

The Setting in *O esplendor de Portugal*

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Abstract: In *O esplendor de Portugal*, the historical setting constitutes the source for a corrosive fiction: the Portuguese colonial past for those who stayed and those who returned. Thus, the life of three siblings is notably marked by history, by the collapsing colonial order, and by war. They exemplify, in the background of *O esplendor*, the division of the artificial family unity and how that past splendor was not regained, either in Angola or in Portugal. Facts and family are demythologized by how the three descendants are presented in *O Esplendor de Portugal*.

As António Lobo Antunes asserted in an interview in 1996, “los portugueses venimos de los escombros dejados por una dictadura” (Juaristo 59), the Salazarist dictatorship that intended to rearticulate the Portuguese nation as the unity of the mainland and the colonies after the failure of the Portuguese First Republic. That targeted rearticulation left the rubble referred to by Antunes and that depicted in his novel *O esplendor de Portugal* (OEP), with the parallel decline of both a Portuguese family and the Portuguese colonial order before and after the Revolution of 1974 and, indeed, with the subsequent rupture of the “Portuguese unit,” profusely glorified and expanded by the Salazarist regime. The depiction of the remaining rubble in OEP clashes with the echoes of the “brumas da história,” echoes of the glorious and misty past of the dictatorship and the mist that sickly haunts the characters in OEP. By linking the quotidian present with the African past in a dialogue “com os segmentos pessoais do percurso subjetivo” (Seixo 485), Antunes underlines the centrality

of memory, both personal and abstract, in OEP, where each character recalls a childhood in a past in ruins before the partition of the family and of the so-called unity of the Portuguese nation: the artificial unity of the mainland with the overseas provinces. Thus, Antunes unmasks "the articulation of the Portuguese nation constructed as an inherent political destiny that derives from God and Christianity" (Ornelas 65), prolonged in the colonies and exemplified in this family. In addition, in the novel, Antunes calls into question the absurdity of life, the absurdity of Salazarism, of militarism and the war. Therefore, this supposed splendor contrasts with a post-colonial time and space in the margins of contemporary Portuguese society. So, human degradation is evident in both Lisbon and Angola, in an appeal to "a experiência do lugar e do acto que a faz" (Seixo 501), for each character in that family, for each being in that broken unity, both the family and the motherland. As Ribeiro reveals, this experience of the place and the space constitutes a feature of recent Portuguese prose, relating that "the collective loss of memory and an excess of personal memory" (186) coexists in the urban existence of the characters with "the violent process of deterritorialization and re-territorialization, marked by individual and collective loss" (187). Carlos, Rui, and Clarisse undergo these processes as siblings, settling for the first time in the center of the metropolis after witnessing the rupture of the family unity, of the colonial unity. This rupture constitutes a consequence of Salazar's willpower to turn the "empire in Africa into a national issue" and of the aim to recreate "the dream of building a Brazil in Africa" (Ribeiro 154), latent in the daily lives of these siblings.

In her extensive study of Antunes's novels, Maria Alzira Seixo stresses how the Portuguese author displays "uma meditação histórica que tem por base o quotidiano e anónimo acontecer do mundo contemporâneo" (488), a reflection of some contemporary anonymous individuals subordinated by that past, unaware that they are searching for their identity in Lisbon. Therefore, the questioning of the official version of history is presented by the way facts are integrated in the fiction through the character's life, through the collapse of a Portuguese family in Angola. This constant awareness, the blend of both facts and fictions, is present in the prose of Antunes since his first novel was published in 1979, having the status of "un cruce sutil de las historias singulares con los momentos singulares" (Mourão 658) of contemporary Portuguese history in an attempt to dovetail, in OEP, the absurdity of the life of Carlos, Rui, and Clarisse in the metropolis. A crossroads of history and prose where Salazar's regime's debacle in Africa clashes with the imperial rhetoric of empire

by revealing, not only how stiff that rhetoric was, but also the way these elements determined and subordinated the life of a Portuguese family, of each individual in OEP. In the novel, Antunes reveals how the splendor, the same that presents the aura of “bilho ou do prestígio de uma nação-repartida em ‘provincias’ ultramarinas” (Seixo 320), as established by the upgrading 1951 reformation, is non-existent.

