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# Within Four Walls

The Portrayal of Home in American  
Immigrant Literature

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## SUMMARY:

In this dissertation I explore the meaning of home in American immigrant literature. Starting from a theoretical framework about spaces in literature, I focus on the case of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*. The study of both works allows me to establish several similarities between them. Home is an intimate place that is supposed to symbolise security and comfort. Nevertheless, in the case of immigrant families this space may be full of dichotomies that trigger conflicts when two cultures collide under the same roof.

**Key words:** cultural studies, Chicano literature, Japanese American literature, home, house, ghetto, Japantown, picture-bride, immigrant, social class.

## RESUMEN:

En este ensayo exploro el significado del hogar in la literatura inmigrante estadounidense. Comenzando con un marco teórico acerca de los espacios en la literatura, me centro en el caso de *The House on Mango Street*, de Sandra Cisneros, y *The Buddha in the Attic* de Julie Otsuka. El estudio de ambas obras me ha permitido establecer bastantes semejanzas entre ellas. El hogar es un lugar íntimo que supuestamente simboliza seguridad y confort. Sin embargo, en el caso de las familias inmigrantes este lugar puede estar lleno de dicotomías que desencadenan conflictos cuando dos culturas colisionan bajo el mismo techo.

**Palabras clave:** estudios culturales, literatura chicana, literatura japonesa americana, hogar, casa, gueto, Japantown, esposa por correo, inmigrante, clase social.

## CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Narrative Spaces: The Ghetto and Home .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. The Barrio in Sandra Cisneros's <i>The House on Mango Street</i> .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Japantown in Julie Otsuka's <i>The Buddha in the Attic</i> .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>6. Bibliography.....</b>	<b>10</b>

## 1. Introduction

Despite living in a globalised world in which people from different cultures interact in the same spaces, academic literary syllabuses tend to focus on classic works for their core modules, whereas minority literatures are either optative modules or consigned to oblivion. During my undergraduate degree I had the opportunity to supplement my studies with the reading and analysis of this kind of literatures within the United States, which gave me insightful perspectives about the other voices of our increasingly multicultural societies. One of the most salient characteristics that caught my attention during the lessons was the meaning of home for immigrant families. This space is related to security and comfort for the collective and individual consciousness, a place where people can protect themselves from the world outside and remove their public personae. Furthermore, in the case of immigrant families in the United States, this feeling of protection tends to increase, since they usually face cultural shock in society, mainly for first generations. Concerning successive generations, home may represent a land of dichotomies where Americanness and cultural roots conflict with each other.

In this dissertation, I explore the meaning of home in American immigrant literature. Starting from a theoretical framework about spaces in literature, I focus on the case of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*. The reason for choosing both novels relies on the importance they give to the concept of home and the neighbourhoods described, as well as their respective influence in Chicano and Japanese American literature. For this research, I make use of secondary sources related to literary spaces such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, which evidences the necessity of theoretically elaborate on the issue of space as a backdrop since antiquity. Regarding the importance of home for literature, I use Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Furthermore, I have included sources that enlighten the coexistence of cultures in American immigrant neighbourhoods, as in Kandiyoti's and Anderson's works. For Cisneros's collection of sketches and stories, I have chosen an interview in which she explains why she chose the short story to structure the collection. In order to understand Otsuka's novel, it was fundamental to make reference to an article that explores the historical phenomenon of picture-brides in the United States.

## 2. Narrative Spaces: The Ghetto and Home

Narrative spaces are fundamental in order to provide a framework for a story to develop, as well as to illustrate the interactions between characters. They may be constructed in several ways and be purely fictional, hence not existing in the real world. However, many authors decide to base their settings in real scenarios. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle highlighted the importance of creating literary spaces closer to reality:

We enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as the forms of vilest animals and of corpses . . . This is why people enjoy looking at images, because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer what each element means . . . For, if one happens not to have seen the subject before, the image will not give pleasure *qua* mimesis but because of its execution or colour, or for some other such reason (37-39).

