

## Going beyond oblivion in António Lobo Antunes's *O Esplendor de Portugal*<sup>1</sup>

Adriana Alves de Paula Martins\*

(...) [E]le [António Lobo Antunes] vai realizar através da sua ficção, (...) a verdadeira psicanálise (...) daquilo que nós imaginamos realmente ser.  
Eduardo Lourenço, "Divagação em torno de António Lobo Antunes"

Eduardo Lourenço, one of the most outstanding Portuguese intellectuals, who has deeply reflected on the nation's myths<sup>2</sup>, considers that António Lobo Antunes is, within the framework of Portuguese contemporary literature, the writer who best addresses the national present. According to Lourenço, Lobo Antunes's fiction has not only revealed the Portuguese reality in its deepest sense, but has also shown how that same reality has been concealed so far. Lourenço aptly refers to the Portuguese imperial experience that has been, according to him, the supreme fiction of Portugal and of its historical alienation (Lourenço 2003: 351).

Among the many novels Lobo Antunes wrote about Africa<sup>3</sup>, *O Esplendor de Portugal* [*The Splendour of Portugal*; not translated into English yet] (1997) deconstructs the mythical aura of Portuguese colonialism, associated in great part with the historical deeds of great navigators in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and, in particular, the whole edifice of the Portuguese presence in Africa, a place which continues inhabiting the nostalgic souls of former colonizers in a postcolonial Portugal. By focussing on the experiences and memories of different generations of white settlers in Angola (even if most of them were already born there), and on the return of the younger members of the family to Portugal after Angola's independence, while their mother remains in Africa facing the horrors of the civil war, Lobo Antunes addresses former colonizers' ambiguous identity, divided between their affective attachment to Africa, the power they believed the colonial enterprise

---

\* Universidade Católica Portuguesa/CECC

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was presented in the Conference "Cultural Memory: Forgetting to Remember/Remembering to Forget" that took place at the Kent Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Kent in September 2008.

<sup>2</sup> On this issue, see, among others, Lourenço (1982; 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Lobo Antunes participated in the Portuguese Colonial War as a medical officer of the Portuguese army. His experience in Africa can be considered a turning-point in his life both in personal and professional terms. A representative part of his fictional work addresses issues related to the Portuguese colonial enterprise in Africa and to the Colonial War.

conferred on them, and the need to rebuild a whole existence after decolonization<sup>4</sup>. The novel can be understood as a gallery of mirrors where the various characters' individual memories are reflected and confronted, thus revealing unknown facets of their personalities that somehow reflect the intricate Portuguese collective identity undeniably shaped by the empire<sup>5</sup>. My aim in this essay is to address how the writer, through the fictional modelling of his characters and the crossing of their experiences, not only reveals and criticizes the rigid and racialized social hierarchy of colonial and postcolonial times, but also sharply questions the Portuguese splendour in the past and nowadays.

The intertwinement of characters' memories and experiences results from the overlapping of temporal and spatial planes, process that promotes the combination of the African reality before and after independence with the Portuguese daily life after the empire's demise. Although each main character reports his/her memories one at a time in the form of monologues, the reader is confronted with multiple voices and points of view as far as the colonial and postcolonial experiences of the family are concerned<sup>6</sup>. The characters' accounts either coincide with the time of enunciation or make reference to the past encompassing a temporal interval that goes from 1978 to the Christmas Eve of 1995<sup>7</sup>. Despite the narrators' importance, Isilda's memories are central to the development of the narrative since they are the link between the past (references to her parents and to her childhood and youth through which a successful period of colonization is recovered and a sombre future is predicted by her father) and the time of enunciation, marked by her transformation from a rich and elegant female colonizer into a dislocated refugee trying to survive by all means in a country shattered by a fratricide conflict.

The relevance of Lobo Antunes's novel lies on the fact that it provides the reader with a detailed characterization of the negative and misleading side of the 'civilizing mission' that was obviously hidden by imperial propaganda. In other

---

<sup>4</sup> On the characters' identity, see, among others, Seixo (2002), Fonseca (2003; 2007), Fernández (2006), and Ribeiro (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Santos (2001) makes reference to a *jogo de espelhos* ('game of mirrors'; my literal translation) in his reflection on the specificities of Portuguese colonialism by recurring to the images of Prospero and Caliban, to which I will return along this essay. I consider the novel a 'gallery of mirrors' since it reminds me of a mirrored closed room from whose walls the characters (as well as the reader) cannot escape.

