THE SUBALTERN'S VOICE IN THE LITERATURE OF MARCELINO FREIRE

A VOZ SUBATERNA NA LITERATURA DE MARCELINO FREIRE

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the representation of the subaltern in the literature of the Brazilian writer Marcelino Freire. We argue that Freire portrays the marginalized with a radical individuality, speaking for themselves and rejecting paternalism. We advance this interpretation by way of a contextualized reading of some of the short-stories present in two of his books: "Contos Negreiros" and "Rasif – mar que arrebenta". Analytical categories from postcolonial, subaltern and libertarian theories are used to show how Freire mixes historical context, social disparities and individual motivation of subaltern, thus creating a displacement of the hegemony and agency of the marginalized.

Keywords: Marcelino Freire; subaltern; periphery**.**

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa a representação do subalterno na literatura do escritor brasileiro Marcelino Freire. Argumenta-se que Freire retrata os marginalizados com uma individualidade radical, falando por si mesmos e rejeitando paternalismo. Nós avançamos esta interpretação por meio de uma leitura contextualizada de alguns dos seus contos presentes em dois livros: "Contos Negreiros" e "Rasif - Mar Que arrebenta". Categorias analíticas pós-coloniais, subalterna e teorias libertárias são usadas para mostrar como Freire mistura contexto histórico, disparidades sociais e a motivação individual dos subalternos, criando assim um deslocamento da hegemonia e da ação dos marginalizados.

Palavras-chave: Marcelino Freire; subaltern; periferia.

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INTRODUCTION

Narratives that address to poverty or to those who are immersed in a context of precariousness almost invariably adopt a tone of protest which can sound a little aggressive for us - citizens who are inserted in the institutionalized society. To outsiders, it is a mechanism of resistance and attack - a reaction to segregation and / or social inequality.

The "violent speech" frequently subverts educated norms of language, which can even "disturb" our eyes and ears, as well as profanities and slangs - idiolects that are part of the culture of the ghettos and of the poor people, often wrongly sorted as 'absents of culture'. In this sense, word (literature) gains strength precisely because it represents a subjugated culture repressed by the *Status Quo* and banished from what we define as "mother tongue" – a representative language of the social group to which we belong.

The language of those who have no voice is hurtful; bastard and rejected, and even when acquires materiality through literature is not recognized as such - at most, it is labeled as "subliteratura" or propagandist literature. However, this language insists on emerging in our society and his use has been increasing specially because of the different perspectives offered by Subaltern and Cultural Studies, which is a tool to recognize various social nuances of our own society. This "bastard language" destabilizes the official discourse, even though it relies on existing elements of language and the official media. It is, therefore, a narrative of residues whose importance is expressed by Richard Nelly's words:

> Only a precarious narrative of residue was able to represent the decomposition of the general perspectives, the centered visions, the entire frames: a narrative that only "let hearing remnants of languages, retails of signs", attaching confused strings and inopportune words (RICHARD, 2002, p. 65).

In opposition to the immaculate speech of winners based on logic and unilateralism, an unorthodox strategy may be effective. Using a hybrid discourse which deviates from the hegemonic media, the story of the "voiceless" people requires an artifice to emerge and to be finally noticed.

In this context – the subaltern voice and the narrative of residues - we would like to study the literature of Marcelino Freire.

MARCELINO FREIRE

Despite recent improvements, Brazil remains one of the most unequal countries in the world with a huge poor population and precarious coverage of basic services like sewage (BAER, 2008). This harsh social reality cannot pass unnoticed and is commonly present in Brazil's contemporary cultural production. Within these lines

of representing disparities, the literature of Marcelino Freire appears as a unique production. In his short-stories, the subaltern is the majority of the protagonists, showing complete agency, pursuing their own self-interest and promoting a displacement of the otherness. The subaltern is presented as agents of free will that refuse paternalism and seek an auto-determination. Sometimes with radical individuality, with a behavior that gets closer to a libertarian philosophy. We proceed by making a contextualized reading of selected stories from two of Freire's books, and show how the subaltern appear as agent of his own life.

