

HONWANA AND HARPER LEE: TO KILL AND NOT TO KILL, FROM THE *MOCKINGBIRD* TO THE MANGY DOG AND THE SNAKE

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Resumo: O artigo aborda o clássico moçambicano *Nós Matámos o Cão Tinhoso!*, de Luís Bernardo Honwana, discutindo as falhas das leituras, sobretudo políticas, de que tem sido objeto. Por outro lado, propõe a sua aproximação, sobretudo no primeiro conto, mas também no conjunto da obra, do romance de Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, que Honwana pode ter conhecido na sua versão cinematográfica.

Palavras-chave: Literatura moçambicana; Luís Bernardo Honwana; Harper Lee.

Abstract: This article discusses the classic Mozambican *Nós Matámos o Cão Tinhoso!*, by Luís Bernardo Honwana, considering the misreadings, mainly political, that have been presented. On the other hand, it proposes the comparison of the first story (and also of the whole book) with the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, that Honwana may have known from its film version.

Keywords: Mozambican literature; Luís Bernardo Honwana; Harper Lee.

It is a well known fact that criticism, like everything else, is subject to the influence of its environment, whether as regards models and methods of reading or their application, and reflects ideological constraints which can be more or less marked, and which, sometimes, only become visible at a later date. From my point of view, this is what has happened with the work of the Mozambican author Luís Bernardo Honwana, *Nós matámos o Cão Tinhoso!*, published in 1964.

Converted into a true classic shortly after its publication and now considered as one of the books marking the beginning of modern Mozambican fiction, the work did not attract much attention at the time on the part of critics, for reasons easily understood: on the one hand, the denunciatory effect of the anthology of short stories and the colonial context of the time; on the other, the situation of the author himself, arrested in that same year of 1964 on the charge of having brought subversive propaganda material from Swaziland. Even so, the volume received, as early as April of that year, a favorable assessment by Urbano Tavares Rodrigues¹ in the pages of the newspaper *República*:

este livro arrasador, desigual, jovem, comovente, que é todo ele a transfusão literária de uma funda humilhação e que nasce, página a página, do sofrimento enfim extravasado de quem acumulou, ano a ano, dia a dia, vergonhas e impotências, e não vem clamar retoricamente contra as mãos que o feriram, senão que nos mostra as suas menos negras do que o resto do corpo, mas tão tristes!

Similarly, *Présence Africaine* included in its issue n. LV (third quarter of 1965) a flattering review of the book by Virgílio de Lemos, an exiled Mozambican poet and

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¹ RODRIGUES, 1964.

journalist who had flown to Paris two years earlier, after having been arrested on charges of subversion:

*l'auteur révèle dans sa façon de juger les hommes, les animaux et les choses un type d'observation et d'analyse subtile et profonde, identique à celui des conteurs d'histoires bantous, sans pour autant lui ressembler.*²

Subsequently, over the last thirty years, the book — and, in particular, its first short story — has come to attract considerable attention on the part of scholars of African literature, with political (and often conflicting) interpretations predominating. Inocência Mata, for instance, wrote in 1992:

*E porque pretendemos uma leitura política, é possível elaborarmos um sistema de equivalências no qual o Cão-Tinhoso representaria o sistema colonial decadente, em vias de ser destruído, e o prelúdio de uma nova sociedade purificada, sem discriminação de qualquer tipo. Ainda a este nível de alegorização, parece-nos significativo o facto de o Cão-Tinhoso ter sido abatido numa apoteose de tiros — de igual modo Moçambique haveria de se purificar pelo fogo das armas.*³

The divergence between different reactions to the book has recently been underlined by Ana Mafalda Leite, in an essay included in a volume to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary:

*o estado terminal do cão tnhoso, com os seus enormes olhos azuis cheios de lágrimas, tem sido equiparado em várias leituras críticas, alternativamente à figura de um colonialismo estrebuchante, como também à figura, impotente, do colonizado.*⁴

These and several other critical contributions notwithstanding, I believe that now, half a century after the book's publication, there are a number of remarks that can be made which may show, if not the mistakes or failings of those readings, at least their inconclusiveness or insufficiency of argumentation.

The first of these remarks may appear all the more paradoxical, since the book was translated into English no later than in 1969⁵ and, from 1964, had a wide circulation in English-language magazines and anthologies, as can be seen from the following provisional list:

- «Papa, the Snake and I». In *Modern African Prose*. An anthology compiled and edited by Richard Rive. London and Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1964, p. 101-116;
- *The Hands of the Blacks*. «Black Orpheus». 17 (June 1965), p. 11-12. Lagos;
- «Dina». In *African Writing Today*. Edited by Ezekiel Mphahlele. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 317-334;

² LEMOS, 1965: 212.

³ MATA, 1992: 93.

