

Bicultural Identity Formation in American Multicultural Young Adult Literature: A Study in Cofer's Call Me Maria

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at shedding light on the portrayal of the Hispanic-American experience in Judith Ortiz Cofer's novel *First Person Fiction: Call Me Maria* (2004), emphasizing the ways in which Cofer represents her adolescent protagonist, Maria, who manages to forge a bicultural identity in multicultural America. How the protagonist responds to oppression and inequality and how the family and society are responsible for shaping one's cultural identity are main questions to be answered in this study. More specifically, the paper draws on the theoretical tenets by Charles Taylor in his essay "The Politics of Recognition" in which he states the main issues related to the politics of multiculturalism. He focuses on the demand for recognition and dialogue in the formation of identity for ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the paper highlights the cardinal role that language, parent-child relationship, and school play in the formation of the protagonist's identity. It concludes that Maria's positive attitude towards her cultural heritage and past as a Puerto Rican-American girl helps her to overcome all the obstacles she faces in a multiethnic society. Ultimately, she managed to fulfill her dream as a poet, reach self-recognition, and construct her identity as equal and unique.

Keywords: identity formation, multiculturalism, recognition.

The American society is essentially a multicultural composition of diverse ethnic identities and religious groups. All of these groups respond to an overwhelming cultural system which one may call the American "diaspora". In her novel, *First Person Fiction: Call Me Maria* (2004), Judith Ortiz Cofer depicts the Hispanic-American experience of a young adult protagonist, Maria, in her search for a cultural identity in a multicultural society. This novel belongs to multicultural literature that it portrays characters who find themselves living and acting between two worlds, two languages, and two cultures. Some of them assimilate while others integrate. The paper tackles different issues facing the protagonist, Maria. It, first, emphasizes her identity formation. Then it elaborates on language. Third, it approaches the child-parent relationship, and finally it elucidates how school has had a significant influence on her life and growth. How Maria deals with all the obstacles in her new life, how she grasps differences, how she reaches self-recognition, and how she integrates in the American society are all matters called into question.

In order to probe into the process of identity formation in a multicultural society, one finds it imperative to grasp the history of Hispanic Americans and to understand how they have become an essential component in the texture of this society. In his book *Latinos in the United States: The Sacred and the Political* (1986), David Abalos divulges that his own experience as a Chicano/Latino individual "is being experienced by a growing number of Latino men and Latina women: Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Ecuadorians, Colombians, Dominicans, and other communities from Latin America" (Abalos, 1986, p. 1). He differentiates between two kinds of Latinos; the ones whose identity is shaped by attaching themselves to the past and, therefore, become rough nationalists and the others who endeavor to assimilate in an attempt to forget their past, which leads to their feeling of alienation and self-hatred (ibid., p. 14). As a matter of fact, Abalos believes the way Latinos are viewed as "Hispanics" is a form of "a monolithic abstraction" (ibid., p. 7).

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Multiculturalism is seen by Samuel P. Huntington as a threat to the national identity and assimilation in the United States of America. In his book Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity (2004), Huntington differentiates Mexican immigrants from others in the United States. For him, Hispanization of the regions neighboring Mexico could divide America and would generate many problems. In fact, the Hispanics aim at sustaining both Hispanic and American identities rather than assimilating to the American culture. This study challenges Huntington's argument and aims at providing an example of the Hispanic-American experience of integration in America in which Maria represents a good example of a Hispanic-American citizen.

Multiculturalism is the theoretical framework employed to examine Cofer's novel. It is a sociopolitical theory which regards all cultures as equal. John Horton defines it as "a generic term for the co-existence of a significant plurality of diverse cultural groups with sometimes conflicting values or ways of life within a single polity" (Haddock & Sutch, 2003, p. 26). Multiculturalism opposes the idea of the "melting pot" in which minority groups are expected to fully assimilate within the dominant culture. Assimilation means, according to Stephen Castles and Alastair Davidson, "encouraging immigrants to learn the national language and take on the social and cultural practices of the receiving community" (2000, p. 60). In other words, it is the Americanization movement which has started prior to and after the American Revolution. In the twentieth century the term "melting pot" gets substituted by the "salad bowl", which indicates the emergence of multiculturalism, when "cultural differences within the society are valuable and should be preserved, proposing the alternative metaphor of the mosaic or salad bowl- different mix, but remain distinct" (qtd. in Baofu, 2012, pp. 21-22). The salad bowl is tied to the way different cultures integrate and combine like the salad ingredients.

Charles Taylor, a pioneer theorist in multiculturalism, argues that multiculturalism is concerned with the politics of recognition and identity. For him, multiculturalism is the backbone through which cultural diversity is recognized and appreciated. In order to grant public recognition for all citizens equally, social hierarchies must be broken down (Taylor, et al, 1994, p. 6). The uniqueness of everyone's identity or group is the thing that should be recognized (Taylor, et al., 1994, p. 38). In agreement with Taylor, Amy Gutmann, in the "Introduction" to *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, observes:

Part of the uniqueness of individuals results from the ways in which they integrate, reflect upon, and modify their own cultural heritage and that of other people with whom they come into contact. Human identity is created, as Taylor puts it, dialogically, in response to our relations, including our actual dialogues, with others. (Taylor, et al., 1994, p. 7)

As a matter of fact, integration is the core of a multicultural society.

Taylor also questions the way public institutions in a democratic society recognize the particular cultural identities of the minorities. He argues that all citizens will pay the price if the institutions view them as equals regardless of the ethnic, religious, racial, sexual differences existing among the peoples (ibid., p. 4). He argues that universal needs are axioms which cannot be questioned (Taylor, et al., 1994, p. 3). Cultural identities are different and they do not hold the same moral values.

