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Nisia Floresta: Laying a Foundation for Feminist Literature in Brazil

Rachel Davidson Skinner

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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December 2013

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## ABSTRACT

Nísia Floresta: Laying a Foundation for Feminist Literature in Brazil

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Many historians and literary critics recognize the nineteenth-century Brazilian author, Nísia Floresta, as the first feminist in Brazil. “Nísia Floresta é considerada a precursora dos ideais feministas no Brasil. Desde o início de sua carreira literária, a defesa dos direitos femininos foi o tema mais recorrente em sua obra” (Castro 250). Her works, published in Brazil and also in France and Italy, influenced women across borders. This thesis will address the discourse on maternity and education found in her works *Opúsculo humanitário*, *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens*, *A mulher*, and *Conselhos à minha filha*.

Focusing on gender equality and the position of women in society, Floresta’s writings appeared in newspapers, pamphlets and books in the early nineteenth century. Contemporary scholars have given her the title of feminist though Floresta never called herself that, for she offered intriguing support for women’s stereotypical role as mothers, as well as addressing the liberal notion of women’s education. Floresta’s publications are of great value due to the scarcity of women writers during her time and because she offers a rare feminine perspective on society both in Brazil and in Europe.

Keywords: Brazil, Nísia Floresta, feminism, literature, women’s education

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation for Dr. Vanessa C. Fitzgibbon for giving me this opportunity to study, learn and improve both academically and professionally. Without her this would have never been possible. Gratitude has to go to my life partner, Steve, who has supported and encouraged me through this experience. Also, I want to give a special thanks to Dr. Valerie Hegstrom, Dr. Fredrick G. Williams, Dr. Brandie Siegfried, and Syl Carson for your valuable guidance and support.

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## Chapter I: An Introduction

Nísia Floresta, identified by most critics as the first feminist in Brazil, laid a foundation for feminist theory and marked the beginning of the construction of a new social identity for women in Brazil. As an educator and writer, she published in Brazil and also throughout Europe. She authored newspaper articles, children's books, translations, memoirs, and more. Many details about her life have emerged due to the extensive research of Constância Lima Duarte, professor at the University of Minas Gerais. However, Floresta's texts are infrequently analyzed in Portuguese much less English; in fact, Charlotte Elizabeth Liddell completed one of the first extensive literary analyses in English and critiqued Floresta's work in her dissertation entitled "Brazil's First Feminist? Gender and Patriotism in the Works of Nísia Floresta" in 2005. The most recent study of Floresta's texts, *Gender, Race, and Patriotism in the Works of Nísia Floresta* by Charlotte Hammond Matthews, appeared in 2012. Because of the scarcity of scholarly work on this writer, many historical and social issues in Floresta's works remain to explore. In this thesis, I will analyze the reconstruction of gender stereotypes by Nísia Floresta in her works *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens*, *Conselhos à minha filha*, *Opúsculo humanitário* and finally *A mulher*.

Social discrimination against racial minorities and women has always existed and a patriarchal society promotes such biases through marginalization and stereotypes. The Colonial Era marked the beginning of Brazilian chauvinism, in which a society emerged with social inequalities patterned after the Portuguese model, the father country. Among the most oppressed in Brazilian society were women, *mestizos*, Indians and African slaves (Rocha-Coutinho *Novas opções* 3). They were all considered inferior to white European men. During the 1800s, Nísia

Floresta became the first voice to challenge the social stereotypes women faced (Duarte *Feminismo e literatura* 153). The following study will review the historical context and position of women, the influences that created gender stereotypes, and Floresta's reconstruction of the feminine identity.

This thesis will not focus on modern feminism, but will examine the beginnings of Brazilian feminism and the principles upon which it was based. Although the idea of feminism did not exist during Nisia Floresta's life, contemporary scholars have given her the title of feminist because of her writings on the importance of a comprehensive education for young girls. Yet she stands as a mediator in behalf of women as her ideas, reflected in her publications, serve as a foundation for feminism in Brazil.

### **Feminism, Feminist and Feminine**

*The Oxford Dictionary* helps to clarify the terms feminism, feminist and feminine. It defines feminist as an ideology for a person who defends political rights and demands equality for women in society, especially in areas of education and employment. A feminist fights against male chauvinism and the participants of the social movement, feminism. The dictionary describes this movement to have occurred in three waves that united women to fight for emancipation. These three waves constantly strived to create more equality among the sexes in the home, workforce, education and politics. Feminism is not only outlined as a social movement but also a philosophical movement, as well as a political movement. The first wave of feminism in Brazil started at the end of the 1800's while in France it began at the end of the 1700's. A citation from *The Oxford Dictionary* explains the history of feminism:

The issue of rights for women first became prominent during the French and American revolutions in the late 18th cent., with regard especially to property rights, the marriage relationship, and the right to vote. In Britain it was not until the emergence of the suffragette movement in the late 19th cent. that there was significant political change. A 'second wave' of feminism arose in the 1960s, concerned especially with economic and social discrimination, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood. A more diverse 'third wave' is sometimes considered to have arisen in the 1980s and 1990s, as a reaction against the perceived lack of focus on class and race issues in earlier movements.

Brazil was far behind France, England, and the United States due to the underdevelopment of the country, however the feminine notion did spread and eventually arrived. This notion of femininity imposes an identity on women and denies them a voice, position and purpose in society. "The patriarchy", a system of society in which men hold the power, constructed women's identity much like the colonizers constructed a role for African slaves. The Civil Rights and the Feminist movements were efforts to allow racial minorities and women to find their own voices and defined their own identities, in which race and gender is no longer victimized nor controlled by the elite in society. These struggles to overcome the patriarchy continue and evolve. Through literature, marginalized social groups have vocalized their opinions to help them cope with the oppressive circumstances in which they live. Novels, poetry, music, and film have become outlets to educate the world on complicated social issues that sometimes seem lost in the mix of daily life.

For many centuries, women never questioned their existence or lack of opportunity in society. They simply believed that they were born to be a wife and mother. Early women authors, like Nísia Floresta, acted outside their feminine roles, courageously taking up the male dominated control of the pen. In her article "Literary Paternity", Sandra M. Gilbert wrote, "For, as Anne Finch's complaint suggests, the pen has been defined as not just accidentally but essentially a male 'tool,' and, therefore, not only inappropriate but actually alien to women"

(489). In the past, when women wrote using the forbidden pen, they crossed over their gender boundaries placing themselves in an unredeemable position. Writing, reading and thinking have been the definition of male activities and women, their property, only existing to be acted upon by men as sensual and literary objects. In chapter 23, Jane Austen declares in her novel *Persuasion* (1817), “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (1164).

Feminist literature initiated the feminist wave generating a full-on social movement provoked by the “woman question”. Through the use of pamphlets, romances, novels, etc. feminist authors sparked their readers with revolutionary ideas about gender roles and stereotypes questioning common traditional beliefs about women’s inferiority (Freedman xi). Many women and men were feminists long before the waves of feminism began. They did all they could to fight against the injustices of chauvinism. Nísia Floresta stands as an example of one of these early feminists, a precursor for the Brazilian feminist movements that would not begin nationally until a decade after her time. She is acknowledged as the first stimulus in preparing Brazilian society for a reformation of gender hierarchy. Feminist, feminism and feminine have in many instances become taboo, fallacious, distorted and skewed to fit certain gender biases hence the importance of reviewing and understanding how these terminologies will be presented in this study. These terms have been applied to Nísia Floresta’s works by contemporary critics labeling it as feminist literature, the first published in Brazil.

## **Gender**

The matriarchal and feminine structures are primitive. They have been constructed and controlled by men that mounted the patriarchal society. The power struggle between men and women is constructed on their biological sex. Gender is a social term that defines a person as a

man (masculine) or a woman (feminine) and sex is the biological term that defines a person as female or male (Connell 194). Gender is an interpretation of what female and male bodies mean in relation to philosophies about the world. This interpretation has changed throughout history and from culture to culture. In the nineteenth century, Brazil's biological state of the woman and her role in procreation resulted in her inferiority to man. A woman's body compared to a man's is, most all the time, weaker, smaller and more fragile. Therefore, the patriarchal society established the inequality between the two genders by comparing their physical strength. Men were labelled as the strong sex and women the fragile sex. Pregnancy and a woman's procreation role also labelled her as inferior. "The gender order is not and never has been immanent in biology. Rather it represents a particular historical response to the human reproductive biology" (286). The biological function in reproduction has been interpreted and determined, by many hierarchical societies, including Brazil's, that women are the inferior sex.

The interpretation of biology between the sexes has constructed the meaning of femininity and masculinity. These terms were created by society and they are not necessary. They solely design a social structure of gender that generates inequalities between the sexes. The definition of what is male or female is taught to infants with the practice of gender and is reinforced in the home, at church, at school, through the media, etc. These institutions teach the two gender identities and have a powerful influence in generating and regenerating the gender hierarchy. "'Gender' means practice organized in terms of, or in relation to, the reproductive division of people in to male and female... Gender is institutionalized to the extent that the network of links to the reproduction system is formed by cyclical practices" (Connell 140). There exists a pattern and standard that passes from generation to generation that defines what is masculine versus feminine. There is a link between genders and the biological difference

between man and woman categorizing the male and the female. Institutions and possessions rooted in history have determined what role masculinity and femininity played in society. Gender studies are very ambiguous because masculine and feminine identity is a behavior of the psychological genesis that can correspond with the biology of a person, but not necessarily.

The role of sex and gender were formed by the patriarchal society and reinforced by various social institutions like school and religion. These institutions created gender stereotypes by teaching the role of man and the role of woman. Brazil was highly influenced by the Catholic Church that taught these principles as doctrine, which helped sustain a patriarchal society. The church and state were inseparable, the monarchy and Catholic Church sent Jesuits over to Brazil to convert the indigenous people and build missions in the 1500's. The institution of religion was a foundational tradition to Brazil's society and culture that had a powerful social influence and still claims to be today (Emanuel Araújo 45).

The church put vigorous pressure on women to fulfill their role in society as mothers, submissive wives, and homemakers. A woman's life was very restrictive and isolated much more than a man's, men having the advantage in education and politics. Men were also trapped in a traditional and repressive society but they had the control, power, and wealth, which increased their position in society. Men could reach their objectives and find fulfillment in life because their opportunities to learn a trade, study at a university or travel were all open to them. After all, the poorest, most inferior men could always say, "at least I am not a woman" and be content with life (Rocha-Coutinho *Tecendo* 19).

It is clear that many women revolted against the patriarchal system and refused to conform to their gender duties. Many women found refuge in the convents, others took vows of silence, and some found a way to support themselves by prostitution. Poverty, oppression and

dependency were what women had to confront on a daily basis, which eventually turned into self-hate. French scholar, Hélène Cixous said, “Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs” (310). Women hate being women because society marginalizes them and constructs a stereotypical identity for them with no other options or choices.

In 1791, one of the first publications criticizing the patriarchal society and the oppressive position of women was circulated throughout Europe. *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (*Vindication*), written by Mary Wollstonecraft, was one of the first feminist texts, among others, to publically surface. She wrote this text shortly after the beginning of the French Revolution when new ideas and a new age of reason were at hand preparing for societal reformation. *Vindication* was categorized as reformist literature and the most radical of its time, making Wollstonecraft famous and infamous (Raquel Araújo 2). Her radical publication made a mark on Brazilian feminism because supposedly Nisia Floresta translated it into Portuguese in 1834.

