

Moutinho, Isabel: Images of Africa in contemporary narrative in Portuguese

Neste extrato, a autora analisa as imagens de África nos dois romances contemporâneos com a temática da descolonização: Os Cus de Judas de A. Lobo Antunes e A Costa dos Murmúrios de Lídia Jorge.

Lobo Antunes's *Os Cus de Judas*, set in Lisbon in 1979, has extensive flash-backs to the experiences of a Portuguese military surgen conscripted to war service in Angola in 1971. Unlike the Angolan novel, which has few descriptive passages, this book gives us an extensive range of images of Africa. There are long descriptions, first of the city of Luanda where the military surgeon initially disembarks, and then of inland Eastern Angola. Such descriptions are necessitated by the internal logic of the narrative, in which the narrator-doctor has returned to Portugal and wishes to tell his interlocutor of his war experiences. The interlocutor has not been to Angola, so the new place must be described.

The view of Luanda appals the narrator. Everything in his description of the city is negative: poor, without grandeur, muddy, dirty, old and rotten, hot and humid, excessively bright; the bushes and insects are overwhelming (25-26). All is weary and moribund, coffins are piled up on ships' decks (29), there is heat, sweat and mosquitoes (31), sordid street-cafés, legless or one-armed individuals (32). The picture could not be gloomier. But, as the narrative progresses and captures our attention with details of the endless dreariness and horror of the war, the reader comes to realise that the decadence, rot, mutilation and corruption descriptive of the colonial city are more precisely the attributes of the colonial circumstances which taint the place and infect its inhabitants. It is as if the staleness of the Portuguese society from which the narrator comes had transferred itself to the Luanda cityscape, as if the turpitude of the European colonial capital had permeated and corrupted the African city, robbing it of a chance to be splendidous.

As he moves from the city to the war front on the South-East, the images of Angola continue to deteriorate: «duas chanas podres ... a aldeia dos leprosos ... dezenas de larvas informes» (45), «o cheiro de decomposição de mandioca a secar nas esteiras, ... excrementos secos..., ratos obesos remexendo o lixo» (47), «furún culos de humidade» (47), in which the descriptions of place are always entangled with the sketchy portrayal of the human (one might say: subhuman) element of hunger, disease, and social alienation.

The Angolan savannah is particularly desolate and infused with human anaemia: «matas rasas que cresciam, amarentas, na areia, torcidas de anemia» (67), «à mata de morrer magra e pálida do Leste» (88).

It is interesting to observe how the narrator's vision of Lisbon changes in the end to resemble that of Luanda. During the war he longs for Lisbon: «A minha lembrança grandiosa de uma capital cintilante de agitação e de mistério» (104). But as his participation in the war in Africa changes all his understanding of life as he previously knew it, after his return from Angola, «Lisboa é uma quermesse de província, um circo ambulante montado junto ao rio...» (115). On the same page, the images of Lisbon and Luanda become blurred in the narrator's vision; it is as if the rot and decadence he first noticed in the colonial city had now come to infect the imperial capital, the carrier of the virus being the military doctor himself for he has become aware that colonialism, too, is an infectious disease.

A sense of utter displacement permeates the novel, and it is twofold. For the Angolans, enforced displacement adds to their suffering at the hands of the coloniser. The Angolans' passivity and apathy, noted by the narrator, is seen as a direct result of the geographic displacement that the colonial régime has forced upon them, with its consequential destruction of tribal, political and cultural pride. But the Portuguese army, too, is the victim of enforced displacement: «Foda-se, também vim para aqui porque me expulsaram do meu país a bordo de um navio cheio de tropas» (177). This feeling of exile from his own country largely explains the disgust that the view of Luanda inspires in the narrator. Curiously, it is when he becomes explicitly aware of his own position as victim of enforced displacement that (for the first and only time in the book) he reverts to an image of Africa which is not the sadly realistic one he has painted so far, but the rosy, embellished one of the official language of the colonial régime, in its complicity with the Catholic Church: «Angola era um rectângulo cor-de-rosa no mapa da instrução primária, freiras pretas a sorrirem no calendário das Missões, mulheres de argolas no nariz, Mouzinho de Albuquerque e hipopótamos» (177).

