

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HYBRID SUBJECT: AN ANALYSIS OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AT THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURES

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RESUMO: Com base nas discussões desenvolvidas por Homi Bhabha e Stuart Hall, este artigo visa investigar a construção do sujeito híbrido em *Memory Mambo*, da escritora cubano-americana Achy Obejas, bem como analisar como os relacionamentos familiares podem ser influenciados por política quando se reside nos cruzamentos de culturas. Apesar de uma família estar distante de sua terra natal, os efeitos de pertencer a uma sociedade diferente podem estar presentes tanto nos relacionamentos de seus membros como no relacionamento entre eles e o novo ambiente. *Memory Mambo* oferece um importante retrato da construção do sujeito híbrido que pode emergir quando se vive em pontos de cruzamento de culturas.

Palavras-chave: sujeito híbrido, relacionamentos familiares, pontos de cruzamento de culturas

Groups that do not belong to mainstream cultures may be forced to follow patterns imposed by colonial and patriarchal societies. Dominant cultures tend to subjugate marginal, non-homogeneous groups. However, these groups need to be heard, acknowledged and embraced. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon states that:

The center no longer completely holds. And, from the decentered perspective, the “marginal” and (...) the “ex-centric” (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that

our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed. (HUTCHEON, 2005, p. 12)

Postmodern discourses provide a relevant opportunity for the inscription of the marginal and the ex-centric. By means of these discourses, the ones who have been silenced by hegemonic cultures are offered an opportunity to be heard. Recognizing the different identities in modern societies, postmodern discourses are capable of displaying this diversity and deconstructing the patterns imposed by monolithic cultures. This acknowledgement may be an instrument through which the inscription of the ex-centric, marginalized subjects may occur.

It is relevant to highlight that there is a close relation between postmodernism and post-colonialism. Ann Brooks states that there is an intersection of feminism, post-colonialism and postmodernism. Brooks claims that “all three movements have in common the process of dismantling or subverting dominant hegemonic discourses. In the process all three seek to challenge traditional epistemologies and to reestablish marginal discourses.” (BROOKS, 1998, p. 105) In this way, feminism, postmodernism and post-colonialism aim at offering marginalized subjects a relevant opportunity to have their voices heard.

In “Signs Taken for Wonders”, Homi Bhabha states that “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (...).”(BHABHA, 1997, p. 34) Bhabha adds that “Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects.” (BHABHA, 1997, p. 34) The recognition and the inscription of hybrid subjects contribute to a more accurate portrayal of modern societies. Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, states that:

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'. (...) The centre of such a study would neither be the 'sovereignty' of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on those 'freak social and cultural displacements'. (BHABHA, 1994, p. 12)

Attempting to contribute to the study of the marginalized and ex-centric subject, the present article aims at investigating the construction of the hybrid subject in Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo*, analyzing how hybridity and politics interfere in family relationships. Even though a family may be distant from its homeland, the effects of belonging to a different culture may influence both the relationships of its members and the relationship between them and their new environment. Analyzing *Memory Mambo* will also be an attempt to understand the effects of dealing with different cultures and the influence of political issues upon family relationships.

In *Memory Mambo*, Juani Casas is a twenty-four-year-old lesbian woman, who was born in Cuba and left for the USA when she was six years old. Juani's memory of her country is patchy, fragmented and, much of it, provided by her relatives. At some points, Juani does not know for sure if the memories are hers or have been constructed by the stories she has been told.

Throughout the novel, the reader is offered a picture of the lives of Cuban-American people and of their attempt to be part of a different society with a different culture. Stuart Hall, in "The Question of Cultural Identity", affirms that the post-modern subject assumes "different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'." (HALL, 2005, p. 598) In *Memory Mambo*, the characters' daily behavior, their festivities, their religious beliefs display their homeland traditions in many occasions but, at the same time, these characters attempt to incorporate the new culture into their lives. Emphasizing this inevitable process of

incorporation of elements of a new culture not only into individual subjectivity but also into national identity, Hall adds that “*Modern nations are all cultural hybrids.*” (HALL, 2005, p. 617. Italics in the original.) Individual and national issues are strong elements in Obejas’s novel.

