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Fearful and Female Narrations of Anxiety and the Boom of the Portuguese Fiction written by Women in the 1980s

ABSTRACT: The article analyses the importance of the minor genre of horror tale in the development of the Portuguese fiction written by women during the 1980s. It permitted to find a literary expression of the silenced topics, such as the fear of pregnancy and childbirth, domestic violence, prostitution. The narrations of anxiety created by such writers as Luisa Costa Gomes, Maria Ondina Braga, Lídia Jorge, Teolinda Gersão, and Hélia Correia mark a period of transition in the Portuguese culture, questioning both female and male condition. Exploration of the gender perspective leads to the utmost triumph of women that finally achieve recognition in the fields of literature and cultural criticism. At the same time, it contributes to exorcise the spectres of the patriarchal culture that became obsolete after the end of Salazarism and the Portuguese colonial empire.

KEY WORDS: Portuguese women writers, tale of horror, anxiety, intimacy

The aim of this article is to assess the importance of a minor genre such as the tale of horror in the development of the Portuguese fiction written by women in the aftermath of the Revolution of Cloves (1974) and the end of the colonial empire (1975). This apparently marginal, or marginalisable, form of literature became an essential field of experimentation in which some of the “unspeakable” topics could find literary expression without causing a frontal clash against the sensibility and prejudices of the society that was still conserving much of its traditionalist features.

All across the second half of the 20th century, the gender question was particularly acute in Portugal as it was a retrograde, strongly patriarchal reality, dominated by Salazarism not only politically, but also at the level of mentality.

The Revolution of Cloves, together with the subsequent, short but intense period of leftist influence (the so-called “Hot Summer”), marked a decisive disruption both in political and social structures. It brought a liberal climate first to the public life and then, gradually, to the private customs. It also marked a turning point from the perspective of the female writing. Shortly after the turn-up of the regime, the three feminist authors of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Velho da Costa, and Maria Teresa Horta were acquitted of the charge of outrage to public decency, which put an end to one of the most famous cases of persecution for literary reasons in contemporary Europe.

Although such names as Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen or Agustina Bessa-Luís had been quite recognisable in the Portuguese literary milieu since the 1950s, the phenomenon of the new literature written by female authors became considerably more important during the 1980s, a decade that could justly be labelled as that of the boom of women’s writing. The success came quickly enough; already at the beginning of the following decade, the Portuguese literary scene might be seen as dominated by female authors. The importance of the new phenomenon was also observed abroad, as the early monograph by Darlene J. Sadlier testifies. Already in 1989, this American researcher was to introduce the Portuguese women’s writing as “a unified body of literature,” representing “a major contribution to European culture” (SADLIER, 1989: xiii–xiv).

Such a statement refers in the first place to the great novels – such as *Casas Pardas* by Maria Velho da Costa (1977) or *O Dia dos Prodigios* by Lídia Jorge (1980) – which appeared in the aftermath of the Revolution of Cloves. Yet even after those symbolic moments of triumph and recognition, the literary careers of female authors certainly were not easy. The traditionalism of the Portuguese society in regard to the woman as artist and creator was lingering well into the 21st century, as it is attested in *A Cidade de Ulisses* (2011), a neo-feminist novel by Teolinda Gersão. Thus it is not surprising that the ascent of many writing women was made through minor and inconspicuous ways. The blossoming of great novels had been prepared by the proliferation of minor texts, such as short story, fairy tale, and the idiosyncratic form of *crónica*, a transversal genre forming the field of radical experimentation, perhaps without exact equivalent outside the Portuguese literature: it is enough to consider the originality of such a collection of *crónicas* as *Desescrita* by Maria Velho da Costa (1973).

The fantastic literature in any form was undoubtedly one of those surreptitious, yet essential paths of female writing. The traditional models and schemes – of local origin and imported – suffered considerable transformations under the feminine plume, acquiring characteristic features. It seems thus justified to speak not of horror tales, but of gender-specific narrations of anxiety, articulated in reference to previous literary models or traditions, but transgressing the acknowledged limits to introduce new problems and contents into the scope of literary expression.

