPTER ONE:  
*The House on Mango Street* as a Counter-discourse...........................................8  

CHAPTER TWO:  
Esperanza's Role Models Based on La Virgen de Guadalupe ...............................15  

CHAPTER THREE:  
Esperanza's Role Models Based on La Malinche....................................................29  

CHAPTER FOUR:  
Redefining the Self beyond the Virgen/Malinche Dichotomy...............................47  

CONCLUSION ...........................................................................................................61  

WORKS CITED ..........................................................................................................68
Introduction

Sandra Cisneros was one of the first Chicana writers to reach mainstream recognition, and her success is mainly due to the popularity of The House on Mango Street, first published in 1984. Even after all these years, The House on Mango Street is still one of the few books by a Chicano or Chicana author that is included in the curriculum of English classes across the country. Through the voice of the young protagonist, Esperanza, Cisneros offered a view of a place that had not been seen in any of the other American classics. She showed us the difficulties of growing up in a male-dominated, inner-city neighborhood of Chicago in the 1960s and challenged the perspective of other coming of age novels in which socioeconomic conditions and gender were not relevant factors in an adolescent’s formation into adulthood.

The widespread success of The House on Mango Street was followed by a number of other notable publications for Cisneros. Immediately following Mango Street was a collection of poetry, My Wicked, Wicked Ways in 1987, in which she tells of different experiences growing up, memories from childhood, and her travels and love affairs as experienced by a Mexican American woman. In an interview with Pilar E. Rodriguez-Aranda, Cisneros says that the “Wicked Wicked” part of the title pertains to the fact that she gets to write about herself, not a man writing about her (67). She wrote those poems from when she was twenty-one years old all the way through the age of thirty and she asserts that the poems tell a story of “a woman appropriating her own sexuality” (68). She is
being wicked by breaking the boundaries by saying: “I defy you. I’m going to tell my own story [...] my autobiography, my version, my life story as told by me, not according to a male point of view” (67-8).

Next, she published a collection of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Short Stories* in 1991, followed by her second book of poems, *Loose Woman*, in 1994. Most of her work reflects a need to challenge the deeply rooted patriarchal values of her Mexican culture in an effort to negotiate a cross-cultural identity. Her work has been characterized by critics such as Deborah L. Madsen as “the celebratory breaking of sexual taboos and trespassing across the restrictions that limit the lives and experiences of Chicanas” (105). Cisneros has said that in her writing she is able to break the boundaries that confined Mexican women from generations before hers:

I leave my father's house, I don't get married, I travel to other countries, I can sleep with men if I want to, I can abandon them or choose not to sleep with them, and yes, I can fall in love and even be hurt by men—all of these things but as told by me. I am not the muse. (Rodriguez-Aranda 67-8)

Cisneros says that it was only after writing the poems in *Loose Woman* that she finally felt that she had built her own home, a “home of the heart” in which she realized who she was (Rodriguez-Aranda 74). By writing about the recurring themes in her writing, she was able “to feel very strong and powerful” (Rodriguez-Aranda 74) and be “at peace with [herself] and [she doesn’t] feel terrified by anyone or by any terrible word that anyone would launch at [her] from either side of the border” (Rodriguez-Aranda 74). After the publication of *Loose Woman* in 1994, she published a bilingual picture book, *Hairs/Pelitos* in 1997, while at the same time working on her first full-length novel. Her most recent
publication was the novel, *Caramelo*, published in 2003, which made it on bestselling lists and once again proved her mainstream popularity.

Her most recent work also involves a preoccupation with her marginalized position in American society growing up as a poor, Mexican American woman. Sandra Cisneros grew up as the only daughter in a family of seven children with a bilingual Mexican American mother and Spanish-speaking Mexican father. As such, she grew up with a culture of men surrounding her in a small home where privacy was not respected and individuality was not encouraged by her father. She has said that the men in her family all “had their own conspiracies and allegiances” leaving her to be odd-woman-out at her home which eventually contributed to her seeking refuge in her reading and writing as a child (“From a Writer’s Notebook” 69).

In her latest book, *Caramelo*, there is a large focus on the protagonist’s, Lala’s, relationship with her father. Although *Caramelo* is not an autobiography, it contains a lot of elements similar to Cisneros’ own life. Lala, like Cisneros, had a father who did not support her aspirations to become something other than a wife and mother. Lala’s father could not understand her desire to “be on her own someday” (*Caramelo* 359). He believes that “good girls don’t leave their father’s house until they marry, and not before” (359), but Lala just “wants to try stuff” (359) like go to college and explore possible careers. Her father says that she wants to do things like “girls who are not Mexican” (360). The following is her father’s response when she expresses her desire to be on her own:

If you leave your father’s house without a husband you are worse than a dog. You aren’t my daughter [...] You hurt me just talking like this. If you
leave alone you leave like, and forgive me for saying this but it's true, como una prostituta. Is that what you want the world to think? Como una perra, like a dog. Una perdida. How will you live without your father and brothers to protect you? One must strive to be honorable. You don't know what you're asking for. You're just like your mother. The same. Headstrong. Stubborn. No, Lala, don't you ever mention this again. (360)

And this is exactly what a lot of Cisneros' narrators in her poetry and stories struggle with when attempting to pursue their dreams. In the effort to try to form individual interests and goals in life, Chicanas risk "hurting" their families and have to deal with the negative reception of their ideas based on what patriarchal society dictates is a proper future for women. Lala's mother, just like Cisneros' own mother, is Mexican American and they are considered "headstrong" and "stubborn" for choosing to defy their culture's expectations. Sandra Cisneros' personal experiences growing up have no doubt had an effect on the topics she chooses to write about. The importance of her culture, her ethnicity, her social class, and her gender are evident in her writing.

Cisneros' latest publication, Caramelo, has sold millions of copies and her books have been translated into ten languages, proving that her voice as a Chicana has become a voice that is finally being heard. Before contemporary Chicano fiction became a part of mainstream reading circles, Chicano literature of the 1960s and 1970s had primarily been a tool used by the leaders of the national Chicano Movement\(^1\) to reach Mexican Americans with the purpose of unifying as one community and resisting Anglo domination. The emerging field of

\(^1\) Chicano political movement of the 1960s and 1970s in which Chicanos sought to build a Chicano national identity, rather than cultural assimilation based on a Mexican-American orientation, as the key to addressing the social, educational, economic and political inequalities facing Chicanos. The Movement helped to garner significant political concession in the 1970s, including some bilingual education programs in secondary schools, Chicano studies departments at the university level, and limited affirmative action hiring practices. It also had the effect of increasing Chicano/a cultural pride. (Watson 5-6)
Chicano literature during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s had set a different type of precedent that contemporary Chicana authors attempted to expand on in order to explore the previously unexamined gender issues within the Chicano community (Watson 7).

Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga are among the most prominent Chicana theorists that sought to "construct or reconstruct ethnic women's literary traditions through the rediscovery of earlier modes of speaking and by challenging conventional distinctions among forms of literary expression" (Madsen 4). The ideas that Moraga and Anzaldúa “articulate both in creative and theoretical form inform the literary work of most contemporary Chicanas” (Madsen 11), including that of Sandra Cisneros. The House on Mango Street emerged during the 1980s when Gloria Anzaldúa in her Borderlands/ La Frontera and Cherrie Moraga in her Loving in The War Years had begun to find their voice by writing from a Chicana lesbian perspective and challenging the patriarchy of dominant Chicano paradigms, while still working towards the main goal of the Chicano Movement, which was to bring ethnic unity within the Mexican American community. These Chicana authors criticized Chicano nationalism for having produced “masculinist,” “unreflective” portrayals of women (Pratt 860).

According to Chicana feminist literary critic Deborah Madsen, contemporary feminist Chicana authors express what W. E. B. Du Bois called a “double-consciousness” or “the consciousness of what one is in oneself (self-consciousness) versus the cultural image or stereotype imposed by the racism of others” (Madsen 4). This “double-consciousness” is what drives Chicana authors
to “construct a feminist voice for Mexican American women” (Madsen 4). Thus, Chicana writers are faced with the challenge of speaking for both women and the oppressed racial group that they belong to. The main characteristic of Chicana literary expression is its deconstructive nature of traditional forms of discourse in which the elements of theme, imagery and style are subverted in order to give traditional, patriarchal Chicano literature a feminist voice. (Watson 8)

Chicana writers insist that the reader work hard to understand the specialized racial or ethnic references included in the text, such as reference to Mexican mythology and cross-cultural references. (Madsen 4-5)

In her writing, Cisneros approaches her poetry and stories as a strategy which “allows her to maneuver around traditional cultural sensibilities that have prevented women from speaking out about issues of patriarchy and sexual violence, two pervasive thematic concerns in her work” (Watson 9). All of Cisneros’ writing has incorporated unifying themes by the same marginalized narrative voice, and although they are not autobiographies, they contain autobiographical elements. Although Cisneros writing may seem highly autobiographical, in reality, she is lending her voice to speak for a whole community of Chicana women by pulling from her own experiences and observations of other Mexican women. By concentrating her work on themes of “trespass, transgression and joyful abandon” (Madsen 105) of traditional patriarchal roles for women, she helps other women in their own search of a unique identity, free from their culture’s expectations. While I cannot possibly concentrate my thesis research on all of Cisneros’ works in the span of her career, I will evaluate her quest to construct one young Chicana’s identity amid
the discovery of her sexuality during the year that she lived on Mango Street. In the following chapters, I will explore how a voice for Chicana women everywhere first began to emerge over twenty years ago with the publication of *The House on Mango Street* through the voice of its young protagonist, Esperanza.
Chapter 1

*The House on Mango Street* as a Counter-discourse

*The House on Mango Street* is a book about a young Chicana’s conscious narrative reflection of her experiences over a year’s span after her family moves into a small house on Mango Street in a 1960s Chicago *barrio*. The protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, takes us through forty-four brief lyrical narratives ranging from one-half to three pages where “she recounts her growth from puberty to adolescence within the sociopolitical frame of poverty, racial discrimination, and gender subjugation” (Olivares, “Entering *The House on Mango Street*” 209). It has won praise for the lyrical narrative, vivid dialogue and powerful descriptions used to depict the young Chicana’s coming of age. Before the publication of *Mango Street*, there wasn’t a coming of age book that young Chicanas could identify with. Its impact was significant to a generation of Chicana adolescents who now had a role model that dared to question her surrounding male-dominated culture. In *Mango Street*, Esperanza Cordero looks to the women of her community for a role model of her own, and she must look at both their positive and negative aspects and learn from them in order to form her own identity.

*The House on Mango Street* is what critics would call a *bildungsroman*, which is “a genre cultivated commonly in the United States by emerging writers, often first- or second-generation immigrants, and especially within literatures emerging around the periphery of a dominant society” (“Entering *The House on
“Mango Street” 209). By the end of the traditional male discourse of bildungsroman, the hero has usually “integrated his consciousness, thereby achieving self-definition, and is prepared to deal with the world on his own terms” (“Entering The House on Mango Street” 210). In contrast, traditional female growing-up stories display a different process and outcome:

...the female adolescent is carefully schooled to function in society, to lose her freedom and her sense of individuality in order to become a loving wife and mother. She thus integrates her destiny with that of a man who will protect her, defend her and create a life for her [...] Thus, rather than achieving maturity, young women of the traditional coming-of-age novels are led down the path to a second infancy. (Gonzales-Berry and Rebolledo 109-10)

With Esperanza’s characterization, Cisneros does not follow the traditional female coming-of-age discourse; instead she sets out to make Mango Street a type of counter-discourse of the traditional female bildungsroman. By allowing Esperanza to consider a future for herself other than marriage and motherhood and allowing her to become a writer, “Cisneros breaks the paradigm of the traditional female bildungsroman” (“Entering The House on Mango Street” 213) and at the same time liberates other Chicana women by forming a collective identity with her sisters.

