

CN NKEMDIRIM & KH BROWN

## Poetry, Culture and States of Being

GUEST: IRENE MARQUES (Canadian Scholar and Poetess)

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**IRENE** Marques, a Mellon Research Fellow at the School of Literature and Language Studies of the University of the Witwatersrand where she investigates issues of scientific racism, race and gender representations in South African and Mozambican colonial and postcolonial literature, holds a Ph. D. in Comparative Literature (2005), Masters degrees in French Literature and in Comparative Literature, and an Honours B.A. in French Literature/Portuguese Minor, all from the University of Toronto. Dr. Marques also has a Bachelor of Social Work from Ryerson University (Canada) and has taught at the University of Toronto and the Ontario College of Arts and Design for several years in diverse fields of World, African, Caribbean and Lusophone literatures.

Irene Marques's teaching and research interests include African literatures, African epistemologies, Buddhist philosophies, Jungian psychology; mystical, spiritual and creative writings and their power to heal and integrate the "whole person," feminist and postcolonial literature and theory, etc. All these significantly impact on the varied themes of her creative works, particularly her first volume of poetry, *Wearing Glasses of Water*, with its power of conviction, its intimacy and deep evocations of personal realities.

A versatile writer and literary critic, Irene Marques has academic articles, short stories and poems published in Canadian and international journals. She sits on the editorial board of the International Confederacy of African Literature and Culture, and has edited a full critical volume on the works of the Nigerian poet and novelist, Chin Ce. More of her literary contributions include several other works of

fiction (in Portuguese and English) in various genres (poetry, short and long fiction) awaiting publication. Her monograph, *From Bolder Politics to Deeper Politics: Feminist, Class and Cultural Identity Discourses Across Continents*, will soon be published, and her current work, *The Patriarchies of Post-colonies*, a widely comparative project that analyses contemporary novels from different African countries: Mozambique, Nigeria, Zimbabwe (or South Africa), not excluding possibly a novel from a Francophone country, explores the different ways in which patriarchies exist in post-colonial countries; how they forge, reshape and recreate themselves; how Western patriarchies intermingle with African patriarchies; how colonization might have changed or reshaped patriarchy in Africa (whether in a positive or negative order); the relationship between patriarchy and the need to reaffirm or rediscover what may be deemed 'true' African traditions and cultural identity.

The publication of Irene Marques's first volume of poetry has inspired the succeeding literary chat while the whole range of ideas covered in this discourse also reveals a poetess's promise of scholarship and evolving social consciousness. Published in Canada by Tsar Publications and suffused with variations of moods and feelings that direct her myriad trains of discourse, *Wearing Glasses of Water* will no doubt aim for Marques's poetry a position of significance from its own unique centre among the veritable range of literature of our times.

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CNN *You are welcome to this year's forum, Irene.*

IM Thank you for inviting me to this forum and for interest in my poetry, even though I am not an African! Or perhaps I am, since we all seem to be according to the latest paleontological and genetic scientific discoveries. But in any case, I am an Africanist in the scholastic sense.

**CNN** *Raised in Portugal and domiciled in America (Canada) your poetry has some interesting references to motherland, paternity and familial values. Looking at your background can you tell us how much of your Portuguese ancestry has made the Canadian poetess and literature critic that you are today?*

**IM** First, I would like to say that I do live in Canada, which is located in North America. And I say that because often people think of Canadians as being Americans, and by Americans they actually mean citizens of the U.S.A. So I would rather be called a citizen of Canada, and of course also a citizen of Portugal, which is the country where I lived until I was twenty years old, before emigrating to Canada – and for that very reason a country that is deeply rooted into my memory, my way of being, seeing and perceiving the world.

A part of your question pertains to how my origins have influenced my work as a literary critic. I think it is difficult to give a simple answer. But I could say that a lot of my academic training in Literature and Social Work, and my subsequent work and interest in those areas, was dictated in many ways, or influenced, by the place where I grew up and the kinds of realities and oppressions that I was exposed to early on in life. Of course my intrinsic interests as a human being, who cannot always explain rationally why she chooses certain career paths and why certain things might appeal to her, have also dictated the path of my career, my passions, and my engagements. I do know that by growing up in a setting which I felt to be deeply rooted in class, gender and sex divisions and impregnated with an oppressive, almost silencing, Catholic religiosity, made me become aware of certain kinds of injustices very early on. Growing up in a rural milieu and with parents who were poor and barely knew how to read and write made me want to conquer that world of the books, of books that can tell why things happen the way they do and if indeed they could happen in a

different way, a way that would be kinder, more beautiful, where poor and rich, men and women, rural and urban, educated and non-educated (in formal institutional terms, I mean) did not live so divided, so alienated from one another, so imprisoned in socio-political and religious categories.

**CNN** *Yes. I can relate to that too as an African and one with keen regard for literature. Most of the writers I have met also talked about a background that did not boast of much sufficiency in terms of amenities, economic, educational and social conditions. To be a writer, to be a good writer, implies a love of learning, a love of reading and the eagerness to conquer the immediate limitations of environment and create anew. The limited environment of one's background then becomes a catalyst...*

**IM** I have always been a very curious person and when I first learned how to read and write, I remember how I felt that words were my own HOUSE, I remember the deep pleasure that I felt in being able to write and read stories in primary school about other people, other worlds, other ways, the pleasure of putting thoughts and feelings into words, into stories, into realities. It was a very powerful discovery. Writing and reading could put me in touch with the wider world, travel in ways non-physical but just as real and powerful, meet people and discover ways so different that I would become astonished and filled by it, richer as a person, as a human being, a pregnant child happy to give birth to more worlds and stories. Writing and reading was the wonder world where I could be, do, think, imagine, see, discover, become enlightened...

**CNN** *Do you see life in Canada (America) as some sort of exile from motherland? Are there nostalgic impulses from such a feeling of exile that have affected or constrained your work in any particular direction?*

**IM** I think when one moves to another country, the home-country, or the country of birth always tends to be a fundamental part of oneself, especially because I left at the age of a young adult, an age when I already had imprinted upon me many, many things, good and bad, things that pertain to specific cultural traits, to family, to my position in a large family (I am the youngest of eight children), to class, to language, to being in that language and how that language has taught me about the world, how to see the world, how to feel in the world, how to see myself and others.

