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Transculturation and Multilingual Lives: Writing between Languages and Cultures

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Abstract

This paper looks at the issues of transculturation as explored in auto and semi-autobiographical accounts of linguistic and cultural transitions. The paper also addresses a number of questions about the structure of these texts, the authors' linguistic competences, as well as questions about the theoretical and conceptual tool which may help us to discuss the issues the writers are reflecting on. Authors such as E. Hoffman (*Lost in Translation*), A. Makine (*Le Testament Francais*), A. Dorfman (*Heading South, Looking North*), A. Kaplan (*French Lessons*), and X. Guo (*A Classical Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*) will be referred to and their thoughts are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In his seminal book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) makes a bold claim that:

It is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking. There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality—as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms—transforms our critical strategies. (p. 173)

We could easily provide examples of the writing Bhabha is talking about, and there is no doubt that the literatures which used to be considered as marginal now, occupies a central position within a global literary system. In fact one could even say that the publishing industry and the media have turned the previously marginalized ethnic and postcolonial writing into a canonical phenomenon. But Bhabha's argument is not generalized; it is firmly situated in the particular postcolonial discourse as it has developed in the academia in the last thirty years or so. This discourse is firmly rooted in the Marxist related approaches and thrives on the traditional binary oppositions between the colonizers and the colonized, the dominant and the dominated, the metropolitan and the subaltern. It is a highly politicized discourse in which one does not seem often to hear the individual voices of the writing subjects.

Although this all-encompassing political approach may be useful in clarifying our minds about the power relations in the modern world, it is perhaps less useful if we want to practice what Bhabha recommends—"that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking" from those who are subjugated, dominated and displaced (1994, pp. 38-39). It is my view that in literary studies such learning may proceed only if we first listen to individual voices, and only then move on to linking them up to a wider political context.

2. Transculturation, Hybridity and Literary Traditions

One of the central concepts in Bhabha's writing is hybridity—the 'third space' in which culture can be displayed in its non-hierarchical diversity. While talking about hybridity Bhabha puts an emphasis on the word 'inter'—'the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people' (1994, pp. 38-39). If applied to literature, this view raises questions about our traditional approaches that often see writers along the often arbitrarily imposed national boundaries. And once we operate within these boundaries, we inevitably begin to impose hierarchies. A cursory glance at the academic departments, East and West, clearly shows that despite the popularity of the de-centering, postcolonial approaches and de-canonization of literature so popular in the 1980s and 1990s, the academic departmental structures in humanities are still to a great extent reflective of the 19th century nationalist paradigms, as if Arnold's (1914) famous dictum that criticism should be a dissemination of ideas, a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world' has never been expressed. But even a cursory glance at what we consider a national literature will easily demonstrate that the carefully constructed canons and hierarchies reveal themselves as somewhat artificial constructs, since literature does not recognize visas, and languages do not recognize borders.

Looking at more specific literary and cultural phenomena, like the postcolonial paradigm, for instance, we may be asking ourselves whether the power imbalance between the colonizer and the colonized is always the best context in which we should investigate literary works from the so called 'third world'. Since these statements may be controversial, I shall better provide some illustrations here. The Polish aristocratic migrant/refugee, Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski, becomes an English novelist Joseph Conrad—a triple canonical literary figure—in English literature, in Polish literature and more recently in postcolonial studies. The writing of a canonical Polish writer, Czeslaw Milosz, belongs to Poland as much as it belongs to Lithuania and the United States. Vladimir Nabokov and Isaac Bashevis Singer are also straddling different literary traditions and national identities. The recently

discovered French writer, Irene Niemirowsky, died from the Nazi hands because according to the nationalist paradigm, she was not French but Russian Jewish. We could continue this list indefinitely. If we dig deeper in the past, things will become complicated even more complicated, because how can we classify, for instance, the writers who belonged to the great bilingual Latin tradition that flourished in Europe until the late seventeenth century? Was it important where those writers lived, or was it more important that they belonged to the pan European Latin tradition, which did not sit comfortably with the parochial political interests? If we ask these questions, then we are only one step from challenging the boundaries of whole literary traditions, such as Spanish, Latin American, German, and perhaps even the Chinese one, which is often considered unproblematic. The deeper we dig, or perhaps the more we stir, the more we can see why Bhabha's concept of hybridity may be the most adequate term to cover a complexity of literary traditions and a variety of transcultural writers. I am borrowing the term transcultural to make one thing clear, namely that hybridity is a convenient term that may be used to include the writers using more than one language, or writers who write in their second, or third language.

