

CHICANO MASCULINITY IN ALBERTO URREA'S *THE HOUSE OF BROKEN ANGELS*

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ABSTRACT

The term machismo, originating from Chicano culture, refers to the construction of masculinity among Chicano men. The Chicano identity itself emerged from the migration of Mexicans to the United States, a process that began with the shifting of the border between Mexico and the U.S. This historical context gave rise to a new cultural identity, including a distinctive form of machismo among Chicano men. This study aims to analyze the representation of machismo in Chicano men as depicted in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The House of Broken Angels*. To conduct the analysis, the study employs Bacca Zinn's theory to

explore the meaning of machismo in Chicano culture alongside Stuart Hall's theory of representation. Methodologically, this research applies a descriptive qualitative approach using library research, with data drawn from the novel's narration and dialogues. The findings suggest that *The House of Broken Angels* portrays Chicano machismo as rooted in traditional Mexican masculinity while simultaneously reflecting the cultural identity of Chicano men.

Keywords: Chicano; masculinity; machismo; representation; patriarchal

Introduction

The Chicano group originated from the Mexican community that became part of the United States in 1848 after a change in borders due to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war between Mexico and the United States (Acuna, 2004). This treaty caused nearly two-thirds of Mexico's territory to be included in the territory of the United States, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. As a result, Mexicans who previously had Mexican citizenship changed their status to U.S. citizens. These changes affected the identity and social life of the Chicano community as new citizens in the country. In addition to changing the border, the existence of the Chicano community was also strengthened by the phenomenon of massive migration. In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, approximately 38 million people migrated to the United States from Europe, Mexico, Asia, and the Middle East (Advani & Reich, 2015). The migration of Mexicans takes place both legally and illegally, in various ways such as crossing through official gates, using planes, and smuggling through border fences. Their main motivation is to seek a better life and future. Not infrequently, family members like fathers choose to settle for many years in the United States, even without certainty when they can return to their homeland (Advani & Reich, 2015).

In this context, Chicano identity is shaped not only by ethnic factors, but also by the social and cultural experiences that take place in American society. One of the important aspects of the discussion of Chicano identity is masculinity. In contrast to biological gender, masculinity is a social and cultural construct that shapes identity, power relations, and gender roles (Patten, 2018). Connell (2005) explains that masculinity is not a fixed trait, but rather a practice and

position in gender relations. Furthermore, Connell developed a theory of *gender order* that recognizes the existence of various forms of masculinity that vary according to time, culture, and individual (Wedgwood, 2009). Thus, masculinity is not only understood as a personal identity, but also as a political and cultural marker that is closely related to dominance and social hierarchy (Lennes, 2020).

Machismo as a cultural construct plays a major role in the Latino family, where it is associated with the values of familismo, personalismo, simpatía, respeto, and caballerismo that shape the father's parenting style (Mogro-Wilson & Cifuentes, 2021). Ethnic identity has been shown to be able to lower the level of machismo while countering the colonial mentality in Puerto Rican society (Colom Cruz et al., 2024), while in literary works it appears through excessive masculinity and womanizing which is criticized as a toxic form of masculinity (Supiastutik, Rakhman, & Anam, 2022).

In Latino veterans, machismo interacts with military identity and masculinity, reinforcing experiences of illness and PTSD (Cancio, 2020). In the Chicano context in the United States, machismo is understood as a twofold: as a symbol of ethnic resistance as well as criticized by Chicano feminists for reinforcing patriarchy and oppressing vulnerable groups.

The issue can be found in one of the novels from Chicano literary works. The story about Chicano is found in the novel *The House of Broken Angel*. This novel centers on the life of Big Angel. The story begins with Big Angel waking up late to his mother's funeral, at that time Big Angel is ill and also his wife, Perla and Minnie his daughter cared for him.

When he comes to the funeral many problems come to his face, like his sister MaryLu and her sister in law called Paz have an ongoing feud. Then many of Big Angel's relatives come to the funeral, but Big Angel's little brother named Little Angel seems not to know much about his relatives. One night Big Angel remembers the story of a border crossing act into the United States of America to make a new better life, he also recites his father's bad manners and his love. Don Segundo is what he called his father, his father left him and his family just for a Caucasian wife in Tijuana. This novel focuses on the character of Big Angel who reflects the figure of Chicano men in the United States of America.

