

**TRANSNATIONAL ISSUES IN THE LITERARY EXPLORATIONS OF THE  
DOMINICAN HISTORY: JUNOT DÍAZ, JULIA ALVAREZ  
AND MARIO VARGAS LLOSA**

**T**ransnational historical perspective has been usually discussed with reference to ethnic literatures of the U.S. In my paper I would like to argue that it also helps to understand many works from Latin American literary tradition and it is an important concept for hemispheric studies. The examples I selected for my comparative analysis are Junot Díaz' *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Julia Alvarez' *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995) and Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* (2000). They not only refer to the same historical period of Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, but also are written by the authors who either have immigrated from the DR to the U.S. (Díaz, Alvarez) or represent another country (Peruvian Llosa).

As far as Llosa's work is considered, he often makes connections between the twists of contemporary history in Latin America and its colonial legacy. His *Feast of the Goat* is no exception. Similarly to Díaz and Alvarez who can refer to a bigger context of ethnic literatures and the quest for counter-history that has been a part of African-American, Native American and Latino/a literature, Llosa's emphasis on the clash between the center and periphery might be treated as an echo of the works of other Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* (1955), Rosario Castellanos' *Balún Canán* (1957) or Augusto Roa Bastos' *Son of Man* (1960). Even though these novels refer to the history of Haiti, Mexico and Paraguay, apart from local history they also refer to pan-American, transnational issues because they describe chosen historical processes as a continuation of the history initiated by the conquest and colonization of America. This is the way in which, e.g. Eric Camayd-Freixas interprets history in Rulfo and Carpentier (Camayd-Freixas 1998). The interest in history reconstruction is also visible in Latin American dictatorship novel, represented, among others, by Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Miguel Ángel Asturias' *El señor presidente* or Augusto Roa Bastos' *I the Supreme*. If I am to point out the Latin American novel with the most pan-American historical context, it will be Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in which the author reconstructs the history in the allegorical way showing pan-American legacy of the conquest and colonization and exposing the history that was drastically different from the European utopia of the America as a Paradise on earth.

Today in the context of ethnic literature of the U.S. one of the most frequently asked questions is if ethnic writers can represent their ethnic groups without distortion or idealization and if they have a right to write about their marginalized histories. These questions are vital as far as Native American authors are concerned, especially when they not only reconstruct the histories of their own tribes, but include the histories of Indian culture/s with which their ancestors were in conflict or sometimes create histories of imagined pan-Indian communities. Can we speak about just and unbiased representation in these instances? The same question is often addressed to Latino and Latina writers who left their home countries as small children or were born in the U.S., but chose to write about their lost home country even though they are physically and often linguistically distant from it. This refers to Sandra Cisneros, Oscar Hijuelos, Cristina García and Julia Alvarez, to name just a few. Paradoxically Junot Díaz never complained about being criticized for the reconstruction of the history of the Dominican Republic, which in my opinion is connected with the innovative language and form of his novel that combines English with Spanish and celebrates hybridity not only of the narrators, but also the genre that is more experimental than genres of other Latino/a writers I have mentioned in this context. Many critics praise transnational historical perspective in Díaz and describe it as at times artificial in Alvarez, which is connected not only on Alvarez's bigger reliance on English but also on her focus on Dominican upper class, white Creoles and their descendants, pushing black characters to the margins of her fiction.

In the context of Latin American literature the questions about adequate representation of common American history or a Latin American country different from an author's home country do not cause so much stir which is certainly associated with the common legacy of Spanish culture and language in Latin American countries. But should the language be such a barrier especially when we take Latino/a group into consideration? The scholars active in the field of hemispheric studies convince us that not really. Just like postcolonial studies might help to understand culture that have undergone physical decolonization much earlier than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but have suffered the effects of cultural, political colonization up to now, hemispheric studies offer a chance to draw a broader map of intercultural connections between Americas, emphasizing similar tendencies in, e.g. writing about history in literature. Similarly to American ethnic writers who wanted to get out of their cultural ghettos and enter the American literary canon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Latin Americans also realized the dream of creating canon of contemporary Latin American literature which started with the "boom" movement of the 60-ties. As José Donoso wrote in *The Boom in Spanish American Literature: A Personal History*, the condition necessary for leaving the cage of regionalism was to stop writing just "for a parish about the problems of the

