

ALZIRA RUFINO AND MIRIAM ALVES: AFRO-BRAZILIAN WRITERS/ACTIVISTS AND ISSUES OF RACE, GENDER, CLASS AND WRITING

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ABSTRACT: This study seeks to present two women who feature among the leading black Brazilian writers of today. Alzira Rufino and Miriam Alves have both produced works and displayed through critical writings and activities their concern not only with other Brazilian women like themselves, but also with the Afro-Brazilian community on a broader scale. What I seek to do here is to describe them as writers, but especially to situate them within a context of black female militancy as this currently exists in Brazil. Ultimately I seek to establish a link between writing and activism, between literary analyses of society, moves to combat racism and discrimination, and black women's agency.

Keywords: Black militancy, Feminism, Afro-Brazilian woman writer

This paper focuses on Alzira Rufino and Miriam Alves, two Afro-Brazilian writers who have, since the 1970s, gradually been coming into the forefront of contemporary Brazilian literature. Today they are valued both as writers and activists whose productions are examined by all who do research on Brazilian women who are activists in the Black Movement and writers of Black literature. This combination of literary production and social activism reflects their commitment to educating and combating racism and discrimination, and to the specific goals related to promoting and uplifting the lives of people of African origin specifically. The ideas of Alzira Rufino and Miriam Alves will be examined in order to

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ascertain their positions on key aspects that are directly related to Black Militancy, Feminism and the specific reality of the Afro-Brazilian Woman Writer.

The decision to become an activist in the Brazilian Black Movement takes race awareness to a politicized level, one into which enter such factors as dedication and commitment to the *cause*. The conscious decision to become active in a public kind of way is an entirely different matter all together. Race awareness is one level of enlightenment; Black militancy involves the centralizing of the issue of race and its projection in dealing with all key aspects of socio-cultural, economic and political participation and existence. As will be shown, such a decision is highly ideological and must necessarily occur outside of the mainstream agenda viewed as being, to use the words of Bell Hooks (1995), predominantly white and supremacist. As Brazil is today, Black consciousness refers to an ideology that is very much played down, under-represented and even rejected, especially within the formal framework of politics and education. It will necessarily be constructed through personalized forms of experience and perhaps family influence. This study will examine the views of these writers regarding the specific needs of women like themselves and how this female agenda conflicts or blends with the broader issues of racial discrimination and socio-economic status. As the writings reveal, their concerns on race and gender blend or conflict with each other, depending on the particular issue at hand and their own reaction to it as individuals or as part of a collective. In the end there is no rejection of race in favor of gender, or vice versa, but rather a perception of specific concerns from the standpoint of a Black woman.

Alzira Rufino founded the Coletivo de Mulheres Negras da Baixada Santista (Collective of Black Women of the Baixada Santista) in Santos, Sao Paulo. This group has quite a list of achievements these being the setting up of a library-archive containing the history and status of the Afro-Brazilian woman; lobbying on female-centered concerns such as sterilization abuse; the establishment of an Afro-Brazilian restaurant, a music group, a theatrical group, a children's choir called Coral Infantil Omo Oya, Children of Iansã and a dance ensemble called Grupo de Dança Afro Ajaina. Alzira Rufino has written *Mulher Negra, uma perspectiva histórica* (Black Woman, a Historical Perspective), *Articulando* (Articulating) and is the co-author of *Mulher Negra tem história* (The Black Woman has a History). She is best known for her 1988 collection of poetry entitled *Eu Mulher Negra Resisto* (I Black Woman Resist). She has written several articles that appeared in the press of Baixada Santista. She also participated in several conferences including the Second Meeting of Black Brazilian Authors and Fiction Writers held in Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro in September 1987¹.

(1) Biographical information taken from *Enfim... Nós/Finally...Us*. Miriam Alves, Carolyn Durham. (31, 163), and *Cadernos Negros*, volume 19. (15, 131).

