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Marta Sofía López

TALK BACK AND THINK BEYOND:
THE RECEPTION OF AFRICAN LITERATURES
IN PORTUGAL AND THE SELF-DEFINITION
OF POSTCOLONIAL NATIONS
THROUGH LITERATURE

JOANA PASSOS

Contrary to what has been happening in many European contexts, the communities of African immigrants in Portugal have not yet produced any literary account of their experience. There are some texts that have been presented to some publishing houses, namely Caminho, which has published most of the established African writers. The problem so far has been the sheer lack of literary quality in immigrants' texts, though they are not short of reading appeal in terms of content. I talked to the heads of several publishing houses and according to their statements, alternatives to work the text have been put forward, but these tentative authors have not accepted any sort of partnership to (re)write their texts. At this moment, the situation is at a dead end. Maybe some second generation authors will come forward, with a better access to education. When the time comes, another factor helping to pave the way for these voices is the current consolidation of the recognition of African literatures in Portugal either in institutional contexts, or informally, among the reading public. It is this process of creating a public and a *muscled* set of critical writing supporting the value and interest of these literatures which this paper surveys in the context of the Portuguese academic debate.

In the last couple of decades, the growing visibility of world literatures (be it in translation or in any of the languages that were appropriated through the long historical process of European colonialism) has (and is) an undeniable fact in the western world. You can consider sale rates, the frequency of reviews, the willingness of editors and publishers to consider the publication of postcolonial writers, or even the presence of world literatures in academic curricular plans. I am going to consider this last

factor to frame the terms of the increasing recognition of African literatures in Portuguese, in Portugal.

I use the expression “world literatures” and “postcolonial literatures” interchangeably. Although the first one is becoming more established, I do not want to give up on the theoretical frame invoked by the second: postcolonial literatures are modern and postmodern, written literatures, that emerged, beyond isolated cases, as a consolidating national literature at the time of independence struggles. Afterwards, in the post-independence stage, postcolonial literatures have had a very important role in terms of social analysis, denouncing current crisis and tensions on a given situated context. Part of the impact of postcolonial literatures, which I see as committed literatures, comes from their ability to suggest alternative projects, or solutions to confront problematic socio-political issues. This critical dimension of postcolonial literatures and their search for solutions are important for both local and international audiences.

Locally, readers become more aware of the problems faced by their societies, and they also acquire the terms to think their personal situation in terms of citizenship in a specific society, going through certain political and historical convulsions. Eventually, as Franz Fanon¹ repeatedly claimed, a national literature is the best means to create a collective memory and allegiance to national identity. In the current transitional stage lived by many post-independence societies, literature has no small role in opening perspectives to assign a particular society its own place in the global order, or develop the terms to think a balance between the different communities and groups living inside one shared national space.

At the same time, the European reception of post-colonial literatures (as they have been labelled among the critics in the western world) is a powerful means to consolidate and promote abroad the cultural identity of several nations which have emerged after such a destructive experience as colonialism. The more Europeans read about African nations, the more they acknowledge their culture, the challenges they face, and ultimately, the greater the public awareness of current forms of neo-colonialism.

On the other hand, these post-colonial literatures also talk back to Europe, creating a less than flattering mirror to reflect on current political practices and on a shameful historical past of abuse. Thus, these committed postcolonial narratives are urgently needed to sober up globalising claims that disregard human rights and sense of international justice. These literatures have the power to confront Europeans with the human price of their wealth. But this power to “talk back” has to be strategically used. If we remain trapped in reversed discourses of racism, self-pity or nativism, we do not move beyond the tensions that have

divided peoples in the past. And we do have to live together, and in peace. Literature, as historical memory and privileged “window” on current problems, has a role to play in the process of creating new forms of awareness and establishing basis of co-operation.

In terms of diaspora, displaced writers are also inviting important public awareness on the role of minority communities, and the problems in the integration of these communities in a host nation that insists on its majority status to claim a unified position of authority (because the more you admit diversity and multiculturalism inside European nations, the more you have to share power).

