TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION IN ANNE TYLER'S DIGGING TO AMERICA

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Abstract: In a present setting of understanding post-colonial US literature and culture, the present article depicts severeal aspects concerning the concept of "The American Dream" and transnational adoption in one of Anne Tayler's latest books, namely Digging to America. There is described the way in which Digging to America supports an American form of neoliberal multiculturalism, so-called colour-blind version. At the same time, we should consider whether the novel manages to overview problems such as ethnicity, cultural identity and, why not, the possibility of racial reparation. Digging to America also explores the so-called "Transnational American Dream", referring to the new immigrants' aspirations to achieve success in the United States. In Digging to America, Tyler starts to focus on the simple question of how an individual moves forward, now turning her (Tyler's) face towards the present and the future, a fact not taken into consideration in her previous novels.

Keywords: American Dream, postcolonial, postethnic, racial reparation

1. Introduction

When the word *identity* (post-, or otherwise) is mentioned nowadays, the tendency of the speaker is not one close to a straightening of the back or a defiant stare, but rather with a recurrent sigh. By virtue of a constant probation, criticism or shrinking of the term over the past decades, the problem seems not to be in any way resolved. Moreover, a set of common problems and positions have been marked off to which one refers from time to time when the subject is brought under discussion. It is common place knowledge that identity politics has acquired its own *identity*, which has made any inquiry into identity a suspect act that stands outside the decorum of polite academic talk. Identity politics is thereby considered to name a particular bad politics. For it deals with unwashed minorities (sexual, racial, ethnic, class, and so on) whose articulation of identity is seen to be not only annoying, but impolite, for their voicing of these concerns forces the majority to engage in something it thought it had been settled once and for all, and settled in its favour. Several proposals have been put forward by several social critics, such as Thomas Eriksen (2007), David Hollinger (2005), John McGreevy (2003), as regards the notions of *beyond identity* and the so-called *postethnic* era. Neverthrless, the intersection of American and postcolonial studies clearly raises various questions concerning both fields under dicussion. Many of these questions, though, remain unanswered in many essays as the majority of these essays has only a mild relation to postcolonial studies of ethnic nature.

2. Multiculutiralism and Postcolonial Considerations

At present, we may be faced with depicting a warantee concerning the postcolonial understanding of US literature and culture, even though postcolonial analyses of American studies have not always been quite relevant or clear. In the early 1990s we witnessed the beginning of a rich debate on the inclusion of the US into postcolonial studies. The major

ingredients of the debate are: the term *postcolonial*, the internal colonization model, ethnic studies in general and, more recently, globalization and transnational capitalism. As Hulme states, ”the adjective *postcolonial* implies nothing about a postcolonial country’s behaviour. As a postcolonial nation, the United States continued to colonize North America, completing the genocide begun by the Spanish and British...” (Hulme, 1995:118). We may consider this comment a particularly harsh one, taking into consideration the multi-ethnic population that came to live in the US by their own will.

Yet, the *American Dream* represents a culture-specific notion, having a long history and being defined by numerous definitions related to the idea of the nation. While the term has historically excluded racialized groups, the *American Dream* can be traced back to the arrival of the first white immigrants in what is now known as the United States.

Anne Tyler is a contemporary American writer whose fiction focuses on families and whose fictional characters have been described as “down-home, all-American people”. Nevertheless, in *Digging to America*, half of the authoress’ protagonists are of Iranian origin. The notion of the *American Dream* has been at the core of Tyler’s protagonists. In Tyler’s *Digging to America* (2006) the topical issue of the transnational adoption of Asian children is linked with the *American Dream* and with aspects of American multiculturalism. In this book, the author surprisingly departs from her own pattern. In her novels, she usually starts with a focus on one or two main characters and then widens it to comply with family and local ties. The *small world* inhabited by the fictional characters in the novel is thus coloured with a slight sense of neoliberal discourse[1]. In this article, we will describe the way in which *Digging to America* supports an American form of neoliberal multiculturalism, so-called colour-blind individualism[2]. At the same time, the article aims at responding to whether the novel manages to transcode problems such as ethnicity, cultural identity and, why not, the possibility of racial reparation.

