THE EXPERIENCE OF RACE IN TEOLINDA GERSÃO'S *A ÁRVORE DAS PALAVRAS*

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Abstract: The article offers an analysis of the complex depiction of race in Teolinda Gersão's 1997 best-selling novel, *A Árvore das Palavras*. It starts by looking at the writer's employment of history and memory in portraying the colonial experience, bringing together often opposing views of Africa to highlight the contrasting construction of truth and reality. The essay also retraces the different racial experiences in colonial Mozambique as illustrated in the novel, the plethora of fragmented and often divergent accounts of a reality unaccounted by history. By analysing the representation of blackness as seen by the Portuguese settlers but also the diverse experiences of Europeans living in Africa, the aim of this paper is to expose the radically different points of view that emphasise the intricacy of racial representation in colonial Mozambique, representative of Gersão's critique of Portuguese colonial society whose oppression of the minor marginalised is manifested in all its structures.

Keywords: Race, History, Memory, Truth

Resumo: Este artigo oferece uma reflexão da representação complexa de raça no romance de Teolinda Gersão de 1997, *A Árvore das Palavras*. O ensaio começa com a análise da utilização da história e da memória na representação da experiência colonial, reunindo visões opostas da África para destacar a construção contrastante da verdade e da realidade no romance. O ensaio expõe as diferentes experiências de raça no Moçambique colonial representadas no romance, a abundância de relatos fragmentários e muitas vezes divergentes duma realidade omitida da história. Através da análise da representação de raça africana percebida pelos colonizadores portugueses, mas também das experiências dos europeus vivendo na África, o objetivo deste ensaio é apresentar pontos de vista radicalmente distintivos que acentuam a complexidade da experiência de raça no

Moçambique colonial, representativos da crítica que Gersão faz da sociedade colonial portuguesa cuja opressão dos marginalizados se manifesta em todas as suas estruturas.

Palavras-chave: Raça, História, Memória, Verdade

The deep connection between nation and empire had been at the heart of Portuguese identity for over five centuries, from its pioneering maritime expansion in the fifteenth century until the 1974 Carnation Revolution and the subsequent African decolonisation. As Fernando Arenas wrote, "the symbiotic relationship between nation and empire in the Portuguese collective unconscious and in the political praxis of the state"[1] was a defining trait of Portuguese identity. Following the abrupt decline of its once vast empire, Portugal saw itself, in the twentieth century, in a marginal position in Europe, confronted with the imminent risk of losing control of its African colonies, yet far from integrated in the European community and increasingly more isolated in global affairs. Moreover, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos observed, Portugal was "simultaneously a colonising and a colonised country", being "the least developed country in Europe and at the same time the sole possessor of the largest and longest-lasting Euro-colonial empire."[2] Barry Munslow also noted that the possessor of a former empire was, ironically, "in the same position in relation to the major industrial powers that the African colonies were to Portugal."[3] And finally, according to Norrie MacQueen, the indigenous populations from Portuguese Africa were "the most disadvantaged of the European empires,"[4] yet their social status was aligned with that of the Portuguese, with high levels of illiteracy and poverty prevalent throughout the empire, including the metropole.

Unsurprisingly given this unique context, Salazar's policy to revive the imperial tradition was a desperate attempt to reinvent the nation's identity and proclaim itself once more as a global power. The famous slogan, "Portugal is not a small country," was interpreted by Manuela Ribeiro Sanches as "the smallness of the nation lacking an empire to liberate itself from its periphery, thus asserting itself as a power nationally and internationally, while legitimising its colonial enterprise."[5]

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[1] Fernando Arenas, *Utopias of Otherness: Nationhood and Subjectivity in Portugal and Brazil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 6.
[2] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, '11/92 (Onze Teses Por Ocasião de Mais Uma Descoberta de Portugal)', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 29.1 (1990), 97–113 (p. 105).
[3] Barry Munslow, *Mozambique: The Revolution and Its Origins* (London ; New York: Longman, 1983), p. 5.
[4] Norrie MacQueen, *The Decolonization of Portuguese Africa: Metropolitan Revolution and the Dissolution of Empire* (London: Longman, 1997), p. 12.
[5] 'Introdução', in *'Portugal não é um País Pequeno': Contar o 'Império' na Pós-Colonialidade*, ed. by Manuela Ribeiro Sanches, Ensaio (Lisboa: Livros Cotovia, 2006), pp. 7–21 (p. 7).

Throughout its long centuries of domination, Portugal's exploitative ruling of Africa, deemed by Luís Madureira as "parasitic" and "cannibalistic,"[6] continued to benefit the metropole politically and economically. Meanwhile, the local populations were oppressed through harsh living and working conditions under the premise of a civilising mission and, as Salazar himself proclaimed, "measures for safeguarding the interests of those inferior races whose inclusion under the influence of Christianity is one of the greatest achievements."[7] Notwithstanding rebranding the colonies as "overseas provinces" in 1951 and the "ideological appropriation of the lusotropical mythology to sanction an obsolete empire,"[8] this allegedly unique Portuguese manner of relating to other cultures was challenged by critics such as Cláudia Castelo, despite the "use of adjectives with positive implication: 'tolerant', 'syncretic', 'humane', 'fraternal', 'Christian.'"[9] These "excessive colonial ambitions and deficient colonial achievements,"[10] as summed up by Patrick Chabal, were embedded in the Portuguese national identity during the Estado Novo, yet blatantly excluded the African perspective.

