

From Fleeing to Returning: Analysis of *The House on Mango Street* from the Perspective of Identity

Caihong Liu

China University of Geosciences
Wuhan, China 430074

Abstract—*The House on Mango Street* written by Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros is a classic novel with its core being the growing experience of a Mexican-American girl during adolescence. According to Erikson, the main tasks during adolescence are to overcome identity crises and acquire time vision, self-assurance, role trial, achievement expectancy, gender identity and polarization of leadership and thinking so as to construct identity. From the perspective of Erickson’s identity theory, this essay analyzes *The House on Mango Street* and finds that it is a story about identity crises of Esperanza: she shatters various confinements, acquires identity in the personal and collective senses and enters adulthood smoothly.

Keywords—Sandra Cisneros; *The House on Mango Street*; identity crises

I. INTRODUCTION

The House on Mango Street, the first novel of Sandra Cisneros (1954–), won the National Book Award in 1985 for her. It records the process in which the Mexican American girl Esperanza grows from a girl to a woman (Zhang Yueran, cited from Pan Pa, 2006: 299). Sandra Cisneros said in the preface of the second edition of her novel that when she began to write *The House on Mango Street*, she wanted to make it a memoir, but when she finished writing it, it is no longer her memoir or autobiography and it is a collective story of various characters set on a fictional time and fictional community — the Mango Street. (Cisneros, 2011: xi) The life experience of the protagonist, Esperanza, is similar to that of the author, but the novel combined the stories of the author and those of many other characters. This novel records the confusion during growing up, especially the exploration and construction of her Mexican ethnic identity, jobs roles and gender roles and formation and shape of values during adolescence and it is almost in accordance with the author’s life experience — the experience of a Mexican American girl who was born in the impoverished communities in Chicago and who overcame various difficulties to become an independent writer.

The growing experience during teenage years described in *The House on Mango Street* is also an important research topic of Erik H. Erikson, the famous psychologist whose research field includes identity construction. Erikson proposed the famous theory which divides a person’s life into eight different phases with different tasks for different phases. The teenage phase in which Esperanza is in is of critical significance according to Erikson because during this

phase people are always vexed at what kind of people they should become and according to Erikson, teenagers’ tasks during this period are to counter identity confusion and construct identity. From individual awareness perspective, identity construction refers to the re-definition of oneself after struggling between what one wants to become and what one should not become (Sun Mingzhi, 1984: 90). In the collective sense, it refers to the conformity to collective identity in terms of politics, religion, ethnicity, etc. (ibid).

This essay interprets the growing up experience of Esperanza described in *The House on Mango Street* from the perspective of Erikson’s identity theory and finds it can be summarized as the process of the protagonist’s experience of overcoming identity crises to construct identity in individual and collective senses. This will have an important impact on readers’ comprehension of this novel, bring positive influence to teenage readers and guide them on how to behave and how to face their ethnic and gender identities during their adolescence.

II. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE INDIVIDUAL SENSE

Erikson believes that during adolescence, teenagers must overcome crises in the following seven aspects and then they can smoothly enter into adulthood (Erikson, 1998: 82).

TABLE I. SEVEN ASPECTS OF IDENTITY

Time vision	vs	Time confusion
Self-assurance	vs	Indifference
Role trial	vs	Passive identity
Achievement expectancy	vs	Work stagnation
Gender identity	vs	Gender confusion
Polarization of leadership	vs	Authority confusion
Polarization of thinking	vs	Concept confusion

And such crises are fully displayed in *The House on Mango Street*.

A. Time Vision vs. Time Confusion

Time vision means that teenagers must have definite vision for the future, construct sufficient identity in terms of time and thus face the future confidently. They must establish realistic time concept so as to acquire identity. Otherwise, they would hurry into society and be unable to solve realistic problems (Sun Mingzhi, 1984: 90).

The protagonist in *The House on Mango Street* sees too many Mexican women unable to fulfill their ambitions: her great-grandmother had been carried off by her great-grandfather and had to spend her whole life looking through the window; her mother could have achieved something but instead ended up with not knowing which subway went to downtown; when her neighbor Ruthie was young, she had various working opportunities but she chose to marry a man, only to be discarded by her husband; her childhood companion Sally married at a young age without any preparation for marriage, then was kept in the room by her husband and could only watch the outside world from the window. Such examples tell Esperanza that one should not hurry into marriage or society. Therefore, with her aunt's encouragement, she persists in reading and writing poems and knows clearly that she would like to become a writer rather than being a mother at an early age just like the other females on Mango Street. Thus, Esperanza at her teenage established definite time vision and adequate identity in terms of time.

