



ROLE-PLAYING AND MASKS IN *AS VISTAS DO DR. VALDEZ* BY JOÃO PAULO BORES COELHO
A MÁSCARA E A ENCENAÇÃO EM *AS VISITAS DO DR. VALDEZ* DE JOÃO PAULO BORGES COELHO

*Mônica Ganhão*¹

ABSTRACT

In the novel *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*, by João Paulo Borges COELHO, role-playing and masks (literal or figurative) are central topics, connected to power or submission within social relationships, during the transition between the colonial regime and independence in Mozambique. They serve several purposes in the story, such as to invoke the past and insert it into the rapidly changing present – through the mask of Dr. Valdez concocted by Vicente -; to momentarily extend a political and social order that is progressively wearing away – through the authoritative mask of Sá Caetana - ; or to introduce without violence the essence of change into former colonial relationships, which predicts the end of the colonial way of living. Sá Caetana, coming from a colonizing family, uses a traditional authoritative attitude towards Vicente that she does not wish to see subverted; a mask which she cannot forgo. Vicente, on the other hand, is divided between the submissive and obedient memory of his father, Cosme Paulino, who was a servant to the family, and the new callings of independence and decolonization. This role-playing and these masks lead the characters into a dead-lock without solution: the simultaneous impossibility of keeping up the role-playing or of dismantling it entirely. In this proposal, we aim to analyse how, in the story, wearing a certain social mask is both part of the colonial past and of the decolonized present and future, and how these masks represent an impediment to the creation of real and emotional connections.

KEYWORDS: power; colonial regime; independence; role-playing; masks

RESUMO

Em *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*, do escritor João Paulo Borges COELHO, a máscara e a encenação (literais ou figurativas) são temáticas centrais que se encontram intimamente ligadas aos jogos de poder do período de transição do regime colonial para a independência em Moçambique.

São tópicos transversais a todo o romance e que servem vários propósitos: permitem a evocação de um passado num presente em mutação através da constituição da máscara do Dr. Valdez por Vicente; permitem ainda a perpetuação temporária de uma ordem política e social que se vai esboroando através da máscara autoritária de Sá Caetana e dos resquícios da máscara de Cosme Paulino em seu filho Vicente; permitem, por fim, introduzir de forma não violenta os elementos de transformação que prenunciam o fim de um modelo colonial. As duas senhoras, provenientes de uma família colonizadora, encontram-se numa posição tradicional de autoridade colonial perante Vicente que não desejam ver subvertida, de cuja máscara autoritária não podem abdicar. Vicente, por seu lado, divide-se entre a memória submissa e obediente do pai, que fora criado da família, e as novas forças de independência e descolonização. Estas encenações e máscaras conduzirão as personagens principais a um impasse sem solução – a simultânea impossibilidade de continuar a encenação e de a quebrar por completo. Nesta proposta, tentaremos demonstrar como, na história, as máscaras formam parte tanto do passado colonial, como do presente e futuro independente, e como se tornam um impedimento para a criação de ligações interpessoais verdadeiras e emotivas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: poder; regime colonial; independência; encenação; máscaras

¹ Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa. Doutoranda em Estudos Portugueses e Românicos com bolsa da FCT, desenvolve o projecto de tese intitulado “Mulheres entre homens: dinâmicas de género na literatura portuguesa oitocentista”.



Role-playing and masks are central motifs in *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez* and are already present in the title of the novel. The visits of Dr. Valdez refer to the visits Vicente, servant to Sá Caetana and Sá Amélia, pays to the latter disguised as Dr. Valdez, a character from the ladies' pasts.

However, these topics stretch across the whole story and are not exclusive to Vicente. In a sense, the story is actually built upon several forms of role-playing and masks that lead the main characters to a deadlock without a solution – the simultaneous impossibility of keeping up the colonial way of organizing social powers and of breaking it completely. This problem is triggered by the transitional period from the colonial regime to independence in Mozambique.

During this presentation we aim to analyse both the meaning and evolution of the masks Vicente constructs and deconstructs, focusing on the mask of Dr. Valdez, as well as the mask Sá Caetana wears in her relationship with Cosme Paulino (her childhood servant and father to Vicente), and the mask of madness worn by Sá Amélia as a means of intervening indirectly and without consequences in domestic and family dynamics.