<sup>6</sup> In the three parts of the novel, the narrative voices' alternate: (a) in the first part, Isilda's and Carlos's (mother and stepson who is a mestizo, fruit of a former relationship of her husband and a native, but who is brought up as if he were a white man); (b) in the second part, Isilda's and Rui's (mother and the youngest son who is epileptic); and (c) in the third and last part, Isilda's and Clarisse's (mother and only female daughter who is promiscuous and who is dependent on her lovers to survive).

<sup>7</sup> On how the multiplicity of narrative voices is structured along the novel and how they address the issue of (the lack of) communication, see Chagas (2003).

words, the novel unveils the unfair economic relations under colonialism, for it depicts how colonizers' wealth was built on the forced work of native people who were severely punished, received indecent remunerations, and were obliged to acquire subsistence products in farmers' shops where goods were much more expensive, what made them increasingly indebted with their employers.

This context of exploitation stresses two interconnected aspects that are crucial to the understanding of Lobo Antunes's disclosure of the fictitious nature of the Portuguese splendour. The first one is the kind of colonialism implemented by the Portuguese in Africa from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, after Brazil's independence and, especially by the end of the century, after the Berlin Conference's deliberations, according to which each colonial power had to explore its colonies economically; if not, any other European power could do so. In fact, Portuguese colonialism in Africa could be characterized as an 'empire of profit' that represented a great (and, in many cases, the only) opportunity to Portuguese lower and working classes to climb the social ladder and to Portuguese government (with particular emphasis on New State's policies) to perpetuate and feed the myth of a glorious imperial condition and consequent centrality of Portugal in the world map<sup>8</sup>. The second aspect is the discussion the novel raises about the colonizers' status in the colony and in the metropolis. In Lobo Antunes's book the colonizers' status is not defined, as it happens in other colonial enterprises, in relation to the colonized, but it is dependent on the view the other Portuguese remaining in the metropolis had of those who supposedly left the homeland to serve the colonial enterprise, despite their personal interests. Such determination of the colonizers' status had obvious implications when most of them had to return to Europe with the empire's demise and were not welcome in Portugal. What this second aspect highlights is the nature of the social hierarchy's configuration both in the metropolis and in the colony, which rested on different kinds of prejudice that deserve to be examined.

Before analyzing the aforementioned two aspects, it is important to bear in mind that the loss of the Portuguese empire stems from a complex historical process, whose central event was the April 1974 Revolution. The peaceful Revolution, poetically characterized by the flowers people put in the soldiers' weapons (the 'Carnation Revolution'), had diverse effects: it marked the end of almost fifty years of dictatorship, the end of more than a decade of Colonial War, the loss of the empire and the return of thousands of former Portuguese colonizers, of their descendants and of those who remained loyal to the imperial cause for various

---

<sup>8</sup> I am using one of Thompson's classifications, who proposed three conceptions to analyze the British empire: "an 'empire of privilege' (espoused by the aristocracy and landed gentry); an 'empire of merit' (espoused by the professional middle classes); and 'an empire of profit' (espoused by entrepreneurs)" (Thompson 2005: 11). According to Thompson, the third category would be the least concerned with the ideals of the civilizing mission. I firmly believe that, as far as Portuguese colonialism is concerned, the first two categories did not make sense bearing in mind that profit was one of (not to say the main) concern of Portugal.

reasons to the former metropolis. Moreover, it obliged Portuguese people to accept that their nation's limits were restricted to a small territory in the western corner of Europe, and that their country was a poor and underdeveloped one. As Margarida Ribeiro (2006: 44-45) points out, the April Revolution did not mean the singularly pacific liberation that people wanted to identify in the first days of the Portuguese young democracy. The celebratory atmosphere of freedom could not efface all the violence underlying the colonial world, the tense relationships between colonizers and natives, the horrors of the Colonial War and the post-independence phase in Angola. This explains, according to Margarida Ribeiro, why Lobo Antunes's novel results from a committed relationship between what she considers a failed collective memory and an excess of personal memories that assume the form of a testimony organized in a novelistic way.

