

Alex Clifton

Prof. T

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The immigrant experience, systemic racism and intersectionality in 'La Jaula de Oro'

"La Jaula de Oro" (The Golden Cage) is a song by the Northern Mexican band 'Los Tigres del Norte'. This song is one of the most iconic pieces of work pertaining to Mexican-American culture, diving into the struggles of undocumented immigrants in the United States and the longing for their home which they can no longer go back to. The song delves into the story of an undocumented Mexican immigrant that has lived in the United States for ten years, along with his family. Financially they are well off, but this has come with an expensive mental price to pay. The "Golden Cage" is representative of his financial stability, being able to provide for his family, buy other material things and demonstrating his overall "success" in achieving the outline of the American Dream, but despite having built a successful life in the United States, the disconnection is related to him feeling like an outsider due to the psychological torture of racial discrimination, immigration status and the pain of not being in his beloved home country. The song provides an extensive, detailed explanation of the struggles of the immigrant experience specifically in the United States. Its meaningful lyrics, combined with the typical up-beat, 'norteño' tempo, allows the listener to understand the issues about cultural identity, racial struggles and class differences that a Mexican immigrant goes through while living "well" in the U.S.

This essay will analyze how 'La Jaula de Oro' is a representation of intersecting identities within Mexican-American culture, such as immigration status, class, and ethnicity. How it demonstrates the maintenance of racist legacies in the U.S. through the significance of "The Golden Cage." As well as a deep dive on the effects of racism and cultural identity and the intricate relationship that an immigrant has with achieving the 'American Dream'.

Immigration status, class and ethnicity is crucial to understanding the immigrant experience in the song, addressing the intersecting identities that are the main issues that the character is going through. Focusing on the distress that comes with being an immigrant in the U.S. creating a clear picture as to what it truly means to achieve the 'American Dream.'

To begin, Immigration status is one of the main fears that consumes the protagonist in this song. Every day he lives in fear of being deported. "Although I am a man of home, I hardly go out on the street, because I am afraid that they will find me, and they may deport me." This fear doesn't allow him to live a normal everyday life, marginalizing him from the rest of society in the United States. This creates a paradox within Mexican-American society, as his feeling of belonging to society is blocked by his immigration status, which causes vulnerability. Even if he keeps a stable job for a long period of time, because of his immigration status he is labeled as an outsider to society. This only deeply constructs his yearning to go back to Mexico.

The protagonist moved from Mexico to the U.S. to have a better life financially, class is the representation of what he was trying to improve in the new country. This speaks on one

reason why people immigrate, but the song complicates the overall idea of the financial success leading to the rise in class. His class position is a key identity in his struggle, having the material wealth to live a “good” life, he is still seen as an outsider. This limits his ability to enjoy a typical American life. The issue with this is that once immigrants find themselves in the United States, they are often given low-wage jobs that require intense labor that somewhat help them financially but don’t allow them to be able to move forward into jobs with better wages or high-status. The economic inequality is conjoined with social hierarchies present in the United States, creating a system that doesn’t allow an immigrant to move upward on the hierarchy chain.

Ethnicity is, in a way, the whole reason behind his entrapment in the experience of being an undocumented immigrant in the United States, being separated into this labeled group gives him the ability to feel alienated in the country.

The isolation into marginalized groups is caused by ethnicity, Mexican immigrants face exclusion and discrimination, they are only given value through their work and not really identified as full, well-rounded human beings. He is debating his place in a society that only values him for what he can financially provide, and not integrating him into everyday life due to his cultural differences. The protagonist feels torn apart from the culture within the United States, but also cannot return to Mexico, where he feels culturally identified. He is stuck between two worlds, to which he is both an outsider to.

These three intersecting identities shape the protagonist’s experience, detailing the struggles and intricate aspects pertaining to immigration status, class and ethnicity in the life of a Mexican immigrant in the United States.

