

REINTERPRETATION OF SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY GENRE IN RICHARD RODRIGUEZ'S *DARLING*

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Abstract. The article is focused on the reinterpretation of the genre of spiritual autobiography in Richard Rodriguez's novel *Darling*. Rodriguez's autobiographical prose depicts his extremely embittered attitude to heritage and the pitfalls lurking at the crossroads of cultural practices. For a long time, this author had been placed outside the canon of Chicano literature and was considered an 'outsider' because of his statement that he was not a representative of a minority but a supporter of the assimilation of immigrants into the broader mainstream American society. Rodriguez emphasized the privilege of the individual over the collective identity. The study focuses on the formation of ethnic identity by autobiographical narrator Rodriguez and the evolution of his views on the nature of the concept of 'self-identification'. In addition, as Mexican-Americans are gradually becoming the largest ethno-cultural group in the United States of America, the issues of identity, assimilation, heterogeneity and cultural hybridity raised by the author stay relevant and important.

Key words: Richard Rodriguez, autobiographical novel, ethnic identity, identity formation, memory, race, religion, ethno-cultural group

INTRODUCTION

The interest of contemporary US artists in the genre of autobiography can be explained mainly by their desire to change the general and impersonal ideals of multiculturalism and 'diversity politics' into personal and specific. According to recent observations, the wide variety of autobiographical genre types reflects the need to return to the individual and to integrate a 'split' identity. For example,

Guajardo describes this category in ‘their own’ and ‘other people’s’ cultural contexts – as a result, creating a certain set of images of their ‘self’ (2002: 20–30).

The complexity and inconsistency of the nature of the autobiography genre is manifested in its stability and tenacity, but also variability and flexibility. Modern research deals with the possibility of the disappearance of the autobiographical canon (Chermenska, 2008). Thus Honcharova proposes a number of terms for the designation of autobiographical writing – autofictionality, autobiographics, ego document, heterobiography, etc. (2016). On the cusp of the 18th and 19th centuries, the genre of biography began to be considered as separate, while the issues of its problems and poetics are outlined (ibid.).

The second half of the 20th century finally saw in-depth and active American autobiographical writing studies. A landmark for the time was the collection *Autobiography: essays theoretical and critical*, edited by James Olney (1980). In the introduction, Olney outlines a range of issues, among which, in our opinion, important. The scholar defines the ‘autobiography’ as ‘both the simplest of literary enterprises and the commonest’ (Olney, 1980: 2). The claim ‘what is autobiography to one observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another’ provides the reasons for the delay in theoretical understanding of this genre, the fluidity of genre embodiments of autobiography as well as its hybridity. (Olney, 1980: 5). American theorists of the genre have not tried to create their own approach to its study, instead just opposing or agreeing with European achievements in this literary field. Modern American research shows an increasing interest in ‘borderline’ variants of the autobiographical genre: female confessional literature, ethnic autobiographies, autobiographies of sexual minority members, etc. (Olney, 1980).

Modern literary studies on autobiography are mainly focused on the issue of ‘self’ and its language, as well as on attempts to find out how three elements – autobiography, ‘self’ and language – are configured and related. Among the discussions on this topic is the opinion of a group of scholars about the fundamental impossibility of autobiography to grasp the individual's self (de Man, 1979; Gusdorf, 1980; Taylor, 1989). Other researchers insist on the idea that identity is created exactly in the process of autobiographical action – and in this sense, writing an autobiography is the second acquisition of language, the second birth of the ‘self’ (Couser, 1989). Paul Eakin believes that the ability of language to form the ‘self’ is absolutely necessary both for living a life and for the implementation of an autobiographical act (1985: 181–278).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1 THE GENRE OF SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The origins of the genre of spiritual autobiography can be found in early Christian tradition and, in particular, in the bibliography by Augustine ‘the Blessed’ Aurelius

(354–430) (Morariu, 2018: 145). According to the rules of spiritual autobiography, the narrator's description of his spiritual quest takes the format of a dialogue with his confessor. During Reformation, these personal stories of spiritual insight were associated with Providence. In the 17th century, this genre found active development among Protestants, especially in England and then in the United States. A model of the spiritual autobiography of that time was John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) (ibid.).

