

You understand, this is not just a problem with the service of water and of the sewers. It is all the society that has to be cleaned, disinfected...

Dr. Stockman in *The Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen

What is the reliability of a work of fiction in its interpellation of a specific reality? When do the work's claims begin and cease to be reasonable? Can a people, or an entire nation, be mirrored in the itinerary of a character? These are some of the questions that assailed me while reading *Nghamula, O Homem do Tchova (ou o Eclipse de um Cidadão)* – [Nghamula, *The Cart-Man (or, Eclipse of a Citizen)*] Aldino Muianga's most recent novel.¹

It is at the very least revealing that the common denominator of these questions is the relationship between literature and reality. This is not my own preconceived idea or predisposition, as a reader; on the contrary, it derives from the work's internal construction, from its strong realistic intentionality, made manifest in the reference to real places (Massinga, the National Highway Number One, Maxixe, Manhiça, Matola, the Military Hospital and Neighbourhood); real facts (the civil war, the floods of 2000, social and matrimonial conflicts); languages (of the military, of street salesmen, of the maimed); objects (*tchovas*, weapons, vehicles, and market stands); behaviours; and so on.

The realist penchant of the book reaches disquieting proportions not only in these references, but also, most importantly, in the way in which the story is told and the phenomena and characters described. I do not usually like to stick to authors' interpretations of their own works. However, in a recent conversation with Aldino Muianga – a person who is generally very discreet, judicious, and of exemplary humility (these being characteristics that he infuses somehow into his writing) – I observed that this last novel is deeply and surprisingly corrosive and pessimistic. To that he responded more or less with the following words: 'It is no longer possible [não dá] to withhold the indignation, nor to remain indifferent to what is happening here'.

I judge that this must be Muianga's dilemma: the supposedly harmonious articulation between fiction and the real world. In the end, it is a false dilemma, because it corresponds to the general vocation of African writers and artists, who, at the core of their creative process, are unable to alienate themselves from the reality from which they come, and which surrounds them, questions them, fascinates them, or simply

1 Translator's note (P. I.): The *tchova* is a hand-pushed cart typical of Maputo's urban landscape. The word comes from the English *to shove*. The related verb *tchovar* means: to push a vehicle that is stuck, to accompany someone somewhere, and metaphorically to carry on. Kok Nam's photograph on the cover of *Tempo* no. 802 (1986) – reproduced in Figure 9 of Assubuji and Hayes' contribution in this volume and analysed in depth therein – associates the post-Independence slogan *a luta continua* to the everyday struggle symbolised by the *tchova* in the popular imagination.

enrages them. And I judge that the *Introduction*, an excerpt of a text by the Brazilian author Ruy Barbosa, as well as the *Author's Note*, end up preparing the terrain for the reader in relation to the development of the story.

The narrative is strongly dominated by a character, Nghamula, whose trajectory resembles that of tragic heroes, because it rises and falls, and because it obeys to a destiny which one does not escape, as if bound by a superior force. The sequence of biting adversities suffered by Nghamula brought to my mind – with all the obvious differences – Justine, the protagonist of Sade's *The Misfortunes of Virtue*.

Muianga's novel is driven by an unrepentant questioning about the principles and values on which human relationships and behaviours should be based, on the one hand, and those that should drive the construction and the leading of a country, on the other. What is the place for virtue, rectitude, dignity, verticality, loyalty, solidarity, gratitude and recognition in a society that wants to elevate itself and garner respect in the concert of nations?

Nghamula follows an elliptical curve that leads him from the humble condition of being a young shepherd that takes care of the family herds in Dingane, in the hinterland of Inhambane; to being a true hero and respected official of a governmental army enmeshed in a dark and fratricidal war; to end up again in a humble position, only this time one of marginality and forsakenness, shared with many others:

That was a crowd of exiles abandoned to themselves. One would have mistaken it for a hospice for beings deprived of any agency, confined in their physical deficiencies, dependent on those who hosted them [...] The allowances were delayed, withheld within the bureaucracy of the Directorate of Finances. The mutilated knew days of hunger. The internal wounds of the deficiencies reopened. The feeling that their efforts were useless were [sic] evident in their behaviours. They nearly rose in mutiny (p. 74).

