

The Dialectics of Family and Gender in *Toys in the Attic* and *Jorginho o Machão*

Júnia de Castro Magalhães ALVES - UFMG

To read Lillian Hellman's *Toys in the Attic* and Leilah Assunção's *Jorginho o Machão* simply in terms of their fidelity to a pre-given notion of male or female ideology is to reduce them to purely documentary and political functions.

These two plays question the internalization of a cultural tradition which defines the feminine as inferior, but they do not aim at uncritically affirming the moral, intellectual, and emotional superiority of the feminine over the masculine. Such a simplistic approach would entrap the critic within a limited dualistic model that disregards the polysemic consequences of conflicting needs and values inherent in people who though of different ages, classes, sexes or races are searching for identity and freedom.

Toys and *Jorginho* are self-contained critical reflections on family conditions meant to undermine fixed meanings and ideological patterns. Their thematic focus is the dialectics of gender and generation in an intersubjective cultural representation of two given family realities. These plays dramatize the claustrophobic conditions of one American and one Brazilian household, respectively. They are both critical of long-held myths of family "civility," but they transcend any immediate or

domestic answer to this socio-political problem. The characters interact in courteous aversion, seeking to disguise their impatience, intolerance, and even hatred for one another. Their philosophy is, in Silviano Santiago's words, "*We shall be friends as long as you obey me.*"¹

The locale of reference in each of these plays is particular: the United States in *Tbys in the Attic*; Brazil in *Jorginho o Machão*. A French American middle-class house of another generation in New Orleans (the Berniers) and a typically 1969-70 provincial middle-class Brazilian family (no last name is given, symbolic of any given name) are their human UmWelts² or theatrical stages.

The semiotic web³ of events and rituals projects the ontologically oppressive and repressive nature of the social units in the plays – one matriarchal (the American), and the other patriarchal (the Brazilian).

The plots have similar constituents but follow different methods and use very different kinds of language. A virtual search for justice unifies these apparently contradictory dramas, products of two different sets of social conditions, and both forms of critical opposition to them.

Neither the United States nor Brazil goes alone through social and political crises. Julian, from New Orleans, is a small-time crook who embezzles seventy-five thousand dollars. Jorginho is a *Teatro do Lixo* (Trash Theatre)⁴ stock character who follows the old established order to economic success: *inherit your father's business and marry a financial equal to create increasingly strong everlasting economic conditions*. The other characters are family crooks and weaklings, inhabitants of a cruel, abased and sarcastic universe. Where do they come from? Meanwhile these two plays represent the souls of two big countries reeling under staggering layers of corruption, as if corruption is the fabric of society. Both plays deal with emotional depression, matriarchal or patriarchal systems, crises of individual and social values, and the collapse of the

American dream – the dream Brazilians, for their part, have never had. For that matter Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes explains:

We are neither North Americans nor Europeans, but deprived of an original culture, nothing is foreign to us, since everything is. The painful building of ourselves... The tenuous dialectics between not being and being another.⁵

The semiosis of the plays carries the two authors' thesis of family disintegration through the following signs, identified and exemplified for didactic and organizational purposes:

1. Extravagant indices of middle-class desires for comfort, pleasure, power, wealth and compulsive consumerism.⁶

Julian. ... Look. It's going to be this way. The first money is for us to have things. Have fun. After that, I promise you, we'll invest. And like all people with money, we'll make more and more until we get sick from it. Rich people get sick more than we do. Maybe from worry. (*Tbys in the Attic*, p.704)

Jorginho (in a fit of rage).

... A jet plane... Onassis... And I Buy His Wife! I Buy Elizabeth Taylor! I Buy Brigitte Bardot! I Will Have Them, And then throw them away! I am big George the king... The king! Thank you, thank you. (*Jorginho o Machão*, p.156-157)

2. Very definite sex/role and generation/role confrontation and competition translated into mysticism, hatred, indifference or aggressiveness.

Lily. Last night when I lay waiting for him, and he knew it, he said he'd had too much champagne and he wanted to sleep alone... (*Tbys in the Attic*, p.719)

Jorginho. Purificaaatioooooon!!!!