Aristotle defended the classical idea that the best works of literature were mainly based on reality, a notion known as “mimesis”. This allows the readers to focus on the plot and

characters through already known spaces, instead of diverting their attention towards unknown details of the setting—as in Science Fiction.

Minority literatures are a good example of the principle of mimesis. Their narrative spaces are closely related to reality and play an important role in the development of the characters. Moreover, the unprivileged and isolated environment the characters have to live in determines their attitudes towards life and the decisions they make, sometimes even in a deterministic way. This situation can be described as a kind of “coloniality of place”, derived from a need to fix individuals or populations and to immobilize the undesirable (Kandiyoti 33). These neighbourhoods are also known as *barrios* or ghettos, and are usually located on the outskirts or inner-city areas, segregated into ethnic enclaves. This is the reason why they have distinctive cultural features that differ from the neighbourhoods whose inhabitants are mainly White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They are also different regarding the income levels. Ghettos are impoverished areas where majority groups do not want to live. In fact, “the well-off and the privileged are inclined to blame the state of the ghetto poor on the poor themselves, or on the policies developed to ameliorate poverty” (Anderson 14). This idea may seem Manichean, but if we bear in mind that the concept of the American Dream is based on the simple notion that “as long as you work hard enough, you will achieve economic success”, we can find the explanation even in the ideological grounds of the country. Therefore, containing minorities within urban boundaries results in the elaboration and spread of ill-informed narratives. This triggers a vicious circle in which the upper classes may not feel socially responsible for not helping those in need, hence gradually increasing the gap between the rich and the poor.

Against this background, the figure of the home is particularly important. Outside it, minorities may feel vulnerable in a harsh society with deterministic attitudes according to birthplace or zipcode. Home, instead, is a comfortable place. As Gaston Bachelard states in *The Poetics of Space*, “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (6). It is an intimate space with many possibilities, where there is no boundaries for the imagination. Home may also be studied in behavioural terms. According to some studies conducted by Baker, Kramer et al., home can be categorised as a symbol of security, a reflection of one’s ideas and values, acting upon and modifying one’s dwelling, permanence and continuity, relationships with family and friends, centre of activities, refuge from the outside world, indicator of personal status, material structure and a place to own (Després 97-99). As we can see, homes are symbolically multifaceted, just as their inhabitants are. Henceforth, these structures become so important in fiction that they can be considered another complex character in the development of the plot. In the following sections, I will explain in depth the way homes are literary represented in Mexican American and Japanese American neighbourhoods. I will also dwell on the influence they exert on the characters.

### **3. The Barrio in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street***

*The House on Mango Street* is more than a novel. It is a compilation of short stories, a polyphony of voices from the different inhabitants of the *barrio*, narrated from the point of view of Esperanza Cordero, a twelve-year-old Mexican American. This format acts as a platform that allows the characters to express their personal histories. During an interview, Cisneros described her book as follows: “I wanted to write a series of stories that you could open up at any point. You didn’t have to know anything before

or after and you would understand each story like a little pearl, or you could look at the whole thing like a necklace” (qtd. in Bolaki 103). If we use her same metaphor, we can relate every house or apartment to a pearl, geographically connected through the thread of the streets of the *barrio*. In the same way, all the stories are linked together through the narrator’s eyes. As a young teen, the way of perceiving her surroundings is sometimes naïve, and sometimes tinged with adult bitterness.

The first chapter introduces the readers to Esperanza and her house. In the beginning, she recalls the other houses her family lived in, which were all rented. The current house on Mango Street is the first one the family owns. This is an important fact, since her parents are able to eventually acquire it through hard work. It represents an amelioration of their life conditions, a step up on the social ladder. However, reality appears abruptly in the midst of the description of the house:

They always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year. And our house would have running water and pipes that worked . . . And we'd have a basement and at least three washrooms so when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody. Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence . . . But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in. (Cisneros 4).