Left without any other option, and driven by his independent spirit, Nghamula abandons the Centre of the Mutilated and sets to assure his livelihood by selling stuff in the balcony of a store in a suburban neighbourhood, or by painfully pushing a *tchova*, a human-traction cart.

Nghamula is, after all, an implacable metaphor for a nation in accelerated decay, which shamelessly consigns to forgetfulness and dishonour those who give the best of themselves in its service. The novel is marked by the harshness of the events and situations experienced by the characters and by the narrator's ferocious disbelief, especially in relation to instituted powers and to society's growing rot. This disbelief makes him depict with surgical precision injustices, familial and personal conflicts, behavioural deviations, betrayals, vices, misunderstandings, and the neglect and misery of an entire population, already vulnerable by itself:

There was a blossoming of eateries, of drinking places and even of centres of amusement of doubtful reputation. Men and women crowded there, looking for encounters that would sublimate the tensions of the everyday. Teenagers divert from the roads of schools to go toward drugs, pregnancies, bodies of foetuses wrapped in plastic sheets decompose in the mounds of garbage. Decapitated human heads are found at the crossroads. It is a transfigured Gomorrah (p. 76).

To the narrator, just like the Military Neighbourhood, 'the Square of Cinema 700 would turn into a fairground of chaos and of disorder' (p. 81), featuring in the novel as an image of the country:

The colour of yore had faded. The buildings betrayed the harshness of bad weather. Alternating times of searing heat and rains had corroded the painting and left the plaster bare. They were the mirrors of negligence of the municipal authorities – we do not have the funds! – they said. Rogues [*marginais*] hailing from other markets came here to get their business done. Agents of the police and wrongdoers fraternised. Women of bad reputation and tired bodies flow here and recruit partners for prostitution. Teenagers, men and women contaminate each other happily. STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] get disseminated in the homes (p. 81).

There couldn't be a more eloquent picture of a country that appears to have lost the capacity to find in collective memory the inspiration and reference that would enable it to stand up and to look to the future, with the dignity and the clairvoyance that future generations, if capable, will harvest.

There are, however, two corrective elements that function as a sign of hope in the human and social quagmire depicted in *Nghamula*. The first has to do with the repeated recourse to the dream. It would be interesting and illustrative to make a statistical survey of the recurrent presence of the dream in the narrative. Here are some examples: '[Nghamula] dreamed impossible dreams: he found himself navigating in a luxurious steamship along the National Highway Number One' (p. 13); 'The images of the dream huddled, painted with faded, twilight-like and indecipherable colours. He wandered in an atmosphere of lightness, in a state of voluptuous tranquillity, as one experiments in a state of agony' (p. 17); 'The idyllic adventure that in some people's dreams the army would be, was no longer such' (p. 23); 'He felt that his world was crumbling, that the support of his dreams was shaky, false and fragile" (p. 52, 53). In *Nghamula* the dream is a space where the imagination breathes; a space of denial of a threatening and unbearable reality. In essence, it is an intimate and personal space, of unlimited and compensatory freedom. But the dream has also a powerful cathartic function, even when it acquires a hallucinatory dimension. Consider, for instance, the moment when *Nghamula*, wounded and battered in combat, is admitted to the Chongoene Hospital:

A strange and pleasant exhaustion takes hold of the mind. It is a sensation of quiet, a relief that softens the pain, a state of drowsiness that announces a long and deep sleep. It slips down the slope of delirium in a soft movement that leads it to the tepidness of Lake Dindane waters (p. 60).

