

Piled Women

Patrícia Melo
Novel
Portuguese



Piled Women discusses in harsh and humorous language the urgent issue of violence against women in Brazil. The book tells the story of a young lawyer from São Paulo who, eager to escape an abusive relationship, agrees to go to Acre, in the middle of the Amazon rainforest to cover a series of trials. While following the numerous cases of women murdered by their husbands, boyfriends or relatives, the young lawyer discovers the beauty of the forest and the dazzling and tragic reality of indigenous life.

"You don't imagine that a guy like him, who studies Wittgenstein and practices yoga, is going to slap you in the face in the bathroom at a New Year's party for lawyers. But statistics show it's common. And that many aren't content with just a slap. They prefer to kill."

Title
Piled Women

Publisher
Leya, Rio de Janeiro

Publication date
2019

Pages
288

ISBN
978-85-7734-688-2

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Patrícia Melo was born in 1962 and is a highly regarded novelist, playwright and scriptwriter. She has been awarded a number of internationally renowned prizes, including the Jabuti Prize 2001, the German LiBeraturpreis 2013 and the German Crime Award 1998 and 2014, and she was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and Time Magazine included her among the Fifty Latin American Leaders of the New Millenium.

Photo: Kyrhian Balmelli

Mulheres empilhadas

Patrícia Melo

Excerpt translated by Cliff Landers

A

The night was pleasant, cool. I lit my cigarette and remained there, arms crossed, smoking and observing the opaque sky.

"That guy's taking pictures of you," someone said.

It was only then that I realized I wasn't alone. To my right, leaning against the car belonging to the woman giving the party, was a guy in blazer & tie, smoking. Behind us, the house seemed to vibrate to the syncopated sound of dance music. The man pointed to the window of the house on the other side of the street.

"Over there," he said.

Realizing he'd been noticed, the observer backed off. He turned out the light and lowered the blinds.

"Those idiots think they can photograph every pretty woman who comes out here for a smoke," continued blazer & tie, believing he was ingratiating himself. I saw he was drunk.

Perhaps thinking I wasn't clever enough to get the line, he insisted: "You must be used to it."

On my part, silence.

He continued: "Doesn't it bother you? For them to take photos? It's gotta be a drag to be as pretty as you are."

"It's a fight between neighbors," I explained, after another puff.

"With Bia? He's got problems with Bia?"

"He was filming, didn't you see? He's going to complain about the party. Loud music."

"That guy doesn't know from loud music."

From where I was I could see the security guard beside the gate at the street entrance, controlling the cars as they arrived for the party.

"How do you know Bia?" he asked.

My cigarette was slowly burning.

"We work in the same office," I replied.

"A lawyer? Like me?"

I nodded confirmation..

"Don't tell me we're in a professional brotherhood?"

I put out my cigarette with the tip of my new shoe,

adorned with small glittering stones, and returned to the party.

Bia was chatting with a group of friends at the entrance to the house, and, when she saw me, tried to steer me to the dance floor. She was even drunker than the guy outside and shouted something in my ear about my boyfriend. I left her shaking her booty under the strobe lights and what happened after that was one of those situations in which you have the impression that none of it has to do with your own life, that by mistake you've stumbled into someone else's film.

I remember the sensation of being pushed into the powder room by my boyfriend, who appeared from the hallway, upset, coming from the bedrooms, "Who were you with?" he yelled. "Where'd you disappear to?" The music made everything vibrate, I could almost feel its rhythm pulsating under my feet, at the tip of my tongue, and while he clutched my arms he pinned me against the cold marble of the wall, I didn't respond, I couldn't react, actually couldn't comprehend that it was me living that scene from some cheap novel, me who had in front of her that delightful sexual partner, an athletic man, cultured, good-natured, whom I had started calling my boyfriend a few months earlier, and who till then had always been as courteous, respectful and pleasant as I could as for in a boyfriend. He went on screaming, possessed by an unjustified fury. All I could do, as I attempted to defend myself and free myself from his arms, was to laugh. Only that. And my tense, drawn smile caused his eyes to take on a savage brilliance, like that of certain dogs before they attack.