B. Role Trial and Achievement Expectancy vs. Passive Identity and Work Stagnation

Role trial means that when teenagers try to play various social roles, they would discover that each role involves certain obligations to perform and various difficulties and risks to overcome, but at the same time they realize the importance of such trials for their future and thus take the trials seriously. Achievement expectancy means that teenagers can accomplish their goals through diligence, constant efforts and adequate consideration and thus can form occupation identity. However, they may also fail to achieve their goal if they are unable to do the job or if they despise their job and under such circumstance, job stagnation would be caused (Sun Mingzhi, 1984: 90).

Esperanza at her teenage years starts to explore her gender and job roles and make trials and efforts. Esperanza starts to pay attention to her figure, likes to wear colorful high heels to walk on streets and develops interest in boys, etc., manifesting trials in Esperanza's gender roles. As for job role, Esperanza's dad tells Esperanza not to go to public school unless she wanted to become bad, but Catholic high schools cost a lot, so Esperanza knows the significance of work. At a young age, she goes to the social security office to get her social security number and searches for jobs. She gets a job from the Peter Pan film developing store in North Broadway Avenue where her aunt works. During work, she does not know whether she can sit to work and finishes her meals to continue to work. She comes across an oriental old man and is kissed heavily. This is her first step at work and it helps her know the risks of work, but at the same time, she tries to figure out the confusion of work and becomes increasingly mature.

On the contrary, Louie's cousin drives a Cadillac to Mango Street, only to be caught by the police. This enhances Esperanza's faith in obtaining income and accomplishing achievements through labor and merits. Later, with her aunt's encouragement, she begins to write — her aunt tells her that writing can keep her free. Although she does not

know what her aunt meant, she follows her advice and begins to write. Her poems touch her aunt and it can be expected that through Esperanza's efforts and persistence, she can be a writer (as can be evidenced by the author's being a writer). Summarizing from the above information, we can see that in trying to play different social roles, especially job roles, Esperanza is successful and she accomplishes expectations for the future.

C. Gender Identity vs. Gender Confusion

Gender identity refers to the feminine or masculine qualities one shows when interacting with people of the opposite gender. Without adequate gender identity, one cannot solve the problem of showing different gender qualities and thus cause gender confusion, affecting future marriage choices and sexual life (Sun Mingzhi, 1984: 90). As an adolescent girl, Esperanza has noticed that boys and girls live in different worlds and she finds that her younger brother cannot be seen talking to his own sisters. Therefore, she would feel shy when gazed by boys and is worried that they would notice her shoes are not beautiful. Meanwhile, inheriting her great-grandmother's name and born like her great-grandmother in the Chinese year of the horse, she would not like to inherit her great-grandmother's place by the window and refuses to admit that being born a female is bad luck and believes that to be a Chinese lie, because Mexicans, like Chinese, don't want their women to be strong. She would not like to be confined by males as her great-grandmother was and wants to have a new name, a name that can shape a brand-new self, a name like Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. "Using X is a sign that Esperanza is challenging the female role under the male discourse." (Zhou Weigui & Zhao Lihua, 2016:41) and this shows the protagonist's betrayal of traditional female role.

At the beginning of the novel, Esperanza says she wants a house, a house of her own. Seeing the tragedies of her great-grandmother, her mother, her neighbor Ruthie, Mineva who likes writing poems, Sally and other females on Mango Street and internalizing their pain into her own life experience, she wants to live a different life and "the house she likes is different from the houses that confine the females on Mango Street" (Zhou Weigui & Zhao Lihua, 2016:41). In the Monkey Garden, boys steal Sally's keys and say they would give the keys to Sally if she kisses them. Esperanza says no while Sally easily says yes, which makes Esperanza angry because Sally, as a girl, easily accepts the rules set by boys. The above description all shows Esperanza (the author)'s gender identity awareness and her focus on writing is both rooted in her awareness as a colored female in America and rooted in her female awareness in a male-dominated Mexican-American community (Jacobs, 2006:7). This strengthens her desire to challenge traditional gender roles: she does not want to get a house through marriage but would like to "say good bye to Mango street and achieve independence and freedom through writing" (Zhou Weigui & Zhao Lihua, 2016: 42).

