



Universidad Tecnológica Nacional
Facultad Regional Concepción del Uruguay

**RE-WRITING THE PAST FROM AN EX-CENTRIC SPACE:
THE REVISION AND RETHINKING OF SLAVERY IN AMERICAN
HISTORY IN MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AND *A MERCY* AND IN SMILEY'S
THE ALL-TRUE TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES OF LIDIE NEWTON.**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and *A Mercy* (2008) and Jane Smiley's *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (1998) from a perspective which combines the fields of postcolonial and postmodern literary studies. Accordingly, this thesis aims at showing how these novels portray ex-centricity and, secondly, at explaining how, from an ex-centric perspective, they explore and revise the concept, understanding and implications of slavery in American history. Narrative devices and character portrayal are considered. Notion such as Hutcheon's "the ex-centric" ([1988] 2004), Bhabha's ([1994] 2004) and Mohanty's (1986; 2003) "difference" and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's "double colonization" (2000) are central to the present work which intends to provide a detailed analysis of the corpus, seeing how these categories operate in understanding and interpreting the texts and in creating a space from which to rethink and revise the history of slavery in the US in the times depicted by the novels.

INTRODUCTION

American novelists Toni Morrison (1931) and Jane Smiley (1949) have both contributed to the American literary canon. Though their writings differ in many ways, Morrison and Smiley share a concern with women's identity, their experience and expression, and with people's relations with their own communities. In the exploration of these themes, both Morrison and Smiley have focused on past events, proposing a critical and reflexive approach towards them.

To select our research corpus we have followed a thematic and theoretical criterion which directed our attention to the way in which Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and *A Mercy* (2008) and Jane Smiley's *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (1998) propose a revision of history in the USA, in connection with slavery and racism. This thesis intends to analyse Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and *A Mercy* (2008) and Jane Smiley's *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (1998) from a perspective which combines the fields of postcolonial and postmodern literary studies. Accordingly, this thesis aims at showing how these novels portray ex-centricity and, secondly, at explaining how, from an ex-centric perspective, they explore and revise the concept, understanding and implications of slavery in American history.

For the first purpose, ex-centricity will be defined in Hutcheon's terms, following her contributions on the field of postmodernism (1988; 1989). A crossing will be attempted of her work and that carried out by authors working in the post-colonial field, namely Bhabha (1994) and Mohanty (1986; 2003), who have also dealt with marginality

and ex-centricity in their analysis of the colonial and post-colonial phenomenon. It is important to mention that Mohanty's studies develop the interconnection between the post-colonial field and the feminist one, which has also proved useful in the analysis of the corpus selected, enlightening our interpretation of gender and race as relational terms in the three novels.

The second aim, showing how these novels have explored and revised history in connection to slavery in American historical accounts, has been approached by considering the works of Hayden White (2003; 2010) and those in the field of New Historicism – Tyson (1999), Elgue de Martini (2003). From these studies, we have found particularly useful the claims which challenge the separation of historical and literary texts, the questioning of objectivity in history writing and a single authoritative version of history, foregrounding histories in the plural and suggesting historical versions as ideological constructions. Bearing in mind these two aims, we can argue that the authors' character portrayal, narrative devices and use of metaphors in the novels seem to contribute to the creation of an ex-centric perspective from which such a revision of history is carried out.

A general overview of the critical literature on the corpus shows that each of the novels has been approached separately from different perspectives, namely post-colonial, psychological, historical and feminist ones in the case of Morrison's texts, and a feminist perspective regarding Smiley's novel. Our attempt is to address them together in order to establish a dialogue between the spaces for the ex-centric constructed in each text, not only because the writers address similar topics in different, yet connected,

moments in history, but also because we believe they share some literary devices in approaching them.

Based on the aforementioned, we regard Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, and Smiley's *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* as texts which exemplify an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment, a site for revising and rethinking categories so far taken as natural and consensual (Bhabha, [1994] 2004: 4-5). We believe this is so, because it is through the characters' recounting of their personal struggles and their journeys of self-discovery that we see how private and public, individual and collective become interwoven.

Each of the characters in these novels is ex-centric in at least one way (Morrison's Sethe and Florence are slaves, black and women, and Smiley's Lidie is a woman, later a widow) and it is from their experience of marginality that we learn not only about their processes of identity construction, but also about the macro structures of the culture and history of the time: *A Mercy* is set in the 17th century, just before slavery became institutionalised; the story in *Beloved* develops when slavery was already established; and *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* takes place just before the abolishment of slavery. Morrison's texts tell the story of primitive America: they allow us to imagine a beginning different from the history which excluded everyone who was not Anglo-Saxon. In this way, *Beloved* and *A Mercy* make us revise history to see how things could have been when slavery and race were just beginning to be institutionalised and associated. Jane Smiley's work, though from a different approach, has also put

forward claims regarding slavery, particularly concerning the established myths about the North and the South in American history.

In this revision, these texts break with the idea of a linear causal relationship among events in history by foregrounding their complexity. In our opinion, this complexity seems to be achieved differently in the works of both authors. However, we would like to point out that both novels resort to fragmentation and juxtaposition of some kind, thus revising the linearity and one-way causality which characterise a traditional notion of history.

The questions which motivated this study are: Is it enough to consider Morrison's and Smiley's texts just under the light of postmodern theory? Or just by only adopting a postcolonial perspective? Could they be better understood under the light of both theories? Could it be possible to approach Smiley's work, though not generally associated with postcolonialism, in the light of postcolonial theory? What literary devices turn these novels into a space for "the ex-centric," a space from which to reconsider and revise the role of slavery in American history? In what ways is the history of the USA challenged? How is the crossing of the categories "gender" and "race" addressed? What does this crossing suggest regarding our understanding of historical events?

In order to provide an answer to these questions and for a better organisation, this thesis is divided into two sections. The first section consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 is aimed at characterizing American literature at the end of the 20th century, and providing a brief description of Toni Morrison's and Jane Smiley's lives, literary careers and

motifs for writing. Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical background in which we will explore critically the theoretical juxtaposition of the categories “ex-centric” and “marginalised” in postmodern and post-colonial theories. The articulation of the two theories on the basis of these terms centres on their association with the challenging to universalising, centralising and totalising notions of history and homogeneous national identities.

The second section consists of three chapters aimed at the analysis of the corpus selected, bearing in mind the categories of the “ex-centric” and the “marginalized” described in our theoretical background and how these operate in the creation of a space for the exploration and revision of the concept, understanding and implications of slavery in American history. In chapter 3 we will explore Morrison’s novel *A Mercy*. In chapter 4 we will focus on *Beloved* by the same author while chapter 5 will centre on Smiley’s *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (1998).

Finally, the conclusions we have drawn from the analysis of the corpus will be provided, attempting to establish a dialogue between the spaces for the ex-centric which, according to us, each novel represents.

Part 1

About Morrison's and Smiley's literary works. Post-colonial and postmodern theories: the revision of history

Chapter 1

American literature at the end of the 20th century: situating Toni Morrison and Jane Smiley

1.1 American literature at the end of the 20th century

The first part of this chapter will focus on a brief discussion of American literary history at the end of the 20th century. Since it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a detailed and exhaustive account of the literary life in the period selected, we will only attempt a description of those moments which we consider necessary for situating the works of the authors of the novels in our corpus. The following subheadings will be aimed at providing a brief description of Toni Morrison's and Jane Smiley's lives, literary careers and motifs for writing

In order to better understand the literary production of the 70s, the 80s and the 90s – decades in which Morrison and Smiley were already actively writing and whose movements influenced their work – we need to go a bit backwards to get a clearer picture. Taking Wagner-Martin's *A History of American Literature: 1950 to the present*,

‘It is in the aftermath of the war (...) that literature – whether called contemporary or postmodern – began to change. (...) Modernism's heavy seriousness gave way at times to a strangely comic irony. (...) Categories that would have seemed contrived during the 1920s, and certainly during the 1930s, came into existence: black literature, Jewish literature, women's writing, and (...) the literature of sexual difference.’ (2013: 16-17)

According to Wagner-Martin, there had existed during the 20th century a pride of place in the United States, but once World War II was over, leaving the country much better off than the other Allies, the deterioration of that pride began. Criticism came from rival countries such as Russia, though some of it came from within (2013: 22). The post-war situation was governed by social opinion about what was and was not patriotic or treasonous. The tendency in American aesthetic during the first half of the century towards innovation gave way during the post-war decade of the 1950s to intent on

erasing marks of newness and invention. ‘The threat of being accused of un-American behaviour kept any questioning largely private’, but the questioning remained, and that was manifested in the literature of the time (Wagner-Martin, 2013: 23). According to this writer, fiction in the 1950s was characterized by the ironic representation of post-war life, a tendency which for the author meant that the novels of war were expanding to become the novels we think as postmodern (Wagner-Martin, 2013: 41). Writers during this period began to re-inscribe novels from past literary theory and, because the USA was trying to appear as prosperous in front of the rest of the world, fiction about the poor was avoided. However, because much of USA narrative was about the experiences of the middle-class, readers began to think of it as formulaic, while at the same time, they rejected the radically new (Wagner-Martin, 2013: 51)

The revolutionary spirit of the 1960s modified the practice of writing. As publishers acknowledged this change, they searched for interesting representatives of the Other, writers who were culturally or philosophically different from the main stream (though still white, still heterosexual, and still male) (Wagner-Martin, 2013: 18). The canon of any literary study during the 1950s developed around male characters and their abilities to undertake adventures and persist towards their goal (Wagner- Martin, 2013: 26). However, during the 1960s and 1970s, there was an increase in the number of novels written by women and a new interest in their lives. At the same time, this period was characterized, according to Wagner-Martin, by the emergence of experimental fiction associated with any of the features which distinguished the postmodern; parody, fragmentation and the bringing of the reader into the novel, together with self-reflexivity

and metafiction, became recurrent terms associated with postmodern literary works (2013: 100). Hutcheon (1989) would further argue in *The politics of Postmodernism* that metafiction and parody served in postmodern literature to effect a critical return to history and politics.

As we move into the 1980s, the writing of African American, Asian American, Latino and Jewish writers becomes significant. The presence of these immigrant populations enriched not only US culture, but also helped diversify its literature. “The validation of all human experience through a printed text is more nearly possible now than ever before in our history,” expresses Wagner-Martin, who affirms that during this decade publishers become particularly interested in the writings of minorities, women, homosexuals and political radicals (2013: 162). By 1982, the publication of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* ‘polarized the literary world in terms of not only race and gender, but also sexual preference and class.’ (Wagner-Martin, 2013: 18). The social context was characterized by hostility towards women’s achieving new rights, and in this context the need “for women writers to create stronger women characters living in realistic worlds” (Wagner-Martin, 2013: 205) became urgent. National prizes were given to many of the works produced in this line, which widen their readership and led to their inclusion in books clubs, conversations and reviews.

It is against this background that the works of Toni Morrison and Jane Smiley acquire great significance.

