

# THE UNBELONGING: ABJECT FEMALE IDENTITIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

## O NÃO PERTENCIMENTO: IDENTIDADES FEMININAS ABJETAS NA FICÇÃO GÓTICA

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**Abstract:** Abjection is a central narrative resource in gothic fiction, a genre which deals with disturbance, terror, cleanliness and ambiguity in order to question the power of cultural constraints. It is also a central process in the constitution and interrelation of gender identities, being understood as a preclusion of identities which defy the intelligibility of heterosexuality and cultural imperatives that dictate femininity and its representation. The analysis of two novels written in the gothic mode, *Cat's Eye*, by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, and *Ciranda de Pedra*, by Lygia Fagundes Telles, a Brazilian writer, aims at discussing figurations of abjection in gothic fiction and at approaching the operation of such process in the performance of female identities that challenge and subvert culturally shared images of femininity.

**Keywords:** abjection; gender; gothic; Margaret Atwood; Lygia Fagundes Telles.

**Resumo:** A abjeção é um recurso narrativo central ao gótico, um gênero que lida com toda ordem de perturbações, terrores, purezas e ambiguidades para questionar o poder de amarras culturais. É, ainda, um processo central à constituição e

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interrelação de identidades de gênero, sendo compreendida como a exclusão de identidades que desafiam a inteligibilidade heterossexual e os imperativos culturais que ditam a construção da feminidade e suas representações. A análise de dois romances góticos, *Cat's Eye*, da escritora canadense Margaret Atwood, e *Ciranda de Pedra*, da escritora brasileira Lygia Fagundes Telles, objetiva discutir figurações da abjeção na ficção gótica e abordar o funcionamento de tal processo na performatividade de identidades femininas que desafiam e subvertem imagens culturalmente compartilhadas de feminidade.

**Palavras-chave:** abjeção; gênero; gótico; Margaret Atwood; Lygia Fagundes Telles.

Gothic fiction has always dealt with abjection in its various manifestations. Being a genre closely concerned with such images as the ghostly, the monstrous, body deterioration, and the double, and to the many ways by which we project our complexities onto these figures in search of coherent and immutable identities, the gothic has managed to construct and perform scenes of abjection, and to elect them as part of its usual narrative strategies, which figure as metaphors for deep psychic and cultural conflicts.

By dealing with the powers of abjection and its centrality to the structuring of binary oppositions that regulate Western societies, the gothic allows for a critical view of those oppositions, which points to their fragility and pliability, suggesting how easily one term of the opposition may slip into the other and defy its coherence and pretensions to a hierarchical superiority. For if the abject is “what disturbs identity, system, order [...] the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 04), then its potential for the subversion and implosion of stable identities suggests a suitable pathway when discussing the quandaries and dangers implied in any attempt at a conventionally unaltered identity.

Abjection itself has been pointed out as the basis for the development

of the gothic plot, given that these narratives portray how the building of ideal and conventional identities depends on the exclusion of any traits that may threaten the purity and coherence of the self and of the knowledge regimes upon which it is signified. Studies such as Hogle's (2002) and Williams' (1995) assert that abjection is fictionally elaborated in experiences of dislocation and in the contact with terrifying images which evoke states of in-betweenness, thus bringing back infantile drives related to a primitive state of "not-yet-being". These drives, they might argue, are symbolic portraits of that moment of birth when the individual is not yet born, but is on the verge of being so.

Gothic and abjection are, thus, two interrelated dimensions or forms of describing experiences that think back to the moment of birth, a moment marked by multiplicity and violence as the individual is severed from the mother. This moment of primitive violence becomes the basis for the structuring of the self, and its chaotic dimension causes us to both repel and desire a mythical reunion with our ancient origins, metaphorized in the female body as a protective container. Therefore, the gothic has embodied abjection in narratives of chaos, in which the past emerges as a *locus* of fear and desire. Gothic characters display their fear of the past as it may bring along secrets best kept hidden, but desire it since it represents an idealized *locus* of order and communion, which are core aspects of the constitution of the psyche.

