

Shattering Women's Images and Rewriting Women's Self In *Novas cartas portuguesas*

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Novas cartas portuguesas (1972), whose English translation is *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters* (1975),¹ is an eclectic narrative form written by three authors: Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Velho da Costa, and Maria Teresa Horta. These authors started the process of writing the book by exchanging letters about their experiences as women, wives, mothers of boys, and as newly-divorced working women in a patriarchal society. The authors wrote these letters and other materials, such as popular songs, fictional sketches, personal notes, articles of the civil code, and fictional letters to portray the dialogical voices of various Marias, Maria Anas, Mónicas, Marianas, and many other women and some men to construct the corpus of the book.

This study analyzes the dialogism of the creative chronotope, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Dialogical Imagination*. For Bakhtin this chronotope has a special matrix of space/time “inside which [the] exchange between [the literary] work and life occurs, and which constitutes the distinctive life of the work” (254). In *Novas cartas portuguesas*, the characters' re-creative discourse of self becomes the catalytic force to express passions, re-evaluate identities, experience personal transformations, and confront social labels and stereotypes. This analysis contends that the dialogical discourse of *Novas cartas portuguesas* defies the dictatorial discourse on women's roles, undermines and challenges it, and offers instead a myriad of open possibilities for women's social contributions and personal fulfillment, which aims at giving a wide view of women's circumstances and validating the textual discourse.

The three authors take advantage of a pliable form of narrative, which Darlene J. Sadlier calls “fragmented and multiform,” and in some aspects, such as the use of time, resembles the novel, but which resists any classification within the parameters of common literary genres (*The Question How: Women Writers and New Portuguese Literature* 14). The book is an example of what Yaeger and Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz call “hybridization,” that is, the use of different literary genres in the same text. This narrative matrix is the authors' response to the need for a diverse mode of representation for the various women's modes of living, self-awareness, and self-understanding, as well as for forging new women's identities. We can say that this hybrid form of narrative best reflects the three authors' intention to represent centuries of female history, especially women's subordination in the home, in the convent, in love relations, and in all other situations.

The authors use the various narrative voices of different social and linguistic backgrounds. They also interweave French and English in the Portuguese text, and play with texts of various authors of different literary genres and periods, thus contributing to the representational possibilities of the dialogic narrative. To this effect, Patricia Yaeger asserts that “the dialogic tendency of languages to interact with one another is the source of textual liberation” (*The Geography of Identity* 255). This same assertion seems to be followed by the three authors in *Novas cartas portuguesas*. They blended a myriad of texts in a dialogical conversation, blurred their individuality, and transformed them in a

global orchestra of harmonic voices, thus liberating the texts from their initial frame giving them new identities. Metaphorically the same occurs with the portrayal of women's lives. The various voices concur to form new women's identities.

Novas cartas portuguesas present a transgressive and fragmented literary narrative in dialogue with *Cartas de amor*² (Love Letters), originally published in French under the title *Lettres portugaises*, which was allegedly written in the seventeenth century by a Portuguese nun named Soror Mariana Alcoforado. Alcoforado's family forced her to enter a convent as often happened at that time, when a noble family could not afford a dowry for their daughters. She was the youngest in her family and entered the convent when she was still a child. Later she allegedly had a love relation with a French cavalier, who abandoned her by departing with his army to France.

Mariana wrote five passionate love letters to her lover complaining about his abandonment of her, but above all, she described the details of her erotic passion that seems to be the driven force of her passion for writing, "Mariana takes her pleasure with her body" but also the joy of writing about her passion and her feelings (Barreno, *Three Marias* 58). Both *Cartas de amor* and the *Novas cartas portuguesas* depict the passion for one's own emotions and the pleasure of writing about them as transforming and creating forces of the self. However, the latter forges a polyphonic dialogue of characters and narrative genres that goes beyond the epistolary form. These include excerpts of the Portuguese civil code, fragments of diaries, journalistic news, poetry, and essays that display a variety of women's circumstances and all contribute to emphasize the myriad of women's realities vis a vis the reductive, monolithic, and simplified portrayal of the dictatorial discourse.

In addition, *Novas cartas portuguesas* also addresses "contemporary national themes such as emigration, repression, overseas war, feminine and masculine roles" (Barreno, *Three Marias* 401) that affected all societies and women in particular. Further, the authors create fictional letters from various members of Alcoforado's family, letters from her alleged lover, the Chevalier de Chamilly, as well as the nun's sixth letter that she addresses to him and in which she declares her sense of independence and fulfillment acquired through writing: "I wrote you letters full of great love and great torment, sir, and after having no answer from you for so long, I began to love them and the act of writing about them more than I loved your image or the memory of you" (342). The authors' appropriation of Alcoforado's voice in this sixth letter is an example of their undermining of fixed texts and the affirmation of the interconnectedness of all literature.

