PROBLEM OF IDENTIFICATION IN COSMOPOLITAN CONTEXT: EMPATHY, CONFLICT AND BALANCE IN *SURREALISMO DO QUOTIDIANO* BY DJINA

ABSTRACT:

Djina's debut novel, *Surrealismo do Quotidiano* (2014), follows an Angolan migrant in the United Kingdom on a journey of self-discovery as the protagonist tests the possibilities of cosmopolitanism. Employing the first-person, metafictional narrative, the novel traces the protagonist's confusion as she navigates the conflicts between the values and tradition of her country of origin and that of her adopted home, particularly in her interpersonal relations and in her capacity to confront mysteries. This article probes the problem of identification by examining the individual's nonconformity and a constant condition of uprootedness. While Djina presents a generally positive view of world citizenship by showing the abilities of imagination and empathy developed through transcultural experiences, the narrator's fraught position between Angolan and Western cultures forces the reader to question the limitation of cosmopolitanism.

INTRODUCTION

Djina[1]'s debut novel, *Surrealismo do Quotidiano* (2014), charts the cosmopolitan experience of an Angolan woman, Jasmim, who settled in the Isle of Wight in Britain after her transnational marriage to an Englishman. The article aims to examine the question of individual identity in a transcultural ambiance by way of analyzing how the author represents the narrator's cosmopolitan mind and grappling with self-identity.

The novel was written in Portuguese and published in Angola, rather than in the Global North, which suggests Djina's intention to speak to the Angolan audience who is unfamiliar with reading about problems of Angolans in Britain. In his study of the internationalizing trend in Lusophone African literature, Marco Bucaioni highlights the acclaimed Angolan writer, José Eduardo Agualusa, as representative of "the postcolonial exotic wave of the 1990

[1] Djina is the pseudonym for Dina de Sousa e Santos. She was born in Angola and currently lives in the United Kingdom.

and 2000s," whose writing translates Angola's national historical drama in a manner that caters to the western public (Bucaioni 128). Djina's work, with its transnational setting that revolves around Angola, diverges from this epistemological unit represented by Agualusa in what concerns readership. Through the protagonist Jasmim's rejection of being burdened by a stereotypical Angolan cultural tradition represented by music and cuisine, the novel demonstrates its relevance in national positioning by interrogating what it means to be part of Angola and of a Nation-state in general in the age of globalization and cosmopolitanism.

Prior to detailed analysis of the novel, it is important to define cosmopolitanism. Martha C. Nussbaum endorses a stoic stance of "world citizenship", asserting that the "differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership" should not "erect barriers … between human beings," insofar as common humanity should always be recognized and respected (157). Nonetheless, while this novel represents the possibility of transnational solidarity and empathy brought about by the cosmopolitan mindset that the narrator develops during her residence in Britain, it also stresses the conflicts and confusion inherent in the position of being a citizen without state as exposed in the narrator's diffuse feeling of out-of-placeness upon her encounter with a variety of novel circumstances, thus rendering self-identity in cosmopolitan context questionable.

This article is divided into three parts: the first part studies how the cosmopolitan mind leads to transnational empathy represented by Jasmim's experience of confronting the mystery and her relation with Jean as spectral; the second part analyzes the confusion over self-identity and the opposition between being a cosmopolitan citizen and maintaining the idiosyncrasy of the country where one originally belongs; the third part explores the author's

suggestion for the possibility of reconciling the cosmopolitan mindset with the values and culture of a home country.

Based on close reading, this article examines the author's strategy of representing the conflicting identity of the individual in the cosmopolitan experience by deconstructing the plot and analyzing the narrative structure. It will argue that the novel, despite demonstrating the narrator's temporary struggle in working out her identity, still manifests the author's positive view on cosmopolitan empathy and the individual's allegiance to what Nussbaum calls "the worldwide community of human beings" (155).

