

Sexual Freedom as Empowerment: The Fat Black Woman and the Use of the Erotic

Liberdade Sexual como Empoderamento: A Mulher Preta e Gorda e o Uso do Erótico

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Abstract

*Women face disturbing realities of repression in Western society, which are built, mainly, through the establishment of stereotypes. One of the main ways such repression takes place is through the limiting of women's sexuality expression. In the Caribbean author Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1986), the fat black woman provides us with new images to deal with her sexuality and to understand it as more than the mere sexual through Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic. In the poems, the fat black woman uses the erotic to empower herself and to question the system of patriarchy. By doing so points out the importance of sexual freedom for women to gain control of their own forms of representation and, ultimately, their own lives.*

Key words: *Feminism. Grace Nichols. The Fat Black Woman's Poems. Sexual Freedom. Erotic*

Resumo

*As mulheres se deparam com realidades repressivas na sociedade ocidental que são construídas, principalmente, pelo estabelecimento de estereótipos. Uma das principais maneiras através da qual essa repressão ocorre é a limitação da expressão da sexualidade das mulheres. No livro *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1986) da autora caribenha Grace Nichols, a mulher preta e gorda nos apresenta novas imagens de como lidar com a sua sexualidade e entende-la como mais do que o mero sexual através do conceito de erótico da Audre Lorde. Nos poemas, a mulher preta e gorda usa o erótico para se empoderar e para questionar o sistema de patriarcado. Com isso, aponta para a importância da liberdade sexual para as mulheres poderem tomar controle das suas formas de representação e, em última instância, de suas próprias vidas.*

Palavras-chave: *Feminismo. Grace Nichols. The Fat Black Woman's Poems. Liberdade Sexual. Erótico*

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The disturbing realities women face in Western society are not something new or surprising. Exclusion, repression, and violence characterize the patriarchal system that englobes our social and private relations. Throughout the centuries, the feminist movement – in its diverse branches – has fought for gender equality; theorists have come up with strategies to overcome female oppression; and literature has had an important task of reconstructing female images which were previously dictated by men. One of the many ways women have been repressed is through their sexuality. In this article I intend to pinpoint the construction that led to such repression and to present: (1) a literary analysis of Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984), of the way the book portrays women's connection with and perception of their bodies and (2) a possibility through which women can reconnect with their own sexuality and other forms of expression related to themselves.

Grace Nichols is a Caribbean author based in England since 1977. She became one of the main voices in the Caribbean literary scenario having more than 20 published books. All her works present an attempt to question and unsettle limiting impositions on women's identity, especially on black women's identity. *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* presents a fat black woman – in other words, a woman who defies the basic constructions of exclusion in our society: patriarchy, racism, and beauty stereotypes – who is Caribbean, but lives in London. Through her daily acts of shopping or taking a bath, the fat black woman is able to undermine with her sharp humoristic tone such constructions and the ones that continue to perpetuate them. Ana Bringas López claims that Nichols's poetic work is “part of a general trend in contemporary black women writers that attempts this redefinition and the construction of new female subjectivities that are able to resist (neo)colonial and patriarchal ideological structures marginalizing black women” (2003, p. 8). These new female subjectivities are exactly what will be explored here in order to understand other paths for women to freely connect with and express their own sexualities along with the aesthetic dimension of the poems which are essential for the comprehension of such other paths.

Nature and Women

To being with, we must understand the patriarchal system that not only established the differences among genders, but also created a hierarchical division. Gender has become a metaphor to define power relations with the intention to mystify and make such relations invisible (LERNER, 2019, p. 259). According to Joan Scott, gender becomes the primary field – but not the only one – through which power is articulated (2019, p. 69). This is why the history of feminist thought has been a history of rejecting the hierarchic construction of the relation between male and female (SCOTT, 2019, p. 65).

According to Judith Butler, the body is “intelligible only through its appearance as gendered” (2006, p. 46). Before one is even born, diverse social symbols are invested in the body. Through several images transmitted by the family and society in general, a social imaginary of gender roles is formed. Such social roles were established by the division between man and woman, based on biological differences – and excluding other types of gender and sexuality that do not conform with the heterosexual imperative. Gerda Lerner, in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, first published in 1986, states that there are indeed

biological differences between men and women, but the values and implications given to these differences are cultural (2019, p. 30). The same takes place in Butler's definition of the relation between sex and gender, which changes what is usually understood by them. The theorist draws attention to how sex and gender are both culturally constructed, by defending that "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature" (2006, p. 10). Sex, then, is not pre-discursive and natural; it was constructed through language; hence, it is a product of culture; "in such case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny" (2006, p. 11).

