# The Representation of Mexican-Americans' Life Stages through the Models in Luis Valdez's *Los Vendidos*

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## Abstract

*Literature and history are interrelated. Literature does not only serve for entertainment but it also serves as a historical record of certain society in certain period. Through literature, many history and events can be examined. This is particularly why Los Vendidos becomes an interesting example. It examines Mexican-Americans' history through its satirical element. The model characters in the play describe not only distinctive characteristics but also specific perception and condition of Mexican-Americans' life in different periods, or stages. Each model represents the reality of Mexican-Americans' history. Thus, at the end, this research will not only evaluated Mexican-Americans' history or discrimination, but it also examine the whole life, the culture and the ideology of Mexican-Americans.*

**Keywords:** *Mexican-Americans' history, models, stages*

## Introduction

Mexican-Americans are often regarded simply as Mexican, or even American alone. However, this would be an unfair way to examine them because they are not just Mexican or American alone. They are something in between. It can even be concluded that Mexican-Americans are both Mexican and Americans at the same time. This community experienced different history, valued different culture and preserved specific ideology for themselves. Thus, this community is a unique mix of Mexicans and Americans. Based on this point, the researcher chooses Mexican-American as the subject of the research. By examining Mexican-Americans in the research, the researcher would like to reveal further their life and identity as a community.

For this study, the researcher is interested in the play *Los* Vendidos by Luis Valdez because the play itself is also a mix between literature and history. It means the play itself is a satirical historical record. *Los Vendidos* is interesting both as a literary work and a historical track of Hispanic culture. Apart from the entire plot and the setting, the historical aspect of the play is revealed vividly and broadly through the model characters such as Farm Worker, Revolucionario and Mexican-American. Each model depicts different facts, perception and condition of Mexican-American community. Therefore, the researcher would like to begin from the model characters of the play.

Therefore, the researcher raises the issue of Mexican-Americans' life stages which are represented by the models in *Los Vendidos*. The research is very significant in revealing the life and culture of Mexican-American through sequential periods, or stages that Mexican-Americans had undergone. These stages are the result of Mexicans' migration for a better living. Thus, the first stage reveals the early life of Mexicans immigration such as life condition and job available. As Light argued that these people were constantly exploited and they were put in the second-class job like labors, farmers and cotton pickers (1989: 370). There were no job option other than labors and farmer because most of them did not speak English. They were uneducated and illegal. The next stage examines the Mexican immigrants' reaction

toward the unfairness in the form of aggression and revolution. This is the phase where they acted for equal right. The last stage reveals the acculturation process where these Mexicans started to attach themselves as Americans resulting to the existence of Mexican-American people. These are the three stages that Mexican people had undergone in America and these phenomena are common in race relation process.

## Race Relation

Reaction is a very common result in race relation, that is when two or different cultures clash each other, they will likely to react toward the situation. This reaction would vary in different circumstances like equal condition or unequal one. Kitano refers this phenomenon as "Racial Interaction" (1985: 11). This theory is particularly interesting in the case of unequal power where one ethnic has weaker position that the other one. Mexican-American, on the other hand, is appropriate to explain the situation where the inferior Mexican-Americans or the minority had to mingle and live with Americans as the superior and mainstream group. Mexican-American, as the newcomer, had to be ready in the New World, America. This is the "Racial Interaction" phenomenon existed.

On one side, the reaction of the superior group could be rejection, discrimination and segregation. These were what the superior group commonly did toward the minority people. They excluded people as stranger or alien. However, what particularly interesting is the minority group's reaction toward the situation. Kitano refers this as the minority's adaptation and it can be in the form of conflict, acceptance or even avoidance (Kitano, 1985: 65). Their acceptance as the effort of adaptation could exist in the process of acculturation. This process will be explained further in the next theory. Another adaptation of the minority group would be in the form of conflict such as aggression, race riot, strike and boycott (Kitano, 1985: 72). The minority group in an unfair and discriminative situation could react negatively. They fought back and protested.

The same thing also applied to Mexican-Americans. As the community which was put in the lowest position in America, the community eventually revolted against the unfair treatments. This community fought for their right and they often trapped in bloody conflicts with the authority. Norton explained "in the 1930s Mexican-Americans belied their image by engaging in prolonged and sometimes bloody strikes" (1982: 743).