Finally, the author chose the novel *The House of Broken Angels* because it reflects the diverse representation of Chicano men in the United States, especially through its main character, Big Angel, whose struggle, dedication, and determination even to be recognized by whites demonstrates a unique form of Chicano masculinity. Contemporary literature shows how masculinity and machismo are understood differently by Latinos as they enter middle age, with roles as breadwinners, protectors, and heads of families remaining dominant, but views on gender becoming more flexible over time (Valdez et al., 2023). Complementing this perspective, contemporary research shows how machismo changes over time and cultural contexts for example, Hispanics who live long periods in the U.S. show higher machismo scores than newcomers (Rubenstein et al., 2024). On the other hand, it's not just a pattern of power, a form of caballerismo, masculinity that emphasizes honor and solidarity, can reduce the tendency to abuse steroids among Latino sexual minority men (Peralta & Zamboanga, 2020). Thus, this novel becomes a door to understand cultural norms, values, and the formation of social identity in modern society. It is hoped that this research can help readers understand the culture of the United States and Chicano masculinity as represented in *The House of Broken Angels*.

This study is conducted because the researcher believes that it is important to bring the discussion of social issue portrayal in literary work, or specifically novels. As an imaginative written work, literature is able to develop the story to get closer to reality. In other words, though it is a fictive work, literature is still able to play a role as the reflection of the real world (Davidsen, 2018). Considering that, the writer conducts this study to see how the unsettling social case in the real world is portrayed in the literary work. Additionally, the novel is chosen because the novel has considerable length and complexity that can deal with the imaginative experience of humans. Considering that, the writer believes that a novel is a perfect object to be discussed in a study that aims to reveal the issue of the real world.

In a broader perspective, the representation of Chicano masculinity in *The House of Broken Angels* can also be read as part of the cultural negotiation that takes place within diasporic communities. The novel illustrates how Chicano men must navigate multiple and sometimes conflicting expectations: maintaining traditional values rooted in Mexican heritage while simultaneously adapting to the demands of American society. This duality is not merely an individual struggle but also a collective process that affects family structures, intergenerational relations, and community solidarity. Big Angel's life story, with its emphasis on family, responsibility, and resilience in the face of illness and social challenges, demonstrates how Chicano masculinity is both contested and reconstructed across time and context. Furthermore, the novel highlights the emotional dimension of masculinity, showing that strength is not only about authority and dominance but also about vulnerability, care, and the ability to sustain relationships. In this sense, *The House of Broken Angels* provides readers with a nuanced portrayal of Chicano identity that resists simplistic stereotypes and opens up discussions about how masculinity can evolve in response to cultural hybridity and transnational experiences. This makes the novel not only a literary work but also a cultural text that bridges fiction and social reality.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method and it aims to delineate Chicano masculinity in *The House of Broken Angel*. The qualitative method aims at understanding and describing (Kasih, 2018). Additionally, the qualitative method is chosen because this study aims to explore a particular phenomenon (i.e. Chicano masculinity in a novel). The SALLS Vol. 2 No. 1 April | ISSN 3064-2019 © (2025) Gusti Nyoman Adiatma Wiguna. Published by Research Centre for Language, Literature, and Community. This is an open access article CC BY-SA license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>). |

descriptive qualitative method also allowed the researcher to provide the data in the form of narrations and dialogues. Qualitative descriptive method is a research method that describes and qualifies scientific data that are related to each other so that they can be compiled into a scientific and objective conclusion. This method also aims to accurately describe or explain the facts being investigated. The data source of this study was *The House of Broken Angels* novel as the main data source, while data were taken from narration and dialogues as the primary data from the novel. The writer also employed several sources, journals, and papers as supporting ideas. Through data, the writer can gain the information and it can help the writer reach the research objective (Mertania & Amelia, 2020).

In this part, in collecting the data, the writer needs several steps to do.. First the writer read *The House of Broken Angels*, and understood all the aspects that related to Chicano masculinity. The writer took notes on which part has a related issue. The writer started to separate and confirm the data. Therefore, it made the writer easier to understand the point. The writer specified the data based on the issues and based on the structure of the story such as plot, characters and setting. The last writer filed the data for analysis needed. After collecting all the data, the writer made the list and classified the data for the research. The data are analyzed by using the theory to answer the research question.. Thus, the writer does several steps in analyzing the data, classifying step, interpreting step, analyzing step, evaluating system and concluding step. In analyzing the data, the writer also employed Stuart Hall's representation theories (Hall, 2003).

Result

The result will be divided into three categories based on Bacca Zinn theory. Chicano masculinity believes that the differences as explained in Chicano masculinity were formed by the cultural differences and major determinants of gender. Masculinity in Chicano culture usually refers to machismo which can be defined as a strong or exaggerated sense of manliness; an assumptive attitude that virility, courage, strength, and entitlement to dominate are attributes or concomitants of masculinity. There is machismo or can be defined as a strong or exaggerated sense of manliness, a high sex drive, and patriarchal authoritarianism. The analysis will be in the form of description of quotations and narrations. This novel delineates many male characters as masculine figures. However, the focus of this research is the character of Big Angel. The complete masculine figure of the male character in this novel.

