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Kultura Popularna nr 1 (55), 86-94

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2018

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Aristi Trendel

# **Exile in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents***

In her first autobiographical novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, published in 1992 (the 90s being the decade that witnessed the boom of Hispanic-American literature, especially with women writers), Julia Alvarez pores over a major phenomenon of our century, exile, and sets up a panoramic view of this form of displacement which is both physical and mental. In fact, as one of the daughters of a Dominican family enduring political exile in the late 50s under the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, who controlled the Dominican Republic from 1930–1961, Alvarez, a Latina writer, has a personal experience of forced displacement. It is no surprise that exile, this “potent, even enriching motif of modern culture” (Said, 173), appears both as a blight and a blessing in her narrative which presents a group portrait around Yolanda Garcia, the character who seems to be the federating agent of the exilic experience.

Although *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is composed of 15 episodic chapters that could be self-contained and be read autonomously as short stories, the novel is tightly structured. It is organized into three parts based on a reverse chronology – the narrative starts from the present and returns to the past spanning the period from 1989 to 1956. The multiplicity of stories that the narrative accommodates, accompanied by a shifting point of view, indicates both “the storytelling culture” (Heredia, 20) of Alvarez’s homeland and the fragmentation, break and split exile entails. Indeed, Alvarez declared that exile was one of the most traumatic experiences in her life (Heredia, 21). In her polyphonic novel, she orchestrates the woes of a divided self thus transforming the shabby condition of loss into a treasured aesthetic motif. Her ironic title points both to a story of assimilation and acculturation and to the loss which exiles keep alive.

Through its reverse chronology, somewhat disorienting for the reader, the narrative inexorably advances towards a retrieval of the traumatic event that put it in motion – what one character sweepingly calls “the day you lost everything” (150). This type of chronology makes all the more clear that the exile’s progress involves a backward movement into memory. I will argue that, far from merely recording loss, the novel by assembling the fragmented memories of the Garcia family into a meaningful whole makes prominent a trajectory from the condition of ontological insecurity, brought about by exile, to the condition of the “unhomely” (Bhabha) and to a nomadic consciousness; Alvarez deftly links politics, history, culture, ontology and ethics. This trajectory also involves a movement from linguistic insecurity to linguistic mastery i.e. from silence to voice.

At the outset, the exile is political and the novel could be read as a political one since Alvarez embarks on a double critique of the Dominican Republic and the us. She does so through the tribulations of the Garcia family whose upper class status and support of the us action on the island gains them easy access to the American haven. Like the ancient Sinuhe who hearing that he is to be seized by the authorities fled the kingdom of Egypt and spent his life among aliens, doctor Carlos Garcia, involved in a us-supported coup against the dictator, has to accept the American fellowship offer which saves his life – it is a decision forced upon him by the circumstances. In the course of the narrative and when the assassination of Trujillo in 1961 makes his return possible, he decides not to go back, to one of the daughter’s regret, thus turning from a political exile into an expatriate.

The notorious brutality of Trujillo’s regime, which ruthlessly slaughtered civil liberties and the dictator’s opponents, is subtly depicted in the narrative.

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The Garcia family is victimized in various ways. The grandfather is sent away from the country as an official in the UN for the dictator is jealous of educated men. Carlos Garcia is saved *in extremis* and is flown out of the country by the intervention of a CIA agent, Victor, who sends away the infamous secret police that invade the house and, under a facade of politeness, terrorize the family. Even in the opulent compound of the Garcia family, life under Trujillo seems to be “a crazy hellhole” as the mother calls it (202). Finally, Garcia’s decision not to return to the island is based on the hopeless post-dictatorship politics at home.

However, the us’s involvement in the fortunes of the Dominican Republic, which seemed to have contributed to the political troubles of the island since its us occupation in 1916 and paved the way for Trujillo’s dictatorship, is also recorded and denounced in the narrative. The us is certainly the savior of Carlos Garcia who committed himself to the last minute us-arrested plot to kill the dictator [“the us chickened out of the plot” (202)] but not the one of the Dominican Republic. Irony and disillusionment with the us is again expressed by the third person narrative voice, “A few weeks ago it was the shores of the Dominican Republic. Now it was the jungles of Southeast Asia they were saving.” (144) The American invasion of the Dominican Republic under Lyndon Johnson who seemed to have dictated the outcome of the supposed free elections in 1965 is thus paralleled in the narrative by the American action in Vietnam.