Like many other people who have left their home country either by choice, which was my case to a certain extent at least, or by need, and I am not saying that I will speak for the latter and also realize I am not the first to say this – I am a divided being, someone who is between two-places, two-cultures, or better yet, many cultures since Canada and specifically Toronto, the place where I live, is a place replete with many peoples from different parts of the world, making it a world of its own, a full world with traces of most of the world in it which can be I think something very rich, very eye opening, very beautiful, very gratifying on all kinds of levels. I am very fond of Canada, my country as well, a place that has offered me a lot, more than my country of birth could have. We are many things, we do not have to be this or that, and certainly I am many things, Portuguese things, Canadian things, worldly things I would hope. I am a product of Canadian multiculturalism and its tolerances, values and opportunities. Canada is, I believe, a very tolerant and accepting place to be, to feel at home, a home that carries the world inside its belly, so to speak. I think this multiculturalism comes across in my writings too in several ways.

There are many references to family and country of birth in my poetry, to mother and father figures, to brothers and sisters and not always in a positive way but that is good too because life is good and bad, it carries sadness and

happiness since one cannot be without the other, and furthermore, poetry is about memory, and how memory is rewritten, recreated, remembered, reinvented in poetry, in words, in language, and in many ways serves as a mechanism to deal with unresolved dilemmas, traumas, familial sagas even.

**CNN** *Now growing over these years and coming into your own maturation, Irene, what has been the educational, cultural and spiritual inspiration that has produced your testy, almost combatant, brand of feminist poetry?*

**IM** I am not sure that labelling my poetry as “testy and almost combatant feminism” is an accurate way of describing it since the poems included in this collection are about many sorts of things and not just about women's or feminist matters. But I am certainly a feminist, someone who strives for the equality of the sexes, and equality does not have to mean sameness, in other words, an equality that can respect the differences that may exist between men and women – someone who will get easily annoyed at injustices committed against women, which are based on oppressive and constructed patriarchal setups, which often announce themselves as natural truths in the name of some law that I am still to understand. Such setups, I have noticed, exist in many societies and in many different ways and disguises not always visible at naked/naïve eye – and thus I will be a feminist as long as I see the need to be one, and sadly I keep seeing that need in many places, whether in Canada, Portugal, France, or South Africa where I have been since last June (2007) on academic work.

**CNN** *A reader has noted that your play with images does not explicate but rather does subsume the feeling in an almost privatist direction. In an era of global contemporary expressions moving towards a new romanticism, do you see yourself as part of an elitist avant-garde of literary post modernism or what*

*a contemporary American poet had called 'anti-romantic romantic'?*

**IM** Could I be labelled an 'anti-romantic romantic'?! I do like the idea of that, at least somewhat since I do often see the non-romantic side of life as some of the more visceral and perhaps raw or cutting metaphors of many of my poems will illustrate, only perhaps to forge and create another Romanticism that must/needs to exist somewhere even if only in the complete world of poetry where everything becomes possible. I think I am referring here to the capacity that poetry has to heal, to cleanse, to recover the lost, to attain a superior state of being, of feeling, of perceiving, even if only momentarily, but that is why I need to write often to recapture/recreate that State again and again since it always evades me. Some of my poems do indeed refer to this cleansed way of being, this way of flying above what could be termed the casualties and causalities of life and suffering, the point of great love, as the last poem of the collection, "It is there" alludes to.

I think the playing with words is something that happens naturally in all poetry not just mine. That very playing happens often at an unconscious level and sometimes it is because the unconscious, or what I might call the a-logical or un-aware intelligences (like the spirit or the soul, or the affect), work/enter the speaking voice of the poetic subject without her/his awareness or consent and pass through without being called for in a conscious manner. This is also tied to the musicality of poetry and language when writing. The words come together often because of their musicality and not necessarily because of the immediacy of their meaning. This is not to say of course that the logical meaning is lost but rather that *that* very meaning is to be found through the dissection and analysis of the metaphor and through the combination of words and the very musicality they might bring about when read as a whole. The meaning is to be found in the musical and what might seem to be disparate metaphoric allusions or even lists

of unrelated things that I know I sometimes use.

**CNN** *But how would all these relate to the reader's ability to pierce through the range of symbols, metaphors and other personal references to discern the heart of the matter, the soul of discourse as often expressed?*

**IM** It is the job of the reader to make the connections, to link the threads, to read in the untold, the subsumed, the hidden. The feeling or message of the poem or poems is there and it might be "privatist" sometimes but I also think that the poems of the collection are very often inter-textual, in other words, they refer to one another. Feelings, ideas and moods brought up in one poem are often re-discussed and re-addressed in other poems later on to give it more completion, more meanings, more disclosures and discoveries. There is what we could call a gradual self-revelation, one that is done slowly or unevenly, like rain drops here and there, and thus one needs to be aware of messages as they come up and link them with the rest of the poems and their meaning. This refers to the idea that the very act of writing is a never ending product and again, I think I am not the first one to say this. Writers and critics such as Clarice Lispector, France Théoret, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous have themselves affirmed this in their own ways. The word writes itself and then not satisfied with what it says, it feels the need to pick up on the same subject, writing on the already written, or better yet, rewriting the already written either to complete the initial project, even if completion never seems to happen, or to add and clarify what was written in the first place. Many writers will say that we are always writing about the same thing, and I tend to agree with them.

**CNN** *And yet you do not advocate a label for your poetry or for the kind of writings you seem preoccupied with at the poetic or prosaic levels of*

*expression?*

**IM** As for a label for my poetry, I find it difficult to choose one or to accept with definite certainty either one proposed by you. For labels are just labels and so what I am is a writer/poetess trying to write things that make sense to me and (hopefully) to others.

