The Problematic Location of the Text in Nalo Hopkinson’s “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider”

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“Red Rider” and “Riding The Red” can be easily traced as texts miming Charles Perrault’s story “Little Red Riding Hood” as revisited by the Grimms. The fact that Nalo Hopkinson felt an urge to write a second version which would be distinctly Caribbean implies that her first version had been unduly read as Caribbean. A comparison of “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” will show that Hopkinson’s use of language as well as her preoccupations in terms of gender roles do not differ to the extent of making the two versions radically different. It would seem also that by situating “Red Rider” in 19th century England and “Riding The Red” in Jamaica today, Hopkinson prompts the reader to read the two versions as part of a large global setting.

“Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” are two short stories written by Nalo Hopkinson, a writer born in Jamaica but who has spent most of her life outside Jamaica, and is currently living in Canada. “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” are built around “Little Red Riding Hood” and as such they create in the reader an expectation for the sequence of events independently of setting or of characterisation. Since “Little Red Riding Hood” is recycled in “Riding the Red” and in “Red Rider”, the heroines of both short stories acquire an archetypal dimension, and they bear similarities with all women whether they be geographically or culturally close or distant. To this extent, the two stories can be said to be gender oriented. In addition, as the reader proceeds through an information age which has accelerated his/her awareness of regional languages, he/she can read “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” as being part of a large global setting and simultaneously as belonging to a specific local one.

The communicative link features as a key element in both stories. The character-narrator establishes the link with the narratee by way of a monologue. “Riding the Red” is half way between interior monologue and exterior monologue. It provides a convincing illusion of eavesdropping and of immediacy since the character’s mental process, style and diction is given access to with no overt sign that it is intruded upon by authorial participation. There is no clue as to what is going on in the world outside. However, the graphic representation of the character’s thoughts uses the conventional means of linear sequence, of punctuation, and of paragraph breaks to mimic
well-formed, articulated, structured, unchaotic and uncontradictory cogitations. The heroine shifts from present-tense to past tense as if she were giving retrospective facts for an unseen audience to understand her present state of mind. In all this, “Riding the Red” is quite comparable to “Red Rider” – whose full title reads “Red Rider: a monologue” – although, the monologue in the latter story is preceded by general information about the character and setting. (“Granny, an old farm woman in plain clothing, sits in her home in a rocking chair, darning by the light of a kerosene lamp on a table beside her.”) Since it is made implicit that there is a place of performance, that the character is alone, and that she speaks to an unseen audience, “Red Rider” is close to performance monologue. Clearly Hopkinson’s objective is to bring the communication issue to the fore through style and diction, which makes it worth comparing the two respective characters’ language to try and discover why “Riding the Red” can be read as the Jamaican story it is not.

The protagonist in “Riding the Red” is a woodcutter’s wife living in England in days past, and the protagonist in “Red Rider” is a small farmer’s wife living in Jamaica. Their low social background is reflected in their use of vocabulary and grammar. They do not speak Standard English, but a regional variety of English with a mix of Standard English. True, to all appearances, the heroine of “Riding the Red” shows a greater competence in Standard English. However, she is also quite prone to employ non-standard popular forms, among which the past participle “growed” for “grown” (“All growed up and responsible now”) is a case in point. She shares a number of dialectal stamps with the heroine of “Red Rider” such as “to ride the red”, a popular expression for menstruation and sexual intercourse, and also “if you don’t look smart” featuring not only a particular meaning of the adjective “smart” – here having to do with care –, but also the regional habit of dropping the suffix signalling the transformation of the adjective into an adverb. Another regional trait consisting in a gap structure where there should be a relative pronoun also bridges the two texts. “It was the fright killed my dear Mam” (“Riding the Red”) and “is the fright bring on poor feelings and strike my dear mother dead” (“Red Rider”) are instances of their parallel lines. The morpheme “pon” for “upon” is also a moot point when it comes to comparing “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider”. Both heroines resort to the short form rather than to the full one, a legacy of Early Modern English (1500-1800) which was brought to the Caribbean as early as 1655 when the English attacked the then Spanish colony and indentured servants from Bristol speaking a Southwest England dialect, together with Midland and Northern lower-class people who spoke vernacular English, settled on the island.

