BOOK CLUB | OSMAN LINS | AVALOVARA | 20TH OCT, 6.30-9 PM

OSMAN LINS (1924-1978)

Avalovara (1973)
translated into English as
Avalovara (1979)

Discover one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century!

A most endearing lyrical novel about the very human quest for love and its delectations – physical and spiritual!

A most enticing tale from the secret lab of story-making: chaos transformed into harmonious order in (meta)physical universes instigated by a meditation on the enigma of the Sator Square!
From the outset, the narrator (or is it the author?) will entice you with the magical ancient Sator Square, the Golden Spiral and a nameless character represented by the ideograph \( \heartsuit \)!

Along the route (at times a maze!) discover reverberating echoes of ancient mythology, the Bible, medieval romance, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Goethe’s *Werther*, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Butor’s *La modification*, sacred geometry and Machado de Assis...

You will get immediately carried away into the realms of phantasy by the multifarious imagery with its symbolic values, a true modern epic!

Unveil the link between the title, Avalovara, coined by master novelist, and Avalokiteshvara [अवलोकितेश्वर]

A special clue for readers: no traditional chapters in this novel but recurring themes sequenced by means of the letters contained in the Sator Square and numbers spiralling inwards from R 1-22, S1-10, O 1-24, A 1-21, T 1-17, P 1-10, E 1-17 to the core N 1&2 of magical square!

**DETAILS OF AVAILABLE PUBLICATIONS:**

**ENGLISH**
SHORT HISTORY OF THE BOOK AND TRANSLATIONS

Alalovara, published in 1973, unusually brings us the exact dates on which the author started writing his novel and the completion date: it was written in São Paulo from 29th September 1969 to 1st December 1972.

The novel is dedicated to Julieta, ‘who greatly contributed to the making of this book’. Julieta de Godoy Ladeira (1927 – 1997), a fellow author from São Paulo, who was Osman Lins’s second wife.

Significantly, Osman Lins comments on writing Avalovara and, as such, we have some access to the ideas, which spurned the author to create this masterpiece. On the one hand, a very intriguing narrative as it starts not with a word but an ideograph (in lieu of the character name) in its title ‘Ο’ and Abel: Meetings, Routes and Revelations’ with a capital R on the left and the number 1 on the right. This creates an immediate impact on reader, who will gradually realize that the narrator is inviting him/her on a journey of discovery.

There is a covert link to his early life and the poignant fact that neither did he ever come to know his mother nor was he able to see his mother’s photo.
She passed away when he was 17 days old. Somehow, there were no photos of his mother and he sought high and low to find an image of her. See more about his life under biography below.

The novel brings various thought-provoking quotes. He is an unashamedly cultivated author. One could venture and claim that he is a true disciple of Machado de Assis. Readers would certainly benefit from returning to the quotes once they have read Avalovara.

The first quotation is from the 1954 *Histoire littéraire de la France médiévale (Vie-XIVe siècles)* by the Swiss-born medievalist, historian and linguist Paul Zumthor (1915 –1995). It refers to the genre novel mingled with the medieval *Chanson de Geste*.

The second quote is from *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957) by Mircea Eliade (1907 -1986) a notable Romanian historian of religion, fiction writer and philosopher, exiled to the US and was also a University of Chicago professor. He put forward a theory of hierophanies, which form the basis of religion splitting the human experience of reality into sacred and profane space and time. Eliade studied Sanskrit in India and this text certainly spawned some seeds for Osman Lins’s garden of ideas. [Hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred, from Greek hieros, ἱερός meaning sacred/holy and the verb phainein, φαίνειν meaning to reveal/to bring to light].

The third quotation is from *La Parole (The Word, 1952)* by the French philosopher and epistemologist George Gusdorf (1912-2000). The text is a historical conceptual overview and role of the word (or language) and draws on earlier traditions.

The fourth quotation is from *L'Art amoureux des Indes* (1957) by the French, poet, writer and art critic Max-Pol Fouchet (1913-1980). It refers to Ligam-Yoni, from Sanskrit, ‘Yoni means place of birth, source, origin. Lingam means symbol of Shiva. As Shiva is represented as an endless fire, Lingam-yoni denotes origin of an endless fire which created the universe’.

