

A Study of the Demonization of Black Women and the Myth of Black Female Sexuality in the Prose Narratives of José Lins Do Rego

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Abstract

This paper analyses the demonization of black women and the myth of black female sexuality in selected prose works – Menino de Engenho (1932), Doidinho (1933), Bangüê (1934), O Moleque Ricardo (1935) and Usina (1936) - of the Brazilian regionalist writer José Lins do Rego. Following the gains of Modernism, Brazilian writers embarked on the rehabilitation of the non-European segment of Brazilian population, especially Afro-Brazilian blacks and mulattoes. However, the image of the black Brazilian woman (slave and ex-slave) depicted in this literature is full of stereotypical notions about her comportment and sexuality: devilishness, animality, a sexual/sensual creature par excellence, etc. The study discloses the realities behind the racial stereotypes, which are masked and misrepresented by the white Brazilian writer in his portrayal of black figures. It also debunks these racial and sexual notions as mere creations of the writer and the white segment of Brazilian society, without any social or biological justification. Lins do Rego's representation of black women as stereotypes are not justified, they are mere myths and falsehoods, made to bastardise the Afro-Brazilian and his image in the mainstream Brazilian literature written by whites. Indeed, the paper shows that the depiction of black women (and men) in racialistic and stereotypical manners are symptomatic of the hardened racial antagonisms prevalent in Brazil.

Key words: demonization, racial stereotypes, myth, sexuality, patriarchy, Afro-Brazilians

Since his appearance in literature, especially in post-abolition literature, after 1850, the Afro-Brazilian has always been portrayed in stereotypical roles. The blacks indeed became subjects of literature in Brazil, when black slaves began to appear in literature. They were however portrayed as stereotypes, ranging from demon or devil, noble slave, faithful and loyal slave (Alencar, 1937, Lins do Rego, 1979, Sayers, 1966). Brookshaw (1986:13) accurately observes that the “positive symbolism of white and the negative symbolism of black are deeply engrained in the Brazilian literary culture as they are in that of the Old World.”

One of the most durable and damaging stereotypes propagated in Brazilian literature is that of the woman of African descent as an ontologically sensual creature. Many Brazilian writers especially the whites, are irresistibly driven to write about the sexual attributes and behaviour of the Afro-Brazilian woman. Sexuality happens to be the main context in which her identity is defined. She has also been described as a demon or devil, posing dangers to white males. In other words, she has been effectively portrayed in sexual and demonic terms in literature, mainly by white writers. The aim of this paper is to critically examine the demonization of black women and the myth of black female sexuality in selected prose works of the Brazilian writer José Lins do Rego. The paper therefore discusses the manner in which black women have been demonized and illustrates the ways in which the myth of black female sexuality has been constructed by the author and critically assesses this myth in order to disclose the realities, which it masks and/or misrepresents.

In this study, the word demonize means to describe somebody in a way that is intended to make other people think of him or her as evil or dangerous (Hornby, 2005). In other words, it means to attribute demonic qualities or characteristics and/or malevolent influence to somebody (*Novo Dicionário Aurélio*). This is done in such a way to make other characters fear them. Myth is taken to mean “Image simplifiée, souvent illusoire, que des groupes humains élaborent ou acceptent au sujet d’un individu ou d’un fait et qui joue un rôle déterminant dans leur comportement ou leur appréciation” (Robert, 1977). (Simplified image, often illusory, that human groups

elaborate or accept about an individual or an act and which plays a determinant role in their comportment and appreciation). In other words, myth as used in this study simply means something false, which people take for granted, but which does not really correspond to reality. This study therefore analyses the depiction of the black female characters in stereotypical roles to see whether the stereotypes are really justified or not.

