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## ETHNICIZING WOMEN'S DOMESTIC ENTRAPMENT IN SANDRA CISNEROS'S ANTIBILDUNGSROMAN *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*<sup>1</sup>

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*The House on Mango Street has been translated into more than 20 languages worldwide, including Croatian in 2005. The novel has secured a firm foothold in many a literature and cultural studies syllabus outside the USA and has served as one of central entry points for the discussion and understanding of the position of women in America's ethnicized communities. In its treatment of women's disadvantaged position, Cisneros's novel relies heavily on the tenets of liberal feminism, which reduces the understanding of gendered oppression to personal relationships between individual men and women and to the attitudes of men towards women. Unlike liberal feminist literary theory, systemic feminist literary theory takes a broader social context into consideration by directing our critical gaze to the structural forces and institutional practices that shape gendered positions and define the role of women inside and outside family settings. The paper shows that because of its subscription to the tenets of liberal feminism, the novel ends up treating gender constraints and women's domestication as though these were phenomena limited only to ethnicized communities. As a result, women's marginalization comes to be construed as a marker of ethnic otherness rather than a structural problem defining and permeating American society as a whole. Through translations, these constructs*

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are inadvertently also carried over and can be uncritically disseminated in other cultural and academic environments outside the USA. The paper therefore argues for the need for a systemic literary approach, which can function as a welcome and much needed critical intervention in social milieus not yet fully acquainted with the problematic nature of liberal feminism and the ethnicization of women's domestic entrapment.

**Keywords:** *female bildungsroman; capitalist patriarchy; women's domestication; cultural essentialism; Sandra Cisneros; The House on Mango Street*

## 1. Introduction

*The House on Mango Street*<sup>2</sup> is a novel of female formation and maturation told from the point of view of a first-generation Mexican-American girl, Esperanza Cordero. It focuses on the hardships of growing up in contemporary American society, specifically, in a Chicago ghetto whose Mexican-American residents continue to be constructed as America's ethnic or racialized others. This in turn facilitates and deepens their systemic exploitation, making them subject to ever deepening cycles of further impoverishment, marginalization and social exclusion. While touching on the issue of poverty, the novel focuses primarily on gender oppression and the resulting experiences of young women and their mothers, aunts and neighbours, thus "register[ing] the different [female] voices of the community in which the [...] protagonist grows" (Bolaki 2011: 25). The novel has been praised for "inscribing competing narratives of female development" (ibid, 105) with the main protagonist refusing "to grow up tame" like other women (Cisneros 1991: 88). In Cisneros's version of the antibildungsroman, Esperanza Cordero's story of maturation serves as an antidote to the life trajectories of the rest of the female characters, who, contrary to their aspirations, remain homebound and mired in domestic drudgery and individualized, full-time childcare. The impression created is that Cisneros's narrative of female formation and maturation refuses to end on a reconciliatory note typical of traditional female bildungsroman and its contemporary variants. Its formula, consolidated in

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<sup>2</sup> *The House on Mango Street* consists of forty-four individually titled and compressed poetic narratives or vignettes. They function by means of juxtapositions and can be read "either as [a] novel of collective protagonist or as short-narrative cycles about the Chicana experience" (Oliver-Rotger 2003: 222).

the 19<sup>th</sup> century, demands that the protagonist accept one's integration into the existing oppressive socio-economic order of late capitalism (Moretti 2014; Moretti 2000), which rests on one's reconciliation with its restrictive gender norms and a specific form of institutionalized patriarchy based on the (modernized) breadwinner model (Barrett 2014). The novel seems to call instead for the formation of a rebellious and no longer housebound female subjectivity, which should serve as a beacon for others to follow and emulate.

Not surprisingly, *The House on Mango Street*<sup>3</sup> has received wide critical acclaim precisely for its script of female emancipation, which, according to mainstream literary critics, it also brings to a successful resolution with the main protagonist simply leaving the confines of the ghetto and joining mainstream America. However, as this paper argues, in this way, the novel ends up treating gender constraints and what is in fact widespread institutional patriarchy as though this were a phenomenon limited only to the ethnicized Mexican-American community. As a result, the problem of women's domestication and oppression in the novel comes to be construed as the sole and naturalized marker of ethnic otherness rather than a structural problem defining and permeating American society as a whole. Cisneros's attempt at a female antibildungsroman, with its emphasis on female emancipation supposedly automatically attained upon one's joining mainstream America, turns out to be culturally essentialist and deeply problematic. This paper therefore problematizes the artificial binary between "us" and "them", that is, between imaginarily free Western women and ethnicized or unfree "other" women. The paper amplifies the voices of the few literary critics who have reproached Cisneros for "challenging patriarchal institutions and cultures gently, from an apparently middle-class, mainstream perspective" (Bolaki 2011: 96) and it makes a contribution of its own by systematically delineating the ways in which Cisneros's attempt at an antibildungsroman falls short of confronting the institutionalized patriarchy that lies at the heart of women's oppression. Its maintenance and perpetuation, as the paper demonstrates, is not dependent on the interests of a few men or individual men per se – let alone is it inherent to ethnicized others – but rather on the capitalist system as such, whose main beneficiaries include men and women alike.

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<sup>3</sup> From here on the novel's full title appears under the abbreviation *The HMS*.