Miriam Aparecida Alves, a native of Sao Paulo is a social worker. She was a member of Quilombohoje Literatura, a publishing company created by a group of writers/activists. She has written a variety of works, including critiques, poetry, short stories, and drama. Her works include two volumes of poetry, *Momentos de Busca* and *Estrelas no dedo*. She co-authored a drama, *Terramar*, with Arnaldo Xavier and Cuti (Luis Silva). Her work appears in numerous anthologies at home including *Cadernos Negros* (volumes 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14) and *AXÉ*. A theoretical essay on the nature of Afro-Brazilian literature appears in *Reflexões sobre a literatura afro-brasileira*. She also contributed to a number of other collections including *Criação crioula, nu elefante branco*, *Mulhers entre linha – II concurso de poesia e conto*, *A Razão da chama*, *O Negro Escrito*, and *Schwarz poesie/poesia negra*².

The presentation of these biographies is important since it clarifies their roles as leaders of movements, activists, writers and thinkers who have combined these various activities and interests in order to effectively verbalize issues related to racial discrimination and injustice to which they dedicate a major part of their activities and resources. Their wealth therefore can by no means be measured socio-economically but rather *ethnically* in terms of their strong sense of purpose and pride in their African-originated identity. Added to this is their capacity to be able to articulate clearly and precisely on issues related to their production and to their experiences as women.

For the purposes of this paper three pieces of writings produced by them will be examined. I will refer to Alzira Rufino's letter to the Third International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal, Canada in June 1988 (Royster 1988), and her presentation "The Black Women's Movement in Brazil" (1996) made at the Fighting Sexism: North and South Conference organized by War on Want and held in London. As co-author of *Enfim... Nós: Por Quê?* (Finally Us... Why?), Miriam Alves introduces the first major anthology of Afro-Brazilian women writers, a collaborative effort between her and Carolyn Richardson Durham. Her introductory remarks will serve as a basis for the three-fold discussion on race, class and gender that are the main concerns of this discussion. While this discussion does not focus on their literature, it is an important consideration since, alongside their writings on the status of the Black Brazilian woman, their literature reveals itself to be an important space for narrating social and cultural issues of specific concern to their communities, as well as for exploring the hardships specifically Black women face in their daily lives.

Initially, Rufino (Jones Royster 1988) attempts to describe the socio-economic sphere that clearly allocates a very narrow space to women like her. The

(2) Biographical information taken from *Cadernos Negros*, volume 19. 163.

dual discrimination, racial and sexual, marginalizes them, placing them at the bottom of a hierarchical scale that stratifies the white man, the white woman and the Black man in descending order.

Even with a university degree, the Black woman probably will be unable to practice her profession because the society has determined, since the times of slavery, that the Black woman must work as a maid, a cleaner, a rural worker, a prostitute, or if she is pretty, as a samba dancer for tourists. (*Jones Royster: 77*)

Attainment of higher education does not guarantee self-realization, economic prosperity equality before the law and rights as a citizen. She cannot aspire to even the traditional stereotypical roles of housewife or first class sexual object for these are reserved for the white woman. Additionally, the chauvinism and sexism that characterize society collaborate with the stigma associated with her skin color, for, as Rufino (Jones Royster 1988) explains, within the white-dominated hegemonic mainstream she will never be anything more than a second-class sex object. Such rejection finds resonance in the Black man's rejection of her as a possible partner and mate (for him the white woman's social status is more attractive), and the white woman's exploitation of her labor. While she reflects on these issues of human relationships as the broader institutional consequences, Rufino (Jones Royster 1988) finds she cannot separate the woman from the family and therefore points out the spin-off effects such negative perceptions of Black womanhood ultimately have on man/woman and parents/children relationships. The family is destined to suffer because of the multiple adverse circumstances surrounding the woman and her general incapacity to overcome them all.

