

## **Refuting feminism: Brazilian lettered culture's complacency/complicity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In appraising the power of antifeminist discourse in Brazil, I examine how this discourse appears in the realm of cultural journalism in order to make some connections to Brazilian social history, in the light of which it may be possible to understand why feminism as transforming praxis seems so alien to the habits of the country. To sustain my arguments I draw on the readings of Brazilian historical and cultural thinkers considered "leftists". At the same time, I point out the limits of their analyses, that is, their silence regarding women's oppression and gender issues. Finally, I examine the persistence of various forms of antifeminism in the lettered milieu so as to understand the statute of feminist critique in the field of literary studies and the reasons for its invisibility, including considerations on its achievements and the limitations of its practices.

**Key words:** culture; power; history; social class; literature; feminist critique

In Brazil, the term "feminism" has been subjected to systematic depreciation and delegitimation within lettered realms for quite some time. As a rule, the use of the term is bound to certain meanings of feminism associated with the 1960s women's movement that have been underscored and universalized in an operation analogous to the synecdoche (figure of speech in which the part is used to represent the whole) to sustain a determined, and – why not put it this way? - a deliberate, discursive, cultural and political representation. I am referring to the way certain ideas have been assimilated into enlightened common sense which have led to a representation of feminism as an extremist movement of Women's Liberation, buttressed by a homophobic, monolithic, authoritarian ideology that is fossilized in past history and - what is worse - engaged in transforming woman, removing her feminine characteristics!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To illustrate, I refer to Paulo Ghirardelli Jr's words, who, in saying that libertarian people in the 19<sup>th</sup> (and 20<sup>th</sup>) century promoted a cult to individual liberty much more than liberal women did, adds: "But they did not

Such a representation, in its many modes of meaning, is present not only in the public sphere, where cultural assets are produced and disseminated, but also, surprisingly, in the institutional sphere where knowledge is generated— more precisely in the academic community – propagated therein by reductionist, pejorative and prejudiced discourses. To vulgarize feminism and to associate it with marginalized and anachronistic notions for the purpose of marking the nature of whatever is not good, healthy or desirable for Brazilian society has been a part of a nearly desperate strategy of some segments in the intellectual elite, in its attempt to disqualify feminism’s unprecedented accomplishments on a global scale over the past decades. The critic Mary Hawkesworth brilliantly elaborates on this point in her paper presented in the Debates section of this issue.

In my intention to contribute to reflections on how antifeminist discourse is disseminated in Brazil, I will first examine how this discourse appears in the content of cultural journalism today. This will enable me to take a brief look at the historical context in which a patriarchal and elitized society developed, in the interest of shedding light on why feminism as a transforming praxis is so alien to the habits of the country. In order to achieve these goals, I draw on readings of Brazilian history and culture as expressed in the thought of intellectuals whom we could consider “leftists,” attempting to re-assess the scope of their perceptions through consideration of gender issues. Next, I attempt to show how antifeminism is expressed in the lettered milieu, in a search to understand the statute of feminist critique within the field of literary studies and the possible reasons for its invisibility. I conclude with some final considerations concerning the efficacy of feminist critique and its practices.

### **The symbolic violence<sup>2</sup> of discourse**

The image that adorns the cover of *Veja* magazine’s special edition *Mulher* (“Woman”; June 2006) is an impressively reductionist caricature in which a woman dressed in order to resemble the figure of the executive – black suit and black briefcase strategically placed at the side – is seen breastfeeding a baby. The headlines “What is Left of Feminism?” (“*O que sobrou do feminismo?*”) interpellate the reader toward a determined reading of the image that induces the following reasoning: what is left of feminism is the white, middle class woman’s triumph in reconciling professional activities with the pleasures of

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promote feminism. At least not that kind of feminism that takes women’s feminine characteristics away.” (GHIRARDELLI JR., p. 14, our translation).

<sup>2</sup> I use the expression as elaborated by Pierre BOURDIEU, 1989. For Bourdieu, every action within the human sphere involves interests, whether material or symbolic. Both types of interest are objective forms that mobilize strategies and set resources into motion in the relation between accumulation and exchange with other forms of capital, including economic capital. When resources are transformed into capital, the interests that drive them act as social power relations. These are the assumptions on which Bourdieu develops his concept of cultural capital as an irreducible form of power. A conception of culture as a symbolic field of mediation of social practices, where interests are invested in the creation and maintenance of social differences and hierarchies, makes culture a form of domination.

maternity. Period. I will not dwell on the performative act executed by the headlines here – what words are doing to constitute an enunciative act that actually carries out the action to which it refers, rather than simply reporting or stating things – nor on the contradictions and inaccuracies, mainly in the descriptive account entitled “Feminism in Its Midlife Crisis” (“*O feminismo na crise dos 40*”) that uses quotations that are removed from their context, including some statements made by Brazilian feminists who probably had no idea as to how what they said would be edited. What draws attention is, on the one hand, the recurrent use of the term “post-feminism” as if it were a consensual term, and therefore dissociated from the conflicting context of some modes of contemporary theoretical feminism, especially in) the United States, which have been present for quite some time. At this point, it may be well to recall the arguments that Tania Modleski brought up regarding the questionable connotations of the phrase “post-feminist phase” in her 1993 classic, *Feminism without Women*,<sup>3</sup> pointing to the deeply conservative implications this academic perspective carries in its gut.<sup>4</sup> In the story published in *Veja*, the use of the term is naturalized in a restrictive and ironic way that is thus used to announce the end of feminism within a very particular Brazilian context – social behaviors that belong to a certain segment of the younger generation of the white middle class youth. It thus makes a *tabula rasa* of the articulations of feminist thought in the diversity of its political, theoretical and ideological affiliations, ranging in its field of action in the country from its transforming presence in social movements such as unions, NGOs and other basic organizations to its increasing impact on the shaping of public policies. The most recent case is the “Maria da Penha” Law, sanctioned by country’s President on August 7, 2006, which represents a major stride in curbing domestic and family violence against women in Brazil, where this sort of violence has skyrocketed to calamitous proportions. On the other hand, the absolute silence with regard to feminism as a theoretical and academic cut in the newsweekly we have referred to above is surprising – or perhaps not, if we consider the intensity of resistance toward feminist themes in the country - given feminism’s considerable accumulated body of research and achievement in all fields of knowledge through the diversity of studies carried out under the auspices of governmental agencies and disseminated in scientific journals such as *Revista de Estudos Feministas* (Journal of Feminist Studies) and *Cadernos Pagu*, among many other sources of reference. If on the one hand, this silence reveals the extent to which the advances of academic feminism are ignored in articles that circulate in communications media directed to the lettered public, on the other hand it can be seen as a strategy to avoid addressing women’s oppression and feminism’s epistemological contribution toward the redefinition of subjectivity and sociality.

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<sup>3</sup> MODLESKI, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> According to critic Lillian Robinson, the term “post-feminism” was coined by the conservative *The New York Times* in the 1970s. This thesis is developed in ROBINSON, 1991.

Within this same line of thought, we might consider the article entitled “Long live Difference” (“*Viva a diferença*”), also published in June, 2006, in the special issue of “Portuguese Language Journal” (*Revista Lingua Portuguesa*) with the theme of “sex and language.” In refusing the very term ‘feminist’ in naming his references to women’s gains, enunciated as “feminine advances,” the writer of the article attributes a “new dynamism in discourse on women” to psychological developments and to “feminine conquests” which “far from leading to ‘feministic’ policing” demonstrate awareness of the fact that the reproduction of patriarchal culture is crystallized in language. It is surprising to verify that the writer remains unaware that his own discourse constitutes a perfect example of what he has asserted: the existing confluence of patriarchal language and power. The article, permeated with misinformation, yields a text whose ideas are either inaccurate or defectively formulated. Thus, the text may be read as a parody of feminism, which means that its negative effects go far beyond its ironic use of the term “feministic” (in Portuguese, “*feministoid*”) <sup>5</sup>

Yet in 2006, a student of mine sent me, via email, a text by the renowned literary critic Wilson Martins, published in the newspaper *Jornal O Globo Online* on August 11, 2005. In the article, entitled “Nisia Floresta’s Feminine Universe” (*‘O universo feminino de Nisia Floresta’*) this intellectual criticizes Nisia Floresta’s appropriation of a text by Mary Wollstonecraft, the English writer who, inspired by French post-revolutionary discussions on citizens’ civil rights, published “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” in England, 1792. Based on this text, Nisia Floresta wrote her “Women’s Rights and Men’s Injustices” (*‘Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens’*), published in Recife in 1832. Making use of a scholarly discourse buttressed in ritualized conventions validated by literary culture (and thus evoking Michael Foucault’s remarks on the role of the ritual in qualifying the subject who speaks well, and on the role that societies of discourse play in controlling which discourses are authorized),<sup>6</sup> Martins describes the use of Wollstonecraft’s “woman” in the singular and Floresta’s “women” in the plural, asserting an ideological opposition between the two – the former’s solely judicial-legal intent, and the latter’s broader and vaguer social connotation – moving on to establish the distortion of Floresta’s view, upon which, Martins states, “is founded, by the way, contemporary feminism in its entirety.” The following citation is long, but indispensable for understanding Martins’ discursive strategy:

This is not about linguistic claptrap and the proof is that, two years before her vindication, Mary Wollstonecraft had published another – that of the “rights of men,” in the plural, whereby we enter into the semantics which feminist vocabulary clearly ignores (in both senses of the word). [...] The word “men,” in the plural, as I have

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<sup>5</sup> The author’s underlying values are clear: “From observing the receptive position that women take in intercourse and the sensation of waiting that characterizes women’s experience (expecting a child, expecting menstruation, vital cycles), Western culture deduces an innate passivity in the feminine. Today it is clear that women must actively accept being receptive; otherwise, relations will tend to be unsatisfactory for all” (p. 22, our translation).

