
Third World/Third Sex: Gender, Orality and a Tale of Two Marias in Mia Couto and Paulina Chiziane

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the gendering of the critical divide between oral and literary culture in relation to two Mozambican short stories: 'Maria Pedra no cruzar dos caminhos' published in Mia Couto's 2004 collection *O Fio das Missangas* and Paulina Chiziane's 'As Cicatrizes do Amor' published in the 1994 anthology *O Conto Moçambicano. Da Oralidade à Escrita* (eds. Maria Luisa Godinho and Lourenço Rosário).

The question that concerns me is how Couto and Chiziane have both in different ways engaged with the problem of writing gender relations into the pre-gendered, pre-coded dichotomy of (mother tongue) orality versus (paternal phallic) script. With reference to the above short stories, I seek to explore how African women writers such as Chiziane may exorcise the 'false father' of colonial and post-colonial literary paternity, and how both male and female writers from Africa may rescue their specific gender histories from the no less mythical dominion of the oral cultural matrix, the overarching 'false mother'.

Resumo

Pretende-se com esta palestra discutir a sexualização imposta à divisória que separa a cultura oral da literária, fazendo uso para o efeito de dois contos moçambicanos: 'Maria Pedra no cruzar dos caminhos' que faz parte da colecção *O Fio das Missangas*, publicada por Mia Couto em 2004 e 'As Cicatrizes do Amor' por Paulina Chiziane, publicado em 1994 na antologia *O Conto Moçambicano. Da Oralidade à Escrita* (org. Maria Luisa Godinho and Lourenço Rosário).

A questão central deste estudo é a de explorar de que forma Couto e Chiziane se debruçam sobre a problemática da inscrição das relações sexuais e de género na dicotomia 'pressexualizada' e 'preconstruída' que subjaz à oposição binária entre a oralidade (língua materna) e a escrita (processo paterno e fálico). Através da análise dos dois contos acima mencionados, pretende-se descobrir como é que escritoras africanas, como Paulina Chiziane, podem exorcizar o 'pai falso' da paternidade literária, tanto no contexto colonial como pós-colonial, e como é que os escritores africanos (tanto masculinos como femininos) podem libertar as suas histórias

e experiências específicas de relações sexuais, do domínio não menos mítico da matriz oral, isto é, a ‘mãe falsa’ e onnipotente.

The pleasure of speaking, the mastery of the word, unveils the game of multiple voices, representing shattered symbols; ironizing about languages — and thus about the limit, the origin. In sum, the mourning of a lost object, an identification with a dead yet signifying figure. (Mudimbe 1991: 71)

Cada nascimento tem uma história e cada acção, uma razão. (Chiziane 1994: 129)

Few critics of Mozambique’s leading writer, Mia Couto, have failed to comment at some level, on the tension between orality and literacy that is the linguistic trademark of his extensive oeuvre. José Ornelas, for example, aptly remarks that Couto’s work as a whole ‘caracteriza-se por um hibridismo gerado pela intersecção da voz e da letra’ (Ornelas 1996: 48). Indeed this technique has been central to Mia Couto’s international success in creating a specifically ‘Africanized’, yet also highly personal, reworking of Portuguese as the national literary language of Mozambique.¹ To date, little critical attention has been paid to the gendering of the power relations that underpin this hybridization of orature and literature, writing and speech.² Yet, in the context of emergent Portuguese postcolonial theories, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos points out, one cannot refer to the generation of hybridity without also evoking the physically embodied, material histories of colonial miscegenation which were the cornerstone of lusotropicalist ideology under Salazarism (2002: 17).

Viewed in this light, the hybridity celebrated by anglophone postcolonial criticism, tends to be regarded in the lusophone scenario as a double-edged sword, invoking colonialism’s physical imposition on African peoples of racial mixing and cultural assimilation, as much as it offers liberating metaphors for subjective or linguistic ambivalence (Santos 2002: 17–18). By the same token, given the investment in natalism and the Catholic family that Portuguese colonialism always maintained, it is questionable whether apparently universalist images of regeneration through hybridity can ever be completely innocent of the taint of colonial assimilation politics. That which is apparently cultural and linguistic always somehow merges back into the corporeal and the material, sustained (but also glossed) by the unacknowledged sexual hierarchy that gave the White Portuguese father dominion over the Black African mother. This specific history of hybridization in turn influences the ways in which memory, tradition, maternity and paternity inflect both the identity construction of Mozambican men and women as writers, and the consolidation of Portuguese as the national market language of Mozambican literature.

