

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WOMEN BETWEEN MIRRORS: THE FEMALE BODY AND SEXUALITY IN PORTUGUESE LITERATURE FOR YOUNG ADULTS

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Introduction

*Today, whether I am her or her,
It doesn't matter.
I simply want to be beautiful (...)
Because some expire on crosses,
others, find themselves in the mirror.¹*

Literature constitutes an important socialisation tool, especially when it comes to readers still in the formative learning stages, such as children and adolescents. We know that, through reading, young people internalise ways of seeing the world and social dimensions, such as how relationships between individuals can be built. As such, we believe it is worth paying particular attention to books that target younger readers, given their influence and views of the world, which not only provide the insights of

¹ Cecília Meireles, “Woman in the Mirror” in *Mar Absoluto*, 1945. All quotations from Portuguese writings in this chapter are translations by the authors.

authors/adult, but also sway potential readers (to various degrees, depending on their critical capacity and distance).

In addition to this, greater value has, once again, been placed upon the connections between literature and the contexts of production, above all, due to the impetus of cultural studies and to the critical analysis of discourses that have included, within this context, the literary text along with other discursive social practices (cf., for example, Fowler 1986; Lehtonen 2000). Given the complexity of the literary/fictional text, an alliance between critical discourse analysis and narratology seems to be an appropriate method for highlighting those dimensions that are generally less explored in literary studies. For example, we can combine an analysis of the lexical approaches or conversational exchanges in fictional dialogues with aspects such as point-of-view (from the narrator and characters), narrative construction and inter-textual relations, among others. When it comes to the analytical observation of books for children and young people, the combination of these dimensions provides greater understanding, particularly of the ways in which behavioural norms, world views or individual ways of being are promoted, sometimes via stereotypical attitudes, other times through attitudes that encourage divergent and autonomous ways of thinking.

Taking these dimensions into consideration, this article aims to analyse aspects related to female identity in teen novels, verifying some of the models that are presented in relation to the female body, in conjunction with broader social “debates”. It has been noted that, in recent decades, there has been a growing concern regarding body aesthetics, which has gained considerable importance in the public sphere, due primarily to the development of social, cultural and artistic phenomena, such as film, fashion, the cosmetics industry and advertising (Veríssimo 2008), which are considered primary contributors to a (narcissistic) cult of the body. Advertising shows a particular body image that compels “each person to attain and assume not his/her own body, but the one represented by those images. The desire of assuming that model may lead to the denial of one’s own body” (Veríssimo 2008, 188).

Certain changes in social patterns of female beauty have, in some ways, imposed “a new and more aggressive corset” upon women, especially young women, particularly during adolescence. As Priore notes (2000, 9), “active thinness was the response of the century to the passive fatness of the *belle époque*”, leaving behind the bourgeois aesthetic standard that associated being fat with wealth. Undeniably, the current cultural standards of female beauty “emphasize slimness and slenderness

in contrast to the weighty matrons of Rubens and Rembrandt” (Turner 2008, 157).

These new social and cultural forms of seeing and desiring the body carry with them particularly important repercussions for current female adolescence. During female puberty, a crucial phase in the construction of the “self” and in the discovery of sexuality, the changes that occur involve a process in which the body is transformed, which every teenager has to deal with (via mirrored dialogues involving “the self” and society at large) in order to reformulate body image and discover femininity. This (re)construction of body image occurs through the relations individuals establish with themselves and others (Campagna and Souza 2006, 11) when constructing their identity. The teenager – no longer a child, not yet an adult – lives with a changing body; one that at times causes discomfort and awkwardness, and which does not always fit into the socially established patterns often widely promoted by mass media.

