

“*Não há coincidências*”? Women’s Writing in Portugal in 1974 and 2004

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Portugal has undergone huge social, economic and cultural changes since the 1974 Revolution, due to both extensive international interaction and nationally driven development initiatives. On the surface, changes have been both visible and rapid but in other areas repressive deeply traditional ideology lingers on and any “advances” or “progress” are eyed with suspicion.¹ In political, legal and, to some extent social terms, the situation for women has improved enormously. Women have won the vote and equal rights are theirs by law; they are more visible in business, government and positions of power and responsibility, and more women have the opportunity to study at university.² Nevertheless, the Portuguese mentality is still inward looking and family-focused after centuries of enforced patriarchy. The formula for social success is now a university degree, as well as the original elements of marriage and children. When their daughter has achieved all this, her parents can sigh with relief that their duty has been done.

And yet, just how much have things changed since the Portuguese Revolution of 1974 and the subsequent new Constitution? According to a newspaper article published on International Women’s Day thirty years later, Portuguese

¹ Two recent studies of how far life and attitudes in Portuguese society have changed since 1974 are Clara Pinto Correia’s *E Depois Pronto: Trinta Anos de Democracia*, and José Gil’s bestselling *Portugal, Hoje: O Medo de Existir*.

² See the European Database: Women in Decision-Making.

women work more and are paid less than their male counterparts and have fewer opportunities to take on management posts (Neves). The recent case of seven women from Aveiro and their so-called accomplices being put on trial for having voluntarily undergone terminations and the government's avoidance of the issue of the decriminalisation of abortion seems an almost medieval turn of events to be taking place in the twenty-first century.³

Naturally, Portuguese society and culture has reflected historical development. In the aftermath of the Revolution, when censorship was lifted, freedom of speech declared, and exiled intellectuals returned from abroad, there was an explosion of literary publications. Many works of literature that came out around this time dealt with the events of the recent past, at last free to criticise or bear witness to Salazarist oppression, the colonial wars and mass clandestine emigration. Yet the reading public of the time was limited because education was discouraged, illiteracy rates were high, books were expensive and reading for pleasure or general instruction (other than the classics) was not a common pastime.⁴

Women writers like Lídia Jorge, Olga Gonçalves and Teolinda Gersão added their voices to the throng of new expression and provided a new "feminine" perspective on the "formerly unspoken (and unspeakable) past" (Ferreira, Sadler, Owen). These women authors and others acquired faithful readers and won the respect of literary critics and academics, although never as much as their male counterparts who were

³ The 1998 referendum on abortion was defeated by 51% to 49%. See the website <<http://www.peticaoreferendoaborto.web.pt/initium.htm>>.

⁴ The Portuguese are not avid readers: in 2000 a survey showed that only 45% claimed to buy and read books. See Neto, Joel. "Os livros são para ler". The article suggests that José Saramago's Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999 and the opening of FNAC superstores in Portugal have contributed to the rise in book sales.

always privileged in university syllabi, by literary prizes and by critical attention. Some women writers, like Sophia de Mello Breyner or Agustina Bessa Luís and Maria Velho da Costa, have achieved their place in the Portuguese canon through the sheer volume of their work, as well as its quality. Indeed, these writers published before, during and after the Revolution along with other persistent, creative, but less well-known women like Fernanda Botelho, Natália Nunes and Luísa Dacosta.

Chick Lit Hits Portugal

In the 1990s and early twenty-first century, a new genre has changed the face of women’s writing in Portugal. It has flourished so quickly and achieved such huge commercial success that it mirrors the boom in *poetisas* (women poets) in Portugal in the early twentieth century, another era when women were re-evaluating their role in society.⁵ The work of the late-twentieth-century women has been named, by its detractors, *literatura pop* or *light*, as if it were low in calories or nicotine and thus associating it blatantly with the world of advertising and consumer culture. Successor to the *folhetim* and romance novel, it is similar in tone to celebrity gossip magazines and close in format to television soap operas. It is written by young women, for young women, about young women in contemporary, urban Portugal. It is also directly related to the success of the genre known as *chick lit* in the UK and the US,

