

Women, Violence, and the Nation in Brazilian Literature and Film

The current political situation in Brazil has required many Latin-Americanists to face old issues anew, in particular the long-standing problems of corruption in all levels of government. Moreover, the impeachment of the first female president in 2016, followed by the unveiling of an all-male cabinet, has renewed the debate about the nation's patriarchal culture. Even though women have achieved more rights over the years, many still experience microaggressions and blatant misogyny. Brazilian women, like so many women around the world, are also vulnerable to physical violence, as researchers estimate that every 2 minutes, 5 women are beaten up by their partners in Brazil¹.

The stories people tell about gender-based violence, whether it is on the news or among friends, play an important role in the configuration of how society understands the issue. Considering that literature and film involve both aesthetic and sociocultural factors, works such as the novel *A Emparedada da Rua Nova* (1886), by Carneiro Vilela, and the film *Aquarius* (2016), by Kleber Mendonça Filho, offer opportunities to consider the perception women's roles in the Brazilian society of different historic periods, the different kinds of violence that they may experience, and the possibilities of resistance women may have had around the time of the works' publication.

Although the aforementioned works are separated by over a century, and they are expressed through different media, in both cases it is possible to observe the concern with women's sexuality, independence and voice. In *A Emparedada da Rua Nova*, the drama of a prominent bourgeois family in Recife portrays cases of a wife's adultery and of a daughter's

¹ <http://www.agenciapatriciagalvao.org.br/dossie/pesquisas/pesquisa-mulheres-brasileiras-nos-espacos-publico-e-privado-fundacao-perseu-abramosesc-2010/>

pregnancy out of wedlock. The novel highlights the corruption and incompetence of the police, as well as the impunity of the father, Jaime Favais, perpetrator of crimes against the women of his family. On the other hand, in *Aquarius*, a mature woman struggles with her body image after a mastectomy, as well as with her children's resentment for her work-related absence, and for what they consider her stubbornness in not selling her apartment for a powerful construction company. Although femicide is ever-present in the 21st century, *Aquarius*, portrays subtler violence, and it also highlights Brazilian society's contradictions around gender, race and class.

Having those issues in mind, I spent a few weeks researching in Brazil. At the Academia Pernambucana de Letras, I had access to the first edition of Vilela's novel. I was intrigued by the illustrations present in the 1886 edition of the novel, which aren't in newer editions. This is possibly a point for more exploration. The novel was also republished in the early 20th century as a serial in *Jornal Pequeno*, a local newspaper. Thus, I also visited the Public Archive in order to access the newspaper and gauge what else was being said about domestic violence and the role of women in society at that time. I observed that the *Jornal Pequeno* had a tendency to report sensationalistic news along with factual information. It is no wonder the story of *A Emparedada da Rua Nova* has become an urban legend that blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. This portion of the research raised more questions around the role of the press at the turn of the century and its close relation to literature, all questions I hope to continue exploring.

The second part of my researched focused on contemporary film, which allowed me to think about women's condition in the present times. Hence, I visited the Fundação Joaquim Nabuco in Recife, and the Cinemateca Brasileira in São Paulo, where I accessed material about Brazilian film and more specifically about film production in the state of Pernambuco, where

Aquarius is set. While in Campinas, I visited the library of the Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero Pagu, at UNICAMP, where I found more sources on gender-based violence in Brazil. Finally, I have also dedicated some time to speak to scholars, to gather general information about literary and cultural studies in Brazilian academia, and to attend events such as FLIP, among others, where I could listen to authors and scholars discussing a variety of topics related to feminism, film, and contemporary literature.

After about six weeks in Brazil, I knew I had found some interesting paths to continue exploring during my doctoral studies at UC Berkeley. It is obvious that women's condition in Brazil have changed since the 19th century, and so has its literary and cinematic representation. However, while current Brazilian legislation protects women from domestic violence through laws such as Lei Maria da Penha (2006) and the inclusion of the femicide as a category of homicide in the criminal code (2015), there are still cultural barriers that help sustain high numbers of violence against women. For example, the sexist mindset of many police officers and judges who dismiss the victims and normalize violence, leading to the impunity of perpetrators². There is also much to be done in terms of microaggressions on the intersections of gender, race, and class. Changing a patriarchal culture that tolerates violence against women is a necessary step to be taken in order to truly promote gender equity. I believe discussing the stories we tell about gender-based violence is part of the process of change.

² <http://www.agenciapatriciagalvao.org.br/dossie/violencias/feminicidio/>