

**IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN
AMERICAN LITERATURE AS A BRANCH OF LATIN
AMERICAN LITERATURE**

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Latin American literature encompasses written and oral works by authors from the Western Hemisphere, including regions of North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Writers from Latin America typically create their works in Spanish, Portuguese, English, or indigenous languages of their countries. On the other hand, Latin American authors who are currently producing their work in the United States are categorized as Latin American fiction writers. Latino literature in the USA is not a monolite, uniform body of work; it can be divided into three major categories: Mexican-American literature, Cuban-American literature, and Puerto Rican-American literature, each with its own distinct characteristics.

People of Mexican descent use several terms. *Chicanos*, a term associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, is still employed by writers today. There are two schools of thought regarding the origins of the word. The first stems from the term the Aztecs used to refer to themselves, *Meshicas*. After combining this with *Mexican* and later further distorting it, it eventually evolved into the modern label. The other, perhaps even more difficult to support, is that it is a combination of the word *chico* (or small), a word some believe was often used by Europeans and Mexicans. *Mexican-American* is the perfect term for many people of Mexican origin who do not like the political implications associated with the term *Chicano*. While dual consciousness is not solely a result of linguistic difference, any term such as this certainly underscores its importance.

Contemporary Mexican American literature is abundant in imagery and symbolism, frequently depicting the complexities of identity, culture, and experience within a bicultural setting. The present work aims to explore the peculiarity of imagery and symbolism that shape Mexican American writings of today.

Firstly, in contemporary Mexican American literature, the U.S. – Mexico border is a potent symbol, representing both a physical boundary and the

cultural and emotional divide faced by those navigating two worlds. Authors such as Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa employ border imagery to examine themes of displacement and belonging.

Secondly, many writers draw on symbols linked to Chicano identity, like the “X” symbol, which signifies reclaiming cultural identity and heritage. This imagery captures the struggle for self-definition in a society that frequently marginalizes or stereotypes Mexican Americans.

Natural symbols continue to be powerful, thus, echoing the old tradition. The desert frequently represents both harshness and resilience in confronting challenges, while urban environments illustrate the complexities of modern life. In the works of writers like Luis Alberto Urrea and Ana Castillo, the landscape is a backdrop for personal and collective struggles, symbolizing beauty and brutality.

Plants and animals often serve as symbols in contemporary Mexican American literature. For instance, the prickly pear cactus can represent survival and adaptability in difficult conditions, while the jaguar typically symbolizes strength and cultural heritage.

Family ties, typically powerful for the Latin culture, are found in today’s texts. Family is a key theme in Mexican American literature, frequently portrayed through imagery representing unity, struggle, and resilience. Writers like Sandra Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street* use depictions of home and domestic spaces to express the complexities of family relationships and cultural expectations.

Symbols of community, like the plaza or Mercado (market), highlight the significance of collective identity and cultural practices. These spaces function as hubs for cultural exchange, social interaction, and preserving traditions.

Migration and the sense of displacement caused by it gave a sprawl to the topics of journeys and boundaries, roots, and disconnection. The imagery of crossing borders, both literal and metaphorical, represents migration experiences and the quest for identity. This theme is common in the works of authors like Héctor Tobar and Julia Alvarez, who delve into the challenges and hopes of migrants. Symbolism associated with roots often highlights the desire to connect with one’s heritage while conveying the disconnection that can arise from migration. This duality is examined through plants, soil, and ancestry imagery, illustrating the yearning for cultural continuity.

Contemporary Mexican American literature frequently incorporates pre-Columbian mythology and folklore, utilizing symbolic references to figures like La Llorona and Coyote. These symbols help to link the past with the present, intertwining contemporary experiences with cultural narratives. Imagery linked to resistance and activism, including murals, protest signs, and the raised fist, represents the fight for civil rights and social justice. This

symbolism captures the ongoing challenges encountered by Mexican Americans as they strive to assert their identity and rights within society. Symbols of cultural pride, like the Mexican flag, Aztec imagery, and traditional clothing, celebrate heritage and identity. Contemporary authors employ these symbols to reclaim narratives and cultivate a sense of belonging.

Religious imagery, especially from Catholicism, is commonly found in the literature, highlighting cultural heritage and the complexities of faith. Writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez delve into themes of spirituality, guilt, and redemption through the use of religious symbolism.

Thus, contemporary Mexican American literature utilizes vivid imagery and symbolism to explore identity, culture, and experience complexities. By examining themes like migration, family, cultural hybridity, and social justice, these writers craft compelling narratives that reflect the realities of Mexican American life. The imagery and symbols in this literature enhance the stories and act as instruments for cultural expression, resistance, and the reclamation of identity.

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