## Acculturation

Acculturation process is part of Kitano's racial interaction where minority group, in this case Mexican-Americans, tried to adapt with the condition in the mainstream, America. Mexican-Americans, as the result of racial interaction, tried to be accepted in the mainstream through adaptation of value, culture and ideology. This is the process of acculturation where people from certain culture try to be similar with another culture in many ways. In the case of Mexican-American, Kitano refers it as "Anglo Conformity" (1985: 2).

From Sociology point of view, acculturation is understood as "the process by which an individual forsake his or her own culture tradition to become part of a different culture" (Schafer, 1986: 232). Thus, it can be concluded that a person who has neglected his or her own tradition and adopts a different tradition or culture is said to have acculturated. The main point here is adaptation where people try to be one by practicing the same value, tradition and culture.

However, acculturation should not only be defined but it needs to be recognized. According to Hazuda, acculturation should be recognized as "a multi-dimensional process which covers language, culture beliefs and values, and structural assimilation" (http://www.rice.edu/project/HispanicHealth/Acculturation.html). Therefore, it is understood that the process of acculturation involved the practice of language, culture and value adaptation and structural acculturation through society's acceptance in social structure. From this point of view, it is

possible to examine whether or not Mexican-Americans have acculturated with Americans.

## Discussion

In this part, the researcher will examine the three stages of Mexican-Americans' life from the three model characters like the Farm Worker, the Revolucionario and the Mexican-American. Each represents one significant period of Mexican-Americans' life and all of them constitute sequential periods or stages itself.

The idea of sequential stages has been presented by Valdez from the introduction of the characters itself. For example, Farm Worker model is depicted of having no ability to speak or to understand English at all. The model speaks only Mexican. Then, it is introduced Pachuco model and Revolucionario model which know very limited English. However, at the end, Mexican-American model is introduced to be a bilingual and educated model. Here, it is obvious how Valdez tries to reveal the sense of development, from not bilingual to a completely literate and bilingual model.

Another example is from food preferences. Farm Worker resembles Mexican with its Mexican foods preference like chile, tortilla and beans. As the other models are introduced, these models depict more complex food preferences like a mix of Mexican food and American food like in Revolucionario model. In fact, Mexican-American as the last model consumes American food only. Here, it is obvious that through food preferences, the sense of development or stages has existed from pure Mexican, a mix between Mexican and American to a total Americanized version.

### The First Stage: The Migration 1900s

The migration period is best represented by the Farm Worker model. This part will examine the common life condition and challenges faced by Mexican immigrant at that time. The period began when massive number of Mexican people came to America in 1900s to seek for new life and opportunity. This is because America, at that time, grew rapidly in economy and agriculture which demanded more labors. This was the Mexicans' opportunity for a better living, and this was what triggered the massive migration in 1900s (www.everyculture.com/multi/Le-Pa/Mexican-Americans.html). Because agriculture demanded more and more cheap labors, the Mexican immigrants became the exploited workers. This is because they were uneducated, illegal and they did not speak English. This is why at that time, almost all Mexican immigrants became labors and farmers.

Basically, the Mexican immigrants' condition at that time was very devastating and unfair. The most obvious discriminatory action they experienced was in terms of payment. These plantation and field labors were not paid reasonable and they were even underpaid compared to other ethnic worker. Take a look at the following quotation.

> *As a result, Hispanics, on average, earn only half to two-thirds of the average American income. The Spanish median income is $17, 465; the national median income is $23, 618. Many Hispanics make up an underclass of workers who take jobs no one else wants at wages no one else will accept* (Light et al, 1989: 90).

It is obvious that Mexican immigrants' income was very low even to the national income of American people at that time. This is because their wages were extremely low and they had to accept that with no question because they did not have legal status as labors. They were mostly undocumented workers with no law protection; therefore, they had to accept whatever offered to them, even the lowest payment none wanted to take.

This unfair payment is represented by the Farm Worker with its "economical" feature. The model is said to be so economical that it only needs one plate of bean with tortillas and plenty of chile. The model also only needs pennies a day to make it run (Valdez, 1994: 1405). It is stated that to run the model, it needs a very cheap and simple food with no cost at all. This is actually Valdez's satire toward the actual condition

that Mexican immigrants often paid so low that they could not even fulfill their basic needs. Thus, it is obvious that how cheap the model is represents and satirizes how low and unfair the payment of Mexican immigrants in actual condition.

