

Dancing in the Mirror: Performing Postcoloniality in Paulina Chizine's *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia*

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Abstract

Through female characters who decolonise their bodies and reveal their desires, Paulina Chizine's *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* (2002), reinserts women's voices in the socio-economic and political affairs of the postcolonial nation. By subverting cultural aspects that constrain women's freedom, the narrative becomes a symbolic space for the reconstruction of women's subjectivity. In this sense, Chiziane's novel establishes connection between the fictional narrative and the extra-narrative world.

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Paulina Chiziane's *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* [*Niketche: A Tale of Polygamy*] portrays the lives of women who reinvent cultural traditions as they fight for the inclusion of their voices in nation building.¹ In the novel, women reveal their bodies, while exposing inconsistencies of post-independence period. By utilising the allegory of women's sexual desire, *Niketche* discusses how political circumstances affect women's lives. As female desire becomes a catalyst to destabilise political and patriarchal power, the celebration of women's sexuality turns into an instrument for renouncing aspects of modernity that tends to annihilate cultural diversity.

Niketche is a *Macua* dance, a sensual dance performed by women during initiation rites when girls inform the community that they are ready to perform women's roles. 'A dança do sol e da lua, dança do vento e da chuva, dança da criação. Uma dança que mexe, que aquece. Que imobiliza o corpo e faz a alma voar.' [Dance of the sun and the moon, dance of wind and rain, dance of creation, A dance that moves and warms. It immobilises the body and makes the soul fly.] (160). As dance is interwoven into African cultures, the novel functions as a reminder to the reader of the many cultural traditions that have been considered the antithesis of modernity in Mozambique. As the *niketche* functions as a metonymy for African culture, Chiziane's novel also establishes connection between the fictional narrative and the extra-narrative world. The novel attributes new meanings to dance and to performance, while female characters reconcile with culture and dance in pursuit of power.

Rami, the narrator, a southern Mozambican woman, married to Tony, a powerful *assimilado* man, profits from the status of *assimilada* and the wealth of her husband.² She speaks

¹ Paulina Chiziane. *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* (Lisboa: Editorial Caminho, 2002). Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text. All translations are mine.

² Assimilated Mozambicans had colonial education, rejected traditional culture and found employment in the capitalist economy. See Allen Isaacman and Barbara Isaacman, *Mozambique: From Colonialism to Revolution, 1900-1982* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983).

Portuguese well, has a European education, and is respected in her community, but she feels impotent and disempowered. After 20 years of marriage and five children, Rami discovers that her husband has four other wives and many children. Each woman comes from a different region of Mozambique. Julieta is from Inhambane, while Luisa, Saly, and Mauá come from the north. After many fights, Rami realises that her co-wives are poor women who need food and shelter and that Tony sexually exploits them. The wives do not have other alternatives for survival than to accept humiliation from their cruel husband. Rami helps her co-wives to become financially independent from Tony, while the women help her rediscover her body and desire.

Rami understands that her lack of knowledge about her culture is a result of colonial and post-independence policies. She sees herself as a product of history and struggles to undo the colonisation. Rami's northern co-wives see her lack of knowledge about her body and sexuality as a result of a pervasive colonisation in the south of Mozambique. On her journeys to rediscover sexual desire Rami adapts traditional rites such as initiation and polygamy. By recreating traditional practices in urban Maputo, Mozambique, she has the possibility of examining which aspects of these traditions to recreate and how culture might work to their detriment. While her co-wives teach Rami how to rediscover her body and sexuality, she takes advantage of her colonial education and privileged economic status to help them overcome poverty. As Tony's wives, metonymically function as each fragment of the nation, Rami plays with the possibility of assembling these parts without promoting cultural disintegration, or privileging one ethnic group over the other.

A rebellious collective that struggles to overcome disempowerment, Rami and her co-wives find ways to claim a space in their nation. On one side, through the *xitique*, a system of micro-credit, women can help each other to gain economic independence. The protagonist has the privilege of accessing education, speaking Portuguese and marrying an important man, utilising her money and influence to assist her co-wives to overcome poverty. On the other, Rami attempts to learn from the northern culture to become liberated and sexually fulfilled. While Rami feels like a person deprived of her own culture, a woman without roots, her co-wives teach her the ways northern women discover their bodies. They teach Rami to dance *niketche* to understand her body and desire.

