

Hyphenated Americans in Julia Alvarez's *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*

Abstract: This work aims at discussing the fictional representation of Latin-American immigrants in the novel *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*, by Julia Alvarez. This discussion will be especially based on the impact of immigration on Alvarez's women characters and the development of their hyphenated identity in the U.S. For this, the paper will also consider the language issue for the construction of the immigrant identity insofar as bilingualism is a key factor in the negotiation the García girls must effect between their Latino and their North-American halves to understand where they stand.

Keywords: north-american immigrant writing, women's writing, bilingualism.

Resumo: Este trabalho visa discutir a representação ficcional dos imigrantes latino-americanos na obra da escritora norte-americana Julia Alvarez. Através da análise do romance *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, a discussão do presente trabalho será principalmente baseada no impacto da imigração nas personagens femininas do romance de Alvarez e na maneira como estas lidam com suas identidades hifenizadas nos Estados Unidos. Para tanto, leva-se também em consideração a questão da língua na construção da identidade imigrante, visto que o bilingüismo é um fator-chave na negociação que as irmãs García agenciam entre suas porções latina e norte-americana.

Palavras-chave: literatura norte-americana de imigrantes, escrita da mulher, bilingüismo.

(...) *language is the only homeland.*
Julia Alvarez

Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* depicts a range of events experienced by a family of Dominican immigrants before and after their exile in the United States. Their experiences reveal immigrants' expectations towards the U.S. and either shatter or enhance stereotypes previously built by Latin-American and North-American cultures. It also changes the García girls, as they have to come to terms with a place that is unknown to them.

Alvarez's novel describes the life of four girls: Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofía who happened to immigrate to the U.S. because of their father's exile, as Carlos García had taken part in a conspiracy to overthrow Trujillo's dictatorship, one of the most corrupt as well as oppressing periods in the Dominican Republic. For that matter, the García girls started to face, some from their late childhood and others from their early teenage on, a new existence in the United States. Throughout the novel they have to overcome circumstances an immigrant might go through in this new location: the acquisition of the local language – English; the conflictive contact with the American society and Americans; the maintenance of their Hispanic tradition despite the tendency to assimilate the American culture and the consequent process of becoming bilingual; and the past which seems to haunt the family.

The experience of the García family is undoubtedly paradigmatic of the process other immigrants may undergo. Such paradigms have been thoroughly argued by contemporary writers, since oftentimes a relevant concern in immigrant writing is the individual as an "other" in the hegemonic social context. In her article, "US Americans and 'Us' Americans", Sonia Torres states that the world has been living a moment of reorganization of national borders due to the impact of globalization. Likewise, the notion of identity has been changing as well: in the 19th century, Latin Americans wanted to free themselves from European parameters, whereas in the 20th century, Latin American identity is marked by the impact of U.S. neocolonialism (Torres, 2003, p. 11).

U.S. neocolonialist discourse silences immigrants' voice, and Julia Alvarez is a writer who makes one aware of this issue when she writes about immigrants who were forced to flee their country to live in the USA due to the American intervention in their family's homeland (Flores and Yúdice 70). Alvarez herself was born in the Dominican Republic and moved away from her country because of Trujillo's 30-year dictatorship. These pieces of information are similar to what has happened to the characters in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and even provide a strong autobiographical reading of the elements in Alvarez's novel: like Alvarez's own family, the García girls go through the same experience of immigration and because Alvarez depicts relationships between sisters, as well as daughters and parents, she highlights the way such relations undergo transformations because of immigration.

In order to portray how immigrants' memory might be affected due to immigration, Alvarez's narrative is written in an inverted chronological order: Part One begins in 1989, when the García girls are already

adults and have integrated themselves into their American lives; Part Two shows the transition from the girls' childhood to their adolescence in the U.S. Finally, Part Three portrays the García family back in the Dominican Republic, when the girls are in their early childhood. Such a technique relies on a gradual exercise of memory by the reader, which is similar to the one immigrants perform to keep reminiscences alive: the girls need to recall their past, just as what immigrants do to maintain their memories perky; the reader, however, must recall the present of the García girls as the novel moves back in time with each chapter. The narrative emphasizes memory and displays episodes recalled by each of the girls, both in the U.S. and in the Dominican Republic.

