

HISTORY, LITERATURE AND MYTHS: A READING OF SANDRA CISNEROS'S "WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK"

HISTÓRIA, LITERATURA E MITOS: UMA LEITURA DE "WOMAN
HOLLERING CREEK", DE SANDRA CISNEROS

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Abstract: History and literature have become one of the several *foci* of feminist investigations concerning their difficult relationship with the issue of gender (GORDON, 1986) and their intersection offers an interesting investigative locus from which representations of different subjects are challenged and contested. Taking into consideration the contributions of authors such as Harris (2005, 2009) and Armstrong (2005), this essay aims to discuss how history and literature are inextricably intertwined while analysing the rewriting of Mexican myths in Sandra Cisneros's short story entitled "Woman Hollering Creek". Not only does Cisneros's rewriting of myths illustrate how history and literature represent marginalized subjects, but it also elaborates a critique which privileges gender as a category of analysis.

Keywords: Sandra Cisneros; Myth; History; Literature.

Resumo: História e literatura têm sido um dos vários focos de investigações feministas no que tange à difícil relação com a questão de gênero (GORDON, 1986) e a interseção de ambas oferece um interessante locus investigativo a partir do qual representações de diferentes sujeitos são desafiadas e contestadas. Levando em consideração as contribuições de autores como Harris (2005, 2009) e Armstrong (2005), este trabalho busca discutir como a história e a literatura estão interligadas enquanto analisa a re-escrita de mitos mexicanos no conto de Sandra Cisneros intitulado "Woman Hollering Creek". Não só a re-escrita de Cisneros ilustra como as áreas da história e da literatura representam sujeitos marginalizados, mas também elabora uma crítica que privilegia gênero como categoria de análise.

Palavras-chave: Sandra Cisneros; Mito; História; Literatura.

One of the most common arguments used to illustrate the thin line between history and literature is the fact that both are narratives with an eye to constructing representations (PARIZOTE, 2010, p. 27). Then, it seems safe to think at first that history deals with the condition of facts and events while the latter focuses on how these may be fictively represented. Yet, this differentiation does not suffice to answer current issues in postmodern literature, nor does it satisfy theorists seeking for definitive answers. History and literature are realms which intersect constantly and, even if the latter is not committed to being read as "real" – it comes from places in which history is necessary. As Cecil Jeanine Zinani (2010) argues in her study of the history of literature, the narration of history depends and relies on the historian, meaning that issues of objectivity and fidelity are highly questionable since it is the historian's stance which is at work.

It is not my intention here, however, to undervalue either realm. History is as important as literature is, thus their relevance in contemporary times when right-wing conservative sections of society try to dismiss both as weapons of destruction of national values. Nevertheless, it is important in my argument to showcase how history and literature as fields of study are not neces-

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sarily monolithic institutions which are unquestionable and unchanging. Quite the contrary, both are constantly changing and changed. Understanding that both are mediated by language which, in its turn, is mediated by users situated historically and socially, one cannot undermine the relevance of understanding which ideologies are at play when history as facts is being written. Questions such as “By whom?”, “When?”, “How?” and “Why?” immediately surface so as to identify from which standpoint historians are producing their materials.

On the connection between history and literature, it may be argued that gender is an issue which cannot be overlooked anymore. Since the 1970s, feminist analyses have contributed to unveiling how gender plays a central role in both realms. History and literature can no longer be understood as isolated from perceptions of gender and their role in having perpetuated images concerning both male and female subject. It is then of the utmost importance to highlight the establishment of departments whose main focus is on women’s studies, generating insights into areas such as the history of women and women writers who had been relegated to inferior positions.

Historian Joan Scott (2011) states that the history of women is always political, especially when one takes into consideration that politics is about power relations and the strategies attempting at keeping or removing them from their place. What has been termed as history is often an interpretation of facts from specific stances, usually male-oriented ones. Analysing history through a feminist lens then allows researchers to better interrogate not only the erasure of female figures in history, but also the interpretation of those who were perhaps historically misrepresented.

