

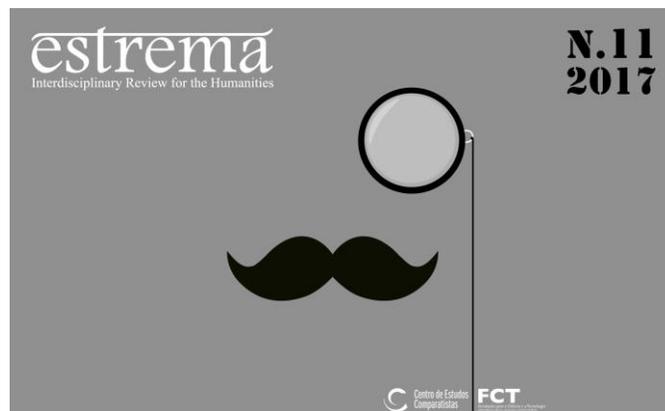
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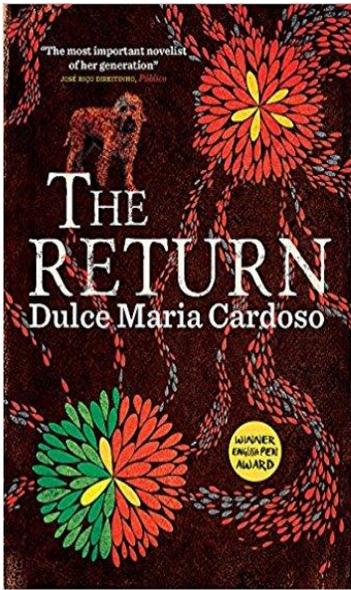
BOOKREVIEW

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**Cardoso, Dulce Maria, *The Return*, Translated from the Portuguese by Ángel Gurría-Quintana, London, MacLehose Press, 2016, 272 pp., ISBN: 978-0-85705-432-6, £14.99 Hardback.**

Translator's Preface. *The Return*.

Bruno Mazolini de Barros<sup>1</sup>



Dulce Maria Cardoso is one of the main writers in the body of Portuguese literature of the early 21st century. Her novels demonstrate the strength of her inventiveness and the boldness of her creative choices, both by the way she chooses to narrate, and by the characters she develops. Ms. Cardoso's writing reveals inner worlds in conflict with external reality, addressing issues such as identity, family, betrayal, grief— all of them subordinate to the relentless action of time.

Although Ms. Cardoso's writing has significant psychological density, the reading is fluid, giving us access to beings who are, each in their own way, misfits in the world in which they live: such as an unnamed liar with a phobia of insects, sustained by his ex-wife and with "the nails of a dog", in her first

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novel *Campo de Sangue*; an obese woman, a seller of wax in a time of laser hair removal, who has casual sex with truck drivers, in *Os meus sentimentos*; later, in her third novel, *O chão dos pardais*, we meet a myriad of characters who really cannot communicate deeply, and despite the relationships they share, it is difficult for them to gain access to each other. Despite the strangeness of these lives, the reader is able to become very close to all the creatures presented by this Portuguese writer.

In *The Return* – a translation of *O retorno* (2011) published in the summer of 2016 – Dulce Maria Cardoso gives us Rui, born in Angola and living in Portugal, who struggles to embrace a new place as his motherland. In the previous novels, there are moments that take the readers back to the childhood and adolescence of some of the characters - the conflicts and losses and the improbable connections and disconnections unleashed by these. In *The Return*, we find the adolescence itself, in the powerful narrative voice of the young Rui, structured in stream of consciousness.

In this novel, themes already developed by Ms. Cardoso are intermingled with the collapse of Portuguese Angola and the lives of “returnees”, the Portuguese and their descendants who returned to Portugal, or went there for the first time, in the famous TAP Airlift of 1975. Rui travels to Portugal without his father, and has to share a hotel room with his sister and mother. In this hotel room, he has the unaccountable feeling that he must take the position of head of the family.

The adolescent is not able to enjoy the environment with his family and friends, and when he assumes a school routine, Rui realizes that integration in

Portugal will not be easy. His idea of what Portugal is, and even his way of speaking (and being) Portuguese come into question.

His new situation is strange to him, and also for others: Rui is part of a group that is discriminated against by some local Portuguese. The majority of the returnees did not have the minimum to ensure being worthy of belonging—a house in Portugal. Housed in hotels, they were isolated communities. In addition, according to the Angolan people, Rui, born in Angola, is Portuguese; to the Portuguese people in Portugal, Rui is “African”.

