

THE RETURN OF THE OLD LADY

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Dream: *An elderly lady, standing in front of an old and neglected house, complained as she saw a sign with the word PATRIMONY, hanging over the gate. She seemed to have come from far away intending to take possession of the said house that belonged to her family.*

In the silence of the midday heat, she showed up on the street dragging a silver-handled walking stick or maybe pushed by the elegant adornment. She walked irregularly, but always advancing, even though it seemed otherwise. Each step forward was preceded by two more, one backward and one sideways, seemingly in regression. But only the steps were delayed as the rest of her body advanced, supported by the long-suffering walking stick. She advanced pulling her legs forward with half a step each turn, which was, after all, the only possible progress. Moving in this syncopated rhythm, the elderly lady, inexplicably, did not lose an inch of her dignity.

She was a haughty and determined lady, almost arrogant and threatening when she managed to stand straight. She was of average height, topped up with a shining head of hair, so white, framing her face, which was made up like a theatrical mask. Finally, she stopped, looking intently at the house in ruins that rose or collapsed in front of her. At first glance, it wasn't possible to say which of the two hypotheses would be confirmed, because, observing it better, either of them could be the translation of reality. The house was, in fact, a dump, but so intact that it looked more like part of a movie set, specifically built to look like a house in ruins.

On that street, only brand new or carefully restored houses could be seen, in a stillness and harmony that was only broken by the ramshackle house, in front of which stood the elderly lady, as old or even older than the house itself. She remained there, standing, her eyes coruscating in anger, her hands clenching the walking stick. There could be no doubt whatsoever that soon, really soon, she would attract the attention of boys and bums, simply astonished youngsters, judging that they had found entertainment for a dull Sunday.

¹ Bettencourt, Fátima. "O Regresso da Velha Senhora." In: *Sonhos e Desvarios*. Rosa de Porcelana Editora, 2019.

Around a dozen spectators had already gathered when a little boy, smudged with dust and poverty, decided to break the enchantment of the static scene. He picked a small rock from the floor and threw it against one of the faded and decayed windows of the house. It sounded like cannon fire that suddenly blasted in the quietude of that Sunday morning. The imp was curtly struck by a terrifying look from the lady, who simultaneously lifted the walking stick to strike a blind blow. She didn't hit the boy, as he bent his slim and nimble body at the right moment to defend himself. A little wonky, to keep the walking stick in his sight and to avoid a new attack, he managed to escape.

After placing himself at a safe distance, a new pebble followed the same route as the previous one. That only increased the anger of the elderly lady, who felt she was the only target of the attacks. By the small-scale gravel being thrown, it was obvious that they were not meant to cause major damage to the dilapidated house. He was only a small boy playing. The fact angered the elderly lady who, in her deepest internal thoughts, could not understand how that miserable imp managed to manifest such expressive happiness. Only the arrival of a young police officer made the boy disappear, identified by the policeman as "I Slept on the Street", a well-known brat feared even by street residents and by the police as well, because as a minor, little or nothing could be done about him. The police officer then turned to the elderly lady, identified just by looking at her as "someone" in that gathering.

- How can I help you, madam? - was the polite question asked by the agent of the law. - What do you want? I, the owner of this, ask you, but before anything else, officer, I want to know what this sign with the word PATRIMONY is doing here.

This is what the elderly lady said, swinging the walking stick in the air with the attitude of someone who sees their property at risk. From the policeman there was only a hesitant suggestion:

- Well, I don't know about that. You will have to talk to the Curator who is the one who goes around identifying what is patrimony in this city. And if she ordered the sign to be put there, she must know the reason why.

- Look, officer, I find all this very strange because this house is mine and nobody ever asked for my authorization to put up any sign. And I'll tell you more, I will not be the one to ask for authorization from someone I don't know to touch what's mine. You, yourself, will please remove this thing, this sign, and right away we will turn it around and write PRIVATE PROPERTY.

The police officer, more and more troubled, kept trying to explain to the angry lady the limits of his functions that had nothing to do with signs, much less turning or changing

them. The elderly lady should head to the Curator on Monday because nothing worked on Sunday.

As the officer spoke, always showing a friendly attitude, the elderly lady started to calm down while being escorted to a nearby garden where, stated the officer, it would be easier to talk and, who knows, even drink some fresh water. After all, she was a fine lady - the officer thought to himself - he didn't understand how she even lost her mind over the boy. He decided to try one of his tricks that, as a rule, gave good results and, this time, it wasn't even exactly a lie as always happened in the most difficult cases. The young man had invented the game of similarities, that lady looked a lot like his grandmother, from Campo de Cão, in Paúl. The conversation went on, and he learned that the elderly lady had relatives in those parts, and this detail brought them closer, establishing a bridge between the two of them that led her to start telling the young man episodes about her past life. So, the elderly lady began to say:

- Oh! Boy! If you had seen me in my time! I had the most handsome fellows in town at my feet, I could choose whoever I wanted, but I only had eyes for Dadinho, the most handsome and blond, blue-eyed, he looked Swedish, like a movie actor... I think his father was Russian, I don't even know how he ended up here. Dadinho and I made the most beautiful couple that had ever entered the Church of Our Lady of Light, that one at the square. That's where we were going to get married. Everything was ready: invitations, the wedding gown, bridesmaids in pairs wearing three different colors...

