

**Immigrant Children's Adaptation: An Ecocritical study of the  
*The Upside-Down Boy* by Juan Felipe Herrera**

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**Abstract**

When a person gets used to a place where he was born and grew up and adapts to people and the environment around him and becomes an integral part of them, it would be difficult if he is forced, by any means, to leave the place and abandon these people, leaving them behind. Migration, whether voluntary or compulsory, has its negative effects. A migrant may need many years to forget the effects of the moves he did and perhaps will not forget their influence on him throughout his life, especially if he is forced to move for certain circumstances and will definitely need someone (s) to help him feel secure and safe in the new environment, and that will relieve him of his feelings of emptiness, irrelevance and isolation.

It is part of human nature to live in social and communicative societies, not in isolation and detachment. Migrant children are the most affected people in these moves. Juan Felipe Herrera believes that it is the duty of the new society to which immigrants are moved to accept and help them, not to impose tough and inconsiderate laws or put other obstacles before them. These immigrants are already loaded with concerns and worries and need no more trouble to suffer. He insists that attention to these children is a human duty, which, when done, can assist them to adapt environmentally, socially and psychologically to their new societies. In *The Upside Down Boy*, Juanito, the immigrant child feels lost at the first days he is in the new school and that everything is upside down for him when his family moved from Mexico to San Francisco. Herrera, himself a Mexican immigrant, tells people about the situations Juanito suffers and calls them to help him to set things up right once more.

**Key Words:** Immigrant, Adaptation, Ecocriticism, communicative societies, environment, and moves

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**Introduction**

Psychologically speaking, the moves of children from one place to another can be tough to them and also disrupt important friendships they have already made in the older place. These effects are problematic for the children who are introverted and those whose personalities tend to be sensitive and inflexible. The same thing is true with adults who frequently moved when they were little children as they have fewer relationships of high quality and when it is a matter of well-being and satisfaction of life, they tend to score lower. One the main reasons that children are negatively affected by their moves is that problems are predicated when moves happen such as lack of harmony with others, isolation, or even a job loss, or a [divorce](#) which have the worst influence on the family. Sometimes the family moves because a parent's job requires them to do so. Moves are also hard on children because they have to make school changes.

Children become the major victims of the moves and they keep the memory of these moves, along with the unforgettable effects they suffer, and that may have the worst influence in the children's future life. However, someone needs to be wise to take more care of the children's psychology just to make it easy for them to deal with the negative effects. The parents are the first ones to be responsible for this mission .People from the new place can also play a significant role in solving such a psychological shock(s). The staff members of the schools, where the children move to, can also be healers because they are already trained to deal with such cases. Children need help to pass the difficult times and learn how to adapt to the new environment and live normal life with less anxiety and stress.

**A Child's Adaptation to a New Environment**

When the parents s help and back each other and exert their efforts to make the move easy for the themselves and their children , the negative effects shall be minimized as possible and this shall make it easier for them all to enter into new social circles, and thus the negative effects become more limited . Like any other process that reflects negative effects on the mutual support and social relationships , and much positive flexibility shall back and then help both the parents and their children in the adjustment process .

Adaptation as perceived by psychologists and education is a dynamic process aimed at changing the person's behavior so that he can create a more harmonious relationship between himself and his environment, which means the ability of the individual to form a satisfactory connection between the two of them .Such connection is relative in its nature, as it engages others , and happens in relation to different cultures .It does not limit itself to a specific group of people , ethnicity , location and time . Children, the sensitive humans to

adaption at all times and places, are no exception. Alberto M. Bursztyn (2015:34) assures that:

The inconsistencies between ethnic identity and national identity may be related to the fact that the process of adaptation to a new society involves complex communication transactions in which immigrants attempt to make sense of what they expect and what is expected from them by the national society [...], and the integrated acculturation attitude is conducive to better school performance, but in some environments, depending on the country, region, and school, embracing a national identity may encourage higher achievement.

This embracement also encourages an individual's feeling of belonging. The sense of belonging, which children enjoy having with sensitivity, is one of the significant steps in building their self-esteem, ways of thinking, and their perspective to the future. This sense is generated by satisfying the child's need within his environment. The community in which the child lives is required to accept the new coming child without linking this acceptance to his achievements. Childhood and the environment have a great impact on the personality of the child and specifies the extent of his interaction and adaptation to the new community. A child who receives satisfaction and care for his needs (biological or social), feels reassured in his world. Any lack of satisfaction of these needs shall create tension that increases and gets more severe the longer he is deprived of them. Satisfying the needs of the child clearly determines his compatibility in the future life to come. If the conditions of the social environment do not allow these needs to be satisfied, such a child may seek other means just to satisfy his needs.