In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft criticizes society for the oppressive condition of the woman, proclaiming that it destroys women’s character and morality. “It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men; nay it is vain to expect that strength of natural affection which would make them good wives and mothers. While they are absolutely dependent on their husbands they will be cunning, mean, and selfish” (Freedman 29). She declares the necessity of offering education to women so that they can achieve their objectives and help their family and community as a whole. She argues in her work that women have a duty not just in the home but also in society as doctors or nurses. She proclaims, “I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body” (27). *Vindication*

was considered appalling for considering formerly educating women thus creating more equality between the genders. It was considered scandalous and contentious if the woman of a home knew just as much as the man and this is an example of the prejudices and mentality she challenged.

Mary Wollstonecraft wanted a society that had equality and Raquel Martins Borges Carvalho Araújo said concerning this desire, “Ela acreditava que a verdadeira civilidade, só poderia existir entre iguais. Lutou ao lado de mulheres e homens, a fim de que os ideais de liberdade, igualdade e fraternidade alcançassem também o sexo feminino” (2). While many were fighting for race equality, Wollstonecraft fought for gender equality desiring all forms of discrimination to end. Following the examples laid out by feminists Christine de Pizan, François Paullain de la Barre and Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft became a reformer ahead of her time who prepared feminism to take off in Europe and eventually spread throughout the world eventually arriving in Brazil and falling into the hands of young Nísia Floresta.

### **The Identity of her Sexuality**

Sexuality has been at the heart of many feminist issues and seen as taboo in many cultures. Michel Foucault remarked on the question of sex in the Victorian Era by simply stating, “On the subject of sex, silence became its rule” (3). Medicine, psychiatry, criminal justice, and other social institutions have tried to control sexuality and the family. Before the Victorian Age, sexuality had little need of secrecy. Foucault continues, “At the beginning of the seventeenth century a certain frankness was common. It was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions” (3). Due to religion, sex was condemned and often associated with sin. Brazilian society was strongly influenced and constructed by the Catholic Church that denounced

sexual and seductive behavior; however, it was more acceptable for men to act to pursue and explore their sexuality than it was for women.

Brazil was a Portuguese colony discovered in 1500 when European explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral arrived there sponsored by the Portuguese Empire. Brazil's society was founded on Catholic *Jesuitas*, the indigenous people, African slaves and white European men that became *senhores de engenhos*. Portugal also sent their criminals to Brazil and participated in the African slave trade to generate a workforce to work on sugar plantations. Portuguese women were the minority and hesitated to migrate to Brazil because it was known to be an uncivilized, wild and undeveloped place. In addition, many ship companies prohibited women to board their ships. Fábio Pestana Ramos confirms, “A presença de mulheres era rara, e muitas vezes, proibida a bordo” (19). Ramos describes the rare presence of Portuguese women in the colonies and to avoid inter-marital relationships between the Portuguese colonizers and the indigenous women the Portuguese court began to send its orphans. *As órfãs “Del Rei”* was the assembly of orphan girls between the ages of 14 to 30 years old that sailed to the colonies to meet their husbands and establish Portuguese families. Many died on the journey, never meeting their future spouse (Ramos 32-3).

The Portuguese did not intend to settle in Brazil definitively. It was reasonable for the women to stay home in Portugal while the men exploited Brazil and had sexual relations with the natives and African slaves. As Brazil's land was cultivated, the Portuguese were obliged to stay to reap the rewards, which led Portuguese families to gradually migrate. Family structure and life was dissimilar from that seen in Portugal. Antônio Cândido describes a basic colonial household in Brazil, “o núcleo central, legalizado, composto pelo casal branco e por seus filhos legítimos; e um núcleo periférico...escravos e agregados, índios, negros, mestiços, no qual estavam incluídas

as concubinas dos chefes e seus filhos ilegítimos” (29). Brazil offered a rural life for the Portuguese immigrants that was racially diverse and culturally violent as the white men constantly battled for power.

Summing up what Cândido further clarifies, the authority in early colonial Brazil was surrendered to the white European men and their guns. They considered themselves the “superior” sex and race and made it known as new communities were established throughout the country. Men’s power to oppress sexuality and marginalize certain groups of society stems from stereotypes and misconceived notions. This attitude led to discrimination against gender, class and race, subsequently creating many divisions in society. Any patriarchal system desires uniformity in all aspects of community hence diversity threatens its power to lose control. Inequality is utilized to maintain men’s superior state and great lengths are made to justify social disparity. Brazil’s first society was built on the notions of power, authority and control as the patriarchal system developed to assume its dominance and superiority.

To justify the repression of women in society the influential Catholic Church taught using doctrine and scriptural reasoning that the patriarchal system was God’s way. The Church clarified the inferiority of women by using what is called the “myth of Eden.” “Nunca se perdia a oportunidade de lembrar às mulheres o terrível mito de Éden, reafirmando e sempre presente na história humana” (Emanuel Araújo 46). The myth of Eden was used to teach women to fear their sexuality. Women were considered “imperfect animals” by nature; they have been seductresses and sinners since mother Eve led Adam to sin and take all of humanity away from the state of paradise and innocence. The Church preached that women were sinful creatures that needed moral teaching and governing. A good and virtuous Christian woman was confined to her home and only left her house three times in her life: one to be baptized, another to be married and the

last time to be buried. A respectable woman was always accompanied. She always had a man to direct her and control her sexuality: first her father and then her husband. For women in Brazil, their life was dedicated to raising children, taking care of the house and ordering slaves to do the work. She was a prisoner in the home and a slave to her husband.

Women's education was limited to the learning of domestic chores. The most education a wealthy woman could receive was lessons on reading, writing, sewing and embroidery. Young girls were groomed and prepared for marriage, which was considered their duty to society. Girls married at young ages, many before they were 15, to older men in arranged marriages (Cerqueira 4). When a lady completed all her steps in life –raised in her parent's house (virgin), married in the church and became a mother– the woman becomes more like the virtuous Virgin Mary and moves away from the sinful temptress Eve. This dissimilarity between Virgin Mary and Eve is also used as an explanation of the duality of the woman as a saint and on the other hand a seductress (Emanuel Araújo 46-53).

The life of a woman in colonial Brazil was very solitary and for most of her life she was treated like a child. For example, her husband disciplined her with solitary confinement, like a “time out” and physical abuse, such as, a spanking. The more wealth a husband had the less work and responsibilities the wife had because servants or slaves would cater to their needs. Especially in Brazil, life was very isolated for women who lived on sugar plantations where there was limited communication and travel was rarely permitted. The men traveled often for business purposes while women stayed at home caring for the children and tending to the slaves (Hahner, 67).

Adultery was against the law but very common. However, for men to behave in such a manner was tolerable and at most they were sent to prison for a short time. Women were at the

risk of losing their lives for committing adultery because under the law husbands had the right to kill their wife if they found them being unfaithful. Knowing the danger of the situation some women still had sexual relationships with men other than their husbands (Emanuel Araújo 99). Maria Lúcia Rocha-Coutinho confirms, “O homem, ao contrário da mulher, devia ter agitada vida sexual antes do casamento, mantendo relações que, na maioria das vezes, continuavam após a união conjugal, geralmente com mulheres das camadas sociais pobres (escravas, empregadas, prostitutas)” (*Tecendo* 86). The relationship between husband and wife was more like a business contract. The wife was never seen as a lover but fulfilled a social status and the role of procreation, which completed the purpose for getting married. Men needed inheritors to pass on their fortune and genes, while women needed their protection and support. In this manner, marriages were necessary for both parties, but love, faithfulness and loyalty were rarely present (86-7).

Marriage was the number one priority in a woman’s life. The title “married” was a prestigious social status for women and an enormous achievement. If a woman was not betrothed by a certain age society considered her a humiliation to her family and she was shamed. Most upper class families had dowries for their daughters to incentivize the bachelors to marry one of them. For many women marriage was their career since society did not offer any other suitable outlet or opportunity to be accepted and respected by their peers. Economic and social interests surrounded the purpose for marital union. Arranged marriages with distant relatives were common to retain a pure lineage of the elite class. It was not until the nineteenth century, with the aid of the literary movement of Romanticism, that the old tradition of matrimony evolved into an actual union of love (85-7).

Feminine sexuality in the colonial age in Brazil uncovers many aspects of society and the hypocrisy that it was respectable for a woman to be a mother and wife but never a lover. “A sexualidade feminina na época colonial manifestava-se sob vários aspectos, sempre esgueirando-se pelos desvãos de uma sociedade misógina e suportando a culpa do pecado a ela atribuído pela Igreja. A mulher podia ser mãe, irmã, filha, religiosa, mas de modo algum amante” (Emanuel Araújo 73). Motherly love, sisterly love, friendship love were all acceptable but the highest level of love found in intimacy was rare in fact, some women were confined to convents; wives and daughters were forced to live there by the authority of their father or husband. These ladies imprisoned in the convent were often detained for years at a time. Motives for detaining them were to avoid a distasteful marriage of a daughter or to rid of a wife to live with another woman for a time period (Rocha-Coutinho *Tecendo* 73).

Women endured their lives repressed in all areas, primarily with their sexuality. Women searched for ways to satisfy their sexual needs through prostitution, adultery, lesbianism, etc. (Rocha-Coutinho *Tecendo* 86). Helene Cixou relates, “We’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we’ve been made victims of the old fool’s game: each one will love the other sex” (310). As feminism has developed and evolved, modern feminism focuses more on women’s sexuality, which has long been subjugated, and uses it as a form of liberation. Nísia Floresta did not mention sexuality specifically in her publications nonetheless she lived in this sexually oppressive society and as for her, she saw education for women as a form of liberation.

### **Feminine situation in Brazil**

In “Women’s Rights, and the Suffrage Movement in Brazil 1850-1932”, June E. Hanher gives an accurate depiction of Brazilian society in the nineteenth century when Nísia Floresta

was alive. She articulates, “According to the common stereotype of the Brazilian patriarchal family, the authoritarian husband, surrounded by slave concubines, dominates his children and his submissive wife” (4). In summary, Brazil’s patriarchal society created distinct social classes, centered on the white wealthy men with everyone else considered inferior to him; the poor workers, submissive wives, slaves, etc. White European men dominated the family, the politics, the economy, and the social organization. Although life was very isolated, some women were able to escape it. Widowed women whose husbands were wealthy took over the household and kept business running on the plantations. Unfortunately, these women conformed to the patriarchal order and dominated like a patriarch not a matriarch reinforcing the order of society.

*Mulheres no Brasil colonial* by Mary Del Priore, as well as in Hahner’s article both identify that the major change for upper class women in Brazil during the nineteenth century occurred when the Portuguese court arrived in Rio de Janeiro in the early 1800s. The Portuguese prince, John VI, his royal family and the court found refuge in Brazil from the threats of Napoleonic forces. They brought with them their European customs and manners. Where once they were isolated and confined to their homes now the women of Rio de Janeiro could go out to the theater, to dances and parties. The Portuguese royal courts Europeanized Brazilian society and aided the progress and circulation of literature.

Teaching also became an appropriate occupation for women as common belief stated it aligned with her “nature” of maternity. Still, there existed many cases where women were confined as homemakers and bearers of children, always subjected to the authority of a male figure in her life. Women needed counsel from a man. This mentality is best articulated in *Iaiá Garcia* written by Brazil’s most well-known author Machado de Assis. In the novel *Luís Garcia*, a father and husband falls ill and is afraid he will die leaving his daughter, Iaiá, and wife, Estella,

to survive on their own. So he speaks with a close friend, Jorge, and asks, “Quisera pedir-lhe que as protegesse e guiasse; que fosse como tutor moral das duas. Não é que lhes falte juízo; mas duas senhoras sozinhas precisam de conselhos” (82). Men just like Luís Garcia worried about dying and leaving their women without any male guide, so frequently they would ask a close friend to care and watch over them.

