# Gains and Losses of Immigration in Julia Alvarez: *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

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Abstract
*Immigration is a frequent theme in American literature both in fiction and in so-called ego-documents. But while United States was often considered a country of immigrants, immigration has only lately ceased to be automatically linked with assimilation and integration. In my analysis of the Julia Alvarez's novel* How the García Girls Lost Their Accents *(1991), I will focus on how immigration is depicted as both a loss and a gain, as a kind of oscillation between the need to accommodate to new home and to retain what is fundamental to one's identity from the old.*

Keywords
Twentieth-century American ethnic novel, Immigration, bi-culturality, Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent*

> *"The migrant has been presented as emblematic of the postmodern, post-industrial condition, a sort of epiphenomenon and heightened version of the consequence of postmodernity."*
>
> Françoise Král[1]

In recent years, the issue of identity has been considered among the central concepts of cultural and literary studies, the formation of identity often being a central theme of many literary works, particularly texts concerned with bi-culturalism, diaspora, and/or immigration. Anthropologists and behavioral scientists André Levi and Alex Weingrod argue that in the current view "diasporas are enthusiastically embraced as arenas for the creative melding of cultures and the formation of new 'hybridic,' mixed identities" and thus to be part of a diaspora is "presumably to be 'on the cutting edge' of new cultural formations."[2] A parallel movement can be seen in literature as well. For example Françoise Král notes a paradigmatic shift in the tone of texts depicting diasporas and immigration, namely that they have "moved away from a certain tragic mode linked to the experience of diaspora as loss, nostalgia and longing for the past, to embrace the more alluring theme of positive immigration and self-reinvention abroad."[3] However, despite the fact that on a theoretical level immigration is increasingly seen in positive terms, in the lives of individual people (as well as literary characters) it generally consists of gains (as for example escaping danger, gaining new, perhaps freer and more self-aware individuality) as well as losses (of homeland, culture, roots). The Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez reflects in her novel both the positive and the negative dimensions of immigration.

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) tells the story of four sisters who, for political reasons, are forced to move to the United States from their affluent home in the Dominican Republic. The novel adopts shifting narrative perspectives and disrupts

1 Françoise Král, *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

2 André Levi, Alex Weingrod ed., *Homelands and Diasporas* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005) 5.

3 Král, *Critical Identities,* 11.

the conventional chronological plot structure by using a more or less backwards timeline, opening with the protagonists' adult lives in 1989 in the United States and ending with their early childhoods in 1956 in the Dominican Republic. As Richardo Castells explains, this backward glance and the book's initial nostalgic focus on the country and culture of origin makes Alvarez's novel different from a typical immigrant novel/autobiography where the dénouement is usually formulated in terms of eventual assimilation and success in the new country.[4]

These formal aspects of the novel correspond to its topic, or more precisely, they parallel some of the issues involved, such as the protagonists' need to look back to their roots and constantly re-create their identity juggling their current situation in America with backward glances towards their Dominican home. Ellen Mayock similarly suggests that opening the novel with the mature protagonists (mostly through Yolanda's storytelling) working their way back "implies perhaps a need to recover a distant self or cultural location through memory, nostalgia, and the power of the pen."[5] William Luis sees the function of the reversed chronology in a similar manner: "The novel is an attempt to understand memory, the past, and a time before the sisters lost their innocence and accents."[6]

Dividing the story among several narrators and employing both the first person and the third person narratives corresponds to the cultural fragmentation the four protagonists at times experience as well as to the postmodern tendency to give up any single and universal narrative in favor of viewing something from different, even conflicting angles to get a more complex if less comprehensible, picture. On a more personal level, these formal innovations also reflect inner fragmentation, the existence of multiple selves. This of course is not to say that the protagonists are suffering from some psychic disorder, it only means that as they move from culture to culture, they find themselves influenced and modified by each. The fragmentation of the self, however, need not be seen in negative terms only; in fact it is a way of coping with biculturalism and with the opposing demands of the Dominican and American cultures. And, as also Mayock points out, "this ability to separate into two selves helps the protagonists to be effective voyeurs, poets, and storytellers along their paths to self-discovery."[7]

The Garcías trace their family roots back to the Conquistadores. They form a large, well-to-do, respected Dominican family whose father organizes the opposition against the dictator Trujillo's power. However, when the plot is revealed, the father's life is in great danger. The family manages to escape with the help of an American consul but it is a very narrow escape indeed. Thus the four girls grow up partly in Dominica, partly in New York and they are

> deeply affected by [their] geographical past and present, by the cultural implications of that geography, by the constantly evolving mosaic of the combination of two distinctly different cultures, and, to complicate matters, by the changing 'locations' of [their] developing adolescent selves.[8]

4 See also James Craig Holte's book *The Ethnic I,* that Castells quotes.

5 Ellen C. Mayock, "The Bicultural Construction of Self in Cisneros, Alvarez, and Santiago," *Bilingual Review* 23 no. 3 (1998): 223.

