

FLIGHTLESS BUTTERFLIES: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN WOMEN IN 20TH CENTURY BRAZILIAN PROSE

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ABSTRACT:

This paper analyzes the role of females in contemporary prose written by Afro-Brazilian women, who frequently utilize the image of the butterfly to narrate their personal experiences and struggles. By comparing these works with the metamorphic process established in Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, or *The Metamorphosis*, this paper aims to show the evolution of Afro-Brazilian women in prose from caterpillars to butterflies. While the butterfly is a common symbol of freedom, at the end of each narrative, these women, quite literally, fail to take flight and face violent endings that, in some cases, end in death. To conclude, while utilizing postcolonial theory from Frantz Fanon, this investigation will posit ideas for why these women are unable to achieve complete freedom in Brazilian society. This investigation will demonstrate that, although brutal, these conclusions lend themselves to an ultimate resurrection of Afro-Brazilian women, thus contributing to positive change.

KEYWORDS: Afro-Brazilian women, contemporary prose, metamorphosis

1 INTRODUCTION

From the earliest of times, world literature and its authors have often featured characters of color, albeit in minor roles. Characters of color, especially women of color, generally take archetypal roles in literature, often casting them in the light of the "Other" and reflecting the marginalization that they experience in society. The realist, and at times naturalist, stories written by Machado de Assis in the late 19th Century were pivotal in giving a voice to the Afro-Brazilian. However, his representations of the plight of black women in Brazil did not give them the chance to write their own story that they so desperately needed. Although some women were publishing at this time, such as Júlia Lopes de Almeida, who wrote *A Família Medeiros* in 1892, and Maria Firmina do Reis, the Afro-Brazilian author of *Úrsula*, published in 1959, the voice of Afro-Brazilian women was still largely unheard. Instead, archetypal roles in literature for women of color persisted well into the 20th Century. Two canonical texts from modern Brazilian literature, *Casa Grande e Senzala* by Gilberto Freyre and *Tenda dos Milagres* by Jorge Amado, painted Afro-Brazilian women as overtly sensual characters who fulfilled shallow roles that often glorified the male characters. During the second half of the 20th Century, more Afro-Brazilian women began to take on roles as both character and author, taking control of the pen and choosing to write their own story. With the publication of diaries written by Carolina Maria de Jesus in the 1950s, Afro-Brazilian women as a literary subjects began to evolve. Years later, in the 1980s, the

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Quilombhoje movement propelled writers such as Conceição Evaristo, Miriam Alves and Esmeralda Ribeiro, took shape and began narrating the reality of Brazilian women of color in short stories and poetry.

The evolution of Afro-Brazilian women in literature, quite literally, starts from the ground and moves upward. In her diary, Carolina Maria de Jesus dreams of leaving her *favela* down on the river bank. Later, one observes that the female protagonists in the short stories by Alves and Ribeiro live in more prosperous areas of the city and are compared with butterflies, alluding to the idea of flight and movement. The Kafkaesque metamorphosis of Afro-Brazilian women, and the importance of the butterfly metaphor, is the main focus of this investigation: what are the various stages of this metamorphosis of Afro-Brazilian women in literature, as seen in Carolina Maria de Jesus, Alves, and Ribeiro, and what are their limiting factors? After reading the literary works showcased here, one will note that the butterflies in question never have a successful flight, for varied reasons that this paper will explore. Just as Gregor Samsa dies at the end of *The Metamorphosis* in order to free his family of the burden of caring for him, the female characters in these stories have conclusions that are clouded with ambiguity and, at times, violence. These “black butterflies,” as they are directly referenced in the stories by Ribeiro, are, ultimately, unable to take flight.

