



Concealment and departures: the trauma in *Antes de nascer o mundo* by Mia Couto

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ABSTRACT. This work aims to analyze the trauma in *Antes de nascer o mundo* by the Mozambican author Mia Couto. Starting from the Freudian reflections, we intend to examine the positive and negative effects of the trauma confronting the positions of the characters Silvestre Vitalício and Marta in the face of the traumatic experience lived by each of them. Drawing on the theoretical reference mainly from reflections by Sigmund Freud, Márcio Seligmann-Silva and Stuart Hall, we will examine how the narrative of the catastrophe allows the characters of the novel to (re)invent their identities shattered by the trauma.

Keywords: memory, testimony, identity, mozambican literature.

Velações e partidas: o trauma em *Antes de nascer o mundo*, de Mia Couto

RESUMO. Este trabalho tem como objetivo a análise do trauma na obra *Antes de nascer o mundo*, do moçambicano Mia Couto. Partindo das reflexões freudianas, pretendemos examinar os efeitos negativos e positivos do trauma, confrontando os posicionamentos dos personagens Silvestre Vitalício e Marta diante da experiência traumática vivenciada por cada um deles. Valendo-nos como referencial teórico, principalmente, das reflexões de Sigmund Freud, Márcio Seligmann-Silva e Stuart Hall, examinaremos como a narrativa da catástrofe possibilita aos personagens do romance a (re)invenção das identidades abaladas pelo trauma.

Palavras-chave: memória, testemunho, identidade, literatura moçambicana.

Introduction

The novel *Antes de nascer o mundo*, by the Mozambican author Mia Couto, published in Brazil in 2009, presents the difficulty of the human relation with time and memory as one of its main themes, amid the remains of the two great wars that affected Mozambique. Silvestre Vitalício, facing the trauma which the war catastrophe caused to himself, promotes a spatio-temporal withdrawal from the city, going into exile in a farm where the past does not exist and contact with the world is interrupted, not only disintegrating the past traumatic scene, but also the possibility of elaboration of current experiences.

Starting from the analysis of this extreme attitude of the narrative protagonist, this work intends to analyze the way how Silvestre Vitalício deals with trauma and the consequences such behavior bring – the identity shock that the repression of traumatic memories produce. On the other hand, another way of dealing with trauma is given when meeting the Portuguese woman, Marta. Although this character had faced traumatic experiences similar to the ones

Silvestre had gone through, she uses memory to cope with them and stands towards the catastrophe, allowing herself some comfort with these experiences, moving onto the stage of understanding her formation as the subject of her own story.

It is theoretically based on the reflections about trauma, testimony and identity, developed by Sigmund Freud, Márcio Seligmann-Silva and Stuart Hall, among others. We intended to analyze how the posture adopted both by Silvestre Vitalício and Marta enables – or not – the (re)invention of the identities shocked by the catastrophic event.

Re-baptism and identity crisis

In *Antes de Nascer o Mundo*, it is Mwanito, Silvestre's son, who tells the history of humanity that, according to what his father had explained, was composed of only five men. They withstood the world's death: Mwanito, his brother Ntunzi, his father Silvestre, the servant Zacaria Kalash and Uncle Aproximado, and also the donkey Jezibela. The end of the world, according to Mwanito's father, was a result of emaciation. The cosmos

'exhausted in despair' and the last survivors started living in a hamlet where Silvestre Vitalício named Jesusalém. Over the horizon there were only lifeless territories which were called 'The other side'.

[...] My old man, Silvestre Vitalício, had explained that the world had ended and we were the last survivors. [...] In short words, the whole planet was like this: without people, roads and animals' footprints. In these remote stops even the lost souls had already been extinguished.

On the other hand, in Jesusalém there were only alive people. The ones who did not know what missing someone or hope were, but alive people. There we were so lonely that we did not even suffer from illnesses and I believed we were immortal (Couto, 2009, p. 11).

Leaving the cities of the world and moving to Jesusalém happened after Dordalma's death who was Silvestre's wife. In Jesusalém the ultimate alive people did not know what missing someone neither lack of hope was. Absent from the world and deprived of past, the inhabitants of Jesusalém got new names: "[...] Rebaptized we had another birth. And we were exempt from the past" (Couto, 2009, p. 37). In the ceremony of 'de-baptism', Mateus Ventura converted into Silvestre Vitalício; Olindo Ventura into Ntunzi; Orlando Macar into Uncle Aproximado; and Ernestinho Sobra was renamed as Zacaria Kalash. Only Mwanito, who did not keep memories from the world he exiled from, "[...] That is why you do not need a name... mwana, Mwanito is enough" (Couto, 2009, p. 39).