Young women, pressured by social and cultural contexts that “fabricate” beauty concepts and push for certain representations of the “ideal body” (cf. Henriques 2009, Stenzel et al. 2006), are heavily influenced by these circumstances, suffering repercussions that, at times, lead to difficulties of acceptance and definition of new body images (Campagna and Souza 2006). In severe cases this leads to eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia. According to Priore (2000, 15), this cult of the body, created around “a thriving market, which includes industries, product lines, marketing pitches and media spaces”, pushes women towards a subordination that violates and conditions the way they (re)construct their body image and experience their sexuality.

Within this broader context, we find that an important topic in literature for adolescents and young adults is often related to the issue of perception (and acceptance) of the female body. As such, teen novels, which boast protagonists of the same age as the readers, give voice to particular concerns of that age group, echoed by Henriques (2009, 27): “the recognition of our own body is essential to consolidate the individual’s identity, since we have a strong connection to our body”. Consequently, the body may be perceived as something that causes tension or conflict, and the demands of the “self” and of society can be a factor that leads to dissatisfaction and anxiety. Due to social demands, peer pressure and media-based stereotypes, the over-emphasis on the “ideal body image” can lead to extreme feelings of “body shame”. In the case of women, this pressure is even more accentuated and suffocating, since, as Priore argues (2002, 92), obsession with the perfect body makes women feel obliged to place themselves at the service of their own body in a cult

“where each one is both worshiper and worshipped.” On the other hand, this cult of the body (and having a lean body) is associated with health, youth and happiness, making a fat body a hindrance and obstacle to being popular among peers and successful in society.

The *corpus* for the study of how teen literature represents the female body consists of the following novels, written by Portuguese authors, almost all of which were published in the 21st century: Ana Saldanha’s *Five Time Periods, Four Intervals*² (1999), *A Mirror of My Own*³ (2002) and *Sixteen and Over*⁴ (2009); Maria Teresa Maia Gonzalez’ *Diets and Pimples*⁵ (1996); Ana Maria Magalhães’ and Isabel Alçada’s *Camila’s Secret Diary*⁶ (1999) and *Crossed Diary of John and Joan*⁷ (2000); Daniel Marques Ferreira’s *Room with a View to Paradise*⁸ (2001), and Margarida Fonseca Santos’ *The First Year of a Fantastic School*⁹ (2003).

All the narratives follow realistic writing styles, touching on fictional situations and real-world experiences. Based on a set of female characters, we shall assess the extent to which the representation of the female body reveals a new way of being in post-modernity, and attempt to understand the implications of such representations on the lives of young women, and the acceptance of their bodies and sexuality. In addition to this, bearing in mind the target readership of these novels, we will also reflect upon the contribution of these representations to the physical and emotional development of young readers.

The mirrors within

Throughout the *corpus* presented above, we find different female characters of different ages (from pre-adolescence to adolescence, to adulthood) with one common problem: the relationship they establish with their bodies and the influence it has on the connections they establish with others and with the world, and, in the case of some of the characters, how they experience their sexuality.

Catarina, the protagonist of *Diets and Pimples*, is a teenager overly preoccupied with her body and the physical changes she is going through.

² Trans. from the Portuguese title: *Cinco tempos, quatro intervalos*.

³ Trans. from the Portuguese title: *Um espelho só meu*.

⁴ Trans. from the Portuguese title: *Para maiores de dezasseis*.

⁵ Trans. from the Portuguese title: *Dietas e borbulhas*.

⁶ Trans. from the Portuguese title: *O diário secreto de Camila*.

⁷ Trans. from the Portuguese title: *Diário cruzado de João e Joana*.

⁸ Trans. from the Portuguese title: *Quarto com vista para o paraíso*.

⁹ Trans. from the Portuguese title: *O primeiro ano de uma escola fantástica*.

She obsessively struggles to get her body to fit the standards of beauty persistently conveyed by society through various means, resulting, ultimately, in problems of anorexia and bulimia. Likewise, Silvia, in *A Room with a View to Paradise*, sees herself as fat and believes it to be an obstacle to the passion she feels for an older boy.

