

HOW DOES CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN WOMEN'S FICTION DEFY TRADITIONAL AUTHORSHIP AND NARRATION?¹

COMO A FICÇÃO FEMININA BRASILEIRA CONTEMPORÂNEA DESAFIA A AUTORIA E A NARRATIVA TRADICIONAIS?

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ABSTRACT: This study discusses Contemporary Brazilian women writers' *romans noirs* and crime novels from the 1990s. Women writers appropriate this traditionally "masculine" form of writing in a setting outside home. They replace male criminals, detectives or narrators with women protagonists or narrators in their stories. This article analyses the fiction of Sonia Coutinho, Marcia Denser, Ana Miranda and Patrícia Melo.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Brazilian, women writers, *romans noirs*.

RESUMO: Este estudo investiga as peculiaridades dos *romans noirs* de autoria feminina da literatura brasileira dos anos 1990. Especificamente, destacam-se as formas usadas pelas escritoras para se apropriarem de técnicas masculinas por meio da troca dos narradores masculinos por protagonistas femininas e por pontos de vistas subjetivos presentes nas narrativas de Sonia Coutinho, Marcia Denser, Ana Miranda e Patrícia Melo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura contemporânea, autoria feminina, romance policial.

Introduction

Contemporary Brazilian women writers defy traditional male authorship when they begin to write *romans noirs* and crime novels after the 1990s. These were initially written only by male authors in Brazil from the

¹ This article was initially presented as a lecture at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth on April 28, 2014, at the invitation of Prof. Anna Klobucka. When Prof. Aina Pérez Fontdevila invited me to write an article on Brazilian women writers who defy the sense of authorship I considered it appropriate for this theme. This is why I would ask for permission to publish it in its original form, in English, although in its present revised form.

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1980s, during the so-called postmodern “condition,” or period, as Lyotard called it (1984; 1986). Women appropriate this traditionally “masculine” form of writing in a setting outside home; and they replace male criminals, detectives or narrators by women protagonists or narrators in their stories.

Detective novels were invented and began to circulate in the 19th century by Edgar Allan Poe, in the United States, and by Guy de Maupassant, in France, when the profession of detective was created. In the 20th century they were widespread by authors as famous as Dashiell Hammett, with *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Patricia Highsmith, especially with *The Talented Ripley* (1955), and Ed McBain in his crime fiction. In Great Britain, many serial crime authors were famous, such as Agatha Christie, with her character Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Edgar Wallace. In France, the detective Arsène Lupin, the “gentleman-cambrioleur,” created in 1907 by Maurice Leblanc, became a classic, at the side of the Belgian Georges Simenon, among other authors. This type of literature was published by terror magazines, comic strips and was inspired by movies. They were always linked to popular literature, and generally became best-sellers. However, in postmodernism, authors such as Umberto Eco, inspired by New History or History of the mentalities, tried to line them with literary art.

Roman noir (*Noir* fiction) was influenced by movies, and began when detective novel authors began to experiment with the inversion of traditional narratives. It amounted to the deconstruction of the traditional detective and murderer, creating odd personalities for the former and making the latter into a hero. It also brought about variations and inversions of their roles and personalities, as well as of the plots. Many authors, among them Eco, also introduced a second layer of reading, with intellectual information on general culture and on the topic of the book, although writing a best-seller. Authors such as Rubem Fonseca and Sérgio Sant’Anna practiced it after the 1980s, but it was only in the following decade that women authors began to write *roman noir*. In fact, during the boom of women’s literature in Brazil in the 1970s their topics were basically restricted to home, family, love, intimacy, and subjectivity, and generally written as *Ich-Erzählungen*. Seldom did they refer to crime, violence or urban night life. One has only to cite the

names of Clarice Lispector, Lygia Fagundes Telles or Hilda Hilst to recognize this fact.³

Realism in Literature

Realist literature tended to pessimism from its outset, in the 19th century, because writers aimed at denouncing the social issues that were around them. Stendhal compared Romanticism to a mirror carried in a cart turned up to a blue sky, and Realism to this mirror turned downwards to a muddy road (see LOBO, 1987, p. 146).

There was much more freedom for women in France than in Brazil, as when one compares a French woman author from the beginning of the 19th century, such as George Sand (1804-1876), for example, with a much later Brazilian author, such as Júlia Lopes de Almeida (1862-1934). George Sand, the pen-name for Amantine-Aurore-Lucile Dupin, baroness of Dudevant, dressed as a man in the Parisian night and wrote many revolutionary chronicles after her much admired Honoré de Balzac in realist style, while the Brazilian writer was falsely accused of imitating her husband Felinto de Almeida's literary style; in addition, when she was appointed to the Brazilian Academy of Letters, she gave her place to him, as she considered appropriate for a wife to do in her time (see Lobo, Luiza, 2006, p. 266-272).