I would like to think of myself as being non-elitist since for me writing comes out of a profound need to communicate deeply with others, and so if I am being an elitist I am not doing that because my message will tend to pass untold to many of those I want to tell it to – those others with whom I want to connect out of a human need to combat aloneness or individualism or to relay things that I might consider important. I also think that I write in a language that is accessible and transparent even if often I use multi-faceted and multicultural references. In the sense that my writing is multi-faceted, trans-temporal and multicultural and that I write out of a need to connect with others, otherness, and myself, I should rather be called a poetess/writer of the cross-currents, a poetess of the here and the there, the yesterday and the tomorrow, the “them” and the “I”, the “I” trying to connect with “them” or “it”.

Perhaps what I am then is transcendentalist, or someone who departs often from a harsh and painful reality and physicality, to then move to another state of being, another level, that can only come with the power of poetic language and the liberation that it allows through the seeing of another way. This is not to say that I am necessarily evading reality or being aloof to the causes that make the world suffer, or that I do not want to feel that suffering. No. In fact, I think that suffering is essential in life; it is a way to teach us about evading suffering, or decrease suffering. Perhaps my writing then is a way to move from one reality to another, to process suffering, or to show that reality does not have to be/should not be so painful, that we should reflect upon it to try and resolve the

many human disasters or actions caused and undertaken by us and which augment and cause our suffering, sometimes unnecessarily out of lack of deep reflection. It is also perhaps a way to show that the physical reality is only one aspect of other realities which are fundamental parts of our "Self" – and thus we should not be consumed by it since there are other ways.

**KHB** *What actually does communication mean to you as a poetess? Who is your primary audience as a writer, and what connection to your listeners can you make in a sense of poetry as dialogue with both Self and Other as Nke'm notes of Wearing Glasses of Water?\**

**IM** I think these questions (or part of them) have already been answered above and in various ways. I have always felt that writing, whether poetry or fiction, and my fiction tends to be very poetic I would say, is about communicating and communicating very deeply, with myself, with others, and otherness, and by otherness I am referring to all that is non-human, the stones, the animals, the stars, the cosmos at large. This communication with self, others, and otherness, can, I think, bring much fulfilment to humans for most of us probably need to communicate with the uncanny and find a language to do so, and also be able to communicate with other human beings in a very honest and complete way in order to connect with one another as much as possible, and annihilate, or at least reduce, the importance of the individual ego or the dissected self - an ego that when in extreme isolation, or always in extreme isolation I should say, since one probably always needs a certain degree of isolation in order to find the self, can cause much suffering and ontological

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See Nkemdirim, C. N. "Teardrops on Marble: A Random View *Wearing Glasses of Water*" p. 157

confusion or insecurity.

I have difficulty knowing (at this point) who my primary audience is. I write about things that are important to me but also things that I hope have a universal appeal, like suffering and memory, being and what being means, loss and findings, the power of the word to heal, to explain, to renew, to make the world more understandable, more bearable, more beautiful even because for me the power of writing lies in its capacity to make the world look anew, alive, magical, sublime...so that 'I' and 'You' can enter the large house of being, a large dwelling, and attain a certain degree of ego decentralization, as alluded to above.

**CNN** *Yet you seek to connect with some audience, some people either visualised or present as in an oral sense, with whom your thoughts on marble, nay paper, may one day strike a chord of familiarity and agreement. Surely in this meeting of minds there must be some aim towards a certain degree of connection.*

**IM** There is the possibility that my writing can connect with others at these levels, but I must say that this is only a possibility, for it is also quite possible that I am reading/seeing too much into my own poetry and expecting too much from people, or better yet, that I am being arrogant enough (or egocentric enough), or just plain naïve and overly optimist to think that my poetry can allude to all that I have been saying and touch people in the ways I have described. I am after all just getting 'my word out' and thus it is difficult to know how people will react and if they will in fact react (!) or can identify with the moods, the feelings, the ways, the objectives of my language, my metaphor. The intentions of my poetry or the feelings that led me to its creation might be perceived in a different manner by my readers as we all read language and metaphor in different and

often very personal ways. Moreover, as many of us know, poetry has a much narrower audience than fiction. It is also much more difficult to publish.

**CNN** *Let's jump a little forward to your first volume of poetry Wearing Glasses of Water, which I call 'Teardrops on Marble' in my review of the collection. Can you elaborate on the meaning/meanings of your title and its connection to what you have been saying up to this point?*

**IM** The title is taken from the poem "Antônio the Blinding man," where it is used to signify the power of oral storytelling and also the power of words, words that carry magic in them and thus are capable of creating and weaving wonderful worlds that can mesmerize us and make us feel more complete, more in touch with the wholeness of the universe, the wholeness of being - words that make us blind to the narrow reality of the world we might be exposed to in a more direct sense and make us see the unseen, the hidden, the vaster dimension of life. In sum, words that blind or reduce the importance of our logical eye and allow the others eyes to come in to give us a bigger and greater picture of existence.

Antônio was indeed a man whom I met as a little girl in Portugal, a man who had a powerful capacity to recount stories so that everything that came out of his mouth was a marvelous odyssey. Even though he had difficulty seeing and ended up by becoming completely blind, his capacity to give life to the world via his speech and use of what I would call 'fluid epistemologies' made every young child in the village become his friend. It made us believe that the world is good and that everything is possible, that wholeness exists, wholeness between humans and non-humans, between men and women, between earth and sky - in other words, as the poem alludes to 'all/everything' becomes a blanket of clean snow "when the world becomes equal." This possibility, wholeness,

animism and fluidity that characterized António's stories also permeate many of the other poems of this collection. Poems like "Changing the Universe," "Kapuska Girl," "Meeting With Another Kapuska Girl," "Gratitude Mornings," and several others further reveal this fluid, gentler and holistic ontological and epistemological poetics, reminding us that it is indeed possible to look at the world with "glasses of water" and experience a mystical consciousness that can bring much solace to our dissected and spiritually alienated contemporary self. In general, or quite often as I have mentioned, the poems of the collection privilege non-rational modes of knowing the world and the self. Such modes escape the overly analytical, logical and rational 'eye' and in fact encourage mystery, wonder and inquisitive transcendentalism.

