

Bride of New France: A Literary View about the Insertion of Women along the Colonization Period

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Abstract

*This paper analyzes the theme of the insertion of white European women in New France, during the seventeenth century, seen by the literary prism. At that time a large number of young girls were recruited in Europe with the objective of marrying, raising a family and bearing children in America. They were known as the “King’s daughters”. Based upon the novel *Bride of New France*, by the Canadian writer Suzanne Desrochers, we emphasized the peripheral and fictional vision of the main character Laure Beauséjour about the first years of colonization in New France and also analyzed if the fictional discourse differs or is similar to the historical one about this American past.*

Keywords: American colonization, Mediation Contemporary Historical Novel, King’s daughters, Suzanne Desrochers, Female authorship writing.

1. Introduction

During the colonization period of the New World, many countries used to send men to start the colonization. However, as time went by, many of them were anxious to return to their homeland due to the fact that they felt alone. A measure taken to try to keep the settlers in the land to be conquered was to send also women so that they had company and raised a family. These women were generally white, virgins and had European background. The men, who were rewarded with such possibility, belonged to the upper bourgeoisie or had more elevated job titles. Literature benefited from such events and blended history with fiction, what ended up giving shape to the hybrid narratives known as historical novel. Some literatures, like the Brazilian, the North American and the Canadian recreated the history of the insertion of the women in the New World.

In the Brazilian Literature, we have the novel *Desmundo*, by Ana Miranda (1996), as an example of such historical theme recreated by fiction. Miranda presents the “orphans of the Queen” who were sent from Portugal to Brazil in the sixteenth century. The protagonist of this novel is Oribela de Mendo Curvo and the author exposes her tough journey as well as her impressions of the New World. She also narrates Oribela’s marriage with the nobleman Francisco de Albuquerque, mentions her two attempts to escape to return to Portugal, talks about her affair with the moor Ximeno Dias, and approaches the birth of the illegitimate child and the abandonment by her husband, who returns to Portugal with the child. To Oribela, the insertion in this New World happened against her will and in a traumatic way as it is shown in this hybrid literary piece. Concerning this theme, in the United States of America, we have the novel *To Have and to Hold*, by Mary Johnston (2016). She addresses in it the theme of Jamestown colonization during the seventeenth century, and to be more specific, in the year of 1622. The British government sent eighty young women because the country needed to be populated.

Each of them cost, on average, 80 pounds of tobacco, what used to be the cost of the journey. In this novel we are presented to Ralph Percy's story. He was a settler who was feeling lonely and, because of that, decided to get married. He chose a woman who also accepted him as a husband. She was Jocelyn Leigh and had run away from England because she had no intention of marrying her suitor, Lord Carnal, who was chosen by the King. The abandoned fiancé shows up in Jamestown looking for his fiancée. After a large number of fights and quarrels between Ralph and Lord Carnal, who had the English Crown support, plus the great attack of the natives over the British settlers in the year of 1622 that decimated a third of the English population, Ralph and Jocelyn fall in love and are able to live together as husband and wife in the New World, the actual territory of the United States of America.

In the Canadian Literature, we have the novel *Bride of New France*, by Suzanne Desrochers (2013). She addresses the insertion theme of the king's daughters, in New France, actual Canada, in the seventeenth century. The protagonist, Laure Beauséjour is sent to New France as a form of punishment for having escaped the orphanage and having written a letter to King Luis XIV reporting the lack of food in the orphanage and the difficulty in arranging a husband. After an almost two-month-journey, the king's daughters disembark in the new land to be colonized. To marry a settler and raise a family with many kids was their role. With that measure, the settlers would not return to their homeland, but they would remain in New France and assure the possession of the land. Having the advantage of choosing the husband, Laure elects Mathurin to be her spouse. He has a one-room house and it is in poor condition. As months go by, Laure realizes she married a weak man, who does not like to work, and betrays her with the native women. Her accounts of the first years of marriage show us a life of difficulty, with hunger and cold. In many moments she survived because of the native Deskaheh, who brought food to her doorstep. With her husband being absent most of time, because of his job, and Deskaheh always being so near and present in the harsh moments, Laure has an affair with the native. From this betrayal, a girl named Luce is born. Mathurin dies frozen in a river. Without husband and unable to raise her daughter, once the French government had not spent money with the young women to bear illegitimate children, Laure gives her child away to the father and tries to restart her life in search of another husband, a white French settler.

Based on this theme, the insertion of women in the New World, we aim to make an analysis of the hybrid narrative *Bride of New France*, to emphasize the peripheral and fictional vision of the main character Laure Beauséjour about the first years of colonization in New France, to present the king's daughters who took part in the immigration process and to analyze if the fictional discourse differs or is similar about this American past.

