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The Reverse Revelation of Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* initially reads like a schizophrenic story that seems to wander all around and arrives at no place in particular. There is no unifying plot, no definitive character arcs, no clarity. But each of these elements represents a choice of the author meant to create a particular effect in the reading of her novel. Through a formalist lens, it is clear how the structure of the novel indicates the importance of stories and memories as a function of identity and how hindsight can be both damning and illuminating. In the process, Alvarez creates a fragmented, ambiguous narrative that echoes the uncertainty of the immigrant experience.

Though difficult to precisely define, formalism is the reading of a text with a focus on its form—how the text is structured, what specific words are used, what is included and what is left out, and how these all work together to create meaning. This is not to be confused with structuralism, which relates texts to a larger structure, such as genre, intertextual connectivity, or some universal narrative structure. Formalist New Criticism began just after World War II and dominated literary theory for decades until the rise of feminism and structuralism in the 1970s. However, many of its techniques remain fundamental tools of modern literary criticism, and, as W. J. T. Mitchell notes, “Formalism continues to rear its head, even when most fervently disavowed” (323). He's right—the techniques of formalism continue to permeate modern schools of criticism despite a marked dissociation from the scholars of the New Criticism

movement. To be fair, New Criticism did not exemplify true formalism; many new Critics specifically sought to “define the ambiguities, contradictions, and paradoxes in individual works of literature” (Otter 119), whereas “‘form’ refers to disposition, contour, structure, and specificity. It opens, rather than closes, questions about the relations of parts to wholes and inside to outside” (Otter 120). Form is the foundation through which all literary criticism occurs: there can be no examination of various meanings and abstract concepts without first connecting those ideas with the text itself through form. I share the hope of David Palumbo-Liu to “rehabilitate Form as indeed a necessary container and common ground that is precisely not reified but dynamic, a contingent meeting place for otherwise divergent histories, literary and public at once” (833). Form is the gateway to understanding and a potential link between all schools of criticism; its means are so prevalent that even non-scholars often make use of its terms when talking about literature. In looking at Alvarez’s novel, chronology, motif, and point of view become the focal points of a formal analysis, chronology meaning the order in which the narrative is related to the reader, motif meaning a recurrent idea that develops to explain a theme, and point of view meaning the narrator’s perspective relative to the story being told.

Julia Alvarez’s novel *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents* does not tell a straightforward story; instead, she employs a reverse chronology—ordering the chapters in reverse chronological order—to increase the initial relatability of her characters to an English-speaking American audience. This story of an immigrant family from the Dominican Republic is written not in Spanish, but in English, and is read by speakers of English. However, because the average reader is an English-speaking American, Alvarez bridges that gap between the typical American experience and that of her distinctly Dominican characters. By beginning her novel from the perspective of an aged Yolanda, so assimilated into American culture that she is a

tourist in her old homeland, Alvarez shows the reader the Dominican culture through the most relatable lens she can: that of an outsider. But chronologically, this is the end of the story, and the rest of the novel depicts how a native-born Dominican woman can arrive at such an estrangement from her family's culture. Scholar William Luis notes that "the beginning of the narration is the end and the end is the beginning and consequently the novel has two beginnings and two endings, physical and chronological ones" (840). The physical beginnings and endings, as they are located on the printed pages, are for the benefit of the reader, but this supposed ending piques the reader's curiosity for the eventual chronological beginning and foments the question that the rest of the novel slowly answers: how did Yolanda get here? Even though the novel functions as Yolanda's exploration of self-identity, the structure of it creates the necessary questions to both hook the reader into that journey and provide the proper jumping-off point: "The chapters are arranged backward so it is the reader who experiences layers being peeled back one by one, to get to the source, the reason for the state of affairs described at the beginning of the novel" (Lovelady 32). To start at the beginning would do a disservice to the English-speaking reader by throwing them into an unfamiliar culture. Instead, Alvarez cleverly begins at the most American point and tells a story of assimilation in reverse, so the reader gradually comes to understand the cultural differences as the story unravels further into the past while simultaneously following present-day Yolanda on her journey of self-discovery through the tangled web of memory.

