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The Female Condition During Mussolini's and Salazar's Regimes

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The Female Condition During Mussolini's and Salazar's Regimes:

How Official Political Discourses Defined Gender Politics and How the
Writers Alba de Céspedes and Maria Archer Intersected, Mirrored and
Contested Women's Role in Italian and Portuguese Society

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Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter I: The Italian Case – a historical overview of Mussolini’s gender politics and its ideological ramifications	6
I. 1. History of Ideology or Ideology of History.....	7
1.1. Mussolini’s personal charisma and the “rape of the masses”.....	7
1.2. Patriarchal residues in the psychology of Italians: misogyny as a trait deeply embedded, over the centuries, in the (sub)conscience of European cultures.....	8
1.3. Fascism’s role in the development and perpetuation of a social model in which women were necessarily ascribed to a subaltern position.....	10
1.4. A pressing need for a misogynistic gender politics? The post-war demographic crisis and the Role of the Catholic Church.....	12
1.5. The Duce comes in with an iron fist.....	15
1.6. Fascist gender ideology and the inconsistencies and controversies within its logic.....	22
Chapter II: The Portuguese Case – Salazar’s vision of woman’s role in Portuguese society	28
II. 2.1. Gender ideology in Salazar’s Portugal.....	29
2.2. The 1933 Constitution and the social place it ascribed to Portuguese women.....	30
2.3. The role of the Catholic Church in the construction and justification of the New State’s gender ideology: the Vatican and Lisbon at a crossroads.....	31

2.4. Salazar’s contributions to the elaboration of a gendered political discourse and practices.....	33
2.5. Maria Archer: a woman who dared speak out.....	34
2.6. Salazar and Mussolini: between difference and similarity.....	37
Chapter III: Literature as a means to comment on, question and contest the official political discourse.....	43
3.1. Alba de Céspedes, women’s writing and its social implications in the context of Fascist Italy.....	44
3.2. <i>Nessuno torna indietro</i> as a demonstration of how Fascism (did not) rule(d) women.....	51
3.3. “Mulher Por Conta” and Maria Archer’s exhibition of woman’s agency in Salazar’s Portugal: The young Portuguese woman between freedom of choice and imprisonment by the New State’s conditioning of social life, moral norms and gender expectations.....	54
Works cited.....	64

Introduction

"Sulle dispense stava scritto un dettaglio che alla prima lettura mi era sfuggito, e cioè che il così tenero delicato zinco, così arrendevole davanti agli acidi, che se ne fanno un solo boccone, si comporta invece in modo assai diverso quando è molto puro: allora resiste ostinatamente all'attacco. Se ne potevano trarre due conseguenze filosofiche fra loro contrastanti: l'elogio della purezza, che protegge dal male come un usbergo; l'elogio dell'impurezza, che dà adito ai mutamenti, cioè alla vita. Scartai la prima, disgustosamente moralistica, e mi attardai a considerare la seconda, che mi era più congeniale. Perché la ruota giri, perché la vita viva, ci vogliono le impurezze, e le impurezze delle impurezze: anche nel terreno, come è noto, se ha da essere fertile. Ci vuole il dissenso, il diverso, il grano di sale e di senape: il fascismo non li vuole, li vieta, e per questo tu non sei fascista; vuole tutti uguali e tu non sei uguale. Ma neppure la virtù immacolata esiste, o se esiste è detestabile."

Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico*

In the work here presented I analyze the official political discourse and gender ideology of Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy and Salazar's right-wing dictatorship in Portugal. The first two chapters of my work consist of a closer examination of how the two political leaders viewed woman's role in Italian and Portuguese society, respectively, what reasons they gave to justify their stance on gender (in)equality and how the general public responded to the gender politics the two regimes embraced. While Mussolini's and Salazar's dictatorships were both on the right end of the political spectrum and shared nationalistic characteristics, in my analysis, I aim to draw the reader's attention to the differences that set the two dictators apart and determined the specificity and peculiarity of the public images that each political leader created for himself.

The third chapter of my thesis is dedicated to a literary exploration of the work of two female authors: the Italian Alba de Céspedes and the Portuguese Maria Archer. Both were important literary figures in their countries during the respective dictatorial regimes, and both

represented in their work outlooks on women's lives and social roles that did not exactly match the vision that official discourse was trying to impose. Although not always explicitly condemning the misogyny that Mussolini's and Salazar's gender politics contained, Alba de Céspedes and Maria Archer exposed facets of Italian and Portuguese women's daily lives that questioned and put in doubt the all-encompassing nature of the subaltern role in which the regimes sought to circumscribe women. For this reason, by working closely with the text of de Céspedes' novel *Nessuno torna indietro* and Maria Archer's short story "Mulher por conta" I seek to point out the aspects of the female condition in Italy and Portugal during the 1930s and 1940s that the two writers exposed but that, by contrast, Mussolini's and Salazar's official discourses did not openly address.

**Chapter I: The Italian Case – a historical overview of
Mussolini's gender politics and its ideological ramifications**

I. 1. History of Ideology or Ideology of History

1.1. Mussolini's personal charisma and the "rape of the masses"¹

Much has been said about how Fascism perceived and sought to rule women. Although Mussolini's attitude towards women and the ways the Italian National Fascist Party and apparatus managed women's organizations and amended the Italian constitution to accommodate the party's gender ideology were not short on contradictions and ambiguities, historians and scholars alike would all agree that Italian Fascism was a misogynistic regime under which women found themselves in an unprivileged and unequal position compared to men. Exactly for this reason it is very important to understand the subtleties of Mussolini's gender politics, and so to avoid succumbing to the "easy" and handy conclusion that Fascism at all times explicitly discriminated against women, ruled them with force and constituted a moral, psychological and physical "yoke" for the female sex. This was not the case by far.

As with every dictatorial political system, under Mussolini's regime the general "atmosphere" of life and the reality in which citizens actually existed and were free (or not free) to construct their personal lives, was always an amalgam of various different and often contradictory elements. For this reason, when talking about Fascist gender politics, we should certainly be aware of the existence of very harsh discriminatory and even violent elements, but also of the presence of milder components of Fascist reality that had an overall attenuating effect on the gender policies and practices in Italy, notably between the two wars. When we take into

¹ "Raping the masses" is a term used by Barbara Spackman in her book entitled *Fascist Virilities*, which analyzes the rhetoric and ideology Fascism used with regards to its sexual politics (Spackman 1996:24).

consideration these conditions, it is certainly not surprising that at a seminar on Fascism in Paris III, Vincennes, Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi asked the question: “Comment cela était-il possible?”, or how the female acceptance of a policy so anti-feminist and anti-women was possible (Macciocchi, 137). And in reality, it would not be unfounded to ask ourselves how it was possible that a significant number of women, not only willingly accepted the subaltern position Fascism prescribed for the female sex, but also vigorously defended Mussolini’s gender policy from the attacks of the eventual opposition(s) and thus contributed to the expansion and consolidation by the fascist regime. As Barbara Spackman points out in her book *Fascist Virilities*, “[women] were indeed enthralled by Mussolini’s virile charm” (Spackman 1996: 26). This fact points to the hypothesis, very likely to be true, that Mussolini was not a stranger to the art of captivating female attention and winning women’s sympathies. This could, to a certain extent, explain why despite the misogynistic nature of Fascism, many women fell in line with it and openly supported Mussolini.

1.2. Patriarchal residues in the psychology of Italians: misogyny as a trait deeply embedded, over the centuries, in the (sub)conscience of European cultures

Yet, although the Duce possessed a gift that allowed him to create for himself an image that a vast majority of Italian women liked, respected and felt attracted to, it would be too superficial to attribute the success of Fascist gender policy solely to Mussolini’s personal charisma. Far more than such a simplistic view of women’s position in society is at issue here. To have a clearer picture of how fascism actually ruled women, it may be helpful to look back to

the past and examine the cultural heritage, traditions and ethical outlook present on the Peninsula for centuries. The image of woman as inferior to man can be traced back to Antiquity. Ever since then, her existence has been viewed in terms of her utility to men – women had been perceived as performers of an auxiliary function that sought to facilitate man’s life and provide him with comfort (mainly in the private space), as well as provide him with pleasure. Plato, for instance, pondered the question of whether women had a soul. Furthermore, his disciple, Aristotle, while reflecting on her role in society, defined woman as inferior to men both on a physical and on a moral level. He argued that female inferiority was innate and an incontrovertible consequence of the laws of nature that condemned woman to a subaltern position only mitigated by her indispensable contribution to the propagation of the human species (Leal 34).

In the western tradition this negative vision of the female condition, instead of being attenuated and eventually abrogated, was by contrast corroborated and propagated, after being additionally nourished by the conservative and ultra-reactionary ideology that the Church and Christianity approved. This antifeminist perspective, cemented in western culture for centuries, has served as a fertile soil for the birth and development of anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic regimes such as Mussolini’s dictatorship (Leal 34). For this reason, where the inferiority of women is the order of the day, it comes as no surprise that the Duce relegated women to a subaltern position in Italian society: he aimed to create a “perfect” nation and it was logical, according to the Catholic tradition solidly present in the mindset of Italians, that women’s primary social responsibility was procreation, marriage and emotional comfort and support of their husbands.

But there was nothing new in this. Although Mussolini’s regime should not be associated with the Church or considered in terms of religion, it would not be wrong to claim that the

Catholic tradition that had governed the social and political dynamics in Italy for centuries had prepared the terrain for Mussolini's misogynistic ideas. Perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to go on to conclude that the moral code and ethics ensuing from the Catholic tradition might explain in part the adhesion of so many women to the Party's vision of the "new woman": the prolific mother and a caring and loyal wife. Because women are usually more "religious" than men, or at least abide much more to religious rituals and manifestations of faith (for example, they go to church much more often than men do; and even when men go to church it is usually to accompany their wives or daughters), it should come as a surprise to us that many women were receptive of the model of the "new woman" without necessarily feeling concerned that their individual rights or personal freedom would suffer from the misogyny and discrimination on which this model was based.

In fact, many must have been the women who sincerely believed that women's primary responsibility was to create and raise children, marry and stay at home to take care of house chores: simply because this had been a model passed down from generation to generation for centuries. These women had been raised by their mothers to be very conscious of models of "normality": i.e. patriarchal social expectations and prescriptions that the most natural "happy" and successful scenario of a woman's life was to marry, have children and be an exemplary housekeeper. Given this perception of a role that seemed natural, it proved hard to break or disprove a model that many women grew up believing to be unquestionably true.