⁵ Cláudia Pazos Alonso comments on Nuno Catarino Cardoso’s 1917 anthology of 106 *Poetisas portuguesas*: “é um numero astronómico, sobretudo tendo em conta [...] a escassez de mulheres poetas até ao último quartel do século XIX. Mas o que é ainda mais surpreendente é que [...] quase todas as poetisas incluídas na antologia teriam de ser, por força, poetisas da actualidade” [this is an astronomical figure, especially taking into account the scarcity of women-poets up until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But what is even more surprising is that almost all the poetesses included in the anthology had necessarily to be poetesses writing at that time], p. 26.

which flourished after the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by Helen Fielding in 1996.⁶

The commercial popularity yet very traditional formula and subject matter of chick lit has provoked academics working in feminism to question whether or not by focusing on women's lives, choices and problems it offered a new kind of female empowerment.⁷ Like Mills and Boon and Harlequin before it, chick lit's emphasis on the quest for the perfect heterosexual relationship triggered the question of whether romantic love was a trap for women. It appeared to threaten their potential for self-realisation and seemed instead to pander to demographics by creating characters in the mould of their ideal reader and playing on issues of self-esteem and self-image.⁸ In Britain, iconic women writers like Germaine Greer and Beryl Bainbridge have dismissed chick lit as inconsequential, undemanding "froth" (Ezard), but their comments have been challenged as elitist for implying that young women are too stupid to write books or read them.⁹ It is a genre that appeals to multitudes of readers because it is easy to read, often humorous and gently sarcastic, realistic because of the contemporary settings, recognisable situations and allusions to popular culture and society. It tends,

⁶ The Portuguese translation, *O Diário de Bridget Jones*, was published by Presença two years later, when the film version was made. The translation has sold 38,000 copies and is in its 14th edition (information supplied from Presença via email, 8 March 2004).

⁷ There are websites devoted to chick lit in the UK <<http://www.chicklit.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk>>, the US <<http://www.chicklit.com>> and the Netherlands <<http://www.chicklit.nl>>.

⁸ Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments on the traditional incompatibility of the "love" plot and the "quest" plot in *Writing Beyond the Ending*. Her contention is that "the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole" and thus upholds the ruling ideology (5).

⁹ Chick lit author Jenny Colgan fought back, defending the style as "good solid comedy writing" (Bushby).

however, to reinforce traditional myths and fantasies about the relationship between the sexes, particularly the idea that a man is the solution to all a woman’s problems, but also the source of a whole new set.

The Portuguese variant of chick lit has caused a commotion not only because of its overwhelming popularity and record sales numbers for women writers but also because of the critical storm that has blown up to debate whether or not it is real literature. Highly respected literary critics with newspaper columns like Eduardo Prado Coelho, Pedro Mexias and João Barrento have commented upon the sociological nature of the phenomenon, Barrento saying that the absence of style in this kind of novel constitutes “a mais radical materialização do grande sonho de um Flaubert, o de escrever um livro sobre coisa nenhuma”.¹⁰ Pedro Mexias assumes the main reason behind the attacks is envy at the ease with which these young women have secured publishing deals and considers the phenomenon of the boom of more importance to sociologists than literary critics (Mexias). The violence of the (male) critical reaction smacks with the misogynist superiority common in the field of literature, like the comments made about women writers by Ramalho Ortigão in 1877.

The publishing world has snapped up new women authors and marketed their works aggressively.¹¹ Rita Ferro,

¹⁰ [the most radical materialisation of Flaubert’s great dream, that of writing a book about absolutely nothing]. Miguel Real (98) sees this as a trend among the 90s generation of Portuguese writers of “realismo urbano total” [total urban realism]: “escreve por (causa/motivo) nada e para (objectivo) nada [...] nenhuma ideia exterior ao texto a leva a escrever, nenhuma mensagem transcendente ao texto a leva a escrever” [they write for (cause/motive) nothing and for (objective) nothing, no idea outside the text leads them to write, no message transcending the text leads them to write].