3. Translingual Writing and Creativity

Conrad and Nabokov are examples of both transcultural and what Kelman (2000) called, translingual writing. After Polish, Conrad learned French, but found his artistic destiny in English. Nabokov worked both in Russian and English. In contrast, Singer, living in the United States for most of his adult life, remained staunchly attached to Yiddish, the language which became practically extinct after the destruction of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe during the Second World War. So he is a rare case of a writer whose literary reputation is due entirely to translation.

In his book, *Translingual Imagination*, Kelman (2000) draws our attention to the fact that although there have been many writers that switched to another language, translingual writing has not attracted critical attention it deserves:

Translingual transactions have occurred frequently throughout literary history, and they are wonderfully instructive to anyone interested in literature, language and the connection between the two. Yet though studies of individual translingual authors and of bilingualism in society abound, it is astonishing that almost nothing has been written on about the general phenomenon of literary translingualism. (p. xi)

This passage was written over a decade and a half ago, and we must admit that since then translingual writing has attracted more attention. This may be partly due to the fact that creative writing and publishing are becoming as influenced by globalization and commercialization as any other activity. Best sellers are not only carefully manufactured now, but they are also carefully disseminated. Aggressively marketed bestsellers by authors such as J. K. Rowling, Paulo Coelho, or Dan Brown are translated simultaneously into dozens of languages and all versions appear on the same day worldwide to increase, what the market and media specialist call the 'impact'. The idea is not entirely new. Walter Scott's novels were dispatched from Britain to France on the day of publication, they were translated into French with a speed of light and those poor translations were available in French only weeks after the original had been published in England (Pittock, 2007). What differs today is the scale of the operation and the amount of money involved in pre-publication promotion. There is also one more difference that results from the promise of very high rewards in the globalized market. The international bestsellers are international by the very fact that they are carefully crafted to avoid the pitfalls of too much cultural specificity. Like adapted European fairy tales, or rewritten children's classics, the international bestsellers carry with them a simplified universality, often at the level of the lowest common denominator. They are trying to be local culture free, which makes them easy to translate and adapt to whatever conditions the publishers wish. In contrast to the popular blockbusters, good creative writing never comes easy. True, it requires a particular skill, but it is also a complex form of personal investment which Canagaraja (2004) defines in the following way:

The interplay between different dimensions of our self has considerable implications for writing. Rather than thinking of texts as simply reflecting a pre-linguistic and pre-defined subjectivity, we must consider how selfhood is constructed in the process of writing. Writing itself is a linguistic activity that shapes the self in complicated ways. (p. 270)

In this particular quotation, Canagaraja (2004) refers mainly to academic writing but the same and to a higher degree will apply to creative writing. This quotation is useful because it clearly specifies what forces are at play when we write. Writing is undoubtedly a linguistic activity, but language is both shaping and is shaped by our personality. The process is dynamic—as Canagaraja claims, “selfhood is constructed in the process of writing” (p. 271), but this construction is not an entirely subjective and internal process. Paradoxically the language we use is not entirely ours; it is a shared ownership, a product of our cultural traditions and institutions and if we want to find an individual voice we need to be very much aware whether it is us who speak the language, or whether it is the ‘language that speaks us’ as some interpretations of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis used to suggest (Key & Kempton, 1984).

So if writing is difficult in one’s own first language, then what happens if we write in the language which is not our first, sometimes even not second? If we follow Canagaraja’s (2004) clue that writing is more than a mechanical function, then we have to ask more questions: How do we make a transition from one culture to another and how does this affect our personality and relationships? What happens with the connection between our first language and the environment to which it belonged, and how do we grow the relationship between the new language and new institutions?

Until recently these questions belonged to the domain of linguistics, anthropology, and social studies. Over a long period of time, they were labelled as the issues of bilingualism, and bilingualism, at least in the Anglo-Saxon tradition has been viewed if not with contempt than with suspicion (Gumpertz, 1996). Now

the issues of translanguaging and transculturalism are not confined to the store of ‘minority’ questions but have become central to many cultures. The postcolonial project is partly responsible for this, but the main reason behind this general interest is elsewhere, mainly the increase in migration.