Systemic racism is deeply embedded in governmental policies, cultural aspects and overall American society, which causes disadvantages to several minorities. The song depicts the way systemic racism is prominent in American culture by highlighting the racist experiences dealt with by immigrants. In “La Jaula de Oro”, the main character is financially thriving, but that doesn’t provide social recognition, and self-fulfillment or even a feeling of belonging in the country that he has spent a lot of his time in. The alienation that is felt by immigrants is not a product of their own fault, it is due to the racial exclusion that is demonstrated systematically through the treatment of minorities and second-class citizens. His race and immigration status makes sure that he does not feel included.

“The Golden Cage” is the representation of systemic racism demonstrated by the dedication to his job and labor, but how that is not appreciated by society. Their limited access to material success, although it seems very glorious and fulfilling, in reality all it offers is social and emotional isolation and detachment from not only their home country, but also from their own loved ones. At the beginning of his new life, he was excited and looking forward to starting from scratch, but then was met with disillusionment as he started realizing how trapped he felt and how he was only in the U.S. for one thing - economic success. He soon realizes that economic success does not equal social equality. The cage represents his yearning to go back to Mexico, which is like being in jail. He cannot go back to his home country and this is felt deeply at an emotional level.

The “Jaula de Oro” isn't just representing the economic status of the protagonist, it also symbolizes the racial barriers that he is presented with, not allowing him to fully integrate with American society. Although the song doesn't explicitly refer to racism as blatantly as skin color and cultural differences, it does examine the sociopolitical, psychological and emotional impact that consumes a Mexican immigrant's everyday life in the United States.

The social structures of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. have prevented the main character from forming a well-rounded social life, the “Jaula de Oro” not only physically restricts him from being free, but also from having a full understanding and connection to everyday American life. These structures are tied with race, and the ability for a Mexican immigrant to have access to the rights and privileges that an American citizen has, despite their contributions to American society. By criticizing the American Dream, the song also encapsulates the idea that the American Dream does not always equal happiness and self-fulfillment for immigrants due to the marginalization that is experienced.

This song provides a perspective on the “hidden” side of the “American Dream” and the myth that comes along with the financial success gained in the U.S. Immigrants go to the United States in order to create a better life for themselves, and their loved ones, than they could back in their home country. These expectations are met with financial success, but are contrasted by the unfair treatment, racial discrimination and overall fear of being deported. The financial security that the main character has acquired is a strong contrast to the feeling of isolation and loneliness that he feels while being away from his home country, and the life that he has known for most of his time on Earth. This illustrates the “model minority” myth by encapsulating the juxtaposition

of the undocumented immigrant being an asset to society, by working, paying taxes, contributing to the U.S. economy, but not being considered into the population.

The song also highlights the disconnection between the protagonist and his son, who is already accustomed to life in the United States and does not wish to explore his Mexican roots and identity. This only adds to the feeling of helplessness and unfulfillment felt by an undocumented immigrant. His children do not wish to speak Spanish, causing there to be a barrier between generations. They don't understand their parent's attachment to their home country, seeing it as old or "outdated." "My children don't talk to me. They have learned another language, and forgotten Spanish. They think like Americans, they deny that they are Mexicans even if they have my color" This has a heavy significance to the protagonist because Mexico is his beloved homeland that he may not be able to go back to, and his children don't realize this and appreciate it the same way that he does.

The "American Dream" is something that is attainable to immigrants in the United States but it often comes with harsh emotional consequences that take a toll on one's mental health and overall wellbeing.

Through one protagonist, "La Jaula de Oro" depicts the story of the struggle of thousands of immigrants and their everyday life in America. Being trapped in a cage where they are financially well-off, but trapped emotionally due to the systemic racism. This is a powerful song by Los Tigres del Norte, cultivating the harsh realities of undocumented immigrants in the

United States. It dives into the harsh emotional setbacks, racial exclusion, racialized systems and overall limitations that undocumented immigrants go through.