

# “A Sense of Shared History and Shared Losses” Based on One of Ana Menendez’ Stories “In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd”

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**Abstract** – In “In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd,” the story revolves around memory and how memory shapes desire to re-create a Cuban culture abroad. In a post-colonial Cuban setting, Ana Menendez reflects on a question of translating a culture from one geographical location to another and the process of constructing a cultural identity in exile. The very fact underlines here is how ‘Cuban culture is being translated in Domino Park through the protagonist’s expression (voice and memory). The aim of this paper is to show the cross-cultural dynamics of narrative excellence through the memory and experience of the protagonist (Maximo), in capturing the realities as a reflection of shared history and shared losses.

**Keywords** – Post-Colonial, Cultural Translation, Memory, Loss, History

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## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of life led people to create different worlds, with different beliefs and practices, ultimately creating cultures. These cultures were formed by mankind with this is in mind. Cultural encounters express the ideas in the past and the people’s identities which impacts on the society from time to time until now. The impact therefore, is either positive like changes in the education system or cultural collaboration that advances science and artwork or negative in terms of conflicts in the society. Since the cultural encounter expressed all the events and people habits from all over the world, it plays an important role at the societal and individual levels. For individuals, it changed peoples’ perspective and classes. In this regard, colonization was one of the reasons that impacted the society and individuals.

### A Sense of Shared History and Shared Losses:

The main character in the story “In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd,” Maximo the protagonist was exiled from his homeland Cuba. Fidel Castro, one of the most internationally recognized leaders, controlled Cuba from 1958 until 2008. While Castro was in power, many thousands of people left their native land by force and many volunteered to leave their nation to begin new lives in other countries, particularly, in the United States. Since the triumph of Fidel Castro’s revolution in 1959, most of the Cubans migrated to various places. “By 1961, when Castro announced that Cuba had become a communist state with rapid centralization of the economy on Marxist-Leninist

principles, many of the island citizens, especially middle-class people like the protagonist in the story, Maximo and Raúl fled to the USA, which had by then broken off all ties with Cuba. The influx to Florida continued steadily in the years that followed with some desperate Cubans even making the hazardous voyage across the Gulf of Mexico to the American Coast in small boats or even rafts. Miami, a city of immigrants with numerous Spanish-speakers from Mexico and South America, was an obvious destination for Cuba’s city folk and the area around Eight Street where the Cuban exile tended to settle became known as ‘Little Havana.’” (Menendez, 2001. Pg 18)

It is clearly understood that ‘Maximo’ represents the countless Cubans who left everything behind to immigrate to the United States. He intended to migrate for a short period of time to escape the political and economic thrust. However, as a result of his initial belief that Castro would soon be out of power and he thought, ‘he would return to his place in two years’ time. Three if things were as serious as they said’ (Menendez 2001, 21).

In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd, Maximo is depicted as an elderly widower, who has had time to accept that he and his family will never return to live in Cuba.

In the true words of Derek Walcott, ‘In the Caribbean, history is irrelevant not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss

of history.’ (1974, 259). As a consequence of leaving Cuba, Maximo, feels the loss of his identity, his profession as a professor, more over the loss of his own history and culture. Like many fellow Cubans, Maximo had to reinvent himself to fit into a new culture and new society. He realized ‘his Spanish and his university of Havana credentials meant nothing’ (Menendez 2001, 21). In Miami, he ‘tried driving a taxi and he felt he was too old to cut sugarcane with the younger men’ (Menendez 2001, 21).

This forced him to establish a restaurant. There, ‘a generation of former professors served black beans and rice to the nostalgic’ (Menendez 2001, 21). Maximo and his small family settled in Miami’s ‘Little Havana’ neighborhood, where he was able to reaffirm his original Cuban identity through this daily communication with other exiled citizens. However, these communications provided Maximo with only a marginal connection to his homeland, most of the time his expressions contained idealized Cuban society that gave him solace and a sense of belonging.

These expressions contain a ‘homing desire’ which connects and individual to a ‘mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination’ (Brah 1996, 192) and another expression ‘the island haunts all of us Cubans; it won’t let us go, no matter what distance we travel to get away’ (Behar 2008,3). This explicitly expresses their sense of belonging to an idealistic ‘Home Land’.

In the sense of sharing history, we find that Maximo is able to share his past to his present community. Although he knew that he would never physically return to Cuba, his native land, he sticks to his Cuban humor to express his identity. He also creates a Caribbean folk group with three elderly individuals from the Spanish Caribbean with whom he plays dominoes in “Domino” park. In these interactions, majority of their time was spent sharing on idealized Cuba ruminating their emotions.