4. Migration and Migrant Writing

According to the UN statistics reported by *The Guardian Weekly*, only 3% of the world population have lived outside their home countries for a year or longer. However, if we represent, this percentage in numbers our perceptions will change. By the year 2005, there were 191 million migrants worldwide. If we look at a geographical distribution of this number, we shall get yet another impression because as many as 70.6 million migrants lived in only six countries: the US, France, Germany, Canada, Australia, and the UK. A decade earlier this figure stood only at 47.2 million. We can assume that these figures must actually be higher since illegal immigration, or a number of displaced people following wars and disasters cannot be calculated with much precision. On top of this, there is the internal migration on a vast scale like in India and China, and I think this also eludes statistics. Since both China and India are ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and socially diverse, this internal migration has the same impact on the individuals as the international migration. There is no doubt however, that the migration pressure is felt primarily by the rich countries, because this is where the migrants are heading (Collier, 2013). Although the large scale of this migration is a new phenomenon, the migration itself is not. The whole of North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and vast parts of Russia have been populated by the migrants. Migrant writing is a well-documented genre and it goes back at least to the eighteenth century. But it appears that the new migrations on such a massive scale have produced a new sensibility, and an increased interest in the way migration affects not only individuals but also whole communities. It is also the dramatic change in the way we communicate and exchange information that has contributed to the visibility of the migrants and of their experience.

It may be a coincidence that that rise of the migrant writing has coincided with a general rise of interest in autobiography, and the kind of autobiography that is a result of a collective trauma. I have in mind two literary strands in particular here—the Holocaust memoir and post Cultural Revolution autobiography. The authors of those autobiographical strands suffered acute dislocation and then adaptation to what we call ‘normal life’. Migrant autobiographies, often with a trauma in the background have a lot in common with these two autobiographical strands. Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* (1989), Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons* (1993), and Ariel Dorfman’s, *Heading South Looking North* (1999) are examples of migrant narratives that have the Holocaust trauma in the background. Even the young character in Xiaolu Guo (2007) fictionalized autobiography, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, although a product of a modern materialistic China, is very much aware of the traumatic circumstances of Mao’s China and a subsequent dramatic rise of her parents from peasant poverty to the new riches. This brings us back to the initial quotation from Bhabha (1994)—migrant narratives may be written by authors who live in metropolitan centres, but their experience is firmly rooted in the marginalisation and displacement. It is the anatomy of this intercultural experience that constitutes the essence of these books and makes them so appealing to a wide range of readerships. This essence allows us to perceive this writing as a particular subgenre, even if there is no doubt that each migrant autobiography is an individually crafted piece of creative writing.

So what are the common points that preoccupy the writing by migrants, and appeal so much to the readers? First of all, all the authors are posing questions about the impact of language change on their lives and what it means to function and write in what a Hungarian Nobel Prize winning author Kertesz (2002) calls a ‘borrowed language’. But language is a part of a wider reality, and it loses its function when it is separated from it. Perhaps Hoffman (1989) expressed this state of separation in the most succinct way when she was moving between Polish and English:

I am becoming a living avatar of structuralist wisdom: I cannot help

knowing that words are just themselves. But it’s a terrible knowledge, without any of the consolations that wisdom usually brings. It does not mean that I am free to play with words at my wont; anyway, words in their naked state are surely among the least satisfactory play objects. No, this radical disjoining between the word and thing is a desiccating alchemy, draining the world not only of significance but of its colors, striations, nuances –its very existence. It is the loss of the living connection. (p. 107)

The same sentiment can be found in Edward Said’s (1999) autobiography, where the author talks about the difficulty of producing an English narrative of the events that happened for him in Arabic.

The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native tongue, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other—to say nothing of the numerous ways in which the languages were mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other—has been a complicated task. Thus it has been difficult to explain in English the actual verbal distinctions (as well as the rich associations) that Arabic uses to differentiate between, for example, maternal and paternal uncles; but since such nuances played a definite role in my early life I had to try to render them here. (p. xiv)

But the disjunction between the language and reality took the most radical turn in Dorfman’s life. Few days after arrival in the United States, then Spanish speaking Dorfman (1999) falls ill and is taken to New York Hospital. Released after many weeks, he refused to speak Spanish for the next ten years. This is Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in action, but it is also a hint that may help us to understand why for so long post traumatic speech disorders in bilingual children were seen rather as sign of a lower IQ rather than a sign of a trauma.

