

SUBALTERNITY AND OTHERNESS: AN INTERNAL ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE IN A FAVELA

SUBALTERNIDADE E ALTERIDADE: UMA VISÃO INTERNA DA VIDA EM UMA FAVELA

Recebido: 31/10/2022

Aprovado: 15/12/2022

Publicado: 29/12/2022

DOI: 10.18817/rlj.v6i2.3034

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Abstract: The word “community” implies homogeneity and equality. Nevertheless, in *favelas*, the community is characterised by its heterogeneity and its internal battles among its members. This article aims at analysing Carolina Maria de Jesus's descriptions of her life in the *favela* of Canindé, in her book *Child of the Dark*, about facts which took place in the 1950s. The aspects of otherness and subalternity will be applied to this study to understand how such a clear description of the drama in the *favelas* did not reach Brazilian society and the political realm when it was published. This article will also describe how the *favela* subaltern community are heterogeneous and lack unity against the powerful forces that submit these communities to invisibility and otherness.

Keywords: Carolina Maria de Jesus; subalternity; otherness: *favela*

Resumo: A palavra comunidade implica homogeneidade e igualdade. No entanto, nas *favelas* a comunidade é caracterizada por sua heterogeneidade e pelas batalhas internas entre os seus membros. Este artigo pretende analisar as descrições de Carolina Maria de Jesus sobre a sua vida na *favela* do Canindé, feitos acontecidos na década de 1950. Os aspectos relacionados à alteridade e a subalternidade serão aplicados a este estudo para entender as razões pelas quais uma descrição tão clara do drama nas favelas não foi visível à sociedade brasileira e à esfera política quando foi publicada. O artigo também estuda as referências sobre como as comunidades subalternas são heterogêneas e carecem de unidade contra as forças de poder que submetem essas comunidades à invisibilidade e à alteridade.

Palavras-chave: Carolina Maria de Jesus; subalternidade; alteridade; *favela*

Introduction

Primarily, a traditional community would represent a homogeneous group of people with a common language and customs and existing within an organised

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structure, whereas with a distinct and individual character. Nevertheless, the idea of a traditional community nowadays has to be considered through the diversity of social environments and the stratification of modern society through cultural, social and financial situations. This way, a *favela* should be considered a traditional community, sharing the same living conditions, opportunities, economic, social and cultural environment and struggling against its differences while suffering from the same prejudices and limitations.

Nowadays, *favela* communities have raised their voices against prejudice and unveiled the people's daily struggle against racism, poverty, inequality, unemployment and educational limitations. Today, they are an integral and structural part of the cities, as described by Pasternak Taschner (2003, p.41).

Nevertheless, the past of the *favelas* is filled not only with dark memories and death but also with racism, prejudice and social indifference towards a group of people whose only choice in life was to be there since there was no other place for them to be. This invisibility brings into light the subalternity of these people, who were less than poor, and less than citizens. In the heterogeneity of this subaltern group, the people from these places are the least advanced since they have been, according to Green and Ives (2010, p. 304) " [...] deprived of institutional political participation and face a more incredible difficulty in raising a critical consciousness than a more organised subaltern group".

Moreover, in the shadows of the *favelas*, they kept struggling to survive against superior groups labelling them as others and also struggling among themselves. This work aims at describing how Maria Carolina de Jesus's book *Child of the Dark* represented a critical account of life inside a subaltern community and raised the problem of otherness outside and within the boundaries of the *favelas*.

Otherness and the subalternity

A *favela* is a complex concept and to understand it from an insider point of view, two aspects must be taken into account: subalternity and otherness. Subaltern is a term described by Gramsci as one to refer to "[...] those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes" (Ashcroft, 2007, p.198). As regards to

otherness it is the quality of people who are defined as outsiders from a social group and are labelled as different.

The predominant model in the power relationships is the opposition between the alleged superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native. Edward Said, in his masterpiece *Orientalism* (2007), states that the production of the stereotype of the colonised always takes into account the superiority of the coloniser. The author explains that the construction of otherness is based on the values of the powerful ones who label those who are different from their presumed correctness as "the other". Also, otherness leads subalterns to lack autonomy and to be subject to the influence or hegemony of powerful social groups. Therefore, the subaltern has no voice and is set apart from the social organisation. That is to say that subalternity is the condition of silence.

In their origin, the concepts of otherness and subalternity take into account the Asian and African Post-Colonial Studies. Nevertheless, in the case of Brazil, the Portuguese context must be taken into account since there are at least three differences in Portuguese post-colonialism, all related to the hybridity concept.