## 2. Female bildungsroman and industrial capitalism

*The HSM* is considered one of the exemplary pieces to have emerged out of the contemporary American feminist tradition of antibildungsroman, enriched by the writings of the so-called American ethnic women writers in the 1970s and the 1980s. The traditional bildungsroman, which was drawn into the service of European empires and consolidated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as “a largely Eurocentric and patriarchal form” (Bolaki 2011: 12; Moretti 2000), rests on strictly prescribed gendered rites of passage into adulthood. In traditional variants of the female bildungsroman, the protagonist reaches “maturity or self-knowledge” (Inness 1997: 2) upon fully embracing the constructs and hence the constraints of femininity. The trials that female protagonists must undergo centre on “tests in their submission” (Gonzales-Berry and Rebelled qtd. in Olivares 1996: 212), self-effacement, passivity and eventual accommodation to domesticity. These trials demand that girls, unlike boys, give up their dreams of meaningful self-fulfilment, intellectual advancement and economic independence. Instead of expanding their horizons and growing up, girls are expected to shrink their aspirations and grow down, which results in their being “led down to the path of second infancy” (ibid). Female protagonists, in other words, must learn to curb their expectations and stifle their voices in order to become and remain little women (Armstrong 1992: 453). In tracing the development of a prepubescent girl through the literary trials and tribulations that teach her to become a little woman, young women are taught socially acceptable forms of behaviour, self-perception, aspirations and occupational choices (Chew 2008: 22) which require that they come to perceive their destiny as dependent on a man and their identity as a derivative of his. The traditional bildungsroman has thus functioned as a training manual that socializes girls into accepting the role of a domestic nurturer with no desires or aspirations of her own, and therefore as a “shadow, a negative, an object” (Waugh qtd. in Oliver-Rotger 2003: 153) of somebody else’s fulfilment and advancement. Any deviation from this norm is strictly sanctioned and any attempt to break out of this prescribed pattern of development and formation is nipped in the bud.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Female antibildungsroman emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s as a reaction to the constraining patriarchal gender norms and harmful literary socialization of girls embraced and perpetuated by mainstream female bildungsromane (Lazzaro-Weis 1990). In this respect, female antibildungsroman stands for a feminist bildungsroman, representing what

The traditional female bildungsroman has played a direct role in endorsing and upholding the cult of domesticity for women and the image of a woman as the angel in the house (Golden 2003). It is therefore not a coincidence that the traditional bildungsroman as a literary genre was entrenched in the West in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was marked by the spread of industrial capitalism and consolidation of the “capitalist patriarchy” (Eisenstein 1999). As demonstrated by sociologists and historians, it was industrial capitalism that reinvented patriarchy to its own advantage by putting in place “new manifestations of patriarchal structures and ideologies” (Mies 1998: ix). These included the institution of the nuclear patriarchal family, the breadwinner model that established the woman’s economic one-to-one dependence on the man, and the doctrine of two separate spheres, the so-called public and private socio-economic domains, with social reproductive work now detached from economic activity in the public domain and confined to the private sphere (Burcar 2015). Capitalism rests on the definition of social reproductive work such as care for children (the elderly and the sick) as non-work so that it can be interpreted as needing no reimbursement, and therefore as a matter of individual and private concern rather than of social responsibility and community-based collective care. If conducted in the home, this kind of work no longer calls for an extensive and well-maintained public network of accessible and full-day

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Whiting has termed “a feminist turn” (1999: 465) in the tradition of bildungsroman. Antibildungsroman attempts to challenge and undo the constructs of femininity and patriarchal limitations placed upon women in traditional novels of female maturation and development. Instead of lending its support to the (eventual) “suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity” (Lazzaro-Weis 1990: 17) as is the case with traditional female bildungsroman, female antibildungsroman propagates “faith in the possibility of [women’s full] development” and growth (ibid, 18). The emphasis is upon the attainment of “an autonomous female identity” (ibid) no longer weighed down or circumscribed by patriarchal norms and gender constraints. For antibildungsroman to offer a truly transformative resolution and not to support the status quo, it needs to be wary of the pitfalls of the bildungsromane that fall half way. These are female bildungsromane that at first detach their heroines from the prescribed traditional roles by setting them on the path of “artistic, intellectual, and morally adventurous pursuits” but which by the novel’s conclusion all end up endorsing the “repressive and submissive retreat [of its heroines] back into paternal hierarchies” (Whiting 1999: 464), thus once again condemning and returning their heroines to “subordinate and domestic roles” (Gosselink De Jong 1984: 75). A female antibildungsroman is thus still something of an accomplishment since it requires a comprehensive understanding and a systemic undoing of the repressive patriarchal norms that constitute a subset of a larger (socio-economic exploitative) system.

childcare with professionally trained, adequately paid and possibly unionized care workers. That is why capitalism insists on (different degrees of) family-based child-care or the so-called “familialization” of child and elderly care rather than its socialization (Leitner 2003: 358). This in turn enables the capital-owning elite, be they men or women, to expropriate a much larger share of the wealth created by their workers exclusively for themselves. This is reflected, for example, in keeping taxes on capital and other social contributions on the part of capital owners very low or non-existent. In this way, the wealth created by the working population is diverted towards the private gain of the few instead of being channelled into the creation of an extensive network of nurseries, kindergartens and after-school care on the one hand, and fully paid maternity and parental leave on the other. In place of publicly funded infrastructure and full-time rather than voluntary-based or just part-time community-based care, capital instead offers the myth of family wage (Fraser 2013: 94), and construes women as those who should do this kind of work in the privacy of their homes out of love and for free, presumably as a natural extension of their assigned femininity (Federici 2014: 8).