1.2 Toni Morrison: life, literary works and motivation for writing

Toni Morrison, whose real name is Chloe Anthony Wofford, was born in Lorain, Ohio on February 18th, 1931. During her childhood she spent a great deal of time with her maternal grandparents and both these and her paternal grandparents had moved north from southern states in search of better economic conditions and freedom from violent southern racism. She was the second of four children and her parents, George Wofford and Ella Ramah Willis, encouraged their children to pursue education. As a child Morrison attended Hawthorne Elementary School and later graduated with honours from Lorain High School. She pursued undergraduate education at Howard University in Washington, D. C. and after graduating, she moved to Ithaca, New York to earn a master's degree from Cornell University, a degree which she completed in 1955. She worked as a professor at Texas Southern University for two years and then as instructor at Howard University. While at Howard, Morrison joined a writer's group where she began writing what would become her first published novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Morrison took a job as a textbook editor at Random House in Syracuse, New York and in 1967 was promoted to senior editor. She became the first Afro-American woman to hold such position. While she was still working as editor, she resumed her teaching career in 1971, when she began teaching literature and creative writing at the State University of New York at Purchase. In 1983 she decided to focus fully on writing and teaching, leaving her position as senior editor at Random House. She retired from teaching in 2006. Her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) was Morrison's first published novel and, though it was not a commercial success, it received critical praise. This was followed by a rich variety of writing which included not only novels, but also critical

literary writing, poems, librettos and children's books which she wrote in collaboration with her son, Slade Morrison. In 1993 Toni Morrison became the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature.

Toni Morrison has expressed in some of her interviews her necessity to write about race, to have black people as the central characters of her works, a project which she has fulfilled by portraying them not simply as victims but multidimensionally. As Susan R. Bowers (2009: 52) has stated in her article 'A Context for Understanding Morrison's Work', Morrison has recognized the need to address America's amnesia about slavery, while at the same time turning the African American novel into a site 'of interrogation of the changing realities of African American experience in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.' In this regard, her oeuvre has focused on rehistoricizing black history, drawing strongly on her heritage and the vernacular black tradition, with its 'embodiment of transformative and creative elements' which has 'enabled Morrison's project of writing outside the white gaze' (Bowers, 2009: 43). Her refusal to write about white people and her concern for the black minority has given this last group a strong voice in her novels while challenging white hegemony.

1.3 Jane Smiley: life, literary works and motivation for writing

Jane Graves Smiley was born on September 26th, 1949 in Los Angeles County Hospital. She is the daughter of Frances Graves and James La Verne Smiley. After her parents' divorce, her mother took Jane, aged four, to Saint Luis. There she spent her days with her maternal grandmother while Frances worked, and had frequent contact with her

mother's sisters, Jane and Ruth, her brother David and their families. She was particularly close to her cousins and in the atmosphere of the family she learned about their love for story-telling, particularly stories about the family. In 1960 her mother remarried William J. Nuelle, who had two adopted children. The couple had two children of their own. Jane Smiley and her step- and half-siblings grew up in Webster Groves, Missouri, where she attended several public and private schools. Her interests during that period included English, History and horses. The latter continued to be a constant influence in her writings. Her development as a reader went hand in hand with her intellectual and creative growth. In 1967, she graduated from high school and spent the summer working as a horse groom at a camp in Virginia. She enrolled at Vassar where she engaged in an extensive examination of English literature, most significantly under the mentorship of Professor Harriet Hawkins, who provided supportive feedback on early creative efforts. After graduation, Smiley pursued her interest in history, archaeology and cultural study by serving as digger in a medieval excavation at Winchester, England. In 1972 she was accepted into the doctoral program in English at Iowa and in 1974 she was accepted into the Writer's Workshop. She completed her master's degree in 1975. Smiley accepted a position on the faculty in English at Iowa State University in Ames, where she taught and wrote from 1981 to 1997, when she resigned. Her work as a writer includes short stories, essays and novels among which *A Thousand Acres* won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.

Jane Smiley's views on the reading and writing of fiction, and on literature in general, are significant for understanding her work. Literature involves for her an

exchange between the writer and the culture: ‘The culture exists apart from the writer and the writer hopes to bring his or her individuality to bear on the culture, but also to be penetrated by the culture, so that the product is a recognizable cultural product but also unique to that writer’ (Smiley in Nakadate, 1999: 15). Bearing this in mind, it is understandable to find a strong connection between public and private affairs in her writings. As Neil Nakadate has stated in his book *Understanding Jane Smiley*, one of the characteristics of Jane Smiley’s work has been the connection that exists between the private lives of her characters and society on a larger scale, that is, their connection with American culture broadly viewed, and with the natural world (1999: 17). The characters she portrays are ordinary ones, their ordinariness often framed by daily experience, ‘by family life as the domain in which character is shaped and stories lived through.’ (Nakadate, 1999: 19).

Smiley has expressed that, as a writer, she has always felt totally at home and written convinced that she belongs to her country (Smiley in Nakadate, 1999: 15).

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework: Post-colonialism and postmodernism overlap: the ex-centric, feminism and double colonization. The revision of history

2.1. On the construction of otherness in post-colonial and postmodern theories

Scholars engaged in theorizing about colonialism, post-colonialism and postmodernism have brought forward considerations about ‘colonizer and colonized,’ ‘centre and margin,’ ‘oppressor and oppressed,’ ‘man and woman’, etc, focusing particularly on the construction of “otherness” in such binary oppositions. We understand that in order to engage in discussions about what these authors have stated on this topic, it would be pertinent to express what we understand by the term “colonization”. According to Mohanty (2003: 18), the term

‘colonization has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the Third World. However sophisticated or problematic its use as an explanatory construct, *colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression – often violent – of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question.*’ (My emphasis)

This is certainly a wide definition of the term but we believe it proves useful for the present work, mainly because it allows us to encompass within it different (yet sometimes connected) forms of oppression, not simply the one which emerges in colonial times. What we want to address firstly is how different authors, namely Mohanty (1986, 2003), Bhabha (1990, 1994) and Hutcheon (1988, 1989), have explored these varied forms of oppressions and, in doing so, have engaged in critical thinking about related categories: ‘colonizer and colonized,’ ‘centre and margin,’ ‘oppressor and oppressed,’ ‘man and woman’, etc.

Though they have theorized about “otherness” from sometimes different perspectives (the colonized, the oppressed, the marginalized, the ex-centric, woman), there seem to be two points in common: first, the scholars have developed these

categories in terms of difference, rather than as homogenous categories of analysis used to refer to a fixed “other”. Second, they have argued for the deconstruction of a reality that is always structured in terms of binary divisions (‘colonizer and colonized,’ ‘centre and margin,’ ‘oppressor and oppressed,’ ‘man and woman’), a deconstruction which should escape the mere inversion of the parts.

In reference to the first point, these authors have manifested their preoccupation about the construction of stereotypical, fixed categories to refer to an ‘other,’ which end up in frozen labels under which all women seem to display the same characteristics, all colonized people the same features, and so on. These scholars, then, have pointed out to the problem about how we understand and represent “difference.” In his discussion of the use of stereotypes in colonial discourse, Bhabha ([1994] 2004) has focused on the role of “fixity” in the construction of otherness. Similarly, Mohanty has engaged in the same discussion when she addresses the topic of Western feminism. What is of paramount importance for her, if one wants to avoid such frozen categories, is the identification of difference not as ‘benign variation’ and the simple suggestion of a harmonious, empty pluralism, but as ‘asymmetrical and incommensurate cultural spheres situated within hierarchies of domination and resistance’ which cannot be accommodated in the discourse of harmony in diversity (2003: 193). She goes on to argue that, when validating the experiences of each woman, one should not let the differences of, for instance, one single woman of colour to stand in for the difference of the whole collective. If such were the case, we would end up with a category characterized by the “fixity” already mentioned.

Now, this distinction between “difference” and “diversity” represents a point in common between Chandra Mohanty and Homi Bhabha. For the latter ([1994] 2004: 2), ‘the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition.’ That is what he would call “cultural diversity” and what should be differentiated from “cultural difference”. At the signifying boundaries of cultures, where interaction between cultures becomes a problem because ‘meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated’, cultural difference is a process of enunciation. And this process of enunciation introduces a split in the process of cultural identification between the traditional culturalist demand for a stable system of reference and the necessary negation of that certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, etc. as a practice of domination, or resistance. This is why, for Bhabha, the articulation of difference ‘is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation’ ([1994] 2004: 2).

As we see, both authors argue for the deconstruction of fixed categories of analysis in understanding the experience of oppression. One of the problems of employing these frozen categories to refer to the “other,” be it the “colonized”, “woman” or “the marginalized,” as opposed to the also fixed categories of the “colonizer”, “man” or the “centre,” is building an understanding of reality in binary terms. This leads to the second point mentioned: for Mohanty and Bhabha there is an urgent need to deconstruct binarisms. Bhabha ([1994] 2004: 19) expresses his concern for binaries in the form of questions:

‘must we always polarize in order to polemicize? Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and historical contradictions can take no other form than a binarism of theory vs politics? Can the aim of freedom of knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image?’

Similarly, Chandra Mohanty has expressed her preoccupation with binary structures when addressing women’s agency. By forcing women into a totalizing category, leaving aside their own individual interests and historical realities, we are limiting their possibility of becoming active agents of their own histories. They become simply another member of a group which is identified as “always-oppressed” in opposition to the oppressor, the powerful. In such a context, Mohanty points out that power relations may end up being understood as “structured in terms of a unilateral and undifferentiated source of power and a cumulative reaction to power,” locking ‘all revolutionary struggles into binary structures: moving from powerlessness to powerfulness, thus resulting in a mere inversion of the existing reality (Mohanty, 2003: 39). Contrary to this idea, she insists on understanding power relations as multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women at particular historical moments, which leaves space for women to exercise agency (individually or collectively) and their engagement on daily life (Mohanty, 2003: 55).

Having considered the issue of otherness and difference from the perspective of authors engaged in postcolonial theory discussions, it now becomes pertinent to explore how this has been dealt with in the realm of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon ([1988] 2004) has also theorized about difference, stating that postmodernism seeks to assert

difference, or rather “differences”, which for her are always multiple and provisional. A consideration of her works has revealed the presence of those two points mentioned at the beginning of this discussion: the need to challenge fixed constructions of otherness, and the need to rethink and deconstruct binarisms. For Hutcheon has also focused on the recognition that culture is not that homogeneous monolith we used to think, and on how ‘the concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way [...] to that of differences’ (Hutcheon, [1988] 2004: 12). Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems and there is an interrogation of human impulses to single otherness and homogeneity, unity and certainty which, according to this author, makes room for the different and the heterogeneous, the hybrid and the provisional ([1988] 2004: 42).

