

Writing in the Margins: The Construction of Non-Western Knowledge in Jorge Amado's *Tenda dos Milagres*

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ABSTRACT

This article takes an angle on Amado's novel *Tenda dos Milagres*, focusing on one aspect: a comparison of the representation of Western and non-Western knowledge. The analysis includes the way in which Amado addresses the 'double bind' identified by Mignolo, that is, the dilemma of whether to consider non-Western cultural practices as essentially different or similar to Western ones, and thereby either to exclude them from academic study or to assimilate them too easily and negate difference.

Key Words: post-colonialism, double-bind, Brazil, Amado, Mignolo

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial theorists have been extremely conscious of the role of literature in the formation and dissemination of Western colonial/imperial discourse. Said (1979, 2-3) argues that since the late eighteenth century some European literary works alongside works from scientific disciplines such as Philosophy, Archaeology and Geography began to create a distinction between the West and the Orient that was part of a tactic of restructuring and dominating the Orient. Moore-Gilbert (1997, 8) observes that postcolonial research on English literature canon have contributed by showing its importance in the formation and consolidation of values underlying overseas expansion.

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Such approaches are based on the understanding that textuality, more than a representation of ideological values, can be used politically to change reality (Bhabha 1994, 23). In a similar position, both Said (1979, 9) and Bhari (2003, 14) argue that literature can only be understood if studied together with society, bringing together text and context in order to see the mutual influence of politics and literary works.

While postcolonial analysis initially focused on writers that either lived or were from Western countries, such as Defoe, Conrad and Kipling, soon authors from other countries began to be read and reread through this framework (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 8). Among the diverse scholarship produced on authors from non-Western countries that deal with their native countries, I could cite a few examples that analyses themes related to this article. Bhari (2003) devoted one chapter of her book to complex analyses of the transformation of themes like migrancy, hybridity and identity in Salman Rushdie's books. She paid special attention to Rushdie's view of hybridity, who explores the danger of purist thinking and stress the relations between cultural and biological hybridity (153).

Hybridity is also studied by Hogan (2004), who focussed on ideas related to pure and plural identities in postcolonial literature. One chapter of his book is devoted to Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, where he analysed Tutuola's attempt to preserve Yoruba oral traditions in a written text and the need for such preservation in the face of Christian expansion (125). Hogan argued that while there is a concern to preserve native traditions, Tutuola is conscious that it is necessary to reshape these traditions to make them accessible to a new audience. Instead of seeing this reshaping as acculturation, Hogan maintained that traditions are always refashioning themselves in order to stay alive (126).

In a similar vein, Huggan (1989) analysed the writer Wilson Harris' proposition that the literature from colonized countries is situated in between two opposing movements. On one hand the 'deconstruction of the social text of European colonialism' (123) is necessary in order to achieve independent literature. On the other hand, it is not possible to ignore the European influence in these countries. For Huggan, postcolonial literature should avoid a search for essentialism and acknowledge European influence, taking hybridism of native and colonial culture as a transitional step in their development (127-128).

These examples introduce the discussion that is going to be developed in this article. My aim is to understand how non-Western knowledge is constructed in Jorge Amado's *Tenda dos Milagres*. My argument is that the novel can be read as an intense dialogue between Western and

non-Western knowledge that re-evaluates non-Western knowledge. The latter is used in this article not to express a complete denial of Western knowledge, but a kind of knowledge that is mainly Afro-Brazilian, popular in its origins.

TENDA DOS MILAGRES'S BACKGROUND

The novel can be briefly summarized as a collection of different narrators' opinions and fragments of texts that reconstruct, from different angles, the life and death of Pedro Archanjo, a man for whom the first mention is an extract from a police report that says: 'Pardo, paisano e pobre – tirado a sabichão e a porreta' (Amado 1970, 14). This comment epitomises the racial and social prejudices that Archanjo faces during his life and prevents his books, "apenas quatro livrinhos, e o mais volumoso não alcança sequer as duzentas páginas" (22) from being acknowledged. It is only in 1968, 25 years after his death, when an American Nobel Prize winner 'discovers' Archanjo's books, that society begins to recognise his contribution to the understanding of African influence on Brazilian culture.

