

Momplé's Melancholia: Mourning for Mozambique

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Abstract: This article offers a close reading of the short story "Stress," by the Mozambican author Lília Momplé. It suggests that Momplé uses the symptoms of melancholia to signal a betrayal of and by the mother country. The analysis uses Julia Kristeva's work, *Black Sun*, to offer a reading of Momplé's text in which foreign intrusion onto the Mozambican cultural and economic landscape is deemed to lead to a breakdown in meaning in the post-civil-war nation. Arguably, Momplé's portrayal is a pessimistically valid cultural configuration of the inevitable trend towards globalization now dominant in Mozambican society. A consequence of that trend, which systematically relies on economic inequality, is a loss of individual national identity and the immense relative poverty that serves as the backdrop to Momplé's story. © 2002 Portuguese Studies Review. All rights reserved.

“**S**tress” is the first short story in Lília Momplé's 1997 collection, *Os olhos da cobra verde*. The epigraph to the collection, “feliz do povo que sabe transformar o sofrimento e o desespero em arte e amor,” has a telling resonance with the Christian Beatitudes.¹ In the Beatitudes, suffering is seen to gain meaning when it leads to something else, which is always promised in the future. The perpetual delay implicit in the promise is overlooked in order for despair to be overcome or, at the very least, postponed. Despair, by nature, implies a void. An efficient mechanism for concealing that void is words because, by nature, one of the primary corollaries of language is the distancing of absence. The sane mind accepts this game and forgets its rules: thus meaning becomes possible. Those with melancholia, however, suffer from asymbolia; language breaks down for them because life's lack of meaning becomes horrifically present. They can no longer accept perpetual delay as a *modus vivendi*; all promise and both semantic and metaphysical meaning fail to fill the vacuum at the center of their existence.

Lília Momplé is one of Mozambique's leading women writers. Born in 1935 in the Ilha de Moçambique, her work is noted for its harsh depiction of her country's reality. Her first collection of short stories, *Ninguém matou Suhura*, published in 1988, portrayed aspects of the horrors of the colonial experience in lusophone Africa.² The 1997 collection opens a new era in her output because the stories resonate with the situation lived in post-civil-war Mozambique, and her message,

¹ Lília Momplé, *Os olhos da cobra verde* (Maputo: Associação dos Escritores Moçambicanos, 1997), 7.

² Lília Momplé, *Ninguém matou Suhura* (Maputo: AEMO, 1988).

in contrast to the country's most famous writer, Mia Couto's later work, is extremely pessimistic, particularly in the first short story, "Stress."³

The epigraph to *Os olhos da cobra verde* troublingly privileges the transformation of suffering, in part, into an art form. This may be read to signal the parasitic nature of the stories it precedes: in their portrayal of suffering, they will feed off that suffering, and turn it into words. At the same time, that transformation into the linguistic becomes the only means of preserving sanity under the shadow of despair, characteristic of Mozambique in the 1990s as painted by Momplé. The narratives in the collection are marked with despair, the despair of a betrayed child, whose *mãe-pátria* has suffered from a foreign intrusion, as we will discuss in this article.

As Patrick Chabal highlights, the Mozambican nation for the first part of the final decade of the twentieth century, was "not a country but a land in which people live in search of a meaning above and beyond the war which has devastated their lives."⁴ The central premise of Chabal's argument was that Mozambique lingered in a phase of cultural inscription, a phase prolonged by the almost continuous conflict that afflicted the country from the independence struggle until the first multiparty elections that, in 1994, marked the conclusive end to the post-independence civil war. The horrific conclusion to be drawn from Momplé's "Stress" is that even after the end of the conflict meaning is not possible within Mozambique because the nation will never be an independent entity. The process of ending the war heralded the adoption of free-market economics in the formerly Marxist-Leninist state, and a huge influx of international aid workers, United Nations monitors (the so-called ONUMOZ), and foreign capital. National identity has been sacrificed on the altar of globalization in the interests of peace, a sacrifice Momplé laments and symbolizes as a loss of language and a plunge into melancholia.

Julia Kristeva argues in *Black Sun* that "for the speaking being life is a meaningful life; life is even the apogee of meaning."⁵ Meaning, in both the semantic and metaphysical spheres, is dependent on enunciation or, more precisely, on a type of enunciation within closed parameters, for, as Kristeva proceeds to point out, the speech of the depressed is "repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill."⁶ The melancholy mind may still command speech but, as its depression advances, it views these utterances as pointless and semantically adrift. Melancholia

³ Couto's more recent collections of short stories, *Contos do nascer da terra* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1997) and *Na berma de nenhuma estrada* (Lisbon: Caminho, 2001) are markedly more optimistic than his earliest collection of *contos*, *Vozes anoitecidas* (Maputo: AEMO, 1986).

