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TRANSLATING THE GLOBAL SOUTH IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND ELAINE CASTILLO'S *AMERICA IS NOT THE HEART*

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Abstract: My article aims to examine the concept of the Global South (Russel West-Pavlov) as it is represented in two contemporary novels, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Elaine Castillo's *America is not the heart*. Firstly, the article discusses the novels as representative of "born translated literature" (Rebecca L. Walkowitz), identifying how their content and formal characteristics reflect such a framing. Secondly, I discuss the Southern identity of the protagonists *in relation* (Pashmina Murthy) to the places and the characters they relate to. Thus, my article proposes an analysis of the Southern identity performed by the characters in the public space and within their interaction with other communities from the Global South.
Keywords: Global South, postcolonial literature, born translated novels, globalization, performativity

The concept of the Global South entered disciplinary debates in the last decades as a substitute for the concept of the Third World (Comaroff, Comaroff 2012, Sousa Santos, Meneses 2020). Theories connected to the Global South try, therefore, to respond to the constant reconfiguration of the world caused by globalization. The dynamics of the Global South are also visible in contemporary postcolonial literature, which manages to reflect the huge social mobility of this era of globalization. The new subjectivities

described in this literature go beyond "celebrating" fluidity and mobility from one world to another, from the periphery to the center, by also interrogating, from a critical and ideological perspective, its causes and effects. As Russell West-Pavlov points out, "'Global South' is a shifter not merely because it is a mobile term with variously inflected meanings but because it works like a deictic marker, linking discourses, places, and speakers in such a way as to generate new subject positions, fields of agency, and possibilities of action" (West-Pavlov 2). Thus, the article focuses on two contemporary postcolonial novels that redefine the Global South, identifying it with different spatial or temporal correspondents, depending on the narrative perspective, as it shifts between individual and collective, feminine and masculine: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, published in 2013, and Elaine Castillo's *America is not the heart*, published in 2018.

***Americanah* and *America is not the heart* as born translated novels**

The novels discuss the emigration experience of two women from Nigeria and the Philippines, respectively. The texts aim to deconstruct the myth of America as an ideal, problematizing, among others, the traumas of migration, the difficulties of integration into the American system, and the question of identity. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, the protagonist Ifemelu decides to return home, to Nigeria, after several years of studying and working in America, in an attempt to renew her relationship with her high school boyfriend, Obinze. Her perspective is doubled by Obinze's, who had tried to emigrate to England but was deported. Therefore, the novel maps all these travels, from Nigeria to America and back. In Elaine Castillo's novel, the main plot is centered around the experience of Hero, a member of a wealthy and important family from the Philippines, who arrives in America after being a doctor for a guerrilla revolutionary group from the National People's Army for ten years, which lead to him being imprisoned and tortured for another two. The beginning of the novel presents the perspective of Paz, the wife of Hero's uncle, who emigrates to America for economic reasons and who struggles with a precarious existence. Both approaches can be discussed as attempts to *translate* the Global South in its interaction with the American North.

The novels are representative of what Rebecca L. Walkowitz calls "born translated literature" which "approaches translation as medium and origin rather than as afterthought. Translation is not secondary or incidental to these works. It is a

condition of their production. Globalization bears on all writers working in English today" (Waklowitz 4-5). The titles anticipate the translation stakes of narratives. By placing the notion of America in their center and then either distorting it and then either refashioning ("Americanah") or negating it ("is not the heart"), the authors exhibit their intention to bring forth and to make another America visible to the public: their novels are a translation of the Global North through the filter of the peripheral experience of the Global South. On the one hand, the word *Americanah* shows, at the linguistic level, that the identity of the emigrant is invariably constructed as a hybridization between languages, experiences, and memories. The novel is an attempt to define the continuous negotiation between different identities and the constant construction of the subject. On the other hand, *America is not the heart* also puts *America* in the center, while denying the possibility of overlap between it and identity. The title is, in fact, a reference to Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, registering the author's intention to link her own text to other Filipino emigration narratives. Thus, the approach is to translate a *different*, perhaps opposite experience – that of non-belonging and continuous alienation.

