

WOMANHOOD AND THE MALE IMAGINATION IN MACHADO DE ASSIS

Laura Binenbojm
Yale University

Abstract: This paper argues that Machado de Assis exposes womanhood not as a stable identity but as a product of male narration. In *Dom Casmurro*, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, and *Memorial de Aires*, the narrators Bentinho, Brás Cubas, and Conselheiro Aires construct Capitu, Virgília, and Fidélia through suspicion, vanity, and idealization. Rather than granting access to female interiority, these narratives reveal the psychological needs and limits of male consciousness. Through close reading, the essay shows how Machado turns narrative form itself into a critique of patriarchal interpretation, inviting readers to recognize the distance between what the narrators claim and what the novels expose. Womanhood emerges not as essence but as a narrative position shaped by power, desire, and epistemological uncertainty.

Keywords: Machado de Assis, *Dom Casmurro*, narration, gender, Brazilian literature

Machado de Assis's fiction repeatedly exposes a foundational truth about human relations and the instability of knowledge: women in his novels are not simply represented by male narrators but constructed, projected, and often distorted through the prism of male imagination. To read Machado is to be confronted with the ways men narrate women into existence, confining them to roles that satisfy psychological needs, ideological anxieties, or narrative convenience. This dynamic is not accidental but structural. In *Dom Casmurro*, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, and *Memorial de Aires*, three narrators—Bentinho, Brás Cubas, and Conselheiro Aires—give us not access to Capitu, Virgília, or Fidélia, but access to themselves. Their narrations reveal less about the women they describe and far more about the fragile male consciousness that depends on them. Machado's genius lies in allowing the reader to perceive the disjunction between what the narrator claims and what the narrative reveals;

in the novels themselves, we witness the process by which womanhood is fabricated, misread, or romanticized. Each narrator deploys a distinct narrative mode—a confessional reconstruction, a posthumous memoir, and diary observations—but all three participate in the same patriarchal gesture: converting female interiority into a male story. The women are not granted their own voices; they exist only through the interpretive apparatus of men who cannot see them except as functions of their own identity.

In *Dom Casmurro*, this pattern takes its most violent and claustrophobic form. Bentinho's account of Capitu is less a biography than an autopsy: he slices her into fragments of gesture, expression, and suspicion, imposing coherence on her through repeated acts of interpretive force. Early in the novel, before any conflict has emerged, Bentinho recalls José Dias's description of Capitu's eyes—"olhos de cigana oblíqua e dissimulada"¹—a phrase that becomes a talisman for his jealousy. Bentinho initially admits he does not even know what "oblíqua" means; what matters is that the phrase furnishes him with a vocabulary for doubt. Capitu is not treacherous; treachery is the narrative category Bentinho needs in order to understand her. When he scrutinizes her eyes—"Deixe ver os olhos, Capitu"—the gaze is not reciprocal. He invents a depth behind those eyes: "traziam... uma força que arrastava para dentro, como a vaga que se retira da praia, nos dias de ressaca"². The metaphor of "olhos de ressaca" is often read by naïve readers as confirmation of Capitu's fatal power, but a more critical reading recognizes that the metaphor originates in Bentinho's imagination. The language does not describe Capitu; it describes Bentinho's susceptibility to fantasy, his need to impose poetic magnitude on ordinary phenomena. Capitu becomes dangerous because Bentinho needs her to be so to justify the narrative he will later impose: that she betrayed him with Escobar. In this sense, the novel's "mystery" is not whether Capitu committed adultery but how Bentinho constructs a woman capable of committing it.

This constructive violence intensifies as Capitu grows from adolescence into womanhood. Bentinho repeatedly frames her development as a kind of threat. When Gurgel comments on her maturity, Bentinho narrates: "Capitu ia crescendo às carreiras... Era mulher por dentro e por fora, mulher à direita e à esquerda, mulher por todos os lados, e desde os pés até a cabeça"³. The repeated insistence on "mulher" reveals an anxiety, not an observation. Womanhood, here, is a category that overwhelms Bentinho, not because Capitu has become inscrutable, but because her expanding subjectivity escapes

¹Machado de Assis. *Dom Casmurro*. São Paulo, Panda Books, 2019, 58.

