

Wanting to Be(long): The Struggle for Identity and Freedom in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Existencia y Pertencia: La Lucha por la Identidad y la Libertad en The House on Mango Street de Sandra Cisneros y The Bluest Eye de Toni Morrison

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between gender and race in connection with Americanness regarding the main female characters in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Both works portray an array of situations which, despite belonging to two different communities (Mexican-American and African-American respectively), depict the various ways in which non-Americans often fight discrimination and segregation. The male-dominant cultures the characters that will be analyzed come from and the lower status they have in the American society as a result of being part of a minority play a paramount role in the development of and search for their identities. Moreover, these factors also determine the struggle they undergo so as to find their place in their community, as well as to approach the so-called American Dream. Thus, their being in the border of Americanness is only worsened by their being women, and this, together with their need to break free from the patriarchal structures imbued into their families and society as a whole, constitutes an obstacle in the search of identity, and marginalizes the characters even more. Consequently, patterns of discrimination and misogyny emerge in both works, which will be explored and contrasted.

Keywords: Americanness, Mexican-American, African-American, race, gender.

Resumen

Este trabajo explora las relaciones entre género, raza y Americanidad con respecto a los personajes principales femeninos de The House on Mango Street de Sandra Cisneros y The Bluest Eye de Toni Morrison. Ambas obras ilustran diferentes situaciones que, a pesar de corresponder a dos comunidades diferentes (la Mexicana-Americana y la Afroamericana respectivamente), muestran las maneras en las que no-Americanos experimentan discriminación y segregación. Las culturas patriarcales de donde provienen los personajes a analizar y el estatus bajo que tienen en la sociedad

norteamericana, resultantes de su pertenencia a minorías, tienen un rol fundamental en la búsqueda y el desarrollo de sus identidades. Asimismo, estos factores determinan las dificultades que encontrarán en la búsqueda de su lugar en la comunidad en la que están y del llamado sueño americano. Consecuentemente, su carácter diaspórico se ve empeorado por su género femenino, lo cual, junto con la necesidad de romper con las estructuras patriarcales que las rodean, constituye un obstáculo en la búsqueda de identidad, marginalizándolas aún más. Como resultado, se ven diferentes patrones de discriminación y misoginia, los cuales serán explorados y contrastados.

Palabras clave: Americanidad, Mejicano-Americano, Afroamericano, raza, género.

Introduction

Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. (Lorde, 2007)

Minorities in the United States, such as the Chicano and the African-American communities, are more often than not rejected in an institutional way and categorized as *outsiders* (Lorde, 1984, 2007). As Jonathan Rutherford explains, “in the hierarchical language of the West, what is alien represents *otherness*, the site of difference and the repository of our fears and anxieties” (1990, p. 10, emphasis added). The Centre, then, projects these negative qualities that it wishes to do away with onto this periphery. This, as a result, brings about a conflict within those othered subjects that is directly connected to their identity and their place within their communities and in society as a whole. Nonetheless, this ‘othering’ process is not only rooted in racial difference: it is also based on gendered standards, which can be observed in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (TBE) and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (THOMS). The main female characters in both novels are examples of the double discrimination that Chicano and Black American women undergo – firstly, as a result of being part of minorities which are heavily influenced by the patriarchal tradition, and secondly because their communities are, in turn, part of the so called “melting pot” that would be North America. The aim of this paper is, then, to analyse the various similarities, as well as some

differences, in the journeys the main female characters go through in both novels, as they attempt to define their identity and to overcome prejudice. Also, this analysis will try to make a point of the way in which segregation becomes not only racial, but also sexist.

A Different Identity

According to Gramsci as quoted in Rutherford (1990, pp. 19-20), “Identity marks the conjecture of our past with the social, cultural and economic relations we live within. Each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations but of the history of these relations. He is a precis of the past.” Jeffrey Weeks (1990, p. 88) would speak of identity in a much simpler way, and state that “Identity is about belonging (...) It gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core of your individuality,” but it must be acknowledged that, if belonging, society, culture, economics, and individuality are taken into account together, the picture becomes much more confusing¹. Therefore, identity is a place in which different variables crisscross and juxtapose; the result can only be complex. This means that, to understand one’s identity, one should take into consideration the surrounding context that is the sum of “our everyday lives with the economic and political relations of subordination and domination” (Weeks, 1990, p. 88).

