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## COLONIALITY AND SUBALTERN FEMINISM IN *CHILD OF THE DARK: THE DIARY OF CAROLINA MARIA DE JESUS*

RAQUEL FABIANA LOPES SPAREMBERGER<sup>1</sup>

FLÁVIA DALL AGNOL DE OLIVEIRA<sup>2</sup>

TRANSLATED BY FELIPE ZOBARAN

**ABSTRACT:** The literary work *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (originally titled *Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada*) (1960), by Carolina Maria de Jesus, is a diary and a literary memorial novel about the daily life in the Brazilian slums, from the perspective of a black, poor, semi-literate woman. This article analyzes the multiple oppressions imposed upon non-white women, victims of a so-called gender colonization, established through the perpetuation of modern universality principles. For that matter, the subject brought up by postcolonial feminist studies, which acknowledges the autonomy of subaltern women based on the heterogeneity of their own life experiences, is used as a starting point. Therefore - through the application of the intersectionality concept - this paper analyzes how race, economical class and gender deeply intertwine in the lives of these marginalized women.

**KEYWORDS:** Coloniality; Subaltern feminism; Intersectionality; “Child of the Dark”.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Carolina Maria de Jesus was a semi-literate black woman, a writer, and a scrap collector who lived in the Canindé favela, in the city of São Paulo, by river Tietê, in Brazil. Her diary gave origin to a literary

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. in Law at *Universidade Federal do Paraná* (UFPR). M.D. in Law at UFPR. Professor of the Graduation Courses and the M.D. programmes at *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande* (FURG) and at *Fundação Escola Superior do Ministério Público* (FMP-RS). Porto Alegre (RS), Brazil. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9366-9237>. CV Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/1275535624435246>. E-mail: [fabiana7778@hotmail.com](mailto:fabiana7778@hotmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Law student at *Fundação Escola Superior do Ministério Público* (FMP-RS). Porto Alegre (RS), Brazil. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0428-6339>. CV Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/9927270332100124>. E-mail: [flavia.dallagnol@hotmail.com](mailto:flavia.dallagnol@hotmail.com).

publication, the memorial *Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada* (literally, *Dump Room: The Diary of a Slum-dweller*), published in English as *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*. The memoirs testify a daily life full of hunger, poverty and racism, amidst times of industrial optimism in the country, due to the political development project of President Juscelino Kubitschek. De Jesus's diaries became known in 1958, when journalist Audálio Dantas published some of their excerpts in *Folha da Manhã* newspaper and *O Cruzeiro* magazine. In 1960, *Quarto de Despejo* was published by Francisco Alves Publishing House, and soon became a worldwide acknowledged novel even before globalization.

Carolina Maria de Jesus went to school only until the second year of elementary school. Her writing is not grammatically correct, “but especially for that reason, it is able to translate with realism the ways of the people and their perspective, the expression of their world” (Jesus, 2014). Carolina, however, is a counter-voice that questions her own reality, a social context of being subaltern and vulnerable, with a specific literary discourse.

This analysis has the purpose of understanding the consequences of colonialism in the work and life of Carolina Maria de Jesus, and to what extent could the intersections of gender, race, and social class lead her to a life of deprivation and segregation. The focus is given to the relevance the testimony of the character represents, considering the social role of black, slum-dweller women in the 1960s, in *Child of the Dark*. Based on the theory of literary feminism, this paper has the purpose of approaching the importance of subaltern studies to understand the heterogeneity of historically marginalized women.

This investigation is justified by the attempt to show that the Law can be seen beyond the legal dogma and normative proceedings, which is somewhat alien to the Brazilian social reality. It is possible to study legal matters with new paradigms and relations, based on literature, for instance. Thus, the idea is to evidence the relevance of law and literature studies in order to tackle different social realities and their singularities, since sometimes the logic of the Law can be over-institutionalized, far

from the needs of real people and of real justice (Suárez Llanos 2017, p. 351).

Such linear and orthodox view of the legal science, essentially spread out by the Positivist paradigm – which greatly influenced the academy between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries – has resulted in a distancing from what should be the Law’s main objective: human intersubjective relations (Siqueira, 2011, p. 25). Indeed, one can say that “the Law has forced the real, individual stories of people and their craving for justice into impartial concepts, causing the silencing of the most vulnerable ones” (Suárez Llanos, 2017, p. 349).

