



**Universidad**  
Zaragoza

## Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Latina's Identity Struggles in the US in  
*The House on Mango Street*  
and  
*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

Autora

Ada Dileyni Hernández Sánchez

Directora

María Ferrández San Miguel

Facultad de Filosofía y letras  
2023-2024

## **ABSTRACT**

In the context of the multicultural diversity that emerged in the US in the 20th century, Latina Literature is an important contribution to US literature. This genre has gained mainstream recognition by presenting complex, hybrid female characters and by addressing the process of identity formation in the in-betweenness of two cultural backgrounds: the US and a Latin American country. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how the struggle for self-definition within the context of Latina identity in the US is represented in *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* by Julia Álvarez. To do this, this dissertation will analyze how ethnicity, gender and social class are important issues involved in the process of identity formation of the characters in the aforementioned novels. The focus will be on how both novels portray the intersectional struggles and complexities of growing up between two cultures, navigating contradictory gender norms, and facing socio-economic challenges derived from social class.

**Keywords:** Latina Literature, identity, hybridity, ethnicity, gender, social class.

## **RESUMEN**

En el ámbito de la diversidad multicultural que surgió en los EE. UU. en el siglo XX, una contribución importante a la literatura estadounidense fue la llegada de la literatura latina. Se trata de un género que ha ganado reconocimiento al ofrecer personajes femeninos complejos e híbridos y explorar el proceso de creación de la identidad entre de dos orígenes culturales distintos: Estados Unidos y un país latino. El propósito de este Trabajo de Fin de Grado es explorar cómo se representa la lucha por la autodefinición dentro del contexto de la identidad latina en los Estados Unidos en las novelas *The House on Mango Street* de Sandra Cisneros y *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* de Julia Álvarez. Para ello, se analizará cómo la etnicidad, el género y la clase social son cuestiones importantes que intervienen en el proceso de autodefinición de los personajes de las novelas mencionadas. El objetivo es mostrar como ambas novelas retratan el conflicto interseccional y la complejidad de crecer entre dos culturas, navegar por normas de género contradictorias y enfrentarse desafíos socioeconómicos derivados de la clase social.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura latina, identidad híbrida, etnicidad, género, clase social.

# Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	3
3. ANALYSIS .....	6
3.1 <i>The House on Mango Street</i> .....	6
3.1.1 Ethnicity as Identity .....	6
3.1.2 Gender as Identity .....	8
3.1.3 Social Class as Identity .....	11
3.2 <i>How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents</i> .....	13
3.2.1 Ethnicity as Identity .....	13
3.2.2 Gender as Identity .....	16
3.2.3 Social Class as Identity .....	18
4. CONCLUSION .....	21
WORKS CITED .....	23



# 1. INTRODUCTION

Latinos/as are one of the most extended ethnic groups in the US, greatly contributing to the country's diversity. As Carlota Caufield and Darién David state, "Latino populations are comprised of immigrant populations from all over Latin America who have made the US their home" (1). Latinos/as have had an important role in the representation of their cultural background and past within literature, and more specifically, ethnic fiction. Nevertheless, being still a minority in the US, Latinos/as often reflect in their writing the process of racial discrimination and the struggle of assimilation to a new culture.

According to Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia, one of the most misrepresented groups in fiction has been Latinas who, nonetheless, have become mainstream in US literary production since the 1900s (2). As they further explain, Latina Literature is a recent movement within American Literature that challenges dominant American society by creating complex characters and telling their stories of hybridity, celebrating the strength of women of multiple cultural backgrounds, the US and a Latin American country (6).

The authors Sandra Cisneros and Julia Álvarez are key representatives of US ethnic and Latina fiction, as "they have succeeded in being recognized as artists and as women despite all the odds against them in U.S. society" (Kevane and Heredia 2). Sandra Cisneros is a Chicana poet and novelist who was born in Chicago in 1954, the third child and only daughter of a family on the constant move. She has received distinguished awards like the American Book Award and the MacArthur Genius Grant. Sandra Cisneros' most popular and acclaimed work of fiction is *The House on Mango Street*, published in 1984. It is a novel that focuses on the life and of Esperanza, a Chicana teenager girl in the US, and her community. It deals with the struggle of finding an identity and a sense of belonging in the US while coping with prejudices and male oppression in the *barrio* (Kevane and Heredia 45-46).

Julia Álvarez is an American-Dominican poet, essayist and novelist who was born in New York in 1950. However, she spent the first ten years of her life in the Dominican Republic, until her father's involvement in a political rebellion regarding Trujillo's dictatorship forced her family to move to the US as political exiles. She gained especial recognition with the publication of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), a novel about four young sisters who leave their home with their family in the Dominican

Republic and move to the United States as political refugees. It is noticeable that Julia Álvarez combines history and fiction since the protagonist, Yolanda, is considered Álvarez's alter ego and the story is, in many aspects, autobiographical (Kevane and Heredia 19-20).

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how the struggle for self-definition within the context of Latina identity in the US is represented in in *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *How the Garca Girls Lost their Accents* by Julia Álvarez. To do this, this work will analyze how ethnicity, gender and social class are important issues involved in the process of self-definition. It also seeks to discuss how these factors determine the life of the characters, and thus, their identity, which is hybrid and shaped by both the Latino cultural background and US culture. In this sense, this dissertation will consist of a first section that presents the context and theoretical framework, explaining the concepts of multiculturalism, ethnic fiction and Latina literature and exploring the notions of identity and intersectionality. The analysis of the two aforementioned novels will follow, exploring the representation of identity in its intersection with issues of ethnicity, gender and class. In the last section, there will be a comparative discussion of the two novels and the final results will be presented.

