Maria de Fátima Marinho

Merging Public and Private Identities: Topics in Twenty-First Century Portuguese Novels

1 Introduction

The boundaries between public and private identities can become blurred within a community when its historic heritage plays an undeniable role and when the players in the identity-making process tend to foster interferences between events belonging to a strictly private sphere and events that belong to the wider public sphere and are supposedly separate from personal histories. These boundaries, which must necessarily be considered artificial, since they are impossible to define, present very specific features in the novels of the second half of the twentieth century, when authors seek to interpret and/or view public events through individual focalization. Such perspectives are conditioned not only by external factors but also, and especially, by personal traits and interests which are hardly objectifiable.

It is not too bold to state, as does Hanna Meretoja in her recently published *The Ethics of Storytelling – Narrative Hermeneutics, History and the Possible*, that to (re)interpret "one's life is to interpret it *in medias res*" (2018, 84; emphasis in the original), because each version of history brings with it a new interpretation. The tensions among all these versions exist in separate social contexts, while the sense of the possible is transfigured and takes on a crucial significance (Meretoja 2018, 90). All these arguments combined allow us to maintain that reading is always a means of connecting oneself through storytelling (Meretoja 2018, 117). Stories always end up revealing more than we would expect, helping us rethink the way in which we read literary works, insofar as these can no longer be regarded simply on their own but become part of a (real or virtual) network together with the empirical author's prior readings.

Assumptions of this kind and knowledge obtained through oblique readings and transversal sensations form the basis of hybrid narratives which, through a private focalization, describe historical events and mutual interferences, tangents and intersections.

In the nineteenth century, the historical novel was primarily interested in legitimizing nationalities, which found themselves in a state of fragile balance after the sweeping changes brought about by the French Revolution and Napoleon's

Maria de Fátima Marinho, University of Porto

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111208664-005

imperialistic policy, less in paying attention to private, subjective views. Even though some novels, such as Eugène Sue's well-known *Mystères du Peuple ou Histoire d'une Famille de prolétaires à travers les âges* (1849–1856) [*The Mysteries of the People or History of a Proletarian Family Across the Ages*], focused on successive generations of the same family, the truth is that the family was just a pretext for narrating external achievements and making them known to readers. In the early twentieth century, however, Thomas Mann's famous novel *Buddenbrooks. Verfall einer Familie* [*Buddenbrooks. The Decline of a Family*], published in 1901, was undoubtedly a prime example of the genre which showed how social and historical processes are played out on the level of family life over three generations.

In the mid-twentieth century, with the theories of the New History and the perception that history can no longer be considered a static science, but rather a dynamic, ever-changing construction necessarily based on different points of view, a new type of novel emerged. These are fictions that represent a given period of time, but they do so almost exclusively by addressing the consequences and repercussions that historical events have in the life of a family. We must keep in mind that historical phenomena that took place in the second half of the twentieth century had a fundamental influence on the perception of public historical developments and their inevitable impact on private households. An example in Portugal is the Revolution of April 25, 1974 and the resulting independence of the former colonies, with the return of settlers to the *metrópole*, as the Portugal territory was then called by those living in the colonies. This event was of decisive importance for the revival of history-based novels and for the (public and private) reading of facts, their consequences as well as the controversial, linear, or orthodox interpretations.

In *O Romance Histórico em Portugal*, I (1999, 150–172) examined some of these novels, drawing attention to a domestic interpretation of history, and the priorities that it generates, including both obvious and less oblique cases, such as the novels by José Saramago, Álvaro Guerra, Helena Marques and Luísa Beltrão, or the more subtle constructions by Maria Isabel Barreno and Mário Cláudio.

There are three other interesting, symptomatic cases (Marinho 2009; 2019; 2020) that can serve as a basis for this essay: two novels by Teolinda Gersão, *A Casa da Cabeça de Cavalo* (1995) [The House of The Horse's Head] and *A Árvore das Palavras* (1997) [*The Word Tree* (2013)], and one by Lobo Antunes, *O Esplendor de Portugal* (1997) [The Splendor of Portugal].

In Gersão's *A Casa da Cabeça de Cavalo*, the former, now deceased inhabitants of a house, discuss political events, such as the French invasions, and produce different versions of the same events stemming from distinct focalizations, since they belong to people whose lives had nothing in common. The family – viewed not in its generational linearity, but as a household comprising masters and servants, power relations that may issue from labor contracts or from family

dynamics – negotiates the separate and well-defined male and female spheres. It is there that the underlying conflicts are played out and eventually legitimize the opposing, alternative visions of the external circumstances that affect the family.

This is not very different from the universe of *The Word Tree* where Gita, a white child born in Mozambique, notices the different behaviors of characters driven by opposite focalizations of a single reality. The atmosphere in the colony, the relations between colonizers and colonized cannot be read uniformly or be based on homogeneous groups. Gita's insightful focalization, which is noticeably opposed to her mother's and is closer to the female black servant's, outlines the dysfunctional vision of a family that is seeking itself but becomes shattered in its dissonant perception of reality.

