LUMEN ET VIRTUS
ISSN: 2177-2789

SILENCED VOICES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MARIA MUTEMA AND MULA-MARMELA

https://doi.org/10.56238/levv16n45-036

Submitted on: 17/01/2025 **Publication date:** 17/02/2025

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the characteristics that approximate and distance the stories of Maria Mutema, a character from the novel Grande sertão: veredas (1956), by João Guimarães Rosa, and Mula-Marmela, from the short story "A benfazeja", present in the work Primeiras estórias (1962), also by the writer Guimarães Rosa. It is observed that the narratives in which these characters are inserted are similar, since they deal with the presence of evil, even though it takes on different forms and motivations.

Keywords: Maria Mutema. Mule-Marmela. João Guimarães Rosa. Narrator.

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FULL TEXT

In this analysis, we intend to study the characteristics that bring together/distance the stories of the characters Maria Mutema, from the novel *Grande sertão: veredas* (1956), by João Guimarães Rosa, and Mula-Marmela, from the short story "A benfazeja", present in the work *Primeiras estórias* (1962), also by the writer Guimarães Rosa.

Maria Mutema's story is part of the stories that are narrated in *Grande sertão: veredas*, but it differs from the others because it is the most extensive and the most important for the plot of the novel. Maria Mutema was known for committing two crimes, first she murdered her husband, putting molten lead in his ear, and then she began to attend church, confessing to Father Ponte every three days, and, in these confessions, she claimed to have murdered her husband because she loved him. The priest, faced with this secret that he could not reveal to anyone, fell ill and ended up dying. These crimes are only revealed when a priest, who was visiting the village, upon noticing Maria Mutema's entrance into the church, interrupted the mass and said he wanted to hear her in confession at the door of the cemetery, where two deceased were buried. Faced with this, the character revealed the crimes, but could not explain the reasons that led her to commit them, and, due to the regret she felt, the population believed that she was becoming a saint.

Mula-Marmela, from the short story "A benfazeja", similar to Maria Mutema, is also responsible for causing some deaths. In the past, she murdered her husband, Mumbungo, in an attempt to rid people of his wickedness, since, as the narrator states, he "[...] he was a hideous, man's dog, a most horrible calamity, danger and punishment for the inhabitants [...]" (ROSA, 2005, p. 162). After her husband's death, Mula-Marmela began to take care of her stepson, Retrupé, a very dangerous man, who had become blind shortly after his father's death, a blindness that the other characters believe Mula-Marmela caused, with the help of some plants. After a fit of rage from Retrupé, Mula-Marmela ends up murdering him and then leaves the city, taking with him only a dog he found dead on the ground.

The characters Maria Mutema and Mula-Marmela have similar stories, which deal with the presence of evil, even though it takes on different forms and motivations. It is observed that this evil is present from the names of the characters, as stated by Sérgio da Fonseca Amaral (2005), "[...] Their insignia – MM – reveal the presence and recurrence of death and *evil* [...]" (AMARAL, 2005, p. 01).

Maria Mutema's narrative is part of *the stories* present in the novel *Grande sertão: veredas*, which are narrated by Riobaldo in his search for proof of the existence or not of the devil. Riobaldo recounts the story of Maria Mutema that he had heard from Jõe

Bexiguento, in a vigil after his baptism of fire, in this way, he only exposes, in an impersonal way, one of the various narratives present in the popular imagination and that, according to Walnice Nogueira Galvão (1986), "[...] it speaks of pure evil, evil itself without motivation [...]" (GALVÃO, 1986, p. 119).

The crimes committed by Maria Mutema provoke astonishment in the readers and in the other characters because they have no motivation, except this "pure evil", as the narrator states:

> [...] To which she, a monster jaguar, had killed her husband – [...] that night, for no reason, without any wrongdoing by him, for no reason –; why, I didn't even know. He killed – while he was sleeping – so he poured into the hole in his ear, through a funnel, a terrible oozing of molten lead. [...] And then, because she got sick of Father Ponte, also without having a complaint or reason, she bitterly lied in the confessional: she said, she said that she had killed her husband because of him, Father Ponte – [...] All the time she came to church, confirmed the false, but declared – to edify evil [...]. (ROSA, 2006, p. 225-226).