Dulce, the pre-adolescent protagonist (ten years of age) of *Five Time Periods, Four Intervals*, does not understand how she has gone from a “chubby little baby!”, “what a lovely baby!”, “what pudginess!”, to a “fatso” “a whale” and “a barrel” (Saldanha 1999, 29), thus revealing the importance of the words we choose when constructing a certain image of “the self” and of the relationship a person has with the world.

In the case of Catarina, the onset of puberty triggers physical transformation that leads to the rejection of her new body image. With the onset of menstruation, Catarina confesses: “I started getting monstrous, my breasts grew too much. That’s when I started gaining weight like a freak. (...) Then I started hating seeing myself in the mirror” (Gonzalez 2005, 32). This description embodies the real transformations of the adolescent body and some of the feelings related to that experience. The terms “monster”, “too much”, “freak” represent the extreme way the character sees her body. Her self-description foreshadows the negative path the character will choose. This situation also demonstrates the “objectification” of the body, as analysed in studies on body image during adolescence (cf. Lindberg, Hyde, and McKinley 2006). The character adheres to every pattern these studies identify: she “monitors” her body, observing it as if it were a third person; she feels “ashamed of her body”, and, ultimately, she seeks to “control” the body by controlling food intake. The character’s hyperbolic discourse reveals a distorted view of herself: “I have monstrous legs, Afonso, you must have noticed. (...) And a monstrous backside. (...) I know perfectly well that I am a tub. Everybody tells me not to worry, but I know the truth; I have eyes!” (Gonzalez 2005, 25).

Catarina thinks she is fat, when compared with socially-perfect bodies, such as those of fashion models – for Catarina, Claudia Schiffer is a “wonder” (Gonzalez 2005, 46). Hence, her difficulty in seeing her own body reflected in the mirror: “unintentionally, she looked in the bathroom mirror, an annoyingly large mirror she had been hiding from for a century” (55). “I have bad luck with mirrors. They don’t please me and I reciprocate that same affection ...” (77); the non-acceptance of a pubescent body, which, according to the protagonist, does not fit the social standards of elegance (and beauty), prevents her from feeling happy and comfortable with herself, and, consequently, with others.

Likewise, Sylvia, in *A Room with a View to Paradise*, does not accept the body she has, as she thinks of herself as fat: “Sylvia remembered her large breasts and her salient rear end distorting her jeans.” (...) She was a WHALE” (Ferreira 2001, 83). She feels bad about herself and believes that her love for Paul, an older school mate, is unrequited because he “does not like fat girls” (21). Because of this, Sylvia does not eat properly, and although other people tell her that she is not fat, she decides that she still “needs to lose fifteen kilos” (21) because, for Paul, who she is in love with, “there are plenty of beautiful girls for him. He is destined to be with a ‘model’, not a ‘ball’ like me” (24).

Here, the body and how it matches social standards of beauty seem to be a passport to personal harmony. It is symptomatic that texts by different authors resort to the same semantic elements to signify the exaggerated sensibilities that characters have towards their bodies – such as “fat” and “whale-like”, which repeatedly appear in all these books, along with profoundly negative adjectives and exaggerations like “monster”, “huge”, “rear end”. The comparative element – which involves the dimension of the “other” – is also common: references to “models” appear constantly as people to be emulated by these female characters; as an ideal image imposed by exterior social discourses, but which the “inner mirror” also aims to achieve. Paradoxically, associated with the idea of “the model” (which is seen in a positive way), the term “skinny” is also used. Camila admires her colleagues Marta and Carina because “they are both wonderfully skinny” (Magalhães & Alçada 2006, 16); in *A Mirror of My Own*, Clara’s stepmother’s (Florabela) body is praised by everyone: she is “a babe!” (Saldanha 2002, 88), “looks like a fashion model” (44), “is skinny” (45).

