

# CONSCIOUSNESS OF EXILE: THE POLITICS OF IMAGINATION IN CRISTINA GARCIA'S *DREAMING IN CUBAN*

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## Abstract

In the strict literary scene, Cuban immigrants who as children left their island and grew up in the U.S are the ones who are preoccupied with the various issues of Cuban American diaspora. Cristina Garcia, who is a Cuban exile living in the U.S, is one of the most prominent Cuban American literary voices to manifest her position in this dialogue. In consonance with Garcia's argument, undergoing an exilic experience depends heavily on the political, social, and psychological changes, taking into account issues like rebel, repression, uncertainty, stress, and alike. The translation of such circumstances and desires may be demonstrated in different forms of expression. Imagination and dreams are two main ways of expressions that Garcia deploys in her novel under scrutiny. In this study, I intend to delineate borderlines between the main conceptions prevailing the novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, which are the physical exile, the psychological exile, and escapism through the novelist's perception of reality. Mindful of the fact that Garcia is a magical realist writer, the matter that strengthen the thesis that underscores the pivotal use of imagination, which prioritizes the inner state of the individual for pronouncing

factual events. The critical reading and discussion of Garcia's chosen novel is going to depend essentially on the psychological, psychoanalytical, and sociological approaches.

**Key Words:** The Cuban Exile, Escapism, Magical Realism, Imagination and Dreaming.

## الملخص

في المشهد الأدب الروائي، كان المهاجرين الكوبيين الذين مرو بتجربة الهجرة من جزيرتهم الى الولايات المتحدة وهم أطفال، هم الأشخاص الذين ينشغلون بمختلف قضايا الكوبيين الأمريكيين. كريستينا غارسيا، وهي من المنفيين الكوبيين الذين يعيشون في الولايات المتحدة، هي واحدة من أبرز الأصوات الكوبية الأمريكية الأدبية لإظهار موقفها في هذا الحوار. تستند حجة كتابات غارسيا على أن تجربة المنفى تعتمد أساسا وبشكل كبير على التغييرات السياسية والاجتماعية والنفسية، كالتفرد والقمع، عدم اليقين، الكبت، والتوتر وما الى ذلك. قد يتم عرض ترجمة هذه الظروف والرغبات بأشكال مختلفة من التعبيرات الخيالية والأحلام هما طريقتان رئيسيتان للتعبير الذي تعرضه جارسيا في روايتها تحت التمحيص. في هذه الدراسة أعترم على إبراز الحدود الفاصلة بين المفاهيم الرئيسية التي تسود رواية "الحلم بالكوبية"، والمتمثلة في المنفى الجسدي، والنفي النفسي، بالإضافة إلى نظرية الهروب من خلال إدراك الروائي للواقع. يجب أيضا الأخذ بعين الاعتبار بأن غارسيا تبني الواقعية السحرية، الأمر الذي يعزز النظرية التي تؤكد على الاستخدام المحوري للخيال، والذي يعطي الأولوية للحالة الداخلية للفرد في سرد الأحداث الواقعية. سوف تعتمد القراءة النقدية ومناقشة رواية غارسيا المختارة بشكل أساسي على المقاربات النفسية، التحليلية النفسية، والاجتماعية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المنفى الكوبي، الهروب، الواقعية السحرية، الخيال والحلم.

## 1. Introduction

Migration, Exile and displacement are indeed pervasive themes in today's literature in general and Cuban-American literature in specific. The pervasiveness of such themes are at the core life of the Cuban-American community that is described as one of the largest migratory minority to the United States. Yet, it is important to indicate the major differences between exile and migration as key concepts for understanding the experience of the Cuban-Americans from the island to the mainland. The individual and collective mobility from one place to another

does entail many explanations and encompass different circumstances. For this reason, the distinction between the related but distinct concepts of exile and migration should be made clear from the beginning in order to accurately comprehend the Cuban American case as demonstrated by Cristina Garcia, and ultimately make a correct connection between what she has already witnessed and her people's experience.

In its broad sense, exile is essentially linked to the political problems that force the individuals as well as the groups to leave their home country. This is especially true when talking about countries that have internal political issues, which cause deep alterations to the social life, which by means would lead to the geographical, physical, and psychological migrations. Therefore, migration is a thorough concept that includes exile, immigration, and displacement (Savin 02). The exile's condition for the Cuban-Americans was not easy neither for them nor for their left behind relatives.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the fact of moving to a new place where everything is different from the usual life is frustrating and tough, starting with the language they communicate with to the culture and religion of their habitual social atmosphere<sup>2</sup>. The Cuban-American writers who underwent the same mental and physical exhausting experience, found a burning desire to tell their story for the sake of uncovering the truth of what the Cuban people witnessed.<sup>3</sup> This journey is well described by Milan Kundera (qtd. In Savin "Migration and Exile" (03)), who compares it to "a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood."