2 AFRO-BRAZILIAN WOMEN AS CATERPILLARS IN *QUARTO DE DESPEJO*

In *Quarto de despejo* (1960; *Child of the Dark*, 1962), the published diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus written in the 1950s, the protagonist is the writer herself, narrating everyday life in the favelas. She raises her two children without an adult male figure in the household and, although she struggles financially, she works daily and also manages to keep a detailed diary. Her testimony of the life of a black woman living in the favelas not only shed light on the substandard living conditions of this community, but also paved the way for progress by showcasing her intelligence, motivation to progress, and fervent desire to create a better life for herself and her family. Although she is constantly burdened by a lack of financial resources, Carolina does not lose hope: she dreams of leaving the favela in order to have a “brick house” (JESUS 24) instead of her *barracão*, or shack.

In terms of the literary metamorphosis of Afro-Brazilian women, Carolina is the ground dweller, or caterpillar; she spends most of her time on foot, collecting recyclable goods and selling them for little money in order to feed her children and pay the bills. She notes that the women of the favelas “pick up fruits and vegetables that fall from the street markets” (27).

Nearly all of the food that she collects, not to mention the items that she recycles, she recovers on the ground. Carolina also repeats that she feels as though she is in Hell, another indication of her low elevation both physically and in terms of the Brazilian socio-economic structure which, in this case, is specifically that of São Paulo. Although generally disgusted by most of her fellow *favelados*, Carolina is acutely aware of the myth of a Racial Democracy in Brazil, as she frequently narrates that struggles between blacks and whites in São Paulo.² Just as Gregor Samsa chooses patience and a passive stance at the beginning of *The Metamorphosis* in order to help his family handle

² In one of the many scenes of racism that she narrates, Carolina describes a white policeman who abuses a black man. She comments “there are certain whites who transform blacks into whipping posts” (114).

the burden of his transformation,³ Carolina does the same for her family in *Quarto de Despejo*. Carolina does not grow wings, although she notes that she would like to throughout her diaries.⁴ With the publication of her journals, Carolina does become wealthy and is able to buy a house. However, despite her fame, she remains as a social pariah who falls back into poverty just as soon as she left it. Also, Carolina's disdain for the other *favelados* caused many to distrust and dislike her, making her round trip voyage from the *favelas* even more difficult.

3 ATTEMPTS AT FLIGHT IN “ALICE ESTÁ MORTA” BY MIRIAM ALVES

If Carolina represents the initial stage of this evolution of Afro-Brazilian women in literature as the caterpillar, then the female protagonists in the short stories of Miriam Alves can very well symbolize the next stage. Alves represents a generation of Afro-Brazilian writers who, publishing since 1978,⁵ were concerned with a positive and realistic portrayal of African culture in Brazilian literature. In her short story, “Alice está morta” (“Alice is Dead”), Alves writes the story of a young, black woman, Alice, who cohabitates with her boyfriend, who is also the narrator. He notes that their relationship is one of dependency, not of passionate love, and signals the characteristics of both Alice and their relationship that bother him. Their residence is in the housing project, and he mentions more than once that they must descend a large hill in order to return home after going into the city.⁶ At the end of the story, Alice, who frequently smokes cigarettes that allow her to “get high” on hope and requires that her boyfriend carry her home, is thrown over the edge of a cliff into a garbage dump by the narrator.

In this story, the language and images used by Alves lend themselves to the metamorphosis in question. Although Alice lives in a housing project, probably not far removed from the favelas that Carolina inhabits, she does show upward movement. Alice has the ability to leave the ground and exists in a liminal space between the caterpillar that is Carolina and the butterfly that we will see in the works of Esmeralda Ribeiro. Alice is the butterfly that has recently emerged from the cocoon; she is unable to fly on her own, receiving assistance either from the arms of her boyfriend or the cigarettes that she regularly smokes. The narrator alludes to this butterfly-esque motion of Alice when he notes that, while carrying her one night, “it seems that she was going to float away like smoke at any moment” (ALVES 263). Later, he states that she “fluttered” (263) in his arms. The use of the word flutter (*flutuar* in Portuguese) is indispensable, as it refers to the motion that butterflies make with their wings upon taking flight. Sadly, at the end of the story, when the narrator throws Alice over the cliff, she is unable to fly. Although the conclusion does not specifically state that Alice dies, the title of the story seems to compensate this lack of narrative detail. While Alice appears to have all of the characteristics of a butterfly in the story by Miriam Alves, she ultimately fails to take flight and creates a space to be filled by other Afro-Brazilian female characters.