⁴ Patrick Chabal, *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 82.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 6.

⁶ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 33.

blocks the “translating” and “metaphorizing” necessary to meaningful discourse, and results in the effective silence and death of the subject.⁷

Kristeva seeks to root melancholia in a subject’s failure to complete the prerequisites of individuation. For an infant to develop a framework of meaning, he or she needs to sacrifice the maternal figure: “If I did not agree to lose mother, I could neither imagine nor name her.”⁸ That loss is necessary for the linguistic sign to emerge. The sign, when it functions well, enables “a triumph over sadness,” since it represents the self’s ability “to identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party—father, form, schema.”⁹ Kristeva links the “spectacular collapse of meaning” suffered by depressives with the assumption that “they experience difficulty integrating the universal signifying sequence, that is, language.”¹⁰ She continues by fusing the speaking subject and his or her language, and by characterizing language as the semiotic replacement of mother:

In the best of cases, speaking beings and their language are like one: is not speech our “second nature”? In contrast, the speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue. They have lost the meaning—the value—of their mother tongue for want of losing the mother.

The melancholy person is, according to Kristeva, unable to accept the linguistic substitution of the mother and, as a result, the mother tongue always alienates rather than replaces. She cites an example of one of her patients, a teacher who suffered from melancholia. At their first meeting, the patient arrived “wearing a brightly colored blouse on which the word ‘house’ was printed countless times.” Kristeva told her, “You are in mourning for a house.” The house for which she mourned was “an African house, the heavenly abode of her childhood, lost by the family under dramatic circumstances.” The patient’s reply to Kristeva’s revelation was the declaration, “I don’t understand, I don’t see what you mean, words fail me!”¹¹ This exchange links depression, a failure to come to terms with an unavoidable loss, and a resulting reduction in the exchange value of language. Mia Couto asserts, “no visto das coisas, a gente vai transitando do útero para a casa, cada casa não sendo senão outra edição do ventre materno.”¹² Given such an equivalence, Kristeva’s melancholy woman may be read to desire a return to the maternal realm, and excessively uses the deemed-to-be worthless mechanisms of language, through the text on her blouse, to announce that intent. She can only feel at home in her first

⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 42.

⁸ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 41.

⁹ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 23.

¹⁰ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 53.

¹¹ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 53-54.

¹² Mia Couto, “Mulher de mim,” in *Cada homem é uma raça: Estórias* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1998), 119-28 (p. 126).

house, an abode which signals the pre-linguistic era before mother was betrayed to, through, and by language.

Mother Mozambique

Mother assumes many guises. The *pátria* is one of the most problematic, due to its parental ambivalence: is it father or is it mother? The term *mãe-pátria* would tend to align the lusophone homeland on the side of the maternal. The term itself also efficiently demonstrates the psychic process whereby language—Kristeva’s “third party—father, form, schema”—comes to overwrite and replace the concept of the mother, since *pátria* has father written all over it. In a Mozambican context, where *Mãe África* used to be deployed culturally to shore up the concept of a *pátria* independent of Portugal, the mother-continent herself overshadows her children. José Craveirinha, Mozambique’s most important poet, constantly drew on the image of “Mãe África” in his pre-independence poetry.¹³ Noémia de Sousa and Armando Guebuza provide other famous examples of poetry, produced on the eve of independence, which used the hackneyed image of Africa-as-mother.¹⁴ In post-independence Mozambique, the psychic replacement for mother, language, always bears the scars of a double alienation. Not only does it distance its users from the pre-linguistic realm of the maternal, it also haunts them with a colonial past because the principal cultural mechanism used to define and replace the mother hinges, in the case of Mozambique, on the tongue of Portugal. The child’s betrayal of mother through the assumption of language has its treacherous charge etiolated. It is no longer mother alone who is betrayed. Her semiotic replacement necessarily alienates her children, a result of the uncomfortable status of a “foreign” mother tongue. For Momplé, in “Stress”, melancholia is the final result of that duplicitous betrayal. Life failed to gain meaning in 1990s Mozambique because of the encroachment of the “foreign” on the site of national and cultural identity. The sacrifice of the years of war appears, under this reading of Momplé, to have been in vain. The mother-country, for whom the struggle was undertaken, has not ceded to a national identity, but rather given way to a collage of “foreign” terms, ideas, and practices.