The first difference is that the hybridity processes between colonised and coloniser were more visible and conscious in the Portuguese context, so it is easier to recognise the ones that reinforced the inequalities of power in the colonial relation.

Another difference is the one that has to do with skin colour and the concept of race. In the Portuguese context, some authors understand that the "*mulato*" figure is the physical result of hybridity. Besides this optimistic view, we must consider that sexism was present in this hybridity since only the white man was permitted to have sexual intercourse with the black woman.

The position of the coloniser is the last difference. The Portuguese coloniser is in an intermediate position; he is not wealthy like the English coloniser, nor like the miserable diasporic African slaves that also came to the country. The native position is almost forgotten due to their minor influence on the resulting culture. Another critical factor is the influence of the European and Asian waves that came to the country after its independence.

The vital point to be taken into account in terms of physical and cultural hybridity is the figure of the black Africans, who were not the native population, but were also the ones that colonised the land. This colonisation was a different one, of

course, since they came as enslaved people, but they interfered actively in forming a new culture, and their role in the colonisation set their position of subalternity in Brazilian society up to the present times.

This subaltern links directly to the fiercest of its aspect, when subalternity is assumed as something right by the people labelled as "the other". Sartre described this acceptance of otherness, stating that someone's alienation and their consequent isolation happens through the assumption of one's otherness established by a more powerful group. The philosopher label this fact as "being-for-others". This happens when the subaltern accepts their position as different and not belonging to the social sphere in which they live.

Indeed, there is a power relation inside this definition of who has to be superior, as Okolie states:

Social identities are relational; groups typically define themselves in relation to others. This is because identity has little meaning without the "other". So, by defining itself a group defines others. Identity is rarely claimed or assigned for its own sake. These definitions of self and others have purposes and consequences. They are tied to rewards and punishment, which may be material or symbolic. There is usually an expectation of gain or loss as a consequence of identity claims. This is why identities are contested. Power is implicated here, and because groups do not have equal powers to define both self and the other, the consequences reflect these power differentials. Often notions of superiority and inferiority are embedded in particular identities (2003: 2).

An outside look at 21st-century Brazil, due to its immigration waves, education, financial situation and social issues, is an example of a stratified society. The country provides a deep ravine between rich and poor, and, in most of cases, the poor are invisible, fated to the powers of the labelled superior groups. Therefore, it is common to listen to comments regarding the *favelas* as the origin of the country's problem instead of the result. Nevertheless, in 20th century Brazil, things were not different, and the only voice from inside a *favela*, a feminine voice indeed, came through a book.

Child of the Dark, the light from within

Child of the Dark written by Carolina Maria de Jesus, a black single mother from a *favela* in São Paulo, in the middle 50's, is a harsh depiction of the Brazilian society of those times. De Jesus depicted her subalternity by describing her

origins: she was the daughter of a single black mother that worked as a housekeeper in a brothel and endured the scorn around her. The author's childhood was a model of prejudice and ostracism, two characteristics of subalternity.

Nevertheless, unlike poor black children like her, from seven to nine years old, Carolina had the opportunity to go to school due to the intervention of a benefactor. Literacy brought her not only a new world but also a new label, since she would suffer prejudice inside her own community, she became the other of the others. De Jesus's description of how she treats the people in the community shows how she wants to use her writing skills to protect herself from them:

You are ignorant and can't understand that. I'm going to write a book about the *favela*, and I'm going to tell everything that happened here. And everything that you do to me. I want to write a book, and you with these disgusting scenes are furnishing me with material. (De Jesus, 2003, p.12)

De Jesus always had the habit of writing, and when she was twenty-three years old, after her mother's death, she moved to São Paulo seeking a better life. She worked as a housemaid in middle-class houses, which was the only opportunity for a black woman then. She had several problems at work because people expected these black women to be submissive. However, De Jesus was outspoken and did not last much in some jobs due to her character. Once she got pregnant, she was fired and consequently had to leave the house. Therefore, she had no option but to go to the *favela*, where she made her best written works: plays, poetry and short stories and, mainly, the diary that made her famous.

Although her diary was a piece of art, it only came to light through the hands of Audalio Dantas, a young white journalist who discovered Carolina when he was interviewing the people from the *favela* for a documentary. Thus, Carolina's life and her accounts from inside the *favela* were revealed only because two white men enabled her to speak: first her benefactor in childhood, who intervened to provide her with the opportunity to learn how to write; then Dantas, the journalist, who published her book after editing the diary and skipping out the poetry that was also part of it. Finally, Dantas released Carolina from her silent subalternity and let her speak, but besides giving birth to the writer, he somewhat "killed" the poet.

