

Irene Marques:

Mia Couto and the Holistic Choric Self:
Recreating the Broken Cosmic Order
(Or: Relearning the Song that Truly Speaks...)

TWO stories from Mia Couto's collection *Contos do Nascer da Terra (Stories of the Birth of the Land)*¹ published in 1997 “The Little Girl Without Words: Second Story For Rita” and “The Little Moon-bird: First Story For Rita,” demonstrate how the Mozambican contemporary writer recreates the traditional African holistic (choric/animistic) 'self' via the use of innovative language and narrative techniques –a self that has been overshadowed by both the colonial and postcolonial orders. Some similarities that exist between African traditional worldviews (epistemologies) and other worldviews such as Western psychoanalysis and Buddhism, could point to the idea that *we* might all have more in common than we think.² We all seem to yearn for the connection with our choric/holistic self, even if often we do not know how to regain that connection due to the general fragmentation and spiritual alienation that tends to pervade our rationally ordered modern societies.

Couto's stories are generally characterized by a great emphasis on the traditional pre-colonial African ways of life and epistemologies: myth, orature, different cosmogonies, conceptions of time, the inter-relation between the world of the living and the world of the dead, as well as animistic and holistic perceptions of life, where humans, nature and the universe at

large are connected in deep ways and often not perceived as separate entities. The characters of the stories are often people who live in rural areas, which in fact constitute the vast majority of Mozambique's citizens, or people who do not adhere completely to and show resistance towards the assimilation of Western cultural values brought about by both the colonization and post-colonization processes. This suggests that Couto is interested in displaying the rural side of Mozambique, the side less touched by Western cultural values, less touched by the colonization and post-colonization processes: the endogenic/internal (or *choric/coric*) side of Mozambican cultures. As David Rothwell notes,

Couto has always demonstrated an awareness of Portuguese and, more generally, Western influence on his work. Rather than recusing such influence, he understands and then distorts it. He disrupts the paradigms of Western orthodoxy as he fashions identity by turning European epistemology into a raw, repackageable material. (28)

Rothwell further avers that

Couto's propensity to dissolve boundaries is apparent, particularly those frontiers that enforce the demarcations of Western tradition. The resultant identity he writes is premised on fluidity, and challenges the rigidity of the systems, both colonial and Marxist, imported from Europe that have dominated Mozambique for most of its history. In the latter phase of his writing, his disavowal of the postmodern project, through an attack on the International Community's invasion of

Mozambican sovereignty, logically completes the postmodern and the nationalist strands in his work. He can justifiably be termed a postmodern nationalist.³ (28)

Most of the characters in Couto's writings⁴ seem to be living in the colonial or postcolonial present since there are many implicit or explicit references to those historical timeframes. Yet we often sense a strong resistance to those historical realities on the part of the characters. That resistance is frequently accompanied by a sense of loss, a feeling of nostalgia or a confusion (an existential nausea of sorts), which suggest that the characters live in a time of deep cultural crisis, in a society that is robbing them of what they value most and what their ancestors have believed for thousands of years. This feeling might be similar to what the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner calls "a kind of vertigo in living" (qtd. in Chamberlin, *If This Is* 80) felt by the Aborigines of New Guinea, as a result of land displacement and cultural impositions brought about by the colonization process. Couto places the following message in his introduction to *Stories of the Birth of the Land*:

It is not the light of the sun that we lack. For millions of years the big star has been illuminating the earth and despite that we have not really learned how to see. The world needs to be seen under another light: the moonlight, that clarity that falls with respect and tenderness. Only the moonlight reveals the feminine side of beings. Only the moon reveals the intimacy of our terrestrial dwelling-place. It is not the rising of the sun that we need. We lack the birth of the land. (7)

