

# Women and work: film analysis of Most Beautiful Thing

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article aims to present aspects related to women's personal life and work illustrated in the TV series *Most Beautiful Thing* (Coisa Mais Linda, in Portuguese).

**Design/methodology/approach** – To this end, a film analysis was carried out considering the first season of the TV series *Most Beautiful Thing*, and to analyze the data, qualitative content analysis was used according to Bardin (2006).

**Findings** – The analysis showed that women's struggles were and are distinct. While white women are fighting for the right to work - concomitantly reconciling their roles as mother, wife and housewife -, black and poor women fight for survival and dignity. As result, the film analysis showed that women's search for a different social position is related to an inherent cultural aspect. It is relevant to mention herein that this struggle remains up to the present; such struggle is characterized by the occultation of the social role played by women.

**Research limitations/implications** – As a limitation, there are few studies that address the theme of white and black women during the period reported in the series.

**Originality/value** – The main contribution of this article is the use of a filming product that portrays the 1950s, but bringing current discussions on the role of women in society, especially regarding the labor market, the patriarchal domination of men, prejudice, racial, and class discrimination.

**Keywords** Women, Working women, Role of women, Film analysis

**Paper type** General review

## 1. Introduction

The 1950s, known as the Golden Years, were marked by great industrial development and innovation. During this period, the role of women, regardless of class and race, was still very traditionalist; it was an era marked by the permanence of customs and traditions (Mittanck, 2017). According to Almeida (2014), there is a historical invisibility when it comes to the female gender, which reflects a sexist culture that undermines women's social role.

Brazil is still considered a country with patriarchal values, marked by a system of sexual oppression (Mota-Santos, Carvalho Neto, Oliveira, & Andrade, 2019) and, in the 1950s, these values were even more present in the society. The role of men was dominant in every sphere: economic, familiar, parental and marital (Rocha-Coutinho, 1994). The man was then obeyed and respected, while the woman was infantilized by the inability to think and act (Rago, 1985; Bassanezi, 2004; Tinkler, 2013). This demonstrates a separation between public spaces—attributed to men—from private spaces, represented by the household, a role reserved for women (Davies & Frink, 2014; Frasuete & Simili, 2017).

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For Bourdieu (2010), this constitutive division of the social order and the relations of domination between genders are inherent in the society, which leads to classifications of what men and women really are. On the one hand, men are responsible for roles related to public acts. Women, on the other hand, are assigned to domestic and private jobs, hidden in the household, e.g. taking care of children.

This study seeks to elucidate, in addition to understanding the functioning of women's roles in the society at that time, the distinction between gender, class and race relations, which are evident when it comes to women's role and work. While White upper middle-class women sought the opportunity to occupy more space in public life through the achievement of job positions while pursuing a career, Black and lower-class women found in work a necessary way to provide for family survival; their works are mostly related to domestic activities, perpetuating exploitation and discrimination features, which stem from the not-so-distant slavery system.

Thus, this article aims to present aspects related to women's life and work in the 1950s, considering advances and setbacks in the society through the analysis of the first season of the TV series *Most Beautiful Thing*. This study is relevant because it considers gender inequality and racial discrimination, which, according to Proni and Gomes (2015), are generally ignored in analyses that consider conjunctures of the labor market in Brazil.

In our study, the term "women" is used as deconstructed categories, being considered as not fixed, not universal and without a unique identity (Ribeiro, 2016b; Teixeira, Oliveira & Carrieri, 2020). In addition, the term "race" is used as an analytical category, according to the study by Teixeira, Oliveira, & Carrieri (2020). We intend herein to show gender relations in the work sphere, discussing the role of White and Black women in the society and their relationship with work based on authors such as Saffioti (1976; 2004), Bruschini and Puppini (2004), Bourdieu (2010) and Davis (2016).

It is important to note that gender studies seek to show and deconstruct cultural, social and historical constructions about the roles attributed to and expected from men and women in the society (Scott, 1995; Nicholson, 2000; Butler, 2003). In addition, gender in the field of administration should be considered in order to analyze and understand gender inequalities in the labor market, which prevent women from entering and progressing in this environment.

Our article is divided into six chapters. First, this introduction deals with the primary issues of the study. Subsequently, we present the theoretical framework, which focuses on women in the 1950s with subtopics related to the realities of White and Black women. Afterward, we introduce the methodology, the characterization of the TV series and the film analysis. Our conclusions are drawn in the final section, followed by the references used herein.

## 2. Women in the 1950s

The 1950s represented a major milestone in industrial development and innovation in the country. The city of Rio de Janeiro experienced several renovations and better urban sanitation, which led to greater possibilities of employment and changes in the society. However, in this context, the Brazilian society was still based on patriarchal values and women played a secondary role in the society; there was a notable difference between what was expected from men and from women (Saffioti, 1976; Queirolo, 2004; Bassanezi, 2004; Azambuja, 2006; Mittanck, 2017; Martins-Suarez & Farias, 2017).

According to Bourdieu (2010), male domination has been intertwined with humanity since ancient societies; such domination was naturally accepted. The author points out that the strength of male domination lacks justification, which explains its acceptance. The domination is seen as being part of the natural order of things, and thus bypasses the need for legitimation. The social order functions are an immense symbolic machine that tends to ratify the male domination on which it is based: it is the social division of labor, a very strict

distribution of the activities attributed to each gender taking into consideration their place, moment and instruments (Bourdieu, 2010).

