

O REGRESSO DO MORTO: THE RETURN TO MISFORTUNE BY SULEIMAN CASSAMO

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ABSTRACT

The book of tales *O regresso do morto* [The return of the dead] (1997) by the Mozambican writer Suleiman Cassamo is a work that describes the degradation of the human being, marking a clear border between reason and irrationality. This work in which the author draws a melancholic scenario falls within the scope of texts of sociocultural affirmation. Through this work, whose texts were anthologized in compulsory reading textbooks in Mozambique, we immerse ourselves in the complex and diverse Mozambican sociocultural reality.

KEYWORDS

Suleiman Cassamo, death, misfortune, society, traditional marriage

O REGRESSO DO MORTO: REGRESSO À DESGRAÇA DE SULEIMAN CASSAMO

RESUMO

O livro de contos *O regresso do morto* (1997), do escritor moçambicano Suleiman Cassamo, é uma obra que descreve a degradação do ser humano, marcando uma fronteira nítida entre a razão e a irracionalidade. Esta obra na qual o autor desenha um cenário melancólico enquadra-se no âmbito de textos de afirmação sociocultural. Através desta obra, cujos textos foram antologizados em manuais escolares de leitura obrigatória em Moçambique, mergulhamos na complexa e diversa realidade sociocultural moçambicana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Suleiman Cassamo; morte; desgraça; sociedade; casamento tradicional

In *O regresso do morto* [The return of the dead] (1997) book of short stories, Suleiman Cassamo sets a melancholic plot, which starts on dramatic questioning: *é assim viver?* [is this living?]. In this parodic questioning, there is a sort of an uncertainty which looms large in the mind of the characters about the destiny of daily life. Each passing new day seems to be an unsolved mystery. Such uncertainty shows the existence of an atmosphere of perplexity that characterizes the state of mind of the characters, noticeable throughout the different short stories of the collection.

Life has become an inconceivable object of subjectivity of the narrative and of the social processes that define the postmodern fiction¹.

Thus, this subjective reality of the social and anthropological phenomena made *O regresso do morto* having a significant appraisal of the Mozambican and international critique. For example, the French publication entitled *Le retour du mort* and the fact that, some of the texts were anthologized in textbooks in use in Mozambican schools, represents, in broadly diversified social logos-sphere, a compilation of emotional experiences of the literary truths present in different moments of life.

The short stories “Ngilina, tu vais mourir”, Laurinda, tu vai mbunhar”, “Nyeleti”, Madalena, “Xiluva do meu coração” and “O regresso do morto” draw a great misfortune review created by a group of characters whose names are anthropologically significant. These themes portray what could be called pastoral lyricism that blends sadness and love, smell and nostalgia. Suleiman Cassamo writes about social histories not social stories. Therefore, quoting the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (2012, p. 123), it can be said that Cassamo’s stories turn “misery itself an object of pleasure” given that the short stories of this collection display a degree of aesthetic perfection.

The short story “Laurinda, tu vai mbunhar” is a clear example of a narrative that portrays a historical moment in which the society knew the hardest times of post-independence, due to the general shortage of everything. This was the time in which, to be well-off was an exception to the rule, and therefore, it was suspected and criminalized. In the 80s, Mozambique was strongly hit by hunger and nakedness; lack of transportation; the market was a canvas without an image to contemplate. That was the time of the so polemic – “bichas”² at the people’s shops, in consumer cooperatives, in transportation, in everything; the time in which early marriages phenomenon became widespread, and the shop owners and the “magaiça”³ were the most privileged people in the society. Let us see the “historiographic” facts reflected in the short story “Nyeleti”:

Nyeleti kept for Foliche, the Mahomo oldest son, her dazzling and breathtaking *xonguile*⁴ body. Foliche would arrive as *gaiça*. In Foliche’s briefcases and bales, Nyeleti’s father wanted a suit and a tie, a pair of shoes and a hop-stick. From him, the *mucume*⁵ and scarf for Mabana, Nyeleti’s mother; the *nkeka* and the snuff box for the old gammer Magugu, the mother of Nyeleti’s father. (Cassamo, 1997, p. 29)

¹ In 2011, Moisés de Lemos Martins, in his “Media e melancolia – o trágico, o grotesco e o barroco” wrote about the nature of postmodern imaginary universe, and thus, about the postmodern narrative. And about the narrative of death, Moisés de Lemos Martins wrote “O corpo morto: mitos, ritos e superstições” in 2013.

