

Voices on the margins: The black woman's formative novel



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an approach to Conceição Evaristo's novel of formation, whose narratives

dramatize the lives of characters who are on the margins of social centers, bureaucratic estates, oligarchies, political patronage, neoliberal economic rationality, and the cultural matrices of colonial domination. In this sense, by proposing a critical reflection on the dominant values of the instances of consecration of the Western literary canon, that is, universities, schools, critics, and Brazilian literary historiography, this text aims to open up ways of proposing a democratic literary education.

Keywords: Conceição Evaristo, Novel of formation, Black woman, Education.

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the great demands proposed for contemporary historiography and literary criticism is to promote the analysis, supply and consumption of works of literature excluded from the pantheon of the canon. In a society as plural as ours, with multiple and heterogeneous identities, the questioning of the literary canon has come to be seen as a fundamental value. If the canon, a religious word in its origins, as stated by Harold Bloom (2013, p. 33), also "originally meant the choice of books in our educational institutions" (2013, p. 29) and "became a choice between texts that fight with each other for survival" (BLOOM, 2013, p. 33), its tradition would need to be made more flexible for survival in schools of texts that contemplate ways of life, the beliefs, attitudes, commemorative rites, symbolic codes and values of historically excluded groups in colonized societies that inherited the cultural matrices of colonial domination.

It is well known that "globalization and the increasingly rapid circulation of human groups and information opened the eyes of thinkers and artists to the universalist abuse of hegemonic Western cultures, which had used the words man, culture and art in a logocentric way until then" (PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2016, p. 10). At a time of declining nationalist ideology, national canons became the object of denunciation for their authoritarian and homogenizing constitution. Finally, literary studies then lost their fragile specificity, based on values considered ethnocentric, and the works then began to be evaluated and studied according to themes that dialogue with culture in the plural. In the Brazilian case, the critical analysis of the colonial imaginary instituted by our canon has become a decisive



premise for a problematizing reading of social identities and revealing the political and economic contradictions of our contemporary reality.

Contrary to what Harold Bloom (2013) thinks, who considers that we cannot illuminate the canon with a new doctrine, be it Marxist, Foucauldian or feminist, we understand that literary criticism and educational institutions are destined to the challenge of making visible the artistic products whose positive representation of marginal values can contribute to the decolonization of the Western episteme. questioning their hierarchies and values, since it is no longer possible to grasp the contemporary, whose reality is governed by a cultural pluralism, without considering that "social and geopolitical movements, disseminated and supported by the mass media, have led to the valorization of works dedicated to specific causes and previously despised groups: women, blacks, colonized, homosexuals, etc" (PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2016, p. 1).

2 QUESTIONING THE CANON

The process of exclusion from the canon of works written by writers on the margins needs to be thought of as conditioned by socio-historical conjunctures responsible for the ideological formations of those who decide and judge in the sphere of aesthetic and cultural taste, which demands the identification of the historical process that enabled the delimitation of cultural hierarchies, fostered as effects of long-lasting social and structural conditions. that formalized patriarchy, machismo, racism and the naturalization of colonial practices, since individuals are rooted in political and moral realities whose structures, in the Brazilian case, were built to remain socially unequal. In a manner of speaking, it is necessary to reiterate that "unequal power relations are constitutive of the literary field and structure it in all its aspects and dimensions" (WREC, 2020, p. 90).

Based on these considerations, it is relevant to ask: who are the voices on the margins of the center? What would be the center as a result of which there would be voices on the margins? If the center can be understood as the empire of Western European capitalism, how was the reaction to its dominance that "culminated in the great movement of decolonization throughout the third world?" (SAID, 2011, p. 9) In this way, it is necessary to "project a general model of imperial culture on a planetary scale and a historical experience of resistance against empire" (SAID, 2011, p. 10), despite the fact that the European cultural imposition on the peoples of the third world, during the implementation of the colonial regime, brought with it, as Frantz Fanon reminds us (2021, p. 20), "the death of autochthonous cultures", since, having witnessed "the liquidation of their systems of reference" by European domination, these cultures were coerced to learn "new ways of seeing", with many having assimilated "a pejorative judgment about their original ways of existing".

