



**THE AWAKENING AND THE VOICES IN *NIKETCHE: UMA HISTÓRIA DE POLIGAMIA*, BY PAULINA CHIZIANE**

**O DESPERTAR E AS VOZES EM *NIKETCHE: UMA HISTÓRIA DE POLIGAMIA*, DE PAULINA CHIZIANE**

*Fernanda Oliveira da Silva*<sup>1</sup>

*Maria Teresa Salgado Guimarães da Silva*<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT**

Questioning the positions women occupy in a patriarchal society is one of *Nikette's* main reflections: Paulina Chiziane's story of polygamy. From the dialogues with the theories of Spivak, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, one can see how there is a need for women to have their place of speech, thus demonstrating a change in their situation of subordination. Paulina Chiziane notes that there is no place for women where they can talk and be heard and, therefore, writes a narrative with performed and told by a woman. With her writing, Chiziane breaks the objectification of women made by male literature. It is observed that the struggle for a speech space happens both in the real world, undertaken by the writer, and in the literary universe, performed by Rami. The awareness of having her voice silenced is driven by the anguish the character (and we dare say the writer too) feels as she becomes aware of her subordinate place in society. It is also noted that the use of popular sayings, oral knowledge and proverbs would be a way to bring women into a prominent position and also preserve the oral tradition and make an appreciation of African culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Paulina Chiziane; Women; Orality; Feminine Voices

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1 Mestranda em Letras Vernáculas, área de Literaturas Africanas e é integrante do Grupo de Estudos e Pesquisas Escritas do Corpo Feminino nas Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa (UFRJ/UNILAB). É professora do Centro Educacional Novo Amanhecer.

2 Professora-associada de Literaturas Africanas na Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.



## RESUMO

Questionar as posições que as mulheres ocupam em uma sociedade patriarcal é uma das principais reflexões ao ler de *Niketche: uma história de poligamia*, de Paulina Chiziane. A partir dos diálogos com as teorias de Spivak, Sandra Gilbert e Susan Gubar, percebe-se como existe a necessidade da mulher de ter seu lugar de fala, demonstrando, assim, uma mudança em sua situação de subalternidade. Paulina Chiziane nota que não há para o ser feminino um espaço onde possa falar e ser ouvido e, por isso, escreve sua narrativa protagonizada e contada por uma mulher. Com sua escrita, quebra a objetificação da mulher feita pela literatura masculina. Observa-se que a luta por um espaço de fala acontece tanto no mundo real, empreendida pela escritora, quanto no universo literário, realizada por Rami. A consciência de ter sua voz silenciada é impulsionada pela angústia que a personagem (e, ousamos dizer, que a escritora também) sente, ao tomar consciência de seu lugar subalterno na sociedade. Nota-se também que o uso de ditos populares, saberes orais e provérbios seria uma forma de trazer as mulheres para uma posição de destaque e também preservar a tradição oral e fazer uma valorização da cultura africana.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Paulina Chiziane; Mulheres; Oralidade; Vozes Femininas

First woman to publish a novel in Mozambique, Paulina Chiziane was present in the conquest of national independence as a militant. She makes her narratives a way of telling the world themes related to the tradition and modernity of her country; and thus enters a universe that was once composed only of men.

Chiziane, born in 1955 in Majancaze, Mozambique, is the author of five novels: the first of them, *Balada de amor ao vento*, published in 1990; then *Ventos do apocalypse*, in 1993; *O sétimo juramento*, in 2000; *Niketche: uma história de poligamia*, in 2002, which gave the writer the José Craveirinha Prize, in 2003, and lastly, *O alegre canto da perdiz*, in 2008. Recently, in 2013, she published a book of short stories, *As Andorinhas*, and in 2018 released her first book of poems, *O canto dos escravizados*. The books *Quero ser alguém* (2010), *Nas mãos de Deus* (2012), *Por quem vibram os tambores do além* (2014) and *Ngoma Uethu* (2015) are also part of her literary production.