[...] – This one is still being born – that is how my father justified not changing my name.

I had several navels, had been born countless times, all of them in Jesusalém, revealed Silvestre aloud. And it would be in Jesusalém that my last birth would be finished. The world from where we escaped, the Other Side, was so sad that one would not wish to be born (Couto, 2009, p. 38).

The 'de-baptism' promoted by Silvestre and leaving the world had as the only objective to withdraw from memories; however, they brought a strong identitary shock as a consequence, riddled with depression, recrimination and offences and set in maintaining, at the cost of violence, the defenses pointed by the protagonist.

In the pursuit of getting rid of the past, the character realizes he needs to assume a new name, because the one by which he was acknowledged in the city of the world – Mateus Ventura – was full of meaning from the other life: "[...] At first, he [Mateus Ventura] wanted a place where no one would remember his name. Now, he couldn't

remember who he was" (Couto, 2009, p. 22).

The changing of names that happened in Jesusalém points out the identity crisis Silvestre Vitalício experiences, as, Pierre Bourdies claims (1996, p. 187), "[...] the first name is the visible identity certificate of its holder through the time and social spaces". Denying his birth name, the character carries out a project that searches for forgetfulness and exiling from himself.

Exile and forgetfulness

Mozambique, *locus* where Mia Couto's narrative takes place, was the scene of almost three decade wars. The first war was between the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and Portugal, and it aimed at the liberation of Mozambique from the colonizers' control. The second great war of Mozambique involved the parties Mozambique Liberation Front and Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO).

The horrors of the wars that have occurred in Mozambique constitute a traumatic experience suffered by the patriarch of *Antes de Nascer o Mundo*. The inability to comprehend and assimilate the experienced catastrophe and the resulting attempt to forget or promote mental hygiene towards the traumatic event – given by the exile in Jesusalém – originates an identity crisis that affects Silvestre Vitalício and also the ones who surround him.

The catastrophe usually brings a representation problem in its core. According to what Ronaldo Lima Lins points out (1990), when horror reaches an extreme level, the art fails at its mimetic principle of representation of reality. Seligmann-Silva (2005, p. 83. Author notes) claims that "[...] the catastrophic event is singular because, *more* than any *historical fact*, from the victims and involved people's point of views, *it is not reduced in terms of speech*". This way, portraying the horror as a response to horror itself is an already failed task: "[...] Whatever you do on literature, nothing will compare to tortuous and sinister paths of reality, when it is about, for instance, what happened in Auschwitz" (Lins, 1990, p. 33).

The intention is to portrait what happens in reality with quality and extension; however, the result permeates banalization and the emptying of the real horror. One example of it is the first documentaries produced right after the Second World War, which generated a reaction of unbelief on their audience due to the fact of being extremely realistic. Lyslei Nascimento (2005, p. 61) calls attention for the perverse effect that such excess of reality had provoked:

[...] The images, too cruel to be accepted as being true, provoked unbelief on the good awareness of the audience and, when being discredited, they were absolved of the complicity or omission.

Having this struggle concerning art, facing the impossibility and need to portrait the horror, Bernardo Carvalho (2000), in his essay *A comunicação interrompida: Estão apenas ensaiando*, proposes the thorough interruption of each communication until the most absolute lack of meaning as an answer. Such incommunicability brings about the introduction of horror at a formal level, reaching the word.

[...] In order to represent the thorough interruption of communication, the violent end of meaning of the dramatic narratives – be it the cinema, the literature or theater – usually uses, by analogy, an interruption of communication at a more tangible, interpersonal, individual, understandable level. The forced separation, the mismatch and the personal loss are the means of representation, although they are meaningless concerning the real and collective dimension of the catastrophe, which are used as an attempt to establish a sensible communication with the audience, a possible dramatic comprehension, a transmission of the feeling of horror (Carvalho, 2000, p. 237-238).

According to the author, facing the absence of a dramatic representation that matches or resembles the catastrophe collective horror, given these limits, understanding the catastrophe would be assuming the position of the other at a level of individual identification. Thus, “[...] the interruption of interpersonal communication is the possible, approximate, known and identifiable form of representing such impossibility” (Carvalho, 2000, p. 238).

In *Antes de nascer o mundo*, Dordalma’s suicide, Silvestre Vitalício’s wife, constitute an analogy in which the war horror is represented. Death brings about the interruption of communication through which the catastrophe, that traumatizes the inhabitants of Jesusalém, is portrayed approximately.

