

# In Eroticization of the religious in the poetry of Florbela Espanca

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## Resumo

Deus e religião em Florbela Espanca: um discurso de ambivalência e de (in)devida apropriação. Florbela Espanca nasceu em 1894 e morreu em 1930, um período agitado na História de Portugal que abarcou o declínio da Monarquia, a implementação da Primeira República e a emergência do que viria a ser o regime salazarista. Em paralelo, houve também várias oscilações na relação entre o Estado e a Igreja. Este artigo começa por apresentar indícios da conexão da autora com, por um lado, o seu tempo em termos históricos e religiosos e, por outro, a sua faceta pagã. Procedemos então para uma análise de alguns dos poemas das suas três últimas coleções – *Livro de Soror Saudade*, *Charneca em Flor* and *Reliquiæ* –, realçando sobretudo a presença de aspectos religiosos associados a metáforas de sexualidade, e substituindo assim a associação clássica entre a religião e o saudosismo na sua poesia.

**Palavras-chave:** Florbela Espanca; Primeira República; paganismo; sexualidade; religião.

## Abstract

God and religion in Florbela Espanca: a discourse of ambivalence and (mis)appropriation. Florbela Espanca was born in 1894 and died in 1930, a tumultuous period in Portuguese history that encompassed the decline of the Monarchy, the implementation of the First Republic and the emergence of what was to become the Salazarist regime. In parallel, there were many fluctuations in the relationship between Church and State. This paper begins by, on the one hand, addressing the connection between the author and her time in terms of history and religion, while considering her pagan facet on the other hand. What follows is an analysis of some of the poems of her last three collection – *Livro de Soror Saudade*, *Charneca em Flor* and *Reliquiæ* –, seeking to emphasize religious aspects linked to sexuality metaphors and, thus, to offer a fresher perspective in opposition to the classic association between religion and *saudosismo* in her poetry.

**Keywords:** Florbela Espanca; First Republic; paganism; sexuality; religion.

## 1. Introduction

Florbela Espanca lived through a turbulent political period in Portuguese history, the First Republic (1910-1926). Amongst other things, the regime was controversial in terms of its approach to the Church. The present study begins by addressing this issue, which is followed by a discussion of the pagan facet of Florbela's lyrical voice in opposition to the religious. The final and the lengthiest section concerns the discussion of the intertwinement of sexual and religious imagery in three of the poet's collections: *Livro de Soror Saudade*, *Charneca em Flor* and *Reliquiæ*. These are the last three published poetry works of the author which, I would suggest, convey a more mature image of the relationship between the sexual woman and the religious aspects of her time.

## 2. The First Republic

In accordance with its anticlerical attitude, the First Republic adopted strict measures in relation to the strong influence of the institution of the Church. In the opinion of Paul Christopher Manuel, this was one of the most successful enterprises of the administration, an affirmation that could be disputed (2002: 78). To the effect of capping the Church's control over the population, the Prime Minister at the time, Afonso Costa, instituted the well-known *Lei da Separação* (1911), whereby Church and State were made completely separate entities and the former was stripped of most of its power. Luís Aguiar Santos rationalizes this law in the following way: “uma tentativa de controlo administrativo de todas as actividades eclesiásticas, com a manutenção do mecanismo regalista do beneplácito” (2002: 17). While this position had a practical intent, namely to free the people from what the State considered to be a blind devotion to the Catholic Church and to allow them to have choices hitherto unimaginable – the act of divorce, for example –, it was, first and foremost, fuelled by the anticlerical Portuguese Freemasonry. The radicalism implied in shifting from the clergy as

the dominant force in the nation's psyche – something that worked remarkably well at a parish level, as Eça's *O Crime do Padre Amaro* (first published in its definitive version in 1880) mordantly demonstrates – to eradicating this in favour of a depersonalized political figure and centralized government was far from straightforward. Vitor Neto argues that:

Daí as razões de um combate infindável entre posições, que pareciam irreduzíveis, numa época em que a questão do combate contra o clero assumia grande relevância e ocupava o espaço mental das elites republicanas e de largos sectores das camadas populares. (2004: 27-8)