Lobo Antunes's novel is also about a crumbling household, set in the time after Angola's independence, when the children return to Lisbon while the mother remains in Africa. The discovery of fragile identities, the different perceptions of the external events, and the difficulty in situating oneself in a univocal space (the mestizo by definition lacks his/her own, unquestionable space) tend to turn individuals into hesitant, problematic beings who are unable to find a time and a space that may validate their tormented, de-centered, a-social and fragmented existences. Angola's decolonization has profound repercussions on personal and familial experiences, leading to narrative focalizations marked by multiple insecurities.

In the novels published in Portugal after the year 2000 there is no longer a clear insistence on the relations between the external world and the family's private space. This means that references to History, be it contemporary history or decisive moments in the life of the nation, are no longer as pressing a subject as in previous decades, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. What we see instead is a shift in the understanding of private history, building identities through a subterranean legacy mainly focused on domesticity, within a framework that construes the outside world as a dark place of vertiginous presence-absence.

Speaking about domesticity inevitably means speaking about women. Although usually silenced and forgotten, women often become the drivers of historical developments, even if only subliminally and indirectly, which becomes a privileged way to assimilate external events. In *O Osso do Meio* (2020) [The Middle Bone], Gonçalo M. Tavares highlights this commonly ignored evidence:

> Buzz is the family's female machine, it makes things, it produces, here is the right example: female buzz produces what will later be called the History of the family. There is more buzz than facts in History, in fictive history, but this is the only history there is both in the family and in individual lives; women win; they are the best at assimilating the past.[1]

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

> [O burburinho é a máquina feminina da família, faz coisas, produz, eis o exemplo certo: o burburinho feminino produz aquilo a que mais tarde se chamará História da família. Há mais burburinho que factos na História, na história fictícia, mas esta é a única que existe tanto na família como nas vidas singulares; as mulheres vencem; são as que melhor assimilam o passado. (Tavares 2020, 15)]

Having identified these common traits in contemporary Portuguese novels, I will now seek to determine the main dynamics governing the construction of family identities, as reflected in the interpretation or perception of external, historical data whose influence becomes less clear, although obliquely essential. For this purpose, this essay is divided into three topics: a focus on the personal past with a tenuous relationship to the external world; the presentation of a present that can only be explained through the past; a personal focalization of specific historical facts.

While analyzing the three topics, I will attempt to describe the specificity of Portuguese literature during the last twenty years and its sustained concern with family constellations that produce controversial, maladjusted, distressing, and problematic identities.

2 Focus on the Personal Past with a Tenuous Relationship to the External World

In order to approach our first topic, let us start with António Lobo Antunes' novel *Que Cavalos são aqueles que fazem Sombra no Mar?* [What Horses Are Those Who Shade On The Sea?], published in 2009. Unlike in earlier novels by the same author, in this one there is no clear relationship with the historical past (as in, for instance, *Os Cus de Judas* (1979) [*South of Nowhere*. (1983) or *The Land at the End of the World*. (2012)], or *O Esplendor de Portugal* (1987) [The Splendor of Portugal], where the colonial wars play an important role). Here, the identity crisis resides entirely within the subject and the family, who are gathered together on the occasion of the mother's death. For instance, here we read: "when a photograph which had hitherto remained invisible emerged from the dark or a mirror stained with the mysteries of time duplicated the portraits from a different angle, which was disturbing because it was not them while still being them" ["quando uma fotografia até então invisível surgia do escuro ou um espelho enodoado pelos mistérios do tempo duplicava os retratos num ângulo diferente que assustava porque não eram eles sendo eles" (Antunes 2009, 13)]. Through such a passage we understand how difficult it is

to embrace one's identity and to enter into the intricate web of family relationships, which expand into a wider universe, because "a portrait emerged from the promising darkness" ["retrato surgia do escuro esperançoso" (Antunes 2009, 26)] and "were it not for clocks and we would never grow old" ["se não fossem os relógios não envelheceríamos nunca" (Antunes 2009, 155)].

Such allusions to the anguishing passing of time and the inexorable presence of death can also be found in other authors and other novels, such as Gonçalo M. Tavares' *The Middle Bone*, published in 2020, ("Children grow, old people too, and the latter die" ["As crianças crescem, os velhos também, e estes morrem" (Tavares 2020, 48)]) or Lídia Jorge's *Os Memoráveis* (2014) [The Memorables]: "The city must be dark, the streets must be empty, the tramway tracks must look like veins, the Rua Augusta Arch must appear in the background, but the clock's hands must not be there, and its face must be blind." ["A cidade deve ser escura, as ruas devem estar desertas, os carris dos elétricos devem parecer veias, o Arco da Rua Augusta deve surgir ao fundo, mas as agulhas do relógio não devem existir, e o mostrador deve estar cego." (Jorge 2019, 331)]

The challenging attempt to bracket time and death, which is present in so many novels, creates an existential conflict, where the historical past plays an essential role, although it is kept hidden and is only indirectly related to the characters' lives. It is this subterranean relation between private experience and history that José Luís Peixoto intends to portray in his novel *Almoço de Domingo* (2021) [Sunday Lunch]: "The past must constantly prove that it did exist. Things forgotten and things that did not happen occupy the same space. There is so much reality happening out there, fragile, carried by only one person. If this individual vanishes, all that reality will irrevocably vanish as well, there is no way to recover it, it is as if it had never existed." ["O passado tem de provar constantemente que existiu. Aquilo que foi esquecido e o que não existiu ocupam o mesmo lugar. Há muita realidade a passar-se por aí, frágil, transportada apenas por uma pessoa. Se esse indivíduo desaparecer, toda essa realidade desaparece sem apelo, não existe meio de recuperá-la, é como se não tivesse existido." (Peixoto 2021, 14)]