Identity for Taylor is "a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being" (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). He argues that one of the essential components in shaping identity is "recognition" or "misrecognition" of others, whereas non-recognition of a group of people in their society could cause great harm to them and, therefore, it "can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (ibid. p. 25). As a result, he suggests that identity is formed and defined through a cross-cultural dialogue between the "Self" and the "Other"; he clarifies: "We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us" (ibid., p.p. 32-33). This dialogue is associated with the "acquisition of rich human languages of expression" (ibid., p. 32). Taylor and K. Anthony Appiah assert that developing one's way of being cannot be achieved through fighting against family, school, religion or society, but rather through "dialogue with people's understanding of who I am" (ibid., p. 154).

Cofer is the author of *The Line of the Sun* (1989), *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990), *An Island like You: Stories of the Barrio* (1995), *The Meaning of Consuelo* (2003), *First Person Fiction: Call Me Maria* (2004), *If I Could Fly* (2011), and other literary works. All of her works share similar themes, incidents and characters. Her protagonists are multiethnic and multilingual, like Maria, and they live between the Latino and American worlds. Her writing demonstrates her significant role in depicting the influence of culture on both Latino and American literature which she presents through her unique style that fuses distinct genres together (Urioste et al., 2017, p. 224). For Margret Crumpton, "Judith Ortiz Cofer represents the new frontier of American literature as her prose and poetry depict and integrate the many cross-sections of culture she has encountered in her life" (2003, p. 93). Cofer states that poetry is a priority for her among other genres (ibid.). This is the reason behind her constant incorporation of poetry within her novels or short stories.

Cofer's *Call Me Maria* is categorized as a young adult fiction which is targeted to adolescent readers. In her book *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), Rebecca S. Trites explains the genre of Young Adult literature (YA) and defines the growth of the novel with "an increasing awareness of the institutions constructing the individual" in which the protagonists attempt "to define themselves within the institutions that necessarily define the teenagers' existence" (Trites, 2000, p. 19). YA fiction demonstrates the "character's ability to grow into an acceptance of their environment" (ibid.). It addresses common themes related to friendship, romantic and sexual interest, and family life. Trites states that "teenagers experience school as a site in which they are simultaneously repressed by authority and peers and in which they are liberated by socializing with their friends and by learning new ideas" (ibid., p. 35). In Cofer's novel, school is one of the important social powers that influences Maria's growth. Family, school, and teachers play an important role in forming her identity.

Cofer exposes her adolescent protagonist, Maria, as a fifteen-year old, poor, Puerto Rican girl who moves to the multicultural city, New York, to live with her father in the barrio, where he is born, in order to fulfill her dream of attending a good university in America. Nevertheless, she is still connected to her homeland, a tropical island, through her mother who lives there and works as an English teacher, and her grandmother, Abuela, who comes to visit her in America. Her experience as a poor Hispanic-American adolescent living in the barrio in a basement apartment, attending public schools, helping her father, and trying to learn Spanglish has contributed to her transformation and enabled her to find a place in between the two worlds and to become the poet she dreams of.

Maria's experience is to a great extent a reflection of Cofer's in America. The likeness between their experiences makes many critics consider the work as an autobiography. Cofer (1952- 2016) has lived between the two worlds of Puerto Rico and America since she was a young girl as her protagonist, Maria. She was born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico and she kept moving with her family when she was two years-old between her homeland island and Paterson in New Jersey until the family settled in Georgia when Cofer was fifteen (Urioste et al., 2017, p. 223). Similarly, Maria is Puerto Rican-American who lives in the barrio neighborhood in New York at the same age of Cofer where the culture and Spanglish are strange to her (Cofer, 2004, pp. 1-2). Both Cofer and Maria have a special bond with their grandmothers; Cofer talks about the stories her grandmother tells her when she is in Puerto Rico about the villagers in their homeland. She admits that these stories have had a significant influence on her life (Acosta-Bélen, Autumn, 1993, pp. 86). Maria's grandmother, Abuela, is also an influencer in her life. When she comes to visit her in America she also tells her about how friendly people are in their homeland. When she comes back home, she leaves a journal for Maria in which she expresses her dislike for everything in America (Cofer, 2004, pp. 92-93).

Moreover, Cofer describes her life experience as a "cultural chameleon" in which she learns to live between two different cultures and languages (Cofer, 1990, p. 44). Likewise, Maria lives the same experience. Cofer is a novelist, a poet, an essayist, and a writer and Maria is a poet as well (Urioste et al., 2017, p. 223). In an interview with Margret Crumpton (1999), Cofer talks about her life in between two worlds saying: "as a Puerto-Rican immigrant my key experience [has been] growing up bilingual and bicultural" (Quoted in Urioste et al., 2017, p. 223). Such experience parallels Maria's life between New Jersey and her home country. The similarities between the writer and her

protagonist make her work a semi-autobiographical novel.

Most critical studies have examined Cofer's other works and approached them as autobiographies but none reads *Call me Maria* in depth through the lenses of multiculturalism. Multicultural literature reflects the viewpoint of an ethnic group or a character who represents this minority. It portrays their life, culture, and belief away from the stereotypical image of this ethnic group.