The child should be aware that he belongs to something greater than himself in the sense that he belongs to a family, culture, community, and nation. This shall make him feel this sense of pride of his belonging. This is done through the child's praise sessions where he is chosen from time to time to do something as an encouragement from the surrounding adults and is highlighted to show his ability to do something with much enthusiasm. It can also be done through the engagement of the child in certain activities based on collaborative and joint learning, such as scientific clubs and collective participation in an invention or manufacturing a thing (s). It can also be achieved by the child's enrolment into a social group that enables him to set a balance into his personality through prompting him to collaborate and cooperate with other children –and adults too, to give

him a chance to increase his self-esteem and self-confidence when he mingles and works with others.

Belonging and self-realization is the major theme of the play *The Upside -Down Boy* by Juan Felipe Herrera (2000). Herrera (1948- ) , is an immigrant from Mexico . The story of the play is based on the author's memories of the time when his family migrated from Mexico to settle down in San Francisco . Juanito ,the main character, moves with his parents from his old environment to a new one and the process of adaptation he went through are the vivid story details that are to be discussed in the following pages .

### **Problem and Solution: Displacement of the Little Boy and his Heal**

Herrera wrote a poem titled " *Everyday We Get More Illegal*" (2011) in which he says :

Yet the peach tree still rises & falls with fruit & without birds eat it the sparrows fight our desert	the daughter who married a citizen they stay behind broken slashed .... yesterday homeless & w/o papers
burns with trash & drug it also breathes & sprouts vines & maguey	Alberto left for Denver a Greyhound bus he said where they don't check you walking working
laws pass laws with scientific walls detention cells husband with the son the wife &	under the silver darkness walking working with our mind our life

He reflects immigrant people's feelings of loss and agony. The poem probes the human capacity to believe that other humans' lives are criminalized .The problem of being an outsider accompanied Herrera and he tried to find a way out of it , for himself and other suffering , and will suffer. He encourages his people to learn to adapt to the new people and environment they are to live among .He did not surrender to the feeling of outcast as there is still hope in them that they can survive in the new communities they immigrated to and adapt themselves there to live, as they have no other choice.

Displacement is part of Ecocriticism .In her definition of ecocriticism , Glotfelty writes: "Simply put, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (The Ecocriticism Reader, 1996: xviii) . Ecocritically , Adaption is a type of ecocritical study of a text. Herrera puts in his mind that Juanito's displacement needs to be healed by adaption to his new world. Juanito's movement causes him to feel its influence. He is confused by his new school and feels missing the love and intimacy of the country life. He feels bewildered and lost. As displaced people "are deprived the benefits of society's norms, values, benefits, and morals that influence their behavior patterns (Ondimu,2010: 1.) , Juanito feels that everything he does is upside down: He eats lunch when there is a break at school , goes out to play when it's lunch time, and his tongue looks like a rock when he speaks English. Being unfamiliar with the surrounding of the new environment , customs, and the language is reflected as his disability to have command over the place he is in , and this is a makes him suffer a sense of estrangement which the playwright translates into Juanito's physical overturning. Azade Soyhan (2001:24 ) wrote :

Multiple Migrations end in the loss of our homes, possessions, and memorabilia .When the smoke clears, we are faced with charred pieces of identification, shards of language, burned tongues, and cultural fragments .However, from the site of this fire , the phoenix of a transformational , bi-multilingual literature has risen .

Herrera's playful and colorful language depicts the experience of a child entering a new school and feels like a stranger in a world that seems upside down to him. Juanito's father tried to comfort the boy:

“Don’t worry, chico,”

Papi says as he walks me to school.

“Everything changes. A new place has new leaves on the trees and blows fresh air into your body.”

As the little boy settles into his new world of school, he started to discover his inner creativity.

We are finger-painting.

I make wild suns with my open hands.

Crazy tomato cars and cucumber sombreros—

I write my name with seven chiles.