Capitalism is directly dependent on women's domestication or, as Mies puts it, their institutionally enhanced “housewifization” (1998: ix). That is why in capitalism, regardless of the form it takes, women are positioned as private domestic carers and servicers first (also by means of specific policy measures promoting different forms and degrees of familialism), and as secondary earners at best. Capitalism therefore has a direct stake in promoting constructs of femininity and masculinity, and most importantly, in maintaining institutionalized patriarchy encapsulated in the traditional or modernized 1.5 breadwinner model with women employed on a part-time basis only. In this respect, and like any other socio-economic system, it has a direct impact upon the shaping of the division of labour and roles inside and outside households, and a direct bearing on social relations within and outside the family (Apodaca 1977: 73). Capitalism, a major export product of the European imperial centres, has also substantially changed the nature and organization of family units in the colonial outposts and across the world. Mexico (and the rest of Latin America) also underwent a transition from a feudal to a capitalist system of production and exploitation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of European imperial intervention, or, as was the case in the Mexican northern territories, as a result of their annexation to the US in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Apodaca 1977: 71). This annexation,

which resulted in the displacement, proletarianization and segregation of Mexicans from the self-imposed property-owning Anglo elite, also profoundly affected gender roles in Mexican families, and saw, in addition, Mexican women “working as domestics or in canneries [for] lower wages than white women” (Oliver-Rotger 2003: 138). The annexation to “new economic conditions and discriminatory practices [thus] combined and developed into a specific conception of family and community [...] that merged with the American ideology of capitalist patriarchy” (ibid, 139).

*The HMS* serves as a form of antibildungsroman in the sense that the protagonist refuses to embrace the prescribed role of a housebound servicer and nurturer, understanding full well that women’s domestic imprisonment results in their “psychological and physical death” (Gomes Gonzales 2014: 24). The novel presents an array of female characters cooped up in their houses/flats who sooner or later exchange the imprisonment of their father’s house for that of a husband’s, where their talents are stifled and their aspirations renounced in favour of years of domestic drudgery and child care, years of stagnation and self-abnegation. Esperanza’s mother, for example, used to have many talents and understands herself to be a “smart cookie”, a woman who “could’ve have been something” and used to “draw when she had time” but who can now “draw [only] with a needle and thread, little knotted rosebuds, tulips made of silk thread” (Cisneros 1991: 90). Similarly, another woman, Minerva, “writes poems on little pieces of paper” but only in the dead of the night when “her kids are asleep after she’s fed them their dinner” (ibid, 84). She finds herself bogged down by fulltime childcare and domestic work, as a result of which she fails to “create a lasting text” (Giles 2000: 75). All adult women in the novel end up in “a place by the window” where they “sit their sadness on an elbow” while observing the space beyond the confines of the house as something completely out of their reach (Martin 2008: 63). The house of the protagonist’s youth thus stands for a symbol of her mother’s and other women’s domestic entrapment and economic dependency that leads to their loss of agency and identity, making them simultaneously vulnerable to physical abuse, harassment and frequent periods of abandonment. The girl protagonist sees this restrictive role for women and their confinement “to a life of domestic drudgery” as a burden that the women in her immediate surroundings are expected to take on and get used to. The girl narrator, however, comes to a resolution “not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (Cisneros 1991: 88). Instead, she begins her own quiet war, as she puts it, by “leaving the table

like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (ibid, 12). This form of rebellion is what should guarantee her ticket to freedom, which, as the novel claims, can be attained only by the main protagonist leaving the ghetto behind. This kind of rebellion and pattern of growth and maturation offered by the novel carries its own ideological entrapments, which turn out to be counterproductive and problematic on several integrated levels.

### **3. Contextual vs. isolationist approach: institutional patriarchy or machismo to blame?**

Despite its focus on an array of female characters struggling with domestic confinement, Cisneros's novel avoids the issue of capitalist patriarchy and thus along with it the “Chicana labor history” (Oliver-Rotger 2003: 138). *The HMS* instead sidesteps these structural relations even though it carries a few scattered references to what are institutionalized patriarchal practices. Yet, it does not recognize them as such even though they govern women's forms of domestication in the USA across colour lines, and in turn also inevitably define the rhythm and life patterns of women in the Mexican-American community. A case in point is the section of the novel titled *A Rice Sandwich*, which opens with the girl narrator desperately wanting to join “the special kids, the ones who wear keys around their necks” (Cisneros 1991: 43). These are the children who “get to eat [sandwiches prepared earlier by their mothers] in the canteen”, which is where they go during school recess “because their mothers aren't home” (ibid, 43). The narrator's mother waits for her child every day to come back home during the lunch recess and has lunch prepared for her, but Esperanza finds the canteen more appealing. The girl wants to negotiate with her mother to let her eat her sandwich in a canteen rather than have a warm meal prepared and ready for her at home every day during recess. She points out to her mother that if she had her sandwich in the canteen “there'd would be less dishes [for her] to wash” (ibid, 44). The mother puts up strong resistance, pointing out to her daughter that this would only mean more work for her:

*Oh no, she says pointing the butter knife at me as if I'm starting trouble, no sir. Next thing you know everybody will be wanting a bag lunch – I'll be up all night cutting bread into little triangles, this one with mayonnaise, this one with mustard, no pickles on mine, but mustard on one side please. You kids just like to invent more work for me. (ibid, 43–44).*

Yet, in both cases the workload is, of course, still there, no matter whether the child's lunch is prepared by the mother in the morning or in the middle of the day, with the latter actually requiring that the mother stay at home. But why lunch needs to be prepared at home and why this kind of work is not socialized is an issue that the novel does not address, let alone explore. For this would require a different type of canteen where children do not eat sandwiches already prepared by their mothers but (hot) meals prepared by professional staff. This in turn would help to relieve mothers of this domestic burden and better enable them to pursue activities outside their home. The novel instead mystifies this state of affairs by taking it at face value, which also explains why the children of those mothers who work "outside home" end up labelled as "the special kids" (ibid, 43).

