

**NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND* AND JAMAICA KINCAID'S *LUCY*:  
DIASPORA, HYBRIDISM AND TRANSLATION**

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**RESUMO:** Este trabalho objetiva discutir a hibridização produzida pelos movimentos diaspóricos nos romances *Quicksand* (1928), de Nella Larsen, e *Lucy* (1991), de Jamaica Kincaid, e a construção identitária das mulheres pós-modernas, utilizando as teorias de alguns dos principais teóricos pós-modernos.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura pós-colonial, entre-lugares e identidade.

Stuart Hall states that in the entire globe cultural not fixed identities are emerging, poised in transition, between different positions, and which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time, being the product of complicated crossovers and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalized world. There is a dilemma which seems to be false. This dilemma preaches that identity in the age of globalization is destined to end up in one place or another: either returning to its roots or disappearing through assimilation and homogenization. Hall presents another possibility to this dilemma: Translation. This term would describe those identity formations which cut across and intersect natural frontiers, and which are composed of people who have been dispersed forever from their homelands. Such people retain strong links with their original places and their traditions, but they have no illusion of a return to the past. They are obliged to face the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them

and losing their identities completely. They bring with them the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages, and histories by which they were shaped, but they will never be unified in the old sense, in a pure way, because they are the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several homes. People belonging to such *cultures of hybridity* have had to renounce the dream of rediscovering any kind of cultural purity, or ethnic absolutism. They are irrevocably translated (HALL, 2005, p.629).

### **Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and the diaspora**

*Quicksand* (1928) explores the possibilities inherent from Nella Larsen's identification to her ethnical heritage. The hybrid characteristics of the author inspire her description of Helga Crane, a restless modern protagonist determined to escape from the traps of marriage and motherhood, which she associates to racial and gender limitations in the United States and to the oppression of the considered proper black middle class life. Helga Crane is the representation of some of the tensions that divide the African-descendants' spaces and minds. The life of the non-white community in the western hemisphere and the treatment given to this community because of its different color are the main themes discussed by Larsen. Diasporization, gender questions and hybridization appear in *Quicksand* as important aspects in the construction of the identities of African-descendant women. *Quicksand* is a representation of African-American women's enterprise to criticize the post-colonial patriarchal society that prevents them from achieving the same social position of men, being them white or black.

Although *Quicksand* is not a declared autobiography, it is important to notice that it has many strong autobiographical traces. For instance, Helga's mother is white and Danish and her father is black and has no origin, as Larsen's parents were. Ethnically Danish and born in the north of the United States, but with a non-white skin and educated in the south of the country, Helga is the representation of the hybrid, the one who belongs to everywhere and to nowhere at the same time. Her physical description can be seen in the following passage:

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

Helga Crane suffers a lot in her life since her biological father abandons her family, her stepfather and her half-brothers treat her badly and her mother dies very young. Crane's inner conflict in her search for her identity, for a place where she could belong, is related to the view she has of the United States and of Denmark. The first clearly presents great ethnical diversity, but it does not treat all ethnical groups in the same way. The second has a population formed mainly by white people and presents a kind of veiled racism that makes people treat Helga Crane well, but as an extremely exotic, different being. This can be seen, for instance, when her Danish aunt asks Helga to wear colorful and exotic clothes to go the party where she would be presented to the Danish society: "Oh, I'm an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you're young. And

you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression" (LARSEN, 2002, p.70).

Helga Crane's trips allow her to be in contact with many communities Nella Larsen herself knew. First we see Helga Crane in Naxos, a small town which has a school for African-descendant people. She is a teacher and is initially full of many positive ideas and suggestions as how to improve "Negro education" and is engaged to another very influential teacher. But, as times passes, she feels unwelcome and out of place, often finding herself alone and isolated. She realizes that Naxos's school is a place not to promote equal conditions to white and African-descendant people. It is a place to teach African-descendants the place that white people had separated for them: "This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency. Life had died out of it" (LARSEN, 2002, p.8).

As the story continues, Helga leaves the town of Naxos behind, breaking up with her fiancé, and boards a train to Chicago. Yet, she soon discovers that this city is not her home: "Helga Crane, who had been born in this dirty, mad, hurrying city had no home here. She had not even any friends here" (LARSEN, 2002, p.30). In fact, her family, biologically speaking, lives in Chicago, but they do not like each other.