But "wearing glasses of water" also means something else like you noted here. It refers to suffering and the very act of, yes, crying – and crying a lot. Many other poems of the collection do indeed relate to suffering, for life is indeed suffering and no one can or should even try to escape it, since avoiding pain can lead to more pain. This suffering comes across in different ways: the suffering of the poetic self when experiencing loss of and disappointment in love, the loss of loved ones like the grandmother, the witnessing of exploitation of humans by humans, animals by humans, the very boredom and nausea that existence can bring (words and metaphors often serve as renewal mechanisms to find or recapture meaning, gayness and wonder in life), and the deep-seated missing of the other self and her other place, the self feeling the deep *saudade* of the country she left.

**KHB** *The idea of literature and Conflict resolution has dominated much of IRCALC's and, recently, the colloquium by some writers in Africa. Do you see literature as having any real business with social or political conflicts let alone attempting the onerous task of contributing to their resolution?*

**IM** Yes I do think that literature can and should be used to address socio-political issues, unmask injustices and bring awareness to people about the problems affecting different societies. I remember that when I first started studying literature I was interested in studying what I would refer to as political literature, literature that dealt with the pain and suffering of humans in different forms and contexts, literature that showed how oppression worked under different disguises and how through it we might be able to learn and create a better society. Books and the stories they tell can be very important in making us understand and clarify why things happen and how they could happen differently; they are sites of ideological combat and very important ones and should be concerned with matters of human dignity and oppression in one way or another. That being said, I think most (if not all literature) is political in an overt or covert way. It is after all humans who write books, and humans live in socio-political webs and thus do address those in one way or another – we can never completely get out of the socio-political setup even when we try. We are born into it and made by it to a large degree. Writers often speak out of a space/place of class, race, locality, age, sex, etc. By this, I do not mean that one cannot empathize or write outside of oneself, write about the other, or think outside the socio-political networks that form us and that are often responsible for the oppressions of certain groups. We can, at least to a certain extent, and by doing so we are being political, perhaps even more so.

The French critic, Pierre Macherey, has written extensively on the idea that all literature is political and I tend to agree with him. In fact, I use some of his approaches to argue many of the points in my doctoral dissertation which dealt with the works of José Saramago, Mia Couto, Clarice Lispector and J.M. Coetzee. In this work I discuss what I term 'bolder politics' and 'deeper politics' and demonstrate that if Saramago and Couto seem to be more overtly political,

Lispector and Coetzee are also very political, and perhaps in a deeper way, for they try to go beyond language and reach sites that are exempt from, or at least less saturated with, 'socio-politicalities' and their many imprisoning ways. We can think of Oscar Wilde's idea of art for art's sake and argue that he was being political in a fundamental way precisely because he was evading (as much as he could) the networks of his society, a society he wanted nothing to do with, and creating art that seemed apolitical in the immediate (and overt) sense. This approach has also been used in varying degrees by Clarice Lispector and J.M. Coetzee who have been accused often of being un-engaged or apolitical or overly personal because they overly use the metaphoric, the allegorical, the poetic, and even the biographical in their writing. But I do think they were being deeply political. Poetry (and by extension allegorical and metaphorical writing) can be more political than something written in a realist journalistic-like manner because the power of the poetic can enter a deeper core in ourselves and touch the spirit – that site that sees like no other, that is blind to divisions or dichotomies, not tolerating oppressions because it sees humans as equal in value despite their differences. The Uruguayan journalist, essayist and poet Eduardo Galeano, who tends to mix journalistic writing with poetry and very insightful political analysis has also said something similar. I think that writings that are profound and meaningful do mix different modes of expression where the perceived real becomes enmeshed with the imagination, the poetic, the allegorical, the spiritual, the bodily, and the emotional. This enmeshed way of writing can be much more provocative and politically engaging because it opens up ways for us, ways of seeing beyond that which is in front of us.

**KHB** *I am of the view that your poetry is almost apathetic to political considerations but avidly attached to intricate inter- and intra-personal emotional values. You seem to present the face of a champion of western*

*individualism as well as a sense of community and communal responsibility in literature. How do you achieve this seemingly distractive merger in a single individual work such as your Wearing Glasses of Water volume?*

**IM** To name my poetry as “almost apathetic to political considerations” is misinterpreting it a great deal. It seems to me that you are reading my poetry in a very conventional way, and I would even say, you are approaching it from a phalocentric/ patriarchal point of view. Such labels are neither fair nor accurate, and for many reasons, some of which I have just pointed out in my previous answer about what constitutes political literature. Also in your previous question/comment you (CNN) define my poetry as “almost combatant, brand of feminist poetry” and now you seem to be contradicting yourself since if one is a feminist (as I am to varying degrees in different poems of this collection) one is being political in the sense that one is addressing women’s oppressions, trying to unveil the reasons of their existence and attacking the structures that are behind such oppressions. It could be that you consider “political” literature only the type that addresses what the followers of phalocentrism and patriarchy would call grander socio-political matters – matters that affect what me might call the interests of men or those of certain groups in society, which are often presented as the interests of an entire society without any thought being given to pre-existing structures that mostly benefit the interests and ways of being of men. We have seen this type of problem (reading of the political) in Western societies for example, which until the work of very important feminists, did not consider the abuse of women and what happens in the family realm as a matter of public interest, as a worthy problem to take note of. But then as some feminists have said “the personal is political.” And if we want to look for examples of narrow/male-centred definitions of the political in Africa or black America, for example, we will also find it well and alive. Toni Morrison’s book

*Sula* is an excellent example of a novel that addresses sexism and patriarchy within the black American society of the early/mid 20th century – a society that sees the woes of black men as more important than the woes of black women. Mozambican writers like Paulina Chiziane or the Zimbabweans Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangarembga are examples of African women writers who do similar things in relation to their societies.

