

# The Chicano Feminist Identity and Cultural Conflict in Sanchez's *I'm Not The Perfect Mexican Daughter*

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## Abstract

This research delves into feminist themes within the novel "I'm not the Perfect Mexican Daughter," focusing on the depiction of women through the perspectives of two key female characters. Employing feminist literary analysis, the study investigates how Chicana women are represented in a society entrenched in patriarchal norms. Drawing from Garcia's Chicana feminist and Tong's feminist theories, it argues that women occupy subordinate positions due to entrenched male dominance. Despite advancements in the public sphere, Chicano women are still expected to adhere to traditional family roles, being judged primarily on physical appearance. Men are portrayed as dominant figures, wielding power in economic and social realms. Through the lives of the main characters, the novel highlights the challenges and contradictions faced by Chicana women amidst the women's movement. It presents an idealized image of womanhood emblematic of Chicana experiences in the United States, exploring Julia's defiance of gender norms, Olga's complex negotiation between conformity and rebellion, and Ama's struggle with societal expectations.

**Keywords:** Chicana, dominance, feminist, gender, inferior

## INTRODUCTION

Marginal discourses, representing the diverse voices of racial minority groups, women, and LGBT communities, persistently challenge the dominant narratives within society (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). These discourses aim to validate the lived experiences of marginalized groups and offer alternative perspectives to bridge societal gaps. One pivotal discourse is feminism, advocating ardently for women's liberation in response to pervasive gender-based injustices (Michelis 2023). It arises from women's profound recognition of the systemic gender-based injustice, where their fundamental rights are inadequately recognized. Feminism boldly challenges the deeply entrenched notion of male superiority over women and feminism is a series of struggles and changes, not just a single enlightenment (Rachman, 2023).

The Chicana feminist movement is a significant and visionary movement rooted in the Chicana community, adapting feminist theory to the unique cultural, socioeconomic, and racial characteristics of Chicanas (Lampe, 1992). This movement confronts gender-based subordination within male-centered social movements and challenges cultural loyalty demands that perpetuate oppression. Chicana feminists navigate dual pressures: enduring an Anglo-dominated society and addressing persecution within their own cultural context. The identity of Chicana feminists is multifaceted, reflecting a complex interplay of cultural, racial, and gender dynamics. This intersectional approach fosters a "theoretical border consciousness", which interprets and reconstructs the Chicana's existence, serving as a means of self-actualization and empowerment (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Chicana feminists are part of the broader women of color feminist movement, which has a fraught historical relationship with white feminist groups due to racism. The history of feminism

in the United States began with the first wave, which included advocating for anti-slavery and protesting the abolition of black men's rights. Chicana feminists strive for recognition within the U.S., identifying with Mexican descendants born in the country. The term "Chicano" or "Chicana" emerged from the 1960s Chicano movement, which expressed pride in shared cultural, ethnic, and community identity. As Peña et al. (2023) note, "*Chicana feminists continue to resist and redefine their roles within the intersecting systems of oppression, seeking to create spaces for empowerment and transformation.*"

Mexican descendants in the U.S. grew in number due to historical events like the Mexican-American War, which resulted in significant Mexican territories becoming part of the U.S., thereby making Mexicans U.S. citizens (Kasih, 2018). This influx was followed by waves of Mexican immigrants, and cultural differences led to negative stereotypes about Chicanos/as. Many Chicano/as worked as laborers, with Chicana women forming the largest group of plantation workers, facing dual roles as laborers and housewives under patriarchal norms. This dual oppression resulted in Chicana women experiencing pressure from both the majority American society and Chicano men. The persecution of Chicanas is multifaceted, involving ethnic, gender, and internal cultural oppression. Chicano culture has been politically and economically exploited by Anglo society, resulting in Chicanos being viewed as subordinate and dependent. Gender oppression is universal, with women in most cultures subordinated and often abused by men. Chicana women face amplified oppression due to their ethnic heritage, which includes a specific form of internal oppression identified as '*machismo*'. This term, driven by Chicano colonization, describes a pervasive male dominance that erodes Chicana autonomy and must be addressed (García, 1997)