One of the moments of stronger narrative vibrancy – which, paradoxically, is also sharper in terms of the interpretation of reality, even if only allegorically – is the long and prodigious dream of Girafa, *Nghamula*'s inseparable companion. 'A thick fog enshrouds the horizons of Girafa's dreams. At first, diffuse images parade and overlap, as if caught in a tumult, in sceneries of landscapes and of places that he does not recognise' (p. 98). It is interesting that we encounter in the dream of a secondary character one of the most significant and enchanting moments of the novel. In

an intense delirium, full of critical intentionality, one can grasp subliminal messages that exhibit the marks of a collective trajectory. Through a ferocious and devastating irony, the author appropriates discursive registers and slogans that have marked the last thirty years of the history of the country, producing a courageous and burlesque revisit of a whole imaginary: 'The structures are already structured and set up'; 'We participate in workshops'; 'Those who try to hinder the march of our revolution will pay with their own lives'; 'The strategic plan of human depopulation'; 'The central idea of our politics is to develop underdevelopment, in the countryside and in the cities'; 'To relieve our society of rogues full of subversive ideas'; 'The orientations emanating from our last congress'; 'In the parliament, we do not want sleepyheads, parasites of the popular efforts'; 'We will put an end to hunger'; 'Great examples of entrepreneurship'; 'Our country is full of true businessmen'; 'We are instructed to put an end to immobilism and corruption'; 'Combat against anti-*cabritismo* [corruption of public officers]'; 'Let us promote closed-air defecation [*fecalismo a céu fechado*]'; 'Intelligent partnership'; 'An agreement with the Chinese company *Xiao Lin Tchova-Xitaduma* Incorporated, based in Shanghai'; and so on.

Besides such oneiric representations, we find some residues of the noble and genuine aspects of the human condition in the ways in which the narrator explores interpersonal relationships, above all among the more disfavoured, in which there are countless demonstrations of affect, solidarity, mutual help and of companionship, as if 'Gomorra ask[ed] the fire of transformation' (p. 81). This is the second corrective element to the skeptical and bitter atmosphere of the novel. It is manifest in the multifaceted group of companions of misfortune who gravitate around Nghamula – characters who will certainly enrich the pantheon of Mozambican literature: Girafa, Mão de Vaca, Frank, the Drugman, mama Nwa-Mawayela, mana Aidinha, Romão Chimbhutso, Jojo. In their simple lifestyles and their multiple misadventures, sometimes bordering delinquency, these characters seem to represent a residue of deep humanity in a society marked by physical and moral degradation. Despite his interior solitude, despite his physical handicap, despite the disenchantment that hopelessly pushes him to alcohol, Nghamula is the moral support and buttress of all these wretched of the earth, who recognise him as such.

In two moments in particular, the human brotherhood that unites all the characters is a beacon of hope, which the novel seems to promise, albeit obliquely. The first is the death of Frank the Drugman and the funerary ceremonies that his friends prepare for him:

A wave of consternation fell on the place. Frank was an icon, a symbol of those disinherited of fate. He represented for many the apex of modesty and of comradeship [...] As he was the oldest brother, Nghamula took responsibility for the direction of all of the providences necessary for his companion to have a decent funeral. As a sign of mourning, that day the stall did not open [...] The neighbourhood contributed in full force to the acquisition of the urn (p. 91).

The second moment, also loaded with an enormous emotional charge, occurs almost at the end, when Nghamula has an epileptic attack and is subsequently chased away from the room that he rents from mama Nwa Mawayela:

That was the saddest moment in the house of mama Nwa Mawayela. Nghamula's circle of friends, presided by Nghamula himself, sat at the table, that is, around that table of sorts, and cast dices to question and discuss the meanings of their life, which delighted in playing dirty tricks one after the other, all of them indecent, unfair, just meant to leave them at the mercy of nothingness, of themselves.

These are some of the interpretive paths suggested by Aldino Muianga's last novel. To conclude, I must underline the author's preoccupation in documenting himself around the issues that his work touches on, thus demonstrating – as Umberto Eco has taught us – that literature is an epistemological metaphor: a place in which all forms of knowledge are represented and disseminated. The story of *Nghamula* is as fascinating as it is disturbing, above all for its inevitable appeal to our condition and consciousness of citizens of a nation that – as José Craveirinha would put it – is yet to come.

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