As such, looking in the mirror means confronting one’s self-consciousness; in this case, it is also connected with monitoring the body. Clara, the protagonist of *A Mirror of my Own*, looks in the mirror and, although thin, she is concerned that the skirt she is going to wear will make her look fatter. Inês, her friend, thinks that she’s “lardy” (Saldanha 2002, 89). Camila, the main character of *Camila’s Secret Diary*, feels the same way as the abovementioned protagonists, which is “extremely fat”:

When the alarm rang, I was up already trying on clothes, furious because my favourite trousers did not fit. I managed to zip up the zipper, but then I couldn’t breathe and felt ‘squeezed into denim’. I went to the living room to see myself in the mirror and almost died! My legs seemed like two badly wrapped sausages horribly swelled up at the top. I turned sideways, backwards, and every angle was worse than the previous. What a backside! (...) I’m so fat! (Magalhães & Alçada 2006, 12-13)

For this reason, Camilla decided not “to eat anything for two weeks” (Magalhães & Alçada 2006, 13): she stops eating cakes, becomes more engaged in her physical training class, and eats very little at meal times. Fortunately, in this case, the failure to take the decisions seriously protects the character from experiencing the dramatic episodes common with serious eating disorders.

The mirrors in the eyes of others

In all the novels discussed, the different characters either have to deal with comments from family members, friends or strangers about their bodies, or see the body of others (close to them or strangers) that they would like to see reflected in their mirror. “Mirrors” are everywhere, with the perspective of others having particular importance in this context; however this dimension is not always viewed objectively by the protagonists.

Reference to “the mirror” has a particular significance, to the extent that it reflects an image that the character does not want to recognise, showing her the “other”, in this case, or as McCallum (1999, 75) points out, “the other in us”; a type of body double that is crucial in the construction and representation of the protagonists’ subjectivity. The notion of the unified and cohesive “self” is also undermined, given that the character lives with internal contradictions and with the alienation of the true self and body, constituting distorted images of “the self” and relationship with others; those whose “observations” are also “mirrors” in which girls are projected. These exterior observations encourage Catarina to continue her battle, aiming to attain a perfect body: “life seemed to smile upon her for the first time. What harm could there be in being slim and not have to endure the mocking or indifferent stares of the boys? (...) Certainly her classmates would see her in a different way” (Gonzalez 2005, 98-99).

School is a key setting in many of these books. Above all, it is at school that these characters suffer most, and where their body becomes a burden hard to bear. In *Five Time Periods, Four Intervals*, for example, it is in the classroom or the school playground that Dulce is constantly teased by her classmates about her body. These episodes are remembered by the same character in *Sixteen and Over*: “in the fifth and sixth grade, her classmates chased her down the hallways at school and called her flabby, a whale, a barrel” (Saldanha 2009, 74). When Catarina walks with her friend Alfonso (who suffers from acne and is very thin), classmates often make sarcastic suggestions: “Catarina could help him with plastic surgery, being

that she's such a good friend ... She could cut a slice from her rear end and glue it to his face (...) and laughter rang out throughout the long hallway" (Gonzalez 2005, 22).

Other characters are also seen, by the protagonists, as mirrors that reflect the desired images of the ideal feminine body. In the case of Camila (*Camila's Secret Diary*), the mother figure serves as a model and a mirror of her own physical condition, to the extent that, according to the protagonist, "[y]ou can eat whatever you want and not get fatter" (Magalhães & Alçada 2006, 27). In *Five Time Periods, Four Intervals*, Dulce's cousin, Mimi, is a girl with very little appetite, she only likes a particular ice cream and, at the age of eleven, "wears the clothes from her mother's shop as if on a catwalk and even the most shapeless tracksuit would fit her like a glove" (Saldanha 1999, 23). Dulce, the protagonist in *Five Time Periods, Four Intervals* (aged ten) and *Sixteen and Over* (almost 16 in this book), loses weight during her adolescence, after hearing comments from one of her father's girlfriends (a character who personifies the ideal feminine "body model"). In the second novel, we see several "flashbacks" that transport her to childhood and pre-teen years, which serve to establish a comparison with her current image ("skinny" – said and meant as a compliment) and her previous figure: "she continued to be a clumsy, chubby girl" (Saldanha 2009, 74). At the age of twelve, she overhears her father's girlfriend Soraya, a 25-year-old psychologist, say: "It's shocking what you're doing to your daughter. (...) Not to mention the question of aesthetics. She's a veritable whale; she's going to have a lot of problems getting a boyfriend". Dulce stops eating because she does not want to be fat any longer. She loses ten kilograms in two months. Her father's comment while he kisses Soraya: "Don't compare yourself to Dulce, love. You are beautiful!" (Saldanha 2009, 76) also appears to contribute to Dulce's decision to lose weight in such a drastic way.

