Gender, Discourse, and Desire in Twentieth-Century Brazilian Women's Literature

Ferreira-Pinto, Cristina

Published by Purdue University Press

Ferreira-Pinto, Cristina . 
Gender, Discourse, and Desire in Twentieth-Century Brazilian Women's Literature. 
Purdue University Press, 2004. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/4125.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/4125

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=239247
Introduction

Brazilian Women’s Literature as a Counterideological Discourse

Before the mid-1900s, the number of female names that were part of the Brazilian literary canon was rather small, although women had certainly engaged in writing, first as a hobby or as a private way of self-expression and, around the beginning of the twentieth century, as a profession. Those few women whose names were part of the national canon seemed to represent isolated and sporadic exceptions, and are viewed today as pioneers who first opened the doors to the wide acceptance of women writers in Brazil. Even though most of Brazil’s female literary production before the late 1800s was all but forgotten along with the authors’ names, a tradition of women’s literature has indeed existed in the country.

This tradition may have begun with the letters a sixteenth-century woman, Felipa de Souza, wrote to her female lover, causing her arrest by the Inquisition; it continued with the poems and chronicles published under pseudonyms in nineteenth-century periodicals, and with the novels and short stories of a pioneering group of female authors such as Rachel de Queiroz, Lygia Fagundes Telles, and Clarice Lispector.1 These modern Brazilian writers constituted in the 1930s and 1940s the first group of women openly acclaimed by the male-dominated literary canon. In this way, over the years and through various generations, Brazilian women writers have slowly made their way into the public space, forming a female literary lineage that only in the last quarter of the twentieth century has started to be recovered. Brazilian critic Zahidé Lupinacci Muzart’s Escritoras brasileiras do século XIX [Nineteenth-century Brazilian women writers] (1999) is an example of the efforts by Brazilian scholars in the critical recovery of previously forgotten or ignored women writers.
Introduction

Brazil’s female literary production has emerged against the canonical, male-produced literary and cultural discourse, and has often served as a counterpoint to a patriarchal, masculinist ideology that remained pervasive throughout the twentieth century. However sporadic and isolated before 1900, in the twentieth century, and particularly from the 1960s on, Brazilian women have deconstructed in their literature cultural myths of femininity, beauty, and youth, and myths about women’s social roles, identity, bodies, sexuality, and desire. As a consequence, their works often render problematic gender relations in Brazilian society. These myths of femininity begin to be more radically undermined in the second half of the twentieth century, when Western cultures witness the crisis of modernity and the failing of logocentrism. In Brazil, this crisis is announced by the counterideological discourses of cultural and political groups such as women’s associations, workers’ unions, the Black Movement, and Gay Pride alliances that up until then had been more or less marginalized or ignored by the dominant discourse.

Even though this cultural crisis must be understood in the aftermath of the military dictatorship in Brazil, it did not happen “unexpectedly.” In the decades leading to the 1960s and during the 1970s, women had become the strongest voices among those in Brazilian literature that sought to deconstruct the dominant discourse, and their presence in the national cultural scene helped open a space for the literature of other minority groups. This phenomenon takes place within the context of a wider women’s movement in the country, in the 1970s and 1980s, “arguably the largest, most diverse, most radical, and most successful women’s movement in Latin America” (Alvarez 3). Since the 1960s, Brazilian female authors had lived through the impact of the Cultural Revolution that brought new lifestyles, drug experimentation, the pill, and the sexual revolution to Brazil. In 1975, the International Women’s Year, introduced by the United Nations and celebrated around the world, also had significant repercussions in Brazil. From that year on, a considerable number of important works about and by women came out in various fields, particularly in sociology, psychology, and public policies. With the political amnesty in 1979, Brazilian exiles began to return to the country. Among them were women who had witnessed and sometimes
Introduction

participated in women's movements abroad, such as Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira. All these factors have placed women in the cultural avant-garde against the dominant discourse in Brazil.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, female poets, fiction writers, and playwrights have produced the most important counterideological discourse in Brazilian literature, as they have strived to create an authentic language and fresh images suitable for the expression of new voices and a changing reality. Many, as well as diverse, names have given shape to such discourse. In addition to Lispector, Telles, Leilah Assunção, Nélida Piñon, and Márcia Denser, are Hilda Hilst (1930), Marina Colasanti (1937), Sonia Coutinho (1939), and Consuelo de Castro (1946), among others. Some of these women writers (for example, Lispector) have denied that sexual difference is relevant in the critical assessment of their works; others (Colasanti, for instance), on the contrary, have not been concerned about hiding their feminist stance. However, what should be taken into account is that Brazilian women writers, either seen as a group or individually, have developed a feminist critique of the Brazilian "master narrative," particularly as it concerns the representation of the female body, sexuality, and desire.

