

Motherhood among female villains in Brazilian telenovelas

A maternidade das mulheres más da telenovela brasileira

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ABSTRACT: *This article investigates the representation of motherhood among female villains in Brazilian telenovelas. To this end, we trace the transformation of villainy throughout the history of Brazilian telenovelas and examine how this shift reflects changes in women's social roles. Thus, we offer a theoretical reflection on the role of fiction in constructing and increasing the complexity of female villains, while relating this process to debates on femininity, motherhood, and their representations. Motherhood and villainy are understood here as overlapping yet ambivalent categories.*

Keywords: *villainy; motherhood; telenovela; representation; ambivalence.*

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RESUMO: *O presente artigo teve como objetivo central investigar a representação da maternidade entre as vilãs das telenovelas brasileiras. Para isso, acompanhamos a transformação da vilania ao longo da constituição dos folhetins e como essa mudança é reflexo das alterações no papel social da mulher na sociedade. Deste modo, elaboramos uma reflexão teórica acerca da relevância das ficções na constituição e complexificação do papel das vilãs, atrelada à discussão sobre o feminino, a maternidade e suas exibições. Entende-se que as categorias maternidade e vilania se sobrepõem e, ao mesmo tempo, são ambíguas.*

Palavras-chave: *vilania; maternidade; telenovela; representação; ambivalência.*

Introductory considerations

The Brazilian telenovela has established itself as a symbolic space for the construction and negotiation of female identities. In this universe, the female villain occupies a distinctive position: she is both the object of moral rejection and the source of public fascination. If the character is also a mother, narrative tensions arise regarding the values projected onto the concept of motherhood. Thus, this article aimed to reflect on how motherhood and femininity are constructed through female villains in telenovelas, and how these representations reveal cultural, political, and identity-related tensions.

Motherhood is historically associated with sacrifice, self-denial, and kindness, while the female villain represents a break with these values. Analyzing the coexistence of these categories within a single character requires examining the contradictions in the moral framework of melodrama. Thus, our analytical approach begins with the notion of character construction (CANDIDO, 2005) and examines how this construction occurs in telenovelas. As a privileged space for the production of cultural memory and the discussion of social issues, the telenovela has, over the past seven decades, occupied a prominent position among television formats. Its capacity to rapidly incorporate elements of everyday life and its ability to construct and consolidate representations of people, spaces, events, and dates (MOTTER, 2004) have established it as a symbol of national culture and identity (LOPES, 2009), capable of exposing the social tensions, identities, and values that define us.

Next, we address the rise of the modern villain, embodied by women characterized by distinctive mannerisms and styles. Contemporary villainy is no longer associated with ugliness and the grotesque; instead, it is embodied by beautiful and elegant women. This construction of the characters' appearance and personality stems from shifts in the understanding of women's roles in society, as well as from changes in the ways of telling, seeing, feeling, and assigning value to the embodiment of characters and plots. Marked by naturalism, the female villains of Brazilian telenovelas bear the marks of these social changes.

Considering these transformations in the construction of the villain, we seek to understand how motherhood is presented within this new framework of villainy through the concept of ambivalence. Our focus is on how the opposition between motherhood and villainy is narratively structured, given that villainous mothers challenge the romanticized ideal promoted by the telenovela and associated with motherhood. Therefore, this tension highlights social constructs that pit the “perfect” maternal role against transgressive, manipulative, or criminal figures.

Brazilian Telenovelas and their characters

Historically, the telenovela has been shaped by a national imaginary, to the point of being considered a “narrative of the nation” (LOPES, 2003). This form of storytelling, which blends traditional elements and anachronisms of our culture with modern technology and audiovisual language (MARTÍN-BARBERO; REY, 2001), makes the telenovela a constantly evolving field of expression. Oscillating between melodramatic themes and approaches that evolve over time — such as gender relations, identity, and sexuality — the telenovela becomes a privileged object through which to examine changes in society.

As the telenovela continually engages with social debates, the characters are central to the unfolding of the plot. Characters are the most active and communicative elements of modern narrative fiction (CANDIDO, 2005), and through them, we contemplate the fullness of the human condition. The narrative world belongs to its characters, who are intrinsic participants in the plots and developments of fiction (RYAN, 2014).