Questioning sex as a fixed natural category is important because it allows for the understanding of how the supposed female inferiority was created. It is so because the differences and hierarchization between male and female were established mainly through an alleged stronger connection of female biology with nature. Sherry Ortner explains such link as the belief in women's capacity to provide the "gift of life" that connected them with nature, whereas men, freer from such connection, were considered closer to culture (1974, p. 73). Another author who explores such connection created between women and nature is Londa Schiebinger. The author discusses the classifications used to characterize and divide the several beings in the world, focuses on the term "mammals", coined by the naturalist Carl Linnaeus. Schiebinger analyzed how Linnaeus – and the entire scientific community that accepted and uses such term until nowadays – chose a feminine characteristic to describe humans' proximity to the animal kingdom while the term used to separate humans from non-humans (*homo sapiens*) focuses on a characteristic traditionally (and wrongly) related to men. According to her, "[T]hus, within Linnaean terminology, a female characteristic (the lactating mamma) ties humans to brutes, while a traditionally male characteristic (reason) marks our separateness" (1993, P. 394). Beyond that, she points to the fact that "[T]he notion that woman-lacking male perfections of mind and body-resides nearer the beast is an ancient one. Among all the organs of a woman's body, her reproductive organs were considered most animal-like" (1993, p. 394). This use of the connection with nature to justify a hierarchization of genders is not new and is the main form through which the female repression is built.

In her book, Lerner also discusses such connection with nature. The author traces several ancient civilizations and discusses the series of processes that led to the domination of one group (male) over another (female). The traditionalist explanation of such process, as Lerner names it, refers to the assumption that male domination is universal and natural (2019, p. 42), deriving from the image of the strong man hunter, superior in strength, therefore, "naturally" occupying a superior position of protector and provider. However, a lot of anthropological evidence denies such explanation for the fact that in most hunter-gatherer societies, the hunting of large animals was an auxiliary activity. In fact, the supply of food came from harvesting activities and from the hunt of small animals, functions executed by women and children (LERNER, 2019, p. 44). Therefore, the superiority that supposedly derived from such societies was inexistent inside their very structure. Nevertheless, this image still permeates our social imaginary. This is how the binary gender division operates, through the images and stereotypes it creates, and it goes as follows: men are rational and strong; they have the capacity for procreation, they have a soul and are made to rule. Women are emotional and incapable of controlling their desires; they are weak, they supply very little material for the procreation process, they have no soul and are made to be ruled (LERNER, 2019, p. 256).

The main forms of knowledge that established our Western world cooperate in the creation of such images as well. Religious thought, specifically Christian, has produced several diminishing images of women. The most famous stories of women in the Bible

encompass two opposing, but equally restricting, representations: Eve – the one who brought sin and death to humanity – and the Virgin Mary - the one who birthed the son of God; the virgin, sinless woman, the mother of Jesus Christ. Although they are opposing images, the message is the same: both women have to follow a strict ideal of female subservience, confined to motherhood and to the domestic experience, otherwise they will be ousted from society and considered the source of all evil.

Greek philosophy, the second root of the system of ideas in Western civilization (LERNER, 2019, p. 248), did not present a different perspective. In one of his writings, *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle claims that women lack soul (1963, np). If this argument is examined from the binary logic perspective (i.e., mind versus body, men versus woman, culture versus nature, and so on), we may understand that Aristotle was asserting that women are only connected with the body, with the lack of intelligence or any other transcendental abilities, with the private domain of the household. In conclusion, he was asserting that women are inferior to men.

