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Saramago's Maries: on the secondary status of women in the fictional universe of The Gospel According to Jesus Christ

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**SARAMAGO’S MARIES: ON THE SECONDARY STATUS OF
WOMEN IN THE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE OF *THE GOSPEL*
*ACCORDING TO JESUS CHRIST***

AS MARIAS DE SARAMAGO: SOBRE O STATUS SECUNDÁRIO
DAS MULHERES NO UNIVERSO FICCIONAL DE *O EVANGELHO*
SEGUNDO JESUS CRISTO

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Whoever bears upon the body the mark—Mary, Mary—
blends pain and joy.

Milton Nascimento and Fernando Brant, “*Maria, Maria*” (1978), trans. by the author.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of women—especially Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene—in José Saramago’s *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. The novel highlights how these characters inhabit a deeply patriarchal society governed by religious norms that subordinate and silence women. Mary of Nazareth appears as an ordinary woman confined to traditional roles, whilst Mary Magdalene, marginalised as a prostitute, gains narrative prominence through her compassion, humanity, and transformative relationship with Jesus. Their bond reveals a form of female solidarity rooted in shared suffering and structural exclusion. The study argues that Saramago critiques the religious and social discourses that sustain women’s inferior status, inviting readers to reflect on how such narratives continue to shape contemporary gender inequalities.

KEYWORDS: Saramago; Mary of Nazareth; Mary Magdalene; literature; gender; religion.

RESUMO

O artigo analisa a representação das mulheres — com foco em Maria de Nazaré e Maria de Magdala — no romance *O evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo*, de José Saramago. A narrativa evidencia como essas personagens vivem em uma sociedade profundamente

patriarcal, marcada por normas religiosas que subordinam e silenciam as mulheres. Maria de Nazaré surge como uma figura comum, limitada por papéis tradicionais, enquanto Maria de Magdala, marginalizada como prostituta, ganha centralidade por sua humanidade, compaixão e relação transformadora com Jesus. A proximidade entre as duas revela uma solidariedade feminina fundada na dor compartilhada e na exclusão estrutural. O estudo demonstra que Saramago questiona discursos religiosos e sociais que perpetuam a inferioridade feminina, sugerindo paralelos críticos com desigualdades de gênero ainda presentes na modernidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Saramago; Maria de Nazareth; Maria Magdalena; literatura; gênero; religião.

Introduction

There are many Marias in the Bible, and the most important of them is certainly the one regarded by Christians as the mother of the Son of God. For the Catholic tradition, Jesus' mother not only conceived him without having had sexual relations with any man but also remained a virgin after the birth of what would be her only son — Mary's perpetual virginity is one of the fundamental dogmas of the Catholic Church (Carroll, 1962, p. 136), and it is also defended by some Anglican and Lutheran theologians.

In this context, Mary of Nazareth, called "full of grace" in canonical narratives (The Holy Bible, Luke 1:28) and considered by Catholics to be holier and closer to God than all the other saints, is venerated with hyperdulia, the name given to the special form of veneration accorded exclusively to her (John Paul II, 1979; Pepler, 1938, p. 830), and is referred to by Catholics throughout the world as "Queen of Heaven", "Mother of God", "Our Lady" and other honorific titles which, given their number, would perhaps fill the pages of this entire article.

However, Mary's relevance extends well beyond the bounds of Christian tradition. Indeed, she holds a prominent position in Islam as well, where the sacred texts affirm: "O Mary! Surely Allah has selected you, purified you and chosen you from among all the women of the world" (Ali 'Imran 3.42). Furthermore, Muslims call her

Sayyidah (Longhurst, 2017, pp. 465-469), an honorific title that means “our lady”, which reveals her importance in this culture.

Even in artistic and literary representations that do not have religious intentions, Mary is far from an ordinary figure and, in some cases, is portrayed in ways that differ from the conventional. One example is the way she appears in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, the novel by Portuguese writer José Saramago, which offers a unique perspective on Mary of Nazareth and the other women who inhabit its fictional universe. This perspective is particularly significant when considered in light of Saramago’s own relationship with religion and politics. An avowed atheist and a member of the Portuguese Communist Party since 1969, he developed a literary project marked by a critical engagement with Christianity, the Catholic tradition, and the social and ideological structures associated with them. His reinterpretation of biblical narratives thus emerges from a secular and politically engaged perspective that questions established representations of faith, authority and human experience.

