



**SOWING WOMEN, HARVESTING A NATION: RETHINKING THE  
MOZAMBICAN FEMALE CONDITION IN PAULINA CHIZIANE'S  
*NIKETCHE: UMA HISTÓRIA DE POLIGAMIA***

**SEMEANDO MULHERES, COLHENDO UMA NAÇÃO:  
REPENSANDO A CONDIÇÃO FEMININA MOÇAMBICANA EM  
NIKETCHE DE PAULINA CHIZIANE: UMA HISTÓRIA  
DE POLIGAMIA**

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Mozambican writer Paulina Chiziane opens her novel *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia*<sup>2</sup> with a Zambezian proverb that says: “A woman is earth. If you don’t sow her, or water her, she will produce nothing”<sup>3</sup>. From this statement, it is possible to sense that we are about to embark on a journey to a world that has yet to be deeply explored by literature: the world of women of Mozambique. Most of the literary production of the country usually portrays the matter of womanhood through the words of male writers. Paulina Chiziane is a pioneer in introducing us to a new literary terrain. Through her gaze into the feminine condition, the epigraph becomes open to a different interpretation. Even though the saying may be understood as a compliment to women; it also raises some questions in regard to the position female characters do partake in society. After all, who is responsible to sow and water earth, so it can produce something? By addressing a third party as the one responsible to make sure that women are productive, aren’t we ignoring their capacity to be fecund in spite of the interference of others? Who determines when, why, what, or how women are supposed to be fertile (in every sense of the word)?

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1 Doutoranda no programa de Literary, Cultural, and Linguistic Studies, da University of Miami, departamento de Modern Languages and Literatures.

2 Translated into English with the title *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy*.

3 “Mulher é terra. Sem semear, sem regar, nada produz.”



Paulina Chiziane did not randomly choose that proverb as an introduction to the story that was about to come. She understands the difficulties faced by women in societies in which morality is still considerably conventional. As a representative of feminine literature in Mozambique, she uses her voice to discuss how the patriarchal system continues to influence the social and political agenda of her country. Through her own experience, Chiziane crafts literature that provides a realistic portrayal of womanhood, especially in situations that contribute to the ideological constitution of a postcolonial and post-independence nation.

In this respect, *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia*<sup>4</sup> is a text that explores the limitations imposed on women by society. Considering the Mozambican context, women are perceived as land owing to the fact that their grounds are also limited by borders levied by men. From a traditional stance (therefore male) of the Zambezian proverb, men are the ones responsible for sowing, watering, and finally reaping female outcomes. In contrast, Chiziane surveys the boundaries that are enforced on the female characters in order to expand them. Initially, female characters are a result of the men who surround them, with no freedom to go beyond the limits set by masculine oppression. But then, once they (self)examine their condition, the narrative takes a different turn (particularly if in comparison to the conventional man-oriented stories). Not only the female viewpoint enlightens readers as to the living traditions that are part of the national environment, it also indicates that, like it is happening to the earth (Mozambican women), Mozambique is experiencing a process of transformation.

Examples of change in the country that can be comprehended through the female experience can be recognized already in the title of the novel, after all because “the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself.” (Mohanty 34). For starters, *niketche*, the dance of love, refers to a ritual that is part of the cultural heritage of the country. It is a dance that can only be performed by women, “A dança do sol e da lua, dança do vento e da chuva, dança da criação. Uma dança que mexe, que aquece. Que imobiliza o corpo e faz a alma voar” (160). The ceremony can be interpreted as the passage from being a girl to becoming a woman – “...somos mulheres. Maduras como frutas. Estamos prontas para a vida!” (160). At first, this imagery could be construed as a preparation of women, so they can be “sown” by men. Chiziane’s representation; however, illustrates that by embracing this ritual (thus their sexuality) women may also achieve freedom over their bodies and take flight, depending only on what they choose to do with their lives (or how they react to the possibility of independence). The *niketche* and polygamy represent the two sides of one story. They can be used to reinforce subjugation of women to the old social customs, or they may be encompassed as opportunities for female characters to emancipate themselves, becoming owners of their

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4 First published in 2002, it was the first book to receive the *Prémio José Craveirinha de Literatura*, prize established in 2003 by the *Associação dos Escritores Moçambicanos* (AEMO)

own land. Through the examination of what it means to be a Mozambican woman, the dance is converted to more than an attempt to overcome barriers imposed to women, it turns out to be a demonstration of a whole new world of opportunities for Rami – the main character who learns about the *niketche* at an old age – and consequently also to the other women in the community.

