

# International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



On the Blade of Identity: Immigration and Cultural Hybridity in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

[PP: 08-18]

**Farnaz Farrokhi**

Department of English Literature, Yazd University  
Yazd, Iran

**Hossein Jahantigh**

Department of English Literature, Yazd University  
Yazd, Iran

## ABSTRACT

Global movement and interracial marriages have been picking up speed and volume in our present time. Therefore, the human condition is no longer specifically defined by traditional identity markers like nationality, origin, birthplace, and bloodlines. These fusions and doublings of two or more cultures and races are the basis for the creation of hybrid individuals who are positioned in a state of uncertainty and constant mutation which eventually leads to their questioning of identity. According to Homi Bhabha, hybrid identities are composed of multiple voices, practices, and feelings that inform them, and so none can be said to have a 'pure' origin. Bhabha's Third Space celebrates uprootedness, cultural and identity fragmentation and gives precedence to the suppressed voices to be heard. Accordingly, the present article proceeds to explore the process of identification and how the identity of Birdie and Yolanda, the biracial/bicultural daughters of two separate families, are formed. A major problem that still exists within countries that have lived under the hegemony and exploitations of colonialism is the suppressed and muted voices that were/are not given the opportunity to speak for themselves or even find their voice. Certain so to say avant-garde events in the age of post-colonialism however attempted to subvert previously held assumptions on western cultural hegemony, making way for the "other" to freely express its true self.

**Keywords:** *Ethnicity, Race, Cultural Hybridity, the Third Space, Identity*

ARTICLE	The paper received on	Reviewed on	Accepted after revisions on
INFO	05/05/2021	29/05/2021	02/07/2021

### Suggested citation:

Farrokhi, F. & Jahantigh, H. (2021). On the Blade of Identity: Immigration and Cultural Hybridity in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 9(2). 08-18.

## 1. Introduction

The postcolonial era was a staging point for the onset of new ideas and perspectives that have been crucial for the 21<sup>st</sup> century human societies. The earliest postcolonial gestures sought to shatter the hegemonies and bring down the upper hand of colonialism and imperial contexts which fostered a long process of continued domination of the West over the rest of the world (Nair, 2017). Instead, efforts were made to coalesce towards more orientalist perspectives of mixing cultures of the west and the east, so that they may learn to co-exist. This opposing gesture can also be seen in the term decolonization, or in the words of Uzma Rizvi (2008), to "decolonize does not only index a choice to change the discipline, but also, in a very real way, is a desire to safeguard ourselves from recreating forms of imperial knowledge production" (p. 126).

Through the course of time, post-colonialism came to be regarded as a need in the vox populi or groups that have been the victims of imperialism, to first attaining and then asserting an identity that is untainted by universalist ideas or Eurocentric concepts and images (During, 1987). Along this thread, post-colonialism paints an expressive picture of the "minority," "subordinate," or "other," and goes so far as to re-explain the western cultural hegemony by ending the silent period for the suppressed and giving voice to such people. According to Bhabha (1994), "the minority" stay in a crack, going awry and never belonging or feeling like a complete citizen. They enjoy only in an undeveloped identity and partial sense of competency as opposed to other citizens. Therefore, a resisting and dissenting voice ought to corroborate with and validate the hybrid and local voices, to end the

prolonged period of subordination and marginalization of the minority.

We are set in this age and time on course to experience cultural diversity and hybridity. In fact, our age is primarily accentuated by matters of mobility, miscegenation, refugees, expatriates, immigration and border crossings, which on a large scale, pave the way towards cultural and racial hybridity. Of course, in doing so, any precise definition of ethnicity or explanation for how people should be identified turns into quite a difficult task. Ethnicity is therefore undergoing constant changes in concept in order to adapt with and incorporate more fluid social contexts.

According to Frederick Barth, ethnic groups are not fixed; instead, they are open, flexible, and often self-defined. This approach suggests that ethnicity is transmissible to other people because culture traits are learned (Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

In its more conventional uses, however, ethnicity is described as a group or category of persons sharing a common ancestral origin and the same cultural traits, with a sense of peoplehood and belonging to a particular group, but of immigrant background with either minority or majority status in a larger society (Isajaw, 1974). On the matter of ethnicity in post-colonialism, what is emphasized most is a trend of cultural hybridity that can be put to use as an essential apparatus in opposition to essentialism and cultural hegemony.

Hybridity is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (Hoogvelt, 1997, p. 158). Hybridity thus seeks to cope with ambivalence, and comes to terms with the ambiguity of meaning and the indeterminacy of the future, which is a more objective realization in terms of existence.

The chance for biracial/bicultural individuals to reveal their hybrid identities is rendered possible by entering a third latent space, in which Western and native “tradition” become confounded and the power of a grand narrative of culture or tradition is disrupted. This repudiation of a dominant narrative in the Third Space occurs with the undermining of unitary, fixed race categories and the ultimate transgression of racial boundaries. This latent space opens the door to a new perspective on cultural hybridity that

entertains difference, without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (Bhabha, 1995).

