


“The cane” and “Father against mother”: Between Normalization and human conception crisis¹ / “O caso da vara” e “Pai contra mãe”: Entre a Normalização e crise da concepção do humano

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting a reading of the short stories “The cane” and “Father against mother”, written by Machado de Assis in the second half of the 19th century, from the actions of its characters, respectively Damião and Cândido Neves, which are emphasized by the narrator in a ironic way. In order to discuss the representations of the enslaver’s behavior, this article starts from what Maestri (2004) considers as normalization. It is also observed the ways in which in the narrative the natural order of human life is questioned and can trigger a crisis in this normalized notion of what would be the human being, also considering the ideas of Pinsky (2010). In this way, the way cruelty is portrayed towards the enslaved subject in machadian short stories is emphasized, contributing to the reflection about the consequences of the abject instruments of violence used in a recent past of brazilian history within the daily reality.

KEYWORDS: Machadian short stories; Slavery; Normalization; Literature

RESUMO

Este artigo se propõe a apresentar uma leitura dos contos *O caso da vara* e *Pai contra mãe*, escritos por Machado de Assis na segunda metade do século XIX, a partir das ações de suas personagens, respectivamente Damião e Cândido Neves, que são evidenciadas pelo narrador, de maneira irônica. A fim de discutirmos as representações do comportamento do escravizador, partimos do que Maestri (2004) considera como normalização. Observamos,

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também, as formas como na narrativa a ordem natural da vida humana é posta em questão e pode desencadear uma crise nesta noção normalizada do que seria o ser humano, considerando também as reflexões de Pinsky (2010). Portanto, enaltece-se a forma como é retrata a crueldade perante o sujeito escravizado nos contos machadianos, contribuindo para a reflexão a respeito das consequências dos mecanismos abjetos de violência utilizados num passado recente da história brasileira dentro da realidade cotidiana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Contos machadianos; Escravidão; Normalização; Literatura.

1 Introduction

The history of Brazil is delineated by different phases and conceptions regarding political and social forms of organization, among them, there were three centuries of institutionally experienced slavery, an infamous practice that still exists through an enslaver and patriarchal mentality, materialized by many mechanisms of capture, oppression and racism in contemporary times, arising mainly from economic, political and social interests, which result in the oppression of people, most of them descendants of indigenous and African. This nefarious historical experience, which ended institutionally only in the nineteenth century, was represented throughout a variety of literary works and other forms of artistic manifestation, among them, the short stories of Machado de Assis, such as *Father against Mother* that was published in 1906 as part of the book *Relíquias da Casa Velha*, and *The Cane*, originally published in 1891 in *Gazeta de Notícias* – a newspaper published in Rio de Janeiro between the 19th and 20th centuries – and later republished in the book *Páginas Recolhidas* (1899).

Once slavery was an abject historical experience that marked the history of Brazil and impacted the social, economic and cultural formation of its communities, it is of great importance to discuss this issue, which is also very present in the works of Machado de Assis. Given the imposing character of slavery and the conception of a pedagogy of fear based on discipline and forced labor, as proposed by Brazilian historian Mário José Maestri (2004), one notices that society normalized the experience. Based on both perspectives and on the concept of “normalization”, as developed by German philosopher and historian Jorn Rüsen (2009), the attribution of punishment or imprisonment is considered normal, and a definition of “human being” encompasses only those that fit into what the community considers normal / normalized. In this regard, others are considered non-human: among them, there were those who were socially pre-selected to become slaves. Such understanding is also perceptible in artistic and literary expressions, for they deal with the tragic events via discourses that expose – in Machado’s case, through irony – recurring social facts, that is, what is considered natural and normal in that context. Using the concept of “normalization” does not entail a lack of criticism; rather, it leads towards a reflection on the

discourses that, although constituted in this context of abject normalization, offer ways to the deconstruction of the dominant norm, such as those found in texts written by Machado de Assis.

Considering the different relationships established by the characters of Machado's short stories which are the corpus of this paper, regarding the 19th century Brazilian slaveocratic context, the main objective is to analyze the materialization of social behavior, in this period, in both the selected texts, based on Maestri's (1994) understanding that forms of torture and punishment were the most effective means of capturing and constituting the slave's body, captive by fear, in this conception. Thus, the traumas created and strengthened amid the slave culture, as well as the reflexes and consequences of the "normalization" of events in the period of institutional slavery, are identified in the works of Machado de Assis and they will be analyzed from Jaime Pinsky's (1981) historical point of view. Therefore, the two short stories by Machado de Assis analyzed in this paper ridicule and explicit the atrocious character of the instruments used for the repressing slaves, such as the cane in *The Cane* and the iron collar in *Father against Mother*, bringing to light a reflection on what, in that context, would be regarded as the natural order of human social life.

2 Machado de Assis, "Father against Mother" and "The Cane": general features

Machado de Assis (Rio de Janeiro, 1839-1908) began writing his comedies in the 1860s and from then on he dedicated his life to fiction. After *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (1881), the writer reaches what is commonly considered the peak of maturity in his realism, reflected in the following works: *Histórias sem Data* (84), *Quincas Borba* (92), *Várias Histórias* (96), *Páginas Recolhidas* (99), *Dom Casmurro* (1900), *Esau and Jacob* (1904), *Relíquias de Casa Velha* (1906).

