

“E tu, que achas tu de tudo isto?”: **Colonial Women, Memory and Post-Independence in João Paulo Borges Coelho’s *Rainhas da Noite***

Sandra Sousa^a

Abstract

*This essay analyzes João Paulo Borges Coelho’s latest novel, *Rainhas da Noite* (2013), from the perspective of its portrayal of colonial women. My argument begins by recalling Laura Calvacante Padilha’s inspired insights into the representation of voices from pre-colonial traditions in modern African fiction. I then develop and extend Padilha’s work by including voices from the historically more recent colonial past within the fictional repertory of recovered voices. Borges Coelho’s writings indeed allude to spaces and “voices” of African tradition, as Padilha argues. I suggest, however, that it is the memory of the past of Mozambican colonial time, as well as the relation between that past and a present defined by post-independence, that constitutes the axis of aesthetic and social meaning in *Rainhas da Noite*. The recent past of Portuguese colonial domination permeates Borges Coelho’s novels.*

Keywords: Colonial Women, Mozambique, Colonialism, Post-Independence

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^a Assistant Professor of Portuguese at University of Central Florida, EUA, sandra.sousa@ucf.edu.

*"Embora muitos anjos se tenham transformado,
por obra do tempo, em verdadeiros monstros, há
que olhá-los nesse tempo apenas como os anjos
que seriam."*

(Rainhas da Noite)

As an entry point for my discussion of João Paulo Borges Coelho's *Rainhas da Noite* (2013), I should like to recall Laura Calvacante Padilha's inspired criticism in "Tradition and the Effects of the New in Modern African Fictional Cartography" (2007). Padilha emphasizes the idea of voices and tradition in modern African literature not to denote something unchanging or characterized by a "journey of return" to essences contained in origins and beginnings. Rather, she understands "voices and traditions" not as "another map" (PADILHA, 2007, p. 106) – but rather as the way in which Lusophone African writers continue to produce impactful elements of meaning. According to Padilha, this act of recovering, or amplifying, the voices of precolonial peoples "was not undertaken (...) merely as a means of discovering a new aesthetic solution, but rather, at a given moment, as a kind of reinforcing of the very utopia of creation of the nation to be" (PADILHA, 2007, p. 106-107). Thus it was, on Padilha's account, the desire for national liberation that "created" a new aesthetic side by side with an ideological project and thereby established the foundations of literary modernity in the Portuguese ex-colonies in Africa. In Padilha's words, "at this present time in history what is cultivated are new forms of artistic expression, and the past is invoked as a kind of seed planted to help grow the present and the future" (PADILHA, 2007, p. 107).

Furthermore, Padilha reiterates the idea of the desire to return to the "locale of the culture," which she regards as the force "capable of promoting the historic liberation movement" (PADILHA, 2007, p. 108). After independence, however, the producers of cultural meanings are still immersed in the imaginary of the past. Padilha points out, "that past continues, intractable, in the diverse forms of language usage and meaning" (PADILHA, 2007, p. 109). And this, she argues, is as true of those writers producing works of fiction at the time of the struggle for independence (and immediately after it) as much as it is of those publishing at the turn of the new

century: “the greatest concern of writers (...) is to stage the lives that lend vitality to the spaces and to the myths and rites that sustain existence” (PADILHA, 2007, p. 111). For these writers, the past “still has a meaning, and thus represents tradition as a symbolic element of primordial importance” (PADILHA, 2007, p. 117). We can cite names here such as Manuel Rui Monteiro, Arnaldo Santos, Paulina Chiziane, Mia Couto and João Paulo Borges Coelho, among others.

To prove her points about the force of locale and the extreme care with which space is configured in the works of Lusophone African writers, Padilha chooses to analyze Paulina Chiziane’s novels in depth. Two comments she makes in her essay prove particularly revealing for understanding some of its main ideas. On one occasion, referring to one of Chiziane’s works, Padilha states:

According to the implied author the women’s subaltern condition turns out to be at the nucleus of a narrative strategy aimed at denouncing the corrosion of the history of the former colony and of the very deficiency of the postcolonial construction of a nationality in the utopian originally conceived of in revolutionary times. (PADILHA, 2007, p. 114)

Padilha also remarks that “what appear on the present-day scene (...) are forms of destroyed subsistence with the masses structurally adjusted to a devastating, contemporary poverty,” aggravated by the “greed of new imperialisms for which the natural resources of these new countries are the object of predatory behavior and the source of avarice, and this without minimizing issues generated by their own correlations of internal forces” (PADILHA, 2007, p. 110). On Padilha’s view, “it is in this context that the question as to the role of tradition, on the level of literary texts, can find pertinent responses” (PADILHA, 2007, p. 110).