Considering the connection between history and women, one cannot overlook the importance of literature in enabling women not only to question previous representations, but also to interrogate the canons from which their names had been erased. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1986) states that it is impossible to write about history detached from the issues of writing as presuming words and history presuming the world which speaks those words. (SMITH-ROSENBERG, 1986, p. 32). In other words, what Smith-Rosenberg signals is the difficulty of overlooking that history is made through writing which consists of words selected by someone. Being sensitive to this interaction encourages historians to tackle “facts” differently, especially after important takes on the matter such as that of Linda Hutcheon’s fact/event dyad. Smith-Rosenberg emphasises that studies on history can no longer consider class and gender as innocent themes which do not interfere in interpretation, especially as both “describe social characteristics: occupation, educational levels, consumption patterns, size of family, modes of social interaction.” (SMITH-ROSENBERG, 1986, p. 33)

With the rise of Cultural Studies and newer modes of thinking history such as the contributions of the Annales School historians, investigations of history and literature from a feminist perspective could not avoid addressing the absence (or stereotyped presence) of women in historical records and literary works. Understanding feminism as an epistemology which values the Other and the difference (FLORY, 2011, p. 209), one witnesses the uprise of literary materials which defied previously-sanctioned views of what was and what was not literature. By addressing the misrepresentations, feminist writers and scholars succeeded in rewriting the voids and silences which had hitherto been the history of women. One strategy employed by several writers then and which still finds itself extremely popular nowadays is the rewriting of myths as an act of resistance and rebelling.

In the English-speaking world, one can easily name several novels which have rewritten world-renowned myths: Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, Amy Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, Marina Warner’s *Indigo*, Ali Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy* among many other popular works. What all these novels have in common is their concern for reconsidering myths from a perspective in which women are the subject of their own storylines, thus illustrating that women have been tackling the issue of myths with an eye to bringing about change.

Karen Armstrong (2005) argues that myths play a central role in humankind, especially as far as the meaning of life is concerned. In *A Short History of Myth*, Armstrong states that, due to the fact that human beings easily fall prey to despair, myths have meant more than simple stories as they attempted to describe, organise and systematise life. (ARMSTRONG, 2005, p.8) Myths have given humans the sense of existence which is needed to avoid chaos in our lives. In a way, Armstrong (2005) argues, myths are not only stories which we are told. Rather, they are illustrations of how humans should behave, ways to help us understand our own difficulties and challenges.

One may disregard myths for their lack of historical objectivity, yet no one should be led to believe that myths attempt to attach themselves to realities since they are fictive matters, closer to novels and operas than to everyday life routines. However, understanding the role they played in having helped organise life in the past also allows us to see how they have been appropriated in contemporary times to focus on previously ignored issues, thus negotiating with humans the own nature of myths as being everchanging.

With the rise of a logos-oriented society – in other words, a new *modus operandi* in society – myths lost their place in society as if fiction had no meaning in our lives. Armstrong shows that, even though we live in a society which claims itself to be free from myths, we are constantly looking for heroes to become our “mythical figures” such as Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. (ARMSTRONG, 2005, p. 114). What differs in this worshipping love for contemporary figures and the ones in the past is that the myth of the hero back in the day was meant to encourage and mould the hero inside each citizen. Unlike the past, what is sought in myths nowadays is not an active understanding of oneself, but passive contemplation, which may help explain that myths are misunderstood in contemporary times as ways in which one should fashion oneself instead of empowering oneself through admiration.