I have myself come across several black men (African or African-Canadian) who are very quick to point to the racial injustices of slavery and colonization that dehumanized them at many levels, and they can even sing their woe beautifully sometimes, but then they treat the women they are involved with in a very sexist manner. It is as if they can only see with one eye. What they need to do is to see with both eyes, or better yet, they need to see with the eye that is outside of themselves – the eye looking into themselves. By this I mean that they need to get out of their bruised/hurt individual ego and identify with the pain of others because the individual ego can be very selfish: the more food we give it, the more it wants. Sometimes the more we dwell on its hunger, the hungrier (and angrier) it gets. As the Buddhists will say, the cause of our suffering is often tied to the great importance we give to our individual ego. So let it die a little, or at least, see outside its pain, outside its prison to also see into the prison and pain of others which we are in fact causing. Of course we can tie this behaviour to the trauma of colonial oppression and slavery and the hierarchical divisions that went along with it which put white men at the top, then white women, then black male and last black female – and then say that the oppressed will have the need to oppress in order to regain power. Fanon has demonstrated that quite well in his works. But we need to go beyond this fatalistic traumatic victimization approach and not tolerate abuses of power. Instead of identifying with the abuser and wanting to be like him, as Fanon would say, the abused

needs to try and see outside the cycle of abuse, the cycle of power and see with a clean eye that does not accept oppression of any kind. With this I do not want to imply that all the oppression of women by black men in Africa or elsewhere is tied to colonial or slavery traumas since patriarchy existed abundantly in Africa and in various forms before the events of colonization and slavery.

**KHB** *Can we take this perspective back to your poetry in terms of how you have sought to reflect these instances of male politics of domination of their female counterparts?*

**IM** Many of the poems of this collection deal with different types of socio-political issues and oppressions like religious and cultural oppressions, fascist governmental tyrannies, imperialism, colonialism, cultural annihilations of colonized countries by the colonizing powers, etc, in a fairly overt manner. Poems like “Memories of the Southern war,” “Walking on egg shells,” “The War Godmother,” “Women from Bunnia,” “Terra Nullius” and “St Lazarus of Jerusalem” are just examples of poems that address, in a fairly open fashion, I think, these oppressions. As I said, it is the job of the reader to connect the threads to see the meaning behind the many metaphors and allegories.

As for your comment about my poetry “being avidly attached to intricate inter- and intra-personal emotional values” and merging “western individualism” with a “sense of community and communal responsibility in literature,” I think you are right to a certain extent, but I do not think this mix constitutes a “distractive merger”. The collection includes poems of different moods I suppose, and is at times deeply personal, but the personal is often (if not always, even when it tries to evade the socio-political web in a manner similar to Oscar Wilde) tied with the socio-political. The emotional is very present in my poetry and so is the spiritual and the bodily and the imaginative –

as those are fundamental epistemological tools that I value and which allow me to know myself and the world better, tools that I try to reconcile with what might be called a more rational approach to life. As noted early, I tend to use holistic epistemologies in my writing as a way to evade the dissecting and incomplete way that conventional rationality has of approaching the world and being. In addition, the emotional is often a response to the problems that exist in the socio-political web where the subject speaker lives. The emotional is a cry, if you like, against the injustices that the subject sees in her society and which are committed against herself, other women or other groups – the personal and the emotional then are more than acts of the self concerned with the self, they are communal acts of solidarity, acts of identification with the collectivity. The personal and the emotional are thus political acts in themselves. I am an individual who has personal and unique concerns and needs which need to be respected by others, and which I need to value, but I am also an individual who lives in a society and who has been exposed to different societies, either directly or indirectly through scholastic learning, and so I think my poetry reflects that and that also makes it communal or extra personal, if you like that expression. The world is not just about my self but it is also about my self in relation to other selves. And as I said in previous answers, and in different ways, I believe that literature and poetry should be about explaining things to ourselves and about dissipating some myths that we might have in relation to one another, in relation to the perceived value of certain groups of people, ways of life, cultural differences, etc. And literature is also about communicating deeply with others and otherness, as I have also said, and therefore in that sense it is about becoming communal, about merging with the other as much as possible – about decreasing the importance of the individual ego.

**KHB** *Influences of Portuguese contact with other parts of the world can be*

*seen in many of the literatures from Lusophone Africa, Brazil and the East. How has your experience in teaching comparative literature illuminated the idea of oneness of cultures and people emerging out of such historical contacts? Can this universality be applied in terms of a dialectical divide between oppressed and oppressor, or historically for Africa, colonial and postcolonial, or the one and other divides discernible from almost every interpersonal, intercultural interactions?*

**IM** I do think that studying and teaching comparative literature has taught me a great deal about commonalities in cultures and differences too of course. It is very important not to dismiss cultural specificities and historical moments in order to understand why people react certain ways at certain points in history or why they are what they are today. I think that when we are dealing with cultures which have been oppressed for long periods of time, it is very important not to dismiss their need to affirm their difference and identity. So movements like those of the Negritude poets, and more recent movements towards the defence of African languages, and what might be perceived as more genuine African ways of life, are important and necessary steps to readdress injustices of the past, and to speak back to the colonizer agents, in order to clarify things and to reclaim a humanity that had been put in jeopardy or altogether taken away. This is not to say of course that one should become an essentialist or a purist and defend only 'things African' in Africa because Africa is many things, including European things that have now to a certain extent also been Africanized. There is an interdialectic that always takes place when cultures meet even when in a context of oppressor-oppressed as the case of Europe-Africa. Also, it should be noted that the oppressed is not always a victim or always against the oppressor – sometimes the former plays the game of the oppressor or helps him in the enterprise of oppression. We now know for

instance, that even though the Europeans bought African slaves there were also many Africans who sold them, in other words, who entered the inhumane game of selling their own people. It is often not just about race but also about who has the economic power and who wants to access it – race, as some will argue, is nothing more than a mask to justify the economic exploitation of one group by another.