In her Master's thesis "Judith Ortiz Call me Maria: a diásporaporto-riquenhanos Estados Unidos" (Judith Ortiz and Call Me Maria: The Puerto-Rican Diaspora in the United States), Ana Sofia Antunes de Carvalho studies Cofer's novel as a feminine voice under the umbrella of Puerto Rican- American diaspora literature by referring to discrimination and prejudice. She argues that Maria's "ability to survive in an alien and hostile environment is fundamental to the construction of her identity and cultural self" (2011, p. 4). She highlights the aspects of young adult fiction in Cofer's novel.

Judith Ortiz Cofer in the Classroom: A Woman in Front of the Sun (2006) is a book by Carol Jago in which she suggests that Cofer's novel is a good source for students to read. Cofer writes: "books [keep] me from going mad. They [allow] me to imagine my circumstances as romantic" (Jago, 2006, p. 35). She adds that "the characters in Judith Ortiz Cofer's stories offer young readers hope" (ibid., p. 33). She also claims that the novel is insightful for students to write about their own experience by imitating Cofer's style and can influence them for reflective writing. (ibid., p. 34).

In her article "Coming of Age and the Transnational Subject in the Works of Judith Ortiz Cofer", Alexandra Fitts refers to Cofer as a multi-genres author whose works reflect her personal experience. She highlights the way her variety of works have coherent themes (2012, p. 58). However, the article mentions *Call Me Maria* simply as a young adult novel without further details.

This study is theoretical, critical and analytical. *Call Me Maria* portrays the multicultural environment in America where Maria tells her story as a Puerto Rican-American adolescent who faces many hurdles which handicap her growth in the American mixed ethnic society; yet, they have not made her a passive person. Instead, she integrates into the society without detaching herself from her own culture. Cofer's novel depicts many aspects related to the theoretical framework established by Charles. It highlights the main cultural issues discussed by Taylor which include identity formation, language, school, and the relationship between the adolescent and both her parents and her society. These issues are all apparent in Maria's experience in America.

Cofer's multicultural novel portrays the life of an adolescent female protagonist searching for her identity and seeking "recognition" in a multicultural society. She depicts the formation of a hyphenated-American identity regardless of the difficulties she might face in order to be recognized as an equal participant in the society. Identity formation is related to many bicultural themes; language, school, culture, religion, parent-child relationship are all essential parts of Maria's "diaspora" experience.

Forming identity as Hispanic-Americans becomes more difficult as not all individuals are able to confront obstacles, especially when they are very young because adolescence is a very critical stage at which identity is affected by everything that makes them treated as different. Names, traditions, family, appearance, religion, values, teachers, and classmates are all factors that might have positive or negative influence on their self-recognition. Names have a significant role in the protagonist's life. The fact that Maria has many nicknames in Spanish and English reflects her fragmented soul. She introduces herself in the first poem: "Call Me Maria" with distress for being a new person. She says:

*I am almost unhappy.
I am a different Maria,
No longer the Maria Alegre
Who was born on the tropical island
And who lived with two parents
in a house near the sea.*

*Until a few months ago,
Nor like the Maria Triste, the lonely
Barrio girl of my new American life.
I am fifteen years old.*

Call me Maria[emphasis in original]. (Cofer, 2004, p. 2)

She grants herself a new identity as Maria. She recalls the different names her mother used to call her when she was *Triste*: her *paloma*, her dove, her *ratoncita*, her little mouse, *nina*, Hija, and a *loca*(*ibid.*). With all these nicknames which carry different meanings and connotations in the two cultures, Maria finds it difficult to position herself within the two cultures. With this sense of fragmentation in her identity, transformation becomes a difficult task.

Names beside other obstacles in the girl's life are all parts of the shared experience among people in the same ethnic group and they help in forming their cultural identity. For Stuart Hall identity as a process is never complete. It is constructed through understanding one's "cultural identity" which is defined in relation to the shared culture among one group in which "one true self" of the individual becomes collective among those who share the same history and experience (Hall, 1994, pp. 222-223). Such kind of cultural identity cannot be formed without noticing the shared history and cultural codes among a group of people.

Based on the above discussion, Maria belongs to the Hispanic culture in which people go through similar experience of racial discrimination, unemployment, and prejudice just for holding different concepts of cultural codes, for speaking another language which is mocked, and even for holding names which are unfamiliar in the hegemonic European community. The similarities rather than the differences among the Hispanic people create their collective "one true self" as one people, which is part of each individual's cultural identity. In order to discover one's identity, the marginalized people should go back to their own history to rediscover their cultural heritage in an attempt to re-tell their own version of their past which is part of their post-colonial struggle ((Hall, 1994, pp. 223-224). Maria never ignores her cultural heritage which is depicted in the "barrio" in the novel. She asserts her connection to her cultural group as she says "I sit on our building's front stoop to enjoy their Spanglish poetry slam and gossip sessions" (Cofer, 2004, pp. 110). She also describes barrio women expressing her wishes to become like them; they walk "like the warriors to the front lines, to their jobs in factories all day, then return to their tiny, cold apartments to work somemore" (*ibid.*, p. 108). She also describes younger men who "party as hard as they work"(*ibid.*). She fondly represents the similarities among people in her ethnic group.

Hall's second definition of the cultural identity is concerned with differences among people; it is what they have become. Therefore, it is unstable and metaphoric. In this sense, identity is a process of "becoming" and "being". While the first one is connected to the past, the second one is tied to the person's future as both are inseparable. It carries history and simultaneously undergoes transformation (Hall, 1994, p. 223). Likewise, Taylor states that identity is "who we are, 'where we're coming from'" (Taylor, 1994, p. 33). In fact, Hall and Taylor agree that the past is as necessary as the present or the future in forming one's identity. In accordance to Hall's and Taylor's cultural identity, Cofer's novel represents both senses of identity.