One of the changes in the life of immigrants in the U.S. is having to acquire the English language to be incorporated into the American society. The García girls are still able to keep and use their native language – Spanish – which contributes to the preservation of the customs they brought from the Dominican Republic. Nevertheless, they make a great effort to maintain their first language and, at the same time, acquire English. Spanish gets hard to understand and their father makes such a process tougher because his broken English is also difficult to comprehend and he is not proficient in English. The girls are no longer on the island, and they need to learn the local language – English – to be accepted by their peers. As the English language becomes more familiar to them, the girls are also able to acquire some American customs and, for that matter, their vision of the world is split: they have to deal with the maintenance of Hispanic traditions and the acquisition of American customs.

Julia Alvarez's characters' split vision demonstrates that the path an immigrant supposedly takes in order to fit into American mainstream society is a matter of choosing either to become bilingual or not. Richard Rodriguez's "Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood" describes his early childhood and the issue of growing up as an immigrant in the U.S. as well as having two languages: his public one (English), regularly used at school, and his private one (Spanish), spoken by his parents at home. Rodriguez feels these two spheres start to clash at the moment the nuns from his school (the public side) go to his house (his private space) and "invade" his private space when they ask Rodriguez's parents to speak English only to their children to help them fit in the American school as well as America. Rodriguez's mother and father start to speak to their children in English and avoid conversation in Spanish. As Richard Rodriguez grows older and becomes an adult, Spanish is no longer a language he is able to understand but it is

only a succession of whispers he can listen from his inside when he remembers his childhood. Thus, this was the option given to Richard Rodriguez: to abandon his native language and speak the mainstream language to be part of American society.

The critic Chérrie Moraga has a very different point of view from Rodriguez's. In her essay "Art in América con Acento", Moraga claims for an America that can deal with cultural differences and does not impose language and customs on immigrants; an America where one has the free choice to decide what to speak, what to wear and what to look like. She understands that this is something tough for Latinos, Native-Americans, African-Americans and Asians to attain since they do not present Anglo-American physical features and they "wear" their ethnicity on their faces (Moraga, 1994, p. 303). Thus, Moraga wants an America where standards can be minimized and one can be whatever one wants to be, speaking the language they know and making their own choices.

According to Richard Rodriguez, bilingualism enhances segregation among the different groups throughout the American territory (Rodriguez, 1996, p. 51). On the other hand, as Juan Flores and George Yúdice have stated in their article "Fronteiras vivas/Buscando América: as línguas da formação Latina", speaking not only Spanish but English properly would enable immigrants to fight against prejudice as well as a pressure for official legitimization (Flores & Yúdice, 1992, p. 72). Furthermore, Chérrie Moraga believes that both English and Spanish can be used to express her points of view about immigrants' status through her writing. As she has affirmed, if immigrants are able to use their other language and know it well – not only language itself but their immigrant culture – they can stick together and "envision" a new culture: a culture in which there is no right or wrong, nor mainstream or margin (Moraga, 1994, p. 306).

Although the novel presents the view of the García girls about their exile in the U.S., the focus of Alvarez's book is Yolanda García, who narrates some of the chapters. Furthermore, Alvarez has published another novel entitled *Yo*, which can either work as a nickname for Yolanda or the translation of the English pronoun 'I' into Spanish. This aspect reinforces again the autobiographical elements in both novels, since *Yo* is taken as an extension of the family story introduced in the earlier *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Julia Alvarez attempts to keep on developing the character of Yolanda García because she seems to have deeply undergone the effects of immigration. In the opening chapter of Alvarez's novel entitled

