

# Female Voice Interpretation of *The House on Mango Street* in the View of Synaesthesia\*

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In *The House on Mango Street*, American ethnic Mexican female writer Sandra Cisneros probes into Latino American's collective identity and Latinas' gender identity. Literature and psychology has been linked together starting from Plato and Aristotle period. In the neuropsychological domain, synaesthesia allows people to combine several perceptions together; while in literature, it magically melts the "voice" of the author's into the works. To interpret the female voice of the book, this article analyzes the voice of poverty and distress, of pursuing ethnic equality, and of pursuing female independence, on the basis of the psychological perception, synaesthesia, so as to reveal Sandra Cisneros's feminist voice on the reflections of ethnic Mexican female values by her beautiful naive poetic language, with a pure and innocent tone.

*Keywords:* synaesthesia, psychological aesthetics analysis, female voice

## Introduction

Synaesthesia, a word coming from the Greek roots, is a psychological phenomenon. If it is for an artist, it is an ability to have extra perceptions in a different sense of modality by the stimulation of one sensation, such as colored hearing, a sound that can be seen. Qian Zhongshu has used a large number of examples to indicate that many Chinese and foreign poets have such ability (Chen & Liu, 2002). Then, what exactly is this ability? Literally, this Greek word synaesthesia can be divided into syn and aesthesia, meaning union and sensation, indicating that a variety of different feelings can be combined together. Specifically, when a sense is stimulated, other additional sensory perceptions can be triggered. For example, when someone with this ability hears a sound, he/she can "see" something, even "taste" some flavor, etc.

This perceiving lifelong ability is automatically generated without a thought. The owners of these characteristics have a world with richer experience than others. A study showed that only 4% to 5% of people have synaesthesia, with no gender difference (Simner et al., 2006). How about the rest of the people, who cannot experience such a wonderful feeling? Fortunately, the existence of literary works enables readers to transform, to generate and to blend different feelings together through association. As a special form of esthetic perception, synaesthesia permeates human reason and emotion, and has its own unique aesthetic value and function (Qu, 2002).

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In *The House on Mango Street*, the masterpiece of the Mexican minority female writer Sandra Cisneros, readers seem to have the ability of “hearing” a maid’s pure voice so as to “view” pictures of her family, friends and life, to “feel” her dream through the author’s poetic monologue, beautiful and fresh. Finally, from the combination of these synaesthesia perceptions, readers would have a wonderful feeling on the reflections of American Mexican female values.

Sandra Cisneros’ fictional “voice” and her feminism are often praised. The narrator and main character of this work is Esperanza Cordero, a girl just entering adolescence, who introduces and describes her family and friends and her day-to-day life with all the troubles and pleasures, in a direct, vivid, and engaging voice. The book writes what Esperanza speaks to readers, in a girl’s language matching her age. However, through these narrative prose poems, readers gain an ironic awareness that Esperanza, the girl herself does not yet possess, but in the end, it all makes sense when the girl grows. Thus, it is of interest to explore the voices representing different perceptions.

In order to demonstrate the unhearable “voices” of the character, “feeling” the atmosphere, and so on, the following parts analyze the voice of poverty and distress, of pursuing ethnic equality, and of pursuing female independence on the basis of synaesthesia.

### **The Voice of Poverty and Distress**

The background of the novel is the real world of the United States at that time, about the survival space of the minority American Mexican, authentic and reliable. The character of this book, Esperanza (meaning “hope” in Spanish), “speaks” crystal clear, seeming to have a conversation with readers, not merely her muttering under her own breath. The author adopts the first person narration in this book to describe the story of Esperanza, telling us stories of the girl herself, her neighborhood and others. This first person narration, represents exactly the voice of Esperanza, the voice of Sandra Cisneros.

Poverty is the present life that Esperanza and her friends experience; distress is the feeling that Esperanza can percept from the people around, or maybe even from herself sometimes. At the beginning of this book, from the girl’s monologue, we learned that the family has moved house for many times before they come to Mango Street. This time, they do not need to pay rents, sharing yards with others, no banging on the ceiling with a broom from the landlord.

