



Itxaso Araluzea Plaza

Degree in English Studies

2015/2016

SEARCHING FOR SOCIAL IDENTITIES DURING ADOLESCENCE IN *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS* AND *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*

SUPERVISOR: DAVID RÍO RAIGADAS

DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA Y ALEMANA Y TRADUCCIÓN E

INTERPRETACIÓN

## Abstract

The novel of adolescence or the Bildungsroman follows the identity formation of the main character from childhood to adulthood. This paper focuses on the development of the identity of the main characters in *The House on Mango Street* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The development of their own voice to define their individual identity is analyzed, parting from the insecurities and the discrimination the protagonists face during their childhood. For this, besides their personal experiences, the paper also considers how the people that surround Marguerite and Esperanza inspire them to embrace the individuality of their communities. The essay is categorized into three predominant sections: class identity, ethnic identity and gender identity. The themes were analyzed taking into account the personal background of each character as Chicana and black women, which showed specific concerns for both characters. The conclusion put side by side the different social identities, and it became apparent that when they had a role model that challenged the mainstream, the protagonists were able to develop better a sense of social justice and the confidence to be their own person.

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## 1. Introduction

The typical features of the Bildungsroman genre describe the main character's moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a usually youthful main character (The Free Dictionary), these years become crucial for building the character's identity. Furthermore, adolescents experience their intellectual growth within the limitations of the society. So, these kinds of novels also give visibility to issues of social inequality when the protagonists are in a less privileged situation. Therefore, the large tradition of Bildungsroman stories in American literature also becomes relevant to the understanding of contemporary America (Millard1).

From 1960 and in more recent literature the Bildungsroman emerges from the female perspective, being generally accepted by the feminist politics of emancipation (McWilliams 32). Female voices give a new outlook to the experience of girls, since girls and young women very often find their concerns belittled, and the perception the society has on them overshadows who they are. Moreover, the media often show explicit messages of the sexist acts in the patriarchal culture, but the news does not project how women and girls endure the oppression. This gives particular importance to the works I will analyze in this paper, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The House on Mango Street* were published after the Civil Rights Movement, in 1969 and 1984 respectively. Although the novels do not mention the movement, they do manifest the struggle of black and Chicano people in the last decade of the twentieth century. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* belongs to a large tradition of black autobiographies. In fact, before the 1940's most Black American literature production were autobiographies, slave narratives in particular (qtd. in Baisnée 58). In *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros tells the story through a series of vignettes that can be considered semi-autobiographical since there is no clear cut between reality and fiction. In these biographies the voices of the characters speak for their community as well as for themselves. Both authors emphasize the importance that others play in shaping the protagonists identity, especially the women that surround them. One of the aspects analyzed in this paper is going to be about the positive and negative role models that appear in both books, and the influence they will have on Esperanza and Marguerite.

The authors, pushed by the lack of representation of young black and Chicana women, set an example for future generation through their protagonists Marguerite and Esperanza. Maya Angelou and Sandra Cisneros work on the coming of age story and conceptualize what it feels like to be a teenage girl, capturing gender-specific issues that are otherwise unexplored. Moreover, they take intersectionality into account and represent powerfully the restrictions and barriers the protagonists find and how these will shape their character. As Angelou writes, the black female teenager “is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power” (272). The books recognize the multiple aspects of identity and the oppression that complicates the protagonists’ life experiences. This paper will focus on the identity formation of the main characters based in three categories: class, ethnicity and gender. The aim of this essay is to compare how the main characters’ identity is formed from their childhood to their adolescence.

First I will interpret the situation of the working-class men and women represented in the novels and then about the protagonists’ thoughts on materialism and the middle-class. The next chapter is going to focus on the cultural legacy that grandmothers and mothers share with the protagonists. Finally, I will discuss gender analyzing the way the protagonists perceive gender and how gender specific behavior, or in this case femininity affects their first sexual approach.

## 1. Identity of Class

Class is an ambiguous identity marker and, as Bottero states in her article, people's identification of class is rather contextual than part of a group belonging (987). Indeed, both novels contextualize class identity in connection with other social and cultural aspects. For example, ethnicity and gender are not to be ignored in the discussion of social class in *The House on Mango Street* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Poverty is a reality portrayed in both novels, but the authors are specific in the struggle of the women of color.

In the novels the main characters develop their perception of social class by observing the working class in their surroundings. Nonetheless, rather than making a political statement, they let the stories carry the message. Still, when it comes to their individual approach to class identity, they do not view their situation as static and unchangeable.