The wishes of owning a T.V.-like house do not vanish and stay in Esperanza’s mind through the pages of the book. As I mentioned in the second section, homes spur daydreaming. In the short story “Bums in the Attic”, she manifests her shame regarding her family’s economic situation and her frustration because of what they cannot have. She often finds herself longing for the material things other people can afford, while she resigns to “[stare] out of the window like the hungry” (86). Esperanza unconsciously begins to question the promise of the social mobility stated in the American Dream through the persistence of inequality. At the same time, she becomes aware that from the outside, it is her, and those like her, that are considered threatening: “Those who don’t know any better come into our neighbourhoods scared. They think we’re dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake” (28). In a turn of events, she manifest the same fear when driving through a neighbourhood inhabited by White Anglo-Saxon Americans. Therefore, both the home and the *barrio* act like a refuge from the outside world, providing security and control.

But home does not only function as a refuge or sanctuary from the outside world. Homes are kaleidoscopic structures that may turn into confining spaces. That is the case of *Mamacita* in “No Speak English”. She was brought from Mexico by her son, who had migrated to the United States in hopes of a better life. However, she cannot speak English, unlike her son. That is the reason why she feels lonely and homesick, being her inability to adapt the cause of recurrent fights:

Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light. The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it’s not the same, you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries. I would. Sometimes the man gets disgusted. He starts screaming and you can hear it all the way down the street. Ay, she says, she is sad. Oh, he says. Not

again. *¿Cuándo, cuándo, cuándo?* she asks. *¡Ay, caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!* (77-78).

For *Mamacita*, the apartment her son lives in may be a place, but not a home. Home entails a feeling of belonging, of being surrounded by caring and loving individuals. She is not only too far away from her true home, but her son does not seem to understand the cultural shock she experiences. Instead, he blames her for her inability to learn English, while not providing any sources for her to acquire language skills. Furthermore, he clearly states that he will not move back to their country under any circumstance, even hinting disdain towards his homeland. It is a no-win situation for her.

The novel finishes with the story “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes”. Cisneros includes in it the same enumeration of places Esperanza’s family had lived in the first chapter, hence providing the narrative with a circular pattern, and closing the necklace metaphor the writer used to describe the collection of stories. The narrator reflects on her dreams of becoming a writer and living outside the barrio. She had always felt full of dichotomies inside her, torn apart between her Mexican and American identity. Nevertheless, we can see a shift on her resolutions. In the end, she does not profess shame towards her home and neighbourhood. Instead, she feels like a representative of the Chicano culture outside the barrio who will eventually come back “for those [she] left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110). In the end, she learns to accept that the house on Mango Street has been more than a material structure for her, it a place to call home where she can extend hospitality to others.

#### 4. Japantown in Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic*

This novel is set in the American interwar period. Within the Japanese immigrant population, there was a high number of bachelors who were unable to marry due to the lack of Japanese women. That is the reason why plenty of them, with the help of their families in Japan, resorted to a practice known as picture-brides. As Ichioka describes it, the practice did not diverge that much from the traditional Japanese custom in which heads of households selected marriage partners through go-betweens. Even if the couples were present during the meeting, they rarely exchange words. The purpose was for the head of the family to know about the other’s family status (342). The picture-bride system functioned the same way, with the exception that the wedding ceremonies never took place: the bridegroom filled in the marriage documents with the bride’s information, hence being able to “claim” them from overseas. *The Buddha in the Attic* is narrated from the point of view of those brides. The narrative voice is not the first person singular but an encompassing “We.” The first chapter is set on the boat that took those brides to the United States. Some of them were underage when they had left their homeland against their will, so they spend their days on the boat wondering about their future American home. Nevertheless, once they land and go through the immigration process, reality strikes them:

On the boat we could not have known that when we first saw our husbands we would have no idea who they were . . . That the photographs we had been sent were twenty years old. That the letters we had been written had been written to us by people other than our husbands . . . That when we first heard our names being called out across the water one of us would cover her eyes and turn away—*I want to go home*—but the rest of us would lower our heads and smooth down the skirts of our kimonos and walk down the gangplank and step out into the still warm day.