6 William Luis, "A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Callaloo* 23 no. 3 (2000): 840.

7 Maycock, "The Bicultural Construction," 227.

8 Maycock, "The Bicultural Construction," 223.

They also need to develop their own individual identities, to outgrow the "peck" identity ascribed to them by their environment. They are often seen simply as the García girls, or "Misses Garcías."[9] Even their mother calls them "the four girls."[10]

Immigration, that is moving into a new place and culture, involves leaving the former place and culture behind and so, as the social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai aptly states, "memory, for immigrants, is always a memory of loss."[11] The crucial role of loss in the coming-of-age of Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofía is suggested in the very title of the book, as the critic Helen Yitah also points out.[12] This loss is described as the loss of accents but naturally stands for the necessity to acquire a new language, i.e., to leave Spanish behind and learn English, and is equally symbolic of the cultural loss and the loss of certainty they all experience.

While moving to America most likely saves their lives, at the same time it involves a loss in status. The Garcías have to lower their expectations significantly – both in terms of possession and position. While in their Dominican home they enjoyed a highly privileged status and lived in a mansion with many servants and private guards, in New York they are initially packed in apartment buildings "where the Anglo neighbors, who are usually people of a lower social class than the family had previously held in their own country, resent the García's presence."[13] No wonder the girls "didn't feel [they] had the best the United States had to offer"[14] as they for example "had only second hand stuff, rental houses in one red-neck Catholic neighborhood after another […] a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines."[15]

The father of the García family eventually *makes it* in the new country and establishes a prosperous medical practice there. In this respect, his immigration is finally marked by success in economic terms. Nevertheless, it also results in his loss of the dominant position as the traditional patriarch of the family. In fact his wife Laura assimilates sooner, as she has time to go to language classes and so her husband often has to rely on her English. For Laura, arriving to America opens new and unexpected career possibilities. She "had begun spreading her wings, taking adult courses in real estate and international economic and business management, dreaming of a bigger-than-family-size life for herself."[16] At one point the father even becomes furious that one of his daughters is rebellious and "his own wife [was] joining forces with her" and he became afraid he would be "surrounded by a houseful of independent American women."[17] And in fact his daughters grow up independent, acquire education and begin careers, and thus naturally, as adults, they lead their own lives. The father clearly realizes this at his seventieth birthday:

9 Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (New York: Plume, 1992), 173.

10 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 40.

11 As quoted in Helen Atawube Yitah, "'Inhabited by Un Santo': The Antojo and Yolanda's Search for the 'Missing' Self in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Bilingual Review* 27.3 (Sept.-Dec. 2003): 234.

12 Yitah, "Inhabited by Un Santo," 234.

13 Ibis Gomez-Vega, "Hating the Self in the 'Other' or How Yolanda Learns to See her own Kind in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Intertexts* 3 no. 1 (1999): 89.

14 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 107.

15 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 107.

16 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 116.

17 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 146.

> Surrounded by his daughters and their husbands and fancy, intelligent, high-talking friends, he seemed to be realizing that he was just an old man sitting in their houses, eating up their roast lamb, impinging upon their lives. […] He, who had paid to straighten their teeth and smooth the accent out of their English in expensive schools, he was nothing to them now.[18]

The realization makes the father withdraw from his surroundings and for the rest of the celebration he seems to be a mere silent observer. As Richardo Castells points out, the novel is full of such moments of withdrawal, of exiles into silence because "silence – or the inability to communicate – plagues Yolanda and her family throughout their years in their adopted home."[19] The silences or communication breakdowns stand for the loss of native language as well and thus become, according to Castells, a "potent symbol of the fractured family relationships that have developed after almost thirty years in a foreign country."[20]

While their Dominican life was comprehensible and clearly set "in the protective cocoon of [the] family's housing compound,"[21] their new life in America is puzzling and often hard to understand: "Here they were trying to fit in America among Americans; they needed help figuring out who they were."[22]

Thus one of the issues the family had to come to terms with were different gender roles. Their Dominican culture was strictly patriarchal, and in comparison their new American home allowed for a more equal position of women and gave the García sisters and their mother a selection of life choices to make. While the mother clearly concludes for herself that it is "better [to be] an independent nobody than a high-class houseslave,"[23] her daughters sometimes appear to a certain degree to be torn between the two models.