Rufino (Jones Royster 1988) also indicated how socio-economic reality contrasts with cultural perceptions of historically accepted assumptions regarding the place and the role woman has within the national and cultural context. These are closely related to spaces of community, religion and cultural (music and dance) expression, spaces that are fundamentally female-centered. Traditionally within the latter, the Black Brazilian woman is the performer, literally associated with movements and expression. In *candomblé* (Afro-Brazilian religion) she has the most important role for she is the medium through which spiritual beings will manifest themselves. The *escolas de samba* or samba schools have through time placed her in history as key contributor of African-originated expression especially as this relates to dress, movement and symbolic representation of Black culture. Rufino (Jones Royster 1988) refers to a history of Black

feminine action that is never part of the official historical discourse. Nowhere does the image of the Black female fighter feature in the conscious historical constructions in contemporary national discourse. Such forced silence loudly signals the workings of institutional discrimination that is in this case both political and intellectual, and women writers constantly work at subverting this presumed non-existence. This lack of any positive historical references to Black female participation is one aspect against which the Santista Collective founded by Rufino works. Emphasis on this aspect also confirms the specific agenda of the Afro-Brazilian woman and how this agenda can diverge from that of the Black Movement. Abdias do Nascimento (61-68) has a chapter entitled "The Sexual Exploitation of the African Woman" and in which he reproduces the negative historical description. There is ample evidence and detail of this kind of female historical insertion, and the link between Black women and exploitation is a very common theme in mainstream history. While this discourse readily supports the Black Movement's anti-racist and anti-discriminatory agenda, it does not contribute to depicting more substantive and valuable expressions of Black female participation.

Rufino and Alves are writers and their activities of writing and activism are not considered separately. What therefore is the link between writing and resistance? Racial, social and class-based values determine attitudes to different forms of aesthetic expression. The current status of Afro-Brazilian writing within national boundaries indicates that African-originated cultural expression and the Black-centered production of Black artists suffer from a generalized perception of their production as being fundamentally folkloric. Abdias do Nascimento discusses this issue within broader political and economic framework: "*A redução da cultura africana ao status de vazio folklore não revela somente o desprezo ao Negro da sociedade vigente, branca, como também exhibe a avareza com que essa sociedade explora o afro-brasileiro e a sua cultura com intuitos lucrativos.*" (118). (The reduction of African culture to the status of folkloric emptiness does not only reveal the contempt the Negro faces from current white society, but also exhibits the greed with which this society exploits the Afro-Brazilian and his culture for lucrative ends). Black production is thus associated with the folkloric and is not substantively valued within the civilized metropolitan cultural centers that dominate and dictate trends. Within a racist society that fundamentally accepts the notions of Black inferiority, the idea of an Afro-Brazilian literature is practically unknown, a reflection of the disinterest and unease such a presence and the themes dealt with therein provoke.

This is the context within which Rufino's and Alves's literature must develop and it varies little from the kinds of barriers they face in other aspects of their lives. According to Rufino (Jones Royster 1988), historical conditioning and

the lower economic and educational status associated with Blacks generally have served as invisible barriers for the Black female writer. For women writers, the fundamental barrier of race, therefore, supersedes that of womanhood and social class, which is why there is still so much affiliation with the Black Movement. Rufino (Jones Royster 1988) finds it is impossible to separate issues of intellectual, artistic capacity from those of class and skin color, for it is on the basis of these that she stands against the system.

With the Black Brazilian being placed in the slums of literature, the Black female writer has the difficulty of overcoming this barrier by taking part in literary contests, exhibits, meetings, publications and international fairs like this one. (78)

As a woman writer and activist, Rufino (Jones Royster 1988) has found that those who are interested in her work perceive her first within the context of her Black activism and then as a writer. She is aware of how this could undermine the expression of her Black female subjectivity, but, as her poetry reflects, the construction of ethnic self-esteem and pride can only be realized within the context of a specific consciousness whose official space within the Brazilian context is taken up by the Black movement. Her own personal commitment is to develop the lives of all Black women, writers or not.