2. Bride of New France: A Mediation Contemporary Historical Novel Analysis.

The stories about colonization always emphasized the reports elaborated by the European settlers. In this way, the men, holders of the power, were able to report the ongoing events based on their point of view and the women were generally excluded.

During the first decades of colonization of America, the white women were not very present. The settlers had the habit of living with the native women, had a disorderly life and bore illegitimate children who they often did not recognized. As a preventive measure, it was necessary to bring white women to the New World. However, they were submissive and played their part: took care of the house and the husband, and had to bear children to populate the country. These women lived by their husband's shade. Consequently, the only known view about it written in the History Manuals was the man's one.

Starting from this reality, literature has the chance to offer another version of the same history and often in a more meaningful way. The novelist presents another prism of what may have possibly happened during the initial decades of colonization in New France, actual Canada, but it was not exposed by the official version of the History because the considered accounts taken as a possible perspective of this past were those of a woman. Our protagonist, the young Laure Beauséjour, exposes her arrival version, her impressions of the land and of the people she found, how her marriage was and the fear of being at the mercy of the Iroquois attacks. The way she was inserted is deeply shown by the art of fiction.

This narrative, which blends History and fiction, is a deconstruction written piece about the ways past was registered. The third person narrator reveals all the difficulties faced by the King's daughter in a region where there was little comfort, it was in the early days of its development and it was extremely cold. Aspects concerning normal life and hard ways to survive in this new land are shown in a way the brave white settlers, estimated men of courage who wrote the History in that time, would never do.

From the beginning, Laure runs away from the orphanage, the Salpêtrière Hospital, and goes up to Hôtel-Dieu where her friend Mireille is interned. The sick girl would be sent to New France under the status of a King's daughter, but she did not want to leave her homeland. As a consequence of this forced exit, Mireille develops a fever, is delirious, speaks about boats and a trip, but passes away. There, by her dead friend, Laure listens to horrible things about Canada and the young women who are sent there:

'Canada? Well, it's just as well she died, then.' The young nurse looks down at Mireille's body. 'Terrible. Just because we don't know what to do with them here doesn't mean they deserve to be sent over there to freeze in the forest (Desrochers, 2013, p. 32).

Laure finds out it is better to die than to be sent to Canada, and she also learns about the climate, which is very cold, and that the young girls sent there, generally from orphanages, were useless and a burden to the French government.

About the fact of being seen as a burden, Runyan (2010) explains this in a detailed manner: "Sending these women, while costly, proved an efficient way to the colonists and, in some cases, reducing the burden of women who were dependent on the state" (Runyan, 2010, p. 34). Since many young girls did not have any dowry, sending them to Canada would be a great way to reduce the expenses. Besides that, they would also serve the French crown by marrying the settlers, bearing children to ensure the possession of the new land, and so forcing the settlers to stay in Canada.

Regarding the historical period in which the King's daughters were in evidence, Zug (2016) points out the reason of the women's regimentation:

Between 1663 and 1673, nearly eight hundred Frenchwomen immigrated to New France as brides for the male colonists. Known as the *filles du roi*, or "King's daughters", these women were recruited to help solve the colony's population problem. The colony had spent years of hoping to increase immigration, but most French perceived Canada as remote and dangerous and had no interest in immigrating (Zug, 2016, p. 30).

Zug (2016) mentions the French government of King Louis XIV was engaged in every aspect of the program and the journey. For example, he paid for the transportation up to the colony. Additionally, he offered a dowry, which ranged from fifty to a hundred livres, the financial currency at the time.

Yalom (2002) asserts that marriage in the past was not an affair of the heart, but a kind of negotiation. "Men would wed women who had dowries; women would wed men who could support them" (Yalom, 2002, p. XIV). In addition to it, she states "it was a husband's duty to provide for his wife. She, in turn, was expected to provide sex, children, and housekeeping" (Yalom, 2002, p. XIV). Since it was hard for the orphans to have a dowry, when the French government offered to provide it, many of them considered themselves extremely lucky and embraced the idea of being a King's daughter.

Through the narrative *Bride of New France* we know that each woman received a trunk with her trousseau for the immediate needs, such as needle, fabric and scissors, a dowry of hundred livres and the paid journey. By reading the book, we are able to visualize that the trousseau and the trip are provided, but we never hear about the dowry paid to the husband. After Laure marries, we have the information that she does not trust the King's providence, but her husband does. While for the women the dowry was specified in one hundred livres, for the men was fifty livres. We can already see they were deceived. Also, while the husband waited for some financial help during the first year of marriage, Laure has less faith in the generosity of the King.

