

Investigating ‘Othering’ in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*

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ABSTRACT

In Sandra Cisneros’s novel *The House on Mango Street* is about the Latino experience as a minority group in the United States. This article focused on the concept of ‘othering’ originally as part of a post-colonial theory. This concept can be related to feminist and Marxist perspectives as well. It is also involved in many academic fields, including literature. The construction of othering in this novel can be manifested in forms of linguistic features, mimicry, double consciousness, unhomeliness, gender roles, and socioeconomic class. The findings represented the negative effects of the othering practices in which affecting psychological, economical, and sociocultural dimensions of the people in general.

Key words: Othering, Post-Colonial Theory, Feminist Theory, Marxist Theory, Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

INTRODUCTION

Among the literary criticism, a post-colonial theory is one of the most important theories that reflects the human relationships in both reality and literary works, especially criticizing against colonialist ideologies. In a post-colonial lens, the concept of ‘othering’ is often referred when there is a discussion and analysis on the issue. The othering issue concerns with a negative side of human relationships. Othering, as a social, linguistic, and psychological mechanism, distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’, othering creates an exclusion. It also breeds inequality and produces tension, dissension, or even conflict between members of the two groups by treating the other as an inferior. The concept of ‘othering’ is related to ethnocentricity and stereotyping; it involves the domination of the in-group that declares itself superior to the out-group and denies the other subjectivity and uniqueness (Culea, 2014; Golkowska, 2014). However, the term ‘the other’ relates to the notion of ‘othering’. As Canales (2000) pointed out, “our understanding of the other is important for how we understand difference and how we engage with those perceived as different from self—as the other. This process of engagement is termed othering” (p. 16). In post-colonial theory, ‘the other’, in a general meaning, is anyone who is separate from one’s self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is ‘normal’ and in locating one’s own place in the world. The term is used extensively to define the relations between self and other in creating self-awareness and ideas of identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2009). According to Halliday, Boughton, & Kerridge (2014), self-identity is only truly known through compari-

sons to the ordinary and typical attributes of others who are perceived as socially normal. Once labeled as different from this prevailing norm, however, individuals are stigmatized, and it is this sense of difference that constructs their identity as other or of an ‘alienated self’. For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985), ‘othering’ is the process by which colonial discourse creates its ‘others’. “By this process, the creation of borders between those who are insiders and those who are outsiders does not occur accidentally but is intended and fuelled by established social laws, principles, and practices which mark boundaries between a group and other social groups” (as cited in Ng’atigwa, 2014, p. 233). From the feminist criticism, a French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1972), the category of the other is as primordial as consciousness itself. “In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one find the expression of a duality – that of the self and the other” (p. 16). As a consequence, the others experienced a feeling of frustration, shame, insecurity, and annoyance caused by outside people treating them differently. The concept of othering, in a broad sense, means a mental distance is created between ‘us’ and ‘them’. A key aspect of othering is the notion of who and what the others are intimately related to ‘our’ notion of who and what ‘we’ are. That is, ‘we’ use the other to define ourselves: ‘we’ understand ourselves in relation to what ‘we’ are not. At the same time, we perceive of our group differently, whether a class, a nation, a race, languages, customs, or beliefs, we define it by those we exclude from it. Moreover, othering is the process by which people are made to seem like an out-group – ‘them’ – who are different from ‘us’. Othering is not inherently problem-

atic; but it can be problematic if it is for the tendency of viewing 'them' as inferior to 'us' (Boréus, 2001; Fitzsimmons, 2015; Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 1996; Littlewood & Lipsedge, 1997).