Vicente, Valdez and the “mapiko” mask

Let's start with the mask of Dr. Valdez: Vicente makes use of this mask by posing as a white male figure from the Mozambican colonial past in order to assert his individuality before Sá Caetana, his mistress, and to subvert the traditional power relationships between servants and masters in a colonial rural environment. The servant constructs an alter ego of the doctor, successfully adopting the appropriate mannerisms required to seem plausible (OLIVEIRA, 2012, p. 22), while asking himself: “How does a white man think? How does a white man feel? How does a white man act?” (COELHO, 2004, p. 48).

In reality, the role-playing and development of this mask end up gaining more importance than the physical mask itself, even though the evolution of the former influences the latter. Being Valdez is for Vicente a means to feel how it is to be treated as a visitor instead of a servant, what it's like to be able to sit on the sofas instead of tins, and how it feels to use with his own discretion objects that he would usually only be allowed to dust and clean around the house (COELHO, 2004, p. 57-58). For these same reasons, being Valdez is also a way of confronting Sá Caetana under the protection of the mask and the guise created from being Valdez.

But Vicente quickly loses the ability to act purely as Valdez, as he first tries to, and progressively lets the true Vicente intervene in the acting. At a certain point, the two characters intermingle and alternate in such a way within the servant as if he had a split personality.

The contact with his new friends, Jeremias and Sabonete, awakens Vicente to a reality he was unaware of: that of anticolonialism and of the desire for national assertion against the white man's colonial power (BARBATO; VEIGA, 2015, p. 68). This encourages Vicente to

further use the mask of Valdez as a means to show Sá Caetana that times have changed, and to point out to her some of her own mistakes and intransigence towards Sá Amélia and himself. Nevertheless, contrary to his friends' aggressive approach and overt manifestations of violence, his strategy is always covered by the mask and the semi-fantastical environment created by the staging of the visits.

The intermingling of Valdez and Vicente becomes even more intense as Vicente, by playing his character, derives from him the necessary courage to assert himself before his mistress (COELHO, 2004, p. 116). It is also at this moment, however, that both the mistresses and their servant are first referred to as a family in the novel. This seems essential to the understanding of the change Vicente goes through and how different it is from the attitudes of his friends or the previous behaviour of his father. It is by then as well that the deconstruction of Valdez begins (p. 117-118), which will be completed by the intrusion of the mapiko mask – a traditional mask used during the ceremony that marks the coming of age for boys.

On the other hand, Cosme Paulino, who had served Sá Caetana all his life and had died defending her property even in her absence (COELHO, 2004, p. 135), is, throughout the course of the boy's transformation, a shadow of a past he inherited and that, due to tradition and respect, he should linearly follow, without subversion.

Therefore, the news of the death of his father represent a crucial moment for the young servant's transformation. Faced with this tragic event, the son questions his duty: "Not knowing if the news reinforced his commitment («You shall serve the mistresses as I would serve them, do you hear me?»), if they freed him from it. Do I extend your gesture beyond your capacities, father, or do I finally let you rest?" (COELHO, 2004, p. 107).

The question he poses himself is, then, "How to disobey?" (COELHO, 2004, p. 134); how to subvert the colonial social order, the traditional relationships between masters and servants, without offending the memory of his own father. How to reconcile his own individuality with the masks of his past: "He wanted to change but he did not know how; he wanted to leave but the forces that held him in the same place were strong." (p. 135).

Nevertheless, although painful, change and disobedience are inevitable and Vicente finds in the transformation of the mask of Valdez the most peaceful way to achieve them. Vicente puts an end to his use of Valdez by invoking the doctor one last time without the request of Sá Caetana and by adding to his mask the mapiko mask (COELHO 2004, 139).

This new addition distorts not only the appearance of the mask of Valdez, but also, and for good, the staging that surrounded it. The mapiko mask is representative both of a national sense manifested in art form and in traditional Mozambican cults, and of a point of transition in the lives of young Mozambican boys, who would celebrate the transition into adulthood by learning how to wear that mask and by observing the dance of the mapiko (COELHO, 2004, p. 143).