Neto's statement may be overambitious in declaring the support of a large part of the Portuguese population. Traditionally, Portugal had – and it could be argued that nowadays it is still the case – a divide between the macrocephalic capital, Lisbon, and the rest of the country, and between coastal and rural areas. This separation also reflected the position of the Church, which was stronger outside of Lisbon, and particularly inland, where progress usually arrived at a distinctively slow pace. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine “largos sectores das camadas populares”, little accustomed to change, to have readily accepted such a drastic overturning. In this context, Paul Christopher Manuel argues: “although there were cases of popular anticlericalism in Portugal, it should be noted that the anticlericalism under the First Portuguese Republic was found primarily among the political elite” (2002: 76). Furthermore, as the regime became more unsteady and the elites began to feel the instability and to express fear towards the current situation, their position also changed. It is Santos who stresses the crucial point that the Church, contrary to what the First Republic anticipated at first, was a force with which to be reckoned and that, this being the case:

Muitas pessoas nas elites secularizadas, convencidas já da dificuldade de desmantelar a Igreja e reduzir repentinamente a influência clerical, mostrar-se-iam até seduzidas pelo seu aparato dogmático, institucional e hierárquico, capaz de fornecer à sociedade uma superestrutura de valores e, a partir destes, uma uniformidade cultural muitas vezes contraposta, em termos de paradigma, à “desordem”. (2002: 18)

The alleged stability provided by the institution of the Church was one of many factors that, eventually, led to the demise of the First Republic and to the ascension of the Second Republic (1926) and the *Estado Novo* (1933), both with António de Oliveira Salazar as the prominent figure and both fundamentally pro-Church at their core.

### 3. Paganism

The historical outline provided above is not without relevance to Florbela Espanca as an author who lived through a time of socio-political change in Portugal and to the poetic subject in her poetry who, despite questioning the existence of one superior entity, frequently addresses a Catholic God in her quest. In “Florbela Espanca e a subversão de alguns topoi”, Isabel Allegro de Magalhães highlights:

Na poesia florbeliana existem frequentes marcas reveladoras da sua inserção num país de cultura católica. No entanto, vêmo-la escapar-lhes, procurando libertar-se de quaisquer amarras, religiosas e outras, que restrinjam a sua liberdade. Não é, contudo, sem hesitação que esses escapes se fazem, pois várias vezes a ouvimos falar de culpa, de blasfémia ou da sua situação de “perdida”. (1997: 224)<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Magalhães’s deliberation that the lyrical voice oscillates between the pagan who adores nature and the religious who searches for God – while pursuing Self and Other –, at times appropriating the God-like image to describe herself or the lover, makes a valid point. In relation to the overwhelming pantheism conveyed in some of the author’s sonnets and to “the sense of nature as a manifestation of the law”, Northrop Frye is illuminating: “Local deities of rivers, trees, mountains, along with the sun and the moon, are among the most primitive of divinities” (1991: 59). All of these mark their presence in Florbela’s

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Florbela has two sonnets titled “Minha Culpa” (*Charneca em Flor*, p. 343) and “Blasfémia” (*Reliquiae*, p. 369), and several of her poems allude to her status as *perdida*, one of which being “Fanatismo” (*Livro de Soror Saudade*, p. 262).

lyric and are employed by the poet to reveal a state of being.<sup>2</sup> Frye also underlines that, etymologically, a pagan is a peasant (*paganus*), and a wanderer (1991: 60). Florbela's poetry offers several examples of the *Judeu Errante* who does not know where he has come from and, least so, where he is headed. In *Livro de Soror Saudade*, the sonnet "Hora Que Passa" presents the "Judeu Errante que a ninguém faz dó!" (p. 292), whereas in *Charneca em Flor* the poetic subject affirms that it was exactly the "Mocidade" "que fez de [si] Judeu Errante" (p. 321). She borrows the image of the deserted wanderer with no homeland to portray her own feeling of abandonment and subsequent solitude. This yields to intense solipsism.

