

Representations of Women in Nineteenth-Century Brazilian Literature

João Roberto Faria

Abstract: *This essay discusses the representation of women in nineteenth-century Brazilian literature. Portraits of rich women, wives, lovers, widows and “old maids” can be seen in the literature produced in that period, but every one of them is drawn by men.**

Systematic studies of the role of women in history or in everyday social life have only recently begun appearing in Brazil. The first publications addressing this topic came out in the 1970s, the decade in which the first Brazilian researchers and specialists were trained in the area. The 1980s and 90s, when new postgraduate courses were created in Brazil, saw the production of many theses and dissertations in women's studies. This research brought to light diverse aspects of the lives of Brazilian women, from colonial days to the present, aspects that have been definitively incorporated into Brazil's broader history. To cite one example of this research, Miriam Moreira Leite wrote a pioneering study entitled *A condição feminina no Rio de Janeiro: século XIX*. She examined all the texts written by foreign travellers to Brazil and identified passages that dealt with women in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro. The result is a remarkable portrait of these women and their lives - rich and poor, married and single; their work and entertainment; their beliefs and values. I would like to mention just one more notable book, published in 1997: *História das mulheres no Brasil*. Organised by the historian Mary Del Priore, the work has become a landmark text for the scope and quality of its twenty essays, which reveal an expanding resource base: inquisition trials, medical books, manifestos, documents relating to social movements, laws, women's newspapers, travel books, marriage and baptismal certificates, letters, diaries, photographs - all portraying 500 years of the lives of women in Brazil.

As one of our richest documentary sources, literature has naturally provided information for these studies of the lives of Brazilian women. But many historians, sociologists, and anthropologists did not focus on this rich material. Literature was often used as no more than one of many documentary sources, serving to illustrate or

prove a given aspect of daily life. It was not long, however, before Brazilian cultural historians, literary critics and professors of literature began writing specific studies on women in Brazilian literature. I would mention, for instance, Ingrid Stein's 1984 book *Figuras femininas em Machado de Assis*, and Luis Filipe Ribeiro's more recent *Mulheres de papel: um estudo do imaginário em José de Alencar e Machado de Assis*, published in 1996.

Numerous specialists in women's studies are now on the staffs of Brazilian universities, as demonstrated by the theses and dissertations defended in recent years. Another sign of the interest that this topic has generated in our academic community is the large number of scholars belonging to the "Women in Literature" study group, part of ANPOLL, Brazil's National Postgraduate Studies Association in Letters and Linguistics. The results of ongoing research projects are presented at biennial meetings, and these papers are published in the form of annals. Thanks to this growing attention, a small publishing house has been founded in Florianópolis, in southern Brazil, dedicated to the publication of works by women that have been forgotten and omitted from the canon.

This preliminary information aside, I would like to reflect on representations of women in Brazilian literature during the nineteenth century and to share with the reader the results of this reflection. What you will read here will include some examples of purity and others of licentiousness; you will also read about rich women, poor women, wives, lovers, widows, and 'old maids'. But every one of these pictures will be drawn by male hands, for practically all - or at least the best known - of Brazil's nineteenth-century literature was produced by men. When observing women, this nineteenth-century male eye could be paternalistic and authoritarian, although softened by good intentions, as in romanticism. It could also be cynical and pessimistic about human nature, as in the case of Machado de Assis. It could be radically conservative, as in some comedies of manners. And it could think itself scientific, in naturalistic writing. Let us now take a look at these moments in Brazilian literary production, through the pages of novels and plays.

Brazil's most important romantic writer was José de Alencar. Born in 1829, Alencar inaugurated his literary career in September 1854, as a columnist for Rio de Janeiro's *Correio Mercantil*. He debuted as a novelist less than three years later, with the publication of two books: *Cinco Minutos* and *O Guarani*. In a period of less than twenty years - Alencar died in 1877 - he wrote two dozen novels and eight plays, engaged in a series of polemics within the literary world, and enjoyed a career as a politician as well. Driven by a strong nationalist sentiment and a desire to help Brazil forge a national literature, Alencar painted a broad panorama of the nation. He wanted to serve as an example for other writers. He also indicated some pathways the Brazilian novel might take: indianism, regionalism, the historical novel, the urban novel. Within his vast legacy of admittedly variable quality what concern us here today are his texts portraying everyday urban life in mid-nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro. For, although Alencar was a profoundly romantic writer, as attested by his dramatic plots, he behaved as a

realist in his observations of Rio de Janeiro's customs and the social types of his day, as transported to his fictional universe.

