

THE DIAGNOSIS OF BRAZILIAN UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN O CORTIÇO: DOES HYBRIDISM LEAD TO DEGENERATION?

O DIAGNOSTICO DO SUBDESENVOLVIMENTO BRASILEIRO EM O CORTIÇO: HIBRIDISMO LEVA A DEGENERAÇÃO?

Adriana Primo-McKinley¹

ABSTRACT: Since 1822, racial and ethnic diversity predominated discussions related to Brazilian national identity. In the literary field, racial mixture dominated intellectual discourses and influenced the literary production. Writers were grappled with Brazil's global position and vulnerability in relation to modernization. For this reason, Brazilian intellectuals attempted to determine the "supposed" causes of the Brazilian backwardness. Aluísio de Azevedo, one of the more prominent writers of Brazilian Naturalism, also seemed to be concerned with the Brazilian underdevelopment, as it is evident in one of his most important work, *O cortiço*. In this context, the aim of this study is to analyze what would be the cause of the Brazilian underdevelopment. As a conclusion, it can be stated that there is a strong connection between economic development and the white race, as well as between underdevelopment and miscegenation, represented respectively by Portugal and the white male characters and Brazil and its female hybrid characters. The couples Romão/Betoleza and Jerônimo/Rita symbolize the old colonial order showing that despite the fact Brazil has gained its political independence from Portugal, the colonial economic ideals persist.

Keywords: Naturalism; Brazil; women; hybridity

RESUMO: Desde 1822, a diversidade racial e étnica predominou nos debates relacionados com a identidade nacional brasileira. No âmbito literário, a mistura racial dominou os discursos intelectuais e influenciou a produção literária. Os escritores da época começaram a buscar as causas do atraso econômico do Brasil em relação aos países desenvolvidos. Aluísio de Azevedo, um dos mais proeminentes escritores do naturalismo brasileiro, também parecia preocupado com o subdesenvolvimento brasileiro. Isso se nota em *O cortiço*, uma das narrativas mais importantes de Azevedo. Neste contexto, o objetivo deste estudo é analisar o que para Azevedo poderiam ser as possíveis causas do subdesenvolvimento brasileiro. Se conclui que em *O cortiço* existe uma forte conexão entre o desenvolvimento econômico do país e a raça branca, assim como existe uma relação entre o subdesenvolvimento e a miscigenação, representados respectivamente por Portugal e os personagens brancos do sexo masculino e pelo Brasil e as personagens femininas mestiças. Os casais Romão/Betoleza/ e Jerônimo/ Rita simbolizam a antiga organização econômico-social colonial demonstrando que apesar do Brasil ser politicamente independente de Portugal o modelo econômico colonial persiste.

¹ Albany State University / adriana.primovincen@gmail.com

Palavras-chaves: Naturalismo; Brasil; mulheres; hibridismo

It's common knowledge that *O cortiço* is an allegory of Brazil in the XIX century. Using the premises of the Naturalism, Aluísio de Azevedo tries to prove that environment and genetics are determinant factors in a man's future. He suggests that hybridity and unrestrained sexuality would result in human deterioration. It is evident the social problems of a capitalist society such as a merciless exploitation of the working class. As a result, there is a social stratification in which it is almost impossible to have mobility between classes. Generally speaking, *O cortiço* presents several social issues of Brazilian society; among them can be highlighted as social stratification, economic development, and national identity.

Brazil's national identity has brought about racial implications since its independence from Portugal. The European philosophies now regard Brazil as an example of "degradation" that results from ethnically mixed people and those that live in tropical environments, as believed by Gobinneu¹. (MARCHANT, 2000, p. 441). In the literary field, this problem has existed for centuries and consequently has not ended with the transition from Romanticism to Naturalism. During the Brazilian Naturalism, which began in 1870 according to historians, racial mixture occupied a major role in the intellectual discourses. The literary writers were also worried about Brazil becoming a part of the world process of modernization. Thus, the Brazilian intellectuals attempted to diagnose the reasons for the Brazilian backwardness.

Two types of discourse are generated in Brazil because of the European political and philosophical foundations. One believes that social classification should be based on the theory of evolution and principles of social Darwinism while the other is embraced by the more affluent, believing in social and racial miscegenation. The former thought process is that racial mixture would result in degeneration and barbarism while the latter holds that the miscegenation would eliminate barbarism and would make Brazil more modern. (MARTINEZ-ECHAZABAL, 1998, p. 30). As a result, it can be stated that the Brazilian intellectuals continued to follow the European ideology, perpetuating the epistemological thesis of the superiority of the latter at the expense of other nations.

