IDENTITY QUESTS ANDDIFFICULTIES OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOG IN IMMIGRANT LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article examines the identity and communication difficulties that immigrants or their descendants face when trying to adjust to their new home while preserving their old cultural values. As it tries to offer a general perspective of these issues, the present article relies on a rich but synthesized critical framework and borrows examples from well-known texts such as: Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club, Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent", Zadie Smith's White Teeth, Monica Ali's Brick Lane, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's "The Teacher", Yiyun Li's A Thousand Years Of Good Prayers and Hari Kunzru's "Raj, Bohemian" in order to facilitate the understanding of the existence in multiple an in-between spaces.

Keywords: alterity, etnic identity, gender, intercultural dialog, language.

1. Introduction

Beginning with the 1980s, there emerged, within the field of literary studies, a growing interest in the process of assimilation (and resistance to assimilation), as well as in the numerous identity-based binaries such as native vs. foreigner, tradition vs. new opportunities, nationality vs. individuality, etc. and the way in which they get negotiated between different languages, accents and life-styles. The problems experienced by the immigrants living in-between spaces have become reference subjects leading to the recognition of a new literary genre – Immigrant literature. The texts analyzed in this article do not only talk about immigrant issues but are also written by immigrant authors, revealing a fictional composition woven with biographical and real life experiences – a common feature of Immigrant literature. Moreover, as this article is based on seven critically acclaimed texts, we can highlight the perpetuation in time and space of a series of similar issues that immigrants are confronted with.

The first part of this article aims to explore the concept of intercultural dialog and the difficulties it implies in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story, *The Third and Final Continent*, selected from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The intercultural dialog does not take place between people coming from different countries but also between generations and genders and it can be successful despite its various constrains, if people interact at a more profound level and find a common ground. In the second part, although the difficulties of the intercultural dialog continue to persist, our focus turns towards the female representations in the recent diasporic London while analysing Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) from a comparative perspective. We engage to present an essential theoretical framework, which involves terms such as 'difference', global feminisms, gender inequality, race and culture. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's short story, "The Teacher" (2008), makes the object of the third part of this article as enable us to identify two alternative readings which take into account: 1) alterity/ Orientalism and 2) gender problems. Whereas, Yiyun Li's *A Thousand Years Of Good Prayers* (2005) and Hari Kunzru's "Raj, Bohemian" (2008) help us reflect in the last part of this article, upon the way in which translation or actually translatability generates a better understanding of different languages and cultures.

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2. Difficulties of Intercultural Dialog

Texts such as Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and Jhumpa Lahiri's short story, "The Third and Final Continent", from the 1999 collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, can very well exemplify the concept of intercultural dialog and its difficulties. They reveal the problems Chinese and Indian immigrants face while trying to adjust to American life style and communicate not only with the members of the majority group but also with those of their own ethnic groups. Working within a theoretical frame based on the ideas promoted by Steven Vertovec in *Transnationalism* (2009), Azade Seyhan in *Writing outside the Nation* (2000), Michael Cronin in *Translation and Identity* (2006), and Christina Schaffner in *Translation as a Political Act: Gender and Translation* (2006), we can have a clearer image of the interaction between various groups of people, deeply marked by the implications of their class, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, education, as well as between different generations.

While talking about immigrants and transculturalism, Steven Vertovec argues that diasporic communities continue "to look back to their place of origin" (13), and that their members do not only try to adapt to their new home but are also extremely interested in preserving their past. The process of emigration does not often involve a total rupture of the homeland and the relatives that remain back there. Many families maintain contact and migrants often go back home temporarily or permanently. They sent money (as a form of investment or consumption), make associations to help certain communities from their homeland, remain politically involved (by raising funds, lobbying and voting), and open businesses in their homeland and/or new host country etc. The members of an ethnic group, however, face long-term changes which influence the way they perceive their environment and the relations between themselves and the others. The most important transformation they go through is the acquisition of a foreign language, which implies the understanding of a new culture and the preservation and translation of the old one.

