

## The Concept of Otherness in American Ethnic Literature of Latin American Origin

Roman Shkilev

Yelabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University, Kazanskaya St. 89, Yelabuga, Kazan, Russia

---

**Abstract:** The study deals with the peculiarities of representation of reality in the researches of immigrant writers, who moved from Latin America to the United States. The main focus was made on depicting the peculiarities of Dominican-American and Cuban American prose. Dominican American and Cuban American writing were compared with Chicano literature. The complexity of searching for new identity was shown. To investigate the features of American ethnic literature of ethnic American origin, we used the comparative method, the method of investigation of historical context for the interpretation of literary facts, the method of integral analysis of literary works. To reveal the specific character of Hispanic American literary works the author based his investigation and conclusions on the unity of historical, cultural and literary approaches to the study of literature. The representation of the phenomenon of otherness in Cuban American, Hispanic American and Dominican American was studied in the light of the categories of transculturation and acculturation. The difficulty of searching for new identity was portrayed on the example of the fate of the characters of the novels of Cuban American and Dominican American writers. The author adheres to the viewpoint that the complexity of searching for a new identity is influenced by the circumstances in which the immigrants found themselves in the USA as well as by what they had to face in their native country. The individual experiences described in the works under study mirror the common mood of the whole generation of immigrants. The immigrants are constantly reconsidering their values. Hybrid identity is shaped under the influence of cultural borders. The results of the given research may find application in teaching special courses on the border of literature and cross-cultural communication and in updating the courses of contemporary American Literature.

**Key words:** Identity, Dominican-American, Cuban American, Chicano, duality, otherness

---

### INTRODUCTION

The last decades are marked by the growing interest in the writers who grew up on the borders of two different cultures. The integration of Hispanic and Anglo-American cultures is investigated in the works of Vaschenko (2013), Sokolskih (2009) and Kazakova (2013). The development of ethnic literatures in the USA is closely connected with the notions of intercultural dynamics and identity.

The researchers speak about the growth of ethnic literatures in the USA since 1980s. At the same time scholars focus not only on literature as such but on the diversity of cultural forms as well. There is an understanding of inadequacy of the approach to literary process only in the frames of national literatures.

Among immigrants the problem of searching for national and cultural identity remains to be important. The perception of otherness plays a major role in the formation of a personality determining the ways of moving from one cultural environment to the other. To describe these complicated phenomena modern science uses the terms “transculturation” and “acculturation”. The first word was

suggested by a Cuban Anthropologist Fernando Ortis nominates the process of a transfer to a different culture while the second one focuses on acquiring an alien culture. What these terms have in common is an effort to explain the process of interaction of two cultures. According to the Russian Scholar Polovtsev a man is able not only to adapt to the environment but to create his own space. A man possesses the ability to enter spiritual life of the other people and in this way he gets to know what the other worlds are like. The borders between “one’s own” and “alien” are not distinct. One can learn alien in a border situation when “I” leaves the borders of a personal space (Polovtsev, 2002).

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research:** The notion of a cultural border became the key concept for postcolonial, cultural and borderline researches formed as cross-disciplinary fields of science at the end of the 20th century. The distinct feature of this specific type of cultural space is ambivalentness.

Ambivalentness is revealed in the description of “a borderline consciousness” of a person living in the conditions of a cultural border which is extremely difficult to define. People when they find themselves in a situation of a cultural border tend to avoid taking root in one or two cultures (Tlostanov, 2002).

This attempt to distance from cultural poles led to the appearance of a new term “biculturalization” which is used to describe not only the interaction of two cultures but the state of unstable balance which makes difficult to single out the dominating culture and the subordinating culture. It was suggested by American literary scholar of Cuban descent Gustavo Perez Firmat in his book “Life on the hyphen: the Cuban-American way”. The scholar investigates the national and cultural identity of Cuban-Americans who were born in Cuba but they had spent in it too little time to consider themselves Cubans because they were formed as personalities in the USA. Similarly, they can not call themselves Americans feeling their otherness towards the other members of the society.

Transculturation is typical of the second generation of immigrants who have no strong cultural links with their mother country as their parents do. But, immigrants of the second generation face the same problems connected with searching for new spiritual identity.

Thus, the work of American writers representing ethnic diasporas undermines the foundation of American cultures. The narrative strategy they use is based upon new forms of self-expression helping to avoid following the existing standards. Ethnic authors tend to depict the socially determined dynamics of the language which helps to reveal the crisis of a personal development in search for new identity. The writers speak about their personal experience of using the English language during their political, cultural and social adaptation. The ethnic authors find themselves in the intermediate position between the two cultures possessing a double identity. The most interesting forms of interaction of cultures can be found in the works of American writers of Latin American origin.

The aim of this study is showing the peculiarities of Dominican-American literature in comparison with the other ethnic literatures of Latin American origin in the USA. The works of contemporary American author Hunot Dias are analyzed and historical and cultural background for migration of Dominican American to the United States and the creation of Dominican-American literature is revealed.

