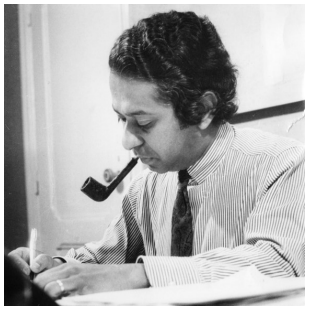
# Orlando da Costa

Stops: Brazil, Mozambique, Portugal

(1929-2006)



“A biography is made of names, because it is made of several people and never of just one” (Costa 1979: n.p.). This quotation by Orlando da Costa is emblematic of how his literary work emerged from a profoundly collective experience, in which both the “lyrical I” and the “narrative I” are blurred, giving way to a shared voice among diverse peoples. With his heart and mind in Lisbon and his gaze directed towards India – a gaze without borders, to paraphrase the title of one of his most acclaimed, and censored, poetry collections – Orlando da Costa made his diasporic identity the cornerstone of his literary career, without ever rendering his work explicitly autobiographical. As the writer himself stated in an interview given to the daily newspaper, *Diário Popular*, in 1975, he never wrote a book about himself; however, everything he wrote relates to him, likening a book to a journey along whose itinerary the writer gradually rediscovers himself.

Orlando da Costa was born on 2 July 1929 in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo), into an Indian family: his father was Goan and his mother came from a family originally from Daman. In 1931, he travelled to Goa for the first time, and from 1935 onwards, while still a child, he was in transit between Brazil and Portugal. Later, due to his mother’s health problems, he was placed in the care of his uncles in Margão. His childhood and adolescence in Goa were formative in his precocious literary career. He studied up to the sixth year at the Abade Faria Institute in Margão and, at just fifteen years of age, took part in a literary competition organised by the Afonso de Albuquerque Secondary School— the *alma mater* of the sons of

the Goan Catholic elites, but also a nurturing ground for young poets. It was here that he received his first literary recognition: his poem won first prize and was published in *Ala: Revista do Centro Escolar nº 1 da Mocidade Portuguesa* [*Ala- Journal of the 1st School Centre of Salazar's Youth*], a periodical with a strong colonial connotation, aimed at youth development. He subsequently moved to Panjim to complete his seventh year at the same school that had awarded him the prize.

In 1947, at the age of eighteen, Costa emigrated to Lisbon, where he studied at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and came into contact with the youth of the Casa dos Estudantes do Império (CEI) [House of the Students of the Empire]. He became President of its India Section in 1952, a time when the organisation underwent significant changes imposed by the government, aimed at dismantling the democratic structure that had previously supported its operations. He developed a close friendship with Mário Pinto de Andrade and became a political ally of other African militants such as Amílcar Cabral, Lúcio Lara, Marcelino dos Santos, and Agostinho Neto. The latter described Orlando da Costa as an authentic poet, for incorporating into his work references from the European literary tradition while also drawing on poets of the Negritude movement, such as Aimé Césaire, to whom he dedicated the poem "Canção do petit matin" ["Song of petit matin"]. Regarding the years at the CEI and their relationship with African students, Costa wrote that it is from this experience that "my integration is achieved socially and politically, and it is also from this experience that my identity as a writer arises" (Costa 1975: s.p.). The years at the CEI and his anti-fascist activism inspired the censored novel *Podem chamar-me Eurídice*… [*You Can Call Me Eurydice*…] (1964) – a clandestine love story between two university students, set partly in a room inspired by the place where Mário Pinto de Andrade once lived – and *Os netos de Norton* [*Norton's Grandchildren*] (1994), published in a democratic context.

Between 1950 and 1953, he was detained multiple times by the PIDE, the secret police of the Portuguese regime, where he was "listed as being hostile to the existing institutions, espousing communist ideas" (PIDE/DGS Report, PR. 2603-CI (2) NP. 7220, 1963). Between October 1952 and March 1953, he served a sentence of five months and one week at Caxias

prison, where he completed his final thesis. During this period, he joined the MUD Juvenil (the youth wing of the Democratic Unity Movement) and, in 1954, the Communist Party. The years of his early militancy in Lisbon were also those of his affirmation as a neorealist poet. In fact, in 1951, under the patronage of writer Armindo Rodrigues – to whom he was introduced by Mário Pinto de Andrade and São Tomé poet Francisco José Tenreiro, both members of the CEI, his first poetry collection was published by the Centro Bibliográfico de Lisboa, as part of the *Cancioneiro Geral* series. The book was *A estrada e a voz* [*The Road and the Voice*], while in 1953 he published *Os olhos sem fronteira* [*The Eyes without Border*]. His third poetry volume, *Sete odes do canto comum* [*Seven Odes of the Common Song*], was confiscated while still at the printer. Regarding this event, Costa wrote: "In 1955, what would have been my third published book was seized like a suspicious citizen, on the Calçada de S. Francisco and on Rua do Loreto, and from that moment on, silenced" (Costa 1979: n.p.). This seizure triggered the censorship of his previous books, including the novels *O signo da ira* [*The Sign of Wrath*] (1961) and *You Can Call Me Eurydice*… (1964).

