

GENDER: CONTRIBUTIONS TO AN EFFECTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF CHANGES

Moisés de Lemos Martins¹, Maria Manuel Baptista², Zara Pinto-Coelho³ & Sara Maia⁴

Over the last 20 years, gender relations and how they are experienced, represented and put into practice have undergone deep changes. It is vital to understand this process more deeply and clearly, especially with regards to the power and control dynamics involved, and within the scope of Portuguese-speaking countries.

In the backdrop of these reconfigurations and interests, the *Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais* (Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies) publishes in its 5th issue a set of contributions of renowned researchers and junior researchers alike, from all over the world (United Kingdom, United States of America, Brazil and Portugal). Additionally, it offers the Portuguese readers an opportunity to read the works of Rae Connell, Jasbir Puar and Sue Thornham in their native language.

The set of articles comprised in this issue seeks to contribute, from an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary perspective, to a deeper and critical understanding of the changes taking place across the different social domains with an impact on gender relations and identities. The contributors resort to different theoretical frameworks to conduct their own research, and seek to understand the diverse issues related to aspects of motherhood, affective and sexual relations, ageing, social activism, science and academia, economy and public policy

Sue Thornham opens the journal issue, offering a discussion of the film *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), directed by Lynne Ramsay, a Scottish director whose work often focuses on motherhood. She brings to the discussion the “new momism”, which emerged in the United States in the 1990s. According to the researcher of the University of Sussex, Ramsay’s film is a criticism of the post-feminist celebration discourse of a new way of full-time mothering. This discourse portrays motherhood as the liberated woman’s enlightened *choice* and as an integral part of personal feminine fulfilment. As she inscribes her discussion in the framework of the cinema of feminist resistance and maternal melodrama, the author argues that in Ramsay’s film the mother-son dyad, contrary to previous films, is seen through the mother’s eyes. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* transports us to a world whose terms and boundaries are set by the son, in a cultural horizon that insists on the possibility of choice, while showing that this choice is

¹ Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade - Universidade do Minho. E-mail: moisesm@ics.uminho.pt; moisesl-martins@gmail.com

² Centro de Línguas Literaturas e Culturas - Universidade de Aveiro. E-mail: mbaptista@ua.pt

³ Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade - Universidade do Minho. E-mail: zara@ics.uminho.pt

⁴ Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade - Universidade do Minho. E-mail: saravmaia@ua.pt

impossible. Sue argues that the film draws its female viewers into a trapped subject position, of accomplice violence, with no apparent escape or chance of redemption.

The issue continues with the topic of motherhood; Alice Gonçalves and Celsi Silvestrin build upon a 2012 Brazilian women group movement who defended home births to show how the combined use of new media and traditional media was essential to heighten the discussion and the social visibility of the issue, as well as to encourage collective action. By focusing on the analysis of the role of the communication and the social collective actors, the researchers also present some elements that help us understand the reasons that led Brazilian women into contesting the obstetric care model available and to argue for the women's right to choose the childbirth conditions and fight for access to a humanised health care.

Claúdia Alvarez's article continues the discussion of motherhood. In her article, the researcher of the Lusófona University of Lisbon approaches new configurations of motherhood deriving from the use of Medically Assisted Procreation techniques. Encouraged by an analysis of the concept of motherhood as presented in the news coverage of Medically Assisted Procreation in the newspaper *Público* in 2008 and 2009, Cláudia highlights that the efforts made to constrain the current diversity of meanings of the concept of motherhood are modest, considering that the constant technical advances render the gap between the social and the biological increasingly more evident. What until recently was relatively undisputed has now become, according to the author, particularly controversial, even within the feminist debate – where some foreground the social over the biological, while others argue for the biological bond between mother and child. The researcher concludes that the coverage of the topic by *Público* shows a clear tendency to inscribe these new realities into the traditional medical model of maternal relations, giving priority to the transmission of genetic heritage to the detriment of the “educating/raising a child” dimension.

Mirian Goldenberg, in an article entitled “Inverted marriages: accusations and prejudice in deviant marital arrangements” aims to investigate why, in a culture and society in which the young body is an asset and marrying to younger men is seen as deviant, some women prefer younger husbands and some men prefer older wives. Based on the data of the “Body, ageing and happiness” research project, she analyses the discourses of women and men about marriages in which the wives are older than their husbands. The researcher proposes the word “salvation” primary descriptive aggregator of these discourses: the men “saved” the women from social death and the women “saved” the men from premature death, and they both fight for the preservation of their cherished safe haven. Mirian concludes by wondering why many Brazilian women and men continue to foster the age taboo and emphasise youthfulness as the main currency in affective and sexual relations. In a setting in which the number of marital arrangements considered to be deviant continues to raise, the witnesses of these experiences seem to reveal a higher degree of satisfaction with such arrangements, when compared to socially accepted relationships.

Sticking to the Brazilian context, Tânia Siqueira Montoro and Maria Luiza Mendonça's article about the new TV soap opera, *Babilónia*, broadcast by *Rede Globo* in the 9 pm

primetime slot, reflects on the articulation between ageing and lesbianism, and its power and exclusion effects. The authors attempt, in particular, to understand the reasons for the intense and polarised debate of the public manifestations about the plot's mature lesbian couple in the social media. The researchers emphasise the contradictions that permeate current Brazilian society, where intolerance and prejudice against women possessing two types of stigmata — old age and lesbianism — persists alongside the transformations that have taken place in traditional institutions, such as family, and progressive discourses in favour of minority classes and groups, for example in the legal arena.

