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Where interculturalism begins? Studies of selected examples of women's modern literature

Abstract

In this paper the author presented the importance of immigration popular women's literature in intercultural studies. Based on examples of selected books written by women such as: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Leila Aboulela, Chintra Banarjee Divakaruni, Hanna Bakula, etc., she indicated, complementary to theoretical knowledge, research material contained in the described sources. Aside from literary values of presented books, author focused only on the layer of interculturalism.

Key words: immigration literature, interculturalism

Interculturalism – theoretical background

Globalisation intensified the process of human migration in the whole world (see: Czainska 2013; pp.86-94; Castells S., Miller M.J. 1993). As a consequence, it also intensified the phenomena that John A. Scholte indicated as (Czerny, 2005):

- internationalization – significant flow of goods, services and capital among countries resulting increase of transfer of people, information and ideas;
- liberalization – process of elimination of previously established restrictions and limitations among countries related to movements of goods and peoples;
- universalism – diffusion of phenomena and things in the whole world;
- westernization – dispersion of modern social life style and forms of economic activity causing destruction of local cultures, economies and identities;
- disintegration of the territory - the geographical location does not matter in the relations between people.

But, it would be mistake to consider that globalisation initiated the phenomenon of multiculturalism, because as stated by B. Szlachta (Szlachta 2010) is a very old phenomenon, which can be traced even in antiquity.

In the scientific literature it is also described the phenomenon of multicultural societies, interculturalism and accompanying it psychological and social consequences for the individual unit, the community, or organization. In particular, it were important concepts

related to the adaptation and intercultural communication. Referring the topic of this article, the notion of interculturalism and cultural shock require clarification primarily.

First of all it is necessary to distinguish the phenomenon of multiculturalism and interculturalism. The first term defines the situation when representatives of different cultures operate in one place but maintain their identity, and sometimes they manifest it. Instead, interculturalism is related to the mixing and penetration of culture in a community composed of representatives of different nationalities and ancestry.

Authors dealing with issues of interculturalism additionally emphasise following phenomena related to it:

- diffusion of culture – as a process of learning and adaptation of materials and practices between cultures (Chaney, Martin 2007);
- melting pot – a sociocultural assimilation of people from different cultures and nationalities by losing ethnic differences and forming one, large and new society (Chaney, Martin 2007; Schneider, Barsoux 2009);
- culture shock – psychosomatic syndrome felt by a person and caused by culture differences (Hofstede, Hofstede 2005; Żymierska 2008).

The issues of interculturalism has become a very important topic in the contemporary world. Representatives of various fields of science has began to be interested in it. There were even specialities focused on the subject, such as cultural psychology (Boski 2009; Matsumoto, Juang 2007), and intercultural management (Deresky 2008).

In addition to the scientific literature, the source of knowledge about the process of cultural collision and the associated consequences can also be popular literature, where the authors describe their own experiences related to changes of the country of residence, the accompanying feelings, ways of solving problems, etc. This literature, though often with elements of fiction cannot be automatically disqualified, as it can possess unique cognitive value to the researcher.

Women's modern literature focused on intercultural problems

Popular literature (fiction) cannot of course be the primary source of information for the researcher. Probably there will also be people who completely discredit it because of the element of fiction, the author's objectivity, or lack of education's code (eg, ethnographic, cultur studies or anthropological). Meanwhile, these same characteristics may be the attractiveness of popular literature, especially when the authors of that literature are representatives of the culture that they describe. Ewa Nowicka (Nowicka 2007) stressed in her

book *Świat człowieka – świat kultury* [The World of man - the world of culture] that the researcher can take the attitude observer or participant. But, a participant always find out and understand more than an observer. In the case of authors of books presented in this article, each of them is a participant of their culture and is familiar with it, because it comes from it.

Among the rich literature of the issue, I have chosen items, which raised about emigration. The characters described in presented books are uprooted from their own culture and try to make a life in a new cultural reality. In addition, to select authors I applied a criterion of the country of origin of the author to ensure the diversity of views, experiences and observations. First of all, I have chosen so called, *women's literature*, that means written by women, and not only addressed to women. The selection of authors additionally guaranteed the high quality of the writing, the ability to observe and mapping of reality, a psychological analysis of the attitudes and behaviors of the characters, their choices and decisions.