Brazilian television drama features a host of characters who have left their mark on the collective imagination through their catchphrases, mannerisms, and stories. This list includes iconic villains such as Odete Roitman (VALE TUDO, 1988–1989), Nazaré Tedesco (SENHORADO DESTINO, 2004–2005), and Carminha (AVENIDA BRASIL, 2012), who remain widely remembered (LOPES *et al.*, 2019). Their ability to resonate with the audience makes these characters key elements in

advertising and social merchandising¹, serving as a form of “educational outreach” and social inclusion (LOPES, 2009). This supports the argument that the Brazilian telenovela performs a broad social role (MOTTER; JAKUBASZKO, 2006).

Generally constructed by drawing on the “real” world (MOTTER, 2004), the characters create the illusion that they are autonomous and contradictory individuals, as the naturalistic tendency of Brazilian productions establishes a correspondence between the narrated world and the lived world (LOPES, 2009). Nevertheless, drawing on the melodramatic tradition, the characters are shaped by strong and recognizable archetypes — the Traitor, the Avenger, the Victim, and the Fool — which function as mechanisms for social and emotional identification (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2001).

The female villains, by embodying the figure of the Traitor, epitomize moral transgression and adopt a deceptive attitude that runs counter to prevailing patriarchal values. In general, they are women who live their lives and express their sexuality as they please, seeking their own pleasure — whether sexual, economic, or otherwise (LOPES *et al.*, 2019). For this reason, they are often round characters² who, due to their greater complexity, are capable of surprising us.

Oscillating between stereotypes and departures from traditional notions of femininity, these women embody the duality between the old and the new (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2001). An example of this is the iconic Nazaré Tedesco (SENHORA DO DESTINO, 2004–2005). A woman characterized by an exaggerated sense of self-esteem and hedonistic behavior, she uses sex as a tool to achieve her goals. A cold woman who blends madness, irony, and psychosis (RIBEIRO, 2012), her entire narrative arc is built around motherhood. Throughout the plot, Nazaré lies,

- 1 Social merchandising is a communication strategy that integrates socioeducational messages into media narratives and storylines with the aim of informing, raising awareness, and influencing society’s knowledge, values, and practices (LOPES, 2009).
- 2 Unlike flat characters, who do not change with circumstances and are built around a single idea or quality, round characters are complex and exhibit different facets and contradictions (CANDIDO, 2005).

blackmails, and kills. Her weakness, however, is her love for the daughter she abducted, Isabel/Lindalva. The real conflict between Nazaré and Maria do Carmo is not about the kidnapping itself, but about who has the right to be called a mother: the woman who gave birth or the woman who lovingly raised the abducted child (RIBEIRO, 2012).

Since the kidnapping is not the central issue — but rather the sincere love that Nazaré feels for Isabel/Lindalva — a narrative arc emerges that humanizes the character: “It is because of this love that Nazaré suffers, and it is when she finds herself without it and with no way out that she takes her own life — she of all people, a character deeply rooted in hedonism” (ROCHA, 2016, p. 230, our translation). Constructed at the intersection of fiction and reality, Nazaré embodies the melodramatic matrix rooted in our collective imagination (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2001).

Motherhood is one of the central representations of femininity in telenovelas (SIFUENTES; RONSINI, 2011), and even for female villains, motherhood becomes either a purpose or a point of vulnerability (ROCHA, 2016). More than just an isolated case, examining villains such as Nazaré, Carminha, and Odete Roitman allows us to identify a broader trend regarding what it means to be a woman in our society:

It is interesting to note that, even though it serves as a driving force in projecting a multicultural and progressive society in Brazil, the telenovela nonetheless constructs its characters and worlds based on archaic models and ideas, prompting viewers to negotiate the limits of how far fictional worlds should advance in relation to the real world (LOPES *et al.*, 2019, p. 38, our translation).

The telenovela character is a collective creation, originating with the writer, shaped by the director and the actor’s performances, and ultimately transformed by the audience (LOPES *et al.*, 2019). As an open work, the telenovela allows its characters to acquire unexpected meanings and forms — such as Nazaré or Félix (AMOR À VIDA, 2013–2014), prolific sources of memes that transcend the original narrative scope.

