THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET, UTOPIA OF A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

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Abstract: *In her novel entitled* The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros successfully manages to represent the image of a utopian space against the background of the development of both a young girl and a writer. In her continuous search of a utopian house, the protagonist turns the house on Mango Street into a prison and her dream house into a symbol of freedom and independence. The aim of the present paper is to explore the utopian space of the protagonist's ideal house inevitably considered in relation to the social space of the house on Mango Street in order to see to which extent it can represent an aporic source of impasse, paradox and restless consciousness for the individual.*

Keywords: *space; utopia; impasse; restless consciousness*

Taking into account Foucault's statement that "utopias are sites with no real place" (3) we feel it necessary to emphasize the contrasting nature of utopias and heterotopias. Whereas heterotopias are born according to the characteristics of real places, utopias are the result of a process of rejection of these characteristics that are considered to be unsatisfactory. It is true that both utopias and heterotopias have a vital relation with the real world, as it is the real world that supports their existence, but what is different is the nature of these relations. Heterotopias accept, preserve and enrich reality, whereas utopias negate, reject and construct a totally opposite image of reality that they found negative and unsatisfactory having "a general relation of inverted analogy with the real space of Society" (Foucault 3).

According to Foucault, between utopias and heterotopias "there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience" (4) in the sense that both of them share the ingredients provided by the reality, but the recipes according to which they mix them up are different. These two kinds of spaces are brought together by reality being, at the same time, torn apart by the way they make use of it.

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* focuses on the story of Esperanza, a 12-year-old Chicana girl, who has recently moved into a Latin neighborhood in Chicago. Even from the beginning of the novel, the main character places herself in the position of a person sentenced to a continuous state of movement:

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> We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot. (Cisneros 3)

This perpetual physical movement is connected to a continuous state of restlessness that the main character experiences in her attempts to find her place/space. After so many years of moving from one place to another, her family has finally managed to have their own house. However, Esperanza experiences a strong feeling of not belonging to and not fitting into this neighborhood. Before moving to the house on Mango Street, Esperanza and her family lived in a number of houses and it seems that she has always been haunted by the image of a house of her own which could offer her the possibility of being what she was meant to be. The beginning of the novel consists in an apparently endless list of places inhabited by Esperanza and her family and is constructed as a flashback designed to emphasize the numerous attempts to find that perfect place that the main character has always been striving for: "I never had a house, not even a photograph … only one I dream of" (Cisneros 107).

The state of waiting and hoping seems to be an inner part of the main character's being. When talking about her name, Esperanza says: "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (Cisneros 10). In English, she associates her name with the idea of hoping for the better, thus offering her name a positive meaning. In Spanish, her name is related to the idea of waiting (*esperar*), not necessarily hoping, just waiting which implies a state of stillness with a neutral meaning and passive state. It seems that *esperar* can easily turn into *desesperar*, since the character tends to associate the state of waiting with a feeling of sadness: "I am tired of looking at what we can't have" (Cisneros 86).

If we take into account the Mexican-American origin of the character, we should not overlook the perspectives through which she sees her Mexican and American origins. Thus, in English she feels like hoping, like being driven by a positive force and a strong will, whereas in Spanish she gets the feeling that she is caught in a state of stillness and waiting which leads to despair. This powerful dissociation of feelings could be justified by the two different cultural forces: the American perception of freedom and fulfillment of dreams (hope) and the highly traditional Mexican patriarchal obedience (waiting and sadness). Therefore, Esperanza is both hope and despair, stuck in a sad state of waiting for the better. She is a Mexican-American girl living in a Latin neighborhood and hoping that her dreams and ambition of becoming both an independent woman and a writer will turn into reality one day.