² “Bichas” are long queues at the people shops and consumer cooperatives to the purchase of essential supplies. However, there was, at that time, special shops only for high ranking representatives of the government where the queues were elastic and stationary. The Mozambican musician Jeremias Nguenha produced a very popular song entitled “La famba bixe”, which means, the queue moves so slowly, clearly criticizing, in this folcloric manifestation, the current economic system adopted by Mozambique.

³ This is a name given to mineworkers who have returned from South Africa (Jone) who would bring bales and briefcases with clothes to lure families in order to be accepted to marry their under age daughters.

⁴ Beautiful.

⁵ Mozambican kind of sarong (capulana) made of two capulanas tailored together generally offered to women.

The two paragraphs are illustrative because, I think, it is from this kind of examples that the literary acidity about the social problems of a nation should be learned. This is not a contemporary presumptuousness neither a nostalgic rhetoric because, still today, there can be seen such practices that hold back life in the country – but, I come back to these issues to contextualize an important aspect of this work: The Mozambican literature as an instrument for glorifying the heroes finds its genealogy in a sung anguish through the flute of organic suffering. A sort of DNA of generational evil.

In *Estética da criação verbal* [Aesthetic of verbal creation], Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, p. 63) states that the writing style is “inseparably related to the utterance”.

From this point of view, the realistic aesthetics in *O regresso do morto* lies on semantic bonds of the storytelling verb that the author uses to interpret the disquiet, the anguish and the collective debility of the characters, clearly observable on the words “mbunhar”⁶ and “morrer” [to die].

The word “mbunhar” draws a concept which leads us to the void of painful death from misery and from an endless search for well-being. However, after running a thousand miles for freedom, in the world of the short stories, such suffering exceeds the limits of misfortune.

The number of street children and in the streets escalated. The consequences of this degradation of human values are far more severe provided that reported cases of kidnapping and deaths of people are intensifying; a clear return to the aesthetic empire of misfortune. Nevertheless, there is, in storytelling, a perfect combination of good and the evil, which results from assembling, in the same collection, themes of death (found almost throughout the book), and love underlying the short stories entitled “Madalena, xiluva do meu coração” [Madalena, the love of my life] and “Nyeleti”.

Reading these texts as a deceptive rhetoric tracing of the past, it is not surprising that the axial narrator of the short stories pushes us to a predictable reading when, in a dedication form, he says the following: “may the reading of these short stories be the light and lightest taste of the land. The taste of our land”. If we rely on Francisco Noa’s words, taken from his book *Perto do fragmento, a totalidade: olhares sobre a literatura e o mundo* (2012, p. 77), this recommendation is a sort of an invitation by the author to celebrate the “triumph of reason and subjectivity”. That is, may the modern society be responsible for balancing the actual ambivalences between beliefs and convictions that sustain the diversity of evil.

In “Ngilina, tu vai morrer” [Ngilina, you going to die], the miserable life lived by the protagonist fits entirely within the hostile of “insults ever and ever”; of “working each and every day”; of the image of “a donkey for pulling carts”; of “the scars that ravage his cheeks, the mouth and the nose” (Cassamo, 1997, p. 13). These epithets are textual details that express a genuine detonation of pain that disturb Ngilina’s world views, reducing her chance of enjoying the benefits of the independence and freedom. On the other

⁶ “Mbunhar” is the same as saying “sucking an empty breast”, a sort of genetic suffering which passes on from generation to another. That is, the term tries to depict the pick of poverty in which, as it is said in hunger jargons, the majority stand and see the train that passes and, only stay and watch the dust that remains.

hand, the reality of the protagonist assumes a strong conformism to the subjectivity of interpreting life. Thus, Ngilina exposes the weaknesses of a reality which, per se, is not the Suleiman Cassamo's bachelor status, as far as the questions, doubts, skepticism, and fear are a cultural continuum almost epidemic.