In this section I will explore the way in which the condition of the working-class is seen and how this affects the formation of the protagonists' identity. The novels often focus on similar views, like the importance the community has in the working-class. They also agree about the middle-class's selfishness and find that the traditional family structure does not work for them. I will analyze the issue in three sections, the first one being the imbalance of work between the working class and the middle class and how being ethnic and poor implies a harder work ethic. The second one focuses on the woman's role as workers outside and within the family structure and the feminization of poverty. Last, I will comment on the individual views Esperanza and Marguerite have on the middle-class and what they expect from the American Dream.

### 1.1 Working-Class

The two protagonists move several times throughout their childhood, allowing them to face different American socioeconomic backgrounds. While Esperanza only meets the suburban Latino neighborhood, Marguerite moves from rural to urban lifestyle several times as a child, which allows her to see how the Great Depression affects Stamps and the way black people conform to the white middle-class manners in the city.

In their portrait of the way adults work, Angelou and Cisneros seem to unintentionally break the stereotype of Latinos and Blacks as lazy workers. Indeed, both novels show the work ethic and extra effort their families and neighbors have to stick to. One of the main examples is Esperanza's father, who has several jobs and is barely present in the domestic life. The novel shows that immigrants confine to "low-skill jobs", actually, Latinos in the US are over represented in low paying jobs (Cammarota 250). As immigrant parents they have the responsibility to provide a better future for their children, so Esperanza's parents send their children to a Catholic school instead of to the public school, because they did not want their children "to turn out bad" (59). Looking ahead, her parents try to offer the best option for a higher skilled job, due to racial inequalities in the public education system (Cammarota 247). The novel presents the notion introduced in Borgen's study, that immigrant parents encourage their children's educational opportunities more than native born parents do (66). This way, Esperanza is given better career opportunities too, and she is able to break the ethnic and class polarization of the work structure in the US (Cammarota 247). The notion of racial inequalities

in the education system is clear in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which also presents the differentiation between the segregated school in Stamps and the unsegregated school in San Francisco. In Stamps Marguerite experiences education with the negative features that segregated schools have, like unqualified teachers, (Cammara 260). Indeed, when she graduates eighth grade she says that "many teachers in Arkansas Negro schools had only that diploma and were licensed to impart wisdom" (172).

Marguerite also observes the way black men have worked in San Francisco and analyzes how they have adjusted into the lifestyle of the white middle-class men. For example, when her father Big Bailey appears for the first time, Marguerite identifies him as a middle-class man for the way he is dressed and the way he talks, which she describes as more educated than her school principal. She instantly fantasizes about how rich he might be, but in contrast she adds in parentheses that she later discovered that he was a doorman (55). By this Angelou seems to imply that there was some illegal action behind his wealth. Later, when she moves to San Francisco she hears the stories of the black business men in the city and she notes that their necessities are ruled with their own morals:

the needs of a society determine its ethics, and in the Black American ghettos the hero is that man who is offered only the crumbs from his country's table but by ingenuity and courage is able to take himself a Lucullan feast. Hence the janitor who lives in one room but sports a robin's-egg-blue Cadillac is not laughed at but admired, and the domestic who buys forty-dollar shoes is not criticized but is appreciated. We know that they have put to use their full mental and physical powers. Each single gain feeds into the gains of the body collective. (224)

Angelou presents a moral dilemma, but she does not condemn the means in which these men get their wealth, on the contrary she is "proud of their achievements" (224), as they manage to use what is on their hand to maintain a position in society. She acknowledges that people of color are discriminated from society and that working as hard as white people, is not enough, so she justifies the ways in which they act, out of the rules that society dictates.

## 1.2 Working-class Women and Female Roles in the Family

As for the women in the working class there are visibly different realities in the two

novels. Cisneros and Angelou portray the unequal gender roles that men and women have, however, while Chicanas are expected to stay at home, black women are expected to do both, domestic labor and work outside. In both novels the characters question the structure of the nuclear family and the traditional roles given to women.

