

***Inmenso estrecho: Obstacles to Achieving Post-immigration Identity Change in Spanish Short Fiction.* Ryan Prout.**

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**Resumen:** This article reads a selection of short stories from the *Inmenso estrecho* collection alongside work by psychologists of immigration. Salman Akhtar has systematised the adjustment process which a migrant must go through if he or she is to feel well adapted to his or her new culture and society. This process depends on a number of support factors being in place. Where these are not available the process of adaptation can be stymied and the article connects the difficulties of the fictional immigrants in the stories with the poor adaptations studied by Akhtar in his clinical work.

**Palabras clave:** *Inmenso estrecho*. Immigration. Psycho-geography. Assimilation. Submerged economy. Psychological therapy.

As Lionel Shriver observes in a 2006 overview of global fiction about immigration, “Fiction writers have long found the stranger in a strange land rich material. An immigrant’s emotions are big and primitive.” She goes on to suggest that the market has become sated with a certain brand of fiction about the immigrant experience: “You know the drill: the new country is scary. They have all these different customs, the father works terribly hard in a Chinese restaurant, but eventually the little girl begins to learn a bit of English and make friends...” Fiction which follows this pattern, Shriver complains, ignores another story about the anger and resentment in host communities and can seem oblivious to the way in which immigration can in turn sometimes make natives feel like strangers to their own life histories as familiar landmarks and neighbourhoods undergo radical cultural reassignment. The model proposed by Shriver of the structurally sympathetic but shop-worn formula of the self-starter and necessity entrepreneur who fleshes out the rags to riches capitalist dream does not translate well to recent fiction from Spain about immigrant experience. So long a country of emigration, Spain arguably has a long way to go before reaching a point of becoming sated with emulations of *The Joy Luck Club*. Shriver’s point about fiction’s unwillingness to deal honestly with the emotions of the host community does translate to the Spanish landscape, however. Spaniards now rate immigration their number one concern, ahead of terrorism and other criminal activity, yet there are few works which stand out in Spanish which address this developing social dynamic.

Demanding such an accomplishment from *Inmenso estrecho*<sup>1</sup>, the collection of short stories to be looked at more closely in this article, would be out of sympathy with its more modest aim of initiating a process of moving immigration in Spain out of a story told in statistics to one of individual voices with personalised narratives. Angel Fernández Fermoselle, the collection’s compiler, says “Ni escuchamos cuando nos informan del número de muertos en patera. Se ha vuelto un mensaje tan plano, tan reiterativo, come el de los muertos en accidentes de tráfico cada fin de semana; no es que no reflexionemos al respecto: es que ni lo oímos” (pág. 11). Fermoselle does see a certain crossover between the immigrant as embodiment of the existentialist plight and the physical realities of immigration, however, in the broad conception which the collection’s twenty-five authors bring to the idea of the immense straits.

The volume presents the narrow yet perilous channel not only as the physical barrier between Spain and Morocco but as the gulf between Europe and the Americas; as the berm between Morocco and its occupied territories in the Western Sahara; as the land mass separating the eastern and western Mediterranean; as the gulf between rich and poor; and as the hurdles which keep non-nationals from establishing a Spanish identity. Between them, the contributors also conceptualise the *inmenso estrecho* as a psychological terrain which forces the reader to see similarities and draw comparisons

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<sup>1</sup> Ángel Fernández Fermoselle y otros, *Inmenso estrecho*, Madrid, Kailas, 2005.

