Women's Agency in the Discourse of Homemade Soap Recipes

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Abstract

This article presents a discourse analysis in the context of homemade soap recipes manufactured by women in the state of Goiás, Brazil. From a theoretical intersection between Critical Discourse Analysis and Women's Studies the article discusses female agency in a domestic activity that was introduced in Brazil in colonial times and is still alive in the so-called "modern" era. The aim of the study was to reflect on the relationship between this activity and the issues of female identity, subjection, submission and, at the same time, resistance to broader dynamics of power, such as patriarchy and capitalism. The results highlight the ambiguities of women's agency, at the same time inserted in the relations of domesticity traditionally associated with the female condition and, on the other hand, breaking with the standards of femininity that support today's consumer system.

Key Words: Soap recipes, discourse, agency, domesticity, women, capitalism.

1. Introduction

The language used in the context of the discourse of recipes shapes our interpretation of many aspects of the practice of cooking but also about the systems of belonging of the community in which recipes are inserted, its values, personal and collective identities, and social and power relations. In this sense, recipes are cultural texts that give us openness to the scrutiny of the world around us, or our place in the world (Cotter 1997). The "world" of recipes is very broad, although, in general, when we speak of them, we mean food. However, recipes guide the manufacture of assorted products including medicines, cosmetics, beverages and, in the case of this paper, items for household cleaning: soap.

Thirty years ago, when I moved to a city in the interior of Goiás (Brazil) with a strong rural heritage, I noticed that women used to exchange soap recipes during casual conversations among friends, relatives or neighbors. At first, it seemed curious and surprising to me that an activity introduced in Brazil back in the colonial times would remain alive in a so-called "modern" era, when the industry of cleaning and hygiene products offers varied options of soap in terms of brands, shapes, fragrances etc.

Three decades later, I became an "insider" in this community, and a researcher of language and gender at the local campus of the State University of Goiás. Many women in the town are still making homemade soap and exchanging recipes. I see a challenging agency in the practice of these women who provide ingredients, dedicate part of their time to the solitary or collective activity of mixing products that react chemically and that, from a viscous liquid, become bars of soap or liters of a kind of detergent. This "agency" contradicts a whole hegemonic logic of market, consumption and even leisure in modern and globalized societies, and invites us to draw up reflections on the relations between this "acting" and questions of feminine identity, women's subjection to great dynamics of power, such as patriarchy and capitalism and, at the same time, their resistance to these very dynamics.

The term agency is used here, based on Laura Ahearn (2001), who synthesizes it as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act". It is based on the intrinsic duality of agency, which is governed both by rules to which we submit in our exercise of living in the world, without challenging them, or, conversely, it is the capacity to resist those same rules and produce effects that (re) constitute the world.

Centered on the dual meaning of agency, this paper focuses women's discourse on their homemade soap recipes. I articulate a discussion grounded on a double demarcation of women's agency: on the one hand, subjected to the traditional exercise of the functions of care, domestic hygiene, etc. and, on the other hand, as a challenge to the consumerist appeals of the cleaning industry of capitalist society.

2. Theoretical ingredients and "how to make" (the research)

Two critical perspectives guide this research: Critical Discourse Analysis – CDA (Wodak, 2001) and Feminist Studies (Lord 2007; Dorlin 2009). Based on CDA this study assumes the objective of denaturalizing the role that discourses play in the (re) production of non-inclusive and unequal social structures. Treated in this way, discourses maintain a mutual relationship with other semiotic structures and material institutions: they shape and are shaped by them (Wodak2001).

Following a feminist perspective, I propose a "creative re-appropriation" (LORDE, 2007) of CDA in the light of what Dorlin (2009) considers as a de-psychologization and de-individualization of women's experience. This approach recognizes in the experiences of singular women the multiple expressions of a common social and historical condition. The recipes will be analyzed as networks of specific social practices which involve particular ways of representing the world and acting within it. They represent the material conditions of women's existence and will be examined as a knowledge that politicizes female action.