As Rebecca L. Walkowitz points out, "[i]n born-translated novels, translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device" (Walkowitz 4). It is also the case in these two novels. First of all, their structural composition is defined by the hybridity of temporal nodes, perspectives, and geographies. Even if they both showcase the experience of two women in America, the emigration plot is instrumentalized as a pretext for exploring their origin cultures and histories, the contexts that prompted them to emigrate, the very actual problems of globalization, and the precarious life of the emigrant communities. Then, the fragmentation and the multiple perspectives of the narrative discourse can be seen in opposition to the classic form of picaresque and bildungsroman postcolonial novel. Conventions of the bildungsroman can still be traced in the novels, but, as Jens Else shows, they have another stake:

> The Bildungsroman of course persisted in this critical climate, but in an allegorical form that emplots an increasing insight into the fictionality of the premises of nationalism or that foregrounds its propensity to articulate resignation and compromise and to emplot maturity as cosmopolitan detachment—as seen recently in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* for example; this form refrains from the illusions of development, the

> pitfalls of affiliating with emancipatory politics, and the allegedly homogenizing single storylines of social emergence. (Elze 43)

Secondly, translation plays a central role as a thematic device. The protagonists consolidate their identity in America *through* and *with* translation. Further, both novels practice multilingualism: if Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reproduces the English spoken by African emigrants as another language, belonging to a specific community, in Elaine Castillo the English language is mixed with words and expressions from Tagalog, Ilocano and Pangasinan, to articulate the complexity and the differences between the origin and social class of Filipinos emigrants.

For Hero, the protagonist from *America is not the heart*, the language spoken by the people around her tells their stories and defines a relation of identification or, on the contrary, the distance between her and others:

> Gutom kayo? Lolo Boy called. It was odd; he was speaking Tagalog, but his accent in Tagalog was more American than anything else, as if he'd come to America as a youth and had spoken both languages simultaneously so that they were one. It reminded Here of the way Roni would sometimes switch between English, Pnagasinan, and Tagalog, seamlessly, oblivious to the differences between them. (Castillo 88)

Ifemelu practices another type of translation: not only a translation that defines her relationships with others, but an act of translation as a mediation between cultures:

> If they asked what she did, she would say vaguely, "I write a lifestyle blog,", because saying "I write an anonymous blog called Raceteenth of Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negros) by a Non-American Black" would make them uncomfortable. (Adichie 3)

Thus, Ifemelu uses the online medium of a blog as a way of discussing her experience with the people she views as sharing the same race. In fact, the blog is her pretext to deconstruct some race stereotypes and to denounce the class and gender inequalities to which she is subjected or which she observes around her, in different contexts. She needs to express her opinions on a blog as an alternative, compensatory way of articulating her identity, different from the way she expresses it in the public sphere,

where it is rather an identity performed according to the expectations of others, as will be shown below.

Therefore, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Elaine Castillo's *America is not the heart* are representatives of the "born translated literature" paradigm through the way their literary form and content negotiate globalization. Both of them are written in English, using different narrative conventions and advocating for hybridity (being, in this sense, inscribed into the phenomenon of the "globalization of the novel", Siskind 339). Their stakes, as born translated novels, are to redefine and to translate the Global South on a social, cultural and ideological level.

Mapping the Global South from the Global North

Starting from the example of Amitav Ghosh's novel, *In an Antique Land*, Pashmina Murthy notes that "The journeying across different places and through different historical periods identifies the Global South first as a *site*, but one that emerges through the *relation* between places, thereby opening up a stable and bounded geo-locality to social and political negotiation" (Murthy 198). Reconsidering the South as a *relation* is, in fact, symptomatic for many contemporary postcolonial novels, including the ones discussed in this article. The protagonists of *Americanah* and *America is not the heart* are traveling to America from Nigeria and the Philippines, respectively. Starting from this plot, travel becomes a narrative device that makes navigation through the past and the present, through different identities and social statuses, possible. As Murthy observes,

> As characters travel, the familiar is estranged, and their stories fail to fully translate in a new idiom, subsequently throwing the sense of locatedness into disarray. Such instability of place widens the gap between the place as-imagined and its harsh reality, but this is by no means the only narrative possible. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), for instance, updates this placelessness by establishing Lagos as the port of departure that doubles as the port of return [...] Confronted with cosmopolitanism's unfulfilled promise of seamless translation to the North, Ifemelu's and Obinze's return rejects the liminal space of unbelonging without defeatedly reinforcing the conservative nationalist figuration of home. Indeed, what remains unacknowledged but makes the return possible within the logic of the novel is Lagos's rise as a global city, which offers new possibilities for the cosmopolitan subject. As the narrative moves from the South to the North and back, it substitutes the double

> alienation with a double translation, resignifying the terms by which the North and South have been constructed as spaces of mutual exclusion. (Murthy 200)

This "placelessness" is also traceable in *America is not the heart*. Even if Hero doesn't return to the Philippines following her arrival in America, her uncle Pol, who goes back in search of his "real" home and looking to retrieve social prestige, takes his daughter, who was born in America, with him. (If before his emigration he had been an important and respected doctor in his native country, while also being part of an important and rich family, in America, he loses the right to practice medicine and his old status has no significance.) Then he comes back, realizing that the Philippines is not the same for him after his departure. The return seems impossible in both novels, once the characters grasp the effects of their temporal dislocation and the extent of their new identity as emigrants: the South is part of their identity in the North and the North, in turn, becomes part of their Southern identity.