The return of the past upon the present is an aspect generally mentioned in conceptualizations of the gothic, although the fundamental hybridism and complexity of this multifaceted genre defies a single definition. Although the gothic is about the past, it is also about a range of other aspects and abjections. The past emerges as a paradoxical site that implies maintenance of order, and unruly violence and superstition. It is generally embodied in spaces such as old houses, castles, abbeys, and cellars. The

past is also a site of abjection, a construction that engulfs the individual, on which all sorts of transgression are projected.

The idea that abjection and gothic are strongly connected might be inferred by the title of the essay signed by theorist and therapist Julia Kristeva (op. cit.), *Powers of Horrors*. Horror, a core aspect of gothic fiction, she argues in this essay, has a central power in the structuring of the self, a power which is paradoxical and still inescapable in building the limits of identity. Horror stands out when the subject faces his/her dejects and considers them as an actual part of him/herself. This leads to the understanding that s/he might fully become “deject” when death approaches. This is why decay and death are central figurations of abjection. Therefore, horror is the structuring drive through which abjection is reinforced, as it is a consequence of the process of repelling performed by the superego in order to keep the self safe.

In spite of that, Kristeva argues that abjection is not fully unconscious, or it is not totally unfamiliar to the individual. Otherwise, it becomes blatant when the subject experiences whatever aspects of their identity they might have expelled in order to be kept safe, regular and intelligible within the cultural norms that regulate the formation of acceptable identities. The process of abjection is thus a form of familiar unfamiliarity that underlies the psyche and refers to uncanny manifestations, as described by Sigmund Freud (1987), constituting the exclusion of all sorts of inconsistencies that might prevent one from declaring meaningful unitary identities.

The psychoanalytical position defended by Kristeva differs from the view stated in *Purity and Danger*, developed by anthropologist Mary Douglas (2001). Although Kristeva asserts that “it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection” (op. cit., p. 04), Douglas defends a complementary explanation upon the ways by which innumerable societies, ranging from the most primitive to the most developed, bring about

forms of abjection based on the parameters of cleanliness. According to Douglas, all of those societies value taboos and collective thoughts derived from the two main aspects of their cultural scripts: fear, usually of a vengeful deity, and concern with hygiene and defilement. She argues that rituals of purity and purification are far from denoting disorder and religious extremism, but contribute to the maintenance of a unitary culture experience and recognition of organizing laws. As she puts it, “they are positive contributions to atonement. By their means, symbolic patterns are worked out and publicly displayed. Within these patterns disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning” (DOUGLAS, 2001, p. 02-03).

However, the ideas concerning pollution work not only at the denotative level, that is, aiming at the ordering and cleaning that characterizes those societies and that set up the conditions for the development of taboos regarding the physiological functions of the body. Pollution is also a metaphorical means of exerting power and of enforcing moral standards and shared aspects of what is understood as coherent identities. It is through metaphors of pollution, degradation and jeopardy that the cultural standards pertaining to a given group are reinforced at a symbolic level. That is an important aspect to be regarded when correlating the abjection to the gothic and to any queer politics of gender, as those that have been discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and Judith Butler (1990; 1993).

Early critical positions within feminist studies tended to ignore the distinction between sex and gender. Womanhood was seen as a perpetual condition of otherness (BEAUVOIR, 1956), a burden in the sense that it was inescapable. It was expressed by one’s genitalia, whose power was to determine which biological and social functions one was bound to perform (FIRESTONE, 1972). It was, then, the product of morphological functions, connected to menstruation, birth-giving, and breastfeeding. It

oppressed women into a life of abnegation and self-annihilation when patriarchy delimited a space of domesticity for them, thus preventing them from fully acting in the public domain.