³ The narrator states that “for now [Gregor] must lie low and try, through patience and the greatest consideration, to help his family bear the inconvenience he was bound to cause them in his present condition” (KAFKA 23).

⁴ Carolina states that if she “had wings, I would fly to the desert or the jungle” (94).

⁵ Nazareth Soares Fonseca notes that the Quilombhoje of São Paulo “comemoraram a vitória de uma luta iniciada no ano de 1978” at their celebration in 2007 (55).

⁶ The narrator begins the story with “I was walking down a hill” (261) and later, after attending a party, “we were going down a hill toward our shelter” (263).

4 BLACK BUTTERFLY IMAGERY IN SHORT STORIES BY ESMERALDA RIBEIRO

Whereas the characters in the works by Carolina Maria de Jesus and Miriam Alves lead us symbolically to the idea of a metamorphosis, the short stories by Esmeralda Ribeiro make direct allusions to the black butterfly being analyzed in this investigation. In “A procura de uma borboleta preta” (“In Search of a Black Butterfly”) and “Ogun”, the protagonists are young, black women who each handle a conflict that results in an inability to communicate. In “A procura...” the protagonist, Leila, calls her friend, Baby, to help her search for a missing black butterfly. The story is narrated by an eavesdropping operator at the Humanitarian Center, who notes that her life “was forever changed” (RIBEIRO 245) by the call. Leila recounts that, after speaking with a doctor about her pregnancy, the doctor found that she had a black butterfly inside of her uterus.⁷ She then discusses the details of the day that she lost her butterfly, which the reader can assume refers to either a miscarriage or an unwanted abortion of a child. Leila reports that she also spent the afternoon at an amusement park with a white, French soldier, Jean, who took her on a Ferris wheel (247). Although she is able to ascend temporarily with the Ferris wheel, she is ultimately forced to come down. At the end, after listening to this phone call between Leila and Baby, the operator indicates that she frequently goes to the amusement park, sits and watches “all the butterfly girls sleeping on the cobblestones” (250). Afro-Brazilian women, and now her offspring, have been described as a black butterfly, indicating the last stage of metamorphosis. However, just as Leila’s own butterfly is lost and fails to fly on her own, the operator worries about the young girls who sleep at the amusement park who, like Leila’s child, may never have the opportunity to fly.

Differing from the protagonists in the works by Carolina Maria de Jesus and Miriam Alves, and even possibly in her own story, “A procura...” the narrator indicates that the protagonist in Ribeiro’s “Ogun” is a member of a higher socio-economic class, thus showing some economic movement on the part of the Afro-Brazilian. She, Mariana Cesário, is the daughter of a black father and a white mother.⁸ As a birthday gift, her father leaves her an inheritance of a black telephone, to be paid in installments, shortly before he abandons the family. Mariana works in an office building appropriately titled “HERE THERE IS NO RACISM” and the narrator describes Mariana’s house as being completely “white all over” (PERES 741), with white painting and white furniture. Therefore, when the black telephone arrives at her home, she is dissatisfied because it does not match her white house. Mariana calls the phone company, hoping to exchange her black phone for a white one, but they do not understand her problem and even question her desire to sell it, assuming that she would enjoy it.⁹ In the meantime, while intending to solve her issue with the black telephone, Mariana straightens her hair, unsuccessfully dates a man who supposedly leaves her to marry a German woman, and loses a job promotion to another woman. Feeling upset, and knowing that she cannot sell the

⁷ In their conversation, Leila tells Baby that “when I went to the doctor to get the results of my pregnancy test, Dr... discovered that I had a black butterfly inside of me” (246).

⁸ The narrator describes that Mariana has a “white mother, Italian descent; black father, African descent” (PERES 741).

