DISPLACEMENT AND (RE-) INTEGRATION IN JULIA ÁLVAREZ'S 'HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS'

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Abstract: The present paper aims at unveiling the narrative challenges posed by the critically acclaimed novel, 'How the García Girls Lost Their Accents'. Drawing on her life, Julia Álvarez's first novel proves a page-turner, sprinkled with witticisms and scrambled English sayings that underlie powerful messages.

High-spirited characters, in pursuit of their happiness, Julia Álvarez's imaginary projections prompt readers to dwell on their voices long after they have finished reading the novel. I entirely agree that the Dominican American writer, Julia Álvarez, succeeds in committing to readers' memory a well-articulated, vibrant literary work that vividly captures the ebb and flow of living as an immigrant in America.

Keywords: cathartic writing, negotiating cultural identities

1. Introduction

Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* approaches *writing* as a means of reconciling one's genuine self with others' expectations. Working with both English and Spanish words enables one of Julia Álvarez's characters to strike the right balance between the ethnic background and an eagerness to broaden her horizons.

Additionally, not solely for enumeration's sake, I shall underscore more *writing* values: a) writing as asserting one's identity in the world; b) writing in order to recover one's past and strive to keep it alive, in other words, to succeed in committing one's past to a higher memory; c) writing to make a powerful statement; d) writing to come to terms with oneself; e) writing to gain a voice, to make oneself heard and seen; f) writing to grapple with history; g) writing to cope with one's anguished experiences; h) writing to reconcile past events with present feelings; i) writing, therefore, to reaffirm one's bicultural identity through the lens of both *positive* and negative stereotypes; j) writing in order to negotiate past mistakes, and also shift perspectives.

Drawing on her life, Julia Álvarez's first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, proves a page-turner, sprinkled with witticisms and scrambled English sayings that underlie powerful messages.

I maintain that readers get immersed themselves into a puzzling universe of laughter and sorrow, of lives easily disrupted and hastily resumed, of shifting power dynamics, as well as of a glimmer of hope oftentimes subsiding to despair. Notwithstanding the myriad problems in their lives, Julia Álvarez's strong-willed characters permanently rekindle their desire to elude any existential trap by living up to all challenges that come their way.

Structured into three parts, the novel intrigues readers with its reverse chronological order which initiates by mapping out the most recently facts. The author gradually guides readers through past lapses of time, revealing to them the struggle for adjustment of the four Dominican girls, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofía, as well as that of their mother's.

Moreover, Julia Álvarez's text appeals to me as a rather kaleidoscopic one, with parents' and girls' voices being interspersed and reverberating throughout the entire novel. Angles are changing all the time: the author either broadens or narrows the point of view in relation to each character involved.

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2. Historical Background

Dominican American writers share the concerns about immigration, poverty, political tyranny, and assimilation in their work. During the significant exodus of Dominicans in the 1980s and 1990s, Dominican American literature became more noticeable in Hispanic communities. By this point migration was open not only to intellectuals and middle-class families but to all classes and racial mixes (black, mulatto, and white).

Accordingly, Dominican American literature addresses such topics as Trujillo's regime, the trying immigrant experience, the difficulties of adjustment within mainstream society, and the construction and negotiation of Dominican identities between two worlds.

To gain a broader perspective on the phenomenon of immigration, we should also take into consideration the notion of *diaspora*, pivotal to the process of understanding the dynamics of a multiethnic society.

Drawn from ancient Greek terms *dia* (through) and *speiro* (dispersal, to sow or scatter), *diaspora* and its adjective, *diasporic*, have been utilized in recent years in a variety of ways.[1] Among these uses – some rather new, all inherently related – three approaches to the notion of *diaspora* emerge and a fourth unrelated approach reacts to them.

Dominican American, Julia Álvarez (1950), is one of the most widely read Latina authors today. Her publications include novels, poetry, critical essays, short stories, and books for children. Álvarez was born on March 27, 1950, in New York to a physician and his wife, but raised in the Dominican Republic until the age of 10. Fleeing Rafael Trujillo's regime, her family returned to New York in 1960, and since then Álvarez has lived in the Northeast, primarily in New York and Vermont.