“The move to rethink margins and borders is clearly a move away from centralization with its associated concerns of origin, oneness and monumentality that work to link the concept of centre to those of the eternal and universal. The local, the regional, the non-totalizing are reasserted as the centre becomes a fiction – necessary, desired, but a fiction nonetheless.” (Hutcheon [1988] 2004: 58)

The consequence of this process of rethinking the centre and its margins is that it brings under the light the fact that cultural homogenization is a fiction as well. What is asserted instead is a heterogeneity which should not be viewed as the mere sum of fixed individual subjects. In this respect, Hutcheon notices something which establishes a connection with the authors previously developed: heterogeneity for her should be conceived as “a flux of contextualized identities: contextualized by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, social role, and so on” (Hutcheon [1988] 2004: 59).

By contextualizing identities we avoid the single and alienated concept of otherness, giving place to that of difference, but a difference which suggests heterogeneity rather than binary opposition. And it is here that we move to the second point for, as Hutcheon states, postmodernist discourses which include the voices of women, Afro-Americans, and so on, in their move away from a single concept of otherness and the assertion of difference, try to avoid a reversing of the parts, the making of the margin into a centre and reaffirm the necessity to stop interpreting reality in terms of binarisms. In this context, what Hutcheon calls “the ex-centric” takes on new significance. For her, this concept refers to those marginalized by a dominant ideology. To be ex-centric is to belong to those ‘silent groups defined by differences of race, gender, sexual preferences, ethnicity, native status, class’ (Hutcheon, [1988] 2004: 61). Hutcheon ([1988] 2004: 67) states that

“To be ex-centric, on the border or margin, (...) is to have a different perspective, one that Virginia Woolf (1945, 96) once called ‘alien and critical,’ one that is ‘always altering its focus,’ since it has no centring force.”

At this point, the crossing of the categories “gender” and “race” deserve notice and cannot be overlooked for different reasons. First, under colonial oppression, both men and women were discriminated on the basis of race, but women were also discriminated on the basis of gender (double colonisation). Second, to the literal use of the term colonisation (in reference to imperial practice) we must add the extensive meaning referring to women’s relation to patriarchy, something we mentioned at the beginning of this discussion when the term ‘colonization’ was defined taking into consideration Mohanty’s concepts. The colonial empire’s and patriarchy’s ideologies of hegemony and

abuse set a point in common between post-colonialism and feminism. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2000) note similarities between ‘writing the body’ in feminism and ‘writing space’ in post-colonialism, thus suggesting an understanding of the female body as a colonised space.

In the book *The Empire Writes Back* ([1989] 2002), these same authors develop the connections between post-colonialism and feminism even further. Apart from the already-mentioned focus on ‘difference’ as a key concept in understanding the ‘other’ and the resistance to the simple inversions of structures of domination, they have also laid emphasis on language, voice and concepts of speech and silence as points in common between them:

“They [women] share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors. Women, like post-colonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available ‘tools’ are those of the ‘colonizer’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, ([1989] 2002: 172)

This has meant the appropriation by both women and colonized peoples to subvert and adapt dominant languages and signifying practices. It has also involved the consideration of the ways and extent to which language and representation are crucial in the construction of subjectivity (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, [1998] 2000).

It is true that post-colonial theory has not always contemplated gender differences in constructing and analysing the category of the “colonized.” Similarly, the first trends in feminism ignored cultural and racial differences in the construction of a universal category of “women.” It is the work of authors who have criticised the ignorance of

gender differences in post-colonial theory, or the middle-class and Euro-centric bias of the universalist assumptions of Western feminism that has called our attention to the importance of the overlapping between these two forms of theorizing and of the intersection of race and gender (and also class) in their reinstatement of the marginalized. Among these authors, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's appeal to the consideration of the historical specific reality of women proves insightful for the present work. In her article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" (1986) she argues that colonisation has been used in the production of a particular cultural discourse about the "Third World." Her questioning is specifically focused on the construction of the "Third World Woman" in Western feminist texts, where the discursive colonisation of the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world has resulted in a composite, singular "Third World Woman" category, which assumes that women are a coherent group with the same interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location (Mohanty, 1986: 336-337). Her contestation aims at white, Western, middle-class liberal feminism, which has focused solely on gender as the basis for sexual rights. Gender and race are for Mohanty relational terms which foreground a relationship and often a hierarchy between races and genders. As she expresses, defining feminism purely in gendered terms is to assume that being a woman has nothing to do with race, class, nation or sexuality (Mohanty, 2003: 55).

At this point and before moving on to the following issue, we believe it is necessary to make an important consideration. The authors developed so far have at different

points made it clear that postmodernism and postcolonialism by no means completely overlap in terms of interests and agenda. Then why is it possible for us to establish a link between them? As Hutcheon has claimed, postmodernism has problematized expression by asserting the necessity to contextualize the enunciative situation, and it is here that the ex-centric (whether it is excluded by gender, race, ethnicity or any other reason) enters the discussion, for the ex-centric has been denied the right of expression. And in their fight to get that right, to stop being silent, both black and feminist discourses, for instance, have laid emphasis on the need to bring theory and practice together, of considering the reality encountered in everyday life, acknowledging the different and the particular in theory if change wants to be effected: in simpler words, they also claim for the contextualization of their own enunciative situation. It is the emergence of these ex-centric voices and their decentred perspectives that has contributed and resulted in the questioning of universalising notions which characterize postmodernism.

2.2. On the revision of history

The previously developed discussion on the emergence of ex-centric voices leads now to another important point we want to raise in connection to the present work: the revision of history. Linda Hutcheon (1988; 1989) has focused on how the postmodernist interrogation of accepted certainties of liberal humanism, such as authority, centre, unity and totalisation, has resulted in the rethinking and redefinition of the notion of history. The questioning of the concept “centre” has resulted in a decentred perspective, a loss of faith in centralisation, which has been widely referred to in the definition of

postmodernism. Our conception of history as a transparent record of “the truth” has been shattered by a plurality of “histories” resulting both from the decentred perspective and the emergence of the “ex-centric.”

These ex-centric voices have insisted on a revision of history, a history which had so far silenced them. Black and feminist theory and practice have been, according to Hutcheon, particularly important in the postmodern refocus of historicity, contributing to the revaluing of the margins and the ex-centric and showing how ‘it is possible to move theory out of the ivory tower and into the larger world of social praxis’ ([1988]2004: 16). Theorising on post colonialism, Bhabha ([1994] 2004: 1) has claimed that in the time in which we live, when everything seems to be named by the “current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix ‘post’: *postmodernism*, *postcolonialism*, *postfeminism*...” it is necessary to turn the present into ‘an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment’ (Bhabha, [1994] 2004: 4). This site opens itself to a revisionary move in which ethnocentric ideas are put into question, and it becomes inevitable to rethink and redefine, among others, concepts of homogeneous national cultures and the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical tradition (Bhabha, [1994] 2004: 5). The revision and rewriting of history should be based, according to Mohanty (2003), on the specific locations and histories of those written out of history, people of colour, postcolonial peoples, etc.

From both postmodern and postcolonial theories then, there is a foregrounding of and a challenge to history writing and its politics. What we have always regarded as the grand narratives of the past are the history told by the victors. However, with the

increasing importance of postcolonial writing, and the work of other marginalised groups such as women, previously silenced voices started to be heard. In this context, the forms in which history has traditionally been recorded, its claim to objectivity and its consideration as a progressive, ordered whole have been questioned, and issues in connection to historical narrative, the distinction between history and literature and the separation between the public and the private have arisen. Since we find a strong connection between postmodern and postcolonial theories on these topics, and because we believe they have been mutually influential, these issues are going to be addressed and developed taking into account the contributions of authors theorising in both fields.

Hayden White (2003) has commented on the status of historical narratives, pointing to the fact that these are verbal fictions which share characteristics with literature and that the contents they deal with are found as well as invented. In this respect, he stresses the fictional aspect of history writing, and how the historiographer constructs a tale out of the events he finds. When doing so, he chooses to suppress some of those events while incorporating and foregrounding or subordinating others. This, Hayden White goes on, is not dissimilar to the techniques employed in the telling of a novel or play. In this process, the historiographer tries to make familiar to the audience a series of events which may otherwise sound unfamiliar by creating a historical narrative which does not reproduce the events it describes, but which suggests in which direction to think about them.

What White questions here is the mimetic aspect of historical narratives: it is a mistake to think that historical narratives can function as models of the events they

describe, just as a model plane represents the original it imitates. By foregrounding some events and suppressing or subordinating others, the historiographer is not only telling something about the events in themselves, but also about the possible relations which he can establish among them. Consequently, the historical narrative which results cannot be viewed as unambiguous, as the correct and only way in which events really happened, but as an ideological construction with a fictive element. According to White, this element, which places history on the same level as literature, does not invalidate the status of the knowledge historiography wants to transmit. If that were the case, then we would be suggesting that literature cannot teach us something about reality. Contrary to this belief, this author understands both forms of narrative (the factual and the fictional) as two ways in which we make sense of and give meaning to the world in which we live.

The postmodern ideas regarding the notion of history as fictional have had their effect on literary criticism, resulting in the deconstruction of the opposition between literature (fictional) and history (factual). As Hayden White (2010: 162-163) states, postmodernists believe all documents are texts and, as such, they can be subjected to the same techniques used to explain literary texts. He goes on to argue that because history writing is a kind of narrative discourse, there are no differences between the representations of historical reality and the representations of imaginary events and processes. In her article “La literatura como objeto social” Cristina Elgue de Martini (2003: 17) claims that ‘[...] para el Nuevo Historicismo tanto la historia como la literatura son artefactos textuales. [...] El Nuevo Historicismo propicia precisamente el estudio de las obras literarias como parte del discurso social de una época’. From this

perspective then, the literary text is itself part of the dynamic interplay among discourses which overlap and compete with each other at a specific point in time. Because the literary text is a representation of human experience at a particular time and place, new historicists believe it is a representation of history (Tyson, [1999] 2006: 292). It is interesting to notice here that, just as Hayden White undermines the mimetic aspect assigned to history writing, Hutcheon foregrounds how postmodern fiction abandons any pretense to simplistic mimesis: ‘Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it (...). Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality (...)’ ([1988]2004: 40).

In addition, the recognition of the fictional element in history writing has brought under the light issues in connection to history objectivity and its presentation as a linear, progressive whole. As we have already mentioned, history writing cannot be viewed as unambiguous, and Hayden White (2010) argues that, from a postmodern perspective, the objectivity of social sciences and our vision and versions of history are regarded as ideological constructions. Postmodern ideology does not ignore cultural bias and interpretative conditions in our recordings of the past and, because of this, it questions their authority and assumed objectivity (Hutcheon, [1988] 2004). A similar claim can be observed in the field of New Historicism, which became prominent in the late 1970s. In addition to the undermining of historical objectivity, new historicists have contested the traditional belief that ‘history is a series of events that have a *linear, causal* relationship’ (Tyson, [1999] 2006: 278). Without denying that events have causes, they stress that ‘causality is not a one-way street from cause to effect’ (Tyson, [1999] 2006: 280): events

have causes which ‘are usually multiple, complex, and difficult to analyze’ ([1999] 2006: 280) and they both shape and are shaped by the culture in which they occur.