This distinction between the representation of women in the biblical context and Saramago’s literary reconfiguration of these representations is essential to understanding his portrayal of Mary of Nazareth. Although the novel draws on a historical and cultural context in which women were subject to particular social, religious, and patriarchal constraints, Saramago does not merely reproduce these representations. Rather, he revisits and transforms them through his own narrative perspective, attributing greater complexity and agency to his female characters. This distinction is particularly relevant to the representation of Mary of Nazareth, whose characterisation at times appears to converge with the patriarchal representations associated with the biblical context. However, such apparent convergence should not be understood as a simple reproduction of those representations, but rather as part of Saramago’s critical reworking of them.

The Portuguese writer’s narrative maintains a sustained focus on female figures, including other women named Mary (Saramago, 2020, pp. 2-3). Among them, however, only one assumes a level of importance comparable to that of Joseph’s wife: Mary Magdalene. This other woman represents a decisive turning point in the story of Jesus precisely because of the loving relationship they establish with each other, a relationship

that at least alleviates the pain of Christ's wounds and allows him to dream of a freedom that is as beautiful as it is impossible.

Mary of Nazareth, the mother of the Son of God

In Saramago's narrative, Mary appears as an ordinary woman, an ordinary human being. Furthermore, she is a woman living in a society and a religious order that, not unlike those represented in other patriarchal traditions, are structured largely by and around male authority, and according to which all the pain and suffering in the world are understood as nothing more than the consequence of a woman's act of disobedience (here Saramago's narrative engages directly with *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 3).

Right from the start of Saramago's gospel, women seem to deserve special attention from the narrator. Contrary to the expectations that might arise from the patriarchal social context represented in the novel, in which women would be expected to remain silent and subordinate, Jesus, the narrator, enters into the feelings and emotions of the women around him, analysing them, seeing their pain and placing them — if not on an equal footing with men — at least in a prominent place in his narrative.

At the very beginning of the novel, when he is still analysing the engraving *Crucifixion* (1498), by Albrecht Dürer, the narrator shows an interest in trying to identify the women who appear there, all the Maries, and amongst them is the one who is the mother of Jesus: “[...] this anguished woman is the widow of a carpenter named Joseph and the mother of numerous sons and daughters, although only one of her children was decreed by fate, or whoever governs fate, to achieve a little renown during his life and a great deal more after his death.” (Saramago, 2020, p. 10).

The pain of losing a child is one of the greatest afflictions anyone can experience in life. This woman, however, is not afflicted by this pain alone. She, who “has learned, to her cost, what suffering, danger, and worry mean” (Saramago, 2020, p. 114) and who is a “married woman who knows her duty” (Saramago, 2020, p. 19), is among many other Maries who live in a deeply patriarchal society, with very well-defined spaces and obligations. It is precisely for this reason that Joseph, amongst the countless prayers he says during the day, thanks God for not having been born a woman — which, in other words, is the same as thanking God for having been born a man:

[...] Joseph rested on his wife's body no more than a minute, and perhaps less. Pulling down her tunic and drawing up the sheet, she covered her face with her arm. Joseph stood in the middle of the room, raised his hands, and, looking up at the ceiling, gave the most heartfelt thanksgiving of all, which is reserved for men, I thank You, Almighty God, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman[...] (Saramago, 2020, p. 20).

For this society, Mary, because she is a woman, is neither pious nor just — the language invented by men “has no feminine form for the words upright and pious” (Saramago, 2020, pp. 22-23) — and is the last in everything: even at mealtimes, she can only eat after her husband (Saramago, 2020, p. 23). She and Joseph should only talk about what is necessary, because it is believed that “at the hour of death each man must give account of any idle conversations he has held with his wife” (Saramago, 2020, p. 27).

Mary, like the other women guilty of Eve's crime, is seen as someone endowed with credulity, curiosity and boundless malice. She must take care of the housework and tidying up, ensure her husband's pleasure, give him satisfactory explanations to be considered a good woman, be a mother and, along with the other women, serve men.

