

Júlia Nery's *Da Índia, com amor*: A Feminist Critique at Work

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Abstract

The Portuguese Maritime Expansion, till date, remains to be one of the most influential political moves, setting into motion various sociocultural changes on a global scale. Goa, then known as the Rome of the Orient, acted as a strategic colony of the Portuguese Empire from 1510 to 1961. During this period, the Portuguese Government undertook multiple initiatives to strengthen their power, with a view of expanding their Empire, as was the case with religious conversions and intercultural marriages. From 1545, up to the early 18th century, several female orphans from Portugal, labelled '*Órfãs d'el-Rei*' (Orphans of the King), were transported via the sea route to Goa, to be married to local rulers or Portuguese settlers. Narratives under displacement often serve as rich historical repositories, and the accounts of women travellers offer a distinctive angle. This paper aims to analyse the feminist elements present in the travel account *Da Índia, com amor* (From India, with love) by Júlia Nery (2012), which fictionalises the experiences of the *Órfãs*

d'el-Rei, both, at sea and while in Goa. Nery, in her work, recounts various episodes of cultural and political significance, and touches upon themes like religion, subordination, separation and longing, making this work an indispensable source of feminist travel literature.

Keywords: feminist travel literature; Portuguese colonialism; displacement; cultural assimilation.

Introduction

The Portuguese Maritime Expansion that began in the year 1385 with the Battle of Aljubarrota is one that lasted several centuries, mapping through the different continents, and altering forever the socio-political climate of the world at large. Vasco da Gama's voyage to India between 1497 and 1499 has, over the years, achieved the rare status of being an event of universally acknowledged importance. (Newitt, 2005) It was only in the year 1510, however, under Afonso de Albuquerque, that the Portuguese officially conquered Goa, setting into motion a type of domino effect on the cultural fabric the state possesses today. Naturally, under new colonial rule and governance, a number of politico-cultural reforms were introduced.

The reign of D. João III in Portugal was not one without challenges. It was during this period that Portugal dealt with the Protestant threat, the Turkish threat, and the rise of the French and English Empires in the East. In Goa, the death of Afonso de Albuquerque in 1515 meant that a strong hand was removed from the control of eastern affairs. (Newitt, 2005) Amongst the unfolding power struggles, however, the Portuguese empire witnessed manifold reforms, like the Inquisition in India, and the Crown's policy of intercultural marriages. As Sarkissian (2000) states, "(...) batches of Portuguese girls, known as *órfãs del Rei* were sent from Lisbon to marry either Portuguese men or high-ranking locals, the latter typically as a means of cementing alliances." (Sarkissian, 2000). As Coates (2001) further explains:

"The practice of sending orphaned women to the colonies formed part of a broader strategy for colonization designed to meet Portugal's empire-building needs. The ultimate goal of this strategy was to populate distant colonies." (Coates, 2001)

García (1946) argues that it is but a natural fact that such societies, as was the case with Brazil, faced a dearth of (white) women, who were

then used and abused.¹ The Portuguese state rewarded orphaned women with dowries and sponsored their voyage overseas as an integral part of a broader colonial strategy. (Rosenthal, 2016)

Theoretical Framework

Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general characterization there are, however, many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine, or as implying an agreed political program. (James, 1998) Feminist theory and methodology have influenced and guided the way one interprets the lived experiences of female travellers. As Falconer (2009) states:

[It] has stressed the importance of bringing women's voices and personal experiences into the research process, by challenging the dominant, masculine power relations that influence both quantitative and qualitative social research, and exposing the political significance of seemingly individual, personal stories. (Falconer, 2009)

Women's narratives help one understand the socialised position of gender, and examine to what extent dominant, patriarchal ideologies are created, reproduced or resisted. (Falconer, 2009) In the Lusophone sphere, the works of women writers have not gone unnoticed: be it the published first-hand diary entries of Carolina Maria de Jesus in *Quarto de Despejo* (1992) (*The Storeroom*), which speaks of her experiences in the favelas of Brazil, juggling personal and professional responsibilities as a single mother, or the essay *A Mulher Indo-Portuguesa* (1928) (*The Indo-Portuguese Woman*) by Propércia Correia Afonso de Figueiredo, which sums up the societal expectations of the 'Indo-Portuguese' woman of the 20th century, one is provided with brilliant feminist narratives from around the world, which also bring to the fore the multi-layered stratification that these women suffer from. In Goa, the former colony of Portugal, the works of Vimala Devi, more specifically in her anthology of short-stories *Monção* (1963) (*Monsoon*), have been studied in great depth, as it offers views on the gendered and otherwise heavily stratified Goan society.