The present article proceeds to explore the process of identification and how the identities of Birdie and Yolanda, the biracial/bicultural daughters of two separate families, are formed. Furthermore, the actions of concealing or giving advantage to one identity for the sake of the other based on different circumstances are to an extent compulsory for hybrid individuals who crave to bridge the existing gap, live equally and possess the same rights as the majority. This is also evident in the case of Birdie and Yolanda who are the protagonists of the two selected novels for this research. What counts as painful for hybrid beings is this lack of sense of belonging which is further enhanced by the majority who are neither willing to exist on par with the “other” nor keen to avoid its conventional beliefs on how the “other” is perceived or should be treated based on racialized norms imposed on them.

The colonial authority and the former binarism can be subverted as hybrids manage to find enlightenment by entering a third space which values culture’s hybridity and functions as a fertile ground for the invention of new identities, especially the suppressed ones. Living in a world where everything finds meaning and credit through its distinctive features such as differences, discontinuities and inequalities, it is of utmost value that these prominent features be maintained and exhibited, rendering unity and fixity as meaningless or obsolete remarks on identity.

## 2. Historical Records

### 2.1 Caucasias

In “Letting the Body Speak: 'Becoming' White in *Caucasia*,” Brenda Boudreau (2002) calls it “a novel which insists that a racialized identity has everything and nothing to do with the body” (p. 59). She posits that “Birdie’s chameleon-like abilities to change color depending on where she is and who she is allows her to move between a black and white world, but her racialized subjectivity gets caught somewhere in the middle” (p. 62).

Daniel Grassian (2006) suggests that *Caucasia*’s most tragic outcome is that Birdie loses her original self (her black self) by passing as white. She maintains that, “if one passes long enough, one’s staged identity becomes more real than one’s previous identity” (p. 331). While Grassian implies that Birdie’s “previous” identity as black is “real,” her white identity is



“staged,” the text suggests otherwise—blackness and whiteness are both inhabitable and uninhabitable roles for her at different moments. Birdie passes in multiple directions, cautiously but opportunistically negotiating the varied requirements of racial performance.

Birdie has a "split awareness" which is, as Amy Ling (1989) writes, typical of minority peoples: "All minority people living in a society that maintains its supremacy by devaluing those who are different possess a double-consciousness or split aware-ness: first, awareness of themselves in positive terms; and second, awareness of the negative view in which the dominant society holds them" (p. 309). Birdie also has a triple-consciousness built atop her female biracial identity that she takes in in response to being classified as the "other" no matter where she is, despite her Caucasian features. Although Birdie identifies herself as being both black and white, she realizes that everyone around her needs to slot her into one racial category or the other, inevitably erasing a part of how she sees herself.

## 2.2 *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* published in 1991 takes the form of a composite novel. Composite novels are like a short story cycle; they work as a set of short stories that are interrelated to function novelistically, but can also stand on their own. The composite form with its focus on "disparate, individual moments" in the words of Margot Anne Kelley (1998) suggests that "identity is not inherent, but rather is constituted" and is "continually negotiated and renegotiated" (pp. 44-45), something the traditional novelistic form with its notion of character coherence would not allow for.

"Belonging," as defined by Maribel Ortiz-Marquez (1997), "is the privileged feeling in Alvarez's writing. It expresses the need to be somewhere where the boundaries of 'here' and 'there' can be easily defined, where the sense of estrangement can be easily defined" (p. 233). This is observed in the scene in which the young Yolanda enters the coal shed with her drum and is eager to take a kitten from the mother's litter, a hunter who happens to cross by states: "Well, just as your drumsticks belong inside your drum, and dowels will not do, so a kitten belongs with its mother, and no one else will do" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 283). He continues: "While a kitten is still a suckling,

it cannot, now can it, be taken from its mother to be a pet? ... To take it away would be a violation of its natural right to live" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 284). Nevertheless, Yolanda takes the cat, names him Schwarz, hides it in her drum, and returns to the house pursued by the mother cat. From that moment on Yolanda is haunted by nightmares that revolve around the presence of the mother cat, a continual reminder to her of the incident with the kitten.

The Garcia's immigration to the United States is similar to the kitten's situation, i.e. being separated and taken away from its mother. In fact, Yolanda was now uprooted from her nest and her childhood in the Dominican Republic. And the drum beats meant to disguise the meows of the kitten which represents a natural language and an imposed one, which turns out to be true in the case of Yolanda who becomes an expert in learning English language to an extent that her Dominican accent is no longer noticed. Her journey to the Dominican Republic after a couple of years indicates her search for her lost past and coming to terms with her trauma that troubled her all these years. After the description of Yolanda's encounter with the cats, the novel pivots; the events stop unfolding in a regressive manner and are now narrated in a chronological order; time is accelerated, and life appears to make sense (Luis, 2000).

