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**MEDEA FROM BRAZIL: CANONICAL 'COUNTER-DISOURSE' IN
POST-COLONIAL LATIN AMERICA**

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The most important elements in the world history of recent centuries are colonization, when European countries brought their influence to many parts of the globe, and decolonization, when those countries achieved at least formally their independence: so, one of the most stressed issues regarding post-colonial literature refers to the influence of Western domination on indigenous cultures. These relationships are very complex and many critics point out how the influence itself: 'has continued since independence: formally through education systems which, despite the rhetoric of man-power needs, continues to sustain a social hierarchy based on clerical and administrative skills [...]; informally through urbanization and consumerism' (Etherton 1981: 102).¹

The consequences of this influence, as (they were) pointed out by post-colonial criticism, can be synthesized through three typical fundamental dynamisms. These are: the dialectic between self/other, central/peripheral and of course written/oral. The European viewpoint, normally appropriates the first term in each set, ascribing the second to the colonized. This appropriation is, as Balme (1994: 4) puts it, based on a hierarchical disposition which assigns value to what belongs to itself: 'the encounter between literate and pre-scribal cultures, an integral component of colonial history and experience, particularly resulted in a problematic hierarchization of textual genres with an obvious privileging of Western written texts on the part of the colonial power'.

Colonial power was premised on notions of racial and cultural 'purity' and on preserving the 'difference' between the colonized and the colonizer. But for post-colonial critics, the idea of 'hybridity' has become the fundamental one, thus re-examining the mutual interrelations between indigenous cultures and colonial inheritance.

In this process, the revaluation of indigenous cultures starts from the development of new literary and theatrical modalities from traditional arts: the process brings the possibility of an alternative point of view to challenge the Eurocentric one, since post-colonial theatre is used as an anti-imperial tool, as a forefront for struggle against colonization and its implications, because of its own strong public dimension. All the playwrights from decolonized areas share the same project of dismantling the colonizer's authorial self-referentiality through specific strategies which aim at the revaluation of logical 'alterity' of the subaltern subject.

Colonization used the literary text as a place of cultural control: in this way: 'the surface of each text purports to represent specific encounters with specific varieties of the racial Other, the subtext valorises the superiority of European cultures, of the collective process that has mediated the representation' (Jan-Mohammed [1985] 1995: 19).² Now new modalities of writing, opposite to traditional Eurocentric ones, appear a real necessity in order to evoke the point of view of the colonized: according to Salman Rushdie's definition, we can name this kind of process as a 'writing back'.³

The concept came into being to designate those texts which re-wrote in some way European or Eurocentric works from the point of view of colonized people: nevertheless, what is invested is not only a mere concept of 'intertextuality' as a bi-vocal correlation between texts, but the necessity: 'to rework the European "classics" in order to invest them with more

local relevance and to divest them of their assumed authority/authenticity' (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 16). The process reveals a problem of 'canon'. Denial of the Western one, composed almost exclusively by Anglo-European male writers, involves a re-definition and a re-orientation of literary history as a re-discussion of the concepts typically linked to canon, that is 'authority' and 'authenticity': the purpose is the revaluation of logical 'alterity' of the subaltern subject (as we said before). Helen Tiffin (1987: 19) calls this approach 'counter-discourse' since: 'processes of artistic and literary decolonization have involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses'. Based on the deconstruction of authority signification and on the destabilization of the power structures of the starting text, the final outcome is a hybrid texture which links classical legacy to modern sensibility coming from the post-colonial world; in fact: 'Post-colonial culture is inevitably a hybridised phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the "grafted" European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 195).

The semantic sphere of 'hybridity' has replaced the one of 'contamination', that is rejected in post-colonial areas because of its Western implications of physical and moral corruption. A new value is borrowed from biological sciences where 'hybrid' designs a more remunerative exemplar achieved by crosses among selected breeds; the scientific metaphor is moved into the literary field, allowing a re-questioning of concepts from the time when: 'two or more complete repertoires are present in such proportion that no one of them dominates [...] they are indeed neighbouring or contrasting kinds that have some external forms in common' (Fowler 1982: 183).