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At some point in the novel Esperanza and her friends have a discussion about snow which could be interpreted as a meditation upon their Chicano origin:

> The Eskimos got thirty different names for snow, I say. I read it in a book.
> I got a cousin, Rachel says. She got three different names.
> There ain't thirty different kinds of snow, Lucy says. There are two kinds. The clean kind and the dirty kind, clean and dirty. Only two.
> There are a million zillion kinds, says Nenny. No two exactly alike. Only how do you remember which one is which?
> She got three last names and, let me see, two first names. One in English and one in Spanish…(Cisneros 35-36)

In Lucy's opinion, there are only two types of snow: clean and dirty. There is not an in-between type. Nenny, on the contrary, believes that there are many more types of snow, not only two, and that they are different one from each other. What strikes our attention is the question asked by Nenny: "Only how do you remember which one is which?" (Cisneros 36). In other words, how does an individual of a certain origin, be it pure American, pure Mexican or Mexican-American, remark himself and stand out from the crowd he is part of? It seems that the answer lies in Esperanza's determination to do her best in order to achieve her goals. She feels that she has to do something to be remembered for by the community.
Judging from Esperanza's perspective, the house on Mango Street is limited only to a physical place meant to provide her a strictly physical existence which does not seem to please her totally. It is true that now her family owns a house and does not have to pay a monthly rent anymore, but Esperanza does not seem to identify herself with it at all, or with the neighborhood:

> The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody, or share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there isn't a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom. But even so, it's not the house we'd thought we'd get. (Cisneros 3)

According to Esperanza, the house on Mango Street brought a certain physical stability by stopping the physical movement, but even so it could not stop the mental restlessness and continuous search. It seems that the house can only bring a certain material satisfaction:

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> We had to leave the flat on Loomis quick. The water pipes broke and the landlord wouldn't fix them because the house was too old. We had to leave fast. We were using the washroom next door and carrying water over in empty milk gallons. That's why Mama and Papa looked for a house, and that's why we moved into the house on Mango Street, far away, on the other side of town. (Cisneros 4)

The state of dissatisfaction that Esperanza continues to face even after moving to Mango Street is caused by the contrasting relation between this place and her mental utopian space. Esperanza's dream house is constructed on two levels: physical and spatial. By the physical level we understand the material and social needs it would fulfill. Thus, the house would provide at least a minimum level of facilities and comfort:

> our house would have running water and pipes that worked. And inside it would have real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T.V. And we'd have a basement and at least three washrooms so when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody. (Cisneros 4)

Therefore, Esperanza's dream house would be a cozy place that would provide at least a minimum level of facilities and comfort. Moreover, above the material desire, one should also notice the need of privacy: "when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody" (Cisneros 4). The ideal image of the house is emphasized by the comparison Esperanza uses to describe her ideal house: "like the houses on T.V." (Cisneros 4), according to the generally accepted idea that the media, in this case television, has always been designed to offer a perfect image of the reality, thus having a strong persuasive character. This physical place would also bring a sense of possession: "one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year" (Cisneros 4). By owning the house, Esperanza and her family tighten their relation with the house which results in their final settlement.

As regards the exterior of the house, one should notice the struggle for freedom that emerges from Esperanza's words when describing the outside: "Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (Cisneros 4). The house would have no fence, no barriers, no borders to separate it from the rest of the community. Esperanza's house would finally be part of a whole. The border implied by the fence could be interpreted both at a social and spiritual level. From a spiritual point of view, the absence of the fence stands for Esperanza's wish of not feeling bordered anymore and of living and expressing herself freely. Therefore, we would

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define the spatial level according to which Esperanza's dream house is constructed as a utopian space able to provide the freedom and privacy that she dreams of.

Esperanza's aporia sharpens even more when realizing that the house on Mango Street is totally different from her dream house:

> But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in. (Cisneros 4).

The house on Mango Street does not seem to either provide the material facilities or fulfill the spiritual needs. With some crumbling bricks and a swollen door, it departs from the ideal house seen on television. Instead of the image of freedom shaped by a great big yard with trees and no fence, the house on Mango Street offers a narrow vision through some small windows and tight steps. Compared to Esperanza's ideal house, the house on Mango Street seems to be a prison that sentences her to a continuous struggle to escape it.

