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## **Ana Luísa Amaral's *The Genealogy of Love***

**Abstract:** In order to survey the impact of *The Genealogy of Love* and offer a revisionary, feminist reading of Ana Luísa Amaral's work, I trace the feminist implications of her poetics by reclaiming for the everyday world of history and politics what seem to be private and subjective moments through which Amaral is able to express and develop her poetic vision on love. I analyze Amaral's development of a solid feminist theoretical perspective by linking her response to wider literary and cultural contexts (Camões, Petrarch, and Dante). In placing *The Genealogy of Love* at the centre of feminist critique, I aim to bring Amaral's work into direct alignment with the methodological discursive frameworks of both feminism and psychoanalysis. In the continuing debate over the relationship between Amaral's aesthetics and her politics, I suggest a serious examination of the concept of femininity to be found at the heart of her writing. The critical impact of this project may then be assessed on two levels. First, it offers a new perspective on Amaral's text by consciously privileging the interdisciplinary connection between the notion of love and feminism. This duality, in the strictest sense of the word, grounds my discussion of Amaral's poetry. Second, in downplaying the complexity between gender and poetry, I aim to highlight the ways in which Amaral's progressive, experimental poetic vision on love may suggest an original formulation of femininity (its interrogation, its description, and its value).

Amaral is addicted to love. This is partly justified in Amaral's recognition of the inadequacy of language to represent experience with the simultaneous inscription of the immortality of love in and through poetry. It is mirrored in the longing for (and concurrent loss) of an embodied beloved created between consciousness and unconsciousness. It is visible in the meditation on the nature of time and love as eternal moment (which here incorporates also the present). It is evident in the centrality of the body to the embodiment of desire. *The Genealogy of Love* constitutes thus a privileged domain for analysis as one of

the first complex poetic elaborations of the notion of love in twenty-first century Portuguese poetry.

Making a serious investment in investigating love as fundamental to Amaral's poetry does not translate as a reduction of her work to sentimental commentary. Instead, there is a continuous dialectical trajectory in thinking about the connection between Amaral's 'aesthetically distinct poetic idiolect'<sup>1</sup> and her feminism. Amaral is, by now, firmly rooted in an historical and literary female Portuguese tradition which includes Florbela Espanca, Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Luiza Neto Jorge and Adília Lopes.

Amaral's distinct pronouncements on femininity, moreover, highlight a formal and stylistic poetic project concerned with the question of love (its meaning and value). By bringing together the real world of politics and the realm of aesthetics, Amaral's work may be seen as a restatement of the real and a manifestation of the ideal (the meeting place of the two). The exemplary embodiment of Amaral's statements on the value of love is, I will argue, the figure of the woman poet.

*'Não interessa onde estou:  
esta linha de abetos ou pinheiros  
que em declive se estende, branda,  
leve, e se debruça em mar,  
pode ser tudo'*

(445)

*'It does not matter where I am:  
this line of firs or pine trees  
which in a slope extends itself, gentle,  
light, and bends itself in sea  
can be everything'*

A detailed investigation and reconsideration of *The Genealogy of Love* begins with an assessment and a persistent reworking of the text's own central ideas and concerns. Love is here understood both in a Western literary context (Camões, Dante and Petrarch) and in a Portuguese historical and literary tradition which Maria Irene Ramalho describes as 'love; or, better put, that theme par excellence, quintessence of Portuguese lyrical writing, which is the longing/loss [saudade] for/of love.'<sup>2</sup> (1990, 98-99)

*The Genealogy of Love* is a profound epistemological reflection on what we know and how we talk about love. The treatment of poetry as a vehicle for erotic persuasion and instruction is not the purpose. Amaral's poetic genealogy is an intimate appropriation of the experience of love itself onto the page and she posits a series of questions throughout the poem to which she gives no answer. In several important respects love designates the potentially disruptive

core of Amaral's feminist poetic vision which she traces to the poetry of Camões, Petrarch and Dante (but which also includes the voices of their poetic muses).

