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Gabriela Leiton.

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Homegoing as an identity feature in postcolonial contemporary women's literature

Dr. Gabriela Leiton

LICH-UNSAM

gleighton@unsam.edu.ar

The Greek, and Homer especially, created a particular literary genre to describe the *peripetia* of the return: *nostos*, going back, everything that takes to go back: battles, dangers, monsters: the return is full of those, but it is worth it, as the prize is getting home. And home is origin, is country, is oneself. And then it derived in *nostalgia*, longing to be home, missing home. That *nostos* has three moments: separation, initiation, return¹ the monomyth. So *nostos* gives origin to the return as the moral development of the hero; going back is growing and turning a mature person.

Now I want to add another concept. We have had, for a while, a discrete academic discipline, women's literature, as we understand that the experience of women has been historically shaped by gender: "Their texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men"², not as a matter of political stance or a particular author, but of her gender, i.e. her position as a woman within the literary world.

So let me put both concepts together. Although, as we all know, women have played a subordinated role in literature and especially in ancient epic, we can find traces of women's *nostos* already in *Odyssey*: Helen, in the first place, going home to her husband Menelaus after experiencing the war and a ten-year separation; and Penelope, who stays home, but Odysseus' return is in many ways a challenge for her as it is for him. So Homer portrays both ordeals as a form of heroic *nostos*³, and they are the direct antecedents for my analysis today: Helen's and Penelope's marginalized roles in the *Odyssey* open a window to contemporary women's writing who pose the new postcolonial *nostos* in the monomyth: already displaced⁴ and separated by colonization, with all the diverse feelings that first step showed (wanting to belong, hating the

¹ Campbell, J. The hero with a thousand faces. Princeton, PUPDM, 2004.

² Blain, Virginia et al. The feminist Companion to Literature in English. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1990.

³ Pache, C. (2014). Women after war: Weaving *nostos* in Homeric epic and in the twenty-first century. In P. Meineck & D. Konstan (Vol. Eds.), *The New Antiquity. Combat trauma and the ancient Greeks* (pp. 67-85).

⁴ Ashcroft, B. The Empire Writes back. Routledge, 2002.

colonizer, loving them, adapting, letting go); initiation (second and third generations in the foreign land, already belonging in some ways, speaking the language, knowing the ways), it is now the time for *nostos*, homegoing, returning to the origin which is home without us even knowing it. And so, we can trace in what I call ultra-contemporary literature a recurrence of the topic of returning in women's literature, new postcolonial Helens who need now to go home in order to understand who they are.

And thus, I intend to analyze in this paper the role of returning to one's roots to find oneself in contemporary postcolonial novels written by women in English. Returning to find identity and completion; to seek one's name, one's words, one's land, both from a literal and a metaphorical point of view.

I have been working on the need to find one's personal ego since many pages ago⁵; starting from the first postcolonial female authors, going through the silences in Caribbean poets, through the amazement of home returning and family re-finding as a way to complete oneself in recent literature. What I will do now is a comparative analysis of three lately published novels written by contemporary women who all worked on this idea of the need to find their identity and, to do that, the need to return.

This text proposes that this return is part of the need to find where one belongs, as the final step of what I will call *post colonial anxiety*: the feeling of not belonging completely, together with the need to belong, and the deep knowing that there is a home where one belongs. I will speak, then of Sadie Smith's *Swing Time* (2016); Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).

Theoretical framework will be underlying my work, as it always does: postcolonial theory and criticism, and particularly Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Bill Ashcroft; culture in a broader sense, mainly through Cioran and Derrida; and comparative literature, so as to have the possibility to explore the postcolonial women world from a wider view. Then, this will be an analysis of identity. A grand question that will ask what identity really is, in this intense postcolonial world with quick changes continuously at hand that makes us difficult not to see what we need to see.

⁵ Leighton, G. Resistance and Liberation in Postcolonial female writers: a comparative reading of Ghana Must Go and Americanah. *En prensa*.

I like to quote Susheila Nasta's epigraph of her beautiful text, *Motherlands*⁶: "It's not art for art's sake; its vibrancy and immediacy are intended to forge unity and wrench a new identity". This contemporary postcolonial identity in permanent repositioning, that is making these contemporary authors wonder once again about the origin and to frame a new identity from the discovery of an almost genetical and familiar past, a many times unknown past that nevertheless define each look and each decision. And now we reach the central idea of this paper: female postcolonial identity in contemporary literature changes the view on origin and past, proposing a re-discovery that implies knowing more about oneself, completing oneself, finding oneself, even when one did not know that was lost in some way: what I call the *postcolonial anxiety*. Let us start the analysis with *Swing Time*, a novel that asks how we become who we are, the choices we make, and the choices made for us. A nameless protagonist who will grow from being the black girl in a whites' school, and therefore find the only other black girl-Tracey-with a powerful personality and shared taste for music, for friend; woman with no name who will go through the oppression of that friend, suffer her parent's separation, and finally find a job as Aimée's -a rock star- assistant, and again-as with Tracey- find herself in a complete second place to serve the other's needs and desires, to West Africa, her ancestors, global charity that does not make real sense, and back to a dying mother and a weak father she never really knew. A main character with no name with powerful friends with names, who needs to find herself, her story, her heritage, but who is compelled by society not to be defined by it, to be "global" and dance to the music of her time, to forget who she is.

Swing Time is a text about how we become who we really are, and about if we can truly escape our origins. Zadie Smith's prose is rhythmical and true to form. Her style interweaves contemporary and historical themes together, taking art, race and origins as its main questions. We become who we are because we are a long line of events that take us to the beginning, always. The novel begins and ends with the mother, the root. Understanding is understanding from where we come from.

⁶ Nasta, S. *Motherlands: Black women writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.

This central topic will link *Swing Time* with *Homegoing*, Yaa Gyasi's masterpiece about going home. The story is in a deep way, circular: from the terrible African slavery period, where both Americans and British and some cruel African traitors plotted against people, to today and the understanding of history deep inside, old stories that live in us even without knowing it.

We have worked with *nostos* and the reborn Helena in three contemporary novels, and proposed a new line of analysis, the postcolonial anxiety of return, to pose that we seem to be in the third stage of the monomyth: after separation in the early postcolonial texts to initiation in the early XXI century⁷, we are now in the stage of homegoing, of returning to find a new identity that has our roots, our language, our own monsters and our name.⁸ And, as Roy does, devote our fight to the Unconsoled.

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⁷ Leighton, G. Mujeres poscoloniales: el silencio como estrategia discursiva y de resistencia; Una aproximación a la poesía poscolonial de mujeres; *Revista Académica liLETRAd: Revista de Literatura, Lengua y Traducción*. no 2, 2016, p. 131. ISSN 2444-7439

⁸ Leighton, G Op cit.