With the mask being taken out of its traditional context and into the old ladies' household, the mask serves the purpose of challenging colonialism and restoring national origins, as well as being symbolic of a transition point for Vicente. Through it the servant asserts his newfound individuality, making it clear for his mistresses that he could not copy his father's behaviour and keep on serving them without introducing some change into their relationship (OLIVEIRA, 2012, p. 137)². Combining tradition, colonialism and individuality, Vicente seems to suggest that change will eventually lead to a future that will be the product of that combination; a future that, while representing a breaking with the colonial regime, will not exclusively be a return to tradition, but a new reality where individuality may also take part³.

The deconstruction of the mask of Valdez leads, in the end, to its symbolic rejection: wearing the mapiko mask, "a powerful weapon" (COELHO, 2004, p. 166), means finally reaching maturity, and, therefore, finally having the possibility of destroying the mask of the white male, putting an end to the staging of the past and revealing his true self to Sá Caetana (OLIVEIRA, 2012, p. 137-138).

This revelation, however, while being a stride towards assertion, is done without the violence Sá Caetana expected (COELHO, 2004, p. 166). In reality, until the end of the novel and the departure of his mistress to Portugal, something in Vicente prevents him from identifying completely with his friends and accepting the new modes of communication between bosses and employees (p. 172), namely a relationship merely of work and hostility.

This is due, or so we believe, to two main reasons: on one hand, the memory of Cosme Paulino and of his remonstrations in regards to the conduct he should adopt which Vicente finds hard to disobey; on the other hand, and maybe mostly for this reason, because his relationship with Sá Caetana and Sá Amélia cannot fit into either of the two work relationship patterns available – old or new. As every character will end up recognizing near the end, Vicente and his mistresses become a family together – they all share their roots and find in each other memories of their past. If Vicente finds complicity in Sá Amélia (COELHO, 2004, p. 52), in Sá Caetana he finds a mother (p. 219). The change of times and place, when they leave the countryside for Beira, makes their relationships different from others, both those of the colonial past, and those of the developing independent present. This turns them into impossible relationships in the new Mozambican social context⁴.

2 Serafim claims that "The visits became his (Vicente's) own mapiko ceremony, in which he ceases to be the young servant and conquers his autonomy." (2016, p. 28).

3 During the ceremony the mapiko says: "«I am simultaneously what has been done and what is left to do. Look, because you, albeit having learnt, will never be able to do as I do.» All of this so that the boy-children know that living is always doing differently, it is respecting tradition and renegading it." (COELHO, 2004, p. 145).

4 Silva mentions, as well, that this family represents an exception in Beira: "Together as if «living in an island», the «mistresses» and the servant preserve between themselves a relationship grounded on «supportive verticality» which, though affected by the war, still remains between the three characters under the influence of *ishima* (respect)." Oliveira also points out the reduced space of their house in Beira, when compared to the Big House in Ibo, as another possible reason for that closeness between servant and mistresses (2012, p. 135).

For these reasons, and because of the change about to overcome the country, the relationship between Vicente and Sá Caetana can only be solved by separation, as letting go of the masks and staging of power, both of the past and the present, is impossible: “A strange sight this one is, not old, not even new, an old lady caressing her servant.” (COELHO, 2004, p. 220).

Sá Caetana, the “Big Mistress” and Sá Amélia, the mad

The mask and staging of power and authority are, indeed, what Sá Caetana tries to sustain throughout the whole story before Vicente, Cosme Paulino and even Sá Amélia.

The mask of the “Big Mistress” that she wears is representative of colonial authority, rigidity and arrogance. It is also, in a way, the mask she inherits from her mother, Ana Bessa, and that she amplifies when she becomes a widow, through the power she acquires over the Big House and the Small House.

The authority/respect or superiority/inferiority relations between servant and mistress begins, for Sá Caetana, in her relationship with Cosme Paulino, who had been her servant since childhood. When they move to Beira, the mistress wants to mimic with Vicente the social organisation that he should have inherited like she had. There are countless times during which Sá Caetana insists in forcing Vicente to abide by the conduct she is used to, stressing her rights as mistress and becoming angry when she perceives any change in the boy (COELHO, 2004, p. 23; p. 91-92).

However, if maintaining her stance as the “Big Mistress” is possible while Cosme Paulino is alive through the letters they keep sending each other, that stance does not seem sustainable in the new social context she finds herself in. Vicente is no longer merely a servant. He becomes, mainly due to the role he plays in Sá Amélia’s life and the complicity that they inevitably develop, a member of the family and a youngster prone to change, to whom being treated as inferior feels offensive.

