

Becoming Latina, Becoming Americana: Shifting Identities in Lara Rios's Chick Lit

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines the process of acculturation in two female members of a Mexican-American community as represented in Lara Rios's chick lit novels: *Becoming Latina in 10 Easy Steps* (2006, 2013) and *Becoming Americana* (2006). The examination of the two chick lit novels is conducted on a trajectory of ecological systems of development as well as in the light of the psychosocial attitude, self-image, expectations and assumptions about becoming Americana or the reverse. The two heroines who reportedly met each other by chance narrated the turning points in their lives, experiencing the developmental passages through which their attitudes, beliefs, intentions, feelings had been assiduously expressed towards age, gender, family, friends, job, ethnic background, as well as, the desire to become American and/or relapsing into being Latina. The article also points out that secure transition through the psychosocial developmental stages demands the trust in self, feminine power, and the culture within the surrounding society in diaspora. Furthermore, the deeper aspects of the host culture require 'firm feelings' and 'self-confidence' as important constituents of becoming Latino-American.*

Keywords: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems of development; acculturation; diaspora; Mexican-American chick lit; Lara Rios

CULTURAL SENSIBILITIES AND IDENTITY

The portrayal of female identity by chick lit authors has always been one of the major issues scholars and researchers deal with (Kent 2007, Wyatt 2008, Pe´rez-Serrano 2009, Ruiz 2011, Kaminski and Magee 2012). The central themes include subjectivity and identity, sexuality, love and romance, womanhood and motherhood, consumerism and beauty, ethnic/racial/class issues, career, friendship, family and relationship. Accordingly, female readers of chick lit could consider the genre as “an ideal starting point for intergenerational discussion of feminism” that understand the protagonists of chick lit novels, not as being “escapist” but for their ability to display “struggles and fears of contemporary women” (Ferris & Young 2006, pp.3-4). The potential of chick lit to cross boundaries brought about the appearance of ethnic variation which includes chick lit novels written by the authors of minority group in diaspora.

The diasporic variations of mainstream chick lit focus on the female protagonists of a hybrid culture. The Latino-American chick lit or Chica lit is a subgenre of diasporic chick lit by female writers of Latin-American heritage residing in America either by “choice or to escape repression in their countries” (Yarberri 2009, p.3). Likewise, other researchers argue that similar to its mainstream counterpart, ethnic chick lit also reflects the same issues and themes with a cultural twist considering the minority cultural backgrounds of the character (Hong 2009).

In addition, the ethnic subsets of mainstream chick lit focus on the heroines of multicultural or multi-religious backgrounds dealing with issues of postcolonialism, multiculturalism and the diaspora. As Shankar and Srikanth (2000, p.371) claim “ethnic writers reflect the general desire of their communities to be considered full and equal participants in the fabric of American life”. Being considered as the minority in the society, heroines of ethnic chick lit novels desire to and struggle to catch up with the dominant culture of the society in which they are living. However, their ethnicity, culture and social backgrounds may influence their whole diasporic life. These influences are also considerable in diasporic versions of western chick lit in which the heroines are of different ethnicities residing in the Western metropolitans.

Two novels that attempt to narrate the issues of ethno-cultural diversification within the chick lit genre are *Becoming Latina in 10 Easy Steps*¹ (*BL*) and its sequel *Becoming Americana*² (*BA*) written by Lara Rios, the American author of Latin heritage. Both novels were written in 2006 within a 10-month interval. The heroines of the two novels are interrelated and Rios portrays almost 6 years of their lives within her narrative. This paper sets out to investigate the psychosocial³ identity as represented in these Mexican-American chick lit novels. The objectives that form the foundation of the present discussion are first to explore the ways in which the heroines’ attitudes, beliefs, intentions, feelings or susceptibilities to conflicts are expressed when they become aware of the traditional way of life within the Mexican community; second, to analyse the ways in which the heroines describe their practices with respect to enacting emotional vulnerability to own cultural beliefs and values when these are not embraced by surrounding society; and finally, to synthesise discourses heroines draw on such as the ones about departure from own community to host society, acceptance of new culture-based normative beliefs along with psychosocial developmental stages they go through when they give accounts of their activities within the host society.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHICK LIT

Cultural development has always been a substantial factor in the human developmental process (Doll 2004). Nevertheless, ethnic minorities have always struggled to strike a balance between their original culture and the dominant culture and this struggle brings up a conflict (Raihanah Mohd Mydin, Norzalimah Mohd Kassim, Ruzy Suliza Hashim 2013). However, this conflict fundamentally occurs in the bedrock of psychosocial development in tandem with age and gender. For example, for Latino adults there is a tussle between the Latino values such as relatedness, interdependence and strong family ties, and the dominant American cultural demands that put emphasis on independence and autonomy, which subsequently creates conflict between offspring and their parents.