In this way, studying the voices on the margins in literature also presupposes a libel against cultural memory that relegates to oblivion the violence of the practices of colonial domination



promoted by the West over the peoples of Africa in the Americas, since history teaches us that the cultural destruction promoted by the colonizers became the driving force sustaining colonial legitimacy. Thus, if the cultural hegemony of the West depended on the war against the keys of the resistance of the native peoples, that is, against the symbols of their identity, it is necessary to understand that "without memocide, therefore, violent or carried out in progressive transition, hegemony is impossible" (BAEZ, 2010, p. 301).

In other words, the reasoning is dialectical: without memocide there is no center of domination, canon, official memory, monument. In this sense, the certificate of identity of voices on the margins depends on the symbolic struggle promoted by a literary criticism and historiography committed to the study, unveiling and legitimation of literary products that narrate the historical experience of resistance of peoples who live on the margins of empires, bureaucratic classes, oligarchies, political clientelism. of neoliberal economic rationality, in short, of the centers of imperial power.

According to Edward Said (2011), "the main object of dispute in imperialism is, of course, land; But when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who exploited it, who reconquered it, and who now plans its future – these questions were thought about, discussed, and decided in the narrative." Also according to this author (SAID, 2011, p. 43), "neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are sustained and impelled by powerful ideological formations." In this way, given that the imperialist ideologies that formed the centers of economic and cultural domination in Europe are materialized in fictional narratives, it is essential to show how the voices that are on the margins of this process resist the instituting imaginary of colonial domination.

From this perspective, the study of these voices is based on the perspective of postcolonial criticism, according to which "literary works are not innocent representational vehicles, but that, on the contrary, they participated in the domination of the West over the rest of the world" (DURÃO, 2016, p. 104), which makes relevant, therefore, the analysis of fictions that contribute to the decolonization of colonial thought. Consequently, these voices can be understood as an instrument of cultural resistance and struggle in search of the construction of a more just and egalitarian society, given that peripheral writers have been, in effect, "confronted with an underdevelopment or a deficit of the institutions of normative knowledge production in their own societies" (WREC, 2020, p. 140). Moreover, since neither the state nor the state institutions of knowledge production can be trusted, peripheral anti-colonial writers and critics of the empire of capital often "cannot be sure about the adequacy of the information produced about their own societies" (WREC, 2020, p. 141), which leads them to produce fantastic narratives in order to problematize the contradictions of the socioeconomic experience of the combined and uneven development of societies on the margins of the center.



On the other hand, it is also necessary to decentralize the perspective through which the exclusion of social voices situated on the margins is analyzed, which demands the displacement of the logocentric criteria that define the canon to think about the experience of those who experience economic, political and cultural exclusion within uneven technical and industrial development. In this sense, it is relevant to investigate: what do these voices say about life in the world system of capitalism? How do they feel about your existence? And if they live in a situation of extreme misery, what can they narrate? How do they represent themselves and how do they perceive the way they are officially represented? How do they represent this experience in literature? This is then the urgent need to study the literature of those excluded from the system, the literature written by black women, who fictionalize their contradictory experiences or, in exceptional cases, realistically expose the impasses of a life within a soul-devouring capitalist system.

3 THE FORMATIVE NOVEL OF CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO

An example of resistance and heroism on the margins is the one presented by the black writer Conceição Evaristo, who integrates her work into the tradition of the novel genre. To highlight this marginal heroism, it is necessary to make brief considerations about the consolidation of the genre. Moreover, the novel is the bourgeois genre par excellence. In this sense, the hero of this novel would no longer be the knight-errant of medieval chivalric novels, but the man inserted in this new political reality consolidated by industrial capitalism. In Don Quixote's novel, for example, the so-called novel of trial, as Bakhtin (2011, p. 207) states in his book "Aesthetics of Verbal Creation", the hero is built to go through trials of "fidelity, of bravery, of courage, of virtue, of nobility, of holiness, saving his beloved Dulcinea of Toboso from great dangers, facing powerful enemies, dragons, in order to conquer, in their adventures, new kingdoms.