These first studies declared that gender was a consequence of sex. Later, as feminism developed a more sophisticated set of theories, the concept of gender was re-elaborated in order to mark the distinction between morphological limits and cultural bearings. Gender, this second group of feminists asserted, was a cultural construction, that is superposed to the previously given biological reality of sex. It constituted a set of stable traits, culturally negotiated and signified through consensual agreements that enabled one to differentiate between a woman and a man. This difference lay in the masculine power of straightening family ties by means of the exchange of women (RUBIN, 2004). The articulation of a homosocial society, in which male heterosexuality was overvalued and female oppression enforced, rested upon the “sex/gender systems” which placed men and women in distinct hierarchical positions of power and agency. The emergence of gender identities was made possible, then, within certain sets of rules, shared cultural standards that determined which identities were to be empowered, made meaningful, acceptable, and coherent.

In spite of that, the biological imperative of sex was still elected to justify the construction of gender identities, as a sort of previous aspect that could escape the theoretical deconstructions operating within feminist studies. Judith Butler’s (op. cit.) influential but controversial studies offered an alternative view of the operations of gender in society, proposing that both gender and sex are the effect of discursive constructions. Gender, she argues, is constructed and achieved by means of performative acts which are iterated in all levels of cultural demands. The repetition of discourses serves to naturalize the contiguity between sex and gender so as to confer centrality to heterosexual identities while other deviant identities

are rendered abject.

Hence, Butler argues that gender not only is performative but also brings about the abjection of any traits that do not fit into socially sanctioned concepts of identity. Therefore, any gender identity is made intelligible when it attends to those concepts, and abject when it challenges their internal coherence, thus evidencing their fragility and defying their claim to a natural and irrevocable stability. Homosexual identities, for instance, are considered abject since they make explicit the operation of cultural demands which confer centrality to heterosexuality. Consequently, homosexuality has been culturally constructed as a site of impurity and disease, of transgression and punishment, and a target of violent homophobic response (SEDGWICK, *op. cit.*).

Even though abjection is a clear process in the conflict involving heterosexual and non-heterosexual identities, it also operates within the more specific range of female identities, in order to engender hierarchies of power among women. Considering that in a first moment the subgenre defined as “female gothic” (MOERS, 1985) presented stories in which a woman is terrified by a male villain and by the shadow of maternity and transgressive sexuality, gothic narratives produced by women, especially from the mid-twentieth century onwards, showed conflicts involving women in their relationship with other female characters. The configuration of the latter forms of abjection in such narratives contributes to highlighting the complexities within feminism itself, which have become clear as long as the meaning of the term “women” has proven to be multiple, complex and unstable, and as the subject of feminism has proved to vary according to its theoretical confluences (RICHARDS, 2002). As an effect bound to whatever gender identities, abjection seems to be a strong element to describe latter-days female gothic narratives centered on conflicts involving women.

Neither Canadian nor Brazilian literatures are traditionally associated with the gothic. As we have argued elsewhere (COPATI; LaGUARDIA, 2013), the studies on the gothic in Brazilian literature tend to punctuate the existence of narratives produced in the gothic mode, although they fail to present it as a well-structured tradition in the fiction produced in Brazil. As far as Canadian fiction is concerned, there is little difference in this aspect. Despite the fact that the concept of Southern Ontario gothic (GIBSON, 1972) was developed in order to cover a tendency of fictionists to apply gothic strategies to their writing, such a concept fails to demonstrate how a “Canadian gothic” would possibly emerge as a particular sub-genre of gothic, i.e., as a tradition of gothic in Canadian writing *per se*, and not as sheer gothic disguised in a national outfit.

Granting the failure of criticism to determine the terms through which the gothic could be applied to a national Brazilian or Canadian fiction, one must recognize that Canadian fiction often deals with fear as its core motif. Fear associated with survival, victimization, sublimity of the landscape and danger imposed by nature. By showing a suspicious view of the *grandeur* of the northern landscape, of the Canadian lakes and of the convulsive nature perfectly translated in the paintings of The Group of Seven – regions combining both strangeness and danger – gothic novels such as Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1998) and *Cat’s Eye* (1989) metaphorize the operation of abjection as it is triggered by the harshness of the landscape and transposed into uncanny and abnormal interpersonal relationships.