According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), language "lies on the borderline between self and other" (p. 282), enabling individuals, when they communicate, to reach across worlds, move beyond limitations, and transcend the barriers or differences their pasts have created. Yolanda's sensitivity towards language makes much sense in this context, since it promotes her to confront the dwelling dualities in her memory and culture.

## 3. The Changing Meaning of Ethnicity and Race

In the popular imagination, ethnicity is often expressed as a grouping of individuals whose mode of identification with one another is predicated on the commonality of factors including: "racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background" (Blackmore, 2019). However, the concept of ethnicity is rooted in ancient conventions. The term "ethnic" derives from the Greek *ethnos*, transmitted into English as the Latinate *people*, meaning folk but also used in

reference to stock, multitude, crowd or nation. The relevance of looking at the etymology of this term is found in the bright perspective it sheds on the ultimate fate of any term which seeks to specify human populations. Be that as it may, the earliest recorded use of the concept of ethnicity, as *ethnos* in Homer, alluded to describe a swarm or flock of animals, “a biologically defined grouping” (Sekulic, 2008, p. 456). During the transition from Middle English to Modern English, the term ‘ethnic’ was predominantly used as a euphemism for ‘heathen’ or ‘pagan’ and other ‘non-Christian’ groups (Schaefer, 2008). This porport of the term drifted well into the nineteenth century.

A shift in the term’s sense occurred from about the mid-nineteenth century, when scholarships put forth the word *ethnos* to refer to groups of like people who were, either latently or proactively, aware of the certain degree of coherence shared amongst themselves as the result of common origins and a unique set of cultural and historical commonalities and experiences (Banton, 2015). The prevailing theme appearing in these experiences is often one of deprivation. This sense of deprivation can be seen among original migrants who left their homelands, seeking improvements elsewhere, or those who were forcibly taken from their lands, as in the case of African slaves.

What has become agreed upon by most scholars is that Ethnicity has bearing on and is somehow involved with the classification of people and group relations. From a conceptual perspective, ethnicity is constituted by cultural elements, suchlike language, religion, art, music, attire, lifestyles, as well as historical ones that all together fabricate the fiction of familiar origin and ancestry (Nagel, 1994). Both culture and history have been conformed through a process of reinventing the past and reviving, restoring and/or creating new cultural practices and customs. Ethnicities are thus to be found in course of formulation and negotiation, dissolution and renewal; they are flexible, and at times quite volatile, never fixed. Neither racial nor ethnic identities can be considered absolute notions, rather, they shift through time, experiencing the changing circumstances, which demand a new discourse of identity.

Ethnicity may also be misconstrued as “race,” as is the case for many instances where the phrases have been used interchangeably. Despite certain correlations

found between delimitations of people as a race and people who identify as an ethnic group, there is a clear distinction between the two concepts (Phinney & Ong, 2020).

The concept of “race” has a history of its own. The word was introduced into the English language in about 1580 and was used until early into the nineteenth century. During that time, the term was directed at groups sharing similar features due to sharing a certain lineage down the line. The view became more placid by late 17<sup>th</sup> century when differences in outer appearances were primarily viewed from one of three main positions: firstly, as predestined and a matter of the divine not to be meddled with; secondly, as the by-product of ecological disparities irrelevant to ethical matters; and thirdly, and most dominantly, as originating in a different ancestry (Cashmore, 1996).

Eventually, imbibing from Georges Cuvier’s theories of anatomy, these differences were assumed as expressions of distinctive classes or what came to be known as type. Types were regarded as permanent and somewhat changeless in the earlier pre-Darwinian views on nature. Accordingly, race came to be used in the same sense as that of type; as a demarcation of human species based on physical constitutions and mental capacities (at times incapacities). The counter-argument was later posed by Darwin who showed that no forms in nature were permanent. Physical differences were then elaborated on the principle of genetic inheritance, which claims that differences in inherited genes lead to differences in the physical attributes of the offspring (Cashmore, 1996).

Ethnicity may also be misconstrued as “race,” as is the case for many instances where the phrases have been used interchangeably. In basic terms, the word race involves shared physical characteristics and ethnicity refers to cultural identification which may include language, religion, or other customs (Morin, 2020). Conventional uses of the term “race” in English-speaking countries are primarily directed towards representing a social construct. This highlights the role of ascendancy in terms of race, wherein people are categorized as a race, based on the oldest inherited gene they possess. For example, a person of one-eighth African ancestry and seven-eighths European ancestry, may consider himself or herself black and be accounted so by others, as black is the elder gene in terms of inheritance. The sociopolitical construct of



race on the other hand seeks to group people in terms of biological and physical differences, wherein these differences were used as a measure of superiority of one race over another. Cases of this can be seen in the domination and subordination of non-Caucasians by Caucasians, as well as in subsequent systems of slavery and finally colonialism. According to Phila Msimang (2019), “The characteristics of a social race are that they are stereotyped groups,” about which there is a “presumption that racial identity is fixed” and a “belief that race is a genealogical and heritable kind of group belonging” (p. 15).