## 2. CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The climate of cultural diversity that emerged in the US at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has not always existed. Even though it was a time of great economic prosperity for white Americans, the 1950s was also a time of conflict marked by severe restrictions for minorities. As Douglass Miller and Nowak Marion state, “blacks and other nonwhites, who did not share equally in America’s bounty, were assured by the white media that they never had it so good” (11). It was “more an era of fear than fun” in which conservative ideals alarmed the ‘outcasts’ (6). As a result, the 1960s were marked by protests against the injustices and inequalities that emerged from the conservatism of the 1950s. In this way, the 1960s traced the path towards multiculturalism, which has its historical origins in the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement challenged racial segregation and discrimination, especially for Black Americans in the south. Thanks to its success, it eventually spread to other minorities, leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or nationality (Finkelman 302-303).

Multiculturalism has had a great impact on literature as, since the 1960s, the literary canon has expanded to include writers of all kinds of social and cultural backgrounds. From this period on, US literature has been progressively concerned with praising cultural differences and giving voice to those who had been silenced before (Song). In general terms, multiculturalism can be defined as a way “to understand and respond to the challenges associated with cultural diversity based on ethnic, national, and religious differences” (Song). In this sense, as Robert Lee states, each emerging American ethnic text “carries its own unique dislocatory force, a resistance to being thought ‘representative’, given a nod of recognition, and then simply absorbed into the more or less same-as-usual American canon” (5).

As David Hollinger claims, there is a clear link between identity and multiculturalism: “the preferred word in multiculturalist discourse is, of course, identity” (6). However, as he continues, “the concept of identity is more psychological than social, and it can hide the extent to which the achievement of identity is a social process by which a person becomes affiliated with one or more acculturating cohorts” (6). In other words, the idea of identity comes hand in hand with the social condition of culture, or multiple cultures, which is one of the pillars for the definition of a person. Besides, another

significant feature of multiculturalism is the rejection of the *melting pot* notion, by which minority groups, like women or immigrants, must assimilate to the dominant culture and discard their background culture. Instead, multiculturalism emphasizes the fact that minorities should embrace their distinctive and diverse identities for their integration in society (Song).

Multiculturalism has set the path for a new range of works within what is termed Ethnic Fiction, which has increased cultural diversity in the United States. One of the branches of Ethnic literature in the US is Latino/Latina fiction. According to Alicia Borinsky, this type of fiction is characterized by a double vision of two countries, the US and a Latin American country. The United States seems to alienate the characters of the fiction work due to the many cultural differences and, contrastingly, Latin America seems to be remote, an old place to feel nostalgia for. Thus, ordinary experiences in life become affected by a feeling of constant in-betweenness which reflects the struggle of self-definition. Altogether, as John Christie states, “Latino writers are engaged in connecting the pieces of their complicated hybrid lives [...] in order to make sense out of the complexity of their own identities spread out in fragments before them” (3). In formal terms, this type of fiction is often autobiographical and characterized by an “advanced storytelling mode” which is set in a particular time and place. There is a common use of the omniscient narrator that moves away from a “one-dimensional interpretation,” together with multiple characters with complex identities that code-switch between English and Spanish. Besides, the narratives are usually nonlinear and non-chronological, reflecting multiperspectivism and “Latino’s aim to reject the universal” (11-12).

Despite sharing some common features, however, there is a considerable difference between Latino and Latina fiction. Generally, Latino fiction is more individualistic and focuses more on a longing for the past. There is a kind of “nostalgia for the past and the security of tradition” (Christie 17). In contrast, Latina fiction moves beyond borders and focuses on the shaping of identity and self-worth. Moreover, there is more experimentation with the narrative structure in Latina fiction, reflecting the complexity of the protagonists’ hybrid identity (17-18). As Latina literature emphasizes, this sense of being between two cultures often leads to hybridization of identity. Apart from race or ethnicity, other major factors for the construction of identity intersect to influence the shaping of the self. This is undoubtedly the case of gender and social class. In that sense, identity must be defined in relation to other factors, as “speaking of gender

apart from race, class, ethnicity and other divisions is inaccurate and distorting” (Goertz and Mazur 195). This is related to the concept of intersectionality, which “refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions” (Collins 18) and relates identity with factors like gender and class among others: “as opposed to examining gender, race, class and nation, as separate systems of oppression, intersectionality explores how these systems mutually construct one another” (Collins 63). As the following section will show, all these issues are central in the novels *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros, and *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, by Julia Álvarez.

## 3. ANALYSIS

### 3.1 *The House on Mango Street*

#### 3.1.1 Ethnicity as Identity

*The House on Mango Street* tells the story of Esperanza, a Chicana girl, and her family who originally come from Mexico and eventually move to a Hispanic *barrio* in Chicago. The novel is structured into a series of tales about different experiences that allow the reader to get to know a variety of characters through the perspective of Esperanza, the main focalizer and homodiegetic narrator. In that sense, the novel can be considered a series of vignettes that seem to have nothing in common but that are essential to each other for the better understanding of the characters. The characters of the novel are Hispanic in terms of ethnicity. Being in the “in-betweenness” of these two cultural backgrounds is precisely what makes the identity of the characters who have been born and/or raised in the US hybrid.

