

A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION IN REFERENCE TO UALALAPI

A relação entre história e ficção a propósito da obra Ualalapi

AMARANTE, Natália¹, ROWLAND, Lucy², CARDOSO, Ângela³, & SOARES, Luisa Castro⁴

Abstract

This short essay examines the relationship between historical and fictional writing, drawing parallels on their shared reliance upon narrative. Centred on the novel *Ualalapi* (1987,) by Mozambican author Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, the analysis is set primarily in the context of post-colonial Mozambique. It also considers broader aspects of historical writing, such as omission, oral history, perspective, and the concept of an "obtainable truth". In its discussion of *Ualalapi*, the essay critically analyses how history is retold, and how certain figures are elevated and calls for more critical engagement with historical narratives. The essay also examines how history can be manipulated to support nation-building and shape a national narrative. Alongside *Ualalapi*, more recent scholarship has been incorporated to enhance the analysis, drawing from both literary critics and historians. Ultimately, the essay seeks to show how history is in fact a controlled narrative, and that the two forms of writing are not as distinct as they may first appear.

Resumo

Este artigo investiga a relação entre a escrita histórica e a ficção, evidenciando os paralelismos entre ambos os registos e a sua interconexão, bem como a sua manifestação em estruturas narrativas, como o romance. Com base na obra *Ualalapi* (1987), do escritor moçambicano Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, a análise centra-se principalmente no contexto pós-colonial de Moçambique, abordando também questões mais amplas da escrita histórica, como a omissão, a oralidade, a perspetiva e a noção de uma "verdade alcançável". A partir de uma leitura crítica de *Ualalapi*, no artigo reflete-se sobre a forma como a história é reinterpretada, como determinadas figuras são enaltecidas e faz-se uma análise crítica das narrativas históricas. Adicionalmente, discute-se como a história pode ser instrumentalizada para promover a construção de nações e moldar narrativas nacionais. Para enriquecer a discussão, são integradas pesquisas recentes de críticos literários e historiadores. Em última instância, o artigo visa demonstrar como a história é, em grande medida, uma narrativa controlada, e que a distinção entre escrita histórica e ficção é menos evidente do que pode parecer à primeira vista.

Key-words: *Controlled History, Mozambican Literature, Post-colonial Literature, Historical Narrative*

Palavras-chave: *História controlada, Literatura moçambicana, Literatura pós-colonial, Narrativa histórica.*

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¹ MARIA NATÁLIA AMARANTE DE SOUSA PINHEIRO - Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, PORTUGAL. Email: namarant@utad.pt

² LUCY ROWLAND – Reino Unido. Email: lucyrowland12@icloud.com

³ ANGELA CARDOSO – Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, PORTUGAL. Email: indi-visivel@hotmail.com

⁴ MARIA LUÍSA CASTRO SOARES - Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, PORTUGAL. Email: isoares@utad.pt

INTRODUCTION

“A História é uma ficção controlada”

Agustina Bessa-Luís.

At one point in Penelope Lively’s 1987 novel, *Moon Tiger*, the main character Claudia Hampton muses:

And when you and I talk about history, we don’t mean what actually happened, do we? The cosmic chaos of everywhere, all the time? We mean the tidying up of this into books, the concentration of the benign historical eye upon years and places and persons. History unravels; circumstances, following their natural inclination, prefer to remain ravelled (Lively 1987, p.6)⁵.

Whilst Lively’s plotline shares little with Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa’s novel *Ualalapi*, this quote certainly feels pertinent, due to its explanation of history. Also published in 1987, the novel *Ualalapi* greatly explores the definition of what history is, its power, how it is used, and, as Claudia Hampton states, what is omitted. Khosa has made it clear that, when writing *Ualalapi*, he had a clear purpose in mind, and that was to question the ruling party FRELIMO’s promotion of Ngungunhane, emperor of the Gaza Empire from 1884-1895 as a national hero. However, the text goes beyond this, as Khosa not only discusses the glorification of Ngungunhane, but also calls in to question history itself, and how it is open to manipulation by those who wish to abuse it. In this sense, Khosa creates his own definition of history, one much like Claudia Hampton’s, displaying that history is not simply *the* past but rather a narrative that is imposed upon the past, a series of carefully selected accounts, facts and perspectives, that an author chooses to line up neatly in order to create a specific portrayal of the past. Here he draws parallels with fiction, displaying how both share common traits, such as a narrative, but also questions whether one “unique truth” is a possibility, further blurring the lines between the two. This essay will discuss how *Ualalapi* interrogates the similarities between history and fiction by comparing similar aspects of each, and how history, like fiction, is a controlled narrative. Khosa shows these similarities in discussing themes of omission, perspective and truth, truly showing how ultimately the two are less distinguishable than may first appear.