The othering issue can be presented in any literary texts such as literary works of African American, for instance, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) or Sapphire's *Push* (1996). Sandra Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street* is one of the literary texts that represents the othering practices in a Latino community. It is presented in a form of storytelling about the Latino experience as a minority group in the United States. The story is about the Diasporas – the brown colored people who move from an original homeland to the United States. The story narrates through the lens of the narrator, Esperanza. She tells the story that revolves around her own mundane life, social environment, friends, and neighbors who have come and gone on Mango Street. Esperanza gives an importance to the house as she has mentioned from the beginning to the end of the story. Through her eyes, she reflects the differences about cultures, languages, and the way of life among the Latino community and the others surround them. She also reflects an alienated self, inferiority and being 'othered' in the American home. The story manifests the notion of othering and related concepts that are crucial in the society that Sandra Cisneros presented throughout the novel. However, the concept of othering can be manifested in many different forms. Therefore, this article aims to investigate the issues and circumstances that othering is used. The literary text from Sandra Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street* will be analyzed in order to answer the question - How does the different forms of othering manifested in the novel?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF PRIMARY TEXT

In this part, I will investigate the origin and the development of the theoretical framework and demonstrating the possibility to apply this framework to the novel. I will be using a textual analysis and interpretation of the selected novel.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The concept of othering can be found in the colonialism period. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin (2009) pointed out, the term colonialism is important in defining the specific form of cultural exploitation that developed with the expansion of Europe over the last 400 years. During this period, the other (the colonized) existed as a primary means of defining the colonizer and of creating a sense of unity beneath such differences as class and wealth. According to the post-colonial theory, "the notion of othering is developed by social scientists to articulate the post-colonial social milieu" (Ng'atigwa, 2014, p. 233). Additionally, the notion of othering and post-colonial theory cannot be separated; namely, post-colonial theory is a background of othering. Post-colonial theory has been found useful in examining a variety of colonial relationship beyond the classic colonizing activities of the British Empire. Although the study of the controlling

power of representation in colonized societies had begun in the late 1970s with texts such as Said's *Orientalism*, and led to the development of what came to be called colonialist discourse theory in the work of critics such as Spivak and Bhabha (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2009). Tyson (2015) describes that a post-colonial theory offers us a framework for examining the similarities among all critical theories that deal with human oppression, such as Marxism, Feminist, LGBTQ, and African American theories. As a theoretical framework, a post-colonial theory seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically—of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies.

For Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin (2002), the term 'colonial' has been used for the period before independence and the term 'post-colonial' is to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. In this perspective, the notion of othering is used, as it exists during and after the period of Europeans imperial domination and the effects of these on contemporary literatures. Edward Said (1977), in his prominent work *Orientalism* (1978), problematizes the process of othering through duality of West/East. He describes that "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, and experience" (pp. 1-2). This is an example of Eurocentric othering by produce positive characteristics of Western nations by contrasting with Eastern nations in which the West projects negative characteristics such as Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality for The Orient. This description sets up the distinction between East and West. The West had the power to define the East as the other. Said (1977) informs us that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient. Orientalism is a subject that teaches more about European power over the Orient than it informs about the Orient. Therefore, in representing the Orient, the European conveys more about what it is to be European than what it is to be Oriental. This is evidence of the positional superiority of Europeans and cultural domination. The Orient is positioned as other. What is more, the Orient is silenced, prohibited to describe the Orient. As other, their words are powerless and meaningless. Only the Orientalist can interpret the Orient, the Orient being radically incapable of interpreting itself (Maccallum, 2002).

However, post-colonial theory is now used in various fields to describe a heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional, including literary field. According to Tyson (2015), there are some questions that post-colonial theory asks about literary texts. The questions are offered a post-colonial approach to literature, one of which such as: What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference—the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity—in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live? Othering might be one area of analysis here. This also includes the case of Cis-

neros's *The House on Mango Street*, which does not seem explicitly related to a colonialist ideology, but the notion of othering can be found as well.

The concept of othering does not appear only in a post-colonial theory, but also found in feminist criticism. In addition, "feminist perspectives are of increasing importance in post-colonial criticism and indeed the strategies of recent feminist and recent post-colonial theory overlap and inform each other" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002, p. 30). In feminist criticism where the patriarchal ideology reigns, woman is other: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have (Tyson, 2015). Thus, the history and concerns of feminist theory have strong parallels with post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002)