To begin with, it is worth pointing out that the novel reflects a hierarchical distinction between the two cultural backgrounds—Mexican and American—by which the Mexican influence is subordinated to the US influence, which is mainstream and more socially accepted. Consequently, Esperanza and her family face racial discrimination and stereotypical behaviors from others. As reflected in the content of the novel, Chicanos are considered not only different from the point of view of white Americans, but also inferior. This differentiation and hierarchization is embodied in the concept of the *barrio*, in which Chicanos/as are alienated from white Americans and in a way trapped within their community.

The *barrio* in *The House on Mango Street* is described with negative connotations suggesting that it is dangerous and decayed, full of businesses which are falling apart: “past my house, sad and red crumbly in places, past Mr. Benny’s grocery on the corner, and down the avenue which is dangerous” (16). These descriptions evoke Esperanza’s sense of confinement and suffocation in the *barrio* and explain her desperate wish to leave and have a better life, as we will see shortly. Besides, Esperanza realizes that people who do not live in the *barrio* do not go there because it scares them. The vignette “Those Who Don’t Know,” suggests how people from the *barrio* are treated by white Americans in a stereotypical manner as outsiders and perceived as criminals: “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 this sense, the *barrio* symbolizes alienation and difference, promoting stereotypes and discrimination towards people of Mexican origin.

Language is also important in its connection to ethnicity and identity, as in the novel there seems to be a hierarchization between Spanish, which is secondary, and English. English is perceived as the mainstream language both inside and outside the *barrio*, and people who do not speak it are regarded as either outsiders or as trapped in the memories of their past in Mexico. This is illustrated by “Mamacita,” a woman who never leaves the house, misses Mexico, and refuses to assimilate. It seems that the reason why she never leaves the house is that “she is afraid of English, and maybe this is so since she only speaks eight words” (77). The character of “Mamacita” reflects that abandoning Spanish comes hand in hand with losing a crucial part of her Mexican origin. In fact, she is broken when her child whom she brought from Mexico insists on speaking English: “no speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin” (78). This represents the feeling of dislocation and powerlessness of accepting a life that has nothing to do with one’s cultural background and the violence of the forced need to assimilate. In contrast, it is natural that Mamacita’s son, like Esperanza herself, speaks English, because he has been born in the US where the official language is English. In fact, the novel shows a tension between these two types of characters, the ones who consider English a way to dispose of the Mexican background and assimilate into US culture, and others who naturally speak English as they have been born and/or raised in the US. In fact, the novel is mostly written in English, while Spanish words are also used to reproduce the speech of first-generation immigrants: “Your *abuelito* is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. *Está muerto...*” (56). This reinforces the idea of linguistic superiority of English, which is a crucial part of Chicano/a identity.

Perhaps because of this, the importance of language in connection with ethnicity and identity is also reflected in Esperanza’s wish to change her name. She associates her name with positive connotations when it is translated into English, but with negative ones in Spanish: “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color” (10). To Esperanza, this name that she inherited from her Mexican grandmother, sets her apart because it is a foreign-sounding name. Instead, she would like to be named Lissandra, Maritza or Zeze which are more “like the real me” (11). This new name would represent her dual identity as

Chicana: both American and Latina, while her actual name only reflects her Mexican background. Indeed, the last vignette of the novel reflects Esperanza's desire to leave the *barrio*: "I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong. I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much [...] One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango" (109-110). As this quotation suggests, she does not feel part of the world in Mango Street, in which there are detrimental living conditions and ethnic inferiority felt towards Chicanos/as.

However, the last few words of the book also suggest that she eventually turns back to Mango Street: "They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110), reflecting that she has gone through a process from rejecting Mango Street and all it represents, to accepting her identity. She has escaped Mango Street, but she has not left, she is returning to it through her writing so that she can help those who have no voice (especially women, as it will be seen in the next section). All in all, it can be said that there is a gradual acceptance of the Mexican and the American dimensions of her identity as a Chicana because, "like it or not you are Mango Street" (107). A good example of this is the vignette "Four Skinny Trees": "They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here" (74). This may be interpreted as a metaphor in which the trees convey the importance of not forgetting one's roots and where one belongs. Esperanza aims to have a better life, but she eventually understands that this does not mean rejecting her ethnicity and, consequently, a part of her hybrid identity.

### **3.1.2 Gender as Identity**

Gender is a crucial issue in *The House on Mango Street* as one of the key intersecting dimensions that form the hybrid identity of the narrator and many of the characters. As Maria Ramirez states, "the way women are perceived and treated in Latino(a) culture greatly affects Latina women, especially young Latinas who have a dual identity" (12). As the novel illustrates, being a woman makes it harder to come to terms with hybridity and in-betweenness, because they are exposed to two completely different cultures that constantly contradict one another concerning what is expected of women. In this sense, "women are caught between two different worlds: a liberal world and a conservative one.

In one world, they are encouraged to seek their independence and sexualities while in the other one, they are shamed for those things” (Ramirez 14). This is highlighted in the novel in formal terms as the reader sees everything through the eyes of Esperanza as main focalizer, framing the story within the perspective of a teenage girl who questions the cultural expectations for women of Mexican background.