Such an idea about historical linearity is closely associated with the modern view of history as progressive, as moving towards a progressive destiny of human nature. In the field of postcolonialism, authors such as Bhabha stress how “the struggle against colonial oppression not only challenges the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole” (Bhabha [1994] 2004: 41). He explains this by discussing Fanon’s articulation of the problem of colonial cultural alienation which results in the depersonalization of the subject. In his discussion of Fanon’s ideas, Bhabha states that in the colonial situation, historical rationality, cultural cohesion and the autonomy of individual consciousness assume a utopian identity and the Enlightenment idea of Man is undermined by colonial depersonalization. In this situation there is an assertion of minority discourses and cultural differences which question cultural supremacy and historical priority, inviting revisions of the rationalizations of modernity already mentioned (history as a progressive, ordered whole, the idea of Man, cultural cohesion, etc):

“The grand narratives of nineteenth-century historicism on which its claims to universalism were founded – evolutionism, utilitarianism, evangelism – were also, in other textual and territorial time / space, the technologies of colonial and imperialist governance. It is the ‘rationalism’ of these ideologies of progress that increasingly comes to be eroded in the encounter with the contingency of cultural difference” (Bhabha [1994] 2004: 195).

The eternal man, as Hutcheon puts it, inscribed on the pages of history and literature of the modern period, is revealed as an ideological construct, created at a specific

historical, social and ideological situation ([1988]2004: 80), just as history and fiction are themselves exposed as ideological constructions.

What we have tried to show in this discussions is how, even though the agendas of postcolonial theory and postmodern theory overlap only partially, there is a strong connection in their undermining of previously held ideas about history, and in their considerations of the way in which the past is recorded, history's status as ideological construction and the need to think of history and literature as two forms of discourse by which we construct our versions of reality. Regarding this last point, it would be pertinent to make one last comment. In her discussion of what she names "historiographic metafiction," Hutcheon argues that: "the two genres [fiction and history] may be textual constructs, narratives which are both (...) unavoidably ideologically laden, but they do not (...) 'adopt equivalent representational procedures or constitute equivalent modes of cognition'" ([1988] 2004: 112). Though history and fiction share certain aspects, techniques and social, cultural and even ideological contexts, this author insists we understand them as different.

Having discussed these issues, we would like to turn now to another important aspect of postmodern thinking on which the contributions of feminism and post-colonialism have been widely influential. We have so far tried to describe how the emergence of ex-centric voices formerly excluded from historical discourse has caused a rethinking and redefinition of the notion of history and history writing. There has been an insistence on revising history from the perspective of these voices and a strong emphasis on doing so by considering the specific histories and lives of those written out

of histories. As Hutcheon expresses, feminism and criticism arriving from working class, gays, ethnic and racial minorities have argued for a reorientation of the historical method to highlight the past of formerly excluded ex-centric. This has certainly led to a reevaluation of the separation between the private and the public in which both take new significance.

It is interesting to notice that, though discussing different issues and employing different categories, Bhabha and Mohanty have, in their respective fields of analysis, argued about how the boundaries between home and world become confused for the marginalized. When explaining what he calls the ‘unhomeliness,’ that ‘estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world’ which the subject experiences in the colonial situation, Bhabha observes how, for the unhomed, ‘the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions’ ([1994] 2004: 9). In this situation, the private and the public, the personal and the political, become part of each other and the ‘unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political experience’ ([1994] 2004: 11): politics, Bhabha goes on, becomes the stressed necessity of everyday life since it is in the banalities of life that the violence of a racialized society falls most enduringly: where you can sit or not, what you can learn, or not, etc. ([1994] 2004: 15). Mohanty elaborates a similar concept in her depiction of Third World feminisms’ questioning of Western feminism. In this discussion she enters the field of the private/public distinction and how such separation acquires different significance for white middle- and upper- class women and working-class women and women of colour. What is of relevance for us

here is that, following Aida Hurtado's ideas (in Mohanty, 2003), she explains that it is in their domestic lives that women, specially working-class women and women of colour, are subjected to state intervention, be it in the form of policies which discourage family life or restrictions in reproduction rights, among others. This intervention leads Hurtado to affirm that 'there is no such thing as a private sphere for people of Color except that which they manage to create and protect in an otherwise hostile environment' (Hurtado in Mohanty, 2003: 51).

What these authors are suggesting is that for people suffering any kind of colonization, the private is no longer isolated from the public, or the historical from the biographical as Hutcheon expresses ([1988] 2004: 94). State intervention and the violence which racism exercise on these ex-centric people enters the realm of the home and the personal, and it is there that these people exercise their day-to-day survival, where the political enters everyday life (Mohanty, 2003).

Part 2

About the construction of ex-centricity in Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy* and Smiley's *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton*: a revision of slavery in American history.

Chapter 3

***A Mercy* by Toni Morrison: analysis.**

A Mercy by Toni Morrison is a novel set in the beginnings of America, just before slavery was institutionalized. In it Morrison imagines and portrays a beginning of America which is not purely Anglo-Saxon as traditional versions of history seem to suggest. The novel begins with Florens, a slave girl, telling her story and, though she is writing it, her narration bares the traces of orality. However, this is not the only voice we encounter as we proceed; on the contrary, there is a multiplicity of voices: Florens' narration, for instance, is interrupted by passages in which the stories of other characters are told, the homodiegetic voice alternating with the heterodiegetic. The events are not described in a chronological, linear order: the development of the story goes from past to present, and in some cases, the same events are described but from different standpoints. It is in this way that the characters add different perspectives to the plot and offer a multiplicity of voices which, according to our interpretation, serves different but connected purposes.

First, the construction of the story through the perspectives of different characters, in addition to its narration in a non-chronological order, gives the novel a fragmented structure. Instead of linearity in the presentation of events which suggests causality as a one-way-street, the situations juxtapose and overlap in order to display the complexity of those events: each new narration helps us understand the intricacy of the correlated events. If, as Hayden White and New Historicists suggest, we consider literary texts as part of the discourses which interact at a particular time and place, and which can help us construct versions of reality just as historical texts do, then we could understand *A*

Mercy as a representation of human experience. The fact that the period the author has chosen is the beginnings of America makes us think of this novel as a revisiting and revision of the historical accounts of that time. If we regard this piece of work as a representation of history then we could say that, by resorting to fragmentation and juxtaposition, Morrison is recreating a non-linear notion of history, in which an event has multiple and complex causes and which challenges the traditional way in which history is written. The novel does not portray a single, authorizing version of the period selected, but offers different truths which come from the stories and perspectives of the distinctive characters, most of them marginal ones. These truths in the plural question the Universalist assumption of history writing which aspires to objectivity and to provide a single, authoritative truth.

Second, the plurality of voices in *A Mercy* is telling us something about the period in which the story is set and about the recordings we have of that time. Taking certain historical facts and resorting to imagination, Toni Morrison has recreated the beginnings of America. But the beginning she reconstructs bears the mark of heterogeneity, something different to the accounts of America and its Anglo-Saxon origins: difference is a crucial aspect here. We encounter a slave girl, a native woman, indentured white servants, a black man who is free, a widow, all part of 17th century America, all already there in its beginnings. But the novel not only challenges historical accounts which leave aside the marginalized form American origins. It also undermines the idea of slavery that has locked such a term to racism. As it has been discussed in the theoretical background, fixity has been one of the main features in the construction of otherness by

dominant groups. Held conceptions of slavery in American history have for a long time associated slavery with racism, contributing to the idea that being a slave is synonym to being black. In an interview with Lynn Neary, Morrison expresses that it is the institutionalization of slavery in the 17th century, and the subsequent laws which authorized any white person to punish or murder any person of colour for any reason, which solidified the link between racism and slavery. In his journey through Maryland, Jacob Vaark, a trader in the novel, recounts this moment Morrison speaks of:

‘Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes – freedmen, slaves and indentured – had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that “people’s war” lost its hope to the hangman, the work it had done – which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land – spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever.’ (Morrison, 2008: 10)

In the recreation which *A Mercy* represents, the inclusion of what she considers the key moment that fixes slavery and racism together foregrounds such association as a construction, not a given, undermining its apparent natural status. And here is where the multiplicity of voices in the novel plays an important part. Not only has the author given a piece of factual information but she has also constructed around it a community of different characters which undergo different situations. Through this plurality of perspectives we get a picture of slavery as a social practice which affected people of all colours.

The multiplicity of voices makes it possible for marginalized groups to be heard and recognized as part of the history which used to be told by the dominant group: the

leading voice, Florens, and many of the other characters are slaves; even Rebekka, the mistress, is in a marginalized situation at some point in the story: once Jacob dies, she realizes that being a woman, and more specifically being a widow, places her in a position of disadvantage, for ‘without the status or shoulder of a man, [...] a widow was in practice illegal’ (Morrison, 2008: 98). Toni Morrison has made of “difference” a key feature of character portrayal in her text, undermining homogenous and fixed constructions of “otherness”. The presence of different characters in her work and how they interact with each other illustrates difference in Mohanty (1986)’s and Bhabha ([1994] 2004)’s terms: as asymmetrical and incommensurate spheres situated within hierarchies of domination and resistance. Rebekka’s relationship with Lina is probably an interesting example of how such spheres operate. At the beginning, their friendship and companionship seem to place them at the same level, as if they were family and blood; that is, there is a horizontal distribution of forces in their relation. Yet, after the master is dead, their friendship and companionship are altered and Rebekka is determined to show her position of superiority as the mistress of the farm. In Florens’s mother’s account of the transportation of her people, not only domination exercised by ‘the whitened men’ (Morrison, 2008: 164) is present. Resistance is desperately attempted, and even death becomes a way of withstanding the chains that imprison:

‘I welcome the circling sharks [...] I prefer their teeth to the chains around my neck my waist my ankles. [...] We are put into the house that floats on the sea and we saw for the first time rats and it was hard to figure out how to die. Some of we tried; some of we did. Refusing to eat the oiled yam. Strangling we throat. Offering we bodies to the sharks that follow all the way night and day.’ (Morrison, 2008: 164)

Similarly, even though Florens interprets her mother's act of giving her to Jacob Vaark as abandonment, her mother is in fact attempting to resist the system, to avoid the perpetuation of what she has endured. Having recognized 'no animal in his heart' (Morrison, 2008: 163) and that he saw Florens 'as a human child' (Morrison, 2008: 166), she begs Jacob to take her daughter away. It is the only protection she can offer and the only way in which she can avoid a repetition of what has happened to her.