Whap. Until then, I had never been struck in my life. In the face.

"Tramp," he said before leaving the bathroom.

2

KILLED BY EX-HUSBAND

Fernanda Siqueira,
twenty-nine years old,
was stabbed to death
in the presence of neighbors,

at the moment she returned the keys to the apartment where she had lived with her ex until a few months before.

B

The beginning, however, had been exhilarating. Full of laughter. About a year before. Impossible not to notice him. He was in the club's garden, his forearms firmly on the well kept grass, and his athletic legs, erect and pointing toward the cloudless blue sky, an inverted yoga position," as he explained when he joined me in the pool. "The blood does a kind of roto-rooter in our vessels," he said between two dips, "...flushes out a whole lot of rotten stuff."

My work was geared toward dealing with sharp outbreaks of hatred and immense volumes of ignorance. If I stood on my head, I thought, I would vomit nuclear arsenals and barbed wire.

"What are you laughing about?" he asked.

I wasn't laughing. My photophobia, worsened by my lack of sunglasses, caused that approximation of a smile plastered across my face.

His name was Amir and he lived in my world, a lawyer like me, older than me, divorced, and now I was discovering that we were members of the same recreational club in the Pinheiros district.

In court, I often attended his performance prosecuting nameless criminals with solid, impactful oratory. Noteworthy.

There in the water, without the suit or the killers he destroyed and despite the teeth that could have been better, he seemed even more seductive. To tell the truth, in that radiant light, what I saw was a very unusual type: a prosecutor-yogi, with a doctoral thesis on Wittgenstein, and able to stand on his head like a circus acrobat.

A half hour of talk, and I already felt at ease.

After we swam, we went on talking, spoke about his criminals, losers in general, a category that now included Venezuelans and Haitians, and the philosophy that especially interested him. I told him about my effort to read Logical Investigations.

"I gave up very quickly," I explained, "right after

coming across a digression about what might be the representation of a non-cat on the table. Or of a cat on the table."

"That has to be Husserl," he said, laughing.

We soon became enveloped in a good-natured atmosphere. Laughing together is a powerful aphrodisiac. I said:

"I keep thinking whether your passion for that type of philosophy wasn't what ended up leading you to public prosecution. You seem to like complicated things."

"I'd better be careful with you," he replied. "Intelligent women are the worst."

What he was saying to me at that moment was that in general women are stupid. But of course, under the effect of seduction and poisoned by my own hormones, I didn't realize it. Worse yet, I inverted the signals, transforming a negative into a positive. He had an effective tactic of making himself the protagonist, which consisted of using language itself as a hammer to demolish everything around him. I remember that on that day a respected sociologist was sunbathing near us, attracting the attention of the people nearby. The man smiled at me, openly devouring me with his eyes. Amir asked:

"You like that guy?"

He didn't even let me answer.

"A pseudointellectual for hire" was how he defined the sociologist. And added: "Just watch: whenever a debate about Indians or sexual harassment, racism or deforestation of the Amazon arises, he pops up in the television studios or on the internet, transparent as a dragonfly wing, in earrings and red pants, the latest glasses that all the with-its are wearing, supporting the party everyone else is supporting, throwing the stones that everyone throws, hitting the same targets. Because it's 'cool' to be against those that everyone attacks. In favor of those that everyone defends. It goes over well. It's painless. All he does, intellectually speaking, is to follow the flow of what somebody called the woke crowd. I detest that plastic good-guy pose."

Later, I commented to my female friends that he was the mercurial type. That he didn't follow standard

behavior. I liked that.

When I remarked that I was interested in my firm's pro bono work, he suggested that if I was feeling guilty about making money—something that wasn't happening, as my beginning lawyer's salary was almost laughable—I should go into teaching.

"Why?" I asked.

"Doing a favor for society? That's a favor."

"It's not a favor. It's an exchange of experience."

