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# (DE)MARGINALISATION IN JULIA ALVAREZ'S *HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS*: IMAGES OF GARCÍA GIRLS' ETHNIC AND GENDER OPPRESSION

Abstract: *Ethnic marginalisation minorities is a recurring theme in ethnic writers' works, such as Julia Alvarez's novel* How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, which highlights the marginalisation of Dominican family García in American culture. This paper, which draws on postcolonial and Latina feminist theory, focuses on the societal practices and familial dynamics that decenter the García sisters' status both in their family and Dominican and American sociocultural environments. The close reading analysis conveys various forms of discrimination and oppression against the García sisters based on gender and ethnicity. Contrary to the novel's title, which implies that the sisters eventually lose their accents or connection to Dominican culture, the paper argues that the sisters, in their effort to transcend the margins, manage to situate themselves between two cultural frames, developing specific bicultural consciousness, which aids them in overcoming feelings of marginalisation, cultural and social alienation.*

Key words: *marginalisation, biculturalism, gender, ethnicity, Latina, New Mestiza, Julia Alvarez.*

## 1. Introduction

A notable Dominican-American writer, Julia Alvarez, published her debut *novel How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* in 1991. Following the publication, the book received widespread critical acclaim, including the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Book Award and recognition from the American Literary Association as a Notable Book in 1992. The expressive representation of Dominican immigrants'

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lives in the United States, with a special emphasis on the marginalisation of Hispanic women, propelled Alvarez not only to the ranks of the most prominent contemporary ethnic writers, but also to the ranks of the most well-known Third World feminist authors. Because of this, the investigation of (de)marginalisation in this paper incorporates arguments from ethnic studies, postcolonial theory, and the relevant Third World feminist theory. Drawing on postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, as well as feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa or Fatima Mujcinovic, this paper aims to explain aspects of sociocultural displacement and cultural hyphenation of characters to bring up the issue of ethnic and gender marginalisation of four sisters – Carla, Sandi, Yolanda, and Fifi García.

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* follows the García family as they flee the Dominican Republic for the United States to escape the severity of the 20th-century Rafael Trujillo's regime. The novel's chronology is reversed, with the narrative spiraling back from sisters' adulthood to their childhood days. The episodic and fragmented storyline accentuates these characters' sense of displacement, presenting the agony engendered by exile, as well as the persistent feeling of being marginalised and socially excluded. As part of the challenge posed by migration and cultural difference, the four girls face numerous forms of ethnic and gender discriminations in the United States. As noted by Rios, "Alvarez utilizes the sisters' successes and hardships in the United States to serve as a portrayal of the issues *Latinas* undergo as immigrants, from language barriers to trying to find a sense of self when caught in between two cultures" (2013: 4). Carla, Sandi, Fifi, and Yolanda García grow up in a rapidly developing United States, yet they are raised according to Dominican custom, which causes much confusion in the girls' childhood and adolescence. Additionally, they are perplexed by severe sociocultural marginalisation and a sense of being on the verge of two cultures. They feel obligated to conform to Dominican culture's gender roles while attempting to adapt to a liberal 20th-century American society in which women had already achieved a greater degree of gender equality. As a result, the four daughters grow up to be Americanized Latinas, attempting to strike a balance between their home culture and the world in which they live. Their goal is to establish a cultural dialogue in order to overcome the existential issues brought on by their biculturalism, which will eventually cease to be an impediment and become a powerful tool in the process of cultural and gender demarginalisation.

## 2. A story of exile, displacement, and marginalisation

Edward Said, a Palestinian postcolonial writer who wrote extensively about exilic experiences in the article "Reflections on Exile", claimed that the 20th-century was the age of displaced people. An exile, according to Said, is a state of discontinuous being because exiles are "cut off from their roots, their land, and their past" (2000: 177). For this reason, exilic topologies concentrate alienation and estrangement as essential feelings and attitudes of displaced individuals, internalising their sense of being on the margins of newly inhabited society. Said, however, sees something beneficial in the experience of exile and writes: "The exile is offered a new set of affiliations and develops new loyalties" (2000: 183). This means that the negative aspects of exilic narratives are somewhat alleviated by these new affiliations and the genuine understanding that "homes are always provisional", making it slightly easier for each exile to do one key thing – "cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience," (Said 2000: 185).