Maria Lúcia Rocha-Coutinho explained even though the arrival of the Royal family modified Brazilian society, the two sexes were still destined for their individual roles in the family:

A mulher brasileira continuava a ocupar posição secundária, inferior e distinta daquela ocupada pelo homem. Enquanto a ele ficavam destinadas as atividades fora do âmbito caseiro – contatos da vida pública, comercial, política, e cultural – a mulher cabiam as atividades estritamente ligadas à casa e à eventual extrapolação deste limite só podia se dar através do homem, do incentivo ao marido e da colaboração em suas atividades. Esta divisão de áreas de atuação era considerada “natural” e era amplamente reforçada pelas teorias científicas que vigoravam no Brasil na época a respeito da “natureza” distinta de homens e mulheres (*Tecendo* 78).

As Rocha-Coutinho stated, men and women were seen as a public, commercial, political and cultural image with a hierarchal structure governed by men. Cleide Cerdeira further explains the position of Brazilian women in the colonial age in her article “Os primórdios da inserção sociocultural da mulher brasileira”, and she writes, “A economia colonial gerou a formação de uma sociedade, na qual ocupava uma posição peculiar, afetando grandemente sua imagem durante anos” (1). Cerdeira articulates that women were treated and viewed like dogs and many of the men preferred to have relations with the slaves than with the home or in other words with their wives (2). For centuries, women have tolerated injustice, discrimination and oppression by the patriarchal system, which has had an effect on their identity and their behavior in society that established an ever-enduring social status for women as second-class citizens.

Hanher comments on how Brazil was regarded as a backwards country dependent on African slavery for economic stability with the majority of the population living on plantations called *fazendas or engenhos* mostly concentrated on the coast (68). Men dominated all sectors of society: political, social, economic, etc. With this type of basis, it made it very difficult for women, like, Nísia Floresta, “to expand their horizons” (68). It was not until 1827 that legislation was passed admitting girls into elementary schools, but that is not to say it was implemented and practiced.

## **Conclusion**

In Brazil, many of the same stereotypes of women existed similar to those of other countries, which identifying men subjugate over women. The female was described with adjectives such as weak, frail, unintelligent, emotional, sinful, etc. She was given the primary titles of obedient wife and mother-slave. Brazil, being colonized by Portugal and partnered with the Catholic Church, shaped a traditional patriarchal system where male authority controlled the norms and stereotypes of society. Emanuel Araújo asserts, “A todo-poderosa igreja exercia pressão sobre o adestramento da sexualidade feminina. O fundamento escolhido para justificar a repressão da mulher era simples: o homem era superior, e portanto cabia a ele exercer a autoridade” (45-6). Quoting from Ephesians 5:22-24 Araújo affirms the doctrine of male authority, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (46). This doctrine laid the foundation of the Brazilian patriarchal society.

Nísia Floresta lived during the end of Portugal’s rule in Brazil and during the time when yet another country was born, also controlled and manipulated by men. Floresta’s first

publication, a translated work, *Direitos das mulheres e as injustiças dos homens*, acknowledged her as the first Brazilian feminist proving her to be an activist for women's education and a revolutionary social reformer, while at the same time supporting women's maternal role within the familial structure. Along with her controversial publications, Floresta also lived an interesting life, contrasting with many social norms, breaking down and restructuring gender stereotypes that will be further discussed.

## Chapter II: The First Brazilian Feminist

### Nísia Floresta

Dionísia Pinto Lisboa, who later adopted the name Nísia Floresta, was born in 1810 in Rio Grande do Norte. As the first Brazilian feminist, she laid the groundwork for the future of gender equality in Brazil leaving a legacy that has been preserved through her writings. Her ideas were not widely accepted by the predominately male influence that ruled in her native land, subsequently, later in life, Floresta lived and traveled in Europe acting as an ambassador for Brazil (Liddell *Brazil's First Feminist* 277). She found more tolerance in Europe where she had more success teaching and publishing her works. Despite being a journalist, poet, novelist, abolitionist, republican, educator and teacher, Floresta cherished her role as a mother, which is apparent in her works. Much about her life is still a mystery, but due to the efforts of scholars like Constância Lima Duarte and Roberto Seidl, the works of Floresta have been uncovered and compiled.

Nísia Floresta was the first child of a Portuguese lawyer, Dionísio Gonçalves Pinto Lisboa and his Brazilian wife Antônia Clara Freire. They had three other children: Joaquim, Clara, and Izabel. The family was raised in a period of political hostility and transition in northeastern Brazil. The country was still under Portuguese rule during this period of social unrest. The northeast region of Brazil had a series of rebellions that forced Nísia and her family to move many times in search of safety (Liddell *Brazil's First Feminist* 12).

At the age of thirteen, a typical age for marriage in Brazil at the time, Nísia Floresta married Manuel Alexandre Seabra de Melo (Duarte *Vida e obra* 20). For reasons unknown, Floresta separated from Melo within months of the ceremony and returned to live with her

parents. This separation caused a minor scandal at the time; however, this event showed Nísia's strong decision to choose her own husband on her own terms.

Floresta studied at the Convent of Carmelitas. Surrounded by thousands of books, Nísia had access to the great works of her time. She took lessons in classical literature and European languages such as French and Italian, which were extremely useful later on in her life when she lived abroad (Duarte *Vida e obra* 19). Floresta was very privileged to receive an education of such variety during a time when most of the Brazilian population was illiterate (Mathews, *Gender, Race, and Patriotism*, 35). Moreover, during her lifetime women were strongly discouraged from reading and writing, such activities were deemed masculine and inappropriate for women.

In 1828 Dionísio Lisboa, Floresta's father, was murdered due to his political affiliation and loyalty to the Portuguese king (Duarte *Vida e obra* 21). That same year Nísia Floresta started living with her lover, Manuel Augusto de Faria Rocha, a practice deemed by society as extremely immoral. Indeed, the intimate union of two people needed approval by the church to gain social acceptance (Duarte, 22). Regardless, Nísia Floresta and Manuel Augusto stayed together and had three children, the second died prematurely. Not long after the birth of their third child Manuel Augusto died at the age of twenty-five leaving Floresta to raise her family on her own. (Duarte 25-6).

In the nineteenth century, most women did not participate in money-making affairs. Poverty loomed over women, forcing many to turn to prostitution or the convent (Follador 10). Some scholars speculate that Nísia Floresta came from a wealthy family and was therefore was able to care for her children with her inheritance, as well as her income generated from writing, for example, her first work was a translation, *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens*, and

her school she opened, Colégio Augusto in Rio de Janeiro (Mathews *Gender, Race, and Patriotism* 5).

Her education became an obvious asset to her success in providing for her family. Raising two children on her own during a time when society focused on social status and prestige shaped Nísia Floresta's writing and observations of society through the lens of a young widow. Never remarried, she traveled to Europe leaving a paper trail of publications along the way finding herself among the European scholars of her time, like August Comte.

Although Floresta exiled herself to Europe, she still had a strong sense of national pride for Brazil. She changed her name from Dionísia Gonçalves Pinto to Nísia Floresta Brasileira Augusto. Nísia comes from her parents naming her Dionísia after her Father Dionísio. Floresta, meaning jungle where she was born on a *sítio* in the northeast of Brazil. Brasileira is her nationality translating to "Brazilian woman" to emphasize her national identity. Finally, her last name, Augusto points to the father of her children and the love of her life, Manuel Augusto. She published many of her works under her initials N.F.B.A., N.F., B.A., along with Nísia Floresta, among other variations.

### **A Passion for Education**

Nísia Floresta opened the first girls' school in Brazil's capital Rio de Janeiro in 1838 (Luciana Castro 239). One of her many feminist influences offered quality education to young girls. It was clear to her that women needed an in-depth education so they could in turn teach their children. She saw how society could drastically improve if women studied math, science, foreign languages, physical education, literature, etc. The article, "A contribuição de Nísia Floresta para a educação feminina", Luciana Castro comments, "O objetivo de educar a mulher era apenas o de prepará-la para o bom desempenho da vida doméstica... Até mesmo Nísia

Floresta... acreditava que a mulher deveria ser educada, principalmente, para que pudesse educar seus filhos de forma satisfatória” (240). Floresta tried to persuade her Brazilian public to allow young girls access to education not only to learn the domestic chores as a wife, but also to learn how to be a mother and teacher.

Women’s education became one of the first debates feminists tackled. The access women had to education gradually fueled their emancipation and helped promote feminist ideals. For Brazil, Nísia Floresta first vocalized the need to offer more education to girls. Guacira Lopes Louro wrote:

Assim iniciava, em meados do século XIX, o *Opúsculo humanitário*, um dos vários escritos com que essa professora autodidata iria perturbar a sociedade brasileira. Afinal, o que pretendia essa “mulher metida a homem”? Nísia Floresta, uma voz feminina revolucionária, denunciava a condição de submetimento em que viviam as mulheres no Brasil e reivindicava sua emancipação, elegendo educação como o instrumento através do qual essa meta seria alcançada. (443)

Louro mentions Brazil as a slow, backwards and primitive society with an illiterate population. As Brazil modernized, education became a major problem but little was done to actually improve it. Floresta faced many adversaries in her efforts to reform education and permit women to have admission to it. Prejudices against women limited their opportunities to receive education outside of the realms of domestic chores. In the article “Nísia Floresta a mulher que ousou desafiar sua época: Feminismo e Educação” confirms, “Para a mulher a educação era para que estas possuíssem boas maneiras e prendas domésticas, a mulher era então excluída do processo de educação formal, principalmente da aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita” (Amanda Castro 5). The simple skills of reading and writing were prohibited to women during Floresta’s time, which explains why Floresta’s notions of equal education to boys and girls appeared so radical. For Floresta, progress in Brazil lied within the educational system and the education of Brazilian women.

## **Colégio Augusto**

After the death of Manuel Augusto, Nísia Floresta taught and opened schools in the north and south of Brazil that provided a source of income to take care of her two children. She taught for more than twenty years and fought against social norms of what was considered an appropriate education for young women. J.C. Rodrigues comments, “Nísia foi por mais de vinte anos professora em várias cidades do Brasil tendo sempre lutado contra a rotina do ensino das meninas. A mulher foi feita somente para criar filhos e encerrar todas as suas aspirações no círculo das afeições domésticas, e que portanto, a mulher não precisa saber muito” (qtd. Seidl 19). Floresta’s objective was to break down the educational boundaries, the notion that women did not need to know a lot and expand girls’ educational horizons qualifying them to be wives, mothers and above all educators.

During the imperialism in Brazil, Nísia Floresta lived many years in Rio de Janeiro, where resided the Court of Portugal’s royal family. Nísia Floresta opened a prestigious girls’ school offering different languages, such as, English, French and Italian, in addition to grammar, literature, geography, history and physical education. Nísia Floresta not only saw it as important to focus on the quality of education by hiring specialized and professional teachers, but she also saw the importance of the quantity of students, “a limitação do número de alunas por turma, como forma de garantir a qualidade de ensino” (Luciana Castro 240). Floresta had a discerning eye for pedagogy and how to improve the system to enhance the experience of the students.

Her modern pedagogical approach focused on equality and excellence in education. Education in Brazil was granted to those born in privileged and wealthy families. Boys’ education was always superior to the girls,’ including more subjects and better teachers, Maria Rocha-Coutinho remarks, “A educação das meninas permaneceu por longo tempo atrasada com

relação à dos meninos. Uma vez que a ela era destinado o papel de mãe e esposa, a menina tinha acesso quase que unicamente ao ensino elementar. Até mesmo com relação a leitura e escrita.” (*Tecendo* 79). Girls concentrated their efforts learning the duties of a wife and mother like sewing and cooking, limiting their schooling on writing and reading.