The differentiation between the roles of men and women was expressed not only by customs but also by law. The Civil Code of 1916, which ruled the Brazilian society back then, brought limitations to women performance based on discriminatory and patriarchal principles, which emphasized that women should be subordinate to men. In this sense, women could not be engaged in any remunerated activity without the authorization of the father or the husband, which accentuated their civil incapacity and the existence of male guardianship (Saffioti, 2004).

In addition, the word “separation” was still attributed to divorce; a separated woman was the one undergoing the process of judicial separation. According to Santana, Rios and Menezes (2017), separation was a form of dissolution between men and women and their material goods, but without breaking the marital bond, which prevented new marriages. In this context, the term “separation” (*desquite* in Portuguese, meaning the ones who own something to the society) alludes to the marital breakdown at a time when marriage was still considered perpetual and indissoluble (Santana, Rios, & Menezes, 2017).

Another characteristic of this period is that a large part of the population in Brazil was still living in the countryside and 75% of Brazilians were functionally illiterate. Men prevailed in the labor market, with a small proportion of women working outside the home. In addition, there were great asymmetries between White and Black individuals regarding access to education and professional training (Próni & Gomes, 2015).

The place occupied by women was considered inferior; a secondary role used to be attributed to women while men occupied primary roles. At that time, however, social movements emerged in order to protect the social rights of women to occupy all spaces in the society (Azambuja, 2006). This new way of thinking was influenced by European feminist movements, gaining more supporters and spreading to large Brazilian urban centers. These movements were important to begin to reshape the role of women in the society (Azambuja, 2006; Martins-Suarez & Farias, 2017).

Women’s resistance movements occurred in other countries, such as Mexico, in which this social movement fought for the exercise of equal rights for men and women, especially with regard to the right to work (Suárez & Huerta, 2018). In the UK, Paterson (2019) reports that women in the 1950s and 1960s had access to education and job opportunities, allowing them to move away from the model of femininity represented by household work and exclusive dedication to the family, as in previous generations.

As a result of these feminist movements, women’s suffrage was legalized in Brazil by a decree enacted in 1932, which considered as a voter the citizen over 21 years old, without any gender distinction (Decree 21076, 1932). However, this decree only gave the right to vote to married women authorized by their husbands and to widowed and single women who had their own income. Women’s right to vote with no restrictions occurred only in 1934 (Sow, 2010; Souza, 2018).

Was this situation experienced equally by all women in Brazil? The Black feminist movement analyzes such questioning, which has become necessary due to the legacy of slavery, patriarchy and classism in the society; the Black feminist movement criticizes the invisibility of Black women and exposes their demands in feminist movements (Ribeiro, 2016b).

White women’s claims were different from Black women’s claims, considering they brought different approaches, experiences and perspectives. While the former had to struggle to have to right to work, the latter have always worked on farms or as street vendors, greengrocers, domestic servants, among others. There is a big difference between the situation of Black and White women considering the marginalization of the latter (Carneiro, 2003; Davis, 2016; Ribeiro, 2016a, 2016b).

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It is necessary, then, to present the social differences between White and Black women in the 1950s. According to [Saffioti \(1976\)](#), the Brazilian slavery and manorial regime and its influence have brought different consequences to the roles of White and Black women in the society.

### *2.1 White upper middle-class women and work*

The White upper middle-class woman in the 1950s was considered to be civilly incapable, and her life was planned—from childhood onwards—according to a future inevitable marriage. Her dependence passed from father to husband, thus perpetuating the secondary and dependent condition of the female figure. The patriarchal society at that time was characterized by the submissive role of women toward the head of the family, which restricted them to the role of mother and housewife ([Saffioti, 1976](#); [Bassanezi, 2004](#); [Martins-Suarez & Farias, 2017](#)).

This patriarchal society sought to preserve “good customs” while keeping women away from the modernity arising from industrial development and innovation ([Mittanck, 2017](#), p. 2). Thus, the possibility for women to have a career was unquestionable ([Rocha-Coutinho, 1994](#); [Almeida, 2014](#)). According to [Frasquete and Simili \(2017\)](#), even with changes in the national scenario, the dominant female and femininity model was that of the wife and mother and/or the woman dedicated to the home. Being against the female social role of a caring mother and a wife dedicated to the family and household chores was an obstacle in the 1950s ([Martins-Suarez & Farias, 2017](#)).

Considering these traditional and patriarchal conceptions of the roles of White women at that time, they ended up being marginalized from the productive workforce ([Saffioti, 1976](#)). According to [Andrade \(2016\)](#), in 1950, only 13.6% of women were economically active according to data provided by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística Demographic’s Census. Working women generally engaged in the so-called female careers, e.g. teachers and nurses ([Wallace, 2015](#)). [Frasquete and Simili \(2017\)](#) conclude that the professional performance of Brazilian women at that period was in job positions that reaffirmed their role in the home, where they served their children and husband; in addition to household chores, women were also responsible for educating their children, sewing and embroidering, for example.

According to [Pinto \(2017\)](#), in urban elites and middle classes, the woman’s sacred place was the home, where she could play the role of a sanctified mother (at least considering the discourses of the ideal family) being prohibited from having a public life. Women were instructed to live in the society in order to serve the home and men; that is, female education reproduced the Catholic ideal of conceiving women as guardians of the home and destined for motherhood ([Almeida, 2014](#)).

[Bassanezi \(2004\)](#) adds that the natural vocation considered for women at that time would be motherhood and domestic life. Not adhering to this path would be against female nature. Furthermore, at that time, the maternal function was no longer just biological, but social and patriotic. Motherhood was the most valued role for women and aimed at for the development of the motherland and of future generations ([Almeida, 2014](#)).