Three women agreed in participating of the project. The first one was Dona Ivailde, a 74 years old woman, a farmer who has a house in the city, but prefers to live in the rural area. It was her son who recorded two audios in which she explains how she makes soap and why she prefers to make it instead of buying it. In one of the audios she still recounts an episode in which she met with a group of friends to make soap together. She also asked her son to film her, demonstrating step by step how to make the bar soap. Audios and video were sent to me digitally with her permission.

From that experience, I considered the idea of using the WhatsApp as a platform to move the data, due to the instrumentality of digital technologies with its capabilities for audio and video recording, information storage and transmission, and connection agility. So, Zenilsa, my student in Pedagogy, a married woman in her forties, teacher, mother of a daughter and three sons, and grandmother of two children, sent me four videos made by her eldest son, in which she teaches how to make liquid soap. She also sends an audio, explaining why she makes soap at home and how she learned how to make it. Her audio and video were used in a pilot study that supported this research previously (Freitas 2019)

Dona Efigênia, the third women in this research, is my mother-in-law. She was 90 years old by the time of the research. She was also married, she had six children, she is a grandmother and great-grandmother. Her son recorded her in two audios, in which she gives us two recipes of soap: one recipe is her own and she makes it quite often, the other one is a recipe that her mother used to make in the past, with ingredients that were all natural and not sold.

These procedures involved very intimate personal contacts, centered in the private stronghold of family relations, with the common characteristic of triggering conversations between mothers and sons, in which "mothers" allow their "sons" to film and record them. Researchers such as Bourdieu (2005) assume that they used the participation of their relatives in their field studies. In a similar way, I also benefit from family networks, displacing different positions of my own as a researcher in these networks and in relation to the social spaces in which they concentrate.

All audios and videos were transcribed by a process that was based on the rules of conventional writing and does not properly obey sociolinguistic transcription norms. These three women have allowed me to use their lines and their names. These considerations are essential to situate later analyses, in which I explore in the discourse of soap recipes the ways women engage in this practice and how they signify their gender roles.

3. Analysis

Like a text locally situated in a given social practice, soap recipes incorporate linguistic relationships that imply specific historical-cultural issues. Soap making is a domestic activity that was introduced in Brazil back in the colonial period and was part of a list of female functions that the Europeans implemented in the country. Brazilian literature has many references to this activity performed in different ways, according to women's social insertions in categories such as class and race. Poor, black and "mestiza" women dealt directly with the harsh domestic activities of cooking, cleaning and caring in general.

One of the main writers in Goiás, Bernado Elis (1988:27), comments on the manufacture of soaps as one of the countless domestic activities carried out by the maidservants of the past rural owners, called "Colonels" in the State:

The maids were mistreated, poorly dressed, involved in the hard work of splitting firewood, cooking, making cheese, butter and soap, refining sugar, making flour, grinding rice, milking cows, taking care of the house, spinning and weaving cotton, washing and ironing, doing everything after all.

The wealthiest women, belonging to white and proprietary families, exercised command and control over the work of these other women. The historian Dulce Madalena Rios Pedroso (2005) analyzed an oral narrative, passed down from generation to generation in her family, about her ancestor's diligent and heroic attitude in combating an indigenous invasion of her property during her husband's absence in the 19th century. The narrative tells that the lady ordered the slaves to pour the hot soap that they were cooking in the furnace on the Indians. A short excerpt from the story gives us an idea of how the manufacture of soaps involved very specific ethnic-racial issues from the Brazilian colonial times: "*The muscular black women with large bowls ran to the harness and, taking the black, boiling liquid, threw it at the savages*".

With the advance of capitalist modes of production and the industrial expansion of the twentieth century, products that were previously made at home, were appropriated by companies and began to be widely commercialized. Thus, many of the homemade manufactures ceased to exist and gave way to consumption by commercial means. However, in Goiás, Minas Gerais and other Brazilian localities with strong agrarian heritage, there are groups of women who still prefer to make the soap they use for domestic means and pass on the recipes to each other.

