

Having read Nísia Floresta's *Humanitarian opuscle* in its entirety, the book is representative of many aspects of the female condition. It represents the desire for equality and emancipation, followed by the search for societal acceptance and recognition. Not only does the book itself present various points of discussion, the context in which it was produced and Floresta's own socialization as a woman present another level of depth to be explored. Through this essay, I would like to analyze its proposals, paradoxes and the current day relevance of the debates in which it is inserted.

Firstly, I would like to contextualize this book's reputation in Brazil. Nísia Floresta's *Humanitarian opuscle* was selected as mandatory reading for Fuvest 2026 along with eight other female writers, a choice which caused much uproar both within Brazil's academic circles and among the country's society at large. Many claimed that a solely female cast of authors represented a lack of diversity and was a forced and unnecessary attempt at promoting inclusion.

The first accusation reveals how womanhood in itself is seen as a defining characteristic, which overrides all other aspects of a person's identity. Upon closer observation, Fuvest's list of mandatory reading was incredibly diverse: it included authors from Moçambique, Angola, Portugal and Brazil, as well as from a myriad of time periods and literary genres. However, this variety was simply invisible to those who criticized this decision.

The idea that women invariably occupy a position of otherhood in opposition to men's neutrality was explored by Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most influential philosophers of the existentialist movement. She described how, as a consequence of male dominance within the production of knowledge, much of the philosophy which is considered canonical, including that which was supposed to describe the universal human experience, was built exclusively from a male perspective. As a direct result of this imbalance, while men are understood as neutral and universal, women are specific and, therefore, defined by their gender. This impacts their ability to define their own existence in accordance to their own ambitions and desires, since the society they occupy already possesses a network of gendered expectations of how they should act and who they should be. By becoming conscious of this conditioning, Beauvoir defended that women should aim to build a type of femininity which differed from how it was societally constructed and understood.

Similarly to Beauvoir, Nísia Floresta's defense of women's education had the potential to promote women's emancipation from the societal roles they are expected to perform. However, she constantly reinstates that it is important for women to be educated so as not to be influenced by the "corruption of society" and to be able to "purify her heart" in accordance to Christian values and morals. She argues that this will benefit society as a whole because women would become better wives and mothers, leading their husbands and children to also act morally. This reflects how a woman's role in society is seen as that of a nurturer and caregiver, someone who is meant to serve the men in her life instead of acting in her own interest.

Although this unwavering defense of female submission made reading her work a bit frustrating, I find it interesting to analyze the context in which this book was written. Had Floresta chosen to bluntly defend women's emancipation, the probability of her proposal being well received would have been extremely low. Taking this into consideration, there is a

possibility that she actively chose to hide her desire of promoting female autonomy behind the veil of preserving religious values as a way to be more positively received.

Despite not having a way of proving whether she was in favor of women's emancipation, Floresta's work questioned several other societal norms. Something which stood out to me as I read the excerpt was the claim that women deviate from morality as a result of society's corruption. Although this may not seem specially provoking, this simple claim directly opposes much of Christian tradition, which defends that women are inherently corrupt. According to the Bible, it was Eve's sin which led humanity to be banished from the Garden of Eden and began our eternal search for forgiveness. It was the woman's inherent tendency towards immorality that introduced suffering and hardship to the world. By claiming that the "corruption of society" is responsible for women's loss of morality, Floresta completely inverts the logic defended by the Christian Church: it is not the woman who corrupts society, it is society that corrupts the woman.

A similar inversion occurs when Floresta defends that men "arrest her intelligence" and "weaken her senses". Western philosophers from all time periods, from Ancient Greece, to the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance and to Modernity, almost invariably defended that women are simply born less capable than men. Be it because of their lack of physical strength or their inferior intellectual capacity, they are predisposed to be weaker, dumber and more irrational than their male counterparts. The pejorative term "hysterical", which originates from the Greek word for uterus, reflects this perfectly: simply being born with a uterus causes one to have less control over their feelings and actions. The claim that men are "always trying to arrest her intelligence, weaken her senses" implies that patriarchal structures are responsible for women's supposed inferiority, not human nature itself.