While Rami attempts to understand how Portuguese colonisation and nationalist policies worked to shape her body and sexuality, the novel functions as a tool to decolonise female sexuality, while restoring women's voices. As she performs the rites, she takes advantage of the transition phase, the liminal space where she is neither linked to the past, nor has yet gained a new status. In this space, she tries to promote social change through the consolidation of a female community that capitalises on practices often oppressive to women. Victor Turner suggests that 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt, and between the two positions.'³ In liminal space, individuals who go through the rites learn from elders to be prepared for their new status. At this stage, Rami joins her co-wives to learn from them, forming a community, what Turner calls 'communitas' which implies a 'social relationship form' or 'a communion of equal individuals.'⁴

From her 'initiations,' Rami learns northern women's culture and forms a bond of solidarity with other women who give her advice about the female body. As a regular practice in the

³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969) 95.

⁴ Turner, 96.

villages, experienced women offer advice on sexual life and pleasure to girls who are ready to initiate their own sexual lives. According to Signe Arnfred, women coming from specific caste groups are designated to give the girls lessons about women's sexuality. Their roles are social obligations handed down through several generations via personal coaching. Arnfred suggests that ceremonies allowed women to have a gendered space for themselves. 'The rituals always also provide adult women with the opportunity to get together under circumstances that permit a very different behavior: disrespectful, non-subservient.'⁵

Women unite to learn from each other. In this sense, Rami's journey begins with her concern about not being able to feel sexual pleasure or desire and wanting to be desired by Tony, but her experiences go beyond her initial concerns. The sisterhood among the wives shows how women access power when they help each other to overcome difficulties in a society where males are privileged. In the end, Rami discovers how solidarity among women might be a crucial element for their empowerment.

In her study of the Bemba ethnic group in Zambia, Audrey Richards examined girls' initiation rites, providing some insights into these rituals' purposes. She explains that within the rites there may be an effort to change some circumstances and maintain others. That said, ceremonies are the expression of a group's effort to interfere in aspects that control social life. For instance, to understand the symbolism of rituals, it requires multiple interpretations because, as Richards suggests, rites are an effort 'to change the undesirable, or to maintain the desirable.'⁶

In *Niketche*, Rami and her co-wives perform together in an urbanised Mozambique not only to change the undesirable but also to maintain the desirable. The women get together to challenge patriarchy and to promote changes in women's lives, but also to maintain the friendships among women that are possible by preserving some aspects of their culture. From this perspective, the dance becomes an instrument of women's agency as well as a symbolic space to come to terms with the reconstruction of their subjectivity.

Niketche is set in the 1990s, after the civil war and the democratic elections, however, the protagonist struggles to come to terms with the legacy of Portuguese colonisation. When the Portuguese arrived in what is known today as Mozambique, they found bantu-speaking peoples who were organised into communities under the rule of chiefs who controlled the land and had religious authority. Before the seventeenth century, African kingdoms controlled a large area of Mozambique. The most powerful of them was the kingdom of Munemutapa, controlling a region from the southern bank of Zambesi River to Save River and into the highlands of contemporary Zimbabwe. Malawi Confederation was the second largest power in Mozambique, located northeast to the kingdom of Munemutapa. For the next four centuries, Portuguese entered some battles against the Munemutapa and the Malawi Confederation to take over the trade. After some years of conflict, Munemutapa ceded, thus acknowledging Lisbon's suzerainty in 1607. In 1632, Portuguese defeated the Malawian ruler. Despite their efforts to control the region, their presence decreased from seventeenth century on. In the eighteenth century, Indians controlled ivory trade, gold and tropical products. During the nineteenth century, traders from Brazil, the

⁵ Signe Arnfred, *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique: Rethinking Gender in Africa* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2011) 29.

⁶ Audrey Richards, *Chisungu. A Girl's Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Zambia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1956) 113.

Caribbean and the US traded 'more than one million slaves from Mozambique.'⁷ The presence of other foreign powers, such as the British, also constituted a threat to the Portuguese. During the conference of Berlin (1884-85), also known as the scramble of Africa, it was not easy for the Portuguese to claim Mozambique as its colony. European powers questioned Portuguese's authority to cease slave trade in the territory. Through military force, Portugal started the pacification of Mozambique and the colonial rule had three periods: 1902-26, when a corrupt and weak government built an economy dependent of South Africa, 1928-62, during Salazar's rule, a period of high exploitation of Mozambican resources to feed Portuguese industrial classes, 1962-75, the foundation of socialist party FRELIMO (Frente Liberal de Mozambique) [Mozambican Liberal Front] forced many reforms that precipitated the war of liberation.

Mozambique became independent on June 25, 1975. Frelimo had to handle many issues, such as illiteracy, poverty, racial and ethnic divisions. By attempting to promote unity, instead of tribalism, Frelimo not only maintained the Portuguese as the official language of the nation, it also disregarded religions, healers and cultural traditions. Renamo (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana) [National Resistance of Mozambique], a political party opposed to Frelimo, supported traditional institutions and recognised traditional healers. Renamo profited from this gap between Frelimo and traditional authorities to foment the dispute for power that resulted in a civil war.

