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TRANSGRESSION AND RESILIENCE IN THE WORK *THE WAY HOME* BY YAA GYASI

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Abstract: African-American literature brings to light many intertwined aspects of the history of African and American peoples. Among them, one of the themes discussed in this literature is slavery and its consequences for today's society. This work seeks to carry out a study on the work *The Way Home* (2017), by the writer Yaa Gyasi, analyzing the characteristic features of the enslavement narratives, as well as the construction of the transgressive and resilient character in the work. To do this, we will address Timothy Spaulding's (2005) studies on the postmodern narrative of slavery, with indispensable discussions for thinking about this harsh reality of black-American people. These reflections are the result of ongoing research, which is characterized as qualitative and bibliographical research.

Keywords: African-American literature. Gyasi. Slavery narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on the African-American literary tradition have grown in recent years, contributing to this literature being disseminated and known. This literature encompasses many themes involving the history and culture of African people, including slavery and its effects on current society. In these considerations, we seek to delve into this literature, reading the work: ``*The Way Home*`` (2017), by Yaa Gyasi, a young Ghanaian author based in the United States, who with this novel, makes her literary debut, drawing attention for being a novel that traces a chronological line of different generations, from the beginning of the slave trade to the present century. Each chapter tells the story of a descendant of Esi and Effia: two sisters who never met and who had different fates. Effia never knew her mother, raised by her father and stepmother, who rejected her, marries a white general and

1. *Plantation* is an agricultural system based on monoculture that used slave labor to work on large plantations owned by landowners in the United States.

remains in Ghana. While Esi, daughter of the great man of the tribe, is captured and taken to the United States as a slave.

Thus, the novel allows the reader to gain insight into the years of colonization, the dungeon in ``*Cape Coast*``, the transfer on the slave ship, work on the *plantations*¹, abolition, the following years of segregation, the fight for civil rights, racism in everyday life., among other scourges caused by the enslavement of black Africans. The reader, therefore, becomes a witness who follows these stories, being touched by the narrative that presents characters such as Ness, an enslaved woman who was born on the *plantation* and had her existence marked by violence and injustice; however, she is described as a transgressive being, who fights for her survival and is resilient because she rebuilds herself with each experience.

It is, therefore, this look that we take on the aforementioned novel, seeking to discuss its importance, as witnesses to the many pains caused by the slave trade, analyzing, from the point of view of the work, the evils that can affect Americans from the diaspora black. But, a closer look reveals the transgression in the work that, in a way, allows resilience in the novel's characters.

NEO-SLAVE AND POSTMODERN SLAVE AFRO-AMERICAN NARRATIVE LITERATURE

Contemporary American literature anchored in the history and memory of slavery or that reflects on aspects of the inheritance of these historical episodes in the post-modern subject, is considered *neo-slave literature* (translated into Portuguese as *neo-narratives of slavery*), configuring a genre of African-American narrative. The first works written about this context appear during the slavery period, they are called *slave narratives*

(in Portuguese slavery narratives). These texts were written by people who were experiencing slavery or were formerly enslaved. During this period, narratives of slavery were used as a manifesto to raise awareness against this practice.

Thus, these manifestos were taken as a source for the abolitionists of the time, to show the general population the injustices and atrocities committed on plantations, more specifically in the South of the United States. They are texts written in the first person, therefore considered autobiographies of enslaved people.

The importance of this writing was presented not only by the testimonial content of the narrative that evoked the trauma of enslavement, but also by demonstrating the black man's ability to write, which proved his humanity, since writing is a characteristic human skill. For example, Solomon Northup (1808-1863), born free in the state of New York, is kidnapped as a slave to work in the South of the country and based on this experience, he writes the book: ``*Twelve Years of Slavery*`` (1853).

After abolition, this writing cooled down, revealing a period of silence. This literary approach reappears in the 20th century, when the black intellectual and artistic movement emerged in the United States, mainly in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, during the movement to fight for the Civil Rights of black people against racial segregation. In this context, a literary upsurge takes place, in which authors emerge who use their voice to bring to light the American racial issue, narrating about its people and its history. The theme of slavery once again fills the lines of African-American writing. The novel that marks the beginning of these slavery *neo-narratives* is *Jubilee* (1966), by Margaret Walker (1915-1998). Other authors include, for example, James Baldwin (1924-1987), Maya Angelou (1928-2014) and 2. "(...) modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (our translation).

Toni Morrison (1931-2019).

