Representation of Black Men and Women Characters in Children's Literature: Breaking with the Hegemonic Culture

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Abstract

This article is the result of a doctoral research and from the reflections and researches developed by the Social Pedagogy Group. The main objective is to analyze the discourses carried in children's literature from a post-structuralist perspective and some notes by Foucault on the articulation between discourse, power and knowledge. For the analysis and understanding of the speeches and the textual and iconographic forms conveyed on the black and black characters, we use children's works produced after the promulgation of Law 10.639/2003, which established the inclusion in the official curriculum of the teaching network of the subject matter "History and Afro-Brazilian Culture". Our initial hypothesis was that discourses on black and black characters, as well as their culture, ancestry, and especially religiosity, kept the operationalization of racism. From the theoretical-methodological point of view, the research is qualitative of an ethnographic nature

Keywords: Children's literature. Racism. Religion. Race relations.

1. Introduction

The definition of the theme of this research originated from the invisibility of the black characters, their culture, religiosity and ancestry in children's stories. It is a great mistake to give as synonyms the concepts of difference and diversity, producing a homogenized discourse about identity. This vision disregarding the particularities of the subjects, their histories, religiosity and culture in a country constituted by a mestizo people, in which racism and its exclusionary practices have been sneaked perpetually since the abolition of slavery on May 13, 1888, to the present day.

The myth of racial democracy, the idea that there would be peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups in Brazil, is a concept derived from the work of Gilberto Freyre [1], a Brazilian sociologist of the 1930s. Although he did not explicitly say or write the concept, through his work *Casa-Grande & Senzala*, the formation of the Brazilian family under the patriarchal economy, there are those who support the idea that there is no racism in Brazil. It emerges as a legacy of slavery that has led to an uprooting of the black people from their historical marks. In a brief historical retrospective in the 1950s, Florestan Fernandes, author of *The Integration of the Black in Class Society* [2], supports the idea that there is racism in Brazil that causes serious damage to its black population.

Based on this reflection, Roger Bastide, Oracy Nogueira, Thales de Azevedo, among other researchers, began a series of studies sponsored by Unesco, which culminated in the substantial modification of the interpretation about race relations in the context of Brazilian society. From a society that until then had been racially resolved, with an ethno-racial democracy, as Gilberto Freyre [1] believed, Florestan Fernandes [2] found that racial groups stand differently within the social order and that the distribution of social positions is closely relate to prejudice (pre-disposition for action) and racial discrimination (action) against blacks. Therefore, when the possibilities opened by capitalist society with its mechanisms of competition, allow the social ascension of blacks, the prejudice of race and class is been manifested.

The question of race, according to Quijano [3], is the social classification of the world population according to a mental construction that express the basic experience of colonial domination and which has since permeated the most important dimensions of world power, including its rationality Eurocentrism. For the author, was the settlers who codified color the phenotypic traits of the colonized and assumed it as an emblematic characteristic of the racial categories imbued with this premise where prejudice is class and race. We intend to analyze how the black and the black character, its culture and its religiosity are been represented in children's literature through the optics of the counter-hegemony of power and the struggle against social exclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

We seek to analyze and discuss the social representations of black men and women characters, their culture and religion, contained in children's books published after the promulgation of Law 10.639/2003. This material establishes the guidelines and bases of national education, to include in the official curriculum of

the Teaching Network, the obligation of the theme "History and Afro-Brazilian Culture", with the intention of understanding how the process of construction of the black identity happens within this context. The books analyzed are part of a Municipal Library of the city of São Paulo.

A total of 14 children's literature works were been analyzed, which were more specifically relate to the religiosity and culture of the African people, according to the categories: oppressed and black identity. Discourse analysis was been based on Foucault [4], in order to understand how the discourse was constructed and manifested in those literary works that made up our universe of research. The relevance of the research is the broadening of the discussion about the configurations of social relations between blacks and whites in children's literature, with a view to promoting equality and respect for diversity.

For the analysis of the books were used the categories oppressed and black identity. Racism and prejudice, in Foucault's work, appear as expressions of power relations. In this sense, education is important to reduce racist practices. This mechanism enable the integration and social ascension of the Black. Discourse analysis was been based on Foucault, on the works The Archeology of Knowledge [4] and on The Order of Discourse [5], in order to understand how the discourse was constructed and manifested in the literary works that composed our research universe.

3. Results

In Brazilian children's literature, black and black characters seem to have a very restricted space since they only appeared in books in the late 1920s and early 1930s with Monteiro Lobato being a reference of this period. It must been remembered that the historical context in which the first stories with black characters were published was of a society just emerging from a long period of slavery. The stories of that time sought to highlight the subaltern condition of the Negro [6].

In this sense, culture, customs, and knowledge of this population were not describe in their entirety but in a pejorative way. In 1975, children's literature began to portray Brazilian society in its social context, thus appearing black characters. During this period, many works are expose to denounce the practices of prejudice and social discrimination. Many of them

> [...]end up presenting black characters in a way that repeats some images and representations with which they intended to break. These stories ended up creating a hierarchy of exposure of black characters and cultures, setting them in a racially, socially, and aesthetically disparaged place. In this hierarchy, the best positions, the best conditions, the most outstanding beauties are always the mestizo and light-skinned female character [6, pp. 187-188].