Purificaaatiiiiiiioooooon! Fuel and Firre! Maria Alices! Pregnant Renatas! Burn them! Burn them! Tedious Mothers, Vexing Fathers, Families, Families, Clocks, Time Clocks, Uniforms, Everything, Buurrrn Them! (*Jorginho o Machão*, p.168-169)

3. Social bias coming up against the characters' ideals of individuality and free sexuality.

Carrie. How can you stand what's happening here? He comes home with all this money nonsense. He's married to a crazy girl. I think he's in bed with a girl who ... (*Tbys in the Attic*, p.731)

Madalena. I won't shut up! I won't let him! I will not let my son get married to a nobody who went to bed with him just like that. I won't let him! (*Jorginho o Machão*, p.165)

4. Fantasy or a moment of release in which the characters break away from social bondage to escape into a dreamlife independent existence.

Lily (smiling suddenly uplifted, happy). Did it rain? I don't remember. It was all days to me: Cold and hot days, fog and light, and I was on a high hill, running down with the top of me, and flying with the left of me, and singing with the right of me ... (*Tbys in the Attic*, p.699)

Jorginho. ... I TAKE, I TAKE MY PLANE. I FLY AND I DON'T NEED A PLANE! I FLY BECAUSE I'M SUPER-MAN! THE SUPER MAN! GEORGE THE SUPER! HURRAH!!! BRAVO! BRAVO!... (*Jorginho o Machão*, p.157)

Lily's lyrical escape as she remembers her wedding day contrasts with Jorginho's "linguagem de lixo" (trash language). These verbal explosions are symbolic of Jorginho's hatred for his family and his "power" over women. It also conveys his desperate need for recognition and security in an effort to free himself from the basic fact that he is a failure as a man.

Taking the family as a microcosmos or social unit, the performance texts' of these plays become macro-signs⁹ of the game of chance and power played by men and women (husbands and wives, parents and children) in an effort to dominate, objectify and exploit one another. *Tbys in the Attic* and *Jorginho o Machão* deal, in fact, with political issues involving essential questions of the most deeply rooted aspects of social organization.

The fundamental difficulty of the ideological views of *Jorginho* is that the position from which Assunção's critique of patriarchy is undertaken does not provide an autonomous source of legitimation, but is itself found in a patriarchal cultural tradition which the playwright and the Brazilian audience must work within even as they question it. In apparently conforming to the Brazilian *status quo*, the text seeks to undermine the patriarchal ideological system portrayed by the play.

Toys in the Attic does not mention sexual politics overtly but the male/female confrontation is certainly present. In order to support her points, Hellman chooses the social clichés of family disharmony. She had originally meant to make Julian the center of her play but was not able to. She explains,

I don't think characters turn out the way you think they are going to turn out. They don't always go your way. At least they don't go my way.⁹

"I can write about men, but I can't write a play that centers on a man."¹⁰

The result was a play dominated by women. Two of them, Anna and Carrie are close portraits of her father's unmarried sisters, Hanna and Jenny, whom she describes as follows:

I suppose all women living together take on what we think of as male and female roles, but my aunts had made a rather puzzling mix-about. [...] I don't think this change-about of roles ever fooled my father, or that he paid much attention to it, but then he had grown up with them and knew about whatever it was that happened to their lives.¹¹

In another instance she talks about her parents: "*Mama seemed to do only what my father wanted, and yet we lived the way my mother wanted us to live.*"¹² In turn, the play seems to mirror the playwright's family experience.

Unlike Julian in *Toys in the Attic*, Jorge is at the center of *Jorginho o Machão*, but ironically he is, like everybody else in this Brazilian drama, relegated to the condition of object, in a society where men have tried to give themselves the prerogatives and privileges of emancipated subject, i.e., "of someone who has won the right to publicly speak against the grain of tradition."¹³ The title of the play reflects the same irony. The suffix *-inho*, is a diminutive, and added to his name, contrasts with the augmentative suffix *-ão*, for big, in *machão*. The supposedly strong Jorge, affectionately nicknamed Jorginho by his fiancée and friends and relatives, is, indeed, a weak man, oppressed by the calcified ideology and objectified historical conception of his social order. Julian, in Hellman's play, is also held in captivity in the attic of his own house.