between experiences, now and in the past. Thus, the juxtaposition of “Terciopelo robado,” a story dealing with emigration from rural Galicia to industrialised central Europe with “De vuelta a casa,” a story about Latin American alienation in contemporary Madrid’s *economía sumergida*, forces upon the reader parallels between Spanish experiences of emigration in the 50s and 60s and the experiences of immigrants coming to Spain in the twenty-first century. Juxtaposing “Con respeto...Carta a Yolanda,” an autobiographical piece about a conductor forced abroad to pursue his vocation, with “Finalmente ¿una oscuridad?” a story which imagines the plight of rafters faced with death at sea, indicates that while the narrative of Spanish emigration is not complete, those who choose to leave face different challenges from those who have no choice but to try and arrive. The *inmenso estrecho* which separates the musician and the rafter also brings them together, however, in the shared psychological territory of emigrants facing a long and difficult psychological process of adaptation. Though divided by access to wealth, both the conductor in “Con respeto...Carta a Yolanda” and the builder in “De vuelta a casa” confront new societies which are seemingly hostile and impenetrable; the protagonists of both contributions face “trastornos de identidad” intimately connected with their status, chosen or assigned, as immigrants<sup>2</sup>.

A paradigm drawn from the emerging discipline of therapeutic immigration psychology provides a useful means of interpreting the portrayal in *Inmenso estrecho* of the obstacles to acquiring Spanishness encountered by a variety of fictive newcomers. Salman Akhtar, himself a first-generation migrant (from India to the United States) has studied immigration and identity in terms of turmoil, treatment, and transformation. In his psychological practice he has found that “The immigrant is almost invariably struggling with various threats to his identity” (pág. 74). Whilst allowing for the differences which distinguish exiles from immigrants, and refugees from both, Akhtar finds that non-nationals resettled in countries other than their places of birth are presented with the pursuit of similar tracks in the process of identity transformation. In *Immigration and Identity* he sets out the psychological context specific to the identity hiatus implied by the upheaval of immigration. He looks at the conditions which are necessary for a successful process of adaptation and the ideal circumstances which must obtain if an immigrant is to achieve the seemingly impossible and establish a well-functioning ego formed from a necessarily hybridised self and a life lived in pieces. The psychological demands placed on an immigrant are reflective, he observes, of the geopolitical fault line between East and West (pág. 80) and non-natives must overcome cultural as well as intrapsychic traumas if they are to achieve a healthy relationship with the host society as well as with their own past selves. In the remainder of this article, I look at some of the conditions which should prevail in Akhtar's model of successful adaptation and see how far these are met in the Spanish immigration contexts imagined by the contributors to *Inmenso estrecho*. Articulating Akhtar’s model alongside the multiplicity of voices presented by *Inmenso estrecho* allows us to theorise the turmoil which the collection’s authors uncover in the process of adapting to Spanishness.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 219.

In “From Near or Far to Optimal Distance” Akhtar describes a process whereby immigrants are torn between opposing tendencies towards ethnocentric withdrawal on the one hand and counterphobic assimilation on the other. In the first case, he describes individuals who react against the culture of the host country by retreating into the habits and practices of the one left behind by means of spending time exclusively with other expatriates, eating only foods familiar from the past, and avoiding wherever possible use of the host country’s lingua franca. Immigrants experiencing ethnocentric withdrawal lead a cloistered life, Akhtar says, and associate as little as possible with other people who are not of their own ethnicity. At the other extreme, Akhtar describes immigrants who over identify with the host culture and are thus caught up in a situation which he defines as counterphobic assimilation. In this instance, an immigrant denies any connection with the past and repudiates his psychological and cultural formation. An immigrant experiencing counterphobic assimilation “Rapidly renounce[s] his original culture and adopts[s] the characteristics of the new culture in order to avoid feeling different and therefore hurt and angry”<sup>3</sup>. The twenty-five stories in *Inmenso estrecho* present a vivid panorama of reactions to Spain and its former colonies read as host countries and reveal to us characters torn between both of the responses Akhtar describes. Contributors such as David Hernández de la Fuente complicate the portrayal of the adaptation process with further dimensions which politicise and query the psychological drama of fitting in.