For American Protestant communities, it was important not only to individually testify to spiritual insight documented in prose but also to verify it with visual examples, actions, or activities. Proven spiritual rebirth was a prerequisite for joining the church community.

Authors who worked in the genre of spiritual autobiography insisted that spiritual values always prevail over material ones, and as soon as a person undergoes spiritual rebirth and finds God, worldly troubles, worries and problems lose all significance in his life. Authors of spiritual autobiographies, from St. Paul to Albert Schweitzer, emphasized that worldly worries, troubles and problems pale after knowing God and spiritual conversion (ibid.).

The formulaic plot of the spiritual autobiography genre includes the sinful youth of the narrator and, subsequently, their gradual awakening, awareness of their own spiritual decline, conversion to God and salvation of their soul. The narrators of spiritual autobiographies were travelers, pilgrims, missionaries, seers, prophets, philosophers and scholastics. The main goal of their stories is to describe the path that led to spiritual insight and reunification with God. Travelers and truth seekers (for example, Thomas Merton), mainly after long journeys to foreign lands and unexplored parts of the world, eventually come to the conclusion that their search should be focused on their own soul, and the external world is too sinful to find inner peace in it (Mikhed, 2007: 40–54).

Spiritual biographies written by pilgrims and missionaries (e.g., St. Paul, Jonathan Edwards) focus on depicting the implementation of God's ideas and instructions in life, as well as the difficulties that the narrators face in doing so. Spiritual autobiographies written by visionaries and mystics (e.g., Teresa of Ávila, Thérèse of Lisieux) do not enjoy much popularity, as they deal mainly with supernatural experiences. Finally, the stories of scientists and philosophers (e.g., Marcus Aurelius, Benjamin Franklin, Denise Levertov) center around a long intellectual search for truth and the path to spiritual purification (Morariu, 2018).

At the same time, modernists and especially postmodernists are wary of the possibility of deep spiritual restructuring of the individual. The very process of rewriting one's own identity loses the non-ambiguity, which was mandatory for traditional spiritual autobiographies. This uncertainty and ambiguity about the possibility of self-knowledge was the dominant feature of modernist literature and was even more amplified in postmodernism.

Contemporary spiritual autobiographies have a secular reference point and are occasionally based on purely conventional religious experience. The spiritual journeys of postmodern literature will rather focus on the constant search for

self and occasionally conclude with the achievement of the integrity of self. They are realized in the form of meditations, infinite uncertainties, and a mixture of temporal and spatial layers.

There is no doubt that transformations in the genre of autobiography and, more specifically, spiritual autobiography are associated with a postmodern understanding of the self and subjectivity, which are closely intertwined and connected with the discourses of ideology, culture and economics. As Butler points out, identity is not an autonomous construct but rather a signifying practice that is constantly changing and varying, along with shifts in both experience and language (1990: 522). These two things define the self as such. Hence, autonomy is conventional, if not accidental. The subject is derived from a discourse or some dominant regime. In this summary of J. Butler's reflections, a critical feature of postmodern autobiography may be emphasized, which is an attempt to revive the subject and its control over discourse. As Joseph Fichtelberg pinpoints, modern autobiographical writing has a two-vector process: separation and reinterpretation (cited in Padilla, 1994).

The complexity of an autobiographical act in the postmodern paradigm lies in constructing the integrity of an artistic image from fragmentary experience, which is achieved by re-remembering, enabling localization of subjectivity in various discourses and giving it uniqueness. Further on, this uniqueness provokes opposition (or at least distancing from) to the powers of specific ideologies. Such uniqueness as the opposition is an affirmation of the importance of a particular experience and a personal version of the truth.

