

On Differences – Aspects of Pluralism in Contemporary Literature

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This paper presents three instances of literary representation of identity, in the age of globalization and cultural hybridity. Namely, two examples from Hispanic-American literature, Gloria Anzaldua and Nicholasa Mohr, who address the issues of belonging to a community and expressing certain ethnic and psychological particularities. The other example is Zadie Smith, a postcolonial writer who expresses the construction of multiculturalism. Their characters demonstrate the problems of living in a postmodern world. They collide with each other in the pursuit of meaning and truth.

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1. Introduction

In the cultural discourses that address the issues of globalization, cultural difference and identity, Arjun Appadurai makes pertinent remarks. He considers that “the world we live in now seems rhizomic, even schizophrenic, calling for theories of rootlessness, alienation and psychological distance between individuals and groups, on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the other. Here we are close to the central problematic of cultural processes in today’s world.” (Appadurai 1994, 325) The critic treats the five dimensions of global cultural flow, which he coins ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, finanscapas and ideoscapas. As Professor Rodica Mihaila points out, referring to the changes in the postmodern, global society,

‘The corporate structure of global capital and the worldwide expansion of communication and information networks make the existence of a unique center of power in a globalized world an impossibility. Americanization is

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seen as a process of transculturation in the course of which American culture is both hybridizing and hybridized.’ (Mihaila 2004, 19).

Richard Jenkins points out, in *Rethinking Ethnicity*, that societies are culturally plural, diverse and heterogeneous, these traces are not new, are not brought by globalization. But globalization and what has been discussed as ‘postmodernity’ bring about quantitative changes in the pluralism aspect. Jenkins draws attention to the fact that:

“The spreading ripples of globalization are enlarging the scale of the social arenas in which identities are forged and maintained. The amount of information about Others is expanding and becoming more immediate” (Jenkins 2008, 40).

As Richard Jenkins says, the main aspect of the new discourse of ‘pluralism’ is the expression of *difference*, that is, multiculturalism. It is a way of resistance to the homogenization brought by history and progress, and

‘as a basis for imagining a new world of mutual recognition and tolerance; (...) as the inspiration for ethics and politics of representation and diversity which challenge the centralization, (...) the integration (...) of the nation (...), and as the inspiration for new analytical models of the complexity of the human world (...) this multi-faceted and heterogeneous strand of argument (...)’ (Jenkins 2008, 31).

This paper presents three instances of literary representation of identity, in the age of globalization and cultural hybridity: two examples from Hispanic-American literature, Gloria Anzaldua and Nicholasa Mohr, who address the issues of belonging to a community and expressing certain ethnic and psychological particularities. And Zadie Smith, a postcolonial writer working in London, who captures – in literature - the construction of multiculturalism, and is very concerned with the issues of cultural difference and identity.

2. Gloria Anzaldua and Nicholasa Mohr – two examples of non-canonical, ethnic writers

Harry Goulbourne points out, in his study “Aspects of Nationalism and Black Identities in Post-Imperial Britain”, that

“Contemporary men and women are committing, or being asked to commit, themselves to the twin project of deconstructing established communities and constructing new ones” (Goulbourne 1993, 77).

Although Harry Goulbourne refers to the situation of coloured people in Britain, the issues treated in his study can be applied to Hispanic-American literature as a relevant example, I think, because the critic talks about the mechanisms of the members of a community who belong to a minority. The response is ambivalent: on the one hand the minorities have sought to demonstrate their right to be regarded as good citizens, on the other hand the minorities assert their cultural distinctiveness. A famous writer, critic and academic, Gloria Anzaldua fought all her life for the expression of the Chicanas in the American culture. The exploration and exposure of Chicano identity through language, cultural practices and especially writing were her concerns all her life:

“Books saved my sanity, knowledge opened the locked places in me and taught me first how to survive and then how to soar”, says Anzaldua in her introduction to *This Bridge Called My Back*. It is suggested that a lot of pressure came from different directions, in the construction of a multicultural society. The text “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” – which is at the border between essay and short story – offers a perspective at this complex world of the Chicana minority asserting their identity in the United States. Also a feminist, Gloria Anzaldua makes an assault on culture in general, seen as a product of masculine patterns of thinking and constructing values. The text is very interesting, because of its structure, which is fluid, associative, and at the same time very asserting. It starts with a concrete scene at the dentist, where the doctor struggles with the patient’s tongue:

‘We’re going to have to control your tongue”, the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth. (...) “We’re going to have to do something about your tongue”, I hear the anger rising in his voice.(...) “I’ve never seen anything as strong or as stubborn”, he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?’ (Anzaldua 1991, 94)

From this point on Anzaldua plunges in a series of connections between quotations from poems referring to “robbing people of its language”, to short memories about the courses in English that were an instance of cultural abuse. For Anzaldua the English language was a means of cultural repression of her Chicana identity, and the variants of the Mexican Spanish were her “home tongues”. Language is indeed the primary means for expressing cultural identity, and her identity as a woman. So

race and gender are categories that operate as repressive agents in the contemporary society, even if the process is of constructing a multicultural space, this is Gloria Anzaldua's creed. The Chicanos have to make a double operation: of keeping their Chicana identity and integrate in the American society, at the same time.

Gloria Anzaldua succeeded in doing this, as an artist and an academic in the American society, and also as the voice in the text "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." She mastered with versatility all the variants of languages that she uses: Standard English, Working class and slang English, standard Spanish, standard Mexican Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, and so on. Gloria Anzaldua found a way out of the women's confining spaces imposed by the traditional Chicana community and of the marginal role as a Mexican writer in the United States. Thus, being the voice of her community, the voice of the women of her community and the voice of herself, Gloria Anzaldua successfully asserts her personality and contributes to the creation of a society of cultural pluralism. Her work illustrates very well what Helene Cixous expressed so clearly in the famous critical text "The Laugh of the Medusa":

'It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility, which will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. (...) It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures.' (Cixous 1993b, 336)

There are, of course, very different situations from Gloria Anzaldua's. For example, the one described by Nicholasa Mohr in a short story called "A Very Special Pet". The traditional family from Puerto Rico, that lives in an apartment in New York, only on the man's salary, represents the situation of in-between-ness of the ethnic group that does not integrate in the new space and culture, dreaming to come back to the culture of origin, with a very different economic situation.

The Fernandez family, portrayed realistically by Nicholasa Mohr, live in a world of their own, with their hen as their children's most loved pet, named Joncrofo. Graziela Fernandez seems to be far away from the protagonist of "How to Tame a Wild Tongue": she does not speak English, she never leaves the apartment, with the eight children the family raises. All the hardships are endured in silence, and fervent prayer.

'Mrs. Fernandez felt completely helpless as she looked about her kitchen. What a mess! she thought. Things were overturned, and there were white

feathers everywhere. Feeling the tears coming to her eyes, she sat down and began to cry quietly. What's the use now?' (Mohr 1991, 104).

Although the situation seems hopeless – Eugenio Fernandez is a porter in a large building in Manhattan, and has fallen ill – the short story ends with the woman's momentary escape in a world of dream, singing a song from back home.

Nicholasa Mohr is the voice that women like Graciela Fernandez never had. As the writer said:

'I, as a Puerto Rican child, never existed in the North American Letters. Our struggles as displaced migrants, working-class descendants of the *tabaqueros* (tobacco workers) who began coming here in 1916, were invisible in North American literature. As I proceeded to record who we were, I addressed myself both to adults and children – and, of course, to women.' (Mohr 1991, 98)

Nicholasa Mohr describes "the invisible walls" that separate the majority from a minority family, who live in a state of isolation, and the social reality of segregation. The Puerto Rican family does not manage to adapt in New York, and the separation walls are, first of all, cultural, I think. As Richard Jenkins points out, in *Rethinking Ethnicity*:

'In a well-known passage in the "Introduction" to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, F. Barth argued that the focus for the investigation of ethnicity should be 'the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses'. By 'cultural stuff', he means language, religion, customs and laws, tradition, material culture, cuisine etc. (...) It remains an argument that must remain at the centre of our thinking. (...) It also reminds us that where or how any particular ethnic boundary that is drawn is arbitrary, rather than self-evident or inevitable.' (Jenkins 2008, 111).

3. Zadie Smith – the construction of multiculturalism

Another example in the construction of identity is offered by Zadie Smith, and her novel *White Teeth* (2000). The winner of seven major literary awards, *White Teeth* tells the story of two families that attempt to overcome cultural issues in order to live happily. The novel is set within the districts of the capital city London, in

Willesden and Kilburn, and it glimpses at South Eastern Europe during World War II, and the former British colonies Jamaica and Bangladesh. The most distinctive trait of this novel is the multiculturalism that thrives in the postcolonial British metropolis, and it illustrates the interaction between the native British and immigrant residents, from different walks of life, races and religious backgrounds.

