

## Machado de Assis: A Keen Look at Nineteenth-Century Brazilian Identity

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**Abstract.** In this essay it is argued that if we look at Machado de Assis' works we may understand that we are dealing with an author who had a very clear understanding not only of the reality of his own time and country but also of "human nature." In Assis' work, the picture of deep, intricate, unspoken, delicate, and always present questions related to ethnicity, which afflicted a society that did not recognize itself as being of African descent, foreshadowed facts and readings that would turn up strongly by the end of the twentieth century.

In the history of human cultures there have been authors whose books were able to provoke different sorts of specific revolutions, as far as their impact upon people is concerned. Such revolutions were aesthetic, political, religious, or human. If we look at Machado de Assis' works we may understand we are facing a very complete example—we are dealing with an author who had a very clear understanding not only of the reality of his own time and country, but also, and primarily, of "human nature." An author who produced a complex and subtle work that does not admit to being restricted to closed, polarized paradigms of analysis. Among all of the authors and critics who have written about him, many have repeated the motto that if it were not for the international status of the language in which he wrote, Machado would, for sure, be more visibly listed among the main authors of western literature.

Machado, who has been classified by Susan Sontag as "the greatest author ever produced in Latin America" (104) and by Salman Rushdie as "the head of a dynasty in Latin American Literature," was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1839 to a Portuguese mother and a Brazilian mulatto father in an extremely poor

family that could not lead a grandson of slaves beyond the elementary level in formal education. Contradicting all presumable circumstances in such a case in Brazil, Machado surpassed all barriers of social ladder climbing—including race, education, and family income—and did not become yet another excluded from the national system of culture.

Machado's story, although atypical in his country and rather strange to some, in fact does not differ from the story of other—a few, but not a negligible number—Brazilians of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries who made contact with the printed word at an early age and who went on working as typesetters or proofreaders. Such a story, generally not very visible, is fundamental for the understanding of Machado de Assis in his context. The stage following such a beginning would always be that of becoming a writer of generalities for different newspapers, a rich environment that would lead them to attend literary discussions at good bookstores, read a lot, make enriching contacts, and start writing on their own.

What caused the difference between Machado and others? The big difference lies in “genius.” The growth of his reputation as a writer came with the rather steady growth in the maturity, polish, and brilliance of his works, as well as with the invitation to different posts that would give him some financial security and allow time for writing. He was the founding president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters. By the time he died in 1908, Machado de Assis had reached the pinnacle of Brazil's intellectual establishment. Equally motivated by the same élan that led Machado to the Brazilian Academy of Letters, both João do Rio and Lima Barreto, at the opening of the twentieth century, were candidates for a place at the Academy. Both were black or mulatto and tried to gain entrance three different times. In fact, only João do Rio got it when Machado had already died.

Machado de Assis is widely acknowledged as the most important novelist to have written in Latin America before 1940. Having witnessed the fall of the Brazilian Monarchy and the rise of the Republican regime as well as all of the intense ideological and critical debate of the second half of the nineteenth century, Machado had a surprisingly modern style: he maintained that the way to write an interesting book was to leave things out. By withholding data, he claimed, the book stimulates the imagination of the reader, just as some other writers, like Edgar Allan Poe in the United States, would consistently claim, too. In doing so he contributed to the solid establishment of alternative strategies for the building of a literary national trait in Brazil, as Sergio Bellei has brilliantly

shown in his *Nacionalidade e Literatura: os caminhos da alteridade*. In his book he also analyzes authors close to Machado, such as Cooper, Poe, and Alencar.

A point that may not be left aside in the constitution of his keen look at nineteenth-century Brazilian identity is that Machado was a translator. Not just any translator but a very important one, working not only with prose texts (fiction and essays) but with poems as difficult as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*. In this translation it is clear that Machado definitely decided to face the challenges Poe himself had pointed to in his analytical text on the poem's gestation—his essay *The Philosophy of Composition*. Machado's relation with translation was long and fruitful and had enormous impact upon both his formation and the building of his work. Among the translated authors, we may cite Shakespeare (*Hamlet*), Dickens (*Oliver Twist*), Victor Hugo (*Les travailleurs de la mer*), and Dante (*Inferno*), showing his culture, his knowledge of different languages as well as his artistic and human scope. Further, we find in him a specific awareness that was not at all clear for others of his time: he was absolutely perceptive of the constant tension existent in translating; in other words, at the same time as translation might act as a vehicle of modernization, it also might work simultaneously as a hindrance to the development of national talents.

Nowadays, the accumulated number of works in literary criticism tackling Machado's writings is enormous, ranging from different authors and places, having influenced works in areas as different and complementary as literature, history, psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, the social sciences, and education. The study of Machado's sharp observations of society and of human nature, of his irony as well as of his delicate but at the same time deeply cruel humor are always there. His texts always reveal an author tirelessly eager to understand his time and the country in which he was born and in which he lived.