The continuous movement between the homeland, Puerto Rico, and the mainland, America, is discussed in depth in Darlene Pagan's article "Ethnicity, Feminism and Semantic Shifts in the Work of Judith Ortiz Cofer". She suggests that this movement in Cofer's life makes her sense for both places the same; it is "a movement between the two in which neither is fixed or privileged" (2001, para. 1). Juan Bruce-Novoa, also, agrees with Pagan; she suggests that this movement generates a "migrating consciousness not to be confused with immigrating" (1992, p. 93) which means moving from one place to another. She adds: "cultural identity demands constant movement, oscillation, which ultimately places identity in the act of movement itself" (*ibid.*).

In *Call Me Maria*, Cofer's protagonist talks about her new life as she moves to America with her father seeking a better life and aiming at getting an admission in an American University. Maria sustains the connection with her homeland through the letters between her and her mother, which make the Island always there in her life. Her mother,

who is an English teacher, decides to stay in the Puerto Rican Island (Cofer, 2004, pp. 3-4). Maria expresses her feeling of depression and loneliness in her first poem in which she compares her life in the tropical island in a house near the sea with her parents to her life in the barrio in a basement apartment, which she compares to a cave (ibid., p. 3). She reflects a fragmentation in her identity; she likens her feelings to a bird "soaring above all that ugly or sad" and then she feels like "a small, underground creature" (ibid., pp. 1-2), who will not see the sun. Though Maria does not like her new life, she is a positive, nice person who helps her father by cleaning the apartment and cooking food (ibid., p. 20).

In her "Letter to Mami", Maria tells her mother about her new life as she reads all the time and her "English is getting better everyday" (Cofer, 2004, p. 4). Maria is a very smart girl; she always makes jokes to make her mother laugh. She explains her father's carelessness towards her mother saying: "I think he misses you, Mami. I know that he does not write letters, but he always asks me what you say in your letters to me" (ibid., p. 4) in an attempt to help them get along with each other.

Maria's love of her homeland is clear from the very beginning of the novel. She misses the time when she looks for shells with her mother on the beach. She describes the *cabana* where she used to live with her family, which is "a little cement cabin" (Cofer, 2004, p. 6) on the beach. She remembers her mambo costume and wearing make up in a humorous sense; she says "I have painted my face like a clown's, a lot of red lipsticks and thick blue eye shadow" (ibid., p. 4). She cannot forget her mother's red Mexican skirt. She also describes the family gathering when they play Celia Cruz's song to learn the mambo dance (ibid., p. 7). They also dance the Salsa. She describes their food and how she licks the *avena* bowl from the bottom (ibid., p. 8).

Abalos also discusses identity formation for Latinos in particular, which is similar to Halls' and Taylor's definitions of identity. Abalos' political theory focuses on how Latinos should be part of the 'drama of life' through which they reject all forms of injustice practiced in the institutions and call for equality. In order to live this drama of life, Abalos mentions the "four archetypal ways of life" which are: "emanation, incoherence, deformation, and transformation" which are sacred sources in Latinos' life (Abalos, 1986, p. 5). He is against assimilation which he views as "a form of self-hatred and the deprecation of our ethnic and racial heritage" (ibid.). When people assimilate to the dominant culture, they will forget about their selfhood which Abalos considers as a handicap. One cannot dislocate himself from his cultural heritage because it is the most sacred part of identity (ibid.). For him, the god of transformation is the "sacred lord [who] enables us to recreate, reshape and rearticulate ourselves, our history and our community through the creative imagination" (ibid.). Cofer begins her novel in Maria's depressed and lonely voice for missing her mother and her island. Soon she starts to adapt and to deal with all the difficulties in her life. Maria's personality transforms through her recognition that her "difference" is a valuable thing that should make her feel proud. Maria becomes able to communicate with everyone, her multiethnic classmates, her teachers, people in the barrio, and her family.

Abalos' theory of transformation parallels Fanon's Manichaeism of colonialism which he discusses in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) in the chapter titled "On Violence". Fanon believes that the colonizer reduces and reifies the colonized as a lesser savage being who must be controlled in order to justify colonization. This violence practiced against the colonized can be ended when the colonized subject becomes aware of this fact and violence is also a part of this liberation process (1961, p. 2). Violence is not only physical; what is practiced against Maria in the fictional work is another form of violence that also reduces and reifies her. Though colonization is over and such groups must have been granted the same rights as American citizens in a multiethnic democratic society, some people are still influenced by the stereotypical image of seeing the "other" and the "self" regardless of the law. Fanon's liberation process resembles Taylor's "politics of recognition" in which one should liberate himself from all the stereotypes imposed on him/her just because he/she belongs to a certain racial group. Recognizing one's self and appreciating one's own culture are part of the liberation process prerequisite in the reconstruction of the individual's identity.

Hall and Taylor share the belief that opening the gate for the past to be retold is crucial in shaping one's identity. In agreement with them, Abalos emphasizes the significant role that professional Latinos play in transformation. He

thinks that the way Latinos are represented in books, anthologies, and commentaries are thwarting and deceptive (Abalos, 1986, p. 48). Abalos is against the programs of Latin American Studies for being neither scholarly nor academic. These kinds of literary writings assume that complete assimilation of Latinos is their sole measure to solve their problems. On that account, Cofer's novel is written by an author who goes through the same experience and belongs to the same cultural group as her protagonists; therefore, her narrative as a professional and intellectual mirrors her own culture and people, and it functions as a "counternarrative" in retelling and rewriting history.