Hence, given the social influences on identity construction, psychologists as well as feminist scholars whose interest is in ethnic diversity in human development suggested that identity development entails “a sense of connection and relatedness to others rather than a need for separation and individuation” (Doll 2004, p.15). In this regard some research has been done on the contextual influences of “social, cultural and political” factors that one experiences in life rather than considering the self alone (Mazmi Maarof, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Noraini Md Yusof, Raihanah Mohd Mydin 2012, p. 395). Therefore, identity development could have different developmental processes depending on these cultural variables. The difference is important in the current paper since it associates with the fact that the developmental process for every single female individual is a function of variables that stem from the individual’s different environmental and ecological levels.

Among the aforementioned psychologists, Bronfenbrenner is well-known for his model of the ecology of human development. Based on this model, human development occurs in relation to different contexts including family, community and society. Moreover, each of the ‘ever-changing’ and ‘multi-level’ environments, as well as the interactions among them has a crucial influence on self-identity development. Therefore, the theory is compatible with the findings from psychology, ecological studies and psychobiology, examining how the individuals develop within ‘nested contexts’ (Bronfenbrenner 2005) throughout the life cycle. This paper investigates these different contexts, as well as their interrelatedness in order to examine the different developmental trends as represented in the two selected novels.

In the diasporic variation of chick lit, culture plays a significant leading role among ethnic and minority groups in the process of acculturation or fixation with the own culture. Latino-American culture originated from this type of cultural migration and subsequently includes a variety of cultural elements such as identity conflict, cultural sensibility, ethnicity recognition, etc. These elements divert in terms of the geographical distance to America. In multicultural America, the closer the geographical migration path is to the dominant culture, the easier the process of acculturation becomes. Acculturation is considered as “culture change that is initiated by conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems.” (Tseng 2001, p. 684). As an evolving process, the acculturation virtually takes place when the attitudes and the behaviours among racial or ethnic minority individuals are subjected to change over time by both appearance and deep culture of the host country (Lau et al. 2009).

Appearance culture denotes the surface of the culture such as costume, music, art, food, overt behaviour while deep culture goes further and represents deeper aspects of the culture that are profoundly ingrained in one’s culture. Currently, the acculturation process may follow a bi-directional model by which a simultaneous shedding of the values, rituals, and customs pertinent to the ethnic culture occurs with acquisition of those within the host culture. The length of residence in a country other than one’s own and speaking the native language at home or in the neighbourhood surrounded by the host society are considered as the measures for acculturation (Lau et al 2009). Nevertheless, the ethnic minorities attempt to incorporate the values or normative beliefs from the two different cultures-to preserve their identity while at the same time adjusting it with the mainstream.

For instance, due to the common boundary with America, a large number (64%) of Latino American immigrants are Mexicans (Alarcon 2009). When the

Mexican immigrants settled down in America, they attempted to bridge the gap between the original culture they came from and the dominant American culture. The reason behind this attempt could be a need to recognize own ethnicity and cultural identity while communicating with the prevailing culture.

Another aspect of the chick lit tradition is the contestation by various feminist perspectives. After almost two decades of emergence of the genre, chick lit has been frequently studied through the feminist perspective. However, mainstream chick lit has been marked by postfeminism (Harzewski 2011) with a focus on central issues such as concerns with popular culture, friendship and family bonds, beauty and consumerism. There emerged a third wave of feminism in the 1990s (Genz 2009, p.163) characterised by “beauty culture, sexual abuse and power structures while it was acknowledged by making the use of the pleasure, danger and defining powers of those structures” (Heywood & Drake 1997, p.15). Nonetheless, the main issues of this third wave mostly associate with “awareness of and respect for multiplicity even within one’s self...” and “...combined with the popular perception of rigidity within the second wave to create a theory that celebrates contradiction, complexity, and individual freedom of choice” (Gilley 2005, p.3).

Since chick lit has a strong relationship with contemporary feminism, past studies have been overwhelmed by different feminist perspectives. Even the genre’s broadening and proliferation into other regions could not prevent it from being exclusively approached by postfeminism. Thus, there is a need to use a more comprehensive view with novelty which goes beyond the gender binary to involve other constituents of identity such as the ecological contexts in which the diasporic heroines live. The following section will explore the ecological systems used as the conceptual framework for conducting this analysis.

