

The New Face of Europe: Literary Images of a Post-Colonial Continent – A Portuguese Portrait

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A Europa jaz, posta nos cotovelos:

De Oriente a Ocidente jaz, fitando,

E toldam-lhe românticos cabelos

Olhos gregos, lembrando.

O cotovelo esquerdo é recuado;

O direito é em ângulo disposto.

Aquele diz Itália onde é pousado:

Este diz Inglaterra onde, afastado,

A mão sustenta, em que se apoia o rosto.

Fita, com olhar sfingico e fatal,

O Ocidente, futuro do passado.

O rosto com que fita é Portugal.

Pessoa 1934: 3

Introduction

The 1974 Carnation Revolution put an end to more than four decades of dictatorship, with the new democracy opposing the stigma of isolation as expressed by the phrase “standing proudly alone”, which had kept the country apart from its Western partners. Since that time, Portugal, a small peripheral state of continental Europe, has mutated drastically, thus resulting in substantial changes to its national physiognomy. The loss of colonial possessions and the subsequent influx of massive and successive waves of citizens coming from the former colonies, who from then on never ceased to seek out the ex-empire’s metropolis, contributed greatly to this change. Joining the EEC (European Economic Community, as the present EU was named at the time) was also a relevant factor, as that process led to the erosion of the traditional border concept with the objective of creating an ample space for the circulation of people and goods, with an eye on creating a European federal state.

Thus, since the last quarter of the 20th century, the image of Portugal has been progressively changing from that of an essentially poor, backward, rural and Catholic country, inhabited by people with a century-old consciousness of their identity, built around a historically unitary language and culture. This image has been changing to a less stable representation due to the influence of the new immigrant communities that have contributed a great deal to turn Portugal into a multi-ethnic, multicultural society, open to globalising tendencies.

In this, Portugal has accompanied many other European countries since the Old Continent, in spite of individual idiosyncrasies, has traditionally been a global destination for the diaspora of migratory waves that are turning it into a “colourful continent, with all of the mutations, adaptations, conciliations and shocks that [arise]” (Eco 2007: 278) from it. During the last few decades, mainly since the end of the Cold War, the

most outstanding symbol of which probably being the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western Europe has received immigrant fluxes mainly from Asia, South America, the Maghreb and other parts of Africa, but also from countries of the former Soviet bloc. In the same way, Portugal changed within a few years from being a country of emigration to being a host for foreign groups already well represented numerically. Among foreigners with a legal residence permit in Portugal, those coming from countries where Portuguese is the official language stand out, Cape Verdeans and Brazilians being the most numerous. Also noticeable are individuals coming from Eastern European countries (mainly from the Ukraine) and China. For the majority of those groups, the aim of immigration is to improve their economic conditions by occupying market fringes left by or less sought after by the Portuguese.

A new panorama, like the above-mentioned, raises a set of political, legal, religious, social and emotional issues which question the “white and Christian Europe’ theory [...] rooted in traditions and habits of historical legacy” (Vitorino 2006), such a theory becoming increasingly inadequate to new emerging realities.

Literature and Post-Colonialism

The relevance of the above-mentioned issue could not fail to be reflected in literary creation, since literary texts “enjoy an anthropologic, ontological and cognitive dimension, a memorial and affective density and resonance” (Aguar e Silva 2003: 15) which renders them particularly suitable to convey any human experience. Hence, contemporary Portuguese literature includes the work of several writers whose fictional universe explores outlines connected with themes, from which arises the framing of a new Europe whose human grounds are the subject of fast and continuous changes.

For this paper, I have selected two contemporary Portuguese authors whose work reflects on the way different ethnic social groups reorganise in an increasingly kaleidoscopic and complex mosaic, making them privileged literary places for the analysis of the multiple and diverse human situation through which Portugal perceives itself and the other(s) in a post-colonial context. I will refer to António Lobo Antunes and Lídia Jorge, two of the contemporary Portuguese literary voices most unanimously recognised by critics and readers, both in Portugal and abroad.