## 2. Estrangement and Hyphenated Selves

The estranged Cuban writers are the most reliable source of understanding the Cuban exilic experience as they have envisaged a two-fold estrangement of the native Cuban and the American Cuban. Eventually, this generation of Cuban writers are a manifestation of non-conformity to either cultures but are capable of giving account of both. Thus, Cuba for them is an unforgettable felt past that would

never be repeated, just like their fathers who reject the idea of leaving their homeland; the case that is similar to the description of Gustavo Perez-Firmat who asserts that, "Cuba is an enduring, perhaps an endearing fiction. Cuba is for them as ethereal as the smoke and as persistent as the smell of their grandfather's cigars" (Qtd. In Payant 163)<sup>4</sup>. In fact, for most Cuban American migrants, Cuba is just a remembered dream that would never be replaced; yet, for many others, the overwhelming sense of belonging and nostalgia is what ignites the feeling of re-experiencing being Cubans.

For Cristina Garcia, the fact of leaving the country was not a matter of choice, this is why she is not considered as an exile since she moved with her parents at a very young age. This experience helped Cristina Garcia like many other Cubans to shape their identity to comply with the new encountered situation of hyphenated selves. At this level, Garcia felt a need of a reconciliation with her past for drawing definite borderlines between the two cultures. However, the Cuban socio-political vision was not clear for Cristina until her visit to her mother's family that is fervent patriotism. This opportunity allowed her to immerse herself fully into her roots. Consequently, most of her works, namely her first novel *Dreaming in Cuban* that is chosen for the present work, are a clear depiction of her own experience.

### 3. *Dreaming in Cuban* and the Split Vision

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina Garcia tries to focus on the exilic experience of the characters, especially female characters, who witnessed different kinds of exile, and which by means led to the emergence of social problems and psychological issues. Correspondingly, the state of the mental instability and emotional disequilibrium that most of Garcia's characters underwent created another crisis of belonging and the questioning of identity. Hence, the novel is a manifestation of binary contradictions that are eminently present in the display of the two different places, the island and the mainland; and the erratic movement of

time, besides the representation of the Cuban and the American cultural dichotomy and the ambivalent feeling about the past and the present (Savin 62-63).

In her 1992 novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina Garcia portrays the theme of exile through different characters who have experienced different forms of exile. In consonant with the central and critical idea that Garcia wanted to explain, Álvarez Borland clarifies that,

In the narrative, the author examines three important dimensions of Cuban exile: the story of the Cubans who remained in Cuba (exemplified in the book by abuela Celia and tía Felicia), the story of the Cuban exiles who came to America in the 1960s (the story of Lourdes, Pilar's mother), and, finally, the story of the children of exile (that is, Pilar's story). (137)

At this level, it is of a pivotal importance to understand the different exilic perspectives suggested by the author who claims, based on her own experience, that revisiting the island in search of memory could play a key role in fixing the problem of the Cuban exile. Notwithstanding, "the story of the Cubans who remained in Cuba" does not resemble the exile of those who left their homeland. Yet, what we could get from Garcia's novel is that things have changed in Cuba over the years of the revolution that Cuba is no longer the real old Cuba. Additionally, the three distinct types of Cuban exiles treat their memories of Cuba differently the fact that added interest and value to the understanding and examination of the socio-cultural experience.

The portrayal of the three different realities in *Dreaming in Cuban* are represented by three generations of Del Pino family namely: Celia and Jorge Del Pino who are the parents, Lourdes, Felicia and Javier who are their children, and Lourdes' daughter Pilar; besides minor characters like Luz, Milagros, Ivanito who are Felicia's children and Irinita the daughter of Javier. Due to political alterations that swept the Cuban society and caused deep influence on the Cubans who were shared between those who are in favour of their saviour "Fidel Castro" and those who are against his communist-like doctrine and, consequently, preferred to leave

their homeland for that main reason. Lourdes Del Pino was the first in her family to take that decision and to move to the United States together with her husband Rufino and her daughter Pilar. Celia, on the contrary, stayed in Cuba as a strong believer in the revolution; she portrays all the Cuban people who remained faithful to Castro's regime.

Lourdes, Pilar's mother, who represents the skipped generation, is a manifestation of the Cuban exiles that believe in the radical change by escaping Castro's Cuba. Lourdes' disavowal, however, was due to a brutal rape by Castro's soldiers and a loss of her baby, which caused her a deep and long lasting psychological shock that forced her to leave Cuba. The case of Lourdes is a bit different, as she continuously manifests her fears of forgetting about her torturing past, which would ultimately lead to her return to Cuba (Socolovsky 146-147). Subsequently, we can say that the Cuban socio-political condition led to the emergence of a longstanding fissure between the two generations of Celia who is a fervent of Castro's regime, and Lourdes who is against him and what he brought to Cuba.