Bearing this in mind, through the analysis of the text I aim to show how Chiziane reinvents what it means to be a Mozambican woman, and how she subverts the entire national sociopolitical structure that denies women's collaboration as fundamental for the construction of ideals that are in line with a self-governing country. My argument is that in *Niketche*, the liberation of female bodies – in all aspects: physical, psychological, sexual, social, and political – personifies the decolonizing trajectory of Mozambique. If Rami needs to reimagine herself as an independent woman, Mozambique also needs to reexamine what it means not to belong to Portugal anymore. As a result, the feminine core that fuels the narrative is a representation of the “motherland” that finds itself in a state of (auto)(re)cognition<sup>5</sup> in search for acknowledgment within and outside its borders.

In other words, Rami, protagonist and narrator of *Niketche*, personifies the development of a female consciousness. First, she observes her identity as a woman (detaching from the male gaze), then she explores who she is in a collective setting (her feminine identity among other women, and the female behavior as a group amid men). Finally, feminine unity comes to a halt as a reflection of the national transitional status as a free country. In short, we are interested in this literary text because it demonstrates how women seek respect and recognition as freethinking individuals inside a social context that values female submission to men in the same manner as Mozambique is looking for its identity as an independent nation, free from Portuguese ruling. Nevertheless, before the discussion about nationhood, let's see how Rami's step to consciousness helps to probe female significance in Mozambique.

### **Sowing the seed: Rami is confronted by the mirror**

According to Patrícia Rainho and Solange Silva, *Niketche* depicts “uma mudança consciencializada da mulher em relação aos seus direitos” (173). Not only that, it is a twist on novels of coming of age. There is growth happening on every page because Chiziane makes us follow the path to the consciousness of the female characters who, despite not being teenagers anymore, are treated as such due to male dominance. Essentially, the text represents the learning course that Mozambican women have to experience – especially the ones from the south, as I will explain later on – to be able to go from “depending” on men, as children do, to being

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<sup>5</sup> I use this term in order to encircle all aspects of the process of awareness to the female condition depicted in *Niketche*. It starts with the self-examination of the main character and it extends itself to the women that surround her to finally reach a wider range, the one of national traditions. Furthermore, the act of (re)cognition represents the communion between the past and present beliefs that shape the diverse history of Mozambique (the African roots, the heritage as a Portuguese colony, and the status post-independence).

*Diadorim*, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 21, Especial, p. 109-124, 2019.

self-sufficient adults, in their eyes and in the eyes of others.

Rami feels the growing pains that mark the change from emotional youth to adulthood. Just like it happened to the violent progression to national independence in Mozambique, Rami's learning curve is traumatic too. Once she unveils the story that her husband, Tony, has several other women he treats as wives, she becomes some sort of outcast (in her community and in her own mind). The social context in which Rami was brought up makes women carry the shame for a failed marriage. Therefore, her reaction is the natural response of female individuals raised in a society that constantly accuses them of responsibility for the reprehensive actions of men. She sees herself as liable for Tony's behavior, then she moves on to blame the other women. Despite already being in her forties, Rami is immature. She does not think for herself, reproducing the speeches that she heard from the patriarchal system. Then, to break with the cycle of obedience and overcome the stigma of polygamy, her first step is to venture on a journey within herself, something that at least in the beginning, she cannot do without guidance.

Among the many breakthrough moments in *Nikette*, the one that triggers Rami's excursion to a new world of explorable femininity is when she finds a confidant on her mirror's reflection. In the conversations with "herself" in the form of an "other", she discovers a persona she did not remember existed. Here the process of (auto)(re)cognition starts. "The mirror game, this game of reflector and reflected, reality and illusion, plays a principal, contradictory, and complex role throughout the novel" (Marques 135). Finding help in the mirror instead of another person (maybe a neighbor or someone in her family) illustrates Rami's isolation and the fact that elaboration of consciousness must happen inward (and after the individual can externalize it to promote social change). The mirror presents itself as her twin (15), yet Rami tries to resist that "unknown" side of herself. Ultimately, she starts to trust and listen to her reflection (a symbol of her empowerment), and consequently to raise awareness of the unfairness of the female condition.