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS AND CHICK LIT

The ecological contexts, elsewhere known as ecosystem levels, within which individuals go through the developmental stages during their life span is suggested by Uri Bronfenbrenner in 1979 and is further developed in the following years in 1983 and 2005 as many “nested” ecosystems within which humans develop and interact. Bronfenbrenner (2005) examines these nested systems on five levels of analysis: the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and later *macrosystem* and *chronosystem*. The *microsystem* involves the direct and concrete interactions of the developing person with significant others including family, friends and caregivers. The *mesosystem* is defined by the connections between the family and the community including the relationships with the school, church, neighbourhood, and civic bodies. The *exosystem* further refers to job or employment effects on the family and the availability of community resources like governmental departments, libraries, and parks. Therefore *exosystem* connotes the systems that are not in direct interactions with the developing person but have indirect effects on the person’s *micro* or *mesosystem*. The *macrosystem* comprises a more general cultural context in which the individual’s religious beliefs, ethnicity or race, as well as, economical status and immigration are included. As a result, the constituents of *macrosystems* including the beliefs, values and societal rules create a hierarchy that directs and influences the interactions between families, schools and communities (Asmussen & Weizel 2010). Finally, the *chronosystem* involves the socio-historical events over time such as wars and exodus (White & Klein 2008). Bronfenbrenner asserts that in

order to ascertain a healthy family structure, full attention must be paid to all these five ecological systems. Moreover, the connections between the five can protect the normal development of the individuals.

In her novels, Rios presents a significant avenue to examine the ways in which both heroines go through the process of development within the five contexts. Furthermore, the present work applies the two novels to study the developmental trajectory paced by the two heroines aged from 13 to 33 years old. Both the heroines, one from 13 to 19 and the other 27 to 33, belonged to second generation Mexican immigrants. One is a sophomore, Lupe Perez, while the other is a Hollywood animator, Marcela Alvarez. The conceptual framework for the purpose of the present analysis was made compatible with Bronfenbrenner’s model of ecological system as illustrated in Figure 1. The methodology used in investigating Lara Rios’ selected chick lit is as illustrated in Figure 2.

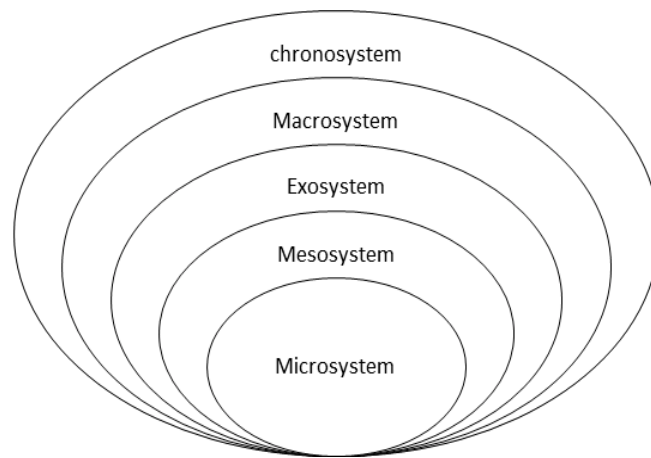


FIGURE 1. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Levels

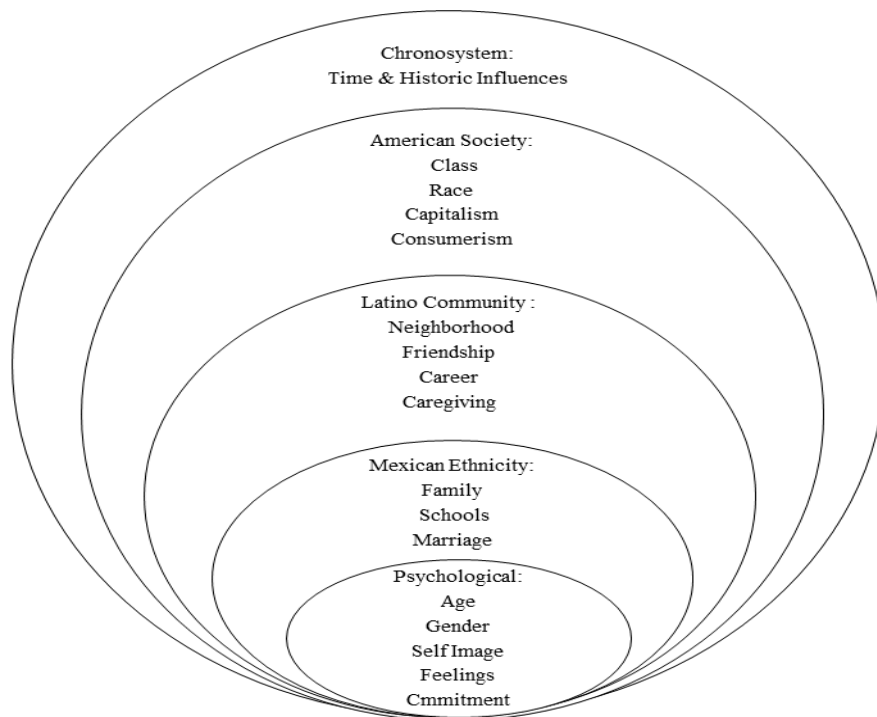


FIGURE 2. Methodology of Study Using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Levels

