

**Transnationalism and diaspora in Immigrant Texts: Re-reading
Elizabeth Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence***

Dr Kavitha N
Assistant Professor
Department of English
All Saints' College,
University of Kerala, Trivandrum

Abstract

Elizabeth Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (1998) addresses conflicts surrounding transnational identity and displacement in the historical trajectory of imperialism. This paper attempts to study how Postcoloniality affects identity formation in immigrant texts. Set in Oshkosh, Trinidad, the text identifies the cultural, political and social negotiations required of Caribbeans moving to America. In the backdrop, the text examines British colonialism, Trinidadian independence and American neocolonialism. Nunez connects migration to neocolonial system of oppression and resistance. She used the characters to provide insight into the cultural chasms that separated Caribbeans from imperial West which is voiced out through the worries and common language of the folk. Being an immigrant narrative, the text shows ubiquitous presence of postcoloniality that is increasingly interested in the transnational experiences of its protagonists; and it is not simply about migrating to and making it in America, but engaging with the literal and metaphorical crossing and re-crossing of borders. The paper further looks into the possibilities of a text created in response to the imperial structure, reflexive of itself as a product of that structure which is written decades after independence with the sensibilities of an author who herself has come to understand the potential contained in a transnational, diasporic identity.

Key Words

Transnationalism, Diaspora, Neocolonialism, Immigrant narrative.

Full Paper

Postcolonial studies, provides a useful foundation for understanding hybrid identities, dislocation, and the ways in which empire gave rise to nationalisms that utilized women in the formation and preservation of the nation-state. Transnational narratives revisit their protagonists' postcolonial pasts through memories and flashbacks, and sometimes more explicitly through the narrator's interjection of historical details about the country left behind in the process of immigration. Elizabeth Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (1998) addresses conflicts surrounding transnational identity and displacement in the historical trajectory of imperialism. This paper attempts to study how postcoloniality affects identity formation in immigrant texts. Set in Oshkosh, Trinidad, the text identifies the cultural, political and social negotiations required of Caribbeans moving to America. In the backdrop, the text examines British colonialism, Trinidadian independence and American neocolonialism which shapes the identity of the

protagonist. Transnationality in its various permutations deals with actions across national borders that brings in cross cultural interaction.

Nunez connects migration to neocolonial system of oppression and resistance in *Beyond the Limbo Silence*. She used the characters to provide insight into the cultural chasms that separated Caribbeans from imperial West which is voiced out through the worries and common language of the folk. While the protagonist in *Beyond the Limbo Silence* strive for a level of negotiated inclusion in her new American lives, the balance between negotiation and inclusion depends on the extent to which each sees herself translated from postcolonial to immigrant to American. The novel can be read as a coming-of-age narrative that charts the development of a young, black, Caribbean immigrant woman, and that must subvert both the stylistic and thematic conventions of that genre in order to pave the way for a new type of transnational heroine and do justice to the complications there in.

Nunez accounts for the vitality of diasporic communities and the manner in which the shared African roots of her West Indian protagonist and the African American community complicate her identity in the U.S. Sara Edgehill's narrative begins when, at the age of twenty, she informs her grandmother that she is leaving Trinidad to attend a Catholic university in Wisconsin on a scholarship. Sara's sensitivities and point of view are clearly delineated where she deals independently with the racial political defiance of her parent's submission and resistance in Trinidad to the remote isolation of Wisconsin's abolitionist attitudes and its differences to Mississippi's civil rights movement. Moreover, this structure reflects the significant role that various identities like Afro-Caribbean, Amerindian, Indo-Caribbean, African-American, Trinidadian - play in her development and the identity Sara has the potential to adopt. This identity is often threatened by what Sara knows about her white Creole great-grandmother, known locally in Trinidad as "mad Bertha". Sara's struggle to cast off identification, limits her engagement with her own blackness, such as her white ancestors and comfortably middle-class family. Unlike Bertha, she is finally empowered by her gender to forge this identity by subverting both Christian soul-making and sexual reproduction in her choices to embrace obeah and abort her unborn child. Sara's development constitutes not only a personal resistance to inheriting her great-grandmother's "madness," but a political resistance to the racial and social conditions that threaten to force her, as a Caribbean subject migrating to America, to conform to the identity that her childhood in colonial Trinidad has prescribed.