Besides the poet's disappearance, Carolina's book represents an inner view of a reality seen and described from the outside. While others saw the *favela* as a

disease of the city, Carolina described the city and *favela* as, respectively, a "beautiful woman" with "cheap stockings". The attraction of the city personalised of a beautiful woman represents how big cities allured migrants as a lighthouse of employment, opportunities and hope. Nevertheless, this illusion vanished as they arrived in the city since the "cheap stockings" represented the lack of detail, the invisibility and the only hope was the outskirts, the *favela*.

What was a heaven-on-earth promise became hell, as Carolina describes her own house. Her home is only hell for her; life is not easy anywhere she can be. The dream to improve her life does not exist, and the place is not a safe one to live in. De Jesus depicts the dream of moving from there to provide her kids with a better environment by stating that "I am living in a *favela*. But if God helps me, I'll get out of here" (De Jesus, 2003, p.12).

Postcolonial criticism depicts the subalternity where subaltern is "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha, 1988:35), therefore, as someone classified according to different and intermingled principles of social and cultural division.

The only thing De Jesus shares with other people in the *favela* is the subalternity they are immersed in. The author describes how "are people who take advantage of the way they live to bully those weaker than themselves." (De Jesus, 2003, p. 13). The people from the *favelas* do not have the same origin, therefore, they do not belong to a single group. There is a strong sense of competition among them since there live the people without work, but also workers that have no option but to live there due to the rental speculation.

Moreover, there are battles inside subalternity regarding gender. De Jesus describes how "in the *favelas*, the men are more tolerant, more understanding. The rowdies are the women" (De Jesus, 2003, p. 13) and adds that "women pick on me. They say that I talk too well and that I know how to attract men" (De Jesus, 15).

Divided or not, *favela* community has some important features in common. One of them is the fight against hunger. In general, according to De Jesus, they believed that enslaved people had a better situation than *favela* people had at those times since the slaves lacked freedom; nevertheless, they had food guaranteed to have enough energy to keep working. De Jesus diminishes the horrors of slavery by stating,

"that is the way on May 13 I fought against the real slavery- hunger!" (De Jesus, 2003, p. 23).

This struggle against starvation also depicts how the situation moulded people from the *favela* to an unbreakable coldness such as when De Jesus describes that when her children shout "Viva Mama!" it pleases her, but "she is not in the habit of smiling. (De Jesus, 2003, p.23) or when she mentions Casemiro the Abreu's poem "Laugh, child, life is beautiful" and points out that life was good in his times, but that in this era "[...] it's necessary to say: 'Cry, child. Life is bitter.'" (De Jesus, 2003, p. 27).

The heterogeneity is also depicted in the lack of empathy among the *favela* inhabitants. Besides their common fight against hunger, there is no sharing of things and the coldness of their feelings is depicted by the author when she describes the moment her pig is killed, saying that:

They skinned him and when they opened the pig I was pleased.[...] The women showed up, all saying they wanted a piece. Chiclé wanted the guts. 'I'm not going to sell, nor give. I fattened this pig for my children'.
[...]
'I'm not going to sell any of it. When you fattened and slaughtered your pig, I didn't come around bothering you.' (De Jesus, 2003, p. 151)

This passage shows how in some crucial moments, selfishness took control and the need of the others became invisible. At that moment, Carolina had her pig for her family and no money in the world would be worthy a piece of it. There was an opposition between the one who had something and the ones who had nothing.

Such dichotomy was present through all the book in several aspects, but race was an even more serious issue since the opposition of black and white in the *favela* is also depicted in it. White people are considered differently, and they are the ones that are regarded as the people who would have a better future, maybe far from there. Nevertheless, the people from the *favela* always relate to the upper classes as "the white", and to some extent, they are correct since only a few black people can help the subaltern.

In her book, De Jesus prays "May God enlighten the whites so that the Negroes may have a happier life." (Jesus, 2003:33). This claim depicts the dependence on white people for hope and how the system was designed for black people not to react against the control imposed to them and which put them below others and depriving them of opportunities.