Orality is a major mark of Freire's production and is explained by the fusion of the rural rhythmics of the Northeast region, where he had grown up, and the urban landscape where he lived later. Freire was born in Sertânea, in the backlands of Pernambuco. He first migrated to the capital of the state, Recife, where he took classes in creative writing with the writer Raimundo Carrero, a disciple of Ariano Suassuna, in the Armorial Movement. Freire later followed the common path of so many inhabitants of the poor Northeast and went to the economic dynamic and cultural hegemonic state of São Paulo. He passed, thus, the double migration that characterizes many from the backlands of the Northeast: first to the capital of the State and later to the rich Southeast. In this journey, he acknowledges his formative years' different influences, like the popular music of Luiz Gonzaga and celebrated poets such as Manuel Bandeira.

It is a common feature of his literature the addressing of urban landscape, the text written with an oral rhythm and the fast pace of his short stories. Sometimes they are really short, as Freire is also the organizer of a book called Brazil's 100 shortest tales (*Os cem menores contos brasileiros do século*). He is a prolific writer and an editor of literary magazines and anthologies. His work has already been successfully adapted to the theater and awarded the important prize Jabuti in 2006, in the category of short story for *Contos Negreiros*. This book is very representative of Freire's uniqueness in the literary scene of cotemporary Brazil. In a context that also includes international reactions, his work addresses themes present in post-colonial and subaltern studies, going beyond dichotomies and narrow ideologies. In sum, in Freire's literature there is no question that the subaltern can speak – to address the famous Spivak's essay (1988) and the Gramscian formulation of the subaltern (GRAMSCI, 1996). The marginalized show agency and reject paternalism. We will exemplify that in selected stories from two of his books: *Contos Negreiros* (2005) and *Rasif – Mar que arrebenta* (2008).

A SUBALTERN SPEAKING: SHORT STORIES

The title of "Contos Negreiros" is a reference to the classic long poem of Castro Alves, a romantic poet born in the State of Bahia in 1847. Alves wrote *O Navio Negreiro* denouncing the conditions of the slaves, especially in the transatlantic traffic. He used rhymes, verses and traditional metrical patterns to write an eloquent poetry aimed at raising awareness of the issue of slavery, an institution that was still in place

in Brazil at that time. In the case of Castro Alves, he was a member of the intellectual elite, a law student, addressing an important social issue to persuade his fellows to fight against slavery.

Freire's *Contos Negreiros* tells the story of many of the heirs of these once slaves in Brazil but is not confined to a matter of race or even class. A plethora of social types that could be grouped under the umbrella of subaltern are present, like the slum inhabitants, prostitutes, robbers, homosexuals and indigenous people. Distinguishably, characters in his story want to pursue their own path in life and show full agency. Freire writes in prose, but with a near-perfect oral composition, making the reader feels that his characters are speaking to him. For instance, We will analyze three of these short stories: "Solar dos Príncipes", "Nação Zumbi" and "Vaniclélia".

In the story "Solar dos Príncipes", four guys and a girl, all black, stop in front of an apartment building. In Brazil, especially in big cities, most of the apartment buildings are blocked by high fences with security systems and served by doormen. The doorman at the Prince's Manor-house could only think that either these people are going to perform any service in the building – like mending the elevator – or they represented a threat. However, the group answered that they were recording a documentary and asked him to allow them to enter in the building. Their idea was to enter by surprise in one of the apartments and capture images of how middle class individuals live. They wonder how is to live with a car in the garage, surplus in a bank account, a swimming pool etc. They want to do just like middle class film-directors do at the hills, the Brazilian *favelas*. The hill is open 24 hours, the people who are interviewed talk freely about their lives, with full of spontaneity. The group thought of accomplishing the same, depicting the life of this 'other' – not of the majority poor people, but of this middle class. The doorman warns them that he is going to call the police. And the police arrive while the camera-man jumps into the building. The narrator says that it was not their intention to do the things in a haphazard way, with bullets in the scene. However, it is fine, they needed to improvise. But it was no big deal, he continues, when editing they would cut what they didn't like.