Camões, Dante, and Petrarch under whose auspices the poem is written, mark a tradition which Amaral both continues and rewrites. As Amaral's language enters into dialogue with these texts, it confronts ambivalent relations between love and the poetic voice. Put simply, *The Genealogy of Love* both extends and undermines the conceptual space of canonical Western poetry. Amaral, as the apologist of *L'amour pour L'amour*, plays a central, if not defining, role in representations of Camões' poetry by remaking and repositioning femininity as central to her writing.

But if love and the knowledge of love organise and regulate the textual unconscious of the poem, Amaral's construction and representation of the poetic voice and its muse is odd. Put simply, as fictional (re)creation of a political process, Amaral's text affords a privileged mechanism for the examination of how writers work within and against traditions. By that I mean Amaral's conception of poet and idealized beloved are not *imitatio* trans-textual exercises (to paraphrase Kublocka) from Dante, Petrarch, and Camões. *The Genealogy of Love* produces instead a unique female voice marked by a sense of the appreciation of lived experience as fleeting and contingent.

*The Genealogy of Love* is neatly structured in two parts: a) 'topografias em quase dicionário'; b) a series of addresses and dialogues. The last poem 'A

Génese do Amor' gives the book its title. Amaral's effort to understand and to speak the accounts of love (expounded at various angles by the different voices we encounter in the text) is structured by a spiraling multiplication of voices: 'Natércia addresses Camões'; 'Dialogue between Natércia and Camões'; 'Beatrice addresses Dante'; 'Dante replies to Beatrice'; 'Dialogue between Camões and Natércia'; 'Catarina's Meditation' (and so on).

The odd trick is that this ordered structure dissolves. More forcefully, Amaral's compelling formulations of love are firmly anchored in an imaginative dialogue between fundamental voices which undercut the validity of its structure. Amaral's legitimate choice to stage her genealogy with dialogue gives the reader a sense of firm structural demarcations. We know Camões addresses Petrarch and we know Beatrice addresses Dante. But what Amaral has to say about love becomes independent of structure (or evades and escapes demarcation). Or better, it is almost as if they did not matter. I am not suggesting an irresponsible and ill-informed disregard for Amaral's divisions. Properly explored, Amaral's representations of love confound boundaries. And make the structural organization of the text irrelevant (as if put there last minute).

From another angle of vision, *The Genealogy of Love* is a carefully crafted arrangement. Amaral's poem changes and transforms itself into new shapes. *The Genealogy of Love* opens with a meditation on how to write about love, then, metamorphoses onto an exchange on the loss of love, is followed by

Camões' quasi-Platonic reflections on the immorality of love and verse, and changes again into a generously sensual dialogue between Natércia and Catarina. *The Genealogy of Love* thus incarnates the very principle of transformation of the story it contains, and through that repetition, situates change (and reversal) on a thematic and structural level at once.

*'Os teus dedos traçaram  
ligeiríssima rota no meu corpo  
e a curva topográfica  
sem tempo  
aí ficou, como sorriso, ou foz  
de um rio sem nome'*

(445)

*'Your fingers drew  
lightest route in my body  
and the topographical curve  
without time  
remained there, like smile, or firth  
of a river with no name'*

Here, as elsewhere, Amaral grounds her text firmly in a radical and distinctly feminist modern context. The centrality of love is measured by the traces left on the body where neither place nor time matter. In order to finesse the ambivalence implicit in the line ‘*without time*’, Amaral only advances the tentative resolution ‘*of a river with no name*’. Amaral then proceeds with a request, in the tradition of Camões, for inspiration. Except here there are neither immortal muses nor gods to instigate the poet. It is the wind Amaral addresses ‘I ask the wind for a sound, / some image / as bright and astonishing / as the ones here / before me.’<sup>3</sup> (447)

In Camões’ address to Petrarch, we find the pledge, common to both, of the immortality of words in verse and the eternal imprint of the beloved in poetry (whether it is Natércia or Laura – their respective muses). It is important to note here that In Amaral’s first volume of poetry *Minha Senhora de Quê* (1990) ‘the first person lyric narrator [...] only rarely implicates [...] the addressee as intimately referenced subject of enunciation.’<sup>4</sup> (2009, 327) By contrast, in *The Genealogy of Love*, the intimate exchange between the poetic voice and its addressee becomes Amaral’s fascination and obsession. What follows is a series of addresses and dialogues which mark the experience of love as one of reciprocity.

