

Violence and Resistance: motherhood in Conceição Evaristo's *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*

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In 2015, the contemporary writer Conceição Evaristo won the Jabuti award, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Brazil, with her work *Olhos D'agua*. A poet, novelist, and short story writer, Conceição Evaristo has immensely contributed to Afro-Brazilian literature and continues to innovate as a creative writer and literary critic. In many of her novels, Evaristo challenges preconceived ideas and depicts the implications of being a black woman in Brazil. Evaristo's *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres* (2011) is a collection of thirteen short stories in which Afro-Brazilian women are the protagonists and the narrators of their own stories. The stories highlight that many Afro-Brazilian women face daily spectacles of physical and psychological violence, poverty, and discrimination. In each story, a woman character shares her past memories, in a process of remembering and rearticulating experiences.¹ One common theme is that of motherhood, which is characterized by mothers who are trying to survive and guarantee their family's safety in a racist and sexist society. Parting from Frantz Fanon's theories of violence and resistance, this paper focuses on the short stories "Aramides Florença," "Shirley Paixão," and "Lia Gabriel" to analyze the peculiarities of the experience of motherhood that helps the women characters fight against victimization. The women characters respond differently to domestic violence; some resist by leaving, ignoring, or even responding with more violence. Nevertheless, the women characters are not judged according to binary notions of good or bad, because such essentialist notions only hinders the complexity of the protagonists, their environment, and their stories. By suggesting the alignment of Frantz Fanon's I propose a reading of Afro-Brazilian literature in light of postcolonial theory, to analyze motherhood in the midst different kinds of violence. I suggest that the maternal figure in the short stories is portrayed differently from the traditional perspective of submission, because motherhood can help women fight against victimization and struggle for empowerment.

The theme of motherhood pervades several of the short stories in *Insubmissas Lágrimas de Mulheres*. Evaristo defies stereotypes commonly associated with the black mother to show the complexity of motherhood. According to Carole Boyce Davies's arguments about the boundaries of motherhood, Evaristo's novels can be said to "problematize the mother rather than romanticize her" (145). The women characters are not idealized or painted as perfect mothers. Instead, the several layers of experience and feelings of the women characters are brought to the forefront of discussion, problematizing issues of gender, race, and social class. The notion of empowerment is also addressed and relativized in many of the short stories. Françoise Lionnet argues that "the female writer who struggles to articulate a personal vision and to verbalize the vast areas of feminine experience which have remained unexpressed, if not repressed, is engaged in an attempt to excavate those elements of the female self which have been buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood" (91). Evaristo's act of writing stories that are commonly forgotten

¹ Despite readings that interpret the narrator's journey as a literal travel made by the author to visit the women who tell the story, this is a literary technique used by the author that enriches the layers of narration. Evaristo does not physically travel to meet these women; and attempts to equate the narrator with Evaristo only downplay her creative literary talent as a writer.

by mainstream canonical literature can be seen as an act of resistance, a refusal to be silent, a confrontation of the status quo that often downplays the domestic violence women suffer. Through her literary work, Evaristo problematizes the hardships and struggles women face as they struggle against a racist, classist, and sexist ideologies.

The first story in *Insubmissas Lágrimas de mulheres* is entitled “Aramides Florença.” The title has the name of the protagonist of the short story, as is the case with all of the thirteen short stories. Aramides is a proud mother and immediately introduces her son, Emildes Florença. She describes how she met Emildes’s father and how much they loved each other when they got married. However, after she becomes pregnant the social dynamics between them changes. One night, while both are already in bed, Aramides struggles to find a comfortable position in bed and she is shocked with what she finds:

She turned over there and over here, looking for a better position to fit her belly and in the place she laid down, her fingers bumped into something strange. There it was, one of those razors, in which you attach a blade at the time of usage. With difficulties to lift herself up, she screamed in pain. A thread of blood was dripping from one of the sides of her womb. (14)².

Aramides screams in pain and out of terror. She is hurt and confused as to why her husband’s razor is on their bed. Immediately, she confronts her husband about it, but he claims not to know why the blade is on their bed either. Aramides decides it was an accident and that the fault is with her pregnancy, which is making her too sensitive.