The three women who collaborate with this research give us some clues about the social conditions of these women who still make soap. The three of them are considered white by a society, such as the Brazilian, which promoted the mitigation of indigenous and black heritage through the discourse of miscegenation, and always promoted forced whitening. Although Dona Efigênia does not have straight hair like Zenilsa and Dona Ivailde and her skin is darker, she was officially registered as white. All of them are considered as middle class women, on a scale that places Dona Ivailde as the most economically privileged, since she is the only one who owns a small farm. Zenilsa and Dona Efigênia besides housewives are also, respectively, teacher and retired employee of a factory. Their recipes give us an entrance to the system of belonging of these women, their identity alignments, modes of subjectivity and agency, as the further analysis will demonstrate.

3.1 The diligent handling of chemistry in soap recipes: echoes of a pre-industrial era and domesticity as cultural cohesion

A first observation about the discourse of women in their soap recipes is their diligent performance, demonstrating great skill in the exercise of domestic activities and mastery over the handling of ingredients and chemical knowledge. Dona Ivailde, one of those women who prefer to make her own soap, tells us how to make alcohol soap:

Extract I

Then you have to heat the water and the butter and the oil, then put the hot water in the bowl, put the caustic soda slowly, always stirring until it melts, then put the butter, plus the oil, then the glycerin or sugar. I use to put some belladonna leaf or papaya, but the papaya leaf has to be green, right? Otherwise it does not melt. We take the stalk and chop it as if we were chopping an herb and add it to turn the soap green. And it helps the soap get better. So keep adding and stirring, you don't need to beat it, just stir and finally add the alcohol. The alcohol goes last and very slowly, because it is very dangerous, otherwise it rises, spills and burns us. We keep stirring until we get a syrup ... when ... it makes a little thread. Then, when it is ready, put it in a bowl that you will leave alone so that you can cut it. Put it into the bowl. Leave it until the other day, you can't touch it because it cracks all over! Oh, the other day, it dawns hard ... then you can cut it. Ok?

Water, caustic soda and grease are common ingredients in soap recipes. This recipe mentions the grease as "oil", the "dirty" one, which is usually used after frying. It can replace the "butter", as she defines, which refers to bovine grease or any other animal grease in some regions of Brazil, as in Goiás. The distinctive characteristics of words in any text index the world in specific ways, so that Dona Ivailde's recipe lexicon expresses some nuances of her social experience, her cultural experiences, and regional aspects.

The ingredients Dona Ivailde cites are also found in the narrative of the Goiás writer Carmo Bernardes (1986:84), in his book "Quarto crescente: relembranças" (Crescent moon: remembrances), in which he lists some types of homemade soap that, according to him, were made by rural women in the past. There are many items in Doan Ivailde's recipe that invoke the rural context that the author register, demonstrating how much the practice of making soap refers to the state of Goiás in a pre-industrial and poorly urbanized phase.

Similarly, syntactic arrangements are also decisive in this regard. She uses the imperative mode, which is proper in the recipe genre as an eminently injunctive or instructional text, such as: put, heat, stir, etc. But she uses it in a style very similar to the storytelling, a discursive practice that was very popular in the rural area of Goiás. Her narrative expresses her diligent role in handling hazardous ingredients such as alcohol and caustic soda. This diligence is also detected in the way she narrates the steps to improve the soap, making it more fragrant. Belladonna and papaya stalk are non-essential ingredients that she adds, particularizing her recipe.

While teaching how to make a liquid soap, Zenilsa follows a similar narrative style. She demonstrates the very diligent performance we observed in Dona Ivailde's recipe. She also narrates the need for careful attention, as there is a risk of accident during the recipe, women may get burned while handling the ingredients, as Dona Ivailde has advised.