⁵ Cited in Cohen 1997, p. 5.

Firstly, in order to gain full comprehension of the text, the historical context of *Ualalapi* must be discussed. In 1974, on the 7th of September, Mozambique achieved independence from its Portuguese colonizers, transferring power to FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), which then initiated a comprehensive transformation of the former colony (Bertelsen, 2018, p. 76) FRELIMO, however, was not elected in, and after 1977, it began to characterise itself as a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party under Samora Machel, ruling Mozambique as a one-party state. In the 1980s, many individuals from the southern region, labelled as "vagrants," were relocated to labour camps in the North, while single women, suspected of prostitution, were specifically targeted and sent to "re-education" camps (Barlett et al 2017, p. 11). This process of forced labour and migration, came to appear not too dissimilar to the forced labour that occurred under the rule of the Portuguese colonists.

This period also involved attempts by FRELIMO to remould the nation's past, creating what Bjørn Bertelsen has termed a "national narratology" of Mozambique (Bertelsen 2018, p. 76). After independence, a sense of *Moçambicanidade*⁶ had to be created, so that the country could determine its own sense of national identity; this was also necessary due to the "military and political aggression from the racist, white-minority regimes in Rhodesia, South Africa, and other countries in the region and beyond" (Ibid., 76). FRELIMO therefore sought to create a stronger sense of national identity in opposition to this, by focusing on certain aspects of literature and history; more specifically, they decided to choose the figure of Ngungunhane, the final king of the Gaza empire, who was eventually captured by Portuguese colonisers in 1895, to raise as a national hero. Ngungunhane eventually became a key part of the national curriculum, and in 1985, to commemorate 10 years of independence, an urn believed to contain the emperor's ashes was ceremonially brought back to Mozambique from the Azores, where he had been exiled (Barlett et al 2017, p. 11). However, Ngunungunhane's reign was by many standards a disaster, with much widespread violence, the termination of the Gaza Empire, and the full conquest of Mozambique by the Portuguese. Certain groups, such as the Chope people were specifically targeted by the emperor and were likely relieved to see Ngunungunhane defeated by the Portuguese (Ibid., p. 13). Additionally, the regions surrounding the Mozambican capital were considered subordinate territories, governed

⁶ 'Moçambicanidade' refers to a sense of national identity being formed that was unique to Mozambique, encompassing the country's core values, traditions, languages, artistic expressions and history.

by Gaza leaders who enforced tax collection through annual raids, often marked by violence (Bertelsen 2018, p. 86). In spite of all this, FRELIMO still chose to appropriate the emperor as the nation's national hero.

Having worked in these re-education camps as a history teacher, and having experienced the glorification of Ngungunhane's rule, Khosa began to question the ruling power and promotion of the emperor. *Ualalapi* thus emerged as a way for Khosa to de-glorify the constant promotion of Ngungunhane, as in the novel he displays the other, violent aspect to the figure's rule, portraying him as an evil despot rather than a benevolent national hero. For example, within the novel, after the death of his aunt Damboia, the emperor orders the pointless death of many people, so that they may share his pain, commanding his men: "vai por essas terras espalhar a morte e a dor. Eu quero que todos, mas todos, se compadeçam com a dor que nos atacou." (56-57) By displaying this tyrannical aspect of Ngungunhane's rule, Khosa not only discounts him as a good emperor but additionally shows his character to be malevolent. Moreover, in questioning the promotion of Ngungunhane, the author is also able to question the FRELIMO regime, and their motivations in promoting him. There are parallels between the two; both were autocratic and repressive regimes that obtained and maintained power through undemocratic and often violent means. As Severino Ngoenha exerts, surely if an evil despot, hated by many, could be considered a national hero in resisting Portuguese military occupation, then Samora Machel could also be considered a hero, despite people naming him as being "responsável pela violência que se instaurou no interior da FRELIMO durante a luta armada e os mortos e assassínios que daí advieram... um ditador, com um método de governo autoritário e mesmo arbitrário" (Ngoenha, 2009, p. 14 as cited in Mathe 2011, p. 327). Khosa therefore uses his ability to fictionalise aspects of Ngungunhane's character, by fabricating quotes, as a method to interrogate the different facets of the Emperor's personality, and exposes how history is more like a narrative than initially appears. Anne Sletsjøe has asserted that Khosa's work in this sense helps to display the "extra-literary potential" of fictional works. She states that "the transformation of factual history into fiction emphasizes the link between two different kinds of storytelling, or two different strategies for the distribution of historical material" (Sletsjøe 2018, p. 157). Khosa here is rejecting the two-dimensional aspect of the emperor's personality that FRELIMO attempted to portray, by displaying how his rule and character can equally be viewed as negative. He is therefore interrogating the history

that has been “selected” by opting for a differing perspective, further displaying how history can be spun into a certain narrative, depending on motivations.