There is a sort of a Bachelardian's "aesthetics of anguish" (1988, p. 25) which is far off to find happiness in the world of Suleiman Cassamo's characters. In his work, anguish ceased to be a factitious phenomenon: the characters cannot breathe freely because they are tormented by the incertitude. Let us see this angelical deep sigh of the protagonist "only Lord knows" (Cassamo, 1997, p.15). Ngilina lives in a world where reconciliation with the evil is only possible at heaven. The reference to Judaic and Christian evocation, in the short story entitled "Ngilina, tu vai morrer" places – xicuembo [God] – in a conflicting overlap at the semantic level. Indeed, the semantic force of the title sends us to an activity of extrapolating the meaning' of conflicts, present right in the first paragraph of the story, between life and death, the divine and the demonic suffering.

The renowned writer Paulina Chiziane recently published a book entitled *Ngoma Yethu*. There is an interesting passage in such compilation of data on Mozambican cults: "when people are confronted with events that the human wisdom cannot reach, they find explanation on the heavenly powers. When the unknown is unattainable, they say that it is superstitious, esoteric, diabolic, demonic, Beelzebub, satanic, and so forth" (Chiziane, 2015, p. 199).

It is "superstitious, esoteric, diabolic, demonic, Beelzebub, satanic" any clarification tries to explain that the maltreatments, suffering and disquiet in people's life results from sketching projects for future and for well-being. This way of celebrating the evil is not ended on the bible verses. It extrapolates the likelihood demiurgic bonds since it is an intertextual exercise that crosses the narratives of socio-cultural rifts. The following paragraphs eliminate all doubt since they attest the morbid state of human conditions in the world of the story. One of the narrative's productive techniques consists of using details, a process that embodies the aesthetics of microrealism⁷ that characterizes the Mozambican literature. I quote the second paragraph of the short story "Ngilina, tu vai morrer" in *O regresso do morto*, as an example that can be expanded to rest of the book: "This is the way Ngilina talks to her heart. Her swollen heart on the chest, heavy to the throat, and shutting her mouth. Silent tears bath the faces" (Cassamo, 1997, p. 15). The deep prostration and realistic clarity conveyed by the expression "this is the way Ngilina talks to her heart" is brought back in a more incisive and clearly sensitive way in the rest of the story:

The body hurts, yes, but it is the heart that pains more and more. The heart has swollen, it will burst on the chest, Ngilina, you going to die. You can go home to rest suffering. But, how will it be if her father spent all the money

⁷ Similar to portuguese poetry (Ferreira, 2012, p. 250), the Mozambican short story is profoundly characterized by the aesthetics of microrealism, as it prioritizes sensitive, visual and tactile aspects.

paid for lobolo⁸ on tontonto⁹ and wine bought at the monhé¹⁰ shop in town.
(Cassamo, 1997, p. 17)

The relevance of the description of feelings has to do with the subjective condition of a human person. However, the individualism gets a social and philosophical acceptance when it is associated with expressions such as: “you going to die”, “rest suffering”, “her father spent all the money paid for *lobolo*”. The issue is that, such philosophical feelings representing the predominantly anti-utopic cultural and political -ideological realities show a trend towards the narrativization of death aesthetics, disquiet, and suffering which, in a harsh manner, are detectable in “objective literature” mentioned by Roland Barthes (2009, p. 35).

The actions of the protagonist, the suffering that life has given her as a woman living on the brink of the abyss concentrate, in a unique moment, the rational and emotional aesthetic scheming of the world, present in Pessoa’s thought in *O livro do desassossego* [The book of disquiet] where, he states that “everything has become unbearable” (Pessoa, s.d., p. 50). For the protagonist of *O regresso do morto*, living itself has become a chasm and a big burden: parents, the house – the mother-in-law, the husband – the environment and the society, everything “oppresses her and makes her sick” (Pessoa, s.d.), and therefore, only death unburdens her. This situation is found in the different episodes of the short story where the social problems extrapolate the bonds of “self-revelation” (Pessoa, s.d., p. 394), read through the expressive ridge of death which brings life of the main character of the short story to an end.