Revisiting Portugal's uncomfortable colonial past and shining a light on the racial violence embedded in the fabric of the empire-state, Teolinda Gersão's *A Árvore das Palavras* rethinks the Portuguese identity once built along the backbone of a glorious maritime empire, equally present in canonical discourses and male-dominated literature. Her writing creates a space for gender and racial differences, in which female subjectivity takes centre stage, challenging the patriarchal ideology that glorified a seafaring imperialism and offering a harsh critique of colonialism uncovering the injustice behind an abusive system that favoured the European patriarchy to the detriment of gender and racial minorities. This, dismantling the myth and glory of the empire, the novel challenges the privileged position of the white Portuguese in Africa in relation to the exploitation of the "black other."

Published in 1997 and informed by the writer's experience of living in Africa, *A Árvore das Palavras* illustrates the journey of the Mozambican society from Portuguese colony to an independent African nation. Centred around the story of a Portuguese family living in Lourenço Marques, now Maputo, the novel narrates the lives of Amélia and Laureano, a young, working-class Portuguese couple who leave behind their poverty-stricken home country under the fascist

[6] Luís Madureira, 'Tropical Sex Fantasies and the Ambassador's Other Death: The Difference in Portuguese Colonialism', *Cultural Critique*, 28 (1994), 149–73 (p. 155).
[7] António de Oliveira Salazar, *Doctrine and Action: Internal and Foreign Policy of the New Portugal, 1928-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), p. 177.
[8] Irina Ene-Mitrović, 'From Testimony to Memory: Gender and Racial Identity in Portuguese Women's Post-Colonial Literature and Cinema' (Birkbeck College, University of London, 2022), p. 100.
[9] Cláudia Castelo, *'O modo português de estar no mundo': O luso-tropicalismo e a ideologia colonial portuguesa (19331–961)* (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, Biblioteca das Ciências do Homem, 1998).
[10] Patrick Chabal, *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (London: C. Hurst, 2002), p. 30.

dictatorship to follow the promise of a better future in the African colony. The narrative moves between the often-opposing views of the strong female characters of Gita, the Portuguese couple's daughter born in Africa and situated at the liminality of Portuguese and Mozambican identities, and Amélia, the white, uneducated Portuguese woman from a modest background, while also bringing into focus the role of the Africans through the figure of Lóia, the family's maid and Gita's wet nurse.

The first part of the novel depicts Gita's happy, carefree childhood spent strolling around the city with her father and exploring the honest beauty of African life from a European point of view, influenced by her fondness of the Mozambican nanny and critical of the distant, exigent mother. Bringing to life the individual stories of the two parents, including their struggles through the cultural change from Europe to Mozambique, the second part reveals the heart-breaking drama of an orphan girl from a poor rural background, who moves to Africa responding to a matrimonial newspaper advert, "dreaming of the middle-class life she never had access to, yet disappointed to discover that the limitations of her social condition are not confined within the borders of her native country alone."[11] Her day job as a seamstress in the service of the rich white families of the Mozambican capital does not stop her from dreaming of becoming part of the elites, bitterly begrudging her husband's lack of ambition to climb up the social ladder. In the third and final part, the story returns to Gita, now a teenager whose awakened political consciousness opens her eyes towards the violence, poverty, social injustice and gender inequality at the heart of what she once saw as the idyllic African way of living and finishing with the outburst of the independence war that gives Mozambique the hope of a fairer society.

This essay aims to offer a detailed analysis of the complex depiction of race in Gersão's best-selling novel, starting by looking at the writer's employment of history and memory in portraying the colonial experience, bringing together often opposing views of Africa to highlight the contrasting construction of truth and reality. The subsequent sections of this essay will retrace the different racial experiences in colonial Mozambique as illustrated in the novel, looking at the representation of blackness as seen by the Portuguese settlers but also at the diverse experiences of Europeans living in Africa, exposing radically different points of view that emphasise the intricacy of racial representation in colonial Mozambique.

History, memory and truth in *A Árvore das Palavras*

Based on a triad of history, memory and truth, the novel juxtaposes several narrative perspectives whose goal is to illustrate the multifaceted reality of life in Africa during the

[11] Ene-Mitrović, p. 11.

Portuguese empire from a white point of view. With the help of memory, the narrative contradicts historical truth, namely the perception of the colony by the Europeans, contrasting the image of a space idealised for its simplicity and unsophistication reminiscent of an uncomplicated life, and a primitive, savage world that challenged Portugal's alleged civilising mission in Africa. Bringing together individual memory and collective truth, the alternative view of colonial Mozambique is depicted through the perspective of Gita, the white African girl of Portuguese descent, and thus a multifaceted female character whose family history amalgamates with that of her country, centring the historical discourse on the unconventional perspective of the silenced outsider, and opposing the colonial discourse of the dominant European elite.