<sup>6</sup> According to FOUCAULT, 1999.

observed in the *History of Brazilian Intelligence II (História da inteligência brasileira II)*,<sup>7</sup> was used in the common sense of the human species, the same that in the singular is understood in neolatin languages, without any sexist connotation. In Latin, where all this comes from, homo means the human species in opposition to animals, whereas vir is the designation of man in opposition to woman. Since feminists, in yet another characteristic inaccuracy, began to designate “gender” as a condition of the woman, such notions have disappeared, not to mention the implicit imperialism that seems to attribute only to women the human condition. (Our translation.)

This shallow reading of Wollstonecraft’s thought, without its proper contextualizations in the intellectual debate of her time,<sup>8</sup> and Martins’ misunderstanding of the concept of gender, not to mention his caustic criticism of Nisia Floresta’s biographer, Constância Duarte, would merit a discussion that would take the present study in another direction. What is important here is to emphasize that Martins’ text constitutes a speech act whose telling rhetorical structure reveals how this sort of argumentation, aiming to persuade, operates through resorting to citation, which acquires the force of authority precisely through the repetition that ratifies the enunciation’s power and reasserts the speaker’s position as an agent of a performative discourse. The latter can be defined as a signifying practice through which the word not only says something, but constructs this something by means of violent interpellation. In the construction of meaning whereby words carry out the very action that they denote (the implicit subject “I affirm” is elided but assumed in the enunciation that affirms: “contemporary feminism is a distortion that began with a semantic inaccuracy”), the critic interpellates the reader in terms of a cultural intelligibility grounded in a fixed and regulating effect of a subject position that is inflected with patriarchal belonging, a location where identifications are forged as part of a linguistic-cultural community. Therefore, understanding Wilson Martins’ discourse means qualifying it as a sophisticated manipulation for domination flowing from a subjectivity marked by its attachment to the interests of a set of politically situated subjects, located within a same cultural sphere and aligned with a same tradition. The logic of Martins’ text is the same as the other texts mentioned here: to refute feminism. It is clear that this contempt takes on a number of forms, whether through contemptuous rhetoric and caricature or intricate erudite phrasing, a trap for readers who are not versed in the subtleties of a discourse that has no other purpose other than to discard whatever is related to feminism and to women’s rights. It could be said that the above-mentioned articles are sustained upon the same ideological bases, since they produce discursive effects derived from the same hegemonic matrix as misogyny, whose intent has always been to normatize, regulate and control women’s space, roles and interventions in social life. Thus, the

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<sup>7</sup> MARTINS, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, see the lucid and clarifying analyses presented in Timothy REISS, 1989, and Francês FERGUSON, 1989.

unavoidable question becomes, “What are the conditions that enable such discourses to attain regularity, thereby enabling them to circulate among us as truth and produce such pernicious social effects?”

### **Power and Culture: in the house of patriarchy.**

In his essay “Politically Correct: The Civilizing Process Takes Its Course” (*Politicamente correto: o processo civilizador segue seu curso*)<sup>9</sup> Luiz E. Soares examines how on the national scenario, a consensus that repudiates ideas seen as stemming from North American culture and delimited by the expression “politically correct” is disseminated among the elites. His analysis is based on meanings whose interpretations by the Brazilian lettered public may be three-fold: 1) the expression of a hysterical North American fanaticism that curbs and controls humor and spontaneity; 2) the manifestation of an intolerance of Puritan origin, having strong rationalist and authoritarian tendencies that aim to constitute an artificially uniform society; 3) a dangerous and misleading position nourished by the pretense to define socially acceptable behaviors, which would lead to annulling diversity and difference. According to Soares, although these interpretations can be explained in the light of arguments that maintain a certain amount of validity, since there certainly have been excesses and radicalizations that lead to such interpretative reductionism, all of the above points are flawed insofar as they do not yield a more complex and elaborate understanding of phenomena associated to the very cultural production of a society that, through its crises, has created spaces for debates and in its ebbs and flows, has made an effort to redefine its ethical-political parameters, attempting to construct a democratic sociability. I would like to underscore the importance of his commentary on having left out of his concise inventory of current Brazilian interpretations of the “politically correct” the more extremist reactions, those “that disqualify, with arrogant contempt, by principle and *in limine*, whatever is associated with themes concerning minority rights or feminist issues.”<sup>10</sup> Soares’ proposal to develop an alternative comprehension of the meanings of this expression through consideration of political phenomena, particularly in terms of social manifestations and the reactions they elicit in contemporaneity, is beyond the scope of our text. Nonetheless, his reading of the interpretative reductionism of the “politically correct” as an expedient for symbolic exorcism is extremely relevant for understanding the mechanisms by which our culture, patriarchal and conservative, stigmatizes the culture of the ‘other’. In this way, we neutralize and assert our Brazilian cultural difference, positively superior, inscribed in the mythological formulations of our purported and innate spontaneity, creativity and peaceful co-existence with differences, despite the national experience of a violent and authoritarian history, repression and exclusion that have never been seriously called to question or unsettled by any significant part of society.

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<sup>9</sup> SOARES, 1998. Soares is, in addition to organizer, co-author of *Violence and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (SOARES, 1996, our translation).

<sup>10</sup> SOARES, 1998, p. 221, our translation.

Contrary to what occurs in the United States, the caricatured image of the “politically correct” disseminated throughout the country leaves no space for discussion, where that which the “politically correct” evokes could be considered as serious and relevant. If this did occur, advances could be made on civic issues of citizenship and public policies that might open access to and promote inclusion for an ample portion of those who are marginalized and deprived of society’s material and symbolic goods. This alone calls the limits of the concept of democracy into question, a concept that has been hollowly and exhaustively repeated in the political and institutional discourses of yesterday and today.<sup>11</sup>

It is telling that a figure as controversial and as academically insignificant as North American Camille Paglia<sup>12</sup> received such projection in the Brazilian media in the 90s, particularly on the pages of the major news daily, *Folha de São Paulo*, whose weekly special magazine sections *Folha Ilustrada* and *Caderno Mais* are considered renowned national references for the Brazilian lettered class. Paglia, who is hardly recognized among her academic peers in theoretical feminism and has unsubstantial standing on the North American intellectual scenario<sup>13</sup>, attained a sudden fame in Brazil, to the point of being elevated to the status of pop star icon as the ‘modern’ feminist, antifeminist and post-feminist. Between 1994 and 2000, her name was cited 105 times in a variety of articles such as essays, editorials, interviews, all of which post the name Paglia as a reference for issues related to feminism. Her self-proclamation as the most important feminist since Simone de Beauvoir, and the propagation of her bombastic declarations for reforming feminism in the second millennium, since, in her words, “this hatred of men must not continue,”<sup>14</sup> was very convenient for conservative segments in the media and in the elite. They rejoiced over her criticism of the “politically correct” and her attacks on academic feminism, both of which yielded an important reinforcement for the maintenance of local voyeuristic practices regarding women, as well as for the legitimation of the view that men constitute the new oppressed “minority.” Importing Camille Paglia for the purpose of mocking feminism has had long-lasting effects on Brazilian memory, so that she continues to be seen as one of the women who has made an important contribution to feminism throughout Brazil and the world, “an influential intellectual in the United States for her

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<sup>11</sup> Many of the arguments brought up against public university quotas in debates involving the various sectors of civil society symptomatically illustrate the psychological, sociological and political difficulties entailed in developing and delving into democratic issues. Such difficulties reveal an unwillingness to rethink, from a historical and social perspective, the structure and relations of domination that define Brazilian society in its mode of function and how it is organized, in addition to a certain fixation with preserving a traditional and conservative self-image of Brazilianness, nourished by the dominant ideology and which is anything but democratic, tolerant, generous and inclusive.

