

**BIRDS OF PASSAGE: LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY
IN JULIA ALVAREZ'S
HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS**

**PĂSĂRI CĂLĂTOARE: LIMBAJ ȘI IDENTITATE ÎN
CUM FETELE GARCIA ȘI-AU PIERDUT ACCENTUL
DE JULIA ALVAREZ**

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Abstract

The current paper tackles the immigrant narrative of displacement through a linguistic lens, focusing on Julia Alvarez' Bildungsroman, How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, and focusing on the character of Yolanda as an example of a new diasporic identity, fractured and reformed by linguistic variety. The paper illustrates the pitfalls of cultural assimilation, as the young woman attempts to write herself into the dominant language of the imperial power (English), while wrestling with the traumatic aspects of her forgotten mother tongue (Spanish). A special emphasis is placed on the duality of Dominican identity within an Anglo-Saxon space and on the fluidity of migratory and diasporic communities that, as Homi Bhabha asserts, can never return to a point of origin, or to any "initial subjectivities" (1994, 1-2).

Rezumat

Studiul prezent abordează narațiunea strămutării imigranților, tratată dintre-o perspectivă lingvistică, concentrându-se asupra bildungsroman-ului scriitoarei Julia Alvarez, „Cum fetele Garcia și-au pierdut accentul”, concentrându-se asupra caracterului Yolandei ca exemplu al formării unei identități noi în diaspora, fracturată și reformată de varietatea lingvistică. Studiul ilustrează capcanele asimilării culturale, deoarece tânăra femeie încearcă să se exprime în limba dominantă a puterii imperiale (limba engleză), în timp ce se luptă cu aspectele traumatice ale uității limbi materne (limba spaniolă). Un accent deosebit se pune pe dualitatea identității dominicane din interiorul spațiului anglo-saxon și pe fluiditatea comunităților migratoare și diasporice care, după cum afirmă Homi Bhabha, nu se pot întoarce niciodată la un punct de origine sau la nici o „subiectivitate inițială” (1994, 1-2).

Key words: Chicana studies, language, identity, immigrant narratives, bilingualism

Cuvinte cheie: studii mexicane, limbaj, identitate, narațiuni imigrante, bilingvism

In the film adaptation of the musical *West Side Story*, a gang of disenfranchised Puerto-Ricans laments the contradictions of being an immigrant in America in the famous song, “America” (written by Stephen Sondheim and composed by Leonard Bernstein), where at a certain point in the medley, the gang leader’s girlfriend, Anita, expresses her naïve dream of getting a “terrace apartment” to which her boyfriend, Bernardo, replies cynically, “Better get rid of your accent!”. There is no thriving future for Anita unless she sounds and looks American, which is rather an

impossible feat. This narrative does not belong to Puerto-Ricans alone; most immigrants hailing from the island-nations in the Caribbean region must at one point face the erasure of linguistic identity, or at least the threat of erasure in order to survive.

How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, as the title suggests, is a tale of such an erasure. It is fitting that it should also be a coming-of-age story of four Dominican sisters who gradually undergo cultural displacement in order to adopt a new culture and language which they struggle to make their own (Yitah, 2003, 1). Julia Alvarez poses the question whether the girls have managed to be integrated successfully into the new culture, and whether there is a possibility of returning to the homeland after their identity has been altered so fundamentally.

Published under different forms as early as 1983, the novel is an experiment in structure; the contents are made up of several interconnected stories whose narrators piece together a complex and often contradictory image of a family forced to immigrate to the United States to escape Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship. In doing so, the family undergoes a process of acculturation that is most visible in the young daughters who represent the new generation, growing up at various stages in America. There is a marked focus on the immigrant Dominican woman, torn between the "island mentality" she is trying to leave behind and the strong sense of alienation she feels in a hostile American environment (Sirias, 2001, 18). The plot is fairly unstructured; there is a "lack of unity" (19) and marked nonlinearity in the presentation of the fifteen episodes in the girls' lives (19). Such irregularity seems to mirror the sisters' similarly chaotic linguistic evolution. Despite the variety of experiences depicted therein, the issue of language and speech is ubiquitous, because it best encapsulates the girls' struggle to tell their story and create a linguistic space of their own within the foreign idiom. As Joan M. Hoffman puts it:

Communication is of fundamental concern for each member of this immigrant family as they struggle with the strange vocabulary, difficult grammar, and incomprehensible voice rhythms of their newly acquired English in order to tell their stories (1998, 22).