In examining Big Angel as the central figure, it is important to emphasize that his masculinity is not constructed in isolation but through constant negotiation with cultural, familial, and social expectations. His role as the head of the family illustrates the embodiment of traditional machismo, where authority and responsibility are inseparable. At the same time, the narrative reveals how his aging body and declining health complicate this ideal, highlighting the vulnerability hidden beneath the surface of power. Thus, the representation of Big Angel demonstrates that Chicano masculinity is dynamic, shaped by the intersection of strength, obligation, and mortality.

Machismo as the Core of Chicano Masculinity

Chicano masculinity is thoroughly related to the idea of *machismo*, which is a form of masculinity that is exaggerated and demonstrated through courage, masculinity, physical strength, and authority to dominate. In the novel *The House of Broken Angels* by Luis Alberto Urrea, this cultural construction is manifested through the figure of Big Angel, who tries hard to present himself as a strong and honorable figure, even when he is in a fragile state. For Big Angel, masculinity is not just a matter of personal pride, but also a cultural demand, he must maintain family dignity and represent a formidable image of a Chicano man. At his mother's funeral, Big Angel's *machismo* side is clearly depicted. Despite his illness and physical exhaustion, he refused to appear weak in front of his family and community. "Everybody else would be there before him. No. Not this. Not today." (Urrea, 2018, p. 11). This fragment of text shows how masculine pride drove Big Angel to transcend his physical limitations. For him, weakness is unacceptable, especially in an important ritual like the funeral of his mother. His refusal to show up late or show vulnerability became a kind of symbolic display of his role as patriarch and eldest son in the family.

The concept of *machismo* in Latin American culture has multiple meanings. On the surface, *machismo* emphasizes excessive masculinity, physical strength, and male authority. But on deeper layers, *machismo* also serves as a mask to mask vulnerability, insecurity, or helplessness. Men are required to display dominance and control, even when they are actually struggling personally. In this context, Big Angel's determination to be present at funerals and her refusal to cry show that Chicano masculinity often serves as a shield, shielding men from weak views, while also trapping them in rigid cultural expectations.

Urrea affirms this cultural claim through another quote when Big Angel says, "I am going to miss Mamá's funeral, " he told the universe. I never cry," he announced, his eyes bright with hard light. (Urrea, 2018). The expression "I never cry" shows that emotional control is an integral part of Big Angel's identity as a Chicano male. The absence of tears is not just a personal attitude, but a broader cultural reflection that masculinity is understood as strength, constancy, and control over feelings. Even in an atmosphere of grief, Big Angel rejects vulnerability and turns grief into a form of silent

constancy.

In addition, Urrea also portrays Big Angel as a good father figure as well as a devoted son, two roles that further affirm his masculine identity. His decision to remain present at his mother's funeral despite his illness shows loyalty and respect for his cultural heritage, as well as his responsibility to his family. His struggle to get out of bed, which is depicted in physical detail "*The sheets catching his feet in a tangle. Sweat tickled his sides as he realized what was happening*" (Urrea, 2018, p.11) emphasizing the tension between the body's limitations and its determination to embody masculine power. Through the character of Big Angel, Urrea presents Chicano masculinity as something dual: both empowering and a burden. On the one hand, *machismo* gives Big Angel dignity, authority, and respect in their families and communities. But on the other hand, it demands self-denial, forcing it to hide vulnerability and suffering. Thus, *machismo* in *The House of Broken Angels* It is not presented as a simple celebration of male dominance, but rather as a complex cultural code of an identity that at the same time empowers and enforces silence.

Masculinity in Family and Social Roles

In the Chicano world, masculinity is understood not only as a distinctive peculiarity of men, but also as a social and cultural construct that is inherited across generations. This concept is faithfully related to *machismo*, a value that accentuates courage, physical strength, authority, and the obligation of men to maintain the honor of family and community. In many cases, Chicano masculinity not only becomes a personal identity, but also serves as a symbol of resistance to American cultural hegemony and as a form of preserving tradition. In other words, being a man in Chicano culture means assuming a great social responsibility: protecting families, displaying courage, while maintaining their cultural dignity.