Luciana Castro recognizes Floresta as a precursor for women’s education, “O Colégio Augusto se mostrou pioneiro em sua proposta pedagógica, pois oferecia às meninas da Corte uma educação no nível dos melhores colégios para o público masculino” (238). Colégio Augusto, regarded as a threat to society, did practice liberal and progressive ideals that took a unique style in preparing young girls for motherhood. In a male-controlled society, the man receives the intellectual education and the woman receives instruction on how to develop good moral character to preserve her purity, in other words, the woman learned submission and self-suppression. Marilda Corrêa Ciribelli reaffirms the condition of the education in Brazil during Floresta’s time:

A educação brasileira ainda era concebida com base em uma visão romântica. Era calcada na religião e na moral, e tinha por finalidade preparar a mulher para as suas funções de mãe e de esposa junto à família. Assim, para elas, só era necessário o Ensino Primário e as habilidades manuais, sendo-lhes vedado o Curso Secundário e o Superior. Só as jovens que possuíam mais recursos continuavam seus estudos em casa. (140)

A school dedicated to women’s learning on topics outside the realm of domestic chores was an appalling idea in Brazilian society even for the Portuguese Court in Rio de Janeiro. Nísia Floresta was highly criticized by her peers because of her methods that increased the subjects taught to young girls in her school. The variety of disciplines were considered unnecessary and utterly useless for girls to study since ultimately their destinies were to become wives and mothers.

The renowned Brazilian author, Machado de Assis, who published many works in the nineteenth century, captures the chauvinistic mentality in his book *Dom Casmurro* published in

1900. The chapter entitled “As curiosidades de Capitu” discusses the protagonist’s curiosity about learning and this scene portrays a realistic example of the education offered to women of the period. The narrator relates:

As curiosidades de Capitu dão para um capítulo. Eram de várias espécies, explicáveis e inexplicáveis, assim úteis como inúteis, umas graves, outras frívolas; gostava de saber de tudo. No colégio, onde, desde os sete anos, aprendera a ler, escrever e contar, francês, doutrina e obras de agulha, não aprendeu, por exemplo, a fazer renda; por isso mesmo, quis Prima Justina lhe ensinasse. Se não estudou latim com o padre Cabral foi porque o padre, depois de lhe propor gracejando, acabou dizendo que latim não era língua de menina. (94-5)

The description depicts the reality women faced when it came to receiving a formal education. The common belief indicated that subjects beyond the realm of mother and wife were unnecessary for women to study. Even though women were interested in learning “masculine” subjects, like Capitu, society forbade it. While Nísia Floresta made a strong argument for women’s education the lack of public support made it difficult for her to fully realize her vision for Colégio Augusto (Duarte, *Vida e obra* 31). Thus, the successes that were achieved by Colégio Augusto went unnoticed and it gained the reputation of a school outside the bounds of society. Charlotte H. Matthews expounds, “Alongside this (apparent) support from high places, Floresta and her school also suffered harsh and vindictive criticism in the Carioca press. She was prepared to face public criticism and slanderous insults to offer a broad and enlightened curriculum to her own pupils” (*Gender Race and Patriotism* 36). Floresta’s title as feminist comes from her passion of educating women on more than just domestic duties. Her radical pedagogical ideas of the time made it difficult to win the public over and support her in her efforts of offering a comprehensive education to girls.

## Travel

The last years of Floresta's life were spent in voluntarily exile in Europe. Matthews suggests she went to escape the conservatism of the Brazilian court:

It has inevitably been suggested that Floresta felt obliged to leave Rio to escape the criticisms of her advanced liberal notions on education, and perhaps other subjects. Whilst she cannot have been forced to leave, it is certainly easy to imagine that Floresta would not have found the stifling conservatism of the Rio *corte* conducive, and the intellectual appeal of Paris must have been great. Whatever the reasons, this first visit to Europe was certainly an immensely important learning experience for Floresta, and its influence is immediately apparent in her work. (*Gender, Race and Patriotism* 4)

Like Mathews proposes, Floresta fled to Europe to escape the conservatism that dominated Brazilian society. Europe offered new learning experiences, adventure, and acceptance for her liberal ideas. For twenty-eight years Floresta lived and traveled throughout Europe. She published memories and diaries in France and Italy that recounted her experiences. Among many of these publications are *Itinerário de uma viagem à Alemanha* and *Trois Ans em Italie, suivis d'un Voyage en Grèce*. Much of her work published abroad remained unknown to her native country during her lifetime. In her article "Narrativas de viagem de Nísia Floresta", Constância Duarte clarifies, "O registro das viagens de Nísia Floresta pela Europa foi bem pouco conhecido do público nacional, principalmente por ter sido escrito em língua estrangeira e ter ficado muitas décadas esgotado" (60). Floresta's publications in Europe were unknown to her native country for several decades, once discovered they added new insight to the author's life and collection of publications.

For example, *Itinerário de uma viagem à Alemanha* was published originally in French in 1857 and was not translated into Portuguese until 1982. Organized much like a diary, this text uncovers various details about the author herself, her likes and dislikes. For instance Floresta wrote, "Meu espírito ama as viagens, meu ser físico nelas se compraz, mas meu coração nunca

será viajor” (Duarte *Vida e obra* 277). *Itinerário de uma viagem à Alemanha* recalls Nísia Floresta’s first adventures in Germany, Belgium, and France in 1856. In five weeks starting in August and ending in September, she toured 23 cities. This publication is compiled of 34 letters the first one dated August 26<sup>th</sup> and the last one September 30<sup>th</sup>.

Another example of an international publication, *Trois Ans en Italie, suivis d’un Voyage en Grèce*, demonstrated the maturity of Floresta’s authorship. Constância Duarte comments, “*Trois Ans en Italie, suivis d’un Voyage en Grèce*, é, acima de todas, a da mulher intelectual e amadurecida, autora de livros conhecidos, que ocupava utilmente seu tempo estudando os novos países, escrevendo, ou frequentando os mais diversos cursos” (Duarte *Vida e obra* 299). Her studies of history, literature and mythology exhibited in this book prove her knowledge as a scholar. The growth she obtained as a writer and scholar can be attributed to the great literary writers she met in her travels, for example, Alexander Dumas, Lamartine, Duvernoy, Victor Hugo, Auguste Comte, George Sand, among others. She fully embraced liberal ideas of individual freedom, political equality, and universal fraternity.

Her memoirs have received praises for their uniqueness of including geographical descriptions, creating immediacy by using the present tense although the events described have passed, and at the same time weaving in biographical information from the author’s life. For example, Nísia Floresta recorded, “Observar o mundo é uma grande ciência; analisar e comparar os costumes, os usos, os diversos graus de civilização dos povos, é o melhor estudo que o viajor pode propiciar” (Duarte *Vida e obra* 293). Duarte expresses the value of Floresta’s memoirs by saying:

Seus livros de viagem, escritos sob a forma de diário ou de cartas aos parentes distantes, pretendem revelar, bem ao gosto daquela época (e também da nossa), as emoções e impressões da autora diante de cada cidade ou país que visita, bem como as reflexões que faz perante as ruínas ou fatos históricos que presencia. Nísia Floresta realiza, portanto,

muito mais que simples relatos, pois descreve com sensibilidade e erudição cada cidade, igreja, museu, parque, biblioteca e monumento, e os tipos humanos que encontra. (“Narrativas de viagem” 61)

Duarte mentions that these memoirs, *Itinerário de uma viagem à Alemanha* and *Trois Ans en Italie, suivis d’un Voyage en Grèce*, Floresta offers a variety of information about various parts of Europe with a feminist flare. Leaving Brazil and journeying through Germany, France, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, Greece and England aided Floresta as a scholar and writer, providing her with new experiences and better opportunities as an author and teacher.

### **Influence**

Nísia Floresta lived the rest of her life, until 1885 when she died in Bonsecours, Rouen, France, traveling and recording her experiences. She has become an overlooked heroine of the past as she concentrated her efforts on solving social problems and assisting those marginalized by society through her writing in newspapers and books that addressed these issues. Constância Duarte affirms, “Esta foi, com certeza, uma das primeiras mulheres no Brasil a romper os limites do espaço privado e a publicar textos na grande imprensa, pois, desde 1830, seu nome era uma presença constante em periódicos nacionais, comentando questões polêmicas, como o direito das mulheres – e, também, dos índios, e dos escravos” (“Narrativas de viagem” 60). Nísia Floresta was a woman ahead of her time who broke free of the gender norms and boundaries and lived a unique life publishing in the defense of women and their rights to education.

Nísia Floresta fostered a feminist literary legacy in Brazil with her first publication, a free translation of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, at twenty-two years old entitled *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens*. Duarte says in her book *Nísia Floresta: Vida e obra*, That this text “deu à sua autora o título incontestável da precursora dos ideais de igualdade e independência da mulher em nosso país, pois não se conhece outro texto

anterior que tenha tratado destas questões” (24). Although many debate the origin of this free translated work, Nísia Floresta is the first author of feminist literature in Brazil that denounced the prejudices against women and their inferior position in society. In addition to her authorship, opening up the first girls’ school, Colégio Augusto, affirms Floresta’s position as a precursor of Brazilian feminism.

Floresta had many life events that assisted her growth as a feminist, for example, an extensive education, travel abroad, and meeting intellectuals like Auguste Comte, founder of Positivism. Charlotte Liddell clarifies, “In turn, this knowledge helps to demonstrate the force of the various intellectual influences which shape her work, from Enlightenment thought to contemporary European liberalism, the predominantly Catholic discourse of maternalism in Brazil and Europe, and the growing influence of Positivism through her friendship with Augusto Comte” (“Brazil’s First Feminist” 44). These influences altered her life’s work in becoming a feminist author and educator placing her as a facilitator between liberal and conservative discourse.

Nísia Floresta’s work helped transform women’s identity in Brazil, as a mother and citizen, by promoting quality education for girls in the nineteenth century. Roberto Seidl affirmed, “Finalizando, poderemos afirmar que Nísia Floresta, foi, acima de tudo, uma educadora, pondo todo seu talento e empregando todos os seus esforços ao serviço da causa da emancipação da mulher no Brasil. Este, o seu maior título. Esta, a sua Glória legítima e verdadeira” (44). Alas, Nísia Floresta did not live to see the emancipation of women. However, she made her mark in history by helping to bring about a more gender-equal society. Some women are still prisoners to their homes, but the application of education that Nísia Floresta

promoted has been enabling the transformation of women in society from a dependent, ignorant object, to an intelligent and independent subject.

### Chapter III: A Translator and Mother

Nísia Floresta lived as a mother, a translator, an educator, a world traveler, a writer, a journalist and a feminist. Her influence and position in Brazil is comparable to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in Mexico, Mary Astell in England and the Grimké sisters in the United States. Floresta's texts benefit the modern scholar, for they offer an authentic and rare nineteenth-century feminine perspective. In addition, her reflections are not limited to Brazilian society, she also wrote concerning European society as well, as in her work *A mulher*.

In the beginning of her writing career, like many other authors of the time, Floresta started by publishing in newspapers including *Espelho das brasileiras*, *Diário de Pernambuco* and *O carapuceiro*. Constância Duarte said that the year 1831 stood as a fruitful year for Floresta for it was the year she made her debut in published literature (*Vida e obra* 22-3). These articles reflected her attitudes concerning the condition of women and slaves. She used these occasions to build a platform in defense of human rights and equal educational opportunities between genders. These newspaper articles were compiled and published in 1853 in a book called *Opúsculo humanitário* (23). The literary works she wrote provide a unique perspective of her time that reflect on her personal life but also her social observations. Above all these publications marked the beginning of Brazilian feminism.