Both writers belong to a generation that emerged after the Carnation Revolution. Lobo Antunes began to publish in 1979, with two autobiographical novels in that same year, *Memória de Elefante* (*Elephant Memory*) and *Os Cus de Judas* (*The Asses of Judas*), followed in 1980 by *Conhecimento do Inferno* (*Knowledge of Hell*), a work that concludes his debut trilogy. Lídia Jorge started her literary career in 1980 with a novel called *O Dia dos Prodigios* (*The Day of the Prodigies*).

Given the historical conditions, it was probably unavoidable that the works of both authors reflected Portugal’s situation before and right after the Carnation Revolution. Therefore, Lídia Jorge’s first narrative fiction is an allegory of the closed and backward Portugal before 25 April, which brought her immediate recognition from critics and the public and started a creative cycle that has produced work that, in spite of its multi-thematic nature, has always focused on subjects connected with the Portuguese

people. It may be concerned with their collective problems and with the historical conditions of national societal changes after the revolution, hence providing a starting point for a reflection upon Portuguese cultural identity. Lobo Antunes's trilogy sketched some of the major themes of the author's work, with a particular stress on the memory of the twenty-seven months spent in Angola's colonial war, as well as on the consequences of such an experience in both personal and collective areas. Besides, though the author's style has been evolving in a direction which obliterates narrative structure to show nothing but "wide concentric circles that narrow up and apparently suffocate us" (Antunes 2002: 111), in these opening novels his own writing style could already be detected: "a lyric chain of images recollecting fantastical pleasure, a cascade of metaphors that no longer connect to each other according to the string of a pre-text-plot, but instead tie one to another according to the colours they bring into the whole" (Mercier n.d).

The debut publications are just doorways for both authors, leading to consistent and varied oeuvres. For example, Lobo Antunes's oeuvre comprises mainly narrative mode genres novels and chronicles, with twenty-three titles so far, while Lídia Jorge's comprises novels, short stories and dramas, for a total of fourteen works already published.

Within the authors' wide production, I shall focus my analysis mainly on one of each of the authors' works: *O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas* (*The Wind Whistling in the Cranes*), Lídia Jorge's second to last novel, published in 2003 by Círculo de Leitores, and *O Meu Nome é Legião* (*My Name is Legion*), also Lobo Antunes's second to last novel, published in 2007 by Dom Quixote. My aim is to analyse them mainly so as to clarify how the contemporary postcolonial and pro-European image of Portugal is construed as a result of the presence of minority groups in the dominant social strata.

Literary Images of a Post-Colonial Continent in the Works by Lídia Jorge

O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas (Jorge 2003) focuses on the problem of social transformations in contemporary Portugal, especially the issue of the cultural acceptance/integration of African minorities. Simultaneously, it develops other recurrent themes in Lídia Jorge's fiction, namely: the socio-cultural mutations occurring in a contemporaneity marked by an often unrestrained desire for modernity and progress; cultural shock arising from the conflict between the old rural and the new urban country, with individualistic and anti-traditional ways of living; the efforts of the various unsuccessfully adapted or excluded groups to conform to new realities; and humiliation and alienation as the source and consequence of extreme situations which demand extreme answers.

The plot centres on a female character, Milene Leandro, a young, wealthy and powerful woman from a traditional family of the Algarve bourgeoisie. After the tragic death of her grandmother, with whom she had lived, she finds comfort and protection in a large clan of Cape Verdeans living in a former conserve factory rented from her family. The girl falls in love with a young man from the immigrant group and has an

intense love affair, which will lead readers to reflect on racial prejudice and how tolerant Portuguese people actually respond to difference.

The novel is built on an opposition between two distinct worlds that are present side by side in the same contemporary space and time. On one hand, there is the autochthonous family – the Leandro family – constituted by a group of the world’s most powerful people. Some members are “Grandmother Regina”, the matriarch and bastion of traditional values of honour and dignity, as well as the uncles, “Rui Ludovice” and “Dom Silvestre”, representing political and economic power, respectively, and also “uncle Afonso Leandro”, solicitor and brother-in-law of the former two. All of them typify corrupt, ambitious and demagogic characters. On the other hand, there is the Mata family, constituted by twenty immigrants from Cape Verde; the women are housewives or supermarket cashiers, the men are construction workers – poorly regarded members of society.

