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MARIA AND NATALINA: THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST BLACK WOMEN IN THE WORK: “OLHOS D’ÁGUA” BY CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO

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Abstract: Gender violence, present in Conceição Evaristo's literature, dialogues with situations experienced daily by black women, belonging to a less favored social class. In the short stories "Maria" and "How many children did Natalina have?" the trajectory of black protagonists who are victims of sexual, verbal, physical violence and femicide is followed. This way, the present work proposes to discuss the representation of violence against black women from the narratives of Conceição Evaristo. The research is bibliographic in nature, thus seeking a dialogue with feminist theories, such as Hooks (2015); Saffioti (2004) and Pateman (1993). Based on the analyses, it was observed that the protagonists of Evaristian short stories were violated by issues related mainly to gender, race and class.

Keywords: Violence. Genre. Black woman.

INTRODUCTION

The historicity of black women shows that, many of them, keep physical marks of a period of slavery, as well as psychological marks of fear, prejudice, silence and oppression. Many also had to learn to deal from a very early age with the thin line between life and death. Because, when trafficked from their countries, in the holds of slave ships, not all managed to survive until their final destination. Furthermore, sometimes the only option/solution for their children not to be enslaved was to kill them at an early age. Resist is the word that is part of the history and experience of many black women.

The gender violence that pervades the narratives of *Olhos d'água* are diverse, also showing that the patriarchal discourse is still quite strong and that women, mostly black women, are the ones who are vulnerable to multiple forms of violence, such as such as the racial, sexist and classist.

Through an omniscient narrator, it is possible to understand the daily life of black

women who work as maids or who run away from home because they choose not to have an abortion. In addition to these types of violence suffered, perceived at first, others still appear and can cause deeper marks or even lead to death. The stories that will be analyzed address various biases of violence and show how much sexist, racist and patriarchal discourses, unfortunately, are still perpetrated in Brazilian society.

NATALINA: THE MANY FACES OF VIOLENCE

Feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2015), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) report the existence of a term that contributes to the assertion that black women are victims of violence not only because they belong to the female gender, but also, due to variables related to the race and class to which these subjects belong. The term that is used by black feminists is called intersectionality. This is used with the aim of discussing that there are inseparable variables to address the oppression of black women, the main ones being: gender, race and class.

In the stories that will be analyzed, this triad is of great importance, since they are women, black people and favela residents, that is, when ranking gender, race and class, it is possible to perceive that these characteristics make up the base of the pyramid, and they are also what give the necessary support for the existence of the top.

When it comes to black women, they also often live at the mercy of public policies, which the Constitution claims to be everyone's right, but are restricted to a few. For example, security is precarious in regions that are not considered dangerous, however, the lack of security in favelas is even more acute. However, the absence of security, health, sanitation and education are naturalized, considered "normal" in certain urban spaces

that are marginalized.

Thinking of black women, far from naturalizations and stereotypes, Conceição Evaristo builds characters such as Natalina, the young woman who becomes pregnant at thirteen but chooses not to have an abortion. Because of this, she decides to run away from home and, mainly, from Sá Praxedes, a lady known for making powerful teas for women to have abortions:

He had to escape from Sá Praxedes. He won the avenue, he won other streets. He hid as far away from home as possible. He gained other friends as well. One day, together with another girl-woman who was also expecting a child, he took a train even further away. And she sighed in relief. Sá Praxedes would never take it. (...) She managed to escape from Sá Praxedes. She didn't want the child, but she also didn't want him to be eaten by the old woman (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 45).

Natalina, a girl who had become a woman at an early age, and contradicts sexist discourses that claim that every woman has a maternal instinct – therefore, it explains how much they are harassed when they abandon a child, while men do not carry this guilt and much less the obligation to be a present father – having to care for and protect that child while still in the womb and, especially, after it is born. In Evaristo's short story, the character does not want to have an abortion, but that does not mean that she wants this child, because at birth she gives the boy to a nurse while still in the maternity ward. This also happens with Natalina's other children. The second, for example, she leaves with the child's father:

When the talk ended and he looked at Tonho, the young man was crying and laughing. He hugged Natalina and repeated happily that he was going to have a child. That they would form a family. Natalina gained new concern. She didn't want to be with anyone. She didn't want any family. She didn't want a child. When Toinzinho was born, she and Tonho

had already settled everything. She liked him a lot, but she didn't want to stay with him. Tonho cried a lot and returned to his homeland, never understanding Natalina's refusal of what he thought was the way for a woman to be happy. **One house, one man, one son...** He came back taking with him the son that Natalina did not want (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 46 – excerpt that was highlighted by us).