Language is a tool for survival, but it can also be a means of "empowerment and rebellion" (Echano, 2004, 223) not only against the new country, but against the homeland as well. The Garcia girls' path to becoming fluent in English is also a path towards distancing themselves from their Dominican parents and their relatives' oppressive influence (223). By playing with words, the girls subvert the authority of moral figures and establish their own autonomy in a female-oriented universe of shared secrets and intimacy:

We got pretty punchy, imitating aunts and uncles and cousins we would be seeing the next day. Maybe it was a way of getting even with people who would have power over us all summer. We played with their names, translating them into literal English so they sounded ridiculous. Tia Concha became Aunt Conchshell, and Tia Asuncion, Aunt Ascension; Tio Mundo was Uncle World... (Alvarez, 2010, 96)

The girls' translation of family names is not only a form of teenage rebellion, but also a visual representation of the transcultural pathways between the Dominican Republic and America. In an Anglo-Saxon space, Tia Concha becomes "Aunt Conchshell" and loses her prestige, her status, and even her credibility. Tio Mundo metamorphoses into a cartoonish, almost parodic "Uncle World". Such figures of authority are forced to relinquish their dominion as their names cross the ocean; language alone has the power to remove their influence.

The history of Dominican migration is rich and multifaceted, but one aspect that has not changed throughout generations is the fascination with the most common destination for any Dominican; the metropolis of New York. As one Dominican immigrant and sex worker confessed to Eugenia Georges in an interview, "in the Dominican Republic there are three kinds of people: the

rich, the poor and those who travel to New York” (qtd. in Brennan, 2004, 101). Such a worldview contributed to the Republic developing a “diasporic mentality” (Brennan, 101) as a country with a people in constant flux, going to or returning from New York, thus creating a transnational culture and economy (101). This flow of people and information was intensified after dictator Trujillo’s death in 1961 and the 1963 revolution (101), by which point the United States opened its doors for Dominicans in order to prevent more civic unrest (101). Silvio Torres-Saillant talks about a Dominican “exodus” that “led to the formation of a diasporic community” (qtd. in Mendez, 2016, 152) which embraced several new ways of being Dominican. Indeed, the “exodus” prompted shifts in national identity and the idea of the “true” Dominican emerged. Ironically, the true patriot was supposed to leave the Republic in order to make money and help their family back home (Ricourt, 2015, 35). Therefore, in a sense, the “true” Dominican became the diasporic, transplanted Dominican. Recent generations of immigrants have made peace with their uprooted condition and have named themselves “birds of passage” (34), precisely because they live in a fluid state of coming and going, while also being mindful of their homeland in the Dominican Republic (35).

Yet this liminal state is difficult to maintain in terms of language, because speech is constantly actualized and modified with each new coming and going. Among the four Garcia sisters, it is Yolanda, the third youngest, who takes on the role of the “linguist” of the family. She seems to become the proverbial Malintzín in a line of “women who have accepted their roles as ‘tongues’ and demanded that their voices be heard” (Flores, Renato, 2007, 133). Much like Malintzín (also known as ‘La Malinche’), Hernan Cortez’s famous native translator who bridged the linguistic gap between the Spaniards and the Aztecs, Yolanda learns the language of the “oppressor” with a view to exploiting it. She does not wish to make English her own, but rather to make something new out of English. At first, she begins writing poetry in English because her new environment (New York, of course) offers little stability and cohesion. As a result of this, Yolanda “takes root in the language” (Alvarez, 2010, 120). Written language is a refuge for the young girl since she is mortified by her Spanish accent and finds expressing herself orally a chore, an experience shared by all sisters. Once she is exposed to American poetry in the story “Daughter of Invention” she takes steps towards internalizing not only the language itself, but the aesthetic process by which she can create words in which she can recognize herself: “When Yoyo was done, she read over her words, and her eyes filled. She finally sounded like herself in English!” (121). Poetry and creative writing, therefore, become a gateway to a dual identity that would borrow a foreign language, but still preserve a native spirit. Alvarez, however, depicts Yolanda’s path to an artistic identity as anything but smooth; what the Garcia girl discovers only late in her adulthood is that expressing herself artistically in a foreign language is not enough to reconcile the two selves – Dominican and American – that are fighting for dominance.

The novel’s inverted chronology shows Yolanda’s involution, rather than evolution, from adult to child, from a bilingual to a monolingual identity, with a view to deconstructing the character and revealing childhood traumas that take on a new significance after prior knowledge of Yolanda’s triumphs and failures (Yitah, 2007, 5). Each story peels off a layer, bringing the reader closer to the “core” of the character, the Self that was reduced to silence, and particularly, the childhood Self that was deprived of words when it needed them most: “I did not know at the time the word for saying one thing and doing another” (Alvarez, 2010, 223). Yolanda is brought to America at an early age when language plays a vital part in the building of identity. Her loneliness and inability to express herself take on a deeply violent form when, in a traumatic episode, she throws a newborn kitten out the window. It is a transgression that comes to haunt her both as a young woman and as a writer and storyteller. The lack of communication and understanding from peers and family after this episode (““A phase,” Mami said, worried. “A perfectly normal nightmare phase.””, 225) causes a rupture between the early Self and the future identity Yolanda would build as an adult.