In part of his work, Machado de Assis develops the theme of slavery in a critical perspective regarding the social configurations of his time. In addition to the short stories analyzed in this article, the representation of slavery is also present in novels such as *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (1881), *Quincas Borba* (1891), *Counselor Ayres' Memorial* (1908) and in the chronicle *Bons Dias!* (May, 1888).

The short story *Father against mother* was published in 1906 as part of the collection *Relíquias da Casa Velha* and has as its protagonist Cândido Neves (or Candinho ["Little Cândido"]), who earns his living by capturing escaped slaves and receiving rewards. The story's initial contextualization portrays the materials used on the slaves so as to avoid their escape or any behavior disliked by the masters (not "normalized"), as the mask, the collar, the iron foot shackles, and the iron collar (the latter was reserved for slaves who recurrently tried to escape). The narrator

develops the theme of “runaway slaves” and points out that their escapes were then considered motives for the emergence of different occupations, since those who recaptured slaves received bounties as a form of livelihood. Since Candido Neves is never able to achieve job stability, he finds himself in poverty out of pride or incompetence.

In the narrative, Candido falls in love with a girl named Clara, a seamstress who lives with her aunt, Monica. After Candido and Clara’s marriage, the three characters began to live in a very humble house, increasingly accumulating debts due to the lack of work. The couple, who wished to have a child, even against the aunt’s wishes, soon became pregnant. Aunt Monica was not content with the idea, claiming that four mouths were impossible to feed considering the situation in which they lived, making the suggestion that they take the child, when born, to a foundling wheel, another social mechanism deigned normal in that context. As expected, the child’s parents were not in favor of the idea and they hoped for an improvement in their situation. But as time went on, debts accumulated and the family was evicted from the house where they lived and moved to another house, lent to them, and there the child was born.

Acknowledging the complicated predicament, it was decided that the child would not spend more than one day with the parents and that the infant would be taken to the foundling wheel by his own father. Along the way, Candido meets Arminda, an escaped slave whose master offered a hundred thousand reis² to anyone who captured her. Immediately, Candido Neves leaves his son in the care of a stranger who worked at a nearby pharmacy, goes towards the slave and captures her, tying her arms with ropes and ignoring her pleadings for help. Arminda, with no one to turn to, reveals in desperation that she is pregnant and, while appealing for Candido’s mercy, admits that she will be flogged if returned. However, deaf to her pleadings, he takes the slave back to her master, he is then rewarded with the amount promised and witnessing the sufferings of Arminda, whose pregnancy comes to an end as a consequence of the violence that is imposed on her. Finally, Candinho retrieves his son and presents the large sum to the family, which reinforces the normalized character of the actions and facts that happened to him, he sheds tears of happiness for having his son back and says that “Not all children make it” (ASSIS, 2014, p. 417).

The short story *The Cane* was published in 1899 in the book *Páginas Recolhidas* and the story begins with Damião’s escape from the seminary in which he was forced into by his father. Out of desperation, Damião goes to Sinhá Rita’s house, a widow who was cherished by João Carneiro, Damião’s godfather. There, he begged her for help, because he could not bear the idea

² Old currency unit used in Brazil and Portugal.

of becoming priest. The lady insists that Damião should return to the seminary because she did not want to intrude in family affairs, but she orders one of her slaves to summon Damião's godfather. Although she is solicitous, as it can be noticed by the way she welcomes Damião, Sinhá Rita does not tolerate any non-standard behavior performed by her slaves - who were mostly children -, and constantly threat to punish little Lucrecia (considered to be a misbehaving girl) with a cane, for laughing at Damião's jokes. When João Carneiro arrives at Sinhá Rita's, he furiously threatens to punish Damião for having fled the seminary; however, due to Sinhá Rita's intimidation, he gives in.

During dinner time, some neighboring girls of Sinhá Rita arrive; there, they spent the late afternoon singing and talking. Damião is asked to tell the same anecdote that made little Lucrecia laugh (and, consequently, suffer threats of punishment). Apprehensively, he does so while he looks at the slave, who does not laugh this time. Late at night, he receives a letter from one of his godfather's slaves, in which he reads about his father's fury regarding his scape from the seminary. At the end of the story, Sinhá Rita replies to the letter and in her reply she takes Damião's side and defends his decision. Afterwards, when she realized Lucrecia had not completed one of her chores, Sinhá Rita picks her up by the ears and insinuates that she will punish her by looking for the for the cane. Damião, who is near the object, is apprehensive, because the lady asks him to pass the cane so she can punish the girl, who gets desperate and asks for help. Finally, Damião hands over the cane, which resulted in Lucrecia's punished.

The actions of Candinho, Sinhá Rita and Damião portrayed in the brief summary above were highlighted to identify the materialization of the enslaver behavior of these specific characters, although it is also possible to develop a closer analysis that would encompass all the characters of both narratives. Starting from reflections by Pinsky (2010) and Maestri (2004), this analysis seeks to present elements in the narratives that evidence the "normalization" of the slavery and the many mechanisms of controlling slave's body in the context in which both storied is set. It is also discussed how the writing of Machado de Assis highlights such actions and offers the possibility to reflect upon the crisis of the notion of what to be human means, what is very celebrated at the time and still present in our context.

3 The materialization of enslaver behavior in Machado's short stories: normalization and the crisis in the notion of the human

Considering slavery as one of the most abject forms of relationship within a society, it can be affirmed that the enslaver period in Colonial Brazil was much more than a fact from the past, or

a mere record of a mode of production. It was, therefore, a phenomenon that marks inhuman relationships which continues to exist in today's social relations, once that current prejudices and discriminations are expressed because of the memory and the experience of slavery.