This difference was also reflected in women’s education: educated women were the ones who knew how to receive guests, obey their husbands, parents and brothers, dress appropriately, take good care of the family and knew how to behave in public. Education was not synonymous with educational background or professional activities, neither with an academic degree in any study field ([Almeida, 2014](#)).

Woman’s work was limited to the home borders, except for women who worked outside the home. According to [Bourdieu \(2010\)](#), the place culturally imposed on women is the inside, which guaranteed their invisibility. Therefore, leaving this patriarchal system, achieving financial independence through education and having a profession meant a break from culturally long-established agreements and could lead to social disorder ([Almeida, 2014](#)).

This way, the struggle of women from more privileged social classes was different from the issues raised by Black and the lower-class women, who worked long hours and received low wages, in addition to being responsible for the domestic work at home. The dissatisfaction of White women for being confined and subordinate in the household was seen by Black women as freedom (Hooks, 2000).

The next subtopic portrays the relationship between Black women and work.

### *2.2 Black lower-class women and work*

Bearing in mind that gender operates with other social categories, such as race, class, sexuality, religion and nationality, it is necessary to understand it from an intersectionality perspective (Santana, Rios, & Menezes, 2017). Thus, working with these categories is relevant to offer analytical tools to understand the articulation of multiple differences and inequalities (Piscitelli, 2008). For Teixeira, Oliveira and Carrieri (2020), race must be considered as a social phenomenon that up to now is the foundation of segregation and inequality in social relations.

In this sense, Mesquita, Teixeira and Silva (2020) argue that racial issues must also address the power relations that permeate society. Miranda (2019) points out that Black women are represented by the lowest tier of the social pyramid. Therefore, it is important to note that the situation of Black lower-class women was completely different from the condition of White women's; in addition, Black women must also face double discrimination—gender and race (Mesquita, Teixeira & Silva, 2020).

With this double burden, other forms of inequality operate together, giving rise to the term intersectionality, used for the first time by the jurist Crenshaw (1989) and understood as a combination of factors that lead to discrimination. Crenshaw's (1991) studies have shown that Black women suffer from these different modes of discrimination. Besides, most Black women face an increasing burden of poverty, which reduces their chance to move up the pyramid. Such scenario becomes more critical when considering the Brazilian context, in which these women still carry the legacy of slavery.

Women from lower social classes were never excluded from work. In the 1950s, working outside the home was accepted only from women belonging to the lowest tier of the social pyramid, in which the imperative of survival overlapped any prejudices or taboos (Pinto, 2017). In other words, Black women were part of the workforce, but occupied subordinate positions (Mesquita, Teixeira & Silva, 2020), i.e. job positions with bad working conditions, which include lowest-paying jobs, informal jobs and domestic work (Próni & Gomes, 2015).

Black women were better accepted in domestic works, which enabled them to provide for the whole family. The long working hours, which were part of most of Black women's lives, reproduced a pattern established during slavery. These women had all other aspects of their existence overshadowed by work. It was common for women to leave their youngest child in the care of eldest children or even elderly Black women that were no longer working. Their main priority should be work, which represented a guarantee of survival (Davis, 2016).

In addition, it has become natural, in a totally wrong way, to accept that Black people have more physical strength, which justifies their participation in activities that require tougher physical activity. Black women are considered "warriors" and "strong" and their bodies are still understood to be more resistant to pain (Teixeira, Oliveira & Carrieri, 2020, p. 65).

According to Pinto (1953), when Black women begin to ascend socially, in addition to other common barriers to color regardless of gender, and to gender regardless of color, they find resistance to their social ascension as a way to perpetuate their subordinate status: Black women are often thought of as servants, performing household duties and having the lowest salaries (Miranda, 2019).

### 3. Research method

This article aims to present aspects related to women's life and work in the 1950s, considering advances and setbacks related to the role of women in the society. To this end, an analysis was carried out considering the first season of the TV series *Most Beautiful Thing*. Vanoye and Goliot-Lété (1994) affirm that analyzing a film means not just seeing it; it entails a review on it and, even more, to technically examine it.

It is relevant to note that films can be defined as a characterization of relevant events occurred in a determined time and space. Film analysis seeks to apprehend the knowledge of socio-environmental representations that are manifested in this characterization (Vanoye & Goliot-Lété, 1994).

Such research strategy was also used in different articles belonging to the field of administration. These articles include topics related to competitive advantages and changing environments (Alvarenga, Leite, Freitas, & Ruas, 2017), mobbing through the analysis of the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (Medeiros, Valadão Júnior & Possas, 2015), management instrumentalism through the analysis of the film *Gattaca* (Carmo, Silva, Teixeira, & Vasconcelos, 2018), and leadership and teamwork through the analysis of the film *Chicken Run* (Aoki & Santos, 2020).

In order to analyze the data, qualitative content analysis was used according to Bardin (2006). The author separates content analysis into three phases: preanalysis, material exploration and material treatment, and inference and interpretation. The first phase, preanalysis, consisted of watching the TV series. The first season of the series *Most Beautiful Thing* has six episodes with approximately 50 min each, totaling 05 h and 22 min.

The series was watched twice without interruption by the authors of this paper and the third time was watched with interruptions to select and collect the scenes and speeches to be analyzed during the second phase of the analysis, i.e. the exploration of the material. In this second phase, we decided to collect the scenes and speeches of the four main characters in the series: Maria Luiza, Adélia, Thereza and Lígia.