García's experience of marginalisation is intertwined with the exilic condition of physical dislocation and psychological displacement, as the family's perpetual sense of exile separates them from the rest of American and Dominican societies, placing them on the margins of both. Back in the Dominican Republic, the father, Carlos García, was accused of conspiracy against long-term dictator Rafael Trujillo, nicknamed El Jefe, who ruled the country from 1930 until he died in 1961. The Trujillo Era, commonly acknowledged as the harshest period in Dominican recent history (Rosario 2010: 13), was the time when many Haitians were slain due to Trujillo's ideological belief of a single ethnicity in the Dominican Republic. Like Carlos, many Dominicans who opposed Trujillo's rigid policy were compelled to relocate by Trujillo's secret police, which caused a tremendous turmoil in the lives of many expatriates. In the chapter "The Regular Revolution", Alvarez acquaints the readers with how much nostalgia and low social status impair the family's life in the United States: "You can believe we sisters wailed and paled, whining to go home. We didn't feel we had the best the United States had to offer. We had only second-hand stuff, rental houses in one redneck Catholic neighborhood after another, clothes at Round Robin, a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines" (Alvarez 1992: 107). In comparison to the family's high-class lifestyle back home, the girls apparently feel disenfranchised by the possibilities offered in the United States. However, it is the parents who feel the most displaced and alienated, as the girls quickly "develop a taste for the American teenage good life and the island becomes old hat" (Alvarez 1992: 108). Carlos was a distinguished doctor in the Dominican

Republic but in America he could hardly afford a decent living. As a source of solace, he insists on the Dominican class-consciousness, despite the fact that economic standing governs class positions in America (Mujcinovic 2004: 119). Similarly, mother Laura frequently emphasises the grandeur of her Dominican maiden name De La Torre in an attempt to recover some of the dignity and confidence she had back home. Maintaining the connection with home in this manner reveals that Dominicans of the older generation, Carlos and Laura, "feel a lasting emotional connection to the patria, or homeland" (Halloran 2010: 78). Carlos even travels back to the Dominican Republic to recapture some of his previous life but is soon dismayed by the island's political situation, declaring: "I am given up, Mami! It's no hope for the island. I will become an *un dominican-york*" (Alvarez 1992: 107). This comment verifies Mujcinovic's claim that life in exile entails the process of acquiring a new identity, as "the previous location is re-experienced in the connection to the new place" (Mujcinovic 2004: 119), and it reinforces the previously mentioned Said's argument that exilic experience includes the formation of new affiliations and viewpoints. As a result, not only Carlos, but also the entire family, begins to see the Dominican Republic through the lens of the American reality. However, while the parents experience nostalgia and displacement because of cultural loss and inability to integrate fully into American culture, the daughters feel an urge to make cultural cross-connections to attain identities that are more coherent in order to legitimise their positions in the newly inhabited country.

When the family eventually decides to stay in the United States permanently, their troubles do not go away because each member continues to confront racial and gender marginalisation, stereotyping, and prejudice – some of the key mechanisms to hold individuals in a given social place. As argued by Homi Bhabha in his seminal critique of the postcolonial powers *Location of Culture*, racial stereotyping has its roots in the long colonial past of the West, which continues to "coexist within the same apparatus of colonial power, modern systems and sciences of government, progressive 'Western' forms of social and economic organisation, which provide the manifest justification for the project of colonialism" (1994: 83). Alvarez validates Bhabha's claim by exposing the realities of Dominican immigrants packed with racial and ethnic prejudice and instances of stereotyping, demonstrating that colonial traditions take on subtler forms in modern times, notably in the rapidly developing United States. For example, the oldest sister, Carla García, is regularly the target of racial and sexist remarks at school due to her Hispanic origin and looks. Like her parents, Carla, at one point, wishes she could revert to her former self and be "a girl she had just begun to feel could get things in this world" (Alvarez 1992: 154). The

other two sisters, Sandi and Fifi, are equally affected by the family's displacement, albeit Fifi, being the youngest, has fewer recollections of her homeland, making it simpler for her to embrace the American way of living. On the other hand, Sandi, who is depressed, reads excessively, and fears she is turning into a monkey, has most certainly suffered a nervous breakdown resulting from various cultural influences. In the chapter "The Four Girls", mother Laura recalls that Sandi was on a strict diet, as she wanted to look like popular fashion model Twiggy. This and other similar impositions of western culture resulted in a variety of difficulties among adolescent sisters, including eating disorders and anorexia illness, both of which Sandi suffered from. Moreover, along with struggles to assimilate and overcome cultural differences and a sense of displacement and marginalisation in the United States, the four sisters feel a sense of alienation in their home country too. As Halloran observes, members of the younger generation in Alvarez's book "feel somewhat displaced when they visit the island as children or young adults" (2010: 79), whereas their parents, driven by the feeling of nostalgia, insist on maintaining ties with the Dominican tradition (76). These facts lead to the conclusion that both groups in Alvarez's novel, the girls and the parents, feel a significant estrangement and displacement as a result of circumstances that decentre their social positions, both in their home culture and in the American one.