2 THE PHENOMENON OF RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Richard Rodriguez was born to a family of Mexican immigrants in San Francisco, California, USA, on July 31, 1944. He spoke Spanish until he was 6 and then went to a Catholic school. Later, he graduated from the Sacramento Christian Brothers High School. In his youth, he used to deliver newspapers and work as a gardener (London, 2009).

Rodriguez received a Bachelor of Arts degree (Stanford University), a Master's degree (Columbia University), a PhD in English Renaissance literature (California University, Berkeley), and studied at the Warburg Institute in London on a Fulbright scholarship. Now a well-known author, Rodriguez had worked as a teacher, international journalist and educational consultant, and also often appeared with his visual essays on *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer* (ibid). Rodriguez's bibliography includes *Hunger of Memory: the education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982), *Mexico's Children* (1990), *Days of Obligation: An argument with my Mexican father* (1992), *Brown: the last discovery of America* (2002) and *Darling: A spiritual autobiography* (2013) (in Shannon, 2015).

Despite the opportunity for an academic career, Rodriguez became a freelance writer, occasionally pursuing other jobs, including as an editor for newspapers and magazines, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Harper's Magazine* among them. In 1982,

he published his first book, *Hunger of Memory: the education of Richard Rodriguez* (ibid.). The book describes his long and difficult transformation from a Hispanic boy from a Mexican family into an American person – not just in culture but also in language, from somewhat secluded Spanish to worldwide spoken English. The author describes this journey as full of pain and suffering, having to emancipate from his Hispanic culture and family. He believed that such a concept as family values was much more represented in Mexican culture than among Americans because for Mexicans, the problem of separating from their roots is much more acute.

Despite its success with critics and a sizable number of awards, *Hunger of Memory: the education of Richard Rodriguez* turned out to be a controversial book due to the author's stance on cultural assimilation. Rodriguez believed that assimilation should exclude raising children to be bilingual as well as undertaking any cultural inclusion actions on the government's part. Due to these views, the author saw an objective amount of outcry from his former Hispanic compatriots, with a hefty dose of slurs and epithets, such as 'pocho' (a derisive term for Americanized Mexicans) and 'coconut' (due to being brown of skin but white in spirit) (London, 2009).

Unlike his first book, Rodriguez's latest novel, *Darling: A spiritual autobiography*, focuses on desert symbolism in the three main religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The author's interest in the desert theme lies in the fact that all three of these world religions have grown in the desert biome. One of this book's chapters, *Jerusalem and the Desert*, compares the desert to a vast and endless temple in the emptiness of which God resides invisibly (Rodriguez, 2013: 44–47).

Rodriguez's works are especially controversial due to their autobiographical nature. The borders of the autobiography genre have not been clearly defined to date, nor have the criteria of its subgenres been listed (reminiscences, diaries, memoirs, notebooks, notes). Study-wise, it is impossible as well as unnecessary to draw borders on the autobiography genre due to the risk of limiting the study field. The most widespread definition of the genre has been suggested by Philippe Lejeune, a leading autobiography theorist: an autobiography is a retrospective narrative about oneself, where the main role is allocated to personal life events as well as the history of the narrator's personality development (Lejeune, 1989: 5). Among other keystones of autobiographical text, Lejeune mentions the oneness of the author, narrator and protagonist, prosaic form and mostly chronological sequence of events (ibid.).

PROCEDURE OF THE STUDY

1 MATERIAL AND DATA COMPILATION

Darling: A spiritual autobiography by Rodriguez was published in 2013. Rodriguez is considered as 'one of the most eloquent and probing public intellectuals in America' by *The Washington Post* (Arana, 2002). *Darling* may appear to be mistitled at first glance; strictly speaking, it is neither a spiritual book nor an autobiography in

any common sense – rather a collection of essays, some of which were originally published in American magazines touching on the questions of faith and character through a broad array of filters, from the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the legacy of Cesar Chavez, the collapse of newspapers to the digitalization age, from gay rights to feminism.