Let me state first of all that Alencar was no revolutionary in his creation of female characters. If some of the women in his novels and plays occasionally stand up to men and to society, suggesting they might be different from most women of their day, and even that they might embark upon independent lives, they always end up regretting their actions, changing their behaviour, and submitting themselves to male expectations. In late nineteenth-century Brazil, there were no social roles for women to play other than those of wife and mother - in other words, of a woman devoted entirely to her husband and children. But what we may interpret today as extreme conservatism gains a new meaning if viewed from the proper historical perspective. We must remember that during colonial times and through the first half of the nineteenth century, the Brazilian family structure was not very orthodox. Marriage was of secondary importance, and men did not take monogamy too seriously. The nuclear family often consisted of an 'official' wife, one or two concubines - chosen from among female slaves - and children, who might be white or racially mixed. In short, the concept of the bourgeois family, sanctified by marriage, held no sway in Brazil. Alencar himself, I might point out, was the son of a priest.

A lot changed in Brazil after 1850, when slave trading came to an end. Money formerly spent on the purchase of slaves for plantation work was now invested in the cities, especially Rio de Janeiro, capital of the Empire. Banks, small industries, railways, steamboat companies, and other businesses sprang up, stimulating urban life and allowing a small bourgeoisie of businessmen, professionals, journalists and intellectuals to emerge. This incipient capitalism proved a strong modernising instrument in a society that had hitherto followed the models of colonialism and slavery, the latter to remain legal until 1888. Brazil would live through a period of contradiction that has been the object of many studies in recent years: a large part of Brazil's financial elite adopted European liberal ideals, yet did not relinquish the advantages of slavery. Literary critic Roberto Schwarz has written an outstanding essay on the topic, entitled "*As idéias fora do lugar*" (*Misplaced Ideas*). Professor Schwarz has studied all of Machado de Assis's works from the standpoint of this contradiction within Brazilian society in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In many ways, Alencar's works reflect this contradiction but do not take issue with it. From the French literature of his time, but above all from the theatre, Alencar learned that bourgeois ethical values like marriage, family, work and virtuousness made French society modern and civilised. Why not adopt these values in Brazil? His works are consequently somewhat didactic in nature, especially in their praise of marriage and the family. Furthermore, he focuses on the richest social strata, precisely the people who were open to bourgeois ideas. Alencar's heroines are thus, for the most part, eligible young women, while his plots revolve around courtship and marriage. These plots would be quite conventional and boring had Alencar failed to add the disruptive element of money to his fictional universe. It is a curious aspect of Alencar's novels that all the

eligible young women are wealthy, whereas their suitors are poor. This disparity moves the plot along, but it is always cancelled out in the end, when love triumphs over money.

The best example of this literature - that undoes tensions and conflicts in the end - is Alencar's 1875 novel *Senhora*. Its protagonist, a poor young woman named Aurélia, is engaged to Fernando Seixas. But he breaks the engagement off to seek the hand of a well-to-do young woman. Aurélia suddenly inherits a fortune from her grandfather and becomes a millionaire. Calling on the services of a go-between, and without identifying herself, Fernando's ex-fiancée offers him an even bigger dowry - and he agrees, on the condition that he receive part of the money in advance. When Fernando discovers that Aurélia is the woman who 'bought' him - undoubtedly the most appropriate verb - he is happy. Aurélia, however, is only out for revenge and, once they are married, she subjects Fernando to all kinds of humiliation. The young man learns his lesson, leaves the dowry untouched, saves up his money, and eventually returns the entire 'down payment' to his wife. Through his moral regeneration, he becomes deserving of Aurélia's pure love. In the end, it is she who kneels down and begs that they stay together, confessing that she never really stopped loving him. She wants him to be "master of her soul" (Alencar 1959, 1208). In other words, she erases the other person she had been - the woman who had challenged social norms - and renounces her own individuality. She will no longer be her own woman. From now on, she will be a wife and mother, while her husband will take charge of the family money. This is, after all, the natural order of things.