With regard to the relation between history and memory, the premier importance of the latter legitimizes such statements as in Lídia Jorge's *O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas* (2002) [*The Wind Whistling in the Cranes* (2022)]: "Death isn't dying, death is disappearing from people's memories" (Jorge 2022, 498) ["A morte não é morrer, a morte é sair da memória." (Jorge 2002, 529)]. Similarly, in Lobo Antunes' 2009 novel, memory is defined as something disposable and prone to change: "the memory of a pair of gloves on the floor without one being unable to remember whom they belonged to, how strange life is, what can one do, where does one start"

[“a memória de um par de luvas no chão sem que recordemos a quem pertenciam, que estranho viver, como se faz, começa-se por onde” (Antunes 2009, 36)]. In a more recent book, *Para Aquela que está sentada no escuro à minha espera* (2016) [For the Girl Sitting in the Dark Waiting for Me], a character speaks of “my memory episodes with no relation one to the other” [“a minha memória episódios sem relação entre si” (Antunes 2016, 209)]; we hear of the fragmentation of images from the past (“I forgot everything but the ponytail” [“esqueci tudo excepto o rabo de cavalo” (Antunes 2016, 127)]), the undoing of all concrete experiences (“they have gradually taken everything from me, words, the past, theatre” [“vão-me tirando tudo, as palavras, o passado, o teatro” (Antunes 2016, 193)], everything leading to the desperate plea, “Help me be myself again” [“Ajudem-me a tornar ser eu” (Antunes 2016, 73)], which shows how difficult it is to build a solid identity.

If we consider that one’s language is part of one’s identity and that silencing it is a means to annihilate it, we easily understand the extent to which such a limitation or prohibition determines the subject’s relations with History and the possibility of a reconciliation with himself/herself. This is what happens to Lillias Fraser, the protagonist of Hélia Correia’s novel by the same name (2001), who is forbidden to speak her own language to avoid giving herself away, in order to hide her true identity.

In *O Regresso de Júlia Mann a Paraty* (2021) [Julia Mann’s Return to Paraty] by Teolinda Gersão, Sigmund Freud, who is the fictive narrator of one of the chapters, says the following about Thomas Mann: “I came to die on this English island which has welcomed me and to which I am grateful, whose parliamentary monarchy government I approve, but where I still feel like a foreigner. | German is the language in which I shall always continue to write, and most of all, to think.” [“Vim morrer nesta ilha inglesa que me acolheu e a que estou grato, cujo governo de monarquia parlamentar aprovo, mas onde não deixo de me sentir estrangeiro. | Será sempre em alemão que continuarei a escrever, e sobretudo a pensar.” (Gersão 2021, 8)]

These thoughts by Freud about Thomas Mann legitimise in turn Julia’s sense of uprootedness. Julia is Thomas Mann’s wife to be, born in Brazil to a Brazilian mother and a German father. She will never be able to feel German or to express herself in her own language, thus making impossible any true communication, either with her father’s or her husband’s family:

> In the meantime, Julia had left a colored world and was coming into another one where everything was black and white or, on most days, grey. The city was dark, the air was cold, even in summer, and the whole inhospitable *habitat* felt like an aggression to her.
> The language people spoke was unintelligible, and nobody understood hers.
> Interaction with Maria [i.e. her sister] was reduced so that they would not speak Portuguese between them.

> Their mother tongue was eventually forbidden and replaced by other languages that they could not speak, German, French, and English.
> Her previous life was to be forgotten, as if it was devoid of interest or value.
>
> [Entretanto Júlia saíra de um mundo a cores e entrava noutro onde tudo era a preto e branco, ou, na maior parte dos dias, cinzento. A cidade era escura, o ar, mesmo no Verão, era frio, e todo aquele *habitat* inóspito a agredia.
> A língua que falavam era incompreensível, e ninguém entendia a dela.
> Os contactos com Maria [a irmã] foram reduzidos, para não falarem português as duas.
> A sua língua materna tornou-se proibida, e foi substituída por outras que desconheciam, alemão, francês e inglês.
> A vida anterior devia ser esquecida, como se não tivesse interesse nem valor. (Gersão 2021, 91; emphasis in the original)]

This imposed erasure, or better, this dilution into a wider identity, which Julia Mann experiences as destructive and Freud himself analyzes, we find also expressed in Gonçalo M. Tavares' novels, namely through the choice of strange, foreign names for his characters, confounds a sense of national belonging. Further examples are the characters in *The Middle Bone* – Kahnnak, Maria Lurbai, and Vassliss Rânia – or those in *Uma Menina está perdida no século à espera do Pai* (2014) [*A Girl Is Lost in Her Century, Looking for Her Father* (2024)] – Marius and Hanna.

