Conclusions to Part III

Following the critical guidelines defined in part I, the above Lusophone texts were read with the intention of extracting from their lines a set of arguments and suggestions which contribute to perfect and enhance available feminist theories and our shared universe of references concerning the perception of women’s issues in their different shades across geo-political, situated, cultural locations.

A feminist reading of Chiziane’s novel had the merit of refining one’s sensitivity to women’s problems in post-war Mozambique. As priority in rehabilitation agendas, Chiziane claims the re-integration of older women, without family or clan connections, isolated in a kind of society where sense of identity is deeply communal and collective. This particular problem, less obvious than rape and displacement, is a good example of the extra value of the sensitive accounts offered by fictional micro-worlds, because seen through the “embodied experiences” of a particular character, the set of topics the writer decided to address illustrate unexpected angles of more general problems. Through literature, highly complex and abstract issues become personal, “felt” accounts, and new complications and implications are revealed.

As the reader follows Minosse, through loss, dislocation and terror, one confronts the impact of war on elderly women, whose struggle to survive is not compensated by eventual peace of mind and gradual re-integration. In close-knit family structures, in a rural landscape, there is not much a society can offer a childless individual, unrelated to any local clan. Without children and a house to care for (the two time structuring and meaningful activities for village women), survival often leaves women with a depressive emptiness. The subtle and enlightening argument of Ventos do Apocalipse is not that women suffer more than men. The point is that they have fewer opportunities to start again since the ageing body is not coded as eligible for a second marriage (and the corresponding integration in a new clan). The adoption of street kids is a happy and meaningful twist of the plot, while it also leads the reader to consider this other sad heritage of war.

It may seem that the particular perception of women’s problems only amounts to a small shift in the comprehension of the overall picture, but it is a necessary shift because the problems of invisibility and exclusion of the ageing body are a current issue in post-war contexts, and the subtlety of these problems is what makes them escape identification from a point of view which is not gender oriented. While the recovering society easily accepts that older men start new lives with younger women, for older women, although this possibility is equally sanctioned, the problem is that a second wedding is often a difficult option due to the preference for younger brides. This amounts to say that women will need extra forms of support.

Another topic of feminist interest in the novel is the sanctioned violence showered upon women by traditional power structures. In the social world represented by Paulina Chiziane to beat a woman is so usual that no available social code refrains men from doing it. For instance, in the “lobolo” ceremony, if the bride does not accept the groom after the “good mannered first attempt” at convincing the girl with words, beating and insult are taken as the obvious optional method to make the young woman conform to “the law” of the group.

It is remarkable the choice of the writer to address such unexpected angles in the frame of post-war Mozambique (the ageing body and sanctioned physical violence), because Chiziane refrains from representing rape and kidnapping, the other two forms of abuse of the women’s body that are already acknowledged and dealt with by governmental rehabilitation
efforts. That is probably the reason why she dealt with these subtler matters, expanding the reader’s perception beyond the more stereotypical, expected problems.

The intertextual resonance between the pieces written by Dina Salústio and Orlanda Amarilis confirm the representation of the archipelago of Cape Verde as a more liberated location than India or Mozambique. The high degree of mobility that characterises the lifestyle of the islands breaks with the permanence of tight forms of social control, because these can be escaped while abroad. Nevertheless, both writers react against a too tight communal life in the small town atmosphere of the archipelago, where the shelter provided by a certain anonymity would be welcome. Dina Salústio goes further than Amarilis in her impatience with the narrow horizon of insular mentalities creating a very provocative and even insulting allegory against communities that are not open to changes and innovation.

Orlanda Amarilis also defends the necessity of accepting changes, moving along the spirit of the time. By representing strong generation gaps between characters, Amarilis marks the volatile nature of codes of respectability that once were unquestionable. The different mentalities displayed by older and younger characters suggest that the more liberated atmosphere of the archipelago may be a recent acquisition, especially because she includes in the represented social world a reference to “respectable families” with a conservative influence in society. Dina Salústio repeats this same snapshot of high-class prejudice associating the preservation of women’s purity to the assertion of social borders, creating distance from lower, “undisciplined” classes. Because of remarkable similarities in their representation of the archipelago, both Cape Verdean writers reinforce each other’s voice.

The three Lusophone writers addressed here seem more connected to the problems of working class people and less favoured sectors of the society than their Indo-English counterparts. This was the biggest difference between the two groups of writers, apart from those that are a reflex of a distinctive socio-cultural context. The everyday struggle for survival was definitively more visible in the Lusophone texts, in more basic and pragmatic forms.

With the exception of Dina Salústio, the writers addressed in part III seem more concerned to write collectively shared problems, investing less in individual sensitivity and private self-awareness as strategies of feminist resistance.