Immigrants literature is not a new phenomenon. In the *Dictionary of literary terms* it is defined as *literature, which is created apart from a writer's native country which left under duress of various reasons: religious, political or racial persecution* (Kotowski, Popławska, Szelağ 2008 – translated by the author). Besides, it indicated that *we can speak about belonging to the literature of emigration only when the writer left his/her country because he/she could not write and publish freely, write in their native language and is related to the culture of their country* (Kotowski, Popławska, Szelağ 2008 – translated by the author). However, the current literature of emigration does not include only books written "under duress".

Analyzing only the Polish environment, it can be observed important role of immigrants literature for historians, sociologists, researchers of culture, etc. The representatives of Polish immigrants literature have included Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Slovák, Zygmunt Krasicki, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Witold Gombrowicz, whether contemporary Melchior Wankowicz, Sławomir Mrozek, Czesław Miłosz, Janusz Głowacki, Vladimir Odojewski. Similar meaning has also the literature written by women such as Maria Pawlikowska - Jasnorzewska, Maria Kuncewiczowa, or even Hanna Bakula.

In the literature of other European countries (i.e. Great Britan, Germany, France, Netherlands, etc.). immigrants literature is divided according to several criteria, including: colonial / post-colonial period, guest and host communities, immigrant versus immigrant perspectives, primary and secondary migration, first and second generation immigrants, etc..

In USA, according to Linda Norberg Blair (Blair 2011) *immigrant literature takes various forms and is usually written by immigrants and secondand/ or third-generation Americans. Often autobiographical in nature, these narratives reflect the experience of immigration and acculturation and the associated uneasiness of these processes.(...) Tension in immigrant literature centers on association with the new land, identification of the self and other, and language acquisition.(...) As immigrants and settlers moved to the interior regions of America, they brought with them their native languages, cultures, dreams of success, and fears of the unknown. In their writings, relationships of characters and narrators to the physical land, the development of self and other, and the acquisition of language appear as central themes not only in literature written by immigrants and their children who made the trek but also in works by authors who may be generations removed from the actual experience but whose collective past embodies acculturation.* (Blair 2011) It is also interesting that American scientist, like J. Kennedy from Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, underline that immigration is the story of their country, because they are a nation of immigrants (Kennedy 2014), so immigrants literature takes very important part of study.

Immigrants literature is therefore recognized in the world of science in countries that have experienced this regard. A special part of it is the literature created by women. A woman's point of view on the organization of the house, raising children, male-female relationships, friendships, neighborly relations, job search and adaptation in the new world is saturated with emotions and feelings, that element which in the literature created by men, it is often overlooked as too "soft" element of analysis. Besides in those books reader can find out women issues, women's world and women's problems.

Tabela 1 Examples of immigrant literature written by women in XX century

Name of an author	Title of a book	Year of publishing	Culture that book refers to
Karen Lynn Williams	When Africa Was Home	2007	Malawian American
Mary Williams	Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan	2005	Sudan
Pegi Deitz Shea	The Whispering Cloth: A Refugee's Story	1996	Thai
Ellen Levine	I Hate English	1989	Hong Kong
Yangsook Choi	The Name Jar	2001	Korean
Karen English	Nadia's Hands	1999	Pakistanian
Eve Bunting	How Many Days to America: A Thanksgiving Story	1990	Caribbean
Sherry Garland	The Lotus Seed	1993	Vietnamese
Sarah Kilborne	Leaving Vietnam: The Journey of Tuan Ngo, a Boat Boy	1999	Vietnamese
Jane Medina	Jorge Is My Name On Both Sides of the River	2004	Mexican
Asma Mobin-Udin	My Name Is Bilal	2005	Muslim

Rachna Gilmore	Lights for Gita	2000	Hindu
Jenny Lombard	Drita: My Homegirl	2007	Muslim Albanian
Margy Burns Knight	Who Belongs Here? An American Story	1993	Cambodian
Beverly Naidoo	The Other Side of Truth	2000	Nigerian
Judith Ortiz Chofer	Call Me Maria	2004	Puerto Rican
Esmeralda Santiago	When I was Puerto Rican	1993	Puerto Rican
Julia Alvarez	Before We Were Free	2002	Dominicanian Republic
Tanuja Desai Hidier	Born Confused	2002	Hindu