The novel freely crosses between reality and fiction, allowing Archanjo to interact with historical characters, such as the *capoeira* masters Pastinha and Bigode de Seda, and fictional ones, such as Lídio Corro, a craftsmen who is his best friend and runs the *Tenda dos Milagres*, and Rosa de Oxalá, the exuberant woman that captivates many men and is Archanjo's greatest passion.

Other characters are heavily inspired by real people, such as Nino Argolo, Archanjo's nemesis. Argolo is a caricature of Nina Rodrigues, a physician, ethnologist and lecturer at the Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia who stated that the mixture of races leads to degeneracy and supported racist policies based on allegedly scientific theories.

In a dialectical conflict,¹ after reading racist theories of the character Nino Argolo (theories popular in many real academic institutions at the beginning of the 20th century (Oliveira 2006, 12)), Archanjo is compelled to write another side of the story (or history), one in which African influence is seen as a valuable contribution to Brazilian culture. In setting this aim for his main character, Amado undertakes a re-evaluation of non-Western knowledge.

While Archanjo is an attentive observer of popular culture, a *capoeira*

1 'A princípio tinha de trancar os dentes para prosseguir na leitura de racistas confessos e, pior ainda, dos envergonhados. Apertava os punhos: teses e afirmações soavam como insultos, eram bofetadas, surras de chicote' (Amado 1970, 229).

player, an influential member of *Candomblé* (a fusion of African religions), and the leader of an *Afoxé* (a carnival group with African religious influences), he does not reject Western knowledge, represented in the novel by the *Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia*, its lectures and European scientific and philosophical ideas. Having no means of engaging in formal education, Archanjo learns how to read and write by himself. He bases his views on Western frameworks of research and thought, writing four academic books on Afro-Brazilian traditions. For Richardson (2000, 21) Archanjo embodies

Simultaneously the African and the European in that he is at once a revered figure in the African religious cult of Salvador and an accomplished scholar of ethnography, clearly a European-oriented branch of the human sciences. [...] Like his racial ancestry itself, Pedro's intellectual and spiritual composition is thoroughly miscegenated and combines Africa and Europe in equal measure.

In real life, popular and African cultures were strongly repressed in the time in which the novel is set, at the beginning of the 20th century (Vieira 1989). Amado brought this reality to the novel pointing out that newspapers treated African culture as vicious (Amado 1970, 220), police destructed African religious temples (*terreiros*) (269), forbidding their cultural celebrations (274), and academics like Argolo only recognise Western culture and thought (120).

Amado constantly mocked Argolo's racist views (165, 292, 321, 325, 346), making clear his intention to fight such prejudice. Closely related to this is Amado's concern in re-evaluating non-Western knowledge. The *tenda* that gives title to the book is a place where undervalued, forbidden popular knowledge is preserved (20), and the *tenda* is compared to the centre of a university (15).

A DOUBLE BIND

However, in order to re-evaluate non-Western knowledge Amado had to answer a question that is generally posed to postcolonial literature (Huggan 1989, 123): how to re-evaluate this knowledge that is so different from Western knowledge without denying its particularities. Or, as Mignolo (2001, 160) puts it

Western categories of thought put non-Western categories (and the distinction

I am making here is a result of the colonial difference) in a double bind. Either non-Western cultural practices are so different from Western ones that they could not be considered properly philosophy, literature, history, religion, science, or what have you. Or, on the contrary, in order to be recognized, they have to become similar and assimilated to Western conceptualization of cultural practices and social organization.

To be considered as a 'proper' category of thought, it has to be similar to—and be understood through—, Western categories. However, by doing so, non-Western categories of thought lose their particularities. This is the 'double bind' presented by Mignolo, and Amado was aware of it, proposing an alternative to the extremes presented by Mignolo; a re-evaluation of non-Western knowledge that did not deny its particularities. To do so Amado adopted two strategies. The first was to refute rigid differences between non-Western and Western knowledge by showing they are not essential or pure categories, but mixed, as Oliveira (2006) notices. While there is a distinction in the novel between a 'popular culture' with African influences (Amado 1970, 36, 220), and the knowledge of 'academia', heavily influenced by European ideas (253), the distinction should not be taken as a reference to a pure, essential knowledge (either African or European). That is so because the idea of mixture, both racial and symbolic, is obsessively presented throughout the book in many different ways. Archanjo, for instance, is often called *pardo* (mixed person with brown skin) and says about himself: 'Sou um mestiço, tenho do negro e do branco, sou branco e negro ao mesmo tempo' (316). He also finds out that Argolo's ancestors were Black, and shows in his book *Apartamentos Sobre a Mestiçagem nas Famílias Baiunas* that 'na Bahia somos todos mulatos' (346).