It is a fairly common feature in the Brazilian movie to have film-directors documenting the everyday life of the poor or the low-middle class. To name a couple, we can cite *City of God* and *Edifício Master*, both from 2002 and representative of this line. The first shows the beginning of a slum settlement in Rio de Janeiro and how it evolved within time – with all the socioeconomic problems and oblivion by the State. In the case of *Edifício Master*, the film documents the life of a number of residents in an apartment building in Copacabana. However well intentioned and successful these projects were, the subaltern is still the other, the one which is chosen by the director to be exposed and tell their dramas. *Mutatis mutandis*, Freire's "Solar dos Príncipes" is closer to Sasha Cohen's Borat (released in 2006) in the portrayal of the hegemonic – in the case of the film, the United States – as the other. One caveat on this comparison is needed because the short-story conserves the touch with reality and plausibility, while Borat creates a simulacrum of Kazakhstan in order to document the "U.S and

A". Nonetheless, the comparison holds in the sense of the portrayal of agency by the selection of the subject to be taped and the representation of the hegemonical as the other (MICAHEL, 2008 and WALLACE, 2008). Neofotistos sees Borat as providing anthropological knowledge about America. "Like anthropologists, who often travel long distances trying to understand different cultures, Borat and Azamat arrive in the US and start shooting the film." (NEOFISTOS, 2010, p. 13). Just like the characters in the story, who want to perform their own anthropological work through a film of the life of the middle-class.

As stated, the subaltern is present in Brazil's filmography, but not the way as proposed by Marcelino Freire. This fictitious group of "favelados" plan something very different, to document the middle-class family in their Sunday. The selection of the subject shows the agency of the subaltern, who want to create their own version of how the other lives. They invert the rule, where a middle-class or a truly rich director – like João Moreira Sales – documents and exposes how the poor live and struggle. Albeit this can be done in a way referred as political conscious, it is still the privileged voice who selects the object to film and edit. In Freire's Manor-house, the subaltern choose the object to record and – very significantly – doesn't give up to the difficulties. They prepare, pursue their objective and start recording. The action doesn't go along the planned line however the ultimate power is with the group: the edition of the movie.

In another short-story, "Vaniclélia", a prostitute remembers in a positive manner the foreign clients she used to serve. She is now pregnant by a useless partner, who only exploits her and does not care about the upcoming baby. She thinks to herself about the fate of this baby wishing, in case a girl is born, for the girl to follow her career as a prostitute: "If she is a girl, I will teach her in that way: do it in the port, during the Carnival. At Boa Viagem's sidewalk. With much care to avoid the police discovering the whoring. They might want to participate. One day, I had to fuck with the entire troop of the Police Station. They used me until the dawning of the day. And they even made fun, saying that I should respect the Brazilian men" (FREIRE, 2005, p. 42). The *gringos*, foreigners, respected her and brought the hope of getting married and living abroad with higher quality of life, like what happened to some of her colleagues. She is both criticizing the police and the treatment of women in Brazil, but not her condition as a prostitute.

This story is preceded by another short story named "Os alemães vão à guerra". The expression "go to war" also has the meaning in popular Brazilian Portuguese of going at night looking for partners. The cultural context where both stories are intertwined is the sex tourism that reigned in the Northeast of Brazil, especially during the 1990's. State governments, like of the Pernambuco, started to promote charter flights from countries like Germany. However, under criticism that these flights attracted only working class Germans looking for sex, the flights stopped receiving governmental incentive to operate. This story questions a state that makes itself present by coercion by the police and the notion of Brazilian male identity that subaltern women are forced to "respect."