With the reader’s imagination, we could transfer our vision images into hearing images. This kind of perception is not difficult to perceive. By reading the literal words, it would be easy to seemingly picture a view that the landlord, with one hand on the waist, the other holding a broom, banging on the ceiling. Then, the feelings of noise and fear come. To our knowledge, it should be good to have one’s own house, “but even so, it’s not the house we’d thought we’d get” (Cisneros & Pan, 2007, p. 152). As a reader, it would be an urge to find out the answer why this house on mango street is not what they want. Because “it’s small”, “with tight steps in front and windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath” (Cisneros & Pan, 2007, p. 153). By reading this, it seems that we readers are really holding our breath so as to experience what Esperanza percepts. In this way, we might have the perception that we are standing in front of the little house, having the narrow window in our sights, feeling the choke that poverty brings. This house is not merely small, but in a poor condition that “bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in” (Cisneros & Pan, 2007, p.

153). Do we really want to push into this little house and stay for a living? Such a minority residence is to be discriminated. Would it be very happy to live here? Perhaps not.

### **The Voice of Pursuing Racial Equality**

Women from different ethnic groups have different experiences. In the United States, starting from 1970s, Mexican feminist movement was launched while women were questioning their traditional roles. They thought that Mexico feminist movement not only should emphasized on gender differences, but also stressed the racial and class problems (Martlin, Zhao, & Wu, 2014). A place with ethnic minorities often means poverty and chaos. Cathy, queen of cats, needs to move away. “Got to.”, because “the neighborhood is getting bad” when the minorities move in. People like Cathy usually move “a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in”. Sad, isn’t it?

There is a reason why *The House on Mango Street* can be popular for more than 30 years. The voice, as it is poetic and refreshing, earns its praise for this fairy tale. Besides, the implied voice is the other reason. In such a White dominated American society, the minorities living in the houses on mango street or similar, are meant to be unable to melt into the mainstream. They always live on the fringe of the society, with racial discrimination.

The economic basis determines superstructure. Though pure as she is, poor Esperanza suffers as a result of the grievance. When Esperanza lived in Loomis, a nun from her school passed by and saw her, asked, “Where do you live?” “There, I said pointing up to the third floor” (Cisneros & Pan, 2007, p.153). Although these are literal stimuli, readers would easily “hear” the contempt from the nun, “you lived there?”. This feeling makes the girl feel like nothing. But we see that a girl has to nod, “There. I lived there” (p. 154). These synaesthesia perceptions lay the foundation that we understand such a house is not the one the girl could point to. And we could “hear” the repetition Esperanza said in mind, “the house on Mango Street isn’t it”, “this isn’t it” (p. 154). They don’t have to pay the rent for the house, but it is not a house that can show others. The residence symbolizes social class. That is why in little Esperanza’s dream, she wants to have a house, a real big house. So do her parents and siblings.

The dream is always beautiful, but the reality is always cruel. Esperanza gets hurt because of the house on Mango street. Canteen, a word from French, sounds important in a girl’s eyes. Esperanza wanted very much to eat in the canteen so she begged her mother for three days for a letter to Sister Superior. However, she was forced by Sister Superior to stand up on a box of books and pointed to her house, with merciless, admitting that she lived not far away. “Even though I knew that wasn’t my house and started to cry”, she still nodded. “Then she was sorry and said I could stay just for today, not tomorrow or the day after” (Cisneros & Pan, 2007, p. 201). The humiliation and the stay in the canteen was not happy. From the words, we “see” Esperanza cry and eat her rice sandwich. It seems that we could feel as she feels, tasting the greasy bread and cold rice in the mouth.

In the eyes of Sister Superior, minorities live in ugly flats. Even though she didn’t say racial discrimination, Esperanza suffered from it, for “the raggedy men are ashamed to go into” these flats in the little girl’s mind. Children are naive and innocent. Cathy told the truth to Esperanza why they were only friends till Tuesday. We seem to “see” this picture, a White little girl and a Mexican minority girl, hand-in-hand, being friends before Tuesday. We might also “hear” the voice of the White little girl explaining the reasons, which stabs into Esperanza’s heart. In this case, Esperanza follows her heart, without listening to Cathy, and become a forever friend to Lucy and Rachel.