Classics play a central role in counter-discourse: since they are considered key points in colonial processes of education, they represent one of the privileged places of the deconstruction of the signification. Specifically the post-colonial writers exploit the polysemic structures of the Greek myths to underline specific appeals coming from the decolonized areas.

Many classical myths have been precious sources for artists during this time, but the role of Medea has been particularly important: during the twentieth century the story has been re-written both through canonical genres (novel, poem, drama) and new approaches like cinema, mimicry, parody... (Mimoso-Ruiz 1986).⁴

Among the main versions of the myth, the one we are going to analyse in this paper, *Gota d'água [Drop of water]*, comes from Latin America, and more specifically from Brazil: the authors, the songwriter Chico Buarque de Hollanda and the playwright Paulo Pontes, first performed this play in Rio de Janeiro in December 1975. The following quotations come from Pontes and Buarque, *Gota d'água [Drop of water]* (1975). (All translations of the quoted extracts are my own.)

The text can be considered a hybrid one: in fact the authors re-wrote Medea's myth in order to underline specific Brazilian issues. In doing so, they used a mythical plot linked to some of the most specific aspects of post-colonial theatre as pointed out by Gilbert and Tompkins (1996), and explicitly: (1) neo-imperialistic topics; (2) the political point of view; (3) dance and music.

The hybridization can be detected in the change of the myth that provides the plot of a new tragedy, set in the suburb of Rio de Janeiro that replaces the ancient Corinth. The original patterns are reconfigured in order to fulfil a sort of Marxian analysis of the socio-political situation in Brazil: the authors used those mythical elements that could represent and symbolize typical conditions after the decolonizing process, the economic boom and the economic crisis in the country during the Seventies.

The strategy adopted by Pontes and Buarque de Hollanda consists in a systematic re-writing of the myth: every detail is preserved and changed for their purpose. According to Euripides' drama, Medea is a witch and the niece of the Sun: she betrays her family and commits many murders in order to help Jason to conquer the Golden Fleece; when she and Jason arrive in Corinth, he leaves her to marry the sovereign's daughter.

In the Brazilian version, Medea turns into Joana: she is a worker adept at the *macumba* (a type of witchery) and its rituals; she also teaches everything she knows about music to the young musician Jasão de Oliveira. Because of him, she also separates from her wealthy husband; after Jasão has become famous for the samba *Gota d'água*, he wants to end their relationship and marry Alma, the daughter of rich Creonte Vasconcelos. This is the antecedent of the drama, which begins in *medias res*, like the Euripidean one. It is important to note that the authors connote Joana as an authentic Medea, though in a Brazilian context: the husband replaces the tradition-based father betrayed by Medea-Joana; her 'help' to Jason is configured as a teaching, and the evil arts of the niece of the Sun are replaced by typical sorcery in Brazil.

As Medea does for the Greek context, each character of the ancient myth embodies a typical representative of the main three social categories in Brazilian society: Creon has maintained his mythical name, but he becomes a rich property-lord. A detail is interesting: the authors do not refuse the classical factor of royalty, but they confer on it an ironic value, by transforming it into the peculiarity of the egocentric and megalomaniac personality of an enriched and unscrupulous man,⁵ who is a member of the social class retaining power in the country, a capitalistic bourgeois enriched by building speculations and usury. His daughter is Alma: 'mocinha de veleidades pequeno-burguesas' ['a girl with bourgeois whims'],⁶ painted by the typical connotations of a rich girl, descending from a very important family.