Actually, before death, that constitutes a definitive withdrawal, the communication is gradually interrupted. At first, the adultery between Dordalma and Zacaria brings about a denial of the body, which is intensified when the Silvestre’s wife leaves him.

Mwanito’s mother suicide was the way she found to get revolted against the property condition that marriage attributed to her. Through such tragic act and intimate of violence, it recovers and makes it to recognize the women’s right upon their own lives.

[...] A married woman’s suicide is the greatest

humiliation for any husband. Wasn’t he her life’s legitimate owner? So, how could he admit such humiliating disobedience? Dordalma did not give up living: by losing her own life’s possession, she threw the spectacle of her own death at her father’s face (Couto, 2009, p. 246).

The catastrophe is an event that provokes a trauma. When facing his wife’s death, which as at a minimal dimension, allegorizes what would be unthinkable about the catastrophic experience of war, and moved by feelings of guilt for survival, Silvestre leaves the cities of the world and exiles himself in Jesusalém, bringing his children with him and accompanied by servant Zacaria Kalash, who also shares guilt for having survived Dordalma:

There is only one thing I cannot understand: why they [Silvestre and Zacaria] went to Jesusalém together [...] - The guilt, Mwanito. It was the feeling of guilt that had joined them [...] (Couto, 2009, p. 271).

Dordalma’s suicide establishes the interruption of communication for Silvestre Vitalício and his children, as well as for Zacaria Kalash. The inability of understanding a traumatic event triggers leaving the city and Jesusalém foundation. On this farm, the contact with the external world is interrupted, as well as each and every mention concerning all that goes over the boundaries of Jesusalém and that brings back the past denied by Silvestre. This place was built under the desire of silencing the trauma once and for all.

Freud reflections (1996c) help us to better understand the concept of trauma, its cause and the response it produces on memory. The traumatic experience, according to the author, is connected to the inability of complete assimilation of an event at the time it happens. According to him,

[...] the traumatic neuroses give a precise indication that a fixation on the moment of the traumatic event lies in its root. [...] It is as if these patients had not ended the traumatic experience, as if they were still facing it as immediate task not yet performed (Freud, 1996c, p. 282-283).

The main cause of trauma development lies on the surprise factor, on the shock. Freud (1996c) claims some expressions like ‘shock’, ‘fear’ and ‘anxiety’ are wrongly used as synonyms, and he also claims that they are different when related to danger.

[...] The ‘anxiety’ describes a particular state of expecting danger or being prepared for it, although it may be unknown. The ‘fear’ demands a definite object one can be afraid of. ‘Shock’, however, is the name we give to the state someone is when they were in danger without being prepared for it,

highlighting the surprise factor.(Freud, 1996b, p. 23).

Thus, trauma is closely related to shock, to the individual's lack of preparation towards the traumatic event and to the omission of anxiety, since there is something about it which protects one against the shock. In fact, when facing a catastrophe, an extreme expression of horror, there is not any possibility of preparation.

Accordingly, trauma is related to shock as much as it constitutes a craving in memory that prevents a complete experience of the event and goes over the boundaries of our understanding ability. According to Seligmann-Silva (2000, p. 84), "[...] trauma is exactly a memory wound [...]", being characterized by the inability to receive an event that goes over the limits of our perception.

Concerning the impossibility of accessing crisis, Silvestre answers with the attempting of eliminating each and every memory. Similarly to him, Zacaria left to Jesusalém as someone who runs away from past - "[...] I have always lived in war. Here it is my first peace...". Zacaria was "[...] a soldier's grandson, sergeant's son, he had not been another thing but a soldier [...]" (Couto, 2009, p. 85). However, he could not remember any wars. He escaped from death as well as he did from memories.

[...] His memories had escaped through his body perforations. [...] Uncle Aproximado was the one who unveiled this forgetfulness: why couldn't Zacaria remember any wars? For he had always fought for the wrong side. It had always been like this in his family: his grandfather fought against Gungunhana, his father enlisted in the colonial police and he fought for Portuguese people in the national liberation fight (Couto, 2009, p. 86).

The trauma war caused in the soldier made him feel like withdrawing not only from the barracks, but also from all the times of all wars. That explains why the soldier exiled out of the world.

[...] There has been a long time since Zacaria Kalash was not understood. The doubts started due to his old name. Ernestinho Sobra. Why Sobra? The reason, at last, was simple: he was human waste, an anatomical rest, a soul's strife. We knew, but did not say: Zacaria had been diminished due to a mine explosion. The mill exploded and soldier Sobra flew roughly like a bird. He was found crying and could not walk. They even tried to find, in vain, any damage to his body. The explosion had completely damaged his soul (Couto, 2009, p. 93-94).