It is through artists and writers that myths have somehow managed to affect us. Novels, songs, paintings and other forms of art have helped us get closer to that inability to speak for ourselves, that space in which we are lost for words and which may also be understood as rites of passage. Myths then can help humans see things differently and even at times put ourselves in someone else’s shoes. (ARMSTRONG, 2005, p. 124)

Similar to what African Americans have done, those of Hispanic descent have claimed that their presence counters the official narrative of the United States as the land of freedom, especially concerning their history of discrimination. Due to their past of displacement and colonization, *Chicano* writers have managed to tackle the issue in their writings so as to shed light on how they have been ignored by the hegemonic discourse of America as “the melting pot”. On one hand, *Chicano* writings have clearly emphasized the need to understand the history of the USA as scarred by processes of domination and erasure, yet even the *Chicano* movement becomes the apple of the discord when *Chicana* writers engage in evaluating their history. What *Chicana* writers have managed to achieve with their appropriation of myths in their rewritings certainly echoes Armstrong’s words concerning helping others see life from a different perspective. According to Leila Harris (2005), *Chicana* writers are central in mediating between their ethnic community and hegemonic society. (HARRIS, 2005, p. 54)

Inhabiting an *in-between-ness* of cultures, living in the USA yet having inherited the Mexican cultural practices, these women writers have addressed the issue of being a woman in a context in which having been born female has been interpreted as lacking a voice. By focusing on how devoid of expression *Chicana* women have been, these writers brought to the table questions which had gone unnoticed by *Chicano* writers. They showed how sexist and patriarchal *Chicano* culture was and how questions of sexuality such as lesbianism and queer subjects were ignored in favour of a focus on compulsory heterosexuality as argued elsewhere by Adrienne Rich. This is why Leila Harris states that the “loci from where contemporary Chicana writers speak, a crucial element in their creation of a literature of resistance, inflect the challenge of making their voices heard.” (HARRIS, 2009, p. 276)

One of the most famous names in Chicana literature is that of Cherrie Moraga. A prolific writer who asserted her political stances in her literary offspring, Moraga was fierce in voicing her dissatisfaction with how Chicano culture treated women. In “A Long Line of Vendidas”, Moraga claims that:

[her] mother is the modern-day Chicana, Malinche marrying a white man, my father, to produce the bastards my sister, my brother, and I are. Finally, I – a half-breed Chicana – further betrays my race by choosing my sexuality which excludes all men, and therefore most dangerously, Chicano men.” (MORAGA, 1983, p. 117)

What the previous quote suggests is that Moraga was acutely aware of the sexism and patriarchy in Chicano culture and that her recognition of herself as a lesbian also meant an act of resistance to the values with which she disagreed. Also, one notices the mention of Malinche, one mythical figure in Mexico which has consistently appeared in several literary works and which is going to be the object of this article as well. Yet, Moraga’s take on Malinche is also present in her writings when she deconstructs this and other mythical figures such as *La Llorona* and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, washing them away from the patriarchal values and representing them in another light which clearly emphasises a feminist standpoint. It is from this point that my analysis of Sandra Cisneros’s short story “Woman Hollering Creek” derives.

Cisneros is nowadays one of the most popular *Chicana* writers. She rose to prominence in 1984 with her debut novel *The House on Mango Street* which depicted the growth of Esperanza, a young girl who finds herself questioning the world in which she lives in. *The House on Mango Street* won the American Book Award and has been translated into several languages. The story analysed here comes from her collection of stories *Woman Hollering Creek and other Stories*, published in 1991.

The story “Woman Hollering Creek” centres on the life of Cleófilas and her marriage. At the beginning of the story Cleófilas marries Juan Pedro and moves away from her father’s house in Mexico to a new life in Seguin in Texas. Lured by *telenovelas*, Cleófilas believes her life in the USA will be one laden with joy and happiness. Yet, what she faces in her newfound home is the absence of everything she looked forward to. Her husband turns out to be abusive and violent, she has no comfort at home, cannot watch her *telenovelas* and ends up finding herself forced to take care of the house while her husband works, drinks and gets home drunk. After having her first child, she realises her husband has been cheating on her, but she chooses to remain silent on the issue to avoid further confrontation. It is when she is pregnant for the second time that her visit to a doctor changes her life: she is helped by two other women and flees to San Antonio, a nearby city. The story ends with Cleófilas being given a lift to San Antonio and thinking about the woman who is helping her.