To begin with, the female characters on Mango Street serve as examples for Esperanza and help shape her gender identity and the path she wants to follow. Esperanza witnesses many Chicanas who have not been able to fulfil their dreams and ambitions, being reduced to marrying young, keeping the house, and having children. Among many, the first one to consider is her “mama,” a traditional woman who, despite being intelligent, decided to marry and never finished school. Another example may be Minerva, a very young woman who, despite her love for poetry, is already married and has two children.

However, there are a few women who act as positive examples for Esperanza about women’s freedom. Although they still suffer the consequences of a chauvinist society, they try to achieve their own independence without the authoritative figure of a man. One example may be Marin, a girl who is staying in the *barrio* with some relatives. Although the narration shows, by prolepsis, that she is not likely to succeed, she wants to get a job and achieve her independence before getting married. Another possible positive example may be Alicia. She lives with a widower father and must take care of the house but she is also receiving a college education to change her life from within, “because she doesn’t want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin” (31-32).

On the other hand, gender oppression is one of the main issues addressed in the novel. Women do not have freedom and are often controlled by a male figure, which is suggested by the symbolism of women looking through the window. One of such women is Esperanza, the narrator’s grandmother: “She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (11). Another example is Rafaela, “who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at. [...] On the corner there is music from the bar, and Rafaela wishes she could go there and dance before she gets old” (79). These examples give Esperanza a clear image of what it is like to be trapped and have no voice. In that sense, the image of the window evokes a jail cell and can be connected to being trapped both in Mango Street and in a misogynist, patriarchal society. Finally, Rafaela’s example also shows that there is a

conflict between women's sexuality and freedom on Mango Street, and also points towards the objectification of women.

In fact, from the very beginning of the story Esperanza becomes aware that "boys and girls live in separate worlds" (8), emphasizing male dominance over women. Despite her youth and innocence, the example of the women of Mango Street allows Esperanza to realize that she would not like to inherit their freedom-less situation as she inherited her grandmother's name: "Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (11). Thus, from a young age, Esperanza is aware of the oppression suffered by women in the *barrio*, which will become one of the reasons why she seeks to escape.

Moreover, there are many instances of gender violence and sexual assault, especially through the character of Sally, who is sexually and physically abused by her father: "he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt. You're not my daughter, you're not my daughter. And then he broke into his hands" (93). Esperanza is also sexually assaulted in the vignette "Red Clowns," which can be considered the peak of gender oppression in the book. She narrates how she is attacked by a boy who calls her "Spanish girl" while Sally is with another boy:

Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me? [...] Sally. You're my friend. But that big boy, where did he take you? (99-100)

All in all, experiences such as these make Esperanza grow from a child that filters reality through fairy tales, to facing the harsh reality for women in the *barrio*, which is marked by gender oppression and violence.

The vignette "A House of My Own" can be considered the culmination of Esperanza's path towards awareness that she wants to escape the situation of gender oppression and violence in the *barrio* to achieve freedom as a woman. This vignette is an intertextual reference to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. This reference symbolizes how women in the *barrio* in general, and Esperanza in particular, need a metaphorical but also physical place in the world for them to progress, be free and have the possibility to fulfil their dreams and ambitions. This sense of growing awareness is represented by the idea of a house that is "not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all

my own” (108), a female space owned by herself that brings a new beginning, a new identity.

From vignette thirty-five onwards, Esperanza looks for an exit, a feminist solution to her problems, which will be becoming a writer:

I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. [...] I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (88-89)

All in all, as Liu Caihong explains, women’s experiences seen through Esperanza’s eyes show how her sense of gender identity and her focus on writing are both rooted in her awareness of a male-dominated Mexican American community, which explains her desire, as a future writer, to give voice to those oppressed women and pursue freedom through writing (761). In fact, it is very significant to notice that the book is dedicated “to the women”/ “a las mujeres,” and through its structure as a collection of vignettes it reflects a variety of women’s lives as a tapestry of events that contribute to shaping Esperanza’s identity.

### **3.1.3 Social Class as Identity**

Class is another important factor for identity formation in *The House on Mango Street*. Esperanza and her family are poor and live in houses that do not fit their standards. Before buying the house on Mango Street, the family lived in several apartments under very harsh living conditions. Indeed, throughout the first vignettes, it can be seen how Esperanza is ashamed of her social situation, and others contribute to Esperanza’s shame and disdain for an apartment that is a clear image of their poorness: “You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there. I nodded” (5). In fact, as Ramirez explains “many Latino(a) children come from impoverished homes. Although they are very young, they know that they do not have the same advantages and opportunities that the rest of America has. Finding themselves in neighborhoods that reflect their socioeconomic status, they come across prejudice and racism” (13). In other words, the impoverished situation of the family influences the prejudices and mistreatment they suffer.

Even after they manage to buy a house for the family, their house on Mango Street reflects the limitations of a Chicano family as members of a minority and as the lower class in the US. Indeed, *The House on Mango Street* also shows the unrealistic expectations of the American dream in terms of social status. Esperanza's parents are hardworking people who are nevertheless unable to make enough money to achieve better living conditions. As they have a low socioeconomic status, they find no other solution than moving to Mango Street, which fits their economic possibilities and allows them to live in considerably better conditions than before: "The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody, or share the yard with people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise and there isn't a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom" (3). However, even though the moment they arrive at the house should have been a moment of celebration, it turns into a moment of disappointment for Esperanza, because "it's not the house we'd thought we'd get" (3). In fact, there seems to be a clear gap between the opportunities of the middle class shown on TV and the situation of Esperanza's family and the rest of the Chicano/Latino people in the *barrio*. Thus, Esperanza's family exemplifies the cruelty behind the unfulfilled dreams that are promised in the US. In that sense, the house acts as a symbol not only of their poverty, but also of the (failed) American dream. Nonetheless, as stated before, eventually the symbolism of the house changes as Esperanza grows. It not only turns into a feminist space where she can write, but, also into a generous house that she will share with others: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house" (87).

