

*The Logical Structure of Hybridity in American Ethnic Fiction*

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**Abstract**

This article is an attempt to analyze the representation of some literary responses of ethnic American writers in the US; and more specifically achieve recognition from the hegemonic subject and go on to form part of the American literary canon. Therefore, one of the objectives of this article is to analyze the hybridity of ethnic-American writers and the representations they construct from the cultures of their native and adopted countries. The majority of US-ethnic writers are not newcomers in American literary scene. Many of them were either born in the US, “brought” or immigrated to the United States, but all share the fact of writing in English and publishing in the US, a fact that has disrupted the traditional literary canon of this country. Consequently, many of them have come to form a “hyphenated cultural identity.”

**Key Words:** hybridity, ethnic-American, hyphenated cultural identity-literary canon.

**ملخص**

إن معظم الكتاب من مختلف الأصول العرقية والاثنية الأمريكية ليسوا بعيدين عن مشهد الأدب الأمريكي كونهم ولدوا بالولايات المتحدة الأمريكية أوهاجروا إليها. ذلك أن العديد منهم يتحدث اللغة الإنجليزية ويستعملها أداة للكتابة والنشر ما أدى إلى خلق بعض التشويه في الأدب التقليدي لهذا البلد.

والهدف الرئيسي لهذا المقال هو التحقيق في ردود بعض الكتاب الأمريكيين ذوي الأصول المختلفة فيما يخص الثقافة والصلة والهوية الأمريكية. بل سيسعى المقال إلى التحليل الدقيق للكتابات الهجينة لكتاب أمريكيين من أصول إثنية وعرقية مختلفة، والنظر في محاولاتهم تقديم هويتهم وثقافتهم الأصلية ودمجها في الثقافة الجديدة للبلد المستضيف.

**Introduction:**

One of the most important features that characterize U.S. contemporary ethnic fiction is hybridity. It is rather queer to talk about diaspora without invoking the term hybridity which, in fact, breeds and nourishes from the politico-cultural pathos of diaspora.<sup>(1)</sup> If diasporas are continuously engaged in developing complex “third spaces” interacting with both home and host countries, their diasporic identities are perpetually recreating themselves anew, through transformation and difference. It is no surprise, however, that their experiences would be reflected in their narratives as the logical creative outlets of hybrid existence in-between cultures.

**The Formulation of Hybridity in Ethnic-American Narratives:**

In this state of in-between-ness, the hybrids are often described as individuals lacking physical and mental-well being. In their attempts to construct an identity, the hybrids feel the burden of loneliness, not knowing exactly who they are. Consequently, the individual who can hardly locate himself/herself in the world and define who he/she is, lives in a constant state of confusion or limbo. They are, according to Bhabha, not in between cultures, but in a state of “fluctuation,” i.e. of being here and there, and nowhere.<sup>(2)</sup> In “The Commitment to Theory” Bhabha defines hybridity as what “is new, neither the one nor the other” which emerges from a “third space”.<sup>(3)</sup> Though Bhabha’s theory of hybridity is strongly related to postcolonial studies—as it is confirmed by Inkwame Anthony Appiah in his “My Father’s House”(1992)<sup>(4)</sup> — it can be adopted to the many existent minorities in ex-colonies throughout the world. The Jewish individual, for instance, among other minorities in America, lives in a situation where these feelings are multiplied: not only is he/she a minority in America, as other immigrants or indigenous groups are, he/she is, in many cases, a hybrid being inside his own group.

In postmodern context the term hybridity may take another connotation completely different from that invoked by Bhabha who stresses the hybrid as that condition of in-betweenness, a situation that is always affirming and escaping its otherness. According to Néstor García Canclini, an Argentine-born academic and anthropologist, hybrid is a theoretical wager to negotiate an identity, a condition which is either/and, and in this sense, becomes related to

heterogeneity. <sup>(5)</sup> Hybridity is referred to as a construct to negotiate the cultural condition of an identity. The conclusion that Canclini draws out when relating the concept of hybrid for cultural crossings is of paramount importance. Canclini, on the one hand, observes that these crossings have been intensified and attributes their speed to paradigm shifts, and the multiplicity of meanings; and on the other hand, he accepts that a progressive intensification of hybridity could potentially disorganize the field of culture and of knowledge and make the defense of this position untenable. <sup>(6)</sup>

However, in the African American literary tradition the term hybrid may manifest itself in a variety of aesthetic forms. Morrison, for instance, uses the aesthetics of *métissage* in the creation of a new woman-centered religion. The term *métissage* as employed by Morrison in her novels, notably *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* includes both the process of hybridity and creolization. According to Françoise Lionnet, the terms «*métissage* and *métis*» combine the meanings of cultural and racial mixing. <sup>(7)</sup> These terms comprise both creolization which is usually related to cultural and linguistic mixing, and hybridity which is connected with racial integration. <sup>(8)</sup>

The cultural backgrounds of Morrison are convenient, valid and conducive to the concept of *métissage*. Morrison seems to belong to and writes from cultures, the hybridity of which is expressed by the combination of locales and identities. She perceives the supernatural as a liminal space of openness and hybridity. Accordingly, Morrison deconstructs Western ideals of racial purity through hybridity or *métissage*.