Reflecting on the circulation of women within society, Rosenthal (2016) cites the work of Rubin (2011), who, in her analysis of traffic in women and what she terms the 'political economy of sex',

argues that while the exchange of women between men can be an analytically powerful concept in that it places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology, the central problem is that:

women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges—social organization. (Rubin, 2011)

Historically, the *Órfãs d'el-Rei* (Orphans of the King) are studied as a mere statistic – one of the measures taken by the then rulers as a means of political expansion and cultural dissemination. But what the experiences of the orphans provide readers with are unparalleled angles into the Portuguese maritime expansion, displacement, and cultural assimilation in India.

The Novel – An Overview

Da Índia, com amor is a work of fiction that narrates the journey of two young women, Joana and Violante, the so-called *Órfãs d'el-Rei* (orphans of the king), who are transported from Lisbon to Goa, as part of the Portuguese Maritime Expansion via the *Carreira da Índia*². The work provides the reader with the atmospheres and emotions of a vast panel of the presence of the Portuguese in Goa, at the time of their affirmation in the Orient. (Nery, 2012) While it begins with a first-hand narration of the experiences at sea, most of the work revolves around the cultural assimilation the protagonists must go through in Goa, India, as part of their new duties, be it social and religious conformity, or gender-based subordination.

The novel is written in a first-person narrative style, wherein the protagonist, along with a group of other women, is transported to Goa, India, via sea, as part of the Portuguese Empire's political maritime expansion. The reader is soon given to understand that the novel, which is divided into multiple chapters, is actually a collection of letters that the protagonist has written to her lover, who she leaves back in Portugal, with the futile and unrealistic hope of meeting him again. Throughout the novel, the reader is introduced to a number of female characters. However, Nery focuses on two – Joana (the protagonist), and Violante. The two central female characters offer the reader two different perspectives of feminism, which portray the wide scope of this line of thought. Violante is an outspoken, clever and

overtly beautiful young lady, who always knows what to do in any given situation. Joana looks up to her, and is always seeking her guidance. When it comes to choosing a suitor for marriage, however, Violante opts for a man who, as Nery puts it, is less probable to be the man of her dreams, but one of convenience, perhaps one that would provide her with a comfortable life. Nery shocks the reader with a character that is so outgoing and sharp-witted, yet one that makes choices that are less than what the others would expect. Joana recounts, “*Mas a minha companheira em tudo me surpreende*” (Nery 2012: 111) [But my companion surprises me in every aspect.]

Joana, the protagonist, on the other hand, is a soft-spoken, inhibited, yet astute lady, who had been convent-trained in Portugal, and bestowed with all the virtues of being a ‘good wife’. Joana attracted her suitors with a heavy dowry, and is married to a soldier, who according to her, is at least thirty-five years older than what he says he is. (Nery 2012: 126) For Joana, however, he is the most tolerable under the circumstances of having a lover back in her fatherland.

Feminist Elements

Nery, in her fictional work, takes the reader on an adventure via the *Carreira da Índia*, through the experiences of Joana, Violante, and a number of other female characters like D. Iria, João and Giomar. While a number of culturally significant themes are discussed, a handful of feminist elements function as shockers, for 16th century accounts. The key concepts of choice and care in Feminist Theory, as given by Hughes (2002), are discussed in this section, relating the works of Nery (2012) to feminist thought. Further, concepts such as polyamory, patriarchy, and racial hierarchy are also examined.

