

Abstract: Verbs of movement reflect our identity's common denominator, such as to leave, to exit, to emigrate, to seek, to go in search. So much has been said of our *situatedly* Portuguese modernity that, in order to be great, we must wander outside our own dreams. We returned from our colonial and colonising saga with our mind and imagination already filled with imaginary baggage, of other centres, other 'discoveries' to be narrated. The Portuguese postcoloniality, although very anchored in the rhetoric of imperial nostalgia, restores, in a watchful gaze, these new movements and identity 'pilgrimages'. This paper seeks to develop a critical reading of the novel by Dulce Maria Cardoso, *O Retorno* (The Return), to critically reflect on the prefix 'post' in our recently conquered postcoloniality. It also seeks to incorporate a reflection on Portugal's place in the historic encounter with modernity and the centrality that resulted from 'docking' with Europe, denouncing the ambivalence and the exotopy with which the country represents and defines itself. At stake are the identity meanings produced in a context of sudden political and cultural transitions, which reveal a historical ballast comprising imperial imaginations and the lessening of the country within Europe and on the road of modernity. Between the return of imaginary empires and the illusions of new routes to old centres, the country renews its eternal cycle of returns and departures, symbolically digesting its losses in a process of identity autophagy.

Keywords: Returns; Identities; Imagination; Europe; Post-coloniality.

1. Escape, Escape, Escape

Partha Chatterjee, albeit in reference to the Indian colonial experience (1997), evokes the pillars of the contemporary history of colonialism in his essay "Our Modernity" by noting that: "let us remind ourselves that there was a time that modernity was put forward as the strongest argument in favour of the continued colonial subjection" (Chatterjee, 1997:19). It would be fallacious to fall into the naive temptation of believing that various modernities and colonialities are over. This observation is proposed as a challenge to consider "O Retorno" (The Return) by Dulce Maria Cardoso (2011) as a fictional essay that discusses not only the historical, political and cultural modernities/colonialities, but in a very unique and prolific manner the coexistence of several other modernities/colonialities, which are imaginary and subjective. In this latest novel by Dulce Maria Cardoso there is a clear desire to embrace the difficult experiences of many 'returnees' in this Other-Portugal that is decolonising, through the lives of a Portuguese

Returns and departures: the exotopic imagination of post-colonial Portugal

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family that has long been rooted in Luanda; the main character, a teenager named Rui, uses the space and time of his memory and the memory of those who accompany him throughout this experience of exile and uprooting to narrate the pain and hurt caused by leaving his land of affections, of identity origin, the basis of his own ontology, with his mother and sister. Upon arriving in Portugal, this Other-Portugal but of metropole, Rui, along with his family and other ‘returnee’ families, is faced with a grim and macabre scenario of this Portugal-metropole. It is up to the autodiegetic narrator to deconstruct, on the one hand, the greatness and grandeur of an imaginary map that transforms the nation into a territorial force that crossed seas, land and the actual imagination of those who believed, then, that Portugal was not a ‘small country’. And, on the other hand, to reveal in a raw and critical way the aporia of the prefix ‘post’ in Portuguese postcoloniality and postcolonialism.

If the narrative of “O Retorno” serves as a drive to rescue from the Portuguese historical oblivion the experiences and difficulties of integration, assimilation and social acceptance that many who the former empire crudely nicknamed ‘returnees’ (*retornados*) went through – “those here call us spilled (*entornados*) to make fun of us, they were spilled here, they must think they’re funny”* (Cardoso, 2011:128); it also serves as a lucid and attentive X-ray of the historical and mnemonic voids (see Calafate, 2012; Khan, 2012) that the Portuguese postcolonialism cultivated as an attempt to sublimate and postpone the pain of colonial loss, that sea of wreckages and human versions of a failed modernity, a reflection of a labile colonial centre defeated by its own boundless imagery, without a vision of the future, and without the historical ability and efficiency to incorporate into its contemporaneity the subjective stories/histories (Khan, 2011), which are no less relevant than History, whether about the Portuguese colonisation and colonialism, or the process of decolonisation and the postcolonial turn towards the European universe. A metonymy of a nation shrouded in its own mythical fog of adventures and discoveries, Rui cannot escape the chronic disease of this nation-ship, which is conducted if not outside itself, in territorial or even imaginary travels. With great fictional agility, Dulce Maria Cardoso confronts us with the challenge of, through Rui, thinking of this Portugal of post-coloniality, a challenge that is written in Rui’s desire to ‘escape’, ‘leave’, ‘exit’ (Buescu, 2008) the ‘prison’ he feels he is in, and vividly channels his thoughts to South Africa and Brazil:

I understand that father did not want to go to America, it must be hard to make a living in America without knowing English, but I do not understand that he did not want to go to Brazil, which is similar to Angola, Mr. Fernando wrote a letter from Rio de Janeiro and said it was just like Luanda, with warm sea water and rain that makes you want to dance, a blessed land like Angola was, a land that allows everything that is sown in it to grow. João Comunista also went to Brazil but never sent any news, I hope he is well and no longer ashamed of the empire or of being Portuguese, it must be annoying to be embarrassed to live with something you cannot change* (Cardoso, 2011: 243-244).