parish” (Donoso 4). Of course, not everything written before “the boom” was local, Jorge Luis Borges is the most famous exception here, but it was the decade of the sixties that initiated formal and thematic experimentation on a big scale. Mario Vargas Llosa repeatedly got inspired by the histories other than Peru’s, improving the form of his novels in a way that would enable him faithful history reconstruction. At the same time Llosa in a postmodern fashion has always insisted that literature cannot be anything more than the truth of lies. Hayden White went even further when he called historiography “the truth of lies” so the belief that the adequate language in the case of literature or historiography can give us full access to the authentic historical event can only lead us astray, therefore instead of it I would rather focus on different ways of introducing historical motives (White 1997). Llosa, Díaz and Alvarez create three different pictures of Trujillo’s dictatorship and the common denominator is transnational perspective.

In his *Feast of the Goat* Llosa included three different planes of action and perspectives. The portrait of the dictatorship has been constructed with the techniques that the writer refined while constructing his total novels. The polyphonic structure is impressive despite the fact that his characters do not speak in the first person but their narration is mediated by the third person neutral narrator. Despite this indirect access into the psyche of the characters, readers get to know Llosa’s characters well because the author differentiated their languages and included detailed descriptions of their inner worlds and their physical environment. As a result Llosa created complex fictional world inhabited by many historical figures such as Trujillo, his closest collaborators and finally his assassins. The three planes of action refer respectively to the memories of Urania Cabral who comes back to the DR after 35 years of living in the U.S., the story of Trujillo just before his assassination and to the perspectives of the seven conspirators who managed to kill Trujillo on May 30<sup>th</sup> 1961.

As Llosa explained (interview with Diego Barvabe, *Perspectiva*, May 1, 2000 quoted by Escudro Alie 2-3), he wanted Urania’s story to be the most dramatic. As Escudro Alie notices the memories of Urania open the closed perspective typical for the historical novel. Thus the past gets connected with the present which enables exposing the long term consequences of trauma. The perspective of Urania is also important for the reason that it is a female perspective and as such it provides contrast to the macho vision of the world constructed by Trujillo and his followers. As Llosa further explained in the interview, the purpose of the sexual abuse of women was confirmation of power by the dictator which demoralized whole social and family groups because it was the fathers who gave away their daughters. It was definitely more traumatic for the victims. Therefore the story of Urania helps to investigate not only an individual dimension of tragedy, but it unveils the drama of the society who succumbed to the power of Trujillo.

To shed some light onto this phenomenon Llosa consistently focuses on all roles of the dictator whom his people called Excellency, Generalissimus, Father of the New Homeland, Benefactor and the Goat and whose virility was believed to be one more proof of supreme status. Trujillo's megalomania is portrayed as both terrifying and grotesque which is exemplified best by the excerpt in which the dictator recollects Balaguer's speech "God and Trujillo". The novel not only shows why Trujillo believed in his supernatural powers, but why others believed him and why Urania cannot forgive someone as misfortunate as Agustin Cabral. Urania is the character who never forgets and even after many years cannot find any excuse for the Dominicans who tried to ignore the monstrosity of the dictatorship by convincing themselves that it is a necessary sacrifice on the part of the citizens who want to have a strong leader or got paralyzed by fear. We understand her because she paid a high price as a victim of Trujillo (the trauma she experience affected her later contacts with men and she remained alone). But, as Escudro Alie concludes, despite the trauma, Urania manages to become an emancipated independent woman, ready to share her experience with other women which she does at the end of the novel. The ultimate proof of her power is the last scene when Urania defends herself against the attack of an accidental man. We can see that neither physical nor emotional wounds can deprave her of her power of the woman she became: strong, independent, uncompromising; the woman Trujillo and his patriarchal followers could not even imagine.