BECOMING AMERICANA OR THE REVERSE

The analysis for the current paper is conducted by five interrelated themes considered in the process of analysis and corresponded with five ecological systems of development suggested by Bronfenbrenner (2005). Since the five ecological systems are interactional or sometimes even overlapping, an attempt has been made to do a thematic analysis in the light of ecological systems through which the heroines go back and forth. The first theme based on the first and the second ecological level describes the heroines' attitudes, beliefs, self-concept, feelings, and conflicts quite particular to their own self (*microsystem*) and/or to their family (*mesosystem*). The second theme is about interactions between the heroines themselves (*microsystem*) along with their families (*mesosystem*), peers or friends, and the activities within the community/neighbourhood (*exosystem*) or at the school as a part of the community. And finally, the positive and negative attitudes, normative beliefs, and the motivation towards the surrounding society practiced by the heroines are described (*macrosystem*). The age difference and the interrelatedness between the two heroines caused the comparative analyses within the same thematic frame and ecological system.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

THE SELF: MICROSYSTEM AND MESOSYSTEM

This section discusses the heroines within the microsystem and mesosystem, specifically in relation to their attitudes, beliefs, self-concept, feelings and internal as well as external conflicts.

Lupe presents low self-esteem and feels humiliation when she talks about her childhood: "As a child, I was raped, many times... it hurt me but I survived..." (BA, p. 122). As a timid victim of both physical and sexual abuse, Lupe conceals it from others especially the significant others such as her parents and abusive brother due to the fear she feels and this in turn leads to the repetition of the abuse which changes her attitude towards herself and other men. Accordingly, Lupe attempts to compensate for her 'hurt humiliated self' by promiscuity as revenge. This revenge leads to a distorted self-identity when Lupe was only 13, an age in which every adolescent is seeking for a unique identity: "for the longest time I'd thought that screwing whomever I wanted made me feel powerful-showed the world that being raped by my brother didn't hurt me in the least. But it did. And I continued to hurt myself by having indiscriminate sex. But I was done" (231).

Additionally, body image (general appearance), family, education and friends are the four components of the self-esteem. Lupe's low self-esteem is manifested through the way she describes her appearance: "I'm small, I'm thin" (BA 2006, p. 10) and "I'm not a girly girl...I have boring, straight black hair and I don't know how to get ... attention the way girls do with boys" (29). Further, while Lupe talks about getting away from the "terrifying, humiliating experiences" in the past, the heroine feels that she is not "ready" and thinks that "it's not so easy" for her to accept the American culture (183). Also, she doesn't look at her appearance as an 'ideal' to adjust to the American society.

Lupe's attitude towards her family is a negative one; she sees herself as a victim since she considers her father as a "tyrant" (BA, p. 183) at home who

physically abused the family in one way or another. Additionally, she feels rejected in her high school where she “really experienced racism” (143) and was marginalised by “Anglos because she was still Mexican” (90) and neglected “by Mexican because she was turning white” (90). These negative feelings and attitudes psychologically motivate Lupe to think of a way out of the ghetto. In order to step into American society, Lupe needs to change her attitude towards her “gang of friends” (90) which also caused her peers and friends in the ghetto to reject her, for they think as soon as she begins “mixing” with the Whites she would “change” (89). Thus, it could be elucidated that to Lupe, the first step in the process of development begins from within the self that is to make a change in one’s attitudes, feelings and beliefs towards other subsystems in order to progress into further social levels.

On the other hand, Marcela in the beginning has a positive self-image implying that she is satisfied with what she is, both as an American who holds a high-ranking position within the society and having a good feeling towards her own identity: “I’m Marcela Alvarez ... I’m an animator for a major Hollywood studio ... something I love” (BL, p. 2). However, her attitude towards her body-image is slightly negative especially her “already dark skin [which] is at least three shades darker ...” (3). Marcela believes that religion and cultural rituals are self-protective factors, so she keeps going to the church and frequently participates in the family gatherings every Sunday. Yet, she has conflicts with her ideals regarding ‘dating’ - which is finding a Mexican man to date with- and that of the real world within the surrounding society. These conflicts stem from her Mexican family expectations and her own beliefs. In her first date she finds out that they “are not a match” (33) since George (her first target to date with compatible with her family expectation) “speaks no Spanish ... also about five generations away from the Mexican roots and seems to have less interest in getting in touch with them” (30-31) But, as the novel continues and Marcela happens to be placed in the developmental process, she gradually becomes independent enough to make her own decisions rather than fulfil the expectations of others. This decisiveness as represented in the novel could be considered as one of the basis for resolving the inner conflict that itself could help her identity to be developed.