Finally, the authors interweave these letters with the real *Cartas de amor*, which, with the advancement of the narrative, give way to a more complex dialogism of narrative texts in order "to denounce those who comply with and enforce a system that isolates and destroys women by keeping them behind walls" and to rescue and recreate women's identity (Sadler 15). The authors' intentional stirring of consciousnesses and the recreation of a narrative form that could reflect the streaming of their ideas and portray a more accurate stance of women's lives and their roles in society leads to the creation of a literature that would not have existed otherwise as Mark Freeman points out:

The narrative imagination, engaged in the project of rewriting the self, seeks to disclose, articulate, and reveal that very world which, literally, *would not have existed* had the act of writing not taken place. In this sense, life histories are indeed artifacts of writing; they are the upsurge of the narrative imagination. (*Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*, 223)

The narrators strive to expose the incarceration of women in social spaces—not in real convents, like Mariana’s, but behind the metaphorical convents of their homes and the institutions of marriage and motherhood—in order to transform women’s circumstances and empower them as leaders of their own destinies. They want to break the walls of the cultural and geographical spaces that surround women’s lives, remake women’s history, and assist them in the creation of their new identities. One of the main voices even previews the impact that their writing will have once it is exposed to the public, “think about the contract proposed, the shattered cloister walls we would disclose, the three of us exposed to the public view, like girls—children placed in the convent turn box, once born in the secret of our threefold womb” (20).

According to Bakhtin, self-identity is essentially achieved through the interchanging dialogue between one I and one other that perceives that I in its totality. In her dissertation *Feminist Identity*, Denise Collins also concurs with Bakhtin’s theory stating that “identity is constructed of multiple elements that must be examined together to understand the individual’s own definition of self” (67). Furthermore, she affirms that women identify themselves with multiple identities, which result from interaction with other identities (67). Therefore, the presence of the other is essential for the perception of one’s own identity, and is conditioned by many factors. Among the elements that determine the construction of the self are cultural and geographical spaces with the former directly affecting the latter.

The geographical space of the home, as well as the cultural space of motherhood and the institution of marriage, among many others, have conditioned and determined women’s subjugation in patriarchal society. However, the cultural appropriation and manipulation of women’s bodies has specially affected women’s self-identity. In her essay “Notes towards a Politics of Location,” Adrienne Rich posits that the body is the closest geographical location from which women derive their identity, and, accordingly, they should reclaim it as their own by reconnecting with it (9). Women should rethink themselves and speak about themselves, starting from what is unique to them: their body.

The main narrators recognize the power of words to transform women’s reality “...in the beginning was the Word, and there we remained, waiting for creative power of words, their power to change things, to come to our way” (372). So, the narrators resort to the combination of women’s unique experiences and the use of the word to re-create them through the act of writing. For the narrators, if the act of creation is carried out with passion and through the passion of the experiences unique to women’s body, it can transform women’s circumstances and make women’s self-affirmation possible:

Listen, my sister, to the body. Now only the body leads us to others and to words ... Which of us did not gorge herself on your obsessive, narcissistic description—those long legs, those breast, that vagina—how to explain to you, sister, how you reveal yourself, show yourself to the object of your own self, bare your furious desire for your own self ... and it seems to me that to expose oneself is to be true to oneself. (374)

The trio of main narrators claims however, that women are still struggling to assert their own identity and independence within a culture dominated by men. Women lack the words and the power to assert themselves. Moreover, women are alienated from their own beings by a culture in which they feel foreign: “...woman does not have a culture of her own. She exists in a culture where power belongs to men, and therefore, within this

culture, she is alienated...”, or they are so indoctrinated by it that they are unable to recognize it as foreign (298). So for the narrators, the importance of the act of writing to appropriate the word and with it forging women’s identity is of crucial importance.

In the essay mentioned above, Rich avers that women should not speak and write from the margins of the culture where the patriarchal culture has placed them. Rather, they should talk about themselves or address others from the center, using their body as a reference (13). Likewise, the narrators believe that a cultural tradition could be initiated with the use of the word and a network of support could be constituted in order to achieve a cultural transformation:

I asked what words could do; we have filled reams of paper over the months, and what can we do, what are we doing? Words are not a substitute for action, but they can be an aid. They can be used, for instance, to outline the political background of the problem of the woman, for as long as that is missing, the problem will dissolve into one of which packaged soup to buy and “how to satisfy your husband in bed”. (377)

With their writing, the narrators envision a possible cultural empowering counterpoint to the existing male dominant one that denigrates, diminishes, and reduces women to manipulated empty puppets.