In her quest to form a counter-discourse specifically for a Chicana narrator, the structure of Esperanza’s story also had to defy traditional patriarchy storytelling. Critic Deborah L. Madsen comments on how Cisneros’ utilizes the narrative structure Mango Street as a subtle way to challenge marginality with the weapons at her disposal as an artist:

Like so many Chicana writers, Sandra Cisneros rejects the logic of the patriarchy in favor of more provisional, personal, emotional and intuitive
forms of narrative. She creates stories, not explanations or analyses or arguments. The stories that comprise The House on Mango Street are linked according to loose and associative logic. In this way the fragmented structure of the text embodies a quest for freedom, a genuine liberation that resolves, rather than escapes the conflicts faced by the Chicana subject. (109)

Because of the changes she makes to traditional writing, determining a specific literary genre for Mango Street has been difficult to do because it could be considered either a novel or a collection of short stories or individual prose poems. In some occasions, Cisneros has called these narratives “vignettes.” A vignette is defined as “a short, usually descriptive literary sketch” or “a short scene or incident,” but since these vignettes put together tell a story, it is also very similar to a short novel. She has written about her decision to write in this format in the essay, “Do You Know Me? I Wrote The House on Mango Street”:

I recall I wanted to write stories that were a cross between poetry and fiction. I was greatly impressed by Jorge Luis Borges’ Dream Tigers stories for their form. I liked how he could fit so much into a page and that the last line of each story was important to the whole in much of the same way that the final lines in poems resonate. Except I wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random point without having any knowledge of what came before or after. Or that could be read in a series to tell one big story. I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation [...] I said once that I wrote Mango Street naively, that they were “lazy poems.” In other words, for me each of the stories could’ve developed into poems, but they were not poems. They were stories, albeit hovering in that grey area between two genres. My newer work is still exploring this terrain. (78-79)

Cisneros’ decision to structure the narrative in that way results in the creation of “vignettes that are self-contained, autonomous, yet link together in an emotionally logical fashion and build to create a picture of life in the barrio” (Madsen 110).

What the author herself says about the book “hovering in that grey area between genres” is very symbolic because it alludes to one of the main themes explored
by Cisneros in *Mango Street*. Esperanza is a Mexican American girl also hovering in that grey area between two cultures, the Mexican culture inherited through her parents and the American culture that she lives in. This constant juggling of two cultures poses problems for Esperanza in her introduction to womanhood because the Mexican ideals of women as wives and mothers compete with the American ideals of individuality and the ability for women to pursue a career.

From the very beginning, in the first vignette titled “The House on Mango Street,” Esperanza poses her unhappiness with the homes she’s lived in before coming to Mango Street and her current disappointment at seeing her family’s new home on Mango Street. The house on Mango Street wasn’t at all what she expected or what she’d been told by her parents, so from that moment on she was sure that it would only be a temporary home: “I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to” (5).

Essentially, what Esperanza most desires is a house of her own, but first she must experience life on Mango Street before she can find out for herself what her home, her identity, will be. Literally, she is unhappy when she sees her new home for the first time because it is small and falling apart, but after a year on Mango Street she learns that the new home that she desires is also a home in which she is content with her own identity. In the essay “Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, and the Poetics of Space” Julian Olivares discusses the unifying factors between the narrator and her desire for a new house:
House and narrator become identified as one, thereby revealing an ideological perspective of poverty and shame. Consequently, she wants to point to another house and to point to another self.” (236)

In several interviews Cisneros has been asked whether The House on Mango Street is an autobiographical recollection because they share a lot of the same characteristics. Cisneros also lived in a Chicago barrio as a child, her father is also Mexican and her mother Mexican American and they both discovered a love for writing at a young age. When asked if the stories in Mango Street are true, she has responded:

Well they’re all true. All fiction is non-fiction. Every piece of fiction is based on something that really happened. On the other hand, it’s not autobiography because my family would be the first one to confess: “Well it didn’t happen that way.” They always contradict my stories. They don’t understand I’m not writing autobiography [...] I’m writing true stories. They’re all stories I lived, or witnessed, or heard; stories that were told to me. I collected those stories and I arranged them in an order so they would be clear and cohesive. (Rodriguez-Aranda 64)

She says that a lot of her stories were from events that happened to her mother or from what her female students would tell her as a counselor combined with things that happened to her. Since Mango Street is a story about many women living in a marginalized society, it was only appropriate that it also be a story for all the other women living in a situation similar to Esperanza’s that wish they also had a home to call their own. Cisneros says that it was while pursuing an M.F.A at the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1978 that she first came up with the idea for Mango Street (Madsen 106). She remembers her class discussing the Poetics of Space by Gaston Bachelard and for the first time realizing her “otherness” when she saw that her classmates were writing about their beautiful childhood homes like the ones on T.V. and much different from her experience growing up in a
poor multi-ethnic neighborhood (Rodriguez-Aranda 65). Of course she always knew she was different from what she saw in the media; she knew she was a Mexican woman, but she “didn’t think that had anything to do with why [she] felt so much imbalance in [her] life, whereas it had everything to do with it” (Rodriguez-Aranda 65). Her classmates could not possibly write about her race, her gender, or her class and from then on she began to unveil the voice she had unconsciously suppressed, the voice of the barrio (Madsen 106).

Esperanza, like Cisneros, had also always recognized the difference between men and women. In the third vignette of Mango Street titled “Boys & Girls” Esperanza begins to explore the “house,” or the world, that she already lives in and notices that even in her own family the boys, her brothers Carlos and Kiki, treat the girls, her and her sister Nenny, differently:

The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can’t be seen talking to girls. (8)

In those lines, she is acknowledging that she recognizes the differences between men and women in her own family and soon she will discover how this translates into the outside world. Men and women do live in different worlds in the sense that they do not face the same judgment by society in whatever they choose to do and they do not face the same dangers that women do in the outside world. In a later scene, while the neighborhood girls are playing, Esperanza mentions that she read in a book that “the Eskimos got thirty different names for snow” (35). Then, her friend, Lucy, and Nenny add their own thoughts on the matter:
There ain't thirty different kinds of snow, Lucy says. There are two kinds. The clean kind and the dirty kind, clean and dirty. Only two. There are a million zillion kinds, says Nenny. No two exactly alike. Only how do you remember which one is which? (35)

What the girls are talking about may seen like childish conversation at first, but in reality what they are saying is exactly what Cisneros debates in a lot of her work, especially in Mango Street. Mexican culture insists on “defining the world by a rigid set of black/white, good/bad, dirty/clean dualities versus the reality of individuality, uniqueness and infinite differentiation” (Petty 119). What Cisneros sets out to do in Mango Street is to show us, through the eyes of Esperanza, how these dualities affect the women in her life. Cisneros has discussed how these archetypes affect her work:

Certainly that black-white issue, good-bad, it’s very prevalent in my work and in other Latinas. We’re raised with a Mexican culture that has two role models: La Malinche y la Virgen de Guadalupe. And you know that’s a hard route to go, one or the other, there’s no in-betweens. (Rodriguez-Aranda 65)

Esperanza sees the characteristics of la Virgen’s and la Malinche's image in the women in her barrio, and these women are her only available role models. She must find a way to surpass the Mexican archetypes that have harmed so many women before her so that they don't continue to harm her as she enters womanhood. In the following chapters I will explore how the dual images of la Virgen and la Malinche have suppressed Mexican women into denying their individuality. I will also ascertain the effects that these limited role models have on Esperanza as she begins to discover her sexuality and how she resolves the themes of a metaphorical house and identity by developing her role as writer.
Chapter 2

Esperanza’s Role Models Based on
La Virgen de Guadalupe

As I mentioned previously, females in Latino culture are not seen as unique individuals but are classified just like Esperanza’s friend, Lucy, labeled the snow. Women are either “clean” or “dirty”, “good” or “bad”. These labels for women are inherited from the Mexican archetypes of la Virgen de Guadalupe, the “good and clean”, and la Malinche, the “bad and dirty.” These archetypes represent the inescapable dichotomy that Mexican-American females are taught to accept as their only two options when entering womanhood, since there are no in-betweens. Since la Virgen de Guadalupe represents the Holy Mother and la Malinche represents the violated woman, female roles in Mexican culture are sharply defined based on their physical sexuality and nothing more (Petty 120). The women that young Latinas see in their lives as belonging to the classification of la Virgen de Guadalupe are supposed to be the role-models she should choose to emulate in order to be socially accepted.

La Virgen de Guadalupe is the Mexican manifestation of the Virgin Mary who has become the religious icon around which Mexican Catholicism centers (Petty 120). Not only will they gain social approval by leading a “good, clean” life like that of la Virgen, but it will also guarantee them approval by God since they would also be spiritually pure by following the Catholic matriarch’s example.
There are several variations of the historic origin of la Virgen de Guadalupe, but critic Leslie Petty gives the following account as the definitive source from a version published in 1649 by a priest named Luis Laso de la Vega:

La Virgen de Guadalupe originally appeared to a converted Indian, Juan Diego, in 1531, on the hill of Tepeyac, identifying herself as "mother of the great true deity God". The Virgin tells Juan Diego that she "ardently wish[es] and greatly desire[s] that they build my temple for me here, where I will reveal...all my love, my compassion, my aid, and my protection". Diego immediately proceeds to the bishop in Mexico City, but he is greeted with disbelief. On his second visit, the bishop asks Diego for proof of the apparition. The Virgin sends Diego to the top of the hill, where he gathers "every kind of precious Spanish flower," despite the fact that these flowers are out of season and do not grow on that hill, and the Virgin places them in his cloak. When Diego visits the bishop, the bishop's servants try to take some of the blossoms, but they turn into painted flowers. Finally, when Diego sees the bishop and opens his cloak, the flowers fall out, and an imprint of the Virgin is left on the lining of the cloak. The bishop becomes a believer, begs for forgiveness, and erects the shrine to la Virgen de Guadalupe on the hill of Tepeyac. (Petty 120)

Ever since this apparition of the Virgin Mary, there has been a strong following of this catholic icon, so much that she is one of the most influential images in Mexican culture.

Not only is she significant in Mexico's religious realm, but her political and social significance is undeniable. In The Labyrinth of Solitude, originally published in 1950, Octavio Paz, Mexico's best known writer on Mexican national identity, credits la Virgen de Guadalupe with being held in such high regard to Mexicans because she is "the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed. In sum, she is the Mother of orphans" (85). Petty also credits her importance in Mexican culture to the belief that "la Virgen de Guadalupe is a Christian transformation of Tonantzin, the pagan goddess who was originally worshipped on the hill of Tepeyac" (Petty 121). By linking la Virgen
de Guadalupe de Tepeyac to Aztec culture, she is distinguished from her Spanish counterpart, la Virgen de Guadalupe de Estremadura, and as such, she became “an Indian symbol” by being “identified with what is truly Mexican as opposed to what is foreign” (Petty 121).