In this universe, "the world is not able to change the hero, it only experiences it, and the hero does not influence the world" (BAKHTIN, 2011, p. 212). The tradition of the bourgeois novel will break with this perspective and will inaugurate the novel of formation, as Franco Moretti reminds us, which does not presuppose ready-made, immutable characters, whose unity would be static, but the formation of man that "presents itself in an indissoluble relationship with historical formation" (BAKHTIN, 2011, p. 221). In this way, against the background of capitalism that presupposes freedom as a principle and a social mobility hitherto unknown, in comparison with the stratified nature of the aristocratic society of the ancien régime, the man who appears in the pages of this literature will reflect this historical formation of the world. In fact, "man is formed concomitantly with the world, he reflects in himself the historical formation of the world" (BAKHTIN, 2011, p. 222).

However, the bourgeoisie brings freedom as a principle, but the maintenance of its political order as an end, which allows us to question: how does the novel thematize the narcissistic dynamism



of a youth thirsty for social ascension and political and social self-determination and at the same time the life of a youth whose happiness would no longer be in the inconsequential exercise of this freedom? But in subordination to the norms of society? How does the novel represent this dialectic between freedom and happiness? As Franco Moretti (2020, p. 41) reminds us, this is "a dilemma inherent to modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization." When it comes to the Brazilian novel, we learn that the protagonists of the narratives of José de Alencar and Machado de Assis are mostly bourgeois who aim to imitate aristocratic life, they are not blacks, women from the periphery and favela dwellers. What would be the novels of the formation of the black woman and the favela dweller? This answer is not offered by Franco Moretti (2020, p. 15), who evokes the limits of his competence, that is, "Western Europe between the French Revolution and the triumph of capitalism".

Conceição Evaristo's novels represent the exiles and evicted from the system. In these, the vectors of oppression are related to the process of limiting blacks to social ascension. When we read the narratives of Conceição Evaristo, we notice that, unlike the bourgeoisie that consolidated itself as the dominant class with the industrial revolution, the characters Ponciá Vicêncio, Maria-nova, Totó, Dorvi, Bica, Idago, Putinho and their mothers did not have the right to choose between the freedom "promoted" by the market or the happiness guaranteed by subservience to the system. because with Conceição Evaristo we learn that the system is a sectarian and bureaucratic machine, extremely efficient in justifying and naturalizing the pain that fills the eyes of these characters with tears.

In the book "Olhos D'água", the eyes are a metonym for the suffering of people helpless by the State, by the project of conservative modernization of a Brazil that replaced the African captivity, the slave quarters, with favelas. This is the perception of the protagonist of the novel "Alleys of Memory", Maria-nova, who, when called by the teacher to talk about slavery in the classroom, reminds us that our economic and cultural history has a long duration, the history that the big houses are converted into the buildings of the great metropolises and the slave quarters into the alleys of their favela. In fact, the oppression evidenced in Conceição Evaristo's narratives needs to be viewed in a complex way, because in them power relations are socially impregnated by the bias of racism, sexism, class, gender and, mainly, by the politics of death underlying the nation's project: the brutal slum clearance carried out by the agents of neoliberal capitalist modernization. As evidenced in the novel "Alleys of Memory", this process was carried out by blond men who drove tractors, machines that destroyed the dreams of favela residents:

"The construction firm's bulldozers were digging, plowing the northern tip of the favela. There, the dust became bigger and so did the anguish. Some families were already ordered to leave and this precipitated the pain of all of us. Each family that left was a confirmation that it would be our turn. They offered the resident two options: a little material, planks and some bricks so that he could build another shed somewhere, or a symbolic indemnity, a little money. The latter was worse. Those who opted for the money received a derisory amount, which ended up being



spent right there. Then came the worst, after the period of permanence had elapsed, neither the money, nor the boards, nor the bricks, only nothing" (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 71).

Despite the thousand struggles "for the right not to leave where they were" (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 146), the firm responsible for the slum clearance threatened the residents, saying that they would be fired and that there was no point in rebuilding the sheds that had been knocked down by the rainwaters. Under these conditions, the blacks of the favela had no paths to experience a dignified life; All were subjected to the material and psychological losses resulting from the violence led by the capitalist logic on a miserable reality. For these men and women, "dreams are good for lunch, for dinner, never" (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 50). And because of gender, class, and race conditioning, life, like the river, "took everything with it" (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 28). There is no prospect of social ascension for black men and women in this context, since they are placed since childhood with obstacles that make it more difficult to access the means for this goal, such as the right to quality education: "there were the problems of the children, who, with the slum clearance, lost their places in schools when they moved in the middle of the year and could not find places close to the place where they went iam" (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 146).

