

In the Time of the Butterflies: Rewriting Dominican History through the Demythologization of the Mirabal Sisters

No tempo das borboletas: reescrevendo a história dominicana por meio da desmistificação das irmãs Mirabal

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RESUMO: Este artigo busca investigar a narração de fatos históricos sob novas perspectivas através do romance *No Tempo das Borboletas*, da autora dominico-americana Julia Alvarez. Tal obra foi selecionada para este estudo por nela poder-se observar a maneira como os conceitos de identidade, memória e história interagem para produzir novas representações de determinado povo a partir da reinterpretação de fatos históricos. Ao longo deste trabalho serão analisadas as maneiras pelas quais Julia Alvarez utiliza diversas e variadas estratégias narrativas para representar novas versões de fatos relacionados ao período conhecido como “era Trujillo”, regime ditatorial totalitário ocorrido na República Dominicana entre 1930 e 1961. Será analisado o processo usado pela autora para promover a desmistificação das irmãs Mirabal, mártires da luta contra o regime que, ao serem alçadas ao *status* de mito, foram historicamente afastadas do povo dominicano. Para a análise da representação histórica pela perspectiva de grupos tradicionalmente silenciados serão utilizados os conceitos de estudos pós-coloniais e pós-modernos de representação e identidade como apresentados pelos teóricos bell hooks, Priyamvada Gopal e Stuart Hall. As definições de “fatos” e “eventos” propostos por Linda Hutcheon também serão abordadas com o intuito de se observar como o romance proporciona novas leituras de discursos históricos.

Palavras-chave: História; Identidade; Representação

ABSTRACT: This article intends to investigate the narration of historical facts under new perspectives through the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, from the Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez. The choice of the mentioned novel is due to the fact that it enables the observation of the manners the concepts of identity, memory and representation interact to portray new representations of a determined people by the interpretation of historical facts. Throughout the article it will be analyzed the strategies Alvarez employs to narrate new versions of facts related to the period regarded as the “Trujillo era”, a totalitarian dictatorship which took place in the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961. It will be studied the process used by the author to promote the demythologization of the Mirabal sisters, martyrs of the struggle against the regime who, when launched to mythic status, were historically distanced from Dominicans. Post-colonial and postmodern concepts, as presented by theorists bell hooks, Priyamvada Gopal and Stuart Hall will be applied to the analysis of historical representation through the perspective of traditionally silenced groups. Linda Hutcheon’s definitions of “facts” and “events” will also be approached to observe the way the novel provides new readings of historical facts.

Key words: History; Identity; Representation.

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***IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES: REWRITING DOMINICAN HISTORY
THROUGH THE DEMYTHOLOGIZATION OF THE MIRABAL SISTERS***

“...if there’s no voice, there’s no story”ⁱ

Julia Alvarez

Caribbean writers, especially women, have often retold the established capitalized History of their home countries through alternative perspectives. These retellings are mostly characterized by the voice they give groups who had not been previously allowed to tell their own stories. As a result, history is portrayed in a whole new way, not from the traditional bourgeois white male dominant perspective, but from the minority or rather subaltern groups’ point of view. This article aims at investigating the ways through which Julia Alvarez uses different and varied narrative strategies to represent new versions of renowned facts regarding the Trujillo era, more specifically from the moment the cited dictatorship starts to intertwine with the lives of four women. This is the story told in Julia Alvarez’s novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

In the above mentioned novel, Julia Alvarez tells the struggle faced by three of four sisters against the dictatorship of General Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina in the Dominican Republic. Rather than a traditional historical account of the period referred to as the “Trujillo era” (which took place from 1930 to 1961), Alvarez decides to explore manners through which the dictatorship both influenced and was influenced by Patria Mercedes, Maria Argentina Minerva, Bélgica Adela (“Dedé”) and Antonia Maria Teresa Mirabal. The Mirabal sisters, as the young women became known, were members of an upper-class rural family. Of the four sisters, Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa, all of them educated under traditional catholic values, decided, each of them at different moments and by varied means, to take part in the resistance against Trujillo’s regime. The sisters, along with their respective husbands, Pedro Gonzalez, Manuel (“Manolo”) Tavarez and Leandro Guzmán founded the Fourteenth of June Movement. The name of the movement is a reference to the date in 1959 when, assisted by members of the Cuban Revolution, exiled Dominicans, members of the Dominican Liberation Movement, attempted to invade the country and overthrow the dictatorship of Trujillo. Their mission failed, since Trujillo’s spies were aware of their plans, and Trujillo’s forces thwarted the plot. In spite of this failure, the attempted invasion was an inspiration for the Mirabal sisters and others to organize their resistance. Through the Fourteenth of June Movement, the Mirabal sisters spread their libertarian ideology and