Pinsky (2010) highlights in *Escravidão no Brasil [Slavery in Brazil]* that

slavery is characterized by the complete subjection of one man to another: the slave is not only the master's property, but also his will is subject to the master's authority and his work may be obtained even by force. This kind of work is not limited, therefore, to the buying and selling of the workforce [...]. In slavery, one human being becomes the property of another, to the point where his own power of deliberation is nullified: the slave may have wishes, but cannot fulfill them (PINSKY, 2010, p. 08. Translator translation³).

In this perspective, slavery is a process of subjugation of one human being to another, through social pressures brought about by pre-established power relations. This phenomenon, which stems from a feeling of authority over another individual, may be observed throughout history and, in Western societies, since Classical Antiquity, one may perceive a normalization of the idea that there exist enslaved subjects. Pinsky (2010, p. 08) states that Aristotle “used to say that the slave *by nature* did not belong to himself, but to someone else”. the philosopher's argument was based on the idea that there were people destined to be free by nature, while others were destined to be enslaved, omitting the historical character of the concrete conditions of the facts.

It is also necessary to consider that the term “human” that is used in this paper to reflect on these contexts of enslavement, which is a premise for this analysis, could denote a certain anachronism if not address the fact that the slaves were not considered humans. To further develop this reflection, it is necessary to revisit a few historical aspects, if only briefly, regarding the modes of organization of this social context, since in it, in the conception of a slave-holder, the slave in his possession was not a fellow human being, for the process of subjugating another human being would be inadmissible.

The process of identification and recognition of their fellow men, by empathy or closeness, cannot be considered as a constituent part of this normal social relationship between master and slave, since the norm in the context of enslavement is the commercialization of the labor force of an individual who cannot be perceived as human, who is not master of himself, who does not hold

³ “a escravidão se caracteriza por sujeitar um homem ao outro, de forma completa: o escravo não é apenas propriedade do senhor, mas também sua vontade está sujeita à autoridade do dono e seu trabalho pode ser obtido até pela força. Esse tipo de trabalho não se limita, pois, à compra e venda da força de trabalho [...]. Na escravidão, transforma-se um ser humano em propriedade de outro, a ponto de ser anulado seu próprio poder deliberativo: o escravo pode ter vontades, mas não pode realizá-las”.

the same rights, among other restrictions derived from the issue of possession, thus bringing him much closer to the animal than the human, nullifying the dignity that is inherent to human beings. The narratives by Machado expand the crisis of this notion of what it means to be human, by articulating the characters' stories in a parallel and similar fashion, highlighting, in each paragraph, the many similarities between the characters, their needs, and the innumerable forms of violence used to deny and distance these subjects from the condition of human beings.

In Brazil, the practice of enslavement began with the arrival of the Portuguese settlers. Portugal was suffering from a major crisis due to population loss and perceived the exploration of lands overseas as an opportunity to generate money. Thus, the country took expeditions across Africa and more than 200 slaves were accounted per expedition in the fifteenth century (PINSKY, 2010, p. 10), they established the black people as a commodity, condition that would be later adopted in Brazil.

In this sense, it noteworthy that

before black slavery, the history of Brazil, in its first century, registers the use of the work of indigenous people. Immediately interested in the so-called tropical products - notably redwood - members of the early expeditions sought to gain, in exchange for some trinkets, the indigenous labor force. [...] It is interesting to note that the Indian labor force is considered a commodity that, in the absence of others, will be taken as a war spoils by the soldiers. These, in turn, will take the Indians as their wage. (PINSKY, 2010, p. 12. Translator translation⁴).

That way, the process of building a society in which Indians were hunted and became victims of other compulsory forms of work begin. Replaced by African slaves, the Indians, who were the first targets of violence and extermination in brazilian lands, had their value as a labor force diminished by the valorization of slave trade by the Portuguese Crown and the Church prospered.

The black slaves brought to Brazil were a work force to be used in farming, an activity which aimed at reaching the world trade and so the farms were constituted as the working space of the slaves. The type of work performed by black slaves was not essentially agricultural, however, that is, it required - in addition to planting, harvesting and selling - a minimum strength to carry out heavier physical labor. This resulted in master's doing great demands on slaves' behavior and

⁴ "antes de chegar à escravidão negra, a História do Brasil, já em seu primeiro século, registra a utilização do trabalho do índio. Interessados logo nos chamados produtos tropicais – notadamente o pau-brasil –, os membros das primeiras expedições tratavam de conseguir, em troca de algumas quinquilharias, a força de trabalho indígena. [...] É interessante constatar que a força de trabalho do índio é considerada um bem que à falta de outros lhe será tomado como butim de guerra, pelos soldados. Estes, por sua vez, farão do índio o seu soldo."

physical body structure. Maestri (2004) states that this requirement existed before and during the slave trade:

During this spatial and temporal trajectory, which could last weeks and months, the *captive* was introduced to the slave universe, undergoing incessant *pedagogical* acts that taught him unconditional obedience and gave rise to conscious and unconscious reactions of adaptation and resistance regarding the new situation of violence. African “slavers” imposed their authority especially through violence, fear, exhaustion. [...] Sick or unsubmitive captives were as an example to others abandoned along the paths, their throats would be cut open, to hasten the pace and increase the submission of the remaining prisoners. (MAESTRI, 2004, p. 02. Translator translation.⁵)

Also in relation to the preparatory trajectory of the slaves, Rudengas (1835) reports:

These unfortunate people are crammed into a compartment whose height rarely exceeds 5 feet. This jail occupies the entire length and width of the ship’s hold (...) against the walls and around the mast; advantage is taken wherever there is room for a human creature, regardless of the position this individual may be forced upon. More often than not, the walls contain, at half height, a kind of wooden shelf on which lies a second layer of human bodies. (RUDENGAS, 1835, apud PINSKY, 2010, p. 25. Translator translation.⁶)

These facts helped to build the image of the black slave in Brazil, since its arrival in the productive unit (MAESTRI, 2004, p. 04), an issue that remains since the expeditions and the slave trade from the colonial period until the nineteenth century, developed through acts of violence, such as the prohibitions imposed on bodies and minds. Besides the main characteristic of Brazilian agriculture being the use of black labor (initially in sugar cane plantations and later in coffee plantations), in the nineteenth century there was the beginning of what is conventionally called as urban slavery: urban slaves performed tasks related to the big cities, tasks considered unworthy of civilians. This aspect also greatly influences the Brazilian culture. In this period, after the prohibition of the slave trade (Law Eusébio de Queirós, 1850), the internal conditions of the slave commercialization became even worse for them:

⁵ “Durante essa trajetória espacial e temporal, que podia durar semanas e meses, o *cativo* começava a ser introduzido no universo escravista, sofrendo incessantes atos *pedagógicos* que lhe ensinavam obediência incondicional e ensejavam reações conscientes e inconscientes de adaptação e resistência à nova situação de violência. Os “negreiros” africanos impunham sua autoridade sobretudo pela violência, pelo medo, pelo cansaço. [...] Cativos doentes ou insubmissos eram abandonados exemplarmente com as gargantas abertas ao longo dos caminhos para apressar o passo e aumentar a submissão dos prisioneiros restantes.”

⁶ “Esses infelizes são amontoados num compartimento cuja altura raramente ultrapassa 5 pés. Esse cárcere ocupa todo o comprimento e a largura do porão do navio (...) de encontro às paredes e em torno do mastro; onde quer que haja lugar para uma criatura humana, e qualquer que seja a posição que se lhe faça tomar, aproveita-se. O mais das vezes, as paredes comportam, a meia altura, uma espécie de prateleira de madeira sobre a qual jaz uma segunda camada de corpos humanos.”

At the Valongo market in Rio de Janeiro, engravings and descriptions show black people for sale being examined as animals: parents and children were separated by buyers who eventually had no interest in the whole family. [...] reaffirming the slaves' condition as commodities, there are advertisements recorded by the press in the 19th century. Offers to buy and sell black captives are easily found, in which there are praises for their qualities such as humility, conformism, lack of vice or defects, and good health. (PINSKY, 2010, p. 31. Translator translation⁷)

This undeniable objectification of the black individual remains strongly present in the context of Machado de Assis' two short stories analyzed in this paper. And it is might argued that the context after the institutional abolition of slavery was at least unstable and suboptimal when we consider what it means a complete extinction of slavery. Thus, the slave, who is helpless in the governmental sphere and socially non-existent as a subject, does not, in fact, become free even with the introduction of the Golden Law [Lei Áurea] (1888).

In this context, the machadian narrator, exposing the enslaver behavior, which precedes the publication of the short story by a few years, contextualizes and highlights, at the beginning of the short story *Father against mother*, the brutality imposed upon the life of a black slave, citing common practices at the time, such as certain devices or machines:

One of them was the iron collar, another was the iron foot shackles; there was also the tin-plate mask. The mask cured the slaves of the vice of drunkenness by shutting their mouths. It had only three holes in it, two to see, one to breathe, and it was fastened behind the head with a padlock. [...] The iron collar was applied to slaves with the habit of running away. Imagine a thick collar, with an equally thick shaft on one side, left or right, which went up to the top of the head, and which was locked behind with a key. It weighed a lot, naturally, but it was less a punishment than a sign. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 393. Translation by John Gledson⁸)

One notices that these mechanisms of control exposed by the narrator are completely related to what Maestri (2004) calls pedagogical acts that, in fact, they were inflicted upon the enslaved subjects in order to capture / dominate their bodies and *normalize* their existence in that

⁷ "No mercado do Valongo, no Rio de Janeiro, gravuras e descrições mostram negros à venda sendo examinados como animais: pais e filhos eram separados sem o menor problema por compradores que não tinham, eventualmente, interesse na família inteira. [...] Igualmente, reafirmando o caráter de mercadoria dos escravos, são os anúncios que a imprensa registrou em todo o século XIX. Com frequência, encontramos propostas de compra e venda de negros cativos, louvando suas qualidades como a humildade, conformismo, ausência de vícios ou defeitos e boa saúde." (PINSKY, 2010, p. 31)

⁸ "Um deles era o ferro ao pescoço, outro o ferro ao pé; havia também a máscara de folha-de-flandres. A máscara fazia perder o vício da embriaguez aos escravos, por lhes tapar a boca. Tinha só três buracos, dois pra ver, um para respirar, e era fechada atrás da cabeça por um cadeado. [...] O ferro ao pescoço era aplicado aos escravos fujões. Imaginai uma coleira grossa, com a haste grossa também à direita ou à esquerda, até o alto da cabeça e fechado atrás com chave. Pesava, naturalmente, mas era menos castigo que sinal". (ASSIS, 1906, p. 01)

context, reducing them to their function as servants to masters, in the condition of being nothing more than workforce and having a life in the eminence of being violated, for they were property.

