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

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Chapter One

Female Body, Male Desire

Twentieth-century Brazilian women’s literature constitutes a body of ideological discourse that stands in opposition to the work of male writers who typically have rendered female sexuality as subservient to masculine desire. The best example of this masculinist perspective of the female body is Jorge Amado’s *Gabriela, cravo e canela* (1958; *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*, 1962), perhaps the most widely translated novel by a Brazilian author. Gabriela, Amado’s protagonist, is the stereotypical sensual mulatto girl, at the same time child and woman, naive and sexually experienced. Seen from a patriarchal viewpoint, Gabriela has come to embody the ideal image of the Brazilian woman, particularly after Sonia Braga, the popular Brazilian actress, portrayed the character on television and in the movies.

In this first chapter, I discuss the representation of women and female sexuality in four male-authored canonical novels published in Brazil in the nineteenth century. Beginning with an analysis of two important Romantic novels, Manuel Antônio de Almeida’s 1853 *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* and José de Alencar’s 1865 *Iracema*, I will examine two other canonical novels that have helped define and establish some Brazilian stereotypes about female sexuality: the sensual mulatto woman; the seductive, unfaithful woman; the pure, white, married woman; and lesbians as perverted and/or frustrated women. These novels are Aluísio Azevedo’s *O cortiço*, published in 1890, and Machado de Assis’s *Dom Casmurro*, published nine years later. By analyzing the representation of women and of female sexuality in these four novels, I hope to establish the type of cultural and literary stereotypes Brazilian female authors have responded to in their writings.
The literature produced in Brazil during the Romantic period gave expression to an ideology responsible for the creation of cultural myths still prevalent in Brazilian society throughout the twentieth century. For most of the next one hundred years, these Romantic cultural myths would inform what we may call the mentalidade brasileira, the Brazilian mentality or, in other words, the dominant worldview in Brazilian society, whereby all social relations are understood and defined. In my analysis, I rely on a concept of ideology as defined by Louis Althusser, for whom ideology refers to a system of representations that holds a historical function in the context of a given society. In other words, this system of representations fulfills a specific social function in a particular historical process. Such function can be understood as the very process of the production of meanings and ideas that, in turn, constitute “the expression of the special interests of some class or social group” (McGann 5). Myths, belonging to the same category as ideas, concepts, and images, are forms of representation that constitute a particular ideological system (Althusser 13), serving as vehicles for the transmission of said ideology. For the purpose of my analysis here, a definition of myth can be derived from that set forth by James George Frazer (1890). Myth should be understood as a basic narrative structure that is part of the imaginary of a group or society, which has an emotional appeal, and which has the purpose of explaining reality, the world, and its origins. In the case of the Brazilian Romantic myths, even as they carry on to the twentieth century, their purpose is, specifically, to explain and define the origins and identity of the nation.

Brazilian Romantic Myths: Iracema and Memórias de um sargento de milícias

Literary historiographers generally use the year of 1836, when Domingos José Gonçalves de Magalhães published in Paris his first book of poetry, Suspiros poéticos e saudades [Poetic sighs and longings], to mark the beginning of Romanticism in Brazilian letters and arts. The inception of the Romantic Movement in the arts coincides thus with the early years of Brazil as
an independent nation, and with the political, philosophical, and cultural efforts toward a definition of a national identity. Within this context, Romanticism can be understood as an ideological discourse that establishes in Brazilian culture myths that only begin to be consistently undermined in the last three or four decades of the twentieth century, with the advent of a postmodern counterideological discourse. The Brazilian postmodern discourse, and specifically the discourse of female authors as counterideological, will be discussed later in this book.

For now, it should be noted that it is in the foundational literature of the nineteenth century that we find very clearly shaped the myths that will be used to define and explain the origins and identity of the nation. Nineteenth-century Brazilian writers, similarly to their Spanish American counterparts, "were encouraged both by the need to fill in a national history that would legitimate the emerging nation and by the opportunity to direct that history towards a future ideal" (Sommer, "Romance" 49). In the specific case of Brazil, this literature represents "a discourse of gendered politics" (Sommer, "Romance" 49) that attributes fixed roles to the white protagonist and to the native woman/land, thus engendering the myth of national foundation. In Brazil, José de Alencar and his Indianist novels serve as the best example of a mythmaking foundational discourse.¹

The Brazilian Indian and landscape, as the most relevant "symbols" of the Romantic period, have been extensively discussed by Brazilian cultural critics such as Antonio Candido and Dante Moreira Leite, the latter elaborating on these symbols’ relationship to the national psyche. According to Leite (1979), these are "symbols" that, still in the last quarter of the twentieth century, sustained nationalist feelings in the country. Reading them as symbols and not myths, the author expresses his belief that these images have become part of the national consciousness and represent the nation (Leite 44). However, he concedes that these symbols do become cultural myths when they "são empregados como recurso de mistificação, isto é, forma de impedir o aparecimento ou o triunfo de outras formas de vida social" (Leite 44) ["are employed as a strategy of mystification or, in other words, as a form of preventing the
advent or triumph of other forms of social life”). Thus I propose to read these images as myths or “ideological strategies,” to use Terry Eagleton’s (1991) expression. The Brazilian Romantic discourse, concerned with painting the portrait of the newly independent nation, constructs the national identity from a masculinist and ethnocentric perspective, utilizing ideological strategies that preclude the participation of certain social groups, namely, women and blacks, in the national cultural project.

Brazilian literature, from the time of independence in 1822, sought to respond to a newly perceived lack, that of “a clear-cut, fully accepted racial and national identity,” with the “conviction that a single, unifying identity can and must be found” (Haberly 7). After achieving political independence from Portugal, Brazilians rejected the Portuguese national myths that had helped define the identity of the colony. And if Os Lusíadas cannot be embraced any longer as our own “supreme national text” (Haberly 8), it becomes urgent to write the Brazilian national text and to create the myths that will define the new nation. Brazilian Indianist literature, most notably Alencar’s novels, responded to this urgency by creating an idealized image of the Indian. The heroic Brazilian Indian that we find, not only in Alencar, but also in the Indianist poems of Antonio Gonçalves Dias (1823–64), established a noble ascendance of which Brazilians could be proud.