Abalos relates the Latino being to four models. The first model is the traditional and the second is the assimilationist. In the third model, Latinos recognize that they are wounded by misleading leaders and movements which have led them to reach the fourth model of transformation through which they discover their identity as both Latinos and Americans (Abalos, 1986, p. 6). Latinos insist on preserving their family heritage and being committed to their community without ignoring the necessity of getting into America's business world which can be achieved by developing themselves to be competent (ibid., p. 83).

Cofer introduces the transformation of a dynamic, adolescent girl, Maria. She is still tied to the memories and history of her Hispanic roots. When her grandmother visits her, she does not like the cold weather and the dark apartment. She tells Maria about her homeland, her Island in the sun. Though Abuela is from Manhattan Island, she teaches Maria how to be proud of her cultural heritage where people treat each other nicely. Abuela says:

We shared what we had, and if you were poor, your neighbors helped you. *La familia, los amigos, le amor*, that's what mattered. People were not always angry; people were not cold like they are here in this place, these are cold people.... The sun shines every day on my Island. (Cofer, 2004, pp. 92-93)

Abuela's visit to America reflects the grandmother's role in reviving the girl's awareness of her cultural heritage. She mirrors Abalos' traditional model who is linked to her traditions, homeland and culture.

In her article, "Hispanics in the United States: More than Spanglish", Cecilia Montes-Alcala attempts to highlight the different definitions and attitudes toward Spanglish, which she views as an evolution of Spanish. She refers to the Census 2000 records in which 28.1 million Hispanics who are over 5 years old speak Spanish at home, which makes it the second spoken language in the United States of America, though unofficially. She defines Spanglish as "the alliance of Spanish and English in the U.S." (2009, p. 98). It is also defined in Merriam Webster Dictionary as "Spanish marked by numerous borrowings from English broadly: any of various combinations of Spanish and English" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2003, p. 1195). Maria "used to think [Spanglish] was broken English, but it really does have its own rules of grammar" (Cofer, 2004, p. 18). It is "invented by people who can dream in two languages" (ibid.) English and Spanish.

Cofer's protagonist decides to learn Spanglish as her third language although she is told by her mother that she will not fill any job application in this language (Cofer, 2004, p. 121). For Maria, Spanglish is "[her] language of adventure, of fun, of survival in the streets of [her] new home" (ibid., p. 121) which is the barrio. For Alcala, Spanglish as a cultural term, came into being as a necessity. She mentions Ed Morales who suggests that:

at the root of Spanglish is a very universal state of being. It is a displacement from one place, home, to another place, home, in which one feels at home in both places, yet at home in neither place... The only choice you have left is to embrace the transitory (read the transnational) state of in-between. (Morales, 2002, p. 7)

She adds that Spanish has borrowed not only from English, but also "around 4,000 words from Arabic" (Alcala, 2009, p. 106). Borrowing from other languages never reduces it.

Alcala also refers to the way some critics see Spanglish "as an invasion of the Spanish language by English, a war between the two languages, and/or a threat to both" (2009, p. 100). Other critics, like Patrick Osio (2002) in the *Houston Chronicle*, "No se habla Spanglish: Useless hybrid traps Latinos in language barrio" suggests that Spanglish users are viewed as living "a lifelong state of limbo;" (Osio, 2002, p. 1). Spanglish is described as "educational idiocy" and "language aberration" (ibid., p. 1). Alcala also stresses the way Spanish is mocked or faked through media and movies.

She argues that this happens only by "monolingual English speakers with a humorous purpose" (2009, p. 110), whether they are derived by racism or not. She agrees with Jane Hill's suggestion that the way Spanish is derided indicates Anglo discrimination/racism not only of the language itself but also of those who speak it as well. (ibid., p. 107). Thus, while some celebrate the birth of this language as an essential part of the Hispanic culture and a normal development of language as in all bilingual societies, others hold it up as an object of ridicule making negative stereotypical suggestions about it.

The role of language is of a paramount importance in *Call Me Maria*. Cofer reflects her own culture in the novel and incorporates some Spanish and Spanglish words with their explanation while others are left ambiguous. Edna Acosta-Belen discusses language in her interview with Cofer; she says:

She writes in English, but in English that is inflected with Spanish syntax and idioms. As a result, she has received some criticism from both sides of the linguistic divide: some Anglo critics have taken issue with her non-standard English while some Puerto Rican writers and critics have questioned her intended audience and authenticity. (Acosta-Belen, 1993, p. 68)

Cofer explains her reason beneath writing in English as the language which is more familiar to her.

Language for Taylor is not only words, but rather "modes of expression whereby we define ourselves" (Taylor, et al, 1994, p. 32). One cannot define his identity or understand himself without the "acquisition of rich human languages of expression" (ibid., p.32). For Maria, poetry is her way of expressing herself and communicating with other, which makes her a dialogical character in Taylor's terms. Cofer depicts her insistence on learning English when she is in America. She starts learning English on the Island as her mother helps her in that. In order to teach Maria, her mother talks to her in "English in the morning and Spanish in the afternoon" (Cofer, 2004, p. 6). To improve her language, she makes a list of words and listens to the English lessons she gets from her mother. She writes to her Mami: "All day I talk to the walls. 'How are you today?' 'I am fine, thank you. How are you?'" (ibid., p. 4). Cofer talks about the role of language through Mr. Browning's word: "Words are weapons. Words are tools" (ibid., p. 46) to show the power of language in forming one's identity.