The novel decontextualizes and dismisses the problem of institutional patriarchy by redefining and reducing women's plight to a seemingly inexplicable and ancient antagonism between individual men and women, and to a form of gendered oppression that it presents as though it emanated strictly from individual Mexican-American men. The novel ends up blaming machismo as being solely responsible for Mexican-American women's domestic entrapment. By obscuring the deeper structural mechanisms at work, the novel proceeds instead to pin the blame on individual men, homogenizing them as a group. In this way, individual men come to be seen as the ultimate originators of Mexican-American women's oppression and subjugation and as the main obstacle to women's advancement. This is most succinctly encapsulated in what is one of the novel's most frequently quoted lines: "the Chinese, like the Mexicans don't like their women strong" (Cisneros 1991: 10). By resorting to this highly reductive approach typical of liberal feminism, the novel effectively pushes from view much more complex structural causes that produce and help to sustain gendered hierarchies between men and women in and outside the community, and which are in the end also conducive to women's domestic entrapment. As pointed out by Zavella, this highly reductive "functionalist model" which links patriarchy and women's domestication with machismo, and machismo with "Mexican folk tradition", is doubly misleading for it

*assumes the premise that Mexican American families constitute a separate world from that of American institutions, and that the American family model is more egalitarian. Structurally [that is, as conditioned by the demands of capital], the traditional American*

*[patriarchal nuclear] family is similar to the traditional Mexican family; the assumption that the former is somehow more modern is unfounded.* (qtd. in Oliver-Rotger, 2003: 136)

To interpret women's domestic imprisonment and their subordination as though these phenomena were instigated and maintained by individual men in the family for their minor personal gain is misleading. Such an approach, typical of liberal feminism, is socio-economically decontextualized and dehistoricized. It inevitably sidesteps the broader picture, that is, the capitalist system itself, thus ignoring crucial structural forces that dictate the overall organization of American society, which in turn directly affect the functioning and the structure of family units across the US.

#### 4. Joining mainstream/white America: a ticket to genuine emancipation?

The novel clearly suggests that to become a free woman and a writer with a voice of her own, rather than one of many domesticated women reduced to staring helplessly out of the kitchen window, the narrator must leave the Mexican-American community and join mainstream white America. The narrator's last leg of the journey towards her maturation and full formation reflects this. The narrator's voice insists that to escape the confines of domesticity is a feat that can be achieved only by establishing a house of one's own outside the premises of the ghetto. Once removed from the Mexican-American community, this kind of house is understood to be automatically the kind that cannot be and is "[n]ot a man's house. [n]ot a daddy's" but "[a] house of my own" with "[n]obody's garbage to pick after." (Cisneros 1991: 108).<sup>5</sup> The impression created is that to leave the ethnicized ghetto is to shed the constraints of femininity and the shackles of patriarchy,

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<sup>5</sup> In the penultimate vignette titled *A House of My Own* the narrator dreams of a house of her own which is a pun on Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. A frequently overlooked fact is that Woolf's statement in *A Room of One's Own*, which says that women writers must claim financial independence and freedom from domestic obligations to be truly emancipated, applies to a selected group of women to the detriment of all others. Or as put by Blair (*The Nation*, 17 August 2007), when Woolf pinpoints women's financial dependence on their partners

"as a central obstacle for women writers, she is talking about the relative poverty of women when compared with the wealth of their husbands and brothers – men of their own class, by which she meant the middle and upper classes. .... Woolf's famous formulation that a woman writer must have £500 a year and the solitude

that is, to follow the trajectory of development or advancement from a state of (ethnic) confinement to (mainstream) emancipation. This has led mainstream liberal critics to replicate the same view, typically emphasizing that in Esperanza's community "the woman's place is one of domestic confinement, not one of liberation and choice. And so, slowly, stroke by stroke, and story by story, Esperanza realizes that she must leave Mango Street so that she will not be entrapped by poverty and shame or imprisoned by patriarchy" (Klein 1992: 24). To mature or to grow up then, as suggested in *The HMS*, is to leave the ghetto rife with patriarchal practices and to join mainstream America as though these two were socio-

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of her own room in which to write presumes implicitly that there will be servants to make the writer's meals and clean her house."

Woolf remained a staunch supporter of "the institution of domestic servitude" (ibid) that rested on the domestic exploitation of poor women as a prerequisite for the growth and development of women of her own class: she considered daily cleaners and live-in parlour maids as indispensable to her career and to the careers of women of her own class, that is, "as [their] force of survival", while describing them in her fiction, diaries and letters (to her lover Vita Sackville-West) "in chillingly class-bound terms" (Lee 1997: 356). In one of her letters, Woolf typically states that one of her live-in servants is "an uneducated woman" and wonders how a woman like that can "let herself in, alone, into our [hers and Lionel's] lives" while she would prefer "a daily of a civilized kind", that is, the kind who would know her place and "would treat her as an employer, not friend" (ibid, 356). The Bloomsbury group's narrow, class-based understanding of women's emancipation stood in stark contrast to the principles espoused by the Fabians on the issue of women's emancipation, and which were most clearly encapsulated in George Bernard Shaw's forgotten British socialist classic of its time *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, published in 1929. In it, Shaw recognizes that women's true emancipation requires the dismantling of class relations if it is not to apply, in its partial and distortedly concessionary form, to only a segment of semi-privileged women to the detriment of other women. Shaw's work never entered the English (literary) canon, nor did other feminist socialist writings of the time, all traces of which have been elided from every single anthology. Instead, Woolf and her *A Room of One's Own*, as also observed by a prominent British feminist literary theoretician, Mary Eagleton, has featured as the only, and consequently the dominant, work on the issue of women's emancipation for decades as though it itself existed in and filled a vacuum (1996: 2). This in turn has led to the restoration of the exclusionary and class-based emancipation policies pursued by contemporary Western liberal feminists and states, or to what Henninger et. al. have termed "exclusive emancipation of highly qualified women" (2008: 289). Exclusive emancipation stands in opposition to gender equality for all women. It rests on the continuing domestic enslavement of poorer women in the households of semi-liberated higher income women (be it those in the USA or in Western European countries such as Britain, Spain, Italy and more recently Finland) rather than calling into question capitalist patriarchy itself. Exclusive emancipation rather than gender equality is also a policy pursued in the novel under consideration here.