I should like to make clear that, in what follows, my argument does not aim to contradict the insights contributed by Laura Padilha’s article; rather, I base myself on it and seek to build upon it. I believe that most Lusophone writers make use of tradition, or if one prefers, the precolonial past as a way to innovate by means of incorporating cultural tradition. Nevertheless, questions arise when, concretely, we read the *contemporary* Lusophone African writers. Is it only to tradition

that they turn when trying to open up "the possibility of new negotiations of feeling"? Are they just using ancient tradition for the purpose as of "subverting the aesthetic traditions of imposed European cultures"? How are writers dealing with the failure of the postcolonial construction of nationality? Can we discern in their works a way forward out of the failure of revolutionary socialist utopias, or, in other words, can we see in their works a new literary project that attempts to re-create the nation?

Rainhas da noite: structure and voice

In an effort to offer a tentative approach to answering these questions, I would like to focus on *Rainhas da Noite*, the most recent novel of the Mozambican writer João Paulo Borges Coelho. This novel, to the best of my knowledge, has to date not been received with as much enthusiasm as his previous ones. According to the majority of his critics, Borges Coelho's literary project is characterized by an ensemble of strategies and features that make his fictional work one of the most original projects with contemporary literature written in the Portuguese language. To cite one of his most devoted critics: "A chegada de João Paulo Borges Coelho produz um saudável abalo no universo literário moçambicano" (CAN, 2014, p. 13). Even though his writings allude to spaces and "voices" of the African tradition (as mentioned by Laura Padilha), it is memory and the relation between the present and the past of Mozambican colonial time that permeates his books. This, I believe, is a feature of many of the new generation of Lusophone African writers. This is not to say that the ancient past does not appear or maintain relevance, but it is to suggest that the main focus is to be found in the recent past of Portuguese colonial domination.

In her recent article, "O Caderno, o Velho e as três Mulheres. *Rainhas da Noite*, um romance indiciário," Elena Brugioni states that,

(...) *Rainhas da Noite* (Borges Coelho, 2013) configura-se como uma proposta de grande novidade no que diz respeito a diferentes aspectos e problematizações que pautam a escrita deste autor e, mais em geral, a prática literária no que vem sendo epistemologicamente definida

como pós-colonialidade. O que sobressai, de imediato, diz respeito à dimensão criativa e literária que caracteriza o que conceitualmente corresponde às noções de *arquivo*, *fonte* e *testemunho* nas suas ligações com a chamada *história*, apontando para constelações conceptuais e desdobramentos epistemológicos de grande interesse em vista de uma reflexão em torno da relação entre passado e presente, narração literária e escrita da história. (BRUGIONI, s/p, 2015)

Brugioni does an excellent job analyzing the aforementioned concepts in Borges Coelho's novel. My aim here, therefore, is not to investigate the conceptual and epistemological issues which situate this text as a place of production of historical and philosophical knowledge; that work has already been accomplished by Brugioni. *Rainhas da noite* is arguably the most interesting of all of Borges Coelho's novels in the sense that it is dense, full of meanings, with several important issues at stake and constantly in conflict. For example, in the prologue the narrator, who in the novel is also a main protagonist, reflects on his relation to the intentions of the other narrator – the one who wrote the diary – and writes, “Confesso que nunca cheguei a resolver esta questão” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 26). As readers, we are left at the novel's end with the same problem. We are made to feel that likewise not all of our questions will be answered.

Rainhas da noite is divided into nine chapters – as well as a prologue and an epilogue – which alternate between the story told by Maria Eugénia's diary and the present tense narrator's “notes.” These “notes” can also be seen as a diary in themselves, since they encapsulate the narrator's journey to understand and to make sense of Maria Eugénia's own “notes,” or if one wishes, “reality.” This diary, we are told in the prologue, came into his hands on a day in which he approached a street vendor of second-hand books in order to buy an old copy of Rui Knopfli's *A Ilha de Próspero*. Since the narrator's attempt to bargain over the price of the book eventually fails, the vendor ends up offering him a notebook “de aspecto vulgar” (18) as a way of compensating for the exorbitant price paid for Knopfli's book. It is the access to this private text that triggers the whole novel, which represents the journey undertaken by the narrator to understand the small colonial world of Moatize. The narrator attempts to fill in the

gaps left by Maria Eugénia, to make her narrative have some sense of temporal logic, and, in the end, to draw meaning from the colonial past: "O meu propósito, não o podia esquecer, era retirar um sentido do passado, não imprimir ao passado um sentido actual" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 212).

