LITERATURE AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Abstract

Cultural patterns in fiction cannot be understood as isolated events; they belong to a context and have to be viewed holistically. While a cultural anthropologist is an active observer and recorder of facts through time and space, a fiction writer presents facts, happened or imaginary, subjectively and judgmentally. The former approaches a human being holistically, analyzing all social and cultural elements that have shaped him through time and space, while the latter has a reductionist view at the time and place described in the book.

The article raises the importance of the interdisciplinary research and the need for humanistic teachers and students to see literature and cultural anthropology as informing each other. This confluence would enhance the attention given to vanishing, primitive or ethnic cultures. Also, this convergence between the objective lens of the cultural anthropologist and the subjective perspective of the writer would allow the reader to have fewer misconceived ideas about cultural patterns and behaviors.

Keywords: cultural anthropology, literature, holistic versus reductionist view, objective, subjective

Culture is not only a passive way of seeing the world and a reflection of common or different cultural experiences; it is also a dynamic way of making and changing the world. It is a fact that cultures can enable, liberate, empower or/and can obstruct, oppress and disempower. The more truthful and diverse the cultural experiences and practices are depicted in fiction, the more they can contribute to the holistic understanding and interpretation of human beings. A human being is a mixture of social and cultural elements that have shaped him/her in a particular time and place.

So, cultural anthropology studies a wide variety of traditions, values, social norms and cultural practices that contribute to the formation of the society described in fiction. In other words, a researcher interested in the connection between literature and cultural anthropology should look across time and space in order to understand that behaviors, traditions and phenomena present in a literary piece of work cannot be understood as isolated events; holistically speaking, they have to belong to a context. Such cultural patterns have to be viewed as a part of a whole social system in order to be explained, and cannot be understood by simply describing them. The Japanese tea ceremony, for instance, tells us much about who the Japanese are as a nation and about their culture. Modes of dress vary widely from culture to culture; dress and interaction in competing cultures show connection with previous culture or assimilation with recent culture. Mind-body dichotomy versus wholeness in fiction, religion, dress and the body, food, culture and gender, etc. are just several cultural aspects that can link anthropology and literature.

Culture is an expression of a period, class, community, population. A literary work can speak about a subculture, that is, a minority culture versus a mass culture or a counterculture. A close attention to its anthropological aspects must take into account not

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only the aspects presented in the book. A fiction writer cannot take the job of an anthropologist.

An anthropologist, when focusing on a segment of society, analyzes, from a scientific point of view, a wide range of cultural aspects, such as arts, attitudes, behavior patterns, customs and beliefs, codes, cuisine, gestures, manners, morals, norms, physical/biological features, habits and rituals, sex and gender, politics, language, sports, meanings and symbols, technology, values and ways of life, etc. A cultural anthropologist is a scientist who sees that segment of society through time and space. He is an active observer and recorder, not a judger of real facts.

Fiction, on the other hand, presents a subjective world resembling the one we live in and which is under the objective lens of a cultural anthropologist; it might contain events that never happened.

So, how can anthropology and literature/film inform each other? What can cultural anthropologists learn from fiction/films? And what inspiration can fiction writers get from cultural anthropology?

A key factor is the cultural relativism. While cultural anthropologists are not judgers, fiction writers can make value judgments about cultural differences. Another factor is the holistic perspective of a cultural anthropologist versus the reductionist view of a writer. The cultural anthropologist sees the interrelationships among different aspects of culture (history, linguistics, politics and economic systems, etc.); in other words, he sees the system as a whole (physical, biological, social, economic, mental and linguistic features, etc.) to determine how that community behaves. Thus, for instance, to understand the Japanese tea ceremony, a cultural anthropologist looks at the entire context of the Japanese society, e.g. at Japanese religion, aesthetics and history, as well as at the economy, social relations and the politics of gender.

As humanists, we might not be interested in such things. We might, however, be interested and investigate the differences between enculturation and acculturation as traditional and liberal ways of thinking and behaving, adopted by the older Japanese versus the new generation, or by the native Japanese versus the immigrants in the process of understanding this Japanese cultural habit.

According to Charnov, books and films can be historical records but also means to participate and transmit to others the cultural heritage, which would otherwise be unknown to a reader of fiction, who is less interested in the objective and scientific field of anthropology. It is true that we can question the objectivity of these written and visual documents. The main reason I find important in teaching books with high anthropological components is "the nature of anthropology, a discipline born of colonialism – largely a white and male endeavor." Boas "was noted for his interest in training 'natives', whether they be Inuit, Native- American, or African-American, to collect stories and material objects from their home communities." This training, Charnov continues in "The Performative Visual Anthropology…", was founded on the belief that

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the researcher's "inside access would enable more accurate and dimensional understanding of the culture under study."