Although they moved to Mango Street for the sake of a final settlement and stability, it seems that neither of these aims has been totally reached:

> There is no front yard, only four little elms the city planted by the curb. Out back is a small garage for the car we don't own yet and a small yard that looks smaller between the two buildings on either side. There are stairs in our house, but they're ordinary hallway stairs, and the house has only one washroom. Everybody has to share a bedroom – Mama and Papa, Carlos and Kiki, me and Nenny. (Cisneros 4)

The incompatibility between the house and Esperanza's needs is emphasized by the presence of a small garage for a car that they do not possess for the time being. That is to say, the house is either unable to offer her the (self-)comfort which she is looking for, or able to offer what she does not need. What Esperanza is looking for is a space of self-comfort which seems to be reached only by reaching an agreement with the place she lives in. Esperanza needs a space able to support her, a space where she could finally feel at home. She needs a space where she could grow, develop herself. She feels that she has to stand out from the crowd. She does not want to be limited by small windows, a small garden or tight steps. She wants to grow, to develop and, on the contrary, the feeling she gets from the house on Mango Street seems to prevent her from growing and developing as it has "a small yard that looks smaller between the two buildings on either side" (Cisneros 4). Both the house and the neighborhood seem to swallow her, to dominate and temper her. In this world,

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she feels small just like the windows, the steps and the yard of the house. She feels that she has a lot to offer and thus she needs a wide open space, a universe, a room of her own, not "a house marked by constriction and absence" (Doyle 7). On Mango Street, she feels like "a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor" (Cisneros 9). The comparison she makes using the image of the balloon is striking and it encapsulates her struggle: she was meant to float, to fly, just like a balloon, but at the moment she is stuck into a small place that prevents her from rising.

Esperanza is tormented by a strong feeling of not belonging to Mango Street. At some point in the novel, she states:

> Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake. (Cisneros 28)

One may easily regard her words as a highly pejorative description of Mango Street, but then she adds:

> But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes. (Cisneros 28)

It seems that under a thick layer of dissatisfaction and negation, there is, however, a sense of being part of a community, no matter how hard Esperanza might struggle to reject it.

Cisneros does not hesitate to construct her character, Esperanza, as guided by a strong feminist perspective. Esperanza initiates a gender-based discussion when she talks about her name:

> It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. 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. (Cisneros 10)

Esperanza posits herself on an ancestral line in which she seems to inherit an inner strength and sense of independence highly rejected by the society she lives in. Esperanza's dissatisfaction with the place she feels trapped in seems to be more like a heritage. Put differently, if we stated that the problem Esperanza is facing is strictly about the physical place she lives in and her dreams, we would overlook the essence of her aporia. Therefore, we suggest

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two complementary perspectives to analyze her aporia: a diachronic and a synchronic one.

The diachronic aporia is a heritage that places Esperanza on a line of strong women who had to fight against a patriarchal society over the decades:

> My great-grandmother. 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 she did it. (Cisneros 11)

In that Mexican patriarchal society, women were not allowed to be independent, they had to be under the permanent tight control of men and always obey them. No matter how hard she might have tried, she could not resist the man's oppressive power: "And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (Cisneros 11). In the end, Esperanza's great-grandmother was tamed and fell into a passive state of obedience with her independent desire limited by the window she would look out of for the rest of her life. At some point she questions her great-grandmother's strength and resignation: "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" (Cisneros 11).

Esperanza has never met her great-grandmother, nor has she seen her strength followed by an inevitable resignation, but at least she is witnessing her mother's feeling of unfulfilment and dissatisfaction:

> I could've been somebody, you know? My mother says and sighs. She has lived in this city her whole life. She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown. (Cisneros 90)

The strong advice Esperanza's mother gives her – "Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. […] Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head. […] Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down" (Cisneros 91) – makes Esperanza feel that she is part of an ancestral struggle towards which she feels a high sense of moral responsibility.