When Maria is on the Island, her mother speaks in English to her although she knows that her daughter will answer in Spanish. She is a caring mother who thinks of all what might help develop Maria's personality. She teaches her and corrects her pronunciation. She talks about the difficulty in pronouncing the letters which are not heard in Spanish like "th"; her mother says: "Thousand, not dousan, Maria. Put the tip of your tongue under your teeth and blow out a little air" (Cofer, 2004, p. 11).

Cofer uses a lot of Spanish words in her novel which are not always explained. Maria thinks that her name Alegre means "crazy" for a long time until her grandmother, Abuela, tells her that it means "happy" and they choose that name because she "was the happiest baby she had ever known" (Cofer, 2004, p. 6). Cofer elaborates on her usage of the two languages stating that: "saying one thing in a particular way is completely different than saying the same thing in another way" (Cofer, 1994, p. 75). Using Spanish in her writing, is "a formula for reminding people that what they're reading or hearing comes from the mind and the thoughts of Spanish speaking people" (Quoted in Pagan, 2001, para. 2). She aims at creating a sense of oneness among Spanish speaking people who would feel that this experience is similar to theirs and, therefore, her novel would empower them to learn from the protagonist's experience.

Family plays an important role in forming Maria's identity. The "significant others" in Taylor's terms contribute to the construction of one's identity, especially for young people. Taylor asserts that parents do not only have influence on us at the beginning but they also continue to be part of our future life. He demonstrates that one should not accept all things without giving attention to what he/she wants; he elaborates:

we should strive to define ourselves on our own to the fullest extent possible, coming as best we can to understand and thus get some control over the influence of our parents, and avoiding falling into anymore such dependent relationships. We need relationships to fulfill, but not to define, ourselves. (Taylor, 1994, p. 33)

One cannot liberate himself completely from the others' influence on his/her life.

The parent-child relationship is also discussed thoroughly by the psychiatric and the humanistic writer Andrew Solomon in his book *Far From the Tree: Parents Children and the Search for Identity* (2012) wherein he draws a distinction between two kinds of identities: the vertical and the horizontal. Presumably, the way Solomon approaches the case of children who are different and disabled by their deafness, dwarfism, Down Syndrome, Autism, Schizophrenia, prodigies, rape, crime and transgender, is to a large extent connected to the way multicultural theory deals with the differences among people and how their rights are related to their differences. Both Taylor and Solomon invalidate difference-blind principles. In this regard, Solomon states that:

All kinds of attributes make one less able, illiteracy and poverty are disabilities, and so are stupidity, obesity, and boringness. Extreme age and extreme youth are both disabilities. Faith is a disability insofar as it constrains you from self-interest; atheism is a disability inasmuch as it shields you from hope. One might see power as a disability, too for the isolation in which it imprisons those who wield it. (2012, p. 33)

Thus, disabilities according to Solomon parallel differences in multiculturalism. They are relevant to a person's particularity in multiculturalism. Misrecognition is not only related to minorities of a certain ethnicity, language, religion, and so on, but also disabled and homosexual people. The latter is also prone to suffer from this misrecognition. In a similar vein, K. Anthony Appiah proposes that "there are other collective identities—disabled people, for example—that have sought recognition, modeling themselves sometimes on racial minorities (with whom they share the experience of discrimination and insult), or (as with deaf people) on ethnic groups" (Taylor, et al., 1994, p. 151). Being different for these people is the reason which renders them subjects to discrimination and misrecognition. Maria is different because she is Puerto Rican- American, she speaks Spanish and English with poor accent, and she looks different. Maria's science teacher, Ms. Coronado believes a close look at ordinary things will make one recognize their beauty. She says: "the closer you look the more beauty you will see" (Cofer, 2004, p. 76). To prove her argument, she takes a single hair from Maria's to let the class see it under the microscope. Maria believes that her teacher attempts to "to save [her] from the turning into an ugly toad in the minds of [her] classmates"(ibid., p. 77). She states that "but for days I am teased about the tropical rain forest on my beautiful head" (ibid.). The teacher describes Maria's hair saying: "the hair shaft is like a little blade of grass borrowing through the epidermis into the sunlight!... Maria has at least 100,000 of these beauties sprouting from her beautiful head" (ibid.). Her difference makes her a subject of ridicule by her classmates. Mastering English and the support of her teacher, family and friends help her to be recognized regardless of her particularity.

Solomon differentiates the vertical identity from the horizontal one. He emphasizes the parents' wish to control their children's throwback genes which in fact are not only influenced by the family but also the environment which plays a pivotal role in evoking such "recessive traits" (2012: 1). Children cannot be a duplicate of their parents; nevertheless, they may inherit some of their parents' characteristics. On a report of this, vertical identities are formed when the "attributes and values are passed down from parent to child across the generations not only through strands of DNA, but also through shared cultural norms" (2012, p. 2) such as color, language, religion, and nationality. Solomon indicates that some inherent traits are acquired from "a peer group" or from being participants in "a subculture outside the family" which is the horizontal identity (ibid.).

In Cofer's novel both, Maria's father and mother have had a significant role in developing her identity. Her mother is a strong, independent woman who teaches her daughter English and pronunciation; she laughs and dances with her. Notwithstanding that her mother does not live with her, she supports her on all occasions and empowers her to reach self-assertion and self-actualization. Maria acquires many traits from her mother who makes a decision to stay in the place she loves, "in her native soil... feeding on sand and sun" (Cofer, 2004, p. 14), does the job that she is passionate about, and not to go with her husband. Maria says "I will go with Papi. I will explore a new world, conquer English, become strong, grow through the concrete like a flower that has taken root under the sidewalk. I will grow strong, with

or without the sun" (ibid.). She chooses to go with her father because she knows that receiving an American education at a respected university would make a great transformation in her life.

