

**Revisiting the Problems of Identity and Migration: A Critical Study of Julia Alvarez's
*How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents***

Lovleen Kaur Baidwan

Ph.D Research Scholar

Department of English and Cultural Studies

Panjab University, Chandigarh

lovleen15@hotmail.com

Abstract

Julia Alvarez in her first novel How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents recreates events from her life, focusing on the issues of loss of identity and alienation that comes with migration. Alvarez reconstructs her family's history of displacement through the portrayal of the Garcia family in the novel. The novel deals with the life of the Garcia sisters in USA and the difficulties they face adapting to a new lifestyle. The entire experience of migration for Alvarez is full of struggles and hardships, in adopting a new motherland. Through a feminist reading, I propose to attempt a critique of the various problems of identity in migration with special focus on women in the novel and how the author constructs and reconstructs an identity for herself in an adopted homeland. The paper aims to study the many obstacles a woman faces inside her home as well as outside in a multicultural society.

Key Words: Displacement, Exile, Migration, Alienation, Dual Identity, and Identity crisis

“That’s all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations”

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines: A Memoir*(3)

Julia Alvarez is a Dominican American writer, currently residing in the U.S. Her novels depict the plight of the hyphenated space that exists in her dual identity as a Dominican-American. She along with her family was forced to flee their country, due to her father's participation in a failed conspiracy against the dictator (Rafael Trujillo). The struggles of adjusting in a new culture and country are vividly portrayed in her novels. Her personal

experience of being an exiled immigrant adds a touch of reality to her novels, depicting a true picture of the latino society in the U.S now.

Along with reconstruction of her identity as a writer, sensitive issues of displacement, uprootedness, feeling of alienation, adopting new cultures are very closely dealt in her novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. The novel portrays the life of the Garcia Family in a reverse chronological order. Carlos Garcia, his wife Laura Garcia and their four daughters, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofia are forced to move to America during Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic. Carlos Garcia's involvement in a failed coup against the tyrant dictator Trujillo leaves them with no option but to leave their homeland and adopt an alien country. How each member of the family encounters identity crisis, feels alienated, are presented in the novel. Alvarez has tried to fit in her and her family's experience in the life of Garcia family. Through the course of events in the novel, Alvarez reconstructs the story of her life .

The novel cannot be termed as a memoir, but is mostly based on the author's life. Yolanda one of the four sisters, third oldest, is a writer and can be termed as author's alter ego. Fifteen stories bind the novel together, each story told from a different narrative perspective, mostly narrated by each character and sometimes the voices change even within one story. In "From Obsession to Amnesia: Survival in Diaspora in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and Katherine Min's *Secondhand World*, Yauling Hseih states," Through the deployment of 'Narrativized trouble'(Graza28), Alvarez shows identity to be an unstable category undergirded by gender, ethnic and class trouble"(5). This stands true, as when the girls feel after few years of being away from home in America, they had "more than adjusted" (Alvarez 9) but on the other hand we already are aware that Yolanda could not adjust to new life in the U.S. She believes, " she has never felt at home in the States, never" (Alvarez 12) This sheds a light on how the author felt and how she reconstructs herself through Yolanda.

In today's multicultural world, where things are fast paced there still exists the primary question of identity. The most vital part of ones being, and in a world of moving spaces, roots becoming routes, the question of constructing and reconstructing identity becomes essentially important. What is identity? It is one's own individual answer to the question, 'who you are'? Julia Alvarez precisely in this sense calls herself Dominican-American. She truly feels her identity is a part of both the worlds, and the hyphenated space helped her carve an identity as a writer. "I am not a Dominican writer...I am not a mainstream American writer...That's why I describe myself as a Dominican American writer".(STD 172,173)