Finally, the third stage of content analysis described by Bardin (2006) was carried out, i.e. the treatment of material, inference and interpretation, which will be described in section five. Content analysis considers the theme of the film and sees it as a story. The film is, therefore, the starting point and the ending point of the analysis (Vanoye & Goliot-Lété, 1994; Penafria, 2009).

The film analysis that we propose in this study addresses and describes the characteristics of the chosen cinematographic work, with regard to aspects related to the personal life and work of the four main women in the series, correlating such aspects with the concepts presented in the theoretical framework of our paper. The series is considered in this article as a representation of the time, the context and the social relations during the 1950s in Brazil.

### 4. The TV series *Most Beautiful Thing*

The first season of the Brazilian series entitled *Most Beautiful Thing* was released on March 22, 2019, by the streaming service Netflix, created by Giuliano Cedroni and Heather Roth. The series addresses the rise of *bossa nova* and the role of women in the late 1950s in Brazil. The story takes place in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which was still the capital of Brazil back then, and focuses mainly on the trajectory of four women: Maria Luiza, a conservative girl from a wealthy family and completely dependent on two men: her father, Ademar, and her husband, Pedro; Adélia, a Black girl who fights against racism daily, working as a maid to provide for her younger sister Ivone and daughter Conceição; Lígia, who dreams of becoming a professional singer, but is prohibited by the machismo and conservatism of her husband who is running for a place in politics; and Thereza, a journalist who fights for

women's rights in the labor market and has the support of her husband, with whom she lives an open relationship.

In 1959, Maria Luiza (Malu) discovers that she was abandoned and stolen by her husband Pedro, when she moves from São Paulo to Rio de Janeiro. She and her husband had plans to open a restaurant in the city, but Malu learns that he ran away with all the couple's money. Willing to change the course of her life, Malu has the idea of opening a nightclub in Rio de Janeiro after meeting the newly created *bossa nova* by the talented but problematic singer, Chico.

During this period, Malu meets Adélia, a Black woman who worked as a maid, and invites her to work with her in the new venture. Lígia and Thereza are married to two brothers and are old acquaintances of Malu and host her in Rio de Janeiro. The narrative is developed around these four women, who join forces to free themselves from the bonds of society at that time.

Thus, the series deals with issues such as violence against women, the patriarchal society, women in the labor market, the difference between the role of White and Black women in the society, discrimination and prejudices experienced by women.

## 5. Film analysis

The analysis was divided into four subsections in order to address the four women represented in the series: Maria Luiza, Adélia, Lígia and Thereza.

### 5.1 *Maria Luiza and the luck of getting married and having fun (?): rich, White and separated*

We are living the life they chose for us and the only way to get out of this is to go crazy (Maria Luiza).

Maria Luiza belonged to a wealthy family of coffee barons in São Paulo. She married Pedro and had their first child, Carlinhos. She moves to Rio de Janeiro with plans to open a restaurant with her husband. However, upon arriving in the city, she realizes that he was cheating on her and had disappeared with all the couple's money.

It is at this moment that Maria Luiza meets Adélia, who worked as a domestic worker. After having contact with the city of Rio de Janeiro, samba and *bossa nova*, Maria Luiza decides to stay in the city to put into practice the plan to open a restaurant, but with the idea of turning it into a music club. However, she had to face her father, who, upon discovering that her daughter had been abandoned by her husband, wanted her to return with him to São Paulo:

- I want to transform the restaurant into a music club, a place where people want to meet and where there is live music.

- No.

- I want it too . . . No?

- I don't want my daughter to live a miserable life here, ruining our reputation with a "music club".

- That's not it. It is much more than a music club or restaurant. I can already see it. You have to trust me. Please.

- You are the one who needs to trust me. A family girl like you has to be in São Paulo, raising your child. [. . .]

- It's just that my whole life has always been about being Ademar's daughter, and then Pedro's wife. And now I'm going to be the poor widow? The poor little girl? No. I want to create my own identity, father. And I want no one to take that away from me. Understand? That's it.

- We are going back to São Paulo now.

Maria Luiza represents women who were against their natural vocation, or according to Bourdieu (2010) “naturalized women”, who belonged to private life, as dedicated mothers and housewives, as approached by Bassanezi (2004). It is clear that Maria Luiza’s father wanted her to be a dependent person again. In addition, it shows how separation at that time marked women, leaving them in an inferior and submissive position. Maria Luiza’s father does not accept that his daughter opens the music club and wants her to return to her role as daughter and mother in the private space of the home. The excerpt shows how upper-class women were restricted to the home, being prevented from participating in the public space (Almeida, 2014) and maintaining their social status (Saffioti, 1976; Martins-Suarez & Farias, 2017).

However, contrary to the customs of that time, Maria Luiza decides to stay in Rio de Janeiro and open her music club, without any moral neither financial support from her father. She asks Adélia to work for her. With the plan in mind, she tries to find a personal loan to open the new venture and faces yet another discrimination:

- I had a meeting with an accountant to check the papers for the club. Do you know what he said to me?

- No.

- No. Exactly that. Then I went to the bank to see if I could get a loan. They told me that because I am a woman I cannot start a business, nor get a loan without a man’s signature (Maria Luiza in conversation with Adélia).

It can be seen how the performance of women in the public space, represented in the series, was limited. According to Bourdieu (2010), public space was destined for men, while women were restricted to the private, hidden, limited space of the home. Women needed authorization from their father or husband to engage in paid work because they were considered civilly incapable (Saffioti, 2004).

