

# A Brief Analysis of the Process of Esperanza's Female Consciousness Awakening in *The House on Mango Street*

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**Abstract:** *The House on Mango Street* is the representative work of Sandra Cisneros, a Mexican - American writer. This novel unfolds around the growth of Esperanza, a Mexican - American girl, in the Mango Street, a Latino immigrant community in Chicago. It reveals issues such as poverty, violence, discrimination faced by women at the bottom of society, as well as the constraints and oppressions imposed on women by traditional gender concepts. Centering on Esperanza's growth journey in *The House on Mango Street*, this paper analyzes the process of the awakening of female consciousness therein and ponders the value of the awakening of female consciousness from multiple dimensions.

**Keywords:** Women's awaking; Self-worth; Bildungsroman; Gender equality

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## 1. Introduction

### (1) A brief introduction to Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros, born in Chicago, United States, of Mexican descent, is one of the most influential Hispanic women writers of the United States and a famous contemporary poet and essayist. She rose to fame in 1984 with her work, *The House on Mango Street*. She is also the author of the short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* and the poetry collection *Bad Boys*. Rooted in the Chicano cultural district tradition, Sandra Cisneros' work is deeply concerned with issues of gender, race, and class. The line of her work is clear and relatable, with a light emotion emanating from her words.

The majority of Latino immigrants are from Mexico. New Latino immigrants are poorly educated, mostly Spanish-speaking, and arrive in the U.S. to engage in low-income manual labor and live in inner-city areas where white Americans do not want to live. It is difficult for new Latino immigrants to integrate into mainstream U.S. society, and even more difficult to enter the upper echelons of U.S. society. Sandra Cisneros came from a poor Mexican-American working family in Chicago, U.S.A., with six patriarchal brothers. Sandra Cisneros became gender conscious at an early age, realizing that in her cultural environment, women did not have an independent sense of self and identity, while she was also ridiculed for her Latina identity. As a result, her work is centered around Latino culture and gender perspectives, which she explores in a deep and nuanced, lived-in way.

### (2) A Brief Introduction to *The House on Mango Street*

*The House on Mango Street*, the debut novel written by Sandra Cisneros, was published in 1984 and won the Book of the Americas Award the following year. In a unique format, the novel tells the story of Esperanza, a girl growing up on Mango Street in Chicago's Latin American immigrant neighborhood in 44 separate short stories.

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Esperanza is a Mexican-American girl living in Chicago's Latino immigrant neighborhood who moves to Mango Street with her family. She dreams of having a house of her own, but her new home is not the promised land of her dreams. As Esperanza's life on Mango Street suffocates her, she matures and observes the women around her being controlled and repressed by men, realizing how Mango Street has shaped her own identity, she eventually leaves and vows to come back and help those who remain on Mango Street.

*The House on Mango Street* is widely regarded as a classic of Mexican - American literature. Throughout the novel, you can find elements of Mexican culture, as well as themes of social class and gender. This book is also a remarkable novel in verse. The author skillfully employs poetic language and unique, original metaphors, telling Esperanza's coming-of-age story from a first-person perspective.

### **(3) Research status of *The House on Mango Street***

As time progresses steadily and consistently, both the domestic and international scholarly interest in *The House on Mango Street* has undoubtedly witnessed a truly remarkable and substantial upsurge. The entire research landscape has not only diversified but also deepened significantly, reflecting an increasingly sophisticated and in-depth exploration of this profoundly seminal work.

In China, precisely according to the comprehensive statistics of CNKI, domestic scholarship predominantly and mainly delves into the novel through the distinct lenses of feminist theory, meticulous character experience analysis, and the complex plight of ethnic minorities. A relatively small number of scholars have also approached the study from the novel perspective of translation theory, offering unique insights that are relatively special for foreign research. However, there still remains a highly notable and conspicuous gap in the comprehensive exploration of female self-awareness, particularly when it comes to the protagonist Esperanza. While a certain number of articles have indeed addressed the essential theme of female self-awareness awakening, the majority of studies tend to intertwine this significant topic with other related subjects, thereby inevitably limiting the depth and intensity of focused analysis.