Another Alencar novel ends on a similar note. In *Diva*, the female protagonist transforms herself from a haughty, rich, powerful woman into a docile fiancée, the future wife with no identity of her own, a mere extension of her man. As the main character herself says to Augusto: "My life has ended; now I begin living through you." Or, in the book's closing dialogue: "You are not only the supreme sovereign of my soul; you are the motive power of my life, my thought, and my will. You are the one who should think and want for me ... Me? ... I belong to you; I am something of yours. You can keep it or destroy it; you can make it your wife or your slave" (Alencar 1959, 558)

Nowadays we find it disturbing to see a woman negate herself like this, becoming her husband's property, with no apparent will of her own. Love simply veils the married woman's position of inferiority. What underlies the endings of both *Senhora* and *Diva* is much less Alencar's personal opinion than notions rooted in the bourgeois mentality then expanding in Brazil. This position is also consistent with the Catholic notion of marriage. In his *Epistle to the Ephesians*, St. Paul describes marital obligations in the following terms:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands (5.22-24).

Alencar believed that marriage and the family were modern, civilising institutions. If the women in his texts accept a supposed male superiority, let it be said in

the writer's defence that he at least advocated a change in Brazil's patriarchal customs, allowing his young female protagonists the right to choose their future partners. Parents generally arranged their children's marriages in the mid-nineteenth century - a tradition inherited from colonial times. Alencar and various other writers combated this old custom and endeavoured to show that it was not suited to preserving the family as society's *celula mater*. Needless to say, arranged marriages or marriages grounded on monetary interests are particularly susceptible to adultery and the separations and tragedies this can bring. Marriage based on love is thus an ideal in Alencar's novels and plays, for love is a sentiment that fortifies the family as an institution. A prime example is his play *O que é o casamento?* (What is marriage?), first staged in 1862, whose title is an agenda in itself. Once again somewhat didactically, Alencar creates dialogues between his characters in which they can voice their opinions on marriage and the family from a deeply bourgeois perspective. At one point, for instance, the protagonist explains that she had grown unhappy after some years of marriage. She had felt very lonely because her husband had devoted himself to business and politics, and was hardly ever at home. But she managed to overcome her sadness when she finally realised what marriage was all about. She had to devote her love to her husband and daughter. As she herself says in the play:

Then I once again found the man I had loved; I joined in this life that before had seemed so barren and so selfish; I accompanied him from afar, and I saw how much generosity and how much kindness is hidden in his reserve. My loneliness was gradually filled. Administrating the house, domestic tasks, the desire to make a sweet and cosy life for he who was devoting himself to his family's happiness, brought me the most pleasurable, purest feelings I have ever had (Alencar, 1960, 374).

As one can see, woman's happiness lies in her understanding the role she must play within the family. She must be a mother and a wife, not an impetuous lover. Alencar goes so far as to 'de-romanticise' love in this particular play, redefining it in terms of conjugal love, something more serene and tender than mad passion.

Even in Alencar's more controversial and courageous works, like the novel *Lucíola* and the play *As Asas de um Anjo*, which both address the question of prostitution, he finds ways to affirm bourgeois values. In *Lucíola*, the protagonist punishes herself for losing her bodily purity by refusing to have relations with the lead male character once she has fallen in love with him. She instead reserves her purity of soul for him, and tries to convince him to marry her younger sister, to build a family, to become a father - because this is what life in her society demanded of men. In other words, there was no future in a relationship with a prostitute. She argued:

There are feelings and pleasures you have not yet felt, and only a chaste, pure wife can give these to you. Would you for my sake deprive yourself of such sacred affections as conjugal love and paternal love? (Alencar 1959, 452)