The novel has many other examples in which racial and symbolic mixture overlap, such as in this complex passage: 'O Oxossi de Agnaldo é um jagunço do sertão. Não o será também o São Jorge do santeiro? Seu capacete mais parece chapéu de couro e o dragão participa do jacaré e da caapora de reisado' (19). In *Umbanda* (a religion that embraces *Candomblé*, Christianity, Indigenous religions, among others) the African God *Oxossi* is associated with Saint George, a figure of great importance in popular Christianity. In the hands of the craftsman Agnaldo, *Oxossi* also resembles a typical figure from the Northeastern countryside, *jagunço*, and, in addition, to two important figures in indigenous cosmologies, the crocodile (compared to the dragon) and the mythical *caapora* (*Oxossi*/Saint George). African, European and Indigenous beliefs are mixed in a single image, making reference to the diffuse idea that Brazil is a mixture of three races (see the influential treatment of this idea by Ribeiro, 1995).

Nonetheless, Archanjo is the character that best synthesises mixture. When asked: ‘Como lhe é possível, mestre Pedro, conciliar tantas diferenças, ser ao mesmo tempo o não e o sim?’; he says: ‘Pedro Archanjo Ojuobá, o leitor de livros e o bom de prosa, o que conversa e discute com o professor Fraga Neto e o que beija a mão de Pulquéria, o iyalorixá, dois seres diferentes, quem sabe o branco e o negro? Não se engane, professor, um só. Mistura dos dois, um mulato só’ (Amado 1970, 316). His very surname (Archangel) is a reference to a hybrid mythical being with animal wings and human shape. He is also called the vice-chancellor of the ‘university’ of *Pelourinho* (20), and learns from both academic and popular institutions, as stated in this extract: ‘Aos trinta e dois anos, exatamente em 1900, Pedro Archanjo foi nomeado bedel da Faculdade de Medicina e assumiu seu posto no Terreiro’ (117).

While hybridism can be seen in the novel as a strategy to fight prejudice, and, by extension, to repositioning non-Western knowledge, it was also necessary to point out the particularities of non-Western knowledge. And that is precisely Amado’s second strategy, one in which he uses Western terms to re-evaluate the prejudiced against non-Western knowledge and, at the same time, explains this form knowledge and its particularities.

Amado’s undertaking is evident in the first sentence of the book, in which *Pelourinho* is compared to a Western place of excellence for the production and preservation of knowledge: ‘No amplo território do Pelourinho, homens e mulheres ensinam e estudam. Universidade vasta e vária, [...] onde homens e mulheres trabalham os metais e as madeiras, utilizam ervas e raízes, misturam ritmos, passos e sangue [...]’ (15).

Stating that *Pelourinho*, historically a poor area of Salvador where Afro-Brazilian culture has survived despite all hardships, was a place of learning, a university, was a radical proposition. It challenged the prejudice that for centuries non-Western cultural expression and forms of thought suffered. At the same time Amado made clear that this popular, Afro-Brazilian university had its own disciplines, such as craft (*metais* and *madeiras*), alternative medicine (*ervas e raízes*), music (*ritmos*), and dance. Teaching does not happen in classrooms, but in the *Tendas dos Milagres* or in the *capoeira* school (120).

The story’s main character, Archanjo, called the vice-chancellor of this university of *Pelourinho*, learns from both official and popular institutions: “Aos trinta e dois anos, exatamente em 1900, Pedro Archanjo foi nomeado bedel da Faculdade de Medicina e assumiu seu posto no Terreiro”. Again combining a broad sense of mixture and revaluation of non-Western knowledge, Amado suggests that distinct cultural practices and thoughts

can coexist, for Archanjo: “Até o último dia de sua vida aprendeu com o povo e tomou notas nas cadernetas (230)”]; and “Não deixou de viver com intensidade e paixão, de pesquisar no cotidiano da cidade e do povo. Apenas, aprendeu também nos livros e, investigando sobre um tema central, enveredou por múltiplos caminhos do conhecimento e fez-se capaz.” (220).

