

CULTURAL IDENTITY: DIMENSIONS OF SELF IN ETHNIC AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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The monograph under review – Elżbieta Rokosz-Piejko. “Hyphenated” Identities. The Issue of Cultural Identity in Selected Ethnic American Autobiographical Texts. – Rzeszyw : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2011. – 109 p. – demonstrates clear-cut results of an original study dealing with an apparently multifarious notion of “cultural identity” as it is expressed in immigrant autobiographies. Present-day universal tendency to globalisation and, therefore, diplomatic strategies in achieving a certain, if not entire, “severable” cultural concord between nations, makes the study topical, for it provides tangible clues to understanding ways of individual accommodation to alien settings that stipulate difficulties in self-realisation.

A methodology suggested by the author is novel to the extent of being an explicit contribution to the treatment of self within anthropocentric paradigm that celebrates its reign in contemporary humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, it may be considered humanistic *ad verbum* since it serves the noble aim of defining how a cultural identity is presented and questioned deep inside the very fabric of its formation by a person who is actually in painful search of this identity. The quest for one’s self will never cease being a most vital, critical issue sustained by cultural legacy beginning with the famous Delphic “gnōthi seauton” (know thyself) – a cornerstone of happiness in classical Socratic interpretation, a way to success. Thus, it is also personal achievement that is preserved as a subject of thorough description in a number of ethnic American autobiographies analysed by the author of this monograph. The method is based on structuring each autobiography into the sections of *place, time (personal past), otherness (nuances of perceiving oneself as an alien), and education*, which appear to be four elephants whereupon individual success as a manifestation of self-realisation lies.

In the *Introduction* the aim of the monograph, the material, and the most important terms are defined: assimilation (full social, religious, behavioural, matrimonial, etc. entrance into the core of the host society), acculturation (a stage of assimilation, a change of cultural patterns to those of the host society), cultural identity (a person identifying himself with a certain culture), hyphenated identity (a person who perceives himself belonging to several cultures, e.g. Afro-American (there is a hyphen in spelling as well as in personal identification)).

In Chapter I (*All Things Necessary – Terms and Definitions*) the author dwells on the nature and history of autobiography as a literary genre (the biography of a

person narrated by that person), indicating its peculiarity of being both *history and literature, creation and recreation, trustworthy account of the past and conscious or unconscious falsification*, for it has a primary motive of self-knowledge and is based on objective events as well as their subjective interpretation, the latter turning out to be a message believed essential for being conveyed to the world as a result of some radical changes in autobiographers’ lives. In this chapter the idea of “the other in oneself” as a quintessence of ethnic American cultural identities is elaborated upon refracted through immigrant autobiographies (texts written by both first and second generations of immigrants) by the authors of African (Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright), Asian (Maxine Hong Kingston), Jewish (Mary Antin, Eva Hoffman), Mexican (Richard Rodriguez), and Native American (Navarre Scott Momaday) origins.

In Chapter II (*The Place. Is Home where the Heart Is?*) the problems of belonging to some place and, accordingly, the results of displacement are critically considered. “Place” is viewed as a complex of environment, history, and language, as one’s own “home”, the clear concept of which is needed only when it has been left to enter a new world with a different social hierarchy, values, customs, etc. Immigrant authors have various, sometimes contrasting ideas of “home” and thus accept “the new world” with different degrees of personal rejection. The reason for this diversity is basically positive or negative memory of childhood, communal or individual traditions, i.e. one’s close or distant association with people in the place left behind. Mary Antin appears to be the most open to new surroundings after a hard period of cultural and social suppression in Russia, African American writers strongly depend in their ability to acculturate upon their attitude to slavery as a part (at least historical) of their lives, Maxine Kingston strives to finding her place through gaining a mythological concept of China conceived in her mind to be a necessary start. E.Hoffman, R.Rodriguez and N.S.Momaday suffer from a kind of intellectual and emotional rupture with their native cultures.

In Chapter III (*Personal Past, Ancestral Heritage and Communal History*) the author turns to the way the autobiographers “weave the song of themselves” referring to their past. Thus, Mary Antin strives to reject her origin together with all traditions of Jewish communities in Russia, which she identifies as “medieval”, and become a real American. Eva Hoffman is less categorical and seems to cherish her immigrant memory as if it were something like an insect stuck in a drop of amber – a splinter, perceived intuitively

important for finding one's nature, but distant and rather a souvenir, than utility. Similarly, though not identically, Maxine Hong Kingston is initially deluded by unreal toy worlds – the China of the past and the Chinese America of the past, which are both simulacra, but which serve to be a unique source of information applied to and reinterpreted in the “real” America. On the contrary, Richard Rodriguez positions himself as a young intellectual limited neither by his parents, nor his ethnic traditions. Richard Wright bitterly confesses his having been constantly despised by his relatives because of his feeling different from others and rejecting communal values; he did his best to show his closeness to European way of thinking, his intellectual potential of not “a black American every man”. Zora Neale Hurston emerges an interesting personality because of her genuinely atypical attitude to slavery as a part of her people's past. She avoids blaming the whites, for she does not have personal memory of slavery; besides, she writes about Africans as about co-beneficiaries of the slave-trade, willingly selling their kinsmen for “civilised” money. Navarre Scott Momaday represents his past as “the land of nostalgia” and, similar to Eva Hoffman, recalls it in the present tense as if it still existed somewhere frozen in time.

In Chapter IV (*Others among Others*) the authors describe themselves as strangers in the world of the white Anglo-Saxon America where they would like to assimilate to become “the social dominant”. All their stories – either harsh or smooth enough and quite successful – show their way of making America “mine”, not “theirs”, thus melting into “them”, becoming “them” through absorbing the American ethos and Franklinian

tradition (the belief in success via hard work), overcoming the “hyphen” in their vision of self, but without losing the actual self. In Chapter V (Education) greed for study (expressed in a varying degree by all seven authors) is fairly treated as a means of assimilation which helped the authors to function successfully in American public life. Eva Hoffman and Navarre Scott Momaday even got Ph.D. in American Universities and Navarre Scott Momaday managed to be awarded with the Pulitzer Prize for his novel “House Made of Dawn”.

The obvious theoretical achievement of the monograph is distinguishing precise structural elements (stages) influencing the formation of cultural identity: identifying one's place as an image of “home”, making peace with one's past and determination to move further, finding courage and tolerance to reconcile with the other in oneself and, finally, educating a hyphenated identity to become whole. Yet, accepting the indisputable contribution of the author to the matter raised, the reviewer thinks it essential that some critical remarks should be made. Firstly, it remains unexplained why only those hyphenated identities whose texts are analysed were chosen as a representative group, but not, for example, French-American or Italian-American autobiographies. Besides, the study of cultural identities presented in the process of formation may be enriched with contrasts and comparisons of the texts analysed to the extent of discovering reasons for this or that model of acculturation and assimilation manifested by authors.

On the whole, the monograph under review is an example of scholarly and literary attainment that may serve a good academic guide in the field of literary and cultural studies.