

CRITICAL REFLECTION IN PASSAGENS, BY TEOLINDA GERSÃO

Reflexão crítica em Passagens, de Teolinda Gersão

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Abstract

This study aims to make a small analysis of some of the main themes present in the novel *Passagens*, by the contemporary writer Teolinda Gersão, being them the memory, identity, fretense and the role of women in society. *Passagens* is a book with a plurality of voices and memories, having as its main background the wake of Ana, a family matriarch, in which she, her family and friends try to rediscover the family memories, in addition to thinking about important matters and acts, as motherhood, ephemerality of life, old age, suicide and simulacrum of life. Through the hermeneutic method, with the help of the theoretical framework, we will try to broaden the understanding of the novel and its possible interpretations. The main theoretical sources will be: *A identidade cultural da Pós-modernidade*, by Stuart Hall (2006), *Problemas de gênero: feminismo e subversão da identidade*, by Judith Butler (2003) and *Tempo e Narrativa*, by Paul Ricoeur (1997).

Resumo

Este estudo tem como objetivo fazer uma análise de alguns dos principais temas abordados no romance *Passagens*, da escritora contemporânea Teolinda Gersão, sendo eles a memória, a identidade, o fingimento e o papel da mulher na sociedade. *Passagens* é um livro com pluralidade de vozes e de memórias, tendo como principal plano de fundo o velório de Ana, a matriarca da família, em que ela, a sua família e os seus amigos tentam redescobrir as memórias familiares, além de levantar discussões sobre temas importantes e atuais, como a maternidade, a efemeridade da vida, a velhice, o suicídio e o simulacro da vida. Pelo método hermenêutico, com a ajuda do arcaboço teórico, procuraremos ampliar a compreensão do romance e as suas possíveis interpretações. As principais fontes teóricas serão: *A identidade cultural da pós-modernidade*, de Stuart Hall (2006), *Problemas de gênero: feminismo e subversão da identidade*, de Judith Butler (2003) e *Tempo e Narrativa*, de Paul Ricoeur (1997).

Palavras-chave: *Identidade; Memória; Passagens; Simulacro; Teolinda Gersão.*

Key-words: *Identity; Memory; Passagens; Simulacrum; Teolinda Gersão.*

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INTRODUCTION

Teolinda Maria Sanches de Castilho Gersão Gomes Moreno, the author of *Passagens*, is one of the most renowned contemporary Portuguese writers. Born in Coimbra in 1940, she has authored fourteen works of fiction that have been translated into eleven languages. Her literary portfolio includes: *O silêncio* (1981), *Paisagem com mulher e mar ao fundo* (1982), *História do homem na gaiola e do pássaro encarnado* (1982), *Os guarda-chuvas cintilantes* (1984), *O cavalo de sol* (1989), *A casa da cabeça de cavalo* (1995), *A árvore das palavras* (1997), *Os teclados* (1999), *Os anjos* (2000), *Histórias de ver e andar* (2002), *O mensageiro e outras histórias com anjos* (2003), *A mulher que prendeu a chuva* (2007), *A cidade de Ulisses* (2011), *Os teclados e três histórias com anjos* (2012), *As águas livres* (2013), *Passagens* (2014), *Amores, prantos e outros desvarios* (2016), and *Atrás da Porta e outras Histórias* (2019). Gersão studied at the Universities of Coimbra, Tübingen, and Berlin, specializing in German and English studies. Although she now devotes herself entirely to writing, she was a professor of German Language and Comparative Literature at the New University of Lisbon until 1995. Her experience living in several countries (Germany, Brazil, Mozambique, and Portugal) has contributed to the broad and diverse worldview evident in her literary works, enriching her narratives. Gersão has received multiple awards, including the PEN Club Fiction Award for two novels (*O silêncio*, 1981, and *O cavalo de sol*, 1989), the APE Grand Prize for Romance and Novella (*A casa da cabeça de cavalo*, 1995), the Fernando Namora Prize (*Os teclados*, 1999), the Camilo Castelo Branco Short Story Grand Prize (*Histórias de ver e andar*, 2002), the Máxima Literature Prize (*A mulher que prendeu a chuva e outras histórias*, 2008), the Inês de Castro Foundation Award (2008), the Ciranda Award, and the António Quadros Foundation Prize (*A Cidade de Ulisses*, 2011), as well as the Fernando Namora Prize (*Passagens*, 2014).