All the sisters care very much for their father, even if there had been conflicts with him when they were growing up: "They were passionate women, but their devotions were like roots; they were sunk into the past towards the old man."[24] Although the youngest, Sofía, who once angered her father by eloping with her German lover, tried hard to reconcile with him by organizing a flamboyant birthday celebration, she is nonetheless hurt by his much greater devotion to her little son than to her daughter:

> His macho babytalk brought back Sofía's old antagonism towards her father. How obnoxious for him to go on and on like that while beside him stood his little granddaughter, wide-eyed and sad at all the things her baby brother […] was going to be able to do just because he was a boy.[25]

18 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 36.

19 Richardo Castells, "The Silence of Exile in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Bilingual Review* 26 no. 1 (2001): 37.

20 Castells, "The Silence of Exile," 37.

21 Castells, "The Silence of Exile," 36.

22 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 138.

23 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 144.

24 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 24.

25 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 27.

Interestingly enough though, Sofía even considered "a belly dancer or a girl who'd pop out of a cake"[26] as a birthday present for her father until her sister Sandra, "who had become a feminist in the wake of her divorce," opposed the whole idea because she thought it was a really "offensive locker-room entertainment."[27]

When Sofía was an adolescent, she was caught with marijuana and as a punishment and a way to straighten her up she was sent to spend a whole year in Dominica with her relatives. When the four sisters reunited afterwards, the three were shocked at how Sofía (nicknamed Fifi) changed. The change basically involved Sofía's adoption to the patriarchal model. She suddenly paid a great attention to her looks: "Fifi – who always made it a point of not wearing makeup or fixing herself up. Now she looks like the *after* person in one of the *before-after* makeovers in magazines."[28] It is not, however, just her looks that shock the sisters, but especially the way she allows her boyfriend to treat her:

> Lovable Manuel is quite a tyrant, a mini Papi and Mami rolled into one. Fifi can't wear pants in public. Fifi can't talk to another man. Fifi can't leave the house without his permission. And what's most disturbing is that Fifi, feisty, lively Fifi, is letting this man tell her what she can and cannot do.[29]

The sisters' opposition to Sofía's relationship with Manuel comes to a head when they see him oppose her reading a book because he considers it "junk in [her] head"[30] and throws it away. And yet, when they try to persuade him that women even in Dominica have rights, he admits that perhaps "you do things different in your United States of America" but immediately adds that this is no good: "But where does it get those *gringas*? Most of them divorce or stay *jamona*, with nothing better to do than take drugs and sleep around."[31]

It is, in a way, surprising that Alvarez confirms Manuel's speech as almost prophetic as we learn that all the four girls have had experience with drugs (it was the 1960s, after all), some suffered mental breakdowns and divorced, and that generally, Yolanda "and her sisters have led such turbulent lives – so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them."[32] Or, in Yolanda's words: "We all took turns being the wildest."[33] And, as critic Joan Hoffman points out, "this fact does not escape even the casual outside observer,"[34] Yolanda's latest lover, who contemplates:

> Supposedly, the parents were heavy-duty Old World, but the four daughters sounded pretty wild for all that. There had been several divorces among them, including Yolanda's. The oldest, a child psychologist, had married the analyst she'd been seeing when her

26 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 33.

27 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 33.

28 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 117.

29 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 120.

30 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 120.

31 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 122.

32 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 11.

33 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 87.

34 Joan M. Hoffman, "'She Wants to Be Called Yolanda Now': Identity, Language, and the Third Sister in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingual*. 23.1 (1998): 21.

first marriage broke up, something of the sort. The second one was doing a lot of drugs to keep her weight down. The youngest had just gone off with a German man when they discovered she was pregnant.[35]

So while they do acquire new freedom in their new home, this does not automatically mean that the sisters have become happier there or that they could translate this element of American culture into their Dominican culture.