The first questions to be solved: what was Maria Eugénia's purpose in writing a diary? Did she write it just for herself or with the intention of possibly producing a future novel herself? Apparently for the narrator, it becomes clear that "embora esta não expressasse um propósito claro, (...) qualquer que ele fosse não se reduzia a denunciar as relações raciais ou coloniais, nem tão-pouco a falar sobre a mina de carvão" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 26). Even though this question is never solved by the narrator, it is precisely on Maria Eugénia's "broader" and most explicit reason to write the diary that I will focus my attention in this space: namely, on racial and colonial relations.

Through the reading of Maria Eugénia's diary we are taken back to the late period of Portuguese colonization in Mozambique – somewhere in the 1960s – and to the small village of Moatize in the district of Tete, whose main reason for existence was coal mining. As Maria Eugénia explains, upon her arrival from the metropolis to meet her husband Murilo, an electrical engineer for the Belgium Company that explores the coal mines: "Foi essa a primeira sensação que tive: a sensação que chegava ao inferno" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 29). Through her diary we are also taken to a world of complex and sometimes ambiguous colonial relationships. The challenges that the narrator faces – "...demasiadas rupturas, demasiados avanços e recuos (...)" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 23) – are, in part, due to the intricate system of relationships established in Moatize – a world that only can be approached fully with the memory of those who survived it. That is the reason why, by luck or chance, the narrator stumbles onto a newspaper's obituary announcing the death of Maria Eugénia, which is signed by Travessa Chassafar, and why he ends up hearing his name called while at an office of public services. The literary web is then established in order to facilitate the path to the past's inquiry. The narrator is thus "armed" with all of the possible sources to "excavate" the microcosm of the colonial world: Maria Eugénia's diary access to one of her main

characters (Travessa Chassafar) – and the official documents found at the Municipal Archive.

Queens, spiders and the others

As we have already have observed, it is through Maria Eugénia's diary, as well as through the narrator's effort to disclose and to make sense of it, that the reader discovers a society as seen through the lens of women. In Moatize, these colonial women are subjected to the control of the so-called "spider", Annemarie Simon, the Belgian wife of the coal mine company's director. In an intricate and complex plot, we come to understand how women can operate in a colonial and repressed environment. In fact, some women, like Annemarie, are able to extend their webs further than it would be possible to imagine, controlling not only other women, but white men and black servants.

In the oppressive environment of Moatize, four strong women characters come to the fore, defying not only the rules imposed by a male colonial society, but also the ones imposed by those of their own gender. According to Ann Stoler, "women, otherwise supporting players on the colonial stage, are charged with reshaping the face of colonial society, as in the case of Africa, and imposing their racial will on, a colonial world where 'relatively unrestrained social intermingling...had been prevalent'" (STOLER, 2002, p. 56). She adds that, "European women were positioned as the bearers of a redefined colonial morality (...)" (STOLER, 2002, p. 57). This is certainly the case of Annemarie, the character who, according to the narrator Maria Eugénia, extends her web from *Casa Quinze* – the house of the Company's director – throughout the whole society of Moatize. It is she, not her husband, who runs the Company by controlling the lives of its employees: "Era a mulher, madame Simon, quem por ele tomava as decisões" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 38). Annemarie, a woman whose voice "tinha um tom autoritário" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 42), does not spare any efforts to control people's lives: in each house there is a "spy" (i.e., a servant who she trusts) that she allocates to the employees' houses to make sure that she controls their private lives, something that Maria Eugénia realizes with time.

Annemarie not only controls: she is also able to create new lines of division and separation within society:

Só com o tempo me viria a aperceber desta nova linha de distinção entre o público e o privado que legitimava a presença de madame Simon no interior das casas de todos os funcionários superiores da Companhia. Aquilo que noutras circunstâncias pareceria uma grosseira intromissão, não passava neste caso de uma genuína preocupação com o bem-estar de cada um. Pelo menos foi isso que algumas defensoras de madame Simon me disseram mais tarde. Como se, naquela natureza tão inóspita, do incansável esforço da mulher do director-geral dependesse a sobrevivência da pequena comunidade onde eu acabava de ingressar. *A nossa comunidade.* (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 44)

In the case of Maria Eugénia, it is Travessa Chassafar who embodies the role of "spy." We can, then, look at Annemarie as a figure of power: she is the queen of that small kingdom, spreading her web across an entire population.