The Law and Literature Movement is precisely a form of criticism to legal formalism in the North-American academy in the 1970s. The publication of *The Legal Imagination*, by James Boyd White, was a pioneer for that matter (Trindade e Bernsts, 2017, p. 227). On that, Ada Bogliolo Piancastelli de Siqueira states:

The dominance of Kelsen’s positivism in Law led to a grammatical reduction of the legal statements, and to a strictly syntactic and semantic analysis of the norms, making them unable to answer social demands in the realm of the law. As a response to this inability of the positivist reductionism, the Law and Literature Movement developed a critical and innovative perspective with the possibility of theoretical alternatives in the law, emphasizing its limitations, its incompleteness, and its contradictions (Siqueira, 2011, p. 36).

Indeed, literature is an opportune instrument to rethink the dogmatic neutrality of the Law, since it is the opposite of such thing: literature is “open, flexible, uncertain, dreaming, and seeks imaginary representations of a more attractive, fairer, better reality” (Suárez Llanos, 2017, p. 351). Besides, the artistic-literary creation “allows one to learn the tensions of the social dynamics of the Law more effectively than legal theories or sociologic analyses”, since it presents the conditions of meaning for actions and value judgments as essentially imbricated elements (Ghirardi, 2016, p. 56).

As an exercise of alterity, literature is able to highlight specific and subjective aspects that are not visible otherwise, especially for legal

practitioners (Siqueira, 2011, p. 41). It thus brings more sensibility and criticism for human relations. From that perspective, one of the main contributions of the literary imagery to the law is based on an idea of “critical subversion”, that is, literature often gives voice to the oppressed, exploring the reverse and the unsaid of legal constructions (Ost, 2004, pp. 25-26).

This is the case of *Child of the Dark*. As a memorial literary work, the novel plays an essential role of exposing the reality of the populations who are on the borders of the social structure, whom the Law has not been able to fully protect by itself. In this case, the relationship between law and literature effectively promotes the unveiling of human nature and social life, and “helps to understand asymmetric, hidden languages and silent voices that the literary works are able to reveal” (Bentes, 2016, p. 152).

Therefore, through Dussel’s Analectic method, this paper prioritizes the dialogical construction of criticism based on the recognition of otherness, the practice of alterity, and the execution of a theory of liberation that, in short, makes it possible to overcome the dichotomy “oppressor vs. oppressed”.

## **2 CAROLINA MARIA DE JESUS: THE REALITY OF HER STANDPOINT**

For Patricia Hill Collins (2009, p. 61), the idea of one’s “standpoint” having to do solely with one’s experiences or positions is not quite the definition of the category. According to the author, when one uses the expression “standpoint”, it is not necessarily about individual experiences, but the social conditions that allow or hinder some social groups to reach citizenship. “It means, mainly, a structural debate. It would not be a matter of affirming individual experiences, but of understanding how the social standpoint of certain groups restricts their opportunities” (Collins, 2019, p. 61).

This is also what Brazilian activist Djamila Ribeiro states in her book *O que é lugar de fala? (What Is Locus of Speech?)*. According to her, it is necessary to understand social groups not as a bunch of people, but as many individuals with their own personal realities, so that it is possible to connect individuals of certain groups who share similar experiences. The

author highlights the importance of the right to living a dignified existence, to using one's voice, to having visibility – whenever the social locus is a marginal social place imposed on certain groups, which hinders the possibility of transcendence. According to Djamila Ribeiro, “it has absolutely nothing to do with an essentialist view that only black people can talk about racism, for example” (Ribeiro, 2019, p. 64).

It is in this conjunction and from the subjectivity of her own experience that Carolina Maria de Jesus imposes herself as a “subject-black-woman” and self-represents herself in her work, in the locus of a writer, in contrast to the history of stereotyped representation of black women in Brazilian literature (Evaristo, 2005, p. 54). According to Raffaella Fernandez (2015), autobiography is an essential style for Carolina's literary creations, since the writer, by narrating about herself, reconstructs her memory and her daily life, conveying the concreteness of her writing. Hence:

Carolina de Jesus, as a writer, introduces herself as a character, a self-taught woman, and her narratives show how she acquired knowledge about things “in the world of life”, as she becomes absorbed by words, language, readings, and as herself gets inserted in language, trapped in the matrix of knowledge that needs to be put on paper to heal her of her disturbing but enlightening ideas (Fernandez, 2015, p. 291).

