



WOMEN'S SURVIVAL THROUGH THE ACT OF NARRATING: *TALES OF BURNING LOVE*, BY LOUISE ERDRICH, A NATIVE AMERICAN AUTHOR

SOBREVIVÊNCIA FEMININA ATRAVÉS DO ATO DE NARRAR: *TALES OF BURNING LOVE*, DE LOUISE ERDRICH, UMA AUTORA INDÍGENA ESTADUNIDENSE

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Abstract

The novel *Tales of Burning Love*, by Louise Erdrich, a Native-American writer, brings up an intriguing topic of discussion for the feminist debate: are women, as it is defended by dominant, patriarchal eyes, speaking too much about themselves or are they still silenced by the mysteries imposed on the female sphere of society along history? We argue here that when women start talking among themselves about topics that have been taken as sacred and forbidden, such as their desires, pleasures and intimacy, they might not only created healthier and promising bonds to other women as well as they guarantee their survival, as it takes place in the literary text we analyze along the article.

Keywords: Female silence; female speech; sisterhood;

Resumo

O romance *Tales of Burning Love*, de Louise Erdrich, escritora indígena contemporânea dos Estados Unidos, traz à tona um interessante e intrigante tópico de discussão para os debates feministas: estarão as mulheres, como defende a visão dominante patriarcal, falando excessivamente sobre si mesmas ou elas ainda silenciam sobre os ditos mistérios que povoam a esfera feminina da sociedade ao longo da história? Argumentamos em nosso artigo que as mulheres começam, a partir do século XX, a trocar idéias entre si sobre temas antes vistos como sagrados ou proibidos, tais como o desejo, o prazer e a intimidade feminina, o que lhes permite criar laços mais fortes com outras mulheres, inclusive podendo garantir a sobrevivência dessas, como analisaremos no texto literário de Erdrich.

Palavras-chave: Silêncio feminino; fala feminina; sisterhood;

In *Tales of Burning Love*, Louise Erdrich, a Chippewa-American writer, presents us Jack Mauser, the male protagonist of the novel as an important first link between all other female characters she presents in the plot. The novel explores the power of passion, whether religious, erotic or platonic. This might be considered as the less typically “native” of all novels by that author. In spite of the fact that several of its characters have some native background, most of them are totally disconnected of their cultural heritage. In this context, our objective along this article is to discuss the idea generally presented as a common sense observation in different cultures that women are excessively talkative, speaking more and in more circular ways than men do. Our idea is to discuss this premise, observing the role female speech assumes in the above-mentioned novel by Louise Erdrich, a literary text that gave us impulse to go deeper into this topic of female silences, where conversation among women assumes a determinant role.

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As Michelle Perrot (2003, p.13)² puts in her article on the silences of women's body, there are several gray zones in respect to women's existence, many of them being kept well hidden. Just to mention some of them, one might consider female desire, pregnancy, abortion, rape, menopause as themes that should, according to the norm, be preserved for very private conversation with doctors or other authorities. According to this point of view, women's lives and women's bodies were topics to be discussed by others, never by themselves. At the same time, women are defined in many societies as excessively talkative, speaking too much about unimportant things, being defined by most patriarchal societies as subjects rarely able to construct deep, thoughtful observations, generally concentrating on trifles.

According to Ana Cristina Ostermann (2010, p.9), after the publication of a fundamental book by Robin Lakoff in 1975, entitled *Language and woman's place*, discussions on the relations between social gender and language have become more and more evident, bringing up the more cooperative nature of communication among women if compared to the ones developed among men. Since narrative, specially literary narrative, recreate possibilities for human experience to be expressed and reconstructed, we consider that the novel *Tales of Burning Love*, by Louise Erdrich, gives us an opportunity to discuss this contradictory position in relation to women's power to express themselves orally and the role such discourse might assume in their lives.