According to Seyhan, language embodies and enacts the totality of our experiences of the world (6). We participate in human experiences through a dialog sustained by shared tradition, and interpret the other in an effort to understand it. Therefore, language offers its speakers a framework of reality and identity they can appropriate in their own way. Nevertheless, the notion of 'intercultural dialogue' is "a two-way, ongoing communication between peoples and communities that enjoy equal negotiating powers" (*ibidem*). It has to celebrate the difference between people and help them find a common ground, in-between spaces, "neither here/ nor there" (*ibidem*). This consensus implies, as Michael Cronin states, translation or the descent "from each language, down to the common base of human communication – the real but as yet undiscovered universal language – and then to re-emerge by whatever particular route is convenient" (43). Translation becomes, implicitly, a subject to power relations concerning not only ethnic and national differences but also gender or generations. In the same line of ideas, Christina Schaffner underlines that in gender terms, this would entail that "writing is masculine, original, authoritative, paternal, truthful, lawful, natural", whereas "translation is viewed as the feminine, the copy, derivative, unlawful, unnatural, artificial, and false" (56).

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Third and Final Continent*, focus on the difficulties of the intercultural dialogue which bring together individuals who face not only ethnic but also gender and age differences. Amy Tan's novel consists of sixteen interlocking stories about the lives of four immigrant women, their Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters who formed the Joy Luck Club and gathered constantly

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in order to play mah jong. Their dialogue unites two continents Asia and America, two cultures, two historical periods and issues concerning both women and men. Jhumpa Lahiri's short story focuses mostly on the relation between a Bengali immigrant and his 103 years old American host who reminds him of his own mother and his efforts to adapt to his new environment. Unlike Tan's characters, the protagonist of this short story does not embody the result of a direct migration (Asia-America). As he also has to send five years of his life in Great Britain, Lahiri's Bengali immigrant carries with him the cultural mark of its former colonizer.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the difficulties triggered by the intercultural dialogue are resumed by the story of the Chinese woman and the swan which Suyuan Woo and later her daughter, Jing-Mei "June" Woo, keep repeating. The woman hoped to have an ambitious daughter who would make something good out her life. She would have the advantage of the American culture and "nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch", "nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English"; and she will never suffer (Tan 17). However, as years pass, she has an American daughter who "grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow" and the woman feels tormented by her past and not worthy enough to give her daughter the swan feather which carried all her "good intentions" (*ibidem*). By the end of the novel, the women succeed to put in order their lives to make peace with themselves and with all the rest of the characters.

The Third and Final Continent points out the difficulties of the intercultural dialogue through a puzzling repetitive conversation the Bengali tenant has with his American host:

> *The woman bellowed, "A flag on the moon, boy! I heard it on the radio! Isn't that splendid?" "Yes, madame." But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead she commanded, "Say 'splendid'!" I was both baffled and somewhat insulted by the request. […] I said nothing. "Say 'splendid'!" the woman bellowed once again. "Splendid" I murmured. I had to repeat the word a second time at the top of my lungs, so she could hear. I am soft-spoken by nature and was especially reluctant to raise my voice to an elderly woman whom I had met only moments ago, but she did not appear to be offended. If anything the reply pleased her because her next command was: "Go see the room!"*(Lahiri 93).

As the tenant begins adjusting to his new home and implicitly to his new country, he starts to cherish the moments spent with the old woman and does not find her lines as patronizing as he used to. He even starts to care about her, although she seems immune to his friendly gestures and cold when he leaves her. By the end of the short story, the Bengali man finds out that the old woman considers him a gentlemen and his wife a lady. Therefore, one may say that the two characters representing two different worlds succeed in finding a common ground of interaction and in understanding each other.

2.Female Representations in Diaspora

In the 1990s, feminists of the Third Wave began to realise that the slogan 'sisterhood is global', which had been used two decades before, in order to underline "the centrality of an international dimension to feminist practice" had failed (Brah 84). Faced with the reality that there are major differences in the social circumstances of different groups of women and that their interests may often be contradictory, recent feminists underlined the existence of "different womanhoods" (Brah 84). However, before developing special strategies to give women greater economic independence and political control, make child care and domestic work easier, suppress patriarchal violence, allow women control over their own

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sexuality and freedom of choice over childbearing, we should begin, as Avtar Brah suggests, by understanding "the ways in which issues of class, racism, gender and sexuality are interconnected and inscribed within the global social order" (*ibidem*).

