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Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street as a Künstlerroman Novel

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ABSTRACT

Künstlerroman, a sub domain of Bildungsroman, is magnificent and pertinently displayed in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. Cisneros has beautifully carved the evolution of Esperanza, a young Chicana girl, from a tender bud to a blooming flower as she discovers solitude in becoming a poet. The paper aims to walk down through the trail of vignettes and explore the paradigm shift in Esperanza's life.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Esperanza, Evolution, Künstlerroman, Vignette

Sandra Cisneros is an American novelist, short-story writer, and a poet. In the words of Gloria Anzaldua "Cisneros' work is a testament to the power of Chicana literature to challenge, dominant narratives and create new spaces for self-expression." Cisneros's first book was *Bad Boys* (1980), a volume of poetry. She gained international accreditation with her first book of fiction*, The House on Mango Street* (1983), a semi-autobiographical novel. Cisneros's other works of note include poetry such as *The Rodrigo Poems* (1985), *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*(1987), and *Loose Woman* (1994), children's book like *Hairs/ Pelitos* (1994),her collection of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories* (1991). Julia Alvarez praises Cisneros' unique voice and style, saying: "Cisneros' writing is like a homecoming, a return to the warmth and vitality of the Hispanic culture she grew up in. "Cisneros was awarded the National Medal of Arts (2015) by U.S. Pres. Barack Obama.

A *Bildungsroman* is a specific type of coming-of-age story that features the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual growth of a young protagonist approaching maturity. The original literary Bildungsroman novel is often considered to be Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*), published in four volumes between 1795–96.The term 'Bildungsroman' was coined by another German philologist Karl Morgenstern in 1819. He created the term in response to criticism that he had become increasingly vain and self-important after reading too much about art and philosophy. He meant the term to more positively describe his progressive intellectual journey and his self-cultivation, like the character Wilhelm in Goethe's novels. Some of the major Bildungsroman novels are James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckelberry Fin*.

Künstlerroman, (German: "artist's novel"), is a class of Bildungsroman, or apprenticeship novel, that deals with the youth and development of an individual who becomes—or is on the threshold of becoming—a painter, musician, or poet. Unlike many Bildungsroman, where the hero often dreams of becoming a great artist but settles for being a mere useful citizen, the Künstlerroman usually ends on a note of arrogant rejection of the commonplace life. Falling perfectly under this domain, *The House on Mango Street* portrays agradual trail of identity construction and personality growth. Ultimately, Esperanza finds her identity as an emerging artist (a poet and writer). Moreover, it is when she finds a "house" of her own within her heart, that she can overcome her anxieties and come to terms with her shabby neighborhood and small family house.

Almost every vignette of the novel showcases Esperanza's journey of self-discovery and growth, however, the following are some excerpts which reflect the elements of künstlerroman more prominently in *The House on Mango Street*.

"There. I had to look to where she pointed – the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we would not fall out. You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there. I nodded. I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go. (Vignette – 1, *The House on Mango Street*) The first vignette reflects Esperanza's innocent desire for a better house, the one she can proudly point at. It expresses her wish to have a better life in a house she can call her own, and the house on Mango Street is not the one.

"Marin says that if she stays here next year, she's going to get a real job downtown because that's where the best jobs are, since 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." (Vignette – 11, *Marin*) Marin represents the desires that Esperanza begins to long for. Marin's need for

independence, autonomy, and the desire to have an identity resonates with Esperanza.

"You gotta be able to know what to do with hips when you get them, I say making it up as I go. You gotta know how to walk with hips, practice you know – like it half of you wanted to go one way and the other half the other." (Vignette – 20, *Hips*)This vignette reflects Esperanza's transition from an innocent child to a growing adolescent. It shows her growing awareness about her own body and the complex societal expectations with respect to beauty, particularly in the Latin culture. Esperanza's conversation with Rachel and Lucy about 'hips' highlights this transition.

"Then he asked if I knew what day it was, and when I said I didn't, he said it was his birthday and would I please give him a birthday kiss. I thought I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go." (Vignette – 21 *The First Job*)Esperanza's first job marks her entry into the harsh adult world. The disturbing incident with her co-worker makes her confront the difficult reality of navigating the world as a young woman.

"Your abuelito is dead. Papa says early one morning in my room. Esta Muerto, and then as if he just heard the news himself, crumples like a coat and cries, my brave Papa cries. I have never seen my Papa cry and I don't know what to do." (Vignette – 22, *Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark)*This incident marks a significant step in Esperanza's emotional growth and development as she witnesses her father being vulnerable for the first time. She can empathize with her father and feel his pain, revealing Esperanza's evolution into a more mature human being.

"One day I'll have my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I am from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house." (Vignette – 34, Bums *in the Attic*)This vignette highlights Esperanza's evolution in a more prominent manner. From a child at the beginning of the novel, whose only concern was to have a grand house, she has grown up to be a mature and empathetic individual who acknowledges the needs of the marginalized people. She is not ashamed to accept who she really is and where she comes from, and wants to stay connected to her roots.

"Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own." (Vignette – 43, *A House of My Own*)The lines reflect a crucial moment in Esperanza's personal journey where she wants to have complete independence, control, and self-sufficiency as she talks about a house that belongs to nobody except herself. A house that is all hers.

"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." (Vignette – 44, *Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes*) Finally, the last vignette brings forward Esperanza as a more confident and mature individual who recognizes her new found strength. She wants to claim her identity by becoming a writer. Even though she desires to leave the Mango Street, she acknowledges that this is the place that shaped her and it will always be a part of her story.

CONCLUSION

The House on Mango Street is a poignant künstlerroman that captures Esperanza's journey as she navigates the complexities of life while carving her own identity and finding her own voice in being an artist. Through the 44 vignettes, Cisneros crafts Esperanza's coming-of-age experience as she moves from the childhood innocence towards adolescent awareness. By the end of the novel, Esperanza evolves as a confident, strong, and determined young woman. Esperanza's journey highlights how finding one's own identity is a complex and an evolutionary process.

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