Once again, women are considered inferior because of their biological nature. Nonetheless, the biological features are not the problem. The real question concerns the values attributed to such biology. In the cases of Christian religion and Greek philosophy – two of the most influential ways through which Western thought was shaped –, as mentioned, the connection between women and nature is held through the notion of passivity. The vulnerability of women, their maternal duties, their supposed lack of intelligence, of morality and of any other transcendental qualities, associate women with nature and with its supposed underdevelopment. It is always through a supposed lack of agency that women and nature are considered inferior. Nature, in its turn, is seen as a passive resource for our use because human beings are seen as superior and in control of nature. In this way, women were only given passive images to follow and mirror themselves so that their behavior could be controlled. Nonetheless, women have not, now or in the previous centuries, accepted such rules blindly. In literature, we are given many examples of women fighting such logic and “the fat black woman” is one of them. In Nichols’s book, not only the fat black woman frees herself from such links, but also the women that surround her.

The Fat Black Woman Rewrites the Connection with Nature

The first poem I want to analyze from *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* is “Those Women” (NICHOLS, 1984, p. 49), in the section “Back Home Contemplation”. In this poem, the fat black woman rewrites the connection with nature and the body as a strength. She does not deny the connection with nature, neither does she state that such connection is stronger or weaker than man’s connection with it. She merely uses such place that has been a locus of oppression as a locus of insurgency. The “Back Home Contemplation” section displays the fat black woman’s home and childhood memories. This poem in particular discusses the women she used to see and live with and their daily activities.

Cut and contriving women
hauling fresh shrimps
up in their seines

standing waist deep
in the brown voluptuous
water of their own element

how I remember those women
sweeping in the childish rivers
of my eyes

and the fish slipping
like eels
through their laughing thighs

The first thing that draws the reader's attention here is how these women are described: strong and incisive. These women are also collecting food. Therefore, they are breadwinners, they are the ones who bring food home, hence they disrupt traditional gender roles. From the first verse, the stereotypes usually attributed to women are denied.

They possess a certain power, which turns them into almost-heavenly figures. Figures that the child fat black woman remembers with a certain amazement or awe, calling them "THOSE women". Their power comes from nature: they stand in the water of their own element. They are connected with nature. They are described as an extension of the river water. The fish come towards them as if nature were willingly providing food. Their bodies are as alive as the fish: "their laughing thighs". These images of connection, fluidity, and balance with nature portray these women as vigorous, voluptuous, capable and forceful.

The place that is usually seen by women as a connection with inferiority, then, is now the place from where their strength derives. They gain a social strength for becoming the breadwinners and a private strength related only to themselves in the relation with their body which provides joy ("laughing thighs") and strength. They also become an image of reference for this girl-child of the fat black woman, which represents exactly what the fat black woman is presenting us with: new images of women for us to connect with instead of the passive, repressed woman patriarchy wishes to establish.

The poem also reveals the eroticizing of these women's bodies, however differently from the usual female sexualization. The reference to "seines", "voluptuous", "thighs" creates a sensual atmosphere in the poem. However, unlike what we usually encounter, there is no other person to whom this sexuality is derived to. Here, the women's eroticizing is connected with, built by and for themselves. It is a new kind of female sexuality. There is no male gaze in the poem, no partner in this sensual scene. The sexuality here belongs only to these women and is only exploited by themselves.

Throughout history, sexuality has served as a main instrument to control women. Ancient Greek philosophers approached female sexuality in a way that can be succinctly summarized by Demosthenes's following words (2003, p. 191): "We have *hetairai* [mistresses] for the sake of pleasure, concubines (*pallakai*) for meeting our bodily needs day-by-day, but wives for having legitimate children and to be trustworthy guardians of our household". Women, then, have no autonomy regarding their own sexuality like men do. Women's sexuality must be at men's service.

This represents the double standard for sexuality: a man's marriage does not restrict him sexually – much less his life as a single man –, whereas a woman is traditionally only allowed to express her sexuality if she is married and only with her husband. This is a reflection of the Victorian sexual repression – and its paradox – which, according to Michel Foucault, continues to dominate us (1998, p. 3). In contemporary societies such standard has

indeed become less severe, but it still exists. However, the fat black woman presents us with a different attitude.

The sexuality of the fat black woman and of the women she portrays in the book is presented from another perspective. It resides outside the scope of this excluding system. The fat black woman's experience with her sexuality involves primarily, and many times, only herself. It is a sexual drive directed to her own body and to the power it has. The poem "Invitation" (NICHOLS, 1984, p. 10-11) is one of the examples in which this sexuality focuses exclusively on the fat black woman herself. The second part of the poem is an exaltation of her body and a statement that such body is too much for others.

