



Literature and Multiculturalism: Connecting Cultures and Mapping the World through Language and Storytelling

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The present paper brings culture to the forefront of literary analysis in a wider context where language may equally divide and, at the same time, facilitate the stories of individuals travel the world (Amy Tan, Pearl Buck, Mo Yan, Orhan Pamuk) and subsequently belong to humankind by means of translation. Stories travel across space and time enabled by linguistic competence, the urge for cultural connection, triggered by immigration – stemming from specific and changing socio-economic context – in a global world, and prompted by the enduring narrative imagination that has contributed to the survival of individuals or communities faced with conditions of dominance or various adversities. The paper undertakes to scrutinize issues of language, memory, identity, (hi)story, culture with reference to the aforementioned writers.

Keywords: multilingualism, multiculturalism, plurilingualism, Mo Yan, Orhan Pamuk



“A person can only experience so much, and once you have exhausted your own stories, you must tell the stories of others ... I am a storyteller. Telling stories earned me the Nobel Prize in Literature ... So I will continue telling my stories in the days to come.”

(Mo Yan, *Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech*)

“Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal.”

(Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*)

“We are the stories we tell”

(Wendy Martin, Alice Walker)

Nowadays, multilingualism and cultural matters have become highly recurrent preoccupations in setting forth national public policies, sustainable development strategies of international organizations¹, in addition to public concerns and academic engagement with the role of literature in contemporary society witnessing the “planetary turn” (Christian Moraru)²

Linguistic inheritance and acquisition represent essential human heritage and intangible asset that facilitate access to culture, its promotion, preservation, understanding and connection. Despite the utilitarian perspective based on socio-economic considerations, widely embraced today advocating the instrumental “motivation of learning a new language for economic advancement ... and when immigrants learn a new

language to meet citizenship requirements” linguistic competence enables the individual to perceive his or her own “multiple voices” (Carol Myers-Scotton) and discover that “different identities are also conveyed by speaking different languages.” (Carol Myers-Scotton, *Multiple Voices. An Introduction to Bilingualism*, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 61, 63) This idea with particular focus on the second meaning will be further developed, with reference to Amy Tan and Pearl Buck, in addition to the sense of psychological displacement, entailed by uprootedness and experienced by first generations of Chinese-American immigrants.

The European Charter for Plurilingualism (2005) outlines that “languages continue to offer the pre-eminent means of access to all cultures ... Because language enshrines culture, it provides access to different visions of the world ... Language provides the only means of understanding the world.” This statement has been endorsed by scholars from multidisciplinary areas endorse the intrinsic connection among language – culture – society: from a sociological perspective “... a society’s language is an aspect of its culture ... The relation of language to culture is that of part to whole.” (Goodenough, “Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics” qtd in R.A.Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 79) or in the field of translation studies, the widely acclaimed Umberto Eco’s *Experiences in Translation* reinforcing the idea that “... translation is always a shift, not between two languages, but between two cultures – or two encyclopedias.” (U. Eco, *Experiences in Translation*, University of Toronto Press, 2001, p. 17).

Reputed translation theorist Susan Bassnett highlights that language is “the heart within the body of culture, and that it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy” (Susan Bassnett, *Traslation Studies*, 22) closely related to the theses of Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf and Juri Lotman according to which “no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language.” (qtd in Bassnett, 22).

Literature acts as interpreter of the world to the humankind and writers translate their own understanding and experience of into another culture, based on unleashed memory, straddling between past and present, East and West, home land and host country, in search for identity accompanied by language, elusive or powerful, as words may sometimes fail or most of the times succeed to transpose the reader into another world, so that the writer’s voice will be one of “the props, one of the pillars help man endure and prevail.” (W. Faulkner, *Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech*)

The essence of our paper is to bring the *story* to

the limelight as an enduring literary genre epitomizing the history of humankind, related to myth and history, biography and imagination, representing a means of survival, salvation, connection and continuation, whose most successful exemplar is Scheherazade the story-teller of *One Thousand and One Nights* providing an alternative to most of life’s disillusionment, frustration, hardship, adversities³.