<sup>12</sup> Author of *Personas sexuais* (PAGLIA, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> One way of verifying the intellectual ranking of an academic professional is by the number of citations of his/her name in productions related to the respective area of work. With over twenty years of experience as reader of feminist production in North American scholarship, I have never encountered the name Camille Paglia cited in books or articles in scientific journals or a book of hers listed in bibliographic reference.

<sup>14</sup> *Folha de São Paulo*, July 11, 1994. *Caderno Especial*, p. A-3, our translation.

libertarian attitude” and for authoring books considered “references in feminist literature.”<sup>15</sup> One might be unaffected in the face of this prestige as it has been forged by the Brazilian media, were it not for its implications as an intellectual fraud that so lamentably contributes to undermining the Brazilian public’s comprehension of the meanings of feminism.

Returning to the Brazilian repudiation of feminism as if it were an illegitimate cause, it is worthy to note that feminism is seen as being associated to foreign culture. Feminism is posed as an “imported” alien, an allegation that I have often heard made, even informally, in academic circles, aligned with a rancid nationalism that defends national singularity and decrees the foreignness of feminist ideas as if they have nothing to do with our reality and with real problems of our national life. Soares finds the intensity of this repudiation impressive:

Gender-based social discrimination is no surprise, nor is it originally Brazilian. What is surprising and original is the intensity of Brazilian resistance, to feminism and its themes. Despite the presence of feminist militants, leaders, intellectuals and congressional representatives, despite the advances made in legislation, despite the noticeably progressive characteristics of our Constitution (signed in 1988), resistance to feminism and to its themes is nonetheless immense. Even in intellectual circles, even in the leftist sphere, even among women. Feminism is often the object of scorn and mockery and its themes are often treated sardonically.<sup>16</sup>

The complexity involved in articulating the phenomenon of Brazilian antifeminism obviously takes its apprehension beyond the limits of the associations that are possible in repelling the “politically correct,” or in rejecting ideas that are “out of place,” an expression coined by Roberto Schwarz<sup>17</sup> to explain our cultural stiffness expressly, our dependence on ideas forged in metropolitan centers of power and their uncritical transplanting to a Brazilian context that is out of step with the reality that produces such ideas. The consequence is an artificial and masqueraded cultural life, alienated from its material conditions. Playing with Schwarz’s expression and inverting its meaning, I affirm that the antifeminism among us has thrust its roots into the sphere of lettered culture as an idea very much in place, adequate to the context, consolidating gradually over the course of the very process that shaped Brazilian social organization and economic development, a consequence of material relations of production and the consolidation of a patriarchal and feudalistic form of thought anchored in a social system of misogynist and racist power relations – instruments in the materialization of the dominant elite’s class interests. It is within the horizon of this historical logic, where class interests overlap with gender and racial interests, that the institutional strength of the concept of the patriarchal family can be apprehended. With its form

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<sup>15</sup> According to the note in the story “Women who cleared the way” (“Elas abriam caminhos”), in the section “Mulher,” by Diana Medeiros and Rosilene Pereira, in *Revista Filosofia* (MEDEIROS and PEREIRA, 2006, p. 69, our translation).

<sup>16</sup> SOARES, 1998, p. 219, our translation.

<sup>17</sup> See SCHWARZ, 2000.



of power organization and hierarchical structure that initially pertained specifically to a privileged segment of the population, the patriarchal family became the model for relations both in the private and in the public domain.<sup>18</sup> At the center of this model, described by Roberto Reis as three concentric circles, is “the lord of the lands (prevalence of a feudalistic order), accumulating the roles of father (prevalence of a patriarchal order) and of male (prevalence of male dominance).”<sup>19</sup>

Structured in a realm of dominant elites within the specific historical context of modes of production and organization in Brazilian society, the configuration described by Reis can be said to have spurred the absolute power of the landowner, a free man, slave owner, head of the family, *coronel* and political chief, whose power of decision is articulated by a system based on clientelism, on personal preferences, and exchange of favors. This network of manipulations that reinforced the hegemonic power of this historical figure, controlled social mobility through relations of dependence and subservience – of women, subaltern classes and ethnic minorities – and guaranteed political stability buttressed by hierarchical and authoritarian ways of thinking was conveniently dissimulated under a benign and liberal rhetoric. Hence the reason that Sergio Buarque de Holanda, at the core of his analysis of the shaping of Brazilian society in his *Raízes do Brasil*, defined the Brazilian man as *o homem cordial*, the “cordial” social being who is a product of this historical process. Nonetheless - and not without a touch of irony - Holanda emphasized that the meaning of cordiality, predicated on feelings of opposition to civility and the rejection of formalities and conventions flowing from rural and patriarchal patterns of behavior, does not entail “solely and necessarily, positive feelings and harmony.”<sup>20</sup> As recent discussions on Holanda’s now classic thesis have pointed out, there is a limit to the applicability of the notion of cordiality as a defining element in Brazilianness, insofar as the concept refers only to relations between equals, and therefore is only relevant for patterns of behaviors among members of the dominant class.<sup>21</sup> Their values, permeated by personalism and patriarchalism, gain a facade of civility insofar as they adopt a convenient liberalism for each situation: progressive, in ideological contentions against the colonial domination running until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, and conservative, when cleansed of its most radical aspects and molded by the system of clientelism that maintains the hegemonic structure of gender, race and class privileges intact, thus holding the Brazilian social structure in place. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this sort of liberalism became the springboard for a conservative, authoritarian and antidemocratic ideology meant to perpetuate the power elites and establish a full oligarchy in the Second

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<sup>18</sup> See, in this sense, Sergio Buarque de HOLANDA, 1995; Dante Moreira LEITE, 1992; Emilia Viotti da COSTA, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> REIS, 1989, p. 566.

<sup>20</sup> HOLANDA, 1995, p. 205, our translation.

<sup>21</sup> LEITE, 1992, p. 293.

Reign.<sup>22</sup> Triggered by the the Abolition of Slavery in 1888 and the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889, an urbanizing and modernizing process leading to the deterioration of Brazil's feudalistic system was begun. Nonetheless, the base of the socio-economic structure that had been generated by colonial exploitation remained intact within the new order of domination represented by the local dominant classes. This meant that patriarchal ideology was reinforced and disseminated throughout all spheres of social life, preserving the relevance and centrality of the family, inflected by the experience of the dominant elite and incorporated by the bourgeois class, protagonist of political and social transformations triggered by the Republic. As Roberto Reis observes, the importance of the family "became rooted in the social unconscious, leaving legacies such as paternalism and a protectionist culture regarding one's offspring which still thrive today, deteriorating the political relations in the country."<sup>23</sup> In other words, the innovations of bourgeois progress and the modern ideas of civilization that served as premises for the shaping of the nation-state such as freedom, citizenship and civil rights came to coexist, within a complex of relations peculiar to the Brazilian scenario, with ancient forms of authoritarianism, with the exploitation of workers and with the large landholding which spawned immense social inequalities, oppression and exclusion that lamentably persist to this day as signs of pervasive prejudice throughout society.

In other words, the innovations of bourgeois progress and the modern ideas of civilization assumed in the shaping of the nation-state, such as freedom, citizenship and civil rights, came into co-existence with, in a complex of relations peculiar to the Brazilian scenario, ancient forms of authoritativeness, exploitation of workers, large plantations. Together they spawned immense social inequalities, oppression and exclusion that unfortunately persist to this day as signs of the pervasive prejudice that runs throughout society.

The networks of domination present in Brazilian social history and the persistent renovation of a tradition of patriarchal and conservative thought clash with critical contemporary thought on hegemonies and their epistemic violence. It is from this perspective that we can appraise the role of cultural discourse and its symbolic representations in the domestication and control of tensions in the field of social relations, not only with regard to women's issues, but also regarding blacks and Indians. Among these discourses, I highlight the glorification and idealization of the white woman, as a prospective image of the mother, a pure feminine not contaminated by sexuality, and who had as historic counterpart the Indian woman, collectively considered as 'prey' during the centuries of colonization, and the black woman, concubine in the 'senzalas' (slave quarters) and precursor of the 'mulata,' that eroticized image and object of carnal desire that is still projected today in the male imaginary as national patrimony and an

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<sup>22</sup> COSTA, 2000, p. XXI-XXIV.