The female figures in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are certainly strong ones. The two most important female figures in Marguerite's life are also the main financial providers in the household. As Lupton's biography on Maya Angelou's life points out, Ms. Henderson sold basic commodities and "made wise and honest investments" (4). The shop in the rural area of Stamps, allows them to endure the economic difficulty that the Great Depression left in America. Maya's mother is also the main incomer in the house, a nurse and an entrepreneur who thought of herself as the original "do it yourself girl" (264). As Koyana points out in her study, black women have always been required to do both housework and hold a job outside of home (72). From the role models Marguerite has, she does not separate home labor from outside work. However, the fact that these women have a job and have to also maintain their household is an inevitable requirement to combat poverty. So it is debatable whether the concept of the middle-class working women would be liberating for poor women who do not work under the same conditions. It is also questionable how society values the selflessness of mothers as a virtue "Maya's struggle demonstrates the tensions inherent in belonging to a group that values these notions of family, while living in a larger society that devalues them" (Koyana 72). Angelou demonstrates the importance the community has for black women to help them raise their children, compared to the mother's isolation in the middle-class family. Cisneros and Angelou show that the established concepts of both motherhood and woman in the workforce are not represented appropriately by the mainstream middle-class. While domestic labor alone leaves them in a marginalized position, doing both household and outside work does not guarantee a comfortable lifestyle. Therefore, Marguerite realizes the importance of unity in Stamps and Esperanza will reach the same conclusion at the end of *The House on Mango Street*.

The family structure in the Latino neighborhood of *The House on Mango Street* shows clearly the unequal gender roles. The men in her barrio are the financial providers and the women take responsibility for home labor. Cisneros portrays the women on Mango Street as caught in passive roles that do not give them the capacity to maintain themselves. She demonstrates the struggle that the Chicanas' bear, since "women are more vulnerable to



poverty due to lack of property rights in land or access to employment, lower wages, illiteracy, early marriage and childbearing, lack of rights in divorce, incomplete education, and lower wages” (Moghadam, 31). Marriage seems to be the only way of escaping poverty or social climb, but it also implies woman’s subjugation to men. The married women in *The House on Mango Street* are portrayed as unhappy and trapped in the houses. Nevertheless, this unhappiness is not perceived by all the women in her barrio, considering that many are willing to get married. For instance, Marin is one of the characters Esperanza admires for her careless attitude around men, and she is described as having the means to be independent. However, she also has a romantic perception of marriage and she is ready to put her economic independence in the hands of her future husband. Cisneros presents the “feminization of poverty” among the Chicana and how the figure of the house symbolizes the dreams of young women, but also the prison for those who are oppressed by their father or/and husbands.

Esperanza, unlike Marguerite, does not have many independent female role models around her. However, her main goal is going to be not to depend on anyone challenging the traditional structure of the family. Therefore, characters like Alicia play a very important role in shaping Esperanza's identity. *In The House on Mango Street*, Alicia contrasts with the other women in her barrio, since she studies in order to not "spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin" (32). Alicia sets the example for Esperanza that studying is her way out of Mango Street.

The protagonists also experience in their own skin the disadvantages of working as women. On the one hand, Esperanza wants to find a job arguing that she needs the money to afford the catholic school. On the other hand, Marguerite decides when she is fifteen that studies would not provide her the same opportunities as her counterparts. Although she graduates from high school, she also works at the same time because she wants to prove her self-sufficiency to her mother. Both characters try to prove their maturity by entering the adult world, but these experiences will also manifest the unequal position they are in. Esperanza's first job in a photo lab consists of matching negatives with their prints, which she does not find particularly challenging, still she has to end up leaving her job due to sexual harassment (55). Marguerite will have to tolerate racist prejudices from the administration (269) to get to be the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Being skilled for the job is not enough in either case, and they experience on the first hand the handicap that being a woman is in the labor world.

### 1.3 The American Dream

The American Dream is “the ideal of freedom, equality, and opportunity traditionally held to be available to every American.” (The Free Dictionary) This predicts that in the United States everyone has the opportunity to achieve what they want as long as they put effort and work hard on it. According to this statement climbing in the social ladder does not depend on the family background. Nonetheless, this view also instills an individualistic behavior in order to achieve success. The protagonists of the novels do not agree with this idea, since coming from a humble area shows them the importance of a communal lifestyle.

The girls’ aspirations are mostly based on the information they get about the middle-class from television and cinema. At first, Esperanza and Marguerite feel envy for the "white folks' cars and white glistening houses"(49). The frustration for not having "a real house" (4) is specially emphasized in *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza will long for a house of her own and this becomes a recurrent feature in the novel. Home ownership is an important part of the American dream, "it provides security and implies putting down roots and community commitment" (Clark 8). At the beginning of the novel the Cordero move to a new place of all their own indicating the family’s self-improvement, but this new house does not fulfill all their expectations. Although it is a big step forward, the American dream is still encouraged by Esperanza's parents, who tell their kids that this house is "temporary" (5). Esperanza knows that it is unlikely that they will move to a better house, but she does not dismiss the possibility for her own future.

