

*Maria Firmina dos Reis's Ursula:
Voices From a Black Brazilian Writer in the Nineteenth Century*

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Abstract

In this study, I analyze how the novel *Ursula*, written in the 1850s, gives voice to the search for social justice in nineteenth-century Brazil before the abolition of slavery in 1888. Similarly to Uncle Tom's Cabin in the U.S.A., the book provides the reader with a heartfelt testimony and plea for social justice. Through the light of sociologists and critics such as Patricia Hills Collins, Leyla Perrone-Moisés, and Lélia Gonzalez, I intend to highlight that a Black Brazilian point of view was neglected for years but has recently resurfaced and can teach the contemporary reader much about the resilience and honor lived by former enslaved Brazilian people.

Keywords: Brazil, Nineteenth Century, Slavery, Enslaved, Place of Speech

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Introduction: The Author

Maria Firmina dos Reis was born in 1825 in São Luís do Maranhão, Brazil. Régia Agostinha da Silva considers Reis's main quality "o caráter audacioso de sua obra [the audacious character of her work]." She was thirty-four years of age at the time of the publication of *Ursula* and knew her place in the male-dominated Monarchic Northeastern Brazilian traditionalistic society. She was a biracial schoolteacher who practically apologizes to the reader in the Prologue for presenting the book to them:

I know this novel is worth little because it was written by a woman—a Brazilian woman, moreover, with little education and without the refinement and experience of illustrious men used to discussing, advising, and correcting others. This woman has had very little instruction, knows only her mother tongue, and isn't well-read. In sum, her intellectual capacity is practically null. (Reis & Pinto, 2021)

Reis is asking for support not only for herself as a new writer but for other women writers, better authors who will come after her. Nonetheless, I know many readers and researchers are thrilled by *Ursula* and other stories Reis published that have survived times and remain available today. They contain remarkable clues to understanding the dynamics of social life in nineteenth-century Brazil.

Further, as Silva points out, Reis:

figura como uma das poucas mulheres negras abolicionistas no século XIX, pois sabemos que a campanha abolicionista no Brasil, principalmente na segunda metade do século XIX, foi perpetrada por abolicionistas homens, em sua grande maioria, brancos, filhos da elite escravocrata, que se formaram no exterior e voltaram ao país com os ideários positivistas, liberais e abolicionistas, pois, só livrando o país da "mancha negra da escravidão," poderia o Brasil figurar no rol das nações desenvolvidas.

[She is one of the few black women abolitionists in the 19th century, as we know that the abolitionist campaign in Brazil, mainly in the second half of the 19th century, was perpetrated by male abolitionists, the vast majority of whom were white, sons of the slave-owning elite, who were educated abroad and returned to the country with positivist, liberal and abolitionist ideals, as only by freeing the country from the "dark stain of slavery" could Brazil be included in the list of developed nations.] (Reis & Pinto, 2021)

A woman who opened a school for boys and girls in the interior of Maranhão was able to publish and give voice to slaves who spoke about times of freedom in Africa and how noble they were despite not having any means is truly remarkable.

The Black Characters in *Ursula*, Lelia Gonzalez, and Patricia Hill Collins

Tulio, Black/Aunt/Mother Susana, and Antero are the three characters that receive the most attention and development in the novel. Tancredo and Black Susana are portrayed very nobly whereas Antero reveals certain flaws, which are realistic according to historical facts. In the 1850s Brazil had laws prohibiting transatlantic traffic consistent with the Eusébio de Queirós

Law but slavery remained legal until 1888 when the final *Lei Áurea* [Golden Law] was signed.

Tulio is a young black man who is innocent of any wrongdoing and good at heart. The title of Chapter 1 is fitting “Two Generous Souls.” Túlio’s actions are noble, and he is portrayed as a generous soul, just like the hero Tancredo’s main character. Túlio has a strong name, the name of a leader, and becomes free, even if only for a short time. Remarkably in the mid-nineteenth century, he is a black man with a voice, a man who is loyal to Tancredo, the man who ends up giving him his freedom (by giving him money to purchase it) due to his loyalty and services when he was almost dead.

The narrator’s voice is that of an abolitionist—remembering that those times were the pre-abolition of slavery times in Brazil. In the following beautiful yet sad discourse, the reader understands the message in Reis’s book:

Poor slaves! They have nothing, not even the right let out a heartfelt cry of agony! Lord God! When will Your sublime teaching, “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” resound in men’s hearts? When will men stop oppressing with such reprehensible injustice their fellow creatures... men and women who were also free in their own country... who are their brothers and sisters?! (Reis & Pinto, 2021)

Such a speech was written before Castro Alves wrote the famous pro-abolition poem *Navio Negreiro* [Slave Ship] in 1880.

Lelia Gonzalez has a strong *Afrolatina* voice. Black Susana represents the strength of African femininity as Gonzalez explains:

Como sabemos, nas sociedades africanas, em sua maioria, desde a antiguidade até a chegada dos islames e dos europeus judaico-cristãos, o lugar da mulher não era de subordinação, o da discriminação. Do Egito antigo aos reinos dos Ashanti ou dos Yorubá, as mulheres desempenharam papéis sociais tão importantes quanto os homens.

[As we know, in most African societies, from ancient times until the arrival of Islam and the European Judeo-Christians, women's place was not one of subordination, but of discrimination. From ancient Egypt to the kingdoms of the Ashanti or the Yoruba, women played social roles as important as men.] (Gonzalez, 1998)

Black Susana is the rock that supports Tulio when his mother perishes. She was born and taken from Africa in her youth, just like Tulio’s parents. Susana remembers the times when she was free: “Freedom! Freedom! How I enjoyed it in my youth! ... no one enjoyed it more fully; there wasn’t a happier woman than me” (Reis & Pinto, 2021).