At the same time, while this false Indian aristocracy, created by the white, Eurocentric discourse, was the source of national pride, the participation of African blacks was minimized, or even erased from the dominant discourse on national identity. In fact, Antonio Candido recalls the practice, common in the nineteenth century, by which the somatic characteristics ensuing from the miscegenation of blacks and whites were attributed to the individual’s Indian heritage (Candido 37). Thus Indianism also offered Brazilians the possibility of disassociating themselves from the African slaves. This form of ethnic misrepresentation, however, continued in the twentieth century and is illustrated, for example, in the short story “Viva la patria” by Otto Lara Resende (1975), among many other examples. Resende’s protagonist is proud to be called “Indian” because it allows him to hide his African heritage, even though his enemies use the nickname in a derogatory way.
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But it is the Indianist novel of Alencar, particularly his famous *Iracema*, that stands as the “supreme national text” of Brazil. *Iracema* presents the genesis of the people of Ceará, Alencar’s home state, and by extension (and due also to the novel’s wide circulation and impact) the genesis of the new nation. The novel effects a foundational myth that explains the origins of a new race. In it, Iracema, the Indian woman, is at the same time Eve and Mary, portrayed as seductive, on one hand, and, on the other, reduced to a maternal, nurturing role, submissive to male desire. Iracema is identified with the American landscape; in fact, the interpretation of the name *Iracema* as an anagram of *America* is now a commonplace, since Afrânio Peixoto pointed it out in 1931. Called the “daughter of the forests” (Alencar 5), Iracema is identified with the tropics, with the new land, an identification that becomes evident in the descriptions of the character and in the numerous comparisons the author makes between her and the local flora and fauna. 2

As the landscape itself is exuberant, hot, and sensual, so, it is implied, is the Indian woman. Beautiful and graceful, Iracema is “naturally” seductive to the eyes of the white warrior, who sees her naked body for the first time when it is still resplendent with the “aljofar d’água” (48; “pearly drops of water”; 14) from her recent bath. To identify Iracema as a native Eve agrees with the general reading of the novel as a genesis of the people of Ceará (and Brazil) proposed by the author himself. The first encounter between her and Martim, the white warrior, narrated in chapter 2, parallels the biblical story of the first man and the first woman in the garden of Eden. Following this reasoning, many critics have characterized Iracema as the seducer, while Martim is the poor Adam who falls prey to the woman’s charms. However, Alencar’s text is more complex than that, as it tells the ambiguous story of love, desire, and seduction. 3

In fact, “Who seduces whom?” is an important question that must be framed by the ideological standpoint from which Alencar writes, and which dictates the characterization of the two protagonists. Iracema is the beautiful “virgin of the forests” in complete harmony with nature, and reacts instinctively when she sees the strange white man. Purity, goodness, and instinct are qualities generally associated with her. Martim, on
the other hand, while equally noble and good, personifies civilization, marked by the "Ignosas armas e tecidos ignotos [que] cobrem-lhe o corpo" (15; "Unknown weapons and unknown cloths [that] covered his body"; 4). He is clearly the man after the Fall who has come to cause the Fall also of the Indian Eve: for his sake, Iracema will transgress the laws of her people, will leave her original garden of Eden, and will (alone) be punished for that. Nonetheless, Martim's noble spirit and gentleman-like manner stem from his Christian upbringing that has inculcated in him a respect for women as "[símbolos] de ternura e amor" (15; "[symbols] of tenderness and love"; 4). In fact, he evokes his Christian beliefs more than once so as not to succumb to the "temptation" he sees in the Indian woman.

Iracema, in spite of being a savage, is characterized also by qualities associated with femininity in Western culture, including obedience and submission to the male. Her main function in the novel will be to give life to the new American (Brazilian) race, in the form of her and Martim's son, Moacir. In this primarily maternal role, the character's sexuality is described in contradictory terms. The first expression of her desire is depicted in terms of maternal feelings toward Martim: she wanted to shelter and protect him, and the image of Iracema embracing his head as he sleeps clearly evokes the Pietà (Iracema, trans. Landers 21). Her love and desire for the white man is manifested through her longing, but chaste, "bird-like" eyes (48 and others) and, more importantly, by the haste with which she submits or obeys each time she hears his voice calling her (17, 48, 49, 50, and others). The sequence of events in chapter 15, when Martim drinks from the jurema liquor, is a most eloquent example of her submission. Here Iracema is represented as a beautiful bird "fascinada pela serpente" (68; "fascinated by the serpent"; 48), Martim. Seduced by his smile, Iracema leans over to kiss him but is rejected: as a Christian, Martim would not in full conscience bring disgrace to the Indian virgin and to her father, who is Martim's host among the Tabajara Indians. Immediately, though, he asks her to bring him the jurema and insists when she tries to dissuade him from drinking the sacred liquor (trans. Landers 49–50). Submissive, she obeys, handing him the drink that will liberate his conscience and allow him the satisfaction of his desire. And again
he is the one who calls her name, and she submissively obeys. Immersed in a fantasy state induced by the *jurema*, Martim can take pleasure from Iracema’s body, without having to take responsibility. And in fact, after the effects of the drink have dissipated in the morning, he again rejects Iracema, who is now the “chaste” wife (50–51).

The lyricism of the language employed by the author, and the European Christian ideology that frames Alencar’s narrative, relating Iracema to both Eve and Mary, have shaped the reading of the novel for many generations. It is fairly easy to accept Iracema as the seducer, an acceptance that, in turn, has softened the violence of the colonization process. As Ria Lemaire states: “[The novel] describes the Indian world, its nature and culture and its women in such a marvelous, fascinating beauty that readers unconsciously shut their eyes to the cruelty of the facts and visions that are narrated” (69). By conveying an image of Iracema as seducer or, at best, as submissive and willing, the author eases the pain ensuing from the ethnic and cultural conflicts between colonizers and colonized. And Alencar, who during his lifetime had already achieved distinction and authority within Brazil’s intellectual and literary circles, not only creates the foundational myth of Brazil, but also “constructed its frame of interpretation . . . in his letters and literary discussions” (Lemaire 70).

The apparently conciliatory union between the two races hides the process of domination, making possible the myth of racial democracy (Duarte 199) associated with the origins of the new nation. Interestingly, in forging a myth of femininity, Alencar does not escape the dialectics of race and sexuality that seems to have been an intrinsic part of Brazilian literature since the arrival of the Portuguese in Brazil. Later in the novel, after Iracema’s chastity and purity of spirit have been well established, her sexuality is represented as “ardent” (in the original, “ardentes amores”; 68; in English, “ardent loves”; 48; the plural word implies sexual favors), in opposition to the “chaste affection” of the “blond maiden” that awaits Martim at home (48). The dialectics of race-sexuality is at work here, with the sexuality of the woman of color represented as passionate and exuberant, unlike that of the white woman. This dialectics will
be developed to a much greater extent in works of literature that depict black Brazilian women, as will be discussed below.

