

Displacement and Unfulfillment

“The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed.”

Salman Rushdie

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Resumo: O objetivo deste ensaio é discutir brevemente a questão sobre pertencimento cultural e identitário, a partir do texto “*Imaginary Homelands*” (1982), de Salman Rushdie, do conto “*Mericans*” (1991), de Sandra Cisneros e da peça *Strange Fruit* (1981), de Caryl Phillips. Os três autores escrevem de uma perspectiva multicultural sobre a aceitação da identidade e os conflitos étnicos, raciais e sociais entre percepção da realidade pelo indivíduo e diversidade cultural em espaços de diáspora pós-colonial.

Palavras-chave: Identidade. Multiculturalismo. Diáspora.

Abstract: This essay aims to briefly discuss the concepts of cultural belonging and identity, departing from the text by Salman Rushdie, “*Imaginary Homelands*” (1982), from the short story by Sandra Cisneros “*Mericans*” (1991), and from the play by Caryl Phillips *Strange Fruit* (1981). The three authors write from a perspective of multiculturalism about identity acceptance and the ethnical, racial and social conflicts between reality as perceived by individuals and cultural diversity in spaces of post-colonial diaspora.

Keywords: Identity. Multiculturalism. Diaspora.

This essay intends to discuss the feeling of belonging and being part of a social body by questioning what it means “to be home”. Does the term ‘being home’ describe a physical and geographical space rather than a subjective and symbolic one? Does a feeling of “being displaced” mean that an individual has been forced away from their “usual” position? And if we accept such a proposition as true, would that mean “having been forced” from a geographical or from a symbolic space? Are those feelings of displacement restricted to those individuals who have had a multicultural upbringing?

This discussion shall revolve mainly around (i) the characters Errol and Vivien, from the play *Strange Fruit*, by Caryl Phillips, an author who grew up in England, but was born on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts; (ii) the reflections found in the essay *Imaginary Homeland*, by Salman Rushdie, who was born in Bombay, India; and (iii) Micaela’s impressions on her heritage culture, the narrator in Sandra Cisneros’s short story *Mericans*. The perceptions, descriptions and

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struggles with reality that are depicted in the works of such authors may be well said to accommodate the complex entanglements of concepts such as diasporic spaces, multiculturalism, identity creation, transnationalism and issues on ethnical and racial struggles, which take place in many Western countries like England.

Our approach will not map and go over the several concepts we just mentioned with the objective of discussing their semiotics and cultural and political implications due to the multiple and stretched-over-time vast theories that have already been written. Instead we refer to the following authors to read on such broad discussions: Guilherme on multiculturalism, Izarra on diaspora and Anderson on imagined communities. We shall leave such academic approach in favor of a more direct and simple approach, to fit the size and depth of this essay, and for the purpose of relying less on the semiotics of the terms and more on the essence of the discussion around Rushdie's question: "How are we to live in the world?" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1982: 18).

Last, it is imperative to explain that we our approach will consider the feelings and perceptions of individuals instead of trying to find and support specific understanding of what words mean to whom: it is about a personal quest that everyone trails, extending the question "How are we to live in the world?" to us living in this fragmented world, independently of where one is born or raised.

It seems relevant to start by recollecting Rushdie's thoughts on what he puts as 'ghetto mentality':

"[...] of all the many elephant traps lying ahead of us, the largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality. To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the 'homeland'." (1982: 19).

What Rushdie advises against is to set off in the hidden path of seeking a "narrowly defined cultural frontiers", which is exactly what Errol - the main character in *Strange Fruit* - does. In fact, Errol manages not only to fall in the dangerous trap of adopting a ghetto mentality, but he also manages to suck the whole world into it with him. Errol and his family's history and



identity are intertwined, and yet each member of the family faces it in a different way. His brother Alvin, after having returned from the Caribbean, where he attended to his grandfather's funeral, realizes that the 'ghetto mentality' he cultivated all his life was nothing different from the mentality cultivated by those on the island towards them, who had left twenty years ago to England. For the islanders he was part of the 'them', the ones who belong to outside the 'ghetto' from where one sees himself. He and his family were considered as having merged into the 'enemy'.