### 2.1. Yolanda García: juggling the margins

The main character, Yolanda García, narrates the first chapter, "Antojos", in which she introduces the experience of homecoming. As the chronology is reversed, the novel opens up with an adult Yolanda returning to the Dominican Republic to reclaim some of her Dominican past and relive her childhood memories. Instead of this, however, the chapter brings forth the details about the main character's cultural hyphenation and, subsequently, fragile identity from which the feeling of being on the margins emerge, as Yolanda struggles to understand Dominican culture in comparison to a more liberal first world U.S. feminist environment. Once on the island, Yolanda discloses a significant difference between the lives of her relatives and her own. The islanders live in close-knit communities resting on rigid patriarchal norms by which men hold power, while women adhere to traditional female stereotypes encompassed by the concept of Marianismo that promotes women's duties to their families and children, subordination to men, subservience, selflessness, virginity, patience, humility, and sacrificial love (Stevens 1973: 94-95). This is evident when Yolanda's cousin Carmencita explains that upper-class

Dominican women are allowed to attend foreign boarding schools but are not permitted to pursue a higher education abroad as "only the boys stay for college" (Alvarez 1992: 6). Instead, women return to the island to fulfill their traditional role of wife and mother (Suarez 125). In other words, it is a social demand on the island that all women marry, bear children and reside in their husband's compound house, where "they supervise their cooks in preparing supper for the husbands who would *troop* home after Happy Hour" (Alvarez 1992: 7). To understand the marginalised position of Dominican women, it is necessary to take a look at the use of the verb *troop* in the previous citation. The verb is specifically associated with the military and their method of penetrating and conquering a specific space. In similar vein, powerful husbands march into their houses, exuding military might and pride as they exert control over both the public and private spheres. Dominican women, on the other hand, are expected to tolerate their husbands' poor behavior (Fernandez 2009: 5).

The first example of Yolanda's disregard for Dominican rules occurs when she travels alone into the island's interior in search of guavas, despite being warned that women should not travel alone in the Dominican Republic. Clinging to her first-world female confidence and presenting herself as a powerful Americanized woman, Yolanda openly refuses to be consumed by the role of the subservient Dominican woman and sets off on her own. Only after her car breaks down in a remote area and she comes across two Dominican men does she succumb to fear. Unable to communicate with them in Spanish, she pretends to be American and creates a shaky statement in English. The inability to speak Spanish at a critical moment underscores the fact that much of Yolanda's Dominican self has subsided under American cultural influence. The sloppy phrase in English, on the other hand, stresses her status as a cultural outsider in America as well, highlighting concerns about the problem of double marginalisation. Yolanda's several nicknames attest to her dividedness, as well as her status of being and not being a part of two cultures: "Yolanda, nicknamed Yo in Spanish, misunderstood Joe in English, doubled and pronounced Yoyo – or when forced to select from a rack of personalised key chains, Joey..." (Alvarez 1992: 68). Though Yolanda comes to the island attempting to reconnect with her Dominican past, she realises that the physical homecoming just adds to her bewilderment, as exemplified by the failure to understand the meaning of the Spanish word *Antojo* – to *crave*. According to Stefanko, the word *Antojo* negotiates Yolanda's race, class, gender, and migration, signifying longing for home and yearning to alleviate the sense of displacement (1996: 55). The inability to understand the word additionally symbolizes the "impossibility of taking up a

positive or powerful place in a culture which privileges masculinity and therefore men" (Barrett 1989: 38). Yolanda, however, cannot identify with American culture either, because the dominant Anglo-American culture places her on the margins as well. Therefore, the marginalisation in her case is best illustrated by the self-directed nickname Yo-Yo, which "recalls the toy in constant motion, going up and down, moving from one extreme to the other, from one culture to the other, touching both but not remaining a part of either" (Luis 2000: 847).

