

## **Controversy between imperial centers and their subjects: representations of the Spanish and the Ottoman empires in the Colombian and the Modern Greek novel**

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### **Summary:**

*This paper observes how the Spanish and the Ottoman empires are represented in the literature of their subjects who came to gain their independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, namely in the Colombian and the Modern Greek novel. Nieto's Yngermína focuses on the civilizing character of the Spanish conquistadors' interests when dealing with the indigenous peoples, while Nikolaidis' Ali-Hourshid Bey suggests the idea of the relativity of identity-formation processes, while finally asserting the superiority of the Greek over the Ottoman culture. The two novels are representative of some more general tendencies of Colombian and Greek post-independence literatures: Yngermína is an example of a national project that calls for the assimilation into Spanish culture, while Ali-Hourshid Bey is an example of an ethnic/perennialist discourse that is based on the invocation of the continuity of the national community from ancient to modern times, and on the rejection of the Ottoman culture.*

**Key words:** Comparative Literature, nineteenth-century novel, Colombian novel, Modern Greek novel, literature and national formation

### **Introduction**

This paper observes how the Spanish and the Ottoman empires are represented in the literature of their subjects who came to gain their independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, namely in the Colombian and the Modern Greek novel. Contemporary theory has sought to explore the processes of identity formation in the postcolonial world, one that is determined by relations of identity and otherness, and by processes of hybridization, between the colonial center and the colonized. This discussion partially accounts for the comparative question of this paper, which is the parallel reading of two novels that share the same thematic interest, that is, processes of identity formation as determined by the relations between an imperial center and its subjects. The until some years ago dominating assumptions of comparative literature, with their focus on influence, would be rather unfamiliar with such a question. However, contemporary theory has questioned influence as the only valid criterion to define the comparability of two literary texts. This preoccupation implicitly led to establish a relation of domination between a developed and a developing literature; in terms of postcolonial theory, between a colonial and a colonized literature; in terms of world-systems literary theory, between a literature of the center and one of the periphery. This comparative approach assumed that literature moved linearly and teleologically, with some, more important, literatures developing at a given time certain characteristics that had to be sooner or later achieved by all others. Literature was thus given a naturalized, ahistorical status. Literatures which exercised influence were considered to have an original literary essence, while literatures receiving influence were thought of as second, mimicking ones. The idea of intertextuality, even if pretending neutrality, did not always differentiate itself from these approaches. However, if intertextuality is usually taken to mean the ways in which the voice of a text is present in another, this

paper assumes intertextuality as the encounter of a literary text with an extra-literary, social and historical text (KRISTEVA, 1974; 1980).

### Assimilating into the empire: the road to Europeanization

*Yngermina* (1844), by Colombian author Juan José Nieto, romanticizes the conquest of present-day Cartagena, through the story of the love between Alonso, brother of the conquistador Pedro de Heredia, and the Indian princess Yngermina. The novel opens with the arrival of the conquistadors Pedro and Alonso Heredia at the village of Calamar in 1533. The village is taken without resistance, and both sides are left satisfied: «*Heredia, de la sumision i mansedumbre de sus nuevos subditos, i estos, de la cortesana afabilidad de su nuevo Señor*»<sup>1</sup> (NIETO, 1844. vol. 1, p. 10). Although «*[l]os Indios [...] vivian tranquilos i contentos [...], sin echar menos su antigua independencia*»<sup>2</sup> (*ibid.*, p. 12), a critical voice arises to disrupt the indifference of the Indians toward the loss of their freedom and fatherland, that of chief Ostáron's son, Catarpa. When Alonso meets Yngermina, he immediately falls in love, and sets out to teach her Spanish language and the Christian faith. However, his determination to marry her is prevented by a series of obstacles. Pedro de Heredia, to consent to the marriage, requires that Yngermina gain sufficient command of Spanish, and adhere to Catholicism and be baptized. Toward the end, Spanish Hernan Velasques, who arrived at the territory as part of the expedition led by Alonso de Ojeda and lived there ever after, proves to be Yngermina's father. Yngermina and Alonso finally get married, symbolically confirming the Spanish prevailing over the Indians in the region.