The conditions for reinterpreting history in the novel correspond to Brian McHale's definition of "constrained realemes," in a system of signification following official historical records, yet exploiting the "dark areas" of history not reflected in traditional discourse.[12] The novel gives a voice to the silenced, the colonized outcasts, in imperialist discourse, the social, gender and racial subaltern, yet the fragmented perspectives that undeniably have a role in the rewriting of history through a plurality of individual truths and memories also contradict the possibility of a master narrative characterised by a universally accepted truth.[13]

Depicting Gita's idyllic childhood memories of growing up in a magical African world, the first-person narrative of the initial chapter carries the mark of the child's innocent and highly subjective view. Her deep fondness of her father and African maid is in contrast with her mother's strictness and cold seriousness, depicting the one-sided reality as experienced by the young girl. The second part, characterised by a plurality of voices and temporal fragmentation, depicts Amélia's and Laureano's harsh living conditions in Portugal and their new life in Mozambique, bringing together a plethora of working-class characters whose voices are mediated by a third-person narrator that follows the memories of the two protagonists. The final part returns to Gita's story as she turns from an innocent child to an adult whose view of the world is broadened by her newly gained understanding of the way in which her parents' destinies have shaped her own, embracing her joint Portuguese and African heritage. The depiction of truth is interpreted through the characters' personal stories in which the (un)faithfulness of memory and perception of reality carry the marks of the unreliable narrator that mediates all voices through that of an innocent child with a naïve view of the world. The final part of the novel offers a stark contrast with the serene image of Africa in Gita's childhood memories, showing the tumultuous history of Mozambique in the early days of the Independence War.

[12] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2004), pp. 86–87.
[13] Ene-Mitrović, p. 103.

The novel overlays personal family history with that of the country, illustrating the harsh living conditions for the indigenous Mozambicans and validating their rise against the white domination, fuelled by the political situation in Portugal under Salazar, that of "'an ill-governed country', 'badly run'"[14] by an obstinate leader who "sits rotting on his perch, surrounded by his fellow chickens, and listens to no one,"[15] as Laureano tells his daughter. The character's political awakening during her teenage years corresponds to the last years of Portuguese rule in Mozambique, as the African nation's fight for independence synchronises with Gita's search for her own identity, "in a journey of (self-)discovery at the border between remaining African and becoming Portuguese."[16] Growing up in Mozambique, privileged by its exposure to the modernising influence of South Africa, Gita and her generation experienced a level of freedom and open-mindedness that Salazar's Portugal was denied.

Gita contrasts her life in Mozambique with the repressive conditions that young people endured in Portugal, a place where "everything was forbidden,"[17] including every form of self-expression and individuality, sentenced to silence and submission, and regulated under stern norms of good conduct. The Portuguese "lived in terror of 'looking bad'" (171), permanently concerned about preserving "composed and orderly" (171) appearances, from the bleak clothes they wore to their everyday behaviour. Unlike the relatively emancipated white women living in Mozambique, Portuguese women were forced to obey strict rules out of fear of looking inappropriate: "the girls wouldn't ever dream of wearing trousers, because that's what boys wear and, of course, it would 'look bad,' and obviously they'd never wear shorts, and if you wore a bikini it would be the end of the world" (171). Repressed by a conservative government that controlled every aspect of their lives, women "resemble[d] prim little saints" (171), under constant scrutiny by the public eye and the political police, in fear of not conforming:

> "They were afraid of everything, they wouldn't take a step without glancing to either side, in case they were either getting ahead of the others or slipping behind; the streets were very narrow, and everything was small and mean, people clung together like a bunch of grapes, parents grandparents cousins godparents colleagues godchildren neighbours, all of them done up to the nines and unable to breathe for lack of air. (172)

[14] Teolinda Gersão, *The Word Tree*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa, Dedalus Africa (Sawtry, UK: Dedalus, 2010), p. 50.
[15] Gersão, p. 54.
[16] Ene-Mitrović, p. 111.
[17] Gersão, p. 171.

In a society under constant surveillance and pressure to keep up an appearance of humility out of fear of standing out, a public expression of political conscience was simply inconceivable: "No one ever talked about politics because it was too dangerous and that's why the newspapers, friends, relatives and neighbours all said the same thing, namely, nothing" (173). The "narrow, torpid life" (173) imposed by the fascist regime was reinforced by the conservative standards of the catholic church, which imposed virtues like chastity and purity: "They have to be virgins when they go to the altar because, if not, the country would collapse and the world come to an end" (173). The narrative highlights the way in which these social, political and moral constraints had an immobilising influence on Portuguese society during the Estado Novo, as opposed to the freedom that the white settlers benefitted from in Mozambique.