Passagens, the novel analyzed in this study, was first published by Sextante in 2014 and is divided into three chapters: “Meeting Point,” “Night,” and “The Ceremony.” In the first chapter, a heterodiegetic third-person narrator introduces the character Ana, an elderly woman who realizes that she is surrounded by flowers at her own funeral. Ana observes that many of her relatives and acquaintances are present, speaking about her and recounting memories of her life. After establishing the context and Ana’s state, the narration shifts to the first person, presenting the people gathered there. One of these figures is Marta, Ana’s daughter who is the character with more dialogue in the novel.

The novel offers a diverse array of voices, as each character at the ceremony recalls past moments with Ana, allowing the reader to get to know Ana and other characters. Memories, secrets, reflections, and family confessions emerge, and various contemporary themes are addressed. What unites the many voices in the novel is the physical space of the wake and the fact that all conversations originate from discussions about Ana.

The second chapter, “Night,” takes place after everyone has left, and Ana’s consciousness splits into two identities (Ana 1 and Ana 2), as if her body has detached from her spirit, enabling them to engage in a kind of posthumous soliloquy. Ana then reflects on significant events in her life and reveals family secrets, such as her mother Olympia’s marriage, which had been a mere pretense. Her father was irresponsible, absent, and abusive, yet her mother refused to confront this reality. She also discusses her experiences in a nursing home, where she felt isolated and abandoned, noting that she pretended to have Alzheimer’s to spare her family from having to care for her.

The third and final chapter, “The Ceremony,” brings the family members back and details the last moments of the funeral. This chapter includes significant discussions and reflections on topics like motherhood, the meaning of life and death from biological, philosophical, and existential perspectives. In this way, the three chapters address relevant, contemporary issues, providing insight into the writer’s critical perspective and prompting readers to reflect on these subjects. This study aims to expand the analysis of the novel and contribute to a deeper understanding of Teolinda Gersão’s work, using theoretical frameworks to support the exploration.

Identities

In the chapter “Night,” the character Ana’s identity is fragmented into two parts (Ana 1 and Ana 2), engaging in a kind of posthumous soliloquy in which she recalls her life and her family’s secrets. When Ana speaks to Ana 2, she imagines she is speaking with her sister Laura, who passed away in childhood:

Sometimes, when we talk, I feel like I’m splitting into a sister, and that our bond is total. In some way, you are also Laura, my older sister, who died of typhoid fever in childhood. I always kept her memory; I spoke to her when I spoke to myself. (Gersão, 2014: 84).

Thus, Ana 2 is an extension of Ana's identity, serving to preserve her sister's memory and cope with her painful absence, illustrating the fragmentation of identities—a prevalent theme in contemporary literature. On the topic of fragmented identities in today's world, it is essential to mention sociologist Stuart Hall, who in *A identidade cultural da pós-modernidade* discusses this issue:

A different kind of structural change is transforming modern societies at the end of the 20th century. It is fragmenting the cultural landscapes that once provided us with stable identities as social individuals of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality. These transformations are also changing our personal identities, challenging the idea of ourselves as integrated subjects. This loss of a stable 'sense of self' is sometimes called the displacement or decentering of the subject. (Hall, 2006: 09).

This highlights that cultural identity in postmodernity is undergoing a crisis as part of a broader process of change. The old, fixed, unified identities based on essentialism are in decline; the subject has become fragmented and decentered. The postmodern human is still uncertain about the new directions society has taken, feeling displaced and carrying multiple identities. We see this in Ana, who through pretense, creates new identities for herself, one of them being that of a person with Alzheimer's.