As I previously mentioned, Rami's initial reaction is to accept the culpability for her husband's infidelity, repeating a conduct common to women who are subjugated and abused by their partners. She says "vou ao espelho tentar descobrir o que há de errado em mim" (15) because she thinks she is the problem. Nonetheless, the mirror will show her that the only issue here is how she perceives herself. The reflection indicates its otherness to Rami by introducing a perspective that she was not able to appreciate without its intervention. The double she encounters is a happy woman, with bright eyes and a smile on her lips that in her own words "traduzem uma mensagem de felicidade que não podem ser os meus, eu não sorrio, eu choro" (15). Her insistence to focus on her own misery resonates the consequences of her conservative upbringing of colonial assimilation. Rami has the impulse to run from the intruder in front of her; still, she stays and confronts the hypnotizing and enchanting creature:

- Quem és tu? – pergunto eu.
- Não me reconheces? Olha bem para mim.
- Estou a olhar, sim. Mas quem és tu?
- Estás cega, gêmea de mim.
- Gêmea? Não sou gêmea de ninguém. Dos cinco filhos da minha mãe não há gêmeo nenhum. Estou diante do meu espelho. Que fazes tu aí? (15)

The beginning of the dialogue implies the unconscious difficulty that Rami has to understand anything that goes beyond what she has been told by the dominant discourse. As a woman from the south, Rami is a black Mozambican raised under the Catholic dogma. She is indoctrinated to silently obey her husband, have children, take care of the house, and tend to the male necessities as a sign of blind respect to the Christian faith. In this case, happiness is not a goal woman should have for themselves. They are taught to work to guarantee male bliss (which is not necessarily equivalent to fulfilling their own needs). Rami cannot recognize herself in the enthusiastic image on her mirror because that is a portion of her identity that was erased to conform to social conventions.

As a Mozambican woman from the south, Rami personifies the impasse of being raised with Portuguese values while also being surrounded by opposite beliefs that are associated with her African roots. To match the expectations of patriarchy, women must show no strength, and their charm must be reserved for the husband. Any qualities that are not devoted to the male spouse, have no value, or worse, they are portrayed in a negative light (as some sort of evil trait that women use to lead men to sin, in a similar setting as the one of Eve, who “made” Adam eat the forbidden fruit). But in her reflection, Rami sees who she could be if she resisted the oppressive authorities. It takes her some time to understand that freedom can be an option. As the mirror responds, Rami is blind not only to the image reflected right in front of her but also to the importance that women have in society. When she responds that she does not have a twin, she references her family history, after all, women depend on the household collective because they cannot exist as individuals (going back to the idea that earth needs someone responsible for sowing, watering, and harvesting it).

In other words, Rami is the result of the colonial legacy that used several subordination apparatuses, such as religion, to create compliance to the Portuguese philosophies. In a certain point in the story, the protagonist questions, for example, the way how women are portrayed in the Bible:

Até na bíblia a mulher não presta. Os santos, nas suas pregações antigas, dizem que a mulher nada vale, a mulher é um animal nutridor de maldade, fonte de todas as discussões, querelas e injustiças. É verdade. Se podemos ser trocadas, vendidas, torturadas, mortas, escravizadas, encurraladas em haréns como gado, é porque não fazemos falta nenhuma. Mas se não fazemos falta nenhuma, por que é que Deus nos colocou no mundo? E esse Deus, se existe, por que nos deixa sofrer assim? O pior de tudo é que Deus parece não ter

mulher nenhuma. Se ele fosse casado, a deusa – sua esposa – intercederia por nós. Através dela pediríamos a bênção de uma vida de harmonia. Mas a deusa deve existir, penso. Deve ser tão invisível como todas nós. O seu espaço é, de certeza, a cozinha celestial. (68)

Rami's take on the Bible is not concerned with demystifying the existence of God, yet she wants to understand how this celestial power who created women can be so evil to them, therefore questioning the treatment that religion offers to them. When she affirms that even the saints would treat women as vile, disposable creatures, she is stressing how old the patriarchic system is, and how unreasonable it sounds. In a way, Rami brings forth one of her greatest dilemmas: how can she be in favor of a God who constantly seems to be against her? To prove her point, she reimagines the religious structure she was taught by the Bible by adding God's wife. Even though the goddess could be the protector of women, Rami is not certain that there is much she could do for them considering that she probably would live in subservience as well. The irony of her comment shows the discrepancy in the care given to the two genders. Paying attention to details, Chiziane refers to the "deusa", without the capital letter as it is used in "*Deus*". This symbolic gesture points to the long history of deference stored to women. Even God's wife does not have the same power, and just like other mere female mortals, she ends up in the kitchen, a witty reference to one of the most iconic sexist sayings there is in the Portuguese language: "lugar de mulher é na cozinha".

The back-and-forth attitude of Rami makes evident that she suffers from the blindness that impairs women because of the constant scenario of overpowering masculinity, yet she is about to regain her sight. In the mirror lives Rami's female identity that was obliterated by her husband. Nonetheless, the act of facing the glassy image and paying attention to it can be translated into an act of rebellion.

