Aida Gomes

Stops: Angola, Cambodia, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mozambique, Portugal, Sudan, Suriname, The Netherlands

(1967-)

Aida Gomes da Silva was born in 1967 in Lundimbale, Huambo, Angola. The daughter of an Angolan mother and a Portuguese father, she went to Portugal with her father in 1975 and stayed there until she was 18. At this age, she moved to The Netherlands, where she studied Sociology and obtained a Master's degree in Development Studies. In 2021, she started a doctoral programme as a student in History of Literature at the Federal University of Rio Grande (FURG) in Brazil. She lived in various countries, including Angola, Cambodia, Guinea-Bissau, The Netherlands, Liberia, Mozambique, Portugal, Sudan, Suriname, where she worked in youth community projects, provided training for journalists, and participated in UN peacekeeping missions in conflict or post-conflict situations. Her childhood was marked by early literacy and exposure to music and literature.

Since she left Angola at a very young age, she holds a limited memory of that time, a fact that is exacerbated by the circumstances of growing up without a mother from the age of 14 months and losing her father at 18. Nevertheless, Africa, and more specifically, Angola, have always represented a territory the author wished to explore and revisit as soon as the conditions in the country allowed. Multilingualism also marks her journey, in which the Umbundu language of her mother and caregivers and her father's Portuguese are significant. Later, Dutch, the language of study and work, a much harsher language, according to Gomes, was also incorporated into her life.

Aida Gomes only published novel to date, *Os Pretos de Pousaflores* [*The Blacks from Pousaflores*] (Dom Quixote, 2011), stems from the desire to write in Portuguese and to tell a story that, while not autobiographical, establishes connections between two territories of memory – the Portuguese and the Angolan. Being of mixed race herself and having come to a village in central inland Portugal to escape the imminent civil war, this is also, in some way, her story, even though she only perceived it as such in the early stages of adulthood.

Aida Gomes has also published essays, chronicles, and short texts in publications from various countries, such as Buala, InComunidade, Revue Noire, among others. In the collective work *Contágios. Mapas do Confinamento*, [*Contagion. Maps of Lockdown*], a collection of texts written by Portuguese-language authors, she contributed with the short story "Bicho quer carinho" [Creature wants love."]

In *Blacks from Pousaflores*, the writer creates a polyphonic novel where the narrative voice is entrusted to the distinct members of the family – Silvério, the children Ercília, Justino, and Belmira, the Angolan wife Deodata, and the sister Marcolina. The latter is surprised by the arrival in the village of the brother who had left for Angola four decades earlier, along with the three mixed-race nephews, each from their own mother. It is a shock for the character, who finds herself facing the inevitability of welcoming those everyone refers to as "blacks". The same applies to the teenagers, who must learn ways of life and behaviours entirely different from those they had experienced on the Heilongo farm. Later, Deodata, the black wife and mother of Silvério's youngest daughter, who had been left behind in the exodus from Angola, joins the family.

Contrary to the rhetoric that presents the integration of returnees as a success story, Aida Gomes gives prominence to those who remain on the margins of Portuguese society, and whose exclusion extends to the present day in the peripheral neighbourhoods of major cities. Subject to considerably less media attention than novels such as *O Retorno* [*The Return*] by Dulce Maria Cardoso (published in the same year) or *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* [*Notebook of Colonial Memories*] by Isabela Figueiredo (2009), in *The Blacks of Pousaflores*,

the author exposes structural racism, the narrowness of horizons in the country in the 1970s and 1980s, and the absence of future prospects. She does so with minimal mediation because the polyphony resulting from the alternation of narrators creates a dialogue between different ways of perceiving and valuing issues such as colonialism, the (non)integration of returnees, conservative customs, and the repression of the feminine.

Right at the beginning of the novel, upon arrival at the airport, the distancing from the crowd surrounding the family is clear "The father doesn't want to see us with the returnees" (Gomes 2011: 22). The denial of this label, to which they feel alien, constitutes a form of resistance to the reality of dispossession they are experiencing, as if it were possible to preserve the connection to Angolan land despite all evidence to the contrary. In response to Ercília's persistent question about whether they would return to Angola, Belmira reassures her by saying that one day they will be back because that is their national identity – "We are Angolans, aren't we?" (*idem*: 23). Interestingly, the difference of this family group from other returnees is highlighted by a villager who praises Silvério for "not staying in the hotels where the returnees are" (*idem*: 30), living at the expense of the state.

However, this distinction does not protect the youth from discriminatory attitudes, as skin colour constitutes the primary marker of difference, condemning them to be the target of repeated acts of racism. Uprooted and lonely, there is no possibility of inclusion for these young people, neither in school, nor in the extended family, much less in a society incapable of integrating the "others" who come from a defeated and humiliated empire, a reality it prefers to ignore. With no solution to the feeling of being "out of place," two of the siblings choose a new deterritorialisation. For Justino, who returns to Angola, the circle is complete, and just as in Portugal, he responded to difficulties with humour and some insight. In his home country, he finds a time of happiness with a wife, children, and a prospective business. On the other hand, Belmira, "without roots or land" (*idem*: 282) like the sea she admires so much, emigrates to Switzerland after a painful drift through the Portuguese capital.