²Machado de Assis, 2019, 58.

³Machado de Assis, 2019, 125.

his control. Rather than recognizing Capitu's autonomy, desires, or complexity, he translates her maturation into evidence of manipulation, sexual cunning, or duplicity. Even innocent actions—visiting his mother, conversing with relatives—become potential performances. When Capitu displays discretion or subtlety, Bentinho interprets it as “astúcia,” praising her for helping him “enganar toda esta gente”⁴. What looks like a partnership is actually conscription: he requires her to behave in ways that validate his narrative, and when she does so naturally and sincerely, he refigures it as calculation.

This interpretive violence culminates in the central accusation of the novel—one that Machado refuses to confirm or refute. The ambiguity is not a puzzle for the reader to solve but a critique of the narrator who refuses to see anything but what he has already decided. By the time Bentinho claims that Escobar and Capitu must have been lovers, his perception has been completely overtaken by the interpretive categories he forged as a youth. Capitu's every gesture becomes retroactive proof of treachery; her entire past is rewritten through the retrospective jealousy of a man narrating decades later. Machado disallows any direct access to Capitu's voice; all we have is Bentinho's version of her, a portrait assembled by a man who admits he writes to “atar as duas pontas da vida”⁵ and reconstructs a narrative in which he is the tragic victim. The novel's title—*Dom Casmurro*—is itself a testament to entrenchment: a man closed in upon himself, so ensnared in his private version of events that no external fact can penetrate his interpretation. In this way, Machadian womanhood emerges as an artifact of male paranoia, a figure who must be treacherous for the narrator's identity to cohere.

If *Dom Casmurro* represents the violent, suspicious mode of patriarchal narration, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* reveals a more ironic and self-indulgent mode in which womanhood becomes a site for male vanity rather than male fear. Brás Cubas is not a jealous narrator: he is a hedonistic one, a man who recounts his life from beyond the grave with a tone of sardonic detachment. Yet even in this posthumous position, where he claims to tell the truth because he has nothing to lose, his portrayals of women remain deeply entangled in the logic of self-serving male narration. Virgília, his central lover, appears less as a character than as a projection of Brás's erotic self-congratulation. She is introduced through an admission that simultaneously flatters himself and trivializes her: “Virgília era um belo erro, e é tão fácil confessar um belo erro!”⁶. Brás calls her an “erro”—a mistake—but redeems the term by emphasizing her beauty, turning her into an ornament of his own narrative, a delicious flaw that enhances his sensual persona. The category of “erro,” however, is telling: Virgília is not

⁴Machado de Assis, 2019, 106.

⁵Machado de Assis, 2019, 12.

⁶Machado de Assis. *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. São Paulo, Panda Books, 2018, 58.

understood in terms of her intentions, agency, or moral stakes; she is understood only in relation to how she reflects Brás Cubas back to himself.

Machado makes this process of narcissistic narration unmistakable in the chapters in which Brás recalls their affair. When he describes seeing her again after years, transformed into a married woman moving through society, he writes: “Era ela... tão outra estava, a tal ponto a natureza e a arte lhe haviam dado o último apuro”⁷. The observation is not about Virgília; it is about her effect on his narrative pleasure. He admires her as an aesthetic object, a “corpo flexível e magnífico” whose touch during the waltz gives him a “singular sensação, uma sensação de homem roubado”⁸. The language is revealing: he is not robbed *of* anything; he is robbed *into* something—robbed into desire, robbed into memory, robbed into the comfort of feeling important. Virgília’s body is not her own; it is a site upon which Brás Cubas inscribes the fantasy of possession. Even his jealousy is not directed at Virgília but at the idea that others might see what he considers his exclusive accomplishment. Virgília becomes a narrative accessory rather than a subject.