This statement is illustrative of the overall nature of the stories included in the collection and of the didactic (and thus political nature) of Couto's stories: it suggests that Mozambique needs to rebuild its identity by looking at (and rediscovering) the land and its old ways. It further suggests that Mozambican identity must come from within that land and not from the outside, or at least not merely from the outside. What Mozambique needs is not necessarily (or certainly not only) the knowledge and the development traditionally associated with the modern world and the West, which has tended to value reason, technology, objectivity, compartmentalization, intellect and masculinity over unconscious, emotion, nature, imagination, femininity and an epistemology of holism.⁵ Couto is asserting Mozambique's need to reawaken its non-masculine, non-rational, non-conscious, sacralized, mystical and mythical side so that the old Mozambican epistemologies can be rescued and reinvented and a truer Mozambique can then emerge –a more 'authentic' nation where all Mozambicans will be able to see, place, cherish and express themselves, and where the old epistemologies are taken into account.

“The Little Girl Without Words” is about a little girl who cannot speak, or better yet, cannot make herself understood. The girl's inability to communicate causes great pains for her father and mother as well as the rest of her community:

The little girl did not speak any words. No vowel would come out of her; her lips were occupied only with sounds that did not add up to three or four. It was a language that belonged only to her, a personal and intransmissible dialect? (87)

In an attempt to make the little girl speak, and in order to communicate and connect with her, the father tries all kinds of methods: he holds her hands tightly, speaks to her tenderly and patiently, implores her to speak, cries out of frustration, takes her to the beach, and finally decides to tell her what seems to be a very unrealistic story. In the end, the story proves to be the very medium that allows for the beginning of communication between father and daughter. This story occupies a place of great importance in Couto's collection and, perhaps, even in Couto's overall writings, including the novels, poetry and short stories. The story, which is a series of *mise-en-abîmes*, a story within a story, within a story, within a story... can also be seen as the *mise-en-abîme* par excellence (the big Russian doll, as it were), for it brings to the forefront many of the cultural identity problems affecting contemporary Mozambique, and it even offers a solution for them. One of the main characteristics of stories which employ the *mise-en-abîme* as a medium, is that they aim at teaching the reader something. In the case of Couto's story, the teaching is in fact multidimensional--and the existence of the *mise-en-abîme* can be detected at many levels: structural, semantic, morphological and symbolical. All these levels work together to give the story an even more unified and coherent character, which in itself is yet another *mise-en-abîme* and serves to further reinforce Couto's cultural agenda: the illustration (display) of the metaphysical holistic conception of the world, as shared by traditional Mozambicans.

Couto's use of language and storytelling techniques shows us how language and narration assume the character of tricksters and how such a quality serves different and very important purposes; it brings wonder to storytelling, it creates suspense, and it keeps our soul alive by connecting us with that which is

beyond our reach, that which is beyond language: the uncanny. But the uncanny always remains uncanny: just like Couto's language which by mixing words and inventing new terms, is constantly playing tricks and evading our understanding. Couto's language becomes similar to “dread talk” as used by the Rastafarians in Jamaica. In the same way that “dread talk” symbolized the forging of a new identity (or better, yet, an identity for the very first time) and the refusal or contesting of the colonial cultural legacy for the Caribbean people, so does Couto's language function as the agent that permits the reinvention or building of a new Mozambican identity --an agent that takes history in its own hands, so to speak, by appropriating the language of the colonizer and changing it to accommodate present cultural Mozambican needs, to affirm its own and unique way of life. Moreover, like “dread talk,” Couto's language seems to be an attempt to restore the wonder of language, its power to connect us with the mystical forces, the unknown, the spiritual, giving us a strength that helps us bear the difficulties of life. As J. Edward Chamberlin puts it,

One of the strategies of the Rastafari has been to rename things. It's an old trick, as colonizers have realized for centuries. I have seen maps of Canada where as many as a dozen different names are layered onto one place, reflecting the different traditions of people who live (or lived) there... The Rastafarian renaming, too, has involved turning language around so that it reflects their own imaginings and recovers their realities [...]. The signature of “dreadlocks” of Rastafari are a way of catching the mysterious power, or of not losing it [...]. (Chamberlin, *If This Is* 187-8)⁶

Couto's constant use of the *mise-en-abîme*, in all its different manifestations, ends up creating a special effect. When reading the story/stories, one might have the impression that one is entering a circling or whirling dance, a cascade of sorts, a musical realm even, a place where we might feel detached from ourselves and experience the universe with all its powerful energy –as if we were in a state of trance or spiritual ecstasy. Thus Couto's writing teaches at least two things: that traditional (old) epistemologies have something wonderful to offer, and also that, when used well and 'strangely', language can become the very medium that allows one to experience the beauty and power of what lies beyond our grasp and to reach spiritual fulfillment.