As has been mentioned, minorities such as the Chicano and the African-American communities suffer from systematized discrimination, and this not a result of cultural diversity – since diversity is not inherently negative – but of cultural *difference*. Homi Bhabha states that to talk of cultural diversity would not “recognize the universalist and normative stance from which its cultural and political judgements [are constructed]” (Rutherford, 1990, p.209). Difference, as opposed to diversity, helps us to give othered subjects a liminal status, connected to alterity. Since the

novels this paper aims at discussing portray two different Others –Chicanos and Black Americans– it is important to bear in mind the notions of difference and alterity that Bhabha proposes, since cultural difference allows for a more universal analysis, regardless of the race of the Other.

Being the Other

What would be advisable, for those who are victims of cultural difference and its consequential discrimination and marginalization, is to embrace one's cultural identity and essence, this 'oneness', as put by Stuart Hall (1990, p. 223). To successfully achieve this, one should be able to turn to one's past and see the "stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual story" (Hall, 1990, p.223) – in other words, to acknowledge the fact that we belong somewhere. The problem in postcolonial times is that access to this past is often marred with bias, which disfigures and transforms it in a way that renders it useless for a diasporic subject to use to their benefit – unless, of course, one comes to terms with a diasporic, *hybrid* identity, one which is, in Hall's words, "constantly producing and reproducing [itself] anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall, 1990, p. 235 - emphasis added).

This hybrid identity can be accepted and embraced by the Other only if this subject successfully undergoes three different phases, as Elaine Showalter describes when she discusses how subcultures search for independence and identity in "The Female Tradition". As quoted in Cormier-Hamilton (1994, p. 114),

Showalter describes the first phase a subculture or minority experiences as an extended period of "*imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles" (1108). As a subculture values the unique characteristics of its identity and gains a better sense of its power, it progresses collectively into a second phase that includes a "*protest* against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights," while she describes a third phase as a period of "*self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity" (1108).

These three phases will be the backbone of the analysis

of female characters in Toni Morrison's *TBE* and Sandra Cisneros's *THOMS*, as these, together with the theoretical background discussed above, will provide insight into the similarities and differences between the aforesaid characters, who, despite belonging to two different subcultures or minorities, go through the same processes of discrimination and othering.

Imitating and (not) Internalizing

Toni Morrison's *TBE* tells the story of three African-American pre-adolescents, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, who are sisters, and Pecola Breedlove, living in Ohio in the 1940s. Claudia is the narrator for most of the story (it must be mentioned that Morrison deals with multiple narrators in this novel, which provides the reading with a richness in point of views), and the themes present in the book range from blackness versus whiteness, stereotyping, white constructions of beauty and identity, to shame, gender issues, sexual abuse and madness. Through these characters, Morrison depicts the conflicts that African American women encounter as they attempt to define who they are in terms of gender and race; they struggle with misogyny and White standards, as well as with their desire to be part of the American Dream². On the other hand, Sandra Cisneros's *THOMS*, narrated from first person point of view, tells the story of Esperanza Cordero, a Mexican-American pre-adolescent who lives in Chicago and, as in the case of Morrison's characters, undergoes an identity crisis. As will be analysed, both novels are considerably similar in terms of themes, since *THOMS* also deals with stereotyping, gender issues, sexual abuse, identity and madness; nonetheless, the main character in Cisneros's novel is able to overcome her identity crisis, which would make the book a *Bildungsroman* or a coming-of-age story, whereas in *TBE* it will be observed that the most Otherised, discriminated character (that of Pecola) will not succeed at embracing her diasporic identity, but suffer a tragic end³.

Maria Karafilis, in her article "Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the *Bildungsroman* in Sandra Cisneros's *THOMS* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*," discusses how the genre of *Bildungsroman* has changed so as to include the complex subjectivities of diasporic characters. She focuses on how these characters "negotiate the different societies in which

they find themselves” and “what constitutes maturation” for them, as well as the endpoint they get to at the end of their developmental journey, their process of becoming. (1998). Her analysis would follow a set of steps similar to Showalter’s Three Phases, as the process of becoming entails reacting to one’s environment and reaching maturation (which can be compared to the protest and self-discovery phases in Showalter). As Lorde (1984, 2007, p. 93) also observes, “we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate.” Her analysis of the kind of negotiation we can engage in as regards the society in which we live also complies with Showalter’s steps, and is a very suitable thesis for Cisneros’s and Morrison’s novels, since the characters in each of the books ignore and copy white standards respectively.