The option to choose is often looked at as a luxurious commodity. While individuals are, in theory, free to select the most suitable action they desire, from the given options, as Hughes (2002) argues, “(...) no account is taken of the gendered construction of self-interest”. She goes on to affirm that women who assert their self-interest risk transgressing norms of femininity. (Hughes, 2002)

These women often find themselves in difficult situations, having to choose between being a ‘good’ woman who takes care of her family, or one that is career-oriented or self-centered. Citing the work of Davies (1991), Hughes adds that men have greater opportunities for discourses on autonomy and choice than women, for whom the same is both tenuous and ambivalent. (Hughes) In the

chapter titled *Mulheres de Goa (Women of Goa)*, Nery recounts the story of a woman who leaves behind her royal inheritance in Portugal, to be with the man she loves, in Goa – an act that could only be scandalous and frowned upon at that time. Nery writes:

Ela própria nos falou de D. Francisca de Vilhena, que, tendo tido forte paixão por D. Fernando de Seiva, abandonou com algum escândalo o seu alto estado de dama do paço real e veio com ele para a Índia (...) (Nery 2012: 58)

[She herself spoke of D. Francisca de Vilhena, who, having a strong passion for D. Fernando de Seiva, abandoned, in a scandalous manner, her high rank of being a dame at the royal palace, and came to India with him.]

While the *órfãs d'el-Rei* were typically transported to Goa to be married to the Portuguese soldiers or to members of the Goan elite in the then colony, one has to acknowledge the concept of choice, or rather, the lack thereof. Joana, being a strong-willed character herself, must ultimately give up the hope of returning to her fatherland, Portugal, and the partner who she so religiously writes to, in order to be married to one of her suitors. In a political climate that is guided by strong inter-community powerplay, how, then, would one perceive the social autonomy of Nery's characters? Feminist research has shown that women are primarily seen as caregivers, and are responsible for it in a given social structure. As Kaplan (1992) states:

Relationality is the key element of the American approach to psychology of women. It distinguishes a uniquely female connectedness that contrasts with male individuality and separateness. (Kaplan, 1992)

As primary caregivers, women are often expected to carry out familiar duties of child-rearing and home-making. The aforementioned concept of choice, if dared to be toyed with, would lead to a breakdown of the patriarchal social structure. Hughes highlights the work of Gilligan (1982), who argues that in this context, women are faced with a moral dilemma caused by conflicting responsibilities. She states that "The ideal goal is to meet obligations and responsibilities to others without sacrificing our own needs." (Gilligan, 1982) However, when these responsibilities (like those of child-rearing) are not shared by male counterparts, women are often left helpless, deemed as either selfish or unbothered. The concept of putting oneself and one's needs first are illustrated by Nery in the chapter *Acabada a guerra, preparam-se*

os casamentos (As the war ends, the wedding preparations begin). Nery touches upon the theme of divorce, which is looked down upon, as the caretaker of the *órfãs* is 'inconvenienced' by the separation of one of the women from her husband, who was not without his own sinful acts, and who, sadistically, enjoyed the fact that his own friends would sexually abuse her.

D. Iria, muito incomodada com o caso de Ana de Freitas, uma órfã d'el-rei, casada de pouco tempo e já separado do marido por sentença de divórcio a seu favor, por ser ele homem de muitos pecados, tirando prazer de seus amigos molestarem a esposa (...) (Nery 2012: 101)

[D. Iria, very upset about the case of Ana de Freitas, an orphan of the king, who had been married for a short time and had already been separated from her husband by a divorce decree in her favor, because he was a man of many sins, taking pleasure in his friends molesting his wife (...)]