It is true that the restart represented by Jesusalém means to be back to square one we cannot

affirm, however, it offers a new route to follow. That is because the trauma undermines Vitalício's hopes for the future and sticks him to an existence in which, as in the past, future is also interdicted: "[...] The city had collapsed, Time had imploded and future had been buried." (Couto, 2009, p. 74). For he is the absolute power holder, Silvestre prohibits singing, prayers, because praying is calling visits – and writing in his kingdom. However, speaking about women was more prohibited than prayers and more sinful than tears or singing in Jesusalém. And, as Ntunzi points, "[...] without women, there is no seeds left" (Couto, 2009, p. 33).

The way as Silvestre Vitalício imposes strict rules of conduct in his kingdom, thereby establishing the absolute isolation of Jesusalém, reveals at what level his trauma also affects the ones who live with him. Unlike Zacaria Kalash, whose moving to Jesusalém happened by his own wish, for Ntunzi and Mwanito there was no choice.

Uncapable of tracing their own destiny, the boys in Jesusalém suffer from the same lack of memory as Silvestre does. The outcomes that the traumatic experience brings to them are felt due to the lack of memories both have from their mother, Dordalma, and the suffering her lack causes.

The exile in Jesusalém was painful for Ntunzi due to the fact that he had been to The Other Side: "[...] Ntunzi suffered because he remembered, he could compare. For me [Mwanito], that reclusion was less painful: I had never had other experiences" (Couto, 2009, p. 54). However, without any contribution that could provide and keep past alive, Ntunzi's memories had gone.

[...] Ntunzi cried.

– What happened, brother?

– That's all lies.

– What lies?

– I cannot remember.

– Don't you remember?

– I cannot remember mom. I cannot remember her (Couto, 2009, p. 58-59)

From all the times they had represented her, in so vivid drama, it had only been pretence. Death people do not die when they stop living, but when they are forgotten. Dordalma had definitely died and, for Ntunzi, the time when he had been a boy, son of a world that was born with him, was extinguished.

– Now my brother, now we are really orphan.

Maybe Ntunzi, from that night on, started feeling orphan. As for me, however, the feeling was more bearable: I had never had a mother. I was only Silvestre Vitalício's son (Couto, 2009, p. 59).

Mwanito did not keep memories from the time when he lived in the city – migrating to the warren happened when he was only three years old. Although he claims not having lived another reality except for Jesusalém it does not turn his life less painful, Mwanito envies the supposed memories of Ntunzi: “[...] I did not like to be remembered of my brother having already lived at this other side, meeting our mother, knowing how women were” (Couto, 2009, p. 72).

[...] I wanted this boat that took Ntunzi to our deceased mother. Once the accumulated anger spilled over:

Dad says it is a lie, you do not dream about mom.

Ntunzi looked at me with pity, as if I was helpless and my dreaming organ had been maimed (Couto, 2009, p. 43).

If, as Geoffrey Hartman claims (2000, p.223), “[...] memory is the evidence of continuity: that future will have a past [...]”, in Jesusalém the absence of any memory imprisons the world survivors in an uninterrupted time, suspended, where not only past is denied, but also any expectation concerning the future. In fact, facing isolation and loneliness which are experienced in Jesusalém and the supposed death of the world, what future could there be for what was left for humanity, especially for all the ‘last survivors’ being men?

Forgetting – as the inhabitants of Jesusalém try to do – is not the only (neither the best) possible way to cope with the trauma. According to Freud (1996a), the effects of trauma can be two types: positive and negative.

[...] The first [positive effects] are attempts to perform trauma once again, namely, remembering the forgotten experience or, even better, make it real, experience its repetition again [...]. The negative reactions have a contrary aim: not remembering or repeating anything from the forgotten trauma (Freud, 1996a, p. 90).

The work of trauma, through its positive effects, aims at reintegrating the traumatic event in a structured way and not pathological in the individual's life anymore. Searching for reality (instead of trying to escape from it), as Shoshana Felman (2000) claims, is a way of exploring the wound inflicted by it as re-emerging from the paralysis of this state, in order to get engaged into reality as an advent and as a need to continue. According to the author,

[...] it is for beyond the shock of being hit, however, even though, inside the wound and inside one's

being hurt, that the event becomes accessible, even being totally incomprehensible (Felman, 2000, p. 40).

