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Alaina Marcuz

To the Women

According to The United States National Library of Medicine, children primarily adopt gender roles through familial customs and practices. Therefore, when children mature under the supervision of adult figures that normalize repressive gender stereotypes, the generations that are supposed to be creating change, eventually continue propagating a system of gender inequality. In Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street*, Esperanza's journey through adolescence is documented through the intertwining stories of women in her predominantly Hispanic community. Due to the lack of guidance from older women, Esperanza outwardly observes the women in her community through her innocent, and naïve lens as a way of learning Hispanic women's roles in a household and her community. Throughout *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros includes the theme of women looking through windows to illustrate the isolation and unfulfilled responsibility of older women to younger generations in breaking the cycle of female suppression Hispanic communities across the United States.

As a result of lacking a proper female role model to guide her, Sally becomes trapped in the same cycle as that of her female elders. At first, Esperanza is jealous of Sally's beauty and the attention she attracts from boys at school. However, this jealousy subsides after becoming more familiar with Sally. She learns that she has been trapped in her home from a young age, and that the abundance of male attention she receives is actually what holds her back. Similar to many husbands and fathers on Mango Street, Sally's insecure and physically abusive father keeps her confined to the house and limits her interactions with men because he believes, "to be this beautiful is trouble" (Cisneros 81). To keep her under his control, Sally's father weaponizes

her physical attributes and sexuality as a way of making her feel ashamed and rendering her completely powerless. Her father is aware that she has no one to turn to and also uses this to his advantage. Sally's mother, being the only woman in her life, merely puts a band-aid on the situation by "[rubbing] lard on all the places it hurts" (Cisneros 92). This mentality allows Sally to begin blaming herself or start crafting excuses on behalf of her father, insisting that "he never hits her hard" (Cisneros 92), or that "he just went crazy [and] he just forgot he was her father" (Cisneros 93).

By not condemning her husband's emotional and physical abuse, Sally's mother normalizes the abuse and propagates a victim-blaming mentality. Unfortunately, because she never receives any sort of guidance, Sally is unable to overcome the abuse and gets married at an extremely young age. She becomes a prisoner in her own home. She is "scared to go outside without [her husband's] permission" (Cisneros 102) and is forced to sit in a dark room because he "doesn't even let her look out the window" (Cisneros 102). Cisneros includes the progression of Sally being trapped in her home by her father throughout her childhood to eventually being confined to a room with no windows in her marriage to illustrate how she is completely let down by the older women in her life. Throughout Sally's early childhood, male dominance and toxic relationships were completely normalized. Examples of healthy relationships on Mango Street are far and few between and it is extremely difficult for a child to observe or learn anything different without proper teaching. Sally's story emphasizes how just one woman intervening could have impacted and changed the course of Sally's entire life. Instead, she ended up like most other women in her community do: alone, completely isolated behind a window, gazing down at the possibilities of what life could be.

Similar to Sally, Esperanza befriends a young woman named Rafaela, who gets married young and is severely limited by her husband due to her physical attributes. Her husband is “afraid she will run away since she is too beautiful” (Cisneros 79), and therefore limits her to the home, where Rafaela spends her life looking out the window. As she becomes better acquainted with Rafaela, Esperanza notices that, despite their proximity in age, Rafaela is “getting old from leaning out the window so much” (Cisneros 79), because she continually observes the commotion at the dance hall down the street. It pains Rafaela to witness from afar the “women much older than her throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys” (Cisneros 80), because she once lived the lifestyle they do currently. Rafaela knows that although it may be fulfilling in the moment to flirt and have an abundance of male attention, these women are on the track to fall into the same trap she did. They will find men at the dance hall “offering sweeter drinks, promising to keep them on a silver chain” (Cisneros 80), and although it may seem almost perfect or like an escape at the time, in reality, the men are just looking for a women to utilize as an object for their personal pleasure. Rafaela wishes she could guide and warn the women that the companionship, freedom, and personal autonomy they enjoy now will slowly fade away.

Cisneros includes Rafaela’s vignette in contrast to Sally’s story to illustrate how the generation of women on Mango Street who are the role models feel, and their struggle to break out from behind their windows to create change. Rafaela is able to reflect on her past and learn from her mistakes, but because she has been belittled and suppressed her entire life, she finds it difficult to leave her home and advocate for the younger generation so they do not fall into the same trap she did. It is also important to keep in mind that Rafaela is still extremely young and a

victim of isolation herself, so to her disobeying her husband, leaving her home, and attempting to reason with girls she doesn't even know will listen seems very risky and not worth the battle. Rafaela's story conveys another young girl let down by the older generation on Mango Street, but it also gives insight on how difficult it can be for women that are already isolated to break free from behind their windows and overcome the emotional and physical barriers of being trapped for so long.

Throughout *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros includes different vignettes that illustrate the plight of Hispanic women and expose the negative effects isolation and suppression have on both old and young women on Mango Street. As a result of lacking proper female role models, the younger generation of women are forced to endure the same struggles as their elders. For example, Sally and Rafaela are limited to their own form of solitary confinement, wishing they had the opportunity or proper guidance while they were younger to change their lives and chase their dreams. Cisneros also includes Rafaela's story to give an alternate perspective. After being suppressed her entire life by men and residing in a community where genuine female companionship is rare, finding the courage to disobey her husband, leave her home, and advocate for other women to do the same is extremely challenging. Sandra Cisneros is aware of how difficult it is for women like Rafaela to speak out, and the detrimental affect it has on young women like Sally. Therefore, she dedicates the book "a las mujeres" or "to the women" so it can be used as an example of the importance of challenging societal norms, female companionship, and teaching younger generations what a relationship based on equality consists of.

Works Cited

- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York, Division of Random House Inc. 1984.
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