#### 4. Dreams, Reality, and Dream Space

The notion of dreaming<sup>5</sup> is of a vital importance for pronouncing essential psychological matters that resulted from the divergent exiles in the novel. Moreover, dreaming in this novel is used for accentuating the crucial problem of moving from and to Cuba as a way of enriching the experience of Cubaness<sup>6</sup>, as well as a literary device for the emotional and corporeal connection to their significant cultural heritage. In Garcia's novel, dreaming is an eminent aspect of talking about the past that is related to the future of those Cuban exiles (Leonard 182).

In Garcia's text, dreaming is linked to the heritage and the history of the Cuban people, where Pilar Puente could reach and meet her Cuban grandmother Celia through dreams, and correspondingly, is accepting the burden of interpreting the Cuban past to the future up coming generations. For Suzanne Leonard, the use

of dreams in Garcia's text is a way of emphasizing the incompleteness of the exilic Cuban reality that is to a great extent similar to the knowledge provided by dreams. Leonard claims that, "the prevalence of uncertain or incomplete knowledges provides an apt correlative for the existence of ethnic identities precisely because such identities are always splintered, incomplete, or in process" (83). Therefore, dreams are used to help the characters know about their past and present, as well as knowing about their shared identities that have been torn between the two countries.

The dream space for creating a condition of possibility is a prevailing literary aspect in Garcia's magical realist text. This space has predominantly emerged for bridging the gaps that consistently divide the Cubans both in and out of their home country. The space where the dreams emerge is meant to juxtapose two worlds that represent two different realities about the Cubans and the Cuban-Americans within a non-existing time and space framework. Again, the dream space might therefore be said to emerge for the persistent need of articulating the incompatible realities that are in good part ascribable to exile and the emergence of the ethnic identity.

## 5. The Psychology of Imagination

Eventually, the Cuban history is the mysterious life side of many Cubans who were born or have been raised on the other side of the sea; yet, they feel connected to their homeland through stories and imagination. Pilar, who has encountered the same situation, recurrently feels that "every day Cuba fades a little more inside me," consequently, "there's only my imagination where our history should be" (Garcia 138). That is to say, Garcia could successfully use the process of imagining for manipulating many historical obfuscations. However, we should not forget about the limited power of imagination, as it could neither envisage nor envision the complete reality, and thus, the act of relying and calling upon one's own consciousness is critically partial. In addressing this point, Kathleen Brogan (qtd. In Leonard 198) believes that such incorporeal imagination that is most often

translated through magical language, "points to the replacement of a vital cultural embeddedness with a merely invented ethnicity, an identity based less on collective memory than on an individual's fabrications". As explained by Brogan, the acts of imagination could reflect the mere subjective viewpoints as it stems from individualistic self-reflection instead of the collective memory that is essentially more credible and believable.

### 5.1 Imagination and Telepathic Communications

The reestablishment of the emotional connection between two different generations in two different places necessitates the existence of a new space that would act as an imaginary channel for communicating and exchanging ideas. The experience of the cultural translation that has been shared between the grandmother, "Celia", and granddaughter, "Pilar", has a key role in the understanding of the historical, political and socio-cultural statuses that the Cubans witnessed; besides the concurrent social, cultural and economic circumstances of the Cuban-American community. Thus, imagination seems to occupy most of the two characters' communications. Celia continuously imagines her granddaughter, as she did not see her but cares a lot about her, yet she could feel Pilar through her intuition, "She imagined her granddaughter pale, gliding through paleness, malnourished and cold without the food of scarlets and greens" (Garcia 03).

Again, the two characters do not write to each other on a regular basis, but they oftentimes exchange ideas and communicate telepathically as both grandmother and granddaughter admit. Pilar states that, "Abuela Celia and I write to each other sometimes, but mostly I hear her speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep. She tells me stories about her life and what the sea was like that day" (Garcia 28-29). Celia, however, "closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter, imagines her words as silvers of light piercing the murky night" (03). Following this passage, we feel the extent to which her message is empowered by magic, which could have a great effect in delivering her idea on the auditor. For this instance, imagination is not just a means of communication, but it is also a way of



overstepping the boundaries of the mundane world. Therefore, I believe that imagination is the magical stream that keeps the magical realist characters free from the real world constrains. In this context, Celia communicates well with Pilar through acts of imagination, which created an affective and strong relationship despite their physical separation. The acts of imagination in this case, function as a vehement force that led to the erasure of all obstacles and boundaries by challenging time and space real structure. Indeed, Garcia wanted to underpin the vitality of the cultural and historical Cuban knowledge that would have remained unrevealed without the bridging literary tool of imagining.