When Rami says that she wants to learn the *niketche*, she counter-narrates nationalist policies by claiming her freedom to acknowledge cultural traditions as part of her identity. By performing it, Rami decolonises her culture, subverts traditions, and brings to light the significance of the symbolism and purposes of these ceremonies that give women opportunities to stay together and reflect on their condition. The women get together to challenge patriarchy and to promote changes in women's lives, but also to maintain the friendships among women that are possible by preserving some aspects of their culture. From this perspective, the dance becomes an instrument of women's agency as well as a symbolic space to come to terms with the reconstruction of their subjectivity. As a metonym for culture, the *niketche* becomes crucial for Rami's sense of identity. In this sense, Chiziane's novel makes a clear point that it is not possible to efface culture to embrace modernity, but that women should reconcile with culture by subverting and reinventing it in ways that will make it a suitable part of their lives.

Paulina Chiziane's story is not about victimisation or women's ever-lasting suffering from a cruel husband. It is about regeneration and women's agency. In his book, *Golden Cage: Regeneration in Lusophone African Literature and Culture* (1999), Niyi Afolabi states that though the term regeneration might not be a novelty in literature, when taking an African perspective, regeneration is strictly connected to degeneration, as (re)birth is inseparable from death.⁸ In the beginning of the novel, Rami feels dead inside when she discovers Tony's extra-conjugal relationships. When she enters her room, and faces her looking glass, she is not able to recognise the woman reflected in it. The image reflected in the mirror appears to be from another dimension. Rami cannot reconcile with the image, which might be an unrecognizable fragment of the self.

⁷ Isaacman and Isaacman, 18.

⁸ Niyi Afolabi, *Golden Cage: Regeneration in Lusophone African Literature and Culture* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999).

Unlike Rami, the self in the mirror appears to be free of constraints; the woman on the other side can make choices regarding her own life. The woman in the mirror interacts with Rami, gives advice, exhorts her, and, in many ways, guides Rami toward her subjectivity. As Rami accepts the image in the mirror as her lost self, she finds the power to make a difference in the lives of those women who have materially less than she does, are more marginalised in society, and who thus have fewer opportunities. Rami finds strength and decides to meet each one of her co-wives.

Stephanie Urdang, in her book *And Still They Dance* (1989), comments that ‘Dance is a vibrant expression of Mozambican zest of life.’⁹ Urdang remarks on the ways that dance and performing are important parts of Mozambican culture. People not only dance to celebrate, they also dance to fight and to heal. In *Niketche*, Rami is disconnected from her culture and initially she is unable to understand why the image in the mirror dances. The self in the mirror tells Rami that dance is healing. When the woman in the mirror starts to dance, the image makes Rami recollect her cultural memory. The protagonist does not recognise the image in the mirror that appears to be false and disconnected. She gets mad when the woman in the mirror starts to dance and asks: ‘Por que danças, tu, espelho meu?’ [Why do you dance, my mirror?] (18) The image reminds her that dance is part of a culture:

Danço sobre a vida e sobre a morte. Danço sobre a tristeza e a solidão. Piso para o fundo da terra todos os males que me torturam ... A dança é uma prece. Na dança celebro a vida enquanto aguardo a morte.

[I dance over life and death. I dance over sadness and loneliness. I send to the bottom of the earth all evils that tortured me ... Dance is a prayer. By dancing I celebrate life while awaiting death] (*Niketche*, 18).

Rami is in the liminal space. An educated woman from the south, she does not know how to perform African dances or rituals. The self in the mirror dances to remind her of her culture and the symbolism implied in performance and dance. Through memory, she reconstructs what is meaningful in her culture to reconcile with the self in the mirror. The image dances to educate Rami about the importance of continuity in a modern environment where changes become overwhelming. The self in the mirror reconnects her with culture. This reconnection makes her regenerate.

As the image forces Rami to remember the social function of dancing and performing in African cultures, Chiziane’s narrative not only regenerates cultural tradition through storytelling, but also makes a clear point about that cultural multiplicity might be part and parcel of subject-formation in the postcolonial Mozambique. By bringing women from several parts of Mozambique, the text not only highlights regional differences, but also focuses on women’s marginalisation.

The quest for women’s empowerment aligns *Niketche* with texts of other African women writers, such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Werewere Liking and others. Some of these women writers have acknowledged themselves as feminists or African feminists.¹⁰ The

⁹ Stephanie Urdang, *And Still They Dance: Women, War, and The Struggle for Change in Mozambique* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989) 45.