The most striking illustration of this dynamic appears in the chapter where Brás imagines Virgília dressing for the opera. Her gestures—consulting her husband about her toilette, choosing jewels—are described not to illuminate her interior life but to frame Brás Cubas’s emotional oscillation between resentment and desire. At dinner, he refuses to look at her, yet he silently reconstructs her body in his mind, dismantling her ornaments one by one: “começava a despi-la... a torná-la minha, somente minha, unicamente minha”⁹. The culminating repetition—*minha, somente minha, unicamente minha*—lays bare the system under which womanhood is narrated: women exist not as agents but as possessions within the male psychological economy. Machado exposes this economy not through moral commentary but through the self-implicating honesty of Brás’s narration. Brás Cubas does not lie; he simply cannot imagine a woman outside the orbit of his self-image.

This narcissistic mode of narration extends beyond Virgília to the other women Brás references—Marcela, Eugênia, and the various fleeting objects of his attention. Each serves a function in his autobiographical performance, but none is granted interiority. Marcela is reduced to “amor por quinze dias”; Eugênia becomes a lesson in disappointment; Virgília emerges as the apex of erotic vanity. Brás’s world is populated with feminine silhouettes rather than persons. The male narrator’s failure is

⁷Machado de Assis, 2018, 58.

⁸Machado de Assis, 2018, 58.

⁹Machado de Assis, 2018, 72.

not one of deception but of imagination. He cannot imagine a woman as anything other than a figure that intensifies or diminishes his sense of masculine identity.

This dynamic shifts but does not disappear in *Memorial de Aires*, where the elderly diplomat Aires narrates from a position of detachment, melancholy, and gentle irony. Unlike Bentinho's paranoia or Brás Cubas's vanity, Aires's posture is one of wistful observation. Yet even within this softer narrative register, the construction of Fidélia remains governed by male interpretive needs. Aires admires her, sympathizes with her, and narratively cherishes her, but he still transforms her into an emblem of virtue, endurance, and feminine harmony—rather than depicting her inner world. When he first observes her at the cemetery, he describes her appearance with fascination but without comprehension. Later, learning of her past, he reproduces others' interpretations of her: “a culpa... foi de ambos, ela por amar a outro, ele por querer mal ao escolhido”¹⁰. Even this moral reflection is borrowed, mediated through hearsay rather than grounded in a direct understanding of Fidélia herself.

Aires's construction of Fidélia becomes clearest in the episodes involving the Aguiars, whose marriage he idealizes. In describing D. Carmo, Aires quotes at length the narrative of her early years as told by Aguiar and the desembargador, emphasizing her steadfastness, domestic skill, and moral grace: “a fortaleza da noiva foi o cimento e a cal que as uniram”¹¹. The metaphor—cement and lime—emphasizes feminine endurance as a structural support for male fragility. Aires admires this deeply and—implicitly—associates Fidélia with the same harmonious, cohesive moral force. Aguiar attributes the stability of their marriage to D. Carmo's disposition; Aires reproduces this vision without question, suggesting his attraction to a model of womanhood defined by self-sacrifice and moral elegance. When he describes Fidélia's gesture of placing the photographs of her father and husband side by side—“tudo responde à mesma harmonia moral da pessoa”¹²—he reads the act as sentimental reconciliation, as if the sole meaning of her action were symbolic harmony. He does not consider her private grief or interior conflict; he interprets her only through the lens of the virtues he assigns to her.

Aires's narration is therefore the most benevolent but also the most insidious. Unlike Bentinho, he does not accuse; unlike Brás Cubas, he does not possess. Instead, he idealizes, translating Fidélia into a figure of lyrical integrity whose harmonies soothe his own emotional solitude. He is gentle toward her but not curious about her; he admires her but does not imagine her interiority. The

¹⁰Machado de Assis. *Memorial de Aires*. São Paulo, Penguin-Companhia, 2022, 11.