In the literary field, these scientific and philosophical theories became the basis for Naturalism in Europe. However, some Brazilians authors, such as Aluísio de Azevedo, challenged some of the precepts of European Naturalism by creating narratives that synthesize the Positivist and Darwinist epistemologies with sensuality. Some social Darwinists of the period published broadly read theories about the decay brought on humans by tropical climates, the inferiority of blacks, and the dissoluteness of the mullattos and other "inferior" peoples to progress or become fully civilized (STEFAN, 1991, p. 45). In this context, this paper will analyze *O cortiço*, one of Azevedo's most important works, which exemplifies the application of the mechanism of natural selection to human beings and the appeal to sensuality and exoticism of characters in their surrounding environment. The study will further focus on the analogies between the countries of Brazil and Portugal as well as the masculine and feminine characters and their role in the underdevelopment of Brazil. This analysis will incorporate a psychoanalytic approach based on Sigmund Freud's and Frantz Fanon's theories and the mechanism of repression/domination established between

the two main couples within the narrative: João Romão and Bertoleza; Jerônimo and Piedad/Jerônimo and Rita Baiana.

In *O cortiço*, the relationship between Bertoleza and Romão reinforces the central theme of improvement of the Brazilian race during the period. Bertoleza was a slave subjected to numerous ways of exploitation and humiliation. She believed that Romão was a man from the superior race. Despite all the suffering and humiliation, she stayed in her “dark condition of a working animal”. Bertoleza, as the narrator clearly states, was subservient to the dominance of the superior race which Romão represented. She was satisfied being in the solitude of her daily labor. According to the narrator, she felt so inferior that she avoided any type of social interaction. Bertoleza was ashamed of herself. For these reasons, she would “curse herself for being who she was. She thought she was a black stain on that bright and clear prosperity” (AZEVEDO, 1986, p. 134). At the same time, João Romão, representing the Portuguese stereotype of superiority, is determined to become extremely rich. He does not surrender to environmental influences, or the corrupting Brazilian nature. After receiving an inheritance, Romão increases this value even further by exploiting the Brazilian people, mainly the slave Bertoleza. When Romão first meets Bertoleza, he tries to gain her confidence. However, he ultimately deceives her by keeping the money she would give to him, money which was to be used to buy her freedom. He forges a letter of freedom to give to her and tells Bertoleza’s blind owner that she has run away. With her money Romão purchases land where he later builds the ‘cortiço’. During this time, Romão and Bertoleza become lovers, but this relationship is never made public. According to the narrator, it was very shameful for Romão to have a relationship with a slave. However, Romão maintains this relationship because of the benefits he could obtain from Bertoleza’s hard work. As the narrator states:

Now, living with João Romão, Bertoleza represented the roles of a cashier, housekeeper, and lover. Though she worked exceedingly hard, she always portrayed a happy face; at four o’clock in the morning, she was already working diligently as she always did, making coffee for the clients and preparing lunch for the stone quarry workers who worked behind the little market where she worked. She swept the house floor, sold items in the tavern when Romão was busy outside; and still managed to make and sell trinkets and other items to customers on the street during the day --- and any free time she had between her regular chores. At night, she worked in the tavern where she fried liver and sardines that Romão would buy in the morning at Fish beach. And yet all that she did was not enough to satisfy Romão (AZEVEDO, 1986, pp. 14-15).²

This quotation clearly states that Bertoleza is continually exploited and humiliated by Romão. It seems that she also believed that Romão was superior to her. Her inferiority complex allows her to accept inhumane conditions which she considers to be ‘normal’. Bertoleza has inculcated “the archetype of the lowest values as represented by the negro” (FANON, 1967, p. 189). She resigns herself to the domination of this superior race and seems satisfied to be able to just breathe during the solitude of her daily hardships. According to the narrator, Bertoleza’s inner being was:

² All translation from *O cortiço* are mine.

Cowardly and submissive like her parents who raised her in captivity. She hid from everyone, even from low class people, because she was ashamed of herself. She cursed herself for being who she was. She was always sad and continually thought of herself as if she were a dark spot, an indecorous stain on that bright and clear prosperity (134).