Despite being raised in a fast developing United States, the sisters' behaviour is nevertheless influenced by Carlos' insistence on keeping the Dominican tradition in the García family: "The rules were as strict as for the Island girls, but there was no island to make up the difference" (Alvarez 1992: 107). The topic of gender marginalisation in the family is best shown in the chapter "Daughter of Invention", which describes Yolanda through her school days when she is selected to give a speech in school. Inspired by the American writer Walt Whitman, she prepares an address that celebrates courage and selfhood, but her enraged father tears it up, labeling the speech as defiant, arrogant, and insolent. Carlos is obviously furious with Yolanda because her speech symbolically undermines his own power in the family. Even more threatening to him is the female solidarity that may erupt at any point, as he suspects his wife of assisting Yolanda in constructing the speech: "But now, Carlos was truly furious. It was bad enough that his daughter was rebelling, but here was his own wife joining forces with her. Soon he would be surrounded by a houseful of independent American women" (Alvarez 1992: 146). As Carter points out, such Carlos' actions reflect the severity of his uneasiness in a new Anglo society, which is why he seeks refuge in the Dominican tradition, where his authority is upheld by the patriarchal system (2010: 326). Yolanda eventually falls victim to her father's pressure. She prepares a completely new speech – one that is more appropriate for her father and the American audience – with the help of her mother, who, in response to Carlos' critique, participates in the paternalist act of female silencing.

Obviously, Carlos' efforts to raise his daughters according to Dominican tradition intensify the girls' struggles to adapt to American culture. For this reason, Yolanda appears naive during her adolescence and later in life. For example, she is unable to understand the sexual overtones in the poem written by her college classmate, Rudy Elmenhurst. As observed by Castells, while Yolanda's college days represent a time of sexual emancipation for her friends, she remains strongly wedded to different traditional conventions (2001: 38). In other words, Yolanda has difficulty understanding the poem because her father has never allowed the

girls' emancipation, believing that female freedom in the American sense would bring disgrace to his family: "I don't want any loose women in my family" (Alvarez 1992: 28). Because of these pressures, Yolanda remains a virgin who romanticises love throughout her adolescent years (Barak 1998: 169). Hence, when the entire class laughs at Rudy's poem, Yolanda feels left out of the joke because she does not understand what they are laughing at. Her inability to understand what the rest of the class does just adds to her sense of being on the margin, estranged from her American classmates.

Later in life, Yolanda marries an American man named John, whom she eventually divorces. The marriage exacerbates Yolanda's sense of marginalisation further because John, as an American and a man, takes the centre stage in both marriage and society. Yolanda, on the other hand, is a woman and an immigrant, and she is disadvantaged on two counts in her marriage due to her gender and ethnicity. This is evident in an episode in which Yolanda and John play a rhyming game and John struggles to access Yolanda's Spanish-language thoughts after she rhymes her name with the Spanish word *cielo*, which means *sky*. Yolanda seeks refuge in her mother tongue because she is unable to rhyme her name with any English word: "And Yo was running, like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried" (Alvarez 1992: 72). By employing the vocabulary from Spanish, Alvarez elucidates the issue of cultural barrier between the spouses, which is quite difficult to bridge. At the same time, as Cameron points out, Yolanda sees her bilingualism, or biculturalism, as both a blessing and a curse because it allows her to perceive the world from at least two different perspectives while also alienating her from Anglos like her husband John. (1997: 1371).

To deal with the anguish of being on the fringes of two societies and in subordinate position in marriage, Yolanda becomes a poet who uses the power of words to cope with cultural misunderstandings and establish her own voice, identity, and a place to call home. This calls to mind Theodor Adorno's claim that exiles' only home is in writing (2005: 87). Through writing, Yolanda seeks to alleviate the experience of being pushed to the sidelines of two societies and misjudged based on race, gender, and class. Moreover, as Sirias points out, writing also reflects Yolanda's ambition to leave a personal imprint on the world (2001: 25). It enables her to validate hybridity by documenting it because once she legitimises her existence and position between two cultures; she is able to derive a meaningful whole out of divided selves. Having discovered the power of writing, Yolanda decides to reject her numerous aliases: "No, no, no, she didn't want to divide herself anymore, three

persons in one Yo" (Alvarez 1992: 78). By taking the nickname 'Yo', which in Spanish stands for the personal pronoun 'I', she demonstrates the capacity to bring together her many selves. As Stefanko explains, this way Yolanda negotiates cultures, establishing herself on a hyphen where "she can shift among subject positions and worlds" (1996: 60). However, near the end of the novel, a scene in which Yolanda, a little girl, physically separates the kitten from its cat mother hints that she will remain affected by the state of hyphenation. Suddenly, she can relate with the kitten since she, too, was forcibly removed from her motherland. As suggested by the novel's open ending, the experience of separation remains with Yolanda and, as Romagnolo points out, her quest for self begins all over again (2008: 162). This further indicates that identity is a fluid concept that evolves and Yolanda will continue to juggle multiple social positions, if not margins, to deal with the obstacles posed by her cultural hybridity.