Memories

Memory is the primary element shaping the narrative of *Passagens*, as the novel consists of family recollections that arise during Ana's funeral ceremony. Through memory, the characters seek to relive moments with Ana and justify past choices and actions. This leads to the revelation of family mysteries and conflicts and the discussion of important topics, as seen in the following excerpt where Marta, Ana's daughter, reflects on family memories: "The secrets of families. The lies, the false stories, that give rise to false memories. The big mistakes someone makes, and the following generations pay the price. Even if you want to erase them, silence them, they are there. And they resurface to be paid." (Gersão, 2014: 74). Thus, the author points out that lies and false stories can create equally false memories that are passed down to future generations.

In Chapter 2, Ana 2 offers a significant reflection on memory: “Memory is a prodigious thing. We remember everything, places, objects, smells, we remember the light, minute details, things so seemingly unimportant we thought we’d forgotten them.” (Gersão, 2014: 83). Memory is therefore something immensely valuable, allowing us to relive countless events and objects from our past, even those of no apparent significance. However, it is essential to note that memory can never fully recreate past events, as it is influenced by later circumstances and social context. As philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues in *Tempo e Narrativa*, memories are affected by time and altered by it: “Memories allow us to ‘climb back up the slope of our past life to seek a particular image’.” (Ricoeur 1997: 44). Accordingly, memories undergo a process of modification each time they reappear, as people select images from the past based on current feelings and circumstances. Therefore, the family memories recalled during Ana’s funeral are not fully true; they have been modified by time, circumstances, and emotions.

The Theater of Life

Passagens is a novel filled with elements of drama, evident especially in its structure, where dialogues are introduced with the speaker’s name. Additionally, pretense and simulation pervade the novel. The protagonist, Ana, is a theater enthusiast and a skillful actress, convincingly simulating Alzheimer’s to everyone around her. Since childhood, Ana has been marked by pretense, as her parents’ marriage was a façade; her mother pretended to be happy with her husband, despite enduring an abusive relationship.

Faking Alzheimer’s was a form of liberation for Ana, who did not want to burden her family and saw it as a way to test her acting skills, as noted in this excerpt: “I couldn’t bear for them to waste their lives on me. Simulating Alzheimer’s was the liberation I found for them. In the absence of another option. And, curiously, I enjoyed it. I wanted to know if I could still act. I could, and very well.” (Gersão, 2014: 81).

The word “performed” is repeated several times by Ana and Marta when speaking about family members, highlighting the fact that life is a grand theater where people strive to be accepted according to social standards. This is evident in the following excerpt, where Marta speaks about her grandfather's pretense: “But at some point, it must have occurred to him that he didn’t represent the family, nor did he open a path for them. He was merely performing.” (Gersão, 2014: 71).

Women in *Passagens*

The role of women in society and motherhood are some of the most recurring themes in *Passagens*, primarily addressed by the characters Ana and Marta. Therefore, it is important to provide a brief historical and theoretical context for these themes.

For a long time, women were considered intellectually inferior by patriarchal society and were deprived of writing and even literacy. When they did write and attempted to publish their works, they faced prejudice from publishers, critics, and the reading public. To achieve success with their literary works, women often had to use male pseudonyms, as the British writer Jane Austen did in the 18th century. In the vast majority of books that circulated, the representation of women adhered to patriarchal stereotypes. Women were depicted as pure, defenseless, and submissive, or, conversely, as sinful, immoral, and treacherous. Although there were many female characters, with many being protagonists or supporting characters, they were still represented according to patriarchal stereotypes.

In her book *Problemas de Gênero* (2003), Judith Butler, a prominent feminist philosopher, argues that women have long been misrepresented in literature because the discourse of others is merely a version with specific objectives and cannot be a faithful representation. Female writers have never lacked a reading audience, but they have faced a lack of recognition from literary critics due to the prevailing patriarchalism. In *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1985), Elaine Showalter asserts that with the popularization of books authored by women, literary critics found it difficult to evaluate these works because they believed female writers tended to expand their own culture and feminine stereotypes into their books. Due to this bias and prejudice, women's works were excluded from the literary canon for a long time, and even today, although women's works are recognized, they are still acknowledged in smaller numbers than those by male authors.