The socio-psychic concept of *pátria* depends for its formulation on the selective suppression of difference: “We are all one, they are Other.” In a lusophone context, it has also, since the time of Pessoa’s famous declaration—“minha patria é a língua portuguesa [sic]”—and before, always rested on the claiming of a language.¹⁵ Post-independence Mozambique chose, under Samora Machel, to appropriate the Portuguese language in an effort to define, in terms of unity, the *mãe-pátria*.

¹³ Examples of his most famous poems that make use of the term include “Xigubo” and “África,” republished in the collection *Xigubo* (Maputo: INLD, 1980).

¹⁴ For examples of their work, and those of many other Mozambican poets who use the image of *Mãe África* see Manuel Ferreira, *No reino de Caliban: Antologia panorâmica da poesia Africana de expressão Portuguesa*, Vol. 3 (Lisboa: Plátano, 1985).

¹⁵ Fernando Pessoa, *Livro do desassossego por Bernardo Soares*, ed. Jacinto do Prado Coelho, 2 vols. (Lisboa: Ática, 1982), 1: 17.

Leaving aside the complex post-colonial issues problematizing that choice, by the 1980s the language had become “an emotive medium of national consolidation in post-independence Mozambique.”¹⁶ That “foreign” mother tongue had assumed a national status through its use as the instrument for the cultural inscription of the nation. However, Momplé, through her strategic distortion of the national language, brings back into play its “foreign” provenance. Where other African writers have deployed languages indigenous to the continent as a means of appropriating European languages through selective code-switching,¹⁷ Momplé adapts the code-switching technique in order to incorporate other European languages. This process accentuates the European dimension of the Portuguese language, fracturing its African façade. It simultaneously becomes the totem of European encroachment and of national alienation.

The 1990s witnessed a period of major change within Mozambique. The civil war, which had marred the country during the preceding decade, came to an end. Large amounts of foreign capital flowed into Mozambique, along with an ever-increasing number of foreign aid agency workers. A positive reading of that decade would be that it represented opportunity for the relatively new nation, and the integration of Mozambique into the international community. Lília Momplé portrays the pessimistic converse of that process. The decade, as presented emblematically in “Stress,” is contaminated by “foreign” concepts, words, and presence. This contamination results in the ultimate Western importation: melancholia—loss of all meaning.

The “Stress” of a foreign intrusion

The narrative of “Stress” relates a short period in the lives of two neighbors. One, the mistress of a Mozambican war hero, is obsessed with the other, a schoolteacher who lives below the poverty line. He is scarcely aware of her until she presents herself as a witness against him at his trial for murder. In contrast, from her vantage point overlooking his poverty, she has watched his every move.

Neither of the protagonists possesses a name. He is a teacher: defined by his role in transferring meaning to others. She is always “a amante do major-general”: a woman defined in terms of a man who “conserva ainda resquícios do aprumo dos seus tempos de guerrilheiro da FRELIMO” (p. 14). However, the meaning the independence movement gave him during the armed struggle has begun to wane. In fact, “não só o aprumo mas os próprios ideais que o nortearam durante a luta de libertação, e pelos quais estaria disposto a sacrificar a própria vida, foram-se diluindo também” (p. 14). If any meaning is left in his life it is principally driven

¹⁶ Russell Hamilton, “Language and Literature in Portuguese-Writing Africa,” in *Portuguese Studies* 2 (1986): 196-207 (p. 196).

¹⁷ Code-switching as a literary device employs morphemes from one language in the midst of a text in another language. In African literature, code-switching into African languages has often been used to disrupt the dominance of European tongues. See particularly Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

by “uma ânsia desenfreada de usufruir tudo o que na vida lhe dá prazer.” Bland selfishness replaces a passionate collective ideal. Serving the *pátria* no longer furnishes any meaningful purpose and this loss of purpose has emasculated him; it has resulted in a meaningless hedonism, turning his belly into something “flácido, projectando-se do corpo como uma caricata gravidez” (p. 14-15). He becomes associated with a womb. This regression does not symbolize a positive return to innocence. Instead, it is representative of a failure to retain meaning within the *pátria*. Like his lover and the teacher, he also eschews a proper name. The title he holds has lost the value it once bore, becoming a heroic word, “major-general,” which conceals a void.

The teacher, in contrast to the lover, who will be discussed in more detail shortly, spends his life trying to support a large extended family in the midst of extreme poverty. He is the focal point for the lover’s meaninglessness. She “crava os olhos no homem,” a phrase that implies penetration, as well as staring. She dismisses him as a drunk and, importantly, “consegue vê-lo perfeitamente”—she sees through him and in him (p. 9). Then she declares, “toda a tarde vai beber.” Her prognostication defines his future actions and reveals knowledge of his past: she knows him, or so it seems. Subsequently, she reveals that she is using language to conceal: “com estas palavras, procura escamotear de si própria o motivo real da sua indignação” (p. 9). The indirect object of her concealment is herself. She wishes to cloak her own motivations from her consciousness through recourse to language. Her commentary on him is, in fact, a commentary on her.