While the story of “Woman Hollering Creek” is far from being fictional – the number of cases of violence against women still soars in several countries -, it seems that little is connected to the issue of myths. However, Cleófilas’ house in Seguin is near a creek which fascinates her because of its unusual name:

La Gritona. Such a funny name for such a lovely *arroyo*. But that’s what they called the creek that ran behind the house. Though no one could say whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain. The natives only knew the *arroyo* one crossed on the way to San Antonio, and then once again on the way back, was called Woman Hollering, a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood. (CISNEROS, 1992, p. 46)

Being unable to explain to others her fascination, Cleófilas decides not to raise the issue with other people since they had criticised her interest in the creek. What is important to highlight is that since she set her foot in the area, Cleófilas became obsessed with the creek, without even noticing that her life was a parallel to the myth of *La Gritona*. Everything she would

face in her new life would lead her to become more and more wretched and resigned to her fate.

By focusing on Cleófilas' suffering, Cisneros manages to cleverly interweave the myths of *La Llorona* and *La Gritona* while trying to reconstruct the story behind the creek with "such a funny name." (CISNEROS, 1992, p. 47) Cleófilas recalls some childhood stories involving *La Llorona* while she thinks about how trapped her life is in that city: "It is *La Llorona*, the weeping woman? *La Llorona*, who drowned her own children. Perhaps *La Llorona* is the one they name the creek after, she thinks, remembering all the stories she learned as a child," (CISNEROS, 1992, p. 51)

While the story behind the name of the creek is unknown, Paula Gunn Allen wrote an article addressing the mystery. Originally published in the newspaper *San Antonio Express-News* in 2004, the article was made available online recently and presents no definitive answer to the question. Allen states that many other creeks have their names interpreted literally for their past, but that the past of the Woman Hollering creek remains elusive. Most of the stories regarding its origins closely resemble that of *La Llorona*, the woman who drowned her children. However, Allen brings to the table important insights which go largely ignored by the majority of readers. One version of the story of *La Llorona* states that a pioneer family was living near the creek and they were attacked by the native populations:

[Upon] Seeing her husband killed brutally, a mother drowns her children in the creek to "save" them from a still more painful fate. When the attackers find the only surviving member of the family, she frightens them off with her maddened screaming. (ALLEN, 2012)

Another version of the myth suggests that the indigenous people had actually been thieves. Another one which is deemed more comfortable is that of "a farm wife in the vicinity (...) known for the carrying power of her voice when she would "holler" her family home for meals." (ALLEN, 2019) What all these versions point to is that the absence of a definitive answer only increases the power of mythmaking behind the story, thus leading to the possibility of revisiting it through fiction with an eye to exposing the issues of gender in it. One cannot ignore the fact that *La Llorona* has been interpreted as a woman who killed her children and became a story to make children frightened and obey their parents.

By blurring the line between both stories, Cisneros interrogates the male gaze which has subjected women to the position of wrong-doers. This closely resembles the story of *La Malinche*, the "betrayal of Mexico" for having "sold" Mexico into the hands of the Spanish *conquistadores*. In Susanna Rostas' study on Mexican Mythology, she mentions that *La Malinche* "has come to symbolize the humiliation of the indigenous people and the need for the Mexican male to reject the feminine in himself as devalued." (ROSTAS, 1992, p. 386)

While *La Malinche* is seen as the one "who raped her country" and "who acted as a medium for conquest" (ROSTAS, 1992, p. 386), little is usually said of her past, especially regarding her situation as a slave sold by her own mother after bearing a son. It has been common to associate *La Malinche* with the downfall of the indigenous empire, thus perpetuating her image as the evildoer and betrayer of the nation. Even if *La Malinche* is not addressed in "Woman Hollering Creek", the presence of the metaphor is there, especially in the absence of Cleófilas' mother.