In addition to these groups, which appear to be positioned on the extremes of the social hierarchy, stands another wide group of people: those who live at “Bairro dos Espelhos”, all of them also immigrants who come from “lands positioned on the Sahel coastal strip, wandering pieces of Africa” (Jorge 2003: 40). However, unlike the Mata family, they symbolise real exclusion, and are epitomized by a horde of those who cannot culturally adapt or absorb and integrate the values and patterns of the host society, characterised by unrestrained consumerism. The “Bairro dos Espelhos” residents live in a slum that they have built with the waste of a society that marginalises them for their incapacity to display the symbolic possession of goods that might open a door to the world outside the ghetto. In contrast, the Mata family had conquered the right to leave the “Bairro dos Espelhos” by building a place to live amongst themselves, which had driven them away from their original group.

Halfway between the caste of those who incarnate typical European values and those who represent the large number of unprotected facing a social and cultural exclusion problem, the singularity of the Mata family also arises from how the family faces the process of adjustment to Portuguese life. Powerless to resist the seduction of the mechanisms installed by the dominant class, they allow themselves to be colonised, falling into the temptation of accumulating goods as a ratifying sign of their social legitimacy.¹ Nevertheless, though this colonisation is discernible on a strictly material level with regard to family and morals, the family continues cultivating habits which proceed from their deep cultural roots, hence showing a positive difference from the dominant social stratum.² In a similar way, though there’s no doubt that the

1 There are numerous passages from the novel where this strategy is visible. As an example, the following is quoted: “Uns atrás dos outros, desentalavam-se das grandes caixas que continham o mundo da técnica, da electrónica e da informática, do mais moderno e do mais condensado. Objectos que vinham da Coreia, do Japão, dos Estados Unidos da América, nem se sabia de onde vinham [...]. Do interior das carrinhas saíam fogões, assadores, berbequins, aspiradores, televisores, jogos Nintendo e Game-Boy para as crianças, objectos de música para gente de todas as idades, acompanhados de seus processos mágicos. E os Mata ali estavam a fazê-los descer, uns atrás dos outros, com a alma cheia de alegria, falando alto” (Jorge 2003: 47).

2 Notice how such difference is exploited and taken pride in: “E Milene, precipitando-se de novo sobre as palavras, repetiu a mesma história [...]. Referindo o que havia acontecido sem tempo nem espaço, invocando a ausência das pessoas da sua família espalhadas por diferentes estâncias

family's youngsters assume behaviour and ways of thinking suitable to the host society's habits,³ it is also true that the adjustment is even less successful for the elders, due to resistance and the will to preserve their specific identifying features.⁴

These features of belonging to an ethnic group with its own culture and identity may perhaps explain the reaction of estrangement displayed by the Mata clan regarding the intruder Milene Leandro. The first meeting of the group with the white girl underlines the way the oddness of race heterogeneity is also felt by the ethnic minority, which emphasises the fact that racist behaviour is not an exclusive feature of any social group, but is rather the expression of a primary and often involuntary reaction when facing difference and strangeness.⁵

On the other hand, Leandro's family sees the Mata Cape Verdeans through stereotypes associated with the black race. From the height of his haughtiness as one of the coloniser's descendents, Afonso Leandro sees them as

a band of dull people, people with no sense of another's belongings, away from clock time and calendar days. People coming from another world, from another age. People who wouldn't know how to do anything but mix concrete and place bricks one over another, primitive actions prior to civilisation [and who take the night] to dance and procreate (Jorge 2003: 263).

The irreducibility and irreconcilability of this viewpoint carries implications on an individual level as well as on a socio-economic level. The first consequence of this incapacity to accept the other, this hiding of the individual under a cover of prejudice, may thus be perceived, on an intimate level, in the same amorous relationship connecting

turísticas da Terra, e o receio que tinha delas quando fosse do seu regresso. E a eles parecia que ela falava não de uma realidade, mas dum sonho dormido, e por isso todos se sentiam, ao ouvi-la, estranhamente fora do mundo, da coerência e das próprias leis da vida" (Jorge 2003: 57-58); "Não, não, a rapariga não volta para casa sozinha. Aqui mora gente cristã, entende você, senhor jardineiro? Ela bem quer, mas a gente não vai deixar a rapariga voltar sem companhia para casa da avó depois dum choque deste tamanho... Sabe, jardineiro português, aqui mora gente Mata, cabo-verdiano badio di pé ratchado, gente com coração e vergonha na cara..." (Jorge 2003: 93).