Reflecting on characters reveals different layers — social, cultural, and political — that go beyond entertainment. If fiction is the space where human beings become transparent to our vision (CANDIDO, 2005), characters are fundamental elements in the composition of possible worlds and imagined nations. Analyzing female villains means examining narrative devices that shape moral pedagogies rooted in Latin American culture, as melodrama must be understood as a cultural matrix that structures sensibilities and forms of social recognition (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2001).

Female villains as protagonists

In telenovelas, there is a polyphony of voices and interests, constant negotiations over power, competing worldviews, and negotiations over which characters will be loved or rejected. In this context, understanding how femininity and motherhood are incorporated into telenovelas — specifically as represented through female villains — means tracing the history of these narratives. It requires examining the social web of meanings that is translated onto the screen through characterization, plot development, and thematic treatment, and that ultimately tells us something about ourselves. Looking at these images and the interweaving of these telenovela narratives is to engage in an “archaeology of the human imagination” (COURTINE, 2013, our translation).

One can understand female villainy in Brazilian telenovelas — as embodied by free and powerful protagonists — through three interconnected dimensions: modes of telling, of feeling, and of seeing. Although separable for pedagogical purposes, these aspects are intertwined in the melodramatic narratives of the so-called “Brazilian model of the telenovela” (PALLOTTINI, 2012, our translation), which articulates narrative, emotion, and image. Melodrama relies on the visible to stage moral distinctions while mobilizing emotion. “Intense in its actions and emotions, it is full of plot twists, eager for impact and communication, embodying an entire pedagogy in which our gaze is invited to grasp more

immediate forms of recognizing virtue or sin” (XAVIER, 2003, p. 39, our translation). In the Brazilian context, it also provides a means of seeing oneself reflected and becoming visible.

Examining female villains and their representations of motherhood is important for several reasons. They have taken center stage in these narratives, especially since 1990; they rank among the characters most frequently remembered in audience studies (LOPES *et al.*, 2019); and, considering the narrative structures of telenovelas and the construction of the characters, they best represent the concept of womanhood as theorized by gender studies. To examine the characterization of villainy and motherhood in these characters, our methodology draws on a substantial corpus and quantitative data collected in previous studies, which are interpreted in light of the relevant literature. The analysis draws on an empirical dataset initiated in 2012 and continuously updated: the Gallery of Villainy in Brazilian Television Drama³.

The Gallery is the result of research that collected data on telenovelas and their villains from official archives (*Memória Globo*, Globoplay), institutional publications, specialized websites, video repositories, and academic literature. These data were organized into a table containing information on all TV Globo telenovelas broadcast in the 9:00 p.m. time slot from 1970 to 2023. The table includes data on each production, the names of the villains and the actors who portrayed them, physical and psychosocial descriptions, and a summary of the narrative arc and the villain’s role. Analysis of the data led to the definition of two fundamental categories — the modern villain and the traditional villain — which were conceptualized and analyzed in the doctoral dissertation resulting from this research (ROCHA, 2016) and in subsequent articles. Subsequent

3 The Gallery of Villainy in Brazilian Television Drama comprises two datasets: one containing data on 9:00 p.m. telenovelas and the other on miniseries (airing after 9:00 p.m.), both covering the period from 1970 to 2023 and broadcast on Globo’s over-the-air channel. In this study, we used only data from the telenovelas. A user-friendly timeline version was created for public access. Available at: https://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline3/latest/embed/index.html?source=1IFWmusWsQQwelgse3eJRIc7a8qBvNSPuL_c3PzKLeyk&font=Default&lang=pt&initial_zoom=2&height=650 Accessed on: May 15, 2026.

studies expanded both the dataset and the analysis. Drawing on the Gallery, we conducted in-depth analyses of selected characters, identifying elements that exemplify the tensions linked to modes of telling, feeling, and seeing.

Although there are differences in historical context and dramatic structure, the data collected in the Gallery indicate that the villains of Brazilian telenovelas share recurring characteristics beyond their villainous actions that define the “modern villain,” especially regarding appearance and narrative agency. Among these elements, economic power, beauty, and motherhood stand out.