Considering that the daily life of the slave was consumed by services that were imposed on him, the actions performed under the control of force led to certain punishments (such as the instruments used to control the slave's body mentioned in the short story). All the instruments used on the slave's body, concrete objects of humiliation and repression, carried with them the intention to dominate by force and punish. Maestri (2004), in this sense, perceives this issue not as a right,

but [as an] obligation of the enslaver, being socially sanctioned those who relaxed the discipline among their slaves. [...] The central feature of physical punishment as a pedagogical element determined extremes such as enslavers who ministered preventive beatings to those arriving from Africa so that they would know the punishment to be received if there were lack of discipline and unattended obligations (MAESTRI, 2004, p. 05. Translator translation⁹).

Thus, following the established norm within this context, the enslaver is obliged to impose both labor and punishment, for those were elements of the slave system. This issue is represented in the narrative *The Cane*, in which Sinhá Rita, owner of many slaves, among them little Lucrecia, fulfills the functions of an enslaver by threatening to punish the girl:

Sinhá Rita was forty on her birth certificate, and twenty-seven in her eyes. She was a handsome woman, lively, jolly, fond of a good laugh; but when it suited she was as the devil himself. She decided to cheer the boy up, and in spite of the situation it was no great effort. [...] One of these, a silly story accompanied by comic gestures, made one of Sinhá Rita's girls laugh; she'd forgotten her work to look at the lad, and listen to him. Sinhá Rita picked up a cane at the side of the settee, and threatened her:

– Lucretia, mind the cane!

The young girl lowered her head to avoid the blow, but the blow didn't come. It was a warning; if when night fell the task wasn't done, Lucretia would get the usual punishment. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 344. Translation by John Gledson¹⁰)

Sinhá Rita's usual behavior towards the slave is associated with the use of instruments designed to punish slaves – instruments that are also described in the short story *Father against*

⁹ “mas obrigação do escravizador, sendo sancionado socialmente aqueles proprietários que relaxavam a disciplina entre seus trabalhadores. [...] O caráter central do castigo físico como elemento pedagógico determinava extremos como a de senhores que ministravam tundas preventivas aos chegados da África para que conhecessem a punição que receberiam no caso de faltas à disciplina e às obrigações” (MAESTRI, 2004, p. 05).

¹⁰ “Sinhá Rita tinha quarenta anos na certidão de batismo, e vinte e sete nos olhos. Era apessoada, viva, patusca, amiga de rir; mas, quando convinha, brava como diabo. Quis alegrar o rapaz, e, apesar da situação, não lhe custou muito. [...] Uma destas, estúrdia, obrigada a trejeitos, fez rir a uma das crias de Sinhá Rita, que esquecera o trabalho, para mirar e escutar o moço. Sinhá Rita pegou de uma vara que estava ao pé da marquesa, e ameaçou-a: - Lucrecia, olha a vara! A pequena abaixou a cabeça, aparando o golpe, mas o golpe não veio. Era uma advertência; se à noite a tarefa não estivesse pronta, Lucrecia receberia o castigo do costume”. (ASSIS, 2007, p. 2-3)

Mother. Thus, these forms of repression reinforce the idea of the objectified, dehumanized slave, who was either considered lazy if he denied to perform his duties or rebellious if he refused to do so or if he performed any act of resistance that deviated from the norm. Still regarding the punishments imposed on the enslaved subjects, Jacob Gorender (2010) highlights:

Work and punishment are inseparable terms in the slave system. The slave is the visceral enemy of labor, for, in it, it is manifested completely the slave's unilateral condition of property, of animated instrument. The reaction regarding work is the reaction of the slave's humanity regarding reification. The slave exteriorizes his most embryonic and indefinite revolt through passive resistance to work for the master. (GORENDER, apud PINSKY, 2010, p. 04. Translator translation¹¹)

In *Father against Mother*, the slaves are also punished during their escapes; there is an ironically charged description of the hunting of the runaway slaves, the rebels, an activity which was the source of income for some individuals:

Half a century ago, slaves frequently ran away. There were lots of them, and not all of them liked being slaves. From time to time they would be beaten, and not all of them liked being beaten. Many were simply reprimanded; there was someone in the household who acted as their godfather, and the owner himself wasn't a bad man; besides, the sensation of ownership acted as a softener, for money hurts, too. Escapes happened repeatedly, however. [...] When someone's slave escaped, they offered a sum of money to whoever returned them. They put advertisements in the newspapers, with the distinguishing marks of the escapee, his name, clothes, physical defects if he had any, the neighbourhood where he might be and the amount of the reward. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 393-394. Translation by John Gledson¹²)

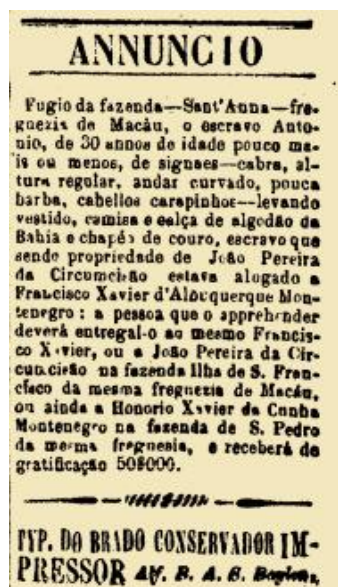
This description reveals the slave's great yearn for freedom, while resisting exhausting hours of work, linguistic and cultural oppression, and precarious housing conditions. It also evidences the normalization of the enslavers' behaviors, by pointing various kindnesses offered to the slave by the owners of the house, who softened the punishments. The absence, postponement, or denial of physical violence reinforce control, docilization, and seem to be more

¹¹ "Trabalho e castigo são termos indissociáveis no sistema escravista. O escravo é inimigo visceral do trabalho, uma vez que neste se manifesta totalmente sua condição unilateral de coisa apropriada, de instrumento animado. A reação ao trabalho é a reação da humanidade do escravo à coisificação. O escravo exterioriza sua revolta mais embrionária e indefinida na resistência passiva ao trabalho para o senhor."