This rupture or crisis takes shape in the collapse of Yolanda's speech; she fails to find meaning in either language. On the one hand, she is unable to connect with the English discourse on love and sexuality used by her classmates in college (in "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story"); on the other hand, she can no longer understand or communicate in Spanish with other Dominicans (in "Antojos") and finally, she grapples with both English and Spanish in the quest to give her own name meaning (in "Joe").

In "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story", Yolanda blames her linguistic inadequacies on her own status as an immigrant, a bilingual child who takes everything literally, who "doesn't get the joke" and cannot seem to grasp language as something fluid and natural due to the fact that she is constantly hyperaware of it:

I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making on the last two digits of the year, 1969; I too would be having sex and smoking dope; I too would have suntanned parents who took me skiing in Colorado over Christmas break, and I would say things like "no shit", without feeling like I was imitating someone else (Alvarez, 2010, 86).

Struggling between her Catholic upbringing and a more sexually tolerant and libertine environment, Yolanda resorts to poetry, once again, as a means of bridging the gap between internalized prohibitions and her own desires, but her chosen lover meets her only halfway: "Perhaps if Rudy had acted a little more as if lovemaking were a workshop of sorts..." (87), "I didn't want to just be in the sack, screwed, balled, laid and fucked my first time around with a man" (87). Yolanda is both jealous at and disappointed with the careless way the English language is used by its natives; though she yearns to be part of the Anglo world and to express herself freely, even coarsely, she refuses to engage with a system in which her experiences are trivialized by speech. Therefore, a conflict stems from the inability to fully reject or fully accept a linguistic standard.

This conflict reaches its summit in the story "Joe", where Yolanda is faced with yet another male figure (John) who disregards her need for rich and complex varieties of speech that are not always afforded by one single language. In an effort to give her Americanized name meaning, Yolanda opposes her husband's simplistic correlations ("Joe-lan-dah?" He quibbled, "What rhymes with Joe-lan-dah?", 66) and resorts to what has become her second language, Spanish. She realizes she has obscured or ignored the Latina element from her identity for too long and attempts to revive it by associating her name with Spanish equivalents. This association is done, once again, through poetry:

"Yo rhymes with cielo in Spanish." Yo's words fell into the dark, mute cavern of John's mouth. Cielo, cielo, the word echoed. And Yo was running, like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried (Alvarez, 67).

Unfortunately, Yolanda's rediscovery of "her first tongue" comes after years of repressing not only her embarrassing "accent", but also most of the idiom, so much so that she and her sisters are no longer able to understand their father's elaborate Spanish syntax. A sudden immersion in her native tongue only further pushes Yolanda on the verge of an existential crisis since she comes to the realization that simply replacing English words with Spanish equivalents cannot stitch together her fragmented identity.

However, Yolanda's first reaction to the loss of the Self in both languages is not silence, but quite the opposite; she begins to speak incessantly, clinging to words even when they do not have a meaning, using them as a coping mechanism, or choosing to lose herself in them: "Yo quoted and

misquoted, drowning in the flooded streams of her consciousness” (Alvarez, 75). Much like her sister, Sandi, who undergoes her own breakdown due to a rupture in self-image, Yolanda continues to express herself, even when she is deprived of the means to do so. The result is a border-speech, or a doubled speech: a representation of the intersectionality between two cultures (Mayock, 1995, 227). Yolanda’s challenge is to reconcile the identities of Yolanda, Yo and Joe, and unite them into one persona, a task that is made more difficult by the fact that she associates each nickname with a different social construct:

Yolanda, nicknamed Yo in Spanish, misunderstood foe in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, Yoyo, when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains, Joey... (Alvarez, 63).

When faced with an inability to connect all three through language, Yolanda finds respite once more in poetry, where imagery can transcend words and temporarily replace language with symbols derived from memory and experience:

They [the wings] spread her mouth open as if she were screaming a name out over a great distance. A huge, black bird springs out; it perches on her bureau, looking just like the etching of the raven in Yo’s first English poetry book (78).

