



# Towards Agency and Communion: *Sehnsucht* or Life Longings of Chicana Women in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*

Jyotismita Sarkar

## Abstract

Sandra Cisneros' seminal novel *The House on Mango Street*, written in the form of a loose assemblage of poetic vignettes, unfolds the dreams and realities of a Chicana adolescent living in a Hispanic neighbourhood in Chicago. Her lyrical anecdotes, mostly featuring her family, her girlfriends, and herself, metonymize the experience of Chicana womanhood in a multi-cultural American setting in late twentieth century. The paper offers a structured psychological exploration of the *sehnsucht*, a German concept denoting 'life longing', of the women migrating to, hailing from, finding a shelter in, and gradually slipping away from the impoverished neighbourhood as evidenced in the novel. *Sehnsucht* has been variously defined by psychologists as an emotionally significant intense longing for ideal alternative states of life that are perceived as distant and unattainable. Consequently, the paper draws on the research of notable psychologists, such as Paul B. Baltes and Susanne Scheibe, to map the complex workings of what they identify as the six characteristics of *sehnsucht* in the lives of the women characters in the novel and the ways in which these characteristics impact them. Furthermore, it alludes to the interrelation between *sehnsucht* and the innate human needs or motivations through a reading of the theoretical works of the psychologist David Bakan to understand Esperanza's conflicting life longings for a home, exclusively her own, and for an enduring togetherness with the women on Mango Street. They are, the paper proposes, the manifestations of Bakan's two "fundamental human motivations", namely, agency – one's need for individual existence, and communion – the need of an individual for communal participation. The life longings of the other women characters in the novel, notably Marin, Rafaela, Sally, and Minerva, are shown to centre obliquely on the same fundamental motivations of human life. The nuances of these life longings of the women characters serve to underscore their perceived inadequacies, imperfections, and uncertainties as Chicana individuals in an American society.

**Key words:** *sehnsucht*, life longing, Chicana, agency, communion



To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have – to want and want – how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again.

–Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*

It seems to me we can never give up longing and wishing while we are still alive. There are certain things we feel to be beautiful and good, and we must hunger for them.

– George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

The lives of Chicana women, their thwarted dreams and aspirations, and a concomitant sense of alienation brought about by their belonging to a minority subculture are central themes in many of Sandra Cisneros' works such as *Woman Hollering Creek*, *Caramelo*, and *Women Without Shame: Poems*. Hers is a seminal voice in the corpus of a Latino literature which problematizes the notions of identity, belonging, and negotiating space. *The House on Mango Street*, her first novel, written in a genre-bending form of seemingly unconnected poetic vignettes that can also be read as an organic whole, succinctly introduces these thematic concerns. The opening dedication of the book reads, “*A las Mujeres – To the Women.*” These are women like her, as Cisneros herself confesses in the Introduction included in the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the book, who dwell in the margins of a dominant American society and culture in the closing decades of the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>. The female characters in the novel – the girls and women who inhabit the impoverished barrio of Mango Street in Chicago along with the adolescent protagonist, Esperanza Cordero – are authentic fictional representations of their contemporary real-life counterparts. Consequently, it is worthwhile to embark on a psychological exploration of both their lived and imaginary lives, accessible to the reader through Esperanza's episodic anecdotes, as a way of contributing to the burgeoning discourse of Chicano/a studies. Esperanza herself is intrinsic to her anecdotes, which mark the trajectory of her mental growth from a pre-pubescent girl to a worldly-wise young woman. What drives Esperanza and most of the other female characters in *The House on Mango Street* is a shared, albeit variously manifested, longing for that which is denied, out of reach, or distant, with a view to contending with their harsh realities. These longings can be seen as operating in the realm of what the psychologists have defined as *sehnsucht*, a German concept pivotal to contemporary life-span developmental psychology.



The novel introduces the reader to a host of Chicana characters including Esperanza's mother, who reminisces about her squandered talents; her aunt Guadalupe, incapacitated from a spine injury and believing in the liberating potential of the written word; the neighbourhood women Marin, Alicia, Ruthie, Rafaela, and Mamacita, all of whom are dissatisfied with their present lives; and her playmates who, likewise, look forward to ideal and utopian lives. Esperanza copes with her perceived feelings of inadequacy and unbelonging in a larger American society by constructing a mental image of an ideal home, which is far removed from the squalor of her actual one on Mango Street. Her ideal home is conjured in images of the whiteness of snow and blank paper. The concept of *sehnsucht*, also referred to as life longing, explored by the psychologists Susan Scheibe, Alexandra M. Freund, and Paul B. Baltes in the discipline of life-span developmental psychology, encompasses some defining characteristics that help explain the complex nuances of these abiding wishes, desires, and longings of the female characters in Cisneros's novel. The concept itself has a veritable lineage in German humanist, artistic, and art-historical tradition, and as Scheibe et al. point out, may be used as a theoretical tool to detail the nuances of a contemporary American mindscape<sup>2</sup>. Dana Kotter-Grühn et al. define *Sehnsucht* as:

thoughts and feelings about past, present, and future aspects of life that are incomplete or imperfect, coupled with a desire for ideal, alternative states and experiences of life. Such thoughts and feelings are typically intense, recurring, and accompanied by a mixture of positive and negative feelings, producing an ambivalent emotional experience<sup>3</sup>.

The emotional significance of these thoughts and feelings designated as *sehnsucht* lends sustenance to one's inadequate life by providing it with a panoptic vision of a quasi-utopian alternative, which although elusive, functions as an imaginary nurturing mechanism. However, in addition to their positive functions, life longings may also contribute to one's feelings of discontent and melancholia. This aspect of a life longing corresponds in the novel to the character Ruthie's sense of resignation in the vignette entitled "Edna's Ruthie" or to Mamacita's sad sighs for lost home and ethnic legacy in "No Speak English." Rafaela, another character who features in a particularly poignant vignette in the book, dreams of escaping from her solitary confinement into the open where companionship is easy and unrestrained. Esperanza's mother, while ruefully looking back on her past, finds solace in the thought that



her daughter might realise her full potential, something which she could not do herself. Instances of such forms of bitter-sweet female longing abound in the novel.

Lilijana Burcar has argued argues that all the grown-up women in the novel find themselves in the throes of a “domestic entrapment and economic dependency that leads to their loss of agency and identity<sup>4</sup>.” These predicaments contribute to their wistful feelings about the unrealisable life longings pertaining to the achievement of these ends. Kotter-Grühn et al. enumerate six characteristics that engender the multi-faceted character of *sehnsucht*:

First, life longings target aspects that are incomplete or imperfect, something essential that is missing in life. Second, life longings involve overly positive, idealized, utopian imaginations of these missing aspects. Third, the two-edged focus on missing aspects and incompleteness on the one hand and fantasies about ideal, alternative realities on the other hand elicits ambivalent, bittersweet emotions. Fourth, memories of the past, reflections on the imperfect present, and fantasies about an idealized future merge in the phenomenon of life longings to form a temporally complex experience (“tritime focus”). Fifth, life longings are rich in symbolic meaning. When longing for a specific object, this object presumably stands for a network of broader motives, desires, and wishes at the core of a person’s identity. Finally, life longings make individuals reflect on and evaluate their life, comparing the status quo with ideals or successful others<sup>5</sup>.

These principles apply to the longings of the female characters in the novel. The women in the barrio are compelled to grapple with multitudinous issues ranging from a sense of marginalization owing to their immigrant status and the challenges of having to lead a double life, to an amalgam of hetero-patriarchy, poverty, and shame. Esperanza’s mother, in the vignette titled “A Smart Cookie,” alludes to these constraints faced by the women of her ethnic community when she says that shame is the real impediment to a woman’s growth. She regrets not knowing better when she was younger and reveals that her embarrassment at her poverty made her leave school prematurely despite being aware that she was smart.

The women devote themselves to a contemplation of what is missing from their lives as a mechanism of coping with their grim realities. The element that is missing is always idealised, something which can only be accessed through one’s imagination. A reflection on the incompleteness in their lives coupled with the perfection of the imagined realities give birth to feelings of ambivalence. We see instances of this phenomenon in Esperanza’s fantasies about a house which she could point to, one that initially resembles the house on a hill with a sprawling garden, akin to the place where her father is employed as a gardener. She is hopeful that one day her dream of having a house will come true. In another instance, Marin, the cousin



of a character called Louie, stands wistfully in the doorway singing a love song and fantasises about an ideal marriage, which would change her life for the better. Sally, one of Esperanza's friends who eventually goes on to betray her, fantasises about a life free from the abuse of her father. It is worth noting that in the case of the younger females like Esperanza, Marin, Sally, and Alicia, the life longings serve a more positive function of giving their lives a definite course, notwithstanding the ambivalence stemming from a disillusionment with the present, than in the case of their older neighbours:

Alicia, who inherited her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin<sup>6</sup>.