In his story “El último dálmata (reseña sobre la extinción)” Hernández describes an imagined encounter between a living linguistic fossil and a postgraduate research student. In an unremarkable Madrid café, the philologist stumbles upon the sole speaker of Dalmatian to have survived into the twentieth century. The philologist congratulates himself on having discovered “Un auténtico dinosaurio”<sup>4</sup> within the Lavapiés district’s “Babel delirante y caragada de tensión,” a further exotic ingredient in keeping with the Indian spices and kebabs which lend to the area “Una simpática algarabía que tenía incluso algo de sinfónico” (pág. 96). Determined to track down the last speaker of Dalmatian to his home in a run down apartment among “Esas casas del ochocientos para obreros que tanto abundan en el barrio y que ahora rebosan de inmigrantes” (pág. 100), the student imagines recognition for a brilliant discovery:

*Ya me veía doctorado con una brillante tesis sobre la lengua dálmata, todo gracias a aquel espécimen que había hallado—a la manera de pájaro Dodo o de un mamut prehistórico—, y que me habría de proporcionar fama y gloria<sup>5</sup>.*

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<sup>3</sup> Salman Akhtar, *Immigration and Identity: Turmoil, Treatment, and Transformation*, London, Jason Aronson, 1999, pág. 169.

<sup>4</sup> Ángel Fernández Femoselle y otros, *Inmenso estrecho*, Madrid, Kailas, 2005, pág. 102.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 100.

Unfortunately for the student's plans, the last Dalmatian exemplifies the pattern of counterphobic assimilation which Akhtar has described. His only wish is to fit in and go unnoticed. As a fugitive from the wars in the ex-Yugoslavia, the last thing the Dalmatian wants is to be visibly identified with his culture: "Nadie se ocupa de mí ahora. A nadie molesta mi diferencia, mi mancha. Y ahora váyase. Déjeme solo" (pág. 102). As the last remaining Dalmatian speaker, the elderly man could not in any event pursue the alternative track described by Akhtar of ethnocentric withdrawal. Hernández plays out in extreme form in this character the mourning process described in the literature on immigration and identity which sees those uprooted from their countries of birth obliged to let go of their pre-immigration selves. The collective psyche of the Dalmatian's original culture and society are literally dead so that his counterphobic assimilation concentrates the mourning of loss of identity. The philologist is unable to pursue the dying language's last speaker when, inopportunistly, he dies, "Entre la indiferencia general de aquella gran Babilonia que le cobijaba"<sup>6</sup>. Within the context of a fraught debate in Spain which often sees the survival of minority languages and immigration conjoined, Hernández's story also asks the reader to reflect on potential losses—both for the host communities in Spain and for their newcomers—implied by over enthusiastic policies of integration: an assimilation focussed on a centralised Spanish identity could threaten regional languages, and a rigid insistence that immigrants adapt exclusively to Basque or Catalan, for example, could in turn undermine non-nationals' connections with their own cultures. When the Dalmatian refugee's language and culture die, he dies with them.

Akhtar proposes that while neither ethnocentric withdrawal nor counterphobic assimilation is to be desired, the immigrant must nevertheless retain "External reinforcement of his intrapsychic connection to [the motherland]" (pág. 10). For those who emigrate as adults, he demonstrates, a too severe detachment with the past implies a dangerous suppression of the self built up in childhood and adolescence. Involvement with the expatriate community and networking through organisations such as protest and interest groups can be part of the acquisition of a healthy hybridised identity of equidistance from the host and birth countries. *Inmenso estrecho* shows us immigrants in Spain who are living with an ethnocentric withdrawal born out of necessity rather than choice, in most cases. Without legal or political representation, these fictive immigrants are unable to organise in the ways Akhtar points to as facilitating the adaptation process.

For example, in 'Manuel Roca's "De vuelta a casa," Wilson Masters, an Ecuadorian teacher who has found work in the burgeoning construction industry around Madrid, finds no way to connect with the Spanish population: his social intercourse is restricted exclusively to the workplace, where he is among other non-national immigrants, and to the ghetto-like living quarters where Spanishness barely

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 103.

intruders. The teacher muses that while the immigrant community defines Legazpi, the district seems cut off from the rest of the city:

*No era la plaza [...] ni el río bajo el puente que compartía con la M-30, ni los altos edificios construidos en los años cincuenta, ni el agolpamiento de camiones que daban identidad a Legazpi. Era una explanada de casas bajas con un arroyo en el centro, era el olor extraño a frutas podridas y a cuero, eran los edificios de madera, los carros tirados por animales renqueantes<sup>7</sup>.*

The poverty of his surroundings takes Masters back to the village in Ecuador where he taught and it is only by intrapsychic vocalisation of his geographic location in Spain that he finds any connection with the host country:

*“Estoy en Madrid, llevo en Madrid dos años, vivo en España, acabo de salir del metro de Legazpi, vengo desde la plaza de Castilla”<sup>8</sup>.*

Other than as a narrative which he cannot share with anyone, Spain has no reality for Wilson Masters. Invisible within the *economía sumergida*, even his ethnocentric withdrawal has to occur within reverie and fantasy. The collective of which he forms a part is one of abjection, its existence denied by the host community: “Una excrecencia formada por seres huidos de la ruina y del hambre en una sociedad a la que parecía costarle una inmensidad asumir el mestizaje”<sup>9</sup>.

While many of Akhtar’s case studies are drawn inevitably from well-to-do immigrants in the United States with access to psychological interventions, his study of the interface between immigration and identity nevertheless recognises the particular challenges facing illegal immigrants around the world. Cut off from the processes which contribute to successful acquisition of an optimal distance between cultural identities, illegal immigrants are confronted by even greater challenges in attempting to create a coherent sense of self:

*Lacking ordinary civil rights [illegal immigrants] experience a deep sense of unworthiness and shame. They become vulnerable to exploitation and constantly live with real and imagined threats to their safety and survival. Fractured self esteem, irritability, regressive daydreaming and bad temper are rampant in this sub-population<sup>10</sup>.*

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 222.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 222.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 221.

<sup>10</sup> Salman Akhtar, *Immigration and Identity: Turmoil, Treatment, and Transformation*, London, Jason Aronson, 1999, pág. 33.

Manuel Roca concisely gives fictional form to the dilemma described by Akhtar. Masters's journey home is suffused with images from his previous life in Ecuador and windows and advertisements send back his own reflection rather than viewpoints with which to establish a connection with Spanishness. Akhtar describes dreams about tunnels as symptomatic of the trauma of immigration (pág. 35) and Masters's journey home from work becomes just such a subterranean nightmare:

*La oscuridad del túnel convertía en espejo [...] La entrada del convoy en la estación de Cuatro Caminos llenó el espejo de luz, lo convirtió en ventanilla y en andén y en anuncios publicitarios. "Tendré que ir al médico, esto no es normal, será el trabajo, las doce horas de cada día, el poco descanso"*<sup>11</sup>.

Roca portrays the illegal immigrant in Spain as someone who is confronted with a superfluity of signs of identity seemingly available for consumption which rebuff the undocumented outsider with an impenetrable opacity. In Wilson Masters, Roca also creates a persona whose turmoil exemplifies the role played by work in Akhtar's model of cross-cultural adaptation. "To feel efficacious," Akhtar writes, "is to live, and to feel vocationally impotent is to physically wither away" (pág. 25). For a successful adaptation to occur, the immigrant must have access to experiences of efficacy which arise from "The awareness of having an initiating and causal role in bringing about states of needed responsiveness from others"<sup>12</sup>. Psychologists of immigration and identity suggest that fulfilling work is essential for the immigrant's acquisition of these efficacy experiences. As Manuel Roca shows, for Wilson Masters and those like him who work as part of Spain's *economía sumergida*, work does not provide these feelings of fulfilment. In Wilson Masters's case, he is exiled from his vocation as a teacher, forced instead to do brute labour as a poorly paid builder. The lack of access to experiences of efficacy is a theme which runs throughout *Inmenso estrecho* and many of the writers describe characters whose work is demeaning ("Terciopelo robado," "Mashimón y las cuarenta y dos iglesias de Santiago Atitlán," "El cumple de Rosa"). A recent study by Josep Oliver has found that immigration, a shrinking population, and a labour market whose needs cannot be met within Spain, are conspiring to sustain and develop the conditions which give rise to conditions like those described by Roca in "De vuelta a casa." The emphasis by the writers of *Inmenso estrecho* on the lack of efficacy experiences arguably responds to the specific relationship between demographics and economics witnessed in Spain as it moves into the twenty-first century.

