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**CREATIVE ETHNICITY AS SPACE OF INTERRACIAL MEDIATION: A READING
OF ZORA N. HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND LESLIE M.
SILKO'S *CEREMONY***

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Abstract:

This study explores creative ethnicity and multiracial discourse in two novels by Hurston and Silko. The objective is to demonstrate that each of the two novels is a narrative space which advocates togetherness in the twenty-first century characterized by rising interracial tensions in American society where peace between communities is undermined. The comparative and narratological theories enable us to collect, and interpret the intra-textual contents of each work. The analysis has shown that the corpus texts make up a text full of strategies of mediation. They advocate togetherness in diversity.

Keywords: creative ethnicity, dialog, multiraciality, multiculturalism, togetherness.

Résumé :

Cette étude explore l'ethnicité créative et le discours multiracial dans deux œuvres de Hurston et Silko. L'objectif est de démontrer que chacune des deux œuvres est un espace narratif qui prône le vivre-ensemble au vingt-et-unième siècle caractérisé par la montée des tensions interraciales dans la société américaine où la paix entre les communautés est sapée. Les théories comparatiste et narratologique nous permettent de recueillir et d'interpréter les contenus intra-textuels de chaque œuvre. L'analyse a montré que les textes des corpus forment un texte plein de stratégies de médiation. Ils prônent le vivre-ensemble dans la diversité.

Mots-clés : dialogue, ethnicité créative, le vivre-ensemble, multiculturalité, multiracialité.

Introduction

Society like that of the American society is composed of various communities from different horizons. Philipinos, Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans -- to name but a few -- make up the United States' populations. Living in this multiracial and multicultural landscape, a category of people faces racial discrimination. Individuals born to mixed-race or monoracial parents experience stereotypical and sometimes inhuman treatment. The relationships between people from the mainstream society and those from the dominated one are always marked by contempt, hatred and rejection. Worst, because of their genotype and phenotype, marginalized minorities are considered subhuman and others. N. Kösker and N. Özgen (2018, p.572) observe, "Otherizing based on differences adversely affect or prevent the cohabitation of diverse cultural structures..." Therefore, members of minority groups are very often victim of abuse and murder. Recently, the killing of Georges Floyd by a policeman is a perfect illustration of the kind of exaction that the Black community experiences in the United States. Most of raced-based violence ends up to killings. Discriminated individuals also experience socio-cultural crises.

In other words, minority groups face acculturation as R. Rodriguez (2011, p. 1) asserts: "Cultural assimilation is the process by which one cultural group is absorbed by another." The rising interracial tensions in the twenty-first century undermine togetherness in American society. In this respect, the present study focuses on the socio-cultural realities which characterize the interconnection between the dominant culture and the dominated one in Zora Neale Hurston's and Leslie Marmon Silko's works.

In fact, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Ceremony* depict and castigate antagonistic stands between communities. As evidence, by taking the case of the Indian tribes, R. Rodriguez (2011, p. 2) upholds: "Every new policy in relation to the American Indians [...] meant a new effort to acculturate the Indians to the White culture." Presumably, to preserve their communities' heritage, the atypical writing styles and the transposition of socio-cultural elements in the distinct texts seek to advocate a multiracial and multicultural society. In this perspective, the investigation of the work sets out to demonstrate how the different works are a space of negotiating and promoting togetherness regardless of race and culture. Thus, to what extent do Hurston's and Silko's works stand for a multiracial and multicultural society? The backbone of the study is articulated around postcolonial and narratological theories. By using the qualitative method, the analysis consists in comparing the internal and external textures of the selected works. In this regard, the paper is divided into three sections. Section one examines the symbolic scope of the authors' writing styles. Section two explores languages and customs as center of contest. The last one deals with the denunciation of socio-cultural contempt.