⁹ When Mariana seeks help from the phone company, the director of the distribution center states, ironically, “looking at your card, Miss Mariana Cesário, I thought that you wouldn’t complain” (742).

black telephone, she donates it to a samba school. The school honors her donation with their *Carnaval* entry, which Mariana sees with her brother from a “special bleacher section” (746). While watching the parade, Mariana imagines herself as a butterfly, growing wings and taking flight.¹⁰ Shortly after, she, in fact, does grow large, black wings, and flies over the parade crowd. However, “on an impulse to reach the infinite” (746), Mariana crashes to the ground and is trampled by parade spectators. Unlike the women before her, Mariana is able to grow wings and take flight without assistance; however, she quickly falls to the ground, is trampled by a crowd of people, and the reader becomes witness to yet another lost butterfly.

5 LIMITING FACTORS: WHY ARE THEY UNABLE TO FLY?

After reading each story, the conclusion is the same: the black butterflies are unable to fly and, in the stories by Alves and Ribeiro, they face a violent ending that could result in death. What is it, then, that keeps the butterflies in the works of Carolina Maria de Jesus, Miriam Alves and Esmeralda Ribeiro from flying? The butterfly, for many years, has been considered a symbol of truth and resurrection.¹¹ It is no coincidence, then, that many Afro-Brazilian writers have utilized this symbol to express re-birth in a society that, ironically, claims to be a democracy free of racial prejudice and discrimination.¹² However, in each case, there are a series of factors, most of them inherited from the pre-existing colonial structures and still existent in the Brazilian society, which keeps these women from completing their metamorphosis and taking flight.

In the case of Carolina Maria de Jesus, one observes that she never leaves the ground, seen as the caterpillar in this investigation. She ultimately remains in the *favela* throughout the entire diary, which could be equated to the ground level. Although it has proven difficult to leave the *favelas* in any circumstance, for Carolina Maria de Jesus, it is her own postcolonial mindset that limits her from flight. At times, she displays pride for her African heritage; she writes about her kinky hair and how it behaves better than the white man’s hair.¹³ In this sense, she does not show shame for being different from the white and hegemonic social elite. However, unexpectedly, she shows great disdain for other Afro-Brazilians that surround her. Robert Levine, in “The Cautionary Tale of Carolina Maria de Jesus,” has argued that her opinions clashed with other *favelados* while, at the same time, conflicted with the intellectual, more liberal society.¹⁴ Carolina’s opinions seem to fluctuate, sometimes valorizing African heritage while, at other moments, depreciating it. Levine goes as far as to call her an “uppity black” (56), meaning that she sees herself as being above, both economically and socially, other blacks.

¹⁰ While watching the parade, Mariana says, “I am going to sprout wings. I need to know who I am” (746).

¹¹ C.H.A. Bjerregaard, in “A Philosopher and a Butterfly”, notes that the butterfly, originating back to Greek mythology, has been seen as a representation of truth and re-birth (380).

¹² In “Brazilian Racial Democracy: Reality or Myth”, Carlos Hasenbalg and Suellen Huntington note that, in the 1930’s, Gilberto Freyre argued that Brazil would be a “multicultural melting pot...a racial democracy, without prejudice or discrimination, but with equal economic and social opportunity for members of all races” (133).

¹³ Carolina writes “I adore my black skin and my kinky hair. The Negro hair is more educated than the white man’s hair. Because with Negro hair, where you put it, it stays. It’s obedient” (72).

¹⁴ Levine writes that the intellectuals on the left did not “embrace her because her views were not strident enough for their class-based view of marginality. Worse yet, her attitudes were at times conservative and even racist” (56).

However, the term used by Levine could also be described by the phenomenon associated with post-slavery society in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952; *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967) by Frantz Fanon. Fanon describes that the African descendant in these former European colonies will, unconsciously, feel a sense of shame and self-hatred due to the social and economic structures that have been put in place and reinforced by the white colonizer. Fanon argues that the black subject, who suffers from an “inferiority complex” (PHILCOX 73) due to the pressures of a white society, will attempt to conform to this society by suppressing his or her own blackness. When Levine calls Carolina an “uppity black,” one can assume that it is because she takes on an oppressor-like opinion of the other blacks around her and reaffirms the prejudice mindset that existed in the colonial period. For her use of the “white mask,” in terms of Fanon, I argue that Carolina remains in the caterpillar stage of the metamorphosis described here. Unconsciously stuck in this colonial mindset, Carolina is unable to leave the favelas and/or the ground. Similarly, we see this mindset reflected in the protagonist of Esmeralda Ribeiro’s “Ogun” as well.