“The Little Girl Without Words” has a subtitle: “Second Story for Rita”. Such title occupies a central importance in the story, for it suggests that the 'true' meaning of the story is not what it might at first appear to be. Put differently, the 'true' meaning is not, or at least not only, the first meaning, but rather the second meaning, or even the third or the fourth meaning. The true meaning is to be found in the metaphoric, the poetic, the unobvious, the hidden, or in the untold/unwritten even. Not only does the second (sub) title tell us literally that the story has a “second” story imbedded in itself, but it also appears within brackets, as if reinforcing once again (visually in the text) the idea of the importance of going behind what we see and literally read throughout the story: the idea of looking beyond the material/real possibility, and ultimately, beyond language and its meaning. Thus, the subtitle of the story is the very first *mise-en-abîme* of the many others that are displayed throughout the rest of story: it is the first Russian doll, enveloping the many

other little ones that are to come out after our careful reading of the Great Mother. This Great Mother functions as the protective womb enveloping all the children inside her: like a goddess who wants us to know/feel the immensity of what exists, and at the same time, does not fully (or rationally) show us *that very immensity* because *that* very knowing/showing would kill the transcendental aspect of the divine, which is untranslatable and unnamable.

But surprises (tricks) never end and so... a more careful (deeper) reading of the (first) title will tell us that in reality it already contains the “second story” of the story, for the title does not say that the little girl is mute, but rather that she possesses no words –which is not the same thing. In fact, being able to speak without words might be a better way of speaking, if we take into account the idea that words are only an arbitrary (and thus incomplete) system, invented by humans to name and comprehend that which is ultimately un-nameable and incomprehensible to us in its true dimension. This reading of the first title makes sense, for in the story we do discover that the little girl speaks through music-like sounds and thus, possesses a language. In that case then, the first title is already a big Russian doll (or the Great Mother) with many little dolls (or children) inside, ready to be played with and also play “the player”.

Couto has stated the following:

The secret, in my case, is to transport the childhood. [...]. We all have preserved in ourselves that childhood, which people have taught us how to tame, how to forget, how to look at as an unproductive place. Children do not fit well into our

present concept of what it means to be productive, responsible. [Yet] that childhood has survived in all of us. (My translation, in Jeremias 2)

As the opening paragraph of “The Little Girl Without Words” indicates, the little girl does indeed possess a language, but one that no one understands. Why does no one understand it? Little girls (and little boys) often have a language of their own, one that is highly poetic, musical, fluid and which does not obey the rules of adult language. In a fashion similar to Julia Kristeva and others, Couto seems to believe that children speak a pre-symbolic language, a language which is detached from social connotations and where gender roles and other assigned social roles and classifications of the world, things and people in general, do not yet exist or are not yet formed. Children are close to what Kristeva⁷, following Plato (67) calls the *chora*, that sacred or sacralized (and whole, in the sense of being unfragmented, un-dichotomized) side which allows them to listen to all their unconscious/subjective intelligence –imagination, instinct, emotion, body, and so on. That *chora* is broken (or at least suppressed and disrupted) when children enter the symbolic world of the adults which imposes roles, regulations and classification on the world and people based on the so-called higher intelligence –reason, science, objectivity, culture, and so forth. This is why the adults do not quite understand children and the world they live in, and also the reason why one can suggest that the father of this little girl does not understand her. In this story, the father has entered the rational adult world and thus broken (or suppressed) his contact with the world of the little girl (the world of his 'little boy,' so to speak)--a world which obeys different linguistic and cognitive patterns. But his

chora still exists inside of him: it is preserved/kept somewhere, as Couto suggests above, and it only needs to be brought to the surface. In psychoanalytical terms, this loosely means that the *chora* of the 'little boy'/father has been pushed to the very back of his unconscious; it has been repressed because adult life and society do not value/favour it, and consider it immature and inferior to the so-called higher intelligences associated with adult life.