Only after understanding the established importance of la Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexican culture, can we fully comprehend the effects of everything she symbolizes to generations of Mexicans, even those that have immigrated to the United States and the U.S born generations after them. La Virgen de Guadalupe, as Paz states, “is pure receptivity, and the benefits she bestows are of the same order: she consoles, quiets, dries tears, calms passion” (Paz 85). Therefore, she not only represents virginal purity, but she is also a nurturing and selfless mother to her children, the “proper” symbol for womanhood to women of Mexican descent (Petty 121). As a result, that is also what Chicana girls are socialized to believe and look for in their role-models, selflessness and nurturing characteristics where there is no room for individualism or selfish needs and desires, as American culture promotes.

The ideal woman, based on the image of la Virgen de Guadalupe, may seem like an impossibility to a young girl like Esperanza, raised in a neighborhood where the social and economic conditions don’t allow room for such “perfection”. As hard as it may seem for a Chicana girl influenced by American media and the progressiveness it promotes for its women, the image of la Virgen still remains embedded in Mexican American girls like her and at the least, they seek out role models representative of that “good” and “clean” image.
But for Esperanza, who was a girl more curious and perceptive than most girls her age, a girl who questioned everything in her surroundings and observed everyone in her neighborhood, and weighed the good and the bad in everyone’s life, simply following those “good” role models would be more of a challenge. In response to patriarchal characterizations of la Virgen, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa expresses her refusal to accept the holy female archetype for herself. She believes that “Guadalupe has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression” (Anzaldúa 53) and that the image of Guadalupe was subverted “to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos [...] to make us docile and enduring [and] this obscuring has encouraged the *virgen/puta* (whore) dichotomy” (Anzaldúa 53). As a result of this:

Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother—only the nun can escape motherhood (by rejecting all sexuality, her body) women are made to feel total failures if they don’t marry and have children. (Anzaldúa 39)

This is what Esperanza sees in the many women in her neighborhood that she introduces to the reader, and since the reader sees these women from her point of view, we can appreciate what typical, everyday gender roles look like from the perspective of an impressionable adolescent looking to find her own identity. The women in Esperanza’s life lived under the same conditions that she did and looked like her, whether they were Mexican, Chicanas, or Puerto Rican, and, as such, she looked to them for images of what she would like or would not like to become. I will evaluate the women in Esperanza’s life that most closely resemble the “good” women that her culture would like for her to emulate and how leading
a "good" life turned out for them and consequently resulted in Esperanza's opinion of possibly ending up with a similar life as these role models.

The women in Esperanza's own family seem to be the most closely related to the Virgen de Guadalupe archetype. It's no surprise then that Esperanza's dilemma is even more serious considering that the "good" examples in her life are also people that genuinely love her, making it harder to reject those role models. It is also further complicated when these "virginal" models advise her to lead a life somewhat different than their own. As Petty states, "while the Virgin Mother is a venerated role model, Cisneros complicates this veneration through her characterization of other maternal figures, most notably, Esperanza's mother and her aunt, Lupe" (Petty 123). In the following paragraphs, I will explore these virginal role models and others in The House of Mango Street.

In the vignette titled "Hairs" we can see that Esperanza has an intimate relationship with her mother because although everyone has different hair in her family, her mother's hair is particularly distinct:

But my mother's hair, my mother's hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pincurls all day, sweet to put your nose into it when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her,...and Mama's hair that smells like bread. (90)

With this vivid description of her mother's hair we get the feeling of a nurturing mother who makes her daughter feel safe beside her. We also see how Esperanza associates her mother to the domestic sphere by specifically stating that her mother's hair "smells like bread," a scent related to the kitchen and cooking. In a later vignette titled "Smart Cookie" the mother's close
characterization to la Virgen de Guadalupe is complicated by her mother's opinion of her own life. This vignette starts with Esperanza's mother asking, "I could've been somebody, you know?" which implies that she believes that by leading a traditional life she is not a "somebody" (90). While her life is one that's supposed to be venerated and accepted by all, in this case, the venerated figure herself is critical of how her life turned out by doing what was expected of women. She married and had children even though she had the talent enough to "speak two languages" and "sing an opera" (90). As Esperanza says, "she used to draw when she had time" and now in her life as a housewife "she draws with a needle and thread" (90). In this vignette, her mother offers her some words of advice "while cooking oatmeal" as she sings from the opera "Madame Butterfly" (91). Her mother brings in a fictional character to reinforce her argument and says, "that Madame Butterfly was a fool" (91) referring to the Japanese protagonist of the opera who falls in love with a Western naval officer, bears his child, faithfully awaits his return as he has promised, and is eventually betrayed by him (Wagner). The mother lets Esperanza know that just because a woman chooses to do the right thing according to what is expected of Mexican culture and marries, it doesn't mean it will bring happiness to a woman. In fact, by marrying and depending on a man for economic support, two other women, her comadres,² "Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead" (90) were left to take care of themselves without the proper education or work experience. Her mother's solution to making sure her daughter doesn't end up

² A term that literally means a "co-mother"; it is used to refer to the female relative or friend that baptizes one's child or a close female family friend.
with thwarted dreams of her own is for her to "go to school" and "study hard" (90). Her mother sees being able to take care of oneself as necessary for independence, "alluding to a culture that desires virgin-like women, but which does not reward the desired passivity with the care and adoration also reserved for the Virgin" (Petty 124).

The other strong representation of la Virgen de Guadalupe occurs in the vignette titled "Born Bad" in which Esperanza is scolded by her mother for imitating her dying aunt, rightly named Guadalupe or Aunt Lupe. Aunt Lupe represents the passivity that women are so revered for in Mexican culture, that passivity which makes women accepting of whatever it is their patriarchal society chooses for them. Her Aunt Lupe had married, had kids and been a good housewife, but a debilitating illness keeps her sick in bed and therefore a passive figure to onlookers like Esperanza and her friends, Lucy and Rachel. Guadalupe is also closely associated to the Virgin because she too is chaste, except for "her lack of sexual activity is not a sign of moral superiority; it is caused by her illness and association with frustration and longing of 'the husband who wanted a wife again'" (Petty 124). Just like the shrine of the Virgin Mother on the hill of Tepeyac is there for anyone to go look at, Esperanza says "My aunt, a little oyster, a little piece of meat on an open shell for us to look at" (60). In his description of the woman's role in the Mexican identity, Octavio Paz states that women are inherently open beings:

Despite her modesty and the vigilance of society, woman is always vulnerable. Her social situation...and the misfortune of her "open" anatomy expose her to all kinds of dangers, against which neither
personal morality nor masculine protection is sufficient. She is submissive and open by nature. (Paz 38)

Because of their intrinsic “open” nature she is also passive and in a way welcomes or accepts/takes in all the suffering of others. That is why he says the Mexican woman is accustomed to this suffering and is known for being “the suffering Mexican woman” who is “less sensitive to pain than those who have just been touched by adversity” and “through suffering, our women become like our men: invulnerable, impassive and stoic” (Paz 39). But Esperanza doesn’t see anything “idyllic or positive about [the] portrayal of a suffering woman” (Petty 124). She tells us how her aunt has gone blind and her “bones gone limp as worms” (61). She describes her aunt’s living conditions as dirty and unkempt with “dirty dishes in the sink,” “the ceilings dusty with flies, the ugly maroon walls and the bottles and sticky spoons” (60). Not only was it dirty, but Esperanza “can’t forget the smell” (60) since it was as repugnant as “sticky capsules filled with jelly” (60). The smell and the filthiness was a result of her husband and children being left to do the “woman’s work” when their mom got sick and obviously not being able to keep up with it. Her husband and sons resent having to perform these “feminine” chores:

The kids who wanted to be kids instead of washing dishes and ironing their papa’s shirts, and the husband who wanted a wife again. (61)

Their way of showing their resentment is by performing the chores badly or not at all, and Esperanza probably translates this as a possible future for herself, a terrifying one. Since men are always in control of the power in sexual and marital relationships, the men in Lupe’s life, even her sons, are using that power cruelly
against their wife and mother by reluctantly accepting to help out around the house even though Lupe is dying.

It is ironic that although Aunt Lupe followed the traditional path of marriage and kids, she was not rewarded for it and Esperanza explains it by saying “maybe God was busy” (59) as if to justify why such a “good” woman was suffering in this way. And once again, another woman in Esperanza’s life who was supposed to be an example of a good wife and mother, instead of encouraging her to lead the same life, tells her:

You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant. (61)

By telling her this, Aunt Lupe makes it clear that she didn’t live a free life, but now that she is dying and confined to her bed she is unable to do anything about it. Aunt Lupe was a passive figure in the sense that she never did anything in her life besides nurture others, but in her state of passivity she was at least available to offer her home as “a safe place to explore her passion for writing and her aspirations as a poet” (Petty 124). Critic Leslie Petty sees this protection as “the most positive connection that Cisneros makes between Aunt Lupe and the Virgin” (124) because by providing a haven for Esperanza to explore her passion for writing she was encouraging her to be active in realizing her own dreams. Only after Aunt Lupe dies, Esperanza begins to “dream the dreams” (61). Only after the symbolic “death” of the virginal figure, is Esperanza able to dream the dreams of other possibilities for her own life that aren’t aligned with traditional expectations.
The other women that are mentioned in *Mango Street* that chose to follow the traditional path, just like Esperanza’s mother’s friends’ mentioned earlier in this chapter whose husbands passed away or left them to provide for themselves, are viewed by Esperanza in a negative light. For example, at the beginning of *Mango Street*, in the vignette titled “My Name”, Esperanza is aware of what her name literally means in Spanish: hope. But to her it means “sadness” and “waiting”, words that she associates with her great-grandmother whom she was named after. At her young age, Esperanza is aware that her culture does not like their women strong and she dislikes having a name so closely associated to a woman that had her strength taken away from her by a man, her great-grandfather:

It was my great-grandmother’s name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong. (10)

While in Spanish Esperanza means “hope,” a faith in that something better will occur or that a certain person or object is the avenue through which that hope will occur, Esperanza translates it to mean something more negative. It is no longer a hope for something better, but the anxiousness and sadness associated to that “hope” during the time that one is waiting for things to get better.

...She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn’t be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window. (11)
For the young protagonist, Esperanza is a sad name because her great-grandmother’s life was not one that she chose for herself. Her great-grandmother wasn’t exactly a characterization of la Virgen de Guadalupe by choice, but, as Esperanza explains, she was forced into the traditional role of married life:

My great-grandmother. I would’ve loved to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn’t marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That’s the way he did it. (11)

In comparing her great-grandmother to a chandelier, Esperanza’s is comparing her to an object, which she understands to be something inanimate without free-will since her great-grandmother had no say in her destiny. Esperanza realizes that she does have a say in her destiny and therefore she says she “would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees” (11). From the beginning of Mango Street, we begin to see Esperanza’s awareness of the options in her life and her reluctance to accept to follow in footsteps of the virginal role models in her own family because it doesn’t guarantee happiness.

