

## ***BETWEEN COMMUNICATION AND SILENCE IN MAGIC REALIST NOVELS***

**Delia-Maria Radu, Assist. Prof., PhD, University of Oradea**

*Abstract: Our paper wishes to focus on verbal and non verbal communication, or the lack of it, silence, in a selection of Magic Realist novels, ranging from traditional roles, in which women remained silent and withdrawn (ex. Tita, in Laura Esquivel's Like Water for Chocolate), to silence as ways of evading authority and taking refuge in the inner imagination (Clara, in Isabel Allende's The House of Spirits) or mastering the words so as to even distort reality (Fevvers, in Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus)..*

**Keywords: communication, silence, Magic Realism, authority, subversion.**

From the most ancient times, literature has rendered images of women seen as inferior others and subordinated to men, postulating masculine supremacy. Basically intended for the trivial occupations of domestic life, they had no access to elevated jobs, to political, military or priestly positions and, therefore, they were often omitted from the great stories of history, reserved for men who had it all: glory, public honours, social achievement. Their education or cultural belonging taught them to speak as little as possible. "Women had to hide the movements of their souls in front of the men. All women know how to keep quiet or to hide, in other words, to be enigmatic" wrote the Romanian critic Garabet Ibrăileanu (1979:230)

One of the characters who is not able to communicate her thoughts verbally is Tita, the protagonist of Laura Esquivel's novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*. Here, it is not a man who forbids talking, especially talking back and questioning judgements and decisions, but a woman, Tita's mother, Mama Elena. She acts like a man, however, is distant to her daughters, is the head of the household, and imposes her own rules and even tradition: "Tita knew that discussion was not one of the forms of communication permitted in Mama Elena's household, but even so, for the first time in her life, she intended to protest her mother's ruling. [...] Ignoring Tita completely, a very angry Mama Elena left the kitchen, and for the next week she didn't speak a single word to her" (Esquivel, 1993:14-15) We see, thus, that if comments and own opinions are forbidden, disobedience is punished by silence as well.

Tita's place is in the kitchen, as a kind of cook, a servant for her family. Her suitor, Pedro, lets himself talked into marrying her sister, Rosaura, just to remain close to her. Unable to be together with her loved one, Tita develops a special way of communicating with him, a way in which tastes and smells play a crucial role. When her mother announces that the man Tita loves will be marrying her sister, Rosaura, Tita is unable to sleep that night, although she couldn't find words for what she is feeling. She communicates by transferring her emotions into the dishes she is forced to prepare for the wedding, and those who eat them feel her sorrow and longing.

Forbidden to talk to the man she loves, and ordered by her mother to throw away the bunch of roses he had given her, Tita thinks of a recipe with rose petals and pours all her repressed passion into the dish. This has a strange effect on one of her sisters, who turns into an intermediary of communication between the two lovers: "It was as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved her entire being in the rose petal sauce, in the tender flesh of the quails,

in the wine, in every one of the meal's aromas. [...] With that meal it seemed they had discovered a new system of communication, in which Tita was the transmitter, Pedro the receiver, and poor Gertrudis the medium, the conducting body through which the sexual message was passed." (Esquivel, 1993:49)

She uses the food she prepares to try to convey messages to her loved ones, and turns cooking into an art, into a language of her own: "at night [...] she would invent new recipes, hoping to repair the connection that flowed between them through the food she prepared. [...] Just as a poet plays with words, Tita juggled ingredients and quantities at will, obtaining phenomenal results" (Esquivel, 1993:64)

For Pedro, "the sounds of the pans bumping against each other, the smell of the almonds browning in the griddle, the sound of Tita's melodious voice, singing as she cooked, has kindled his sexual feelings. Just as lovers know the time for intimacy is approaching from the closeness and scent of their beloved, or from the caresses exchanged in foreplay, so Pedro knew from these sounds and smells, especially the aroma of browning sesame seeds, that there was a real culinary pleasure to come [...] (he) couldn't resist the smells from the kitchen". (Esquivel, 1993: 62)