1

Fantastic motives in general, and tales of horror in particular, are not unknown in the Portuguese letters since their medieval beginnings. At the breakdown of modernity, they crystallised in specific genres, following closely the paradigms of the major Western literatures to which the Portuguese letters remained indebted. Elements of fantasy appear in the foundational texts of the Portuguese romanticism, such as *Lendas e Narrativas* by Alexandre Herculano (1851). Fantastic fictions of terror, coming close to the European models of their time, flourish in the Portuguese literature throughout the 19th century. The European models of the Gothic fiction had been adopted by António Feliciano de Castilho, who also wrote their parody, *Mil e Um Mistérios* (the first part published in 1845). This parodist endeavour, even if it utterly remained unfinished, testifies indirectly that the genre was popular and easily recognisable for the readers. In the second half of the century, the Hoffmannian inspiration had been explored by Teófilo Braga in his *Contos Fantásticos* (1865). If we add that also Eça de Queirós and Camilo Castelo Branco, as the author of *Anátoma* (1851), wrote fictions of horror and supernatural, the reader may easily conclude that this literary genre was practised by all the major figures of the Portuguese belles-letters in the 19th century. The same statement remains valid for the modernists; they experimented both with the elements of fantasy and sheer horror. Fernando Pessoa left us numerous, yet often unfinished macabre sketches such as *Czarkresco* and Mário de Sá-Carneiro was the author of the fantastic *Confissão de Lúcio* (1913).

Nonetheless, in the Portuguese literary and cultural studies anterior to 1980, it had often been defended that the Portuguese spirit is prone to irony, sarcasm, and the comic, rather than terrifying, aspects of imagination. As Eduardo Lourenço argues, the Portuguese literary space “is dominated by a kind of radiant familiarity with transcendence without mystery” (LOURENÇO, 1977: viii). This statement, over-generalising and arbitrary as it might be, seems to find confirmation in the feminine writing, where the inspirations of horror in its purest form suffer constant contaminations of irony and grotesque. On the other hand, the tale of horror as a genre seems to be associated with an external, imported inspiration, not with the national cultural and literary tradition. It is perhaps not an accident that Pessoa sketched many of his would-be horror stories in English and not in Portuguese. Somehow, this feature of the genre, associated to a border zone between the domestic and the foreign, may have fostered its importance in breaking through the limitations of the Portuguese mentality.

The female tale of horror at the beginning of the 1980s in Portugal is thus marked not only by intertextuality, but also by the consciousness of the alien origin of the genre. Among other examples, the short story *Frankenstein revisitado*,

included in the volume *13 Contos do Sobressalto* by Luisa Costa Gomes, offers an interesting material to analyse the complexities of the intertextual procedures used by the emergent women writers, forming, according to the expression used by Luís Mourão, the “non-heroic regime” of the Portuguese post-modernist literature (MOURÃO, 2013: 61–71).

The reference to Mary Shelley’s famous novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is visible both in the title and in the names of the main personages: Elizabeth Lavenza and Henri Clerval. Nonetheless, the most conspicuous element of the original story, the Creature, is nowhere to be found. Luisa Costa Gomes takes from the original *Frankenstein* only the essential subject: obsessive fear of pregnancy and childbirth that in Shelley’s novel becomes the primary stimulus to Victor’s invention of the artificial man. Yet the ambience of the *Frankenstein revisitado* is not uniquely that of the horror introduced by the “yellow eye of the embryo.” In spite of the remarkable fidelity to Mary Shelley’s main topic, the terror of death in labour, the Romantic model seems contaminated by yet another Anglo-Saxon influence: that of the grotesque model of horror tale, proposed by Ambrose Bierce in such works as *The Parenticide Club* (1911). *Frankenstein revisitado* follows Bierce’s pattern of the grotesque confession of a murderer, starting with the stereotyped description of his or her family and childhood that should presumably explain and justify the subsequent crime. It gives way to black humour as the murderer gets entangled in euphemisms concerning violence, both suffered and perpetrated. It is according to these models that the Portuguese Elizabeth Lavenza speaks of herself from her prison:

A minha família era asquerosa, o pai alucinado, a mãe alcoólica, os irmãos, os dez, estropiados de irreversíveis taras [...]. Na minha casa éramos todos ignorantes, o pai espancava-nos com ponderação e aplaudíamos depois quando minha mãe, que prezava a arte, trinava árias italianas de esmiuçado *staccato*.

GOMES, 1982: 95

As the narrating heroine interprets the sobs of the beaten mother as her attempts at singing an Italian operatic aria, the discourse produces a grotesque effect. Subsequently, the tone of confession oscillates between the terrifying and the scabrous, as Elizabeth introduces, often in quite an awkward way, further reminiscences of her past life.

