



Pôsteres

The Construction of Identity in Zona Neale Hurston and Alice Walker - a Comparative Study of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* Janice Inês Nodari (UNIJUÍ)

Este estudo tem por objetivo analisar a construção da identidade sofrida por Celie, a personagem principal no livro *The color purple* (1982) de Alice Walker, e Janie, a personagem principal no livro *Their eyes were watching God* (1937) de Zora Neale Hurston. A abordagem empregada favorece a investigação dos aspectos: jornada, sensualidade/sexualidade, e comunidade na construção das identidades dessas personagens. A comparação entre os romances revelou que as personagens passam por um processo semelhante e fazem uso da estratégia de contar suas próprias histórias, para expor seu crescimento como sujeitos atuantes.

Palavras-chave: construção da identidade, jornada, sensualidade/sexualidade, comunidade, análise comparativa.

Introduction

The scholarship so far has mentioned that it is due to Alice Walker that Zora Neale Hurston's work is known nowadays, since the former made a research to locate the latter's tombstone and recuperate her work. Besides, it is also claimed that Hurston's work has influenced Alice Walker's, a theory that can be shown in, at least, two ways. First, it can be asserted that both writers make use of orality in their works. In addition, they denounce the prejudice faced not only by black women but also by black men in the American society.

This study aims at comparing Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and showing how similar the process of construction of identity of Celie and Janie, the leading characters, is in both novels. The hypothesis is that aspects such as the characters' temporal and spatial journey, the sense of belonging to a community, and the awakening of sensuality/sexuality contribute to this process and are portrayed through the familiar tradition of storytelling.

Although the structure of the novels is different, since Hurston's novel is the history of Janie's

life told by her to her friend Pheoby and Walker's is an epistolary novel compound mainly by the letters (in a number of 90) its main character, Celie, writes to God and to her sister, the similarities are more numerous than the differences. Along with the aspects already mentioned, storytelling is one of the similarities found and it is also responsible for making possible the change of status, from passive object into active subject, of both Celie and Janie in the novels.

One of the similar aspects is related to the formation of black communities in the United States as a way of enhancing black identity. Both novels present this idea of forming communities as a means of keeping the alike together and supportive. Besides, in her *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston portrays the richness of the orality of the African American speech, a peculiarity also explored by Alice Walker in her *The Color Purple*. However, both Hurston and Walker were criticized by other African American writers precisely for portraying this illiterate speech of the African Americans. It was believed that such portrait did not help to erase the idea of inferiority planted by white people in the African Americans' minds.

Another similarity is related to the way the authors organize the stories, as if they were tales of many voices, justifying the fact that history is not written by one individual only.

When talking about individual testimonies of history, one may not forget that they may be oriented by an ideology, an issue vastly analyzed in most black writings. And once more, New Historicism proves itself worthy. "A traditional formalistic approach, treating the text as self-contained, can never locate these ideological operations, also known as "representations." Only a historicist approach, treating the text as one element in the ideology of an age, can hope to lay them bare", according to Myers (3). In this sense, individual testimonies through storytelling and written documents, like the ones used in the two works of fiction, are proved to be worth considering.

From A (Alice Walker) to Z (Zora Neale Hurston): a comparison

The Color Purple was first published in 1982 and transformed into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg three years later. The novel won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and an American Book Award. The historical period portrayed in it is the one before the 1920s and after the end of slavery in the United States, which happened officially in 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery was ratified (Miller & Faux 100).

Alice Walker's novel caused a lot of controversy among the African Americans in the United States. Based on *The color purple*, people have been accusing her of hating men, black men in particular, of writing an injurious work to black male and female relationships and of defending harmful, even destructive ideas of equality and tolerance to the black community (Walker 22). In defense of her novel, Walker says,

The Color Purple is not a story against black men, it is a story about black women. The fact that the men in the story are not all good guys needs no justification, for it is not the obligation of any work of fiction to

present every possible angle of every possible situation (Jones 226).