Other than that, self-accomplishment as Marcela views is a real goal when she considers herself as a Latina woman who is going to enter the third decade of her life:

When you’re in your twenties you are supposed to be messed up- people expect it. But when you hit thirty ... you’re magically supposed to have it altogether: a career, a husband, kids (and if you are Latina- you’d better *want* those kids). This means that I have only got three years to become a millennium woman with an answer to everything (BL, p.50)

While Marcela is seeking for her true self, she attempts to mate someone Mexican “who is fitted into American society in his own way” (BL, p.57) so that she can recognise her culture vicariously. This again proves how Marcela tries to develop her cultural identity in the wrong way that is for the sake of satisfying others, specifically her family, and not through her own real feelings or attitudes. However, either way the attitude towards mating in Marcela’s mind has some sequences such as getting acquainted with some body, trusting him which may lead to the expansion of a deeper social relationship with the opposite sex: “In my world, men take you out, maybe to a movie or out to dinner. We chat. Get to know each other. Decide if we like each other. Then feelings grow.” (61). Furthermore,

Marcela's attitude towards development is that it should start from inside out: "After all, a Mexican man isn't going to make me more Latina⁴. I have to concentrate on changing myself." (75). It seems that Marcela is approaching a new way of thinking about herself with regards to dating when she puts "honour" and "character" prior to "unknown Chicano who fit a label" (112). This attitude demonstrates that she begins to doubt cultural labelling and emphasises the personality. Having an artistic talent, Marcela has a creative mind that helps her to step in the developmental process in her own way that is the ability to scrutinise the Latino cultural phenomena. For instance, she visits "a Mexican painting exhibition" that inspires her to "give her project a Latin twist" (113). However, she puts her "freedom" prior to marriage although she doesn't want to lose love at the same time: "I want him, but I just don't think I'm ready for anything permanent. Let's face it; I'm married to my job. Then my family takes up a huge chunk of my life. I don't want any more changes. I like being alone, living alone, dating here and there" (239); however, she gradually begins to have a more positive image of having her own family and kids.

Even though in the beginning of the novel Marcela shows less interest in her own culture and tradition after she finds out about Paul (her biological father), she thinks perhaps this unwillingness, disinterest and detachment from her own culture is because of her mixed-blood. Therefore it could be claimed that even from the beginning, Marcela's thoughts and behaviour is not against Latina, otherwise she should not have been so distressed upon learning she had a biological white father. Learning this truth, along with her love towards her family and culture create an inner need for Marcela to prove that she is not against her own traditions and culture. It is also implied that nobody- not even a biological white father-could be the reason why she has not "embraced her Latin culture". Rather, her lifestyle is influenced by the surrounding American society which seems to keep her away from her own culture. All these lead her to plan to become a "real Latina" (BL, p.16).

Therefore, one could conclude that it is not important whether the individuals' thoughts and behaviours are against or for their cultural sensibility. But, what undoubtedly matters is that different ecological systems in which individuals are set clearly affect their way of thinking, beliefs, and attitudes towards everything in the process of identity development.

THE FAMILY: MICROSYSTEM, MESOSYSTEM & EXOSYSTEM

This section discusses the interactions between the heroines themselves along with their families, peers/friends, activities within the community/neighbourhood or at the school.

As portrayed in the text, Lupe comes from a chaotic Mexican family living in America. Her father is an alcoholic, her mother works long hours and her brother is abusive. The negative attitude towards all her family members resulted in family affective detachment. Thereafter, Lupe replaces her family with a 'gang' and becomes a 'street kid' who shows a defiant character through antisocial behaviours such as vandalism, drug use, promiscuity and carrying weapons. Although Lupe sees her father as "a tyrant with no real power", she believes that "maybe deep inside, he knew this and it's why he drank" (BA, p.76). While she thinks that her mother also was not 'affectionate' to her, Lupe finds herself in an unsupportive family. This attitude along with Lupe's own dreams which were "getting out of the

ghetto”, having “lots of money” and “an important job” (203) trigger the thought of “moving out” (17).

Contrary to Lupe, Marcela has a positive attitude towards her ethnic Mexican-American background. In a conversation with her relatives where she is adamant about “not marrying a Latino”, a secret is revealed all of a sudden. She finds out that she herself is a mixed-blood child due to her mum’s out of wedlock relationship and this is the fact that shocks her: Sonya (her cousin) says: “everybody in the family knows Marcela’s real father was the *guy* her mother slept with when she cheated on *uncle* Juan” (BL, p. 5). Since she finds that the blood tie between her and her father is at risk, she begins to search for her Mexican identity as she says to herself: “Losing the blood tie to my dad also hurts” (9). However, this finding leads Marcela to have a negative attitude towards her ethnicity when she talks about “deluded blood” (45) which she thinks will be purified only by marrying a Mexican man. This causes a conflict between Marcela and her family because even though she accepts her family, Marcela is curious to know more about Paul, her biological father. The discussed conflict is considered as a turning point for Marcela; since it affects her attitudes towards her Mexican identity throughout the novel. It also causes her to step into the process of identity development through plans like a trip to Mexico and learning to cook Mexican food. Both plans are the changes that occur in the cultural appearance during the process of acculturation.