Although they all strongly believe in women rights and equality, Carla, Sandra and Yolanda do not manage to persuade Manuel to agree and they are equally unsuccessful when they try to raise awareness in their female relatives in Dominica:

Once, we did take on Tía Flor, who indicated her large house, the well-kept grounds, the stone Cupid who had been re-routed so it was his mouth that spouted water. "Look at me, I'm a queen," she argued. "My husband has to go to work every day. I can sleep until noon, if I want. I'm going to protest for my *rights*?"[36]

The Dominican culture clearly values sons above daughters and on several occasions the Garcías are met with pity for having just girls. "Strangers counted them, 'One, two, three, four girls! No sons?' 'No,' the mother said apologetically. 'Just the four girls.'"[37] And while they never know for sure whether the father was displeased by not having a son, he devised an apologetic, yet macho explanation: "Good bulls sire cows."[38]

Despite Sofía's short-lived return to the patriarchal order, all four sisters become Americanized in their understanding of gender roles and rights, thus whenever they return to visit Dominica the level of freedom from the restraints of patriarchy they acquired in American is yet another factor making them different from their Dominican relatives.

When in the book's opening Yolanda wants to take a trip to the north of the Island, she realizes that the family opposes this because a woman of her class simply does not travel alone: "'This is not the States,' Tía Flor says, with a knowing smile. 'A woman just doesn't travel alone in this country. Especially these days.'"[39] Although Yolanda's secret hope is to find home in Dominica, in this respect she is already too Americanized to obey: "She has sat back quietly, hoping she has learned, at last, to let the mighty wave of tradition roll on through her life and break on some other female shore."[40] And yet, Yolanda to a degree envies her cousins the certainty of their position: "But look at her cousins, women with households and authority in their voices."[41]

When Yolanda returns to the Dominican Republic at the novel's opening, she does so in the secret hope to make the island her home again because "she believes she has never felt at home in the States, never."[42] Yet although she never felt that she

35 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 47.

36 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 121.

37 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 41.

38 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 40.

39 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 9.

40 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 9.

41 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 11.

42 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 12.

belonged in her American home, she unquestionably does not quite belong in Dominica either. Upon her very arrival, she is greeted by her cousins and aunts as "Miss America."[43] Not only is her hairstyle and clothing foreign to them, on top of this Yolanda struggles with Spanish, her native language. She can converse only in "halting Spanish" and she even "reverts to English,"[44] for which she gets scolded by the aunts who believe that "the more she practices, the sooner she'll be back into her native tongue."[45] The not-quite-belonging anywhere, the in-between-ness characteristic of most ethnic or bi-cultural protagonists, is stressed in Alvarez's novel often, as for example when Yolanda admits to herself that when she returns back to the States, she will for a time have troubles with English, "going blank over some word" or "mixing up some common phrase."[46]

Yolanda's secret desire to make Dominica her home has almost the quality of quest for a lost paradise, for lost childhood innocence. Her lonely drive into the country to find some fresh guava, which she has not had for a long time, is described in this manner:

> All round her are the foothills, a dark enormous green, the sky more a brightness than a color. A breeze blows through the palm trees below, rustling their branches, so they whisper like voices.[47]

But as Castells correctly explains, "in reality Yolanda feels nostalgia for a countryside that is not a significant part of her personal or family history."[48] Although, he goes on, "she may feel an emotional, romantic attachment to the tropical splendor" she would, because of the way she has grown up, feel "far more at home in a country club than in the countryside."[49] Thus the opening chapter does not end with a happy or reconciliatory recovery of the lost home through celebratory immersion in the beauties of the natural environment, but quite to the contrary. Yolanda becomes scared as she finds herself alone with a flat tire in the quickly falling night while two men are approaching her. Suddenly nature seems hostile, "the rustling leaves of the guava trees echo the warnings of her old aunts: you will get lost, you will get kidnapped, you will get raped, you will get killed."[50] Even if the men help her change the tire, the situation makes Yolanda realize that "she is not driving through the island paradise of her nostalgic imagination."[51] Thus her not-belonging is confirmed again – the countryside of Dominica is not her true home.