This feeling of loss and disturbance aches both Juantino and his family .His disability to speak English adds more agony to him. Despite this disability , Juanito , depended on his own experiences of being a farmer . He tried to learn the English alphabet and words through writing his name with seven chiles. He made certain

illustrations that represent the letters ‘A’, ‘B’, and ‘C’ as if they were growing out from the ground with the plants roots and leaves, which is a clear hint to the individual's firm and everlasting between himself and the surrounding nature .It also expressed Juanito's certain connections to his instinctive background knowledge while trying his best to learn the new language .Juanito's colorful illustrations do portray the psychology of the main character through the detailed facial expressions that he showed . There are times when he showed his serious facial expressions, which reflect the tension he feels when he endures going to school for the first time in his life .He suffered being unable to communicate in English. However, there are other illustrations that show Juanito’s joy and excitement when he started to find happiness and joy in learning English language. His father and mother are very proud of him, not only because they see him gaining back his lost confidence that he used to enjoy having back at home , but because they know that his education and learning English will grant him the opportunities they themselves could never get . When it was bedtime, they tell him their stories, which were about sacrifice. His mother told him about the spelling medal she won when she was in the third grade, in El Paso, but she was obliged to drop out that same year just to help her mother. His father said that he had to pay his friends some money so they teach him English. This language is a foreign language for this family, just like the foreign place they came to and this language and land alienation needs to be challenged by them. The new place, language, people shape a new environment with all its elements. The whole family, not only Juanito, was to adapt to San Francisco. Eco critically, the challenge is not an easy one, especially for a little boy. He and his family miss the country life's warmth, yet humans in their nature fight to survive and challenge their surrounding because they have no other option, either to resist or surrender and die.

Despite his being in difficulty in his new environment, yet he does his best to shine like any active young boy trying to overcome his feeling of disengagement. This is due to his inner capability and determination. This is not the only motivation he has as there is another one that comes his way and provides the young boy with much energy and activation .This time it is Juanito's sensitive third grade teacher , Mrs. Lucille Sampson and his loving family who insisted on helping him find his voice through art and music which seem to be the best cure for his loneliness and isolation. This help did not only assist Juanito to fit in as a boy feeling lively and happy but made his life up right again. The play also pictures how the students feel that they are appreciated, accepted and have self-pride and about where others come from . They felt that they enter

the classrooms without being obliged to lose their own culture. This is critical and crucial for this particular student in order to make the academic success as he gains knowledge at the school in the new language he needs to learn.

The text revolves around the feeling of displacement through the physical suspension of Juanito, who floats on the baseball field in an upside down position. When he goes to school for the first time, he feels lonely and is unable to speak, and thus his emotions and feelings are suspended. But with the grace and joy of his parents, he is encouraged to continue the education they could not get. They help him to persuade him that he needs to firmly believe in the notion that "Each word, each language has its own magic." (Herrera, *Upside-down*: 23.) His agitation is more relieved when his teacher discovers his talent for music and singing, and Juanito is pleased to enter a new world of expression and interaction in another language with which he reacts and shares his feelings with other children, parents and teachers. Herrera's work is particularly interesting for the visual and linguistic examples of the code-making, which is a symbol of Juanito's sense of isolation in the new environment and his progressive creative experience. When Juanito mixes the English word "recess" for the Spanish word "reces" (cattle), the readers could imagine that they see the cows flying in the sky above the children who were playing in the field, while he himself was sitting in a corner wondering what to do in such a mess and unable to interact with the other children at class. He is living in his own world, he says:

When I jump  
Everyone sits  
When I sit  
All the kids swing through the air.  
My feet float through the clouds  
When all I want is to touch the earth  
I am the upside down boy (Herrera, *Upside-down*:14)

This isolation causes a sense of frustration in Juanito, physically and spiritually. Juanito's sense of frustration is translated into a physical overturning. His lack of knowledge of the language and customs of his new surroundings and environment is perceived as a lack of control over space and time. Herrera explains the process in which a migrant child must engage, in the way he negotiates his own sense at the social, psychological and cultural levels.

With much internal courage and outer encouragement, Juanito could reconcile with the various dimensions and creative creations of creolization and embodying the image that illustrates his first poem in English. His parents dance between chili and pepper. The moustache

of his father is turned into the word "mustache" and his mother's hair into clusters of strawberries, Juanito writes :

Papi Felipe with a mustache of words

Mama Lucha with strawberries in her hair

I see magic salsa in my house and everywhere . (*Upside-down* : 24) .

Salsa "is the Latin dance that blends different rhythms and beautifully symbolizes how to meet rural members, the family world, the mother language of the living city, school world, and the new language in the way that begins the process of quiet self-acceptance. Juanito is taught how to interact with the environment, at the present time and in the future. Juanito is thus ecocritically taught and cultivated.