I will now answer your question/questions in a more direct manner. I do believe that certainly the places that have been colonized by different European powers will have different end results, to a certain degree, and thus will display different characteristics. Lusophone colonies will display elements of the Portuguese culture (good or bad, one should say) and the same would go for Francophone or Anglophone. The colonization process was done differently and that depended on many things – for instance, the miscegenation 'politics' implemented by each colonizing power, the different brands of Christianity, the types of patriarchy and racial oppression/classification applied, the socio-economic and cultural 'position' of the colonizing country, etc. But I think there are similar elements that exist in all colonized societies, elements that always emerge in situations of oppressors-oppressed. In relation to the Portuguese colonies, many have argued that they were doubly colonized (by Portugal and by other European powers considered to be 'above' Portugal) since Portugal was (at least in the latest periods of the colonial enterprises) a peripheral power which depended on other more potent countries like England. Despite the several scientific advances, especially in terms of navigational knowledge that Portugal had shown in early colonial and maritime explorations and its accompanying successes that made it one of the most powerful European nations in the late fifteen and sixteenth centuries especially, the country came to be considered in many ways a sub-European power, backwards, poorly

developed in terms of industry and technology, and culturally not at par with what some would have called (and perhaps still do...) true European cultures of high and refined civilization – and this difference and fracture is something that has lasted until today and that can be seen in Lusophone post-colonial societies and Portugal itself.

**CNN** *Irene, how many African poets or writers have you had the opportunity of reading their works or meeting in flesh? How has the impact of any such encounter shaped your own poetry or confirmed your Universalistic perspective of the world and other contemporary conditions of the life we live?*

**IM** I have read many, many African, African Caribbean, African American writers and poets, in English, French and Portuguese so counting them would be impossible, and as said earlier, I think they have influenced me in various ways. I have only met about four African writers directly, two of which I communicate with occasionally, but I must say that one does not need to meet writers and poets in flesh to connect with them or see in them something that one also thinks one has. I am of the opinion that we all have much more in common than we think we do – even if we use different metaphors and stories to explain the world and ourselves. Whether we are Buddhists, Christians, or followers of Mozambican traditions (etc), we are often after the same fulfilment – a meaning, a story that makes sense to us and which we come to accept as true...

**CNN** *In Africa and much of contemporary Diasporas, much fuss has been made about the colonial language question in literature and the emergence of lingoes such as Pidgin, Rastafarian or even Creole dialects in the trend to appropriate this foreign or second language element and then revising it to suit*

*some cultural or psychological requisites. Do you see any evidence of real success in this direction from your own perception as a writer?*

**IM** I do think that languages are dynamic agents and thus should adapt to the needs of people so that they can say their reality in a more accurate way. This is of course central to the cultural recreation/rescuing in colonized societies which have been imposed foreign values and languages. I think there should be more emphasis on making African languages official languages, even if along with the colonial language (which is now an African language also). In Mozambique for instance, there are more than 37 African languages and the only official language is Portuguese even if less than half the Mozambican people speak it and that creates many problems. In South Africa there are now 11 official languages and that makes more sense even if, of course, English still tends to dominate in many settings. I think by making African languages official one is ensuring their future and development, otherwise they will tend to disappear and with that we lose a vast wealth of knowledge and ways of understanding the world and being, since each language has access to different realities. My understanding is that in societies where strong forms of pidgin have emerged, such as Nigeria and Jamaica, there is still (in varying degrees) a preference for the standard English and the speakers of the standard language usually have access to better opportunities and are perceived in a more positive light. But I think that Cape Verde is perhaps a country where Portuguese Creole is fairly well received and is spoken by most people colloquially; it is also a language used abundantly in literature and music for instance – but a standardized type of Portuguese continues to be the official language. Writers like Mia Couto (Mozambique) or Luandino Vieira (Angola – who in fact won the Camões prize in 2006, which he refused. This is the most prestigious prize awarded to writers in Portuguese in

the value of 100.000 Euros) also have been fairly successful in having their *sui generis* Portuguese language accepted by mainstream publishers (usually Portuguese publishers) which shows perhaps a certain willingness on the part of the former colony to accept and respect the difference in speech and see it as a reflection of a society that although a 'sisters of sorts' it is also fundamentally different and thus will speak differently. But this can be tied to the fact that publishing houses in Lusophone African countries are scarce and so is the readership which means that the writers of those countries are in fact writing more for a foreign public than for their own. I should say though that Mia Couto's language does not necessarily reflect the way people speak in Mozambique and constitutes more his own invention, even if such invention aims at recreating (and penetrating) more accurately certain Mozambican traditions and epistemologies that have been lost in the standard colonial language. I do think that more writers should forge their own language and adapt it to their cultural realities so that we can have access to a richer deposit of cultures since that is what languages are. Moreover, literature should be creative, in other words, change/reinvent language and structure so that it can retell us the world in a fresh manner making it anew and recapturing the lost wonder.

**CNN** *Your study of Mia Couto's short stories illuminates a technique of mise-en-abime which I have found to be significant in the multiple perspectives that your own poetry also brings to narrative. Would you see Couto's technique as contiguous with your own experimentations in your present work or other forthcoming creative works?*

**IM** Yes I think it is quite true that I use the technique of *mise-en-abime* in my writing and very abundantly, not just in this collection but in most, if not all (to a lesser or greater degree) my other writings whether they are in Portuguese or English. In fact, my first novel in Portuguese uses the *mise-en-abime* a great

deal as there are many stories (in the form of several diaries) which are all interrelated and which refer to and complete one another. This technique of *mise-en-abime* is highly tied to the metaphoric, the use of the poetic, the hidden, the unobvious, the transcendental which are prevalent in my writing – but it is something that I do almost unconsciously since writing is also a playful exercise, a game of words, words that become things and ideas and moral takes even – a way to make the world anew, mysterious, to bring upon wonder, the Russian doll inside the Russian doll inside the Russian doll...as I discuss in my paper on Mia Couto published by IRCALC in 2007.