Chicano's feminist identity is closely related to cultural conflicts, as revealed in various studies. Chicana's feminist literary and artistic works critically examine the cultural norms and representations that undermine women's identities, emphasizing the importance of developing a feminist critical language to revise traditional cultural icons such as La Malinche (Avilés, 2014). In addition, Chicana writers such as Ana Castillo and Alvina E. Quintana prioritize cultural and discursive interventions in gender issues, encouraging changes in cultural representation and tagging practices as an arena of political and cultural struggle (Sanchez, 1996). The incorporation of Mexican and U.S. cultures within border communities, such as Gloria Anzaldúa's Chicano community, emphasizes the need to navigate and validate individual and group identities in order to create a shared identity and enhance international relations (Blackmore, 2015). These studies as a whole show how Chicano feminist identities are shaped by cultural conflicts and the constant struggle to challenge and redefine traditional representations as well as societal norms.

This study examines E.L. Sanchez's *I'm Not the Perfect Mexican Daughter*, which features three Mexican-American women: Julia, Olga, and Ama Reyes. After Olga's tragic death in Chicago, Julia's parents are devastated, having viewed Olga as the 'perfect Mexican daughter.' Julia feels guilty and struggles with her mother's intense emotions while resenting her mother's admiration for Olga. Julia rebels against the submissive roles expected of women, misbehaving at school and straining her relationship with her mother. Despite these challenges, Julia seeks independence and recognition, eventually gaining acceptance into a good school. She battles perceptions, compares herself to Olga, attempts suicide, but improves with therapy. Discovering Olga's affair with a professor, Julia continues her studies and earns a scholarship.

Studies of Chicana's feminist literature have explored several key themes, including the concept of a "new mestiza" identity that incorporates different cultures (Anzaldúa, 1999), the balance between the struggle for women's rights with the preservation of cultural traditions as well as the struggle against racial discrimination (Alarcón & et.al, 1983), and Chicana's efforts to realize self-actualization and awareness of marginalization (Groenewold, 2005). In addition, narratives of generational conflict in the feminist space often hide the struggle to redefine feminism and extend solidarity to marginalized groups (Michelis, 2023). Chicana's feminist literature also categorizes various approaches to feminism such as liberal, radical, and nationalist (Alarcón et al., 1983), as well as examines the challenges faced by women due to cultural clashes in the family and the impact of American cultural influences (Henríquez-Betancor, 2019; Vallejos, 1983). Building on these themes, the study identifies gaps in literature with a focus on how contemporary literature, particularly Sánchez's novels, portray the complexity of Chicana's identity and cultural dynamics. This study aims to analyze how Sánchez's work depicts Chicana's feminist ideology and the challenges faced by Chicana's characters, possibly through the lens of different feminist categories or the impact of cultural clashes, thus providing new insights into the representation of Chicana's experience in feminist literature.

## THEORY

Feminism, as described by Madsen (2000), is a perspective that underscores the significance of achieving gender parity and critiques societal frameworks that either discriminate against or favor one gender over another. Madsen highlights the need to challenge cultural norms that reinforce gender inequality and supports societal changes and policies aimed at promoting equality between genders in all aspects of life. In American ethnic women's literature, analyzed by Madsen (2000), including works by African American, Chicana, Native American, and Asian American writers, there is an exploration of the emergence of a unique feminine ethnic or racial voice, as well as a reinterpretation of ethnic cultural traditions to express feminist perspectives rather than traditional patriarchal values. Additionally, this literature addresses oppressive aspects within Black, Chicano, Native American, and Asian American cultures, aiming to articulate an analytical approach to achieving liberation without compromising ethnic heritage.

Tong (2009) argues that feminism encompasses diverse beliefs and actions aimed at achieving gender equality and empowering women, addressing the complex dynamics of patriarchal systems and cultural norms sustaining inequality. Tong emphasizes feminism as a dynamic movement advocating for women's rights while actively dismantling oppressive structures hindering gender equality. Furthermore, Tong highlights how third-wave feminists recognize the changing demographics in the United States, foreseeing people of color constituting the majority soon. They observe increasing societal acceptance of individuals with multiracial and multiethnic backgrounds, with parents of children from blended racial or ethnic backgrounds reporting their children's disregard for distinctions between white and nonwhite identities.

