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### **An Analysis of, *The House on Mango Street* through Foucault**

Sandra Cisneros's, *The House on Mango Street* is a novel that displays several different conflicts that run throughout the story. One of the biggest conflicts that Cisneros focuses on is gender inequality, specifically men having a sense of physical and mental control over women. This is shown primarily through fathers, husbands and boys that the story's protagonist, Esperanza has some sort of encounter with. These ideas can be further explored through Michel Foucault's, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, which shares Foucault's views on societal imprisonment and the idea that people are constantly under surveillance. *The House on Mango Street* is set in a patriarchal world and it is through Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, that these limitations that the male characters set, can be fully exposed and understood.

When it comes to gender inequality, a lot of the father aspects in this book is based upon physical abuse. An example from the text is when Esperanza talks about her friend Sally, writing,

“He never hits me hard. She said her mamma rubs lard on all the places where it hurts. Then at school she'd say she fell... But Sally doesn't tell about the time he hit her with his hands just like a dog, she said, like if I was an animal. He thinks I'm going to run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed.” (Page. 92).

This quote shows that Sally accepts being treated like an animal in order to keep the family proud. This is wrong though because it proves that not only does Sally's father not

consider her an equal, but he does not consider her a human being as well. It is as if Sally is enslaved and is ensured her place in the family through fear and dehumanizing tactics, like being beating like a dog. Because of this, it is important to question why Sally would ever deny the physical abuse in order to protect her father. The answer to this question is simple, it again comes down to fear: What would happen to her father? and most importantly, What would he do to Sally if she exposed him? These are both questions that Sally has to consider, when she thinks about seeking help from this abusive man.

The conflicts that surround upon Sally can be further dissected with Foucault's, "Delinquent Theory". Foucault writes,

"The delinquent is an institutional product... The prisoner condemned to hard labour was meticulously produced by a childhood spent in a reformatory... But it is not on the fringes of society and through successive exiles that criminality is born, but by means of ever more closely placed insertions, under ever more insistent surveillance..." (Page. 1496).

What Foucault is saying is that people are products of the environments that they grow up in. Which means, if someone is told something long enough, they begin to believe it because that is all that they know. In the case of being a, "delinquent", a child can only become one because they are told they are no good and because they are placed into societies where they are around other misguided people and they have to act tough in order to survive. In Sally's case, she was born into an environment that makes her think she is enslaved to her father, which means she accepts the role because she does not know otherwise. Therefore, she has no ambition to fight for her liberation because she was never taught to do so, which of course minimizes her as not only a woman, but as a human being.

Husbands are another group in this book that possess too much power. When discussing this oppressed housewife named Rafaela, Esperanza writes, “And then Rafaela... Gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid that Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at.” (Page. 79). Because Rafaela allows herself to be held captive, she shows that she is okay with being possessed as a piece of property. This idea can be proven further later on in the passage, when Esperanza describes the women at the local dance hall, writing, “... The dance hall down the street where women much older than her (Rafaela) throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys. And always there is someone offering sweeter drinks, someone promising to keep them on a silver string.” (Page. 80). What is interesting about this quote is Esperanza’s word choice, “silver string”. Because she describes women at the dance hall as being over flirtatious and on the hunt for men who can offer them, “sweeter drinks”, it can be inferred that, “silver string” implies that the women are looking for men who can take control of them, similar to Rafaela’s marriage. Although it is crazy to think that anyone would want to be enslaved or held under captivity, the women in this book are okay with this because it is what is normal for them. From the time the women are young, their father’s treat them like property (like Sally), which means they are never actually given any freedom. Because of these norms, life is like a prison sentence for these women without them even knowing it.

This madness of thinking can be explained further with Foucault’s, “Judgment Theory”. Foucault writes, “The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based” (Page. 1499). Foucault’s message here is that society is constantly being judged, which makes trying to live up to one’s standards a normal

part of life. This normalization process then becomes much more difficult to break because it has evolved into being such a strong routine in the lives of so many. So when it comes to the women in the bar, or even Rafaela herself, they just want to be like everyone else. Because they think that men are superior and because they think being in a patriarchal marriage makes fellow women happy, they think it will make them happy as well, which will ultimately help them fit into the norms of society.

