

Invisible work: the undervalued cleaning sector in Portugal, in the work of Rita Carvalho

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Abstract

As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza (2022) (The invisible: Stories behind the cleaning sector), by Rita Carvalho is a book that uncovers the invisible and undervalued cleaning profession in Portugal. A collection of true personal narratives, reveal the struggles and aspirations of cleaning women, who are predominantly immigrant and black. Using a combination of literary techniques, the journalist immerses to denounce injustices and inequalities, critique the social system, and empathetically engage readers with these marginalized subjects. This article approaches the book as a piece of literary journalism, employing a qualitative, interpretive method based on close reading and textual analysis of Carvalho's narrative strategies. The analysis is framed by literary journalism studies (Sims 1984; Alexander and McDonald 2010), which stress immersion and truth-telling; by the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Collins and Bilge 2016), which elucidates the interplay of gender, race, class, and immigrant status; and by perspectives on social justice journalism (Hackett and Carroll 2006), which highlight the role of journalism in exposing systemic inequality. This article places this book on the shelves of literary journalism for its intersection with social justice, its presentation of literary journalism as a form of social critique, and its connection with the concept of intersectionality and multiple oppressions.

Keywords: Rita Carvalho, literary journalism, social justice, intersectionality, cleaning women, immigrants.

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Resumo

As Invisíveis: Histórias sobre o Trabalho de Limpeza (2022), de Rita Carvalho, é uma obra que revela a realidade invisibilizada e desvalorizada da profissão de limpeza em Portugal. Através de um conjunto de narrativas verídicas e de carácter pessoal, a autora dá voz às vivências, dificuldades e aspirações de mulheres que trabalham na limpeza, maioritariamente imigrantes e negras. Recorrendo a uma combinação de técnicas literárias, a jornalista desenvolve um trabalho de imersão que denuncia injustiças e desigualdades, questiona o sistema social e promove um envolvimento empático dos leitores com estes sujeitos marginalizados.

Este artigo aborda a obra como um exemplo de jornalismo literário, adotando uma metodologia qualitativa e interpretativa assente na leitura atenta e na análise textual das estratégias narrativas utilizadas por Carvalho. A análise enquadra-se nos estudos do jornalismo literário (Sims 1984; Alexander e McDonald 2010), que enfatizam a imersão e o compromisso com a verdade; no conceito de interseccionalidade (Crenshaw 1989; Collins e Bilge 2016), que permite compreender a articulação entre género, raça, classe social e condição migrante; e nas perspetivas do jornalismo para a justiça social (Hackett e Carroll 2006), que salientam o papel do jornalismo na exposição das desigualdades estruturais.

Defende-se que esta obra ocupa um lugar relevante no campo do jornalismo literário devido à sua articulação com a justiça social, à apresentação do jornalismo literário como instrumento de crítica social e à sua ligação ao conceito de interseccionalidade e às múltiplas formas de opressão.

Palavras-chave: Rita Carvalho, jornalismo literário, justiça social, interseccionalidade, mulheres da limpeza, imigrantes.

Ubiquitously (in)visible

As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza (2022) (The invisible: Stories behind the cleaning sector), a book by Rita Carvalho, discloses the truth behind the undervalued cleaning sector in Portugal. The author immerses in giving these undignified, voiceless, and invisible professionals, a platform to share their struggles and aspirations: "The nights spent on the *Carris* buses, in Lisbon, and the conversations with those who wake up at three or four in the morning to go to work, have made it clear that this work is neither known nor recognised" (12). The Portuguese journalist narrates true, personal stories of cleaners and denounces the physical and emotional challenges, injustices, and inequalities endured. Though the challenging off-the-clock work of these professionals is indispensable to society, they receive very low wages and have precarious working conditions.

Furthermore, they are recurrent victims of racism and discrimination. During the 2020 lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, these cleaners became vital, as did doctors, nurses, and other professionals in all healthcare facilities. As infected cases rose dramatically, they became more exposed to contamination than the ordinary citizen. At the time, cleaners' work was noticed for its immense value; however, cleaning continues to be a job that lacks respect and work conditions in Portuguese society. Carvalho denounces and critiques the Portuguese social system that keeps these workers discriminated, marginalized, and invisible. The author defends the need for more respectful, valued, and dignified working conditions for these true unsung heroes.