ECHO AND EMPATHY

The narrator, an Angolan woman named Jasmim, settled in Britain after she had finished a course in Manchester, where she met and married Liam, a Londoner. They moved to an old house on the Isle of Wight off the south coast of England after their marriage. The reason they choose to live there is simple, as explained by Jasmim:

> A ilha de Wight era conhecida como um dos lugares mais assombrados que há nesse país, com um lugar famoso onde passa um trem fantasma e onde, segundo os rumores, se ouvem vozes do passado ... A parte das vozes e as lendas paranormais não me davam medo, muito pelo contrário, fascinavam-me bastante. Mas na realidade, foi o desejo de viver numa ilha bonita que nos fez comprar a primeira casa por aquele lado. (Djina 31)

In this sense, Jasmim's transnational condition stems from emotional and aesthetic roots, which are common to all humankind and cannot be nationalized. This passage also describes the Isle of Wight as an unsettling place forever haunted by the past, thereby alluding to spectrality as a central theme of the novel.

Jasmim does not strive to be British but feels compelled to live there out of a romantic ideal and imagination, which contrasts with the sensitive parochialism of another character, Dona Margarida, who rejects any influence of foreign culture and sees it as a contamination of "angolanidade." These two attitudes stand in opposition to Jasmim's aunt Rosangela's obsession with hierarchy, as Rosangela regards immigration to Britain as a means of achieving upward mobility. Rosangela takes pride in her niece who lives in the UK and shows her ignorant hostility towards refugees like Dona Margarida. Aunt Rosangela is a professor in biology and only travels to visit Jasmim for two weeks. Serving as foil to Jasmim, Rosangela's lifetime engagement with intellectual labors does not help forge any empathy but only constitutes her arrogance that is ironically described by the narrator as "uma arrogância estúpida daquela princesa de um país onde não existem famílias reais" (Djina 203–04). Rosangela's self-internalized racism towards other Angolan people is laid bare in her disappointment at Jasmim's offering support for refugees, as she considers this to be "uma vergonha para [a] família" (Djina 201).

Faced with Dona Margarida's interrogation of her "angolanidade," Jasmim insists that living in Britain and shifting to the culture and values of this country is merely contingent: "Estou aqui porque conheci o Liam aqui e juntos decidimos fazer as nossas vidas aqui" (Djina 112). This notion is aligned with Diogenes' idea of the world citizen, for whom the place of birth is nothing but an accident; and everyone could have been born in a country by mere accident (Nussbaum 157). The narrator overtly refuses to be defined by the man-made boundaries between nations: "quem disse que nações existem? … E eu era um animal rebelde que não me deixava catalogar" (Djina 103). The author brings into focus the cultural debates

throughout the novel around the idea of global citizenship through the competing viewpoints of Jasmim and Dona Margarida.

Jasmim, who identifies herself as cosmopolitan, begins to write a novella about Jean, an Englishwoman who lived in the early twentieth century, when Liam is about to move to work in Thailand. Jasmim is inclined to identify herself as the reincarnation of Jean as she faces the same dilemma in which Jean is trapped: “Pela primeira vez na minha vida senti uma estranha sensação como se estivéssemos a ser reencarnados por pessoas do passado que tiveram que enfrentar o mesmo dilema” (Djina 35). During Liam’s absence, the spirit of Jean increasingly takes control of the narrator so that she cannot tell the boundary between the imagined and the real: “O pensamento que cada vez mais se apoderava de mim era que talvez Jean não fosse somente um personagem imaginário mas sim algo que realmente acontecera. Porque é que esse nome me aparecia tão claro na mente?” (Djina 41)