## 5.2 Imagination as a Mental Escape

The escape from conscience<sup>7</sup>, which is a self-controlled mechanism used in *Dreaming in Cuban*, is an intentionally utilized motif for the representation of a forgotten history, hidden memories, and search for a better future for the Cubans. Additionally, we should also be aware of the debate over the main psychological reasons that literally lead to the decision of escaping the unbearable reality that coexist any given environment. In her work "A Forced Road to a No-Place: Escapism as a Form of Inner Emigration", Polina Golovátina-Mora notices that, "Stress, uncertainty, as well as the desire to change the environment and Self, either by moving away or by modifying the environment itself, become reasons and a driving force for escaping or migrating" (42). Following this argument, we can say that the inner emerged problems that are the direct reasons for the Cubans' escapism are the substantial causes of the growing rejection of former political and social values. For those who favoured their attachments to their shared past and memories, however, escape is not really a case in point, as they are the mediators and the transmitters of the Cuban reality.

Again, pointing out at the state of inner escape as an optimal way for showing the dissatisfaction with a certain reality has a set of different expressive ways. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, however, dreams and imagination are the pivotal means of expression for underscoring the notion of escapism or the psychological

and the mental escape. Therefore, exile and migration for the Cubans is a restoring and healing strategy for reducing their heightened tensions towards their political system and its followers and loyalists. Yet, it could also be used as a “substitute for development”, as Susan Gzesh suggests (qtd. In Golovátina-Mora 42), the claim that suits Celia's second daughter “Felicia” perfectly, who moved to Miami for getting a better chance for a prosperous and abundant life.

Imagination, on the other hand, which is an epistemological tool, tends to create a space that gives reality a new breadth; yet in other cases it tries to distort reality itself. This claim is clearly portrayed in Garcia's aim of showing the forced belonging of many Cubans, who believe in the necessity of staying loyal to their home country and their ruling system, and this is because they were born in Cuban, hence they should be obedient to their government and loyal to their nation. (Golovátina-Mora 43). Therefore, being a Cuban is a forced reality that certain Cubans could not challenge. In this regard, Golovátina-Mora explains, “national identity becomes the forced belonging that implies strict limitations on people's way of thinking, their aspirations, and their loyalty” (44). Celia Del Pino, for instance, falls into this category as she tirelessly “guarding the north coast of Cuba. Square by square”, as she believes that she is participating in the revolution's success. Besides, her deep sad feelings about her family's wrong decision of leaving the island, as well as her grievance about her husband, for his mixed up allegiances.

## 6. Conclusion

Eventually, imagination is used in the novel to stress the importance of the inner state of the Cuban exiles who continuously use the empowering the mental or psychological exercise, which eventually enabled the Cuban-American community as well as Cubans under duress to cope with the social and political circumstances. The overwhelming need of remembering the past is subsequently so recurrent throughout the novel. For some of the characters, imagination replaces history as it plays a key role in bringing back and most of the time creating the past. For others, conversely, the process of imagining failed as a way of representing the past.

Subsequently, characters in Garcia's novel who try to escape the reality with the help of imagination and dream powers could create a kind of manipulative and a therapeutic-like technique for transmitting their ideas and feelings.

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<sup>1</sup> - For a good understanding of the Cuban exilic experience, see the work of Juan Clark, "The Exodus from Revolutionary Cuba (1959–1974): A Sociological Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., Dept. of Sociology, University of Florida, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> - Larry Preston, in "Theorizing Difference: Voices from the Margins" (American Political Science Review 89, no. 4 [December 1995]: 941–53), writes about the difficulties inherent in this endeavour.

<sup>3</sup> - For an extensive review of the personal experiences of Cuban authors about their journey as exiles see the story of María de los Angeles Torres in her work "In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States", Of Memory and Mirrors pp. 1-21.

<sup>4</sup> - Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *Life on the Hyphen* and *Roman de la Campas Cuba on My Mind* are two good sources that provide the terminology necessary to understand the Cuban exile community by distinguishing between three generations of Cuban Americans.

<sup>5</sup> - For an extensive study of the topic, see Viera, Joseph M. "Matriarchy and Mayhem: Awakenings in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *Americas Review* 24.3-4 (1996): 231-42, who tries to emphasize on the importance of dreaming in the novel that is tightly linked to the disordered stories told by women in the novel, the fact that gives the novel itself a specific structure that is similar to a dream.

<sup>7</sup> - The escape of conscience, which is in this case manifested in a form of an inner emigration, is best described by Golovátina-Mora as not just an out-of-place, but also a no-place of a kind. In other words, inner escape is a state of feeling lost and lonely even when at home; thus, it is when the one feels belonging to nowhere from the perspective of a rational reality, which mostly deals with imagination and perception. (46)