In the beginning of this hybrid narrative we notice there is a deal between the orphanage and the King to send young women to New France. According to our narrator, "the purpose of their agreement with the King, after all, was to send the worst possible women from the hospital to Canada" (Desrochers, 2013, p. 81). Laure is an example of these women. Although, she was great at needlework, she had disobeyed the rules and was considered insolent. Historically speaking, the women sent had three backgrounds: "the residents of the Salpêtrière charity hospital in Paris, the rural women from various provinces of France, and the women of noble classes and the upper bourgeois" (Runyan, 2010, p. 33). Laure belongs to the first group, which ended up creating suspicion about her conduct, for the Salpêtrière was a place where the most miserable women and prostitutes lived. In fact, all outcasts were placed there. Laure's own husband, Mathurin, judged his wife. In the village, he listened to people say that "the women from the General Hospital are diseased. That's why they can't have children" (Desrochers, 2013, p. 226). The angelical aura of good girls, coming from France, was gone.

This detrimental situation had already started along the journey. After a storm, the girls from Salpêtrière and the ones who had some dowry and were searched in Normandie to marry more prominent man were “sprawled across the floorboards like an abandoned doll collection” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 96). Even being King’s daughters, they did not have any privilege and were thrown where there was space. The only right thing was that they were leaving behind their country and “they are turning themselves into colony wives even now they sleep on the sea” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 101).

As they go down the St. Lawrence River and dock in Québec, Laure has her first vision of Canada: “The town is high above the river, and dense forest rises from the shore to meet it” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 125), “houses have been built around the religious and Royal edifices” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 125), “the fort is surrounded by a stone wall” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 126) and “the whole town isn’t just much bigger than the grounds of the Salpêtrière” (Desrochers, 2013, pp. 126-127). The place seems to be apparently developed, but Laure will not reside there. She will leave for Ville-Marie, a place where the women “don’t get chosen to marry men at Québec” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 132). We can interfere that, at this point, the hybrid narrative agrees with historiography.

According to Zug (2016), “when the filles du roi agreed to immigrate, they were promised the right to choose their partner and the right to refuse any suitor” (Zug, 2016, p. 41). Laure chooses to marry Mathurin, a *courer de bois* and small farmer. However, History does not explicit how they were. In the fiction, many spoke a language that sounded like “the snarl of fighting dogs” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 148). Added to this, Mathurin was ugly and illiterate, because in his marriage certificate he did not sign it. He only made an X. Subsequently, we also learn he was lazy for work and he was disloyal to his wife with the native women.

Many of the settlers had come under a contract. Runyan (2010) says that “male immigrants could work for three years to pay off their transport and lodging” (Runyan, 2010, p. 34). After this period, some would return and others would choose to stay.

A large number of men were also *courer de bois*. They were “supported by a fur trading company, wandered over the forests instead of sailing over the sea, and led adventurous lives inimical to domesticity, in friendly contact with the savages who supplied them with the only article of trade they dealt in” (Douglas, 1912, p. 6). Mathurin was one of these traders, except that instead of searching for furs, he liked to spend time with the native women. While he was being well fed by them, Laure experienced a great deal of difficulty with the intensive cold and lack of food.

On the way to Ville-Marie, Laure understands about the deficiency of the country under development. It was infested by insects. Some women even cried because of the infestation. Others disembarked on the shore of the river and had to walk through the forest up to their new homes. The trip lasted a week, what brings us the idea that Ville-Marie was a village far away from the developed colony, and, consequently, the easiest one for the Iroquois attacks.

Laure also realizes that the natives wanted to take advantage of the French people. Although the Jesuits tried to convert them to Christianity, they were nothing but greedy traders, who wanted to benefit from the white French settlers. If she could, “Laure would gladly board a ship back to France” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 146). Unfortunately, there is no way back for the King’s daughters because they have arrived in Canada, and there they will die. At this point of Desrochers’ hybrid narrative we can see that it is similar to Miranda’s Brazilian tale in *Desmundo* – the female characters wish to return to their homeland, but it is out of question: they are confined in this new world and this sort of life is now their destiny.