This double critical vision is maintained when it comes to the politics of race and gender. Alvarez, in her depiction of exile, brings together the top and the bottom of the social scale inserting the history of the Dominican Republic into the narrative and showing its relevance to the experience of the family in the us. Just like the Garcias who are offered political asylum in the us, Chuca, the family’s Haitian servant was offered “asylum” in the Garcia’s household when persecuted by Trujillo’s action to eliminate all “foreigners” and the Dominican Republic’s African heritage. Chuca is an exile on her own island and a survivor of the so called parsley massacre, the 1937 massacre of 15,000 Haitian immigrants near the border by order of Trujillo, referred to by one of the daughters, Fifi, “Chuca had just appeared at my grandfather’s doorstep one night begging to be taken in. Turns out it was the night of the massacre when Trujillo had decreed that all Black Haitians on our side of the island would be executed by dawn. There is a river the bodies were finally thrown into that supposedly still turns red to this day, fifty years later.” (218) The Massacre River, as it is now called, becomes a reference point in the narrative. Chuca, “the blue-black” Haitian (218), a former cane-picking worker, one of the jobs that the Haitians took because the Dominicans did not want to take them, is the Other in the Dominican Republic and among the servants in the household. Likewise, the Garcias become the Other in the us where from “white” they turn into people of color.

As a matter of fact, they are the “spics” asked to go back home by the man in the street. Some episodes illustrate what Chester Pierce in 1970 called racial microaggressions, commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards a person or group. Yolanda does experience as such the remarks made by Rudy Elmenhurst’s parents, which her platonic boyfriend reports to her, “they said that should be interesting for him to find out about people from other cultures. It bothered me that they should treat me like a geography lesson for their son.” (98). The

parents' anthropological stance, connoted by the simile "geography lesson," objectify Yolanda and threaten her humanity just like the openly racist remarks addressed by the other students to Sandi.

Moreover, Alvarez subtly depicts the plight of a double cultural exile. Yolanda retrieves her crucifix and puts it under her pillow after Rudy abandons her making a remark in retrospect, "Had I been raised with the tradition of stuffed animals, I would have hugged my bear ... salting the ragged fur with my tears all night." (99) The cross alleviates the separation whether it is her boyfriend or ultimately her homeland, a process of mourning which Ricardo Ainslie called a cultural one (Ainslie). Yolanda's retrospective observation points to the act of lamenting a lost culture. Likewise, Alvarez also eloquently illustrates "reverse displacement," what the Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti called *desexilio* (cited by Averis, 17) – in the first chapter Yolanda finds herself a cultural foreigner in her homeland. Indeed, her aunt reminds her that "this is not the States. A woman just doesn't travel alone in this country." (9) This remark highlights the fact "the lost home and the homeland do not necessarily represent loci of secure locatedness for women, but sites in which identity was already problematic," as Kate Averis demonstrated in her study of six contemporary Francophone and Latin American writers (23).

Therefore, exile is not necessarily a negative event as it becomes a privileged site for the expression of women's identity. It appears in the narrative that women are finally empowered by exile whereas men are weakened. The father is challenged by Fifi's erotic kiss to him during the guessing game they play in her flat. In the same way, though a victim of the dictator, Carlos finds himself cast into the role of the dictator – when he tears the speech Yolanda was to deliver to her school, his daughter calls him "Chapita" to his face, unmistakably Trujillo's nickname "for the bottle caps he collected like medals" (Roorda, 21). Likewise, the conquest of the adolescent daughters' independence in the US is termed as "a regular revolution" (117). Moreover, the "coup" (127) to save Fifi, "exile[d]" (117) in her own homeland, from the danger of an untimely marriage to her local macho boyfriend is symbolically set "on the same Avenida where a decade ago the dictator was cornered and wounded on his way to a tryst with his mistress" (127). Therefore, exile contributes to women's emancipation, a most vital issue in the narrative.

It is no wonder, then, that the position of women in Yolanda's native land is one of the reasons that make her return, under consideration in the first chapter, appear impossible. However, the gender issue is far from being resolved in the US whose multinationals engineer a transnational objectification of women. At the end of the first chapter, the Palmolive ad picturing a blond woman under a shower, "her head thrown back in seeming ecstasy, her mouth opened in a wordless cry" (15), signifies not only the economic invasion of the island but also what women fought against, the commodification of femininity. Nevertheless, Alvarez revises the "messages of dollness" (Frever, 122) as Trinna S. Frever rightly argued. Indeed, the Spanish Barbie that Sandi appropriates is "less an enemy to be destroyed than a force to reckon with" (126) as it restores the girl's ethnic pride.

However, the author also shows the illusory nature of such pride building on the double identity of the victim and the victimizer, which Jennifer Bess analyzed through the concept of Miranda's complex (Bess). Alvarez not only plays with the interchangeability of dictators, Trujillo/Carlos and exposes the island's guilty history but also unearths the colonial past of the Dominican Republic, which again blurs the frontiers of dominator/dominated. In fact,

the drawing, at the beginning of the book, traces the origins of the family back to the Conquistadors. In addition, in the ambiguously titled chapter, “The Blood of the Conquistadors,” which makes the reader wonder whether it is the blood the Conquistadors had in their veins or the blood they shed, namely the first inhabitants, the Arawaks, the game Carlos plays is reported as one “that nobody likes” (197). Yolanda calls it the test her father gives her to determine whether his children have inherited the blood of the Conquistadors— he holds her upside down till she says yes.