Source: http://www.energyofanation.org/sites/25e1f498-741c-478a-8a08-aa486d8533a5/uploads/novels_with_immigration_themes__short_version_.pdf [06.05.2014; 14:09]

Selected examples of women - authors of immigrant literature

From a long list of authors I have chosen only nine. It was a very difficult choice, so as a criterion I used diverse cultures that authors comes from and popularity of their books. As a result I have presented in the paper following authors:

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,
- Leila Aboulela,
- Chintra Banarjee Divakaruni,
- Hanna Bakula,
- Yiyun Li.

All the above mentioned authors describe in their books the problem of adaptation to the new environment. This thread is a background for family and professional problems lived by characters of novels. Apart from sociological observations, a reader may also refer to the psychological layer of the characters, including the factors affecting the process of their decision-making.

Selection and presentation of books was not accidental, because each of them represents a different problem of immigrants, namely: Adichie - on the one hand the threat posed by extreme conservatives, on the other hand, mindless fascination of new culture and its imitation; Aboulela - religion and culture as a guideposts, and help in overcoming personal problems and dilemmas; Divakaruni - desire to preserve tradition and to reconcile it with the new surroundings; Bakula – emigrant’s difficulties arising from the false image of the country of residence; Li - .

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Enugu in Nigeria. She grew up in Igbo family. She is a fifth daughter of her parents (James Nwoye Adichie - a professor of statistics and Grace Ifeoma – a university's first female registrar). At the age of 19 she moved to United

States to continue her education. In 2003, she completed a master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University. In 2008, she received a Master of Arts degree in African studies from Yale University [www.l3.ulg.ac.be]. Adichie is an author of:

- a) four novels: *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), *Americanah* (2013).
- b) one play: *For Love of Biafra* (1998)
- c) one collection of poems: *Decisions* (1997)

and many other short stories and uncollected poems published in journals and anthologies.

Based on information published on her official website, www.chimamanda.com, she was awarded plenty of prestigious prizes and her books were listed among the best in the world, in example:

- Listed among the 'Ten Best Books of 2013', New York Times Book Review, for *Americanah*
- Listed among the 'Top Ten Books of 2013', BBC, for *Americanah*
- Listed among the '100 Most Influential Africans 2013', New African
- Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award 2013 (fiction category), for *Americanah*

What kind of people are characters of her novels? For sure they are very real, often sad and disappointed, but strong. Like many emigrants from different parts of the world, these are the people charmed by the false vision of a new country (usually United States and United Kingdom). Life in foreign country is prestigious for them, even if they are not successful there; even if they think like Obiora in *Imitation* (Adichie 2011; 40) that west life style looks plastic; even if they have to take a job below their qualification and education like Kamara and Tobeche in *On Monday of Last Week* (Adichie 2011; 109); even if no one believes history of their life in Africa and depreciates their knowledge like it happened to Ujunwa in *Jumping Monkey Hill*, when her stories are called *agenda writing*, that means not a real story of real people (Adichie 2011; 158); even if they encounter ridiculous stereotypes like characters in *The Thing Around Your Neck* suspected of eating local squirrels, etc.

Despite the overwhelming sadness in Adichie's stories, their characters believe that the new world can lay a new life. Some of them voluntarily and deliberately adapt to the country of emigration believing that attachment to the previous culture will make more difficult for them to achieve success. Ofodile Emska Udenwa, a character of *The Arrangers of Marriage*, who in America changed his name into Dave and believed that immigrants attain nothing if they do not adopt to America (Adichie 2011; 241). Another one, quietly, day after

day build their lives without forgetting about their roots and culture from which they originate.

Leila Aboulela

Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 in Cairo. Her mother was an Egyptian, her father was from Sudan. As she pointed on her official website (<http://www.leila-aboulela.com>) she moved to Sudan at the age of six weeks and lived in Khartoum until 1987. She graduated with a degree in Economics from the University of Khartoum specializing in Statistics. *She then travelled to Britain where she was awarded a M.Sc. and an MPhil in Statistics from the London School of Economics. In 1990 Leila moved to Scotland with her husband and children. She started writing in 1992 while working as a lecturer in Aberdeen College and later as a Research Assistant in Aberdeen University. Since 2000, Leila and her family have lived in Jakarta, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha.*(<http://www.leila-aboulela.com>). She published four books: *Lyrics Alley* (2010), *Minaret* (2006), *The Translator* (2008) and *Coloured Lights* (2005), that were translated into twelve languages.