When Gita decides to leave Mozambique and study in Lisbon, she worries about feeling asphyxiated by the restrictive political conditions in Portugal, but also about being misunderstood in her parents' birth country. While she perceives Portugal as conventional and oppressive, Mozambique is instead the land of individuality, in which even language itself defies the rules in order to manifest its freedom of expression, becoming an unhindered "hybrid language, in which the grammar breaks down because [people] think differently and thinking has to be left free to happen" (204). Gita's affection for Mozambique comes through both her childhood memories and teenage experience, proudly proclaiming Africa as "the most beautiful continent in the world" (80), for its multicoloured versatility and unchained expressivity that heavily contrasted with the austere, dull life in Portugal during the dictatorship, while also defying the European preconception that viewed Africa as primitive and uncivilised.

While Gita's perception of Mozambique is centred around the land's beauty, variety and warm-heartedness, Amélia's view is dominated by her anxiety around the infinite African unknown, echoing the racist Portuguese misconceptions under the influence of colonial ideology that justified the metropole's superiority and alleged civilising mission. Instead of depicting the poverty and social injustices faced by the black population of Mozambique, not very different to her own experience in the African country, Amélia chooses to concentrate on the privileged situation of the affluent, white Portuguese, who relished the liberties and wealth of the Mozambican capital without the despotism that Salazar's Portugal implied. Subjective and incomplete, the truth in Amélia's memories neglects the reality of everyday life in Africa, completely omitting the racial oppressions of the colonial system and further proving the inability of memory to create a trustworthy description of history.

The fragmented reality created through Amélia's and Gita's interpretations of truth derived from the characters' experiences helps to form an alternative history that disputes a unilateral and

unequivocal understanding of the past. Yet using memory to reinterpret official discourse involves a degree of subjectivity that changes the experience of reality conforming to each character's perspective, showing how Gita's and Amélia's often opposing versions of truth contribute to depicting the relativeness of reality of African life.

The representation of blackness in *A Árvore das Palavras*

The depiction of race in Gersão's novel comes from two often radically opposed sources, namely Amélia's cautious view of Africa, representative of the European colonial ideology, and Gita's and Laureano's exploration of the city of Lourenço Marques, who focus equally on the beauty of Mozambique and the oppression of the indigenous population under colonial rule. These two contrasting perspectives are combined to form a narrative that paints a complex picture of the black experience under Portuguese rule and at the start of the African war of independence.

Amélia's suspicion and scepticism of Africa become obvious from the beginning of the narrative, showing the character's paranoid fear of the black Mozambicans, whom she believes able to inflict death through their ability to cast spells on the white invaders: "'You can't trust the blacks,' Amélia says. 'Because they hate us and wish us ill. They put the evil eye on us and can bring us illness or even death. Yes, your friend, your own friend can cause you to die'" (19). All alone in an unknown and misunderstood world, Amélia sees the African way of life as a big mystery and instead chooses to isolate herself from any neighbours, vehemently refusing to make any compromise to adapt to her new country. Her views reflect the Portuguese mistrust of the indigenous Mozambicans, believing that their adoption of Portuguese names is nothing but a subterfuge: "'Oh, those blacks and their lies, says Amélia. 'They say their name's José, João or Joaquim da Silva, then one day, for some reason, it turns out they're called Bulande, Panguene, Maimige, Comenhane or Chinguizo. We know nothing about them. Absolutely nothing" (40). For Amélia, the way the Africans live is a big mystery, yet her views betray a complete ignorance and dismissal of anything that does not comply with the European principles of civilisation: "'We can't go looking for them [the Africans] because we don't know where they live, they have no address, they live in vague, unnamed places, in straw-thatched huts that all look the same, in shanty-towns"' (28-29). Seeing the Africans as hard to recognise as "a needle in a haystack," Amélia believes the Mozambicans are devoid of any individualism, forming part of an undefined, uniform mass with the sole purpose to confuse the Portuguese, most of them oblivious to the reality that the Mozambicans experienced.

In Amélia's view, Africa is akin to a fatal curse or illness that causes everyone to lose their own identity, overwhelmed by endless despair and mediocrity, reiterating the idea of the black race experienced as an infectious disease frequently referred to in the character's behaviour towards the Mozambicans.[18] When she reluctantly hires a black local woman to work as a wet nurse and help with her new-born daughter, Amélia worries about the ways in which lack of hygiene can affect the baby, yet remaining completely ignorant to the powerful influence that the African woman would have on her daughter in more ways than through physical proximity: "But Lóia refuses to apply any disinfectant to her nipples, and Gita catches the very worst of all contagions: she becomes as black as Lóia."[19] For Amélia, Africa is more than just the home of life-threatening illnesses caused by insufficient levels of cleanliness by European standards; it is also a source of contagion that risks to taint the whiteness of the Portuguese.

An important aspect of depicting race in Gersão's novel is Amélia's definition of racial hierarchy, which firmly places the Africans at the bottom of the pyramid, followed by the poor, dark-skinned Portuguese, while the rich, fair-skinned Northern Europeans embody the image of superiority that she herself strives to attain through the artifice of lighter hair dye. Full of admiration for the Anglo-Saxon world, foreign western languages and the South African culture, she is disappointed about not being able to visit the "splendid and modern" (111) Capetown, the holiday destination of the rich Portuguese families in Lourenço Marques. Yet Amélia's romanticised vision of South Africa as the glamorous home of skyscrapers resembling New York is juxtaposed with Gita's observation of brutal racial segregation that makes the neighbouring country lose any trace of idyllic quality. Gita's version denounces the segregation of Whites and "Non-Whites" in South Africa, the absurd practice of stigmatising the dark colour of the skin as a contagious disease: "Everything was separate, a line had been drawn between them, an invisible wall so obvious that you were constantly bumping up against it with body and eyes" (75). Yet again, the notion of race seen as an infectious illness that could contaminate the purity and superiority of the whites is ironically judged through the child's innocent voice.