The women that are characterized as Virginal models all have one thing in common, the fact that they are imprisoned in their homes, somewhat like the shrine of la Virgen de Guadalupe de Tepeyac whose only purpose is to be worshipped by her children and for her to nurture and protect them. Because these women are imprisoned, they can merely “observe” the outside world, but they cannot participate in it. Even her great-grandmother who was “a wild horse of a woman” (11) was tamed down and sat by a window her whole life and as I mentioned earlier, Esperanza does not want to “inherit her place by the window”
(11). In Felicitous Space, Judith Fryer explains the imprisonment that women have felt throughout history and the free space that they imagine for themselves:

It is not only, then, as Virginia Woolf suggested, that women have had no space for themselves, not only that they have been forbidden spaces reserved for men. Trapped, as she has been at home, a home that in America has been “not her retreat, but her battleground […] her arena, her boundary, her sphere…[with] no other for her activities,” woman has been unable to move. She has been denied in our culture, the possibility of dialectical movement between private spaces and open spaces. But let us not forget the room of one’s own […] (22)

Esperanza begins to imagine the possibility of not simply taking the world in through her eyes and she fantasizes about what it would be like to be on the outside, experiencing the world like the women in her life were unable to do. This occurs halfway through the novel in which Esperanza’s interest in boys has just been sparked. Before this vignette, which is titled “Sire” after the boy she fantasizes about, Esperanza had pondered about her changing body and womanhood and had even been unexpectedly kissed by an older co-worker at her first job. But in this vignette Esperanza is becoming aware of sexuality and she notices Sire, an older boy who she wishes would notice her but who has a girlfriend named Lois. All Esperanza can do is look out her window at the young couple holding hands, taking walks and laughing late at night in the dark. Although her mother tells her that girls like Lois “those kinds of girls…are the ones that go into alleys,” (73) Esperanza wishes she could “sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt” (73) and not this way “leaning out my window, imagining what I can’t see” (73). Here we get a glimpse into the curious thoughts that inhabit every girl her age, that desire to grow up and be like the older girls. Before a girl can take on the traditional role of mother and wife, a
girl is faced with her available options. Esperanza had all the traditional female role models in her family, but since they are adults they may seem "distant and revered" (Petty 125) like la Virgen de Guadalupe and the adolescent girls who are closer to her age are “more accessible” (Petty 125) and, therefore, more appealing to her as role models.

There is a vignette titled "Bums in the Attics" in which we see a transitional point in Esperanza’s life that is very closely aligned to la Virgen de Guadalupe but which is complicated in the story immediately following it in which her character is characterized with images related to la Malinche. This is a symbolically significant insight into Esperanza’s desires because it alludes to her struggle with the Virgin/Malinche dichotomy. In "Bums in the Attic," Esperanza says she wants a “house on a hill like the ones with gardens” (86). The reference that Esperanza makes to wanting a house “with gardens” is associated with the flowers on the hill that the Virgin made grow as a sign of her divinity (Petty 128). Like the Virgin who told Juan Diego that “they build my temple for me here” (Poole 27) on the hill of Tepeyac, Esperanza also wants a house to offer “aid and...protection” (Poole 27) and to “hear their weeping...and heal all...their sufferings, and their sorrows” (Poole 27):

One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house. (87)

Esperanza wants to have a house of her own to be “the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed” (85) as Octavio Paz states as the function of la Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexican culture. Her “desire
for a house is prompted by her desire for security and autonomy, it also encompasses a degree of compassion and nurturing that represents the noblest qualities of the Virgin archetype" (Petty 129). In order for her to find this metaphorical house she has to find her own house, a “house all my own” (108) and “not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s” (108). She wants a house that will nurture the “passing bums” (87), but that will not fall under patriarchal domination. In order to get this type of house, she must negotiate with both sides of the Virgin/Malinche dichotomy so that it will accommodate both sides of her Mexican American identity.
Chapter 3

Esperanza’s Role Models Based on La Malinche

Characterizations of la Malinche, the violated woman, are far more prevalent in *Mango Street* than those of la Virgen de Guadalupe. A lot of the characters that are aligned with la Malinche are teenage girls, easily accessible to Esperanza and are therefore more likely to seem like appropriate role models to an impressionable young girl. Before I can elaborate on the effects that the Malinche archetype has on Esperanza’s options for her own future, the history of the deep, cultural effects of the Malinche archetype in Mexican culture must first be understood.

La Malinche, in polar opposition to la Virgen de Guadalupe, is the female archetype that is embedded in Mexican consciousness as a betrayer of the *patria* for having been Hernan Cortés’s interpreter and mistress during Mexico’s conquest (Petty 121). Critic Leslie Petty states that this popular perception of la Malinche, like the story behind the Virgin is based more on legend than historical accuracy and that makes it often “romanticized and contradictory” (121). Although this mythical figure was from an indigenous Mexican tribe, she wasn’t an Indian Princess or royalty at all, as is commonly believed (Phillips 103). The following documentation on la Malinche’s history is based on Rachel Phillips’ deconstruction of factual information in “Marina/Malinche: Masks and Shadows”:

Born in Painala, she grew up speaking Nahuatl and was either sold or given away as a child; therefore, she was enslaved by another tribe and

3 Patria: Native land or nation one belongs to due to sentimental, historical, or legal attachment to it.
moved to Tabasco where she learned to speak Mayan. As a young woman, she was given to Cortés, along with nineteen other Indian slave women, as gifts from local Indian leaders. When Moctezuma’s envoys came to Tabasco to find out information about Cortés, they spoke only Nahuatl while Cortés’s Spanish translator spoke only Mayan. Marina was used to provide the missing link by translating the Nahuatl into Mayan. Marina soon learned Spanish and became Cortés’s primary translator...Marina was near Cortés at all times and that her skill as a translator helped him defeat Moctezuma, furthering the cause of the Spanish conquest in Mexico. In addition to her role as translator, historical writings confirm that Cortés and Marina had a sexual relationship; she gave birth to his son, Martín....Some time after this birth, on an expedition to Honduras, Cortés gave her to one of his captains, Juan Jaramillo, to marry. (103)

Although the historical facts on la Malinche are minimal, the myth of this female archetype has nonetheless been powerful enough to affect generations of Mexican women and their Mexican American counterparts. If la Virgen is the prototype for what Mexican women should strive to be in order to be socially accepted as “good” women, la Malinche is the archetype that women should aim not to resemble lest they be labeled “bad” women. Therefore, la Malinche has become part of the Mexican consciousness such that if a woman is used as an object or is raped and then abandoned she is related to the image of la Malinche. If she willingly consorts with newcomers and betrays her people or accepts a different culture and rejects her own, she is also related to the popular configuration of the Malinche paradigm. La Malinche functions as the figure to blame for the conquest, despite the other crucial factors that contributed to the Spanish victory, and she has become the national symbol of a traitor, of Indian acceptance of Christianity. The Malinche archetype is very detrimental to the Mexican woman’s identity; since they are destined to repeat the tragic past of la Malinche, their culture is full of restrictions for its women meant to help them
avoid repeating Malinche’s “mistakes.” Octavio Paz wrote about “The Sons of La Malinche” in his *Labyrinth of Solitude* in which he explained the reason that la Malinche figure has never been forgiven:

If the Chingada is the representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense, but also in the very flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortes. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated, or seduced by the Spaniards. And, as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal. (86)

While la Virgen de Guadalupe represents passivity for selfless reasons in order to protect others, la Malinche also represents passivity, but in the sense that the woman allows herself to be used, or raped, and cause pain to her community. Paz says that “The person who suffers the action [of *chingar*, or la *chingada*] is passive, inert and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive and closed person who inflicts it” (77). But he also acknowledges the fact that in order for there to be a Malinche, or *La Chingada*, the violated woman, there must be *chingones*, the strong ones, those who violate: “The *chingon* is the male, the one who opens” (77). So, while historically Cortes and the other Spaniards were the *chingones*, nowadays it is Mexican men and a patriarchal society who have taken that role in wounding their women. As Paz said, the verb *chingar* is “masculine, active cruel: it stings, wounds, gashes, stains” (77) just like it has wounded the Mexican women’s ability to be active in deciding her destiny and not fall into the Malinche paradigm of passivity:

---

4 *Chingar*: to rape or violate; *La Chingada*: the Malinche figure; the person who is raped/violated
The *Chingada* is even more passive. Her passivity is abject; she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust. Her taint is constitutional and resides, as we said earlier, in her sex. This passivity, open to the outside world, causes her to lose her identity: she is the Chingada. She loses her name; she is no one; she disappears in to nothingness; she is Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition. (85-86)

If we look at the contradictory elements of the Mexican woman, everything that is pure and worthy of protection by men is aligned with the Virgin’s ideals and everything that is not worthy of respect by men is aligned with la Malinche’s characteristics, then we can understand what Gloria Anzaldúa says about the treatment of women by Mexican men. Since “males make the rules and laws” (38) and women merely “transmit them” (38), they are in charge of protecting and punishing women that are characterized by either archetype, something that is accepted by his society, including other women. While there seems to be a concern with protecting women, according to Anzaldúa, what it actually accomplishes is to keep women in “rigidly defined roles”:

*La gorra, el rebozo, la mantilla* are symbols of my culture’s “protection” of women. Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles. (39)

Even women participate in giving these mixed messages to their daughters. While a good Mexican mother strives to protect and nurture her children, once it is time for a daughter to move on to a relationship with a man, she is no longer under her mother’s protection but under her husband’s not-so-loving dominance:

Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages. *No voy a dejar que ningún pelado desgracado maltrate a mis hijos.* And in the next breath it would say, *La mujer tiene que hacer lo que le diga el hombre.* Which was it to be—strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming? (39-40)
Some women even go as far as to make sure that their daughters and daughters-in-law are in compliance with “good” virtues that fall under traditional values of what a husband expects:

How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being hociconas (big mouths), for being callejeras (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of the children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives? (38)

Another author on Mexican national identity, Roger Bartra, has also written about the Mexican metamorphosis and the modern “peculiar feminine duality” (158) that Mexican women must deal with. He says that the contradictory ways that women are treated based on the two archetypes can be explained in psychoanalytical terms:

The cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe is seen as a deep expression of man’s guilt, whereby he begs forgiveness from the woman he himself has betrayed and abandoned; love for the virgin runs in parallel with worship of the mother, now institutionalized but practiced under certain circumstances and on special occasions. But Mexican man knows that woman (his mother, lover, wife) has been raped by the macho conquistador, and he suspects that she has enjoyed and even desired the rape. For this reason, he exerts a sort of vengeful domination over his wife and expects total self-sacrifice from her. Thus arises a typical sadomasochist relationship, in which the woman must behave with the tenderness and abnegation of a virgin so as to expiate her deep sin: within her lives the Malinche, swollen with lust and heiress to ancient female treachery. (158-159)

In Mango Street Esperanza is burdened with having to outweigh the effects of her culture on women whose characteristics fall closer to the Malinche paradigm in order to decide her own future. Just like other Chicana writers before her, Cisneros is preoccupied with the Malinche myth due to the fact that when
dealing with Chicana's liberation she may be accused of betraying her Mexican culture. For Example, Cherrie Moraga, one of the early Chicana feminists, said:

As a Chicana and a feminist, I must, like other Chicanas before me, examine the effects this myth has on my/our racial/sexual identity and my relationship with other Chicanas. There is hardly a Chicana growing up today who does not suffer under her name even if she never hears directly of the one-time Aztec princess. (100)

In Mango Street, Esperanza's neighborhood is inhabited by many women who, as Moraga says, "suffer under her name." While most of these women have personalities that are more closely aligned with characterizations of la Malinche, we see their constant struggle with the "good" things they are expected to do. In some cases, their families' attempts to "protect" them only contribute to suppressing each woman's unique needs and desires. All these women, whether they followed the traditional role of marriage and kids or whether they were "bad" women, are possible role models for Esperanza. She observes her neighbors' lives and is able to take in all their experiences and consider the possibility that she could have a similar future to theirs.