Recording songs, customs, tales, superstitions, dances, rituals in books and films, through this confluence of anthropology and literary studies allows for interaction between contending cultures, for cultural wholeness, and not for cultural dichotomy, e.g. mainstream – the Other, male-female, etc. This confluence would show the importance of reading books about vanishing or primitive cultures, about diverse ethnic groups. Irrespective of being an objective outsider or a subjective participant of the community, the value, even small or subjective, transmitted through the book or film, still stands up as anthropological documentation.

Anthropological literature and films are thus modes of aesthetic expression, a pleasant and informative means of getting into contact with other people's culture.

Literary anthropology is "the study of people and their cultural manifestations through literature" (Erickson 95). Wolford suggests that literary anthropology logically connects the study of culture shared by literary studies and humanistic anthropology. "Literature can provide superb introductions to social and cultural customs, beliefs, artifacts, behavior, and roles." (1265).

To what extent, can literature help us "to obtain a clearer picture of society and its culture? How does literature reflect the social structure of a society and its concomitant behavior patterns? How does literature complement, contain or contradict assumptions about culture…? (Erikson 99)

How much of a literary work is ethnography and how much is fiction? The anthropological turn in literary studies with its focus in interdisciplinary research, which allows for communicating with both the past and the future, is still interrogated. As an academic teacher, I agree with Irene Portis Winner (Poyatos viii) who values narrative literature as anthropological documentation, i.e. the anthropological information relating to the ethnic culture revealed in the text. Authors like E. Wharton, "who have tried to portray their cultures, interweave personal experiences with historical truth; … anthropological terms are used throughout the novel. Wharton in *The Age of Innocence* depicts New York society in these terms, discussing society's 'rites', 'taboos', 'idols', 'tribal disciplines', etc. which makes the reader examine the book's characters from the perspective of an ethnographer while at the same time attending to the drama of the story." (vix)

Portis Winner looks at writers as anthropologists and readers of facts. Writers more and more use perspectives from anthropology as a way of structuring the story. Katie Trumpener and James M. Nyce in "The Recovered Fragments" illustrate several anthropological perspectives in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Ellen Olenska acts as a catalyst for the New York people, mostly Newland Archer, to perceive the culture they belong to, the customs which they want to preserve, despite the mask of innocence that hides the hypocrisy. 'Innocence', as the critic argues is "the first standard that Newland questions. This innocence makes May able to keep her husband. This civilized concept

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and others, such as courtship and marriage make Archer think of the "savage rites of primitive tribes"; the more able he is "to examine it, the more alienated he feels." (395) Although Ellen was born in New York, she feels a stranger the way Newland starts seeing it when he manages to detach and view this society's rites, rituals and taboos with the eyes of an objective anthropologist. The way Mary embodies "the narrowness of New York values", Ellen, in Newland's eyes, seems to symbolize "a freedom from social rules" (396). The ending of the novel shows us a traditional Newland who nostalgically recalls the moments of his youth when he became alienated from his own culture. Ellen, caught between the American and European culture, is alone to realize that "he will never be able to free himself from his own culture." (169).

Clifford Geertz argued for interpreting culture as if it were a text, "hence the 'revitalization' of the cultural contexts… [literature] was able not merely to represent cultures, but also to be representative of them – as if an object of ethnography." (cited in Evans 429)

Obviously, writing has acquired an 'anthropological dimension', which is on the increase; literature both reflects and promotes diversity.

On the other hand, Evans argues that literature can also be a bad resource for understanding different cultures: "If literature is understood to be a part of culture, reading literature is obviously going to point us to something like cultural studies; however, if we are to say that culture no longer exists as we knew it, then not only will our understanding of contemporary literature change, but so too will our relations to literature from other places and other times." (439)

Writers' personal ethnographic experiences certainly add, as Erikson thinks as well, to the reader's cultural empowerment. But it is also true that texts can 'sell' wrong, misconceived ideas about certain cultures and peoples. Literature has a huge role in this sense to make justice or injustice to a culture. We should not forget the fact that while the anthropologist presents a true and detached view of the world, based on historical, social and cultural documents, the writer has a biased view upon a subjective reality from where he gets inspiration even if he researches the documents of the time that are described in the book. The anthropological writings are fictions, things recreated from an existing reality – while there is no clear line where anthropology ends and fiction begins.