Yet the general scheme of the story produced by Costa Gomes does not resemble the plot of Shelley’s prototype. Elizabeth Lavenza, the wife of Victor Frankenstein, becomes an orphan girl made pregnant by her teacher of Greek, named Clerval – after his schoolfellow in Shelley’s novel. Originally killed by the Creature, the Portuguese Clerval becomes victim of Elizabeth’s madness. The woman is tortured by terrifying hallucinations and visions of her own death at the childbirth:

A cabecinha meio-sáida, entalada de través na boca do útero, a exaustão, a falta de sangue, a febre, a infeção, as dores, a falta de ar; os ossos a estalarem, a carne rasgada, o selvagem abusar da minha integridade.

GOMES, 1982: 101

The grotesque and the absurdity of the female condition come close together, culminating in the moment of killing Clerval, precisely as he offers the “obvious” solution to Elizabeth’s problem – a clandestine abortion. The impulse of self-defence that causes this involuntary murder appears as totally misguided. Not knowing against what or whom she should channel her aggression, the girl dives into madness.

The essential value of this short story consists in voicing an existential truth that previously could find no expression in the Portuguese literature. The anxiety of the pregnant woman, nurturing hateful feelings against the foetus hidden in her own body, is an “unspeakable” mystery, usually silenced by the dominating discourse of maternity that requires total abnegation and self-sacrifice of the woman. The gloomy reality of pre- and postpartum mental suffering finds no place but in the grotesque model of the horror story that nonetheless enables its verbalisation and thus the passage progresses from procreation to creation, from the anxiety of childbirth to “the anxiety of authorship,” as it had been defined by Susan Stanford Friedman:

In contrast to the phallic analogy [present in the metaphors of pen and paintbrush], that implicitly excludes women from creativity, the childbirth metaphor validates women’s artistic effort by unifying their mental and physical labour into (pro)creativity.

STANFORD FRIEDMAN, 1987: 49

2

One of the main characteristics of the classical tale of horror is the particular construction of its space. Since the foundational texts such as the *Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole (1764), inscribing the action in claustrophobic interiors became one of the usual proceedings of the genre. The Portuguese authors often drew these castles in miniature, as modest villas in which local patriarchs used to place their humble clandestine lovers belonging to lower social strata. Nonetheless, a female writer such as Maria Ondina Braga introduces an interesting procedure of gender inversion into the dominant scheme. The terrifying Gothic castle is transformed, in her short story *Estação morta*, into a hotel inhabited by a tortured male figure, living quite another type of horror. While maternity may be recognised as the fearful fate of women, the terrifying destiny

of men is war. In both cases, against the dominating cultural discourses, these destinies are shown in a non-heroic perspective, leaving no space for sublime abnegation or self-sacrifice. Lourenço, the ex-soldier of the Portuguese colonial war, is haunted by unnamed ghosts. His internal struggle is once again “unspeakable,” just as the anxiety of the pregnant woman who secretly hates and fears her own child.

The narrating voice of the story, Dora, is characterised as the reader of second-class literature, indulging in tales of horror and supernatural. This literary inspiration is constantly visible in the way how she presents the ambience of the hotel where she stays, comparing it to “those English castles” (BRAGA, 1980: 38). The anxiety she experiences in the large, deserted building seems to be derived from her reading (BRAGA, 1980: 53). Yet the hidden source of the ambient horror is the suicide of the father of Lourenço. An English tourist, Mr Comb, reckless enough to sleep in the chamber where the suicide took place is – obviously – found dead the next morning. This fact completes a long list of terrifying events that took place at the hotel, many of them unexplained.

The hotel transformed into the Blue-Beard’s castle with its rooms containing the secrets about which it is unwise to enquire is profoundly implicated in the hidden political history of Portugal. The mysterious “room number 8” is inhabited by the combatant from Angola, a murderous ghost incarnating the African horrors. Before she decides to leave, Dora discovers only a part of the gloomy secrets of the old house: enough to foster an emergent writing. As she claims, what she has seen seems enough to produce a new horror tale. The appearance of yet another minor text signals the existence of the monster, calls the attention of the reader to the unspoken truths of the haunted national consciousness he epitomises.