Extract II

Now for the liquid soap, we will use 1 liter of alcohol of gas station ... a caustic soda, 2 liters of used oil and some hot water to dismantle the soap pellets that will appear. Then we will put the soda first ... the same measure of water. Then I pour the water to dissolve the soda and stir until it dissolves. Now I add the oil ... and now the alcohol. When we put the alcohol we have to be careful because it boils, then do not breathe that little air that comes out, and then there are some pellets of soap inside. So, the hot water is to melt the soap pellets that appear. Avoid breathing this steam coming out! Then I move until I dismantle those little pellets that are there with the hot water. After you have to remove all the remaining soap pellets, you can add water, even cold water, add it ... it makes about 50 to 60 liters of soap.

As Cotter (1997) notes, the characteristics divided into recipes can provide, as narratives, a form of cultural cohesion. We can see that in teaching their recipes these women proudly demonstrate their proactive ability in domestic work. At the same time, they are also very creative in personalizing their recipes, handling additional inputs that make the soap better and more fragrant. Their diligent domestic agency, in this sense, has a positive influence on the financial economy itself, since, as Zenilsa points out, the soap made at home yields a lot. According to Silvia Federici (2019), the domestic work carried by women in the home, silently and practically invisibly, produces a powerful force of cohesion as the support base of the capitalist system.

The discourse of these women seems to be well subjected to this social and cultural cohesion, without showing an opposite confrontation or an attitude of resistance against it. However, in the so-called "modern era" soap making has been usurped from the private domestic sphere and was transferred to the domain of the large chemical industries of capitalist societies. Making soap, in this sense, can be seen as an act of resistance to this dynamic. This contradiction will be explored more thoroughly in the next topics

3.2 Hybridism in the recipes: between resistance and assimilation to capitalist industrial dynamics

Although the recipes vary, the basis for soap, according to Carvalho (2016) demands three essential ingredients: water, grease and caustic soda, all of them appeared on the recipes already shown. But the last ingredient, the caustic soda before the industrial advance was obtained by a natural process that is no longer in use. Nevertheless, Dona Efigênia still keeps in memory a recipe of ash soap that her mother made in Minas Gerais. Like Dona Ivailde, Dona Efigênia also "narrates" the recipe to her son:

Extract III

Son: So can you tell me, Mom, how did Grandma make soap?
Mother: She used to take a can, one of those used to store kerosene, but today it's a can of oil, she used to put a cloth around the edge so that the cloth wouldn't slip, and then she would put the ashes inside the can, she sifted the ashes inside. She used five liters of water, which she was gradually pouring into the can,
Son: Did that mixture have any names? This liquid, how did she call it?
Mother: What was the name, my God?
Son: Isn't it "decoada", isn't it?

Mother: You knew that! Then you put the water until you finish that water gradually. Then she would remove that cloth with that strained ash and put it there in the fire, on the wood stove.
Son: That liquid?
Mom: Yeah, that can with the liquid on the wood stove, and then she used to add bovine fat, but you can use oil, right, we make it with oil nowadays.
Son: Was it tallow, really?
Mom: Yeah, tallow. And then she would cook it, and she kept stirring from time to time.
Son: And do you remember the smell?
Mother: Bad smell. From time to time she would stir the mixture, when this tallow cooked, when melted, it was ready, it turned into a thick and hard mass.
Son: The whole liquid?
Mother: That liquid dried, right?
Son: Was it like dough?
Mother: It turned a mass, right? Then she used to take it off the fire and let it cool in a small crate, this big, lined with a cloth inside, she spilled that mass on the cloth and let it dry. Dry a little, right? When that dough dried and became very hard to the point of rolling it, then she rolled with her hand, like this (showing with the hands), making small balls, and would put the balls aside.
Son: Where? Outside the house?
Mother: No, it had to dry, if it was out in the sun, it wouldn't dry in the sun, it should be inside the house, she used to throw a cloth on the floor and kept putting the balls…they got hard.