The book is the story of the love between two black and poor sisters, Celie and Nettie, that lingers throughout their forced separation of many years, entwined to the story of how during this period of time, the shy, ugly and almost illiterate sister, Celie, finds out her interior power, thanks to the support of a friend/lover, Shug Avery. However, Celie's interior power appears just after she undergoes many challenges and grievances in her life.

The novel is a critical narrative that comments on issues of feminism as well as African American identity, while presenting the hardships of a young woman, Celie, within the patriarchal North-American system in her struggling to become an individual. The novel is a critique to such system. It makes a denial of the commodity value of women, and an insistence on female self-sufficiency in terms of sexual and moral independence from male domination, the preference of sexual deviation, and even the construction of an alternative language for the novel's characters, a language incoherent and limited but serving their users perfectly (Abend-David 15), as the language Celie uses to write her letters, since she cannot utter her ideas, proves to be.

While Celie obeys her stepfather and marries a man she does not even know the name, her sister Nettie, after a while, goes to the city and finds help from a couple of missionaries that take her to Africa. Nettie starts her journey after African roots, while Celie stays in a restricted space of action, her sister has an entire new world to meet.

Celie's place of action, opposed to her sister's, is a mere domestic one and her ignorance is measured by the spatial limits given to her. This fact is shown by her attitude after Shug Avery recovers her sister's letters since after observing the letters Celie struggles to puzzle out the markings on them:

Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letter in my lap. Little fat queen of England stamps on it, plus stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say Africa . I don't know where England at. Don't know where Africa at either. So I still don't know where Nettie at (116).

To elaborate on this passage, it is worth quoting Selzer's words,

[r]evealing Celie's ignorance of even the most rudimentary outlines of the larger world, this passage clearly defines the "domestic" site she occupies as the novel's

main narrator. In particular, the difficulty Celie has interpreting this envelope underscores her tendency to understand events in terms of personal consequences rather than political categories. What matters about not knowing “where Africa at” – according to Celie – is not knowing “where Nettie at”(1).

Celie’s difficulty interpreting the envelope sent by Nettie at first only seems to support the claim that her domestic perspective erases race and class issues from the narrative.

Celie’s awakening

Throughout the novel, Celie’s construction of identity process obeys the following sequence: first the discovery of her sexuality/sensuality in her homosexual relationship with her mentor Shug Avery, then her journey out of her husband’s slavery (when she decides to accept Shug’s invitation to go to Memphis, Tennessee) and, finally, her sense of belonging to a community, a group (Shug and Albert being the most important elements of it).

Eventually Nettie returns home, in the middle of World War II, and they finally know each other’s ‘people.’

In Selzer’s words,

The Color Purple closes with a celebration of kinship, its concluding action composed of a series of family reunions: Sophia patches things up with Harpo; Shug visits her estranged children (for the first time in thirty years); and the novel’s two narrators, Celie and Nettie, are joyfully and tearfully reunited. Even Albert and Celie are reconciled, his change of heart signaled by his earning the right to have his first name written. Coming after Celie has achieved both economic independence and emotional security, the reunions at the end of The Color Purple testify to the importance of kinship to the happiness of every individual. Appropriately, then, when the two sisters fall into one another’s arms at the end, each identifies her kin: Nettie introduces her husband and the children, and Celie’s

first act is to "point up at [her] peoples...
Shug and Albert." (243)" (08).

In terms of ideological achievement, it can be said that *The Color Purple* does not reside only in the denouncing a male dominated society field, but describes the possibilities in the absence of such domination. The conclusion of the book also suggests that feelings of kinship can transcend gender differences, even when these differences include injustices as harmful as Albert's abuse of Celie.