gathered hundreds of members throughout the Dominican Republic. Having evidence of the movement's efforts to put an end to his regime, Trujillo ordered the imprisonment of dozens of its members, including Minerva and Maria Teresa Mirabal, as well as of their husbands and Patria's husband and son. They were all taken to La Victoria, Trujillo's torture prison in Salcedo. After being pressed by the Catholic Church and by social opinion, Trujillo freed all the women and underage political prisoners (including Patria's son, who had recently turned 18). Trujillo himself decided to transfer Manolo and Leandro to San Felipe prison, in Puerto Plata, forcing the Mirabal sisters to take a long perilous journey to visit their husbands. On the 25th of November, 1960, while returning of one of these visits, Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa Mirabal, together with Rufino de la Cruz, their driver, were ambushed, spanked to death, and had their bodies returned to their vehicle, so their deaths would look like an accident. Dedé, who opted to protect her sisters instead of getting directly involved in the conflict, was the only sister who survived the regime's retaliatory measures. The story of the Mirabals' murder became internationally famous, and, from that moment on, the women were widely known by their codenames in The Fourteenth of June Movement: The Butterflies (*Las Mariposas*). Their story became a myth and their murder was acknowledged in the United Nations' declaration of November 25th as the International day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.ⁱⁱ

As noted by Julia Alvarez in the postscript to the novel, although the Mirabal sisters are regarded throughout the Dominican Republic as the ones who struck one of the final blows to the Trujillo regime, there were not official documents and accurate information relating their activities during the Trujillo's dictatorship. Due to this lack of information, Alvarez decided to write the Mirabal sisters' story mostly based on the account of the one of them who survived, Dedé. Alvarez's account of how difficult it was for her to find accurate reports on the Mirabal sisters' struggle even after 30 years of the women's deaths also demonstrates that, although in more subtle manners, the silencing forces that prevailed during the Trujillo era are somewhat still at play. As for the details related to the development of the events, Alvarez takes some "liberties", since, as she asserts in the cited postscript, "a novel is not, after all, a historical document" (Alvarez, 1995, p. 324).

In order to revise and retell the Mirabal sisters' lives, Alvarez makes use of fragmentation devices. One of these strategies refers to the use of polyphonic discourse. The narrative in the novel does not come from a single narrator or follow a single story line.

Rather, the referred narrative is characterized by the use of multiple voices and perspectives. The reader is guided through the narrative by the personal impressions of each one of the sisters about the fight they were to face, and this guidance is also performed through the use of varied narrative strategies, including first and third person narrators, as well of diverse genres, such as journal entries and letters. As argued by critic Linda Hutcheon, multi faceted plots, as the one present in the novel,

challenge narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity. Through narrative, they offer fictive corporality instead of abstractions, but at the same time, they tend to fragment, to render unstable, the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 368).

In the novel, the mentioned multiplicity contributes to the demythologization of the Mirabal sisters, a crucial element to Alvarez's narrative of the women's trajectories. To demonstrate the reader that the sisters' struggle was one performed by ordinary but courageous women, not by mythical characters, the author narrates the Mirabal sisters' paths through the description of their routines. Representing the Mirabals not as the established national myth, but as common women, Alvarez comes to term with an uncomfortable national "ghost": unlike most Dominicans, who either left the country or remained silent at home, the Mirabal sisters raised their voices and took actions against the regime. In reality, this simple but disturbing truth, as noted by Alvarez in her article "Chasing the Butterflies", "haunted the whole country" (Alvarez, 1998, p. 198).

So as to approach the Mirabal sisters from this innovative perspective, Alvarez represents the women's inner conflicts, characteristics, feelings and emotions. Therefore, the narrative individualizes the Mirabal sisters, in opposition to the traditional historical approach, according to which the sisters' individual selves have been suppressed under the "Mirabal" label. Representing each of the four sisters, through a fictional first-person narrator, as individual women with personal weaknesses and strengths, also contributes to the portrait of the Mirabals as ordinary people. Each sister individually experiences her own awakening to the damages the Trujillo regime was inflicting not only upon them and their families but upon the Dominican people and country as a whole, and each of them decides to act towards revolution at different moments and each of them assumes different roles in this struggle. The individualization and consequent demystification of the Mirabal sisters are necessary because, according to Julia Alvarez in the postscript to the novel, "by making them myth, we

[Dominicans] lost the Mirabals once more, dismissing the challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 324).