3 Notice, as an example, the narrator's comments on the relationship between individuals and water: "Os mais novos adaptavam-se, deixavam de pensar no assunto, achavam que água era água, boa para beber ou desperdiçar, tão natural como os actos da respiração, mas para os mais velhos era diferente. Sempre que se rodava o manípulo e saía água, sabiam que estavam a abrir a foz de um rio, o leito duma constante ribeira – Pelo menos era assim que pensavam as mulheres mais velhas da família Mata" (Jorge 2003: 40).

4 Language being one of the strongest factors marking the preservation of a people's identity, the fact that the old women of the African community always spoke in Creole between themselves is a powerful indicator of their tenacity in remembering their origins.

5 In the description of the first encounter between the Mata family and Milene, the latter is subject to a highly derogatory evaluation, being "reified" and "animalised": "No meio do estendal, meio encoberta pelos lençóis, que a mulher de Heitor ainda segurava ao alto, incapaz de descer os braços, encontrava-se, sentada numa cadeira, *uma rapariga branca* [...]. O cómico era *aquela coisa intrusa* que ali estava, *aquela coisa esbranquiçada*, dobrada sobre si mesma, de olhos espantados e lábios entreabertos, a sorrir ou a rir mesmo [...]. *A coisa*, sentada na cadeira de plástico, com um saco a tiracolo ajoujado sobre os joelhos redondos, muito unidos, o pescoço estreito muito estreito, os cabelos curtos muito despenteados, a olhar para os Mata [...] que a olhavam como se fosse uma larva a quem quisessem expulsar com o piparote de um dedo" (Jorge 2003: 50-52, italic highlighted by the author).

Milene Leandro and Antonino Mata. Under the apparent normality of their relationship, which is in no way extraordinary from an emotional point of view, boils the consciousness of a prejudice that stops the lovers from openly declaring their relationship and makes them wish they were invisible so they could experience it.⁶

On the other hand, prejudice is also at the heart of why the Leandro family despises the Mata clan, to the point of obliterating their human condition when profit available through fast land conversion is at stake, a product of a savage instinct for progress and modernity. When the chance arises to sell the “Fábrica de Conservas Leandro”, where the Cape Verdeans live, to a Dutch multinational company that projects a luxury urbanisation for the site, the powerful white landlords do not hesitate to run over any right or legitimate expectation of the black tenants.⁷ In a similar way, they do not restrain themselves from exercising their despotic authority (even if it is disguised by hypocrisy) over their own niece, mutilating her to avoid any half-blood descendant who would share the matriarch’s heritage with them.⁸ Although at the end of the novel a marriage ceremony between the white girl and the Cape Verdean boy has finally taken place, with both families side by side sharing the same happy moment, it is implicit that such was only possible because that appearance – of acceptance, of difference and of minimisation of racial and interclass prejudices – suits the political image of Rui Ludovice, the mayor of Valmares, who attends the wedding wearing a “red tie on a dark-blue suit, just like any politician since the existence of television” (Jorge 2003: 460).

Post-Colonial Violence in the Works by Lobo Antunes’s

Concerning António Lobo Antunes’s novel, *O Meu Nome é Legião* (*My Name Is Legion*), it is clear from the first chapter on that the work’s central theme is the picture of

