2019 – The year of adding marvellous Brazilian novels to your reading lists!

OSMAN LINS (1924-1978)

A Rainha dos Cárceres da Grécia (1976)

translated as

The Queen of the Prisons of Greece (1995)
Imagine what would happen if the love of your life had a sudden tragic death. Your world would tumble down. What do you do with her manuscript novel, bearing a bewildering title — *The Queen of the Prisons of Greece* -

Where do you start in your state of bereavement?

Can you use the narrative to understand your lover or even yourself in your unbalanced state?

A conundrum: the main character of the novel suffers from a mental disorder and sanity cannot be found anywhere....

Where is the novel set? How does the story unravel?

What is Marie of France doing in the Brazilian Venice - Recife? Or is it Olinda? What do ancient Greek prisons have to do with this diary-essay-novel?

Time-travel in this tale of insanity and mayhem with overlapping times of Hesiod, the Byzantine past, the medieval past, the past of the Dutch West India Company and the past of second half of the 20th century Brazilian northeast!

You will find a logic of madness: the hyperreality of the narrator’s critique of the cannon of Brazilian literature in a sort of essay in a diary format (inspired by British literature) along with quirky categorization of Brazilian authors, from Father Anchieta to Clarice Lispector, of various other historical figures foreshadowing the teacher’s inability to understand and make sense of life, art and history – a metaphorical descent of the author into his own version of Dante’s *Inferno*.

Can the Humpty-Dumpty narrative broken into pieces be put together again?

Or is the author of *The Queen of the Prisons of Greece*, Júlia Marquezim Enone, an alter-ego of Osman Lins, a ploy for the real author to present a panoply of theoretical concepts regarding the acts of writing and reading fiction?

Prepare to be astounded by Osman Lins’s sixth and last novel, this major talented author already suffering from cancer...

Our book club read and discussed his masterpiece *Avalovara*.


**DETAILS OF AVAILABLE PUBLICATIONS:**

**ENGLISH**


**PORTUGUESE**

1976 *Rainha dos Cárceres da Grécia* published by Companhia Melhoramentos, São Paulo.

Reprinted 2005 *Rainha dos Cárceres da Grécia* by Companhia das Letras


**SHORT HISTORY OF THE BOOK AND TRANSLATION**
A Rainha dos Cárceres da Grécia was the last novel, which Osman Lins wrote before he died of terminal cancer. Similarly to his Avalovara, this novel represents a singular exploitation of multifaceted aspect of writing and reading fictional works, which necessarily entails numerous acts of reading and interpretation.

The formal device, which Osman Lins used in his last novel, is of a distinctive nature. By using the format of a diary, he can offer commentary on a fictional novel, a book, of a deceased author. This is nothing new in Brazilian literature as our book club members know well – Machado de Assis employed the technique with great aplomb.

The 15th July entry reveals some of the sources of the idea of using an imaginary fictional diary along with some subtle clues. Osman Lins or the narrator (a biology teacher) mentions Werther actually, The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), which is an autobiographical epistolary novel. He also mentions Memorial de Ayres (1908) by Machado de Assis (1839-1908). Our book club read and discussed this excellent novel – often neglected by Machadian specialists. The third book, which he mentions, is the novella La Symphonie pastorale (1919) by André Gide (1869–1951). The narrator tells the reader that, while the heroes were women for these authors, his hero is the book.

The technique of using smoking mirrors unravels. Osman Lins employs various guises. The Sorrows of Young Werther contains more letters than diary entries as well as newspaper excerpts. Osman Lins uses newspaper excerpts to speak about the state of affairs in Brazil in general and about the National Health System, the Instituto Nacional de Previdência Social (INPS) in particular. The contemporary events record the matters and issues and some named people were actually real, as is the case of the minister at the time, Reinhold Stephanes (1939–), who headed the INPS in the 1970s. A. Gide’s The Pastoral Symphony contains a thematic reference to music and blindness, which also feature in this novel.

The diary entries span the period from 26th April 1974 to 23rd September 1975. The narrator does not write daily but only intermittently.

The main theme of The Queen of the Prisons of Greece, is mental health, insanity in various degrees and levels, madness. Insanity locks an individual in, imprisons either in the real world (asylums) or in the imagination. One cannot fail to be reminded of the notable satirical novella O Alienista (1888) by Machado de Assis as it raises the issues of how treatment for mental health should be provided.
The diary format in *A Rainha dos Cárceres da Grécia* enables the narrator to offer insights on his interpretation of the manuscript. By the same token, it enables him to voice value judgements on various matters and the actors/characters in fiction and reality. The author only offers fragments of Júlia Marquezim Enone’s alleged or imagined novel and even considers the possibility of reordering the sequencing of the narrative in her original. The narrator creates a series of multiple fuzzy mirror images in a maze-like sequence.