Chiziane's works have attracted the public's attention in many countries. Her writing attracts the attention of readers, because, besides the innovative power, she brings controversial issues related to women from Mozambique. Such a brave attitude raises much criticism. However, this does not prevent the writer from giving up exposing taboos about the Mozambican female universe.

The stories lead us to travel through Mozambican culture, introducing us to the traditions and customs carried by the colonizers, the country's history and especially the inequalities that women suffer in their daily lives. We have learned that there is no possibility of talking about the female issue without considering the patriarchal cultures rooted in the country, especially in the south. Thus, we come into contact with various habits and discourses that corroborate the oppression of women in Mozambique.

Paulina Chiziane's text denounces the situation of colonized, marginalized and subordinate women, thus evidencing a struggle for the proper recognition of the feminine being as a woman, as a citizen and as a human being. The claim of the rights, dreams and desires of women, to reach their space and, thus, being able to (re) write their history, are characteristic of the writer's works.

Reading *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* is listening to the voices of women who have long been drowned out by patriarchal society. Chiziane inaugurates this space of female speech not only by presenting a woman narrating and starring in the novel, but also by using recurrent orality as an allied element to promote the visibility of the voices of Mozambican women.

In a brief account to summarize the work, the main character is Rami, a woman from southern Mozambique who has a high social level compared to other women in the country. Tony, with whom she has been married for twenty years, holds an important position in the local police. As her husband is often strangely absent, Rami goes looking for an explanation and finds that Tony has extramarital relationships with four women - Juliet, Luisa, Saly and Mauá Saulé - and becomes aware of the existence of Tony's other children. To the reader's surprise, the protagonist sympathizes with the inferior condition in which these women and their children live and begins to live with them until they become mates.

Before we broaden the discussion of this study, it is interesting to know that Paulina Chiziane belongs to Chipe culture, one of the ethnicities of southern Mozambique, in which musicality is a significant aspect. This would explain the inheritance of oral word and musicality well present in his works. Thus, in the passage "Titubeio uma canção antiga daquelas que arrastam as lágrimas à superfície. Nessa coisa de cantar, tenho minhas raízes. Sou de um povo cantador." (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 15). The orality in the form of song appears to the character as characteristic of her origins.

The importance of orality in African cultures is undeniable, since the spoken word existed and was responsible for the transmission of knowledge before the written word. The oral word represents tradition, "diffuses ancestral voices, seeks to uphold the law of the group, thus making it an exercise in wisdom." (PADILHA, 2007, p. 35). As it appears in other African literary works, orality is one of the main features of Chiziane's work, but in a reinvented way. The oral elements are not only connected with tradition, as they lead us to know the real position that the Mozambican woman occupies in society.

At the beginning of *Niketche's* reading, it is believed that the plot will develop only around the protagonist's life, as she is turned inward, raising questions about her position and trying to understand who she is. However, when seeking answers to their questions, Rami leaves the private environment, her home, to the outside and, from contact with other women, leads to the narrative different situations told by the voices of women from different parts of the country.

The dialogues that Rami has, throughout the novel, with other women bring to light the situation of subordination in which they find themselves in society. It becomes apparent that one of the narrative's intentions is to denounce the reality of Mozambique's feminine being and, through conversations between the characters, enable the protagonism of these silenced voices. We defend this view, because Chiziane, in an interview by Rosália Diogo to Scripta Magazine, confesses: "I have tried to make a kind of provocation by showing that the feminine deserves to be heard."

Bringing the place of speech and listening to the woman is to allow her to be free from the only condition that the scenario commanded by man provides her: that of inferiority, subservience. In some moments of the novel, it is noted that Rami realizes having the right to voice and to be heard denied: "Do I have the right to be heard at least once in my life? I'm tired of being a woman. Endure every whim. Being a foreigner in my own home. I'm tired of being a shadow." (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 203)

Thinking about the concept of "place of speech" brings us to the Indian writer Spivak, especially her work *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, which raises important reflections on the silence imposed on those who were colonized. Critics believe that these oppressed groups can and should overcome this barrier.