In the 1970s Brazilian women refused to write realist literature because they chose to exploit a more subjective and intimate niche that was seldom present in male authors' fiction. However, already in the 1990s they began to change their domestic setting and personal style for street scenes of

³ Néilda Piñon was able to counterbalance realism and imagination in *A república dos sonhos* (1984). She combined the word "republic" in its political notion with the heroine's biography and the history of the immigration of her family from Galicia to Rio de Janeiro. History and dreams are thus interconnected, through the stream of consciousness of the female protagonist, in a female *Bildungsroman*, accompanied by the description of Rio de Janeiro and Galicia in the first decades of the 20th century. Memoirs have always been an important genre for women writers to keep in touch with their imaginary, as one sees in Rachel Jardim's *O penhoar chinês* (1985; see my *Guia de autoras da literatura feminina brasileira*, 2006, and my *Crítica sem juízo*, 1993; 2nd ed. 2007). These novels deal with much description: of the family house, habits, relatives. Only eventually do they go out in the streets or mention the city. Few Brazilian women authors have dealt with realistic and historical plots, such as Dinah Silveira de Queiroz in *A Muralha* (1954). The first woman to be elected to the Brazilian Academy of Letters, she was most known for her naive realistic novel *Floradas da serra* (1954), but she was also one of the few Brazilian authors of science fiction.

violence and murder in *roman noir* plots. Here we refer to middle class women who are until today the great majority of Brazilian writers, especially due to the lack of good basic education for the subaltern classes. Until the 1950s women were excluded from the working force. However, at the end of the last century women's writing became independent from psychic and social subjection to the patriarchal order led by fathers and husbands. Since then, women's mentalities have very much changed, and private journals have been transformed into public literature through digital blogs written by young Brazilian women, as I showed in my *Segredos públicos* (LOBO, 2007).

French feminist theory (*écriture femme*) defined private writing as essential to women and linked to their bodies. Of course, this idea is highly debatable, since a new environment and new forms of social work and relationships outside the home have already visibly transformed women's sensitivity in many ways. Anglo-Saxon feminist theory, on the contrary, presents a sociological view of feminism and constant debate of Freud's theory of women's castration. This theory was led by essayists such as Juliet Mitchell (1974), Toril Moi (1991), Kate Millett (1970) and Nancy Chodorow (1989). They have argued that women's writing circling around their own self and home-attached was due to the lack of experience in a profession far from their families and outside the house walls, that is, due to cultural biases.

I think that both lines of thought, the French one that values the body, and those that value social values, in pragmatic, English-speaking countries, can be combined to explain women's writing, their behavior and their interests, which are not essential to them but can change with history.⁴

Nowadays, Brazilian contemporary women's writing does not focus so much on family and "feminine" issues. Its characters and narrators are nearer to the behavior of the "bad guys" in crime novels or to witches who dedicate themselves to flying on brooms or by airplane, sprinkling dangerous spells and poisonous ideas through their digital books, sites and blogs that have become best-sellers. They have abandoned the imaginary inner travels based on the stream of consciousness, as discussed by Irma

⁴ As evidence of the importance of the body and how male and female genomes affect behavior and sensitivity in both sexes, see an article issued on this topic in the *New York Times* on April 24, 2014, p. A-4.

Garcia in *Promenades femmilières* (1981) – a title that combines the French word “*femme*,” for woman, and “*familière*,” for familiar and homely. They have replaced their seclusion in their home and in their imagination for an external *The Voyage Out*, as Virginia Woolf titled her first novel, in 1915.

Sonia Coutinho (1939-2013), Marcia Denser, Ana Miranda and Patrícia Melo are intellectual authors who know that “feminine” and “masculine” are categories that can be applied either to men or to women, depending on their psychology rather than by any trait essentially linked to a gender. Proust, for example, can be said to have a feminine style, while Marguerite Yourcenar and Doris Lessing can be characterized as having a more “masculine,” realist or objective style. In fact, “feminine” and “masculine” are psychoanalytical categories that are flexible and that do not belong essentially to any given gender. They also vary with time and cultural background.

It is with this awareness and freedom of expression that Brazilian women authors have decided to experiment in their texts, shifting from female to male narrators and characters, from the home to the street, from subjection to violence, rebellion and risk, from housewives to murderers. For instance, in Marcia Denser’s short story “O animal dos motéis,” which gives its title to the collection (2003), female characters ride a motorcycle, choose their partners for one night in hotels or even sleep on a bench in the main square of São Paulo. Danger, crime, mystery, violence, and adventure haunt female narrators and authors in her plots as well as in those of Patrícia Melo and Sonia Coutinho (the latter after 1989), as we shall see. Much of the imaginary and lyric subjectivism of past heroines are now replaced by realistic style and an outward perspective; therefore, the *Ich-Erzählung* and the sentimental tone in poetry and in the private journal have been shifted for more objective narrator, characters and plot. Day-time plots taking place at home and everyday topics taking place in healthy environments or in the countryside, as in Julia Lopes de Almeida’s *Correio da roça* (1913), have been replaced by night-time plots in which female professionals sometimes perpetrate crimes.