The Chicana feminist movement is a social movement aimed at liberating marginalized and historically conquered groups (Garcia 1997). Chicanas have long been part of Chicano history as a marginalized group. Their history is also tainted with issues of multi-oppressive identities along the lines of gender, class, and race. Chicana feminist consciousness is used to confront the multi-oppressive life they experience. The Chicana feminist movement challenges traditional Chicana gender roles, traditional families, and cultural nationalism. Chicana feminism empowers women

and insists on challenging the stereotypes and limitations faced by Chicanas across gender, ethnic, racial, class, and sexuality lines.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research utilizes qualitative methods. The research method employed in this study is descriptive (Cresswell, 2003). The author uses this method to describe the perspectives of the three main female characters in the novel *I'm Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* written by E. Sanchez, thereby forming an analysis of the representation of women in the novel. The author collects data using text from the novel and consults the library to obtain the necessary information for this research. The researcher employs a descriptive analytical research method (Wolniak, 2023). Descriptive analysis involves obtaining information based on data gathered from previous studies conducted by other researchers and explaining the concept of feminist literary criticism to facilitate readers' understanding of this study. The research method used in this study is descriptive. The author uses this method to describe how women's perspectives on the three main female characters in Sanchez's novel shape an analysis of the representation of women in the novel.

## DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the struggles of three women, each with different backgrounds and goals, in fighting for their rights as women. Women are understood as individuals who must be independent in modern life while also adhering to existing cultural norms. This is reflected in the attitudes displayed by the three female characters in this novel as depicted by the author, E.L. Sanchez.

### Julia's Perspective and Rebellion Against Gender Norms

In the novel, Julia emerges as a pivotal figure, a teenage Chicana girl navigating the complexities of her cultural identity while still in school. Through her eyes, the author paints a vivid portrayal of the traditional role expected of Chicana women – one characterized by obedience and dependency on their husbands. Julia finds herself at odds with this depiction, particularly in contrast to her own mother, who is deeply entrenched in serving her father, confined to domestic duties within the kitchen and embroidery. Disillusioned by her mother's adherence to these norms and the admiration bestowed upon her seemingly compliant sister, Julia rebels against societal expectations. Her acts of defiance manifest in school misbehavior, often leading to confrontations with authority figures and exacerbating tensions within her family. Despite these challenges, Julia's determination to assert her independence remains steadfast as she strives to resolve her own problems and earn recognition through her academic achievements, ultimately securing acceptance into a prestigious school.

In E.L. Sanchez's novel, Julia emerges as a powerful symbol challenging the traditional constraints imposed upon Chicana women. Her narrative serves as a poignant critique of the rigid gender norms prevalent in the Chicano community. Julia's firm rejection of the submissive role assigned to Chicana women is encapsulated in her resolute declaration, "*I would've let my mother teach me how to cook. But I hate the way she hovers over me and criticizes my every move. I'd rather live in the streets than be a submissive Mexican wife who spends all day cooking and cleaning*" (Sanchez 2017, p. 13). From Julia's statement, Julia tries to wrestle with her identity as a young Chicana woman who is caught between traditional Mexican values and American culture. This statement also involves

questioning social expectations as Julia begins to challenge the roles assigned to her as a Mexican-American woman.

Julia's character in this analysis highlights various stereotypes often associated with the traditional role of women in Mexican culture. Julia's emphasis on phrases like "*a submissive Mexican wife who spends all day cooking and cleaning*" reflects stereotypes commonly linked to the traditional role of women in Mexican society. Julia emphasizes the term "*submissive*," which denotes submission and unopposed obedience, reflecting gender inequality where women are considered inferior and expected to obey their husbands. In this context, Julia also underscores her culture and identity with the term "*Mexican wife*." This provides a specific cultural context, highlighting traditional expectations within Mexican communities where women are expected to perform domestic duties. On the other hand, Julia seeks to emphasize the Chicano woman's role of "*spending all day cooking and cleaning*." Julia feels the need to stress this exclusively domestic role, suggesting that a woman's primary duty is to care for the household, which is often looked down upon and undervalued, leaving no room for personal development or a professional career. These words criticize and reject traditional roles of Chicano women that confine women to domestic tasks and subject them to patriarchy (Ibarrarán Bigalondo, 2017). As a character in the novel, Julia rejects these stereotypes and chooses to seek her own identity beyond the confines of traditional culture.