Llosa's novel is therefore an excellent psychological, historical and sociological study, as many critics have pointed out (e.g. Sabine Kollman describes impressive use of telescope technique and the interplay between history and fiction, Kollman 2001). The fact that this fictionalized account of the Dominican history is told by a Peruvian is not an obstacle but even a merit because Llosa not only had prepared meticulously for writing this novel but also had written other novels (e.g. *Conversation in the Cathedral*) on the topic of the abuse of power. On one hand *The feast of the Goat* conveys the universality of one of most important Latin American traumas, on the other Llosa took care of describing the particularities of the Dominican dictatorship and let us hear many different voices to make us aware how difficult it is to capture history. The novel can be also analyzed in the context of postcolonial studies because Llosa made it clear that Trujillo's abuse of power and extreme racism are not 20<sup>th</sup> century inventions but the consequences of much older processes (the patriarchal culture that cherished the Goat is a colonial legacy). Last, but not least, the novel offers a lot for feminist critics which allows for the interpretation not only inside the Latin American context.

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, despite of the fact that it refers to the same historical period and place and describes the lives of some of the historical figures Llosa included

and is far from being a homage to *The Feast of the Goat*. Díaz not only criticizes Llosa's work openly in the footnotes of his novel, but he also attacks it in an interview. Paradoxically, Díaz accuses Llosa of painting a rose-colored picture of Trujillo. Monica Hana quoted the part of the interview in her article; as Díaz explains: "I'm book-obsessed and I wrote about a book-obsessed protagonist. The narrator too: book-obsessed. You better believe that I was fucking with other books written about the Dominican Republic. I mean, have you read *The Feast of the Goat*? Pardon me while I hate, but people jumped on that novel like it was the greatest thing on earth! And you should have seen the Dominican elites fawning over Vargas Llosa. The Great Vargas Llosa has deigned to visit the Dominican Republic! Call me a nationalist slash hater, but Vargas Llosa's take on the Trujillo regime was identical to Crassweller's and Crassweller wrote his biography 40 years ago!" (Hana, 2010, 517). The biography of Trujillo that Díaz mentions diminishes the horrors of Trujillo's state and tries to counterbalance the oppression of the dictatorship with economic improvements and it is hard to find anything like that in Llosa's novel, but what Díaz's disliked about *The Feast of the Goat* was probably connected with Llosa's attempt to portray Trujillo not just as a demon of some sort, but also as a human being with his weaknesses. Does that make Trujillo a more sympathetic character? In the opinion of many critics, it does not. The conflict between Llosa and Díaz, is, in my opinion, connected more with their completely different styles of writing. Llosa's novel in its whole complexity and totality is addressed to better educated readers, whereas Díaz creates the language that becomes the authentic voice of the dispossessed and marginalized who use a hybrid colloquial style. This poetics is definitely aimed at a broader readership than Llosa's because both university professors and barrio inhabitants of various professions can enjoy it. What Díaz achieves resembles to some extent what Gabriel García Márquez did in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when he created the style that appealed both to soap opera lovers and postmodernism experts (more on similarities between Díaz and Márquez in Hana's article).

Coming back to Díaz's novel, his main character Oscar de Leon does not suffer only because of the impact of Trujillo's dictatorship on his life and the life of his family. Right from the beginning of the novel Díaz constructs a broader historical perspective, making Trujillo only one of the demons of the history of the New World which was initiated by the curse called *fukú americanus*. As Díaz explains in the novel: "No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be fukú's Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not."

But the fukú ain't just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare.” (Díaz, 2007, 1-2).