This categorization of the African-American narrative as *neo-slave* is recent in academic studies of literature. Bernard W. Bell (1987) carries out a sociocultural and critical reading of the history of African-American narrative, he is the pioneer in coining this nomenclature (in principle without a hyphen) to designate "(...) modern narratives of escape from servitude to freedom". (Bell, 1987, p.286)² and which are constructed from popular culture, emphasizing the premise of folklore in its context. This 'popular culture' refers to the historical and cultural references of African-American people during slavery and post-abolition, highlighting the existence of an African-American literary tradition.

Asharaf Rushdy (1997; 1999) redefines the term, using it with a hyphen and popularizing it among academic studies, conceptualizing it as a "contemporary narrative of slavery" that is contextualized as an *antebellum slave narrative*. His definition has a more detailed scope than Bell (1987), as for him the neo-slave novel is produced in several categories such as historical novel, social realist, magical realist, genealogical, etc.

Based on Asharaf Rushdy's (1999) studies on the *neo-slave narrative*, many critics developed their reflections based on his understanding, and even expanding this notion, as is the case of Timothy Spaulding (2005), who carries out a study on this literature, coining a different concept for African-American narratives, classifying them as postmodern *slave narrative*. For him, these narratives encompass a diverse mix of aesthetic proposals about the history of American slavery, claiming its continuity, that is, the presence of its legacy in contemporary society. Emphasizing the fluidity of this genre as it encompasses the complexity of coping facets, in addition to starting from a common place with other narratives. This means that your writing does

not always start from the new: “Ultimately, African American postmodernism generally, and postmodern narrative more specifically, is a complex discourse united by a commitment to reforming the past through narrative.”³ (Spaulding, 2005, p. 123). This understanding confirms the proposal of this work, since we believe that postmodernist narratives provide the reconstruction of a past and the memory of a people. Thus, analyzing these novels allows us to envision a return to African and African-American history, potentially restoring its legitimacy.

According to Spaulding (2005), the *postmodern slave narrative* has a transgressive character, as it contains a discourse that deconstructs stereotypes, highlighting that it is essential to rethink identities that go beyond pre-established racial categories with the aim of achieving “liberation in the postmodern context”. modern”⁴. Furthermore, he observes that these narratives break the thresholds of the existence of a predominantly realistic genre, when they highlight fantasy in their works:

The postmodern narrative about slavery (of slaves) is transgressive. She blurs the lines between genres, relentlessly crossing and reinvesting popular forms often considered escapist or ahistorical with an overt political dimension. He deconstructs realism as the dominant mode of historical narrative, even as (in many cases) he implies that the past history of slavery is a knowable object, recoverable through written form.” (Spaulding, 2005, p. 123)⁵

Spaulding (2005) confirms what Rushdy (1999) says, regarding the perception of the existence of an insurgency in *neo-slave*

literature, as there was an attempt by writers from the civil rights movement in the United States to find a way to direct and absorb the feeling of the counterculture that existed at the time: “For these writers, the act of reforming the past is an overtly political gesture – a means of criticizing the legacy of slavery in the present, radicalizing our view of the past.” (Spaulding, 2005, p. 124)⁶

The existence of an African-American literary tradition is evident through this literature, which addresses not only the period of slavery, but also post-abolition and contemporary times. Its relevance to history is implicit in this power to witness and reform this past and, consequently, leave the memory and culture of these people alive, affirming and reconstructing their experiences through these voices.

Anchored in this thought, we understand the work ‘‘*The Way Home*’’ (2017), by Yaa Gyasi as a *postmodern slave narrative*. An epic novel about the genealogy of two sisters who are led to different destinies: Esi and Effia. The work presents Esi’s descent from forced labor on plantations, the fight for freedom, to the contemporary moment, highlighting in all phases: the fight for survival.

If, on the one hand, Esi’s descendants were martyred by enslavement, on the other hand, Effia and her descendants lived with the decadence of their country after enslavement: agreements with whites; the fight between enemy tribes to capture people; the deterioration of the country’s economic growth due to dependence on the colonizer; the trauma left by the destruction in the

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villages and the trauma crossing the Atlantic on slave ships.

Effia and her countrymen had an idea of what happened to those who were captured. She just didn't know that she had a half-sister, who was among those agonizing from mistreatment and starvation in the *Cape Coast fortress*.

This work becomes more relevant, because it not only shows those who came to get and those who went, but the work shows the continuation of those who also stayed after selling their brothers and the chaos created in the midst of so many conflicts and collective misfortune, as Santos (2008) discussed. Therefore, this narrative has a different historical breadth, as it encompasses both sides of history, reformulating the memorial of the Ghanaian people. The narrative also outlines the obstacles that the black and immigrant population faces in a country where racism is embedded in social roots.