Jasmim’s encounter with a neighbor, Doreen, who is Jean’s niece, confirms that the figure that constantly appears in Jasmim’s mind not only did exist, but also lived and died in the same house where Jasmim and her son live. The posthumous voice of Jean is disembodied and turned into an echo that hovers over Jasmim’s body, blurring the boundary between the two: “E enquanto pensava nos meus antepassados e na Jean adormeci na banheira. Naquele momento em que se faz uma travessia para o inconsciente, vivi um momento em que a minha alma levitava e se separava do meu corpo.” (Djina 41). Situated in a similar position to Jean, that is, enduring a long separation from her husband, living and raising a child alone, the narrator finds herself more prone than ever to resonating with the echo of Jean. The narrator views herself as a wife, mother, friend and writer, rather than accepting an identity

exclusively defined by national boundaries (Djina 102). In doing so, she demonstrates her primary allegiance to those close to her and to her profession. Furthermore, Jean, both as a ghost and as a character in Jasmim's fiction, embodies the fear of war shared by an English woman whose husband was sent to fight in the First World War and an Angolan who experienced the war of independence and the subsequent civil war that extended into the early twenty-first century. Through these connections, the yawning gap in time and nationality is suddenly narrowed, giving rise to a sense of empathy in Jasmim's mind:

> Cada dia sentia que me convertia mais numa Jean dependente emocionalmente de James e menos em Jasmim independente: emocionalmente e profissionalmente. A tristeza que Jean sentia quando James partiu começava a fazer parte do meu dia-a-dia. (Djina 40)

According to Elaine Scarry, "cosmopolitan largesse … relies on the population to spontaneously and generously 'imagine' other persons" (Scarry 98). This idea aids in understanding the relationship between Jasmim's cosmopolitan mind and her generous imagination for the distant figure, Jean, which enables her to conceive of Jean's pain as her own: the wounds caused by separation from a loved one can be understood beyond parochial boundaries. Furthermore, rather than trying to merely imitate the style of an English woman, by cultivating her faculty of imagination, Jasmim not only translates the distant experience but also writes about herself. Emotionally engaged in writing the story of Jean, the narrator finds her own life intertwined with that of this character:

> … enquanto Jack estava na escola atacava a máquina de escrever e escrevia como uma desesperada. Como a Jean que escrevia linhas e linhas ao seu amado, eu escrevia com o desespero de dar à luz uma novela escrita pelas minhas mãos, mas dita por um espírito que cada vez tomava mais conta de mim. (Djina 41)

John Berger proposes that the "act of writing is nothing except the act of approaching the

experience written about" (61). He also believes that one's experience is not entirely his or her own, and therefore, writing "has no territory of its own" (Berger 61). In line with Berger's idea of creativity and writing, the narrator's empathetic observation of Jean's life trajectory fosters a more cosmopolitan sensibility, enabling her to engage with experiences of the distant other. As noted in the novel's preface, Djina regards this ability of imagination elicited by the experience of living globally as a step towards becoming a "verdadeiro ser humano" in a community for "todos e todas nós" (Djina 7). This adventure of exchanging lives and emotions allows the narrator to expand as a human being by inviting her to experience the world of another concrete individual, which later helps her gain a knowledge of herself.

It is worth noting that the grievance of the dead woman is represented in a posthumous voice, which indicates Jean's "interdicted status of … woman-as-speaker" when she was alive (Raymond 6). The truth about Jean's death has long vanished into oblivion until it is revealed to Jasmim in her state of delirium. The revivification of the mute, dead woman is realized in Jasmim's body and writing. In this sense, the narrator's empathic writing that recovers the distant experience "extend[s] humanism's protection to those more marginal lives that would once have been neglected" (Robbins 81). Through the portrayal of ghostliness – both in Jean's wandering phantasm and Jasmim's hallucinations – the author draws a parallel between these two outcasts: while Jean inhabits the margin between past and present, Jasmim experiences a sense of displacement arising from her culturally nomadic life. The permeable border between the experiences of Jean and Jasmim enables Jasmim to reveal the mystery of Jean by approaching her life that once languished in obscurity, as Jasmim

reconciles her split sense of identity through a productive dialogue with Jean: “a presença da Jean desapareceu completamente, como se finalmente ela conseguisse descansar em paz” (Djina 160). The restoration of peace may indicate Djina’s belief in the beneficial function of a cosmopolitan mindset in cultivating empathy and compassion for all.