Ruth Behar outlines two main trends that have emerged over the past twenty-five years; the first, is " the auto-ethnography", which is now "more fully woven into the narrative" in ethnographic writing; the second is a shift toward 'insider' or 'diasporic' ethnography in which ethnographers work "with a deep sense of connection to the places and people they write about."[2] (cited in Byler)

Linda Arthur speaks about the connection of female bodies and dress code to religious communities. Religion can constrain the female bodies of their members through dress, in American religious communities. Because dress controls the external

[2] Behar, Ruth. "Ethnography in a Time of Blurred Genres" in *Anthropology and Humanism* 32.2 (2007): 145 155; http://www.culanth.org/curated_collections/5-literature-writing-anthropology

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body, it has the potential to become a symbol of social control. "Dress immediately signals the religious affiliation of community members to those inside and outside the communities. Within a religious community, strict conformity to internal codes typically becomes interpreted as an outward symbol of inward religious piety"[3]. (cited in Rosser)

Most religions apply "a dress code more strictly to women than to men since dress becomes a mode of controlling women's sexuality and bodies." (Rossner) As the critic illustrates, "a woman's deviation from the dress code expected by the community and its leader demonstrates contempt for community values on the part of both the woman and her husband. Since control of female sexuality within religious communities becomes a central concern to members, dress, emotional expression, and diet all become aspects of the body which reflect sexual and religious propriety." (Rossner) Therefore, the widely varying experiences of empowerment (e.g. through reproduction) and the rejection of "hegemonic notions of the female body." (Rossner)

Silhol's advice about the connection between literary criticism and literary anthropology was that the latter should "keep the original formula in mind, Conscious/Unconscious, and never estimate unconscious desire. Always remember reading is not analysis, and in your research distinguish between the text as discourse of a subject, remaining aware that meaning is not simply 'there' but is always constructed, so that the analyst also has to reconstruct the portrait of the subject he/she is examining." (304) Literature should be, he continues, a source of knowledge and a source of pleasure. The anthropologist writer gives this illusion of truth, being both an analyst and a dreamer. He is a re-constructor of the objective and scientific anthropological reality, in which he makes us identify with that anthropological reality.

Symbols can be assigned powerful cultural and emotional meanings and may have different meanings for different people in different cultures: "A boy carries the bridal slippers which the bride will change into at the altar – they signify purity and cleanliness in Seventh Day Adventist weddings." (Heider 100). Heider also speaks about Swastika, which is, for instance, a common Buddhist and Hindu symbol, but can also symbolize inhuman barbarism for the Jews and other nations and strength and unity for Germans (Cf. 120)

Different cultures exhibit opposing cultural themes. Issei as first-generation immigrants in USA, born in Japan, versus Nissei, the second-generation immigrants, born in USA, are a pair of cultural opposites that can be analyzed from an anthropological point of view in Hisaye Yamamoto's collection of short stories entitled *Seventeen Syllables*.

Marriage, as a reflector of cultural principles, can be analyzed according to the degree of individual freedom in choosing one's lifetime partner. (Heider 234) Arranged marriages practiced in Japan and China, for instance, are based on alliance-forming exchanges, and not on love, and are facilitated by marriage brokers whose job is to find two families with compatible educational, social and religious status. Western love results

[3] Arthur Linda (ed). *Religion, Dress and the Body,* 2001

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in independent marriages, irrespective of educational, social and religious standing of the two families.

Novels and films can be studied for love or marriage schemes. When studying these schemes, we should pay attention to culture, time period, gender, age, etc. We can find remarks that highlight the vulnerability of a joint Hindu family, for instance in the film *Dadi's Family* (1980): "There are a hundred things that can divide a family" or, on the contrary, the strength and the role of the family in economically difficult times. (Cf. Heider 262)

At the opposite pole, we have the increased rate of illicit love affairs and of divorce in western cultures. After marriage, children usually leave their parents' home to live separately. However, the parents-children relationship is still very close in Christian countries.

Muslim women, on the other hand, are not allowed to marry outside their faith and culture. *Hidden Heart* (2008) is a documentary film about mixed marriage, a taboo for most Muslims. The American films, by contrast, present these inter-faith marriages between people of different skin color or social standing in an attempt to idealize democracy and the importance of love and communication in a couple. *Far from Heaven* (2002) has the housewife's flirtation with her African-American gardener, while *Our Family Wedding* (2010) presents an African-American guy who plans to marry a Mexican-American girl, but they must meet each other's families.

Conclusion

In the process of altering reality, we have filmmakers first and then fiction writers. They use more effective scenes to appeal to the film viewer while the fiction writer is more anchored in the real world. Speaking as both an anthropologist and a book-writer/ filmmaker is hardly possible. A book-writer/filmmaker must represent anthropological reality as closely and faithfully as possible, while not forgetting the subjective, personal stain that he/she has to add in order to call it fiction or film, even if a documentary.

When we speak about the convergence between anthropology and literature, we also speak about the traditional gulf between theory and practice. I think that our engagement with anthropology in literary texts has been given more attention lately due to internationalization. Crossing physical borders imposes crossing metaphorical borders. Thus, the need of anthropology to be treated as a genre of literature and the need of literature to be a source of anthropological analysis of culture.

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