*Cat’s Eye* is narrated by Elaine Risley, a painter currently living in Vancouver, who returns to her hometown of Toronto for an exhibit of her paintings. Coming back home after leaving years before gives rise to memories from a troubled childhood, a period of her life when she was in constant transit to follow her entomologist father on expeditions inside the



most deserted and dangerous natural areas around Toronto. As she turns eight years old, her family moves to this city and she makes friends with a group of three girls, Carol, Grace and Cordelia. Among the three of them, the memories of Cordelia still haunt Elaine, especially for her being the leader in bullying the narrator and harassing her psychologically.

Cordelia's ghost works as a metaphor of past dangers, of memory and abjection which pervades the narrative and gradually emerges as a site where Elaine, now in her old age, projects her worries concerning ageing and physical decay. As she states at the opening of the narrative, when she and Cordelia are still teenagers and experiencing the beginning of their prime,

[o]n the streetcars there are always old ladies, or we think of them as old [...], there are the ones who have not resigned themselves, who still try for an effect of glamour [...]. They have escaped, though what it is they've escaped from isn't clear to us. We think that their bizarre costumes, their verbal tics, are chosen, and that when the time comes we also will be free to choose (ATWOOD, 1989, p. 4-5).

To Elaine and Cordelia, old age bears the curiosity of destiny, of whatever monstrosity they were supposed to turn into when they reached that stage when people are allowed to be eccentric to disguise the decay of their own bodies. Or at least this is what Elaine thinks, now that she herself has become one of those old ladies, "walking along the street with my mouth slightly open, drooling a little. Only a little; but it may be the thin edge of the wedge, the crack in the wall that will open, later, onto what?" (ATWOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 6).

Such images of ageing, as they portray the failure of bodily functions and the fading of beauty, are then read as an edge or a crack, an in-between zone where abjection takes place and to which all bodies that do not attend to the commands of cleanliness, beauty and health are relegated. This ghostly region is now fully occupied by Elaine and the images of Cordelia

she is able to conjure up from her memories of observing old ladies on the streetcars from her childhood. Cordelia, who has long been erased from Elaine's memories after causing her great pain, reappears now as the ghost of a lady who embodies the abjection of old age:

I think of Cordelia examining the growing pouches under her eyes, the skin, up close, loosened and crinkled like elbows [...]. She drops the bath towel, which is green, a muted sea-green to match her eyes, looks over her shoulder, sees in the mirror the dog's-neck folds of skin above the waist, the buttocks drooping like wattles, and, turning, the dried fern of hair. I think of her in a sweatsuit, sea-green as well, working out in some gym or other, sweating like a pig. I know what she would say about this, about all of this. How we giggled, with repugnance and delight, when we found the wax her older sisters used on their legs, congealed in a little pot, stuck full of bristles. The grotesqueries of the body were always of interest to her. (ATWOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 6-7).

As a child, Cordelia had been attracted by abjection and its powers, as she watched old ladies closely and tried to track the passage of time. She had also been drawn by all sorts of excrements and bodily dejects she could grab and examine. Repugnant and grotesque images attracted her as they revealed the limits of safety and health, and pointed toward cultural forces exerted on shared images of femininity. Cordelia's observation of the strategies old women explored in order to look younger and prettier marked her first contacts with the process of becoming a woman, in the sense of performing conventions, accepting impositions and constructing a female body made normal and intelligible by means of discursive norms that dictated the construction of womanhood in terms of imperatives of beauty and youth.

In her turn, Elaine was never aware of such imperatives, being a wanderer and living mostly in tents in the woods, or in motels, or inside the family's van. Her idea of what being a girl was mingled with her tomboy-

ish manners and looks, producing an abnormal female identity, one which defied cultural standards of femininity and its limits. As she describes herself as an eight-year-old girl, “I’m wearing pants, baggy at the knees, and a jacket too short in the sleeves. Under the jacket, I know though you can’t see it, is a hand-me-down brown and yellow striped jersey of my brother’s. Many of my clothes were once his” (ATWOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 28). The metaphor of the elder brother’s clothes is suggestive of the ways Elaine has her own body turned into a site of performative discourses that contradict the stability of femininity, thus being understood as a place of abjection where conventional imperatives that dictate gendered identities are deconstructed and rejected.