Identity in general can be classified into social identity and personal identity, where the former encompasses the latter. In, "What is Identity (As we now use the word)?" Fearon quotes, Hogg and Abrams, "identity is people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of

people they are, and how they relate to others.”(Fearon 4) This definition explains, identity is an individual attribute, how an individual behaves in society, and most importantly how the society reacts to those attributes. Identity is gender based as well, considering the societal barriers a woman faces, identity is an obstacle for her to create. As Simone de Beauvoir rightly puts in *The Second Sex* “one is not born, but rather, becomes woman” (Beauvoir 14). To be born with a female body gives you an identity of a woman by birth, and to walk out of that “woman” shadow, there is a battle to be fought. The herculean task of creating a space in a man’s haunting world gets all the more difficult when faced with displacement. The displacement from one’s homeland to an alien country is a double fight for a woman. First, to become a part of that alien world, to get herself accepted as one of them and Secondly, to be known for what she is, not for what she is born as. For the difference she can make with her individuality. Identity for Deng is, “the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language and culture” (qtd in Fearon 4)). The Garcia sisters fight the identity given to them on basis of their race and ethnicity by the adopted country and carve an identity of the individualistic features each one hold. Despite of sharing an ethnicity and belonging to same race an individual has an identity of its own outside the socially attributed features. Identity is much deeper and many sided.

According to the *Dictionary of Sociology*, “Migration refers to geographical movement of people. R. G. Latham differentiated between primary and secondary migration. While the former means migration to uninhabited places, the latter implies migrating in inhabited places, establishing contact with indigenous people and adjusting to their way of life. Secondary migrations can lead to resistance by the locals.”(Subberwal M10). Precisely, the resistance the immigrants face gives them an urge to create an identity for themselves. Sarika Chandra in the essay “Re-Producing a Nationalist Literature in the Age of Globalization: Reading (Im)migration in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*” explains “The term immigrant nevertheless continues to designate those who are different or “other” in some way. Unity is sought in diversity, but for such unity to exist, something, or someone, has to remain on the outside. A “unity” cannot simply be the sum of its parts. It must have an “other” as well.”(832). A woman is always considered as the “other” in comparison to a man, when the same woman is an immigrant, she has to face another brunt of being the “other” in a community. The identity of a migrant woman gets problematic. She first has to overcome the male counterparts symbolizing authority and power within her household and further reconstruct her identity in an alien land apart from being the “other”. In a magnificent manner, Alvarez embraces hybridity and uses it to depict her position in the society firstly as a woman, and then as an immigrant writer. Alvarez creates her identity as a Dominican-American writer by playing with her diasporic circumstances, utilizing her position as an

immigrant to express the plight of all those who adopted a second homeland. It is proposed that such diasporic narrative is not only an individual story but a cultural narrative. Julia Alvarez in *Something to Declare* states that being a part of both the worlds fascinates her and the richness of the contradictions interests her,” being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side-“ (173) Writing helped her adjust in these contradictions of two worlds poles apart. Had it not been for writing, she would have never recovered from mental trauma and illness of being torn in two cultures(as seen in Yolanda).

Erikson’s term “identity crisis” has made it into dictionaries, and is defined in one as follows: “the condition of being uncertain of one’s feelings about oneself, especially with regard to character, goals, and origins, occurring especially in adolescence as a result of growing up under disruptive, fast-changing conditions” (as qtd in Fearon 9,10) Fragmented narration of Yolanda’s chapter reflects her “disjointed thought processes related to her mental breakdown, as well as her fragmented sense of identity as her national and cultural identity is split between the Dominican Republic and the United States”(Hsieh 8).The identity crisis Yolanda undergoes can be seen through her disturbed relationships with boys, then her divorce from her husband, her name changing from Yolanda to Yo and further to Yoyo and so on. This clearly sums down the effects of migration on girls coming of age in an adopted homeland. The displacement of roots causes havoc in their identity, which remains dormant for some time, later erupting in the form of mental illnesses if remains undiscovered.