<sup>23</sup> REIS, 1989, p. 568, our translation.

export product. The genesis of these images can be found in the slavocrat mentality and its forms of subordinating women. Its residues survive in the bourgeois ideological patriarchy which, as might be said, constitutes a structural problem of difficult solution in Brazilian society and culture. Although the myth that characterizes the white woman as passive, dependent, and an eternal prisoner of patriarchal authority has been contested in recent studies, particularly with regard to the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>24</sup> as a general rule the white, middle or upper class woman was elevated to the status of symbol of male honor and sacred domestic asset, secluded within the sentimentalized space of home and family.<sup>25</sup> This image has always been an unnegotiable point within the ideological inner circles of Brazilian tradition, even when its discourse was undermined by modernity, not in the form of the European vanguards but from women's demands for their civil rights. As Sylvia Paixão clearly shows in her study about the magazines in circulation in 1920 Rio de Janeiro, the issue of women's right to vote, for example, virtually triggered a cultural war aimed to wipe out the danger that women's desire for emancipation would pose for the stability of the family, hence, of society. Paixão offers a sample of typical diatribes, from an article entitled "Feminismo" (Feminism), published in *Revista Para Todos* ('Everyone's Journal'):

What is the point in allowing women to join the electoral colleges and the partisan associations [...] Feminism, as extolled by those who understand that women should not be barred from exercising some activities that are incompatible with the fragility of their sex and with the unique mission Jesus bestowed on them, disorganizes the family.<sup>26</sup>

In this context, it is not surprising that we were, in 1932, the last country in the Americas to ratify women's vote. Furthermore, the emergence of women writers within the scenario of Brazilian literature produced a derisiveness that exposes the trials and tribulations confronted by women entering a realm of male prerogative. We can see this in the critic Olívio Montenegro's ironic writing, from the 1930s:

Let us be positive: fictional literature penned by women has, among us, more often than not, been weak in its essence. Sentimental and puerile. And when it fills with emotional quivering, it is nothing but hysteria. There is no exaltation of the imagination but of desire. Women authors are more faithful to sex than to literature. However, literature is not the best derivative for sex, nor is it the healthiest. Maternity would be better understood and catered to.<sup>27</sup>

It can be affirmed that the opposition to women's struggle and to feminism was bolstered and strengthened by the rhetoric of the family – the grand and harmonious, miscegenated, Christian, Brazilian

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<sup>24</sup> See, in this sense, chapter 10, "Patriarchy and the Myth of the Helpless Woman in the Nineteenth Century," in COSTA, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Important contributions on these issues can be found in Maria Lucia ROCHA-COUTINHO, 1994; Maria Ângelo D'INCÃO, 2001; and June HAHNER, 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in PAIXÃO, 1996, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> MONTENEGRO, 1953, p. 273, our translation..

family, according to Gilberto Freyre's idealized view in his classic *Casa-Grande & Senzala*<sup>28</sup> -, a rhetoric which, long upheld by the state and by the Church, has swept under the rug the entire tragedy resulting from the authoritarianism, violence, lust and illegitimacy that mark our history. It is symptomatic that canonic literature, the literature that has been endorsed by historians and literary critics as representative of national literature, has avoided telling these stories or, to say the least, has been silent regarding the real dimensions of the misfortunes of Brazilianness. Rather, it has limited itself to merely signalling a 'crisis' in the identity/authority of the *pater familias* within the context of the rural oligarchy's economic decline and the subsequent demise of family relations, as is the case in *Dom Casmurro* (1899) by Machado de Assis. In this same period, that is, the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were other stories that circulated, denouncing the falsity in the traditional values of the patriarchal family and the violence in gender, race and class relations within the context of a slavocratic and authoritarian society. And, as for their content, they are far from being sentimental and puerile stories. Some novels to be mentioned are *Ursula* (1859), by Maria Firmina dos Reis, *D. Narcisa de Villar* (1859), by Ana Luiza Azevedo Castro, *Celeste* (1893), by Maria Benedita Borman, or *A falência* (1901), by Julia Lopes de Almeida. The reason that these novels have been forgotten by literary histories and are considered today an object of interest only for a minority of feminists committed to reviving the voices of women in the field of literary production of the past is that lettered culture has refused to attribute any value to them, reserving them the status of 'minor literature' –so as not to say irrelevant -, as texts that purportedly did not interfere in the system. This attitude is deeply telling of lettered culture's complacency with the mode of thought – and deeds – of the dominant class. Since these texts were not even acknowledged in their time – in fact, precisely because of this - they did not circulate, and the claim that they had no influence in the system<sup>29</sup> is merely rhetorical manipulation to justify the viewpoint that dismisses them or renders them irrelevant.

From the perspective of the historicity that guides discussions of the constitution, circulation and regularity of discourses that aim to produce effects of normalization and consensus, I see no qualitative distinction made between the defense of the family rhetoric that subliminally underlies current Brazilian attempts to refute feminism and the discourses that circulate in literary forums throughout the country using the criteria of aesthetic value as a means of preserving the dominant tradition or the high culture. Let me explain. It is known that the historical origin of women's subordination has been the patriarchal family and that its driving force, as a mode of producing gender (and heterosexuality), was

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<sup>28</sup> FREYRE, 1987. See also Ria Lemaire's study on the metaphors in *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (LEMAIRE, 2000). The author shows the extent to which family metaphors naturalize another reality for the reader: "the hardly 'fraternal', not at all harmonious truth [...]" in which cordial gatherings could not take place among siblings. They were sexual, they took place on a radically unequal footing, on a basis of sexual violence [...] between the man, white colonizer, and a slave or Indian woman" (LEMAIRE, 2000, p. 136).

<sup>29</sup> According to critic and historian Antonio Candido's definition of Brazilian literature, who in distinguishing between what he considers literary manifestations and literature proper in Brazil, considers literature as "a system of works linked by common denominators" (CANDIDO, 1964, p. 25).

equated with power in the public sphere, so that the patriarchal family is still defined as the bedrock on which moral and political order lie. When I speak of the family as a mode of production, I refer to the social control of women's sexuality and how such control, in Brazil, has in many respects remained linked to the power of the State and the influence of the Church, despite the fact that the politics of the neo-liberal state would make things appear otherwise. The Brazilian state continues to exercise dictatorial control over women's sexuality and reproduction, as illustrated by an incident that took place in the city of Natal, in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, in March, 2006. A group of women, engaged in putting up posters in favor of de-criminalizing abortion, was approached by military police and arrested for inciting criminal action and "forming crime rings". What correlations are there between control over women's sexuality and the question of aesthetic value as a criterion to define what literature is? I believe that the blatant discrediting of literature written by women in the past is a form of controlling the literary field through a concept of literature that ratifies a knowledge/power apparatus that is inseparable from the cultural elites – that is to say, the interpretative community of individuals who introject the point of view of the dominant gender, class and race – and that therefore participates in a field of social relations of power. On the other hand, prohibiting abortion is a way of maintaining women's bodies under control, in the interests of preserving the ideological meaning of reproductive sexuality and the truth of women's 'natural role' within the idealized horizon of the notion of the patriarchal family. If, on the one hand, the definition of what is literature is inseparable from its material implications, that is, from control over resources, access, circulation and distribution of certain texts and a certain body of knowledge - a control that aims to reproduce the traditional hierarchies of the field in order to preserve its identity (its centers and margins) - the definition of abortion as a crime is part of the universal imposition of the Law of the Father in the name of a sacralized definition of life that does not admit contradiction and that is bolstered by the rhetoric of the family. The latter, as we well know, participates in the reproduction of hegemonies and thus constitutes effective symbolic capital for controlling the material/social field where identities are constituted. In this sense, both the rhetoric of the family and the discourses that eulogize the canon are clearly invested with the interests of social segments in privileged positions and thus configure a form of serving a social and political economy that maintains the *status quo*. Therefore, nothing is more adverse to effectively democratic practice than the dissemination of both of the above-mentioned discourses: the judicial-legal and the literary-cultural.

In our attempt to advance in understanding the determinations that condition the historical specificities of antifeminism in Brazil, it is impossible not to draw on the analyses of Brazilian history and culture produced through the lenses of important 'leftist' intellectuals such as the aforementioned Sergio Buarque de Holanda, as well as others such as Caio Prado Junior and Raymundo Faoro. Their interpretations of the course of history, politics and sociology break away from traditional historiography,

marked by evolutionist and culturalist approaches, and capture the tensions and contradictions that constitute our identity. In this sense, they can be defined as re-discoverers of Brazil. Raymundo Faoro, in his *Os donos do poder*,<sup>30</sup> leads us through a lucid and penetrating analysis of the profile of the dominant class and of the process of social-economic expropriation that took place throughout our political history, with the consolidation of a patrimonial state based on the bureaucratic estate or order, and of cultural patterns corresponding to relations of domination. He speaks of the formation of two parallel societies: one, cultivated and lettered, and the other, primary, “uncultured” marginalized from government. According to this author, what has been referred to as “Brazilian civilization” is little more than a “social monstrosity.”<sup>31</sup> From another perspective, Caio Prado Junior, in *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo*,<sup>32</sup> offers a historical reading of the roots of contemporary Brazil, referring to the political processes implanted in the country under the sign of modernization as an adaptation of capitalism which conserved elements of the old order: large plantations, patronage and clientelism. For Prado Junior, such political arrangements carried out from above had authoritarian and excluding repercussions in social life: under the artificial disguise of progress, they concealed the country’s economic and social disparities and left the patriarchal system or the old order intact. It was Sergio Buarque de Holanda, in *Raízes do Brasil*, who so appropriately and with such critical accuracy defined the intellectual profile of the Brazilian elite, particularly during the period in which our identity was consolidated in relation to the modern national state. In his view, romantic sensibility and thought, in which the “love for letters was quick to institute a convenient derivative for the horror of our daily reality [...],” are an indication that “the entire body of thought of this time in history reveals the same fragility, the same intimate inconsistency, indeed the same indifference, toward the social realm.”<sup>33</sup> For Buarque de Holanda, who observed the processes of the historical past from the vantage point of the 1930s, Brazilian thought had absorbed the Iberian inheritance of a superficial and artificial verbosity, quite distant from the material conditions of life and estranged from the surrounding world, as it engaged in cultivating the erudite knowledge it considered a sign of mental superiority. This is one of the features that most reveals “its clearly conservative and feudalistic mission.”<sup>34</sup> Along these lines of argumentation, he considers that the driving force behind the knowledge this class accumulated was much less borne of concern for the intellect or the social than of a desire to extoll and dignify those who cultivated it.