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) clearly highlight these important issues by portraying several women coming from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and describing their struggles to adapt to the ups and downs of the British society. The first novel brings to the forefront five complex female characters: Irie, a mixed race teenager, her mother, Clara, a Jamaican woman, her grandmother, Hortense, who is a devouted Jehovah's Witness, but also Alsana Iqbal, a Bangli Muslim and Joyce Chalfen, a Jewish horticulturalist and writer. The second book focuses on the struggles of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman, who moves to London at the age of 18 in order to marry Chanu, a man much older than her. Just like the women portrayed by Smith, Nazneen lives in a modern society but continues to remain imprisoned by the strict rules of her community. As she is confronted with the rebellious behaviour of her daughters, her husband's crises of pride, and the problems of her sister, Hasina, who remains back home, in Dhaka, Nazneen starts to question her fate.

The social reality of these women is constituted as Avtar Brah claims "around a complex articulation of the economic, political, and cultural modalities which mark the interrelationship between 'race', class, ethnicity, and gender" and in order to understand these issues "it is necessary to analyse the socio-cultural processes of colonialism and imperialism, the historical basis of the international division of labour, and the position of women in the global economy" but also the "issues of politics and identity"(67). All female characters depicted by Zadie Smith and Monica Ali, besides Joyce Chalfen, are members of the working class, yet they deal with economic and social aspects differently, especially because of the differences born out of their skin colour, ethnicity, education and, more importantly, gender. These issues make them all extremely vulnerable and qualify them as marginal, but curiously enough, they also endow them with power, positioning them in various power relations.

According to Avtar Brah, gender relations are as well interconnected with "class, racism, ethnicity or sexuality in the construction of capitalist, imperialist, or indeed any other form of social relation, and what type of identities are inscribed in the process" (67). In the same line of ideas, concepts such as 'capitalism', 'patriarchy' or 'imperialism' fail to signal "independent, albeit interlocking systems" and signify, instead, "contingent relations of power" (*ibidem*). They end up becoming "themselves patriarchal, taking varying forms in different contexts" (*ibidem*). In other words, women are dominated by men, (no matter whether they are their fathers, husbands or sons) who, throughout the centuries, have been entitled by laws and traditions to exercise their power over them. This aspect is exemplified by Zadie Smith especially through Alsana Iqbal, the Bangli Muslim wife who lives a poor life, sewing clothes in order to pay the bills and has to deal her husband's infidelity and the vagaries of their sons, Magid and Millat, who are constantly rebelling against parental interference. In Monica Ali's novel, we can see that Nazneen, who has an obedient and loyal behaviour deliberately, accepts her father's decision to have her married to an older man and have her taken away from home. Fate takes Nazneen from the Bangladeshi village she used to live and brings her to London, in a country where the only words she knows are "sorry" and "thank you". For years, she does the house work, cares for her conceited husband, and bears him children. Obediently, she carries her unhappiness in silence, secretly whispering to herself "I know what I would wish" (Ali 30). Gradually, she begins to question her destiny, falls in love with a young man and learns the complexity of free choice. On the other hand, her sister, Hasina, who has always had a more rebellious personality, ignores her parents' rules and rushes into a "love marriage" which ends in

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distress. Not willing to abbey her violent husband, she flees him and becomes an outcast for her society. Other female characters which seem in a more desirable or advantageous position, only because they are white, middle class, and have an education are also caught within the boundaries of the patriarchate. For instance, Joyce Chalfen, in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, despite her profession and relative freedom, is still very much connected to the domestic sphere of live, an implicitly to the patriarchate, as she continues to work as a part-time house wife.

Going even further and analysing the interracial gender relationships, we should also take into account Robert J. C. Young's controversial and bracing 1995 study, *Colonial Desire*, which proves that today's theories on post-colonialism and ethnicity are remarkably close to the colonial discourse of the Victorian Age. In Young's view, we have not been really separated from the racialized thinking of the past and we are actually operating in "complicity" with historical ways of perceiving "the other", both sexually and racially (87). Apart from defining race and ethnicity as "cultural, as well as political, scientific and social constructions" (*ibidem*), the author also embraces Hyam's idea that "One thing is certain… Sex is at the very heart of racism" (qted. in Young 91). In other words, racism increases women oppression. A proper example in this case, can be found in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Here, Clara Jones, born Bowden, a gorgeous and captivating Jamaican woman missing her front teeth (or symbolically, her own roots), starts by rejecting the precepts preached by Jehovah's Witness, which, instead, her mother deeply internalises. What is surprising, however, is that eventually she obeys tradition despite marring a white, unimpressive, older man, named Archie Jones. Their interracial marriage reveals his domination over her and represents a cause for some of the problems their author, Irie, has to experience later on. Born in a mixed family, she cannot find a place among the white and nor among the black people and feels alienated by British society she lives in. Only after sleeping with both Magid and Millat, and giving birth to a daughter whose father can never be known, as the twins have exactly the same DNA, can Irie find a room of her own; one that is far from being conventional. Moreover, her baby girl seems to embody a fresh start as she embodies the beginning of a new race mixture, one that has no patriarchal ties, no strings attached.

