

The Country and City in Mia Couto and Bernardo Elis Short Tales

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Abstract

This article compares aesthetically the short tales written by the Brazilian writer Bernardo Elis and Mozambican writer Mia Couto based on archaic and modern social-historical factors but also utilizing Country and City allegorical logic. It is considered in this research the Brazilian's field called *sertão* as it is also considered the deep Africa, both of them are not adequate to modern European patterns present in the big cities.

Keywords: Bernardo Elis, Mia Couto, Country, City, Archaic, Modern, Mozambique, Brazil.

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Introduction

The connections between Earth and human society are put in evidence when we deal with a dialectical pair as “The country and the city”, which is present as historical representation and collective thoughts. One is source of subsistence, other is the human act, but how much longer? During the advance of human communities through history, one of them affirmed superior than the other by bucolic aspect or technological breakthroughs. Today this dialectical pair becomes a representation through the model of great cities, of economic and political relations that goes beyond national state borders, representation seen, but also refuted as a model of world (Williams, 2011, p.456).

The dependence between industrialized and underdeveloped countries tends to emphasize new relations to the countryside and city as a model of world, predominant features of what we call cultural imperialism (Williams, 2011, p.457). How to think on getting over through universal industrialization if many of underdeveloped societies were thought to feed industrialized countries necessities? Although city persists growing by its own logics, the countryside corrupts itself using this thought, even though resisting by its own ways, which overpass colonial and neocolonial historical events (Williams, 2011, p.467-468) which express more accurately city domain or country resistance.

Modernity is associated to the cities. Based on that, the poet establishes his own relation with the city environment and its observation is subjective, considering the misery of its literary condition, as it is said by Walter Benjamin (2000, p.17) when he analyzed Charles Baudelaire works. The modernity elects a hero and the poverty, waiting for miracles of the world, is faded to ornament the literary work world as wallpaper. Poet’s heroic duty is to shape the modernity though its impossibility to reach its true form only using social classes. The election of a hero may be a tragedy, a tension mark between literature and history that is worthy to modernity.

During XX century the city was taken in Portugal by Eça de Queiroz as a place of intense social interchanges or a way to join western capitalist civilization (Candido, 2010, p.39) while the countryside was associated to traditional values, agricultural economy and paternalism. From social vices to the criticism against bourgeois class, or from bourgeois ideals of Portuguese nationalism, Eça creates a schematic style of urban prose dependent on city superposition in relation to the country.

At his second phase, Eça emphasizes the national values through rural prose and finds out values related to provincial Portuguese traditional mettle and morality that complexifies and dramatize his work, also gives him own style. If through the city he didn’t matched to modern model of metropolis, a way to cosmopolitanism, through the country Eça found the matrix of Portuguese traditional values that made his style singular and modern, an event possible thanks to his choice on the country and on the balance between countryside and urban on his works constitution even though the citizen predominant look.

The Portuguese empire and its heritage

The Portuguese empire, through its commercial, cultural transactions and domain, made its colonies heirs of a common cultural past and thought that, after independence and liberation conflicts, gave shape to independent nations and thoughts besides their unbreakable historical links. The scars made by colonial past persist, but the national recognition isn't enough to heal these latent wounds. With this purpose, the authors of Portuguese official language must not restrict themselves to national borders, but apply their views and their publics beyond the effort of modernization of each country, according to the Brazilian researcher Benjamin Abdala Junior (2007, p.189-190). Based on common cultural and literary bases, Abdala has in mind an opened cultural system that holds, through related elements, a literary system that integrates the community of Portuguese language countries and then makes these groups to communicate based on a common and particular imaginary.

Just like the thought, the forms used by colonizer gains different proportions on Portuguese language colonial literatures, an example that the Brazilian Marxist critic Antonio Candido (1987, p.163-180) establishes on Brazilian case in his 1987 text "Literatura de dois gumes". Its values not just take particular proportions of expression by these principals of common culture and history but also by experiences of development and underdevelopment, whose cultures determine different patterns of conscience, reception and forms, an idea expressed by Candido (1987, p.140-162) on his text "Literatura e Subdesenvolvimento". These relations are present not only on Brazilian literature but also on Mozambican literature.

The Mozambican and Brazilian literatures

The formation of Brazilian and Mozambican literatures occurred in different ways. The first one had its literary system constituted on Romanticism, when the literary manifestations acquired values that justified the Brazilian form of European national independence. Even though a restricted circle of readers had formed, there was a great dependency on European forms, which resulted on cultural and artistic independence made by modernists followed by an awareness of underdevelopment during 30 decade. From that on, there was its projection to universal values, a point that Brazilian modernism judges itself as a standard of national art.

The Brazilian regionalism is an important period of 30 decade, when the Brazilian nation was aware of its position toward the world, its literature and its narrated subject. Graciliano Ramos, Rachel de Queiroz and Jorge Amado are known as great authors of this period. Moving the narrative space from the great urban centers to politically ignored areas, the Brazilian northeast gains more importance to achieve the unification proposed by modernist project at its first phase but now on a mature way. Its retaking by Bernardo Elis works, produced after 30 decade, in a period that he was contemporary to Guimarães Rosa, gives space to the problematization of inhospitable spaces and of Brazilian territory center in a way that witness the late modernity which reached the backcountry of Goiás state at 40, 50 and 60 decades.

