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Jacey Cornett

The Connection of Flowers to Cultural and Feminine Identity

Throughout the vignettes of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, a young and inquisitive Esperanza shares the difficulties of growing up in her Chicano community.

Esperanza's navigation presents various aspects of Mexican and American culture, causing her to often ponder the validity of applying certain practices and beliefs to her own life. This moral crossroad Esperanza encounters forces her to determine the encompassing components of her identity and Cisneros highlights this phenomenon with the recurrence of flowers in her short stories. Esperanza's curiosity and desire to flourish is reflected by her constant references and observations connected to flowers since they serve as a mechanism for highlighting the struggles of defining the identity of various female characters.

One of the most consistent features displayed by Esperanza's descriptions is the comparison of her mother to roses. This accentuates the relationship between Mexican culture and the constraints tied to it in an American setting. When describing how her mother looks, Esperanza likens her hair to "little rosettes" (Cisneros 6) and her hands to "knotted rosebuds" (Cisneros 90). In suggesting that Esperanza's mother is similar to flowers that have not fully blossomed, Cisneros implies that it is quite difficult for her to flourish to her full potential (economic status, gender inequality, etc) as she is hindered by the impoverished state of her Chicago neighborhood. Considering flowers are also closely tied to femininity (and, thus, features of fragility and delicacy), this conveys the message that Esperanza's mother is unable to express any sort of liberation or expression within her community solely because of her gender. This supplements Esperanza's mother's sentiment of the belief that she "could've been

somebody” (Cisneros 90). Even though she is full of qualities that would be valuable to society, the internalization of misogynistic tendencies causes Esperanza to, sadly, view her own mother in an inferior manner.

Additionally, Esperanza only refers to other Latina women concerning roses (and no other kind of flower) to expound upon the notion that Chicana women are confined in their roles and have no room to step outside the box in expressing their femininity. Esperanza refers to Mamacita as having an aura likened to “fuschia roses” (Cisneros 76) and toes similar to “little rosebuds” (Cisneros 77) when she first observes her. Mamacita is criticized for her poor English skills (Cisneros 77), implying her similarity to roses is representative of the shame associated with expressing her Mexican heritage in American culture. She is unable to bloom like a real rose since the area suppresses the components of her identity. Esperanza also extends the image of roses to Sally with the “linoleum roses on the floor” (Cisneros 102), a part of the interior design of the home she is imprisoned in. The artificial qualities of this flower symbolizes the inability of Sally to ever truly and naturally thrive because the system of abuse she endures prohibits her from conveying her own defining characteristics. Esperanza’s comparisons of women in her community to roses reflects Cisneros act of highlighting that this specific flower serves as a social commentary for the injustices faced by Latina women every day.

Esperanza purposely never refers to herself as having a connection to roses in order to express her determination in making sure the negative influences surrounding her will not aid in shaping her identity. When Esperanza’s mother provides her with “a new slip with a little rose on it” (Cisneros 46), Esperanza is uncomfortable with bearing this flower and contributes her lack of participation in laughing with her family because of her new clothes (Cisneros 47). The

uneasiness of this situation is representative of Esperanza's rejection in sharing the same rose-like qualities of other Latina women because she seeks to provide and practice her own definition of a strong and empowered female in her "quiet war" (Cisneros 89). This idea is supported by the notion that Esperanza's future home will be decorated with "pretty purple petunias" (Cisneros 108), signaling that she is separating her potential identity, in a distinct manner, from the commonality of rose-like women in her childhood community. Esperanza works to avoid the shame encompassed by her mother (Cisneros 90) since her tenacious attitude demands a different pathway for herself. In her desire to grow her into her own type of flower, Cisneros expresses that the characteristics of Esperanza's current environment heavily influence her attempt to escape from such a degrading situation.

Prior to Esperanza's description of her petunias, she describes her fascination in "The Monkey Garden" with multiple types of flowers to symbolize the various options of exploration at her availability which are fueled by the struggles she faces with finding her own sense of belonging. Esperanza claimed the beautiful flowers were too few in her neighborhood (Cisneros 30), hinting at a frustration with other females and their complacency associated with lack of growth and change. While it is not necessarily true that all females are satisfied with their current status and roles, Esperanza becomes aware of the fact that she possesses the ability to stop obeying the social norms of her environment. Even with the lack of female characters untouched by oppressive principles, Esperanza wishes to grow much like the concrete flowers (Cisneros 95) in an act of defiance. Esperanza's interest in the non-rose flowers marks a moment in her desire to define herself outside of Mexican culture.

However, some may argue that since the initial glamour of the garden wears off once it no longer becomes a “good place” (Cisneros 98) for Esperanza, it points at the notion that she retracts from defining herself outside of Mexican culture. Ultimately, finding the balance between expressing both cultures proves to be a difficult task for all Latina women as they are likened to “soggy flowers” (Cisneros 96), bogged down by the patriarchal features that demand uniform and specific illustrations as to what a female should consist of. Even when Esperanza tries her hardest to bloom into a beautiful flower, she is held back by the historical foundations of both her Mexican and American culture that pruned women into remaining a “knotted rosebud”(Cisneros 90), proving that the overwhelming obstacles faced by these women makes it nearly impossible to label their identity with one defining characteristic.

Cisneros’ utilization of flowers and their connections to identity deliver the relationship between one’s culture and the effects that it has upon the roles in life available to women. In Esperanza’s coming of age moments, her associations of certain women (and herself) with specific flowers provide the idea that communities lacking the correct supplements to cultivate growth breed unfair treatment directed towards females. The conflict of Esperanza identifying herself with one specific flower directly comments upon one thing: the lack of society’s willingness to promote positive definitions of self-worth and flourishing for women.

Works Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage Books, 1984.