¹⁰ See Ama Ata Aidoo, *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories* (Feminist Press New York, 1970); *Changes: A Love Story* (Cox and Wyman, London, 1991); ‘The African Woman Today.’ *Sisterhood Feminisms and Power: From*

Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo envisages a feminist movement that would seek justice not only for African women but for all African people, suggesting an inclusive movement with a pan-Africanist vision that could integrate all people into the construction of the continent. For her, there is no possibility of African development if women do not take part in the project, thus, 'every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land.'¹¹ For Aidoo, African males should be part of the feminist struggle to empower women in the continent. In her creative writing, Aidoo often presents emerging female characters searching for new roles within their countries.

Perhaps one of the most coherent alternatives to feminism comes from the Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking. Rather than using terms like 'feminism' or 'African feminism' in her writings, Liking invented the word *misovire*, a French neologism that means 'male hater.' In *Elle Sera de Jaspe et de Corail* (1983), the *misovire* denounces bad governance in Africa, relating it to the inertia of male leaders and intellectuals. For Irene Assiba D'Almeida, Liking's invention is 'all the more important as the creation of the word also creates the function, and the possibility of another reality.'¹² It is worth noting that while Liking coined a new term to define women's struggle in contemporary African contexts, she had in mind a common struggle among African women; in her work, she avoids examining specific issues of her own country, but rather adopts a Pan-Africanist approach.

In *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), M. Jacqui Alexander remarks that the idea of a Global Feminism, a transnational feminism or the feminism of the majority, often blurs categories of race, culture, and sexuality.¹³ She declares that these discourses have been filled with binaries such as oppressor-oppressed. These feminist approaches explain Third World women's oppressions in terms of their relation to traditional practices, and they propose feminism as a way to save women from their own patriarchal traditions. Alexander warns of the dangers of subsuming the local into the global through applying the Western experience to the rest of the world. Certainly, if an ideal global feminism puts all women in one box in order to examine how they are oppressed by nature and culture, these women then become victims to be saved from their own backwardness and ignorance. Jacqui Alexander's work aligns with Chandra Mohanty's in advising us on how to conduct our practices from the position where local and global interests might converge and diverge, since categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality are differently nuanced in different locations.¹⁴

Nikette brings to light a bond of solidarity and sisterhood created among these women. The narrative deals with women's perspectives in the history of the decolonisation of Mozambique as women efface the country's boundary between north and south. While Rami takes advantage of her colonial education and privileged economic status to help northern women overcome

Africa to the diaspora. Ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998); Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, Trans. Modupé Bodé-Thomas.(Oxford: Heinemann, 1989); Werewere Liking, *Elle sera de Jaspe et de Corail* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1983).

¹¹ Aidoo, 'The African Woman Today', 39.

¹² Irene Assiba D'Almeida, *Francophone Women's writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994), 20

¹³ Alexander. M. Jacqui, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, and the Sacred*. (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005).

¹⁴Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

poverty, the women teach her to how to dance the *niketche*. By recreating traditional practices in urban Maputo, Mozambique, she appropriates and subverts cultural practices. While Rami and her co-wives unveil their sexual desires, Chiziane makes them public through the literary narrative. Sexual desire and pleasure are crucial to the narrative as they are turned into a parody to express other desires about women's inclusion as decision-makers in the public spheres of the postcolonial nation.

Niketche also questions government's policies that interfere in women's lives, such as polygamous marriages. Mozambican nationalists banished polygamy in the country, however African men, like Tony, reinvent the practice in different ways. He has five wives, each one from a different part of the country and from a different ethnic group. Rami recognises that Tony is not a polygamist husband, rather he takes advantage of a system to appropriate as many women as possible. She criticises the ways that Tony exploits the system: 'Que sistema agradável é a poligamia! Poligamia não é substituir mulher nenhuma... esperar que uma envelheça para trocá-la por outra' [What a nice system polygamy is! Polygamy is not replacing a woman ... expecting one to get older to exchange her for another one.] (96). Rami's criticism is not about polygamy but about the ways that her husband utilises the traditional practice. 'No caso do Tony são várias famílias dispersas com um só homem. Não é poligamia coisa nenhuma, mas uma imitação grotesca de um sistema que mal domina' [In Tony's case, there are several dispersed families with one man only. This is not Polygamy. It is nothing but a grotesque imitation of a system that he barely controls] (96).

The theme of polygamy in African literature has generated several debates with some writers positioning themselves in favour of polygamy, and others firmly denying the possibility of accepting it. In the introduction of *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (1986), Carole Boyce Davies outlined the main fundamentals of African feminism and recognised polygamy as part of a feminist agenda that seeks women's empowerment.¹⁵ However, other writers, such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, affirm that though some women defend the polygamous system by arguing that in traditional cultures a woman can benefit from co-wives helping with the household work, she firmly believes that there is no justification to maintain polygamy in postcolonial Africa, especially in the cities. She considers the system oppressive while suggesting that those women who accept it might be contributing to their own victimisation.¹⁶ Irene Assiba D'Almeida also suggests that those in the academic world tend to idealise polygamy, showing a positive side that does not often coincide with the lives of actual women who are generally forced to endure polygamy.