economically separate and socially qualitatively different worlds, with the first one mired in a patriarchy that subsists on women's domestication and the other one free of patriarchal institutions and oppressive gender norms, a veritable safe haven and a thriving outlet of opportunities for women's unlimited development and growth. This presumption is also unquestioningly echoed by mainstream literary critics who claim that "Cisneros writes against the patriarchal characteristics of [her] communit[y] and the racism of the mainstream society" (Bolaki 2011: 15). If it is admitted that America, unlike its ghettos, is plagued by any kind of structural injustice, then this is strictly speaking racism only. The perpetuation of this stance helps to exempt mainstream America from any other forms of structural inequalities and discrimination, most noticeably patriarchy and the class system, of which both racism and patriarchy are in fact constitutive elements (Keeanga-Yamahtta 2016).

After WWII, Western capitalist societies did not do away with the breadwinner model and state-supported forms of women's domestication due to the non-existent public care for children or its sporadic and limited provision, which in turn to this day does not enable mothers to seek full-time and permanent forms of employment (Burcar 2015).<sup>6</sup> Western states

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<sup>6</sup> All Western capitalist states encourage familialism rather than full socialization of childcare and women's full-time employment, thus entrenching women's dependent and secondary status. Characterized by "different faces or variants of familialism" (Szelewa 2012: 7), Western capitalist states' policies might differ, but their aims are the same. Depending on the structural incentives and methods used, capitalist states and their gendered welfare regimes fall into three distinct categories: liberal, corporate-conservative (or continental European) and social-democratic (Scandinavian) ones (Esping-Andersen 1990).

Liberal capitalist welfare regimes rest upon non-existent or minimal state provision of childcare for all age groups. The state instead provides means-tested subsidies for a selected group of the poorest among the poor and tax breaks for upper-income families, while entrusting highly sporadic forms of formal provision of childcare services to privately-run, profit-oriented businesses that charge high fees and operate in selected, most often only affluent areas, usually on a part-day basis only (Lambert 2008: 318; Thévenon 2011: 76-77). Tax breaks and means-tested subsidies in particular constitute "a very limited form of public co-funding" (Thévenon 2011: 76), with market-oriented childcare services remaining out of reach for the majority. Families are instead "directed to make their own care arrangements privately" (Engster and Stensöta 2011: 87): upper-income families are encouraged to use tax breaks towards hiring in-stay private nannies to avoid part-time work arrangements for themselves while lower income families are forced to rely on a network of relatives and/or on mothers' flexible part-time or home-based work arrangements. Great Britain and Ireland are typical representatives of the liberal welfare system in Europe (and outside Europe the US,

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New Zealand and Australia). In Britain, local authorities/municipalities are responsible for providing public care only for children with special needs and some groups of financially disadvantaged children but not for the rest of the population (Boje and Almquist 2005: 45). (Privately-run) kindergartens operate on a part-day basis and are mostly targeted at children aged four and above, with the majority of mothers forced either to outsource childcare to their relatives (most often to their own mothers) or to work as part-timers (White and Friendly 2012: 305). As part-timers, women are subcategorized into those that put in 6, 18 or 30 hours per week: all are disadvantaged, but the hardest hit are those that put in 6 hours per week, for they are not entitled, by law, to pension benefits and social security payments, which makes them utterly dependent on their partners or other family members.

The corporative-conservative welfare system, typical of continental Europe (e.g. Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands), is characterised by the capitalist state's disinvestment into public childcare facilities for children under three years and by the limited provision of formal childcare for preschool children above three – the latter is based on a limited number of kindergartens open only half a working day (Bussemaker and van Kersbergen 1999: 33). The corporative-conservative welfare system instead promotes extremely prolonged parental leave for women of up to three years and more, offering wage replacements that fall far below subsistence level (they are much lower than unemployment benefits or social support benefits) and part-time work for mothers once their children turn three. Most women do not or cannot return to their former full-time jobs due to the loss of skills or knowledge, or end up as part-timers stuck in the so called “marginal employment with earnings” well below the poverty line (Auer and Welte 2009: 396). As reported by Auer and Welte, in Austria these earnings amount to “about €340 per month” for individual women (ibid). Prolonged and poorly paid leave followed by part-time employment “enforce the caring and domestic role for women” (Leitner 2003: 370), while effectively removing them from the labour market and making them financially dependent on other family members.

Contrary to the popular myth promulgated by the corporate media in our region, the Scandinavian or the so-called social-democratic welfare model falls half way between familialism and full de-familialisation (once typical of socialist states). It is a mix of public provision of childcare complemented with day-care childminders, who work from their homes (and who are not subject to regulation or professional training), and an ever more increasing share of stay-at-home mothers who are given childcare allowances to stay at home at the end of extended and only partially remunerated parental leave (Sainsbury 1999). The Scandinavian model represents what sociologists have termed “the third type of familialism” or “optional familialism” (Szelewa 2012: 9): the state provides and subsidizes public childcare facilities for all age groups but with the ratio set in favour of part-day rather than full-day childcare services; the same also holds true for publicly subsidized private childminders. This leaves families only “partly unburdened from [fulltime] caring responsibilities” (Leitner 2003: 359). Women who wish to keep their full-time jobs are forced to seek other forms of informal care arrangements, otherwise they too must resort to part-time jobs, which is not their personal choice, but the only structural option left. Sweden and Denmark might boast a high rate of working mothers in comparison to liberal and conservative-corporate capitalist states, yet what is not mentioned is that almost half of them work on a part-time basis only (38%-48%), which leaves them not only burdened