Indeed, *Child of the Dark*, being intentionally a device of social criticism, represents a life of suffering that coexists with a historical moment of national development, during the government of President Juscelino Kubitschek. The Golden Years of economic progress and the building of the city of Brasilia ended up disguising the country from the growing social inequality. Carolina Maria de Jesus is aware of the social injustice she lives, as well as the opportunism of politicians towards the vulnerability of the favela-dwellers:

May 15. [...] Politicians only appear here during election times. When Mr. Cantidio Sampaio was a counselor in 1953, he spent Sundays here in the favela. He was so nice. He drank our coffee, drank from our cups. He addressed his velvet phrases to us. He played with our children. He left good impressions here and when he ran for congress, he won. But in the Chamber of Deputies he did not create a program to benefit the favela people. He didn't visit us anymore. ... I classify São Paulo as follows: The Palace is the visiting room. The City Hall is the dining room and the city is the

garden. And the favela is the yard onto where the garbage is thrown (Jesus, 2014, p. 32).

It is observed that Carolina's work, therefore, is not restricted to her space. On the contrary, it relates the life of the slum to the city's system, illustrating the logic of exploitation of those who hold power (Martins, 2018, p.158). In the same sense, the author metaphorically refers to the city as a "visiting room", where the elite benefits from a colonial structure established by a slavery past, while the favela is the "dump room", marked by hunger and misery (Jesus, 2014, p. 37).

Hunger, on the other hand, is exhaustively addressed by the author, who, as a single mother, finds herself numerous times without the necessary resources to have food for her children and herself. The daily life in the diary is mainly represented by the search for food in the garbage and from the little money she received by collecting papers and metals. For Carolina de Jesus, hunger represents the slavery of her time (Jesus, 2014, p. 32), and in several moments in the book she considers suicide as a possibility.

Furthermore, Carolina Maria de Jesus recognizes that she is inserted in a context where the superiority of the white man is constantly reaffirmed. At the same time, the author rejects the justification of racism and states that she is proud of her black skin in a section of the work that, in itself, is representative of the magnitude and strength of her memoirs.

June 16 [...] I wrote plays and showed them to circus directors. They answered me: "It is a pity you are black". They did not know that I adore my black skin, and my rustic hair. I even think black hair is better than white hair. Because the hair of black people is obedient, it stays the way you comb them. The hair of white people is not disciplined, if they move their heads, their hair will move. If there are reincarnations, I want to always be black. [...] White people says they are superior. But what superiority does white have? If the black man drinks, the white man drinks. The disease that strikes the black, strikes the white. If the white are hungry, the black are hungry. Nature does not select anyone (Jesus, 2014, p. 64 and 65).

It should also be highlighted that Carolina Maria de Jesus was a single mother of her own choosing, as she mentions in her diaries that she preferred to dedicate her life to her children at the expense of not having partners. Anyhow, the author plays a strong social role, since, in addition to facing government neglect, hunger and racism, she is clearly faced with gender struggles. She was in the condition of a single mother, living below the poverty line in a society that, while fostering the figure of the male provider, resisted the idea of male responsibility in raising children.

With the success of *Child of the Dark*, Carolina Maria de Jesus managed to get out of misery and the favela. Despite its success and international recognition, it was disowned by a significant portion of the literary elite, reflecting the current issue of black women not belonging. Carolina Maria de Jesus died in 1977, of a lung failure crisis. Her legacy as one of the most important writers in the country is currently relevant in the political and social context, because “*Quarto de Despejo* is not a book from yesterday, it is from today. The dump rooms have multiplied, are overflowing” (Dantas, 2014).

### 3 SUBALTERN FEMINISM

Many thinkers from different areas understand colonization as a long-lasting event and not as a historical stage that has already been overcome. Colonization is not only about direct colonial administration over certain areas of the world, but also about the logic of domination, exploitation and control that spreads into the dimension of knowledge. In this sense, a new concept arises from colonialism, the state of coloniality (Sparemberger and Damazio, 2016, p. 3).