The very title of the novel depicts the identity transformation that starts with their language . The girls unlearn their Spanish accents to fit into the American Society, to be accepted as one of them. Their very language and the accent becomes a hinderance in shedding the immigrant tag. Yolanda “still had a slight accent, and she did not like to speak in public, subjecting herself to her classmates’ ridicule” (Alvarez 141) This brings to the forefront the silence that comes with migration. Kaja Kazmierska in his paper titled,” Migration Experiences and Changes of Identity. The Analysis of Narrative”, claims that narrator’s migratory experience can be seen from two aspects.” One aspect refers to the cultural roots of the narrator. New experiences have changed her self image of being a woman”(1) and the other aspect being the narrator becoming an adult and independent woman. He further states that” the process of migration is related to losing culturally influenced ways of describing the narrator’s identity. As a result, she becomes a stranger in her homeland, but she also remains a stranger in the country to which she migrated” (1)

In accordance to the statements mentioned here, Garcia sisters in the novel narrate their own incidents, being their own narrator gives them the liberty to openly lay bare their feelings and experiences. With foot in each culture, they feel rootless, homeless, displaced, alienated. They are addressed as Americans back home and Spics in the US. As William Luis in his

paper, “A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez’s: *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*” puts, “As time passes, for the immigrant, the rupture with the past, strongest in political exiles, is transformed into a desire to recover a lost moment in time. But the past ceases to exist as an island reality and is interpreted from the perspective of the mainland culture.”(839) By becoming a part of the new culture they are letting go off their past, and by not adapting to the new culture their identity would always remain that of being the “other”. Uprootedness is challengingly difficult for young girls to understand, the new way of life poses threat to their existence.” “You can believe we sisters wailed and paled, whining to go home”(Alvarez 107) The Garcia’s was an affluent family in the Dominican Republic, and being displaced to peripheries can cause identity crisis in people, especially for children it becomes difficult to understand. The adopted homeland has nothing best to offer them, all they had was second hand things, and rented apartments. The Garcia sisters hate being in a new country, Yolanda narrates how they were given nasty names, reminding them constantly they are not needed, they do not belong to that country. The bodily changes in Carla with reaching adolescence accompanied by a new homeland adds to her mental stress, Carla went to school with a “Host of confused feelings”(Alvarez153) and “there was this body whose daily changes she noted behind the closed bathroom door.”(Alvarez 153) At school epithets” Spic, greaseballs ” were hurled our way” (Alvarez 107).Carla was chased by a gang of boys in school calling her names, and shouting,” go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!”(Alvarez 153). Changing schools didn’t really change anything for the girls.” we met the right kind of Americans all right, but they didn’t exactly mix with us”(Alvarez 108) This shows the ugly side of migration,” you want to get us killed? Those kids were throwing stones today! “ yoyo complains her mother, but the mother replies” Sticks and stones don’t break bones” (Alvarez 135) This conversation between Yolanda and her mother depicts the sad plight of immigrant children, their identity remains hazy. They do not understand who they are, at home they belong to their past and outside home they have to learn to adjust to their unaccepting future. Their true identity is in dilemma when they face rejection from outsiders , “ Garcia’s should be evicted. Their food smelled. They spoke too loudly and not in English. The kids sound like a herd of wild burros” (Alvarez 170) and contempt within home from their father , “ I don’t want loose women in my family.”(Alvarez 28). After one year of arriving in America, the pangs of returning home does not go away for Carla,” What do you wish for on the first celebration of the day you lost everything?” (Alvarez 150) Migration accompanies loss, and an unrecoverable past. Even their best of efforts would go waste when competing, “what use was it trying to compete with the Americans: they would always have the head start. It was their country, after all. Best stick close to home” (Alvarez 140)

Pramod K.Nayar in *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* states in context of diasporas, "having arrived in a new geographical and cultural context, they negotiate two cultures: their own and the new one" (189). The parents put them in the best of the American schools to learn best English, but are eventually scared of losing them to the American way of life. For this fear always lingering in their minds the girls were sent back to Dominican Republic every summer "we four girls would be sent summers to the Island so we wouldn't lose touch with *la familia*." (Alvarez 109) Adapting the American way of life was close to committing blasphemy, they would be told "examine your consciences" (Alvarez 113). So the outcome is they start using codes to hide things from their parents, "we had devised as sophisticated and complicated a code and underground system as Papi had when he and his group plotted against the dictator". (Alvarez 110)