Changing the wound into an opening that allows access to reality is possible by means of memory and words: the narration of trauma, or its testimony, if it is not possible to empty it, can lead to their pacification through knowledge. Silvestre Vitalício, however, protects himself from words with his son Mwanito's help who, weaving “[...] the delicate threads with which we make quietude” (Couto, 2009, p. 14), tunes the silences and puts the father away from the memories. In addition, when Silvestre uses words, he produces mournful and confusing speeches, ordering them in speeches that mean nothing:

[...] All the stories dad used to invent about the reasons for leaving the world, all of those unrealistic versions had a single objective: disturb our mind, putting us away from the past memories (Couto, 2009, p. 23).

Facing catastrophe, a conflict between necessity and impossibility of representation, between forgetfulness and its impossibility are interposed towards the individual. In this meaning,

[...] both the testimony must be seen as a way of forgetting, an ‘onwards escape’, heading to the word and language immersion, and, on the other hand, there is a search through the testimony the liberation from the traumatic scenery (Seligmann-Silva, 2000, p. 90).

The word is the tool through which it is possible to access crisis. However, the inability to re-live the traumatic experience by means of the narrative and, thus, understand it, leads Silvestre to deprive himself of his own life. Victim of an identity crisis triggered by the fact that the character refuses the testimony through which he could find his own name, signature, Mateus Ventura leaves the identity that would recognize him in the cities of the world and becomes Silvestre Vitalício.

[...] After all, there is only a true suicide: not having a name, losing their own and others' understanding. Being out of reach of words and others' memories.

– I killed myself much more than Dordalma did to herself.

Silvestre Vitalício, he did commit suicide. Even before dying, he had already ended his life. He swept places, put the living away, deleted time (Couto, 2009, p. 212).

The book

The identity reconstruction of Jesusalém inhabitants begins at a visitor's arrival. Portuguese

Marta travels to Mozambique looking for her husband, Marcelo. As he had combated as a soldier in Africa, Marcelo spend a month in Mozambique, at the expense of losing his feeling of belonging to his city of origin, Lisboa:

[...] you've come back from Africa, but a part of you has never been back. Every day, early in the morning, you would leave home and wander around the streets as if you could not recognize anything in your city (Couto, 2009, p. 138).

Such inadequacy heads the Portuguese man back to Mozambique, but this time it is a one way trip.

After Marcelo had returned to Africa, Marta found at the bottom of a drawer, a photograph of a young black woman with a phone number at the back of it. When traveling to rescue her husband, the Portuguese woman get in contact with her rival, Noci, from whom she gets some information about his last tracks: Marcelo had been conducted to warren by Orlando Macara (Uncle Aproximado), Noci's boss, and that was his last known whereabouts. The aim of finding Marcelo guides Marta's destiny to Jesusalém, where she stays in the old administration house that kept uninhabited.

The meeting of the visitor with Jesusalém's inhabitants shatters Silvestre Vitalício's authority, revealing the sham upon which his empire was supported: at last, the world had not died.

[...] An only person – a woman, to make matters worse – collapsed the whole Jesusalém's nation. In scarce moments, Silvestre Vitalício's laborious construction had been fallen apart. Eventually, there was, outside there, an alive world and someone from this world was sent and had been settled in his kingdom's heart (Couto, 2009, p. 127-128).

While Dordalma's death provokes the rupture of the thread that connected to Silvestre's existence, his children and Zacaria with the world, Marta's presence destroys the basis on which Jesusalém was supporte by, undermining the boundaries that separated this space from the territory named 'The Other Side': "[...] The creature's vision [Marta] suddenly led the world to overflow from the boundaries I [Mwanito] knew so well" (Couto, 2009, p. 123).

Marta's story is similar to Silvestre's. As Silvestre, Marta was also victim of the war catastrophe occurred in Mozambique. Such event crosses the Portuguese woman's life story and it is represented by Marcelo's passing. Actually, as it happens with Dordalma, Marcelo's existence annulment does not happen suddenly, but gradually. The body denial (or the interruption of communication) occurs, at first, through the betrayal, the involvement with

Momzabican Noci in one of his trips to Africa. After, through the definitive abandonment of Lisbon and his wife and, finally, through death.

However, the way how Marta copes with the trauma that the catastrophe triggers is distinct. The Portuguese woman brings up the positive effects of trauma, the ones Freud mentions: instead of trying to forget it, as Silvestre does, Marta tries to face it. And by following this struggling with the traumatic experience she reconstructs the last tracks of Marcelo and can make his death real.

Besides, while Mateus Ventura abandons even his own name for he cannot cope with the past, leading him to forgetfulness and creating an indentitary crisis, Marta rescues the past in her diary and reconstructs her identity through writing. Thus, she shows that "[...] writing is one of the resources we can use to invert, even precariously, the passive position we have faced toward catastrophe, and causes so much horror" (Kehl, 2000, p. 139).