¹¹ The novels read as research for this article (and the abbreviations used to refer to them within the text) are: Rita Ferro’s *O Nó na Garganta* [NG], and *Uma Mulher Não Chora* [MNC]; Margarida Rebelo Pinto’s *Sei Lá* [SL], *Não*

journalist and granddaughter of Fernanda de Castro (one of the original *poetisas*), has her own series of books and collected “chronicles” with mainstream publishers Dom Quixote. But most of the *literatura light*, by men as well as women, is published and aggressively marketed by a new company: Oficina do Livro. Their books have plain but fluorescent, brightly-coloured covers, with photographs of the glamorous authors on the back, in contrast to many of the British chick-lit books whose cartoon-like graphics emphasise the comic, playful nature of their style. The Portuguese novels include glowing prefaces from established writers and pretentious epigraphs, which may be drawn from Nietzsche, children’s literature or pop lyrics.

The doyenne of *literatura light* is the journalist Margarida Rebelo Pinto, who has been the direct target of much of the critical bile. She insists that she is a serious novelist who tries out a different idea with each novel, lectures on creative writing and has a web page with tips for aspiring novelists.¹² She has represented her country at international literary festivals and book fairs. She claims not to care about the critics’ sniping, retorting that high sales figures and numbers of readers are sign enough for her that she is providing a service that people enjoy and need. Her attitude is defiant: “Não me preocupo com os críticos. São como os gatos castrados: sabem como se faz mas não conseguem fazer” (Amaral).¹³

Há Coincidências [NHC], *Alma de Pássaro* [AP] and *Pessoas Como Nós* [PCN]; Maria João Lopo de Carvalho’s *Virada do Averso* [VA] and *Adopta-me* [AM] and Mafalda Belmonte’s *Inevitável* [I].

¹² <<http://margarida.clix.pt>; see also www.margaridarebelopinto.com>.

¹³ [I’m not bothered about the critics. They are like castrated tom-cats: they know how to do it but they can’t actually manage it].

Patterns and Fashions in *Literatura Light*

Literatura light follows the pattern of the classic melodramatic romance novel in portraying an instantly recognisable location (Lisboa, although there are excursions to Évora, Porto, Quinta do Lago) and a series of relationship problems for a middle-class, white, educated woman to solve.¹⁴ The heroines are successful professional women (teachers, publishers, journalists), but never managing directors and they are therefore vulnerable to harassment and discrimination. Flouting social disapproval, which still exists among the older generation, they are sexually active before marriage and talk to their friends openly and enthusiastically about their sex lives. Such apparently independent and liberated women could be positive role models for Portuguese readers by illustrating that life need not follow the domestic route laid down decades before by Salazar and the Church. Yet these characters are obsessed with the idea of finding “The One”, Mr. Right, the Prince Charming who will provide them with love, children, money and intellectual stimulation so that they fit neatly into the role society (usually through the voices of their mothers) has proscribed for them.¹⁵ The ending, though, tends to be open or unhappy, leaving the characters on the brink of another endless, fruitless search: “tinha tudo aquilo de que precisava. Ou que os outros precisavam que ela tivesse. [...] Joana tinha afinal tudo

¹⁴ My definition of melodrama follows that of Anja Louis, its fundamental characteristics being “the indulgence of strong emotionalism, extreme states of being, and the desire to express all”.

¹⁵ The majority of the Portuguese “thirtysomething heroines” have at least one child and a failed marriage behind them before the narrative starts. Thus good mothering also becomes an issue upon which they are scrutinised by society.

com que sempre sonhara. [...] deveria sentir-se feliz. Mas não sentia”, (NG, 289).¹⁶

The settings are unashamedly middle-class: all the protagonists have cars, credit cards and maids. The maids, secretaries, receptionists, policemen and shop assistants provide background colour but are distinguished from the main characters by their incorrect speech or strong accents, their interior decorating, their clothes and their manners. The bad taste of the lower classes and the nouveaux-riches is described scornfully and gleefully by both characters and narrators: tracksuits, shoes with tassels, extreme mini-skirts, excess cleavage or man-made fabrics. The assumption of what is good taste and what bad is never questioned. This clear-cut class divide is patronising and perpetuates stereotyped images of both the bourgeoisie and the working class. Relationships that cross class barriers are frowned upon and broken up by the heroines wherever possible.