The telenovela villain has become more complex over the decades and is no longer the “wicked witch.” At the intersection of ethics and aesthetics, this transformation attenuated the melodramatic and serialized narrative conventions that constitute the genre’s central cultural matrices (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2001). Evil is no longer visibly inscribed on the characters’ bodies; instead, their representation has undergone a profound transformation: villainy has come to be embodied by beautiful and elegant women. Especially since the 1990s, villainy has also become predominantly feminine and central to the narrative, building on a model of the villain established as early as 1970.

The growing prominence of the female villain, evident both in her appearance and in plots centered on her desires and actions, reflects transformations in the storytelling conventions of the telenovela. It is also connected to changing ways of seeing the body and beauty, as well as to the context that constrained certain perspectives on monstrosity while encouraging others, amid the consolidation of the entertainment industry. Alongside this, changing social and cultural expectations not only enable but also require female villains to embody forms of womanhood that would have been unthinkable a few decades earlier.

These narrative modes point to fundamental cultural frameworks and successive changes in the narrative patterns of Brazilian television drama, including shifts in the processes of TV production, distribution, and consumption. The rise of the modern villain is linked to the modernizing

movement in television drama between the 1970s and 1980s, connected to the emergence of a realist trend concerned with curbing sentimental excesses and distancing itself from the didactic and polarized formulas of traditional melodrama (XAVIER, 2003). The search for “psychological naturalism” allows for a softening of melodramatic and serialized narrative conventions, adapting old narrative forms to the bourgeois values of a modernizing society that identifies patriarchy as the cause of its ills. This is a logic grounded in science, a “comprehensive and explicit presentation of the worldview that governs the moral lessons of the Brazilian cultural industry” (XAVIER, 2003, p. 144, our translation).

This softening allows for a loosening of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics; thus, the ways in which female villains are presented display qualities that may be perceived as desirable by female viewers. Desire is shaped by the *zeitgeist*, the context in which these narratives are created, distributed, and consumed, and by the balance between category, judgment, and value (CALABRESE, 1999). It is this repositioning of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics that allows realist narratives to loosen the “correspondence between bodily figure and moral type” (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2001, p. 173, our translation).

Through this shift, evil is detached from the idea of the “pure signifier” (BROOKS, 1995), and what is seen is no longer sufficient to define evil. Once appearance ceases to function as an immediate marker of evil, a form of villainy that was immediately legible is abandoned in favor of a bolder, more multifaceted one (CANDIDO, 2005), capable of producing new visual meanings for evil, such as the villains’ use of light-colored clothing. Dimness, shadows, and ugliness no longer represent evil. Modern female villains display light-colored clothing, beauty, and sophistication as hallmarks of villainy. Odete and Carminha, for example, repeatedly appeared wearing white outfits, designer handbags, and jewelry.

Modes of seeing, however, are not limited to the relationship between bodily form and moral type in melodrama. There is a broader context in which the body takes on an almost unprecedented importance. The early development of a visual culture of industrial entertainment was

shaped by the consumption of physical monstrosity, which was later replaced by an exclusively moral form of monstrosity, more attuned to the new practices of the gaze during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Over the course of a century, the spectacle of “human monsters” first became problematic and then intolerable, and teratology museums were closed as a consequence of the “normalization of the abnormal” (COURTINE, 2011, our translation).

The monstrous, once inscribed on the body, is transformed into discourse, signs, and the circulation of images. Both the delight in the bizarre and the attribution of meanings to images are shaped by memory and history. The simultaneous attraction and repulsion we feel toward horror binds us to the experience of witnessing a form of evil that, in the telenovela, presents itself as feminine, beautiful, slim, and elegant. This is a moral monstrosity (FOUCAULT, 2010) that, by removing everything that might undermine our visual delight, presents us with murderers, manipulators, liars, and swindlers. Often, our revulsion fades, and we almost find ourselves wishing that they would be forgiven.

The modes of telling and seeing are conditioned by the modes of feeling, precisely shaped by the feminist movement — by feminisms, in the plural. This marks the emergence of a renewed *ethos* of relating to oneself, to others, and to the world. The modes of seeing speak to new regimes of visibility and the disciplining of the pleasure of seeing; the modes of feeling concern the permissions and prohibitions surrounding these practices and can only be understood in conjunction with the political, economic, and cultural spheres.