By rearranging the question of poet and muse as measured against the coordinates of reciprocity, Amaral provides a new vision of the beloved. This

duality is further transposed onto death. Eros and Thanatos are summarized in stanzas where the tension between borders and their transgression is erased.

‘Há literatura que fala do que está  
a montante do amor,  
[...]  
mas não lhe está – eros, tanatos,  
a sua ligação, o seu estar-  
entre-estar’  
(446)

‘There is literature that talks about what is  
in the totality of love,  
[...]  
but in which there is not – eros, thanatos,  
their connection, their being-  
in-between-being’

Explicitly and implicitly, desire and death are interwoven within the text as in existence. Apart from the overt references to Freudian psychoanalysis, Amaral’s poetry offers, with systematic consistency, literature’s exposure of and involvement in a conspicuous transaction: that of ‘being-in-between’ Eros



and Thanatos. If these fantasmatic images of *The Genealogy of Love* help to determine Amaral's literary vision as manifestly organised around duality, they also emphasize the narrow boundary separating Amaral's poetics from the transformative power of death.

Amaral leaves, moreover, easily graspable threads of meaning. These threads have to do with immanence and transcendence, with embodiment and abstraction, and with the very limits of poetic language:

*'Onde fica o que está descrito*

*em verso*

*no meio de tudo isto?*

*Onde se escondem as palavras*

*todas?*

*sei que preciso de uma forma nova,*

*que precisava de palavra nova*

*para a moldura, ou cor.'*

(447)

*'Where does it remain what is described*

*in verse*

*in the middle of all this?*

*Where do words hide?*

*all?*

*I know that I need a new form,*

*that I would need new word*

*for frame, or colour.'*

To estimate the part played by the value of language and of love in the construction of Amaral's genealogy, it is important to note that Amaral's feminist aesthetics are based not on a question of reading the world as she finds it but rather of transforming it:

'Reaprender o mundo

em prisma novo' (445)

'Relearn the world

in and through a new prism'

More importantly, the title poem 'Camões addresses Petrarch' is paralleled by 'Natércia addresses Laura'. The voice of two male poets is immediately reinstated by the voice of two muses. Amaral emphasizes the

coexistence of two different representations of love (the poetic voice and its idealization). An examination of this question reveals, not only Amaral's interest in plotting a profoundly intimate negotiation between Camões' poetics with the more powerful reservoir of Natércia's own voice, but also an unconventional portrayal of femininity.

In order to situate Amaral's prevalent aestheticization of woman in the context of Camões' poetic voice, we must focus on the direct impact of Amaral's representation of women and on the meaning of this stance in relation to the figure of the male poet:

‘- Como se o Tejo  
se rompesse em ondas  
ou o sulcasse uma ternura  
de astros,  
assim te amei,  
me foste branda musa.’

(456)

‘- *As if the Tagus  
broke itself in waves  
or furrowed by a tenderness*

*of stars,*  
*that is how I loved you,*  
*my gentle muse you were.'*

In Amaral's text, Camões is not an inventor of forms, since they all exist in nature; he remakes them into an ideal image, through inner vision. What counts is the expression of a certain ideality produced by the mind. Ideal love makes Camões capable of creating, and at the same time, idealizing the feminine. Camões' longing for the forbidden object of desire as spiritualized love corresponds to and is highlighted in idealization '*my gentle muse you were*'. In doing this Amaral articulates a relationship among writing, memory, and desire that fully corresponds to the Camonian paradigm. By that I mean *The Genealogy of Love* represents the object of desire (woman), first, as a rigid and impassive figure translated into an ideal.