Plenty of Marianas, Marias, Maias, and others, whose names are symbolic representations of all women, populate the text as voices depicting multiple experiences of women’s lives. In *Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, Rich affirms that the woman writer/critic “shares the mission of rescuing women’s past from silence; in particular, she would resurrect women’s bonds to other women from the obscurity surrounding them” (11). The same objective drives the authors of *Novas cartas portuguesas* when they enmesh a variety of texts and voices of different periods and sources in an attempt to link women’s past to the present as well as to launch the transformative dialogue open to an empowering future for women’s presence in society.

Among the various women’s voices in the text there is one that sets her apart from the others. Her experience and specially her reaction singularizes her even in the name, Mónica, which is a unique name in the text and also not common in the Portuguese population. Her partner shows his prepotency towards her when he tells her that he likes to feel that even though she has revulsion towards him, she still goes to bed with him (260). This statement not only shows a distorted relationship but also underlines the common permissive social subjugation of women. However, one day after being raped, Mónica reaches her threshold of tolerance and transforms herself from a victim to an avenger. She shatters the walls of her subjugation:

Mónica waited for him to go to sleep. She listened attentively to his breathing, and then with slow, careful deliberated movements she picked up a pillow, put it over his face and with all the strength of her desperation pressed down on it, struggling against the convulsive grasp of the man’s arms, lying on top of his body, her legs pinning down his as he fought to throw her off, the two of them remaining thus, locked together, until she stopped feeling him move, and even long after, lying stretched out for hours there on top of his already-cold body, sleeping, her head resting on the pillow over his face. (262)

This graphic description of a desperate reaction to an awful abuse is not supported in the text as a solution for women’s social status, but showcases what is going on in the society and from its emotional charge intends to bring awareness and a possible transformation.

One of the narrators questions what is needed to make a difference in women's lives and provoke their awakening so that they can assume their own identities and claim control of their own lives. She observes that Mónica's desperate act is not a solution for everyone, but she finds it important to tell others about it. In *The Quest of the Warrior Woman*, Cristina Feldman states that the act of telling is part of the process of finding solutions for women's existence because women "know the pain and grief of being disempowered, silenced and devalued" (Introduction x). The awareness of similar problems and the sharing of personal experiences can help women to cope with their circumstances, and women who have model references can better forge viable paths for their own lives. Although this can be said for men and women, owing to historical and social circumstances men always had models to follow while women lack them. Thenceforth, Feldman expressed the urgency for women to have access to such models.

In *Novas cartas portuguesas* one of the main narrator wonders if words can make a difference in women's lives:

How can we use words to help us and talk to each other, woman to woman, and tell each other how we are still the property of men, the spoils today of warriors who pretend to be our comrades in the struggle, but who merely seek to mount us and be cavaliers of Marianas who are prisoners in other prisons and nuns in different convents, without realizing it? (296)

The narrator worries about men who present themselves as supporters of women's empowerment but in reality are their subjugators even if in subtle ways: in the family relations, in the marriage, or elsewhere in society. On the other hand, the narrator brings words to the forefront as the vehicle for women's communication and a means to overcome male dominance in society. She invokes Mariana's story to underline how in spite of being prisoner in a convent she liberated herself through the use of words.

In *The Transforming Power of Language: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich*, Diaz-Diocaretz maintains that Rich once observed that the rereading of texts entails the act of looking back into them with new, fresh eyes (19). Similarly, in *Novas cartas portuguesas*, one of the main narrators illustrates Rich's observation when she emphasizes the importance of one's life experiences for the way we read and relate to texts. She calls for a fresh new approach to Mariana's letters in order to analyze how she had liberated herself from an imposed destiny and transformed it by the process of writing. Mariana becomes, then, a model to follow because with her example she proved that women can forge an identity through the word.

Women did not have an easy way to express themselves through writing, though. Especially under dictatorial regimes women always suffer the most and as the authors acknowledge in "Authors' Afterword" in the English version, they had to hide their identity to try to pass the censorship in dictatorial Portugal.³ They decided that they would date their letters but would not sign them so the censorship then existing in the country could not tell them apart (401). However, in spite of the authorship mingling subterfuge, censors banned the book within a month of its publication, and the political police arrested the authors on various charges, with immorality and attempting to pervert the youth being the most serious ones.