As a religious woman, Mary, like Joseph, is also in the habit of praising, thanking and talking to God. However, because she is a woman, which in this society is synonymous with resigned, obedient and submissive, she has very little hope of being heard by God and men. Furthermore, within the social order represented in the novel, women are expected to bear numerous children for their husbands and to fulfil the reproductive role assigned to them. The following passage makes this clear:

[...] When they set off, the men in solemn chorus recited prayers suited to the occasion, while the women merely mumbled the words, for it is pointless raising your voice if no one is likely to listen, even though they ask for nothing and are grateful for everything.

Among the women only Mary is in an advanced state of pregnancy, and such is the strain on her that, had providence not endowed donkeys with infinite

patience and stamina to match, she would long since have given up and begged the others to abandon her at the roadside to await her hour, which we know is near, but who can say when or where, for this is not a race given to making bets or predictions about when or where Joseph's son will be born, and what a sensible religion to have prohibited gambling[...] (Saramago, 2020, p. 43).

Joseph and the other men are always ahead of Mary and the other women, not only during the processions to the temple in Jerusalem, but in all other situations in this society— as if that weren't enough, they still must rejoice in the men's victories (Saramago, 2020, p. 49). Women are secondary in everything, as can be observed in the following passage:

[...] After watering and feeding the donkeys, the travelers finally sat down to eat, the men first, of course. How often we need to remind ourselves that Eve was created after Adam and taken from his rib. Will we ever learn that certain things can be understood only if we take the trouble to trace them to their origins.

The men had eaten and were back in their own corner, the women were finishing off the leftovers [...] (Saramago, 2020, p. 45).

The place which women occupy in Saramago's novel appears to be connected to the way women are represented in the biblical narrative. This becomes evident in what Maltz points out next: “In the biblical account of creation, it is man who is explicitly described as having been created in God's image, with woman mentioned almost as an after-thought” (Maltz, 1993, p. 188). Whilst the first man is created in the image and likeness of God, shaped by the hands of the Creator, the first woman, Eve, is created at a later moment, from Adam's rib— and it seems to reveal the insignificance of women in this context. Furthermore, as Maltz points out, in the text of Genesis, as soon as man is created, he is given a prominent task: to name all living creatures, including the woman. From the outset, she assumes a secondary and subordinate position. It is also important to note that Adam's naming of Eve is subsequently associated with her role as

the mother of all living, thus linking the female figure to motherhood and procreation. To understand this, it is enough to observe the origin of the name Eve: “*חַוָּה*, *living*, or *enlivening*”; “*Chava* in Hebrew, is derived from the same root as *chajim*, life: because she was to be the mother of all living.” (Calmet, 1812, p. 428)

In this context, from the very beginning, the God portrayed by Saramago demonstrates a clear preference for men. This is evident in the fact that many of the significant communications between the Creator and humanity in Saramago’s novel are directed to men rather than women. This pattern of male religious privilege can also be observed in Jewish traditions that developed and were institutionalised over time. Circumcision, for instance, marks the covenant between God and male descendants of Abraham, while the Bar Mitzvah, in later Jewish practice, marks a boy’s assumption of religious obligations at the age of thirteen (Spiro, 1977, p. 395) and serves as a significant event in his religious life. On this subject, Maltz clarifies:

[...] it is evident that the disparate religious obligations imposed on men and women simultaneously reflect and reinforce their disparate status in Judaism. This is further corroborated, not only by the rite of circumcision undergone by the male infant (as noted above), but by the public ceremony of the Bar Mitzvah, celebrated by the Jewish boy at the age of thirteen as a significant part of his religious life-cycle. Although the Bar Mitzvah can be regarded sociologically as a *rite de passage* from childhood to adulthood, its more specific function is to mark the Jewish boy's assumption of the religious obligations (and privileges) incumbent on the adult male by virtue of his gender.