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Like the Indianist literature of Alencar, Brazilian Romantic urban literature also served as an ideological discourse, by creating myths of femininity that prescribed acceptable forms of behavior to women, established boundaries for the participation of women in society, and regulated women’s bodies and desire. This Brazilian urban literature of the second half of the 1800s originates within a “heterosexual, reproduction-oriented mindframe,” as Michel Foucault (History of Sexuality. An Introduction 3) has characterized Western cultures. Thus its ideological project is to curb or “to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction” (Foucault, History of Sexuality. An Introduction 36). Even works that depict Brazilian social reality critically, or with irony, such as Manuel Antônio de Almeida’s popular novel Memórias de um sargento de milícias, fail to significantly deviate from a stereotypical portrayal of women. In reality, Memórias defines some of the myths of femininity that will be pervasive in Brazilian culture throughout the twentieth century. These myths are concerned particularly with the female body and sexuality, and with marriage as the institution that sets the boundaries for women’s social actions.

Almeida plays up with humorous mastery the dichotomy between the “domestic woman” and the “public woman,” through two equally adorable—but for different reasons—female characters, Luisinha and Vidinha. Luisinha is first described as “alta, magra, pálida; andava com o queixo enterrado no peito, trazia as pálpebras sempre baixas, e olhava a furto” (Memórias 75; “tall, skinny, and pale; she walked with her chin buried in her chest, kept her eyes aimed downward, and looked by furtive glances”; Memoirs 70). In short, she was a timid adolescent who had “perdido as graças de menina” (75; “lost the graces of a girl”; 70), but whose budding body did not yet display any of the physical characteristics traditionally associated with female beauty. Later in the novel, after she has
been briefly—and unhappily—married, and meets the male hero again, she is an “elegant, young lady” who has lost her former “physical timidity” (164), but who still acts “cautiously” (165) and with propriety, with ladylike behavior. The character of Vidinha, on the other hand, is described from the outset in very different terms:

Vidinha era uma mulatinha de dezoito a vinte anos, de altura regular, ombros largos, peito alteado, cintura fina e pés pequeninos; tinha os olhos muito pretos e muito vivos, os lábios grossos e úmidos, os dentes alvéolos, a fala era um pouco descansada, doce e afinada. Cada frase que proferia era interrompida com uma risada longa e sonora, e com um certo caído de cabeça para trás. . . . (Memórias 118 [1])

Vidinha’s physical attributes define her as eminently sensual. She displays a number of characteristics that seem to constitute the ideal female figure in various cultures, and the contrast of sizes and proportions are noticeable: “broad shoulders” versus “slim waist”; “salient breasts” versus “tiny feet.” The qualities of her voice, her tendency to giggle easily, and her mannerisms contribute to a portrait of female sexuality as excessive. In addition, she is later described as also “movediça e leve” (“flighty and shallow”) and “uma formidável namoradeira” (120; “a shameless flirt”; 119), jealous and hot-tempered. In sum, Vidinha is a kind of tropical femme fatale seen through the relative innocence of Almeida’s Romanticism; she is the paradigmatic Brazilian sensual mulatto woman.

Another aspect complements this contrastive characterization of Luisinha and Vidinha, and that is the space that each one inhabits. Luisinha is seen mostly within the protected space of the home, and in the few occasions when she does go out, she is followed by the attentive gaze of her aunt and legal guardian, Dona Maria, and her entourage of adult friends, servants, and slaves. Vidinha, on the contrary, can go out on her own whenever she pleases and is seen on the streets in the joyful company of other girls and young men her age, without the supervision of an adult chaperone whose presence would have been expected then. Thus we can ascertain that Luisinha is mostly confined to the domestic space, while Vidinha has much
more mobility, having free access to the public space of the streets. As Antonio Candido points out in “Dialética da malandragem” [The dialectic of roguery], *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* deals exclusively with the lower strata of Brazilian society, excluding both the upper classes and the slaves. However, one can distinguish a social hierarchy within the lower classes portrayed in the novel. Dona Maria and Luisinha, the latter being heiress to “some thousands of cruzados” (*Memoirs* 69), are at the upper end of this social group, while Vidinha and her family are at the other end. It is useful to emphasize here that race plays a major role in the identity of these two characters and in determining the spaces wherein each woman is allowed.

Almeida’s delicious and, for this very reason, insidious novel introduces within our national consciousness myths of female behavior that later novels and other forms of cultural expression (such as movies, TV, and popular music) will reinforce within the Brazilian collectivity. Among these myths, those represented again and again in Brazilian literature and culture, are that of the “domestic woman,” respectful, virgin, ready and willing to get married and be a mother; and that of the “public woman,” not necessarily the prostitute, but the sexually free woman, aware of her own body and desires, who has control over her own sexuality. *Memórias de um sargento de milícias*, even if it does not inaugurate such dichotomy in Brazilian letters and culture, is the text to leave a deep mark in the Brazilian imaginary, therein weaving together the representation of the female body and a dialectics of race. In this way, we will have in Luisinha and Vidinha the incarnations of the marriage-appropriate woman and of the sexually free woman, juxtaposed to the “purity” of the white woman and the “uncontrollable” sexuality of the black woman. And so that the readers should have no doubts about the ideology the novel wants to convey, suffice it to recall which one of the two women is given the reward of marrying the hero: Luisinha, the well-behaved, proper, shy, white woman.

Vidinha, it should be noted, does not appear eager to marry, as marriage brings inevitable restrictions on a woman’s freedom, which the character highly values. But even with all her independence and free behavior, much of Vidinha’s identity
comes from her position as an object of desire for the male voyeur. Vidinha is probably the first example in Brazilian fiction of a prototype Affonso Romano de Sant’Anna has identified in nineteenth-century Brazilian poetry as the “mulata cordial,” or the “cordial mulatto woman” (Sant’Anna, 

*Canibalismo* 19), whose body is synonymous with parties, dancing, laughter, and pleasure. Seen as the locus for male pleasure, the “mulata” is in fact the mediating element between the white woman and the prostitute, as Sant’Anna has correctly asserted (Canibalismo 24), and between the domestic and the public space.

**O cortiço and the Myth of the Sensual Mulatto Woman**

The myth of the sensual mulatto woman is well defined in the Brazilian Romantic narrative, and we find similar representations in Brazilian poetry of the same period. Sant’Anna, for instance, has analyzed a representative number of works by male poets of the period in his book *O canibalismo amoroso* [Amorous cannibalism] (1984). Sant’Anna’s analysis leads to some important conclusions, among them, that Brazilian Romantic poetry “dramatiza o jogo entre a mulher esposável (branca) e a mulher comível (preta)” (19) [“dramatizes the play between the (white) marriageable woman and the (black) good to eat woman”]. He also discusses how in this poetry the female slave’s body becomes the *locus* for male pleasure, and how Brazilian Romantic poetry brings together violence and seduction (19). Later in the twentieth century, the association *women of color–food–pleasure* becomes the main axis in Jorge Amado’s popular novels, *Gabriela*, mentioned here before, and *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* (1966; *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*, 1969). Having been taken to Brazil as slaves, blacks were stigmatized also by the long-held view of slaves as sexual objects, pervasive in Western culture since before the Classical period. As Foucault states in the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, “Slaves were at their master’s disposition, of course: their condition made them sexual objects and this was taken for granted” (Pleasure 215–16). Interestingly, in *Woman: An Intimate Geography* (1999), Natalie Angier recalls how his-
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torians have established that in early times, slavery always meant the enslavement of women, used by their captors for sex and procreation, while men would be killed once defeated in a battle (279).