#### 4. Sexual and religious imagery

The last aspect to be considered before proceeding to an analysis of poems with specific semantics is the eroticization of the religious. According to Angélica Soares, even if obliquely so, Florbela's poetry has a social dimension when blending the two concepts:

A recuperação poética do carácter religioso do erotismo conduz a uma superação do estreitamento das religiões ocidentais, que sempre se empenharam em separar o sagrado do profano, situando neste último as manifestações do corpo e reunindo-se às noções de impureza e de mácula. E note-se ainda que o moralismo das instituições religiosas, ligado a estratégias de dominação masculina, acabaram por interditar, mais fortemente, à mulher, a vivência do desejo. (1997: 133)

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<sup>2</sup> There are numerous exemplary poems throughout the three collections of the present study, most of which in *Charneca em Flor*. Examples of such are "Charneca em Flor" (p. 299), "Espera" (p. 326), "Volúpia" (p. 328), "Sou Eu!" (p. 339) and "Panteísmo" (p. 340). Florbela, the author, also provides evidence of the belief in a pagan nature in her letters and diary. Pantheistic symbols abound in her poetry, a quality that she reiterates in her diary, in the entry dated 21 January 1930: "Não esgotei ainda, graças aos deuses, o arrepio de prazer, o estremecimento de entusiasmo, este *élan* quase divino, para tudo o que é belo, grande e puro: flor a abrir ou tinta de crepúsculo, raminho de árvore, ou gota de chuva, cores, linhas, perfumes, asas, todas as belas coisas que me consolam de resto. Serei eu apenas uma panteísta?" (2002: 258).

While not contending with the argument that the junction of the two prerogatives may be interpreted as a subversion of patriarchal dominance, it could nonetheless be suggested that this is a response to a personal, rather than social, need. As for the poetic subject, Magalhães observes the following: “[Ela está] a viver a sensualidade como elemento constitutivo da sua religiosidade” (1997: 225). Even when denying the existence of religion, she is still affirming it, as illustrated in the line: “E eu, que não creio em nada, sou mais crente” (“Anoitecer”, p. 275), in *Livro de Soror Saudade*.

#### 4.1 *Livro de Soror Saudade*

Florbela was born during the monarchic regime, lived through the First Republic and, in the last few years of her life, experienced the initial period of the rule of Oliveira Salazar, the chief-to-be of the *Estado Novo*. Coming from the inland region of Alentejo and not being part of the elites, one would suspect her not to be entirely persuaded by the anticlerical rule that characterized the First Republic. Moreover, she was actively writing when the later phase of the First Republic was instituted and when the Second Republic commenced, the two representing a gradual shift towards clericalism.<sup>3</sup> The author was, therefore, familiar with Catholic rituals. Despite the “beijos estáticos, pagãos” (“Exaltação”, p. 295), which will afterwards symbolize the awakening of an active predatory female sexuality, her poetry provides evidence of this acquaintance. In the poem

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<sup>3</sup> As Neto explains: “Durante a vigência da 1ª República existiram duas fases bastante diferenciadas: a primeira, entre 1910 e 1917, caracterizada pela ausência de relações políticas e diplomáticas com a Santa Sé e por uma verdadeira ‘guerra religiosa’ no conjunto do país; a segunda inaugurada pelo Sidonismo, após o reatamento das relações diplomáticas entre Portugal e o Vaticano” (2004: 17). In respect to Florbela, she writes in her diary, in an entry dated 3 August 1930: “Eu não sou católica, como não sou protestante nem budista, maometana ou teosofista. Não sou nada.” (2002: 274). Nonetheless, in another entry, dated 11 January 1930 and presented in a more recent version of her diary, she acknowledges her belief in God: “Deus malicioso e frívolo que tão lindos mantos teces sobre os ombros das mulheres que vivem. Para mim és um fantoche, ora amável ora rabugento, de que conheço todos os fios, de quem eu sei de cor todas as contorções” (1986: IV, 123). Furthermore, there are abundant references to God in her diary. For example, “Deus do Céu” (2002: 270), “Pelo amor de Deus” (2002: 274), “meu Deus” (2002: 276), “graças a Deus” (2002: 278) and “Deus lho pagará” (2002: 296).