Apart from a post-colonial theory and feminist criticism, the Marxism is another theory that can reflect the othering practices. This perspective can be employed to analyze and interpret any literary texts, especially the concept of othering in the Cisneros' novel *The House on Mango Street*. As Tyson (2015) pointed out, "for Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities. (...) Thus, economics is the *base* on which the *superstructure* of social/political/ideological realities is built" (p. 51). Moreover, "from a Marxist perspective, differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the haves and the have-nots" (Tyson, 2015, p. 52). 'The haves' includes the rich or the upper class, while 'the have-nots' implies the poor or the lower class. The rich group has many material possessions, economically privileged, and easily accessible to financial, educational, and career opportunities. They also see themselves as a superior. In contrast, the poor group has few material possessions, less opportunities, and economically oppressed. They are seen as an inferior. Since the poors are seen as 'the others', they are devalued and alienated, "thus inevitably promotes social, economic, and political discrimination against the poor" (Tyson, 2015, p. 57).

In order to answer the research question about the othering practices manifested in the novel, I will be using a textual analysis and interpretation to analyze and synthesize the selected text. Moreover, words, phrases, sentences, and discourses will be analyzed throughout the text to find out how the forms of manifestation of othering practices are represented through the lens of post-colonial theory, feminist criticism, and Marxist perspective.

Review of Primary Text

The House on Mango Street narrates a coming-of-age story charting the life of protagonist Esperanza who together with her family has recently settled into the neighborhood of Mango Street. Primarily revolving around the mundane lives of people in the tiny Latino community, the novella is

richly packed with powerful messages of friendship, ethnic stereotypes, sense of community and quest for identity. Written from the perspective of non-white author Sandra Cisneros, she shares with readers the realistic portrayals of the upbringing in the ethnic community and social constructs formed around the minority, bringing into focus the relevant discussion of gender and race issues. Born on December 20, 1954 in Chicago of Mexican descent, she intends to weave the fictitious Mango Street into the American context of Chicago setting despite her lack of sense of connection to her place of birth. Representing a distinct voice in American literary canon, the book basks in the glory of its retention of sense of authenticity composed by the widely praised non-white author trying to enrich the white-dominated literature landscape.

First published in 1984, Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* has proved highly popular among school syllabus, young and adult readers alike, and its tremendous success is a clear testament to the unabated public reception. Against the ebb and flow of mainstream white authors, Cisneros represents an audacious ethnic voice that speaks uniquely. Composed in vignettes and randomly digestible throughout, readers will find the fluidity and loose plotting inherent in *The House on Mango Street*, and on countless re-readings, they can simply jump right off to their favorite vignettes without a need for the start-to-finish. The conciseness, simplicity, and sporadic playful uses of language are one of the many good reasons to justify for the novella's eternal appeal to both young and adult readers. Categorized as the bildungsroman genre, it finely captures the progress and development of the protagonist, charting her life before and after their settlement into the House on Mango Street, her establishment of friendship in the community, and her socialization etc. Cisneros' intention for the novel to be the coming-of-age story centering on the Latina girl growing up and gaining various life experiences as she matures helps preserve the sense of reality and book's engagement with readers for a sustained period of time.

THE FORMS OF MANIFESTATION

Sandra Cisneros has captured the concept of 'othering' in the text *The House on Mango Street*. In this article, I aim to analyze the forms of manifestation through linguistic features, mimicry, double consciousness, unhomeliness, feminist perspective on gender roles, and Marxist perspective on socioeconomic class.

Linguistic Features

According to Canales (2000), "language, as a powerful symbol influencing the othering process, can be employed in ways that harm or in ways that acknowledge and respect those perceived as other" (p. 17). Since othering, by its nature, has a characteristic of exclusion and discrimination, therefore a usage of linguistic feature is composed of a negative meaning. In *The House on Mango Street*, when the nun passes by and asks Esperanza where she lives, "Where do you live? she asked. There, I said pointing up to the third floor. You live

there? (...) The way she said it made me feel like nothing" (p. 5). The word 'there' indicates the power of language to make the inferior feels poor and cheap by stressing it. It also makes a psychological impact to the girl as well by using the word 'nothing'. Furthermore, as Esperanza described her new house, "We didn't always live on Mango Street (.) but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to (.) One day I will go away" (pp. 109-110). The usage of the phrases like 'sad red house', 'do not belong' and 'go away' represents a self-dissatisfie towards the community where she moves in. Additionally, it indicates a self-alienation from the community and a denial from the outside people. Moreover, these terms the 'Mango Street' and 'sad red house' represent the physical surrounding and symbolism in which affecting the mentality of the Latino people. As Golkowska (2014) pointed out, "the symbolism of the setting is crucial in building the theme of alienation and imprisonment. In fact, (...) mental landscapes appear to be both shaped by their physical surrounding and symbolized through their interaction with it" (p. 64).