As it stands, the Jamaican English spoken by the heroine of “Red Rider” looks closer to the regional English used in “Riding the Red” than to any African language. It should here be recalled that in Jamaica, the linguistic
spectrum includes at one of its extremes Jamaican patwa, i.e. a basilect or fragmented English speech and syntax developed during the days of slavery, with strong African influences. An acrolect close to Standard English falls at the other end of the spectrum. In between the two extremes lies the mesolect, or a continuum with various degrees of competence in the acrolect. A Jamaican whose English is nearest the acrolect speaks Standard Jamaican English; if his/her command of English is more imperfect, then he speaks Jamaican English. While patwa is the speech most often used by the peasant or labourer with little education, the vast majority of the population speaks Jamaican English. Although some of the syntax commonly found in patwa is present in “Red Rider”, it is not given prominence. For instance, “them” which is the mark of the plural form of nouns in patwa, is not used consistently by the narrator, but alternately with the Standard English plural pattern. She thus switches from “and I work me finger-them” or “but the youth-them”, to “how my hands” and “all those flowers I pick”. The heroine of “Red Rider” is signalled as someone nearer the basilect than the acrolect.

The spelling system which might have served to cut a clear line between the two stories is of little help. As written texts which mime oral speech, they are presented according to the standard English spelling system, an idiosyncrasy reflected in numerous postcolonial narratives. They shed very little light on pronunciation. The insistence is not on sounds. If it had been, the adjective “stocious” – the short form for “ostentatious” – would have been spelt “stoosh”, or “stoshus”, or even “stush”. Rhythm and intonation, two prominent characteristics of Jamaican English, are rarely graphically stressed apart from “steupps” (otherwise spelt “stops”) to follow the Jamaican mannerism.

It is now all too clear that “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” share a non-standard variety of English that might be spoken by multifarious regional users with a lower-class social background. Both stories might therefore be read as located in any of the English speaking regions of the world, Jamaica included. I posit that regional English does not so much oppose “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” as it makes the two texts converge. I also posit that Hopkinson makes use of regional English as a medium through which the tale - as a genre which deals in the experience of alienated people but contains so little said by alienated people themselves - is subverted. “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” definitely give voice to subaltern characters. This might also contribute to explain why “Riding the Red” can be read as a post-colonial text although its setting is not a post-colonial country.

Since both stories are a recycling of “Little Red Riding Hood”, the reader’s/listener’s sense of knowing what comes next remains constant and transcends setting and characterization. His feeling of being on familiar grounds is not expressly challenged. The elderly woman’s attempt to have her daughter’s female offspring warned against the facts of life is in keeping with
the cautionary stance taken by the narrator of “Little Red Riding Hood.” The young girl has now begun “to ride the red”, i.e. she has reached the time when sexually predatory men will come around to capture and seduce. So it should be her mother’s duty to protect her by advising her against the dangers of seduction. She should not trust a stranger-friend because a wolf, i.e. a man who chases women, may lurk in every guise, and sweetest tongue has sharpest tooth! The mother, however, is reluctant to pass the lesson on to her young daughter since she considers that the issue is an adult one. At this early stage in his reading, the reader assumes that the full portent of her contention is actually a fear that among the primal forces at play in disclosing the facts of life is the force of sex. And shouldn’t the girl be kept immune from that force? Even if the reader/listener inadvertently overlooks the implied message addressed by the daughter to her ageing mother when she refers to the issue of sex as “old wives’ tales” (“Riding the Red”) or “old woman story” (“Red Rider”); even if he does not anticipate that there may be an oblique allusion to the oral folklore versions of “Little Red Riding Hood” often told by women, to the repetitive rhythms of work, until spinning a yarn and telling a tale were one and the same; even if he does not know that in these oral versions the heroines were far from passive and that their behaviour went against the grain, he concludes that by preventing the girl from being told about unrepressed sexual drives the mother assumes her role as guardian of moral values. Nothing in “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” apparently differs from the cautionary aspect of the original story. In her monologue the grandmother urges young girls against trusting men naïvely, but she also delivers a message of redemption for the fallen ones. She too once was a triumphant young girl who met the Wolf and let herself be seduced by him on her way to adulthood. The middle passage would have ended in absolute disaster had she not been subsequently rescued by a huntsman who offered her patriarchal protection, fathered her children and at the service of whom she put herself. Her daughter followed the exact same route. Thus the lesson the adolescent should absorb is that she should not worry. At the end of the path with the dangerous middle passage there will be salvation. The reader’s/listener’s sense of the familiar is whetted. All the characters in “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” behave in compliance to the set of norms assigned to them and asserted in Perrault’s and the Grimms’ texts, and the lesson they contain is not off the track – or is it?