By committing the crimes only for the motivation of evil itself, it is verified that Maria Mutema demonstrates resistance to the social institutions in which she is inserted – State, family and church. The character is against the imposition of the male voice that runs through her entire narrative, in the figures of the narrator, the husband, the priest, the people of the village and the missionaries. And even the way in which his crimes happened demonstrate this resistance, by inserting lead in the ear of one and words in the other, as highlighted by Amaral, the character

> [...] he acted under the sign of mute and silent revolt against men who embodied their roles too much. Because, if this were not the case, there would be no narrative of the murdered husband sleeping, because his sleep points to the relaxation of attention [...]. Father Ponte, on the other hand, believed intensely in the sacrament of confession [...]. He died because faith in the institution made him believe that where he was he would suffice as a center, authority and beacon in the truth of the committed word [...]. (AMARAL, 2005, p. 06).

These crimes of Maria Mutema symbolize Riobaldo's own narration, in the novel *Grande sertão: veredas*, which, by demonstrating its jagunço/narrator duality, brings words and lead to the ears of its readers and its narratee, as observed in the following excerpt:

> [...] Do you understand me? Days I scheduled: there were eleven. Certainly, the war was going. We had an average firefight, a skirmish, and a half-combat. What is this worth telling? Kid and kid, if you want, I'll give you a description. But I don't advertise value. Life, and war, is what it is: these silly movements, just the opposite of what is not so [...]. (ROSA, 2006, p. 229).

While Maria Mutema's crimes do not have an explanation, the narrator of the short story "A Benfazeja" strives to convince the reader that Mula-Marmela committed the murders with the aim of exterminating evil and, thus, protecting the other characters: "[...]

The woman had to kill, she had to fulfill by her hands the necessary good of all, only she herself could be the executor – of the most high work, which everyone did not even dare to conceive, but which, in their hidden hearts, they begged [...]" (ROSA, 2005, p. 164). In addition to acting for the good of all by killing her husband, the character, with the help of some herbs, caused blindness in her stepson, thus preventing him from continuing to commit the same atrocities as his father, and, finally, ended up murdering him, this death being necessary to end his mission to extinguish the evil of the village.

It is noted, then, that the two characters, Maria Mutema and Mula-Marmela, are presented by different types of narrators. Maria Mutema's narrator narrates the story he heard from a distance, therefore not being able to understand exactly the reasons that drove the character in her crimes, so he believes only in "pure evil" to explain them, giving

> [...] to know a little of Mutema's spirit only in the confession of crimes: he acted with obscurity and pretense, indicating atavistic will and tortuous desire; deception and vanity. For the reader, there is a suspicion that the narrator's speech preserves in suspension fatal male links of connection between the dead, because for both death came poured into the ears [...] (AMARAL, 2005, p. 03-04).

The narrator of Mula-Marmela is a cultured, literate individual, not belonging to the village, as "I am from outside" makes clear, who listens to the story through the voice of the community, because, because Mula-Marmela is marginalized, he is not allowed to speak. However, this narrator is not limited only to what he hears from the community – differing from Maria Mutema's narrator, who does not clarify to the reader the motivations for the crimes – since, in an omniscient look, he is able to see, interpret and sympathize with the character's actions, seeing beyond its dirt and misery, and questions the city and, also, the readers, pointing out the ingratitude of all in the face of Mula-Marmela's benevolent attitudes:

> [...] But when she killed her husband, without knowing the clear and external reason, everyone here breathed, and blessed God. Now, we could live in peace, the evil had leaked out, so fortunately suddenly. O Mumbungo; That was the one who had to revolt to another place, it was like a soul that fell into hell. But they did not reward her, the Mule-Quince; on the contrary: they left it in the mockery of being aimed at bitterness, and in mute misery, for here it is [...]. (ROSA, 2005, p. 164).

About this narrator of the short story "A benfazeja", Betina R. R. da Cunha (2009) states that he is

> [...] a mixture of interlocutor and critical conscience of a backcountry community, [...] reconstructs the history of beings, marginalized by social difference and indifference and who, however, painfully represent the gaps of objective reality and existential disrespect. (CUNHA, 2009, p. 144).