In the chapter "Beautiful & Cruel", Esperanza says she is an ugly girl who envies the woman in movies who drives men crazy and whose power is her own. Meanwhile,

Esperanza doesn't want to be a submissive woman who puts her neck at the door, waiting for sweet chains (Sandra Cisneros, Translated by Pan Pa, 2006: 119). She fights against this quietly, "leaving the table like a man without putting back the chair or picking up the plate". At such time, Esperanza realizes that to have power, she needs to crumble gender shackles and "this starts from table" (Bloom, 2010: 47). All this means that Esperanza shows rebellion and fleeing from traditional female roles and turn towards independence and freedom, so it can be predicted that in future marriage choice, Esperanza would not follow the old routine and would make different choices from traditional women because she would like to be an independent woman. Seeing from the author's experience, we can know this has come true: Sandra Cisneros remains unmarried and sees writing her own child, enjoying the happiness of being alone and the space that being alone gives for her thinking and writing (From Wikipedia).

Drawing from the above analysis, we can see that Esperanza shows feminine qualities in dressing during adolescence, notices differences between men and women when interacting with the opposite gender, but she bravely wages war against traditional female roles and turns towards independence and self-reliance, achieving gender identity in the process.

D. Polarization in Leadership and Thinking vs. Authority and Concept Confusion

Polarization in leadership and thinking refers to the fact that young people need to choose a type of life philosophy, religious belief and ideology and form stable ideology or value system after comparing different ideologies or value systems by participating in collective and social life (Sun Mingzhi, 1984: 91). Esperanza lives in a patriarchal society where males have absolute say while females are confined in small houses, looking out the window all day. Esperanza sees that Alicia who goes to college is afraid of her father, that is to say, she is afraid of the male discourse represented by his father. Esperanza's mother always regrets that she could have been somebody, Minerva's biggest trouble is her husband who left and keeps leaving, girls like Sally easily accepts rules proposed by boys and this makes Esperanza angry. Therefore, it can be seen that Esperanza cannot really accept the male discourse system in traditional Mexican communicates. Under the guidance and enlightenment of her mother and aunt, she discards traditional female role under the patriarchal system, criticizes such system and chooses to be an independent and self-reliant woman who hopes to get out of the shadow of Mango Street and the patriarchal system through writing (Shi Kaiping, 2005: 27). Instead of yielding to the male discourse system, Esperanza criticizes the system, chooses to be independent rather than reliant on males, and finally she forms positive identity and stable value system by summarizing the growing-up experience of females on Mango Street.

Just as Mr. Lu Gusun said in the prologue of the Chinese version of *The House on Mango Street*, "People find the English spoken by youth of minor ethnic groups new and fresh and such discourse is a rebellion against mainstream

discourse." Esperanza realizes that in the social system, white people have greater say and when people from other communities come to Mango Street, they feel afraid. Therefore, she wants to fight against the mainstream discourse dominated by white people through writing, establish discourse of ethnic minorities and make their voices heard. However, she is aware that by boycotting speaking English just like Mamacitais does in the novel will not help ward off the current of mainstream discourse of white people, so she needs to make her voice heard by using the unique English discourse with Spanish characteristics. Therefore, she summarizes and internalizes the life experience of characters on Mango Street in the novel, comes to have better understanding of the environment she is in and herself and forms stable self-awareness and life values; she refuses to yield to patriarchal system or be confined in the Mexican community, and instead she employs English writing as the means to make the voices of ethnic minorities heard and to wage war against mainstream culture dominated by white people.

III. IDENTITY IN THE COLLECTIVE SENSE

One's growth cannot be separated from society, so one's identity crises are closely connected with contemporary crises in historical development. So in one's growing up process, one needs conform to the collective identity of nationality, politics, religion, etc. Therefore, collective awareness of nationality, politics, religion, etc. can be reflected in one's identity. *The House on Mango Street* does not clearly point out the housing, racial discrimination and segregation problems in the 1960s and 1970s in America, but they are implicitly disclosed in the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, Esperanza says she wants a house, a house different from the one they live in, one that she can point to and one that looks like the house in where her father works. The differences between houses in Mexican community and houses elsewhere demonstrate the separation of Mexican community from the real world and it helps enlighten Esperanza's ethnic awareness. When Alicia points at the house which makes Esperanza feel ashamed and asks her whether she lives there, Esperanza nods and feels like nothing. At such time, Esperanza feels ashamed for her identity and house. Meanwhile, Esperanza realizes that for those who don't understand them (Chicano people in American communities), they would feel afraid when entering Chicano community because they consider Chicano people dangerous. But for Chicano people like Esperanza, they feel safe. However, when Chicano people enter another colored community, their knees shake and their car windows get rolled up tight and their eyes look straight (Written by Sandra Cisneros, translated by Pan Pa, 2006:34). Such description vividly depicts the stereotypes and the fear of other ethnic groups. Esperanza's name also reflects her initial fleeing from her ethnic identity: Esperanza does not like her name and wants a name like Zeze the X, and as her original name represents Mexican tradition and connection with ancestral identity, this shows that Esperanza is ashamed of her ethnic identity. Just as Sandra Cisneros said in the prologue of the novel, after leaving Chicago, she felt she was different and was ashamed (Cisneros, 2011: xiii). But