The second child, Natalina, also didn't want to, because of that, she also leaves her partner. According to the patriarchal discourse and the sexual contract itself analyzed by Pateman (1993), there are ways to control motherhood, which are also discussed by Saffioti, "One of the core elements of patriarchy resides exactly in the control of female sexuality, in order to ensure the wife's fidelity to her husband" (SAFFIOTI, 2004, p. 49). Based on these assumptions, it is clear that Natalina subverts these concepts and naturalizations, because for the second time she abandons her son and the man who claimed to love him. Natalina was the owner of her body, she didn't want to be attached to labels, especially to a commitment, which was marriage.

According to Pateman (1993), from the moment the children appear in the marriage, the man holds more power in the relationship, because this way, he assures his wife even more. Female subjection and male domination are present in marriage, depriving women of rights, especially when they become mothers. For these reasons, Natalina subverts what is said by the patriarchy and runs away from all these existing rules. But, to what extent does this character subvert? How long does Natalina own her body? Because, at a certain point, this woman becomes a surrogate mother, in the house where she worked as a maid, "She and her husband had already talked. She was just the maid making a child for the boss. They looked a little like each other. Natalina just had the blackest skin" (EVARISTO, 2015, p.

47).

From that pregnancy Natalina experienced adverse situations, especially after the child was born. Because during pregnancy she was treated well because she is expecting her employers' child, but after the child's birth, "Natalina almost died. She had empty breasts, no trace of milk to nurse the other's child. To her own relief she was forgotten by both" (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 48). The fact that the protagonist was forgotten by the family of the child she had borne is related to the issue of her body no longer being important to those bosses, as the essential was already with them, the child. Therefore, Natalina leaves that residence and is a victim of physical and sexual violence:

The man got out of the car and violently threw it to the ground; then he untied her hands and ordered her to pet him. Natalina, between hatred and fear, obeyed everything. At the time, almost at the time of orgasm, the man ripped the blindfold off her eyes. She was shaking, her body, her head were as if they were going to burst with pain. The dark night did not allow her to see the man's face. He came like an enraged horse on top of her (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 50).

In this excerpt, a rape scene in which Natalina is a victim can be observed, it is possible to observe violence, which, as Marilena Chauí addresses, "By violence we understand a determined realization of power relations, both in terms of social classes and in interpersonal terms" (CHAUÍ, 1985, p. 35). In this case, power relations occur in the literal sense, as the man uses his physical strength and male power to sexually abuse the girl.

Natalina showed no reaction, but the propagated patriarchal discourse about men exercising domination over women makes rapists think they have the right to abuse the female body. However, the unexpected happens after the abuse, "The movement was fast. The shot was accurate and so close

that Natalina thought she was killing herself too. She ran away. She kept everything just for her" (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 50). The fact that the victim reacted violently to the rape deconstructs what is natural, in relation to the woman, who has a fragile body and who "accepts" extreme situations of violence because she has less physical strength than men. According to Saffioti, "Women are 'amputee', above all in the development and use of reason and in the exercise of power. They are socialized to develop docile, agreeable and appeasing behaviors" (SAFFIOTI, 2004, p. 35). As the researcher points out, women are not expected to engage in aggressive behavior, such as, for example, murdering the person who violates her. The fact that Natalina kills her tormentor demystifies the docility preached to women for a long time.

The conclusion of the short story leads to an attempt to answer the question present in the title "How many children did Natalina have?". From the rape she had been victim of, she was expecting a child, this was really her son, "Now, quite recently, she had left another city running away from the accomplice of a man she had killed. She knew it was dangerous there, but she was glad. She would soon bear a child. A son who was conceived in the fragile limits of life and death" (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 50). The outcome of the narrative breaks with the horizons of expectation, but contributes to several questions related to the text. Perhaps from this passage it can be concluded that Natalina had only one child, the one born of a rape. This child is only the daughter of the young woman, as the one who generated her was murdered, so she will not have to share the baby with anyone else. It was a son who would not have paternal characteristics, only those of Natalina.

DISCOURSES OF POWER: PATRIARCHY, MACHISMO AND RACISM

The stories that make up: “*Olhos d’água*” transit through various themes, always bringing black characters as protagonists. Mostly women, as in the story “Maria”, in it, the main character with the same name as the story is a maid, mother of three children, from the favela and black. Based on these characteristics, it is possible to imagine the daily struggle of this woman. According to researcher bell hooks:

As a group, Black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the job ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying this position, we bear the burden of sexist, racist and classist oppression (hooks, p. 207, 2015).

It is observed that the discussions of bell hooks in relation to the black woman can be identified in the story under analysis, as the main character is a maid, dependent on public transport to return home and the price of the bus ticket worries her a lot, “You really had to get used to the walk. The ticket price was increasing so much! In addition to fatigue, the heavy bag. The day before, on Sunday, there was a party at the mistress’s house. She took home the remains” (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 39). This is a woman in conditions of extreme poverty, because in addition to working even on the weekend, she took leftovers from her boss’s party to her children, because the money received would already have another purpose, “The two youngest children had a lot of flu. I needed to buy syrup and that medicine to unclog my nose. She would also buy a can of Toddy” (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 39). In the excerpt, in addition to making explicit the class in which this woman belongs, it can be observed that she is a woman who provides for the home, where there is father absence.

