



## From duplicity to the double: reading the upside down embroidery in José Eduardo Agualusa's

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**ABSTRACT.** Doubleness and duplicity in the novel *The Book of Chameleons* by the Angolan writer Jose Eduardo Agualusa are analyzed. The two factors may be found in the identification between the two narrators and in the two most emphasized possibilities in the interpretation of the novel, or rather, subjectivity and national identity. Agualusa's novel may also be defined as belonging to 'minor literature', as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari's text *Kafka: Toward a minor literature*. According to these authors, in minor literature, each subject is inscribed in and connected with politics, a highly strong factor in *The Book of Chameleons*.

**Keywords:** angolan literature, Jose Eduardo Agualusa, double, minor literature, national identity.

## Da duplicidade ao duplo: Uma leitura do bordado ao avesso em *O vendedor de passados*, de José Eduardo Agualusa

**RESUMO.** O presente trabalho visa a apontar a presença do duplo e da duplicidade no romance *O vendedor de passados*, do escritor angolano José Eduardo Agualusa, que podem ser encontradas desde a identificação entre os dois narradores do texto até as duas mais insistentes possibilidades de leitura da obra: uma referente à subjetividade e, a outra, relativa à identidade nacional. Pretendemos, ainda, mostrar que o romance de Agualusa pode ser definido como pertencente à 'literatura menor', conceito forjado por Deleuze e Guattari, no texto *Kafka: por uma literatura menor* (1977). De acordo com os autores, nas literaturas menores, o individual é ramificado no imediato político, característica fortemente marcada em *O vendedor de passados*.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura angolana, José Eduardo Agualusa, duplo, literatura menor, identidade nacional.

### Introduction

The novel *O vendedor de passados* (2005), translated into English as *The Book of Chameleons*, written by José Eduardo Agualusa, narrates the life history of Félix Ventura, an albino Angolan who makes his living by fabricating illustrious past histories to the emerging bourgeoisie of his country. This is, however, only the surface of a piece of embroidery which must also be appreciated from its reverse. Starting from the doubleness that marks the relationship between the narrator and a gecko, the story's protagonist, the narrative is foregrounded on duplicity. The duplicity treated here has two meanings given by Houaiss (2003):

1. State or quality exhibiting two correlated features, two correlated functions etc.
2. As a metaphor. A feature of someone who presents him/herself differently than he/she actually is; concealment, deception, pretense (HOUAISS, 2003, p. 179)<sup>1</sup>.

The second sense brings out a remarkable aspect of Agualusa's novel, namely, dissimulation. It appears mostly in the irony that sets the tone to the narrative. In *The Book of Chameleons*, the questioning of established truths is latent. The boundaries between fiction and reality fade away, senses slide, and the text as a milieu rife with pretending is made explicit. Irony opens the possibilities of deception present in the language. Since it proposes a multiplicity of meanings, doubleness and duplicity in the novel are inscribed in the novel.

The possibility of a two-way reading of the narrative is reiterated, when it is recognized as part of a 'minor literature', which Deleuze and Guattari define as "[...] literature that a minority population develops in a major language" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1977, p. 25). It is possible to notice in the main text some issues concerning the construction of national identities in Angola. In *The Book of Chameleons*, the characters come to represent metonymically the Angolan people. When the narrator describes the maid of the house of Félix,

<sup>1</sup> Translated by the authors of this article, as well as the other quotations from works in Portuguese.

bearing the significant name of Hope, he states: "[...] I've been learning a lot about life in this country - which is life in a state of intoxication [...]" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 11). One of the main features of 'minor literature' is that individual cases always end up connecting themselves to politics. In "DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation", Homi K. Bhabha points to the national allegory in which the narrative of individual history involves collectivity (BHABHA, 2001, p. 535).

Current essay analyzes the stylistic features that lead the reader through two intersecting roads, or rather, the path of subjectivity and that of political and social intricacies.