Only after the establishment of democracy in Portugal in 1974, was the book republished and its authors acquitted of all charges for the narrators' deliberate use of graphic erotic language as in the following passage:

Petrified, Mónica felt him start to enter her, slowly at first, his sex organ still soft and hesitant in its semi-impotence, and then larger and hotter, impatient, clumsy. A small, atrophied penis inside her deep, soft woman's vagina enlarged by love-making and amorous bouts in bed and profound orgasms. (261)

This type of language according to the narrators is needed for the appropriation of language that was until then used only by men. Once women own the language they can re-create their identity, which includes the acceptance and validation of their body, their sexuality, and their passions. The narrators fathom that this new approach for women to express themselves is revolutionary, and one of the main three narrative voices expresses her awareness of the possible outcome of this transgression:

Oh, how many problems I foresee, sisters: the three of us will be considered a single case, though we have no way of knowing if it will become a cause, and for that very reason we give each other our hands, and hold them out to others, hands joined in a circle, warmly clasped and firmly wielding the pen... (21)

The authors through their narrators recognize that indeed theirs is a rebellious statement for the time and place. So, one of the main narrators acknowledges it by addressing all women and pointing out the way they should follow—go on writing about your experiences and pass them along to others. She is not completely sure of the exact ramifications of her endeavor but has the assurance of its importance.

The narrative strategy of the book challenges the established poetics of the various genres it comprises. It offers an alternative, dialogical, and pluri-dimensional discourse that consubstantiates women's existence and aims not only at "ridding [themselves] of the image of the woman created by men" (56), but also at denouncing social constraints that impeded the development of women's full potential. This choice of language also represents a resistance to the feminine cultural text, which misrepresented women and denied them their agency in self-narration and self-determination:

Men have always been involved with and have always dreamed of what is extroverted form, in what rises up straight and tall, in what rends space. And so they know nothing of the abysses and depths, they know nothing about us women. They say to you: "You're fluid," and fail to recognize the solid rock that sustains the weight of this ocean; and that is why it is necessary to come to know women through "their learning, their talent for writing, and their respected names." We are defending ourselves against traditional uses and customs, and so we are refusing the support of those who use us. (62)

Through this statement the three main narrators take a collective stance before the social status quo towards women and affirm their intention to stir it and offer a different alternative to women's presence in the society, because "... women gain cultural support from other women and thus gain the perceptual capacities for forming new literary conventions and for reading lives in new ways" (Frye 46). The promise for an innovative way of presenting women's lives is reflected in the structure of the text itself.

The authors present a dense, apparently unstructured narrative, where poetry and epistolary, among other literary forms, are intertwined and pasted in the text to depict a scope of different sources witnessing women's lives. Some of these voices are historically-recognizable literary voices, such as Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or the narrator of Alcoforado's letters, whom one of the narrators calls 'the nun of *Beja*' in order to distinguish her from another contemporary Mariana A. Other voices are simply an anonymous Maria or António who signs various letters exposing different aspects of the social fabric.

In the beginning, the narrative presents a structure that is dissolved with the introduction of a polyphonic dynamic of dialoguing voices. The three main narrators wrote eight letters each, and the first two sets, each consisting of three letters, are separated by poems. However, the letters in each set engage in close dialogue with one another. In the third set, other letters, representing different voices, begin to undermine the cohesion of the trio's dialogue, and after that the letters of the three main narrators are dispersed in the text with the emergence of various other voices that participate in the creation of the dialogical narrative. These added voices address a variety of situations that represent aspects of women's lives, such as religious education, repression in the parents' homes and in marriage, work in the home either as maids or housewives, work in the fields, the dilemma of emigrants' wives and soldiers' girlfriends, motherhood, incest, and rape, among others.

The letters of the main narrators constitute a cohesive force within the narrative and act as a counterpoint to the other voices in the text that form a "chorus" of witnesses to women's lives portrayed in different social spaces and at various historical times. The voices talk about their own experiences and in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir affirms that women "... know the feminine world more intimately than do the man because we have our roots in it" (Introduction xxxiii). Not surprisingly then, in *Novas cartas portuguesas* the majority of the voices are female, while, only occasionally, males author the discourse narrative. According to one of the three main narrators, Alcoforado broke the walls of her confinement by writing the letters about her passionate feelings—which was forbidden—and by exercising her passion of writing about her own experiences. She had defied the silence that had subjugated women's voices and by doing so, she created and defined her own identity. On the other hand, in *Novas cartas portuguesas*, the time elapsed between the first letter⁴ and the last date referred to in the text is nine months, which emphasizes a metaphorical intention to give birth to new women's identity through an apparently chaotic process of narration, where even the dates occasionally do not follow their chronological display.