¹² "Há meio século, os escravos fugiam com frequência. Eram muitos, e nem todos gostavam da escravidão. Sucedia ocasionalmente apanharem pancada, e nem todos gostavam de apanhar pancada. Grande parte era apenas repreendida; havia alguém de casa que servia de padrinho, e o mesmo dono não era mau; além disso, o sentimento da propriedade moderava a ação, porque dinheiro também dói. A fuga repetia-se, entretanto. [...] Quem perdia um escravo por fuga dava algum dinheiro a quem lho levasse. Punha anúncios nas folhas públicas, com os sinais do fugido, o nome, a roupa, o defeito físico, se o tinha, o bairro por onde andava e a quantia de gratificação". (ASSIS, 1906, p. 02)

effective instruments for maintaining control than what was conceived as the norm. The facts portrayed in the aforementioned narrative are evidenced in nineteenth-century newspaper records, as we can observe in the following advertisements of fugitive slaves in Rio Grande do Norte, in 1881 (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2):

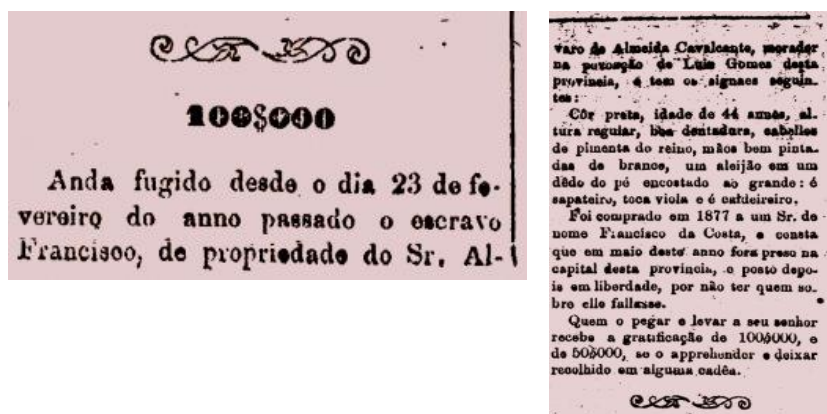
Fig 1: *O Brado conservador* [*The Conservative Clamour*], published in the municipality of Assú, in September 23, 1881. Announcement: The slave Antonio escaped from the farm Sant'Anna, Macaú Parish. He is around 30 years old, signals – man, regular height, curved walk, has little beard, frizzy hair – is carrying a dress, a shirt and cotton pants; he, being the property of João Pereira da Circumcisão was rented to Francisco Xavier d'Albuquerque Montenegro: the person who captures the slave shall bring him to Francisco Xavier or to João Pereira da Circumcisão at Ilha de S. Francisco Farm, Macaú Parish, or to Honório Xavier da Cunha Montenegro, at S. Pedro Farm, same parish, and shall receive a gratification of 50\$000.



From: Tokdehístória (2011).

Figure 2: Announcement of pursuit for the captive named Francisco, who escaped from the village of Luís Gomes, located at the westernmost of Rio Grande do Norte, in December 29, 1881. 100\$000 Since February 23, the slave named Francisco has been a fugitive, he who is property of Mr. Alvaro de Almeida Cavalcante, dweller in the village Luís Gomes, at this province, and has the following signals: Black color, aged 44, regular height, good denture, black pepper hair, hands with many white spots, maimed in a toe close to the big one: he is a shoemaker, plays the viola, and is a boilermaker. He was bought in 1877 from Mr. Francisco da Costa, and there are records of an arrest at the capital of this province in May of the current year. He was released for no witness came forward to speak about him.

Whoever captures and takes him to his master shall receive the gratification of 100\$000, and of 50\$000, if he is apprehended and left at some jail.



From: Tokdehistoria (2011).

These records attest to slaves' resistance to work, which results from situations of revolt and conflicts generated by nineteenth-century Brazilian enslaver consciousness. It is also valid to consider that the context of violence, both physical and psychological, was institutionalized. If we consider that, for instance, in 1688 the king of Portugal recommended that excessive punishment of slaves should be avoided, authorizing denunciations made by religious people against cruelty in dealing with black slaves (PINSKY, 2010, p. 47), we also must be aware that the numerous mechanisms of violence imbricated in the process of enslavement that were not physically materialized remained as institutionally valid (and, apparently, were even preferable). Despite this prerogative against physical violence and in contradiction to the established law, slaveholders perceived slaves "more as property than as human beings" (PINSKY, 2010, p. 47). Thus, they did not recognize the limits imposed by the Portuguese Crown:

On the one hand, there was the interest of the slave system as a whole, which sought to establish rules for the master / slave relationship in order to preserve the labor force. On the other, there was the master himself, who admitted no limitations on his right as property owner. One way or another, however, the very perversity of the slave relationship was not questioned: the right of one man to have so much power over another. When the force of law - in this case, legislation - identifies with the law of force - in this case, repression, we have a process of institutionalized violence. (PINSKY, 2010, p. 47. Translator translation¹³)

¹³ "De um lado, o interesse do sistema escravista, como um todo, que procurava estabelecer regras para a relação senhor/escravo, no sentido de preservar a força de trabalho. De outro, o senhor concreto, que não admitia limitações ao seu direito de proprietário. De uma forma ou de outra, contudo, não se questionava a própria perversidade da relação escravista: o direito de um homem ter tanto poder sobre o outro. Quando a força do direito – no caso, a legislação – se identifica com o direito da força – no caso, a repressão, temos um processo de violência institucionalizada."