The colors in the scene, the smells of the nostrils, are full of prejudice and excluding minorities. Only when we use our synaesthesia, can we perceive actively, to better understand the character's situation, so as to improve our aesthetic consciousness and understand the book better.

### **The Voice of Pursuing Female Independence**

Published in 1984, it took Sandra five years to write this book, which is of great success for the first official appearance of the female narration of the American Mexican minority. The feminism in this fiction resonates with minority readers, making the White Americans paying attention to their female status. The central theme of this book is a universal one: a young girl's struggle both to find her own place within her culture and, at the same time, to discover and preserve her individuality.

The theme is a commonly seen scenery but complex in the society. The usual rules are generated from the society power. Females stay in the cage of patriarchy, then run into her husbands' after marriage. These conventional rules bury deep in the author and influence the readers to find out the voices. How did the author describe the female images in this work?

Besides the main character Esperanza, there are other females in this fiction, who also love freedom, and are eager to get rid of this condition. However, because of various reasons, most or all of them ultimately compromise to reality or failed. The most influential female to the main character should be her mother, who once had a dream but remained in the family. It was also she who encouraged Esperanza to realize her dream. As a typical wife, she was selfless, hard-working, but she was unhappy to lose herself and her dream. Even so, she was still a model for her growing daughter, with feminist consciousness in her heart, keeping a part of her true self, not giving up a passion for arts. From the words, we could "listen" to her humming "Madama Butterfly", "watching" her cooking oatmeal with Esperanza. We might even find a regret look on her face when she mentioned her dropping out of school because of unsuitable clothes. And this was the reason why she taught her daughter to change the fate of female being affiliated to male, to become an independent and strong woman.

To Esperanza, she did not like her name. "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth" (Cisneros & Pan, 2007, p. 160). She would like to baptize herself under a new name, a name more like the real her, the one nobody sees. It seems that we could "see" the boys teasing her with her name. Actually, it was also the name of her great-grandmother, a strong woman, a wild horse of woman who suffered because her culture did not like strong women. Great-grandmother "looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (Cisneros & Pan, 2007, p. 160). The character inherited the name, but she did not want to inherit her place by the window. With the picture in mind, "hearing" the names and "looking" at the woman by the window, readers perceive that Esperanza is very different from other females because of her pursuing independence.

In the book as well as the reality, a general picture of female is usually dominated by her husband without respect, reflecting the patriarchal culture of cruel. For the minority females, they are struggled under the male discourse, being depressed. Marin, a boy-crazy girl, is potentially a bad influence on younger sisters and girl-cousins. Readers may picture the view that in the dark evening, a girl is staying out in front of the house with a radio, dressing seductively. Perhaps we may even smell the cigarette she sneaked. She is so different from others. Like Marin, Sally wishes to be taken away by a man. But unlike the other girl, she needs to be rescued

from a home life that has turned into a nightmare for her. In the cultural tradition, a woman's responsibility to remain pure until her wedding day. All the sudden, we "feel" her father's beats with his fists, and his belt.

To become a female with free will, Esperanza finally changes her circumstances by her own strength. She starts writing to establish an independent female self-consciousness, while at the same time, she helps other women like her, to change a minority women's survival state, opening up a new living space for women, pushing the ego construction to a bigger one.

### Conclusion

*The House on Mango Street* evokes readers' sensations: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, palpable feelings. Cisneros' characters speak directly and honestly to readers and with the interpretation using synaesthesia, readers might recognize her perspective in a more vivid way. Through her clear eyes to look around the world, and her poetic language, it seems that there appears a young girl, Esperanza. From her beautiful and pure voice, we "see" her life, "hear" what she hears, "feel" the poverty and distress, being racial discriminated, "shouting" for feminine independence.

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