The image reflected in the mirror serves to remind Rami of her genuine self: the mirror is the object that permits Rami to look at herself in a reflective and more profound manner, thus taking beyond the superficial persona reflected and allowing her to uncover (or at least envisage) her deeper, genuine self: that self untouched by the various social agents that are responsible and suppression as a fully entitled human being. (Marques 135)

Rami's truth and the one about female subordination come out in the (re)encounter with her "self" in the reflection. The mirror serves as a tool to materialize Rami's awareness of who she is and in what society she lives in. In the exchange with the mirror, it refers to Rami as "child" when she insists that her husband was stolen (16). This comment emphasizes the immaturity of the protagonist that still has to understand (and accept) that Tony was not taken away by other women, he was the one who chose to leave, and he should be the one blamed for his choices. Rami accuses the mirror of lying and from here she goes through a tidal wave of emotions until she admits:

Tento, com a minha mão, segurar na mão da minha companheira, para ir com ela na dança. Ela também me oferece a mão, mas não consegue me levar. Entre nós há uma barreira fria, gelada, vidrada. Fico angustiada e olho bem para ela. Aqueles olhos alegres têm os meus traços. As linhas do corpo fazem lembrar as minhas. Aquela força interior me faz lembrar a força que tive e perdi. Esta imagem não sou eu, mas aquilo que eu fui e queria voltar a ser. Esta imagem sou eu, sim, numa outra dimensão. (16)

Within the same passage, Rami goes from denial – this image isn't of me – to acceptance – this image is me, but in another dimension. In the conversation with the mirror, we witness the reencounter of the past, present, and future of the protagonist. The cold, icy, and glassy barrier that stops Rami from being taken away by her twin was constructed by the social norms that imprisoned her “other” self. With the awareness brought by such revelation, Rami's next challenge is to balance her internal conflicts, so she can make amends with her happy self.

The last sentence in this chapter accentuates how the institution of marriage tyrannizes women like Rami. She affirms: “espelho revelador. Vivemos juntos desde que me casei. Por que só hoje revelas o teu poder?” (17) According to the narrator, the mirror has always been there since she got married. Nonetheless, the commitment to serving and being faithful to her husband are two reasons why she had not look attentively in the mirror up to this point. It was necessary that her marriage became a castle in the sand for her to face that the life she had been living was not the one she thought.

It is interesting to highlight that *Niketché* is not about judging the legitimacy (or the correctness) of polygamy. In fact, Chiziane takes us to reflect on what it means to women to live in a polygamic context. In the first instance, polygamy can be seen as a demonstration of male power. Tony is entitled to have other wives, but the same right is not reserved to Rami. Nonetheless, the protagonist takes over the narrative, defying her female status as a Mozambican woman from the south, and turns polygamy into her own political agenda. Here lies the idea of conscious change addressed by Rainho and Silva and that I want to explore in terms of collective transformation.

### **Watering the land: manifestations of a love hexagon**

*Niketché* is a story about the conflict between choices and social impositions. Rami personifies a female post-colonial crossroad: she is split between keeping up with the tradition (to follow the social norm of the south and risk losing her husband) or accepting a new reality that reconfigures the notion of family by adding the polygamic scenario (associated to the north of Mozambique). Rami's plight exemplifies the saga of all women who are constantly asked to choose between being subservient to the dominant discourse or demanding control over their own narratives. The path to consciousness in her case is also a journey of reconciliation with the pre-colonial past. As Rami becomes aware of other forms of femininity, she also gains

awareness of her condition as an assimilated subject, recognizing a menagerie between the Portuguese legacy and the Afro-Mozambican heritage.

Rami is in the liminal space. An educated woman from the south, she does not know how to perform African dances or rituals. The self in the mirror dances to remind her of her culture and the symbolism implied in performance and dance. Through memory, she reconstructs what is meaningful in her culture to reconcile with the self in the mirror. The image dances to educate Rami about the importance of continuity in a modern environment where changes become overwhelming. The self in the mirror reconnects her with culture. This reconnection makes her regenerate. (Silva 5)

Rami states: “a vida é uma metamorfose” (95). Transformation and education are hand in hand in *Niketche*. Stuck in “her” old ways – “her” because as it was already established the conservative unhappy Rami is what society made of her – she must go in another direction and fathom that differently from what the oppressive discourse implies (a notion of superiority of the Portuguese culture, usually depicted as more civilized), she lives in a post-colonial configuration in which individuals have a plurality of layers that form their identities. The wakeup call comes when she realizes that in spite of what her “European” upbringing might say about polygamy and the African rituals associated with the sensual life (especially of women), they can be used as cultural artifacts that produce a sense of community, detaching womanhood from the ideas of loneliness and captivity.

