

## Towards a Horizontal Critical Literary Reading of Hughes' and Angelou's Poems

Khaoula HAKKOUM

Mohammed Seghir HALIMI

Kasdi Merbah University-Ouargla-Algeria

### Abstract

As a reader of literary discourse, one endeavours to explore and understand the similarities with and differences from the other in that literary discourse is laden with the authors' and characters'/speakers' experiences. Readers allow themselves either a centripetal or a centrifugal reading with reference to their implication in the text and to their different backgrounds. As a result, this view created binary oppositions such as *the* self versus the other, male versus female and oppressor versus oppressed. Therefore, the study of literary discourse should attempt to generate a horizontal account for human relationships beyond any vertical social, cultural, racial, sexual and even ideological considerations.

**Key Words:** literary discourse, background, gender, the other.

### الملخص

يحاول قراء الخطاب الأدبي أن يستكشفوا ويفهموا أوجه الشبه و الاختلاف مع الآخر حيث أن هذا الخطاب ينقل تجارب الكتاب و الشخصيات. تختلف قراءات الخطاب الأدبي من قارئ لأخر على حسب خلفية كل فرد. و من هذا المنطلق تنتج ثنائيات مثل الأنا و الغير و رجل و امرأة الخ. و عليه فإن دراسة الخطاب الأدبي يجب أن تتجه أكثر للحصول على قراءة تتجاوز الفروقات الاجتماعية و الثقافية و العرقية و الجنسية و حتى الأيديولوجية بين الأفراد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخطاب الأدبي، خلفية، الجنس، الآخر.

### Introduction

In the increasingly globalized age, the teaching/learning of literature seems challenging because of the intense rhythm of the political, economic and social changes that marked the shift into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These social metamorphoses and psychological disturbances created miscellaneous opinions and attitudes *vis-à-vis* Man's perception of himself within a distorted human being's/race's constellation. This view created binary oppositions which could be better represented through dialectical views between the *self* and the *other*. In reality, this opposition has become the matrix of the world order, which makes people having different cultural backgrounds, ideologies, skin pigmentations, gender, confessional ideologies, social standards, etc, react almost vertically but not necessarily similarly. Their perception would be certainly different and thus their construction of meaning would bear essentially different linguistic and/or cultural connotations. Therefore, the study literature would, undoubtedly, generate a horizontal account for human relationships beyond any vertical social, cultural, racial, sexual and even ideological considerations. Thus, reading literary discourse requires particular critical approaches which would, eventually, enhance both the English native speaker's and the non-native speaker's knowledge and understanding of each other's mind.

### The Reception of the Literary Discourse

Reading literary discourse is a dialectic process between its producer/writer and its receiver/reader. The writer and the reader do not necessarily share the same background. Therefore, it is noteworthy that as readers, whether native or non native, come '*equipped*' with their stock of experience<sup>1</sup> (Selden 1997:56) when interpreting any text. As a result, the process of interpreting the

<sup>1</sup> Prior experience with other texts.

literary discourse can be described as *interactive* between one's stock of experience and the linguistic input in the text (Ibid). The readers should know about themselves, about their very nature as human beings; they should know that the modern writers deal with the inner being more than with the social being, and since their (the writers') literary production is not always an imitation of something real which is as well an imitation of a universal concept or idea that Plato called "the really real", but a *liberating force* as it is agreed upon by most Marxist and New Historicist literary theorists, they look for adequate and convincing answers inside themselves.

People's experience, in a world where individual's definition of himself is most often blurred, shows that the fact of being a lonely "outsider" as far as the others' cultures are concerned is no longer exclusive to a particular segment of a given social constellation, but a Global issue. In this perspective, one would say that any process of interpretation does not depend only on intrinsic<sup>2</sup> elements of the text but also on extrinsic<sup>3</sup> ones.

Reading a literary text, hereafter, is not static since readers are expected to depart from the text itself, and then relate the experiences carried in the discourse to their real experiences. The construction of its meaning(s) differs from one reader to another. They may, consequently, be in either a centripetal, a centrifugal position or in both positions, simultaneously referring to their background. They may raise individual and/or collective horizons of expectations, as well. Holub defines the horizon of expectations as: "an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a system of references or a mindset that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text" (1984:59). This will depend on their personal (one's unique identity) and collective identity (gender, geographical distribution, religion, race, ideological confessions).

In fact, the intrinsic and extrinsic elements, reader's position towards the text, individual and collective horizons of expectations and the individual and/or collective identities are the factors which shape the attitude of the reader towards the experience carried in the text. For example, male readers may display *sympathy* with feminist characters while female readers are expected to display more *empathy* with the same characters. Despite that, one cannot neglect the fact that female readers may only sympathize with feminist characters.