In Brazil, only in the middle of the 20th century, with the publication of some works by mestizo authors, the Black was represent in literature and art, through Lima Barreto, Solano Trindade, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Oswaldo de Camargo, Machado de Assis, Cruz and Souza and Alberto Guerreiro Ramos. In the 1980s, books came up with new proposals, whose central objective is to break with the stereotyped view of blacks, valuing their traditions, religiosity and their physical appearance, but not all books succeeded,

further reinforcing racial prejudice.

Several researches demonstrate the presence of these negative stereotypes in relation to blacks in the children's literature. A study by Fúlvia Rosemberg [7] shows the racial stereotypes present in the children's and youth literature produced in Brazil between 1950 and 1975, through the texts and illustrations of these productions. The author shows that women, children and non-whites were at the same level of inferiority compared to the white male adult model, even keeping the appropriate differences between black women, non-white and non-white men. With the purpose of changing the apparent picture, important curricular reforms occurred, with questions related to racial prejudice.

The landmark is Law 10.639/2003, which imposes compulsory education on Afro-Brazilian history and culture, including the study of the History of Africa and Africans. Children's literature began to present the racial theme in some books, emphasizing the disingenuous and unsystematic racial bias with which we live. Afro-Brazilian literature, if used in a way compromised with the basic principle of deconstruction of racist stereotypes and prejudices, can be a great ally in the awakening of child subjectivity, in the formation of ethnic-racial identity and in the valorization of black culture. It can make possible the construction of a liberating education, as proposed by Paulo Freire [8], or else a creative education that strengthens a liberating praxis, which is neither adaptation nor reproduction of the culture that strengthens prejudice and racism [9].

Another relevant feature is the emphasis on the importance of the figure of the ancestors, grandmother and mother in the lives of the characters, as transmitters of a culture of African matrix with the intention of perpetuating it [10]. Authors such as Joel Rufino[11], Abdias Nascimento [12], Heloísa Pires Lima [13] emerge, telling the story of blacks in a singular way, without stereotypes, revealing African culture and religiosity so quiet until then. From 1980, blacks linked to black militancy began to discuss problems through actions, which somehow resumes the idea of Alberto Guerreiro Ramos: it is one thing to discuss blackness as a theme and another thing is to discuss it like life.

Black groups like Ilê-Ayê and Olodum appear, valuing racial culture also through music. The 10.639/2003 encourages schools to teach the history of Africa and Africans, the struggle of blacks in the Brazilian context and their contribution in the various areas of Brazilian history and culture. It advocates that the children learn a realistic and respectful history, from contents about the struggles of liberation that the black people has until the present days in search of his rights of citizen.

Afro-Brazilian literature emerges as result of reflections, debates and, especially, the intense struggles of black movements since the 1970s, in various social spheres. More than narrating fictional stories of black and black characters, it manifests a political commitment to the diffusion of African culture and history. According to Turchi [14], Afro-Brazilian literature brings the discourses of the excluded and forgotten, making the child imagine and construct his subjectivity and deal with conflicts. Working Afro-Brazilian children's literature will contribute to breaking with the Eurocentric and only cultural model that privileges the knowledge of European culture. For Peixoto [15], knowing African stories can break with the stereotyped vision of the black character and his culture. Currently, Brazilian children's literature presents several works that value culture, identity, religion and African tales.

4. Discussion

We could observe that in the works there was recurring concern with the affirmation of the identities of the black populations, the exaltation of the beauty of the black people and a strong presence of Afro-Brazilian religions. We reiterate that the concept of identity cannot be understand by only one definition, since its construction is associated with the environment in which the individual is insert. Identity is a way for the individual to be in his group, it is the way of being. We therefore believe that it is

> [...] a reality always present in all human societies. Any human group, through its axiological system has always selected some pertinent aspects of its culture to define itself in opposition to the other. The definition of self (definition) and the definition of others (assigned identity) have known functions as the defense of the unity of the group, the protection of the territory against external enemies, the ideological manipulations by economic, political and psychological interests. [16, pp. 177-178].

We understand that the process of building ethnic-racial identity in Brazil is complex, because the discourses related to miscegenation and culture generate polemics and create new paradigms. Six of the works analyzed reveal the symbolic universe of the African gods (orixás) and the candomblé locations. The colors, food and greetings are part of this repertoire where the orixás appear with their cognomen, for example: Omolu is the Healer, Xango is the Thunder, Oxalá is the Creator of humanity, Oxum is the Beauty, Yansã is the Fearless. Four other books point to a relationship between the human being and the deities. The offerings are references to belief and punishments directed at humans and the orixás when they disobey the order of superiors. The other books make a return to Africa as origin and constituted by the maternal figure of the yorubás myths. These works refer to rivers and villages. They tell about the creation of the world and portray the orixás: Oxalá, Olorum, Odudua and Exu.