In “Ogun,” Mariana Cesário struggles with her, in terms of Fanon, fact of blackness. The black telephone that her father, of African descent, left her is what constantly mars her attempts to assimilate into the elevated white society. Despite her completely white home and straightened hair, the black telephone remains as a permanent marker of her “Otherness.” While Carolina Maria de Jesus outright insults the other Afro-Brazilians around her, Mariana believes herself tolerant of all others, even working in a building called “HERE THERE IS NO RACISM.” Both women attempt to hide their African heritage by utilizing the “white mask” that Fanon proposes. Different from Carolina, at the end of “Ogun,” one sees that Mariana is able to fly over the crowd at Carnaval in the form of a black butterfly, actually taking flight for a brief moment. Before flying, Mariana recalls a voice saying to her “I am going to sprout wings. I need to know who I am. Their doubts will always be our certainties” (RIBEIRO 746). Here, one observes that the final stage of metamorphosis is characterized by truly knowing oneself, in which case she can take flight. However, in the case of Mariana and Carolina, these women do not truly know themselves and, instead, unconsciously assimilate to and reaffirm the colonial point of view that oppresses them. Due to these attempts at blending into the melting pot, both Mariana and Carolina are unable to take flight and, thus, liberate their own minds from the prejudice and discrimination that they faced daily in Brazilian society.

In addition to the “white masks” that these women may be tempted to utilize, they also face extreme gender inequality on a daily basis. Since the colonial period, Brazil has been a patriarchal society. In his essay about “The Brazilian Family,” Antônio Candido notes that “paternal authority was practically unlimited” (295). Women were seen as sexual objects, regardless of race, and economic goods that served to strengthen a man’s position in society. In both “A procura de uma borboleta preta” by Ribeiro and “Alice está morta” by Alves, we see women who are victimized by this misogynist tradition and treated as mere possessions by the men that claim to love them. The protagonist in “A procura...,” Leila, has an affair with a French soldier, Jean, who takes her to amusement parks and she worries that he only dates her because of the belief that Afro-Brazilian women are more sexually liberated than white women.¹⁵ In the end, Jean leaves Leila, who experiences either an abortion or a miscarriage and, as a result, is emotionally distraught and calls a friend to help her search for the

¹⁵ Leila narrates, “I was also afraid that he was with me because he believed in the stereotype that black women are good in bed” (247).

missing black butterfly. It is also worth noting that Jean is a white man, a fact which lends itself to the promotion of racial miscegenation by Gilberto Freyre and other Brazilian cultural leaders of the 20th century.¹⁶ Leila, then, is not only victimized by Jean, but also by social policies that see the woman as nothing more than sexual medium by which a society achieves miscegenation. Not surprisingly, the protagonist of “Alice está morta” by Alves finds herself in a similar situation. Involved in a relationship built on comfort and not love, Alice often takes drugs in order to escape her reality. At the end, as Alice and her partner walk home from a party, he throws her body into a garbage dump (ALVES 264). Her boyfriend shows no remorse upon seeing her fall to her death, showing the lack of emotion that he, as a man, feels after killing a woman. Alice, just like Leila, is another victim of a gender biased society that, doubly so for Afro-Brazilian women, treats them as objects of the market rather than as individuals.