But the relationship of language with reality does not concern only the physical reality that is external to us. Reality is also within us and the change of this internal make up, or internal mental life we all live is another strong motif in migrants' autobiographies. In the modern Western critical discourse this internal reality has a variety of labels depending what framework of reference we use. The most common, but also the most useful, although opaque term applied to our inner constructions of our selves is the notion of identity. Whether we like it or not, we are all made to believe that we have one. Again, depending on what intellectual framework we take, our identity may be described in a variety of ways. There is no doubt, however, that in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, very much influenced now by Freud and French poststructuralist theory, the individual as well as the group identity is one of the key cultural notions. The debate whether identity is inherited, constructed, stable, or fluid has surged particularly in the two decades. It has been influenced by the new possibilities opened by genetic testing, sharpened up by the perceived Muslim threat and re-connected to the political debates about national identity in post Lisbon Treaty Europe. The present discussion of Britishness and British citizenship is also a variant of the identity debate, although the background here is clearly political. The migrant narratives demonstrate, however, that this preoccupation with identity is more of a Western disease rather than a universal phenomenon. A migrant begins to think about their identity, mainly because the new environment demands from them to declare who they are or who they want to become. Eva Hoffman who arrived in the United States, already as a complex fusion of Polishness and Jewishness, discovered that the American sense of identity goes beyond this kind of European complexity. In the American mind an identity is looming large; it is a part of the culture of choice as much as the issue of inheritance. Likewise, Guo (2007) begins to discover her identity and her 'self' only when she arrives in London:

The day when I arrived to the West, I suddenly realised I am a Chinese. As long as one has black eyes and black hair, obsessed by rice, and cannot swallow any Western food, and cannot pronounce the difference between 'r' and

'l', and request people without using *please* – then he or she is a typical Chinese: an ill-legal immigrant, badly treat Tibetans and Taiwanese, good on food but put MSG to poison people, eat dog's meat and drink snake's gut. (p. 187)

It is the sudden change of the environment that puts into question, what most of us normally have—a relatively stable, inherited identity, which we do not investigate on a daily basis. But the migrant's mind placed within an alien context inevitably begins to be preoccupied with comparisons, questioning and re-evaluation. Postmodern critical theory puts a strong emphasis on identity as a complex and multilayered construct. Surprisingly, the migrant narratives do not necessarily confirm this view. It appears that for the migrants it is a journey between the two points—the familiar point of departure, and the unfamiliar point of arrival. This dual paradigm is confirmed by research undertaken by Burck (2005), a family therapist working with multilingual families in London who says that “perhaps the most striking was the fact that few individuals drew consistently on postmodern notions of subjectivity— of their identities as multiple, fragmentary and constantly in flux” (p. 91). It may be the case that by sticking to this trajectory of departure and arrival, the migrants construct for themselves a sense of security, a promise that some point they will reach their imagined destination. Multiplicity, flux and fragmentation may be good terms when we view the migrant identity from the outside, but perhaps they are not terms that help the migrants to find a psychological balance in the situation of constant cultural and economic pressure.

The last common point for all the migrant autobiographies, I want to discuss is how much the issue of globalization has obscured the fundamentally different attitudes to family ties. In the post industrial and postmodern Western world, the preoccupation with individuation and the self has obscured the fact that for the majority of the world population blood ties are still very significant. This misunderstanding clearly manifests itself in discussions about arranged marriages, casts and mixed race relationships. Again, as in the

case of the issues discussed above, migrant narratives allow us to see a different perspective on the phenomena that we often consider to be universal or unproblematic.

