

Miguel Ferrante's *Seringal*: human exploitation and violence in Amazonian rubber plantations

Miguel Nenevé¹, Giselle Silva Costa²

¹Miguel Nenevé - PhD in Literature. Professor in the master's program of Literary Studies. Universidade Federal de Rondônia and in the Graduate Program of Languages and Identities. University of Acre; Coordinator of the Language Center at FCR. Email: nenevemi@gmail.com

²Giselle Costa - Master's student in the program of Literary Studies at Universidade Federal de Rondônia – Brazil; email: gisellecostaadiv@gmail.com

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Abstract— In this article we explore the issue of violence and oppression suffered by rubber-tappers in the Amazonian rubber plantations, visible in Miguel Ferrante's novel *Seringal*. The novel is set in the Santa Rita rubber plantation in the interior of Acre, in the Brazilian Amazon, and reproduces the oppressive life of rubber tappers who work for the owner of the rubber plantation, the "colonel." "Always aiming at "profit and more profit" rubber plantation's owner exploits and enslaves the "seringueiros", taking violent actions against the poor workers. The novel also reveals the subhuman condition in which the women in the rubber plantation live, subject to rape and other sort of violence. Women are more deeply colonized and exploited than the rubber men. We argue that violence against women and workers today reflects violence in rubber plantations in the XX century. Scholars such as the thinker Frantz Fanon (1979) who wrote about colonization and Cristina Wolf (2001) who researches violence in the state of Acre, among others, support our argument.

I. INTRODUCTION

We believe that studies on rubber plantations in the Brazilian Amazon remain very important and necessary as the region continues to be the scene of several conflicts: the exploitation of workers in favor of the wealth of a few is still a reality. In addition, violence against women, who were an object of consumption in the rubber plantations, still seems to be frequent in the Northern region of Brazil. Miguel Ferrante's work is not so recognized as it is the novel *A Selva* by Ferreira de Castro, but it contains several elements that denounce the working conditions in the rubber plantations in the pan-Amazonia. Contextualized in Santa Rita Rubber Plantation, located in the Brazilian state of Acre, in the western Brazilian Amazon, the novel *The Seringal* presents a rubber plantation in the Amazon in the "second Rubber Cycle." There is a strong control of the boss

over a vast territory of the rubber plantation and everything that happens in it seems to suffer his influence. In this context we propose to discuss Miguel Ferrante's novel, focusing on the scenario of violence and exploitation of the human being.

II. THE CONTEXT OF RUBBER PLANTATIONS IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON

The "new boom" of rubber production was motivated by the Second World War, which required rubber extracted from the Amazon rubber tree, since the allied countries could not buy the product from Malaysia. The alliance between Brazil and the United States clearly involved the interest of the United States in the Brazilian rubber. Thus, the two

countries formed a formal alliance under the Washington Agreement of March 1942. It was precisely in 1942 that a great drought occurred in the Brazilian Northeast. The government would then send the most suffering people to the Amazonian rubber plantations. Amazonia became the “Promised land” of those people who were almost starving in Northeast. President Getúlio Vargas recruited about thirty thousand “rubber soldiers” and thus began the migration of northeasterners to the Amazon.

Samuel Benchimol, a scholar who studied the rubber plantations in the Amazon, in his work *The romance of rubber battle* (1992) informs us that the migration of northeasterners to the place of rubber battle in the Amazon “developed during 1941-1942 and early 1943, in the traditional fashion with the flagellates and northeastern migrants, hit by the drought and or attracted by the rubber, in search of the Amazon and its high rivers” (BENCHIMOL, 1992, p. 227).

The appalling working conditions given to the workers shocked observers at the time; Most of the rubber tappers were illiterate and did not read the contract they signed with the owner of the rubber plantation (seringal). Thus, the rubber tappers lived in slavery condition, as the descendants of the “rubber soldiers” still claim today. Researcher Cristina Scheibe Woff relates violence in rubber plantations with violence against women today:

Violence was not one-way, it was not established in a type of relationship between the boss and the rubber tapper, for example. It circulated between relationships, a kind of language that many used and took on different forms. But what I could identify is that it almost always also had a gender character, especially linked to masculinity. (Wolf, 2011, p. 36).