Elaine longs for female companionship, which she understands as a sort of alien identity, bearer of mysteries and unknown meanings. But, as soon as she starts at regular school and gets to meet “real girls”, she experiences the strangeness of having to cope with femininity and its rules:

I am left to the girls, real girls at last, in the flesh. But I’m not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them. I don’t know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder (ATWOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 50).

Elaine is seen by her peers as an exotic person whose family strayed from all social norms of behavior. As they slept on mattresses on the floor, did not adhere to novelties like the electrical appliances at home, as her father worked in close contact with the grotesquerie of the animal world, as she herself had only two dresses and was never sure which boys at school were in love with her, and as she was not a Christian, she was situated upon the tightrope of abjection and difference, pending unacceptance as she struggled to fit her female identity into a brand-new model.

Cordelia was the one that most frightened Elaine, the one she paradoxically recognized with both awe and distrust. It is Cordelia who gradu-

ally approaches Elaine, and ends up by controlling, harassing and isolating her from the quartet of girl friends. As she looks angelical and good-mannered, Cordelia can easily disguise her punitive behavior. Elaine is elected as a scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in their plays; therefore she becomes the object of Cordelia's cruelty, as she observes that "[I]ittle girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized" (ATWOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 125).

Elaine turns into an object identity, a foreign body to be looked over, examined at a distance, controlled, but excluded in order to safeguard the other girls' prominence and power. Feminism and its theoretical development have shown that hierarchical distinctions take place not only in the heart of patriarchy, but also in the complex realm of womanhood. Women also fight over power among themselves and are positioned by regulatory discourses in hierarchical disputes for the major or minor validation of their particular demands. A hierarchical relationship between Elaine and the other three girls, especially Cordelia, is then structured, a relationship in which she is subdued, bullied and diminished:

Grace is waiting there and Carol, and especially Cordelia. Once I'm outside the house there is no getting away from them. They are on the school bus, where Cordelia stands close beside me and whispers into my ear: "Stand up straight! People are looking!" Carol is in my classroom, and it's her job to report to Cordelia what I do and say all day. They're there at recess, and in the cellar at lunchtime. They comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. On the way home from school I have to walk in front of them, or behind. In front is worse because they talk about how I'm walking, how I look from behind. "Don't hunch over," says Cordelia. "Don't move your arms like that".

They don't say any of the things they say to me in front of others, even other children: whatever is going on is going on in secret, among the four of us only. Secrecy is important, I know that:

to violate it would be the greatest, the irreparable sin. If I tell I will be cast out forever (ATWOOD, op. cit., p. 127).

Abjection is here presented as the girls exclude Elaine from their circle, having her walk in front or behind them while they point out her flaws. The terrible blunder which she had always feared emerges as she is not able to be girlish enough to cope with their secret demands. The biggest blunder, however, the one that would condemn her to eternal perdition, would be revealing their cruel game. The fear of being cast out prevents her from telling others about her burden, and such fear remains a motif in gothic fiction, one that is constructed in subtle narrative layers that suggest the fear of persecution, solitude and, ultimately, of death.

Elaine fears losing her girl friends as this loss could signal the death of a part of herself, her brand-new female self, though death also emerges as a response to cultural difference. As proof of that, she embodies a different aspect of Canada, an image of an aboriginal country, of savagery, of wandering and of animality which is supposed to be domesticated and suppressed in order to keep the illusion of civilization untouched. Such images of wildness are considered to be a recurrent *topos* in Canadian literature (ATWOOD, 2004), one that sets Canada in contact with gothic and its narrative strategies. Paradoxically, Cordelia's spiral of cruelty intensifies to the point of a metaphorical aboriginal sacrifice, portrayed in a ceremony of imprisonment. Elaine is elected as a scapegoat to be buried alive and thus purify an ideal of femininity and placate the wildness of national identity:

Cordelia and Grace and Carol take me to the deep hole in Cordelia's backyard. [...] They pick me up by the underarms and the feet and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. The daylight air disappears, and there's the sound of dirt hitting the boards, shovelful after shovelful. Inside the hole it's dim and cold and damp and smells like toad burrows.