Nationality is always a relational term for an identity that is the result of a social and symbolic-discursive construction surrounding an ideological system of differences whose administration and

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<sup>30</sup> FAORO, 1957 (meaning: “The Masters of Power”).

<sup>31</sup> FAORO, 1957, p. 271, our translation.

<sup>32</sup> PRADO JR., 1942.

<sup>33</sup> HOLANDA, 1995, p. 162, our translation.

<sup>34</sup> HOLANDA, 1995, p. 164, our translation.

direction sparks a national project stabilizing the nation as an “imagined community.” This concept was formulated by Benedict Anderson in his provocative study *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and the Spread of Nationalism*.<sup>35</sup> For Anderson, the construction of modern nations followed a conjunctive logic that aimed to assimilate differences in the demand for a seamless totality. In other words, beyond the question of a demarcated, delimited and sovereign territory, the nation was conceived through the political and anthropological figure of an imagined community, forged through the shared sentiments of horizontal fraternity whereby the processes of identification and singularization necessary for the constitution of a national identity would be established. In Brazil, the formation of the national identity cannot be dissociated from a historical context that includes the colonizing process, the forms in which a civilizing mission incorporating a ritualistic order of sacrifice and violence are territorialized, the formation of a slavocratic, oligarchic and authoritarian state, and the molding of a cultural and economic elite. The latter was the protagonist of a hegemonic project bearing political meanings that had – and have – very little to do with the fraternal. The enlightenment ideals of emancipation, conciliation, the future, and progress which nourished the conception of the modern state remain at the level of ideas and are abstracted from real practices, since real practices, implicated in the reproduction of power relations, have been translated into violent acts of segregation, marginalization, exclusion and economic coercion. This explains why, in Octavio Ianni’s words, “broad sectors of the dominant classes, or their ‘elites,’ continue to exert their rule upon the public and private realms as exploiters, colonizers and conquerors.”<sup>36</sup>

In the process of building a nationality, the functional myths of Brazilian culture – non-violence, racial democracy and the peaceful traits of a people whose self recognition is seen as the result of racial and cultural hybridities – are collective fictions that are presented as solutions for comprehending a complex and contradictory historical and social reality. This requires reflection on the meanings of colonization in a scenario where the patriarchal hegemony of gender, class and race molds a peripheral capitalism whose forms of functioning shape the ideological elements of nationhood. This means that it is the dominant patriarchal elite’s perspective of class in its material relations of production, that formulates and organizes the symbolic-discursive structures that determine forms of subjectivity and sociability that define the political and institutional functioning of the nation. What is important here is to recognize the limitations imposed on women’s agency as a subject of the nation’s horizontal community. The representation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century republican mother, linked to a ‘woman’ who in the context of marriage and the family plays the role of reproducer of citizens who is viscerally tied to a teleological view of a grand national destiny, was an image inflected by bourgeois class values and interests in

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<sup>35</sup> ANDERSON, 1983.

<sup>36</sup> IANNI, 2003, p. 259-260, our translation.

reproduction. The strength of its sedimentation within the national imaginary explains why antifeminism today can only be understood in the light of this elite's consolidation, as an effect of the tradition of thought that is nourished by a class-based logic meant to maintain asymmetries and gender inequalities,<sup>37</sup> demonstrating a historical reticence for openness and renewal. It may be said that patriarchy, refined by the dominant social class's reactionary and conservative features, constitutes a hegemonic discursive formation that supports the foundation upon which institutional and ideological structures of the political field rest. We employ the term 'political' to designate not only the forms of the state's social organization, the economy, society and the management of symbolic capital in the public sphere but also the familial and affective-sexual relations in the private sphere.

Every statistical survey or report on the situation of women and children in the context of Brazilian society, undertaken by the various institutions within and without our country, such as IBGE, FGV, IPAS/Brazil, World Economic Forum, is shock provoking in its alarming figures: substantive differences in income (30%) between males and females, placing Brazil on the list as one of the Latin American countries with the worst unemployment rates; third ranking in the exploitation of child labor, behind only Haiti and Nicaragua; showing increasing abuse and sexual violence against children, and girls in particular; rampant child prostitution; inadequate food supply for a 6.5% of Brazilian families largely made up of women and their children, traffic in women and domestic violence at epidemic levels, insofar as every four minutes there is a woman suffers aggression within the family circle. Hence, the domestic environment is the most dangerous place for Brazilian women! This situation reveals the complacency and complicity of a society that has been unable to overcome the naturalized rhetoric of its myths – including the rhetoric of the family – and to face the dominating structures and expropriation that has characterized its historical development. Without disregarding the important studies referred to here that have evidently contributed to the comprehension of the political and social history of Brazilianness through which we have been able to trace the archeology of antifeminism and reveal deeply-rooted historical phenomena, it is relevant to underscore that not one of the 'leftist' authors we cited above mentioned the issue of gender or women's oppression in any of their analyses. This fact illustrates not only the extent to which, from a gender perspective, women have been omitted from purportedly neutral analyses of the construction and maintenance of the national community, but also the extent to which the blindness toward issues of gender domination within the context of the society that these thinkers have attempted to understand inscribes the female subject in the condition of subjugation within the ideological apparatus of dominant power/knowledge. The relations of gender inequality, oppression and violence in the Brazilian political field are testimony of the symbolic violence perpetuated by a poorly-finished national project that eschews the concrete social/political/cultural existence of women. In other

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<sup>37</sup> Friedrich ENGELS, 2005.



words, 'the right of men' and 'the right of citizens' present in discourses of the modern dialect of equality and freedom do not incorporate the women who, in their condition of ex-centric subjects, have always had a problematic relation with the modern nation-state and the construction of subjectivities.<sup>38</sup>

### **In the mined field of critique and values**

The national patriarchal episteme cannot be separated from the trajectory of feminist critique in the country. Hence, the path that my reflections have followed aims precisely to attempt an understanding of what from a theoretical standpoint constitutes its marginal place and ambivalent position within the realm of the country's literary studies and culture. The institutionalization of feminist critique in Brazilian academia today is an uncontroversial fact throughout the country; one has only to look at academic curricula, research projects, research areas and student and faculty production at graduate and undergraduate levels, as well as a significant number of research projects that receive support from government agencies in order to verify this. But it is also an unquestionable fact that feminist critique has never been consolidated as a theoretical-critical current with an impact on literary studies. As a general rule, its academic status as a contribution to the study of literature is nearly invisible among respected theoretical-methodological approaches such as the sociology of literature, the aesthetics of reception, structuralism and Marxism - and more recently, post-structuralism and cultural studies, of which it is often mistakenly seen as mere branch or product. One of the most prestigious scholars in the literary field in the United States, Jonathan Culler - author of *Structuralist Poetics*, a book that became well known in the 1970s - makes the following statement in the introduction to his latter work, *On deconstruction*:

In mapping contemporary critique as contentious among the *New Criticism* adepts, structuralists and, later, post-structuralists, feminist critique cannot be acknowledged enough, as it had the greatest effect upon the literary canon than any other critical movement, and has been one of the most powerful driving forces of renewal in contemporary critique.<sup>39</sup>

Among us, this is evidently not the scenario. Books and studies on literary theory and history written by Brazilians<sup>40</sup> do not even mention feminism and its epistemologies or feminist critiques' pioneering breakthroughs in relation to the traditional modes of thinking within the literary field. This is quite a curious fact, since so many translated foreign books circulate in undergraduate and graduate programs in

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<sup>38</sup> See, in this sense, the different theoretical-critical implications of this issue in the studies compiled in *Between Woman and Nation* (Caren KAPLAN, Norma ALARCÓN, and Minoò MOALLEM, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> CULLER, 1997, p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> See, in this sense, Roberto Acízelo SOUZA, 2004; Maria Eunice MOREIRA and Luiz Roberto CAIRO, 2006; Luiz Costa LIMA, 2005.