The stigma slave/sexual object, therefore, especially hurt black women in Brazil. Although slavery as an institution was officially eradicated from Brazil with its abolition in 1888, it has lingered within the dominant ideology, affecting the way blacks are regarded by society. In the twentieth century, Brazilian popular culture and the mass media continued selling the image of the sensual mulatto woman. In fact it brought from the page to the big screen Azevedo's Rita Baiana and Amado's Gabriela (Gabriela was also the basis for a popular TV soap opera), whose famous protagonist can be seen as a direct descendant of both Rita Baiana and Almeida's Vidinha. Many other examples could be mentioned here; suffice it to say that, still at the turn of the new millennium, the sensual mulatto woman is one of the images most commonly used to sell the country to foreign tourists.

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Almeida's Vidinha, the paradigmatic sensual mulata of Brazilian fiction, is shown through the lenses of the Naturalist movement in Azevedo's O cortiço. Here the image of the sensual mulatto woman is fundamentally associated with a definition of national identity. The cortiço, which literally means a beehive, is presented as a live organism growing spontaneously, like larvae that multiply themselves (26). As such, it appears as a microcosm of Brazilian society, more specifically of a low segment of the society, men and women of the working classes, washer women, quarry laborers, factory workers, slaves, and other types of workers. Alongside the petit bourgeois household of Miranda, a textile merchant, the slum is the perfect background for the author to practice the philosophical and scientific ideas of the Naturalist school of literature en vogue then. Azevedo was particularly fond of the ideas relating to Materialistic Determinism, according to which human beings are moved by biological and/or social forces, and of the influence of the environment over the individual. Following the
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directives of Naturalism, the novel offers a pathological view of the characters and emphasizes themes such as adultery, criminality, and mental and physiological disorders. As Foucault has made clear, this is the period when Western cultures see a proliferation of discourses on human sexuality. In addition, forms of sexuality considered “perverse” or “deviant,” such as male homosexuality and lesbianism, are labeled and catalogued by the medical and juridical-legal discourses (Foucault, History of Sexuality. An Introduction). Azevedo utilizes the slum’s inhabitants as case studies that illustrate several different social and or biological “anomalies,” such as the “nym­phomaniac” and adulterous Dona Estela, the weak homosexual Albino, and the prostitute Leónie. Others serve as exaggerated and grotesque representations of normal biological processes such as aging (for example, the old man Botelho).

Interestingly, exaggerated, if not pathological, portrayals of women seem to be more abundant than those of men in O cortiço. The characterization, both of men and of women, is achieved mostly by means of a process of reification that underlines the animal-like characteristics of the individuals. Female characters are often defined by way of their sexuality, and their sexuality, in turn, is inscribed in their physical attributes, as in “olhos luxuriosos de macaca” (Azevedo, O cortiço 38; “lustful eyes like a monkey’s”; The Slum 24) that describes Florinda, a fifteen-year-old mulatto girl. Others are characterized by a lack, as in the case of Pombinha (her name means “little dove”) who, at the age of eighteen has not yet had her first menstrual period. Some of the female characters (Florinda, Rita Baiana) are described as erotic objects, others (Augusta Carne-Mole, Piedade) by their capacity for procreation and/or hard work, while others still (Dona Estela, Leocádia) by their uncontrollable sexuality.

In all, the level of sensuality or eroticism of a character seems to be in inverse relation to their capacity to procreate or to work. Thus, it is apparent that characters such as Rita Baiana, Firmo, her mulatto lover, and others, do not belong within the dominant capitalist mode of economic production. For example, Rita Baiana does work but goes through long periods of inactivity when she is involved in a new or passionate love affair. The best example of the inverse relation between work
and eroticism is Jerônimo, the Portuguese quarry mason who comes to live in the cortiço with his wife and young daughter, and to work on the quarry behind the slum.

When Jerônimo and his family arrive, he is described as hardworking and industrious, “perseverante, observador e dotado de certa habilidade” (53; “determined and quick-witted”; 40), a man of simple habits and strong as a bull (53). Likewise, Piedade too is hardworking, healthy, honest, strong, and completely faithful to her man (54). They keep to themselves, living and working to build a better future for their daughter. They are the guinea pigs the author utilizes in a social experiment. Having fallen in love with Rita Baiana, Jerônimo undergoes a moral degradation described as a process of abrasileiramento, or of becoming Brazilian. He begins to enjoy everything that is Brazilian, and to show a preference for the local food, music, and cachaca over the food, fado, and wine from his native Portugal. Most importantly, Jerônimo becomes more sensual, more erotic, and at the same time, lazier, preferring to make love with Rita than to work. Piedade and, later, their daughter also suffer the impact of Jerônimo’s abrasileiramento and the subsequent dissolution of their family, Piedade becoming an alcoholic and the young girl following the path to prostitution. In the novel, these processes are described as consequences of the inescapable influence of the social environment upon the individuals’ helpless will, and serve to prove the social experiment the author set out to make. Through this social-literary experiment, the author seeks to demonstrate that the environment can shape and/or transform an individual, even the most ethical and moral.

O cortiço is structurally organized over a series of oppositions or parallels: between social spaces and social classes (the cortiço and Miranda’s household; the working poor and the bourgeoisie) and between characters (João Romão and Miranda; Rita Baiana and Piedade; Jerônimo and Firmo, etc.). The most significant oppositions, that primarily define each of the characters, are those between races (whites versus blacks or mulatos) and between nationalities (Portuguese versus Brazilian). Attaching specific characteristics to each side of these oppositions, the author draws a critical profile of the Brazilian national identity, although he is no less critical of the
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Portuguese characters in the novel. From this profile, which can be better understood from table 1, emerges a strong identification between the woman of color and the Brazilian land. The novel forcefully establishes a link between Brazilians, particularly those of African descent, the body, and other related attributes, such as instinct and sexuality. On the other hand, whites, for the most part, are moved by rationality and especially by a desire to ascend socially and economically. Thus whites, as for example, João Romão, Miranda, and Jerônimo, are all linked to work, and they express in different ways a desire to conquer Brazil.