“Sol Poente”, for instance, she makes reference to the rite of mass at the end of the day: “Tardinha... <<Avé-Maria, Mãe de Deus...>> | E reza a voz dos sinos e das noras...”. This is the time of the “cabeças mart’rizadas | [que] ficam pensativas... meditando...”, that moment of the day when, just as the evening is about to settle in, the pain of the poetic voice is most exacerbated (p. 294). Hence, it is associated with religious imagery appropriated by the subject in order to convey a concordant state of being. Considering the designation of *Soror Saudade*, Maria Lúcia Dal Farra highlights that:

Assumindo com convicção essa máscara poética propícia e convincente, ao mesmo tempo que com o título veste o hábito e se recolhe à sua cela, Florbela tem oportunidade de *vasculhar*, para conhecer, o que de recolhimento, de unção, de “hóstia comungada”, de humilhação e de renúncia o percurso amoroso encerra. A partir de então, o amor se revela via de martírio e de calvário, e a desistência do mundo, sondada agora no signo “convento”, encontra justificativa no uso poético anterior e posteriormente incisivo da sua “precoce velhice”. (1995: 45. Author’s italics.)

Conversely, it could be suggested that she employs religious symbolism to express negative feelings as a reaction to the oppression received from society and, intrinsically, the institutional Church itself, as a long-standing representative of the symbolic realm. Therefore, she reacts instinctively against what she perceives as an aggressive exertion of power. In “Ódio?”, her “olhar de monja, trágico, gelado” is “como um soturno e enorme Campo Santo” (p. 285). As the lover has departed and she undergoes a period of mourning in isolation, common icons of religiosity acquire a darker connotation. In “Cinzento”, there are:

Monges soturnos deslizando lentos,  
Devagarinho, em mist’riosos passos...  
Perde-se a luz em lânguidos cansaços...  
Ergue-se a minha cruz dos desalentos! (p. 279)

This is the cross of disillusionment, of an inevitable march to death, as she feels crucified by emotional scarring. In fact, with its strong image of intangibility conferred by terms such as *poeiras*, *fumo leve* and *névoa*, the poem may also be alluding to the weak foundations of both individual and religious feeling. The religious appropriation of the cross, itself a visual representation of the referential

horizontal and vertical axes, is recurrent in Florbela's poetry. Although broadly correlated with pain, it serves different purposes.<sup>4</sup> In "Renúncia", her youthfulness "passa dias, noites, sempre presa, | Olhos fechados, magras mãos em cruz...", a sacrificial scenario that is not sufficient for the lyrical subject to express her extreme condition of suffering. Hence, she addresses herself imperatively: "Prende os teu braços a uma cruz maior!". As time slowly elapses, she prays for a hastier death, the cure for the future of anguish she foresees. Yet:

Lá fora, a Noite, Satanás, seduz!  
 Desdobra-se em requintes de Beleza...  
 É como um beijo ardente a Natureza...(p. 286)

The poetic subject is fully alert to the world outside her confinement and is making an effort to abdicate from it, in an attempt to shield herself from agony. This is a form of *moral masochism*, as termed by Freud, "where the subject, as a result of an unconscious sense of guilt, seeks out the position of victim without any sexual pleasure being directly involved" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2004: 244-45). "Satanás", the one who, according to Catholic rhetoric, is the "supremo inimigo do ser humano, ao qual trata de manter sob a escravidão do pecado", is employed here as the irresistible seducer (A Bíblia, 2005: 83).<sup>5</sup> In actual fact, she is becoming the direct agent of self-inflicted pain, which leads to the lack of self-definition expressed in "Não sei o que em mim ri, o que em mim chora | Tenho bênçãos d'amor pra toda a gente!" ("Anoitecer", p. 275). Having been debilitated by pain and in need of protection, she cannot help but feel that there has been no retribution to all the *bênçãos d'amor* she has given. Chevalier and Gheerbrant suggest that "abençoar quer dizer, na realidade, santificar" (1994: 119). She feels