If Mia Couto has, without a doubt, spearheaded the Africanization of Portuguese literary language over the last three decades, his sharing of the 2003

1 See Chabal 1996, 77–78.

2 An obvious exception here is Phillip Rothwell’s pioneering monograph *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality, and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto*.

Craveirinha Prize with Paulina Chiziane was a major symbolic turning point in her career. This paper sets out to explore the gendering of the oral/literature divide in the writings of Mia Couto and of his less well-known woman compatriot, Paulina Chiziane, as a preliminary step in accessing the influence of gender on the formation of national literary language identity in Mozambique. To this end, I ask how women writers such as Chiziane can exorcize the false fathers of both colonial and post-colonial literary paternity to express their personal micro-histories as women, and whether male writers such as Couto can rescue their gendered memories and histories of paternity, from the no-less-mythical dominion of the oral cultural matrix, the overarching ‘mother of all mothers’.

In her study of gender and orality in the post-colonial contexts of anglophone and francophone Africa, Cynthia Ward has pointed out that the forging of a ‘decolonized’ national literary language by post-independence African writers frequently follows an Oedipalized trajectory that entails disclaiming the ‘false fathers’ of colonial influence and power. In this respect, she summarizes the Africanist critic V. Y. Mudimbe, suggesting that ‘the crisis of the psychic space created by the confrontation of the writer with the false father — “producers of discourses that have been coded in advance” — might be productively opened out into the discursive regime of the mother, or, more precisely, the superlative mother, the “mother of all mothers”’ (Ward 1997: 114). For Mudimbe, this quasi-archetypal mother figure would find its ultimate form in the grandmother who is also the *grand* mother, the ‘depository and matrix’ of memory for family, social group and community (1991: 77). In Ward’s analysis, problematizing Mudimbe from a feminist perspective, this quest for the *grand* mother is often in fact tied to the nostalgic reclamation of a pre-Oedipalized African-language orality. When it is incorporated into the written monoglossia of a common national literary language, this orality then allows the paternal pen to assert its authority, so that the “‘matrix-as-mother-of-all-mothers” does not appear outside of this monoglossic discourse that has been coded in advance’ (Ward 1997: 120) and national literatures come to be “‘dialogically” engendered via the forcible appropriation of the feminized mother tongues by the father’s pen’ (Ward 1997: 121). National literary language is thus materialized as written script in necessary relation to the daily ‘vernacular’ of the reified Mother Tongue, as a matrix and repository of collective cultural memory.

For Mia Couto, writing about postcolonial lusophone African space but lionized in the Portuguese metropolis, the disclaiming of the ‘false father’ discussed by Mudimbe and Ward above, finds itself complexified still further. As a white Portuguese-descended Mozambican who opposed colonial rule, the question concerns how to both *be* and *disclaim* the false father of European cultural and linguistic patrimony at one and the same time. V. Y. Mudimbe asks, regarding the francophone educational legacy in Africa:

What about the status of memory: if I’m confronting a false father who has imposed a false word on me, what sort of memory am I rejecting? This has long been the case in colonized Black Africa: Having been drilled from textbooks that speak of

'our ancestors, the Gauls,' what happens when you wake up and discover that your ancestors were not the Gauls? Do you remain silent — or shout yourself hoarse? What are the implications here for a practice and politics of patrimony and tradition? (1991: 73)³

For a writer in Mia Couto's position, the false father of colonialism is also, in another crucial historical sense, a true one. So the issue for him becomes, how can he stage his own drama of cultural disaffiliation in a manner politically equivalent to the less ambiguously colonized Black African writers of post-independence evoked by Mudimbe above? To put it another way, what does a white African writer do when he wakes up in post-independence Mozambique and finds that his ancestors in fact *were* the Gauls (or the ancient Lusitanians) after all? It should be noted that the true/false opposition is not being used here to evoke essentialized identities of race or colour. Rather it refers to the ways in which specifically raced and coloured histories, particularly those of lusotropicalism and assimilation, shape the different cultural patrimonies, traditions and positions of power available to ex-colonizer and ex-colonized becoming African writers. White male disaffiliation takes the form of a battle against the false father of colonial education and culture, who is also at the same time one's true historical father, i.e. the white, European father who is never quite false enough, never a sufficient antagonist, in the quest to forge a national literary language as authentically (oppositionally) Africanized.