1.3. Fascism's role in the development and perpetuation of a social model in which women were necessarily ascribed to a subaltern position

In this respect Mussolini's gender ideology did not constitute a novelty in the Italian collective mindset. On the contrary, Italy had been a patriarchal society and Mussolini's attitude towards women was more logical than surprising. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that gender ideology was not completely a given for Fascism, it was something that Mussolini and his adherents justified, developed and modified in accordance with the pressing political and social needs of the regime. When Mussolini came to power with the March on Rome in 1922, there was not yet a clearly delineated gender politics that the regime had proclaimed as official. In fact, as early as 1919 Fascism associated itself with the Futurist movement that actually defied the traditional and misogynous vision of woman. Affiliates and sympathizers ridiculed the conventional morality and defended the legalization of divorce. However, fascists were not unanimous in respect to female issues, and the former participants in World War I, as well as the fascist syndicalists, faced with the post '18 economic depression that was a direct consequence of the devastation the war wrought on Italian economy, human resources and demographics, rose against women's emancipation and labor, and supported the attacks of the "camice nere" on cooperatives and socialist leagues, thus putting an end to the more progressive aspects of fascist ideology (Leal 36).

In this way in 1923, a new ideology that placed at the center of its value system the defense of the "Patria" and gave rise to an extreme nationalism, justified by the interest of the State, and for which fascist rhetoric sustained that any personal interest had to be sacrificed, institutionalized an explicitly authoritative politics towards women. Under the guidance of Mussolini, a new ambition for a powerful State, omnipresent in the lives of its citizens, gained popularity. This new fascist vision, which perceived women in the narrowly defined terms of their biological function of mothers, prescribed to them the role of child-bearers purposefully

distancing them from the social, labor and political sphere. This was soon followed by a sequence of policies, legal amendments and establishment of specific “female” institutions that facilitated the State’s project for improvement of the Italian race and defense of maternity and childhood. In addition to the series of political administrative measures, such as the establishment of the ONMI (Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia) in 1925 (Dogliani 108), the regime mobilized the sciences in order to prove the incontrovertible rectitude of its ideology. Anthropologists, criminologists, physicians and hygienists were encouraged to get involved in the resuscitation of the Italian nation according to paternalistic and traditionalist guidelines that postulated a direct proportion between women’s importance and utility in society and their capacity to act as “incubators for the demographic boom Mussolini desired” (Spackman, 83). Moreover, the signing of the Concordat with the Vatican in 1929, and with it the official acceptance of the catholic conservative stance on the role of women in society, only reinforced the initial antifeminism that marked fascist politics.

1.4. A pressing need for a misogynistic gender politics? The post-war demographic crisis and the Role of the Catholic Church

Yet, contrasting Mussolini’s imperialistic yearning for the grandeur of the Italian nation was the stark reality that followed the Great War. Post ’18 Italy had to face the loss of more than 600,000 Italians and about half a million mutilated men. In addition, the country was overwhelmed by a wave of unemployment and low wages. Through the prism of fascist politics the remedy of this burdensome situation lay in a promotion of demographic growth through an

increase in birth-rates. This, as Fascists saw it, could only be achieved if women re-assumed their “noble” role of prolific mothers and thus necessarily returned to the private sphere. For this reason, in respect to women, it could be concluded that Fascism converged with religious rhetoric: Mussolini’s gender ideology embraced the position of Pope Leo XIII that nature had destined woman to a responsibility for domestic tasks and this was the only activity capable of protecting and preserving uncorrupted her fragile sex (Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, 1891 in Leal 36). As a result, the alienation of women from the workforce meant less competition for men and the vacating of positions, formerly held by women, which could now be occupied by men.

The reality, however, did not correspond to the facility with which fascism sought to alleviate the high unemployment rates after the war. On the one hand, market dynamics, always driven in the first place by profit, instigated many employers to continue seeking cheaper female labor. On the other hand, liberalism in Italy, which had preceded the advent of Fascism and the upsurge of feminist movements prior to 1914, had rendered possible the emancipation of women and the *prise-de-conscience* of the arbitrariness with which they were treated in the professional and private sphere, as well as of their right to seek equality with men. In short, the woman that came out of World War I was already a “new woman”, but one who was diametrically opposite to the model Mussolini desired and envisioned². In other words, women had become more

² Here it is appropriate to acknowledge that Mussolini’s fascism was a complex and controversial phenomenon in its essence. Its controversial nature translated as well into the fascist vision of woman: on the one hand women were viewed in their narrowly defined roles of mothers and wives. On the other hand, however, there was an effort to also add to Italian society’s patriarchal perception of women a more progressive and modern image. It was exactly Fascism that encouraged an emancipated vision of woman, the woman-pilot being one of the more striking and obvious examples. Yet, in my work, I have chosen to concentrate on the traditionalist mother/wife function in which Mussolini’s regime sought to circumscribe women, because I think that the emancipated image it added was not representative of Fascism’s pivotal stance on women’s role in Italian society, nor was it fully developed and as vigorously embraced as the traditional notion that women’s social importance was, above all, determined by their reproductive function.

socially and politically sensitive and active, and so constituted a major threat to the gender relations and hierarchy Fascism sought to impose.

Once again, in order to justify the ethical validity and the social utility of its vision of the differentiation of the roles that the two sexes had to assume, or the relegation of women to the confined space of the home, Fascism benefited from the support of the Church and, although with caution, sought an alliance with it. In 1930 Catholic support came again in the form of an Encyclical: Pope Pius XI's *Casti Connubii* was a written, structured and explicit, report on the position of the Vatican on family life, the relationship between husband and wife and their responsibilities in the private sphere. *Casti Connubii* unambiguously defends the sanctity of marriage and postulates that its primary function and ultimate aim is the creation and upbringing of children, an idea that perfectly fits with the fascist project for the regeneration of the Italian nation through a quantitative and a qualitative increase in Italian population:

11. Thus amongst the blessings of marriage, the child holds the first place. And indeed the Creator of the human race Himself, Who in His goodness wishes to use men as His helpers in the propagation of life, taught this when, instituting marriage in Paradise, He said to our first parents, and through them to all future spouses: "Increase and multiply, and fill the earth." [12] As St. Augustine admirably deduces from the words of the holy Apostle Saint Paul to Timothy [13] when he says: "The Apostle himself is therefore a witness that marriage is for the sake of generation: 'I wish,' he says, 'young girls to marry.' And, as if someone said to him, 'Why?,' he immediately adds: 'To bear children, to be mothers of families!'"

17. Since, however, We have spoken fully elsewhere on the Christian education of youth, [18] let Us sum it all up by quoting once more the words of St. Augustine: "As regards the offspring it is provided that they should be begotten lovingly and educated religiously," [19] - and this is also

expressed succinctly in the Code of Canon Law - "The primary end of marriage is the procreation and the education of children." (Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*)

In the early 1930s, however, even the support of the Church was not enough to convince many women of the exclusiveness of their obligation to humankind to propagate and dedicate their lives to the upbringing of their children in accordance with the "Christian education" to which Pope Pius XI refers. Still numerous were the peasant women-workers and female factory workers who had become very conscious of their right to the same working opportunities as men, as had begun to happen during the liberal period before World War I. They continued to fight for better wages and tenaciously refused to partake in fascist politics: for example by returning with unflagging determination the affiliation cards distributed to them by the Party (Leal 37). These tensions escalated in 1931 with the strike of 200,000 unionized women which ended with modest gains for the women compared to the violence of the repression, resulting in the physical injury and incarceration of many female participants.

1.5. The Duce comes in with an iron fist

As a result of the turmoil Mussolini became even more convinced of the pressing need to win over women's support and inculcate in their mindset the pride and desire to collaborate with Fascist demographic politics and accept its gender ideology, not as offensive and hostile to their individual freedom, but rather as a privilege and an honor to be "madri della Patria". Actually, reality points to the fact that Mussolini indeed succeeded in gaining women's sympathy and

support, which to a detached observer might seem more akin to an inexplicable infatuation than to a reasonably justified appreciation.

For example, as Patrizia Dogliani notes in her *Uomini e donne nel fascismo*, when on the eve of the conquest of Addis Abeba and of the proclamation of the Italian Empire on May 7th 1936, Mussolini spoke to the gathered female masses (approximated to be 100,000 women) from the balcony of piazza Venezia, eulogizing them for the exemplary execution of the role of prolific mothers: “l’eroismo dei vostri figlioli, dei vostri mariti, dei vostri fratelli, si deve anche a voi, o donne di Roma e d’Italia” [“the heroism of your sons, of your husbands, of your brothers, is also your merit, oh women of Rome and of Italy”], thousands of mothers responded with an ecstatic gesture of holding up in their arms their applauding children (Dogliani 123). This is beyond doubt very telling evidence of the degree of devotion Mussolini enjoyed among Italian women.

The Duce’s charisma and popularity among women in Italy was achieved despite the fact that he never hid or attempted to mitigate his paternalistic and patronizing attitude towards them. Quite on the contrary, from his public speeches and interviews all he conveyed was a strongly misogynistic outlook that many observers have characterized as disdain for women. In an interview with the French journalist Maurice de Valeffe, for instance, when asked if he intended to extend the right to vote to women, Mussolini imperturbably replied that he considered the question irrelevant because in Italy women did not count: “Mon opinion sur leur participation aux affaires de l’Etat est en opposition avec tout feminisme. Naturellement la femme ne doit pas être une esclave, mais si je lui accordais le droit de vote on se moquerait de moi. Dans notre Etat elle ne doit pas compter” [“My opinion on their participation in state affairs is contrary to any feminism. Of course, woman must not be a slave, but if I gave her the right to vote, I would be

laughed at. In our State she should not count”] (Valeffe in Leal 38). Another example of Mussolini’s misogyny that crystallizes in his claim of female inferiority is cited in Ferdinando Loffredo’s (one of the pivotal fascist philosophers and perhaps the most important fascist theorizer on what family should be) essay *Politica della famiglia*:

La donna deve obbedire... essa è analitica, non sintetica. Ha forse mai fatto dell’architettura in tutti questi secoli? Le dica di costruirmi una capanna, non dico un tempio! Non lo può. Essa è estranea all’architettura, che è la sintesi di tutte le arti, e ciò è il simbolo del suo destino. (...) ma se io le concedessi il diritto elettorale mi si deriderebbe. Nel nostro Stato essa non deve contare. (Lofreddo 372)

Some attribute this attitude of neglect of the qualities of women as potentially useful to Italian society insofar as it was part of the efforts of the Duce to drive women out of the workforce in the 1930s. As Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi defines how fascism perceived women at work (whereas, according to fascists, it was men who should have been working instead): women were seen as thieves stealing men’s bread and guilty of masculine castration (Macciocchi 157). Moreover, Macciocchi touches upon the deeper complexity of female labor. Namely, that it was pernicious to the regime’s social project because it was, according to fascists, not only in direct proportion with (male) unemployment, but also distracted women from their primary responsibility: procreation. As Macciocchi refers to it, in fascist eyes female labor meant material and psychological independence, implicated forms of existence contrary to the natural state for women, i.e. to be mothers and wives, and had thus to be condemned as vicious and socially unacceptable (Macciocchi 185).