1. Social Stakes of Zora's and Silko's Writings

Their Eyes Were Watching God and *Ceremony* are two works which impress by their atypical presentations. In fact, the writing format of the former is characterized by a blatant discrepancy between the different chapters in terms of length. Hurston begins her novel with an introductory italicized sentence. Besides, chapters have no title and seem to merge to form a monolithic bloc like on pages fifty-five, seventy-three, to mention but a few. One also encounters a full-page paragraph on page fifty-six, which can be construed as a symbol of unity and togetherness between Whites and African Americans. Arguably, the author's technique is an aesthetic representation of the American society. By functioning like a unique bloc without any clear delimitation, Hurston's chapters connote one nation in diversity. In addition, the text contains a poem-like passage as follows:

We 'll walk in de light, de beautiful light
Come where the dew drops of mercy shine bright
Shine all around us by day and by night
Jesus, the light of the world. (Hurston, 2000, p.54)

The foregoing poem expresses better days to come for African-American community. The beam of hope heralds a new starting point for that category of persons in the American society. Indeed, after the emancipation proclamation, former enslaved try to rebuild their life. In this move, they seek to fully integrate the society. To cite R. Barthes (1967, p.32): “[Hurston's narrative is] the receptacle of [Blacks'] existence in all its density...” She, ingeniously, integrates two genres into her work --poem and prose. By doing so, she also challenges the canon concerning fictional works. Through her writing style, the author attempts to redefine new social norms by rejecting the imposed ones. In other words, the White supremacists' established norms are put into question. In this regard, Hurston's writing format inscribes into a symbolic act because she artistically puts into dialog two forces --the dominants and the dominated one. One can assume that the sole poem-like passage within the work consists into including the periphery into the center. That is, she puts into the center the discriminated and excluded African-American community living at the periphery of the mainstream society. Thus, the author wants the center to be de-centered. Evidently, her text advocates African Americans' inclusion in the American society, regardless of race and color. If Hurston's writing style is impressive, the external texture of Silko's writing is also atypical.

Unlike Hurston, Silko adopts a writing strategy which consists into entitling her chapters. Apart from some slight differences with Hurston's writing strategies, Silko's text is also a mixed production. For instance, the use of two literary genres pervade her work, too. Strikingly, the juxtaposition of poems and prose connotes a vision the author wants to convey. The external texture of the work reveals the cohabitation of two cultural elements. On the one hand, the text contains standard architecture of prose narrative and on the other hand, it encompasses American Indians' orality. This orality is remarkably expressed by poems. By blending two antagonistic socio-cultural materials, Silko also attempts to promote togetherness. Through her artistic creation, she tries to negotiate a multicultural space. In this regard, L. Goldmann (1964, p. 345) asserts:

“Writing is the individual expression of a collective consciousness...”³ Thus, Silko’s text expresses cultural riches if communities get together. By incorporating Pueblo Laguna tribe’s way of telling story into her work, the author attempts to promote her culture:

Ceremony
I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren’t just entertainment.
Don’t be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death. (Silko, 2006, p. 2)

As above-mentioned, the quote introduces the audience to Pueblo Laguna tribe’s rituals written in poetry. In reality this excerpt foreshadows that the story deals with social uneasiness:

The only
cure I know
is a good ceremony (Silko, 2006, p.2)

Visibly, indigenous tribes in the United States resort to ceremony to solve social problems. The extract indicates that American Indians face complex issues. This calls for an existential emergency in their reservations as illustrated in the following terms: “I will tell you something about stories...They are all we have...we have to fight off illness and death” (Silko, 2006, p.2). One can assume that their existence is at risk because of the impact of a tremendous westernization upon their culture. In fact, since the colonization of America, settlers undertake a socio-cultural genocide against American Indians. Based on the ideology of superior race, Westerners impose their culture. Thus, Indian tribes undergo a vast program of acculturation through schooling of their children. According to D. Sanders (1987, p.81): “The incompatibility of the traditional Native American value system with that of the mainstream American educational system is a source of great difficulty...” Therefore, that situation entails a gradual loss of their socio-cultural landmarks. In this regard, Silko puts the socio-cultural survival of her tribe at the crux of her narrative. In the search for revitalizing her culture, she disseminates her tribe’s cultural materials into her work. The scrutiny of Silko’s corpus text shows the mixture of two distinct genres – prose and poetry. These genres function together and make sense. In other words, put together, they confer harmony and aesthetic to the narrative. In addition to depicting a multiracial society, the external structure of the work connotes a multicultural nation. In this perspective, Hurston and Silko represent the United States’ socio-cultural realities by using various languages, customs and beliefs in their texts.

³ My translation of : « L’écriture est l’expression individuelle d’une conscience collective... » L. Goldmann (1964, p. 345).