Representing the 'middle' working class there are Medea (she is a worker, as we said before) and Egeu who becomes Joana's godfather and the owner of a small workshop of electronic repairs and he: 'representa, sem duvida, [...], a pequena burguesia brasileira sem organização política, que aspira a uma solidariedade entre os explorados, mas que não è suficientemente forte para se opor ao poder e à esperteza do grande capitalista' ['he represents without doubts, [...], the small Brazilian bourgeoisie without political organization, that aspires to a solidarity among its members, but that is not strong enough to react to the power and to the experience of the great capitalists'.] (Lind 1983: 30). The other characters are invented: Cacetão, Galego, Xulé and Amarin are representatives of the lowest classes, who are the great part of the population. Among these, we can also find Corina, Joana's friend and confidante, who is this modern transposition of the nurse in *Medea*.

Just a few words about the Greek chorus: although the original value is completely absent, it consists of the neighbours of Joana, located in the first of a three-part divided stage: 'enquanto lavam roupa vão desenrolando o fio da história' ['while they are washing clothes, they uncoil the thread of the story'] (Alves 1975).

In order to represent all the parts of Brazilian society, the authors pointed out one of the most important neo-imperialistic issues: the influence of economic power that establishes an exploitation relationship between rich and poor similar to the post-colonial dichotomy of colonizer/colonized. For this reason, they reveal a strong attention to political aspects of the saga. Mythical material has always implied this problematic: the betrayal of Medea's native land and family; the revenge on Pelias (the man who had usurped the throne of Jason) and his relatives; the attempt to murder the successor in favour of Jason, and so on. All these moments underline the conflicting links between power authorities and Medea, who is the destabilizing component. Now, they are readapted in order to configure new correlations between sovereign and vassals from the viewpoint of economic resources' management: in this drama they are constructed as a dichotomy between richness/poorness, as a dialectical

intersection between the capitalistic entrepreneurs and the indigent masses. As we said, this opposition can be brought back to post-colonial interaction: as the colonizer's ideology produces control strategies which create a subaltern image of the colonized subject, the rich actuate a similar policy to oppress the poor. In this tragedy, the dichotomy is developed in order to stress the different life conditions of the three social groups we mentioned before: the Marxian analysis that the authors want to realize implies the use of the viewpoint of the poor; adopting this perspective, it can be possible to show the oppressing strategies actuated by the rich towards the poor. One of the first aspects is pointed out by Xulé, in the first act of the drama, where he asserts:

[...] A gente vive nessa divisão
 Se subtrai, se multiplica, soma,
 No fim, ou come ou paga a prestação
 O que posso fazer, mestre Egeu?... (Gota d'agua p.13)

[We live in that division / if you subtract, if you multiply, if you add /
 In the end, either you eat or you pay on loan / What can I do, master Egeu?...]]

The passage represents the last comment of a long discussion about the impossibility for the character to collect any money: but through the mathematical metaphor the man transforms his personal condition into representation of all the members of the same social class, who share the same consternation about their lives. Moreover, the allusion to the loan refers to one of the most important semantic spheres in the play, that is one of the main oppressive strategies actuated by rich towards poor. In the same way, better ways of life for the working class are highlighted by Amorin, in opposition to his own:

[...] Mestre Egeu, você pode dizer
 o que pensa, ja que é dono de teto e chão
 Dono do seu nariz, não tem nada a perder
 Tem a oficina e tudo o que está dentro dela
 Então fala correto, justo, dá conselhos
 Mas eu devo tijolo, cal, porta e janela
 Acho que não sou dono nem dos meus pentelhos (ibid p. 13)

[Master Egeu, you can say / what you think, since you are owner of a roof
 and a floor, / owner of your nose, you do not have anything to lose: / you
 have the workshop and everything inside. / Then you can talk correctly, fair,
 you can give a lot of advice. / But I owe bricks, plaster, doors and windows: /
 I am not an owner, not even of my louses.]]

The character emphasizes not only the difficult circumstances of his life, but also, in an indirect way, his (and others') inability to resist, both in a political and psychological way. Therefore this issue becomes the main topic of another part of the drama, with an innovative scene, in which the men, who are protesting against the 'banishment' of Joana—Medea,⁷ are indeed deceived by Creonte's vague assurances: according to Mimoso-Ruiz (1986: 195), in this way Pontes wants to underline 'les ambiguïtés de l'action populaire' ['the ambiguity of popular action'].