The world of *Yngermina* is a heteroglossic one. The novel features distinct voices, which express different points of view. If chief Ostáron rapidly accepts the order established by the Spanish, asserting their generosity and military and cultural superiority, and establishing relationships between Alonso de Heredia's family and his own, Catarpa aggressively refuses to cede to the governor's power. Catarpa criticizes Heredia's assumed generosity, which, he argues, is just a means to assure the obedience of the Indians, who are now humiliated, subjugated, and reduced to slavery. Contrary to the will of his father, he gathers an Indian army and organizes an uprising against the conquistadors. His critical attitude is maintained even when defeated and led to Alonso de Heredia who will decide his sentence.

In spite of the presence of voices such as Catarpa's one, the novel is not really, in the Bakhtinian sense, polyphonic. The narrative is dominated by the author's voice, which asserts its own singular truth. The Indians of Cartagena are to be subjugated by the Spanish conquistadors and absorb their culture. Catarpa's voice, one that radically questioned the author's point of view, is gradually deconstructed. Catarpa is right from the beginning presented as «*sombrio e impetuoso*»<sup>3</sup> (NIETO, *op. cit.*, p. 17), characteristics that Ostáron thought to attenuate by marrying him to Yngermina. His opposition to the Spanish arises more from his determination to maintain his rule as successor to the throne than from a preoccupation with protecting the population's rights and culture. More importantly, despite his brave opposition to the conquistadors' army, Catarpa is finally convinced by Alonso de Heredia, who is supported by Ostáron and Yngermina, to abandon fighting and accept the generous and tolerant Spanish rule. After reconciling with Heredia, Catarpa even follows him as a leader of the

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<sup>1</sup> [Heredia, with the submission and docility of their new subjects, and [the Indians] with the court affability of their new Master]

<sup>2</sup> [[t]he Indians [...] lived peacefully and happily [...], without missing their old independence]

<sup>3</sup> [gloomy and impetuous]

expedition to the region of the Sinú river, and consents to his marrying to Yngermina.

The other characters of the novel support the author asserting the conquistadors' superiority. Ostáron, realizing the superiority of the Spanish military forces, immediately surrenders and, when peace is threatened by an Indian uprising, he rushes to Heredia to clarify he is not involved in it. For the same reason, he conceals from Alonso, with whom he establishes close relationships, that Catarpa is his son. His reaction to Catarpa leading the struggle against the Spanish stems more from his fear to dissatisfy Heredia than from a preoccupation with his son's fate. For his kind treatment to Yngermina and his family, and his generosity not to kill Catarpa when he is caught for having organized the rebellion, Ostáron even considers Alonso Heredia «*su angel salvador*»<sup>4</sup> (*ibid.*, p. 62). He is happy with Alonso's special interest for Yngermina and his project to teach her Spanish language, religion and culture. He gladly consents to the marriage of Yngermina and Alonso, whom he considers a great luck for his adoptive daughter and himself as still assuming the role of the Indian chief.

The positions held by the natives with regard to their new rulers are determined by a condition of hegemony. In Gramsci's (1971) conception, hegemony is a form of domination exercised not so much through violence, but rather through the controlling of knowledge and culture, by means of the inculcation of values and convictions which are considered as natural and unquestionable. In a concept more particularly developed to deal with the Latin American postcolonial condition, Quijano importantly argued that coloniality of power was based on «the idea of the history of human civilization as a trajectory that departed from a state of nature and culminated in Europe», as well as on «a view of the differences between Europe and non-Europeans as natural [...] differences and not consequences of a history of power» (QUIJANO, 2000. p. 542). In *Yngermina*, Ostáron abandons any thoughts to resist, and decides to adhere to the conquistadors' culture, when he realizes the inferiority of his army to the Spanish forces. The Calamareños are obliged by Alonso de Heredia to return to Cartagena, and Spanish military superiority guarantees the natives' obedience. Once in Cartagena, the Indians admire the transformations that the city has undergone, and, most of all, «*el aparato militar, que le infundia ese temor que es compañero inseparable de la esclavitud*»<sup>5</sup> (NIETO, *op. cit.*, p. 22). It is only under these conditions that the Spanish put forward their project to acculturate the natives, focusing primarily on the teaching of Christian faith and Spanish language. This process is described by the author as one in which the natives gradually abandon their idolatrous habits to worship «*[e]l verdadero Dios*»<sup>6</sup> (*ibid.*, p. 23). For Alonso de Heredia, if the Spanish are allowed to subjugate the native populations of the conquered territories, it is because they were the ones to guide them away from ignorance and idolatry to knowledge and Catholicism. Ostáron gladly observes Alonso putting forward his project to civilize Yngermina, teaching her Spanish religion, language, and manners, with a view to preparing her to be his wife.