Rami was isolated before she came to terms with the idea of a polygamic relationship as the solution to save her marriage, instead of the reason for it to end. She was fighting with others and with herself as represented in the mirror<sup>6</sup>. She struggled to understand her female condition, but she learns that there is more to her feminine status than she has been taught by the patriarchic system, especially in Mozambique where there are many ways to understand themes such as love, marriage, and sex. Despite the Catholic conservative speech, through the contact with the women from the north, Rami sees that the “love hexagon” she is in offers more to women than a life of obedience and sacrifice.

As the woman from the south, and the one most betrayed by Tony, it is up to Rami to explore and lead the alteration of the social structure, so that it may come to favor her<sup>7</sup>. From this internal investigation, she realizes that the distinction between villain (women) and hero

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6 “Canto a minha canção preferida para espantar a solidão. Dentro de mim cresce a vontade de deixar tudo. Divorciar-me. Estoiar este lar pelo ar. Procurar um novo amor, talvez. Mas não. Não, não largo o Tony. Se o deixo, nesta cama dormirão outras mulheres, não vou sair daqui. Se eu me divorcio o meu marido vai casar com a Julieta ou com tantas outras, não vale a pena sair daqui. Se eu vou, os meus filhos serão criados por outras, comerão o pão amassado pelas mãos do diabo, não posso sair daqui.” (27)

7 “Vejam só o meu caso. O meu lar cristão que se tornou polígamo. Era uma esposa fiel que tornei-me adúltera – adúltera não, recorri apenas a um tipo de assistência conjugal, informal, tal qual a poligamia desta casa é informal.” (95)



(men) it is not as black and white as she led to believe. After the physical encounter with the “second wife”, Julieta, Rami hears from the mirror a truth that reshapes her way of thinking: “agrediste a vítima e deixaste o vilão. Não resolveste nada” (27). Later on, the mirror repeats the same conundrum, but now making it even more obvious to Rami that she has been focusing on the wrong problem: “Pensa bem, amiga minha: serão as outras mulheres as culpadas desta situação? Serão os homens inocentes?” (33).

The seed of doubt was planted, and Rami needs to water it to see what sort of result it will produce. Her first action, then, is to attend a “love class”, a traditional practice connected to the valorization of female sexuality in the north of Mozambique. Here, Rami crosses the limits that were imposed to her up to this point as a Catholic Mozambican woman from the south. Once she sees with her own eyes the world of desire and fulfillment she had been missing on, she breaches the cultural line she was trying so hard to maintain.

Paulina Chiziane says that “as culturas são fronteiras invisíveis construindo a fortaleza do mundo” (39). Her narrator is the representation of the possibility that women have to trespass these frontiers, so they can expand the meaning of their existence. If poet John Donne wrote in his famous poem “no man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main”, the same should be said about women. As an important part of the social cloth that covers the nation, Rami realizes that it's necessary to create a sense of communion with the other wives. Such attitude leads to what Hilary Owen describes as “a modified, urban form of polygamous union” (204). Nonetheless, as a result of the fragmentation of identities that we can find in Mozambique due to its colonial past, there is an almost ironic and conflicting essence in the polygamic establishment, as pointed out by the narrator:

Que sistema agradável é a poligamia! Para o homem casar de novo, a esposa anterior tem que consentir, e ajudar a escolher. Que pena o Tony ter agido sozinho e informalmente, sem seguir as normas, senão eu teria só consentido em casamentos com mulheres mais feias e mais desastrosas do que eu. Poligamia não é substituir mulher nenhuma, é ter mais uma. Não é esperar que uma envelheça para trocá-la por outra. Não é esperar que uma produza riqueza para depois a passar para a outra. Poligamia não depende da riqueza ou da pobreza. É um sistema, um programa. É uma só família com várias mulheres e um homem, uma unidade, portanto. (94)

Here the first wife depicts how useful “proper” polygamy can be to the female agenda<sup>8</sup>, and that opposite to what the external gaze might think, polygamy is an organized system, with norms just like any other social construct. Yet, in spite of its “pleasant” side, Rami has the challenge of dealing with what she calls “informal” polygamy because “Rami recognizes that Tony is not a polygamist husband, rather he takes advantage of a system to appropriate as

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<sup>8</sup> Forming a female collective that empowers them as a group since they are denied of strengths as individuals.

many women as possible” (Silva 7). Tony does not follow any regulations – nor monogamic or polygamic – because as a man he is entitled to break boundaries. Silva also points out that Mozambique has banished polygamy in the country (7), but this sort of practice is accepted, as long as it benefits men considering that in the polygamic context they can fulfill their male desires while also exploring female submission.