#### **4. Components of Cultural Hybridity**

In the wake of the first half of the twentieth century, cultures were defined as complex *wholes* or *sums* of characters comprised of a set of ideas, belief systems, representations, practices and behaviors, that people share in common (Cole, 2020). As a result, culture engenders tradition, and guides people in the manners by which they think and behave on a daily basis (Benedict, 1996). However, the more modern standpoint on culture accounts for the division and splitting of cultural borders and ethnic groups through various forms of population movement and migration or interracial marriages, which ultimately concludes that cultures and ethnic groups have no actual existence as autonomous totalities – or, at least, no longer appear to exist. As a result, there no longer exists the need to adhere to timeless, traditional essence and sense of uniqueness which once so occupied the space which is now free to learn and wonder.

Since the earliest days of history, human affairs have been majorly influenced by cross-cultural interactions and exchanges, such as trade, migration, establishment of empires, interracial marriages, evangelization, exile and forced removal, and other anthropogenic activities. These workings have propelled various encounters and confrontations between different cultures. As so, no civilization or human group has ever survived in complete isolation or through self-containment and sufficiency. Hybridity may then be construed as the phenomenon or perhaps epiphany caused by the encounter of different people. However, from a broader perspective, a static view on hybridity would be interpreted as the cultural, racial, political, and religious *mixture* evoked by such encounters.

The dictionary definition of the word *hybrid* includes “a person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions” and “something heterogeneous in origin or composition” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The origins of the term *hybridity* are found in biology and agriculture (the Latin *hybrida*; as a classification of the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar), albeit its recent applications mainly fall within the realm of cultural discourse.

The clash of civilizations provoked immutably by colonialism, entailed not a well-defined dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized, but the formation of new cultural hybrids. As colonialism pressed on, new losses and gains were accrued, while new mounting identities took ascend, and later debased or crushed others.

However, hybridity in the postcolonial discourse is particularly “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (Hoogvelt, 1997, p. 158). Hybridity also sheds light on the matter of border existences between opposing identities, and is often associated with terms such as *the third space*, representing the latent space or medium through which identities can translate and negotiate with one another (Bhabha, 1996). From this perspective, hybridity passes over as an antidote to *essentialism*, or “the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (Fuss, 1991, p. 11).

#### **5. Bhabha’s Views on Third Space and Identity Formation**

The Third Space is the in-between space between cultures or, as previously mentioned, worlds, wherein the individual can transcend any fixed notion set in place by various delineations of human beings, by undermining the unitary, and stationary racial categories and infringing on pre-ordained racial boundaries. “Tradition” thus, in the latent spaces of cultures experienced by the colonized, western and natives, becomes disconcerted, rendering obsolete the grand narrative of a fixed culture or tradition: “The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its

inequalities, its minorities” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 6).

Iain Chambers (1994) sees “[t]he migrant’s sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a non-integrated present as perhaps the most fitting metaphor of [our] (post)modern condition” since “[t]he national, unilateral colonial model has been interrupted by the emergence of a transversal world that occupies a “third space,” a “third culture,” beyond the confines of the nation state” (p. 6). Culture and political authority, and consequently definitions of meaning are thus connoted and re-signified in the third space occupied by cultural hybrids.

As maintained by Bhabha (1995), traditional cultures were primarily transformed after their encounter and struggles with colonizing cultures. He writes that “culture is itself the act of articulation or enunciation” (p. 19). Bhabha (1994) defines cultural enunciation as “the place of utterance” where meaning is produced, meaning that is never “simply mimetic and transparent” (p. 36).

Identity takes form as cultural realities collide and the western “I” meets the colonial “You” in a flowing amalgamation of cultural worlds. Any sense of a dominant culture’s constructed, fixed, and assigned identities are dislodged through the process of enunciation within the Third Space.

Bhabha (1995) emphasizes the “fact” that identity is never fixed permanently, and never coheres into an absolute form, but always presupposes a sense of location and a relationship with others. However, this attention to place does not presuppose closure, for the representation of identity most often occurs precisely at the point when there has been a displacement.

Throughout history, mixed groups have been somewhat marginalized, never truly belonging in one racial group or another. More recently, however, it has been argued that multiracial people have a propensity to be more racially conscious due to the in-between status they possess, i.e. “The particular standpoint of multiracial persons, not being fully a part of a monoracial group, nor being completely recognized as a separate category, leads to an increased emphasis on racial issues for them” (Brackett et al., 2006, pp. 437-44). Here identity is interpreted as “the way we understand ourselves within a context” which highlights the importance of moments produced at the time where different cultures

meet. The in-between space between the different realms of cultures is the host for the linkage (or dialectic) of different cultures, or components of culture which enable the construction of a new self-hood. Thus, our identities are formed through the reflective processes of interaction between the inherent self and the external others in our environments, such as families, schools, neighborhoods, places of worship, etc. (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005).

## **6. The Quest for Self**

Racial identity involves the perpetual process of reinventing the self in different contexts. Herein the “third space” acts as the medium which makes possible the emergence of other positions, resulting in the advent of a new unrecognizable, yet different area for the negotiation and interpretation of meaning and representation (Bhabha, 1994).