Gomes and Oliveira point out through the light of Foucault’s notion of resistance as the power that Susana and Túlio resist the system of oppression as they form a bond that helps them survive and not break completely. Remembering that part of the system of oppression that existed still in the nineteenth century was not allowing the formation of black families. Those were constantly split apart as they are in Reis’s novel.

In sum, Túlio and Black Susana have many positive characteristics. Régia Agostinho da Silva notices such a trait in dos Reis's oeuvre: "O escravo firminiano, como já disse, não é apenas vítima passiva da escravidão, é dotado de humanidade, de caráter, e saudoso de uma mãe África ausente" [The Firminian slave, as I said, is not just a passive victim of slavery, he is endowed with humanity, character, and longs for an absent African mother] (Reis & Pinto, 2021).

The Sociologist and Black Feminist Patricia Hill Collins proposes the concept of intersectionality, which she seeks a definition as "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Collins, 2015). Intersectionality can be applied in Reis's novel even though it is a very fluid concept. It is easy to see how the white rich men Fernando and Tancredo's father, another "old evil man" as Reis describes, are the most powerful characters in the novel. Tancredo is good at heart and thankful to Túlio, granting him freedom, but unfortunately does not achieve a happy ending with his beloved Úrsula. Collins states that:

Racial formations have distinct configurations of racial projects for which interest groups advance various interpretations of racial inequality. Within racial formation theory, ideas matter, not simply as hegemonic ideologies produced by elites by also as tangible, multiple knowledge projects that are advanced by specific interpretive communities. Because groups aim to have their interpretation of racial inequality prevail, knowledge lies at the heart of racial projects. (Collins, 2023)

I believe that Reis knows that perhaps she does not know that she has such an awareness. She is a woman ahead of her time because she can point out racial, class, and gender inequalities even without naming them.

The wheel of power/privilege is in some ways comparable to the notion of intersectionality. The language of the colonized and enslaved as well as their religions and cultures were completely taken away from them. With few exceptions and through many hardships they were able to preserve some of those and many Afro-Brazilians long to learn the languages, beliefs, and everything that was stolen from their ancestors not so long ago. Thanks to Maria Firmina dos Reis and other writers such a process is becoming somewhat viable.

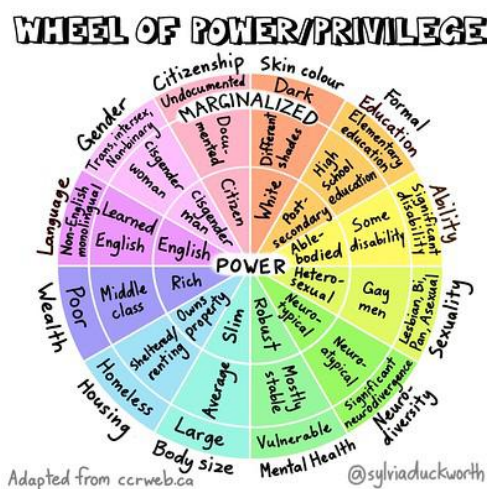


Figure 1: Wheel of Power/Privilege

Language and Literature: Leyla Perrone-Moisés on Committed Literature

The title of this work highlights the importance of voices. Voices and language are interconnected. Leyla Perrone-Moisés notices how that occurs in literature in her article *Literatura Engajada [Committed Literature]*: “O conhecimento de línguas e culturas hegemônicas pode, portanto, ser subvertido como fator de libertação” [The knowledge of hegemonic languages and cultures can, therefore, be subverted as a factor of liberation] (Perrone-Moisés, n.d.). Similarly, the language the enslaved people speak in the novel *Ursula* is Portuguese, a language imposed by the colonizer. Perrone-Moisés emphasizes that she does not see that through a negative lens. She defends the view that “essas línguas europeias são adotadas pelos ex-colonizados não por serem ‘superiores,’ mas por serem meios de comunicação mais poderosos” [those European languages are adopted by the ex-colonizers not for being superior, but for being more powerful means of communication] (Perrone-Moisés, n.d.). The enslaved people in dos Reis’s novel—Tancredo, Aunt Susana, and Antero, speak exclusively in Portuguese. It is widely known that the Africans brought to Brazil were from various parts of Africa and spoke different languages. Some of the vocabulary has been incorporated into Brazilian Portuguese spoken today, but for the most part, Portuguese has taken over. It keeps changing as well, as expected. The future of literature and language is taking new directions, that is certain.

Conclusion

I have shown how Maria Firmina dos Reis could portray black characters in her Romantic 1851 novel *Ursula* in a mostly positive light. To do that, she had to create characters who have strong morals and a passion for doing what is right and ethical. Despite their situation of slavery, they do not lose their bonds of friendship and love. One of the characters, though, is not strong enough to endure the pains of slavery and his character reveals flaws that hurt himself and others and make him an ally of the cruel master. Reis published several literary pieces in the northeastern state of Brazil not knowing that her work would become a testimony to the horrors of that system and be studied almost two hundred years after its publication.

Moreover, two of the characters, Susana and Túlio, develop a mother-son bond when Tulio’s mom is taken away and kept apart from him until her death. Black Susana becomes a true mother to Túlio and that is resistance in a period in which such bonds are not allowed by masters, who fear the organization of the enslaved. *Ursula* gives voice to the oppressed sadly and remarkably.

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