The second literature, however, started as a journalistic literature with national intentions. Its social focus on the country in relation to the world encouraged national independence by the creation of a reader circle through newspapers. The

independence war and the national affirmation were important as political marks that gave the Mozambican literary system a better structure though the unconcluded modernity of a culturally fragmented country. Not only the independence, but also the civil war, was relevant to Mozambican literature.

Due to colonial past, the value of mozambicanity (Macedo & Maquea, 2007, p.20) acquired a great importance if related to Mozambican literary system. This concept open space to an uncertain but certain future to its writers, liberation and constant interchanges with the globalized world. The major example of an author that promotes these interchanges is Mia Couto.

The raw material of this scope

This article is intended to analyze the short tales “A avó, a cidade e o semáforo”, written by Mia Couto, and “A enxada”, written by Bernardo Elis, considering the representative dialectic of the countryside and the urban, the conditions of Mozambican and Brazilian literary systems and the connections between literature, nation and peripheral modernity.

“A avó, a cidade e o semáforo” (“The grandmother, the city and the traffic lights”, in Portuguese) is a short tale written by Mia Couto at 2004, post war. The tale is narrated by a character-narrator in first person, and it is about a narrator who leaves his village and goes to the city with his grandmother, who insisted to go with him because she was afraid he would lose his link with their relatives and tradition in the unknown city. The grandmother ended living in the city on her own ways.

The narrator, a teacher of his village, had earned a trip to the city to join an event. His grandmother was bothered with her grandson by small details, like who would sleep with him or who would cook to him, activities that, based on their village customs, would be made with or by trustworthy people like relatives or consanguine people. In front of that, she decided to go with him. Considering she’s an old character, she’s important as an ancestral symbol of Mozambican traditional values, a decisive element that regulates the structure and the dynamics of these societies (Leite, 1995/1996, p.110). Her fear is based on her knowledge about African myths and traditions that break the barriers between spirit and practical life, those that are supported by the character of the elders but also consolidated by collective conscience.

In the end of the tale, however, this tradition is not only matched to the modernity of citizen logics but also complains the poor conditions that this adjustment occurs, once that grandmother ends living in the street with the beggars, next to the traffic lights. She, however, recognizes the beggars as similar [her alikes] and somehow incorporate them on her collective unconsciousness due to their common practices. Even though she kept a link with her relatives by sending a letter to her grandson at the end of the tale. Her socialization in the city bridge over material and instrumental limits, like the distance of her village and her relatives promotes a harmonization with citizen social practices (Leite, 1995/1996, p.108). Not only has the grandmother showed herself heterogeneous, but also the distinction between Mozambican countryside and city.

“A enxada”, on the other hand, is about Supriano’s search for a hoe (“enxada”, in Portuguese) even though landowner interests web. He should plant and raise rice for his employer, the colonel Elpidio, who decreed a holy day for the harvest. After a hard seeking, Supriano didn’t get help of any character of the tale. Desperately he raved thinking he had planted but soon faced the raw reality. He ran to the plantation and hopelessly digs the earth using his own hands tearing his own flesh. The colonel’s rangers killed Supriano. Following, in the city, during the holy day party, the widow spouse and the orphan son of Supriano appeared begging for food and money. Their grotesque forms were motive of gossips between people in the city.

Supriano is a tragic hero elected by tale’s modernity, target of historical impasses maintained by landowners interests and by city’s position on what happened. The narrator, as long as it keeps focus on Supriano, does a free indirect speech, which makes him interfere on narration with his opinions. After Supriano’s death, at the party in the city, the narrator’s view seems more distant, a mark of different relations between Brazilian countryside and city.

The narrator also demarks the historical impasse between interior and shore of Brazil, once the historical abandonment by capital in relation to other interior areas made that colonial origin relations persisted, specially slavery and land domaining.

In Mozambique there’s an effort to affirm itself as a nation on tradition’s fate and on latent past historical maintenance, and also on these thoughts pass through them. How these impasses were dealt on postcolonial events and on underdevelopment state?

A modernity plan

Differently from European realities said by Antonio Candido in his text “Entre campo e cidade”, Brazil and Mozambique didn’t have specialized public of readers for their national literatures according to the refered Marxist critic (1993, p.125-126) in his essay “De cortiço a cortiço”. The relation of the public with the work of art must not only be capable to deal with national historical impasses of Mozambique and Brazil but also modern and established between tradition and universality.