As Frantz Fanon (1967) has explained in *Black Skin White Mask*, the Cortiço's narrator believes that Bertoleza has internalized racism to her own detriment. She was shaped by the Portuguese view of nonwhite people and as a result, undertakes the European stereotype. After Bertoleza gains her freedom from her previous owner, she subjugates herself by accepting the role of "a beast of burden" instead of fighting to be recognized by Romão and society as both his companion and partner. She perceives herself as evil, ugly, wretched, immoral, and dirty and for these reasons, hides in Romão's shadow because she is not proud of being who she is. Bertoleza thinks she symbolizes a dark side of Romão's soul. She believes she is his antithesis. The white people have inculcated in Bertoleza's mind that they are exactly the opposite of her. They, including Romão, embody brightness, purity, beauty, and morality (AZEVEDO, 1967, p. 190-192). In other words, white European principals have forced an existential deviance on her being. Bertoleza is a "white man's artifact" (p. 14).

The narrator then states, through Miranda (Romão's jealous Portuguese friend), that there is a clear parallel between the slave Bertoleza and Brazil. Both were subservient to men and the colonizing country respectively. As Miranda states, Brazil was a "beast of burden loaded with richness to be controlled by the white man" and Bertoleza was a "bad-mannered Brazilian with no virtue". In other words, Miranda believed that Brazil and Bertoleza "were no more than working animals to be used by the superior race" (AZEVEDO, 1986, p.22). However, Miranda's motivation to promote these ideas is his jealousy. In fact, Romão takes advantage of Bertoleza and Brazil. He exploits a stone quarry in Brazil, Bertoleza, and other tenants who live in his 'cortiço'. This narrative clearly illustrates the positivist philosophy where the strong element, the white male, defeats the weaker one, the black female, as illustrated by the narrator:

Bertoleza is the one on the crooked stump, the same dirty, scatterbrained person as she was. She could not enjoy his rights that he had attained by virtue of his status; on the contrary, as Romão climbs socially, the unfortunate slave, Bertoleza, descends further in the social pyramid - being left behind as an old nag is left behind when no longer needed to continue the trip (AZEVEDO, 1967, p. 104).

Romão tries to climb not only economically but also socially. After using Bertoleza, he tries to leave her. He denounces her to the son of her former owner so he can marry Miranda's daughter. The police attempt to arrest Bertoleza, but she commits suicide by stabbing herself. Her suicide can be interpreted at least from two perspectives. First, from Bertoleza's point of view, her death may represent the destiny of the "inferior" race. Freedom for this race was an impossible dream. The solution, however, could be found in death, thus eliminating reproduction. In this way, Bertoleza would end her father's legacy by preventing the possibility of a child being born in captivity. Secondly, from the positivist point of view, the death of Bertoleza represents the predominance of whites over blacks which would ultimately spur the development of Brazil.

The point can be made that the characters Romão and Bertoleza are connected respectively to Portugal and Brazil. Additionally, the idea of the colonial Manichaeism

which determines the superiority of Portugal over Brazil and the white class over blacks is maintained. Thus, the domination by Portugal and Romão over Brazil and Bertoleza is justified by the ideological project of bringing progress to the uncivilized country and its people. Even after the political independence of Brazil from Portugal and the legal liberty of Bertoleza from her previous owner, both elements still do not begin a phase of independence and prosperity but rather a period of dependency of the modern capitalist system.

Unlike Romão, Jerônimo does not resist the temptations of the tropical paradise. Initially, Jerônimo, as well as other members of the “superior race”, is characterized as a hard worker, reliable, and a strong Portuguese man who is a good husband and father. He is a man of irreproachable character and honesty (42). As the narrator comments about Jerônimo:

It was not only his zeal and ability that moved him forward, but two other factors contributed to his advancement: his strength --- like the strength of a bull, which made his fellow workers respect him; and his serious character and the austere purity of his values. He was a very honest man who had a very simple lifestyle --- a lifestyle that was free of complexities. He simply goes from his house to his work and back to his home, and as a result, he never had an extramarital relationship (AZEVEDO, 1986, p. 42).