A Mercy is a novel which, on the whole, gives enunciation to these ex-centric voices, and the fact that Florens is writing her story on the walls of a room is also an act of resistance if we think of how marginalized people (Hutcheon 1989) have been denied the right of expression. She appropriates the tool Reverend has given her when teaching her how to write, and uses it to find a way to explain herself and her acts, something which she constantly highlights with expressions such as 'My telling', 'my confession' or 'I explain' (Morrison, 2008: 3). In addition, this could also be understood as an attempt to build her own identity: she writes her story on the walls of the house, not only for someone to read it, but also, and most importantly, for her to know who she is. That process of writing can be seen as an awareness process in which she tries to find the face she could not see in the lake of her dreams and which represented her lack of self-image: 'Where my face should be is nothing. [...] Where I ask, where is my face', asks Florens (Morrison, 2008: 138). Through Florens's complete narration we see how her identity is shaped and reshaped by every new experience: her mother's abandonment, the blacksmith's appearance, the journey she has to accomplish, etc. are all events which construct her identity. The description of how Florens's soles change from soft to hard

after the long journey is probably the best metaphor in the novel for the process of her identity construction (strengthened by the pun soles/souls): ‘Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress’ (Morrison, 2008: 161).

As each of the voices is given expression (Florens through first-person and others through third-person narration), we learn, through their stories, features which contextualize their identities and exemplify how for these people, the private and the public, the historical and the biographical and gender and race become intertwined. Identity construction is then marked by difference and heterogeneity and contextualized, in Hutcheon (1989)’s and Bhabha ([1994] 2004)’s terms, by race, gender, class, sexual preference, etc. in a process which displays race and gender as relational terms which foreground a relationship and a hierarchy. This articulation is not to be ignored if one considers how the identities and daily lives of characters such as Florens, her mother, Lina and Sorrow are suppressed and determined on the basis of both their being black and slaves, and their being female: double colonization. Lina is aware of their position of disadvantage in this double sense: when mistress is ill and bound to die, she foreshadows the inevitable future that awaits herself, pregnant Sorrow and Florens: ‘three unmastered women and an infant out there, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. [...] Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died [...]’(Morrison, 2008: 58). In this sense, Lina is recognizing that not only being black and slaves is a drawback for them. Being female is just as dangerous, a lesson she also learns when beaten by a man (Morrison, 2008:52).

Even though Rebekka does not endure the consequences of having dark skin, there is a similitude in how slaves were sold and bought and her marriage: ‘Rebekka’s mother objected to the “sale” – she called it that because the prospective groom had stressed “reimbursement” for clothing, expenses and a few supplies [...]’ (Morrison, 2008: 74). This, together with the fact that she is transported on a ship with other women to the New World as if they were goods, illustrates how the female body can be understood as a colonized space, colonized by men, under the patriarchal system. When Rebekka thinks of her future, her reflection is about how any path she takes will be determined by a man: ‘As with any future available to her, it depended on the character of the man in charge’ (Morrison, 2008: 78). The recognition of their dependence on men reappears when Rebekka and the rest of the women were being transported as animals in the ship: ‘Women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither’ (Morrison, 2008: 85) It seems interesting to note that if women are defined by their function (of and for men) then in this “middle passage” they seem to be in an undefined space (expectant of their role to be fulfilled). Yet, sadly enough, they are still defined by their being somebody’s property. What is interesting of this “collection” of women is that all of them enjoyed different status: some were prostitutes, some thieves, and some, like Rebekka, were just travelling to marry someone. However, the one thing they shared was their womanhood in a time in which being a woman was almost the same as being a slave: all women, church women and her shipmates, had in common

‘the promise and threat of men. [...] Some, like Lina, [...] withdrew. Some, like Sorrow, [...] became their play. Some like her shipmate fought them. Others, the pious, obeyed them. And a few, like herself, after a mutually loving relationship, became like children when the man was gone.’ (Morrison, 2008: 98)

In the light of this, it becomes clear what Florens's mother later states: that to 'be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below' (Morrison, 2008: 163). What the previous examples illustrate is how for all these characters it is not possible to separate the public from the private, that the historical events penetrate the biographical space in such a way that owning your body, choosing who to marry, where to stay and even where to sleep is no longer a right you have. And in this illustration gender and race cross in such a way that to understand what the characters have endured, it becomes impossible to separate them.

The literary text can tell us something about the interplay of discourses operating in the time and place in which the text was written. *A Mercy* portrays the beginnings of America by imagining what the different discourses of that time could have been, challenging a traditional version told from a single European dominant perspective. By doing so, Morrison has posed a revision of history, a revision which starts with the act of not pretending to "record" history but to "imagine" it, which foregrounds the fact that Morrison is giving voice to the unheard marginal and ex-centric. That it is a revision and that it challenges traditional notions of history is what makes *A Mercy* "say" something about the discourses operating in our century. Among the discourses she depicts, the white Anglo-European discourse is perceived through its representation of the "other" and "new world": slaves are compared to herding: as when Jacob thinks: 'The kick up from one herding [cattle] to another [slaves] was swift and immensely enriching' (Morrison 2008: 19). Or they are equaled to goods when being advertised for

purchasing: ‘A likely woman who has had small pox and measles... A likely Negro about 9 years... Girl or woman that is handy in the kitchen sensible, speaks good English, complexion between yellow and black... [...]’ (Morrison, 2008: 52). Representations of the “new world” include the idea of wilderness, abundance and the promise of something new: Barbados, for instance, is compared to a whore, ‘Lush and deadly’ meaning ‘all is plentiful and ripe except life’ (Morrison, 2008: 30). When Jacob asks how they managed with the illnesses and the deaths of the slaves, Downes answers ‘They ship in more. Like firewood, what burns to ash is refueled’ (Morrison, 2008: 30). This fragment suggests a comparison of slaves to goods which can be replaced once you have run out them. For Rebekka, who was ‘impatient for some kind of escape’ (Morrison, 2008: 77) from her family, America came as the promise of something different and probably better: ‘marriage to an unknown husband in a far-off land had distinct advantages’ (Morrison, 2008: 78). Given all the drawbacks at home, Rebekka thinks ‘America. Whatever the danger, how could it possibly be worse?’ (Morrison, 2008: 78). The vision Rebekka has of the new world is one of promise of a better world, where every new thing is cause of marvel as she well expresses when she describes its landscape, its rain and its animals: ‘Rain itself became a brand new thing [...] She clapped her hands under her chin gazing at the trees taller than a cathedral, wood for warmth so plentiful it made her laugh, then weep, for her brothers and the children freezing in the city she had left behind’ (Morrison, 2008: 76).

The Anglo-European discourse represented in the quoted passages is at the same time challenged in the book because Morrison foregrounds them as constructs. One of

the examples of how discourses compete is the presence of diverse religious discourses such as the Roman Catholics, Protestantism and Baptists which were in continuous struggle at the time. Jacob for instance, who is a protestant (though without much conviction) shows some rejection towards Catholics: ‘although he believed they should not be hunted down like vermin, other than on business he would never choose to mingle or socialize with the lowest or highest of them’ (Morrison, 2008: 22). Within these religious discourses, some of them had their own representation of “the other” based on the idea of the Devil. That is why, when Florens is met by the people in the Widow’s house where she is spending the night, the fact that she is black makes them believe she must be a minion of Satan: ‘The Black Man is among us. This is his minion’, one of the women says (Morrison, 2008: 111).

The passage which probably best illustrates the view slaves had of their world is the one in which Lina is telling Florens the story of an eagle threatened by a traveler who claims the place belongs to him. Under threat, the eagle attacks him but she is stroke by his stick. The eagle falls and her eggs are left to hatch alone. When Florens asks if they live, Lina answers ‘We have’ (Morrison, 2008: 63). The traveler may represent the Europeans who have come to appropriate the New World, and Lina and Florens would be the eggs which, after all, have survived. The forever falling eagle could stand for the fall of the primary peoples. In this survival, Lina and Florens have adopted different positions. Lina has attached to the small self-sufficient community her master and mistress created, though she is aware of the dangers of this self-sufficiency. Florens, on the other hand, has subsided to the representation the dominant discourse

had of slaves, that of a savage: by the end of the novel, when she is recalling the blacksmith's accusation that she is a slave by choice (Morrison, 2008: 141), she writes: 'You say I am wilderness. I am' (Morrison, 2008: 157). Yet, this realization comes also as a realization of her identity: 'I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. [...] Slave. Free. I last' (Morrison, 2008: 161). Given the fact that she was born a slave, and that she underwent situations in which she was continually treated like a savage and a monster, we wonder whether there was another possible outcome. After all, our identity does not only shape the circumstances which we live in, but it is also shaped by them (Hall, 1996: 621).

Chapter 4

Beloved by Toni Morrison: analysis.

Beloved (1987) by Toni Morrison is a novel set in times in which slavery was already institutionalized in America and in full swing. In this work the author has portrayed the period through the story of a slave woman, Sethe, who has tried to escape slavery. Even though she has achieved her goal, the consequences of her actions, and the events she has gone through, end up questioning whether breaking the bondage with white people really meant to be “free.” When starting the novel, the reader encounters third person narration through which he or she learns Sethe’s story. However, as the novel develops, the stories of other characters are known. These stories are not separate and, once again, Morrison presents a complicated plot in which every new voice which is given expression adds new layers to our understanding of the picture she wants to construct. In addition, third person narration is alternated at some points with first person narration, and in some sections the author has resorted to the technique of stream-of-consciousness. Events are not described in a chronological, linear order and, as in *A Mercy*, we go from past to present, from present to past, witnessing the same events through the eyes and the perspectives of the different characters, faced once more with multiplicity of voices in Morrison’s work.

As we have already argued in the discussion of Morrison’s other novel selected as corpus, fragmentation, juxtaposition and non-linearity in her recreation of a historical period has served the purpose of challenging a linear notion of history. This recreation questions at the same time a single authoritative version of it, by providing truths in the plural which come from the standpoints of different characters in the story, in a period in which the institution of slavery had been settled for quite a long time and which affected

society in all of its strata. Considering Hayden White (2003)'s understanding of both forms of narrative (the factual and the fictional) as two ways in which we make sense of and give meaning to the world in which we live, *Beloved* could then be regarded as a piece of literary work which provides a version of reality and a representation of human experience.

Beatings, killings, hangings, running-away slaves, freed slaves and infanticide are some of the historical references Morrison has taken into her novel in order to present us with a story which not only depicts but also revises that period in US history. Infanticide, central to the story since Sethe kills her already crawling baby the moment she learns Schoolteacher has come to claim for her and her children, becomes relevant if we consider how a single event could be looked at from different perspectives. In the eyes of the dominant white, an act like this was a reflection of the savagery which characterized black people. Schoolteacher and his nephews represent this dominant view in the novel. For them, such an act was all "testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred" (Morrison, 1987: 150). From this quotation we can infer that for white people there was a natural tendency to wildness in "Negroes" which they could control only through the institution of slavery: "Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle" (Morrison, 1987: 198). But Sethe's action is viewed differently as the novel develops: Baby Suggs "could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice" (Morrison, 1987: 179) while Paul D, though knowing exactly what Sethe was protecting her children from, still could not help

feeling shocked at what she has done: “This here new Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began. (...) It scared him” (Morrison, 1987: 164). After an exchange in which Sethe tries to explain herself, he makes a remark which ends their conversation: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four.” This comparison he makes between Sethe and animals is something for which she cannot forgive him. She believes what she did was the only way of protecting her children from the atrocities she lived back at Sweet Home, from what she knew was terrible (Morrison, 1987: 164).

