

The Creative Launcher

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Representation of Life, Death and Afterlife in Mexican Culture: An Analysis of *The Book of Life* and *Coco*

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Abstract

Mexican culture has a unique and rich tradition of representing life, death, and the afterlife in art and storytelling. This is particularly evident in the animated movies *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017), both of which draw heavily on Mexican folklore and mythology to explore these themes. In *The Book of Life*, the afterlife is depicted as a colourful and vibrant world, full of music, dancing, and celebration. The movie emphasizes the importance of honouring one's ancestors and remembering those who have passed away, while also acknowledging the pain and grief that comes with loss. Similarly, in *Coco*, the afterlife is depicted as a beautiful and mystical world, full of music and wonder. The movie explores the idea that death is not the end, but rather a continuation of life in a different form, and emphasizes the importance of maintaining a connection with one's ancestors and family history. Both movies also highlight the cultural significance of *Dia de los Muertos*, the Mexican holiday that celebrates the dead. The movies depict various traditions associated with the holiday, such as creating ofrendas (altars) to honour the deceased, decorating grave-sites with flowers and offerings, and preparing special foods and drinks. These traditions serve as a way to remember and connect with loved ones who have passed away, and to celebrate the cycle of life and death. *The Book*

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of Life and *Coco* both offer a rich and nuanced representation of life, death, and the afterlife in Mexican culture. Through their use of vibrant imagery, music, and storytelling, the movies celebrate the importance of family, community, and tradition, while also acknowledging the universal experiences of loss and grief, and this will be looked up in the paper.

Keywords- Life, Death, Afterlife, Culture, Multiculturalism, Vibrant, Festival, Community, Marginalization

In past few decades, the representation of Latinx character in the movies have increased in America, possibly due the increase in the population of the Latinx in U.S. In early cinema, it is found that Americans distinguished themselves from Latin-Americans on the basis of appearance and other factors like culture and language. Previously it can be observed that Latin-Americans were marginalised in the movies during early 1990s, but now the scenario has changed and in American Latinx culture is valued more, maybe to show more gratitude towards them or maybe due to political reasons.

Multiculturalism is an essential part of cinema since 1990s, and they focus more upon positive side of the culture which can create oneness among the citizens. In this research two movies have been selected, *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017), though both the movies are production of two different studios, but they convey the same idea. They predominantly show the Mexican culture and the famous festival *Día de Muertos* or The Day of Death, which is celebrated in the remembrance of the dead people of the family. There is merry making all around and people enjoy this festival with food, songs, music, and dance. In many cultures some festivals can be noticed which is somehow similar to *Día de Muertos* and is related to the death of ancestors and is celebrated happily.

Mexico is a country with rich cultural inhabitants, which has its impact on the festivals and also on life of the Mexicans. Music, colour, family bonding, different games, etc. are all integral part of this culture, which makes the culture rich. Reading about this culture one can come across various important elements, which help in enriching this culture. In this chapter

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those components would be focused along with the festival *Día De Muertos* on which this paper focusses.

Dia de los Muertos, also known as Day of the Dead, is a Mexican holiday celebrated on November 1st and 2nd. It is a time when families and friends gather to honour and remember their loved ones who have passed away. The holiday has pre-Columbian roots and was traditionally celebrated in the Aztec empire. When the Spanish arrived in Mexico in the 16th century, they incorporated some of their own traditions into the holiday, including the use of Catholic symbols such as crosses and candles. *Dia de los Muertos* is celebrated with various traditions and customs, including creating ofrendas (altars) in honour of the deceased, decorating gravesites with flowers and offerings, and preparing special foods and drinks. During the festival, it is thought that the spirits of the dead visit their loved ones in the living world. *Dia de los Muertos* is a joyous and vibrant celebration of life and the connections between the living and the deceased, despite its association with death. It is a time to reflect on the cycle of life and death, and to honour the memories of those who have passed away.

Today's *Día De Muertos* festivity is a mash-up of pre-Hispanic religious rites and Christian beliefs. Stanley Brands in his paper "Is There a Mexican View of Death" says, "It is said that Mexicans live side by side with death and are therefore able to confront death honestly and directly. They scorn death, they mock death, they are disdainful and irreverent in face of death" (*Ethos*, 128).