As a public policy, it is reasonable to target a high income tourist group, as advocated by the critics of the German's charter flight to the Northeast of Brazil. However, the prostitute is speaking on the level of the individual gain. It is the German working class tourist who could promise a different life by marriage or at least by being treated with respect locally. The end of such flights – which horrified the middle class who went to the beaches and saw prostitutes with "gringos" – is of no benefit to the prostitute.

"Nação Zumbi" is a fictionalized monologue of a real police case. The name of the short-story makes reference to the leader of the maroon society of Palmares in the 17th century, Zumbi. He was the most famous leader of the settlement created by runaway slaves that lasted for around a hundred years challenging the slave owners in Brazil's Northeast. Nação Zumbi is also the name of a musical band from Recife which fuses rock with traditional folk rhythms of Pernambuco. Last, the title is also a reference to the idea of a zombie, a walking dead being.

In the impoverished Northeast, in 2003, an international human organ traffic group gathered inhabitants from Recife to buy their kidneys. The inhabitants of Recife flew to South Africa to have their kidneys extracted by an Israeli medical group. The scheme was discovered by the police, and in an international effort the group was dismantled, resulting in the imprisonment of 13 suspects in December of 2003. A worker had his kidney extracted by the Israeli group; he had received the money but as soon as the police discovered, the Justice confiscated it. According to the law of many countries, including Brazil and South Africa, selling human organs is a crime and the government seized the reward for that crime: the payment. This story was thoroughly explored by the local media and resulted in a book by the journalist Julio Ludemir "Rim por Rim." He traced the beginning of the recruitment scheme, the individuals who benefitted from it and the police's operations that led to the end of the Recife-Durban kidney connection. Officialy, 39 people from Pernambuco travelled to South Africa to sell their kidneys. That number includes an English teacher, who with the money bought a house, and a number of other workers who used the money to open small business. In Julio Ludemir's journalistic account, it is clear that the people who sold the kidneys knew what they were doing, were able to negotiate a rise in the amount agreed (LUDEMIR, 2008, p.68) and showed compassion when meeting the people who needed the kidney so much at a point of buying it illegally (LUDEMIR, 2008, p. 85).

And how does Marcelino Freire rewrite this story? He portrays the seller of the kidney complaining about being forbidden to sell his kidney and having lost the opportunity to raise money. He starts by asking: "Isn't the kidney mine?" And he says that, to escape misery he would even accept being made blind. "It is easy to denounce, drop rules and betray. What about it, man? The kidney is not mine, bunch of son of bitch? Of my health no one takes care" (FREIRE, 2005, p. 54-55).

One could say that the protagonist is reasoning in this way just because he lives in poverty and would only seek short-run incentives and easy money. In this reading,

he wants to be exploited because he is trapped in the ideology of the oppressor. In this sense, the arguments of the protagonist would reflect desperate thinking and be an indirect critique of the conditions that led him to do such things. Following this path, the point of view of the character would not be considered as a whole. Instead, his opinions would be treated as non sensical words uttered by someone in desperate need. We propose a different reading. Yes, there is a critique of the social conditions that he lives. But again he criticizes the power of the state, which does not look out for his health has forbidden him to do what he wants with his kidney. The state only makes itself present by coercion – the police arrive and he predicts that out of jealousy they will punch his kidney. And he adds that his action would save the life of a person. He defends selling organs legalization as a way of saving lives.

Although it may sound horrific, the possibility of a market for human organs is not totally dismissible. In fact, a Nobel Prize laureate in economics, Gary Becker, argues in favor of a market for organs. He and his co-author, Julio Jorge Elías, compare the selling of human organs to the criticism that used to be made against paying market wages to the army instead of relying on a forced draft. It used to be said that a paid voluntary army would be filled only with the very poor part of the society – which did not happen. Another criticism that they address is the position that to pay for organs is immoral because it represent the commodification of body parts. However, some countries accept the use of a woman's womb to host the eggs of other women and bear their children. If that is acceptable under the law, "why cannot men and women get paid for selling their organs to save the lives of others?" question the authors (BECKER and ELIAS, 2010). In addition, they defend the ethics behind allowing poor people to sell organs:

> The sale of organs has also been opposed because poor individuals probably would be the main ones who would sell their organs … This argument is disputable on ethical grounds: Should poor individuals be deprived of revenue that could be highly useful to them, especially when their organs might save the lives of persons who desperately need to replace their defective organs? (BECKER and ELIAS, 2010, p. 21)

In addition, the current prohibition helps to foster a black market, which ends up benefiting only the wealthier individuals who have access to illegal and risky operations. This character in "Nação Zumbi" reasons in a similar way to a Nobel Prize winner in economics. He wants to be free to take a decision that the State denies him. Let's not underestimate the judgment of the character and his free will by imposing the ideology of the critic toward his arguments. To deny that this is his will is to consider him incapable of making such a decision by himself; it is to argue that he needs the supervision of someone else. That mistake may happen if the reader takes a position that the subaltern can only speak when what he says is in agreement to the (frequently) progressive view of the literary critic, usually against market exchange relations. Thus this reading would consider the subaltern as an inferior being – essentializing him. This is not the case in Marcelino Freire's literature. In fact, the author rebuts the label that he gives voice to the voiceless. In an interview (AGUIAR, 2010, p.3), he

said that is more appropriate to say that the characters are the ones who give voice to his prose – not the other way. In addition, he says that he disagrees with authors who proclaim that they write to save someone. According to him, this redemptive function of literature is closer to a religion than to his literary project.

LIBERTARIANISM AND POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS

We are here closer to a libertarian philosophy – like what was developed by names such as novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand, economist Friedrich Hayek and political scientist Robert Nozick – than to any form of collective political intervention, from the left or the right. In fact, libertarianism has been seen as a major challenge to Marxism (NAVERSON, 1988, p. 1). We are not claiming that Freire is a libertarian writer, but that the characters in his literature can be read very well from a libertarian perspective. Brian Doherty summarizes in this way the libertarian project:

> Libertarians believe either or both that people have a *right* to be mostly left alone do conduct their own affairs inasmuch as they don't harm others, or that things will on balance work out *best* for everyone if they are. They define "work out best" to mean creating the most varied and richest culture and economy. In a sense, that very freedom is part of what constitutes "best" – people will flourish and be happiest to the extent that they are free to choose their own life plans and pursue them as best they are able. In that pursuit, the libertarian believes, people will discover new ways of living, new ways of meeting human needs and desires, even new ways of understanding what it means to be human, that will enrich us all. (DOHERTY, 2007, p. 4-5)

It is an established philosophical thought that defends the highest freedom to individuals, as advanced by philosopher John Stuart Mill in his essay "On liberty." Libertarians see the concentration of power as a menace to individual freedom and government as one of its major threats since it can unite political and economic powers. From this follow that government's sphere of action should be limited preferably to guarantee individual rights. One of the ethical bases for this thought comes from philosopher Immanual Kant, who defended the idea that no one can be forced to be happy according to other's people conception of welfare (KANT, 1991, p. 74).

Another perfect example of rejection of a collective project is from the short-story "Da paz" from Rasif, where a woman says several times that she is not for peace. She decidedly refuses to participate in public demonstrations for peace – such as a peace walk – or pray for it. She does not want to make her sorrow public because it is useless, her dead son would not return. In addition, she refuses to participate justifying that such mobilizations are organized not for or by people like her, but by artists, politicians and sparked by the criminal murder of someone from the middle or rich classes. She refuses to be an extra, as in a movie, in an effort that won't help her.

Freire seems to be faithful to Beverly's definition of subaltern project as a "critique of hegemony and the possibility of a new form of hegemony" (BEVERLY, 1999, p. 49). Freire also provides an answer to Beverly's question: "What would be the point,

after all, of representing the subaltern *as subaltern*?" (BEVERLY, 1999, p. 49). Freire does a literature that puts the subaltern as a protagonist; however, they behave in a very unique way. As Harrison remarks about Marcelino Freire's literature, "Unwilling to be silenced, these subaltern beings offer alternative, as opposed to subjugated, points of view. They may be victims of society's ills, but stripped bare… as they are of innocence, honor, dignity, and even sustenance, they demand – insist upon – visibility and respect" (BEVERLY, 1999, p. 79).