A delicate question that has been tackled rather often recently, although still quickly and superficially, is the fact that Machado may well have had problems accepting his racial identity. Some critics point to the beard and closely cropped hair in his photographs as an attempt to hide his African features, while others mention his preference for aristocratic characters in his works as evidence of a racial or social inferiority complex. Brazilian critic José Veríssimo (304) and abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco (387) present opposite descriptions of the way Machado dealt with his color. Machado's characters frequently speak of a desire for parenthood or express their anxiety if deprived of that state.

Although a recurrent topic nowadays, when Brazil has increased its discussion of racial and cultural formation, whether in society or in university academia, Machado's skin color and his possible attempt to deny it has not yet been clearly discussed. Considered by some to be an irrelevant or unmerited debate, the fact that no text carrying Machado's signature is known in which he explicitly fights against the injustice of such a vile situation as slavery, and that most of his texts never present an ideologically fraternal or solidarity-filled look towards the poor and the oppressed—most of them blacks, who clashed against the luxury and sophistication of the Belle Époque—disgusts and fills some with anger. As an example, opposite to what happens in Balzac, for instance, there is no main character in his novels that has ascended in the social classes. No blacks at all in such a situation. The *why* is always contradictory to his several biographers, since he was an author to explore the most various topics and themes in his writings.

Anyways, although not a man to go up into a pulpit and deliver an inflamed speech, one may not forget that in his writings we may find vigorous pages about the Brazilian mentality towards slaves at the time and about the not always veiled Brazilian racism. Maybe the fact that the critics' attention is generally pointed at Machado's novels has left aside the poignancy found in his short stories. Under this heading we would not like to leave aside stories like "O Caso da Vara" and "Pai contra Mãe." The eminent folklorist and journalist Edison Carneiro insists in including the last story in his referential study and recently re-edited *Antologia do Negro Brasileiro* (1950) as one of those indicators of the presence of the blacks in the building of Brazilian nationality (8). Even though most of Machado's novels have the upper classes of Rio de Janeiro's bourgeoisie as their main characters, one may not forget Machado's strong criticism towards established social values. His most famous novel trilogy—*Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, *Quincas Borba*, and *Dom Casmurro*—shows a very skeptical mind commenting on the cynicism and the dishonesty of a society supposedly honored and a very inflexible view of the individual as always motivated by selfishness and pride.

Following a brief survey of different opinions, we may begin with Brazilian critic and Professor Domício Proença Filho, for instance, who is very clear about his attitude towards Machado de Assis. Departing from the statement of different critics' points of view, as far as the racial question in Machado's work is involved, he finally concludes:

in my point of view, I understand that the literature written by Machado de Assis is indifferent to black people's and black descendants' (like Machado himself)

problems. Even his two short stories that involve slaves—“O Caso da Vara” and “Pai contra Mãe”—are not centered in the ethnic question, but in human selfishness and in character weakness. (166)

A similar attitude is embraced by David Brookshaw in his book *Raça e Cor na Literatura Brasileira*, as he classifies Machado’s literary work as “totally divorced from his racial origins” and Machado de Assis as the author of a work that “never worried about the racial problem and rarely touched slavery questions whose abolition happened when he was still alive” (152-53).

On the other hand, Heloisa Toller Gomes states:

Ironic discourse has been the main option of authors like Machado de Assis, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain in the treatment of slavery and inter-racial relations. Instigating the intelligence and the sensibility of their contemporaries with the exhibition of the grotesque masks of slavery—as Machado did in “Pai contra Mãe” [...] they elaborated a social criticism that aimed acutely at their time, but which also transcended it. (197-98)

To deal with such ideas without being restricted to fixed paradigms that, as already has been shown, simply do not fit the richness and complexity of Machado’s work, one should not leave aside Roberto Schwarz’s renowned study of Machado’s work: *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism* (a translation from the original Portuguese). The leading Brazilian theorist and author of the highly influential notion of “misplaced ideas” focuses his literary and cultural analysis on Machado’s *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*, which was published in 1880. Writing in the Marxist tradition, Schwarz investigates in particular how social structure gets internalized as literary form, arguing that Machado’s style replicates and reveals the deeply embedded class divisions of nineteenth-century Brazil. Schwarz argues that Machado’s vanguardist narrative reflects the Brazilian owner class and its peculiar status in both national and international contexts, and shows why this novel’s success was no accident. The author was able to confront some of the most prestigious ideologies of the nineteenth century with some uncomfortable truths, not the least of which was that slavery remained the basis of the Brazilian economy.

Many times seen as contradictory, Machado was a human being living in his own contradictory country and turbulent time. The fact that he did not participate actively in the abolitionist campaign or take a stand in his writ-

ings in favor of the blacks and their descendants surely throws him under the criticism of scholars in post-colonial times. But such facts, associated with all that Machado means for Brazilian literature today, just reinforce the final picture we get of nineteenth-century Brazilian identity derived from his keen look. The picture of deep, intricate, unspoken, delicate, and always present questions related to ethnicity, which afflicted a society that did not recognize itself as African descendant, foreshadowed facts and readings that would turn up strongly by the end of the twentieth century.

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