In 1956, he was among the founding members of the Sociedade Portuguesa de Escritores (SPE) [Portuguese Society of Writers], serving as a board member until its closure, decreed by the Salazar dictatorship in 1965. The SPE was shut down after the *Grande Prémio de Novelística* [The Great Prize for Fiction] was awarded to the book *Luaanda* by the Angolan writer Luandino Vieira, who was then imprisoned in the Tarrafal camp for political prisoners in Cape Verde. In fact, as early as November 1962, Luandino Vieira had received the first prize of the CEI Literary Competition, whose jury included Orlando da Costa. Later that same year, the Goan writer himself had experienced a similar form of constraint when he received the *Prize Ricardo Malheiros* from the Academy of Sciences for the publication of his novel *The Sign of Wrath*, which was still under censorship. In his acceptance speech, Costa stated: "A jury that rewards the work of a writer, by awarding its literary quality, first and foremost rewards and encourages the spirit of freedom with which it was created" (Costa 1962: 2). It is possible that it was the spirit with which he supported Luandino Vieira's candidacy, first for the CEI prize and later for that of the SPE, that made him aware of the paradoxical condition of writing in freedom within a context of detention and compulsory confinement.

Neorealism, his “great literary motivation,” influenced the writing of the novel *The Sign of Wrath*, which symbolically represents his return to Goa. Set at the end of the Second World War in a Goan rural village, Torsan-Zori, the novel addresses social issues ranging from the exploitation of agricultural workers to colonial violence and the abuse of the female body. However, as Costa himself stated in a 1988 interview, the social and physical environment of Goa functions as more than just a backdrop, it is an integral part of the narrative itself. Costa was prompted to write this story for reasons he defined as civic, while also being driven by “a kind of nationalism, a need to intervene, to assert ‘ourselves,’ to prevent myself from feeling uprooted” (Costa 2019: 21). In this sense, neorealism provided him with the opportunity to reconcile social concerns and his political commitment with form and style. Despite the censorship he faced, the award of the *Prize Ricardo Malheiros* in 1962 resulted in the novel being reissued in the publishing market, where it quickly sold out, leading to a second edition in the same year by Arcádia Editions. In 2017, the Goan publisher Goa 1556 released the English translation of the novel *The Sign of Wrath*. Excerpts from this work also appear in the books *Pivoting on the Point of Return: Modern Goan Literature*, edited by Peter Nazareth in 2010, and *Ferry Crossing: Short Stories from Goa*, edited by Manohar Shetty in 1998.

In 1964, *You can call me Eurydice*… was censored “due to its distinctly revolutionary nature and the shamelessness it embodies” (Censorship Report, 13-2-1965). In contrast, the three-act play *Sem flores, nem coroas* [*No Flowers, No Wreaths*], published in 1971, managed to escape the censor’s scrutiny. The play, originally entitled *Requiem por um civil* [*Requiem for a Civilian*], is a family drama set on the last night of the Portuguese in India, on the eve of the arrival of the Indian Union Army in Goa on December 18, 1961. In 2017, its English translation was published, and in January 2020, the play was staged for the first time by theatre director Fernanda Lapa. In 1973, alongside other prominent figures in the Portuguese cultural scene, Costa founded the Associação Portuguesa de Escritores [Portuguese Writers’ Association], and served on its board in 1983, 1985, and 1988. In 1979, he collected all of his poetic works in the book *Canto civil* [*Song of the People*], which includes the three poetry collections censored in the 1950s, along with previously unpublished poems, gathered under the title *O coração e o tempo* [*The Heart and the Time*]. In 1984, he published the play *A*

*como estão os cravos hoje?* [*How Much Are the Carnations Today?*], a conversation between three men in a cemetery, set on the night of the 24th April, 1974. Although the play was not staged, it was awarded first prize in the original play script competition held by the Seiva Trupe company of Porto.

Orlando da Costa's political militancy during the Salazar regime led to his exclusion from both public and private education, a field in which he had worked briefly in his youth. As a result, he turned to the world of advertising, where he worked throughout his life. After the publication of *How Much Are the Carnations Today?*, his literary creation decreased, though he did not withdraw from the public sphere. In 1994, he published *Norton's Grandchildren*, inspired by the experiences of overseas students who had organised around the CEI in the 1950s. Ten years after the publication of his last work, and thirty years since his last novel, Orlando da Costa returned with a book about his generation. The writer confessed in a 1994 interview: "The book was not intended to be generational, but at a certain point I realised something that was important in my life, and that determined the generational reference: it was the experience of the House of the Students of the Empire. And I understood what the book was going to be." (Costa 1994: n.p.)