However, there are also moments when the narrator is overwhelmed by the powerful spaciousness of Africa. There are brief images of the inexhaustible vitality of Angola, perceived in the indestructible, overpowering nature of the *capim* grass: «O capim engolia os tractores avariados numa fome de mil bocas vegetais vitoriosas, devorava as casas, pulava as vedações, destruía as cruces anónimas das cam pas» (175), where the *capim* seems to be the only thing victorious in the whole novel.

The narrator of Lídia Jorge's *A Costa dos Murmúrios* is a woman living in Beira, Mozambique's second city, as the wife of an army officer. The novel presents few images of Africa, but uses them to great effect, by means of their own contradictory cumulative effect as they are scattered throughout the book, often without direct comment.

As Portuguese troops prepare to go to northern Mozambique, where the pro-independence fighting has started, the language is loaded with negative connotations: «As ... forças [armadas] ... iriam convergir para Cabo Delgado, essa terra de *selvagens*, perto da mosquitagem do Tanganhica, o coio inóspito onde o sovieta tinha encontrado o côncavo necessário para pôr o ovo» (56).⁴

The description of Cabo Delgado as an area of savages near the mosquito infested Tanzania appears in the middle of a paragraph focusing on the visit to the officers' mess in Beira by a General of the old guard. The narrator makes no comment. Whether this view of Cabo Delgado is the General's only, or whether it coincides with the prevalent view of the military and their families remains unexplained. More ambiguously still, it is not made clear at this stage whether the narrator shares it too.

The heat of the African afternoon provides the opportunity for a more ciphered image: «Fazia um calor intenso ...Alguns coisas estava à beira do desmaio, a forma mais abreviada do colapso. Olhando pelo gradeamento, de costas para a praia, a casa de Helena era tão real que se parecia com a vivenda do sono, a casa onde alguém se tivesse deixado adormecer para uma sesta de longos anos, enquanto as árvores ganhavam ramos e frutos - e silêncio» (91).

Helena's house represents Portugal's colonial presence, subdued by the heat, on the verge of collapse, and caught napping in a long historical slumber, while Africa's vitality bursts into fruit even in the silence imposed by colonialism.

The private office in the Captain's house is decorated with the paraphernalia of triumphant colonialism: «o chão estava atapetado de peles de zebra, e as paredes estavam enfeitadas de setas, máscaras e tambores» (130).

The décor is suitably colonial and safari-coloured. All the symbols of African freedom (wildlife and weaponry) and of Africa traditional culture (masks and drums) have been robbed of their primary function and reduced to a decorative dimension for the pleasure of European eyes. As Jean-Marc Moura explains, in the *White gaze* the African environment is always diminished in that it becomes domesticated for European purposes (Moura, 1992: 195). But the narrator finds out that this is the reliquary where the Captain keeps the secret photos of his battalion's burning of villages, and killing and impaling of black civilians. It is the ironic juxtaposition of the image of a tamed Mozambique with the narrator's growing disgust for her husband whom the war has

transformed into a monster that creates a distance and an estrangement which allow us to see her selective presentation of distinctively colonial images of Africa as a fierce, «no-comment» critique of colonialism.

Africa is often presented as teeming with a threatening life of its own. One white character fears that the burgeoning of insect life («os mosquitos, as formigas, as vorazes formigas de Africa, as baratas voadoras do tamanho de pássaros, ... e a chuva dos gafanhotos,» 221) will bring her death. Another, the Angolan journalist, fears that the burgeoning of Africa's enzymes will bring catastrophic overpopulation («as enzimas e as bactérias acendem a reprodução em estufa e se expandem à velocidade da luz,» 208). Africa is teeming with life, so overwhelmingly that it constitutes a peril, in this case, both to the coloniser and the colonised.

Notas:

⁴ My emphasis

(MOUTINHO, Isabel. "Images of Africa in contemporary narrative in Portuguese". In SEIXO, Maria Alzira, NOYES, John K., Comparative Literature Association Congress; et al. *The paths of multiculturalism: travel writings and postcolonialism : precedings for the Mossel Bay Workshop of the XVIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*. Lisbon: Cosmos, 2000, p. 327–330)

Atividades:

1. Qual é a ótica escolhida pela autora para tratar os romances de Lobo Antunes e Lídia Jorge?
2. Indique em que consiste a ambiguidade da representação do espaço nos dois romances.
3. Em que sentido a perspetiva colonial entra nos romances indicados?