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Abstract: *Charles Rice-González's* Chulito *(2011) destabilises traditional masculine stereotypes by exploring ethnicity, sexuality, and spatial identity. The novel centres around a teen from the Bronx who struggles with the cultural expectations of Latino masculinity that often marginalise queerness. The novel emphasises the protagonist's need for authentic self-expression, which comes into conflict with heteronormative expectations, especially those rooted in spaces shaped by ethnic identity. Racial exclusion is seen in gay spaces, while Latino communities continue to often display deep-seated homophobic attitudes. Chulito's transformation from internalised denial to bold resistance reflects the psychological and societal pressures masculinity norms place on queer Latino adolescents. This study contributes meaningfully to the discourse on intersectionality within queer ethnic young adult literature.*

Keywords: masculinity, sexuality, ethnicity, Latino identity, queer, intersectionality, young adult literature.

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Masculinity in Conflict: Queer Latino Identity and Ethnic Belonging in Charles Rice-González's *Chulito*

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In recent years, the re-evaluation of masculinity in literature has captured scholarly interest, especially within marginalised narratives. Queer Latino narratives have become significant sites for rethinking gender and identity through the framework of intersectionality. Charles Rice-González's *Chulito* (2011) is one of the finest examples of this literary movement. The novel presents the journey of a sixteen-year-old Latino youth within the urban confines of the South Bronx, where heteronormativity defines one's masculinity and societal expectations fundamentally at odds with his emerging queer identity and his yearning for belongingness.

Chulito emerges as a culturally significant text by its candid depiction of queer adolescence within a racially and economically oppressed environment. Rice-González does not depict queer identity as conflicting with Latino identity, rather he integrates it into the protagonist's journey of self-discovery. This study argues that the novel critiques traditional Latino masculinity by exposing how identity, sexuality, and space converge in the protagonist's journey. With its focus on cultural dislocation, internalised homophobia, and peer conformity, the novel emerges as a key text in understanding the struggles and the reshaping of masculine identity of queer Latino adolescents.

This paper examines how gender identity is constructed through "stylized repetition of acts" shaped by prevailing cultural codes rather than being innate, drawing from Butler's theory of performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler 140). In Rice-González's novel, the eponymous character exemplifies this concept of performing hypermasculinity through acts like bodybuilding and adopting emotional stoicism to align with expectations within the Bronx. These performances also resonate with R. W. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity, which sustains patriarchal norms by preserving male authority and suppressing non-normative, particularly queer expression of masculinity. The novel explores the protagonist's personal struggle to conform to dominant gender expectations and adopting a queer identity.

Crenshaw in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989), illustrates, through a metaphor of traffic, how different aspects like sexuality, class, and race intersect to create compounded harm- "Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number

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of directions and, sometimes, from all of them" (Crenshaw 149). Through the lens of Crenshaw's intersectionality, the study shows how Chulito is subjected to compounded marginalisation on the dimensions of sexuality, class, and race in a Latino setting that privileges heteronormativity and ethnic cohesion. Chulito's emergence as a queer is more than personal revelation and it is also a transgression of social and spatial norms.

When examined through the perspectives of spatial and racial theory, queer identity is shaped within tangible and symbolic geographies. Jerry Eugene Scruggs Jr. asserts that "societies prioritize White queer identities and delegitimize Black queer identities" (Scruggs Jr. 97). Many gay spaces are primarily for white people and queer Latino people often feel alienated from their own communities as well as the mainstream LGBTQ+ environment. This alienation reveals that identity is not only constructed by inner conflicts, but also by exclusion from communal and social spaces of belonging. These imperative tools help understand how Chulito emerges as a dynamic site where concepts of ethnicity, sexuality and masculinity intersect and evolve.

Charles Rice-González's *Chulito* (2011) portrays the complexities of Latino masculinity as shaped by cultural norms, social performance, and peer pressure in the Bronx. The Puerto Rican protagonist, Chulito, adopts hypermasculinity to survive in a world that values heterosexuality, toughness, emotional stoicism, and aggression. From the very beginning of the novel, Chulito's daily routine reveals a conscious construction of masculine identity. He observes himself in the mirror while standing nude, flexing his growing muscles. He practices to be a "mean gangsta snarl," suggesting that he wants to follow an urban masculine archetype defined by dominance over body, the ability to intimidate, and stylish self-presentation (Rice-González 2). Judith Butler's theory of performativity can be applied to understand the construction of masculinity in this context. She argues that gender is not "a stable identity" but rather "is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 140). The repetition of his hypermasculine behaviours illustrates that Chulito's gender identity is constructed with inherent truths rather than repeated social performances in conformity to the expectations.