The universally patriarchal idea of women having to be family-oriented, and withstanding any and every obstacle that comes their way is illustrated here, wherein Nery portrays the generationally different attitudes to this occurrence. According to Sheff (2005), "Polyamory is a form of relationship in which people have multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective partners", and while Cardoso et al (2009) claim that this might be a sexist man's dream, feminist theories of choice would argue that it is the right to equality that makes polyamory a women's concept as well. Feminism has long been concerned with relationships – and especially with how women seem to be framed mostly as part of a relationship, as caregivers, and hardly if ever that relationship and care is actually the care for the self. (Cardoso et al, 2009)

Da Índia, com amor is a collection of letters written by Joana to her lover in Portugal, as she travels from Lisbon to Goa, in the quest for her husband. During the maritime journey, the reader is emotionally hooked on to the longing – the feeling of *saudade*³ – that Joana feels for her lover but once in Goa, she is met with an eligible suitor, Gaspar de Noronha, who she ends up marrying. During this time, Nery notes,

Com mais agrado do que eu desejaria, aceitei a saudação de Gaspar de Noronha e mostrei o meu interesse em continuar a ouvi-lo. Qual a donzela que não gosta de ser olhada com admiração e afeto? (Nery 2012: 125)

[With more pleasure than I would have liked, I accepted Gaspar de Noronha's greeting and showed my interest in continuing to listen to him. What maiden doesn't like to be looked at with admiration and affection?]

Joana continues to narrate her experiences in India to her long-lost love in Lisbon, despite being married to Gaspar, and in these narrations, never fails to communicate her continued longing for him, and for their togetherness. Nery brings us a character that, although is meant to belong to the XVI century, seems to be ahead of her time. Walby (1989) defines patriarchy as a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. In a highly feminist work like *Da Índia, com amor*, how, then, do patriarchal notions slip in? In the chapter titled *No Diwali, Joana honra seu marido* (On the occasion of Diwali, Joana venerates her husband), Nery provides the reader with a religious occurrence that takes place in Goa, during the Hindu festival of Diwali. Joana is guided by the house-help, Jaoá, to carry out certain Hindu rituals. Belonging to the Catholic faith, she quickly refuses to adhere to the ritual of lighting lamps near the *tulsi*⁴ plant outdoors: to her, the idea of venerating a plant is unfathomable; something she believes would be punishable in her own faith. However, when Jaoá goes ahead to venerate and honour Gaspar de Noronha, Joana's husband, Joana is quick to follow and join in the rituals. She then questions her own actions, wondering if her own Christian faith would not be equally disappointed, that she so readily venerated a man.

Também não acendi luzes à volta da casa defronte dos *tulsi*, pois honrar assim uma planta me pareceu ato de feitiçaria que na minha terra seria punido pela Igreja. Não sei se honrar um homem da maneira como o fiz não seria punido também. (Nery 2012: 128)

[Neither did I illuminate the lights around the house in front of the *tulsi*, because honouring a plant in this way seemed to me to be an act of witchcraft, that, in my land, would be punishable by the Church. I don't know whether honouring a man, the way I did, wouldn't be punishable too.]

While Joana's choice to refuse to join Jaoá in the worship near the *tulsi* is a strong indication of her refusal to adhere to another religion's ritualistic norms, she subconsciously conforms to the universal patriarchal idea of worshipping a man - the head of the family. Traditionally, the Indian family structure, being patriarchal in nature

(albeit changing in recent times), solicits the honouring of males, in the various social roles they play – as a father, brother, etc. – on various religious and culturally significant occasions. Ribeiro Machado (2017) argues that through this narrative, Joana demonstrates a type of cultural assimilation with regard to certain local customs and rituals performed by Indian women, especially the ones of honouring the males of the community.⁵ (Ribeiro Machado, 2017)

Women's writings offer novel angles to pre-existing notions of history. Women's writings under colonialism tap into unique, unheard-of narratives that question one's perception of gender and race relations. Nery illustrates this in the chapter *Quem viu Goa não precisa de ver Lisboa* (He who sees Goa need not see Lisbon), wherein the wife of a nobleman struts around with 'an army of slaves' – one for each menial function. Nery goes on to describe the lady's behaviour, that of a queen, who is dismissive of her female slaves.

Entra a mulher de um conhecido fidalgo de Goa, seguida de um exército de escravas (...) Sentada na missa como uma rainha, deixa a escrava abaná-la. (Nery 2012: 60)

[The wife of a well-known nobleman from Goa enters, followed by an army of slave girls (...) Sitting at the Holy Mass like a queen, she lets the slave girl fan her.]

