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THE ANALYSIS OF SANDRA CISNEROS' *HOUSE ON MANGO STREET* BASED ON SOCIAL CRITICISM OF GLORIA ANZALDÚA'S *BORDERLANDS: LA FRONTERA*

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Abstract

The article deals with the main female characters that appear in Sandra Cisneros' collection of vignettes, *House on Mango Street* (1991). It sheds light on their lives and motives for their actions, through social criticism of Gloria Anzaldúa and the main points she establishes in her semi-autobiographical collection of essays *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1999). The topics Anzaldúa addresses give an insight into the Chicano identity, and the struggle of Chicano women in particular. Through her vantage point, I discuss gender roles, the immigrants' search for identity and their quest for a more dignified life, by trying to reconcile the antagonizing forces of the different parts of their identity.

Key words: Chicano, Mestiza, immigrants, gender roles, borderlands

Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004), the author, cultural theorist and feminist philosopher, born in Raymondville, south Texas (American National Biography Online), was, as she described in *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1999), “the first in six generations to leave the Valley, the only one in family to leave home” (Anzaldúa 1999: 38). Being Chicana herself, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, she aptly describes the position and role of Mexican women in her culture, the “cultural tyranny” (Anzaldúa 1999: 38) they experience, as well as the social position of the Mestizo population in general. She sheds light on the centuries-long struggle of living in “the borderlands”, experiencing the ostracism of white Americans and having family members from Mexico risk their lives to come to a promised land, only to be treated as “cucarachos”. In her essay *The Homeland, Aztlan/ El otro Mexico*, there is a passage where she explains the situation they find themselves in:

Those who make it past the checking points of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano *barrios* in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in a no-man’s borderland, caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation, the illegal refugees are some of the poorest and the most exploited of any people in the U.S. (Anzaldúa 1999: 34)

Further on in her essay, she expresses an even bigger concern, which permeates her entire collection of essays, and is especially important for the topic of this article, and it is the concern for the Mexican woman. She writes:

The Mexican woman is especially at risk. Often the *coyote* (smuggler) doesn’t feed her for days or let her go to the bathroom. Often he rapes her or sells her into prostitution. She cannot call on county state health or economic resources because she doesn’t know English and she fears deportation. American employers are quick to take advantage of her helplessness. She can’t go home. She’s sold her house, her furniture, borrowed from friends in order to pay the *coyote* who charges her four to five thousand dollars to smuggle her to Chicago. She may work as a live-in maid for white, Chicano or Latino households for as little as 15\$ a week. [...] *La mojada, la mujer indocumentada*, is doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness. As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain. (Anzaldúa 1999: 34, 35)

To understand the subject matter behind *House on Mango Street* (1991), one must consider the terms *Chicana* and *Mestiza*. As the term *Chicana* generally refers “(in North America) to a woman or girl of Mexican origin or decent”

(Oxford Dictionaries) the term *Mestiza* is used “(in Latin America) [for] a person of mixed race, especially one having Spanish and American Indian parentage” (*ibid*). The latter term is especially dealt with in Anzaldúa’s seventh essay, *La consciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness*. In this essay she mentions Jose Vasconcelos, a Mexican philosopher, who “envisaged *una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color, la primera raza sinesis del globo*” (Anzaldúa 1999: 99). “Opposite to the theory of pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity” (*ibid*). In her essay, Anzaldúa speaks of an “[...] ‘alien’ consciousness [that] is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*: It is a consciousness of the Borderlands (*ibid*). It is a consciousness that is a product of “[...] racial, ideological, cultural and biological crosspollinization” (*ibid*). But as much as this definition sounds promising, and describes a new consciousness which is richer and full of potential, it often reveals a life filled with struggle and search for identity. Anzaldúa eloquently describes this in the following passage:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. [...] Within us and within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture. (Anzaldúa, 1999 : 100)