The voice of the pestle flees to the bush. The pestle and Ngilina’ shadows expand and get taller. Her small breast looks bigger in the shadow, but it slightly shakes. The shadow also stops. Zombateira imitates Ngilina who rubs the saliva into her palm. This and all other shadows expand silently and embrace each other in order to dance the *xigubo* of Ngilina’s pestle.
(Cassamo, 1997, p. 16)

The nouns “voice”, “shadow”, “breast” that “embrace”, “silently” in the forest lead me to conclude that the human person ceases to be a socialization guild, a worldview of sharing values and symbols: the human person is just a source of resistance and of sibylline confrontation, what makes these nouns as markers of misery very significant. In literature, the semantics of the voice is, most of the times, associated with exultation and shout. The association between the pestle sound and Ngilina’s creates a perfect aesthetic symbiosis in building literary meanings. The shadow is the dark that glares the quietness of clarity. In the philosophical view of African tradition, the shadow is seen as the “second nature of the things and the living creatures and it is generally linked to death” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2010, p. 615).

⁸ Traditional marriage, common in the south of Mozambique.

⁹ A mozambican traditional brew produced through destillation of fermented fruits such as oranges, sugarcanes, mangoes, cassava, etc.

¹⁰ Arabic descendant generally owning shops that sell essential supplies, groceries and clothes.

The breast that appears in the shadow draws life and narrative illusionism.

Ngilina's situation got worse when the husband returned home: "that day when her husband arrived, the mother-in-law complained about her to him. She said Ngilina was with mufanas¹¹ at the well when she went to fetch water. Youé! That was a vicious beating" (Cassamo, 1997, p. 17). The universal and traditional antonym mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and vice versa made the husband beating his wife until "having her teeth broken" and "Ngilina almost wanted to die" (Cassamo, 1997, p. 17). Dissensions of the kind are the usual cause of prejudice-based and early deaths in the world of the story, and it is, in fact, a behavior that emerges from marriage rituals¹², because they tend to keep what happened ngalesosikhathi¹³, the time of great respect for social values. They update the primitive practices of traditional contacts.

The death of the protagonist, actually caused by suffering, debility, and suicide is, at the integral realism level, caused by the degradation of all the certainties, despite the possible ironic rudderless, the truth is that most of her life, Ngilina was treated as "the donkey for pulling carts" by her husband and mother-in-law. As a consequence of such subhuman attitude, after suicide, in the bush, the chant and ritual for the dead is performed by the "turtledove cry" (Cassamo, 1997, p. 18), what, in my point of view, exacerbates the ruin of morality and the lack of respect for the human person. Would it be the "chant (...) of the turtledove pricking the heart of the savannah" (Cassamo, 1997, p. 16) the main reason for such misfortune? The truth is that, for Ngilina, dying is really better because everything ends. It is clearly explained: death emerges as an effect of a fatalistic mechanism which falls into a mythological fabric that has become the *Modus Vivendi* of the society.

The death was, in advance, predictable. In the short story that gives title to Suleiman Cassamo's book – *O regresso do morto* – the diegetic action is clearly stated when it is highlighted that "the dead bring a heavy cross from their graves" (Cassamo, 1997, p. 81). In other words, Death is an insuperable and indisputable reality. The intriguing aspect about Ngilina's death is that it results of *[ti]ndzava*¹⁴ (Cassamo, 1997, p. 82) told by the mother-in-law when she complained about the indolence of the daughter-in-law to her son: "lazy, lazy and lazy. Each and every day" (Cassamo, 1997, p. 17). In those false claims, the mother-in-law mentions "the *lobolo* her son paid" (Cassamo, 1997, p. 17), what shows that in the Mozambican traditional societies a woman is seen from the lens of exploitation and disdain; she is sold from birth.

To recreate thoughts about the myth of death, we should take into account the physiology of the entire traditional reality which folds life from one specific standpoint.

¹¹ Young boys.

¹² When a maiden gets married, she is given serious recommendations, firstly in private, by her aunts (traditional teachers for a woman), and secondly, through emotional chants and lectures, at moment of handing over the bride to the future groom. These are prior moments to woman or man's decisions willing to live together in spiritual communion or not. It is, in fact, the moment for declaring the mutual and intimate love.