Most of the times, the characters are not complaining about their supposed inferiority in life. They are not asking for protection from a higher force, like the State or Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). They are not there to make the reader feel pity or guilty for their situation. They show spectacular consciousness of their condition and the need of actions to overcome difficulties. In "Roupa Suja", from Rasif, a former laundry shop worker tells the story of how she conquered the love of her life, a rich customer. She resorted to a number of tricks, including Afro-Brazilian deities and putting some money in the pocket of a pair of pants he left for laundry, so they could start a conversation. She overcomes what seems impossible and succeeds in her efforts. At one moment she says: "Maria, this is for you to see how life is like. Pure perseverance. It is not true that people can't mix. We end up spinning in the same machine" (FREIRE, 2008, p. 61). She makes a statement about class mobility in the world by using her own reality: the mixture and rotation provided by the way a washer machine works.

If in Freire's literature the subaltern is not afraid to speak, the fear might come from those within the hegemonical position, who feel that they are losing their privileged status. For instance, a position of insecurity is portrayed in the short story "We speak English", also from Rasif. Here there is a cry from a speaker of the hegemonic language (English) against the intrusion of Arab words and culture. Freire plays with words in Portuguese that have its roots in the long Arabic presence in Iberia and delicate political themes. In fact, even the word Recife – the capital of Pernambuco - has its origin in the Arab, while Pernambuco comes from the indigenous Tupi-Guarani. "Rasif – mar que arrebenta" is a project that recognizes the hibridity of cultures, as the name makes clear. Cultural encounters are depicted as well as the rupture of sexual and criminal norms. On the short story I-no-cen-te (a spelled Innocent), where the author reproduces the reasoning and suffering of a pedophile that claims not guilty, is where perhaps we have the height of this experience of otherness and subalternity in Rasif.

Unlike what is present in some post-modern narratives, Freire does not recreate the history to virtually vindicate a different version, sometimes non-plausible as well as intellectually idealized. Such is the case of Gerald Vizenor's "The Heirs of Columbus", where he inverts the story of the discovery of America by showing a Christopher Columbus as a Mayan descendent. Or "A Estranha Nação de Rafael Mendes" by Brazilian Jewish writer Moacyr Scliar, who claims that there are enormous contributions of the Jews to the Brazilian identity and history, so much that the Brazilian indigenous population of the story is one of the lost tribes of Israel.

That is not the case of Marcelino Freire. His characters seem to be of flesh and blood – and that is one of the reasons that his text adapts so well to the theater (LIMA, 2010, p.1). The actions are either based on true historical motives or are quite probable. They are subalterns who speak, and aloud – so the rest can't say they cannot be heard. However, a Marxist derived critical approach may consider them to be still silenced because they are just reproducing the hegemonical way of thinking. This might occur because the actions of the characters would be measured with a rule that ultimately claim that only a radical transformation of society is to their interest. In this line of approach, everything else is compensatory or bourgeois aspiration. We claim that this reading may be a result of the projection of the critic's own political ideals to the literary representation, leading to the error of saying that the marginalized can't speak when in reality they simply don't say what the critic wants. In this interpretation, the subaltern cannot speak either because he does not have the opportunity or is trapped in the discourse of the hegemony, thus reproducing his material condition. Freire's literature is a case where the subaltern is the protagonist, has agency and the hegemony is displaced. However, this is done with a radical individuality and within the limits of the economic scarcity. In view of this, such literature is better analyzed from a libertarian perspective, which defends the autonomy of individuals, the mutual benefits created by voluntary exchange and is against interventions by the state to assure privileges and maintain the tyranny of the status-quo (FRIEDMAN, 2002, p. 68) or regulate social issues like limiting speech rights, adult-consented sexual practices and drug use.

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