As for the universality of the 'ghetto mentality', it is hardly deniable the fact that, none of us can manage to escape falling into the same trap, just that at different degrees – hopefully at a lower degree – at one time or another. Being human and forming your identity means just the separation between the "I" and the "you", primarily, and furthermore, socially extending it to the separation between the "we" and the "they". This is not only a trap in itself but a human legacy and heritage that reasoning inflicts on us. However, this separation hides the fact that the homogeneity is inside heterogeneity inherent to living in society. A person, besides being in a group, is part of as many different groups as he or she acknowledges as existent. To start with, we all have a gender, age, possibly nationality, color, political ideologies, and if we want to extend it, food preferences, clothing preferences, etc. The ghetto mentality then, erases all the differences that are undesired of perceiving to still be able to create this 'imaginary ghetto' and focus on things like the color of the skin, the nationality, language, descendency.

This is precisely *Strange Fruit's* setting, which discloses, I would say, a separation or 'shattering' that is not just 'external' to individuals and affecting societies, but which comes from an 'inner shattering', if we are to use Rushdie's metaphor of the broken mirror. The 'outer' shattering can be seen as affecting not only the social division, resulting in the social behavior – extreme, in Errol's case – that outlines an individuals' feeling of displacement to its surroundings and to others, to everyone considered as the 'them'. The behavior that follows toward the ones who are not deserving of being part of the 'us', like Errol's attitudes toward his British girlfriend, supports the idea that his mismatching of reality exacerbates his feeling of not belonging in the country he lives, leading to an aggressive and racist behavior. The acceptance or denial, ultimately, depends largely on one escaping or embracing this ghetto mentality, and therefore welcoming or rejecting the social surroundings.



The short story *Mericans*, by Sandra Cisneros on the other hand, unfolds the impressions of a first-person narrator, a little girl called Micaela, who unveils the other side of the diasporic stories, contradicting Errol's feelings: as an immigrant who is spending time with her grandmother in Mexico, the country where her family has its origins is just a place of learning and perceiving differences to compare what she considers her inner culture and mother tongue: English. Her cultural upbringing is probably American, lending on the language she speaks and on the historical setting she describes, speaking and explaining in English about the (probably Catholic) church. She accepts well the `other` and their diversity, albeit her own different cultural references, and speaks of the Mexican culture with a glimpse of curiosity:

“Why do churches smell like the inside of an ear? Like incense and the dark and candles in blue glass? And why does holy water smell of tears? The awful grandmother makes me kneel and fold my hands. The ceiling is high and everyone's prayers bumping up there like balloons.”(*Mericans*, 1991: 157)

Rather than raiding on a crusade against the `new culture`, that is, the culture deriving from the place of her upbringing, she embraces the cultural heritage found in the new land, and in spite of being in previously known but foreign cultural and geographical space, her attitude is not of hatred. It might be argued that she stands, somehow, to an opposition of Errol's grasping of reality. Moreover, she does not reject the `other culture` as the enemy, although it is clearly, as it is represented by her “awful grandmother”, a culture that has not been taken in, although she was plunged into by her direct and extended family. So, the concept of mobility, which is usually associated with the discussion of multicultural backgrounds and thus to non-acceptance of a `new culture` is not necessarily alone the cause of an the feeling of being in a place where one does not belong. Micaela feels she does not belong in her family-inherited culture, whereas Errol feels he belongs to an ancient inheritance his family has forsaken.

Sure Errol and the little narrator girl's capturing of reality differ in many other aspects too, but for now my point is that the physical space where one belongs may be overthrown by one's perception of reality. Errol longs for a culture that he does not really know, for costumes, habits and a language he has never used or learned, a cultural heritage totally imagined, an “imagined community”, not more, not less. After all, whether Errol understands it or not, he is English, his life is English, his habits, costumes, acquaintances (the “brothers”) are English, and



his language is English. From that point of view, besides both, Errol and Micaela can be said to fit in the so-called ‘in-betweenness’ of cultures, she chooses to believe that she belongs in the place where she is, and her displacement is felt positively as something gained. As for stating that she feels fulfilled by her ‘new culture’, that is, just to judge from the short story, a long shot, and totally lacks evidence. But if we see fulfillment not as a state of reaching a desired life condition that had been longed for, but as a state of being satisfied by whatever she was given in life, it is relatively safe to say that she does not suffer with ‘unfulfillment’. In fact, it could be even argued that she accepts a certain type of unfulfillment, which is the one arising from the consciousness that her beliefs share space with other beliefs held by other people.