The fact that there is no equivalent ceremony for a girl in Orthodox Judaism may be seen as another instance of androcentric bias. Even more crucially, it indicates that there are no commensurate religious obligations in the synagogue or the community for the adult female to assume since (as noted above) a woman, exempt from time-specific precepts, may neither be counted for a minyan nor therefore be considered an integral member of the congregation. (Maltz, 1993, p. 197)

In the fictional universe of Saramago's novel, women, much more than men, might be able to understand what it means to be human if they weren't incessantly silenced by men's law. Women are condemned to a harsher and crueller existence, all because, in this patriarchal society, it is understood that they were the ones who invented sin and that, being made up of a divine part and a demonic part, women are the ones who generate men the way they are, capable of both good and evil:

[...] If the law had not silenced women forever, perhaps they could reveal what we need to know, for it was woman who invented the first sin from which all the rest came. What do we need to know. Which part of woman's nature is demonic and which divine and what kind of humanity they have. I don't understand, I thought you were referring to my child. No, I was not referring to your child, I was talking about women, who generate beings such as ourselves and who may be responsible, perhaps unknowingly, for this duality in our nature, which is base and yet so noble, virtuous and yet so wicked, tranquil and yet so troubled, meek and yet so rebellious. (Saramago, 2020, pp. 52-53).

Still on the subject of the law that was created by men and to which all women are subjugated, for those who make use of it, it would be better if that law ceased to exist instead of being communicated to women (Saramago, 2020, p. 118); what is wanted is for them to remain in the place that is destined for them in that society, that of a peculiar insignificance.

Women appear in Saramago's novel as creatures for whom God and men have reserved no importance. In fact, the religious life of women is also full of limitations. God is not accessible to them in the same way that he is accessible to men — even though he is not fully accessible to them either; God is the main subject exclusively for men once they come of age (Saramago, 2020, p. 294). As the passage that follows demonstrates, parts of the Jerusalem temple were spaces from which women were barred: "Mary has not much farther to go, she still has to climb the fifteen semicircular steps leading to the Nicanor Gate, also known as the Gate Beautiful, but there she will stop, because women are not permitted to enter the Court of the Israelites, which lies beyond this gate." (Saramago, 2020, p. 84)

What is common in the fictional universe described by the narrator is the systematic representation of women as socially insignificant. Mary, however, is an exception. She occupies a prominent place, but in the eyes of a man, she is still seen, at best, as the most important of the unimportant women: “Simeon’s strange words still filled his ears, but he found it hard to believe that any woman could wield so much power, especially this unassuming wife of his, who had never shown any sign of being different from other women.” (Saramago, 2020, p. 53)

Joseph, as a man, is represented as more intelligent, capable and strong than Mary. She, being a woman, is considered weak, and her ability is measured by her capacity to bear children (Saramago, 2020, p. 82). With a life so full of limitations, women are used to crying, and crying “inside”, as the narrator says: “women know from bitter experience when to hide their tears. Hence the well-known saying, They’re either laughing or weeping, but it simply is not true, because they weep quietly to themselves.” (Saramago, 2020, p. 133).

Incidentally, the pains that Mary experiences during childbirth and — later, in the deaths of Joseph and Jesus — come together as possible representations of the pains and afflictions endured by women in general. It is enough to note that Mary suffered during Jesus’ birth, in a representation of childbirth that emphasises the physical pain associated with it — something that also contradicts the views of important Church thinkers on the episode (Aquinas, 1913, p. 349). From a certain point onward, Mary becomes accustomed to them, much like someone who becomes accustomed to an instrument of penance: “The pain has gone, and she was telling the truth, the stabbing that caused her to cry out had become a mild throbbing, uncomfortable but bearable, rather like wearing a hairshirt.” (Saramago, 2020, p. 61).

In this sense, Mary is able to establish a bond of solidarity with the other women through what they have in common: the peripheral position they occupy within the patriarchal society represented in Saramago’s narrative. Proof of this can be seen in Mary’s first meeting with Mary Magdalene, whose figure is also fundamental to my analysis of this work.

Mary Magdalene, the companion of the Son of God

In Saramago's novel another Mary deserves attention: Mary Magdalene, companion of Christ. Whilst for a long time (and still today) many in the West have used the birth of Christ as a reference point for narrating his history (Cullmann, 1950, p. 17), in Saramago's Gospel, this woman represents a decisive turning point in the story of Christ himself.