Yet, that intransigent and authoritative countenance, distanced from Vicente, that Sá Caetana wants to sustain is in fact a way of hiding her true feelings, her vulnerability and her conscience. When she receives notice of the death of Cosme Paulino, the “Big Mistress” imagines herself telling Vicente: “«It’s okay, I will take care of you.» and she would timidly venture to add, «After all, are we or are we not a family?»” (COELHO, 2004, p. 105-106).

Nevertheless, when the moment comes to tell Vicente about his father’s death, Sá Caetana cannot express herself in that way and simply reads to him the letter explaining what happened. And when Vicente, disguised as Dr. Valdez, talks about returning to Mucojo the narrator mentions: “And why does she oppose to the return of Vicente? Mysteries of one who feels the responsibility of being almost a mother to the boy without being able to assume it.” (COELHO, 2004, p. 152).

On the other hand, the mask of Sá Amélia is less clear and more questionable than her sister's. First of all, Sá Amélia's body is described throughout the novel, even when the narrator refers to her body as a child, as some sort of vessel for an unreliable and absent mind (COELHO, 2004, p. 10; p. 13). When she grows old and sickness prevents her from walking, her body is often described as being disconnected from her mind, which alternately inhabits it or leaves it (p. 31). That split between mind and body is aggravated by her blindness near the end of the novel, which leaves her entirely to the ghosts of her imagination (p. 167).

In fact, Sá Amélia's madness is uncertain throughout the whole story: we are never sure where her hallucinations start and her lucidity ends; or when she is truly oblivious or, instead, using her supposed madness to serve her lucid purposes, staging that madness deliberately (Serafim, 2016, p. 26-27): "She knows that behind the madness derived from sickness and old age, she is capable of using her memory to charge what is owed to her with the same ease that she resorts to forgetfulness to avoid responsibilities." (COELHO, 2004, p. 37).

The moments when her acting become clearer are those when Dr. Valdez comes to visit her. In certain passages, it becomes clear that Sá Amélia stages her own madness in order to indirectly intervene besides her sister in favour of the servant or to point out to her the mistakes from her past (COELHO, 2004, p. 74).

As a matter of fact, contrary to Sá Caetana who vehemently resists the change of times and of Vicente, Sá Amélia, although "mad", understands that change is inevitable and that Vicente cannot mimic his father's devotion in that new national context:

Sá Amélia, until then lost in herself, intervened:

- Don't pay attention to her, my friend. The boy is at an age of discovery. My sister does not understand that. She wanted him here all for herself, always available, always saying yes and nodding like his father. She does not understand that these are different times, that Vicente can never be like his father." (COELHO, 2004, p. 157-158)

Cosme Paulino, the maskless

Finally, contrary to most other characters, Cosme Paulino is the only one to not wear any mask in the novel. The old servant belongs entirely to the colonial past and manages to prolong it beyond its time; he belongs to the time when the role-playing inherent to colonial power and the relationships between servants and masters were inherited from the family (COELHO, 2004, p. 38; p. 40) and, therefore, unquestionable. Indeed, the sort of role-playing that would be invisible to its actors, because it was unconsciously ingrained from birth within those who staged it.

Cosme accepts his poverty, the hardship of his job and the violence of the unfair punishments he suffered as unavoidable and they do not influence his everlasting loyalty to

his masters. Even his death is marked by blind faithfulness: he refuses to leave his mistresses' property and is, therefore, captured and beaten to death by Portuguese soldiers who believe (or pretend to believe) that he is a rebel. Paulino's death is surrounded, thereby, by a dark irony: he dies defending colonial power while being accused of rebellion, something he could never have dreamed of.

If he ever wore any mask and played his role in the staging of colonial relationships, he did it so well that he became completely identified with it.

Conclusions

In this novel, both the physically present mask and the mask that can be sensed through the countenance of each character serve several purposes. On the one hand, they allow for the invocation of the past within the changing present – this is accomplished through the mask of Dr. Valdez created by Vicente; they also allow for the temporary elongation of a political and social order that is disappearing – this is accomplished through the authoritative mask of Sá Caetana and the remnants of Cosme Paulino that live within Vicente⁵; they allow, finally, for the non-violent introduction of change that predicts the end of the colonial regime.