If trauma goes over the boundaries of our power to understand the catastrophic event, it is only by means of its narration that it is possible, somehow, to assimilate it.

[...] Memory, and especially the one used in narration, is not simply a posthumous birth of the experience: it enables the experience, allows which we call the real enters in mind and in the words presentation, to turn it more than only the trauma followed by a mental hygienic deletion and, at last, illusory (Hartman, 2000, p. 222-223).

This confront with the trauma presupposes a reunion with the history permeated by an affective way of composition. In this sense, memory is revealed as a tool of past recovery in which the fragments and the individual and community experiences are crucial. "[...] The art of memory [...] is the art of the scars reading" (Seligmann-Silva, 2003, p. 56) and it is based on the dialectic between remembering and forgetting.

[...] Memory only exists beside forgetfulness: one complements and feeds the other, one is the background onto which the other is based. These concepts are not simply controversial, there is a mode of forgetfulness [...] as necessary as the memory is and that is also part of it (Seligmann-Silva, 2003, p. 53).

Thus, the reading of the past through memory (and forgetfulness) seeks to keep the past active in the present, not searching for the representation, but the presentation and the exposition of the occurred event through fragments, ruins and scars. Memory

[...] is engaged with subjectivity, with the reconstruction of a personal story that needs to find

viable solutions [...] to reconstruct a life, a future, although it tell about pain and wounds (Cytrynowicz, 2003, p. 132).

It is through narration that Marta is capable of, at the same time, Access and get free from the past and recover her identity, which was lost as (or with) Marcelo.

[...] – What's this?

At the last stop before arriving in Jesusalém, Orlando (whom I need to call Aproximado) asked, pointing towards my name at the diary cover:

- What's this?

- This – I said. – This is me.

I should have said: this is my name, inscribed at my diary cover. But no. I said it was me as if all my body and life were simple five letters (Couto, 2009, p. 133-134).

By means of the words, of her testimony, Marta recovers her name and can be reborn:

[...] Nothing comes before me, I am inaugurating the world, the lights, the shadows. More than that: I am founding the words. That is me who debuts them, creator of my own language (Couto, 2009, p. 134).

Marta desires to pass on this way of making the scars left by time emerge to Jesusalém's men. Thus, she forces Silvestre to confront the traumatic event and exercise mourning, bringing up his history, which was silenced before. And she warns: "[...] It is not possible to forget everything for such a long time. There is not such a long trip..." (Couto, 2009, p. 160).

Marta's presence arouses in Ntunzi and Mwanito the temporality expansion of Jesusalém. In Silvestre's ruled territory, there was only the present time, being past prohibited and the future unreachable. However, the Portuguese woman arouses Mwanito's missing his mother and the desire towards the past: "[...] Marta was my second mother. She had come to take me home. And Dordalma, my first mother, was home" (Couto, 2009, p. 147). And she sharpens in Ntunzi the carnal desire, intensifying his wish for the future.

[...] I [Mwanito] considered her as a mother more and more. Increasingly, Ntunzi desired her as a woman. My brother was especially guided by the rut: he would dream about her nudity, strip her eagerly as a male, at the floor of sleep the Lusitanian underwear was lying (Couto, 2009, p. 152).

When the warren is, due to Marta's intervention, finally abandoned, contact with these other times turns possible. Past can, given the visitor's interference, be accessed and incorporated inside a memory heading the future, "[...] inside a memory

that enables the narration" (Seligmann-Silva, 2000, p. 89). Learning how to narrate the traumatic past through memory, to testimony, is provided by the Portuguese woman, especially for Mwanito.

Before learning it, Marta and Mwanito dealt with trauma in a different way: while Marta tried to access it, keeping a diary during her trip to Africa, in which she narrated Marcelo's loss, to Mwanito, 'the silences' tuner', there was only the task to help his father to forget past: "[...] As me, Marta was a foreign of the world. She wrote memories, I tuned silences" (Couto, 2009, p. 152).

Mwanito gets in contact with the 'woman's paper' when, to accomplish the task assigned by his father, he spies on the goods Marta keeps in her room. That is how he first gets in contact with the testimony: "[...] During hours I browsed through Marta's paper, eyes and fingers. Each page was a wing that gave me more dizziness than height" (Couto, 2009, p. 129).

The way to rescue history that Marta teaches to 'the last survivors' does not intend to cover past integrally, as it happened indeed. She focuses on the work of memory that translates past from the trauma and 'the rest'. Thus, Marta's example meets what Cytrynowicz claims (2003, p. 136): "[...] We should not expect testimony to explain anything, we should not ask it questions neither inquire it about history, but only assure it the right to speak, to tell".