How the GarcíaGirls Lost Their Accents, winner of the 1991 PEN Oakland / Josephine Miles Award, tells the story of four Dominican American sisters (Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia) who immigrate to the United States and struggle to adjust to life in the Northeast while maintaining their island heritage. The García girls' sheltered lives parallel the political history of the Dominican Republic, particularly the political unrest of the Trujillo regime (1930-61). Major themes in Álvarez's writing are identity and culture, exile and home, hybridity and assimilation, the negotiation of the past and the present, and language and memory. (Ramirez, 2008:15-6)

Álvarez graduated *summa cum laude* as an English major from Middlebury College in 1971, and in 1975 she earned a master's degree in creative writing from Syracuse University. She went on to develop a career as a poet and fiction writer and became a tenured professor at Middlebury College. Álvarez's narratives are loosely based on growing up between the two cultures of the United States and the Dominican Republic. (Kanellos, 2003: 71)

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[1] a) *As a social category*. 'The Diaspora' was at one time a concept referring almost exclusively to the experiences of Jews, invoking their traumatic exile from an historical homeland and dispersal throughout many lands. With these experiences as reference, connotations of a 'diaspora' situation were negative as they were associated with forced displacement, victimization, alienation, and loss. Along with this archetype went a dream of return.
b) *As a form of consciousness*. Here *diaspora* refers to individuals' awareness of a range of decentred, multi-location attachments, of being simultaneously 'home and away from home' or 'here and there'.
c) *As a mode of cultural production.* In this approach, the fluidity of constructed styles and identities among diasporic people is emphasized. These are evident in the production and reproduction of forms which are sometimes called 'cut'n' mix,' hybrid, or 'alternate'. A key dynamic to bear in mind is that cultural identities 'come from somewhere, have histories' and are subject to continuous transformation through the 'play of history, culture and power'.
d) *As a new kind of problem.* According to this line of thinking, transnational communities are seen as threats to state security. In this view too, people's links with homelands and with other parts of a globally dispersed community raise doubts about their loyalty to the 'host' nation-state. Hybrid cultural forms and multiple identities expressed by self proclaimed diasporic youths, too, are viewed by 'host-society' conservatives as assaults on traditional (hegemonic and assimilative) norms. (Cashmore, 2004)

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3. Language Mediation

Julia Álvarez translates Dominican sayings into English to give the reader a sense of what it means for the García girls to 'lose' their accents; of course, much meaning is lost in translation. Each chapter reads like a short story and is told from the perspective of each sister and several family members. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* unfolds in three sections presented in reverse chronological order: the first section deals with the girls' adulthood and college years in the 1970s and 1980s; the second shows their adolescence and adjustment to American life in the 1960s; and the third takes place in the late 1950s, prior to the family departure from the island. This unconventional use of time and perspective characterizes Alvarez's fiction.

Álvarez focuses on the difficult process of self-discovery that comes through the assimilation, sexual awareness, and moving between two languages and cultures. Like many Latino authors, Julia Álvarez utilizes code switching, by incorporating Spanish phrases into her English text.

By way of illustration when touching upon the importance of code switching, Luz Elena Ramirez claims that we can attach to this linguistic means more than one value, as oftentimes it adds new shades of meaning to the process of shaping one's identity, bringing also into focus more complex matters concerning the adjustment to the American mainstream society: 'We can find several reasons why Latino speakers may move back and forth between Spanish and English. One is that the speaker lacks knowledge or strategies to speak exclusively in English or to speak exclusively in Spanish. Another reason is that bilingual speakers alternate between two languages either because communication takes place in a bilingual community or because certain expressions and words are better expressed in one language over the other. Code switching takes place when translation is problematic or inaccurate. Code switching is not merely a linguistic phenomenon; it also signals a hybrid identity. […] the expression of cultural identity, whether in Spanish, English, or both languages, is a major concern in Latino literature and especially Chicano literature, which is often set on the U.S. –Mexico border. Latino authors may reconcile their experience of living in a multilingual society by code switching.' (Ramirez, 2008: 74-5)

4. Insights into García Girls' Vacillating between Dominican Republic Homesickness and the Mesmerizing Adjustment to American Culture

Álvarez's fiction focuses on themes of exile during Trujillo's dictatorship, putting special emphasis on the negotiation between Dominican heritage and American life. Her *'How the García Girls Lost Their Accents'* (1991) recalls the experiences of four sisters who, fleeing Trujillo's regime to the United States, struggle with defining their identities as Americans and Dominicans. (*id.*: 98-100)

As Kelly Oliver points it out, Julia Álvarez, referring to revolts, '[…] compares the four daughters' revolt against their parents' authority and against patriarchal authority to their father's participation in the revolt against the Trujillo dictatorship. The girls plot their revolution using the accepted patriarchal codes for chaperones, and for young ladies' proper behaviour, against those very codes, Alvarez shows how the patriarchal traditions are turned against themselves in order to undermine patriarchal authority. She imagines how everyday practices of domination also open up everyday modes of resistance, how power is not only the power to dominate, but also the power to resist.'[2]

Though exposed to a greatly lesser extent to economic hardship and assimilation challenges entailed by acquiring the social status of *immigrants*, García girls have nonetheless