The differences between the two worlds that meet in *Yngermina* are symbolically resolved by the union of the two lovers by whom they are represented. Doris Sommer analyzed such «stories of star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, or economic interests which should naturally come together» (SOMMER, 1990. p. 75). In Nieto's novel, Yngermina and Alonso represent two different worlds, one of the ignorant, barbarous, uncivilized natives, who can at best be kind and brave; and one of the brave and generous Spanish conquistadors who dominated not by violence but by the natural superiority of their culture, which is to be peacefully adopted by the Indians. *Yngermina* is

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<sup>4</sup> [his savior angel]

<sup>5</sup> [the military apparatus, which filled them with this feeling of fear that is slavery's inseparable mate]

<sup>6</sup> [true God]

written in the mid-nineteenth century, a time of transition from the empire to the nation-state. In this context, the union of the Spanish conquistador Alonso de Heredia and the Indian princess Yngermina would symbolically invoke the formation of an inclusive, civic, nation, one which would call for all its citizens, regardless of their differences at the level of race, class, genre, culture, to join, as Anderson (1991) put it, the deep, horizontal comradeship of the national community. However, this is not the case for Nieto's novel. If Yngermina is deemed worthy to be Alonso's wife, it is because she already has certain European characteristics, namely a European beauty; she is considered to be the daughter of an Indian chief, and her noble origin allows for her marriage into the conquistador's family; such a marriage, the narrator argues, would be an example for the natives to peacefully surrender and get acculturated; finally, she is susceptible to become a good Christian and representative of the Spanish manners. If Yngermina is an adequate wife for Alonso, it is because her original culture can be hegemonized, colonized, europeanized. In this sense, as far as the time of the writing of the novel is concerned, that is, the nineteenth-century post-independence period, the union of Alonso and Yngermina would not result in an inclusionist, civic, horizontal national formation, but rather to a nation which excludes those subaltern sectors of the population that do not fit to the paradigm of the white, Catholic, modern, male, citizen. Significantly, Yngermina proves to be the daughter of Hernan Velasques, a Spanish who arrived at the territory with Ojeda's expedition. Rather than unify different worlds in a civic, egalitarian community, the novel asserts definitely the Spanish dominance over the native Indians and their culture.

### **Assimilating into the *ethnie*: the road to Hellenization**

In *Ali-Hourshid Bey* (1882), by Greek author Vasileios Nikolaidis, Greek-born Vasileios is taken as a baby from his nanny by the Ottomans, at the beginning of the Greek war of independence, in 1821. He is brought up in the family of the pasha of Magnisia, given the name Ali-Hourshid, and looked after by the women of the pasha's harem. Being considered the pasha's son, he is brought up as a bey, and receives a solid education in Turkish language and Muslim religion. He develops close relationships with the women of the harem and the pasha's daughters. Growing up with the Ottoman manners, he develops an aversion to Greeks, and is very sad to hear that he will be returned to his Greek mother. Once he is back in his Greek family, he becomes aggressive and refuses to adapt, the primary target of his rage being his mother. The process to acculturate him is long and difficult, as Vasileios refuses to accept Orthodox faith and Greek language and culture. His relations with women changes, and the narrator particularly stresses the transition from a feeling that his mother could be any one of the women of the harem to his affectionate relationship with his natural Greek mother. After a long period during which Vasileios refuses to adapt to his Greek family and culture, he finally gets used to the new way of life and, from the point of view of the mature narrator, asserts the superiority of the Greek over the Ottoman values.