In *Memory Mambo*, one may notice that Cubans try to embrace American customs, for example, when Juani’s family has people over after Tío Pepe’s funeral. Juani’s relatives live at the crossroads of cultures and they attempt to assimilate the new culture while maintaining their own heritage. When Tío Pepe dies, Juani’s family adopts the American funeral tradition although they don’t actually know for sure how it should be carried out:

Although Cubans don’t normally have people over after funerals, Father Sean had explained to our family that this was an American tradition that made some sense. At first it sounded much like a party to us. Cubans prefer to hold an all-night prayer vigil and bury the body immediately. Mami was concerned that Tía Celia [Tío Pepe’s wife] would think the kind of gathering Father Sean suggested might be offensive to Tío Pepe’s memory. But Father Sean said, “It’s a healing thing. It’s not a celebration, but a reassurance.” I thought it was a good idea, as did Patricia [Juani’s cousin, Tía Zenaida’s daughter], who’d actually been to a few American funerals, so we decided to try it. (OBEJAS, 1996, p. 92) ¹

In their attempt to embrace new customs, Juani’s relatives follow this American religious and social ritual, trying to incorporate the new culture into their lives. Nevertheless, they are not completely aware of all the norms for having people over after someone’s funeral. In addition, this moment of mourning portrays the way Juani’s relatives dwell at the crossroads of cultures. The food that Juani’s relatives take to the meeting display their close ties to the Latino traditions while, somewhat perplexed, they try to perform an American custom:

People from all over the neighborhood brought plates of black beans and rice, guacamole, *yucca con mojo*, freshly baked breads, baskets of fruits, flan and *tres*

leches, and about a dozen other kinds of dessert. I realized most of us were Latino, awkwardly trying to perform an American custom, and didn't really have much sense of what to do. (...) "Do we play music?" asked my father anxiously. "Mozart or something like that, soft?" "No, no music," said Ira, Patricia's husband. (...) "I mean, I think no music..." (p. 92)

Besides living at the crossroads of cultures, Juani searches for memories of her family's history. To a certain extent, she searches for her own identity. She wants to know what really happened, although this proves not to be possible. In her pursuit, Juani even considers going to Cuba, a journey she believes could provide her with the answers she wants.

Concerning identity, another issue that should be taken into account in this investigation of *Memory Mambo* is sexual identity. When the novel begins, Juani's relationship with her girlfriend Gina has already ended. Their relationship and Juani's sexual orientation are significant elements in Juani's self. Being lesbian is obviously part of her identity and influences not only the way she behaves but the way her family behaves towards her as well. Though Juani does not experience any sort of anxiety for being lesbian, her family does not deal with her sexual identity openly. Juani's father, for example, knows that she is homosexual, but he avoids any conversation that could involve Juani's sexuality:

If anyone at a family gathering or party starts in on when I'm going to find the right man and get married, I can always count on my father to rescue me with a quick comment about women's liberation, or there being no man alive good enough for his daughter. His motivation isn't to spare me discomfort but to save himself. Because he's afraid I won't lie, it's vital to him that I not be provoked into the truth. In my family, this is always the most important thing. (p. 80)

Probably, Juani's father would be embarrassed if she assumed her homosexuality in front of other members of the family. Since he knows that Juani will not lie, he seeks to justify the fact that his daughter does not have any boyfriend. Juani's father does not

want her to verbalize her sexual orientation in order to avoid any situation or commentary that could be unpleasant to him.

Juani's parents deal with her homosexuality in different ways. Nevertheless, both of them are uncomfortable with their daughter's sexual identity. It is not easy for Xiomara, Juani's mother, to accept her daughter's sexual orientation. Xiomara's Catholic background seems to have contributed to her difficulty in dealing with Juani's homosexuality:

Her [Xiomara's] basic reaction is Catholic: she is mystified but defers, both to her vague knowledge of the church's condemnation, and to the fact of my existence. I think in her heart of her hearts she wonders, if this is supposed to be morally disfiguring, why do I seem so clear and reliable? My mother meets my friends and lovers and cannot hide her confusion: She wants to dislike them but can't. (...) Embarrassment is part of our tension, and of our ever increasing silences. (p. 79)

Eventually Juani's sexual orientation leads to a void in her relationship with her own mother, exemplified by embarrassment and increasing silences. In *Nosotros in USA: Literatura, Etnografía e Geografías de Resistência*, Sonia Torres states that Xiomara is aware of Juani's homosexuality and, although they only talk through half-words, Gina, Juani's former girlfriend, is accepted as Juani's friend, though she endeavors to hide their real relationship in front of the other members of the community. (TORRES, 2001, p. 154) Juani is lesbian in a community whose origins are in a homophobic society. Sonia Torres adds that "The intersection between the support to the social improvements of the revolution and the repudiation of Cuban homophobic politics has been particularly difficult to negotiate, especially for the Cubans that are, at the same time, homosexual." (TORRES, 2001, p. 158.)² Cuban society is so homophobic that Juani's cousin Titi, who lives in Cuba, desperately wants to go to the United States.