⁴ LEITE, 2016: 44.

⁵ HONWANA, 1969.

- *The Hands of the Blacks*. «Sunday Times». 26/03/1967. London;
- «We Killed Mangy-Dog». In *Two Stories: 'Argo, or the voyage of a balloon' by Andreas Embiricos; 'We Killed the Mangy-Dog' by Luis Bernardo Honwana*. London: London Magazine, 1967, p. 53-104;
- *The Hands of the Blacks. Political Spider: An anthology of stories from 'Black Orpheus'*. Edited by Ulli Beier. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969, p. 81-83.

In view of this, it is difficult to understand how no one has ever detected something which seems, to me at least, quite obvious: the affinity, particularly as concerns the first story (but also in the book as a whole), between Honwana's *Nós matámos o Cão Tinhoso!* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published in 1960, the latter achieved immediate success and earned the Pulitzer Prize for its author, having quickly become a classic of American literature. The action takes place in the southern United States, in Alabama, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and is narrated by its young protagonist, Jean Louise, nicknamed Scout. With all the innocence and naivety of a child who, at the beginning of the story, is only six years old, what we are given is a picture of the simple, rural existence in the imaginary city of Maycomb, which at the same time unveils the racism and sexism of conservative local society.

It is unlikely that Honwana had read Lee's novel before the publication of his own book, although the former was circulating in English, at least in neighboring South Africa. It should be noted that the first Portuguese translation dates precisely from that same year of 1964: translated by Raul Correia, it was published by Europa-América as *Não matem a cotovia*. There is also a Brazilian edition which was printed in that same decade, but with no date: translated by Fernando de Castro Ferro, it was published in Rio de Janeiro, by *Civilização Brasileira*, under the title of *O sol é para todos*.

Be that as it may, and even if he had not read the novel, it is quite probable that Luís Bernardo had seen the 1962 film adaptation of the book, which — according to the Mozambican newspapers of the time which I have consulted — was shown the following year in what was then Lourenço Marques⁶. It should also be noted that, at least at that time, Honwana was paying attention to the cinema, as can be inferred from his account, published in 1963 in the newspaper «Voz Africana», of Sunday afternoons in the Cinema Império in Lourenço Marques, where westerns predominated and where «a aquisição de um bilhete não garante a posse de um lugar. É preciso chegar-se cedo, porque há sempre mais gente do que a que comporta a lotação estabelecida. Também não se respeita a classificação segundo idades: todos são igualmente crianças. Ou igualmente adultos. Depende do filme.»⁷.

Directed by Robert Mulligan, the film adaptation of Harper Lee's novel featured Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch and Mary Badham as young Scout. Acclaimed by both public and critics, the film was nominated for eight Oscars, receiving the prize for Best Actor (Gregory Peck), Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Art Direction in black and white.

⁶ «A Tribuna», of Lourenço Marques, announces the opening of *Como matar um rouxinol* in its edition of April 18, 1963, p. 9.
⁷ HONWANA, 1963: 8.

There are several similarities between the two works, which I will limit myself here to pointing out, since this is not my field of research and it is not possible for me to undertake a full comparatist and interarts study.

Firstly, we have the question of the narrator: in both works he is an autodiegetic narrator, who assumes the point of view of a child or an adolescent, and this produces a marked critical (and at times satirical) effect in the way both the societies, the American Deep South and colonial Mozambique, are depicted. On the other hand, in both cases the narrator undergoes a transformation, as in the so-called *Bildungsroman*, moving from innocence and naivety to a first stage of maturity, which allows him/her to begin seeing the world, identifying its contradictions and injustices, and situating him or herself in relation to it. In the film based on Lee's novel, the protagonist sees in her father, the widowed lawyer Atticus Finch, a hero of integrity, courage and tenderness, who teaches her a decisive lesson: that a defeat may ultimately turn out to be a victory. Watching the trial of Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a young white woman, Scout realizes that race overrides truth and justice, brilliantly represented by her father, leading her to greater maturity and allowing her to find her own place in a society which practices segregation while, at the same time, condemning Nazi persecution of the Jews. As we shall see later, the process of maturation of the narrator in Honwana's stories is represented in a different way, as is the intervention of the father-figure.