Pearl Buck, American-born female writer who spent most of her life in China, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature at a young age, for “her rich and truly epic descriptions of peasant life in China and for her biographical masterpieces.” (Nobel Prize in Literature - motivated by the Swedish Academy) successfully managed to connect East and West in her novels, non-fiction and autobiography, undertaken the mission and duty of telling and writing stories, an idea which first came to her in China (Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech) Pearl Buck’s autobiography, *My Several Worlds*, provides ample proof and balanced perspective of her “multiple voices”:

The reader is warned, however that the story is incomplete, and, worse still, that it is told upon different levels and about different places and people, the whole held together merely by time, for this is the way my life has been lived and must be lived until I die. Geographically, my worlds are on opposite sides of the globe and for me, too, only the years of my life tie them together. There is yet another diversity and it is within myself. I am a creature instinctively domestic, but the age in which I am born, combined with whatever talents have made me a writer, have compelled me to live deeply, not only in home and family, but also in the lives of many peoples.” (Buck 1)

Narrative imagination – as defined by Martha Nussbaum – “means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” cultivates the “inner eye” of the reader (Martha Nussbaum, “Skills for Life” in *Times Literary Supplement*, April 6th 2010, p. 15) Accordingly, Pearl Buck pays fair share of attention to China and America, host and home land, minutely exploring the genuine beauty of American territory, as well as revealing the fascinating life in China making us familiar with a different reality, a human geography meant to change our perception of otherness:

It is only an American, born and reared in an alien country, who can appreciate fully the amazing beauty of the American woods in autumn. Inexplicably, no one had prepared me for it. I had lived all my days in a clam Chinese landscape, lovely in its way with delicate, swaying bamboos, curved temple roofs mirrored in lotus pools ... A week later I found myself walking through a wood in Virginia. How can I



put the excitement of it into words! NO one had prepared me how paganly gorgeous it would be ... Do the Americans realize it every year, I wonder? ... It has long been my pleasure to note particularly bits of loveliness about the world, and to see how differently the peoples of the earth have expressed themselves in ways of unconscious beauty. I do not mean by that the great sights which tourists run to see. Seldom are the people of a country to be found there. ... During the forty years I lived in China I had kept myself aware of what was going on in the rest of the world and especially in my own country. I had learned from childhood to recognize the people of the earth as members of one family, known or unknown, .. Her [China`s] beauties are of old things, old places carefully fashioned with the loftiest thought and artistic endeavour of generations of aristocrats, and now, like their owners, falling gently into decay ... If I really have to find fault with the beauty of China, however, it is that it is too secluded, too reserved. (Buck, 190-192 passim, 198 Buck, Pearl, *My Several Worlds. A Personal Record*, New York: Pocket Cardinal ed., 1965 print)

To quote the homonymous title of a collection of essays, edited by Wendy Martin, „we are the stories we tell”, i.e. personal and collective experience, shaped by memory, language and culture will give rise and shape the story unfolded by the skillful artist to reveal what might have been a remote place worldwide, heal wounds, trigger empathy in the reader`s perception and response to art and life, equally. „To articulate experience, to give language to otherwise inchoate perceptions, is always empowering and liberating ... Surely, one of the most effective – and most pleasurable – ways to understand the issues is to make an empathic leap into understanding through fiction.” (Wendy Martin ed., *We are the Stories we Tell*, Pantheon Book, New York: 1990, Introduction, p. 7)

Amy Tan, an inspiring American writer of Chinese origin, author of widely acclaimed books, who strives and successfully manages to achieve a fictional, though not fictitious, balance between East and West, the worlds of yin and yang, empathizing with the unknown China and American novelty in her bestselling and appealing stories that capture and retain the reader`s attention and compelling him to immerse in voracious exploration of life near or far away, in a world of „hundred secret senses”. When opposites meet – East and West – one of the most important negotiations regards language, as a means of communication and integration. Amy Tan approach to and engagement with language, personally and artistically, is reflected in her essay „Mother Tongue”.

I am not a scholar of English or language. I cannot give you much more than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others. I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I

spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language – the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all – all the Englishes I grew up with.” (Amy Tan, *Mother Tongue*)

In her case, the phrase ‚mother tongue’ has multiple connotations and helped reconcile „all the Englishes I grew up with”: „the English I spoke to my mother ... the English she spoke with me ... my translation of her Chinese ... and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language.” (Amy Tan, *Mother Tongue*)

Language shapes reality – from a sociological perspective, carries vast and deep emotional experience – from a psychological perspective, represents a means of access to education or employment and social integration – of decisive influence particularly in the case of immigrants, whose „broken”, „fractured” or „limited” (Amy Tan, *Mother Tongue*) language skills continuously shape their interpersonal relations inside the family and outside with the larger community. „Perfect American English” (Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, Vintage Books: 1998, p.17) is the key to social acceptance and professional advancement.