The “burning love” in the tales

Along the novel by Erdrich one learns that Jack, a fifty year-old man of native background, has already got married for five times. In order of engagement, his wives were: June, Eleanor, Candice, Marlis and Dot. Maybe as a consequence of his first marriage to June, which lasted for one night only, Jack is over and over again looking for some kind of “happy ending” to his emotional life. If at the beginning of the novel it seems that Jack is the one who is weaving all the love tales, later on one learns that there are lots of parallel stories of burning love and various different perspectives being presented by his ex-wives. Thus, the main voices here, deciding about what is told and from which perspective, are surely women's ones. He, Jack, assumes the position of being the main topic – a much more objectified position than one might suspect at the first pages of the novel.

June, Jack's first wife, got married to him after a meeting in a bar, where she was waiting for a bus to go back to reservation. As a result of too much alcohol as well as their first night together, their immediate marriage is a complete disaster, reason why June left the place, trying to walk home during a winter night, what determines her death. Eleanor, Jack's second wife, got married to him for revenge, since he was responsible for the separation of her parents. To Candice, Jack got married after she convinced him not to kill a street dog. With Marlis, marriage came after a “rescuing meeting”. She was walking with no purpose around a big store, when she touches an electrical cable. The charge was so great that she collapses. Jack saw it and saved her by “giving her mouth to mouth”. Unfortunately he forgot to hold her nose closed and so, she gets some slight nerve damage. Dot, his fifth and last wife, got married to Jack as a result of a misreading.

² Any translation of Portuguese into English is of our responsibility.

She did not notice his financial life was a chaos nor did she have any information about Jack's numerous ex-wives. As a matter of fact, Jack seems to have something these women cannot resist – what makes us think of him as a character strongly attached to the trickster figure – a talkative, charming and irresistible lover.

The plot of the novel is on a first moment organized in relation to events involving Jack. Female characters appear as they appear in his life. However, it is important to stress that Louise Erdrich was able to break with this centrality of Jack as a character, without taking him out of the narrative – in fact, he continues to be “the” theme these women share and dissect. Along the plot, Jack slowly becomes more a common issue of female discussion – a topic of female conversation - than the central figure he used to be at the beginning.

Erdrich divides her novel in four parts; the first is entitled “Jack of Sunflowers”, where the reader is presented to Jack's last adventures. The second section of the novel, entitled “Blackjack Night”, tells about Jack's fake funeral and his ex-wives first collective meeting. The third part, entitled “Tales of Burning Love”, is the focus of our analysis. Here one comes across the voices of the female narrators and the different views each of Jack's ex-wives presents of him. Erdrich still presents a fourth section to the novel, entitled “Balancing Tricks”, which helps the reader make out the ending of the novel as well as Jack's trickster-like nature.

The section entitled “Tales of Burning Love”, as mentioned above, deals with the power of narrating and the way story-telling might help individuals not only to understand themselves and their culture but also to survive. The section starts at the moment Jack's four surviving ex-wives are leaving his funeral in Dot's car. Dot is driving when they find themselves in the middle of a blizzard. The car got stuck in the snow and they simply cannot move any further. This happens on January 6, and for about six hours Jack's four ex-wives have to stay inside the car, eating toffees and waiting for help. The only way to stand the cold and the fear of dying, since the car heater can only be turned on every thirty minutes, is through the sharing of stories each of them experienced with Jack. Dot is the one to suggest their survival depends on their state of alertness. Eleanor agrees, affirming they should “tell all”, pretending “that car is a confessional” (ERDRICH, 1997, p.205). Dot reinforces: “we have to stay alert. “If we fall asleep, we're headlines in the *Enquirer*” (ERDRICH, 1997, p.206). In Dot's words, the rules are the following: “rule one, no shutting up until dawn. Rule two. Tell a true story. Rule three. The story has to be about you. Something that you've never told another soul, a story that would scorch paper, heat up the air!” (ERDRICH, 1997, p.206). It is here already being indicated that the confessions are going to be quite erotic.