Jennifer L. Hochschild describes the ideology of the *American Dream* as follows: “everyone, regardless of ascription or background, may reasonably seek success through actions and traits under their own control” and ”true success must be associated with virtue” (Hochschild, 1995:103).

Anne Tyler’s novel brings forward two families: the Donaldsons (Anglo-American) and the Yazdans (Persian-American). According to Jim Cullen “the most widely realized” variety of the *American Dream* has been linked to suburban home ownership (Cullen, 2004: 142). Initially, the word *suburb* was used to refer to “strategically located garden communities outside, but within commuting distance of large cities” (Cullen, 2004: 144-146). Subsequently, the dream of home ownership in a suburb has been recognized as America’s ideal of national belonging. It is not surprizing therefore that, as in most of Tyler’s novels, *Digging to America* is set in a suburb near Baltimore. In keeping with this idylic ideal, the Donaldsons’ house is “a worn white clapboard Colonial” (Tyler, 2006), while the younger Yazdans live in a large new house, where only “the wedding gifts in the dining room cabinet” (Tyler, 2006) indicate that the occupants might be Iranian. There is no doubt in either case that the two families have acquired their version of the mainstream ”American Dream” by what they consider to be virtuous means.

[1]*Neoliberalism* refers to two different, but related, threads of political discourse, namely *classical liberalism* and *collectivist central planning*

[2]*Color-blind individualism* represents the adoption area’s version of the color-blind discourse, being accompanied by shifts in adoption policy that promote transracial and transnational adoption as solutions to poverty and family disruption.

2.1. The American Dream and Transnational Adoption

The conventional ideals of the mainstream *American Dream* generally involve happy heterosexual nuclear families with children. As David L. Eng claims "the possession of a child, whether biological or adopted, has today become the sign of guarantee not only for family but also for full and robust citizenship" (Eng, Hom, 1998:35). Transnational adoption of Asian babies has come to be seen as a means for childless American couples seeking to re-inhabit the conventional post-War structures of family and kinship. Until 1991, children from South Korea constituted the largest number of adoptees that had entered the United States, while adoptions from other Asian countries, like China, have since increased.

The two families in *Digging to America* meet for the first time at the local airport where they are waiting for the arrival of their adopted baby girls from South Korea. The narrator describes in an ironic tone how the entire flight arrivals area takes on the form of "a gigantic baby shower." Moreover, the crowd is holding aloft "flotillas of silvery balloons printed with IT'S A GIRL!" as if they were witnessing an actual birth. The financial standing of the fictional families in the novel indicates that the couples have no trouble regarding the costs involved by such a transnational adoption.

Transnational adoption has not only proliferated alongside global consumer markets, but it also represents a material and affective enterprise that exceeds the privatized boundaries of the nuclear family (Eng, Hom, 2008). Also, postracial and postethnic thinking commemorate a "happy mixedness" that runs across ethno-racial borders. However, David Eng claims that "Asian immigrants and Asian Americans are never fully assimilable to normative regimes of whiteness" (Eng, 2003). Parental figures seem to be at ease with their racial differences. The omniscient narrator of *Digging to America* describes Sami and Ziba Yazdan as "a youngish couple, foreign-looking, olive skinned and attractive" (Tyler, 2006:85). Unlike the Donaldsons, who choose to use their daughter's Korean name, they give their adopted daughter an English name and dress her in Western outfits. At first, we are left with the impression that the only person in Tyler's novel who feels that she is a stranger in the United States (in spite of her American passport) is Sami's mother, Mariyam, who joined her husband in America a day after a proxy wedding in Iran. As a young woman, she left Iran for America to become the wife of an educated, progressive Iranian expatriate; it was an arranged marriage but also a love match.