The modern villainess, as a narrative possibility, emerges alongside the critiques of patriarchy advanced by feminist movements. The changes in storytelling evident from 1970 onward accompany the emergence of the first efforts to understand gender as a category of analysis, in a movement that gained prominence in academia during the 1980s. The new moral code helps exorcise biblical guilt and allows a more hedonistic lifestyle to appear on screen and be understood as a viable way of life, while also promoting the idea that women can live freely.

The aim was to move beyond the distinction between sex and gender and to understand gender as a means of addressing power relations (SCOTT, 1995). In this context, Brazilian television drama makes it possible to replace an earlier image of femininity associated with the Christian *ethos* of renunciation, redemptive sacrifice, gentleness, self-denial, and a fragility that demands protection. A new image of femininity emerges, one that allows women — especially female villains — to express feelings and behaviors previously restricted to men, including the pursuit of power, freedom, personal desire, and calculated or obstinate actions, in which romantic love does not always serve as a counterbalance to ambition.

Data from the Gallery of Villainy show that, from the 1970s onward, the model of femininity that would come to be embodied by the female villain began to consolidate. But this is not merely about models of appearance and the power to act within the plots: there is also a shift toward making female characters the principal embodiments of evil and placing the villain at the center of the narrative. These changes parallel the consolidation of gender studies and the understanding of intersectionality as a framework for interpretation beginning in 1990 (HARDING, 2019; COLLINS, 2019; BUTLER, 2022).

The idea emerges that discourse functions as a *dispositif* through which gender is constituted, and the body comes to be understood as a historical situation, a possibility, and “a fabrication, a dramatization, and a reproduction” (BUTLER, 2019, p. 216, our translation). It is in this context that a shift occurs in the portrayal of female villains in telenovelas. As the data from the Gallery show, between 1970 and 1980, only 20% of storylines featured female villains in the telenovela’s central cast. This figure rose to 100% of the stories aired between 2010 and 2020. Over the course of fifty years, the proportion of the analyzed stories featuring women as central villains rose from 20 to 100% of the stories. The rise in the feminization of villainy parallels the development of successive waves of feminism and results in a villain who is increasingly attuned to the process of “becoming a woman” beyond the screen.

The prominence of female villains can be understood in relation to the influence of successive waves of feminism on the representation of a powerful, free woman, one capable even of not caring about her children, of giving up heterosexual romantic love in the name of a goal, and of refusing to accept being diminished simply for being a woman. The female villain is permitted to do so. It is the reorganization of power relations between the genders that has placed the female villain in a leading role, making her a driving force in the plot. Women who have shed the fragility that would demand protection have freed themselves from the notion of self-denial and self-sacrifice for the sake of others and have been able to put themselves first.

In a structurally sexist society, only a villain — a character associated with evil — can “have become a woman” in the way that gender studies tell us is not only possible but necessary: a free woman, whose body is an open possibility, who understands that being a woman is also a cultural fiction. Only a woman who is politicized through a logic of rejecting fixed and “natural” structures, one who challenges a system of intersectional oppression, can embody characteristics culturally associated with masculinity. And this woman, in Brazilian television drama, is a villain.

Redemptive motherhood?

Despite the increasing sophistication of telenovela plots in terms of their modes of telling, feeling, and seeing, it can be said that, in the classic melodramatic formula, there are no psychological ambiguities, and the characters’ actions merely confirm positions established a priori. Thus, the narrative structures conflict in clear moral terms, allowing the audience to identify moral stances and form expectations of punishment or reward (MOTTER, 2011). Manichaeism, in this context, does not add psychological depth but rather organizes the moral universe of the telenovela through the dramatic opposition between heroes and villains. We are interested, however, in the ambivalence present in telenovelas in which female villains are also mothers. We

therefore introduce the concept of ambivalence as an epistemological and sociocultural category linked to the contemporary experience of indeterminacy (PILLAR, 2013).