The institutionalized violence is present in the short stories *Father against Mother* and *The Cane*, in which Cândido Neves and Sinhá Rita, respectively, represent different social functions and, consequently, distinct objectives regarding the penalties directed to the slaves. While Candido Neves represents a lower-class man who seeks his livelihood by hunting runaway slaves, Sinhá Rita represents the role of a slave-owner who has the power of property over them. The relations established between both characters and the slaves are those of repression, once they enjoyed the condition of being free, while the slaves were understood as property.

In *Father against Mother*, Cândido Neves, when experiencing financial difficulties and put in the position of being the father of a newborn baby, begins his hunt for Arminda, a runaway slave who is pregnant:

That evening, he went through all his notes of runaway slaves. The rewards for the most part were just promises; some mentioned a sum, though nothing much. One, however, was for a hundred *mil-reis*. It was for a mulatta; there was information about her looks and her clothes. [...] He went out in the morning to look for signs and ask questions round the Rua da Carioca and the nearby square, the Rua do Parto and the Rua da Ajuda, which was where she might be, according to the advertisement. He didn't find her; only a chemist in the Rua da Ajuda remembered selling an ounce of some drug, three days before, to someone with those marks. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 409. Translation by John Gledson¹⁴)

Considering this objectification, or even animalization of the slave, as portrayed in the short story through the activity of hunting a property (in this case, the slave), the narrative develops a strong ironical relationship between Cândido Neves, who plays the role of a father, and the slave, who is pregnant. Thus, there is a process of reification, of not recognizing the other as a human being, and a reaction to this reification by Cândido Neves, who ignores Arminda's pleadings to be released due to the fact that she is pregnant. These arguments are of no importance to Cândido Neves, who captures and returns Arminda to her master:

The slave made as if to shout; it seems she even let out a louder cry than usual, but she soon realised that no one would come to free her – quite the contrary. She then asked him to free her, for the love of God. - I'm pregnant, master! she exclaimed. If your worship has a child, I beg you for the love of him to let me go; I'll be your slave, I'll serve you for as long as you want. Please, please let me go, young master! - Get moving! Candido Neves repeated. - Let

¹⁴ “Naquela noite reviu todas as suas notas de escravos fugidos. As gratificações pela maior parte eram promessas; algumas traziam a soma escrita e escassa. Uma, porém, subia a cem mil-réis. Tratava-se de uma mulata; vinham indicações de gesto e de vestido. [...] Saiu de manhã a ver e indagar pela Rua e Largo da Carioca, Rua do Parto e da Ajuda, onde ela parecia andar, segundo o anúncio. Não a achou; apenas um farmacêutico da Rua da Ajuda se lembrava de ter vendido uma onça de qualquer droga, três dias antes, à pessoa que tinha os sinais indicados.” (ASSIS, 1906, p. 08)

me go! - Don't keep me waiting; get moving! [...] Finally, she arrived, dragged along, desperate, gasping for breath. She even got down on her knees, but in vain. The master was at home, and responded to the call and the commotion. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 413-415. Translation by John Gledson¹⁵)

At this moment in the short story, relations may be established with *The Cane*, a narrative in which Damião, moved by self-interest, commits a violent act regarding little Lucrecia, motivated by Sinhá Rita. In this case, there are also pleadings for mercy by the slave, which are met with the coldness of the acts committed by those who hold power:

Sinhá Rita went over to her, saw that her task wasn't finished, flew into a rage, and grabbed her by the ear. - Ah, you little good-for-nothing! - Missy, missy! For the love of God! For Our Lady in heaven! - Good-for-nothing! Our Lady doesn't protect idle girls! [...] - Please, mistress, forgive me! The little girl coughed. - Certainly not. Where's the cane? [...] - Senhor Damião, pass me that cane, if you please. Damião went cold ... Cruel moment! [...] - Give me the cane, Senhor Damião! [...] - Help me, young master! (ASSIS, 2014, p. 352-353. Translation by John Gledson¹⁶)

Ultimately, both narratives lead the reader towards extreme, ironic and cruel outcomes. In this analysis, even though recognizing the remarkable role that irony plays in the works of Machado de Assis, which include these two short stories, it was chosen to highlight the discussion of normalization especially considering the marks that establish or not the characters as "human beings", who may or may not have their dignity protected. In *Father against Mother*, the institutionalized violence and the materialization of normalization between slave-owner and enslaved subjects become even more evident once motherhood is not considered an aspect to be protected for Arminda nor her dignity as a human being, as opposed to what seems lawful and normal for Candido Neves and his son. At the end of the short story, one reads:

Candido Neves put the two fifty *mil-reis* notes away, while the master was still telling the slave to get inside. On the floor, where she was lying, carried away by fear and pain, and after a short struggle, the slave had a miscarriage. The product of a few months' growth came lifeless into the world, amid the groans