<sup>4</sup> The entry "cruz, crucificação", included in the appendix of the *Bíblia de Estudo Almeida*, is the following: "Método de executar a pena capital que consistia em pendurar ou pregar o réu em um poste com uma madeira atravessada para os braços" (2005: 51). This image of crucifixion is one to which Florbela often alludes. However, the cross can also be seen as a spatial and temporal reference. As Chevalier and Gheerbrant point out, in the cross "se confundem o tempo e o espaço. Ela é o cordão umbilical, nunca cortado, do cosmos ligado ao centro original. De todos os símbolos, ela é o mais universal, o mais totalizante" (1994: 245). This confusion, both in relation to time and to space, and the need to define temporal and spatial boundaries in order to attenuate it, is typical of the poetic subject and is amply exemplified in Florbela's lyric.

<sup>5</sup> The entry "Satanás" is also included in the appendix of the *Bíblia de Estudo Almeida* (2005).

that, like Christ, she has been sanctifying those around her, to endure pain as a response. The lyrical subject no longer bears the weight of a fruitless pursuit, in her view only equivalent to the crucifixion of the Christ. For this reason, the “Anoitecer” comprises:

Horas tristes que são o [seu] rosário...  
 Ó minha cruz de tão pesado lenho!  
 Meu áspero e intérmino Calvário!

*Calvário* was the place of Christ’s crucifixion. This reinforces the message that, progressively more distant from reality, to the extent that she is unable even to rely on her own fantasy world in order to tolerate the former, the lyrical voice’s spiritual being is what truly *anoitece*. The “saudades de saudades que não [tem]... | Sonhos que são os sonhos dos que [teve]...” indicate the absence of a referential axis that makes the soul of the “Princesa Desalento” “frágil como o sonho dum momento, | Soturna como preces de agonia” (p. 290). In this latter poem, there is, again, a refusal to accept the end of the relationship. As her soul “vive do riso numa boca fria”, it is visible that there is no emotional feedback from the lover, a cause of great anxiety for the subject. Consequently:

O luar ouve a [sua] alma, ajoelhado,  
 E vai traçar, fantástico e gelado,  
 A sombra numa cruz à [...] porta [do Amado]... (p. 290)

So imperative is the need to be part of the lover, emotionally unified with him, that moonlight itself delineates the shadow of a cross, the one which she bears, by his doorstep. Hence, the *sombra* can be interpreted as both the desired visualization of her despair by the lover so as to induce his pity, and the darker side of herself propelled by his departure. In *Livro de Soror Saudade*, arguably the collection of poems with the most striking religious imagery within Florbela’s body of work – in which she takes possession of the mantle of *Soror Saudade* –, this is employed primarily to emphasize the pain of the subject. Rituals and symbols of suffering are purposefully selected to illustrate the subject’s fragile state of being, thus feeding into a cycle of self-imposed torture, as her own

perception of *Soror Saudade* grows into a form of self-victimization. The last poem of the collection to be considered is “Da Minha Janela”. The main focus here is the sexual relation. It narrates the pattern of the relationship between the subject and the lover: the beginning leads to the sexual act, sex makes the sense of fusion more palpable, the lover departs and she struggles to let go of what they once shared. For the purpose of religious imagery, the second quatrain is the most important:

Sol! Ave a tombar, asas já feridas,  
 Batendo ainda num arfar pausado...  
 Ó meu doce poente torturado  
 Rezo-te em mim, chorando, mãos erguidas! (p. 293)

The description of the post-coital act works here as a blend between the pantheism embedded in him as a *sol*, symbol of masculinity, who is also the *ave* that takes its flight inside her body, and the religious is encapsulated in her response as the recipient female in a passive sexual position, who cries with pleasure and pain. She mirrors the *jouissance* expressed in his “doce poente torturado”, whilst elevating him to the position of God when she prays to him with an open gesture. The altar of God becomes the sexual bed in which, more than just praying to him, she “prays him” inside her. This is the kind of blasphemous imagery that is explored further in *Charneca em Flor*.