5. Migrant Narratives as Family Stories

Each migrant story is inevitably a family story, and it does not get less of a family story even if migration concerns an individual. In all the cases of migrant literature, I have mentioned, the families that are left behind, or the families that have also decided to migrate, loom largely in the narratives. Hoffman's (1989) parents who as Holocaust survivors were so eager to leave Poland, never adapted to the new North American environment. As their chances to realize the American dream wane, the success begins to depend on the success of their children, even if there is a lot of ambivalence in the parents' attitude to the impact of the American culture on the values brought from Europe. Guo (2007), who seized the stay in England as an opportunity to loosen the ties with her possessive mother, finds it difficult to accept the Western concept of independence. Indeed, according to the Chinese protagonist the English notion of a family is so distant from the Chinese one that they simply belong to two different conceptual schemata:

In Chinese, it is the same word (*jia*) for 'home' and 'family' and sometimes 'house'. To us, family is the same thing as house, and this house is their only home, too. (Character *jia*), a roof on top, then some legs and arms inside. When you write this character down, you can feel those legs and arms move around underneath the roof. Home is a dwelling house for the family to live. But in English, it is different. In *Roget's Thesaurus*, 'Family' related to: *subdivision, greed, genealogy, parental, posterity, community, nobility*. It seems that 'family' does not mean a place. May be in the West, people just move round from one house to another house? Always looking for a house, maybe that's the lifelong job for Westerners. (pp. 125-126)

Similarly Said (1999), as I stated above, emphasizes the fact that the variety of family

relationships that have distinct names in Arabic, do not have even approximate equivalents in English, thus one cannot even name them. But it is not only the living family members that are significant in these narratives.

Makine's book, *Le Testament Francais*, (1995) is about the immense impact of a past family history on the life of a young protagonist that lives in the remote parts of Soviet Russia. The distant memories of another country passed on by family members, the French language used by the grandmother at home, and a few photographs found in an old suitcase establish a link between the gloomy life in Russia and the different life in France. The link has a transformational power to such a degree that the protagonist begins to feel French, although his chances of ever being able to France are remote: "France was for me no longer a simple collection of curious, but a tangible and solid entity of which a small part had one day been implanted in side me" (p. 95). It is a vivid case how the imagined culture and the imagined community, as defined by Anderson (2006) become tangible constructs despite the absence of the material framework of reference.

5. Concluding Remarks

With one exception, all the narratives which I have mentioned have been written in English—the writers' second language. As all the authors made a transition to the English speaking country, the use of English was a logical but by no means a necessary outcome of the intercultural shift. However, it may also be the case that being a language of such wide dissemination, English lends itself to translanguaging accounts. After all, many people believe that English is an international neutral code that allows us to communicate within a value free globalized zone. But these narratives make it absolutely clear that English is not a culture free language. Like any other language it is embedded in a set of cultural norms. True, that because of the colonial past and the postcolonial presence, English has many variants, but none of the variants can be described as value free. In her book *English. Meaning and Culture* Anna Wierzbicka (2006) claims that it is unwise to mistake what she

calls 'Anglo-English' for a cultural norm. The translanguaging narratives confirm Wierzbicka's claim in more than one way. Perhaps Guo's (2007) narrative is the best evidence of this. The language of *A Classical Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* replicates the style of a Chinese language learner. The cognitive, transcultural development of the protagonist is accompanied by the change in her writing style. Throughout the whole stay in England she looks up words in a dictionary, tests then tests their contextual meaning in real life and then makes them 'her own'. She says:

I want to write these newly learned words everyday, make my own dictionary. So I learn English fast. I write down here and now, in every second and every minute when I hear a new noise from an English's mouth. (p. 20)

As I said earlier, none of the migrant narratives which I have discussed ends in the way the American success migrant story should end. In fact, all endings in these texts are ambivalent. But ambivalence means here wisdom rather than unhappiness. Burck (2005) sees this wisdom as the outcome of, what she calls, a 'reflexive practice'. In her study of multilingual families she says:

It was through the development of reflexive practices that individuals made use of the contradictions and the sometimes irreconcilable tensions in their different language perspectives, and, indeed, came to celebrate their multiplicity. All of these individuals, with one exception, considered the multiplicities engendered by their languages as highly advantageous, and of which they made creative use, and positioned this in relation to a construction of the limitations of monolingualism. What is evident from this study is that a positioning in several languages facilitates the development of reflexive practices of the self – that this is a recursive relationship—that self-reflexivity is a technology of the 'multilingual self'. (p. 187)

Reflexivity in general and self-reflexivity in particular are tools that underpin important

conceptual developments in social sciences and humanities. Reflexivity is a foundation principle for modern pedagogy, counselling, creative industries and management. It seems then that the translanguaging narrative is a literary form through which, all of us, whether we are multilingual or not have an opportunity to reap the benefits of this reflexive practice.

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