‘ – Meu brando amor,  
fala comigo antes,  
não deixes que os meus olhos  
assim fiquem,  
vagos, ainda antigos,  
sem saudades

Seduz-me novamente,  
traz-me versos  
em que queria sentir que em ti navego.’

(460-61)

‘- My gentle love,  
talk to me instead,  
don’t let my eyes  
thus remain,  
vague, still ancient,  
without longing

Seduce me anew,  
bring me verses  
in which I would wish to feel that I sail in and through you.’

A theoretical alignment between Amaral’s characterization of love and the poem’s literary positioning entails therefore a reversal of courtly poetry in the re-emergence of woman as a figure for the ephemeral and the contingent. If Natércia is already present and ideologically reconfigured in Camões’ verses, Amaral re-situates her voice by providing new terrain for the contextualization

and exploration of the feminine. From this point onwards, Amaral structures a discussion of the genealogy of love around two major aspects: woman and desire. Beatrice therefore addresses Dante in her own terms.

‘E, meu amado, o desejo:

o caminho mais suave

para o céu em que te sonho [...]

E, vivo,

no meu desejo,

desobrigarás a morte,

desobrigarás o tempo,

assegurando a esperança

do mais eterno presente:

o do céu

em que nos sonho’ (458)

‘And, my beloved, the desire:

the softest path

to the heaven in which I dream you [...]

And, alive,

through my desire,

you will disobey death,  
you will disobey time,  
reassuring the hope  
of the most eternal present:

that of the heaven  
in which I dream us'

What concerns me here is less the textual complexity of courtly poetry than the emergence of rhetorical links between love and the feminine. Amaral's notion of love is structured around a persistent tension between Beatrice's attempt to represent desire through death and the emergence of a feminine voice. If with Camões the object of desire is a pure pretext for idealization, with Beatrice (who dreams her beloved Dante into existence), Amaral offers something far more sinister: Beatrice's commanding voice

The radical characterization of love that we began to identify in Amaral's poem is paralleled by and intertwined with dreams.

' – Quando o meu pensamento  
era o teu pensamento,  
em atino e temperança  
de bem querer

Ou fui eu que sonhei  
esse momento  
e nunca houve mais  
que supor crer:  
por ele me perdi  
no desejo de em ti  
me desejar perder?’

(462)

‘ – When my thought  
was your thought  
in accordance and temperance  
of well wishing

Or was it I who dreamt  
that moment  
and there never was more  
than suppose belief:  
through it I lost myself  
in the desire of in you



myself desire to lose?’

If a dehistoricised idealization of femininity is clearly legible in the first half of Camões’ speech, Natércia replies to Camões idealization (of herself) by suggesting instead it is her who dreamt his dream:

‘Ou fui eu  
que ao sonhar esse momento  
me desejei,  
te querendo?  
e o que via de ti,  
amor, amado,  
era a mim própria,  
paralela em amor,’ (462)

‘Or was it I  
as I dreamt that moment  
desired myself,  
wanting you?  
and what I saw of you,  
love, beloved,  
was myself,

parallel through love.’

Amaral’s feminist aesthetics carry the stamp of a dream-related experience conferred with structure and vividness. The oscillation, moreover, between dream and reality constitutes the thematic core of Amaral’s love for the feminine. By that I mean the female voice embodies the careless rapture of dreams as a marker of power:

‘Eu sou só essa  
que sonhou aquele  
que entre sonhos  
e versos  
me sonhou.’

(465)

‘I am only that one  
who dreamt the one  
that in between dreams  
and verses  
dreamt me.’

This closure in Natércia's desire replicates a sense of completion which she expresses with regard to her own sense of self. For Natércia, desire and dream are thus structured by the same motivating force, the desire for a harmonious completion which is both known and ideal. Her quest involves the active awareness of 'I am that one / who dreamt the one' (that by which she defines herself) with 'that in between dreams [...] dreamt me' (that by which Camões defines Natércia).