We return to the “birds of passage”. The three identities become one voice embodied by a black bird, issuing from Yolanda’s mouth, forcing her to reckon with herself. The bird is not only a reminiscence of her artistic past as a young girl and later, as a woman reciting poetry in front of an audience, but it is also a warning of the future, a foreshadowing of her return to the “island”: the same image of a woman “screaming out a name over a great distance” is depicted on the Palmolive ad Yolanda notices in the story “Antojos”.

It is in “Antojos” that Yolanda undergoes a third crisis when she realizes she has become alienated from her own motherland and cannot seem to connect to its people. Chronologically, Yolanda’s journey back to the Dominican Republic takes place some years after her breakdown in “Joe”, which means that her return is a continuation of her attempt to rebuild the roots of her Latina identity. “Antojos”, which is also the first story in the novel, packs the most dramatic irony, since it starts off with Yolanda’s desire to stay in her native country to write and rejoin a community she no longer perceives with obedience or fear, but the story ends with her realization that she still fears this community and will resort to her “Anglo” identity to escape its bounds.

From the very beginning there is a tension between Yolanda and her relatives, who assume she will easily revert to her Dominican identity once she settles into her first language again:

The more she practices, the sooner she’ll be back into her native tongue, the aunts insist. Yes, and when she returns to the States, she’ll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English... (Alvarez, 16).

The tension escalates as Yolanda is corrected every time she reverts to English and her aunts throw scathing remarks at the Anglo world: “An antojo, one of the older aunts continues, is a very old Spanish word “from before your Unites States was even thought of”, she adds tartly” (17). Yolanda is unable to integrate well with the family because, instead of focusing on the center, which is represented by the cousins and aunts, she is drawn towards the periphery, represented by the various darker-skinned female servants, whom she perceives in a poetic and exotic manner. The impression she gives is that of a tourist or a visitor in a foreign country, one who does not understand the customs and cannot comply with “the old ways”, a fact evidenced by Yolanda’s desire to pick guavas by herself. The natives even treat her like a tourist and offer their services in a

respectful and detached manner, because they perceive her as an outsider, an unknown element. Yolanda has become an immigrant in her own country.

In an ironic twist, Yolanda proves to be exactly like her old lovers, Rudy and John, the men who misinterpreted and ultimately rejected her identity, since she too rejects the possibility that two Dominican men she encounters on the road may stray from the well-known stereotype and may actually wish to help her. At the beginning of the story, Yolanda recalls the remark made by a poet on the connection one has with one's mother tongue:

That poet she met at Luanda's party the night before argued that no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert to one's mother tongue (Alvarez, 21).

When such a moment does occur, not only does Yolanda not revert to her mother tongue, but she also makes a conscious decision to refrain herself, feeling more comfortable and safe using a language she knows will distance her from the natives. The implication here is not that Yolanda has irreversibly become an American; "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story" and "Joe" give ample proofs that Yolanda has only partially accepted the Anglo culture. The conclusion to be drawn is that Yolanda belongs in halves to both cultures; she cannot completely forego her Latina origins and she is too attached to her Anglo identity to return to the island. However, there is no union between the two halves and the mission that Yolanda set out to accomplish in "Joe", that of stitching together her fragmented identity, has remained unfulfilled. One need only look at the very last story, in the novel, "The Drum", to understand why; the deep trauma of childhood has to be unburied and exorcised in order for Yolanda to truly overcome the linguistic and cultural schism within her.

There is hope, however, that Yolanda may, to some extent, repair the early damage that was inflicted upon her through the use of writing, which provides a form of catharsis. The first-person narrator of "The Drum" abandons the child persona at the end of the story to reveal a consciousness of past, present and future, suggesting the way in which the little girl will cope with her ghosts: "You understand I am collapsing all time now so that it fits in what's left in the hollow of my story? I began to write, the story of Pila, the story of my grandmother..." (Alvarez, 225). Yolanda is, above all things, a storyteller, transcending language and culture. Her storytelling has the power to give the scattered episodes in the novel a meta-textual unity, but the "collapsing" of time can only be done in hindsight. Ultimately, *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* remains a story of irretrievable loss, of identity splintered. Alvarez dwells in that loss without offering happy endings, because something useful can be gained from the breakdown of identity. There is no one "true" Dominican identity that can unite the migratory and the homesick, the Anglo and the Latina, and searching for such an identity is a doomed quest. As Homi Bhabha states in *Location of Culture*:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity (1994, 1-2).

Alvarez is laboring under the same premise; "initial subjectivities" are hopeless in the face of a diasporic, migratory identity. Narratives of origins are less important than strategies of articulation and spaces of in-between-ness. Yolanda and her sisters cannot return to a Self before migration; they are birds of passage, and they must reckon with the Self mid-flight.

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