3. Alternative Readings of Ethnicity and Gender

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's short story, "The Teacher" published in *The New Yorker*, in 2008, contributes to our analysis of the difficulties of the intercultural dialog as it offers two alternative readings of its text. The first one is generated by the idea of otherness and Orientalism whereas the second one derives from all the gender problems Jhabvala's characters are confronted with. Many theories have been produced in order to explain the concepts of 'otherness' and 'gender' and big names can such as Heidegger, Sartre or Beauvoir can be evoked here, yet our analysis is deeply influenced by some of the ideas contoured by Emmanuel Lévinas, and later on popularized by Edward Said.

'Alterity' or 'otherness' cannot be summarised, according to Emmanuel Lévinas, in "the fact that the other who resembles me has, in his characteristics, another attribute" (49). The other is not necessarily different from me only because he has other properties, physical characteristics, or is positioned in another place in space. Alterity, Lévinas says, "is not justifiable logically, it is logically indiscernible. The identity of the I is not the result of any knowledge whatsoever: I find myself without looking for myself. You are you and I am I." (50). At the same time, alterity is not something that we encounter as from the very start we are not indifferent to the other and we do not live all alone. Attitudes such as indifference or nonindifference (even love) adopted in relation to the other confirm our interest or preoccupation in him. The other, however, may not necessarily refer only to an individual but also to a group of people and therefore the attributes of an individual might extend over

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the entire group he is part of, despite each one of us is unique. The generalization of alterity may lead to serious ethical problems. Used in reference to a group which is excluded or stigmatized, the notion of 'altery' constructs social roles as people define themselves in relation to the others. The dominant West has always perceived the East, or the colonized, in a way which corresponds to its own interests, whereas the image of "the Oriental" has been enveloped by stereotypes. Thus, a Westerner refers to an Oriental in terms such as "his primitive state, his primary characteristics, his particular spiritual background" (Said 120). The Oriental is ugly, scary, dishonest, unreliable, evil, and yet, exotic and extremely attractive.

In "The Teacher", Dr. Chacko is an intriguing character who seems to embody all these traits. Right from the beginning, he is seen as "the Other", the stranger who is totally different from the narrator, her friends Betty and Maeve or his followers. His nationality is really suggestive: "They had taken him for an Italian, a Sicilian, until they discovered that he was partly Indian, the name Chacko coming from a Syrian Christian community in the south of India. Moreover, he is also thought to be partly Russian— or had he only lived in Russia?" (Jhabvala 2008)

His skin colour, his life in the cottage, his attraction to vegetation and his showers in the waterfall reveal his primitive side. This approach to nature makes him both attractive and repugnant. He acts as a guru who preaches a sort of a life philosophy or wisdom which hypnotizes his followers. However, the narrator cannot understand it and the reader will eventually perceive Dr. Chacko as a misleading person whose teachings lack value, whose books do not sell and who takes advantage of those around him.

The discrepancy between his physical appearance and the language he speaks also emphasis the idea of falsehood:

> *He was too dark to be Anglo-Saxon, and his teeth were very strong and white, the most alive thing in his lean face. He spoke English fluently—more than fluently. Under the layers acquired through much moving around in the world, there remained—like a canal still flowing in the oldest part of a city—the flat accent of the English Midlands. I had noticed this at his workshop, where he had deliberately stressed it—as though its homely and provincial sound would bring his message closer to the earth*. (*ibidem*)

Everything related to him suddenly becomes a fraud encouraged by the Westerners who meet him and seemed eager to recreate his image. For instance, he admits that a woman bought him the Ph.D. title from a small college in India (his home - a place where many illegal things are possible). His own actions seem to have no excuse. He takes money for his pointless workshops, lives in the narrator's cottage without paying a rent, eats for free, builds several shelves for his own books and demands money in exchange, takes his host's silverware and disappears. The story, however, offers only one version of the events which happens to be that of a Westerner. On the other hand, Dr. Chacko represents "the Other", "the Oriental" who helps the narrator and her friends perceive themselves as much better, superior spirits. They are incapable of understanding him and their wish to help him actually reflects their desire to change him, to model him according to their own principles and desires.