In Gersão's novel, this purposeful confusion of identities favors the characters' connections to Portuguese and European history, which is delineated in the background and focalized through a private, strictly personal point of view. It is the family that conditions their perception of what is real, and European history is understood and commented upon from Freud's, Mann's, or Julia's viewpoint. Freud comments on the war and Nazism and the way it unsettled his family life. In Tavares' *A Girl Is Lost in Her Century, Looking for Her Father*, one finds numerous references to Jews and their persecution by the Nazis. The relation of these events has a deep impact on the characters' experience, playing an oblique, subterranean role that influences their present actions:

> Books and History, so many photos scattered all over the house.
> In a conference, Grube had maintained that History was like a living element, changing position, accelerating, decreasing its pace, an element with constant weight – a mass which drags itself or accelerates from one point to another – but with a variable center of gravity.
> On one of the walls of the house, the names of different cities, with a date under each of them, were marked with dots with a black marker, as if they were train stations: Moscow (1917), Jerusalem (1948), Berlin (1961).
> For Grube those dots identified the successive centers of gravity of History. Those dates and those cities were the points where all of the world's weight was concentrated. Should somebody

> wish to overthrow History, turn it upside down, that was the spot where the blow should be applied, in that precise spot, the center of gravity.
>
> [Livros e História, imensas fotografias espalhadas por toda a casa.
> Grube defendera numa conferência que a História era como um elemento vivo, que mudava de posição, acelerava, diminuía de ritmo, um elemento com peso constante – uma massa que de um ponto para outro se arrasta ou acelera – mas com um centro de gravidade variável.
> Numa das paredes da casa, como se fossem estações de comboio, assinaladas com pontos a marcador preto, estavam os nomes de várias cidades, e debaixo desses nomes uma data: Moscovo (1917), Jerusalém (1948), Berlim (1961).
> Para Grube estes pontos identificavam os sucessivos centros de gravidade da História. Nestas datas e naquelas cidades estava o ponto que concentrava todo o peso do mundo. Se alguém quisesse derrubar, pôr a História de cabeça para baixo, era ali que teria de aplicar o golpe, naquele ponto preciso, no centro de gravidade. (Tavares 2014, 181–182)]

Even if not from a functional or traditional point of view, the characters and the members of the family view European events through a private focalization, as is also the case in other novels with a greater focus on the Portuguese context. For instance, in José Luís Peixoto's *Sunday Lunch*, mentioned above, the main character is presented as an 89-year-old man in a third-person narrative, although he speaks in the first person when recalling episodes from his childhood, youth, and adulthood. This character, Senhor Rui, mentions specific historical political moments that he had witnessed and which, directly or indirectly, had had an impact on his private life: these are mostly discrete events dating back to the Estado Novo (1933–1974) or the April Revolution. His is a private view that reflects the protagonist's experiences at different ages and in different historical moments. These references are always episodic, linked to different experiences, and the character refrains from offering political interpretations or making comments of a partisan nature: "Mário Soares [former leader of Socialist party, Prime Minister and President of the Republic] unabashedly speaks a clumsy sort of goofy Spanish. With his jacket hanging from the back of the chair, his shirt sleeves rolled up and elbows piercing the tablecloth, he leans forward. Felipe Gonzáles seems to understand half of it, having a lot of fun, while he pecks at bread crumbs." ["O Mário Soares lança-se a espanholar sem pudor. Com o casaco pendurado nas costas da cadeira, mangas da camisa arregaçadas e bicos dos cotovelos espetados na toalha da mesa, inclina-se para a frente. O Felipe González parece entender metade, divertido, enquanto depenica flocos de miolo." (Peixoto 2021, 127)] Or, take the following passage:

> When the news arrived [i.e. the Revolution of April 25, 1974], we were all at work, a very normal Thursday morning. Machines did not come to a halt; coffee beans were aware of nothing. Word went from mouth to mouth, covered by the noise and the smell of roasting.

> Men and women listened to the information with wariness, not wanting to seem scared lest it was a false alarm or a not-so-funny joke.
>
> [Quando chegou a novidade [Revolução do 25 de abril de 1974], estávamos todos a trabalhar, manhã normalíssima de quinta-feira. As máquinas não chegaram a suspender-se, os grãos de café não tiveram conhecimento de nada. A palavra foi passando de boca em boca, por baixo do barulho e do aroma da torra. Homens e mulheres apreendiam a informação com desconfiança, não queriam logo aventar uma reação espavorida ainda assim não fosse alarme adulterado, ou brincadeira sem graça. (Peixoto 2021, 60)]

Similarly, the Spanish Civil War persecutions affect the child protagonist, because in the border town where he lives, he comes into contact with police-inflicted torture, albeit indirectly and unknowingly. The description of screams coming from the police station suggests the violent repression, although this is not fully articulated. The first-person account of the child's perception does not explain the facts; these are merely presented, tasking the readers with interpreting them:

> Spaniards were screaming inside the police station. I did never tell my uncle about the horror of those screams, coming from deep down inside the throat and tearing up all the nerves along the way. There were many terrible things I was unaware of. I discovered some of them there, inside those screams, a fear I was unable to bear. In a similar state of panic, despite his age and his wisdom, my brother pulled me away by the arm and we ran from the screams, went up the alley, came inside the bedroom and, even after they were over, we continued to hear those screams in the silence.
>
> [Eram espanhóis aos gritos no posto da polícia. Não chego a descrever ao meu tio o horror desses gritos, nasciam do fundo da garganta e rasgavam todos os nervos à sua passagem. [...] Havia muitas coisas terríveis que eu não conhecia. Descobri algumas ali, no interior daqueles gritos, um medo que eu não era capaz de aguentar. Com o mesmo pânico, apesar da idade e da sabedoria, o meu irmão puxou-me pelo braço e fugimos dos gritos, subimos a travessa, entrámos no quarto e, mesmo depois de terminarem, no silêncio, continuávamos a escutar aqueles gritos. (Peixoto 2021, 231)]

The privately limited nature of the focalization generates a simultaneously neutral and unique tone, since this is the point of view of Senhor Rui (as an adult or as a child), who is never directly or emotionally involved when he describes facts or *faits-divers* in which he participated and which he views only according to his own, inevitably limited experience.

In Lídia Jorge's novel *Estuário* (2018) [Estuary], one of the characters worked in a refugee camp in Ethiopia, where he suffered a mutilating hand injury in an accident. This experience determines the way he acts. Family decadence, the urgency of writing a book (a sublimation of family and historical events), and the existence of refugee camps are at the center of this novel, which points to the inevitable interference between the reality of the camps and the family, or rather,

helps focalize the Ethiopian space through a private view that also aims to be critical and activist. For the character, writing this book would be tantamount to achieving redemption: "after all, he was in a hurry to write, with his mutilated hand, a book titled *2030*, which would begin with what he knew and loved best, and what he most wanted to save." ["afinal, tinha pressa em escrever, com a sua mão decepada, um livro intitulado *2030,* que iria começar pelo que melhor conhecia e mais amava, e mais queria que se salvasse." (Jorge 2018, 283; emphasis in the original)]

3 The Present that Can only be Explained by Means of the Past

Let us now focus on the second group of novels, which deal with a present that can only be explained by means of the past. I will start by looking at *The Memorables* (2014), by Lídia Jorge, where a young Portuguese journalist, the daughter of an old member of the resistance against fascism, and now working in the United States, is invited to write a documentary on the Carnation Revolution. The aim is to demonstrate its unique nature when compared to other revolutions in different times and places.

The young woman, Ana Maria, comes to Portugal and embarks on a kind of initiatory journey through both her own and the country's past. Although her memories are fuzzy, she seeks to learn about the revolution (she was a child then) through a photo that she finds in her father's house, by interviewing the people shown in the photo, and by trying to understand their different perspectives and experiences during and after the revolution. This photo seems to bring together important figures of the 25 April Revolution, disenchanted characters who continue to live in a fictive world from which they are unable to escape. One of the most flagrant examples is precisely that of Ana Maria's father, a well-known journalist who cannot adapt to the new times, refuses to go back to work and accepts retirement, but who still leaves home at the same time every day only to stay inside his car and wait for time to pass. When Ana Maria finds out about this strange habit, she begins to understand what the past hides, and focalizes it through the different stories/families of the characters in the photograph. As mentioned above, the photo becomes the starting point for her quest, since "objects have a soul which writes itself" ["os objetos possuem uma alma que a si mesma se escreve" (Jorge 2019, 54)]. This 'soul' triggers various memories, which do not always correspond to reality, but which revolve around the momentous 25 April, an

event which Ana Maria's supervisor, an American journalist, considers to have been unique.

As we read the novel, we become aware of the protagonist's alienation vis-à-vis the historical event about which she is supposed to write a documentary and the disjointed versions, near lies or various false accounts that are being told and that refer to private, individual perspectives. History thus emerges in fragments, almost mythical, transfigured into a dimension that may have little in common with reality. One of the characters in the photo, who is endowed with an astonishing charisma, is the one called *El Campeador*, identifiable as Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, or "*the Portuguese red oak*" (Jorge 2019, 27; emphasis in the original), as the American journalist describes him. This character seems to live in a dreamlike world, imagining to embody the hero-protagonist of a movie that does not exist, in a kind of Cervantine hallucination.

The revolution, then, is also presented as a construction, not just a verifiable event. In her documentary project, the young woman comes across a series of disjointed versions; slippery, deceptive universes are the signs of a collapse. Comparing Otelo and Ana Maria's father, we find similar paths and a common inability to accept dystopic reality. By focusing on individual memories and their reading(s) of History, a history which mercilessly interferes with people's lives, the novel seems to underscore precisely that sense of dystopia: "[t]hat was exactly it, the stark reality, Praia Grande, as a scenic setting for so many movies in the past, would not be a setting for any movie whatsoever called *The Sea Hero*. Neither fiction nor history, it just would not" ["Era assim mesmo, realidade nua e crua, a Praia Grande, espaço cénico que o fora para tantos filmes, não seria cenário para nenhum filme chamado *O Herói do Mar*. Nem ficção, nem história, não seria" (Jorge 2019, 228)].

The title of the film is not chosen randomly: any Portuguese person with an average education immediately associates it with the Portuguese national anthem. This is a tragic, inconsequential heroism, like Ana Maria's quest, her documentary, unable to "decipher what really happened" ["decifra[r] o que verdadeiramente se passou" (Jorge 2019, 342)]. The accumulation of private points of view conditions the various presents of the characters, irremediably influenced by the unreachable past.