Consequently, facts and history outline the “*pano de fundo da trama romanesca*” (Marinho 293), where a family unit “*encuentra en la Historia, la otra cara, el reflejo de su propio abismo*” (Barella), an abyss where the reader, after having listened to the notes and the echoes that evoke a glorious past in the Portuguese national anthem, encounters, on Christmas Eve of 1995, various voices and echoes of a separated family in Lisbon and in Angola. Echoes and facts that haunt the characters in OEP, as Faria notes, in “*o entrecruzamento da perspectiva história e da configuração de subjetividades*,” as these selves are marked both by the collapsing order set up by the Estado Novo and by the one established after 1974. There is, however, as Seixo notes, “*um complexo de attitudes que envolve a desgraça do colonizado tanto como a do colonizador, as attitudes de agressão e prepotência visíveis em ambos lados*” (501), the attitudes and violence that marked the returned, divided individuals of this family in Ajuda, Damaia, and Estoril, as well as those who remained in Angola.

The question of the role played by the traditional concept of family in the engineered Salazarist regeneration of Portugal is essential to understand the *pano de fundo* in OEP and its function. As a result of this, the novel unfolds against a backdrop where the Salazarist notions of the “restoration of the nation, with its social, corporate and colonial policies and the organic doctrine based on the family” (Pimentel 124) operates as the mentioned *pano de fundo* illustrated with the dissolution of the family unity in OEP. Since the background to the novel illustrates how the family, which was regarded as “the nucleus of the Estado Novo and of Portugal’s rebirth” (Pimentel 124), and which was going to restore Portugal’s splendor, is disintegrated. For that reason, the demystification is evident when the novel opens as “*tempo de enunciação*” (Seixo 532) on Christmas Eve 1995, the night when Western society celebrates the birth of whom “*velava pela tranquilidade universal e pelo bom andamento da sociedade Portuguesa*” (Medina 17) and the first Christian family in a humble shed. This is the very night when the reader encounters Carlos, Rui, and Clarisse (as well as Lena), who neither gather that eve, nor meet for the Christian celebration of the family despite the wishes

of the eldest brother, Carlos. Consequently, we attend, from various perspectives, the supposedly glorious unity, the dissolution of that family in a reconstruction of “um saber que reside na memória e no incosciente de uma comunidade” (Marinho 292), to the voice of each anonymous urban individual with a latent present past.

According to Fusi, Salazarism aimed at “la desmovilización de las masas” (126) in order to overcome the social and religious polarization of the First Republic and to regenerate the country. Subsequently, as that mentality regarded this polarization as the first step into the decomposition of a society and, to overcome this process and return to “unos pretendidos orígenes de la comunidad nacional” (Loff 62), the hand of the Catholic Church followed the path. Directing this regeneration, as Medina notes, Salazarism regarded family as the “pedra angular” (Medina 29) of society and it was intended to regenerate Portugal starting from its foundation: the family. Besides, the natural environment of a family was rural, where man acted in accordance with nature: the space of the Portuguese little house (a *Casinha Portuguesa*). In conformity with the image of the family reproduced in the pictures of the “Lição de Salazar” [“The Lesson of Salazar”], enthusiastically explained by Medina, the Christian family was regarded as the basis and the proper mirror of society. Consequently, the so-called basic trinity was established with the father, the mother, and the offspring, the pyramid of the foundation of the New State. As a result, the Family was conceived as a Christian patriarchal unity where, first, the father, a good, generous and respectful person, was the most honorable being and visible Head of that unity, as well as the only one who worked outside the home. Second, the mother, the loving being who was in charge of the household, the kitchen, and the education of the children (and where farming was regarded as an extension of the duties of the house), represented the pure image of the person who sacrificed herself. These members of a unity must follow a clear hierarchy that reflects the patterns they are expected to act in accordance with. The prototype illustrates how the hierarchy should be preserved by the eldest son (*o rapaz*), who was to head to a new family and to whom the other brothers and sisters (those that he should care for) should pay tribute as the future acting head. It is in this paradigm that the sister should be aware of her position as the “futura condição de mulher doméstica” (Medina 30) at the hand of her future husband, transferring to him the same delight and joy she used to welcome her father, as a proper loving woman.