It is with her that Jesus is reborn. As fate would have it, as he follows the path of pain he has travelled since meeting God in the desert, the wound in his foot reopens as he passes through the city of Magdala. More precisely, this happens in front of a house set apart from the others in the city, "as if ostracized" (Saramago, 2020, p. 258). Unable to stop the bleeding, Jesus asks those who lived in the house for help, not knowing that this would be one of the most special encounters of his life:

[...] Help me, he said, and taking hold of her outstretched hand, he struggled to his feet and made a few faltering steps. You're in no state to be walking, she told him, come inside and let me bathe your foot. Jesus did not say yes or no, the woman's perfume was so powerful that the pain vanished as if by magic, and with one arm around her shoulders and another arm, which obviously could not be his, around his waist, he felt turmoil surge through his body, or more precisely through his senses, because it was in his senses, or at least in one of them, which is neither sight nor smell nor taste nor touch, though all of these play some part, that he felt it most, God help him [...] (Saramago, 2020, p. 258-259).

At this point in the narrative, Jesus has already experienced unfamiliar reactions when he saw a naked woman bathing in the river. However, it was the first time that his senses drew his attention to the smell and touch of a woman, Mary Magdalene, who, as shall be discussed in the subsequent pages, had been a prostitute before meeting Jesus and who, in that society, seemed to be one of the most socially marginalised women in the novel. That is because, as Reimer and Santana explain, her status as a prostitute places her "on the margins of traditional conservative society, which, in a way, tolerates such a role but does not admit it within the framework of family protocols and rituals." (Reimer; Santana, 2017, p. 357 [trans. by the author])

Despite being marginalised for her work, the Magdalene is shown as a kind and gentle woman, who welcomes Jesus into her home and promptly treats his wounds — from the most superficial to the deepest. This goes against everything he had learned from the religious leaders about this and other “dangerous women”: “Have nothing to do with female dancers lest you succumb to their charms, and finally, Do not fall into the hands of prostitutes lest you lose your soul and all your possessions” (Saramago, 2020, p. 260).

Mary Magdalene, however, does not want Jesus as a client. She is just someone who has decided to help him and tend to his wounds. As “payment”, what she wants is not to be forgotten — a request that reveals something about her marginalisation, given that she is usually sought out by men who only want the pleasures that her body can offer for a few moments.

Jesus, however, can see her in a different light:

[...] How can I thank you, asked Jesus, and for the first time his eyes met hers, eyes black and bright as coals, also like water running over water, veiled with a sensuality that Jesus found irresistible. The woman did not answer at once, she looked at him as if weighing him, the boy obviously had no money, at length she said, Remember me, that is all I ask, and Jesus assured her, I will never forget your kindness, and then, summoning his courage, Nor will I forget you. Why do you say that, she asked, smiling. Because you are beautiful. You should have seen me in my youth. You are beautiful as you are. Her smile faded, Do you know what I am, what I do, how I earn my living. I do. You only had to look at me, and you knew everything. I know nothing. Not even that I’m a prostitute. That I know. I sleep with men for money. Yes. Then, as I said, you know everything about me. That is all I know [...] (Saramago, 2020, p. 261)

This passage illustrates what Camila Santiago identifies as Saramago’s humanisation of women’s bodies (Santiago, 2018, p. 147). By stating that he only knows that this woman is a prostitute, Jesus is also saying that there is more to know about her. The secret appears to lie in Mary Magdalene’s eyes, which contain something

that touches Jesus deeply: she has moist eyes, and this is something they both have in common, as can be seen in the subsequent passage:

[...] Amid the shadows of the cave Jesus got to his feet, as if to flee, but after a few faltering steps his legs gave way, and he put his hands to his eyes to catch his tears, poor boy, writhing in the dust, tormented by a crime he never committed, condemned to remorse for the rest of his life. This flood of bitter tears will leave its mark in Jesus' eyes forever, a dull glimmer of sadness and despair, always as if he has just stopped crying [...] (Saramago, 2020, p. 204).

If Mary Magdalene's moist eyes likewise suggest some sense of remorse, this may be inferred from the passage. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that society seems to reduce this woman's identity to the marginalised profession she carries out, not being able to see the beauty that only Jesus was able to recognise.

The two become sexually and romantically involved, and Jesus finds in Mary Magdalene's arms the promise of freedom that he was looking for. He, who is dominated by God, misunderstood by his family, despised by the Devil, is finally loved by a woman whose love makes him feel free.