Carvalho resorts to several of the features found in literary journalism to disclose the covert aspects of this undignified industry: thorough research, close observation, interview technique, and contextual analysis. Literary techniques bring to light and the public eye the experiences of cleaning workers in Portugal, resulting in a deeper understanding of their realities. This vivid portrayal of these professionals allows the reader to empathize with their plights, successes, and ambitions. The complexities of their daily lives are disclosed and questioned by the author employing the first-person voice. They mirror the broader social and economic structures that contribute to cleaners' marginalization. By denouncing and opposing these truths, the author gives voice and, more importantly, visibility to these subjects.

The book *As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza* arises from "a work of reportage about women who clean, about the difficulties they face to pay the bills at the end of the month and put food on the table every day, and about the lasting prejudice" (12). *The invisible*, the title of the book is quite significant. The author chooses to use "the", which in Portuguese is the definite feminine plural article, to highlight that the invisible cleaners are mostly women, whom she encountered and whom she is going to write about. It evinces that this unknown or ignored reality regards predominantly women, as the author emphasises: "In Portugal, cleaning is for the feminine gender" (14). The majority of the women Carvalho interviews are immigrants of African origin. They share their gender, race, job, and social class. According to Peixoto et al. (2006), most women from Portuguese-speaking African countries wind up in low-skilled occupations when they immigrate to Portugal. According to *Revista do Observatório da Imigração* (2013), 55 % of immigrant mothers work as cleaning professionals. The European Agency for Fundamental Rights reveals that the African or African descendant population living in Portugal is the poorest, with 38% struggling to pay the bills. Women face unique challenges in terms of gender inequality, including wage disparities and occupational segregation. The most recent document for this professional occupation, the *2010 Portuguese Classification of Occupations* (National

Statistics Institute, INE 2011) rates cleaning workers as “unskilled workers”. Pereira (2013) identifies the underlying reasons for the racial segregation observed in this sector as: the inadequate training or low qualifications of African women; the scarcity of opportunities; and the general disinterest for these jobs among Portuguese women. The book *As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza* begs the question: Is this the only possible means of integration for African women in Portuguese society?

Over several months, Carvalho observed and interviewed cleaners in various settings, including hospitals, banks, hotels, offices, industries, chemists, newspapers, and the Parliament, and discovered a cluster of overlooked and underappreciated cleaning professionals. This prejudiced and preconceived attitude is presented in the first-person plural, indicating collective responsibility, and an inclusive, non-judgmental attitude: “We look at cleaning ladies as a class residing at the bottom of the pyramid, not at the persons who clean, each one individually” (11). Carvalho encountered undervalued cleaners who tirelessly work behind the scenes to ensure clean and functional spaces for all other citizens. Their personal stories reveal everyday physical and emotional challenges, hardships, and unfair working situations, and her narrative amplifies their unheard or silenced voices: “Besides not having a vest, she doesn’t get paid on Sundays and holidays. She gets a day off when it so happens, and also when it suits her, but she doesn’t take double time off nor is she paid for work on days considered for rest” (75).

The journalist denounces the labour-intensive nature of cleaning and advocates for fairer and more dignified working conditions. She challenges societal perceptions of cleaning work and reflects on broader social implications. The author refutes the social system that keeps these women invisible and relegated to the peripheries, emphasizing the need for valorisation and respect. Humanizing these individuals encourages and inspires the reader to reassess the value placed on this essential work, prompting a deeper understanding and appreciation for the human beings who perform it.

The book under scrutiny here is proposed as a piece of literary journalism as it intersects with issues of social justice. According to Alexander and McDonald (2022, 2-3), literary journalists “can return agency to the oppressed, while encouraging social action on their behalf”.

Methodological and theoretical framework

This article combines a qualitative methodological approach with a theoretical foundation grounded in literary journalism, intersectionality, and social justice journalism. The aim is to position *As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza* within the field of

literary journalism, analysing how it gives voice and visibility to marginalized women, and to discuss the broader socio-political implications of this narrative. Methodologically, the analysis is based on a close reading of the text, focusing on narrative techniques, use of literary devices, and thematic content. Following the perspective of Norman Sims (1995, 4), literary journalism is characterised by “immersion reporting, structure, accuracy, voice, and responsibility”. Rita Carvalho’s immersive observation of cleaners in multiple contexts (hospitals, banks, hotels, public transport) and her use of first-person voice and dialogue illustrate these features. The analysis also examines how Carvalho’s narrative strategies humanise the subjects and challenge dominant discourses that render cleaning workers invisible. The theoretical dimension draws on three key axes:

1. **Literary Journalism as a form of social critique:** According to Alexander and McDonald (2022, 2), “literary journalists have consistently been motivated by an appetite for truth-telling and a desire to address inequality and its consequences”. Carvalho’s work aligns with this mission: she denounces structural injustices and narrates lived experiences that are typically silenced in mainstream media. Sims (1995, 4) further argues that literary journalism “brings readers closer to the people and places it portrays by making use of literary devices”, a method clearly seen in Carvalho’s personal, emotionally engaging portraits of cleaners.
2. **Intersectionality and multiple oppressions:** The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), helps explain the simultaneous effects of race, gender, class, and immigrant status on cleaners’ lives. As Crenshaw notes, “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (1991, 1244). Carvalho’s narrative echoes this when she writes: “No woman is born a cleaner, but many are born with one or more social advantages which allow them to choose other paths, structurally better accepted and seen with better eyes” (14). This approach also dialogues with Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016, 2), who state: “Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life”.
3. **Social justice journalism:** The analysis adopts a perspective informed by social justice journalism, which seeks to question systemic inequalities and highlight voices from the margins. According to Hackett and Carroll (2006, 5), social justice journalism is “concerned with stories about the structural bases of inequality and injustice,

as opposed to individual failures or misfortunes". Carvalho exemplifies this when she challenges the reader: "Whoever is reading this book may ask a simple question: how many cleaning ladies have you seen today?" (11) — prompting reflection on collective responsibility and social blindness.

By integrating these theoretical lenses, this article shows how *As Invisíveis Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza* functions as an act of narrative resistance and documentation, offering a vivid, humanising counter-discourse to the silence that surrounds cleaning work in Portugal. This article aims to position the book as a piece of literary journalism, and to delineate the distinguishing features of Carvalho's approach to literary journalism and its departure from conventional reporting. It elucidates how her storytelling technique contributes to a deeper and more informed understanding of cleaning work, discrimination, and invisibility issues. The underlying question concerns how her narrative techniques depict the struggles faced by marginalized African immigrant women seeking a dignified job and life in Portugal.

The study's methodology is qualitative, with an emphasis on textual analysis and interpretation. It primarily involves examining narrative techniques, storytelling methods, and literary resources. This analysis includes reviewing excerpts from Carvalho's work to identify themes, stylistic features, and narrative strategies used. Critical analysis is applied to interpret Carvalho's work, exploring the social, cultural, and political implications of her storytelling choices. It also considers Carvalho's depiction of marginalized communities and assesses how effectively her narrative journalism challenges societal norms and fosters empathy among readers. The study utilizes theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Bak, Reynolds, and Hartsock to analyze Carvalho's approach and its importance in journalism practice.

Giving voice and visibility

In the United States, the 1960s and 1970s marked the emergence of a new form of journalism, later called Literary Journalism. Pioneering writers such as Gay Talese, Truman Capote, and Norman Mailer began incorporating narrative elements and literary techniques into their journalistic work, telling stories of ordinary people. In 1973, Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson published a collection of essays titled *The New Journalism*, which provided the theoretical basis that "paved the way for a new, less conservative, more creative and narrative form of journalism" (Amorim and Baltazar 2021, 38). Although literary journalism has been described as a discipline, a phenomenon, a style, or a form, it is now

recognized as an independent genre with distinct features and practices. Several scholars have contributed to its characterization. Tom Wolfe identified four key features of the new genre: scene-by-scene construction, dialogue transcription, third-person verb usage, and meticulous attention to detail. Norman Sims added in 1984 the concepts of immersive reporting, factual accuracy, authorial voice, symbolic representation, and authorial responsibility. Connery (1992) states that literary journalism differs from traditional journalism mainly through its immersion, structure, precision, voice, responsibility, and symbolism. According to Bak and Reynolds (2001), literary journalism is nonfiction narrative journalism or factual reporting that uses stylistic and narrative techniques. Hartsock (2016) also notes that the genre employs detailed descriptions and constructs narratives with scenic qualities. Pedro Rosa Mendes, as highlighted by Coutinho (2022, 276), describes “Literary reportage as an engagement with reality with a novelist’s eye but with a journalist’s discipline”. According to Coutinho (2022), there is a close and intrinsic relationship between journalism and literature, although some literary works focus on reporting the present, certain reports read almost like authentic literary works thanks to narratives that go beyond conventional journalistic techniques. The author emphasizes that literary journalism is created by journalists but often incorporates techniques typically associated with literature.