It is naïve to think though, that Micaela does not struggle with her cultural heritage. Her feelings toward her Mexican heritage and their customs are materialized in her description of her grandmother, apparently one she has spent much time with and who personifies her feeling of ‘displacement’:

“There must be a long, long list of relatives who haven’t gone to church. The awful grandmother knits the names of the dead and the living into one long prayer fringed with the grandchildren born in that barbaric country, with its barbaric ways.” (Mericans, 1991: 158).

Micaela’s inner culture, underlying her American upbringing and costumes are not represented in the saints, in the uncles’ nicknames and traits that indicate other ways of approaching life, Mexican ways, and in the way her “awful” grandma cares for her children and grandchildren. Micaela as an ‘in-betweenner’, shows that conciliation does not mean to swallow it all as hers and choke or spite it out, but means living comfortably in her displacement, recognizing the differences by looking at both edges of her position:

“My brother Junior squatting against the entrance, talking to a lady and a man. They are not from here. Ladies don’t come to church dressed in pants. And everybody know men aren’t supposed to wear shorts.” (ibidem)

Her position as an observer acknowledges the cultural boundaries of those who have been not raised ‘in-between’, and at the same time tags Micaela as belonging to both cultures, at times swinging between the two opposite sides of the cliff, the one where everybody knows men



aren't supposed to wear shorts and the one that does not see the religion as a bond to which she connects.

Errol, in turn, seeks refuge from his surroundings in the ideas of the “Black Front”, “his own kind”, as he puts it, also showing how his displacement does not find contentment in his girlfriend or in his family, neighborhood, city, society, country. His efforts seek to meet the ‘old culture’ from the islands his family left for England. Errol sees only the pieces he wants, ignoring the community where he [could] find he belongs to. Errol’s capturing of reality, rather than resulting in accepting the ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultures and dealing with them from a chosen perspective, wherever that was, inflicts on him the feeling that belonging is one related to the physical environment:

“When I get off that plane in Africa, you know what I’m gonna do? I’m gonna walk barefoot down the steps onto the tarmac, and kiss the ground like that white cunt, the Pope. I’m gonna sit out in the sun all day listening to the drums till I’m as black as coal. I’m gonna sit there and feel fine cos everywhere I turn they’ll be as black as me. I’ll find myself a family. A new family. Can’t I take you to Africa with me!” (*Strange Fruit*, 1981: 44).

As for Vivien, Errol’s mother, she is not different in essence from Errol, she is different in her degree of displacement. Vivien lives her life, just pretending that there is nothing to be noticed, understood, and digested. She, most of time, ignores the whereabouts and deeds of her sons, she ignores the country she came from and her past, and she ignores all the same what she has been through after arriving in England. She displays a sort of alienation shared with Errol, just that she has forced all the experiences we come to know just later (being spit and punched on the face after knocking on someone’s door for being black and the throwing and more) so deep into a vault that she only tells her neighbor Vernice about those decades after they took place. Vivien ignores all the racial debate that is set around her and all situations and actions that emerge from that, as if it did not exist at all. That is quite astounding for a primary school teacher, specially one who is an immigrant from an old colony, who is black and who teaches only white children. She has gone to an “unmentionable country”, leaving her relatives, her past, and her ‘inner’ as well. She lives in alienation, being spat on the face by white adults and being racially insulted by white kids, lied to by her kids, as if nothing was going on, as if there were nothing to be faced, fought, discussed, resolved.



Vivien and Errol both despise part of reality, and while he exteriorizes his feelings and blames on his surrounding adoptive city for his unfulfillment, she seals it all within her memories, ignoring them or worse, refusing to construe this reality lived or how she can deal with it. She and Errol clearly display an incapability of dealing with their displacement.

Rushdie discusses as well the importance of the memory for the gathering of our immediate reality. He speaks of his writing process and the illusion of an individual's reality:

“[...] it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*.; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects. (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1992: 13)

Ultimately Vivien and Errol made different choices of what they believe as “belonging”, both bearing on their memories to reconstruct their present reality, just like we all do. We recall things partially. This could be better said this way: the things we recall to have happened are not what happened to us in its whole, but it is the partial truth which we held to, the reality one person ‘chooses’ (even if it is unconsciously) as their reality. And as for the understanding of what is around us, each individual's surrounding reality, how much of it is drawn from memory? After all, our capability of processing everything that we live is minimal, and we live stretches of consciousness, which we use to categorize what we see, what we experience, what shapes our learning and our premises to understand who we are, who are the others, and how much the ‘I’ and the ‘them’ match into a “us”.