"What exchange? You contribute the work and they furnish the problem? I don't believe in that. Solidarity, altruism, Santa Claus, the lottery, none of it works in this country. I don't fall for any of it," he said, "I prefer my part in cash."

I guffawed. I took as a joke what was merely vulgar. Low. I asked:

"What else don't you believe in?"

"I think it's better to ask what I believe in."

"Give me the list."

"Cancer. Darwin. Pure mathematics," he replied.

"And the devil."

When we dived in to get my cap, swept away by the strong wind that had started to blow, I could feel a throbbing energy surrounding us.

At the end of the afternoon, we were in his apartment, with me sunburned and him slightly tipsy from the wine at lunch.

That's how it all began.

You don't imagine that a guy like him, who studies Wittgenstein and practices yoga, is going to slap you in the face in the bathroom at a New Year's party for lawyers.

But statistics show it's common. And that many aren't content with just a slap. They prefer to kill.

3

KILLED BY EX-BOYFRIEND

Rayane Barros de Castro,
sixteen years of age,
died from gunshot wounds.

Before killing her, the killer sent a
message
via WhatsApp:

"I'm going to live my life, but you're not going to live yours."

C

Whore. Cow. Bitch. The curses are variations on the same theme. Slut. Tramp. Hooker. In one case, the husband, intoxicated, called his wife toad woman (there flashed through my mind the memory of a photo posted on the web, a closeup of a pretty woman with a large fleshy dewlap and the caption: "fuck you") "Fat toad," said the man, guffawing. As the victim moved about the house, she was trailed by her stumbling husband, who repeated "toad woman, toad woman, toad woman." In front of the children. "A water toad, by the river edge..." he sang. "You could carry five pounds of oranges in that double chin of yours," he would say. When he saw he could no longer irritate her, he attacked her fatally with a kitchen knife. In another case, the boyfriend took care to warn: "I'm gonna put a bullet in your pussy." And he kept his word. "Rotting meat like you," another murderer repeatedly said, "I can find in the dumpster behind the butcher shop, Luzineide." Death by asphyxiation. Iracema, strangled. Like Elisa, Marineide, and Nilza.

It's foolish to think that the killer ought to be worried about an autopsy. The system is intended not to function. At the crime scene, the investigator looks at the victim with disdain, it's just a woman, he thinks. A black. A whore. A thing. If possible, he doesn't even answer the call when the phone rings in the warren where he works. He foists the matter off to the next duty officer.

With my mother they couldn't do that for a very simple reason. She was white. And she wasn't poor.

Besides the reference books for consultation, I had 180 cases in my file, all of them downloaded from the Acre legal system, which unlike many districts in richer states had digitized its entire holdings in a heroic effort to outgrow our come-back-in-two-weeks culture. Wanda. Telma. Abigail. Kelly. The list of names filled several screens on my computer, which remained on throughout the flight.

Profession of the accused: Soldier. Electrician. Farm worker. Public employee. Student. Killing women is a

democratic crime, one could say. I was making my own tables, which in the future would transform those statistics into more statistics. Formal education of the accused: Semiliterate. College degree. Illiterate. Some college. Relationship with the victim: Husband. Boyfriend. Former lover. Brother. Brother-in-law. Stepfather. In only five cases was the killer unacquainted with the victim.

During the trip, I remembered a female friend from childhood who flattened insects and glued them in a notebook. I came to do the same, though I never liked killing butterflies. Now, I could perhaps fill several albums with my photos of murdered women or with the weapons used in the crimes. Kitchen knives. Scythes. Penknives. Hoes. Bottles. Hammers. Electrical wire. Pressure cookers. Barbecue skewers. When it comes to killing a woman, any object is a weapon.

I only took my eyes off the cases when we landed in Brasília. The plane began to discharge the type of man who wears the same type of business suit and carries the same type of laptop. How many of them got a thrill out of beating a woman? The temperature increased. I thought of getting up and asking them to turn the air conditioning back on, but at that same instant was overcome with a sudden weariness. Wanda.