Far from the benefits of a policy promoted by a welfare state, these black and favela children will remain on the margins of class society. And the pessimism of the novel is evident in the memory of the characters Totó and Maria-Velha, who remember the lost work she had been to abandon the farm to try life in the city: "lost work for her to have left the farm where she had been born with all her siblings and come to the city to seek a better life" (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 142). In fact, in the Brazilian historical process of formation of black men and women, the multiple vectors of oppression converge to legitimize the failure of the social trajectories of these characters, who fictionalize the social barriers imposed on these individuals by a reality whose family and political structures were dominated by machismo, patriarchy, racism, by fascism, clientelism, and phallocentrism.

4 PONCIÁ VINCENCIO

In the novel of the formation of black women, "power relations involving race, class, and gender, for example, do not manifest themselves as distinct and mutually exclusive entities" (COLLINS, 2021, p. 16), but in an intersectional way. In fact, this model of the novel invites us to an intersectional reading of the life experiences of these characters, since, "by looking at power from various angles and asking ourselves what kind of power relationship is behind those that are most visible in a given context" (COLLINS, 2021, p. 249), the intersectional perspective points to "creative solutions to important social problems, such as violence against women and girls, the exploitation of work in precarious conditions, and the denial of education to young people" (COLLINS, 2021, p. 244), themes that are entangled in the stories of Ponciá Vicêncio, Maria-nova, and other black women in this



fiction. Unlike her characters in terms of social ascension, Conceição Evaristo transformed her memoirs into a believable writing of this process, since she

"was born in 1946, in a favela located at the top of Avenida Afonso Pena, one of the most valued areas in the south zone of Belo Horizonte. Over time, shacks and residents were removed, the avenue was expanded, new buildings were erected and the alleys and alleys of childhood had to be lodged in the affective memory of the future writer" (DUARTE, 2006, p. 305).

Based on these considerations, "Ponciá Vicêncio" is the great protagonist of the novel of the formation of the black woman from the favela, whose social trajectory is very similar to those of the characters in "Alleys of Memory", whose stories perhaps keep points of contact with the family dramas witnessed by the writer in the alleys of her childhood. In this novel, those who lived in the countryside feared urban life and Ponciá Vicêncio's mother "also warned him of what it would be like to live in the city", but she "did not understand why people feared the city so much. Some people would go out and be fine; however, they only remembered, only repeated the unfortunate cases, the stories of failure" (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 35). The reading of this work shows us that there is no room in the city for the happiness of the black woman, but Ponciá Vicêncio "believed that she could trace other paths, invent a new life" (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 32), since she was tired "of working the clay with her mother, of coming and going to the lands of the whites and returning empty-handed".

The decisive feature of the formative novel is to represent social mobility and "youth is, let's say, modernity in its purest state, a sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future instead of seeking it in the past" (MORETTI, 2020, p. 30). However, the social paths traveled by black people who ventured into the life of the city did not allow the long-awaited mobility. Had

"Other and other cases of acquaintances who left the village on their way to the city and were robbed at the arrival station. They lost what little they had and became beggars right then and there. Others couldn't find work or earned very little and had no way to live. Life was worse than in the countryside. She knew of many sad cases where everything had gone wrong. He tried to think of one that had a happy ending. He didn't remember. He tried harder and didn't hit any. He did not give up. They reminisced so much, talked so much about those sad cases, that even she only remembered them. It didn't matter. Her case, when she returned to get her own, would be a story with a happy ending" (EVARISTO, 2003).

However, Ponciá Vicência's happiness could not come from his process of formation in the capitalist and bourgeois city. In the latter, their freedom would always be stifled by social relations that perpetuate inequality, oppression and injustice. Proof of this is that "Ponciá would return to the place of the waters and there he would find the substance, the humus for his life" (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 129). The protagonist of this novel will find herself with her destiny, with her grandfather's heritage, her traits and her ways, that is, with the link that kept her in close connection with the history of blacks, since "since she was a little girl she worked so well with clay, she had the arts of modeling the raw earth in her hands" (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 130). Finally, by also presenting the reflection on destiny



made by the protagonist's brother, Luandi José Vicêncio, a destiny marked by the disappointments of life in the city, the writer points to a path whose perspective could be emancipatory: the path of reading, because "from reading it was necessary", for Luandi, "to draw other wisdom. It was necessary to authorize the text of one's own life, just as it was necessary to help construct the history of one's own" (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 131). Art, reading and writing are the two great instruments of education and emancipation of black people, of black women, of their writers.

