



ISSN: 1983-8379

## Remembering the forgotten: a literary representation of politics in *The Farming of Bones*, by Edwidge Danticat

Maria Cláudia Simões<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This communication analyzes *The Farming of Bones*, by Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat, investigating the representation of politics and its effects on individuals. Danticat portrays the Massacre of 1937, in which thousands of Haitians were killed on orders from the Dominican government. In the novel, Amabelle Désir, a Haitian woman, struggles to survive the massacre. *The Farming of Bones* offers an important opportunity to become aware of how politics might affect individuals.

Key-words: Politics; Memory; Literature

**RESUMEN:** Esta comunicación analiza *The Farming of Bones*, de la haitiana-estadounidense Edwidge Danticat, investigando la representación de la política y sus efectos sobre los individuos. Danticat retrata la Masacre de 1937, en la cual miles de haitianos fueron asesinados por órdenes del gobierno dominicano. En la novela, Amabelle Désir, una mujer haitiana, lucha por sobrevivir a la masacre. *The Farming of Bones* ofrece una importante oportunidad para tomar conciencia de cómo la política puede afectar a las personas.

Palabras-llave: Política; Memoria; Literatura

Politics is an instrument of power that may be utilized by dominant classes. According to their interests, governments may decimate peoples as well as distort events and manipulate memory. French philosopher Jacques Le Goff states that collective memory is not only a conquest, but also an instrument and an object of power. (LE GOFF, 2008, p. 470). By deciding what is recorded, the dominant classes may perpetuate their power. Politics has, at its disposal, efficient means of blurring facts. Political decisions have implications over peoples and individuals.

Literary works may provide the readers with an important opportunity to become aware of how politics might affect individuals. This communication aims at analyzing *The Farming of Bones*, by Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, investigating the representation of politics and its effects on individuals. Danticat portrays the Massacre of 1937, in which over fifteen thousand Haitians were killed on orders from the Dominican

---

<sup>1</sup> Doutoranda do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciência da Literatura da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).



ISSN: 1983-8379

government. The Massacre occurred at the frontier of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, called the Massacre River. Interestingly, this river received that name due to another Massacre dated from 1728, when Spanish colonists killed *boucaniers*. The Massacre of 1937, at first, did not receive much attention from the press and Dominican President General Trujillo took much effort in attempting to undermine that atrocity. According to historians Robert Heinl and Nancy Heinl in *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People 1492-1995*:

On 21 October 1937, the *New York Times* ran a brief report, filed by a United Press stringer in Kingston, of a "border clash" of the frontier in which "several Haitians" had been killed. Based on this and other rumors, *Collier's* magazine sent reporter Quentin Reynolds to Hispaniola [the Dominican Republic and Haiti]. Lunching a few days later over Lanson 1928 champagne with General Trujillo, Reynolds was told, "Yes, it is true. A few Haitian farmers crossed the border up north and tried to steal some goats and cattle from our farmers. There was a fight - very regrettable - and several were killed on both sides." (HEINL; HEINL, 2005, p. 480).

By means of manipulation, politics may construct the stories in which societies are developed. Control over collective memory, including forgetfulness of peoples, is an important element that serves the interests of dominant classes. According to Jacques Le Goff, "Becoming lords of memory and forgetfulness is one of the greatest concerns of historical societies. The forgetfulness and the silences of history reveal those mechanisms of manipulation of collective memory." (LE GOFF, 2008, p. 422. My translation).

Driven by a political agenda, Trujillo was responsible for the murder of thousands of individuals, including children. Heinl and Heinl add: "For three days and nights, from 2 October, on orders from Trujillo, the Dominican army and *Policia Nacional* had systematically butchered some 15,000 to 20,000 Haitians not only along the Massacre [River] (...)." (HEINL; HEINL, 2005, p. 480).