In a recent book review of Jhumpa Lahiri`s book *In Other Words*, Joseph Luzzi wisely noted that “no one reminds you how far you are from home than trying to speak in someone else`s tongue” which excellently epitomizes the situation of Amy Tan`s mother (The New York Times, 14 March 2016, web). Moreover, much like Amy Tan`s biographical background and creative attempt to connect American-Chinese experience, Jhumpa Lahiri confessed: “I became a writer in America but I set my first stories in Calcutta, a city where I have never lived, far from the country where I grew up, and which I knew much better. Why? Because I needed space between me and the creative space.” (Lahiri, Jhumpa, *In Other Words*, Alfred Knopf: 2016, p. 215)

Very much in keeping with the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression (2005), in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, Gustave LeClezio highlighted the role of culture nowadays: „Culture, as I have said, belongs to us all, to all humankind. But in order for this to be true, everyone must be given equal access to culture. The book, however old-fashioned it may be, is the ideal tool. It is practical, easy to handle, economical.” (Gustave LeClezio, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech)

To conclude, despite increasing expansion of digitization in the arts, in addition to other means enabled by new information and communication technologies and the appeal of media literacy, books are still alive, coping successfully with the electronic age,

whereas the publishing industry merges culture and commerce. Books travel the world whereas writers and their cultures are brought to the center stage occasioned by a host of widely acclaimed International Book Fairs – Frankfurt, London, Beijing, Paris, Bucharest, Dublin - to name only a few of them. "... literature is never just a national concern. The writer ... must have the artistry to tell his own stories as if they were other people's stories, and to tell other people's stories as if they were his own, for this is what literature is. But we must first travel through other people's stories and books." (Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech)

Hence, books open up minds and stir creativity, urge the reader to get familiar with unknown territories and accept differences, move beyond cultural or geographical barriers set up by language or ideology, help the writer and reader alike to think and relate outside the mental frame and overcome distance:

One book means freedom; too many books, though, act as a barrier to further discovery of the world. When you have a ready quote in your head for every new vista before your eyes, you can no longer see clearly ... A book can connote the place where it was read better than an old photograph can ... Books are an act of resistance, not just to the distractions of the electronic age, but to our problems, and to our pretensions. The goal is not *success*, but *presentness*" (Robert D. Kaplan, *In Europe's Shadow*, Random House: 2016, pp. 27,29)

Notes:

1. The 2005 *UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression*, "emphasizes the need to incorporate culture as a strategic element in the national and international development policies as well as in international development policies ... in today's interconnected world, culture's power to transform societies is clear ... culture helps to re-establish ties broken by conflict"
2. "Less and less relevant to the twenty-first century, modern paradigms appear increasingly unable to predict, let alone adequately explain, the global operations of technologically enhanced finance capital, cosmopolitanism's struggle to reinvent itself from the ashes of post-empire Europe, and the risk environment brought about by the ever-escalating crises of world ecologies. A reaction to the multiple and steadily widening inconsistency between what the world is becoming and how this change registers in prevalent epistemologies and cultural histories, the critical-theoretical model of *planetarity* attempts a move away from the totalizing paradigm of modern-age globalization – and thus a critique or critical completion of 'globalism' – as well as from the irony and hermeneutics of suspicion typical of what came to be known as postmodernism ... The discourse of *planetarity* presents itself, in response to

the twenty-first century world and to the decreasing ability of the postmodern critical apparatus to account for it, as a new *structure of awareness*, as a methodical receptivity to the *geothematics of planetariness* characteristic of a fast-expanding series of cultural formations." (Amy J. Elia and Christian Moraru eds., *The Planetary Turn. Relationality and Geo-Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, Northwestern University Press, 2015, p. xi)

3. Mario Vargas Llosa, foreword to *O mie si una de nopti*, Humanitas, Bucuresti: 2013, pp 31-40 " [prin povești], omul cunoaște aventuri extraordinare și are sute de destine diferite; ... 'a spune povești' este o expresie ambiguă: a depăna povești pentru a delecta un public, așa cum adulții își distrează de obicei copiii, făcându-i să viseze, 'să spui povești' mai înseamnă și să torni gogoși, să îndrugi minciuni, prezentându-le ca și cum ar fi adevărate; ... [povestirea] oferă o existență alternativă..., oferind oamenilor toate aventurile refuzate în viața reală și clipe de supremă fericire.
4. „I am an American by birth and by ancestry and though I live now in my own country and shall live there, since there I belong. But it is the Chinese and not the American novel which has shaped my own efforts in writing. My earliest knowledge of story, of how to tell and write stories, came to me in China” Pearl Buck - Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech.

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