5 FINAL THOUGHTS

Therefore, based on the analysis and considerations about some works of the writer Conceição Evaristo, we note that the study of these narratives needs to be accompanied by a reflection on the place of literature in the context of societies marked by the exclusion of these social voices, which ratifies the permanence in the country of institutions that are not contemplated with political democracy. cultural and social. The inclusion of these voices in the classroom can correspond to an alternative that integrates the aesthetic, economic, moral and religious values that are in dispute in contemporary reality, values that constitute a complex network of connection and social segregation, through which literature can serve as a reflexive guide for the transformative questioning of the political and symbolic structures that legitimize social inequities.

Consequently, the literature teacher cannot forget that "the most emblematic document to show the new times of appreciation of black culture (and the black population) is the law that established the mandatory teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture in the country's schools (Law 10.639, of 2004)" (ABREU, 2018, p. 26), which includes this literature. In addition, it needs to face the challenge of including other symbolic forms in its practice, such as the artistic products that are resized in the system of exchange of symbolic goods by the culture industry, that is, the hybrid forms that denounce the capitalist logic of the laws of the market, since if there is no resistance to the arbitrary process of cultural segregation operated by the different means of social communication, The centers will overshadow the margins.

In this vicious cycle, the prestige of canonical works, resulting from the process of colonial domination, compromises the supply and consumption of the works of women writers who subvert the values of hegemonic systems of literary representation. In a manner of speaking, the logic of literary education ends up reproducing the exclusionary logic of the systems of representation of the political sphere, where "the powers (of the representative system) represent themselves and do not represent the collectivity of which they are supposed to be representatives" (PENNA, 2015, p. 17), affecting the foundations of a democratic social order.

Questioning the way in which these powers continue cultural memory is one of the moral duties bequeathed to us by humanistic education. Finally, historiography and literary criticism need to



investigate the literature produced by these women, as proposed by the essay "Beyond the canon", present in the book "Literature and feminism: theoretical proposals and critical reflections", by the critic Elódia Xavier (1999, p. 17), which expresses the need for a literary reading that aims to carry out, in the work of critical reflection, the "unveiling of the patriarchal structure in its hierarchical and alienating bias" in our society. This scholar mentions the relevance of rescuing literary works that question hierarchies, values and social structures naturalized by the common imaginary. In order for this proposal to be put into practice, it is first necessary to recognize the "discursive monopoly of the dominant cultural subject, declined in the masculine, which, historically, has managed the production and circulation of meanings and discourses about women according to an exclusionary rationality" (SCHMIDT, 1999, p. 26).

In fact, the approach of narratives that propose the decentralization of this subject from a discursive displacement that places the woman as the producer of her own narrative, as the dominant voice in the imaginary and symbolic construction of her world, questioning, rethinking and transforming her reality, may be able to open a path for the deconstruction of the "identity model of reference of white Western culture" (SCHMIDT, 1999, p. 26). In this way, it would be possible to democratize the access of these voices to the margins to the instances of consecration of the canon, to universities, to classrooms throughout the country. Without the relativization of the cultural reference systems legitimized by the tradition of the West, the idea of democracy that presupposes the representation of the collectivity is imprisoned in an impasse, that is, in a place where contradiction, irony and injustice reign.

In fact, the impasse becomes more acute when this idea of democracy becomes a political ideology to mask the social tensions not resolved by the systems of representation. Thus, confronted with the real conditions of its validity, conditions that are far from the realization of the humanist ideals of justice and equality, it is transfigured into fiction invented by the voices of the center that dramatize stereotypes, values and dreams not dreamed of by the voices on the margins. Finally, on the margins of society and also on the margins of the educational project that forces us "to choose between a model of education that promotes profit and another that promotes full citizenship" (NUSSBAUM, 2015, p. 11), black women writers resist economic, political and social interdicts in the fields of symbolic dispute, that is, in the institutions of consecration of the canon, in schools, in the representative political system, in universities, in publishing houses, in congresses, in periodicals and in digital media.



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