In contrast, foreign scholars tend to emphasize the novel's narrative techniques, post-colonial perspectives, and intricate interplay between different cultures. Although foreign researchers have indeed conducted research on female awakening, their research focus usually focuses on the discussion of individual autonomy, which is different from the more specific and detailed analysis perspective in China.

## **2. Female Consciousness**

### **(1) From ecological perspective**

This perspective advocates a culture of living in harmony with nature. This perspective promotes both social harmony and environmental protection.

In *The House on Mango Street*, the application of ecofeminist principles is vividly illustrated through the constraints imposed by men on women's attire and the limitations placed on women's lives by marriage and family structures. Many women in the book are depicted as dressing to please men and being bound by their marital and familial obligations.<sup>[1]</sup> The heroine Esperanza's awakening self-consciousness serves as a quintessential embodiment of ecofeminism. Through her interactions with her father and brother, she gains profound insights into the flaws of patriarchal society and reevaluates the male figures around her. Her aspiration to own her own home and her courage to pursue self-worth, rather than conforming to pleasing and clinging to men, reflect her resistance against the male-centered paradigm.

### **(2) From colonial perspective**

This perspective emphasizes the critique of Eurocentric discourse narratives, advocates respect for the

heterogeneity and power dynamics between different cultures, and is committed to deconstructing traditional binary oppositions. This theory speaks up for marginalized female groups, striving for equality and respect.

Esperanza's developmental journey exemplifies her self-exploration and awakening within a distinct historical context. As a Mexican-American woman, she navigates the intersection of multiple cultural spheres, confronting the pressures of mainstream culture and grappling with her own cultural identity. Within the constraints of traditional societal norms, her identity undergoes a complex and multifaceted struggle. Through introspection and critical observation, Esperanza gradually cultivates independent thought and begins to reassess her surroundings. She no longer passively accepts established conventions but actively seeks to realize her self-worth and personal autonomy. Ultimately, she makes the deliberate choice to leave Mango Street in search of her own space, symbolizing her proactive control over her destiny and pursuit of broader horizons.

### **(3) Female consciousness**

Female consciousness refers to the profound awareness and pursuit by women, as autonomous subjects, of their status, role, and value within society. It emphasizes gender equality, personal autonomy, and individual dignity, reflecting women's deep understanding and active struggle for their identity, rights, and social responsibilities.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza's female consciousness is depicted with rich and multi-faceted nuances. As a Mexican-American woman, Esperanza holds a deep and abiding recognition of her Mexican heritage, while concurrently and resolutely striving to assert and establish her own unique value and independence. Her intense longing for a house of her very own symbolizes her passionate quest for self-autonomy and a liberation from the constricting and often oppressive societal constraints. The house, in this context, transcends its mere physical manifestation; it morphs into a haven, a sanctuary where she can wholeheartedly and without reservation embrace her individuality and the precious gift of freedom.

Through the medium of writing, Esperanza emerges as an independent and deeply introspective woman, one who possesses the acumen and the courage to critically examine the deeply entrenched patriarchal society that surrounds her. By closely observing the lives of those in her immediate vicinity and through her interactions with men, she not only ceases to blindly worship or conform to the overbearing authority of the male gender but instead passionately pursues a state of genuine and equitable parity between men and women. This remarkable transformation is not merely a rejection of the conventional and restrictive gender roles but constitutes a powerful and assertive proclamation of her own agency and the right to determine her own destiny.

Furthermore, Esperanza's unwavering and dogged pursuit of freedom and her cherished dreams serves as yet another compelling exemplification of her awakened and vibrant female consciousness. She ardently yearns to break free from the confining and restrictive boundaries of Mango Street, a locale replete with numerous and pervasive limitations imposed on women's marital status, family life, and their personal aspirations and ambitions. Esperanza firmly believes that through her own unwavering efforts, unyielding perseverance, and an indomitable spirit of determination, she can mold and shape an ideal life for herself. Rather than passively accepting the narrow and limiting notion that happiness can only be attained through the institution of marriage or through reliance on men, she decidedly and resolutely chooses to embark on her own distinctive path towards happiness, the realization of her dreams, and the unfettered pursuit of freedom. Her remarkable journey is one characterized by profound self-discovery and an empowering assertion of her own identity and potential. It is a courageous challenge to the imposed and often unjust norms, and a resolute forging of her own unique and empowering destiny.