2 METHODS AND PROCEDURE

Comparative and historical as well as cultural methods lay the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of the fiction by Rodriguez. The textual analysis contains elements of ‘close reading’, namely contextual and stylistic analysis. The hermeneutical method is used to justify multiple interpretations of works of art and comprehend hidden meanings. The biographical method was used when referring to the author’s interviews and discussions on reception by readers in social networks, making it possible to clarify the author's intentions. In the study of the aesthetic value of the author’s works, it seems to be appropriate to use elements of comparative, typological, receptive, aesthetic, and poetological analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The inconsistency of modern existence is the artistic dominant of Rodriguez’s spiritual autobiography *Darling*. The author chose an angle of view that is both grounded in a particular location and in the world as a whole. The narrator gradually and carefully explores all sorts of overly sensitive and quite often painful modern topics, in particular, the intersections, interweaving and points of contact between ancient religions and the post-religious world in which we live.

The topic of religion, which in the 21st century begins to gradually replace the topic of race, is used to activate a new confrontation between people and communities. Thus, Rodriguez’s work serves to demonstrate that the main modern religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) actually come from the same locus and are ‘fraternal religions’:

I long have assumed, as a Christian, a Roman Catholic (by the favor of colonial Mexico), that I am a younger brother to the Jew, because the Jew and I worship the same God, and the Hebrew Bible is mine also, though less mine – cf. Jesus Christ: Salvation is from the Jews. For most of my life, though, I have scarcely regarded the Muslim – despite centuries of Muslim rule of Spain, a country to which (by the favor of colonial Mexico) I am related. (Rodriguez, 2013: 3)

In the first chapter of his autobiography, titled *Ojalá*, the narrator problematizes his own identity, actualizing the eternal problem of the self, which becomes layered in the postmodern way. He recalls a long-standing incident in London when a woman of Arab descent asked him if he was an Arab:

One summer evening in London, many years ago, I was walking through green twilight in Hyde Park when I attracted the gaze of a large woman who was wearing several coats; she was tending to two children, a girl and a boy – her grandchildren, I surmised. As I passed, the woman posted a radiant, recognizing smile. ‘Arabie?’ she asked. (ibid.: 1)

At the time, the narrator answered in the negative, but later this question came back to him again and again. He recalled that his mother often used the Arabic word *Ojalá*:

My mother appended *ojalà* to every private leave-taking; my father never did. I heard the Spanish expression pristinely – I had heard it all my life. *Ojalá* meant *ojalà*. [...] In fact, the name of Allah was enshrined in the second and third syllables of my mother’s *ojalà*. I doubt my mother knew that, though maybe she did. I didn’t. The expression is a Spanish borrowing from the Arabic commonplace prayer *Insha’Allah* – God willing. (ibid.: 11)

In the modern world, we cannot clearly define ourselves because we are all mixed, or, in the words of Rodriguez, ‘brown’. (Rodriguez, 2002: 135).

In addition to the ethnic self, the narrator also has significant experiences with his self-identification as gay. The autobiography is imbued with reflections on religion and same-sex marriage. In the end, the narrator localizes the understanding of this topic in the format of defining one’s self through others, which echoes Taylor’s idea that

it is impossible to be a self if you are alone. The ‘self’ is this only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to the partners in the dialogue who were essential to my self-determination; in another way in relation to those who now play an important role in maintaining my understanding of self-determination languages – and, of course, these two classes may overlap. The self exists only in what can be called ‘dialogic networks’. (Taylor, 1992: 55)

A dialogue with a woman with a female identity emphasizes the gender identity of the narrator:

I cannot imagine my freedom as a homosexual man without women in veils. Women in red Chanel. Women in flannel nightgowns. Women in their mirrors. Women saying, Honey-bunny. Women saying, We’ll see. Women saying, If you lay one hand on that child, I swear to God I will kill you. Women in curlers. Women in high heels. Young sisters, older sisters; women and girls. Without women. Without you. (Rodriguez, 2013: 132)

Therefore, to realize our identity, we always need an interlocutor, an accomplice in the negotiation process, and we need to relate ourselves to them; it does

not matter whether we agree with their position or deny it. In each case, some influence, some experience, some feeling is absorbed by us, and becomes part of our own self.