The characters of the works which are dealt with here face in the US the problem of finding their identity which involved the understanding of the connections between

the past of their native land and American reality. A very important motive of the immigrant writing is a duality of the life experience of the immigrants. As Dias himself has once said “Being an immigrant one couldn’t help living simultaneously in Dominican Republic and the USA, in the present and in the past as well as in the future” (Tlostanova, 2002). Being an immigrant requires good imagination. The immigrants belong to two cultures and they have to find their own way through the maze of identity.

For >30 years, Dominican Republic was ruled by dictator Rafael Trujillo, the personal interests of the dictator merging with the interests of the state. During the dictatorship leaving the island was impossible. The immigration was restricted by administrative measures such as limitations for issuing passports to Dominican citizens. Consequently, <1000 people managed to leave the island during 1951-1960. But after the death of Trujillo the immigration grew rapidly. The Dominicans are the third largest group of immigrants from the Caribbean after Cubans and Puerto-Ricans. The majority of Dominican people settled in New York State and in New Jersey.

In the works of Hunot Dias the book resembles the form of archipelago. The writers who lived dictatorship tend to reject the idea that the voice of one author can reveal the meaning and essence of what is going on. For example, Reinaldo Arenas gives his reader several interpretations of events, his books lacking “the voice of the author” as a homogeneous unity. After his Cuban-American predecessor in his novel “Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” Dias uses the double narration technique: from the point of you of Junior, Oscar’s roommate and from the point of you of Lola, Oscar’s sister. As the story goes, it becomes obvious that the storyteller is at the same time one of character’s under the name of Junior. So, the narrator may be considered to be within the narration as well as outside it. In the same way, the protagonists of the works of Dominican-American writing are a part of the American culture being at the same time rejected by it.

From the linguistic point of view the works of Dias represent a mixture of the literary form of the English language, Dominican variant of Spanish, colloquial English and a mixed dialect combining the elements of English and Spanish. Dias sets himself a task to investigate how communities are brought together or distanced from each other by means of language. So, English speaking reader finds himself in a situation when he or she is not able to understand Spanish and feels like an immigrant.

The conclusion can be made that in ethnic literatures the specific character of culture is revealed by trying to shift the world of Hispanic culture to the English language

environment. The Hispanic element finds its expression in the themes of works. Dominican-American authors strengthen the duality by the use of Spanish in English texts (Scott, 2013).

Another ethnic literature of Hispanic origin is Cuban-American literature. In comparison with Chicano literature the borders of which may be defined more or less precisely Cuban-American literature has no exact definition. The literary historians have troubles with drawing parallels between it and other ethnic literatures of Latin American origin which may be explained by the peculiarities of Cubans as a nation located on the island and having the history of struggle for independence and immigration to the USA. It makes sense to apply the term "Cuban-American" to all the authors of Cuban origin living and working in the United States.

Now a days, the study of multiculturalism in Latino writing in the US gains actuality. Analyzing the representation of dual mentality of Cuban Americans, the researchers use the notion of "hybrid identity" though determining which culture is a dominant one may be difficult (Chevtayev, 2011).

In 1980 about 125000, Cubans took part in the immigration wave known as "Mariel Boatlift" (leaving the island on boats from Mariel harbor) (Menton, 1975). This event changed the structure of Cuban population in the US as well as the self-consciousness of the Cubans who had migrated to the USA before: before Mariel they had been cherishing hopes for a return to the island after Castro's death and now they became immigrants in full sense of this word.

In 1982, Roberto Fernandez begins his literary career with a short novel "Life in a Special" which represents a parody on the life of Cuban community in Miami (Hernandez, 1975). The novel "Raining backwards" is considered to be his best work, where the brightest feature of Cuban national character "choteo" is revealed. Choteo is making fun of things which are normally thought of as serious. Making fun of everything around becomes a way to create an artificial world which the immigrants invent for themselves under the influence of changing memories. Works of this kind, though being appreciated by critics, inevitably cause questions as writing such books is an attempt to shift Latino culture to the English speaking world. A cultural experience is moved through the language barrier and it results not only in bilingualism but in biculturalism as well. It is vividly expressed in everything which is related to the life of Cubans in Miami. Here, the problem is in the fact that not all the elements can be translated from one cultural code into another. But this problem opens a new space, forms a new background for the work of immigrant writers.

The texts of Cuban-American novelists after Mariel were written in English but, nevertheless, they preserve their Cuban character. Virgilia Suarez in her novel "Latin jazz" tells the story of a Cuban family having to face many troubles and obstacles. The characters ask themselves the same questions as their compatriots in exile. The theme of the other novel by Suarez "The cutter" is an escape from the island. A young character named Julian had to escape from the island on his own.

In early works of Cuban-American, author Garcia (1998) much attention is paid to letters and diaries. The character of the novel "Dreaming in Cuban" Pilar is living in America and keeping a diary in which she is writing about the history of her family. Her grandmother, Celia living in Cuba has been doing the same writing letters without an addressee. Pilar having lived in Brooklyn all her life does not feel that America is her home. She wants to see her grandmother Celia to understand where her home is. In search for her identity she gets to Cuba. And Cuba turns from a spot on the map into a real place and the border between Cuban and American disappears. And Pilar's diary performs, the role of a link between two different cultures.