With these considerations we can enter the novel *Seringal*, the fiction created by Miguel Ferrante, based on the history of rubber plantations. We propose to develop a reading centered on human and social issues

III. THE SERINGAL BY MIGUEL FERRANTE

Ferrante's work describes the daily life of the rubber plantations as the paradise of the few people and the hell of many others, from the extraction of sap to the moment of rubber manufacturing. “The Santa Rita” rubber plantation is the main setting for the moving stories that end the centuries-old martyrdom of the Acre settlers, a martyrdom

that is repeated in hundreds of other shacks, where the tyranny of the rubber plantation owners reigns” (Ferrante, 2007, p. 10). The scenes suggests a cycle of violence imposed by the rubber tapper to guarantee his dominating position.

The narrative develops at the moment when the character named Toinho, who had recently become an orphan, arrives as a teenager at the headquarters of the Santa Rita rubber plantation, where his godfather was the rubber worker, a fact that initiates the character's perception of violence. One of the first impacts occurs, when the female character Paula, only 12 years old, his lover, was raped by Carlinhos, son of the mayor and godson of the colonel who owned the rubber plantation. Toinho comes to know a universe marked by violence, injustice and crimes. As it had been done with indigenous people before, it also began to be done with northeastern migrants:

He worked like an animal, day and night, traversing rubber-tree roads, cutting trees, collecting milk, sitting on the edge of the smoker, or breaking the chestnut urchins. He had deprived himself of many of the few things in his life. But the small balance in the boss's hands soon disappeared in an illness, in the purchase of medicine, a hammock, a piece of cloth (Ferrante, 2007, p.23).

In this scenario marked by the representation of the strength of the colonizing discourse, the author presents the violence generated by the reproduction of this same discourse, as an instrument of power to define and maintain the position of the one who utters it. The novel describes in detail the cycles of exploitation and perpetuation of violence from generation to generation. The rubber forest owners used to submit the workers to slavery, leaving them, without hope and with no perspectives to a better life.

His wife had died. The son grew up, stunted, stunted. Years and illnesses bury the dream, breaking its will [...]. And it stayed. Aging, almost blinded by the urucuri smoke, in the daily work of the smoker. [...] The chest tight with suffocating anguish, and the swollen liver. He walked bent over under the pains that tortured his entrails (Ferrante, 2007, p.23).

This discourse covers multiple violence which is engendered in the narrative, which presents throughout the plot, the naturalization of these sad experiences that strengthen a process of oppression. For Franz Fanon (1979), violence is this fuel that drives the colonial gear, experienced both physically and mentally. "It is violence in its raw state and it can only bow to greater violence" (FANON, 1979, p. 46).

The character Toinho, a rubber tapper under the command of the rubber owner, is well inserted in this world of violence from which he seems to be unable to get out.

Now Toinho is sixteen years old. He is already a man. Soon he will be in a "placement", coming and going all his life along the same narrow rubber trail, in the disheartening ergastule of the forest, collecting and smoking the latex for Colonel Fábio Alencar, until his legs weaken, the diseases undermine his organism, the urucuri smoke blinding his eyes. And die one day as he lived, anonymously, forgetting gods and men (Ferrante, 2007, p. 21).

The protagonist, who already lived in a "colocação"¹, with the death of his father, now is living under the roof of his godfather, Colonel Fábio Alencar. In this context Toinho comes to know a universe marked by violence in the face of an aggressive landscape that tones the anguish experienced in the "seringal":

"In the still landscape there is a gray tone of desolation and anguish. The immobilized air. Not a wing, the slightest breeze. Everything static, dying brutalized by the suffocating heat, under the dome of the sky" (p. 13).

The writer Miguel Ferrante (2007), describes the rubber plantation environment, as the underworld, a place of everlasting misery or an infernal region: "The hell of the igapós on the floodplains. The devilishly green forest, exuberant, oozing with sap, advancing dominating, enraged over the tent" (p. 23). Nature is described with characteristics of anguish, authority, related to the perpetuation of the miserable life of the rubber tapper that ends in a painful and undignified death.

The fiction *Seringal* reveals a lower world, an environment of affliction in the Amazonian rubber trees forest. It is a narrative which shows traces of naturalism when the stronger imposes violence on the weakest. The dominator, we could say, in this sense, the colonizer, responds to his desires and instincts and, in this way, is always seeking the advantage over the workers. Violence is manifested by the colonizing instinct that brutalizes the human being and causes fear to the victims. Toinho expresses this fear for the first time, when he is introduced to his godfather, the owner of the rubber plantation, Colonel Fábio Alencar:

Toinho, embarrassed, fearful, eyes fixed on the syringe shoe, asked for a blessing. [...] The boy remained motionless, lost in the confusion of strange fear. [...] He raised his hand in supplication, dumbfounded, struggling in vain to free the words strangled in his throat, while walking away like an automaton (Ferrante, 2007, p.17-18).