Kuribayashi asserts that "material conditions are so much part of their oppression that coming into possession of material necessities is a must for becoming one’s own person" (167). Nonetheless, Esperanza and Marguerite are not blinded by the idea of owning commodities; they also show interest in sharing their commodities. For example, Marguerite describes that she feels "fear-admiration-contempt" (49) for the things whites own. She also realizes that among the black people in Stamps there is a tendency to share and be generous, which are qualities she admires over being rich. Esperanza reaches a similar conclusion in “Bums In the Attic”, in this vignette she analyzes the inequality between the rich and the poor. In this section, she repeats that she wants a middle-class house, but also acknowledges the selfishness of the middle-class. Moreover, she asserts that she will not be like them, “one day I'll own my own

house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house." (87)

Esperanza decides that she will be generous when she has something to offer. Therefore, she will take advantage of her privilege to change the exclusion of the marginalized people in her barrio to that of inclusion. Esperanza considers that the middle class is desensitized from the reality she is actually living. Marguerite also despises the way white people spend money "so lavishly" (49), but the Great Depression hits Stamps and it "did not discriminate." (50) As soon as poverty affects the town, there is the need for a different exchange system that does not involve money. Even if the Henderson were in the position to help others, they also received from poorer families. The sense of unity in the black community of Stamps seems even stronger during economic crisis. Indeed, it is frequent to find highlighted the importance of the black community in the development of the individual in black autobiographies (Baisnée 58). These two examples challenge the individualistic approach of the American Dream. The girls realize that the way to success cannot be individual if everyone is not given the same opportunities. Their particular American dream is indeed an escape from their own oppression.

Moreover, the ownership of the house is not just related to being closer to the middle-class. The two novels show that there is a deeper meaning in owning material goods. The house is not a mere commodity for Esperanza; it also symbolizes her own independence as a woman and, as mentioned earlier, a way to challenge the traditional family structure. Certainly, when her friend Sally gets married too young, Sally is imprisoned in her house with the things she now owns and Esperanza pities her complete lack of freedom.

### 3. Ethnic identity

As part of a minority in the United States, the girls develop their consciousness for social justice and manifest their disconformity on the issues that affects them and their people. How discrimination affects their identity is more visible in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where Marguerite as a child ingrains biases against her skin color. However, the closeness of the black community in Stamps and her grandmother show her how to face the blatant racism in Stamps. Later in the novel Marguerite becomes very critical and shows strong moral convictions against racism. Esperanza also mentions the discrimination Chicanos face in her

barrio, but she also points out that the ignorance and prejudices make Chicanos insecure when they find themselves in other parts of the city too. However, what I am most interested in this section is the influence maternal figure play in the cultural identity formation of the protagonists.

In the context of the two cultures, women have different expectations, as Tafolla criticizes: women are the preserver of the culture, while men are the ones who live the culture (1425). Here, I will analyze how the cultural background is perceived by the main protagonists of the novels. For this, I will comment on the cultural legacy that the girls inherit from their mothers and grandmothers. The mother daughter relationship is valuable in the identity development of the female characters. Mothers do not only influence their daughters as women, but they also work as a bridge that unites them with their ethnic background.

### 3.1. Mother-Daughter Relationship

The grandmother has become the epitome of the traditional representation of women, confined to the role of caretaker and provider. While the mother has become the bridge between the traditional and progressive, pushing their daughters to explore each and every single opportunity to succeed (in American society). (Marceline)

Esperanza mentions her grandmother very shortly, but her description suggest that the grandmother does indeed become the "epitome of the traditional representation of women," since like many of the women in her neighborhood, they share the same place by the window. However, for Esperanza her grandmother is also a symbol of resistance "a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry," (11) but her tenacity is tamed when she is forced to get married. Esperanza wonders about whether her grandmother has regretted not been able to be all the things she wanted to be. Later, her grandmother's story connects to Esperanza's mother's experience, as she tells her daughter: "I could've been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard, That Madame Butterfly was a fool. She stirs the oatmeal." (91)

The mother, as well as the daughter, struggle with shame for being poor, which on Esperanza's mother's case caused her to quit her studies. Talking about herself and her "comadres", Esperanza's mother shows the scarce opportunity that Chicanas have to take the

lead of their lives. Since her mother missed her opportunity for a different lifestyle, she influences her daughter not to care about superfluous matters like looks or status. Instead, she fully supports her daughter's intellectual potential and reinforces Esperanza's wish for autonomy. She tells her that she "Got to take care all [her] own" (91) while putting examples in fiction like, *Madame Butterfly*. This reference to *Madame Butterfly* also shows that Esperanza's mother is a cultured woman and that both mother and daughter share a taste for literature.