The lack of communication, the interdiction on her expressing herself verbally affects her physical and mental health. When she finally can't stand her mother's abuse, Tita gives in and collapses: "Tita felt a violent agitation take possession of her being [...] she calmly met her mother's gaze and then, instead of obeying her order, she started to tear apart all the sausages she could reach, screaming wildly, 'Here's what I do with your orders! I'm sick of them! I'm sick of obeying you!'" (Esquivel, 1993:89)

As she is acting like a lunatic, she is immediately sent to an asylum. Instead of taking her there, doctor Brown takes her to his house, where she gradually recovers and is very thankful to him for that. After so many years of interdiction to speak her mind, she finds it difficult now to express her feelings openly: "Those hands (i.e. Dr. Brown's) had rescued her from horror and she would never forget it. Some day, when she felt like talking, she would tell John that; but now, she preferred silence. There were many things she needed to work out in her mind, and she could not find the words to express the feelings seething inside her since she left the ranch." (Esquivel, 1993:98)

To encourage her to speak, doctor Brown tricks her to write down the reason for her silence: "he thought it would be a good way for Tita to start communicating with this world again, if only in writing." (106) Tita is supposed to write her reason for not speaking on the wall, with a piece of phosphorous. What she doesn't know is that phosphorous glows in the dark, so John could read her answer that night. Communication has started again, even if feebly, and only in writing.

Silence in Esquivel's novel is parodic, thinks Helen Carol Weldt-Basson, as it refers to the implicit connections between a text and conventions of genre. Silence is employed to accentuate a genre-based parody [...] The works of Laura Esquivel illustrate this use of silence through her mimicry of both romance and science-fiction novels. (Weldt-Basson, 2009:30)

In *The House of Spirits*, by Isabel Allende, Clara del Valle is, even from the beginning of the novel, an exceptional character. The novel opens with a scene in the church, where the

believers listen to an over-zealous priest. When she can no longer bear it, Clara interrupts the silence and, for that, she is called possessed and devilish, and dragged out of the church by her father. After giving voice to her premonition that there will be a death in their family, and her sister Rosa dies (a victim of the political intrigues), Clara stops speaking for a long period.

She finds other ways of communication, which she will use all her life: telepathy, or writing. Clara writes down her daily experiences in diaries, or notebooks to record life, as she calls them, which contain her perspective on life, predictions on her life or the life of others around her. Clara's spirit is the one urging her grand-daughter, Alba, to do the same thing when she finds herself in a critical situation. Arrested and subjected to unbearable tortures, Alba is on the verge of losing her mind and decides to let herself die, when Clara's spirit suggests her to keep a mental diary in which to "note down" the things that have happened in her life and the feelings she has, to keep her mind busy and to live. Here, communication is equalled to life. Unable to communicate orally her story to others, she transfers it onto the paper later on. By using Clara's notebooks, Alba reconstructs the untold story of women's oppression in Latin America, thinks Stephen Hart (Kristal, 2006:279), for others to know what was going on in parallel to their cosy, tranquil existence. It is communicating another version of the history, an alternative to the official one, the lived history, the personal experiences.

The voice that speaks and, thus, changes things, does not only belong to Clara or Alba. Alba's mother, Blanca, also has a voice of her own in the intimacy of her bedroom, when she tells bedtime stories to her daughter, completely inverting the roles, through a feminist perspective of the fairy tales. "This was how Alba learned about a prince who slept a hundred years, damsels who fought dragons single-handed, and a wolf lost in a forest who was disembowelled by a little girl for no reason whatever".