Could not the grandmother’s mandatory silence be interpreted as a strategy on the part of her daughter to challenge the status quo because, precisely, her expectation for the sequence of events is all too whetted? Could not the narrator’s monologue be read as the way found to give air to new truths? In her continued monologue, she makes it quite clear that her married life was one of toil which left her or her husband little or no time for sexual games and pleasure. As a now ageing woman, she tries to recover from the
sense of loss in an imaginary space in which she explores her sexual self and invalidates the moral of “Little Red Riding Hood”. Her stance should not be analysed essentially as a nostalgic attempt to return to a lost sexual life, but as reflecting a project of re-negotiation. She in fact reconstructs her past as a means of reaching back to the dislocation of her sexual identity through the divisive barriers set between men and women. She is in search of a new agency that transcends the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Paradoxical as it might seem, her quest follows the recurrent theme of needle work which she first approaches conventionally as the symbol of duty and feminine virtue, and then as the symbol of the resolution of contradictions. Thanks to embroidery, she says substantially, women can mature tension-free:

For Mami did know one thing for true; the trick is this; you must always have a needle with you, and one piece of thread. Them blasted embroidery lessons have they use, mek I tell you. What rip could get sew up again, oh yes, and then mek we dance again! Them have a way to say is the hunter man save we, me and my daughter little girl, but is Brer Tiger give we birth, yes Lord. (“Red Rider”)

The reader/listener of “Riding the Red” and of “Red Rider” sees the codes of “Little Red Riding Hood” defamiliarized, and is introduced to a cautionary tale of a very peculiar kind. The message not to stray from the path (“don’t stop feh dawdle, sweetness; stay on the path!” [“Red Rider”]) is unseasonable. For one thing it is not part of Perrault’s tale. Secondly, although as in the Brother Grimms’ tale, the warning brooks no deviation, the consequence in case of disobedience, although not explicitly expressed, is a consequence for the girl, not for her grandmother who, the Grimms say, will have nothing left of the basket intended for her. If the little girl of “Riding the Red” and of “Red Rider” dawdles she will have time to gather a bunch of flowers for the wolf to pluck. Equally, if she delays the time when she reaches her grandmother’s place, the latter will get her due share of pleasure. So for the prophecy of the needle to be accomplished, girls have to transgress the law and go through the rite of passage between girlhood and womanhood by projecting themselves into the dangers of their conflicts, and by saving themselves from them. Only if they do not stay on the path along which their mothers are in a hurry to send them knowingly will they become able to cope with what the wolf represents; they will encounter the dangers residing in themselves and the world, and exchange childish innocence for the wisdom that only the “twice born” - who not only master an existential crisis, but also become conscious that it was their own nature that projected them into it - can possess.

“Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” thus refigure male and female sexual selves as commonal and no longer vexed by interactions which block and/or distort their realization. The new construction that the character-narrators
practise in their monologues has a liberating dimension. The moral of “Riding the Red” and of “Red Rider” is that daughters must not conform and be the guardians and prisoners of prevalent mores. Instead, they have to transform the world which has been prepared for them by men with the complicity of women. Their feminine difference is posited in terms very different from those used by Perrault and the Grimms. They are recast as sexual aggressors and claim a libido equal to that of their adversary thus transforming the advice against female libido into a joyful return of the repressed. “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” advocate complementary roles which rehabilitate the body. Their stance is one which is often made in postcolonial literature, so that it is not strange that “Riding the Red” is read as the postcolonial text which Nalo Hopkinson insists that it is not.

Notwithstanding that Hopkinson chose to set “Riding the Red” and “Red Rider” in different places and at different times, the message she delivers to women remains unchanged, a proof that their positions of entitlement in the world still stand at a disadvantage. Women have to de-colonize their bodies in a process of resistance that involves the interrogation of social and cultural codes of control of the body. By recovering their history as Hopkinson’s heroines do, women can challenge the liminality of totalizing boundaries, provide a place from which to creatively explore the multiple layers of their experience, and construct a counter-narrative. Isn’t the movement in both stories from the margin to the centre?

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Works Cited