4 Personal Focalization of Specific Historical Facts

Let us now look at the personal and familial vision of a concrete phenomenon: the return home of thousands of Portuguese citizens after the African colonies were granted independence. They are the returnees (*retornados*), as they were

then called. Dulce Maria Cardoso's novel *O Retorno* [*The Return* (2016)] is a very thorough illustration of those events.

The book, published in 2011, is an exemplary account by an adolescent whose family was forced to leave Angola soon after the country's independence. The title, *The Return*, is in itself quite evocative. Indeed, the name *retornados* is usually applied to people coming from the former Portuguese African colonies either after or immediately before their respective independence, placing the focus on those who came back, or returned, to Portugal, even if they had never lived there in the first place. The noun *retorno* [return], however, emphasizes the process rather than the people. By accentuating the phenomenon of the return to European Portugal (and it should again be emphasized that for many, who had never left Africa, this 'return' is a trip to the unknown), this lexical choice shifts the focalization to something that paradoxically goes beyond the family and becomes a presentation of experiences at the crossroads of the subjective and the objective.

Adopting the first-person narration of a male adolescent whose oral language register has frequent gaps and often lacks references, the novel places the narrator in a position of discomfort and insecurity. The book starts with the adversative 'but' ["mas"] ("But there are cherries in the Motherland" [Cardoso 2016, 7] ["Mas na metrópole há cerejas" (Cardoso 2021, 7)]), thus announcing itself as a text that operates on the basis of small, seemingly insignificant details which in many instances reveal themselves to be highly symbolic and meaningful.

Centered in an exclusive point of view, this novel, as is typical for first-person narratives, plays with internal focalization, as is typical of first-person narratives, generating incomplete perspectives on episodes that the character cannot have witnessed: "Just as it won't do me any harm not to know what happened to Father in prison, what happened to Mother's demons, to Silvana or to Uncle Zé. There's no harm in not knowing any of those things as long as there are things I do know for sure." (Cardoso 2016, 178–179) ["Como não faz mal eu não saber o que aconteceu ao pai na prisão, aos demónios da mãe, à Silvana ou ao tio Zé. Nada disso tem mal desde que ainda haja coisas de que eu tenha a certeza." (Cardoso 2021, 267)] Internal focalization fosters the emergence of dichotomies opposing the *I* and his/her space, the *here* and the others (whether they be family members or strangers) in their other space, which is usually dysphoric and hostile.

In *The Return*, we find two categories of others, those who belong to the family (father, mother, sister and Uncle Zé) and the strangers, from neighbors in Angola and the other people who live in the hotel, in the Motherland, to the Angolans, who are the others *par excellence*, "[b]y they I mean the blacks" (Cardoso 2016, 8) ["Eles são os pretos" (Cardoso 2021, 8)]. Rui, the adolescent, views what is happening in Angola in 1975 through the perspective of his immediate family. All the events are

focalized and received by the boy, who adopts his parents' view as well as that of other Portuguese people. The polarization of 'us/the others' also implies a radicalization of discourse and the awareness that an irremediable rupture will necessarily occur between those two worlds. A member of the lower-middle class, Rui combines his and his family's experience in Angola with the spaces in which his life unfolds: his father and his truck company; his sick mother and her illness ("the illness we never talked about" (Cardoso 2016, 108) ["doença de que nunca falávamos" (Cardoso 2021, 155)]), his sister Milucha; his neighbors back in Angola; the hotel dwellers in Estoril, where returnees stay while waiting to be integrated into life in Portugal.

The departure to Lisbon signals the loss of balance and the breakdown of the family structure, as his father is taken by the Angolans and his whereabouts remain uncertain until nearly the end of the novel. The sense of displacement, seen through the teenage boy's eyes, which reflect his family's perspective even if only obliquely, represents the primacy of private opinion and is necessarily incomplete: "Not even the gunfire can undo the silence of our departure, tomorrow we will no longer be here. Even if we like telling ourselves that we will be back soon, we know we will never be here again. Angola is finished. Our Angola is finished." (Cardoso, 2016, 12) ["Nem os tiros conseguem desfazer o silêncio da nossa partida, amanhã já não estamos aqui. Ainda que gostemos de nos enganar dizendo que voltamos em breve, sabemos que nunca mais estaremos aqui. Angola acabou. A nossa Angola acabou." (Cardoso 2021, 14)]

The break with the *here* (which, at a personal level, may correspond to the *I*, or the *self*), as well as not knowing his father's whereabouts, causes the narrator's instability. At first, the figure of the father provides a secret force of hope, followed by the narrator's passive acceptance of his death, followed by the sudden and completely unexpected resurfacing in the end, and the creation of a new survival strategy (the cement factory). Besides the obvious confusion, the displacement from home in Luanda to the hotel in Estoril also marks an involuntary movement away from the family environment (the family home) to a collective space where identity tends to become blurred and negative tendencies condition the focalization, originating in a discourse that is partial, dysphoric and dystopic.