The main black character in the novel, Lóia, is constructed in opposition with the image of Amélia as the white Portuguese woman who insists to remain an outsider to the African land until the end of her stay in Mozambique. Always kind, patient and jolly, the black woman rules over her side of the house, comprising the kitchen and the untamed garden, through a perfect communion with nature, allowing elements to follow their natural order without opposing it. Mysteriously gifted with the power of life and death over the flora and fauna of the garden, Gita

[18] Ene-Mitrović, p. 123.
[19] Gersão, p. 17.

perceives Lóia as the centre of the universe, "immobile, fixed to one spot, with everything else revolving around her" (16). Enjoying everything life has to offer, the woman's "infectious" (39) happiness is a radically different form of contagion, an ironic contradiction to Amélia's sombre and narrow view of Africa. On the other hand, the simplicity and ingenuity that define Lóia's character can equally be read as a likely unintentionally yet overtly racist interpretation of a white narrator reducing "the representation of the indigenous Mozambicans to a set of basic primitive traits lacking profundity."[20] As Benita Parry writes in *Postcolonial Studies*, the exclusion of the black woman from the feminist condition was determined by her firm positioning "on the boundary between human and animal as the object of imperialism's social-mission or soul-making" (21). Lóia's depiction as mostly quiet, only occasionally voicing basic sentences and platitudes, aligns with an inferiorising portrayal of the black woman subject, who appears as "infantile, ingénue and guided by instinct and superstition rather than mature judgement."[21]

The novel frequently opposes Amélia's strolls through the affluent white neighbourhood of Sommershild and her resentment of being excluded from the Portuguese elites with Laureano's heartfelt sadness when observing the endless struggles endured by the Africans, such as the long miles of walking that each can of water requires: "He had once met a woman who had called her son Sofrimento – Suffering. A small black boy called Sofrimento Nassiaaca" (*The Word Tree*, 121). In fact, Laureano sees himself as one of the poor Mozambicans, feeling closer to their simple yet fulfilling life, rather than aspiring to climb the social ladder and join his fellow co-nationals in the ranks of the elites: "He knew and he had seen how the Black people suffered, he knew it from the inside, he could put himself in their place, because he didn't feel (…) any distance from them" (125). Content with his fair treatment of the Mozambicans, the man is happy to be one day buried among them without any guilt of having contributed to their suffering, like "the vampires who had sucked the blood from the Blacks" (126). During their visits to the *caniço*, the slums where the locals lived, Laureano wants his young daughter to witness the painful reality of the African life: "The desolate streets of the Black people… As if nothing mattered and everything that was going wrong would, inevitably, only get worse. Dead people walking about in the light of day" (167). Confined to the harsh conditions of the crumbling slums at the limit of subsistence, the indigenous community is exiled to the outskirts of the city, at the edge of an alleged civilisation built by the Portuguese through its colonising mission.

Gersão paints an evocative picture that shows the way in which the racial divide between whites and indigenous Africans impacts even the geography of the city, resulting in a clearly

[20] Ene-Mitrović, p. 125.
[21] Ene-Mitrović, p. 125.

defined socio-economical segregation between the neighbourhood of the rich and that of the poor. Nature itself seems to reinforce the abrupt differences between the two classes, highlighting the unfairness that even weather can amplify:

> Meanwhile, the rainy season arrived and, as usual, the city was divided in two, which was a blessing on one side and a curse on the other: in the city of the Whites, the rain washed the buildings and the streets clean, watered the gardens and caused flowers to bloom, but it opened deep wounds in the city of the Blacks, which was transformed into a swamp. The sand became mud, the ditches overflowed with excrement; filthy, stinking water and detritus invaded the houses.
> Between the concrete city and the airport, the swamp filled everything and was everything – filth, flies, piles of rubbish, sewers, putrid smells, parasites, and mosquitos that would spread still further when the wind was in the wrong direction. (168)

Even though separated by only a short distance, the two cities are affected in completely opposite ways by the weather. Gentle and beneficial to the white city, helping the neighbourhood to blossom, rain becomes a destructive force on that of the Mozambicans, a bitter reminder of how poverty unforgivingly damages the poor and throws them in a state of misery invisible to the European settlers unaffected by such trivial matters like the weather. The architecture of the slums, radically opposed to the opulent mansions of Sommershield that Amélia walks past during her strolls, consists of simple buildings made of scraps "that looked like children's drawings or abandoned stage-sets, fading in the sun: a door, two windows, one on each side, and below them a band of colour in bright blue, yellow or pink" (166) whose "thin, rickety roof" (166) was unable to offer enough protection against the aggressive elements of African nature.