Through her cousin Tomás Joaquín, Juani learns that Titi has had relationships: “It’s not that Titi hasn’t had lovers, because between the lines of Tomás Joaquín’s stories – in which Titi’s ‘best friend’ changes from time to time – I know (...) that she’s been loved and has loved, powerfully and jealously.” (p. 75-76) When Juani’s family discusses about her cousin, they affirm that Titi wants to be free, but they are not able to say the reason why she desires to be free. On the other hand, Juani is the one capable of understanding her cousin’s attitudes. For her, Titi’s reasons are not related to political issues. In fact, her motivation to leave Cuba has to do to with her necessity to be openly herself. According to Juani, Titi needs to be loved in daylight and, in the United States, she may be might be free to express her own sexuality:

What no one will say (...) is that Titi’s addiction to the notion of escape, her desire to come to the U.S., has nothing whatsoever to do with any of that patriotic crap, but with a whole other, perhaps, even crazier idea – that once here, she might be free to be queer. (p. 76)

Even though Juani and Titi are miles apart and separated by political reasons, Juani feels connected to her cousin. Juani is capable of understanding Titi’s necessity of being loved openly. In spite of the fact of living in a free country, Juani experiences some of the issues of someone being closeted. All of Juani’s girlfriends have been closeted, always concerned with other people’s opinions. Juani’s former girlfriend Gina, the one she loved the most and still does, could not manage to come out:

Even though I’m here, in what is supposed to be the land of the free, I share this desire with my cousin Titi. Every lover I’ve ever had has been closeted, has always instantly looked over her shoulder when we’ve kissed on a street corner or train station platform. This was especially, and most painfully, true of Gina. (p. 76)

In their affair, Gina was not capable to demonstrate intimacy in public. Gina’s refusal to assume her homosexuality has reached significant levels, as she does not even provide a word to classify her relationship with Juani. It is ironical that Juani and Titi

share the same kind of problems, though due to different reasons, when related to express intimacy openly in their relationships:

It wasn't as if she [Gina] pretended to be heterosexual. (...) Whenever she introduced me to anybody, she had no word for me, not *friend* or *lover*, just *Juani*. She'd greet me with a kiss, but always on the cheek, and squeeze my hand, then always let go. I tried hard to understand and respect her boundaries, but they were so different from mine – and to make things worse, Gina refused to talk about any of this. (p. 76-77. Italics in the original.)

It is interesting to mention that Gina is an *independista*, struggling for Puerto Rican sovereignty, and even works in political campaigns. Besides, her politically correct attitudes also involve music, food, clubs, and clothes. Due to Gina's politics, for instance, they did not listen to old salsa and malesung boleros, "because they encouraged women to romanticize instead of working on real relationship" (p. 116); they did not eat California grapes or lettuce because of the boycotts; they only went to lesbian bars with mixed races clienteles or to salsa nights; and they "only wore clothes made with natural fibers – although, whatever their fabric content, absolutely no clothes from Asia which could have been made with child labor." (p. 117) However, Gina could not manage to come out, which clearly disturbed Juani: "'It's nobody's business,' she'd [Gina] say. 'Why should my life be an open book to complete strangers?' 'Yeah, but why deny your life in the process?' I'd [Juani] ask (...)." (p. 77) By denying it, Gina's behaviour may be seen as a way of depreciating the issue of sexuality.

To a certain extent, Gina attempts to separate sexual identity from politics, which seems impossible. Adrienne Rich, in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", considers "heterosexuality as a political institution which disempowers women". (RICH, 1993, p. 227) Rich declares that she has chosen the terms lesbian existence and lesbian continuum rather than lesbianism, due to its "clinical and limiting

ring”. Rich adds that lesbian existence is also “a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance.” (RICH, 1993, p. 239) Gina could have used her connexions with political issues in order to give voice to oppressed same-sex oriented people that have been silent by patriarchal societies. Sonia Torres states that although Gina is “fanatical for everything that is politically correct, she is not able to assume her homosexuality in public.” (TORRES: 2001, 157)³ Though Gina is engaged in political causes, ironically, she could not manage to come out.