There is also the usage of wordings 'scared', 'dangerous', and 'shiny knives' in which reflecting the feelings of the outside people who are not Latino. They distrust, suspicion, and ultimately other this group of people to be the strangers. As Esperanza's thought, "Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives (...) But we aren't afraid (...) All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes" (p. 28). In addition to the linguistic features from the excerpt above, the othering can be considered in a form of racial discrimination. The colored people (Brown and Black) suffer from internalized racism of the color – the White who is a majority group of the society. "Internalized Racism results from the psychological programming by which a racist society indoctrinates people of color to believe in white superiority. Victims of internalized racism generally feel inferior to the whites, less attractive, less worthwhile" (Tyson, 2015, p. 346). In *The House on Mango Street*, the people of brown color as a minority group in white society, in the eyes of white people, all brown are bad and dangerous people.

There is another circumstance where Esperanza contemplates about the status of the rich people and how they live their lives, "People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don't look down at all except to be content to live on hills. They have nothing to do with last week's garbage or fear of rats. Night comes. Nothing wakes them but the wind" (pp. 86-7). The usage of wordings such as 'stars' and 'earth'; 'garbage or rats' from the excerpt above indicate the using of a satirical language. It reflects the gap between the riches and the poors living their lives.

Mimicry, Double Consciousness, and Unhomeliness

From a post-colonial perspective, the social relationships among the colonizers (superior) and the colonized (inferior)

have led to the phenomenon called 'mimicry', 'double consciousness', and 'unhomeliness'. According to Tyson (2015), mimicry phenomenon is about the imitations of the colonized group to their colonizers as much as possible, such as dress, speech, behavior, and lifestyle. The reason is that the colonized has been programmed or taught to believe in the colonizer's superiority and in their own inferiority. Mimicry can be found in *The House on Mango Street* when the poors, as an inferior imitate the riches, as a superior. There are circumstances that indicate the mimicry phenomenon.

"I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works (.) People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars. (...) They have nothing to do with last week's garbage or fear of rats. Night comes. Nothing wakes them but the wind" (pp. 86-7). According to Esperanza's lens, her thought represents the imitation of lifestyles of the rich people. The othering process can affect the individual's experience as the other or an alienated self, an identity and self-esteem, a feeling of frustration, shame, and insecurity. As Esperanza thought "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth (.) I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do" (p. 11). Esperanza wishes that her name could have changed in order to reduce the feeling of inferiority. This reflects the behavior of mimicry.

Additionally, as Tyson (2015) pointed out, postcolonial theorists often describe the colonial subject as having a double consciousness, a consciousness or a way of perceiving the world that is divided between two antagonistic cultures: that of the colonizer and that of the indigenous community. Double Consciousness is used by W. E. B. Du Bois (2007) in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Double consciousness describes the awareness of belonging to two conflicting cultures. Double consciousness sometimes speaks two languages. Like Meme Ortiz in *The House on Mango Street*, he uses Spanish as a native language at home or with family members and English with others or in public space: "His name isn't really Meme. His name is Juan. But when we asked him what his name was he said Meme, and that's what everybody calls him except his mother. Meme has a dog with gray eyes, a sheepdog with two names, one in English and one in Spanish" (p. 21). A double consciousness often produces difficulties of an individual in social life, feels unstable sense of self, and alienated in the world, especially for the indigenous people.