Roberta Rosenberg, while analyzing *Tales of burning love*, defends that it is really possible to identify in it Louise Erdrich's double positioning in cultural terms. Rosenberg sees this interest on the act of storytelling as coming both from her Native as well as from her European cultural background. In fact, she defends that *Tales of Burning Love* shows many similarities with some pre-modern European storytelling cycles, found in texts such as the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*, for instance. According to Rosenberg, the novel seems to revise and revitalize such traditions within a native context, since *traditional* (pre-modern) Western storytelling has much in common with its Native American counterpart (ROSENBERG, 2002, p.14). In both traditions one can identify multiple narrators being reconnected through

storytelling. In *Tales of Burning Love* as well as in the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales* one comes across “narrators with divergent versions of a story which are able to create a complex harmony with a center that resists atomization” (ROSENBERG, 2002, p.117).

It really seems that Erdrich is here using that knowledge she got through her formal education and its reviews of Western tradition, as well as the influence and interpretations native cultures give to the act of storytelling. Rosenberg observes, however, that, on the contrary to what used to happen in such pre-Modern narratives, the “destabilizing, conflicting and decentering character of contemporary [Western] narratives has tried to atomize our world view and not to center and harmonize it” (ROSENBERG, 2002, p.19). She insists that in *Tales of Burning Love*, Erdrich is able to use both traditions in order to “create a highly innovative, postmodern voice which harmonizes instead of disconnecting and atomizing” (ROSENBERG, 2002, pp.119-120).

In the narrative, Jack Mauser’s four ex-wives have to “tell all” in order to survive, love relationships becoming a central theme, what means, Jack becoming a central theme or at least a point of departure. It is important to keep in mind that the only ex-wife who dies is June, since she had run away in isolation, not sharing her deception in relation to Jack with anybody. She died in the middle of a blizzard, trying to run back to her original community. Eleanor, the ex-wife who is going to re-establish a relationship with Jack after the blizzard, is the one who matures with the whole situation and the stories she has to face inside that car. She states, as if predicting the effects of the storytelling: “perhaps when all is said and done and we are rescued, this cathartic account will help to lay undone feelings for Jack to rest” (ERDRICH, 1997, p 209). As a matter of fact, later on one learns Jack is not dead but simply hiding from his creditors and the love and attraction existing between Eleanor and him is going to be reenacted, reinforced.

Madan Sarup in his book *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* discusses the existing relations between identity and narrative. He stresses that “identities, our own and those of others, are fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities”, having a history of their own. In this sense, the way “others have typified us creates our ‘public identities’” (SARUP, 1996, p.14). Generally it is assumed that we construct our identity at the same time as we tell our life-story. And, according to Sarup, there is an incredible transformative power attached to the act of telling one’s story (Cf. Sarup, 1996, p.15).

One has to take into account, however, that what happens in the blizzard scene in *Tales of Burning Love* is something a little bit different than a personal storytelling, since Jack is not telling his story but his ‘public identity’ is being deconstructed, presented from different perspectives by each of his ex-wives. The reader, in this case, is able to see different constructions of the assumed protagonist identity in process. According to Sarup, narratives are, obviously, sites of cultural contest, involving, in this way, topics of representation and power (SARUP, 1996, p.18). In this sense, although presenting a male protagonist, *Tales of Burning Love* tells us a story composed by the perspective of several women, concentrating on the way they orally construct the story of their lives as well as the images of their common ex-husband and the relation they established to him. It is even possible to state that, by giving voice to these women at this crucial moment, that is, in the middle of a blizzard, Erdrich is presenting her literary questioning of male

centrality, showing that, in this plot, despite their love for Jack, his four ex-wives are able to analyze their feelings from a detached, liberating perspective and survive *through* it.