Akhtar contends that the lack of efficacy experiences results in the withering away of the physical self and, again, this equation is one which is hypostasised in "De vuelta a casa." Wilson Masters ostensibly dies after going into a coma following an

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<sup>11</sup> Ángel Fernández Fermoselle y otros, *Inmenso estrecho*, Madrid, Kailas, 2005, pág. 220.

<sup>12</sup> E. Wolf, "Self object experiences: development, psychopathology, treatment", en Mahler and Kohut, *Perspectives on Development, Psychopathology and Treatment*, ed. S. Kramer y S. Akhtar, Northvale NJ, Jason Aronson, 1994, pág. 73.

accident at work but Roca's insights into his character's experience of identity dysphoria demonstrate that turmoil and the inability to access the pathways that might have led to a successful adaptation process are also significant factors in the death of the teacher turned builder.

While the main characters in "Sintierra" and "Terciopele robado" do not die, Lucía Etxebarría and Elena Pita, the stories' respective authors, also show us situations in which the experiences of migrants to Spain are far less than ideal and the possibilities of achieving a hybrid identity of optimal psychological distance severely limited. Elena Pita takes her readers back to the days of post-war hardship when millions of Spaniards left the country in search of a better life. In Pita's conceptualisation of the *inmenso estrecho*, Ofelia leaves Betanzos, a rural Galician village, an "Esquina no dibujada en ningún mapa" (pág. 209), for Zurich and a textiles factory to which dozens of Galician women have already made the journey. In Switzerland, Ofelia finds an expatriate Spanish community which tries so far as possible to achieve invisibility. Integration is impossible in a context where the Spanish workers are shown to be segregated and prevented from even attempting to achieve any kind of social intercourse with the host population. Ofelia feels marked out by a body interpreted as inappropriate by the Swiss: "El olor, la ropa, la expresión que ella traía, iban a señalarla allá a donde fuera en aquel país de seres igualmente inodoros e insulsos"<sup>13</sup>. Her experience of immigration is not linked as explicitly with mortality as is Wilson Masters's but the author reminds her readers that the same Spaniards revealed as hostile to migrants in "De vuelta a casa" were once themselves shunned by the closed ranks of a homoethnic community. Unable to integrate in Switzerland, Ofelia finds on her return to Spain that her absence has also closed off her connection with her home community: "La emigración la despojara del futuro que había soñado; al frente se abría ahora un destierro de dolor: el amor robado, lindo terciopelo, y la tierra sin porvenir"<sup>14</sup>.

The Sahauri women described by Lucía Etxebarría in "Sintierra" are similarly dispossessed from their pasts as well as their futures. Exiled to camps in the Algerian desert, there is no host community with which to attempt to integrate. Etxebarría paints Moroccans not as victims of failed Spanish immigration policy but as colonists themselves, responsible for the uprooting of entire communities to situations where there is no other option but that of ethnocentric withdrawal and the consequent retreat into fundamentalist formulations of identity.

For Etxebarría's narrator, "La lengua es el oxígeno de la vida, es la que define a un pueblo"<sup>15</sup>. For this character, as for others in *Inmenso estrecho*, language plays a vital role in negotiating immigrant status. The contributors to the collection seem particularly attuned to the linguistic dimension of the psychology of immigration, an

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<sup>13</sup> Ángel Fernández Fermoselle y otros, *Inmenso estrecho*, Madrid, Kailas, 2005, pág. 209.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 212.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 52.