The story begins with the friendship between Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal during the Second World War and continues with depicting their lives further on. While Archie ends up marrying Clara, a Jamaican girl whose mother is a devout Jehovah-Witness, Samad marries Alsana, a 'fresh' immigrant from Bangladesh, as the result of an arranged marriage. Samad is haunted by the permanent conflict between his religious and cultural background as a Bengali Islamist, on the one hand, and the life in a 'corrupting' and estranging postcolonial centre – London. Consequently, he decides to send his son Magid to Bangladesh, where he can develop properly under the teachings of Islam. Ironically, his decision turns against him as Magid becomes an atheist. The lives of the two families interact with that of the Jewish-Catholic Chelfens, who consider themselves intellectual liberal towards the others, but actually fail to respond to their children's needs. The second generation of these three families discloses how one grows up in the heterogeneous, postcolonial London of the 1990s.

Zadie Smith's preoccupation with debating the issues of cultural difference and identity is obvious in the entire novel. The Chalfens, for example, are taken to be 'more English than the English', because of their liberal middle-class values. However, they originate from Poland. Zadie Smith develops the theme of hybridity and multiculturalism, using extended metaphors, from horticulture and the weather.

At a structural level, Zadie Smith is interested in constructing a web of parallels and correspondences among the four parts of her novel. It is a carefully controlled narrative, and the author uses exterior structures, such as chapter titles, to govern its presentation.

Each of the four parts is named after a character and contains two important years in the character's life: "ARCHIE 1974, 1945", "SAMAD 1984, 1857", "IRIE 1990, 1907" and "MAGID, MILLAT AND MARCUS 1992, 1999".

Each section includes a chapter title that concerns teeth, for example "Teething Trouble", or "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden."

In the novel *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith demonstrates that the relationship between the past and the present is important for her characters, but it is fractured, and they approach their relationship with history from various perspectives. At the same time, Zadie Smith's characters face the impossibility of escaping history, or living entirely outside its influence.

For example Magid is essentially uprooted from his family and from his history, and he tries to construct an identity entirely separate from it. However, he is unable to escape their influence, and the novel's final section finds him reunited with his twin brother and entangled with Irie Jones.

Samad views history as an accurate reflection of the present, and accordingly, he spends much of his life trying to come to terms with the role of his family history in his own life.

On the other hand, the younger generation in *White Teeth* takes a different approach to history – a more relaxed one, less tied to the problems and intensities of the past.

The novel *White Teeth* successfully presents the problems of London at the end of the twentieth century, also pointing to the new possibilities and ways of transformation at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

There is a double movement that leads to the construction of London as a multicultural centre: the differences in identity traces are tolerated by the others, and at the same time the immigrants wish to integrate in the huge flux of metropolitan life. Zadie Smith's novel illustrates very well what Richard Jenkins sustains in the above-quoted book, *Rethinking Ethnicity*:

'The key to this new discourse of 'pluralism' is a celebration of *difference*: as the site of resistance to Eurocentric and androcentric meta-narratives of history and progress; as the basis for imagining a new world of mutual recognition and tolerance; as a bulwark against fundamentalist images of the world; as an assertion of the rights to autonomous (co)existence of peripheralized, marginalized, minority-ized peoples; as the inspiration for ethics and politics of representation and diversity which challenge the centralization, the homogenization, the integration and the domination of the nation'. (Jenkins 2008, 31)

4. Conclusion

The writers that I chose for exemplification, Gloria Anzaldua, Nicholasa Mohr and Zadie Smith, demonstrate the problems of living in a postmodern world, and their characters constantly collide with each other in the pursuit of meaning and truth, and struggle in their attempts to find happiness in the fractured and chaotic world of contemporary life.

The main theme with Gloria Anzaldua would be constructing the Chicana – American identity, with all the challenges that are involved, while the main theme with Nicholasa Mohr would be revealing the enormous difficulties for a Puerto

Rican family to adapt in the life of New York city. The relation majority-minority is underlined in both these writers.

Zadie Smith, on the other hand, presents a multicultural society – London at the end of the twentieth century. She is concerned with how people come to terms with their identities and with the past, with how individuals fit in society, and with metaphysical questions about the nature of existence.

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