“Coloniality” is a word used to emphasize the dark side of modernity, so the authors use the double concept of modernity / coloniality. The rhetoric of modernity and its pretentiously universal ideas, such as Christianity, State, Democracy, and Market, has strengthened the state of coloniality through domination, control, exploitation, dispensability of human lives, contempt for the colonized

people's worldviews and knowledges, among other ideas (Mignolo, 2008, p. 293). Coloniality has survived and developed due to an epistemic imagery of universality. In the name of a so-called universal rationality, it was necessary to trade slaves, explore indigenous peoples, expropriate their lands. That is, the positivist rhetoric of modernity serves to justify the destructive logic of coloniality (Sparemberger e Damazio, 2016, p. 4).

If on the one hand coloniality is the invisible face of modernity, on the other hand, it is the generating force of decoloniality. The latter has the purpose of exposing the logic of coloniality and its universality epistemology. Such colonial logic is directly transferred to the sphere of economics, politics, law and issues of gender, race and social class. Thus, the subaltern studies have the purpose of deconstructing this colonialist epistemology that, through the discourse of universality, legitimizes the Eurocentric knowledge as unique and dominant at the same time that it stimulates the silencing and invisibility of historically subordinated peoples and groups.

Similarly to that, in the early 1980s, subaltern feminism or third-world feminism emerged in order to reframe the logic proposed by hegemonic / western feminism, whose objectives did not contemplate the reality of women who did not fit the white, heterosexual, Western and middle-class standards. It was common for Western feminist theorists to focus on subordinate women only as an object of study, through a paternal and even imperialist bias (Mohanty, 2008, p. 18). Such phenomenon is called discursive colonization, where the only valid epistemology is that produced by the dominant academy.

Stuart Hall, in his famous essays *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* and *The Question of Cultural Identity* shows that the feminist movement emerged supporting the primordial questioning of the notion of universal "humanity" and replacing it with the question of sexual difference, which helped to destabilize the concept of Cartesian subject (Hall, 1992, p. 46).

However, hegemonic feminism itself sought to encompass all women in a universal concept, while victims of the same system, in an attempt to wrongly legitimize the idea of global sisterhood.

From that, Chandra Mohanty stood up for a necessary third world feminism that could highlight the heterogeneity and specificities of subordinate women, affirming them in their historical and cultural context instead of just reducing them to a unified and powerless group of people:

Any discussion on the intellectual and political construction of “third world feminisms” must deal with two simultaneous projects: the internal critique of the hegemonic feminisms of the “West”, and the formulation of feminist interests and strategies based on autonomy, geography, history, and culture. [...] Although the assumptions of radical and liberal feminisms that constitute women as a sexual class may elucidate (still inadequately) the autonomy of particular struggles of women in the West, the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to Women in the third world colonize and appropriate the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different women groups in class and ethnic reference frames, and in doing so, it ultimately robs them of their historical and political agency (Mohanty, 2008, p. 1 and 18 ).

For that matter, when dealing with subaltern feminism, it is essential to stress the existence of a wide spectrum of characteristics that have as a starting point certain political, ethnic-racial and cultural traces, and that, therefore, it encompasses countless movements, such as post-colonial feminism, third-world feminism, black feminism, Latin American feminism, indigenous feminism, African feminism, Islamic feminism, among others (Ballestrin, 2017, p. 1040). Only by contextualizing the subaltern groups of women from a social-historical perspective, and only by analyzing the contradictions of each specific situation, can effective strategies of coping and resistance be proposed, since the category of “woman” is built in a variety of political contexts that usually coexist simultaneously (Mohanty, 2008, p. 12).

Considering the agendas of universality discourse proposed by Western feminists as insufficient to understand the reality of subaltern women, there is the relevance of addressing the issue of *intersectionality*.

It means thinking about gender together with issues of race, class, sexuality and nationality. The forms of oppression do not operate isolated in their singularity, but they intertwine with each other (Kilomba, 2019, p. 99).