The issue of poverty is also addressed in the vignettes through the references to the different struggles about basic human necessities like food or clothes in the *barrio*. This is reflected in the description of the kids whose "clothes are crooked and old," who wear "shiny Sunday shoes without socks" (14-15), or when Esperanza had a baptism party and she tried to forget she was not wearing the "appropriate shoes," but "ordinary shoes, brown and white, the kind my mother buys each year for school" (47). It is also pointed out how there is a difference between "the special kids, the ones who wear keys around their necks" and that "get to eat in the canteen," and Esperanza, who attempted to eat her rice packed lunch at the canteen once and was watched by the other kids while she cried, "the bread already greasy and the rice cold" (45). In fact, the effect of poverty is also

shown in the fact that Esperanza's family does not have money to buy lunch meat, enhancing an image of poverty and food insecurity. This situation forces Esperanza to lie about her age in order to get a job and be able to help her family financially. Thus, the novel reflects how the protagonist and narrator struggles growing up in the lower class in the US, showing how everything, she expected is part of a dream that is unrealistic. There is a constant feeling of being trapped in the *barrio*, where the future possibilities of their inhabitants are limited by their social status and marked by the impossibility of having a better life despite working hard.

## ***3.2 How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents***

### **3.2.1 Ethnicity as Identity**

The García girls, Yolanda, Sofía, Sandra and Carla, move to New York with their parents to find shelter against political uncertainty in the 1950s Dominican Republic. As a result, they encounter a clash between two different cultural systems: the modern world that the US represents, and the cultural background they have from the Dominican Republic. From the very beginning, the experiences that result from the four sisters' ethnicity are presented in full detail. This is achieved thanks to the novel's shifting focalization (through the four sisters) and alternating narrative voice, which changes from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic and omniscient between and within chapters. This allows the reader to access the experiences of the four sisters one by one and all together at the same time, which creates a sense of individuality while also pointing at their collective experience. In this sense, we follow their journey from childhood to adulthood as they grow up while accustoming themselves to their new life in the US.

To begin with, throughout the novel, there is a clear sense of ethnic loss because of emigration, until at the end of the process the girls seem to have assimilated into US culture and abandoned their Hispanic background. This is very much reflected in the structure of the novel, as the story is told in reverse chronological order. Part one is mostly about representing how the girls are "Americanized" young adults and suffer a cultural clash while visiting the Dominican Republic, while parts two and three deal with the girls' childhood in the Dominican Republic and their forced remove to the US.

Language is one of the main issues that reflect the struggle resulting from hybrid identity because of ethnicity. During their childhood, the girls are shown to feel displaced due to their inability to speak English properly. Yolanda, for example, feels alienated at school because of it: “As the only immigrant in my class, I was put in a special seat in the first row by the window, apart from the other children so that Sister Zoe could tutor me without disturbing them” (166). Thus, language constitutes a barrier between Yolanda and the rest of the students. Due to her ethnic background and speaking Spanish, she is separated from the rest of the class, highlighting the fact that she is different from them and categorized as the other. Language is also a symbol of inferiority for Carla, who is bullied at school due to her accent and her struggle with English: “‘Stop!’ Carla cried. ‘Please stop.’ ‘Eh-stop!’ they mimicked her. ‘Plees eh-stop’” (153). As this quotation suggests, her strong Spanish accent reinforces the idea of difference and alienation, stressing the fact that she is a foreigner. What is more, the lack of vocabulary in English is portrayed as an impediment for the girls to communicate properly and assert their personality.

However, as they grow up, the girls start using English to communicate, which reflects their assimilation into US culture. This is especially emphasized in the case of Yolanda when she goes back to the Dominican Republic as an adult. In this sense, the first chapter of the novel, “Antojos,” symbolizes her final assimilation into the US mainstream culture: when she gets a flat tire and needs to ask for help, she struggles to speak in Spanish and eventually decides to act as an “Americana”: “she begins to speak, English, a few words, of apology at first, then a great flood of explanation . . .” (20). This suggests that Yolanda feels more comfortable by assuming the identity of someone from the US, as Dominican people do not expect her to speak in Spanish properly, which is ironic because the purpose of the trip was to assert her Dominican identity. After all, like the title of the novel suggests, Álvarez depicts the process of “how the García Girls lost their accents.”

Indeed, it is interesting to see that after their struggle to assimilate in the US, when they do come back to the Dominican Republic, they have the same problem in reverse. It seems that, at different points they have had a feeling of displacement from both the US and the Dominican Republic, which highlights how their identity has changed in response to the cultural influences they have been exposed to. The emphasis is on the girls’ in-betweenness. In fact, Yolanda believes that she will be misunderstood because of her dual

cultural influences: “I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who could understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles” (99). In this sense, there is an interiorization that there is a struggle due to a dual identity, suggesting that this is something considered socially problematic.