Up above, outside, I can hear their voices, and then I can't hear them. I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror (ATWOOD, 1989, p. 112).

Gothic is the literature of terror (PUNTER, 1996), a genre in which terror emerges not only as a sensation or an effect, but mainly as a structuring element. Terror, as opposed to graphic horror and physical violence, has also been elected as a distinctive mark for the female gothic, a tradition within gothic fiction with which Margaret Atwood dialogues and corresponds. It can be described as a sensation that awakens deep perceptions and delight about the beauty provided by sublimity and danger, or, as is said in Edmund Burke's (1998) classical enquiry into the subject, it encompasses "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (op. cit., p. 42). From this perspective, Elaine's life story can be taken as a gothic tale of terror and abjection, one that causes her bittersweet delight as she hovers over her memories and masochistically rebuilds them in her art. It is also a tale of terror in the sense that her perceptions of art and beauty will be fully determined and influenced by her childhood traumas, which will be translated into her lack of self-confidence as an adult and into her painting of convulsive and surreal images, elaborated as an effect of her troubled memories and as a means of coming to terms with her ghostly terrifying past.

Lygia Fagundes Telles' gothic novel *Ciranda de Pedra* (1998) introduces a similar female character who faces abjection and exclusion from childhood. Virginia is presented as a girl without a home, who thus wanders in search of a place where she can lay down roots and found a

stable ideal of family. Experiencing fragmentation and madness, loneliness and disownment, she is haunted by the presence of her ill mother, who dwindles imprisoned in a dark bedroom, and by the disdainful existence of her father, Natércio, and her sisters, Bruna and Otávia, who dismiss and humiliate her, and insist on casting her out of the circle of friends and neighbors that she wishes to preserve.

As she wanders about in places dominated by the dilemmas of adulthood, Virginia lacks lightness and self-confidence as a child. She poignantly reminds herself that she is loved by no one and, being unable to elect references from both the children and the adults surrounding her, she encounters expression in metamorphic daydreams, in which she is transformed into grotesque and fragile animals:

She lay down on the floor and contorted in anguish, crawling into the middle of the room. [...] Being a snake hurt her elbows, better being a butterfly, then. But the one deemed to be a butterfly was surely Otávia, who was beautiful. “And I am ugly, and bad, bad, bad!” (TELLES, 1998, p. 9-10)<sup>1</sup>.

Virginia perceives her identity in constant comparison to her sisters, whom she thinks are beautiful, magnificent, worth attention, and privileged for living in a house with their father, while she is forced to accept their mother's madness and cope with her tantrums and excesses. Laura, the mother, has gone mad for transgressing rigid social conventions still meaningful in Brazilian society in the fifties, conventions concerning the roles of women regarding sexuality and gender. The mother is scorned by Bruna and Otávia for having betrayed their father and left home to live along with Daniel, and her madness is understood by them as an inescapable punishment for her sin. It is this net of women figures, her mother, sisters and caregivers, Frau Herta and Luciana, who provide the parameters for the performance of Virginia's female identity, one that is influenced by transgression, abnegation and guilt.

The girl keeps moving places, going from the house where she resides with Laura and Daniel to where her father and her sisters live, a wealthy mansion neighboring the house where Conrado, a boy whom she loves, lives with his family. Hence, Virginia's recognition as a significant individual is projected onto her constant movement, which allows her to inhabit the abject threshold of public and private spaces, struggling for self-recognition and acceptance. She is thus predestined to wandering, embodying the figure of the wandering Jew<sup>2</sup>, a recurrent character in gothic fiction. Through wandering, Virginia accepts being the payer of her parents' transgressions, though she also fosters new possibilities for femininity and browses a variety of familiar references that allow her to experience a painful process of self-discovery.