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- 6 Antonino verbalises this desire most, showing his awareness of the problems of both: “‘Se fôssemos invisíveis’... Pois se fôssemos invisíveis, agora mesmo íamos ao Mãos Largas jantar. Arrumávamos os carros ali em frente e ninguém nos via, entrávamos lá dentro, sentávamo-nos à mesa e ninguém nos via. Nem a minha família, nem a tua, nem ninguém [...]. Milene fechava os olhos [...]. Ele próprio lhe abria as pálpebras – ‘Muito perigoso, Milene, muito perigoso ficarmos aqui. Não é por nada, mas já vi muitos filmes como este. Terminam todos mal. Devíamos parar’” (Jorge 2003: 272-273).
- 7 Don Silvestre and Afonso Leandro show manifest insensitivity to the human problem of evicting others in order to secure their valuable property: “Mas o tio Dom. tinha achado por bem tentar explicar que se tratava de um empréstimo, um empréstimo passageiro, e que não se impressionasse o Sr. Van de Berg com o facto porque *eram apenas umas pessoas da terceira vaga*” (Jorge 2003: 246). E, mais adiante: “É que *aquela gente da terceira vaga* podia sair dali já amanhã” (Jorge 2003: 265). Bold highlighted by the author.
- 8 The terms used by the author to create the family dialogue when the subject of Milene’s mutilation is discussed are particularly cruel, faithfully reproducing the grotesqueness of the situation: “‘Vamos lá a ver. Então como se iria saber duma coisa dessas? Se a rapariga era ou não infértil?’ – O tio Dom. Silvestre à espera de resposta. [...] Ângela Margarida levá-la-ia à clínica? Faria lá exames? Porque falava ela disso? [...] Mas Afonso avançou para ela. [...] Ele estendeu-lhe o dedo acusador – ‘Escuta, Ângela Margarida – Tu capaste-a. Capaste ou não capaste? Tu capaste-a’” (Jorge 2003: 432-435).

urban violence in contemporary society, epitomized by bands of youngsters from suburban neighbourhoods who exercise violence with impressive cruelty and gratuity.

The plot starts with an alleged police report written by an officer near the end of his career, who is deeply disillusioned with the institution to which he belongs. This report recalls, step by step, the sequence of criminal activities of delinquents (mainly robbery and violent assault, but also rape and all kinds of physical aggression committed with or without a firearm), some among them having barely left childhood. The members of the group are:

The so-called Capitão, 16 (sixteen) years old, mulatto, the so-called Miúdo, 12 (twelve) years old, mulatto, the so-called Ruço, 19 (nineteen) years old, white, and the so-called Galã, 14 (fourteen) years old, mulatto, [...] the so-called Guerrilheiro, 17 (seventeen) years old, mulatto, the so-called Cão, 15 (fifteen) years old, mulatto, the so-called Gordo, 18 (eighteen) years old, black, and the so-called Hiena 13 (thirteen) years old, mulatto (Antunes 2007: 14).

In its heterogeneity, the group well illustrates the social mesh that is the contemporary Portuguese population, a blend of individuals with different skin colours nevertheless held together by similar feelings of distress and conflict – conflict with themselves and with a reality they cannot fit into and to which they react violently.

The panorama from which such characters emerge is called “Bairro 1º de Maio”, a fictitious name that allows us to identify real spaces such as Lisbon’s degraded suburbs, which are easily identifiable with any of the suburbs of any European capital from which waves of real violence arise, often reported by the media. The youngsters’ wanderings take us through several sites of metropolitan Lisbon, from dormitory towns like Almada to fancy traditional zones like Sintra. Through their descriptions, the reader is confronted with a cartography that exposes the huge contrasts that keep significant groups of its population in different worlds by a social gap that seems unlikely to be narrowed.

Racial prejudice and discrimination, rooted in aprioristic value judgments, are the dominant factors explaining the heterogeneity and contrasts which are so detrimental to social cohesion and harmony. Beyond being a detailed police report on the actions achieved by a band of criminal youngsters, *My Name is Legion* is also (or mainly) the report of how facts are perceived by each of the voices to whom the narration is entrusted. It is precisely through the subjectivity of those voices that modes of thinking which reveal features of the Portuguese mentality can be shown. Thus the police officer, the first narrator of the story, introduces racism while verbalising xenophobic concerns so often shared by the common citizen.

The fact [must be stressed] that the so-called Ruço is the only Caucasian (white race in technical language) and all his companions half-African, and in one case black and hence more given to gratuitous cruelty and violence, which leads the undersigned to take the liberty of questioning himself outside the scope of this report about the justice of national immigration policy (Antunes 2007: 14).