Prospective boyfriends/husbands are also judged by what they wear and which perfume they use:

Não há dúvida que é um homem bonito. E inteligente.
E esperto. Bem educado. Tem um fato azul escuro
absolutamente irrepreensível, uma gravata discreta e
uns botões de punho de óptimo gosto. O anel de brasão
é talvez a única coisa que me incomoda um bocadinho,

¹⁶ [She had everything she needed. Or what other people needed her to have. In fact, Joana had everything she had ever dreamed of. She should have been happy. But she wasn't]. This stereotypically Portuguese melancholy can be found in the tragic stories by neglected Portuguese women writers from the 1940s collected by Ana Paula Ferreira in *A Urgência de Contar*. Ferreira explains how, through literature, these women had found a space and a voice to protest about “a exclusão das mulheres do espaço da cidadania, do fórum público” [the exclusion of women from the space of citizenship, from the public forum] (38).

mas pensando bem, não tem qualquer importância.
(SL, 181)¹⁷

Uma figura engraçada, a do Eduardo. Baixo, meio careca [...]. Sempre vestido de Rosa & Teixeira, gravatas clássicas e camisas lisas e discretas, rematando com uns antiquados sapatos de “avô”, daqueles com furinhos e atacadores que só são possíveis de encontrar num avô. Com a particularidade de não usar boxers, o Eduardo é tudo menos um homem sensual. No entanto, a sua constituição (sic) física forte e robusta marcada por anos de ténis e musculação tornam-no num cinquentão, no mínimo apetecível! (VA, 100)¹⁸

The female characters are avid consumers and aware of their status as consumables themselves, who must look and dress the part:

Para além dos muitos incómodos que os homens causavam às mulheres, Joana revoltava-se contra o enorme rol de preceitos cumpridos que a sua

¹⁷ [There’s no doubt that he’s a handsome man. And intelligent. And clever. Polite. He has a dark blue suit that cannot be faulted, a discreet tie and very tasteful cufflinks. The signet ring is perhaps the only thing that worries me slightly, but now I come to think of it, it doesn’t matter at all].

¹⁸ [Eduardo is a strange character. He is short, half bald. He always wears Rosa & Teixeira [suits], with classic ties and smooth, discreet shirts that match his old-fashioned “grandfather” shoes, those ones with little holes and laces that only a grandfather would wear. With the particular habit of not using boxer shorts, Eduardo is anything but sensual. Nevertheless, his strong and robust physical constitution built up by years of tennis and exercise make him a fifty-year old who is rather tasty, to say the least!]

companhia exigia a uma mulher da cidade: depilação, manicura, cabeleireiro, calista! (NG, 137)¹⁹

Como tive algum tempo para me arranjar, resolvi experimentar se ainda sabia brincar às mulheres sexy, e parece-me que o resultado não foi mau. Umas calças pretas justas, botas de salto alto e uma camisola encarnada de gola alta sem mangas com uma boneca estampada à frente, o cabelo lavado e bem escovado, bâteon, rimmel e um toque de blush, e pareço outra. (AP, 157)²⁰

A girl's appearance, accessories and clothes must be classically fashionable and the sheer amount of name-dropping of designers, perfumes, boutiques, bars and nightclubs leads the reader to wonder whether or not the writers have contracts for product placement. The texts can be seen as instruction books for achieving the lifestyle of the characters and the authors themselves: effortlessly beautiful and sophisticated writers who more often than not have another career (journalist, teacher, nurse) and a family too.

Portraits of “Typical” Women and “Real” Men

The dating game is seen as a transaction: the women have to evaluate a potential mate's attractiveness, style, background and

¹⁹ [As well as the numerous inconveniences that men caused women, Joana was disgusted by the huge list of rules with which an urban woman had to comply in order to go out with them: hair removal, manicures, visits to the hairdresser, the chiropodist!]