Continuing her trips, she moves to Harlem, where she finds a refined black middle class, which is hypocritical and obsessed by the "race problem": "It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why, she demanded in

fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk?" (LARSEN, 2002, p. 57). Helga relocates to Denmark to live with her white relatives. There she is received as an exotic treasure. In Copenhagen, she is treated as an exotic being and an object of desire. In time, though, Helga longs again for life in Harlem. She comes back to Harlem, and after having her heart broken by a married man, she attends a revival service one night, and meets her future husband, Reverend Green, thinking that God's providence has led her, at last, to her place in the world. She moves to the poor south of the United States. After delivering three children in only twenty months, Helga realizes that she has wasted her life away and is disillusioned with the blind devotion of people to religion.

In each one of her trips, or diasporas, Helga Crane fails in her search for a place in society and for her identity. According to some postmodern critics and theorists as Stuart Hall e Homi K. Bhabha, Helga Crane could never, and cannot, negate her origins and delineate one cultural identity for herself as black or white, American or Danish, since identity is something in constant mutation and impossible to be labeled. In *Quicksand*, hybridization can even be physically noticed, since Helga Crane is the representation of the hybrid, the "mulatta", someone who is neither white nor black, being both at the same time. By the end of the novel, Helga Crane gives up her dreams so as not to abandon her children and has her voice suffocated by a society that does not have, and does not want to have, a place for her.

Hutchinson states that in *Quicksand* Larsen releases all the rage against the forces she had fought against for so long: the social institutions in which Larsen herself had for so long been trapped. Some readers get shocked by Helga Crane's sudden break from one style of life to another totally different from the first at the end of the novel. Critics

declare that Larsen does not provide sufficient narrative preparation for Helga Crane's sudden conversion to Christianity and marriage to a Southern preacher. According to Hutchinson, Helga's personality lacks unity and coherence, "it lacks identity" (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.224).

Far from lacking identity, as Hutchinson argues, what can be observed is that Helga Crane is one representative of the postmodern identity depicted by Stuart Hall. An identity that is not monolithic and does not conform to a pattern because it is always changing, it is in constant stage of mutation. That is to say that Helga's personality does lack unity and coherence and it is a sample or a characteristic of her very fragmented identity, or better: identities. In a way, the rupture in the plot of the novel that leads Helga to become the wife of a religious man humanizes and brings her close to the reader, since human beings are not flawless and many times do things that they never thought they could be capable of.

Migrant writers, like Nella Larsen, who belong to two worlds at once, are translated beings. They are products of the diasporas produced by the postcolonial migrations and must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them. Hall states that some people argue that hybridity and syncretism, the fusion between different cultural traditions, is a powerful creative source. Others, according to him, argue that hybridity, with the indeterminacy and relativism it implies, also has its costs and dangers. Salman Rushdie's novel about migration, Islam, and the prophet Mohammed, *The satanic verses*, offended the Iranian fundamentalists who passed sentence of death on Rushdie for blasphemy (HALL, 2005, p.629-630). Rushdie declares that those who oppose the novel believe that intermingling with different cultures will weaken and ruin their own,

but he believes that his book celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, and the transformation that comes from new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs; a manifestation that fears the absolutism of the pure (RUSHDIE, 1991, p.394).

On the other hand, as we can see in some events narrated by Helga Crane in *Quicksand* where the character was asked to determine a pure identity to herself in order to survive, there are powerful attempts in the world to reconstruct purified identities, as this act could restore coherence, closure and Tradition, in the face of hybridity and diversity. Two examples quoted by Hall are the resurgence of nationalism in Eastern Europe and the rise of fundamentalism (HALL, 2005, p.630).

Both Liberalism and Marxism, in their different ways, implied that the attachment to the local and the particular would gradually give way to more universalistic and cosmopolitan or international values and identities; that nationalism and ethnicity were archaic forms of attachment the sorts of thing which would be “melted away” by the revolutionizing force of modernity (HALL, 2005, p.632).

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

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

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

I would suggest that cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and most of birthing. For salamanders, regeneration after injury, such as a loss of a limb, involves regrowth of structure and restoration of function with constant possibility of twinning or other odd topographical productions at the site of former injury. The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, nor rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstruction include the utopian dream of hope for monstrous world without gender (HARAWAY, 1991, 181).