[2]Kelly Oliver, 'Everyday Revolutions, Shifting Power, and Feminine Genius in Julia Alvarez's Fiction', in Christa Davis Acampora and Angela L. Cotten (eds), *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul. Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom,* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007; p. 47

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tackled their share of miseries and discrimination dilemmas: "We ended up at school with the cream of the American crop, the Hoover girl and the Hanes twins and the Scott girls and the Reese kid who got incredible care packages one a week. You wouldn't be as gauche as to ask, 'Hey, are you related to the guy who makes vacuum cleaners?' (You could see all those attachments just by the way Madeline Hoover turned her nose up at you.) Anyhow, we met the right kind of Americans all right, but they didn't exactly mix with us. We had our own kind of fame, based mostly on the rich girls' supposition and our own silence. Garcia de la Torre didn't mean a thing to them, but those brand-named beauties simply assumed that, like all third world foreign students in boarding schools, we were filthy rich and related to some dictator or other. Our privileges smacked of evil and mystery whereas theirs came in recognizable pantyhose packages and candy wrappers and vacuum cleaner bags and Kleenex boxes. " (Alvarez, 2004: 108)

Once immersed in the genuinely American environment, that is, enrolled in highly appreciated academic programmes, and considerably distanced from their parents' supervising eyes, García girls initiate the transition from what their Dominican cultural background dictated them to do, to the more permissive and enticing American culture: 'But hey, we might be fish out of water, but at least we had escaped the horns of our dilemma to a silver lining, as Mami might say. It was a long train ride up to our prep school in Boston, and there *were* guys on that train. We learned to forge Mami's signature and went just about everywhere, to dance weekends and football weekends and snow sculpture weekends. We could kiss and not get pregnant. We could smoke and no great aunt would smell us and croak. We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old, man. Island was the hair-and-nails crowd, chaperones, and icky boys with all their macho strutting and unbuttoned shirts and hairy chests with gold chains and teensy gold crucifixes. By the end of a couple of years away from home, we had *more* than adjusted.' (*Ibid.)*

In the same fashion, as Kelly Oliver argues 'The girls use the patriarchal convention that girls are not to be left alone without their chaperone to expose the breach of another convention that girls are not to be left alone with their *novios*. Their motives, however, are not to protect their sister's reputation or virginity but to protect her from the oppressive patriarchal culture that would demand and circumscribe marriage, family, and subservience to her husband.'[3]

I would also emphasize that *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* addresses the issue of vulnerable women in the grip of a domineering patriarchal society. Kelly Oliver claims that 'Julia Álvarez uses the conventions of domestic femininity, womanhood, and motherhood to resist patriarchal authority both at the level of private family life and in public institutions, including government. These uses simultaneously demonstrate that resistance to domination involves shifting power dynamics and strikingly underscore sexual difference in relation to power, resistance, and genius. Álvarez's fiction powerfully portrays how shifting power relations are gendered and are inflected by race and class.' [4]

5. 'How the García Girls Lost Their Accents'. Breaking the Narrative Mould

The novel transgresses the typical narrative pattern, as it primarily encompasses the concept of *fragmentary display* of the plot. Along these lines, I sustain that the *fragmentary narrative substance* is portrayed by a string of almost independent stories, which can easily read alone or assembled.

In a similar vein, that of a rather unconventional narrative approach, Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* introduces readers to a chronologically inverted, yet eventful panorama, mostly similar to a maze structure. To my mind, staging facts backwards

[3] *Id.,* p. 48
[4] *Id.*, p. 47

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represents Julia Álvarez's choice to enhance all four Garcíagirls' development process and adjustment drive to a whole new world, that is the American society.

Consequently, in order to succeed in handling the narrative of the aforementioned examples, I believe that we definitely have to read between lines and pick up any hint that the novelists might drop. In a nutshell, while engrossed in reading *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, our awareness is equally raised by both form and content.

6. Conclusion

I readily notice the fact that Julia Álvarez's language is masterly devised in order to enhance readers' interest in, and wish to untangle the narrative threads: form and content coalesce into a widely acclaimed body of work.

High-spirited characters, in pursuit of their happiness, Julia Álvarez's imaginary projections prompt readers to dwell on their voices long after they have finished reading the book. I entirely agree that the Dominican American writer, Julia Álvarez, succeeds in committing to readers' memory a well-articulated, vibrant literary work that vividly captures the ebb and flow of living as an *immigrant* in America.

To conclude, I will point out that the most compelling argument for getting acquainted with the novel lies in bringing forth universal values: for instance, in spite of cultural adversities, squandered opportunities, and daily skirmishes, the García girls do approach life, resolved to fight tooth and nail to lead a fulfilling existence.

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