Catarina is envious of her younger sister, Sara: "My God! Why was Sara so slim?! She's not even a picky eater! (...) It's a pity my body is not like hers" (Gonzalez 2005, 33). At one point, she is again confronted with another situation when the observation of others – in this case her father's – is highlighted. He confronts her with her own body and with feelings of powerlessness regarding her mother: "She cries for not being able to do anything to make her mother younger and more attractive in her father's eyes, this because it is absolutely impossible to offer her a body like the stupid floozy that was walking downtown in the middle of the afternoon with her father" (39).

It is also worth mentioning that, in some of these books, the media – via advertising – also seems to be a mirror, making the characters aware that their physical appearance is socially “unusual”; reinforcing the distance between them and the “ideal body type” associated with beauty and success (personal and professional). In *Diets and Pimples*, there are several references to television advertising: “one thousand and one television ads, where very fat, ridiculously fat people appeared promoting products that allow people ‘to lose weight without any effort!’, pills, corsets, special bicycles, creams, seaweed soaps, teas, dietary products” (Gonzalez 2005, 55), “a fat woman with a strange legless corset sweating profusely” (67), all well known to Catarina. According to Bradley Greenberg (2003, 1345), “television creates or perpetuates negative stereotypes of obesity”, contributing to the effective discrimination of overweight people. In this case, watching films in which “semi-naked, slim and tanned people walk about by the sea” (Gonzalez 2005, 90) leads Catarina to wonder how long it would take until she had a body like those of the actors.

In *Five Time Periods, Four Intervals*, Dulce’s aunt shows “a fashion magazine opened at a page where a half-naked model is shown on a beach with a slim but curvy body” (Saldanha 1999, 30), confronting those present with the obsolescence of the popular saying “big is beautiful”, and making fun of Dulce’s physical shape. We must acknowledge that advertising – while a discursive and persuasive process – has a social and cultural dimension that cannot be neglected. In relation to this, Verissimo (2008, 19) notes that “the way advertising uses the body is expressive of a dominant social movement: the striving for a perfect, beautiful and healthy body (...). Hence, the use of physically perfect and socially accepted models, whose physiognomy is identified as the norm, to be adhered to, directly or indirectly, by the recipients of those messages”.

In the novels discussed here, the marginalisation of fat people also occurs via the relationship the characters have with food and eating. Indeed, there are several descriptions of compulsive eating and dietary habits. These “excesses” – the lack of control over appetite and food – are presented in pejorative terms. The terms chosen to describe the attitudes of these characters in relation to food are representative of “deviant” behaviour and how they are viewed, supporting a certain stigmatisation of the body that does not fit current beauty standards. Priore (2000, 89) points out that the stigmatisation of fat people in today’s “lipophobic” times is the product of a widening gap between social identity and virtual identity, which demands that the body reflect the narcissistic control of our appetites, our motivational drive and our weaknesses.

Mirrors and sexuality

Undoubtedly, the way each character strives towards the desired acceptance of their body (not only their own acceptance, but, to some considerable extent, acceptance by others as well) is different. However, the scale of acceptance influences the way each one awakens to the experience of gender relationships and sexuality. As previously mentioned, the importance given to the perceptions of others, especially of one's peers, brings about problems concerning one's self-image during adolescence, an issue that these books deal with. These female characters show, in different circumstances, how (male) classmates look at them; the dimension of sexual attraction and the body is also highlighted.