The Book of Life is an animated musical movie that tells the story of a young man named Manolo, who is torn between fulfilling his family's expectations of becoming a bullfighter and pursuing his true passion of playing the guitar and singing. The movie takes place during the Mexican holiday *Dia de los Muertos* and explores themes of love, death, and the power of storytelling. When Manolo and his childhood friend Joaquin both fall in love with the same woman, Maria, they embark on a journey through the Land of the Remembered and the Land of the Forgotten to prove their love for her. They meet different mythical creatures and impediments along the way, and Manolo learns that he has been designated by the rulers of the eternal to complete a hazardous mission. The movie features vibrant and colourful animation,

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as well as a mix of contemporary and traditional music. Ultimately, *The Book of Life* is a heart-warming tale about finding one's true identity and following one's dreams.

On other hand *Coco* is an animated movie that tells the story of a young boy named Miguel who dreams of becoming a musician, despite his family's generations-old ban on music. The movie takes place during the Mexican holiday *Día de los Muertos* and explores themes of family, memory, and the power of music. Desperate to prove his talent, Miguel finds himself magically transported to the Land of the Dead, where he meets his ancestors and sets out to uncover the truth behind his family's mysterious history. With the help of a charming trickster named Hector, Miguel embarks on an extraordinary journey to the Land of the Dead and discovers the importance of honouring one's ancestors and following one's dreams.

Coco features stunning animation, heart-warming characters, and an unforgettable soundtrack that includes original songs and traditional Mexican music. The movie is a celebration of Mexican culture and a beautiful tribute to the importance of family and memory. It is a touching and uplifting story that will resonate with audiences of all ages.

***Día De Muertos* and its significance in Mexican Culture**

The concept of life, death and afterlife is deeply rooted in Mexican Culture, and the selected movies best convey these ideas. Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* expresses his view on Mexican culture's acceptance of death and how life, death and afterlife are linked:

Mexicans accept death stoically; Europeans, by contrast, cannot easily or bravely confront the prospect of dying... For Paz, loneliness and solitude conspire to make the Mexican unfeeling, guarded, and defended in matters of death and life (*Ethos*, 129).

Día De Muertos is celebrated all over Mexico and now also in different parts of USA. The rituals are performed for two days, and there is a hidden message or prayer in both the days. On the 1st of November souls of young children or angels are remembered and this day is called *Día de los Angelitos*, whereas on the second day, that is, the 2nd of November at 12:00 A.M. souls of adults are remembered and this ceremony *Día de los Difuntos* and on the same day at noon all the dead are collectively remembered which is known as *Día de los Muertos*. Marigold, sugar skulls, gifts, belongings of the dead and their favourite things are kept and people enjoy by dancing, singing, and playing games.

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This tradition of celebrating *Día de Muertos* has started in the Mexican culture thousands of years ago with the Aztec, Toltec, and other Nahua people, who considered mourning the dead disrespectful. Mexicans add lots of things in this two-day festival, which has its own significance. The most familiar symbols of *Día de los Muertos* are calacas and calaveras (skeletons and skulls), which appear everywhere during the holiday, as parade masks, as dolls, as sweets and candies. Calacas and calaveras are almost always portrayed as enjoying life, often in fancy clothes and entertaining situations.

In Mexican culture people are found to be obsessed with the dead, and their way of celebrating death is unique in itself. Most of the people around the globe get confused in *Día De Los Muertos* and *Halloween*, both the festivals are celebrated during same time but they both convey different ideas. In *Halloween* ghosts are obviated whereas in *Día De Los Muertos* death is celebrated. In the selected movies the same notion of celebrating death, by remembering the dead ones and following the tradition of Mexican culture can be witnessed. There has always been conflict between Mexicans and Americans regarding these two festivals. Americans earlier never accepted *Día De Los Muertos* as a Mexican festival and was considered to be part of *Halloween*. Stanley Brandes states:

In a multicultural context, such as that which prevails on the North American continent today, national identity is shaped by commonly accepted binary oppositions. Contrasting views of death are just one among many ways in which we distinguish Mexicans from Anglos. And yet, a number of mortuary customs in the United States appear to challenge this point of view. (*Ethos* 131)

In this paper culture has been focused upon and it has been shown that what actually rituals and tradition mean to Mexican people. The selected movies are animated movies produced by two different producing houses but same crutch is found in both the movies.