A striking example of Mme. Simon's role "as the bearer of a colonial morality" is intertwined with the story of another female character, Agnès Fink, who is also Belgian and who ends up succumbing to Moatize's oppressive environment and running away in a desperate act to find freedom within the local populations. We never really know what happens to her during her second attempt to escape; she crossed the border and was never found. In Annemarie's words, "A história de Agnès Fink pouco interesse tem, além de mostrar o que pode acontecer a nós mulheres, neste lugar, se não tomarmos muito cuidado" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 124). Agnès's last successful attempt to run away could not be made publicly since, according to Annemarie, "Deixar saber publicamente que Agnès partira como partiu era o mesmo que reconhecer que uma branca, uma belga, aderira à subversão..." (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 311). And Annemarie gives other examples of women who were not careful, as is the case of a woman who ends up being called *Balançoise* because of the way she walked:

Mas, embora nunca se lhe tivessem conhecido *casos*, ou talvez por isso mesmo, uma coisa era certa: *Balançoise*, ao caminhar com aquele balanço insinuante não tomara o cuidado que as mulheres brancas deviam tomar neste lugar, e o resultado é que não mais se libertaria daquele nome nem

da reputação que a ele vinha associada. Quisesse ou não, fosse ou não, *Balançoise* passara a ser, na expressão sarcástica de Annemarie, *une putain*. (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 126)

Besides having their husbands fired, not being “careful” can lead to such women acquiring bad reputations, or being accused of subversion against the Empire or of carrying out subversive rituals, especially if they have the audacity of mingle with the natives. In another direction, women who challenge rules end up in some kind of madness, isolation, sadness and revulsion. The only way to acquire freedom is to leave Moatize, even if they do it only in a state of emotional breakdown or insanity. In the narrator’s words:

Nada posso dizer sobre os pensamentos do velho. Quanto aos meus, erraram por um momento em torno da loucura das mulheres de Moatize. Também elas lutavam incansavelmente para se libertar da corda que as prendia às hortas respectivas. Também, no caso delas, a loucura parecia ser a forma de garantir que desempenhassem o seu papel. (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 249)

Men, on the other hand, respect Annemarie out of fear. Murilo, Maria Eugénia’s husband, lives in constant anxiety of what the latter can do to defy Annemarie. According to him, “A mulher controla tudo, até a natureza” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 56). Not even the member of PIDE, inspector Cunha, who is feared by everyone, escapes the influence of the director’s wife. In Murilo’s words, Cunha “... é desde sempre um aliado de Annemarie...” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 313). If inspector Cunha represents the order of the Empire, an order repeated in hundreds of “Cunhas” throughout its corners,

A sala era patética, com as suas florzinhas de plástico amarelas numa mesa baixa, sob o olhar sisudo de um Presidente do Conselho pendurado na parede. Não pude deixar de pensar nas centenas de salas iguais àquela, espalhadas pelo império, todas elas com o mesmo retrato zelando pelo que dentro delas se passava. E, já agora, nas centenas de inspectores Cunhas assegurando que dentro delas se passava mesmo alguma coisa. (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 314)

Annemarie can be seen as the extension of Cunha’s and, in its turn, Salazar’s webs into colonial Portugal. Mme.

Simon thus makes sure that the women around her lead no more than tedious lives.

Agnès Fink was a Belgium pianist who, as we had seen, had to escape in order not to subjugate herself to Annemarie. Her problem of intense solitude in Moatize would have been easy to fix if she had been allowed to practice her profession. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that there was a piano at the "spider's" house that no one used, Annemarie never conceded her the pleasure of having access to it and playing it. For her part, Agnès "estava disposta a tudo para tocar, tudo menos submeter-se à mulher do director-geral" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 88). At some point in the narrative, the author of the "notes" asks the following question: "Que fazia mover aquelas mulheres?" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 178). It is worth recalling his explanation of Agnès actions:

Em Agnès, parecia-me evidente a atitude corajosa de desafio dos limites postos à pequena comunidade. Buscava no espaço mais além uma espécie de mundo real, distinto da mediocridade que a cercava. (...) Agnès buscava simplesmente ar que respirar. E fazia-o com uma valentia que só poderíamos entender na sua verdadeira dimensão se houvesse uns óculos que nos permitissem ver o mundo a partir dessa altura – as regras rígidas a estúpida moral. Mas, além de ter motivos de sobra para agir assim ela tinha também a sabedoria de não tentar ignorar aquilo que tinha dentro e sabia impossível de conter. Ou seja, o combustível que alimentava as suas obstinadas arremetidas ao desconhecido vinha-lhe de dentro. Faltava-me apenas saber se Agnès fugia ou se procurava. (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 178)

It is my perspective that it is not important to know if Agnès ran away or if she was in search of something else, since, at the bottom line, both actions are one and the same. Agnès was incapable of adapting to the oppressive society of Moatize and had no other way out: staying would mean annihilating herself.