The way sex is represented in the novel also contributes to the ordinary depiction of the Mirabals as an alternative to the traditional sanctified portrayal of the sisters. Confirming to be ahead their epoch, the Mirabals view sex not only as a way to provide their husbands pleasure, or to become pregnant, but also to have pleasure from it. In this position, the Mirabals defy the male-dominant Dominican culture, according to which men regulate not only women’s sexuality and family internal issues but also the nation from a *macho* perspective. One example of the prevailing Dominican sexist culture occurs when Minerva asks her father reasons for having a second family, and the patriarch simply answers “*Cosas de los hombres... Things a man does*” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 92). Minerva’s indignation following this statement and the actions she takes towards equal rights for men and women (as her fight to be able to study Law at university) places her at the initial stages of more comprehensive and risky battles.

As a result of Julia Alvarez’s intended form of representation, the narrative of *In the Time of the Butterflies* focuses on domestic, private issues, rather than on grand events. The way the struggle against the regime is depicted in the novel emphasizes relatively small actions, personal and subjective interventions. This downscaled, humanizing representation provides interesting examples concerning how revolutionary and yet traditional the sisters could be. One example of this apparently contradictory position occurs when the *guerrillera* Patria needs to ask her imprisoned husband permission to visit her brothers-in-law when they are transferred to another prison: “I told him I wanted to see the boys tomorrow, and he gave me his permission” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 287). When asked by Minerva what her husband could have done to stop her from doing so, Patria’s answer is obvious: “He could have said, no you can’t go” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 287).

Besides providing the Mirabals individualization, polyphonic discourse is also responsible for the retelling of history through distinct stories. Giving voice to each one of the sisters, the novel replicates their struggle for freedom. As argued by scholar bell hooks “those who understand the power of voice as gesture of rebellion and resistance urge the exploited, the oppressed to speak” (hooks, 1989, p. 110). The stories told by each of the sisters – women who, in spite of their courage and libertarian aspirations, lived in a male-oriented, patriarchal

and sexist society – at different times of their lives narrate specific moments of history from perspectives other than the traditional ones, through the viewpoint of those who are traditionally misrepresented. History is generally told by the ones who have the power over historical representation. Writing *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez allows the reader to approach the history of the Dominican Republic dictatorship through the accounts of the three murdered sisters. Through the Mirabal sisters' fictional accounts of the events occurred in the Trujillo era, Alvarez posits a new answer to theorist Priyamvada Gopal's provocative question: "Who is the 'one' who interprets historical events and how does the mediation of that 'investigative consciousness' influence the writing of history?" (Gopal, 2008, p. 139).

In the Time of the Butterflies offers readers a particular illustration of the Trujillo regime and this illustration gives voice and power of representation to different spokespersons. Once history is allowed to be told through a new perspective, it also allows readers new readings of historical facts. As argued by scholar Deepika Bahri "those with the power to represent and describe others clearly control how these others will be seen. The power of representation as an ideological tool has traditionally rendered it a contested terrain" (Bahri, 2008, p. 205). Turning capitalized History into stories told by different narrators also allows for a new perspective onto the representation of identities, not only of those of the Mirabal sisters but also of the Dominican people as a whole. The relationship between narrative and representation is commented on by Cultural Studies critic Stuart Hall as follows: "identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation. Identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one's own self" (Hall, 1997, p. 49). Since history in *the Time of the Butterflies* is told from the standpoint of those who went through the mentioned events and were killed because of their opposition to a totalizing regime, ordinary people are in charge of representing the mentioned events, and thus the establishment of a common representation of the Mirabals' struggle is due to these people.

Due to the representation issue, the discursive strategies employed by the author play a key role in the development not only of the narrative but also of history itself. The stories of *The Butterflies* (*Las Mariposas*, as the Mirabal sisters were known) are retold by Dedé, the sole surviving sister, to a woman interviewer. The interviewer listens to Dedé, reinterprets the sisters' lives and ultimately tells them to readers. Alvarez's role as the narrator of the

Mirabals' struggle may as well be related to the role of the storyteller as determined by Walter Benjamin, according to whom the storyteller should have a "counsel" for the readers. As for this counsel, it would be "less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 92). Therefore, the counsel present in the narrative of *In the Time of the Butterflies* would be related to avoiding the high-level oppression exposed in the novel from ever occurring again. As argued by Vazquez, "by working through history, instead of simply ignoring or circumventing the events, the possibility for constructing a new type of society increases" (Vázquez, 2003, p. 398).