Literary journalism heightens awareness of socio-political issues faced by marginalized and disadvantaged people in society (Bak 2011). Its humanitarian foundation—focused on real subjects and relevant social concerns—emphasizes a research approach rooted in careful investigation, real-life stories, immersion, and first-person perspective. Together, these elements create a sense of personal involvement, engagement, and humanize the author, making literary journalism a powerful and transformative form of communication. According to Hartsock (2016, 2000), empathy stems from a deep understanding of social problems, storytelling, and the use of the senses and perspective. Literary journalism encourages a deeper understanding of social (in)justice issues to foster empathy and self-reflection.

Literary journalism is not, as some suggest, just an English-speaking phenomenon, nor is it limited to any particular country or region. It crosses borders and adapts to the social, political, and cultural contexts of each nation, often known by different names. In Portugal, journalists like Eça de Queirós, Ramalho Ortigão, Oliveira Martins, Jaime Batalha Reis, and Fialho de Almeida, influenced by 19th-century English publications such as *The Pall Mall Gazette*, are seen as pioneers of literary journalism. Portuguese contemporary literary journalists include Isabel Nery, Susana Moreira Marques, Raquel Ochoa, Pedro Coelho, Alexandra Lucas Coelho, José Luís Peixoto, Miguel Esteves Cardoso, Miguel Sousa Tavares,

Catarina Frois, and Ana Cristina Pereira. As journalists and writers, their work often shines a light on marginalized, discriminated against, hidden, or forgotten subjects at the edges or peripheries, using formats like *crónica*, reportage, articles, and books. Plus, Portugal has a growing academic community studying literary journalism, with research published in national and international outlets such as Springer, Palgrave Macmillan, and Routledge. The special issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* (Volume 12, Number 1), published in August 2020 and titled “Lusophone Literary Journalism”, features Portuguese-speaking researchers dedicated solely to Portuguese-speaking literary journalism. Each year, an increasing number of researchers from Portuguese-speaking countries share their work at the IALJS (International Association of Literary Journalism Studies) annual conference. Two Portuguese scholars, Alice Trindade and Isabel Soares, are among its founding members. According to Coutinho (2023), the Foundation Francisco Manuel dos Santos is one of the few publishers in Portugal that consistently supports young journalists through a book collection called *Retratos* (Portraits): “Retratos may represent an opportunity to give voice to a new generation of journalists. This collection can also be a way to broaden the horizon on different subjects concerning Portugal and, to this point, reach a different and perhaps wider public because of it” (Coutinho 2023, 120). On the first page of each book, it states that the Foundation’s Portraits collection offers readers an up-close look at the country’s reality. Portugal as told and experienced, narrated by those who saw it—and see it—up close. Rita Carvalho’s *As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza*, discussed in this article, is published in *Retratos* because it depicts real-life events and people in Portugal, using narrative techniques and blending journalism with literature.

While the city sleeps

Rita Pereira Carvalho is a Portuguese journalist who has worked since 2018 as a reporter for well-known Portuguese newspapers, as *Jornal I*, *Semanário Sol*, and *Expresso*. Currently, she writes for *Sábado*, and for *Observador*. She covers national and international news on different issues, including those related to social justice. *As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza* is Carvalho’s first non-fiction book, focusing on the relegated surviving on the margins or peripheries of society, and out of the media spotlight: “Some people are socially invisible, there is a barrier responsible for the separation of people and social classes” (11). To write this narrative, Carvalho followed and interviewed thirteen female and one male cleaners, on buses, at bus stops, and in their homes. Her implicit subjectivity shows the reader how the story was obtained. She shadowed these (in)visible workers during their commute in public transport between the outskirts of Lisbon, where they live,

and the city centre, where they work. They travel at the earliest hours of the day, four or five a.m., when the city is still asleep. One of the interviewees, *Ana Isabel*, experiences and expresses the same invisibility encountered by the author: "You feel that when you are in the cleaning profession, you become invisible to others" (42). It is this deep-felt, discriminating, and almost ghostly existence that *Ana Isabel* finds hard to embrace. Some people do not notice her, and others pretend she is not there. Some do not greet her, and others react as though her job were shameful. In the last chapter, *Ismario*, the male interviewee, confirms this women-targeted discrimination: "It's traditional, as a man I have never felt discriminated against and I think it is more toward women" (82).

