

## REVIEW

Lucílio Manjate, *Rabhia* (Maputo: Alcance, 2019), 139 pp., ISBN: 9789928794338

The growing interest in Mozambican crime fiction since the early 2000's reflects a move to portray underexplored characters, stories and spaces of postcolonial life through the lens of the police procedural. This period has not only seen numerous debates in Mozambique surrounding the purported 'death' of Mozambican literature, but it has coincided with a significant literary shift towards the crime novel. Works such as Mia Couto's *Under the Frangipani* and Lília Momplé's *Neighbours* have drawn Anglophone readers and scholars into these conversations.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Mozambican writers have continued to expand the boundaries of the crime novel in order to question the status of 'engaged' literature and to offer readers nuanced explorations of the genre alongside that of the country's social inheritances of colonialism, liberation struggle, civil war and ongoing armed conflict.

Recent approaches to the *policial*, exemplified by the works of Sérgio Raimundo and Lucílio Manjate, offer new, often parodic, renditions of the genre, which both expand and subvert traditional police procedural narratives. Much like Virgília Ferrão's Dionísio, the inspector who solves a series of mysterious deaths is Xindzimila, police storytelling weaves truth and memory, tasked with a sense of duty for ordering the past and its unfolding in the present.<sup>2</sup> Literary scholar Gilberto Matusse, who writes the preface to *Rabhia*, suggests that in Mozambique the police novel transcends the confines of specific literary genres and languages, and is an appropriate terrain for subverting predetermined codes and formulas with contributions from African oral traditions and Lusophone literature.<sup>3</sup> The *policial* prompts an exploration of truth and knowledge, reimagining African crime fiction as a literary as well as an epistemological pursuit.

It is in this context that Lucílio Manjate's third novel, *Rabhia*, published in 2019 and discussed by the author in a recent visit to Cape Town, stands out. The book traces the murder of a *prostituta* whose naked body was discovered in *Rua da Candonga*.<sup>4</sup>

1 M. Couto, *Under the Frangipani* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001) and L. Momplé, *Neighbours* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001).

2 V. Ferrão, *O inspector de Xindzimila* (Ribeirão Preto: Selo Jovem, 2015).

3 G. Matusse, 'Um lugar para o policial' in L. Manjate, *Rabhia* (Maputo: Alcance, 2019), 7–13.

4 I opted for keeping the term used by Manjate as 'prostitute', not only to follow the original text and Brazilian Portuguese translation, but to evoke the historical and literary tropes animated by the literary figure of the 'prostituta' in these contexts.

Named after her, the book chronicles the woman's tragic fate through the eyes of the police-intern, whose name readers only learn at the end, and of Sthoe, a relic of a by-gone era in the police force, introduced in Manjate's earlier crime novel, *A Legítima Dor da Dona Sebastião*.<sup>5</sup>

What is at stake for Sthoe and the intern is how the narration of death disturbs the status of truth. 'Mine, yours, all the truths, whoever invents them,' he muses. Sthoe considers himself a has-been who lost his strength and finds himself poor and old. In the aftermath of the civil war in a Maputo where crime reveals which deaths have consequence, Sthoe crafts a story characterised by exaggerated sensory stimuli and forensic precision. The work of the police here is not only to seek justice, but to most effectively narrate death: how death alters the cadence of everyday life, reframes the memories and moods of war, the portrayal of lost loves and broken political dreams. As tension simmers between the rookie and the aging detective, the narrative vacillates between the naiveté of the novice and the old detective with a 'vocation for distant memories, those that blend with imagination and make old men eternal fictionists'.

Death, which was once a public process rather than an individualised event, as Walter Benjamin argued elsewhere, has been the limit of the communication of experience and thus 'the sanction of all that the storyteller can tell'.<sup>6</sup> For Benjamin, war's effect on storytelling was profound. Those repatriated from the battlefields of Europe in the 1920s, had 'grown silent' not only because financial decline eroded the communicability of experience after death but because the value of experience itself dwindled. A post-war world where experience cannot be communicated accepts as story only new and noteworthy information, rather than shared, layered retellings: the place of the traditional storyteller was gradually taken by reportage. What is at stake for Benjamin's storyteller is the ability to communicate the experience of death, revitalised in the realm of the living speech and also through the ability of death to chronicle what vanishes and what is remembered.

In *Rabhia*, Sthoe connects the fragments of a seemingly inconsequential murder, stitching together his own past and with that of the nation, which, like the body of Rabhia, is fading from public view. It is a past in which former-soldiers and aging sex workers adopt and abandon *noms de guerre*, with identity no longer enabling but hindering belonging. Death turns the policeman into a complicit narrator, an inconsistent fictionist and a twisted griot of sorts: one capable of navigating the many unexplored corners of crime and countless dead bodies stitched unevenly into the national script – though not unscathed.

The unravelling of Rabhia's murder allows the *policial* to challenge how the transmission of memory is written in the present. With the poetic layering of oral elements to the narrative, Manjate reconsiders how fiction shapes the historiographical

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5 L. Manjate. *A Legítima Dor da Dona Sebastião* (Maputo: Alcance, 2017).

6 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 151.

and literary possibilities of the text. He offers us, thus, a different kind of *whodunit*, with the policeman appearing as a reluctant storyteller: one whose report hinges on death, the lack of trust in the truth and a disaffection for the fallen narratives of the nation.

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