In a 1990 article for the Portuguese *Jornal de Letras*, the Mozambican critic Nelson Saúte cites Mia Couto referring to the Portuguese colonizer's language as the 'grande dama' who has been 'maculada (desrespeitada, dirão alguns) por mil sensibilidades, mil colorações' so that 'o português foi deste modo assaltado, amado, violentado. Esse namoro cedeu fecundidade, experimentou limites desse corpo que é a língua' (1990:16).⁴ A doubly anxious regime of colonial paternal influence governs Couto's description here of a feminized body of Portuguese language subjected to enforced hybridization. Inverting the gendering of the lusotropical race hierarchy, Africa has forced himself upon Europe appropriating the white man's scriptural phallus by penetrating the virginal 'grande dama' of Portuguese language. The lusotropical dream (the white man and the black woman) has become here the opposing lusotropical nightmare (the white woman and the black man) and the ultimate threat. Despite the racial crossover (feminine Portugal/masculine Africa) the body of woman remains the terrain that the hybrid luso-African language must be 'dialogically engendered upon' in an essentially masculine contest.

Couto's male linguistic protagonist seems bound to usurp, from an African

3 Mudimbe is referring here specifically to Bernadette Cailler's research on Edouard Glissant, which reads his life and work through the experience of the maroon or fugitive slave (1991: 72–75).

4 Mia Couto is cited here in an article by Nelson Saúte responding to the perceived threat that Mozambique's entry into the British Commonwealth posed to the survival of the Portuguese language in Africa. For further discussion of the way Couto was misused in this debate, see Rothwell 2001: 174.

positioning, the white father's masterly panoptical grasp of a (prone) feminized world of language. As a result, the creation of a Portuguese African script through oral hybridization is still crucially bound to a paternal vision of natalism and female fertility ('cedeu fecundidade') but the paternal signifier of Portuguese colonialism is here displaced by the speaker's identification with the more 'true', vital and invigorating forms of African orature. The figures who disappear from Couto's scenario are the white father and the African mother. However, the object of male power is still maternal and essentially oedipalized in the classic 'love-rape' oxymoron of Gilbert Freyre's lusotropicalism. Thus not only does the body of woman serve as the matrix of *mestiçagem*, a familiar enough trope in lusotropical discourse, but this matrix also affords the flexible discursive field in which Couto may most effectively hybridize and cross-hatch the cultural identifications and collective memories pertaining to the 'true' and the 'false' father.

For Mudimbe the impossible challenge of reclaiming the black father, through an irretrievably fractured or 'marooned' paternal heritage, the trauma of (dis)affiliation under slavery, is to be countered, as Ward notes, by the collectivized cultural realm of the grandmother who is also the *grand* mother, equating to a pre-colonial ideal. This leads Mudimbe to declare in his conclusion that the 'reign of the grandmother is the other side of the presence of the father (false or true, it matters little) whose power is questioned in the smile and the memory of the grandmother' (1991: 78). For Couto, as we have seen, something rather different is at stake in the question of true or false colonial paternity. The paternal cultural deficit which Mudimbe characterizes in the figure of the maroon, must for Couto be effectively performed. The matrix of the *grand* mother, authorizing endless cultural and physical hybridization, becomes the space of pure matter or materiality into which the father, the disciplinary phallus of symbolic (colonial) language, may infinitely recede. The *grand* mother serves as the screen behind which the racialized historical contest of African/European fathers may most readily disappear. Thus, Couto's work engages in a symptomatic redoubling and intensifying of Mudimbe's quest to install the *grand* mother as the other side of the presence of the (true and false) father, serving here as a means of disavowing the traumatic material histories attaching to the 'true' colonial father who must also, in the quest for post-independence Africanization, become his 'false' one.

In a recent interview for *Jornal de Letras*, following the publication of his book *O outro pé da sereia*, Couto describes subjective and philosophical 'mestiçagem' as central to the entire human condition. In answer to specific questions about his own cultural 'mestiçagem', as both African and European, he replies, 'todos somos feitos de várias intercessões, de várias vidas e culturas' resulting in a permanently transitional 'between-space' identification, a state of 'quase ser' (Couto 2006: 13). As this ontological state of 'quase ser' also maps out the indeterminacy of his linguistic hybridity, Couto goes on to remark, 'não é fácil saber como uma história, que ocorre no mundo da oralidade, pode ser escrita, sem ficar a perder. [...] é preciso deixar que a oralidade rasgue, refaça a página escrita, emergindo com a sua lógica e poesia' (2006: 14). In this violent metaphorical

encounter of oral and written cultures, the oral world with its own pre-ordained poetic logic, must be made to prevail in a struggle against its own cultural loss or death, so as to enter the realm of 'escrita, sem ficar a perder' (14). This oral world is always somehow both before and beyond, recaptured on the nostalgic point of vanishing by a written form that can never truly render the oral in its pure 'original' form. In this respect, it is worth recalling Ward's contentions that:

As Africa supplied the image of European civilized identity, [...] so too it supplied the logocentric notion of the 'other' language, behind its own language-identity: orality. Postulated as *the* monoglossic, originary (feminized, mater-ized) presence standing prior to and in opposition to writing, this notion of primitive orality reflects the dream of wholeness behind written languages. (1997: 123)

Where the oral world that Couto invokes remains profoundly imbricated in discourses of luso-African maternalism and *grand* mothering, it must be asked how far his linguistic hybridization practices reinforce a gendered 'coding in advance' that culturally masculinizes written Portuguese as the national literary language of Mozambique. As the remainder of this paper will endeavour to demonstrate, Couto's attachment to various forms of hyper-maternalism in his writing is more clearly revealed as a kind of strategic paternal disclaimer, when he is read alongside his female compatriot Paulina Chiziane, the first African woman novelist in Portuguese to emerge into major international prominence.

Where post-colonial male writers may ground their linguistic and cultural disaffiliation in Mudimbe's return to the 'superlative mother-of-all-mothers', this discourse finds itself coded in advance for women writers, such as Chiziane, by the oedipal manoeuvres of the male African (or Africanized) literary script. This in its turn complicates the woman writer's attempts to construct a female narrative subject at the intersection of written Portuguese language and oral African vernaculars. The figure of 'woman as writer' effectively finds itself reified as oral matrix in a way that militates against conscious female agency using linguistic hybridization to women's own political ends.

A particularly good example of the unselfconscious 'oral matrix' argument working to foreclose and gender-exoticize the critical reception of Paulina Chiziane is evident in the following comments by Luís Carlos Patraquim, although their author clearly intended them to be favourable. He describes her second novel *Ventos do Apocalipse* in terms of:

Uma dimensão telúrica, sem modismos literários, que impregna a própria matriz cultural da autora, uma respiração larga onde instância judicativa e ímpeto narrativo advêm directamente de uma oralidade como sabedoria primeira, matizando-se em registo diríamos elegíaco, poético. (1999: 3)

Counter to Patraquim's not-uncommon view, I will argue that Chiziane's narrative discourse weaves a knowing path in and out of oral/written intertextuality, in order to highlight both the gender politics of literacy, and the liberating and oppressive uses to which oral cultures and mythologies can be put. In this respect, Chiziane's insertion of Tsonga sayings and oral tales into Portuguese

literary settings serves precisely to expose the inventedness and contingency of essentialist maternal 'traditions' operating as the oral 'other' behind the written script. The contingent gendering of the oral/literature divide, and its different implications for masculine and feminine narrative dynamics, becomes even more evident in the comparative reading which follows, of two short stories by Couto and Chiziane: Mia Couto's 'Maria Pedra no cruzar dos caminhos' from his 2004 collection *O Fio das Missangas* and Paulina Chiziane's 'As Cicatrizes do Amor' written in 1989 and published in 1994.

'Maria Pedra no cruzar dos caminhos'

In 'Maria Pedra no cruzar dos caminhos', an African woman, Maria Pedra, has remained virgin and unmarried until the age of twenty two. Driven by desperation for sexual relations and a child, she makes her body available at the village crossroads at Chão Oco, to all comers to enjoy until exhausted after five days and nights she is brought back home by a neighbour to her house 'ali onde a praça se enche de luz, avistosa de todos, redonda como a vozearia da aldeia' (2004: 87). The visual roundness of the light in the square is linked to the oral, communicative fullness of village voices, collective gossip spreading their tales. The polyphony of the multiply-voiced village will narrate her experience and her 'truths' in a variety of different and conflicting ways. Some say no one touched her, others say that the same neighbour, who brought her home, took advantage of her himself 'anoitrevido'. Or, it is implied, maybe she received offers from so many men she was offended and had enough. Her mother, determined to maintain the monologic authority of her home, swears that her daughter returned home a virgin. The only written 'signs' to be discerned on her body appear to be tiny animal bites. For the next nine months, family and village alike keep their eyes fixed on her belly for signs of change and evidence of what really happened. Nothing emerges and Maria Pedra retains her usual cycle of domestic duties, cleaning, watering and carrying wood, 'o infinito ciclo do seu existir' (88). During this time she also, significantly, refuses to speak a word. In September, at the end of the suspect nine months, she gathers a bunch of rags and ties it to her waist to feign a pregnancy heading once again to the crossroads where she lies 'enroscada, pteridófitas' (88).