It was only with the emergence of feminist criticism in the 1970s that previously ignored works by women began to be rediscovered, valued, and discussed by literary critics. Regarding the patriarchal tradition that excluded women from the literary canon, Lúcia Osana Zolin (2012) states in *Teoria Literária: Abordagens históricas e tendências contemporâneas*:

Historically, the literary canon, considered a perennial and exemplary set of masterpieces representative of a given local culture, has always been constituted by the white, middle/upper-class Western male; thus, it is regulated by an ideology that excludes the writings of women, non-white ethnicities, so-called sexual minorities, and less privileged social segments, etc. For a woman to insert herself into this universe, a rupture and the announcement of an otherness in relation to this worldview centered on logocentrism and phallocentrism were necessary." (Zolin, 2012: 327).

In her book titled *Desconstruindo a opressão: a imagem feminina em A república dos sonhos de Nélida Pinõn*, Zolin asserts that the effort to rescue the literary production of women, relegated to oblivion, is fundamentally important, as it reveals women who are conscious of their oppressed state and women who are dissatisfied with patriarchal oppression. In the excerpt below, the author discusses the recovery of female literary production:

These are writers who, in light of the change in mindset uncovered by feminism regarding the social condition of women, venture into the world of fiction, until then genuinely male, crafting narratives populated by female characters who are aware of the state of dependence and submission to which patriarchal ideology has relegated women. (Zolin, 2012: 255).

Building on Elaine Showalter's concepts, Zolin divides women's literature into three main phases: the feminine phase, where authors imitated the writing of male authors to internalize prevailing values and standards; the feminist phase, marked by protests and critiques of female oppression; and the female phase, characterized by self-discovery and a quest for one's own identity.

The history attests that female writing has always been a means of liberation from the shackles of patriarchy and a way to construct one's own identity. Literature authored by women, especially contemporary literature, questions and problematizes the representation of women, the role of women in society, and patriarchy itself. Since the 1970s, women have gained greater prominence in global literary production, making it possible for female voices to be heard. Patriarchal standards of female representation are broken to pave the way for the construction of an emancipated female identity. Based on the theory outlined above, it can be concluded that contemporary women's literature is fundamental for linking artistic production to sociocultural issues and denouncing all forms of oppression.

Psychological aspects of characters in contemporary women's literature include dependency, revenge, and loneliness, reflecting the state of modern women. In this sense, Antonio de Pádua Dias da Silva states that even in a society where the discourse is of female emancipation, many women still remain dependent on a man, as is observable in the following excerpt:

Patriarchal or phallocentric societies have constructed this myth of women's dependence on men. This discourse has been so well articulated in the images constitutive of our anthropological heritage that the structures of the unconscious or collective imaginary have not been resized over the last few centuries concerning gender issues. Even living in an era where the discourses in favor of liberation, emancipation, and freedom for women and other categories previously oppressed by men are constant and penetrate more forcefully than in other times in the debates surrounding the issue, a part of women still remains trapped—many are aware of this fact—within the regime of dependency. (Silva, 2015: 4).

Such a reality is presented in *Passagens*, primarily through the story of Ana's mother, a woman who suffered greatly with an abusive and violent husband but tolerated him because she felt dependent on him, as demonstrated in the following excerpt where Ana speaks about her mother:

Ana 1

And she pretended to believe that she was happy like that, because she wasn't able to live without him.

Ana 2

She depended on him, she needed him,

Ana 1

she couldn't go without his presence, his arms, his body, his kisses, his sex, (...) (Gersão, 2014: 96).

As can be observed from the excerpt above, despite all the suffering caused by her husband, Olímpia had a relationship of total dependency on him, with that dependency being something intrinsic and a consequence of the influence of the discourse of the patriarchal society she belonged to. Ana also mentions the psychological and physical violence her mother suffered at the hands of her husband, which she refused to acknowledge:

I confronted my mother about this, but she downplayed it. Oh, no, they were just small domestic arguments like those in all families. And what about the time my father threw a plate on the floor because that wasn't food that should be presented to a man like him? My mother ignored the question and went off on a tangent: A man like him, she said, showing me a photograph. (Gersão, 2014: 86).