To sum up, the novel tries to resolve tensions between the sexes – but not between the races and, therefore, all those critics who accused Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* of being unfair to black males are proved to be misconceived. However, Walker fails in her attempt to solve the tensions, since the ending she gives to her novel does not approach reality: she puts a chauvinist man knitting next to the woman he had taken as wife/property who is by her turn set next to her real love: a woman. By doing this, Alice Walker suggests that a balanced and non-biased society is only possible if men learn the so considered women tasks and if women have homosexual relationships. This reading is only broken when considering another important character in the novel: Nettie, and her family.

The scholarship so far has mentioned that it is due to Alice Walker that another black writer called Zora Neale Hurston is known nowadays, since the former made a careful research in order to recuperate the latter's work and even to locate her tombstone. It is also claimed that Zora Neale Hurston's work influenced Alice Walker, something that can be shown in at least two ways.

Honoring the dead: slavery, storytelling and the construction of identity

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Eatonville , Florida , around 1901. Eatonville was one of the few all-black towns in the United States , which had been incorporated in 1886, and her early childhood was probably free of the racism experienced by most children growing up in mixed black and white communities.

Many critics, such as Darwin Turner, quoted by Smith, have described Zora Neale Hurston as indifferent to her own and other black people's dignity, obsequious to whites, opportunistic, and politically retrograde (59) both as a woman and a writer. According to him,

[t]he Zora Neale Hurston who takes shape from her autobiography and from the accounts of those who knew her is an imaginative, somewhat shallow, quick-tempered woman, desperate for recognition and reassurance to assuage her feelings of inferiority; a blind follower of that social

code which approves arrogance toward one's assumed peers and inferiors but requires total psychological commitment to a subservient posture before one's supposed superiors. It is in reference to this image that one must examine her novels, her folklore, and her view of the Southern scene. (98) (Turner qtd in Smith, 59).

The problem with this kind of criticism lies in the fact that it is tendentious and partial. In addition, Turner himself provides a possible explanation for Hurston's obscurity: she got sandwiched in between the exotic primitivism of the Harlem Renaissance, to which many critics claim she belonged, and the protest mood of the forties (Washington 11).

Some critics saw the problem related to prejudice going beyond control, since uneasiness had already been provoked by black male writers who based their narratives on the experience of the atrocities of racism. This situation only got worse when black women, like Zora Neale Hurston accused of presenting a "whitewashed" picture of African Americans, introduced sexism to the long series of abuse, and unveiled the fact that not only did white people abuse black women but black men did as well.

On the other hand, other critics saw Hurston's position as an outsider of the mainstream literary canon and "as a commentator on the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference" (Johnson 318). These critics

read Hurston not only for the kinship inherent in such relations but because she used black vernacular speech and rituals, in ways subtle and various, so glaringly absent in other black fiction (Gates, Jr. 186-187).

Janie's awakening

In the book, Janie's journey along time – her childhood, her adolescence, her adulthood – and space – from Georgia to Florida – promotes the character's growth. The author, by providing mobility, both temporal and spatial, gives Janie the opportunity of becoming an acting subject. Moreover, by giving Janie two chances of getting rid of slavery puts her as an example of the resistance to slavery her ancestors had performed.

There are many types of journey described in black women writings, such as: journey into slavery, journey into freedom and journey back into history. Each of these journeys, no matter how arduous, has generated growth in consciousness, and has provided a means for defining

the self.

Their Eyes Were Watching God recalls literary and racial memories, in the speech of a mulatto woman in her struggles to attain selfhood. The fiction portrays a female protagonist (Janie) that tells her own story in a way that one may think it is the story of all black women in the south of the United States. However, different from the other possible women, Janie Crawford achieves a powerful and somehow independent cultural voice as a result of her different experiences, while telling her friend Pheoby her own story. Through her experiences, she perceives herself as an individual: she undergoes a process of self-construction as a person. Slowly, she notices that her existence as a human being does not depend only upon the others, but mainly on herself.