On the other hand, Maria's father feels depressed on the Island and decides to go back to New York where he was born leaving his wife behind. Maria describes her father's feelings towards his homeland and the mainland saying:

His feet wanted to walk on the concrete of the city where he was born. He complained of the sand that burned his feet all day long on the beach that he cleaned for strangers. He said the sand was in his clothes, his eyes, his ears. (Cofer, 2004, p. 3)

Home for him is the place where he was born and living on the Island gives him a sense of displacement. He is talented at playing the guitar and chooses to play the old Puerto Rican songs. He chooses to marry an Indian woman because he falls in love with her. His daughter believes that he loves her mother because she speaks English very well (Cofer, 2004, p. 8). Maria's mother presumably resembles his love to New York. The father wishes to his daughter a good life and a good education. Though the father is obsessed with the American life style, he is unable to make Maria like him; she is still proud of her cultural heritage without showing hatred to America; for her, each place has positive aspects. Although Maria's father plays the role of the assimilationist, she never wants to become like him; she transforms and never forgets about her history. The protagonist develops a cultural identity in both senses; the fixed and the unstable, transformative one.

Cofer represents the experience of a Latina-American student at multicultural school environment where there are students from different ethnicities and backgrounds. Abalos highlights the main challenges that the Latinos have faced as individuals and as groups living in the American society as Americans and Latinos. As citizens in the United States, Latinos struggled to get their civil rights in the 1960s, especially in relation to the politics of education (Abalos, 1986, p. ix). He values education as a means of guaranteeing a better life and opportunities. In order to transform, Latinos should continue to fight for acquiring degrees and for bilingual education because their children leave school early and do not usually get higher education (ibid., pp. 6-7). Transformation happens when they start to celebrate their cultural heritage and claim it to be a fundamental part of their education for the purpose of reproducing their history (ibid., p. x).

In their book *A History of the Mexican-American People*, Julian Samora and Patricia Vandel Simon refer to the Supreme Court decision (*Lau V. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563, 1974), in relation to separating Mexican American students from dominant white students in a large school in Los Angeles. It declares that:

The child should be accepted as he is. Education should be based on the talents, the heritage, and sociocultural attributes which the student possesses. We interpret this to mean that if a child does not know English, his native language presumably should be used in order to teach him English or special efforts should be made in his behalf. (Quoted in Samora and Simon, 1993, p. 161)

The students' culture and language should be taken into consideration at schools in America where all of them should be able to get equal educational opportunities without ignoring their difference. Such particular needs of the minorities are part of the multicultural society which aims to grant its citizens their rights based not only on the similarities among the different cultural groups but also on the "differences" as well. Maria is a unique girl who challenges obstacles related to language and she develops her English not only to understand others, but also to express herself and her feelings in a poetic language. In spite of granting their right to get equal education as different by law, speaking English is necessary to excel and fulfill the student's dreams of getting higher education.

Cofer's novel portrays Maria's life at a multicultural American school. James Banks and Cherry Banks refer to multicultural education in American schools as "a reform of movement that is trying to change the schools and other educational institutions so that students from all social class, gender, racial, language, and cultural groups will have an equal opportunity to learn" (Banks, 2010, p. 4). She feels at first that her school is like a prison; "it has a wall around it and bars on the windows" (Cofer, 2004, p. 4). She does not have many friends, but she likes some of her teachers. She has few friends, Whoopee Dominguez, Papi-lindo, and Uma. She loves her English teacher, Mr. Golden, who

encourages her to write poetry. When the teacher gives the student a task to make declarative sentences from a list of words in English, Maria writes:

*My brain contains a universe.
I dream in Spanish of white sand beaches.
The ground I walk on is hard concrete,
But between the tall buildings, on a clear day,
I can still see the blue horizon.* (Cofer, 2004, pp. 46-47)

In spite of her feeling of displacement, Maria can see the horizon; she is able to view the positive side of her life. Mr. Golden avows Maria's talent as a poet after these lines. He plays a positive role as he encourages students to believe in themselves. He tells Maria's barrio friend: "Go on, Ms. Dominguez, I'm going to ask you to take it over the class for today" (ibid., pp. 48). The teacher's role in multicultural schools is depicted in a positive way that helps the students to talk about themselves and about their culture during the class. He asks them to let other students know about what have made them and who they are by wearing their traditional clothes on Who You Are Day. Maria wears her mother's red skirt which "opens like an umbrella" (ibid., p. 96), and her father's sharkskin suit jacket. She is proud of herself for wearing traditional Puerto Rican clothes; she feels that she is elegant and she ignores the kids who make fun of her costume. Being mocked reminds her of her grandmother's words: "*I know who you are and who you may be if you choose* [emphasis in original]" (ibid., p. 98) and she tells Mr. Golden having her head held high: "today I am a poem" ((ibid.).

The role of schools is discussed by the French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron who refer to the important role of the educational system in America in creating inequalities among children who belong to different social classes and, therefore, it produces misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1990, p. XI). For Bourdieu, changing and reproducing the structure of a social system can be achieved by reproducing school system (ibid, p. VII). Misrecognition, for Taylor, is dangerous and it affects forming one's identity. Though Maria has been ridiculed by some of her classmates, she is strong enough to ignore them. Her teacher plays an essential role in forming students' cultural identities, helping them accept difference, and being proud of their cultural heritage. In the same way, some people contribute to the creation of inequalities among students, others have been trying to reproduce this system to be a multicultural environment in which all individuals are appreciated and accepted as different but unique.