#### **4 BLACK FEMINISM AND THE REALITY OF BLACK WOMEN IN BRAZIL**

According to Marques (2016, p. 53), “the logic of coloniality while erasing the ways of life of the colonized people and their transformation because of gender coloniality are obtained effects that become more evident with time”. For Maria Lugones (2008), as quoted by Marques (2016), the importance is to question the indifference of men facing the systematic violence of the State, of patriarchy, perpetrated by the same men, imposed onto women of color, that is, non-white women, who are the victims of gender and power coloniality. These same women are the ones who have criticized the hegemonical feminism for seeking a “universal woman”.

In *Quem tem medo do feminismo negro? (Who's Afraid of Black Feminism*, in literal translation), Djamilia Ribeiro (2018, p. 82) reaffirms the central question of intersectionality based on the main concept created in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>3</sup>. Ribeiro then demonstrates how “race, class, and gender must not be seen in isolation, since they are inseparable”. As previously seen, the feminist movement itself proved resistant to the inclusion of an agenda that addressed the racial issue, in the name of a universality discourse of patriarchal oppression and in an attempt to maintain a supposed unity among feminist agendas. However, when talking about feminism and women’s struggles, it is more than necessary to include race as a central issue in the gender hierarchy, since, at the intersection between “woman” and “black” there is a gap where the “black woman” should be, which is not included in any of these categories

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<sup>3</sup> Intersectionality is a conceptualization of the problem that seeks to capture the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination. It specifically addresses the way in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create basic inequalities that structure relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and others (Crenshaw, p. 177, 2002).

constructed by the logic of modernity, using terms that are “homogeneous, atomized, separable and constituted in dichotomic ways” (Lugones, 2014, p. 942).

It is due to this indispensability of thinking feminism in an intersectional way, that Sueli Carneiro (2003) talks about the need to question: “What women are we talking about?”, when dealing with certain feminist agendas, since the reality experienced by white women it does not necessarily correspond to the reality faced by black women. When hegemonic feminists fought for the right of married women to work outside home, for example, only the rights of white women were in focus, given that black women were already inserted in the labor market, seeking survival of theirs and their family, and demanding better working conditions in both rural and urban settings. This corresponds to a cut resulting solely and exclusively from the racial issue and even from the reminiscences of slavery legitimized by Occident policies for centuries.

When entering the national scope, therefore, it should be noted that Brazilian economic development has historically been based on the exploitation of blacks and indigenous people, obeying a logic of colonialist domination, whose consequences contributed to the development of a structural and structuring racism, which, in turn, are very significant in social and institutional relations until today. Sandra Maria Marinho Siqueira analyzes this understanding:

The black slave was called “a piece”, their value was determined by age, sex and robustness and the few who reached old age or those who became disabled, when they were freed by the landowners, broadened the ranks of the hungry and miserable. This leads us to the certainty that racism was socially produced, creating forms of hierarchies in the social organization (Siqueira, 2018, p. 62).

In Brazil, the abolition of slavery by Law 3,353 of 1888, known as *Lei Áurea* (The Golden Law) did not necessarily grant freedom for slaves, since the law did not provide for any protective rights, leaving them completely vulnerable and marginalized in society. Reports are common that, even after abolition, some freedmen remained providing services and

labor to their masters, since the opportunities and possibilities to start a new and dignified life were practically zero. It is based on this that Florestan Fernandes understands the abolition of slavery as a “historical farce”, given the fact that it was after *Lei Áurea* that racism started to be institutionalized in the country (Fernandes, 2017, p. 77).

To illustrate this, it is necessary to deal with the effects of the so-called “myth of racial democracy”, whose discourse produced a national identity based on the idea of miscegenation as a beneficial event and a reflection of the wide Brazilian cultural diversity. Nonetheless, this same discourse, according to Sandra Maria Marinho Siqueira, “hid the violent and abusive practices of rapes against indigenous and black women throughout the colonial period”, and “produced in the minds of black women that they were part of families for which they worked”, creating “an ideological amnesia, a brutal policy of displacing and desocialization to depersonalize and mischaracterize black women and men” (Siqueira, 2018, p. 66).

The reality of black women, therefore, must be analyzed under a different view, since there is a racial abyss that has not yet been overcome in Brazil. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that the black female population, even exercising an identical function as white women, receives lower wages, occupies more precarious positions, usually domestic, outsourced or informal jobs without due legal protection (Siqueira, 2018, p. 68).