***

In the chapters ahead I discuss a significant number of poems, short stories, and novels by Brazilian female authors in order to identify and analyze the poetic and discursive strategies employed to deconstruct cultural myths and stereotypes, and to defy traditionally accepted patterns of female behavior. The work of Brazilian women playwrights, while not the object of my study here, has also been a part in this process of deconstruction of cultural myths. However, as David S. George has stated, "as writers, women came late to the Brazilian stage. Their way was paved by poets and especially by fiction writers" (57). Plays by Hilst, Assunção, de Castro, as well as Edla Van Steen (1936), Maria Adelaide do Amaral (1942), and a few others, share with Brazilian women's poetry and fiction certain thematic aspects, specifically the discussion of women's roles in society, gender relations, and women's search for emotional, sexual, and intellectual self-realization. For this reason, George
places Brazilian women's plays within a tradition of “quest for identity” literature previously initiated in Brazil by women fiction writers (cf. George 57–66), and also developed by Brazilian women poets.3

I focus on the strategies Brazilian female poets and fiction writers utilize to achieve new forms of representation of the female body, sexuality, and desire. Sexuality and desire are intrinsically linked to an individual’s sense of identity, and are of particular importance for women, given the historical repression of their bodies and sexualities; the double standard of morality still often applied to men and women in many Western cultures, and specifically in Latin America; institutional heterosexuality as the accepted norm; and the assignment of rigid social roles for women. Therefore, I will examine the narrative and poetic strategies Brazilian female writers have employed in portraying the female body, in the representation of female sexuality and eroticism, and in the discussion of social and cultural issues that, in one way or another, relate to a woman’s sense of her own body and sexuality. Among these issues are: the characterization of women based on racial features and class hierarchy, marriage, motherhood, and aging.

In Chapter 1, I establish what had been the cultural “norm” of femininity or, in other words, the ideas about women’s bodies, sexuality, and social roles predominant in Brazil throughout the twentieth century. In order to do so, I discuss the representation of women and female sexuality in Brazilian literature by male authors as seen in four nineteenth-century novels. These novels are Memórias de um sargento de milícias (1853; Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant, 1959; 1999), by Manuel Antônio de Almeida; Iracema (1865; English translations 1886; 2000), by José Martiniano de Alencar; Aluísio Azevedo’s O cortiço (1890; A Brazilian Tenement, 1926; 1976; The Slum, 2000); and Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis’s Dom Casmurro (1899; English translations 1953; 1997). These four canonical works have helped define and establish some stereotypes about female sexuality well rooted in Brazilian culture, such as the sensual mulatto woman; the seductive, unfaithful woman; the pure, white, married woman; and lesbians as perverted and/or frustrated women.

In Chapter 2, I take as a point of departure the poetry of Gilka Machado (1893–1980), who, at the beginning of the
twentieth century, sent shock waves through the literary public and critics with the publication in 1915 of her first book, *Cristais partidos* [Shattered crystal]. Machado’s subversion lay mainly in her claims of women’s subordination in society and in her erotic poems. These claims were cause for scandal, fueled in part by the sensationalist treatment the author received in the media at the time. Machado has been recognized as an important precursor of contemporary literature by Brazilian female authors who recurrently focus on problems affecting women’s social situation, their sense of identity, and their sexuality.

One of Gilka Machado’s most significant achievements, which underlies the “offensive” quality her early critics and readers found in her poetry, is the very fact that men are often absent from her erotic poems, either as the subject of desire or even as its object. In all her poetry, the poetic voice is female and takes the role of the desiring subject. At the same time, a woman may be also the source of pleasure, and even the explicit object of desire. The exclusion of a masculine figure from the erotic exchange becomes problematic in a male-centered society such as Brazil. In a country famous for being sexually “free,” female autoeroticism and lesbian desire, which Machado’s poetry hints at, are tolerated only as far as they may be erotic stimuli for the male voyeur.