In Portugal, the reception and reviewing of postcolonial literature is increasingly visible and important. A brief survey of the M. A. curricular plans from the main state and private universities consolidates this statement and, more recently, one may even find some courses on African literatures offered at the undergraduate level.

In fact, among the thirteen public universities in Portugal², after a general re-organization to fit the Bologna Agreement, there are several courses devoted to the study of African literatures and culture, at the undergraduate level. In Lisbon (in two of its three universities), Porto, Évora, Aveiro and Coimbra, one finds, at the Faculty of Arts, a degree on Portuguese and Lusophone Studies which include several courses on African literatures (I, II and III), as well as courses on Brazilian literature (two annual courses). The University of Minho (Braga) includes in its curricular plan courses on Postcolonial studies, African literatures (I, II and III—three semesters) and African cultures. In terms of literature, Universidade do Minho has got specific courses for each of the African literatures in Portuguese, namely, Angolan literature and culture, Cape Verde’s culture and literature, Mozambican culture and literatures.

Sometimes, the study of African cultures appears in a compound with courses on Oriental cultures with Portuguese expression (Universidade da Beira Interior and Aveiro).

There were no references to the study of African cultures or literatures at the sites of the universities of Algarve, and of the archipelagos of Açores and Madeira. At the University of Algarve there is a very clear focus on the study of oral literatures, starting from Portuguese popular traditions themselves, which may explain other curricular choices.

As I said above, the institutionalisation of subjects devoted to African Literatures and cultures started at the M. A. level, where I could find specific seminars devoted to African literatures and cultures, before they ever made their appearance at the undergraduate level. Probably, it was considered that on a higher level of specialization there was room to

include a wider variety of subjects. At this moment, the interest to study African literatures and cultures has moved to undergraduate curricular plans since these subjects have grown in importance, being recognised as an important part of the life of the Portuguese language.

I know that there are many research projects that address the status of emigrant communities in Portugal, but this line of research is not institutionalised as a specific course in any university. It is a matter to be looked up in the list of recent M.A. and PhD dissertations.

This degree of institutional recognition of African literatures in Portuguese enables me to say that a multicultural perception of literatures in Portuguese, independent from the study of Portuguese literature, is a current fact in state universities.

Among the private Portuguese universities³ the room allowed to African literatures and cultures is almost negligible. Not because African cultures or literatures may be regarded as less important or deserving in comparison to other European literatures. The matter is of another order: usually, these universities prefer to offer technical courses and they do not invest so much in literature or cultural studies. These universities are mostly interested in engineering and sciences' degrees, with an equally strong offer at the graduation level in Law and Economy. Faculties of Humanities in private Portuguese universities prepare students to work in the media world, cinema, or international relations (towards Europe). The exceptions are Universidade Católica, in Braga, which offers a degree on Portuguese and Lusophone studies, and Universidade Aberta which has an M. A. on Comparative Study of Lusophone Literatures.

This mapping of the institutionalisation of literatures in Portuguese must be situated. In the first place, I would like to discuss a change in Portuguese national self-image, which has been taking place since the 1970s. After three colonial wars (Mozambique 1964-1974, Angola 1961-1974, Guiné-Bissau 1963-1974) and the change of regime with the Carnation Revolution, in 1974, Portugal lived a complex period, looking for new basis of identity after the ending of a long colonial history.

This change in terms of national identity has to be measured in relation to the traditional self-image of Portugal.

For too long—four centuries, actually—imperial expansion had been the core of Portuguese national pride. Obviously, the sea routes and the colonies have meant an important source of profit and opportunities for Portuguese people, but they also had a paralysing effect in terms of national development. Instead of looking up to modern, new ideas springing from such lively centers as Paris or London, or even neighbouring Spain, Portugal turned its back on European influences,

consolidating its sense of independence and strength in the achievements of colonial expansion. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos⁴, Portugal is a semi-peripheral country in relation to Europe, but it could imagine itself as center in terms of its colonial network.