The multiplicity of voices in this novel not only serves the purpose of providing different perspectives about the same historical events. Through it, it becomes also possible to spot “ex-centricity” as central to the novel. Most of the characters given expression are marginalized in at least one way: Sethe, Paul D, Sixo and the other Sweet Home men, Ella, Baby Suggs, all slave people. Even Mrs Garner, the mistress on Sweet Home, becomes an ex-centric character when her husband dies and she becomes a widow. This new position places her in a disadvantaged situation, which is what motivates her to bring Schoolteacher into her house: being alone among a group of slaves, she needed “another white on the place” (Morrison, 1987: 219).

In this context full of ex-centricity and marginality, there is a negotiation of domination and resistance which, once more, makes “difference” a key feature of character portrayal in Morrison’s work. Mohanty’s (2003) and Bhabha’s ([1994] 2004) understanding of difference as spheres situated within hierarchies of domination and negotiation is reflected in how the people in the story interact. Sweet Home men appear as an interesting illustration of these spheres. Mr. Garner, master on the farm, treats his

slaves as men, he lets them have guns, and listens to what they say: “Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?” (Morrison, 1987: 220) This last questions acquires greater significance when, after Mr. Garner dies and things on Sweet Home start falling apart, the Pauls, Sixo and Halle realize everything had been an illusion. No matter how gently they were treated by Master and Mistress, they were still slaves:

“Was that it? Is that were the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know? (...) It was schoolteacher who taught them otherwise. A truth that waved like a scarecrow in rye: they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race.”

Halle is aware of this lie and expresses it. When they are planning for their escape, Sethe asks Halle about Mr. and Mrs. Garner:

“What do you want to know Sethe?” “Him and her,” I said, “they ain’t like the whites I seen before. (...)” “How these different?” he asked me. “Well,” I said, “they talk soft for one thing.” “It don’t matter, Sethe. What they say is the same loud or soft.” (Morrison, 1987: 195)

At this realization they attempt to resist, they attempt to escape. Sethe manages it. But Paul D ends up a prisoner in Alfred, Georgia, Sixo dies, and Halle and Paul A disappear. While imprisoned in Alfred, Paul D learns that everything belongs to the men with the guns, men “who knew their manhood lay in their guns and were not even embarrassed by the knowledge that without gunshot fox would laugh at them. And these “men” (...) stop you from hearing doves and or loving moonlight (Morrison, 1987: 162)” This was how the spheres of “difference” operated for them, the Negroes.

In this negotiation in connection to slavery, what is and it means to be free appears as an important topic in the novel. On Sweet Home, Garner allows Halle to buy out his mother, Baby Suggs. Having seen every child she has had taken away from her except Halle, Baby asks herself: “What for? What does a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for?” (Morrison, 1987: 140-141) But as soon as she set foot on free land “she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn’t: that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world. It scared her” (Morrison, 1987: 141). That was when she noticed the beating of her heart and that her hands were hers. And she did not keep the lesson for herself: she “became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it” (Morrison, 1987: 87). In the Clearing, she told them that

“the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it they would not have it. “Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it(…)” (Morrison, 1987: 87-88).

What Baby Suggs wants is every coloured person to claim themselves. That is something Sethe learns from her mother-in-law during her twenty-eight days of unslaved life, that “freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison, 1987: 94). Those days gave Sethe company:

“knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their lives, habits, (...). One taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day. (...) Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself” (Morrison, 1987: 94).

As we have seen, the “ex-centric” and the “marginalized” have been historically denied the right of expression (Hutcheon, [1988] 2004: 70). Through literature, authors such as Morrison have worked to return that right to them. *Beloved* gives enunciation to the “ex-centric” voices that build the story. In this context, “telling” becomes significantly important, particularly for some characters. By the end of the story, when Sethe finally recognizes Beloved and starts to be consumed by her, her need to tell, to put into words the reasons why she has murdered her, becomes strong. Similarly, Denver experiences a hunger to be told everything about her birth: she needs to hear it from her mother, to listen to her words. As each of the ex-centric characters in *Beloved* is given expression, their stories build up and their identities are contextualized by the events they depict. For each marginalized person in this story, public and private life become intertwined and the historical enters the realm of the biographical to such an extent that even claiming their own bodies and their own children is taken away from them by the white men, “the men without skin” (Morrison, 1987: 215):

“...in all of Baby’s life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers. (...) What she [Baby] called the nastiness of life was the sock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (Morrison, 1987: 22-23).

So Baby Suggs saw every one of her children sold, taken away. All except Halle. “The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood” (Morrison, 1987: 138). And Sethe, though not separated from her children, knew that

maybe she “couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky” because they were not hers to love (Morrison, 1987: 161).

Not being able to stick to your children and love them properly is but one of the examples – a rather serious one – in which the machinery of slavery penetrates everyday life. But smaller things, those are affected too. When Sethe and Halle wanted to get married and she asked whether there would be a wedding, she was laughed at by Mrs Garner who just managed the answer “You are one sweet child” (Morrison, 1987: 26). Shopping for salt or pepper meant “the embarrassment of waiting out back of Phelps store with the others till every white in Ohio was served before the keeper turned to the cluster of Negro faces looking through a hole in his back door” (Morrison, 1987: 189). As each of their stories is constructed, the events shape and reshape the identities of the people involved. Identity construction is then marked by difference and heterogeneity and contextualized, in Hutcheon’s (1988) and Mohanty’s (1986; 2003) terms, by race, gender, class, etc. The journey becomes a strong metaphor for the process of this construction: Sethe sets off to escape Sweet Home and get her milk to her children; Paul D to escape the chains and the iron bit which break him and to get to Sethe. In both cases, what they go through leaves a mark on who they are. And who they are they associate once again with freedom. Paul D learns that the men with the guns are the ones who determine what he can love. This is why he understands, in a way, Sethe’s unlimited love for her children at 124: because he knows the value of a place “where you could love anything you choose – not to need permission for desire – well now, *that*

was freedom” (Morrison, 1987: 162). However, what strikes him the hardest is the realization that even a rooster – “Mister” – is freer than he feels after Schoolteacher:

“Mister, he looked so... free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son of a bitch couldn’t even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was...” Paul D stopped (...). Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you’d be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.” (Morrison, 1987: 72)

The process of identity construction of some characters in the novel displays race and gender as relational terms which foreground a relationship and a hierarchy. Double colonization manifests in the bodies of Negro women in the story. Sethe is not only property in the eyes of Schoolteacher, but “property that reproduced itself without cost” (Morrison, 1987: 228). Her own mother, who had not been able to feed her or spend time with her because she was always working in the fields, had been taken by many white men, and thrown every child born out of those meetings. Ella, one of Sethe’s black neighbouring women, spent her puberty in a house where father and son shared her and whom she called “the lowest yet:” “It was the lowest yet who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities” (Morrison, 1987: 256). These women do not own their bodies. They are the property of someone else because they are slaves, but being women, their bodies are abused on a double basis and the consequences are terrible: despising their own children, feeling disgust for a pleasure they have a right to enjoy. Denver is warned by Baby Suggs about these abuses and her advice is to love her own body:

“Grandma Baby says people look down on her because she had eight children with different men. (...) Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to feel like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them (Morrison, 1987: 208).”

These examples suggest an understanding of the female body as a colonized space, illustrating the similarities between ‘writing the body’ in feminism and ‘writing space’ in post-colonialism which Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2000) have theorized about.

Beloved is an interesting example of how a literary piece of work can tell as something about the interplay of discourses operating in the time and place in which the text was written (Elgue de Martini, 2003). Morrison has taken events which occurred in America while slavery was still a powerful institution and has constructed around them the story of these slaves and their journeys in search for freedom. The wars against the Miami, the Spaniards, the Secessionists (Morrison, 1987: 260); the Colored Ladies of Delaware, Ohio (Morrison, 1987: 183); the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee (Morrison, 1987: 173); beatings, hangings and infanticide are among the historical references which the writer has included in the novel but which, when looked from the perspectives and through the eyes of the “ex-centric” characters, acquire a different meaning: they become much more than mere references to a historical period. They enter the realm of the home, of the family and interfere with every decision: what you can do, what or whom you can love; the children or the body you cannot claim. Looking at those events from the eyes of the marginalized, the ones who have so far been silenced, is what turns *Beloved* into an “ex-centric” space from which to revise history, more specifically the history of slavery in America at that time. In this space, what one understands as being

free becomes much more intricate than just being or not in bondage with some white person. What Sethe had learned during those twenty-eight days of unslaved life reappears here: “freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison, 1987: 94). And this is exactly what Paul D is referring to in that last scene in which Sethe and him are talking: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” (Morrison, 1987: 272)

Chapter 5

The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton by Jane Smiley: analysis.

The All-True Travels and adventures of Lidie Newton by Jane Smiley is a novel set in a completely different historical moment in the US if we compare it to Morrison's works, since the story occurs just before the abolishment of slavery. However, it is slavery that sets a point in common with Morrison's texts for Jane Smiley has also put forward claims regarding it, particularly concerning the established myths about the righteous North and the violent South in American history. Her work is also marked by the traces of difference and the "ex-centricity" of her characters and a challenging attitude towards held ideas in history which she has developed while questioning the objectivity and linearity of historical accounts about America and slavery.

As we start with the novel, we encounter Lidie, who is telling us her story. In contrast to Morrison's juxtaposition and fragmented narration which includes the perspective of different characters, we hear in this work only one voice, Lidie's, who tells her story in a chronological order. However, as events develop, we grasp a complex idea of the historical moment, in which the events themselves add new layers to the overall picture. Even though we learn the story through the perspective of only one character, it is through the adventures which she goes through that we feel the presence of other voices operating. In this way, through her daily adventures, we start constructing a picture of the historical moment which the writer has recreated while questioning the apparent clear-cut separation between the private and the public. The novel centres on the discussion between the North and the South about the abolishment of slavery and related issues of violence, racism and freedom. The situations and people faced by Lidie appear to challenge well established myths about these topics, such as the

violent South and the righteous North, or ideas about what being free implies. If we consider once more Hayden White's suggestion that literary texts are part of the discourses which interact at a particular time and place, and which can help us construct versions of reality (White, 2003), then we could understand *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* as a representation of human experience at this particular moment of American history. In this way the novel is presented to us as a revisiting and revision of the historical accounts of that time. The novel does not portray a single, authorizing version of the period selected, but offers different truths which come from the stories and perspectives of the distinctive characters, most of them marginal ones. These truths in the plural question the Universalist assumption of history writing which aspires to objectivity and to provide a single, authoritative truth. How the writer intertwines private and public issues through Lidie's story also undermines the clear-cut separation between the personal and the historical.