Although she loves Conrado, she understands that he also rejects her, which contributes to her self perception as an abject being. Along with the three other children, Leticia and Afonso complete the group of characters that despise her and waive her presence. This group of children who treat Virginia with indulgence, as if she were a willful but unwanted child who everybody was forced to be kind to, is symbolized by the stone statues of dwarfs who ring around-the-rose in the garden, and who provide the title for the novel, and where Virginia hides for protection when they leave her behind:

Leticia was excited: "We could have a snack at home, my mother is having some friends over, and she'll be radiant to see you all again. [...] Let's have Virginia come, too". Bruna fiddled the folds on her uniform skirt: "But Fraulein is about to come with our snack, she'll be mad if she doesn't find at least... So you'll stay, right, Virginia?". Leticia had a move: "Well, that's up to you". Then, looking at Virginia with tender interest: "She still doesn't look like either of you". Bruna smiled: "Virginia looks like no one".

Blinking effortlessly not to cry, Virginia [...] trespassed the ring of



dwarfs, took a seat at a stone and dived her fingers in the mumbling water. [...] “Why didn’t you come with them?” – Frau Herta marveled to herself. “Because they didn’t want me”, she said, simply (TELLES, op. cit., p. 62-63)<sup>3</sup>.

After experiencing such episodes of rejection, Virginia finds out that Natércio is not actually her father, but her stepfather. Her real father was Daniel, who had committed suicide after Laura’s death. Such revelation arouses in her the wish to enter a boarding school, where she spends most of her adolescence and from where she returns to her stepfather’s house as an extremely interesting and attractive young woman years later, a woman who becomes the center of attention now. In spite of that, her return to her childhood house brings back painful memories of the way she used to be set apart as an outsider. As a grown-up woman, Virginia is now about to review and reassess her past as it is shown to her through the sieve of time.

As an adult, Virginia seduces her former tormentors into the lure of her sexual awakening and undergoes abjection in different levels, as she experiences transgressive sexuality and questions the limits of gender through homosexuality and identity negation, which bring her close to madness. Written in the fifties, a period when Brazil was still a conservative country in terms of women’s behavior, and when the sexual revolution had not yet hatched into a movement of questioning of cultural standards, *Ciranda de Pedra* looks ahead of its time to present the dilemmas of femininity and gender from the perspective of abjection and social acceptance.

At first, Virginia has an affair with Afonso, now married to her sister Bruna, but, later, she is introduced by Letícia into the possibility of a lesbian relationship, though her involvement with another woman intends to redirect her attraction for Conrado to another object of desire:

Virginia laid her dull eyes on her friend’s dry face. Her grayish hair was Conrado’s. Her hair and her eyes of sadly fallen corners. She lowered her heavy eyelids: “Let’s pretend it’s him. It’s him”. [...]

She softened her muscles and relaxed her position and soon she felt Leticias's mouth crawling up her neck, slowly up until it reached her own lips (TELLES, op. cit., 143-144)<sup>4</sup>.

As she “felt an obscure pleasure in passing on them all” (TELLES, op. cit., p. 144)<sup>5</sup>, Virginia tries and delimits a gender identity for herself, seeking freedom from the cultural bounds that castrate female sexuality and force her into the performance of a domesticated gender role. By engaging in homosexuality, which is the ultimate cultural site where abjection takes place (SEDGWICK, op. cit.), as well as in other transgressive sexual activities, Virginia looks into the pits of madness, echoing her mother's story and considering suicide a new possibility for discovering herself. In spite of that, her unresolved passion for Conrado and her incessant urge to wander as a way of purging her transgressions and those of others, leads her into leaving one more time, on a trip to nowhere in special, as the novel finds its closure.

Both Margaret Atwood and Lygia Fagundes Telles reflect upon abjection to demonstrate that it is a central process in the constitution of the self and in the regulation of identities, whether these are based on gender traits or on other identitary aspects. Therefore, two fiction writers who are seemingly distant in time and space can be approximated through the way they describe the development of female identities and give special attention to childhood as a moment of life when abjection is most emphasized, since it constitutes the primary moments when the individual is in the process of being shaped by social constraints and modeled according to cultural imperatives.