beholden to capital have only modified this key structural feature of institutionalized patriarchy by turning it into the so-called 1.5 breadwinner model. Low-income and middle-income women are most frequently encouraged either to leave employment completely after the birth of their first child, or to combine the burden of fulltime childcare with precarious or intermittent forms of employment such as temporary, part-time or home-based work for mothers. The point of such forms of work, which are touted as women-friendly, is to keep as much social reproductive work still familialized rather than socialized, so that, for example, part-time work in the end “neither promotes [women’s] financial autonomy nor relieves them from being chiefly responsible for childcare” and housework (Ciccia and Bleyenbergh 2014: 8). As a result, women’s full-time employment in the formal sector and their socio-economic independence in capitalist patriarchy has been the preserve of only a handful of women in the West. Due to public disinvestment into childcare, well-to-do women’s exit out of domesticity has most often proceeded on “the basis of the broadening of informal feminine working conditions in the home economy” (Sauer 2011: 117), thus keeping social reproductive work effectively familialized, that is, still privatized and individualized. In the US (just like in Italy, Spain and Britain, for example), this has depended heavily upon the importation of

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with the major share of childcare not fully supported by the state, but also financially vulnerable and dependent.

As pointed out by Gornick, “high levels of female part-time work cut across the three welfare state models” (1999: 219), which is also one of the intended results of policies set on familialism regardless of the structural incentives and methods used. Part-time jobs “decrease women’s chances of advancement and lead to the reduction of income” (ibid), which in turn automatically reduces their entitlement to full social benefits and to adequate pensions during their retirement. This is the hidden structural ingredient of capitalism that leads to the feminization of poverty during women’s working lives and during their retirement. This rather lengthy foray into the actual workings of gendered welfare systems in capitalist states and their consequences for women serves to dispel various myths and constructs in circulation today. It disproves the claim that it is only American capitalism that is problematic and that its European version has been advantageous to women or women-friendly, as one of the reviewers of this paper has claimed. The claim that women in capitalism are free of patriarchal bonds or automatically emancipated just by virtue of being employed also misses the point: it disregards the structural forces at work that entrench women’s secondary and dependent status despite their employment. The key question to ask is what is the nature of their employment and whether this employment is accompanied by a full socialization of childcare rather than a partial or minimum one, which in the end leaves women still both dependent and inevitably weighed down with what remains truly a double burden.

female migrant labourers who are pressed into the service of upper-class white women under living and working conditions that fall short of basic survival.

By subscribing to the myth of white America as a place of unlimited freedom and choices for women, that is, as a separate and progressive space not burdened by patriarchal scripts, the novel falls into the trap of cultural essentialism. Among others, this discourse rests on the promotion of the Eurocentric myth that patriarchy, with its norms and gender subjugation, is inherent only to other cultures and societies. This in turn, as has been well established by feminist critics, leads to the construction of a homogenized image of all non-Western racialized women as victims and prisoners of their oppressive “patriarchal ethnic groups”, and to the construction of the myth of all Western women as “secular, liberated and having control over their own lives” (Mohanty 2002: 42). Cisneros’s narrative of maturation directly partakes in producing and upholding this kind of imaginary. A house where women are not confined to “care-taking and domestic-activities that destroy their sense of self and silence them” (Oliver-Rotger 2003: 141) is possible, as the narrative suggests, by extricating oneself from the ethnicized ghetto and embracing mainstream America instead. This action implies leaving behind for good patriarchal patterns of socialization, women’s domestication and limited life choices for women. The impression created is that the domestic confinement of women alongside their sexual objectification, curtailment of their bodily freedom and possibilities of professional self-realization, as well as domestic violence, is a unique problem underwriting ethnic communities and a phenomenon that does not exist beyond the ghetto borders. Literally moving house on the part of the female protagonist in this narrative thus also symbolizes an imaginary journey of “liberation into ‘progressive’ social customs of the West” (Volpp 2001: 1198). It is only here that the author, supposedly free of gender restrictions, can finally recuperate from patriarchal oppression and acquire a voice of her own in order to write stories of empowerment dedicated to the women still oppressed by patriarchy and “left behind”, that is, Mexican-American women who unlike the protagonist “cannot out” (Cisneros 1991: 110). By artificially splitting what is in fact a common social framework of capitalist patriarchy into two seemingly mutually exclusive and hierarchically juxtaposed spaces, the novel in turn helps to install an image of liberated modern white America versus tradition-bound ethnicized America. One of the ideological effects is

that the perpetuation of this culturally essentialist artificial binary helps to eliminate from view the existence of the institutionalized and all-pervasive patriarchal system of mainstream white America, which in turn not only prescribes very specific feminine norms, bodily comportment, and behaviour for all groups of women but demands conformity to the very same or similar restrictive patriarchal gender roles supposedly inherent only to ethnic communities. Cultural essentialism, which associates patriarchy exclusively with racialized communities, helps to make invisible the institutionalized capitalist patriarchal system of white America that affects the ways of being and possibilities of becoming of Mexican-American men and women within what are in fact permeable rather than hermetically sealed boundaries of their communities.