Of course, the most obvious limiting factor that each of these women face in the literary works analyzed in this investigation is the color of their skin. The prejudiced and discriminatory social and economic practices that were, and still are alive in Brazil, serve to limit their participation and movement. Although slavery was abolished in 1888, the segregationist practices continued in Brazil for many decades. During the early 20th Century in Brazil, positivist politics and the acceptance of social diseases related to degeneration reigned supreme in Brazilian government and society.¹⁷ Due to this mindset, the Afro-Brazilian was seen as a possible contaminant to an overarching societal well-being. These pseudo-scientists, such as the Bahian physician Raimundo Nina Rodrigues proclaimed that the black and mulatto were not “competent to stand trial by civilised [*sic*] law” (BORGES 241). This thought pattern can be seen in *Quarto de despejo*, when people are constantly surprised at Carolina’s level of literacy. Due to her race, she was not expected to be intelligent, but rather less competent. We also see this prejudice in “Ogun” by Ribeiro, when Mariana does not receive the promotion in her workplace. Given that she “was the only black woman running against two other women” (PERES 745), one must assume that race was a factor in the decision. In this sense, the fate of these black butterflies is also determined by the fact that they were not born the same color as the white hegemony.

6 CONCLUSIONS

After studying the presence, or absence in the case of Carolina Maria de Jesus, of the black butterfly in the works utilized in this investigation, it remains clear that this symbol is not merely a coincidence. Whether it is a metaphor representing the notion of liberty or resurrection, one can see that, in each story, the butterfly never fully metamorphoses: her flight is cut short by a number of factors. In the diaries of Carolina and in “Ogun” by Esmeralda Ribeiro, one witnesses women that have been affected and influenced by the colonial mindset that the black is inferior to the white. Ribeiro’s “A procura...” and Miriam Alves’ “Alice está morta” offer visions of women who are used by men as purely sexual objects in a misogynistic society. These categories, of course,

¹⁶ Dain Borges notes that, in *Casa grande e senzala*, Freyre gives credit to the “plantation Big House [as] the institution that enacted most of this cultural mixing. Some took place in the kitchen, and some in the master’s hammock. Colonial concubinage did not produce differences and alienation, but rather harmony, among Brazilians” (253).

¹⁷ Borges notes that “from the 1880s to the 1920s, the national ailment that the medicalised social thought of Brazil most often diagnosed, an ailment that connected individual health to national well-being, was degeneration” (235).

are not mutually exclusive; Carolina and the protagonist of “Ogun” also suffer inequalities due to their gender, while the protagonists in “A procura...” and “Alice...” are also subject to the same sense of self-hatred that Frantz Fanon discusses in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, as well as the favorable opinion of miscegenation proposed by Gilberto Freyre.

The most common marginalizing factor for each of these women, of course, is her race. If she is, for any reason, not limited by her gender, her race is an issue that proves difficult even today to resolve in Brazil. Perhaps the words of Machado de Assis, writing about “A borboleta preta” in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, best summarize the struggle that each of these women face regarding her complete metamorphosis. After killing a black butterfly that entered his room through the window, he reflects upon his actions and reaches this conclusion: “vejam como é bom ser superior as borboletas! Porque é justo dizê-lo, se ela fôsse azul, ou côr de laranja, não teria mais segura a vida...não, volto à primeira ideia; *creio que para ela era melhor ter nascido azul*” (166; my emphasis). Writing from nearly a century before, Machado de Assis, even then, was able to predict the future that these women would experience in Brazilian society. Simply for being born a different, perhaps less favorable color, these butterflies would end up with much the same fate as the butterfly in the chapter by Machado. However, writers from more recent generations, like Ribeiro, Alves and others from the *Quilombhoje* movement, are utilizing the black butterfly as a symbol for the resurrection of the Afro-Brazilian identity. Just as Gregor Samsa dies at the end of *The Metamorphosis*, these black butterflies must also die in order to have the opportunity to be re-born. Perhaps a re-birth, a second chance at life, will provide them with a positive outcome. The antiquated structures and mindsets that were indoctrinated during the colonial period, such as those outlined by Fanon and Freyre, must be discarded in order to allow the Afro-Brazilian to return to his or her roots and construct an original, true, and positive identity from the inside out. This resurrection is one that is still in progress, still metamorphosing and searching for its voice, but it is a re-birth that will help to eventually surpass societal prejudices and discrimination that have held these butterflies down for far too many generations.

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