Even so, Maria Luiza does not give up on her venture and invites Roberto, a music producer from Rio de Janeiro, to become a partner. And, once again, she realizes the prejudice for being a woman:

- You are young, Maria. You are a beautiful woman. You’re here, in Rio de Janeiro, single. Enjoy it. Just get to know the city. There are so many beautiful places here. Leave the boring part for the boys (Roberto’s discourse to Maria).

It is interesting to notice some relevant aspects of this episode, whose title is *Girls are not welcome*. According to this excerpt, the man treats the woman in a childish way, asking her to “have fun” while he solves the “boring part”, which corroborates what Rocha-Coutinho (1994) affirms about the dominance of men’s role in contrast to the women’s, considered submissive. In addition, the report also illustrates that men must be obeyed and respected, while women are infantilized by their inability to think and act (Rago, 1985; Bassanezi, 2004; Tinkler, 2013).

Despite the difficulties, Maria Luiza tells Adélia how uncomfortable she feels by repeating the role of her mother, who is restricted to the home and submissive to Maria Luiza’s father. She decides to sell her wedding ring and fake her husband’s (Pedro’s) signature to get the loan. And she does not give up, even when suffering discrimination: *Today I heard from three different men that I can’t do what I want to because I am a woman* (Maria Luiza in conversation with Adélia).

With the money in hand and after renovating the club, a heavy rain in Rio de Janeiro floods Maria Luiza’s property before the inauguration. And Maria Luiza’s first instinct is to give up. She then returns to her parents’ home in São Paulo, and is pressured by her father to remarry:

- Do you understand how lucky it would be if a boy like that agreed to marry you?

- Marry?

- It's time to get back to reality, Maria Luiza. You need to find a new husband. A decent one this time (Maria Luiza's conversation with her father).

It can be seen how upper-class women were destined for marriage; matrimonies maintained their social position and guaranteed their stability (Saffioti, 1976; Martins-Suarez & Farias, 2017; Mittanck, 2017). Thus, according to Maria Luiza's father, she needed to remarry as soon as possible for the maintenance of the family image, since she had been abandoned by her first husband.

However, Maria Luiza did not feel that she belonged to that role. With the support of her mother, she returns to Rio de Janeiro, which goes against the social role of women at that time, as approached by Martins-Suarez and Farias (2017). She, then, looks for Adélia again, proposing a 50–50 partnership agreement. After getting a loan, Maria Luiza renovates the club once again and inaugurates it. With Thereza's help, she prepares an ad for magazine publication in order to promote the club *Most Beautiful Thing*. Her father, however, doesn't like the publication:

- What was that ad in the magazine?

- Did you see? Yes. I know it was a little bold, but look, the club is crowded every night, Dad.

- I'm embarrassed.

- I thought you could be proud.

- Carlinhos just lost his father. Be the respectable mother he needs! (Conversation of Maria Luiza with her father on the phone).

On behalf of good customs, White women were assigned to the household, as daughters, wives and mothers. And it was this specific role that Maria Luiza's father wanted his daughter to play. One can also notice that motherhood was appreciated (Almeida, 2014), but this role should be exercised in the private space of the home: the role of "respectable mother."

Finally, in a conversation with Adélia, Maria Luiza complains about her role as a woman and realizes how she and Adélia belong to different worlds. The series shows how Maria Luiza always had a place to turn to (her parents' house) and how Adélia did not have that privilege. Adélia has always had to work to provide for herself and her family:

- I wish I didn't have to worry about looking pretty and being well dressed.

- I would find it wonderful to spend all day only thinking about lipstick and rice powder (Conversation between Maria Luiza and Adélia).

Therefore, it is important to introduce herein the different women represented in this TV series.

### 5.2 Adélia and the intersection of roads: poor, Black and domestic worker

Fighting for your right to work? I've been working since I was eight years old. My grandmother was born in a slave quarter and it is just tough. It's really tough (Adélia).

Adélia is a Black woman living in a slum, who fights daily against racism and works seven days a week to provide for her younger sister Ivone and daughter Conceição. Adélia hides the fact that Conceição was conceived during her relationship with the son of her former employer, and not during the long relationship with the musician Captain.

In the plot, after the discovery of Adélia's relationship with her son, the ex-boss sends her son to Europe before he even knew about the pregnancy in order to break them up and fire Adélia. After having the baby, Adélia transfers the fatherhood to the figure of the Captain, a musician with whom she starts a relationship during the plot.

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At the beginning of the plot, Adélia worked as a maid in an apartment in the same building where Maria Luiza's husband lived before his disappearing. She experienced discrimination of her employer on a daily basis. The series features scenes in which Adélia is repressed for using the social instead of the service elevator and for taking her daughter to work:

- Look who decided to show up. And chatting in the lobby, like a queen. They complain when we call them lazy. And you brought the girl again. [. . .] Adélia, you've been working for me for two years and you know how generous I am. I don't force you to sleep here. I let you take my clothes home to get them washed. And I even give you Sundays off (Employer talking to Adélia).

Adélia represents female domestic workers, which was the service considered as an opportunity for lower-class women due to the lack of preparation or qualification demanded by the profession. Most Black women from lower social classes turned to domestic work as a way to provide for their family (Bruschini & Puppini, 2004).