The same Helen Carol Weldt-Basson has labelled the silence in Isabel Allende's novel as hyperbolic silence, or the exaggerated use or presence of silence in a text, usually to provoke the reader's doubt concerning its credibility, so that the notion of passive silence characterizing women itself becomes ironic. (Weldt-Basson, 2009:30)

Angela Carter's character, Fevvers – the enigma of *Nights at the Circus* – was born in London, but with the circus she travels to many places in an itinerary somehow reminding us of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (which in turn alludes to George Gordon Byron's *Don Juan*): from London to Petersburg to Siberia. "But the most persistent adventures in the book are linguistic", writes Michael Wood, "Fevvers's and others' knockabout recountings of her life to the American journalist Jack Walser, who follows her across the world, lured by the enigma of her wings – are they real or not?" (Wood, 1999:139)

Jack is in London not to find out who Fevvers is but what she is. He is there to observe, to objectify, to subject Fevvers to his scrutiny, to define her. Jack is part of a system that defines others by labeling, naming, and describing what they are – a "hoax" or a humbug, perhaps, but never an individual human being. Knowing someone in this system means classifying her. (see Gas, 1994:71)

Fevvers is helped by Lizzie, so Walser feels overwhelmed: "He continued to take notes in a mechanical fashion but, as the women unfolded the convolutions of their joint

stories together, he felt more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place; or a sultan faced with not one, but two Scheherazades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories into the single night” (Carter, 1985:40).

When he loses track of time, and the clock strikes midnight for the second time (an hour later than the first time), “it was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife [...] imperious as a siren’s [...] voice of a fake medium at a seance. (Carter, 1995:43)

Walser raised his mental eyebrows [...] But Fevvers lassoed him with her narrative and dragged him along with her before he’d had a chance to ask Lizzie if-” (Carter, 1985:60) The situation has reversed, and it’s time for men to shut up and listen to the women’s voices. And, like in Marquez’ *One Thousand Years of Solitude*, time seems to have somehow stopped during the telling of the story, and the protagonists are frozen within that moment. At one point, Walser feels “as if the room [...] had, in some way, without his knowledge, been plucked out of its everyday, temporal continuum, had been held for a while above the spinning world and was now – dropped back into place.” (Carter, 1995:87)

Walser becomes a prisoner of her voice, which seems imperious as a siren’s, can’t resist it and gets lured into the adventure of her life, joining the circus in order to follow her. The disbeliever has been turned into a follower. In Lorna Sage’s view, the narrative voices of this text are endowed with the kind of dubious plausibility that comes from the suspicion that they are making it up as they go along, just like the author” (see Wood, 1999:140)

In the end of the novel, Fevvers accepts Walser’s love and looks forward to telling him more stories which will be passed on, transmitted, communicated through his scribbled notebooks: “Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis [...] of all those whose tales we’ve yet to tell him, the histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been, so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the word a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow.” (Carter, 1995:285)

Unable to express themselves verbally, women find a way of expression in forms other than direct expository speech, through symbolism in art, myth, ritual (see Weldt-Basson, 2009:18) There are women characters who find indirect ways of expressing themselves in the novels our paper is dealing with. Tita, the first protagonist, treated by her own mother in a Cinderella-like way, takes refuge in the food she cooks, which she infuses with her feelings, becomes a master of the kitchen and writer of a recipe notebook, in which she adapts and changes initial recipes, showing signs of creativity. The second character, Clara, unusual since childhood, is not too talkative and cannot really take charge of the chores of a ranch and household, but expresses herself through writing, communicates telepathically with the sisters Moira and others, and anticipates events in a mysterious way. There are two instances when she stops speaking altogether: as a self-punishment for anticipating her sister’s death, and after being slapped by her husband, scene after which she moves out from their house and will not speak to him again, except through an intermediary. This kind of mutism or silence belongs to what Marjorie Agosin considers ways of evading authority, ways of taking refuge in the interiority of imagination in order to say only in this space what one wants to say. (see Weldt-Basson, 2009:23) It’s the same silence we see in her grand-daughter, when she refuses to speak to her torturers in prison, and wishes to die.

The opposite of these previous silences is Fevvers' story-telling, the unfolding of her unbelievable life to an initially skeptical reporter, whom she bewitches with her voice and makes him lose track of time, question his senses and himself, and join the circus to follow her. She is atypical, just like Clara, but in a different, down-to-earth way, and shows us, like Scheherazade, how the feminine voice, communicating stories, can seduce men, even seem to manipulate time, and start change in society, "the new era" in which women voices are heard.

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