The novel's lack of any real unifying storyline—any straight-forward plots or character arcs—perfectly mimics the uncertainty of cultural assimilation. Traditionally, assimilation is described as "a shift from 'one mode of heterogeneity ... to another mode of heterogeneity'" (Jansen 91), but sociologists have moved away from this outdated understanding of the concept

to a new approach which “disregards the notion of assimilation as a single process, considers multiple reference populations, and envisions distinct processes occurring in different domains” (Jansen 91). This multiplicity of process is mirrored in the divided, protean narrative of Alvarez’s novel and serves as a motif to unify the chapters. Upon arriving in America, into a culture that is mostly new and unfamiliar to them, the García girls naturally feel lost and outcast; the cultural values and standards of America are found to be vastly different than those of their familiar Dominican Republic. Over the course of multiple chapters—and thus, multiple years—the girls struggle to adapt to the changes in language, lifestyle, and cultural norms.

The lack of narrative unification, alongside this focal instability, also destabilizes the temporality of Alvarez’s tale. Throughout the novel, the reader is rarely granted an understandable and concrete grasp of time which further adds to feelings of insecurity which mimics those of the characters. Julie Barak notes that “this difficulty in talking about time in the novel adds, like Alvarez’s shifting of narrative focus, to the reader’s uncertainty and instability, re-creating something of the Garcia girls’ own ambiguities” (163). Once the girls arrive in America, most of the narrative is spent, chronologically speaking, in relating their search for certainty—of both identity and domestic coherence. Their migration becomes a schism in the continuity of their lives, and as one culture begins to take precedence, the other is slowly lost, and the foundation on which these girls have built their lives since birth must be rebuilt and recontextualized: “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” (Luis 839). William Luis suggests that these girls, now locked into this domestic dissociation, will

forever feel lost and continue to chase a past which no longer exists until they reconnect these two halves of their severed selves.

Thus, the organization of the novel as a series of stories represents the fragmentation of self the girls experience in the midst of an entirely new culture. These girls began in the Dominican Republic with relatively whole and complete ideas about their own identities—at least with no more uncertainty than the normal capriciousness of childhood. And the Dominican culture is a large part of this identity. Even once they get to America, they are not playing cops and robbers, or cowboys and Indians, but instead are enacting bullfights and doing flamenco dances in their tiny apartment. They are celebrating and reliving their cultural heritage, and in doing so, keeping it alive. However, as Trinna Frever notes, “This cultural pride begins to grow ... until the downstairs neighbor interrupts their reverie by banging on the ceiling with a broom (p. 170). Throughout the novel, these ‘thumps’ from the broom form a phonetic textual interruption that intrudes on the girls’ moments of cultural pride” (131). These interruptions are not solely representative of the irritation of their downstairs neighbor; they also serve to show the expectation that the girls abandon these cultural vestiges and surrender to the process of assimilation. Even Yolanda’s name is splintered upon their arrival in America: “Yolanda,” as one of her chapters begins, “nicknamed *Yo* in Spanish, misunderstood *Joe* in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, *Yoyo*—or when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains, *Joey*” (Alvarez 68). This fragmentation serves to symbolically illustrate her lack of a singular identity. Throughout the novel, she is known by each one of these names in turn—Joe, Yoyo, Yo, and Yolanda—showing that even though she is on a search for identity, for personal wholeness, she will not find it in something as simple as a name. William Luis notes that

Above all, she is “Yo,” the Spanish first person pronoun, the “I” of the narrator ...

The protagonist's onomastic displacement will be continuous. It characterizes a search for identity, for a voice that will offer a coherent understanding of her circumstances, but also the impossibility that any one perspective exists which can explain the complexity of her inquiry. (847

She is not just an American person or a Dominican person, a sister or a daughter, a lover or a divorcee, but all of these things; she cannot reconcile herself into a singularity because she is a multi-faceted woman with many parts to her identity. The stories she shares in her attempt to understand herself indicate clearly this sense of multiplicity.