At this point, the narrator suddenly went silent with her hand in the air and her eyes lost

in some image only she could see, her wrinkles got more pronounced, her back seemed more curved, her hand shook and the walking stick fell to the ground while the lady tried, with her hands splayed, to contain the tears that cascaded down her face. Gently, the young policeman supported her and tried to help her pull herself together. With a visible effort, she continued:

- It's over, now I'm fine. As I was saying, this Hollywood movie set was nothing more than a dream that faded out in a woe. Dadinho, after going through a minor surgery, was wrapped up in a hell of a generalized infection and died. Almost going crazy, I placed all the blame on the land that, at the time, did not have the means to save lives. My outrage and anger came to the point that I had to go away and dwell on my sorrows somewhere where nobody knew me.

- But, certainly, you have already managed to overcome everything and now I see that you are back in the land - commented the policeman.

- Life, time, they don't stop, in fact, they only stop with our death. But don't let yourself be fooled by this apparent return. In the past few years, the idea of coming back here has chased me nonstop... coming back to a place where I knew heaven and hell. It was then that an old relative warned me of the danger of losing my house, which had belonged to my parents. I don't know why in the world it had become a state patrimony, they said a famous elder had been born here before my grandfather. Long story short, if I wanted to preserve what was mine, I had to come here immediately.

- All right. Now that you are here, stay calm, pursue your rights and everything will go well. By the way, in this city, everything is solved in peace. In a while, you'll end up recognizing the town you left and even staying here.

- Thank you very much for all your kindness, but one thing I can guarantee: I won't stay. What brought me here was a mission and as soon as it is accomplished, I will go away. I liked meeting you a lot and now I'm off to the hotel that is right up ahead.

Each one went their separate ways: the young man considered his day well spent once he had helped a lady in such distress to find her balance, while she... unfortunately, for her nothing was that simple. She could not find any sign of conciliation within her. She had scratched at her scars and now they hurt more. What had to be done would be done without a shadow of a doubt. She was more and more convinced that only one punishment to the city could calm that discomfort and she knew exactly what she would do.

It was very important to keep secret the solution her aching heart had found. She would remain really calm, even if only for show, she would plan the trip for the following week, but before that, she would execute her decision without giving anyone the time to interfere.

The time to leave had come. She would have to be at the airport at four in the morning to catch the six o'clock flight. At this same time, the team hired by her would arrive with all the wrecking machinery, without any authorization from the relevant authorities. After all, who would be more relevant than the owner of the construction herself? She, yes, had decided that there would be no stone left unturned. This thought motivated her to go up the stairs of the airplane, dismissing the help offered by one of the crew members. It was evident that she returned lighter.

Translator's Note

In *The Language of Languages: Reflections on Translation* (2023), Kenyan author Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o argues for putting translation into the service of connecting different languages and cultures as "the common language of languages." Such a challenge would entail rethinking long-standing translation practices that reinforce and consolidate colonial and imperialist oppressions by reproducing hegemonic discourses. From a decolonial perspective, questioning and replacing such practices with approaches that resist linguistic and cultural hegemony begins with the choice of literary works to translate. Despite increased attention to African women's literary production in the 21st century, the reach of their works outside the Portuguese-speaking world is still limited, as the vast majority of authors have not had their works translated into other languages.² In general, female writers are still less recognized within academia than their male counterparts: women's literary production is still less studied than men's, and their writings have less visibility.

The study and translation of African women's stories still require more recognition for their intrinsic literary and cultural value. Similarly, quantitative and qualitative research on existing translations of their work is scarce, highlighting the need for further studies and more translations of their literary contributions. In one of the most comprehensive data collections on African literature in translation, Marco Bucaioni identified a total of 171 African authors writing in Portuguese, distributed as follows: 37 from Cape Verde, 15 from Guinea-Bissau, 16 from São Tomé and Príncipe, 55 from Angola, and 48 from Mozambique.³ He documented 386 publications in translation, with 91 in Italian, 69 in French, 54 in Spanish, 42 in English, and 30 in German, as well as 20 republications. Among female writers, Paulina Chiziane stands out with 12 translated works, followed by Ana Paula Tavares with 5, Lília Momplé and Conceição Lima with three each, and Lina Magaia, Vera Duarte, and Olinda Beja with two each.