The violence in the Santa Rita rubber plantation is reflected on the gun, the firearm which was the instrument useful both to punish the said transgressors and to demonstrate the power of command. "The rifle was, then, the symbol of authority. There was no place for pity, for compromise. [...] The weak either succumbed or bowed, slavishly, to the law of the strong. There was no alternative." (FERRANTE, 2007, p.38). This clearly reflects what Frantz Fanon argues in "Concerning Violence" from *The Wretched of the Earth*

In the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge. It is obvious here that the agents of government speak the language of pure force (FANON, 1979, p.38):

The Amazonian rubber plantation reveals itself to be a colonial context where one sees inequality, and "the immense difference of ways of life which never come to mask the human realities." Dona Clara, the colonel's wife, wants to build a school for the children of the rubber plantation, and after so much insistence she got her husband's approval and then occurred the actual construction of the shed to receive students and teacher. The

order to offer shelter to the rubber tappers and their families.

¹ - Colocação –a little improvised house, built in the forest, it was made from wood and covered with straw in

methodology used by the teacher relied on the action of the paddle, an instrument to punish the mistakes made by the students in the evaluation of the lesson of the day, as well as screams and physical punishment added to the difficulty faced by the way into the woods, which were discouraging the disposition of the children.

In the beginning, it had been all that fuss, that eagerness to get to school right away. Soon, however, their enthusiasm died. They now go to classes under threats from their parents. Fearful and reluctant, lengthening their path as if to delay a punishment (Ferrante, 2007, p. 39)

Among the acts of violence experienced by Toinho, we highlight the case of Paula who suffered an outrageous violation of her body and then gradually languishes as a result of the rape. Without adequate medical care to treat the trauma, as indicated by Father José in a visit requested by the boy, she felt hopeless. A fact that leads the protagonist to question about the injustices and violence suffered in that world. And the understanding that he had about the figure of the colonel in front of the rubber plantation, as a leader who upheld justice, is slowly crumbling into painful perceptions of injustices that have been fraught with violence in that world which reminds us of Fanon's colonial world:

Then the colonized discovers that his life [...] is the same as the colonist's. He discovers that a settler's skin is not worth more than an indigenous skin. This Discovery produces an essential shake-up in the world. [...] Not only is his presence no longer intimidating, but I am ready to prepare such ambushes for him that within a short time he will have no other way out than to flee (Fanon, 1979, p.34).

The narrative tension increases when there is a double murder between the rubber tappers Chico Xavier and Clemente, motivated by their disputing a woman. This disagreement leads to a strong controversy and fight which resulted in a point-blank death. Later on, another death happened as punishment for the assassin rubber tapper, this death allowed by the colonel. At this moment, Toinho finds himself confused between the ideas of justice and violence

that are exposed to him, seeks in his friend Mané Lopes, a former rubber tapper from Santa Rita, for clarifications. However, he receives from his friend only words of servile submission to the colonel's orders, reproducing the colonizing discourse in terms of holding back thoughts that interrogate the commands of the owner of the rubber plantation. His friends is still blind to the need of justice for that place. Toinho is confused in this environment, and begins to reflect on whether to follow his fate, a whirlwind of questions invades his mind:

His heart troubled with contradictory emotions, his thought insisting on pulling away from the prayer that his lips utter and he pulling it, bringing it back, trying to concentrate, gazing anxiously at the crucifix. And horrified, he senses that that "thing" is taking possession of him. [...] An anguish digging into his chest, his head heavy, the contours blurring, the colors blurring. (Ferrante, 2007, p. 105).

The novel highlights a feeling of fear inherent in the rubber tapper, which manifested itself every time in the presence of the colonel: "Toinho was trembling before him. It was always like that when I had to talk to him. He had never managed to overcome the fear that his godfather inspired in him" (p.135). He becomes the colonel's slave and has ideas to escape this reality and seek a new destiny. It so happens that upon learning of Toinho's plans, Colonel Fábio expresses his denial:

Where to Go ? You were born here and here you will have to live. This is your world. Our world. Mine, yours, Raimundão's one. All's world.. We are attached to the earth, we are part of it. understand? [...] "You need to work to end these crazy ideas. I'll give you a 'placement'. (Ferrante, 2007, p. 136)

Once again we realize that the rubber tapper lives in a situation that reflects Fanon's ideas (1979). "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity."(p.54)

Toinho maintains his fears regarding that fate determined by the godfather, as if agreeing with what was imposed on him would mean accepting all the violence and injustices witnessed and experienced by the protagonist.