### 2.2. Juxtaposing marginalisation of Carla and Sandi García

The racial marginalisation and discrimination based on gender is especially visible in the case of the oldest García sister, Carla. The chapter "Trespass" recounts Carla's negative experiences in the United States, including exposures to racial biases in school and her encounter with an unclothed American man. As we learn from the chapter, the parents pressure Carla to attend a neighbouring Catholic school because they believe that public schools spoil children and teach them inadequate theories of human evolution. The pious parents obviously disapprove of Darwinism, arguing that their children should not be told that their "distant cousin kissed an ape" (Alvarez 1992: 152). This is how Alvarez introduces one of the guiding concepts of scientific racism – the monkey motif, to address racial issues in the case of Carla. The motif appears when the narrator describes Carla's classmates abusing her because of her gender and ethnicity, comparing her to a monkey after noticing some silky hair on her thighs. Carla, predictably, is embarrassed and alienated by her changing body, to the point where she wishes she could wrap it up to suppress the change: "how she wished she could wrap her body up the way she'd heard Chinese girls had their feet bound" because then "she would stay herself" (Alvarez 1992: 154). Furthermore, the boys attack Carla because of her ethnicity, throwing pebbles at her feet, demanding she go home, and referring to her as "a spic" – a disparaging term for Hispanic people (Alvarez 1992: 153). Likewise, an episode in which Carla meets an unclothed American man who asks her into his car addresses the topic of sexual abuse further. The episode is especially noteworthy because Carla

remains deafeningly silent, unable to voice a single word in her defense during the encounter. Her inability to speak is caused not only by her weak command of the English language, but also by her conservative upbringing. Namely, seeing male genitals makes Carla ashamed, so that "not one word, English or Spanish, occurred to her" (Alvarez 1992: 157). Carla's muteness appears to be the result of the shock of seeing what no one had ever spoken about in front of her because she was raised under the watchful eye of her patriarchal parents and the strong Catholic influence at school, where sexual discourse was elided: "Now she was learning English in a Catholic classroom where no nun had ever mentioned the words she needed" (Alvarez 1992: 163). Moreover, Carla feels violated and speechless again when she is asked to report the incident and speak about the horrible event in front of two police officers. To Carla, these police officers also represent a threat because they remind her of the boys from the playground (Barak 1998: 170). In fact, she sees them as adult versions of the boys who made her feel vulnerable by their violent behaviour or, in the case of the police, by their dominant and apathetic demeanor.

Contrary to Carla who experiences severe racial discrimination on an everyday basis, the second sister Sandi has no major difficulty with violence and exclusion because of ethnic differences in the United States. As mother Laura explains, this is because Sandi acquired the looks from a distant Swedish grandmother: "Sandi got the fine looks, blue eyes, peaches and ice cream skin, everything going for her [...] It was a girl who could pass as American" (Alvarez 1992: 52). Though Laura regards her daughter's appearance as a privilege, Sandi is unhappy because she wishes to look more like her sisters and be proud of her Dominican origin (Bonilla 2004: 211). Sandi, in fact, feels absolutely inadequate and rejected by both societies; therefore, she has the most difficulty reconciling the two cultures (Barak 1998: 170). The discrepancy between appearance and ethnic identity eventually leads to Sandi's mental breakdown and the delusion that she is transforming into a monkey. The monkey metaphor in Sandi's case alludes to her feeling of being dehumanised and estranged not only from two cultures, but also from the rest of humanity: "She told that she was being turned out of the human race. She was becoming monkey" (Alvarez 1992: 54). As Angela Brüning notes, Sandi detaches her body and later her mind to escape reality and the status of an outsider, taking refuge in illnesses like anorexia nervosa and insanity. Sandi's health, she claims, is the consequence of an oxymoronic pursuit of a Twiggy-esque Western beauty ideal on the one hand, and a more Latino-like complexion on the other (par. 26). Similar observation is made by Llorente who underscores that Sandi's madness stands as "a trope for the girls' inability to articulate a bicultural, divided self" (2001: 73). In

addition to being a metaphor for the sisters' inability to deal with the problems of biculturalism, madness has a transcendent character, symbolising a mental passage that leads Sandi beyond the marginalised position and liminality in which she lives. This means that the function of madness in Sandi's case and writing in Yolanda's case is the same, as both serve to overcome marginalisation caused by conflicting sociocultural environments.