On the other hand, Julia in the American modernity strives hard in her search for education. Inspired by her sister, Olga, Julia realized the transformative power of knowledge and sought to get an adequate education for herself. Julia successfully completed her studies and was accepted into college, showing her journey as a testament to the resilience and determination of the Chicana women. For Julia, being accepted into college is more than just an academic achievement—it symbolizes her worth as a Chicana woman and her ability to defy social expectations. Her victory statement, "*NYU has accepted me with a scholarship*," (Sanchez, 2017) emphasizes the importance of this achievement in its journey to self-awareness and empowerment.

Despite her aspirations for personal advancement, Julia remains deeply connected to her family's sense of responsibility and obligation. He acknowledged the importance of the role of Chicana women in the family and sought to take care of the well-being of his sister, his mother, and his father. Julia redefines the concept of femininity, emphasizing the importance of care and nurturing in addition to intellectual achievement. Through her journey in empowerment and education, Julia seeks to demonstrate the resilience, agency, and determination of Chicana women in the face of social expectations. She challenges conventional notions of femininity and champions a vision of more inclusive and equitable femininity within the Chicano community. Her rebellion against the traditional role of Chicana women as obedient housekeepers is a profound reflection of the consciousness that developed among young Chicana women.

### **The Complexity of Conformity and Rebellion in Olga's Character**

Olga Reyes, the second significant female character in the novel, embodies the ideal Chicana woman as envisioned by her parents. Initially, the author depicts Olga as an obedient, intelligent, and well-mannered child, reflecting her parents' aspirations for her. Despite Olga's death early in the novel, her character remains a focal point through the end, symbolizing the persistent influence of her memory and the ideals she represented. Her parents, Ama and Apa Reyes, mourn her loss deeply, recalling her as a dutiful daughter who "*was a grown-ass woman, and all she did was go*

to work, sit at home with our parents, and take one class each semester at the local community college" (Sanchez 2017). This remembrance encapsulates their vision of a Chicana woman who balances familial responsibilities with personal education. Madsen (Madsen, 2000) explores dual consciousness in women of color, resonating with Olga's contrasting public and private personas, highlighting the pressures Chicana women face to conform to cultural ideals while grappling with their aspirations and identities. Olga's struggle embodies broader tensions within the feminist movement, balancing solidarity with individual expression.

Olga's struggle against the cultural and familial expectations imposed upon her. Her parents envision her as the model Mexican daughter—obedient, self-sacrificing, and unwavering in her role within the family. However, Sánchez uses Olga's narrative to expose the duality of her existence, which involves both outward conformity and internal rebellion. This duality aligns with the Chicana feminist concept of resistance within tradition, where women navigate and subvert restrictive cultural norms while outwardly adhering to them (Anzaldúa, 1987). Olga's hidden rebellion is symbolized through her affair with a married man, a significant act of defiance against the stringent expectations placed upon her. Sánchez reveals this secret with a striking line: "*Dull, dutiful Olga was sexing a married man. This explains almost everything—her faraway look, the hotel key, the underwear, the reason she never graduated from community college*" (E. L. Sanchez, 2017). These words unmask the facade of Olga's perfection, highlighting her vulnerabilities and the personal cost of her outward compliance.

Olga exemplifies the intersectional approach emphasized by (Garcia, 1989), who underscores the importance of understanding the experiences of women of color within their unique cultural and social contexts. Her life, shaped by cultural expectations, familial pressures, and personal desires, reveals the need for a feminist analysis that recognizes the complexities and contradictions in the lives of women of color. From a Chicana feminist perspective, Olga's affair is not merely an act of personal defiance but a manifestation of her struggle against a patriarchal system that demands women's compliance while ignoring their personal needs and aspirations. Chicana feminism, as articulated by scholars such as Alarcón & et.al, (1983), emphasizes the importance of recognizing the intersectionality of gender, culture, and identity. Olga's experiences reflect this intersectionality as she contends with both the demands of her cultural heritage and her own desires for autonomy and self-expression.