At this point, Jerônimo’s reality principle was still stronger than his pleasure principle. He was loyal to his Portuguese moral values and family traditions. As Freud states: “there exists in the mind a strong tendency toward the pleasure principle, but that tendency is opposed by certain forces or circumstances, so that the final outcome cannot always be in harmony with the tendency towards pleasure” (FREUD, 1959, p. 25). Nevertheless, Jerônimo subconsciously represses his instincts associated with the pleasure principle which disturbs the moral world of his ego (FREUD, 1962, p. 23). As a result, the pleasure principle which is synonymous with happiness, makes Jerônimo change. He succumbs to two forces in Brazil: the tropical environment and women. One of these women is the mulatta Rita Baiana. Jerônimo’s instincts overcome his reality principle. Jerônimo’s desire for this woman is stronger than his Portuguese moral values. According to Freud, the pleasure principle is related to a person’s desires. In this context, Jerônimo desires can be related to his feeling of happiness (KIROS, 1998, p. 105). The demand Jerônimo has for happiness is a threat to the societal customs, the norms and social values established by family traditions, churches, educators, and other institutions of control (1962, 23). Now, Jerônimo’s personality reflects an instinct of animalism and barbarism. His motivations are for carnal pleasure, corruption, and sin. Gradually, he becomes a salacious person, prone to the sensuality and sexuality of the tropical environment and the Brazilian women. Justifying Jerônimo’s changing behavior the narrator says:

His vitality was slowly declining: he became contemplative and affectionate. The Latin American life and the Brazilian nature changed his character. Seduction now becomes the element that drives him. Instead of focusing on his dreams of ambition, he dreams about violent and hot passion. He becomes more liberal, natural, and unpredictable. With no interest in saving money, he frivolously spends by buying whatever he wants in the name of pleasure. He becomes very lazy --- defeated by the heat and the tropical environment (AZEVEDO, 1986, p. 66-67).

Attempting to justify Jerônimo's behavior while ensuring that the main premise of superiority of the European race advocated by the positivist ideology is maintained, the narrator states: "The Portuguese man now becomes a Brazilian. He is lazy, enjoying the extravagance, excesses, luxuries, and jealousies of this environment. He does not have the spirit of economy or order. He has no hope of attaining riches. His only desire is for the mullata Rita, and nothing else" (AZEVEDO, 1986, p.136). As the quotation suggests, Jerônimo exhibits the lowest of emotions and inclinations, and as a result, displays the worse side of his soul..... characteristics representative of a Brazilian, not a Portuguese. Unlike Romão, Jerônimo surrenders and loses his home like Adam who loses his paradise as written in Genesis. Madly in love with Rita, Jerônimo leaves his home and family to live with the mulatta. At this point, the narrator establishes a clear connection between Brazil and the Brazilian woman:

Brazil was a big mystery. And Rita was a synthesis of his impression when he first arrived in the country: She was like the noon day sun-scorching and radiant; she was like an afternoon nap-comforting and serene; she was like the scent of clovers³-aromatic and fragrant; she was like the taste of the Brazilian forest – tantalizing and sweet; she was like the swaying palm tree-enticing and hypnotic; and yet she was like a deadly viper- poisonous and dangerous. She was sweet like a 'sapoti' (honey drenched fruit), she was like a cashew whose oil can burn and wound you like fire; she was like a green snake in the grass; like a viscous lizard, like a crazy mosquito, provoking and awakening his desire by stinging his arteries to introduce in his blood a spark of that northern love. She was like musical notes creating a melody of pleasurable groans spreading in the air like an aphrodisiacal phosphorescence (AZEVEDO, 1986, p. 57).

The narrator describes Rita as an allegory⁴ of Brazilian nature. For this reason, when Jerônimo sees Rita for the first time, he has that same animalistic and barbaric instinct that he had when he first arrived in Brazil. Both Brazil's and Rita's heat, aroma, taste, and danger bewitch and poison Jerônimo. Brazil is the idyllic setting where sexuality, exoticism and sensuality rule. Rita, like an aphrodisiac, makes Jerônimo forget his homeland. Consequently, Brazil and Rita are both responsible for Jerônimo's fall like Eve and the serpent are responsible for the fall of Adam. The mulatta woman is also responsible for Jerônimo's corruption. Metaphorically, hybridity has resulted in barbarism; the mullata Rita corrupting the untouchable Jerônimo's Portuguese character. As Freud has stated previously, unrestrained instincts lead to an uncivilized world. Paradoxically, the relationship between Rita and Jerônimo, under the concept of positivism, was beneficial only for her. For Jerônimo, this relationship represents a regression to barbarism as was previously identified. However, for Rita, this represents the opportunity to 'clean' her blood. As the narrator suggests, Rita was fascinated by Jerônimo because of "his calmness and seriousness -- like a good and strong animal". Rita "claimed her right to refine her race". For this reason, "she preferred the European man", to men of her own race (AZEVEDO, 1986, p. 117).