In the Bronx Latino community, cultural traditions deeply influence and regulate social behaviour. When Carlos, his childhood friend, embraces his gay identity, Chulito severs his ties with him despite their emotional ties. Here, heteronormativity acts as a regulatory force. One of his friends, Papo calls Carlos "a fucking faggot" and a "dirty pato" (Rice-González 5). This abusive language reflects toxic masculinity and internalised homophobia. Papo then "handed Chulito a bottle and gestured with his head to throw it" at his friend, Carlos (Rice-González 5). Succumbing to the pressure from his male peers to appease them, Chulito does it. Society always tries to devalue and humiliate queerness. Alejandro Haro argues that hegemonic masculinity, despite its ongoing criticism, is still relevant as it helps illuminate the ways queer Latinx men within a patriarchal order shaped by intersecting social

categories like sexuality, class, gender, and race. He focuses on "masculinities with queer Latinx men within a patriarchal society where femininities are subordinated or deemed 'less than' masculinities and to complicate this further, race, class, gender, and sexuality also play a role in where people are situated or positioned in this hierarchy" (Haro 30).

Surveillance among peers and group solidarity operate as tools of disciplinary as well as rewarding forces. Chulito secures an elevated status through traditional male rites, like the party organised by Kamikaze, symbolising his entry into adult masculinity in his community. This gathering serves not only as a celebration, but also as a ritual that validates his adherence to heteronormative, patriarchal values. Activities like displaying wealth, indulging in strip clubs, displaying flashy accessories, and macho posturing are expected expressions. These performances create a public persona and mask inner conflicts.

In the novel, Chulito's desire for his childhood friend, Carlos, is revealed through their close late-night conversations and his jealous reaction to his interaction with other men. Thus, Chulito disrupts the traditional notions of masculinity. However, the pressures of his surroundings prevent him from acting freely. Catalina tries to expose Chulito's avoidance of commitment in front of the neighbourhood, and she feels betrayed. Carlos is also ridiculed by the local boys. Chulito decides to be silent and does not resist; rather, he chooses to conform to the expected masculine norms, suppressing his true feelings.

The conflict between Chulito's public image and his private desires is intensified by intersecting forms of marginalisation. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality helps understand queer Latinos face dual marginalisations- racial marginalisation and societal homophobia. In Chulito's case, the Bronx becomes a paradoxical space- a nurturing ground and simultaneously a place of restrictions- where personal identity is shaped by traditional gender expectations and cultural allegiance.

Carlos's character provides a sharp contrast to Chulito's. Carlos openly expresses his queerness without shame and challenges traditional notions of Latino masculinity. He declares, "There's nothing wrong with me…. And I'm still the same Carlos. It's the neighbourhood that's fucked up" (Rice-González 4). It reflects his rejection of hypermasculinity and his determination to live authentically. R.W. Connell underscores that heterosexual men uphold power, while homosexual men are subordinated in contemporary European and American societies. She says, "The most important case in contemporary European/ American society is the dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men. This is much more than a cultural stigmatization of homosexuality or gay identity. Gay men are subordinated to straight men by an array of quite material practices" (Connell 78). This subordination is sustained through institutional practices that prioritise heteronormativity. To gain social status, Chulito resorts to violence and the denial of his true self. On the other side, Carlos finds strength in embracing who he is through self-acceptance. Carlos resists the

fragmentation of his self into acceptable and unacceptable parts and articulates his holistic understanding of identity. He tells Chulito, "But that's part of me, too, Chulito. On the one hand I'm different and on the other I am still the same. You want to relate to the me who's still the same and the fellas want to relate to the me who's different. I'm relating to all of me" (Rice-González 10). It is Carlos's bold declaration and indicates that Chulito is yet to achieve an integrated identity. This contrast between the two characters is the essence of the novel, which is more than a coming-of-age story. It is a journey toward visibility, focusing on the oppressive nature of hegemonic masculinity and silent suffering within the closet.