Male Authors in 1970s Roman Noir

Male authors often profited from their experience working as journalists, lawyers, or prosecutors which familiarized them with criminal or police cases to be exploited in literary form. Such was the case of Sérgio Sant'Anna (a Labor Court assistant) or Rubem Fonseca (a civil police detective). However, in *roman noir* it was necessary to introduce the “great art”, that is, literary content and information that would run parallel to the straightforward narration of the traditional detective stories. The figure of the detective also had to be made into someone original and interesting. These changes would provide *roman noir* with a double layer of reading.

By the 1950s the genre had become popular not only in the movies but also in a long series of authors. Already in 1930 Samuel Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961), had written a classic in detective novel, *The Maltese Falcon*. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) was another classic detective story in realist style, describing the crime of a family in Oklahoma in a journalistic style, written in the present tense as if it were taking place at that very moment. Bringing facts into an eternal present is a constant goal and an illusion of postmodernism.

Roman noir is not, strictly speaking, a literary genre, since it is related to the dramatic genre (as in movie scripts or television serials), thus to action, and not so much to the narrative mode, which tends to the creation of images and to literary style. Aiming at action, crime novels follow a fixed form that does not allow for much creativity or criticism, even when in the *roman noir* format. They cannot speculate on morality or ethics because it would digress into the imaginary and divert the readers' attention from the realistic plot.

Roman noir attempted to introduce increasingly eccentric characters and gained increasingly complex plots, with the transformation of straightforward detective figures into sophisticated and well-read intellectuals, or with the transformation of brutal murderers into ingenious heroes. In Brazil, many male authors followed the trend of the *roman noir* as a way to obtain popularity and hope for a best-seller in a time of digital media and television serials, which gave rise to a deep crisis in the book market. It was written in the two last decades of the 20th century by authors such as

Sérgio Sant'Anna, Ivan Angelo, João Gilberto Noll, Garcia Rosa, Luiz Ruffato (with *Eles eram muitos cavalos*, 2000), Rubens Figueiredo (with *O segredo da samambaia bailarina*, 1986), and Rubem Fonseca, probably the most influential among them.

Paulo Lins' novel *Cidade de Deus* (1997), a title named after a poor community on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, depicts criminals and drug dealers somewhat as heroes and leaders. This is in part true because, in the eyes of this community, they have grown rich and thus part of the upper classes. Rubem Fonseca's short story "Feliz Ano Novo", the same title as the book (1979), had already played at this kind of heroism, depicting a lumpen who rebels against social injustice and kills or tortures people from the bourgeoisie. His book was published during the military dictatorship (1964-1985), which forbade it. It is debatable if making criminals and drug dealers into heroes could still be considered counter-ideological today.

The Name of the Rose (1980), by Umberto Eco, was one of the main inspirations for the postmodern novel in the *roman noir* mode, since it combined two layers of meaning: one directed to the mass media readers and consisting of a basic crime novel plot aimed at solving the death of a monk in an Italian monastery; and a second providing sophisticated information and "New History" or the "History of Mentalities" to describe the monks' way of life, as well as the debates being held among the different Catholic orders at the time.

Brazilian crime novels or *romans noirs* do not even approach the rich intellectual background information provided by the semiologist Eco. Brazilian authors probably feared chasing away their readers and diminishing their sales if they introduced too much intellectual information, especially in the context of oral culture, as is predominant in Brazil.

Another source for the *roman noir* are Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and *Inferno* (2000; the same title of Patrícia Melo's book, either in Portuguese or in its English translation). I read these two books out of curiosity to know how a best-seller is constructed and I nurtured a deep admiration for the art history background that is provided in them. However, later, I found out that such rich information was produced by his wife, Blythe

Brown, a professor of art history, who is not even acknowledged in the book, either in a dedication or as co-author of his best-sellers, as she should be.

Around the 1990s Brazil had become increasingly urban. The IBGE 2013 census states that 84 per cent of its population is urban, or 64 per cent, according to the 2015 Ministry of Agrarian Development census (<http://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/>, accessed on 18 July 2016), which employs another methodology. The more urban the population is, the more it is under the impact of television serials, cell phones, the Internet, and the less it is inclined to spend time reading books. These media have reduced book reading to a minimum. In Brazil the reading public is reduced to only ten million people out of a population of more than 200 million – the same figure as in Italy, for example, whose population is about one third of ours. These statistics bring us to one book per citizen per year! (actually, the quality or genre of the book is not specified, only the quantity, as always happens with statistics). This phenomenon is what Gwyn Prins calls the postliteracy era, after the 1950s impact of television on the population, states Prins (“Oral history,” in Burke, ed., 1992, p. 114-39). The population is thus submitted to “excremental television,” with programs of increasing emotion dedicated to sentimental and trifle facts of everyday life, such as cooking, child bearing, beauty care and home decoration. (See the Canadian researcher Arthur Kroker, “A TV excremental”, 1990; see also “Cinema secreto”, 2014, cingnose.blogspot.com/2014/04/reality-show-aponta-para-nova-funcao.html).