As Rufino (1996) talks about the situation of women in Brazil she makes it quite clear the importance of clarifying whether one is speaking of white women, Black women or indigenous women. "*Each one lives a different reality, with distinct challenges and achievements.*" (79). She calls attention to the patronizing attitudes towards Black women especially and the extent to which they are devalued and discriminated against in relation to white women. A major concern for her is the issue of violence and its continued perpetuation in the most diverse forms possible. It is within this context that open denunciation of culture-based disadvantages and exploitation becomes vital. Denunciation of sexism and racism is necessary for combating the worldwide phenomenon of violence against women. It is directly linked to combating women's general vulnerability and struggle against poverty.

In explaining the value of militancy and activism, she points out the positive results to be gained by placing representatives in decision-making positions at government level. In this sense she shows herself to be very much aware of the influence and control public administrative officials have on promoting change and improvement. Policies implemented at the government level do have the spin-off effect, which makes the issue of representation fundamental. As she

points out, 32.4 million Black women are at the lowest level of education and professional achievement, but because of a lack of adequate representation there is little hope of altering this situation. She points to statistics on education which confirm just how Black women are the least likely to be educated, while those who do attain higher education are still condemned to the most demeaning jobs. In this sense she openly speaks out against such a situation pointing out the absurdity of using the term democracy to apply to Brazil. "*One cannot claim to embrace democracy for as long as Black and indigenous women are excluded from power.*" (1996: 80) The roles of Black and indigenous women's organizations therefore are vital, for they speak on behalf of the millions who are excluded citizens. Such movements will simultaneously serve to identify female political leaders and pressurize the government to put aside patriarchal *modus operandi*. In this way women will gain experience and become more assertive while transforming Brazil's political arena.

Miriam Alves (1995) concentrates on the issue of the Black writing within the sphere of national literature. Since its organization in the 1970s, Black literary production has been directly linked to issues and conflicts of race and class that mark national relations in a hidden sort of way. Alves indicates how it is impossible to treat the issue of Black writing differently from any other issue regarding Blacks in Brazil, since it is subject to the same processes of distortion, marginalization and official extermination.

These interpretive distortions to which we are subject, certainly, are linked to Brazilian socio-economic-cultural upbringing and to contradictions that are rooted in the series of collective negative stereotypes that are reproduced in a continual sequence, together with actions that try to do away with the conflict between the races with bland discussions. (18)

Within this context where the problem of race relations is rarely addressed at decision-making levels, this writing will inevitably be a disruptive force, one that cuts through the calm and does away with any illusions a pacific image of Brazil may create. This literature is in no way a literature of denial, but rather one of portrayal; an important component is human violence and rejection and this reminds us of its origins among writers/activists. Currently sustained by a small selective readership, it continues to receive limited acknowledgement and examination by those not closely involved in issues of race in Brazil.

For Alves, considering the issue of the Afro-Brazilian woman in writing necessarily means dealing with a "specificity within a specificity" (20), while recognizing independent efforts at publications. Inevitably, issues of unequal opportunities between sexes and economic constraints will separate male and fe-

male production. Of even more crucial consideration are the prejudiced biases that cast doubts on the competence of Black female writing. As is already seen in their attempts at greater socio-national participation, women are not welcome in scenarios of public competition, and in work or acquisition of knowledge, whether scientific or artistic, they suffer the consequences of intruding in what is still conventionally male-dominated space. Turning the tide against systematic historical exploitation based on race and gender, female written expression will therefore continue to necessarily move against the tide in the same way that Black feminism necessarily must.

Alves points out the even more significant result of this difficulty i.e. the whole questioning among women who necessarily challenge gender-based prejudices. Perhaps it is worth their while to consider that what is important is not being a **Black** poet or **Black** short story writer, but being a writer. The internal pressures such a notion bring to bear on both Black men and women are tremendous and could even turn out to be just as limiting, but at the same time they do seem to uncover basic differences between men and women that have led to fundamental divisions in Black action and militancy and for Alves it is this awareness that is initially needed for discussion and problem-solving to take place.