In her book *Profane and Sacred Latino/a American writers Reveal the Interplay of the Secular and the Religious*, Juan Bruce-Novoa highlights the power of storytelling in Cofer's literary works. For Novoa, Cofer's protagonists adopt the oral tradition as they "seek alternative spiritual paths for their sense of identity and for their community" (2008, p. 70). Her characters feel blessed at the end "because they have empowered themselves through alternative stories" (ibid.). She refers to Cofer's interview with Edna Acosta-Belen in which Acosta-Belen states that storytelling plays a crucial role in Puerto Rican women's lives that she describes as a "survival strategy" (Autumn 1993, p. 87). In the same interview, Cofer talks about the role of storytelling in the lives of women in her family; she says:

I instinctively knew storytelling was a form of empowerment, that the women in my family were passing on power from one generation to another through fables and stories. They were teaching each other how to cope with life in a world where women led restricted lives ... I felt that the women in my family empowered me and when I got my college education I could transfer that oral tradition into literature. I took what they gave me and made it into a weapon for myself. (Acosta-Belen, Autumn 1993, p. 86)

She obviously employs storytelling in her literary works in general and in *Call Me Maria* in particular.

Martha Menchaca also refers to the oral tradition as "newspapers, property tax records, speeches, and court cases are among the many primary documents that can verify peoples' oral histories. Such abundant physical evidence makes possible the historical reconstruction of racial discrimination" (Menchaca, 1995: xv). For her reconstructing one's identity is tied with the oral history of Mexicans. In this novel, storytelling is used among the three generations represented by Maria who keeps sending her mother letters, her mother who sends her letters in return, and her

grandmother who keeps telling Maria stories about her homeland, the beautiful nature, and the kind villagers. In this respect, Melissa Heckler and Carol Birch, in the article *Building Bridges with Stories* (1997), point out that “the longevity of the oral tradition is a testimony to the power of the told story. Stories improve understanding by building bridges of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual connections among peoples” (p. 8). In the Hispanic oral storytelling tradition, the strong connections are born within families and passed down to subsequent generations. It is imperative for young people to learn about their own family, history, culture, and the expectations that the family has for them in an endeavor to understand how to direct themselves in a multicultural world. Cultural heritage and history are main issues for Taylor and Hall who believe that they are essential in reaching recognition and forming a cultural identity.

To summarize, Cofer's novel depicts the Hispanic immigrants in the United States of America as a pluralistic society. Despite the differences among individuals in this group, there are lots of similarities which are necessary in creating the collective "one true self" described by Taylor. Maria has her own differences and particularities but she also shares similarities in her experience as a young adult in America; she belongs to the Hispanic ethnic minority, she speaks Spanish and Spanglish, and her identity is in the process of becoming. She keeps moving between her homeland and the mainland mentally and emotionally. As an ethnic minority, Hispanic Americans have a collective history, one language, and the same cultural background. When the adolescent protagonist becomes part of the barrio community and speaks Spanglish, she recognizes the unity among individuals in her own cultural group and she becomes able to understand who she is. Such transformation changes Maria as she has self-confidence and she no longer feels bad for her classmates' comments. This empowers her to insist on seeking recognition and reconstructing her identity. Without her past as a Puerto Rican-American, she will not have future. Not all protagonists perceive difference in a positive way. Some characters choose to fully assimilate into the American culture, like Maria's father. To be different is no more a problem for Maria; difference makes her unique and distinguished. She enjoys her life, excels at school, and becomes a poet. Transformation happens when the character chooses to assimilate or to integrate; it is a matter of choice.

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تشكيل الهوية ثنائية الثقافة في أدب اليافعين الأمريكي المتعدد الثقافات: (دراسة في رواية كوفر ناديني ماريا)

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تسليط الضوء على تصوير التجربة الأمريكية الإسبانية في رواية جودثاوترتز كوفر رواية سرد الذات: نادني ماريا (2004) إذ تركز الدراسة على كيفية تصوير كوفر لبطلتها اليافعة ماريا، التي استطاعت تشكيل هوية ثنائية الثقافة في أمريكا كدولة متعددة الثقافات. كيف تستجيب البطلة للاضطهاد والظلم و كيف يساهم المجتمع والعائلة في تكوين الهوية الثقافية للشخص، كلها اسئلة للطرح في هذه الدراسة. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على نظرية تشارلز تابلور في مقالة "سياسات الاعتراف" التي اشار فيها الى اهم المسائل المتعلقة في سياسات التعددية الثقافية. كما أنه ركز على الحاجة للاعتراف والحوار في تكوين الهوية للأقليات الاثنية. وتقوم هذه الدراسة بتسليط الضوء على الدور الأساسي للغة، علاقة الآباء بالأبناء، والمدرسة في تكوين هوية البطلة. وقد خلصت الدراسة الى أن سلوك ماريا الإيجابي تجاه ماضيها وموروثها الثقافي كفتاة أمريكية من أصل بورتوريكي قد ساعدها على مواجهة الصعوبات التي واجهتها في المجتمع المتعدد الثقافة حيث تتمكن أخيراً من تحقيق أحلامها كشاعرة، الوصول إلى ادراك ذاتها، وتشكيل هويتها كشخص فريد وكفؤ.

الكلمات الدالة: تشكيل الهوية، التعددية الثقافية، الاعتراف.