Yolanda describes how she feels as a person with a bi-cultural identity: "I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who could understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles."[52] The multifaceted character of Yolanda's identity is also conveyed through her names. When she is a small girl, she is called Yoyo. Her name is often

43 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 4.

44 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 7.

45 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 7.

46 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 7.

47 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 12.

48 Castells, "The Silence of Exile," 36.

49 Castells, "The Silence of Exile," 36.

50 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 17.

51 Castells "The Silence of Exile," 37.

52 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 99.

abbreviated into Yo and she also encounters many other forms of her name throughout her life: "Yolanda, 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*."[53] Sometimes she is also "*probecita* Yosita"[54] and a gift of monogrammed pencils turns out with her name "Americanized, southernized *Jolinda*."[55] Perhaps no wonder Yolanda becomes very particular about her name and clearly prefers its original, full version, "pure, mouth-filling, full-blooded name"[56] Yolanda. She reacts strongly to anything different people may want to call her. When her husband names her Violet, she responds: "Stop violeting me. I hate it when you do that."[57] The verb in her reaction has a very clear proximity to "violating", thus suggesting that calling Yolanda anything else than her full name is taken by her as parallel to not being taken as who she is, as not being accepted as the individual she defines herself. She feels that when someone is using an abbreviated version of her name, it is a "bastardized name."[58]

Yolanda is also nicknamed Yo, even her husband occasionally calls her Josephine[59] and there are certainly parallels between her character and that of her literary predecessor – Yo (Josephine) of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Just like the early literary protagonist, Yolanda is the most courageous and outspoken of the four sisters and the one who gives the family its voice through her narrative.

Despite her later eloquence, for a long time Yolanda feels isolated and lonely in the States, acutely aware of her otherness. Even during the first session of her English class the teacher stumbles over her name "smiling falsely", a smile Yolanda identifies as "one flashed on 'foreign students' to show them the natives were friendly"[60] and another student looks her over probably taking her as an "intruder upon the sanctuary of English majors"[61] as if the fact that English is not her native tongue excludes her from majoring in English. Thus Yolanda "for the hundredth time, cursed [her] immigrant origins."[62] She does not like to be labeled "a Spanish girl" by her boyfriend nor to be treated "as a geography lesson for their son"[63] by his parents. Thus more often than not, Yolanda is seen as the other in America, yet she becomes Americanized to such a degree as to be seen as the other by her relatives in Dominica as well. Ibis Gomez-Vega similarly concludes that

> Yolanda reveals herself as a Western-identified dominant subject confronted with her own 'third world' people as the oppressed 'other'. The irony of her situation is that, during her years of growing up as a 'Latino' exile within the United States, Yolanda learns to feel like an 'other', but when she returns to the country of her birth, the country from which she was originally exiled,

53 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 68.
54 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 81.
55 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 90.
56 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 81.
57 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 74.
58 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 47.
59 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 76.
60 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 88.
61 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 89.
62 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 94.
63 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 98.

> Yolanda begins to recognize other *dominicanos* as different from herself.[64]

The García sisters do not fit both because of their command of English and for their looks. They are automatically seen as strangers, as those who do not belong, and they suddenly experience racial labeling and assaults. It is hard for them to understand "why the Irish kids whose grandparents had been micks were calling them spics."[65] Especially Carla has the hardest time of all. Since her parents are not rich enough yet, she has to go to a public school where she is faced with severe bullying. A group of boys "pelted her with stones" and screamed at her: "Go back where you came from, you dirty spic!"[66] As Gomez-Vega explains, Carla throughout these attacks acutely recognizes that they are aimed at her "because she is different" and so they "emphasize just how different and foreign she is […] [a] person so different that she does not merit respect or understanding."[67] The sad fact is that is not only kids assaulting the Garcías but even their neighbor in the apartment building, an elderly woman who "spat out that ugly word" calling them "spics" and ordering: "Go back to where you came from!"[68]

Nevertheless, apart from these disturbing manifestations of racism, we learn through the story of Yolanda about other forms of experiencing one's otherness. Yolanda has to face the damaging power of racial stereotypes when her boyfriend breaks up with her because she has not fulfilled his expectations based on these stereotypes: "I thought you'd be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bullshit, you'd be really free […] But Jesus, you're worse than a fucking Puritan."[69]