### Data collection

To examine the Algerian readers' reception of the discourse of the oppressed in literary texts, a questionnaire has been administered to a mixed<sup>4</sup> group of twenty (20) Anglo-Saxon literature Master students (Ouargla University). The sample encompasses fifteen (15) female students and five (05) male students<sup>5</sup>. The selected students were required to read *I, too* (2012) and *When I think of Myself* (1994), two African-American poems written, respectively, by Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou. The selected texts reveal the oppression the African-Americans had undergone during the civil war and after it. The African-Americans used to be considered as slaves and inferior to their white masters. The poems are expected to stimulate the reader's interaction with both content and form. Upon reading, the students are required to answer questions on the basis of their reaction towards the experiences of the speakers in the two poems.

In reality, the students' reaction is oriented by the way the questionnaire was designed. The latter was divided into three sections<sup>6</sup> as follows:

- 1- *Before you read*
- 2- *As you read*
- 3- *After you read*

<sup>2</sup> Intrinsic refers to the textual elements which are found in the text itself.

<sup>3</sup> Extrinsic elements refer to the elements which are found outside the text. In this paper, the reader's background and schemata are the elements addressed mainly.

<sup>4</sup> By a mixed group, it is meant a group which encompasses both male and female students.

<sup>5</sup> The selected sample is a non-random. The group is ready-made; this type of sampling is selected to avoid any extraneous variable which may affect the results of the study. Also, the number of master students is limited as a result the researcher had to take the sample as it is without any further selection or regrouping.

<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire follows the PDP (pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading) framework.

Section One is to check the extent to which the students are familiar with African-American literary texts during their study course. Section Two is designed to examine the students' comprehension of and reaction to the text. The last section is intended to examine the factors which affect the students' different reactions towards the text. It is necessary to mention that not all questions are of direct relevance to this paper; hence, there will be only four questions whose results will be analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

**Section One: Before You Read**

**Q3: To what extent is the following statement true: “The experiences reflected in African-American literature are close to my own life experience”?**<sup>7</sup>

- a) True    b) Untrue

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
<i>Male</i>	02	02
<i>Female</i>	04	06
<i>Total</i>	06	08

The aim of this question is to find out whether the selected students find that there is a shared experience with the African-American individual. Most of the students have opted for “*b untrue*” while five students have opted for “*a true*”. The students' inverse answers are almost equal. This fact signifies that the students' life experiences and their views to the other are different. People who answered with “*true*” are readers who either have undergone the same experience of marginalization as the African-Americans or readers who accept to be in exactly the position of the other.

**Section Two: As you Read**

**Q6: As you read poem A (*I, too*), do you find the “I” used in the poem includes you?**

- a) Yes    b) No

	<b>a</b>	<b>B</b>
<i>Male</i>	01	03
<i>Female</i>	08	08
<i>Total</i>	09	11

The objective of this question is to investigate whether the students react to the experience carried in the poem basing on their gender differences. The speaker in *I, too* (2012) is a male, but, surprisingly, 3 out of 4 male students have answered with “*No*” although it would have made more sense and been closer to expectations<sup>8</sup> if the male students would have provided a positive answer “*Yes*”. Female students, on their part, have been divided into two camps equally; eight feeling included by the “*I*” in the poem and the other eight not included. The expectations that the number of male students answering with “*yes*” would be greater than the females' were defied. The students' answers to this question are more *individual identity-based answers*: they make appeal to their personal stock of experience instead of their collective one. The male students allow themselves a centrifugal reading, i.e., they read the text as outsiders.

**Q7: As you read poem B, do you find the “I” used in the poem includes you?**

- a) Yes    b) No

	<b>A</b>	<b>b</b>
<i>Male</i>	00	04
<i>Female</i>	06	10
<i>Total</i>	06	14

<sup>7</sup>The two questions previous to this one are about the number of African-American literary texts the student has read so far. Some of the students have answered that they read none and they skipped directly to Sections Two. It is for this reason that the total number of the answers is less than the number of the sample.

<sup>8</sup> The expectations are that the male readers would feel concerned with the situation of the male speaker in the poem.

The answers to this question are expected to confirm the results obtained in the previous one. 0 % of the male students answered with "Yes". The male students could not again put themselves in speaker's shoes. They are still in the centrifugal position. Interestingly, more than half of the female students did not feel included by the "I" in the second poem even though the speaker is a female despite the fact that a greater number of them put themselves in a centrifugal position in the previous question. One may say that the real readers, with reference to this question, do not feel concerned with the question of racism. One may also state that the experience of the speaker in *I, too* is harder and the tone is overtly raising challenge as in:

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen"

Conversely, the tone in *When I think of Myself* is less challenging. The speaker sounds more helpless before her plight accepting the stigmatizing treatment of her young master for the sake of making a living as in:

Sixty years in these folks' world,  
The child I works for calls me girl,  
I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake.