Some of the more perceptive critics have implicitly recognized the problematic nature of the novel's resolution by posing a very simple and yet fundamental question even though they do not take their observations any further. Bolaki wonders whether "the trope of the house [can] be envisaged as a solitary space outside history or an idealized space, untouched by patriarchy, where a woman can attain absolute singularity and wholeness" (2011: 114) in a society that ultimately rests on policies that uniformly strive towards familialism and women's domestication. A seemingly separate and liberated house of white mainstream America that Esperanza embraces as her ticket out of women's domestication and dependency on men is, specifically, still the very same place where one encounters unpaid maternity leave, which makes women completely dependent on their partners. At the same time unpaid or semi-paid leave serve as a signal for women's secondary attachment to the workplace and therefore as a built-in incentive for them to leave it "more easily" to take care of children at home (Matysiak and Szalma 2014: 603). This imaginary house of American mainstream freedom is still a place where all women, no matter what their skin colour, do not necessarily even have the right to unpaid maternity leave<sup>7</sup> and hence no constitutional guarantee of being able to return to the

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<sup>7</sup> Liberal welfare states have only recently introduced paid maternity leave. Ireland did so in 1998, (Switzerland in 2005) and Australia as late as 2011 (European Parliament 2015). Before, maternity leave was selectively granted on the basis of means tests or not paid at all, which is still the case in all of the USA, except for Rhodes Island, California and New Jersey (Gilpin 2015). In liberal systems maternity leave is not fully paid (usually only 50% of the woman's salary), while paternity leave remains unpaid. In conservative-corporate states,

same job they held prior to giving birth (Ray et al. 2009). This again deepens their insecurity and compounds their dependence on their partners or other family members in their new capacity as mothers. And just as crucially, this is, and remains, a place characterized by US federal policies that promote a very limited provision of public childcare, access to which is most often conditioned by means-testing and even then only partially subsidized (Thévenon 2011: 76), thus leaving the majority of women to struggle with childcare on their own. Instead of accessible and high-quality community-based childcare, US liberal welfare regimes expect families to resort to “their own care arrangements privately” or turn to a few commercialized outlets of care that remain out of reach for the majority of women (Engster and Stensöta 2011: 87). It does not come as a surprise that “in the mid-1990s”, when Cisneros’s novel started to grow in popularity, only “about one in four American children under three years received some outside care, however, [with] only 5 percent [...] in government subsidized care” (Lambert 2008: 321). All of the above policies that inhabit the house of mainstream America “directly regulate gender relations” by enforcing women’s domestication and along with it traditional gender roles (Leitner 2003: 366). They are designed specifically to encourage the familialization rather than de-familialization of care, which has negative consequences for women’s autonomy and possibilities of self-realization in general (Saraceno 2003: 447).

The American house of freedom that the novel wholeheartedly endorses is, despite the narrator’s proclamation to the contrary, still a house of segregation and strict hierarchical gendered and racialized division of labour. If Esperanza wants to write stories in this kind of house and see

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maternity leave is usually fully paid at the rate of a woman’s salary (except in Belgium and Switzerland) while parental leave is paid minimally for a limited period of time and unpaid thereafter (Boling 2015: 45). They usually follow a pattern which is a combination of reimbursement of a certain percentage of a woman’s salary for a few initial months, which is then followed by a flat-rate payment below subsistence level or no payment at all (Bussemaker and van Kersberger 1999: 30). In Scandinavia, maternity and parental leave are universally granted with an upper ceiling imposed for maternity leave and with the replacement rate for paternity leave standing at just a certain percentage of the woman’s salary (Sainsbury 1999). This creates a structural incentive for better paid women to cut short their parental leave and return to their jobs while outsourcing childcare to informal carers. All of these replacement rates offer less than a 100% reimbursement of women’s salaries, as socialist systems did, thus reinforcing their financial dependency on other family members.

her voice expand rather than shrink, the crucial question is, at whose expense can she then establish a voice of her own in a mainstream society that is only imagined to be exempt from institutional patriarchy and patterns of women's domestication? By simply moving from one location to another, both of which form a subset of the same system, Esperanza as an adult narrator is, of course, not exempt from the gender norms and institutionalized constraints that aim to reduce women to domesticity and at best to part-time "working housewives". The question is whether she can claim such a voice at all and secure personal growth in a deeply capitalist-patriarchal American society which rests on the familialization rather than socialization of care and other forms of reproductive work. Cisneros appears to ruminate on this issue in one of her diary entries when she wonders how Emily Dickinson could be so prolific and establish a voice for herself in the capitalist patriarchal society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that demanded she perceive and constitute herself primarily as a self-effacing servicer and nurturer, focused exclusively on the needs of others:

*She even had a maid, an Irish housekeeper, who did, I suspect, most of the household chores ... I wonder if Emily Dickinson's Irish housekeeper wrote poetry or if she ever had the secret desire to study and be anything besides a housekeeper.... Maybe Emily Dickinson's Irish housekeeper had to sacrifice her life so that Emily could live hers locked upstairs in the corner bedroom writing her 1,775 poems. That's what I'm thinking. (Cisneros qtd. in Bolaki 2011: 117)*

It is clear that Esperanza's own "economic and intellectual freedom" (Oliver-Rotger 2003: 297) also comes at the expense of other women. The "house of her own" that Esperanza speaks of is a middle-class replica of the rich people's houses where her father worked as a gardener and which Esperanza's family would go to admire from afar on weekends. Esperanza too speaks of having a house of her own in a way that is clearly based on the model of assimilation where social inclusion is symbolic and concessionary. She promises not to forget those people she left behind but her hospitality extends only as far as "offering them an attic" (Cisneros 1991: 87). As pointed out by Oliver-Rotger in a different context, "in Spanish, the [l]ático designates the place under the roof that is occupied by the servant or the maid in the houses of the middle and upper middle class" (2003: 296). The "bums" or the transient others Esperanza's house of American freedom

now harbours in the attic, and whose invisible but all-pervasive presence makes the floorboards squeak and grumble with cleanliness, seem to constitute an invisible army of (live-in or transient) nannies, maids, and domestics. Through their sweat and toil and their own stifled aspirations they will create the necessary small space of limited freedom for the narrator to pursue her writing career. By joining mainstream America and thus supposedly shedding (institutional) patriarchal constraints as suggested by the narrator, in the capitalist patriarchy Esperanza's voice can grow only at the expense of other women, including those left behind in the ghetto, for it is from there that the army of invisible female carers is very likely to be recruited.