Set in a transnational context, *Digging to America* also explores what can be called the *translated* or *transnational american dream*. This refers to the new immigrants' aspirations to achieve success in the United States. Indeed, generations of immigrants have been prone to formulate their fulfillment of the American Dream. Since the 1980s, theorists of ethnicity have claimed that ethnicity is a construction that everyone has to create anew. In Tyler's novel, Bitsy Donaldson, Jin-Ho's adoptive mother, seems to support the "salad bowl" variety of colour-blind multiculturalism. She does not want to Americanize her daughter, but hopes that she keeps "the style she came with" (Tyler, 2006:57). Bitsy also promotes the idea of celebrating the Korean girls' arrival in the United States by organizing a special arrival party. At the party, the little ones appear hand in hand dressed in traditional Korean outfits "just like they were arriving again" (Tyler, 2006:63). An annual arrival party is repeated several times, as if the Asian nature of the girls needed to be constantly reinvigorated before they could receive a piece of the American arrival cake. Ultimately, this ritual seems to be in accordance with David A. Hollinger's "postethnic perspective," which "favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations" in order to "incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds" (Hollinger, 2005). Ironically,

the assimilated Yazdans rethink their minority ethnicity in relation to the dominant society as a result of the built up sense of togetherness of the multicultural group.

Until recently, Tyler's writing has been criticized for its myopic absence of any world view. However, as a reviewer of *Digging to America* points out, "not even she [Tyler] has been completely immune to the events of the last few years" (Allardice, 2006). Although Maryam Yazdan, the grandmother, suspects her son and his wife of copying the ultra-American Donaldsons, Ziba grows tired of Bitsy's exoticizing her, and the 9/11 events finally make the American-born Sami deeply aware of his foreignness. As Maryam concludes: "It's a lot work, being foreign" (Tyler, 2006: 214). There is little wonder that the adoptees are captivated by an idealized whiteness. Even though little Susan Yazdan is raised to be an American, she complains that her American Christmas is not as American as it should be. Jin Ho Donaldson-Dickinson is forced to listen to Korean folk music and to drink soy milk, but asks to be called Jo and yearns for an American girl doll.

Following Kleinian theories of infancy[3], Eng and Hom claim that "psychic health for the transnational adoptee involves creating space in her psyche for two good-enough mothers – the birthmother and the adoptive mother" (Eng, Hom, 1998:104). Ironically, it is Tyler's satirically-depicted Bitsy, who begins to fantasize about the Korean birth mothers of Susan and Jin Ho. No wonder that Jin Ho, who has learnt to idealize whiteness, could not be less interested in the possibility of meeting her Korean birth mother. According to Eng, racial melancholia describes a psychic process in which "ideals of both Asianness *and* whiteness remain estranged and unresolved" (Eng, 2003:18). Eng also recognizes transnational adoption as "one of the most privileged forms of diaspora and immigration in the late twentieth century" (Ibidem:24).

The idea of the *American Dream* clearly shows that history doesn't matter, while the future matters much more than the past. There are hints throughout *Digging to America* that Maryam is unconsciously the lost maternal figure in the psychic configuration of the transnational adoptees in the novel. In its different way, Tyler's novel postulates the need for a"good enough" mother for the racialized transnational adoptee. By doing this, the authoress emphasizes the importance of collective negotiation of psychic racial reparations over the privatized nuclear family and, thus, the novel continues to resist color-blind neoliberalism in a somewhat multicultural harmony.

3. Conclusions

In *Digging to America*, Tyler turns her face towards the present and the future, leaving the past behind, a move that she has consciosuly ignored by now in her previous novels, creating a new prose, both simple and profound at the same time. Now she has begun to focus on the simple question of how an individual moves forward. Having such a map sketched in her mind, it is obvious for the reader that she no longer finds herself in the search of a buried treasure; she has reached a point where she may look safely at the road ahead.

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[3] According to Melanie Klein (1998:89), the infant's world was threatened from the beginning by intolerable anxieties, whose source she believed to be the infant's own death instinct.

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