As they aim to understand the influence of sex in the grieving process and in the ability to adapt to loss, Jenny Sousa and Maria Manuel Baptista present the results of an empirical study conducted in the context of widowhood and permanent institutionalisation. The research reveals differences between the discourses of widows and widowers. The authors build upon these differences to underline that loss and the elements underlying closure are influenced by the gender roles that determined the couple experiences and forms of socialisation. The authors end the article by recommending that the residential facilities should supply different closure support strategies to overcome grief, which suit and are coherent with the social and cultural universes of widows and widowers.

The article entitled “Women undergoing international academic mobility: a description of the Brazilian female researchers at the University of Minho”, authored by Sônia Cerqueira and Rita Ribeiro, inaugurate the discussion of gender and public policies in this issue. The text profiles the women benefiting from international mobility experiences and investigates the main reasons underlying their choice of host university and country, as well as the senses and meanings that they allocate to mobility. The authors root the analysis of this reality on the debate about women's increasingly prominent role in science and in the academia in Brazil, and on the gender inequality that still prevails in those fields, which weakens the opportunities for women to fill certain positions in the professional hierarchy and in certain areas of knowledge. They also discuss how gender inequalities are revealed in international mobility, highlighting in particular the obstacles arising from culturally associating women to the sphere of reproduction (and consequently with the expectations of their being more (naturally) prone to caretaking, namely in households). The researchers describe the mobility under analysis as deviant (semi-peripheral) in relation to the hegemonic forms of academic mobility, and as attempts to build new action roadmaps in science, motivated by the need for visibility and greater professional recognition and a desire for acceptance and social integration.

In her article Juliana Souza challenges the non-inclusion of public policies encompassing gender relations in Portugal, in the setting of the current financial crisis. By exploring the hypothesis that the impact of the financial recession varies according to the exclusion or inclusion of public policy-based management models that encompass gender relations, the author identifies some of the main impacts of the recession on the everyday lives of women in Portugal. She emphasises two aspects in particular: how the absence of gender equality public policies played a vital role in worsening the social crisis across a period of austerity; and how the dialogue involving the neo-liberal model,

post-feminist rhetoric of consumption and meritocracy, and the media encouragement of the women's return to their role as housewives as a means to fight the crisis combine to further narrow down the subject positions of Portuguese women, pronouncing their subordination and oppression, while favouring an ideological regression.

Within the purview of debates about rights discourses and the rights-based subject, Jasbir Puar, a researcher from Rutgers University, New Jersey, brings the rise of gay and lesbian movements to the fore, and demonstrates how sexuality has become essential in the articulation of proper citizens areas across registers such as gender, class and race, both in national and transnational arenas. The researcher highlights that it is necessary to attend to the un-progressive consequences of progressive legislation, as well as to the modes of bodily comportment that defy identity parameters. Drawing on her work on homonationalism, she highlights the relevance of sexual rights discourses and the narrative of "pinkwashing" to legitimise the occupation of Palestine by Israel. Jasbir states that the essence of the pinkwashing discourse is not sexual identity, but identity regulation in an increasingly homonationalist world, i.e. a world that assesses nationhood based on how the country in question treats their homosexuals. She concludes by suggesting that we should think about sexuality not as an identity, but as an assemblage of sensations, affects, and forces. The virality of this notion, according to the author, has the potential to destabilise not only the humanist notions of the subjects of sexuality, but also the political organising seeking to resist legal discourses that attempt to name and control these subjects of sexuality.

The collection of articles in this 5th issue of the Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies concludes with the contribution by Raewyn Connell, Professor Emeritus at Sydney University. The researcher aims to reintroduce bodies into the debate about gender, within the framework of a new world that she describes as unstable, threatening and of deregulated capitalism, where bodies are colonised and mined for profit-yielding potential. Raewyn stresses that the gendered character of current world economy and political system derives from a long history of gendered power relations, embedded in the institutional structures of the imperial and post-colonial societies, that is also a history of struggle. She then discusses the complexity of the gender effects of neo-liberalism and the diversity of these effects around the world. She finishes by appealing to the creation of "impure feminisms", mobilisation in the peripheries and the need to connect different feminist experiences and linking different conceptual approaches from all over the world in order to build a more appropriate understanding of gender and embodiment, power and resistance worldwide.

The *Varia* section includes an article by Moisés de Lemos Martins, Full Professor of the University of Minho. In his text, he invites us to look at Cultural Studies as the new Humanities, by advancing several arguments to support his claims. According to the author, studying culture means studying the human, being particularly sensitive to that which they have that is breath-taking, and within the scope of a compromise between the current and the contemporary. In particular, he questions the role of technique in redesigning the human boundaries, as he views in it the accomplishment of reason as

control and, simultaneously, as the shaping of our sensibility and emotionalism. Moisés Martins believes that the focus on the axis of technical-aesthetic meaning, whose modernity that it conveys reflects the current crisis, has clear emancipatory effects: as it has the advantage of not presenting the dramatic structure of an ultimate redemption, it embeds the horizon of a forthcoming community, of a body that will be given to the community.

The volume closes with a set of reviews of classic books: Chinweizu's (1990) *Anatomy of female power: a masculinist dissection of patriarchy*, by Sara Maia; Braidotti's (2002) *Metamorphoses: towards a materialist theory of becoming*, by Helena Ferreira; Butler's (2004) *Undoing gender*, by Rita Himmel; and of a work on a developing field of studies (Critical Animal Studies), that gathers politically engaged perspectives about the human-animal relationships: Nocella II et al's (ed.) (2014) *Defining critical animal studies: an intersectional social justice approach for liberation*, by Anabela Santos.

The volume *Gender: contributions towards an effective understanding of the changes*, which publishes the works listed above, includes relevant content that contributes to building the body of knowledge about gender issues in Lusophone cultural studies, and for academic and social practices shaped by outlooks of social justice.