Lins do Rego's prose narratives, especially the Sugar-Cane Cycle novels, examine the function of the patriarchal power in the economy of the Brazilian Northeast. The author also depicts in realist terms the decadence of the patriarchal society developed in the sugarcane region of Brazil's Northeast, especially Paraíba and Pernambuco. *Menino de Engenho* (1932) initiates the novels collectively termed Sugar-Cane Cycle novels. It is followed by *Doidinho* (1933), *Bangüê* (1934), *O Moleque Ricardo* (1935) and *Usina* (1936). The writer actively took part in the Regionalist movement, which emerged in the Northeast of Brazil in 1926. Led by Gilberto Freyre, the Regionalists affirmed the need to reassert the socio-cultural values of their society, which were rapidly being replaced by foreign ones. Freyre called upon Brazilian artists to promote regional and traditional elements, themes and motifs, such as mill workers and sugar-cane plantations and popular modes of expression. The movement had emerged victorious in the Southern Brazilian metropolis of São Paulo in 1922, with the celebration of the Modern Art Week (Andrade, 1942).

The Modernists embarked on the rehabilitation of the non-European segment of the Brazilian population, especially the Afro-Brazilian blacks and mulattoes. The society had earlier ridiculed, bastardized and alienated elements from these ethnic groups. Essentially artistic in preoccupation, the Modernists did not show interest in the adverse socio-economic and racial situation of the black segment of the Brazilian society, which constitutes the lowest social class in Brazil society. They promoted the formation of a Brazilian literature, which cultivated national themes expressed in a Brazilian language, consisting of a mixture of different varieties and register of Portuguese and local languages spoken by Brazilians. The way

was thus cleared for linguistic experiments and innovation which are also noteworthy in José Lins do Rego's work.

One of the outstanding gains of Brazilian Modernism (and Northeastern Regionalism) is that Brazilian artists, including Lins do Rego showed de-assimilation by seeking inspiration within the culture of the colonized below the compartment line. They were inspired by the socio-cultural values and elements of the wretched of the earth - slaves and ex-slaves – which were not considered suitable for literary themes and subjects. This attitude should be seen as a reaction against accepted norms in Brazil. Since then, the underprivileged class/race has become a constant feature in Brazilian literary texts.

Stereotypical notions about the sexual nature of the Afro-Brazilian woman have been propagated majorly, though not exclusively, by white Brazilian writers. In his Sugar-Cane Cycle narratives, Lins do Rego approaches the question of power in the Northeastern society through the drama of sexual relations. This drama forms an essential part of the experience of the narrator-agent in his initiation into the patriarchal community of Santa Rosa and into the society at large. The black female servants are forced to submit to the sexual whims of the master, Colonel José Paulino, and his male relatives, such as the narrator, Carlos de Melo, and his uncle, Juca. The women are victims of a double exploitation, economic and sexual, reflecting a patriarchal system which is sustained by the exploitation of slave and ex-slave labour. Force, fear and desire for survival explain the apparent ease with which the female servant succumbs to sexual abuse. The relationship between poverty and promiscuity contributes considerably to the moral atmosphere of these narratives.

Sexual promiscuity is the norm in the rural world of Santa Rosa, a practice indulged in by both the masters and the servants, the young and the old. The black female servants are particularly described as depraved animals, sleeping with any man without scruples nor with the intention of marriage. Some of them are also portrayed as not knowing the men who father their children. In fact, the practice of sexual exploitation of the black woman, including the mulatto dates

back to the era of slavery in Brazil. This revealed in its folklore. The practice forms the basis of a popular prejudice:

Branca para casar
Negra p'ra trabalhar
Mulata para fornicar (Nascimento, 1961:63)

(The white woman marries
The black woman works
The mulatto woman fornicates).

This notion is strongly exemplified by Lins do Rego in his texts. For illustration, both Dr. Juca (*Usina*) and Mr. Alexandre (*Moleque Ricardo*) have a mulatto mistress each. The society has assigned to black women, especially mulatto women, the role of mistress. They are not considered suitable for marriage. The reproach of slavery effectively continues to destroy the chances and image of the black people in Brazil, nearly a hundred years after the abolition of slavery.

