ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS

TIMELESS PEOPLE IN AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE: THE FEMALE ANCESTOR IN MAYA ANGELOU AND TONI MORRISON

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As an African-American writer, Toni Morrison is deeply concerned with reclaiming and preserving the cultural identity of her ethnical group, threatened by the influence of the dominant white majority. The massive migration of black Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North and the consequent press for integration inevitably brought on a distancing from communal life, and a severance from ancestral roots, which the author deplores,

> We don't live in places where we can hear those stories, any more; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago.[1]

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1 MORRISON, Toni. Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation. *In:* EVAN, Mari (ed.) *Black women writers (1950-1980)*: a critical evaluation. New York: Anchor Books, 1984.

To counter the movement away from African traditions, she chooses to write for *her* people what she calls "village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe".[2]

Like the elders of the tribe who have the task of preserving ancestral wisdom and instructing the new generations,the older members of the black American community provide the connection with their people's roots.As the author argues, one of the distinctive traits of Afro-American literature is that

> there is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the character are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.[3]

Consistently, Toni Morrison's fiction is peopled with the figure of "timeless people", keepers of the tradition, a role which she ascribes to the elder women in the community. Such is Pilate, in *Song of Solomon* a natural healer and reconciler, because in her cultic role she preserves the cultural tradition and participates in the regeneration of the Afro-American. Baby Suggs in *Beloved* plays a similarly relevant role: she is the preacher, in a culture in which the spoken word is instrumental in the maintenance of tradition. Eva Peace, the matriarch in *Sula*, on the other hand, illustrates Morrison's frequent reversals of received assumptions.

In order to observe how Morrison constructs a character who deviates from accepted ideas of the community elder, we have chosen Eva Peace as one of the poles of our analysis which contraposes autobiography – Maya Angelou's *I know why the caged bird sings* – and fiction – Morrison's novel *Sula*. Both books present basically the same situation: young girls living in a practically all-female household, from which male parents are conspicuously absent, and controlled by the awe-inspiring figure of a domineering grandmother.

2 MORRISON, Toni. The Language Must not sweat: a conversation with Toni Morrison, interview to Thomas LeClair. *In:* GATES, Jr., Henry Louis; APPIAH, K.A. (ed.) TONI MORRISON. New York: Amistad, 1993, p. 370.

3 *Id.*, Rootedness..., p. 339.

The contrast reality X fiction will give us a notion of Toni Morrison's particular view on issues of black American community life, as well as the possibility to observe her characteristic literary mode of representation.

In *I know why the caged bird sings,* the first volume of her autobiography, Maya Angelou evokes her childhood in the American South of the 1930s. At 3 and 4 years of age, respectively, Maya and her brother Bailey join the thousands of frightened Black children who traveled alone toward newly affluent homes in the North or back to grandmothers in Southern towns, when the North proved to be a disillusionment. Thus, they arrive in "the musty little town" of Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother, Mrs Annie Henderson, whom they come to call Momma.[4]

In Morrison's novel *Sula,* the title character, a wild rebel, has a tempestuous relationship with her grandmother, ironically called Eva Peace.

There are striking similarities between the factual and the fictional grandmothers: both are physically impressive; both had been abandoned by husbands who left them to cope with small children; both hold a commanding position in the community and are extremely distrustful of whites. But here the similarities end.

From Angelou's linear, 1st person narrative there emerges the image of a stalwart, strict, hard-working, but loving Momma, a representative figure in the community, and successful in business, thanks to her "miraculous ability to be in two places at the same time".[5]

The Bible is her every minute guidance and although she thinks nothing of whisking the children out of their sleep on the coldest of nights, when their cleanliness is not satisfactory, or of whipping a child for misbehaving in church, she goes to extremes to defend her own. Little Maya holds her grandmother in absolute trust and faith to the point of endowing her with magical powers. Afflicted with a tremendous toothache, the child watches as her grandmother confronts the white dentist who curtly refuses to treat the little girl, – as he would rather "stick (his) hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's". Her faith unshaken the child reckons they were going home where "she (Momma) would concoct a brew to eliminate the pain and maybe give me new teeth too".[6]

4 ANGELOU, Maya. *I know why the caged bird sings.* London: Virago Press, 1990, p. 6-7.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

6 *Ibid*, p. 186.