Although these numbers might seem promising, in fact, they highlight how little work by African women has been translated from Portuguese on a global scale. For example, while Paulina Chiziane has 12 translated works, only two are in English: *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* (*The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy*, 2016) and *O Alegre Canto da Perdiz* (*The Joyful Song*

² Among the influential works written or organized by these scholars are *A Mulher em África: vozes de uma margem sempre presente* (2007), by Inocência Mata and Laura Cavalcante Padilha, *Literaturas Africanas e Formulações Pós-Coloniais* (2003), by Ana Mafalda Leite, *Sexual/Textual Empires: Gender and Marginality in Lusophone African Literature* (2004) by Hilary Owen, and *Elementos para uma Literatura da África*, by Zuleide Duarte.

³ Bucaioni, Marco. Quem Constrói o "Cânone Internacional" das Literaturas Africanas em Português? Tradução, Instituições e Assimetrias Norte/Sul. In: *Mulemba*, v. 12, n. 22, p. 28-48, 2020.

of the Partridge, 2024), both translated by David Brookshaw. Lília Momplé's stories have been featured in various short story collections, but her only full-length book in English is the novella *Neighbors*, translated by Richard Bartlett. It is also worth noting that most books by African women authors translated from Portuguese into English tend to be either longer narratives or poetry. My translation of Fátima Bettencourt's story "O Retorno da Velha Senhora" ("The Return of the Elderly Lady") is only the second of her works to appear in English, following "O Último Julgamento" ("The Last Judgement"), translated by Anna Kushner.⁴

Fátima Bettencourt was born in 1938, in Porto Novo, on the island of Santo Antão, Cape Verde. Growing up and completing her studies in São Vicente, she attended primary school there before continuing her education in Mindelo. Bettencourt's extensive travels and active engagement in educational and cultural endeavors have profoundly shaped her world-sense and fueled her activism. In Lisbon, she earned a teaching degree and trained at Universidade Nova de Lisboa and the Escola Superior de Educação de Setúbal (Higher Education School of Setúbal). As an educator, Bettencourt seized opportunities to immerse herself in diverse cultures, teaching in Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and Angola.

The story "O Regresso da Velha Senhora" ("The Return of the Old Lady") opens Bettencourt's short story collection *Sonhos & Desvarios* (2019) with a narrative centered around an elderly woman who revisits Cape Verde after a prolonged absence abroad. Upon arriving at her childhood residence, she finds a conspicuous sign bearing the word "património" (patrimony) in bold capitals, hanging at the gate. Through a conversation between the old lady and a local police officer, we glean insights into her personal history—a narrative shared by countless Cape Verdeans who, like her, embarked on journeys abroad at an early age.

Bettencourt's story, a complex interplay of orality into writing, includes several idiomatic expressions and various literary devices. I have chosen to adapt colloquialisms such as "conversa vai, conversa vem" ("the conversation went on and on") and "por que cargas d'água" ("why in the world)," still capturing the informal, conversational nature of the narrative. Additionally, prosopopeia and similes add another layer of complexity—"empurrada pelo elegante adorno" (pushed by the elegant ornament) and "martirizada bengala" (martyrized cane) required careful phrasing to preserve their poetic effect. Likewise, I had to adapt expressions such as "aquilo soou como um tiro de canhão" to balance literal translation and natural expression in English. My choice for adaptation in these cases is

⁴ Bettencourt, Fátima. "The Last Judgement." Trans. Anna Kushner. Words Without Borders, <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2020-05/may-2020-writing-from-cabo-verde-the-last-judgment-fatima-bettencourt-anna/> Accessed 9 October 2024.

mainly due to the specificities of these expressions. While they are a significant part of the author's writing style, they are not necessarily local Cape Verdean colloquialisms. Thus, I opted to keep their colloquial and informal intentionality without reproducing such expressions in Portuguese or creating a disruptive literal translation.

Other elements of Bettencourt's style pose challenges for translation, such as her frequent use of the passive voice and her tendency to invert word order by placing the subject at the end of the sentence, creating a grammatical disruption that is difficult to replicate in English. Other distinctive features of Bettencourt's writing include long, descriptive sentences, the use of metaphors and irony, popular expressions, and intertextual references. Bettencourt writes in Portuguese, but as a Cape Verdean, her writing follows the European Portuguese standard while being influenced by Cape Verdean Creole, the everyday language of most Cape Verdeans. Translating her texts presents many challenges, especially when navigating the best ways to convey terms, expressions, and short sentences that deviate from standard Portuguese grammar and vocabulary. Her deliberate use of language to transgress norms and experiment is more than a stylistic choice—it holds more profound social, cultural, and historical significance. The greatest challenge is preserving her literary style and the cultural nuances of her work while producing a translation that remains respectful to the receiving language and readers and their cultural context.

Reflecting on the specificities of my positionality in relation to Bettencourt and her text, I recognize the potential limitations of approaching her work as a Brazilian woman and as a non-native English speaker. However, I see these aspects as tools to engage in the broader conversation about and the action of translating African women's literature. My obstacles in translating these texts do not lie only in their linguistic, cultural, and stylistic intricacies. The biggest challenges rest in the subtleties surrounding these texts, their production, readership, cultural meaning, and social impact. I hope this and my future translations of African women's writing can further these discussions and contribute to the reach of their texts and messages.

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