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

Ferreira-Pinto, Cristina

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Brazilian Women Writers in the New Millennium

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Brazilian women writers have come a long way in their representation of female desire, eroticism, and sexuality. From the first decades of the century with Gilka Machado’s daring poetry, through the pioneering fiction of Rachel de Queiroz, Clarice Lispector, and Lygia Fagundes Telles in the 1930s and 1940s, to the work of Leila Miccolis, Márcia Denser, Sonia Coutinho, Marina Colasanti, and others in the latter part of the twentieth century, Brazilian women have written and rewritten the female body and identity, and have deconstructed masculinist cultural myths of femininity. By the end of the first millennium, these writers have reinscribed women in Brazilian history and culture, giving their female characters agency and letting them find their own voices.

In order to achieve this, Brazilian women writers strived to create a new discourse, each poet or fictionist searching for her own language, a language that could give authentic expression to a woman’s life, especially her erotic experiences, for sexuality stands at the very core of a person’s sense of self-identity. For Brazilian women, the universal impulse toward self-knowledge has been coupled with the urge to reject images of the female body and sexuality originated in male desire. In Brazil, still a male-centered society in spite of women’s many social advances, female sexuality has been described and prescribed by a masculinist culture. Women characters have “desired” forms of male desire, have “been” insatiable femmes fatales or dangerous Medusas, or have “spoken” as dummies through the voice of a ventriloquist.

Hence finding their voices has meant for Brazilian women writers letting their female protagonists explore their sexuality.
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and erotic drives, while they too have explored the erotic in language. In this way, one of the main focuses of this book has been the creation of a female erotic discourse, the obstacles and problems Brazilian women writers have encountered in doing so, as well as the poetic and narrative strategies they have employed in the depiction of female eroticism. As I began my analysis of the poems and narratives here discussed, two important questions emerged that guided the writing of these chapters. One question was, "What is an appropriate definition of the erotic?" and the second, "Can female desire be rendered in a way other than submissive to male desire?" Or, in other words, "Can the dialectic subordination versus submission be left out of the erotic exchange?"

In Chapter 1, I pointed out that this dialectic was in fact at the core of gender relations as depicted in canonical, male-authored, Brazilian nineteenth-century novels. It was as well at the basis of the creation of female protagonists such as Vidinha, Luisinha, Iracema, Rita Baiana, and other characters, who came to represent, since the second-half of the 1800s and throughout much of the 1900s, rigid myths of the feminine ideal in the Brazilian imaginary.

In Chapter 2, I focused on the creation of an erotic discourse by different women poets and fiction writers, and thus addressed the issue of an appropriate definition of the erotic. I was able to find satisfying working definitions of what is a "pornographic" discourse and what is an "erotic" one. Based on the theoretical works of Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, Rosalind Coward, and others, I have considered the erotic discourse as an aesthetic endeavor that privileges a mutually consensual exchange between equals, while the pornographic discourse seeks to depict the domination of one subject by another. In fact, the pornographic text can be understood as a kind of "poetics" of the Other's oppression. However, given the many different sexual preferences that human beings display at different times of their lives, these are meant to be strictly working definitions for the purpose of the analyses I have effected in this book. Although many in Brazil generally accept the distinction I have made here between pornography and eroticism, it would be wise to accept Maurice Charney's term "sexual fiction" (or sexual literature), for Brazilian women
writers have often challenged or problematized the distinction between the two categories.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Brazilian women poets and fiction writers spoke with progressively greater openness of the female body and sexuality, often challenging or deconstructing traditional myths of femininity. Each one of them sought to find new forms of linguistic expression, in an effort to let the female voice speak in a most authentic way. In this regard, both Helena Parente Cunha and Marilene Felinto stood out for their formally innovative novels *Mulher no espelho* and *As mulheres de Tijucopapo*. While different in the formal solutions they achieve, Cunha and Felinto have in common the depiction of an unequivocally daring female voice that speaks up for herself in each of these two novels. In addition, Cunha creates some of the most beautiful erotic passages in Brazilian fiction when portraying her protagonist engaging in forms of self-pleasure. Felinto too presents a compelling female erotic discourse in *Tijucopapo*. In the end, however, neither author is fully able to think female eroticism outside of hierarchical heterosexuality relationships that privilege the phallus, penetration, and female passivity.

Cunha’s and Felinto’s novels exemplify the kind of obstacles twentieth-century Brazilian female authors were trying to overcome in their works. Some of the problems these writers faced emerged from the fact that they too are cultural beings living and writing within a specific dominant ideology. While challenging, questioning, and deconstructing this ideology and the cultural myths that have supported its existence, they often had to revisit their own beliefs as they invited their readers to do the same. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Brazilian women poets and fiction writers expressed an ambiguity and discomfort concerning the female body and female identity that reflected well the reality lived by many middle-class women in Brazil at the time. As Brazilian women were being confronted with new possibilities of self-realization and self-pleasure, on the one hand, and traditional female roles on the other hand, writers like Lya Luft and Telles, whose novels I discuss in Chapter 3, employed strategies such as elements of the fantastic and the grotesque to represent a deeply fragmented female subject and her conflicts.
In Chapter 4, again I examine the use of the grotesque by another Brazilian woman fictionist, Coutinho. However, rather than using the grotesque to express the disruption between the female character and her body or her society, as seen in the previous chapter, Coutinho appropriates it as a strategy to represent—even parade—the aging sexual female body. By bringing together two categories that are culturally perceived as mutually exclusive, the aging body, and the sexual and sensual body, Coutinho deconstructs old myths of femininity that relate a woman’s sexual desire and prowess with youth, and her desirability with traditional standards of beauty. The female grotesque thus offers the female subject a cultural-literary space wherein she is able to find agency and give expression to her sexuality and desire outside of the parameters set out by the dominant masculinist culture.

 Likewise, as I discuss in Chapter 5, lesbian desire and sexuality open up a space for female subjectivity and agency. There exists in Brazil a long-standing tradition of lesbian literature that includes such mainstream authors as Telles and, more recently, Denser and Myriam Campello, among others. However, the recognition of such a tradition often requires a “queer” reading that will foreground the lesbian subject, much as one hundred years ago readers needed to look for the palimpsest in a woman’s text in order to find there the authentic female voice.

 In Chapter 6, I focus once more on female heterosexual desire as represented in Denser’s short stories and in the erotic poems of Colasanti. Whereas both writers are successful in the representation of female sexuality, Denser’s fiction problematizes the expression of female eroticism within a gender system still centered on masculinist desire. Colasanti, in turn, is successful in creating an erotic discourse that gives agency to the female subject; while in other poems she depicts and critiques the dominant ideology that frames men and women’s relationships.

 As we move along through the twentieth-first century, Brazilian female authors will continue to deconstruct any rigid cultural myths that posit women in reductive ways, in a process of continual critical revisionism. As they question, subvert, and re-create masculinist myths of femininity, perhaps women writ-
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ers will also engage in a process of mythmaking. Nevertheless, these female-authored "myths," especially since the last quarter of the twentieth century, are not to be read as static or prescriptive forms of female behavior. Rather, they recurrently offer dynamic, plural representations of an evolving female subject. In the new millennium, then, the Brazilian "New Woman" will have, in fact, many faces, many voices, and will be ever more self-assertive, comfortable with her body and sexuality, senhora of her desire.