And this the point where Díaz introduces Trujillo's story, which is not only a part of Oscar's story, but it develops in the footnotes. Thus in a postmodern style the story of the dictatorship completes the main plotlines of the novel and all these planes of action have a partially didactic purpose as they are written 'for those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history.' (Díaz, 2007, 2). Just like the story of Urania contributed greatly to our understanding of the abuse of power, Díaz's story from the margins is the voice from the periphery that becomes crucial for our understanding of Oscar's tragedy and his status of a refugee from both American and Dominican culture. Díaz is not as much interested as Llosa in vivisectioning the mechanism of dictatorship along with its dark legend, but he wants to locate and partly explain the context of identity problems. It is a novel about Dominicans living in their barrio in the U.S. and about Dominicans from the Dominican Republic written in the colloquial sharp language, full of black humor and a sense of 'first-hand', authentic story. This often derisory tone together with the elements of an inter-textual game played with the reader is at the same time a great although unusual history lesson. The reader gains knowledge without didactic sermonizing and Díaz's style is so hybrid (see, e.g. Ramón Saldívar 2011) that it is clear that Díaz speaks to Latinos in the U.S., Americans, Latin Americans and all other because fukú is a hemispheric problem or in some cases even a global one as José David Saldívar suggests (Saldívar 2011). Díaz neither cares for political correctness nor for clear boundaries between reality and fiction and that is why the narrator of the footnotes, alter-ego of the author seems to be an integral part of the fictional world (he speaks the same language as his characters). Just as Llosa took care of creating the illusion of the total world of the novel and to support the illusion he introduced a completely transparent narrator filtering the consciousness of Urania, Trujillo, his supporters and opponents, Díaz consistently insists on making his narrator audible and standing out. While reading Díaz one has an impression that traditional boundaries between the author and the reader have disappeared. Llosa created the relationship with the reader by the means of empathy (when he wrote about Urania) or repulsion (when he presented Trujillo) and through psychological, historical and sociological study he tried to show the power of the writer as an expert, analyst and thinker. Díaz through his direct style creates history which is direct, accessible not only for refined readers but for every dude, brotha, hombre... The inclusion of popular genres of sci-fi, comics and fantasy, mixing literature, classical and popular with computer games makes history a kind of interactive space of the present, not just a thing of the past, defined by experts and closed in libraries. This access to history is democratic in nature even though it is history of the world that has little in

common with democracy, justice or tolerance. Genre-mixing is also a way of introducing survival humor into the novel, for example when the Dominican Republic is portrayed as Mordor, Trujillo gets reduced to something absurd and this perspective on history makes it less burdensome for the survivors. Díaz's tendency to construct interconnections between different histories of the conquest, colonization and the consequences of them that reach up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century results in the shift of perspective after which these histories no longer refer to some remote peripheries of the world condemned to the lack of progress but these histories start to have a global impact.

Julia Alvarez does not use history in her novels in such an intriguing way as Llosa and Díaz, but similarly to them also adds universal dimension to the particular history of the country from which her family had to immigrate as a result of Trujillo's dictatorship. In contrast to Llosa and Díaz, this universal component of her novels does not open so many possibilities of interpretation but rather reduces historical and sociological themes in order to highlight feminist elements which were also important for Llosa and Díaz, but they did not dominate other planes. Alvarez is interested, first of all, in the histories of women, particularly Mirabal sisters who sacrificed their lives opposing Trujillo. Thus Alvarez writes a classical "herstory" in which she concentrates also on the private lives of historical figures and, additionally she creates a new myth of the Dominican heroines. Alvarez' main achievement is the form of the novel which is polyphonic, similar to the multi-perspective structure of Llosa's and Díaz's works, but in contrast to the tone of their novels, Alvarez' treatment of historical characters is at times sentimental and stilted. The story of Mirabal sisters consists of three parts, each devoted to a different sister and describing a different period in her life. Memory plays a crucial role in the novel which is reflected also in the narration initiated by *la gringa Americana*, alter ego of Alvarez, who comes to the Dominican Republic from the U.S. thirty four years after the death of sisters to interview the only survivor Dedé. The American-Dominican narrator makes it clear that she wants to save the story of Mirabal sisters from oblivion so that they can gain some recognition also beyond the DR. Apart from the American-Dominican perspective and Dedé's relation, we also get access to the minds of Minerva, Patria and Maria Teresa (in the last case through her diary). Alvarez definitely wants to reconstruct history in her novel, as one may guess even from the dedication ("for Dedé") and as the remark on the front page that the story is meant as a tribute to the Mirabal sisters and Rufino de la Cruz.