What was narrated in “A enxada” puts a hick, general character designed before as Brazilian motherland and underdevelopment illness through Jeca Tatu, a Monteiro Lobato character. The narrator is an important piece that penetrates on Supriano’s experience and thoughts and that describes its world and its conflicts. The change on perspective caused not only by Supriano’s death but also by narrator’s distance, that acts like an observer, which resulted on a new way to deal with what happened, like a gossip that was known at the city as became real by widow’s appearance with her son in grotesque forms. These limits between country and city were taken as obstacles, ways which Supriano’s madness was taken as a hallucination about the imminent tragedy, as a faith on Priest who would give him the hoe but wasn’t enough, as superstitions suggested about his inexorable fate, and as the myth about a drunk blacksmith who would be capable to forge the tool didn’t match with the hard practical life of the character.

It could also be about a teacher, in a foreign land, contemplated with a trip to a place far from his relatives but confident on what he read about the city, differently from his

grandmother, ingrained with tradition's knowledge given by her own authority. Mistrustfully she traveled to a distant land and changed her relation with her culture due to her contact with townspeople, tending to cultural hybridism. The narrator keeps its focus on the grandmother, a character that not only moved from a different place to other but also her conceptions and perspectives, which made her decide by her permanency in the city. Although his return to the village and have moved away from his grandmother, the narrator received a letter from her, a way at which she expressed not only her invitation to her grandson (she invited him to visit her in the city) but also expressed a confirmation that she's knowing how to deal with the logics of her new habitat and esteeming the maintenance of her familiar links. Her change is evident based on her mystical, religious and rational conceptions and finally her relation with the connections of these conceptions and real world. How to register this effort?

Both narrators are different from those presented by Walter Benjamin (2012, p.213-240) on his text "The Storyteller" ("O narrador"). They aren't exactly the traveled man nor the sedentary man that knows about the past, but, about "A enxada", it's about a kind that retains the experience from the second proposed by Benjamin but conscious about the first. About "A avó, a cidade e o semáforo", the narrator is characterized as the teacher that owns the exotic knowledge of local beyond his community, which is typical of a traveler, but with the knowledge about the past lived at the occasion of the trip made with his grandmother, what represents a past that happened before that moment.

On the other side, the historical marks of Supriano's story are noticeable by his mishaps during the story. The narrations of both short tales go through special and temporal experiences, and the act of telling itself stresses the manual labor it is made: the teacher's report about his grandmother's moving to the city or the inadequacy of Supriano's narrative on epic patterns. The way the story is told indicates the a writer intention to keep his sources on popular experience and to provoke the class movement by popular beliefs that take the reader to the mythical plan or by the hierarchy of narration tones and plans, what represents a social dimension of the narrated events or a relation the artist has with the narrated in a mystical plan. This "magic" is made by the short tales.

Mia Couto and Bernardo Elis opted by the short tales because it's a genre capable to interchange experiences through the way the story is told considering its elements. Nadia Batella Gotlib (2006, p.17), a Brazilian specialist in short tales, says about a magic invoked by the power of narrating, like happens on the classical *One thousand and one nights*. It is explained that that this magic has the power to also maintain dead's memories by the refered genre and religious duties by recounting. The profane attributions of the short tale exposes the mythical force of the short tale, characterized this way mainly by oral narratives, that assured the world's totality explanation.

Its total freedom of form and flexibility permit that the manual labor is made, called by Antonio Candido, as a narrative web, just like he said about the complexity of forms and narrated events on Machado de Assis. The major acceptance of the short tale and its hybrid character between other genres by the public makes the genre acceptable nowadays. The Brazilian critic Alfredo Bosi (1977, p.8-9) considers the short tale as a way to rethink the relation between men and history indicating exactly

the short tale “A enxada”. Maria Fernanda Afonso (2004, p.75), a portuguese specialist in Mozambican short tale, believes that the short tale is a way, in mozambican case, to preserve the values of african cultures and traditions considering the oral tale as its source but not hiding the written tale as a way of degradation of life conditions and of human relations felt by the African peoples. The particular aspects of authors, considering the way they tell the stories, would make the short tale a joint of these individual aspects as a collective legacy of tradition and memory logged on orality that finally would make the genre hybrid and, because of that, modern considering the past history. Its success occurred due the published short narratives in literary reviews, once the editorial market wasn't possible to that time of national affirmation, even considering the literature had an important role denouncing social and political problems through reporting colonization woes. It also gives the short tale an important role of historical syncretism. Its modernity is possible because its possibilities, that makes it a model of major creative and originality. Could that modernity be done on the same way?

Final words

The country and the city proved to be spaces of national and individual dimensions, whose experiences interchange not only between these two poles but also between the narrator and narrated, the past and present history, the literature and the world, a place where a grandmother and her grandson see the limits between urbanity and village entangle, or where a dying man perishes and a blind city ignore the country's problems, and on aesthetical option to be done. To the genre and to the presented narratives are given great modernity for denouncing historical impasses of national, political and social nature, inherent of nations whose modernity is unconcluded but has unique and hybrid aspects if compared to European model of modernity, that was inefficient on its total applicability to the colonies (Patke, 2013, p.11), fact that stimulate a new way to tell the national history based on individual subjectivity of authors and on objective reality, an proper effort to be characterize as original and modern.

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