Table 1
Profile of Oppositions in Azevedo’s O cortiço

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portuguese characters</th>
<th>Brazilian characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black/mulatto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work, greed, capitalist production</td>
<td>Indolence, laziness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality</td>
<td>Instinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domination over nature</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The controlled body</td>
<td>The sensual, hot, exuberant body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual procreation</td>
<td>Sexual pleasure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are, however, some presumable exceptions to the pattern that emerges from table 1. For example, Augusta Carne-Mole, one of the washerwomen at the cortiço, is a white Brazilian married to a mulatto policeman, with whom she has several children. Her name literally means “soft flesh,” but also implies a person of slow movements, lazy and indolent, which is her most defining characteristic. As a Brazilian woman of the white race, she lacks the excessive sensuality that defines mulatto women in the novel. Augusta Carne-Mole is famous among her neighbors for her honesty and faithfulness to her husband. Nevertheless, the narrator immediately qualifies her honesty as “without merit,” for it resulted from her “indolent character” rather than from any free will. Augusta, therefore, embodies one of the defining elements of Brazilianness, that of laziness. In addition, Augusta has several children, and thus her
capacity for procreation follows one of the two or three possible patterns of female characteristics established in the narrative.

*O cortiço* typically relates excessive or uncontrollable sensuality to Brazilian women of color, who mostly belong to the lower classes. An exception to this is Dona Estela, Miranda’s adulterous wife. She is a married white Brazilian woman, of Portuguese origin, and from an upper class, but with a strong sexual drive that she seeks to satisfy through adulterous relationships. Thus she obviously transgresses the limitations placed on women of her race and social status. She says at one point: “Desgraçadamente para nós, mulheres de sociedade, não podemos vivir sem esposo, quando somos casadas; de forma que tenho de aturar o que me caiu em sorte, quer goste dele quer não goste!” (33; “Unfortunately for us society ladies, once we’re married we have to put up with our husbands whether we like them or not!”; 19).

More than the adulterous relationships and her flirting behavior with her husband’s employees, what is described as perversely transgressive is the violently erotic encounters between Estela and her own husband. These encounters take place after the couple had been all but separated from each other and combine hatred and lust, his shame and her scorn. The disparity of emotions involved in these sexual encounters lends them an element of the grotesque, since Estela reveals a dimension of herself normally hidden because socially unacceptable: the behavior of an experienced but passionate prostitute under the skin of a respectable, married bourgeois woman. The first two encounters are carried out because of Miranda’s urgency to release his sexual desire, and from then on, Miranda and Estela alternate between hatred and moral repugnance toward each other during the day (6–7) and the most violent erotic desire at night. In a sense, Miranda ends up being his own rival, as if he were committing adultery with his own wife who, in turn, acts like a “whore,” according to the dominant social norms. It is this intricacy of opposing sentiments that makes Estela a transgressor, and their sexual relationship repugnant even to today’s readers.

The gallery of “abnormal” or “perverse” female behaviors in *O cortiço* includes a representation of lesbianism. The prostitute Leónie’s passionate desire for Pombinha is satisfied
in a sequence of events that amounts to not much less than rape. It is lesbianism depicted from a masculinist perspective (Foster, *Sexual Textualities* 2), showing the innocent young virgin being forced to submit to the older, more powerful, and sexually experienced woman (cf. Mott 76–77), in a scene that might fulfill the fantasy of some male voyeur. In addition, lesbianism here serves another purpose, that of a rite of sexual initiation. The homosexual act, although violent, awakens Pombinha’s sexuality, and soon after, she has her first menstrual period, which in turn makes her ready for marriage. If Azevedo initiates “a tradition that recognizes lesbian sexuality in Brazil and Latin America” (Foster, *Sexual Textualities* 2), it is a tradition that will have to be rewritten, for it shows the homosexual woman as violent and perverted and does not allow for the healthy expression of lesbian sexuality. As I discuss in Chapter 5, it will be necessary to examine literary texts by Brazilian female authors in order to find the authentic expression of lesbian desire or, in other words, to find homosexual female desire represented not from a masculinist perspective but, rather, from the perspective of the lesbian subject herself.

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*O cortiço*, much like *Iracema*, displays a close link between Brazilians and the land (nature). Words such as *sensuality*, *instinct*, *hot*, and *exuberant*, may describe the landscape as they do some individuals, in particular, women of color. In Alencar’s novel, the Indian woman, living within the exuberant American nature, acted *instinctively* and was capable of *ardent* love. In *O cortiço*, however, it is the *mulata* Rita Baiana who is compared to the Brazilian landscape, in a series of associations that evoke the heat, the colors, tastes, and smells emanating from nature. Seen by the Portuguese Jerônimo, Rita was the synthesis of all the elements of the Brazilian land that had left an unforgettable impression upon the European; she was:

... ela era a luz ardente do meio-dia; ela era o calor verme­lho das sestas da fazenda; era o aroma quente dos trevos e das baunilhas, que o atordoara nas matas brasileiras; era a palmeira virginal e esquiva que se não torce a nenhuma outra planta; era o veneno e era o açúcar gostoso; era o
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One could argue that the image of the *mulata* has come to represent the nation, but obviously this image is nothing more than that: an image or, in other words, an object for the enjoyment of the voyeur, be he foreign or native. Meanwhile, Brazilian black women—as well as Brazilian women in general—have been mostly reduced to the position of the Other, excluded from the dominant discourse. Of course, one should not be blind to the issue of women as oppressors of other women. This is certainly a problem in Brazilian society, and its most obvious example is the case of domestic servants and their relationship with the middle- and upper-class women they work for. The social oppression of women by other women results from forms of capitalist exploitation of the lower classes but is also a consequence of the slavery-patriarchal mentality that has shaped the dominant ideology in Brazil. As such, it is just another way Brazilian women of color are rendered passive objects by the dominant ideology.

**Dom Casmurro and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Woman**

The novels of Machado de Assis are set mostly within the domestic space of the household, specifically those four novels commonly referred to as belonging to Machado’s first phase, which follow more closely a Romantic narrative composition in the plot development and in the constitution of characters and their motives. These first four novels—*Ressurreição* [Resurrection] (1872), *A mão e a luva* [The hand and the glove] (1874), *Helena* (1876), and *Iaiá Garcia* (1878)—are centered on female protagonists, and the women in these novels seem to fit the Romantic ideal of femininity. As Ann Pescatello describes, they are “virtuous, beautiful, romantic” (18). Nevertheless, the careful reader will find that these early female
protagonists are more complex than the women characters of other Brazilian Romantic novels. In addition, each one of them serves to illustrate the social situation of nineteenth-century Brazilian women of the middle classes, and several critics have written exclusively on Machado’s female characters.7

In the five novels that follow Machado’s first phase, beginning with Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas (Epitaph of a Small Winner, 1952; The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas, 1997), published in 1881, the narrative focus is on the male protagonists. Although women continue to be important as they relate to and help define the male characters, the female characters in this second phase play somewhat secondary roles in the novels, with the notable exception of Capitu, the famous heroine of Dom Casmurro. Here Machado again sets his story in the domestic realm, and makes of Capitu an excellent example of how Brazilian women of the middle—or intermediate, as John Gledson characterizes them (69)—classes lived in the second half of the nineteenth century. Capitu’s struggles with love, the prospect of marriage, class distinctions, and life as a married woman, are illustrative of the kind of social expectations Brazilian women of that period had to face—and tried to fulfill. However, just as Capitu is a more complex character than some of her predecessors in Brazilian fiction, so is the author’s perspective on women’s social situation at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, not only does Dom Casmurro present a portrayal of Brazilian women’s condition at that time, but it also problematizes that condition through the use of ambiguity and an unreliable narrator, thus inviting the reader to look at it in a critical way.