Or even:

In other dreams, father yelled and hit mother and she cried, and he would leave the house and take many days to return, and then he would come back and she would sigh, and he would transform and be like he was again and bring her gifts, and she would end up forgiving him and they would take another trip." (Gersão, 2014: 95).

As can be seen from the excerpts presented, Olímpia suffered from psychological and physical violence, but like many women who are victims, she pretended that everything was fine and continued with her husband without even complaining for fear of society's judgment. Olímpia's personal story can be interpreted as a representation of the stories of many women who have gone through or are going through similar situations. Therefore, the novel *Passagens* is an important way to give voice to oppressed and silenced women, as well as to lead readers to reflect on this topic, which is so significant and relevant.

The novel also discusses the fact that when a baby is born, most of the time, the woman's responsibility for its upbringing is greater than the man's, as evidenced by the following remarks from Marta:

And only then does the father come in, in his normal suit, when everything has already passed, and sees the woman and the child and receives congratulations, as if it had all cost him a tremendous effort (Gersão, 2014: 54). [...] And I was filled with fury, and my body shrank in size, day by day I became weaker and smaller, while the father, the adult, deserted (Gersão, 2014: 55). Through Marta's dilemmas, the novel reveals something very common in patriarchal society: women being overburdened with the duties of motherhood while men perform a largely absent form of fatherhood, making motherhood an exhausting role.

On the topic of women being overburdened today, the novel points to how difficult it is for women to balance so many responsibilities simultaneously:

Life is complicated; there's too much pressure on women—they demand everything from them, and all at the same time. It's natural they may falter. But weren't they the ones who wanted it all—family, job, husband, children, career? They chose everything, and now they complain that it's too much to bear. (Gersão, 2014: 60).

Or:

António had shown himself to be far more than that. And I could carry Hugo alone. I discovered, after all, that I was strong. (Gersão, 2014: 62).

Later, to illustrate this same idea:

Until a few years ago, men completely delegated this role to mothers, who were confined to the interior world of the home. Now, they've left the house, and men participate more and offer more support, but in unequal parts, and their lives are easier (Gersão, 2014: 177).

The above excerpts reflect Marta's views on the excessive responsibilities of the modern woman who, despite being part of the workforce, is still expected to fulfill traditional roles such as being a good mother and wife. According to Marta—who, in essence, voices the author's perspective—these demands make women overwhelmed and exhausted, but choosing between one responsibility and another is difficult. In the last excerpt, Marta speaks about her experience with her ex-husband António, who hardly helped care for their child, emphasizing that she strove and was strong enough to raise her son on her own. Thus, Marta represents many women who have not had the support of their partners in raising their children yet persevered, dedicated themselves, and, despite the difficulties, managed to raise their children without the father's presence.

Despite women being gradually incorporated into the workforce starting in the 1960s and often working as many hours outside the home as their husbands, the responsibility of managing household chores and childcare still largely falls on them. This happens because society remains largely sexist in its division of tasks and responsibilities, with few husbands sharing in these duties, which leaves women overly burdened, as the author highlights in *Passagens*.

Motherhood

Motherhood is one of the most frequently addressed themes in *Passagens*, emerging from dialogues regarding Ana and Marta. Throughout the novel, the characters reflect on motherhood in ways that invite readers to think more deeply about the subject.

Shortly before Ana's body is cremated, a tribute is made, highlighting what a good mother she was and underscoring the importance of the mother's role in society, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

They become so vulnerable and so attached to us that if we die, they die with us, even if they continue living. If we are unhappy, so are they; if life mistreats us, it mistreats them as well (...) [Mothers] forget to love themselves enough, but almost never forget to put us first in their lives." (Gersão, 2014:175).

This passage is a tribute to Ana, but it extends to all mothers who, out of love for their children, give up many aspects of their own lives to dedicate themselves to motherhood.