### From duplicity to doubleness

Focus on the paradoxes and the fluidity of meaning already appears in the Portuguese title of the novel, *The Seller of Things Past*. The materiality of seller is associated with the subjectivity of the past. Since irony deflates the original meaning and gives a new one to both words, this fact constitutes the first sample of the strategy that will recur throughout the text. The absurdity of the statement pinpoint to the reader the ironic universe of the narrative.

In fact, nothing may be considered ironic if it is not proposed and seen as such; there is no irony without an ironist; s/he will be someone who perceives dualities or multiple possibilities of meaning and explores them in ironic statements whose only purpose is completed in the corresponding effect, that is, at a instance in which the duplicity of meaning and the inversion or difference between the desired and the transmitted message is realized (DUARTE, 2008, p. 3).

The title prepares the reader for a game of illusions of which he will always make part. In one of several metaliterary passages in the text, the narrative's dissimulating characteristic is confirmed. Ventura gives the following answer when asked about the authenticity of one of his customers, Ventura gives the following reply: "It's a game. I know it's a game. We all know that" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 73)

The story is narrated by an omniscient gecko (lizard). The presence of the animal narrator takes the reader back to fables, a very important genre in oral tradition. Orality is a common characteristic in African literary texts due to the training based on an 'acoustic culture', which Miguel Lopez defines as "[...] a metaphor that indicates important features of a culture that relies primarily on sound and in which writing is rarely used" (LOPES, 2003, p. 27).

However, keeping with the ironic tone of the text, the fable genre is subverted. The tale is a "[...] short narrative, often identified with the allegory and parable, with an implicit or explicit moral it encloses" (MOISÉS, 2004, p. 184). In Agualusa's novel, 'counsel' is exchanged for a series of questions. Instead of an answer, several questions are raised. Again, the readers are asked to participate because it's up to them to draw their own conclusions.

Owing to several associations, the animal will prove to be a double to Félix Ventura. The gecko, or rather, the tiger gecko, is a rare species, very similar to Félix, who as an Angolan albino, is also somewhat rare. As he approaches the reptile, Ventura says, "You've really got terrible skin, you know that? We must be related" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 4). As the gecko may reproduce mutilated parts of its own body, Ventura may regenerate the not so convenient past histories of his clients. The theme of the double is constantly reiterated and throughout the narrative confirms its presence in the relationship between Félix and Eulálio. At a certain point in the narrative the protagonist discovers that the country's president had been replaced by a double, and notes: "At some point in our lives we all resort to a double" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 167).

According to Lelia Parreira Duarte, the irony emerges from the romanticism as a solution to the paradox between the infinity of desire and the finitude of life (DUARTE, 2008, p. 2). Rank, quoted by Freud, remarks that it is the awareness of finitude that will convene the double to literature. "The double was a sort of insurance against the destruction of the ego, an forceful denial of the power of death" (RANK apud FREUD, 1976, p. 294). Not coincidentally, in *The Book of Chameleons*, irony carries the whole load of simulation and makes room for duplicity and subsequently for the double.

Félix gives a name to the gecko, Eulálio, which etymologically means good speaker. Throughout the book, six chapters are devoted to the gecko's dreams which reveal that it had previously lived a human life. The relationship of a double between Eulálio and Ventura becomes clear through these dreams. The gecko's dreams are followed by Félix's report on them. In his article *The Uncanny*, Freud (1976) speaks of the presence of the double in certain texts, which is accentuated by mental processes, called telepathy, that are transmitted from one character to another, so that all share knowledge, feeling and experience in common. (FREUD, 1976, p. 293).