Spivak notes within the group of underlings the difference between men and women:

In the context of the obliterated itinerary of the subordinate subject, the path of sexual difference is doubly obliterated. The issue is not that of female participation in the insurgency or the basic rules of the sexual division of labor, because in both cases there is "evidence." It is a further matter that, although both are objects of colonialist historiography and subjects of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender retains male domination. If, in the context of colonial production, the subject has no history and cannot speak, the female subordinate subject is even more deeply in obscurity. (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 66 - 67)

The above passage helps us to understand that it is not only in the literary universe that women are considered inferior and that their words are not heard. We can consider that, through Rami, besides the fictional voices, Chiziane's voice is exposed, and her "narrative (...), when confronting past, present and future, ends up bringing out hypocritically disguised and clandestine cultural practices. but deeply rooted in Mozambican society." (SALGADO, 2004, p. 302). Researcher Victor Azevedo analyzes this issue and realizes that even with the "concern to distinguish the empirical subject from the self-biographical reports, from the perspective of narratology, in common sense there still remains a certain confusion between narrator and author, especially in first-person narratives." (AZEVEDO, 2016, p. 102). Therefore, the novel denounces the reality of the Mozambican woman and, as Francisco Noa states, "the literature implying the creation of imaginary worlds, nevertheless, establishes relations with the world to which we belong" (NOA, 2015, p. 257).

Although Paulina Chiziane is concerned to clarify that the protagonist narrator and the other characters are fictitious and different from her, the writer states: “I will confess something about this book: I have something with me that I call the author’s book. I wrote the book in a very personal way, I wrote my version.” (CHIZIANE, 2013, p. 363-364).

Important for this chapter is the statement Chiziane often makes when she is called a novelist: “My starting point is orality, and all my work to date is based on oral tradition, so I don’t like to say that I made a novel, a novel, whatever. I tell a story and, in telling it, add a point. And it can be big or small.” (apud AZEVEDO, 2016, p. 4).

Paulina’s insistence on being recognized as a storyteller rather than a novelist leads us to pause Niketche’s study to analyze the behavior of the female writer. These statements undoubtedly attest to Chiziane’s desire to claim a “legacy of orality that rural childhood has given her,” as Leite states (p. 29). Such a strategy would also indicate, continues Leite (p. 29), an authorial intentionality of moralizing, that is, pedagogical meaning, committed to the formation of ethical and behavioral values.

Although such observations are pertinent, let us raise some considerations regarding the question of female authorship brought by the theorists Gilbert and Gubar, in the article *Infection in the sentence: the woman writer and the anxiety of authorship*, also fit. In this text, the researchers analyze how the writing process between men and women diverges. In the case of writers, they realize that the psychology of literary history - anxieties and tensions - is linked to predecessors. While the writer tries to distance himself from the previous texts, which will be called “anxiety of influence”, the woman, at first, has her presence marked in the literature as stereotypical characters, which would influence her writing. The writer would thus suffer from “anxiety of authorship”. Unlike the man who is afraid of not being original, the woman would be afraid “of not being able to create, because she can never become a ‘precursor’, the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.” (GILBERT, GUBAR, 2017, p. 193). Thus, this anxiety would be intensified by the fear of fighting male predecessors, resulting in the experimentation of their own identity and the search for a female model to authenticate themselves in the literary space.

We are interested to note that throughout this common process in a male-dominated society, the writer will experience “downward phenomena” and, consequently, will experience “her gender as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy.” (GILBERT, GUBAR, 2017, p. 194).