### **3. The Process of Esperanza's Awakening of Female Consciousness**

Esperanza Cordero, a young Chicana (Mexican-American) girl, is the protagonist of the bildungsroman (coming-

of-age tale) *The House on Mango Street*. In this book, it describes Esperanza's development from a small girl to a young adult in the Latino section of Chicago. She is growing up with several kids from primarily Mexican American households in a modest home in an urban Chicago neighborhood. She manages the stigma of poverty at her Catholic school, the sense of suffocation that comes from living in a small place with her parents and brothers, the challenges of growing up sexually aware, and the loss of childhood innocence.

### **(1) Childhood innocence**

At the beginning of the story, Esperanza is a young girl with a rich imagination. She observes the world around her with curiosity. For example, in the vignette "Hairs," she describes the different types of hair in her family, showing her attention to detail and her early awareness of individual differences. However, at this stage, her understanding of gender is still relatively simple and influenced by the traditional environment around her. She accepts the gender roles prescribed to her without question. She helps her mother with household chores, dresses in the manner deemed appropriate for girls, and internalizes the idea that her future will likely involve marriage and motherhood.

### **(2) The awareness of gender difference**

The boys and the girls live in separate world. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls. Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friend ... not ours. (Cisneros)

"Separate world" means that Esperanza already understands some of the gender disparity in her society. She knows that she can't be the best friend of Carlos or Kiki because of gender, but for now it is innocent and confined to her siblings. The early manifestation of her yearning for autonomy is her wish to have a best buddy "of her own."

However, as she matures, Esperanza begins to question these roles. Her awareness of gender difference starts with her realization of the limitations imposed by her gender. She observes the ways in which her mother's life is restricted by her role as a homemaker and the lack of financial independence this entails. Esperanza also notes the different expectations placed on her and her brother. While Carlos is encouraged to dream big and aspire to greatness, she is reminded that her future is more circumscribed.

This awareness is further heightened when Esperanza encounters other women in her community who are also struggling against gender constraints. For instance, as Sally represents a kind of sexual maturity that Esperanza finds intriguing, she becomes an important figure for Esperanza. Sally appears to have retained her autonomy while still being desirable to boys, and Esperanza wants to befriend Sally and learn her ways.

### **(3) Women's awaking in Marriage**

Esperanza explains that her name means "hope" in English, but in Spanish it means "sadness" and "waiting." She got the name from her great-grandmother, who was such a free spirit but became sad because of her marriage. She realized that marriage brought sorrow to women, and her grandmother looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow, so she said that "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window." (Cisneros)

As Esperanza grows older, she encounters more limitations imposed by traditional gender roles. In "The Family of Little Foot," she recounts the story of a woman who was married off at a young age and had many children, eventually becoming tired and old before her time. This story deeply affects Esperanza and makes her realize the potential pitfalls of a traditional female life path.

Esperanza lives in a neighborhood where the confines of marriage and family are palpable. Her family, like many others in the community, is structured around traditional gender roles. Esperanza's mother, for instance, is depicted as a devoted homemaker, responsible for nurturing her family and maintaining the household. This role is both a source of pride and a constraint, as it limits her mother's ability to pursue her own dreams and aspirations. The

community reinforces these gender roles through social norms and expectations. Women are expected to marry, have children, and manage their households, while men are the breadwinners and decision-makers. This binary division of labor creates a system of confinement for women, who are often trapped in relationships and roles that do not fulfill their personal or intellectual needs. Esperanza's observations showed her that she could not follow the traditional path of a woman's life, and that marriage in a patriarchal society brought more confinement than happiness to women.

#### **(4) Challenges to traditional gender roles**

Esperanza's journey begins with her family's move into a small red house on Mango Street. This house, though far from perfect, represents a sense of stability and a step away from the constant moving that has characterized her life. However, Esperanza's aspirations for her future home transcend the modest confines of Mango Street. She envisions a house that is "completely my own" (Cisneros) a place where she can be free from the constraints of others and live according to her own terms. This house represents not only physical shelter but also a space where she can be free and independent. It symbolizes her longing to break away from the restrictions of her family and community and to create a life on her own terms.

This dream of ownership and autonomy is a direct challenge to traditional gender roles that often restrict women's access to property and financial independence. And her desire for a house that is hers alone underscores her rejection of the idea that women should be content with living in spaces owned and controlled by men. Esperanza's desire for independence becomes stronger as she continues to grow.