The boy looks like a cornered animal, lost in grief, as if something has broken inside him and his mind is crumbling in the gears of dread. A frantic desire to scream, to throw himself into the shining waters of the Aquiri, to disappear. And the blurred, semi-conscious senses, holding him to the shreds of reality, warning him of danger, impelling him to seek help (Ferrante, 2017, p. 141).

This feeling provoked in the character a certain dose of revolt that had been fueled by the representation of domination in the figure of his godfather. Now with greater clarity and more certain of his ideas, he tried to break free from the “seringalista”, the owner of the plantation.

When the day arrived for Toinho's farewell, who, then, had a job to take care of and follow the same fate as his father, he felt his fear transformed into a feeling of revolt when he saw the colonel with "a relaxed expression of calm security, a firm gaze of an oppressor. “Toinho felt himself suddenly, enraptured by that gaze” (Ferrante, 2007. 159). And at that moment, as a way of freeing himself from the fear generated by the history of violence, which the colonel represented, and with the possession of a firearm, the representation of order and justice in the seringal, he shot the colonel, and then runs away towards the forest, in the Amazon jungle.:

From the depths of the past, the monotonous voices of rubber tappers emerged, chanting the blessed of the dead at his father's funeral. The hammock swaying to the cadenced rhythm of the porters' footsteps. The hollow sound of the earth falling on the body buried without the coffin. Paula's eyes looking at him, green and meek, through the shadows of death. [...] And the disturbing vision of Chico Xavier, tied to the post, the mouths of the wounds uttering words of blood... Trapped in the tangle of torturous ideas, he felt like a dog that the jaguar is chasing” (Ferrante, 2007). , p. 162).

The sudden reaction undertaken by the protagonist, reflected the desire to revolt against the oppression Toinho had experienced. And during the flight, he was presented with a momentary freedom that allowed him to enjoy a state of peace, overcoming the fears caused by a life of violence.

His eyes no longer saw the land buried in darkness. The ears no longer heard the angry voices, which were approaching. Alone, in front of himself, he felt invaded by an immense stillness, his heart freed from the chains of fear, stripped of anguish. As if all the suffering from seringal had gathered in himself. (Ferrante, 2007, p. 163)

Toinho resorted to the power endorsed by the firearm, and this decision gave opportunity, even if momentarily, to freedom that he desired, had been desiring for a long time.

IV. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We are aware that there are many studies on fictional and non fictional works related to rubber plantations and rubber tappers. We consider, however, that it is still extremely important to bring more studies and investigations into our discussions. As we explained at the beginning of this chapter, the exploitation of workers and slavery are still present in the Amazon. Behind the desire for profit of a few and the suffering of a large number of workers, who live in their skin the humiliation of working without any prospect of improvement, there is always a discourse that speaks of progress and development in the Amazon. Bringing for discussion a less explored work such as Miguel Ferrante's *Seringal* a work written from Acre perspective, may help us to understand better the literature produced in our environment. Although the author did not live in the rubber plantation itself, the author lived in the state of Acre and he is able to offer us in his work clear characteristics of a colonial world. By reading the novel one is reminded of Frantz Fanon's warning, when he affirms that “the colonized world is a world split in two” (1979, p 143), on the one hand, the privileged colonizers, on the other, the colonized, the damned of the land or “wretched of the earth.” Perhaps we can say that *O Seringal* represents this world divided in two: on the one hand, the rubber tapper and those closest to him, and on the other, the rubber tapper with all his tribulations: colonial violence was exercised for the dominating permanence. Another important theme which may be explored in the novel is the violence against women in the seringal. The novel invites the reader to reflect on issues such as misogyny, feminist studies or gender studies. This was not our aim for this article, but we probably feel invited to explore this on another occasion. It is worth mentioning that violence against women and workers today reflects violence in rubber plantations in the XX century. It is important to remember Cristina Wolf's

work (2001) which denounces violence in the state of Acre, especially violence against women.

Finally, the narrative presents the violence generated by the discourse and attitudes of the colonizer that can be well addressed with the help of post-colonial and decolonial theories that invite us to realize that in the Amazon the colonizers often come with the intention of producing “profit and more”. profit” regardless of the need to respect the others.

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