Come up and see me sometime

Come up and see me sometime

My breasts are huge exciting

ammons of watermelon

your hands can't cup

my thighs are twin seals

fat slick pups

there's a purple cherry

below the blues

of my black seabelly

there's a mole that gets a ride

each time I shift the heritage

of my behind

Come up and see me sometime

This second part depicts almost a kind of worship of this body through its association with elements of nature. The comparison between her body parts – breasts and thighs – and nature, for example, not only constructs this body as part of nature, but it also points to the impossibility of limiting it. The adjectives ("huge exciting") and the expressions ("your hands can't cup") all indicate that others are incapable of coping with this body, which is at its peak of sexuality, power, and energy. Thus, not only is this body a sensual and independent agent of its sexuality, it achieves such agency through the connection with nature, the same nature that was once used to undermine women because of their biology. These descriptions also present a very sensual tone and although there is an invitation ("come up and see me sometime") to another person, the sensual derives from her body alone. The fat black woman's pleasure comes only from herself and her body.

We live in a world regulated by the male gaze. According to Cecilia Hartley, “because the male gaze is always present, even when it is physically absent, women must continually produce bodies that are only acceptable to that gaze (2001, p. 62). In other words, a woman’s appearance becomes the measure for her self-esteem and self-love. In the fat black woman’s world, there are no impositions as such; hence, no internalizations of stereotypes. The main point in her world is that she is not preoccupied with the male gaze. None of her poems indicate expectations as to nor relation to the importance of men or any partner in her life. Likewise, her sexuality is only related to herself and to her body, presenting freedom not only from the male gaze, but from male repression and social impositions.

The title of the poem is ambiguous in the sense that invitations to women’s bodies usually are sexist perspectives for using their bodies. However, here there is an invitation to see this new woman in formation along with nature – the fat black woman that embodies her agency and may be too much for fixed and simplistic forms of understanding. It is almost a challenge, more than an invitation, to see this woman in the way she decides to show herself, not a “repressed self” that patriarchy imposes.

The sentence “come up and see me sometime” is a famous chorus from a Mae West song. The US Mae West has been considered one of the most controversial figures and sex symbol of all times. She adopted an allegedly deviant behavior and became a success as an actress, a playwright, a screenwriter, a comedian and a singer. She spoke openly about sex in the 1930s, and wrote a play named “Sex”, about which the newspapers refused to comment. She was arrested for corrupting young people and many of her words were censored. Nevertheless, at the age of 38, too old an age according to beauty standards for actresses and singers, she still succeeded as a Hollywoodian sex-symbol. Mae West’s sexual freedom seemed shocking to society, for which she was considered vulgar. Unlike men, whenever women express their sexuality, they are strongly undervalued.

The use of Mae West’s chorus shows how the fat black woman’s relation to her body is a statement of her own sexual freedom. She does as she pleases and she speaks about pleasure. For centuries women could not admit to feeling pleasure or sexual desire; they felt guilty for having such feelings. This is very significant given that “the inclusion of pleasure is key to sexual agency because women’s sexuality is traditionally mandated to be in service of men, procreation, and the nation” (KING, 2016, p.124). The drive here is directed to no one but to herself.

If this drive, desire, energy or any other name given, is related to the fat black woman herself rather than to possible partners – as it can be seen in the denial of this other person’s ability to “cup” her body – then perhaps it is restrictive to name it sexuality, according to Audre Lorde. Lorde proposes a new name for the energy that encompasses the way the fat black woman relates to her own body: the erotic, which is not just about sexual acts, but “a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, [...] projected within each of us” (2007, p. 90). The word erotic comes from the Greek word “eros”, “the personification of love in all its aspects;” (LORDE, 2007, p. 89) it is “an assertion of the life force of women, of that creative energy empowered” (ibid). It is an energy, a power which is not only related to sexual activities, but to all kinds of creative exercise that may, as well, lead to pleasure.

The erotic has always been misnamed or misunderstood. Lorde argues that there have been many attempts to “equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Owing to these attempts, it has become common to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical”

(LORDE, 2007, p. 89). The erotic is not vulgarity. It is different from pornography, which is “the abuse of feeling”, according to Lorde (2007, p. 91). It is exactly the connection with a woman’s deepest feelings of love, not for the use of others, but for her own use.