### 2.3. Dismantling gender marginalisation and Fifi's rescue from male oppressors

Fifi, the youngest sister, has the easiest time adjusting to life in the United States because she migrated at a young age and does not remember much of the life in the Republic. The García family's insistence on Dominican holidays and island life, however, has an effect on Fifi as well. Like her other sisters, she is required to be a respectable and dutiful family member, though being strongly inspired by 1960s American liberal views and practices as Fifi smoked cigarettes and consumed marijuana, dated many boys, and never graduated from college. As Mujcinovic observed, through similar rejections of conservative behaviour imposed by Carlos, Fifi and the other girls "transcend the roles of devoted wives, mothers, and daughters and are able to develop their own careers and interests" (2004: 119). However, after being caught with marijuana, the parents decide to send Fifi back to the Dominican Republic, where she undergoes a radical transformation, becoming a nice Dominican girl: "Fifi – who always made a point of not wearing make-up or fixing herself up. Now she looks like the *after* person in one of those *before-after* makeovers in magazines" (Alvarez 1992: 117). Additionally, the sisters discover that Fifi is dating a Dominican boy named Manuel Gustavo, who exhibits patriarchal qualities, such as authoritarian behavior, decision making on behalf of a woman, and control (Sirias 2001: 44). Manuel also puts Fifi under duress to have unprotected sex because he believes that preservatives are causing impotence. Fifi, on the other hand, is unable to obtain the birth control pill because it is considered taboo in the Republic and requesting it would disclose her sexual activity before marriage. Because of Manuel's and the Dominican community's restraints, Fifi gradually sinks into a marginalised position, renouncing all the previously gained feminist ideals and her minor rebellions against patriarchal oppression.

To prevent Fifi from marrying Manuel, the sisters devise a minor revolution, planning to leave Fifi and Manuel alone in the hopes that the parents' shame and embarrassment will make them decide to return Fifi to the United States. The only

obstacle to the plan is the cousin Mundin, who would not approve of the sisters' arrangement due to Latino men's implicit allegiance and unity: "Male loyalty is what keeps the macho system going, so Mundin will want to protect Manuel" (Alvarez 1992: 127). As a solution, the girls devise a different plan to deceive Mundin too. They take action relying on feminist bonding to detach Fifi from both Manuel and the Dominican Republic. However, the sisters' revolution is directed not only at Manuel, but also at their parents and the Dominican community. By separating Manuel and Fifi, the girls sever the link between the dominant and submissive, enabling a woman to transcend beyond the traditional role imposed by Latino patriarchal ideologies based on the notions of Marianismo and Machismo. Fifi, on the other hand, considers her sisters traitors after learning that she was returned to the United States because of their actions. By carrying out the plan, the sisters not only betray Fifi but also their father and the entire Dominican community by exhibiting some of the colonial attitude in their effort to save their younger sister (Stefanko 1996: 61). According to Parikh, even the sisters feel guilty since they are conflicted about their small revolution too (2011: 7). Hence, they eventually concede that they cannot break relations with the Dominican Republic: "We are free at last, but here, just at the moment the gate swings open, and we can fly the coop, Tia Carmen's love revives our old homesickness" (Alvarez 1992: 131).

Upon her return to the United States, Fifi regains some of the previously held liberal views and continues to question her father's authority through unconventional behaviour, such as that described in the chapter "The Kiss", in which Fifi gives her blindfolded father an open-mouthed kiss, making him feel ashamed in public. The kiss is an explicit challenge to male authority and a modest act of retaliation against a father who continues to ignore Fifi's presence: "After all hard work, she was not to be included in his daughter count. Damn him! She'd take the turn and make him know it was her" (Alvarez 1992: 39). Carlos' neglect of Fifi stems from his severe disappointment with his rebellious youngest daughter, who later conceives with a German man and leaves home to follow the baby's father whom she ultimately marries. Years later, Fifi and Carlos are still unable to communicate their disagreements and numerous quarrels, such as when Carlos discovers Fifi's love letters and assumes his youngest daughter has lost her virginity before marriage. As indicated earlier, losing one's virginity outside of marriage meant shame and dishonor to the family, as evidenced by Carlos' heated interrogation of Fifi: "Has he deflowered you? Have you gone behind the palm trees? Are you dragging my good name through the dirt – that is what I would like to know [...] Are you a whore?" (Alvarez 1992: 30). According to Castells, Fifi's virginity