The second alternative reading of this short story focuses, as we have previously mentioned, on gender issues. As Simone de Beauvoir stated in her famous book "The Second Sex" (1948): "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" (2:13); gender is socially acquired and psychologically internalised. In the same line of ideas, her follower, Judith Butler, presents gender as "a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real"

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which constructs itself within a "framework of intelligibility" or within "disciplinary regimes" through repeated bodily performances (Butler viii). For her 'performativity' is "that discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names"- femininity, masculinity (*ibidem*). For centuries, due to different laws, customs, religious precepts, men have been thought that they were superior and had authority over the women who were inferior and vulnerable. But, gender roles - Butler reminds us - cannot be switched, especially since they are products of 'performativity'. In Jhabvala's short story gender roles are, indeed, reversed. The narrator is a divorced old lady with a nice property in the countryside and a good income which allow her to have an independent life style. She acts as a self empowered woman and lives with the impression that she is above all the other characters. The male protagonist, Dr. Chacko, is deprived of the specific masculine attributes. He is not able to take care of his family back in India and he waits for women, such as the narrator and her friends, to provide for him. The female characters shelter him, feed him, buy his academic title, organize his workshops and publish his book while he seems unable to handle his life all alone. Surrounded by nature, he does not reveal male traits such as physical strength or habits. Moreover, he does not even encourage a love affair with the narrator or Maeve. On the other hand, he might be a Teacher, indeed, as he indirectly teaches women to mobilize, discover their own powers and achieve certain goals. The scene when he steals his host's silverware reminds the reader of Jean Valjean, from Hugo's Les Misérables. Jhabvala's female narrator assumes the role of the kind-hearted old clergyman, Bishop Myriel, who forgives the thief and offers him the silverware. This parallel renders women as superior not only from a socio-economic point of view but also from a philosophical and a spiritual one. They can condemn Dr. Chacko, even send him to prison but, instead, they take a wiser decision and chose a peaceful life continuing their charity work.

Taking into account the alternative readings of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's short story, "The Teacher", we underline the performativity and implicitly the changeability of alterity; ethnicity and gender being the result of a complex equation.

4. The Function of Translation

Yiyun Li's *A Thousand Years Of Good Prayers* (2005) and Hari Kunzru's "Raj, Bohemian" (2008) help us reflect the way in which translation or actually translatability generates a better understanding of different languages and cultures. Translation is usually associated with the conversion from one language into another, be it foreign, technical, professional, or otherwise. We live in a very dynamic world where many different cultures have come into close contact with one another, calling for a mutual understanding. According to Wolfgang Iser translation takes place when the specificity of the culture encountered can be associated to something that is familiar. In this respect, he adds that:

> *a foreign culture is not simply subsumed under one's own frame of reference; instead, the very frame is subjected to alterations in order to accommodate what does not fit. Such a transposition runs counter to the idea of the hegemony of one culture over the other, and hence the notion of translatability emerges as a counter-concept to a mutual superimposing of cultures.* (13)

Yiyun Li's *A Thousand Years Of Good Prayers* reveals the life of a Chinese father, Mrs Shi, who travels to the USA in order to help his divorced daughter overpass a difficult period of her life. Once he arrives there, he becomes a totally different man who enjoys cooking and talking. He befriends to an old lady from Iran and despite the fact that they know only a few English words, and usually use their mother tongues to continue their ideas, they are able to understand each other and share their joys and sorrows:

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"America good country"she says often. "Sons make rich money."[…]
"My daughter, she make lots of money, too."
"I love America. Good country for everybody."
"Yes, yes. A roket scientist I am in China. But very poor. Rocket scientist, you know?" Mr. Shi says, his hands making a peak.
"I love China. China a good country, very old" the woman says.
"America is young country, like people."
"America a happy country."(Li 187)

On the other hand, his conversations with his daughter take place only in Chinese and are cold and very limited. Mrs Shi starts to believe she might have a sort of a breakdown because of her divorce and tries to talk to her in order to better understand her behaviour. Finally, he discovers that it was his daughter, the one who asked for divorce and not her ex-husband, that she was in love with a Romanian and changed significantly becoming a totally different person whenever she used English.