In Aboulela's books we can observe relationship between religion and assimilation problems felt by emigrants. For some of them, religion is like a point of reference, which contains normality. For Sammar, the main character of *The Translator*, her prayer rug was such a symbol. *Her prayer rug has fringes on the edges, velvety touch, smell, which she liked. The only stable element in her life, a life full of uncertain returns, which mind would not be able to invent* (Aboulela 2010; 53 – translated from Polish edition). But, Yasmin, another character of *The Translator*, represents also different perspective. For her, religion and tradition help to keep identity of emigrants in new country. As citizens who pay taxes they have rights to follow rules of their culture and obtain information about all of their social privileges. *She used to deliver general statements, starting with the "we", where "we" meant the entire Third World and its inhabitants. She said so: We're not like them"* (Aboulela 2010; 17 – translated from Polish edition). Moreover, she was convinced that those who try assimilate and change their culture make a big mistake, because such policy represents *Typical imperialistic way of thinking* (Aboulela 2010; 29 – translated from Polish edition).

Although the characters of Aboulela's novels are strongly attached to religion and tradition, the author is not in favor of rejection of assimilation. She also seeks a balance between the new and old world, fearing the loss of those immigrants who mindlessly renounce their roots.

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni was born in Kalkata in India. As it presented on her official website *she came to the United States for her graduate studies, receiving a Master's degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley* (<http://www.chitradivakaruni.com>). Currently C.B. Divakaruni teaches at the University of Houston. Moreover, she serves on the Advisory Board of Maitri in the San Francisco Bay Area and Daya in Houston (helps South Asian or South Asian American women who find themselves in abusive or domestic violence situations) and on the board of Pratham (helps educate underprivileged children in India). She is the author of following novels: *Black Candle* (1991), *Arranged Marriage* (1996), *Leaving Yuba City* (1997), *The Mistress of Spices* (1998), *Sister of My Heart* (2000), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2002), *Neela: Victory Song* (2002), *The Vine of Desire* (2003), *The Conch Bearer* (2005), *Queen of Dreams* (2005), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2007), *The Palace of Illusions* (2009), *Shadowland* (2009), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Grandma and the Great Gourd: A Bengali Folktale* (2013) and *Oleander Girl* (2013).

As Divakaruni pointed in the TV interview with Patrica Gras (Houston PBS) in 2011, she has started her writing after her grandfather death to do not forget things that she learned from him in the homeland and to do not loose memory of important people of her life. She want to keep all of those things (tales, habits, stories, etc.) and people alive in her heart [www.goodreads.com].

But, she achieved much more. She became the voice of immigrants. In 2005, *The Mistress of Spices* has been made into film directed by Paul Mayeda Berges. The movie start from following introduction: *India is an ancient land famed for its myths, magic and traditions. But when its people leave to start new lives in the faraway lands of America and Europe, what happens to the magic left behind? This is an immigrant's tale about keeping the magic alive*". It proves that critics of her work understood perfectly its importance. Books written by Divakaruni do not only "keep the magic alive", they link old and new circumstances of life and help immigrants to adopt to.

Hanna Bakula

Hanna Bakula has graduated Warsaw Academy of Arts. In 1981 she left Poland for New York City where she lived on Manhattan, drew, painted, designed scenography and costumes for the avant-garde theatre "The Kitchen". As it presented on her official web site (www.hanna.bakula.pl) *these designs were praised by "The New York Times" as the best of*

the Off Broadway projects and won Bakuta first prize. In 1982, by recommendation from the Guggenheim Museum she was awarded one year grant. She is the author and illustrator of many books, i.e.: How to Lose Friends (1991), How to Gain Friends (1992), She-Idiot (2003), She-Idiot Returns (2010).