It is noticeable that nature never adapts itself to humans, but the other way round is actually happens. Humans cannot survive without nature but the latter has the power to survive by its own .Man's natural weakness to Nature's power is acceptable to humans and thus they are forced to adapt to the area and time where and when they live. Nature's supremacy is for granted and honored. The child is taught this doctrine and is asked to respect it everywhere and every time. Juanito was doing that when he was in Mexico and was happy doing it, and was encouraged to repeat the same thing when he moved to another location and time. He needed the help of whoever can afford it and he did not refuse the help he got from his family and teacher because he was aware that he may not survive unless he gets any available assistance he was offered. Nature showed him its power to put hindrances on his way. On the other hand, he himself showed his environment that he is able to adapt and get himself indulged in any new conditions he has to face and needs to be the victorious part in the struggle.

Despite its utmost prevalence and undefeatable power, Nature may be merciful and timid. Nature did not deprive Juanito everything, as it helped him to survive by his lovely voice and charisma. Other people enjoyed his singing and accepted him among themselves, which is a kind of adaptation to the new environment .Juanito is indulged in the new community he is presented to. He cannot keep himself lost all the way long. He needs to prove his existence and character to people surrounding him. The feeling of loss is normal at first, but the boy cannot let this loss goes on forever. The playwright himself went through these circumstances and managed finally to get in harmony with his new circumstances and place he was put in. Herrera sets an example for all immigrants who are to face new environment and people. Immigrants are required to adapt and

survive, thus they exert more efforts to get in harmony with their new communities.

Learning speaking a new language can be easy while the learner listens listening to music or sings. Listening and singing helps Juanito to learn how to pronounce the words in a correct way. He expands his vocabulary, and teaches himself some typical phrases from the culture of the native speakers of the language. Musicians and singers can learn new languages even faster than other people because they have the ability to turn the sound patterns into words. They have this ability since they have to learn the organization of certain c sounds within melodies and compose their own music. Juanito is lucky to have his teacher Mrs. Sampson, as an example of the new environment element who accepted the little boy and understood his fear. She is sympathetic and tender and takes the boy by his hand to put him on the right path to challenge his fear and defeat all his worries. The way out for the boy was to sing. Music assisted him in different ways. Music is known to help Juanito in by enabling him to overcome his suffering languages problems by helping him learning how to speak in a better way. It also improves his health and productivity and worked as a way and method of expression. Moreover, it became a way for him to identify his emotions that he feels. Music is also helpful for him as he is under stress as it helps him relax. Mrs. Sampson understands well enough that music therapy is really helpful emotionally, physically, and mentally, and that is why she depended on music to help Juanito and also people around him to accept him among them. She managed to find a common ground on which people from within the community and people who are immigrated to it can stand in harmony and love each other. With the help of music and signing, Juanito feels that he is healed and becomes able to talk about the farm community where he came from and tells many stories about that place. Mrs. Sampson digs deep into Junaito's heart and soul to find out the source of inspiration that would influence both Juanito and the people of the new community. Juanito's soul is vivid and spontaneous and offered Juanito's lovely sound to be the source. The boy is afraid that his tongue would be like a rock when he tries to learn and speak English but music and songs gave him the freedom to fly like a singing colorful little bird in the sky above the heads of his classroom mates and other people. Cleverly, Mrs. Sampson uses Juanito's melodic voice to affect the whole new environment. Nature made its elements harmonize with each other in a flowing manner. Juanito became the singing bird and the listeners are other elements of nature that enjoyed listening to him- people.

Herrera drew a colorful scene as if the place was a lovely garden where the birds sing freely without the fear of being shot or interrupted by people. The magical atmosphere in the garden was the same in the classroom where Juanito was allowed to charm the other students with his musical tunes coming out of his pure soul and heart. Purity is a powerful force that no one can resist accepting it. Juanito's parents, school mates and teacher are all impressed by the charming songs he sung for them. He teaches them the feeling of love and harmony, and also teaches himself the new language. It is a double learning and teaching process that was going on in Juanito's heart and mind.