Another interesting female character is Suzanne Clijsters, who is also a Belgian married to a Company employee. Maria Eugénia's first impression of Suzanne is that she is trying to set her into conflict with Annemarie in an enigmatic and rebellious way. Suzanne has a deep hatred for Annemarie and, in her defiance of the "spider's webs" and societal rules, also finds herself having to leave Moatize. Suzanne possesses

an acute perception of the kind of place Moatize is: “um lugar, segundo ela, onde às mulheres era vedada a possibilidade de exercerem a sua função mais fundamental, precisamente a de serem mulheres” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 71). She is not, however, referring to the African women, but to the European ones who have many servants at their disposal: “cozinheiros, mainatos, moleques, *macaiaias*, *mwana-cooks*, jardineiros, guardas, estafetas, ajudantes de todas as espécies” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 72), even spies. In her view: “Que restava às mulheres para fazer enquanto os maridos permaneciam nos escritórios ou na mina, enquanto jogavam ténis ou bebiam o seu *whisky & soda*?” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 72). And the answer is simple: they were left with tedium that would drive them to degradation. Suzanne challenges Maria Eugénia several times to “let the masks fall” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 74). That is exactly what they do by breaking on the village’s sacred rules: crossing the racial borders and going to the compound where the Africans live. Suzanne convinces Ernesto Cambala, an African nurse, to take them there, which he does because he is used to obliging the colonials. But in spite of that feeling of obligation, he knows that is taking a path that can bring him serious consequences. His discomfort is noticeable according to Maria Eugénia: “Levar esposas de engenheiros da Companhia à sua casa constituía uma atitude inusitada, difícil de classificar; e, se a notícia se espalhasse, com repercussões inimagináveis” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 81).

Apparently one of Suzanne’s reasons for taking such an action is to make Maria Eugénia aware of the difference between the two worlds that form Moatize: “‘Não é isto tão diferente do mundo em que vivemos?’” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 82). At some point in this visit, Maria Eugénia realizes that they envy the world in which their African female counterparts live, since they see it as providing a king of natural freedom which they don’t have:

Apesar das condições precárias em que viviam –,states Maria Eugénia – tinham expressões alegres e um ar seguro. Muitas tinham os seios descobertos. (...) Os braços e as pernas eram vigorosos. Os dentes, quase sempre de uma total alvura. E nós (...) sentíamos inveja daquela alegria e daquela despreocupação. (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 90)

Later Maria Eugénia learns that, by crossing the invisible line of gender and race relations, she had also unknowingly violated a deeper one - the one between servants and masters, since she had been to Travessa Chassafar's house.

By defying everything and everyone, including inspector Cunha, Suzanne ends up in prison, accused of subversion: "A notícia espalhou-se com rapidez. A comunidade era pequena, não havia memória da prisão de um branco (...). Além disso, tratava-se de uma mulher, ainda por cima estrangeira. E finalmente, ao que tudo indicava, acusada de um *crime político*" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 204). In Maria Eugénia's words: "Suzanne Clijsters sobreviveu, é certo, mas foi como se tivesse deixado de existir. (...) uma vez *oficializado* o seu estatuto de não-existência, foi deixada em paz no mês e meio que se seguiu, em que foram levados a cabo os preparativos da partida" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 260). Her destiny becomes the same as Agnès's, the woman that she had obsessed over so much about and whose actions she admired and desperately wanted to embody. According to the note's narrator, "Já em Suzanne [...] havia mais o fascínio pelo gesto da amiga perdida que propriamente a busca de algo que a si própria faltasse. Suzanne, embora não deixasse de ser valente, deixava-se prender pelas aparências e virava-se para dentro do seu mundo. É isso, Suzanne, mais que descobrir pretendia impressionar. Digamos que lidava com o seu confronto como inevitabilidade ou simples prazer, ou seja, era uma vítima do seu hedonismo" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 178-179). Suzanne finally leaves for Belgium, and Maria Eugénia is left alone with the "spider".