She is also concerned with issues of social status. Issues of social class do not have to do with where the Afro-Brazilian woman is currently in the social scale since she has not been allowed the right to construct her status over time. The historical legacy from slavery has been maintained and even rigidly enforced within the modern democracy Brazil claims as its own.

Our confinement to the servile context didn't change much; seeing that from slaves we went on to become domestics who still keep the slavocratic heritage in place, since after the pseudo-abolition of slavery, physical punishment imposed by the bosses and the denial of basic necessities such as food were a constant for domestic workers. (22)

This reality ensures the social stagnancy of the Brazilian woman, for even if she is university educated it prohibits the expansion of her writing and its integration into mainstream present-day literature. As writers, both Rufino and Alves make no distinction between experience and text, for the two spaces record the exploitation and discrimination and their sense of a double marginality that is the result of their own dual identity that links them to issues of Black existence and female social exploitation.

As she retakes the issue of woman's place within the Black movement and within literary groups that are offshoots of it, Alves expresses concern with the

paternalistic and obscure ways of thinking that represent opposition to feminist expression and narrow possibilities while increasing female isolation and silence within such groups. In effect she laments this since it is fundamentally based on the same principles the very Black Movement condemns as being discriminatory. She visualizes this attempt to channel discourse as limiting and narrow, a further hindrance to the possibilities of Black female publication. Such attitude in a sense results in productions such as the one she introduces with these thoughts, *Finally ... Us*, a collection of poetry by Afro-Brazilian women writers.

Finally, Alves values her role as writer, for it broadens her to the intricacies of the kind of existence and identity she enjoys. As the same time she is made aware of female strengths. Writing has made her aware of mistakes, of traps, of achievements and it has served to give the freedom, creativity and confidence that life is more likely to deny her.

“Finally ... Us” exposes naked intimacies and sharp sentiments with agile, languid, and sensual curves, without false modesty. It rebels with its poetic action, reclaiming the ownership of the body, going on to being the subject of desire and pleasure, de-objectifying itself. (25)

In light of the issues presented above we can examine Soares et. al. (309) who discuss what causes Black women to separately form groups of their own or to gravitate towards groups composed of others like themselves, to the detriment of the cohesion of the Black Movement. She points to the growing feminist/gender traits the Black women’s movement portrays as it increasingly becomes more organized and she also points to the influence of feminist ideals along with the paternalistic trends within the Black movement’s discourse that excludes female involvement in fundamental ways. Based on Alves and Rufino’s testimonies, we can confirm the indelible link of ideology and solidarity that is still maintained with the Black Movement, even though the Movement’s inability to equally consider women-focused issues is a point of contention that will continue to separate Black activists on the whole. As Soares points out, the kinds of concerns Black women like Rufino express at feminist conferences and meetings reflect an attitude of appreciating that the formation of women’s groups does not translate into male rejection, but expresses concrete objection to the kind of exclusion they are being told to accept within the Black Movement. In this sense we can therefore observe the ambivalent sentiments of collaboration and conflict that must necessarily continue to mark the relationship between the two.

Carneiro (219) details the two important aspects that in many ways are responsible for the separatist tones encountered among Black Brazilian female

consciousness – firstly, the traditional, biased ways of conceiving the Black woman within the Brazilian socio-cultural context, and secondly the rather diverse and scattered development these women's movements have had, a diversity directly related to the main concerns of labor, health, education and political participation. Coinciding with the above writers' opinions Carneiro (219) points out these concerns are rendered gender specific and to a large extent class specific, for they were concerns raised by women from the popular classes, a factor that resulted in the inevitable connections with the more diverse and broader social struggles of the Brazilian society.

