Julia Álvarez' life story: *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

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La historia de la vida de Julia Álvarez: *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*.

Resumen

La autobiografía, que fuera definida por Albert Stone como "la historia de la propia vida" (1981:2), recrea vívidamente los vínculos entre el yo singular, la comunidad que lo rodea, y un ámbito más amplio de lectores y conciudadanos. Dada su vinculación a temas relacionados con el Yo y la historia, y el Yo y el lugar, la autobiografía es la forma literaria que se utiliza más a menudo para narrar historias que atañen a cuestiones raciales, étnicas y de género en Estados Unidos y otros lugares. Estados Unidos fue poblada por inmigrantes que buscaban realizar el 'sueño americano' de libertad y una vida mejor. Las narraciones sobre inmigrantes han sido relatadas por autores varios tanto en historias reales como de ficción. La novela de la autora inmigrante Julia Álvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* se compone de episodios que describen de modo realista la vida de los inmigrantes provenientes de la República Dominicana en Estados Unidos, puesto que se basan en su propia historia personal en aquel país.

Palabras clave: autobiografía, inmigrantes, lugares, identidad, cultura.

Abstract

Autobiography, defined by Albert Stone (1981) as "the self-living history" (p. 2), vividly re-creates the links between the singular self, the immediate community, and a wider world of sympathetic readers and fellow human beings. Because of its ties to themes of self and history and self and place, autobiography is the form that stories of emergent racial, ethnic, and gender consciousness have often taken in the U. S. and elsewhere. America is a country that was created and settled by immigrants from many different lands who were in search of the "American Dream" of freedom and a better way of life. The immigrants' narratives have been recorded by various authors in both fiction and non-fiction stories. Immigrant author Julia Álvarez' *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is composed of stories that convey a realistic depiction of the immigrant people she writes about, since they are based on her own personal story of becoming American.

Key words: autobiography, immigrants, places, identity, culture.

"One knows that one's life is similar to that of a thousand others, but through 'chance' it has had opportunities that the thousand others could not or did not have. By narrating it, one creates this possibility" (Flores 1980: 155). Autobiography shows life in action, which gives it a great historical value. A fundamental feature that can be attributed to autobiography is the deep impulse to tell one's story as a creature of one time and place, and to reveal how one's existence has been 'ircumstanced', as Howells says (Stone 1981: 2). Autobiography can be defined as 'the self-living history'.

> A historical consciousness speaks *out of* singular experience, *for* some particular social group, *to* a wider audience. This triple articulation is at once an act of perception and creation: what forces in the past have made me, how I now see and express my unique individuality. Autobiography is, simply and profoundly, personal history. (Stone 1981: 2)

Indeed, many oppressed groups and individuals have turned to personal history as a means of understanding and protesting against the social realities, which have affected their lives and identities. Autobiography vividly re-creates links between the singular self, the immediate community, and a wider world of sympathetic readers and fellow human beings. "Autobiographies present the ideological problematic of the author, reveal the cultural context in which information is conveyed, and transform an individual story into a cultural narrative" (Stone 1981: 8). Since autobiography brings life to literature, personal identity becomes the root and result of the autobiographical act. Identity may be seen as a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings –quotations from innumerable centres of culture, ideological state apparatus and practices: parents, family, schools, the workplace, the media, the political parties, the state– blend and clash. Through autobiography it is possible to chart the historical, cultural, and psychological factors surrounding the development of an ideology of the self, as well as to advance a critical attitude toward social institutions, turning what it seems an inherently private form of discourse onto the public social world. Because of its fundamental tie to themes of self and history and self and place, autobiography is the form that stories of emergent racial, ethnic, and gender consciousness have often taken in the U. S. and elsewhere (Flores 1980: 154).