Another critical issue in the narrative is the way men see the women, who arrived weakened from the sea journey. Laure listens to one of the man saying: “What did they send us? These are the weakest ones yet. It’ll take more to revive them than the work they’ll do in a lifetime” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 147). As reported by Laure, the settlers were more interested in supplies and weapons to fight the Iroquois than in the women the King set to them. There, in Ville-Marie, the furthest colony station, she hears that “the best-looking and healthiest women were chosen to stay at Québec” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 161). She senses she has been used for a purpose and nothing else. Laure arrives in Ville-Marie in July of 1669 and gets married in October of 1669, three months after her arrival, but she will reside in a settlement called Pointe-aux-Trembles. For Zug (2016), “they waited an average of five months before marrying” (Zug, 2016, p. 41). On the way to Mathurin’s cabin, Laure’s husband makes plans, but she looks for traces of her past in the frozen view. We interpret he thinks of the future, while she has in mind her life in France and the dream of being a seamstress.

Mathurin's house has only one room, where we can find a table and some chairs, a bed in one corner, and an open firepit in the middle of the cabin, which smells sour leather and rotten meat. If Laure considered the orphanage a bad place, her new house was worse. Runyan (2010) informs us that the houses were built of wood and how common was to have an open firepit in the house, because it was the kitchen center and "one of the primary tasks in the home was keeping the fire burning steadily at all times" (Runyan, 2010, p. 75). The fire would evidently hold people warm.

Laure feared the forest, plus she did not like to stay home alone. She even begged her husband to go along with him when he searched for animal skins, but "he had laughed at her pleas" (Desrochers, 2016, p. 201). During the time her husband is away, Laure experiences harsh moments of necessity. For instance, she needs to save her candle or she will not have light inside her house. Furthermore, she is not well seen by her neighbors, the Tardifs, because she does not bear any children and has the habit of sewing dresses, a useless clothing item in the colony because there are no parties to attend, just work to be done.

The absence time of the husband is not stated by the official version of history and how the women survived through it, is not either. On the other hand, the narrative in study exposes one of the husband's absences as a period of one hundred and twenty-six days and that the wife almost starved. From the second winter on, they were able to survive better because they had more experience with the cold and the dried food.

The native Deskaheh, who was always nearby Laure, is who helps the young woman to survive during the winter. He brings food to her, kills a deer and places it by her door. Other times, he brings some corn mush. Thanks to him, she does not starve and freeze to death. Due to this proximity, Laure has a love affair with the native. From this betrayal, a girl named Luce is born.

In the narrative, the French government was an avid encourager of kids, but not illegitimate ones. Williams (1976) states the government encouraged large families and "gave bounties of three hundred livres per year of living families of ten and four hundred livres to family of twelve or more" (Williams, 1976, p. 34). The more children the families had, the more money the French Crown would donate. However, the child that had been born through Laure could not be considered legitimate because she was the crossbreeding of a white French woman and a native.

Laure's husband freezes to death in a river on his way to see the wife who was in natural childbirth process. With his death and unable to raise a child who had indigenous features, Laure is forced to give the child away. The father buys his own daughter for the price of two animal skins, and gives the baby to another native woman to be raised, just like the war prisoners when they are taken into custody.

Laure Beauséjour is now a widow and the mother of a stillborn child, as she announced. She tries to continue her life working in Madame Rouillard's inn, until she finds another suitor to marry.

In this interpretative analysis, we find an inversion of the hegemonic historiographic discourse. The reductionist vision of phallogocentric writing is questioned by the female authorship writing of Suzanne Desrochers. We run into a hybrid narrative with high content of social criticism about the choice of the King's daughters and their insertion in the French colony.

This narrative is built through the blending of History and fiction without a doubt. Among the historical categories, *Bride of New France* presents the characteristics of Mediation Contemporary Historical Novel, detected by Fleck (2011), establishing some important differences with the New Latin American Historical Novel and the Historical Metafiction, which are much more deconstructionist ways of revisiting the past by Literature.

First, Fleck (2011) reports that the Mediation Contemporary Historical Novel rereads the past critically and keeps the likelihood. The narrator shows us, through Laure, another version of the King's daughters coming to New France. It is revealed the husband's betrayal with the naïve women imposed on the wife, and the abandon of the child Luce to a native woman who would raise her. Such facts are presented in the following way: "She has been hungry for weeks" (Desrochers, 2013, p. 208); "He's no different from others. They prefer the filles sauvages over their own wives" (Desrochers, 2013, p. 210); and "She wonders what you want in return. For the baby. [...] Will Laure add this exchange, giving away her daughter, to her recollection of losses and carry on?" (Desrochers, 2013, p. 286). There is a revisiting to the past by means of this hybrid narrative.

Second, according to Fleck (2011) “the fictitious reading tries to follow the chronological order of events created [and] the return of linearity is directly linked to the less experienced reader and less specialist, which such books try to conquer” (Fleck, 2011, p. 91 – our translation). The novel highlights the events that took place in a linear way: the departure from the orphanage in France; the harsh journey; the arrival, the marriage, the winter, the husband’s trips to search for animal pelt; Laure’s pregnancy; her love affair with the native Deskaheh; Mathurin’s death; the abandonment of the child; and the restart of Laure’s life by Madame Rouillard’s side, the inn owner and midwife in the colony. The manner the events are mentioned helps the reader with less experience.