Here we see Amado’s alternative to what Mignolo called a ‘double bind’. Non-Western and Western knowledge are given the same status, but, at the same time, their particularities are preserved in the description. What is proposed in *Tenda dos Milagres* is an alternative that goes between the extremes presented by Mignolo: an evaluation of non-Western knowledge that does not deny its specificities.

Another example of such a strategy is found in the description of the *Tenda dos Milagres*, a place where

[N]ascem as idéias, crescem em projetos e se realizam nas ruas, nas festas, nos terreiros. Debatem-se assuntos relevantes, a sucessão de mães e pais-de-santo, cantigas de fundamento, a condição mágica das folhas, fórmulas de ebós e de feitiços. Ali se fundam ternos de reis, afoxés de carnaval, escolas de capoeira, acertam-se festas, comemorações e tomam-se as medidas necessárias para garantir o êxito da lavagem da Igreja do Bonfim e do presente da Mãe D’água. A Tenda dos Milagres é uma espécie de Senado, a reunir os notáveis da pobreza, assembléia numerosa e essencial. Ali se encontram e dialogam iyalorixás, babalaôs, letrados, santeiros, cantadores, passistas, mestres de capoeira, mestres de arte e ofícios, cada qual com seu merecimento (117).

The *tenda* is referred to as a type of senate, as the ‘reitoria dessa universidade popular’ (20). However, Amado observed that this senate is not made up from the *nobreza* but from notables of *pobreza*. The projects discussed in this *reitoria* are not academic, but Afro-Brazilian celebrations. The teachings are *cantigas*, and one of its subjects is the magical property of plants in the use of spells and *ebós* (offerings to divinities). Despite the diversity of knowledge, all are placed at the same level and respected (‘cada qual com seu merecimento’, 117). The concern of attributing distinct knowledge with the same level of importance is also expressed in the passage: ‘Nas barracas de folhas, os obis e os orobôs, as mágicas sementes rituais somam-se à medicina’ (19), in which popular medicine is set side by side with Western practices.

CONCLUSION

In engaging in a discussion developed from postcolonial theory, this article proposed to analyse a work by a ‘marginal’ (Hooks 1990) writer and what he has to say about these very ‘margins’. Amado skilfully used the fact of being an author from a ‘peripheral’ country to his favour in a move that goes close to Hook’s (1990) idea that living on the margins allow people to look “both from the outside in and from the inside out [...] remind[ing] us of the existence of a whole universe [...] made up of both margin and center.” (341).

Postcolonial theory was the starting point of this discussion as framework to analyse a book that challenges a Western conceptualization of knowledge that “erased the possibility of even thinking about a conceptualization and distribution of knowledge “emanating” from other local histories [...]” (Mignolo 2002, 59). More specifically, this article aimed at understanding how non-Western forms of knowledge are constructed in Jorge Amado’s *Tenda dos Milagres*, and, in doing so, highlighting how he evaluates and explains this non-Western knowledge based in Western categories. It is argued here that Amado sought a more harmonious coexistence than a radical cut of Western influence, as proposed, for instance, by Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa, and Ihechukwu (1983).

As the examples shown above, Amado was conscious of the challenge of re-evaluating knowledge that has historically shown prejudice by many sectors of society. He faced the problem shared by other postcolonial literature of measuring Western influence in the construction of non-Western knowledge, and developed strategies that gave it a new position. In this task, I argue that he employed two strategies. The first was a refutation of a pure division between Western and non-Western knowledge. The second was a re-evaluation of non-Western knowledge that went together with a detailed description of its particularities. Although he used Western terms (university, senate, medicine, literature, among others) to put non-Western at the same level as Western knowledge, he informed the particularities of non-Western knowledge, even using words from African languages (*ebós, iyaborixás, babalaós*, among others), and popular terms (*like terreiros, tiririca de babado para ressaca, quebra-pedra rins*); including capoeira songs (15-18) and extracts from cordel literature (17) in the book in order to let this Afro-Brazilian, popular knowledge speak for itself. Instead of being trapped in the double bind observed by Mignolo (2001, 160), Amado proposed a third way, an alternative in which Western and non-Western knowledge are believed to be equally important, but specific in their own characteristics.

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