The father loves his little girl (and his 'little boy') dearly and so he wants to 'find' them, to understand them, to reconnect with them. He suffers immensely from the fact that he cannot speak to and reach them. The father knows (senses, feels) that the language spoken by them is beautiful: “so beautiful as to enchant,” so beautiful as to “imprison [him] in the intonation,” and so “touching” (87) that it has the power to make one cry. It is a language that sounds more like a song, a song of yearning for something beautiful and powerful and good--something that one has lost and wants back madly –but does not really know how to bring/call back to us. The song-language sung by the little girl, awakens in the father a powerful urge, an almost visceral need; it is like a demand, seemingly as strong as the one expressed in Derek Walcott's poem “Sainte Lucie”: “come back to me, my language, come back cacao, grigri, solitaire, ciseau the scissor-bird” (309). “Fala comigo filha!” (87) ('Speak to me daughter!'), says the father to the girl. It is the magnitude of the father's urge that makes him search for ways to communicate with his daughter (just like Walcott makes use of all kinds of words [i.e., French, English, Spanish, Creole] in an attempt to create a language that will 'tell him' as accurately as any language can allow):

Her father would dedicate a lot of attention and affliction to her. One night he held her hands tightly and implored, certain that he was speaking to himself:

- *Speak to me daughter!*

His eyes gave in. The little girl kissed the tear. She tasted that salty water and said:

- *Sea...*

The father was surprised from mouth to hear. Had she spoken? He jumped and shook his daughter's elbows. *See, you can speak, she speaks, she speaks!* He would scream so that people could hear him. *She said sea, she said sea,* the father would repeat throughout the house. The relatives came running and leaned over her. But no other intelligible sound was announced... (87-8)

The communication between father and daughter is hard to achieve. Yet, the need for that communication to happen is so great that it forces the father to keep searching deeper and deeper inside himself, to see if he can find the magic word that will 'speak' to his daughter. Finally, he does come to a brilliant idea: to tell his daughter a story. This idea works. The idea of the story comes to the father because it had in fact never left him; it was in some part of his unconscious self and just needed to be called back to 'conscious' life: it was there, underneath, like a latent, soft lullaby⁸, just waiting and wanting to be brought to the surface, so that the father could feel the wonder again --the wonder of feeling whole, connected, unbroken, the wonder of entering the choric realm:

It was then that it came to him: his daughter could only be saved by a story! And right there he invented

one [...]. When he arrived at that point the father lost voice and became quiet. The story had lost its string and thread inside his head. Or perhaps it was the cold from the water which was already covering his feet, and the legs of his daughter? And in a desperate state, he said: - *Now, it will never be.* Right away, the little girl got up and walked through the waves. The father followed her, scared. He saw his daughter pointing at the sea. [...] -*Daughter please, come back. Slow down, daughter, please...* Rather than stepping back, the little girl penetrated further into the sea. Then, she stopped and passed her hand through the water. The liquid scar closed itself, instantaneously. And the sea restored itself, it became one. The little girl walked back, took her father's hand and guided him back home. Above, the moon recomposed itself. - *See father? I finished your story.* And both of them, illuminated, vanished from the room, which they had never left. (88-9)

The story told to the little girl is a story where doubt is suspended: it is a story that makes (and gives sense) to the world, without concerning itself with truth boundaries. It is a story (seemingly) very unrealistic which merges the real and the imaginary, reason and unreason, possible and impossible; it is a story full of trickery, as if we were in fact dealing with a real trickster who is constantly tricking us into believing things that are unreal or seemingly opposite.⁹ The bridge between such opposites can, of course, be questioned, if we argue that the stories or histories or theories that explain the world and ourselves to ourselves are in fact all human makings—made out of an arbitrary language system—and so we end up with all kinds

of 'fabulous' stories about who we are, what we must do, feel, eat, dress and how it is that the world or universe 'really' functions. As well argued by Edward Chamberlin in *If This Is Your Land, Were Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground*, many (if not all) of the stories (and thus histories) informing and giving sense to our lives, are make-up/made-up fables, which serve to ease our existential nausea, hide our ignorance, fragility and fears of the unknown –and yet, also fables that make us feel at home and give sense and purpose to our lives.