Even so, other violent incidents happen that become too blunt to be ignored. During her last month of pregnancy, Aramides is in front of the mirror admiring her body, when she sees her husband approaching. She closes her eyes and welcomes his arms. But once again she suffers physical violence:

Only that, in this instance, she screamed in pain. He, who rarely smoked, especially if he was in her presence, had just hugged her with the cigarette lit between the fingers. It was such a fast and violent gesture that the cigarette was macerated and put out in Aramides’ womb. A slight smell of burned meat invaded the air. (15).

Her husband burns her body with a cigarette. Aramides is a victim of domestic violence, but she fails to recognize herself in that position. Although there is no denying that this time her husband committed physical abuse, she believes her husband when he replies that it was an accident.³ Aramides is a victim of domestic abuse, her life and her baby’s life are in danger, but she refuses to acknowledge her husband as an aggressor. She wants to believe that the physical abuses she suffers are accidents, because her husband is not a violent man. She knows he loves her. Why does Aramides take these forms of abuse in silence? Why does she refuse to see the aggressions and fight against this physical abuse? In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon talks about how the oppressed incorporate the oppressor’s ideology, by internalizing a “guilt complex” (53). The oppressed becomes imprisoned in the dominant culture’s configurations, even if they are deteriorating to the self (52).

² The translations in this article are mine, unless indicated otherwise in the references.

³ In the three short stories analyzed in this article, the names of the male characters are not mentioned and they are referred to as husbands and/or fathers.

In light of Fanon's arguments, a parallel can be made with Aramides, who is domesticated into submission by her husband, the oppressor. She ignores the cruelty his violent acts, because she is imprisoned by patriarchal paradigms that legitimize and undermine men's abusive actions. Aramides has internalized tainted paradigms of a sexist society and, thus, she believes the problem is with the pregnancy, which is making her too sensitive.

Domestic violence is often downplayed and the fault is generally placed on women who are labeled as too sensitive, too demanding, or simply mad. In such scenarios, women are given the false impression that they are to blame or that they are being strong by accepting their husbands independently of abuse behavior. Aramides's husband violates her body, as he becomes increasingly violent. He tries to assume control of her body and her life. She is trapped in a metaphorical prison of the social roles of wife and husband; she knows that he is abusing her, but she downplays his actions, performing the role of a good wife by being submissive. She is taught that despite his violent actions, that man is her husband and she is his wife. The role of being a wife comes with the burden of accepting any action from a husband. Domestic violence is one of the hardest kinds of violence to acknowledge, because the aggressor is part of the family, and if male, he can hide behind tainted paradigms of a sexist society.

After giving birth and back at the house, Aramides tries to forget about the domestic abuses she suffered and focuses her attention on her son Emildes, who is only a few days old. But once more, her husband attacks her. Now, he is more violent than ever. Aramides shares:

I was breastfeeding my son- told me Aramides, emphasizing the meaning of the sentence, as she slowly pronounces every word-, when Emildes's father arrived. Abruptly, he wrenched the boy from my arms, putting him in the small crib without any care . . . In a succession of violent acts, he threw me over our bed, ripping my clothes and violently touching with his mouth one of my breasts that was already undressed, in the act of breastfeeding my son. And, in this way, Emildes's father violated me. And, in me, what still hurt a little by the passage of my son, from a more profound pain I suffered, feeling the blood gush. (17-18).

Aramides's husband rapes her as he attempts to dominate her body. She left the hospital few of days before his attack and thus, she is too weak to physically fight against the wrath of her husband. She is raped, violated, abused, in front of her newborn baby. The husband immediately leaves after raping her and she never hears from him again. Aramides says that she finds the will to survive because she wants to be strong for her child and guarantee his well-being. The doctor advises Aramides to avoid breastfeeding Emildes, however, Aramides refuses to stop breastfeeding her son. The narrator states: "subversively, the mother breached science and the doctor and offered her breasts to the baby" (12). The act of breastfeeding Emildes becomes symbolic, because despite being raped and abused, Aramides refuses to give up her motherhood. She feels strengthen the mother-son bond that is shaped during the breastfeeding. Aramides's kind of resistance is not through violence, but nevertheless full of action, marked by acts of courage to continue her life and care for her son. She rejects victimization by loving her son and cherishing their mother-son bond, which her husband tried to break. Even though it is important denounce domestic violence and the aggressors, Aramides should not be judged negatively for not going to the police. The Law Maria da Penha in Brazil is

making it easier for women to denounce domestic abuse, which is still often ignored or downplayed by local authorities. Thus, although Aramides does not denounce her husband to the authorities, this does not mean that she is convenient with his actions. Through motherhood she tries to find the best way she can overcome the violence, caring for her son and fighting against victimization.