The fact that stories set during slavery are still being told today reveals that this trauma has not yet been overcome, so it becomes a relevant issue for this and future generations to rewrite this history. According to Eyerman (2004), enslavement is seen as a "primal scene of a cultural trauma", which reverberates more strongly for those who are on the move, questioning the duality of their identity and their citizenship. This way, this novel allows for reading and a return to memory where it is possible to submerge in textuality and reconstruct identities.

Literature written by African Americans is part of the process of questioning and fighting for their place in the arts, politics and society, meaning a space for voice for this movement, since literature has the power of the word. Therefore, writing plays this transgressive role, whose most powerful weapon is the word, the verb that builds and deconstructs the entire segregationist bias, clothing those who were denied it with humanity.

NESS, THE REPRESENTATION OF THE TRANSGRESSIONAL AND RESILIENT BLACK WOMAN

Postmodern narratives of enslavement aim to reformulate the past through a rewriting that provokes a new look at the history of enslavement. This way, they respond to this cry for testimony of trauma with a bias that promulgates a reformulation. To carry out this reconstruction, they bring characters who demonstrate their transgressive and resilient capacity and who resist injustice and the blunting of their identities.

This representation can also be understood as a way of reaffirming this collective identity of the African-American people, since these characters are constructed differently from the image of the 'good' and 'subservient' enslaved person, stigmatized by some written narratives, who represent enslavement from the colonizer's perspective. In this sense, we can observe the presence of characters who speak and criticize the system and white standards based on their experience in the epistemic place, that is, in the diasporic experience.

Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) was a slave who managed to escape and write the book: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave* (2021), recounting her own experience of enslavement in the South. This autobiography is also configured as an American narrative of enslavement, denouncing dehumanization and violence against black people, especially black women, who suffered from abuse and harassment from their masters. It is also an abolitionist novel, which told the population of the North what was happening on the other side of the country.

The novel *Beloved* (2018), by Toni Morrison, first published in 1987, is a post-modern American narrative of slavery, which features in its plot the American slavery context and the post-abolition moment.

Based on real events, it tells the story of Sethe, a former slave who is tormented by the spirit of her daughter, who she killed as a baby, when she was a slave. According to Spaulding (2005), this is a narrative constructed with the element of the fantastic, which escapes traditional realistic narratives of slavery. Furthermore, this novel outlines a critique and a look at the pain and evils generated by the diaspora and enslavement.

The ‘‘Underground Railroad: the paths to freedom’’ (2018), by Colson Whitehead, inserted in postmodern American slavery literature as a work that reports, among other misfortunes, the common practice of separating families during this period of enslavement through the story of Cora, a young slave who commits the transgression of running away with the enslaved Caesar via the underground railways that cross the country and lead to freedom in the North. The plot unfolds discussing this slavery framework, written with a magical realist bias, tracing the escape route taken by the American states and the constant struggle against violence and for a place in the world.

The novel: *‘‘The Way Home’’* (2017), by Yaa Gyasi, presents this vital flow of human existence, which is transformed by constant movements of the elements. Such movements reveal the fluidity in which identities are built by the influences of the environment and experiences.

Thus, the narrative presents the transcendence of female characters marked by the context of migratory transit, violence and racial segregation. However, this becoming of the female figure demonstrates the strength and resilience of black women who managed to overcome and transgress by remaking themselves even in the face of trauma.

We find reports of the gentlemen’s hard work and violence, both in the story of the character Esi and in Ness. Esi, who is captured

and taken to forced labor on American plantations, has her daughter Ness, who grows up on the plantations. In addition to daily forced labor, there was extreme violence for any mistake and to maintain control over the obedience of the enslaved. Violence is used as a way of insulting both the body and the emotional, weakening any feeling of belonging to humanity. As examples of this violence, the following excerpt shows Esi being flogged for speaking her language to her daughter:

Ness wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to hearing English pouring out of black people’s mouths. In Mississippi, Esi spoke to her in Twi, until her master caught her doing so. He flogged Esi five times for every Twi word Ness said; and when Ness, seeing his mother being punished, was too terrified to open his mouth, he gave Esi five lashes for every minute of Ness’s silence. Before the whipping, her mother called her Madame, in honor of her own mother, but the man had whipped Esi for that too. He had whipped her until she exclaimed “My goodness!” — the words escaping her mouth, without her thinking, undoubtedly learned from the cook, who used to say them to mark each sentence. And since those were the only English words that came out of Esi’s mouth, without her struggling to find them, Esi believed that what she was saying must have been something divine, like the gift of a daughter. That’s how that “goodness” became just Ness. (Gyasi, 2017, p. 112)

The immersion in the traumatic memory shows the image of the trauma revisiting the memory of Ness, while resting in bed with Pinky. The daughter, still a child, witnesses the beatings, the prohibition of her mother tongue, the imposition of another language and culture, the change of the name given in memory of her grandmother, becoming just Ness, the end of the only word her mother was able to speak in English. This constitutes cultural epistemicide, in an attempt to dehumanize, deny any trace of its history and human individuality.