It is by feeding this imagination, that drive and aspiration visible in both Rui – “when we’re in Brazil my sister will like to straighten her curls again and make herself look pretty for parties, to read graphic novels, in Brazil it isn’t cold and there is fruit like we had there [refers to Angola, Luanda], my sister can eat the pitangas she wants”* (*Ibidem*, 2011:150) – and in the nation that is recycled in its new imaginations, that new regenerating spaces are erected like new oxygen of a nation-vessel that initiates its pendulum, ambiguous and almost obtuse voyage, as it turns to its lost Africa, and then turns and imagines itself as a new and modern European country. Rightly, the Mozambican writer Mia Couto in one of his novels, also about the journey and the travels of men, nations and cultures, candidly warns us about the following:

The journey does not begin when distances are travelled, but when we cross our inner borders. The

journey happens when we wake up outside the body, away from the last place where we could have a home* (Couto, 2006:77).

2. Docking like one who leaves

It was not just a chronological coincidence or a political inevitability that determined the change of direction in Portugal's historic journey of the late 20th century. If decolonisation, that fizzling end of the empire, with bags packed hastily and sluggish goodbyes, and the desire to merge with Europe coincided, it would have been because both symmetrical sides of the identity imagination of a country historically oriented outwards. It is true that the empire, with the many names from which it was purged, was an archaism and a political and economic impossibility. It is also true that the Portuguese were submissive to, if not convinced about, a war to defend territories that were little more than exotic to them, and that ideologically carved a grandiose and singular self-definition. It was therefore difficult to disengage and understand the tethers of the remains of a five-century empire and, above all, it was hard to know what to make of it. How could Portugal be seen as a postcolonial country if the very notion of colonialism had metamorphosed in the last decades of Salazar's and Caetano's dictatorship? How to return from the ruins of war and the land that had been *civilised* with minimal damage, i.e. without pain and without guilt? We venture to say that the answer is a dual process of reorganising the identity of the country that served to defend itself from the chaos: the silence and the exotopy.

“O Retorno”, by Dulce Maria Cardoso, among a few other works that in recent decades have revisited the war and decolonisation, highlights precisely the silencing these experiences were subjected to by underlining the insurmountable boundaries between those who lived them and those who did not want to know they were being lived by the ‘others’, the ‘returnees’. But beyond the specifically more subjective level of this process, it is worth noting the collective amnesia that drew a cloak of forgetfulness and indifference over these processes. Eduardo Lourenço is accurate and clairvoyant in this way he exposes that paroxysmal moment of the country's recent history, where several crises converge and, yet, the weight of the empire unexpectedly dissipates:

Thirteen years of colonial war, abrupt collapse of that Empire, seemed to be events destined not only to create a *deep trauma* – analogous to the loss of independence – but an in-depth rethinking of the *whole of our image to ourselves and in the mirror of the world*. However, we all witnessed this surprising spectacle: neither one thing nor the other took place. (...) Such a spectacular event as the collapse of a five-hundred year ‘empire’, whose ‘possession’ seemed co-essential to our historical reality and moreover a part of our *corporal, ethical and metaphysical image as Portuguese*, ended *without drama** (Lourenço, 1988: 42-43).

Considering the ironic *serenity* with which the colonial issue was laid to rest, as if it were a history file and it were possible to put it away in a box, without flesh, without voices, without mess, Eduardo Lourenço speaks of a “*realistic adjustment of Portugal to itself*”* (1988: 44), where “everything seemed to pass as if we never had this notorious ‘imperial’ existence and the return to the narrow and dusky walls of the ‘small Lusitanian house’ in no way affected us”* (1988 : 38). To put it differently, we did not lose the empire, we forgot the empire. An empire that was always more imagined than concrete in the national identity configuration, “this empire that is not marked on maps”* (Silva, 1988: 90) and that remained distant and ex-centric to all those who had no experience of it. The empire that was imagined was much more the idea of *portugals* scattered throughout the world, *lusotopia* as *ecumene*, of which João Pina-Cabral talks (2010). When reality dissolved this imaginary empire there

was little, therefore, to preserve. Except all those who, because they are not imaginary, but people of flesh and soul, seemed to be the remains that did not know what physical or symbolic place they belonged to, and who were, for the spell of forgetfulness not to be broken, *gently assimilated*, that is to say, their disparate narratives destined to silence, to oblivion and invisibility.