The third short story in *Insubmissas Lágrimas de mulheres* is entitled “Shirley Paixão.” Shirley is an older woman, who lost her first husband and tried to kill her second. Despite the initial shock with such a statement, her story sheds light on how such a violent act is possible, if not welcomed. Shirley has two daughters with her first husband, who one day abandons her. Then, after falling in love again, she adopts the three daughters of her second husband. Shirley explains that she loved all the girls equally: “The girls, his daughters, became mine like my own” (26). Shirley mentions that Seni, his oldest daughter, was usually quiet and didn’t interact much:

Seni, the oldest of my daughters, the girl had arrived at my house when she was three months away from completing five years old, was always the most aloof. Not by gestures, but by words. She was capable of staying a long time holding hands with her sisters, or me, without saying anything, in profound silence . . . I respected her little talk, I imagined suppressed feelings of missing her mother and incomprehension at her mother’s death. (26).

Shirley assumes the little girl suffers from the loss of her mother, which makes her quiet. She tries to be even more caring towards Seni because her father was too strict, usually fighting with Seni. The little girl’s father, Shirley explains, “lacked patience, he was always picking a fight with her” (27). Even though the relationship between Seni and her father is problematic, Shirley thought it was a normal father-daughter dynamic.

At school, Seni is too self-censored and is constantly expecting perfection from herself. One day, the schoolteacher tells Shirley that maybe Seni should see a psychologist. When Shirley brings the news home, to her surprise, her husband bursts in outrage almost hitting Seni in front of all of them. Later that night, similar to many other nights, the father violently pulls his daughter, Seni, off the bed. But for the first time, Seni reacts differently: “That night, the animal was very furious -Shirley states, crying- that Seni, for her salvation, made the fear, the terror, courage. And she burst into mourning and screams” (29). Seni breaks her silence and voices her desperation. Shirley hears her cries and runs to the girl’s bedroom. She describes what she sees: “Not even then the bastard backed away. And he advanced on top of Seni, yelling, cursing the biggest insults, ripping her garments and exposing the nudity of that body still half-girl, violated several times by him, ever since her mother had passed away” (29). Seni is now twelve years old and her father has been raping her since she was five years old. Her silence, extreme self-censorship, and feeling of protectiveness towards her younger sisters, are the mechanisms she finds to cope with being raped by her own father. The helplessness of Seni enrages Shirley as she describes:

It was when I watched the most painful scene in my life. A man raging, trying to grab, possess, violate the naked body of a girl, while other begging, desperate, helpless voices called for help... In that instance, for me, life lost its meaning, or gained more, I don’t know. I needed to save my daughter that, literally, was under the claws of a monster! It would be to kill or to die. Die, I couldn’t, or else he would be victorious and would take his intent to the end. (29).

Shirley is in shock at the horrific scene, but through motherhood she finds the strength to fight back. She is aware that her daughters depend on her. Shirley sees only two choices: eliminate the enemy or let him conquer her daughter. She does not consider dying because she needs to live to guarantee her daughters safety.

Shirley has no doubt that violence is the only way to stop her husband from continuing to rape her daughter and she does not refuse to act. She attacks her husband using whatever she finds to stop him: "And a salvation came. A small iron bar, which worked as a lock for the window, was lying in one of the corners of the room. It was only a pull up and a pull down of the bar. When I looked, the bad animal fell sprawled on the floor. Half way in the second movement, somebody held me- a neighbor" (30). Shirley's priority is to save her daughter; she wants to kill this man, her husband, who is destroying her daughter's innocent mind and body. She is in shock and reacting to defend her daughter; she only stops because a neighbor intervenes.