the country, such as Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory: a Very Short Introduction*, Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, and Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* among others.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, outside the circle of its (female) practitioners, feminist critique does not even exist. Whenever mentioned, it is discredited, often with explicit prejudice, and viewed with suspicion as just one more 'foreign' theory, an expression that, as we have already argued, inscribes feminist critique within the scenario of repudiation of theoretical mimetism, an issue associated with the Brazilian tendency to seek intellectual prestige by endorsing difficult names and foreign theories that Sergio Buarque de Holanda spoke of in 1936. Without neglecting this side of the issue, it can be argued that the critique of mimetism does not entirely explain resistance to it since - for example - this type of reaction is not verified in the face of the theoretical influxes of post-structuralism or post-colonialism. Within this context, the specific discrediting that feminist criticism is subjected to is related to a combination of misinformation and resentment toward what is thus considered one of the by-products of North American neocolonialism, as expressed from the vantage point of cultural nationalism. But as history has taught us, cultural nationalism may assume progressive or reactionary features - in the latter case, responding to objectives of domesticating and controlling dissent. Thus, what can be uncovered in the political unconsciousness of such discredit and resistance is a fear of destabilization of deeply rooted values in our culture - high literature is one of them - since feminist critique, in its epistemological heterogeneity, partakes of an ontological project that works to dismantle the cultural/patriarchal authority and privilege crystallized in historically situated representations. It is precisely this course of feminist critique that unsettles the complacency in the world of letters. Let us examine the forms of this unsettling.

In one of the essays in the book *Literatura e resistência*,<sup>42</sup> (Literature and Resistance) entitled "*Os estudos literários na era dos extremos*" ("Literary Studies in the Era of Extremes"), Alfredo Bosi, one of the most renowned critics and historians in Brazilian literature, ponders the chaotic world of the end of the millennium, focusing on the degradation of literature and its transformation into mass literature and entertainment culture in the era of the market. He argues that a correspondence can be found between market and academic discourses, since both extol the emergence of literary subgroups "exclusively according to their contents." What he means by subgroup deserves attention:

At least since the 1970s, we have seen the emergence of a feminist literature and criticism, an ethnic minority literature and criticism (the American examples of the Black novel and the Chicano novel are well known), a homosexual literature and criticism, an adolescent literature and criticism; the same can be said for senior citizens, ecology, third-world, ghetto dwellers, etc. What differentiates them is the target audience; what brings them closer is their mutual hyper-mimetism which, in the regime of serial commodity production, sooner or later becomes convention.

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<sup>41</sup> CULLER, 1999; EAGLETON, 1983; and JAMESON, 1992.

<sup>42</sup> BOSI, 2002.

Further ahead, in stating that an emphasis on content prevails within contemporary culture, he evokes cultural studies in the United States and peripheries as an example of a paradigm for reading which, in his understanding, has replaced “literary interpretation and aesthetic criticism with crass exposition of issues, extolling them if politically correct, and condemning them if politically incorrect.”<sup>43</sup>

Bosi’s statements are not particularly surprising, given their relation to some of the issues we have discussed above, such as the mistaken interpretations of the politically correct, the judgmental gaze that is thrown on the symbolic and academic practices of culture ‘from the other side,’ particularly when it involves the fear that the latter may interfere with the local interests and practices linked to the maintenance of class, gender and race privileges and with the defense of aesthetic value that is widespread in the Brazilian world of letters. I must dwell a bit more on the literary assumptions that nourish this position as it strives to disqualify feminist critique. Bosi speaks from the location of aesthetically-framed criticism and a concept of literature rooted in the tradition of classic European authors as well as in four Brazilians (Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, Mário de Andrade and Carlos Drummond). Thus, he works with a notion of literature that essentializes artistic value, placing works over and beyond the contradictions engendered by and within the cultural discourses of time and place, as if a literary text were not a historical object, as if value were not embedded in structure and as if structure were not a result of an ideological function. If judgment regarding artistic value can only be formulated in relation to pure art, in the hypotheses that its elements can be separated from the dialect of form and content and structure and function, then we would return here to the most radical tendency of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian formalism. This is precisely the place to which Bosi’s position leads us. Therefore, his disqualification of feminist critique is founded on a refutation of what he understands as ideological analysis that focuses on content, which from this perspective is seen as clashing violently with the statute of the literary. For Bosi, feminist critique responds in nature and degree to the existence of a literary subgroup he calls feminist literature, and it is here that his argument goes astray for its vague, general and unknowledgeable statements. What is worse, these statements are marked by their contempt for the signs of belonging that spring from the processes that mediate the consciousness that represents and the world that is represented as they become part of literary plots, composition strategies and linguistic operations.

Aiming to expose feminist criticism/feminist literature to ridicule through its connection to what he refers to as hyper-mimetism, Bosi makes analogies to the criticism and literature of ethnic minorities in the United States, and with *queer* criticism, adding on a list of fictitious forms of criticism to serve as an ironic resource, such as “adolescent literature and criticism” and “senior- citizen’s criticism” and so forth. There are many issues here that are worthy of problematization, but I will focus on three. First, the

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<sup>43</sup> BOSI, 2002, p. 251.

mirror relation between feminist criticism and feminist literature is a serious mistake since the former, particularly in the 1970s in the United States, was geared toward a re-reading of the canon, that is, works of male authorship, and toward critical revisionism, that is, research into the value criteria and paradigms used in the tradition of literary studies. I recall works considered as classics published in this first phase of North American feminist critique: Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, in which the author presents a critical re-reading of works by D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Jean Genet; Judith Fetterly's *The Resisting Reader*, in which the author offers a new approach to the canonic works of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century North American fiction; and the critical collection *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*,<sup>44</sup> from which I cite the following, as a form of counter-arguing Bosi's statements on the overemphasis on content:

Although many critics and many schools of criticism share belief in the interrelationship between society and art, feminist critics, obviously, are distinguished by virtue of their particular concern with society's beliefs about the nature and function of women in the world, with the transformation of these beliefs into literary plots, with the ways in which artistic and critical strategies adjust and control attitudes toward women.<sup>45</sup>

Secondly, the statement about the Black novel, also in the United States, reveals, to say the least, a prejudice or an attitude on the part of someone who places himself in the position of a superior culture and who considers that production deficient in virtue of his operationalization of a concept of literature that was formulated within the context of literary studies and the tradition of erudite white culture. Bosi's reductionism makes *tabula rasa* of the history of the North American Black novel, whose development has been marked by intense debates in aesthetics and politics, particularly after the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. These general depreciatory judgments delivered without acknowledging the traditions and evolution of literary forms in specific and historically situated cultural contexts translates into a gesture of intellectual arrogance that is incompatible with a critical intelligence sensitive to the nexus of identity and difference that entwine in cultural formations. In third place, revealingly unspoken but underlying Bosi's view of literature's deterioration through the association, perverse insofar as destituted of any explainable logic, between the insatiability of the market and the production of minorities, is the old criteria of universality. This criteria, inscribed in the conception of a text's aesthetic dimension harbors a hierarchical distinction between literature with a capital L - as exemplified in the practice of the great masters - and second rate literature. The problem does not lie within universality itself but in the logic with which critics in Bosi's school articulate it: universal means literature that is exempt of ideological marks, that is, canonical or high literature. The ideological, according to this reasoning, means the emergence into the scene of textual productivity, a particularist point of view, tantamount to arguing that

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<sup>44</sup> MILLET, 1969; FETTERLY, 1978; and Arlyn DIAMON and Lee EDWARD, 1977.

<sup>45</sup> Arlyn DIAMON and Lee EDWARD, 1977, p. x.

the text presents null mediation or disputable neutrality, since its artistic qualities are contaminated and overdetermined by something that is foreign or alien to it, that is, by values that are specific to a form of belonging or identity. In fact, we are unable to know what Bosi means by feminist criticism or feminist literature, except that both have been dismissed due to their so-called particularist, opposition here to the universalist, discourse. It is precisely on this logic that Judith Fetterly, in her introduction to her above mentioned book, is emphatic:

Literature is political. It is painful to have to insist on this fact, but the necessity of such insistence indicates the dimensions of the problem [...]. The major works of American fiction constitute a series of propositions on the female reader, all the more potent in their effects because they are “impalpable”. One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative.<sup>46</sup>

The Bosian paradigm of reading can be found as well in the positions taken by other acclaimed Brazilian critics, for whom particularisms, exemplified in references to feminism or to feminist criticism, jeopardize the very survival of literature. This perspective appears to overlook the fact that universalist claims are inscribed in a closed typed of particularism that at some point became dominant precisely because it failed to recognize its own origins, as Ernesto Laclau has pointed out in his discussions on the contemporary construction of concepts that accompany the processes of modernity, such as identity and difference and universalism and particularism and on how they are today articulated into paradoxical combinations that sustain political and cultural hegemonies.<sup>47</sup> We have become increasingly aware of the fact that the enunciative *locus* of many of the discourses that invoke the universal inscribe, uncritically, a particular notion of this category. I refer here to a notion of the universal that has been historically inflected by a hegemonic perspective which imposes and homogenizes cultural values and implants a system of thought that presumes itself as a totality. Within this context, the emergence of new social actors and new identities who have been historically excluded from the access to universality signifies two things: the collapse of an epistemological location from which the universal subject presumed to speak and the collapse of the fiction that this was the only feasible location of authorized speech, that is, speech that is legitimated politically, symbolically, institutionally. In texts by literary critics such as Leyla Perrone-Moisés<sup>48</sup> and Benjamin Abdala Junior,<sup>49</sup> this critique of particularism is imbued with strong

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<sup>46</sup> FETTERLY, 1978, p. xi.