Beyond the Limbo silence, is one example of a text that presents the complicated relationship between a dark-skinned Caribbean immigrant and the civil rights movement. While the protagonist ostensibly lives out the American Dream in Wisconsin, she learns that Americans who look like her are being beaten and lynched in the South, causing her to question her African-descended identity and her ability to accept the opportunity to fulfill America's promise. A preconceived notion of an "American" way of life is the immigrant's ultimate goal. For decades, the 'melting pot' metaphor prevailed as the model for how immigrants in America should be understood. This paradigm ostensibly satisfies both those who believe in a unitary definition of what it means to be American and those who see America as a nation of immigrants: differences "melt" away as immigrants conform to American values, customs, and ideals; meanwhile the contents of the "pot" are enriched but not too drastically changed by the inclusion of diverse

peoples. In exploring the problems with pluralism, Higham notes that assimilation is historically significant to American nation-building:

The building of a national republic gave central importance to the process of convergence, to the making of a homogenous future from a heterogeneous past. The dominant American legend – what was later symbolized in the image of the melting pot – said that a continuous fusion of originally disparate elements was forming a single American people. In the attainment of oneness, rather than the persistence of separate identities, lay the promise of American life. (199)

Although this statement is clearly problematic when we consider the violent ways in which certain minorities, particularly African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans were simultaneously appropriated by the United States and excluded from American culture and denied basic American rights, it represents a persistent and widespread perception of immigrants in America.

Sara's perception of America prior to arriving consists of images derived from popular culture, cowboy movies and television shows that idealize the American spirit as persevering, bold, opportunistic, and brave and from how these images were appropriated by the independence movement in her own country in order to inspire nationalism. She recalls hearing Eric Williams, the independence activist who went on to become Trinidad's first prime minister, speak at a demonstration:

He told us stories about the fighting spirit of the Americans to set us on fire on the eve of our independence from British rule. The Americans, he said, had defied the British. They had refused to follow the British religion or to pay them taxes. Later they fought a bloody war against the British for their freedom. "Live free or die"... They had won the right to be themselves. They had severed themselves from the weight of an ugly past. They were not Europeans with a suitcase of memories. They were Americans, a new people in a new world. I envied their absence of baggage. How was I also to know about their shame? Their enslavement of black people? (Nunez 92)

America provides a model for freedom from British rule that Trinidadians admire. On the other hand, Sara and her family experience firsthand the manner in which Americans have installed themselves in Trinidad by way of their "gifts," the implications of which Sara does not fully comprehend until after she leaves Trinidad. It is not until she is confronted with the deeply rooted struggle of African-Americans in her new home that Sara understands how she has been appropriated by white America to justify the treatment of the non-immigrant Black population and how the "gifts" she and her family received from the Americans in Trinidad foreshadowed the situation in which she finds herself in the US. But Mr. Edgehill's parting words to Sara before she leaves offer a cryptic warning, steeped in the painful compromise he is forced to make with Americans in Trinidad. He tells her:

Don't let America fool you with its righteous words. Freedom, independence, the right to choose, justice – these are for them alone. Americans are sentimental. They cry and weep at the movies, at makebelieve– but don't think real life moves them. Be careful, Sara. To them, you owe them everything. They owe you nothing. Your scholarship? They have paid for your silence and your friendship. (38)

Later in the novel, Sara describes an experience:

Milwaukee shocked me with its blacks and its poverty...The people on the street were brown like the people I had left in Trinidad, and yet they frightened me. When they turned to stare at the bus, I saw a guardedness and an anger in their eyes I had never seen before (191-192).

Although Sara's narration hints at the separation she feels, as an immigrant, from African Americans, it also addresses the guilt she comes to feel because of her own privilege. Sara's real education, which takes place during her first years in the U.S., offers Nunez the opportunity to explore the civil rights movement as a component of immigrant identity formation. Moreover, through Sara's experiences, Nunez explores the many challenges the immigrant faces in attempting to negotiate a sense of belonging that honors the complicated histories of both the new homeland and the one left behind.