Eulálio starts the novel's diegese by narrating its life style, trapped in Félix Ventura's house. Although

restricted to a single place, the gecko knows what is happening in different places. Eulálio describes his house as a type of environment in which everything is alive. This is very common within the fables' tradition. "This is a living house. A living, breathing house. I hear it sighing all night long" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 9). The description intimates a metonymy between Ventura's house and Angola, peopled by 'piles and piles of books', 'men in top hats and monocles, women from Luanda and Benguela', 'officers from the Portuguese navy', 'a nineteenth-century Congolese prince', 'a famous black North American writer' (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 5). Such is the house; such is Angola in people's imagination, made up of "[...] cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism" (GELLNER apud BHABHA, 2001, p. 32). These patches and flaps are also made present in newspapers and magazines clippings, which Ventura uses to fabricate the past of his customers. These patches are also used by the writer to weave the novel. In the narrative, where nothing is absolute, the senses slip into an endless dance. "I used to think of this house as being a bit like a ship. An old steamship heaving itself through the heavy river mud. A vast forest and Night all around". Félix spoke quietly and lowered his voice. He pointed at the books in a vague gesture. "It's full of voices, this ship of mine" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 24).

Duplicity becomes more evident when Eulálio presents the maid of the house, the crony Esperança. "Esperança Job Sapalalo has a fine web of wrinkles on her face and completely white hair, but her flesh is still firm, her gestures solid and precise. If you ask me she is the pillar keeping this house up" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 12). In the midst of irony-woven strands, a strong analogy on the identity issue in post-colonial Angola may be noticed. The analogy is reaffirmed by the book's graphic resources. A map of Angola greets the readers when they open the first page of the book; in other words, it is a statement that leaves no doubt about the narrative's geographic space. Among the main features of what they call 'minor literature', Deleuze and Guattari (1977) mention "[...] the deterritorialization of language; the spreading of the individual in the political surroundings; the collective agency of the enunciation" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1977, p. 28).

By considering space as a dissimulation, *The Book of Chameleons* functions within the meaning of language displacement. The sliding meaning inherent to the text's duplicity subverts the standard language. As stated in the introduction, the 'minor

literature' is the "[...] literature that a minority society constructs within a major language" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1977, p. 25), which, as a consequence, involves Angolan literature written in Portuguese. However, the characterization is not restricted to a geopolitical area; rather, it is the revolutionary stance of certain types of literatures with "[...] their own instance of underdevelopment, their own *patuá*, their own third world" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1977, p. 28). Agualusa's novel may be inscribed as 'minor literature' not merely because of its geographical affiliation, but due to the subversive nature of the language of narration. When this literature "[...] forges the manner of an other consciousness and of an other sensitiveness [...]" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1977, p. 27), it opens spaces for collective agencies.

The story develops when a new client, identified by Eulálio as a foreigner, is introduced. Besides a different past, the character is after a new name and new documents. After some reluctance, Félix accepts the challenge and fabricates José Buchmann who faces his new identity as if it were the real one. The boundaries between fiction and reality are questioned in the midst of highly humorous resources. The game of illusions that entangles the entire text is placed under discussion when Ventura describes the life of a mother he created for his client.

She lived alone in Manhattan in a little apartment with a view of Central Park. The walls of the tiny living-room, the walls of the sole bedroom, of the narrow corridor, were all covered with mirrors [...]. They were artifacts from the Hall of Mirrors at the funfair, warped panes each created with the cruel intention of capturing and distorting the image of anyone who dared to stand before it. A few had been given the power to transform the most elegant of creatures in an obese dwarf; others to stretch them out. There were mirrors that could reveal a secret soul. Others that reflected not the face of the person looking into them but the nape of their neck, their back. Glorious mirrors, and dreadful mirrors (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 45).

Buchmann accepts the game. The fiction he had commissioned becomes his only reality and he is anxious to have all the details of his new history. "Jose Buchmann was a regular visitor to this strange ship. One more voice to add to all the others. He wanted the albino to add to his past" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 44). In one of the passages where the text reaches the climax of humor, Ventura answers one of his customer's many questions: "I ought to be charging you overtime, damn it! Who do you think I am - Scheherazade? [...]" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 46)

The intertextuality with *One Thousand and One Nights* recalls the narrative as a way to circumvent death. The presence of another double of the narrator thus emerges, the word itself, a tool of resistance, capable to reframe the past, and give longevity to the present. Would Ventura be a post-colonial Scheherazade to save the nation? In fables tuned upside down, it is another question for the reader to answer.