In *Ali-Hourshid Bey* there are two main voices which represent two opposing points of view. One of them defends Ottoman culture, expressing its aversion to Greeks; the other asserts the superiority of Greek over Ottoman values. Interestingly, both voices are articulated by the same character, Ali-Hourshid, or Vasileios. The two names, one Ottoman, and one Greek, with which the narrator presents himself are suggestive of an identity that is not stable nor linearly recognizable. The narrator's identity is a shifting one, it results from the interaction with a given context, and is historically situated. Being brought up in the family of an Ottoman pasha, Ali-Hourshid identifies himself as a good Muslim, and as a future pasha himself, who can decide for the fate of his Greek or Jew subjects, and enjoy the dedication, as the narrator affirms, of the women of the harem. At the end of the process of his integration into Greek culture, the same character, as Vasilis now, identifies

himself as a good Christian, an affectionate person who loves his mother and the world, and a woman free to define her life, as opposed to the enslaved women of the harem. His identity is unstable, shifting, historicized, and appears as determined by two cultures, one of the Ottoman imperial center and one of its Greek subjects. Although the main character of the novel is identified both as an Ottoman and a Greek, this identity is not a hybridized one. In García Canclini's (1995) conception, hybridity focuses on the ambivalence of cultural authority, shifting away from the idea that there is a stable, coherent, knowable self that is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal. For Bhabha, «[hybridity] is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority» (BHABHA, 1994. p. 114). This is not the case for *Ali-Hourshid Bey*. In Nikolaidis' novel, the main character subscribes to two different systems of values, one of the imperial center and one of its subjects, but this double subscription occurs diachronically. The character, rather than combine characteristics of two opposed cultures, replaces one culture with another. In the passage of time, he abandons one culture to gradually adhere to another. Recurring to Bakhtin (1981), the dynamic chronotope of the novel is characterized by a time that is decisive not only for the psychological evolution of the character, but for his very identity. However, it is not merely the passage of time that determines the shift of Ali-Hourshid's/Vasilis' identity. The character changes as he is submitted to a process of acculturation, undertaken first by his mother, his nanny and his cousin. The child aggressively resists Greek values for long, rejecting Orthodox faith and popular culture, as well as his mother and other relatives. His strict uncle finally achieves to transform him into a Greek Christian by means of obligation and punishment.

In *Ali-Hourshid Bey*, the experience of the main character indicates that culture, rather than natural, universal and ahistorical, is constructed and historically situated, and can be learned through obligation and punishment. Culture, as Foucauldian knowledge, is inextricably connected to power. In spite of the presence of two voices that represent two politically opposed cultures, the novel is dominated by the point of view of the narrator, who coincides with the main character at a mature age. This voice, which is perceptible all over the novel, asserts from the beginning the superiority of Greek culture. The novel is dedicated to Alexandros Mavrokordatos, one of the leading figures of the Greek war of independence, characterized as the sacred war of the Greeks, and is described as an episode of the Greek revolution. The novel opens with a description of the death of the protagonist's father in the massacres of the Greeks by the Ottomans in the first year of the war, in 1821. The narrator insistently refers to himself as «ἀναστάντα, εὐρεθέντα καὶ ἐξελληνισθέντα»<sup>7</sup> (NIKOLAIDIS, 1882. p. 12), and to the political and symbolic leaders of the War of independence as sacred figures. His life in the Ottoman pasha's family is presented as a joyful childhood. Ali-Hourshid enjoyed the privileges that stemmed from his quality as the pasha's son, his relationship with the pasha's daughters and the women of the harem, who took care of him, whom he platonically loved and over whom he exercised the power he was allowed to as a bey, and thought he would grow up to be a pasha and exercise control over Greeks and other subjects. However, the voice of the narrator keeps commenting from the mature author's point of view, asserting how much he was wrong as a child and stating that, luckily enough, Hellenization and Christianization would later make him realize his fallacy. In the second part, he regrets having rejected his mother for so long, and offended Christian faith and cultural manifestations of the Greeks, and calls upon his readers to observe «τὴν διαφορὰν μεταξὺ τῆς ἐλευθερίου καὶ ἡμέρου

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<sup>7</sup> [resurrected, found and Hellenized]

ἀγωγῆς τῶν τέκνων ὑμῶν πρὸς τῇν κτηνώδη καὶ ἀγρίαν ἀνατροφὴν τῶν ἀνελευθέρων καὶ φανατικῶν ἐχθρῶν τοῦ Ἐξευγενισμοῦ»<sup>8</sup> (*ibid.*, p. 109). The conception of Greek culture and Christian faith as one of freedom, and of Ottoman culture and Muslim religion as one of enslavement, constantly arises in the novel, and summarizes for the author the superiority of Greek over Ottoman culture.