As she becomes an adult, Gita's perspective on Africa switches focus from the beauty of local nature and the wholesome lifestyle as experienced during her childhood to a more critical view of the Mozambican society, including the experience of gender in traditional African families. She is critical of the exploitation and violence against women, in charge of caring for the children, procuring water and wood for fire, while also feeding their husbands: "the best food is always kept for the husband; when he sits down at the table, she doesn't sit down with him, she eats the leftovers" (176). Meanwhile, the man "walks beside her like a king, while she carries everything, like a donkey pulling a cart" (176). As Gita observes, black women are also often forced by their families into arranged marriages, denied basic rights in their households and even left behind by

husbands who choose a better life away from their homes, or made to share a house with other wives in polygamous marriages. The effects of violence against women can sometimes be extreme: "That's why sometimes women run away, go down to the river in search of crocodiles, hang themselves from trees or flee into the jungle until they drop from hunger, thirst or exhaustion" (176).

Gita's experience makes her understand how socio-economic, cultural and gender violence justifies the emerging war as an opportunity for liberation. Yet the imminent political revolution does not automatically need to uproot the traditional African way of life. Maintaining their humility towards the vastness of the universe and respect for the untamed nature, in Gita's view, Mozambicans are "bound to the earth, to cultivating the fields, to the old customs, to their children" (177) respecting their duty to continue the "long line of time that passes through them and of which they are the guardians, unaware of the importance of everything under their guardianship – the gestures of rocking a child to sleep, of sowing, harvesting, lighting a fire, grinding maize" (177). Carrying on centuries-old traditions, from the most mundane gestures to the most detailed rituals, is an intrinsic aspect of the Mozambican identity that remained unchanged during the long years of Portuguese occupation and ought to continue even after the liberation.

The multifaceted representation of the Africans in *A Árvore das Palavras* brings together the divergent views of the Portuguese settlers through Amélia's and Laureano's perspectives, illustrating the deep European misunderstanding of the African civilisation, and the complex perspective of the white girl born in Mozambique to a Portuguese family, fond of Africa and open to seeing both its beauty and its curses. Gersão's novel proves the destructive effects of colonialism on the indigenous society, characterised by extreme poverty and violence, portraying the independence war as Mozambique's only hope for changing its fortunes.

The white experience of race in Africa

Similarly to the complex representation of blackness in Mozambique, bringing together opposing perspectives, *A Árvore das Palavras* paints a bifocal picture of the white experience in Africa, juxtaposing Gita's experience as a Mozambican of Portuguese descent, deeply fond of the country of her birth, and that of Amélia as an outsider to the African society, unable neither to fit in to her new home nor to return to her home country. This opposition is also reinforced through the narrative structure that emphasises the separation between the two races, reflected in the boundaries of physical space and perception of the two main female characters with a radically divergent view of the African continent.

From the opening sequence depicting the family house, the novel clearly marks the limits of the space shared by the white Portuguese and the Mozambicans, emphasising "the two worlds colliding and coexisting under the same roof,"[22] with a White House ran by Amélia and a Black House belonging to Lóia. The physical border between the two houses is the garden, which the novel portrays as a low-scale representation of the colonial world, governed by the women's divergent attitudes. Amélia sees this space as a wild jungle that needs to be tamed and disciplined into submission, while Lóia's approach is to leave nature untouched and unhinged, happy to simply exist in this space: "It wasn't a garden, it was a wilderness, which you either loved or hated; there were no half measures, because you couldn't compete with it. It was there and it surrounded us, and you were either part of it or you weren't. Amélia wasn't" (*The Word Tree*, 10). Even from a young age, Gita intuitively perceives her mother's rejection of Africa as materialised in a vehement refusal to embrace the untameable wilderness of the garden, in a stark contrast with Lóia's and her daughter's strong sense of belonging to Mozambique.[23]

The garden helps shape Gita's identity and sense of belonging to Africa, empowered by her sense of communion with the unlimited nature around her: "everything in the yard danced, (…) and had no limits, nothing did, not even your own body, which grew in all directions and was as big as the world" (*The Word Tree*). The character brings together the Portuguese and the African identities, embodying the perfect balance between the two contrastive worlds: "Neither fully Portuguese, nor entirely African given the colour of her skin, Gita's non-identity offers her a vantage point in the analysis of race, endowing the character with a critical gaze able to notice both the distinctions and similarities between the two races."[24] Her fondness of the black nurse reinforces her deep connection to Africa, while the stern mother further distances her by trying to make her fit a false ideal of conservative Portuguese femininity, with frilly dresses, ballet lessons and strict manners. The lines between black and white are blurred in the child's innocent eyes, showing that the colour of her skin is only the outside shell of what defines her as a human being, further reinforcing the racial distinction through her mixed identity. At nightfall, the unifying virtues of darkness give Gita the opportunity to reveal her "black" face and identity, becoming who she truly is: "it seemed to me that at night there were no real differences. I rediscovered my dark face and lived with Laureano and Lóia in the Black House" (41). Unbiased by racist imperialist mentality, the girl maintains her purity as she refuses to allow social constructs of race to limit her identity.