**KHB** *Some poets from Nigeria confess to a lack of connection between them and their contemporaries, a condition imposed by the tribal environment in Nigeria and also some personal tendencies of theirs to isolation. As a poet do you see yourself as a sort of 'solitary reaper' in view of similar dominant themes of disappointment, of seclusion and other subtle vilifications expressed in them? Has the solitariness affected reception of your work within and without your immediate operating vicinity?*

**IM** To a certain extent I feel that my writing is quite different from the writing of others writing in Canada or Portugal. In fact, I have been told (by Portuguese publishers) that my writing is too complex and also that they have never seen anything like it, which can be a good compliment I suppose, but can also constitute a difficulty in terms of getting it out there, at least initially since often people are resistant to novelty. As for Canada, I do not yet know since this is my first full collection out and no reviews have yet been done. I am certainly curious to see how the Canadian public/critics will see my writing. I have however, been told by Canadian publishers that my writing is very imaginative but also sometimes lacking what they see as adequate/sufficient structural

organization, or pushing the language too far, as one said. I think that shows a certain conservatism on their part. I actually think that French-Canadian writing is much more avant-garde than English-Canadian writing in that sense, more playful and open to novelty in language and structure. And that might be the reason why I always felt more drawn to French-Canadian writers. I suppose I could be considered a 'solitary reaper' or someone who writes in isolation, to a certain extent, and who does not quite fit one category or another, someone who deals with the immediate sometimes but also with the trans-temporal, the trans-territorial, the transcendental. We do seem to live in a global world and are giving more importance to the spiritual aspects of life so perhaps this way of writing makes sense and will appeal to people.

**CNN** *Your critical interest in the story reminds one of an African author's (Chinua Achebe I think in Anthills of the Savannah) familiar quotation that at the end of all the human violence and quest for freedom it is only the story that remains to teach us and celebrate our past struggles. In your study of Mia Couto, you have also mentioned the story that "explains the world and ourselves to ourselves" through "an arbitrary language system" about who we are, etc. Is this also your attitude to creative writing, i.e., one of such "fabulous explanations" of self, and should we imply by this that art rather becomes the expressions of communal ethos as argued in many corners of the Third World particularly?*

**IM** Yes, as I have said in different ways, I think that language and story telling can be very powerful in teaching us things about life and suffering and ways of avoiding suffering. They have a didactic character that must not be dismissed. They are a mirror one must keep looking at in order to avoid future sufferings, future mistakes. In my aforementioned paper on Mia Couto the

stories analysed really show how language can make reality, can give sense to reality and explain it to us so that we feel at home so to speak. Like Ngũgĩ once said in his well known book *Decolonizing the Mind*, that is why the speaking of African languages in postcolonial contexts, for instance, is of extreme importance because languages carry in them a bank of knowledge related to the specific cultures where they emerged from. So the speaking of African languages that were relegated to the periphery during colonial times can today be a powerful way to affirm one's own culture and regain a more balanced sense of self, self in culture, in community, in religion even. The fact that language is an arbitrary system does not quite matter here because we have come to believe that its power is real and so is the sense produced by it. This is not to say that we should blindly see one's language (and by extension one's culture which is framed/produced inside a language and its capacity to generate meaningful stories) as being the only right one, or as carrying all there is for us to know – getting out of one's language can be good and enriching in various ways. So in a way, as J.E. Chamberlin argues in his book *If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories – Finding Common Ground*, we need to believe in language because it gives sense to our world and makes us feel at home, and at the same time, we must keep in mind the doubt that inevitably goes along language and story telling, since language is only a translation of true reality.

**KHB** *According to Joe Ushie "literature is like a sea which takes in water from many rivers, rivulets and streams."\*\* He talks about an African image and alternatives to the African viewpoint where a non-African image might be available to him at the time. For the poet, is there really such a thing to you as*

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\*\*See Amoah, A. B. & M. Lillet, "After our Obliteration" *African Journal of New Poetry* No. 5, 2007

*racial imagery or memory, or what you may term a West European image, an American image or a Canadian image, or do you think African critics and their writers make too much bone of the race as if to attach undue uniqueness to the craft of their literature by such expressions of Africanness?*

**IM** I do agree with Ushie's statement that "literature is like a sea which takes in water from many rivers, rivulets and streams." After all, literature and poetry are about the art of imagination to a great extent, how that imagination can make sense of a reality; they are also metaphor and metonymy – things that stand for other things so to use non-African images to relay an African viewpoint or vice-versa makes sense and it allows the poet/writer to become more enriched, innovative and versatile in his speech, to compare his culture to others even and gain with the comparison. It allows for a certain interdialectic or trans-dialogue to take place in language, culture and metaphor that I think can be very enriching. In fact, because I write in Portuguese and English, I have noticed that one language (with its own ways of saying the reality of self and the world) helps the other language to become richer, to expand its capacities, to enter previously unknown areas, areas that would be barred to its access had I no knowledge of both languages and their ways. So the knowledge of Portuguese enriches my writings in English and the knowledge of English enriches my writings in Portuguese because each language has its own strengths and weaknesses, each language can say things that the other cannot, each language allows me to enter different ways of seeing and being in the world. This might sometimes create a strange effect in the language I forge in my writings, but I think that can be very fecund, very empowering since innovation is fundamental in fiction and poetry. The more languages one knows then the more linguistic trans-dialogue of this sort can happen. But this is perhaps also why a Canadian publisher said (as mentioned above) that my

writing sometimes pushes the English language too far or might lack what they see as adequate structure. Obviously there is a resistance to innovation and change.

That being said, I think that because of the European colonial past and the many misrepresentations of Africa and Africans or other colonized peoples that went along with that, it is necessary to be careful when writing the 'other' or about the 'other' from the outside. So certainly Africans and Aboriginal peoples from Canada or Australia for example, need to write and tell their own story since they are the ones inside it and thus have a perspective that is not accessible to outsiders, a perspective that will clarify the perspectives of outsiders who did not undergo the experiences of colonization and the many injustices that resulted from it. But I do think that today Europeans/or Westerners can write about the 'other' in a manner that is not necessarily stereotypical or ethnocentric and that can be said for anyone writing about anyone i.e., men about women, rich about poor, white about black, etc. To say that only Africans can write about themselves and their world accurately, is, I think reductive and essentialist, and a view that is a little passé today. As South African critic, Cherryl Walker has said, it would be like saying that only French can teach French history, or that one can never get outside of oneself which would be to say we can only write autobiographical stuff and thus can never truly connect or empathise with the 'other'. Sometimes the ones who are outside can see things that the ones inside cannot see. Sometimes we write purely out of emotion and hurt and cannot see things as a whole.