The same viewpoint is recalled in a new perspective, this time lending a voice to those who suffer discrimination and prejudice. In fact, the officer’s report is complemented by the various testimonies of those who are in some way related to the gang of alleged criminals, as may be seen in Hiena’s sister’s report. From her testimony, we shall ex-

tract three themes that reveal, each in its own way, the status of minorities in contemporary Portugal. The first theme is once again connected to underlying racism, which leads the officers who run the inquiry to despise the witness, deducing her guilt in the process from the fact that she is mulatto;⁹ this is also perceptible through other discriminatory behaviour.¹⁰

A second theme is related to the eager desire for integration, shown by ethnic minorities as an attempt to escape from socio-racial determinism and ascend to a more favoured social strata. In the case of the character whose testimony is being considered, it is shown in various ways: by leaving her neighbourhood of origin – “I dropped the Bairro when I was sixteen, not because I was pregnant from a white, don’t insist on it, but to get a job in Lisbon, and I don’t remember almost anything” (Antunes 2007: 187), by adopting the living patterns of the dominant super-stratum – “Even if I don’t become white I won’t rot in this place [...] and by my own effort I am a married woman, I have a decent job, I live in a white’s place with two bedrooms, closed veranda, proper neighbours” (Antunes 2007: 190-191), by means of interracial marriage, whose advantages obliterate any weakness in the white partner – “Do you really want to marry him? / and me, hidden behind the bouquet, seventy-eight years and the lips moving a long time before achieving a sentence and continuing to move after the sentence had finished” (Antunes 2007: 197).

Finally, a third theme connects to the immigrants’ professional status, condemned to fill the places rejected by autochthones and to endure a fate of suffering and misery:

Don’t push my brother on me, for I left him in his cradle with his mouth open and willing to swallow the world [...] and now that he has grown up and his races have ended, I can’t imagine what he is doing, I think he is in the construction industry waiting for a beam to fall from the crane and empty his sleeve, for the destiny of the poor is to lose parts until they have nothing left but hunger and [...] reaching out his hand/Spare a dime partner (Antunes 2007: 193).

Resorting to techniques that characterise his style – such as voice proliferation and narrative discontinuity – and continuing to focus on his dearest themes – childhood, life, death, need for love, non-communicability – António Lobo Antunes finds the motive for this novel in the reality of the degraded neighbourhoods of the capital’s suburbs, fed by waves of immigrants, mainly Africans, who have settled down there, thereby building a painful portrait of Portugal.

9 Notice should be given to the incomprehension and grievance the character repeats as a refrain, facing the disregard which she suffers: “Não percebo a sua pergunta nem o que querem que eu diga, não sou uma infeliz sem vergonha nas esquinas por dinheiro ou por vício e tão pouco percebo porque me tratam assim visto que me não pareço com elas na miséria, na roupa, nos modos, sou uma senhora casada, tenho marido, um filho para educar e um emprego sério, no caso de não me acreditarem procurem os vizinhos e toda a gente lhes conta que tenho um emprego sério” (Antunes 2007: 187) and “e aí está o que digo, a desconsideração, o desprezo, por madame e por tu como as infelizes das esquinas” (Antunes 2007: 210).

10 As an example, the reference to the witness’s doctor’s attitude: “uma tarde dei com o doutor em voz baixa / O cheiro da sua esposa não lhe mete impressão? / e compreendi o motivo de examinar a palma depois de me cumprimentar, os doentes a recusarem-no / Tem mãos de preto você” (Antunes 2007: 196-197).

Conclusion

I believe that this paper on Lídia Jorge's and António Lobo Antunes's novels has allowed tracing diverse connexions between the two works. Both of the authors draw realistic portraits of Portugal within a process of rapid change due to the integration of multicultural and multi-ethnic elements that test the country's ability to accept and assimilate difference. Furthermore, these fictional texts sketch the outlines of the new physiognomy of an old nation, which is renewing itself by the exercise of tolerance and by opening itself to difference, aspects which are basic values of the European culture.

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