Digital illiteracy, along with poor distribution of wealth and lack of basic schooling contribute to making Brazilian TV-Globo serials (the *novelas*) extremely famous and widespread here, as well as in Africa, Portugal and Russia. In many countries where oral culture predominates, these serials constitute the main source of information. Urban habits and the influence of these media have made subaltern classes hostage to a perverse and apparently unsolvable situation in the Third World. In this scenario, many Brazilian writers decided to turn to the realist rendering of violent topics typical of TV scripts and the *roman noir* to obtain more readers.

Female Authors and the *Roman noir*

Paulo Lins' successful novel *Cidade de Deus*, which focuses on drug dealing and crime in a slum, has certainly been a source of inspiration for Patrícia Melo's *Inferno* (2000). Both books became best-sellers and their authors became TV-serial script writers. Rubem Fonseca, who is the topmost Brazilian master in the art of dialogue and action plots, helped both Melo and previously Ana Miranda to write their novels.

Ana Miranda has based her best-selling novel *O boca do inferno* (1989) on the crime novel but also on New History for the study of her character, the Baroque poet Gregório de Matos, and the movement in the Bahia State harbor during the 17th century. However, much of this historical research (that functions as a deeper layer of reading) that was present in the first edition (1989; 1990, 5th ed., 2nd impression), was suppressed in the next ones, especially after the English translation. She was probably pressed by her editors to shorten the book and make it more readable. With it, Miranda broke with the women's tradition of writing memoirs and journals from a subjective viewpoint, as was usual in Brazil in the 1970s. She presents it through a realist third person narrator in the frame of the history of mentalities or "history from below" (the vanquished, the subaltern classes, Afro-Brazilians and women). Her topic is the biography of two public men living in Salvador of Bahia in Baroque colonial Brazil: the poet Gregório de Matos and the Jesuit priest Antonio Vieira, from the Companhia de Jesus. The novel opens with a parallel plot showing a crime in the Ravasco family and links it to the Portuguese governor of Bahia. At the same time, notwithstanding the beauty of Matos' lyrical and religious poetry, her quotations are mostly taken from Matos' comic verse. Known as "Hell's Mouth" due to his satirical vein, this was an effort on her part to make her book more palatable to the less demanding public. Antonio Vieira's intellectual Jesuitism is criticized, as usual, because, as a Portuguese, he represents the Portuguese crown in the colony. The book suggests that he is under the suspicion of Judaism by the Inquisition. Miranda follows postmodernism or deconstruction in its negativity, which was inspired by Nietzsche, Foucault and Derrida.

Here women play secondary roles, either as a rich housewife or the maid of the Ravasco family, or as the several prostitutes who are the love objects of the priapic Gregório de Matos. He is depicted as an active, lively

and non-problematic lover, whereas women are represented as sullen, emotional, frail and dependent, even when they were professional prostitutes. New History novels and a realist style based on biography are evidently not appropriate to present gender criticism. In fact, in the 17th century, during the Baroque period of colonial Brazil, we did not have an outstanding nun like the Mexican Sórora Juana Inés de la Cruz, who wrote drama, poetry and essays. This is probably what explains why Ana Miranda abandoned this genre in her following production.

Her next novel was *Desmundo* (1996), also written in the frame of New History. This time she focuses on women and makes them into heroines. It takes place in Ceará, a Northeastern province of Brazil in colonial times, in the 16th century, and she employs the vocabulary of that time. The book departs from a historical letter from King Manuel of Portugal declaring that he will send orphans from a Portuguese nunnery to marry Portuguese farmers who immigrated to this province.

O retrato do rei (1991), a book also based on New History, like Melo's *O boca do inferno*, takes place in 18th century colonial Brazil. Women are again central to her plot. The heroine disguises herself in men's clothes to be able to exploit a gold-mining piece of land on the das Mortes river that she had inherited from her father, which she could not have done if dressed as a woman. But the book also covers the battle for the control of the meat industry in this region, among the Portuguese, inhabitants from Minas and those coming from Bahia, in a time when most of the food had to be brought from the coastal provinces.

Patrícia Melo's literary career had a turn as Ana Miranda's, since her first characters were male. However, she did not move on to feminism as did Miranda in her books. Melo's first books deal with male murderers, whereas women do not drive, but only sit in the passenger side of the car or go shopping or stay home cooking. Employing a realist setting, she cannot ignore that the drug dealing business and crime in the Rio de Janeiro slums are led by men. After *O Matador* (1995), a realist book on this topic, Patrícia Melo adopted the postmodern *roman noir* in *Elogio da mentira* (1998), *Acqua Toffana* (1994), and in her following novels, until *Ladrão de cadáveres*, a digital book written one line per day, in real time, like a blog (on the site

“Décimo andar,” begun in 2010). In these *roman noir* novels, her postmodern characters are self-centered, egotistical, apolitical and often hedonistic. There is not much emphasis on the environment, or psychology, which would slow down action. The interest is action itself, as in a film script.

Her style is journalistic, as is also employed in *romans noirs* by other postmodern authors, such as Sérgio Sant’Anna or Ivan Angelo. Ornamentation is suppressed and the speed of action is enhanced, so that the reader’s attention can be drawn from the first to the last page. These are the rules for style in *roman noir*, which were followed by Melo, but not so much by Sonia Coutinho. The latter tried to draw a link between the 1970s women’s literature which she herself had published until 1989, and the crime novel mode that she adopted including sensitive heroines and women narrators.