The fact that Gina could not manage to come out interferes in her relationship with Juani. As Bianca Cody Murphy states, in “Difference and Diversity: Gay and Lesbian Couples”, “Stage differences in coming out affect the relationship of same-sex couples. Each of the partners may make what feels like a personal decision about coming out, but the consequences of such a decision affect the couple” (MURPHY, 1997, p. 349) Juani feels uncomfortable with Gina’s decline to come out.

Taking into consideration Gina’s own words and behavior, it seems that she displays internalized homophobia. Her refusal to assume her sexual identity in public may indicate that she cannot cope with her own sexual orientation. Besides, she may have been utilizing her political struggle for Puerto Rico as a way to overshadow the importance of coming out:

“Look, I’m not interested in being a *lesbian*, in separating politically from my people,” she’d [Gina] say to me [Juani], her face hard and dark. “What are you talking about? Issues of *sexual identity*? While Puerto Rico is a colony? While Puerto Rican apologists are trying to ram statehood down our throats with legislative tricks and sleights of hands? You think I’m going to sit around and discuss *sexual identity*? Nah, Juani, you can do that – you can have that navel-gazing discussion.” (p. 77. Italics in the original.)

As Gina so ardently claims that the political cause regarding Puerto Rico is more important than issues of sexual identity, it seems she attempts to minimize issues of her

own sexuality so that she can utilize this as an excuse for not coming out. By refusing to assume her homosexuality, Gina, intentionally or not, might have diminished the relevance of being able to express one's sexual identity, a right that Juani's cousin Titi has eagerly been looking forward to and has been denied in her motherland.

On the other hand, it should also be considered that Gina may be preoccupied with the consequences of coming out in a community whose origins are in a homophobic society. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa claims that:

Most of us [lesbians of color] unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect [homosexuality] of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. (ANZALDÚA, 1999, p. 42)

Maybe Gina was afraid that, once she had come out in public, she would be labeled once again, since her Puerto Rican origins are already motives for suffering prejudice. However, this time, she would be labeled by her own community. Gina was attempting to fight for Puerto Rico, but she could not be sure if her community would accomplish the same for her. Gloria Anzaldúa adds that "For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality." (ANZALDÚA, 1999, p. 41) Perhaps Gina was not ready to accomplish this rebellion openly and to put herself in a position in which she may be abandoned by her own compatriots.

Moreover, it should be highlighted the relevance of Juani's relationship with Gina concerning her own connection with Cuba. Juani becomes aware of her relation with her motherland through her relationship with Gina, who maintains a much closer relationship with her Puerto Rican origins: "And I realized (...) that (...) I [Juani] was jealous that she [Gina] and her friends knew so much about my country, and I knew so

little, really, not just about Cuba, but about Puerto Rico and everywhere else.” (p. 133)

Gina’s friends also ask Juani if she were a “good” or a “bad” Cuban. Sonia Torres states that from this confrontation Juani realizes that, in fact, she does not know her Latin-American roots. (TORRES, 2001, p. 156) In fact, political issues are significantly present in Juani and Gina’s relationship. As Isabel Alvarez Borland states in *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona*:

Juani’s Latino friends (mostly Puerto Ricans) have already decided that the Cubans in the United States are “worms” since they left a regime that in her friends’ eyes was more equitable to minorities than the current U.S. society. Moreover, Juani’s Cuban background is one of the reasons that her love relationship with Gina eventually comes to an end – Gina is the object of racial “Puerto Rican jokes” among Juani’s family; Juani, in turn, is the center of “Cuban exile jokes” among Gina’s friends. Both women feel unfairly treated, yet neither does anything to remedy the situation. (BORLAND, 1998, p. 119)

Political issues and sexuality are intertwined in *Memory Mambo*. Both Juani’s and Gina’s backgrounds perform important roles in their relationship. One of Gina’s friends, for instance, shows her prejudice calling Juani a *gusana*, which literally means “worm”, a pejorative term used to refer to Cuban exiles, a reference to “the shape of the duffel bags used by the first wave of [Cuban] refugees, who left by planes or ferries”. (p. 242)