The longer the colonial past and the wider the economic and cultural distance from European centers, the more the Portuguese escaped diminishing comparisons through the myth of history as destiny, being Portugal destined to be the key middleman between Europe, Africa and Brazil. To reform colonial practices, looking critically at a decadent Portugal is something that either the Portuguese monarchy or the subsequent dictatorship were unwilling or unable to do. Internal rivalries replaced more realistic administrative priorities, and, as the empire did support Portuguese elites, absolutely necessary reforms were postponed. Besides, the sea adventures, with its heroic aura, did disguise another scaring reality, which is that, apart from the sea, Portugal was indeed surrounded by mighty Spain, the source of a centripetal Iberian power. The conception of a national project turned towards the sea, is also, undeniably a strategic evasion away from Spain.

According to Margarida Calafate Ribeiro⁵, the 19th century is the period of a new stage in the history of European colonialism, when modernity and capitalism created a hierarchy of imperial nations that leaves obsolete Portugal behind, in spite of its pioneer status and sense of historical legitimacy. Nineteenth century scholars like Eça de Queiroz or Antero de Quental (the so called "Geração de 70") do recognize this backwardness, but their warning words and texts are not capitalised for a renovation of Portuguese identity. Instead, Portuguese official discourses close upon legitimatising mythologies. During the majority of the twentieth century, Salazar's dictatorship and his *Estado Novo* (1928-1974) also invested in a convenient mythical projection, persecuting opposition, activating censorship and keeping a powerful propaganda machine at work. As Margarida Calafate Ribeiro rightly points out:

Throughout the nineteenth-century imperialisms, and for most of the twentieth century, Portugal was never at the centre of European movements. The same is still true today in relation to Portugal's position within the European Union. However, during the Salazar era, the *Estado Novo*'s increasing desire to isolate Portugal—especially after the beginning of the colonial war in Angola in 1961—resulted in the "imagination of the centre" assuming a more abstract and schizophrenic profile in which Portugal was simultaneously the center and the only member of the space built for itself, safe from "foreign conspiracies"⁶.

Simultaneously, the official discourse of *Estado Novo* on Africa represented the overseas colonies as an extension of Portugal, where the colonial hero—the rural landowner—moves a Portuguese family to Africa to carry on his colonial mission for the benefit of Portugal and of Africa itself, which is, thus, uplifted from its backwardness. Nevertheless, from the 1950s onwards, writers in Portugal start to deviate from the official story. They reveal the dark face of violence and abuse in Portuguese colonialism. They also expose the ignorance, meaning, the lack of a proper education in the Portuguese coloniser recruited from Portuguese villages. *Terra Morta*, (1949) by Castro Soromenho and *Natureza Morta* (1949) by José Augusto França are selected by Calafate Ribeiro as key examples of such a deviation, corresponding to the emergence of a less idealised perception of the colonial world among the Portuguese public.

Currently, Portugal wants to become more “European,” more organised and more modern. In my opinion, the recognition of the importance of African literatures in Portuguese, as seen from its increasing inclusion in curricular plans and wider consumption among the reading public, is related to this transitional stage in terms of national identity. It is a sort of national exorcism to confront one’s colonial past in order to move on to other new basis of identity. I would say that Portugal sees itself as no longer colonial, not yet European; no longer fixed in a static and castrating view of the past, and still searching for ways to embrace modernity and negotiate its relationship with other countries in a changing world order. Hence, one of the possible frames to place the reception of African literatures in Portuguese is to understand the particular context of traditional Portuguese self-images, and the mythical centrality of empire in its national identity.

The confrontation with a critical view of colonialism as seen through the eyes of the colonised is then received in Portugal with particular interest. The process of thinking through the evils, failure and violence of the colonial experience is part of the process to search for renewed self-images. Hopefully, the emerging dominant discourses that are weaving renewed national references in Portugal will underline the waste in human lives and the lack of higher ethical demands in colonial views. They should also underline the impossible sustainability of projects of capitalist exploitation that disregard the environment and other humanitarian goals, which have to be part of the picture when considering economic reforms and international investment. Literature always had a role in creating networks of public pressure, and here, once more, I claim it as extremely necessary to balance the grim perspectives of a second wave of exploitation, falling on the same mistakes. Of course this claim goes

beyond literatures in Portuguese, and assigns a role of socio-political intervention, through criticism, through philosophical reflection and through the affective impact of literary language to world literatures. Just consider to what extent current debates on citizenship, multiculturalism, feminism, refugee rights, sustainable development and the rights of emigrant communities, in fact, owe to literatures and to the influence of committed writers their hold on public opinion.