Subsequently, Maria Luiza emphasizes her will to open a music club and invites Adélia to work with her. They start renovating and cleaning the space for the music club, but at a certain moment they lose everything they had due to a flood in the city of Rio de Janeiro before the launch of the club. Then, they had a serious discussion:

- You are right, Malu. We are not the same. You've always had choices. Not me. (Adélia in conversation with Maria Luiza)

In this discussion, the difference and distance between Malu and Adélia is clear, as presented by Saffioti (1976) and Rocha-Coutinho (1994). Malu returns to her parents' home in São Paulo, while Adélia must return to her job as a domestic worker to provide for her family. She faces discrimination again:

- Adélia! What are you doing here?

- Miss Regina, I went to the greengrocer as you asked.

- But what are you doing here in the social elevator?

- Ah, it's because the service elevator is still under maintenance. I was just putting the groceries here, then I'd use the stairs.

- You can't put that here, the neighbors will complain.

- But the apartment is on the ninth floor, do you want me to go upstairs with all these groceries?

- If I had your arms, I would have taken them myself.

This scene illustrates the fact that Black women are considered strong and resistant; therefore, one expects them to be mostly necessary in activities that require more physical strength, as approached by Teixeira, Oliveira & Carrieri (2020).

Another portrait of Adélia's reality reveals that she did not know how to read or write. According to Pinto (1953), the census revealed that in Rio de Janeiro, in the 1950s, 54.08% of Black women were illiterate. The fragile economic situation of lower-income families led to the premature use of the child labor either in the domestic work or on the streets as vendors; such reality takes away the opportunity for better jobs.

The first time that Lígia goes to the music club represents and reinforces the discrimination experienced by lower class (and mainly Black): they were only seen as individuals that must serve upper-class women. According to Davis (2016), when Black women start to ascend the social ladder, they find resistance to their social ascension as a way to perpetuate their subordinate status.

5.3 *Lígia and the dream of singing: rich, married and high society*

[...] we know that women have to choose between children and their career (*Lígia*).

Lígia is forced by her husband to represent the image of the traditional woman belonging to a patriarchal society, who is restricted to the private space of the household and must play the role of living in the ideal family while being prohibited from having a public life, as cited by [Pinto \(2017\)](#). Considered the “family girl” of that time ([Bassanezi, 2004](#)) and despite having studied music, Lígia is forbidden by her husband, Augusto, to become a singer in order to avoid ruining the family’s “reputation.” Augusto is against the woman’s right to a job, which becomes evident during a conversation with his brother Nelson:

- Do you need money, Nelsinho?
- What do you mean, man?
- Then why are you letting your wife work? Is that right?
- Augusto, you know that we have very different views on what is right and wrong. Thereza owns herself, man. I am not the one who will tell her what to do or not.

At that time, women should ask for the authorization of the husband or father in order to engage in remunerated activities ([Saffioti, 2004](#)). In the first scene in which Lígia asks her husband for permission to sing, he gives her a slap in the face:

- I passed an audition to sing next week. [...] Honey, that’s what I want to do. Doesn’t Grace Kelly help the Prince of Monaco? Let me sing at your political rally, will you?? (Augusto answers her with a slap in the face).

After this episode, Augusto still manages to make Lígia feel guilty for the event, for having disobeyed and displeased her husband:

- It was my fault. I always knew that you don’t like me singing.
- Help me to treat you the way you deserve.

Lígia’s relationship with her husband in the series illustrates how women were submissive and inferior to the husband ([Azambuja, 2006](#)). However, in addition to trying to let go of music because of him, Lígia cannot give up on her dream of becoming a singer. At the inauguration of *Most Beautiful Thing*, Lígia ends up being invited by Maria Luiza to sing and, while she is performing, her husband arrives at the club:

- Wow! Bravo, Liginha. Bravo. What a beautiful performance. You really look like a beautiful singer.
- Please, Augusto . . .
- From a brothel. A beautiful whore. If you go on that stage again, you will never step on my house ever again (*Lígia’s conversation with Augusto*).

After this event, Augusto once again attacks Lígia, but is interrupted by Maria Luiza, who bans him from the place. Lígia then goes back to the stage and does not return home, staying with Maria Luiza. The next day, after Lígia’s presentation, the music critic Requião had his note published on the newspaper regarding the inauguration of the music club *Most Beautiful Thing*. Note that appeared at the inauguration of the music club *Most Beautiful Thing* appears in the newspaper. Requião mentions specifically Lígia’s presentation:

- About Lígia Soares there is not much to say. A somewhat vulgar girl, without much charisma, but with a beautiful pair of legs, which are her only noteworthy attributes.

It is important to note that Chico, considered the “new genius of music,” was the only one complimented in Requião’s newspaper note, even though he was drunk, did not finish his presentation, and had to leave the stage for assaulting his producer. It is, therefore, possible to notice the discrimination faced by women, who are often objectified by men and considered incapable individuals.

After the occurrence of these events, Lígia decides that she wants to pursue her career as a singer but discovers that she is pregnant with her husband’s child. That’s when she decided that her career was more important at that moment: [. . .] *we know that women have to choose between children and their career* (Lígia’s conversation with Thereza). For Lígia, it was necessary to make a choice between motherhood and career, and as mentioned by Almeida (2014), motherhood was the most valued role attributed to women, and it would be very difficult to reconcile motherhood with career.

Lígia then has an abortion in order to dedicate herself entirely to the career and signs the divorce papers sent by her mother-in-law; she experienced discrimination not only for being a divorced woman, but also for starting a singing career. When she goes to the club, for example, with Thereza and Maria Luiza, the club members feel uncomfortable with the presence of Lígia and Maria Luiza, as they did not have the behavior expected at that time for women (both without a husband and working individuals).