The grandmother's magic turns out to be her cunning in demanding the payment of ten dollars' interest on a past loan to the ungrateful white dentist, the necessary amount to take the child to the colored dentist in a neighboring town.

Momma's ancestral wisdom, which made her house the center of the community, second only to the church, allows her to be a sure guide for the younger generations, pointing them "the paths in life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones". [7]

What marks Angelou's narrative is her profound admiration for her grandmother, the infinitely strong nurturing black woman, whose seldom demonstrated but "deep-brooding love" "hung over everything she touched". Caution is a quality developed by Black Americans in order to survive in a hostile environment, and as the author remarks: "Knowing Momma , I knew that I never knew Momma. Her African-bush secretiveness and suspiciousness had been compounded by slavery and confirmed by centuries of promises made and promises broken." [8]

Reverently, Angelou draws a magnificent portrait of a strong black woman who neither corresponds to the Euro-American myth of the black Mammy of popular film, or to that of the black woman as "the mule of the world" a passive, nurturing, self-sacrificing, uncomplaining burden bearer. Her conclusion is a hymn of praise to all African-American women:

> The fact that the adult America Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence.It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.[9]

In *Sula*, the very beginning of the narrative, in the peculiar style of fairy tales, – "In that place..., there was once a neighborhood" signals a different world. An entirely different kind of order is established by Eva Peace, the only creator and sovereign of a grotesque realm, who is herself a source of wonder: abandoned by her husband in extreme poverty, she disappears for eighteen

7 ANGELOU, *op. cit., p. 46.*
8 *Ibid.*, p. 189.
9 *Ibid.*, p.195.

months. When she returns she is missing a leg but has a substantial income, whose mysterious origin is never explained.

Three generations of women Eva, her daughter Hanna, and her granddaughter Sula live in an enormous ramshackle house, where Eva establishes herself as a queen and "directs the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders". She is an imposing sovereign, in spite of her ridiculous throne: a rocking chair adapted to a children's wagon. "Although people had to look down at her in her wagon, they all had the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes."[10]

Where Momma's good looks are recognized by everybody, the only information the reader has about Eva's is that her leg was magnificent. It was stockinged and shod at all times and in all weather, and a constant source of admiration for the male callers that came to play checkers and to talk.

Eva proves to be protective and benevolent when she adopts three boys and gives them a home. However her choice follows "a private scheme of preference and prejudice" and the boys, who are left pretty much to their own devices are indiscriminately called Dewey. By robbing the deweys of their names, Eva also robs them of their identities, and of their links with their ancestors.

In time, the omniscient narrator informs the reader, nobody was able to tell them apart, although when they first came they had completely different physical characteristics, "They became a trinity with a plural name... inseparable loving nothing and no one but themselves".[11]

Besides reversing assumptions, Eva's characterization is ambiguous: charitable impulses are contrasted to absolute destructive indifference. However, Morrison reserves judgment and asks the reader to do the same, by using delaying techniques such as the dots that interrupt the above quotation and mark a time break, functioning as stop signals.

Motherly love is another incongruity in Eva. When questioned by Hannah about whether she had loved them as babies, Eva replies "I kept you alive, didn´t I?" Her supreme act of love toward Plum, her only male son who had returned from the war a drug addict, is to rock him into sleep, drench his body with kerosene and set fire to it. She recalls how hard it had been to bear him and to keep him alive, but now he was helpless as a baby "trying to climb back in my

10 MORRISON, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Plume, 1973, p. 31.

11 *Ibid*., p. 39.

womb (...) Godamercy I couldn't birth him twice".[12]

This act lines Eva Peace up with mythological figures of female goddesses such as the Greek Hecate with her demands for human sacrifice. As Eve, she is related to Adam's first wife in Hebrew legend, symbolic of the terrible mother.[13] Like a deity or a queen she is endowed with the power of life and death over her subjects.