<sup>47</sup> See Ernesto LACLAU, 1995, and also Simon CRITCHLEY, Jacques DERRIDA, Richard RORTY, and Ernesto LACLAU, 1996.

<sup>48</sup> See PERRONE-MOISÉS, 1998 and 2000.

<sup>49</sup> ABDALA JUNIOR, 2006.

political connotations which enable us to conclude that both subscribe to conservative positions on the issue of difference. Their conservatism reveals itself in relation to the emergence of new identities that demand self-affirmation in power struggles unfolding within the field of literary production as well as in relation to critical currents that, directly or indirectly, are responsible for helping to undermine concepts and criteria of value constructed in the literary field in the light of Western tradition, taken as a paradigm for universal aesthetic taste and moral values. According to Perrone-Moisés, North American feminism is responsible for the implementation in literature departments in the United States of ('responsable for literature departament' está incorreto) courses based on the "particularist" viewpoint of a social group – feminists – who, among others, "squabble over what is left of old literature to order to use it *exclusively* in their favor." In Perrone-Moisés terms, the expression "in its favor" refers to feminists' rejection of the study of literature from the perspective of universalizing aesthetic criteria, since the use of such criteria "has become politically incorrect."<sup>50</sup> It is important to point out that here, as in Bosi's text, the meaning of politically (in)correct, essentializes a univocal meaning in tune with current interpretations of Brazilian common sense.<sup>51</sup> Following these criticisms of the culture of difference, Abdala Junior refers to the opening to the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Brazilian comparative literature association, ABRALIC that took place in 1995 under the general theme "Literature and Difference" and made his notion of difference explicit upon addressing congress participants from his position as president of the Association. In defining his stance on literary studies from the perspective of the building of a supranational cultural communitarism, Abdala Junior makes a point of stressing that he would advocate an against-the-grain strategy "against the unilateral Americanizing process in the world" (the same core notion that underlies Perrone-Moisés arguments) and that his concept of difference represents a counterpoint to

the insulation of critical groups that have identified difference with a sort of ghettoization. Difference would be a way to foster open critical reflections in non-hegemonic margins, not confined to local, ethnic groups or even the national sphere. Hence, a perspective adverse to closed particularisms such as those that emerged, for example, in the North American Black movements.<sup>52</sup>

Taking a reductionist anti-Americanism in which the United States is conceived as a uniform entity as his point of departure - as if the entire country were little more than a huge shopping mall of mass products waiting to be transformed into instruments of cultural globalization by imperialism (ideas appearing in Abdala's text), in other words, a hegemonic machine destitute of internal margins and dissidences, this critic assumes a homology between radical factions of social movements and critical

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<sup>50</sup> PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2000, p. 12, our translation.

<sup>51</sup> It is pertinent to examine Michael BÉRUBÉ's illuminating discussions on the so-called PC and humanities, 1994.

<sup>52</sup> ABDALA JUNIOR, 2006, p. 19. our translation.

groups (which ones?), that in addition to being erroneous, would lead us to believe that only an undifferentiated location of belonging – neither local, ethnic, nor national – can effectually and legitimately articulate a concept of difference. This articulation elevates the term to a level of abstraction that cannot account for the web of relations that allow identifications among margins, for example, identifications among women of different latitudes, among whites and Blacks, and identifications in terms of gender and racial oppression, even though oppression acquires multiple forms and is differentiated in specific historical and geographical contexts. Although not referred to explicitly, feminist critique is contemplated in references to ghetto-ization and to closed particularism, an interpretation that fixes and freezes the concept of difference, significantly reducing its reach in building affiliations and alliances, the basis for anti-hegemonic cultural politics. Lastly, it must be pointed out that his monolithic view of the Black movement, much like Bosi's reductionism, highlights if not racial antagonism, at least an unwillingness to undertake a more precise or sensitive reading of the multiple forms of resistance that cannot be dissociated from the particular historical processes of a society that has become aware of a racialized point of view from the perspective of the other and not simply imposed by the white subject. This change has not yet taken place in the Brazil. Aligned with the position of undifferentiated difference, Abdala Junior's statements nourish a concept that is more like a version, in new attire, of the old universal. This should be surprising in a text that posits comparative studies of cultural/textual communities traversed by internal or local differences, as well as historical experiences and analogous cultural diversities. We are therefore faced by a paradoxical combination of particularist and universalist notions mobilized in order to make an exclusionary concept of difference feasible, since the web (of peoples) to which Abdala refers are located south of the equator. In the discourses of all three Brazilian critics, there is a tendentiousness in the way notions of particularism and difference are dealt with in relation to cultural contexts emerging from a national history, as if their positioning within the symbolic field were not already traversed by contingent particularisms and, hence, committed to certain values that stigmatize feminist criticism as a critical and knowledge-producing discursive field.

### **On feminist criticism : limits and scope**

The panorama that we have discussed here, including aspects of Brazilian social history from the prism of power relations, references to the constitution of the intellectual field and the conservative tradition of letters in the context of bourgeois patriarchal ideology's permeability and its historical efficacy in the construction of a society that resists emancipation, makes it possible to understand feminist criticism's lack of intellectual resonance: its history is in step with the context in which it is generated. But I am skeptical as to whether it makes sense to resort to external causality in order to explain this contingency, since in my understanding, while it may be unproductive to think of theory from the national/foreign

perspective, it is also inaccurate to justify the status of feminist criticism only by the external context of its practices. In this sense, in attempting to look at feminist criticism from within in order to understand what makes its articulation possible and, at the same time, what prevents the materialization of its radical contribution, I must also emphasize my own implication in activities of self-awareness and self-criticism, as a cultural subject located within a field of power. From this perspective, I throw out some provocations: Can it be that we do play a part in the invisibility of feminist critique in the literary field? Can it be that this situation occurs only because the area of letters can be considered the most conservative one among the fields of knowledge? Or is it perhaps that the identity of Brazilian literature has not yet broken with its tradition and elitist moorings<sup>53</sup>, while feminism is perceived as a threat to this aura? Do researchers in the field fear being deemed less feminine for subscribing to the term “feminism?” And might not Wilson Martin’s criticism of the conflation of ‘gender’ and ‘woman’ find nourishment in our own ways of proceeding? I do not believe that we will arrive at a moment in which all impasses will be resolved through the constitution of a coherent body of practices that is able to support a stable identity. This would be impossible, since difference is its constitutive limit as a possible articulation and as an impossibility for closure. But it is imperative that we engage in self-evaluation, mainly because making issues explicit and adjusting our course to adapt theoretical practices and formulate specific strategies for diversified contexts has been a fundamental part of feminism’s historical advances.

One of the few texts, among us, to make some sort of appraisal of feminist criticism has been Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda’s article, “O estranho horizonte da crítica feminista no Brasil”<sup>54</sup> (meaning “The Strange Horizon of Feminist Criticism in Brazil”) in 2003. In the first place, I would like to make it clear that I disagree with many of her statements regarding theoretical feminism in general, considering them inaccurate generalizations based on weak evidence and little bibliographic support. For example, I consider her assertion that, despite advances in the theoretical debate, there have been “signs of confinement and decline in the area”<sup>55</sup> to be fallacious. Here, she has followed along the lines of Gayatri Spivack’s argument in a 1986 text, which criticizes the development of a feminist critique guided by the dominant metropolitan paradigms, which takes us back to old discussions, many of which have been settled. Just as an example, we could mention texts that had an impact on the paradigms of a white middle class feminism such as *Esta Puente mi espalda (This Bridge Called my Back)*, edited by Cherrie

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<sup>53</sup> According to LEITE, 1969, p. 289. In turn, Antônio Cândido appoints men’s erudite literature as “the matrix of Brazilian erudite literature” in discussing the formation of the literary field and of how literature played the role of a colonizing instrument, “with the purpose of imposing and maintaining the political and social order established by the Metropolis, even through the local dominant classes” (CANDIDO, 1999, p. 13, our translation).

<sup>54</sup> HOLLANDA, 2003.