The stereotype of black women as sexual perverts is strongly cultivated in the narratives. Examples abound in the experience of Carlos, the narrator-agent of *Menino de Engenho*, *Doidinho* and *Bangüê*. He narrates his story from childhood to early adulthood. In *Menino de Engenho*, Carlos de Melo recounts how he is initiated into promiscuity by the black female servants, namely Luísa and later, Zefa Cajá. As the narrator, he is in a position to judge other characters. He does not praise this female character. He rather regards her as a devil and as having bad influence on him:

Ao contrário das outras que nos respeitavam seriamente, ela seria uma especie de anjo mau na minha infancia. Ia me botar para dormir e enquanto ficavamos sozinhos no quarto arrastava-me a coisas ignobéis... Só pensava nos meus retiros lubricos com o meu anjo mau, nas masturbações gostosas com a negra Luísa (Lins do Rego, 1979a:102).

(Contrary to the others who deeply respected us, she was a kind of bad angel in my infancy. She would take me to sleep and when we were alone in the room, she would drag me to ignoble things... I only thought of my lascivious retreats with my bad angel, of pleasant masturbations with the negress Luísa).

Carlos in fact extends the notion of the black female lover as devil to all his black lovers: Luís, Zefa Cajá and Paula. Characteristically, while describing Paula's initial moves to him, he comments as follows: "O diabo me visitou em carne e osso" (Lins do Rego, 1969:85). (The devil visited me in human form). This narrator's comment on Luísa reflects the society's attitude to amorous affairs between white men and black women. He portrays the society's hypocrisy in singling out the black female servants and holding them responsible, they engage in sexual relationship with the white boys. Evidently, the society believes that the black woman is essentially a sexual creature "par excellence", a seducer who is always looking for carnal pleasures. It is germane to observe here that the attitude of blaming the black servants for corrupting the white boys is a common theme in Brazilian post-abolition literature. Luísa's behavior echoes that of the so-called immoral slave, always wanting to have sex with her master. She consequently constitutes a serious threat to not only to her master, but also to her master's family. This is a traditional prejudice held by whites against blacks. The society always blames the slaves for constituting a bad influence on the sugar-cane planter and his family. However, this prejudice flourished in the writing of the abolitionists because they sought to persuade the society to do away with the institution of slavery, in order to save itself from destruction. What a paradox!

It can also be recalled that the stereotype of the Afro-Brazilian as a devil echoes the notion of the slave as a demon which first appeared in José de Alencar's *O demônio familiar* in 1859 (Alencar,1957). That this prejudice reappears frequently in Brazilian literature and particularly in Lins do Rego's fiction confirms the standardization of this stereotype in Brazilian writings. Implicated in this stereotype of the Afro-Brazilian woman, as a devil is the influence of the image of Eve in Judeo-Christian tradition. Expectedly, it is not a

surprise to see that Lins do Rego usually depicts his black female figures as adept at tempting or luring the white men into having sex. For by so doing, he effectively depicts the love-hate relationship of the lure of the black female body. However, the reality seems to point to the moral weakness of the white man, who loses his self-control in the vicinity of the Afro-Brazilian woman. In addition to this myth of white male innocence, Carlos talks about being lured if not “assaulted” by the black maid, first into having masturbation and later into sex. He continued to enjoy and even advance in debauchery, yet he puts all the blame on the black female servant. The white man cannot wash off his hand as innocent; rather he must accept both his culpability and acquiescence.

Ironically, Carlos’ first sexual experience at the age of 12 with the black maid, Zefa Cajá, becomes a source of pride for him and a criterion for acceptance into the adult world. He suffers no rebuke, rather the black maid is found guilty.

E comecei a envaidecer-me com a minha doença. Abria as pernas, exagerando-me no andar. Era uma glória para mim essa carga de bacilos que o amor deixara pelo meu corpo imberbe. Mostrava-me às visitasmasculinhas como uma espécime de virilidade adiantada. Os senhores de engenho tomavam deboche de mim, dando me confiança nas suas conversas. Perguntavam pela Zefa Cajá, chamavam-na de professor. (1979:116).

(I started to puff up with my sickness. I opened my legs exaggerating my steps. This load of bacilli, which love left in my premature body, was a glory. It showed me to the male visitors as an example of advance virility. The sugar-mill lords corrupted me, confiding in me in their conversation. They asked for Zefa Cajá, calling her teacher).