#### 4.2 *Charneca em Flor*

In the intermediate collection being discussed here, religiosity is articulated by prayers which are counterbalanced by sacrilegious statements expressing the sexualization of the religious. While the latter could easily be associated with *Soror Saudade*'s sadness and incarceration in the first phase, in *Charneca em Flor*, following on “Da Minha Janela”, it hints further at the sexual content (p. 293). An example of such is the chalice, symbol of the blood of Christ in the Eucharist which, in this collection, may allude to the blood of the woman who

offers herself to the lover as a sexual being: “Diluído numa taça de oiro a arder | Toledo é um rubi. E hoje é só nosso!” (“Toledo”, p. 317). The *taça* contains blood, which is interpreted by Chevalier and Gheerbrant in this manner: “princípio de vida –; é, portanto, o homólogo do coração [...] o hieróglifo egípcio do coração é uma taça” (1994: 627). In fact, blood has an ambivalent meaning, as it can allude both to death and to life. In terms of female biology, it is a sign of promise of life, for without menstrual blood and the rupture of the hymen there would not be sexual or maternal fulfilment. Not only is she giving herself sexually, she is succumbing to the “grande amor [que] é sempre grave e triste” (p. 317). It follows that, in the sonnet “IX”, “perdi a minha taça” (p. 353) could be interpreted not only as symbolic of the loss of her virginity, but also as an expression of the loss of the sexual partner, who briefly gave her the emotional feedback to feel more coherent as a psychic being. What is left is nothing, the “mãos vazias”.

There are numerous references to God in *Charneca em Flor*, as one who fulfils different roles according to the message that is being conveyed. Let us first consider the instances in which the poetic subject addresses God directly. In the poem “Rústica”, the lyrical voice paints a picture of a simple and pretty country girl, in every manner the antithesis of her perception of Self as complex, ambitious and proud. In the first quatrain, the last line – “A bênção do Senhor em cada filho” (p. 301) – describes a utopian scenario that can accommodate no evil. In the last tercet, she appeals to God as the only means through which the impossible task of becoming that girl, “pura como a água da cisterna”, can be achieved: “Meu Deus, dai-me esta calma, esta pobreza!” (p. 301). He is her God, to whom she resorts in times of need. Likewise, in “Árvores do Alentejo”, the trees that “gritam a Deus a bênção de uma fonte” reflect her own despair: “– Também ando a gritar, morta de sede, | Pedindo a Deus a minha gota de água!” (p. 336). Pleading turns into questioning in “As Minhas Mãos”, a sonnet in which she queries the use of her hands if, faced with the lover’s absence, they can no longer feel the lines of his face: “– Pra que as quero eu – Deus!” (p. 311). Conversely, she wonders about the lover’s own relationship with God, in relation

to her role in his life: “– Que contas dás a Deus indo sozinho, | Passando junto a mim, sem me encontrares? –” (“II”, p. 346). The idea of God as the creator is also used. In “Conto de Fadas” he is the architect of the world. “Dou-te comigo o mundo que Deus fez!” (p. 303) offers another example of sexuality and religion, as sex is seen as a divine creation and in her body, which she wishes him to have, the world is contained. God is also her maker. In her manic phase, she exclaims:

O mundo quer-me mal porque ninguém  
Tem asas como eu tenho! Porque Deus  
Me fez nascer Princesa entre plebeus  
Numa torre de orgulho e de desdém! (“Versos de Orgulho”, p. 300)