It is practically convenient to mention that in the Caribbean context, where the term (*métissage*) has first appeared, signifies not only the mixing of different elements, but also the fabrication of a new entity out of disparate fragments. *Métissage* is a highly imaginative process, as it involves the re-creation or even fabrication of history and identity. <sup>(9)</sup>

Pursuing a similar vein, but with a slight varying degree, Ralph Ellison in his novel *Invisible Men* also meddles with the notion of hybridity which refers to a culturally mixed identity that cuts across racial and national lines. Though his views about hybridity may concur with Du Bois's model of double consciousness <sup>(10)</sup>, Ellison's conception of hybridity with regard

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to national identity denotes repressed exclusion. This is explicitly illustrated through the Ellison's protagonist while he was in Wall Street searching for a job. In this episode, the main symbol for national identity is a film to which Invisible Man treats himself:

*In the evening I went out to a movie, a picture of frontier life with heroic Indian fighting and struggles against flood, storm and forest fire, with the out-numbered settlers winning each engagement; an epic of wagon trains rolling ever westward. I forgot myself (although there was no one like me taking part in the adventures) and left the dark room in a lighter mood. (Invisible Man, 1952, p. 170)*

Unlike Gilroy's use of the international space of the Atlantic Ocean which leads to the construction of the African diaspora characterized by hybridity and homelessness, Ellison's uses the national territory of Oklahoma to describe his border space. <sup>(11)</sup>

Hispanic-American literary tradition has also dealt with issues of transnational identities, acculturation and the construction of new hybrid identities. These representatives of Chicano/a literature hold different ideological positions. For example, Anaya is regarded as one of the most conservative Chicano authors, studied in American universities for his contributions to the understanding and illustration of more essentialist notions of the Chicano identity. Julia Alvarez, on the other hand, represents the feminist and post-modernist perspective whose writings are often considered of breaking the bridge between cultures. More significantly, however, both writers are mostly concerned with the opportunities that belonging to more than one culture affords and introduces us to the concept of hybridity. For this Caribbean woman, writing becomes the space where she can enthusiastically celebrate her two cultures, and her doubleness. The following extracted quotation from one of her interviews seems to add some insight to Álvarez's views hybrid identity:

*I discovered that the act of writing was a way of bringing together those two worlds that would often clash in my own head, driving me in different directions. A way of reconciling two cultures that mixed together in such odd combinations. At my*

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*desk, I could sort out and understand those combinations.*<sup>(12)</sup>

It should be remarked that the personal cultural hybridity of Alvarez's characters in her novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accent* are the logical outcome of long years of exile. This would certainly pervade her writing. In this respect Alvarez illuminatingly said:

*One of my theories [ . . . ] is that there is not such thing as straight-up fiction. There are just levels of distance from our own life experience, the thing that drives us to write in the first place. In spite of our caution and precaution, bits of our lives will get into what we write [ . . . ]*<sup>(13)</sup>

Particularly pertinent is that the act of writing in itself is used as an instrument to explore and come to terms with her hybrid self: it is a way of exorcising her demons. Her works, accordingly, bring forth a whole series of ideological and cultural issues, which concern her greatly, and which "come out of being in worlds [the Latino and the Anglo-American] that sometimes clash and sometimes combine."<sup>(14)</sup> Thus, it is no surprise that her writing would encompass a variety of topics such as hybrid identity, integration and assimilation, racial discrimination, Latino values and culture and the rewriting of history from a female point of view.

It is imperatively important to notice that the form of Alvarez' narratives can be regarded as a good illustrative example of postmodern textual hybridity. To show her hybridity, Alvarez has applied special technical stylistic devices. Those would include: (a hybrid genre of the novel: autobiography and short story), experimentation with language (word plays and code-switching thanks to their bicultural condition), alteration of the temporal linearity, polyphonic narration (fragmentation), and use of fictionalized memory (reinvention of their history as women) are among their most distinguishable features. This is to explain to what extent hybridity dominates not only Alvarez's life but also her literary productions, emerging as the cornerstone to the understanding of this writer's narratives as well as her self. Thus, Alvarez literary works (both in content and form) should be conceived as the creative outlet of such hybridity in which her life constantly evolves. Her exilic expe-

rience in the United States did not only brand her life forever—making her liminal beings trapped between two cultures (the Latino and the Anglo-American)—but also strongly influenced her literary writings. One is, therefore, compelled to understand her life in order to fully comprehend her narratives.