Literary works may provide readers with an important opportunity to become aware of the atrocities that people had to endure, even when it is accomplished or endorsed by the power that is supposed to protect them. In *Paradise lost: Haiti's tumultuous journey from pearl of the Caribbean to Third World hotspot*, historian Philippe Girard argues that Haitian



ISSN: 1983-8379

President Sténio Vincent was a mulatto who had “little sympathy for the black peasants who had migrated to the Dominican Republic”. (GIRARD, 2005, p. 91). Girard adds:

He [President Sténio Vincent] promptly negotiated a deal with his good friend Trujillo, asked for \$30 indemnity for each dead Haitian, and obtained it. Relatives of the victims would have been outraged to learn that Haitian life was valued at a good pig's going rate, but they never saw the money. Vincent reduced the \$750,000 total to \$525,000 to speed the payment and shared the proceeds with his cronies (GIRARD, 2005, p. 91).

This political arrangement illustrates how devalued were Haitians. Not even their president fought for them, endorsing the Dominican government's efforts to silence their cry. Political compromises may dehumanize individuals, placing them at the same level of objects or animals. Besides, politics also operates in the process of distorting facts and of erasing memory and personal accounts of historical events.

As Lucia M. Suárez states, in *The Tears of Hispaniola*, "If memory can be stolen from the masses, by powerful leaders, it can be returned to the people through literature." (SUÁREZ, 2006, p. 53). *The Farming of Bones* returns memory to Haitian people, empowering the ones who were silenced in 1937 and offering them a site to be heard. Besides, a female perspective of the event has the opportunity to be discussed. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera states:

Recent feminist criticism has increasingly attended to the notion that in literature and life women, both inside and outside, the Caribbean have traditionally been excluded from the main currents of economic and political life. Virtually denied entrance to the public domain – the space, almost exclusively reserved for males, where History is made – women have essentially been rendered ahistorical. (HERRERA, 1997, p. 70).

Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* provides a relevant opportunity of inscribing female voices into the scenario that has ignored them. In the novel, Amabelle Désir, a young Haitian woman, is a servant to a wealthy Dominican family and she desperately struggles to survive the massacre. When Amabelle was just eight years old, she became an orphan when both her parents drowned in the same river that years later would be part of the massacre scenario. (DANTICAT, 1999, p.50) On the day her parents died, Amabelle was found by the girl named Señora Valencia and her father:

3



ISSN: 1983-8379

"We [Señora Valencia and her father] went to the river and there you were, a bony little girl with bleeding knees. You were sitting on a big rock, watching the water as if you were waiting for an apparition. Papi paid one of the boys by the riverside to interpret for him while he asked you who you belonged to. And you pointed to your chest and said, yourself. Do you remember?"  
I remembered. (DANTICAT, 1999, p.91).

Amabelle's sense of herself would become destabilized by future political events. When the novel begins, Amabelle is a young woman who is romantically involved to Sebastien, an itinerant sugarcane cutter. Amabelle wishes to marry him and to return to Haiti at the end of the cane season and begin a new life. Instead, politics comes in their way and alters their lives. The title of the novel itself is a significant element in the process of remembering the plight that Haitian people had to endure. Amabelle deems the cane field as "*travay tè pou zo*, the farming of bones" (DANTICAT, 1999. p. 55). It refers to the working in the cane fields. Haitian cane cutters were exposed to dangerous tasks that could get them wounded, mutilated or even killed.

It is interesting to highlight that the epigraph that opens the novel is a biblical passage in which it is mentioned the discrimination towards Ephraimites accomplished by Gileadites. In that passage, it is said that, if the Ephraimites said 'Sibboleth' instead of 'Shibboleth' because they could not pronounce that word in the way considered correct by the dominant power, they would be killed. The same type of criteria was utilized in the Massacre of 1937.

Historian Philippe Girard states that the "prevailing story holds that Dominican soldiers asked blacks to say the word *perejil* (parsley) (...). Blacks who failed the test were then sent to the border" (GIRARD, 2005, p. 90). Girard adds that "twenty-five thousand were killed in the Dominican Republic, bayoneted on the shores of the aptly name River Massacre, or thrown out to sea to be eaten by sharks". (GIRARD, 2005, p. 91). This "test" is represented in *The Farming of Bones* and Amabelle reflects on the reason why this particular word was chosen: "But parsley? (...) We used parsley for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides. Perhaps the Generalissimo in some larges orders was trying to do the same for his country." (DANTICAT, 1999, p. 203). This thought seems not to be far from the possible motives for Trujillo's orders. Michele Wucker (1998), in her article entitled "Race and Massacre in Hispaniola", states that Dominican dictator Rafael