²⁰ [As I had a bit of time to get ready, I decided to see whether or not I still knew how to play at being sexy and I do believe that the result was not at all bad. Tight black trousers, high-heeled boots and a bright red high-necked sleeveless sweater with a doll printed on the front, freshly washed and well-styled hair, lipstick, mascara and a touch of blusher, and I look like someone else].

credit rating before considering a relationship. The myths of love at first sight, electricity in the touch and the affinity of soul mates are staples of the romantic novel, as are the coincidences and “inevitable” encounters. Female characters admit and acknowledge their desire for men, but all too often become passive, paralysed and lose their sense of reason (and, in this case, of language: mixing metaphors) when seduced by the predatory male: “Tinha descoberto nesse dia que não era senhora de si mesma [...] podia ser presa dos seus sentidos [...] um joguete nas mãos dos seus sentidos” (I, 120).²¹ Sex makes them feel fulfilled: “Adormeci logo contente por ter sido Mulher” (VA, 16).²² Yet, if a female character takes an excessive number of lovers or commits adultery, she risks serious social disapproval:

À força de ser tão independente e ambiciosa, [Luísa] está cada vez mais masculina. É ela que manda, que põe e dispõe. Ou me engano muito ou é este o tipo de mulher que mais anseia que se lhe atravesse no caminho um homem com pulso e lhe refreie as vontades. (SL, 97)²³

The male fantasy rears its ugly head as these books confirm all the received ideas about rape fantasies, the power of male virility to dominate a woman and man’s irresistible sexual force even when a woman protests. But the female characters do insist

²¹ [That day she had discovered that she was not responsible for her actions, she could be caught out by her senses, a toy in the hands of her senses].

²² [I fell asleep happy at having been a Woman]. Note the capitalised “M” [W] indicating, supposedly, profound emotion and authenticity.

²³ [Because she has to be so independent and ambitious, Luísa is becoming more and more masculine. She gives orders and makes decisions. Either I am mistaken or this is the kind of woman who most longs for a red-blooded man to cross their path and rein her in].

that sex is not everything and will move on to another man if their current lover is not their ‘soul mate’. Rebelo Pinto uses male as well as female narrators in *Não há Coincidências* and *Alma de Pássaro* and succeeds in reinforcing stereotypes about men’s fear of commitment, inability to talk about their feelings, male pride, peer pressure, ambition and promiscuity.

In this fictional world, adultery is deemed regrettable but acceptable for a man, but the epitome of betrayal for a woman, following centuries of tradition and the legal support (up to 1974) for a man to beat his wife if he suspects her of extra-marital liaisons. The protagonists of these novels take male infidelity for granted and hate the “verdadeiro macho latino” [a true Latin male] yet “no fundo invejávamos por ser tão cabrão e ter uma imagem tão exemplar” (SL, 19).²⁴ From the “other” woman’s point of view, Raquel (I) initially feels liberated by an affair with her best friend’s husband:

resolvendo o seu remorso com a justificação de que não estava a pôr em causa nem o casamento dele, nem o seu. Curiosamente, um argumento tipicamente masculino: se eu tiver um caso fora do casamento e conseguir controlar esse caso de maneira a que não ponha em causa o meu casamento e ainda por cima o melhore, porque me faz sentir bem-disposta e contente, criando até um ambiente agradável dentro casa, não tem mal nenhum esse caso. (I, 123)²⁵

²⁴ [deep down we envy them for being such bastards and having such a model image].

²⁵ [neutralising her remorse with the justification that she was not damaging his marriage, nor her own. Curiously, a typically masculine argument: if I have a affair out of wedlock and can manage to control the affair so that it does not threaten my marriage but actually improves it, because I feel cheerful and happy, even creating a pleasant atmosphere at home, there is nothing at all wrong with that affair].