Furthermore, the people's behaviour towards Jasão and their not completely unfavourable ideas about his decision are fundamental factors in this direction: the neighbours' ideas about the man's actions show a sort of justification, mixed with the envy of him and with the regret for anyone who cannot react to his conditions and who regards anyone who is able to change his own life as an hero or a god. As Xulé says:

E' bom menino, sabe o que è necessidade
 faz bem em se casar co'a filha do Creonte

E assim que estiver sentado bem à vontade
à direita de Deus Pai, talvez nos desconte
um pouco de dívida e da mensalidade (ibid. p.14)

[He is a good boy, he knows his needs / and he does well in marrying
Creonte's daughter / while he is sitting very comfortably / to Lord God's right,
maybe we can discount / some debt and fee.]

It is important to note the use of the term 'casar', that involves the concept of 'house': all the Neo-Latin languages share this alternative definition, even if vernacular, both for the wedding and for house, where the couple are going to live.

Economic patterns are also the cause of contrasts between Joana and Jasão: because of his richness and fame, the man is trying to abolish his social pseudo-alterity towards the class to which he belongs. In this way, the authors transform the Euripidean motivations about Medea's abandonment to concrete form: for example, in re-invoking the term 'casar' previously discussed, they reify the need of a new house (as it can be seen in Euripides' *Medea*, 593–97) in a real examination of Jasão and Alma's new residence, materialized in a long inventory of the most powerful symbols of a capitalistic and elitist society:

Já colocaram todos os vidros fumê
nas esquadrias de alumínio. E a fachada
do prédio ficou bem moderna, *liberty*,
colonial e clássica. Puseram lambri
de madeira com mármore no hall de entrada
O elevador todo forrado de veludo
ficou uma graça, [...]
O chão está brilhando de sinteco, amor
Você está me ouvindo?...[...] Sala de jantar,
living e nossa suite dão vista pro mar
Dos outros quartos dá pra ver o Redentor
[...] Tudo que è eletro-domestico: gravador
e aspirador, e enceradeira, e geladeira,
televisão a cores, ar condicionado,
você precisa ver, tudo isso ja comprado,
tudo isso ja instalado pela casa inteira (ibid. pp. 28; 29)

[They already put the smoked glasses / in the looms of aluminium. And the
front / of the building is very modern, liberty, / colonial and classic. They put
panelling / of wood and marble in the hall. / The lift is lined by velvet / it is so
gracious, [...] The ground is shining, darling, / Are you listening to me?... [...]]
From the dining room, / living room and our bedroom you can see the sea. /
From the other two rooms you can see the Redeemer's statue. [...] / There
are all the appliances: tape recorder / and vacuum cleaner, and floor
polisher, and refrigerator, / colour television, air conditioning, / you have to
see them, all is bought, / all is installed in the whole house]

The opposition between poor and rich is also the structuring element of Jasão and Joana's relationship (he wants to remove his social pseudo-alterity in becoming a member of the predominant class, while Joana represents the impossibility of improving his life conditions) and it becomes the main occurrence in the classical element of revenge. During the twentieth century in particular, the myth is used in order to represent a conflict between opposite points of view and the classical pattern of revenge assumes new values: it is not a mere revengeful instrument, but it is always linked to the avenger's psychological sphere and it often results from the impossibility of reconciling these incompatible topics or it represents the last attempt

of an oppressed subject to react to his oppressor. In this case a new problematic version, the suicide, is related to the classical one, the infanticide: 'quand se pose la question de l'oppression des exclus [...] seule la réaction de l'horreur absolue, de la violence auto-destructrice semble être une réponse possible à l'oppression' ['When the problem of oppression is underlined [...] only a reaction of complete terror and self-destructive violence seems to be a possible answer to the oppression'] (Mimoso-Ruiz 1986: 145). Many versions in the Nineties share this opportunity: although in Pasolini's *Medea* we can doubt about the final suicide of the heroine, the revenge results from the impossibility of reconciling the sacral sphere of Colchis and the technological world of Greece; in Jeffers' *Medea* (1970), in Lenormand's *Asie* (1938) and in Anderson's *The Wingless Victory* (1968) the revenge is linked to a post-colonial issue, since all of the dramas re-write Medea's myth in order to point out the oppressive strategies of white men towards strangers.