To make more concrete all the claims I have put forward above concerning the committed role of postcolonial literatures and the issues they put out, I would now like to discuss a couple of selected texts.

My interest in postcolonial literatures in Portuguese combines postcolonial theory with a feminist approach, and this double theoretical frame explains my choice of the texts to be addressed in this paper. I follow feminine voices or feminine characters because I believe women have a view of colonialism which is also framed by domestic, family life, combining public events with their domestic side-effects. It is at the private, domestic level, through the representation of individual experiences that, in my opinion, a more insightful and "territorialized" representation of history is achieved. Women were confronted with a double form of colonisation (racist and patriarchal); hence they have a richer tale to tell, starting from their personal histories that represent how it feels to live at that time in that place. I look at the narration of individual, private experiences as metaphors of wider debates and events. Thus, history, national self-definition and international relations can be tamed into a nutshell that travels across cultures making both local and international audiences more aware of the issues at stake in a given location.

I am also interested in the representation of women characters by male writers. I analyse the position and roles appointed to women and their importance in the construction of a national project.

Current African literatures in Portuguese include the national literatures of three continental countries, Angola, Mozambique and Guiné-Bissau, and two archipelagos, Cape Verde and S. Tomé e Príncipe. There are many choices for the literary critic discussing these matters. From the wealth of material available, I selected for discussion a short story by the Mozambican writer Orlando Mendes (*Boas-Vindas Mamã*, 1982) and a set of ten poems (*Exercício Poético 1 a 10*, 1998) by a woman writer from Cape Verde, Vera Duarte.

I will point out the elements of the text which are relevant for the topics I have discussed so far, integrating these two instances of postcolonial literature in the frame of a) anti-colonial/global resistance, b)

national self-consolidation through literature and c) the role of the feminine in the construction of national projects.

The text by Orlando Mendes is particularly powerful, because it addresses effectively many relevant issues, in spite of being so short. It is more complex than its readable easiness suggests. Orlando Mendes writes a short story (*Boas-Vindas Mamã*) that recreates, with amazing narrative skill, the point of view of a rural, old African woman on Portuguese colonialism. She sees it as scaring, but “natural”: she never rode a bus, and even the thought of catching it to sell her agricultural products in the nearby town causes some stress. She lost most of her family to typhoid fever, but she does not complain against the lack of health care. She just notes that “nobody came from the local health care unit, not even from the big hospital that had been built, far away to take care of sick white people” (“Do posto não viera ninguém nem do hospital que se dizia haver longe para atender brancos adoecidos.” 26). She accepts the absence of administrative organization on the basis that the life of the village is not connected to the structure of Portuguese organization. In short, she does not resist colonialism because she does not have a frame to interpret it, nor does she see any connection between her hard life and the exploitative Portuguese presence.

In the following year, after the epidemic, white colonisers appeared, the “gente de mandar” [“people that rule”], as she calls them, to carry on their administrative duties: collect taxes, take the census and take away (by force) men and women to work in the lands of white farmers. For the old woman, this is the way of the world; the way things have always been.

With this narrative, Orlando Mendes demonstrates the importance of political awareness, a form of lost innocence, as the necessary condition to foster resistance. At the same time, it denounces the multiple forms of extreme abuse carried out under colonialism, underlining the lack of any effective concern for the local population. When the head of the regional administrative section arrives to the village and is confronted with the death rates, he is not concerned with the health of those human beings living in his district. He is worried about the decrease in the amount of taxes to be collected (less people to pay) and the lack of bodies intended for enforced labour, which is already promised to several landowners. The speech of the administrative clerk is marked by the complete denial of human status to the villagers: “E o doutor acha que o governo me paga para me preocupar com a saúde desta escumalha?” (27) [“And do you think, doctor, that the government pays me to look after the health of this scum!?”]. This lack of human solidarity and professional responsibility deconstructs the credibility of the colonial propaganda that presented

colonialism as white men's civilising burden. It is sheer exploitation for white men's profit. Thus, no administrative measures are taken to solve the problem. The soldiers and the administrative clerk simply take away as workers all the teenagers and adult men or women that still seem physically able to endure hard work. Only the elder, like Mamã, and the children, like twelve year old Julinho, are allowed to stay.