Another narrative thread entwined in the narrative is the reference to the main character in the manuscript, a woman named Maria de França. Her name becomes a means of creating an interplay with the fictional or real characters in the remote antiquity and the medieval period. By using a sort of onion model, the narrator peels off layers of world history of knowledge and myth until the core is reached, presumably carrying the essential message of his book. Thus, the reference to the medieval *Lais of Marie de France*, and to the person or nom de plume, Marie de France (1160-1215) is included in his narrative. Marie de France was a poet who was probably born in France and lived in England during the late 12th century. The references to fables and other forms of timeless narratives abound in this novel. Many of the works by Osman Lins used to refer to the medieval intellectual heritage. He was fascinated by it and various works refer to that period.

The novel is entitled *A Rainha dos Cárceres da Grécia* translated as *The Queen of the Prisons of Greece*, a glaringly odd title especially in the context of the northeast of Brazil, where the novel is set. From the outset, the reader is puzzled and challenged to discover why and how the topic of imprisonment features in Júlia Marquezim Enone’s novel.

Another important component of this novel is the historical memory of Brazil as the narrator (or author) explores it in detail through the legacy of the Dutch invasion of Brazil, the so-called ‘Dutch Brazil’ period, or New Holland. Osman Lins makes particularly reference to Olinda and Recife throughout the novel.

The Dutch were late comers to the Atlantic voyages of discovery and conquest. They conquered the northern part of the Portuguese colony of Brazil. The Dutch colonisation spanned
the period from 1630 to 1654. The main cities of the Dutch colony of New Holland were the capital Mauritiusstad, modern Recife, Frederikstadt (João Pessoa), Nieuw Amsterdam (Natal), Saint Louis (São Luís), São Cristóvão, Fortaleza (Fort Schoonenborch), Sirinhaém and Olinda. From 1630 onwards, the Dutch Republic conquered almost half of Brazil's settled European area at the time.

The Dutch West India Company (WIC) set up their headquarters in Recife. The governor, Johan Maurits, invited artists and scientists to the colony to help promote Brazil and increase immigration and spread its practices and cultures.

We often find references to herds of cattle in Brazilian novels and most cannot remember that European breeds were introduced by the Dutch, crossbreeding with the local native breeds. The famous Brazilian ‘vaqueiros’ originated there.

During the Dutch conquest and colonisation, there were sieges and battles, many maps and documents are available including the digital format. The narrator creates virtual maps of a few of battles. The reader will have glimpses of those intertwined in the novel.

There are various references to the Dutch heritage, for instance, to Frans Post (1612 – 1680) a painter of the Dutch Golden Age. He was the first European artist to paint the landscapes of the Americas, during and after the period of Dutch Brazil. An invaluable work Historia Naturalis Brasiliae, originally written in Latin, is the first scientific work on the natural history of Brazil, written by Dutch naturalist Willem Pies (1616-1678), a Dutch physician and naturalist and the German cartographer, astronomer naturalist-illustrator Georg Marcgraf/Macgrave (1610-1644), published in 1648. It was dedicated to Johan Maurits, the Count of Nassau, who was the patron of the project during the period of Dutch rule in Brazil.
The Dutch army fought the army of the Portuguese settlers and indigenous Brazilians at the Guararapes Hill, in the Captaincy of Pernambuco, on 18th and 19th April 1648 and was defeated. It was the first joint Brazilian effort, a united army on Brazilian soil under the leadership of the governor André Vidal de Negreiros (1606-1680) commanding the white settlers; the indigenous people led by Poty or Potyguaçu (meaning ‘shrimp’ in the Tupi language), Felipe Camarário (c.1600-1648) and the black and mulattos led by Henrique Dias (c. 1600-1662), a Brazilian military officer and son of freed slaves. The Brazilian Army, the oldest of the three Armed Forces, chose 19th April 1648 as the date marking its inception and its date is commemorated to this date.

On 19th February 1649, there was a significant victory at the Second Battle of Guararapes in 1649. On 26 January 1654, the Dutch surrendered and signed the capitulation, but only as a provisional pact. By May 1654, the Dutch demanded that the New Holland/the Dutch Republic be given back but it was formally ceded to Portugal on 6 August 1661.

This is a complex novel with many actual references to world literature. The readers should beware, though. Some of references (including footnotes) seem to have been invented by the author. A noteworthy Brazilian historian and author is mentioned: José Francisco da Rocha Pombo (1857-1933). His History of Brazil (5 volumes), illustrated has been reprinted many times.
The novel was translated into English as *The Queen of the Prisons of Greece* translated by Adria Frizzi, published by Dalkey Archive Press in 1995.