Nonetheless, Esperanza's mother feels lost in the American culture even though she has lived her whole life in the city; still she is not able to go downtown without her daughter. The desire of wanting to be involved in the American culture is juxtaposed with the traditional setting of the home and the tasks that she has taken as a mother, like sewing or cooking. So, Esperanza's mother, instead of being part of both cultures, she seems to not be part of neither culture.

The three generations of women in *The House on Mango Street* struggle with similar dilemmas, but Esperanza is determined not to inherit the same fate, "I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain." (82) Esperanza associates domestic spaces with her mother and the other women in her neighborhood and compares their situation with prison. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel Esperanza does not only want to confront this fate, but she also knows that she wants to make a better place for the women in her barrio, as she says that once she has the power she will come back "for those who cannot out." (110).

Also in relation to Marceline's study, the grandmother takes the role of the caretaker and the provider in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Mrs. Henderson takes the maternal role for the biggest part of her grandchildren's childhood and she always portrays an image of dignity to Marguerite. Mrs. Henderson sets an example of strength for the young Marguerite even though she does not provide the tenderness the girl might have needed as a child. The strict norms at home are contradicted with the flexibility Mrs. Henderson shows with the white girls who make fun of her. As a child, Marguerite learns that the passive attitude of her grandmother towards the insolence of white people comes from "the paths of life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones," (47) since talking to a white person meant risking one's life. Later Mrs. Flowers teaches Marguerite she should not tolerate ignorance, but be understanding of illiteracy (99). With this lesson and

Mrs. Flowers as a role model, Marguerite begins to oppose the discrimination that made her devalue her blackness.

The two maternal figures, Marguerite's grandmother and mother complement the kid's needs in different parts of her life. Mrs. Henderson's restrictions and conventional morals, contrast with Vivian's free spirit. While her grandmother teaches her to embrace her ethnic background and be respectable, her mother is the one who teaches the insecure Marguerite, how to love herself and be involved in the contemporary America's diverse culture. Marguerite's mother breaks with every traditional and religious expectation that her mother-in-law has taught to Marguerite. Unlike the Chicana women of *The House on Mango Street*, Vivian is completely involved in the city lifestyle and it can be said that she is indeed the "liver" of the culture. This has a negative impact on Marguerite as a kid, who feels abandoned and increases her insecurities. Yet, her mother will help Marguerite gain a fresh outlook on life when she hits puberty. Vivian has no shame to talk to her daughter about any topic and introduces both her children to the modern city and its cultural diversity "through food we learned that we were other people in the world."(207) In San Francisco Marguerite learns about the diversity of people's backgrounds, still she observes that there is no inclusion for black people in the society. She admits that San Franciscans are wrong if they think they overcome racism. She only gets to see what it is like to be in a diverse and inclusive community when she finds some homeless teenagers living in a junkyard. With them she feels that "the lack of criticism evidenced by [their] ad hoc community influenced [her], and set a tone of tolerance for [her] life," (254) these feelings benefit Marguerite's feelings of insecurity and resentment.

#### 4. Questioning Gender

The protagonists face very different dilemmas with gender identity. One of the critical points in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the rape of the eight year old Marguerite and the trauma this will cause throughout her life. The brutal happening during her childhood makes Marguerite question her own identity between being a child or a woman. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza experiences a less traumatic exploration of her gender identity, yet she finds a very harsh differentiation between the men and the woman in her neighborhood. As mentioned in the previous chapter, her fate as a woman seems to be limited to the domestic sphere, but Esperanza will also question the fluidity of gender identity.

As Esperanza soon realizes observing the relationship she has with her brothers, “boys and girls live in separate worlds.” (8) Esperanza lives in the world of girls and women, so the novel focuses mostly on the women in her neighborhood. As I mentioned earlier, gender is constantly defined by the confinement of women in their houses. The women in *The House on Mango Street* “defiance against patriarchy constraints offer resistance strategies in the face of domination by Chicano and Mexicano men, as well as by the ruling class and dominant race.” (Saldivar-Hull 104)

As Cisneros states “the sexist attitudes of Chicanos need to be critiqued and opposed, but Chicano men are no enemies or at least nor the real enemies.”(Cisneros qtd. In Garcia) as she depicts in *The House on Mango Street*, there are men who challenge the "machista" stereotype that the Chicano men have being attributed by the mainstream media. For example, Esperanza's father represents the term "macho" as understood by the Chicano culture, a man who fulfills his responsibilities and is brave (Tafolla 1425). Nonetheless, the patriarchal and oppressive side of the coin is also displayed with Sally's father, who beats her daughter, making Sally escape to a lesser form of oppression by getting married too young to a much older man.