Warned of Maria Pedra's behaviour, her mother heads out to look for her but not before she has looked in the mirror and smoothed down her own waistline, grown fatter from the anxieties her daughter has brought upon her. The drunken, wheelchair-bound father meanwhile, remains in the house, his empty bottle indicative of the flaccid, non-speaking phallus, the inarticulacy of his drunken state. Raging at the male neighbour who has alerted them to Maria Pedra's wanderings, the alcoholic father argues '*você devia era arranjar-me uma garrafa de rodas!*' (89). Finding Maria Pedra at the crossroads, swathed in rags, the mother tries to persuade her to come home. She pulls at the concealing cloths in which Maria Pedra has wrapped herself and is drawn into a physical battle

with fists and nails flying, until blood runs down the leg of the mother who then discovers that her daughter is concealing a real, newborn baby boy. As the two generations of women lie side by side on the ground, the mother declares 'Esse filho é seu, Maria Pedra!' and Maria Pedra replies, 'Sossegue mãe, Eu digo que é meu' (90).

Key to Couto's cryptic account of an 'impossible' impregnation in this story is our understanding of the Greek-derived botanical term 'pteridófito', or pteridophyte in English, which he uses to describe the body of Maria Pedra when it is spread out at the crossroads for the second time.⁵ The pteridophyte order of plants, comprising ferns, horsetails and clubmosses, is distinguished by its peculiar and unique mode of reproduction. Unlike flowering plants which emerged considerably later in the evolutionary cycle, and possess their own systems of bisexual fertilization through pollination, pteridophytes such as ferns possess neither seeds nor flowers. Their life cycle must pass, instead, through two distinct reproductive phases, the first completely asexual and the second sexual. Thus, according to the botanist, Michael Chinery:

Clouds of spores are scattered in dry weather but they do not grow directly into new fern plants. [...] Each grows into a little green heart-shaped plate called a *prothallus*. The sex organs are borne on this and, in damp conditions, male cells are released to swim to the female cells which remain embedded in the plate. After fertilization, the female cell grows into a new fern plant, drawing food from the prothallus at first, and then putting down its own roots. (1982: 355)

Precisely because they must go through not one but two alternating generations in order to live and reproduce, pteridophyte plants are often well adapted to survival in changeable and hostile conditions, because the asexual *prothallus* phase of the plant may live independently for several years before encountering conditions moist enough to trigger the second, sexual, phase that completes the cycle.⁶

Returning to Couto's Maria Pedra, it is notable that she is described not only as 'pteridófito' but also repeatedly as 'enroscada' (88; 89) as if she were curled up like the fronds of a fern plant. Her name appears to embody both fertility and infertility, the symbolic western maternalism of Maria combined with the apparent physical barrenness of rock or 'pedra'. Maria Pedra (and the Mother with whom she struggles) prove able to generate from within their own bodies not only new creatures, but bisexuality itself, the very first principle of heterosexual reproductivity. Thus, the asexual phase, in which the virgin Maria Pedra waits for her fertilization at the crossroads, ultimately gives way to a form of spontaneous bisexualization (real or imaginary) that produces a child without any obvious signs of intercourse or human gestation on her body. The displace-

5 It should be remembered in this context that Mia Couto is also a professional biologist and for much of his adult life worked as a lecturer in biosciences at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. This precise botanical reference, therefore, is unlikely to be a gratuitous one.

6 See Peter Thompson 1989: 107.

ment of masculine agency in reproduction through sexual difference, finds itself further reaffirmed in the figure of Maria Pedra's father. As a permanent drunk in a wheelchair, the father is literally and metaphorically legless. His empty alcohol bottle and his comically impotent desire for a 'garrafa de rodas' are the signs of a castrated and denied African paternity.

The father is cared for by the equally ambivalent figure of the neighbour, whom the villagers believed had taken advantage of Maria Pedra. Yet his parting words to Maria Pedra's mother as she goes in search of her daughter suggest a different type of relationship to the family altogether, as he calls after her, 'vá, à vontade. Eu tomo conta aqui do nosso homem' (89). His implied sharing of 'nosso homem' with the mother indicates his allegiance to an all-male pairing with the father. Standing apart from Maria Pedra and her mother in the collapse of bisexual sociality, the father's empty bottle, his absence of moisture, has left his family unproductive and degenerate.