On the one hand, Esperanza in Cisneros’s *THOMS* experiences the world from her position as a Chicana Other; she can be seen to go through Showalter’s stage one, the imitation stage, as she tries to copy certain prevailing modes of the White patriarchal tradition. For instance, she and her friends in the neighbourhood are very aware of the fact that the American Dream is only accessible to those who comply with certain beauty standards – standards which are not only racial, but also sexist and male chauvinistic, as shown in the vignette “Marin”:

What matters, Marin says, is for *the boys to see us* and for us to see them. And since Marin’s skirts are *shorter* and since her eyes are pretty, and since *Marin is already older than us in many ways*, the boys who do pass by say stupid things like I am in love with those two green apples you call eyes, *give them to me why don’t you*. (p. 27)

This is also portrayed in “The Family of Little Feet,” when Esperanza and her friends walk down the street wearing high heels. At first, they experience attention, and feel proud of that (“Lucy, Rachel, me tee-tottering like so. Down to the corner where the men can’t take their eyes off us. *We must be Christmas*” – p. 40, emphasis added); nonetheless, later on they realize that this sexual power they are embracing while walking down the street is not safe. Mr. Benny at the corner grocery warns them against the shoes, and tells them

that “Them are dangerous” (p. 41); and immediately after, Rachel is offered to have a dollar if she kisses a drunken man (pp. 41-42). After the girls run away, Esperanza expresses, “We are tired of being beautiful” (p. 42) – which shows that, despite the fact that they were interested in imitating the pretty and sexy White woman stereotype, they were able to go through this first phase in the search for their identities without internalizing the beauty standards in question, because they felt they were in danger while pretending to be grown-up women.

This danger is materialized in “Red Clowns,” the vignette which tells the episode of Esperanza’s rape. Unlike her friend Sally, who was still toying with the idea of behaving like a sexually active young woman, Esperanza had learnt that it was a dangerous thing to pretend, and had decided not to follow her steps. Nonetheless, she undergoes sexual abuse at a carnival, and, despite not giving a thorough, detailed account of the event, her torn thoughts provide enough as to arrive at certain conclusions. To begin with, she complains that “the way they said it, the way it’s supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies” are lies (p. 99); this suggests that society perpetuates the idea of sex being connected to love and romance, while in reality it is not, and Esperanza finds out about this in the worst way. Secondly, she recalls her attacker not letting go of her arm, and saying “I love you, I love you, Spanish girl” (p. 100). The abuser’s assumption that she was Spanish was most likely a result of pigeonholing all women with a darker skin into the ‘Spanish’ or ‘Latina’ category; moreover, this “I love you, Spanish girl” entails a stereotype of the Hispanic minority as openly sexual, as opposed to White people – a “presumption of Esperanza’s sexual availability” (Marek, 1996). This allows us to see how Esperanza was slowly but surely decoding the fact that her race and gender worked together as factors in the hardships that she had to endure as a young Mexican-American woman.

Esperanza not only endures situations that imply racism and sex-role expectations, which make her revise her place in Mango Street; she also undergoes a much deeper identity crisis, one that is connected to her family roots, and one that implies questioning of her own name. In “My Name,” Esperanza talks about her name and what it means in both Spanish and English. She says, “In English my name

means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means *sadness*, it means *waiting*" (p. 10). It is extremely telling that she should make a distinction between the meanings of her name in both languages, since the meaning in English would be directly related to the American Dream, while her name in Spanish is tainted with less hopeful feelings. She continues to explain that it was her great-grandmother's name, and describes her as a "horse woman too, born like me I the Chinese year of the horse – which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female – but I think this is a Chinese lie because *the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong*" (p. 10 - emphasis added). She continues to say that her great-grandmother was so fierce that she had to be forced to get married, and that, once she had become a housewife, "she looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow (...) I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (p. 11). This vignette, which is one of the shortest in the book, is packed with awareness of social mandates and gendered stereotypes; Esperanza is a girl who is thoroughly aware of the history of the women in her family – and in her Mexican roots, ruled over by patriarchy – and, as she resorts to the past to attempt to make sense of who she is, protests against the standards and values that pervade her past and her present. In turn, she expresses that she does not want to be like her great-grandmother, nor inherit the waiting and the sadness that were characteristic of many women in Mango Street; indeed, she states, towards the end of the novel, in "Beautiful and Cruel," that she has "decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (p. 88). Thus, we can conclude that Esperanza fulfills the characteristics of the coming-of-age protagonist, who undergoes change and ends her process by learning more than she previously knew about her surroundings – that is to say, she has reached phase three of self-discovery in Showalter, and is on the path to searching for her true self, and to coming to terms with her diasporic, hybrid identity. On the other hand, Pecola in Morrison's *TBE* can also be seen, like Esperanza, experiencing the community she lives in as an Other and entering Showalter's phase of imitation. Nevertheless, there is a difference in the degree of tragedy that there is to Pecola's attempt to conform to