CONFUSION AND CONFLICT

The echo of Jean, a disembodied posthumous voice, that appears in Jasmim’s mind and fictional work, effectively puts the question of self-identity to the narrator. While the narrator is writing a novella that “não lhe pertencia” (Djina 80), the split between the voice and body as well as the confusion over her temporal and spatial position render the self no longer integrated:

> Porque é que ela iria manifestar-se numa africana cujas histórias do passado reflectem lutas contra colonizadores portugueses e não guerras de ideologias mundiais? Perguntava-me porque é que essa viagem no tempo me levava até à Inglaterra e não até à cidade de Luanda, capital de Angola ou outra cidade onde os meus antepassados com certeza enfrentaram batalhas intermináveis … (Djina 41)

The narrator emphasizes the experience of wartime as the bond between Jean and Jasmim, a connection based on what they share as human beings, rather than on national identities. Having died nearly a century earlier, Jean no longer has a physical body. However, her voice lives on and her spirit as a British woman takes over the narrator’s mind, demonstrating a possibility of what Ulrich Beck describes as “deformed cosmopolitanism”: Jasmim’s life and body, as well as her “individual existence” passively “become part of another world, of foreign cultures … without [her] realizing or expressly wishing it” (Beck, *Vision* 19–20). The

old house where Jasmim lives exerts on her a power so overwhelming that she has “very few opportunities to identify with something greater than what is dictated by [her] circumstances” (Beck 20): “aos poucos transformavam-me em refugiada na minha própria casa, refugiada nela mas asilada dela, pois apesar de morar nela sentia-me desconectada dela” (Djina 40). While Jean’s spirit dwells and haunts the narrator’s house which used to belong to Jean, the narrator’s physical reliance and sentimental attachment to the house cease to be solid. Feeling dislocated and disintegrated at her own home, which is occupied by an unacquainted other, the narrator is actually homeless and, at the same time, uprooted, according to Dona Margarida.

The narrator’s interaction with Dona Margarida, an Angolan woman who lives in Britain but maintains the “traços da sua angolanidade” (Djina 102), prompts her to look back and confront the reality of Angola. This encounter also leads to a clash in values despite their shared national origin through which they are superficially connected: “há tanto tempo que não tinha contactos com angolanos que tinha perdido um pouco a noção do que era ou não era aceite como tópicos de conversa” (Djina 86). Having long been cut off from the culture and people of her country of origin, the sudden intrusion of what Dona Margarida regards as “angolanidade” exerts an intense emotional impact on the narrator:

> Entrei no quarto e o meu cansaço tinha-se convertido numa nostalgia inexplicável. Aquele sotaque que há anos eu não escutava de repente penetrava em cada célula do meu corpo. De imediato, sentia o corpo todo a vibrar e uma nuvem preta vagueava à minha volta. Sem querer, aquela müsica estava a levantar em mim uma tormenta emocional. (Djina 98-99)

Nevertheless, the emotional storm (“tormenta emocional”) that the lyrics of Angolan songs evoke in Jasmim points only to a nostalgia for family and childhood. Unlike Dona Margarida,

Jasmim, in her cosmopolitan state, is no longer sensitive to the emotion attached to the "terra angolana," which stands for a deep passion for Angola as a country (Djina 102). The narrator's lack of identification with Angola is considered by Dona Margarida as a betrayal of roots. This critique highlights the narrator's interior conflict ("conflito interno"): "E então será que eu estava a passar por um processo de falta de identidade ou será que estava a transformar-me num ser humano mais completo por não aceitar que um papel como o passaporte me definisse …" (Djina 102). Rather than viewing herself as a victim "bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging", which, as Sheldon Pollock et al. observe, is often the case for cosmopolitans (Pollock et al. 582), the narrator tends to believe that her rootless and cosmopolitan identity is the result of her own willing choice, made through conscious effort, as she claims that "eu vim para cá porque quis, não fui enviada como se fosse um pacote ou outro objecto e despreocupe-se que estou bastante satisfeita com o papel que decidi …" (Djina 202)