Ness, is a character built with characteristics of being A transgressor, she is born and grows up amid the work of the plantations, presents a posture that is aware of the yoke of her reality and looks for a way to leave the plantation where she worked to care for and raise her baby son, Kojo. Together with her husband Sam, also a transgressive character, they escape with the help of Aku, a woman who helped enslaved people escape to the north, where it would be possible to live in freedom:

Ness and Sam talked about it every night they spent together. "You can't raise a child in Hell," Ness repeated over and over, thinking about how she had been stolen from her own mother. Who knew how long she would have with her perfect son, before he forgot the sound of her voice, the details of her face, the way she had forgotten Esi's? And when Sam finally agreed, they sent word to Aku, telling her that they were ready, that they would wait for her signal, an old song in Twi, sung softly in the forest as if carried by leaves blowing in the wind. And so, they waited. [...] The song came in the spring, so delicate that Ness thought perhaps he had imagined it, but soon Sam was taking Jo in one arm and Ness in the other; and they three left the Demon lands behind for the first time they could remember. (Gyasi, 2017, p. 133)

The transgressive act of Ness and her husband took the form of escape, but the ending was not as desired, as they ended up being persecuted and surrendered, so that their son could continue the journey towards freedom. They are taken back to the *plantation*; her husband is hanged and she is flogged until her skin is deformed. This attempt to escape to freedom is a common feature among slavery narratives and can be considered an act of transgression.

Ness is also a character who resists the dehumanization of her emotions, she resists as a protector who protects her husband when in a fit of rage, he destroys the entire

accommodation and to free him from punishment, she takes the blame for the destruction he caused and She is whipped until she becomes unconscious. At another point, to protect the girl Pinky from suffering physical attacks from Mr. Tom Allan's son, her maternal instinct urges her to hold the stick she was going to use, and the boy falls, provoking the father's anger.

Her resistance to accepting injustices against her fellow men also demonstrates the resilience she has to rebuild herself, even after all the suffering on the previous *plantation*, the interrupted escape, the lack of news of her son's whereabouts, the death of her husband, the violence suffered. She recovers, continues standing on the plantations. Her part in the narrative ends with her thanking God for the harvest and asking for her son:

She considered picking cotton a prayer, as she had since the day she saw Sam's head. When he bowed his body, he said: "Lord, forgive my sins." When he pulled out the cotton: "Deliver us from evil." And when she stood up, she said: "And protect my son, wherever he is." (Gyasi, 2017, p. 136)

Through the character Ness, the author constructs the 'becoming' of black women who, like her, experienced the pain of displacement, segregation, prejudice, violence against their bodies, their motherhood, their children; but, they continually reinvented themselves, fed on what remained only in the memories of their roots, in the daily effort of survival, but which transformed her into a woman of solid character, who fights for her existence.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel ``*The Way Home*`` (2017) presents the characteristics pointed out by Spaulding (2005) to classify itself as part of the postmodern narrative of slavery, such as: dealing with the period of colonization and enslavement; present a critical view of the past; builds characters that escape the standards of 'good enslaved people', but are characters that fight for their survival and dignity in the face of the yoke and oppression both in the period of slavery and also in the descendants of Esi and Ness who live the legacy of colonization; rescues African roots and memories, contributing to the affirmation of the identity of African and African-American people who experience racism; as a political act denounces the injustices suffered by segregation in American society.

As an author, Gyasi reformulates the past of slavery, based on several narrators, retelling it as the story of African people who crossed paths with white people, showing the emergence of African-American people in the United States. However, it does not hide the hardships and injustices faced and reinvented

that today constitute a cultural fabric for this population.

In Ness's case, she had her childhood stolen, separated from her own mother, saw her husband die by hanging, was unable to raise her son, and had her body deformed by the whip. But even so, she was refreshed with each memory of her mother's stories about the slave ship, or about her relatives she never met, about her homeland and origin. His resilience was demonstrated because he continued to fight for survival and against injustice. This brings us to the relevance of building the memory of African peoples to reaffirm their identity beyond the yoke of slavery.

Yaa Gyasi's work is powerful, as it encourages the reader to understand and experience the scourges of the lives of black Americans, both in her debut novel, read on these pages, and in her second novel, ``*Transcendent Kingdom*`` (2021), in which the author provokes the reader to think about the topic of depression and trauma caused by racism in the United States. The author therefore presents a narrative of resilience, but also of resistance and transgression.

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