Olga's affair and its consequences, such as her failure to graduate from community college, illustrate the deep-seated conflict between her desires and the expectations placed upon her. This duality in her character underscores the immense pressure Chicana women face to adhere to traditional roles while striving for personal fulfillment. Olga's story reveals that the appearance of success and obedience can mask significant personal turmoil and resistance. Through Olga, the novel critically examines the nuanced reality of Chicana women's lives, where the weight of cultural and familial expectations often leads to concealed acts of rebellion. Her life and hidden struggles serve as a poignant commentary on the complex dynamics of identity, duty, and personal desire within the Chicano community. Tong (2009) emphasizes the diversity of feminist thought, arguing for an inclusive theory that encompasses a wide range of experiences and identities. Olga embodies this complexity, navigating the intersection of cultural expectations and personal desires. Her hidden rebellion, exemplified by her affair, can be seen as a response to the patriarchal structures confining her to a singular, obedient role, asserting her autonomy against traditional norms. Olga's

character challenges readers to consider the often unseen battles faced by those who seem to perfectly embody societal ideals, advocating for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of womanhood.

### **Navigating Traditional Roles on Ama's Struggle with Compliance**

In this novel, Ama Reyes' character is portrayed as a very dedicated wife and mother, but her character also reflects her deep personal sacrifice and social constraints. From the perspective of Chicano feminism, Ama Reyes represents the struggle and collective consciousness of Chicana women who are often marginalized in dominant historical and cultural narratives. Chicano feminism focuses on the experiences of Chicana women who are affected not only by patriarchal structures but also by broader racial and class oppression in United States society. Ama Reyes not only faces gender barriers, but also challenges related to cultural and economic identity. When Ama said, "*You know, I hardly went to school. I had to drop out to work and help take care of my family when I was only thirteen. I'm ignorant, mija*" (Sanchez 2017), this statement reflects the internalization of patriarchal power and class structures that limit its access to education and other opportunities.

From the feminist Chicano perspective, Ama Reyes' narrative can be analyzed as a critique of patriarchal structures that not only affect women individually but also serve as part of a broader system of oppression involving race, class, and gender. Chicano feminism emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the experiences and voices of Chicana women as part of the struggle against oppression. In this context, Ama's past trauma and sacrifices for the family show how oppressive social structures shape and limit women's role in society. Ama Reyes also represents the intergenerational experience of the Chicana woman, where restrictive gender values and expectations are passed down from generation to generation. Chicano feminism highlights how traditional gender roles and cultural expectations that bind Chicana women can be seen as part of systemic oppression that hinders their individual growth and development.

In addition, through the perspective of the feminist Chicano, Ama Reyes, despite being trapped in her traditional role, is a symbol of collective resistance and solidarity within her community. Her struggles describe the ways in which Chicana women confront and challenge structures of oppression, even though they often lack power or voice in the dominant system. It also underscores the power of Chicana women in shaping and redefining their roles beyond the framework of patriarchy and oppression that already exist.

Moreover, Ama's confession of feeling "ignorant" sheds light on the insidious impact of societal perceptions that devalue women who do not conform to traditional gender roles. Her internalized belief reflects the oppressive nature of gender norms that equate a woman's worth with her ability to conform to prescribed roles of wife and mother, relegating her intellectual pursuits to a secondary priority. Ama's experience highlights the intergenerational transmission of gender expectations and the perpetuation of gender inequality across familial lines. By replicating the same sacrifices and limitations imposed upon her by society onto her daughter or others in her community, Ama inadvertently perpetuates the cycle of women's compliance with entrenched gender norms. In essence, Ama Reyes emerges as a symbol of resilience in the face of societal constraints, embodying the struggle of countless women who grapple with the tension between their personal aspirations and societal expectations. Her narrative serves as a poignant call to action for broader societal changes aimed at dismantling patriarchal structures and empowering women to pursue their dreams free from oppressive gender norms.