But, again, no voice of authorial judgment intrudes and the reader is left to wonder about obvious gaps in the text:neither the characters' feelings nor the community's reactions are disclosed; no funeral takes place, no police action is mentioned. Morrison deliberately establishes a dialogue with her audience, leaving gaps that allow the reader to participate in the creation of meaning in the text. In her view, it is extremely important "to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book".[14]

Later in the narrative, Eva's characterization suffers another 180 degrees turnabout: watching from her upper floor window as a yard fire envelops Hannah whose clothes start burning, Eva smashed the window pane and threw herself out of the window, trying unsuccessfully to aim her body at the burning figure. She is again the mother who sacrifices herself for her children, as she had done in the past. Good and evil coexist in Eva as good and evil coexist in African literature.

In the role of the wise ancestor, Eva's bequest to her daughters was manlove: "The Peace women loved maleness for its own sake." Eva, in spite of her age and her lameness "had a regular flock of gentlemen callers (...) and there was a good deal of teasing and laughter".[15]

Hannah, the daughter, takes sexual pleasure wherever she can find it, but she does it so naturally, with such a lack of guile that not even her partners' wives can be angry with her. She is happy in her choice of path.

Eva's advice to her granddaughter Sula, the rebel out to "make herself", who returns home after an unexplained ten-year absence is , "Ain't no woman got no business floatin around without no man". Sula's reply shows a disrespect that is equally deviant from expected behavior, "Cause you was bad enough to cut off your own leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump."[16] Later on Sula clinches matters by interning Eva in an asylum, to the

12 *Ibid.*, p. 71

13 CIRLOT, J.E. *A dictionary of symbols*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

14 MORRISON, Rootedness..., p. 341.

15 *Id.*, *Sula*, p.41.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

chagrin of the community, for whom this is an unforgivable crime. From beginning to end, Sula's and Eva's relationship is based on suspicion and ends in mutual hatred.

Thus, Eva is a contradictory and perplexing realization of the female ancestor, a cruel goddess who devours her offspring and who preaches male love, in contraposition to Momma's legacy of courage, faith in God and homespun wisdom.

A question poses itself: if Morrison is interested in notions of community and ancestry – a corollary of her concern with the preservation of African-American cultural identity- why does she treat the subject of the "elder of the tribe" through examples of dislocation?

What is possible to observe in the text of *Sula* is that there are two facets to Eva Peace, and the mythical Eva is counterbalanced by Eva the woman who, like Angelou's Momma, is created out of the lived experiences of black women. The sacrifice of her leg indicates courage and commitment to her children; her weird way of life and her strange bequest to her female descendants show *independence of mind*, strengths which the Euro-American stereotype of the black Mammy denies. Eva's character like Toni Morrison's fiction itself is an alignment of fantasy and reality, her own literary mode for representing Africans' traumatic experiences on American soil.

More than reversing expectations and stereotypes, Toni Morrison's peculiar treatment of her subject recognizes the dimensions and strengths of black women. Morrison is above all an African-American woman writer, writing about black experience, creating African-American literature, whose peculiarities have to be evaluated in their specific context.

RESUMO

Por meio de paralelos entre o tratamento da ancestral feminina – elemento-chave na preservação e transmissão da cultura negra tradicional – na autobiografia de Maya Angelou, *I know why the caged bird sings* e no romance *Sula*, de Toni Morrison, este trabalho observa como Morrison subverte estereótipos e convenções literárias a fim de estabelecer liames com as raízes ancestrais da cultura afro-americana, numa tentativa de preservar tradições ameaçadas.

Palavras-chave: Fantasia x realidade, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison.

ABSTRACT

By drawing parallels between the treatment of the female ancestor – one of the key elements in the preservation and transmission of traditional black culture –, in Maya Angelou's autobiographical, *I know why the caged bird sings* and in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, this paper observes how Morrison subverts well established stereotypes and literary conventions, in order to achieve links with the ancestral roots of African-American culture and preserve endangered traditions.

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