The testimony of past that Marta gives, as it could not be different, comes from her own perspective. She revives Marcelo's life and death from the fragments that the individual experience allow her to access, and there is no preoccupation about exactly representing what really happened, but presenting, through fragments, the last days of her husband's life.

[...] I had never wanted to know how Marcelo died. Being sick was enough to explain it. At the day I left, already at the airport, Noci told me details about my husband's last trip. After being left by the gate by Aproximado, Marcelo would have wander with no direction during days, until he was shot in an ambush. We wondered about where he walked through the images that were left in his rolls of films. Noci offered me these black and white photos. They were not, as I thought, herons and landscapes images. It was the report of his own closure, a pictorial diary of his decadence. Through this record we realized he desired to get away from himself. First, he was walking naked and shaggy. After, he was closer and closer to animals, drinking water from puddles, eating raw meat. When he was shot down, Marcelo was taken as a wild animal, not by the war men, but by the hunters. My man [...] chose this type of suicide. When death came, he

would already ceased being a human. Thus, he would feel himself dying at a lower level (Couto, 2009, p. 239-240).

Collecting the memory fragments and exposing them through narrative allows the individual to recreate their own history and identity. This narration “[...] is arranged both as a way to ‘get free’ from past and also develops as a painful exercise of identity construction” (Seligmann-Silva, 2005, p. 114).

Returning to the city, the secrets that hid Ntunzi’s origins are revealed. The boy, in fact, is not Silvestre’s son, but the result of the relation between Dordalma and soldier Kalash.

[...] Now everything made sense: the different way Silvestre treated me. The punishments he would infringe on my brother. The veiled, but constant protection that Kalash would give to Ntunzi. The affliction the soldier felt when taking my sick brother to the river. Now, everything made sense. Even the way Silvestre renamed my brother. Ntunzi means “shadow”. I was his eyes light. Ntunzi covered his Sun, reminding him Dordalma’s eternal sin (Couto, 2009, p. 270).

Finding and uncovering his real ascendance, Ntunzi follows his destiny and – as his father, his grandfather and great-grandfather did – he becomes a soldier. Recovering his history, the boy can recover his identity, his own name: “[...] Now I am sergeant Olindo Ventura” (Couto, 2009, p. 266).

Mwanito, having left Jerusalém, does not meet in ‘The Other Side’ any feeling of belonging. The house where he was born was strange: “[...] Everybody in that group was returning. The only home he had was the ruins of Jerusalém” (Couto, 2009, p. 220); “[...] No matter how much I made an effort, I would find the house where I was born a strange place. No bedrooms, no objects would bring me memories of the first three years of my life” (Couto, 2009, p. 221); “[...] I was born at the home where we were now, but this was not my home, it was not here I would sweetly sleep. All in this home caused me strangeness” (Couto, 2009, p. 227).

As he did not feel like being part of the world in which he lived now and not being able to access the traumatic past, the boy reveals the same desire to forget the past that led his father to found Jerusalém.

[...] This exclusion of everything and everybody brought me some contentment, I confess. As if I secretly wanted to regress to loneliness. And I kept following this deviation during the time. [...] I started to greet my father in old ways, according to Jerusalém’s rules:

- I can already sleep, dad. I have already embraced the earth.

Maybe, deep in me, I missed the enormous quietude of my sad past (Couto, 2009, p. 256).

[...] For the first time I confessed what, for such a long time, tighten my chest: I inherited my father’s craziness. For long periods of time I was attacked by a selective blindness. The desert would transfer towards me, converting the neighborhood into a village of absences.

- I have blindness, Ntunzi. I suffer from the same illness as Silvestre does (Couto, 2009, p. 275).

However, through the testimony that

[...] as a humanizer and transitive process, [...] it acts upon the past rescuing ‘the individual, with face and own names’, from the place of horror where that face and that name were taken away (Hartman, 2000, p. 215),

Mwanito has the chance to get cured from the illness inherited from his father.

When Ntunzi, or better, Sergeant Olindo Ventura, visits his brother in the city, Mwanito receives him in a cold and distant way. After revealing to be ill as his father, the boy shows him his notebook.

[...] – See these papers – he said, reaching a pack of written pages.

All of that was written by me at the moments of darkening. Attacked by blindness I ceased seeing the world. I could only see letters, all the rest was shadows.

[...] – I cease being blind only when I write (Couto, 2009, p. 275).