As a result, the notion of the role of the family in Salazarist Portugal,

both on the mainland and in the colonies, constituted the foundation where “repousa a constituição da sociedade” (Medina 32). This was a society, an integrated homeland (*a nação*) of the metropolis and the overseas provinces (so called after the 1950 constitutional revision) embodied in a unity, *a Nação Portuguesa*, “a single multi-racial nation, spread around the world” (Pimentel 126) and subject to the metropolis. Hence, both the Estado Novo and the Catholic Church were in charge of “civilizing and evangelizing local peoples and assuring the multi-racial and pluri-continental integrity of the empire” (Pimentel 126). On that account, Portuguese families settled in the overseas provinces were acting as an extension of the metropolis in the regeneration of the country and as the civilizing agents of the colonies. However, as Isilda’s father openly explains, what brought them to Angola was not money nor wealth but “pretos sem dinheiro que nos dessem a ilusão do dinheiro e do poder” (Antunes 255), the very illusion that was denied to them in the fatherland as, in fact, they were regarded as outcast people in Portugal. So, these were outcast beings willing to live in humble small villages next to the Africans and those left behind despite the official propaganda. Therefore, in OEP, Antunes is debunking the idea of Portuguese colonial policy as “an encounter with the Other” (Simões da Silva 30) and of the apparently seductive egalitarian Lusotropicalist image as a multiracial form of art adopted by Salazarism. In fact, as reflected in the novel, the motto was to appropriate the other, the African, from his own soil and his houses as Isilda’s father confesses to her.

In line with Seixo’s remarks on the importance of houses in OEP as spaces “que se preenchem de uma espesura psicológica, social, cultural e ideológica que faz a personagem movimentar-se como pessoa” (Seixo 477), in OEP these spaces are closely related to “lugar, família, tempo e separação” (Seixo 30). So, the different houses manifest the fragmentation of the family back in the metropolis: Carlos is the eldest and the one who received the family house in Ajuda where he lives with Lena; the isolated epileptic Rui lives in Damaia in a sanatorium after having being expelled by Carlos from the family house in Damaia; Clarisse lives in an apartment in Estoril and guarantees her economical position with various affairs; and Isilda remains, next to Maria da Boa Morte, in Angola after having been expelled from the family plantation. Therefore, houses exemplify the complexity of the novel as different examples of the dissolution of the family since the house constitutes the real space for the Christmas celebration of the family as a result of the aggression against the Angolan soil that haunts the isolated siblings in each of their houses in Lisbon

and surroundings.