Earlier I discussed the transitional part in Mango Street in which Esperanza goes from being a curious but innocent young girl to a girl becoming aware of her sexuality. Following the vignette "Bums in the Attic"—in which she expresses her desire to help and shelter "passing bums" when she has her own house—is the vignette, "Beautiful and Cruel," in which she contemplates her sexuality. Before this we had only seen her attempts at exploring her sexuality, but only as a child would, by playing dress-up or playing games with the other girls her age. On one occasion, in a vignette titled "Hips," she and her friends had
playfully discussed what they thought about woman’s hips and then took turns making up rhymes about hips while playing jump rope. The fact that they talked about a woman’s body while playing a children’s game alludes to the fact that they are still young girls simply playing around with adult ideas. In “The Family of Little Feet” a neighbor gives her and her high-heeled shoes for them to play with. Esperanza refers to them as “magic high heels” because she feels that the shoes give women a special power which she doesn’t yet realize is the power of a woman’s sexuality. It is in this story that we begin to see Esperanza’s awareness of how a woman’s body is perceived by men as they prepare to go walking around the neighborhood in their new shoes “where the men can’t take their eyes off us” (40). Mr. Benny at the grocery store warns them about the dangers of a girl going out with shoes like that:

> Them are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them shoes off before I call the cops, but we just run. (41)

The scene in which Esperanza and her friends play around with imitating womanhood reminds me of something Elena Poniatowska said in her essay “Mexicanas y Chicanas”:

> To put shoes on the Virgin of Guadalupe and throw her into the streets in her high heels, in a short skirt, is a lesson for us who do not let loose the reins. (46)

Esperanza and her friends represent this new generation of Chicanas that unlike Mexicanas, Poniatowska says, are at least attempting to question and defy the rules imposed on women by Mexico’s patriarchal dominance. But as the girls later learn, even though they may feel ready to play dress-up and flirt with the idea of being older and sexier, the men in their community are not forgiving of
women who attempt to take ownership of their sexuality. In their few hours of
dressing up in the high heeled shoes and walking through the street in them, they
are harassed by males. One “boy on a homemade bicycle calls out: Ladies, lead
me to heaven” (41) and as they continue strutting down the avenue, a drunken
bum stops them. He tells one of the girls, Rachel, that her shoes are beautiful
and that she is very pretty and for her to come closer. Although Rachel is “young
and dizzy to hear so many sweet things in one day” (41), they don’t like it and
decide to go. Then, the bum says:

If I give you a dollar will you kiss me? How about a dollar. I give you a
dollar, and he looks in his pocket for wrinkled money. (41-42)

At this point Esperanza realizes that it’s not as easy as she thought to flirt with
the idea of being a woman in her barrio and they run “fast and far away” (42)
because they are “tired of being beautiful” (42).

The previous unpleasant experience with men contributed to Esperanza’s
idea in the transitional part of Mango Street in which she decides that she wants
to be like the one in the movies with “red red lips who is beautiful and cruel” (89).
In this vignette titled “Beautiful and Cruel,” Esperanza seems certain that beauty
is highly regarded in the world, especially for women, and with that beauty a
woman can be pickier about what she wants for her future. Her sister, Nenny,
says that “she won’t wait her whole life for a husband to come and get her” (88)
nor leave her mother’s house by “having a baby” (88) like Minerva’s sister did,
but Esperanza attributes her sister’s attitude to her “pretty eyes”:

She wants things all her own, to pick and choose. Nenny has pretty eyes
and it’s easy to talk that way if you are pretty. (88)
At this point Esperanza is still not convinced that women have other options, like getting an education, to avoid being forced into taking the traditional role of wife and mother, but she is aware that good looks are highly valued in society. Even if her beliefs are a bit naïve and overly generalized about what good looks can get you in life, she begins to show an understanding of the value imposed on women’s femininity and sexuality by her culture. Esperanza believes she is the “ugly daughter” (88) and her mom reassures her that when she gets older her “dusty hair will settle” (88) and her “blouse will learn to stay clean” (88), but she has decided to reject what is expected of girls:

[...] I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. (88)

Instead of waiting around for a man to come and take away her freedom she decides that she wants to be like a “beautiful and cruel” movie star so that she can have power like those femme fatale type of figures:

She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away. (89)

The kind of powerful “beautiful and cruel” woman that she would like to be is much like the “bad woman” that Octavio Paz depicts as the opposite of the “self-denying mother”:

It is interesting to note that the image of the mala mujer—the “bad woman”—is almost always accompanied by the idea of aggressive activity. She is not passive like the “self-denying mother,” the “waiting sweetheart,” the hermetic idol: she comes and goes, she looks for men and then leaves them. Her extreme mobility, through a mechanism similar to that described above, renders her invulnerable. Activity and immodesty unite to petrify her soul. The mala is hard and impious and independent like the macho. (39)
Esperanza isn’t specific as to whether Hollywood or Mexican cinema influenced her idea of adopting a sort of *femme fatale* image and behavior, but this figure appears in the movies of both of her cultures. The figure of the *femme fatale* recurs in numerous mythological, literary, and cinematic traditions, and even in Mexican cinema, where she is known as “la devoradora” (Hershfield 107). In her research on the Mexican version of the femme fatale, Joanne Hershfield says the following:

Although the particular representation of this powerful female archetype changes in response to historical and psychic mechanisms, the symbolic function of the femme fatale as a threat to male authority remains constant. Specifically, her perceived control over life (through procreation) and death (through symbolic castration) challenges the stability of patriarchal ideology in classical narrative texts. In order to contain this threat, the femme fatale must be destroyed or made powerless. (107)

At this point Esperanza is aware that in order to hold the power over her destiny, she must begin her “own quiet war” against a patriarchal society that pretends to have power over her:

I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (89)

In her innocent determination, she believes that by being defiant of a few simple things that women are expected to do, like pick up after themselves and their male family members at the dinner table, she is being powerful. She has yet to realize that these gender roles are part of the larger, inherited patriarchal society that she belongs to and it is not forgiving of women who attempt to take control and change their predetermined roles.

While Esperanza experiments with the growing curiosity about her sexuality, she also looks at the role models available to her in her neighborhood.
The many images of la Malinche on *Mango Street* “indicate that the unfortunate reality of la Malinche’s life is a more likely scenario for women in the barrio than that of being worshipped as the ideal mother” (Petty 125). Many of these women are portrayed as violated, abandoned, or enslaved, making it even harder for a young girl like Esperanza to see a different future for herself. One girl that she sees as a possible future for herself is Marin, purposefully named by Cisneros after the mythical figure she represents. When she is introduced in the vignette “Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin,” we can immediately see her how her description is aligned with the “darker, more sexual side of Chicana femininity” (Petty 125). According to Esperanza, Marin is “older and knows lots of things” (27) and she dresses and acts older than her and her other friends. Marin’s “skirts were shorter” (27), she wore “dark nylons all the time and lots of makeup” (23) and she “lights a cigarette” (27).

Marin’s close characterization to la Malinche is due to the fact that she is living with people who are not her immediate family since her family in Puerto Rico has sent her to live with an aunt in the U.S. Now her aunt’s family wants to send her back because she is “too much trouble” (27) and that trouble sounds like boy trouble, probably the same kind of boy trouble that got Marin sent to live in the U.S. with her aunt in the first place. Because her aunt is in charge of protecting Marin from boy trouble, she is in a way “enslaved” in her home and Esperanza notices she “can’t come out—gotta baby-sit with Louie’s sisters” (23) and they only “see Marin until her aunt comes home from work, and even then she can only stay out in front” (27). Although she presents herself as a sexual
object, it is not really sex Marin is interested in; she’s more interested in love. In Marin’s search for love she believes that by getting a “real job downtown” (26) she can meet someone to take her away:

She’s going to get a real job downtown, because that’s where the best jobs are, since you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away. (26)

By having these aspirations, Cisneros aligns her desires to the alleged betrayal of la Malinche who left her tribe in order to help the Spanish. What American culture would see as normal aspirations for a young person—the desire for improvement in one’s life by working and happiness through marriage and moving to a bigger house—for Marin this is viewed as a betrayal because her success would be at the cost of abandoning her home and her people. To get a “better job” she would have to go to the more Anglo-oriented downtown area and leave her duty as a baby-sitter for her family.

_Mango Street_ takes place during the 1960’s at the same time that the “Sexual Revolution” was taking place in the rest of the country, but in Latino culture, girls were protected from sexual knowledge and they only knew what they heard from other girls their age or from what they saw on T.V. Esperanza is impressed with Marin’s “knowledge” since she’s the one who told Esperanza and her friends how “Davey the Baby’s sister got pregnant” (27) and how “if you count the flecks on your fingernails you can know how many boys are thinking of you” (27). Marin, like many Latina girls her age, is probably ignorant of how babies are conceived or anything else about how her sexuality works, but the younger girls still listen to her because that is the only way they ever hear about such things.
Because of her ignorance about sexuality, Marin confuses being sexy and attracting boys for love and romance. She says that “what matters...is for boys to see us and for us to see them” (27), but all that causes is for “boys who do pass by to say stupid things like I am in love with those two green apples you call eyes, give them to me why don’t you” (27). When this happens, “Marin just looks at them without even blinking and is not afraid” (27). This “focus on her sexuality leads to a denigration much like that of Malinche” (Petty 125) because all it proves is her dependence on men for her importance and security, just like when she says she wants a job downtown so that someone might marry her and take her far away. By connecting her to Malinche, Cisneros alludes to the harsh reality that depending on a man’s acknowledgment and approval can lead to violation and abandonment. Also, by waiting around for a man to change one’s life, like Marin who “is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (27), she is proving her passivity leads to a fate much like the Chingada’s:

This passivity, open to the outside world, causes her to lose her identity: she is the Chingada. She loses her name; she is no one; she disappears in to nothingness; she is Nothingness. (Paz 86)

In the end, Marin is sent away because she is “too much trouble” much like doña Marina, whom Cortés sent away after a few years.

