

Book Review

Tavares, Maria. *No Country for Nonconforming Women: Feminine Conceptions of Lusophone Africa.* Legenda, 2018.

Maria Tavares's first monograph poses an immediate question: Are nonconforming women dispossessed from a country, any country? The provocative title sets in motion a study based on the comparative analysis of three female authors from Lusophone Africa, namely Dina Salústio from Cape Verde, Paulina Chiziane from Mozambique, and the Angolan Rosária da Silva. Tavares takes as her point of departure the fact that, despite their differences, all three were the first female writers to publish in the context of their respective independent nations. This commonality constitutes a major step forward in the male-dominated literary canons of their countries. According to Tavares, the works of Salústio, Chiziane, and da Silva "demonstrate the importance of examining nationalism and national identity through gender" (1). Through the lens of a theoretical framework based on postcolonial theory—both from within and without Lusophone studies—and focused on gender and identity, Tavares's main argument is that the building of these three post-independent nations is structured by gender differentiation. Her study thus aims to "observe the authors' cultural construction of their complex postcolonial nations from a female-focalised point of view, as well as their representation of the women of these nations and their interaction with the transcultural contexts of each country analysed" (1-2).

Maria Tavares holds a Ph.D. in Portuguese Studies from the University of Manchester and is currently a lecturer at Queen's University Belfast, where she pursues research in the postcolonial literature and film of Portuguese-speaking Africa, gender studies, and representations of heroism. *No Country for Nonconforming Women* grows out of these interests. It aims to amplify global theories that analyze and deconstruct hegemonic discourses of identity while applying them to the works of the three female writers who are the subject of the book. This includes theorists such as Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Edward

Said, Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, Mary Louise Pratt, and Anne McClintock, to name a few. Tavares dedicates one chapter to each author, focusing on Salústio's *A louca de Serrano* and *Mornas eram as noites*; Chiziane's *Ventos do Apocalipse*, *Niketche: Uma história de poligamia*, and *O alegre canto da perdiz*; and da Silva's *Totonya*. Throughout, she simultaneously assesses the capabilities and constraints of her chosen theoretical approach in regard to the gender-related issues that emerge from the specific cultural, social, and political contexts of each writer's newly independent country. Tavares is able to overcome the limitations of her framework by formulating a detailed and original analysis of each literary text. This allows her to trace similarities that link the experiences of women during Portuguese colonialism and the socialist experiment, or, as Tavares puts it, "to postulate some common postcolonial spaces that reproduce African women's experiences" (192).

Tavares achieves her main objective by showing that, even though the works of Salústio, Chiziane, and da Silva have obvious differences, they are anchored by a commonality that should not be neglected: "The micro-histories of women's daily lives, emerging from the problematic and forgotten domestic pace (the arena which they are constructed to represent) disturb the macro-histories of the nations by exposing their hidden layers of power structures, thus forcing them to assume and rethink themselves in their full complexity" (197). Tavares's strongest point is understanding and emphasizing that these authors' works—revolving around themes of power dynamics, hegemony, and women's conditions—go beyond feminist interpretations and local contextualization. Rather, they reach for a universal, global dimension, which is a much-needed perspective in the field of postcolonial theory as a whole.

Still, the monograph could shine more light on the issues at stake by bringing more Marxist theory to the table, as Tavares hints at in the introduction: "this comparative study will analyse the works by these African female authors focusing on the Marxist and post-Marxist legacies for women and gender politics" (2). Perhaps this would not have been a strategic way of establishing herself in the academic-centered world of Postcolonial Studies, but it would certainly help attain the results—real ones—alluded to in the last sentence of her book: the goal of "promoting a debate over the human condition and, perhaps,

delineating some strategies for conceptualizing a better, fairer and more democratic existence” (198).

By more fully engaging Marxist theory, Tavares could conceivably envision more tangible possibilities and strategies for equality based on solidarity. Perhaps these women would not then be *countryless*, but would find a country, or space in their countries, where their voices would be equally heard and their lives and actions equally recognized. Yet despite this reservation, *No Country for Nonconforming Women* remains an excellent scholarly contribution that is both clear and accessible. It must be critically addressed by professors, students, and researchers both in and beyond the Lusophone academic sphere.

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