The characters are introduced as piercing voices from different houses, each a solitary person that suffers “the trauma of partition which is subsequently memorialised” (Cleary 2) which is related, as well, with their experience of Africa in the configuration of the different subjectivities, of the various voices. Eduardo, the father, died as an alcoholic and his voice is almost absent from the novel because he remains in the colonial past of the plantation house. It is definitely not the respectful father pictured in the *Lição*. Then, Carlos’s first section opens in the house and with the rejected invitation to his two siblings to his house to celebrate Christmas. These are voices such as Carlos’s, the eldest mulatto and illegitimate son who suddenly realizes “del tempo que passara desde que chegámos de África” (11). He departed from Angola eighteen years ago and his attitude in the novel exemplifies the rupture with the image of the *Lição*’s model son as explained by Medina. Hence, the son is in charge, but of guaranteeing the continuity of the family unity by looking after the members of that unity. He feels responsible for all of them and for maintaining the principle of hierarchy and so should “ser respeitado e amado” (65) by the rest of the members for assuring the continuity of the family with his wife, Lena. Carlos is the son who received, despite being mulatto, the family flat in Ajuda where the newly arrived two brothers and the sister have settled as a unit back in the homeland. Carlos does not succeed in the role of eldest brother as he is the person who expels both the ill Rui and unmarried Clarisse from the house while saying that he had to put up with “sem um protesto três anos seguidos suportando até aos limites da paciência as maluquices de um e os caprichos da outra” (69). At the same time, Carlos fails as he does not open any of the letters sent by Isilda, breaking his responsibility as head of the family as explained before in this article and, consequently, in charge of Isilda. He never feels accepted as a mulatto because he recalls when they were children, Isilda would show Rui and Clarisse to the guests at home but “se era eu as bochechas lhe caíam como se perdesse malares e me enxotava numa lufa-lufa antes de que pudessem ver-me” (124). This rejection was unanimous among the family and only the honest Maria da Boa Morte, the loyal employee, treated him as an equal by addressing him with “tu” and revealing to him his nature: “tu és preto” (95). In addition, his relation with Lena is fading away; they have no descendants and he does not conceive of a life on his own, not a proper state for a man, we are told, as the houses of single men stink of “leite azedo, cigarro frio, recheio de almofada” (120). Carlos is an

ambivalent character in the sense that he keeps waiting for an answer from Rui and Clarisse and, however, he stores in Ajuda the pile of unopened letters that Isilda had sent from Angola. The dual essence and experience of Africa determine the configuration of Carlos as a contrasting subjectivity. Thus, on one side he regards Angola as a peaceful “casa e a minha família e Angola” (65) and on the other he reacts against Angola. Duality coexists and, as he explains, “chamavam um Carlos que era eu em elas não era eu nem era eu em eu” (121), as the example of the “divisão do sujeito” (Seixo 337) and the implications of partition for a mulatto who does not recognize himself.

The second part of the novel leads us through the “percepções do mundo” (Seixo 340) exemplified by the lonely Rui’s unawareness of the world surrounding him and the implications of his acts as reflected in the beginning of this segment. While the disease Rui suffers from determines the way the character is presented in this segment of the novel, it strikes one how, after the regular visit to the doctor in Malanje, he states how “a minha mãe comprava-me um bolo de creme e a seguir à consulta voltava para casa a sacudir-me as migalhas da camisa e a chorar” (143). Thus, the ill Rui is the son who exemplifies a privileged condition and this justifies Rui’s privileges. Since he admits “sentia-me importante por estar doente e ir morrer” (144), Rui remarks how this makes him feel important both in Angola and in Damaia, where Clarisse simply visits him only as a result of his condition. Medina states that hierarchy and gender were two principles that ruled the family so the fact that the legitimate son was epileptic confers Rui with a distinct role. Pity is a shared feeling in the family towards him and he takes advantage of “a situação de privilégio que a situação de doente lhe confere” (Seixo 339). Thus, he is allowed to behave as he pleases and this reflects “certa medida e impotência dos pais” (Antunes 341) in his upbringing, of not acting according to certain values due to his condition. His existence is concentrated on watching television, eating, and trying to be happy while none of them would stop him from “estrangular pombos, incapaz de impedir-me de ser feliz” (201) because this was the way he was brought up in Angola as his aim is just to be happy. In order to gain this happiness, he allows few things to stop him. In connection to that, his violent reactions against animals reveal the codes of behavior towards those regarded as inferior when it comes to justify unjustifiable acts, illustrating the unlimited colonial power towards beings beyond him. Besides, when Isilda, back from the visit to the doctor, leaves him alone to meet her lover, the chief policeman, Rui recognizes in his mother the woman in her dubious behavior and his

own loneliness. He confesses that he is annoyed that Isilda did not allow him to play any dirty trick while he was waiting in the car because as “eu querer livrar-me dela e respirar e não podia” (242), stopping him from breathing. As a result, the shaping of Rui denotes how the experience of Angola and colonization, of hypocrisy and his personal circumstances modeled his subjectivity. Rui is an ill person whose personal happiness is a priority as it was for the colonizers in Africa, those rejected in the metropolis.