Undoubtedly, *roman noir* tried to keep up with movie techniques and to emulate this dramatic genre in literature by stressing action and aiming at becoming best-sellers. The spread of *roman noir* is an evidence of the decadence of literary fiction in the digital era, and only confirms what Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) stated about the emergence of mechanization and dehumanization that would appear with the culture industry.

Realistic Style and External Narration in Women's Writing

The four women writers mentioned above, Sonia Coutinho, Marcia Denser, Ana Miranda and Patrícia Melo, are all perfectly aware of feminist studies and they deliberately decided to play at shifting from a “feminine” gender to an androgynous perspective, considering the ambiguity existing in gender categories.

Marcia Denser’s short story protagonists are young women who behave like men. They act almost in a theatrical way, in a grotesque, violent and exaggerated fashion. As in Patrícia Melo’s and Ana Miranda’s male priapic characters, these heroines are only interested in sex, not love. In the 1990s Denser experimented with gender in “O animal dos motéis”, the same title as has the book (2003), among other stories, while drawing her female characters in the night of São Paulo, making them copy the stereotypically

macho behavior, drinking and taking drugs, riding on motorcycles (but not driving or owning them, though) or dressing in masculine, punk clothes. “O animal dos motéis” was an attempt on the part of Denser to travesty female characters, making them behave like males. In my view, she failed in it. She stopped writing altogether, except for a book for adolescents based on computer games called *Ponte de estrelas* (1990). One must find an explanation for so many references to beasts in Denser’s work (as well as in Melo’s). It probably points to the dehumanization of characters that stopped loving humans and either became bestialized or identified with beasts. Melo’s books are inhabited by a pig that is a domestic pet, a dog, tigers, elephants, mice, and serpents of all kinds, all of them poisonous. These reptiles may work as symbols of the repressed in the feminine gothic, which now reappear in the *roman noir*, but they can also stand for the *clichés* of terror films in pop culture that pervade the culture industry.

Patrícia Melo plunged into the *roman noir* or crime novel probably aiming at having her books used as scripts for TV-serials – as happened with Sérgio Sant’Anna, whose short story “A senhorita Simpson” (1989) was adapted by Bruno Barreto in his film *Bossa nova* (2000). Following the usual mode in *roman noir*, most of Melo’s novels are narrated by an eccentric, first person, male protagonist and she always employs an external and realistic point of view. The emphasis in all of these authors is placed on the dramatic mode.

Sonia Coutinho took a Master’s degree in Communication Studies at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s, and wrote a thesis titled *Rainhas do crime* (published in 1994). It was in 1980 that she adopted the crime novel as her topic, beginning the second phase of her career. In this new phase, women occupy the traditional roles that were reserved for males and become murderers.

However, it was not the first time she had shifted the gender of her characters, for in the novel *O jogo de Ifá* (1980) the characters-narrators, brother and sister Renato and Renata, identify with one another and with the narrator herself, to a point that they assume an androgynous figure, which derives from *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf, whom she cites (but whom ultimately comes from Coleridge): “(...) Renato and Renata somehow slowly

became one and the same person, that is, they are me" (1980, chap. 48, "Vazios e omissões," p. 95; 2002, p. 84). Meanwhile, the plot also alternates between Salinas (Salvador) and Rio. The first author to explicitly experiment with the shift from a supposedly female to a male narrator was Clarice Lispector in *A hora da estrela* (1977), a book published in the same year when she died, already in the postmodern period. Thus, it was meant to criticize mass culture through parody. The ugly and ignorant Macabea, an immigrant from the poor Northeastern region, failed at her job as a secretary in Rio de Janeiro because of her poor spelling. Her only source of culture was a radio station that gave the time by the minute and provided some useless information. At the end of the book the voice of a male narrator intervenes to announce the girl's stardom exactly when she becomes an anti-star and gets killed. This patriarchal intervention seemingly expresses a verdict and the voice of truth.

Coutinho's three crime novels *Atire em Sofia* (1989), *O caso Alice* (1991), *Os seios de Pandora: uma aventura de Rosa Diamante* (1998), are followed by three books of stories, *Os mil olhos de uma rosa* (2001), *Ovelha negra e amiga loura* (2006) and *Toda a verdade sobre a tia de Lúcia* (2011), and, in addition, the essay *Rainhas do crime* (1994). Their plots all resemble one another, as it also happens with Patrícia Melo's novels, since they all center on cases of murder and their main aim is to solve the crime. The gothic and fear of violence appear in their utmost strength in plots full of action. They replace the sense of pleasure and beauty of style that permeated the introspective creations of her first phase, as in *Uma certa felicidade* (1976). Sonia Coutinho's *Toda a verdade sobre a tia de Lúcia* (2011), published two years before she died, on August 23, 2013, combines the crime novel with stream of consciousness as a form to reveal women's feelings, especially of fear and catharsis.