Thus, we can see similarities between Chiziane’s speech, when she says she doesn’t want to be called a novelist, with the ideas of Gilbert and Gubar, because even being the first woman to publish a novel in Mozambique, Chiziane opts for the category of storyteller. This would indicate, simultaneously, a movement of affirmation of the place of orality, but also of self-protection, thus avoiding possible comparisons of his work with that of authors.

The writer will show in some of her speeches some of the reasons that led her to write *Niketche*: the inconvenience to identify the absence of women who write about women and the uneasiness to be part of an unequal reality. When asked by Rosália Diogo about her country's literature, Chiziane reports that:

There were people who thought I succeeded by chance. Some writers considered that I was writing about feminine because it was fashionable. But I followed with great force and determination. (...) The fact is that I am a woman and I write about topics that touch me in my condition. (CHIZIANE, 2013, p. 362-363).

So we can say that romance will be a way of claiming a place of speech for female voices. It is not enough to bring themes about women, there is a need for stories to be told by them. Once again, another statement by Paulina corroborates our perspective: "I like the poets of my country very much, but I have never found in literature that men write the profile of an entire woman. It is always the mouth, the legs, one aspect. Never the infinite wisdom that comes from women." (CHIZIANE, 2013, p. 358). Therefore, throughout the novel appear stories, myths and legends told by women. This shows the wisdom being imparted by them through orality, such as the passage below where Rami's aunt explains how the practice of polygamy worked.

— No nosso mundo não havia haréns — explica-me ela. — eram famílias verdadeiras, onde havia democracia social. Cada mulher tinha sua casa, seus filhos e suas propriedades. Tínhamos o nosso órgão — assembleia das esposas do rei — onde discutíamos a divisão de trabalho, decidíamos quem iria cozinhar as papas matinais do soberano, quem ia preparar os banhos e esfregar os pés, cortar as unhas, massajar a coluna, aparar a barba, pentear-lhe o cabelo e outros cuidados. Participávamos na feitura da escala matrimonial de Sua Majestade, que consistia numa noite para cada uma, mas tudo igual, igualzinho. E ele cumpria à risca. Ele tinha que dar um exemplo de Estado, um modelo de família. Se o rei cometesse a imprudência de dar primazia a uma mulher em especial, tinha que suportar as reuniões de crítica dos conselheiros e anciões. (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 71)

In the passage above, it is through Aunt Maria's voice that the main character and we readers have an explanation of how one of Mozambique's cultural practices worked. Interesting is Chiziane's care not only to talk about, but to present and clarify to the reader traditional customs.

Popular sayings, oral knowledge and proverbs are also some resources that will contribute to the record of orality in the novel. For example: "The popular voice says that the neighbor's wife is always better than mine." (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 37). Similarly, the retrieval of memory will appear as a way of bringing oral knowledge. In some moments, Rami acknowledges that there is a past that is not only hers and that it is related to her culture traditions: "This is my certainty, my subconscious, rescuing sayings and knowledge hidden in my memory." (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 172).

Interesting is to analyze the legend of Princess Vuyazi that appears in *Niketche*. As the story about polygamy told by Aunt Maria, this legend is told by a woman, explains how menstruation arose, and teaches that unsubmitive women are punished. That is, it has a moralizing effect for Rami and the other wives. Ana Mafalda Leite will recognize in the novel this moralizing character and notes that “Stories illustrate such knowledge, effabulize tradition, run through a specific temporality, since it is the reappropriation of a secular voice and knowledge, retaking and responding in a Griotic attitude of pedagogy criticism.” (LEITE, 2013, p. 30).