Let me now return to the exam of the interrelated elements through which Lobo Antunes deconstructs the splendour of Portugal. The first one — the nature of the Portuguese colonial enterprise — leads me to take into account Boaventura de Sousa Santos's theoretical premises (1994; 2001), according to which Portugal has occupied a semi-peripheral position in the world capitalist system. This position defined Portuguese colonialism as subaltern, since there was a deficit of colonization that derived, on the one hand, from Portugal's inability to colonize effectively, and, on the other, from the fact that Portuguese colonies were submitted to a double type of colonization, led by Portugal and, indirectly, by central countries under whose influence Portugal has always been, with particular emphasis to Britain's weight (Santos 2001: 24)<sup>9</sup>. Although in his novel Lobo Antunes does not openly address the indirect influence of foreign powers (this influence is only referred to when the episodes of the Angolan civil war are depicted also as a consequence of the Cold War), the novel addresses Portugal's subalternity in a very refined way. In a symbolic dimension Lobo Antunes not only exemplifies Santos's point, but goes beyond the Portuguese sociologist's position. Santos defends that the Portuguese, despite having one of the oldest empires throughout history, were faced by other European powers as a kind of colonized nation, a fact that can partially explain the aforementioned deficit of colonization. Santos subtly summarizes this condition of subordination by characterizing the Portuguese as an ambiguous mixture of Prospero and Caliban, since they believed they were Prosperos towards the natives of the colonies they possessed, but, from a European perspective, they were considered a kind of Calibans. This multifarious identity was, in Ribeiro's opinion (2002; 2004), projected onto the way the Portuguese imagined the nation, that is to say, as occupying a central role that did not correspond to its true semi-peripheral position in the world scene<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> On the origins of the modern Portuguese colonialism and its frailties, also see Alexandre (1979) and Ribeiro (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Departing from Santos (1994; 2001), Ribeiro (2002, 2004) develops the concept of Portugal as 'the empire as the imagination of the centre'.

From among the many examples through which Lobo Antunes mocks the fictionality of this centrality in his novel, I select two that I consider particularly representative. The first one is the novel's title — *The Splendour of Portugal* (my translation). It corresponds to a line of the Portuguese anthem, written by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Portugal had to deal with the British *Ultimatum* that revealed the country's international frailty as a European empire<sup>11</sup>. The title has to be understood in close relation to the major themes discussed in the book, as well as to the epigraph that reproduces part of the anthem and whose content is clearly nationalistic and laudatory of Portuguese people's courageous character. Since the book's dominant tone is fairly melancholic, for it addresses various degrees of generations' personal and collective losses with direct implications on characters' and nation's identities, both the title and the epigraph are clearly ironic on the author's part, mainly when it is taken into account that what was supposed to be the country's past splendour — the empire — does not exist anymore and that the reality of postcolonial Portugal seems to be uninteresting and rather decadent (remember that Lisbon is described in a depressing way<sup>12</sup>). Moreover, none of the book's characters is successful or happy. Isilda dies alone and as if she were a black woman of low condition in Africa, deprived of everything. Carlos, his wife Lena, Rui and Clarisse live separate lives and none of them has experienced true love. Rui is the one who seems to be not so affected by his condition of returnee only due to his illness, who transforms him into an alienated being. There is no bond among them, except the African memories, and even the latter are, most of times, reason for grief.

The second element the novelist uses to ridicule the splendour of Portugal is the strategy of giving voice to colonizers, who, through their memories, reveal how they were imagined in the metropolis and how they imagined themselves during the colonial period. This strategy is particularly relevant since it allows the writer to address Portugal's colonialist condition from an unusual perspective, bearing in mind that in most postcolonial novels the voice is given to former colonized people, frequently identified as the victims of the colonial enterprise. By discussing the colonizers' status, configured in a depreciative and derogative way from the standpoint of those who remained living in the metropolis during colonization, the novel's criticism operates at two different levels.

The first level discloses the colonizers' subordinate condition in the metropolis; a condition that pushed them to the colonies. The acknowledgment of their original

---

<sup>11</sup> Ribeiro (2006: 54) considers the reference to the Portuguese national anthem as a kind of death bell toll that evoked a wished empire that did not exist. On the British *Ultimatum*, see, among many, Sardica (2008).

<sup>12</sup> Carlos's apartment is pretty small and decadent. Rui inhabits an institution located in the periphery of Lisbon, and that aimed at taking care of those who posed problems to their relatives. Moreover, he is associated with disabled people, poor immigrants and prostitutes. Clarisse lives in a small apartment located in a street that is not finished.

miserable conditions of life within a framework of exploitation in Portugal has two consequences. The first one is the deconstruction of the belief that people left Portugal in order to accomplish the aims of the 'civilizing mission', that is, to enlarge the empire and to disseminate the Christian faith, taking development and knowledge to primitive cultures. The second one is the writer's sharp criticism of patterns of life in the colony, since colonizers are depicted as mimicking the higher classes' modes of living in the metropolis, adopting an attitude that could be expected from natives. The description of exuberant parties attended by official dignitaries or of simple familiar dinners in the farmers' house served by black servants dressed with uniforms and gloves are good examples of how colonizers experienced a dream of social ascendancy that could only be achieved outside the metropolis. The splendour of some colonizers' lives in the colony reflects Santos's theoretical presupposition related to Portugal's pseudo-centrality in a small scale. In fact, this reflection reinforces the criticism of 'the empire of profit', for the colonial modes of production in a certain way reproduced the procedures of exploitation adopted in the underdeveloped metropolis even if at another level.