In the African context, some might argue, like Wole Soyinka has for instance, that those who advocate for a pure 'Africanist' perspective in their writing, whether in their choice of language use or literary references and themes chosen, are being too reactive, essentialist, and denying the dialectical nature of cultures and the inevitable borrowing that occurred with colonization,

or believing in the idea of a pure/idyllic Africa – a naïve uni-dimensional take that rests upon the supposition of the existence of clear dichotomies of god/bad, perfect/imperfect, etc, rather than in multifaceted and often contradictory ways of being, which are common to most (if not all) peoples of the earth. I tend to agree with (Wole) Soyinka since we are many things and for Africans to deny everything western is a step in the wrong direction. Yet, we must also be careful because often what happens is that the western modes of life and their cultural frameworks are the ones being promoted, reinforced or developed in African societies and not enough attention is given to ways of life that are 'more' African. So a balanced middle ground view is needed but it is often difficult to find such balance, since the West, due to the colonial baggage, its economic power and continuous grasp on Africa, continues to play a great role (on the continent) – greater than desired perhaps. I argue this in my paper on Mia Couto.

Chin Ce argues something very similar in his writings, as I, and many others demonstrate in the recent critical IRCALC Supplement on his work.

**CNN** *Finally, Irene who are your role models in literature, in writing, and in your personal life?*

**IM** I have already mentioned many authors, whether poets, writers or philosophers, whom I think have influenced my writing. But as I also said, I have read people from many different traditions and time frames so it is difficult to know exactly who has entered my writing voice. I could say though that writers like the Brazilian Clarice Lispector, the French Marie Redonnet, and the French-Canadian France Théoret, have consciously influenced me. I remember that when I first read Clarice Lispector, I felt a great connection with her and I thought to myself: “There is someone who writes/thinks like me.” I had just written a short story earlier that I thought was very close to Lispector's own

style and so I felt reassured. But I do like a wide variety of writers and writers who are creative and innovative in their writing techniques – that might invent new terms, and find unique ways to say the world, because that is what makes poetry and literature powerful for me. My closeness to Lispector, Redonnet and Théoret, is I think, related to the fact that they often write about the condition of women, and they make abundant use of the poetic in their writing. And by poetic I do not mean merely their abundant use of metaphor, but also their use of, and the primacy that they give to, what can be termed non-conventional intelligences such as the emotion, the spirit, the body, and so on, (I have said this above in a slight different manner) – intelligences that allow them to know and relay the world in a more holistic manner and evade the reductive and dissecting traps that exist in conventional reason, and which have been tied to phallogentric and patriarchic institutional setups or ways of seeing the world. These setups have tended to classify women (at least in the West) as a-rational, too emotional, and thus as inferior, when in fact it might be more accurate to say that women are more holistic or allow the holistic to come in more easily to give them deeper knowledge of themselves and the world. This might also be tied to gender roles and expectations which would be less candid to men who would want to show the emotional or holistic side rather than rely purely on reason to arrive at knowledge and truth. Thus I do not intend to be essentialist or to necessarily biologize difference, even though I may believe that men and women are different, to a certain extent, because of their biology. Rather I want to say that conventional knowledge in the West did not allow for the non-rational to be nourished as much as it should, and so even if men and women wanted to use non-rational intelligences, they would have been reticent because they knew they would be labelled as a-rational, less intelligent. This type of rationalist discourse (a product of European Enlightenment) was of course used to also classify Africans as less rational – as we all know. I also

discuss some of these issues in my paper on Couto. Today though, I still see this resistance against the cherishing and use of non-rational intelligences as being very prevalent in academia and other settings. Sadly.

As for the role models in my life, I have no adoration for a specific person or figure. I have perhaps an adoration for an ideal... But I like people who are honest, humble and hardworking. I dislike pretentious academics and I seem to find them in many places these days. I like people who despite the hardship they might have had in their lives are able to become gentle souls, people who do not become jaded by their own experiences, and who because of them, can in fact be greater human beings empathising with others and seeing in a better way. I like people who can imagine/envisage others ways of being, people who make an effort to get out of their own self, people who are open to difference but who also can defend their own ideas and way of life without feeling threatened.

My mother and my grandmother might be people whom I admire a great deal, people who had very difficult lives, and who have taught me how to work hard to achieve my goals and keep honesty as the core of my being.

My Ph. D. director J. E. Chamberlin is also a man whom I admire a great deal and from whom I have learned immensely – a very decent and accomplished academic who loves languages and poetry, who believes in their many powers, a lover of African and Caribbean literatures and cultures, a lover of limpid language that can tell things without the interruption and burden of heavy and obscure expressions that sometimes academics love to use to hide God knows what... I am specifically fond of one of his recent books, which I have already mentioned above, *If This is Your Language...* – a book that in its profound and revealing academic complexity dealing with issues of story telling, cultural and language differences, oral and written traditions and their equally legitimate relations to land claim, being and knowing in language - does not lose the beauty and transparency of the word, mixing sometimes the

personal with the professional in a way that just produces a much more meaningful message; a book to be read by those who want to know how close we all are to one another despite the seemingly different stories we live by. This man was also one of the first male academics I met, who made me feel that being a woman was incidental, and did not play any role in the way he treated me. I felt no trace of phallocentrism or patriarchy coming from him, and that was deeply reassuring.

I also greatly admire Professor Linda Hutcheon and I am very thankful for her dedicated work while a member of my Ph. D. committee and thereafter, a woman who really works hard for her students, who gives them detailed feedback and emphasizes the importance of communicating clearly as an academic, so that the ivory tower of academia can be demolished and we can all become closer to one another. She is a highly ethical woman who has reached the highest academic point because she truly deserves it. Sometimes I see people moving up the ladder using tricks that are not so admirable or playing that game, but when I think of her being there, I smile because she reminds me that justice still finds its way to flourish.

**CNN/KHB** *Irene, we would like to thank you for your clear and frank discussions on this forum, for your interest in Africa, and for your support for IRCALC's journal project efforts.*

**IM** Thanks.