The teacher has become the focus of the lover’s attention as a way of filling her life with some meaning. In contrast, he has lost even the desire for meaning—a consequence of the harsh reality related to a poverty that does not touch her. Her meaninglessness is derived from excess, his from paucity. Meaninglessness comes to be embodied, particularly for the teacher, in monotony. His inexplicable action, spontaneous uxoricide, occurs on a “tediosa tarde” (p. 14) as his wife’s suddenly droning voice intermingles with the repetitive sound of the radio broadcast. His only attempt at an explanation is “eu próprio já não consigo viver” (p. 19). With the suspension of meaning, life is no longer possible.

The teacher’s melancholia is his most attractive characteristic in the eyes of the lover. She is aroused by his “rosto grave e melancólico” (p. 13). As she makes love to the major-general, she fantasizes about the teacher in terms of his melancholia: “quantas vezes, no breve lapso de um beijo, ela procura, no rosto desgastado do amante, esse outro rosto muito jovem e já tão profundamente tocado de melancolia” (p. 13). They are united by a loss of meaning, and under this reading of “Stress,” the trigger for that loss is, in both cases, a foreign intrusion. In his case, the intrusion of a foreign economic presence (embodied in the tale in the “cooperantes”) has driven his cost of living to prohibitive excess and led to his despair. In her case, which will now be discussed, a desire to become a foreigner in her own *mãe-pátria* may be read as symptomatic of a trend which destabilizes the effort to foster a national identity by the privileged intrusion of foreign paradigms on the Mozambican space.

The lover is always labeled in terms of her male partner. She seems to be marked as another one of his useless possessions, “a amante do major-general.” In her interaction with the major-general, the lover is guided by what she deems to be international practices, trying to convince the major-general to mix the drinks for them because “segundo as revistas mundanas, cabe ao homem essa tarefa” (p. 15). Her purpose in life has become the flight from everything she associates with Mozambique. The house in which she previously lived is replaced by the “*flat*”. This new abode was gained through corruption facilitated by the economic distortions associated with an excessively high international presence. An abundance of foreign capital arrives in the country and inflates the cost of living to such an extent that the previous occupants of the homes can no longer afford to live in them. Consequently, they sell their house contracts to those who have the economic means to live in the area. This latter group is predominantly foreign, embodied in the “cooperantes das mais desvairadas origens europeias e americanas” (p. 11). These foreigners who live in Mozambique under the pretence of assisting in the country’s development are described in less than flattering terms:

Mal se vêem na rua pois entram e saem de casa nos seus carros reluzentes e, nos fins-de-semana, voam para a África do Sul ou Suazilândia ou então empanturram-se de álcool, na companhia de outros cooperantes, nos “complexos turísticos” e “*boîtes*” da cidade. São criaturas muito temerosas dos “instintos roubadores” dos moçambicanos e, por isso, resguardam-se atrás de muros gradeados, protegidos por cães ferozes e por guardas que mantêm de plantão, dia e noite (p. 11).

Momplé signals a foreign intrusion by the italicization of a non-Portuguese word. Like the lover, who uses words ostensibly to comment on an object (the teacher) but in the process reveals her own motivations, the aspersion that the “cooperantes” cast over the Mozambican national character serves as a verbalization of their own tendencies. They possess the “instintos roubadores,” they arrive and profit from the poverty they claim to alleviate, and worst of all, under this reading of Momplé, they become a target for emulation. They model what the lover seeks to become: secluded in their houses, they accelerate the denationalization of Mozambique.

The lover’s principal sources of definition center on semiotic systems contaminated by foreign intrusion. The first is the post-ablutionary ritual in which she indulges: “o relaxante ritual de se vestir e maquilhar . . . a que ela se entrega com o zelo das mulheres que vivem sós e procuram, com a sua aparência cuidada, compensar a solidão, provocando nos outros admiração, invejas e secretos desejos” (p. 10). Her ritual seeks to elicit the recognition of others, but the process she uses conceals. The make-up acts as a subterfuge, seeking to divert attention from an overwhelming void that characterizes her existence. She is a person who seems to have everything that she could want and yet dissatisfaction based on lack mars her. The semiotic system she chooses to conceal this absence—the make-up and the clothing—draws on products that are, within the text, linguistically marked as “foreign.” Momplé again accentuates foreignness through italicization. The lover

dresses in a “*shantung* de seda” (p. 10) and applies “*blush*” and “*eye-liner*” to her face (p. 10).