Alicia is another neighborhood girl who functions as a role model for Esperanza, but her life’s not as glamorous and dreamy as the life Marin dreams about. Alicia is juggling two worlds in her life, that of taking care of her widowed father and taking a long commute in order to attend a university. She has “inherited her mama’s rolling pin” (31) and her father says that “a woman’s place
is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star” (31). To a young girl entering adolescence, Marin’s imaginary rewards must certainly seem much simpler and exciting than Alicia’s distant and uncertain ones. Alicia must wake up early and cook for her father, go to school and come back home to cook dinner for her father and still make time to study for her courses. To Esperanza, this might seem like too difficult of a route to take in order to get an education. In addition to the difficulties that Alicia has to go through in order to go to the university, she must deal with her community’s perception of girls who attend college, which was something very uncommon for that time, especially for lower-income Latina girls. In one instance, Esperanza says “Alicia is stuck up ever since she went to college” (12) which is the same way girls that seek an education are perceived because they are thought to be thinking selfishly instead of dedicating their full attention to serving their family. Gloria Anzaldúa talks about how attempting to improve one’s life, or “selfishness,” is perceived in Mexican culture:

In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue. In the past, acting humble with members outside the family ensured that you would make no one envidioso (envious); therefore he or she would not use witchcraft against you. If you get above yourself, you’re an envidiosa. If you don’t behave like everyone else, la gente will say that you think you’re better than others, qué te crees grande. With ambition (condemned in the Mexican culture and valued in the Anglo) comes envy. (40)

Therefore, it is even harder for a woman to try and do something to improve her life that doesn’t include improving the welfare of others or taking care of others in the immediate present. The value of education does not make sense to a culture that believes a woman should marry and raise children for the rest of her life
because they believe that time could be better spent preparing for marriage and helping around the house. Although at first Esperanza criticizes Alicia for being stuck up ever since she went to college, she will later come to learn a great deal from Alicia. Alicia listens to Esperanza’s sadness when she has no one else to talk to and it is she who offers another possibility for her own future.

There are other female characters in *Mango Street* who are aligned with la Malinche. For example, Rafaela “who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid [she] will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (79). Rafaela, like Malinche, must be kept enslaved because her sexuality is viewed as a threat that must be contained (Petty 125). Another woman, Rosa Vargas, is a very distracted and ineffective mother to her unruly children. The reason for this seems to be because she was abandoned by her husband, just like Malinche was ultimately abandoned by Cortés, and now she must work to support her kids on her own even if it means paying less attention to them.

Yet another woman, Minerva, is a victim of an abusive husband who also abandons her and comes back every time only to abandon her once again. The difference between Minerva and the other women who suffer from imprisonment or abandonment is that although she “cries because her luck is unlucky” (84), she also writes poetry. It is important to note the symbolic significance of Minerva’s name; *Minerva* is also the name of the Greek goddess of wisdom, the arts, poetry and war (*Encyclopedia Mythica*). It is not surprising that Cisneros named this woman Minerva since it is with her that Esperanza feels comfortable
sharing her interest in poetry. In a way, Minerva serves as a source of wisdom for Esperanza since Minerva “lets her read her poems” (84) and Esperanza lets Minerva read hers. While they share their interest in poetry, Esperanza is also aware of Minerva’s sadness. She sees how Minerva is so consumed by it, that poetry is her only emotional outlet. The possibility of Minerva developing her poetic interests seems very unlikely because she only writes after she has put her children to bed and she keeps taking her husband back. Later, Esperanza will learn that she too must use her writing as an outlet for the emotional turmoil she undergoes on Mango Street. Surely, Esperanza sees all these imprisoned and abandoned women, including Minerva, as the women she does not want to become.

A girl that has a lasting impression on Esperanza is her close friend, Sally, who personifies both la Malinche and la Virgen at different times in the novel and represents the objectification and confinement associated with each archetype (Petty 126). At first Sally is introduced much like Marin, closer to the darker side of Chicana femininity because she has “eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke” (81) and hair “shiny black like raven feathers” (81). Her attractiveness is perceived as a sign of promiscuity by both the girls who stay away from her and the boys who tell stories about her. Even her father perceives her beauty as dangerous:

Her father says to be this beautiful is trouble […] He remembers his sisters and is sad. Then she can’t go out. Sally I mean. (81)

Because of her beauty, her father does the only thing his culture has taught him; he tries to protect her from the outside world, from other men, by attempting to
control her life. In his quest to protect his daughter, he is violent and hits Sally until “her pretty face [is] all beaten and black” (92) for fear that she’ll “run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed” (92). Sally becomes a victim of the common contradictory effects of the Virgen/Malinche dichotomy in which a man, in his attempt to protect a woman’s virtue, does so by inflicting harm on her. "Like la Malinche, Sally’s sexuality is doubly threatening to her father’s masculinity" (Petty 127) since she could betray him by being promiscuous or her beauty alone could cause a man to violate her (Petty 127). Eventually, Sally marries a marshmallow salesman at a very young age and, as Esperanza says, she was “young and not ready to be married” (101). In order to fulfill the ideal Virgin image, Sally opted for marriage so that her sexuality could be contained within the proper confines of marriage. What she didn’t count on, though, was that whether she was perceived as a “bad girl" for being beautiful and hanging out with boys or a “good girl” by marrying, she was still subject to being imprisoned by a man. She believed that by being “good” she would be leaving behind the violence she endured by her father, but the only thing that changed was the transfer in dominance over to her husband. Her role as housewife became just another imprisonment and Sally “sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission” (102). When she lived with her father she was abused, but at least she was able to be outside, and now, as a housewife, her husband “doesn’t let her look out the window” (102) and “nobody gets to visit her unless he is working” (102). It would be very difficult to affirm that Sally gained anything
from “crossing from one extreme to the other of the good/bad dichotomy that classifies Chicana women” (Petty 127).

After seeing all these roles models in her life, those that did the “right” thing and married and had kids and those that were “bad” and defied what was culturally acceptable, Esperanza must now choose what kind of future she wants for herself. The women in *Mango Street* seem to offer a grim outlook on womanhood and Esperanza must negotiate within the Virgen/Malinche dichotomy and her bi-cultural identity to find the best solution for her own life.
Chapter 4
Redefining the Self beyond the Virgen/Malinche Dichotomy

The House on Mango Street is a coming of age novel in which the protagonist comes to terms with her sexuality. After observing all the female role models available to her in her family and neighborhood and experimenting with different aspects of her femininity and sexuality, Esperanza must now find an appropriate resolution for her own life. This resolution must be fitting to both her Mexican identity and her American one; her American side pushes for independence and autonomy while her Mexican side pushes for selflessness through marriage and motherhood. Besides having to find a compromise between the two cultures that influence Esperanza’s life and dealing with racism and poverty, she soon realizes that her gender is also subject to certain limitations under the highly patriarchal community she inhabits.

Esperanza’s search for her own identity is tarnished by the sexual violation that she suffers at the closing of the vignette titled “The Monkey Garden.” This vignette starts out with Esperanza playing with the other kids in the abandoned lot that they called the Monkey Garden and which the neighborhood children had adopted as their playground. Esperanza is there with her older friend Sally, who is not as interested in running around with the kids and more interested in flirting with Tito and other boys. For Esperanza though, the monkey garden is a safe haven for childhood games, a place where her sexuality does not yet matter and she can still run around with the boys:
I only remember that when the others ran, I wanted to run too, up and down and through the monkey garden, fast as the boys, not like Sally who screamed if she got her stockings muddy. (96)

The longer that she remained attached to her childhood, the longer Esperanza felt she could disassociate herself from her sexuality. In a way, she wasn’t ready, or willing, to face womanhood quite yet. When she tried to get Sally to come and play with her, she saw that the boys had taken away Sally’s keys and they were all laughing. Esperanza thought to herself, “It was a joke I didn’t get” (96) because she didn’t understand the way that boys and girls flirt with each other. The boys were insisting that Sally give each of them a kiss if she wanted her keys back and again, Esperanza did not see the humor in it:

...I don’t know why, but something inside me wanted to throw a stick. Something wanted to say no when I watched Sally going into the garden with Tito’s buddies all grinning. (96-97)

She immediately ran to tell Tito’s mother who treated the claims of her son’s harassment with indifference. His mother didn’t even care enough to defend her son, much less offer any protection to Esperanza:

Those kids, she said, not looking up from her ironing. That’s all? What do you want me to do, she said, call the cops? And kept on ironing. (97)

This is one of many times throughout the novel that Esperanza will be failed by the women in her life. Solidarity and loyalty from other women is something that is very important to Esperanza, and as she learns later on, it is not always reciprocal. She alludes to these ideas of solidarity and loyalty between females earlier in the book. There were times when she would get annoyed by her little sister’s, Nenny’s, ignorance of things older girls understood. Instead of completely disregarding Nenny, she knew that although she was “too young to
be [her] friend" (8), Nenny was still “my responsibility” (8). Just as she is willing to be there for other women, she felt that other women should come to her own aid and protection. From the very beginning of Mango Street, Esperanza is concerned with finding a best friend to talk to, someone to understand her point of view:

Someday I will have a best friend all my own. One I can tell my secrets to. One who will understand my jokes without my having to explain them. Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor. (9)

Esperanza's concern with finding a friend that she can confide in is a metaphor for that solidarity and loyalty between women that many contemporary Chicana writers, stemming from the early 1980s, have seen as essential in Chicana women's social progress. Sandra Cisneros has talked of her own desire for a best friend while growing up. In one interview, Cisneros says that she remembers living in "shabby neighborhoods where the best friend I was always waiting for never materialized" (70). Through Esperanza, Cisneros alludes to the importance of communication with other Chicana women who can understand her status as a double-minority facing racism and female oppression. Until that type of communicative solidarity exists between Chicana women, only then will the "anchor" of patriarchy be released.

According to critic Maria Herrera-Sobek, Chicanas live in a culture that promotes a “conspiracy of silence” (178) which, she says, includes two forms of silence:

Silence in not denouncing the “real” facts of life about sex and its negative aspects in violent sexual encounters, and complicity in embroidering a fairy-tale-like mist around sex, and romanticizing and idealizing unrealistic sexual relations. (178)
Sandra Cisneros herself has spoken of this silence, a harmful silence that prevents both knowledge and true solidarity between Mexican American women. In an essay that she wrote, “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” Cisneros says that she is “overwhelmed by the silence regarding Latinas and our bodies” (48): She refers to the silence as a “double chastity belt of ignorance and vergüenza, shame” (46) which she says is locked in “the guise of modesty” (46):

How could I acknowledge my sexuality, let alone enjoy sex, with so much guilt?...What a culture of denial. Don’t get pregnant! But no one tells you how not to. That is why I was angry for so many years every time I saw la Virgen de Guadalupe, my culture’s role model for brown women like me. Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus? They were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and pointed us women toward our destiny —marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was putahood. (48)

She blames the image of la Virgen de Guadalupe for the culture of silence surrounding Latinas. Because of her image, women dare not speak of sexuality or anything that could be associated with being a “bad girl,” which would be translated as accepting her Malinche side of femininity. For Latinas, knowledge of sexuality is left for marriage, and because of that Chicanas suffer from ignorance about their bodies or anything having to do with sexual relations. According to Cisneros, “la Lupe was nothing but a goody two shoes meant to doom me to a life of unhappiness” (“Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” 48). Not only are Chicanas expected to live up to the ideals of the Virgin, but because of her image there is a silence that doesn’t allow for complete knowledge of what they are not supposed to become, the sexual Malinche side.