Therefore, just like Rushdie spoke of “his India”, Errol and Vivien have each their ‘own London’, in a certain way, as we have our own representation of our own city, our family, our neighbor, of us. This is actually true for all of us, we make our city, our life, our reality, not because it is not what it is, but because we see in a specific way what it is, by the lenses of our recollection of what we lived, in different manners. So, ultimately, the displacement that the characters in the diaspora feel may actually be felt without us ever living our cities of birth, without ever having contacted different ethnical groups, it is how our grasping of reality fulfills



us, or not, how this is alloyed to our inner-self and accepted or rejected, buried forever within a vault inside us or dealt with.

Alvin, Errol's brother, upon his return from the islands of origin of their family, returns aware of both, the ghetto mentality and the alienation that plagues his brother and mother, respectively, and sets an alert that ignoring reality by either blindness or alienation is no longer a valid choice. He states that "neither his mother nor none of us" has anything for him, he is the only one who can deal with his reality and find inner fulfillment, accepting his role in dealing with the surrounding reality. He gets to know their origin and where they got to be, and he is aware of what contemporary British reality is like now, he has grown and lived there, so he is clearly advantaged in relation to Errol and his mother. Neither must he falsify his reality, nor ignore it, but reconcile them. He has the two ends of the wires, and it is up to him to put them together. Maybe he will set off for Micaela's way of learning how to live in the "in-betweenness" or maybe not, but he is no longer an "unflawed mirror", an only piece, free of cultural cracks, seams and sewn-back-to-back patches.

It is totally true what Rushdie stated that "the broken mirror may be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed". In fact, this concept must be explained and recontextualized, and then added to why 'an individual's reality' is so important for each individual and collectively to society. The broken mirror he mentions is him writing about India after having left India behind, and the unflawed mirror is the image of India recalled by one person who never left it. First, the unflawed mirror is a fallacy; all mirrors are broken, due to our incapacity of apprehending the whole. As he cites from the 1977 novel by John Fowles: the human being are "cracked lenses", and their reality is a "shaky edifice built out of scraps, dogmas, articles, remarks," (: 13).

As for a matter of leaving a little a transnational context in which the characters above find themselves just and support our argument that we all live in multicultural settings, Brazil has had the majority of its population of catholic inclination, and yet, books on Spiritism have been largely sold and read by millions since the 1930's. Or if we think of the migration existing inside Brazil, historically from the North and Northeast to the South and Southeast, for instance, we can surely state that a multicultural environment or space does not need to cross international



boundaries, it does not involve only those who are part of a Post-Colonial diaspora. That is just to show that the “broken mirror” is a fate for us all, and the understanding that we do not need to seek a ‘cultural wholeness’, actually, contributes to accepting and dealing better with the feeling of displacement, just like Micaela does.

To conclude, the ‘partial whole’ of us all, must be understood to conciliate each individual’s totally different understandings and descriptions of the world. Rushdie reminds that:

“Literature is self-validating. That is to say, a book is not justified by its author’s worthiness to write it, but by the quality of what has been written.” (*Imaginary Homeland*, 1982: 14)

If on the one hand Rushdie states that literature is self-validating because of its author’s worthiness, on the other hand, I state that each individual’s self-narrative is also self-validating because it is each person’s version of reality. We are all authors, and as such, our quality is not bound to the worthiness of our ‘authorial work’, but bound to everyone’s contribution of making ‘our whole’.

It shall not be overlooked that there are different ‘wholes’ that must not be ignored nor overruled by our own created ‘truth’. We do not have ‘the truth’; we have a ‘partial whole’. It must not be forgotten that assertion or denial of a partial whole, as in the case of Errol and Vivien, are all “unflawed mirrors” that actually are not as valuable as the “shattered mirror” of Micaela. But all versions, without exception are only one of hundreds of millions of versions, as put Rushdie, and they all coexist. Whatever space where we find ourselves is a multicultural environment, rich and full with experiences that come from ‘different realities’ and we are to choose whether we alienate or acknowledge them, for the sake of our imagined community.

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