Despite the way gender is depicted in *The House on Mango Street*, in the vignette "Hips" Esperanza questions whether gender is biological or something that people learn to perform. Even though the conversation Esperanza has with her friends about growing hips does not have a serious tone, they come up with interesting observations about womanhood and its connection to the body. According to Esperanza, hips mark the difference between being a woman or a man, so she begins defending that the difference is merely a scientific or biological one. In this vignette, Esperanza emphasizes the importance of associating women with their bodies and their biological function. Some feminists philosophers argue that due to the association of women with nature and bodily features to do with procreation, women are also associated with devalued terms like being irrational (Prokhovnik qtd. in Mikkola). In *The Last Generation*, Moraga acknowledges the unhealthy split between the body and mind leads to the notion that it is fine to exploit the physical or material by making a comparison between rape and the exploitation of natural resources (172).

The girls value positively getting hips and are thrilled to get these changes and become woman. Furthermore, this vignette also shows the different worlds Esperanza's sister Nenny, who is still a child and Esperanza, who is entering puberty, are in. This difference between

girlhood and womanhood is even more present in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Marguerite suffers from being dissociated from herself several times through her childhood. First, she rejects being black due to the unfair judgment she suffers in Stamps and wants to wake up from her "black ugly dream"(4). Then, she expresses her desire to be a boy due to the lack of representation of female heroes in the books she reads. However, her biggest identity crisis begins at the age of eight, when she is raped by her mother's boyfriend. The trauma silences Maya for several years and deeply affects her identity. Marguerite grows to learn the power of her words and begins to fear them when her uncles' kill Freeman after she confesses what happened.

For years she tries to be out of touch with her feelings and her body. This creates great confusion on her identity, which she cannot define as either a girl or a woman: "Signs with arrows around the barbecue pit pointed MEN, WOMEN, and CHILDREN toward fading lanes,... so when the urge hit me to relieve myself, I headed toward another direction." (139) Only Mrs. Flowers will help her find relief and get her voice back by introducing her to poetry. Mrs. Flowers teaches Marguerite not to fear her voice, and at the same time it helps her develop a new way to express her feelings. Until that moment Marguerite had only found male representations of heroes, and now she has someone to look up to, because Mrs. Flowers embodies all the ladylike features that Marguerite admires in the women of the books she reads.

Unlike for Esperanza, for whom the physical changes during puberty establish her growth into a woman. For Marguerite, age or physical changes do not determine whether she is a child or not. The traumatic experience does not let her perceive herself as a child anymore, since her innocence has been taken away; yet as a child, she is still surrounded by the adult world, which she does not quite understand. Even if Mrs. Flowers is a good influence in Marguerite's life, their friendship cannot make her feel like a girl. Her innocence is somehow restored with her first friendship with a girl her age.: "I don't think she understood half of what she was saying herself, but, after all, girls have to giggle, and after being a woman for three years I was about to become a girl. " (142)

## 5. Femininity and Sexuality



Previously I have mentioned there are different gender roles in relation to class, specifically in *The House on Mango Street*, which shows the restrictions women face in Chicano society. Nevertheless, as Connell argues, the term “role” only explains the expectations for each gender, but it does not imply a power imbalance between genders. So, Connell suggests a power relation *between* and *within* genders, by acknowledging the diversity of masculinities and femininities and introducing the concepts “hegemonic masculinity” and “emphasized femininity”. While hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to subordinate masculinities and in relation to women, there is no dominant form of femininity among the feminine identities (Connell).

As Connell defines, femininity is constructed in the context of the subordination of women to men. Moreover, even though there are non-conforming femininities, “emphasized femininity” is “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (Connell). These terms seem to define more accurately the struggles faced by Esperanza and Marguerite when it comes to their personal experiences with femininity and their sexual awakening.

The two female leads show strong moral convictions about civil rights, yet they have internalized standards of femininity that clash with their own perception of themselves. Within the context of hegemonic masculinity beauty is considered to be feminine (Connell). Therefore, Esperanza and Marguerite conform to a very narrow set of expectations and it becomes apparent that their insecurities are affected by patriarchal constructs of femininity. Both protagonists’ insecurities deal with self-image, to the extent of depending on men to prove their worth and value.