Along with her newspaper publications, Nísia Floresta is also known and esteemed for her book *Conselhos à minha filha* published in 1842 and originally written as a gift to her daughter, Livia. Subsequent to Nísia Floresta's death her most acknowledged piece is her translated work entitled *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens*, published in 1832. As an author, she matured intellectually over the course of her lifetime. In summary, Her travels to Europe strongly influenced her progress as a writer as she was able to associate with some of the

great European intellectuals. In fact, Nísia Floresta published many of her texts abroad in France and in Italy (Liddell *Brazil's First Feminist* 8). Her most mature works, for example the classic essay *A mulher*, were written abroad. Nísia Floresta left a paper trail of her observations, criticisms and comparisons about European and Brazilian society that concentrated on the position of women during the 1800s.

### ***Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens (1832)***

Nísia Floresta's literary legacy began with her translated work *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens (Direitos)*. Floresta's first edition of *Direitos* was published three different times in Brazil: first in Recife, Pernambuco (1832), later in Porto Alegre (1839), and lastly in Rio de Janeiro (1839) (Duarte *Literatura feminina* 21). This text is probably the most known, read and analyzed of all her works because it stands as her first publication, from which she receives her title as feminist. Most scholars believe Floresta translated it from *Vindication of the Rights of Women* written by Mary Wollstonecraft, however others have found evidence saying otherwise. *Direitos* can be seen as a prerequisite to reading her other works as it introduces themes of feminist critique that she adopts throughout all her texts.

*Direitos* remained controversial during the time and stood as one of the first publications by a Brazilian to address directly gender inequalities. Charlotte Liddell emphasized in her article "Brazil's First Feminist? Gender and Patriotism in the Works of Nísia Floresta":

[*Direitos*] is the first known work to be published in Brazil dealing directly with the issues of women's intellectual equality and their capacity, and right to be educated and participate in the active process of society on an equal footing with men. Moreover, it is without doubt amongst the most radical and forceful in the claims for women of any such text published throughout the nineteenth century, original or in translation. (19)

Liddell questions Floresta's motives, however, admires her approach in beginning her career as a feminist writer with this translated work for Floresta has a personal buffer and, in order to keep

her reputation, denies original authorship by attributing the work to Mistress Godwin, better known as the wife of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft (20).

When she was 22 years old, Nísia Floresta's *Direitos* was published and skepticism has kept scholars intrigued about the legitimacy of the translation. Although many academics agree Floresta translated the text from a French edition of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which was published in England in 1792, other scholars consider this work an original or a manifestation of "*antropofagia*" or "cannibalism", a term coined by one of the Brazilian literary frontrunners of Modernism, Oswald de Andrade, in 1928 (Duarte *A primeira feminista do Brasil* 872). Most recently, scholars have found a stronger correlation between *Direitos* and a text entitled *Women not Inferior* written by an unfamiliar French author Sophie.

*Antropofagia* is originally a cannibalistic ceremony the indigenous communities of Brazil practiced. During times of war the captured prisoners would soon be served as dinner like Darcy Ribeiro mentions, "a antropofagia de comer seus inimigos em banquetes selvagens" (57). The tribe would offer the prisoner a widow to produce an offspring preserving his gene line. Oswald de Andrade used this term as a literary metaphor preserving the past through art. For example, *antropofagia* occurs in literature when an author metaphorically consumes the work of other writers and then reiterates it using their own words. Floresta considered *Direitos* a free translation indicating that she restated and elaborated on the ideas of other feminist authors. Some scholars are inclined to believe that *Direitos* was actually a process of *antropofagia* due to the fact that Nísia Floresta read books both in Portuguese and French and found inspiration from Poulain de LaBarre, Sophie and Olympe de Gouges, (Duarte *A primeira feminista do Brasil* 827). Nonetheless, scholars have perceived ambiguity between *Direitos* and the accreditation to Mary Wollstonecraft.

Charlotte Hammond Mathews blames the researchers for this ambiguity by accusing them of jumping to conclusions too quickly. In her article, “Between ‘Founding Text’ and ‘Literary Prank’” she claims, “It is also important to note that it is Floresta’s subsequent biographers who have assumed that *Direitos* is specifically a translation of *Vindication*” (24). There still has not been a definite conclusion on where this translation came from but it has been affirmed that there is a strong correlation between *Women Not Inferior, Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and *Direitos*. Was it Sophia, Wollstonecraft, or a case of *antropofagia*? These questions still exist and refer to the Floresta myth.

Consequently, there was a study done by the South Santa Catarina University in Brazil in 2010 that addresses the Floresta myth. The study concluded that Sophia was a pseudonym for Mary Wollstonecraft who published *Woman Not Inferior to Man* in 1739. The link between the two authors seems weak and may be just another attempt to resolve the mystery considering Wollstonecraft was not born until 1759 (Liddell *Brazil’s First Feminist* 33).

Essentially, Nísia Floresta read *Women Not Inferior to Man* and/or *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and while she was living in Recife did a “free translation” of the work from French to Portuguese, attributing the work to a “Mistress Godwin.” *Direitos* is considered a “free translation,” as the translator modestly admits in the introduction of the book. She felt incapable of doing a worthy translation from French to Portuguese. Despite this confession, Floresta became known for her ideology as a feminist due to this revolutionary work.

Comparing Wollstonecraft’s work and Floresta’s translated text Raquel Araújo stated, “Nísia Floresta deu os primeiros passos para a desconstrução dos preconceitos que envolviam o seu sexo. As duas obras foram extremamente significativas para a história do feminismo, visto que tiveram como um de seus grandes méritos questionar o papel que era imposto à mulher,

levando em consideração o momento político de cada país e seu contexto cultural” (6-7).

According to Araújo, Floresta made the first steps in Brazil deconstructing the social stereotypes and prejudices by publishing *Direitos*.

Along with Araújo, many other scholars have also attested that *Direitos* was one of the first texts that define feminism in Brazil by visibly questioning the traditional role women were expected to perform. For example, Roberto Seidl confirms that this text was a vital precursor to Brazilian feminism and states, “Lendo-se este folheto conclui-se logo que a Nísia Floresta cabe o título de precursora de feminismo no Brasil e quiçá na América do Sul” (9). In *Direitos*, Nísia Floresta denounces the power that men assume over women and daringly declares that women deserve more respect in their essential role in society. She boldly emphasizes that women possess a much larger capacity and ability than the prejudices suggest, claiming that such prejudices cause women to be confined to their roles as submissive and obedient housewives and mothers. Floresta, along with many other feminist of her time, proposed that the solution to such biases is education and increased learning opportunities for women.

In *Direitos*, men are ridiculed for their behavior and thought patterns toward women. The feminist objectives of the text are similar to other early feminist literature where equal education is primarily emphasized followed by a series of arguments to redefine women’s capabilities and attributes such as pinpointing myths found in doctrine and stereotypes, addressing the misrepresentations in social norms and finally promoting the admiration women should receive for being a mother and wife. Floresta’s translated work embarks on a revolutionary path for Brazilians to begin rethinking and questioning society’s structure and the patriarchal system in which they reside. Constância Lima Duarte affirms, “Oferecendo ‘às brasileiras’ e aos ‘jovens acadêmicos’, o livro continha a denúncia dos preconceitos e do estado

de inferioridade em que se encontrava a quase totalidade das mulheres de seu tempo” (*Vida e obra* 24). Duarte suggests that *Direitos* offered the Brazilian people, especially young students, a new perspective that could potentially change the male dominant trend in society.

One of the many feminist critiques in *Direitos* suggests that women are capable of working in medicine, “Nosso sexo parece nascido para ensinar e praticar a medicina” (69). This sentiment advocates that women possess feminine attributes that are useful that can empower women to learn and achieve. The text raises the question, if it is in women’s nature to cure, converse, nurture, and persuade, then why are women not allowed to be lawyers, judges and doctors? It seems hypocritical and wasteful to not authorize them to explore their talents in these professions. The text goes further to propose that women are intelligent and inspirational, which qualifies them to become philosophers or theologians. It reads, “Meu sexo não é tão desprezível como os homens querem crer, e que nós somos capazes de tanta grandeza d’alma como os melhores desse sexo orgulhoso” (89). Nineteenth century Brazilian society considered such ideas to be ridiculous and even humorous. To think that a woman could be a lawyer, philosopher or doctor was impossible because the prejudices suggested otherwise.

The stereotypes women faced were promoted and sustained by religious doctrine, such as the myth of Eden. Religion, along with other institutions, taught that women were born to benefit the lives of men. *Direitos* argues contrary to these common beliefs and actually proposes the antithesis, “os homens foram criados para o nosso uso, assim como do que nós para o deles” (35).

The abrupt defiance *Direitos* made against the social norms deemed it one of the most liberal publications in Brazil of its time. A feminist is clearly defined in this text as someone who seeks equality in society and announces a reformation of the status quo. Despite this translated

work being a literary work with strong feminist ideals, it does not abandon the nature of women as a mother and wife, but asserts, “Tudo isso é admirável” (35). This work teaches that it is admirable for a woman to be a mother and wife; however, the man and the woman share equal parental responsibilities and obligations in establishing a home and raising their children together. This radical notion disrupted the hierarchy within the home treating parenting as an equal partnership.

The importance of education appeared to be the main emphasis throughout the work and was on the agenda of many feminists throughout the world. The inequalities in the realm of education put the publication of feminist literature, like *Direitos*, in a difficult situation because the majority of women were illiterate. Besides, women were the ones who desperately needed to read such revolutionary messages as “espero que as mulheres de bom senso se empenharão em fazer conhecer que elas merecem um melhor tratamento e não se submeterão servilmente a um orgulho tão mal fundado” (41). As discussed in chapter one, women were treated like slaves and some even like dogs. Some women lived their whole lives in such hostile environments, never receiving an education, never feeling loved by their spouse, and never living in peace and happiness. A publication like *Direitos* was desperately needed in Brazil because women needed to hear that they deserve an education, a husband that loves and appreciates them, and the right to happiness and prosperity.

In the 1800’s every opportunity for women to succeed was based on the chances of being born into a prestigious and privileged family. The women who were fortunate enough to be born into better circumstances were more likely to learn how to read and write but they were still trapped by the same male dominance. The opportunities to escape such oppression were few and far between. Desperation called upon death as the only answer for freedom causing many women

to commit suicide as they became increasingly anxious and distressed to escape the oppression that bound them. All this can be attributed to the lack of educational and occupational opportunities for women.

Education was a central solution to find respect among the elite in society. A woman capable of holding her own in a conversation about politics or economics was highly impressive. Even though there was criticism against women being as intelligent as men, *Direitos* approaches education as a solution to the harsh inequality between genders and a resolution to liberate women from the bonds of society. It is reasonable to say that women have the same capacities as men to learn. The text confirms this reason, “[A mulher] tem todos os talentos e requisitos para aprender e ensinar as ciências, que põem os homens em estado de possuir o poder e as dignidades, elas são igualmente capazes de reduzir seu saber à prática no exercício de seu poder e dignidades” (76-7). It is repeatedly affirmed in *Direitos* that women are talented and have all the capabilities that are required to learn science, medicine, and math just as well as men. Such notions transform the woman who is so often viewed as an object into a subject.