Other harsh criticisms of forms of female emancipation through work came from Loffredo. He saw the typewriter as a satanic object that opened up new opportunities for women to enter the administrative and managerial sectors, and thus distracted them from their most natural vocation – maternity – and resulted in the destruction of family. The interest Fascism had to circumscribe women in a tightly knit circle of family life, where they were perceived more as biological means of procreation than as individuals equal in rights and qualities to their male counterparts, inspired a panoply of theorization around the biological inferiority of the female body and, above all, of the female mind. In this respect the major philosophical essays that appeared on the subject were works by Gentile and Loffredo (Re 80-89 in Pickering-Iazzi 1995), but their “philosophical” endeavors to define and categorize women’s physical and intellectual capabilities were reinforced by the translation in Italian of foreign literature, namely German, that argued in favor of a natural male superiority. For example, one such text that nurtured fascist misogyny and provided a “scientific” basis for fascists’ discrimination against women was the 1904 translation of *L’inferiorità mentale della donna* in which the German Moeubius seeks to explain the differences in the development of men’s and women’s brains, claiming that certain parts of the female brain are less developed than those in the male brain (Leal 39).

Although it might be too extreme of an argument to claim that all adherents to fascism supported the idea of the innate female intellectual inferiority, any examination of fascist gender rhetoric would be incomplete and arbitrary if we overlook the claims made by Loffredo in his *La politica della famiglia*. Of course, fascist reality did not correspond exactly to the theorizations of fascist philosophers, but if we aim to understand *le fondamenta*, or the basis, of the regime’s vision of women, it is essential to examine the theoretical side of the ideology. Once again, I insist on the remark that these are extreme examples of fascist thought, but I am convinced they

serve as a valuable insight into the “heart” of fascist attitude towards women. A closer reading of Loffredo’s arguments warrants a much more informed and conscientious understanding of what lay at the foundations of the fascist discourse of women’s inborn responsibility (before the Italian nation) for procreation on the one hand, and of the idolization of masculine virility, manifested above all through sexual intercourse, on the other:

La indiscutibilmente minore intelligenza della donna, e la sua maggiore capacità analitica e di giudizio immediato che non sintetica e di previsione, le ha vietato di contemperare ed equilibrare i risultati tratti dai due campi di osservazione, di riflessione e di indagine, e le ha quindi impedito di comprendere che la maggiore soddisfazione, definitiva e totale, si può trarre solo dalla famiglia, quanto più onestamente intesa, cioè quanto maggiore sia la serietà del marito, quella della moglie e quindi quella dei loro rapporti, sessuali in primo luogo. Il pensiero della donna è allontanato dall’idea di un marito che sia soprattutto onesto e affezionato, di una casa intesa come focolare domestico, dei figli; è sospinto dalla erudizione su un piano che la innata e, per altro verso necessaria, sentimentalità della donna trasforma in un pendio in fondo al quale l’idea della vita familiare retta e della figliolanza numerosa diventa sempre più debole. (Loffredo)

The passage puts in relief Loffredo’s vision, which we see later adopted by Mussolini and flaunted during a number of his public appearances, that woman’s intellectual capacities were in close relation, or in fact essentially dependent and a direct consequence, of her greater sensibility and propensity for a more frequent outward exhibition of her feelings (than men). It is important to note here that Loffredo, and fascist rhetoric in general, relies heavily on a traditionalist patriarchal outlook. Neither Loffredo, nor any of the fascist ideologists, invented the idea that women were more emotional than men. They rather adopted, elaborated and adjusted this vision in accordance with the more palpable objectives of the regime: namely the consolidation of the

pater familia model in which all family members are ethically obliged to respect and obey the father-male-head-of family. From here comes the “indiscutability” of female intellectual inferiority (“l’indiscutibile minore intelligenza della donna”). Not to such an extent that it is taken as an incontrovertible truth, but rather that the traditional paternalistic lens through which fascists chose to look at the female sex confers credibility to the sharp differentiation between male and female mental capacities. It for this reason that both Lofreddo and all those Italians who fell in line with fascist gender ideology believed that there should be a separate, different education for women that would appropriately prepare them for the governance of domestic life. As we can see in Nicola Pende’s article *Femminilità e cultura femminile* published in March 1941 in the monthly *Gerarchia*, the major source of fascist orthodoxy and edited by Mussolini’s long-term companion Margherita Serfatti between 1924 and 1934, although some fascist proponents were not as extreme in their categorization of female intellectuality as undoubtedly inferior, there still remained the firm conviction in the indisputability of female fitness for the domestic sphere and in the fact that any deviation from the social role Fascism prescribed for women would result in a disruption of the healthy functioning of society:

Noi non siamo di quelli che credono alla inferiorità cerebrale della donna. Ma è indiscutibile che il cervello femminile è qualitativamente diverso da quello maschile. La donna può fare tutto quello che può fare l’intelligenza maschile, ma fino ad una certa misura media, più che sufficiente però per i compiti per i quali la donna è stata creata. (...) E’ noto che quando mancano queste qualità [...] in una donna che deve governare una famiglia, questa famiglia va incontro facilmente a squilibri economici e morali logorata dalla piaga dell’arrangiamento e dell’anarchia spirituale (...). Io ritengo giunto il momento che sia senz’altro modificato profondamente l’attuale ordinamento della Istruzione Superiore, limitando alla donna quelle professioni liberali per le quali sappiamo

che il cervello femminile non è per natura sufficientemente preparato: come sono le carriere delle scienze, delle matematiche, della filosofia, della storia, dell'ingegneria, dell'architettura. Io vorrei vedere sorgere una Facoltà Universitaria Femminile, nella quale la donna possa approfondire le proprie conoscenze ed addottorarsi in quella che possiamo chiamare scienza della donna, del fanciullo, della casa e dei lavori femminili.

Although in this passage Pende does not explicitly embrace Loffredo's conviction in men's *a priori* intellectual superiority, his position is no less discriminatory and doubtful as to women's aptitude for certain social roles. Or in other words, by claiming that women can do everything that men's intellectual capacities can achieve but only to a certain average degree, is very much the same thing as saying that she cannot in fact do as well as men. The end of the phrase I am referring to culminates in the crystallization of the covert misogyny in Pende's argument by evoking woman's fitness for the "tasks she has been created for" ("i compiti per i quali la donna è stata creata") that are, in accordance with fascist logic, invariably associated with procreation, the raising and education of children and a sincere dedication to domestic activities. As Pende underscores any deviation of this traditionalist model of perceiving women's social significance primarily in terms of their biological capacity to be mothers would lead to a destabilization of society's structure, would disrupt its healthy functioning and would eventually lead to a "spiritual anarchy". As the passage progresses, however, we observe an apparent contradiction in Pende's argument. While in the very beginning he affirms that he does not favor female "cerebral" inferiority, in the second part of his argument he goes on to claim that a new educational system, adequately designed to meet the specificity of women's mental capacities is needed: women should be banned from the liberal professions exactly because "the female brain is not by nature sufficiently prepared for them".

1.6. Fascist gender ideology and the inconsistencies and controversies within its logic

The above-mentioned passage is a very good example of the ambiguity with which Fascism approached the question of gender and the role and place of women in Italian society. Fascism was neither ideologically nor politically fully consistent nor coherent. On the one hand, it adopted and relied heavily on a traditionalist and patriarchal vision of woman, and in this respect also strongly corroborated by the Church. On the other hand, it sought to reject many of the elements of that vision as being backward and narrow-minded aiming to replace them with a new fascist modernity. Another manifestation of these inconsistencies is apparent in Victoria De Grazia's summary, in *How Fascism Ruled Women*, of the paradoxical controversies in fascist efforts to redefine women's role in politics and their participation in public life:

In the end, fascism's organization of women as political citizens rested on a fundamental paradox, one that can be traced back to fascism's own contradictory definitions of female citizenship. Women's duty was maternity; their primary vocation was to procreate, nurture, and manage familial functions in the interest of the state. Yet to perform this duty, they needed to be responsive to the public weal; they needed to be conscious of societal expectations and the effects of their essentially individual acts on the collectivity. This required women to be engaged outside of the household. (...) Consequently, the very women who had been consigned to and declared protagonists of the social domain were fetched out of it, to be fashioned into a fresh, apparently malleable constituency. As members of mass organizations were they beholden to the Duce-patriarch? Or to their own organizational hierarchies? subordinate to male superiors in the PNF or to their female leaders? wholly self-effacing in sacrificing for national causes or serving their own

self-interest to promote organizational solidarity. The mass organizations of women ultimately reflected unresolved tensions within the dictatorship over how to define women in the Italian state. These reflected in an acute form the dilemma of modern states generally insofar as they assign females to the private and social for procreative purposes, yet pretend participation in the public interest in part to achieve those very ends. (De Grazia 270).

De Grazia's observations help us understand that a quantification of the extent to which fascism infiltrated the private lives of Italian women during Mussolini's dictatorship inculcating its own ideology and thus victimizing and subjugating those women to the particular political and social interests of the fascist state, is not feasible. Any effort to determine whether Italian women supported the regime or felt forcefully dominated by it would only be an approximation of the truth. The objective reality lay much more likely in the space between the two extremes of subjugation and emancipation. Of course, it would always be wrong to claim that Fascism contributed to female emancipation in Italy, but at the same time it would be a significant omission not to admit that Mussolini's regime did bring about social changes that, although not consciously or on purpose, through the creation of the *Nuova Italiana*, fostered female solidarity and sharpened women's conscience of their role and importance to the Italian state.

Even though that role was very clearly defined as, and generally limited to, motherhood, it cannot be denied that the Fascist state created an atmosphere in which women grew more aware of their social significance and enjoyed some relaxation of the old patriarchal mores in respect to women's engagement in public life. After all, we should not forget that Fascism had its one of its origins in the futurist movement, and futurists such as Marinetti, for example, exhibited an extremely avanguard vision of Italian society: they rejected everything old, repudiated the cult of the past, and praised originality. As far as the condition of women is concerned, the close

relationship between Fascism and futurism was manifested in the modernistic aspects of the way fascists perceived and treated women. It was exactly during the regime that women started appearing in commercials and an obvious emphasis was placed on the sensuality of the female body. This was a new modern phenomenon unthinkable a few decades earlier. In this sense, Fascism did break with some old social conventions. Of course, this does not mean that Mussolini's dictatorship had a liberating effect on its female subjects: rather, while it loosened some ties coming from tradition or religion, it nevertheless curbed women's freedom to take full advantage of the new opportunities that opened in front of them. This double-standard of fascist sexual politics is once again well observed in Victoria De Grazia's observation that during fascism:

Women were at greater liberty to go out than ever before. The dictatorship could not bar their access to mass culture. But fascism conditioned how freely they could use it. It was one thing for women to exercise their powers of fascination in the boudoir, another in the salon, in public social gatherings, or in the streets. Though mass culture put more power in the hands of women to carve out and rule domestic niches, the regime nevertheless sought to check the individualist impulses that nurtured and thrived on these new domestic cultures. In sum, under fascism, women's freedom to go out could be compared to the freedom reigning at Pensione Grimaldi, a halfway house with fixed hours, closely watched group routines, and the structures of newly internalized conventions" (De Grazia 233).