The Portuguese world in the years that followed the loss of the colonial empire is often presented as a universe of dissatisfaction and stagnation. The closed horizon of the decolonised metropolis gives birth to the consciousness of the “end of the earth,” *finis terrae*. This sensation of inhabiting a narrow, front-line region on the outskirts of Europe is voiced in the *Finisterra* by Carlos de Oliveira (1978), where the apocalypse of the colonial empire is translated by the silent disintegration of the house on the dunes. Similarly, home becomes a narrowing, endangered space in the fiction written by women authors. The female instinct of inhabiting and creating a home is pushed towards a border of non-being, just like in the short story *O Marido* by Lídia Jorge. The heroine inhabits a fragile penthouse on the roof of a block of flats, invaded by a drunken husband. The heaven appears as the last refuge of the woman whose consciousness is dominated by images and verbal formulae derived from Catholicism: “Levem-na, Regina e Rex, com vossas quatro mãos, vossas quatro pés, deste lacrimorum vale, eia ergo, ad nos converte” (JORGE, 1998: 24). In the final, terrifyingly mystical moment, she is transformed in a blazing angel as her husband inadvertently fires up her clothes.

The relationship between those stories and those kinds of horror may seem not evident. Yet the reality of the colonial empire draining on the national resources, hidden from the feminine eyes, is still a burden on metropolitan women. They live the tangible consequences of intangible horror, sharing their intimacy with the generation of men broken by the war without a front-line that the Portuguese had led in their African colonies.

3

The tale of horror formed a minor, yet popular genre, establishing a tradition and gathering their own public. No wonder that, in the 20th century, this tradition is exploited by the women seeking their way of access to the closed world of men-of-letters. The minor character of the genre suited the marginalised situation of the emergent writers, serving them as a kind of trampoline. This is the perspective that justifies the return to some of the early texts by such authors as Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Ondina Braga, Luisa Costa Gomes, Teolinda Gersão and others, who started their literary careers inscribing their female anxieties into the tradition of fantastic short story. Yet this ascension to the condition of an author was conquered in parallel to another form of recognition, that is, the entrance of women into the Portuguese academic world. It is important to notice that the first generation of the boom female writers joined the literary ambitions to their ascent at the university. Such authors as Yvette Centeno or Teolinda Gersão were at the same time fiction writers and senior university scholars. All along the popularity of the fantastic genre, another factor should thus be taken into consideration. The fantastic literature became a fashionable topic of literary studies just in the same period, when the pioneering works of Roger Caillois, Tzvetan Todorov, Louis Vax or Peter Penzoldt became popular in the Portuguese academic circles.

Once again, this presence of the convention provoked in many cases a move of dissidence on behalf of the women writers. Their aim was not to offer an illustration to recognised theories, but to enlarge the scope of the literary expression and put the “unspeakable” realities in the focus of their work. This is why such a narration as *O Silêncio* by Teolinda Gersão seems to invert the values attributed to the familiar abode in the Bachelardian definition of “poetics of intimacy.” Gersão deconstructs the organic vision of home sketched by Bachelard: “En sa cave est la caverne, en son grénier est le nid, elle a racine et frondaison” (BACHELARD, 1948: 104). Such should be in fact the female dream of an ideal home. But in reality, it is by no means a space of protection or unhindered introspection, as Bachelard imagined it, because it is inhabited by a kind of domestic

adversary, a man, forcing his companion to accept quite the opposite vision of a “male” abode, practical, well organised, away from the earth and its dreams:

[...] pequena [...] e funcional, onde só caibam as coisas necessárias. Uma casa masculina, o apartamento de um homem. Sensato, organizado, prático, sem a profusão de objetos que as mulheres espalham em volta.

GERSÃO, 1981: 41–42

It is precisely this absence of mystery that becomes the source of horror, as it leads to the suicide of the heroine’s mother. In other words, the home is haunted not by a ghost, but by the oppressive figure of a husband through which the terror invades the intimate space.

The house in the feminine fiction becomes thus a space of non-intimacy, offering no protection. On the contrary, it becomes oppressive, maze-like. It forms a separate universe where the woman is obliged to bend down to the laws dictated by the male figure. Yet the link between home and the earth is rebuilt, and the house becomes the space of initiation for that male figure alienated from the basic truths of existence. Such an initiation may again take a terrifying turn, because what is meant is the initiation into death. Nonetheless, it is through the images of intimacy and rest that death is utterly tamed. Such a complex interplay of existential secrets is presented by Lídia Jorge in *A Última Dona*. A Casa do Leborão is yet another strange hotel where Moura, an elderly man, hopes to spend a long weekend in the company of a prostitute, Anita Starlet. As his satanic-libertine adviser explains, the hotel is a sanctum of a special kind, where Moura would “cease to exist,” and pass to “no place whatsoever”: “estares lá é o mesmo que deixares de existir, ou não existires em lugar nenhum” (JORGE, 1992: 79). His female companion epitomises an indefinite temptation, the utmost, revealed mystery:

[...] correspondia a alguma coisa efervescente que tinha dificuldade em definir [...]. Uma espécie de tentação para alguma coisa desconhecida e rumorosa que o chamava sem se desvendar.