After Esperanza is ignored by Tito’s mother, she returns to the garden “where Sally needed to be saved” (97) from Tito and his buddies. Even after she
has just been let down by another woman who did not listen to her, she still believes that she should help her friend. Upon her return, Sally and the boys tell her to leave them alone, and she runs away ashamed. In the following vignette, “Red Clowns,” we learn that she was sexually assaulted after she left them alone. The reader is not provided with the exact details of the rape, but it is obvious from Esperanza’s words of anguish to her friend Sally:

I waited such a long time. I waited by the red clowns, just like you said, but you never came, you never came for me. Sally, Sally a hundred times. Why didn’t you hear me when I called? Why didn’t you tell them to leave me alone? The one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn’t let me go. (100)

Esperanza is obviously in a state of shock and distraught over what has just happened to her, but she is angrier at the fact that Sally was not there to protect her. The man who grabbed her arm is a metaphor for men’s domination over women, and the protagonist expected her friend, a female in the same oppressive position as her, to come to her rescue. Esperanza waited and waited and Sally never got there, and her waiting serves as a metaphor for the culture of silence surrounding Chicana women that is still desperately in need of being broken. Chicanas are still in the process of being informed, of being saved by their fellow Chicanas and still waiting for change in that silence that overshadows solidarity between Mexican American women. As Herrera-Sobek explains, “The Chicana writer […] has taken the concept of rape and has successfully elaborated it in her writings as a literary motif in order to engage the reader in a reconstruction of the experience from the victim’s perspective and from a feminist point of view” (171):
Feminist critics view rape in patriarchal societies as a metaphorical construct skillfully designed to insure the continuation of phallocratic rule. Chicana writer, as expressed through their creative works, seem to concur with this position and have utilized the rape-as-metaphor construct to critique the patriarchal system that oppresses them...as members of an ethnic minority, and thus doubly marginalized, Chicana authors are vitally concerned with the inferior status they have been relegated. (171)

Although the rape that Esperanza experiences is an unfortunate experience for any woman of any age to experience, it is even more important to see its symbolic significance as vital in the formation of Chicana identity. It brings into light the importance of loyalty and solidarity between Chicana women, something that Esperanza hopes for throughout her narration of Mango Street and which ultimately fails her. All she wanted was a best friend which she sought in Sally, but this best friend that she looks for doesn’t exist in Chicana culture due to the silence surrounding Chicanas and sexuality issues. By accusing Sally of lying to her, she is blaming the whole Mexican, androcentric culture that has lied to her all her life through a culture of silence:

Sally, you lied. It wasn’t what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn’t want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it’s supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me […] why did you leave me all alone? I waited my whole life. You’re a liar. They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong […] Sally, you lied, you lied. (99-100)

Through the literary motif of rape, as Herrera-Sobek says, woman is transformed into a “quavering accomplice in her own rape...women are socialized into being participants in their own oppression” (173). This is not to say that literally Esperanza is responsible for her rape, but that all the women in her life, including Sally, are also partly to blame for not offering their protection and for continuing that “conspiracy of silence” that did not warn Esperanza of the dangers in a
“man’s world.” In this man’s world that Esperanza inhabits, women are “invisible, voiceless, worthless, devalued objects…silent entities dominated by ingrained patriarchal vectors” (172-173). This silence is also what made Esperanza have to hear about all things sexual from movies, books and magazines. Sandra Cisneros says that in her own life “womanhood was full of mysteries” (“Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” 46) due to her Mexican American culture:

Religion and our culture, our culture and religion, helped to create that blur, a vagueness about what went on “down there” […] When I see pregnant teens, I can’t help but think that could’ve been me. In high school I would’ve thrown myself into love the same way some warriors throw themselves into fighting. I was ready to sacrifice everything in the name of love, to do anything, even risk my own life, but thankfully there were no takers. I was enrolled at an all-girls’ school. I think if I had met a boy who would have me, I would’ve had sex in a minute, convinced this was love. (“Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” 46)

Cisneros’s idea of what love was as a teen is similar to Esperanza’s idea of love. These ideas of love are romanticized since they are not based on realistic testimonies. If only someone had warned Esperanza about the dangers of being a woman in her male-dominated neighborhood, she would have known that all females, even ones that aren’t quite ready to leave childhood, are susceptible to being vulnerable in a man’s world.

The horrific rape that Esperanza experiences marks the period in her life where she officially went from being a child to being a woman. It was not something that she chose, but her initiation into womanhood, as heinous as it was, in a way introduced Esperanza to a patriarchal world in which women do not hold the power. If we see rape as a metaphor, then it should be inevitable for a woman who has just been violated to take back her own free-will from men. But
in Esperanza, Cisneros created a woman that refuses to live within the restrictions imposed on her based on the Virgin/Malinche archetypes. Since she did not to choose to be raped, Esperanza decides to take control in her life from now on and no longer be a victim.

Throughout *Mango Street*, Esperanza has observed her available role models and she’s gotten a chance to pick and choose which things she likes. Her house on Mango Street came with some awful memories that converted her into “a girl who didn’t want to belong” (109), but Mango Street was part of her and she can’t just leave it and forget it. Mango Street represents the Mexican heritage that she was born into, and everything about that environment has become a part of her identity. Cisneros has said in an interview that this desire to reject the things she didn’t like about her culture is like a “balancing act” in which she had to define those things that she thought were fine for herself instead of just accepting what her culture says should be fine for women (Rodriguez-Aranda 66). But with the strong influence that culture has in one’s life, it is very unlikely that a Chicana can just completely escape her heritage:

> At the same time, none of us wants to abandon our culture. We’re very Mexican, we’re all very Chicanas. Part of being Mexican is that love and that affinity we have for our *cultura*. We’re very family centered, and that family extends to the whole Raza. We don’t want to be exiled from our people. (Rodriguez-Aranda 66)

Other Chicana writers, like Gloria Anzaldúa, have also written about this process of rejecting certain aspects of Mexican culture as necessary in order to form a new Chicana identity. To do that, Chicanas have to evaluate those things about her culture that do not help her be free from man’s domination:
Conozco el malestar de mi cultura. I abhor some of my culture’s ways, how it cripples its women, *como burras*, our strengths used against us, *lowly burras* humility and dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue. I abhor how my culture makes *macho* caricatures of its men. No, I do not buy all the myths of the tribe into which I was born. (Anzaldúa 44)

Anzaldúa does not buy into the myths that have made Mexican women to be oppressed under the Virgen/Malinche archetypes. Not only have those archetypes helped men have control over women throughout history, but they have also accomplished to socialize women into believing that their highest virtue is defined by their ability to serve men. Anzaldúa, like many contemporary Chicana authors, refuses to “glorify those aspects of my culture which havejured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me” (Anzaldúa 39-40). Esperanza Cordero, like Anzaldúa, has also fallen victim to these aspects of her culture that, in the attempt to “protect” her from all sexual knowledge, in the end, only caused her more harm.

At one point, in the vignette “Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water”, a witch woman read Esperanza’s fortune and told her that she would have a “home in the heart” (64) in her response to Esperanza’s request for her fortune regarding a house. It is important to also remember what her Aunt Lupe told her, that “writing would keep her free” (61). Only after her rape does she realize that their advice would not only prove helpful, but necessary, for her to escape the trauma that she experienced. Towards the end of *Mango Street*, she also receives a third piece of advice from three sisters that appear to have psychic powers. They tell Esperanza to make a wish and without her even saying what she wished for, they say that her wish would be granted, but with the following advice:
When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are...It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish. (105)

Throughout *Mango Street*, Esperanza shows a collective identity with other women, but in her quest to find her own “home of the heart,” her own identity, she must find a personal solution to liberate herself from the gender constraints of her culture (Olivares, “Entering *The House on Mango Street*” 213). It is important to note the symbolic significance of Esperanza’s surname, Cordero, a surname that she inherited from her father—or from patriarchal culture—that means “lamb.” Critic Manuel Martin-Rodriguez says that her last name “operates in an ironic manner because she refuses to sacrifice her gender to patriarchic society and at the same time it serves as a sacrificial symbol by which the individual speaks and acts for the community” (qtd. in Olivares 213). Esperanza has to find a way to “reinvent” herself in order to reject those aspects which she doesn’t like while still accepting her culture:

I felt, as a teenager, that I could not inherit my culture intact without revising some parts of it. That did not mean I wanted to reject the entire culture [...] I know what I am and I know that part of the trauma that I went through from my teen years through the twenties up until very recently, and that other Latinas are going through too, is coming to terms with what Norma [Alarcón]⁵ calls “reinventing ourselves,” revising ourselves. We accept our culture, but not without adapting ourselves as women. (Rodriguez-Aranda 66)

For Cisneros, and for her character Esperanza, this reinvention of the self comes through the creative art of writing. Through her writing Esperanza is able to get rid of what Cisneros calls the “big ghosts [that] still live inside you”

---

⁵ Norma Alarcón: A contemporary Chicana author
(Rodriguez-Aranda 67). She cannot simply remove herself from Mango Street, or from her Mexican heritage, so with her writing she is able to "make [her] peace with the ghosts" (Rodriguez-Aranda 67). In order for Esperanza to build this "home of the heart" she had to first decide to leave the home that a patriarchal society has created for her, one that oppresses her individuality. Critic Caren Kaplan has written about this need for women to leave that oppressive home:

First world feminist criticism is struggling to avoid repeating the same imperializing moves that we claim to protest. We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practice. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and difference must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. (194-95)

Of course, since Esperanza faces the problem of being a double-minority, both a woman and a racial minority living in poverty, finding this new home is more of a struggle to accomplish. The privacy needed to find this "home of the heart" is difficult when facing economic deprivation and literally living in a small home. The author's own childhood home was similar to Esperanza's in which there is not much room for self-exploration:

Privacy for self-exploration belonged to the wealthy. In my home a private space was practically impossible [...] I had my own room, but I never had the luxury of shutting the door. ("Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" 47)

In order for Esperanza to have a realistic resolution for someone coming from the barrio, lacking the resources available to the wealthy, Cisneros decided to make her a writer. To be a writer, one does not have to be rich or have a nice, big house:

I didn't intend for her to be a writer, but I had gotten her into this dilemma, and I didn't know how to get her out. I didn't know anything about what it's like to be a doctor or a social scientist. I don't know about those things! So
the only way that I could make her escape the trap of the barrio was to make her an artist. (Rodriguez-Aranda 69)

Esperanza is a subaltern figure, and only through her writing can she finally have interpretative power that’s not male-dominated. Since males have historically held the authoritative power when it comes to literary texts, it is symbolic that Esperanza chooses writing as a way to escape the harm that her patriarchal community has caused her. According to critics Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, males have traditionally held the authoritative power in our society because they have had the power of the pen. The pen, which is in some sense a penis, representative of masculinity, has enabled men to be both the “author and authority” (Gilbert & Gubar 4) in our society. Through their role as authors, they have been able to be the authority in everything that is written, everything from history to literature (Gilbert & Gubar 4-5). Women of color have had the power of the pen for even less time than Anglo women. Esperanza, like Cisneros, feels a responsibility to give a voice to marginalized women of her community who have not historically been heard:

I am the first woman in my family to pick up a pen and record what I see around me, a woman who has the power to speak and is privileged enough to be heard. That is a responsibility. (“Notes to a Young(ér) Writer” 76)

Critic Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano notes that Chicana feminism “depends on the love of Chicanas for themselves and each other as Chicanas” (214) and that “the most important principle of Chicana feminist criticism is the realization that the Chicana’s experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not
the dominant culture" (214). By choosing to use her writing as a way out of her oppressed situation on Mango Street, Esperanza does not just have to be a voice for other women, but for other women in her same marginalized position as a racial minority and of a low socioeconomic class. In her writing, her task will be to show how “elements of gender, race, culture and class coalesce” (Yarbro-Bejarano 214).