While among the Indian writers, Ghita Hariharan is the “professional myth-maker”, in the Lusophone set, it is Dina Salústio who creates new figurations. Her madwoman and her companion midwife reverse established sexist prejudice, claiming the worth of unreason and women’s closeness to nature and its cycles as forms of empowerment.

The postcolonial component of this study shifted the way I looked at collective patterns of identity in the represented societies, not so exclusively attuned to the position of women. Although both critical points of view are related, they direct my attention to different details.

In Ilhéu dos Pássaros an anthology of short stories marked by mobility between the archipelago and other countries, Orlanda Amarilis gradually composes a stable image of Cape Verde, as it is remembered from abroad or from a past period. In this way, Orlanda Amarilis elaborates a notion of Cape Verdean identity that incorporates mobility and de-territorialisation (in fact, the experience of emigration of half of its citizens) by becoming an “imagined community”, as emulated by the constant memories of “home” that haunt all the characters of the short stories. Secondly, the amiable Creole culture represented by Amarilis negotiates its hybrid identity in non-problematic ways reflecting on the wrongs of its
colonial past while it asserts its half African identity. Thirdly, the clearest hedge of resistance in the anthology comes from the inscription of continuities between colonial period and postcolonial consolidation, with the same histories of dispossession and privilege. This continuity spells out neo-colonial threats, projecting the necessity of the same activist attitude of the past liberation struggle for the future self-preservation of the archipelago.

Dina Salústio writes a fantastic text that is less limited to the realities of the Cape Verde. The ideas she discusses have a more general range of application as they can be meaningful to analyse any isolated community, committed to the deliberate preservation of insularity, not as a geographical matter to be compensated by improved means of travelling, but as mental barriers that close people to the “other”, and the new ideas the confrontation with otherness may bring.

At the same time, the tense relationship between city and village, the central dichotomy in her novel, invites reflection on the increasing gap between urban centres of decision and planning, and the marginal rural communities, ever more detached from the “big” urban world. While the novel encourages villagers to transgress borders and join the city, taking part in the full complexity of modern life (for the rewards it brings are worth the anxiety of adaptation), it also unfolds a critical argument against the way the urban world of the XXth century is dismissive of the fragility and the rights of communities under its guard.

Paulina Chiziane’s representation of the plight of war as the Apocalypse for the people of Mozambique establishes once more the power of literature to promote insights on complex realities. I can only praise her willingness to confront readers with a view of recent events the impact of which is so immense.

As a piece of postcolonial literature, Chiziane’s novel posed interesting theoretical challenges as it contradicted some of the main categories in the postcolonial frame presented in part I. In the first place, any contribution to international dialogues devoted to a western revision of colonial mentalities, reflection on past history and resistance to neo-colonial practices, though mentioned in isolated passages, are virtually absent from the main themes addressed by Chiziane. This matter was easily settled because there is an intra-national dimension to postcolonial literatures which functions in an autonomous way, beyond “writing back” to the west. Still, though she deals with the local national context, Chiziane does not offer nationalist arguments. On the contrary, her novel is a stern critique to the civilian price paid by “the nation” in its management of power rivalries in relation to neighbour countries. Yet again, Chiziane produces discourses that are very relevant to consolidate a sense of collective identity in Mozambique as she represents the fusion of different clans of villagers, helping each other as refugees. This is a very important idea because it encourages hope and the effort at healing deep internal scars, balancing internal (ethnic and regional) rivalries enhanced by civil war.

Another relevant point to consider Ventos do Apocalipse from a postcolonial perspective is to analyse the way it deals with issues of identity, self-assertion and self-definition, bearing in mind that postcolonial literatures have deconstructed cultural borders between communities with the same energy as they map and promote them. This ambivalence is very visible in emigrant writing, connected to diaspora and to the expression of experiences of de-territorialisation. It is less common on narratives of consolidation and self-assertion. Chiziane’s novel handled a similar contradiction, between writing the destruction of the nation and asserting its identity, in a very interesting way, as her effort at recording disappearing traditions and rituals establishes a cultural heritage that projects a past identity to the future. At the same time, while writing about war, Chiziane represents the suspension of functional patterns of collective identity among displaced and traumatised communities.
The bitter tone of the last novel about Mozambique reproduces a more general change of mood in the current second generation of postcolonial writers, especially in post-war African contexts where the disappointment in relation to the liberation ideals is widespread.

Finally, a note on the appropriation of the Portuguese language by these postcolonial writers: while Paulina Chiziane and Orlanda Amarílis insert terms from local languages in their texts in Portuguese, creating a dialogue between the two linguistic systems, Dina Salústio writes standard Portuguese, erasing deliberate appropriation from her text.