ISSN: 1983-8379

Trujillo ordered the massacre as a way of “whitening” his country, portraying it as a paternal act to save his people from Haiti. The ethnic background is a significant element in the relationship between the two countries. According to Donette A. Francis, in “Unsilencing the Past: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*”, “Unlike US racial politics where one drop of black blood makes one black, in the Caribbean one drop of white blood makes one not-black” (FRANCIS, 1999, p. 173).

Interestingly, in 1958, Haitian dictator Papa Doc signed a cooperation treaty with Rafael Trujillo, formalizing “an agreement under which he would provide Haitian cane cutters to Dominican plantations. (...) this cynical trade yielded a yearly \$1 million bribe and it continued throughout the Duvalier era”. (GIRARD, 2005, p. 99). According to political interests from both governments, Haitian workers would be allowed to work in cane fields in the Dominican Republic, whose leader had ordered the killing of thousands years before.

The Massacre of 1937 consumed thousands of lives and contributed to the forgetfulness of individuals, especially female ones, who have constantly been denied voices. Gayatri C. Spivak claims that if, “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.” (SPIVAK, 1997, p. 28). Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida states that “if the female subaltern cannot speak, as Spivak claims elsewhere, there is the need to create the space and conditions so that when she speaks she can be heard, and, above all, we have to learn to listen.” (ALMEIDA, 2005, p. 168).

In *The Farming of Bones*, by Edwidge Danticat, marginalized subjects obtain a chance to externalize the oppression suffered. Lucía M. Suárez claims that “Danticat’s characters help us learn about the brutal experience both of nameless, silenced victims and of survivors who retain vivid memories of atrocities visited upon them or their families and friends.” (SUÁREZ, 2006, p. 30)

Literature is a rich terrain in which politics may be discussed and marginalized subjects may be rescued. In Danticat’s novel, the reader is offered a literary representation of an episode that marked Haitian people and of a political agenda that affected two countries. As this communication has sought to display, literature may be a powerful instrument to destabilize political interests and to offer visibility to subjects whose stories had been untold



ISSN: 1983-8379

or erased. In Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, the ones who were forgotten and denied voices are remembered and heard.

## REFERENCES

- ALMEIDA, Sandra Regina Goulart. Transcultural fictions: contemporary women writers in the Americas. In: \_\_\_\_\_. (Org.). Perspectivas transnacionais/transnational Perspectives. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2005, p. 165-174.
- DANTICAT, Edwidge. The farming of bones. New York: Penguin Books, 1999, 312 p.
- FRANCIS, Donette A. Unsilencing the Past: Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones. Small Axe. New York, p. 168-175, mar. 1999.
- GIRARD, Philippe R. Paradise lost: Haiti's tumultuous journey from pearl of the Caribbean to Third World hotspot. New York: Palgrave USA, 2005, 230 p.
- HEINL, Robert; HEINL, Nancy. Written in blood: the story of the Haitian people 1492-1995. Lanham: University Press of America, 2005, 882 p.
- HERRERA, Andrea O'Reilly. Women and the Revolution in Cristina García's Dreaming in Cuban. Modern Language Studies. Selinsgrove, v. 27, n. 3, p. 69-91, 1997, p. 69-91. Disponível em: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195394>>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2008.
- LE GOFF, Jacques. História e memória. Tradução: Irene Ferreira et al. Campinas: Unicamp, 2008, 541 p.
- SPIVAK, Gayatri C. Can the subaltern speak?. In: ASHCROFT, Bill et al. (Ed.). The post-colonial studies reader. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 24-28.
- SUÁREZ, Lucía M. The tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican diaspora memory. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006, 223 p.
- WUCKER, Michele. "Race and massacre in Hispaniola" Disponível em: <[http://www.tikkun.org/article.php?story=nov1998\\_wucker](http://www.tikkun.org/article.php?story=nov1998_wucker)>. Acesso em: 04 out. 2010.