Another discrimination and inappropriate treatment these people had to bear was in terms of house facilities. Mexican immigrants were not only underpaid, but they were also neglected without housing, health and sanitation facilities from their employers. These workers had to squeeze themselves in a very small house together. They had to live with ten or more people in one small house. It is obvious in the following quotation.

> *Sometimes, whole families of "braceros" would only get paid twenty cents for three hours of work. Working families lived in small run down shacks or tents in crowded camps. If there wasn't enough room, some family members would sleep under bridges nearby. In order to survive, families were forced to move to where work was available*
> (http://l3d.cs.colorado.edu/systems/agentsheets/New-Vista/grape-boycott)

Here, it is obvious how insufficient the housing was. It was too small to hold many workers, but they had to stay there. They even had to stay outside in the field when the house could not hold people anymore.

Through Farm Worker, Valdez also tries to reveal this condition. The model is described to be very "portable". It means the model could be stored in any place such as old barns, old cars, or even river banks. In fact, the model is so portable that it does not even need a place to be kept. It can be left out in the field. Examine the following dialogue.

> SECRETARY. *What about storage?*
> ANCHO. *No Problem. You know these new farm labor camps our Honorable Governor Reagan has built out by parlier or Raisin city? They were designed with our model in mind. Five, six, seven, even ten in one of those shacks will give you no trouble at all. You can also put him in old barns, old cars, river banks. You can even leave him out in the field overnight with no worry!*
> (Valdez, 1994: 1405)

The last would be the challenges faced by the Mexican immigrants in fields and plantations. As labors who worked as cotton pickers or fruit harvesters, the real obstacle would be the weather. This is because they had to adapt themselves in every season and they had to be ready in any condition when the harvest month came. No matter how hot or cold the weather was they had to be in the field. It was even more devastating because weather kept changing each month. Summer brought its heat while winter blizzards would pile up and troubled the workers. Not only that, In March and April, melted snow threatened the workers with flood that would wiped out all the crops (Norton et al, 1982: 453). This was what the workers had to face, the weather.

The idea is also represented through Farm Worker's durability with its special features such as *Sombrero*, a typical wide Mexican hat and four-ply Goodyear *huaraches*, anti-rain tire. The model is described to be very durable that it could work in any condition and weather with the help of its features. Take a look at the following dialogue.

> SANCHO. *(…)Also take special notice of his four-ply Goodyear huaraches, made from the rain tire. This wide-brimmed sombrero is an extra added feature- keeps off the sun, rain, and dust.*
> SECRETARY. *Yes, it does look durable.*
> (Valdez, 1994: 1404)

Here, it is obvious that the *Sombrero* is very useful for the Farm Worker to keep off the sun, rain, and even dust. Thus, it will not be a problem for the model to work under the hot sun, or to work under rain. The model can overcome that. Not only that, the model is also very durable with its anti-rain tire which will help it in slippery land in rainy season. Thus, it can be concluded that Farm Worker model is prepared with any kind of condition, weather and season, and it can work effectively. Here, it is very obvious how

Valdez represents the weather as an obstacle in Mexican workers' actual condition by making the Farm Worker model to be fully prepared with any weather condition. The model's durability represents the necessity of Mexican Workers to adapt in any condition, season and weather.

**The Second Stage: The Revolution and Movement After 1940s**

As Kitano argued before about "Racial Interaction" (1985: 11), minority group, in this case Mexican-Americans would react aggressively toward the discrimination and prejudice by Americans as the result of conflict adaptation. After the previous period where Mexican workers were discriminated and treated bad, these people reacted back and they fight back in this period. Thus, in this period, it is basically reveal the struggles and the clashes of Mexican to gain their equal right. They fought vigorously in order to be treated fair and respectfully. This is the period of Revolution and Movement which is best represented by the Revolucionario.

Basically, in the second stage, it will be revealed the general condition during the revolution and the mindset of people toward those revolutionaries. As what has been mentioned before, revolution was basically the way Mexican workers fought back through direct aggression, conflict, strikes and boycott. These people did many strikes and boycotts to show their aspiration for equal right. These strikes were often happened in the plantation or in the field. What commonly happened during strikes was that these people demonstrated and aspired their rejection toward discrimination. It resembled much a demonstration. On the other hand, the authorities and the police would also reacted back in the form of violence and abuses toward the Mexican immigrants. The condition often ended bloody and brutally. Take a look the following quotation.