The author once stated in an interview how he wished this tyrannical aspect of Ngungunhane’s character to be displayed: “E foi aí que comecei a sentir a necessidade realmente de escrever para falar dessa realidade e expor o que muitas pessoas não sabiam. Achava que era importante que isso se soubesse” (Sletsjøe 2018, p. 157). Therefore, within the novel, fiction is used both to question the facts of history and to highlight how history can be used for a specific purpose. By emphasising the negative elements of Ngungunhane’s personality through fabricated quotations by Ngungunhane, Khosa exposes FRELIMO’s attempts at glorifying him. Fiction within the novel is therefore used to offer an alternative view of how the emperor can be considered.

In his study *History in Three Keys: the Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* Paul A. Cohen discusses how omission is an unavoidable element of history. He states that:

At the bare minimum, all historical writing, even the best of it, entails radical simplification and compression of the past; an event, such as the Boxer episode, that took several years to unfold and spread over much of North China, is transformed into a book of a few hundred pages that can be held in the hands and read from start to finish in ten hours (Cohen 1997, p. 4).

Although in reference to the to the Boxer Rebellion that occurred in China in 1900, Cohen’s point still holds validity in reference to Khosa’s work. Within *Ualalapi*, Khosa too explores what is omitted in history, displaying how easily an event or series of events can be moulded into a narrative by choosing what is displayed or not. For example, FRELIMO deliberately chose to omit Ngungunhane’s tyrannical persecution of the Chope people from their portrayal of him as a national hero. This omission aligned with their desire to promote a Mozambican idol who symbolized resistance to Portuguese colonialism and helped foster a sense of *Moçambicanidade*, by way of interaction with historical figures. Khosa chooses to highlight this omission element of history. By structuring his work through “fragments” instead of chapters, Khosa displays from the very outset that his novel is fragmented, and that it will not, and is unable to, tell the full story. Toying with the idea of omission also allows Khosa to engage with the question of truth, and therefore “fiction” as omitting a fact doesn’t make a history specifically untrue. For example, one “fragment” in the novel is named “*O cerco ou fragmentos de um cerco*”

(55 my emphasis added) and is about a battle between two Mozambican warlords and includes the retelling of the massacre of the Chope people. The use of the definite article with “*O cerco*” contrasted with the indefinite article of “*fragmentos de um cerco*” place a high level of ambiguity over the chapter. This gives a warning to the reader that, on the one hand, this is not the full picture of the siege, rather only a portion of it and, on the other hand, that elements of it may be fictitious. This could be the depiction of the specific siege that occurred, or rather one that didn’t truly occur. Furthermore, the chapter like all the others is preceded by genuine historical accounts by witnesses, this time by the councillor Correia e Lança, acting governor of the Province of Mozambique. These short introductory quotations often contradict what the chapter is about to explore, displaying how different fragments of history can contradict one another, and it is the readers duty, like a historian, to decipher which parts may or may not be “true.”

Throughout the book, Khosa persistently alludes to the unreliability of history and how it is fragmented, with lines such as when the old man at the end states “*Há pormenores que o tempo vai esboroando*” (88) and “*Ele repisava alguns aspectos que o meu pai esquecia e que tu omitiste. E são pormenores importantes*” (88.) In this sense, Khosa is therefore specifically highlighting, much like Paul A. Cohen, how historical writing naturally omits large events and elements, and how it is inherently fragmented. In addition, Mozambique as a country was based upon oral tradition, meaning there is a great lack of concrete written primary sources. Interpreting Mozambican history therefore becomes even harder, as it is based off eyewitnesses’ ability to remember or paraphrase what has been said. Relying on witness accounts therefore leaves much room for dialogues to be adapted and changed, as human memory is intrinsically imperfect. This begs the question of what is fictional and what is not, especially when it comes to oral histories, which are so open to misremembering. I believe this may be an element of why Khosa uses so much dialogue in his novels, as he is portraying the unreliability of Mozambican primary sources. When relying on people to recount an event, occurrences can so easily be omitted or changed, therefore blurring the lines of what may be fictional and true. History thus in this sense is perhaps a fiction with the intention of trying to remember past events. Furthermore, through this omission, history can be manipulated and sculpted into a narrative, much like literature, with the writer in complete control of what they chose to present to the reader. Khosa therefore seeks to display that there are in fact many similarities between fiction and history and wishes to highlight, as Bjørn