¹¹Machado de Assis, 2022, 13.

¹²Machado de Assis, 2022, 11.

diary form disguises this limitation by presenting itself as modest, reflective, and observational. But the diary is still a narrative act, still a construction. Fidélia appears only at the edges of Aires's inner life, filtered through his desire for symbolic order at the end of his days.

If Bentinho weaponizes suspicion and Brás Cubas weaponizes vanity, Aires weaponizes tenderness. All three gestures ultimately serve the same structural purpose: they reduce womanhood to a reflection of male consciousness. Machado's mastery lies not in condemning his narrators overtly but in letting their own words expose their limitations. The distance between narrator and narrative truth is not measured by the women's actions—which are often inaccessible—but by the reader's ability to detect the mechanisms through which men appropriate women for their own ends. In all three novels, the narrative form itself becomes a medium of distortion. Bentinho's retrospective memoir allows him to rewrite his youth through the paranoia of adulthood. Brás Cubas's posthumous perspective permits him to justify his life without fear of contradiction. Aires's diary, with its gentle fragmentation, enables him to make Fidélia a symbol rather than a person. The narrators differ, but the structure of gendered narration endures.

To see this structure clearly, it is useful to compare how each narrator deals with ambiguity. In *Dom Casmurro*, ambiguity is explosive: Bentinho cannot tolerate uncertainty about Capitu, so he resolves it by inventing guilt. The ambiguity of her behavior—her kindness toward Escobar, her emotional intelligence, her maternal affection—becomes reinterpreted through the jaundiced logic of jealousy. Capitu's silence is not an absence of meaning; it is a refusal of Bentinho's interpretive demands. Machado denies the reader a definitive answer about adultery because the lack of certainty indicts the narrator, not the woman he accuses. If Bentinho had access to the truth, the novel would cease to expose the catastrophic effects of narrative control.

In *Memórias Póstumas*, ambiguity is playful rather than paranoid. Brás Cubas often mocks his own ignorance, joking about misinterpreting events or misremembering details. Yet when it comes to Virgília, the ambiguity serves a different function: it preserves the illusion that she existed for him. The question is not whether their affair was noble or illicit, but whether Virgília's interiority matters in Brás's account. It does not. The ambiguity of her motives—her love, her fear of scandal, her relationship with her husband—remains unexplored because Brás does not need to resolve such uncertainties to narrate a pleasurable version of his past. If Bentinho's ambiguity produces violence, Brás's produces indifference. Both are forms of erasure.

Aires's ambiguity, however, is melancholic. Whereas Bentinho overwrites Capitu with suspicion and Brás overwrites Virgília with vanity, Aires overwrites Fidélia with a veil of idealization. He repeatedly comments on her moral harmony, her delicate virtues, and her refined sensibility. When D. Cesária praises Fidélia with “a expressão dos olhos, o ar admirativo e aprovador, um sorriso teimoso”¹³, Aires records it almost gratefully, as if collecting evidence for a portrait he is assembling. His attraction to Fidélia is never overtly erotic, but it is undeniably emotional: she represents a possibility of moral beauty in a world he perceives as morally exhausted. By transforming her into a figure of reconciliation—between father and husband, between past and present—he reduces her grief, complexity, and independence to a symbolic function. She becomes an allegory of harmony rather than a woman with an inner life.

These different modes of misreading—suspicion, vanity, idealization—reveal the elasticity of patriarchal narration. They are not simply personal flaws but narrative strategies shaped by gendered assumptions. Women appear in these novels as objects of interpretation rather than interpreters. Even when they speak or act directly, their intentions are recast in the narrators' voices. Capitu's maturity becomes duplicity; Virgília's sensuality becomes vanity; Fidélia's integrity becomes allegory. None of the narrators engages with the full humanity of the women they claim to know. Instead, they use them as mirrors, each polishing the glass differently but all looking only at their own reflections.