the beauty, racial and social standards that the American Dream demands. Being a neglected child, Pecola is hungry for the love and care she does not receive at home, and she believes that this is due to the fact that she is not beautiful; as Bronson explains, "physical beauty works closely with romantic fantasy as a gateway to the fantasy's realization, becoming the prerequisite for worthiness to obtain the fantasy's promised fulfillment. (...) [The fact that] physical beauty (...) [is] encouraged in American women strengthens the groundwork for [its] use as trope in illuminating the issues of identity development" in both *THOMS* and *TBE* (2000, p. 4). Being non-white, but American at the same time, Pecola experiences feelings of unworthiness which she links directly to physical beauty as understood by the White patriarchal society. Since the prerequisites of race and class for the acceptance into Americanness are impossible to fulfill for her, she turns to her appearance as her only hope for social mobility and, above all, love and respect.

Pecola inherits this obsession with physical appearance from her mother, Pauline, who was subject to the beauty standards portrayed and perpetuated in films, which can be considered as a "tool of Americanization (...) [working] ideologically by often presenting "American" values while simultaneously defining those values and the prerequisites to attaining them" (Bronson, 2000, p. 16). Once the reader understands Pauline's relationship with the movies, it is not difficult to trace where Pecola's desire for blue eyes comes from. Her ugliness is to be held accountable for the domestic turmoil and violence she experiences, and she is sure that "as long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people," (Morrison, 1970, 1994, p. 45) meaning her parents. This is the reason why "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (p. 46). Blue eyes mean love, care and acknowledgement, as she observes in her mother's treatment of the little blond Fisher girl who lives at the house Pauline cleans and keeps up. As Bronson very clearly describes,

A hierarchy of recognition is, thus, established in this scene:

Pecola is outside and unknown to the Fishers; Pauline is inside the house but only as a servant; and a small child is living in the luxurious house and reigning over them. Pecola sees this hierarchy, though she may not be conscious of its implications, and sees that the

little blond-haired girl is living in comfort and, more importantly, is receiving love from her mother that she has not personally experienced as her daughter. (2000, pp. 18-19)

The beauty standards that Pecola aims at are represented by the figure of Shirley Temple, who is mentioned several times throughout the novel. As Claudia observes, “we knew that she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (Morrison, 1970, 1994, p. 23).

Pecola’s identity is not only questioned by the treatment she receives from her own mother, but also from that which she gets from members in the community. Firstly, the fact that Black people are not allowed in Lake Shore Park, as narrated by Claudia, reminds the little Black girls that they belong somewhere outside of that centre that is the park; they belong to the margin, since that park was “sweetly expectant of clean, white, well-behaved children and parents” (p. 105). Claudia is much more aware of this on a conscious level, as she describes her own people: “Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with – probably because it was abstract” (p. 17). Pecola also experiences racism when she goes to Mr. Yacobowski’s shop to buy some candy. As can be seen in the following quoted extract, this episode is loaded with violence, since the shop owner himself is the Other, an immigrant – but still feels in a superior position, and behaves terribly rudely towards Pecola, a neighbour, a fellow Other:

Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space *he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance*. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary. (p. 48)

This scene becomes even more desolate for Pecola when she acknowledges “the total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness” (p. 48) and when she perceives the “interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes (...) The distaste must be for her, for her blackness” (p. 49). Immediately afterwards, she feels humiliated and angry, and, to calm herself down, she eats the Mary Jane candy, which was wrapped with the picture of a little blond-haired, blue-eyed girl. While she does so, she thinks that “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. *Be Mary Jane*” (p. 49, emphasis added), which takes her back to Shirley Temple and her desire to become beautiful according to Western standards.