This fact can be seen as a manifestation of what Scheibe et al. name the "imagined realization of psychological utopias" or of what Heckhausen and Schulz designate as "a special instantiation of secondary control."<sup>7</sup> As one grows older, a mature and more realistic evaluation of the life lived thus far and an appraisal of the resources available diminish one's hope of realising an exalted life longing. In the light of an individual's altered circumstances in later adulthood, life longings tend to aggravate feelings of ambivalence. Esperanza's mother and her aunt Lupe have such mixed feelings about their respective life longings.

The fourth characteristic of *Sehnsucht*, namely its "ontogenetic tritime focus" differentiates it from a simple goal in life<sup>8</sup>. Scheibe et al. propose that goals are motivations contingent on positive behavioural expression – they can be attained by developing an earnestness of will and behavioural patterns predicated on favourable habits<sup>9</sup>. Life longings, conversely, are remote and almost impossible to attain, which relegates them to the realm of imagination and often fantasy. Moreover, the concurrent involvement of the past, the present, and the future is what sets them apart from a goal, which is more future-oriented. Unsurprisingly, then, in each of the instances of the female life longings in the novel, the reader discerns a convergence of past, present, and future. In one of the early vignettes titled "My Name," the reader is acquainted with the history of the adolescent narrator's name. Esperanza, which means both hope and sadness, a nod to the narrator's bilingual identity, was originally the name of her great-grandmother. The narrator speculates about the older woman's life, her blighted dreams, and her sadness accompanying her by the window. She was forced into a conjugal life with a man



she did not want to marry and was confined to his house forever. An awareness of this genealogical past is instrumental in Esperanza's developing life longing in the present for a destiny different from her grandmother's and also for a house of her own. She is aware of the insurmountable challenges to be overcome, and it is, in effect, this life longing that shapes her character, as she creates a distinct space for herself through her writing.

Esperanza's first friend on Mango Street is Cathy, the owner of numerous cats, who deals with the vicissitudes of her life by dwelling on a near-mythical past: the comforting visions of an elite European life far away from her dingy neighbourhoods of present-day Chicago. She believes in the possibility of her father flying to France some day and reclaiming their royal inheritance, the longing for the materialisation of which keeps Cathy going despite her despair. The life longings of Mama, Aunt Lupe, and Rafaela, too, centre on the past, the present, and the future. Scheibe et al. hypothesise that *Sehnsucht* "is likely to involve abilities and experiences related to emotional competence and the self-concept that only become fully accessible and more available in middle to late adolescence<sup>10</sup>." Furthermore, it is subject to changes with the progress of one's life. The area of focus or substance of *Sehnsucht* may change as the circumstances of one's life change with the passing of time. While self-actualization, partnership, and the establishment of identity are predominantly the life longings of younger individuals; generativity, wisdom, and health are those of the older adults<sup>11</sup>. Both Esperanza's mother and aunt, representatives of the older generation, pin their hopes on her for the fulfilment of their life longings.

It has been pointed out that *sehnsucht* functions in the realm of symbols and metaphors. Scheibe et al. expound on this aspect of a life longing by postulating the idea that its symbolic richness delinks it from an immediate object, demeanour or occasion. On the contrary, such a specific object is a signifier for something more profound in the mind of an individual, and therefore, a specific longing is *Sehnsucht* only if it is tied to something larger and transcendental:

Such a wish is regarded as an instantiation of *Sehnsucht* only if the mental and emotional representations associated with this desired state are linked with a broader configuration of thoughts and feelings about the course of one's life (e.g., an embrace as wish for intimacy in general)<sup>12</sup>.

This feature of *sehnsucht* is of signal importance to the discerning reader of *The House on Mango Street* in deciphering the significance of the female life longings in the novel. Home, a worthy partner, or proper education, things which the female characters long for, are often more



than mere things in themselves. They are signifiers for the innate human longing for agency and communion. As Ana M. Manzanás Calvo has argued, Esperanza's vision of the utopic home is ideological in the sense that it is a safe haven for the dispossessed like herself<sup>13</sup>. As she matures, Esperanza is increasingly disillusioned with the perfect bourgeois American house atop a hill overlooking a garden because she knows instinctively that it is off limits for the outsider or the immigrant. The American dream is exclusionary: it renders those on the margins invisible. Esperanza's ideal home is one in which she would allow entrance to the people like herself who have often been likened to rats:

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 them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know it is to be without a house<sup>14</sup>