All the voices are threaded in the dialogic mesh of the chorus of voices that form the narrative. Thus, all of them communicate and underline the innumerable circumstances of their life experience, and each one adds new validations to women's multifarious life venues. This polyphony of voices giving testimony of their lives reinforces the authors' emphasis on the importance of telling and writing about women's existence in history. As one of the authors' voices claims all comes down to the fact that:

...all of literature is a long letter to an invisible other, a present, a possible, or a future passion that we rid ourselves of, feed, or seek. [...], to which I add that what is of interest is not so much passion itself, which is a mere pretext, but its exercise. (15)

Consequently, the passions of women's lives, the passions of their bodies and the passion of writing about them are intimately entangled in the narrative of *Novas cartas portuguesas*, thereby becoming the driving force for writing and forging new identities. The authors intertwine poems and letters in such a way that they dismantle the typical poetic and epistolary genres, and by having the letters unsigned, they efface the authorial category. The weave of inter-textualized narrative under unrecognizable authorship undermines the patriarchal power and affirms women's voice: "... and what about us, whose words go out into the world unsigned, the paths between us untraceable—merely a trio of hands, an anonymous chorus?" (21). The main narrators express their awareness of this singular faceless authorship and although, the narrators do not present characteristics of fully developed fictional characters, they present three points of view and different stylistic writings so, we can extrapolate that they are representations of the three authors. A myriad of other fictional characters contributes to the making of the narrative, but they are equally not well-developed as characters (although their identity is at least recognized by a name). The lack of authorship of the letters, which are identifiable only by the time and order in which they appear in the text, gives the text a representational freedom of discourse and constitutes an innovative process of writing that became a characteristic of post-modern literature.

The innovative narrative of *Novas cartas portuguesas* resists an encasing classification within any literary genre. It maintains an openness of interpretation and meaning that will be ever in dialogue with other texts that have already been written or are to be written, because it addresses a variety of themes that pertain to literature, women, and all human existence. Incidentally, Yaeger maintains that for Bakhtin the novel is: "... the 'carrier' of a plural decentralizing tendency in which the 'dialogic orientation of a word among other words' can create new and significant artist potential in discourse"—can become the source of verbal and political emancipation" (*Honey-Mad Women* 255).

As Bakhtin contends, the open work of art that results from the use of heteroglossia, polyphony or/and dialogism, like *Novas cartas portuguesas*, eludes an absolute interpretation and allows the novel to adapt itself to various contexts and diverse social realities, as well as to speak of the world as the reader experiences it. *Novas cartas portuguesas* portrays a writing matrix of the creative chronotope where space and time play a decisive role in displaying a polyphony of texts and multifarious modes of women's lives. It presents a myriad of texts, narratives, and voices witnessing women's being in time and space, and with it undermines the stratified, reductive, and simplified discourse of women's lives portrayed by the patriarchal society and specifically by the dictatorship. Instead, it counterpoints the importance of the word, appropriates it, and transforms it in a new discourse model to liberate the act of writing and to empower women to re-create new identities.

Endnotes

¹. The quotations of the study were taken from *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters*. Trans. Helen R. Lane. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975, the English translation of *Novas cartas portuguesas*.

². *Cartas de Amor* was originally published in French under the title *Lettres Portugaises, The Portuguese Letters: Love Letters of Mariana to the Marquis de Chamilly*. Trans. Donald E. Ericson (Barreno, Three

Marias 403). The authorship of *Cartas de Amor* has been contested. “While the authenticity of these letters has long been debated (it is generally agreed that they were written by the Frenchman, Guilleragues, who published them in Paris in 1669), they were originally attributed to a young Portuguese nun, Mariana Alcoforado, who supposedly wrote them to her lover, Noël Bouton, a Frenchman who had come to Portugal to help liberate the country from Spanish rule” (Sadler 5).

³. See for more information on the status of Portuguese women: Elina Guimarães, *Mulheres Portuguesas Ontem e Hoje*, Lisboa, Portugal: Comissão da Condição Femenina, 1989 and *Portuguese Women Past and Present*. Lisbon, Portugal: Commission on the Status of Women, 1978.

⁴. The first letter is dated March 1, 1971 and the last written poem dates from December 11, 1971. There are interruptions in the linear sequence of the dates, which are all from the year 1971. March 11 comes between March 13 and March 14; Nov. 11 comes between Nov. 13 and Nov. 25; and the last text, dated Oct. 25, comes after the letter from Nov. 25.

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