As the three extracts show, the ingredients of soap recipes can vary and yield different types of soap and their uses. The belladonna and papaya leaves that were mentioned by Dona Ivailde and Zenilsa are additional ingredients that, while modifying the final product, do not interfere with its basic structure which is composed of water, fat and caustic soda. The literature of Goiás is full of chronicles that inform how this last ingredient was obtained until the middle of the last century:

It is necessary to know that, when making a soap to wash hair, there can be no caustic soda. It must be made with natural potassium, distilled in the barreleiro, and the ash with the best result in this case is that of bean straw. Corncobs and stalks of banana clusters also give good ash, as well as assa-peixe leafs and a tree called maria-pobre (Bernardes1986:84).

As this narrative shows, natural soda was obtained by a process of burning vegetable remains in which ashes were filtered in the *barreleiro* (a piece of cloth) - hence the term "decoada" (from the verb strain_ "coar" _ in Portuguese). It is a kind of sweep, that is, a liquid that is taken from the ash mixed with water, which is equivalent to a caustic soda, as Dona Efigênia has mentioned.

Zenilsa's recipe, however, is a liquid soap, a form that was only developed with the evolution of the chemical industry and the commercial expansion of cleaning products. The ingredients she mentions are: alcohol (the one sold in gas stations for cars), caustic soda, oil (dirty) and hot water. The "dirty oil" is the one used in food frying and is stored for disposal or reuse. This oil works on the recipes of Zenilsa and Dona Ivaildeas a substitute for the grease used on the original recipes. The soda takes the place of the "decoada". Thus, these recipes include a hybridity, a mixture between the practices inherited from Brazil back in the Colonial period, and the current consumption practices of the capitalist industrialized societies.

While the older recipes were produced with ingredients available from natural resources, the up-to-date revenues require industrialized and commercialized products on a large scale. The frying oil, the alcohol and the caustic soda, must be bought in commercial establishments, since they are all industrialized products. This reveals that although the practice of making homemade soap enacts a resistance to the consumption of the products of the cleaning industry, it does not break with the current commercial and market context, that is, it does not break completely with the consumption of industrialized products.

3.3 The ambiguities of the women's agency in making soap and exchanging recipes

Making soap is not essentially a discursive activity as, for example, lecturing. It is a mechanical enterprise which demands physical and manual diligence, not necessarily oral conversation, since many women do it in seclusion of domestic work, sometimes alone, without having to whom or why to speak, while carrying out the action.

Nevertheless, the practice is embedded in discursive means that are immersed in everyday exchanges, through which recipes circulate and are renewed in each generation, through conversations, or as a narrative / injunctive / instructional genre, based on the simultaneous explanation of the execution. The next excerpt is part of the audio in which Zenilsa explains that she learned to make soap and to enjoy it with her mother, with whom she shared her daily coexistence in domestic work.

Extract IV

[...] I learned to make soap with my mother, because ... since I was a child, my mother used to do it and I always liked being with her, in everything she was going to do, I was with her, right? She took care of the garden, I was with her, she was going to work with plants, I was with her and it was no different with soap, she was going to make soap, I was with her... and I believe it is because I learned from my mother, I grew up with my mother, using only this type of homemade soap, I don't like market soap.

Zenilsa highlights the pleasure she felt in being with her mother, helping her to plant, garden and, of course, making soap. Her narrative corroborates what Federici (2019) explains about the need for at least twenty years of socialization and daily training, carried out by an unpaid mother, to prepare women for domesticity, as the reports analyzed here demonstrate. On the contrary, in the common sense, domestic work is widespread as a natural attribute of the female psyche and personality, "an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depths of our feminine nature and, thus, does not need to be paid" (Federici 2019:43).

The apparent naturalness that these women see in domestic work and the prospect of enjoying doing it permeates the discourse of these three women. Zenilsa, for instance, in addition to being a housewife is also a teacher and works in two shifts. Despite the excess of labor, she is proud of following her mother's steps and embraces the tradition of soap making, as well as the traditional functions of domestic care, cleanliness and hygiene, without claiming any opposition against this role arbitrarily associated with women. On the contrary, she affirms the pleasure of making her own soap, by emphasizing the aspect of tradition, passed from mother to daughter, which is followed by her, in a nostalgic perspective, and at the same time, as a kind of pastime and fun.