The listeners to Juanito's singing were also pure at heart and soul. Herrera created a paradisiacal atmosphere where all are having white hearts and souls. This pure little place needed music to fill it with the smell of heaven and mercy. Nature offered its riches to make the place charming and attractive. The little students are like angels at their hearts and acceptance. They did not reject the new comer but embraced and assisted him to be one of them. Their pure hearts received the new heart and gave him the space and freedom to express himself and tell them about his emotions. Everything is harmonic and lively. Moreover, the pictures Juanito drew with his vivid imagination add more to the already pure existence in the school. Juanito's question "If I learn the English words will my voice reach the ceiling, weave through it like grape vines?" is answered with a big "Yes" when people accepted the person who came from the mountains by Lake Wolfer, a glassy world full of sky colors." He manages to harmonize with the new environment and decides to learn from and teach people around him.

### **Conclusion**

Adaptation to a new place is difficult for most people. Juanito, with his little age, is face to face with a new place, people and language. He needs to exist in the new surroundings. He is lively and active. He transfers his culture to the new community. He makes people believe in him and his magic salsa, cucumber sombreros, and tomato cars. He writes poetry and sings it for them. Herrera needs to make Juanito upside down just to encourage and motivate him to spell out his vividness and chanting voice to touch other people's souls. He wants him to adapt to the new community but it seems that the latter is affected by the former. He tries to learn their language and they also learn from him how to be charming and creative. Herrera wants to deliver a message to people that despite being immigrants some people are, yet they do belong to this world and there is a space for everyone everywhere and that nature cannot be server to its elements as long as they are in harmony with it.

This study reflects the psychological and ecocritical points of view in reading the play *The Upside Down Boy* and proves that both views are interrelated in understanding the human psychology and literature. Juanito and his family stand as an example of any immigrant family who tried their best to get along with the new community in its various components and environment. It sends a warning to the concerned people to pay more attention to the problem of immigrants and their sufferings. Herrera is worried about the future of the immigrants and wanders "how many immigrants will have the skills and potentials like Juanito to be fortunate in being received by the American school teacher to help him get adjusted and change his "upside down" status to be a right one? The change and move confuse Juanito for a long time and makes him feel so lost that he lost control over his actions and behaviors till he is saved by a kind teacher and understanding and loving colleagues. The shift in time and place are ecocritically studied and reflected in Juanito's actions and drawings. Juanito regains his self-control when love and passions of loving people embraced him with warmth and smiles.

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## تكيّف الأطفال المهاجرين: دراسة نقد بيئية لمسرحية " الصبي المقلوب "

لمؤلفها خوان فيليب هيريرا

## الخلاصة

إذا تعود شخص ما على مكان ولد وترعرع فيه وتكيّف مع الاشخاص والبيئة من حوله وأصبح جزء لا يتجزأ منه، فان الامر يكون عسيرا لو انه اضطر الى مغادرة المكان وترك هؤلاء الناس وراءه. ان للهجرة، سواء كانت طوعية او اجبارية، تأثيرات سلبية قد يحتاج المهاجر الى سنين طويلة حتى ينسى اثارها وربما لن ينساها طوال حياته وبخاصة إذا كانت اضطرارية وسوف يحتاج الى من يمد له يد العون لينتقله من احساسه بالفراغ وعدم الاهمية والعزلة.

ان جزء من طبيعة البشر العيش في مجتمعات اجتماعية ومتواصلة وليس العيش في معزل وكأبة. ان الاطفال المهاجرين هم أكثر الاشخاص تاثرا بمثل هذه الانتقالات ويرى الكاتب خوان فيليب هيريرا ان من واجب المجتمع الجديد الذي ينتقل اليه المهاجرون ان يتقبلهم ويساعدهم، لا ان يضع امامهم القوانين القاسية والمعرقلات الاخرى فهم محملين بالهموم اصلا وليسوا بحاجة الى المزيد من المتاعب وقلة الراحة. انه يرى ان الاهتمام بهؤلاء الاطفال واجب انساني حتى يستطيعوا التكيف بيئيا واجتماعيا ونفسيا مع مجتمعاتهم الجديدة.

في مسرحية (الصبي المقلوب) يشعر خوانيتو، الطفل المهاجر، بالضياح في الأيام الأولى من وجوده في المدرسة الجديدة وأن كل شيء مقلوب بالنسبة له عندما انتقلت عائلته من المكسيك إلى سان فرانسيسكو. يروي المسرحي هيريرا، وهو مهاجر مكسيكي، للناس عن المواقف التي يعانيتها خوانيتو ويدعوهم إلى مساعدته على إعادة الأمور الى نصابها الصحيح مرة أخرى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المهاجر، التكيف، النقد بيئي، المجتمعات التواصلية، البيئة، الانتقال