Abigail. Carmen. Joelma. Rosana. Deusa. I stared at that list of women's names, a pile of corpses that seemed endless. And I fell asleep.

I woke up in Cruzeiro do Sul three hours later, without having been aware of the stop in Rio Branco.

The plane had left Brasília empty but was now full. While waiting to be allowed to disembark, I had the thought that many passengers were the children of the victims. Like me, they were there to attend the trials.

We left the aircraft, feeling the impact of the humid heat of Cruzeiro do Sul. "The pride of being Acrean" was written on the welcoming panel.

All I knew about the region was what I had read in Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões*, in college, about the occupation of the Amazon in general and Acre in particular, described as a kind of "natural selection in reverse," a land of exile.

I got a taxi and gave the driver the address of the

hotel where I would be staying. A sign along the highway stated that use of helmet was obligatory, but I didn't see a single motorcyclist wearing protective headgear.

"Is this your first time in Cruzeiro do Sul?" asked the receptionist, a good-looking if disheveled biracial young man named Marcos, son of the owner of the hotel.

I said it was.

"Well, now you can tell your friends in São Paulo that Acre exists," he said.

On the days that followed, wherever I went he would always appear out of nowhere, with his inseparable dog Tadeu at his side. I would be leaving court, or in the square having ice cream, and he would show up in his flashy T-shirts, orange, purple, or fluorescent pink, coming from the university, sometimes only in shorts and barefoot, on his way to swim in a nearby igarapé. When he spoke, he looked me directly in the eyes in a curious, almost childish way. He walked with the tips of his feet turned slightly inward, which resulted in an unmasculine look. If he was in a car, he would offer me a ride. "Want to go for a dip?" he was always asking. His mother was an Indian from the Ch'aska village. "You have to get to know the Ch'aska." Every day he would add to my list of "You have to." "You have to go into the forest." "You have to see the flight of the flycatchers." "You have to swim in the Croa River." "You have to drink ayahuasca." If not for his omnipresence and willingness we wouldn't have become friends so quickly.

That same night of my arrival, seeing my interest in the "Welcome Bolivian and Peruvian Brothers" signs on the hotel reception counter, he spent a long time explaining that living in a border city was "a real crazy thing." "You end up not being from here, not being from there," he said, "but it's cool. I consider myself a citizen of the world." And he dragged me to the sidewalk to contemplate the full moon, despite there being no moon at all in the sky at that moment.

Later, after taking a shower, I unpacked my suitcase and arranged the clothes in the closet. Amir had sent me another email. "Did you block me from your cell phone? When are you going to stop acting like a child

and have a direct conversation with me?"

At eleven o'clock I was in bed, exhausted but unable to sleep. I left the lights on and observed the humidity stains spreading along the walls toward the window. Suddenly, whap, I felt that slap in the face again. In retrospect, the scene played out differently, no longer as if I were also the spectator, watching myself take the blow. The observer-I disappeared. I was there alone with my aggressor. Tramp! My cheek burned in a way that felt even more real than on that fatal day.

It was exasperating to admit that my thoughts were operating in circular fashion in the last few days. From the slap to the slap. the truth is that a slap in the face has the same effect as an expanding projectile. The obvious differences aside, it provokes something in the immaterial resembling what a dum dum bullet does to flesh: instead of transfixing the body, all that destructive energy implodes inside you, enlarging the wound. Much of the person struck dies from the slap. In psychological terms. But in me that blow created a kind of domino effect in reverse, it raised up a fallen piece, an interior piece, dead, that in rising leveraged another, and so on, until coming to the last one, the most fallen of all, almost buried, called "mother."

My relation to my mother's death had already gone through several stages. There was the I-don't-want-to-forget-her-face moment, which forced my grandmother to blow up various photos of her and fill our house with picture frames; the pread-olescent I-don't-want-to-talk-about-it phase in which all that material was put away, except for a single photo of her at 18 in shorts and sneakers, sitting beside her dog. Then came the hardest phase, when I swept her under the carpet of my rebellion. It was only during law school when, equipped by then with the proper technical vocabulary, I reapproached the matter, always cautiously: "those facts." The words "killing," "father," "trial," and "prison" were never uttered, I avoided them even mentally, as if they possessed some terrible power to summon our past to the surface.