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My title for this section about the “domestic woman” evokes the book by Nancy Armstrong on the emergence of the English-language novel. In fact, in Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (1987), Armstrong dedicates one chapter to the “domestic woman” that came to be shaped in England, and later in the United States, by the numerous “conduct books” published in those two countries during the eighteenth century. My concern here, unlike Armstrong’s, has been
with the literature produced in Brazil in the nineteenth century, particularly after the 1850s. However, some of Armstrong’s findings are not totally alien to the situation of the nineteenth-century Brazilian “domestic woman,” particularly in that the public discussion on women’s education in England and in the United States will find parallels in similar discussions held later in Brazil. For example, Armstrong contends that the English-language conduct books

... assumed that an education ideally made a woman desire to be what a prosperous man desires. ... For such a man, her desirability hinged upon an education in frugal domestic practices. She was supposed to complement his role as an earner and producer with hers as a wise spender and tasteful consumer. Such an ideal relationship presupposed a woman whose desires were not of necessity attracted to material things. But because a woman’s desire could in fact be manipulated by signs of wealth and position, she required an education. (59)

The “domestic woman,” for whom these conduct books were written, represented women from a middle class, emergent in England in the eighteenth century and in Brazil a century later. As John Gledson asserts in his *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis* (1984), *Dom Casmurro* deals with the ascension of the middle class and its interactions with the upper, landowning classes.

Up until 1808, when the Portuguese crown moved to Brazil in order to escape Napoleon’s invasion of the Iberian Peninsula, Brazil was an extremely conservative patriarchal society. In the patriarchal family, the father (or a surrogate male figure) was the exclusive authority in charge of everything, including the household, the children, and the slaves. The woman held a very low status in the house, treated almost as one of the children, or even as inferior to the male children once they reached a certain age. According to many travelers’ accounts, the women of the house were usually kept hidden from visitors. On the other hand, certainly no one looking from the outside would be able to see these women, since the interior of the house was protected by the *muxarabiê*, the traditional tall wood lattice of Arab influence.
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The arrival of the Portuguese court brought a number of changes to the country, and particularly to the city of Rio de Janeiro, which underwent a series of structural changes and urban and cultural improvements. With the Portuguese, many foreigners also went to Brazil, among them women, introducing new habits and forms of behavior in the country. These changes in cultural practices were more noticeable in Rio de Janeiro after the 1840s, and later in other parts of Brazil. Nevertheless, with the upgrade in the political status of the country (from colony to Reino Unido de Portugal, Brasil e Algarve [United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and Algarve] in 1808, and to independent nation in 1822), the colonial woman turned démodé. The wife became then the one responsible for running the household, in charge of the children, domestic slaves, and other servants. She would also be called upon to receive and entertain the husband’s guests, at times acting as a kind of unofficial public relations agent for him, helping the husband in business deals or in his political aspirations (Costa 119–20).

The importance of the woman’s role within the family became an object of discussion in Brazilian intellectual and political circles, and this discussion eventually came to address the social function of women in regards to their contributions to the community and to the nation at large. The public debate about the women’s role in Brazilian society is better understood if examined within the context, again, of the efforts to define national identity following Independence. While these efforts were heightened with the declaration of the Republic in 1889, by then a consensus already existed for women to be active participants in society, and supported their right to be so. Nevertheless, the consensus remained that women’s realm of participation should be primarily within the limits of the family—or in the public arena, provided the needs of the family had received priority and had been properly taken care of.

Among the many improvements introduced by the Portuguese king after arriving in Rio de Janeiro were those made in the fields of culture and education, starting a trend that was followed by the two Brazilian emperors after Independence in 1822. In addition, the Enlightenment, even if arriving late in Brazil, reinforced the importance of education in general and disseminated among the public the idea of the importance of
women’s education. Thus the second half of the nineteenth century in Brazil witnessed a movement toward better education for girls, more comparable to that received by boys. At the same time, a woman’s right to higher education was defended, and eventually the first woman to enroll in an institution of higher education in Brazil joined the School of Medicine in Rio de Janeiro in 1881. From the perspective of the dominant ideology, the issue of women’s education was seen as part of a general understanding of a woman’s role within the family and in society. The pervasive idea was that, responsible for the education and welfare of the children, an educated mother would be a better mother; and in preparing the country’s (male) leaders of tomorrow, an educated woman would be better prepared to help shape the future of the nation. As an article published in 1897 in the women’s journal *A Mensageira* [The female messenger] made clear, it was necessary for Brazil to realize that a major distinction existed between *criar* (“to raise”) and *educar* (“to educate”) a child (49), and the time had come for Brazilian women to do more than “just” raising a child.

This ideology survives into the twentieth century, as is attested by many publications, fiction and nonfiction. As an example, it may be sufficient to revisit here the preface to the first edition of the book *Perfil da mulher brasileira* [The Brazilian woman’s profile], published in 1922 and reprinted in a second edition of 1938, authored by the medical doctor Antônio Austregésilo:

... como dirigente e guarda do lar, [a mulher] poderá sempre inculcar no homem os princípios sólidos de um bem inestimável e essencial à nossa índole.

A influência que a mulher exerce na formação, das nossas qualidades, e o muito que a Brasileira pode contribuir para a organização do caráter [nacional]. . . .

As qualidades maternas influirão consideravelmente no bosquejo e na constituição do perfil moral dos homens, que delas precisam para construir solidamente as ações nacionais. (v–vi [3])

It should be noted that the Positivist ideology, predominant in Brazil throughout the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century, depicted women as morally superior beings
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whose superiority ought to be preserved within the domestic space by the social institution of the family. In spite of her moral superiority, a woman was still legally inferior to the male figure, since the law determined that the husband was the head of the household. Legally, therefore, the expectations placed on a married woman were of submission, obedience, and faithfulness to the husband.