In *O caso Alice*, the protagonist Alice Dumar is presented as a victim, when in fact she is a double murderer, for she has killed both her stepfather and a male friend who dealt with real estate. After this novel, these fears gradually increased throughout her work, states Malcolm Silverman⁵.

⁴ Malcolm Silverman (*World Literature Today*, spring 1986, March, vol. 60, issue 2, p. 295) reviews Sonia Coutinho's *O último verão de Copacabana* (1985), and states that, as her work progressed, she stopped deriving pleasure from catharsis, as defined by Aristotle. In *Mil olhos de uma rosa*

Furthermore, women's writing has traditionally employed the gothic as catharsis since the end of the 18th century, with Ann Radcliffe. Thus, they aimed at getting rid of the ghosts that haunted their imagination in patriarchal society (Gilbert; Gubar, 1979). For Freud and Lacan, on the contrary, fear would be intrinsic to women's constitution and would result from an inner hysterical inclination existing in the female gender.

The scene changes, in these four women writers' fiction, from "psychic geography," to a "street geography," as states Renato Gomes (1984, p. 76). Anna Maria Martins sees the street in the first phase of Coutinho's work, as in *O último verão de Copacabana* (1985), not as a geography of independence, but of solitude (1990, p. 8). There, women characters identified with famous movie actresses in a kaleidoscopic fantasy while they roamed through the busy streets of Copacabana at night; but they were not exempt from psychic fragmentation.

Such fragmented and dreaming personalities of female characters in the 1970s and 1980s are absent from Patrícia Melo's work. They have become the female killers of *O Matador* (1995), *Inferno* (2000) or Fúlvia Melissa in *Acqua toffana* (1994), a book dedicated to poisoning, especially by snakes – following a scheme of poisoning already exploited by Rubem Fonseca's *Bufo & Spalanzani* (1986) in relation to toad poisoning. In Chapter 15 of *O Matador*, Máiquel, who has become a professional killer, states that everybody is born with a weapon in hand, therefore humans are essentially evil: Bang, bang, bang (see 1995, p. 93). Her male killers are perverse (paranoid?), characters who tread the streets having as their only aim the wish to kill, like beasts. Here, as in so many action movies, there is no attempt to explain the motivation for such behavior.

(2001), she exposes the thousand facets of old age, death and suicide. Negativity impregnates the short story "Gilda, seu passado negro" (p. 33, 36, 37), in which its external narrator is once again androgynous; "A mulher que perdeu muito na vida" (p. 47-33) is also told by an external narrator who duplicates the initial voice of the female character. Another external narrator in "Verão no Rio" (p. 100-101) imagines the female protagonist being killed through spanking ("morta a pancadas"). "Casamentos e analistas" runs as "I was split in two: one acted and the other observed. And there are also fobias (...)" (p. 55). In "Noites de insônia com Stefan Zweig," the female character's voice alternates with a female narrator's voice, and both identify with the suicidal Jewish writer Stefan Zweig and his wife, in Petrópolis, when they presumed that the Nazis would win the war and take over Brazil (2001, p. 75-81, p. 80). So much for personal negative catharsis, notwithstanding that pessimism is part of the postmodern deconstructive era.

Hobsbawn created the expression “social bandit” in his book *Primitive Rebels* (1959) to illustrate popular forms of resistance, such as violence. It is a form of social inadequacy and a primitive form of social rebellion, and, in the past, it was practiced by rural rebels excluded from modern society, such as Sancho Panza or Lampião. Today, ideally, they should enter a union, a political party or participate in political demonstrations, says the author. Later Hobsbawn wrote *Bandits* (1969), in which he discussed other forms of violent behavior considered illegal, such as piracy and organized crime. In Melo’s *Inferno*, Rezinho (José Luís Reis), fits this kind of criminal, since he is a drug dealer. As if often happens with this kind of criminal, he is considered a hero by many in his community, either because he has become rich and a leader or because he apparently rebels against social injustice. However, Marta is not considered a heroine when she takes over the drug business after her father’s death and her boyfriend’s (Rezinho) imprisonment, because, evidently, she does not fit the male stereotype of a bandit. She is soon killed and ceases to be the protagonist in this patriarchal plot that reflects the Brazilian society.

Rezinho and his friend Enoque, a mechanic who drives stolen cars, once drove in such a violent way, while they took drugs and drank alcohol, that they ended up killing a pedestrian, whom they abandoned on the spot (see *Inferno*, 2000).