From her perspective, God has created her as a superior being, who is above mere mortals. Yet, that is also the reason for her isolation from the outside world, locked up in her “torre de orgulho e de desdém”. If, on the one hand, she feels that “se Deus nos deu voz, foi para cantar!” (“Amar!”, p. 322), on the other, “Quis Deus dar-me o condão de ser sensível” (“O Meu Condão”, p. 310) and “Quis Deus fazer-me tua... para nada!” (ibid, 310) indicate that God’s enterprise in making her and their union has been to little avail in the course of her existence. After all, she remains on her own. There are also references to God making the lover – “Quis Deus fazer de ti a ambrósia | Desta paixão estranha, ardente, incrível!” (ibid, 310) – and the women that he will have after she is no longer in his life – “Erva do chão que a mão de Deus levanta, | Folhas murchas de rojo à tua porta...” (“Supremo Enleio”, p. 316). At this point, she is not intimidated by these other women, as the goddess implied in “Mas eu sou a manhã: apago estrelas!” (ibid, 316) discloses a higher ambition, that of finding an Other to the Self who is compatible with her in being above the common person:

O amor dum homem? – Terra tão pisada!  
Gota de chuva ao vento baloiçada...  
Um homem? – Quando eu sonho o amor dum deus!... (“Supremo Enleio”, p. 316)

Whether the pursuit is angled at the man as God or the God of Christian dogma (or both, perhaps), the suggestion of “Quem sabe?...” appears to be that

this has been an unfruitful pursuit in which she persists still: “Queria encontrar Deus! Tanto o procuro!” (p. 337). This leads to questioning her previously ascertained source of origin, God as her maker: “E quem vestiu de monja a andorinha, [...] Quem me criou a mim?” (“?”, p. 334). The title of the poem itself is indicative of the poetic subject’s feeling of solipsism before the lover’s departure and realization that he is not to return. The *andorinha* that used to fly in the open fields has become the imprisoned *monja* as a result, “uma chaga sangrenta do Senhor” (“Minha Culpa”, p. 343). The blood that was symbolic of pleasure in “Toledo” (p. 317) becomes synonymous with pain in this sonnet. In a confession with the intent of attempting to expurgate herself of sin, she concludes with the following:

Sei lá quem sou?! Sei lá! Cumprindo os fados,  
 Num mundo de maldades e pecados,  
 Sou mais um mau, sou mais um pecador... (“Minha Culpa”, p. 343)

Madalena Tavares Alexandre argues that this sonnet is “um dos mais representativos do labiríntico processo de busca de identidade e da ignorância de si mesmo” (1997: 72). The lyrical voice finds herself to be completely at a loss in the world.

The significance of the cross, and how it paves the way to death, will be considered next. In “O Meu Condão”, the lyrical voice exclaims: “– Vãos, os meus braços de crucificada, | Inúteis, esses beijos que te dei!” (p. 310), imitating the role of Christ on the cross. It is Angélica Soares who states that, in this poem: “é a religião ainda a fonte de metáfora, a unir as ideias de sacrifício e paixão” (1997: 134). The imagery of the crucified woman after the lover’s abandonment is stronger in the lines:

Crucificada em mim, sobre os meus braços,  
 Hei-de pousar a boca nos teus passos  
 Pra não serem pisados por ninguém. (“Crucificada”, p. 325)

Exhibiting an attitude of masochism towards herself and of possessiveness in relation to the ex-lover, she proceeds to express the sense of fusion in a joint crucifixion:

São mortos os que nunca acreditaram  
 Que esta vida é somente uma passagem,  
 Um atalho sombrio, uma paisagem  
 Onde os nossos sentidos se poisaram.  
 [...]
   
 Que Deus faça de mim, quando eu morrer,  
 Quando eu partir para o País da Luz,  
 A sombra calma de um entardecer,

Tombando, em doces pregas de mortalha,  
 Sobre o teu corpo heróico, posto em cruz,  
 Na solidão dum campo de batalha! (“VII”, p. 351)

The *Passion of the Christ*, not erotic in itself but capable of producing ecstatic reactions in fervent believers, here incites another kind of passion, involving on her part a megalomaniac bloodshed. She equates both her body and the ex-lover’s to that of Christ when making the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of humanity. His body, which she venerates still, is the one that is now also “posto em cruz”. This takes places after her thoughts of life as a passage (to a better world) prompt a call for her own death. It is in this new “País de Luz”, that her view of God as the creator returns, and she hopes that he will grant her more tranquillity. In the final sonnet of *Charneca em Flor*, “X”, the cross is associated with the Discoveries, a theme that is carried to the last collection. Pondering on all that she wanted from a life that has been of little more than disappointment, the lyrical voice asserts that she would have liked to have had “mais sangue sobre a cruz das caravelas!” (p. 354).