> *But in the 1930s Mexican-Americans belied their image by engaging in prolonged and sometimes bloody strikes. In united action in the San Joaquin valley in October 1933, eighteen thousand cotton pickers walked off their jobs and set up "strike city" after being evicted from the growers' camp. Shortly after, their union hall was riddled with bullets and two strikes died. The nest year labor violence was frequent in the imperial valley, where police crushed a strike by burning the pickers' camp to the ground. In this dispute and others, Mexican-Americans showed their determination to organized, gain strength from unity, and fight for their rights* (Norton et al 1982: 743).

The quotation has described the chaotic condition of revolution efforts and strikes. People were fighting each other. The police even used bullets to control the situation even if they had to kill many people. This is basically the idea in strikes and boycotts where people gathered and yelled out their protests out loud.

This chaotic condition is revealed humorously through the Revolucionario's volume control feature. The model is depicted of having a volume control. Thus, the model can scream when the volume is increased or it can even gives mousey and small sound. Take a look at the following dialogue.

> SANCHO. *Well, he was in all of them. Listen to this. (Snap.)*
> REVOLUCIONARIO. (*Scream). VIVA VILLAAAA!*
> SECRETARY. *That's awfully loud.*
> SANCHO. *He has a volume control*. (*He adjusts volume. Snap.)*
> REVOLUCIONARIO. *(Mousey voice). Viva Villa!*
> (Valdez, 1994: 1407)

This feature is a very special feature owned only by the Revolucionario. The volume control signifies the actual chaotic condition of strikes commonly happened in plantation or fields. The loud scream and the aspiration yelled by the Mexican protesters are tried to be represented by the fact that the Revolucionario is able to increase its volume into screaming just like what happened in demonstration or strikes. Moreover, another significant point is the words screamed by the Revolucionario. It keeps saying "Viva Villa" which literary means long live the

country. This is a very common utterance during Mexican revolution in 1910 to defend Mexico. Thus, it is obvious how the volume control feature actually represents the general condition in strikes and revolution.

Besides the bloody and brutal condition during the revolution, the mindset of people against Mexican immigrants who fought back was also bad. Take a look at the following quotation by Daniels and Kitano.

> *The Caucasian [and] especially the Anglo-Saxon, when engaged in fighting...resort[s] to fisticuffs...; but this Mexican element considers [good sportsmanship] to be a sign of weakness, and all he knows and feels is a desire to use a knife or some lethal weapon. In other words, his desire is to kill, or at least let blood* (1985: 161).

It is obvious that the struggle of Mexican immigrants were regarded negative by American people. They believed that Mexicans were a savage and brutal people who loved to killed and shed blood. They believed that it was their nature to revolt and kill because the Mexican enjoyed it as sign of manhood. This mindset was particularly unfair for them. When they did not fight back, they were discriminated and excluded from the society, but when they actually struggled to achieve their right, they were regarded as savage and bloodthirsty people. They were always put as victim physically and mentally.

This mindset is also depicted through the Revolucionario. The model is depicted to be a special model which can rides horses, stays in mountains, crosses deserts, plains, rivers, leads revolutions, follow revolutions, kills, can be killed, serves as a martyr, hero (Valdez, 1994: 1407). Here, the model is simply said that it kills. This description tries to represent the unfair mindset as if by nature, Mexican loves to kill or as if only Mexican that kills people in strikes, not Americans.

**The Third Period: The Acculturation**

This part is particularly interesting because not only it is necessary to defined first what acculturation is and its parameters to recognize the process, it is important also to examine the facts whether or not Mexican immigrants have done such process that made them into Mexican-Americans.

Therefore, as the process which involves culture and value adaptation of another ethnic, acculturation will involve in language mastery and culture and value attachment of Mexican immigrants to America. This is to reveal that Mexican-Americans have acculturated, and this is best represented by the Mexican-American model.

The first is language mastery. The process of acculturation happens when a person tries to be accepted by the mainstream through language mastery. It means that when Mexican-Americans learn English as their language, they wanted to be welcomed in the new society. Take a look at the following dialogue.