It is curious to notice that women do not drive cars in Melo’s books; they go shopping by foot or they cook at home, as does Máique’s sister Caroline. Alzira even cooks delicacies, such as a pig that was her husband’s pet. It had been given in recognition of his first killing, which had made him into a hero – or a bandit – therefore a “matador” (see *O Matador*, 1995). These details are meant as irony, which is typical of *roman noir*. In *Acqua toffana* (1994), Fulvia Melissa is a middle-class intellectual who has a car, in which she was eventually killed. In *Elogio da mentira* (1998), Ingrid is also a middle-class woman who owns a car and drives it, but having always her husband at her side. The plot implies that, having worked as a secretary to Weber, the owner of the firm that published her future husband Guber’s best-selling books, she becomes so subservient after marrying him that she also became a killer herself, as easily as that. So much so for Aristotle’s *peripeteia*, or reversal of action. It is so mechanic that it can only be understood in the

context of the postmodern irony that abounds in *roman noir* and deconstructive postmodernism. Thus, not much can be said for feminism in the book. Another feature of irony is when Guber declares to his editor Weber that his scripts are nothing but lies meant to fool the readers – a scene that is supposedly autobiographical, since Melo also writes scripts. Sant’Anna’s short story “O Duelo,” in *A senhorita Simpson* (1989; 1997, p. 331-356, p. 355), also presents a similar scene against an editor which amounts to the same satirical purpose. Melo’s first two books take place in Rio’s slums and tell crimes realistically, in journalistic tone, as if it was meant for a TV-serial script. Later she moved on to more sophisticated techniques employing settings typical of the *roman noir*, full of *imbroglios* and false identities. It reminds one of the postmodern fiction of Fonseca in the short story “Romance negro,” in his anthology *Romance negro* (1992). There, it is uncertain whether the writer John Landers may have killed the writer Peter Winner to adopt his identity and go to conferences or give interviews in his place. The theme of changing or assuming identities is foregrounded in postmodern fiction, as we see in Philip Roth, John Barth, Paul Auster and the pioneer Vladimir Nabokov. Its fascination is due to the uncertainties of our deconstructive times, so far from 19th century beliefs. Such doubts on identity and personality are visible in Fonseca’s short story “Passeio noturno,” from *Feliz Ano Novo* (1979), in which a bourgeois male character leaves the comfort of his house every night to run over women after he seduces them.

It is only through strict observation of subliminal details in Melo’s writing that one can find out that she is a woman writer. She projects onto her male characters and their paranoid world her own feelings of guilt, emotion, self-pity and spells of human charity, as when she depicts the multiple killers Rezinho or Máiquel, the protagonists of *Inferno* and *Matador*. Fábio de Carvalho Messa (1999, p. 191-203) concludes that her male characters are a projection of her own women’s fears.

In *Elogio da mentira* male characters either dream of killing, or actually kill. The fact that women also murder is new in Brazilian literature, and it functions as a new form of “social catharsis,” since it does not derive either from inner feelings nor work as medicine or healing, as in Aristotle’s definition, but is directed against the other or society. It may derive from

anger, but its motivation is not explained in the book, as currently occurs with action films.

Social catharsis functions as a relief from poverty and social injustice; for Freud, anger results from not being acknowledged, not finding “a room of one’s own” (or a city of one’s own). But social catharsis differs from Aristotle’s definition of tragic catharsis since it does not occur psychologically, but outwardly, meant to perpetrate perverse actions against the other. Its aim is not to provoke emotional purification or healing among the audience, as was meant in Greek drama, but to destroy, to take revenge. This negative drive of the characters has become a mechanistic *cliché* in *roman noir*, in part because of the culture industry. Its function is thus similar to “excremental television,” in Kroker’s expression, since it does not lead to understanding the causes of catharsis, only to entertain and provoke fear. If literature reduces itself to best-sellers and fixed forms, it will also become “excremental,” a mere by-product of the culture industry. Instead of maintaining its artistic function of criticism and social awareness, or of “teaching while giving pleasure,” as states Horace, it will only employ repetitive stereotypes in order to sell more. As a fixed form that is part of mass media this kind of literature will lose its commitment to ethics or morality, embracing negativity, under the influence of Nietzsche when he denies metaphysics and Western culture. In postmodern times, “*Ad captandum vulgus, panem et circenses*,” as states emperor Vespasiano to his son Tito in a letter dated June 22, 79 BCE. This might be the motto for our present hedonistic society, in which nothing positive or “constructive” stands. And this is what the culture industry is all about. Maybe it is not only the author that is dead, as Barthes and Foucault announced in 1968 and 1969; maybe it is also literature that is languishing or is already dead. “*O ser é o ser para a morte*,” parodied Guber, the best-seller writer in *Elogio da mentira*, but without being able to remember the author of the quotation. It is from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927). It means that we should strive to understand life, since we are doomed to die. Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s chapter “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; 1947; 2012) expresses all their pessimism in regard to mass media, since they considered it as merely commonplace ideas and platitudes replicated or repeated by all. However,

Adorno found some salvation for human beings in art and esthetics, as he wrote in his posthumous book *Esthetic Theory* (1970).⁵ Only art can free people and allow them to identify with the beauty of life and the human, thus escaping the certainty of death. This is what makes us *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (1876), as Nietzsche wrote.