In African novels, this theme has been discussed, focusing on different aspects of the institution of polygamy. For instance, in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1989), the protagonist is victimised by an institution that seems to have lost its significance in urban Dakar. Modu, a powerful man, chooses a teenager to be his second wife and ultimately abandons his family. On the other hand, Binetou, his second wife, accepts the marriage as a viable way to gain a stable economic life. Mariama Bâ's novel does not acknowledge any positive aspects of polygamy and,

¹⁵ Carole Boyce Davies, 'Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism: *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (New Jersey Africa: World Press, 1986).

¹⁶ Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African Woman and Critical Transformations* (New Jersey: African World Press, 1982).

while Davies defends that women in Africa should search for a new definition of polygamy that fits in postcolonial African societies, Bâ says that every form of polygamy in an urban environment runs the risk of being distorted.

In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* (1991), the protagonist enters a polygamous relationship to have more freedom and sexual pleasure. After her divorce, Esi falls in love with Ali, a very charming and handsome married man. In this new relationship, she has a perfect space to express her sexual desires and the freedom to focus on her career. The polygamous relationship becomes the perfect site for Esi to combine all her aspirations; she has her house to herself and receives a man on days when she is willing to have a nice chat and a good night of love-making. Every time Ali comes to her house after his long absences, Esi is fulfilled sexually in a way she never felt before. The quality of sex that Esi has with Ali gives her security to accept Ali's proposal of marriage, becoming his second wife. Though Esi will be involved in a polygamous relationship, she is not the victimised wife who does not have the husband at home at all times. On the contrary, at the beginning she feels fulfilled by this kind of agreement. She finally has a perfect relationship in which she can be herself without having to deal with a man who interferes in her life. Ali is the perfect match for an independent woman with an established career. In her relationship with Ali, she attempts to combine 'gender equality with sexual desire.'¹⁷

By calling Tony's system a grotesque imitation of polygamy, Rami accuses her husband of unfairness. Tony manipulates his wealth and power to abuse polygamy, refusing to respect the traditions and rules that are intended to govern the system. In addition, he declares himself a Christian, further complicating his relationship to culture. Rami does not intend to fight polygamy; however, she struggles to combat its distortion and insists that if Tony is going to take many wives, he must recognise each woman, pay the dowry, and assist with all the children. For the wives, Tony needs to be genuinely polygamous; he has to respect the conventions of the system.

Clear that it is not polygamy but rather the breaking of polygamy's rules that is the issue, Rami unites all the wives and children, and introduces them to friends, family, and important members of the community such as the priest and Tony's co-workers during a celebration of Tony's birthday. All the family and important people are present in Rami's house, and she introduces the four wives, telling everybody that Tony is not the Christian he pretends to be. He is an African man, a guardian of African traditions, and a polygamist. Rami's husband is confronted with the contradictions in his own identity. Colonialism intended to produce a repetition of the European man, thus, Tony is, as Homi Bhabha suggests, 'a partial vision of the colonizer's presence'¹⁸ Race, culture, and history contribute to disturb Tony's postcolonial self; the fragmentation of his identity leads him to an unstable position. He is a polygamist who defends his cultural traditions, but, in the postcolonial Mozambique, he is also supposed to be a married, Christian man.

Rami, in satiric tone, compares Tony's polygamy with the national project proposed by Frelimo: 'Em matéria de amor o Tony simboliza a unidade nacional' [In matters of love, Tony

¹⁷ Sally McWilliams, 'Strange as It May Seem: African feminism in Two novels by Ama Ata Aidoo'; *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, eds. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Willentz (Trenton: African World Press 1999) 348.

¹⁸ Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man,' *Postcolonialisms. An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair (NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005) 68.

symbolises the national unity] (161). Tony's connection with women from different parts of Mozambique is significant to Rami, and she sarcastically calls him a national man, comparing him to the national unity. Chiziane's narrative deconstructs discourses of cultural integration central to national discourse. Frelimo's main project was to eliminate differences in order to pursue its national cohesion. However, it had to eliminate all forms of tribalism and any cultural aspect that they considered oppressive to people.