The other problem touched upon by Garcia (2005) is misunderstanding between those who migrated to the US and those who stayed in Cuba. In her novel "The Aguero sisters" the author tells the story of two sisters who live on the other sides of the ocean but both of them want to know the truth about the death of their mother. They learn the truth after reading the diary of their father on which the plot of the novel is based. The interception of the past and the present helps to understand the history of Cuba and the history of the Aguero family.

## RESULTS

Ethnic literatures of Latin American origin play a special role in the reality of a modern world. American writers of Hispanic origin are a link, a bridge between Indian and Hispanic America and English-speaking America. They have a dual vision of the world. The Spanish language for them is a "generic language" with the help of which they take knowledge from the previous centuries. The English language is more suitable for describing American experience. So, bilingualism is a stable feature of this literature as a whole.

From the academic point of view, the American literature of Latin American origin belongs contemporary American writing but at the same time, it has its own way of development determined by a specific mentality which originates from a mixture of two cultures.

## DISCUSSION

Dominican-American and Cuban-American writing can be compared with Chicano literature and culture where the dominant role is played by the concept of border and borderlands on the territory of which chicano culture was developing. The theme of a border (*la frontera*) predominates in the works of Chicano authors. The border is shown from different points of view (especially, it concerns the third generation of Chicano writers).

Mexican Americans together with Dominican Americans, Cuban Americans and other representatives of Latin American world play their role in forming a border cultural space *hispanica-americana* where they as the people of borderlands act as masters. For example, Luis Urrea writes about social and economic problems (such as illegal migration and standard of living), the philosophy of life on the border and its cultural contradictions (Urrea, 2002). The researchers operate with the term “bridge metaphor” which is perceived both positively and negatively. The negative meaning consists in uncertainty of the situation of the immigrants as they occupy “neutral” place in between the two cultures.

## CONCLUSION

So as we see ethnic literatures of Hispanic origin from the cultural point of view differ in predominating theme/concept: Chicanos write about border (mental and physical) while Cuban Americans and Dominican Americans are the representatives of island nations/cultures with the idea of escape from the island to the US.

The works of American writers of Hispanic origin make the readers change their attitude towards the categorization of reality and understanding of culture as a system. Art becomes a “borderline situation” in which a person’s self can cross its borders going outside and overcoming psychological and cultural barriers of otherness. A universal language of art can serve as a bridge over the gap between the two cultures. Some scholars believe that borderline cultures have many advantages over non-borderline cultures as they have much more opportunities to avoid limitations (Bagno, 1999). Overcoming limitations is possible only in the process of confrontation with something alien or comparing things which an individual considers to be his or her own with things that seem to be alien.

The work of American writers of Hispanic origin enable us to see that borders made by politics and history

prevent from forming complete national and cultural identity and make immigrants to constantly re-consider their values. Such limitations are overcome by hybrid consciousness of immigrants. Integrity is achieved not by taking root in one culture but by translating cultural codes into universal language of art.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

## REFERENCES

- Bagno, V.E., 1999. Justification of the Minotaur. *Borderline conscious* (Almanac ‘Eve’, 5th Issue). SPb.
- Chevtayev, M.Y., 2011. The issue of otherness against the background of the Cuban-American cultural borderzone. *J. of the Moscow Region State University. Series Russian Philology*, pp: 112-117.
- Garcia, C., 1998. *The Aguero sisters*. New York: The Random House publishing Group.
- Garcia, C., 2005. *Cuban dreams*, SPb.: Amphora.
- Hernandes, A.R., 1975. *Cubans in the United States: A Survey of the Literature*, pp: 25-31.
- Kazakova, Y.K., 2013. Traditions of the magic realism in the novel of Daniel Kehlmann ‘Measuring the world’. *Philological sci. The Issues of Theory and Practice*, 12-1 (30): 98-102.
- Menton, M., 1975. *Prose fiction of the Cuban Revolution*. Austin: The University of Texas.
- Polovtsev, D.O., 2002. The issue of otherness in the works of E.M. Foster: Thesis of the Candidate of Philological Sci., Minsk.
- Sokolskih, N.N., 2009. ‘Not belonging’ and the bridge metaphor as the existential poles of the borderzone. *J. Volgograd State Pedagogical University*, 10: 182-185.
- Scott, A.O., 2013. *Dreaming in Spanglish: Review of the Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/209/30/books/review/Scott-t/html>.
- Tlostanova, M.V., 2002. The issue of multi-culturalism and the US. literature of the end of the 20th century: Thesis of the Doctor of Philological Sci., M.
- Urrea, L.A., 2002. *Nobody’s Son: Notes from an American Life*. University of Arizona Press.
- Vaschenko, A.V., 2013. Mexican-American (Chicano) ethnic literature on the way towards trans-boundary. *Language, philology, culture. M.*, 2-3: 69-80.