Regarding the general perception of this Brazilian woman, Carneiro's views blend with the poetry and thoughts of Alves and Rufino who confirm that besides the broader social negative image she suffers, she still has to face the inferiority attributed to her within the Black Movement. According to Carneiro: "*For Black women, the Black Movement also exhibits internal weaknesses and contradictions that have limited its usefulness as an arena for mobilization.*" (221) The realization that the Black woman's political activism is vital if she is to experience improvements is another aspect that led to the desire to represent self rather than let the Black Movement do it on behalf of all. Once again, women openly express doubts about the ability of the Movement to deal adequately with their specificities. The double militancy we observe in Alves and Rufino is therefore not by choice but by necessity.

Of importance here, therefore, is the growth of the Brazilian gender politics in the 1980s and the subsequent appearance of Black female organizations. Alvarez (1990: 232) draws attention to the fact that in Sao Paulo in the late seventies and early eighties these movements did not separate from the Black Movement and many did organize within its parameters. Subsequently many developed given the movement's inattention to the race, gender and class specificities of Black women. The importance of conferencing and meetings mentioned by Rufino (Jones Royster 1988: 78) in many ways ties in with Alvarez's observations in terms of the rise in collective and political events and collaborations across the country and internationally. As Rufino pointed out earlier, participation in and sponsorship of conferences and meetings at all levels is an important consideration for expanding female articulation and knowledge, for increasing political effectiveness and for preparing future female leadership. These meetings proved vital for networking, constructing collective agreements, policies and campaigning skills. At the same time there was no such thing as a hegemonic movement, on the contrary, as Alvarez (1990: 233 and 1994: 25) points out, the groups were diverse, the only initial common denominator being their rejection of the feminist label given its association with white feminist movements that had proven hostile to incorporating the issue of race into their agendas.

While examining trends of the nineties, Alvarez (1994: 51) indicates that more than ever this women's movement is ideologically quite diverse, following many paths that were largely determined by the issues they sought to highlight in their various groups. Feminism, close alliance with Black men to fight racism and rejection of feminist label represent three positions that shape current groups and determine the kinds of relationships they maintain with Black men and white women. Alvarez (1994: 51) describes two key groups situated in the state of Sao Paulo, the Collective of Black Women of the Baixada Santista (Coletivo de Mulheres Negras da Baixada Santista) founded by Alzira Rufino, and Geledés-Instituto da Mulher Negra of Sao Paulo. With the broad objective of fighting all forms of discrimination, the Collective of Black Women of the Baixada Santista simultaneously sought to encourage female participation and awareness of her status as woman and a Black person in a sexist and racist society.

O que nós poetas negros vivemos hoje nao é um gueto. Gueto é quando se é segregado pelos outros. Hoje nós vivemos um quilombo; a revolta que nós mesmos provocamos: Quilombohoje. (*Miriam Alves*)³

What we Black poets are living today is not a ghetto. Ghetto is when you are segregated by others. Today we are living a quilombo (settlement of runaway slaves); a revolt we ourselves provoked: Quilombohoje (quilombo today).

Finally, consideration of these words by Alves confirms the general spirit that governs Afro-Brazilian women's views as to their role as writers, thinkers and leaders in contemporary society. There is a desire to execute change and to work consciously towards this in spite of the odds. The invocation of the spirit of revolution through *quilombo* confirms the indelible link with the past and is used as a lesson for constructing current and future forms of dialogue and resistance. The *quilombo* was the nearest the African slaves got to recuperating the life style from which they were taken and it does not only refer to resistance, but also organization within modern society. The message is that African heritage, along with other forms of expression such as community involvement, political consciousness and cultural pride, are the means through which women must work in order to develop themselves and all others.

(3) Miriam Alves interviewed by Luiza Lobo in April 1987. 162.

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RESUMO: Este estudo busca apresentar duas mulheres que se destacam entre os mais atuantes escritores brasileiros negros de hoje: Alzira Rufino e Miriam Alves. Essas autoras não apenas produziram trabalhos sobre a temática mulher-negra, como buscam, através de suas críticas, atividades e inquietudes, o debate, a inserção e a atuação na sociedade da comunidade afro-brasileira como um todo.

Palavras-chave: Militância negra; Feminismo; Mulheres escritoras afro-brasileiras