Before paying closer attention to De Grazia's reference to the Pensione Grimaldi, the Roman women's college where the action of de Céspedes' *Nessuno torna indietro* takes place, and in fact before changing the focus of this analysis in a more literary direction, I would like to

go beyond the ideological definition or systematization of Mussolini's sexual politics, which has been the objective of the first part of this study. As we can see, although official fascist rhetoric sought to carve out a niche for the Italian woman and anchor her in a subaltern position limited to a prolific maternity and the responsibilities domestic business entailed, paradoxically another phenomenon parallel to that one opened up space for a greater social conscience and female solidarity that consolidated the bonds between women in certain professions or social classes. This observation could only be made, however, with the greatest caution, careful not to exaggerate the claim that fascism actually had a liberating effect on Italian women. This was not the case although a certain relaxation of traditionally patriarchal expectations was observed and can be attributed to the fascist openness to and its conscious strive for modernity. Yet, the fostering of some liberties, formerly denied to women, remained very limited and cautiously controlled by the fascist authorities.

Not surprisingly, De Grazia underscores that it is tempting to accept fascist claims that the way fascism treated its female subjects, constantly fluctuating between modernity and tradition, was "among the era's most magnificent achievements" (De Grazia 14). However, such a statement relies on false assumptions: for instance, the fact that women went to public rallies, were involved in political organizations, or that the Italian state recognized their social importance by defining their rights and duties in an attempt to inspire a sense of citizenship and national pride, does not automatically prove that any such forms of participation in fascist public activities represented the most effective way of shaping perceptions of social order and self-consciousness for Italian women. That is why when we try to understand the social climate in which women lived during the Duce's dictatorship, we should be aware of the necessity to look for the crossing point between what the state desired and expected from its female subjects and

women's individual goals, family needs and commitments to the dominant fascist ideology and its perpetrators, fascist institutions and policies. The central question then becomes just as much how fascism sought to "rule women" as how women themselves experienced the social atmosphere that was created as a result of Mussolini's ambition to inculcate his vision of the "new man/woman" in all spheres of Italian society:

As we come to see how Italian women shared information among themselves – about sentiments, sexuality, family, and work – their responses to fascist rule appear more complex than the attitudes commonly ascribed to them, namely passive subordination or delirious enthusiasm. Among Italian women there was disquiet, rebelliousness, dissimulation, and shrewd manipulation. (De Grazia 12)

In any case, Mussolini's regime managed to redefine the boundaries between public and private, between collective engagements and social responsibilities, on the one hand, and private lives and personal aspirations on the other. That is why the changes in women's condition were the consequence of both the new ways in which women experienced, manifested and shared their feelings and needs, and their more ostensible involvement in the agitated fascist public life with its commercial pastimes, sport events and mass rallies. The most salient characteristic, however, which in fact distinguished the Italian case from similar phenomena in other European countries, was that fascism sought as much as possible to curb the possibility that Italian women experienced these new occasions as opportunities for collective, and not even individual, emancipation (De Grazia 15). Still, the caution with which the state sought to define and apply fascist modernism to its sexual politics in an attempt to ultimately achieve the nationalization of its female subjects did not prevent the surge of alternative identities that did not conform to the female images propagated by the official discourse.

**Chapter II: The Portuguese Case: Salazar's Vision of Woman's
Role in Portuguese Society**

2.1. Gender ideology in Salazar's Portugal

Italy was not the only European nation to experience a dictatorial regime at the beginning of the 20th century. Other European countries did so too. Such was the case of Portugal. Although Salazar's *Estado Novo* (New State) shared some of the characteristics of Italian fascism, and the two regimes seemed similar in nature in that both were inspired by the same nationalistic logic, they differed substantially in their aims, in the results they obtained, and particularly in the social climate these regimes installed. Some may attribute the divergence in the outcomes that Mussolini's and Salazar's right-wing dictatorships obtained to their different cultural and historical heritage (which, it could be argued, contributed to the creation of specific "national temperaments" of Italian and Portuguese people respectively). Others may argue that the differences in Italy's and Portugal's regimes were due to other more tangible factors such as geographic location, level of industrial development, or direct cultural consequences of past historical experiences (such as the Age of Discovery in the case of Portugal, for instance). No matter where the major differences between the two regimes came from, however, it should be noted that Fascism and Salazarism differed in many more aspects than those in which they converged.

Yet, if there are certain points of tangency between Mussolini's and Salazar's dictatorships, one important characteristic that the two leaders have in common was their gender politics. Set against the background of a recent legacy of democratization processes and feminist movements, which surged both in Italy and in Portugal at the turn of the 20th century, and also emerging in the broader picture of a significant increase in women's presence on the labor market, the two dictatorships affirmed on an ideological as well as on a political level their

appeal to women's return to their traditional roles of mothers, wives and housekeepers. Both Mussolini's and Salazar's political discourse placed a strong emphasis on family as the building block of society (Pimentel 393, on Portugal).

2.2. The 1933 Constitution and the social place it ascribed to Portuguese women

The first most salient manifestation of Salazar's sexual politics and his personal attitude, similar to Mussolini's, in that the Portuguese dictator also sought to relegate women to a subaltern position, was the 1933 Constitution which legitimized Salazar's dictatorial seizure of power³(de Azevedo 6). The Constitution announced the equal treatment of all citizens by the law and, as a result, "the denial of any privilege bestowed at birth, due to nobility, aristocratic title, sex or social condition" [a negação de qualquer privilégio de nascimento, nobreza, título nobiliárquico, sexo ou condição social] (Art.5, translation mine). However, in the following sentences the constitutional text rapidly clarified that the assertion of social equality in Portuguese society had to be made with caution and taking into consideration "the differences resulting from female nature and from the interest of the family" [as diferenças resultantes da sua natureza e do bem da família] (Art. 5, translation mine). It was in opening this parenthesis about the specificity of women's nature that the 1933 Constitution differed significantly from the previous 1911 Constitution, which is considered much more liberal and democratic (Cova e Costa Pinto 72).

³ I am using the terms "gender politics" and "sexual politics" interchangeably to denote the entirety of ideological notions and political actions taken by the Fascist regime

In this skein of thought, Salazarism denied women legitimate full equality to men, which to a certain extent they had enjoyed during the previous liberal period, in the name of a certain “female nature”, which was better suited to specific social roles (in particular, motherhood and marriage) than others. Thus, Salazar focused his political discourse on the dichotomy culture-nature in which public dominates private (Cova e Pinto 72), and culture (associated with men) is considered to be superior to nature (thought to be represented by women). In this respect the logic behind Salazar’s reasoning about the social roles of men and women resembles Mussolini’s famous assertion cited in Ferdinando Loffredo’s essay *Politica della famiglia* and already referred to in the first chapter of this work:

La donna deve obbedire... essa è analitica, non sintetica. Ha forse mai fatto dell’architettura in tutti questi secoli? Le dica di costruirmi una capanna, non dico un tempio! Non lo può. Essa è estranea all’architettura, che è la sintesi di tutte le arti, e ciò è il simbolo del suo destino. (...) ma se io le concedessi il diritto elettorale mi si deriderebbe. Nel nostro Stato essa non deve contare.
(Loffredo 372)

2.3. The role of the Catholic Church in the construction and justification of the New State’s gender ideology: the Vatican and Lisbon at a crossroads

Furthermore, apart from such “inter-textual” similarities that can easily be noted in the discourses of the Italian and Portuguese extreme right dictators, Salazar’s New State also re-appropriated the rhetoric of the Catholic Church, which most clearly reveals its vision of women’s place in society in the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* from 1891 and *Quadragesimo*

anno from 1931. Both of these unambiguously manifest the Church's conviction that nature predestined women to stay at home and raise children, and limited their capacity to contribute to the development of society purely to their biological ability to procreate. In *Rerum Novarum* Pope Leo XII put in relief the undeniability of women's smaller physical strength and used it as a justification for their natural greater fitness to take care of home-associated tasks: "There is work less suited for women who nature destines in return to domestic chores" [Existem trabalhos menos adaptados à mulher, que a natureza destina antes aos trabalhos domésticos] (*Rerum Novarum* in Cova and Pinto 72, translation mine). In a similar way, Pope Pius XI claimed in 1931: "It is above all at home or in the private space of the house and in the domestic chores that one finds the [right type of] work for women, mother of family" [É em casa antes de mais, ou nas dependências da casa, e entre as ocupações domésticas, que se encontra o trabalho das mães de família] (*Quadragesimo anno* in Cova and Pinto 72, translation mine). As Cova and Pinto affirm in their article "Salazarism and Women" (*O Salazarismo e as Mulheres*), according to the stance of the Catholic Church, women were conceived to be mothers: nature had decided so.⁴ With the publication in 1932 of the project for a new Constitution which defined and legitimized the New State, Salazar adopted this traditional vision in his political platform with the elaboration that, apart from simply being biological mothers, women had the obligation to be devoted to the country (*a pátria*) and to assume their responsibility, in the capacity of Portuguese citizens, towards the "domestic government" (*o governo doméstico*) (Cova and Pinto 73) – this was all very similar to the message that Mussolini sought to transmit to Italians.

⁴ *idem*

2.4. Salazar's contributions to the elaboration of a gendered political discourse and practices

Salazar's assiduity to publicize this message even went so far as to encourage in 1945 the publication of "Domestic Economy" (*Economia Doméstica*), a work of the National Secretariat for Propaganda, in which the government aimed to establish a parallel between the art of managing the home and that of governing the state. This initiative manifests the New State's concern and effort to include ideologically women in the greater political project that Salazar envisioned for Portuguese society, and to convince women that the State considered them valuable. The only fallacy was that in practice, when it came to the exercise of the very basic rights of each individual, Salazar's government refused to accept that women could be compared to men in the social responsibilities that each sex had to assume. Or, in other words, the New State, similar to Mussolini's regime, sought to instill in women a sense of their social significance underlying their contribution to the well-being of the country in their sole capacity as mothers and wives.