Another element common to Robert Mulligan's film and the Mozambican author's book has to do with the death of a dog: in the first case a mad dog, in the second a «cão tihoso». In truth, the difference between the animals is not significant. The one in Honwana's story, «andava todo a tremer, mesmo sem haver frio, fazendo balanço com a cabeça, como os bois e dando uns passos tão malucos que parecia uma carcaça velha»⁸, while the other, in Lee's novel, «walked erratically, as if his right legs were shorter than his left legs. He reminded me of a car stuck in a sand-bed»⁹. In the Mozambican work, the description is more detailed, allowing us to perceive the advanced state of the disease which afflicted it:

*O Cão-Tihoso tinha a pele velha, cheia de pelos brancos, cicatrizes e muitas feridas. Ninguém gostava dele porque era um cão feio. Tinha sempre muitas moscas a comer-lhe as crostas das feridas e quando andava, as moscas iam com ele, a voar em volta e a pousar nas crostas das feridas*¹⁰;

or, again:

*O Cão-Tihoso tinha uns olhos azuis que não tinham brilho nenhum, mas eram enormes e estavam sempre cheios de lágrimas, que lhe escorriam pelo focinho. Metiam medo aqueles olhos, assim tão grandes, a olhar como uma pessoa a pedir qualquer coisa sem querer dizer*¹¹.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the dog is described from a distance and thus in less detail: «We could see him shiver like a horse shedding flies; his jaw opened and shut; he was alist,

⁸ HONWANA, 1972: 9.

⁹ LEE, [s.d.]: 103.

¹⁰ HONWANA, 1972: 11.

¹¹ HONWANA, 1972: 9.

but he was being pulled back toward us»¹². I believe we are dealing, in both cases, with the same disease, probably distemper¹³. The dog in Honwana's story may also suffer from other afflictions, such as dermatophytosis or leishmaniosis, either of which would account for the skin lesions and the designation of «Cão-Tinhoso», which is, in Portuguese, one of the names given to the devil, and was applied in colonial Africa to black people.

The main difference between the two works, as far as the dogs are concerned, has to do with the way each of them is killed, and this leads us to the second point that I want to discuss. The dog in the film based on Harper Lee's novel has a name (Tim Johnson) and was «the pet of Maycomb»¹⁴. It is killed by Atticus, in the presence of the sheriff, because it represented a threat to the children and the neighborhood. The animal is killed by a single shot and this provokes admiration for their father in Scout and her brother Jem, who, until then, had compared him unfavourably with their friends' parents, regarding him as an old man (he was already in his fifties) with no particular talent. It turns out, however, that Atticus had been an accomplished marksman in his youth, before giving up the practice and concealing his skill from the children, warning them that «it's a sin to kill a mockingbird»¹⁵.

What happens in Honwana's story is quite different: the animal is killed not because it represents a threat to public health, but only to relieve the Administrator's momentary rage at having lost in a game of cards. Furthermore, death is neither immediate nor assumed: it comes at the end of a long chain of buck-passing, which goes successively from the veterinary surgeon to his subordinate Mr. Duarte, from him to Quim and, finally, to the narrator, who was charged with firing the first shot. On the other hand, and contrary to most interpretations, I believe that this experience should be regarded as an apprenticeship in the art of killing. This can better be understood if the first story is read in parallel with «Papá, cobra e eu». In the latter case, too, there is the death of an animal, a snake, which had killed chickens, eaten eggs, and come to pose a threat to the children. Here, too, there is buck-passing: the narrator's mother complains to his father, who promises to get someone to do the job, which will eventually be carried out by the child narrator, with the help of a servant. Looking back at the first story, and to the side — the film based on the book by Harper Lee — a new reading may perhaps be justified: the narrator learned to kill, that is, learned *not to kill*, not a *mockingbird* but a dog. He learned through his own experience, by trial and error, what popular wisdom has so well condensed into proverbs such as «A cão fraco acodem as moscas» or «A cão mordido todos o mordem». The son is now in a position to receive from his father the lesson which seems to summarize a kind of moral of the whole book:

*o nosso filho acha que ninguém monta em cavalos doidos, e que nos famintos e mansos é onde lhes dá mais jeito, percebeste? Quando um cavalo endoidece dá-se-lhe um tiro e tudo acaba, mas aos cavalos mansos mata-se todos os dias. Todos os dias, ouviste? Todos, todos, todos enquanto eles se aguentarem de pé!...*¹⁶

¹² LEE, [s.d.]: 105.

¹³ Also known by the initials CDV (*Canine Distemper Virus*).

¹⁴ LEE, [s.d.]: 102.

¹⁵ LEE, [s.d.]: 99.

¹⁶ HONWANA, 1972: 112

Testimony is thus passed from one generation to the next, announcing the passage from silent resignation to action, and the struggle against the injustices of a colonial society dominated by racism. Now, finally, the *Cão-Tinóso* becomes João Cabral de Melo Neto's *cão sem plumas*:

*Como o rio
aqueles homens
são como cães sem plumas
(um cão sem plumas
é mais
que um cão saqueado;
é mais
que um cão assassinado.*

*Um cão sem plumas
é quando uma árvore sem voz.
É quando de um pássaro
suas raízes no ar.
É quando a alguma coisa
roem tão fundo
até o que não tem).¹⁷*

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¹⁷ MELO NETO, 1999: 108.