The sense of unhomeliness is presented as well. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) proposes the notion of *unhomeliness*. "To be unhomed is not to be homeless" (p. 9). It is to feel that you are not at home, even though you are in your home because you are not at home in yourself. In other words, the colonized has a feeling that one has no cultural 'home', or sense of cultural belonging. In *The House on Mango Street*, "Mamacita is the big mama of the man across the street, third-floor front. Rachel says her name ought to be *Mamasota*, but I think that's mean. (...) we didn't see her. Somebody said because she's too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn't come

out because she is afraid to speak English, (...) Whatever her reasons (...) she won't come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull" (pp. 76-7). This excerpt represents the notion of unhomeliness. It reflects the behaviors of the people who live in the other land, which is not their homeland.

Feminist Perspective on Gender Roles

A gender role is an important issue in feminist criticism. As Tyson (2015) claimed, "gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature" (p. 88). In *The House on Mango Street*, according to Esperanza's description, "The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls" (p. 8). This instance portrays the role played by gender in which male and female are set apart in the society – that is, by a society's definitions of femininity and masculinity – in our daily lives. For example, our gender plays a key role in forming our individual identity: both our self-perception and the way we relate to others (Tyson, 2015).

The notion of othering also relates to gender roles. By *patriarchal woman*, any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles, cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and sub-missive. Patriarchy promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men (Tyson, 2015). In *The House on Mango Street's* chapter *My Name*, for instance, it manifests the notion of othering in feminist criticism point of view, "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means (...) sadness, (...) It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She (...) born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (p. 10). This indication emphasizes an inferiority of women in a patriarchal society by believing that having a male heir is better than having a female heir. Having a female heir is like bringing in bad luck to a family. Moreover, it reflects the ideology in which the women are being oppressed, unequally treated, and discriminated in many ways such as in educational and career opportunities. The women's roles are set only to raise their children and take care of the house's duties.

Marxist Perspective on Socioeconomic Class

The Marxist perspective can be represented the lives of the people in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. According to Esperanza, "People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don't look down at all except to be content to live on hills. They have nothing to do with last week's garbage or fear of rats. Night comes. Nothing wakes them but the wind" (pp. 86-7). The mentioned excerpt reflects the differences in

socioeconomic class, dividing people into two broad groups. The first group is the Latino people in which poor, lower class or 'the have-nots'. The latter group is the people outside the Latino community in which rich, upper class or 'the haves'. This division makes the two groups differ in material possessions, the opportunities, finances, lifestyles and so on. Consequently, the lower class people are excluded and discriminated to be 'the others' from the upper class.

Furthermore, Esperanza has reflected her feeling: "I am tired of looking at what we can't have. When we win the lottery. Mama begins, and then I stop listening" (p. 86). She also reveals that "Mama and Papa always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always (.) But the house on Mango Street (...) It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. (...) Out back is a small garage for the car we don't own yet and a small yard that looks smaller between the two buildings on either side. (...) the house has only one washroom. Everybody has to share a bedroom" (p. 4). This indicates that being poor has fewer opportunities to fulfill their needs, and a low quality of life. They only have a pipe dream to be rich by winning a lottery.

CONCLUSION

The investigation of Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street*, aims to explore the forms of manifestation of the othering concept. The study indicates that the othering can be manifested in different forms in both direct and indirect ways. The othering phenomenon also reveals unfavorable treatments from a superior group towards an inferior group through practical processes. From a post-colonial perspective, it demonstrates the power and oppressive nature that are concealed in the concept of othering. *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros implicitly reflects the crucial role of othering that have an impact on a group of people in a way that the minority group feel inferior and excluded as the others by the majority groups. Living inside a home of others, like the people of black color, the brown people are seen as a marginalized and alienated group. They perceive themselves as an inferior, sometimes loneliness. They interact mostly among the same group of colors where they belong. Meanwhile, they dream to lift their lives up to the same level as white people, including language use, lifestyle, and habitat. These difficulties of the life of the colored people in other cultures, especially the Latino people are ingeniously manifested in many forms throughout this novel. Although *The House on Mango Street* may not be a very prominent novel, but its value lies in reflecting the problems of othering issue, which is one of the major problems in the human relationship system. This article can make readers aware of critical results of the othering phenomenon as well.

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