The connection between the couple is nourished by the fact that they both have wounds. Jesus, in addition to the wounds he bore on his body, carried deep wounds in his soul. Jesus' pain is partly visible; Mary Magdalene's is not:

[...] But you are not in pain. You will find my wound if you look carefully. What wound might that be. This open door through which others have entered, but not my beloved. You said I am your beloved. That is why the door closed behind you as you entered. There is nothing I can teach you, only what I learned from you. Teach me, so that I may know what it is like to learn from you. We cannot live together. You mean you cannot live with a whore. Yes. While you live with me, I will not be a whore, I stopped being one the moment you came into this house, and it is up to you whether or not I continue living as one. You ask too much. Nothing that you cannot give me for one or two days, or for as long as it takes

your foot to heal, so that my wound may open once more. [...] (Saramago, 2020, pp. 265-266).

Jesus loses his virginity to Mary Magdalene, who teaches him more about the carnal pleasures that life can offer. But she, who only knew how to be desired, learns from him what it means to be loved. Together, they are like Adam and Eve: they live as if the world had just begun and experience it in their own way.

Through this love, Jesus, who was dying in life "a thousand deaths" (Saramago, 2020, p. 268), feels that he is born again in Magdala, from a woman who occupies one of the most marginalised positions among the women represented in the novel because she was, until she met him, a prostitute. About the importance of this relationship, Harold Bloom says:

[...] Jesus' principal relationship in his life, as Saramago sees it and tells it, is to neither of his fathers, nor to the devil, nor to Mary his mother, but to the whore Mary Magdalene. Of all the splendors of Saramago's *Gospel* the love between Jesus and the Magdalene is the grandest, and their meeting and union (231-43) is for me the summit of Saramago's achievement, up to the present time. (Bloom, 2001, p. 164)

This love, so pure and simple, seems to heal the wound of a woman whose body had previously been seen as nothing more than an object of pleasure — this woman who lives in a society that, as Santiago explains, focuses "its attention on and defines women by, their bodies, limiting, as such, their roles and confusing their identities." (Santiago, 2018, p. 144). With the passage of time, Jesus' pain also seems to subside: "Four years, however long, may not be enough to heal one's sorrow, but they should bring some relief... he no longer gives the appearance of suffering, except for those tears in his eyes" (Saramago, 2020, p. 272). Moreover, as the narrator himself points out, the wounds of the body are easier to heal (Saramago, 2020, p. 290).

On the night when, like the prodigal son, he returns to his family home, Jesus thinks, before going to sleep, about Mary Magdalene "and everything they had done together" (Saramago, 2020, p. 278). His encounter with her would contribute to his dream about his father taking on a different shape. The love of this woman, who,

despite being so flawed in the eyes of the dominant religion, was so generous, delicate and loving, brought Jesus and his father together in a peaceful dream for the first time:

[...] No sooner did the dream begin than he felt a slight jolt, as if he had brushed against another. He thought it was Mary Magdalene and smiled, and smiling turned his head in her direction, but the body drifting past, carried by the same current beneath the sky and branches and the fluttering silent bird, was that of his father. The usual cry of terror formed in his throat but stopped there, this was not his usual dream, he was not an infant in a public square in Bethlehem awaiting death with other children, there was no sound of footsteps, no neighing of horses or clanking and scraping of weapons, there was only the gentle murmur of water and the two bodies forming a raft as father and son were carried along by the river. All the fear went out of Jesus. Overcome with a feeling of exultation, he called out, Father, in his dream, Father, he repeated, awakening, but now with tears in his eyes, realizing he was alone. He tried to revive his dream, to repeat it, to feel again the brushing jolt and find his father beside him, so that they might float together on these waters to the end of time. He did not succeed that night, but the first dream never returned, from now on he will experience elation instead of fear, companionship instead of solitude, promised life instead of imminent death. Now let the wise men of Holy Scripture explain, if they can, the meaning of Jesus' dream, the significance of this river, the overhanging branches, the drifting clouds, and the silent bird, which made it possible for father and son to be united even though the guilt of the one cannot be pardoned or the sorrow of the other relieved. (Saramago, 2020, pp. 279-280).