We perceive in this quotation the first prerequisite to be met if a woman is to marry: she must be chaste and pure, that is, a virgin. Even though the novel's protagonist

lives on the margins of society, she endorses its moral code. She is well aware that there is no place for her in this society, even if she regenerates herself and leaves prostitution behind. Thus, at no point in the novel does she think about marriage. But for the young man who was her lover, no harm comes from associating with a prostitute. He can still socialise with the finest families and marry with no problem. Alencar refers to this double standard in the play *As Asas de um Anjo*. The central character, Carolina, who would like to regenerate herself, is indignant when she realises society will not accept her. At a certain point in the play, one of the characters justifies this double standard in terms that clearly illustrate the strength of bourgeois ideology:

Perhaps it is an injustice, Carolina; but don't you know the reason? It is the enormous respect, a kind of cult, that civilised man devotes to woman. Among the barbarians, she is but a slave or lover; her worth lies in her beauty. For us, it is the threefold image of maternity, love, and innocence. It is our custom to venerate in women virtue in its most perfect form. This is why the slightest fault in a woman soils her body as well, while in a man it soils only his soul. The soul can be purified because it is spirit; the body, no! ... Here is why repentance wipes away a man's blemish, and never that of woman; here is why society will accept a man who regenerates himself, but always spurns she who carries on her body the indelible marks of her error (Alencar 1960 274-275).

It will be recalled that a large part of the reading public in the mid- nineteenth century was made up of women. The didactic tone we find in Alencar and other romantics, like Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, is directed at women, in order that they might see themselves in these pure young ladies, virtuous wives and self-denying mothers. We can conclude from José de Alencar's works that he believed strongly in bourgeois institutions; he felt they were modern, and perfect for building the Brazilian society of his time. But we can also say that Alencar overlooked the ideology - in the sense of false appearances - contained in these imported bourgeois values, and how much they clashed with the reality of slavery and the patron-client model, which kept people from realising their full potential as individuals. With the action of his novels almost always located in the upper classes, Alencar did not take issue with the supposed universality of bourgeois ideals - although these were meaningless to the poor, free men and women of nineteenth-century Brazil. In a slave society, these individuals had no way of working, and generally depended on favours granted by the wealthy.

It was only when the novels of Machado de Assis appeared - especially those produced after 1880 - that Alencar's positive point of view would be replaced. Machado, born in 1839 and thus ten years younger than Alencar, was an earnest liberal in his youth. He believed in bourgeois institutions; he wrote romantic short stories, which were published in the *Jornal das Famílias*, read by young ladies; and he was optimistic about the human being and about literature as well, which he saw as an instrument for regenerating and moralising society. His early novels, written in the 1870s, contained

no criticisms of Brazilian society, even though they exposed the patron-client relation and the workings of Brazilian paternalism. In these early texts, poor young women dependent on well-to-do families endeavour to climb the social ladder through marriage, with their protectors' help. Less romantic than Alencar, Machado creates heroines like Guiomar, in *A Mão e a Luva*, a young woman guided more by reason than by emotions when she chooses her future husband. But as Machado had not yet developed his cynical, pessimistic view of man and society, the author was still depicting rich families through a positive prism - for it was thanks to them that intelligent young women like Estela, in *Iaiá Garcia*; Guiomar; and Helena, from the novel of the same title, could rise to the social position they deserved. In these works, the novelist values and respects the family as an institution, while he depicts the social roles played by women as being no different from those we saw in Alencar.

However, with his 1880 novel *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, Machado not only introduces into his fiction a new way of narrating, but also a new way of seeing the world as well. Disillusioned, cynical and ironic, he takes aim at both genders, viewing them through a psychological prism while at the same time situating them in a historical time and place: that is, Rio de Janeiro's social life during the second half of the nineteenth century. We are now distant from any naïve understanding, whether of human behaviour or of social mechanisms. Vanity, egotism, financial power, social conventions, dissimulation, lies, ambitions - these are the driving forces behind the characters and the society in Machado's novels. His women are consequently either accomplices or victims of this state of affairs, depending on their social position. Let us look at some examples.