A parallel can be made with Frantz Fanon's arguments, which suggest that for the colonized to be freed from the colorizer, violence is the only efficient way and is inevitable in the process of becoming independent or free (12). There are obvious differences between such comparisons, for one is the literal rape of a girl, and the other is a more metaphorical idea of a rape of people and land. Even so, Shirley's reasoning come from desperation, from an attempt to eliminate the danger and pain the oppressor is inflicting upon her daughter. Violence seems to be the most efficient way to immediately fight back and expel the invader. She has no time to ask others for help or to reason about alternatives to stopping her husband from raping her daughter. In the very end of the short story, Shirley says: "I know that you cannot and should not take justice with your own hands, but my act was to free my daughter. There was no other way. He was a tall and strong man. Just a well given blow would stop his brutal force" (30-1). She acknowledges that violence should not be answered with more violence, but in the night that her husband was raping her daughter, she was determined to stop him by any means necessary. Through motherhood, Shirley acquires the strength to fight against her husband and save her daughter. She does not hesitate because he is her husband. She immediately defends her daughter. Although her method is unconventional and may lead to further violence, she had only one objective in mind: save her daughter from a rapist father. Despite Shirley's reaction, her husband does not die and he is sentenced to lifetime in jail, while she is sent to prison for three years, for tempted murder. In the end of her story, Shirley emphasizes that her family, her and her daughters, are united and happy. She states: "Our sisterhood, our community of women, is now strengthen by a generation of granddaughters that emerges" (31). Shirley and her daughters come together to strengthen themselves and overcome their traumatic past. A parallel can be made with bell hooks's arguments about the importance of women bonds. Hooks explains that through women bonds "rather than seeing giving care as diminishing us, we will experience the kind of care giving that enriches the giver" (*Sisters* 168). This kind of care is what Shirley and her daughters experience. The women characters turn to each other for support, care, and love.

The tenth story of *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres* is entitled "Lia Gabriel." Lia quickly mentions that her son is diagnostic with possible schizophrenia at a young age. She describes her son, Máximo, as "Now, Gabriel was a sweetness of a happy child, at times consumed by aggressiveness, however, always against himself. Throwing himself at the floor, sometimes suddenly, for nothing or for some repressed wish. In these moments of unrestrained anger, hitting with his head on the wall,

tearing out his own hair, pulling his lips, nose, ears, biting himself; self-harming” (83). Lia emphasizes that he has never hurt her or his sisters; his violence is always against himself. She briefly mentions that one day, after a fight, her husband left them and she had to support her family alone. First, Lia works as a math teacher at a local school, then at home, to spend more time with Máximo. She opens her own shop: “Everything can be Fixed.” She explains the name by saying that “For a long time, when the kids were small, we survived from the classes I taught at home and the money from the store ‘Everything can be Fixed’. And it can. I fixed up my life, whose spring was rusting.” (84). Through motherhood, Lia finds a way to restore her life and she manages to survive supporting three kids on her own and patiently taking care of Máximo, who needs extra care.

Lia mentions that one of Máximo’s doctors is interested in the story of his father, because during one of his crises, he screamed his name. Lia, for the first time, begins to share violent incidence that happened when Máximo was only two years old. Lia tells her story:

It was a Sunday afternoon, I was seated in the living room floor with the kids, making some building games, when he walked in stepping thickly and asking for lunch. Seated, I continued and I replied that his plate was inside the microwave, he just needed to turn it on. After few minutes passed, him, the mad dog, returned to the living room advanced on top of me, dragging me to the outer room in the back of the apartment. There, he opened the tap of the tank and, covering my mouth, stuck my head under the water, while giving me knee blows from the back. It was not the first time that he attacked me. (86).

Lia is another victim of domestic violence. She is physically beaten and tortured, inside her own home. The beating does not stop. She does not have the physical strength to fight back, but she resists by not screaming: “Afterwards, he threw me in the maid’s room and with the belt in his hand, he ordered me to take off my clothes, whipping me several times. I didn’t issue one single scream, I couldn’t scare even more the kids, who were already terrified” (87). She is afraid to scream and scare her children even more. As a mother, she tries to protect her children from further suffering by pretending she is not in agony. She wants to be strong for them so they would not to be completely terrified. However, Lia’s resistance to voice desperation enrages her husband and this time his violence extrapolates to an even worst extreme:

After, he came back to the room and brought my boy, already naked, throwing the child against me. I protected my boy in my arms, which were already bleeding. It started then, a new session of tortures. He was whipping me, with Gabriel on my lap. And when the blows caught the body of my boy, I only had time to bend myself over my son and offer my back and my naked buttocks to the man that tortured me. (87).