This is not surprising since, as previously advanced, the novel brings to the fore the marginalization and racial stereotyping that the García family struggles with while living in the US. Hispanic immigrants in the novel are treated as inferior because of their different origins. The oldest sister, Carla, is frequently the object of racial discrimination at school, where some of the classmates tell her to “go back to where you came from, you dirty spic” (153). The use of the term “spic,” a racial slur to refer to Hispanic people, highlights a sense of difference, while the idea of “going back to where you come from” reinforces that she does not belong to US society, that she is an outsider. In addition, the novel reflects how some white people judge the family based on stereotypical arguments:

The old woman in the apartment below [...] had been complaining to the super since the day the family moved in a few months ago. The Garcías should be evicted. Their food smelled. They spoke too loudly and not in English. The kids sounded like a herd of wild burros. (170)

Apart from taking issue with the family’s use of Spanish, which as has just been discussed is perceived as a marker of inferiority and otherness, this quotation reflects how Hispanic people are stereotyped as loud, and even animalized.

Thus, the fact that the girls have been exposed to negative representations of Hispanic culture explains their forced assimilation, as they have been raised in a context where everything related to the country in which they were born is seen as negative, while all that is related to US (white) culture is better considered and more socially accepted. Maybe because of this Laura, the mother, and the girls show internalized racism. This is reflected, for instance, when they feel extremely proud of having a Swedish son/brother-in-law thanks to whom Sofia’s baby has light skin. Similarly, Sandra’s blue eyes are a source of joy and pride for her parents and sisters: “The mother spread her arms in all directions to show how pretty and pale and blue-eyed the girl was” (52). In short, even without being consciously aware of it, the family also reflect the consequences of white supremacy and the social inferiority of Hispanic people in comparison to the US-born,

which complicates the shaping of the Gracia girls' identity and their coming to terms with their in-betweenness.

### 3.2.2 Gender as Identity

Throughout the novel, the García girls are confronted with problems related to gender and sexuality. On the one hand, many of the struggles that the García girls go through on account of their gender often emerge from the contrast between the arguably more conservative gender values of their Dominican upbringing and the presumably more tolerant cultural norms of the US. As Maria Ramirez explains, there are many things that are more acceptable and adequate in the US than in the Dominican Republic (16). Cultural difference in connection to gender is embodied by the girls' mother Laura, who like her husband Carlos, is more connected to the island's traditional culture. Laura, in this case, reflects a very conventional way of thinking about women's sexuality. This is highlighted in the chapter "A Regular Revolution," in which Yolanda brings a book called *Our Bodies, Our Selves* to the house:

Mami couldn't quite put her finger on what it was that bothered her about the book. I mean, there were no men in it. The pictures all celebrated women and their bodies, so it wasn't technically about sex as she had understood it up to then. But there were women exploring "what their bodies were all about" [...]. Things, Mami said, examining the pictures, to be ashamed of. (110)

*Our Bodies Our Selves* is a book on women's health published by Nancy Hawley in 1970 that, according to Susan Wells, can be considered an "allegory of the second-wave women's movement" (1). The fact that Laura despises this feminist book and does not allow the girls to read it reflects her traditional mindset about women's behavior. Besides, the quotation above reflects how there are taboo topics for Laura, in this case, sex. All this shows that the way she is raising the girls fits the standards of the Dominican Republic and the patriarchal system established there, by which women should be submissive and chaste.

In fact, the novel shows that before moving to the US, and when they return to the Dominican Republic, the girls live in a world where the norm is to see women submit to men. This is reflected by Sofia and her Dominican boyfriend Manuel:

We begin to get the long view, and it's not so pretty. Lovable Manuel is quite the tyrant, a mini Papi and Mami rolled into one. Fifi can't wear pants in public. Fifi

can't talk to another man, Fifi can't leave the house without his permission. And what's most disturbing is that Fifi, feisty, lively Fifi, is letting this man tell her what she can and cannot do. (120)

After being sent back "home" by her parents for her wild (Americanized) behavior, this quotation suggests that Sofía seems to have become another person; she is not the Sofía that she was in the US or the one she would become when she is older. This Sofía seems to be less independent and subjected to the socially accepted superior role of men. Besides, the gender role that she assumes in the Dominican Republic comes with a change in her appearance, which is now "hyperfeminine" as she wears a lot of make-up, always has her hair done and tries to look "perfect" (117).

In contrast to this, another interesting aspect to discuss is the clash between the girl's traditional (and Catholic) upbringing and the expectations for young women in the US. For instance, Yolanda has problems with her sexual awakening when she grows up, as her first boyfriend seems to be very disappointed because she refuses sex. One day, he goes to her house with one mission: "Let's just fuck" (103). Yolanda narrates these experiences as such:

Catholic or not, I still thought it a sin for a guy to just barge in five years later with a bottle of expensive wine and assume you'd drink out of his hand. A guy who had ditched me, who had haunted my sexual awakening with a nightmare of self-doubt. (103)

Regardless of her Catholic background, Yolanda wants to be appreciated as a woman without the necessity of having sex; but at the same time, she finds herself trapped by the mystery of Rudy and the pleasure of sex that he offers.

On the other hand, the novel also brings to the fore the universal experiences of gender oppression and violence to which women are exposed within patriarchal societies, including the US. Carla, for example, reflects on how she struggles with the changes in her body during adolescence, like growing breasts and body hair. What is more, she suffers a sexual assault: a man in a green car approaches her and she notices that he is naked and masturbating. Carla seems to be paralyzed and unable to make a sound because of the shock. This terrifying event makes her feel more vulnerable and afraid of her body changes, perhaps as they in a way announce her entrance into adulthood as a woman and the potential threats that she will be exposed to because of this.