Julinho wants to go to school, to study and fight those men that take people away, but Mamã does not want him to go. She is afraid of losing him, and she desperately needs his company, the only family left after all her other children (that she adopted from her husband's younger wives) have died. The boy seems to give up on the idea of joining school and accepts to stay at the village helping mother to sell the products from their small farm. One day, after selling the harvest, Julinho does not come home. For a week, old mamã resists going to town to search for him, but eventually her anxiety is stronger than her fear and she goes. She asks here and there, discretely, but she never considers asking for any help from the Portuguese administration. On the contrary, she reasons they would probably be the ones to blame if Julinho had been beaten or killed. At the end of the day, as she decides to go back home, a man starts to walk with her. Once they are out of town, he tells her that Julinho is not at school but at a training camp. He has joined the independence fight. Mamã is also told that someone will come, once in a while, to check on her. She does not like the news, but has to accept them, and gradually starts to understand Julinho's fight. The people that come to visit Mamã talk about the independence fight and explain things to her. Six years later, Mamã is suddenly told the Portuguese were defeated and soon after a letter arrives from Julinho with the best of news: he is well, he is going to return to the village, he has learned to read and write and he also did an apprenticeship. After the war, the new challenge is reintegration: Julinho finds a job in a factory and Mamã asks to work there as a cleaning lady. The final sentence on the short story is also the title, "Boas-vindas Mamã" ["Welcome mama"], and it can be read at several levels. Mamã is welcome to a new independent nation, a city life, a job and, most important, to evening classes, because even old citizens like Mamã are now entitled to rights that were not recognised before.

This narrative is clearly committed to anti-colonial resistance but it also promotes the importance of education and of social reintegration after a war period. I find extremely interesting the role appointed to Mamã, not only as the mother that risked her only son for the nation (a commonplace in this kind of postcolonial literature), but mostly as a citizen that overcomes her own inner fears, moving to the city and adapting to new

opportunities like education and a professional life. In this particular point, this text is in contrast with a certain current backlash against women after the war, which is promoting, for example in Mozambique, their exclusive return to domestic lives. The appeal for feminine integration in an urban, professional setting is liberating, and echoes a more balanced and fairer stage in the society of Mozambique.

For a Portuguese audience, the portrait of colonial incompetence and ethical emptiness will not go unnoticed. This kind of discourse has been seminal to manage the change from colonial nation to "modern," pro-European country, because this negative confrontation breaks with the myths that fed traditional images of Portuguese national identity. Besides, the negative dimension of colonialism is part of Portuguese history and to live with the knowledge of the violence of your forefathers should instigate a more responsible and committed citizenship on current generations.

The set of poems by Vera Duarte, which I address in the next and final section, belong to a different stage in postcolonial literature. They neither address the independence struggle nor the memory of colonization. Instead, they focus on current internal contradictions inside the postcolonial nation itself. The whole set of poems is based upon a set of binary oppositions between individual subjectivity and collective public life, between life and death, past and present, or development and poverty.

The wider frame to interpret this set of opposite pairs is the contrast between a masculine warrior element (the embodiment of a death drive, articulated in the public/political/historical sphere), and a feminine principle of *jouissance* (desire, pleasure, life asserting drive), falling back on traditional stereotypes that relate women to nature and instinct and men to reason and culture. Only this association between masculinity and war, or, masculinity/public sphere/history, is not heroic. On the contrary, the gothic inspiration of some of the poems values the feminine creative principle as the positive alternative. "Death" is something craved by men and the institutions of power in their hands. In fact, the first poem refers to living corpses that come to kill the leader of the fights that killed the living: living leaders and dead men kill each other in a perpetual life denying/desire denying cycle. These endless fights, for whatever cause, are "inert" gestures that do not bring any freedom. These fights have an end in themselves, as a self-assertive game, unable to project positive visions or projects. Meaningfully, the current life of this post war people (no definite invocation to a concrete country) is cold, uncomfortable and feels oppressive:

Estamos todos e prescindimos do voto. A cidade é nossa e está sitiada. O frio inunda a praça pública onde a multidão se agita.(552)

[We are all gathered here, and give up on the vote. The citadel is ours and it is under siege. The cold floods the rebellious crowd in the public square⁷.]