#### 5.4 Thereza and an open mind in a closed society: journalist, independent and feminist

A magazine for women must be produced by women (Thereza).

Thereza is very different from Maria Luiza and Lígia, despite also having a higher social status. She is a woman who was not attached to the patriarchal customs of that time; she was against the social role attributed to women (Martins-Suarez & Farias, 2017). Thereza is the exception for having a career as a journalist, walking in the opposite direction of what was expected from women at that time (Pinto, 2017).

Such exception is attributed to her living in Paris with her husband, where they were influenced by European feminist movements that were already reshaping the role of women in the society through work and educational opportunities (Azambuja, 2006; Martins-Suarez & Farias, 2017). Thereza’s husband had the same open mind about woman’s role in the society and supported his wife. Thereza was a journalist and the only woman who worked for a women’s magazine, the so-called *Angela*.

In one of the scenes, his boss asks Thereza to hire a new editor for the magazine, but Thereza was not finding a writer who met the company’s profile and did not want to hire another male colleague:

- Please, Thereza. It’s not that hard. You don’t have to be a genius to write like a woman. [. . .]
- Why do we need another man in this newsroom?
- Simple: Biology. Men are more focused, more professional, less emotional. If you were a man, for example, we wouldn’t be having this type of conversation.

The series illustrates the prejudice that Thereza faced in the workplace for being a woman, being considered inferior to her male colleagues (Azambuja, 2006), despite working for a women’s magazine. When contacted by Helô, a girl who worked as a model and who was interested in becoming a reporter, Thereza used strategies of discrimination suffered by women, who earned lower salaries compared to men, to convince her boss to hire her, because, according to the dialog above, the boss only wanted to hire men:

- This girl would cost you five times less. It is up to you.
- Yes. I don’t think it’s going to hurt to have another skirt to decorate the room (Thereza and her boss).

This way, Thereza manages to hire Helô as part of the editorial staff of the magazine. After that, in a meeting with reporters to close the next issue of the magazine, Thereza suggests an article about women who were working on the construction of Brasília in order to highlight women who were invisible at the time; however, she is one more time discriminated by the group:

- As there is still an article to complete the edition, my suggestion is to talk about these women who are working on the construction of Brasília. They are a third, a third of the workforce, and nobody says anything about them in the press. I interviewed this woman. She left Rio Grande do Norte driving a truck, seven months pregnant, to get there.

- (laughs from magazine colleagues).

- Is there a problem, Gustavo?

[...]

- It's ok. No woman is interested in that, Thereza.

- Oh, no?

- Only lesbian women will read this, guys (laughter from other colleagues).

- What do you suggest then?

- I do not know. Something related to fabric, to the new season, to trends. I don't know ... Or maybe how to be as generous as your cleavage (laughter), something like that

It is possible to notice from the excerpt above how men had power over women's affairs. They wanted to write about the women they wanted to have at home, telling them how to behave, which emphasized a family model with predefined roles and with rules related to behavior and opinion about sexuality, marriage, youth, marital happiness, moral and good customs (Bassanezi, 2004). After the above-mentioned episode, Thereza's boss interrupts the conversation and suggests that the magazine should publish an article about Brasília; however, addressing Miss Brasília. For Helô, he suggested an article about the ideal outfit to wear on a first date.

The scene shows how the two women were embarrassed by the speech and attitude of their coworkers. In another scene, after the closing time, the male coworkers arrange a happy hour and neither Thereza nor Helô are invited. It is evident how the public space was occupied by men (Bourdieu, 2010) and how the women who occupied this space suffered prejudice and were excluded.

Thereza and Helô are the portrait of women's resistance; they wanted to conquer all spaces of the society (Azambuja, 2006). Through their work in the magazine, they seek to encourage women and eliminate the idea of submission, inferiority and the ideal role that women should play in the household. Despite being criticized by the boss, they tried to publish more feminist content in the magazine, such as: *in the end, marriage is not a reward for your good behavior, even if your mother taught you that* (Helô in one of the articles).

With regard to gender relations, the series illustrates how women were in a position of inferiority and submission in relation to men, as stated by Rocha-Coutinho (1994), Almeida (2014), Frasquete and Simili (2017), Martins-Suarez and Farias (2017). Maria Luiza and Lídia represent women who were stuck to their husbands/fathers and limited to the private space of the household; they were also prevented from engaging in any remunerated activity and had to play the role of mothers and wives/daughters. For them, marriage played a major role, as Mittanck (2017) points out, and when they wanted to break from this reality, they suffered discrimination and even violence.

Regarding race relations, the series illustrates Adélia's difficulties, as she is a Black woman, poor, head of the household and single mother. Adélia had to work as a domestic worker all her life to provide for herself and her family; when she had the opportunity to ascend the social ladder, as a partner in the music club, she faced discrimination. According to Crenshaw (1991) and Proni and Gomes (2015), Black women had fewer job opportunities due to gender and race discrimination, in addition to the fact that they did not have access to a proper educational background nor professional training. Such reality relates to the legacy left by slavery in Brazil.

Regarding the relationship among social classes, the series shows that the needs of women from more privileged classes are different from the issues faced by women from lower classes, for the latter group work was placed in a more prominent position. Some scenes illustrate the dissatisfaction of the character Adélia as being a domestic worker because she could not focus only on household activities; instead, she had to worry about providing for her family. For Hooks (2000), the confinement and subordination experienced by upper class women were seen by the less privileged women as freedom.