Indeed, the author depicted how natural laws dismantled the otherness regarding skin colour by stating that:

The white man says he is superior. But what superiority does he show? If the Negro drinks *pinga*, the white drinks. The sickness that hits the black hits the white. If the white feels hunger, so does the Negro. Nature hasn't picked any favorites. (De Jesus, 2003, p. 57)

De Jesus also depicts the abyss between rich and poor in society by describing how other people despise people from the *favelas*: there is a difference inside the neighbourhood between those living in a brick house and those living in a slum:

The neighbours in the brick houses look at the *favelados* with disgust. I see their looks of hate because they don't want the *favela* here. They say the *favela* debases the neighbourhood and that they despise poverty. They forget that in death everyone is poor. (De Jesus, 2003, p.49)

Thus, lower classes also despise the favela people, and the author describes the lack of empathy among humans by saying that "[...] human beings are like that. They prefer to see things spoil than let others get some use from them" (De Jesus, 2003, p. 70).

If the lower classes have this relationship with the so-called *others*, the higher classes have an even more inquisitive look at them. In one of her descriptions of her first time riding a lift, De Jesus depicts her meeting with a man from a building she had been invited to fetch some papers. The man was not sympathetic to find her in his building's lift, as the author states:

a man got into the elevator and looked at me with disgust. I'm used to these looks, they don't bother me. He wanted to know what I was doing in the elevator. I explained to him that the mother of those two boys had given me some newspapers. And that was the reason for my presence in his elevator. I asked him if he was a doctor or a Congressman. He told me he was a Senator. (De Jesus, 2003, p.102)

De Jesus describes how politicians voted to promote welfare to the people, look down on poor people and even ask what they are doing in rich people's realm. The author depicts the hypocrisy of those who visit the *favelas* before elections,

hugging people and taking pictures. This is how the knowledge of the past should be used to avoid repeating these actions in the present.

The subaltern only has a voice when they vote, and the power of the vote is usually misused, believing in vague promises, forgotten as the election results are announced. This episode also depicts how the subaltern represents the dominant power to themselves, accepting the superiority of others as something normal and explaining the reasons to be in that place, invited by an insider.

De Jesus's depiction of life in the *favela* was crucial to understanding this heterogeneous group, at first considered a single unity. After the publication of the diary, one of the first accounts of poverty written from the inside, de Jesus was able to move with her family from the *favela*.

Nevertheless, the price of the change was high: she was always bothered at home by people asking for money and avoided by her new white neighbours, who saw her as a person that was too proud and overspoken to be a black woman. In the afterword of De Jesus's book, Robert Levine describes her fate:

within a short time, she was forced to sell the house of her dreams and return to collecting cans, paper and wire. A newspaper published a photograph of Carolina scavenging, but no outcry was raised.[...]
Forgotten by the outside world, she planted a garden, raised chickens, and rode buses two hours each way to downtown Sao Paulo to collect trash to sell. Audalio Dantas ignored her, though his fortunes as a journalist were buoyed by his discovery of her in 1958. A few journalists visited her for follow-up interviews; some asked for mementos and took them, never returning them. To many, she remained a curiosity: a black woman who had risen from the depths of society, only to sink again.
On February, 13, 1977, Carolina Maria de Jesus died at the age of sixty-three. (De Jesus, 2003, p.187)

Considering De Jesus's end, it can be concluded that by that time, the accounts of life, a life shared by many others, was not heard. Being heard by the upper classes would have represented a change to her fate, but being heard by her community would have represented an attempt of organisation by the subaltern classes, as described by Spivak (1988):

Yet an account of the phased development of the subaltern is thrown out of joint when his cultural macrology is operated, however remotely, by the epistemic interference with legal and disciplinary definitions accompanying the imperialist project. (p. 55)

In Literature, *Child of the Dark* is regarded as a work that grants close access to the subaltern's inner thoughts, feelings and dreams, showing that the subaltern has the power of agency. It is not a simple discourse about the subaltern but the action of the subaltern and its imposition on the world.

Therefore, the problem is not that the subaltern cannot speak but that society needs to learn how to hear and forget the predetermined image, the constructed image of the subaltern as someone that must act according to how the upper classes expect them to.

Conclusion

This account of Carolina Maria de Jesus's description of life inside a community shows how heterogeneous it can be, besides sharing important features in common. Moreover, it shows how raising a voice alone can reinforce both subalternity and otherness.

De Jesus raised her voice in her private diary, but her wish was to write a book, to make her thoughts and opinions public. Besides her lack of social status, De Jesus aimed at the nature of human beings to face and defy social impositions. Unfortunately, in *Child of the Dark*, the subaltern spoke but was not heard, and proof of that is that the author was ignored in Brazil for many years. Fortunately, today, Carolina Maria de Jesus's masterpiece is one of the best sellers in Brazilian Literature and is regarded by the critics of postcolonial Brazilian Literature as a bibliographic jewel since it was the first time that, besides being unsuccessful at the time, a subaltern screamed for being heard and finally reached new generations.

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