According to Bauman (1999), modernity combats ambivalence through the production of order. To order and classify is to divide the world between what belongs and what does not belong, the good and the bad, the right and the wrong, while ambivalence threatens this organizing gesture. Without structures, what remains is indeterminacy, revealing the fragility of boundaries, including conceptual ones. We have thus moved from a solid modernity, built on certainties, to a liquid modernity, in which the ambivalence of “options, identities, and life projects” (BAUMAN, 1999, p. 16, our translation) has become a structural condition of social experience. Ambivalence allows opposing elements to coexist in actions, languages, and identities without resulting in synthesis (PILLAR, 2013).

Tolerating ambivalence is a hallmark of psychological maturation, according to Winnicott (1896–1971) (*apud* COSTA; RIBEIRO, 2016). Ambivalence is a sign of mental health insofar as it enables individuals to sustain contradictory feelings, such as love and aggression, directed toward the same object. The coexistence of these affects is a prerequisite for integrating the personality and forming a cohesive identity (COSTA; RIBEIRO, 2016). Withstanding internal conflicts without becoming psychologically fragmented reveals emotional maturity and lays the foundation for realistic and stable relationships.

In telenovelas, female villains often embody ideas developed within feminist and gender studies, particularly through their embodiment of traits historically associated with masculinity, such as ambition, a desire for power, and autonomy. However, when it comes to motherhood, these characters are still typically portrayed through the lens of fragility and sensitivity. This ambivalence organizes our discussion around three analytical axes: patriarchy as an ordering and classifying force, the female villain as the fictional capture of feminist ambivalence, and motherhood as a point of patriarchal restoration.

Patriarchy can therefore be understood as a system that suppresses ambivalence, in which anything that cannot be clearly ordered and classified would threaten the established order. Patriarchy is a rigid system that categorizes women as “good” or “bad,” “maternal” or “sexual,” “caring” or “ambitious,” and “domestic” or “public,” and these oppositions produce hierarchies rather than neutral distinctions. Since ambivalence is a threat — as it produces subjects, actions, and narratives that elude binary understanding — the heterosexual matrix defines who can be recognized as a legitimate man or woman (BUTLER, 2022). Within this framework, gender can be conceived as a system of intelligibility in which the subject becomes legible only if they are capable of performing socially recognized norms (BUTLER, 2022). Viewed through this lens, the female villain who is also a mother embodies a potentially disruptive ambivalence, as she is capable of performing attributes historically associated with the masculine, such as autonomy, desire, and ambition, while continuing to embody femininity. She is neither the docile traditional woman nor the masculine figure traditionally associated with power.

The second axis concerns the female villain as an embodiment of the emancipated woman theorized by feminism: independent, free, hardworking, and sexually autonomous. It is not uncommon for feminist advances to be followed by reactions that demonize the emancipated woman (FALUDI, 2001) or that argue that post-feminism only appears to celebrate female autonomy while subjecting her to moral punishments (MCROBBIE, 2020). This narrative model unfolds as follows: first, the villain embodies traits valued by feminism (career, sexual freedom); then, the narrative proceeds to associate these traits with characteristics such as coldness and selfishness; and finally, that autonomy is transformed into moral deviance. The ambivalence here both exalts and punishes emancipation.

Finally, functioning as a device of patriarchal control, the villain’s motherhood is her point of vulnerability and returns her to the logic of the “good woman.” It is worth noting that motherhood, in the far-right’s anti-feminist discourse, is an important moral and political asset and serves as

proof of public legitimacy. This view of motherhood is mobilized within a nuclear, heterosexual, patriarchal, and moralizing family model, in which motherhood symbolizes the ideal woman as guardian of the nation, morality, and the family, while also humanizing public figures and fostering affective connections with audiences (FONTENELLE; GALETTI, 2026). In this context, conservative discourses appropriate the language of empowerment and produce a post-feminist logic that asserts that equality has already been achieved, that it is easy to balance motherhood and work, that caregiving is part of female nature, that motherhood is an individual choice and a path to personal fulfillment or success, in short, discourses that combine women's empowerment with patriarchal values, erasing structural inequalities (FONTENELLE; GALETTI, 2026) and undermining the political struggle of the feminist movement.