Portugal has forty thousand cleaning workers who wake up, travel, and work while the city is still dark. During their daily shifts, they encounter dozens of people, yet they go unnoticed. They know each other from their neighbourhoods, buses, or bus stops. Most are women, Black immigrants, who hold two jobs to survive and have children in their care. Each chapter of the book focuses on a different group of female cleaners: the Black, the immigrant, the mothers, the lonely, the young, the old, those who won't stay at home, those who fight back, and those from the inland. They reveal their identities and readily share their stories and perceptions, with Rita Carvalho, the engaged, empathetic listening journalist.

Whether at bus stops or on buses, the silence these women carry through dawn is transversal, a silence only broken by the offer to talk about their lives or what they do. They are not afraid; they are the "cleaning madams" nobody sees. (13)

Carvalho's writing is subjective, transporting the reader to the writer's milieu, in what Hartsock has called "writing subjectivity". Storytelling takes the reader to meet one male protagonist, Ismaio, and thirteen female cleaners—Ana Isabel, Isaura, Carol, Elissangela, Vanessa, Ana, Madalena, Paula Pires, Feliciano Afonso, Amélia da Cruz, Francisca, Betina, Susana (the only pseudonym). These protagonists, "women of all colors and ages," (14) are not isolated cases, as the author clarifies: "Elissangela is not the only black woman, neither in cleaning, nor in the pages of this book. And discrimination is not circumscribed to this woman" (21).

According to Hooks (1981), Black women are doubly exposed to various forms of violence, discrimination, and racism. When the cleaning sector is mentioned, race is also involved. Elissangela, a thirty-three-year-old Cape Verdean who works twelve and a half hours a day, describes her life as 'sacrifice'. She faces racism and discrimination for being Black and for her work as a cleaner: "I didn't ask to be black, I was born black," (20) and

emphasizes: “People think cleaners are worthless and don’t value them, but all jobs deserve respect” (20). Elissangela will not tolerate abuse, but many others endure discrimination out of desperate need for a job and income, as Carvalho highlights: “Moral harassment exists, and so does verbal violence” (15). Women’s complaints at the STAD Union reveal their status as victims. According to the Union’s representative, Vivalda, cleaning supervisors believe “to be in charge and run the sector means to carry a whip” (16). Cleaners experience widespread disrespect, as noted by Carvalho.

The episodes of racism and discrimination for being ‘the cleaning lady’ cannot be counted on the fingers of one hand. Or it would take many hands to count them. Besides physical and verbal violence, racism is felt through a look, a distinct look that crushes you. (19)

According to Elissangela, the absence of a diploma or certificate highlights discrimination: “Racism exists, some people believe cleaners have no qualifications and are worthless” (20). Creole is used as the main way of communicating among cleaners who share similar backgrounds, experiences, and cultural heritage, either because of linguistic preference or to make interaction easier among colleagues who do not speak Portuguese. It serves as a way to endure and fight against colour or race discrimination, foster solidarity or community-building, and is thus an aspect of social dynamics in the workplace.

With an appetite for social justice

“This book exists because prejudice exists.” (11)

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the term “intersectionality” to highlight the legal neglect of multiple forms of oppression, especially the rights violations faced by Black women. In her analysis, the author observed how the prevalent single-axis approach, which treated race, gender, and class as separate categories, perpetuated the marginalization experienced by individuals (Crenshaw 1989). This approach not only influenced laws against racial discrimination but also shaped feminist and anti-racist theories. Collins and Bilge (2016) argue that intersectionality provides a framework for understanding and examining the complex nature of the world by considering individuals and their experiences. They assert that multiple interconnected factors shape social and political events and circumstances. Regarding social inequality and the distribution of power in society, various identity markers such as gender, race/ethnicity, and class, among others, contribute to social divisions. The concept of intersectionality serves as an analytical tool to

understand how different combinations of identities affect access to rights and opportunities (Women's Rights and Economic Change 2004). Carvalho criticizes and disapproves of the shameful and contemptuous looks directed at female cleaners by those sitting at desks in offices: "No woman is born a cleaning woman, but many are born with one or more social advantages that allow them to choose other, more accepted, and better-regarded paths" (12).