In the *metropolis* nearly everything is perceived as negative, and the sentence that stands out in a chapter which is made up of this sentence only, ("So this is the Motherland, then" (Cardoso 2016, 47) ["Então a metropole afinal é isto" (Cardoso 2021, 65)]) underlines the disillusionment of experiencing a hostile space. This is complemented by a totally utopian vision of America and a planned meeting with a friend from Angola at the Sears Tower (Chicago), which never comes to happen. The abrupt arrival of Rui's father breaks the utopia and seems to restore the balance that had been ruptured by their traumatic departure from Angola.

In parallel with this de-centering of the teenager's worldview, there is another, even more personal de-centering: his sexual initiation with all the insecurities that it generates. His hesitant steps in this direction, both in Angola and in Portugal, culminate in an ambiguous relationship with Silvana, the doorman's wife, whose pregnancy is revealed at the end of the novel. Such insecurities contribute to what is a very partial view of the political circumstances and corroborate the imperfection of a focalization that is conditioned by a personal experience and hence necessarily interferes with the perception of external events.

The disruption of balance brought about by the April revolution elicits Rui's various comments, situated as he is inside a somewhat claustrophobic space with no possibility of escape, since he is confronted with his mother's illness, maybe epilepsy, his father's absence, and his sister's female adolescent world. Isolated within this broken-down family, with a mother who is psychologically damaged, the narrator chooses to analyze the clues that he gets from an external viewpoint. What such clues reveal to him is a world of insecurity and frustration. His mother's state denies him the much-needed support that his absent father, presumably dead, is far from being able to provide. The boy narrates the events that caused his 'de-centeredness' and describes his space and circumstances unilaterally and in some detail. His mother's desperate actions (such as trying to pawn some personal belongings), his relationship with his schoolmates, and his sexual initiation, are all intimately connected to the socio-political environment and create a private narrative, which may also be read as a national one.

Outside the close family circle, there is also Uncle Zé, the mother's brother who came to Luanda with the Portuguese military and later settled there. This character could conceivably have played an important role as a mediator, but as a gay man, Uncle Zé does not belong to a traditionally privileged space, but he rather occupies a transgressive space, generating in Rui a series of ambiguities and uncertainties. A supporter of the revolutionary movement, Uncle Zé seems to be doing nothing to free his brother-in-law from prison. He also never answers his sister and nephews' insistent letters:

> Uncle Zé who appeared in the hotel bar did not mention my letters but said he'd answered Mother's. It's not true, so many letters could not have got lost. Uncle Zé realized we didn't believe him but he swore over and over again that he had done everything he could to get Father released. Perhaps it's true, Uncle Zé almost cried in anger when he realised that we kept saying yes of course yes of course just to make him shut up. It might be that Uncle Zé had not written to us because he had no good news to give us, and instead of a lack of love or interest on his part there may have in fact been a greater love that didn't allow him to do things differently. It doesn't matter. If he liked us, he should have known how to do what we needed him to do, otherwise any love he claims to have for us is simply a nuisance. That's why, in my mind, Uncle Zé never did anything to get father released and as soon as

> he put us on an aeroplane, he ran off to go and suck Nhé Nhé's cock and never wanted to hear from us again. (Cardoso 2016, 176)
>
> [O tio Zé que apareceu no bar do hotel não falou das minhas cartas mas disse que tinha respondido às da mãe. Não é verdade, não se podem ter perdido tantas cartas. O tio Zé percebeu que não acreditávamos nele mas jurou e voltou a jurar que tinha feito tudo o que podia para libertar o pai. Talvez, seja verdade, o tio Zé quase chorou de raiva quando percebeu que íamos dizendo que sim só para o calar. Pode acontecer que o tio Zé não nos tenha escrito porque não tinha boas notícias para nos dar, e em vez de desamor ou desinteresse pode ter havido um amor maior que não soube fazer as coisas de outra maneira. Não interessa. Se gostava de nós tinha de ter sabido fazer o que nós precisávamos, se não for assim o amor que os outros nos têm só estorva. Por isso, para mim o tio Zé nunca fez esforço nenhum para o pai ser libertado e assim que nos enfiou no avião para virmos para cá foi a correr pôr-se a chupar na pichota da Nhé Nhé e nunca mais quis saber de nós. (Cardoso 2021, 263)].

This uncertain certainty is what conditions Rui's thoughts and makes him long, as we have seen, for a mythical America. The father's unexpected return breaks the different stages of Rui's progression towards adulthood, forcing his regression back into adolescence. His description of his father's entrepreneurship further contributes to recreating the atmosphere among the returnees and the possible activities that they consider taking up.

Outside this more or less restricted family unit, the case of Senhor Manuel stands out. This character represents the scheming Portuguese man who manages to leave in time and safeguard all of his possessions. Mistrustful of Senhor Manuel's motives, Rui's focalization describes a set of opinions that perfectly illustrate the political circumstances of the time, to which we have access through the narrator's translucid, blurred lenses. The political discourse, or the discourse about politics, used by the narrator to describe the hotel dwellers, is necessarily conditioned by his expertise in analyzing the circumstances and the atmosphere of a society in deep crisis: "There were returnees from every corner of the empire, the empire was there, in that waiting room, a tired empire, in need of a house and food, a defeated and humiliated empire, an empire no-one wanted to know about." (Cardoso, 2016, 60) ["Estavam lá retornados de todos os cantos do império, o império estava ali, naquela sala, um império cansado, a precisar de casa e de comida, um império derrotado e humilhado, um império de quem ninguém queria saber." (Cardoso 2021, 86)]

It is interesting to note that the blurred view produced by an imperfect (private and partial) focalization is rendered through the use of a somewhat imprecise language, by linguistic taboos, making it impossible to narrate in a transparent or linear way: "I know the words, I'm sure I know the words, I never say them, I'm afraid of them, I don't even say them in my head, but I am sure I know them."