This is how, in Portugal, he discovers that he is someone different:

“We were told that I.A.R.N. was the name for the Institute for the Support of Returnee Nationals. We are now returnees. We don't know what it really means to be returnees, but that's what we are. Returnees. We and all the others who are arriving from over there”. (78)

Of course, Rui had never left Portugal, but he returned. The collective history changes the course of his personal history, putting him in an identity conflict between himself and other's perception of him.

In the hotel, and between tours and escapes with his friends, as well as in his incursions of memory, Rui revisits relationships and establishes new bonds, even though some ambiguous, in his new-old motherland. Gradually, he becomes aware of his new condition, which he sometimes has a hard time with, and realizes the effects of the colonial war on his compatriots in the IARN building: “There were returnees from every corner of the empire; the empire was there, in that waiting room, a tired empire, in need of house and food, a defeated and humiliated empire, an empire no-one wanted to know about” (87).

In the novel, the entire construction of historical background intersects with the existential situation of the character, and in this context, it is significant to note the use of cultural elements brought out in *The Return*, especially the relationship the young guy articulates to music, cinema and characters from television. All of these elements end up functioning as tools with which Rui reads and lives the world into which he has been inserted; they are not just historical references in the novel.

When it is time to leave Angola for Portugal, and there is not much space to take all his belongings, he calculates:

I won't be able to take my collections of the *The Adventures of Kit Carson* or *Captain America* but I can take my poster of Brigitte Bardot and my signed poster of Riquita [...] When I was a boy I used to kiss Brigitte Bardot's poster [...]. I should take my "La Décadance" record, [...]. When "La Décadance" is playing we can feel up the girls and fumble with their bra hooks. (23)

In Portugal, he realizes one of the positive aspects of his new life, when he sees that a soft-porn movie, forbidden in Angola, is openly shown in Lisbon: "Gegé and Lee won't believe that here in the Motherland, families go to the matinee to watch films like *Emmanuelle*. I bet that doesn't happen in Brazil or in South Africa, it must be one of the few things that are better about the Motherland" (259-260).

But in middle of the adjustments to his new life and memories and reference points of Brazilian music, Beatles and radio soap operas, the conflict between Rui's personal and collective history still bothers him. This is clearly exposed when, being bombed by different ideas about the returnees and the

decay of Portugal, he still misses his father and loses hope of seeing him again:

Not all men are wearing black ribbons. João the Communist isn't, "those lands do not belong to us, its only fair that they are handed back to the people we stole them from", and on the television some revolutionary is saying, the empire is coming to an end, our shame is coming to an end, today we can say we are proud of Portugal, long live Portugal.

I'm not wearing a black ribbon, I don't know what's fair, I feel no pride, I feel no shame, and I don't even know what they're talking about. The only thing I know is that they killed Father. (157)

This stream of consciousness, revealing the anxieties and discoveries of the adolescent aligns *The Return* with the canon of books such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, which were successful in creating a teenage narrative voice. This novel can also be read according to the five stages of grief – a grief of the possible loss of a father, and the grief of the loss of the homeland. It is well-balanced between moments of the family's suffering and tender moments of teenage sensibility.

Either way, in the face of their experience, the adolescent Rui, his mother, and sister, adopt the most varied strategies in order to consider, deny, deceive or recreate reality. Thus, within the novel, the characters unfold other smaller narratives. These stories, which they tell for themselves or for others – a pantheon of memories and projections of the future, driven by hope and fear, are examples of the insight of Dulce Maria Cardoso, not only in relation to the complexity of her character's existence, but also in relation to the complexity of what we call *life*.

## Review of *The Return*, by Dulce Maria Cardoso

**Dulce Maria Cardoso** was born in Portugal, in 1964, in the province of Trás-os-Montes, and spent part of her childhood in Angola. She has a law degree and currently lives in Lisbon. She published the novels *Campo de Sangue*, in 2001, *Os meus sentimentos*, in 2005, *O chão dos pardais*, in 2009, and *O retorno*, in 2011. She published two collections of short stories, *Aténós*, in 2008, and *Tudo são histórias de amor*, in 2014, and adapted stories from the Bible for children. Each of her novels received different prizes, including the Prémio da União Europeia para a Literatura. In 2012, France awarded her the prestigious title Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Her literary works have been published not only in Portugal, but also in Brazil, France, Italy, Argentina, the Netherlands and England.