Virgília, the rich young lady who marries Lobo Neves for his money and position, becomes Brás Cubas's lover, yet suffers no consequences as a result of her adultery. A dissimulating woman, she deceives her husband but lacks the courage to leave him for Brás Cubas. Like many of Machado's other characters, she places great value on social opinion. In this same novel, Eugênia, a poor young woman born out of wedlock, eventually ends up living in a *cortiço* - a kind of tenement - because she was unsuccessful in getting Brás Cubas or any other man to marry her. Two other poor women in the novel, Marcela and Dona Plácida, meet similar fates. It is known that poor women had no dowry and therefore could not expect to marry, because - although Alencar and the romantics preferred not to see it as such - marriage was often a business transaction. Virgília, for example, is offered to Brás Cubas as his fiancée, and he agrees for political motives - so that he can run for state deputy - even before meeting her. But Virgília trades Brás Cubas for Lobo Neves, because the second suitor guarantees he will make her a marquise. *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* does not idealise husband-seeking females, or wives or mothers - and much less does it idealise institutions like marriage and the family. Unlike Alencar, Machado realised to what extent ideology underpinned bourgeois ethical values, and he showed his readers the other side of the coin. To use current critical terminology, we can say he deconstructed bourgeois institutions.

Take *Quincas Borba*, for example, a novel written after *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Sofia and Palha's marriage is one of appearances. She is a young woman from a poor family who married up in life. Her husband is a slick businessman. The ambitious couple join forces in order to swindle the simple-minded Rubião. Sofia leads Rubião on but does not go as far as adultery - because she does not like him. She might, however, have committed adultery with Carlos Maria, had the idea attracted the young man. Like most of Machado's female characters, Sofia is deceitful, false and a liar.

Dissimulation is the ultimate female weapon. Machado's most notable female character, Capitu, from the novel *Dom Casmurro*, is described as a woman with "the eyes of a sly and cunning gypsy." The character-narrator, who has known Capitu well for many years, repeatedly reminds us of her ability to dissimulate. In fact, it is because he is so certain she is false that he believes himself to be the victim of betrayal. His story is an indictment of his wife, and for a long time it convinced the novel's readers. In a 1917 study, for example, Alfredo Pujol had this to say about *Dom Casmurro*:

It is a cruel book. Bento Santiago, of good and guileless heart, submissive and trusting, made for sacrifice and tenderness, has from childhood loved his delightful neighbour, Capitolina - or Capitu, as she is known by her family. Capitu is one of Machado de Assis's finest and strongest creations. She wears deceit and treachery in her eyes brimming with seduction and charm. Cunning by nature, dissimulation is for her [...] instinctive and perhaps subconscious. Bento Santiago, whose mother wanted him to be a priest, manages to escape his destiny, graduate from law school, and marry his childhood friend. His wife Capitu then cheats on him with his best friend, and Bento Santiago eventually learns that the child he presumed to be his is not. His wife's betrayal leaves him cynical, almost evil (Pujol 240).

Incredible though it may seem to us today, *Dom Casmurro* was read as a novel about adultery until at least 1960. Critics generally accepted the narrator's viewpoint and believed his story. It was necessary for a woman - the American Helen Caldwell - to come to Capitu's defence, in her book entitled *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis: a study of Dom Casmurro*. Caldwell argues that the narrator is unreliable and that his story is a one-sided interpretation of the facts. She acquits Capitu - likewise an error, because the novel does not enable the reader to judge Capitu's guilt or innocence. In any case, what is fascinating is that readers in the past took the narrator's side. It was much easier to condemn Capitu - indeed, Machado's works are filled with false, deceitful, adulterous female characters.

Was this the writer's view of women? Obviously not. Machado was interested in human nature - of both men and women. There are no stereotypes in his works. Virgília, for example, is not evil because she is an adulteress. On the contrary, her concern over Dona Plácida's state of health and future are signs of Virgília's goodness. Machado's short stories and novels also portray women who are entirely virtuous and good. One

fine example is Dona Carmo, in *Memorial de Aires*, who is devoted to her husband, to Fidélia and to Tristão. In a letter to Mário de Alencar, Machado himself confessed that he constructed the character Dona Carmo based on his wife, Carolina, who had just died.

Machado's female characters are almost always complex, whatever their social position. Capitu and Sofia are poor young women who marry into wealth; Virgília and Fidélia are already rich, and marriage makes them no richer. Machado preferred to observe the wealthier strata of urban Rio de Janeiro and their relationship with bourgeois ethical values. Unlike Alencar, Machado idealised neither sentiments nor institutions and did not write literature of a pedagogical bent. But we should not be deceived: underlying his critical view of society is an angst-filled soul that laments, in the case of women, the fact that they are not always sincere and virtuous, exemplary wives and mothers.