On “stage” as Dr. Valdez, Vicente is able to show his mistress, without having to resort to explicit confrontation, that the present and the future cannot linearly prolong the past; that the dynamics and role-playing inherent to colonial power are reaching their death bed; that the traditional family heritage of superiority or inferiority needs to be broken to give way to a fairer social order, within which the masks of power can no longer be used for cruelty and injustice. Lastly, that in the new Mozambique, the emotional connection that that unlikely family had created amongst itself had no place, because it could never be accepted as it was, nor maintained through the old social organisation models as the relationship between Sá Caetana and Cosme Paulino had been.

Thus we believe that in this novel, the end of colonialism does not entail, as one could think, the end of role-playing and masks. As the characters Jeremias, Sabonete and Maria Camba Françoise seem to suggest, if independence was going to end the colonial type of social interaction and relationships and give way to the straightforward stare of the Mozambican man and woman, it was also going to replace the masks of colonialism with those of anticolonialism and revolution. What Borges Coelho seems to suggest through Vicente is that neither of those masks, being simplistic and reductive, could translate the emotional and sentimental complexity existing between human beings, be them masters or servants, old or new, colonialists or rebels⁶.

5 The relationship between masters and servants and the authority of the former over the latter is actually designated as role-playing within the novel: “The nausea and a certain surprise of verifying how fragile authority was. As a play requiring the effort both of those who give orders and of those who receive them.” (COELHO, 2004, p. 155-156).

6 “With it I simply wanted to tell a story, and, at the same time, question the Manichean interpretation that rules

References

ALVES, I. M. M. *Ser Velho em As Visitas do Dr. Valdez de João Paulo Borges Coelho. Universidade de Aveiro, 2011.* Dissertação de Mestrado em Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas, Universidade de Aveiro, 2011. Available at: <http://www.retrievo.pt/record?id=oai:ria.ua.pt:10773/6876>

BARBATO, L. F. T.; VEIGA, V. N. Um jogo de relações: os dependentes na obra *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*. *Revista Eletrônica Literatura e Autoritarismo*, Nº 25, p.59-72, 2015. Available at: <https://periodicos.ufsm.br/index.php/LA/index>

COELHO, João Paulo Borges. *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*. Lisboa: Caminho, 2004.

FORNOS, J. L. G. Desmascaramento do mundo colonial moçambicano em *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*, de João Paulo Borges Coelho. *Navegações*, V. 7, Nº2, p. 194-199, 2014. Available at: <http://revistaseletronicas.pucrs.br/ojs/index.php/navegacoes/article/view/21052>

MARÇOLLA, B. A.. Identidade, alteridade e memória em *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*, de Borges Coelho. *Cadernos Cespuc de Pesquisa*, Nº16, p.141-151, Belo Horizonte, 2007. Available at: <http://periodicos.pucminas.br/index.php/cadernoscespuc/article/view/14768/11447>

OLIVEIRA, N. S. Simulação e/ou dissimulação: reflexão sobre a estética em *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* e *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*. *SCRIPTA*, V.16, Nº 31, p.119-138, Belo Horizonte: PUC Minas, 2012. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284636965_Simulacao_e_ou_dissimulacao_reflexao_sobre_a_estetica_em_Memorias_postumas_de_Bras_Cubas_e_As_visitas_do_Dr_Valdez_DOI_-_105752P2358-34282012v16n31p119

SERAFIM, Y. O olhar por detrás da máscara em *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*. *Revista Decifrar*, Vol. 04, Nº07, p. 19-30, Manaus: Amazonas: Brasil, 2016. Available at: <http://www.periodicos.ufam.edu.br/Decifrar/issue/view/96>

SILVA, L. A. M. G. *A representação do «ishima» no romance As Visitas do Dr. Valdez de João Paulo Borges Coelho*. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo/Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, s.d. Available at: <https://uspdigital.usp.br/siicusp/cdOnlineTrabalhoVisualizarResumo?numeroInscricaoTrabalho=3339&numeroEdicao=22>

over the period right before independence. Where everything is usually read in black and white, I wanted to insert greys, nuances.” (João Paulo Borges Coelho in an interview for the newspaper *Público* quoted in ALVES, 2011, p. 37).