### ***6.1 Birdie’s Struggle with Biracialism***

In Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998) we are presented with a family of biracial/bicultural kids, who are the offsprings of mixed parentage, a black father and a white mother. Birdie Lee, the protagonist of the novel, is born to a black father and a white mother, taking after her mother’s side in terms of skin color. In the course of the story Birdie finds that she must try to fit into the existing social norms assigned for races in order to be accepted by the community and her peers. Throughout their childhood, Birdie and her older sister Cole, are homeschooled by their mother, who herself is involved and participates in underground activities against racial discrimination. As a result, Birdie and Cole become confounded on matters of race, prejudice or discrimination.

According to Richard Felson (1981), “self-perception does not occur in a social vacuum” (p. 79); in fact, how individuals conceive themselves is highly influenced by the actual or perceived responses and judgment of others. It is only by their arrival at the Nkrumah school, a “Black Power school,” that Birdie and Cole are confronted with the feelings and manners of discrimination and biased behaviors. Since Cole’s physical appearance was black like the rest of the majority, she was much more easily accepted and welcomed, and unlike Birdie, by managing to win the approval of others, she escaped being teased around or taunted with.

The first encounters with biased behaviors take place after registering at school, as Birdie encounters verbal criticism



from her black classmates: “Who’s that? She a Rican or something? I thought this was supposed to be a black school,” “a boy threw a spitball, which hit [her] square in the forehead. Laughter sprinkled the room. He hissed, What you doin’ in this school? You white?” (Senna, 1998, p. 43). By referring to the Lacanian concept of the mirror, demonstrating the manners through which a child can formulate identity from the reactions or mirrored appearance of others: “whether the child sees itself in an actual mirror or sees itself mirrored back to itself in the reactions of [others]... the child develops a sense of itself as a whole as if it had been identified with the whole image” (Tyson, 2006, p. 27). “Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was still too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence” (Senna, 1998, p. 17). Because Birdie identifies with the image of her sister, she fails to realize that she will inadvertently continue to be different unless she becomes cognitively aware enough to interpret the reactions of doings of others through an impartial perspective, per se. Birdie soon realizes that although her sister is “cinnamon-skinned” and “curly-haired,” her own appearance is not the least similar.

As an individual who is not only culturally but also racially hybrid, Birdie cannot “deny or mask [her] hybrid composition ... [under] the myth of pure lineage” (Broeck, 2007, p. 46). Students wonder if she is white or Puerto Rican while Cole is taunted for not wearing her hair in cornrows (Senna, 1998, p. 53). Quickly, Cole realizes that if they want to be accepted among their new classmates, they must prove they are black, wear their hair in braids, dress in black style and convince their peers by acting out and tailoring themselves to the appropriate linguistic practices and presentations of blackness. Here is an excerpt of the book on this matter:

—We don’t talk like black people Birdie. It says so in this article.

Like, don’t say, I’m going to the store. Say, I’m goin’ to de sto.

Get it? And don’t say, Tell the truth. Instead, say, Tell de troof. Okay?

I nodded, and whispered to myself, Tell de troof. (Senna, 1998, p. 57)

As children, Birdie and Cole speak together on a regular basis in a secret language unrestricted by context which they name “Elemeno;” a language which is

“impossible for outsiders to pick up—no verb tenses, no pronouns, just words floating outside time and space” (Senna, 1998, p. 6). It is precisely at these particular moments when Birdie faces the fact that she, through a more mindful frame of thought and perhaps apparition, begins to freely transcend any fixed notion set in place by various delineations of human beings, by undermining the unitary, and stationary racial categories and infringing on pre-ordained racial boundaries in which she begins to identify with who she is and simply exists, all the while maintaining her biracial identity independent of contextual demands for racialized performances, without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (Bhabha, 1995).

This third space which she experiences and enters when she speaks the “Elemeno” language represents a rhetoric or elocution that rescinds in her the assigned labels, characteristics, and inclusively, identities that have been constituted by the ascendant culture. As Bhabha (1995) puts: “strategy of enunciation disrupts, interrupts and dislocates dominant culture’s “assigned” identities constructed by the language of us and them” (p. 245). Subjects define their identities through their own enunciation as opposed to, for example, when identities are compelled to definitions rested on racial stereotypes that are “constructed” as static and transparent – one can see through the stereotype to the racial “image.” However, through self-enunciation and self-representation using its own symbols, icons, such as rituals and language, culture reflects the inner “I” as opposed to an outer “You.” She no longer needs to erase or hide half her true self in order to fit in with the social extremes of her race, and proceeds to maintain her hybrid self and freely speak the language she wishes, transgressing any imposed rules of say in different circumstances.