[22] Ene-Mitrović, 128.
[23] Ene-Mitrović, 128
[24] Ene-Mitrović, 129.

The fluidity between race, skin colour and identity is also manifested in the character of Amélia, as Lóia's wise words reflect a deep understanding of her old mistress, crossing racial and social boundaries: "'She has a heavy heart. (…) 'It beats lightly, but it's heavy. And cold as stone" (24). Despite Amélia's distant and often offensive attitude towards Lóia and the Africans in general, the woman kindly justifies this by reminding Gita of her mother's deeply troubled life: "'She has a *lot* of problems.' Lóia's white face making Amélia's black face white. Black and white are variable concepts, I always knew that. Lóia was white. Luminous. She talked about Amélia with something akin to pity, that close companion to understanding: 'She's dead. She's alive, but she's dead'" (189). Reinforcing the fluidity of blackness and whiteness, Lóia's kindness and wisdom emanate a positive light, rendering her white in the eyes of those around her, while Amélia's tormented life blackens her image, making Gita see her mother as a heavy, dark soul during her entire childhood. Yet revisiting the past helps bring Amélia's dark image to light, and Lóia's compassionate judgement helps change Gita's perception and forgive her mother for abandoning her.

Amélia's experience of Africa is characteristic of the white immigration wave in the first half of the twentieth century, which the Estado Novo supported as part of its alleged colonising mission. Part of the humble rural working class, lacking skills, education and prospects in Portugal, Amélia's only hope to a better economic and social position is to emigrate to the colonies. As Malyn Newitt observes, "the fact that most of the emigrants were poor and illiterate peasants was moulded to fit the colonial ideology, for it was claimed that they would bring the traditional peasant virtues, such as thrift and industry, to the task of developing Africa."[25] Yet the regime's plans failed to materialise, as most of the white settlers like Amélia did not even attempt to integrate or promote these desirable Portuguese values, choosing to remain isolated from the local populations. Ironically, as Newitt notes, Portugal's multi-racial politics endorsing its possession of the colonies resulted in the poor black and white working class occupying comparable positions in the colonial society, limited to similar domestic servant and labourer positions. Thus, the immediate effect of these policies was of creating a racially inclusive environment "where the realities of class were frequently greater than the prejudice of colour" (170).

Coming back to Amélia's definition of racial hierarchy, favouring the white Anglo-Saxons over the Portuguese and the Mozambicans on the principles of class, her desire to be seen as a foreigner is evocative of the separation between races. Choosing to reject the reality in which she is closer to the bottom of her racial hierarchy than the top she aspires to, Amélia builds a new persona for herself as Patrícia Heart, a tall, blonde, "pretty, rich, much-admired woman" (124) as

[25] M. D. D. Newitt, *Portugal in Africa: The Last Hundred Years* (London: C. Hurst, 1981), p. 153.

a form of escapism from the disappointing life in which she is a mere servant for the rich Portuguese. The doors of the opulent mansions remain permanently closed to her, "utterly inaccessible, as if protected by a glass screen" (96), rejected from entering a world that she could only aspire to: "But life decided to take you seriously and, having caught you making that first step, forced you to keep on walking. It wasn't right, but life was like that. Because of one small step, taken just for the hell of it, you could find yourself on the other side of the world, almost without knowing how" (97).As she makes the life-changing decision to move to the colony on a whim, believing that just by being Portuguese she is superior to the black Mozambicans, Amélia is bitterly disappointed that her new life does not meet her unfounded aspirations of climbing the social ladder, confronted with the unforgiving working class reality that she finds in Africa.

Working as a seamstress for an affluent Portuguese family, Amélia is exposed to the informal phone conversations that the lady of the house, Dora Flávia, had with her equally wealthy friends, enjoying hearing about the frivolous intrigues and rivalries of the rich, yet their lack of discretion towards her betrays the modest, disposable role that she occupied: "Dora felt free to say such things in front of her, just as she did in front of the cooks, the servants and the cleaners, because none of them existed: they were things, shadows, objects that passed through the house and would be thrown out tomorrow, as if they had never been there" (118). Limited to a status of invisibility in the eyes of the bourgeois families that employ her, Amélia is faced with the reality of being closer to the social status of her own servant Lóia. When the lady gives her a piece of ugly, unwanted fabric, "as a more discreet way of throwing it in the rubbish" (119), Amélia's embarrassment makes her see herself as the Africans, "as if she were barefoot in the jungle and her white bosswoman had just given it to her as a tip" (119). Her experience of Africa is nothing but humiliation and failed aspirations, bitterly begrudging her inferior position in the colonial society, not very dissimilar to her status in Portugal before emigrating to Mozambique.

The other facet of white experience in Africa is that of Laureano who, unlike his wife, assumes a modest and dignified way of life, choosing to take inspiration from the Mozambicans' attitude and beliefs rather than to distance himself from the social class that they occupy: "You asked for a crumb, and God, if he chose, would give you food in abundance. That was what the Blacks did and so he did the same. He imitated them because they knew about these things. He asked life for a little happiness, the size of an ant's leg, and life would give him happiness in abundance" (135). The disparity between Laureano's fully embracing his position through hard work and open-mindedness, and Amélia's vehement refusal to accept her status, bitterly resenting her humble yet inescapable condition, illustrates the two extreme sides of the white experience of race in Gersão's novel.