This passage is a commentary on the dispossession of the Chicano/a ethnic community in contemporary America and the simultaneous challenges of racial marginalization and communal erasure that they have been facing for a long time. Carlos H. Acre in his article titled "A Reconsideration of Chicano Culture and Identity" observes that

throughout most of the past one hundred fifty years, Mexicans have been perceived as a racially nonwhite group, and as such, have been systematically and rigidly prohibited from full entry into, and participation in, mainstream American society. This segregation necessitated more intensive intragroup reliance and interaction, reduced socio-cultural contact with non-Mexicans, and, hence, inadvertently reinforced the Mexican ethnic persona. According to most observers and researchers, Mexican Americans - "Mexicans," as the majority refer to themselves, or "Chicanos," as they are increasingly labeled in social research literature and in the mass media – today maintain a tenacious hold on significant elements of their culture and share an ethnically salient identity<sup>15</sup>.

Esperanza's life longing is an expression of a desire for personal as well as a distinct social identity, which can only be achieved through an authentic communion with the members of her ethnic group. As a member of a racially marginalized unit, the implications of what Esperanza longs for, while keeping in mind the image of a mythical Mexico and the reality of her present discomfiture, are twofold: agency and an abiding communal existence with her subordinated Chicana peers. Esperanza's life longing, like those of the other characters', is influenced by her evaluation of her life and its present imperfections and an awareness of what is the ideal<sup>16</sup>.

Marin's longing for a desirable partner who would marry and provide her with the luxury of living in a big house is also a longing for agency. She plans to get a well-paying job the following year in order to realise her life longing, which would also give her the freedom to look and dress the way she pleases, to smoke or listen to music without the reproach of her aunt. The novel in its delineation of the life longings of the likes of Marin and Sally indicates



that the impression of marriage which young impoverished Chicana girls cherish since their adolescence is a reinforcement of the Cinderella trope<sup>17</sup>. Marriage seems to them a panacea: it tantalizes them with the hope of a lenient household sans the influence of the authority figures of their girlhood and an opportunity to wield unrestrained agency and to forge a meaningful communion with a like-minded partner. It also promises them a one-way ticket to upward social mobility. Manzanas Calvo's observation on the inability of the Chicano to move up the social ladder is significant in the present context:

Moving up in the supposedly dynamic society of the United States translates for Chicanos as simply moving to another location. Deprived of the possibility of moving up in society, Chicanos' basic mobility, like that of African Americans, is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one as Martín Luther King, Jr. put it<sup>18</sup>.

As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear to the reader and also to the women themselves that marriage has not alleviated their woes. It is metaphorically akin to "moving to another location" because in a repressive Chicano society, marriage is merely a shift to a different house in which the living conditions are the very same, if not worse. The life longings of these women remain ever elusive. What sets Esperanza apart from young girls her age is her differential design to achieve the life longings of agency and communion: unlike Marin or Sally, she does not seek emancipation or abiding companionship through marriage but through her writing and her resolve to stand up for the women who cannot do so themselves. Although she wishes to leave Mango Street behind in her quest for agency, she would eventually return for the sake of her less fortunate sisters.

The recurring motifs of agency and communion in the life longings of most of the female characters in the novel are no coincidence. The psychologist David Bakan in his book *The Duality of Human Existence: An Essay on Psychology and Religion* posits that a basic dualism characterises human nature and underlies its needs and motivations. The concepts of agency and communion relate to the two intrinsic manners of human living. Bakan elaborates that while agency denotes the innate drive of an organism to subsist individually, communion is the idea of a coming together of individuals to associate with a larger body<sup>19</sup>. Accordingly, as Walter A. Weisskopf points out:

'Agency' implies self-protection, self-assertion, self-expansion, separation, isolation, alienation, aloneness, repression of thought, of feeling, and of impulse. 'Communion' implies participation, being at one with another organism, lack of separation, contact, openness, unity, noncontractual co-operation, lack of repression<sup>20</sup>.





An integration of these two antithetical modalities informs the mental well-being of an individual. These modalities are also one's prime motivations for an optimal life and, as such, influence life longings. In the domain of psychology, Bakan identifies agency with the masculine and communion with the feminine, further speculating that such a distinction is a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors. The findings in the survey undertaken by Kotter-Grühn et al. in their case study on *Sehnsucht* corroborates the aforementioned proposition of Bakan<sup>21</sup>. The women in the aforementioned survey showed a greater predilection for life longings having to do with interpersonal well-being than the men. Kotter-Grühn et al. argue that this facet of female psychology "reflects the importance of communion orientation and relatedness as basic motives in women's lives<sup>22</sup>." However, their findings report that education and career were important to the women in the survey too. The changing dynamic of the social roles of men and women in recent times may account for this particular occurrence. The reader encounters a reflection of a woman's changing attitude towards work and career in the life longings of Esperanza and Alicia.