To this end, the example of *Silvia* in *Room with a View to Paradise* is symptomatic of a subordinate body image degraded by a stereotypical view of gender relations. Initially, the quest for the ideal body leads her to anorexia. After being sent home in order to put on weight, she becomes bulimic, deceiving those around her. For *Silvia*, "to be beautiful, a girl has to be thin! I know it's the physical part that attracts a boy" (Ferreira 2001, 136). Later, after a stay in the hospital, she starts gaining weight, which makes her happy; especially because the boy she met in the hospital likes "chubby" girls: "I'm putting on weight, which makes the doctor and my family happy. Myself as well, I confess; but that's for another non-health related reason. I'm going to get a bit 'chubbier', just the way he likes it" (Ferreira 2001, 150). It is worth mentioning that this is not highlighted and questioned neither by the narrator nor by any other character. Instead, the character's perspective remains a passive one, by supporting the desire to "please" the other, especially in physical terms: the adolescent, in this case, becomes more an object of desire than a person that desires.

In some novels, we can find a more complex vision of this kind of problem, and characters undergo certain changes. *Catarina*, who also ends up suffering from anorexia, becomes increasingly aware of the extreme state she finds herself in: "after all, she was happy: forty-eight kilograms was the right weight, although she should lose the rest of her 'spare tyres'" (Gonzalez 2005, 95). Faced with the tragedy of her good friend *Afonso* (he has testicular cancer), she perceives the true dimension (or lack of it) of her "fixation" with body image: at the end of the book *Catarina* and *Afonso* are eating a large ice cream and enjoying the moment, because "each one of us is as we are, and that's it. Screw it!" (Gonzalez 2005, 119).

There is also the perception that body changes that occur during adolescence are a part of the normal growth process. Even the characters

that initially experienced some discomfort because of this, eventually accept the changes in their bodies. In *Camila's Secret Diary*, the protagonist begins to look in the mirror in a different way: she realises that she's becoming a woman and that strict dieting is not worthwhile. The way Camila rediscovers herself naked, without shame, in front of the large mirror in the living room marks a change towards accepting her body and discovering her femininity. This visualisation of her body has an integrating effect, helping Camila to discover, in herself, a woman's body:

But the best part of all was to be able to undress myself in the living room, to see myself naked in the mirror, and on top of that, I liked what I saw. It seems like a lie but it's true, I did not consider myself fat. I spent ages observing myself from the front, from the back, from the side. I don't have puffiness in my legs, my waist is well defined. The definition of my hips seems beautiful to me and the curvature of my behind as well. There is no doubt that my breasts have grown and are firm, with accentuated pink coloured nipples. I have no belly. There is also no doubt that the triangle is thankful to the body; it is a kind of mark that indicates 'woman'. (Magalhães & Alçada 2006, 31)

The acceptance of the body is obviously essential to the experience of sexuality and this notion appears in some of the novels discussed here. It should be noted that the theme of adolescent sexuality is not common in Portuguese teen literature. While many books address the issue of adolescent relationships, explicit reference to sexuality in its most intimate form (thoughts, acts) is rare. As Colomer pointed out (1998, 219), "the strong sexual presence in our society, through countless cultural products, made more evident the artificiality of the aseptic literature found in this field." At this level, *Camila's Secret Diary*, and even more so *Sixteen and Over*, are therefore innovative in the current panorama of teen literature.

Camila describes her new sensations and emotions, hitherto unknown to her, which relate to mixed feelings, as well as the physical sensations that physical love awoke in her: "Could it be that the surfer will fall for me? Hmmm ... Just thinking about him gives me the chills in places where I have never felt chills before!" (Magalhães & Alçada 2006, 20); "I have no idea how long we spent on the balcony clinging to each other and kissing; I just know it was the strangest experience ever in my life. I liked the embraces but not the kissing" (46).