As can be seen, such experiences in her neighbourhood only make Pecola painfully aware of her position in society as a result of her class and race. She also experiences, like Esperanza in *THOMS*, sexual abuse – only that, in her case, the abuser is her own father, Cholly Breedlove. Cormier-Hamilton’s analysis of this episode is interesting in that it refers to certain “circumstances stemming from his environment that may have contributed to his actions and his nature” (1994, p. 119), that is to say, that might explain the origin of such a manifestation of the objectification of women that violating his own daughter represents. Regardless of these circumstances, this rape results in Pecola’s incestuous pregnancy, and ultimately drives her to madness. Having said this, it can be stated that Pecola, unlike Esperanza in *THOMS*, does not move beyond Showalter’s stage one of imitation and internalization, as she never goes into a protest against the beauty stereotypes and racist behaviour that pervades her life. She can never be free from the mandates of the dominant society; on the contrary, she remains their prisoner until the end of the novel, by which time she has descended into madness, as Claudia reflects upon: “A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (Morrison, 1970, 1994, p. 158).

Despite the analysis above, and although she is not the focus of the discussion in this paper, it must be mentioned that Claudia does manage to move past Showalter’s first phase of imitation and internalization of dominant values and standards. From the beginning of the novel, Claudia

expresses her hatred for Shirley Temple and everything that represented the White beauty myth – more specifically, the dolls she got for Christmas: “I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair”(Morrison, 1970, 1994, p. 20). She never identified with the dolls, and did not understand why they were supposed to represent beauty. As she describes,

I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around (...) I did not know why I destroyed these dolls. But I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. (p. 21)

Moreover, Claudia has got more characteristics in common with Esperanza in *THOMS* than with Pecola, as “she has developed in a less debilitating environment (...), an environment that encouraged [her] to feel pride for herself, while still a young girl” (Cormier-Hamilton, 1994, p.121). Thus, it can be stated that this character does get to stage two, as she protests against the standards and values discussed in the paper, and also arrives at stage three, since she is able to search for identity and to embrace the diasporic, hybrid nature of it, being African-American.

Conclusions

Both Morrison’s *TBE* and Cisneros’s *THOMS* can be analysed from their depiction of the hardships that the main characters undergo and which are related to the hegemonic oppression of women, the desire for the achievement of so-called “Americanness” and the racism and exclusion that being a member of a minority, of the diaspora, entails. Institutionalized discrimination, biases and stereotypes permeate the lives of Esperanza, Pecola and Claudia, and play a paramount role in their search for identity and freedom. DuBois’s Double Consciousness concept could apply to the cases of all the characters in both works, even those that have not been analysed in this paper; despite the fact that this term was coined in connection to African-American subjects, it is also suitable to describe the Chicano “painful consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence” (Schreiber, 2010). It was also observed and accounted for

that the characters’ being in the border of Americanness is only worsened by their gender, since they experience double humiliation: first, in connection to their race, and then, in connection to their being women.

The difference that we can see between these two works is that while “*THOMS* ultimately traces the satisfying development of a young woman who not only matures but also attains harmony and a greater appreciation and understanding of her surrounding society: the Chicano community represented by Mango Street” (Karafilis, 1998, p. 65), meaning that Esperanza succeeds at going through Showalter’s three phases that subcultures undergo in their quest for identity, *TBE* fails – of course, with an intention to raise awareness regarding alienation – to tell a coming-of-age story, at least in Pecola’s case. Barbara Christian, as quoted by Cormier-Hamilton, states that “Pecola’s destiny is ultimately determined by the myth of beauty and goodness one culture has foisted on another,” which is why, as has been mentioned above, she is a character “trapped in Showalter’s first phase of growth for a subculture” (1994, p. 115-116).

All in all, conscientious reading of both works with the objective of unveiling the effects of cultural difference as understood by Homi Bhabha. After all, as stated by Weeks (1990, p. 92), “If ever-growing social complexity, cultural diversity and a proliferation of identities are indeed a mark of the postmodern world, then all the appeals to our common interest as humans will be as naught unless we can at the same time learn to live with difference.”

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- ² Bronson states that “full assimilation as an “American” would result in ownership of American ideologies, recognition by other “Americans” as one of them, and full participation in the privileges granted to already assimilated “Americans”.” (2000, p. 2)
- ³ This novel could indeed be taken as an example of an anti-*Bildungsroman*; for an analysis of *The House on Mango Street* as a coming-of-age story and compared to an anti-*Bildungsroman*, see Karafilis.

Endnotes

¹ “Identities are not often neutral. Behind the quest for identity are different, and often conflicting values. By saying who we are, we are also striving to express what we are, what we believe and what we desire. The problem is that these beliefs, needs and desires are often patently in conflict, not only between different communities but within individuals themselves.” (Weeks, 1990,