Interestingly, the law considered male adultery very differently from female adultery. During most of the nineteenth century, the Ordenações Filipinas, the Portuguese laws, according to which the husband would be legally protected if he killed his adulterous wife, ruled Brazilians. Even though these legal codes suffered a series of changes and amendments implemented by new codes in the late 1800s, it is well known that the practice went unpunished in Brazil for many decades of the next century. In fact, only in the 1960s and 1970s, did the unwritten law that had for so long protected the male murderer of an adulterous woman begin to suffer strong opposition.

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Those familiar with Machado de Assis’s novel Dom Casmurro know that the theme of adultery is at the very core of the novel. This is not to say that Dom Casmurro is about adultery. Since Helen Caldwell published her famous study The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis in 1960, in which she defends Capitu’s innocence, several critics have pointed out that whether or not Capitu committed adultery is beside the point, since it is practically an insoluble enigma. Paul B. Dixon, in his book Reversible Readings: Ambiguity in Four Modern Latin American Novels (1985) asserts the impossibility of determining either Capitu’s guilt or innocence, and states that, in fact, “the enigma of Capitu must remain unsolved” (29). In this way, what matters in Machado de Assis’s Dom Casmurro—and what matters in all his novels—are not so much the facts, but rather, how they are narrated. The novel is about ambiguity itself, and it is this ambiguity that has come to be known as the writer’s distinctive mark. Nevertheless, many other critics have continued to insist on the issue of Capitu’s alleged adultery, either to find her guilty or to defend her innocence.
The fact is that, still at the end of the twentieth century, Bentinho, or Bento Santiago, the protagonist/narrator of *Dom Casmurro*, was known in Brazilian culture as a “cuckold” (Bonassi 73), while the ambiguity involving Capitu’s innocence or guilt conferred upon her the category of myth (cf. Mindlin 78). Capitu’s eyes, described as “de cigana oblíqua e dissimulada” (38; “a bit like a gypsy’s, oblique and sly”; 48), her famous “olhos de ressaca” (46), or “undertow eyes” (63), have become synonymous with mysteriousness and seduction, capable—we may conclude from the narrator’s remembrances—of dragging one against one’s will:10

Traziam não sei que fluido misterioso e energico, uma força que arrastava para dentro, como a vaga que se retira da praia, nos dias de ressaca. Para não ser arrastado, agarrei-me às outras partes vizinhas . . . ; mas tão depressa buscava as pupilas, a onda que saía delas vinha crescendo, cava e escura, ameaçando envolver-me, puxar-me e tragar-me. (46 [4])

It is quite noticeable in this passage that, seen through Bentinho’s emotions, Capitu appears as another version of the seductive Eve. In fact, if the reader pays attention to words such as *força, puxar, cava e escura,* and *ameaçando,* what emerges is really a sketch of the powerful Medusa with her dangerous, hypnotizing eyes or, as Sant’Anna has put it, the “castrating sphinx” (*Canibalismo* 77, 78–79). The fear of being swallowed up by this Medusa may be understood as describing the conflicting emotions of a romantic male adolescent in love. However, if we remember that the words are actually coming from an older narrator who writes his memoirs, and thus has a privileged authoritative position regarding his own past, it becomes apparent that what Bentinho, and later Bento Santiago, really feared was some kind of a mythical *vagina dentata.* Sant’Anna discusses the myth of the *vagina dentata* as a variation of the devouring sphinx, a recurring theme in Brazilian male-authored poetry of the Parnassianism, the poetic movement that was dominant in Brazil after the 1880s. The fear of the *vagina dentata* seems to originate in the trauma afflicting the male child of a “phallic mother” (Sant’Anna, *Canibalismo* 78).

Gledson discusses Dona Gloria, Bentinho’s mother, as a kind of dominant/domineering mother. In fact, as a widow, she
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represents the patriarchal figure. She is the head of the household after her husband's death and, as such, she makes decisions concerning such items as the properties of the family, the slaves, and the household helpers, as well as Bentinho's future. Bentinho submits to his mother's desires, unable to stand up for what he truly wants, or even to express his wishes. The manner in which he reacts to Capitu, the portrayal he presents of her as someone who thinks, makes plans, and takes action, reflects his own passivity and submissiveness toward his mother.

In this regard, the reader should not ignore the adjective *energico* in the passage quoted above. The duality *activity* or *initiative* versus *passivity* is recurrent throughout the narrative and is used to compare and contrast Capitu and Bentinho. It would seem that the narrator Bento Santiago wants to characterize himself, from an early age, as somewhat passive, naive, and accepting of others' wishes, particularly the desires of women—first of all, his mother, and then, Capitu. Roberto Schwarz comments that Bento presents himself as a "venerador lacrimoso da mãe" ["weeping adorer of his mother"], as one of various strategies utilized by the narrator to obtain the reader's sympathy (Schwarz 10). By underscoring his adoration for his mother, whom he labels a "saint" (*Dom Casmurro*, trans. Gledson 236), the narrator finds himself a place within the Christian dogma of veneration for the Mother and, by extension, for women in general, much like Martim in *Iracema*. Thus Bento defends himself against any possible accusation of having done harm to his own wife, whom he would necessarily respect as a result of the Christian spirit in which he was raised (cf. Gledson 197–98).

Gledson proposes another way of understanding Bento's reaction to Capitu, an interpretation that complements what I have discussed above. According to the critic, "In order to marry Bento, Capitu has to manipulate and dominate him, a process which, reversing the traditional roles of man and wife, produces resentment and jealousy" (Gledson 8). The suggestion that Capitu in fact manipulates and dominates Bento springs from the narrative itself or, in other words, from Bento's own perspective. Nevertheless, what should be considered here is that Capitu seems intent on marrying Bentinho.
Marriage was at that time the only truly acceptable social end for a woman and the only form of social ascension available for women of the middle classes. Machado’s novel portrays the dominant ideology at the time of Brazil’s Segundo Império [Second Empire], the period following Don Pedro II’s coronation in 1841; more specifically, it portrays Brazilian society in the late 1850s when most of the action in the novel takes place. Among the various social, legal, and political-economic codes that regulated social relations in Brazil then, was the social-religious code that concerned marriage and the social situation of women in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Capitu embodies this social-religious code, representing the social status of middle-class women at the time. Thus we see how the character inhabits primarily the domestic space, in her father’s house, in Dona Gloria’s, and in Bento’s once they have married. We see also that Capitu receives the education typically available for Brazilian women then (Dom Casmurro, trans. Gledson 59), and we can understand her efforts to secure her marriage to Bentinho, since marriage was the only acceptable means a woman of Capitu’s status had in order to ascend socially. As his wife, Capitu occupies herself with running the household efficiently and economically and with the care of their son. She also submits to Bentinho’s whims, as we see, for example, when he insists that she should not show her bare arms at a ball, even when in his company (Dom Casmurro, trans. Gledson 183). In sum, she fulfills in many aspects the expectations of submission and obedience to the husband commonly placed on a married woman. However, as with some of Machado’s other female characters, Capitu displays a strong and independent personality and, as was said earlier, often takes the initiative, rather than assuming a passive role. Here perhaps lies Capitu’s flaw for, otherwise, she is practically the perfect domestic woman of late-nineteenth-century Brazil. Her independent thinking and initiative translate as signs of unfaithfulness for the jealous husband who then accuses her of adultery.