In using her writing to escape the trap of the barrio, Esperanza enters the realm of education and knowledge. By doing this, she is, in a way, betraying her culture, becoming a Malinche by not conforming to her culture’s expectations of her. As a writer, Esperanza risks adopting the Malinche image by rejecting passivity and taking an active role of “producing” in her life. With writing, she is no longer waiting for life to happen around her, but she is now responsible for producing an outcome in her own life. The availability of education for women is something that American culture promotes more than Mexican culture, something that is aligned with Americanized ideals of autonomy and independence. So, in order for a woman to gain her autonomy, she must, in a way, relieve herself of some family-oriented responsibilities and risk being considered a traitor, like the Malinche archetype. Cisneros has talked about the guilt associated with this feeling of betraying her Mexican culture, something that Esperanza will also have to deal with:

I think that growing up Mexican and feminist is almost a contradiction in terms...for a long time—and it’s true for many writers and women like myself who have grown up in patriarchal culture, like the Mexican culture—I felt great guilt betraying that culture. Your culture tells you that if you step out of line, if you break these norms, you are becoming
anglicized, you’re becoming the Malinche— influenced and contaminated by these foreign influences and ideas. (Satz 166)

While Esperanza risks being labeled a Malinche figure by using the power of the pen and not conforming to her culture’s female archetype of the Virgin, at least her writing will free her from male authoritative power:

I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free. (110)

Esperanza could have very easily followed in the footsteps of other girls like Marin or Sally, who remained imprisoned by patriarchy, but she chose to look within herself and get rid of those ghosts that hold other people down. Thanks to the few role models in her life that influenced her to create her own “home of the heart” through her writing, Esperanza is able to free herself from Mango Street and, in the process, help free other women, too.
Conclusion

By turning to her writing as a way out of the confining space of the barrio and all that it means to be a woman there, Esperanza moves to a new house, a house of story-telling. As a narrator, she was still searching for a way out, but now, as an author she “transcends her condition, finding another house that is the space of literature” (Olivares, “Poetics of Space” 242). Although living on Mango Street resulted in a very unpleasant experience for Esperanza, it was necessary for her to live through it in order become a writer. The imprisonment of Mango Street made it necessary for her to find a way out through her writing because she was not able to physically or emotionally leave it behind. Esperanza “comes to understand that despite her need for space of her own, mango street is really a part of her—an essential creative part she will never be able to leave” (Gonzales-Berry and Rebolledo 114-15).

Through Esperanza, Cisneros shows the reader that a resolution for Chicanas must be one similar to what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the new mestiza. Although Mango Street was published a few years before Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, we can see some elements of Anzaldúa’s new mestiza in Esperanza. This new mestiza is a Chicana who embraces racial, sexual and other types of ambiguity and whose “identity is grounded in the Indian woman’s history of resistance” (Anzaldúa 43). As a mestiza, Anzaldúa says she must “stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar
and my own feminist architecture" (44). This is exactly what Esperanza sets out to do at the end of _Mango Street_, she refuses to "glorify those aspects of [her] culture which have injured [her] and which have injured [her] in the name of protecting [her]" (Anzaldúa 44).

In what Anzaldúa calls the Coatlicue state, she has a point of reflection that helps her reach a new mestiza consciousness. According to Anzaldúa, Coatlicue is the “underworld (dark)” (49) aspect of the Mesoamerican goddess, Coatlalteuh, while Tonantsi is the “upper (light)” (49) aspect. The patriarchal Aztec-Mexican culture sent Coatlicue underground with other female deities and they transformed Tonantsi in the “good” mother once having detached her from the dark half (49). Later, the Spanish and the Catholic Church designated the desexualized aspect of Tonantsi to the Virgen de Guadalupe. From that moment on, Tonantsi/Guadalupe has been classified as the protective Virgin Mother and the sexualized aspect, Coatlicue, is classified with the whores (Anzaldúa 50). By rejecting the desexualized Tonantsi/Guadalupe aspect of herself, she releases the Coatlicue in her as a form of resistance:

I see _oposición e insurrección_. I see the crack growing on the rock. I see the fine frenzy building. I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock, releasing _la Coatlicue_. And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man’s or the colored man’s or the state’s or the culture’s or the religion’s or the parents’—just ours, mine. (73)

By allowing the Coatlicue to roam free inside of her, she is able to decide which oppressive aspects of her culture she wants to leave behind and is open to
external views of thinking. This is similar to what Esperanza has to do in order to build her own home and create a self in her own terms.

When *The House on Mango Street* came out, most critics saw the importance of understanding it as a text written for a symbolic addresses—*las mujeres* (de Valdés 287). Most reviews of the book, like that of Bonnie Britt in the Houston Chronicle, noted that the stories expressed the “reality of voiceless women, that the narrator is the embodiment of female possibility, a metaphor for a woman who takes charge of her own life” (de Valdés 288). There were a few critics, among them most notably Juan Rodriguez, that read *Mango Street* as a girl’s realization that happiness comes with the traditional ideology of the American Dream. He comments that Esperanza seeks to “become more Anglicized” in her desire of “a large house in the suburbs away from the dirty and filth of the barrio” (de Valdés 288). In his review, Rodriguez states:

That Esperanza chooses to leave Mango St., chooses to move away from her social/cultural base to become more “Anglicized,” more individualistic; that she chooses to move from the real to the fantasy plane of the world as the only means of accepting and surviving the limited and limiting social conditions of her barrio becomes problematic for the more serious reader. (qtd. in “Poetics of Space” 242)

In his review, Rodriguez is ignoring the “ideology of a social class’ liberation, particularly that of its women, to whom this book is dedicated” (“Poetics of Space” 242). Esperanza “is not indulging in escapism” (“Poetics of Space” 242) in hopes of leaving the barrio for the Anglicized suburbs, but she is, in a way, exploring the option of escaping those limitations imposed by the Virgin and Malinche archetypes of her culture in search of a metaphorical home of her own.
In an interview with Pilar E. Rodriguez-Aranda in 1990, when asked about the recurring themes in her writing, Cisneros said:

Maybe I'll always be writing about this schizophrenia of being a Mexican American woman, it's something that in every stage of my life has affected me differently. I don't think it's something I could put to rest. I'll probably still be writing about being good or bad probably when I'm ninety-years old. (Rodriguez-Aranda 67)

While *The House on Mango Street* explored a young girl coming to terms with her womanhood and sexuality in the context of her Mexican patriarchic society, some of Cisneros' future works explores what happens with a girl much like Esperanza once she becomes a woman many years into adulthood. For example, in the short story "Never Marry a Mexican" from *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* which was published about eight years after *Mango Street*, she struggles with the issue of cultural hybridity. The narrator, Clemencia, was always told by her mother, a Mexican American, to never marry a Mexican, like she had done in marrying Clemencia's Mexican father, because you risk being rejected by your Mexican's husband's family for not being Mexican enough, for not conforming to Mexican ideals of femininity. Clemencia describes herself as "amphibious [...] a person who doesn't belong to any class" ("Never Marry a Mexican" 71). Clemencia has many jobs, sometimes she's a substitute teacher, sometimes she's a translator and sometimes she's an artist. Clemencia is not a traditional passive woman who married and had children; instead she is closely characterized with la Malinche by being a translator and an artist who "creates" and in a way sells herself by selling her paintings to the rich.
Clemencia describes her lengthy affair with a white man and how she has chosen not to ever marry because she knows first hand how “belonging to a man” does not guarantee happiness:

I’ll never marry. Not any man. I’ve known men too intimately. I’ve witnessed their infidelities, and I’ve helped them to it. Unzipped and unhooked and agreed to clandestine maneuvers. I’ve been accomplice, committed premeditated crimes. I’m guilty of having caused deliberate pain to other women. I’m vindictive and cruel, and I’m capable of anything. (68)

Clemencia’s close alignment with la Malinche is further emphasized by the fact that her white lover calls her “My Malinalli, Malinche, my courtesan” (74) in the midst of one of their sexual encounters. She describes the peculiar revenge she takes upon her lover who believes he can “Never Marry a Mexican.” In seeking revenge, in one instance, while at her lover’s house she leaves gummy bears in places where she knows his wife will be sure to find them, and she also seduces their teenage son “to make the boy love [her] the way [she loves] his father” (82). The vengeance that she takes on her lover is a vengeance that is more than personal:

This is vengeance on behalf of La Malinche for all her Chicana daughters who are good enough to seduce but never enough to marry. This is vengeance on behalf of all the women who are led to believe that marriage is the only mechanism by which their lives may be validated and if they are not married then they themselves are somehow not valid. (Madsen 112)

While her mother always advised Clemencia to never marry a Mexican, as an adult she comes to the painful revelation that in the same way, Anglos are socialized to think the same way and never marry a Mexican. Clemencia is a Mexican American and as such she is neither Mexican enough nor American
enough to marry someone who is not a product of cultural hybridity like herself. Through the characterization of Clemencia, “Cisneros revises aspects of her hybrid culture as a woman: that is, both by using her power as a woman and by challenging those aspects of her double cultural inheritance that prescribe what she as a woman can be” (Madsen 124). In most of her writing, as with “Never Marry a Mexican”, Cisneros must negotiate with both obstacles of sexism and racism due to the patriarchal bias of Chicano culture and the Anglo bias of American women’s culture in order to write authentically (Madsen 130).

As is evident in the adult characters of Cisneros’ work, like that of Clemencia, it is safe to assume that Esperanza’s struggles do not end after her year of living on Mango Street. Although Esperanza has come to a resolution to the immediate trauma that she undergoes on Mango Street by deciding to write, she will always have to deal with the fact that she is a marginalized subject living in a male-dominated, Anglo-dominated society. In a 1986 lecture that Cisneros gave at Indiana University, Cisneros talks about her need to continue writing about those “ghosts” that continue to haunt her:

...those ghosts inside that haunt me, that will not let me sleep, of that which even memory does not like to mention [...] Perhaps later there will be time to write by inspiration. In the meantime, in my writing as well as in that of other Chicanas and other women, there is the necessary phase of dealing with those ghosts and voices most urgently haunting us, day by day. (“From a Writer’s Notebook” 73)

In her own life, Cisneros has chosen to “resist the traditional lifestyles available to her because marriage and children would leave no time and no energy for creativity” (Madsen 126-27). Although she does not have a husband or kids to take care of, in a way she is taking care of other Chicana women in a very
powerful way. Through characters like Esperanza, Cisneros has defined new Chicana voices according to the liberated feminine subject she has created in herself. Just like Esperanza needed role models from which to construct her own identity, Esperanza has served as a role model for young Chicana readers who until reading *Mango Street* did not know of anything other than what their culture dictates as appropriate expectations for its women.
Works Cited

Active Part:


Reference Part:


Satz, Martha. “Returning to One’s House.” *Southwest Review* 82.2 (Spring 1997): 166-86.