During her initial days in America, Sara feels caught between her fellow "third world" scholarship recipients, two West Indian American girls, Angela, from British Guyana whose ancestors were indentured slaves from India, and Courtney from St. Lucia whose roots are from the Yoruba tribes of Africa. These three girls are isolated in the wintry north among the yellow wheat fields and waves of Anglo faces who are liberal enough to accept these girls as classmates and "friends". Angela is in love with the idea of America and the potential for opportunity and progress she believes define the American Dream. Courtney, on the other hand, is proudly Afro-Caribbean. She believes in and practices obeah and she feels cynical towards the nuns and her white classmates, with whom she feels she could never truly belong. Of Angela, she says, "To [her] every place but here is the bush" (60). Sara witnesses Angela's fear of Courtney's obeah. Moreover, her elevation of Sara's "white blood" shows that she does not feel that the civil rights struggle taking place around the country at that time involves her. She repeatedly encourages Sara to adopt a similarly unburdened attitude towards belonging in America. Because of her mixed racial background, Sara is not convinced by Angela's approach. She knows that she:

...came [to America] with [her] self-consciousness, [her] memory burdened with histories of slavery, exploitation, colonialism, deprivation," which alienate her from her white American classmates (90).

Angela's behavior in front of their white classmates confirms for Sara what she has already begun to understand:

I, through whose veins ran the blood of slave masters, closed ranks with [Courtney] with my African blood...My African ancestors and Courtney's were brought to the Caribbean as slaves, chattel, commodities to be used and then traded or put out to pasture. Angela's ancestors came as indentured laborers. No slight difference in countries where the people had learned to mimic the intricacies of British class structure. (82-83)

Sara's revelation from these diverse opinions recalls Mignolo's assertion in *Local Histories/Global Designs*, where he makes the case for an empowered "third world" identity via diasporic transnationalism. He introduces the notion of "diversality" as a way of thinking about diasporic identities that are simultaneously unique and related to other subaltern identities. This term is useful here because it accounts for Sara's transnational bond with Courtney given their shared African heritage, and for thinking about Sara, whose blackness links her to the civil rights

movement despite the national and class differences that threaten her ties to the African American community. Angela's willingness to disparage the Caribbean as "the bush" in order to be accepted by her American classmates and Courtney's staunch refusal to believe that she could ever be anything other than an outsider in the U.S. provide useful foils for Angela's more thoughtfully negotiated identity. Although they find different ways of belonging or not belonging; at the end of the novel Courtney returns to St. Lucia, each must translate her West Indian identity, already necessarily complicated by race, gender, and culture, into something she can live with in the U.S. While Angela and Courtney take opposite approaches to this process, Sara attempts the more challenging task of occupying a middle ground that resists the colonial, nationalist, and racist ideologies, even if at different times each of those ideologies afford her privilege in Trinidad and the U.S. Her more complicated approach involves neither acceptance nor rejection of these ideologies; instead, she must translate how she has been appropriated by them at various moments during her childhood in Trinidad to determine her place among African, white American, and African-American identification strategies.

In addition, by the end of the text, Sara learns and accepts the cult of the Obeah where a man or a woman who practices the arts of healing and the psyche. The hardship of developing, approaching, becoming and entering into womanhood, Sara is advised by Courtney's words: "Her words filled my ears: Love yourself. Open yourself to your spirit. Know yourself. (thyself) (309). Courtney secretly is a practitioner of the Yoruba culture. She is an Obeah woman who saves Sara's spirit. The love combined with the ancient arts of the Obeah cult is a very powerful medicine. Sara adopts a transnational Africanist position in her choice to abort her pregnancy and participate in Obeah rituals with Courtney. the spirit of Sara's unborn child is identified as Yoruba and released to assist the civil rights cause, Courtney uses the spiritual to unite herself, Sara, the African American struggle, and all of the African tribes that she lists in her attempt to identify Yoruba. As a result, Sara is able to link her Afro-Caribbean experiences with the injustices against African Americans, and free her great-grandmother Bertha from her "madness".

An immigrant narrative *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, show ubiquitous presence of postcoloniality that is increasingly interested in the transnational experiences of its protagonists; and it is not simply about migrating to and making it in America, but engaging with the literal and metaphorical crossing and re-crossing of borders. The paper also looked into the possibilities of a text created in response to the imperial structure, reflexive of itself as a product of that structure which is written decades after independence with the sensibilities of an author who herself has come to understand the potential contained in a transnational, diasporic identity.

WORKS CITED

- Higham, John. *Send These to Me*. New York: Atheneum, 1975. Print.
 Mignolo, Walter D. *Local Histories/Global Designs*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. Print.
 Nunez, Elizabeth. *Beyond the Limbo Silence*. Seattle: Seal Press, 1998. Print.