Divided by the opposite views of class and race, the troubled relationship between Amélia and Laureano emphasises the fallibility of marriage in a society where women were required to perform their duty as wives to perpetuate the traditional value of family as a defining building block of the Estado Novo. Having replied to Laureano's matrimonial advert only to take revenge on a former lover, Amélia succumbs to social pressure and accepts the marriage proposal because of what her adoptive family and the community expected of her. Yet her failed ambition to have a comfortable, luxurious life in the colony that would make everyone in the village jealous makes her resent the husband that was unable to gain her love and respect. Disillusioned by her first love, Joaquim Albano, who abandons her for Adelina, a richer, more respectable girl in the village, then disappointed with Laureano's modest salary and lack of ambition, the men in Amélia's life fulfil purely instrumental roles in helping to better her social condition. Therefore, as she decides to leave her husband for a richer man in Australia, Amélia continues to perform her predetermined role as wife. She replaces Mozambique with Australia like she once did with Portugal, taking yet again her chance to a new life, with a wealthier man that could offer her more than her first husband.

Along the same lines of social class and gender roles, a crucial episode in Gita's experience of Africa is her love story with Rodrigo, one of her schoolmates who comes from a rich Portuguese family in Lourenço Marques. The passionate young love comes to an abrupt and unhappy ending when Gita lies to Rodrigo about being pregnant in order to test his reaction, who in turn accuses her of deliberately plotting to have a child to secure her own future. After having been made to use the backdoor of the young man's mansion to remain hidden from his father, Gita witnesses the condescending attitude of the Portuguese rich, ending up by being rejected by the same elite that her mother had once envied and aspired to be a part of. The repetition of the humiliating experience is nothing but a reminder of the limitations of social class in a divisive colonial society in which the poor, whether white or black, are confined to the same inferior position.

Keen to leave this bitter experience behind, Gita follows her mother's example in abandoning Mozambique, not for the exotic continent of Australia but for Salazar's Portugal, the country that her parents had left decades ago. Her uncle offers her a room to share with his sister-in-law that helps around the house, insinuating a similar status as a maid in return for accommodation, and reminiscent of the life that Amélia had before leaving Portugal, treated as a servant in her godfather's home. Gita thus abandons her fight for the liberation of Mozambique in favour of her own independence from "a home filled with the disappointment of first love, the abandonment of an estranged mother and an increasingly distant father."[26] Yet she does not give

[26] Ene-Mitrović, 132.

up hope that Portugal's imminent revolution will have the same radical effect that she expects to see in Mozambique: "But it could be blown apart, be forced to rethink everything. The Old Man was on his throne, but surely we could knock him off."[27] The ending of the novel describes Gita's final day in Lourenço Marques, thinking about the world she leaves behind, with "wide open spaces, broad horizons, and a tree that used to grow in my dreams and that reached up to the sky" (203-204).

Like the complex depiction of the African experience in colonial Mozambique, the portrayal of the Portuguese status brings together a diversity of perspectives that define the multifaceted nature of race in the African society. The tensions between the black and white races forced to occupy the same space in society are explained through the positions of Amélia and Laureano, both working-class Portuguese immigrants with identical social and racial statuses yet fundamentally opposed views that lead to the end of their marriage. The different European perspectives are complemented by Gita's standpoint, equally Portuguese and African, with a complicated racial identity that uniquely places her at the edge of the two races. Neither entirely Portuguese, nor fully African, her character represents the often-surprising complexity of the colonial society, challenging the imperialist multi-racial conviction according to which Portuguese immigration and miscegenation contributed to social equality through the European civilising mission.[28]

Portugal's long colonial history in Africa, tainted by violence and racism, is representative of a ruthless empire that based its superior political and economic power on the exploitation of minorities. As I tried to demonstrate, the concepts of history, memory and truth are key to understanding not only Gersão's narrative, but also the racial tensions that it exposes in colonial society, disputing the myths of a maritime empire, multi-racialism and equality fostered by the Estado Novo propaganda. Bringing together a plethora of fragmented and often divergent accounts of a reality unaccounted by history, *A Árvore das Palavras* contributes to outlining an alternative representation of the subaltern in the Portuguese colonial and social system. The framing of the African experience of race in Mozambique reveals the Portuguese lack of understanding of the situation of the indigenous populations in colonial society, exposing the inequalities and brutality embedded in the social fabric of the empire and the way in which the European ruling of Africa perpetuated a system of violence and injustice against the black Mozambicans. Moreover, by giving women a voice through the strong and complex female

[27] Teolinda Gersão, *The Word Tree*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (Sawtry, UK: Dedalus, 2010), p. 202.
[28] Ene-Mitrović, p. 134.

characters of Gita and Amélia, Teolinda Gersão offers a multifaceted critique of the Portuguese society whose oppression of the marginalised is manifested in all its structures.

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