From what has been discussed thus far, it may be concluded that *The House on Mango Street*, set in the eighties in Chicago, through its delineation of the life longings of its female characters, offers an insight into the racially segregated contemporary American society. Although the narrative confirms that Mexicans, much like the Chinese, are patriarchal and prefer subservient women, it endorses the evolution of a strong woman who recognises that both agency and communion are equally important for a holistic life and that in her specific Chicana context, one can never be fully achieved without the other. Esperanza and Alicia are both embodiments of the novel's implied ideal of strong women striving for liberation from restrictive social and familial mores. It is appropriate, then, that Alicia, the older of the two, counsels Esperanza to reclaim and acknowledge her true identity: "No," Alicia says. "Like it or not, you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too."<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the life longings of the other female characters, although predominantly focused on a successful marriage or material comfort, manifest the subterranean desire of the women for agency and communion, albeit to a different degree. The novel, in its exposition of the diversity of the wishes and longings of the women sharing a common fate of oppression, poverty, and racial marginalisation in a ghettoised existence, celebrates Chicana womanhood in its myriad manifestations.



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**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup>Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, Vintage Contemporaries, 2009, p. xxiv.
- <sup>2</sup> Susanne Scheibe et al., "Toward a Developmental Psychology of *Sehnsucht* (Life Longings): The Optimal (Utopian) Life," *Developmental Psychology* 43, no. 3 (May 2007): 779, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.43.3.778>.
- <sup>3</sup> Dana Kotter-Grühn et al., "What is it we are longing for? Psychological and demographic factors influencing the contents of *Sehnsucht* (life longings)," *Journal of Research in Personality* 43, no. 3 (2009): 428, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2009.01.012>.
- <sup>4</sup> Lilijana Burcar, "Ethnicizing Women's Domestic Entrapment in Sandra Cisneros's Ant bildungsroman *The House on Mango Street*," *FLUMINENSIA: JOURNAL FOR PHILOLOGICAL RESEARCH* 29, no. 2 (2017): 119.
- <sup>5</sup> Kotter-Grühn, "What is it," p. 428.
- <sup>6</sup> Cisneros, *Mango Street*, p. 32.
- <sup>7</sup> Scheibe et al., "Developmental Psychology," p. 780.
- <sup>8</sup> It denotes a concurrent preoccupation with the recollections of the past and its unrealised desires, a focus on the present, and fantasies about an ideal future. Scheibe et al., p. 781.
- <sup>9</sup> Scheibe et al., p. 779.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 782.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 782.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 782.
- <sup>13</sup> Ana M. Manzanas Calvo, "The House on Mango Street and Chicano Space," *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, no. 7 (September 2000): 23–24, [https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/ESTUDIOS\\_NORTEAMERICANOS/article/view/10574](https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/ESTUDIOS_NORTEAMERICANOS/article/view/10574).
- <sup>14</sup> Cisneros, p. 87.
- <sup>15</sup> Carlos H. Acre, "A Reconsideration of Chicano Culture and Identity," *Daedalus* 110, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 177, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024728>.
- <sup>16</sup> As seen in the present context, Mexico is an ontological site of enunciation which gives Esperanza and Nenny a dual identity to which only the Chicano/as have access. The sisters have never been to Mexico themselves, and yet there is a nostalgia for the mythical homeland. Cisneros, p. 17.
- <sup>17</sup> A popular romance trope in which a dispossessed young woman escapes her miserable circumstances of poverty and familial cruelty and has her social status restored when she is eventually rescued by a man. A subversion of the rags to riches trope implies for these young women that, like Cindrella, they can also realise their full potential with the help of a suitable partner.
- <sup>18</sup> Manzanas Calvo, "Chicano Space," p. 21.
- <sup>19</sup> David Bakan, *The Duality of Human Existence: An Essay on Psychology and Religion*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966, pp. 14–15.
- <sup>20</sup> Walter A. Weiskopf, "Review, *The Duality of Human Existence: An Essay on Psychology and Religion*," *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 3 (November 1967): 368, <https://doi.org/10.1086/224499>.
- <sup>21</sup> Kotter-Grühn et al., p. 435.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 435.
- <sup>23</sup> Cisneros, p. 107.



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