Esperanza's voice can be claimed in its own limited and encumbered way only by perpetuating and keeping intact the same mechanisms of gendered subordination that still constrain her as a woman, but which she can now afford to completely or partially download onto other, poorer women. Both parties, the private employer and the hired woman, thus remain in a way still primarily house-bound women, with the capitalist patriarchal system of women's domestication hardly modified let alone shaken. As Peterson points out (2003: 103)

*domestic service involves labor that is traditionally assigned to wives and mothers. Avoiding these activities by paying other (often non-citizen) women to do them [in the privacy of one's home and for less money than public sector's unionized workers] avoids disrupting gendered divisions of labor within the household, but at the expense of exacerbating class (and often racial and national) divisions among women (my emphasis).*

This points to the institutionalized patriarchal nature of the mainstream American society that remains premised on the familialization of care and hence on (different degrees of) women's systemic domestication. Within this imaginary house of freedom, the narrator thus asks for small concessions for herself, while keeping the gendered division of labour, which is one of the main structural features of capitalist patriarchy, undisturbed. The house of one's own that the narration builds outside the Mexican-American community and which is understood to be a house of female emancipation hides, and thus ends up perpetuating, the same mechanisms of gender subordination and patriarchal oppression allegedly typical only of "patriarchal ethnic communities". The voice of a seemingly liberated woman

that embraces mainstream America can expand as long as it continues to participate in the master's discourse. That is, it can continue to expand as long as it seeks only small concessions for herself within the capitalist patriarchy without really addressing, let alone doing away with, the structural causes that generate gender differences and demand women's domestication.

## 5. Conclusion

Instead of systemic change that would substantially alter all women's possibilities of self-realization and their well-being, Cisneros's novel of female maturation merely asks for a handful of concessions for a small group of women; hence the focus on the preoccupation with Esperanza's individual success, a frequently used strategy of mainstream liberal feminism. The focus on women's individual success leaves out the systemic investigation and understanding of the synergic structural forces that continue to work to the exclusion and marginalization of the majority of women, and which in turn also affect the handful of women seemingly exempt from these processes. This kind of focus has a completely depoliticising function. It averts our gaze from the structural inequalities affecting women across the spectrum, while masking the ways in which these inequalities and policies geared towards women's (re-)domestication are also by necessity reinforced by a few top-ranking women if they want to secure their so-called individual success and their entry into the upper echelons of power within the capitalist patriarchy. Ethnicizing women's domestic entrapment helps to mask these processes.

In order to fight such tendencies, it is the responsibility of women writers and literary critics to ask not only how gender operates but also why it operates in that particular way (Ebert 2005: 34). It is therefore of paramount importance for writers of novels of maturation and formation, as we are reminded in a different context by Yarbrow-Bejarano, to "show how [...] elements of gender, race, culture and class coalesce. [...] While this may seem painfully obvious, the assertion of this project in Chicana writing [as well as in other women's writing] is crucial in combatting the tendency in both white feminist and Chicano discourse to see these elements as mutually exclusive." (qtd. in Olivares 1996: 228) Such a partial and decontextualized stance, which eventually comes to see the enemy in individual men, can tilt dangerously towards cultural essentialism, thus distorting the basic socio-economic framework and missing the broader but essential picture.

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## SAŽETAK

Lilijana Burcar

### ETNICIZIRANJE KUĆANSKE ZATOČENOSTI ŽENA U ANTIBILDUNGSROMANU SANDRE CISNEROS *KUĆA U ULICI MANGO*

Roman *Kuća u Ulici Mango* preveden je na više od dvadeset svjetskih jezika, uključujući i hrvatski (2005.). Ovaj je roman našao svoje mjesto u brojnim programima studija književnosti i kulturalnih studija izvan Sjedinjenih Američkih Država te je jedna od temeljnih početnih točaka za rasprave i razumijevanje položaja žena u američkim etničkim zajednicama. Baveći se nepovoljnim položajem žena roman Sandre Cisneros uvelike se oslanja na postavke liberalnog feminizma, koji razumijevanje rodne opresije svodi na personalizirane odnose između individualnih muškaraca i žena i na stavove muškaraca prema ženama. Za razliku od liberalne feminističke književne teorije sistemski feministička književna teorija u obzir uzima širi društveni kontekst tako što usmjerava našu kritičku pozornost na strukturalne sile i institucionalne prakse koje oblikuju rodno uvjetovane položaje i definiraju ulogu žena unutar i izvan obitelji. Ovaj rad pokazuje da zbog svojega prihvaćanja postavki liberalnoga feminizma roman u konačnici rodna ograničenja i domestikaciju žena tretira kao da je u pitanju pojava koja je ograničena isključivo na etničke zajednice. Rezultat je toga da se marginalizacija žena shvaća kao znak etničke različitosti, a ne kao strukturalni problem koji definira i prožima američko društvo u cijelosti. Zahvaljujući prijevodima ova se shvaćanja indirektno prenose i mogu se nekritički diseminirati u kulturnim i akademskim okružjima izvan Sjedinjenih Američkih Država. U radu se stoga zagovara potreba za sistemskim književnim pristupom, koji može funkcionirati kao dobrodošla i prijeko potrebna kritička inovacija u društvenim okružjima koja još nisu upoznata s problematičnom prirodom liberalnoga feminizma i etniciziranjem „zarobljavanja” žena u njihovim domovima.

**Ključne riječi:** *ženski bildungsroman; kapitalistički patrijarhat; domestikacija žena; kulturni esencijalizam; Sandra Cisneros; Kuća u Ulici Mango*