The imagery of this scene is visceral and disturbing, as Lia attempts to save her son from the lashes of her husband. She tries to defend her son at any cost. She suffers cruel domestic violence, which haunts women who are entrapped in an abusive relationship. As in many cases of domestic violence, children also suffer the consequences of an abusive husband/father. The story implies that Máximo’s psychological problems can be a result of his traumatic experience, seeing his father abuse his mother, but not being able to do defend his mother. Lia and her children, especially Máximo, suffer horrible physical and psychological domestic violence.

After facing such horror, Lia manages to clean herself up and take the children to her mother's house, looking for shelter and guidance. She mentions:

I searched for my mother's house. I was received by her with care and advice. I could stay for a few days, but the right thing would be to go back and talk to my husband, to reach an understanding. It was necessary to think about the kids. Yes, I would do that. I would talk to him. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but the hate I was feeling made me stronger. It wasn't necessary, however. Cowardly, he didn't wait for my return. (87).

In this scene, the importance of motherhood is once again affirmed. Lia Gabriel's first reaction is to run to her mother. Although she finds support in her mother, she is advised to go back to her house, because the man is her husband, independently of his actions. How could her mother tell her to go back after her husband almost beat her death? After he abused his own son, Máximo? How can Lia return to that prison, to talk with the man who violently tortured her and the children? It can be argued that Lia and her mother may have internalized what Fanon describes as the "guilt complex" (53). Both are metaphorically imprisoned by dominant discourse that many times justifies or accepts domestic violence. Any logical reasoning is suppressed by a sexist discourse that reinforces the idea of women's role as submissive wives. The repetition of culturally acceptable acts reinforces women's position as inferior to men's and her submission as a wife. Lia is entrapped in an abusive environment that privileges men's authority, especially inside the house. She does not want to go back, but she is forced to consent to the violence, because he is her husband. Fortunately, when Lia goes back to the house, her husband was gone—taking all their belongings with him, including their bed. Lia's shop "Everything can be Fixed" acquires a metaphorical meaning about how much fixing her life needed. She overcomes domestic violence and manages to come out strong to protect and support her three children. By having the courage to tell Máximo's doctor the truth, Lia challenges dominant discourse that privileges men's authority inside the household by exposing the domestic violence he inflicted upon herself and her family. By voicing her traumatic past, she defies her guilt complex and condemns domestic violence and its consequences. Through motherhood, Lia finds the courage to share her experience, denouncing her abusive ex-husband, to help her son heal and overcome his traumatic experience.

As briefly addressed in a footnote, in the three short stories analyzed, the name of the husband/father is not mentioned. This may be a strategy adopted by Conceição Evaristo to reduce these male figures to something less worthy than characters with proper names, because of the horrible acts of violence they committed. At the same time, the literary choice of not revealing the male characters' names allows the short stories to transgress borders of time, space, and location. The domestic violence caused by these men echoes that of many others who abuse, torture, and rape women. The mystery around the men's names also suggests that the violence transcends them, because although they are guilty for their actions, they are not solely to blame, as tainted paradigms confine both women and men in deplorable conditions. In this sense, the short stories welcome the reader to think about the causes and consequences of domestic violence, while problematizing women's subject position in such contexts.

In conclusion, the short stories "Aramides Florença," "Shirley Paixão," and "Lia Gabriel," bring to the forefront of literary discussions how women suffer different kinds of physical and psychological violence. Domestic violence is present in many of

the households and the women characters refuse succumb to such violence. Frantz Fanon's theories of colonialism and decolonization, adopted in this article shed an alternative perspective in reading motherhood, violence, and resistance. Despite cruel circumstances of domestic violence, acts of resistance are possible as the women characters refuse oppression and care for their children, at times resorting to violence. In *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres* the women characters fight against victimization and struggle for empowerment through motherhood.

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