The other main post-colonial issue, that is the dance and music, is difficult to discuss because of the total absence of information about the performance of this play. What we are going to present in the last part of this intervention are personal reflections, starting from the annotations in the language of the play, where we can find many clues denoting their importance.

First of all, we can take note of the meta-literary function they reveal in the play. *Gota d'água* is both the title of the dramatic piece and the name of the samba that makes Jasão rich and famous: in this way, the music and the dance become the main reference in the text and its structuring element. I would like at this point to add my personal idea regarding the title of this drama. As is well known, the alternative title of the saga has often been 'The Golden Fleece'. The fact that the title of this specific drama refers to a type of music, the samba, makes me think that the music could have the same functions as the fleece, meaning that they both allow people to have wealth, fame, power and so on. Moreover, in the tradition, Medea helps Jason to conquer the golden fleece, while in this version she helps him to learn how to compose music.

But this is not the only component in the drama. According to post-colonial theories of theatre, music and dance are very important topics since the fictional frame of performance allows their adaptation, especially if they come from rituals and ceremonies. In this case, they are used as a medium to react to the oppressor and to revalue the pre-colonial cultures, as a tool of resistance and of on-going struggle against colonial power by dismantling the hierarchized corpus of imperial culture. In this play, based on neo-imperial structures, music and dance assume two values: on the one hand: 'la seule voie lassé au peuple et aux femmes (doublement exploitées) c'est de communier dans la musique, en particulier dans la samba créée par Jasão' ['the only one way for the people and the women (doubly oppressed) it is to communicate through music, in particular the samba created by Jasão'] (Mimoso-Ruiz 1986: 195); on the other, music represents a medium of both personal realization and social affirmation.

The first issue is visualized in moments of strong social cohesion and fellowship among the members of the lowest classes and, in fact, it assumes particular relevance when the characters on the stage are described singing and/or dancing all together. The first one of these moments introduces the general theme of the play: after a long conversation of the neighbours about what is happening to Joana and Jasão, Cacetao breaks the discussion with an 'embolada' concerning the opportunity of Jasão's choice in the context of general impasse. The 'embolada' is a poetic-musical form with stanza-and-refrain structure, declamatory melody and fast tempo. It may be improvised or not, and recited by one person or more, as in the 'desafios' [challenges] between two singers and the 'cocos', traditional dances of north-eastern Brazil. This scene concludes with a new rhythm played by the orchestra, which makes the characters dance and sing all together, as a symbol of common opinions and

shared experiences. This general exhibition ends while the following scene shows the meeting between Jasão and Alma: here we can find the most important clue regarding the second implication, helpful also to explain the approval given by the friends to the musician's behaviour towards Joana. This value will be underlined some lines below by Amarin, who affirms: 'Samba e futebol / são a salvação da lavoura. Duvido / que exista outra maneira de fodido / brasileiro arranjar lugar ao sol' ['The samba and soccer are the salvation of the workers. I doubt that for the unlucky Brazilian another way exists to obtain a place in the sun'] (*Gota d'água*, pp.60-61).

While Alma describes their new house and she is talking to Jasão about their projects: '*vai nascendo uma introdução musical em ritmo da samba*' ['an introduction of a rhythm of samba is growing up'] (*Gota d'água*, p.30 [italics in the text]) he begins to follow the rhythm until he is almost seated on Creonte's throne: the scene visualizes the great power of the music in improving life conditions and in sharing status and privileges of the upper classes.