<sup>55</sup> HOLLANDA, 2003, p. 16, our translation.



Moraga and Ana Castillo, Trinh Minh-Ha's *When the Moon Waxes Red*, or Bell Hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*.<sup>56</sup> What I want to emphasize is that much has been achieved in theoretical terms since 1986, and that "decline" is an absolutely inappropriate term to define the scenario of feminist production in the North American context. As for the Brazilian context, that is an entirely different matter, in as much as "decline" is a term that cannot define a feminist criticism that has never even attained national expression in the literary field. Furthermore, I disagree with the statement that feminist criticism in Brazil, on investing predominantly in archeologically inclined historiographic studies, has privileged the examination of "minor" genres of literature produced by women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Judging by the editorial work resulting from these studies, the outcome of which is the publication of volumes of novels and poetry, I do not believe these genres can be literarily defined as minor. Conversely, I corroborate other points that have been brought up and I would like to list them: 1) despite the institutionalization of feminist criticism, feminist researchers encounter resistance to their work in the academic milieu; 2) texts written by women are seen as invested only with "sociological" value; 3) in the area of Brazilian literature, feminist production is "meek;" and 4) discussions in this area remain limited to themes such as "feminine language or sensibility," and keep "more politicized issues from being addressed," which would imply associating the study of women's literature with the Brazilian cultural debate. And I subscribe to her conclusion: "To say the least, a series of difficulties can be identified in establishing a location for the feminist voice in the cultural field in which these researchers participate."<sup>57</sup>

Returning to my questions on the ways in which feminist criticism is carried out and weaving them into the points highlighted above, I would like to emphasize that it is necessary to observe that the local limitations, detectable in the bulk of our achievements, are perfectly coupled to the Brazilian cultural network in the sense that such limitations arise from the cultural logic of a patriarchal and stratified society that has immense difficulty in solving social and racial inequalities, thus tending to reproduce this logic in various forms. In other words, the reproduction of this cultural logic is a symptom of the contradictions by which the very subjects involved in it are constituted in social and material life and experience their realities.<sup>58</sup> In this framework, I will present some issues for the purpose of exploring the above mentioned problematic. It has not gone unnoticed that the use of the category of gender has often been dissociated from the political- epistemological project of feminisms that in spite of multiple and differentiated theoretical articulations, maintains on the horizon the notion of intervention and of social transformation by means of the politicization of all aspects of social life. This includes the organization of social relations of power, the reproduction of binary logic in colonization strategies

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<sup>56</sup> MORAGA and CASTILLO, 1988; MINH-HÁ, 1991; and HOOKS, 1994.

<sup>57</sup> HOLLANDA, 2003, p. 21.

<sup>58</sup> The dominated's internalization of the dominating discourse in such a way that the dominated becomes an accomplice of his/her own domination (BOURDIEU, 1999).

(gender, race, class, ethnics, social orientation) including the organization, access, production and distribution of knowledge, since struggles for social justice, human rights, citizenship and democratization are struggles waged over concepts as well. The de-territorialization of the category of gender in feminism, as is observed in a number of papers presented in literature forums (ANPOLL and ABRALIC congresses, “Women and Literature” convention, among others) is seen in two contexts. The first involves the effort of making feminism palatable, giving it a light or mild content, mainly in situations that require the approval of institutional financing for research, which in turn means competing with the dominant discourses in literary studies. In this case, there is a de-characterization of gender as a historical and analytical category, since it is dislocated from the discursive-representational apparatus of power relations and asymmetries and thus attempts to make feminism unnecessary. This is coherent with arguments that disseminate the idea that there is no need for the support of feminist theories in order to carry out a gender analysis of a literary text. The second context is related to the conceptual and terminological confusion between gender and woman. Reference is made to gender when actually the object of analysis is the category ‘woman.’ This undermines feminism’s critical power to intervene in hegemonic discourses. In this second sense, the term ‘gender’ is used only as a pretext in discussions inscribed in the dogma of a feminine identity – invisible then, visible now – in generalist argumentations that set white middle class culture as the norm, without the explicit and necessary problematization of what is understood by the category ‘woman,’ assumed and positioned within determined identity and textual locations. The predominant model of feminist criticism among us belongs to what might be called cultural feminism, with its ideology geared toward overvaluing feminine characteristics through stressing themes such as feminine memory, feminine body, feminine poetics, feminine writing, women’s literary history, feminine tradition. The risks involved in this critical model is that it may aggregate a romanticized and essentialized politics of difference that will end up reinforcing and reinscribing binarisms and their ghettos, precisely what feminism aims to destabilize. . In this regard, I quote from the inspiring words of Chantal Mouffe:

Feminism is, for me, the struggle for the equality of women. But this should not be understood as a struggle for realizing the equality of a definable empirical group with a common essence and identity, women, but rather as a struggle against the multiple forms in which the category “women” is constructed in subordination.<sup>59</sup>

Differences among women can highlight the different shapes of racial and class inequality. For example, the meaning of patriarchal authority in Brazil, according to Maria Inácia D’Avila Neto, was translated “in different modes of domination in the man-woman relation, varying according to the skin color or the

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<sup>59</sup> MOUFFE, 1992.

woman's social segment, that is, her 'class-color.'"<sup>60</sup> To whatever extent the historiographic turn has fostered new learning and knowledge about women's role as 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse producers, with its important work in retrieving texts of female authorship that were relegated by historiography and by patriarchal critical discourse, this approach cannot, on its own, generate enough power to intervene in the institutionalized standards of evaluation nor in institutionalized standards of interpretation. It is therefore important to go beyond descriptive sociological readings of a literary text in order to construct a critical act of literary/ideological/political consequences regarding the nature of the Brazilian social experience and the dominant structures of literary high culture. I do not believe that feminist criticism can cause an impact in literary studies if it does not invest in a consistent effort of textual/historical/anthropological/cultural criticism, viewing culture not in isolation but rather as a location of symbolic practices where social mechanisms that produce subjects and subjectivities are shaped and is, therefore, entwined in the material organization and functioning of society. Yet it is clear that in order for feminist criticism to pursue a view of social and cultural transformation within the Brazilian context, permeated with specific contradictions, disparities and asymmetries, the analytics of gender will not suffice.

Interdisciplinary comprehension of Brazilian history and a historical awareness of social processes in the political context of privileges and of relations of domination appear to be a *sine qua non* condition to enable feminist criticism to play an important role in the production of a new approach to thinking culture and literature in the light of the intersections of social class, gender and race. However, a number of studies of texts authored by women contemplate analyses in a dominant inter-class framework, where gender appears as a category isolated from other determinations of belonging that, although present in an underlying form, are not investigated and integrated to the focus of the analyses. In this context, the demand for a politics of inclusion, conditioned at its base by class belonging, may be one more reinforcement of the concept of liberal-bourgeois politics, placing the equality of certain women (as shown on the cover of *Veja* magazine) before the law or the symbolic order as the limits of the feminist project, thus clashing head-on with the meaning of the political constructed by feminism and which is rooted in a radical critique of dominant discourses. Although an academic activity, feminist criticism may well be considered a type of social movement, since it can contribute to destabilizing traditional categories or paradigms,<sup>61</sup> according to the definition that Sandra Harding has provided. To those of us in the field of literature, who work with aesthetic/cognitive/symbolic/textual systems – for it is from this perspective that I can speak - the exercise of literary criticism through an interpretative politics supported by textual strategies that are able to de-codify regimes of truth engraved in the texts of culture, to

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<sup>60</sup> NETO, 1980, p. 6, our translation.

<sup>61</sup> According to HARDING, 1986.

dislocate their hierarchies and open spaces for difference is the most important way to construct new knowledge about who we are. It is not a question of producing knowledge about certain subjects, but rather of articulating an epistemological project by means of an interventionist discursive practice that will trigger reflections on the meanings of domination and the domestic practices of colonization, including intellectual colonization. As I understand it, this is the major contribution that feminist criticism can offer: producing a displacement of the democratic model installed in the country, the very one which led Sergio Buarque de Holanda to assert that democracy, among us, is but “a lamentable misunderstanding.”<sup>62</sup>

To achieve such a level of intervention, a series of challenges must be faced. I am afraid we have no ready-made, easily adaptable formulas or methodologies, but rather theories and categories of analyses that must be transformed into hermeneutical procedures specific to the articulation of a relevant critical discourse. I also believe that there are no fixed models to teach us, in working with literature, to develop a comprehension of the construction of textual meanings and to explain and interpret these meanings toward signification and critique. The refinement of interpretative skills and the exercise of creative imagination are pre-conditions for constructing the critical power and intellectual authority of Brazilian feminist criticism.

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<sup>62</sup> HOLANDA, 1995, p. 160, our translation. This view is reiterated in the idea of Brazil as a fictitious nation, elaborated by José Murilo de CARVALHO, 1999.

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