Two Maries, the same pain

As argued at the end of the first section, pain and affliction connect the women of this society. This is evident in the fact that, although she has not yet met Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene thinks of her and tries to connect with her, imagining the pain she must have felt when she was told that her son, despite his mother's request that he come back home, would not return:

[...] She loves Jesus as a woman loves a man, but also wants to love him as a mother loves a son, perhaps because she is not much younger than his real mother, who sent a message asking her son to come home, only to be refused. Mary Magdalene wonders how Mary of Nazareth will feel when she receives his answer, but that is not the same as imagining how she herself would suffer were she to lose him, for she would be losing her man rather than her son. O Lord, punish me with both sorrows if necessary, murmured Mary Magdalene as she sat waiting for Jesus to return [...] (Saramago, 2020, p. 309).

In this sense, the first meeting between these two Maries, who are among the most important women in Jesus' life, at the wedding at Cana, is very significant. There is a look of mutual recognition between the two, and even though she knows about Mary Magdalene's previous life, Mary of Nazareth embraces her and blesses her:

[...] Mary Magdalene followed him, and as she passed Mary of Nazareth, the two women, one upright, the other fallen, glanced at each other, not with hostility or contempt but with mutual recognition, which only those familiar with the labyrinthine ways of the feminine heart can understand... Take care of my son, for an angel warned me that great tribulations await him, and I can do nothing for him. You may count on me to protect and defend him with my life if necessary. What is your name. I'm known as Mary Magdalene, and I lived as a prostitute until I met your son. Mary said nothing but began to see things more clearly, certain details came back to her, the coins, the guarded statements made by Jesus when she asked where the money came from, James's indignant account of his meeting with Jesus, his remarks about the woman who was with his brother. Now she knew everything, and turning to Mary Magdalene, said, You will always have my blessing and gratitude for all the good you have done my son Jesus. Mary Magdalene leaned over and kissed Mary's shoulder as a mark of respect, but Mary threw her arms around her and held her tight, and there they remained for some moments, embracing each other in silence before returning to the kitchen, where there was work waiting to be done. (Saramago, 2020, pp. 321-322).

The relationship of solidarity between Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene is not built on the fact that the former, being the mother of God himself — as professed, for example, by the Catholic Church (BENEDICT XVI, 2008) —, would be able to understand what was going on in the heart of a sinful (and therefore dangerous) woman, as the woman Jesus chose as his companion was considered to be. Rather, this solidarity arises from the fact that, despite the different social positions they occupy — one, a woman considered honest, a respectable widow and mother of many children; the other, a former prostitute, considered impure, rejected by her family and practically everyone around her —, they both occupy a reasonably common place in that society because of what they both are: women.

In Saramago's narrative, God is not concerned with freeing women from their apparently eternal condemnation. If God does not aim to save Israel from Roman domination or to free humanity from the prospect of countless wars and martyrdoms — in truth, his plan seeks only to extend the domination of a dissatisfied God over all the nations of the earth — he is even less concerned with liberating women from the social condition assigned to them: to love, follow, and serve men.

[...] Turning their backs to the lake, the men started walking, followed by the women, most of whose names we never learned, not that it matters, for most of them are called Mary, and the rest will answer to that name, a man need only shout, Woman, or Mary, and they will look up and come to do his bidding. (Saramago, 2020, p. 375).

Conclusion

From the beginning, Saramago devotes particular attention to the women who inhabit the fictional universe he constructs. Within this fictional world, women are systematically positioned as subordinate to men through social practices, religious norms, and cultural representations. In this male-dominated world — built at the expense of many, many Maries —, Mary Magdalene occupies a paradoxical position:

although she is socially marginalised because of the profession she practises for much of her life before meeting Jesus, she becomes one of the most significant female figures in the novel. Mary of Nazareth, in turn, embodies the constraints imposed upon women by the social and religious order represented in the novel, while also sharing with Mary Magdalene a condition of subordination and suffering. The encounter between the two therefore acquires particular significance, as their different social positions give way to mutual recognition and female solidarity. The representation of Saramago's Maries thus invites reflection on the ways in which religious and cultural narratives contribute to the construction of gender roles and on how representations inherited from such traditions may continue to inform contemporary understandings of women and their social positions.

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