Precisely, Yolanda’s reluctant assent entails the acknowledgment of “the violation” committed by the Garcias’ ancestors, uttered at the end of the narrative— Yolanda, beset by guilt, recalls the kitten she took away from her mother, “At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black fur thing lurking in the corners of my life ... wailing over some violation that lies at the centre of my art” (290). There is little doubt that Alvarez endorses Adorno’s aphoristic, oft-cited thought in *Minima Moralia*, “The highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one’s own home” (39). Like Nancy Huston who emigrated to France and exposed Canada’s colonial history and its extermination of the vast majority of its indigenous population, Alvarez scrutinizes this problematic position. Metonymy establishes a relation between Yolanda’s childish misdemeanor and the adults’ ones – the extermination of the island’s first inhabitants, the massacre of the Haitians, the invasion of the island by the Americans and the exile endured by the family.

Though the us is life-saving for Carlos and a secure place for the whole family, it also appears as “an unsafe place” (223) and “a nation of zombies” (221) in the discourse of Chucha, the Sibylla of exile in the narrative. Her discourse anticipates the shattering of a different type of security, what Laing calls ontological security. Exile’s traumatic discontinuity seems to shatter the primary ontological security and creates the existential condition of “primary ontological insecurity” (Laing, 39). All the characters, to a greater or lesser extent, touch upon or sink into this type of insecurity. Carlos’s fear of the secret police verges on paranoia. Chucha, in her effort to control her own death, sleeps in her coffin, the only space that seems to offer safety. But the most poignant intimation of this rupture of primary ontological security is significantly related to Sandi who, just like her sister Yolanda, is committed at some point in her life to a mental institution,

It was strange how when held up to the absolute phrase—  
*the one toy I really want*—nothing quite filled the hole  
that was opening wide inside Sandi .... Nothing would  
quite fill that need, even years after, not the pretty wom-  
an she would surprise herself by becoming .... not the  
men that held her close and almost convinced her ....  
this was what Sandi has been missing (215).

Sandi’s black hole that threatens to swallow her dates back to what her sister Carla, who tried to understand her condition by becoming a psychologist, termed “the day you lost everything” (150), primary safety included.

Indeed, Sandi and Yolanda go through a severe identity crisis and are committed to mental institutions at some point in their lives for a condition that goes beyond a nervous breakdown and reads like psychosis. The term does not appear in the narrative and Alvarez’s approach is clearly based on existential phenomenology that defines madness as “what is ‘existentially

true is lived as 'really' true" (Laing, 37). Sandi becomes a compulsive reader for fear of turning into a monkey holding onto books as the last remnants of humanity. It is precisely this humanity that was denied to Carla when she was called monkey by the other children at school in this diffuse experience of exile. Alvarez depicts the anxieties that are aspects of a basic ontological insecurity, more particularly engulfment – Yolanda engulfed by other voices compulsively quotes and misquotes authors in the Babel Tower of herself. If one sister obsessively reads, and the other obsessively cites, "they feel most closely identified with the 'mind' (Laing, 65), a state that aims "to transcend the world and hence to be safe" (Laing, 80). The two sisters, both avid readers of the classics, represent the couple, writer (Yolanda)- reader (Sandi) and thus appear as paragons of the humanities which value human experience.

It seems that Alvarez extends the alienation from place to self alienation and makes them indistinguishable thus setting exile on an ontological ground. Precisely, in *Something to Declare*, Alvarez pointed out this sort of ontological uncertainty entailed by exile: "listening to cousins my age complain about their maids, I felt like the poor relation. But what I most lusted for was not their luxuries, but their lives of certitude. They seemed so unshaken by the self-doubts and life decisions that were buffeting me." (182–83). This indecisive middle ground corresponds to Yolanda's mental landscape in the first chapter which ambiguously ends with an affirmation of difference; the latter is commented by Said as a defining characteristic of the exile, "clutching difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will, the exile jealousy insists on his or her right to refuse to belong" (182). In addition, the last chapter of the novel that ends with an affirmation of art sends the reader back to the first chapter in which Yolanda as a grownup artist gropes for answers in an indeterminate space.