Additionally, the organization of the novel as a series of unrelated stories instead of one sweeping, continuous narrative invites the reader into these personal memories and presents them with a view of the past that may or may not be entirely accurate, but one that is absolutely true for the narrator, Yolanda. She is a storyteller, and however inclined she is to remain truthful (or not), she is not telling the story as it happens. The novel, structured in reverse-chronological order, is instead a collection of memories as stories, and there is no way to determine the accuracy of her recollections. “In the vocabulary of Alvarez’s work,” Jessica Cantiello notes, “storytelling is a complicated confluence of truth, lies, and memory, and memory is not always to be trusted. ... Alvarez’s work engages with the complexity of memory, including the possibility ... that memory is a method of ‘making up the past’” (85). It is entirely possible that Yolanda, rather than setting down an accurate record of her personal history, is instead telling stories that play loose with the truth—taking creative liberties to instead create a cohesive picture of herself. She utilizes the past to make sense of the present. Throughout the novel, she uses language and storytelling to remember who she was and also to create her new identity in

America. By the end of the novel, she does seem to have finally arrived at a unified sense of self, not because of her return to the Dominican Republic as a middle-aged woman, which happens in the first chapter and provides no personal epiphanies, but instead finding it in this collection of stories from her past. As Stephanie Lovelady writes, “Yolanda reconnects with her homeland by means of the storytelling so prominent in the novel ... the portrayal of the immigrant girl’s adult life is always marked by backwards looks and steps” (33). In a new place and culture, forming an identity is no longer automatic and unconscious, and the process requires a deliberate melding of adaptation with the original self, understood best through stories of the past. And sometimes, stories of the past serve nothing more than to alleviate the harshness of the present, as Fifi says: “Nothing like a story to take the sting out of things” (Alvarez 65). Mami too always tells stories of when the girls were younger, and she always has a ‘best story’ ready to go—a story that not only makes everyone laugh and lightens the mood, but also frames the difficulties of their past in a better light through the story’s meaning or moral. Alvarez’s novel, it seems, is written by Yolanda, but still begs an important question: if these are the stories Yolanda has selected to tell of herself and her sisters, which stories is she leaving out? Perhaps there are stories from her past that she, like Mami, would like to forget.

The novel also ends with first-person perspectives from all but the youngest García girl—though Fifi still gets a short section in the chapter “The Blood of the Conquistadores”. Previously, only some of the Yolanda chapters were in first-person, so this is the first and only time anyone other than Yolanda tells a story in the first-person. Each chapter is a fairly complete story in itself; however, they all eventually relate to who the girls are in the present—or as we saw them in the beginning of the novel during the most recent stories. It becomes clear, in these chapters, that the journey of understanding in Alvarez’s novel does not belong solely to Yolanda.

Her sisters get a similar chance to use the past as a means of understanding and justifying their present lives and the choices they've made. "Everyone wants to be in control of her own version of her history," Julie Barak notes, "and these first person narratives in the last section become, in effect, a defense offered by each girl in her own words, an explanation of who they have become in the present, of why they 'turned out' the way they have" (162). The past is used as a lens through which to see the present, though the lens is not clear and without chinks; the stories and narratives they use are slanted and indirect, as though they wish to understand themselves and explain for their actions yet refuse to admit to anything directly. Yolanda's "stories about herself and her sisters will never be simple, linear narratives; they will always be complex spirals pulling in and twisting together the conflicts of their present lives in the U.S. and the fragments of their island pasts" (Barak 176). It is impossible for them to evade this sense of dissociation of self, even in trying to find it, or clarify it to others. Telling these stories of their childhood is the closest they can get, offering up how things used to be, as though hoping that some secret revelation might present itself. Outside of the story-within-a-story chapter "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story" and the very short chapter "Snow," both from Yolanda's perspective, these final chapters are the only first-person narratives in the entire novel. Every other chapter is told from a distant third-person perspective or the plural first-person. The chapters at the end of the story show the girls at their youngest, and the lack of first-person perspectives elsewhere in the novel suggest that their time in the Dominican Republic is when the García girls feel closest to their senses of self. As they get older, emigrate away from their homeland, and assimilate into a new culture, they grow distant from their own identities showcased by the narrative shift from the intimateness of first-person singular to the collective first-person plural and the very distant third-person. The most definitive pieces of themselves are memories from childhood now that

they are lost in the dense thicket of assimilation, born again in a culture which has drastically shifted their personal identities from everything they used to know.

The twists and turns of Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* creates a fragmented depiction of the immigrant experience, using the power of storytelling and language as a framework for understanding and identity. While there is no clarity in its plot—no connection between stories other than the cast of characters—there is a clarity of form and how that form connects with the content to create meaning. Alvarez's novel paints a starkly accurate portrait of assimilation, while using a varied cast of characters to avoid stereotyping the experience. It is a novel which seems to live and breathe between its pages, much in the same way our own lives live and breathe between the fabric of our memories.

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