Frelimo spoke out against traditional practices such as polygamy and *lobolo* (dowry) that could hold women back, putting them in a position of subordination. Frelimo argued that 'just because a custom is African does not mean that it unquestionably enhances African life, and therefore fails to oppress.'¹⁹ To address women's issues, Frelimo supported OMM (Organização da Mulher Moçambicana) [Mozambican woman Organization] that functioned as an arm of the party. OMM backed many campaigns to end polygamy and *lobolo* in Mozambique. Despite Frelimo's and OMM's intentions to end women's oppression, some groups of women criticised the government, claiming that even though women participated in the revolution, they were excluded from the party leadership – high-ranking members of the party were all male. For most dissidents, Frelimo assimilated all differences within the country under the umbrella of a class struggle.

Conceição Osório suggests that Marxist struggle provided women with a formal space to claim equality, however women's voices in the revolutionary struggle did not translate into a change in gender relations.²⁰ Within the political party women did not occupy positions of power always given to males, thus, revealing the main contradiction within the party concerning gender discourse and practice as women continued to be subordinated to men even within the political party. Though women participated in the revolutionary struggle, they continued to face restrictions in gaining leadership positions in a party where all leaders were male such as in the Executive and Central Committee of Frelimo. As OMM rejected colonial policies and some traditional practices understood as oppressive to women, such as polygamy, payment of the dowry, initiation rites, and others, the abolition of these practices become part of the struggle to free women from the authority of patriarchy. However, inside the Marxist party women faced a system of exclusion where, as Osório affirms, 'forms of male domination were not called into question and that those in power relegated women to the role companion to committed men.'²¹

Kathleen Sheldon states that OMM and Frelimo's policies regarding traditional practices displeased many women, especially those women from the northern part of the country where most ethnic groups, such as Makonde and Makua, do not consider polygamy an oppressive institution as it is a way to provide women with an opportunity to marry and have a family.²² OMM and Frelimo's liberation agenda included the abolition of polygamy as part of the struggle to free women from oppression without giving those women the chance to choose which marriage arrangements they would find suitable to their situations. Concerning the policies regarding the initiation rites, OMM saw the rites as a way to teach women to be subservient, to perform roles as wives, and to serve their husbands, thus being a system that reproduced male

¹⁹ Urdang, 2002.

²⁰ Conceição Osório, 'Political Power in Mozambique and Women's Activism,' *Democratizing Democracy: Beyond the Liberal Democratic Canon*, Ed. Boaventura Sousa Santos (London: Verso, 2005).

²¹ Osório, 138

²² Sheldon, Kathleen, 'Women and Revolution. A Luta Continua,' *Women a Revolution in Africa, Asia and the New World*. Ed. Mary Ann Tétrault (Columbia: U of South Carolina, 1994).

domination. Contradictorily, some Mozambican women saw the rites as a female space where women form a community to exchange their experiences and learn from each other.

The government had a commitment to create policies and implement legislation to benefit women, such as maternity leave for 60 days with a pay and child care, however, these policies had limited effects as the legislation could not benefit those women who work in agriculture or who do not have paid employment. As most women worked in their small gardens and family plots, governmental policies could not benefit those who needed them most. For those women, policies did not grant any benefits and changes did not occur.

The war in the 1980s hardened women's lives because they were affected by the devastation of rural areas that contributed to poverty and displacement. Most of these women did not have the formal education needed to get a job in urban areas, thus they were stranded. The lack of education restricted opportunities for the majority of women who remained in poverty. In addition, austerity measures imposed by World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have made women's lives even more difficult. As Molará Ogundipe-Leslie affirms: 'Women in labor process became the 'proletariat' of the proletariats, becoming more subordinated in the new socioeconomic schemes'²³ While Rami's husband attempts to secure his privilege of having five wives or as many as he is able to support, he does not realise that his powerful situation is also a result of colonial history. Through his connection to the colonialists, he can blend into the spheres of power and acquire wealth and privilege. While the colonial enterprise tried to banish some traditional practices that safeguard male privilege, it also generated disparate economic conditions, calcifying gender inequities. Like Frelimo's nationalism, Tony's masculinity suppresses cultural difference. Because of his privileged situation as a high-ranking police officer, wealthy, and powerful, he is able to connect to each region of the country without running the risk of fragmentation – maintaining an apparent unity. He becomes the perfect symbol of the nation, a southern assimilated African man, educated, and wealthy who is able to forge an integration of diverse ethnic communities through appropriation. Nevertheless, Tony's identity is somewhat disturbing, because while his African identity gives him license to be polygamous, his Christianity identity thwarts it, imposing monogamy on him. Tony's African identity also becomes counterfeit in a postcolonial context where he is seen as an adulterous, rather than a polygamous, man. In many ways, Tony is forced to cope with his ambiguous identity that embodies multiple cultures – Mozambican/African and Portuguese. His privileged position enables his fragmentation. As an assimilated Christian African man, he is supposed to assume or flatten cultural difference, but his African culture marks difference and opposition to the European norm. Tony assumes a paradoxical role. While his identity has an irreconcilable aspect, he is also seen as an icon for national unification. This very project is destabilised by his African identity.