Rodriguez begins his spiritual autobiography with a definition of faith. After the 9/11 terrorist attack, the narrator suddenly realized that ‘The God I worship is a desert God. It was the same desert God the terrorists prayed’ (ibid.: 3). The narrator addresses the reinterpretation of Islam, which in the Western world was interpreted as something hostile to Christianity. Today, as the narrator argues, religious warfare is called ‘war against terrorism’. However, political games and ideological confrontations do not prevent him from seeing the essence, and it consists in the fact that all religions have more similarities than differences. What Fichtelberg calls ‘separation in autobiographical writing’ (cited in Padilla, 1994: 15) allows the narrator to go beyond stereotypes and ideologemes and, ultimately, to proclaim:

At the dawn of a worldwide religious war that Americans prefer to name a war against terror, I feel myself drawn to Islam, drawn to read the Koran, even to kiss the Koran – melodramatically, but sincerely – as I did one evening recently in front of a university audience. I meant to honor Islam. I meant to convey that, as a Christian, I consider myself a loving brother to the Muslim, as I am to the Jew, by the favor of Father Abraham. (Rodriguez, 2013: 4)

Abrahamic religions, according to the author, are an ecumenical concept based on common spiritual heritage in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The narrator calls these three religions ‘siblings’ in the family of Abraham's forefather (ibid.: 6). In the narrative of the novel *Darling*, monotheistic religions act as a weapon with which people answer challenges posed by various forms of racism and terrorism.

In contrast to such acute problems of our time as islamophobia and anti-Mexican racism against immigrants, as well as the war on terror, the author puts forward the concept of monotheistic religions as a space of interreligious conversation, the ultimate goal of which will be unification in the not-so-far future (at least according to the author).

The journey to the Holy Land connects Rodriguez's spiritual autobiography with a tradition of this genre at the level of the plot. The very purpose of the trip is remarkable: ‘I have come to the Holy Land because the God of the Jews, the God of the Christians, the God of the Muslims – a common God – revealed Himself in this desert’ (ibid.: 25). Further, the loci of Jerusalem and the desert are described in close connection with Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The narrator calls them desert religions, that is, religions having originated from the desert.

And it is the desert that attracts the narrator more than Jerusalem itself. The city does not provoke any sensations, only emptiness:

My first impression of the city is my own loneliness – oil stains on the road, rubble from broken traffic barriers, exhaust from buses,

the drift of cellophane bags. [...] Already it is hot. Late spring. It is early morning. There is a stench of uncollected garbage. [...] I turn into the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the site of Christ's burial and resurrection [...] I will return many times to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher during my stay [...] Though my first impression remains my last: emptiness. (ibid.: 27)

Holy places do not inspire the narrator but provoke him to think about the common origin of monotheistic religions. The narrator is not looking for God but for common ground in religions, something that can unite humanity, which today is involved in a deep confrontation. Therefore, Jerusalem is contrasted with the desert.

The desert locus represents permanency, immutability and constancy. Time, human worries, troubles, buildings, luxury and glory – all this pales in front of the eternal peace of the desert. Rodriguez reflects on the importance of 'desert ecology' in a religious context. When he started thinking about desert religions, he was struck by how rooted they are in their locus. He does not refer to the deterministic interpretation of religion, but he still cannot write about Abrahamic religions without mentioning the desert (ibid.: 39). That is why all the great prophets – Moses, Jesus and Mohammed – fled the cities to understand God. 'The desert hid them, emptied them, came to represent a period of trial before they emerged as vessels of revelation' (ibid.: 39–40). In addition, according to the narrator, the desert is a place where community and tribe are formed. However, despite the emptiness, the desert remains unexplored for the narrator, just like God:

To travel to the desert 'in order to see it', in order to experience it, is paradoxical. The desert remains an absence ... So I come away each night convinced I have been to the holy desert (and have been humiliated by it) and that I have not been to the desert at all. (ibid.: 49–50)

The enigma of the desert resembles the mystery of God, whom the narrator is trying to get closer to, but then immediately realizes that God is far too immense for Man to know.