*This is America*, we would say to ourselves, *there is no need to worry*. And we would be wrong (Otsuka 18).

For these brides, their new home is not a secure place. One of them even expresses her desire to go back to her real home, the one in Japan, with her family. They are left in a foreign country where they cannot speak the language and, as teenagers, they are submissive to their husbands. They find that their new homes were located in designated neighbourhoods, in Japantown. Instead of living a comfortable life, these women were required by their husbands to work hard at home. Again, they learn that their husbands had lied about their wealth before marrying:

We worked in basement laundries in Japantowns in the most run-down sections of their cities—San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Barbara, L.A.—and every morning we rose before dawn with our husbands and we washed and we boiled and we scrubbed. And at night when we put down our brushes and climbed into bed we dreamed we were still washing, as we would every night for years . . . *If you come home*, our fathers had written to us, *you will disgrace the entire family. If you come home your younger sisters will never marry. If you come home no man will ever have you again*. And so we stayed in J-town with our new husbands, and grew old before our time (50).

Apart from that, they have to work in the fields or shops. Once they finished their workday and returned home, the homes only represented more work for them. The saddest part is that returning to their home in Japan was not an option for they risked the reputation of their families.

When they had children, the brides felt like they would offset the loneliness their husbands made them feel. Nevertheless, once the children grew up, they started to show signs of shame towards their ethnic roots:

*I feel like a duck that's hatched goose's eggs*. They preferred their own company to ours and pretended not to understand a word that we said . . . Our sons grew enormous. They insisted on eating bacon and eggs every morning for breakfast instead of bean-paste soup. They refused to use chopsticks. They drank gallons of milk. They poured ketchup all over their rice. They spoke perfect English just like on the radio and whenever they caught us bowing before the kitchen god in the kitchen and clapping our hands they rolled their eyes and said, "Mama, *please*" (74-75).

Therefore, the space of the house turned into a scenario where both the American and the Japanese culture coexisted. For the mothers, Japan represented their true home, a memory of their happy childhoods. For their descendants, the country represented the obstacle that did not allow them to be considered fully Americans. As Rolle mentions, this feeling is common among second generations—or *Nisei*, when referring to Japanese in the United States (qtd. in Sollors 213-214). In the end, both just wanted a place to belong.

The final chapters are devoted to the relocation of citizens of Japanese ancestry to internment camps as a preventive measure from the American government during World War II. It was the peak of hostility within the host country. These picture-brides were forced to move again far from their homes, without knowing if they could eventually return to them. It is then that readers understand the title of the book. We read that "Haruko left a tiny laughing brass Buddha up high, in a corner of the attic, where he is still laughing to this day" (Otsuka 109). The Buddha is an important spiritual element for



her, which is saved in an intimate place in the hope of returning and being home again. Furthermore, the presence of the figurine creates two powerful contrasts: one the one hand, the Buddha is a material object, just like all the objects that were left behind in the house. All the man-made objects stay while their owners are missing. On the other hand, the statuette is described as “laughing”, an act that involves sound. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of the house is completely silent due to the forced removal of its inhabitants. Henceforth, the Buddha conveys presence and absence, sound and silence.

## 5. Conclusion

The portrayal of home is a staple feature in American immigrant literature. Its importance is based on its role as a sanctuary from the outside world. But home may also be the stage for the unfolding of polarities, mainly when several generations coexist in the same space. In the case of *The House on Mango Street* and *The Buddha in the Attic*, both novels share similitudes. They are set in immigrant neighbourhoods whose inhabitants are constantly torn apart between their two homelands: the one they were born in and the one they live in. Children, as second generation, feel this dichotomy more acutely. The houses are humble buildings that do not correspond to the ones they imagined. Some of the characters have dreams of going away, so daydreaming is an important activity in fiction. All in all, the experience of immigrants from different ethnicities is not so different from one another. They share feelings that transcend any space and nationality. They want to feel secure. They want to feel comfortable. They want to live with a loving and caring family. And, above all, they want to have a place to call home.

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