The sex scenes are described more in terms of the psychological and emotional events taking place than physical details. But outside the bedroom, other taboo subjects relevant to contemporary society are glossed over or ignored. Male homosexuality is seen as an aberration that provokes such fear and shame that it must be ignored (AP) disguised with excessive promiscuity with women (NHC), “cured” by finding the right woman (NG) or erased by suicide (NG). Admittedly, there are gay characters in Margarida Rebelo Pinto’s novel *Pessoas Como Nós* including one of the three main female narrators. The most significant male gay character is infantilised by his nickname, Pirolito, and is apparently a misfit within gay society, associated by the narrator with frivolity and illegal pastimes:

Costuma dizer que só por acaso é que é *gay*. Apesar de viver rodeado deles, nunca se encaixou nos rituais da classe; nunca entrou em loucuras coletivas, os seus melhores amigos são heterossexuais e quando chega o Verão não se enfia numa pensão em Ibiza a aviar carne fresca todas as noites, entre pastilhas, *shots* e linhas de coca. (PCN, 68)²⁶

Even so, the narrator (frustrated in love, naturally) manages a swipe at heterosexual men and women, and ends up describes the “gay best friend” known from US television shows such as *Will and Grace* or *Sex and the City*, and Hollywood films like *The Next Best Thing* and *My Best Friend’s Wedding*. Pirolito becomes a kind of accessory: confidant, style adviser and reliable companion:

²⁶ [He usually says that he is only gay by chance. Despite being surrounded by them all the time, he has never gone along with the rituals of his class; he never joins in crazy group antics, his best friends are heterosexual and in summer he doesn’t slip off to a hostel in Ibiza to hunt for fresh meat every night and take pills, shots and lines of coke].

Ninguém percebe que o Pirolito seja mais equilibrado e mais maduro do que a maior parte dos tipos da minha idade. Ninguém percebe que ele tenha sempre tempo para mim e me faça mais companhia do que qualquer outra amiga, sem os dramas inerentes às mulheres de trinta, essas histórias sempre iguais [...]. (PCN, 69)²⁷

Lesbians are even less visible in this kind of literature. Rebelo Pinto's plain, overweight, bitter Maria do Carmo falls in love with her sister-in-law Kika, another "Ugly Duckling" (PCN, 80), and leaves her husband. Her behaviour is explained gradually, as details of her past are revealed: her father was a womaniser who beat her mother into submission and abused her sister. Ironically, Maria do Carmo is one of the few characters whose story ends happily. Lina is another lesbian, a peripheral character who is colourful and eccentric, but nobody's fool. She is described affectionately (?) as "a chefe do bando das fufas de 1,47m, daquelas baixinhas poderosas que, quando levantam o sobrolho, são capazes de silenciar uma sala repleta de homens" (PCN, 209).²⁸ These portrayals are extreme and cartoon-like, serving to reinforce stereotypical ideas about homosexuals, confirming preconceived ideas about their appearance, their taste and situating them firmly outside the mainstream – "they" are not "people like us".

Abortion is not an issue, partly because pregnancy occurs as a result of love, in this romantic world, but also

²⁷ [Nobody understands that Pirolito is more balanced and more mature than most of the blokes my age. Nobody understands that he always has time for me and is better company than any other (female) friend of mine, without any of the dramas inherent in being a woman in her thirties, the same old stories ...]

²⁸ [head of the band of 5 foot dykes, one of those women who are short but powerful and can silence a roomful of men just by lifting an eyebrow].

because the protagonists have access to a gynaecologist, the best family planning advice, and if the worst came to the worst could afford to go abroad for a quick operation. Rita Ferro mentions abortion briefly but with embarrassment:

Pisou um insecto na casa de banho e, na manhã seguinte, foi encontrá-lo no mesmo sítio, ainda agonizante, oscilando as antenas./ Esmagou-o com o pé, com o dobro da força de que precisava, e pensou que se estivesse a matar um cavalo os seus escrúpulos aumentariam./ - Será tudo uma questão de tamanho – lembrou-se./ E, na sequência desta pequena descoberta, pensou, estranhamente envergonhada, nessa monstruosa questão do aborto. (NG, 98)²⁹

Literatura light varies in tone from the humorous, cynical pastiche to the catalogue of complaints that cast women in the role of victim. There must be something of the melancholy Portuguese *fado* in these laments at lost or unattainable love. The texts are self-aware in that the characters often comment that what is happening to them could only happen in a fairy story, book, film or *telenovela*. The girl doesn’t always get the man, and when she does, he is not enough to make her happy. Nor is self-awareness, fulfilled creativity or the rewards of hard work. The heroine seems doomed to cyclical disappointment, masochism and discontent.