This value is reinforced by the different attitude of Creonte in the direction of music; while the other characters are often accompanied by music in their speeches, Creonte is not; the only time he sings about his personal vision of life with Jasão, the rhythm is configured as a march and the song is soon interrupted: his 'filosofia do bem sentar' ['philosophy of the good arrangement'] (*Gota d'água*, p.35)⁸ reveals the unscrupulous man the authors want to portray. He shows a negative attitude towards music in another part of this conversation, when he explains to Jasão why he is not pleased about his daughter's marriage; he specifies that any kind of man was suitable for Alma (lieutenant, dentist, psychoanalyst, banker, and many others) except a musician: Creonte is hypothesized to be alarmed by music because of its subversive power, able to allow the social escalation of the poor.

One of the most important points in the drama, showing dancing groups, is accomplished when for the first time the famous samba is presented: on this occasion the dance is performed by the female characters of the play. In the meantime, Joana appears for the first time on the stage, in an attitude contrasting with the general euphoria created by the samba, that becomes the best medium to underline her status. The silence created on the stage by her arrival is followed by a new melodic tone while she is talking about her sons: the music emphasizes, through the contrast with the disruptiveness of the samba, the anxiety of the mother and her worry for the unhappy future of her own children.

The samba is performed for a second time by all the people on the stage at the end of the play: Joana has just killed her sons and herself, and Creonte is announcing that Jasão is his worthy successor, because of his valour despite his humble origin. While the characters begin to sing '*Gota d'água*', Egeu and Corina interrupt the performance by bringing on the stage the lifeless bodies of Joana and her children. The legend suggests that: 'os atores que fazem Joana e filhos levantam-se e passam a cantar também; ao fundo, projeção de uma manchete sensacionalista noticiando uma tragédia' ['the actors who play Joana and her sons get up and sing '*Gota d'água*'; in the background, the screening of a sensational headline announcing a tragedy'] (*Gota d'água*, p.168).

This final use of music suggests a sort of carnival inversion of the accepted rules of reality, but also the potential of music to join all the characters at different instances, while the message in the transmission that the audience can read in the background means the spectators do not forget Joana's misfortune. In this way, the value of the drama is safe and the authors' message too.

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NOTES

¹ Further information about interactions between Western domination and post-colonial areas can be found in Hogan (2002).

² The quotation comes from the reprinting in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1995: 19).

³ 'The Empire Writes Back to the Centre'—is a phrase originally used by Salman Rushdie, as he was punning on *The Empire Strikes Back*, the famous American T.V. film. Here, the 'Empire' is the sum total of the colonies of the British Empire, which Britain lost with the coming to independence in the 1960s of nation-states from Africa to Sri Lanka. 'The Centre' is here Britain and the notion of 'writing back' is crucial in understanding the various strategies of decolonization that Britain's former colonies have used to set the record straight.' *The Empire Writes Back to and from the Centre*, Chantal Zabus, Universite Catholique de Louvain <<http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/worldlit/empire.htm>> accessed October 2005.

See also B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin (2002) *The Empire Strikes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge).

⁴ Mimoso-Ruiz, French scholar of the myth, studied its many anthropological and literary implications. He pointed out more than 400 versions of the myth in all the artistic forms (theatre, opera theatre, ballet, novel, picture, sculpture...), although his research is totally contained in European countries, except Brazil.

⁵ This ironic value is underlined by an indication in the screenplay, where the Creonte's chair is connoted as a throne: '*no centro desse set, uma cadeira imponente, muito trabalhada, quase um trono*' [*in the centre of that set, an imposing chair, very decorated, almost a throne*] (Pontes, P. and Buarque, C., *Gota d'água*, p. 26).

⁶ Alves, E.F. (1975) 'Uma tragedia brasileira', in Pontes, P. and Buarque, C., *Gota d'água*.

⁷ This is another transformed element coming from the classical world: actually the banishment is an eviction from a crumbling flat-block, whose owner is Creonte. As the authors did in adapting the plot, the mythical factors are suffering from a re-semanticization in a daily dimension, useful to underline the neo-imperial patterns.

⁸ An ironic value is given by the term 'sentar', 'to sit', while Creonte is going to accommodate Jasão on his chair.