The second process that accompanies the moment of decolonisation and rotation towards Europe is the exotopic nature embedded in national identity. By this we mean the tendency to be outside the space-time one actually belongs to and, consequently, to decentre identifications and ambitions. The place where one is, essentially, the mirror of the place one desires and one believes to belong to. In her analysis of the structuring elements of national identity in Portuguese literature, Isabel Allegro Magalhães (1995: 192) shows how exotopy is a deep imprint of how the country thinks of itself as outside itself – “a constant sense of being on a threshold, the feeling of never getting where you want, of never achieving what you desire, of never getting there: the experience of missing out, or falling short, of that truly desire”*. In fact, the author mentions that post-1974 literature

almost does not have, as in previous decades and centuries, characters that travel or seek beyond the doors of the country the craved novelty or an attractive otherness. (...) Even though there are a considerable number of novels with characters who travel, most of their journeys are now their homecoming, their return to the motherland: journeys of emigrants arriving from European countries, of soldiers coming from former colonies, of exiles returning from abroad, of returnees disembarking from Africa. They come back in search of their land: Portugal. But these arrivals, apparently the end of the completed circle of a trip, or its happy ending, result in an arrival at nowhere, or at the same and emptied place from which they set off. (...) There are many novels in which the Portuguese reality after ‘74 is described and narrated in their precarious hopes, and especially in their frustrations and rapid disappointments, without any nationalistic emotion. A reality traversed by empty or violent relationships, by ambiguous commitments, by a total lack of perspective* (Magalhães, 1995: 195-196).

How can the exotopic inclination of national thinking help to understand the anesthetised overcoming of the trauma of the loss of empire? Because leaving continues to be the solution, even when one considers returning. When the 1974 revolution definitively closes the imperial chapter of the Portuguese history, the moment of return to the continental perimeter from where we had left five centuries is now, too, a moment of ex-centricity. Symbolically, it was not possible to stay. Without answers from the Atlantic side, it came without surprises or anxieties that the national *oracle of destiny* turned towards the continent. In reality, this was an artery of departure and escape already opened by the haemorrhage of emigration. Europe comes to us, therefore, as a new narrative of dockage, in so far as “European integration represented the holy bath of a country newly reborn”* (Ribeiro, 2011b: 123). For this reason, Miguel Real states (1998: 96) after Eduardo Lourenço, that Europe was for Portugal the “Great Normaliser, giving us the simultaneous image of our smallness as a country incorporated into it, but also of our greatness for being part of it”*. After centuries of remoteness in relation to the European political and economic space, the country sought its modernity in the united Europe that stood for development and prosperity.

Europe thus became the new “imagination of the centre”. According to Boaventura Sousa Santos (1994: 58), since the end of the colonial empire, “Portugal entered a period of renegotiation of its position in the world system, seeking for itself a base to fill the void left by the collapse of the empire. (...) to be with Europe is to be like Europe”*. Moreover, the decentralisation that imperial expansion implied was not solved by joining what was then the European Community, which became another decentralisation, as explains eloquently by Boaventura Sousa Santos (1994: 136)

But interestingly the creation of the national cultural space is contradictory, because it occurs in the same process in which Portugal becomes a region, an area of Europe. Within less than twenty years, the transnationality of colonial space was transferred to intra-European transnationality (...). The historical difficulty in coherently configuring an intermediate cultural spatio-temporality is hereby confirmed.*

Nevertheless, the decentralisation in favour of a new realignment, with Europe, was still undertaken with the same ambiguities with which the atlantic, imperial vocation was reflexively incorporated into the *corpus* of national identity. The identification with Europe as a historical place for Portugal toils in misconceptions and in the fragility of a pragmatic, instrumental and commercial link with Europe, as an opportunity for affirmation and modernisation. With regard to a sense of unity and identity with the European historical, social and cultural space, we can say that *we are in Europe, but Europe is not in us*, in the sense that it is consistently seen as a scenario, the little more than circumstantial *outside* of the Portuguese historical experience.

In summary, the Portuguese remain in an ambivalent relationship with their historical and cultural place, between insularization and expansion, between normalising modernity and imperial singularism. Unable to escape from departures and returns, Portugal materialised them as the *topos* of its self-definition: Portugal is where the language is and where the Portuguese “in the wide world could create their vegetable patch and their garden” (Lourenço: 1994: 22).

The duplicity – which often is, strictly speaking, duality – of the national way of being seems to become a vertigo that accompanies national reflexivity and its ideological constructions of national identity: between the imperial vocation, that mission mythically described as *spiritual*, and the refuge in the idea of appendix, a delayed but aspiring appendix, of Europe* (Ribeiro, 2011a: 93).

*Our own translations.

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