²⁹ [She trod on an insect in the bathroom and, the next morning, found it in the same place, still in agony, waving its antennae./ She crushed it with her foot, with twice as much force as was necessary, and thought that if she had been killing a horse, she would have many more scruples./ “It must all be a question of size,” she thought./ And, following on from this small discovery, she thought, strangely embarrassed, about the monstrous question of abortion].

Pessoas Como Nós [People Like Us]: Painting Contemporary Portuguese Society

To tell their stories, the writers use copious dialogue, colloquialisms and regionalisms: “escrevem como falam, jogando com vocabulário anglo-saxónico, informação científica, informação histórica, mitologia grega, notícias da Internet, tudo no grande caldeirão vocabular”.³⁰ Conversations held in nightclubs and restaurants, or on the mobile phone, e-mails, letters and even putative novels written by the characters themselves are all naturalistic representations of colloquial speech that increase the illusion of immediacy and reality, and strengthen the reader’s feeling of complicity with the characters.³¹ There are nudges and winks to the reader in a lot of the social criticism made by characters and narrator in a world-weary and often comical way:

Desinteressei-me da vida cosmopolita desta cidade
provinciana onde todos se cruzam e se conhecem. [...]
Há muito que me cansei de ser portuguesa e de cá

³⁰ [they write as they speak, playing with a range of vocabulary: anglo-saxon, scientific information, historical information, Greek mythology, news from the Internet, all brought together in a big mixing pot]. (Miguel Real, 125).

³¹ “Il y a, de toute évidence, chez les nouvelles romancières portugaises la recherche d’un ton que est celui de l’immédiateté et de l’identification du lecteur (lectrice). Le modèle de construction de leurs récits est du côté de l’oralité et de la dynamique discursive. Dans cette perspective, les romans se font le lieu de retentissement d’un discours collectif propre à une génération gavée d’images publicitaires et connaissant une certaine liberté sexuelle” [Clearly, among the new Portuguese women novelists one can identify a search for a tone of immediacy and identification with the reader (male or female). The way they construct their tales is by using orality and dynamic discourse. Within this framework, the novels become the repository of a collective discourse that belongs to a generation gorged on images from advertising and who have access to a certain amount of sexual freedom] (Besse).

viver. Queria mais e melhor. Um lugar onde sentisse a vida a pulsar e acontecessem coisas interessantes e diferentes em vez deste marasmo nacional podre e acomodado, onde todos se instalam em esquemas de favores e cunhas, jogos de cama e lobbies mais ou menos ranhosos, mas nem por isso menos eficazes. A sociedade vive fechada dentro de si mesma, como se todos tivessem um umbigo gigante e palas como os burros para olharem sempre e só numa mesma direcção. (SL, 45)³²

Também se exasperava com a passividade dos Portugueses, muito embora sabendo que a passividade podia ser sinónimo de bonomia, atitude afinal tão próxima da bondade! Além disso era o seu povo, e ela adorava-o, mesmo que cheirasse mal! (NG, 33)³³

Literatura light is not only descriptive of a particular sector of Portuguese society but also prescriptive in the characters’ judgements about taste and lifestyle. The female characters are obsessed with their appearance, emotions and sex lives and all too often painted as passive victims: exactly the figures

³² [I’ve lost interest in the cosmopolitan lifestyle of this provincial city where you can’t avoid bumping into people you know. For a long time now I’ve been tired of being Portuguese and living here. I want more, a better life. Somewhere where I could feel life pulsating, where interesting and unexpected things happened instead of this rotten, complacent, national apathy, where everyone is involved in schemes of favours and contacts, sleeping their way to the top and more or less corrupt lobbies, but no less efficient because of it. This society lives closed in on itself, as if everyone had an enormous navel and were blinkered like donkeys in order to look always and only in one direction].