This implicit racial bias also corroborates the issue of inequality of access and treatment in institutional services. With regard to health, for example, the maternal mortality rates of black women in the puerperal state are directly related to the difficulty of accessing health services, the low quality of care and the lack of actions and training of health professionals focused on for the risks to which black women are exposed (Geledés, 2015). Moreover, according to a study by *Ipea* - Institute of Economic and Applied Research, the homicide rate of black women increased by 29.9% between 2007 and 2017, while the rate of non-black women increased by 1.6%. The research institute shows that 28.5% of

homicides of women occurred at home, which is related to possible cases of femicide and domestic violence (Lisbon, 2019).

Furthermore, the subordination of black women must also be examined from the perspective of silencing, since, “even though they are subjects, black women are not present in the records of the ‘official history’, and their multiple and vast contributions remain outside textbooks and the population’s imagery” (Schumacher and Vital Brazil, 2006, p. 271). This is the case, for example, of Tereza de Benguela, head of Quilombo de Quaritetê, where, through a rigid and disciplinary organization founded on parliamentarism, she resisted the attacks of government troops for two decades. It is clear, therefore, that there is a general lack of knowledge in relation to the stories of black women, since their active participation in Brazilian historical episodes has always been seen as inappropriate, and, consequently, silenced. The long-lasting repertoire of black women resistance is also significantly ignored, even though such articulations have been present since the first Quilombo organizations until the development of black feminist thinking in the mid-1980s.

Therefore, it is evident that the trace of the colonial structure based on and developed by a slave and patriarchal economy is still perpetuated in the social imagery, with new contours in an order that calls itself democratic and egalitarian, but which, however, remains maintaining relations of gender according to color or race (Carneiro, 2003). That is why insisting on discussing the actions, presence and representativeness of black women in the most diverse spaces is a provocative task, and, at the same time, a necessary one, to help develop critical awareness that allows to question the molds in which the current order has grown stronger over the centuries.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

Even though Carolina Maria de Jesus was a strong woman who resisted the colonial impositions of her context and critically analyzing her standpoint, she still had her life ruled over by the consequences of a social

structure derived from colonialism policies. Her life conditions were strongly marked by several forms of oppression, such as of race, gender and social class, which have always intertwined to one another. The life and work of Carolina Maria de Jesus, therefore, are consistent with the need to analyze the category “woman” from an intersectional perspective, given the variety of oppressions and specificities that exist and are related simultaneously.

That is why third world feminism sought to address the importance of analyzing the reality of non-white women and victims of gender coloniality from a perspective that contemplates their historical, social and cultural issues, dissociating them from the idea of a hegemonic woman as seen by the first feminist wave.

Black feminism, with the similar rationale, brings the idea that both the consequences of racial oppression and of gender oppression, which operate simultaneously, constitute a unique form of racism experienced by black and racialized women (Kilomba, 2019, p. 99). Such approaches are possible and visible from the realization that black and poor women remain at the bottom of the social pyramid, and that public reparation policies have not yet been enough to reverse this situation. That is why racism must be analyzed as a central and crucial dimension of women’s experience (Kilomba, 2019, p. 103).

In addition to that, it should be noted that the use of literature to support a social factor that is linked to the context of social and human rights is not an arbitrary choice. This is because, from the decolonial perspective, literature makes it possible to deconstruct the problematic status quo, with the purpose of revealing and undoing the legal and political ties that are supposedly neutral and non-judgmental. Indeed, the relationship between law and literature in the perspective of *Child of the Dark* is relevant as the work reveals a reality that has been forgotten and silenced by the totalizing and hegemonic order. In this case, therefore, it can be said that literature acquires a critical bias and disapproves the gargantuan inequalities structured after colonialism, which pervade Brazil until today.

Thus, the work of Carolina Maria de Jesus operates, by breaking with the dominant and universal stigmas built by the cultural instances of

power, in agreement with the decolonial premises of valuing subaltern worldviews. Also, the author uses her writing as an instrument to criticize her reality of vulnerability to a multiplicity of oppression aspects, which coincides with the main purpose of subordinate feminism.

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