"Antojos", Yolanda finds herself at the age of thirty-nine and back in the Dominican Republic. She is seeking for an answer to the question "Who am I?"; Yolanda wishes to eat guavas in the northern part of the island. Interestingly, guavas were not common to Yolanda in the U.S. and her craving for them shows her distance from her Dominican side. In New York, Americans have never been able to pronounce her name correctly and called her Joe; her parents would also address her as either Yo or Yoyo: "Yolanda, nicknamed *Yo* in Spanish, misunderstood *Joe* in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, *Yoyo* – or when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains, *Joey*." (p. 68). These characteristics echo Yolanda's ambiguity about her identity: when she is in the U.S., she searches for the Dominican Republic, and when she is on the island, she searches for the U.S. Yolanda faces what most immigrants probably do: the negotiation of places as well as identities in order to find themselves.

In the end of "Antojos", Yolanda is lost in the northern part of the Dominican island because her car broke in the middle of a guava field. It is going to be dark soon and she gets frightened as she sees some campesinos coming back from working in the fields. Two men come to her and offer her some help to fix her car. They talk to her in Spanish and she is not able to reply to them in the same language, even though she clearly understands what they say. Yolanda tries to speak to them in Spanish but due to her fright, she mutters only English words. She then recalls what a friend of hers once said: "That poet she met at Lucinda's party the night before argued no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert to one's mother's tongue." (p. 13).

In his essay entitled "Imaginary Homelands", Salman Rushdie states that the linguistic struggle immigrants undergo reflects other struggles in real life: the struggle between two cultures within themselves (Rushdie, 1990, p. 16). This is what happens to Yolanda when she is in the guava field: she has to cope with two worlds she belongs to and when she sees herself in a dangerous situation she prefers to speak English due to the association this language has in the Dominican Republic. Rushdie further claims "to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (Rushdie 16).

In the chapter entitled "Antojos", which ambiguously functions as a beginning and an end to Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Yolanda's attempt to find out whether she's American fails. Julia Alvarez leaves the question open: "what are we?" Immigrants like Yolanda leave it unanswered.

Again, according to Salman Rushdie, a translated individual is the one born across two worlds. Immigrants, too, go through a translation, a movement that makes them lose some things that remained in their native country, but also makes them acquire some new things from their new location (Rushdie, 1990, p. 17). And, this is what makes the García girls be considered “hyphenated Americans”, for their new existence in the U.S. makes them turn into Dominican-Americans.

Ana Celia Zentella, in her article “‘José, can you see’ – Latin@ Responses to Racist Discourse”, claims that Latinos’ use of English is monitored and corrected by Americans who live near them, and their use of Spanish is censored and considered “acceptable” only in “ethnic” places. Mixing the two languages is, in general, reprimanded and not desirable. Such monitoring over Latinos, as well as other immigrants, does not improve communication or enhance national unity; it creates a tension among immigrants and the mainstream society (Zentella, 2003, p. 51). The García girls also experience the same tension throughout the novel, as they try to keep their Hispanic and American halves steady. In this process, they negotiate between their peer pressure, in their American school, to understand and speak English and their Hispanic tradition maintained at home by their parents.

This paper tried to show what immigrants might encounter in their new location owing the need of choosing either to become bilingual or not. There was the attempt to show that the García girls’ ability to speak English and Spanish enhanced their feeling of living in two worlds and, therefore, made them have, as Salman Rushdie proposed, a translated identity which showed their twoness.

This research also tried to show that bilingualism is one of the consequences of the impact of immigration in immigrant’s lives. In the final analysis, through the characters of Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, one is able to notice what immigrants may face in order to get by in the U.S. Although bilingualism is one of the most prominent reasons for immigrants to feel as “hyphenated Americans”, other issues need to be taken into consideration, such as the place immigrants live in the U.S. and the other minority groups they live with, their social status, etc. Since the aspects that confer immigrants their translated identities were not investigated in this work, this is a point which deserves further investigation.

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