It is the closing physical battle between the two women that brings forth the male child that Maria Pedra has somehow created and now orally claims as her 'own'. The regenerative force of orature is thus produced in the absence of paternal agency. The normal, mammalian sign of the maternal, the belly expanding from within, is here replaced by a kind of prosthesis, an accretion, the bundle of rags attached from the outside. In the terms of the pteridophyte plant cycle, it recalls the *prothallus*, a casting out of spores that are genetically identical to their own origins, from which sexual difference itself, denied in Maria Pedra's ambivalent mother/father couple, will subsequently be reborn.⁷ Blurring the boundaries between mother and grandmother, the story renders them both as pure biological 'matter' or grounding (terra) on which the myth of orature behind writing may reproduce and re-root itself as a necessary fiction, after the fact. By the same token, the child itself, elliptically described as a 'recém-recente', reflects back a primal form of orality, Maria Pedra's 'eu digo que é meu', rather than vice versa. Maria Pedra's flesh thus becomes her word, in a usurped and inverted annunciation, whereby the Mother unfertilized by man spontaneously re-roots herself as a Mother-Land.

The 'Chão Oco' is empty like the father's phallic 'garrafa' but unlike the father's 'garrafa', it is imaginatively able to refill itself with internalized oral tales. The fullness of the villagers' disparate oral histories, the 'vozearia' of rumour thus coheres into a singular, physical truth replenishing the emptiness of the 'Chão Oco' on which Maria Pedra procreates. The grandmother-mother-child continuity gestures nostalgically back towards the idealization of the oral matrix at the same time as it projects a future of fertility and natalism that is bound ever more closely to the hyper-biologized body of woman as pure vegetal matter. Women no longer bear the predominant burden of reproduction in this story, they bear all of it. Redeeming and regenerating against all odds the insufficiency of conventional, male-authored, bisexual paternity, Maria Pedra's miraculous

7 The term *prothallus* derives from 'pro' meaning before and 'thallus' referring to a plant-body that has no vascular tissue and is not differentiated into root, stem and leaves.

maternity guarantees the national future as the very future of reproductivity itself, even if it will take, like the pteridophyte plant, more than one generation to bring it to fruition.

Celeste Fraser Delgado has noted in her work on motherhood in Kenyan nationalism that the nationalist idealization of the Motherland as the origin, the virginal mother-form, and the 'full presence' behind written language, 'always threatens slippage into the reproductive practices of women in Kenya' (1997: 132). But, as she goes on to point out, the so-called originary Motherland is always a fiction, 'a screen covering a colonial past, a post-colonial present, and an uncertain future' (1997: 133). Thus the drive to post-colonial nationhood that evokes this prior origin, relies 'not upon the "fiction of a pure present," but a fiction of a purified future: an imaginary of fertility' (1997: 133). As noted in the introduction, it is conversely the reproductive history of hybridity that drives Couto's national fiction of futurity in lusophone colonial and post-colonial contexts but the emphasis remains none the less on maternal fertility. In light of this, my reading of Paulina Chiziane seeks to ask how women writers, drawing on oral and written cultures, express their materially located experiences as African mothers in post-independence Mozambique, from behind the linguistic screen, the imaginary of fertility, that the post-colonial desire for the hybrid national Mother/land continues to erect?

As Cicatrizes do Amor

Chiziane's short story 'As Cicatrizes do Amor' first appeared in a multi-authored collection called *O Conto Moçambicano. Da Oralidade à Escrita*, edited and produced in Brazil in 1994 by Maria Luisa Godinho and Lourenço do Rosário. The explicit concern of the two editors in this collection of oral tales, written tales, and 'contos de transição' is to emphasize the importance of a shared literary matrix in the ongoing production of Mozambican nationhood, as they remark 'Moçambique tem procurado afinadamente modelos que consolidem a ideia de unidade nacional, por isso, não pode deixar de recorrer ao fenómeno literário onde se projeta a matriz desse imaginário, através dos universos criados por poetas e prosadores' (Godinho and Rosário 1994: 10). Chiziane's contribution to this volume, placed in the written literature rather than the orature section, mirrors Couto's predominant themes in 'Maria Pedra' in reverse parallel.

Here the real maternal relation of a mother to her daughter not son is not affirmed but denied. Oral culture is heard, absorbed and rewritten by a female listener. The act of telling the story itself is cast not as concealment in layers of disguise, but as the public striptease of myths and images revealing for re-interpretation a series of scars and tattoos on the taboo female body. This in turn marks out the space of a female oral/literary polyglossia, reproduced by the story's first person female listener/narrator, who eventually identifies with the 'confessional' tale she is hearing.