Any references to life, inner life, life drive or desire are associated to a feminine self, isolated in the middle of the “zombie” males:

[U]m lenço de lindas cores envolve meus cabelos fartos e a saia, imensamente rodada, apenas deixa ver minhas pernas voluptuosas que se abandonam entre rendas coloridas. Meu peito cintila ... de mim se emana, em sons subterrâneos, uma música celestial que faz assomar a felicidade aos lábios dos mortos e agita os vivos. (552)

[A colourful scarf covers my long, thick hair, and my wide skirt allows a glimpse of my voluptuous legs among colourful lace. My breast shines, and from me spring waves of heavenly music that make the happiness of the living and unsettle the dead⁸.]

Within the frame of the histories invoked by the postcolonial debate, I think these poems represent an appeal to move on and think beyond the independence struggle. The present is a moment to live and not a moment to kill, hence the importance of the life affirming feminine element, if the desire to create a new life is ever to take place after the cycle of destruction.

Still the challenge to unlearn colonial discourses remains an open challenge after other more obvious wars had been fought. That is why another of the structural binary oppositions that run through this set of poems distinguishes the acquisition of knowledge related to Europe from the marginalization of Africa, in the school curricula, and in the mass media. I would like to finish this essay with the inspiration from the deconstructive irony in Vera Duarte's words:

E no entanto sei que os Turcos e os Otomanos. Que em 1066 a batalha de Hastings. Que a Willy Brandt sucedeu. E que Jean-Paul Sartre—que me dá momentos de êxtase—morreu ontem. Se Cheik Anta Diop tivesse morrido ontem sabê-lo-ia hoje? E saberei eu que a rainha Ginga. E Gungunhana. Quem precedeu a Menghistu? Pois é, é uma vida mal vivida. Não bastas colher as flores. E as raízes? (553)

[And yet, I know that the Turks and the Ottoman. That in 1066 the battle of Hastings. That to Willy Brandt happened. And Jean Paul Sartre—

who gives me moments of euphoria—died yesterday. If Chiek Anta Diop had died yesterday, would I have known it today? And do I know that queen Ginga. And Gungunhana. Who were the forefathers of Menghistu?⁹ After political independences, in a global media world, postcolonial citizens may still have first hand access to European news or events, while neighbouring African news and cultures remain in the background, more silent and less visible to their own inheritors.

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¹ Frantz Fanon. 1952. *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971).

² State Universities in Portugal: Universidade de Lisboa, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, Universidade do Porto, Universidade do Coimbra, Universidade do Minho, Universidade de Évora, Universidade de Aveiro, Universidade da Beira Interior, Universidade de Trás-os-montes e Alto Douro, Universidade do Algarve, Universidade dos Açores, Universidade da Madeira.

³ Private Universities in Portugal: Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, Universidade Aberta, Universidade Moderna, Universidade Fernando Pessoa, Universidade Católica, Universidade Portucalense, Universidade independente, Universidade Lusófona, Universidade Lusíada.

⁴ Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. "Estado e Sociedade na Semi-periferia do Sistema Mundial: o caso Português." *Análise Social*, XXI (87-88-89, 1985): 868-901.

⁵ Margarida Calafate Ribeiro. *Uma História de Regressos, Império, Guerra Colonial e Pós-colonialismo*. (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 2004.)

⁶ Margarida Calafate Ribeiro "Empire, Colonial Wars and Post-colonialism in the Portuguese Contemporary Imagination." *Portuguese Studies* (London, King's College, volume 18, 2002): 132 - 214.

⁷ My translation.

⁸ My translation.

⁹ My translation.