Bertelsen states, how monitoring and analysing the “process of narration” is essential (Bertelsen 2018, p. 90). By overtly portraying his book as “fragmented,” Khosa is highlighting how history is inherently omissive, and how such omissions can be selected in order to portray the narrative the author or historian desires.

A final element of *Ualalapi* that will be discussed is Khosa’s discussion on narrative and perspective. Through his exploration of different narratives and perspectives, the author displays how there may be multiple truths in history, therefore also questioning whether one “unique truth” is attainable, as is often presumed within history. This element of his novel is explicitly alluded to in his initial epigraphs that are short accounts from real historical figures, such as António Enes (interim governor of Mozambique), Ayres d’Ornellas (a military commander used in the “pacification campaigns” to bring Ngununghane down) and George Liengme (a Swiss evangelical who frequented Ngununghane’s court). The epigraphs, drawn from historical documents, biblical passages, poetic fragments, and full lyrical texts, provide the reader with what Philip Rothwell has called an “extra-textual framework” that interacts dynamically with other works. Khosa employs these sources to highlight the subjectivity of history through various accounts and perspectives (Barlett et al 2017, p. 14). For example, at the beginning the author uses Dr Liengme’s negative account of Ngununghane to completely contrast Ayres d’Ornellas wholly positive perception. Whilst d’Ornellas describes Ngununghane as being “um homem alto..., sem dúvida, belas, testa ampla, olhos castanhos e inteligentes e um certo ar de grandeza e superioridade.” (7) Dr Liengme’s account completely contradicts this, describing the emperor as “Um ébrio inveterado.... Era medonho de ver com os olhos vermelhos, a face tumefacta” (7). The two accounts paint a completely opposite picture of Ngununghane, which makes the reader wonder which could possibly be true. This is further seen when they describe his temperament, with D’Ornellas describing the emperor as having “uma argumentação lúcida e lógica...”(7) whilst Dr Liengme describes his “expressão bestial que se tornava diabólica, horrenda, quando nesses momentos se encolerizava” (7) The reader is therefore left not knowing which account of Ngununghane to believe, or which one is “true,” and whether the Emperor was calm and logical, or rash and aggressive. By displaying these two accounts, Khosa is further showing how in history there is in fact no one specific perspective that is more real than the other, and that both hold equal validity, further blurring the lines between what can be considered “true” and “fictional.” As Rothwell

states: “*The result (of Ualalapi) is not a true account of Ngnununghane- as no such thing can exist*” (Ibid p15). In fact, Khosa is perhaps not even purely intending to display *Ngnununghane as a terrible emperor but also that reaching a truth about Ngnununghane is in fact not possible*. By displaying how historical accounts can contradict one another so easily, and by showing how simple it is to omit alternative perspectives in history, Khosa shows how history is open to being adapted and changed by those who wish to mould it. He therefore encourages the reader to critically view the history they often take for granted.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Ualalapi* functions as an interrogation into the meaning of what history is, and its relationship to fiction. Throughout the novel, Khosa persistently blurs the lines between what parts of it are historical and which are fictitious, so that the reader is left unknowing and guessing. By doing so, Khosa therefore encourages the reader to question the significance of history and asks them to interrogate histories they may have taken at face value. He portrays history as multifaceted due to the abundance of narratives and perspectives available, and how by selecting which perspectives to portray, a historian or author is easily able to manipulate history for their own cause. In addition, he discusses through *Ualalapi* the role of omission in history, displaying how history is inherently fragmented and that it is impossible for a historian to write a full account due to the lack of sources and time available. However, he also displays how omission is another way in which people can bend and use history in order to promote a certain narrative of choice. In 1980s Mozambique under the FRELIMO regime, this became particularly important, as the promotion of *Ngnununghane as a national hero was highly problematic and had troubling reasoning behind it*. Khosa therefore wrote *Ualalapi* to encourage the public to bring a critical eye to the FRELIMO regime and the heroes it chose to promote.

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