After their parents’ separation, their father reveals an interest to move to Brazil, while their mother, after taking part in a revolutionary venture, believes that she must evade the CIA and go underground. Both parents eventually agree to leave Boston and in the case of their daughters, adhere to complete opposition to the racial constructs that they raised their daughters to ignore. Cole is sent to go with her father and Carmen (the father’s girlfriend), forming a black family. Birdie, because she does not look black, is sent with her mother (Senna,

1998, p. 121). Birdie's mother explains to her that "the fact that [Birdie] could pass... with [her] straight hair, pale skin, [her] general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race, would throw [the CIA] off [their] trail" (Senna, 1998, p. 128). Thus, Birdie is forced to surrender the black identity that she worked so hard to attain at Nkrumah and begin a new life with a new identity chosen for her by her mother. The identity of Birdie Lee is abandoned, and Jesse Goldman (a rural white girl) takes her place. Birdie's physical shifts between homes and racial shifts between identities demonstrate "the price of hybridization ... [which] includes the loss of ... traditions and local roots" (Burke, 2009, p.7).

The augmented identity of Jesse tries to reassure her that she is not destroying Birdie, but rather, preserving her throughout this process by crossing into and out of different identities at only critical moments all in accordance with impending scenarios of class, location, and context. She attempts to adapt to her new environment along its diversities with the help of her ability in hiding one's true self behind a mask which she wishes to destroy. This blended existence for Birdie was accompanied by being harassed and at times feeling insecure which she surmounts by acquiring a performative and a flexible identity as different circumstances required.

Another encounter with the third space recurs for Birdie while playing the role of Jesse; Birdie reemerges and voices her disapproval in a scene where a black boy threw a rock at Birdie which did not hit her straight in the head and instead put a few scratches on the car's windshield. Jim, her mother's new boyfriend, steps out of the car to confront the boy, and Mona, Birdie's all white New Hampshire friend, who was in the car with them, uses "the N word" and a slur towards the boy: "Mrs. Goldman," she called to my mother, "what's he gonna do? Those niggers are gonna kill him." Birdie reacts violently and automatically by punching Mona on the shoulder hard and hissing, "Shut up. What do you know?" (Senna, 1998, p. 231).

This sense of unintentional behavior indicates Birdie's biracial identities, multiple voices and feelings. These rare moments of experience throughout the novel in which both her pluralistic identities come into contact with each other portray Birdie as neither white nor black but a new hybrid which encompasses both whiteness and blackness. During these moments or the in

between spaces which she gets caught in, the authority of the dominant discourse, racial boundaries and fixed identities are being subverted, transgressed, undermined, and "newness enters the world" (Bhabha, 1996).

Racial identity involves the perpetual process of reinventing the self in different contexts. Negotiating with the differences, discontinuities and inequalities within both the society and her biracial self and being able to perform in an appropriate way by crossing in and out of her dual identities as required at different circumstances helps her in engaging with and articulating a third space which she creates to identify with her dual, or perhaps multiple, identities. There are times when she can also be her hybrid self for brief moments and enjoy the blurring of the dominant racialized norms. Both Birdie and Jesse become part of her identity which she cannot condone.

### 6.2 Yolanda's Assimilation in America

Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) is primarily centered on the process of adaptation which the Garcia family are forced to experience due to circumstances necessitating their immigration to the United States. The story elaborates on the ups and downs that Yolanda, the novel's protagonist, goes through in her struggles with language, culture, and expectations so as to hold a grasp on her identity and if needed redefine it in accordance with the framework of newly found American independence, or so to say the illusion of the American Dream, all the while maintaining her devotion to her Latino roots.

The political persecution becomes intact following a CIA-backed governmental coup by the government to relinquish the totalitarian power of Trujillo, which eventually fails. The only option left for Carlos, the father of the family, is to seek refuge in the United States and flee from the Dominican Republic along with his family. As circumstances transpire and the family settles in their new home in America, they feel the unwelcoming looks of alienation and feel what it is like to feel as an outsider in virtually any community. A glimpse of such reluctant and alienated behavior is seen and perhaps emphasized when their neighbor complains to their building's manager about the Garcias, declaring: "The Garcias should be evicted. Their food smelled. They spoke too loudly and not in English" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 170).

A great deal of the pain and suffering is experienced by Yolanda, the third



daughter of the family, who constantly battles and is defeated in the hybrid in-between space she encounters by failing in both assimilating and adjusting to her new Dominican-American culture. Circumstances however, are somewhat alleviated in due time after Yolanda senses the very first signs of freedom and realizes the independence provided for her age in America, for instance, the freedom of speech, sexual liberation, undermining and subverting traditional patriarchal rules, being able to stay out late at night and attend parties. She realizes that the conditions she lives in are in fact much more tolerable and in tune with her true identity.

In seeking to adapt to this new environment and mustering up the courage to express herself, she finds that it is necessary for her to improve her capacity and fluency in perhaps the most elusive tool at her disposal; learning the English language, “Since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language” (Alvarez, 1991, p. 141).