Exemplary wives and mothers: living for men rather than as independent individuals. This is what was expected of women in late nineteenth-century Brazil. Ibsen had already written *A Doll's House* - the remarkably feminist drama in which the courageous Nora leaves her husband and children to lead her own life - when one of the most conservative Brazilian plays ever written enjoyed a highly successful run in Rio. I am speaking of the comedy *As Doutoradas* (The Physicians) by França Júnior. Premiered in 1889, it brought to the stage a concern that must have been on many people's minds: what would the future of the family be like in a society where women went to college and worked as professionals, at the same level as men?

This is what had indeed started happening in 1879, when the Brazilian government opened the doors of higher education to women. Five years earlier, in 1874, 14-year-old Maria Augusta Generosa Estrella had to go to the United States to attend medical school, from which she graduated in 1881. Another young woman, Josefa Agueda Felisbella Mercedes de Oliveira, followed in her footsteps. Together they founded a feminist newspaper in New York called *A Mulher*, in which they defended the idea that both women and men can devote themselves to the study of the sciences. Moreover, they argued that women should work to support themselves.

Documents suggest that the first woman to graduate from medical school in Brazil was Rita Lobato Velho Lopes, in 1887. In reporting this event, the feminist paper *Eco das Damas* praised Lopes as an example to young Brazilian women, whose only hope of achieving independence and personal dignity was through education.

While Machado's novels simply ignored these early expressions of feminism in Brazil, França Júnior, on the other hand, satirised the *femmes savantes* that had begun to appear on the scene. Exploring this very timely topic, his comedy *As Doutoradas* underscores the conflict by putting on stage a married couple who are both just out of medical school. Since husband and wife do not support the same theories, they often become involved in scientific discussions, inevitably humorous, especially when the female doctor's simple-minded mother or garrulous maid are around to add their

comments. França Júnior is as successful with his characters' exaggerated use of technical terminology as he is with the inflammatory rhetoric of the cast's other female professional, a lawyer who always talks as though she were in the courtroom.

The first three acts are marked by humorous language and situations. As the plot moves along, the couple's scientific discussions evolve into professional rivalry and arguments, culminating in a separation. But normality is resumed with the wife's providential pregnancy and ensuing shock - which leads her to give up medicine. In the fourth act, the utterly happy doctor is content to be a wife and mother. In a symmetrical parallel, the same thing occurs with the loquacious attorney. The play's conclusion evinces the conservatism of its author - true not only of França Júnior but of most men in those times. How else to explain the 50 presentations in a row of *As Doutoradas* and its tremendous box-office success?

The same theme was taken up shortly afterwards by a playwright whose name has since fallen into oblivion: L.T. da Silva Nunes. Nunes stated that he wrote the comedy *A Doutora* to show that a young woman should not go to medical school because the position of doctor might itself place her at times in situations inappropriate for a virtuous woman, for instance, when making house-calls. In other words, medicine was an improper profession for women. Practically the only profession seen as acceptable for women at that time was that of schoolteacher.

Bias against women was not limited to the social sphere. At the close of the nineteenth century, women were considered biologically inferior to men. Scientists believed that women's genital organs were the source of nervous illness and even mental disorders. Theories on hysteria abounded, and it was soon labelled a typically female disorder, often caused by sexual abstinence.

While the field of science was coming up with absurd ideas about female sexuality, naturalist writers were applying them in their novels. It is difficult for contemporary readers to accept the naturalist view of women because nineteenth-century "truths" no longer hold good. The "hysterical" woman was a central or secondary character in many European naturalist novels. Read in Brazil, supported by scientific and medical treatises, these books provided models for those Brazilian writers who adhered to naturalism, like Aluísio Azevedo and Júlio Ribeiro. In 1887, Aluísio Azevedo published *O Homem*, a novel grounded entirely on scientific theories about hysterical women. Although weak as literature, the novel is nonetheless striking for its portrayal of the 18-year-old protagonist, Magdá, who loses her mind because her sexual instinct is not satisfied. The plot begins melodramatically, with Magdá falling in love with Fernando, who, unbeknown to her, is her brother. The shock of discovery leaves her susceptible to nervous attacks. Her attending physician does not mince words in diagnosing the young woman's illness. In straightforward fashion he tells Magdá's father that she needs to get married. And he adds: "'Marriage' is just a way of putting it. What I insist upon is coitus! What she needs is a man!" (Azevedo 36). From this point on, we witness Magdá's descent into madness. Her nervous attacks progress, her health worsens

and her erotic dreams intensify, peppering the novel with scenes that were considered racy and shocking.