The writing of *Norton's Grandchildren* began in 1971 and was slow and arduous, partly due to the emotional ordeal caused by a trip to Goa in 1974 – after twenty-seven years of absence – which led him to start another novel set in India upon his return to Lisbon. This Indian creative phase, initiated in 1974, did not conclude until 2000 with the publication of the coming-of-age novel *O último olhar de Manú Miranda* [*The Last Gaze of Manú Miranda*]. In this sense, the writing of the two novels alternated over more than two decades, influencing each other reciprocally. Although Costa himself considered *The Last Gaze of Manú Miranda* the book that completes his Goan trilogy, which began in 1961, this literary work takes on greater meaning when read in contrast with *Norton's Grandchildren*. One is inspired by his youth in Lisbon, and the other by the youth he might have lived in the colony. Both novels represent "this double rootedness, seemingly generous" (Costa, 1985, 22), yet "indomitably treacherous" (Costa 1985, 22), which characterises the literature of this diasporic writer.

In October 2000, the Museum of Neorealism in Vila Franca de Xira organised the documentary exhibition *Os olhos sem fronteira* [*The Eyes without Border*], showcasing the complete bibliographic production of the writer, as well as a selection of personal photographs. To this museum, Costa donated part of his literary archive in May 2000, which was subsequently complemented by his personal library, donated by his heirs in 2016. Orlando da Costa passed away in Lisbon on January 27, 2006, and his last book, *Vocações evocações: poesia* [*Vocations, Evocations: Poetry*], was published in 2004.

## Quotations

Like a river that flows without decline, grandparents die, parents grow old, far away, far beyond the open sea, and we, as though unaware, beyond distant and fleeting mourning, go on weaving with the months and years our chance and unfinished conversations, looking in the mirror at the first wrinkle without alarm, as if it had been etched on our face since adolescence. And everything happens with impune naturalness in childhood and seems as if it will go on happening unless something violent comes before tomorrow's dawn – like leaving home for the colonial capital or returning without triumph to the dock from which we departed. (*Os netos de Norton*, 1994: 123)

We dropped anchor before sunset, by the quay of the old port of Mormugão, buried beneath tonnes of ore, from where I had once departed without remorse, in a farewell to ideals and with the freshness of my youthful eighteen years of age. Unaware of the painful and ambiguous anxieties of late returns and, above all, ignorant of the sudden fear that, with each passing day of the journey from the Red Sea, grew within me – the fear of not finding, on arrival, among the survivors of my generation, anyone who might recognise me or to whom I could speak in either of the two languages of my childhood: a dream so real and haunting that, in order to make my way home, where the eternal old champa tree awaited in

bloom, I was forced to reflect, to the point of regret, that my long absence had been the sin responsible for the shifting of every path within the labyrinth of my identity. (*Os netos de Norton*, 1994: 267-268)

During the long, solitary journey, he wrote an equally long letter to his nephew, in which, among other things, he repeated what he had said to him in the conversation they had had, alone, on the eve of his departure. It could be summed up as follows: if he wished to continue his studies in Portugal, he should go to Coimbra or Lisbon to study law; otherwise, he should come to Africa to try his luck and put his abilities—and his determination to become a man with a future—to the test, without feeling as uprooted as he surely would if he chose to go to the colonial capital. For in Mozambique, there were so many Goans, from almost every caste, that they would make him feel at home in countless situations. (*O último olhar de Manú Miranda*, 2000: 140)

(…) I often struggle with the choice of my experiences: as you know, in my work as a fiction writer and playwright, there are two distinct socio-geographical spaces – India, the land of my childhood, adolescence, and youth, and Portugal, where I spent my twenties to fifties forging a seasoned adult path, which I believe, in some ways, to be rich. Not provincial; diversely human; seriously committed; joyously bohemian. Now, this dual rootedness, seemingly generous, is indomitably treacherous, I assure you. (Interview with Armando Baptista-Bastos for Diário Popular, published on 31st July 1985, on the occasion of the 3rd edition of *Podem chamar-me Eurídice*…)

I have always been conscious of these roots, and this, in a sense, placed me within Portuguese society in a position where I was constantly reminded of the importance of

difference. Since my adolescence, I have been an enthusiast of India, which, I acknowledge, overshadowed what might be called my Goan identity. In this regard, the civilisational importance of India fostered a genuine sense of pride, which, however, seemed somewhat affected by the fact of being Goan, that is, a representative of a culturally hybrid and historically weakened community, subject to the influences of an imported European culture, or rather, a Europeanising culture, more specifically Portuguese, which, to be frank, was more limiting than amplifying, particularly when we set aside the positive and negative aspects of Christianity. (Interview with Eufemiano Jesús de Miranda, conducted in 1988 and published in 2012 in the book *Oriente e Ocidente na literatura goesa: realidade, ficção, história e imaginação*, Saligão, Goa 1556: 138) [*East and West in Goan literature: reality, fiction, history and imagination*]

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