As Cova and Pinto assert, in fact, women could enter the public sphere, but with provisions. Some women were, in fact, allowed to actively participate in public life but only on the grounds that such women were playing a vital role in the "governing" of their families, and for this reason deserved to have a voice in public affairs because, as the Salazarist logic had it, the State was nothing more than a well-arranged conglomeration of families (Cova and Pinto 72). On the other hand, however, the recognition that Salazar gave to Portuguese women was very narrowly delineated, and exclusively associated with women's biological function as mothers. According to Salazarist rhetoric, women were very important to the State, but only if

and when they dutifully carried out their intrinsically female obligation, i.e. to give birth and educate their children in accordance with the ideology that the regime installed and tolerated. Any deviance from the traditional “natural” image of woman was harshly critiqued and rapidly stigmatized.

2.5. Maria Archer: a woman who dared speak out

An example for the practice of such social ostracism is the writer Maria Archer. Born in 1899, she spent her childhood in Portugal, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau. Later in her life, in 1931, she divorced her husband, Alberto Teixeira Passos. This happened at a time when the institution of marriage had a significant social weight in Portuguese society and very few women divorced, or at least those who opted for putting an end to their lives as wives were perceived by the public as abnormal cases, a deviation from the standard moral codes. Although women who sought official legal methods to end their marriages were not necessarily always explicitly condemned, there was a taciturn disapproval among the broader public opinion that surrounded them. For this reason, Maria Archer’s divorce was a clear sign that she was going to be an unconventional woman who challenged and defied the social norms of her time. After her divorce from Alberto Teixeira Passos in 1931, Maria Archer, together with her parents, moved to Angola and initiated there her literary career. While in Luanda she published her first novel *Três Mulheres* [“Three Women”]. A few years later she returned to Lisbon and in 1945 joined the Movimento de Unidade Democrática [Movement for Democratic Unity] which was an oppositional group to Salazar’s regime. As a result she attracted the attention of the New State authorities and her works begin to be censured and their publication obstructed. Another factor that brought Maria Archer the hostility of Salazar’s government was her participation as a

journalist in the prosecution in 1952 of the military officer Henrique Galvão, who initially supported the New State but later became one of its most ardent opponents. During the trial salazarist authorities confiscated Maria Archer's notes. Three years later her involvement in the prosecution on the side of Galvão, as well as her participation in oppositional groups, had placed her intellectual production under the vigilant control of the state authorities and had stifled her possibilities of free literary expression. For this reason she was forced to seek refuge in Brazil. Maria Archer settled there in 1955, continued to write and collaborated with the newspapers *O Estado de São Paulo* [*The State of São Paulo*], *Semana Portuguesa* [*Portugese Week*] and *Portugal Democrático* [*Democratic Portugal*]. Her health caused her to return to Portugal in 1979, after the Carnation Revolution had put an end to Salazar's New State. Once in Portugal, she was immediately hospitalized in the almshouse Mansão de Santa Maria de Marvila, where she died three years later in 1982.

Despite the numerous efforts of the Salazarist authorities to suppress Maria Archer's literary activity and thus neutralize the defiant messages that her work conveyed, Maria Archer left behind a rich literary legacy of more than thirty works, novels and short story collections, and plays. Moreover, her combatant spirit, unquenching desire for social justice and resistance to the sexual prejudice that was deeply rooted in the platform of Salazar's New State surmounted the obstacles Maria Archer had to face during her life and her forefront democratic vision of Portuguese society remained alive, epitomized in the texts of her authorship. Demonstrative of her objectives as a writer and an intellectual are her own words "rebater o conceito arcaico da inferioridade mental da mulher" ["to combat the archaic concept of female mental inferiority"] (from *Mundo Português*, April 11, 2012).

On March 29 2012, at an event at the *Teatro da Trindade* in Lisbon relatives, friends and literary critics and professors gathered to pay homage to Maria Archer thirty years after her death. The initiative aimed to reflect on and re-evaluate the role that the writer played in the struggle for a democratization of the Portuguese state and society. Olga Moreira, Maria Archer's nephew presented her aunt as “uma mulher livre, escritora de garra, senhora de si, impondo-se pelo talento, alguém que escreveu aquele que é hoje um dos maiores retratos da situação das mulheres portuguesas na primeira metade do século XX” [“a free woman, a vigorous writer, master of herself, who imposed herself through her talent, someone who wrote what is today one of the greatest portraits of women's situation during the first part of the twentieth century”] (*Mundo Português, idem*). Insightful about the importance of Maria Archer's work are also the comments of Prof. Dina Botelho who pointed out that although Maria Archer lived in a period in which it was supposed that women had to be good daughters, wives and mothers, she was among the few women who were professional journalists and writers, i.e. a very difficult life for a woman during the first decades of the New State. Furthermore, Prof. Botelho highlighted the fact that while many female writers, contemporaries of Maria Archer, chose to “hide” behind male pseudonyms so that they could enjoy greater freedom and encounter less social prejudice in the recognition of their work, Maria Archer never “hid”, and “dared be Maria Archer, with no pseudonyms” (Manuela Aguiar in *Mundo Português, idem*, translation mine). Prof. Botelho also argued that writing turned into the “arm” with which Maria Archer contested the sexual discrimination present in Portuguese society and reinforced by Salazar's regime, and thus became her means to escape the world of silence within which woman was circumscribed. As a result, Prof. Botelho concluded “o regime não gostou do retrato, nem gostava de Maria Archer” [“the regime did not like the (social) portrait, and did not like Maria Archer”]. Finally, extremely

telling about Maria Archer's philosophy and character are her words, reiterated by Fernando Pádua in his attempt to provide a succinct and accurate account of what his aunt was like: "eu sou uma mulher igual a eles" ["I am a woman equal to them (men)"] (*Mundo Português, idem*).

2.6. Salazar and Mussolini: between difference and similarity

Yet, although the New State did not deny women's importance to society, even though only when it fit into the pre-established model of what exactly woman was supposed to be, the official discourse was centered much more on the differences between the two sexes than on what united them around their importance to the State. And here, one major distinction from the case of Italian fascism should be made. In the first place, one thing that would strike any careful observer of the two dictators, and the public speeches they gave, is the difference in the tone with which they approached the issue of women's role in Italy and Portugal, respectively.

While Mussolini was almost invariably arrogant and paternalistic in his confrontation of gender issues, revealing conspicuously his virility and ridiculing any manifestation of weakness, which he attributed as a natural given for women, Salazar was much more reserved, temperate and humble when he addressed questions related to women's role in the Portuguese State. Apart from that he always justified the claim of women's complementarity in society with the allegations coming from religion and strongly corroborated by the Catholic Church. In this sense, a similarity can be traced between Salazar's vision of women and fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile's perspective on what the social equilibrium between men and women had to be. In a similar way (see first chapter on fascist gender ideology), Salazar's New State preached that the social functions of men and women were not identical. Unlike in fascist Italy, however, this was

neither meant to privilege one sex at the expense of the other, nor to imply that the social function which one (and by this I mean *men*) was in charge of was more important than the other: what was implied by Italian fascists. This was another “nuance” in the tone of Salazar’s gender ideology that differentiated (and distanced it) from Mussolini’s.

Mussolini, in a number of his public speeches or interviews, flaunted his disparaging attitude towards women (Spackman 26), arguing that human history proved that women were intellectually inferior to men and for that reason were not to enjoy the same rights of participation in public affairs as men: Mussolini’s was the widely cited phrase “in our State women must not count”. Unlike his Italian counterpart, Salazar did not adopt the same extreme, and somewhat savage, language that Mussolini normally used. While the Italian dictator was much more secular in his opinion about women’s role in society and created for himself the image of a macho who enchanted the masses with his steel-like strength of character, physical vigor and overpowering virility, Salazar “seduced” the Portuguese masses by the exhibition of very different qualities. He was the erudite, very reserved, intelligent and noble political leader who inspired respect and unquestionable authority exactly on the premise of these very same qualities, i.e. on the other extreme end of the spectrum in comparison to Mussolini’s. Salazar lacked Mussolini’s excessive outright manifestation of a somewhat crude and unrestrained masculinity. Barbara Spackman well illustrates the Duce’s attitude of a “procurer”, as she calls it, through a referral to the work of Maria Antonietta Macciocchi:

Like a true pimp, Mussolini had grabbed the bludgeon and begun to wave it about in his speeches addressed to women with the arrogance of the male who reminds

his woman that love will come after the blows. (Macciocchi 1:157 in Spackman 29).

The Portuguese dictator was, by contrast, much more refined and controlled in his behavior and contact with the people, contrasting the impression of impulsiveness that Mussolini created around his image. This distinction between the different public images that Mussolini and Salazar had is important to understand the overall “cultural” differences between the case of Italian fascism and that of the right-wing regime in the New State-ist Portugal. Italians and Portuguese were two culturally very different peoples and even more so were the personalities of their authoritarian leaders. Yet, as I have stated at the beginning of this work, I have felt vital for a realistic understanding of the essence of Italian fascism and Salazar’s New State to be aware that they were two different phenomena and had many more points of divergence than of convergence. However, as the primary objective of my work is not to analyze the generic character of the two regimes, but rather to compare and contrast the sexual politics and its ideological roots and justification, I will not concentrate my analysis on the different images Mussolini and Salazar had nor will I study in depth the cultural differences between Italy and Portugal. I chose to mention them at this point because I do believe that they have contributed to the specific conditioning of the State’s treatment of questions of gender and the respective vision of women’s role in the Italian and Portuguese societies.

As I have pointed out in the beginning, however, Mussolini’s and Salazar’s sexual politics are among those points of convergence that much more bring the two regimes closer than distance them. As in Italy, women in Portugal were glorified for the important role they were in charge of within the closed space of the family. According to salazarist logic the [sacred]

“mission” of women was to take care of the domestic work and to be “guardians” of the family. Although the message that Salazar sought to convey, or that women were destined to a different social role than men, was similar in its essence to Mussolini’s, the more docile tone with which it was delivered, as well as the way it was structured that conferred a more respectful treatment of women puts in relief the different “spirit” of the Portuguese nationalism evidenced in the politics of the New State. Yet, the final and underlying message Mussolini and Salazar conveyed was quite similar: women were to be justifiably relegated to a subaltern social position. The more palpable docility in the well-educated tone that became Salazar’s trademark at his public appearances is well noticeable in the interview he gave for António Ferro, the director of the National Secretary of Propaganda (SPN) in 1932, in which Ferro referred to the President as “elegantly anti-feminist like Mussolini, and like most dictators” [elegantemente anti-feminista como Mussolini, como quase todos os ditadores] (Ferro 132):

(...) a mulher casada, como o homem casado, é uma coluna da família, base indispensável de uma obra de reconstrução moral. Dentro do lar, a mulher não é escrava. Deve ser acarinhada, amada e respeitada, porque a sua função de mãe, de educadora dos seus filhos, não é inferior à do homem. Nos países ou nos lugares onde a mulher casada concorre com o trabalho do homem – nas fábricas, nas oficinas, nos escritórios, nas profissões liberais – a instituição da família pela qual nos batemos como pedra fundamental de uma sociedade bem organizada ameaça ruína... Deixemos, portanto, o homem a lutar com a vida no exterior, na rua... E a mulher a defendê-la, a trazê-la nos seus braços, no interior da casa... Não sei, afinal, qual dos dois terá o papel mais belo, mais alto e útil⁵. (subl. nossos).