This is the struggle Chicanas face every day of their lives, when they try to reconcile the different aspects of their identity and strive to lead a better life in a country that is often unwelcoming to everything they represent as Chicanas and as immigrants. In her essays, Anzaldúa masterfully conveys her theory of the borderlands and Jorge Capetillo-Ponce, in his article *Exploring Gloria Anzaldúa’s Methodology in Borderlands/ La Frontera – The New Mestiza* (2006), observes that Gloria Anzaldúa had taken

her analysis of the emergence of a New Mestiza consciousness into unexpected and unexplored territories. [...] Not only does she shift continually from analysis to meditation, and refuse to recognize disciplinary barriers, but she speaks poetically even when dealing with cultural, political and social issues. (Capetillo-Ponce 2006: 87)

Similarly, Sandra Cisneros portrays her characters through the eyes and narration of Esperanza, the main character of *The House on Mango Street* (1991). Their stories are soaked with tragedy, but yet they are not presented in a somber

and gloomy way. Esperanza's accounts are, similar to Anzaldúa's, very poetic and implicit in meaning, thus having a more powerful impact on reader's ability to relate. She speaks almost matter-of-factly about the lives of Sally, Marin, Alicia and others, and demonstrates that such is the reality for them, and lamenting their fate or giving in to desperation is not the luxury they have. Of course, they do, to some extent, correspond to her age, as certain aspects are presented from a girl's point-of-view. However, she is a girl who had seen more than an average young person, and who has had life teach her lessons many adults never receive in their lifetime. She learns by example, and observes which path not to choose in life. Nevertheless, she is somewhat trapped in her seemingly pre-determined role, struggling to take control of the course of her life. She falls prey to the manipulations of a man and is robbed of the ultimate virtue in her culture, her virginity.

Sandra Cisneros, the acclaimed author of several books that deal with the Chicano and the immigrant topics, was born in Chicago in 1954. She studied at Loyola University of Chicago and the University of Iowa. Among her most well-known books are *Bad Boys* (1980), *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987, 1992), *Loose Woman* (1994), *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), *The House on Mango Street* (1991) and *Caramelo* (2002). The novel of particular importance to this article, "*The House on Mango Street*, first published in 1984, won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award in 1985 and is required reading in middle schools, high schools, and universities across" (sandracisneros.com) the U.S. It is a novel, more accurately, a collection of vignettes, narrated by a girl named Esperanza. She is the main character from whose perspective we experience all the stories about different people in her neighbourhood. She is an excellent observer of gender roles that her Mexican culture imposes on her and her peers. She observes and describes how different people, especially women, deal with their role in the community, as well as in society in general.

She begins her story with herself, and how her name bears an already pre-determined sadness, as if she were aware of the "Mestiza consciousness" Anzaldúa speaks of, and how her destiny, as a woman, and as a Mexican immigrant, is meant to be a struggle. She expresses the awareness of the weight of her heritage, since it was her great-grandmother's name. She explains:

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. [...] I would've liked 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. (Cisneros 1991: 11)

She understands her great-grandmother's wish, much to the resemblance of her own, to have a future of her own design and not give too much importance on marriage. However, a rebellious woman was something that was not to be tolerated, and matters had to be settled then, similarly as they are settled now. She writes:

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the ways 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. (Cisneros 1991: 11)

Here, she states her point-of-view about her own future, and makes it clear that she would never accept this heritage passed on by so many women before her, who had to passively watch their lives pass them by, and perform the tasks that were expected of them, on account of being Chicano women. Esperanza's mother, in between repeating to herself "I could've been somebody, you know" and telling her how "shame is a bad thing" because "it keeps you down" (Cisneros 1991: 91), encourages her to try to be the master of her own destiny and amount to something in her life. Esperanza expresses her conviction in the following passage:

[...] I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. [...] I have begun my quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (Cisneros 1991: 89)

Anzaldúa possesses this same mentality, and in the description of her experience as a young girl, hers greatly resembles Esperanza's:

At a very early age I had a strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair. I had a stubborn will. It tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms, no matter how unsuitable to others they were. *Terca*. Even as a child I would not obey. I was "lazy". Instead of ironing my younger brother's shirts or cleaning the cupboards, I would pass my hours studying, reading, painting, writing. Every bit of self-faith I'd painstakingly gathered took a beating daily. Nothing in my culture approved of me. (Anzaldúa 1999: 38)

All the female characters Esperanza describes in *House on Mango Street* (1991) are predominantly isolated and kept quiet by the men in their lives. The young girls dream of a better life which solely depends on men, who are the only catalysts of change, and the ones who can, by means of proposing matrimony, change their lives. The only character that does not invest her hopes in a man is Alicia.

She is yet another girl who faces her father's deeply set and rigid beliefs about gender roles and the position of women. He believes there should be no distraction in Alicia's life, no silly or unnecessary thoughts (she is afraid of mice) that would keep her from her duties as a woman in charge of a household. Alicia, being so unfortunate as to have lost her mother, is the one who needs to run the household. Her father believes that "a woman's place [in the evening] is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs behind the sink, beneath the four-clawed tub, under the swollen floorboards nobody fixes" (Cisneros 1991: 31) Alicia wishes she hadn't inherited "her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness" (Cisneros 1991: 31) and she is a smart girl who managed to enter university, so she would not have to waste her life in a factory or as a housewife. Esperanza comments, that Alicia "[i]s afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers" (Cisneros 1991: 32). With the latter she wishes to express how crippling and fear-invoking her father's beliefs and expectations are for Alicia. Her entire life could take a different course, should he make it his business to prevent her from following her dreams.

Anzaldúa believes that "[c]ulture (read males) professes to protect women", but "[a]ctually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles" (Anzaldúa 1999: 39). She goes even further in depicting the true sentiment of these women:

The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits. (Anzaldúa 1999: 42)

Esperanza's friend Sally, represents Chicano women, who wish to live a better life, but are convinced, that they will achieve it only by putting all their hopes in a man, and renouncing all power over their own destiny. Sally's father, who desperately holds on to tradition and tries to enforce it in raising his daughter, resorts to physical violence to try to keep her at her best behaviour and remain pure until marriage. This was the ultimate virtue in a woman's life, to remain a virgin, and by doing so, be a good woman.

Anzaldúa, in her second essay *Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan* speaks of this "cultural tyranny" and states that:

[...] culture is made by those in power – men. Males make the rules and laws, women transmit them. [...] Men were enforcing this traditional behaviour, without truly understanding it, and women followed and obeyed in order to avoid physical punishment, shame, or simply to avoid the social tag of a “*mujer mala*”. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being *bociconas* (big mouths), for being *callajeras* (going to visit and gossip with neighbours), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives? The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. (Anzaldúa 1999: 38)

In her opinion, women in the Chicano culture are quickly categorized:

If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce in favour of the male she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us. As a working class people our chief activity is to put food in our mouths, a roof over our heads and clothes on our backs. [...] Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother – only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children. (Anzaldúa 1999: 39)

The cultural “paradigm” that women should not rebel, maintains them in a permanently inferior position, frightened to overstep their limits that have been established for women “of their kind”. Anzaldúa demonstrates this by saying:

In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness [...] 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 are better than others, *que te crees grande*. With ambition (condemned by the Mexican culture and valued in the Anglo) comes envy. *Respeto* carries with it a set of rules so that social categories and hierarchies will be kept in order: respect is reserved for *la abuela, papá, el patron*, those with power in the community. Women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants. (Anzaldúa 1999: 40)