Maria is a woman marked by diverse forms of violence, from the moment she waits at the bus stop to the moment she is the victim of a domestic accident at her workplace, “The palm of one of her hands hurt. She had suffered a cut, right in the middle, while she was cutting the ham for her mistress. What a Thing! Laser knife cuts to life!” (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 40). The pain provoked by the laser knife cut in Maria does not compare with the situations experienced by her on a daily basis, at home, at work, on the bus.

Even in the face of all the difficulties, the woman imagined that she could rest a little on the bus until her stop arrived. However, when getting on public transport, a young man pays for her ticket and she realizes that he is the father of her eldest son. Her ex-partner questions are several, “Have you had other... other children? The woman lowered her eyes as if asking for forgiveness. She had two more children, but she didn’t have anyone either. She stayed, only from time to time, with one or another man. It was so hard to be alone!” (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 40). At this point in the narrative, it is confirmed that Maria was responsible for the maintenance of her home.

After a long dialogue with Maria the father of her child takes action, “This time he whispered a little louder. She, still not listening properly, guessed what he was saying: a hug, a kiss, affection for her son. And soon after, he got up quickly, drawing the gun” (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 41). At the time of the robbery, it becomes evident why Maria did not continue in this relationship, because in the face of this situation, the protagonist was a woman who worked to survive and support her children, that is, she led an honest life. This situation and similar ones that occur daily in the environment that the character lives in and leads her to think about it, mainly, in the face of the assault, “Maria was very afraid. Not the burglars. **Not from death, but from life.** He

had three children. The oldest, eleven years old, was the son of the man who was there in front of him with a gun in his hand. My God, what would your children's lives be like?" (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 41 – excerpt highlighted by us). Maria's fear of life can be interpreted as her concern for the future of her children. What future will this child have who has a father who robs and a mother who cannot be there because she has to work? Will it be that when these children grow up, racism will have ceased in Brazil? Therefore, this mother's fear in relation to life, because the lives of her children were also vulnerable in the oppressive society of black subjects.

In view of the situation experienced by Maria on public transport, the circumstances worsen, as she was not robbed, "Her ex-man's accomplice passed by her and did not ask for anything. If there were other robbers?" (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 41). The fact that Maria was not robbed and a few minutes before the incident she was talking to one of the robbers resonates with the passengers, because they understand that she was in partnership with those men.

Someone shouted that that naughty whore out front knew the robbers. Mary was scared. She didn't know any robbers. She knew the father of her first child. She knew the man who had been hers and whom she still loved so dearly. She heard a voice: *Naughty black woman, maybe she was hanging out with both of them.* Another voice from the back of the bus added: *Calm down people! If she had been with them, she would have gone down too.* (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 41-42).

In this excerpt, it can be seen how much the patriarchal discourse still reflects on society, as the protagonist is a victim of verbal violence, racism and later femicide for having talked on the bus with the father of her child. The "intimate" conversation that took place between the two sharpened the passengers' hatred towards Maria. But if she

had been a white woman from a favorable social class, would the passengers have judged her as an accomplice?

In addition to the patriarchal discourse, race and class were other variables that contributed to the following outcome, "Beat this person! Beat this person!!" Maria was bleeding from her mouth, nose and ears. The bag had burst and the fruit was rolling across the floor. Would boys like melon?" (EVARISTO, 2015, p. 42). The femicide that occurred with the protagonist also demonstrates that this type of violence does not only occur in the family or intra-family environment. There are growing crimes in the country and the victims are mostly black women from slums.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The black woman from a less favored social class is the victim of different stigmas by the patriarchal, sexist and oppressive society, which considers itself entitled to dominate the class, gender and race considered subordinate. These women have their bodies naturalized by some, exploited by others and in the midst of so much symbolic, physical and psychological violence, they are made visible through literature, by black women writers, who enunciate "fictionalized truths", a term used by Evaristo herself, when referring to its literature.

In Conceição Evaristo's literature and, mainly, in the stories analyzed, it was possible to observe how to criticize the condition of marginalized peoples through literature. His denunciation through the fictional text demonstrates a need to listen to the emerging voices, which before spoke from the holds of slave ships, now scream and claim for a fairer society from the alleys of the favelas.

However, Conceição Evaristo's narratives lead to a reflection on the condition of black women in Brazilian society. In addition to showing and denouncing, through fiction,

gender violence that is growing every day in the country. Raising several questions, as well as those that appear in the title of the first narrative under analysis: Why does the author seek an outcome that does not dialogue with reality with regard to rape? Why does that character who did not have the “maternal instinct” accept the fruit of a rape with

open arms? In which moments of Natalina’s narrative was her body violated? Can the protagonist be considered subversive? About the story “Maria” the following question can be asked, accompanied by an answer: How many Marias cross the alleys, take crowded buses and leave children alone to provide for the household? There are countless!

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