In the USA, Mrs Shi's daughter understood that Chinese culture and especially her mother tongue made her unable to communicate her feelings: "Our problem was I never talked enough for my husband […] The more he asked me to talk, the more I wanted to be quiet and alone. (Li 198-199)". By adopting a new language and a new culture she believes that she can substantially improve herself: "Baba, if you grew up in a language that you never used to express your feelings, it would be easier to take up another language and talk more in the new language. It makes you a new person"(*ibidem*). Yet, she fails to observe the changes in her father's behaviour, which start to take place the moment he is exposed to a new environment, life style and the use of English. Living in a Communist society where even innocent conversations lead to persecutions and personal tragedies, Mrs Shi and his family were forced to obey to a rigorous conduct. America, on the other hand, offers them the chance to speak and express their opinions freely; to reinvent themselves.

Hari Kunzru's "Raj, Bohemian" focuses on the clash between two opposite cultures: the hip and the buzz. The protagonist-narrator is a nameless New York trend setter, who discovers that many of his trendy lifestyle friends are actually Buzz Agents, who try to recommend and sell him various products or services. The character feels aggressed not only by their messages, indirect commercials, but especially by the despicable way in which they spread these messages. He meets the first buzzer at one of the extravagant parties organized by his friend, Sunita. Raj is an attractive man who brings a new sort of Vodka and transforms the people who drink it into adverts by taking their pictures and publishing them on the internet. Despite the fact that all his friends are not bordered by this event, the protagonist feels used and betrayed. Later on, many other friends such as Thanh, Constantine, Otto, Wei Lin, who have different backgrounds, seem to share the same buzz culture and assault the main character. Although they talk to each other their communication is reduced due to the lack of mutual comprehension. For instance, when he talks to Thanh, she cannot or does not want to understand his point of view:

"You came out pretty well" she said. "I like your glam-rock pout".
"But look at it. The bastard made us into an adevert."
"Are we credited?"
"Only our first names."
"Shame. And I look so drunk."
"I suppose you – no, no, no! That's not the point. I mean, don't you feel used?"

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"What are you upset about? You don't look nearly as wasted as me. It's hardly fair. You were downing those shots all night."(Kunzru 111)

This lack of understanding makes the protagonist go crazy and reject all the products that he used. Eventually, he throws all his things to garbage and plans to kill Raj Bohemian. When he meet Raj, however, the protagonist abandons his initial plan and his fight against consumerism. He accepts to share a common language with Bohemian: "«Is there anything going on tonight?» He smiled and started to tell me about a party, a guest list, a secret venue. I took out my phone to punch in the contact number" (Kunzru 115).

Translation or translatability mediates communication not only between people speaking foreign languages but also between those speaking the same language but coming from different cultures. Yiyun Li's and Hari Kunzru's texts prove that a great difficulty of dialog is not necessarily language but the ability of finding a common ground, suitable for the exchange of ideas and cultural values.

5. Conclusions

The texts analysed in this article and the theories they help exemplify help us meditate upon a series of important topics that Immigrant literature revolves around. Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* and Jhumpa Lahiri's short story, "The Third and Final Continent" reveal, as we have seen so far, the difficulties of the intercultural dialog which are primarily triggered by 'otherness' in all its dimensions. These difficulties can be overcome if people's perception of the other goes beyond surface. The female characters in Amy Tan's and Jhumpa Lahiri's texts can very well be mirrored by those portrayed in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, despite the fact that we talk here about the British instead of the American society. Immigrant women are not only affected by the identity-based binary such as national vs. ethnic but also by many other social dimensions such as gender, class, religion, education etc. All these interconnected factors influence deeply the way in which they are perceived as well as the way in which they begin to perceive themselves. In Jhabvala's"The Teacher", roles get switched proving that all the social dimensions mentioned above are performative and changeable constructs. Finally, our analysis of Yiyun Li's *A Thousand Years Of Good Prayers* and Hari Kunzru's "Raj, Bohemian" proves that that translation or translatability can act as means of mediation between foreigners who speak different languages but also between members of the same group who have different cultural values.

Taking into account the theories and literary examples presented above, we conclude that identity quests are always conditioned by the difficulties of the intercultural dialog since identity itself is a construction based on various interconnected and interchangeable dimensions such as ethnicity, gender, class, age etc. Moreover, the prospect of communicating the truth of the experiences faced by immigrants and their descendents though literary means, remains in our view, just like in Charles Simic's, "a myth of origins (...) A longing to lower oneself one notch below language" (110).

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