Henceforth, I will discuss how the South and the North are continuously defined inside African and Filipino emigrant communities in America. The binary of these geographical locations is interrogated by reconsidering class, gender, and social status. In the discussed novels, migration from the periphery to the center and (perhaps) back does not only affect an individual, but an entire collectivity. The singular, existential experience of the main character is complemented by a political and critical perspective: the texts do not only question the effects of the world (be it North or South) on the individual, but also the effects of social mobility on the world. Murthy notices that

> The North-South binary implicit in the Global South runs the risk of repeating the reductionist problems of an East-West opposition. But disorientation as a textual strategy draws attention to the paradox inherent in the "Global/South" and disrupts the binary division. It undermines a stable global position for the South by emphasizing its deixis and recognizing that that South emerges primarily in relation to other sites. (Murthy 206)

Furthermore, in these two novels, identity emerges in relation to the other characters thus establishing a sort of social hierarchy. I will focus on several scenes in which the characters express themselves in the public space. In this case, the South and the North

become performative markers: the more cosmopolitan (American) the characters are, the more they can be at the top of the hierarchy of the emigrant community.

A symptomatic example can be found at the beginning of *Americanah*, when the protagonist, Ifemelu, expresses her decision to go back home to Nigeria and goes to a hair salon in order to prepare for returning. This is a pretext for the narrative voice to describe a part of the peripheral African community from the American metropolis. She seems to be familiar with these environments, these micro-communities, without being part of them. Her view of this world is clinical, familiar and distant at the same time. The cartography of the place is very specific – Ifemelu interacts with some female workers from a hair salon, observing the way they talk, the way they relate, what they eat and what they consume, that is, the way they internalized America:

> She gave him the address of Mariana African Hair Braiding. It was her first time at this salon – her regular one was closed because the owner had gone back to Côte d'Ivoire to get married – but it would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding, they had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer, and they were full of Francophone West African woman braiders, one of whom would be the owner and speak the best English and answer the phone and be deferred to by the others. Often, there was a baby tied to someone's back with a piece of cloth. Or a toddler asleep on a wrapper spread over a battered sofa. Sometimes, older children stopped by. The conversations were loud and swift, in French of Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. Words came out half-completed. Once a Guinean braider in Philadelphia had told Ifemelu, "Amma like, Oh Gad, Az someh." It took many repetitions for Ifemelu to understand that the woman was saying, "I'm like, Oh God, I was so mad." (Adichie 10-1)

Once she starts interacting with Aisha, the woman who takes care of her hair, there is a kind of competition between who can perform more of their American identity. When Ifemelu asks Aisha why she says Africa and does not directly specify the country where is she from, the response is:

> You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, "Where is that?" My friend from Burkina Faso, they ask her, "your country in Latin America?" Aisha resumed twisting, a sly smile on her face, and then asked, as if Ifemelu could not possibly understand how things were done here, "How long you in America?" (Adichie 18)

Aisha is conscious that her origins need to be translated differently depending on the receiving community. To say that she is from Africa becomes an automatism that betrays her attempt to adapt to the American world. Then, speaking with Ifemelu and offering her explanation, she perceives herself in the position of the mediator: she translates her experience to Ifemelu, and gives her some strategies to adapt to a virtual American public. Her position is changed when Ifemelu reveals her American life:

> Ifemelu took her time putting her phone back into her bag. Years ago, she had been asked a similar question, at wedding of one of Aunty Uju's friends, and she had said two years, which was the truth, but the jeer on the Nigerian's face had taught her that, to earn the prize of being taken seriously among Nigerians in America, among Africans in America, indeed among immigrants in America, she needed more years. Six years, she began to say when it was just three and a half. Eight years, she said when it was five. Now that it was thirteen years, lying seemed unnecessary but she lied anyways.
>
> "Fifteen years," she said.
>
> "Fifteen? That long time." A new respect slipped into Aisha's eyes.
>
> "You live here in Trenton?"
>
> "I live in Princeton."
>
> "Princeton." Aisha paused. "You student?"
>
> "I've just finished a fellowship," she said, knowing that Aisha would not understand what a fellowship was, and in the rare moment that Aisha looked intimidated, Ifemelu felt a perverse pleasure. Yes, Princeton. Yes, the sort of place that Aisha could only imagine, the sort of place that would never have signs that said QUICK TAX REFUND; people in Princeton did not need quick tax refunds. (Adichie 20)