(Cardoso 2016, 108) ["Sei as palavras, tenho a certeza que sei as palavras, nunca as digo, tenho medo delas, nem em pensamentos as digo mas tenho a certeza que as sei." (Cardoso 2021, 155)]

The difficulty of putting concepts into words, the vanishing of a sense of utopian belief in the future, means to accept the limitation and ignorance that stems from internal focalization, and which becomes quite visible in the end, "Just as it won't do me any harm not to know what happened to Father in prison, what happened to Mother's demons, to Silvana or to Uncle Zé." (Cardoso 2016, 178–179) ["Como não faz mal eu não saber o que aconteceu ao pai na prisão, aos demónios da mãe, à Silvana ou ao tio Zé." (Cardoso 2021, 267)], all this propitiates a discourse signaling a reality that goes beyond individual or family experience to signify the social circumstances, conditioned by political events. In *The Return*, readers can clearly see the complicity between the adolescent narrator's view and external facts, a complicity that is achieved through the skewed perspective of his personal experiences and the specific perspectives of his family.

5 Conclusion

As I have sought to demonstrate, the novels published in the last twenty-two years are not principally concerned with exorcising past memories, family memories, or the visions imposed by the ghosts of former times. Instead, we witness a re-dimensioning of the family structure that views the events of national history in oblique ways that are more discreet or translucent. With the exception of Dulce Maria Cardoso's novel, all the other novels discussed here are distinguished by indirect and internalized, though no less reliable, allusions and atomized references. We may conclude that these novels feature family constellations and broken identities, though they often hide behind removable screens and masks.

Bibliography

Antunes, António Lobo. *Para Aquela que Está sentada no escuro à minha espera*. Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2016.

Antunes, António Lobo. *The Land at the End of the World*. Transl. Margaret Jull Costa. London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

Antunes, António Lobo. *The Splendor of Portugal*. London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011.

Antunes, António Lobo. *Que Cavalos são Aqueles que fazem Sombra no Mar?* Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2009.

Antunes, António Lobo. *O Esplendor de Portugal*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1997.

Antunes, António Lobo. *South of Nowhere*. Transl. Elizabeth Lowel. London: Random House, 1983.
Antunes, António Lobo. *Os Cus de Judas*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1986 [1979].
Cardoso, Dulce. *O Retorno*. Lisboa: Tinta-da-China, 2021 [2021].
Cardoso, Dulce. *The Return*. Transl. Ángel Gúrria-Quintana. London: MacLehose Press, 2016.
Correia, Hélia. *Lillias Fraser*. Lisboa: Relógio dÀ'gua, 2001.
Gersão, Teolinda. *O Regresso de Júlia Mann a Paraty*. Porto: Porto Editora, 2021.
Gersão, Teolinda. *The Word Tree*. London: Dedalus UK, 2010.
Gersão, Teolinda. *A Árvore das Palavras*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1997.
Gersão, Teolinda. *A Casa da Cabeça de Cavalo*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1995.
Jorge, Lídia. *The Wind Whistling in the Cranes*. Transl. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: Liveright, 2022.
Jorge, Lídia. *Estuário*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2018.
Jorge, Lídia. *Os Memoráveis*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2019 [2014].
Jorge, Lídia. *O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2002.
Mann, Thomas. *Os Buddenbrook*. Lisboa: Relógio dÀ'gua, 2020 [1901].
Marinho, Maria de Fátima. "Il était une fois un arbre (à propos de *Árvore das Palavras* [Arbre à Paroles], de Teolinda Gersão." *Carnets* 19 (2020). https://journals.openedition.org/carnets/11251 (March 15, 2024).
Marinho, Maria de Fátima. "A Memória da Família." *Revista de Estudos Literários* 9 (2019): 115–130.
Marinho, Maria de Fátima. "In Search of Lost Identity – Essay on the Crisis of Identity in the Contemporary Portuguese Novel." *Language, Literature, Culture and Identity – 200th Anniversary of the University of Belgrade*. Eds. Slobodan Grubačić/Dalibor Soldatić. Belgrade: University of Belgrade, 2009. 87–101.
Marinho, Maria de Fátima. *O Romance Histórico em Portugal*. Porto: Campo das Letras, 1999.
Meretoja, Hanna. *The Ethics of Storytelling – Narrative hermeneutics, History and the Possible*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018.
Peixoto, José Luís. *Almoço de Domingo*. Lisboa: Quetzal, 2021.
Sue, Eugène. *Os Mysterios do Povo*. Lisboa: Empreza Editora do Mestre Popular. s. d. [1849–1856].
Tavares, Gonçalo M. *O Osso do Meio*. Lisboa: Relógio dÀ'gua, 2020.
Tavares, Gonçalo M. *Uma Menina Está perdida no século à espera do Pai*. Porto: Porto Editora, 2014.