The contact he had, in Jerusalém, with Marta’s papers was meaningful for Mwanito, as well as the last lesson that the Portuguese woman provides, when she sends him a letter from Portugal. Marta reinforces the power that testimony performs in the indentitary reconstruction:

[...] When you started reading the labels of the boxes of guns, it was not about the letters anymore. The learning was another one: the words can be the arch between Death and Life (Couto, 2009, p. 241).

Through his narrative, his testimony, Mwanito rediscovers who he is. This self-knowledge, however, “[...] can only *happen* through testimony: it cannot be apart. It can only be divided in the process of testifying” (Felman, 2000, p. 64). Therefore, the blindness the boy suffers is only interrupted at the moment of writing.

Mwanito (re)-updates time through memory, embodied in narratives that (re)-put past in the characters’ life. He recovers histories about his family, his culture, which were denied by his father. However, the (re)construction of Mwanito’s

identity heads to a movement towards the future; at last, the boy still needs a name which identifies him in the cities of the world:

“[...] Mwanito stayed in Jesusalém, and I needed a new name, a new baptism” (Couto, 2009, p. 218). And, once again, Marta is the one who encourages him in this formation of his own identity - “[...] There are a lot of trips, a lot of childhood you can still experience. Nobody can ask you to be more than a silences’ pastor” (Couto, 2009, p. 250) – and she reminds him that “[...] There will not be Jesusalém anymore” (Couto, 2009, p. 250).

This movement towards future, which must be put in scene to Mwanito’s identity formation, is represented by Noci – who was Marcelo’s lover before, and now, Uncle Aproximado’s girlfriend. While Marta aroused the feeling of lacking his mother in Mwanito, Noci arouses the carnal desire in the boy, in a wish for future.

[...] there was Noci, an added reason for missing school. Aproximado’s girlfriend offered to help with homework. Although I did not have any, I invented them only for having her leaning over me, looking at me with her big black eyes. And there was still the drop of sweat running down her breasts and I kept sunk and excited in this drop, going down on her breast until I was involved in shaking and sight (Couto, 2009, p. 256-257).

Thus, the two women contribute in the (re)construction of Mwanito’s identity, metaphorizing the two sides around which, according to Hall, the identities are built. On one side, Marta’s intervention promotes the boy’s meeting with past – “[...] It is my obligation to give you back the past which was stolen from you” (Couto, 2009, p. 242). In this meaning, Hall (1990, p. 223, our translation) claims:

[...] our identities reflect the common historical experiences and the shared cultural codes that are provided for us, as ‘a nation’, stable, immutable pictures and also continuous of reference and meaning, under the mutable divisions and the vicissitudes of our real history.

On the other hand, the second side presented by Hall reveals that the identities must be thought as a production, always in process and never completed.

[...] Cultural identity [...] is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture

and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our senses of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall, 1990, p. 225).

Finally, it is Noci who completes Mwanito’s liberation from missing Jesusalém’s silence. She evidences the importance of thinking the identities in terms of dialogic relations between similarity and continuity, between difference and rupture, between past and future.

[...] That woman’s tenderness made me sure about my father being wrong: the world has not died. The world has not even been born. Maybe I will learn, on Noci’s tuned silent arms, to find my mother walking around an infinite wilderness before coming to the last tree (Couto, 2009, p. 277).

Thus, Marta and Noci developed a very important role in the destiny of Jesusalém inhabitants, especially Mwanito’s. Marta brings out the past: she instigates him to collect fragments of memory, hardly buried before, and teaches him to re-make his identity through testimony. On the other hand, Mwanito’s feelings about Noci brings future up and then, reveals that identities are subject to constant changes, they are always in constructions and never complete. Both women reveal the importance of memories and affections, but also point that the construction of identity does not finish with rescuing the past. Thus, they present a way to be followed towards liberation and accessing the traumatic past, allowing the reconstruction of lives and futures.

Conclusion

In *Antes de nascer o mundo*, Silvestre Vitalício’s difficulty to cope with the trauma of the occurred wars in Mozambique, and metaphorized Dordalma’s suicide, leads the character to the attempt of forgetting the past. Withdrawn from the world, isolated in a farm he names Jesusalém, Silvestre tries to get rid of memories and raise his children in a world free of the horror of wars. This task, however, is not capable of liberating him from the trauma and end up imprisoning the boys in a world that, is free of past on one hand, does not present future possibilities on the other one, besides generating a deep crisis of identity.

The wounds left by the past start to come with the Marta’s arrival in Jesusalém, and she teaches the ones who live there about the importance of accessing the trauma. Following the Portuguese

woman's teaching, Mwanito recovers his family's history, creating, through his testimony, the narrative *Antes de nascer o mundo*.

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