The male characters, especially the white, derive immense pleasure from this lewd practice and boys who have known women sexually, those who contract venereal diseases are greatly admired by their

peers and even by the elders. This attitude clearly reveals the level of moral decadence of the Brazilian patriarchal society early this century

In addition, racial discrimination is clearly visible in Lins do Rego's portrayal of the black maids. For example, the image of black female lovers can be contrasted to that of the white female lovers. Carlos describes his affair with Paula, one of the domestic servants of Maciel's College, as repulsive, carnal and selfish. He, however, paints glorious and sublime pictures of his affair with Maria Luísa, a white colleague at the same college. He considers this relationship as innocent, pure and edifying.

Maria Luísa: quantas vezes eu não me esforçava nas lições enchendo a cabeça de regras a exceções para não sofrer na sua presença, humilhação de bolos! Aquele amor de anjo bom me ensinava o que nem a palmatória conseguia (Lins do Rego, 1969: 83).

(Maria Luísa: how many times did I not force myself in the lessons, stuffing my head with rules and exception in order not to suffer in your presence, the humiliation of blows (of ruler)! That love of good angel taught me what blows could not).

The narrator almost deifies Maria Luísa. In the process, he valorizes the white aesthetic and the original symbolism of colours, which equates white with purity and morality as against black symbolizing perversity and immorality. It follows that the conflict of the two ethnic traditions – white versus black- is a conflict of two levels of morality in Brazilian society. This binary opposition is a common preoccupation in the works studied in this paper. In the words of Roger Bastide: "...the racial struggle assumed the aspect of an opposition between two morals, or between morality and immorality." (1941:4 – 5). Lins do Rego hints at the racial conflict inherent in Brazilian society: the struggle among the racial constituents of society for national identity. He aligns himself with the white group of the Brazilian population for obvious reasons.

Being a member of the bourgeoisie, the writer does not want to offend the society by upsetting the social and ethnic structure. He chooses to perpetuate societal norms and standards, which consider everything white as good, beautiful and pure, while black connotes the opposites. Closely linked with the prejudice of black female sexuality is that of her animality. Generally, the black characters are represented as behaving like animals. Typical examples are Josefá, a little black girl described like a domestic animal and Maria Gorda, a freed African slave. The latter will serve as illustration.

No quarto da Maria Gorda, não se pode entrar... Ela não sabia falar, articulava uma meia língua e na hora do almoço e do jantar saía da loca pendida em cima de uma vara para buscar a ração. Gritava com os moleques e as negrtas, com aqueles beiços caídos e os peitos moles dependurados. Era de Moçambique, e com mais de oitenta anos no Brasil, falava uma mistura da língua dela com não sei o que (1979: 57).

(In Maria Gorda's room, nobody could enter... She did not know how to talk, articulating a half language and at the time for lunch or dinner, she left her hiding, leaning on a stick to look for her ration. She shouted at the black children, with her drooping lips and soft hanging breasts. She was from Mozambique and with more than eighty years in Brazil, speaking a mixture of her language with what I do not know.)

This question shows the writer's affinity with other Eurocentric writers, who usually represent the blacks as ugly and animals. Maria Gorda is largely described as animal. She speaks an unintelligible language, her lips drooping, as do her breasts. Hard work and age have taken their toll on her physical features. Above all, she shouts or rather barks at people, creating the image of a domestic animal.

José Lins do Rego does not stop at describing Maria Gorda as an animal; he goes on to depict her as possessing some of the attributes

of the devil: repelling every one by her foul smell, itself a further prejudice against blacks in Brazil. Roger Bastide says this negative prejudice appears more in oral literature (folklore) than in written literature, because of its repugnant nature (Bastide 1972:13). Maria Gorda is also depicted as dancing with the devil and as such is feared by all.

Esta velha fazia-me medo. As fadas perigosas dos scontos da Sinha Totonha tinham muito dela. O seu quarto fedia como carniça. Na noite de São João era na sua porta somente que não acendiam fogueira. O diabo dançava com ela a noite inteira. Eu mesmo pensava que a negra tivesse qualquer coisa infernal, porque nela ada senti, nunca, de humano, de parecido com gente. Todos na rua temia a Maria Gorda (1979: 57).