Telling a people's story

Hurston portrays the richness of African American oral culture and the complex individuality of its illiterate "uncultured" folk creators. The author does not use historical data in her fiction; however, one may notice that the events take place during the post-slavery period in the United States, due to social-political incidents portrayed in the novel, the most important one being the formation of the first completely black community in the United States: Eatonville.

According to Miller,

[i]n Eatonville, the store porch is the cultural center of the community, the place where all of the relevant cultural rituals occur. In a community whose ethos is expressed in the richness of the spoken word, Joe's attempt to browbeat Janie into silence block [sic] her from meaningful participation in Afro-American cultural traditions. The price Janie must pay for her "front porch" existence is the dissociation of her sensibility and isolation from the values of the community (64).

Jane's spatial mobility was delimited by the space inside the store Joe had. He limits her physically by establishing that she could not stay on the porch listening to the common folk's talk-tales. Nevertheless, for some people her job at the store can be understood as a remarkable achievement, since before that time women did not dare to occupy a space related to business economy. According to Theriot,

[n]ot only were the physical boundaries of womanly activity expanded in the late-century period, but the premarriage options

were also numerous for the young woman than they had been for her mother. Women's employment grew by 50 percent from 1880 to 1900, with the most striking increase among middle-class women. Technological and economic changes produced jobs, and some daughters occupied their late adolescence and early adulthood as salesgirls, stenographers, or typists (79).

According to Awkward, "Starks has chosen for Janie a psychologically and physically limited role – that of a "wife" – which does not include public speaking (25). Moreover, since an early age, Jane had been either envied by women or coveted by men. The description provided by Hurston in her book is overflowed by sensuality:

[t]he men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day (11).

The reason for all this jealousy and desire might be her skin color, and this can be the reason why Joe Starks wanted her so badly. Janie was not a white woman but a mulatto; even so, she could fulfill the lust for revenge that not only Joe but also all African Americans had: what could be better than going to bed with the enemy's/master's white woman?

Being a mulatto makes of Janie a person who does not belong to just one world. Due to this double source, she feels in many occasions that she does not belong to the black community in which she was living. Besides, a question might have crossed her mind: when one parent is white and the other is black, is the child both, or neither?

After all, from an inarticulate object, Janie becomes an active subject.

The last journey, the historical one, Janie makes throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In all events there is a bit of history: history of black slavery, history of struggle, history of war,

history of sufferings and even history of death.

Preserving black identity through storytelling

Gates, Jr. classifies *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a speakerly text, that is

a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed to “emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the ‘illusion of oral narration’”. The speakerly text is that text in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of the tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be the privileging of oral speech and its inherent linguistic features (181).

A speakerly text, in this sense, would seem primarily to be oriented toward imitating one of the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in classical African American vernacular literature. One of these forms is precisely what the main character, Janie, follows: storytelling. Storytelling has its justification through Gates, Jr.’s words, since according to him, “for Hurston, the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines the search for the self” (183). The self, in this case, can emerge through the will in an attempt to write itself into being within a first-person narrative structure (Gates, Jr. 183-184).

Janie’s act of remembering the past, both bad and good experiences, and also the act of telling them aloud to Pheoby is a positive characteristic related to constant change.

According to Gates, Jr., Hurston’s contribution to literature reside in the fact that she blended in her narrative two extremes – narrative commentary in the diction of standard English and black diction. In his words,

[t]he mode of narration of *Their Eyes* [sic] consists, at either extreme, of narrative commentary (rendered in third-person omniscient and third-person restricted voices) and of character’s discourse which manifests itself as a direct speech rendered in what Hurston called dialect). Hurston’s

innovation is to be found in the middle spaces between these two extremes of narration and discourse, in what we might think of as represented discourse, which as I am defining it includes both indirect discourse and free indirect discourse. It was Hurston who introduced free indirect discourse into Afro-American narration. It is this innovation, (...), which enables her to represent various traditional modes of Afro-American rhetorical play while simultaneously representing her protagonist's growth in self-consciousness through free indirect discourse (191).