As already mentioned, it is through Maria Eugénia's diary that we gain access to the complexities of the small community of Moatize, as well as through the narrator of the "notes", who also performs the place of the reader, by giving meaning to her story, interpreting and filling in the gaps. As soon as she arrives in Moatize, she is worried about being "seen" by the others, but before long she realizes that "simplesmente o mundo não se movia ao meu redor" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 91). This was, in her perspective, a moment in which she learned one of the most important lessons. Later on this preoccupation is substituted by the addiction of "seeing" the others, to know their secrets. Right away she notices that at the train station there are only men and that the blacks

were “vultos imóveis” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 29); she is further shocked by the name of one of the servants in her house, “Travessa Chassafar.” She thus discovers one of the ways in which white colonizers establish their power over black Africans, by naming or renaming: “Se lhe perguntei dessa maneira é porque suspeitava que alguém, um capataz ou um qualquer anterior patrão, tivesse resolvido humilhá-lo dando-lhe aquele nome de objecto” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 35). Maria Eugénia asks, nonetheless, if Travessa would not like to have another name, to which he replies that he likes his name. It is then that she realizes the consequences of her behavior: “Imediatamente me envergonhei da atitude de querer *baptizar* quem mal conhecia. Senti-me não muito diferente de quem tivesse o hábito de fazê-lo, gente que de algum modo já me incomodava” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 35).

Maria Eugénia describes herself as inquisitive with a rebellious character, who never turns her face to a good challenge (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 45). Right from the first encounter that she has with Annemarie, she is not afraid to confront her. Given her curious spirit she starts immediately to observe how that society works. She notices, for instance, how “apesar do estatuto de subalternos, não deixavam de ser eles quem faziam as coisas funcionar” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 51). When Maria Eugénia is told by Suzanne that she is inhabiting the house that before belonged to the Finks (Agnès’s house), she also becomes obsessed with trying to understand what happened to Agnès, to what happens to all of the women in that place. With Suzanne, she crosses borders that are not open to white women, and step-by-step she starts uncovering the complexities of the colonial world, a world revolving around games of power. When Suzanne drags her to go to the *compound* where the Africans live, Travessa tries to stop her. Many years later, while talking with the narrator, Travessa explains the reason why he tried to stop her: “Tentara impedir a senhora de ir à aldeia porque nessa altura ela não sabia nada sobre o lugar. Nessa altura ela ainda avançava como uma criança, ou então como uma pessoa cega. Ele tentara simplesmente impedir que ela caísse na armadilha da outra mulher” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 110-111). But Eugénia comes to understand that place in a very acute way even though that means growing apart from her husband: “Retorqui, já alterada, que a sua subserviência

me espantava; mais do que tudo isso, que ela me desapontava profundamente. O que acontecera àquele Murilo combativo que eu conhecera? Já quanto a mim, acrescentei, ele podia ter a certeza de que em mim ninguém mandava!" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 114).

Maria Eugénia and her husband see Moatize and the world with antagonistic perspectives: her perspective is "feita de curiosidades que se diluíam num misto de tédio e de revolta" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 115). Maria Eugénia hates hierarchies (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 117). She not only defies her husband, but also Annemarie and inspector Cunha. Apparently, however, the reasons that motivate her to ignore the differences between blacks and whites are not the same as the other women's reasons. According to Chassafar, years later, when questioned by the narrator: "Respondeu-me que eu estava certo: ambas ignoravam essas diferenças, desprezavam linhas que ninguém podia atravessar. Todavia, enquanto Maria Eugénia o fazia por curiosidade e inocência, a Suzanne movia-a o desprezo, e sobretudo a vontade de não ser ela" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 148).

Maria Eugénia grows more and more uncomfortable with the world of differences that surrounds her. Christmas becomes something with a bitter taste after the party given by the Company. This party embodies all the present and future hierarchies and discriminations manipulated by the colonial society. The ironies of the party consist of a black employee dressed as Santa Claus who is responsible for distributing presents to the employees' children who, in their turn, receive them according to the place their parents occupy in society:

E, por fim as prendas, distribuídas em rigorosa consonância com a dita hierarquia, deslumbrantes bonecas francesas para as filhas dos engenheiros belgas, minúsculos carrinhos de lata para os filhos dos estafetas e dos cozinheiros. (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 177)

Leaning against a wall, Maria Eugénia could not avoid imagining Agnès looking at her with half a smile asking: "*e tu, que achas tu de tudo isto?*" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 177).

If we try to answer this question, we can assert that "all of this" is something that disturbs Maria Eugénia, which makes her feel sick in the presence of the violence and racism

of that world. Comparing her life to that of the “others,” she ironically states:

Quanto à minha [vida], à nossa, resumia-se a uma casa cercada por um filme onde as coisas pareciam acontecer mas não aconteciam de verdade, separadas de nós por uma espessa barreira: não podíamos beber a água, respirar o ar. A gente do outro lado era gente mas não era gente, sofria uma dor diferente da nossa, falava uma língua à qual não chegávamos. Tinha propósitos diferentes dos nossos, destinos também. Que era aquilo, que era aquilo que ninguém me deixava conhecer de verdade? (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 157-158)

Nevertheless, she keeps searching and while she does, Suzanne departs and Agnès is just a ghost that permeates the walls of her house. Maria Eugénia’s world becomes more and more confined: “Havia a minha casa e a minha gente, mas suspeitava de que isso estava longe de ser tudo” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 277). In her perspective both Agnès and Suzanne had freed themselves, each in her own way; only she “continuava presa” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 284). She tries to rely on Agnès’s ghost to whom she identifies herself – “Uma de nós é o futuro da outra”(BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 337) – to show her the way out. But Agnès had only left behind an empty notebook, which Maria Eugénia interprets as a sign that she needs to find her course in life by herself. She starts believing that she managed to succeed where Agnès failed.