Toys in the Attic and *Jorginho o Machão* do not claim to affirm the superiority of men over women or women over men. Julian and Jorginho are unable to circumvent their circumstances, because their imaginations are as limited as their lives. As a result, they are entrapped not only in their bodies but also in their minds.

The two plays have a similar circular structure. Each begins with a scene focusing on the family and its anxieties. In both cases, the main characters are unhappy with the course of life their relatives have planned for them. Jorginho and Julian rebel against their family dreams by taking refuge in some maladjusted fantasy. The fantasy becomes a nightmare. As a result, each play ends much the same as it began – in thoughtless ritual and conformity. Jorginho's photo sequence is a semiotic device to ironically illustrate his progressive acceptance and eventual embodiment of the Brazilian established patriarchal order and male defined values of which he is also a victim – a complete surrender to the *machão* (macho man) ideal that his family had projected for him. Julian, likewise, accepts his family's definition of happiness. He is his sisters' toy in their attic. They keep, fondle and protect him. They play with him. He is prisoner of their watchful scheme.

When, at the climax, Julian gets beaten and Jorginho is crippled, the audience (or the reader) cannot help feeling that all the characters are exploiters and exploited people – villains and victims of a beating and crippling society that they could not – and we cannot, at least immediately – overcome.

Endnotes

¹ SANTIAGO, Silviano. *Apesar de Dependente*, Universal, *Vale Quanto Pesa*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1982. p.16. Santiago's essay focus on colonization and fake cordiality.

² "In the evolution of life, the human *UmWelt*, or *LebensWelt*, developed out of, and as a species experience common more or less to any anthropoid and in different ways, to all animal forms." (DEELY, John. *Basics of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, Production Copy, 1990), p.222.

³ "As the spider spins its thread, every subject spins his relations to certain characters of the things around him, and weaves them into a firm web which carries his existence." (J. von Vexkull, 1934: 14)

⁴ The Trash Movement in the Brazilian theatre and movies is located in the end of the 1960s and beginnings of the 1970s. For more information see Paulo Emílio's "Cinema: Trajetória no Subdesenvolvimento" in *Argumento*. Rio de Janeiro, n.1, p.64, out. 1973.

⁵ Paulo Emílio, op. cit., 1973. p.58.

⁶ "According to Garcia Canclini, consumption, understood as an 'appropriation of products,' should not be reduced to consumerism, passive reception, useless waste and depoliticization or to habits targeted by market research. It is, rather, the terrain of struggle between classes and other group formation over the distribution of goods, and as such it also serves as the medium in which needs and other cultural categories such as identity are constituted." (George Yúdice, "Post modernity and transnational Capitalism in Latin America," *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada 1.*, Niterói, March 1991), p.105.

⁷ "Unlike the literary semiotician or the analyst of myth or the plastic arts, the researcher in theatre and drama is faced with two quite dissimilar – although intimately correlated – types of textual material: that produced in the theatre and that composed for the theatre. These two potential focuses of semiotic attention will be indicated as theatrical or performance text and the written or dramatic text respectively." (ELAM, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. New York: Methuen, 1980. p.3)

⁸ According to "Mukarovsky... the work of art as such (e.g. the theatrical performance in its entirety) is a semiotic unit whose signifier... is the work itself..., and whose signified is the 'aesthetic object' residing in the collective consciousness of the public... The performance text becomes, in this view, a macro-sign, its meaning constituted by its total effect." (ELAM, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. New York: Methuen, 1980), p.7.

⁹ PHILLIPS, John and HOLLANDER, Ann. The Art of Theatre: Lillian Hellman; An Interview, *Paris Review*, 33 (Winter-Spring, 1965). p.71.

¹⁰ HELLMAN, Lillian. *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits* (New York: Signet, 1973). p.170.

¹¹ HELLMAN, Lillian. op. cit., 1973. p.9.

¹² HELLMAN, Lillian. *An Unfinished Woman: a Memoir*. New York: Banta, 1974. p.4.

¹³ MORICONI JR., Italo. Chassez le Naturel et Il Reviendra au Galop: História Literária Hoje. *Anais do 2º Congresso Abralic*. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 1991. p.208.