***Día De Muertos* and Selected Movies**

Día De Los Muertos is the famous festival of celebrating death and to show the acceptance of death as an integral part of life. The concept of death is coherent in Mexican society and people rejoice death. Selected movies *The Book of Life* and *Coco* both deal with three different phases of the soul: life, death and afterlife.

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The idea of *Día De Los Muertos* is represented in both the movies but in different ways. In *Coco* it could be witnessed that, when a person dies s/he is sent to the Land of Dead, where their souls are kept in form of skeleton and are allowed to travel to the Land of Living during the festival. In this movie two different concepts of “the remembered” and “the forgotten” can be traced, and those who are still being remembered by their family members are allowed to go to the Land of Living. In the movie, the character Héctor is not allowed to travel through the Marigold Bridge, whereas “the remembered” are permitted.

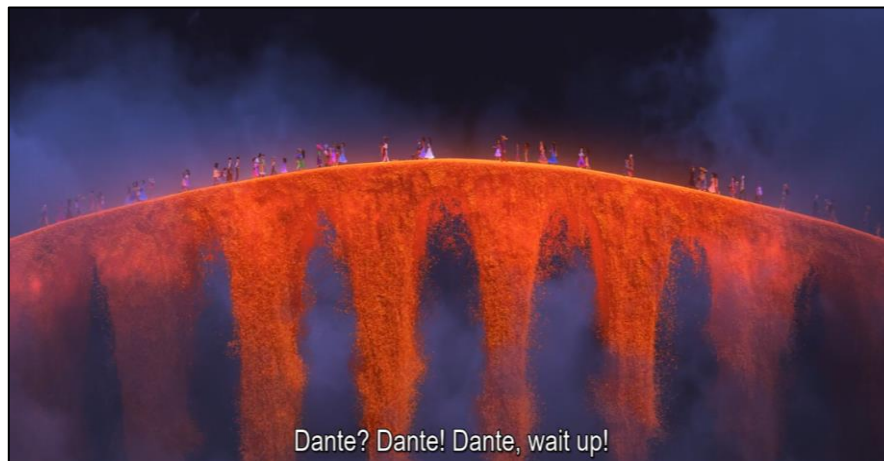


Figure 1, Screenshot of Marigold Bridge taken from movie *Coco* by Pixar.



Figure 2, Héctor gets trapped in Marigold Bridge as no one remembers him on *Día De Los Muertos*, screenshot from movie *Coco* by Pixar.

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The two pictures shown above are from the movie *Coco*; the first one shows happy dead who are permitted to move, suggesting that the "Remembered" can easily cross the "Marigold Bridge," while the second shows Héctor getting stuck among marigold petals, suggesting that he has been abandoned by his family. Marigold has its key importance in Mexican culture, and distinctively in *Día De Los Muertos*. *Coco* shows us different aspects of the festival. In the movie people are found celebrating happily the festival at the cemetery of their ancestors, face painting as done during the festival can be noticed, skull candies and other food items are seen and pierced paper which is an important part of the festival has been used in the movie. Another important element is marigold and the petal of marigold and love from the family is an integral part of the movie and helps Miguel return back to the Land of Livings and helped Héctor to be remembered by his family members.

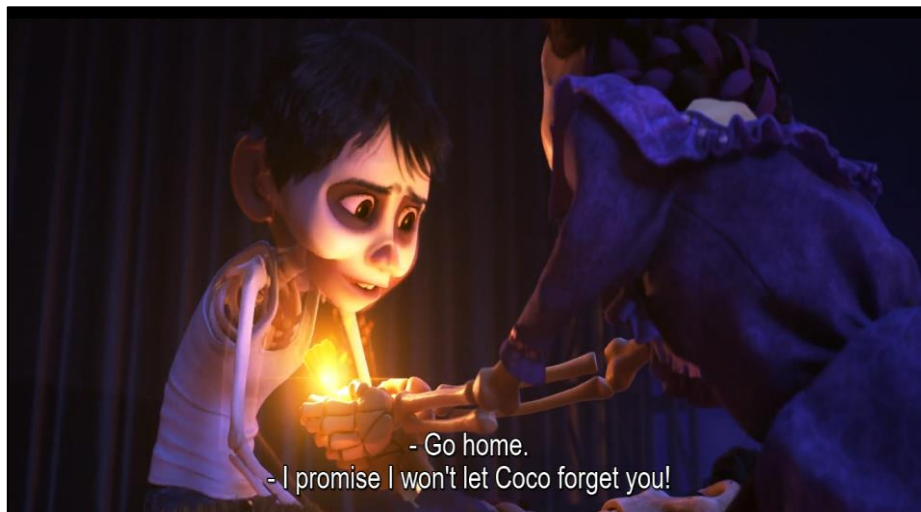


Figure 3, Screenshot from *Coco* by Pixar Studios shows Miguel's great grand parents giving him Marigold petal as blessing to return to Land of Living.