Besides the diachronic aporia, Esperanza is also subjected to a synchronic one. Whether her great-grandmother gave up her dreams and ambitions or not, one thing is certain for Esperanza: she will never give it up: "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 11). Esperanza separates herself from the women in her family through her strong intensity of feelings and desires. She sees herself as a highly

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determined person who will do anything to follow her ideals: "I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (Cisneros 88).

Esperanza's dream house would be

> 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 my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. (Cisneros 108)

Esperanza's desires are to live in a house of her own, not to stay in the background, but stand out from the crowd, to get rid of the limits established by the patriarchal censorship. In her dream house, she would be neither a wife, nor a daughter, but an independent woman surrounded by books and stories, a successful writer. When describing the house, she chooses to negate any kind of connection between it and the presence of a man. Neither the house nor her would ever be considered by making reference to any men.

Esperanza's dream house would not belong to a man whom she may call her husband and she would not be a mother "tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come" (Cisneros 29). The highly patriarchal society in which she lives made Esperanza consider the relation between a man and a woman as being strictly about belonging. And belonging as being only about limiting. But she does not want to belong to any man, neither her nor the house, as she does to want to be limited in any way. In her dream house, she will be "a girl who didn't want to belong" (Cisneros 109).

On Mango Street "you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away" (Cisneros 26). It seems that the only way a woman can escape Mango Street is by getting married. But marriage proves to be another prison that the she-convicts are moved to. Girls escape their fathers' prisons on Mango Street but move into their husbands' prisons where the sentences can get even harsher:

> Sally says she likes being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money. She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is ok. Except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is

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> working. She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. (Cisneros 101-102)

Compared to the passive character of Marin, one of Esperanza's friends, who is "waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (Cisneros 27), Esperanza is determined to adopt an active attitude towards all the moral injustice that Chicana women are subjected to. Every day she sees girls and women beaten by their fathers or husbands, wives not allowed to leave their houses without their husbands' permission, women trapped in men's houses as convicts in prisons:

> Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at. Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel's. […] She throws a crumbled dollar down and always asks for coconut or sometimes papaya juice, and we send it up to her in a paper shopping bag she lets down with clothesline. (Cisneros 79-80)

Mango Street is a prison of women and dreams and "there is too much sadness and not enough sky" (Cisneros 33). The only way Esperanza can escape it is by writing. "Somehow the spirit of independence and creativity grows in Esperanza and leads her to escape the barrio in search of a house of her own – her own personality and identity –presumably through literature" (Kanellos86). In one of her poems that she reads to Aunt Lupe, she expresses her strong desire of freedom:

> I want to be
> Like the waves on the sea,
> Like the clouds in the wind,
> But I'm me.
> One day I'll jump
> Out of my skin.
> I'll shake the sky
> Like a hundred violins. (Cisneros 60-61)

For Esperanza, writing is a form of liberation: "I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free" (Cisneros 110). Despite this liberation will not be able to totally untie the connection Esperanza has with the Mango Street. Mango Street is a part of her and she is part of it, no matter how hard she might deny it. It is true that more often than

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not she is eager to leave Mango Street no matter what ("One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away" (Cisneros 110)), but later on she realizes that she will always be Esperanza and Esperanza will always be Mango Street. She will never be able to erase who she is and no matter if she wants it or not, she is Mango Street: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are" (Cisneros 105). Esperanza realizes that the key to freedom sometimes is not negating, but on the contrary, accepting. She could jump out of her skin, but it may prove to be useless as her essence will also be a drop of Mango Street: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from" (Cisneros 87).

The moral responsibility towards the other women on Mango Street is also something that prevents her from totally escaping Mango Street. As if leaving Mango Street and then negating any connection with it would mean a real betray towards the other women in the neighborhood who have shared the same prison room but were not that lucky to escape Mango Street as Esperanza did through writing: "They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros 110).

Taking everything into account, not only heterotopias, but also utopias are responsible for placing the individual in an aporic position. Utopias seem to offer an ideal image of the reality but this state of perfection is highly questionable, as sooner or later the individual realizes that he cannot escape the reality he will always be part of and he ends up being trapped in an aporic space suspended between reality and utopia.

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