*Cat's Eye's* and *Ciranda de Pedra's* unbelonging protagonists, Elaine and Virginia, dispute the contours of gender and femininity in their relationships with their female antagonists, thus embodying the sophistication of feminist theoretical approaches to gender as they subtly indicate that power is a gift for which women would fight over against one an-

other. Although power cannot be reduced to the possibility of an object of possession, being better understood as a net of discourses which regulate and domesticate bodies into culturally intelligible identities (FOUCAULT, 2007; BUTLER, 1993), it is important to notice that the complexity of the female identities and the variety of demands coming from feminisms show that women are also positioned in different hierarchical levels in relation to other women, and that abjection is a central dynamics for a proper operation of such cultural callings.

As abjection is also a central process in the elaboration of gothic plots, Atwood and Telles end up making important contributions to the genre by constructing their novels as stories in which abjection is presented as a source of terror and horror, rejection and loss of reference. As previously observed, gothic plots frequently portray the metaphorical return of the past upon the present in the form of a ghost. The ghostly presences of Cordelia and of Virginia herself as a child give new – darker – shades to abjection as they haunt the protagonists and threaten them with the revival of a painful childhood. By exorcising the evil influence of the past and purging a life of suffering and trauma by means of an incessant wandering, those protagonists achieve deliverance and face new possibilities for constructing their identities.

Even though the gothic may not be a traditional genre in Canada nor in Brazil, Margaret Atwood and Lygia Fagundes Telles mobilize a transnational tradition and blaze new trails in elaborating particularly national gothic fictions, taking into account the peculiarities and fears observed in their own countries. Their writings serve, then, the understanding that literature creates connections in various instances, refabulating genres and reading tradition backwards. However, such complex and controversial novels know no single interpretation or classification. Prior to that, they would serve as a way to ensure that literature knows no frontiers, that ter-

ror knows no limits, and that abjection knows no kindness.

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**(Endnotes)**

- 1 Originally: “Deitou-se no assoalho e começou a se espiar angustiosamente, avançando de rastros até o meio do quarto [...]. Ser cobra machucava os cotovelos, melhor ser borboleta. Mas quem ia ser borboleta decerto era Otávia, que era linda. ‘E eu sou feia e ruim, ruim, ruim!’”. All translations from the Portuguese by the authors.
- 2 “A popular motif of the doomed sinner in Christian folklore, the legend of the wandering Jew influenced Gothic fiction [...]. Like an earthly demon, the aged scornor was the unwilling immortal, the supreme literary symbol of alienation, otherness, and perpetual penitence” (SNODGRASS, 2005, p. 356).
- 3 Originally: “Leticia animou-se: – Pois podemos tomar o lanche em casa, mamãe está recebendo algumas amigas, vai ficar radiante de ver vocês [...]. Deixa Virginia vir também. – Bruna alisou as pregas da saia do uniforme. – Mas a Fraulein já vem com o lanche, vai ficar aborrecida se não encontrar ao menos... Você fica, hem, Virginia. – Leticia teve um gesto, ‘Enfim, vocês é quem sabem’. Observou-a com afetuoso interesse: ‘Ela continua não se parecendo nada com Otávia nem com você’. Bruna teve um sorriso. ‘Virginia não se parece com ninguém’. Piscando, piscando num esforço desesperado para conter as lágrimas, Virginia [...] transpôs a ciranda de anões, sentou-se numa pedra e mergulhou os dedos num fio de água murmurante. [...] ‘Por que não foi com eles?’ – estranhou [Frau Herta]. ‘Porque eles não me quiseram’, disse simplesmente.”
- 4 Originally: “Virginia deteve o ar mortiço na face árida da amiga. Os cabelos cinzentos eram de Conrado. Os cabelos e os olhos de cantos tristemente caídos. Baixou as pálpebras pesadas: ‘Faz de conta que é ele. É ele.’ [...] Afrouxou os músculos e relaxou a posição tensa no momento em que sentiu a boca de Leticia roçar-lhe pelo pescoço e subir lenta até alcançar-lhe os lábios”.
- 5 Originally: “Virginia [...] sentia um gozo obscuro em ir passando de mão em mão”.