It is worth noting that women from the lowest social classes were never excluded from work. According to Pinto (2017), working outside the home in the 1950s was accepted for women belonging to the lowest tier of the social pyramid. Survival needs made women part of the workforce. The character Adélia represents these women.

Thereza, on the other hand, represents women who had the opportunity to get an education and even live outside Brazil, being influenced by feminist thoughts that criticized the traditional and patriarchal roles imposed on women by the society. Thereza worked as journalist in a predominantly male environment, as approached by Proni and Gomes (2015), in which she was discriminated daily in the workplace for being a woman.

Plate 1 shows the spaces occupied by the four women represented in the TV series *Most Beautiful Thing*. The image shows Thereza at her workplace (top left image), the only woman in the newsroom (before she managed to hire Helô) surrounded by male colleagues. Lígia appears being photographed for her husband's electoral campaign (bottom left image), trying to put aside the dream of being a singer and pass on the image of a "family woman", the wife of a politician. Malu is illustrated during her arrival in a new city—Rio de Janeiro—(top right image), dealing with her husband's abandonment and fighting for the right to work in the music club. And Adélia (bottom right image), who had a different lifestyle in comparison with



Source(s): *Most Beautiful Thing*. 2019. Screenshot by authors

Plate 1.  
Women in the series  
*Most Beautiful Thing*

the other women of the series, had to work her whole life in order to survive and provide for her family.

The series takes place in the late 1950s but brings up issues that are recurrent up to now. Today, it is possible to perceive women's advances with regard to the access to the labor market and access to education (Bruschini & Puppini, 2004; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2018), as well as access to civil rights, considering that the 1988 Federal Constitution of Brazil established equal rights and obligations between men and women. Despite these advances, women today still face inequalities and discrimination due to the accumulated historical legacy of slavery and to the civil incapacity attributed to them (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2018).

The labor market is one of the spaces in which these inequalities are still present. Women receive lower salaries, fail to reach to management positions and, when they do, they experience discrimination. Women are still the minority in power-related environments and are still generally the ones responsible for household activities and caring for the family (Bruschini & Puppini, 2004; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2018).

## 6. Final considerations

This article aimed to present the aspects related to the life and work of women in the 1950s considering advances and setbacks in the society through the analysis of the first season of the TV series *Most Beautiful Thing*.

We noticed that women's struggles are different. While Black and poor women were fighting for survival and dignity, already inserted in the unskilled labor market, White women were fighting for the right to engage in remunerated activities, while trying to detach themselves from their defined roles as mother and wife. This difference is highlighted by the distinct identities reflected in the way women are defined in relation to social class, race and culture. However, a common difficulty for all female protagonists presented in the series is historical invisibility; that is, the nonrecognition of the presence of women at work and in public life in general.

The analysis presented focuses on labor market issues, bringing the challenges faced by Maria Luiza, Lígia and Thereza, White and upper class women who decided to abandon the traditional roles of women and face public life in Brazil in the 1950s experiencing discrimination. It also brings the story of Adélia, a Black and poor woman, and the prejudices and challenges experienced by her, who had worked since she was a child and had the opportunity to improve her own life. The series illustrate how these women faced male domination and fought for their entry in public life.

Furthermore, by bringing the story of different women, the case analyzed uses fiction to recall realities from a recent past and reinforces the criticism about the lack of progress in several aspects that still constitute challenges for women today. Themes such as marriage, motherhood, prejudice and discrimination, marital oppression, marital violence, separation, abortion, reproductive rights, the labor market and barriers to achieve career advancement are issues that have not been separated from the cultural roots that define the social role of women and men. Women still have a long way to fight for social protagonism.

It is possible to indicate herein an analysis around the maintenance of women's subordination in relation to jobs that socially approve them. Such a situation is represented in the series, in which it is possible to perceive that the society accepts that domestic or less prestigious works can be performed by women, especially those that are Black and belong to lower social classes; the most qualified jobs were intended only for young men. This reality is still recurrent today as women still have difficulties to occupy more prominent job positions and to be involved in decision-making processes in organizations, as well as in politics.

In order to modify this reality, this article highlights how the feminist movements, exemplified by the intersectional feminist movement and the Black feminist movement, play an important role in the struggle and resistance of women before these inequalities and discrimination.

The film analysis presented in this article contributes to research in management, since the perception generated by the analysis reflects that after 70 years of the story time we verified how issues related to women's social roles and work are still frequent and harm both White and Black women, considering that the managerial sphere is still considered a space for men.

The main contribution of this article is the use of a filming product that portrays the 1950s, but bringing current discussions on the role of women in the society, especially regarding the labor market, the patriarchal domination of men, prejudice, racial and class discrimination. The series shows how education and job opportunities are fundamental for women to detach themselves from the stereotypes and invisible space that have been historically reserved for them. These opportunities can provide a socially and financially independence for women.

In addition, this article contributes to the discussion of the analytical categories of gender, class and race in organizational studies. According to [Mesquita, Teixeira & Silva \(2020\)](#), these categories have been overlooked in studies in the area of administration. Gender, race and class studies are important for the administration area, and require research in diversity management and organizational studies in order to solve the challenges and discrimination experienced by women in the labor market.

The issues addressed in the series *Most Beautiful Thing* expose the main issues faced by women in the 1950s; however, they can easily motivate discussions about the challenges of women today. As a limitation, there are few studies that address the theme of White and Black women during the period reported in the series.

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