In general, in these books, many of the African myths and tales are present and relate to the orixás. The themes of aesthetics and self-esteem are permeate by the approach of conflicts in the daily life of the characters and especially in the construction of their identity. There are stories and tales related to the Afro-Brazilian traditions that are approach through older characters. In summary, the books analyzed reinforce the idea of the Protagonism of the now humanized oppressed, deconstructing labeled and Eurocentric visions, in which the Black could never occupy the leading role of a children's story. They present elements to make visible what was been hidden for a long time in children's literature, giving visibility to absent and silenced knowledge such as religiosity. The iconographic and narrative images represent in a positive way the Black and his religiosity.

The authentic mode of struggle of an oppressed freedman consists in the search for the more being, the being, the subject, the being. It means the possibility that is present to the concrete man to cease to be something, to humanize. The radical commitment to the concrete man cannot be passive. He is praxis insertion in reality and scientific knowledge of this reality. This possibility is fundamental in the humanizing experience. It is a moment of duality, because the oppressed wants to be more and, at the same time, fears this conquest due to the introjection of ideas within it by the oppressors and the processes of

appropriation of the oppressive culture.

The liberation of the oppressed occurs in a long and painful historical process, similar to a childbirth, according to Paulo Freire [17], and begins in the moment when the oppressed becomes aware of their position in society and fights for the stolen humanity. The texts of children's literature that seek to value black culture through the characters can be an excellent pedagogical tool in the process of social formation and child awareness. Returning to Paulo Freire [8], we understand that this mechanism is a kind of unprecedented feasible or even a utopian realism. In other words, this

> [...] is the viable dream that requires me to think daily of my practice; requires of me the constant discovery of the limits of my own practice, which means to perceive and demarcate the existence of what I call free spaces to be filled. The possible dream has to do with the limits of these spaces and these limits are historical.

Some of the characters in the texts we analyze bring this ability to dream. They are protagonists, because they dream of a different world, they have a vision of tomorrow and of the future in which they are engage. Others seek to destroy the dream and prevent enchantment and joy. For there to be a real decolonization of minds, it is necessary the praxis to begin with ourselves, each leaving for its generations experiences of love, respect for all beings of nature. It is undoubtedly a collective construction, with the denaturalization of prejudices, disrespect, starting for a construction of subjects that seek their awareness, discover their unfinished and seek to be more, that is, they leave the common sense and exercise the reflection.

Only with the liberation of the Black can we think of the end of the black-white opposition, since there is a contradiction based on the power that one pole holds over the other. Liberation is a historical and collective processes, therefore the liberation of the Black is also the liberation of the White, in the sense that it is the end of the domination that sustains the relation and the emergence of the social meaning of what it is to be "black" and "white." In this context, we affirm that discourse is a materialization of ideologies and symbolizes power, becoming then the desired object, as Foucault states [6].

We add that one way of amplifying and transforming this reality is the capacity to dream of the subject and his collective. We also emphasize that the theme of cultural plurality is valued. Despite being few, the children's works, which are been researched, promote the experience, negritude, preservation and appreciation of Afro-Brazilian and African culture, emphasizing the principle of racial equality and perpetuating ancestral knowledge to the new generations.

5. Conclusion

We seek to report on some aspects of the ethnographic research that we have developed in the analysis of ethnic-racial themes in children's books. We have discovered in them various descriptions of historical and cultural relations between Africa and Brazil. They bring a new discourse centered on the conception of nation and culture, where Africa is a continent and takes a place of extreme importance. Cultural diversity, black culture and religion are convey through positive discourses around black identity. The narratives rescue African culture, bringing beliefs and myths that continue to support the identity of black people and

Brazilian society.

In the empirical analysis of the research, it can be verify that there is still a small children's book production, after the promulgation of Law 10.639/2003, but that it meets the assumptions and the theme of cultural plurality. Despite being few, the researched works provided the experience of blackness, the preservation and appreciation of Afro-Brazilian and African culture, emphasizing the principle of racial equality and perpetuating ancestral knowledge, especially religious ones, to the new generations. The characters are protagonists of the stories and seek their ontological vocation to humanize themselves.

These books encourage children to question their ethnic-racial identities as they bring African stories and roots to the center. They make black children identify with the character and accept themselves in a positive way, not resorting to whitening as a way to hide their race to be accept in society. In them, the child, in appropriating the narratives, recognizes elements of their ethnicity, religion and tradition, and can live moments of satisfaction. We must reiterate that they contribute to the empowerment of black children who were inferior and oppressed, enabling the relationship between different cultures and peoples.

Among the characteristics of these books, we highlight the valorization of the black people's memory, their culture and their image, as well as the presence of African tales and the African tradition. It includes the possibility of the topics addressed dialogue with the reflections on racism and Brazilian identity, the presence of elements that make up the identity of the Black, the approximation of the values, customs and habits of the African people and a reflection for non-black children to value and respect diversity. They invite the reader to enter the mythical African universe and its relations with the universe. In face of the analysis of the representation of blacks and blacks in children's books, we understand that racism is not operative in children's works with ethnic-racial themes.

6. Acknowledgement

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