Amaral fashions emotion and the knowledge of love as issues at once aesthetic, political, and personal. Amaral reverses, moreover, the tradition of courtly love poetry since it is Beatrice who immortalizes Dante in her verse. And it is Natércia who asks Camões to be elevated in his poetry (not Camões who immortalizes his muse). Inextricably linked to this reversal is the centrality of dreams in desire. The self-creation of the subject of desire immediately reflected in the image of the beloved through dreams, together with the interrogation of who creates and who is reflected in verse implies, in Amaral's text, the dissolving boundary between the two. It also implies the reflection on the nature of time and love (and the importance of the eternal now).

'Neste leito te tive  
e me tiveste,  
uma noite de verão

em que cantavam  
os pássaros, a água,  
as coisas todas,

mesmo que não houvera  
disto nada  
e tudo isto fosse só  
de dentro

Mas pouco importa isso,  
minha amada,  
se o pensamento  
engenha o que se passa' (469)

'In this bed I had you  
and you me,  
one summer's night  
singing  
the birds, water,  
all things

even if there hadn't been

any of this  
and all of this was only  
from inside

But little matters that,  
my beloved,  
if thought  
creates what happens'

But Amaral takes us back to Camões again: This fixation on the static quality of ideal beauty reflects in relation to femininity something akin to crisis: unable and perhaps unwilling to engage beyond the ideal, Camões advocates a self-referential model of love that appears to exclude female difference. This idealization locates, therefore, in 'woman' the possibility of an escape from political reality which Amaral reclaims unflinchingly - from beginning to the end of *The Genealogy of Love* – through the creation of commanding female poetic voices.

In line with this argument, Amaral also describes powerfully love's relationship of essential and immediate proximity with pain. The recognition of this deeper parallel between Camões' ideal passion and suffering is worth tracing because his love arises, not only by virtue of a lack that is impossible to fill, but also because suffering is that which he desires and by which he desires.

Camões' gaze is registered by the nostalgic construction of Natércia: he produces a series of serene and stylized images of Natércia's unchanged and unchanging ideal beauty. By insisting on the aesthetic and ideal character of 'woman,' and by framing it in a language specific to deception, Camões figures 'woman' in terms of his own imagination and, at once, removes the real woman he physically encounters and knows from himself.

'Eu falarei  
com mais suave voz  
de ti, amada,  
porque tanto amada

E se além de mil almas  
eu tivera,  
teceria por ti  
perfeitas rimas'

(460)

'I will speak  
with the softest voice  
of you, beloved,

because so beloved

And if beyond a thousand souls

I had,

for you would weave

perfect rhymes'

This is exactly what Natércia complains about (and reverses through her voice). Natércia's own resistance appears most strongly in relation to her position as an object of desire. Her resistance to this position is assigned a radical status: although Natércia experiences her body as the location of desire, she makes not only a refusal of Camões' love, but also a refusal of idealization itself.

The desire and attempt to reconcile the ideal with the real through 'woman' is at the core of Natércia's speech to Laura. In the seesaw movement and dependent interchangeability between Natércia and Laura, Natércia succeeds in linking the ideal with the real in a bond of direct relation and as a form of expression of Natércia's own sexual knowledge (particularly in her relation to Laura). Her speech articulates thus a distinctive feminine perspective in its erotic desire and political ambition.

Amaral evokes Dante's Beatrice only to give the reader a firm sense of her voice:

‘Mas, viva,  
no teu desejo  
não anseio por morrer:  
morrendo no teu desejo  
desejo, em carne,  
viver’

(457)

‘But, alive,  
through your desire  
I don’t desire to die:  
dying in your desire  
I desire, in the flesh,  
to live’

Desire does not lie outside the world, a fantastic impossibility, the product of Dante’s mind. It is to be found in Beatrice’s desire to live and desire in and through death. Desire, in this sense, owes as much to a form of rupture that thrusts its roots deep into Beatrice’s consciousness, as it does to the notion



that it is only through this split female identification with death that Beatrice accesses love.