Mozambican government, after the decolonisation process, recognised and legitimised the Portuguese. For instance, the European language functioned as one of the means to cement and to promote the unity as different ethnic groups got together within the borders of the emerging nation. Frelimo decided to maintain Portuguese as the national official language. Like many other nationalist leaders across Africa, Frelimo opted not to choose one of the local languages to be the national language since the decision could instigate ethnic disputes. Some groups could argue that one ethnic group was being privileged to the detriment of others. Phillip Rothwell

²³ Ogundipe-Leslie, 108

claims that government of President Samora Machel enforced Portuguese language as the only language through which to imagine Mozambique.²⁴ Frelimo also believed that keeping Portuguese as an official language could connect Mozambique to other parts of the world, such as Brazil and other Lusophone colonies in Africa. Though Portuguese became the official language, at that time, only a few Mozambicans could learn the colonial language because the majority of the population did not have access to education. By avoiding linguistic multiplicity, nationalist government tried to avoid fragmentation. Chiziane appropriates the Portuguese language to write her story, thus imagining a nation where multiple cultures become acknowledged and legitimate. The European language, through her writing, becomes a tool to evidence Mozambican cultural diversity.

However, Chiziane's portrays Africa as fragmented and diverse as women's identities. Africa is metonymically represented as a woman who suffers exploration. Rami compares Tony's wives' destinies with the destiny of Mother Africa.

Há dias conheci uma mulher do interior da Zambézia. Tem cinco filhos já crescidos. O primeiro. Um mulato esbelto, é dos portugueses que a violaram durante a Guerra colonial. O Segundo, um preto, ... é fruto da outra violação dos guerrilheiros de libertação da mesma Guerra colonial. ... A primeira e a segunda vez foi violada, mas a terceira e a quarta entregou-se de livre vontade, porque se sentia especializada em violação sexual.

[I met a woman from the interior of Zambezia. She has five grown children. The first son is a slim mulatto from the Portuguese who raped her during the colonial war. The second, a black, ... the fruit of another violation, from the guerrilla war of liberation ... The first and second time I was violated, but the third and fourth I surrendered willingly, because I was a specialist in sexual violation.] (277)

The first son is a mulatto, a consequence of Portuguese invasion, the second one is an elegant Black, the consequence of another abuse. For Rami, the authors of the second violation are Africans themselves. She accuses the new government of continuing many of the Portuguese policies. The fifth child is certainly representative of democracy, when people have the chance to choose their leader. The raped woman is Africa, in general, and Mozambique, in particular. Rami parodies the comparison between Africa and women, a trope employed by colonialists and African male nationalists. For Rami, as Mother Africa, women are relegated to spheres of abstraction where their voices tend not to be heard. In Rami's analysis, Africa is as exploited, abused, and humiliated as African women themselves.

Nationalist rhetoric thus frequently utilised women's bodies as metaphors for the land, and their poems were hymns praising a beloved motherland, or Mother Africa, subjected to patriarchal power, thus creating a mythical 'African woman' who is always ready to sacrifice herself for the sons of her nations. Women's identities are connected to the land, or to mythical mothers, thus being 'virtually silent observers who simply fulfilled their destiny without questioning it or the structures that sanctioned the roles they were made to assume.'²⁵

²⁴ Phillip Rothwell, 'Mirroring Imperial Ending. Recognizing the Unknown in Lusophone texts,' *Hispania*, 85.3 (2002) 486-493.

²⁵ Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 5.

Niketche also challenges nationalist discourses that reinforced the patriarchal concept of the African continent as a motherland where her children come back to be nurtured and get strength. Chiziane's perspective evidences Africa as a place of suffering, especially for women. While women may not despise their cultural roots, some also cannot accept the image of a fertile mother who has been often present in many nationalist narratives, as is the case in Senghor's Negritude writings. As men struggle against the injustices of colonialism and search for the spirituality of Mother Africa to give them strength to fight the colonisers, women's struggles are much more complex. Elleke Boehmer suggests that to women of color, motherland might not mean 'home' because they need 'to resist the triple oppression or marginalization.'²⁶ Boehmer emphasises the ways that nationalist politics in Africa excluded the discussion about gender hierarchies and the need for female participation in the spheres of power. Though women participated in struggles of independence, their efforts were frequently not recognised by their male counterparts who became the leaders of the newly independent nations. In these masculine and nationalist narratives, women might occupy an erotic place or a spiritual place, as mothers of the nation or Mother Africa. In these cases, the subjects of the nations are the male heroes. When the trope of Mother Africa is applied to women, women's function may be to nurture the males who will be in charge of constructing the new nations.