This idea of leisure and fun also appears in the audio of Dona Ivailde, in which she comments with her son, the day when she met with friends to make soap together:

Extract V

It was so good, one (friend) bought the soda, which she found near her house, she lives near the Social Fund, we did not find it here; another (friend) brought the cooper pan and it was so good, it was very fun, you see? The biggest scheme was the pan and the soda, because I have both, but there in the farm, right? It's hard to get them here, right? Then they brought ... ixi was "easy". - Time passed quickly. We will make more soap soon. I said "let's go" "you" bring the soda, I like that soda "Sun", but any soda is difficult to find here in the center, you don't find it. But it was nice, see?

In this report, Dona Ivailde enthusiastically highlights the steps taken to make the soap with her friends: "one bought the caustic soda", "the other brought the copper pan". She suggests that these provisions are the most complex "scheme" when making soap off the farm, where these items are commonplace, unlike the city where, in her evaluation, it is "difficult" to find. Once these demands have been resolved, and the friends have brought the cooper pot and the caustic soda, the assessments she makes for the activity are all positive: "easy", "very fun", "very good".

The perspective of pleasure and amusement that these women point out, in the light of a reading that includes domestic work subjected to dynamics of domination and inequality, could be interpreted as a mere lack of choice. For Federici (2019), capitalist development created a real masterpiece at the expense of women, obtaining an enormous amount of work for free or almost free, by spreading an ideology that female work in the care of the home and family is an act of love that gives us happiness and pleasure.

Apparently, these women embrace the culturally imposed condition that domestic work is an integral part of women's gender roles. Thus, they perpetuate an activity historically associated with female labor in Goiás. Although their work is essential in the domestic economy on a large scale, they narrate it without claiming this status, but just as a natural activity that brings them a sense of individual fulfillment.

However, the positive evaluations that they make of this domestic enterprise also demonstrate that it is not only of resignation that domesticity is made. In fact, their narratives support an alignment with traditions that value the diligent role of women in the logistics of domestic administration.

Even within subordination, people always enact an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization / acceptance, a dichotomy that forges a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, ignore, resist, or protest, sometimes all at the same time.

As Scholz (1996) quotes, under the precepts of the peasant family economy, women have more power and influence than the public appearance of male domination would suggest. In this sense, women's discourse on soap recipes is based on their agency on the production and direct control of vital resources. Making soap involves saving several resources, such as reusing frying oil, and obtaining more yield in the amount of soap. These women, directly or indirectly, also act in socially relevant decisions in the dynamics of the local daily life, although under the invisibility that characterizes the female domestic work.

Final remarks

The analysis here on the women's agency on soap recipes relied on a specific textual corpus to discuss broader political and ideological issues. The analysis showed that the practice of making homemade soap is associated with a tradition that is still alive, despite the hegemonic context of the current hygiene and cleaning products industry.

It is a practice eminently associated with the feminine identity based on the traditional gender roles that assign to the woman the domestic activity. A generational component seems to influence this evidence, since women who make homemade soap seem to be over the age of 40, like the three women in this study. Attributes such as diligence in performing domestic tasks, zeal, the ability of saving money and resources are associated with a higher prestige of women's gender roles. However, unlike women of the past, today's recipes, although home-based, are already in a context of dependence on the new industrial dynamics, that is, it does not promote a deep resistance to the consumption of industrialized products.

The women's agency is politically ambiguous in relation to, if also perhaps against, dominant modes of femininity: one the one hand it is inserted in relations of domesticity traditionally associated with the feminine condition, but, on the other hand, this agency also breaks with patterns of femininity that support the current world's consumer system. The discourse that stands out in these women's recipes does not promote a feminine identity engaged in the consumerist logic that links femininity to beauty, for example. Thee discourses do not disseminate female profiles based on stereotyped attributes such as docility and fragility.

This article may contribute to discussions about today's different patterns of femininity and their relationship to issues of gender, power, market, localism, and globalism.

Greetings

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