Couto's first lesson then seems to be that we must all try to reconnect with the world of our childhood, the world of wonder, the world of the *chora* –it is a lesson for all the adults of the world. But the story aims at much more than that. The story can (and should) be read directly in the socio-cultural context of Mozambique. The use of the little girl and father metaphor in this story can be taken as another trick used by Couto to point to the multiple meanings of his stories.

Before further exploring the relationship of this story with the Mozambican socio-cultural environment, a look at the other story included in the collection, “The Little Moon-bird: First Story for Rita,” is necessary. This story precedes “The Little Girl Without Words.” This means of course that “The Little Girl without Words” can be taken as a continuation of the first story - -a reasoning reinforced by the fact that it has the subtitle of “Second Story for Rita.” This does not invalidate the previous argument pertaining to the subtitle of the second story and its function as the first *mise-en-abîme* of the second story. It actually reinforces it by suggesting that each single story in Couto's collection always contains multiple messages or stories in it, and that what each story says is always incomplete: its meaning always surpasses what it openly says, what the eye can

directly catch. Moreover, the first story ends with the question “And then what happens father?” --indicating that the story has not been completed, at least not according to the little girl who was receiving it from the father. In fact, in the first story the father is frustrated with the little girl, for every night she demands a story from him and when he tells her one, she never seems satisfied with its ending and always asks the same (stubborn) question: “And then father what happens?” At the structural level, the first story also contains two stories: the one about the girl and the one about the bird.

After telling the little girl several stories, and not being able to satisfy her constant thirst for knowledge or wonder, the father decides to tell her the story of a bird whose dream was to fly to the moon:

My daughter has a painful time falling asleep. No one knows the fears that sleep brings to her. Every night I am called to my duty as a father and I invent her a lullaby. I always perform that duty poorly. When I am trying to end the story she asks me for more: - *And then what happens?* What Rita wants is for the entire world to fall asleep. And she always argues a dream that might happen in her sleep: she wants to become the moon. The little girl wants to travel to the moon, and, she tells the two of us, so that I become the land, and she the moon. The Mozambican traditions are still inflating her lunar courtship. [...]. Once upon a time a little bird was dreaming in its little roost. It would look at the moonlight and it would make fantasies go up in the sky. Its dream would become more immense: - *I will land there, in the moon...* (67)

The story about the bird is of course also a story about the little girl and her constant craving for stories of wonder: like the bird, the little girl seems to have dreams, needs and wishes that are far too big for her human capacity. The father's story seems to suggest that only people (and to a certain extent animals) have life: the other bodies, such as the moon are petrified, lifeless entities. It is the “moony” ('enluarado') (67) character of the bird (and little girl) that makes it lose its quality as a bird and become petrified and lifeless. The adjective “enluarado,” used to describe the bird here has a second meaning; it is yet another Russian doll, for it implies that the bird suffered from mad ideas, reason why it wanted to fly to the moon.¹⁰

Thus, the first story has many messages (*mise-en-abîmes*). At first glance, it would seem to re-enforce the idea that when one has a dream, a need or a wish, one should try to fulfill it, and if one can not realistically fulfill it, one must resort to the power of the imagination in order to get it, for the imagination can have the power to fulfill our most grand desires. If it happens in the realm of the imagination, it becomes as real and fulfilling as if it were to happen in actual reality. As the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott would say: “I [have] no nation now but the imagination” (350). However, a more careful reading of Couto's story will tell us that too much dreaming and unreasonable desires will lead us to madness and the loss of humanness. An analysis of the morphology of the first title of the story, will also show us that the story has at least two meanings (two more little Russian dolls ready to play), again reinforcing the idea that stories and words possess secondary hidden meanings--meanings which we must aim at understanding so that we can have access to the wonder of the infinite, the mystical, the