At a very young age the girls are trying to make sense of the things they are feeling, both physically and psychologically, so, they engage in mature activities that expose them to gendered social interactions. In this chapter I will analyze how “emphasized femininity” distorts the protagonists’ relation with their sexuality and gender identity.

“Emphasized femininity” is promoted by the mass media much more than any masculinity (Connell). This promotion is mostly managed by men or as Mulvey coined, the representation of women is presented through the “male gaze” in mainstream media, which refers to the objectification of women in cinema as strongly visual and erotic (809). In the novels the protagonists show admiration for the women portrayed in the media. For example, in *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza is attracted by the female villain lead in the movies.

“In the movies there is always one with red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away.” (89) Esperanza is fascinated by these women in a similar way that she admires Marin when she ignores the boys' advances. Esperanza considers that that might be a good representation of women having power. However, the idea of luring men into dangerous situations suggests an overly sexualized character. As Mulvey states, in films, the woman is often portrayed as the object that has the power to subordinate another person to their “will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically” (813), so often the sexuality of the woman is portrayed as the source of trouble, erasing men’s responsibility for their own actions.

Esperanza is subject to the double-edged sword that seduction and femininity are, when her friends and herself, decide to walk around the neighborhood with heeled shoes. They immediately become exposed to the male gaze and are warned of the dangers of exposing themselves as sexually mature woman. The performance gives the girls mixed feelings about the attention they get. On the one hand, they are flattered for being considered attractive. On the other hand, they are subjected to men’s entitlement to women’s bodies by being asked for a kiss in exchange of money. Nevertheless, Esperanza and her friends still can get off the high heels and go back to being children. Indeed, since they are not ready to embrace all the aspects of adulthood they decide to bury the heels, which are a strong symbol of emphasized femininity.

Esperanza, after the incident with the heels still believes that women get what they want because of their looks and that beauty is a source of power. The protagonists in both novels appreciate the beauty of other women, yet they fail to see themselves as beautiful. They believe that the attention received translates into actually being liked. In other words, they internalized that validation comes through self-objectification. This makes them learn that they are constantly meant to be aware of their bodies and appearances.

For example, in *The House on Mango Street*, when Esperanza's sister states that she is not going to wait for a man to get her out of Mango Street, Esperanza, who previously has showed the same desire of autonomy, does not feel sympathetic towards her sister. There is some envy in Esperanza’s words when she says about Nenny that "she wants things all her own, to pick and choose. Nenny has pretty eyes and it's easy to talk to that way if you are pretty” (88). Since Esperanza feels rejected for being ugly, she does not think that being feminine will lead her to get what she wants. Instead, she feels that masculine traits will give

her a power she cannot get otherwise. Esperanza is in part rejecting femininity because it implies being attractive to be valuable in the society.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* also takes a close look at Marguerite's views on beauty standards and femininity. In a world where people are expected to show their sex in an unambiguous way (Frye 25), Marguerite feels frustrated for not considering herself physically "normal" for being a woman. Moreover, the misleading information she gets about what lesbianism is, makes her question her gender and sexual identity and she feels compelled to demonstrate her femininity. First, she asks for her mother's assertion to define her gender, but this is not enough, because later she compares the shape of her body with a more developed friend of hers, "a universe divided what she had from what I had. She was a woman." (279) The envy and admiration towards her friend's breasts leads her to think she is a lesbian, although she does not fully understand the term. Then, since she cannot get her mother's response as valid, she believes that she has to prove her femininity through her sexuality, therefore she needs "a boyfriend's acceptance [to land her] into that strange and exotic land of frills and femininity" (280).

Nonetheless, like Esperanza, Marguerite feels in a disadvantaged position as an "unattractive" woman. Marguerite's view on "pretty girls" is similar to Esperanza's one, but Marguerite acknowledges that even the girls that are considered attractive by boys, deal with hardship too.

Even those sought-after girls were asked to "give up or tell where it is". They were reminded in a popular song of the times, "If you can't smile and say yes, please don't cry and say no." If the prettiest were expected to make the supreme sacrifice in order to "belong," what could the unattractive female do? (280)