Madan Sarup, in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, states that:

> When considering someone's identity, there is necessarily a process of selection, emphasis and consideration of the effect of social dynamics such as class, nation, 'race', ethnicity, gender and religion. I think we all link these dynamics and organise them into a narrative. When asked about our identity, we start thinking about our life-story: we construct our identity at the same time as we tell our life-story. (Sarup 1996: 15)

For Sarup identity is a social construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices. In some ways, identity is an effect of socialising

institutions -the family, schooling, the workplace, friends, and the media (p. 48). When mentioning some of the elements in the construction of a socio-cultural identity, Sarup says that every nation has its own story, and that nations make appeals to blood, native soil, and homeland. Each nation has its culture, which provides collective self-awareness, and which is based upon communication. "It is through language that a group becomes aware of itself. Language and place are interconnected" (Sarup 1996: 131). In the novel to be analysed in this work, it can be seen that certain aspects of the Dominican culture, such as the Spanish language, are gradually lost from one generation to the next in the U.S. Therefore, teaching the young their native language, as well as visiting the homeland as often as possible, reinforce their identity.

> It could be said that the impulse to preserve the past is part of the impulse to preserve the self. Perhaps people try and retain their sense of identity by maintaining their links with the past. Without knowing where they have been, it is difficult to know where they are going. The past is the foundation of individual and collective identity; objects from the past are the source of significance as cultural symbols. (Sarup 1996: 97)

Culture, which provides collective self-awareness and is based upon communication, is one of the elements in the social construction of a national identity (Sarup 1996: 131).

America is a country that was created and settled by immigrants from many different lands, immigrants who came to America in search of the 'American Dream' of freedom and a better way of life. These immigrants narratives have been recorded by various authors in both fiction and non-fiction stories. Immigrant author Julia Álvarez has written about immigrant experiences. Her fiction *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is composed of stories that convey a realistic depiction of the immigrant people she writes about, since they are based on her own personal story of becoming American.

The writer of the Introduction to *The Immigrant Experience in American Fiction* states: "The process of becoming American begins with making the choice to leave one's country to come to the United States -no simple matter to leave family, friends, and familiarity for the unknown" (1995: xvii). In most American immigrant narratives, the stories start with the immigrant's decision to leave the old world. Though the reasons for leaving may vary from person to person and country to country, most immigrants make such choice seeking a better life than they had in the old world: "more economic opportunity in the form of free or cheap land or better-paying jobs; or freedom form a class system; or the ability to establish one's own special church and community; or even for adventure" (xvii). The children, however, don't have much choice but to move along with their parents. In general, the narratives continue with the actual journey to the new world and the struggles that are encountered along the way. Once in America, many immigrants face shock at the new culture they encounter and some may resist assimilation as long as possible. The first generation may even experience dishonest

receptions or hostility by earlier immigrants of their group; they may have to put up with homesickness and nostalgia; they usually compare the pros and cons of the old country and the new one; they have to make their way through settlement and employment; they have to deal with children born in another land; and they have to decide what to give up of the old and what to accept of the new country (xxi). Eventually the second, third or fourth generation immigrants will assimilate to the dominant American culture and a loss of ethnic identity will occur. The second generation, for instance, generally show love and respect for their parents but crave for individual freedom, and experience rejection and reconciliation. The final step in the narrative can usually be seen as these later generations attempt to rediscover their ethnic identity. Thus, third and fourth generations wish to connect with their ancestors and their culture.

Julia Álvarez is a second-generation immigrant, whose family moved to America for political reasons. Álvarez was born and raised in the Dominican Republic 'in a repressive and dangerous dictatorship' until the age of ten. Her father was a doctor who was involved in an underground plot to overthrow the dictator Rafael Trujillo. When he was discovered, he and his family were forced to leave the country in a hurry. That was in 1960, and they escaped to New York. They settled in the Bronx, where Julia's father set up a medical practice.

"We arrived in the United States at a time in history that was not very welcoming to people who were different, whose skins were a different color, whose language didn't sound like English." (1) Homesick and heartbroken, Julia Álvarez and her sisters initially had a more difficult time adjusting to America than their parents, who were both fluent in English, having been educated in American boarding schools. However, the girls spoke only Spanish when they arrived in the States. "Spanish was the language of home, of *la familia*, of self understanding." (2) Along with the trials of learning a new language, Julia Álvarez and her sisters were faced with discrimination for the first time, especially at American schools, for they were called 'spics' like all those who spoke English with heavy accents, whose social condition was different, and whose skins were a darker colour.