As David J. Vásquez notices, in order to break the silence around the dictatorship, Alvarez does not use a traditional form of the historical novel, but creates a hybrid genre. The historical context of her novel is not just a background for the main narration, but it is used by Alvarez 'to re-imagine and reclaim history' (Vásquez, 2011, 135). This renewed narration of historical events should help in solving the contradictions of the diasporic identity. In his study Vásquez refers to the idea of

historical trauma by Adam Lowenstein (2005) who notices that in Alvarez's novels there is a very important tension between those who believe that certain historical traumas cannot be expressed and those who claim that these traumas have to be expressed. As Vásquez concludes, in her prose Alvarez usually contrasts one model of historical narration (usually described by a first-person narrator) with other models suggested by other participants of the events. She chooses this strategy in order to replace the silence imposed by the dictatorship with the historical narration that would enable national reconstruction based on the affective truth instead of the official doctrine.

In my opinion Vásquez is right because in Alvarez' novel the re-creation of the community through a return to history is truly visible, even if this return is sometimes emotional or even sentimental. Alvarez idealizes historical portraits of women: the Mirabal sisters, despite the fact that their family, private and intimate lives are revealed, remain true heroines full of charisma and sacrifice which leads to the conclusion that their characteristics aims not at achieving psychological or historical credibility, but that its purpose is to construct a new national and transnational pan-American mythology. The novel is full of evidence for this kind of interpretation. First of all there is lack of criticism of the female characters who always sacrifice themselves for their country and even if they become victims of the patriarchal culture, Alvarez does not expose their naivety, but her heroines' tendency for self-sacrifice that bad men used for their own purposes. I think that the strategies of Alvarez's aimed at illustrating the impossibility of reconstructing one monolithic version of history because history is always dialogic are effective, whereas her tendency of creating paradoxically 'bigger than life' female characters is disturbing. I write 'paradoxically' because Alvarez unveils private lives of her characters so she has many opportunities to show them as ordinary women, but she decides not to do it and instead constructs impeccable mothers, wives and lovers that do not get affected by mundane duties because they live a life of classical romantic heroines, full of spiritual and ideological involvement. Thus Alvarez's history reconstruction is revisionist in nature and her way of portraying women silenced by history results in compensation narratives. The aim of these stories is proving that women could combine intellectual, political and artistic pursuits, even at the cost of ignoring the fact that they must have been also women of flesh and bone.

In conclusion, despite the differences, in *The Feast of the Goat*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *In the Time of the Butterflies* history has been used in a similar way, not only on the level of content, i.e. the focus on Trujillo's dictatorship and its consequences, but also with a similar purpose in mind which was inscribing the history of the Dominican Republic into the history of the world. The authors achieved their goal by literary strategies that helped them to expose transnational historical perspective; the history of the DR has been relocated from the periphery to the

center thanks to the construction of diasporic, hemispheric and world contexts. The history of the Caribbean country has gained a postcolonial dimension and dialogic story-telling reflects not only the perspectives of the Dominicans who remained in their homeland, but also those who had to emigrate. In all three novels feminist motives are crucial and the memory of women serves the function of another counter-history constructed against the official version which silenced other stories. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the analyzed works are so linguistically diverse that each of the author's styles is immediately recognizable and we, the readers, realize at once whose vision of *fúku americanus* is presented.

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