However, the novel also shows how the girls rebel and seek freedom. Yolanda, for example, shows a defiant attitude towards gender oppression. This is reflected in the

chapter “The Human Body,” in which Yolanda tries to exchange toys with her cousin Mundín, and he demands: “Show me you’re a girl” (233). After many impatient orders—“go on,” and “take them down” (234)—Yolanda eventually obeys: “I gave my cousin a defiant look as I lifted up my cowboy skirt, tucked it under my chin, and yanked my panties down” (235). His expectation that she will do as he tells her shows that Mundín is in a more powerful position, both in the trade of toys and, more importantly, as a man in the Dominican culture. However, Yolanda’s attitude manages to subvert the hierarchy when she yells, and we learn that “Now it was Mundín’s face that was naked with worry. ‘Come on, please’, he pleaded with me [...] I tortured him with a long slow moment of consideration, then nodded. He fled out of the shed in search of his toy” (235). In this moment, it is Yolanda who seems to be in a superior position that even makes him run away.

Another example of resistance and emancipation on the part of the García girls can be seen in Sofía. Even though she is also a victim of gender oppression, she rejects the Dominican view on sex and marriage and other women’s expectations. She has sex before marriage, has many boyfriends and, despite being the first one with kids and in a considerably stable relationship, she challenges gender standards that are more rooted in the Dominican culture, becoming an independent woman. This behavior causes her to clash with her father Carlos, who has a contrary view of the expectations for women. Among the many things done to gain her independence, Sofía decides to move away far from her parents to escape from their domination, especially from Carlos, something he considers shameful and disgraceful. Besides, the novel portrays how she uses her sexuality against the traditional sexist perspective of her father to try to assert her independence, while also refusing to feel ashamed for her choices.

### **3.2.3 Social Class as Identity**

Another key element shaping the García girls’ identity is social class, once again in terms of the contrast between their lives before migrating to the US and once they start their lives in the new country. Mainly, the novel reflects that the family was used to an advantaged social class and that this completely changes when they move to the US. The extended García family are very wealthy and live extremely privileged lives. Their privilege and economic power are emphasized, first and foremost, by the army of

servants, maids, cooks, attendants, and chauffeurs at their disposal. Besides, there are other signs of their high status, such as the compound on which all the extended family lives: “The cousins will disperse down these paths to their several compound houses. There they will supervise their cooks in preparing supper for their husbands” (7). All this suggests that the Garcías are a wealthy family who live luxuriously and comfortably.

Additionally, it seems that the García family are very much aware of their privileged living conditions within the Dominican Republic and contribute to a hierarchization between themselves and people who are less economically affluent: “I’m alarmed, you know, the ways things are, a big car stalled in the middle of the university *barrio*” (5; italics in the original). In this quotation by “Tía Flor,” the word *barrio* seems to not simply mean “neighbourhood,” but for her it clearly has negative connotations connecting it to poverty, isolation and low-class. Besides, the fact that she is “alarmed” promotes the stereotype of the lower classes being dangerous. In relation to this, the novel also shows how the Garcías use their privileged status to their convenience. In the chapter titled “The Blood of the Conquistadores,” which evokes the family’s almost aristocratic and privileged status on the island, we see how problems are arising due the family’s implication in the dangerous political environment of the Dominican Republic. As the secret police arrives to question her husband, Laura uses the eloquent and grand manners that characterize the high social class to distract them: “‘By all means, wait for him, but please not under this hot sun.’ Laura switches into her grand manner. The grand manner will usually disarm these poor lackeys from the countryside, who have joined the SIM” (201).

However, there is an appreciable difference when the family—Carlos, Laura and the four girls—are forced to move to the US, leaving their high social status behind. Indeed, the novel emphasizes the contrast between their former lives as members of the privileged class on the island and their new lower social status in the US. This difference is already seen in the very first chapter “Antojos,” when the Americanized Yolanda visits the Dominican Republic. The clothes she wears reveal the change in the social scale, as she “sees herself as they will, shabby in a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet, her wild black hair held back with a hairband” (3). Moreover, her cousins compare her appearance to that of a missionary (4).

The novel also shows how the life of the García girls changes drastically when they move to the US: their houses are smaller, the clothes are no longer extravagant and

there are no luxuries: “We had only second-hand stuff, rental houses in one red neck Catholic neighborhood after another, clothes at Round Robin, a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines. Cooped up within those little suburban houses” (107). It seems that the loss of status and wealth influences the challenges and struggles of the García girls in the US. They no longer enjoy the social prestige which had enabled them to have an innocent and careless childhood. When they move, they must adapt to the condition of being an immigrant from a lower status. For instance, the girls feel embarrassed because of their old clothing, for which they are mocked, in comparison to the trendy clothes of their classmates. This shows the struggle to adapt to a new social class, which causes them to experience shame and embarrassment, in stark contrast to their previous life.

All in all, by considering the difficult trajectory of the girls from a privileged social class in the Dominican Republic, to the lower class and eventually to the middle class in the US, the novel seems to suggest that class hierarchies are just a construct that can change and does not define a person, although it does affect the shaping of one’s identity. The girls were born to an upper-class family but were mainly raised in the struggling conditions of a migrant family with less economic power. For this reason, they had to suffer the consequences of financial struggles, which are even more strongly felt due to having been accustomed to certain luxuries and privileges of the high social position they had in the Dominican Republic.