The likeness between Hurston and Walker resides in the fact that while the former was calling people's attention with her denouncement of black male dominance over black women, the latter came up with the idea that the feminist movement could not clearly and completely represent all women, and this is basically why a movement called womanism has appeared. They both also portrayed power relations in their novels. Moreover, by presenting different faces of the same prism, namely racism, they proved to be innovative and daring for their time. Both novelists, as mentioned earlier, elaborate on black women through whom men fulfill their expectations regarding their masculinity. Schmidt offers a possible explanation for this behavior. She claims that,

(...) victimized by both caste and class, the black man could not challenge the white man to assert his power and control in a society where these were valued and considered to be the parameters of male identity. This uncertainty about role and, consequently, his fears of emasculation made him turn to the only element he could beat on: the black woman. Thus, male oppression within the black family reveals a simple yet horrifying truth: power and control over the black woman often became the only means by which the black man could prove himself to himself and to others and in this way attain some kind of leverage with the white man, even if only in sexual terms (59-60).

In order to react against male power, both novels present the two poles of female reaction: dissent and conformity, mainly in marriage. If at first both Celie and Janie seem to conform to

the abuses, they, eventually, react against them.

Despite the similarities, however, we cannot affirm that in both novels we have “stable kin networks, steadfast marriages, unusual fidelity and resistance to forced marriages” (Zinn 174) like we had during the slavery period in the United States . On the contrary, we have a Celie separated from her children right after they were born and obliged to a forced marriage.

To complete the idea of marriage and love, we may recall the one of sensuality/sexuality, which is also elaborated on in the novels. And it is closely connected to flowers. While for Janie the idea of finding love is related to the metaphor of the bee visiting the blossoming flower, Celie finds her sensuality through Shug Avery’s teaching. It is Shug who motivates Celie to know her own body, to find her “rose” (vagina) (76-77). And it is the search for someone who could take good care of them (not to say of their flowers) that makes Celie declare independence from Albert to go along with Shug Avery to Memphis, and that makes Janie accept Tea Cake’s offering to go along with him to work in some beans fields.

This aspect of physical, as well as spatial, mobility makes possible the construction of their identities not only as women but also as human beings. Along with the discovery of their sensuality/sexuality, Celie and Janie’s both temporal and spatial journey concur in making the process of construction of identity possible. However, community, or the sense of belonging to a group, proves to be as meaningful as journey.

Although Janie speaks herself into being, while Celie writes herself into being, they both struggle to find their own voices throughout the narratives. They do it by using the black dialect that reinforces their identity. Moreover, in both novels we have the storytelling, albeit in different ways, taking place, and the use of free indirect discourse, possibly in order not to stop the flow of ideas. And in this storytelling we, the readers, play an important role since when reading the letters of *The Color Purple*, we do it as if it were over Celie’s shoulder, just as we overhear Janie telling her story to Pheoby in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Gates, Jr.). While telling, and sharing the stage with the authors, it is Celie and Janie’s turn to master the language and show the power they struggled to conquer.

Concerning narration, it is worth talking about the mediators in both novels, which is another difference regarding them. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we have Pheoby who mediates between the individual (Janie) and the group (Eatonville community), whereas in *The Color Purple* the reader gets the information through Celie and Nettie’s letters. Regarding the narrative structure, we have the shifts from third to first-person point of view and vice-versa only in Hurston’s novels, while in Walker ’s novels everything is first person.

To sum up, it is worth saying once more that the aspects used by Hurston in her novel in order to promote the leading character’s growth as a subject, namely: journey, community, and sensuality/sexuality, were also explored by Walker in her *The Color Purple*. Moreover, both authors use storytelling as a tool for allowing the construction of the character’s identity and explore power relations in the American society of the 30’s. Therefore, although 50 years separate the publication of both novels, it is undeniable that Hurston’s style influenced Walker ’s.

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