Third, “The narrative thread, which shares purposes of the new History, privileges peripheral visions in relation to big events and historical characters, as many of the new historical novels and historiographic metafiction” (Fleck, 2011, p. 92 – our translation).

In the narrative, we have the reports of the narrator who makes another point of view possible to be examined in relation to the colonization of New France. The official History discourse that cemented the tensions with an uncritical discourse is laid aside; and the prism of the orphan Laure, who was forced to assume a role, is put into evidence.

Fourth, it is made use of a friendly and smooth language. The sentences are generally short, elaborated in direct approach, and with a vocabulary commoner than the one directed to erudite audience. These types of books also focus on the narrative thread and, in many cases, modernize the language of the past trying to bring the language closer to their readers, explains Fleck (2011). In *Bride of New France* we find some examples, such as: “The King will take care of us this year, my wife” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 195).

Fifth, Fleck (2011) points out those tools like parody and intertextuality are present. In *Bride of New France*, we observe the narrator uses parody, a debauched form to show the inversion of roles, in many moments along the narrative, like: “How can we marry these women? They can hardly stand up. Look at them, not a single bosom or hip between all of them, and they’re expected to produce children. You haven’t brought us helpmates. You’ve given us another burden” (Desrochers, 2013, p. 149). From exalted women of ‘royal lineage’, they were reduced to a heavy burden. The beauty of benefiting from King Luis XIV’s protection is shattered and their degrading condition is exposed.

Besides that, we also notice that the intertextuality happens due to the historic context present in the hybrid narrative. It is France colonizing a new territory — new France, actual Canada — and the King’s daughters being sent as brides to the French settlers.

The sixth and last characteristic of the Mediation Contemporary Historical Novel is the “use of metanarration tools, or comments by the narrator about the writing process of the book” (Fleck, 2011, p. 93 – our translation).

We notice that not all the characteristics are exposed, as, for example, this last one; however, most of them are present in this hybrid narrative. We understand it is a much more critical reading because of the time distance in the book in relation to the time it is inserted, what makes possible for the past to be retold in a more credible way and not so much idealized.

3. Conclusion

When analyzing comparatively the historic events spread by the phallogocentric society along with the narrative in study, we encounter an inversion of happenings and their destabilization. Although the official version of History presents us with a glorified prism or the program, the narrator’s voice of the hybrid novel shows us it is possible to conceive another version of the facts. Laure, with her deconstructionist discourse, uncovers the disadvantages of a project that tried to help colonizing a territory. Hunger, cold and the presence of the Iroquois are considered constant danger. She describes that living in the New France is to depend on other people’s kindness.

In accordance with Albuquerque and Fleck (2015), “a critical reading can be established by many different ways from which fiction uses to revisit the past in search of other possible versions for the existing facts” (Albuquerque & Fleck, 2015, p. 7 – our translation). In this way, Laure is an example of a character that provides us a possibility to revisit the past. To these previously mentioned authors, Albuquerque and Fleck (2015, p. 15 – our translation), “History and fiction are set side by side, in a relation sometimes very intriguing, but with something in common: their constitution, in a distinct way, permeated by the subjective reality of each ‘speaker’, generating new discourses through times”.

It is the report of Laure about Canada that allows us to have some extra knowledge about how the colonization would have happened if it were told by a woman. Her critical view exhibits a New France far from perfect. We understood that Desrochers (2013) brings forward a narrative that in many moments is compatible with the registries pointed out by the official History, such as, the coming of French women, the harsh journey, and the financial help employed in the transportation, trousseau, and large families. Yet, Desrochers displays the reports of a woman; the adversities faced by her, like the husband's absence for months, the lack of food and the cold. Such facts were not exposed openly before. Maybe because it was intended not to scare the King's daughters away and provoke a decrease in the number of the ones who were coming to New France, actual Canada.

Apart from all the adversities faced by the King's daughters, they were definitely a vital part of New France Colonization. Even though, they were socially outcast, the brides were brave enough to leave the city behind and face an isolated area in the New World. They gave their lives away to fulfill the French Crown purpose and became founding mothers of a nation, claims Runyan (2010). The fictional point of view does not exclude the historical one, but it allows us to think about some other perspectives upon which History could be registered. This increases the reader's critical sense by considering that what we know about the past by History is what a certain part of the society wanted to be consigned as facts.

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