Marguerite's viewpoint supports Connell's theory that femininity consists on adapting to men's desires. As Marguerite shows, the pressure to "belong" made the girls in the city feel the need to show availability to the point of not having agency of their own. However, the two protagonists develop different views to fight against the imposed standards of femininity. Esperanza's response against femininity is going to be acquiring masculine traits and beginning her own "quiet war" (89). While Marguerite believes that unattractiveness leads women to a position of invisibility. Therefore, as a woman the way to be relevant in the society is to develop other skills. "I believe most plain girls are virtuous because of the scarcity of

opportunity to be otherwise. The shield themselves in an aura of unavailability (for which after a time they begin to take credit) largely as a defense tactic.” (280) Marguerite acknowledges the importance of cultivating the mind in a superficial society where beauty is glorified. Yet, when the protagonists start experiencing their sexual awakening they feel the need to conform to certain gender standards. Marguerite, who feels ignored by the mainstream representation of femininity and by her love interest, decides "to take matters into [her] own hands" (281) and approaches the most handsome boy in the neighborhood. Nonetheless, the experience concurs with Good and Sanchez's study, which states that “placing importance on gender conformity is associated with basing self-esteem on the approval of others as well as decreased feelings of autonomy within sexual situations.” (204). As a consequence, Marguerite does not feel liberated from her concerns. She feels that she used the boy for her own purposes, reassuring her femininity, but at the same time she also feels used due to the lack of romantic connection.

In Esperanza's case, she begins to feel attracted to a boy in her neighborhood and begins to fantasize about what having a boyfriend would be like. Therefore, she decides to join Sally, a girl of her same age that is more sexually mature than her other friends. Sally engages in more gendered social contexts, which are generally showed to be associated with the development of more gender stereotyped qualities (T.D. Steensma et al. 290). However, Esperanza does not feel comfortable when she is exposed to these gendered social contexts, it "was a joke [she] didn't get." (96) Esperanza notices the power imbalance between the boys and Sally and she cannot bear it, but while Sally agrees to that type of social interaction, Esperanza finds it threatening and dangerous. Moreover, she tries to confront the situation and protect her friend, but they will not take her seriously and the boys sexually abuse Esperanza. Instead of focusing her anger on the boys, Esperanza feels betrayed by her friend and by the way the romance is portrayed in the media. These feelings make her reconsider the previous idea that being "beautiful and cruel" is going to give her control over men. She notices that objectification does not only take away Sally's power and her own, but it also makes the power imbalance between men and women more visible, which creates an unhealthy environment for Esperanza to explore and own sexuality. Therefore, Esperanza decides to join again her less sexually mature friends.

In the novels femininity strengthens inequality instead of providing a sense of identity. Imitating Sally in Esperanza's case or feeling the need to take matters into her own hands in

Marguerite's case shows that embracing femininity reinforces the duality of gender roles and perpetuates sexual oppression. The characters see themselves through a distorted lens not of their own creation that as Frye describes, misshapes their bodies to the shapes of the subordinate (38). In the analysis of Irigaray's work, Whitford explains the need of a "loving" reconstruction of the notion of the female body to enable women to feel and think differently about their embodied form. As the protagonists of the books show, to find worth and value in the approval of others encourages their feeling of inferiority, which lead them to gender-conforming behaviors that do not concur with their own identity.

At the end of the novels the heroines priorities completely change. Marguerite who after the sexual encounter with the boy of her neighborhood gets pregnant, changes her preference and her concern is not anymore about proving her femininity but has a bigger responsibility as a mother. Esperanza also seems to focus her thoughts on a subject that is not all about her-self. Alicia's words, "Who is going to change it? Not the mayor" (107) inspire Esperanza to take the responsibility of changing her neighborhood in the future. Esperanza learns the meaning of actual power and she is willing to use it to defend herself and the women in her barrio from the abuse and oppression they endure.

## 6. Conclusion

The identity formation of the girls varies in each theme analyzed on this paper. The novels criticize the imposed white middle-class structure that contributes to the oppression of their communities and the protagonists embrace a communal identity instead. However, while Esperanza and Marguerite show mature moral convictions in relation to the materialism and individualism of the middle class or against the cultural and racial discrimination that black and Chicano people confront; gender is explored from the perspective of girlhood. There is a division between the ways the girls perceive women and how women are perceived in society. The notions of Esperanza and Marguerite's own gender identity vary between the influences of the women that embody what they want to become themselves, and gender conforming behaviors in which the protagonists are not comfortable in. In addition, the protagonists' terrible approach to sex makes them aware of the power imbalance between men and women in the most abrupt way. In other areas of identity, like ethnic identity for instance, they get rid of their insecurities and get their priorities straight by feeling closer to their communities.

However, when it comes to their gender identity, there is no sign that Esperanza and Marguerite got a positive outlook on their “embodied form”. Nonetheless, instead of focusing on being likeable, they decide to focus on bigger responsibilities, like motherhood and sisterhood.

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