### 4.3 *Reliquiæ*

*Reliquiæ* has fewer semantic references to the religious. Towards the end of the collection, when the fragmentation of the subject leads to a psychotic

outbreak, her connection with the physical Other and with the ethereal God is lost, to be substituted by death. Before that, the topic of sexualization of the divine prevails. The divine is a concept used throughout Florbela's *oeuvre*. In *Livro de Soror Saudade*, while in the company of the lover, "toda a graça | Duma boca divina fala em mim" ("Fanatismo", p. 262), and *Charneca em Flor* highlights the lyrical subject's "divinos braços de Mulher" ("Mais Alto", p. 330). In the final collection, the divine is brought to the fore as the title of a poem that deals with the female orgasm, considered to be the "Divino Instante" (p. 376). Therefore, the notion of the divine is employed not as a person or a thing that is truly divine, but in the metaphorical sense of the divine as that which is perfect and beautiful. Sex and religion are unified more intensely in the last tercet of "Blasfémia":

Em ti sou glória, altura e poesia!  
E vejo-me (Oh, milagre cheio de graça!)  
Dentro de ti, em ti, igual a Deus!... (p. 369)

The author is aware of how blasphemous the poem is within the realm of a predominantly Catholic society. Hence the title is both a preview and a warning of what is to come. As was the case with the divine, the perception of a miracle is also notable in Florbela's poetry. From the lover's arrival in *Livro de Soror Saudade* – "Chegaste enfim! Milagre de endoidar!" ("Tarde Demais...", p. 277) – and, in *Charneca em Flor*, his hands, extraordinary because they are on her body – "E sobre mim, [...] | As tuas mãos [...] milagrosas" ("Tarde no Mar, p. 307) –, the "milagre cheio de graça" evolves naturally to lovemaking in *Reliquiae*. Whereas previously the lyrical voice had pleaded for the love of a God, a request she believes to have been answered in "O Meu Desejo" – "Ó minha perfeição que criou Deus | E que num dia lindo me fez sua!" (p. 374) attests to this –, in "Blasfémia" she is the one who is made God-like through her fusion with the lover. Additionally, this is one of the rare occasions in the collection in which she is the one in control sexually, as the last line illustrates. This is short-lived, and she soon begs for his return, addressing him as "Ó meu

Deus, ó meu dono, ó meu senhor” (p. 369) and unearthing the “doce e humilde escrava” (“Escrava”, p. 375) of the sacrificial “Mendiga” (p. 315) of *Charneca em Flor*. Faced with the lover’s desertion and being no longer capable of engaging in her cyclical pattern, the poetic subject isolates herself in the cell of the convent of *Livro de Soror Saudade* in the fittingly named “Último Sonho de <<Soror Saudade>>”: “Soror Saudade abriu a sua cela” and “entrou no seu convento” (p. 384). In the end, she confesses to God: “Não sei de nada, Deus, não sei de nada!...” (“Loucura”, p. 386).

## 5. Conclusion

In the three collections under discussion, religion functions on several levels. Firstly, it demonstrates the prevalence of Catholic rhetoric in Portugal at the time; secondly, it reflects the ambivalence of the lyrical subject who, in this instance, questions the existence of a God to whom she turns in times of need; thirdly, and most importantly for the argument underway, it provides the poetic subject with the appropriate means to convey her state of being, both in the presence and the absence of the lover, and their physical union. The “linguagem da carne para recobrir uma semântica da alma” (Ana Luísa Vilela, 1997: 121) articulated earlier is thus inverted, resulting in inflammatory sexual descriptions, a concept that is epitomised in the sonnet “Amar!” (*Charneca em Flor*, p. 322).

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