The fifth and last quotation comes from the best known work by Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956), a German literary scholar, philologist, and Romance language literary critic: *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter (European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages)*, specifically to the section on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

The subsequent page brings us a picture of Sator Square overlaid with a spiral. The Sator Square (or Rotas Square) is a Latin palindrome, of which there are numerous examples throughout Europe. It is a linguistic magical square with the words ROTAS OPERA TENET AREPO SATOR, which can be read from various directions and is also a sentence.
A palindrome is defined as a word, phrase, number, or other sequence of characters which reads the same backward or forward. Allowances may be made for adjustments to capital letters, punctuation, and word dividers. The earliest was found in the ruins of Pompeii, buried in the ash of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Also found in excavations under the church of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, at Corinium (modern Cirencester in England) and Dura-Europos (in modern Syria).

Other Sator squares were found in a group of stones in the grounds of Rivington Church and reads SATOR AREPO TENET OPERA ROTAS, thought to have come from a local private chapel in Anderton, Lancashire; on the wall of the Duomo of Siena; inserted in a wall of the old district of Oppède, France; in the museum at Conimbriga (near Coimbra in Portugal), excavated on the site; in the Benedictine Abbey of St Peter ad Oratorium, near Capestrano, in Abruzzo, Italy, and at the Valvisciolo Abbey, central Italy, which has the letters forming five concentric rings, each one divided into five sectors.
Osman Lins has some memorable quotes, which encapsulate his novel. ‘Avalovara refers to the cosmic order’ and that it’s ‘a novel made of novels, of stories’. [Avalovara remetia à ordem cósmica. | Avalovara é um romance feito de romances, de histórias].

Part of the story of the book, narrated by Osman Lins, is contained in a text (interview) published by Edla Van Steen (1936-), a Brazilian author of Belgium and German descent, author of various novels, short stories, plays, art books and interviews. The so-called interview happened just before the untimely death of the author, and was stitched together with the help of the author’s second wife, Julieta. There is a translation in English which appeared in The Review of Contemporary Fiction (1995) as ‘An Interview with Osman Lins’ by van Steel. The original appeared in the 1981 Revista Viver e Escrever - ‘Entrevista concedida a Edla Van Steen’

In the interview, Osman Lins tells us that the ‘hero in Avalovara, goes around the world searching for what he had not lost. The author also tells that he was a most avid reader. He recalls that in his lonely childhood and teenage years he would read just about everything and that books would appear at the right moment in his life as was the case of Robinson Crusoe(1719), Treasure Island (1883) and books on ‘sexual education’ mentioning Gamiani, ou deux nuits d'excès (1833) and the salonnière Ninon de Lenclos (1620—1705) and this is followed by the comment that the author wonders ‘whether would it be that so many years later he would create his Avalovara, in which love, carnal and non-carnal, plays such an important role for the couple in an important space, where the couple undress make love ardently on the flowery carpet, endeavouring in the description of this act and of the body of the woman, to use all possible resources, which I could make us as a writer’

He claims that Avalovara is direct and clear and answers the interviewer’s question whether he would give any suggestion on how the book ought to be read. He replied,
‘I would say that the structure of *Avalovara* is like a cage in which wild animals move about. Disquiet, anguish, despair, all which is part of our human condition. I would like the reader to be aware of this. *Avalovara*, similarly to every book of mine in every period of my life, corresponds to the very best that my creative and imaginative capacity were able to offer to my fellow beings. I had felt degraded and it seems to me that I would neither honour literature nor my readers had I acted in a different way.