Consequently, the novel's plot is developed through the use of non-linear narrative. That may be observed mainly when the narrative leaps forward in time, going back to 1994 and exposing Dedé's conversations to the interview woman. These moments work as the trigger for Dedé's report on her sisters' lives. Dedé's memory plays a central role here, since it will both influence her sisters' stories and be influenced by them. Actually, when the story comes to us, readers, it is filled by many different impressions on the sisters' trajectories: the ones of those who had had any contact with the sisters and retold their experiences to Dedé, Dedé's memory's influence upon these accounts, and finally the impressions these accounts must have had on the woman interviewer. This woman might be read as a representation of the author herself, and the commentaries Dedé makes on her remind the reader from time to time that although the story being told may fictionalize historical events, it does have its basis on inquiries about actual episodes dealt with by the protagonists of the novel.

The multiplicity of versions on the Mirabal sisters' lives brings some consequences to the novel. Although the narrative does not contradict itself, it is quite common to find different versions of the same fact represented in the novel. This might be related to the way memory affects discourse and through which determined facts are variably portrayed. As the retelling of historical facts relies on Dedé's memories/impressions as well as on the impressions those memories may have had on the woman interviewer to be then retransmitted to the reader, one must recognize that the story in the novel is one of many possible representations. As Alvarez recognizes in "Chasing the Butterflies", her novel is based on "individual versions of that history" (Alvarez, 1998, p. 198). Those different versions of history are possible because memory may affect the way we deal with our past. According to Stephen Bertman, "memory is distorted by needs, desires, interests, and fantasies (...)

constantly undergoing revision, selection, interpretation, distortion, and reconstruction” (Bertman, 2000, p. 27). According to this view, the manner memory affects representations of historical events depends on the value society applies to different matters of representation. This standpoint agrees to the scientific approach to memory, according to which “memory is not a register of reality – it is an interpretation constructed by the mind” (Blanco, 2009, p. 59 – my translation). More than once in the novel, the narrative reminds us that memory is indeed a flawed, unreliable construction, as mentioned by Dedé when telling the sisters’ lives to the woman interviewer: “Nonsense, so much nonsense the memory cooks up, mixing up facts, putting in a little of this and a little of that” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 72).

In *The Time of the Butterflies*, the multifaceted narrative perspective also helps to create a representation of the Dominican Republic through varied angles. By doing so, Alvarez reasserts her commitment to the Mirabals’ struggle even decades after the death of the three sisters. Such a multiple perspective thus resists Trujillo regime’s monolithic standpoint. It is relevant to observe that the dictatorship’s single perspective represents the male, then patriarchal, dominant discourse, which is exactly against what the sisters’ resistance goes. Although the Dominican Republic is an independent country, more than once the narrative reminds us that the prefix in *post-colonial* might not be exactly accurate. As argued by McCallum, “[Alvarez] offers a strong critique of the ‘post-colonial’ situation of the Dominican Republic by representing a world where dictators like Trujillo, the Dominican ruling class and the United States replace the original colonizers” (McCallum, 2000, p. 97). The novel reminds the reader that the reason many people kept silent against the regime is related to the fact that those people, especially the bourgeois class, to which the sisters belonged, did not wish to risk their comfortable wealthy lives, since they were not the first to be affected by the dictatorship, differently from the *campesinos*, black people and Haitian immigrants.

The narrative of the Mirabal sisters’ resistance may also be related to the manner a novel may work towards facing national trauma and then overcoming it. Varied studies have approached the necessity for narrating a story in order to overcome national trauma behind it. Above all, these studies have concentrated on national traumas provoked by the Second World War, and although one may not put the events occurred in this conflict and those represented in Alvarez’s novel at the same level, some aspects might be related to both situations. For instance, one could observe that it is common for trauma stories to take some

time to be finally narrated. Initially, there is a tendency that the affected society remains silent before being able to relate its traumatic events. According to collective trauma researcher Gabriele Schwab, “human beings have always silenced violent stories. Some stories, collective and personal, are so violent we would not be able to live our daily lives if we did not at least temporarily silence them. (...) Too much silence, however, becomes haunting” (Schwab, 2006, p.110). Another important feature regarding Alvarez’s novel refers to the fact that it is possible for the author to refer to this national trauma because besides being far from the actual traumatizing events in time, as she writes her novel more than 30 years after the depicted events occurred, Alvarez might also do so because she is distant in space from where the events took place, since she was raised in the United States. In an interview to scholar Caminero-Santangelo Julia Alvarez says:

Living at a distance from some of the things that truly move me deeply gives me a certain kind of freedom. I’m not controlled by forces that silence me there. Being outside the country allows me the freedom to reject the typical stance that I would have to adopt towards my history (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998, p. 21).