Obviously, one feels solidarity with a challenging person who sees the future hopefully as the speaker in *I, too* does .

	a	b	c
<b>Male</b>	01	00	03
<b>Female</b>	04	08	04
<b>Total</b>	05	08	07

**Q10: Do you find that the speaker in poem A and the speaker in poem B undergo the same level of oppression?**

- a) Equally oppressed                      b) A more than B                      c) B more than A

Despite the fact that the answers in the previous questions demonstrate how the factor of the speaker's gender is disregarded by the students, only 25 % of the sample found that the speakers are equally oppressed; 40% of them found that the speaker in *I, too* is oppressed more; and 35 % of them found the opposite. It insinuates that the factor of gender is discretely present in the students' analysis of and reaction to the texts because there is no difference between the speakers in the two poems except for their gender. Both speakers are black, poor and live in America, and both are prone to oppression for their skin pigmentation. One may also notice that the number of female students is greater than the number of male ones; nonetheless, the larger portion sympathized with the male speaker in *I, too*. One can refer to the readers' background; they belong to a more traditional region, Ouargla. Among the particularities of this region is that derogatory treatments to a man are not accepted by the society whether males or females. In addition, the difference in status between men and women is a social consensus. Men are expected to have a life full of dignity .i.e., the nature of their lives is totally opposite to that of the speaker in *I, too*. The latter's ' *manhood*' is affronted, yet, he raises the challenge confidently instead of surrendering to the denigrating situation. Subsequently, the readers join the speaker in his challenge since they would rather prompt him to reclaim his affronted '*manhood*'

## Discussion of Results

Answering the question, *who am I?* is an ongoing process (Yip et al, 2006). The self-image one makes about oneself is rooted in the life events one goes through. Who we are in this world is sometimes imposed by societal standards; who we think we are in this world rests greatly on our perceived circumstances; who we become is predicated by our lived experiences. In this sense, readers' attitudes towards the two poems, *I, too* and *When I think of Myself* are rooted in their background. In fact, in the last section of the questionnaire, 99 % of the students confirmed that their background effected their reception and attitude to the texts. In this context, Billig contends that:

Whether the topic is political, moral, religious, commercial, or whatever, an attitude refers to a stance on a matter of public debate and disagreement. In other words, an attitude represents an evaluation of a controversial issue (1996:207)

Accordingly, the students reacted to the text basing more on who they are disregarding their and the speakers' gender. One is to conclude that the gender of the speakers does not affect the students' reception of the literary discourse in the poems greatly. The students opted for a horizontal reading of the poems with reference mainly the speakers' experience as human beings regardless of their sex. Although the majority of students (19 out of 20) confirmed that the gender effected their interpretation and interaction with the text, the impact of this factor (gender) is not remarkable enough. In their justification of their answers in the tenth question in Section Two, expressions like "I am female I sympathize with female" "yeah, because we are the same in gender" and "because the speaker is a man, he feels more oppressed"<sup>9</sup> to mention but a few appeared only in few answers but an expression like "it doesn't matter the gender, they are both humans", and "because being neglect not only for women but also for men" appeared more frequently

As above-mentioned even though female students constitute that lager portion of the sample, there are more readers who sympathized with the male speaker. This can be due to the fact that the experience of oppression in *When I think of Myself* is told to the reader from an economic perspective. The speaker depicts how the poor state of the speaker urges her to accept humiliation to make a living. Therefore, if one takes into consideration that the group under study is a group of students who have not graduated yet, one may understand why the majority sympathized with the male speaker more than the female one. To explain more, the students are not yet aware enough of the concept of making a living and of being responsible for feeding oneself and his/her family. The results of this question are not expected, but knowing that in the Algerian context, the students are not expected to look for an income unless they graduate<sup>10</sup>, in the meantime their parents are responsible for their study fees enables one to justify the students' unexpected reaction.

## Conclusion

To conclude, a reader cannot rid himself of his profile when dealing with literary discourse. In this context, Rosenblatt contends that: "The STUDENT WILL BRING to his reading the moral and religious code and social philosophy assimilated from his family and community background"(1995:111). Therefore, one should know that the processes of reading and interpreting the literary discourse are dependent on the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the text equally. The amalgamation of these elements enables the reader to develop a horizontal attitude which denigrates differences to the experience the other vis-à-vis his own experience i.e., one is enabled to better explore and understand the other.

<sup>9</sup> Some mistakes can noticed because the students' answers are copied verbatim

<sup>10</sup> The majority of students are expected first to have their diploma than look for a job. The concept of part-time job is not too common among university students. This is not, surely, to suggest that all university students do not have an income apart from their parents'

**Bibliography**

- Angelou, M. (1994). *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. US: Random House
- Billig, M.. (1996). *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Holub, R, C. (1984). *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Methuen.
- Hughes, L. (2012). *Langston Hughes-Poems*-.PoemHunter.Com. The World's Poetry Archive. Available at: <http://www.poemhunter.com/langston-hughes/> [last retrieved:15-03-2016].
- Rosenblatt, L. (1995). *Literature as Exploration*. New York: Noble and Noble.
- Selden, R. Widdowson, P & Brooker, P.(1997).*A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. (5th ed.). Longman.
- Yip, T., Seaton, E. K., & Sellers, R. M. (2006). *African American racial identity across the lifespan: Identity status, identity content, and depressive symptoms*. *Child Development*, 77(5), 1504-1517.