It is interesting to remember that Rami is not the only assimilated subject in the story. Tony is a man from the south, brought up as a Catholic. Therefore, it should be expected of him the same monogamic Christian standards that are demanded of Rami. Gender is what separates them in this equation. Tony is permitted to do whatever he wants without great consequences<sup>9</sup> while the male discourse continues to position women as the ones who should be blamed for their husbands’ actions<sup>10</sup>. For example, when Rami tries to level with Tony not on a sentimental stance, but in a logical one – by using the law as a reference – he inverts the game, showing that the policies applicable to women are not the same to men:

- Traição é crime, Tony!
- Traição? Não me faça rir, ah, ah, ah! A pureza é masculina, e o pecado é feminino. Só as mulheres podem trair, os homens são livres, Rami.
- O quê?
- Por favor, deixa-me dormir.
- Mas Tony – sacudo-o furiosamente – Tony, acorda, Tony, Tony, Tony...!  
(29)

Tony’s voice is just one among several male voices represented in *Niketche*. Most of the time they are there to remind women of their inferiority and to mock their pursuit of equality. Even when women like Rami use arguments as logical as the social norm – cheating is a crime – they react in a manner that diminishes their ideas as if they were insane. For Tony is clear that men are free while women are subject to the social judgment. To make matters worse, while Rami wants to continue the discussion, Tony goes back to sleep as if nothing was happening. Rami’s plea for her husband to wake up is also the female supplication for society to see that things should be different and that they deserve to be heard.

We have been discussing the role of polygamy in Chiziane’s narrative; still, it is important to call attention to the fact that polygamy is a general term used to describe non-monogamous

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9 The reaction of Tony’s mother to the news of her son’s adultery shows the consonance of society with the male behavior.

10 In an interesting passage of the text, Rami looks for comfort within her own family, but instead of finding compassion coming from her relatives, at a certain point her own father says “Se o teu marido não te responde, é em ti que está a falta.” and he continues: “As mulheres de hoje falam muito por causa dessa coisa de emancipação. Falas de mais, filha. No meu tempo, as mulheres não eram assim.” The narrator makes a meaningful statement right after “Estou desesperadamente a pedir Socorro e respondem-me com histórias de macho.” (97).

relationships. Nonetheless, in *Niketche* we see the acceptance of polygyny, the specific polygamous relationship in which men are allowed to have more than one women. Polyandry (when a woman is allowed to have many husbands) is not an option. So, in spite of the “democratic” and “liberal” ideas that may be associated to polygamy, in this scenario female space is still limited. At a certain point, Tony reacts to Rami’s transformation by stating that women “Julgam que têm espaço, mas não passam de um buraco. Julgam que têm direitos e voz, mas não passam de patos mudos.” (166). It is this double standard that Rami needs to contest, not the other women in the narrative because only as a group is that they can rise up against the patriarchal system.

The power of the female collective is demonstrated when all Tony’s wives decide to satisfy his male desire. They are confused, and not happy, with Tony’s behavior once the informal polygamous system is installed in their lives. He has not been giving the same attention (especially sexually) to the women, so they get together to confront him. He tries to stand his ground as the righteous one in that relationship, but he ends up showing his weakness, not managing to handle the excess of femininity in the room, especially when the women want to sleep with him all at the same time:

O Tony fica atrapalhado. Somos cinco contra um. Cinco fraquezas juntas se tornam força em demasia. Mulheres desamadas são mais mortíferas que as cobras pretas. A Saly abre a porta do quarto. A cama estava desmontada e o soalho coberto de esteiras. Achamos a ideia genial e entramos no jogo. Era preciso mostrar ao Tony o que valem cinco mulheres juntas. Entramos no quarto e arrastamos o Tony, que resistia como um bode. Despimo-nos, em strip-tease. Ele olha para nós. Os seus joelhos ganham um tremor ligeiro. (143)

This passage shows that the polygamic relation that Tony desired had less to do with sex, and more with male enablement. Nonetheless, the union of the wives emasculates him, and then he reacts with despair – “Meu Deus! Por favor, parem com isso, por Deus, que azar que me dão agora?!” (143). His response is to see the female communion as some sort of witchcraft that will cause his doom. The moment of empowerment of women is interpreted by the conservative discourse as a violent attempt to undermine men and it cannot be accepted. After this, Tony resorts to the most traditional institution he can use, a family council. As Rami explains, his intent is to gather support<sup>11</sup> and reinstate his “reign”. Following the script, he gets what he wants, finding the endorsement he was seeking in the traditional belief that women can ruin a man’s life<sup>12</sup>. Thus, when the greatest plot twist happens – Tony “dies” – the wives are blamed once more for the unfortunate end that such “good man” had.