2. Languages and Customs as Center of Contest

Languages and customs are key elements of a culture. Not only are they the nerve center of transmission of cultural heritage, but also they express feeling, emotions, and practices of ethnic groups or communities. This is why the use of various languages and customary practices characterize Hurston's and Silko's stories. In addition to Standard English, the language of narration, dialect and Ebonics -- also known as Black vernacular English -- pervade the internal texture of Hurston's work. Spoken by African Americans in Florida in the Southern area of the United States, non-standard English and Standard English imply cohabitation between Black people and Whites:

What she doin' coming back here in dem overall? Can't she find no dress to put on? —Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in? —what all dat money her husband took and died and left her? ... Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs--why she don't stay in her class? — (Hurston, 2000, p. 2)

The author alternates both languages in such a way that they seem to engage into a contest. By writing so, Hurston puts into dialog two worlds where everyone wants to impose themselves. However, by using them simultaneously the author tries to balance the two forces. In this regard, African Americans' colloquial and non-standard languages epitomize Black people's cultural riches. The use of African Americans' dialect connotes the promotion of a multicultural country. The following double-voice narrative discourse is revealing:

Humph! Y'all let her worry yuh. You ain't like me...Ah say 'bout dese ole women runnin' after young boys... Pheoby Watson hitched her rocking chair forward before she spoke. Well, nobody don't know if it's anything to tell or not. Me, Ah'm her best friend, and Ah don't know. Maybe us don't know into things lak you do...she went 'way from here and us sho seen her comeback. 'Tain't no use in your tryin' to cloak no ole woman lak Janie Starks... (Hurston, p. 3)

As the extract indicates, through the double-voice discourse the narrator and characters are engaged into a discursive style reflecting strategies of mediation. Hurston's style highlights two very different modes of storytelling. As evidence, characters' dialog and the narrator's speech show a split style of the novel. However, she does not elevate one above the other. The southern vernacular and the Standard English work together to create harmonious language. Standard English and African-American vernacular express the author's concern to stick to the socio-cultural landscape of American society. In this regard, the text symbolizes the multicultural scope of the writer's social environment. Arguably, Hurston uses language as an instrument of selfhood and empowerment. She seems to place great emphasis on the control of language as the source of identity and empowerment as follows: "Ah see you is. Gal, you sho looks good. You looks like youse yo' own daughter. They both laughed. Even wid dem overhalls on, you shows yo' womanhood" (Hurston, 2000, p.5). One notes that the writer wants to reconfigure American

society by putting African Americans on the center stage. Moreover, Hurston's poetic is also a pure product of orality. "In terms of its poetics, the African-American's literary tradition is distinguished by...orality of its language and folk motifs...usually achieved by using Black Vernacular English and copying the rhythms of black speech..." asserts L. Tyson (2006, pp.385-386).

Likewise, the writing style of Leslie Silko's work is atypical. The author adopts a writing strategy challenging the canonical presentation of a novel. The image of confrontation between American Indians' culture and that of the White people appears in the presentation of the different parts of the narrative. "Sunrise" is the sole title of the whole Silko's text. As a matter of fact, there are no clear delimitations between the different parts. They seem to merge into a monolithic text. This textual configuration of Silko's work connotes unity. She also impregnates her work with Indian Tribe's way of storytelling reflecting orality. This is remarkably expressed by poem-like forms. By writing in this particular manner, Silko makes a transposition of Indians' cultural elements into the narrative. Her writing strategy is also a form of mediation which puts into dialog two forces—the discriminated people and the mainstream society. Tayo's health disorder is the metaphorical representation of the degrading customs and beliefs in the indigenous communities. In order to find a therapy to their endangered culture, a ceremony is needed. In this respect, Silko's story depicts how acculturation threatens their cultural survival. A ceremony is needed to revive American Indians' socio-cultural existence. The mixture of two antagonistic cultural materials advocate diversity. As evidence, pueblo languna tribe's language is inserted into English: "It was summertime and Iktoa'ak'o'ya-Reed Woman was always taking a bath. She spent all day long sitting in the river splashing down the summer rain" (Silko, 2006, p. 8). In the foregoing excerpt, one notes the mixture of American-Indian tribe's phrase "Iktoa'ak'o'ya-Reed" which seems stranded between the language of narration. As presented, the Indian's word is absorbed and almost invisible in the sentence. This connotes the absorption and disappearance of the indigenous people's languages. Implicitly, Tayo stands for the new generation of American Indians at the confluent of cultural loss. He feels stranded between Western's culture and his motherland's culture. To ward off the socio-cultural crisis, Tayo needs some treatments:

Tayo's stomach clenched...There was something large and terrifying in the old man's words. He wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things the white doctors had yelled at him—that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like "we" and "us." But he had known the answer all along, even while the white doctors were telling him he could get well and he was trying to believe them: medicine didn't work that way, because the world didn't work that way. (Silko, 2006, p. 97)

As indicated in the foregoing quote, the process of healing Tayo's illness is long and complex because: "...his sickness is part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything" (Silko, 2006, p. 97). The extract shows that to cure the patient, various kinds of treatments are needed. Presumably, not only does Tayo need conventional medicine, but also he needs to resort to traditional healers. In this dynamics, the

socio-cultural malaise is so deep that Tayo does not seem to rely on traditional medicine. Thus, Silko's story is a kind of consciousness-raising in order to save her culture. It can be inferred that the necessity for Tayo to come back to her ancestral sources connotes the promotion of American Indians' customs and beliefs. In this vein, Silko castigates the predatory western culture by trying to advocate multiculturalism in her country:

Hey-ya-ah-na-ah! Hey-ya-ah-na-ah!
Ku-ru-tsu-eh-ah-eh-na! Ku-ru-tsu-eh-ah-eh-na!
to the east below
to the south below
the winter people come.
Hey-ya-ah-na-ah! Hey-ya-ah-na-ah!
Ku-ru-tsu-eh-ah-na! Ku-ru-tsu-eh-ah-eh-na!
from the west above
from the north above
the winter people come... (Silko, 2006, p. 161)

This extract displays traditional healers' incantations in esoteric languages. These incantations are typical American-Indian tribes' ways of warding off devil spirits and curing pains. By putting them side by side with English language, the writer intends to highlight how cultural diversity can thrive in the same spatial locations. So, the two authors attempt to value what A. Appiah (2005, p. 254) terms: "Cross-cultural dialog". In this perspective, Hurston and Silko strongly castigate the dominant culture's stereotypical behavior and discriminatory practices against other communities.

3. Denouncing Socio-Cultural Contempt

Born to mixed ancestry -- Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white -- Leslie Marmon Silko spends her life in the Laguna Pueblo Reservation with her husband. As to Zora Neale Hurston, she is an African American from Florida in the Southern area of the United States. The two authors employ themselves to denounce how racism undermines togetherness in the American society. After the proclamation of emancipation, both communities endure racial discrimination. African Americans, now, have to assert themselves. Therefore, they demonstrate their human capacity through the development of their cities in the South:

Joe Starks...had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin' dis place dat colored folks was buildin' theirselves. Dat was right too. De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to want to crow over somethin'. (Hurston, 2000, p.35)

As the foregoing excerpt indicates, through initiatives aiming to develop their country, Black people want to reject stereotypes against them. "Let colored folks build things too..." is edifying.

Joe Starks epitomize the ingenuity of the segregated minority, as well. Through his talent of leadership, Hurston's character challenges the notion of inferior race:

Folkses, de sun is goin' down. De Sun-maker brings it up in de mornin', and de Sun-maker sends it tuh beda t night. Us poor weak humans can't do nothin' tuh hurry it up nor to slow it down. All we can do, if we want any light after de settin' or befo' de risin', is tuh make some light ourselves...Dis evenin' we'se all assembled heah tuh light uh lamp. Dis occasion is something for us all tuh remember tuh our dyin' day. De first street lamp in uh colored town. (Hurston, 2000, p. 54)

As abovementioned, Black people also participate into the construction of the United States. The extract indicates the capacity of resilience of African Americans. Despite the poor socio-economic conditions, they stand together to celebrate the better days to come. "...let de light penetrate inside of yuh, and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine" (Hurston, 2000, p.54) is a perfect illustration of the rebirth of the Black people.