The story opens with a convivial group of people enjoying an evening of

drinking in a bar. The ominous sign of crows calling outside is ignored and the atmosphere grows livelier. The oral banter of the party takes a new turn, however, when it is interrupted by a piece of print, an old newspaper story, about two women who abandoned their children. The condemnation of the women as 'doidas' is met with various responses, including the common Marxist retort, that the economic hardship of the PRE is the root cause of the women's actions.⁸ The bar's female owner, Maria, refuses to condemn the women as she rejects the age-old cultural manicheism of woman as good and evil stating, 'a maldade nasceu antes da humanidade. A culpa cabe às mães mas é de toda a sociedade' (129). Emboldened by her own intervention, Maria begins to tell the assembled group her own life story, which is similar to the one in the newspaper. In response to a male listener, who dismisses the women as either drunk or stoned, Maria replies 'o que vocês não sabem [...] é que cada nascimento tem uma história e cada acção, uma razão' (129).

Meanwhile, the tale's female listener, the first person narrator, pays attention to the tale that she will later relay into writing. The story begins with Maria not being allowed to marry the man she loved. When she falls pregnant by him, she runs away to South Africa because her father, the local *régulo*, throws her out in disgrace. Her female listener/re-narrator intervenes at this point to say that Maria's sorry tale is a common female experience stating 'o que aqui se conta, está a acontecer agora!, em qualquer parte do mundo' (130), adopting a female perspective of identification that refracts the negative universal gaze of the male commentators, affirming a collective maternal experience in its stead. The sharing of the oral narrative is also expressed as a moment of physical connection between the women. The listener becomes also a viewer who addresses Maria as 'tu'. While she watches the listening men 'watching' the striptease act, that accompanies the revelation of Maria's past secrets, she remarks:

E tu bailas, Maria, o streep-tease das batucadas da tua amargura que a embriaguez revolveu-te a lingua! Desatas o lenço e a capulana. Da blusa já levantada, espreitam os seios surrados de mil beijos, desfraldas as cortinas dos teus segredos, és indecente, Maria! (130)

Maria's striptease dance for the men, accompanied by the telling of her secret story, widens the narrative's gap between masculine and feminine receptions of oral discourse. In the alternating commentaries provided by the female listener, Maria's personal recollections expand into a physical reincarnation, a re-enactment of events not for the men present, but for the women, that goes beyond memory or nostalgia, as it 'ultrapassa o limiar de uma recordação. É uma revivência' (131). Thus the narrator's intervention, 'és indecente, Maria!' echoes a conventional condemnation of Maria's sexual performance for the men, at the same time as it re-appropriates this bodily performance as a moment of female self-recognition. Thus, the charge of 'indecentcy' also refers semi-ironically back

8 PRE was the acronym for the 'Programa de Reabilitação Económica', the structural adjustment plan imposed by the IMF in 1987, towards the end of the Marxist-Leninist period. Chiziane's story was written in 1989.

to Maria's daring to speak and relive her own oral history in public at all. The ultimate taboo challenge to the maternal ideal is posed when Maria reveals how she had almost been driven to kill her own offspring.

When her child became ill in South Africa, Maria was afraid to be found in a foreign land with a dead baby in her arms and condemned for killing it. Consequently, she tried to throw it in a ditch or find a place to bury it. Remarking that she cannot return it to her own body where it came from, she finds a bush in which to hide it. However, an old woman finds her and takes her to her home. Although Maria still tries, in desperation, to get rid of her sick daughter in the latrine, she cannot escape the old woman's vigilant gaze. Once the child is taken care of, it makes a miraculous recovery. Meanwhile Maria's female listener is driven to recall her own similar life history as she listens to the story. Thus the initial unity of the social group, drawn together by shared assumptions of the maternal ideal, finds itself fragmented and reconstituted along gender lines as the listening narrator asks 'quem somos nós? Em quantos vendavais nos espiralamos até galgar o degrau do presente?' (132).

Having stripped herself of personal shame by telling her secrets, Maria's dancing body is refashioned not as a singular, fetishized oral memory but as the very breakdown of oral mythology that now finds itself translated back into a host of individual oral, and potentially written, tales by and about women. The multiple tattoos on the surface of her skin become the proliferation of written, physical signs that are 'as mais secretas e as mais sagradas do teu mundo' (132). Finally Maria tells how she escaped exploitation in the foreign country, returned home to find true love, and has two grandchildren by the daughter she had once tried to get rid of. Through the agency of the surrogate 'mother' figure, the old woman in South Africa who rescued her, Maria has become an actual grand mother, but conspicuously not Mudimbe's mythological *grand* mother. Meanwhile, throughout Maria's performance, another unnoticed listener to the tale has been sitting beside her. It is finally disclosed that this is her own daughter who had not previously known her mother's thoughts of infanticide and rejection.