As for Silvério, his journey is marked by ambivalence, navigating between the role of the

white coloniser, owner of women and businesses, and a progressive consciousness that leads him to advocate for education for all and acknowledge the legitimacy of liberation struggles. A migrant from early adulthood, the unexpected permanent return to the native village constitutes a defeat that exiles him from a sense of belonging constructed over decades on African soil. The slow process of mental deterioration, leading to the loss of memory, can also be understood as an incapacity to cope with the weight of the past, invalidating any hope for the future and complicating the search for references to an identity that always remains elusive for his children.

With the exception of Marcolina, entrenched in prejudice and a product of the narrow walls of the village, all the main characters are thus marked by diaspora and nomadism, expressing, as Ana Luísa Amaral states in the presentation of another book (*Notebook of Colonial Memories*), an ambivalent identity under construction: “In the nomadic subject, what is at stake is not deterritorialisation or displacement per se, but discursive freedom in relation to dominant narratives, because it is a subject in the process of becoming – and I emphasise here the pulverisation and refusal of stable identities”.

These words gain even greater relevance when we consider that Aida Gomes’s nomadic life, initiated in childhood and continued into adulthood through personal and professional choices, is essential to understanding her own identity. In a recent interview, the author reflects on her connection to the concept of diaspora:

“In defining the word ‘identity,’ I think I am part of an Angolan diaspora. Diaspora is a fascinating modern concept because it is paradoxical, belonging without truly belonging. An imagined space, the recognition of being part of a community that, distanced from a land, recognises the flavours (Calulu), the sounds (so much music!), the enjoyment, and finally, the landscapes: the greens from Huambo to Benguela are my peace; I wouldn’t trade them for the serenity of the lakes in Switzerland. We all have a place of origin where our soul rests. Even if it is an imaginary place.” (Gomes 2011a)

In this regard, it is worth mentioning Deodata’s experience, the black woman who sets out for

Portugal to reunite with her family. Through her voice, a brief distinction is introduced between refugees and displaced individuals, with the former being those forced to leave due to war, bringing nothing with them, and the latter being those who have lost their belongings, wanting to "be urgently listened to and save what they have lost" (Gomes 2011: 157). It is a distinct perspective from that of Silvério and the other Portuguese who pejoratively refer to the returnees, perhaps more naive but relevant for questioning the valuation of migrants and their motivations. Involuntarily nomadic, the character focuses on the final goal, and when she finally reaches the village, she becomes the material and emotional support for Silvério, who is progressively alienated from himself and his circumstances.

Aida Gomes's literary production, although still relatively limited, represents an important contribution to the reconsideration of post-colonial identity issues, subverting the mythology of the empire and creating space for the voice of Afro-descendants, who are rarely present even in the corpus of what is known as "literature of return." The concepts of exile, migration, and diaspora thus emerge as intrinsically linked to memory and identity – a memory constructed in and through writing, in constant redefinition: "(…) memory is what, in one way or another, recomposes what would be a part of my identity because I recompose, reconstruct at the moment I am writing. And in writing, memory is always invented, just like identity. (…) And that is part of writing: we are constantly redefining and defining the world from what our memory and our identity focus on." (Gomes 2021)

Quotations

They push me against the wall poster. Blue and white letters, Welcome to Portugal. I grip the handles of the plastic bag with my fingers. Avalanche of voices in the corridors. Doors of glass and grey metal. The loudspeaker wants Mr. Silva to come to the counter. I don't see Dad. Not Justino. Not Belmira. They've disappeared. Grey clouds on the glass doors.
I stretch. On tiptoes. The soles of the sandals bend. The straps hurt me.
I stumble.

Water itching in my eyes, bubble by bubble, almost bursting.
– Ercília! Don't you understand anything at all? Dad doesn't want to see us with the returnees. (*Os Pretos de Pousaflores*: 22)

I don't like black people. It came out, it's out there, I sleep better now. I don't like them, period! What do you want me to do? Now that we have a television, I'm fed up with seeing them. They're very good at athletics and football, they dance and sing a lot, but they don't appeal to me. I don't like them, and even less mulattos, and look at my fate, I have them at home. False race, only Ercília, poor thing, is obedient, she takes after me. We here in Portugal have nothing to do with black people. Losing the colonies was the greatest blessing God gave us. Let them stay in their land, we'll stay in ours, at least here it's not a mess like over there! And you show up here with three mulattos. At first, I was even ashamed to go out on the street. (*idem*: 142-3)

The difference between the displaced and refugees is patience. The displaced lost their belongings. Lost their homes. They want to be urgently heard and save what they lost. Refugees don't. They left. No one told them to leave. They fled the screams, the fire, the cloud of smoke, the guns. They hit the road, basket on their heads, biquatas on the quindas, the rest of the fuba in a can, abandoned child and fear, a lot of fear. They brought nothing more. (*idem*: 156-57)

The ice of the days hurts me since Dad cursed fate, Angola, land of the unhappy, and Portugal, a misguided nation. On both sides, luck is scarce. And when he speaks, he doesn't seem to know who he's talking to, whether he's talking to us or Mr. Manuel. Aunt says, your father went crazy. It must be that. It was a curse, which resulted in the effect of this atrocious sadness in me. (…)(*idem*: 161)

Ercília could ask, but she was like me, our father's baggage. We only had the right to ask, we didn't have the right to change our destination. Neither did Justino. We were all our father's baggage. But is it wrong to be baggage? the lorry driver wants to know. At first, no, but can baggage tell its own story? (…) No, baggage can't tell its own story. Baggage never seizes

the journey. The same goes for the story of the lion hunter, who will tell it? The lion won't tell. It will always be the hunter. He set the trap. Only he can tell how it happenned. (*idem*: 284)

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