

https://dspace.org/

Inclusivity and the construction of memory in Mia Couto's 'Under the Frangipani'

Ngoveni, Lawrence

2007-03-15T12:36:37Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/2270

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Appendix: Interview with Mia Couto

`

Lawrence Ngoveni (LN)	To which Mozambican historical background/event(s) or period do your narratives draw upon, particularly, *Under the Frangipani*?
Mia Couto (MC)	The most part of my short stories are un-temporal (sorry, I don't know if that word exists in English). The novels, however, are well circumscribed in time. My first novel, *The Sleep-walking Land*, is written in the context of the civil war, which happened between 1978 until 1992. *Under the Frangipani* was written in the post-war circumstances. The country, at that time, was feeling a kind of an euphoric environment. The war was over – and that was conceived as a miracle – and everything was possible. In my book I was influenced by that same feeling but I was noticing that some wounds were more serious that we though. And some of the social constrains could not be explained by the war. Those constrains are part of our human condition.
LN	Is there any relation between the fictional character, Vastsome Excellency, and the former Mozambican President, Samora Machel? What is the significance of the character, Vastsome Excellency, in the novel?
MC	No it has nothing to do with Samora Machel. On the opposite it is a caricature of the new type of leaders, new elite that has emerged after the war, characterized by an outstanding appetite for power.
LN	Tell me a little about the Portuguese fort of São Nicolau.
MC	Well, there is not such a fortress, in real terms. For me it is a symbol that, although we are independent, we are still prisoners of the same political and cultural framework left by colonial powers.
LN	The director of the fort, Vastsome Excellency, is a Mulatto, what does this mean?
MC	In Mozambique mulattos are seen as those who don't have a banner. It is of course a racist stereotype. But it reveals a representation of a group marked by some ambiguity, and searching for their own identity. But, in the end. We are cultural mulattos. And who is the one that has found his entire identity ?

LN	*Under the Frangipani*, as with *Voices Made Night* and *Every man of the Race*, draw largely on oral forms, including proverbs and mythologies. Is there any specific community or tribe(s) to which your stories acquire these oral forms?
MC	Of course I am more related with the communities around Sofala province (the place were I was born) and from the southern Mozambique (the place where I am living since 1972). But it is my express purpose to mixture everything (names, proverbs, myths) from every part of Mozambique. The idea is that I am talking about a nation which is still in process of formation.
LN	The language used in your stories is clearly innovative. Is there any specific writer in Mozambique who has inspired your writing? What about outside the country?
MC	From outside, yes. Luandin Vieira, from Angola, was the first writer that surprised me by his own way of recreating Portuguese language using the influence of the orality around Luanda. After that, it was the Brazilian writes with special emphasis to Joao Guimaraes Rosa. This last one was a poet writing stories in prose. And it is necessary to say that Brazil is an example of a new country with a none-European culture using an old European Language. That implies a dynamic of changes and reapropriations that is very inspiring.
LN	What is the significance of the association between death and life in *Under the Frangipani*?
MC	As you know the frontier between death and life are very particular in Africa. In our countries the dead never die. They are still living, influencing the day-by-day life of the living persons. I choose that presence giving to a death person the place of narrator. That enables the story to be written from both sides of

	the frontier of our existence.
LN	Most of the characters in the novel, *Under the Frangipani*, are older people. How does this assist in building up the thematic concerns of the novel?
MC	Old people in my country mean permanence, a more close connection with the land and the history. As Joao Guimaraes Rosa wrote: History is trying to escape from stories. The task of a writer is to establish the connection between stories and History. The old people are all of them storytellers. Because memory is not a faithful reproduction of the past but it's reconstruction by fictional mechanism. Those old guys are all of them my partners: writers that don't use paper.
LN	There is only one white character in the novel. What is the implication behind the strategy?
MC	There is not a strategy in this. The Portuguese character represents a certain type of memory, a very particular connection with Mozambican land. That is part of own history, we can't simply throw it away
LN	In the open letter written to the current President of the USA, Mr. George W. Bush, you signal a strong condemnation of violence against innocent ordinary people, to what extent is *Under the Frangipani* advancing this struggle?
MC	I think that all writers should be linked with an ethical position. That ethical position – in favor of the powerless people – is present in all my texts. Not only in that letter or that that novel.
LN	Is there something that you would like to add about the novel, anything issue that is not covered by the above questions?
MC	I think there is a message that is linked with the search of our identity. Even if that identity is never founded because it is a construction and a very changeable and dynamic portrait. In our case we are obliged to establish bridges between the deaths (representing the live past) and the living ones. Mozambique is a kind of veranda looking to the Indian Ocean and part of our identity is born from that contact and cultural exchanges. Identities are built not in pure features (which are always an mirage) but in this traffic of differences.