On the other hand, although she has accepted many American values, she still does not “feel at home in the States” and pertains to preserve her Dominican roots rather than abolish or reject them and feels a sense of responsibility in maintaining them. She finds it in herself, as a purpose or a mission, to bridge the gap between her dual identities by establishing a sort of equilibrium or balance that stretches across the line of her dual or maybe multifaceted identity, to eventually embrace both sides.

These dilemmas created in the mind of Yolanda penetrate in even her romantic relationships, causing many of them to fail or not work out as she imagined or pleased. For example, a problem with Rudy, the person she confides her emotions in, results in a lack of clearance or understanding of each other’s manner of speech and wants. A case in point is when Rudy is unable to employ proper poetic vocabulary when addressing her, and Yolanda being accused of being “worse than a puritan,” is still attached to traditional norms. Such encounters indicate the difficulties inherent in their relationship and Rudy’s rejection of Yolanda’s hybridity and her struggle in being faithful to both her upbringing roots and those of the new culture she has found herself emerged into. She does not cohere to the characteristics of a stereotypical Latino, but is Yolanda; “a peculiar mix of

Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles” (Alvarez, 1991, p. 99).

As she ages, Yolanda begins to gradually adapt to her new culture and masters the English language to the degree that she slowly begins to find her authentic voice and sound like herself through writing an articulative speech that is met with reluctance and disapproval on part of her father, who finds it to be insubordinate, improper, and ungrateful: “as your father, I forbid you to make that speech” (Alvarez, 1991, p. 145). Even so, Yolanda proceeds with her speech, signifying her dismissal and refusal of her father’s demand and to generalize the rejection of patriarchal embodiment in her own culture. This goes to show just how well she has adjusted to the American culture and slogan of non-patriarchy. Through the medium of the English language and her oppositional or so to say rebellious responses towards debasing the traditional Dominican patriarchal rules which granted total authority to the father on controlling everything, she reveals her hybrid self.

Out of the Garcia sisters, Yolanda in particular feels left out and disconnected despite the smooth and all too well assimilation she experiences in her new homeland. This feeling is further evoked when she realizes that her name cannot be found in a display of personalized key chains and the closest name she could get to was “Joey.”

Given the overwhelming circumstances in America which impeded on her efforts to piece together her fragmented identity, Yolanda decides, on her birthday, to undertake a homeward voyage to the Dominican Republic in search of her subliminal or missing self(ves). Upon reaching the Dominican Republic, she becomes engrossed with visiting the countryside in search of some guavas (tropical fruit). The path she steps into takes her on a journey which reflects her inner calling or predilection towards self-discovery, which is presented in the form of a mission to find guavas, yet proclaims of the authenticity she hopes to find in the Dominican Republic. However, the brutal truth hits her in a stay-in at her relatives, at a moment when she realizes the transitions made in herself on account of living in the United States. The actualization hits her that she can no longer assume the role of a typical Dominican girl, who is expected to act in accordance with what others define for

her as proper conduct. Soon after she decides that she does not want to be a "some nice third-world girl" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 118).

The result of her decision later shows in her verbal quarrel with her aunt who disagrees with Yolanda visiting the family orchard alone, remarking that "this is not the States, a woman just doesn't travel alone in this country," in response to which Yolanda reassures her that "I can take care of myself" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 23).

At last, she manages to find the guava trees, "Yolanda eats several right on the spot, relishing the slightly bumpy feel of the skin in her hand, devouring the crunchy, sweet white meat" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 32). As she fills her basket, since it can endure a certain amount of weight, it spills over a bunch of times. This overflowing of guavas, the need to fill the basket, and yet feel detached enough to not care whether they spill again, is representative of Yolanda's present state, which is a hybrid being with two cultures, and consequently the simultaneous wanting of both cultures in order to belong to both her ethnicities. This way, she can, to a certain extent, be both Dominican and American (Luis, 2000).

For Yolanda it becomes apparent that hybrids like herself would find more reasonable grounds by entering the in-between space which she highly credits, instead of being forced to take sides with either her dominant (Dominican) or her host (American) origins. But to be more objective, she, at times, has to go through the process of assimilation and act in accordance with conventional norms constituted by society, depending on different circumstances and in order to be accepted, valued and have an appropriate relationship with the rest of the majority or the natives of both her new and former homeland.

Thus, her "whatness" cannot be defined by relying on a singled-out or absolute identity, but rather on the process of reinvention which takes place in the realm of differences and how she manages to feel belonged and get a sense of place out of the conflicting values of the shifts in paradigms and dual tendencies inherited within her bicultural self.

## 7. Conclusion

Conclusively, hybridity presents an opportunity for both Birdie and Yolanda to come and face the fact that they must choose their own ways of self-identification based on different circumstances. Their

determination to reach a balance or fill the void which they feel as being bicultural/biracial was to a point solved but not completely. This goes to show that attempts to reconcile the two sides is not a straightforward task, but demands the active participation of the individual willing to adapt or at times requires breaking the long-held assumptions or set of rules imposed on them to act accordingly by grabbing hold of the oppressor's power and appropriating it to their own need. Thus, being a hybrid engenders something besides past binarism, laying claim to new manners of cultural exchange and cultural identities, and the hybrid individual "becomes an integral part of the new formations which arise from the clash of cultures" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p. 183). Entering the third space and seeing things for what they are and being able to evoke the others in us, is however not an easy task to accomplish for a hybrid who is considered an outsider, undefined and not accepted by the affirmed norms known to the majority. By entering into the third space both Birdie and Yolanda opened a new path for themselves which enabled them to become more active and possess a powerful role as hybrid individuals who were given the chance to be their true selves even for brief moments.