loss, as well as her indulgence with a non-Dominican man, has tarnished the family's name and honor (2001: 38). Furthermore, as he continues to argue, the act itself calls into question Carlos' authority once again, resulting in a breakdown in contact between father and daughter. Silence is chosen over communication among family members mostly because discussing the problems would bring up the subject of difficult transition into American culture and a nearly complete loss of cultural connection to the Dominican Republic in the case of all girls. Finally, the break in communication with Carlos raises an important question about the paradoxical nature of silence and recalls Dorothy Roberts' argument that silence can be interpreted in different ways, as it can be both "a product of oppression or a means of resistance against oppression" (2000: 928). Seemingly, Fifi cuts off contact with her father as a means of overthrowing the oppressor in favour of her gender demarginalisation. As with writing in Yolanda's case and insanity in Sandi's case, silence formulates Fifi's resistance because its meaning is subverted and used as a means of relationship termination with the patriarchal father.

## 3. Embracing biculturalism as a strategy of demarginalisation

Despite the fact that the novel's title implies that the girls eventually lose their accents and become Americanized, various evidence show that the girls continue to rely on two cultures as they develop borderlands consciousness, as Gloria Anzaldúa calls it. According to Anzaldúa, this consciousness is inherent in New Mestiza – a redefined Latina who, as a result of being on cultural borders, develops a high "tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" and learns how to "juggle cultures" and "re-interpret history" (2007: 79), which leads to the breakdown of hegemonic subject-object duality and the formation of new perspectives on Latinas. The process of becoming a New Mestiza is gradual and includes many assimilation-related challenges, such as being labeled a cultural traitor or modern Malinche[2], which the girls risk becoming by adopting American liberal views. Adhering to Third World feminist practices, the girls merge cultures and look up to new role models to break free from the gender marginalisation imposed by Dominican culture. Although the U.S. culture deems them marginal as well, the sisters use these margins to evade those at home, which is why they become almost Americanized. Carla, Sandi, Yolanda, and Fifi, for example, are very much controlled by their father

[2] The name Malinche comes from a 16th-century colonial myth about an Indian woman enslaved by the Spanish invader Hernán Cortés. According to mythology, she becomes his interpreter and mistress, giving birth to the first mestizo, Cortés' son. Because of her relationship with the Spaniard, Malinche is deemed a traitor to the Indian people and culture.

during their adolescent years. The 'American ways', however, teach them how to shift away from the patriarchal control and gender marginalisation in the family. As a result of their efforts to redefine binaries, the sisters begin to reflect on Third World feminist practices, transforming themselves into agentive subjects or New Mestizas seeking to validate their biculturalism.

The sisters eventually achieve a balance between two cultural grounds as they become cultural interpreters, accepting feminist perspectives of the Malinche myth and participating in the rewriting of myth and history. The feminist interpretation of Malinche as an active female figure who "was faced with an existential decision and who trusted her fate to a future she would help create" (McBride-Limaye 1988: 13) juxtaposes the existential dimension of the García girls with the traditional teaching of the colonial myth, which holds that Malinche was a traitor to Indian people. Drawing on feminist interpretations of historical figures like Malinche, the girls never reject any culture altogether, but instead build a tolerance for duality and develop a border consciousness that integrates two cultural frames into a unified bicultural reality. As a result, the girls establish what Homi Bhabha refers to as a hybrid identity which is "marked by an uncanny ability to be at home anywhere" (Huddart 2006: 53). This means that while they feel like Americans on the one hand, they also feel the impetus of their native culture. The main indicator of inseparability from both cultures is embedded in the novel's final chapter, in which the Yolanda dreams of the kitten she had previously separated from its mother. Symbolically, the separation from the cat stands for Yolanda's own separation from the Dominican Republic which is only physical. As asserted by Mujcinovic, acculturation in the girl's case does not imply a complete abandonment of the original culture because it always remains a point of reference during the process of adopting a new culture. In other words, the ties with their native culture never disappear, but remain a source of self-identification at times when acculturation becomes futile (2004: 51). For example, the girls frequently reject the Dominican principles in favour of the free thought embedded in American cultural society, and similarly, when confronted with racial discrimination in the United States, they rely on their racial pride and heritage. By embracing biculturalism in this way, the girls reduce marginalisation and feelings of otherness because they can always turn to either culture for support and comfort in times of need. Yolanda, as previously said, turns to her mother tongue when threatened by John's cultural and racial superiority. Similarly, Sandi overcomes her sense of racial inferiority by taking pleasure in her cultural background, which further allows her to undermine the Anglo dominance portrayed in the chapter "Floor Show". At the same time,

when confronted with gender issues relating to Dominican culture, the girls rely on American culture, which provides more space for female action.