The erotic also defies the binary logic of social and cultural constructions and gender inequalities, and enables women to make their own life choices. Lorde states that being in touch with the erotic makes her “less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied status of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement” (2007, p. 90), all of which have been imposed on women’s behavior. This is reflected on the way the fat black woman speaks with wit and tenacity, the creative construction of her thoughts, and her praise of herself. All her forms of expression derive from this erotic energy and provide the fat black woman with much more than sexual freedom. It provides her, in the poem “Beauty” (NICHOLS, 1984, p. 3), for example, the power to recreate the norms through which her body was constructed as ugly, wrong, and excluded.

Beauty
is a fat black woman
walking the fields
pressing a breezed
hibiscus
to her cheek
while the sun lights up
her feet

Beauty
is a fat black woman
riding the waves
drifting in happy oblivion
while the sea turns back
to hug her shape

Again, nature has a key role in reframing the female body and its sexuality. Here, the fat black body is framed as the very definition of beauty. The fat black woman not only is, as Lorde claims, less willing to conform with restricting images of herself, but she creates a new possibility for her to connect with and to represent her body in such a free way as she is “drifting in happy oblivion”. This is only possible because this fat black woman loves and accepts her body as it is, with all the powers it brings her and exploring all its forms of expression.

The short poem is presented in two stanzas, marked by the use of repetition and enjambment. The last element points to how both woman and nature are deeply connected,

even in the structure of the poem. The repetition may be seen here as building up an expectation of more. At the end of the poem the reader may ask if there is not more to such short description or recreation of what beauty means. The fact that the poem is short also supports this: a brief, concise, and incisive definition of beauty in the poem that inaugurates the book shows how such recreation is not unnatural or so different to imagine; it is a statement.

Indeed, the poem presents a re-imagining, but this recreation is founded on the hidden and repressed force and knowledge of her body. As Lorde claims, the erotic lies “in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (2007, p. 87), or, in other words, the repressed feeling. The author continues, “in order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives” (2007, p. 87-88). What the fat black woman does here, then, is to reclaim or access that which has always been her and within her, but for too long has been suppressed as a form of maintenance of domination.

We can see, then, how the erotic goes beyond the mere sexual. In fact, the only time the fat black woman actively refers to another person in the romantic or sexual sense in the book is in the poem “The Fat Black Woman’s Instructions to a Suitor” (NICHOLS, 1984, p. 22).

Do the boggie-woggie
Do the hop
Do the Charlestown
Do the rock
Do the chicken funky
Do the foxtrot

Do the tango
Drop yourself like a mango
Do the minuet
Spin me a good ole pirouette
Do the highland fling
Get down baby
Do that limbo thing

This first stanza shows what this supposed suitor should do to be with her. In a humoristic tone, the fat black woman jokes with this supposed suitor and leads him to perform all kinds of playful and almost ridiculous dance moves to somehow be with her. However, in the last stanza, these expectations are frustrated:

After doing all that, and maybe mo

hope you have a little energy left
to carry me across the threshold

Here, the fat black woman states how difficult it is to be with her because one needs to cross the threshold. Such threshold can be interpreted as the frontiers between the usual stereotypes and roles attributed to women and the way she acts. The fat black woman's sexuality is self-sufficient, she does not need another person to exert her sexual and sensual side. Therefore, if anyone would like to join her in this dance, then one needs to be able to perform all kinds of "dance moves" and to be able to cross such threshold, to understand that she will not bow, that she will not be denied what she wants and already has achieved. Therefore, the instructions to a suitor are more of a warning and a challenge, then actual instructions. Once again, the fat black woman plays with the common images and expectations we have and creates new images of possibilities for women to be and act as they please.

By being in touch with the emotional knowledge of which her body is guardian, the fat black woman recovers the wisdom that was denied to women. It is how she reacquires the agency of which women have been traditionally deprived. It is a rediscovered love for herself that empowers her and gives her the energy to create this new relation with her sexuality inside *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. In this way, the fat black woman disrupts the way patriarchy has taught – and compelled – women to relate with their bodies. Being able to openly express and experiment your own sexuality is not merely about the sexual. It is about the emancipation from the ties of a repressive system, about gaining control of our own forms of representation and of how we face ourselves; it is about becoming independent of the male gaze and judgment. What the fat black woman instigates in us is, ultimately, the desire of empowerment and freedom.

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