In the novel *The House of Broken Angels*, Luis Alberto Urrea depicts how Chicano masculinity manifests in family and social roles, specifically through the figure of the Big Angel. As the eldest child as well as the head of the family, Big Angel is seen not only as a protector and provider, but also as a contradictory representation of Chicano masculinity—between pride, dominance, and the burden of responsibility. Big Angel's role as the eldest son and patriarch of the family is very prominent in portraying *machismo* in family dynamics. As a protector and provider, he was seen as a heroic figure by his wife, Perla. "*Big Angel was her hero. She did not know his heroism was fueled by fuming rage. He fought anyone who insulted her or her children.*" (Urrea, 2018, p.40). This quote shows that Chicano masculinity not only serves as a symbol of courage and protection, but is also often accompanied by anger and the impulse to maintain self-esteem. As the head of the family, Big Angel is respected, but his authority also often seems in the form of symbolic dominance that confirms distance from his family members.

On many occasions, Big Angel was perceived as a person who distanced himself from the roots of Chicano culture. Some of his families even reflect him wanting to become a "*gringo*," a term used pejoratively to refer to outsiders. "*Big Angel wants to be a gringo, they said in their richly rewarding family sessions of *tijereando*.*" (Urrea, 2018, p.17). This assumption emphasizes that Chicano masculinity is not only built through protective roles and responsibilities, but also through pride, dominance, and the tension between tradition and assimilation. With his wealth, Big Angel was considered to be beyond his brothers, so he was accused of violating communal identity. This reflects that Chicano masculinity is often associated with class identity and social position, rather than just gender roles.

Masculinity in Chicano culture is also not limited to the domestic sphere, but is present in a professional context. As a leader in his office, Big Angel exhibits a harsh form of authority that emphasizes power over rewards. Urrea describes this through quotes. "*He had often set out styrofoam cups of coffee for each of them. Not to show them respect. To tell them all to go to hell.*" (Urrea, 2018, p.14). The act shows how Chicano masculinity can appear as a symbolic ritual of power, a way to assert dominance over others. In this context, *machismo* serves as a performative strategy to show who is superior.

The role of masculinity is also inherited from previous generations. Don Antonio, Big Angel's father, is described as a *machismo* figure who emphasizes the value of power and control, even in simple things like drinks. "*In Don Antonio's view, coffee with cream and sugar was dessert, not a drink for men. Angel felt superior at last to his father. He knew the old man had been thrown out for sleeping with American women in his wife's bed.*" (Urrea, 2018, p.135). This scene shows how masculinity is often manifested through small symbols (e.g. how to drink coffee) that are given gender meaning. However, on the other hand, Big Angel felt himself to be ultimately superior to his father, especially since Don Antonio had lost his moral authority. This suggests that Chicano masculinity also involves a generational battle over who is more entitled to family authority. As explained by Zinn (1982), masculinity is often interpreted through assumed attitudes such as virility, courage, and claims of superiority. Big Angel himself often displays an attitude as if he is "better than others," which is an expression of *machismo*. This attitude, as understood by Lennes (2016), not only a form of domination in the family, but also part of a symbolic resistance to American hegemony. By asserting his superiority, Big Angel refused to be positioned as inferior in a society dominated by Anglo-American values. However, this superiority also often creates social distance and exclusion, both towards women and fellow men. For example, Big Angel felt that only he could pass on "strong blood" to his descendants. "*My beautiful daughter. We have good, strong blood. But I don't like the men she sees. He winked at her. Only Big Angel could wink and denote wisdom.*" (Urrea, 2018).

This quote shows how Chicano masculinity is linked to genealogical pride as well as claims to moral authority in determining a child's spouse or identity. This kind of attitude reflects that machismo not only places women in subordinate positions, but also positions other men as inferior.

Tension in masculinity roles is also seen in Big Angel's relationship with his younger sister, Little Angel, who is often seen as an outsider in the family. Because she is the child of an American woman (referred to as "*gringa hussy*"), Little Angel is often treated as a "footnote" in family history. "*He was the footnote to the family, that detail everybody had to deal with when he deigned to appear.*" (Urrea, 2018, p.31). In this case, Little Angel is not recognized as a full part of the Chicano machismo because her blood is considered "tainted." Little Angel's marginal position underscores how Chicano masculinity is not only a matter of gender, but also the politics of ethnic and racial identity. Thus, through the figure of Big Angel and his relationship to family and community, Urrea shows how Chicano masculinity is constructed through a combination of patriarchal authority, symbols of social power, resistance to hegemony, and identity exclusion. Machismo serves as both a source of honor and a burden, showing the tension between family roles, cultural traditions, and the demands of assimilation.