¹³ A Zulu expression for "in ancient times"; mystical and historical time; the time of great traditions.

¹⁴ Fake, intrigue, lie and subversion by the mother-in-law. Filimone Meigos writes in his *Ensaio sobre a mentira e a inveja & outras coisas* (2015, p. 5), that "a mentira ocorre nos rapports sociaux diários" [the lie is within daily social relationships]. In fact, the lie got a privileged space in the sociology of common sense, lie and envy.

Very smelly, as argued by Filimone Meigos (2015, p. 184) in sociology of emotion, a lie dodges the truth of reason, spoiling the interpersonal relationships. Let us see an interesting pedagogical example: the gap left by the social rift is filled by lullaby of the “turtledove” and by the dense cold of the forest where the suicide took place. However, this is not surprising if we take into account what was stated by Gaston Bachelard (2008, p. 192) in *A terra e os devaneios da vontade: ensaio sobre a imaginação das forças* [Earth and reveries of will: an essay on the imagination of matter], in which the “sub-lunar universe” involves “the mineral kingdom”, “the plant kingdom” and “the animal world” and that they are all mutually complementary. Bearing in mind the social values clustering in exegesis, the “cry of the turtledove”, in the current complementariness, unfolds as an ancillary specimen of grief divagations.

The proposition *O regresso do morto* describes the pragmatic absurdity in the context of literary criticism. According to Chevalier and Alian Gheebrant (2010, p. 460), and assuming the symbolic understanding of the utterance “death is a perishable and destructive aspect of existence”. Therefore, celebrating the return of the dead can convey multiple levels of understanding. However, the destruction will never be a reason for a joyful celebration. The destruction must be wept and fought against by everyone

From the metaphysical point of view, death is, in the world of the story, experienced in a different way from the western perspective. In ethnic societies, the dead do not die. Instead, they immigrate to an imaginary world, made of symbols and magic; a universe which is the metaphor of real cosmos immersed in the world of mythology. Thus, although death is celebrated by tears and pain, this view is common in traditional societies. There is, in this viewpoint, a huge contradiction that derives from the fact that death is, on the one hand, an expression of a great sorrow, and, on the other hand, a representation of the metaphorical configuration of such pain in a dreamlike world; in the paradise of society imaginary world. In other words, in African traditional societies, death reifies the anthropological patterns and the development of the ethnic communities.

As I stated in the outset, and as it has been insistently referred by national and international critique, *O regresso do morto* is a collection of short stories of Mozambican socio-cultural affirmation, and as a consequence, its ideological foundations derive from the personal competences of Suleiman Cassamo, who is interested in describing a native aesthetic and socio-political universe, hand in hand, with the mechanism of building the *logos* of identity civilization.

Undoubtedly, the elements of a strong report, – chauvinism, misery, irrational violence and the ruin of a human being, are visible and vibrant. However, it does not seem that the expressive intention of the text lies on that domain. On the one hand, the aspects of report, especially the harshness of man’s power against the submissive woman, and the eschatological oppression by ethnic rules, which cannot be confused with justice – which instead defines the field of aesthetic and artistic practices of writers such as Orlando Mendes [in his brilliant book *Portagem* (1981)], Mia Couto¹⁵, Paulina Chiziane, João

¹⁵ His recent novel entitled *Mulheres de cinza* (2015) clearly denounces the man’s power over woman by referring to her as an object for sale or a machine for procreation.

Paulo Borges Coelho, and others. The specific featuring of a woman married through *lobolo*, for instance, being the main character of postmodern narratives, and, on the other hand, the big issues that stimulate poetic and philosophical thinking of the character make part of the core concerns shared by human consciousness, regardless of the time or space. Therefore, I believe that even in the process of affirmation of Mozambican literature, the semantic dimension of Cassamo's work is a very important element of aesthetic and literary affirmation. In other words, without losing the idiosyncratic values of micro-fiction, by its artistic quality, the work reaches the universal level of narrative master pieces. I reckon that this might be the reason why great works and true writers are interesting to everyone. Suleiman Cassamo, with his *Le retour du mort*, redefines the complex space of human soul.

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