³ Herbarceous leguminous.
Phrase: in glove in ease and luxury

⁴ A story, poem, or picture which can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.

However, according to the narrator, Rita, unlike Piedad, Jerônimo's Portuguese wife, is not a good match for him. She is the exact opposite of Piedad. He believes that Rita is representative of the Brazilian people, driven by lust and instincts, hedonism and sensuality. The narrator portrays Rita as an unworthy match for Jerônimo. On the other hand, Piedade is portrayed as a worthy match for her husband. She is "healthy, honest, strong, and a diligent worker. She helps her husband to support the family by washing clothes for people ...". Piedade also reinforces the theme of the Brazilian corruptive environment. When Jerônimo leaves her, Piedade does not blame him, rather she blames the tropical surroundings. For Piedade, Jerônimo is simply a victim of the tropical environment. As the narrator states:

She was not mad at her husband, rather at the wretched hallucinatory light, the dissolute sun which makes a man's blood boil and feel like a lusty goat. She seems as someone rebelling against the pimp of nature that stole her man to give to a native woman ... (AZEVEDO, 1986, p. 123).

Piedade thought that the tropical nature had conspired against her, but at the same time, this nature was in partnership with the native people of the region. According to Piedade, Brazilian nature was a constant and imminent threat. In other words, "a person could find lying under each leaf on the ground a poisonous reptile as well flowers spreading the virus of lust. Brazil was like a young man... energetic, passionate, and boisterous" (123). This way, Piedad highlights the Brazilian stereotype where the instinctive forces defeat everything and everyone. It seems that progress and development never will be possible for Brazil. The description Jerônimo's wife uses to describe this country entails luxury and lack of rationality, and this drains the energy that is necessary for progress and development.

Portugal is the exact opposite. It is a quiet, cold, and gloomy country (123). In Portugal, Jerônimo "would still be the same chaste, quiet, and affectionate husband. He would be the same sad and contemplative farm worker...". He would not have the temptations peculiar to the tropical environment. As such, in Europe, a person "would neither find a snake like the bushmaster which foresees death, or a coral snake that waits patiently to bite an unsuspecting traveler" (AZEVEDO, 1986, p. 123). In Portugal, Jerônimo, like all people from the 'superior race', would just work and take care of his family as is traditionally expected.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the parallel drawn in *O cortiço* between Brazil and its women as opposed to Portugal and its white male population highlights Azevedo's reliance upon the scientific determinist thesis and further illustrates a direction that leads to a pessimistic future for Brazil and its feminine population. Following the precepts of the European theories, *O cortiço* reinforces the idea that Brazil and its female population are fated to degeneration and to the inability of becoming fully civilized. The couples Romão/Betoleza and Jerônimo/Rita represent the status quo of the old colonial order. Even though Brazil has gained its political independence from Portugal, the colonial economic ideals persist. The corruptive nature of Brazil and its women justify their subordination to the developed countries and to the national and international community. Brazil and its female component seem to be bound to patriarchal, social, and economic systems that prevent them from challenging the prevailing social structure. Likewise, during colonialism, the domination and exploitation in the nineteenth century is justified as a way to avoid Brazilian backwardness.

REFERENCES

- AZEVEDO, Aluísio. **O cortiço**. São Paulo: ática, 1986.
- FANON, Frantz. **Black Skin White Masks**. New York: Grove, 1967.
- FREUD, Sigmund. **Beyond the Pleasure Principle**. Trans. James Strachey. New York: bantam Books, 1959.
- _____. **Civilization and its discontents**. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York, W. W. Norton, 1962.
- JUNIOR, C. Prado. **História econômica do Brasil**. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1965.
- KIROS, Teodros. **Self-Construction and the Formation of Human Values: Truth, Language, and Desire**. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1998.
- MARCHANT, Elizabeth A. Naturalism, Race, and Nationalism in Aluísio Azevedo's **O mulato**. *Hispania*. Vol. 83, nº 3, (Sep., 2000) pp. 445-453.
- MARTINEZ-ECHAZABAL, L. Mestizaje and the Discourse of National/cultural Identity in Latin America, 1845-1959. **Latin American Perspectives** 25.3, Race and National Identity in the Americas (May, 1998), pp. 21-42.
- SODRÉ, N. Werneck. **O naturalismo no Brasil**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1965.
- _____. *História da literatura brasileira*. São Paulo: Difel, 1982.
- STEPAN, Nancy Leys. **The Hour of Eugenics: Race, gender, and Nation in Latin America**. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.