Nevertheless, Marcela is trying to strike a balance between her family’s traditional culture and the modern culture of the surrounding society:

I love my family. And maybe when I get into our culture more, I’ll have more in common with them. The biggest difference is I don’t see myself as belonging to a subgroup, and tried so hard but to see myself that way. It’s made me feel like an outsider in my own family many times. (BL, p.22)

Knowing that she is ‘mixed-blood’, results in Marcela being annoyed with her mother but she realises: “I’m not turning my back on her. How could I when deep inside, I believe all that crap Mom fed us all these years? I’m nothing without my family, especially without Mom” (BL, p.47). Therefore one could infer that according to Mexican family traditions, mothers play the role of ‘stabilisers’ and that they see marriage as the natural way of continuing the blood and these influence the family members, as well.

Thus, the way in which Marcela and Lupe conceive their families of origin are different. One could argue that within the family setting as one of the subsystems of *mesosystem* level, Lupe did not receive the required support and safety for her identity to be developed and as a result she contemplated stepping out of the family to enter the bigger subsystem (*mesosystem*) to find what could not be achieved in her family. Therefore, Lupe was conflicted about her Mexican identity due to the unsupportive family structure and the Latino community or even the broader setting that was the American society. Nonetheless, she was fortunate enough to survive via the help and support received from other social circles such as friends and peers (*mesosystem*).

Marcela, on the other hand, is blessed with a healthy, safe and supportive family structure. However, her positive attitude towards her family changed when she found out that she was of mixed-blood. Although Marcela eventually met her white biological father, at the end of the novel, one could presume that the author let this problem unresolved by stating that the DNA results were burnt long time ago by Marcela’s father, Juan, who raised her. This open-ending also disapproves the idea

of cultural-labelling as once was one of Marcela's obsessions. Besides, Marcela was not interested anymore to find out the truth about her real father. In the course of the novel when her identity began to develop stage by stage, she gradually gave up the plan of proving her family to be a real pure Mexican which indicates how she ended up with a compromise with her Mexican identity. Marcela's struggle to strike a balance between her Mexican tradition and modern American lifestyle caused her to encounter a conflict with her Mexican identity at first. Yet, the two different family structures of the two heroines as depicted in the two novels along with the support from both family and friends are represented. These illustrations as well as the different psychological aspects of the heroines' identity demonstrate the significance of the family bonds, friendship ties as the crucial factors in transition from the different ecological levels as it has an interactional effect on the heroines' ethnic identity development.

THE COMMUNITY/NEIGHBORHOOD: EXOSYSTEM

This section discusses the heroines' conflicts with their Mexican community.

... when you grow up in East Los Angeles and you look totally dark, and, well ... Mexican, you get tired of people asking you where you're from or assuming you can't comprehend the English language or that you are an illegal alien and thus barely human" (BA, p.155) "I didn't want to be involved in some Chicana (females of Mexican descent) group. I wanted to get away from *La Raza* (race) (156).

Lupe is heading to become American by rejecting any cultural tags: "No tags, just me." (BA, p.157) since she thinks it gives a "political-sounding reason to gather into groups" and be socially negative about everything. Nevertheless, she tries to express that "being Mexican-American is fine", "being Chicana is cool" but "just American is probably the best" (156). The current conditions within the Mexican community include drug availability/use, law violation, unsupportive family and neighbours, physical/sexual abuse within the family and neighbours and lack of law enforcement. These circumstances along with her dreams to become American facilitate Lupe's decision to leave the community. Consequently, she meets Marcela and becomes her mentee. As a result, Marcela plays a significant role in Lupe's developmental process. To her, "Marcela was part friend, part older sister, part mother" who "saved her life" (21). Lupe conceives the school as a place to fulfil her goal which is getting acquainted with the American culture and preparing herself to enter the American society. Lupe's decision determines that the developmental process is a dynamic practice which requires getting out of the smaller ecological level and getting in to the more inclusive setting although this process may be sometimes reversible.

Likewise, the first conflict that Marcela encounters with her community is triggered by family traditional attitudes towards life, and that of modern American life: "Have you ever wondered if you were dropped on earth by aliens who somehow forgot to instruct you on the customs and habit of the natives?" (BL, p.1). The second cultural conflict she encounters is related to the traditional view towards lifestyle including marriage age or having children; she thinks that marriage "is not a race". She believes that her job is her first priority which brings her social prestige and good financial status.