## **Empires to look up to, empires to look down on: representations of the Spanish and the Ottoman empires in the Colombian and the Modern Greek novel**

If in *Yngermína* the evolution of the plot asserts the dominance of the Spanish conquistadors over the colonized native culture, in *Ali-Hourshid Bey* Greek culture is considered superior to that of the Ottoman imperial center. This fundamental difference between the two novels seems to be confirmed by the characteristics of the overall nineteenth-century production of the two literatures, as far as the encounter between the empire and the local peoples is concerned. Colombian literature features a big number of novels which focus on, and stress the importance of, the conquest, while liberation from the Spanish empire appears rather rarely; on the contrary, Greek literature features various novels which are interested in the war of independence, and no novel dealing with the relations with the Ottomans in pre-independence times. These characteristics are indicative of what appears as a fundamental characteristic of nineteenth-century post-independence literature in the two countries: Colombian literature often articulates a national project that incorporates the encounter with the Spanish, while Greek literature proposes an ethnic/perennialist one that seeks its origins in the ancient past, while rejecting the Ottoman imperial factor.

In Greek literature, the nation is conceived of as a community that goes back to ancient times, an idea that was central to the project of the intellectual elites of the pre-revolutionary period. This assumption was represented in a primordialist or, rather, perennialist narrative for the nation. As primordial link is considered one that stems from the elements that a culture considers as natural, while in the perennialist conception nation is conceived of as a community the roots of which go back to antiquity and the characteristics of which stay unchanged despite the passage of time. These ethnic, considered as preexisting, communities are analyzed by the ethnosymbolistic approach of nationalism, according to which modern nations, rather than modernist inventions, are formed on the basis of myths, symbols and values formed in previous historical periods (SMITH, 1986; 1991). In *Ali-Hourshid Bey* the conception of national community is based on the idea of its natural opposition to another culture. Greek nation is presented as one that is ethnically and culturally homogeneous, and one that features certain natural, given, ahistorical characteristics that are, in an essentialist manner, opposed to those of the culture of the Ottoman imperial center. Greek national discourse is one of an ethnic nation, one that excludes people who do not belong to the same ancient and essentialist ethnocultural unity, the characteristics of which travel across time without being changed. By the mid-nineteenth century, Greek national narrative gradually came to incorporate Byzantine Christian past apart from the ancient one, on which had focused the pre-revolutionary intellectual elites of the late eighteenth-century Greek Enlightenment. Greek national discourse, then, came to focus on the idea of an essentialist cultural superiority over Ottoman culture and religion, an idea that was politically and militarily expressed in the formation of the *Megali Idea* [Great Idea], according to which Greeks now had to engage in a redemption struggle to gain Ottoman territories where Greek populations persisted. The first Greek

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<sup>8</sup> [the difference between our children's free and gentle education and the bestial and savage education of the unfree and fanatical enemies of nobilization]

novels of the post-independence period, for example those of Panayotis and Alexandros Soutsos, focus on an ethnic nation in which modern Greeks are the heirs of the ancient civilization, which was the base for the modern European culture. *Ali-Hourshid Bey*, however, represents a national narrative in which Byzantine Christian period is incorporated in this scheme of continuity of the nation's essence, and in which Greek cultural characteristics are naturally opposed to those of Ottoman culture and religion.

Contrary to this discourse for an ethnic national formation based on the opposition between Greek and imperialist Ottoman culture in Greek literature, Colombian post-independence novel features a national discourse for a civic, inclusionist, national formation, which is however questioned by a rhetoric and a practice of inclusion of those sectors that could successfully assimilate imperial Spanish racial and cultural characteristics. Other Colombian novels of the time, such as the important *Manuela* by Eugenio Díaz, invoke a national community based on the idea of horizontality and equality of all its citizens despite their differences, an idea that fits the conception of nation famously suggested by Benedict Anderson (1991). *Yngermína*, however, considered the first of the Colombian novels of the post-independence period, and a long series of novels to follow, suggests a national community based on the superiority of the culture of the Spanish imperial center, and the exclusion of sectors of the society that have not been sufficiently assimilated into it. Nieto's novel clearly demonstrates that, in the case of Latin America, nationalisms of even a civic, liberal, kind had specific limits, and national communities clearly excluded the Indian sectors that had not been integrated into colonial Spanish culture. Latin American nations were composed, as Lomnitz (2000) importantly observes, by strong and weak citizens, fundamentally, as *Yngermína* indicates, between sectors that represented civilized, modern, superior, Spanish culture, and uncivilized, premodern, inferior, native culture.

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