As we have said, one of the characteristics of Smiley's work is the marginality and ex-centricity of her main character: Lidie. Not only is she a woman, but for a woman, she is of a rare kind. According to her sisters, Lidie cultivated uselessness. She could do none of the things a woman of her time was expected to do. Her abilities – riding a horse, swimming, walking long distances, writing letters or carrying on lively disputes – were regarded as useless (Smiley, 1998: 5). She enjoyed reading and stating her opinion, and to that she added fishing and hunting skills which she learned from Alice's sons, which, if we think of that time, were regarded as male activities. Even though she later gets married and starts her journey to new lands with her husband Thomas, widowhood

places her once again in an unprotected situation in a territory not suitable for a woman. Not only Lidie embodies marginality. We also read about Miriam, her dead sister, whose revolutionary ideas about teaching black children and slavery cause her to be rejected even by her own family: “I don’t know why she [Miriam] brings these ideas into the family! You sit down to supper, and there’s ideas there; and then you get up in the morning and make tea, and there’s ideas again. It makes you feel all outside of yourself (...)” (Smiley, 1998: 92). But what is particularly interesting is how her sisters attribute Miriam’s ideas to her reluctance to pursue what they regarded “normal” in a woman: “if only poor Miriam had been prettier, she wouldn’t have wasted herself on such muddleheaded ideas but would have gotten a husband and some children to occupy her” (Smiley, 1998: 93). Through this passage we are allowed to see Miriam as an ex-centric character in a double way: for her political ideas, and for her unwillingness to fit the stereotypical image of woman of that time.

Lorna, a slave, who appears almost at the end of Lidie’s adventures, is another ex-centric character in the novel. Even when she is cared for and loved by her holders at Day’s End Plantation, she is still a slave and demands her freedom. Just as in the case of Morrison’s work, the presence of different characters in Smiley’s novel and how they interact with each other illustrates difference in Mohanty’s and Bhabha’s terms: as asymmetrical and incommensurate spheres situated within hierarchies of domination and resistance. Lorna and her relationship to Papa and Helen, her owners, illustrate this in a clear way. In a historical moment in which masters were known for beating and mistreating their slaves, Lorna is loved by them, even regarded as family. Helen trusts

her and depends on her for everything; she cannot imagine herself without Lorna. However, Lorna is aware that she is still a slave; no matter how much love she gets, she is not free and this is what motivates her to resist and escape in the end. And Papa, facing this situation, cannot help but doing what he is supposed to do as master: he sells her south as punishment. Lorna's escape is something Papa, and even Lidie at the beginning, cannot understand. When they are running away, Lidie cannot help asking Lorna about this:

“Did he ever bit you?” “Not so's you'd notice much. He aim for me wid his razor strap one time. He only yell a lot. He don' eveah bit the boys, 'cause he ain' big enough. He buy dem off wid presents.” I [Lidie] laughed. “Why you laughing?” “Because that's not the way the northerners think slaves live?” “Slaves live all different. But dey all slaves. Dey all got to do what dey is tol' to do.” “I didn't see anyone tell you what to do much at Day's End Plantation.” “Now you soun' like Massa Richard.” (Smiley, 1998: 419)

Similarly, when Papa is talking about Lorna's escape, he expresses why it is difficult to understand her actions: “Ah, Lorna! No one could ever say that Lorna was ill-treated or uncared for. Lorna herself couldn't say it and didn't say it” (Smiley, 1998: 440). What he failed to see was what Lorna felt that even though she knew other slaves lived in tougher circumstances and that she, in a way, enjoyed privileges which others did not, she was still a slave. Escaping was her way of resisting, just as having no children had also been: Delia, the other slave woman at Day's End Plantation, had seen her baby boy sold by Master and Mistress and that day Lorna had promised herself: “I ain' havin' no babies on dat palce, no mattah what my man say” (Smiley, 1998: 420).

Throughout the novel, the same acts are contemplated under the eyes of the different people Lidie encounters, sometimes one view reinforcing the views of others, but more frequently contrasting, adding to the intricacy of the events of the time and providing, in this way, varied truths about the same historical moment, thus challenging a single, authoritative, Universalist, historical version of the period. Taking certain historical facts, Smiley has recreated around them the story of a woman and her adventures. During her journey in a territory where the abolition of slavery is the cause of heated discussion, fights, killings, sackings and even war, Lidie meets people of all kinds. The clear-cut separation between the north and the south regarding the slavery question becomes not so clear as we see that not everybody is not so easily accommodated as a righteous northerner or a violent aggressive southerner. Thus fixity, which has characterized constructions of otherness in historical accounts (Bhabha, 1994; Mohanty, 2003) is challenged by this work. Smiley manages to do this by first installing fixed notions on this topic and then subverting them by the very presence of her characters:

“On this slavery question, he didn’t know or understand how to take a realistic position. Southerners were well known to argue and bluster about slavery, but they would fight to death about one thing only, and that was what they called honor and what my sister Miriam had called prickled pride (...) A northerner, insensitive in some ways and full of self-righteousness, could easily offend a southerner in a second. The northerner would be giving his general opinion, more than likely unasked for, and all unknowingly challenging the southerner’s every deeply held belief, not to mention, with sundry looks and expressions, suggesting that the southerner was possessed of numerous flaws of character and person. The southerner was bound to see offense in every suggestion, insult in every difference of opinion, and to act upon his stung pride. (...) The northerner, the yankee, didn’t seem to care about differences of opinion. He had the blithe and unsociable

conviction, which poured out with every utterance, that he was so completely in the right that what the other men thought didn't bother him." (Smiley, 1998: 128-129)

In a context in which northerners and southerners were expected to behave in a particular way, characters such as Jim Lane and Papa disrupt these ideas: Lane, an abolitionist, shows little of the reasoning expected from him, while Papa, a slaveholder, shows no evidence of the aggressiveness masters in the south were expected to display. By providing held ideas on both sides of the slavery discussion and then subverting them with her different characters and their actions, Smiley is foregrounding such notions as constructions, rather than pre-given traits attributed to each side.

As Lidie's voice finds expression through her narration, we learn features which contextualize her identity and exemplify how for her, the private and the public, the historical and the biographical become intertwined: she is well aware that "ladies always behaved as if someone were watching them, and more often than not, someone was..." (Smiley, 1998: 340). This fact turns their own behaviour into something which does not only belong to themselves but to the public dominion as well. Identity construction is then marked by difference and heterogeneity and contextualized, in Hutcheon's (1988) and Mohanty's (1986; 2003) terms, by race, gender, class, sexual preference, etc. in a process which displays race and gender as relational terms which foreground a relationship and a hierarchy. Gender, on the one hand, becomes a key topic here, for being a woman is central even to the way in which Lidie is addressed by people: when she is travelling to Lawrence with Thomas, Mr Graves addresses her from time to time only to recognize 'Thomas' manhood': "...Mr Graves presumed that my husband's

conversation would be with him. (...) Once in a while, he would address some informative remark to me, as a courtesy to Thoma's manhood (...)" (Smiley, 1998: 65). During her whole journey she is continually reminded that her womanhood will affect her actions and how others treat her. This becomes probably more evident when, after becoming a widow, she has to start her journey for revenge: the only possibility for accomplishing such an ambitious task is to dress herself as a man: "I saw at once that as long as I was a man, I would be able to do whatever I wanted, and that I would have a state of freedom such as no woman I had known, even Louisa, had ever had" (Smiley, 1998: 294). Lidie discovered herself as "bolder and more reckless" than she had been as a woman (Smiley, 1998: 300).

But race also enters the novel, and it is here that Hutcheon's and Mohanty's ideas become relevant, for the relationship and connection between such a term and gender are displayed in the novel. Louisa Bisket is an interesting character because she does not fit in the stereotypical image of a woman of the time: she displays confidence, asserts her opinion in front of men and enjoys a favourable position even after becoming a widow and before remarrying. She is certainly not affected by racism or slavery for she is a white woman. However, she cannot help noticing the parallelism that could be established when comparing women to slaves. Lidie expresses it in these words:

"In her mind, (...) she said, back in Boston, the lives of women and those of slaves were not so much different. When Charles and my husband smiled or squirmed at this (and glanced about at Louisa's grand furniture), she caught them up short. "Now," she said, "you are looking at my things and judging the general state of woman by a very particular, and I might even say peculiar, gauge. A slave may wear beautiful clothes, read and write, and do his master's business with perspicacity and care, and he may even have some appreciation of and gratitude

for his lot in life, and he may certainly be attached to his master, but his circumstances do not therefore reflect or mitigate the circumstances of millions of others who live under the thumb of someone else, who have no freedom and no money and no say in their own fate” (Smiley, 1998: 170).

There is an interesting idea within this passage which could be read under the light of Mohanty’s (1986) work and which has to do with forming a composite representation of women, or slaves. By suggesting it is not fair to judge the reality of all women, or all slaves, by looking at only one woman or slave, she is appealing to the consideration of the historical specific reality of women and slaves, to their material and historical heterogeneities if we think of Mohanty’s terms (1986). However, what Louisa fails to see, or at least to recognise, is that just as the favourable circumstances of a single slave do not mitigate the circumstances of millions of others, they, in addition, do not change the fact that he or she is still a slave. This is something which, as we have already mentioned, Lorna is constantly reminding us of. Louisa’s comparison does not end there. She asks Lidie how she regards her corset and when Lidie does not know what to say, she answers herself “I regard my corset as a saddle.” She compares her corset to the bridles used with troublesome slaves and ends up saying “They stifle our breath and cut us in two and shape us to the liking of our masters” (Smiley, 1998: 171). If we think of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2000) noticing similarities between ‘writing the body’ in feminism and ‘writing space’ in post-colonialism, and how the colonial empire’s and patriarchy’s shared ideologies of hegemony and abuse set a point in common between post-colonialism and feminism., then this last quote is a good example suggesting an understanding of the female body as a colonised space.

In her novel, Smiley not only portrays situations and characters which could be read as establishing a parallelism between patriarchy and slavery. She has also created a context in which double colonization is present. When Thomas and Lidie are in K.T. discussing with their friends about the disputes between pro-slavery people and abolitionists, a man, Stringfellow, and his low ideas on proslavery are mentioned. What becomes striking of this conversation is this man's opinions on women and slavery: "He said that men will of course do low and cursed things to women, that's their nature, and in a slavocracy, it's a protection for the white women that the slave women are there for the men. He said that's the best thing about slavery" (Smiley, 1998: 82). Once again, the female body is represented as a colonized space, but from this quotation we could read that, in the institution of slavery, the body of these women is colonized and abused on a double basis, as slaves and as women.