It is Isilda's father, who was born in Portugal, who exhorts his daughter never to leave Angola, since the Portuguese from the metropolis considered colonizers 'another kind of blacks' destined to be exploited in a similar way to what happened in Africa with the natives who had their 'own blacks' of an inferior social position. According to him, metropolitan Portuguese considered colonizers primitive and violent creatures that had accepted banishment in Africa and who should be kept there through a network of decrees that warranted their [the metropolitans'] profit and wealth (Antunes 1997: 255-256). It is interesting to observe how, through Isilda's father, the novelist merges two distinct categories — race and social prestige — to designate a group of people that, in principle, should be considered the same — white people who were either born in Europe or were of European descent, but that in the novel appear clearly divided into two distinct groups on the basis of social stereotypes: the metropolitans and the colonizers. The acknowledgment of this process of social hierarchization evidences the inability of Portuguese to deal with the *Other* at home, when it is taken into account that the *Other* discussed here belongs to the same nation. The relevance given to this aspect serves to deconstruct another myth of Portuguese colonialism, that is to say, the belief that the Portuguese had a special gift for adapting to different environments and for contacting with other cultures, which reinforced the confidence in the success of Portugal's messianic mission<sup>13</sup>. The absurdity of this idea lies on the social representations Portuguese metropolitans and colonizers built about themselves, not to mention the cruelty and the violence inflicted on the natives that I am unable to examine in the framework of this essay.

---

<sup>13</sup> This belief was reinforced by Gilberto Freyre's Luso-Tropicalist positions. On how Lobo Antunes's novel distances itself from the Luso-Tropicalist ideal, see Fonseca (2003).

The exam of the colonizers' status paves the way for the analysis of the second level at which the novel's criticism operates. The second level is related to the so-called 'returnees', term used to designate people who were forced to return from overseas provinces with the colonies' independence<sup>14</sup>. Bearing in mind that most of them 'returned deprived of everything they had accomplished in their time in Africa' (Sardica 2008: 86), as the characters' case illustrates, their integration was undoubtedly problematic. Apart from arriving deprived of their possessions, they were stigmatized as the designation 'returnees' demonstrates. Within the framework of the novel, Carlos's, Lena's, Rui's and Clarisse's difficult integration, to some extent, confirms Isilda's father's description of metropolitans' mental representations about colonizers, since the characters feel as foreigners in Portugal, their existences being initially confined to a very small apartment in Lisbon, where memories from Africa are constant. It is into the micro-space of the apartment that returnees' tensions after displacement are projected, since the same racial and social distinctions that were valid in Africa are transposed to postcolonial Portugal. Carlos, who was the illegitimate son of Isilda's husband with a black woman, continues trying to hide his racial origin and to deal with a fractured identity. Lena, Carlos's wife, who was despised in Africa by Portuguese colonizers due to her low social condition, exemplified by the poor neighbourhood where her family lived and that was also inhabited by the natives, continues refusing Carlos and avoids becoming pregnant, since her pregnancy would socially represent the ultimate experience of going native. She ends by leaving him, since her dream of social ascendancy through marriage with a mulatto proved to be useless. Clarisse and Rui do not accept the fact that Carlos could command their lives. The result is that the familiar unit is dismantled and each character searches his/her own way never attaining happiness or emotional stability<sup>15</sup>.

The characters' faulty integration and their evocations of past time in Angola translate the effects of the rigid colonial social and racial stratification. As Maria Alzira Seixo (2002: 519) points out, Lobo Antunes's novel raises the issue of the colonization within colonization through what she calls 'a successive embedment of subaltern submissions'<sup>16</sup>, an issue that becomes even more relevant nowadays when Portugal learns to be a multicultural society composed of a mosaic of people

---

<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that some 650,000 returnees returned to Portugal (Sardica 2008: 86). The designation of African territories as 'overseas provinces' was adopted with the constitutional revision of 1951 in order to soften the vision of a colonial Africa when international calls for freedom started to be more frequent (Sardica 2008: 68).