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11 “Ele precisa dessa reunião para colher ideias. Para ganhar testemunhas da sua desgraça e aliviar a consciência. Quer ganhar aliados para melhor segurar o seu rebanho, que lhe foge do controle.” (151)

12 “A tensão de Tony liberta-se miraculosamente. Porque toda a gente lhe dá razão e condolências antecipadas pela sucessão de azares que ainda está por vir. Lança-nos um olhar de troça e de triunfo enquanto enxuga o rosto suado.” (155)

The events unfolded after Tony's supposed death replicate in detail the unfair treatment that the patriarchic society gives to women. Polygamy, that before was "accepted" because it favored Tony, it is depicted as immoral. The five wives; however, receive different treatments. Rami becomes a female martyr because she is the one who suffers at the hands of the traditional conduct after the husband dies. Not only she is relinquished of all her possessions, she needs to go through the *kutchinga*, a ritual of "purification" of the widow through sex with another man. The ceremonial is imposed to the first wife is violent. Even though Rami gives the idea that Levy managed to satisfy her sexually in a way Tony never did, we are still talking about a sexual act that happens not from consent and desire, but as an imposed practice.

The *kutchinga* is not Rami's choice, it is part of the national narrative. But once Tony "comes back from the dead," his impulse is to question his first wife as to the events that succeed when he was not around:

– Vi tua morte e fui ao teu funeral – desabafo – Usei luto pesado. Os malvados da tua família até o meu cabelo raparam. Até o *kutchinga*, cerimônia de purificação sexual, aconteceu.

– O quê?

– É a mais pura verdade.

– Quando?

– Há poucas horas, nesta madrugada. Sou *tchingada* de fresco.

Ele olha para o relógio. São dez horas da manhã.

– Quem foi o tal?

– Foi o Levy.

– Não reagiste, não resististe?

– Como? É a nossa tradição, não é? Não me maltratou, descansa. Foi ate muito suave, muito gentil. É um grande cavalheiro, aquele teu irmão. (227)

Tony is not worried about what happened to Rami or what was done to his family. Instead, he is concerned with his own masculinity. As I previously mentioned, polygamy in the patriarchic context only serves to men. But the idea that his wife has been with another man hurts his ego. In his point of view, she should have resisted because the husband expected the spouse to react to defend his honor. Tony even says: "És uma mulher de força, Rami. Uma mulher de princípios. Podias aceitar tudo, tudo, menos o *kutchinga*." (227). His statement reflects the paradoxical situation that Rami is in. But at this point, she is already aware of her status (the journey to consciousness seems complete) and she answers to his "compliment" with a certain sarcasm: "Ensinaste-me a obediência e a submissão. Sempre te obedeci a ti e a todos os teus. Por que ia desobedecer agora? Não podia trair a tua memória" (227).

In the dispute between female rights and duties, Paulina Chiziane shows how women have to deal with a back and forth situation that constantly plays with female identity. Rami is supposed to behave as a southern woman but adapt to the customs of the north (to please her husband). Once she goes through this transformation, she cannot demand more freedom as a consequence of the polygamic system because it was accepted only to facilitate men's adultery. Finally, when she surrenders to another tradition, the *kutchinga*, she is misunderstood once more. According to Chimalum Nwankwo, the conflicts faced by African women "are expressed as integral parts of the problems of colonial and post-colonial Africa." (152). Thus, the liminal space where Rami sees herself in reflects not only the liberation of the female body but in the decolonization of Mozambique as I will argue in the following section.

### **Harvesting a nation: reexamining the Mozambican frontiers**

So far, I have discussed the road to consciousness that starts with Rami and results in the formation of a female unity in *Niketche*. Rami, as a woman from the south (and the first wife), represents the legacy of the assimilated culture. As she embarks on a journey of (self) discovery, she becomes progressively detached from the male gaze, and from the colonial voice that continues to mandate the traditions that should be followed in its former colony. Then, once she blends with the other female characters and their traditions; their newborn sisterhood establishes a symbolic amalgamation of the north and the south, that can push them forward to better (independent) lives<sup>13</sup>.

Ana Margarida Martins declares that "In *Niketche*, national identity is built in terms of regional alignment, which have been historically calibrated with an Outside - a male European-based aesthetic experience that was once responsible for the anthropological and literary creation of a non-Portuguese 'African voice'" (Martins 64). The novel represents the decolonized voice because African identity is discussed from within the borders of Mozambique. Furthermore, the female African voice found in Chiziane's writing shows to the exterior world that within the borders of her country there are many ways of being African, especially after the independence, denoting the attempt to reorganize the former colony.

