

Changing Cultures of Solitude: Reclusiveness in the Short Fiction of Sandra Cisneros

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Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) is both the coming-of-age novel of Esperanza, its narrator and protagonist, and a collection of vignettes questioning existential and cultural certainties of mostly teenage girls growing up in the Mexican American barrio of Mango Street. Esperanza keenly observes the bonds and restrictions that tie her and her friends to their family circles and the options they have for changing their lives and becoming independent. The family home on Mango Street, on the one hand, and "A House of My Own," as one of the vignettes is titled, on the other, provide the metaphorical poles of both the cultural and familial background and the trajectory of personal freedom, which Esperanza observes and reflects throughout *The House on Mango Street*. In these negotiations between familiarity and desire solitude and reclusiveness play a pivotal role.

Reclusiveness can be a result of repression and fear. Several vignettes both depict and analyze the fear of cultural otherness. The awareness that everybody is a stranger where he or she is not at home does not alleviate the fears of experienced otherness. The recognition that such fears may be a common emotion across cultural and ethnic divides does not immediately close these divides, as several vignettes demonstrate ("Those Who Don't," "No Speak English," "The Earl of Tennessee"). Isolation and solitude are the result. More specifically, the fear of male dominance and machismo tends to determine the lives of Chicana women and leads to their enforced hermitism. Girls learn early that masculinity is tantamount to paternal violence ("What Sally Said"). This unsentimental education leads to their acceptance of imprisonment at home by their equally possessive and violent husbands ("Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays," "Minerva Writes Poems"). The titular "Linoleum Roses" on the floor, which Sally stares at, as her repressive husband does not even allow her to look out of the window, turn into the central metaphor of such marital entrapment.

Solitude can also become a catalyst of change. In several vignettes the retreat into the imagination triggers transformative impulses. In "Boys & Girls" the image of a balloon tied to an anchor provides a counter-image to the linoleum roses, as it ambivalently represents the desire for freedom and change but also the danger of drifting away once one lets loose. After all, the balloon might soar but also crash or collapse. In "Darius & the Clouds" the sky itself turns into a projection screen for change, a heterotopia of desire. "The Monkey Garden," where used cars seem like giant mushrooms, describes a directly accessible heterotopia, a liminal zone of reclusiveness and reflection for Esperanza – in between nature and civilization, home on Mango Street and a house of one's own. What environmentalist Emma Marris would call a rambunctious garden turns into the perhaps most potent and poetic image of the Chicana protagonist's transition to independent womanhood.

This paper will explore further these both repressive and emancipatory functions of solitude and reclusiveness in *The House on Mango Street*.