wonder of “overstanding,” as the Rastafarians might put it. First, “The little moon-bird” (‘A luavezinha’) can be read as “moon-neighbour” (‘luavizinha’), a reading that will point to the cosmic holistic conception of the universe shared by many Mozambican groups: it implies that all the planets are deeply connected and close to each other, that the earth is in fact near the moon, like a sister of sorts. By extension, this also implies that birds and humans are part of the greater order and that is why they feel the urge to go beyond their human and animal limits and connect with the rest of the universe. On the other hand, given the closeness between the words “luavezinha” (‘little moon-bird’) and “levezinha” (‘very light’), we can suggest that the story wants to point to the fact that the human mind (our spirit and imagination) is very light --so light in fact, that it can fly away, travel and enter other world orders, other realities, and thus experience the wonder of what lies beyond our physical reach. The story did not satisfy the little girl precisely because the imagination of the father was not light (flexible) enough to travel beyond the moon and liberate the bird, not light enough to be able to allow the bird to be both bird and moon, that is.

It is precisely because of the ‘heaviness’ of the father’s imagination that the little girl remains unsatisfied with the story and demands more with the question “and then father?” Ultimately, the little girl is the metaphor for the Mozambican land, its people and their holistic or sacralized conception of the universe. The little girl is the nation of Mozambique and the father represents the governing elite of colonial and post-colonial states. The constantly repeated question of the little girl “and then father?” has multiple meanings and functions. On one hand, it alludes to the dissatisfaction (and loss of wonder) experienced by Mozambicans who have had their culture and

way of thinking dismissed and shattered by the new, modern, secularized and compartmentalized Western order. On the other hand, and because of its constant use, this question actually re-establishes that same Mozambican world order: the repetition causes us to feel that whirling effect that I mentioned previously--the effect of something that has no end, like a cascade where all parts are interrelated and work to produce a holistic and sacralized conception of life and the universe. Again, Couto is killing at least two birds with one stone (or two rabbits with a single stroke, as we say in Portuguese).

But the father feels the dissatisfaction of the little girl. It is precisely because of the dissatisfaction of both father and daughter that the father comes back with another story, a second story, which as it turns out, proves to be much more effective. The little girl's muteness is related to the fact that the new order governing the country does not value or really understand the old Mozambican epistemologies. In other words, it is not purely a matter of the semantics of the language—that is, the fact that the majority of Mozambicans speak Bantu languages and the small elite running the country speak Portuguese, which is the official language of Mozambique—although that of course plays an intrinsically role.¹¹ In the story, Couto *actually resolves the issue* of separation between the world of the father and that of the little girl, the world of the Mozambican colonial and/or post-colonial state and its citizens and thus the culturally and linguistically alienated situation of most Mozambicans. The Kristevan *choric self* now becomes symbol of the Mozambican land: its people and its traditions, a self that must be reawakened to feed/teach the new order—a *choric self* that had been relegated to the periphery of the state's interests in the name of

modernization and civilization. The *choric self* then, becomes the universe at large, where all the elements are joined and where the human self becomes de-centered, only to experience what can be termed as the force of the universe, or God. This *choric self* is what in astronomy would correspond to the time before the big-bang and what is Buddhist Zen terms would equate to the “all in one” or the “Great I”¹², which is also the state that allows for nirvana (emptiness of thought) to occur, a state that 'resides' beyond language and thus is indescribable through it--a state of bliss and mystical apprehension. In its original platonic sense, the *chora* refers to that place that merges all the elements: air, water, earth, fire, a place of high power and energy that will give origin to everything –this is why Plato calls it the “nurse of all becoming and change” (67). In Christian terms, these would loosely equate to the “De Profundis” of Psalm 129. All these senses of the choric self are similar to each other, which only serves to show that different traditions (Western and otherwise) do in fact share many of the same underlying beliefs.