In Cristina Elgue de Martini's (2003) discussion on New Historicism, it has been mentioned that the literary text can tell us something about the interplay of discourses operating in the time and place in which the text was written. *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (1998) portrays a period of America in which the slavery question related to abolition was the cause of a separation between the North and the South. Smiley has recreated this period through the daily adventures of a woman, intertwining her private experiences with public events, challenging not only the separation between the personal and the historical, but also challenging constructed notions about slavery on both sides of the argument. By doing so, Smiley has posed a revision of history. The fact that it is a revision and that it challenges traditional notions

of history is what makes *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (1998) “say” something about the discourses operating in our century. In this revision, slavery and freedom appear as important and complex issues which Smiley has developed in order to demystify what we have already discussed as the fixed positions associated with North and South. There is an interesting passage when Lidie is travelling with a group of women to K.T. in which a northern woman tries to defend a slave after being slapped by her Mistress for ruining her expensive shoes. After witnessing the slap, this northern woman complains to the slave-owner, who in turn replies that she would willingly free herself of the girl if she could. She ends up offering the girl to the northern women in exchange for her dress and her hat; then she could give her freedom. The other woman, not knowing what to say, goes red and walks away from the scene. This situation has three different reactions from the witnesses. Firstly, the ladies on board, most of them pro-slave, cannot avoid stating: “They are plenty happy to be telling us what to do, but that’s all they really care about” and “They are perfectly happy for us to be with the niggers on an equal footing, but you know, they won’t touch them” (Smiley, 1998: 53), which suggest a questioning of abolitionists’ acting in accordance to principle. Thomas, on the other hand, sees the woman’s unwillingness to take the slave girl with different eyes: “you see, she couldn’t even put a girl and a dress in the same category” (Smiley, 1998: 53), probably judging the situation from his own principles, while Lidie, observing the slave girl’s expectancy at the outcome of the argument, states that “the girl herself could [put a girl and a dress in the same category]. She was ready enough to be traded for a dress” (Smiley, 1998: 53). This exchange makes us reflect upon the

complexity of the institution of slavery, where not only principles but actions are important, and where the view slaves had of themselves add new layers to the understanding of the overall picture. In this interaction, the slave girl, who is ready to be traded for a dress, may be suggesting a naturalization of her being treated as property. In addition, having the same scene contemplated from three different standpoints reinforces the idea of “truths in the plural” we have been talking about.

Questions of principle and action in connection to slavery and freedom and the positioning of northerners and southerners reappear at other moments in the story. Over the discussion of what to do with the slave woman after they removed her Missourian Masters, one of the men said: “But even so, I hesitate to free a bondman I’ve never met from an owner I don’t know, and send him or her off to a life she may not understand or want” (Smiley, 1998: 132), upon which Lidie reflects: “Northerners, even abolitionists, knew more about how and why to chop down the slavery tree than they ever knew about what to do with its sour fruit” (Smiley, 1998: 132). Once again, acting in accordance to principle becomes a complicated matter and the fact that a bondman may not understand or want a life of freedom directs our attention to the possible naturalizing effect that the institution of slavery may have on slaves and people in general. David B. Graves ideas on principle add, later in the story, to the same idea. For him, you may show views which not necessarily turn into acts, as if it its right to think one way, but not act in consequence: “Every man in the world knows that views are different from acts. (...) I see all around me far less judicious men than myself, who descend from views to acts, and what has come of it but sorrow, horror, and conflict, as you yourself can testify, Mrs

Newton?” This idea contrasts with Lydie’s, and when she expresses that Lorna ‘wanted to be free’ and that is why she has tried to help her, his response is a shocking one: “If I wanted to be a horse or a bird of the air or a fine lady in Richmond, Virginia, should I then have my wish? We are born who we are, and we get nowhere pinin’ to be otherwise.” What is striking of this remark is how he naturalizes being a slave by placing it alongside being a horse, or a bird, or a lady from Richmond, a fact you cannot, and should not, try to change (Smiley, 1998: 439)

One last consideration we would like to express is connected with Lidie’s journey in itself, which could be understood as a process of identity construction, awareness and self-discovery. Throughout it, events affect Lydie, and after considering her present situation while in jail almost at the end of her journey, she also challenges her own ideas about principles and acts:

“What K.T. and Missouri really were was talk. People in the west made a big house of words for themselves and then lived inside it, in a small room of deeds. (...) But after you talked for a while, it seemed, you ended up talking yourself into acting. Didn’t matter what side you were on or what your principles were; if you talked about them long enough, well, you had to act on them. Now that I was in jail, I didn’t know what I thought about principles anymore. It seemed as though the main result of having any was dislocation, injury, pain and death” (Smiley, 1998: 443).

Even though she does not know what to think about principles anymore, she has chosen to help Lorna escape, partly because it was time for her to act and also as a way of giving meaning to Thomas’s death for the cause of abolition. When Lorna’s escape ends in failure, she feels she owes her something as well. This is what in the end motivates her to give the lecture she is asked for, giving testimony of what had happened to her and Lorna: “Did I owe it to Lorna to tell her story to the world? Was that my last

gesture for her, to use her and what we had done together to raise money to buy guns and cannon to be sent to Kansas?” (Smiley, 1998: 450). She knows Lorna herself would never benefit from her telling her story, for there “could be no hope for Lorna individually, but her cause could be helped through helping the cause of all of those in bondage (...)” (Smiley, 1998: 450).

After all her adventures, Lidie does not see things as she has done in the past: “after K.T., nothing, (...) nothing ever surprised either of us ever again.” (Smiley, 1998: 452).

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper we have tried to explore Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy* and Jane Smiley's *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* in order to display how these novels represent an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment, a site for revising and rethinking categories so far taken as natural and consensual (Bhabha, [1994] 2004: 4-5) and associated with the role of slavery in American history.

To better accomplish our purpose, we have first centred our attention on how scholars such as Hutcheon (1988;1989), Bhabha (1994) and Mohanty (1986; 2003) have worked in the field of postmodernism and post colonialism, addressing the topic of colonization and the emergence of "the ex-centric" and "the marginalized." Mohanty's definition of colonization proved useful in the elaboration of our theoretical background, for it encompasses a wide understanding of the term.

In the context of oppression which colonization represents, the authors already mentioned have pointed out the role of "fixity" in the representation of otherness and the construction of frozen categories. In order to avoid the suppression of the heterogeneity of the subjects involved in situations of domination caused by fixed categories of representation, Bhabha, Mohanty and Hutcheon have argued for the consideration of "difference" as a key concept, understood as 'asymmetrical and incommensurate cultural spheres situated within hierarchies of domination and resistance' which cannot be accommodated in the discourse of harmony in diversity (Mohanty, 2003: 193). In the on-going negotiation of difference there is no place for binarisms. By contextualizing

identities we avoid the single and alienated concept of otherness, giving place to that of difference, but a difference which suggests heterogeneity rather than binary opposition.

Because our main purpose has involved proving how Morison's and Smilye's texts revise and rethink categories associated with slavery in American history, we then focused on Hutcheon's assertion that the emergence of "ex-centric voices" has contributed to the rethinking and redefinition of notions of history. We have also addressed the topic of history writing by considering the works of Hayden White (2003; 2010). White has theorized about historical narrative, arguing for the recognition of a fictional component in history writing. This statement has had several consequences: firstly, it has foregrounded historical accounts as ideological constructions; secondly, it has levelled history and literature: both forms of narrative (the factual and the fictional) are two ways in which we make sense of and give meaning to the world in which we live. Finally, the notion of history as fictional has had an effect on literary criticism, resulting in the deconstruction of the opposition between literature (fictional) and history (factual). As Hayden White (2010: 162-163) states, postmodernists believe all documents are texts and, as such, they can be subjected to the same techniques used to explain literary texts.

With this theoretical background in mind, we have analysed the novels in the corpus, trying to provide clear examples of why we believe they represent an expanded and ex-centric site for revising and rethinking slavery in American history. From these analyses we have drawn the general conclusion that they share, apart from the evident

issues of slavery, racism, violence and freedom, several features associated with: narrative devices and a challenging attitude towards objectivity, authority and universalism in history writing; character portrayal; and the use of some metaphors.

Regarding narrative devices, our analysis has shown that it is important to bear in mind the concept developed by White which suggests that the literary text can help us make sense of and give meaning to the world in which we live. Applying this notion in the present study has allowed us to consider the novels in the corpus as representations of human experience and versions of reality at a particular time, giving them the same status historical works have. In this context, we have shown how the choice of narrative devices becomes significant. The fact that Morrison's novels resort to fragmentation, juxtaposition and non-chronological narration could be associated with a challenging attitude towards the recordings which present history as linear and progressive. Smiley has not chosen to use fragmentation as a narrative strategy. Neither has she used a non-chronological telling of events. However, we believe each new event or character which enters the story through Lidie, helps build a complex picture of the historical period by adding new layers to it. In this way, we could argue the effect of juxtaposition is achieved, serving the same purposes it does in Morrison's texts. In addition, such techniques contribute to the construction of historical events as complex ones.

We have also pointed out to the multiplicity of voices as another feature in the narration of the novels. Morrison's texts have appeared clearer on this aspect, since as we proceed with the reading we immediately notice different chapters told by different

characters and the alteration between third and first person narrator. Smiley's work, on the other hand, does not provide such an alteration or changing of character voices. However, once again we believe a similar effect is achieved when different voices enter the story, throughout Lidie's recounting of her adventures. In the three cases, we have tried to show how the diversity of voices shatters the notion of a single, authoritative vision and version of historical moments by proving truths in the plural.

While dealing with character portrayal in the corpus, we have had to focus on how "ex-centricity" is achieved, on the role of "difference" as understood in terms of Mohanty's and Bhabha's studies, and on double colonization. We have drawn the attention to the fact that almost all the characters in the novels are "ex-centric" in at least one way, giving the reasons why we believe so. We have explained how the authors of our corpus introduce "difference" as a key feature to the depiction of their characters, and how these differences represent spheres situated and interacting within hierarchies of domination and resistance. Finally, we have try to spot those characters who, being both slave and women, are subjected to double colonization and whose bodies could be understood as colonized space.

Our analysis has also directed the attention to the journey as a recurrent metaphor in the novels: a metaphor if we think that the journey the characters start go hand in hand with an inward journey of self- discovery; a journey which in the cases of Florens in *A Mercy* and Lidie in *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* could only be accomplished by wearing men's shoes. We have tried to prove how during the journeys,

their identities are shaped and re-shaped and we have also attempted to establish a connection between public events and private ones, showing how the historical and the biographical become mutually influential.

By considering all the previously-mentioned points, we would like now to move to our last and most important conclusion: that through the individual stories of these “eccentric” characters, the authors have come to question held ideas about slavery in American history at three different but related points in time: the association of slavery and racism in the beginnings of America, which matched being a slave with being black; the meaning of being free in the context of slavery in the three moments revised in the novels; and the myths about the North and the South in the US regarding slavery in times of abolition. One of the foregrounding notions implicit in this rewriting of history is, then, that the voice of private and individual is enough authority to speak of a social history, contributing to construct the multiple location which had before been reduced to a homogeneous single-voiced (hegemonic) space.

We have tried to contribute to postmodern and postcolonial literary studies by approaching these novels from concepts which we believe permit an overlapping between the two fields. We have tried to provide a detailed analysis bearing these concepts in mind. However, we do believe this is by no means an exhaustive research. The richness of the corpus selected could certainly allow much more to be said and would open new ways for investigation and analysis which would enlarge and enrich this and other studies on the same novels and/or the same topics.

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