In all, this figure fully embodies some typical prejudices against blacks, not only during the era of slavery, but also in the contemporary age. The image and myth of the black Brazilian woman as the devil incarnate, fetid and bestial have persisted even when (social) reality disproves this one-sided demonization of a race.

In addition, the term “cabra” (a goat) is used by the author to describe black servants, both male and female. This reinforces the bestial image of the Afro-Brazilian.

Nas primeiras pancadas do inverno, os cabras deixavam o eito para tomar uma bicada na destilação. Vinham gritando contentes, numa alegria estrepitosa de bicho (Lins do Rego, 1979:110).

(In these initial knocks of the winter, the goats left the work to take a sip in the distillation chamber. They came shouting contentedly, in a noisy happiness of animals.)

The author thus dehumanizes the black servants, denying them of their positive attributes. The logic behind this attitude commonly found in Brazilian literary texts is that so long as the blacks are not regarded as human beings, their description as domestic animals is merited.

Overall, José Lins do Rego's female characters are presented from the conservative and traditional male perspective. The man is shown as the powerful lord over a woman. Women are expected to play a subservient role to men. They may be seen but not heard. The author embraces this ethos of machismo and delineates the morals of the sugar-cane plantation and mills from the perspective of the white male middle class occupants of the "casa-grande" (the master's mansion). Significantly, Lins do Rego's black female characters are depicted as victims not of their economic situation (servants or ex-slaves) but of their colour or race. He accepts bestiality and demonization as norms. However, Gilberto Freyre, an enlightened social researcher, contends that the causes of moral degeneracy are diverse and are motivated by the environment. He suggests that the Afro-Brazilian slave is rather conditioned by prevailing socio-economic factors:

This animality of the Negroes, the lack of control over instincts, the flagrant prostitution within home were encouraged by white slave owners. Some, in the interest of widescale procreation; others to satisfy their sensual whims. It was therefore not the Negro who was the libertine, but the slave serving the economic or lustful proclivities of his master (Freyre 1956: 494).

Freyre argues that it was the institution of slavery, which degraded the slaves, who were not born degenerate.

Jorge Amado is another Northeastern writer, whose works deal with thematic concerns similar to those of Lins do Rego, although his treatment of the same theme slightly contrasts with Lins do Rego's with regard to the depiction of black (female) figures. His characters are also described in stereotypical roles, alongside their

revolutionary features. He particularly views the mulatto woman as the perfect colour symbol for sexuality. Mention can be made of his mulatto women, such as Esmeralda, who possesses all the charm and cunning of the “femme fatale” and Rosenda Rosedá, the female counterpart of Balduino, who serves as a symbol of black bestiality “per excellence”. Nevertheless, revolutionary and radical figures, such as Rosa Palmeirão, Lívia, Colodino and Balduino abound in his works. The first two are women, who revolutionize women’s behaviour following the death of Lívia’s husband Guma, a sailor. They both take to the sea to fend for themselves and for Guma’s son instead of prostituting themselves as is the traditional reaction of women who have lost their men in similar circumstances. Both Colodino and Balduino are transformed by Amado into conscious workers, who dedicate themselves to the defence of class solidarity.

Amado’s dual tendency is at first sight a surprise, in view of his commitment to denouncing social and political injustices and his strong defence of the proletariat of all races. However, David Brookshaw has indicated that this dual tendency in Jorge Amado proves that no matter how much interest a white writer may appear to have in vindicating the poor masses, he is still prone to the prejudices common to his class and race (1986:167). Amado does not confine himself to seeing the bad qualities of his black characters, but also their good qualities, which he seizes upon to create a revolutionary art. Evidently, Lins do Rego is not imbued with a sense of criticism and especially, of critical perception of reality. He represents a jaundiced vision, by representing the patriarchal system as just and natural, and by seeking to perpetuate the status quo. He is also influenced in his depiction of black female demonization and sexuality, as well as their animality by age-long universal myth created by men around the notion of danger of female sexuality (Haye 1986). The image of his black female character is above all symptomatic of the hardened racial antagonisms prevalent in Brazilian society.

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