JORGE, 1992: 22

The initiation that utterly takes place in this libertine abode redirects the man towards the earth, its impurity he tries in vain to avoid. It is an introduction into the mystery of the grave, the passage into another world, that of rotten flesh, larvae, and germs.

The latent aspect of the narrations of anxiety produced by the Portuguese women authors is the presentment of an utmost victory of the feminine principle. The particular trait of the Portuguese female fiction consists in a significant modification of the paradigm, in which the male, rather than female personage tends to become the prisoner of the terrible space. The labyrinthine abode cre-

ated by Lídia Jorge becomes a trap for the elderly man. The erotic aspect of his adventure is a mere illusion, hiding a terrible truth. The house is a space of initiation in which he is confronted with his own mortal condition. On the other hand, the woman is able to transform the abode of horror into a centre of vitality. Such transformation takes place in *Villa Celeste* by Hélia Correia. This short novel is yet another variation on the image of the libertine castle, reduced to a miniature in the modest conditions of Portugal; yet it is still a villa of convenience where a patriarch hopes to enjoy his privilege of sexual liberty. In spite of its modest proportions, the place used to be terrible enough to transform women in victims. As a Portuguese incarnation of Duke of Blangis, the libertine hero of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, Edgar Leborão

[...] mandava algumas vezes buscar repariguinhas a bordéis ou asilos, sustentava-as, mantinha-as numa espécie de reclusão de luxo sem lhes tocar, vendo-as perder aos poucos a cor e o entendimento. [...] Estavam fechadas num salão imenso, com chão de tijoleira e divãs duros; pelo teto, que abria em clarabóias de vidro acastanhado, passava um sol moído e à noite olhava Edgar. Quando se iam embora, estonteadas pela imensa luz da liberdade, mal conseguiam alinhar palavras, e qualquer estrada ou praça mais aberta lhes causava vertigens e suor.

CORREIA, 1985: 13–14

But Eros is accompanied by Thanatos, and the life of the abusing male is short. Teresinha, his lover, inherits this libertine castle in miniature. Soon she transforms it into an asylum for the marginalised of any kind and condition: homeless people and animals. Together with its garden, the house epitomises the vitality of the earth, the link between local community and nature, solidarity of women and plants.

Conclusion

The Portuguese female narrations of anxiety seem to form a genre characterising a period of transition in which social and cultural conditions changed and silenced truths penetrated into the domain of literary expression. After the period of crisis that followed the decolonisation, the Portuguese identity had to be redefined. The end of colonial hegemony contributed to shatter the basis of the patriarchal order. At the same time, the trauma of the colonial war was first of all the male destiny. To a large extent, the female population remained isolated from the conflict, as the official propaganda tried to screen the metropolitan consciousness from the pressure of African reality. The confrontation with

the nightmares of Africa that the combatants brought back with them was yet another source of anxiety. Profound depression forced the questioning of both female and male condition. Yet during the 1980s, the general circumstances suffered an accelerated evolution. Prosperity returned quickly; the progress started with the adhesion of the country to the European structures (1986). The second half of the decade was marked by optimism fostering the liberal climate and more or less generalised acceptance of new customs and cultural conditions.

In the meanwhile, the contribution brought about by the horror tale, the minor among minor genres, seems to justify a glance back. The tale of supernatural, still seemingly unpretentious genre in spite of important precedents under the pen of the major literary figures, had been used as a trampoline by a generation of female writers wishing to penetrate into the domain previously reserved to men. The women writers such as Teolinda Gersão, Yvette Centeno and others produced also an eminent class of university professors in literary and cultural studies. The process enabled the women to penetrate into the sphere previously reserved for men and to guarantee a sufficient place in the Portuguese cultural and intellectual discourse for the criticism representing feminist and neo-feminist orientation. Therefore, delving into horror appears as a necessary step on the path leading this illustrious feminine generation to the literary and intellectual success. These writers transformed the classical genre into a specific field of gendered writing, inscribing their anxieties into the transnational tradition of horror short story and novel.

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