The narrator's thoughts are intertwined with biblical stories. He persistently resorts to the moments that show points of contact between the three monotheistic religions. The narrator recalls the biblical account of Ishmael and Hagar, and that God promised Hagar that Ishmael would also become the founder of a people. 'From Ishmael's line will come the Arab tribes, and from the Arab tribes, the Prophet Muhammad' (ibid.: 39).

Irreconcilable inconsistency and antinomy largely determine the mood of Rodriguez's spiritual autobiography. America – the American dream – is a deep belief that your past does not matter. 'Opportunity comes to those who put away the disadvantages of family or circumstance and entrust themselves to the future' (ibid.: 14).

At the same time, your past as Other always reminds you of itself – for example, when passing through passport control at the airport. The author recalls these events as follows:

In the months after September 11, at various international airports, I found myself facing security officers in glass booths who fastidiously turned the pages of my passport, as though they were reading. But they were not reading. Their eyes did not leave my face. Don't look evasive, don't look steely, don't look sly. The linked tongue of the stamp machine was held suspended over my passport all the while, but then it was put aside. I was directed to accompany another officer to a no-man's-room for a second scrutiny. (ibid.: 4–5)

Part five of Rodriguez's spiritual autobiography focuses on the apparent and unreal nature of modern life. Words have long lost their true meaning – they have become formulaic and clichéd. In particular, the narrator refers to the extremely popular vocative 'darling', which often does not correspond to the speech situation. The narrator recalls how his niece's teacher invited him to speak at her school. When he entered the classroom and said hello, he asked his niece: 'How are you, darling?' (ibid.: 100). The girl's mother later called him and told him that the girl was extremely embarrassed when her gay uncle called her 'darling'.

The theme of the narrator's identity as a gay person is constantly repeated and varies in his books. In more than one way, it correlates with his religious and cultural crisis. Interestingly, same-sex relationships, according to the author, do not threaten modern society. The central person in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is the male God. And this encourages the narrator to think about the incredible number of families in which children are raised only by their mothers:

The prospect of a generation of American children being raised by women in homes without fathers is challenging for religious institutions whose central conception of deity is father, whose central conception of church is family, whose only conception of family is heterosexual. A woman who can do without a husband can do without any patriarchal authority. (ibid.: 113)

Hence, the narrator claims that a single mother poses a greater threat to religion than a homosexual marriage. However, the church believes that it is same-sex relationships that are dangerous for a construct called the 'law of nature'.

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, Rodriguez's novel *Darling* follows the model of spiritual autobiography, developing the devotional quest in the format of a dialogue with intangible values dominating material ones. Reinterpreting the formulaic plot of

the spiritual autobiography genre with the obligatory soul salvation, Rodriguez introduces uncertainty and ambiguity about the possibility of self-knowledge, thus deeply restructuring the traditional narrator's quest. Focus on the never-ending search for the narrator's ethnic self with the remote promise of the integrity of self constitutes the significance of the personal experience of the genre.

Darling represents its author as a visionary whose prior background in the humanities enables him to detect the ethnic issues of the Chicano identity. Apart from the issue of ethnic identity, the challenges of the narrator as a representative of a sexual minority add to the reinterpretation of the spiritual autobiography. Rodriguez studies the image of the male God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the context of families with single mothers and same-sex relationships.

The author works out a rich metaphor of the desert as an infinite temple of divinity producing main world religions. The topos of allegedly empty and unknown desert forms community and tribe, suggesting the spiritual exploration.

Rodriguez's spiritual autobiography manifests the inconsistency of modern existence, too. The beginning of the novel exposes the impossibility of a clear definition of the self in our world with the only chance of understanding one's own self through others (interlocutors or/and accomplices).

The climax of Rodriguez's text undermines the apparent and delicate nature of modern life on a verbal plane: common words lose their initial semantics acquiring politically in/correct connotations that are directly linked with the novel's title.

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