However, after she discovers the truth about her biological white father she decides to prove to herself that she is Mexican as we read when she talks to herself: "I need to prove to myself that I am my parents' daughter just as much as my sisters

are ... so as of today, I start becoming a real Latina.” (BL, p.16). The second attitude contradicts with the earlier one. In order to resolve this contradiction, Marcela decides to learn the truth about her ethnic identity, so she begins by embracing her mother’s cultural heritage. Hence, the first step to becoming Latina is that Marcela tries to enter the Latino community by choosing one of her female friend to get help from: “you’re Latina. I need to do this with someone else who can understand what I’m going through” (18). In addition, Marcela decides to learn Mexican cooking as a representative of cultural appearance. Following this, she attempts to pick up some interest within the family cultural values such as Latina music, literature, art and history which could be regarded as cultural deep layers. Marcela also decides to participate in a community activity to empower Chicano groups by signing up to mentor an at-risk Latina child “as a kind of give a hand up to the next generation” (25). As a convergence act, siding with the family can inspire Marcela to approach her Latina identity which is a constituent to accomplish two tasks of the self and social aspects of life. In other words, Marcela also realises that in order to resolve her conflicts and to develop her identity in a broader social setting (*exosystem*) she needs to establish her Latina identity. For this purpose, she began with following the acculturation model that is first to embrace the Latino cultural appearance and then to go deeper into the Latino cultural way of thought and beliefs.

To sum up, the two heroines encounter more conflicts when they step into the next ecological level that is their own community. However, they end up with the idea that in order to go even further in the process of development they need to follow the acculturation model as a way to solve their conflicts and to adjust themselves into the cultural values they are heading to.

AMERICAN SOCIETY: EXOSYSTEM & MACROSYSTEM

This section discusses the practice of heroines’ positive/negative attitudes, normative cultural beliefs and motivation from Mexican traditional community towards the modern American society.

Two psychological determinants of ‘assuming responsibility towards self’ and ‘self-conscience’ direct Lupe to transit from the Mexican community to the American society. What contribute to this transition are friendship with the white male/female Americans, mentoring by an Americana woman, education and employment. The acculturation process is another step for Lupe to get familiar with both the appearance and depth of the American culture. By appearance culture, she tries to “learn a little about fashion, hair style, and makeup” (BA, p.90); also she says that “the new world flashed at me on every commercial and in every magazine, the world that included a college degree and a heavy bank account” (142). So to approach the deep culture, she enters university to pursue her education or tries to get a job and establishes friendship with male/female white Americans. It is as she says: “I felt our relationship and bond grow. I was trying to fit into her world, and she was doing the same for me. This was cool and exactly what I needed.” (159). A further step to become Americana is to marry a white boy ultimately. Having this plan in mind, Lupe recognises her feminine power to attract a man which derives from her feminine identity: “I was becoming acquainted with my feminine power and it felt great” (45). While studying at the University of California, Los Angeles, (UCLA) (as a social source), Lupe finds the need to get integrated with the American society through making friends. Having been employed in the American society, she was required to have ‘initiative’, to be ‘good looking’ and ‘hard

working'. In addition, the commerce rules within the American society demand that everybody should be involved in spreading out the "consumerism" within the ethnic minorities including "Latinos" (101). Therefore, one could affirm that in order to transit from her Mexican community (*exosystem*) to the surrounding American society (*macrosystem*), Lupe needs to have a more positive attitude towards the latter by intermingling with American society to be accepted as a member. The process of acculturation as represented in the novel is the supplementary model that Lupe experiences which illustrates the safe transition; there is a need to fit into both appearance and depth of the surrounding dominant culture.

On the other side, Marcela has a positive attitude towards American lifestyle. Specifically, she is an independent woman who is close to her thirties and lives alone, has her own apartment and a well-paid job in Hollywood. She is a workaholic who prefers spending most of her time outside and the least time cooking since she prefers to eat outside, enjoys dating and attending parties held in Hollywood, communicating with famous people in her work circle more than the traditional family gatherings. All these aspects of American lifestyle that she got used to are somehow different from that of family style: "... I'll endure this bridal shower and I'll even enjoy parts of it ... lately, I can't help but feel more at home at movie release parties than at these family events" (BL, p.3). Similar to Lupe, Marcela is conflicted when she rejects any cultural label emphasising to be the self as the way she is, but not "a cultural tag ... feeling Mexican in the Anglo world." (3).