Another postmodern social issue presented in *Passagens* is the fact that interest in motherhood has significantly decreased in recent decades, while interest in pets has increased: "There are fewer and fewer births; the world is not a good place for children. But there is more interest in animals—they are loved more than children these days" (Gersão, 2014: 44). This passage presents a critical reflection on contemporary society. Indeed, following the advances in women's rights and the increased freedoms gained since the 1960s—particularly their entry into the workforce—there has been a decline in the desire and willingness for motherhood. Meanwhile, pets have never been so desired or well cared for, with Portuguese households now having more pets than children. (Petronilho, 2019: s/p).

The novel also emphasizes that motherhood is not a gift bestowed upon every woman at birth. Not all women possess a strong maternal instinct, nor do they instinctively know how to handle motherhood:

Now her job is to take care of the child. Seek help if you're tired. A mother, mother-in-law, aunt, cousin, friend, maid. An extra maid, or even a nurse or child-care specialist, if you can afford it. Someone trained, who can teach you to be a mother. It's something you practice, of course. You're not born knowing, and it's not as innate as generally assumed; it's natural to feel distressed and incompetent. (Gersão, 2014: 57).

As illustrated in the passage above, the work breaks away from the common assumption that all women are born with maternal instinct. The character's words express the real emotions of a woman facing the challenges and insecurities of motherhood, feeling distressed and inadequate for not meeting the idealized version of the perfect mother set forth by society.

The novel also exposes the reality that motherhood has many negative aspects, challenging the romanticized view that sees motherhood as an essential part of a woman's fulfillment and life's greatest goal. The following excerpt illustrates this theme:

And a mother to care, because now even I have a right to some attention and comfort, even some extra affection, after all, it was me who endured nausea and vomiting in the first months, had to sacrifice loads of sleep to get up and go to work, because pregnancy also means nausea, exhaustion, and sleepiness, and as luck would have it, coffee is one of the first things we can't stand... (Gersão, 2014: 52).

For a long time, motherhood was considered the greatest purpose in a woman's life, with the Virgin Mary being the most prominent symbol and example of motherhood in Western society. However, the difficulties and suffering of motherhood have long been taboo subjects, avoided to preserve the sanctity of motherhood.

Literature has played a vital role in breaking these taboos by presenting unpleasant themes, such as the negative aspects of motherhood, in an artistic and formal manner. This is because readers are encouraged to put themselves in the character's shoes, to understand her psychological conflicts and personal and social dilemmas.

Despite offering a critique of the romanticized idealization of motherhood, *Passagens* also highlights the greatness and uniqueness of the maternal experience, as seen in the following excerpt:

And then your child is born, the moment you feel like you're going to die because you can't bear the pain anymore, suddenly you open up, or they cut you in two, and there is your child, amid blood, urine, feces, screams, and someone cuts the umbilical cord with scissors and places the baby on your belly, now on the outside, as you breathe a sigh of relief, sweaty and happy, and after crying, the child snuggles and calms, still covered in blood and amniotic fluid, close to you. (Gersão, 2014: 54).

Passagens addresses motherhood realistically, showing its greatest challenges and pains as well as its joys. Motherhood is presented as a unique and grand experience, but one that also has many unpleasant aspects, which cannot be ignored or left undiscussed.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

With the aid of theoretical frameworks, it was possible to deepen the understanding of *Passagens*, a contemporary novel that addresses relevant modern issues with high aesthetic quality. The novel is constructed primarily through memories, allowing readers to revisit past events and understand gaps in the family's history. One of the novel's key themes is the everyday pretense that is part of most people's lives, serving as an attempt to gain greater social acceptance and escape life's brutal reality. Another significant theme is identity, presented as multifaceted and fragmented, as theorized by Stuart Hall. Moreover, the novel explores the primary dilemmas faced by contemporary women, highlighting the fact that society is still not entirely free from sexist thinking.

In short, the analysis of Teolinda Gersão's *Passagens* is of great importance, not only for its aesthetic quality but also for its artistic exploration of such timely and pressing themes.

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