Even if this sense of inferiority is socially constructed, it is still internalized and reproduced, even by women themselves. Although this is not explicit in the selected excerpt of the book, one of its most defining characteristics are the constant references to other philosophers and authors, as well as mentions to erudite art and the use of foreign languages. These citations made Floresta's writing less accessible, but it reveals something which many women struggle with even today: the search for legitimacy and recognition. As a result of the historical exclusion of women from academia, these spaces and the production of knowledge itself have become permanently intertwined with masculinity. Consequently, women who attempt to participate in them have a difficult challenge to overcome: being recognized as a legitimate member of intellectual society. One of the most common ways this search for recognition materializes is the constant referencing to others who compose academia's canon. By associating oneself to someone who is understood as legitimate, one hopes to be deemed legitimate by proxy.

When I share my essays with others who are interested in writing and philosophy, one of the most common criticisms I receive is that I rely too much on the work of other authors. At first, I felt as if I simply didn't have original ideas that were worth writing about. However, I've come to realize that much of the reason as to why I seek to validate my opinions through the work of others is because I don't quite believe that what I have to say is valuable by itself. Although it is true that a lack of self-confidence is not restricted by gender, I believe that, as a result of societal conditioning, women tend to internalize our supposed inferiority, even without realizing it. Based in conversations I've had with women of all ages, it seems to me as though no matter how much external validation we receive, there is a part of us which is eternally insecure, that grows exponentially whenever we don't achieve our goals and makes

us question our own capabilities. I do not wish to imply that my experience is universal and applicable to all women, or else I would be doing the same thing as the philosophers Beauvoir criticized, but it is truly frustrating to see so many brilliant and admirable women struggling to recognize their own value.

This might sound a bit ironic, but I would like to cite a philosopher who contributed immensely to my understanding of my own experience as a woman: Judith Butler and the concept of gender as a performance. According to Butler, gender is not only a social construct (as defended by Beauvoir), but also something which is constantly performed by the individual. In this sense, to be a woman is not solely to have been designated a woman at birth or to identify oneself as a woman, but also to perform femininity through the way you dress, speak, act and exist. Instead of a monolithic and immovable concept of “woman”, there is a network of things which are identified as feminine. In this view, to be seen as a woman, one must associate oneself with this network of symbols or, in other words, *perform* as a woman.

When it comes to womanhood as an individual experience, understanding Butler’s framework of gender allows us to analyze the way we choose to perform our identity. It reveals how the relationships we form with others are influenced by societal conventions, norms of what we associate with femininity, such as kindness, sensibility and delicateness. Although these characteristics are in no way negative by themselves, they reflect how women are expected to occupy a position of submission and subservience. They are frequently read as weakness and futility, in direct opposition to masculinity’s strength and intelligence. Butler’s work helps to recognize the ways in which the patriarchal perspective is reproduced and, consequently, strengthened. If a woman is meant to be docile, women won’t want to rebel against the system that oppresses them.

Along with the expectation of female docility, contemporary society poses other obstacles to true emancipation. In his work about identitarianism, the Brazilian philosopher Douglas Barros defended that a marginalized group’s identity is defined by the marginalization they experience itself. In this sense, the shared identity of a collective can be utilized as a tool to mobilize a community so as to go against the societal structures which originate their oppression. However, this is combated through the individualist value system promoted by neoliberal capitalism, which incentivizes the search for personal success above collective action. This weakens social movements’ ability to unite, making it almost impossible to actively deconstruct the systems of oppression which they aim to oppose. When it comes to the feminist movement, instead of collective actions aiming to demolish an unequal system, we settle for small personal victories, such as the handful of women who are able to reach positions of political or economic power.

One of the reasons as to why I find gender to be one of the most interesting topics to discuss within a philosophical lens is because of how it is inserted into every single aspect of human identity. The way we present ourselves, relate to one another and how society itself is structured is intimately connected to what we associate with each form of gender expression. Not only that, the field of studies surrounding the intersectionality between gender, ethnicity, class and much more is extremely vast and could never be fully explored within a single essay. Still, I have attempted to scratch the surface, going over the othering of the woman in opposition to the neutral man, societal expectations surrounding womanhood, the search for recognition and legitimacy within academia, how gender manifests through our performance of it and, lastly, why it is so difficult to deconstruct all of these social structures. I am in no way

completely emancipated or free from the norms imposed upon me, but these discussions allow me to feel a bit more free.