That slap initiated a new phase in our relationship. It was like breaking the dike that held back my

violent longing for my mother. In a certain way the slap reconnected us. "We're made of the same stuff" was the lesson of that slap. From there it was only a step to open for the first time the boxes that my grandmother had kept clean, cataloged, and numbered for years, with more than enough material for us to create a museum in honor of the dead daughter. In that sense, the slap released a type of rebirth of my dead. All those who were sleeping inside me awoke with hunger.

I could hardly believe it when, two weeks later, by some strange coincidence the firm where I'm employed began to select beginning lawyers to participate in the various trials of femicide occurring in the country. Volunteer pro bono work, as observers. The purpose was to support, with information and statistics, the project of the majority partner, Denise Albuquerque, who was preparing a book about how the state creates murderers by sanctioning asymmetry in gender relationships. "We're going to talk about the authorized slaughter of women," she simplified. "Ten thousand cases of femicide in the courts, with no solution. That's my theme."

"What's the option for the farthest place from São Paulo?" I asked Bia, my friend who was handling the selection of lawyers.

"Acre," she answered.

Now, I was there.

You shouldn't mess with a person who carries a cadaver inside her.

ETÁ

Flap, flap, flap, in the sky the pussies were flying alongside the flocks of birds that herald the summer. Pussy-parrots, pussy-sparrow hawks, pussy-violet-capped woodnymph, pussy-wattled jacanas, pussy-red-necked aracarís, pussy-jabirus, pussy-frigate birds, pussy-roseate spoonbills, pussy-red-headed trogons, pussy-jacamars, pussy-rosy-billed pochards, pussy-lemon-throated barbets. There were so many and so colorful, some flying in V-shaped formations, others solitary, gliding in the blue sky.

And the women too kept arriving. Some were flying. Others swimming. Some on horseback. Skating. I,

walking slowly, looking carefully where I stepped, now in fire, now in ice, now on the water.

Some of the women were nude. Others had a black strip to cover their sex, or rather, a chastity belt. And they, the ones with the belt, as they lined up along the lake, received their pussies back, pussies that came flying. Flap, flap, click. I mean, our pussies simply fit onto us with an automatic click, freeing us from the black strip-thong-chastity belt.

Txupira, among us, said that her case had been different. Her pussy had not returned flying like the others. Hours before, Txupira had found her sex tossed onto a pile labeled "pink pussies."

"To sell?" one of the women asked.

The tallest one said yes.

"In the pussy market, the pink ones are very valuable."

"That's why our vaginas are being operated on," said the latter.

"They trim our large labia," stated the former.

"They reduce our Mount of Venus," added another.

"And narrow our canals," exclaimed still another.

"They polish our twat," added the tallest woman.

All together:

"Those butchers! Those slaughterers!"

I said:

"They hunt our pussies with nets. As if we were butterflies."

Txupira:

"Nothing is as irritating as an independent pussy!"

"They say: a pussy in the hand is worth two flying," commented the shortest woman.

Carla, who had joined us within my noticing, said:

"Wait until they find out what we did with those piles of pink pussies."

"We killed the men," said one.

"They were pedophiles," stated another.

The woman with Black Power hair:

"Pedophiles like pink pussies."

And the small blonde:

"The pedophile whistled when Txupira recovered her sex. 'What a beautiful vagina!' he said, before he was lynched."

At that point we all had our pussies back, comfortable around the lake, laughing a lot and awaiting the grand moment.

Carla asked:

"Is she really coming?"

And then the lake suddenly lit up from within, so we could observe not only the spectacle of the Woman of the Green Stones emerging, but also the magnificent cortege of little boys and young girls with hundreds of fishes of every color adorning their garments.

We sang and danced in homage to them.