⁵ *Idem, ibidem*, p. 133.

This passage points to the fact that the innate inferiority of female nature was never an argument evident in Salazar's official discourse (what was explicitly stated by some fascist philosophers like Loffredo: for more information see first chapter). The rhetoric Salazar used was much milder and balanced, which had the effect of camouflaging the discrimination against women by seemingly recognizing women's importance in Portuguese society. The woman who has responsibly assumed her obligations to society or is, in other words, married and deeply involved in the management of the home, is a building block of the Portuguese State just as important as man, her husband (also charged with the responsibility to create a family). So, according to Salazar this woman who devotedly assumes her role of child-bearer and wife, is to be respected because "she is not inferior to man", because in the end it is unclear who of the two spouses (the mother responsible for the harmony of the home or the father responsible for the family's subsistence) has "the more beautiful, noble and useful role".

At first sight, it might appear that, here, the New State is less misogynic than fascist Italy in its treatment and perception of women. When we look at the allegations Salazar makes, however, a much more complex and no less sexually discriminating message comes to the surface. While women are allegedly "not inferior", they are assigned a narrowly defined social role and only conformity to the model that the official discourse has established guarantees women's respect by the rest of society. Or put in other words, women in the Portuguese New State have the possibility of being reckoned of equal social importance as men but only when they adhere to a specific pre-determined by the government model of what a woman is and what her function in society should be. Moreover, we should not fall in the trap of seeing Salazar's claim that within the family the woman is not a slave ("Dentro do lar a mulher não é escrava") as an argument attenuating the misogyny in the dictator's vision, and thus as a difference from the tangibly more

aggressive tone of Mussolini's public statements. In one of his famous discourses the Duce also admits that "of course she [woman] must not be a slave" [Naturalmente essa non dev'essere una schiava] (Ludwig, *Colloqui con Mussolini*). So, in an effort to evaluate the misogyny in the discourses of the two political leaders we should not allow ourselves to be misled by the immediate and literal meaning of the assertions each of them makes. Rather, we should pay closer attention to the arguments they use to defend their position and the way they define categories such as "not inferior" or "not a slave".

What is striking in the excerpt from the Salazar's interview with Ferro mentioned above is the conditionality of the possibility to consider women equally socially important (although in a very different way) as men. The first and perhaps most important of this system of conditions is marriage. Salazar appeals to the re-establishment of a decayed moral system, and although he does not explicitly state it, he still implies that it is in the nature of the woman to be a mother, wife and housekeeper, and that it is just as natural that the man bears the responsibility to work outside of the house and ensure the material well-being of the family. Any deviance from these conditions that Salazarist and Fascist logic defined as the "impeccable order of things", is considered to be an undesirable abnormality detrimental to Portuguese (and respectively Italian) society.

**Chapter III: Literature as a means to comment on, question and
contest the official political discourse**

3.1. Alba de Céspedes, women's writing and its social implications in the context of Fascist Italy

As we have seen, gender politics and gender “moods” in Fascist Italy were far from unambiguous and immune to contradiction. Quite on the contrary, although Mussolini’s public discourse, as well as personal behavior and private life, demonstrated in quite an outspoken manner both the misogyny in Fascist ideology and Mussolini’s personal conviction of man’s inborn superiority, it is surprising that Fascism still did enjoy a very substantial and devoted female support. We could choose to attribute the success of fascist misogynous discourse and politics to the personal charisma of the Duce, to the cooperation of the Church or to the centuries-old patriarchal tradition in Italian society that marked both men’s and women’s outlook and had already made women convinced of the “fragility” of their sex and their consequent suitability to home and family-dedicated responsibilities⁶. Yet, no matter which hypothesis we end up opting for in an attempt to ascertain why many women sympathized with Mussolini and his social and political vision, we should be aware that there still remained a vast territory in Italian social reality that neither fascist relentless propaganda and efforts for an all-encompassing inculcation of the private lives of Italians, nor the virile charisma of the Duce managed to infiltrate.

⁶ And here I am saying this with caution and awareness of the changes in this traditionalistic mindset at the beginning of the XX century with the wave of liberal movements, the first Italian feminism and the upsurge of emancipationist progressive ideas. Immediately before the Duce’s ascent to power there Italy had seen its first-wave feminism, which although had only limited achievements, was a fascinating phenomenon new to the Italian social context and contributed to the questioning and contestation of common norms and traditional models deeply rooted in Italian culture (Willson 41).

One example of intellectual resistance is the novel *Nessuno torna indietro* published in 1939 and written by the Italian-Cuban writer Alba de Céspedes (daughter of a Roman mother, Laura Bertini Alessandrini, and a Cuban father, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes de Quesada, who served as the Cuban ambassador to Italy in 1911 and as president of Cuba for the short period of a few months in 1933). As Piera Carroli affirms in her article “Alba de Céspedes Revisited” de Céspedes was among the major figures on the Italian cultural scene between the postwar years and the sixties (Carroli 37, in Gallucci and Nerenberg’s *Writing Beyond Fascism*). De Céspedes was a journalist and a writer, but along with her artistic contributions to Italian culture in the mid-twentieth century she actively participated in key social events and debates during that period of Italian history. She founded and edited *Mercurio*, Italy’s first review of politics, arts and sciences, published after the liberation, and she was also significantly involved in the intellectual and cultural reconstruction that took place in Italian society after World War II. In 1966 de Céspedes became the first female president of the International Council of Literary Authors (CISAC), wrote for Italian, French and German newspapers and magazines and was the editor of the Turin-based daily newspaper *La Stampa* (Carroli 37). Her importance to Italian cultural life, as well as her literary contribution and social involvement, have been pointed out by the prominent Italian literary critic Alberto Asor Rosa in *Letteratura Italiana* (1982):

On the 20th of February 1948 the Alleanza della cultura (Cultural Alliance) was founded in Florence (...). That Alliance (...) was joined by (...): S. Aleramo, C. Alvaro, F. Balbo, A. Banti, G. Bassani, (...) Alba De (*sic*) Céspedes, (...) N. Ginzburg, F. Jovine, M. Luzi, A. Moravia, C. Muscetta, C. Pavese (...) – an extremely significant and important core of men (*sic*) of letters (587).

As we can see from this citation, although Alba de Céspedes' work and contribution to the reconstruction and development of Italian culture was given credit to by [male] voices of authority on Italy's mid-twentieth century cultural scene, there still remains a hint of condescension to women's involvement in literature and social issues. Two details in Alberto Asor Rosa's comment suggest the existence of such a patronizing attitude on behalf of the male figures of cultural prominence. First, Asor Rosa misspells de Céspedes name (instead of Alba *de* Céspedes he writes Alba *De* Céspedes) which reveals a lack of attention and a certain degree of nonchalance. Second, even though we chose to attribute this, in reality minute mistake, to an unintentional spelling error, we would not be able to so easily discredit the fact that Alberto Asor Rosa refers to the members of the Cultural Alliance, both men *and* women, using exclusively the word "men". Of course, in this particular context it would not be completely founded and justified to argue that Rosa deliberately chooses to speak about men and women collectively referring to both genders as "men". Nevertheless, even if we assume that he does this unconsciously, the generalization he makes does not cease to serve as a valid and powerful demonstration of the rigidity of Italian male-dominated (sub)-conscience and public discourse. In fact, Rosa's comment would be mitigated if we presumed that it is dictated by his own personal reluctance to acknowledge woman's distinct and autonomous role in the reconstruction and making of modern Italian culture. By contrast, however, if his most spontaneous, inadvertent and natural reaction is to use "men of letters" as a general term equally adequate for referral to both men and women, then we could argue that it reveals how deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes are in the mindset of Italians. In other words, this suggests that an outlook that embraces and

consolidates a male-dominated society has already been unwaveringly inculcated in Italians on a verbal as well as on a psychological level.

Apart from by Italian literary criticism, the important role Alba de Céspedes' fiction has in the depiction of the uneasy condition of women in Italian family and society has also been noticed internationally. In his review of de Céspedes' novel *Quaderno proibito* [*The Secret*] published in 1958 in the New York Times and entitled "The Way Things Are" Frances Keene observes:

Signora de Céspedes is one of the few distinguished women writers since Colette to grapple effectively with what it is to be a woman. Her brilliant handling of Valeria's moral Hegira places her in the forefront of contemporary novelists. (28 September 1958, 5)

In her analysis Keene puts in relief de Céspedes' "compassion[ate] and occasionally iron[ic] gradual revelation of Valeria's disenchantment with her family and love life and on the problem then faced by Western woman of combining the role of wife and mother and her claim to a space of her own, physical and metaphorical" (Keene 1965, n.p., in Carolli 38). Furthermore, very interesting is the observation the Italian poet, critic, professor and life senator Carlo Bo (1911-2001) makes in his presentation at the conference "Women's Emancipation in Italy" held in Turin in 1961:

If women's literature has a meaning of its own, this has to be found where it distances itself from the simple repetition or amplification of common motives,

and instead provides reasons and motives of clear independence so as to allow new lessons, new research, in short, a way of working that is certainly free. It will therefore be necessary to juxtapose to official literature, a particular vision, where women writers have been able to better approach those subjects, those areas that have never been classified, or exalted, perhaps not even visited. (1963, 285, cited in Carroli 38-39)

Bo's comment is worthy of attention because of its insightfulness as to the specificity of women's literature and of those factors indispensable for the creation of an autonomous artistic space elaborated by women and responsive to women's lives, sensations and concerns. In this respect, Bo's claims that in order for us to be able to speak of a fully emancipated women's literature, it is necessary to have a literary production that is not a mere reiteration or expansion of a dominant male canonic tradition characterized by specific recurrent themes and forms, but that is, instead, distinctly independent in the ideas that govern its logic and in the models that determine its organization. In the same vein, here it is appropriate to evoke John Stewart Mill's assertion that women⁷ have long been overshadowed by male cultural imperialism:

If women's literature is destined to have a different collective character from that of men, much longer time is necessary than has yet elapsed before it can emancipate itself from the influence of accepted models, and itself by its own impulses. (Mill 207, 1970)

⁷ Although in his work Mill primarily discusses women's literature within the British national context, it is important to recognize that his assertions hold true for women writers in a much broader and trans-national sense.