For Álvarez leaving the old world behind meant leaving behind a large extended family. In the Dominican Republic her immediate family lived in a house on her grandparents' property where her extended family also lived. Life among so many relatives was somewhat communal; the writer and her sisters were raised alongside their cousins by her mother, maids, and many aunts. In contrast, when the family moved to America, they left behind the protection and patronage of the larger *familia,* to be on their own. Although Julia came from a traditional family where she received no encouragement to pursue a career and was expected to become a housewife, her love for words won over.

Being young, Julia and her sisters soon adapted to the change. They learned the new language, the new music, and the new ways to dress and behave. After living in America

for several years, and although the Álvarez' parents wanted their daughters to succeed in the new culture, they began to worry that they would totally forget their heritage. They still wanted the girls to be sweet and submissive, to let *Papi* take decisions, to remember the Spanish language, to respect their parents. Therefore, they began to send the girls back to the Dominican Republic each summer. Álvarez speaks of these visits in her book *Something to Declare*:

> And just as we had once huddled in the school playground, speaking Spanish for the comfort of it, my sisters and I now hung out together in "the D.R.," as we referred to it. Kibitizing in English on the crazy world around us: the silly rules for girls, the obnoxious behavior of macho guys, the deplorable situation of the poor. My aunts and uncles tried unsuccessfully to stem this tide of our Americanization, whose main expression was, of course, our use of the English language. (Álvarez 1991: 64)

Seen from a distant time, the girls were caught between two worlds, value systems, languages and customs. And their challenge, like many others', was to be successful in the new world while maintaining the connections to their roots. However, in the United States of the early 60's –a time a civil rights struggles, pre-women's movements, pre-multicultural studies– in which the model to be followed was assimilating into mainstream America, it was very difficult not to cut off the ties with the past and the old ways to become a fully American citizen. Nonetheless Julia Álvarez became a hybrid -she was neither a mainstream American girl nor a totally Dominican girl. Yet, she wanted 'desperately to belong somewhere'. Her homesickness and loneliness, and her desire to connect with others led her to writing books. Writing was a way to reconnect herself with the past and the culture she had left behind, and she experienced all aspects of the immigrant narrative. By the time she was in high school she knew she wanted to be a writer, and in College she studied literature and writing, graduating in 1971 from Middlebury College, and receiving and MA in Creative Writing from Syracuse University in 1975.

Álvarez' fiction novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1992) is a reverse chronology of fifteen interwoven stories chronicling the lives of four sisters –Yolanda, Sonia, Carla and Sandi– and their parents, who arrive in New York City in 1960 "dispossessed of their genteel upper-class lifestyle" (Muller 1999: 116). The narrative structure of the novel, divided into three sections, moves back in time, covering the period 1989-1956. The stories are semi-autobiographical; like their creator's family, the fictional Garcia family is Dominican and is forced to flee to America, where they feel like outsiders. Like Álvarez and her sisters, the Garcia girls struggle to adapt to their new environment and assimilate themselves into American culture. They grow up conscious, like all immigrants, of living in two worlds.

There is no straightforward plot; rather there are vignettes (often short stories featuring one or more of the sisters at various stages of growing up) that tell the story of a

doctor and his family who flee to America while running from political strife in the Dominican Republic. Álvarez refers to Trujillo as "the tyrant who had ceased power" (Álvarez 1991: 226); his dictatorship was dangerous and repressive, and intellectuals were suspects. The novel mainly focuses on the struggles of the four Garcia daughters as they begin to assimilate to the new world, and the strife they face as their parents try to cling to the culture that they left behind. Like the Álvarez parents, the Garcia girls parents try to maintain the use of the Spanish language, and to send their daughters back to the island to meet the extended family.