‘Nestes versos  
te mantenho,  
neles  
te faço viver

E para sempre serás,  
mesmo se em carne  
morreres’ (458)

‘In these verses  
you remain,  
in them  
I make you live

And forever you will be,  
even if in flesh  
you die’

The key conceptual index for Amaral's account of love is the profoundly eroticized interchange between the poetic voice and the beloved. The relationship between the two is one of reciprocal impact. In this sense, the politics of sexual intimacy have the same underlying importance as the emergence of a feminine voice (which Amaral makes visible across the entire surface of the text).

The political import of her poetic vision can, as we have seen, be traced to a radical representation of love and of women. Because Amaral tries to capture the essence of love without assuming the existence of abstract pure form, her entire enterprise consists in recapturing something eternal that is always beyond the present instant.

‘Imagens como abóbadas de céu,  
de espanto igual ao espanto em que nasceram  
as primeiras perguntas sobre os deuses,  
o zero, o universo,  
a solidez da terra, redonda e luminosa,  
esperando Adamastores que a domestiquem,  
ou fogos-fátuos incendiando olhares,  
ou marinaheiros cegos, ávidos de luz,  
da linha que, em compasso,  
divide céu e

mar'

(479)

'Images like vaults of sky,  
of amazement equal to the wonder in which were born  
the first questions about the gods,  
the zero, the universe,  
earth's solidity, round and bright,  
awaiting Adamastores to tame her,  
or slow-fires burning glances,  
or blind seamen, eager for light,  
of the line which, with compass  
divides sky and  
sea'

Amaral opens onto new vistas. She engages systematically with the subversive possibilities of political thought in terms of a consistent and continuous analysis which interrogates normative conceptual notions of gender through poetry, through the creation of an idealized beloved, and through the powerful emergence of a female voice in her writing. Yet there is also something much more violent and dissonant in Amaral's text.

Amaral mistrusts all limitations placed on the realm of the sensuous and never wavers in her fundamental conviction that love may be an accident in and through time:

‘Talvez um intervalo cósmico  
a povoar, sem querer, a vida:  
talvez quasar que a inundou de luz’

(473)

‘Maybe a cosmic interval  
populating, by accident, life:  
maybe a quasar which flooded life in light’

With Amaral, illusion turns into a longing for redemption by illusion. With subtlety, she reveals to herself (and to the reader) that love does not exist outside the theatre of the mind since language and the body cannot contain it nor describe it:

‘Quasar é pouco, porque a palavra rasa  
o que a pele descobriu. E a pele

também não chega:

pequeno meteoro em implosão' (473)

'Quasar is not enough, because the word erases

what the skin has discovered. And the skin

is not enough either:

small meteor imploding'

In stressing the knot joining love, memory, and writing, Amaral provides a particularly robust paradigm through which specific tensions regarding the discourse of love can be framed. Here, as elsewhere in the text, Amaral represents an attempt to substantiate human desire in the accidents of language. The inadequacy of language, the fragmented nature of desire, and the untraceable aspects of both serve as Amaral's attempt at a definition of love. And her style reflects this ethereal vagueness.

Premised on the foundations of dominance and submission, the cult of heterosexuality is compellingly re-staged by Amaral as reciprocal exchanges and legitimate role reversals which privilege the feminine. If Amaral's work resonates with political concerns, it is important to register here the intersection of conflicting renditions of femininity which run parallel with the slow debunking of the discourse of love as idealization.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> 'ídiolecto poético esteticamente distinto' (2009, 323)all translations mine

<sup>2</sup> "o amor; ou, talvez melhor, esse tema por excelência, quinta essência do lirismo português, que é a saudade do amor" ("Duplo posfácio" 98-99)

<sup>3</sup> 'Peço ao vento algum som, / alguma imagem / que seja tão brilhante e deslumbrada / como estas que aqui estão / à minha frente' (447)

<sup>4</sup> 'o eu lírico de *Minha Senhora de Quê* só raramente implica na sua "discreta arte" um tu intimamente referenciável ao sujeito da enunciação' (2009, 327)

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