Nothing is opaque in *Avalovara*. It is as if I were trying to convey a dream or various dreams in the most precise manner possible. In order to do it, it was always necessary to find the correct word, to form exact sentences which would correspond to the ideas I had. *Avalovara* may be understood in various ways, apprehended at various levels and gain meanings which will be totally different depending on the reader. This has been happening. And every reader can read *Avalovara* in the way he/she wishes. Fortunately, there is nothing freer than reading. *Avalovara* enables this freedom. It can be read in the order in which it was made or, read story by story, without interruptions. Perhaps much of its sense will be lost. Its structure is not gratuitous. However, the reader may wish, at a later opportunity, to re-read the book in the order it was made and, thus, access the meaning of the construction. [NK]

Further on, he tells us that he uses his manual typewriter or writes by hand and that,

‘I plan my books beforehand, punctiliously, as in the case of *Avalovara* (I have created three graphs) or sometimes in a simpler form as I did with my other books. There is always a basic plan or various basic plans with the natural allowance for the imponderable.’
The text/interview offers various insights about the creative process of writing stories and about the roles of the author and reader.

Osman Lins speaks about how the word ‘Avalovara’ came to him: Avalokiteshvara [अवलोकितेश्वर] the Sanskrit word and its various references and underpinning concepts inspired the author to coin the word/title for the book. You can see Avalovara in Avalokitesvara, he states. An additional source (see authors in initial quotes) for O. Lins could have been the 1936 Mythologie générale by Félix Guirand. Despite the fact that he makes passing reference to the deity, he states that his avalovara is a bird with a thousand birds within. Hence some of the illustrations in the book covers.

What is important to highlight is that as soon as Avalovara was published in Brazil, it became an immediate best seller rated as the ten top fiction titles in the survey that the Veja magazine conducted in 1973.

Avalovara was translated into German in 1976 Avalovara by Marianne Jolowicz published by Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main. Before passing away the author spoke of translations into French and Spanish. He never saw the English translation published in 1979 by Gregory Rabassa (1922-2016) as his life was cut short by illness.

Gregory Rabassa was a prominent translator of Spanish and Portugues, born in the United States of a Cuban family. Rabassa sometimes translated without having read the book beforehand and wrote a memoir of his experiences as a translator, If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents, A Memoir (2006).
Osman da Costa Lins was born on 5th July 1924 in Vitória de Santo Antão, a town in the state of Pernambuco.

On the 17th of his life, his mother Maria da Paz de Mello Lins, passed away because of complications following his birth. The author frequently referred to the fact that there was no single photograph of his mother, but that people told him that she was a beautiful woman. As a writer he tried to create a metaphorical image of his mother in his works.

He was lovingly brought up by his relatives: his grandmother (father’s side) Joana Carolina; Auntie Laura married to Antonio Figueiredo, a businessman, from whom the little Osman would listen, in awe, stories about his travels until late at night. The stories invented by his uncle, would awaken a taste for story telling in the young Osman. His extended family life would become a source of inspiration for various characters in his stories.

One of his teachers José Aragão, his tutor at the high school - Ginásio da Vitória - supported his talent for writing. He inherited from the teacher the sense of discipline and discernment in his imaginative order. He pays tribute to the teacher comparing him to his ‘first book’.
He was emotionally attached to his father, Teófanes da Costa Lins, who was a tailor. His chronicles depict the work of a tailor. At various points he draws a theoretical analogy between the labours of a writer and the artisan tailor.

Having completed his studies at the high school (1936-1940), he had to leave his home town to pursue his studies. He went to the capital of the state Recife in 1941, where he got his first job as a clerk to the high school, Ginásio de Recife, as he had already trained as a typist. It was at this time that he began to publish his first fictional works in the supplement pages of local newspapers, e.g., Menino Mau and Fantasmas.’

In 1943, he seemed to stop worrying about publishing his writings as he prepared for the selection exams to work for Banco do Brasil. Next, he pursued a graduate degree in finances at the Economy Faculty of the University of Recife. During his degree course, he also penned a novel labouring for over two years. Although, he finished it, he did not publish it describing the process as a rite of passage; he was a stern critic of his own work and regarded this piece as practice or rehearsal.
In 1947, he married Maria do Carmo and they had three daughters: Litânia, Letícia e Ângela. In addition to being a father and working, he found time to write publishing short stories and entering into literary competitions. His short stories ‘O Eco’ and ‘A doação’ received recognition through awards in 1950 becoming very active in the literary circles the following year. He became a member of the editorial team of the magazine Memorandum, published by the Associação Atlética do Banco do Brasil and a regular contributor to the Literary Supplement of the newspaper Diário de Pernambuco, publishing short stories there. He also got involved in producing and directing radio programmes for the Rádio Jornal do Commercio in Recife.