Moreover, if we continue in the same direction of reasoning, we shall observe that Carlo Bo's observations come into close contact with Elaine Showalter's evaluation of female literature in Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth century in her book *Literature of Their Own*. Although Showalter focuses her analysis on the British novel, the perspicacity of the conclusions she draws extends on a much broader scale and, as a result, the validity of her arguments reaches beyond national boundaries. That is why I consider the following assertions very pertinent to a better understanding of the challenges and complexities that conditioned Italian women writers' artistic production, including that of Alba de Céspedes:

There is clearly a difference between books that happen to have been written by women, and a "female literature," (...), which purposefully and collectively concerns itself with the articulation of women's experience, and which guides itself "by its own impulses" to autonomous self-expression. As novelists, women have always been self-conscious, but only rarely self-defining. (...) (Showalter 4)

I am also uncomfortable with the notion of a "female imagination". The theory of a female sensibility revealing itself in an imagery and form specific to women always runs dangerously close to reiterating the familiar stereotypes. It also suggests permanence, a deep, basic, and inevitable difference between male and female ways of perceiving the world. I think that, instead, the female literary tradition comes from the still evolving relationships between women writers and their society, Moreover, the "female imagination" cannot be treated by literary historians as a romantic or Freudian abstraction. It is the product of a delicate

network of influences operating in time, and it must be analyzed as it expresses itself, in language and in a fixed arrangement of words on a page, a form that itself is subject to a network of influences and conventions, including the operations of the marketplace. (12)

This passage illustrates Showalter's consciousness of the complexity of literature created by women. In the first place, the recognition of the author's gender and the subsequent presumption that it is, beyond doubt, a factor that inevitably conditions women's writing is in itself a manifestation of gender bias. In fact, Alba de Céspedes was always aware and sensitive to the danger of discrimination that her female nature brought along. For this reason, it is not surprising that in an interview with Piera Carroli, de Céspedes unambiguously stated that she preferred being called a poet to a poetess:

de Céspedes: I wanted to be a poet, not a poetess. Poet, I used to say. They would say to me: "What would you like to be? "A poet." "Poetess?" they would ask. "No, poet!"

Carroli: Because of the prestige bestowed upon the masculine term in regard to the feminine?

de Céspedes: Yes, exactly, because if you said poetess, well, she is a poetess, you know. (Carroli 1993, 190, in Gallucci and Nerenberg 53)

De Céspedes' conscious and deliberate self-identification with male configurations of the literary world, is on the one hand further evidenced by her distancing from her mother's realm,

which she viewed as limited, tedious and frivolous – defined by the repetitious exercise of hollow social functions – and by her purposefully sought proximity and association with her father’s professional world, based on politics and intellectual activities. This explains de Céspedes’ constant efforts to escape the inferior status to which women writers, especially until the mid-twentieth century, were relegated. De Céspedes’ denial of her sex in favor of intellectuality, at least inasmuch writing comes into question, can be explained by her belief that writing should be gender-free, and that, for this matter of fact, gendered terms such as *scrittrice* and *poetessa* diminish the authority and significance of women writers (Carroli in Gallucci and Nerenberg, 41), because they put in relief gender difference and move the focus of attention away from what should be truly important: the quality of an author’s work.

3.2. *Nessuno torna indietro* as a demonstration of how Fascism (did not) rule(d) women

Alba de Céspedes’ novel *Nessuno torna indietro* [*There’s No Turning Back*] became an immediate success at the time of its publication in 1938 and put its author in the spotlight of the international literary arena (Pickering-Iazzi in Gallucci and Nerenberg 85). The book went through eight editions in the time span of only a year after its publication and was rapidly translated into thirty languages, including an English translation in 1941 under the title *There’s No Turning Back*. Despite the readers’ and literary critics’ interest that de Céspedes’ novel provoked, its success was by far not an unambiguous one. While vigorously acclaimed and praised by prominent Italian critics such as Silvio Benco and Maria Borgese, *Nessuno torna indietro* encountered the hostility of the fascist regime and was, as a consequence, harshly critiqued for its lack of conformity with fascist ethics and caused the regime to order the press to

“not give any publicity to Alba de Céspedes” (Flora 84). The adverse attitude that Mussolini’s regime adopted with regards to *Nessuno torna indietro*, however, resulted in two controversial outcomes.

On the one hand, paradoxically, the novel continued to enjoy significant public interest and sales continued to soar. On the other hand, however, no matter how successful *Nessuno torna indietro* had been, de Céspedes received little critical attention in literary historiography created in the postwar years. That is why, the disquieting nature of the themes tackled in the novel, as well as their function to undermine some of the postulates that Mussolini’s gender politics had established, have recently served as powerful instigators of a revived interest in de Céspedes’ work, and in the analysis of *Nessuno torna indietro*, in particular, as a literary work of considerable social and cultural significance. Instance of such renewed critical attention is the analytic work done by namely feminist critics such as Maria Assunta Parsani and Neria De Giovanni (1984), and Maria Rosaria Vitti-Alexander, who have examined the ways in which de Céspedes has represented gender roles throughout her literary production (Pickering-Iazzi 86).

In general terms, critical analyses of *Nessuno torna indietro* are centered on how gender, and the multiple ways in which it can be constructed, as well as notions of the female body, sexuality and the limitations and freedoms of women’s agency, come into direct interplay with the official vision of a clearly defined social segregation based on a pre-established and immutable system of gender stereotypes, roles, moral expectations and social responsibilities. In other words, the female characters in *Nessuno torna indietro*, their personal traits and interactions among one another, as well their interactions with the other (male and secondary) characters of the novel, go beyond the starkly differentiated binary masculine-feminine that Mussolini’s regime sought to impose. As a result the analysis of the novel creates room for a

deeper insight into the ways in which de Céspedes' female protagonists and their lives intersect, corroborate or contest Fascism's view of a masculine-feminine dichotomy determined and governed by hegemonic impulses in a male-dominated society.

Although not explicitly anti-fascist, *Nessuno torna indietro* indirectly defies the social, ethical and moral norms Fascism sought to establish. The novel does not contain immediate references to Mussolini's regime. In fact, apart from the Spanish Civil War, there aren't many other obvious evocations of historical events or figures. Yet, the themes that de Céspedes tackles, as well as the characters she constructs throughout the narrative, do not conform to Fascist ideology: what we see in their studies, work and private (independent) lives serves as an antidote to the image of exemplary wife and mother that the "new (Fascist) woman" was supposed to be (Gallucci 201). This failure to conform, or more accurately, the purposeful creation of an artistic space where de Céspedes could raise questions and contest the rectitude of the fascist social vision (that the regime propagated as incontrovertibly correct), cost her the banning of *Nessuno torna indietro* in 1940. The novel, however had already become a sensation in Italy and abroad – it had gone through nineteen editions for the two years between its publication in 1938 and the ban in December 1940. The reason why fascist authorities prohibited the dissemination of the book was that the story "did not reflect the Fascist ethic" (Gallucci 200). Before an investigative committee de Céspedes defended her novel claiming that she had simply intended to create a realistic depiction of Italian society and that the story provided myriad ways of looking at the world without necessarily imposing or suggesting one vision as socially desirable and morally acceptable (Gallucci 201). In other words, according to the author *Nessuno torna indietro* was not a critique of life in Italy in the 1930s, but rather a truthful representation of a multifaceted reality open to the free interpretation of the reader. I very much agree with de Céspedes'

categorization of the ideological arbitrariness present, or not present in the novel, and believe that her scope was not to undermine fascist ideology but instead to show, in an unprejudiced and detached manner, the various existential “paths” that women could take in early twentieth-century Italy. What is important, however, is de Cespedes’ suggestion that women did this despite the structures of fascist ideology.

At the same time, I do agree with scholars’ assertions that eventually de Céspedes created an artistic space abundant with “occasions” to see that many aspects of fascist ideology, and notably the fascist vision of woman, were impracticable and of questionable validity in the lives of the protagonists. In other words, the “reality” depicted in *Nessuno torna indietro* was different from the reality that the official fascist discourse propagated and thus the novel did defy many of the norms established by fascist ideology. In this respect, Carole Gallucci’s argument in her article “Alba de Céspedes’s *There’s No Turning Back*: Challenging the New Woman’s Future” is very well-founded: Gallucci asserts that navigating among dominant discourses, de Céspedes constructs a gendered female space that contests the established fascist vision of gender, class and religion, as well as the social conventions of friendship, maternity and romantic love (Gallucci 201).

3.3. “Mulher Por Conta” and Maria Archer’s exhibition of woman’s agency in Salazar’s Portugal: The young Portuguese woman between freedom of choice and imprisonment by the New State’s conditioning of social life, moral norms and gender expectations

In her short-story “Mulher Por Conta”, published in the short-story collection “Há-de Haver Uma Lei” in 1949 (cited from Ferreira 186), the writer Maria Archer creates a clearly delineated portrait of the young Portuguese woman in the first half of the twentieth century. Although the author herself affirms that she perceives her responsibility as an artist to refute and defy the notion of female intellectual inferiority: “A minha obra literária tem sido norteadada pelo princípio vital de rebater o conceito arcaico da inferioridade mental da mulher” [“My literary work has been guided by the vital principle to fight against the archaic concept of woman’s mental inferiority”] (Archer, 1952, p.5). In “Mulher Por Conta” Maria Archer reveals another facet of Portuguese woman during the first half of the century.

On the surface, it might appear that in the story, instead of being directly victimized by the masculine dominance in Portuguese society through an explicit subjugation to male authority, the protagonist Matilde suffers more due to her own desire to take advantage of the men in her life. She herself digresses from what we would normally consider a sound moral system according to which each individual should rely exclusively on his or her own qualities to attain his or her goals in life. As we see in “Mulher Por Conta”, however, Matilde tries to climb the ladder of social hierarchy, gain society’s respect and a comfortable material situation through the men she encounters in her life. The protagonist’s dream and main objective in life is to marry a rich and influential man and thus ensure herself a respected social standing. In this respect, Maria Archer does not idealize her female character, depicting her merely as an innocent victim of the existent male hegemony that permeated Portuguese society. The author does, however, implicitly underscore the subaltern position to which women are relegated through the fact that Matilde sees her only to chance to climb in the social hierarchy through selectively attaching herself to well-off and influential men. It is this certainty that the female protagonist experiences

that testifies to the general feeling of “doomed-ness” that defines the social condition of the majority of women in Portugal during the first decades of Salazar’s regime. Women are denied any social mobility realized through their own individual capacities and merit. Like Matilde, young Portuguese women are circumscribed in a narrowly defined model of women’s role in society that, as we have seen earlier crystallizes in the official Salazarist discourse. Nevertheless, the way through which Maria Archer represents her protagonist in “Mulher Por Conta” is not one of complete sympathy and compassion. Instead of outrightly protecting Matilde and portraying her as a victim of the social conditions, unfavorable for women, the author chooses to construct a narrative in which Matilde’s image is, while still unarguably victimized by the gender preconceptions deeply rooted in Portuguese national conscience, inherited by Catholic tradition and perpetuated by Salazar’s conservative dictatorship, a victim of her own ambition and tacit embracement of the gender status-quo. Or in other words, while Matilde is a victim of the male hegemony in Portuguese society during the New State, she is partly held responsible for her victimization because she is too passive and makes no effort, if not to directly contest, then at least to question the gender stereotypes that determine the individual’s place in Portuguese society and possibilities for social mobility. In brief, Maria Archer’s Matilde in “Mulher Por Conta” is a victim of her own ambitions and of the dependencies that those ambitions generate.