Similarly as Sally, Marin is another female character Esperanza speaks about, who is also portrayed as a sad figure, which is desperately aiming for a better life,

one sold Avon product at a time, and working as a baby-sitter for her cousins. Although, she has a boyfriend in Puerto Rico, she dreams of an American man who would offer her better opportunities in life. Her mentality is that of many young girls from Mexican families with rigid traditional views that represent the only stability in a life full of struggle, belittlement and uncertainty in a foreign country. Marin, who lights a cigarette outside the house every night and listens to the radio in the cold, shares her wisdom with Esperanza, that gives her insight into the motives of the women she knows, by saying that “it doesn’t matter if it’s cold out or if the radio doesn’t work or if we’ve got nothing to say to each other. What matters [...] is for the boys to see us and for us to see them” (Cisneros 1991: 27). And Esperanza knows all too well that “Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere”, “[i]s waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (Cisneros 1991: 27).

Esperanza also speaks about the stereotypes she is faced with, when other people arrive to her neighbourhood. She explains:

Those who don’t know any better come into our neighbourhood scared. They think we are dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. (Cisneros 1991: 28)

She realises that some people in her neighbourhood look unusual and sinister on a surface level, but people in her community don’t feel threatened because they know them, and accept them as one of them. But Esperanza is acutely aware of the duality of their standards considering their own visit to a different community. She admits:

All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighbourhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled uptight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes. (Cisneros 1991: 28)

This is how stereotypes and fears are perpetuated. Every immigrant community feels vulnerable in a foreign country and finds acceptance only within the confines of their own neighbourhoods. They find refuge in the most rigid of cultural beliefs and traditions, in ways of life that are oppressive, but at the same time incredibly appeasing and close to home. However, it is interesting how diligently they reference stereotypes themselves, when considering others from their own community. They use them in a very bitter, resigned fashion. An example of such an event is when Marin meets a man who is later killed in a road accident and she turns out to be the last one to have seen him alive. She is helpful to the police, but deep down she reprimands herself. She tells herself

that he was of no importance to her. "Just another *brazier* who didn't speak English. Just another wetback. [...] The ones who always look ashamed." (Cisneros 1991: 69) Esperanza explains to the reader:

His name was Geraldo. And his home is in another country. The ones he left behind are far away, will wonder, shrug, remember. Geraldo – he went north... we never heard from him again. (Cisneros 1991: 66)

Anzaldúa addresses this issue when she writes about how the Mexicans "have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks" (Anzaldúa 1999: 33).

Faceless, nameless, invisible, taunted with "Hey cucaracho" (cockroach). Trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation. Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a closed country. (Anzaldúa 1999: 33)

They are often called *mojados* or wetbacks, because they

float on inflatable rafts across *el rio Grande*, or wade or swim across naked, clutching their clothes over their heads. Holding onto the grass, they pull themselves along the banks with a prayer [...] on their lips. (Anzaldúa 1999: 33)

If they are fortunate, they end up in *barrios*, across the border from, what Chicanos call, "North America's rubbish dump" (Anzaldúa 1999: 33). They join communities ravaged with poverty, but held together by shared struggle in a hope for a better life. For Esperanza, a better life is represented by the house she will once own. It will be completely different from the house on Mango Street which, for her, represents shame and the inability to do better – a house not worthy of pride, but she will do better in her life. She feels she represents all the people who are disenfranchised and underprivileged, especially Mexican women. She writes:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. (Cisneros 1991: 108)

This is her way of saying that she will claim her freedom and independence for those women she knew couldn't, and her house will represent to her a territory where she would belong, even if it was built in a country she never felt truly accepted.

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Analiza dela *House on Mango Street* Sandre Cisneros z vidika družbene kritike Glorie Anzaldúa v *Borderlands: La Frontera*

Prispevek obravnava glavne ženske like v zbirki vinjet Sandre Cisneros *House on Mango Street* (1991) ter analizira njihova dejanja in motive zanje skozi optiko kritiškega dela Glorie Anzaldúa *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1999).

Ključne besede: Chicano, Mestiza, migranti, vloge spolov, meja