Apart from exhibiting Malinche-like traits, the sisters manage to become active forces while emulating yet another mythological figure associated with the New Mestiza concept – the Aztec goddess Coatlicue. In contrast to the traditional image of La Virgen, Coatlicue is a symbol of female empowerment rooted in her own dualism as she is both a life giver – a mother and a life taker – a destroyer. Even Coatlicue's physical appearance reflects ambiguity – she wears a skirt made of interlaced snakes and a necklace made of human hearts, hands, and sculls. Her hands and feet are clawed, and her breasts are saggy from breastfeeding. Anzaldúa's New Mestiza, like Coatlicue, embraces dualism as part of her identity, with opposing forces that no longer contradict each other. Likewise, as the García girls begin to embrace the New Mestiza consciousness, their cultures become less antagonistic and the girls grow more Coatlicue-like, genuinely embracing duality embodied in their biculturalism. As the open ending of the novel implies, the sisters never abandon either culture, but remain right at their intersection, developing the New Mestiza's consciousness through which, as Mujcinovic points out, they are able to subvert patriarchy or generate any other opposition to similar subjugation (2004: 30). Ultimately, this way they evolve into modern-day Latinas who claim hybridity and embrace biculturalism in order to demarginalise their position and secure more liberating forms of self-definition and expression.

## 4. Conclusion

The analysis of (de)marginalisation in this work combines literary and ethnic epistemologies, including Third World feminism, to uncover the fundamental difficulties in the lives of Latino/a ethnic minorities in the United States, as depicted in Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. The analysis focuses on the sense of alienation and dislocation that many U.S. immigrants feel as a result of discrimination against minority groups and describes the García girls' adverse social situation, exposing various aspects of familial, social and cultural subordination and discrimination based on either gender or ethnicity. As evidenced in Alvarez's novel, despite being subjected to different forms of sociocultural marginalisation, the García sisters eventually manage to find a balance between their original Dominican culture and the modern U.S. world in which they grow up. Ultimately, they establish a cultural dialogue to alter their positions and de-marginalise themselves. Developing a New Mestiza consciousness that operates in

a pluralistic mode, they embed opposing cultures to reject any social or cultural fixture that threatens their self-perception. As a result, the girls embrace cultural ambivalence, demonstrating that neither culture nor any aspect of their identities must be abandoned as they embark on a journey of self-discovery and social repositioning.

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## (DE)MARGINALIZACIJA U ROMANU JULIJE ALVAREZ *KAKO SU GARSIJA DJEVOJKE IZGUBILE NAGLASKE*: SLIKE ETNIČKE I RODNE OPRESIJE NAD SESTRAMA GARSIJA

*Rezime*

Prikazujući slike rodnog i etničkog nasilja, rad se bavi temom kulturne, društvene i rodne marginalizacije u književnom djelu Julije Alvarez *Kako su Garsija djevojke izgubile akcente*. U analizi se povezuju aspekti imigrantske kulture življenja, odnosno života u egzilu, sa marginalizovanim položajem sestara Garsija, kako u okviru zapadne američke kulture, u kojoj ovi ženski likovi odrastaju, tako i u okviru dominikanske zajednice iz koje potiču. Zbog specifičnog međukulturnog položaja, neravnomjernog odnosa snaga i moći između kultura, kao i osjećaja podređenosti ženskih likova, koji se javlja kao posljedica života na kulturnoj granici, odnosno kao posljedica etničke različitosti i rodne neravnopravnosti, sestre se suočavaju sa važnim egzistencijalnim pitanjima o tome gdje zapravo pripadaju. Kako bi razbile matricu etničke i rodne marginalizacije u američkoj i u dominikanskoj kulturi te se društveno bolje pozicionirale, sestre u konačnici prihvataju kulturnu simultanost kao autentični konstituent svoga bivstva, razvijajući svijest nove mestice, odnosno strategiju življenja kroz koju, u cilju demarginalizacije društvenog položaja, validiraju kulturnu ambivalentnost i umanjuju osjećaj podređenosti, nepodobnosti, otuđenosti i izolovanosti.

► ***Ključne riječi***: marginalizacija, bikulturalizam, rod, etnicitet, Latina, Nova mestica, Julija Alvarez.

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