It is verified that the marginalization of Mula-Marmela, in addition to being motivated by the lack of understanding of the other characters, can also be understood by the fact that she is portrayed as a sorceress in some moments of the narrative, for example, when the narrator describes how the character made Retrupé go blind, by making use of "[...] milks and powders, from plants, poisons that they secretly remove, regain vision, from eyes that should not see [...]" (ROSA, 2005, p. 166). In relation to this, Marina Ambrozio Galindo Rolim (2010) states that "[...] Marmela is compared to sorceresses and witches, women endowed with magical powers and spells who are generally persecuted and removed, by exile or death, from the places where they live" (ROLIM, 2010, p. 82).

It is observed that, when narrating the story, the narrator strives to show that Mula-Marmela does not have the bad nature like her husband's, as if trying to demonstrate that a reversal of evil into good is possible. The character represents the "necessary evil", as shown at the end of the tale, in which, after murdering her stepson, she removes a dead dog from the ground and hugging it leaves the city, to die soon after. According to Ana Paula Pacheco (2006), "[...] Transformed by the residents into their expiatory victim, she is at that moment the pestilential animal she carries in her arms – [...] to give her a grave (since both would have no place in the soil of the community), so that the disease does not spread through the village" (PACHECO, 2006, p. 134-135).

This reversal of evil is also present in Maria Mutema, because, after confessing her crimes, she seems to be really repentant, since "[...] He did not eat, he did not settle down, always on his knees, crying out for his remorse, asking for forgiveness and punishment, and for everyone to come to spit in his face and slap him. That she – he exclaimed – all this deserved [...]" (ROSA, 2006, p. 226). In the face of this repentance, the people show compassion for Maria Mutema and believe that she was becoming a saint. It is noted that the liberation from evil and, therefore, from the character occurs through speech, and it is interesting that, in the same way that he practiced evil, he got rid of it. As Galvão points out,

> Maria Mutema's two crimes are, formally, one. The crime is carried out by introducing something into the brain through the ear canal, something that solidifies or consolidates, and kills [...].
> At the same time, Maria Mutema frees herself from evil in the same way: by speaking, that is, by introducing her public confession into the ears of the people [...]. (GALVÃO, 1986, p. 120).

It is verified that, although Maria Mutema apparently has no motive to commit the crimes, when she confesses to them, she receives the support of the community. As the narrator states, "[...] the people forgave her, they came to give her words of consolation, and together they prayed [...]" (ROSA, 2006, p. 227). Mula-Marmela, on the other hand,

who acted with the intention of protecting the other characters – the "necessary evil", has no compassion from anyone, leaving her with loneliness and abandonment:

> And she was leaving, bitter, without having to say goodbye to anyone, stumbling and tired. Without offering her even any spontaneous alms, you saw her depart: what the goat's expedition figured – her expiation. Ugly, stealthy, wolf, so thin. You, from your decreed hearts, expelled her [...]. (ROSA, 2005, p. 169).

Despite the differences in relation to the types of crimes and the motives for committing them, Maria Mutema and Mula-Marmela are similar in that they represent two women who, when murdering their husbands, take over the direction of their lives, not resigning themselves to accepting the impositions instituted on women by tradition. As Amaral points out,

> The two elements of *evil*, the fictitious status of women, in the images of Mutema and Marmela, present themselves, each in their own way, to undo something, in a tenuous balance, in the story staged by men in petrified and brutalized social roles. Hardened within millennial precepts, such men would walk to the limit of the group arrangement if another presence did not divert the restoration of chaos, giving continuity to life in common [...]. (AMARAL, 2005, p. 05).

Although these women chose to undo the social ties to which they were bound, their stories are still told and retold by men. In the novel *Grande sertão: veredas*, Riobaldo listens to the narrative of Maria Mutema de Jõe Bexiguento, but the character has the possibility to speak, thus, as mentioned earlier, that he frees himself from crimes.