The Mozambican identity portrayed in *Niketche* continues to be formed with one foot on the oppressive postcolonial past and the other in the fragmented landscape that was a consequence of the violence that impacted the land after 1975. Looking back in history, the country underwent the colonization phase that lasted long enough to leave permanent scars. In

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13 One example of this change it is the financial independence these women acquire once they start to support each to work. "Temos que trabalhar -- diz Lu --, ainda temos um pedaço de pão porque o Tony ainda está vivo. E quando ele morrer? Do luto até encontrar um novo parceiro vai um longo período de fome. É preciso prevenir o futuro." (118)

comparison, if in *Niketche* we question if it is possible for the land to blossom without male domination, the postcolonial past destabilized the sociocultural African foundation. After the Carnation Revolution, civil war contributed to another fragmentation of the national identity. This violent trajectory highlighted the hard task to define what it means to be Mozambican within the national reality. After all, to whom does the land belong?

In *Niketche*, the answer to this question lies, once more, with Rami. Let's consider, for example, that she holds the status of the first wife. This title can carry the emblematic value of the connection that the African country maintained with Portugal. Just like the marriage of Rami and Toni, the colonial relationship between the two places represents a bond based on power. As the first wife, Rami has more responsibilities than the other women in Tony's life. She is the land that is explored because it was conquered and colonized by the outside world. Nevertheless, the other women are allowed to maintain certain perks because they were not dominated by the colonial thought, which means that inside that land, they have more right to freedom because they are closed to their native roots, while Rami is a stranger in her own land.

The peculiarity of Rami's condition as a colonized individual speaks to the dilemma of the nation after its independence. "Throughout the narrative, the nation is also significantly re-built as a plural body, or as a 'national-body-with-strangers-within'. The novel narrates the confrontation with these strangers – female subjects whose presence (in the body/family/nation) questions the way in which the masculine 'I' inhabits and defines the nation-space" (Martins 72). Rami becomes more than one when she morphs her southern persona with the northern one that was hidden in the mirror, therefore becoming a plural body. She dances between the Catholic religion and the African traditions and even comes to reimagine these cultures, as when she says that "No paraíso dos *bantu*, Deus criou um Adão. Várias Evas e um harém. Quem escreveu a bíblia omitiu alguns factos sobre a génese da poligamia. Os bantu deviam reescrever a sua Bíblia." (40). The spelling bible/Bible may be another metaphoric sign of the plural identity that Rami has. She is not a woman from the south anymore, nor from the north, she is a Mozambican woman, someone whose land spreads all over the country without any limitation because she is willing to tear down the patriarchic walls.

The mixture of identities in this context becomes a symbol of resistance. Mozambique does not belong to Portugal anymore, and it has to be recognized for itself, not as an eternal "former colony". As the representative of the new discourse detached from the male interests, Rami says "Lobolo no sul, ritos de iniciação no norte. Instituições fortes, incorruptíveis. Resistiram ao colonialismo. Ao cristianismo e ao islamismo. Resistiram à tirania revolucionária. Resistirão sempre. Porque são a essência do povo, a alma do povo. Através delas há um povo que se afirma perante o mundo e mostra que quer viver do seu jeito" (47). The way to achieve this goal is to embrace the postcolonial and decolonized individual as one.

What we see in *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* is that the sociopolitical male agenda is too focused on its own needs and desires to fully understand and capture the conflicts that are happening inside the country. That is why Chiziane's voice is so meaningful for the construction of a national ideology that connects men and women, the past and the present, the Portuguese inheritance and the African ancestries. It is up to the female discourse to highlight the ideological problems of the nation and explore the dichotomies in favor of the people, because characters like Rami "represent women who redefine their spaces, and since they share the spaces with men and are revealed in their relationships with them, they also progressively redefine men's spaces as well as how spaces are structured societally" (Okafor 340). Even though Mozambique may still be a patriarchic society, Paulina Chiziane and Rami force the limits of the conservative discourse and emphasize the presence of women in the history as the representatives of the interests of the motherland, after all "Desde pequeno lhe ensinam que um homem voa, sem asas, mas voa. Desde pequeno que dizem que ele é grande, é dono, é senhor. Mas mal quebra uma pena, lá vem correndo para o colo da mãe." (244).

With my analysis of *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia*, I hope to have contributed to the development of the panorama of transformation and (auto)(re)cognition of Mozambican women and of the independent nation. Paulina Chiziane deserves attention not only as a skilled writer but because she transgresses the limitations imposed to women in her country and writes down her name in the literary history as someone who allowed forsaken women to speak through her words. The legitimacy of her experience as a female author justifies the comprehension of *Niketche* as a text that helps to tear down the frontiers built around Mozambique and Mozambican women and reinforce the need to have representation in the discussions of the national project.

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