Masculinity, Power, and Vulnerability

In the context of Chicano culture, masculinity is understood not only as physical strength and leadership roles, but also as an identity fraught with contradictions. Chicano masculinity is often portrayed through a macho attitude that emphasizes courage, independence, and power, but behind these images lies emotional vulnerability and a fear of losing relevance. Thus, masculinity in Chicano culture is not something singular and static, but rather a meeting space between strength and weakness, between pride and vulnerability. In the context of Chicano masculinity, it is often shown the exaggerated sense of manliness, in which men have nearly perfect characteristics in the society.

Urrea complicates the image of Chicano masculinity by exposing the fragile side behind it. Big Angel tries to maintain his appearance as a strong figure even though his body is plagued by illness and he has to deal with the reality of death. "*Big Angel believed he could kick the ass of anything that came at him, and everybody else believed it too*" (Urrea, 2018, p.53). Although his strength was weakening, he still insisted on being remembered with authority and admiration. "*I want the boy to look good at my funeral..., and he will feel awe*" (Urrea, 2018). These moments show that excessive masculinity is often a cover for feelings of inferiority, loneliness, and the fear of losing meaning in the family and community. Reflection on himself, "*I am nobody special. Just a husband, a father. A working man. I wanted to change the world*" (Urrea, 2018, p.57), emphasizing the tension between the image of power shown outward and the inner vulnerability that he feels. In the context of Chicano culture, this contradiction is important because masculinity is not only a matter of power and dominance, but also a man's existential struggle with the position and legacy he wants to leave behind. Big Angel is portrayed as a figure who still wants to be respected, but at the same time he realizes his limitations as a human being. Thus, Urrea presents Chicano masculinity not only in the form of traditional *machismo*, but also as a human experience full of ambivalence between strength and vulnerability.

In the cultural framework of Chicano masculinity, manhood is often tied to near-perfect social traits: respect, power, and leadership. Big Angel embodies this through his reputation for discipline and professional success. "*He wasn't legendary only for his punctuality; he also had been the head of the computing division for the gas and electric company... His name tag said HOLA! instead of HELLO!*" (Urrea, 2018, p.18). This passage depicts Big Angel as both competent and proud of his Chicano identity in a predominantly white workspace. His refusal to accept government aid, his insistence on independence, and his self-comparison to Emiliano Zapata further frame him as a man who rejects submission and embodies strength.

From Perla's perspective, Big Angel fulfills the heroic role of husband and protector. "*Big Angel was her hero. She did not know his heroism was fueled by fuming rage. He fought anyone who insulted her or her children*" (Urrea, 2018, p.40). Here, masculinity is tied not only to power but also to sacrifice and responsibility. Yet this "heroism" is not without its contradictions, as it is driven by rage and a refusal to appear weak. Even when confined to a wheelchair, he strives to maintain the image of a "macho" leader. Zinn (1980) notes that machismo is both an expression of power and a response to feelings of powerlessness, an idea clearly reflected in Big Angel's struggle. His grief at his mother's death further reveals the duality of Chicano masculinity. Instead of openly mourning, he whispers. "*Forgive me if I have no tears to spare for you, Mother. I am down to my last ones. I know you understand*" (Urrea, 2018). By refusing to cry, he aligns himself with the cultural expectation that men must not display weakness, even in the most human of circumstances. Zinn (1980) emphasizes that this exaggerated masculinity often serves to conceal vulnerability, creating a façade of invulnerability that contradicts men's inner struggles. Big Angel's identity thus embodies both sides of Chicano masculinity: the respected leader and provider, admired as a "hero" by his wife and family, yet simultaneously a man haunted by fear, loneliness, and unacknowledged grief. His insistence on appearing powerful until death reveals masculinity not as fixed strength, but as a fragile performance constantly maintained against the threat of exposure.

Conclusion

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Luis Alberto Urrea's novel *The House of Broken Angels* showcases the complexity of Chicano masculinity through the character of Big Angel who represents machismo as the core of cultural identity. Big Angel is depicted as full of courage, pride, and charisma, while trying to cover up his vulnerability in the midst of illness and mortality. As a patriarch, he was respected in the family and community, his position was affirmed by his father's historical legacy as a controlling figure. Behind that authority, however, there appears a fragile side that suggests that Chicano masculinity is an ambivalent construct: it confers honor and power, but at the same time demands self-denial. The contribution of this study lies in the understanding that machismo is not only a symbol of power, but also a psychological and social burden for Chicano men. Further research can develop an analysis by comparing representations of machismo in other Chicano literary works, or linking them to issues of the diaspora, second-generation immigrants, and changing gender values in contemporary Latino society.

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