

Vidal, Nara. *Sorte*. Belo Horizonte: Editora Moinhos, 2019, p. 99.

Brazilian cultural and literary critic Roberto Schwarz has said “literature is not judgement, it is figuration”¹ (42: translation by the author) Therefore, the major quality in a novel is the ability to investigate and analyse a specific social environment rather than just tell a good story. Nara Vidal’s first novel, *Sorte/ Luck*, is one of these works in which a narrative of the past shines a light in our present.

Winner of the 2019 Prêmio Oceanos, one of the most celebrated literary prizes in the Portuguese language, *Sorte* is a rare beast: a slim historical novel which describes with depth and sense the way in which movements of History change personal lives. Vidal is a Brazilian writer living in England, whose extensive research for this novel is quite evident.

The protagonist is Margareth Cunningham, an Irish young woman living with her God-fearing family in the early eighteenth century in terrible conditions: “Our poverty was also a punishment by God. We agreed from the beginning that opening our eyes and traverse unhappy hours until we close the eyelids again was our greatest luck.”² (15: translation by the author)

From this quote in the first page of the novel, one can deduce most of the themes discussed by Vidal. God and poverty are everywhere throughout the pages of this book. Following a tradition in Irish literature, the writer investigates the way in which the intersection between family, country, religion, and the absence of money turns into the force that drives the Cunninghams to abandon Ireland, and try a better life in Brazil.

This country, as the legendary island Hy-Brazil, has a mythical aura in the first part of the novel, while Margareth and her family are still living in Ireland. “Hy-Brazil is a wandering island. It appears every seven years and, therefore, infinitely.”³ (Vidal, 22: translation by the author). Martha, the protagonist’s younger sister, loves this legend, and the possibility of life in a new land contaminates the whole family. Once the father receives the news that they will go to Brazil, he says: “We are going to a warm land full of hope. It will take forty-five days to cross the ocean in a ship and we will scape this famine, this end of the world. They need families for working as settlers. Daniel and James can start a business. The land is called Brazil.”⁴ (23: translation by the author)

The short part of the novel set in Ireland creates a dialectical movement with the Brazilian land once they arrive there. Vidal paints a bleak scenery in a way that is opposed the sunny and tropical South America. However, what remains in both countries is a life of poverty and exploitation. Leaving their homeland in Cork is a joyful moment that will prove to be just a disguise for worse things yet to come.

The women from this family leave Ireland in winter clothes – blankets and scarves – to which the father argues: “In Brazil it all will be useless. Your mother can sew a cotton dress for each one of you to kill time throughout this crossing.”⁵ (24: translation by the author) And he was right. Margareth describes Rio de Janeiro when they arrive as a city of “frightful heat”. The crossing proves to be an ordeal for the family – among other things, the matriarch dies and the protagonist gets pregnant by a doctor with whom she loses touch once they arrive in Brazil.

As described in the novel, many people who took this journey from Ireland to Brazil died of the poor conditions of the ships, lack of food and such. They were all buried in a fictitious mass grave identified as “Ireland 1827”. This first contact with Brazil unveils how flawed was the utopian dream of the Cunninghams. Apart from the harsh climate and other unforeseen difficulties, they were met with a war that would claim the family’s both young boys,

whom the father had dreamed to become businessmen.

The girls would have an even worse fate. Working in the house of a rich and white family Margareth would be almost as exploited as an African slave, who also lived there and who became her only friend. The protagonist's pregnancy, however, would bring a change in her life once she is sent to a home run by nuns with the same aim as the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland.

Brazil, a country which was supposed to be the antitheses of Ireland for this family, turned out a disappointment, for the Cunninghams would find there the same life of poverty as in Ireland, only under a different climate. Vidal has a resourceful way for underlining that the Cunninghams are trapped in the same nightmare with the shining sun as the only differential.

Utopia and dystopia are not two different sides of the same coin – they are the same side. Brazil and Ireland are an oppressive utopia that privileges only the elite, the ones at the top of the social pyramid. It is not easy for Margareth to learn that. After undergoing a painful process, the protagonist discovers that no matter where she is, as a woman, and specially a poor woman, she will always be oppressed and subdued.

The fact of having Margareth as a protagonist and narrator for most of the novel, as in the last part there is a shift in the narration and point of view, allows us to read a first hand-account of this process, and allows us to perceive that the two countries are not as different as they seem. A place similar to a Magdalene Asylum in Rio de Janeiro is a narrative device that highlights how close the realities of these two countries were. As we can see, Margareth may have left Ireland, but Ireland will never leave her.

As aforementioned, a great work of literature must be able to shed light over its present, the society and social developments which have allowed its production. *Sorte* is a novel that looks back into the past, but it is actually investigating the perennial situation of exploitation and oppression of women – especially in underdeveloped countries. The existence of the Magdalene Laundries in both countries is a symbolic symptom of this situation. The fact that in Brazil one also finds a setting that is typically Irish, creates a mirror effect pointing at how trapped Margareth's life is. But not only hers: the presence of an African slave in the house the protagonist works and lives at enables Vidal to establish a comparison of their conditions and how similar they are – although since Marialva is an African slave, her life is, of course, worse than Margareth's.

In an essay about Brazilian politics and culture during the Military Dictatorship, Schwarz, once more, affirms that “the reader will see that time has passed but it is not past”⁶. (Schwarz, 2008, 70: translation by the author) This is exactly what Vidal is aiming at with her novel. Not only is she able to paint a vivid and accurate portrait of the past, but by doing so she can also investigate the social elements that remain the same throughout Brazilian history, such as the exploitation and oppression, specially of women and African-Brazilians.

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Notes

1 “literatura não é juízo, é figuração” (42)

2 “A nossa pobreza também era punição do Senhor. Concordamos desde cedo que abrir os olhos e atravessar as horas infelizes até fechar as pálpebras de novo era nossa maior sorte.” (15)

3 “Hy-Brazil é uma ilha movediça. Aparece de sete em sete anos, e por isso, infinitamente.” (Vidal, 22).

- 4 “Vamos para uma terra quente e cheia de esperança. Atravessamos quarenta e cinco dias num navio e saímos dessa fome, desse fim de mundo. Precisam de famílias para trabalhar de colonos. Daniel e James podem começar o negócio. A terra chama-se Brasil.” (23)
- 5 “No Brasil, tudo isso sera inútil. Sua mãe pode costurar um vestido de algodão para cada enquanto o tempo passa nessa travessia.” (24)
- 6 “o leitor verá que o tempo passou e não passou.” (Schwarz, 2008, 70)

Works Cited

- Schwarz, Roberto. *Ao Vencedor as Batatas*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, Editora 34, 2000 [1977].
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