Further, other characters, Angela Lúcia and Edmundo Barata, cross the story, weaving their individual stories into the nation's history. Buchmann's masked past erupts through them. The characters' past and Angola's past. "The past is usually stable; it's always there, lovely or terrible, and it will be there forever" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 59).

Although the characters have been on opposite sides, they all bear the marks of a common history. Physical marks in the case of Angela: "I notice a group of dark, round scars on her back, which stick out like insults on her golden velvet skin" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 172). Physical marks are also extant on Edmund:

See this shirt I am wearing? It's become like a skin to me. It is a shirt from the Communist Party of the USSR. [...] Like a skin to me - you see? I have got a hammer and sickle tattooed on my chest now (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 161).

Once more, the marked presence of doubles is evident. Buchmann and Angela, the former a photographer of darkness; the latter, a photographer of light, are father and daughter, two sides of same coin. While desperately trying to erase their memories, both register the present, past future, in their negatives.

### Final considerations

In the novel, several historical facts of a country that survived antagonistic types of power run, ranging from the colonial to the post-colonial, the political conflicts experienced by Angola, are registered. Angola's real story mingles with the past fabricated by the protagonist. In fact, Ventura's customers include people who participated in Angola's independence, exhibiting the marks of torture, and current politicians who lack a new identity for future perspectives. Among these customers, a minister is highly conspicuous: invented past makes him the offspring of Governor Salvador Correia de Sá e Benevides, a renowned Brazilian, Estacio de Sa's cousin, who in 1648 freed Luanda from Dutch rule. During several years, Salvador Correia was the name of a high school in Luanda, which after Independence in 1975 was

replaced by the name of Mutu Ya Kevela as a tribute to a hero of Angola. "In those day we needed our own heroes like we needed bread to feed us," explains the seller. The minister became angry and was dissatisfied with such a loss of representativeness:

Damn! Whose stupid idea was it to change the name of the high?! A man who expelled the Dutch colonists, an internationalist fighter of our brother country, an Afro-antecedent, who gave us one of the most important families in this country - that is to say mone. No, old man, it wont do. Justice must be restored. I want the high school to go back to being called Salvador Correia, and I'll fight for it with all my strength. I'll have a statue of my grandfather cast to put outside the entrance [...]. So, I am descended from Salvador Correia - *caramba* - and I never knew it till now. Excellent!. My wife will be ever so pleased (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 121).

The doubles seem analogous to the demonstration of time cleaved from the national representation. The need to create a decent past for Ventura's customers merges with the need to search an equally worthy identity for the nation. On the surface of the embroidery, the fluidity inherent to the subjects' identity is questioned, as in one of the reflections on the human past of gecko: "As she woke up, she was called Alba, or Aurora, or Lucia. In the evening she was Dagmar. At night, Estela" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 35). The man is a collector of masks.

The story does not have a happy ending, but such a possibility is intimated. A struggle for life continues. "This morning I found Eulálio dead. Poor Eulálio [...]. He died in combat, as a brave man. He did not consider himself a brave man" (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 197). In the boat of many voices, the gecko is killed by a scorpion, referring to another fable. After the death of the gecko, the narrative continues in Félix's voice, consolidating the dual relationship between them. Eulálio's death and the end of the narrative is actually not the end, but the incessant construction of identities of the subject and of peoples. Literature is the tireless needle that weaves the embroidery.

I'm reminded of that black and white picture of Martin Luther King speaking to the crowd: I have a dream. He should have said: I made a dream. There is some difference, I suppose, between having a dream or making a dream. I made a dream (AGUALUSA, 2005, p. 199).

On the reverse, the same fluidity is present in national identity. It is a nation that Benedict Anderson conceives as "[...] an imagined political community" (ANDERSON, 2003, p. 23). The political and social intricacies vie in the text and disrupt the horizon. The seemingly tenuous

boundaries between fiction and history are completely deconstructed. One ends up seeing “[...] the historical narratives as they actually are: verbal fictions whose contents are both invented and discovered [...]” (WHITE, 2001, p. 98).

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