Brazilian readers did not give this translated work high regards. However, pinpointing the hypocrisies and addressing the absurdity of gender stereotypes helped effectively articulate the feminist perspective. The arguments are successful because they are presented to the reader through questions. For example, why are women excluded from the universities and the job market? This language style makes the reader think about the situation of women in society while considering the information and opinion stated in the text. Also, the injustices are easily perceived whether or not the reader agrees or not, hence the title, *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens*, [*Rights of Women and Injustices of Men*]. This translated work was aimed

at humanizing women by opening discourse and presenting a new perspective, displaying women as subjects rather than objects as they are so frequently seen.

Although scholars are unsure about Floresta's motive in publishing *Direitos* in Brazil it seems like an earnest attempt to introduce feminism ideas to the Brazilian people by challenging tradition, stereotypes, and male authority. In practice, the feminist critiques presented in this translated work strive to establish a more orderly community and promote more progress through gender equality. With the help of the feminist model from Europe and her initial work, *Direitos*, Nisia Floresta received the information and inspiration to lead the dialogue of emancipating women in Brazil. This work started a pattern that continues throughout her work as she addresses core feminist issues of her time in areas of home, education and economics, calling attention to the problematic situations and positions women faced on a daily basis but also suggesting solutions to these problems via an increase in opportunities and participation of women in society.

### ***Conselhos à minha filha (1842)***

Nisia Floresta wrote *Conselhos à minha filha (Conselhos)*, [*Advice to my daughter*] which she dedicated to her daughter Livia and was given to her as a gift on her twelfth birthday. With her level of education and awareness of the female condition, it is natural that Nisia Floresta would be concerned for her daughter and would want to give her advice. All young girls faced difficult situations about marriage and education, or the lack thereof. *Conselhos* was published in 1842 and was admired by not only Brazil but also Italy and France (Liddell *Brazil's First Feminist* 95). It was better received and more successful as it was less focused on the feminist critiques found in her translated work, *Direitos* and more centered on the moral perspective of the virtuous woman and motherhood. However, maternity has always been a big

topic of debate for feminists and is a major theme in *Conselhos* in which Floresta has many important arguments to make.

Nísia Floresta was recognized in Italy for many of her works. *Conselhos* was published in 1858 and the author translated it herself. Bishop Mandoví considerably revered the text and wanted it to be required reading in all the Catholic schools. Roberto Seidl affirms, “O Bispo de Mandoví, encantado com os alevantados ensinamentos contidos no livrinho de nossa patrícia, ordenou nova edição destinada à leitura nas escolas católicas” (14). The Bishop wanted to censor some of the content in *Conselhos* and publish another edition due to the mild feminist ideas it espoused. For example, Nísia Floresta wrote “Por vezes minha alma tremeo, e detestou os homens a cuja maldade succumbia a innocencia e a virtude nesses calamitosos tempos de horror, e de desolação!” (12). Nísia Floresta disapproved the bishop’s request to alter the work and convinced him that it should remain unchanged, since it was written for her daughter. Needless to say, it was published again without any alterations and it was widely read by the young Italian girls as part of their school curriculum.

*Conselhos* was read throughout Italy, as well as, France, for many years teaching young girls about womanhood and cautioning them of the challenges they would face in education and choosing a husband. The scholar Roberto Seidl complemented *Conselhos*, and said, “Neste primoroso trabalho onde palpita em cada linha o mais santo dos amores que é o amor maternal, Nísia a fim de incutir à filha, inexperiente e cândida, coragem e destemor para vencer os fatais revezes da vida” (10). Nísia Floresta indeed professed her maternal love for her daughter in this book filling it with words of wisdom for the young, inexperienced girl Lívia.

As heartwarming as it is to read of the love Floresta had for her daughter one could argue that among the pedagogical discourse on a virtuous and educated woman in this text lacks the

feminist fire that is found in her translated work, *Direitos*, is non-existent. Charlotte Liddell speculates Floresta's feminist hesitation was to protect her reputation and that of her school's, Colégio Augusto, due to her dependency on the public support for her livelihood since her male partner and support had died. Liddell claims, "At this time the school was her most important project and, as far as is known, her primary source of income... Floresta could not afford to attract polemic by putting her name to ideas which might have damaged her reputation and that of her school" (*Brazil's First Feminist* 97). This argument seems bold considering the historical context in which Floresta wrote. Because of her discourse on mother-educator, some feminist scholars, like Liddell, observe Floresta's work walking a fine line between controversies and keeping the status quo. Even Duarte says Floresta idealizes herself as a mother and widower in *Conselhos*, "Nísia Floresta apresenta-se, da mesma, como uma mãe dedicada e extremosa (bem de acordo com a imagem idealizada da mulher na época e que aparece em diversos escritos), como esposa saudosa do marido, como filha querida e obediente e como professora zelosa" (*Vida e obra* 222-3).

Floresta's intention for writing *Conselhos* was to gain positive public attention and support, though her sincerity was not lost as she idealized motherhood and education. *Conselhos* conveys the author's devotion to her children and expresses how motherhood helped her cope with the death of her husband. She writes how much her daughter Lívia helped her find purpose in life and escape the awful sadness of her loss, "Meus filhos!...o alicerce, o edifício de minha felicidade"(14), She also comments, "Quantas vezes o meu coração pulava de prazer ouvindo-o exclamar 'Oh! Minha filha! Quão feliz sou em possuir-te!'" (12). Floresta appears to rejoice in her role as a mother and to believe it is an important role for women where they can achieve a sense of divine power, influence and purpose. In the preface to *Conselhos*, she relates that

maternal instincts are above all other human passions and to be a mother is the greatest sacrifice a human being can make (VIII). Floresta seems to find great purpose in motherhood and uses it as an advantage repetitiously as she promotes and argues in favor of equal education.

In fact, her emphasis on motherhood and virtue reflects the predominant role Christianity played in author's life. In *Conselhos*, as part as her council and advice to her daughter, she teaches about living a virtuous and Christian life. "A felicidade é sempre o resultado da virtude" (21). The virtues that Floresta addresses to her daughter in this text are charity, generosity, humility, and gratitude. She teaches that religion is necessary because it encourages living both a virtuous and happy life. "São as virtudes christãs, que eu desejo inspirar-te, e para conseguil-o é mister."(18). As enigmatic as this pious attitude appears perhaps it stems again from protecting her reputation and finding common ground with the readers of her time. Regardless, by publishing her works she represented an uncommon feminine voice that initiated a sluggish social reform in behalf of women's educational rights.

Nísia Floresta concludes *Conselhos* with a collection of poems she wrote for her daughter. Her emphasis in these poems is education and the importance of education for women. She stated in the text, "me esforço por dar-te uma educação, que entre nós se nega ao nosso sexo, é sem dúvida na esperança de que a minha cara filha, bebendo as saudáveis lições da sabedoria" (16). Under the tutelage of her mother, Lívia became a translator and translated many of her mother's works into English and French. There is nothing known about Lívia following her mother's footsteps as a writer and educator, but there is the assumption that she married, had children and lived her life in Europe with her family (Duarte *Vida e obra* 66).

Much like the morality that was taught in *Conselhos*, Nísia Floresta also included these teachings in the novels that she wrote for young readers. She dedicated much of her writing

towards education, emphasizing the situation of women in society. She wrote *Fanny*, also entitled *O modelo das donzelas*, and *Daciz*, also entitled *A jovem completa*. These works were published around 1847 and followed a similar model to *Conselhos*, being directed towards the youth and written to educate them on the importance of learning and morality (Augusta and Duarte *Cintilações* xii). Floresta's works present a conversation between women's traditional stereotypical roles as a mother and more controversial topics, such as education. Charlotte Mathews relates:

It is possible to identify two basic roles at the heart of Floresta's vision of womanhood: the duties of motherhood, in particular the notion of the mother-educator, and the role of moral guardian and regenerator of men. Both are portrayed as a means by which women can secure a position of greater value in society, since these roles are expressed in terms of their benefit to society and the nation. In fact the two are essentially aspects of the same gendered nation-building discourse, in which woman is cast as producer and influencer of citizens. (*Gender, Race and Patriotism* 65)

Nísia Floresta's discourse concerning womanhood and the mother-educator will become more apparent in her works *Opúsculo humanitário* and *A mulher*. However *Direitos* inspiration and *Conselhos* popularity marked Floresta's initiation into the realm of feminist authorship.

## Chapter IV: A Feminist Writer

### *Opúsculo Humanitário* (1853)

As a young author, Nísia Floresta published many articles in local Brazilian newspapers advocating for feminism and abolition of slavery. She compiled her publications into a book entitled *Opúsculo humanitário* (*Opúsculo*). According to the Roberto Seidl this work stands as one of Nísia Floresta's best. He indicates that this work shows Floresta's prowess as an educator and sociologist (15). She addresses the value of education in regards to its benefits to society while challenging gender stereotypes and social norms. The constant themes emphasized in Floresta's works are first the importance of offering quality education to girls and second, the value of motherhood. The fact that male authors dominated the production of literature in the nineteenth century (excluding the female perspective) gives Floresta's authorship great value (Telles 408).

Floresta points out the lack of subjects offered to students as a major flaw. She promoted physical education, arts, languages, math and science for both boys and girls. To include the girls in this was controversial, especially in classes like math and science. Counter to the notion that men may have more physical strength than women, she proposes that it does not justify the misperceived belief that men have a natural gift for learning. Many feminists agree that the brain does not have a sex and Nísia Floresta concurs by stating, "É a inteligência que não tem sexo" (63).

*Opúsculo* objectively raised awareness of how Brazil lagged behind other countries socially, economically and politically. Education stood at the center of all of Floresta's comments, she believed that the heart of a nation's strength and the hope for progress in the

future depended on it. The root of all social problems comes from the lack of education or the quality thereof.

Critic Guacira Lopes Louro has argued that Brazil trailed behind because of a backwards and primitive society, most noticeably manifested in illiteracy (443). As Brazil modernized into a country of order and progress (the national motto derived from Positivism) it was obvious to Floresta that the country needed to invest in quality education for the masses. Yet Floresta faced many adversities in her efforts to improve education and permit the admission of girls. She opened the first girls' school in Rio de Janeiro, Colégio Augusto, offering young girls a formal and comprehensive education. Constância Lima Duarte, in her book *Nísia Floresta vida e obra*, expresses the scholarship exhibited in *Opúsculo*:

Em *Opúsculo Humanitário* encontra-se a síntese do pensamento de Nísia Floresta sobre a educação – formal e informal – de meninas. Pode-se também perceber através dele a grande erudição da autora, suas leituras, a experiência no magistério e na direção do Colégio Augusto ou, ainda, os conhecimentos obtidos na viagem que havia feito a países europeus durante os anos de 1849 e 1851. (209)

The collection of articles in *Opúsculo* displays Nísia Floresta's foresight as she critiques and analyzes the social structures of her time. Not only did she pinpoint the problems facing Brazilian society, she also offered solutions that revealed her intellect and intuition as a true feminist idealist. Many of her feminist critiques seem to come from her own life's experience; namely, the death of her father and husband which left her to fend for herself and her children. Her own education stood as a significant value to her and quite possibly kept her out of poverty. Maria Lúcia Rocha-Coutinho notes in her book *Tecendo por trás dos panos*, women have remained in the marginalized sector of society and part of the oppressed people because of their gender. With some rare circumstances most women suffer from discrimination and share an inferior status with other marginalized groups. The universal oppression men put upon women

has victimized women and left them defenseless (18-9). Floresta would be categorized among the social rarities during her time.

### **Positivism and *Opúsculo***

Although Floresta was considered revolutionary in promoting women's education she also endorsed the traditional familial role women play as mothers. *Opúsculo humanitário* faces the paradox between the author's feminist ideology and her Christian affiliation. Liddell says, "She is clearly a devoted wife and perhaps more importantly, she is a devout Christian" (*Brazil's First Feminist* 180). Many scholars assisted in Nísia Floresta's scholarship and ideology as a writer and feminist. One in particular was Augusto Comte who strongly influenced Floresta and her works, especially *Opúsculo*.