The stories of Maria Mutema and Mula-Marmela highlight the hinterland portrayed by Guimarães Rosa, in which the concepts of good and evil are always intertwined, and the oscillation between one and the other is part of the nature of the human being. And it is this mixture of things that runs through the entire narrative of *Grande sertão: veredas*, always disturbing the character Riobaldo, as he states before the report on Maria Mutema,

> [...] That this has always been what has invoked me, you know: I need the good to be good and the ruin ruin, that on one side there be black and on the other white, that the ugly be well separated from the beautiful and joy away from sadness! I want all pastures demarcated... How can I do with this world? Life is ungrateful in the softness of itself; but it brings hope even from the midst of the gall of despair. To which, this world is very mixed... (ROSA, 2006, p. 221).

The episodes lived by Maria Mutema were told by the character Jõe Bexiguento, who showed himself to be a gunman who did not believe in the mixture inherent to the world, as the narrator Riobaldo presents him, "[...] in the sense of his nature, there was no mixture in this world – things were well divided, separated" (ROSA, 2006, p. 221). However, throughout the narrative of *Grande sertão: veredas,* Riobaldo provides a lot of evidence of how complex the human being is, even in the vision he has about who he really is – "[...]

The gunman Riobaldo. Was it me? I went and I didn't go. I didn't go! – because I'm not, because I don't want to be. God be so!" (ROSA, 2006, p. 216).

It is noted, then, that the stories of Maria Mutema and Mula-Marmela show the mixture, transformation and fragmentation inherent to human life, because, as the character Riobaldo points out, "Mr. ... Look and see: the most important and beautiful thing in the world is this: that people are not always the same, they have not yet been finished – but that they are always changing [...]" (ROSA, 2006, p. 23).

Before concluding this study, it is important to highlight the meanings of the characters' names, since they contribute to their analysis. In the name Mutema, Guimarães Rosa managed to create an antonym, as evidenced by Galvão, for the meaning of *phoneme* – "sound of the voice" – by adding the root *mut* – mute, that is, Mutema would be the one that does not have a voice. It is observed that this meaning of the name is related to the fact that the character keeps the secret of her crimes, changing this situation only when she decides to speak, in order to free herself, "[...] sharing the weight of the secret among all, abandoning her condition as a Mutema and beginning to become a saint [...]" (GALVÃO, 1986, p. 128).

It is verified that, in order to achieve forgiveness and the support of society, the character needs to return to the position of Mutema, that is, silencing herself and seeking self-flagellation, and also, as Cleusa Passos (2000) points out, returning to religion,

> Thus, one accepts Mutema's *non-knowledge*, the obscure law by which he 'proceeded and thought', his terrible acts are accepted in exchange for a return to religion, 'reconnecting', whose double role of reconnecting it to the camp and to God allows the preservation of the illusory, that is, religion continues to provide *meaning* to reality and prevents the *re-elaboration* of the transgressive act. (PASSOS, 2000, p. 149).

Regarding the name Mula-Marmela, Pacheco says that

> [...] 'Marmela' alludes to a violent character (present in 'stick-of-quince') and to the popular meaning of 'quince' – deceiver, libertine, individual who practices bad actions. 'Mule', a beast of burden, also brings in Minas Gerais the sense of rock crystal, a clean block of quartz used therapeutically [...]. (PACHECO, 2006, p. 135).

It is understood, then, that the name Mula-Marmela associates both violence, verified in the way the character carries out the crimes, and her benevolent character, when she murders her husband and stepson to prevent them from continuing to do evil, becoming, as the title of the story itself highlights, the benefactor, that is, the one "who practices or provides good" (HOUAISS, 2011, p. 120). The character's name "[...] it also confirms the heroic destiny of Mula-Marmela, as if, inexplicably and intuitively, she had been chosen to

fulfill an emblematic and sacralized role, in the merciless execution" (CUNHA, 2009, p. 146).

The narratives of Mula-Marmela and Maria Mutema show that women, when they decide to tread their own paths, not submitting to male domination, end up being punished, even when they act for the common good, as is the case of Mula-Marmela, or when they have the support of the community, as is the situation of Maria Mutema. These characters are no longer allowed to live in society, and, therefore, they need to be isolated, by imposition of the city itself or by the intervention of the courts. And it is up to the narrators to tell and retell the stories of these enigmatic characters, thus seeking to understand the motives behind the crimes they committed.

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