Different from the "enforced cosmopolitanism" of Dona Margarida, a refugee who "lack[s] the free will to move" and "consciously prefer[s] to be local and parochial" (Kendall, Woodward & Skribis 17), Jasmim's cosmopolitan life is based on her ability to think and act beyond borders and thus constitutes what she deems as a condition of becoming a complete human being. While Jasmim eventually interprets her split self as "uma estrangeira no [s]eu próprio corpo," she decides to rediscover Angola by returning home – a gesture that may also appear condescending. Assuming a Eurocentric perspective, she attributes her ignorance of her cultural roots to her intellectual ambition ("ambição intelectual") (Djina 226), which seems to be an unjustifiable pretext. As Jasmim attempts to refamiliarize herself through

tourism with the country where she grew up, Angola is appropriated as a nostalgic alternative to her current crises in personal life and literary creation. Another instance where the narrator conflates intellectual ability with transnational experience appears in the opening chapter, “Reflexões”, when the narrator delineates an experience of discussing classical music with a musician couple. While she emphasizes the couple’s Scottish and Uruguayan backgrounds as proof of her frequent international exposure, she merely lists the names of canonical western composers before quickly drawing a conclusion that classical music is ideal for people like them, characterized by their creativity (“homens e mulheres como nós que vivíamos da criatividade”) (Djina 19). This clearly reveals her sense of superiority and cultural hierarchism as she dismisses the cultural influence of her origins. Her shame about her roots is also evident in her deliberate effort to shun her Angolan background: “… sempre usei mil e uma variantes para me definir, excepto a minha nacionalidade” (Djina 102).

Despite her education and her self-perception as an “aspiring writer” (Djina 35), Jasmim has yet to complete her first work and remains financially dependent on her husband, the family’s sole provider. While Liam is working in Thailand, Jasmim develops feelings of isolation and displacement even on the Isle of Wight, the place she calls her ideal home. In this sense, her cosmopolitan mindset appears no more than the result of a transnational marriage, after which she adopts the values of her husband’s country, namely, she speaks English with her child even in his absence, and stresses the notion of equality in the family in ways not compatible with Angolan tradition, etc. Jasmim emphasizes her exposure to Western culture as a marker of intellectual ability, yet in practice adopts a pragmatic posture of assimilation into hegemonic norms. This position contradicts the cosmopolitan, empathetic

mentality that the narrator tries to persuade the reader she possesses. In this first-person narrative replete of contradictions and self-conscious reflections, Jasmim's cosmopolitan identity appears self-deceived or duplicitous. By arrogantly juxtaposing the connection to Angolan tradition with her creative capacity and intellectual pursuits, the narrator seems to put herself in a Eurocentric position, and thereby showcases the limits of cosmopolitanism.

BALANCE AND RECONCILIATION

By the end of the novel, Dona Margarida obtains her right to remain in the UK and accepts Jasmim's counsel to learn English and adapt to her circumstances in Britain, while Jasmim regards Dona Margarida as the best therapy for unrooted souls ("almas desenraizadas") and travels back to Angola with her husband and son in order to "solidificar as [suas] raízes e descobrir quem realmente [é]" (Djina 226-27). The ending may suggest a possibility of breaking "a dichotomous logic that asks us to choose between identity and difference" (Posnock 804). The mutual impact between the two Angolan women in the novel aligns with *the mélange principle*, where "local, national … *and* cosmopolitan cultures and traditions interpenetrate interconnect and intermingle," supplementing each other (Beck, *Vision* 7).