Thus, from the child's choric self, Couto moves us to the adult (repressed) choric self, to the Mozambican (repressed) choric self, and then he shows us (discloses) all the *choras* and the wonder that lies there awaiting to be embraced: he is the teacher, teaching us how to dance in the whirls of the greater or larger life. The language sung by the little girl made people cry because it reminded them of the Mozambican choric self, the self that they had forgotten how to connect with and buried deep inside them. Their cry symbolizes their loss and profound yearning and desire to reconnect with the grand order of the universe their ancestors once had. That is why the father goes to great extents to (re)learn the language of the little girl.

It is important to note that it is the emotion (and not the 'reason') of the father that first speaks to the little girl. He had tried all kinds of words and ways to achieve communication with his daughter and yet she had remained mute (and deaf). When the father cries out of desperation, she mumbles what seems to be her very first intelligible word: "sea". On a larger symbolical level, the tear shed by the father has many other meanings. Being a fluid substance, the tear can symbolize the letting go of the individual self and the entering in the choric/cosmic self. This is further supported by the fact that it is by the sea that the girl will finally find a way to speak and be understood by the father. The house (the father) represents the individualized human self, which tends to dichotomize and separate things, whereas the sea represents the decentered or choric self. The sea is the place that can 'liquidize' both the father and the girl so that they can finally enter the larger cosmic realm.¹³ It is in the sea that we witness the disintegration of the entire world. It is in the sea that all becomes shattered and the order of the universe is lost but also re-established: it is there that we witness the 'all becoming one', or the 'one becoming all' and thus the holistic African conception of the universe is restored. The moon breaks down, the sea opens up and the earth bleeds. Blood becomes indistinguishable from water and the water indistinguishable from blood. Sand becomes silver and silver becomes sand. It is the end of the world. Or so the father thought. But then the little girl takes charge of the story and literally jumps inside it to help the father reconstruct the cosmic order, to literally give birth to the land.

As in the first story, the father's imagination has not been flexible enough to continue the story he is telling. His rational

and compartmentalized self, not used to intricate exercises of the mind, becomes numb: it loses the story's "string" and "thread" (89). He is flexible enough to disrupt the order of the world, but not ingenious enough to re-establish it again. He becomes afraid of the unknown, of that which cannot be measured in rational terms: he becomes afraid of his unconscious, of the dark places of the world, of the universe at large which he cannot measure in human (and Western) quantities, for it escapes his smallness. The little girl is the one who saves both of them and the world from finally disappearing:

Right away, the little girl got up and walked through the waves. The father followed her, scared. He saw his daughter pointing the sea. Then he could see a glimpse of it: in the entire extension of the ocean, a deep crack. The father was surprised with that unexpected fracture, fantastic mirror of the story he had just invented. A deep strange fear invaded his entrails. Would it be in that abyss that they would both disappear? - *Daughter please, come back. Delay yourself, daughter, please...* (89)

At the structural level, this story (like the first one) contains more than one story. It has at least three: the one being told to Rita about the little girl who did not speak, the one about Rita (or is it the little girl of the story being told?) literally taking over and finishing the father's story, and the one told in the last line, indicating that father and daughter had never left the room, even though we might have thought they did. Thus, this story (like the first one) further reinforces the idea that imagination is indeed very powerful, and that words give meaning and sense to

that which is meaningless and disorganized: words weave the world, literally reinventing it for us, giving sense to the senseless, and ultimately having the power to make us feel safe at home. This serves to show the central importance of orally transmitted knowledge in traditional African cultures; it shows that the mere act of telling a story makes the events being told real; in other words, it demonstrates the magical power of storytelling and language. This magical power can also apply to written stories since language in general (written or oral) is capable of creating an entire world system, of giving meaning to that which has no *a priori* meaning. As Hampâté Bâ puts it,