In television fiction, just as in reality, motherhood functions as a structuring moral marker that legitimizes or mitigates villainy by providing a space for redemption. If the villain breaks with patriarchal models and, at the same time, is a good mother, even if she is cruel, her narrative moves toward sacrifice and reinscribes her within the patriarchal order, as happened with Nazaré Tedesco. On the other hand, if the female villain is socially powerful, the narrative may expose her maternal vulnerability by portraying her as an inadequate or frustrated mother or as one who rejects her children, as in the case of Odete Roitman. If she fails in the realm of motherhood, the narrative tends to restore the moral order, reestablish the hierarchy, and, above all, symbolically punish her, as Carminha's narrative arc demonstrates. We can infer that the villain's maternal fragility serves a structural function through which moral order contains ambiguity. Alternatively, motherhood may function as a criterion of moral classification: if she fails as a mother, her villainy is confirmed; conversely, if she suffers as a mother, she is rehumanized and reintegrated into the norm. Either way, the ambivalence of the villain's motherhood is reabsorbed. It is worth adding that when the villain fails as a mother, the narrative punishes her more severely than it would a male villain, establishing motherhood as a rigid moral boundary.

We are dealing with an ambivalence that is controlled and reabsorbed by the social order, in narratives that flirt with rupture but reaffirm traditional roles, punish transgression, and reposition the character within the norm. Thus, patriarchy is reestablished while ambivalence takes on a dramatic function. The villain's ambivalence highlights the tension between feminist advances and the persistence of patriarchal structures; in this context, motherhood limits and punishes ambivalence, transforming maternal fragility into a mechanism for the symbolic restoration of the patriarchal hierarchy.

Ambivalence could acquire a destabilizing potential if television narratives maintained simultaneous and unresolved oppositions, which would denaturalize gender roles and expose the arbitrariness of hierarchies and rigid models of masculinity and femininity. In this case, ambivalence would serve as a critical device capable of revealing, through its refusal of resolution, the artificiality of gender oppositions.

In contrast to classical melodrama and recurring patterns in television drama, the persistence of ambivalence without a binary resolution could produce more complex characters, capable of integrating contradictory emotions and shifting interpretation from moral judgment toward psychological complexity. Villains who are mothers articulate both care and destruction, exemplifying conflicts inherent in human affective life and fostering more empathetic interpretations. In this case, a more radical portrayal of ambivalence — as emotional integration — would reveal a villainy that transcends ethical deviation and moves toward the expression of identity-related tensions.

Final considerations

Brazilian telenovelas characteristically incorporate public issues into the private sphere. Issues such as racism and sexism are inseparable from romantic storylines and the intricate web of family relationships through which social problems are narratively addressed. Through the characters' affective relationships, the telenovela represents people, ways of life, and

worldviews at the level of lived experience, thereby bringing narrative and life into contact, showing that power operates not only through direct domination but also through continual negotiations of meaning.

By examining villainous mothers, we address characters who defy the classic melodramatic construct, in which female villains embody a threat to the moral order. In line with contemporary modes of telling, feeling, and seeing, we observe continual adjustments and tensions in the ways in which these narratives imagine and portray “bad” women, how they experience motherhood, and the social tensions they reflect and generate beyond the screen.

The “evil” women of Brazilian telenovelas have become the central protagonists of these narratives and are marked by an ambivalence that can be examined through three analytical perspectives. First, patriarchy, challenged by the feminist movement and criticized for perpetuating a model of womanhood that requires revision, functions as the organizing and classificatory principle that defines what it means to be a woman in these narratives. Next, the female villain is understood as a fictional embodiment of feminist ambivalence and as a representation of the emancipated woman theorized in gender studies. The final analytical axis concerns the understanding of the female villains’ motherhood as a return to patriarchal constraints.

We examined how the female villain is constructed in the telenovela, considering her evolution over the decades, her appeal, and the collective memory she has helped shape. Villainy, as we have observed, operates through a dynamic of revelation and reiteration, whereas the villainess’s motherhood operates through the logic of ambivalence. The problem is that this ambivalence serves only a dramatic function, and the disruptive potential of female villains — and, by extension, of the forms of womanhood they represent — is once again contained within a crude patriarchal logic. The motherhood of these characters is yet another element that reinforces the political power structures that feminisms have long denounced. And the critical potential of this ambivalence is ultimately neutralized.

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