### **Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and the diaspora**



*Lucy* is the first of Jamaica Kincaid's novels set outside her home island, and adds a new level of literary maturity to Kincaid's autobiographical chronicle. "*Lucy* could be viewed as Kincaid's first truly mature work of fiction, one in which the autobiographical and novelistic elements are blended more deftly and with greater skill" (GEBERT, 1999, 118).

The story starts with Lucy arriving in America. She finds everything new, from the weather to the refrigerator, but feels unexpected emotions. When she left home, she expected to feel excitement and relieve rather than homesickness. On the other hand, she likes the family she works for. Lewis, the father, is a successful lawyer, and his wife, Mariah, is an enthusiastic guide and source of support for Lucy. Mariah and Lewis yearn to expose Lucy not only to new things but also to new concepts. Throughout her time with the family, Lewis and Mariah buy Lucy books on various topics such as photography and feminism.

One day, while talking to Mariah, Lucy discovers that daffodils are one of Mariah's favorite flowers. Lucy despises these flowers even though she has never seen them. As a child she was obliged to memorize a poem, *Daffodils*, written by Wordsworth. Although she recited the poem perfectly, she deeply resented it. Lucy meets her new best friend, Peggy, and she helps Lucy to get used to the American culture.

The family travels to their summer home by the Great Lakes. Lucy has never been on a train before, but she realizes that all the people who look like her relatives are servants. Lucy and the four girls get accustomed to the daily routine at the lake house, where they walk through the forest to the beach. At the lake house, Lucy meets Dinah,

Mariah's friend, and her brother, Hugh. Lucy and Hugh instantly find a connection and become lovers. At the end of the summer, however, their affair ends.

The family returns to New York and Lucy drops her nursing classes and studies photography instead. One night, at a party with Peggy, Lucy meets a fascinating artist named Paul. Lucy and Paul become lovers and Peggy and Lucy make arrangements to share an apartment. Meanwhile, Mariah and Lewis argue more frequently, and she asks Lewis to leave after his affair with Dinah has been revealed.

Lucy's relative, Maude Quick, arrives at the house unexpectedly and bears the news of Lucy's father's death. It has been over a month, but Lucy is unaware of it, never having opened any of her mother's letters. She immediately sends all of her savings home, and Mariah contributes with money too. As she is still angry with her mother, along with the money, she sends a bitter letter blaming her mother for marrying the kind of man who would leave her in debt. Lucy goes through a period of depression, quits her job with Mariah and moves into an apartment with Peggy. She becomes a photographer's secretary and starts to think that Peggy has an affair with Paul. The novel ends with Lucy, alone in her apartment, writing her full name on a blank journal and blurring it with her tears.

Lucy is Kincaid's most accessible work of fiction. In the character of Lucy, Kincaid dramatizes the political, class, and race dynamics. The book can be read as the third installment in Kincaid's fictional recreation of her own life. The protagonist is characterized by her unflinching truthfulness and refusal to yield to sentimentality, and the abbreviated time span (only two years) and the character's isolation from her home environment confer greater immediacy and psychological richness to the story. Lucy,

courageous, reckless, and at times brutally candid, is considered Kincaid's most sympathetic heroine (GEBERT, 1999, p.33-34).

In *Lucy* Jamaica Kincaid intertwines discussions of gender relations with colonial and postcolonial rebellion. The novel could be seen as a continuation of the *Bildungsroman* begun with *Annie John* (1985), although the name of the central character has been altered. *Annie John* ends with the young Annie leaving Antigua for England to study to become a nurse whereas *Lucy* opens with a teenager named Lucy arriving in an unnamed American city that is very much similar to New York, where Lucy will work as an *au pair* for a wealthy family. In both novels we witness the young heroines in the beginning of their journeys, according to Daryl Cumber Dance, usually made by protagonists in West Indian novels into the white and Western world "starting with the journey to England (or more recently to the United States or Canada) [which generally] reinforces the fact that the cold and alien land is not home and that the traveler must divest himself of his Europeanization or his Westernization" (DANCE, 1986, p.18). Dance states that the second journey would be to Africa (or India) and the third a return to the West Indian home. In the third journey author and character often feel too different from the person they once were to fit in at home since they have been too far from "their people, their roots and thus themselves" (DANCE, 1986, p.19).