For many decades, Gilka Machado was an isolated and often marginalized figure within the Brazilian literary canon. She was certainly not the only writer of that period to have raised issues relating to female sexuality. We only have to think of Rachel de Queiroz, one of the most important authors of the 1930s Novel of the Northeast, or of Patrícia Galvão (pseud. Pagu; 1910–62), whose novel *Parque industrial* (1933; *Industrial Park*, 1993) has lately been recognized for its significance within the Brazilian Modernist movement of the 1920s. Ercília Nogueira Cobra (1891–196?), who was active in the first wave of Brazilian feminism in the early twentieth century, also gave female sexuality, including lesbianism, representation in her work. What distinguishes Machado, however, is the exuberance and excess of female desire represented in her poems. What these other early twentieth-century writers seem to lack, and Machado’s poetry offers, is a female *erotic* discourse and the affirmation and celebration of female sexuality.
Thus, some pertinent critical questions that I address in the following chapters are: What constitutes female eroticism in works by Brazilian women writers? What is an appropriate definition of the erotic? What are the problems involved in the creation of a female erotic discourse? I discuss these issues in Chapter 2 and examine the production of some Brazilian women writers of the 1970s and 1980s, a period when a significant amount of female erotic poetry and fiction is published. I then focus my analysis on two novels: Marilene Felinto’s *As mulheres de Tijucopapo* (1982; *The Women of Tijucopapo*, 1994), and Helena Parente Cunha’s *Mulher no espelho* (1983; *Woman between Mirrors*, 1989). Both writers have been successful in representing female eroticism in these novels. However, important questions emerge from them: Can female desire be rendered in a way other than submissive to male desire, and to what extent can the dialectics of domination versus subordination be left out of the erotic exchange?

The female discourse that emerges in the last three decades of the twentieth century is varied in genre, in poetic and narrative strategies employed, and in tone. As the writers portray women’s reality and address issues concerning the female body, sexuality, and desire, the tone they employ in their works can be lyrical, realist, assertive, or ambiguous. It can express rebelliousness and defiance against the dominant patriarchal ideology, or it can express guilt and uneasiness when women confront, on the one hand, the options they seem to have and, on the other, the traditions that for so long have alienated them from themselves and their bodies. Some female novelists have given expression to this alienation through the use of elements of the fantasy novel—more specifically, elements of the fantastic, the gothic, and the grotesque.

In Chapter 3, I examine how Telles and Lya Luft (1939) have made use of such strategies in order to represent their female characters’ problematic relationships with themselves, their bodies, and their reality. And again in Chapter 4, I discuss the role the grotesque plays in Brazilian women’s fiction. This time I examine its use by Coutinho in her short fiction, along with other narrative strategies she utilizes to represent the aging female body and to problematize aging as a social construct.

In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, as I discuss the construction of a female erotic discourse and the representation of the female
body by Brazilian women writers, I consider how many of them convey the problematic relationship that may still exist between Brazilian women and their bodies and sexuality. Nevertheless, other authors are able to create a poetic voice, or a fictional character, who comes to terms with her own body, and experiences her sexuality and desire freely, both in heterosexual and in lesbian relationships.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the existence of a tradition of lesbian literature in Brazil, followed by an analysis of short stories by five contemporary Brazilian women that portray lesbian desire. They are: Van Steen’s “Intimidade” (1977; “Intimacy,” 1991); “A mulher de ouro” [The golden woman] (1980) by Myriam Campello (194?); Telles’s “A escolha” [The choice] (1985); Denser’s “Tigresa” [Tigress] (1986); and Coutinho’s “Fátima e Jamila” [Fatima and Jamila] (1994). While some of the authors problematize the invisibility of the lesbian woman in society and in literature, others present lesbianism as a space in which the authentic expression of female desire is made possible.

In Chapter 6, I again focus on women’s heterosexuality, addressing the questions raised in Chapter 2 of whether female desire can be rendered in a way other than submissive to male desire, and whether an erotic exchange that is satisfying for the female subject can take place outside, or in spite of, gender hierarchies. In order to address these issues, I examine some of Denser’s short stories published in the mid-1980s and Colasanti’s poetry published a decade later.

My aim in this book has been to present an assessment of what Brazilian women poets and fiction writers have accomplished in the twentieth century. At the same time, I point out some tendencies that can be identified in narrative fiction and in poetry by Brazilian female authors, particularly in the last quarter of the century. Some of the writers here discussed, as for example, Coutinho and Colasanti, are at the avant-garde of a new female discourse in Brazil, one that announces the “New Woman” of the twentieth-first century. Overcoming patriarchal guilt, successful in the deconstruction of old cultural myths, celebrating the female body, and giving authentic expression to women’s desire, their works, at the beginning of a new millennium, constitute a counterideological discourse that also proposes the possibility of a new order, giving expression to what this new woman has to say about—and for—herself.