As previously pointed out, Dulce, the protagonist in *Five Time Periods*, *Four Intervals* and *Sixteen and Over* (two novels that have the same main character but which take place six years apart), sees her body undergo significant changes and, in both books, the reader follows the prejudices and the feelings experienced by the character in relation to

herself and her image. We find that the weight issue, and how it comes to be socially associated with beauty, stays with Dulce throughout her teenage years, while we become aware that her self-esteem and self-confidence are quickly undermined by comments (even if not directly aimed at her or if they are just impressions) about fat girls: “Dulce looks back. Eddie and Dionísia are laughing out loud. Maybe, Dionísia told a joke about the fact that girls today are all fatsos and Eddie found it funny” (Saldanha 2009, 103), which demonstrates that she has not completely overcome this issue. In addition to this, the way Dulce feels in her body, especially the way she hopes others see her body, is very important at the onset of her sexual activity. She is now a young woman who uses her body as an element of sexual attraction, using plunging necklines that force others to look and admire her (Saldanha 2009, 34-36). She has formed an opinion about the way adolescents experience their sexuality: “Here in Portugal, at fifteen ..., at sixteen, you aren’t actually a child any more (...). Even when it comes to ... to sex” (98).

In the more recent of Ana Saldanha’s two novels, the issue of sexual relationships during adolescence is discussed, within the context of social networks and how young people interact in this new virtual space. Dulce meets Eduardo/Eddie, a friend’s cousin, on Facebook. He subsequently contacts her by phone, establishing a long distance relationship. If, on the one hand, we find a character that mythicises about their own life, building a “fictional story” in relation to a “virtual” friend, focussing much of what is happening within the virtual network, on the other hand, when Dulce comes face-to-face with Eddie, she assumes a more active role as a female adolescent who is sexually interested in her male counterpart. In this respect, she distances herself from other characters we have mentioned who prefer to take a more passive attitude, confining themselves to obsessive thoughts about a body that wants to be moulded, largely according to the observations and the desires of others.

Throughout the narrative, explicit reference is made to various situations where Dulce is more intimate with boys of her own age (kissing, fondling ...) without ever reaching the point of having sexual intercourse (Saldanha 2009, 83-84,162). In her relationship with Eddie, there is explicit reference to sexual play: “And he rubs his bare foot along Dulce’s leg. Up and down. Up and down” (134), describing, in detail, every moment of the first time the adolescent engages in sexual intercourse (157-162), which is unique in terms of Portuguese authors’ writings for adolescent readers.

Within this context, the issue of “the body” obviously assumes great importance in the way Dulce allows herself to be led by that older man the

first time she has sexual intercourse. Eddie praises her beauty: “You are so beautiful, you know? You are such a doll!” (Saldanha 2009, 139), and her lean body: “You’re so skinny! – say it. Dulce shudders, but with pleasure: skinny!” (159), and these comments appear to be very important for increasing her self-esteem, and will determine the events that follow. The compliment about her body touches her core, where her greatest fragility is hidden and fills her with pleasure. When, later in the book, Dulce feels alone in Spain (when Eddie goes to a conference), all her doubts and uncertainties about others liking her and her body return once more: “Eddie does care about her. He says that she’s his baby, which is beautiful – but she is not, she knows he is lying so as not to hurt her, she is nobody’s baby and is ugly, ugly, ugly and fat” (201).

Final considerations

Given its focus on adolescent characters, teen literature offers a significant set of texts that portray representations of young girls, while seeking to portray different aspects of youth, including relations with bodies and sexuality. Despite their popularity with readers – which the various editions of the books analysed herein illustrate, these literary works have received little attention from critics. Often considered as literature of minor importance, we cannot, however, neglect the impact of these books on young readers. Establishing an explicit dialogue with today’s social and cultural context and seeking to intervene in the way they are received and perceived, these novels, as we have seen, can reinforce stereotypical images of women’s experiences during adolescence; or, conversely, question and interrogate images and behaviours that society “manufactures”, often imposing a female ideal and the way the female body is seen.