In *She-Idiot* (Bakuła 2003) author presented perfectly how reality clashes dreams and expectations of immigrant. On the board of the plane flying to New York two ladies meet. First of them was approximately 50 years old. Second one (called Molly) was twenty years younger. Actually, reader can realize that it was the same person, confronting owns experiences. Molly represents typical enthusiasm of young immigrant.

Her naivety was funny, but also irritating, because she was so self-confident, as if she believed that he could change the fate. Absolutely deaf to the curiously cast questions about what would happen if friends, to which she was riding, does not show particular interest. Where she will go? Or what if her friend, to whom she goes, will live in some horrible place and conditions?(Bakuła 2003;36 – translated by author)

Older lady knew answers for asked questions; she knew that true life in America will quickly disappoint her, friend will not come to take her from the airport, his 'house' would be just a garage in slums, other friend will steal her money, etc. Even advices given by 'specialists' in home country will be useless and finally she will conclude that she listened *specialist of America who have never been there* (Bakuła 2003; 32 – translated by author).

In Bakuła's book we can find a lot of interesting intercultural plots. But, two of them need to be emphasised. First of all, false image of the country of emigration, created by: 1/ those who has never visited it, and 2/ those who currently live there, but are ashamed to tell the truth of their real and embarrassed to admit defeat. Secondly, the importance of emigrant's attitude in terms of the difficulties encountered. The main character of the book could face problems, she tried to be flexible and open-minded, but particularly she learned quickly the rules of new society, business and everyday life. Of course, she learned based on her mistakes, but successfully.

Reading this, mostly true story of Bakuła's experiences in United States, we can understand that immigrants

Yiyun Li

Yiyun Li was born in 1972 in Beijing. In 1996 she emigrated to the United States. She has published, in many journals, among others, in "The New Yorker", "The Paris Review", "The Gettysburg Review," and "A Public Space". She received a scholarship of Lannan Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation and Whiting Foundation. For his debut collection A

thousand years of good prayers received a number of awards, including Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, PEN / Hemingway Award, Guardian First Book Award and the California Book Award. The novel *Vagrants* (Black 2010) found in 2009 in the final of the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, and in 2010 was named the American Library Association Notable Book. The prestigious British literary magazine "Granta" scored author of one of the best young American writers (www.czarne.com.pl). Currently, she lives in Oakland (USA) with her husband and their two sons, and teaches at University of California (www.yiyunli.com).

Conclusions

Popular literature shows a more human face of migration and immigrants than the scientific literature. In addition, popular literature which the authors of are women, lets us analyze multiple layers of behaviour of immigrants. In the scientific literature immigrants as quite often described as a group of persons of a particular nationality, which: 1 / escaped , 2 / fled from the country, 3 / is unified in terms of adaptive problems. Meanwhile, in women's literature we can see individuals who are experiencing varieties of functioning in the new conditions. Each person leaves behind not only the mother country, but also their parents, sometimes children, spouses, friends, enemies, unfinished stories, favorite places, smells, food, customs, etc. In addition, each of characters has a different baggage of experiences, which in new environment overwhelms them or, conversely, gives strength to adapt. We are able to understand that the depression of these people are not only caused by culture shock, but just longing, disappointed love, lack of money, impolite neighbours or personal matters such as abortion.

Another advantage of the popular literature of emigration is the opportunity to explore various forms of narrative, styles how different authors describe the feelings and emotions or decision making process. Readers accustomed to analyzing moral dilemmas within the Christian culture can become familiar with the way of thinking of people representing the Muslim culture, or Hindu, or more others. We note, however, that religion is not the sole determinant of the final decision. We are aware of the importance of factors such as personality, upbringing, intrinsic motivation of the person and independent environmental factors.

First of all, this literature helps to break free from stereotyping thinking about the representatives of other cultures. This facilitates creation of sensitivity that allows to

distinguish behaviour as a consequence of the culture from behaviour caused by the psychological profile of particular person.

The pleasure of reading can therefore be combined with the pleasure of associating with foreign cultures. Moreover, learning about differences between representatives of various countries can be combined with the psychological analysis of human behaviour. First of all, we can enrich our sensitivity and skills of perception of reality. Finally, we conclude that we struggle with everyday problems, we are doing differently, but the way how we are doing this is not only caused by our nationality.

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