Almost at the end of her narrative, Maria Eugénia describes a scene where her servants are looking for a snake around the house. After her initial shock, her gardener tells her not to be afraid, that it is not a real snake but rather “Agnès *vestida* de cobra, regressada em busca de água” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 340). In spite of being disturbed by the answer, Maria Eugénia joins the team of servants in the search. When she thinks about that event, she realizes that that place, people and culture had changed her into seeing the world in other terms: she is now much closer to the African culture than her own:

Quando caio em mim e me pergunto porque me deixei tomar por aquela estranha convicção, verifico que se há que me acontece nestes dias, difíceis de classificar, é sentir-

me transportada para um mundo novo de significados e sensações. (...) Como me sobreveio esta maneira nova de ver as coisas, que em certos dias me parece fantástica e em outros a única possível? Quem me ensinou a ouvir a voz do silêncio? (...) Sinto que não foi uma maneira brusca, assim como atravessar uma ponte para o outro lado, mas uma marcha feita de pequenos avanços quase imperceptíveis. (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 343)

On another occasion Maria Eugénia accompanies Chassafar and Laissone into the bush to see the river Revúbuê from above. She describes this as a "momento de silêncio e paz, partilhado com os dois" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 344). She felt "uma comunhão total com eles" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 344). Nevertheless, she states: "Mas, estar aberta a tudo em volta, estar tocada por novas sensações, não significa ter baixado a guarda. Não tenho ilusões, sei da violência que carrega o mundo que nos cerca. Conheço agora Moatize" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 344-345).

Fifty years later, Chassafar explains to the narrator that "Maria Eugénia começara a ver as coisas com clareza" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 367). According to him:

[...] Maria Eugénia *nunca aprendera a perguntar*. Enquanto os outros, assim que chegavam a Moatize começavam a aprender a colocar as perguntas certas, da senhora Maria Eugénia era de esperar qualquer pergunta, como se ela fosse uma criança. [...] A senhora Maria Eugénia interrogava as coisas fora das regras determinadas, fazia-o a partir de fora, e de uma maneira original e ingénua. Por isso as suas questões eram, não uma repetição das questões dos outros mas mais perturbantes e, à sua maneira, mais fundamentais. Maria Eugénia abandonava a lógica para seguir um fio misterioso. Segundo ele, foi assim que ela chegou à música das palavras. (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 367-368)

All of these women understand the society of Moatize, but they adapt or react to it in their own specific way. In the narrator's words, these women "vogavam pelos tempos escuros da pequena vila como verdadeiras rainhas" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 320). It is my suspicion that in a quite contradictory way - since writing is associated with the control of African populations - it is the process of writing that gives Maria Eugénia the power to better understand, reach out to, and commune with the African world. If Annemarie is a queen in

the strict sense of the word, since she controls and manipulates everyone in the small village of Moatize as if they were her own subjects, Maria Eugénia has a deeper power, since she is able to connect and to establish ties between the two worlds.

Travessa Chassafar: the bridge between past and present

If Maria Eugénia's diary illuminates the colonial past in the present from a private and feminine perspective, it is Travessa Chassafar who lives to confirm or deny the story told in those pages. Travessa, as is embedded in one of the meanings of his name, bridges the past and the present and helps the narrator of the "notes" to clarify the "verdadeiras ambiguidades na linha do tempo" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 23).

Through Travessa and the diary, the narrator of the notes travels into colonial times, to a period when the Portuguese colonials were preoccupied with activities of subversion and the possibility that organizations engaged in the struggle for national liberation might dislodge them from power. By focusing the action in the colonial, the novel returns readers to, and enmeshes them within, the African tradition mentioned by Laura Padilha. The novel successfully establishes a notion of a "tempo rendilhado" (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 26) - colonial, precolonial and present - by showing its (dis)continuities. Hence, it is through the lens of the colonial that contemporary writers, such as João Paulo Borges Coelho, engage the traditions of African cultures. Maria Eugénia, Suzanne and Agnès cross boundaries and divisions separating the worlds of colonizer and colonized and thereby enable the portrayal of the world of tradition, which lives on submerged beneath colonial rule.