Thus, through the fake funeral of Jack, Erdrich creates an appropriate rearrangement of the existing relations between his ex-wives, making them speak up, presenting the reader different interpretations of Jack, the trickster-like husband. At the end, Jack is perceived by the reader as an issue these women share. This sharing, their interest about him and even their curiosity helps them survive along that terrible snow storm. The reader learns, for example, that Marlis and Candice (wives number 3 and 4), although having both been married to Jack, have a long time ago found out their love for each other; so, here the ex-husband is the one who brought them together, having to give up the central position he used to assume in these women's lives. He becomes a parallel, linking element that loses importance as soon as these two women fall in love. Even Sister Leopolda, a nun who will supposedly be sanctified and who is also the object of Eleanor's research, is involved in the process of teaching the last how to mature through love. She makes Eleanor notice she cannot escape passion, be it physical or religious. The religious discourse, in this sense, also shows the inevitability of talking about and seeing the loving bonds between Eleanor and Jack.

Erdrich finishes the novel with the reencountering of Jack and Eleanor, the most passionate couple in all the tales presented. The last tale, in fact, is the description of a sexual act, their physical reencountering, a meeting in which Eleanor tells herself, while looking to Jack – "*Through you, in you, with you, as long and often as I can stand you*" (ERDRICH, 1997, p.452), while Jack cries in silence considering how hard it is to bear the pain of coming back to life. Here the sexual act, performed on the stairs of Eleanor's house, symbolizes their emotional mutual attachment and increasing self-knowledge. They make love, while moving up along the stairs, and the voice of a non-identified narrator tells us that *we are conjured voiceless out of nothing and must return to an unknowing state. What happens in between is an uncontrolled dance, and what we ask for in love is no more than a momentary chance to get the steps right, to move in harmony until the music stops* (ERDRICH, 1997, p. 452).

Final conclusions

As a matter of fact, *Tales of Burning Love*, being consider the less native of Erdrich's novels, might better mirror the ideas she presented in an interview to Allan Chavkin in 1994. When the interviewer asked her what was the place (and/or contribution) of American Indian literature to mainstream American literature, Erdrich answered: "I don't distinguish the two. I don't think American Indian literature should be distinguished from mainstream literature. Setting it apart and saying that people with special interest might read this literature set Indians apart too (CHAVKIN, 1994, p.25). In another section of the interview, when asked if she considers herself a Native American author, she puts it clearly: "I think of any label as being both true and a product of a kind of chauvinistic society because obviously white male writers are not labeled "white male writers". However, I suppose, they are useful in some ways. I could as well be "woman writer" or whatever label one wants to use. But I really don't like labels. (...) I prefer simply to be a writer" (CHAVKIN, 1994, p.31). Independently on labels, Erdrich has a place of her own among recognized US writers, and for sure, *Tales of Burning Love* helps demystifying her cultural heritage as being exclusively

based on native grounds, what is an interesting way of breaking up with stereotypes often attached to subjects (and writers) belonging to non-hegemonic groups.

Finally, Laura Cavalcante Padilha (1997, p. 61), a Brazilian literary critic states that to think of the canon is not only to think of contradictions that inhabit conventions, as Linda Hutcheon defended, but also to think of the power relations that underlie its very process of sedimentation. In this sense, having a native author presenting women who have previously disputed a man being able to change the relation among them by creating a bond surely is an innovation in terms of representing the gender system in the literary sphere – be the theme native or non-native. As Margareth Rago (2004, p. 33) defends, in spite of its difficulties and limitations, feminism has created a *specific mode of existence*, much more integrated and humanized, exactly because it has undone binary oppositions (...), reinventing the political and cultural imaginary of our times. Elaborating ideas, agendas, and organizing women's belonging in the world are topics that have become pillars of feminism that still believes in the power of sisterhood. The novel by Erdrich here discussed surely reinforces the possibilities of sharing stories and experience as steps for a collective empowerment of female subjects in general.

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