By holding a feminist attitude towards men and marriage, Marcela thinks that all men "want sex without any responsibility or consequences" and she sees herself not as a "desperate female who uses sex to trap a guy into marriage" (BL, p.17). She justifies this attitude by referring to the traditional view of women's obligation to "feed and clean" for men which she calls a "drag" (43). However Marcela comes up with a compromise when she excludes her mother from this obligation siding with her sister that they both "have a bond with" their mother who needs to be supported more than their father because "he's a man" (47). This viewpoint also could be regarded as indicative of a collective female identity regardless of any ethnicity that exists within the American society. When exposed to the American society (*macrosystem*) to which Marcela is transiting, it is implied within the novel that even in a bigger ecological system such as the modern American setting, there are still some signs of male-female distinction which put women of all ethnicities into the second gender identity in the society. Thus, the author seems to uncover and condemn this existing fact and uses it as an inducement that motivates Marcela, first, to understand and stop blaming her mother and siding with her; and second, to point out that gender identity could be developed in both the ethnic community (*exosystem*) as well as the surrounding society (*macrosystem*). Thus from the feminist point of view, in this transition, ethnicity plays a small part since gender difference is more significant.

The American society as the fourth level in the developmental system is the context in which both heroines of the two novels put their attitudes, cultural beliefs and motivations into practice. This interactional process is accomplished in two directions; from Mexican traditional community (*exosystem*) to American modern society (*macrosystem*) and the reverse. Therefore, the interaction between the two ecological systems paves the way for the heroines to go back and forth in the process of acculturation and development.

THE GLOBAL & THE HISTORICAL: CHRONOLOGICAL SYSTEM

This section discusses the conception of the Mexican cultural heritage as own Mexican identity.

Marcela begins to become interested in her ethnic historical background which could be considered as a starting point for her to get into the depth of her Mexican culture. She sees California “which was once part of Mexico in the early 1800 A.C” as her “homeland” that “it was part of America-her country” (BL, p.110). Moreover, she starts seeking for her “historical identity” through knowing more about Chicano movement after she is impressed by her discussion with her aunt and Rogelio (two Mexican activists). Marcela is also inspired by Latino art such as Mexican paintings, so she decides on representing Latino culture and traditions nationwide through her creativity and within a modern framework such as producing an animation with a “Latino twist” (113). Eventually, Marcela decides to take a trip to Mexico aiming to find out more about her origin as a Mexican. This enables her to integrate with Latina culture and to build a part of her free self. Since Marcela has the mentorship of Lupe, one could not disregard the influence she probably has on her as her mentee. Therefore, they have the same attitude regarding the historical background.

CONCLUSION

Within the landscape of human development and corresponding acculturation, there are certain concepts and meanings that the individuals give to emotional practices, intentional social moves, interactions with friends or peers, and with the family or neighbours, as well as the fellow students or colleagues. The present article attempted to explore these concepts and meanings represented within two Mexican-American chick lit novels.

The first step in the developmental process is to distinguish and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the ‘self’. This is the starting point to reach out for self-differentiation which is unique for the individuals to find their own typical way of life. Only then converting from one culture to another is following the rule of ‘individualism’. Moreover, human development requires taking risks and recognising the protective sources within the self, community and the society. The challenging path of growth predicts the upcoming frustration and anger due to the insufficiency of the self. As a result, the attitudes towards the own and the host cultures could lead to a negotiation to examine the strengths and weaknesses and to an integration of both cultures into one discourse. This discourse contains the intention to change the images and to gain decisiveness and courage to adjust those images with the cultural-based ideas within the host society.

Thus, within the diaspora context of the chick lit genre, using the present framework is to step away from the previous feminist frameworks. This is to assert that women, who are central in chick lit narrative, could be changed and developed in relation to their different ecological environments. Although the present paper does take the gender issue into consideration, it emphasises more on the influences of different ecological levels on female identity development in a chronological order. In general, it is practical to transit from a traditional culture to a modern surrounding society and/or to fuse, progressively, the constructive characteristics of the two traditional and modern cultures through self-respect, self-improvement, love as well as trusting others.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The first novel has been reprinted in 2013 as the second edition.
- ² This connotes the Latina who are born and live in America, experiencing the process of merging the two cultures of Mexican and American who are more attached and adjusted to the American culture rather than own.
- ³ This term denotes the combination of two processes in which the psychological designates the first level of ecological developmental system, while the social refers to the outer world of the self.
- ⁴ The idea of “Becoming more Latina” or “more Mexican” stem from a need Marcela feels inside when she finds out that she is of mixed-blood. Although she has already accepted and known that she is Latina, she still thinks her identity is at risk. In order to prove her true ethnic identity to others specifically her family and relatives, she feels she needs to be a “better” (BL, p.18) member of the community. Hence, it entails getting acquainted and more attached to the Mexican and Latino traditional culture to be accepted completely in the family and community.

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