> SECRETARY. *That's much better, but you didn't answer my question. Does he speak English?*
> SANCHO. *Bueno...no, pero he has other—*
> SECRETARY. *No.*
> SANCHO*. Other features.*
> SECRETARY. *NO! He just won't do!*
> (Valdez, 1994: 1405)

Here, it is obvious that there is actually a demand from the Secretary to have a bilingual model, a model which understands English. The Farm Worker is rejected directly because it is not bilingual and the Secretary believes that it will not be suitable to work among Americans in the office. The demand of language as part of acculturation itself has been portrayed in the play; This was what really happened in America especially in the case of Mexican-American where they employed different language. The society demanded that in order to be accepted as part of the mainstream, the person needs to understand each other through language. Take a look at the following quotation.

> *In contrast, the norms and the values of some Hispanic Americans have been profoundly challenged by the need to interact with the pervasive Anglo world. One example can be seen in language.*

> *Hispanics have had to make their way in a "foreign" society in which English is the language of workplace, the marketplace, the school, and the political arena* (Light et al, 1989: 91).

Here, it is clear that mastering English is one of the way for Hispanics to "survive" in the foreign country. This is because it was the official language of the country and it was used anywhere such workplace and market. Therefore, they needed to learn English.

This is what Mexican-American model represents. Compared to the Farm Worker which is rejected because it is not bilingual, the Mexican-American model comes as the model which fulfills the Secretary demands because it is educated and bilingual.

> SANCHO. *Well, we'll just write that down. Yes, senorita, this model represents the apex of American engineering! He is bilingual, college educated, ambitious! Say the word "acculturate" and he accelerates. He is intelligent, well-mannered, clean– did I say clean? (Snap. Mexican-American raises his arm.) Smell* (Valdez, 1994: 1409)

The model suits the Secretary because it can speak English fluently. Here, it is obvious that the Mexican-American model has follow what is demanded from it, the same language; therefore, the model has follow what the mainstream wants. This is where the process of acculturation existed that is when Mexican-Americans follow what happened in the society and mainstream, they have acculturated. Thus, it is obvious that how the model actually fulfills the Secretary's demand represents the process of acculturation through language.

The acculturation of Mexican-Americans through attachment or following the mainstream can also exist in the level of culture, value and belief. This is what Gordon referred as "Cultural Assimilation" where people started to assimilate another culture as their identity (1964). Take a look at the following quotations.

> *Racial ethnic groups have also gone through the same process, and some have successfully acculturated. They have learned English and the American way; They have fought and died for America and have subscribed to the tenets of patriotism and love of country* (Kitano, 1985: 27).

It is clear that learning the language and believing the same way, that is the American way, are the acculturation itself. This is where Mexican-Americans tried to be similar with Americans in many ways like culture, ideology and value. These people were actually proud to part of America and their attachment had grown into patriotic action itself.

These facts are described vividly by Valdez through the Mexican-American's patriotic feature and its political speech. Take a look at the following speech.

> MEXICAN-AMERICAN. *Mr. Congressman, Mr. Chairman, members of the board, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen. (Sancho and Secretary applaud.) Please, please. I come before you as a Mexican-American to tell you about the problems of the Mexican. The problems of the Mexican stem from one thing and one thing alone: He's stupid. He's uneducated. He needs to stay in school. He needs to be ambitious, forward-looking, harder-working. He needs to think American, American, American, AMERICAN, AMERICAN, AMERICAN. GOD BLESS AMERICA! GOD BLESS AMERICA! GOD BLESS AMERICA!! (He goes out of control.)*
>
> *(Sancho snaps frantically and the Mexican-American finally slumps forward, bending at the waist.)*
>
> SECRETARY. *Oh my, he's patriotic too!*
>
> (Valdez, 1994: 1409)

From the speech, the attachment to America can be seen clearly. The model feels proud to be American and he thinks Americans are the best because they are ambitious, forward-looking and hard-worker. The sense of patriotism is also obvious when the model yells 'God Bless America' over and over. He

tries to show his patriotic sense. Thus, it can be concluded that the way the model proud to be American and thinks like American is a representation of the true acculturation of Mexican-Americans.

## Conclusion

*Los Vendidos*, in the basis of historical issue, does not only evaluate the cultural clashes between Mexican value and American culture such as prejudice, discrimination or struggles. More than that, the play tries to examine the whole life of Mexican-Americans in the New World as stranger through three sequential stages. These three stages which involves migration, revolution and acculturation period will eventually reveal the actual history of Mexican-Americans from the moment they lived in America to the end. Each stage would be the best trace of Mexican-Americans' life, culture, identity and value as whole.

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