One peculiarity of the African memory is its restoring the recorded event *in its entirety*, like a film that unreels from beginning to end, and restoring it *in the present*. It is a matter not of remembering, but of *bringing up into the present* a past event in which everyone participates --the person who is reciting and his audience. The whole art of the storyteller lies in that. No one is a storyteller unless he can report a thing as it happened 'live' in such a way that his hearers, like himself, become new living, active witnesses of it. (qtd. in *Unesco: A General History of Africa* 109)

It is precisely this “entirety,” the restoring of the past event “in the present” and the “bringing up into the present a past event” pointed out by Bâ that Couto's story tries to reconstruct in the story of the little girl, thus showing his engagement in recreating the reality of African oral traditions. In this story the father does indeed re-learn the old ways; he gets in touch with his little girl, and consequently, with his nation. Let us hope

that, like the father, the post-colonial state will also be open enough to allow non-Western epistemologies to be nurtured in Mozambique so that *all* can sing the song that truly speaks, the song of the little girl, who in reality might be the most mature of all. And she sings beautifully indeed.

NOTES

¹All translations pertaining to this collection and other Couto's writings/titles are my own.

²This paper is based on some of the ideas discussed in my doctoral thesis, in which I explore with greater detail some of the intersections between Western psychoanalysis, Jungian psychology, *écriture féminine*, Lévinasian, Irigarayan and Heideggerian philosophy, Buddhism and African epistemologies (using as basis the works of four world writers).

³Rothwell further argues that Couto's project of endogeniation is particularly clear in his recent novel *O Último Voo do Flamingo* ('The Last Flight of the Flamingo'). See *A Postmodern Nationalist*, specifically section 7: "Finding the Nation's Phallus: Expelling the UN Specter from Mozambique" 158-169 and "Conclusion" 170-2.

⁴See for example, *A varanda do frangipani* ('Under the Frangipani') *Cada homem é uma raça* ('Every Man is a Race'), *Estórias abensonhadas* ('Blissfully Dreamed Stories') and *Terra sonâmbula* ('Sleepy Land').

⁵Couto's introductory quotation seems to associate the sun with the masculine, the rational, the compartmentalized and violent forces, and the moon with the feminine, the earth, the tender and the holistic.

⁶For further discussions of the concepts of "dead talk" and "overstanding" see also Velma Pollard's book *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafarians* and J. Edward Chamberlin's *Come Back to Me My Language*.

⁷See "Freud and Love: Treatment and its Discontents" 240-248 in *The Kristeva Reader* and *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* 9-24.

⁸The reason why the song-language of the little girl is able to reach the subconscious of the father: music (like poetry) functions as the pre-symbolic language or way of communicating, which has the power to

liberate us from societal (conscious) constraints and allows us to go deeper inwards.

⁹As Lewis Hyde puts it, “The trickster is a boundary-crosser,” the one who blurs distinctions and connections between “right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead (7).”

¹⁰In Portuguese, when someone is angry or acts/reacts in an unpredictable way, we often say that the person “está de lua” (literally meaning 'is with moon') or “está enluarado” ('is moony') or “está com a lua” ('is with the moon'). All of these expressions imply that the person is mad and has lost the ability to reason properly (he/she is a lunatic).

¹¹Couto is a language relativist like Ngũgĩ (see *Decolonizing the Mind*) or Whorf (see *Language, Thought, and Reality*) and others. Language relativists believe language molds the way humans see reality and themselves. Different languages emerge out of different socio-cultural, physical, ontological and epistemological environments and thus no language will 'say' the same thing. By creating new words, Couto is writing in a 'new' Portuguese –just like many other postcolonial writers who write in 'new' englishes in order to try and recapture a more 'authentic' post-colonial subject, a subject that is more faithful to the pre-colonial ways of being an 'seeing'.

¹²See “Chief Characteristics of Satori” in *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism* 163-168 and *The Quest for Self* 119.

¹³In *A Postcolonial Nationalist* Rothwell also discusses the importance and constant presence of water in Couto's writings and its frequent association with the unconscious realm, the realm that allows one to have access to dream and imagination and thus 'encounter' all possibilities (see “Sealing into the Unconscious: The Role of Water in Mia Couto” 91-132).

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