The reader may wonder about what has taken Yolanda back to the island after a five year absence of visit and "a long journey, a cycle, an Odyssey" (Cassin, 16 my translation) with the secret hope to stay. The answer is in the title of the first chapter, "Antojio," a Spanish term that refers both to a yearning for a certain food and a spiritual yearning. The guavas Yolanda is hungering after signify the childhood paradise which the character can no longer find as she is clearly the odd woman out and the island has become a marketer's paradise. Likewise, the last chapter also establishes the illusory nature of this paradise spoiled by the primeval act of violation of local rights. Indeed, Barbara Cassin points out that "nostalgia has two faces, rootedness and wandering" (54) and to illustrate her view brings up Dante's view of Ulysses as "an emigrant who does not desire return" (56). Yolanda's nostalgia turns out to be not the sort of *Heimweh* or home sweet home but rather *Sehnsucht*, "an open nostalgia that does not return to itself" (Cassin, 60). Cassin also brings up Heidegger's notion of "*nicht zu Hause*" to signal that we are nowhere at home. The French author concludes with the vertiginous equivocality of the world and the insecurity of human beings (121) which are intimated in Alvarez's novel.

Alvarez's open-ended ending, which depicts a dangling woman and points to the aporia of belonging, could be examined under a host of concepts that illuminate the peculiar condition of in-betweenness. First, as other critics pointed out (Goss Erickson, 86), Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely," which blurs the frontier between the personal and the political is quite relevant. According to Bhabha, the unhomely is related to displacements "caused within cultural lives of postcolonial societies" (Bhabha, 146), and is "the uncanny literary and social effect of enforced social accommodation, or historical

migrations and cultural relocation.” (Bhabha, 141). Throughout the narrative Alvarez precisely “relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (Bhabha, 144) and it is this relation that Bhabha defines as the unhomely. Yolanda finds herself not homeless but “unhomed” as both the Dominican Republic and the us are problematic sites that do not offer a satisfactory shelter.

In addition, Yolanda’s ultimate figuration as a nomad which seals “an image of the subject in terms of a non-unitary and multilayered vision, as a dynamic and changing entity” (Braidotti, 5) also brings up Rosi Braidotti’s concept of nomadism. As Braidotti puts it, “The point of nomadic subjectivity is a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreign distinction, but within all these categories” (7). Moreover, Averis identifies a “current trend of nomadism in exiled women’s writing in French and Spanish” and points out the transcultural applicability of this notion across exiled women’s writing (165). Indeed, Alvarez’s writing can be understood in the light of this notion.

Finally, Georg Lukács’s concept of “transcendental homelessness,” developed in his *Theory of the Novel*, is not irrelevant either. Alvarez’s novel with its fragmentary structure, its divided characters, its deviations from the *Bildungsroman*, its elusive, misleading nostalgia, prominent in the first chapter, does raise the question of a nostalgia whose object is a totality of existence. Hopelessly shattered in the modern world it refuge in language. Yolanda, the writer, in search of a lost Eden, finally holds out “the violation in the centre of her art,” an art which, unable to reach the epic unity, exemplifies the unreachable telos of the novel, “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (Lukács, 88). Alvarez’s narrative displays this sort of homelessness, the exile from the paradise of the epic that could secure satisfactory answers.

Nevertheless, the type of “aerial roots” (Cassin, 130), which the narrative seems to sketch out, points at language. In the narrative, language can kill, as the parsley massacre exemplifies (the pronunciation of the word *parsley* being the ‘test’ given to Haitians to supposedly distinguish them accurately from Dominicans), but it can also save, as Yolanda’s recovery illustrates. David Cowart rightly states that “language functions as a kind of *pharmakon*, the site or medium of both psychological collapse and emotional restoration” (48). The narrative’s ending establishes the authority of language despite the violation. It is the artist’s voice – Yolanda finally asserts her voice emerging from this remembrance from things past previously denied by the father/dictator when he tore up her speech in which she found herself. It is the language that triumphs over the initial silence pregnant with the stories Chuca can hear, “They have left—and only the silence remains, the deep and empty silence in which I can hear the voices of my *santos* settling into the rooms, of my *loa* telling me stories of what is to come” (222). It is the language that vehicles the initial double loss that of Spanish and English but also of a greater gain. As Sonia Farid puts it,

It is through a disrupting of the hegemonic language codes that Latino/a writers make English malleable enough to suit their purpose: recounting the story of a Hispanic in the United States .... Spanish still features powerfully in the texts whether by the actual inclusion of Spanish vocabulary and syntax or by constant references to the way characters approach their native tongue while in exile (243).

This enriched version of language, relying on both English and Spanish and in which linguists could delight, is the home of the unhomely, of the nomads, of those “beings without frontiers and beyond categories” (Kristeva).



Just like Hannah Arendt who redefined herself in relation to a language and not to a space, Alvarez quoting Czeslaw Milosz stated that language is the only homeland (McClellan). This ever-expanding homeland whose frontiers are beyond control and which eludes all potentates is certainly large enough to wander for life. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is Alvarez's noteworthy contribution to the literature of exile. Her depiction of exile involving a constellation of issues makes the novel a rich testimony to the complexities of our times.

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