What makes Machado's approach so powerful is that he does not write against his narrators but through them. He allows Bentinho, Brás Cubas, and Aires to reveal themselves unwittingly. Bentinho thinks he is proving Capitu's guilt; instead, he proves his own monomania. Brás Cubas thinks he is entertaining us with his life; instead, he exposes the poverty of his emotional imagination. Aires thinks he is honoring Fidélia's virtues; instead, he transforms her into a sentimental projection. Machado does not correct them; he lets their own words become the evidence of their failure. The reader's task is not to decode the women but to diagnose the men.

In the end, the cumulative effect of these three novels is not a portrait of three women but a portrait of the mechanisms by which men construct womanhood. Capitu, Virgília, and Fidélia do not form a coherent system, but the narrators' treatment of them does. Womanhood becomes a rhetorical device—sometimes feared, sometimes desired, sometimes idealized—yet always shaped by male perception. Through Bentinho's paranoia, Brás Cubas's vanity, and Aires's melancholy, we trace the varied contours of a single theme: the instability of female representation in a patriarchal narrative

¹³Machado de Assis, 2022, 11.

world. Machado shows that women cannot be known under such conditions; they can only be narrated. And every narration, no matter how affectionate or admiring, becomes a form of containment.

This insight resonates beyond the fictional world, revealing something about the construction of gender in social life. Machado suggests that the problem is not merely the failure of individual men but the structure of narration itself—how stories are told, who tells them, and who is allowed to appear within them. Womanhood, in these novels, is not a characterological essence but a narrative position. Capitu, Virgília, and Fidélia occupy that position in radically different ways, yet all are constrained by the narrators' need to render them comprehensible within male frameworks. Their silence is not evidence of absence but evidence of exclusion. We do not hear their voices because the narrators do not imagine that they have any.

In this sense, *Dom Casmurro*, *Memórias Póstumas*, and *Memorial de Aires* form an implicit trilogy—not of characters or plots but of epistemological critique. They reveal the limits of male knowledge, the dangers of interpretive overreach, and the subtle violences of narrative authority. Machado, writing from within a society shaped by patriarchal norms, does not preach feminism; he performs it. He exposes the mechanisms through which women are denied complexity, autonomy, and narrative presence. And he entrusts the reader with the responsibility of recognizing these mechanisms, of perceiving the spaces where women's stories should be but are not.

Thus, the true unity between these three novels lies not in the women who haunt them but in the men who narrate them. Bentinho, Brás Cubas, and Aires inhabit different stages of life—youth, adulthood, old age—but their visions of womanhood share a common limitation: they see women only as extensions of themselves. Through these narrators, Machado offers a profound meditation on the ethics of interpretation and the politics of storytelling. He shows that narrative is never neutral, that every act of description is also an act of power, and that to narrate another person—especially someone marked by social hierarchy, gender inequality, or structural silence—is always to risk distorting them.

In the end, Machado leaves us with a paradox. We want to know Capitu, Virgília, and Fidélia, yet the novels prevent us from accessing their interiority. But this very frustration is the point. It forces us to confront how literature—and by extension, society—renders some subjects legible and others opaque. The opacity of Machado's women is not a failure of representation but a critique of the conditions under which representation occurs. Their indeterminacy is the measure of the narrators'

limitations, not their own. Through this indeterminacy, Machado invites us to read not only what is said but what is silenced, not only what is narrated but what is excluded. His novels do not give us women; they give us the mechanisms that prevent women from being known. And in exposing these mechanisms, they illuminate the profound entanglement of gender, power, and narration that continues to shape the stories we tell and the selves we create.

Laura Binenbojm is an undergraduate student in History and Comparative Literature at Yale College, originally from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Email: laura.binenbojm@yale.edu

Works Cited

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Dom Casmurro*. São Paulo, Panda Books, 2019.

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Memorial de Aires*. São Paulo, Penguin-Companhia, 2022.

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. São Paulo, Panda Books, 2018.