In the desire to expose and denounce, and in a critical attitude similar to that of literary journalists, Carvalho highlights "a difference at the starting point" for many black women. According to the author, this alone explains why so many end up in the cleaning sector and are vulnerable to inequality: "A sort of destiny for being born in a neighbourhood where more than half the women have cleaning jobs" (44). Vanessa's story begins in a social neighbourhood where women's opportunities do not go beyond a cleaning job. This job was a kind of 'inheritance' from her mother, who was also a cleaner. Vanessa became a cleaner herself because she lacked qualifications. She does not want the same destiny for her daughter. Those arriving in Portugal without papers or with temporary documents have very limited chances of finding employment outside the cleaning or catering industries. To obtain a work contract and become legal, as Carvalho mentions, immigrants accept lower salaries and "see their rights shrink, shrink, shrink" (23). According to Vanessa, when women become cleaners, they view their job as "temporary, a transitory period, and not a long-term solution. Nobody wants this job forever, or for many years" (23).

Alexander and McDonald (2022, 2) describe literary journalists as "have consistently been motivated by an appetite for truth-telling and a desire to address inequality and its consequences. Carvalho became aware of the discrimination and mistreatment that permeated the cleaning sector, worsening social inequality and the power distribution in Portuguese society. Immigrant workers, in particular, face additional challenges due to their status, including language barriers, exploitation, and fear of reporting abuses, which can lead to retaliation or deportation. This often leaves them vulnerable, susceptible to unfair treatment, and without the legal protections they deserve. Besides these difficulties, the cleaning sector suffers from a lack of recognition and respect. The invisibility of this work can lead to devaluation of the job itself and a disregard for the valuable and essential contributions made by cleaning workers.

As Invisíveis: Histórias sobre o Trabalho de Limpeza is regarded as a piece of literary journalism because it explores real-life stories in a narrative and immersive manner. Carvalho uses literary techniques to vividly portray the experiences of cleaning workers, providing a deeper understanding of their realities. She employs storytelling to create a vivid depiction of these women, fostering empathy and connection with their feelings and

emotions. As a literary journalist, she goes beyond simply reporting facts and statistics. Instead, she explores personal narratives to give a platform for these workers' voices, allowing their stories to be heard, told, and preserved, as "news that lasts" (Kerrane 1997). This approach adds emotional depth and humanizes the subjects, helping to break down the barriers of invisibility and prejudice often associated with this profession. The journalist uncovers the harsh realities of the cleaning industry through interviews, close observation, and contextual analysis. Irony, a common feature of literary journalism, is evident in Carvalho's narrative, revealing the social stigma faced by these workers: "While the Members of Parliament were preparing to discuss, for example, whether the 25th of April Revolutions should be celebrated with 130 people [...] the sound of trolleys full of toilet paper could be heard in the corridors, as cleaners ensured the deputies had all the necessary conditions in the restrooms" (11). Sarcasm is also present: "And they continue to endure lack of respect, racism, and xenophobia from people whose adjectives have no place in this book" (45). Carvalho's literary style uncovers the complexities of cleaners' experiences and the larger social and economic structures that contribute to their marginalization. The book calls for a discussion about systemic change and advocates for fairer working conditions, ultimately working toward a more inclusive and equitable society. It encourages reflection on broader issues such as economic inequality, gender discrimination, and social stigmas, which contribute to the invisibility of these workers. Additionally, Carvalho encourages empathy and awareness among readers: "Whoever is reading this book may ask yourself a simple question; how many cleaning ladies have you seen today? for most of you, the answer is 'none'. However, you must have seen at least one" (11). The author critiques the lack of appreciation for the "unsung heroes of the common good" (Amorim and Baltazar 2020, 71), who work at the bottom of the labor ladder and do jobs nobody else wants to do.

The invisibility faced by cleaning women comes from several factors. First, cleaning work is traditionally linked to women and often tied to gender stereotypes and expectations. Second, the physical aspects of the job often involve handling dirty or unpleasant tasks, which are frequently seen as menial or unimportant, reinforcing a labor hierarchy where cleaning jobs are viewed as less valuable and thus invisible. Lastly, these workers often come from marginalized communities, experiencing economic hardships and limited access to resources and opportunities as Carvalho states: "In most schools, for example, the only time we see black women is when the cleaning women enter" (12). According to Carvalho, one of the primary difficulties encountered in the cleaning sector is the prevalence of low wages, precarious jobs, and economic insecurity:

Cleaning workers have always existed, though they have not always claimed their rights. Overdue payments and other illegal work practices also occur with these workers and since they are low-paid, and most of them receive little more than the minimum wage, when payment is late for a day or two, the family budget is strongly affected. (57)