The second source from which she seeks to derive meaning is the “*flat*” in which she lives. It too is marked by linguistic foreignness. Its name is an anglicism, and its contents representative of foreign intrusion on lusophone territory: “um local sombrio, tal a profusão de mobiliário de precioso e escuríssimo jambire, alcatifas, *bibelots* de metal, *maples* de veludo e pesados cortinados.” It contains an “enorme sala comum que poderia ser alegre e arejada, dadas as suas dimensões, a cor branca das paredes e a ampla porta envidraçada que comunica com a varanda” (p. 9). But that happiness is absent. In its stead is a void filled by the clutter of foreign furniture. The excess of the furniture forms part of a semiotics of concealment. This simultaneously signposts a pointlessness that needs to be escaped: “até mesmo a poeira parece circular na sala agitadamente, ansiosa por se libertar de tamanha ostentação” (p. 9).

A significant aspect of the district in which the lover lives is the boredom endemic to it: “pesa no ar um tédio morno, latente durante os dias de semana e que, nas tardes de domingo, se torna quase palpável” (pp. 10-11). This tedium—a symptom of meaninglessness—is rooted in the buildings, which are themselves products of a colonial past: “tédio talvez segregado pelos prédios e vivendas, construções incaracterísticas, de uma beleza fácil e cansativa, concebidas, ainda no tempo colonial” (p. 11). The fact that the buildings are not characteristic of Mozambique, or rather, that they represent its colonial era, accentuates their “foreignness.” This, in turn, produces the tedium clinging to the air. The building the lover makes her home serves to move her away from her *mãe-pátria*. The “prédio” substitutes mother in such a way that the very process of substitution obliterates the possibility of a meaningful replacement. Hence the tedium. Having blamed the building structures for failing in their semiotic duty to represent meaning for the *pátria*, Momplé proceeds to qualify her observation: “mas pode também acontecer que até sejam os moradores dos prédios e vivendas os causadores deste tédio” (p. 11). The buildings’ contents are themselves representative of the foreign, “os cooperantes,” or of the attempted emulation of the foreign, the lover. The buildings may have been subject to the “nacionalizações dos prédios” which occurred shortly after independence, but subsequently they have been denationalized. Or rather, they have re-assumed their intrusively foreign characteristics, and blocked the development of a truly national meaning.

Momplé establishes a network of foreign influences that surround the room in which the lover spends her days. As well as the intrinsically alienating colonial and neo-colonial aspects of the neighborhood—characterized in the buildings and the “cooperantes” respectively—the lover’s room is replete with “foreign” clutter. This results in a profound sense of melancholia. Visitors feel “uma melancolia insidiosa e funda” which suffocates them (p. 9). Indeed, “os próprios visitantes se espantam com a urgência que os move a demandar a rua, pois ignoram que a melancolia acumulada assim, inconscientemente, chega a ser mais insuportável que a própria dor” (p. 9). The room represents an accumulated melancholia: it oppresses over time. The lover’s mechanism for dealing with this melancholia is to clutter the room

with more furniture. This furniture, like her make-up, acts as a language behind which she hides; it serves to conceal a void. But, at the same time, it reinforces that meaning loss through rendering patent the foreign intrusion implicit in the language process, since the furniture is “alcatifas, cortinados e *bibelots*” (p. 9).

The lover’s room, which embodies a melancholic spirit, also points to a loss. Like Kristeva’s patient who used ostentation to conceal a childhood perdition—“mourning for a house”—Momplé’s lover suffers from a similar loss—the loss of a mother, or rather, the ambivalent betrayal of the *mãe-pátria*. If, as Couto suggests, the house is always another version of the womb, then the loss of a house is analogous to the loss of the *mãe-pátria*. In both cases, meaning manifests itself as fraudulent, and yet semiotics continue to be used in excess—the patient hardly stopped talking, and emblazoned her clothes with the word house; the lover decorates her abode ostentatiously. In both cases, melancholia lurks close to the surface, and can only be explained in terms of a loss of meaning. The house for which the lover unconsciously mourns is a Mozambique, which never had a chance to exist—a country whose independent identity was strangled at birth. Momplé’s outlook is bleak, but her underlying message is valid. After a quarter of a century of independence, the nation has been forced to join the global trend of international exchange and the free market that inevitably precludes or, at the very least, curtails a distinct national identity, simultaneously disadvantaging the weakest. The only recourse open to those Mozambicans who fought to establish a different reality based on economic equality is to mourn for the loss of something they never really gained. That is Lília Momplé’s lament.