CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

António Lobo Antunes

The Land at the End of the World

Os cus de Judas

Presented by: Marta Gburzyńska

The Land at the End of the World is one of the earliest works in which António Lobo Antunes, a famed Portuguese writer, deals with the topic of his country's imperialism. The story of a doctor who participates in military operations in Malanje (Angola) is blended with his chaotic monologues about war atrocities. The novel does not only deal with post-war trauma on a personal level, but it also offers a diagnosis of the declining Portuguese Empire as a sick and corrupted country with backward-looking elites that send young men to fight in a cruel war in Angola for the sake of preserving colonial power.

Published a couple of years after the Carnation Revolution, in 1979, the novel reflects on the events of the last years of *Estado Novo*, the Portuguese regime led mainly by António de Oliveira Salazar. The period after the *coup d'état* of 1926, which brought to power a dictatorship that will soon transform into *Estado Novo*, was marked by the building of statehood in the colonial territories conquered years earlier and, in fact, by cruel exploitation of colonies in Africa. In 1961, due to poor living and working conditions, riots erupted in northern Angola, and they soon turned into an uprising. As the answer to unrest in its African territories, Portugal started its Colonial War (1961-1974). The war became a generational event for many young Portuguese man sent to the battlefield as soldiers, doctors and officials. The main character of the novel *The Land at the End of the World* – usually identified with the author himself – is a member of that generation. Called up for military service, he gets sent to Angola as a medical officer. Written in first person, retrospective narration constitutes the main plot of the novel depicts main characters' two-year stay in Angola and the atrocities committed in the Colonial war. As the storyline continues, we witness the main characters' return to Lisbon, where his mental health problems become visible in the monologues.

For the narrator, participation in the war is a formative event that, first, distances him from his upper-class family and, subsequently, leads him to question the rules and traditions cultivated by it. The opportunism of Portuguese elites who do not oppose the dictatorship and blindly worship the old heroes and the idea of Portuguese empire is ferociously exposed in the novel through the metaphor of a sick body and physicians. Lobo Antunes frequently uses vocabulary related to the decay, humidity, decomposition, putrefaction and obsolescence to describe dwellings of the Portuguese upper-class as well as military buildings in Angola:

> These houses, don't you think, suit our squat ambitions and our diminutive feelings: the damp gets in, everything warps, the blocked pipes emit sudden belches and gurgles, the carpets come unglued, the inevitable drafts whistle in through the cracks, but we buy furniture in Sintra to conceal these faults and blotches behind supposedly old-fashioned frills and flounces, just as we dress up our narrow egotism with the appearance of a vengeful generosity (pos. 177.9).

In this way, he brings attention to the mental and ethical condition of a whole class of people who live in an imaginary past and are reluctant to face the ethical challenges of the present.

The war in Angola, as an act of colonial terror, permeates the text. The narrator addresses the dehumanizing character of war that transforms soldiers into apathetic insects and machines. Soldiers' depression and fear are visible mostly on a somatic level: they follow primal instincts and, even though they try to reestablish everyday life on the front lines, it becomes impossible. For example, pornographic photographs of women seem like a brutal substitute for their love life. Although the novel is mostly focused on the effect of colonial war on Portuguese soldiers, the misery of colonized inhabitants of Malanje strikes the narrator as he realizes the system of exploitation. Moreover, the novel depicts an officer who, aware of colonial war atrocities, spreads revolutionary ideas among soldiers and constitutes a promise of national revolution that eventually takes place in 1974, years after the plot of the novel ends.

The political dimension of *The Land at the End of the World* lies also in an extraordinary use of literary devices. Similar to the stream of consciousness, Lobo Antunes' style is full of complex sentences that juxtapose seemingly unconnected facts and images. In this way, the text constantly moves between Malanje and Lisbon and draws attention to the colonial violence and exploitation that brutally tie Angola to the Portuguese metropolis. What is more, the use of chaotic sentences is a literary attempt to represent human psyche irreparably affected by the horror of the war: what was supposed to make the main character a "man" (pos. 24.3) destroys him as a person. The imaginary of decay and decomposition is applied to describe both upper-class dwellings in Lisbon and Portuguese military bases in Malanje, what disrupts the oppressive binaries between Europe and the colonized territories.

All quotes come from the English translation by Margaret Jull Costa.

LANGUAGE: Portuguese/Português

This title was not censored before publishing