¹⁵ "A escrava quis gritar, parece que chegou a soltar alguma voz mais alta que de costume, mas entendeu logo que ninguém viria libertá-la, ao contrário. Pediu então que a soltasse pelo amor de Deus: - Estou grávida, meu senhor! exclamou. Se Vossa Senhoria tem algum filho, peço-lhe por amor dele que me solte; eu serei tua escrava, vou servi-lo pelo tempo que quiser. Me solte, meu senhor! - Siga! repetiu Cândido Neves. - Me solte! - Não quero demoras; siga! [...] Chegou, enfim, arrastada, desesperada, arquejando. Ainda ali ajoelhou-se, mas em vão. O senhor estava em casa, acudiu ao chamado e ao rumor." (ASSIS, 1899, p. 10).

¹⁶ "[...] Sinhá Rita chegou-se a ela, viu que a tarefa não estava acabada, ficou furiosa, e agarrou-a por uma orelha: - Ah! malandra! - Nhanhã, nhanhã! pelo amor de Deus! por nossa Senhora que está no céu. - Malandra! Nossa Senhora não protege vadias! [...] - Minha senhora, me perdoe! tossia a negrinha. - Não perdoe, não. Onde está a vara? [...] - Sr. Damião, dê-me aquela vara, faz favor? Damião ficou frio... Cruel instante! [...] - Dê-me a vara, sr. Damião! [...] - Me acuda, meu sinhô moço!" (ASSIS, 1899, p. 05-06)

of the mother, and the owner's gestures of despair. Candido Neves saw the whole spectacle. He didn't know what time it was. In any case, he had to run quickly to the Rua da Ajuda, and that was what he did, with no wish to know what the consequences of the disaster were. [...] Candido Neves, kissing his son amid genuine tears, blessed the escape and was unconcerned about the miscarriage. - Not all children make it, said his beating heart. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 416-417. Translation by John Gledson¹⁷)

In *The Cane*, Lucrecia is also punished:

Sinhá Rita, her face on fire and her eyes starting out of her head, demanded the cane without letting go of the girl, who was now paralysed by a fit of coughing. Damião felt a pang of guilt; but he needed to get out of the seminary so badly! He went over to the settee, picked up the cane and handed it to Sinhá Rita. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 353-354. Translation by John Gledson¹⁸).

Thus, the need of punishment by those who hold the power is made notorious, as well as the obscuration of the individuality of the enslaved subject, the denial of his human dignity. In this sense, the punishments portrayed in the short stories are connected to traces in the fiction produced in the 19th century enslaver Brazilian context, yet are not restricted to it, denouncing its features, or at least ironically exposing the devices of this normalization based on the enslavement and on the maintenance of power structures via physical and psychological violence in order to control enslaved bodies and dehumanizing them.

Concluding remarks

The short stories analyzed here present what it may consider as recurrent characteristics of the 19th century Brazilian enslaver period. From the contact with these literary texts, we are made to face practices that disregard the humanity of captives, practices that have physical and psychological punishment as their main forms of oppression.

¹⁷ Cândido Neves guardou as duas notas de cinquenta mil-réis, enquanto o senhor novamente dizia à escrava que entrasse. No chão, onde jazia, levada do medo e da dor, e após algum momento de luta a escrava abortou. O fruto de algum tempo entrou sem vida neste mundo, entre os gemidos da mãe e os gestos de desespero do dono. Cândido Neves viu todo esse espetáculo. Não sabia que horas eram. Quaisquer que fossem, urgia correr à Rua da Ajuda, e foi o que ele fez sem querer conhecer as consequências do desastre. [...] Cândido Neves, beijando o filho, entre lágrimas, verdadeiras, abençoava a fuga e não se lhe dava do aborto. - Nem todas as crianças vingam, bateu-lhe o coração. (ASSIS, 1906, p.11)

¹⁸ "Sinhá Rita, com a cara em fogo e os olhos esbugalhados, instava pela vara, sem largar a negrinha, agora presa de um acesso de tosse. Damião sentiu-se compungido; mas ele precisava tanto sair do seminário! Chegou à marquesa, pegou na vara e entregou-a a Sinhá Rita." (ASSIS, 1899, p. 06)

In *Father against Mother*, some important elements are the descriptions of punishments which were imposed to slaves, the instruments of repression, and Candido Neves' practice of hunting slaves as a form of livelihood. This represents the cold and inhuman character of a society that excludes the enslaved black person - for considering him/her as a property and prioritizing his own interests in a situation in which Arminda, the captured slave, is as much the parent of a child as he is.

In *The Cane*, Damião, resembling Candido Neves, prioritizes his own self-interests by handing Sinhá Rita the rod to punish Lucrecia, who had done no wrongdoing. Sinhá Rita and Arminda's master commit violent acts against their slaves, fulfilling the proper role of enslavers and reaffirming their position through instruments of repression.

The actions performed by Cândido and Damião, far from being constituted as individual choices, can be perceived as practices that are based on what, in their context, is considered *normal*. The two short stories deal with behaviors connected to a slave system, which were well accepted socially during this time. They highlight the cruelty towards the enslaved subject and foster reflections upon today's social structures, especially concerning mechanisms of violence and enslavement of the subjects that reinforce the perspective that they are not human, that they are not people, that they do not suffer from the same needs or favors that fall upon human beings, such as Sinhá Rita, or the normal, good men, such as Candido and Damião.

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