Nísia Floresta and Comte became good friends. Marilda Corrêa Ciribelli wrote in *Mulheres singulares e plurais* that, "No período em que morou no exterior, no seu 'exílio voluntário', percorreu muitos países, publicou vários livros e seu relacionou com grandes intelectuais da Europa... De todos aqueles relacionamentos, porém, o mais comentado foi o que teve com Augusto Comte e que influenciado mais sua obra" (144). Out of all the contact Floresta had with other intellectuals in Europe, Augusto Comte proved to be the most influential in her writings. They communicated frequently through letters that were later published in the book *Cartas*, edited by Constância Lima Duarte. Much like Floresta, Comte believed that women stand as moral guardians and considered them the redeemers of men both spiritually and morally.

Nísia Floresta did not approve of all the principles of Positivism but she especially agreed with the stance on women's capabilities and their natural moral superiority (Liddell *Brazil's First Feminist* 55). She draws considerable attention to Positivism's principles in *Opúsculo* as she expresses the importance of virtues such as, charity, tenderness and self-denial. This strongly

supports her argument of providing education to women, which she concluded that education would, above all, assist women in developing their virtues and strengthen their morality and ability to nurture. Living in a society dominated by religious perspectives, as a feminist writer Floresta found common ground with her more conservative readers by promoting motherhood.

The passion for motherhood so clearly expressed in her works led to contemporary criticism and accusations of Nísia Floresta being contradictory. For example, Charlotte Liddell notes, “[Nísia Floresta conveys a] ...specific concern for female education, still dominant in *Opúsculo*, towards the question of woman’s value to society as moral guardian and regenerator of man” (*Brazil’s First Feminist* 64). Liddell criticizes Floresta suggesting Nísia’s discourse of self-denial and sacrifice places women in a submissive and dependent role to men with little opportunity to improve their own lives by calling attention to the fact that Nísia Floresta obsesses over the role women play as a mother. Contemporary feminists question Floresta’s title as a women’s activist because of this obsession, however it was modern scholars that labeled her as such. Plus, though women’s roles as mother and wife did consume most of the discourse found in Nísia Floresta’s texts, her obsession is pardonable due to the historical and cultural context in which she lived. A woman’s career during the nineteenth century encompassed the roles played as mother and wife. Furthermore, Nísia Floresta found that by fulfilling the role of mother, what she deemed a moral duty for women, society benefits by placing the family and motherhood as the tipping point to modernize Brazil. “Mães dirigem com perseverante zelo a educação de seus filhos, afastando-os dos cardos que lhes juncam o trânsito da primeira mocidade... A vida é para tais naturezas uma luta constante, de que sempre saem vitoriosas...” (104).

Noticeably, Nísia Floresta desired women to gain an education because of the subsequent rewards it would offer to society both morally and economically. For instance, an educated

woman offers support, guidance and council to her husband and she also acquires the capacity to teach her children. These children will grow and learn from their parents subsequently becoming the future leaders, mothers and fathers of society. Many scholars have criticized Nísia Floresta for being trapped in the religious stereotypical mind-set that women should still be confined to the home to teach morality and virtue to their children. Granted Floresta does suggest these obligations for women, but with good intentions with the expectation that education will improve parenting, home life and further assist in the progress of society. Not only that, this attitude kept her reputation as an author who found common ground with the pious readers of her time.

Floresta's writings also portrayed aspects of her personal life and experiences; caring, nurturing and rearing her own children combined with her career as a writer and educator greatly enhanced her life as expressed in *Conselhos à minha filha*. She found great happiness in education and in her role as a mother and wife, so naturally she desired the same for others. In addition, by idealizing the role of motherhood and constructing a more active role sets up a most persuasive argument to allow women into schools for Floresta's conservative audience.

### ***A mulher (1859)***

In comparison to Europe, during the nineteenth century, Brazil was a more distressing place to live as a feminist because improvement was slow-moving; both men and women could not break the social norms constructed by the colonial years and the Catholic Church. Not surprising, Nísia Floresta went to live in Europe, Charlotte Liddell confirms, "As an independent woman in a deeply conservative society, it is not surprising that the comparative intellectual freedom of Paris held so great an appeal" ("Nature, Nurture and Nation" 71). In France, for instance, similar gender inequalities remained commonplace but society was restructuring economically, politically and socially. The problem France faced in Floresta's opinion was

neglected families. Both men and women worked outside the home and children were neglected and uncared for. While living in France, Nísia Floresta wrote *A mulher*, at the peak of her writing career with more than twenty years of experience as an author and this particular text stands as one of her best-written works on the subject of women. *A mulher* discusses universal problems in society in regards to gender and family in addition to modifications that would benefit both men and women. Nísia Floresta proceeded to write about her reflections regarding motherhood as found in *Opúsculo* nevertheless she expounds her reasoning using real life experiences.

*A mulher* was published in 1853, in Florence, and later translated into Italian entitled *La Donna*. Constância Duarte explains that *A mulher* displays Floresta's intellectual process and authorship of fiction, essays, chronicles, and texts (*Vida e obra* 241). Nísia Floresta uses these three styles of writing beginning with a narrative approach, next a journalistic approach and finally a sociological approach centering on the breast-feeding debate. The narrator is the author and she addresses the book to mothers by declaring, "Escutai, Ó mães, escutai a narração daquilo que ainda me foi dado ouvir" (97), telling mothers to listen to her experiences and observations and to learn from them.

Besides the logistics of the work, the content addresses the breastfeeding issue. Many women during the time hired wet-nurses to breastfeed their children either for social status or simply because they worked outside the home. The narration is an interview with a woman who raised her own family on wages from breastfeeding other children, "É um dos meus dois amamentados de Paris." – "Como fazei vós," repliquei, "para amamentar três de uma vez?" – "Que hei de fazer?" – respondeu; "aqui é tão duro tocar a vida! E é preciso arranjar-se de algum jeito." E contou-me em seu dialeto, o quanto tinha que penar para tirar o sustento da sua família" (97-9). This conversation with Nísia Floresta occurred while living in France obviously, with a

woman who breast-fed children all day for a small wage to have the money to feed her own family.

For Floresta, motherhood stood as an exalted opportunity and responsibility for women, a sacred privilege as regenerators of society and the vessels of new life and future generations. As she writes of her experiences in *A mulher*, her passion about the topic is felt and her disapproval that women would pay someone to breast-feed their own child is displayed. Nísia Floresta's dismay is articulated, "Ó mães sem coração, que abandonais os mais sagrados deveres da natureza, destacando de vosso seio os próprios filhos, esta parte de vossa alma para mandá-los sugar um leite estranho em alguma longínqua aldeia, onde não dais depois o ar de vossa presença!" (87). Perplexed by this practice, Floresta condemns it in the citation above as she accuses women of being heartless.

### **Nation-Building**

Falling victim to the male dominated medical practices and beliefs of the time, Floresta believed that virtue and morals are passed on to children through breastfeeding and a child's future depended on the breast milk of its mother (Liddell "Nature, Nurture and Nation" 72-5). As part of the nation building discourse, Nísia Floresta emphasized women's role as mothers in preparing future generations to be upstanding citizens in society. "Quando chega a sua vez de ser mãe, é naturalíssimo que ela siga o exemplo de sua mãe, e assim por diante" (121). *A Mulher* presents the nature versus nurture debate from Floresta's perspective. She suggests that the mother has influence and passes her motherly attributes on to principally her daughters, supported by the idea that offspring would naturally gravitate and repeat the same behaviors, attitudes and beliefs as their parents. These thoughts, theories and ideas debating the nature and nurture effect were new to Floresta's time when science and genetic research were still

developing. However, Floresta did not stand alone in her opinions, many others preached the same, “To breast-feed was widely described by doctors, philosophers and essayists as a woman’s ‘natural’ duty or ordained by nature, and those mothers who neglected this duty are frequently portrayed as denatured” (Liddell *Brazil’s First Feminist* 64).

Nísia Floresta recognized the need of persistence and dedication to reform the social norms, she comments, “Ter-se-á enorme trabalho em abrir escolas, academias e asilos de caridade; promulgar leis, dilatar o horizonte das ciências e da arte; favorecer e ampliar o comércio e a agricultura; alinhar exércitos formidáveis; não se continuar a desleixar a educação moral dos povos” (111-3). Although Nísia Floresta chastises women for being improper mothers, she assumed it was due to the lack of education and access to knowledge. Floresta yet again returns to her discourse on women’s education believing that every effort achieved in educating women would consequently reflect on their children by the manner they are raised. For Nísia Floresta, education became a constant theme in all her works, even in *A mulher*. She strongly urged it so women could be better equipped intellectually to raise a family.

Floresta adopted many of the Enlightenment principles about women’s role within the family and the importance of the family or mini-fatherland in society (Liddell “Nature, Nurture and Nation” 79). Liddell claims that Floresta fails to engage in the feminist discourse of mother-slave:

It was not only patriarchal male discourse that emphasized women’s natural role in the private sphere... Floresta’s failure to acknowledge slave motherhood is therefore extremely significant. In the context of Brazil, this focus on the domestic sphere demands a consideration of female slavery in relation to nation-building discourse. (73)

Floresta’s lack of attention to the feminist critique of the mother-slave notion indicates her efforts in redefining the identity of motherhood within the traditional patriarchal system. She observed about women, “...só ela poderá constituir a base fundamental do verdadeiro progresso

da sociedade que nada mais é, como todos sabem, que prosperidade dos povos” (113). She placed more consideration on women focusing on improving their condition as a mother. From reading *Conselhos à minha filha* it is apparent that Floresta received gratification from her role as a mother. Arguably, Floresta ignores the mother-slave stigma in her efforts to reconstruct the identity of mothers as an educator and leader in the home.

Liddell fails to recognize that Nísia Floresta expounds upon the ideal relationships between not only husbands and wives, but also parents and children in her text *A mulher*. She explains to the husbands, “Guarde-se bem o homem de ter a mulher para seu joguete, ou sua escrava; trata-a como uma companheira da sua vida, devendo ela participar de suas alegres e tristes aventuras...” (117). She advises that marriage should be more of a companionship than a fight for power between the sexes. As for parents, she gives guidance on how both mother and father can have a more active part in raising their children, “Os pais, eu sempre disse, obstinam-se a criar suas crianças mais para si que para as crianças mesmas...” (119). She explains a good example of parenting is where both the mother and the father involve themselves in the lives of their children persistently with discipline, love and education.

Unlike in Floresta’s other works, which denounce the patriarchal society, *A mulher* harshly criticizes women for not fulfilling their role as matriarchs. She articulates how women can improve as mothers, “Estabelecei a ordem e a harmonia em vossa casa, e com uma constante providência fazei com que aí reine a parcimônia, o asseio um modesto júbilo e todas os atrativos tão fortes da família, a fim de que o vosso esposo disto regozija” (135). Nísia Floresta was considered controversial throughout her life, but yet she held on to traditional gender roles of men and women within the family. She imparted to women their value in their duties as mothers and wives. Her main criticisms towards society were centered on not valuing women and their

fundamental roles in the family, condemning the oppressive state and harsh treatment women faced.