The boys around Esperanza's age are another important aspect to consider in this book. Esperanza shares an encounter she has with a boy, writing, "I couldn't do anything but cry... They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong... He wouldn't let me go. He said I love you, I love you, Spanish girl." (Page. 100). Besides the fact that Esperanza is sexually assaulted in this encounter, the worst parts about it is that she loses both her identity and innocence from this boy that she does not know. A young girl grows up reading fairy tales and learns about sex in a romantic, delicate way. These tales are supposed to educate women at a young age that men have to treat them right and because this boy fails to do so, Esperanza has her innocence taken away from her, which leaves her feeling angry, betrayed and confused. Also when the boy refers to her as, "Spanish Girl" he takes away everything about Esperanza that makes her who she is, degrading her to only a race and a sex. Because he does this, this creates the illusion that he is superior to her, therefore he can do what he wants to her, minimizing her very existence.

Throughout the book, there are a few instances of sexual assault that Esperanza at least witnesses with the boys from her town. It is important to question why these boys feel it is okay to treat young women the way that they do and it is honestly their parents fault, specifically their

mothers. This is proven when Esperanza informs a mother that her son is not treating Sally right, writing, “Your son and his friends stole Sally’s keys and now they won’t give them back unless she kisses them... Those kids, she said, not looking up from her ironing. That’s all? What do you want me to do, she said, call the cops? And kept on ironing.” (Page. 97). Because this mother did nothing, the boys bad behavior is not stopped, which means it can only become worse. This results in the boys looking at women as sex objects because their own mothers do not stop their behavior, which means that they do not consider sexually assaulting women to be wrong. That, or the boys simply know that there is not going to be anyone to stop them. In either case, parents, especially mothers not doing anything to teach their boys about equality only reinforces male dominant ideas that run throughout the story.

It is important to question though why the mothers in this story refuse to educate or discipline their sons for their vulgar behaviors. Foucault’s, “Denatured Theory” explains this question perfectly when he writes,

“... The internal dislocation of the judicial power or at least of its functioning; an increasing difficulty in judging, as if one were ashamed to pass sentence... In view of this, it is useless to believe in the good or bad consciences of judges... The major fact that the power they exercise has been ‘denatured’; that it is at a certain level governed by laws; that at another, more fundamental level it functions as a normative power...” (Page. 1498).

The main message here is that life is not about what is right, it is about what is considered normal. The mothers in this book grew up being dehumanized and enslaved in a sense, Sally’s story shows this first hand. So when the mothers marry men that over power them (like Rafaela), they do not think of raising their sons to be better because they do not have the free thinking to

do so. What is right in the female eyes is male patriarchy, or at least no one believes that they have the power to stop it. Therefore, this cycle that starts when a woman is a child, is continued on into their adult hoods and immortalized through their sons.

The reason that Cisneros wrote this novel is to give female readers a perspective, a perspective that challenges them to see the hardships that the women characters faced, living in a world dominated by men. The hope is that females can use this book as a testament as some sort, reflecting on their own lives and if they are being treated equally. The purpose of Esperanza herself, is to show all readers that this is a young woman who is capable of so much more than what is expected of her. Because of this, it is important to look at how Esperanza contrasts with the male characters, which shows that she is not only different than other female characters, but that she is not willing to give into the expectations established by the men in this book as well. It is also important to understand how Foucault can help someone who reads this book, which is assisting readers in their realization that this is a novel that shows just how imprisoned a society can be. ***The House on Mango Street is set in a patriarchal world and it is through Foucault's Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, that these limitations that the male characters set, can be fully exposed and understood.***

Works Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. 25th Anniversary Edition ed., 1984.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism: Second Edition*, 2nd ed., pp. 1468–1503.

\*First paper, I used Berlant and Warner.