## References

- Alvarez, J. (1991). *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. NC: Algonquin books.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (Eds.). (2007). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). Discourse in the Novel. In M. Holoquist (Ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination* (259-422). U of Texas P.
- Banton, M. (2015). *What We Now know about Race and Ethnicity*. NC: Berghahn Books.
- Benedict, R. (1966). *Patterns of Culture*. Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. (1995). Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. (1996). Culture's In-Between. In S. Hall, and P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1-17). SAGE Publications.
- Blackmore, E. (2019, February 22). Race and Ethnicity: How Are They Different? Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/race-ethnicity>



- Boudreau, B. (2002). Letting the Body Speak: Becoming White in Caucasia. *Modern Language Studies* 32(1), 59-70.
- Brackett, K. P., Marcus, A., Mckenzie, N. J., Mullins, L. C., Tang, Z., & Allen, A. M. (2006). The effects of multiracial identification on students' perceptions of racism. *Social Science Journal* 43(3), 437-444.
- Broeck, S. (2007). White Fatigue. In J. Kuortti, & J. Nyman (Eds.), *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-colonial Studies in Transition*. Rodopi.
- Burke, P. (2009). *Cultural Hybridity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cashmore, E. (1996). *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Chambers, I. (1994). *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Cole, N. K. (2020, August 27). So What Is Culture, Exactly? Retrieved from <https://www.Thoughtco.com/culture-definition-4135409>
- During, S. (1987). Postmodernism or Post-Colonialism Today. *Textual Practice* 1, 32-47.
- Felson, R. (1981). Social Sources of Information in the Development of the Self. *Sociological Quarterly* 22(1), 69-79.
- Fuss, D. (1991). *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. Routledge.
- Grassian, D. (2006). Passing into Post-ethnicity: A Study of Danzy Senna's Caucasia. *Midwest Quarterly* 47(4), 317-335.
- Hoogvelt, A. (1997). *Globalization and the postcolonial world: The New Political Economy of Development*. MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Isajaw, W. (1974). Definitions of Ethnicity. *Ethnicity* 1, 111-124
- Kelly, M. (1998). Daughters of Invention: Alvarez's Originality and the Composite Novel. In M. Caminero-Santangelo, & R. Boland (Eds.), *Antipodas: Cultural Collisions and Cultural Crossings* (41-52).
- Ling, A. (1989). Chinamerican Women Writers: Four Forerunners of Maxine Hong Kingston. *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*. NJ: Rutgers University Press, 309-23.
- Luis, W. (2000). A search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's: How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents. *Callaloo* 23(3), 839-849.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Hybrid. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved May 26, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hybrid>
- Morin, A. (2020, September 21). The Difference between Race and Ethnicity. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellmind.com/difference-between-race-and-ethnicity-5074205>
- Msimang, P. (2019). Racializing Races: The Racialized Groups of Interactive Constructivism Do Not Exclude Races. *Ergo* 6(1), 1-30.
- Nagel, J. (1994). Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture. *Social Problems* 41, 152-76.
- Nair, Sh. (2017). Introducing Post-colonialism in International Relations Theory. *E-International Relations* (1-5). University of Arizona.
- Ortiz-Marquez, M. (1997). From Third World Politics to First World Practices: Contemporary Latina Writers in the United States. In B. Ghosh, and B. Bose (Eds.). *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Womens Literature and Film* (227-44). Garland.
- Phinney, J., & Ong, A. (2020). What is an "Ethnic Group" in Ordinary People's Eyes? Different Ways of Understanding It among American, British, Mexican, and Polish Respondents. *Cross-Cultural Research* 54, 28-72.
- Rizvi, U. (2008). Decolonizing methodologies as strategies of practice: operationalizing the postcolonial critique in the archaeology of Rajasthan. *Archaeology and the Postcolonial Critique* (109-127). Altamira Press.
- Rockquemore, K., & Laszloffy, T. (2005). *Raising Biracial Children*. Altamira Press.
- Schaefer, R. (ed.) (2008). *Encyclopedia of race, ethnicity, and society*. Sage.
- Sekulic, D. (2008). Ethnic group. In Schaefer, R (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society* (456-459). Sage Publications.
- Senna, D. (1998). *Caucasia*. Riverhead.
- Smedley, A., & Smedley, B. (2005). Race as biology is fiction, racism as a social problem is real: Anthropological and historical perspectives on the social construction of race. *American Psychologist* 60, 16-26.
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. London and New York: Routledge.