

Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Julie Hansen and Carmen Zamorano Llena, 2013. *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 284 pages \*

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*Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, the book edited by Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Julie Hansen and Carmen Zamorano Llena, is a volume born out of the current global economic interdependences in the world, the intensification of information exchange through new channels of communication technology and the increasing travelling experiences of individuals who no longer need to be part of an elite to travel around the world.

The book is composed of twelve essays by contemporary authors of fourteen different nationalities that can, in fact, themselves be described as translingual and transcultural. Therefore, the range of linguistic, cultural and geographical contexts that appears in the volume is very rich. The book is structured following four concepts that are central to the recent debates on literature and transculturality, i.e., migration, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and traslingualism.

Regarding the first concept, we find Carmen Zamorano Llena, Karen L. Ryan and Carky McLaughlin dealing with the issues of migration and globalization. These issues have presupposed the reconfiguration of the time-space concepts as well as the birth of a generation of individuals called “transnational migrants” or “transmigrants” that is key to understand the formation of identity and the phenomenon of cultural adaptation in today’s plural societies. They can be defined as a type of group of immigrants who are able to link together their origins and that of their settlements by constructing simultaneous embeddedness in both (Nina Glick Schiller et al., p. xiii). Zamorano Llena focuses on the global repercussion of the tragic events of 11 September 2001 on a diverse group of characters, making reference to Joseph O’Neill’s novel *Netherland* (2008) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Both authors offer insights into the definition of the American national identity in very critical periods of the country’s history: the Great Depression of 1929 and

the aftermath of 9/11. Karen L. Ryan analyzes three works by Lara Vapnyar, who belongs to the so-called Fourth Wave of Russian émigrés composed of writers whose native language is Russian but who opted to write in English once in the States. In many cases they have not been translated into Russian and on the occasions in which they have, the reception in their country has not been favourable, in spite of which these writers keep going back and forth to their original homeland. Ryan's essay points out the importance of preserving one's culture and presenting transcultural identity as an alternative to a complete assimilation. Finally, Carly McLaughlin tackles the concept of identity for the migrant children who in her essay become actors in the construction of their own transcultural identity. Children have been largely neglected in these types of studies as they have been traditionally considered as mere appendages to their parents. Whenever they have become the focus of study it has been as the victims of migration: sex workers, refugees, child laborers, i.e. the dark side of globalization. McLaughlin also revises the concept of the "Cross Cultural Kid", a broad term that makes reference to children of asylum seekers, children whose parents are of two different nationalities, children who are second generation immigrants, children who grew up in refugee camps, etc. She also explains what a Third Culture Kid means: a child who has spent a significant part of his/her personal development years outside his/her parents' own culture, so that they somehow become "hidden immigrants" when returning to their families' home countries. In fact these children are by-products of globalization and challenge traditional assumptions, having been brought up among multi-cultural environments. McLaughlin pays particular attention to Chris Cleave's second novel *The Other Hand* (2008) and its main character, Little Bee, a girl who manages to escape the oil wars in Nigeria but who ends up being a victim of them. In the end, the essay points out the need "to develop new forms of identity developing a language in which children's transcultural experiences can be conceptualized and communicated." (p.66)

The second part of the volume deals with cosmopolitanism and citizenship, as treated in the essays of Christoph Houswitschka, Mats Tegmark and Kristin Rebien. Houswitschka has been criticized in many reviews for having written a novel of ideas but without any narrative value. *In the Kitchen* depicts a group of underclass migrants

from the former British colonies in a London hotel in which differences between members of the dominant ethnic group within English society and the migrants appears blurred. Everybody develops a sense of belonging in the hotel precisely because of their cultural differences and not despite of them. In the London kitchen they all meet as equals and share a deep sense of community. That is the reason why, although some of the characters in the novel define the cosmopolitan concept of citizenship in a negative way, the convivial act of solidarity helps to establish spaces of positive cosmopolitan citizenship. Tegmark, on the other hand, deals with the Vietnam War conflict by means of the short-story cycle, *A good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992), in order to explain the conflicts that Vietnamese-American refugees experienced in the USA during and after the war. The essay argues that the protagonists can enjoy some sort of mutual understanding thanks to a transcultural transcendence that takes place in the text on the level of the characters, the author and the narrators. While traditional American fiction focuses on the effect of the war on the American individual, Butler's above mentioned volume constantly focuses on "the other" and maintains that only by transcending our homogeneous national, ethnic and ideological identities can we open ourselves up to "the other", to an act of transcultural solidarity. Finally, Rebien's essay on cosmopolitan perspectives, globalization and transnationalization in contemporary German literature, speaks about the fact that one of the most noticeable trends in the XXI century is for German language writers to go beyond their own borders to see the rest of the world. This is possible, in part, because travel and tourism have become a middle-class life-style, no longer exclusive to the wealthy elite. In this way, people perceive themselves as citizens of the world and of their nations at the same time, with all the contradictions that this implies. Afterwards, Rebien distinguishes between the terms globalization and transnationalization indicating that the first one refers to economic, political and cultural processes while the second one involves small groups and institutions as main actors.