³³ [She was also exasperated by the passivity of the Portuguese, although she knew very well that passivity can be synonymous with bonhomie, an attitude which is, in the end, so close to kindness. Beyond that, they were her people and she loved them, even if they smelled bad].

misogynist proverbs and jokes have ridiculed for centuries: “Amanhã serei melhor mãe. Não consigo desempenhar bem tantos papéis. Dá-me vontade de desistir de tudo o resto” (VA, 91).³⁴ They are written as if in a historical vacuum, focusing on self-gratification and clichéd values and ideas of what constitutes happiness. Although professing to be about real life, they ignore issues of which Portuguese women need to be aware and neglect to show the full range of options available to them. The characters in Rebelo Pinto’s *Alma de Pássaro* do indeed have their crosses to bear: childlessness, bereavement, drug addiction, suicide (so many problems, in fact, that the reader succumbs to compassion fatigue), all of which are part of subplots, less important than love relationships. Similarly, Maria João Lopo de Carvalho’s *Adopta-me* tries to deal with a huge range of serious social issues at once: abandoned children, beggars, abuse of immigrant workers, prostitution, drug abuse, frustrating bureaucracy and the incompetence of many professionals. Although her novel confronts the reader with these very real problems through the narrator’s pet causes, the social crises have to vie for space in the text with her passionate affair with a mystery man and the constant quoting of pop lyrics in English that, by implication, encapsulate her states of mind and put them into words better than she can.

Conclusion: Não Há Coincidências [Nothing in Common]

Such is the state of popular women’s writing in twenty-first century Portugal, a far cry from the key literary work by women in Portuguese: *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, published in 1972 by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa (“the three Marias”). Their outspoken demands, in the text, for women’s rights, vivid descriptions of female sexual activity, puncturing of male ideas of virility, criticism of the

³⁴ [I’ll be a better mother tomorrow. I can’t manage to play so many parts at the same time. It makes me want to give up everything else].

Church and government policy, and the mentioning of taboo subjects (masturbation, rape, abortion, incest, lesbianism) led to their arrest on charges of obscenity. The polyphonic text rewrites the seventeenth century story of Mariana Alcoforado, a Portuguese nun who fell in love with a French soldier. The Marias posed the question “Qual a diferença do tempo de Mariana?” and concluded “very little”, for in the 1970s women were still imprisoned by Church, state and family.³⁵ If we consider how women’s lives have changed between 1972 and 2004, the answer would appear to be “a lot”. Yet the evidence *literatura light* provides is not so encouraging. Despite all that the Marias fought for, books by the next generation of women, the Margaridas, reflect a society that is consumerist, family-oriented and submissive to patriarchal society in the form of husbands and bosses – as if nothing had changed.

What is worse, the centuries-old perception of women’s writing as trivial and incompetent is upheld because *literatura light*

está sociologicamente a revelar a face de uma mulher tão ou mais imbecil que o mais imbecil dos homens urbanos, com o agravante desta imagem ser, não a da camponesa analfabeta do Alentejo ou a da mulher-a-dias de Angola, mas a da actual imagem da mulher portuguesa de elite, directora de relações públicas, gerente de conta bancária, professora do ensino liceal ou administradora de empresas.³⁶

³⁵ [What is the difference between now and Mariana’s time?]. Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Velho da Costa, *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*.

³⁶ [sociologically, it is revealing the face of a woman who is as stupid or more stupid than the most stupid urban man, the aggravating thing about this image being that we are not talking about an illiterate peasant from the Alentejo, or an Angolan cleaning lady, but the current image of the elite Portuguese woman, a public relations director, an accounts manager, a

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf asked the question: “what will women actually do when they are free?” The Marias fought for women’s choices, yet the best-selling Portuguese women writers of today create characters who are “decorativas, absorventes” [decorative, absorbent],³⁷ take their rights for granted, with very traditional aspirations and concerns, whose most important choice is that of an ideal husband.

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³⁷ *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, p. 154. Cf.: “Em que mudou a situação da mulher? De objecto productor, de filhos e de trabalho dito doméstico, isto é, não remunerado, passou também a objecto consumidor e de consumo” [How has woman’s situation changed? From an object that produces children and so-called domestic (that is, unpaid) labour, she has also become an object that consumes and is consumed]. (idem 218).

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