Once again, however, it is very important to understand that our interpretation would be too simplistic and unilateral if we attributed Matilde’s suffering solely to her moral confusion resulting from the false values that permeated Portuguese society and that were in direct interplay with the attempt to impose a purposefully sought ideology that privileged male agency

and downplayed women's overall social importance⁸. On the contrary, the portrait that Maria Archer creates, not only of her protagonist, but also, metaphorically, of the entire Portuguese society during the first half of the twentieth century, it becomes clear that Matilde, although consciously seeking social ascension through men is not to be blamed and judged for her acquiescent acceptance of a male-dominated status-quo. The short-story "Mulher Por Conta" suggests that the young woman's ambition is dictated by her unprivileged social condition, and for this reason is, to a certain, extent, beyond her control and wish. Maria Archer successfully manages to recreate the atmosphere of affliction and despair that Matilde feels due to her modest background. In this way the story demonstrates that the only way out of this helpless situation can be realized solely through Matilde's finding a wealthy husband who could potentially rescue her from a life devoid of bright perspectives to which she has been doomed simply for being born woman in a male-dominated society, and to a poor family in a poverty-afflicted Portugal. It would be unjustified to defend Matilde's choice to take advantage of the institution of marriage in order to gain social respect and a better financial situation. At the same time, however, we should not go too far in our criticism of the moral wrongness and make the mistake of blindly condemning her without taking into consideration the limitations that Portuguese society put on the female sex and in which Matilde was also trapped.

It is not by chance that the story "Mulher Por Conta" begins precisely with a description of the protagonist's village: "Almançorgo é uma aldeia pobre a meia dúzia de léguas de Lisboa. Aldeia de casas acanhadas, de terras exangues, de onde as gentes emigram para as vilas vizinhas,

⁸ Again, it relevant here, to refer to the previous chapter where the major characteristics of the official political discourse of Salazar's regime have been highlighted. It is important to understand that there existed a close connection between the way the New State envisioned Portuguese society and the perpetuation of a male-dominated social order, in which women's agency was significantly restrained and limited to the role of mothers and wives.

para as cidades mais próximas, na ilusão de um emprego e de melhoria na vida” [“Almançorgo is a poor village half a dozen leagues⁹ away from Lisbon. Village made up of timid-looking houses, pale lands, from where people emigrate to the nearby villages, to the closest cities, under the illusion of finding a job and betterment of their lives”] (Archer, edited by Ferreira 175, translation mine). It is in these circumstances of extreme poverty that the people from the village of Almançorgo have created a new set of values that corresponds more accurately to the daily hardships they are confronted with than the values one would consider acceptable in today’s society. Or, more precisely, these are values that we would consider decadent today from our contemporary moralistic point of view.

Yet, my argument is that Maria Archer includes such a vivid and emotionally engaging description of the poverty and lack of perspective for the people who in the protagonist’s village, Almançorgo, quite deliberately, because it is exactly in the detailed description of the poor living conditions in Almançorgo that one can find the “guilt”, or if not outrightly “guilt, then at least the “responsibility” that society has for Matilde’s victimization. Or, in other words, if we assume that it is justifiable to consider Matilde a victim, in the first place, of the social conditions in which she lives, and only in the second place of her own and consciously made choices, we can argue that the morally corrupted outlook of the society in which Matilde grew up determined and defined her own perception of the world she lived in and her personal role and function within the its social dynamics. In this line of thought, her desire to marry a rich man and thus climb in the social hierarchy is dictated, on the one hand, by the poverty which she faced in Almançorgo, and on the other hand, which is in fact the more important factor, by the collective social

⁹ 1 league = approx. 4km

perspective that material destitution generated in the people who shared Matilde's destiny: her sisters, for instance.

Having made this allegation, I do not aim to condone the protagonist's behavior, neither to suggest that the author's purpose is to minimize the responsibility that Matilde has for her own destiny. On the contrary, I see Maria Archer's short-story "Mulher Por Conta" as an unambiguous representation of the protagonist as fully responsible for her unhappiness and failure in her relationships with the men she encounters in Lisbon. At the same time, however, it seems to me that Maria Archer's critique is in the first place directed to Portuguese society, which tolerates and encourages gender inequality and, in particular, the inferiority and dependence of, specifically, those Portuguese women who come from a lower social medium and of a modest economic background. This social discrimination is represented by Luzia's character, the relatively well-established middle-class lady who lives in Lisbon and who had agreed to serve as Matilde's guardian and had accepted her in her house in the capital. As we see later in the story, Luzia's gesture of generosity and compassion, as it might appear at first sight, is not completely altruistic and devoid of egoistic incentives: Luzia does not have any children and sees Matilde as a possibility to fill this gap in her life. For this reason, however, in order to preserve a good relationship with her figurative stepmother, Matilde can never fully unleash her freedom of a young and independent individual. While she is in Luzia's house and under her protection, she is not valued as an individual; she is, rather, a young woman who lives in better economic and social conditions because of the benevolence of a generous patron. That is why when Matilde expresses her desire to start working as a dressmaker, Luzia is terrified and utterly opposed to the idea:

(...) esverdeava de cólera e nem queria acreditar que o seu Pedro estivesse a considerar a Matilde como uma pessoa com vontade própria. Criava-a desde os sete anos dando-lhe o comer e o vestir, os remédios, os tostões para os rebuçados, na ideia de ter uma criada de portas adentro que lhe facilitasse a velhice, que fosse um corpo obediente ao seu mando, uma alma serva da sua alma. (...) Voltas para o chaile roto, os vestidos de chita, a cama em que se dorme vestida, sob um velho bocado de cobertor... A Matilde estremecia como se a ameaçassem com as penas do inferno. Mas a mocidade triunfava dos terrores e na liberdade da rua, na alegria do *atelier*, recuperava confiança, aguardava o milagre e esperava pelo rapaz rico que havia de casar com ela e tirá-la daquele fadário de aturar a tia e comer um pão que lhe sabia de esmola. (179)

[...] green with anger she didn't even want to believe that her Pedro considered Matilde a person with own will. She raised her from the age of seven providing her with what she needed to eat and dress, medicine, pittance, in the belief that she would have a servant at home, who would take care of her when she was old, who would be an obedient body subject to her command, a soul servant to her own soul. (...) You are going back to your broken scarf, your cotton clothes, to a bed where you sleep dressed, under the old remains of what once used to be a blanket... Matilde would tremble as if she was being threatened with a sentence of Hell. But the vigor of her young age triumphed over her terror and in the freedom of the streets, in the joy of the dressmaker's studio, she would recuperate her confidence, would hope for a miracle and would await a rich young man who

would marry her and would free the doomed obligation to tolerate her hostess and to eat bread that smelled of alms] (179, translation mine).

This part of the story puts in relief the significant impact that the conditions in which Matilde lives have had on the conditioning of her ultimate desire to meet someone who would be able to save her from the humiliating position of servitude that she is forced to accept in Luzia's house. There are not, however, as the author implicitly suggests, many options for this "someone", in the context of Portuguese society in the first half of the twentieth century: the only possibility of rescue for which Matilde could potentially hope for could only come from a well-off male figure. In this way, we can conclude that Maria Archer purposefully creates the character of Matilde as constantly revolving around the protagonist's life-dream of a profitable marriage, and obviously considering love only a minor detail that does not have any significant relevance to her happiness as a woman and as an individual. But it is, above all, very important to understand that Matilde's reasoning should not be solely attributed to a corruption in Matilde's values system. This is a product of a society that does not leave many other means of social mobility to young women besides marrying rich men. For this reason, Matilde sees in an eventual marriage a responsibility that comes close to being defined as a moral obligation both to herself as a person and to her family as a daughter who justified the confidence of her parents to coin her own life and opportunities. In this sense, the inability to find a suitable husband (i.e. of satisfactory financial standing) would be equivalent to a dramatic failure that would only testify to the futility of her coming to Lisbon, and would thus signify a major disappointment for her family who invested time, hope and dignity by sending their daughter to the capital. Because of this, the most essential priority for Matilde becomes finding a way out of Luzia's house, where

she feels dependent and oppressed and cannot, for this reason, reach to the many opportunities that Lisbon has to offer, without at the same time having to go back to her village Almançorgo:

Havia de casar rica, em Lisboa, como aquelas duas raparigas de que ainda se falava em Almançorgo, raparigas do tempo da sua mãe, que tinham vindo para Lisboa, em pequenas, e agora viviam à grande, com automóvel, e tinham ajudado a família... A Matilde sentia-se como o emigrante que embarcou para o Brasil, sentia-se obrigada a triunfar e enriquecer. O regresso à aldeia era uma confissão de derrota, era uma confissão de incapacidade, era humilhação. (181)

[She had to marry and become rich, in Lisbon, like those two girls who people still spoke about in Almançorgo, girls from the time her mother, who had come to Lisbon when young, and now lived like true ladies, with a car, they had helped their families... Matilde was feeling like an emigrant who boarded on a ship to Brazil, she was feeling obliged to triumph and get rich. Her return to the village would be a confession of her defeat, a confession of her incapability, of her humiliation.] (181, translation mine).

This passage testifies to the fact that Maria Archer aims to suggest it is Portuguese society that leads Matilde to willingly and almost desperately cast herself at the feet of rich men as if they were her only haven in a world hostile and uncomprehending to the suffering and day-to-day difficulties of a young Portuguese girl of modest background. It is true that the protagonist is strongly attracted to and tempted by material possessions, economic well-being and the social

recognition it brings, but before it is Matilde's personal fault for this materialistic and easily condemnable outlook, we have to account for the harsh circumstances in she was born and grew up. Instead of presenting Matilde in the light of a morally corrupt person, Maria Archer's story "Mulher Por Conta" portrays a young and protection-less Portuguese girl who was subject to the unjust treatment of Salazarist Portugal, a country that did not offer many opportunities for its female citizens and treated them in narrowly defined gender terms: economic and social mobility for women were possible almost exclusively through male figures. For this reason marriage, and marriage by advantage turned out to be the most common, realistic and viable means of social ascension.

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