Since Alvarez is a writer who is very much interested in different cultures, she often employs metaphors and images of hybridity, wrapped in the term “borderland”, to show the formation of identity by dint negotiation between clashing cultural realms. The border, which in the work of Alvarez becomes internalised as a psychic space negotiating cultural collisions, is a metaphoric image of hybridity: Yolonda, for instance, becomes a twilight figure, a character who deviates from the norm, someone who is dislocated. She is a character experiencing the in-betweenness. It is useful here to evoke Bhabha’s in-between, conceived as the contested realm between different and supposedly distinct cultures. According to Bhabha, the “partial” culture that migrants bring to their new homes is still similar but also surprisingly different from its “parent culture.” This partial culture is the “contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures”<sup>(15)</sup> — it separates and connects at the same time and therefore becomes an “impossible” boundary. It is in this border area that something new emerges: in this sense, the in-between is the “location” of culture. It is exactly this contestation, the paradoxical situation of the neither-nor (and yet the bothness) of Bhabha’s in-between, that is conjured up in Alvarez’s novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*.

Borders, especially, for Latino-Americans, afford excellent locations and interesting sites for an individual to perceive culture and its implicit values. Their desire to cross the border is enhanced by their strong thirst search of a new life and a new identity. This act would prompt them to sacrifice everything they have for the sake of acquiring a new life, new culture and a new language. In this perspective, America, the land of opportunities, is a privileged site for the exploration of a new hybrid cultures. However, the way the American culture manifests itself as a host country is problematic. America still reasons by the imperial logic in the sense that all other cultures should melt like ice as an agreement with her Americanness. This bounded notion of culture, “My” culture means “not yours”<sup>(16)</sup> to borrow Anne Phillips’s words is evoked by Jacob T. Levy, an outstanding scholar of sociology

of culture, who rejects the optimistic view that cultural hybridity is a means to dissolve the rigidity of ethnic and/or cultural boundaries and to defuse the conflicts of the multiethnic world. According to him, a to have a culture is to find your ways of doing things more natural than any other and to feel greater allegiance to those you regard as your own. <sup>(17)</sup>

As it has just been mentioned the notion that there are distinct cultural groups, which must be integrated, assimilated, accommodated, or allowed to secede, can be interpreted as a reflection of the imperial logic. For minority groups are often defined by reference to some presumed majority, consequently furthering the illusion that what is left when the minorities are taken away is itself undivided by difference. This notion comprehends difference basically in terms of what distinguishes one minority group from another, and minority groups as a whole from the majority, turning a blind eye to all manner of crosscutting differences that do not echo and fit these supposedly basic divides. <sup>(18)</sup>

Increasingly, this notion misses any agreement with Bhabha's conception of the Hybridity of cultures which simply refers to the mixed-ness, without any complex or whatsoever, as long as all cultures are "impure"<sup>(19)</sup> In a collected essays in his book entitled *The Location of Culture (1994)* Bhabha endeavors to decimate and weaken the simple polarization of the world into self and other through his concept of hybridity of cultures. Indeed, this concept of mixed-ness, which proves a great adaptability within every form of identity, has influenced many literary writers. Selman Rushdie can be cited as one among these writers who have taken a great interest in expressing hybrid cultural identities. He is mentioned here as an adequate illustration to Bhabha's notion of hybrid cultures. In defense of his novel *The Satanic Verses (1997)*, Rushdie states that, "*The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling. . . . It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world.*"<sup>(20)</sup> In an age of mass migration, characterized by global trade and wide economic exchange, cultural influences are radically dispersed. Thus, on this basis Rushdie seems to build his argument rejecting the notion that the world divides up into separate and distinct cultures.

Undoubtedly, literature, a vehicle of expression and a tool of cultural representation would certainly be affected by the ongoing process of hybridization. Hispanic-American writers, for instance, have hardly ever missed to describe the characters in their literary works as people who are unwelcomed in their new society. On the meantime, they do not entirely or any longer fit in with those whom they left behind. They are no longer Mexican or Dominican or Puerto Rican or Cuban but rather a confusing blend of the two. It is true that the immigrant experience is not always burdened and filled with struggle and challenge, but the sense of transition, of geographic and linguistic change, hovers and looms over many of the works these authors produce.

It is very important, therefore, to notice that the wide use of Spanglish symbolizes that hybridization or mixture of cultural influences. Many authors such as: Anaya, Alvarez, Cisneros, Ernesto Quiñonez, to cite just a few, often use Spanish phrases or words without providing an English translation; thereby leaving the non-Spanish speaker alone to infer the meaning from the context. By so doing, these authors want inform the non-Spanish-speaking readers about the difficulties the immigrants face. They want them to experience the same sense of isolation and alienation many immigrant populations experience. They want them to taste the bitter sensation of being shut out of the narrative because of the barriers of language and communication; effectively, transforming these readers into immigrants in the world of the story.<sup>(21)</sup>

### **References:**

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- (10) See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Essays and Sketches Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903. According to W. E. B. Du Bois in his prophetic works *The Souls of Black Folk*, defines double consciousness as this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity»(p5) . In simpler terms it can be defined as a constant internal fight between being an African American and just an American. African Americans right after the Civil Rights movement battled with this concept to try and reestablish the roles of society in relation to color whose trans-Atlantic expatriation catalyzed his sense of transcultural identity. See also Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 17-19.
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