As Veríssimo notes (2008, 63), in today’s society we are witnessing “a new myth of the body and, simultaneously, new concerns regarding the social representation of the body.” To adolescents, the social discourse offers mixed messages: on the one hand, the mass media uses the body (and adolescent sexuality) to sell different kinds of products; on the other, it simultaneously alerts the masses about the importance of having a healthy body (free from obsessive deviations). As pointed out by Ann Elizabeth Younger (2003), these books, in presenting so-called controversial issues (sexuality being one of them) to young readers, are one of the resources where young people can find information and discuss issues of gender and sexuality.

These novels also reveal the growing concern about the body that pervades today's society, including issues dealing with weight and body image. Equally worth highlighting is the close relationship between the "ideal body" and sexuality: the quest for a lean body is associated with sexual attraction and the notion of beauty is presented as essential to success. As such, the female characters in these teen novels direct much of their efforts towards achieving this goal. We are reminded, for example, that characters described as having model-like bodies are always portrayed as winners when it comes to sex appeal. Ironically, in all the books examined, family reconfigurations happen because the protagonists' fathers are attracted to someone substantially younger, who fits the aforementioned sexual "labelling". This is something to be regarded as a distorted view of gender relations, imposing a considerable amount of personal investment in one's own body, to the extent that women's sexuality and body image appear to be strongly associated with one another, as reflected in these novels.

One of the reasons that may explain the success of these books is that they express adolescents' real anxieties about their bodies and sexuality; although these are texts that adult educators (parents, teachers, librarians) often do not recommend. If the group of Portuguese authors mentioned here seems small, the overall response of teen literature to the issues discussed here actually acquires another dimension when we look at the publishing market. Collections like "The Club of Friends" ("O Clube das Amigas") and "Cool Girl" ("Miúda Fixe"), which are specifically geared towards a female readership, enjoy large print runs, meaning that they have a large set of young followers.

Bearing in mind the broader context in which these books are written, we find that these novels disseminate the aesthetical canons of beauty of post-modern times, and contribute to the "structuring of truths and production of patterns" (Martins 2006, 25) related to female beauty. However, it is worth emphasising that *Diets and Pimples*, *Room with a View to Paradise* and *The First Year of a Fantastic School* highlight the consequences of this "tyranny of slenderness" (Hartley 2001, 60), which seems to affect more and more of today's adolescents, especially girls (who are often affected by serious eating disorders, like anorexia and bulimia). As stressed by Stenzel et al. (2006, 612), "preoccupations about weight, diet, and body-form are a part of contemporary adolescent culture, and do not affect only the adolescent group that is overweight". Girls, mainly due to "cultural pressures on their bodies, idealised by the standards of beauty imposed by society" (Henriques 2009, 34), are usually the ones most affected by the "ideal body culture", meaning they have

difficulties in accepting and constructing their new body image, which, in the most severe cases, leads to eating disorders.

Making the body the base of a sexuality matrix, the (re)construction of body image ends up reflecting the way adolescents perceive their relationships with others. This problematic issue is evident in the novels we have studied: characters are confronted with different mirrors that, in a kaleidoscopic way, reflect images that have problems fitting the “ideal” female body, given the socially instituted model-like perfection that applies a “new corset” to women. Along with the difficulty in accepting their bodies, comes a sort of slavery resulting from the struggle to attain a “perfect body”. As Priore (2000, 13) puts it, “the tyranny of physical perfection pushes women not to search for an identity, but, instead, an identification” with what is socially considered feminine beauty standards, turning this situation into a new form of subordination.

In conclusion, we must not forget that, for girls, these novels are not only mirrors in which they see themselves, their friends or classmates, but also, in some cases, spaces of reflection upon issues that directly affect them.

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