On the night that the family is readying to leave for America, Chucha the maid remembers back to her own immigration experience and says of the girls, "I see their future, the troublesome life ahead. They will be haunted by what they do and do not remember. But they have spirit in them. They will invent what they need to survive" (Álvarez 1991: 223). Once in America, the Garcia family struggled to adjust to their new surroundings. Though they were not destitute, their social status had been lowered, the same that had happened to the Álvarez' family. "We had only second-hand stuff, rental houses, clothes at Round Robin, a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines. Cooped up in those little suburban houses, the rules were as strict as for Island girls, but there was no island to make up the difference." (Álvarez 1991: 107)

Fear of complete assimilation to the American culture is a prevalent theme throughout *García Girls*. The first generation parents resist assimilation not only for themselves, but also for their daughters. Meanwhile the daughters begin to lose touch with the old world as soon as they break the language barrier in America, and just as Álvarez was sent back to the Dominican Republic every summer to reconnect with her heritage, so are the Garcia girls.

> We began to develop at taste for the American teenage good life […] by the end of a couple of years away from home we had more than adjusted. And of course, as soon as we had, Mami and Papi got all worried they were going to lose their girls to America […] The next decision was obvious: we four girls would be sent summers to the Island so we wouldn't lose touch with la familia. (Álvarez 1991: 109)

Just as Álvarez reconnects with her ethnic identity as an adult through her writings, the character of Yolanda returns to the Island as an adult and attempts to reclaim her old world culture as well.

> All around her are the foothills, a dark enormous green, the sky more a brightness than a color. A breeze blows through the palms below, rustling their branches, so they whisper like voices […] This is what she has been missing all these years without really knowing that she has been missing it. Standing here in the quiet, she believes she has never felt at home in the States, never. (Álvarez 1991: 12)

With the inclusion of Yolanda's desire to reconnect with her homeland, Álvarez' novel also touches on all aspects of the immigrant narrative. The personal story of Álvarez closely follows the immigrant narrative pattern. She experienced leaving the old world, and the journey to the new world. While her parents continued to cling to the customs and traditions of the old world, much like the Garcia's, she was able to assimilate into the American culture. Álvarez was drawn to the new freedoms and ideas that America had to offer. However, even after she totally assimilated, she found a need to reconnect with her past and chose to write about her immigrant experiences.

By comparing Álvarez' fictional narrative with her personal life, we are able to see that the fiction narrative is a source for understanding the immigrant narrative. This is especially true due to the fact that the author has experienced the immigrant narrative first hand.

I should not disregard the fact that *Garcia Girls* was Álvarez' first novel, followed by several others also dealing with Dominican women immigrants. The novel was written during a period of increased immigration from the Dominican Republic when the community of Dominicans living in the United States expanded. Along with other writers and artists, Álvarez contributed to the articulation of a new Dominican-American identity. In addition, this novel shares a space with other works written by Caribbean immigrants concerned with exploring the experience of Spanish speakers and their descendants in the United States. The geographic proximity of the U.S., as well as its historical and continuing political influence in this region, distinguishes the experiences of these communities from other immigrant groups.

Álvarez's protagonists share some things in common with the typical Dominican immigrant experience, such as the painful dislocation of family ties and difficult cultural readjustments. However, it is important to consider that most Dominicans living in the U.S. did not come from the privileged background that the Garcia family enjoyed. Though the family faced financial problems during the first year of life in the U.S., they drew on tremendous financial and political resources that many Dominicans did not enjoy (Muller 1999: 119). They perceived hardship only in comparison to the luxurious lifestyle they were used to in the Dominican Republic, where different economic conditions meant that the family could afford numerous servants and expansive estates. Even in the United States, the Garcia girls were given expensive private education and numerous opportunities to travel. In this sense, the novel does not represent the typical Dominican immigrant experience. Yet, it has contributed to make readers aware of the differences between American and Dominican cultures, as well as the psychological difficulties children who are forced to move from one cultural context to another undergo.

As regards integration of Hispanic communities into mainstream America, Álvarez's novel illustrates a desire to retain access to the language and culture of the home nation while also incorporating oneself into the new country' culture, economy and political system.

Notas

(1) http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/writers/alvarez.htm

(2) Ibídem.

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