gradually, Esperanza realizes that admit it or not, her Mexican identity is part of her. And such identity is always hidden in her heart as can be seen from the novel that when Esperanza sees a house which looks like the house she saw in Mexico, she is sure it is a Mexican house and it is and this shows that the collective identity is deeply engrained in her heart.

In the end of the novel, Esperanza says she has gone away to come back, for the ones she left behind. Esperanza's coming back is not like Ruthie who returned to Mango Street after being discarded by her husband. The coming back of Esperanza does not mean literally and physically returning to Mango Street, but "to make the voices of her ethnic group heard through writing and thus be together with people on Mango Street mentally. (Zhou Weigui & Zhao Lihua, 2005: 42)".

The transition from fleeing from Mango Street to returning to Mango Street shows that Esperanza has been exploring her own ethnic identity and her attitude towards her ethnic identity has turned from refusal to acceptance. Meanwhile, although Mango Street is an impoverished and backward community, it is never short of happiness there and it has brought much joy for Esperanza and her companions. Even though the characters in the novel are underclass and are not without limits, they also show brilliance of humanity just like the stowaway Geraldo and the tired father, etc. All of the above information demonstrates the author's gradual acceptance of Mexican culture and her Mexican-American identity.

The manner one communicates can suggest something about her identity in relation to ulterior motives, prospective audience and ethnic background (Regina, 2012: 12). Many Chicano writers choose to write in Spanish while Sandra Cisneros, that is Esperanza in Sandra Cisneros's novel, wrote in the special Spanish English. This is partly because in the midst of the cultural market where English is the main language for public communication, ethnic minority writers have to use English — the mainstream language to write about their individual or ethnic experience. Also, using Spanish-English to write shows that Sandra Cisneros, while integrating into the American society, tries to display the cultural tradition and customs different from the mainstream society and emphasize the differences between Standard English and the English she uses (Wang Xiaolu, 2005: 36). Just as Lu Gusun said in the prologue of the novel, "Super short sentences (such as me instead of as for me), ungrammatical usage and frequent use of Spanish proper nouns and sentences are unique symbols of ethnic groups". If using English is what Sandra Cisneros had to do, then special marks of ethnic identity and deliberate use of Spanish proper nouns and sentences are Sandra Cisneros or Esperanza's choice because she no longer flees from but rather chooses to return to her Mexican identity and culture and would like to help make the voices of her ethnic group heard.

IV. CONCLUSION

Adolescence is a critical period of life when young people form time vision, self-assurance, role trial, future expectancy, gender identity and thinking values. Analyzing

from the perspective of Erikson's identity theory, we can see that *The House on Mango Street* is a work that describes the process in which Esperanza goes through identity crises and acquires individual and collective identity. For Esperanza who grew up in the Mexican community in Chicago, she has the identity of being a member of ethnic minority and a female in a patriarchal community, so in the process of entering into adulthood, she has to overcome more crises and confinements. Seeing the tragedies of females on Mango Street, she decides not to depend on males and would like to have a house of her own through writing rather than marriage; Working hard and experiencing trials on different jobs, gender roles, she breaks through the rigid male discourse system, wages war against traditional female roles, acquires self-assurance, stable self-awareness and life values and finally becomes an independent female writer; for her collective identity, at the beginning, she tried to flee from her ethnic minority community, but gradually she has accepted her ethnic identity and acquired identity in the collective sense, and she would like to help make the voice of her ethnic group heard and return to her ethnic identity. Finally, Esperanza has overcome various crises of adolescence and smoothly run into adulthood, becoming a role model of growth for Mexican-American women and attracting the attention of mainstream America to the various social problems ethnic minorities face.

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