When they realize losing them to a westernized lifestyle is inevitable. Mami would keep reminding her daughters "how important roots were" (Alvarez 111) Roots, and the essence of their being had been displaced in migration, and the girls make an effort to rebuild new roots and new identity against the parental wishes. The change that comes in Sofia after spending few months on the Island makes Carla remark, "it's a borderline schizoid response to traumatic cultural displacement" (Alvarez 117) When we are introduced to Sandra, she is a patient in a psychiatric hospital as a result of nervous breakdown, believing herself to be turning into a monkey. The sole reason being, "she is confused by her multiple identities as a result of displacement" (Hsieh 10) It is precisely this cultural displacement that leads to loneliness and strangeness in a new country. And the author comes out successfully to reconstruct her identity through construction of Yolanda's identity as a writer. Writing heals the ruptures caused by the spatial movement in her life. Yolanda finds tranquility in reading and learning English to be able to write in that language. When the world around breaks her down for being the 'other' she silences those voices by writing, "she needed to settle somewhere, since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language." (Alvarez 141) In an article "Latino-Caribbean Writers: Where is Home?" Hilda Mundo-Lopez puts, "In their search for a Caribbean identity, writers like Julia Alvarez look forward to find a literary style through which to describe their Caribbean selves" (426) she further examines, they "succeed in submerging themselves in their own writing imagination in order to rescue a Caribbean identity, already transformed by and through their own processes of acculturation in the US." (427)

Every immigrant writer as Alvarez does makes an earnest attempt to map an experience, shared by many. Alvarez takes to writing to make the world realize her presence, which was much more than being a woman and that too a migrated one. Her work depicts a yearning for homeland just as Yolanda has an "*antojos*" in the very first story. *Antojos* in Spanish means a

kind of craving for something, and for Yolanda this craving can signify many things. A craving to be home, a craving to put an end to her fragmented identity, a craving to be Yolanda and not her Americanised version (Yo, Yoyo, Joe). For diasporic writers, like Alvarez, writing lends voice to their silence, a way of letting the world know about their existence, a method of rising from the peripheries and that is the way a woman ceases to be a woman, but an identity of her own defines her. Through writing Yolanda searches for her identity which got fragmented into multiples and “writing in search of a homeland” (Alexander 4)

In conclusion, Salman Rushdie in *Shame* puts “What is the best thing about migrant people...? I think it is their hopefulness... And what’s the worst thing? It’s the emptiness of one’s baggage. We’ve come unstuck from more than land. We’ve floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time. (91)

Works Cited:

- Alexander, Meena. *Faulty Lines: A Memoir*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1993.
- Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991.
- . *Something to Declare*. New York: Workman Publishing, 1998.
- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage. 1989.
- Chandra, Sarika. “Re-Producing a Nationalist Literature in the Age of Globalization: Reading (Im)migration in Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*”. *American Quarterly*. vol. 60, no. 3, 2008. pp. 829-850. JSTOR
- Fearon, James D. (1999) “What is Identity. As we now use the Word?” CA: Stanford University. Retrieved January 10, 2017 from <https://web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research>
- Hsieh, Yauling. “From Obsession to Amnesia: Survival in Diaspora in Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and Katherine Min’s *Secondhand World*”. *Intergrams*. 2012. pp 122-131.
- Kazmierska, Kaja. “Migration Experiences and Changes of Identity. The Analysis of Narrative”. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. vol. 4, no. 3, 2003.
- Lopez, Hilda Mundo. “Latino-Caribbean Writers: Where is Home?” *Caribbean Studies*. vol. 27, no. 3/4, 1994. pp. 426-427. JSTOR.
- Luis, William. “A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez’s: *How the Garcia Girls Lost their*

Accents". *Dominican Republic Literature and Culture*. Vol. 23, no. 3, Summer 2000, pp. 839-849. JSTOR.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley Pvt. Ltd, 2008.

Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.

Subberwal, Ranjana. *Dictionary of Sociology*. New Delhi : Tata McGraw Hill, 2009.