In Charles Rice-González's *Chulito*, the protagonist's personal transformation from denial to acceptance, suggestive of a broader redefinition of masculinity within a strictly gendered Latino urban context. At the beginning, Chulito internalises the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, like lifting weights, dealing weed, hanging out on the stoop, and putting on an exaggerated macho image to suppress his feelings for Carlos. This behaviour reflects hegemonic masculinity culturally privileges heterosexuality and suppresses queer identities through cultural dominance.

In the novel, a queer Puerto Rican protagonist navigating masculinity, sense of belonging, and identity. Through his emotional journey and longing for Carlos, Chulito defies the stereotypes of "real man" and redefines Latino masculinity within his cultural framework. Once Chulito wakes up, and suddenly shouts, lying on the bed, "CARLOS, I LOVE YOU AND I WANT TO BE WITH YOU, ON THE PIER AND EVERYWHERE" (Rice-González 257). This is his heartfelt confession of love to Carlos, and a departure from the hypermasculine ideals that he once internalised. When Chulito tells Carlos that he (Chulito) cannot be like him (Carlos), he is not only denying queerness but also avoiding vulnerability that society often associates with challenging traditional masculinity. At the later part of the novel, holding Chulito, Carlos tells him in his ear, "I love holding you, but I don't want to go around hiding it. I'm not ashamed of the way I feel for you" (Rice-González 257). Chulito holds him tighter and eventually admits after his emotional breakdown- "That's one of the main reasons why I like you so much" (Rice-González 257). It reveals both his vulnerability as well as strength. Chulito performs masculinity in different ways, where masculinity is reconfigured by embracing emotional openness and longing.

Reconstruction of Chulito's identity is moulded by the responses of his family members and friends. Chulito is very close to Kamikaze, who is his protector and role model. Kamikaze displays a hypermasculine image, like his tattoos, flashy car, designer outfits, and drug dealing. He is a leader and product of the Bronx environment. When Chulito confesses his love for Carlos, Kamikaze shows his emotional frankness that challenges the traditional depiction of urban male toughness, saying, "You still my boy" (Rice-González 277). He further says, "I'm glad you came clean about Carlos. You don't have to be hiding and sneaking anymore" (Rice-González 278). The moment highlights acceptance

that reflects the pressure and vulnerabilities ingrained in their performance of masculinity and male bonding. His mother Carmen comes to Chulito's love with Carlos, she says, "I love you, papito, but it's gonna need help. You are all I have and I want the best for you" (Rice-González 308). Chulito's mother's acceptance of his queerness disrupts the conventional expectations of rejection from Latina mothers within the Bronx setting. Her support empowers him to affirm his queerness as well as his ethnic belonging. In the end, Chulito's masculinity is defined beyond the macho-effeminate binary. Chulito defies both the limiting street code and prevailing stereotypes. He represents a new kind of masculinity that is characterised by loyalty, empathy, and true expression of self.

The study critically examines how queer Latino masculinity is constructed and regulated through performances in Charles Rice-González's *Chulito*. Through the lens of Judith Butler's performativity, Chulito's hypermasculinity emerges not as inborn but as a strategic attempt to conform to heteronormative expectations. It is evident in the initial denial of his romantic inclination for Carlos and reverence for Kamikaze. Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity helps understand how Chulito attempt to preserve his social status by upholding dominant ideals of straight male identity by marginalising queerness and his acceptance within the community by following heteronormativity. Carlos's identity is not limited to his sexuality, but it also encompasses racial as well as geographical dimensions. Crenshaw's intersectionality helps comprehend multiple marginalisations of the victim in the Bronx, where queerness is often labelled as white and is stigmatised as abnormal.

Charles Rice-González's *Chulito* (2011) emerges as a seminal text in queer ethnic literature by presenting a personal coming-out narrative and redefining masculinity beyond binary framework. It offers a transformative view of masculinity, much like sexuality, which is not fixed but rather fluid and shaped by social and cultural contexts, especially within marginalised groups where conformity to traditional expectations often suppress true emotions and desires.

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