Ama Reyes is also portrayed as an obedient and devoted wife, fulfilling her husband's needs at home, even in the absence of emotional connection. "*When Apá came home from the factory, she'd bring out his foot bath. She'd kneel down, place his feet gently inside, and massage them. They never said a word during this daily ritual. I can't imagine touching him like that*" (Sanchez 2017). This portrayal demonstrates Ama's obedience as a Chicana woman. Fulfilling traditional gender roles, prioritizing her husband's comfort over her own emotional fulfillment. Her actions reflect society's expectation for women to serve and sacrifice for their husbands, regardless of their own desires or needs. This depiction resembles a patriarchal position that prioritizes the head of the family, to be respected and served. This analysis highlights the gender dynamics within Chicano culture, emphasizing the complexity of Ama's obedience in the context of broader gender oppression (Garcia 1999).

Ama's compliance as a wife in the form of service, on one hand, is also a struggle in determining her position as a wife. Ama, as a wife who is very obedient to the head of the family, but on the other hand, Ama succeeds in becoming a modern mother to emphasize her child's pursuit of modern education in the United States. This shows the struggle in balancing tradition with progress, and creating space for Chicana women to take on more independent and progressive roles in a society still filled with strong patriarchal norms.

Ama Reyes also supports her children's education, showing concern for Olga and Julia's schooling. She becomes angry when Julia misbehaves at school. Despite not having a high education herself, Ama represents a modern woman who demands education for women. For Ama, everything she does is for her family, as narrated by the author. Ama tells Julia, "*I'm very happy for you...Can't you see that? ....All I do is think of ways to protect you*" (Sanchez 2017). In this context, Ama's behavior highlights the importance of education in empowering women, even when she herself did not have the opportunity for higher education. Ama's actions demonstrate her commitment to her children's future and her desire to provide them with better opportunities through education. This portrayal highlights the transformative power of education in empowering women, even when access is limited. Ama's steadfast efforts reflect her role not only as a traditional mother but also as an agent of change, striving to create opportunities and equity for her daughters. Furthermore, the depiction of educated images reflects broader sociological dynamics between majority and minority groups. In societies where minorities face pressure from the majority, there is a concerted effort to assert themselves through education. This struggle is exemplified by Chicano characters' pursuit of education in the United States, representing their aspiration for recognition and empowerment within a dominant culture.

Moreover, the analysis aligns with Tong's feminist theories (2009), which emphasize the importance of education in challenging gender norms and empowering women. Ama's insistence on education for her daughters reflects a rejection of traditional gender roles and a commitment to their autonomy and empowerment. Additionally, Gracia's Chicana feminist theories (1997) shed light on the intersectional nature of Ama's struggles, highlighting how her experiences as a Chicana woman influence her pursuit of education for her children. Through Ama's character, the novel embodies the broader sociological dynamics between majority and minority groups, where education becomes a tool for marginalized communities to assert themselves and strive for recognition within a dominant culture.



## CONCLUSION

The author concludes that Erica L. Sanchez aims to critique the American perspective on Chicana women and assert the destiny of Chicana women in the United States by portraying them through three distinct female characters. In the novel, Chicana women are depicted as expected to be highly educated and career-oriented. Sanchez venerates education through the admiration of the intelligent Olga while ridiculing Julia for her perceived foolishness and stubbornness. However, Julia's story ultimately reflects success as a Chicana woman with educational and career achievements. Meanwhile, Ama is portrayed as a submissive Chicano woman and a mother who supports education for her children. Throughout the narrative, the novel emphasizes the ongoing struggle of Chicana women to break free from Chicano cultural oppression, pervasive gender oppression, and the influences of American culture. Despite facing these challenges, characters like Olga, Julia, and Ama find ways to rebel against societal norms in their own unique ways. In essence, the novel illustrates the complex experiences of Chicana feminists who navigate multiple cultural identities and reject restrictive roles based on race, class, and gender. They embody a multiracial and multicultural existence, inhabiting two or more worlds within one language and across borders, as they strive for empowerment and equality.

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