Furthermore, Hurston depicts the relationships between mixed blood, Black people and Whites. These categories of communities living in the same spatial indications hate each other. People born to interracial marriage think they are too white to go with monoracial individuals whereas White people discriminate all of them. That raises the complex equation of racial categorization in the American society. Mixed-blood individuals do not consider themselves as Blacks:

Mrs. Turner was a milky sort of a woman...Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her thin lips were an ever delight to her eyes. Even her buttocks in bas-relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking all these things set her aside from Negroes. That was why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie's coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields. (Hurston, 2000, p.163)

The quote shows how people live behind interracial barrier undermining unity. Like Mrs. Turners, many mixed-blood individuals consider themselves superior to African Americans. That credits William Du Bois's vision about racial issue in the United States. Du Bois (2006, p.5) heralds: "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men..." (5). In this regard, the concept of "Otherness" always fuels the conflicting interracial relationships. However, by virtue of "the one-drop rule" those mixed blood are classified as non-Whites. Despite this law, many people reject their racial category. Mrs. Turner's attitude of contempt towards monoracial individuals illustrates this social reality. The author writes: "[Mrs. Turner] didn't forgive her for marrying a man as dark as Tea Cake, but she felt that she could remedy that. That was what her brother was born for" (Hurston, 2000, p.164). By narrating discriminatory attitude, Hurston attempts to denounce such practices like Silko.

Actually, Silko castigates White people's contempt towards Indians' culture. Indians explain everything through natural elements. However, the cohabitation with the mainstream society's culture undermines their ancestral beliefs. Silko narrates one of their customary belief as

follows: “Spider Woman had told Sun Man how to win the storm clouds back from the Gambler so they would be free again to bring rain and snow to the people. He knew what white people thought about the stories” (Silko, 2006, p. 72). The last sentence of the foregoing extract implies that white people do not believe in Indians’ stories.

Western education influences Indian people’s way of thinking. White people undertake alienation campaign and reject Indian culture as evidenced in this passage: “In school the science teacher had explained what superstition was, and then held the science textbook up for the class to see the true source of explanations. He had studied those books, and he had no reasons to believe the stories any more” (Silko, 2006, p. 72). So, Indians’ beliefs are deemed erroneous. The clash between the two cultures is revealing: “...the first time in science class, when the teacher brought in a tubful of dead frogs, bloated with formaldehyde, and the Navajos all left the room; the teacher said those old beliefs were stupid” (Silko, 2006, p.152). Obviously, by trying to impose their domination on Indians, Westerners treat them with condescension. This is why, to cure the interracial and cultural contempt, the acceptance of other people’s ways of life is paramount. Through these edifying lines, one notes:

If the white people never looked beyond the lie, to see that theirs was a nation built on stolen land, then they would never be able to understand how they had been used by the witchery; they would never know that they were still being manipulated by those who knew how to stir the ingredients together: white thievery and injustice boiling up the anger and hatred that would finally destroy the world: the starving against the fat, the colored against the white. (Silko, 2006, p.149)

The excerpt is inscribed in the straight line of promoting mutual acceptance. The message calls on white supremacists for more responsibility and clear-sightedness. That is the reason why, fearing for the future of American society, J. Baldwin (1963, p.50) writes: “...the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks...must, like lovers, insist on, or create the consciousness of the others--do not falter in our duty now... to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.” Thus, “to end the racial nightmare”, both Indians and White people must not accept any manipulation. The latter must be righteous by recognizing that lands also belong to Indians. Otherwise, selfishness and lies can undermine togetherness.

Conclusion

The study explores Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Watching God* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. Its main goal was to demonstrate that the distinct texts advocate and promote both a multiracial and multicultural American society. Articulated around the social stakes of Zora's and Silko's writings, languages and customs as center of contest, and denouncing socio-cultural contempt, it has collected and analyzed the discursive strategies used in both works. The authors have different socio-cultural backgrounds and different writing styles.

Despite some similarities and differences, the analysis has revealed that Hurston's and Silko's discourses have a common goal. As members of discriminated and subjugated communities, they have artistically represented socio-cultural realities of the United States. Zora Hurston and Leslie Silko tries to redefine intercultural paradigm. The most obvious distinguishing mark is that their creative writings are an extremely mixed production. By writing so, they advocate togetherness in diversity. As shown in Silko's and Hurston's narratives, negotiation dialog and compromises are powerful instruments which can help mitigate tensions between antagonistic communities.

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