Even more scandalous was Júlio Ribeiro's 1888 novel *A Carne*, labelled pornographic by some. When he created the hysterical 22-year-old Lenita, Júlio Ribeiro must have drawn his inspiration from Aluísio Azevedo. After a series of nervous attacks, Lenita has an affair with a divorced man, who can never marry her. Once again we witness the story of a well-educated young woman who does not want to marry. But Lenita's sexuality is awoken after her father dies. In keeping with the naturalist style, the narrator describes Lenita's moment of insight in these terms:

She realised that she, a superior woman, despite her powerful intelligence, with all her knowledge, was, as a member of her species, no more than a simple female, and that what she felt was desire, the organic need for a male (Ribeiro 30).

Again, the language is coarse and of questionable taste. So I will spare the reader the description of Lenita's first sexual experience and the descriptions of other hysterical women found in novels like *O Mulato* and *Casa de Pensão*, both by Aluísio Azevedo, or in *A Normalista*, by Adolfo Caminha. The two examples cited above suffice to demonstrate how women are generally represented in naturalist works. When the focus is not on hysteria, it is on something of a similar nature, a physiological element likewise derived from the science of that day. As a Brazilian myself I take solace in the fact that this way of looking at women was not a Brazilian invention. Our authors were merely faithful to European models. So much so that Júlio Ribeiro dedicated his novel to Émile Zola, while Aluísio Azevedo added the following warning to his: "Whoever does not love truth in art and does not have quite sure and clear ideas about naturalism will, should he fail to read this book, be performing a great favour to its author".

What conclusion can be drawn? Written mostly by men, the portraits of women in nineteenth-century Brazilian literature are, for the most part, tightly linked to the prevailing ideology of the period. Except for Machado de Assis, who preferred the psychological exploration of women as complex human beings, the outlook of Brazilian writers of that time was predominantly bourgeois, particularly in the case of Alencar and França Júnior. But the bourgeois mentality can be detected even in naturalist works. 'Normal' women are married: marriage not only lends structure to the family, but also guarantees women their health by providing them with a controlled sex life.

In short, nineteenth-century Brazilian literature depicts women as dependent creatures, whose lives should revolve around men. The chaste young woman, the faithful wife, the devoted mother - these were the only social roles a woman should play. Anything else was a transgression of the norm, for which she could expect to pay a very high price.

We can also conclude that this literature was out of step with social reality because, in late nineteenth-century Brazil, a good number of women were gaining

independence, taking charge of their own lives, challenging bourgeois norms, and earning their own way. The composer Chiquinha Gonzaga is a good example. She married at a very young age, later separated from her husband, made a living writing music, and engaged in the struggle for abolition - but she suffered tremendous social discrimination. Like her, other courageous women fought for equal rights, published newspapers and literary works, and moved into an arena formerly restricted to men. Recent research is bringing these first feminist struggles in Brazil to light. But telling this other story lies beyond the scope of the present article.

Note

* Text revised by Dr Peter James Harris (UNESP).

Works Cited

- Alencar, José de. *Obra completa*, Rio de Janeiro, Aguilar, 1959, vol.2.
_____. *Obra completa*, Rio de Janeiro, Aguilar, 1960, vol.4, p. 374.
Azevedo, Aluísio. *O homem*, São Paulo, Martins, 1970, p. 36.
Pujol, Alfredo. *Machado de Assis*, São Paulo, Tip. Levi, 1917, p. 240.
Ribeiro, Júlio. *A carne*, 11 ed., Rio de Janeiro, Ediouro, 1996, p. 30.
The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Eph.5, pp. 22-24.