His short story book ‘Os sós’ is awarded the second prize in the Concurso Livro de Contos Tentativa, in the town of Atibaia, state of São Paulo.

The wordsmith flourished in that period and his first two books O visitante, a novel launched in 1955 (he started writing it in 1952, awarded the Fábio Prado Prize in São Paulo in 1954; he moved to this city and met other authors there), and Os gestos, 1957, awarded the Monteiro Lobato Prize in São Paulo. Later other awards were given for these two books. Also in 1957, his play O vale sem sol has a special mention in the Cia. Tônia-Celi-Autran Competition. In 1956, he launched a column ‘Carta do Recife’ subsequently ‘Crônica do Recife’, sending his first critical reviews to the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo.


In 1960, he graduated in Drama from the Fine Arts School of the University of Recife and travelled between Rio and São Paulo pursuing his literary career in earnest.

He was also awarded a six-month scholarship to France by the Alliance Française in 1961. In Paris he followed an intense cultural programme visiting cathedrals, museums, travelling to other countries and writing theatre reviews for the Jornal do Commercio as a correspondent from France. His play Lisbela e o prisioneiro was launched Rio while he was abroad. In the same year, his novel O fiel e a pedra, achieved great acclaim.

Osman Lins became a leading literary figure and received due accolades in the same year. Two years later, he separated from his wife and his daughters returned to Recife. He continued working very hard and supported his family maintaining warm relations with his daughter until death.
He published novels, travel accounts, plays and in 1964 married the writer Julieta de Godoy Ladeira. He became engaged with playwriting and participated in intellectual debates at the time publishing some polemical articles in the local press.

In 1966, he published Nove, novena, nine narratives which launched the cycle in which his masterpiece Avalovara (1973) and A rainha dos cârceres da Grécia (1976) hailed a new style anchored in strict structural architecture combining exactness, fantasy, prose and poetry. The innovation attracted critical reviews and he also published essays. Osman Lins retired from his post at the Banco do Brasil, and in 1970 became the chair of Brazilian Literature at the Philosophy Faculty of Marília in São Paulo, when he began to write Avalovara.

A very meticulous lecturer carefully delivering excellent lectures, he also wrote various articles criticizing the teaching of literature at the Belles Letters Faculties in Brazil; formalist and structuralist theories tended to prevail in those institutions. He became rather disappointed and abandoned lecturing. In 1973, he submitted his doctoral dissertation entitled ‘Lima Barreto, e o espaço romanesco’, a seminal study, published in 1975. The highlight of his year was the publication of Avalovara. He also continued writing for the theatre.

His wife Julieta remained as a great supporter and intellectual interlocutor for him. In 1978, he began to write his last novel, Uma cabeça levada em triunfo, but was unable to complete it as his health deteriorated quickly. He died from an aggressive cancer.

In 1978, his last book, Casos especiais de Osman Lins, comprising three novellas ‘A Ilha no Espaço’, ‘Quem era Shirley Temple?’ and ‘Marcha Fúnebre’, which were later adapted and broadcast by Globo Television in 1978. He was awarded various literary prizes such as Fábio Prado, Monteiro Lobato, Coelho Neto of the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

His play Lisbela e o prisioneiro was made into a film by the Brazilian film and TV director Guel Arraes (1953-) in 2003. His widow donated his manuscripts and materials to Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa and Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros – USP (see details below).
A portrait of Osman Lins – Retrato 2 – by the visual artist from Recife Gil Vicente Vasconcelos de Oliveira (1958) visual artist, charcoal on paper from the Lauro de Oliveira and Marilda Vasconcelos de Oliveira Collection.

You may wish to see the biography on the dedicated website (in Portuguese, used as one of the sources for this post)
http://www.osman.lins.nom.br/

Manuscripts and other materials have been deposited at:

(i) Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa:

(ii) Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros – USP:
http://www.ieb.usp.br/guia-ieb/detalhe/157

The film adaptation available at: Lisbela e o prisioneiro
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSVMsnphC8A

Attendance is free, but booking is essential:
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