In "Hips," she writes about the pressure on women to have perfect bodies and the expectations placed upon them. By doing so, she starts to challenge the narrow definitions of beauty and femininity imposed by society.

Esperanza's journey is also marked by a growing sense of self-awareness and agency. As she navigates the complexities of her neighborhood and her family dynamics, she becomes increasingly aware of her own desires and aspirations. She begins to question the societal expectations placed upon her and to assert her independence and autonomy. For example, Esperanza rejects the idea that she should conform to the traditional roles prescribed for women in her community. She refuses to be defined by her relationships with men or to accept the limitations imposed by her gender. Instead, she asserts her own identity and agency, making choices that align with her own values and aspirations. She begins to express her dissatisfaction with such constraints through her writing.

### **4. The Values of Women's Awakening**

#### **(1) Personal values**

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza's journey of female awakening reveals highly meaningful personal values that are ultimately embodied in her success in breaking free from the confines of tradition and realizing her own breakthrough.

As Esperanza grows up, she witnesses the injustices endured by the women around her and finds herself constantly in such an oppressive environment. Most of the women in the book have long been under the influence of patriarchy. Their sense of self is severely lacking, reducing them to a subordinate position to men. Take Esperanza's mother for example. She's trapped in a life filled with endless domestic chores and a male - dominated lifestyle, having no right to choose her own path. In the chapter "The Red Clown," Esperanza recounts her painful experience of being molested at a carnival. Esperanza expects her best friend Sally to come to her rescue, but Sally never shows up. The screaming "Sally, you're lying, you're lying!" is repeated throughout the text, emphasizing her isolation and helplessness at the time of the assault, as well as reflecting women's reliance on others to help them in dangerous situations and the trauma of not being able to do so. From a young age, Esperanza realizes the misfortune of her

grandmother's inability to control her own destiny, and she carries the dream of writing in her heart and longs for a house of her own, a longing that from the very beginning highlights her rebellion against the traditional fate of women and the awakening of women's self-awareness.

Esperanza's sense of female self is reflected in her attitude towards rules and life. In a complex environment where patriarchal oppression, racial discrimination and sexism are intertwined, Esperanza gradually realizes that the only way to break free, build her own hut, and carve out a world of her own is through education and writing. In her quest for female freedom and equality, she not only realized the humble status of traditional women, but also dared to raise her own questions, and worked hard to break the shackles on her body and build her own identity. Esperanza eventually leaves Mango Street and gets her dream house through her writing, a house that is not attached to any man but belongs to her. The "house" is an important image in the whole book, and in women like Esperanza, who seeks for the awakening of women's consciousness and self-worth, the house is a symbol of the success of the rebellion against the patriarchal society and the independence of women. The fact that Esperanza finally gets her own house is also a symbol of her breakthrough of the long-standing oppression and constraints imposed on women by the patriarchal society. Esperanza's awakening of women's consciousness, breaking the shackles, continuously enriching and improving herself, and actively searching for her own living space, which truly realizes women's self-worth, and at the same time also points out the value of women's consciousness and the road for the majority of female immigrant groups.

## **(2) Family values**

The traditional Mexican family usually consists of parents, children and grandparents, with very strong ties between the three generations and a more distinct division of gender roles. The father is usually responsible for the financial aspects of the family, while the mother is in charge of housekeeping and childcare. Esperanza's mother is a hard-working housewife who is busy with the household chores as well as taking care of the young Esperanza and her sister Renee.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza's home epitomizes the traditional Mexican family. The great-grandmother of Esperanza was once a woman who was free like a wild horse. While after marriage, she can only stay at home. Esperanza's mother, talented and intelligent, speaks two languages, can sing operas, repair television sets, and painted, who used to be a woman with a high-quality pursuit of life. After marriage, she had to give up all this, and become a "angel in this house", her personal ambitions subordinated to the needs of her family.

The fate of the female elders around her made Esperanza realize that she couldn't choose to live the same life as them. Esperanza reinforces her dreams and pursuits. Her awakening not only allowed her to break free from her traditional female destiny, but it was also a challenge to break down the traditional division of labor in the family, prompting men to become more involved in household chores and caring for their families. Simultaneously, women are empowered to explore and pursue their passions and careers beyond the confines of the home, unshackled by societal expectations.