As underlined by Seixo, Clarisse and Isilda are the two female voices that share a close relation with their fathers, a state of independence and a lack of affection that unveils the prescribed image of loving and loved mother and daughter in the *Lição*. The effect is also underlined by placing an unmarried Clarisse in her own flat and by leaving the widow Isilda in Angola away from her descendants. Besides, by saying, “quando voltei a Portugal do que mais gostei” (269), Clarisse opens up the third section in OEP by regarding herself as a returned self to Portugal. To begin with, she portrays an ironic urban scene with some heavy men jumping off a tram and she seems happier in a city, clearly different from the two previous brothers. Certainly, she seems happy back in Lisbon as a way of being independent from the social conventions where she was brought up. Similarly, throughout the last section of the novel, she emerges as the most detached character, visibly unmasking the image of the loving daughter, the mother-to-be, and openly satirizing an ideal marriage. Undoubtedly, Clarisse’s rupture with the role of the daughter is evident since the fact that her life is not restricted to the house as “futura condição de mulher doméstica” (Medina 30) or to the role of the mother who sacrifices herself for non-existent children. Since Rui reveals earlier in the novel, just when Clarisse was in secondary school, how she brought with her, out of her mom’s sphere, not only the scandal of “uma filha despida como uma cancanista e maquilhada com um palhaço” (217) but the scandal of the time when she went for an abortion. Clarisse’s attitude underlines her unconventional character and personal determination. Also, she is regarded as a prostitute for her way of living and we learn from her father how he is ready to cheat in a game just to make her happy. In contrast to the other members of the family, Clarisse seems characterized from a different angle: a more individual, detached, and slightly sensitive character concerned just with what Rui experiences in his crises, who, however, considers getting revenge on Carlos by not phoning him, by not contacting him and expressing the rupture with what he represents. Like her brothers, she is presented as a solitary person in that her

lover Luis Filipe seems indifferent towards her and does not satisfy her. Overall, Clarisse finds out that she is in the homeland of her family for “assumindo uma sinergia positiva” (Seixo 335), lacking an identity as she awakes afraid of her own name.

To conclude, this dialogue in a present that locates these demobilized personal segments in an everyday Lisbon, this present that brings them back to Angola and to the plantation in Baixa de Cassanje, to the past before the partition of the unity and family is developed in OEP as the *pano de fundo* of the oeuvre, echoing the fallacious splendor of a family and a past. The setting shows the demythologization of the Salazarist conception of family unity; the attempt to regenerate the broken Portuguese unity of the mainland with the overseas provinces. This *pano de fundo* constitutes the stage as we encounter the life of these siblings that settle for the first time in Portugal and who do not speak. So, lacking a homeland, Carlos, Rui, and Clarisse are depicted alone, without identity, not having created a new unity of a family and, in Lisbon on Christmas Eve with the background memories of Angola, of the failure of colonization as well as the post 1974 wars and regimes. These are memories that take us back to that time of a supposed splendor and those that unmask the official splendor of the unity of the family and of the nation before and after the departure of the siblings from Angola. These siblings exemplify, in the background of OEP, the division of the artificial family unity and how that past splendor was not regained. The three of them are trying to communicate with their individual pasts while they are not capable of conversing among themselves. As a result, Carlos evidences the failure of the eldest son, Rui's representation of sickness confers on him a distinct role exemplifying unjustified privileges, and Clarisse, who appears as a lonely person who needs sleeping tablets, away from the ideal female image portrayed in the *Lição*. Each of them exemplifies the absolute division and estrangement of the family unity away from Angola, unaware that the African encounter was based on occupation of the land the consequences of their presence on that soil.

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