Ifemelu, on her turn, performs an act of translation when she says how long she has been an emigrant. The experience in America taught her to be attentive to the interpretive community and respond to their expectations. To speak with another emigrant is also a performative act for her, since she once again needs to satisfy some expectations and recreate her identity depending on her public. Despite Ifemelu's

arrogance, the scene is very representative for what the connections of the Global South mean in the Global North: an uneven network, and relations constructed by social and economic status. Therefore, in this incidental relation to Aisha, the Southern identity of Ifemelu is defined by the social class from which she comes and by her much vaster emigrant experience. In fact, through scenes like this, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie opposes classical binaries: Africa and America, South and North, periphery and center, etc. In her novel, these notions are interconnected and change their valences depending on the environments and relationships that her characters maintain. Moreover, when it comes to interactions between members of the same community in the public space, the author shows that the South and the North redefine themselves performatively, especially according to class, race, and gender. Her stakes are to show the limits of globalization and to criticize neoliberal exploitation, understanding the global South "as constituted in the uneven global spaces of production and consumption." (Murphy 201-02).

The mapping of the South in the globalizing American north happens similarly in *America is not the heart*. The relationship between Hero and Paz, the wife of her uncle Pol, is very representative in this sense. Even though they share Filipino origins and the experience of emigration, their relationship maintains a certain distance from the beginning: in the Philippines, they belonged to different social classes (which explains why their native languages are different), and they are from different generations. Moreover, they emigrated for different reasons: Paz ends up living in Milpitas, a suburb of San Jose, California, as a result of the American dream of economic empowerment, while Hero comes here after being tortured for two years for being part of the revolutionary group of the National People's Army. The trauma of coming from a poor family and of being part of a revolutionary group is never shared between the two women. For both, America is a new beginning and a place of reconciliation with their past. The Filipino community of Milpitas offers them this possibility, but even here the mapping of their native country depends on their social and economic class.

Another example is the relationship between Hero and Rosalyn, who becomes her lover. Rosalyn had lived in California from a very young age and, at the beginning of their relationship, she becomes a translator of America for Hero. The act of translation is mediated by music and books – by the pop culture consumed by the Filipinos born in America and by those who emigrated here before Hero. The

translation also implies the description of social dynamics, as it happens when Hero and Rosalyn watch a Filipino procession, which reminds them of their country of origin:

> They watched for a while in silence, laughing and aww-ing when one of the younger queens started crying in the middle of the procession, self-conscious and frightened in front of all the people. The small rondala, only two guitarists and a ukulele player, not the full band Hero remembered seeing in the Philippines, followed the procession, singing Dios Te Salve. Next to her, Rosalyn was humming, half singing, Y bandito es el fruto, Y bandito es el fruto.
> Who did you play? Hero asked, bringing her knees up so she could rest her chin on them. Rosalyn shrugged, toying with her shoelace. Nah, I was never part of it. I was too young when we were in Manila, and shit was still too crazy when we were in San Francisco, and then we got to Milpitas, I remembered it, and wanted to do it, but, you know, it's organized by like, some rich Filipinos. People like the Couples for Christ gang, so. It was all those kids who were part of the big Santacruzan. It wasn't like in Manila, where every barrio did their thing, whatever. (Castillo 225-226)

As *Americanah* shows, to speak about origins can be an act of social performance. In this scene, Hero and Rosalyn allow themselves to be nostalgic and to contemplate a world that they do not have access to anymore. Rosalyn explains that social hierarchy is hyper-present even in a very traditional and religious ritual such as "Santacruz". To see this kind of performance does not remind Rosalyn of her childhood in the Philippines, but also reminds her of the social order constructed even in the diaspora: in the past, only "rich Filipinos" could participate in this ritual. The position of Hero and Rosalyn in this scene is also symptomatic since they are outsiders and, from their peripheral position, can become observers of the uneven Filipino community. In this case, the public performance also proves that South hierarchies emerge and are reproduced even within the very peripheral Milpitas, California.

Conclusions

The present essay has discussed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Elaine Castillo's *America is not the heart* as "born translated literature." This notion is, I think, a very fertile one for analysis and close reading in the field of contemporary postcolonial literature. These structural and thematic approaches of the two novels are

both the expression of globalization. They try to translate this phenomenon by following the different individual experiences of the characters, thus mapping, through a critical perspective, the effects and causes of migration. The experience of this phenomenon proves that the Global South and the Global North are not a fixed binary: quite the opposite. The southern and the northern identity are fluid notions for each of the characters – discovering America, Ifemelu and Hero, the protagonists of the novels, discover a new "South," with its hierarchies and inequalities. Focusing on the performance of the main characters in the public sphere, one can observe, therefore, that southern identity is *a relation* not only to a geographical place, but also to its *affective and social communities*. In this sense, the article showcases the strategies employed by the characters *to perform* and *translate* their Southern identity.

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