

QUICKSAND: A HYBRID'S MANIFESTO

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Abstract: This work aims at discussing the hybridization produced by diasporic movements in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and the construction of the identities of postmodern women.

Keywords: African-descendant literature; Harlem Renaissance; in-between spaces.

■ **D**uring the first half of the XX Century many African descendants were traveling and living beyond the borders of The United States of America. The African-American culture was conquering international amplitude. During the 1920s, artists usually traveled to Europe and to England. Many of them had connections to the Harlem Renaissance and traveled to other countries to work, study or relax. The internationalization of the African-Americans, especially after the First World War, coincided with the ascension of Nella Larsen as a novelist during the Harlem Renaissance (DAVIS, 2002, p. 7).

NELLA LARSEN AND HER *QUICKSAND*

Half Scandinavian, Half West Indian citizen of the United States, with traces of German and African ancestry, Larsen embodied the image of the hybrid. She was born on April 13, 1891, and her name was Nellie Walker. Walker was the daughter of a Danish immigrant woman and a man whose nationality was unknown, but whose racial designation on the birth certificate was "colored". The little Nellie Walker was also designated as "colored". The fact of being considered a half-breed and her non-white appearance would complicate her rela-

tionship not only with the black community, but also with her own family, who would increasingly become a part of the American economically mobile population (DAVIS, 2002, p. 7-8).

Her first novel, *Quicksand* (1928), explores the possibilities inherent to her identification to her ethnical heritage. The hybrid characteristics of the author inspire her description of Helga Crane, a restless modern protagonist determined to escape from the traps of marriage and motherhood, which she associates to racial and gender limitations in the United States and to the oppression of the considered proper black middle class life. Helga Crane is the representation of some of the tensions that divide the African – descendents' spaces and minds. The life of the non – white community in the western hemisphere and the treatment given to this community because of its different colour are the main themes discussed by Larsen. Larsen's view of racism is not purely nationalist. She does not forget to depict the gender oppression. *Quicksand* is a literary work that deals with questions related to identity, hybridism, gender and diasporization among other aspects. The analysis of this work according to the Cultural Studies views is important because it is a matchless example of post-colonial literature. Besides, the diasporization and the hybridization appear in this work as important aspects in the construction of the identities of African – descendent women. *Quicksand* is a representation of African – American women's enterprise to criticize the post colonial patriarchal society that prevents them from achieving the same social position of men, being them white or black.

When we read this novel, we can notice that Helga Crane is a character inspired in Nella Larsen herself. Although *Quicksand* is not a declared autobiography, it is important to notice that it has many strong autobiographical traces. Many autobiographical writers have explored multicultural stories that create alternative notions of subjectivity and hybrid subjects, subjects capable of living in two places, sometimes speaking two languages, and living two cultures. Helga Crane can be considered one of these subjects, being the representation of Larsen herself many times. But, it is also important to notice that, as Larsen's story, autobiographies also have great portions of fiction, since they are produced by different human beings who can see only some aspects of some events or give more relevance to certain events and forget others. As the concept of "truth", the word Autobiography is difficult to define as a distinct genre, on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary:

This kind of disruptive interdisciplinarity, the challenging of traditional boundaries and definitions, has also been central to the feminist project, especially as articulated in Women's studies, as autobiography provides a meeting – place for many different kinds of feminist approaches. Feminist approaches in turn have helped to revolutionize the study of autobiography, expanding its definition to include not just a literary genre or a body of texts but a practice that pervades many areas of our lives (COSSLETT, 2000, p. 1).

For instance, Helga's mother is white and Danish and her father is black and has no origin as Larsen's parents were. Ethnically Danish and born in the north of the United States, but with a non-white skin and educated in the south of the country, Helga is the representation of the hybrid, the one who belongs to

everywhere and to nowhere at the same time. Her physical description can be seen in the following passage:

An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade. A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate, but well-turned, arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health. In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was – to use a hackneyed word – attractive. Black, very broad brows over soft, yet penetrating, dark eyes, and a pretty mouth, whose sensitive and sensuous lips had a slight questioning petulance and a tiny dissatisfied droop, were the features on which the observer's attention would fasten; though her nose was good, her ears delicately chiseled, and her curly blue – black hair plentiful and always straying in a little wayward, delightful way. Just then it was tumbled, falling unrestrained about her face and on to her shoulders (LARSEN, 2002, p. 6).

Helga Crane suffers a lot in her life since her biological father abandons her family, her stepfather and her half-brothers treat her badly and her mother does not defend her. Crane's inner conflict in her search for her identity, for a place where she could belong, is related to the view she has of the United States and of Denmark. The first clearly presents great ethnical diversity, but it does not treat all ethnical groups in the same way. This can be seen in passages as the following one, in which a white preacher goes to Naxos, the black school, to preach:

This was, he had told them with obvious sectional pride, the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country, north or south; in fact, it was better even than many schools for white children. And he had dared any Northerner to come south and after looking upon this great institution to say that the Southerner mistreated the Negro. And he had said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places, and that, said the preacher, showed good taste (LARSEN, 2002, p. 6).

The second has a population formed mainly by white people and presents a kind of veiled racism that makes people treat Helga Crane well, but as an extremely exotic, different being. This can be seen, for instance, when her Danish aunt asks Helga to wear colorful and exotic clothes to go the party where she would be presented to the Danish society:

Oh, I'm an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you're young. And you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the colour of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression (LARSEN, 2002, p. 70).