Djina cites Alda Lara's poem, "Noite," as the epigraph for the third part of the novel, which centres on Jasmim's experience of reconciling the image of a traditional Angola, as conveyed up by Dona Margarida with the reality of the modern world she inhabits. This epigraph suggests Djina's alignment with Lara's literary expression. As a representative of 1950s Angolan poetry, Lara's work fully develops "the search for the culture of

Angolanidade" (Leite 143). Phillip Rothwell proposes that the sense of unhomeliness in contemporary Angolan women writers' work reflects an attempt to struggle against "the ideological grasp of the MPLA' and a monolithic 'institutional fantasy of Angolanness" (Rothwell par. 11). In his analysis of Lara's poetry, Rothwell emphasizes that the trope of motherhood has been misinterpreted as "wombs in service of the nation", while "the lived, and very contingent, experience of mothers that particularly Alda Lara's poetry enunciated" is willfully overlooked (Rothwell, par. 7). Djina's novel conveys such unhomeliness stemming from a conflict with nationalist narratives and ideology, a tension amplified through the character's experience of motherhood and transnational circumstances. Djina's engagement with Lara reflects an attempt to recuperate "angolanidade" as a personal negotiation with the modern reality, shaped and complicated by the experience of living in Angola.

The novel can be read as a self-conscious act of postmodern storytelling, not only in regard to its emphasis on the dissolution of border opposing the nationalist mindset embodied by Dona Margarida, but also the metafictional structure. For one thing, the narrator constantly reminds the reader of her process of creating, or recuperating, Jean's story. For another, by the end of the novel, the narrator finally reveals the fact that she decides not to publish the fiction about Jean, and unveils the real work she is creating: a story of Angolan people who lead cosmopolitan lives and transmit the idiosyncrasy of their native country to the rest of the world, that is, the story of Jasmim, or, the novel *Surrealismo do Quotidiano* per se:

> … uma história que representasse todas aquelas flores desenraizadas que viajaram pelo mundo, levando as lendas de Angola pelo mundo fora, para que todos os meninos, homens e mulheres,

> pudessem sonhar com aquela terra mística, mas mais importante, para que eles jamais se esquecessem dela … (Djina 236)

The author's pseudonym, Djina, rather than the name of the narrator and author of Jean's story, Jasmim, appears at the end of the novel. In this way, the first-person narrator and the author of *Surrealismo do Quotidiano* – a story that represents all the unrooted flowers that travelled around the world (todas aquelas flores desenraizadas que viajaram pelo mundo), are finally united in one: an integral self capable of adapting to an intercultural environment and maintaining the memories of her native country at the same time. The form of metafiction may imply the author's expectation for transnational literature: the story of Jasmim, a flower of Angola as well as the narrator in this novel, would transcend territorial borders and national boundaries and be understood and accepted by people across the world.

CONCLUSION

This article is centered on the problem of identification of individuals with cosmopolitan experiences. Djina represents the beneficial function of a cosmopolitan mindset in fostering transnational empathy, while also highlighting an inner struggle that challenges her narrator's sense of identity. By comparing two Angolan women, Jasmim and Dona Margarida, Djina manifests a dialectical idea about cosmopolitanism: "cosmopolitanism without provincialism is empty, provincialism without cosmopolitanism is blind" (Beck, *Vision* 7). The end of the novel shows Jasmim and Dona Margarida's reconciliation in values, which aligns with the idea that "[c]osmopolitanism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive" but can be mutually complementary (Beck & Sznaider, "Unpacking" 389). While the novel represents through this reconciliation a hopeful picture of how "angolanidade" can grow and evolve

organically with the mainstream Western culture and the elements of cosmopolitanism like *flores desenraizadas*, it also conveys a message of nonconformity that arises from the individual's positioning between dealing with reality and facing themselves.

With its metafictional structure, *Surrealismo do Quotidiano* finally unveils itself as a story of uprooted Angolan women living in a cosmopolitan context, no longer as a story of Jean, a work that does not belong to the author. This elucidation indicates a reestablishment of a firm identity within a cosmopolitan setting, a balance between being a citizen of the world and an individual with cultural idiosyncrasies related to one's geographical origins.

The novel concludes with the narrator's unfinished novella and her ongoing journey in Angola, suggesting both uncertainty and hope. The author's portrayal of Jasmim's empathy and her efforts to reconcile cosmopolitan values with cultural traditions reveals a generally positive attitude towards the possibility of a cosmopolitan mindset as well as an attempt to persuade the reader to see the benefits associated with the complex identity it implies.

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