Being the only daughter in the family, Cleófilas was raised without a mother and her father's role as supportive and caring needs to be questioned. The first paragraph of the story informs readers that Cleófilas' father had a hunch that his daughter would come back:

The day Don Serafin gave Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez permission to take Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández as his bride (...) already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning to the chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man's complaints. (CISNEROS, 1992, p. 43)

What has been interpreted as a father's kindness should also be understood as a doomed fate of having to conform to the role expected by her father. This is why the open-endedness of the story is more promising than allowing Cleófilas to return to her father's place where she would still be reduced to the role he expected her to play. By not offering the ending one would hope for – a child meeting their parents –, Cisneros paints a different destiny for Cleófilas, one in which her life needs not be decided by men surrounding her. While *La Malinche* was sold by her mother, Cleófilas was sold by her father who, in turn, knew she would come back after having known the world. Even his parting words – “I am your father. I will never abandon you” (CISNEROS, 1992, p. 43) – illustrate the power he exercises over her, showing that his presence is going to constantly be with her: her husband is so abusive that the only way out for her is to go back to her father's rule, a step which does not encourage her independence and only traps her in the same maze. *La Malinche* was betrayed by her mother; Cleófilas was betrayed by her own father.

It is then important to contrast that Cleófilas' life only changes when she comes across women who are genuinely worried about her. She had previously met other women, her neighbours Soledad and Dolores, women whose lives centred on dead husbands and sons, offering very little perspective of a brighter and better future. However, only the last scenes in the story display that Cleófilas may have a chance of escaping that cycle in which she is inserted.

While at the doctor, one of the women notices all the bruises and blue marks in Cleófilas' body, prompting her to talk to another friend to help Cleófila and plan an escape. She calls a friend and arranges to drive Cleófilas with her child out of the city to San Antonio. This is when we are told that Cleófilas speaks very little English, meaning that even communication becomes impossible due to her restrictions in life. When Cleófilas finally is picked up by the caller's friend, they have to cross the creek of the title on the way to San Antonio. Upon crossing, the driver hollers and scares Cleófilas, which makes the first explain that she always does that whenever she crosses Woman Hollering Creek. Their short interaction then shows how this driver, named Felice, is the opposite of Cleófilas: she is independent, has her own car and talks the way she feels she wants to. The act of screaming then becomes meaningful for Felice is able to speak for herself whereas Cleófilas is not, being constantly spoken for. Felice can holler and make her voice heard while Cleófilas' is yet to be heard.

It is at the end of the story that one realises that, unlike the women associated with the river, Cleófilas is not going to holler because of the sadness in her life. She is unable to have her voice heard, yet she is finally setting herself free and taking up the reins. Different from *La Llorona* and *La Gritona*, who are doomed to a life of sadness for not being able to have their stories told, Cleófilas finds a way to have hers known through the other women, showing the importance of bonds against patriarchal rule.

When Cleófilas finally disentangles herself from the pattern of living a life mediated by men, she finally can see that the creek means to Felice as much as it means to her. Metaphorically, she can deconstruct not only the myths of *La Llorona*, *La Gritona* and *La Malinche*, but she also manages to break free from the essentialist views of what being a woman is. She realises that Felice – close to the word *feliz* which means happy – is different from the women she had known – Soledad and Dolores, words which mean respectively loneliness and pain.

The end of “Woman Hollering Creek” offers no final answer as to the story of the creek, but it shows that the one thing readers should be concerned about is not whether the stories about the creek are true or false. What Cisneros' short story undermines is the very fact that we accept stories unquestioningly, allowing myths to perpetuate sexist and prejudiced values. Cleófilas' story illustrates the need to question and challenge how myths have been portrayed and how they are of value to help us engage in discussions regarding more meaningful understandings of society.

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Envio: 30/08/2019

Aceite: 30/09/2019