Many cleaning workers, especially those in low-skilled jobs, face inadequate pay that keeps them in a cycle of poverty and makes it hard for them to escape financial hardships or build a secure future for themselves and their families. Additionally, the physical demands of the cleaning profession should not be underestimated. Whether scrubbing floors, lifting heavy equipment, or doing repetitive tasks for long hours, cleaning workers often endure tough working conditions that can cause fatigue, injuries, and long-term health issues. Ismario describes the burden of this endless, repetitive routine: “In the cleaning profession, there is always someone who makes a mess during the day, and someone else who has to clean it during the night” (82). Despite their vital role in maintaining clean, healthy environments for others, these individuals may lack access to proper healthcare and sanitary conditions. This highlights their vulnerability and lack of proper support. Carvalho explores Portuguese society, its reality, and daily life, “capturing as closely as possible in words the miseries endured by the lower classes” (Soares 2011, 129), a technique often used in literary journalism, as Soares explains.

Concluding remarks

This analysis was conducted using a qualitative, interpretive, and inductive approach, relying on close reading and textual analysis of Carvalho’s *As Invisíveis*. Drawing from the field of literary journalism, understood as immersion reporting, structure, accuracy, voice, and responsibility (Sims 1984), the study emphasizes how Carvalho’s immersive observation and storytelling humanize cleaning women and challenge their social invisibility. The framework integrates three main axes: literary journalism as social critique (Alexander and McDonald 2010), which positions the work as a critique of inequality; intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Collins and Bilge 2016), which highlights the interactions of race, gender, class, and immigrant status in shaping cleaners’ experiences; and social justice journalism (Hackett and Carroll 2006), which focuses on exposing structural inequalities and amplifying marginalized voices. From this perspective, Carvalho’s book appears as a piece of literary journalism that functions both as reportage and as narrative resistance, fostering empathy, visibility, and a deeper understanding of the lives of immigrant cleaning women in Portugal.

As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza raises awareness of the living and working conditions of women in the cleaning sector, advocating for their rights and well-being, and contributing to the pursuit of social justice. Carvalho provides an intimate look at the personal, professional, and social struggles that cleaners endure and gives visibility to one of the most invisible jobs in our society. Addressing the invisibility of women who clean requires a collective effort. It challenges societal norms. It involves recognizing and acknowledging cleaners' essential contributions to society and valuing their work for the functioning of communities. It entails promoting fairer and more dignified working conditions, providing equitable pay, and ensuring opportunities for professional growth and development. It is crucial to actively challenge stereotypes, promote inclusivity, and advocate for the rights and well-being of cleaning professionals. The book broadens understanding of greater social justice for these marginalized workers. Carvalho critically addresses controversial issues (Soares), raising awareness of injustice, precarious conditions, and social inequalities, exposing and denouncing them to promote more equality and fairness. Immigrant cleaning work remains a social stigma, and a culture of respect must be fostered to counteract invisibility. As a piece of literary journalism, this book intersects with social justice and "pushes boundaries: those of the journalist, those of the research, those of the topic the journalist wishes to illuminate and bring to the public attention" (Soares, Amorim and Batazar 2022, 261). Carvalho combines rigorous reporting and complex reader engagement; what Alexander and McDonald (2022, 3) define as the "fusion of fact and feeling [...] makes literary journalism a uniquely compelling force for social change". Carvalho's immersive presence and openness to others allow for an intimate understanding and deep engagement with her subjects. She becomes the eyewitness participant who seeks to shape reality for the reader. Furthermore, as is common among literary journalists, Carvalho "can return agency to the oppressed, while encouraging action on their behalf" (Alexander and McDonald 2022, 6). Sue Joseph (2022, 99) note that "marginalized, oppressed groups, inherently must fight to be heard" and the author of *As Invisíveis, Histórias sobre o trabalho de limpeza* addresses social and human invisibility, narrating stories of marginalization, silences, and forgotten voices. The author encourages empathy for her subjects and fosters a change in mentalities and attitudes. Carvalho is the literary journalist who "acts as witness, aiming for amelioration, restitution and social justice" (*ibidem*) for these women. By bringing the issue into the public light, the writer becomes a denouncer, engaging the reader as a collaborator. A personal and critical narrative is presented here as a means to illuminate and make visible the reality of underprivileged others, with a possible attempt at modification and repair.

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