Whereas, in the other selected movie *The Book of Life*, *Día De Los Muertos* has been shown through a different perspective. This movie also shows the culture but in a dissimilar manner, two gods who rule over the Land of the Remembered and the Land of the Forgotten: La Muerte (Kate de Castillo) and Xibalba (Ron Perlman) respectively. These gods interfere in the life of humans and play with the soul of human life. In this movie, too, a man's journey

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from life to death and afterlife is shown along with the interference of supernatural elements and a mythological story.



Figure 4, Screenshot of conversation between La Muertos and Xibalba taken from movie *The Book of Life* by Reel FX Creative Studios.

The Book of Life deals with the festival Day of Dead in the same manner *Coco* deals, but here rivalry is found to be a dominating factor. As directors of both the movies belong from two different cultures, but they have tried to portray what they felt should be more focused. In *The Book of Life* myths is incorporated along with culture, which shows director's more closeness towards Mexican culture or society; whereas in *Coco*, Day of the Dead is more focused and small details of the festival have been shown.

There are various elements which are similar in both the movies along with depiction of music, fight against family for passion, *Día De Los Muertos*, dead family members coming on Land of Livings, good versus evil, supportive family, etc. In both movies the main protagonists are passionate about singing but their family was against it and music comes out as the main reason around which plot rotates.

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Figure 5, Miguel's love for music, screenshot taken from movie *Coco*.



Figure 6, Manolo sings a song to defeat death (Toro, i.e. bull) and return back to Land of Living, taken from *The Book of Life*.

The first picture resembles Miguel's love for music, which changed his destiny and he entered the Land of Dead, while the second picture shows Manolo's love and dedication for music which helps him come out from the Land of Dead. Apart from this one thing which could be noticed in both the pictures are 'marigold petals' which is an important symbol of Mexican culture and festival Day of the Dead. Mexicans believe that the soul needs to be joyful even after death, and for that they offer things at cemetery on The Day of Death. This point has been noticed by Patricia Fernandez Kelly in her paper *Death in Mexican Folk Culture* where she articulates her idea:

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The finding of offerings that more profoundly excites the imagination, as the custom seems to support the belief in the continuation of the daily needs of man even after his death. Accepting the continuing need for human essentials, an acknowledgment of the permanence of life, seems also to suggest that whatever follows death must be explained in accordance with familiar experiences. (1974, *American Quarterly*)

As in Mexican concept of life death and afterlife is found, in the same way these movies have done justice with this concept. Though contact with death may seem unsettling but it helps in reducing feelings of anxiety regarding death. In a paper “Death in Mexican Folk Culture” Patricia Fernandez Kelly depicts her idea about death as:

It is of central importance to realize that far from defining an objective reality, categories of time shape the way in which human beings organize reality. The idea of death in the pre-Hispanic civilizations of Mexico and in the contemporary folk culture cannot be fully comprehended without some mention of the peculiarities that time-notions have in specific contexts. For the natives of Mexico, time was a never-ending succession of cycles separated from one another by death and the destruction of the world, the order of which could only be restored through sacrifice. (1974, *American Quarterly*)

The movies *The Book of Life*, and *Coco*, productions of two different studios convey very similar ideas on the concept of life, death and afterlife. They predominantly depict the Mexican culture and the famous festival *Día de Muertos* or The Day of Death, which is celebrated in the remembrance of the dead people of the family. Also the festival of *Día de Muertos* is quite different from Halloween and should not be mixed up just because of the timing of celebrations and the characters celebrated in the truest spirit of multiculturalism. While the one tries to do away with ghosts and reminisces of death the other celebrates it making it more acceptable. To show the relativity of the findings about the movie, figures have been used to show the dialogues or the conversation in between the characters.

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