There is an interesting phenomenon that Nery depicts here, wherein Violante, on observing this occurrence, learns that she too, in the near future, would have the right to demand the services of perhaps her own army of slaves, the ones that would be purchased after her marriage to a nobleman.

Nos olhos de Violante não vejo reprovação, sim o brilho de aprender. Ela já sabe pedir com muito à-vontade os serviços das escravas (...), e a ser aquilo que certamente esperam de nós nossos futuros maridos, que nos comprarão muitos escravos. (Nery 2012: 60)

[I don't see reproach in Violante's eyes, but the sparkle of learning. She already knows how to ask for the services of slaves with great ease (...) and to be what our future husbands will surely expect of us, who will buy us many slaves.]

Apart from being trafficked for functional purposes, such as the aforementioned marriages, as well as for slavery and prostitution, Polónia (2017) argues that the role of women goes much further, to act as go-betweens in empire building. She states:

As for the Eastern societies, elite women in local courts seem to have exercised economic as well as political power. This depended on the role of women in local societies, heterogeneous as they could be. (Polónia, 2017)

Nery makes references to a number of women, both local and western, holding varying hierarchical positions in society. In an Indian social structure that is heavily stratified, it becomes evident, then, that attempts would be made, on the part of women, to portray race-based superiority. Ghose (1998) posits that “In the case of women travellers to India, very rarely do we find in their texts a challenge to colonial inequality.” (Ghose) She adds that in Dea Birkett’s work, *Spinsters Abroad*, it is argued that women travellers often exploited racial inequality to realize their own personal project of freedom. Birkett uses the term ‘Honorary Males’ to refer to these women who desired to enjoy the privileges of race in colonialism.

Conclusion

While conventional narratives focus on the male perspective of events, it is crucial to focus on the untold stories – the narratives of marginalized communities. Women’s travel writing offers fresh perspectives into historical events, giving readers novel views into occurrences that were once seen as having only a single facet. Historically, during the Portuguese Maritime Expansion, the transportation and lived experiences of the *Órfãs d’el-Rei* focus primarily on the statistics involving the new cultural hybrids that would populate the so-called ‘Rome of the Orient’.

Júlia Nery’s work, albeit fictional, narrates the first-hand, personal experiences of the *Órfãs d’el-Rei*, on the *Carreira da Índia*. The narratives of Joana and Violante offer new insights into the niche that is feminist literature under colonialism. The novel delves into feminist themes of choice and care, as developed by Hughes (2002), as well as modern, unconventional ideas such as polyamory, while illustrating the still deeply entrenched ideas of patriarchy, through themes of racial and sexual subordination in colonial Goa. The novel, an ample fictional resource of cultural assimilation under displacement, illustrates the various roles undertaken by Portuguese women in colonial Goa, through the adventures of Joana and Violante, providing the reader with an insider’s view on the thoughts and desires of this socially stratified section.

Notes

1. “É fato natural nas sociedades em formação, como era a do Brasil por meados do primeiro século, a falta de mulheres; entenda-se, no caso de mulheres brancas, porque daquelas [sic] da terra, das chamadas índias . . . havia sobras, e delas usaram e abusaram os colonos” (Retrieved from Rosenthal, 2016; Translated from the original Portuguese to English)
2. *Carreira da Índia* is a portuguese term to refer to the sea voyages made between Lisbon and Goa.
3. *Saudade* is a Portuguese word for which there exists no exact translation in English or any other language. It encapsulates the bitter feeling of longing and yearning for an entity that is either out of reach, or perhaps, inexistent at the indicated time.
4. The tulsi is a sacred plant in Hindu tradition.
5. “Joana já dá mostras da assimilação de alguns costumes locais e do confronto de algumas práticas das mulheres indianas, sobretudo relacionadas aos rituais de sedução das mulheres gentis sobre os homens.” (Translated from the original Portuguese to English)
6. All translations from Portuguese to English are self-translated.

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