— Era uma vez uma princesa. Nasceu da nobreza mas tinha o coração de pobreza. Às mulheres sempre se impôs a obrigação de obedecer aos homens. É a natureza. Esta princesa desobedecia ao pai e ao marido e só fazia o que queria. Quando o marido repreendia ela respondia. Quando lhe espancava, retribuía. Quando cozinhava galinha, comia moelas e comia coxas, servia ao marido o que lhe apetecia. Quando a primeira filha fez um ano, o marido disse: vamos desmamar a menina, e fazer outro filho. Ela disse que não. Queria que a filha mamasse dois anos como os rapazes, para que crescesse forte como ela. Recusava-se a servi-lo de joelhos e a aparar-lhe os pentelhos. O marido, cansado da insubmissão, apelou à justiça do rei, pai dela. O rei, magoado, ordenou ao dragão para lhe dar um castigo. Num dia de trovão, o dragão levou-a para o céu e a estampou na lua, para dar um exemplo de castigo ao mundo inteiro. Quando a lua cresce e incha, há uma mulher que se vê no meio da lua, de trouxa na cabeça e bebé nas costas. É Vuyazi, a princesa insubmissa estampada na lua. É a Vuyazi, estátua de sal petrificada no alto dos céus, num inferno de gelo. É por isso que as mulheres do mundo inteiro, uma vez por mês, apodrecem o corpo em chagas e ficam impuras, choram lágrimas de sangue, castigadas pela insubmissão de Vuyazi. (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 157)

Looking closely at the participation of the women who make up the narrative leads us to reaffirm that *Niketche* is a space in which women’s voices demarcate a place for their speech. Through Rami’s dissatisfaction with her life, we have questions that lead us to think about the condition of being female in society. At the same time that we “hear” their voices, we know that they are mostly set aside in public spaces. Thus, Chiziane manages to fill orally the void caused by the silencing imposed. Here’s the scene where the characters try to argue at a family reunion, and after unsuccessfulness, one of the main character’s thoughts exposes the situation:

Cerramos as nossas bocas e as nossas almas. Por acaso temos direito à palavra? E por mais que a tivéssemos, de que valeria? Voz de mulher não merece crédito. Aqui no sul, os jovens iniciados aprendem a lição: confiar em mulher é vender a tua alma. Mulher tem língua comprida, de serpente. Mulher deve ouvir, cumprir, obedecer. (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 154)

In *Niketche*, the characters realize that they should have studied, but instead of being encouraged, they were assigned to activities related to marriage and household chores. Not having attended these places interferes with adulthood, making them dependent on her husband and even being represented by his voice.

É a nós que a sociedade não dá oportunidade para ganhar com dignidade o nosso próprio pão. (...) Enquanto isso, os homens vão para a escola do pão. Enquanto eles aprendem a escrever a palavra vida no mapa do mundo, nós vamos pela madrugada fora, atrás das nossas mães, espantar os pássaros nos campos de arroz. (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 291)

Being limited in their spaces in society means that women do not have, since childhood, a space to express themselves with words. Which is harmful, not only to the female, but to any individual, since the voice is the mark of a worthy existence. Not listening also happens and will be a recurring practice when women claim their right to speak, because for those who have always obtained the power of speech, being in your position is comfortable. All this ends up discouraging the woman who was silenced trying to take her place, for example, when Rami, even though she was right, was sure they wouldn't hear her: "Mas quem iria me ouvir? Alguma vez tive voz nesta casa? Alguma vez me deste autoridade para decidir sobre as coisas mais insignificantes da nossa vida?" (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 228).

At the end of the novel, we come across a very different Rami from the beginning of the story. Now she is no longer afraid to speak, as shown in the following passage: "Falo com muito prazer e ele sente a dor (...). No meu peito explodem aplausos." (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 227) And, a few pages later, Rami goes on to say what has long been kept: "A minha linguagem é mais dura que uma rajada de granizo. Chicoteia. Eu dizia tudo sem rodeios." (CHIZIANE, 2004, p. 229).

Paulina Chiziane creates a new literary proposal as she makes *Niketche* a work of contestation by giving voice to Mozambican women from her characters and at the same time opening a space to address the silenced issues in society. Therefore, claiming for the right to have a voice is paramount to achieving liberation.

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