“Living at a distance” from the Trujillo era, Alvarez might write without the regime’s constant surveillance. In the novel, Trujillo’s power over the country is exercised through his omnipresence, and the General is initially described as being really loved by the Dominicans, including the Mirabal family. As it has been traditionally observed, propaganda performs a crucial role in turning dictators like Trujillo into loveable figures. The teenager Minerva quotes her school history textbook, in which the *Generalissimo* is described in a godly manner: “All through nature there is a feeling of ecstasy. A strange other-worldly light suffuses the house smelling of labor and sanctity. The 24th of October in 1891. God’s glory made flesh in a miracle. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo has been born” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 24). Although Minerva describes the above mentioned passage as “disgusting”, love and admiration towards Trujillo prevail for a long time among Dominicans. The same Minerva, attending the Discovery Day Dance under Trujillo’s invitation, declares how easily one may be seduced by the regime: “He [Trujillo] rises from his chair, and I am so sure he is going to ask me that I feel a twinge of disappointment when he turns instead to the wife of the Spanish ambassador. Lío’s words of warning wash over me. This regime is seductive” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 96). Maria Teresa, for instance, believes that being born in the same month as Trujillo, “shows something special about [her] character” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 37). Before totally despising Trujillo and fighting against him, the sisters’ position goes from admiration to a certain resignation, as observed when Patria affirms: “El Jefe was no saint, everyone knew

that, but among the *bandidos* that had been in the National Palace, this one at least was building churches and schools, paying off our debts” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 51).

As the Mirabals’ opinion towards the dictator takes a more critical perspective, the presence of Trujillo in the women’s lives is accentuated. For instance, after Minerva assumes a critical position towards the tyrannical regime, her family is invited to Trujillo’s Discovery Day Dance, Minerva being Trujillo’s special guest. And as the Mirabals’ opposition to the regime increase, leading them to take active part in the struggle, Trujillo’s presence in their lives becomes more and more active. This leads to a certain point where the Mirabals’ private life was entirely watched over and affected by the regime as Trujillo ultimately assigns spies to watch over the Mirabals night and day. As observed by Patria, the spies were like “ghosts all over the place. (...) All night we smelled their cigarettes in the yard and heard muffled coughs and sneezes” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 212).

As mentioned before, the Mirabal sisters’ reverence for the god-like image of Trujillo, as conveniently represented by the regime’s propaganda tools, moves down first to resignation to the despotic regime and then to indignation towards it, ultimately leading to the action against it in the form of the armed revolution. The regime’s decline under the Mirabals’ perspective provides Trujillo a process of demythologization, similar to that which Alvarez performs regarding the Mirabals. Although this parallel may be observed, it is important to notice how the myths of Trujillo and the Mirabals differ regarding the purposes of their deconstructions. While Alvarez demystifies the sisters in order to make their representation closer to regular people and demonstrate that theirs was a struggle headed by representatives of the Dominican ordinary people, the deconstruction of the Trujillo myth in the narrative is exactly what allows the Mirabals and others to see Trujillo as the leading representative of the oppression imposed to the Dominicans. This is the process which permits Dominicans to initiate their struggle for freedom and equal rights.

Interviewing people who had been directly related to the struggle, rather than only trusting documentation and written accounts of the events, Alvarez contributes to the fictionalization of history. Writing the stories of the Mirabal sisters under fictionalized impressions of those who had had contact to them, Alvarez focuses her narrative in facts rather than events. As observed by Linda Hutcheon:

Among the consequences of the postmodern desire to denaturalize history is a new self-consciousness about the distinction between the brute *events* of the past and the historical *facts* we construct out of them. Facts are events to which we have given meaning.

Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events (Hutcheon, 1990, p. 57).

Maybe Alvarez's greatest merit is the representation of past *events* as new *facts* related to the Mirabals struggle. Through *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez achieves her project: to rewrite Dominican history through the demythologization of the Mirabal sisters. This novelty is also related to a new approach to the history of the Dominican Republic under the Trujillo dictatorship. Alvarez accomplishes her task as the novel acquaints the reader with a period of history not familiar to people outside the Dominican Republic and one which is also misrepresented within the country, where most people still do not have the exact notion as to what extent the Mirabal sisters were involved in the resistance to the Trujillo regime. The novel works as a tool for recognition and representation of a struggle performed both by the people and for the people.

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ⁱ From an interview to Penguin.com website, available at http://www.us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/time_of_the_butterflies.html accessed on July 20th, 2011.

ⁱⁱ The facts on this paragraph might be verified on the mentioned INTERNET sources.