She travels to many places searching for her identity, searching for a place in which she feels comfortable being as she is. Helga Crane's trips make her be in contact with many communities Nella Larsen herself knew: Naxos, a school for African-Americans in the South of the United States that is located in

Tuskegee; Chicago, where her white relatives live; Harlem, where she finds a refined black middle class that is hypocritical and obsessed by the “race problem”; Copenhagen, where she is treated as an exotic being and an object of desire; and, finally, the poor south of the United States, where she is disillusioned with the blind devotion of people to religion. In each one of these trips, or diasporas, Helga Crane fails in her search for a place in society and for her identity. Not finding a place she can consider her home in the United States or in Denmark, she starts to understand her difference as a cultural hybridism, in which there is no other denomination for her besides the pejorative term “mulatta” and there is no other solution besides the negation, by herself and the others, of at least one of her ancestries, since the society demanded a fixed identity, a very well delineated one. Would she be black or white? American or Danish? Would this choice be possible to her?

LARSEN'S AND CRANE'S HYBRID IDENTITIES

According to some postmodern critics and theorists as Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha, Helga Crane could never, and can not, negate her origins and delineate one cultural identity for herself as black or white, American or Danish, since identity is something in constant mutation and impossible to be labeled. Homi K. Bhabha (1994, p. 2), in *The Location of Culture*, declares the idea of identity abandons a monolithic and totalizing character to give occasion to identities built in the gaps, in “in-between spaces”. In “Signs taken for wonders”, Bhabha (1997, p. 34) claims that from this contact between colonizer and colonized, result hybrid modalities of expression which challenge the assumption of the “pure” and “authentic” concepts upon which the resistance often stands. He declares that despite the “imitation” and “mimicry” with which the colonized cope with the imperial presence and authority, the relationship between these two forces is one of constant – even if implicit – contestation and opposition. Stuart Hall (2001, p. 62) also suggests that the postmodern subject is fragmented, having many identities, and that the modern nations are cultural hybrids. This hybridization and fragmentation are in *Quicksand* and have great influence in the family relations of the characters of this work. In this literary work, hybridization can even be physically noticed, since Helga Crane is the representation of the hybrid, the “mulatta”, someone who is neither white nor black being both at the same time. By the end of the novel, Helga Crane gives up her dreams so as not to abandon her children and has her voice suffocated by a society that does not have, and does not want to have, a place for her.

Something that must be highlighted about this novel and about other works which have autobiographical traces or are autobiographies, is the notion that we can not take an autobiography or a work with autobiographical traces as representative of a group of individuals, even when they are a legitimate space where voices that are usually forgotten can be heard:

Since Western autobiography rests upon the shared belief in a common-sense identification of one individual with another, all “I”s are potentially in-

teresting autobiographers. And yet, not all are "I"s. Where Western eyes see man as a unique individual rather than a member of a collectivity, of race or nation, of sex or sexual preference, Western eyes see the colonized as an amorphous, opaque collectivity or undifferentiated bodies. In this way, argues Rey Chow, "Man (hence Europe) [...] hails the world into being [...] in such a way as to mark [the non-European world] off from European consciousness or universality". Moreover, heterogeneous "others" are collapsed and fashioned into an essentialized "other" whose "I" has no access to a privatized but privileged individuality (WATSON; SMITH, 1992, p. 17).

THE CYBORG LARSEN / CRANE

Larsen's work, *Quicksand*, was written in 1928, but it could be used as an illustration to many topics that are being discussed nowadays, specially the question of hybridism. Analyzing the book we can notice that it is a hybrid construction because it is a product of a borderline between fact and fiction. We can assume that some parts of the book, some situations, are part of the author's autobiography because they perfectly match events that occurred in Larsen's life, but about other cases, other events depicted in the book, we can not say the same. Even concerning the events that are correspondent to the author's life we need to be suspicious about their accuracy, since, if we consider them as memories, we are going to have only one point of view of the events: the author's.

Besides, as was said before, the main character, Helga Crane is a hybrid, not only culturally but also physically. If *Quicksand* were a Science Fiction book, Crane would probably be a cyborg, and consequently Larsen herself, since the cyborg is a construction, a mix of organism and machine, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction, being both and none at the same time. An outcast who has no place in the world. An outsider, having a minor or none social status. Considering this we might compare the cyborg, and all hybrid forms, to Donna Haraway's (1991, p. 149) definition of irony: "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true".

However, Haraway empowers the cyborg as Larsen is empowered by being able to write and publish her story. Haraway's (1991, p. 156) cyborg myth "is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work". Haraway's cyborg and Larsen's works are ways to challenge the patriarchal society and the power of some groups over others. They are powerful weapons to promote the subversion of the social order and constraints. They are instances and strategies of resistance:

I would suggest that cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and most of birthing. For salamanders, regeneration after injury, such as a loss of a limb, involves regrowth of structure and restoration of function with constant possibility of twinning or other odd topo-

graphical productions at the site of former injury. The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, nor rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstruction include the utopian dream of hope for monstrous world without gender (HARAWAY, 1991, p. 181).

CONCLUSION

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* was written in the end of the 1920's, but it is extremely up-to-date. The many diasporas that happened through the centuries, and are still happening, transformed and transform the society of the XXI century in an enormous mosaic formed more and more by pieces with new shapes that look for a space between the old pieces. What needs to be observed studied and understood is the way these pieces fit into the mosaic. It is important to know if those pieces fit in a violent or in a peaceful way, what happens when these pieces are not able to fit, and what kinds of strategies these pieces use in order to guarantee their places in this multicolored and heterogeneous shaped mosaic.

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Resumo: *Este trabalho objetiva discutir a hibridização produzida pelos movimentos diaspóricos no romance Quicksand (1928), de Nella Larsen e a construção identitária das mulheres pós-modernas.*

Palavras-chave: *Literatura afro-descendente; renascença do Harlem; entre-lugares.*