Nísia Floresta desired to motivate women to be educated and fight against the injustices of the patriarchal society. In *A mulher* it reads, “Mostrai-vos todas generosas, ó mulheres; em vez de gritar contra os erros, e injustiças, dos quais sois vítimas, procurai com vossa natural doçura, com uma bondade inalterável, e com prudentes observações, extirpá-los de seu transviado espírito, e pô-lo no bom caminho, o caminho da felicidade” (129). Many feminists share the mindset that women should embrace their “femininity” and use this quality to persuade change. Femininity is seen by most early feminist as a powerful identity among women to unite them and could be an effective force to fight against the repression placed upon them by a male dominated society. Thus feminism plays a pivotal role in helping women define femininity from their perspective.

Nísia Floresta illustrates this union of women in *A mulher*, “As mulheres, unanimemente reunidas pelo nobre desejo de efetuar um verdadeiro melhoramento na sociedade, poderão, com a simples prática de suas virtudes, obter em vinte anos, um resultado seguramente mais útil para o gênero humano, do que não fariam em um século toda a competência intelectual, e todos os esforços do homem” (131). Women could achieve more freedom and experience more equality if they unite together in one voice to demand justice. Nísia Floresta was one of the few that took a stance for women’s rights in Brazil during the 1800’s. Emancipation arrived in Brazil during the twentieth century and was accomplished by the power of unity that Nísia Floresta advocated.

Floresta utilized local newspapers to publish her opinions about the role of women in society, which resulted in *Opúsculo*. “*Opusculo humanitario* é todo ele um brado vibrante pela redenção da educação feminina, provando que a grandeza de uma nação reside no principal

órgão de uma sociedade, que é evidentemente, a mulher” (Seidl 17). The contradictions found in *Opúsculo* are clarified more in Floresta’s work *A mulher* where she continues her discourse on women, education and motherhood. Currently, this conversation between motherhood, education and career options are central topics for today’s women, proving how far ahead Floresta’s discourse stands for her time as she negotiates in behalf of women’s rights to education and presence as a mother.

Her major contributions, opening up Brazil’s first girls’ school, Colégio Augusto, along with publishing works like *Conselhos à minha filha*, grants her the title of feminist. Some contemporary scholars have criticized her inconsistency about the role of women as mothers while others have praised her for her intellect and earnestness to reform the patriarchal tradition. As a scholar herself, Nísia Floresta was shaped by intellectual movements of the Enlightenment, European liberalism, and Positivism and are demonstrated and represented in her texts. Nísia Floresta played an important role in furthering the cause of feminism in Brazil. Her publications reached across the spectrum of influence, referring to and publishing in Brazil and also Europe. Although her translated work, *Direitos*, is the most well known of her publications, her essays, like *A mulher*, are also great sources of her own ideas and personal observations of society in the nineteenth century that still carry relevant discourse for today’s feminists.

## Chapter V: Literature and Feminism

The publication and distribution of *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens*, *Conselhos à minha filha*, *Opúsculo humanitário*, and *A mulher* marked a social transition where Nísia Floresta, among other female authors, began making a stronger presence among the male dominated literary arena. Nísia Floresta was one of the few Brazilian women to publish internationally during the nineteenth century. She contributed to the restructuring of feminine stereotypes as an educator and mother. Feminism entered into the literary arena and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* introduced feminism to the young Floresta. Norma Telles, author of "Escritoras, escritas, escrituras" explains,

O discurso sobre a "natureza feminina", que se formulou a partir do século XVIII à sociedade burguesa em ascensão, definiu a mulher, quando maternal e delicada, como *força do bem...* Mesmo assim, foi a partir dessa época que um grande número de mulheres começou a escrever e publicar, tanto na Europa quanto nas Américas. Tiveram primeiro de aceder à palavra escrita, difícil numa época em que se valorizava a erudição, mas lhes era negada educação superior, ou mesmo qualquer educação a não ser das prendas domésticas. (403)

Telles attests that the historic position of women in the eighteenth century, where social changes like the establishment of the bourgeois, the French Revolution and the literature of the Romantic era assisted in the reconstruction of gender. Romanticism explored antitheses; woman/man, angel/demon, mother/father, nature/culture, superior/inferior, rich/poor, etc. Such analyses of oppositions generated discourse on the dominance of masculinity over femininity. Women were excluded from simple activities such as reading and writing, holding public positions, having access to formal education, and much more, being subjected to masculine authority. These issues caught feminists' attention, like Floresta, and though there was opposition, her work circulated among feminist writers until the end of the nineteenth century (406).

It has not been too long that historians began searching for information on the female perspective. Hélène Cixous and many other scholars have published articles explaining the importance of uncovering feminine writers like Nísia Floresta and encouraging more women to write. Cixous wrote, “I shall speak of women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies... Women must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (309). Such literature, like the texts of Nísia Floresta, marked the initial feminist movement in Brazil while giving women a place in history and making women a part of the general discourse.

### **Literature and Gender**

Literature passes from one generation to the next creating a repetitive pattern of thought and conduct hence, making patriarchy become a vicious cycle. The literary canon stands skewed toward the patriarchal system that has dominated society. All the great authors that are studied and recommended are primarily men, such as, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, among others. This male-authored canon perpetuates stereotypes and presumptions concerning the female sex. Masculine identity, values and imagery have always been present in a wide range of writings (Robinson 574). Women have had a disadvantage in the art of writing because of traditional beliefs, values and prejudices that the pen belongs to men.

Many scholars and researchers remain determined to uncover the lost and forgotten women authors of the past that have daringly taken up the pen to write. Many of the early female writers used male pseudonyms to get their works published, like, George Elliot, some even published under their father’s or husband’s name. As mentioned before Nísia Floresta published under many names, for example, Telesila, sometimes she used just her initials (N.A., N.F.,

N.F.B.A) (Duarte *Vida e obra* 98). Besides, Nísia Floresta Brasileira Augusto or simply Nísia Floresta also acted as pseudonyms, for her real name was Dionísia Gonçalves Pinto Freire.

More information about past events remains unidentified due to the lack of historic female-authored perspectives. Lillian S. Robinson said, “We have to return to confrontation with ‘the’ canon, examining it as a source of ideas, themes, motifs, and myths about the two sexes. The point in so doing is not to label and hence dismiss even the most sexist literary classics, but to enable all of us to apprehend them, finally, in all their human dimensions” (582). Bringing more attention to and revealing the female historical perspective could potentially uncover new dimensions of history offering new insights and new understanding

Many women were illiterate throughout the nineteenth century; leaving a readership of mostly men who gave little attention women’s writings. The literary canon was naturally formed with an overwhelming male presence. Male readers would find themselves outside and unfamiliar with writings about the female experience in the home, kitchen, and nursery where women were confined. “Virginia Woolf therefore quite properly anticipated the male reader’s disposition to write off what he could not understand, abandoning women’s writings as offering ‘not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak, trivial, or sentimental because it differs from his own’” (Kolodny 507).

Annette Kolodny’s explains the act of *Dancing through the Minefield* by questioning how a reader can truly understand how women live, how they have been living and how they imagine themselves when so often their narrative has been told by male-authors. Feminists, just like Nísia Floresta, Mary Wollstonecraft and Helene Cixous, encourage women to read and write to expand the female perspective and presence in society. With more female authors comes a greater understanding about the feminine consciousness, imagination and psyche (504).

Men and women have vastly different styles of writing and outlooks on life. Myra Jehlen's scholarly article, "Gender", clarifies, "literary critics have recently recognized that in their most ordinary expositions of character, plot, and style they speak the language of gender" (263). She goes on to explain that sexual identity has organized different perceptions into "masculine" and "feminine" literary phenomena where it does not necessarily correspond with sex. Gender is more commonly viewed as a cultural and social idea rather than a biological element. "If gender is a matter of nurture not nature, the character conventionally assigned to men and women in novels reflects history and culture rather than nature, and novels, poems and plays..." (264).

Male sexuality has dominated literature and is considered a patriarchal power, as the pen is in some sense a phallic symbol. The pen is like the penis in the application of reproduction. Like a father has children an author has poems or novels. However, several courageous women stepped out of their boundaries and have taken hold of a pen to write novels, poetry, etc.; Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Emily Dickenson, Christina Rossetti, Florbela Espanca, and many nuns wrote, like Soror Maria do Céu along with many more (Gilbert 491-3). In Sarah M. Gilbert's article "Literary Paternity," she writes:

Since both patriarchy and its text subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them, they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as "Cyphers," deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen. (492)

The disadvantages and persecutions were obstacles for many women-authors in the nineteenth century. To recall, at age twenty-two, Nísia Floresta began to write and develop her feminist ideology, thanks to the help and influence of female authors. At a young age she was widowed with two young children to take care of. Through her grief of the death of her companion,

Manuel Augusto, she began to teach, open schools for girls, publish feminist texts and raise her children alone. She stands as an early example of feminism, the first feminist in Brazil. In the afterward of *Fragmentos de uma obra inédita*, Natalie Bernardo da Câmara commented:

Pesquisar Nísia Floresta é, sem dúvida, um contínuo descortinar de surpresas e revelações. As suas histórias, verdades e trajetória fascinantes ressurgem a cada passo, quando nos aventuramos no seu universo, em busca dos mistérios de outrora. Sim, uma deliciosa aventura, em que nos apaixonamos ainda mais pela sua personalidade maravilhosamente singular e plural, versátil em ser viver. (107)

Floresta preserved her ideas and also her life's story in her publications. She was a woman ahead of her times not only in her opinions on women's position in society but also the modern opportunities she had to gain an education, teach, publish texts and travel.

## **Conclusion**

Indeed, Floresta lived a unique life for a Brazilian woman of the nineteenth century as she traveled and published texts in newspapers, pamphlets, and books on controversial gender issues. Though esteemed for her life, her work and involvement in women's education, Floresta's conservative mother-educator discourse confuses her feminist admirers. Charlotte Liddell, for example, comments, "The importance of *Direitos* in an analysis of Floresta's own feminist credentials now lies in a comparison of this text with her own work, which is markedly more conservative, focusing increasingly on the value of patriotic feminine virtue and women's exclusively domestic role as wife and mother" ("Brazil's First Feminist" 322). She admittedly stated Floresta's conservatism "might have been a practical necessity... to court a conservative readership" in addition to the influence of Christianity and her friendship with Augusto Comte (322). These conservative claims hold truth. As a translator of *Direitos*, Floresta presents herself as a feminist yet, as an author, she appears more like a negotiator. She found common ground with her conservative readers by focusing on how education relates to motherhood emphasizing

a traditional role while promoting a liberal notion. Her discourse on motherhood differentiated from the status quo of the period, especially in Brazil, revealing Floresta's attempt to redefine women's role in the home through educational opportunities.

Perhaps in Europe Floresta stood as a conservative yet in Brazil she was definitely labeled as a liberal due to her publications on women's education and her school Colégio Augusto. Liddell determines:

It is perhaps as a kind of 'feminist educator' that Floresta in fact earns her most powerful liberal feminist credentials: with the practical work done in the Collegio Augusto, educating girls to an unprecedented intellectual level and simultaneously confronting and combating parental and social prejudices. Floresta showed herself to be operating far ahead of her time. ("Brazil's First Feminist" 323)

Floresta made the first steps towards women's emancipation by demanding equal education.

Even though she is said to be ahead of her time she remained within the boundaries of tradition by endorsing motherhood and using this female role as why women need education.

Nísia Floresta's life's work helped transform women's identity as mothers and educators. Her efforts have not been forgotten due to scholars such as Constância Duarte, Charlotte Liddell, among others, who have compiled, analyzed and published concerning Floresta's authorship. Alas Nísia Floresta did not live to see the emancipation of women, however she made her mark in history by questioning social norms, offering education to girls and publishing texts, such as *Direitos das mulheres e injustiças dos homens*, *Conselhos à minha filha*, *Opúsculo humanitário*, and *A mulher* canonizing her as the first Brazilian feminist.

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