Chiziane's novel examines some traditions that tend to function to the detriment of women, as is the case of the levirate marriage or *kutchinga*. During one of Tony's escapades to Paris with another woman, his family thinks he is dead and Rami executes all the rituals of widow. One of these practices establishes that women should go through the *kutchinga* ritual. In this ritual, the husband's eldest brother must have sexual relations with the widow eight days after the death of her husband. In the novel, Rami complains about the rituals she has to go through, such as cutting her hair, being locked in a room and so on, but the protagonist comments that the best part will be the *kutchinga* and she will do everything possible to have sexual pleasure. During the funeral, Rami knows already that Tony is not dead, but all she wants is for her husband to not return before the *kutchinga*. The *kutchinga* is ironically reversed and becomes a moment of sexual pleasure:

Olho para o Levy com olhos gulosos. Ele será o meu purificador sexual, a decisão já foi tomada, ele acatou-a com prazer ... Daqui a oito dias vou-me despir. Dançar niketche só para ele.

[I look at Levy with hungry eyes. He will be my sexual cleanser; the decision has already been taken; he obeyed with pleasure. Soon I'll be in his arms during kutchinga ceremony. I will dance the niketche only for him.] (220)

Rami reinvents the *kutchinga* by affirming that she will make sure to enjoy the moment with the brother-in-law. The *kutchinga* ritual is a way to exorcise the dead, giving the partner freedom to reinitiate her sexual life. It is a cleansing ritual in which the widow disconnects from the deceased husband. Through the *kutchinga* the widow inaugurates a new life, thus the ritual is part of the purification. As Audrey Richards suggests, the ritual is a way to 'take the death off

²⁶ Elleke Boehmer, 'Stories of Women and Mothers: Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of Flora Nwapa: *Motherlands: Black Women's Writings from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, Ed. Susheila Nasta (London: Women's Press, 1991).

the living partner.²⁷ It is a ritual to remove the deceased's spirit from the living spouse.

Nevertheless, Rami subverts the ritual and takes advantage of the moment to have sexual pleasure. By deconstructing the ritual's function, Rami empowers herself and becomes subject. The ritual would not be complete without the dance practiced by women during the ceremony. In an affirmation of her newly found sense of self, Rami – despite her age and her weight – says she will dance the *niketche* and Levi will desire her, while she has sexual pleasure. Through her dance, Rami achieves her liberation in terms of sexuality and empowerment. She also finds her voice on issues concerning the continuity and change of African traditions in a society where male privilege is secured by any and all means.

Conclusion

Though the allegory of women uncovering their bodies and unveiling their sexual desires, Chiziane's narrative deals with the construction of women's subjectivity and the inclusion of their voices in national affairs. As female characters subvert traditions, they denounce the incoherence of political policies when dealing with some circumstances of women's daily lives. In the novel, while polygamy or girls' initiation rites seemed to be abolished to protect women's rights, patriarchal privilege is still ingrained in the society. Rami realises that only through an alliance among women is it possible to challenge patriarchy. Recreating her initiation rites affords Rami a space to be among women as a way of searching for a symbolic compensation. As Richards points out, rituals also function to heal daily life's repressions or 'as symbolic compensation for the unpleasant roles which society may assign to an individual or group.'²⁸

With the recreation of the rites, Rami attempts not only to compensate herself but also to compensate the group of women who have to cope with the loss of power. Through the exposure of the rites, Rami brings to light a broader discussion about women's freedom and choices. Women should be the ones to come together as a collective and decide what to do with culture or how to perform the postcolonial dance. As a woman who received colonial education and who speaks Portuguese, Rami attempts to restore her culture while coming to terms with her hybrid self: a self that pertains to a liminal space where ambivalence becomes part and parcel of the construction of subjectivity.

Rami realises that poverty leads women to accept Tony's polygamy system because they do not have other means to survive. When women become financially independent, they break away from Tony, recover their voices, and restore their subjectivities. Most importantly, they create a community of women from diverse regions of the country and re-imagine a nation where cultural diversity is part and parcel of the identity construction of Mozambique. In Chiziane's narrative, the postcolonial nation, instead of being a space for cultural suppression, becomes a place of inclusion and cultural negotiation.

As women freed themselves from Tony, the only wife who stayed with her husband was Rami, the legitimate one according to Christianity. But even Rami was not the same, she was pregnant with a baby that was fruit of the *kutchinga*, the fruit of sexual pleasure. The new Rami is a different woman, an 'impure' woman. The baby represents sexual freedom for Rami, while Tony experiences Rami's pregnancy as another humiliation. Both Rami and Tony are faced with

²⁷ Richards, 34.

²⁸ Richards, 118.

negotiating their ambivalent selves as they learn to perform new roles in a postcolonial environment.

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