‘late in the night after several glasses of wine, someone would start the stories that began with, ‘In Cuba I remember.’ They were stories of old lovers...Of skies that stretched on clear and blue to the Cuban hills. Of green landscapes that clung to the red clay of guines, roots dug in like fingernails in a good-bye. In Cuba, the stories always began, life was good and pure. (Menéndez 2001, 21).

“But something always happened to them in the end, something withering, malignant’, ‘The stories that opened in Sun, always narrowed into a dark place’ – signifying their inner loss - memories of the traumatic reality.”

To quote the words of Salman Rushdie ‘The past is a country from which we have all emigrated, it is loss is a part of our common humanity (Rushdie 1991, 12) – the feeling of shared losses is well interpreted in the last and final joke that he presented to the people

around. This signifies even the title of the story projecting the loss of oneself, one’s identity and a sense of not belonging. Maximo’s revelation about life’s realities hit the ground when a tour group visits the ‘domino park’. He was disgusted by the tour guide’s condescending disruption of the man and Cuban culture, he feels ‘like and animal to grown and cast about behind the metal fence’. He felt the stillness around him, a shadow move past the fence, but he didn’t look up’

He narrates the story of a dog from Cuba that arrives in Little Havana and notices and elegant white poodle striding towards him’ (pg 36). The dog Juanito professes his love for the poodle only to be rejected ‘calling him a short, insignificant mutt’. Juanito replies, ‘Here in America, I may be a short, insignificant mutt, but in Cuba I was a German Shepherd’. The identity between Juanito and Maximo is clear – Juanito represents the Cuban immigrants like Maximo and the other members whom he employs in his restaurant, when they fled Cuba, they lost their profession credentials and identities. The white poodle represents Americans who considered the Cuban immigrants as insignificant.

#### **Dynamics of memory:**

In the ‘Little Havana,’ Maximo successfully integrated into the present culture. He plays dominoes with his friends, eats Cuban food and does activities to cope up with this new environment amidst all of these his memories accentuates the grief he feels over the loss of his homeland and the loss of his wife. Much of Maximo’s memories may not be nostalgic. One important memory feeling related to the experience of remembering is that of the sense of loss. In the words of Loewald, (1972/1980). “The first organization of memories in...centers on feelings, and especially feelings of loss or absence.”

The title of this story, “In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd” itself is the voice of memory as it is obsessed with the past. Like Juanito, the members of the community suffered the trauma of separation and underwent humiliation and created a new identity in the new environment. Of course! These painful memories appeared through the voice (jokes) shared by Maximo which were replaced by immediate laughter moving his companions into an intense emotional level. These jokes were tools of an expression that allows the characters to display the bitterness and allows the protagonist to express real yet unspeakable truth of reality.

Maximo’s memories – his daydreams become present in the figure of his wife. The death of his wife doubled his pressure. Her loss again, is a symbolic representation of losing his own self. His memories stood as a whole of Cuba – memories stand in for that location, his home. His memories represent how

the exile occupies a certain place while remembering another place.

'Episodic memories represent short time slices of conscious experience and although most frequently access through conceptual knowledge structures may also be organized and accessed quite separately along a feeling/emotional dimension' (Conway, 2005).

With this reference we see Maximo's dominating forces of voluntary memory of his wife with his involuntary memories of home. Through his jokes he is reckoning on his past and present, the jokes themselves are a memory. A memory, of his social past and his survival now.

For the immigrant families, the dividing line drawn between the old world and the new causes infinite suffering for the ones who tried to find a place to fit in in the world beyond their birth place.

## CONCLUSION:

Social identity and Language are the major concerns of cultural studies. Language in literary texts plays a major role in constructing meaning and reflecting the author's intention. Social identity relates to how we identify ourselves with others and decides one's status in the society he lives in. These issues are interrelated as they cooperate and construct social and cultural materiality. Ana Menendez, the most dominant cultural author whose concern is, social identity and cultural crisis reflected this through her stories. Addressing social, and cultural issues, writers believe that "literature can serve as an agent of changing the society. Seemingly, Ana Menendez pertains to the notion of social identity and language as cultural practices within the framework of cultural translation. In, "In Cuba I was a German Shepherd," as a writer, she decorated the main character with his sense of loss and his ritualistic behavior of overcoming his sadness through his sensible jokes as a product of memory is a part of social constructs as a shared history.

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