## 4. CONCLUSION

As discussed before, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Álvarez deal with the struggles of the female protagonists in the process of growing up between two different, and sometimes contrary, cultures—the US, and Mexico/the Dominican Republic respectively—which determines their experiences regarding ethnicity, gender, and class. Thus, the novels allow us to see how the intersections of ethnicity, gender and social class contribute to the formation of the characters' hybrid and complex identity.

In relation to ethnicity, both novels portray how Latin backgrounds are considered inferior to US culture by white Americans. In *The House on Mango Street*, Mexican influence is subordinated to the dominant US culture, causing Esperanza and her family to face racial discrimination. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* depicts a similar clash between the modern US world and the traditional life of the Dominican Republic, reflecting how the García girls grow up feeling more comfortable with US culture over time. In both novels, language underscores this cultural hierarchy: English is mainstream, while Spanish is secondary and associated with being an outsider and the feeling of otherness. Characters in *The House on Mango Street* struggle with the tension between shedding their Mexican identity though English and naturally speaking it due to their US upbringing. Similarly, in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, the inability to speak English creates a feeling of displacement, leading the García sisters to wish to escape from the negative ideas associated to their Hispanic background. When they return to the Dominican Republic, the feeling of non-belonging is also presented due to their assimilation into US culture. Yet, eventually, Esperanza and the García sisters acknowledge and embrace their hybrid identities despite feeling more comfortable with the US one.

In terms of gender, *The House on Mango Street* depicts women striving for independence from subordination to men. Most of them are controlled by a male figure, which brings to the fore a clash between women's sexuality and their quest for freedom. In a similar way, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* contrasts the conservative gender values of the Dominican Republic with the apparently more tolerant US ideals. However, before and after moving to the US, the García girls experience gender oppression, illustrating the struggle of women in patriarchal societies, including the US.

In that sense, both novels also reflect on the pervasiveness of gender violence and on the need for women to seek emancipation. Esperanza embodies the dream of escaping sexism and violence in the vignette “A House of My Own,” referencing Virginia Woolf’s feminist work *A Room of One’s Own*. The García girls also show examples of rejecting traditional Dominican values on women as acts of emancipation, while the novel also establishes intertextual connections with a feminist book.

Regarding class, in *The House on Mango Street*, impoverished houses and neighborhoods are linked to racism and prejudice due to people in the *barrio*’s low socioeconomic status despite their hard work, highlighting the lie that the American Dream represents. This is evident in the struggles for appropriate housing and basic needs, and it is also brought to the fore by the difference established between impoverished children like Esperanza and the “special kids” in school. The García family in Álvarez’s novel also experiences prejudice due to their lower status once they move to the US, which contrasts their advantaged social class in the Dominican Republic. Moreover, their previous wealth affects the girls’ struggles, as they lose the social prestige that afforded a carefree and innocent childhood. In these terms, the sisters, like Esperanza, feel shame and embarrassment due to their social status in comparison to the rest of their classmates’ privileges. Like this, both novels reflect upon the prejudices and struggles associated with belonging to a lower social class.

All things considered, the two novels bring to the fore the importance of rich and nuanced explorations of immigrant experiences told from a female perspective, which draw attention to the complex process of growing up while adjusting to life within two cultural backgrounds, to often contradictory gender norms and circumstances, and to adverse socio-economic conditions. *The House on Mango Street* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* allow readers to understand the challenges of assimilation from a female point of view. The experiences of Esperanza, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofía illustrate the arduous process of shaping one’s identity as Latina and American working-class girls in the US. With these two novels, both Sandra Cisneros and Julia Álvarez make important contributions to the field of Latina Literature, by demonstrating the complexity of growing up while navigating intersecting struggles because of one’s ethnicity, gender and class.

## WORKS CITED

- Borinsky, Alicia. *Latino/Latina Fiction in America*. Oxford University Press, 2017.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.766>
- Caufield, Carlota and Darién Davis. *A Companion to US Latino Literatures*. Woodbridge, 2007.
- Christie, John S. *Latino Fiction and the Modernist Imagination*. Routledge, 2014.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.
- Finkelman, Paul, *Encyclopedia of American Civil Liberties*, vol. 1 A-F. Routledge, 2006.
- Goertz, Gary and Amy G. Mazur. *Politics, Gender, and Concepts*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Hollinger, David. *Post Ethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. Basic Books, 2006.
- Kevane, Bridget and Juanita Heredia. *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers*. University of New Mexico Press, 2000.
- Lee, Robert. *Multicultural American Literature Comparative Black, Native, Latino Bados and Asian American Fictions*. Edinburgh University Press, 2003.
- Liu, Caihong. *From Fleeing to Returning: Analysis of The House on Mango Street from the Perspective of Identity*. Atlantis Press, 2019.  
<https://doi.org/10.2991/cesses-19.2019.172>
- Miller, T. Douglass and Marion Nowak. *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*. Doubleday & Company, 1997.
- Ramirez, Maria D. *An Exploration of Dual Identity in Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street*. PhD Dissertation, Governors State University, 2015.  
<https://opus.govst.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1068&context=theses>
- Song, Sarah. *Multiculturalism*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/multiculturalism/> Accessed 20 Mar. 2024.
- Wells, Susan. "Our Bodies, Ourselves: Reading the Written Body." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol.33, no.3, 2008.