Alvarez depicts well the paradoxes of racial stereotyping and prejudices. While in Dominica, the Garcías felt themselves superior both in terms of class (they were the ones who had servants) and in term of race. "They live a privileged life within an impoverished world and inevitably fancy themselves a better class of people than working class dominicanos."[70]

The father considers his servants childlike -- he for example comments on the reaction of one of them, Gladys, touched and moved by a mechanical money box shaped as a statue of Mary: "They are like children. […] It's as if she had seen the real thing."[71] One of the daughters remembers how they described Nivea, another servant: "Nivea, the latest of our laundry maids, was 'black-black': my mother always said it twice to darken the color to full, matching strength."[72] That the servants are well aware they live in a racially prejudiced environment can be seen in the futile attempts of Nivea's mother to change the fate of her daughter's life: "She'd been nicknamed Nivea after an American face cream her mother used to rub on her, hoping the milky white applications would lighten her baby's black skin."[73] Another of the maids is described by Sofía in this way: "Chucha […] had this face like someone had wrung it out after washing it to try to get

64 Gomez-Vega, "Hating the Self," 86.

65 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 138.

66 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 153.

67 Gomez-Vega, "Hating the Self ," 91.

68 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 171.

69 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 99.

70 Gomez-Vega, "Hating the Self," 87.

71 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 266.

72 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 260.

73 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 260.

some of the black out. I mean, Chucha was super wrinkled and Haitian blue-black, not Dominican *café-con-leche* black."[74]

The father, Carlos García, openly expresses his racially biased attitude when he elcomes his grandson into the world, a baby "big-boned with blond fuzz on his pale pink skin, and blue eyes just like his German grandfather's."[75] Carlos is pleased that the boy is named after him and in observing him "all [his] Caribbean fondness for a male heir and for fair Nordic looks had surfaced."[76] Carlos is happy because now the family name will continue and "there was now good blood in [it] against a future bad choice by one of its women."[77] Both parents think highly of Nordic looks; another example is the fact that the mother even considers her daughter Sandra as the most beautiful of her children because she "got the fine looks, blue eyes, peaches and ice cream skin"[78] she inherited from an ancestor of Swedish origin. The racial overtones in Garcías' speech is noted also by Luis, who explains that because their racial prejudice chronologically preceded the discrimination they experienced in USA, it may well be that their own experience with racism actually "allows them to uncover an earlier one in the Dominican Republic."[79] Thus in a way the sisters' newly, albeit painfully, acquired awareness of the injustice and inhumanity of racial prejudice and discrimination can be seen as an important gain in their personal development.

However, among the greatest gains of immigration, particularly for Yolanda, is the finding a new voice in the acquired language. The importance of language is suggested in the very title of the novel itself – it points out not only to the loss usually connected with immigration but it also implies that language is among the novel's central themes. Hoffman summarizes this aspect of the novel:

> As the title of the novel suggests, not only words, but also the manner of speech is significant to the story of the Garcia girls' coming-of-age in America. Language, in both its form and its content, is an important unifying agent here, every bit as essential as the strong family connections throughout this loosely woven work. Communication is of fundamental concern for each member of this immigrant family as they struggle with the strange vocabulary, difficult grammar, and incomprehensible voice rhythms of their newly acquired English in order to tell their stories.[80]

When Yolanda finally feels that she has found her voice in English, that she "finally sounded like herself in English"[81] it is in fact a literary inspiration that gives her the voice – she is inspired by the poem "Song of Myself." And what author can best symbolize the freedom and focus on individuality of Yolanda's new home than Walt Whitman? Yolanda successfully discovers her self-expression in the new language and eventually becomes the poet and storyteller of the family, the best master of the language

74 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 218.

75 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 26.

76 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 26.

77 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 27.

78 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 52.

79 Luis, "A Search for Identity," 841.

80 Hoffman, "She Wants to Be Called Yolanda Now," 22.

81 Alvarez, *García Girls*, 143.

among all the Garcías. In this way, Yolanda gains through immigration another voice, command of another language, another dimension of herself that helps her overcome the inevitable losses. By telling the story of the Garcías, Yolanda is assigning meaning to their present through their past and hopes to bridge the present with the possibilities of future. The novel's focus on language and narrativity on one side, and on bi-cultural, bi-lingual, ethnic, fragmented selves of the migrant protagonists on the other make it a truly interesting, complex work that can be seen as an alternative to traditional immigrant novel as well as to female Bildungsroman.

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