It is also Travessa who brings us to the present with all of its dramatic and harsh continuities after forty years of independence. Several examples can be found in the novel, but I will indicate only a few. At a government office where he will end up finding Travessa Chassafar, the narrator comments on the greed of the bureaucrats for the taxpayers' money. Bureaucracy is the way the new independent nation keeps its population imprisoned in striking similarity to colonial times: "Aqui e ali, vozes elevavam-se da multidão protestando contra o vício das autoridades de inventarem sempre novos

procedimentos como se o fito fosse o de manter a besta sempre bem segura pela trela” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 57-58).

Ernesto Cambala, the nurse that lived for a while with Chassafar and who was a nationalist, became an important person after independence and therefore invisible to ordinary people like Travessa. In Travessa’s words: ““Tal como os grandes pouco se interessam pelos pequenos, também os pequenos desconhecem o mundo dos grandes”” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 100). Chassafar belonged to the world of those oppressed by colonialism, but not much has changed in his life post-independence. Despite the fact that he is no longer a servant, he still lives in a world that separates him from the narrator. The narrator has a guilty conscience because of his belonging to the privileged minority and remarks: “Subitamente, levantou-se e estendeu-me uma mão calejada e quente, um pouco trémula, antes de partir a toda a pressa, enquanto eu lutava ainda com o miserável dilema de lhe oferecer ou não dinheiro para o transporte” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 111). The narrator also criticizes the government for “imponderadas decisões” and its lack of concern for its citizens (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 181). Such comments as, “A ilusão das rupturas serve muitas vezes para nos distrair destas tenebrosas continuidades. O mundo, velho ou novo, é o mesmo. Os que dizem o contrário são papagaios que vomitam uma retórica oca e mentirosa” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 245-246), and “Várias vezes me pediu que achasse uma colocação para o rapaz, qualquer coisa que o mantivesse ocupado e longe da rua a troco de algum dinheiro” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 292) show how post-independence Mozambique failed to remedy the abyss between poor and rich by eliminating social and economic inequalities.

In João Paulo Borges Coelho’s *Rainhas da Noite*, tradition is used to illuminate a world destroyed by colonialism, and the present is used to criticize the failure of the postcolonial construction of nationality. As the narrator states, Maria Eugénia, Travessa and he himself are disquieted by the state of the world. Alongside Maria Eugénia, the narrator and Travessa both learn how to interrogate the world - to ask the right questions. In this novel, a literary project attempts to make sense of the present through the use of tradition and the colonial past. It is a project in which the book itself can be seen as an “ameaça à harmonia pública pelo conluio que

estabelece com o leitor,” a type of book that is “diferente dos padrões habituais, aqueles que nos domesticam e nos põem todos a pensar da mesma maneira” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 286). *Rainhas da noite* makes a difference by challenging the present through the lens of the past – the private past of colonial women, replete with a “rebeldia radical” (BORGES COELHO, 2013, p. 286). Borges Coelho makes us think in new and more solidary ways and invites us to build better and more equal societies.¹

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¹Nazir Can refers that “A corrupção ativa e passiva, o clima de desconfiança e de crise generalizado, a ostentação e o luxo convivendo lado a lado com a pobreza mais radical, a guerra civil que atrasa a independência do país em quase duas décadas e o peso ideológico do sistema político produzem no autor (...) um gradual distanciamento das causas heróicas propagadas nos anos 70 e 80” (CAN, 2014, p. 14).

Resumo

"E tu, que achas tu de tudo isto?": Mulheres colonas, memória e Pós-Independência em Rainhas da Noite de João Paulo Borges Coelho

Este ensaio analisa o último romance de João Paulo Borges Coelho, Rainhas da Noite (2013), da perspectiva da sua representação das mulheres colonas. O meu argumento começa com a invocação do trabalho crítico elaborado por Laura Calvacante Padilha sobre a representação de vozes das tradições pré-coloniais na ficção moderna africana. Pretendo ampliar o trabalho de Padilha ao incluir vozes de um passado colonial historicamente mais recente no interior do repertório ficcional de vozes recuperadas. A escrita de Borges Coelho alude de fato para espaços e "vozes" da tradição africana, como argumenta Padilha. Sugiro, contudo, que é a memória do passado colonial moçambicano assim como a relação entre o passado e o presente definido pelo Pós-Independência, que constitui o eixo do significado estético e social em Rainhas da Noite. O passado recente da dominação colonial portuguesa permeia os romances de Borges Coelho.

Palavras-chave: *Mulheres colonas, Moçambique, Colonialismo, Pós-Independência.*