New History and the Crime Novel: The External Narrator

In his article "Narrate or Describe?" (1971) Lukács mentions the conflict existing between these two forms of approaching a topic in literary writing. On the one hand description employs a neutral, third person external voice, which tends to indifference; on the other hand, narration provides the live intervention of a narrator who enlivens the story with a personal point of view. However, contemporary literature deals mostly with the dramatic, following the precept "show, do not tell." There are three types of narrators in this postmodern literature: 1) the narrator with an external view on facts; this is the most traditional kind of narrator, who only observes facts, with little psychological insight. It is used mostly by Patrícia Melo in the fixed form of the crime novel, as in *Inferno*. It is useful for simplifying the writing technique with a linear narrative and for pleasing the reader, who wants to get promptly to the solution of the murder case without many stylistic or philosophical detours. Psychic conflicts, historical and philosophical issues, flowery style and ambiguities of meaning are reduced to a minimum in this kind of novel, and the narrator writes as an objective journalist with an external point of view. All amounts to achieving a literary piece as similar as possible to a film script. The use of this kind of external narrator can be interpreted as an appropriation of traditional male writing by women authors; 2) the character-narrator is often a first-person voice who frequently employs stream of consciousness. It shows inner conflicts and divisions of the self. This kind of narrator is normally absent in the canon of the crime novel, because the story aims only at telling actions and revealing the author of the crime. The stream of consciousness technique eventually appears in *O Matador*, when Máiquel relates his long saga of crimes in cold blood; in *Valsa negra* (2003), which

⁵ See Daniel Ribeiro da Silva, "Adorno e a indústria cultural". Access in May 2014: www.urutagna.uem.br//04fil_silva.htm.

Melo dedicated to her husband, a music conductor in São Paulo, when the first-person narrator exploits the paranoid jealousy of a music conductor that ends up by drawing ridicule on himself, becoming a grotesque and laughable figure in whose existence it is impossible to believe. *Elogio da mentira* is a postmodern work that does not aim at verisimilitude, only at parody, as in *Acqua Toffana* (1994). Both play with female narrators who are paranoid, potential or real killers; the first-person narrator is employed to spread doubt whether he/she is telling the truth or inventing or imagining it; here, the postmodern defies the notion of truth, as also does New History; 3) the third type is the omniscient narrator who knows all about the plot as well as the characters' feelings, thoughts and conflicts. It works as an inner voice and may employ stream of consciousness through free indirect speech. Since this narrator knows all about external actions as well the characters' intentions, it can sometimes be identified with a paranoid voice.

Melo's, Miranda's and Denser's narrators employ the description of the characters' actions and thus belong to the first type of narrator-observer, although also sometimes to the first person singular narrator. Both types aim at introducing grotesque personalities who tend toward evil, who then become stereotypes, not real human beings.

Writing in the postmodern mode, Paul Auster, Philip Roth and John Barth could invert the bourgeois points of view on life, as did Rubem Fonseca when he launched it in Brazil-during the military dictatorship. Since then this form has become crystalized into *clichés* of mass literature and has lost its power of creativity and critique due to the repetition of its formulae. These are constantly exploited in television serials and popular films, having become a means of consumerism rather than an instance of aesthetic work.

By Way of Conclusion: From Gender Prison to Literary Genre Imprisonment

Until the 20th century, women were reduced to domesticity and were prisoners of repression in patriarchal society: prisoners of their gender. But I am afraid that now they may have become prisoners of *clichés* and fixed forms in their writing. Action, adventure, crime and mystery have

transformed the previous quest for literary originality and style into a *deus ex machina*, a mechanic tool of simplified replication of reality into literature, telling facts that the reader already knows. Reading about violence and crises, news that he/she already knows from television or the Internet, gives him/her a sense of recognition that generates pleasure. This process is explained by Freud's theory of the *fort-da* relation, when a mother distances her infant's cradle, then approaches it again, provoking happiness in it through recognition (*fort*, or "there," and then *da*, "near," in German). The recognition of the mother is a source of pleasure for the infant. This is what happens in the culture industry: it gives the public what it already knows, not to make it question new facts and ideas and contest society, but rather internalize the *status quo* as a reality that cannot be changed. The cathartic process would then generate in the reader a feeling of satisfaction or *déjà vu*. Furthermore, the culture industry develops consumerism through the invention of needs that are superfluous. Even sex, so present in Denser's, Miranda's and Melo's male characters, are part of such sexual consumerism, and women represent only sexual objects to them. Human relationships are then devoid of feeling, they become mechanical. This infinite repetition of the same signifiers in the symbolic order of consumerism in society is defined by Baudrillard (1976) ultimately as death. However, states Baudrillard, women and other subaltern, colonial peoples are exempt from this process that amounts to symbolic death, since they are already excluded from power in the capitalist symbolic order. So, they can rebel. However, this is not the case of the female characters in these narratives, who partake in a dehumanized relationship as objects. Therefore, this kind of literature does not free women from patriarchal roles and *clichés*.

It is symbolism itself that is lacking in these fictional works that try to emulate reality as if told in the context of mass media. Paraphrasing is not parodying. Repeating a model is simulacrum, as states Baudrillard, and does not inaugurate a voice in literature. If literature wants to survive and react to mass media and the culture industry, it must go on offering a critical, innovative and counter-ideological response to the world. Maybe women writers are failing in their counter-ideological mission in postmodern times, or worse: maybe they are only repeating patriarchal canons and emulating society in its less admirable flaws.

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