It is interesting that this split between tradition, on the one hand, and independence and initiative, on the other, that confronts Capitu in the late 1800s seems to follow Brazilian women throughout the next century. In actuality, it will become
a common topos in Brazilian women’s literature, from Gilka Machado at the beginning of the twentieth century, to writers such as Helena Parente Cunha (1929) and Sonia Coutinho at the end of the millennium.

In *Dom Casmurro*, this split or duality of *tradition* versus *independence* is best illustrated at the end of the novel, when Capitu is faced with Bento’s accusation and reacts with dignity, not as an accused woman (trans. Gledson 231). Taking the initiative again, she instead asks for “an immediate separation” (231), which would mean social ostracism. Within the limits society imposes on women, Capitu finds solace in religion and submits herself to her husband’s desire: (“—Confiei a Deus todas as minhas amarguras, disse-me Capitu ao voltar da igreja; ouvi dentro de mim que a nossa separação é indispensável, e estou às suas ordens” (146; “‘I confided all my bitterness to God,’ said Capitu when she came back from church; ‘I heard a voice inside me saying that our separation is unavoidable, and I am at your disposal’”; 233). Having shown throughout the narrative a preference for dissimulation, Bento sends Capitu to exile in Switzerland under some pretense, in order to “delude public opinion” (235).

As the memoirs of Bento Santiago, *Dom Casmurro* obeys the single perspective of the male narrator who seeks to write and to rewrite, reorganize the past, and to construct not only a portrait of Capitu but mainly of himself. Capitu’s voice is never heard in the novel, except through the voice of Bentinho/Bento, and her story is never told. Only a hundred years later does it appear, as a palimpsest, in the 1999 novel by Ana Maria Machado (1942), *A audácia dessa mulher* [This woman’s audacity].

In Ana Maria Machado’s novel, the protagonist, Bia, an independent and self-sufficient woman living in Rio de Janeiro at the end of the twentieth century, is presented with a notebook that had belonged to a young housewife a hundred years earlier. In it, the young woman wrote her diary among cooking recipes, grocery expenses, and home remedies. As Bia finds out, this woman is no one else but Capitu herself, and her secret diary tells her version of the events that led to her exile. The title of the book thus refers to Capitu’s audacity, as well as to Bia’s and to another female character’s in the novel who, like
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Capitu, has to face her partner’s extreme jealousy. These fin-de-siècle women dared stand their ground and not submit to masculinist desire. The female voice—of Capitu, of the author, and of the characters who tell Capitu’s and their own stories—is raised in opposition to the discourse of the male narrator of Dom Casmurro. Hence Ana Maria Machado aligns her work with those of other Brazilian women writers who counteract the masculinist ideology. This ideology had for a very long time enacted a kind of social-literary “ventriloquism”—to borrow an expression used by Sant’Anna (Canibalismo 39)—by which the body is female but the voice—and the desire—male.

Exerting its power to regulate the female body, the dominant ideology has created a number of cultural myths catering to a masculinist form of desire: the reification of the female child and adolescent; the childish woman as a synonym for “being feminine”; the invisibility of the middle-aged and elderly woman; the sexuality of the working-class woman and of the woman of color as being easily negotiable; and similar devices. Whether or not all these representations of the feminine originate in cultural manifestations prior to the advent of Romanticism in Brazil, they generally become part of our national discourse thanks to the artistic expressions of the Romantic and of the Realist-Naturalist periods, when culture becomes more accessible to the middle classes. Later, with the advent of the mass media, literature will find in the movies, radio, television, and in various forms of popular culture, most notably Brazilian popular music, vehicles for the widespread propagation of these myths.

In this regard, we should remember that these nineteenth-century novels discussed here have been adapted to the cinema and/or television, and that Almeida’s Memórias de um sargento de milícias became a popular samba in the hands of Paulinho da Viola, a well-known Brazilian composer and singer.12 Certainly, one factor has played an important role in the process by which these literary characters became widely accepted myths of cultural behavior, and that is what Foucault calls the “author function.” The “author function” has a classificatory effect, as the author’s name confers a particular status to the literary work in a given society (Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 107–08). In addition, the author’s name may indicate,
or even dictate, a particular way of approaching the text. Thus, Alencar, for example, having achieved early in his lifetime great recognition among literary critics and the general public, was called the “Father of Brazilian Literature.” His public authority, along with letters and other writings he produced before and around the time he published *Iracema*, certainly exerted an influence upon his readers.

The same could be said of Machado de Assis, the founder of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, who held the status of a literary authority, enjoyed great prestige among his peers and the reading audience, and is considered the greatest Brazilian writer of all times. During their lifetimes, Almeida and Azevedo perhaps did not hold quite the same level of prestige as did Alencar and Machado de Assis. This is quite understandable in the case of Almeida, who wrote *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* when he was only twenty-three years old and died prematurely in a shipwreck. Nevertheless, during his time Azevedo was called “the first national novelist” by some critics (Viveiros de Castro, in Mott 77). By the time he published *O cortiço*, Azevedo had already been a literary success, with the publication some years earlier of *O mulato* (1881; *Mulatto*, 1990; 1993). Furthermore, both he and Almeida had an influential instrument at hand: the newspapers, for which they both wrote satire and social commentary, and Azevedo, in addition, worked as a cartoonist.

In sum, the four nineteenth-century novelists discussed here constitute literary authorities whose influence extends into the culture and the entire nation’s way of thinking, while some of their female characters represent myths of feminine behavior that have become part of the Brazilian imaginary. It is against the literary authority of Alencar, Almeida, Azevedo, Machado de Assis, and other names in a male-dominated canon that Brazilian women authors in the twentieth century have produced their works. These women have attempted to find an authentic expression for the social and psychological reality of Brazilian women, for their desire, their bodies, and their sexuality, and have often succeeded, although not without problems. In the chapter that follows, I will examine the expression of female desire and eroticism in the poetry of Gilka Machado, who is

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considered a pioneer in the tradition of Brazilian women’s literature, specifically in female erotic discourse. I will then discuss how some late-twentieth-century Brazilian women writers have continued this tradition by seeking to give expression to female eroticism, and the problems of literary representation that have emerged.