It is relevant to point out that Cuban and Puerto Rican communities demonstrate prejudice towards each other. Even though these communities are in a new environment that may be hostile to both of them, they demonstrate ingrained prejudice in their discourses and actions. It should be observed that political issues clearly affected Juani and Gina’s relationship. The way each of them is treated by the community of the other was a significant problem for them, since neither of them defended the other one from those disrespectful behaviors. In fact, when Gina broke up with Juani, one of the reasons she gave to do that was the treatment she received from Juani’s family:

What Gina said was that she was tired of coming over to my family's house and having to put up with my relatives, especially the men, making Puerto Rican jokes all the time, acting like Cubans were god's gift to the world. (...) She said we were racists and classists and that we only made fun of Puerto Ricans because most of them were darker and poorer than us. (p. 122)

Gina and Juani's relationship was deeply affected by their different national and cultural affiliations. Besides having to face problems that any couple would have to deal with, Gina and Juani had also to cope with racial and political issues that were beyond their reach. Bianca Cody Murphy states:

Ethnic and racial minority gay men and lesbian women live in three communities: the gay and lesbian community, the racial/ethnic community, and the dominant mainstream society. Although each community offers some support, each has its own expectations and demands, which often conflict. The tension of living in these three communities, in all of which one feels marginalized, adds to identities difficulties, which can be particularly troublesome if there are racial and cultural differences between the partners. (MURPHY, 1997, p. 353)

Same-sex oriented people may be exposed to tenser situations if they also belong to ethnic and racial minorities. The fact that they are part of three minority groups increases the probability of their suffering discriminatory treatments, even by their own peers. Isabel Alvarez Borland affirms that *Memory Mambo* "provokes the reader (...) into thinking that the issue of sexual identity is fraught with complexity, and that it cannot be understood without first taking into account others factors of identity such as ethnicity and culture (...)." (BORLAND, 1998, p. 120) Inhabiting different communities may be crucial in the construction of one's identity. Discourses that deal with issues of sexual identity should take into consideration not only gender and sexual orientation but also other specificities of the communities in which the subjects are inscribed.

As this article attempted to discuss, if a person with specific origins is inserted in another culture, this contributes to the formation of his/her subjectivity. Living in different cultures may interfere in how this subject is going to perceive himself/herself as well as the environment and the people around him/her. As previously pointed out, this negotiation may even include, for example, social and religious rituals, which may be the case of having people over after someone's funeral.

In *Memory Mambo*, Juani and her family dwell at the crossroads of cultures, which, in a way, forces them to live in constant awareness of their hybridity. They live in the United States and try to embrace the new culture's customs. At the same time, they try to maintain their own traditions while incorporating some customs that belong to the mainstream culture. Living in two cultures defines them.

Besides living at the crossroads of cultures, Juani has to deal with issues related to her own sexuality. Her community is originated in a homophobic society and her homosexuality affects the way her family treats her. *Memory Mambo*, by Cuban-American writer Achy Obejas, fosters the discussion over the issues of hybridity and sexuality, displaying an interesting portrait of groups which do not belong to the homogeneous monolith. This article attempts to contribute to the study of postmodern and post-colonial representations of the female subject who dwells at the crossroads of cultures.

ABSTRACT: Based on the discussions developed by Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, this article aims at investigating the construction of the hybrid subject in *Memory Mambo*, by Cuban-American writer Achy Obejas, as well as analyzing how family relationships may be influenced by politics when subjects dwell at the crossroads of

cultures. Even though a family may be distant from its homeland, the effects of belonging to a different society may be present both in the relationships of its members and between them and the new environment. *Memory Mambo* provides an important portrait of the construction of the hybrid subject that may emerge when living at the crossroads of cultures.

Keywords: hybrid subject, family relationships, crossroads of cultures

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¹ Subsequent quotations from this novel refer to the same edition and will appear by page number in the text.

² My translation. Original text: "A interseção entre o apoio aos avanços sociais da revolução e o repúdio à política homofóbica de Cuba tem sido particularmente difícil de negociar, especialmente para cubanos que são, ao mesmo tempo, homossexuais."

³ My translation. Original text: "Gina (...), apesar de ser fanática por tudo que é politicamente correto, ela não consegue assumir publicamente sua homossexualidade".