According to Diane Simmons, on arriving in the wintry American city, Lucy does indeed feel herself to be in a cold and alien land, a place that surely is not her home. On the other hand, she does not come to any awareness of dissociating herself from Europeanization or Westernization. Rather, it is possible to see in *Lucy* a philosophy similar to that developed by Françoise Lionnet (SIMMONS, 1994, p.120).

Lionnet advocates that the very idea of essential racial, sexual, geographic, or cultural oppositions is the result of a European worldview predicated on the existence and manipulation of hierarchical relationships. Thus, to attempt to divest oneself of Europeanization could be interpreted as accepting a philosophical system of hierarchical division, engaging hegemonic power on its own terms and then becoming a term inside that system of power (LIONNET, 1989, p. 6-9).

The stereotype, a limited form of otherness, becomes the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, is the scene of a similar fantasy and defense – the desire for an originality which is again jeopardized by the differences of race, color and culture:

My contention is splendidly caught in Fanon's title *Black Skin White Masks* where the disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit – a grotesque mimicry or 'doubling' that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego. The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations (BHABHA, 1997, p. 298).

Kincaid's *Lucy* does not show a protagonist attempting to choose between two identities, but it does not indicate that Lucy is unaware of this dichotomy. "She is quite aware of the two options most readily available to her: to remain in a place where she cannot really be at home or to journey to a place where she will be a vulnerable outsider" (SIMMONS: 1994, p.121).

Lucy's story, the story of a new generation of coloured migrants in a white Western urban context, resembles the events of Kincaid's own life history. In the novel, we follow Lucy from her arrival in New York to her independent life sharing an

apartment with a friend, and witness her personal struggle against a hostile environment permeated by latent racism. Being very determined, Lucy refuses any contact with her mother, with whom she has a love-hate relationship, and leads a life of discoveries and personal failures that help her to grow. At the end of the book, Lucy writes her full name down in her notebook, and then starts crying, so that her tears erase her name. By doing it, Lucy tries to assert her identity, and then blurs it. This attempt of assertion and the blurring of her name by her tears can be seen as a symbol of her hybrid identity, an identity that is not Caribbean, not English, and not white North-American, being a mix of all these cultures:

Lucy thus rejects the available identities offered by her mother and Antiguan society, the British Empire, her well-meaning employer Mariah, the American man who finds her exotic, and her employers' African-American maid, who thinks her manner of speaking and acting is disgustingly prim and proper. What all of these seem to offer Lucy is a role, based on their perception of her place in a framework of "essential oppositions", whether "racial, cultural, sexual or geographical" (SIMMONS, 1994, p.121).

Set apart from her old world and not yet a part of the new, Lucy can see the manipulative power of both empire and the white world clearly. As a child she had memorized that ode to the daffodil, a flower adored by the British but never seen by West Indian children. When Mariah shows Lucy a daffodil for the first time in her life, Lucy reacts with rage, since she recognizes in the flower a disguised weapon of imperial domination disseminating the notion that everything that is European should be considered better than anything found in the West Indies:

I said, "Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?" As soon as I said this, I felt sorry that I had cast her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes (KINCAID, 1991, p.30).

Lucy is treated kindly by her wealthy employers and their four children, but their six yellow-haired heads remind her of a bouquet of flowers. At the same time that Lucy appreciates their apparently innocent beauty, she also realizes that they, like the daffodils in the poem she was forced to memorize as a child, embody the white Western world that children from her land have been taught to value at the expense of their love for their own world (SIMMONS, 1994, p.124).

As mentioned when discussing Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Kincaid's book is a hybrid construction because it is a product of a borderline between fact and fiction, having a hybrid protagonist and written by a hybrid author. If the novel *were* a Science Fiction book, Lucy could also, as Helga Crane in Larsen's book, be a cyborg, and consequently Kincaid herself. The many diasporas that happened through the centuries, and are still happening, transformed and transform the society of the XXI century in an enormous mosaic formed more and more by pieces with new shapes that look for a space among the old pieces. What needs to be observed, studied and understood is the way these pieces fit into the mosaic. It is important to know if those pieces fit in a violent or in a peaceful way, what happens when these pieces are not able to fit, and what kinds of strategies these pieces use in order to guarantee their places in this multicolored and heterogeneous shaped mosaic.

**ABSTRACT:** This work aims at discussing the hybridization created by the diasporic movements in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1991) and the construction of the identity of postmodern women, according to the theories of some of the most important postmodern authors.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial literature, in-between spaces and identity.

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