In the third part of the book, Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, Malin Lidström Brock and Katherina Dodou write about issues connected with multiculturalism. Cuder-Domínguez focuses on the Canadian reality, its plurality and multiculturalism. She revises the case of

Canada as a country whose identity was in part defined by the two founding nations, Britain and France, and the official adoption of bilingualism (1969). Nevertheless, the plurality of races and ethnicities inhabiting the country together with the claims of numerous indigenous cultures, finally resulted in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 where the plurality of the contributions which forged the country was recognized. By choosing to work on the novels of two Canadian writers with South-Asian ancestors Michael Ondaatje and Neil Bissoondath, Cuder-Dominguez focuses on Canada's post-national project, which moves away from the original scene to a much more plural one. Lidstrom Brock discusses American multiculturalism before 9/11 as a movement that proclaims equality among different races and peoples in American society. According to Lidstrom Brock, minority demands for multiculturalism have become very successful in the USA and, with it, institutional academic multiculturalism. The writer makes reference to two novels whose protagonists share their social invisibility and whose notions of ethnic and racial identity end in tragedy. In the meantime, Dodou refers to John Updike's novel *Terrorist*, and writes about the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which caused American citizens to unite in order to fight a common enemy. In the novel, the events of 11 September 2001 are seen neither from a "conventional" perspective, nor from the victims', nor does the author sentimentalize about the towers' collapse as a national symbol. Rather, the spirit of unity and tolerance that was said to have risen after the attack on the towers is critically analyzed and, as Judith Butler suggests, used to prove the justice of the Bush administration's responses to the events. In fact, after the attack, Muslim Arabs were clearly designated as the new enemy for Americans, and their identity was, from then on, defined as anti-American. The novel therefore ultimately suggests that Americans should refocus their self-perception by opening their eyes to so many cases of intolerance and inequality. The ultimate goal is to promote a self-criticism that enables self-understanding and, ultimately, a recognition of culpability which entails a reconsideration of American foreign and domestic policies. In this sense, and contrary to many other cultural and artistic representations of it, New York does not appear portrayed as a city where diversity and liberalism are the main features.

The last part of the volume deals with the interaction of languages in translingual texts. Stefan Helgesson deals with the case of Assia Djebar and the use she makes of Arabic and French in her literary work. Djebar, originally from Algeria, has been at the center of postcolonial debates on gender, identity and cultural translation. Depending on the circumstances she found herself in, her French schooling made her use this language, creating therefore, a never-ending fracture: we can see the writer sometimes divided between French, the language of the colonizer, the enemy, and Arabic, which she exposes as a patriarchal language. Therefore, both languages are questioned in Djebar's work, although the French is scrutinized more deeply. In Eric Sellin's "Translingual and Transcultural Patterns in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb", the writer explains how globalization has made translingualism explode into a major field of critical inquiry. The author then focuses on the multilingual authors of the Maghreb that can be called monolingual translinguals, i.e. writers who have written in a single language but a different one from their native one. Nearly all Maghrebian francophone writers have made reference to the dual, sometimes even conflicting loyalties they feel towards Algerian and French culture, a tension that in some cases produces interesting creative results. The essay explains that to be able to appreciate transculturalism and translingualism in literature, the reader must make a tremendous effort and remain sensitive if he/she is to appreciate the presence of new realities even in old linguistic schemes. The last essay of the volume has been written by J.B. Rollins and deals with the Taiwanese poet Hsia Yü, whose unlimited capacity for poetic experimentation is well known. Rollins' essay attempts to present a partial survey of Hsia Yü's experiments from 1983, the beginning of her career, to 2007, when *Pink Noise*, her masterpiece, was published. The essay shows the poet's evolution from her first experiments with Chinese to the use of three languages (English-French-Chinese) in her literary masterpiece. Rollins writes about the post-humanist poetic effects in her writings through the use of "machine" language, including transparent plastic pages to allow the reader to see poems in different languages at the same time. Rollins also mentions that Taiwan, a microcosm of our complex postcolonial world, where Hsia Yü was born, acts as a perfect laboratory to study the pros and cons of transculturality and globalization.

*Transcultural Identities* attempts to reconceptualise traditional concepts of culture using a transcultural perspective that also serves to redefine collective and individual identities. It also puts together essays that analyze contemporary literary works with a great variety of settings in order to offer a richer view of the concept of transculturality.

As globalization is still expanding in the world and migration is also increasing, it seems very probable that we will find more transcultural themes in literature, which will require more scholarly work in a very rich field which is still emerging. Let's hope that the development of the concept inspires a more peaceful world in the short run, since the notion itself implies a recognition within oneself of cultural features that one can also find in "the other". This may lead to the existence of more empathic individuals in a world that is rapidly turning more plural and complex.

The volume is especially dedicated to those who seek to study the concept of globalization and all its implications: migration, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and traslingualism, all of which have a definite impact in the forging of an individual's identity.