<sup>15</sup> Ribeiro (2006) and Fernández (2006) propose interesting readings of the characters' integration by deconstructing some of the myths developed by Salazar's rhetoric.

<sup>16</sup> Seixo makes particular reference to the importance of the discussion about gender roles when she talks about 'colonization within colonization' (my translation). However, what interests me here is the colonizers' subalternity in relation to the metropolis.

from different parts of the world, who chose the country as a destination of immigration. By addressing the characters' painful and conflicting memories, and by trying to go beyond oblivion, Lobo Antunes's novel paves the way for the reflection on why immigrants (and many of them have come from the former colonies) remain being treated as the colonial *Other* in a postcolonial Portugal<sup>17</sup>. But this is a matter to be discussed in another essay.

### Bibliography

- Alexandre, Valentim. (1979) *Origens do Colonialismo Português Moderno 1822-1891*. Lisboa: Sá da Costa.
- Antunes, António Lobo. (1997) *Esplendor de Portugal*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote.
- Chagas, Maria Manuela Duarte. (2003) "Da Multiplicidade de Vozes Narrativas à Incomunicabilidade: *Esplendor de Portugal* – Uma Narrativa Plurivocal." *A Escrita e o Mundo em António Lobo Antunes: Actas do Colóquio Internacional António Lobo Antunes*. Ed. Eunice Cabral et. al. Lisboa: Dom Quixote. 171-85.
- Fernández, Daniel Zubía. (2006) "Dispersed Splendour: Rejection and Ambivalence in *Esplendor de Portugal*." *Towards a Portuguese Postcolonialism, Lusophone Studies 4*. Ed. Anthony Soares. Bristol: University of Bristol. 197-215.
- Fonseca, Ana Margarida. (2003) "Identidades Impuras – Uma Leitura Pós-Colonial de *Esplendor de Portugal*." *A Escrita e o Mundo em António Lobo Antunes: Actas do Colóquio Internacional António Lobo Antunes*. Ed. Eunice Cabral et. al. Lisboa: Dom Quixote. 281-96.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2007) "Between Centers and Margins – Writing the Border in the Literary Space of the Portuguese Language." *Postcolonial Theory and Lusophone Literatures*. Ed. Paulo de Medeiros. Utrecht: Portuguese Studies Center. 41-61.
- Lourenço, Eduardo. (1982) *Labirinto da Saudade*. 1978. Lisboa: Dom Quixote.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Nau de Ícaro Seguido de Imagem e Miragem da Lusofonia*. Lisboa: Gradiva, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2003) "Divagação em torno de Lobo Antunes." *A Escrita e o Mundo em António Lobo Antunes: Actas do Colóquio Internacional António Lobo Antunes*. Ed. Eunice Cabral et. al. Lisboa: Dom Quixote. 347-55.
- Ribeiro, Margarida Calafate. (2002) "Empire, Colonial Wars and Post-Colonialism in Portuguese Contemporary Imagination." *Portuguese Studies* 2002, 18: 132-214.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2004) *Uma História de Regressos. Império, Guerra Colonial e Pós-Colonialismo*. Porto: Afrontamento.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2006) "As Ruínas da Casa Portuguesa em os Cus de Judas e O Esplendor de Portugal, de António Lobo Antunes." *Portugal não é um país pequeno – Contar o "império" na pós-colonialidade*. Org. Manuela Ribeiro Sanches. Lisboa: Livros Cotovia. 43-62.

---

<sup>17</sup> On new forms of racism in Portugal, see Vala (1999).



- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. (1994) *Pela Mão de Alice – Social e o Político na Pós-Modernidade*. Porto: Afrontamento.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2001) “Entre Próspero e Caliban: Colonialismo, Pós-Colonialismo e Inter-Identidade.” *Entre ser e Estar: Raízes, Percursos e Discursos da Identidade*. Ed. Maria Irene Ramalho e António de Sousa Ribeiro. Porto: Afrontamento. 23-85.
- Sardica, José Miguel. (2008) *Twentieth Century Portugal. A Historical Overview*, Lisboa: Universidade Católica Editora.
- Seixo, Maria Alzira. (2002) *Os Romances de António Lobo Antunes*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote.
- Thompson, Andrew. (2005) *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Harlow: Pearson/Longman.
- Vala, Jorge. Org. (1999) *Novos Racismos: Perspectivas Comparativas*. Oeiras: Celta.