aspect which is understudied in clinical assessment of clinical interactions, Akhtar suggests in *Immigration and Identity* (págs. 153-63). He proposes that immigration often creates a psychological pathology he terms the “Linguistically lacerated self” (pág. 100) and that counterbalancing the language of the country of birth and the country of residence is one of the most complex elements along the tracks followed in post-immigration transition. Akhtar refers to Julia Kristeva’s description of her own polylingual status to describe the effect of immigration on the relationship between language and self. “Between two languages,” says Kristeva, “[the immigrant’s] element is silence”<sup>16</sup>. Several of the stories in *Inmenso estrecho* extend the metaphor of the straits and of ruptured Spanishness to encompass this linguistically barren decussation. In Elena Pita’s story, the living quarters of the exiled Galician women are characterised by their absolute silence. Their transient status seems to turn the women mute so that “Vivían en sus casas como amebas en el estómago de un animal”<sup>17</sup>. In “Con respeto... Carta a Yolanda,” Ramón Torrelledó uses his narrative alter-ego to ask those at home in Spain not to assume that because immigrants seem terse or laconic they have nothing to say:

*Al no poder relacionarte con normalidad, ofreces un perfil pálido de tu personalidad, los interlocutores la mayoría de las veces no se paran a pensar si tu silencio está provocado por el desconocimiento del idioma, porque estás sordo o porque no tienes nada que contar. Por desgracia esta última variante, precisamente, la que genera marginalidad y frustración, es la que incoscientemente eligen*<sup>18</sup>.

Language, Akhtar shows, is intimately connected with the process he calls emotional refuelling whereby immigrants are able to adapt successfully to a new country by staying in touch with home either through actual visits or by associating with the expatriate community overseas. A well synthesised hybrid identity, Akhtar says, retains “Exposure to familiar symbols: the dress, the language, the food, and the participation in rituals all [of which] reinforce a sense of identity” (pág. 62). When cut off from these sources of emotional topping-up, the immigrant’s process of adaptation is hindered. *Inmenso estrecho* again shows how ideal conditions for inter-cultural adaptation are stymied by less than ideal circumstances. In “Lejanos,” for example, Jorge Eduardo Benavides describes the plight of a Peruvian woman working as a domestic servant in Spain. Her employers are sympathetic to her need to refuel emotionally but it is something she cannot do. She fears that if once she leaves Spain without the correct documentation she will never be able to return. “Rosita,” “Los parientes lejanos,” and “Estrecho” also show us immigrant characters whose adaptation to Spanishness is stunted by the difficulty they have in accessing the emotional sustenance highlighted by Akhtar.

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<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline Amati-Mehler y otros, *The Babel of the Unconscious: Mother Tongue and Foreign Languages in the Psychoanalytic Dimension*, Madison, International Universities Press, 1993, pág. 265.

<sup>17</sup> Fernández Fermoselle, *op. cit.*, pág. 210.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pág. 265.

*Estrecho inmenso*'s broad canopy of stories of migrant experience from and to Spain, when seen alongside Salman Akhtar's model of a multi-layered process of identity transformation, shows that contemporary Spanish writers are aware both of how multicultural integration would work ideally and of the obstacles which prevent this happening, in a psychological as well as a material sense. The stories illustrate that immigrants to Spain are people for whom emotional refuelling, optimal intra-cultural equidistance, linguistic grafting, and efficacy experiences could work in the way proposed by Akhtar's model of post-immigration adaptation. The stories' sensitivity to the socio-economic realities of immigration to Spain point to the need for a system of management of multiculturalism tailored to the country's specific demography. Citing Copelman, Akhtar suggests that the process of post-immigration identity transformation is never finished, and that a healthy host community and a healthy individual immigrant must both accept that "We are bound to have fragmented allegiances, and dissonant voices within ourselves that name our world"<sup>19</sup>. Arguably, and as this article has sought to illustrate, *Inmenso estrecho* uses its congeries of voices to try to begin to listen to the emerging Spanish confederacy of post-immigration diverse selves, one which makes up the identity of the immigrant to Spain and one which might also come to determine a country well adjusted to its new populations.

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<sup>19</sup> D. Copelman, "The immigrant experience: margin notes", *Mind and human interaction*, IV, 1993, pág. 103.

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