Adria Frizzi, PhD, is a lecturer in Italian at the University of Texas at Austin. She studied at the Milan Catholic University and then at the Penn State University. She is a Lecturer of Italian in the Department of French and Italian since 1988, teaching a variety of language, literature, and culture courses, including ‘Italian Translation Workshop, Italian Women Writers; Italy: Tradition and Change [Italian Civilization]; Latin American Literature into Film. Her research interests include Latin American and Italian modern and contemporary fiction; film and literature; cultural studies; Italian women writers; and translation theory and practice. She translates from Portuguese, Italian and Spanish. She also translated Caio Fernando Abreu, Regina Rheda, Marina Colasanti, Rossana Campo, Elena Ferrante, and Dacia Maraini and was the recipient of two translation grants from Fundação Biblioteca Nacional in Brazil. [https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/frenchitalian/faculty/frizzia](https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/frenchitalian/faculty/frizzia)

The translation reads adequately, but there are some mistranslated words. For example, the word ‘hino’ is mistakenly translated as ‘hymn’ (a religious song or poem of praise to God or a god), it should be ‘anthem’. This includes the odd ‘civic hymn book’ which should be ‘anthem book’ (page 86). A bad rendering of the word *pátria*, which is feminine gender in Portuguese, appears in her translation resulting in a strange anaphoric reference further in the text as ‘loving, gentle mother’. *Pátria* should be translated as *homeland*, and certainly not as ‘fatherland’. There are other minor errors, perhaps a lack of revision. The word *seresta* word which replaced serenade, the Brazilian serenade, is misspelled as ‘sereste’. The annoying splitting of words at the end of lines appears in this publication.

**BIOGRAPHY**
OSMAN LINS
(5th July 1924-8th July 1978)

OSMAN DA COSTA LINS was born on 5th July 1924 in Vitória de Santo Antão, a town in the state of Pernambuco. He died of cancer on 8th July 1978 in the city of São Paulo. He wrote short stories, novels, plays, poetry, chronicles, travel accounts and literary essays.

One tragic memory that the author carried with him is about the death of his mother Maria da Paz de Mello Lins. On the 16th or 17th day of his life, his mother died 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.

His father was Teófanes da Costa Lins and he was lovingly brought up by his relatives: his grandmother (on his father’s side) Joana Carolina, his 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, encouraged him to use his talent for writing. From his teacher, he inherited 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 drew 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 at 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 finance 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 a dress rehearsal.
In 1947, he married Maria do Carmo and they had three daughters: Litânia, Letícia and Ângela. In addition to being a father and working full time, he found time to write. He published short stories and participated in literary competitions. His short stories *O Eco* (*The Echo*) and *A doação* (*The Gift*) received recognition through awards in 1950. He became very active in the literary circles the following year. He was 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* (*The Lonely Ones*) was awarded the second prize in the Atibaia short story competition (*Concurso Livro de Contos Tentativa*) in the state of São Paulo.

His work as a wordsmith flourished in that period. His first book *O visitante*, a novel launched in 1955, which he started writing it in 1952, merited the Fábio Prado Prize in São Paulo in 1954. His second work *Os gestos* (*The Gestures*), published in 1957, was awarded the Monteiro Lobato Prize in São Paulo. Later, other awards were given for these two books.


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 became acquainted with a broad circle of contemporary authors.

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 foreign 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 various 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 daughters until death.

He published novels, travel accounts, plays and in 1964 married the writer Julieta de Godoy Ladeira (1927-1997). He wrote plays and became involved in performances. He 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, heralding the arrival of his masterpiece *Avalovara* (1973) and *A rainha dos cárceres da Grécia* (1976). The author would develop an original style anchored in strict structural architecture combining exactness, fantasy, prose and poetry. He would weave his passion for the intellectual life in the Middle Ages in the waft and weft of his narratives and often surprised the reader with the type of analogies he elicited from his readings of old texts. Equally, world mythology and arts featured in these novels. The novels attracted a great deal of critical reviews and positive appraisals for his innovative writing. Osman Lins retired from his post at the Banco do Brasil and was appointed to the Chair of Brazilian Literature at the Philosophy Faculty of Marília in São Paulo in 1970. It was then that 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 Lettres Faculties in Brazil. Teaching pursued some of the prevailing fashion of formalist and structuralist theories at those institutions. He became rather disappointed with the state of affairs and abandoned lecturing. In 1973, he submitted his doctoral dissertation entitled *Lima Barreto, e o Espaço Romanesco (Lima Barreto and the issue of space in his novels)* a seminal study, published in 1975. However, the highlight in 1975 was the publication of a uniquely innovative and erudite fantasy novel *Avalovara*. He also continued writing for the theatre.

His second wife Julieta was 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 form of 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* was published. The novellas were later adapted and broadcast by the Globo Television Network in 1978. He was awarded various literary prizes such as Fábio Prado, Monteiro Lobato and the Coelho Neto Prize 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 of the University of São Paulo (see details below).

- 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/](http://www.osman.lins.nom.br/)
- Manuscripts and other materials have been deposited at:
- The marvelous *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae* can be downloaded from [https://archive.org/details/marcgrave/page/n6](https://archive.org/details/marcgrave/page/n6)
- The film adaptation of *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8VMsnphC8A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8VMsnphC8A)

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HAPPY READING!

Attendance is free, but booking is essential: nadia.kerecuk@itamaraty.gov.br

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