Just as Couto's story reveals a child of unknown origin, so Chiziane's reveals a child who did not know what had almost been her destiny. The story concludes 'na caserna de Maria há uma mulher que chora, e os soluços sincronizam com a makwayela das palmeiras' (133). The dark natural omens that were gathering at the beginning of the tale are now apparently fulfilled by the tragedy of Maria's life history that dispels the joyous atmosphere. However, the oral culture to which these omens belong has now been appropriated by the female voice, not as the instrumentally unitary space behind male written authority, but as a poly-oral and poly-aural form of expression. This woman-centred re-embodiment of speech reforms and transposes the gendered binaries of writing and speech, in a move to make literature a space of women's counter-expression to the authority of the press. The resulting text, Chiziane's 'conto', renders a collective female experience, multiply mediated by women who decentre the universal maternal

myth with which the story began. It therefore points beyond the boundaries of written literature to a female oral narrative, not of memory or nostalgia, but of autobiographical witness, of somatic ‘revivência’ (Chiziane 1994: 131) that is not simply a blank screen on which the Mother Land can be engendered. Thus the story’s ending marks not the (feminized) wholeness of a universal human subject concealing unacknowledged or disavowed masculinity, but the material and historical differences of women, connecting their experiences on their own terms, no longer automatically available for (m)othering the self-alienation of a paternalist male written culture in its response to colonial and post-colonial conditions.

Conclusion

One important corollary of Chiziane’s female-voiced reclamation of the oral sphere has been the reluctance of critics to validate in her work the linguistic innovation and oral hybridization that is the trademark of Couto. As we saw with the critique from Luís Carlos Patraquim, Chiziane can ‘be’ orality but it seems she cannot be allowed to ‘use’ orality on quite the same terms as her male counter parts do. This is particularly evident when critics discuss her use of the Portuguese language, treating orature not as a consciously manipulated act of choice but as the ‘natural’ primary sphere by which she, as a ‘woman writer’, comes to be ‘written’ by men. Referring to her ‘lack’ of linguistic rigour in Portuguese and her ‘digamos “imperfeições”’ the *Expresso* critic José da Silva Moreira writes:

Falta de domínio de português, dirão uns. Excessos de emoção envolvidos na temática, perdoarão outros. Fica a dúvida sobre se esses pormenores se devem justificar pelo estilo, se se devem aceitar até como uma linguagem própria dos escritores mais jovens moçambicanos.

Quando Paulina Chiziane se obrigar a um rigor maior junto ao seu talento indiscutível de contadora de histórias, facilmente ascenderá à qualidade de ‘terceira mosqueteira’ da literatura moçambicana, a par de Mia Couto e Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa. (2000: 22)

Stressing her emotionalism and her lack of capacity for self-consciously innovative lexical strategies, da Silva Moreira moves to assimilate her style to a proper (male) literary standard. As the guardian of that standard, Mia Couto has certainly done much to conquer and tame the ‘grande dama’ of European Portuguese literary language, with the ‘mil colorações’ of Mozambican cultural expression. However, it is in the works of Chiziane that we find the first sustained awareness of and challenge to the matricial politics that that project has entailed. A further consequence of this, which is ever more relevant as Chiziane grows in international stature, concerns who is to be considered as ‘real and authentic’ in the representation of a Mozambican national literature abroad.

Where the singularity of a “market” national language signalled the ration-

alization of the market economy as well as the nation as a political unit' (Ward 1997: 120), both Couto and Chiziane have relied on their strategies of African vernacularization to mediate and invigorate the perceived singularity of Portuguese as Mozambique's rationalized, market language. They have done so, however, to significantly different ends and effects. Couto's controlled explosions of linguistic estrangement, which involve both the poetic recasting of everyday Portuguese words and code switching into African languages, trace a circuit of alienation and familiarity in which a metropolitan-centred, print-based Lusofonia reflects upon and reinforces itself, through a carefully staged proximity to its imagined oral exclusions. Chiziane, on the other hand, plays hide and seek with the exotic feminization of the oral sphere, exposing in the process the continuity that links colonial and post-colonial masculinities in a national literary fraternity of 'Africanized' language-innovation still largely in thrall to a gendered lusotropical ideal of mixing, that the body of woman may rhetorically enable but is not conventionally allowed to speak.

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