## **(3) Social values**

The value of women's self-awareness at the societal level is of extraordinary and profound significance. To begin with, the awakening of women's self-awareness serves as a linchpin in vigorously advancing the concept of gender equality. Take Esperanza, for instance. Her relentless pursuit to break free from the shackles of traditional patriarchal society exemplifies this awakening. Through her dedication to education and writing, she realizes her dreams and ultimately leaves Mango Street, no longer bound by dependency on men. As the book poignantly notes, leaving is to come back, and Esperanza's journey stands as a powerful testament to the promotion of gender equality.

Secondly, the awakening of women's self-consciousness acts as a catalyst for enriching the cultural ecology of society. Alicia's story in *The House on Mango Street* illustrates this transformation. Despite the premature burden



of family responsibilities following her mother's death—rising early each day to prepare tortillas and perform household chores—Alicia refuses to be confined to traditional familial roles. Instead, she dares to challenge the entrenched patriarchal norms, pursuing education and striving for economic independence. Her determination to seek her own decision-making power not only breaks free from the limitations imposed on women in traditional society but also significantly enriches the social and cultural fabric.

Furthermore, the awakening of women's self-awareness fosters unity, solidarity, and mutual support among women. The female characters in *The House on Mango Street* provide examples of this inherent unity. For example, when Esperanza encountered adversity and setbacks, her friends gave her unwavering support and help. This unity not only strengthened her resolve to pursue freedom and equality, deepened her belief that she could overcome challenges and achieve her aspirations, but also strengthened her faith in the power of unity and persistence. This mutual support has profoundly impacted the personal growth, development, and empowerment of women, fostering a spirit of resilience that enables them to overcome various difficulties and challenges.

Finally, the awakening of women's self-awareness serves as a powerful driving force behind societal progress. In the face of countless injustices and hardships, the women in the book never waver in their pursuit of dreams and rights. Their persistence and efforts have not only empowered individual women but have also made significant contributions to the development and progress of communities like Mango Street. The awakening and struggle of these women have dignified and uplifted their lives while promoting the overall advancement of society, paving the way for a more harmonious and inclusive future.

## 5. Conclusion

*The House on Mango Street*, an extraordinary and remarkable creation by Sandra Cisneros, has persistently remained a primary and essential focus of in-depth scholarly exploration not only within the boundaries of the nation but also on the international stage. This novel prominently spotlights Esperanza, a vibrant and youthful Mexican-American girl who is undergoing the process of maturation in the Latino immigrant enclave of Mango Street in Chicago. As Esperanza advances through the course of her life, her innocent and childlike naivete gradually fades and vanishes, giving way to an increasingly acute and heightened perception of the significant gender disparities that exist in society. Simultaneously, there is a burgeoning and escalating discontentment with the restrictive and confining impositions brought about by traditional marriage. Moreover, she passionately and fervently embarks on an unwavering pursuit of freedom and independence. Through these profoundly transformative and life-altering encounters, Esperanza's self-awareness undergoes a vigorous and flourishing growth, gradually maturing and ripening. Eventually, this internal evolution compellingly drives her to make the weighty and momentous choice of departing from Mango Street, all in the pursuit of realizing her own intrinsic worth and attaining a sense of autonomy.

The awakening of Esperanza's self-awareness holds an exceptionally profound and far-reaching significance. Throughout this remarkable odyssey and journey of self-discovery, the inherent and intrinsic value of women is gradually and steadily unveiled and exposed. The inflexible and unyielding division of labor that has long persisted within the family structure begins to undergo a gradual transformation and alteration. Furthermore, the concepts and notions of gender equality are passionately and vigorously advocated and promoted. This profound transformation not only empowers individual women by bestowing them with a sense of agency and self-determination but also makes a substantial and notable contribution to the comprehensive development and advancement of society as a whole. By delving deeply and comprehensively into Esperanza's self-awareness awakening process as depicted in *The House on Mango Street*, it holds substantial enlightenment and serves as a valuable reference point for contemporary society. This exploration facilitates and promotes the continuous and further progress of the society, paving the way for a more inclusive, equal, and progressive social landscape.

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