



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

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Launch speech for *Saudade* by Suneeta Peres da Costa

In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* a young man wakes up one morning to discover he has been transformed into an insect. In Suneeta Peres da Costa's first novel, *Homework*, the reader learns that the narrator is a young girl with antennae. In the opening lines of *Saudade* we hear a wise, intelligent and rather melancholic woman recalling her early childhood in colonial Angola. Her weary Goan mother warns her of dead men whose feet point backwards as they walk forwards. The father is an angry and discontented lawyer, and may well be spying for the government.

The daughter becomes haunted by the fear of seeing spectres of the living-dead and of what might happen to her should she be carried off into their world. She recalls these distressing nightmares and is made to feel guilty about her imagination. But the girl also experiences epiphanies of childhood innocence. She is coming of age in a small town, 'an oasis where she wanted for nothing'. There are moments that only children can see and know in their childhood way of knowing. This is an ideal but short-lived state of the soul's tabula rasa, a Blakean Innocence. It is a magical way of thinking. The narrator recalls herself as a child who gradually grows in self-consciousness of her colonised status.

At the beginning of the story, the young child is yet to see herself as interpolated (as adults do) in terms of colour or race, by class or status. The girl is unaware of what she will become and of what the colonial state will force her and her parents to become: either victim or oppressor, or in-between, left-overs and losers in a vicious conflict. As she grows up, she finds that identity is unstable, and she ponders 'how home can be destroyed by so much strife and how it can be remade...'. She will not be able to identify with a stable identity that other 'purer' people have – the Portuguese colonial whites, or the Indigenous African Angolans.

Underneath all of that is a sense of a childhood that is in many ways beautiful, privileged, unspoiled and for that forever marked by Saudade, a sense of lostness and sorrow. Like the protagonist-narrator of Duras' faux memoir, *The Lover*, a story about French colonists in Indochina, Peres da Costa's heroine, Maria, is also an object of desire, but too young to be aware of her burgeoning sexuality and the power that comes with it. The comparison with Duras is pertinent, as Peres da Costa imbues the story with a sense of lives devastated by catastrophe, guilt, and shame (for status, power, and wealth are lost).

As the faultlines of memory and history appear the reader begins to see the cracks in Maria's world, one in which colonial power relations are inverted by the interventions of foreign powers and a distrustful and antagonistic society is about to collapse into violent war. It is a dysfunctional world in which all bodies and social relations are deformed and de-humanised, especially the bodies of indentured slaves. Those with twisted feet are the colonial zombies, both spectres of the colonisers and those who have been colonised. But the dead are not quite dead yet.

Saudade is an allegory set around the time of the Angolan War of Liberation. From where the narrator is located in time and the place she speaks from, readers might ask whether the book is in fact memoir. Peres da Costa's writing is so vivid and clear, that while reading I was convinced it was but had to remind myself the book is not memoir. At the same time, the first-person limited voice seems to emanate from an

undisclosed location, a 'no-where'. Is the narrator speaking from Australia, or from Goa? Do we need to know? The narrator's point of view, taken from the vantage point of adulthood, allows Peres da Costa to imbue the child's consciousness with adult wisdom, even omniscience. The child becomes a fictive poet of history, an angel or prophet of a certain disruptive and inverted order who belongs to no Heaven-state, and as one who dreams and recalls her fragmented past.

When the girl's family move to the capital Luanda, the narrator becomes aware of the city as the 'mirror of the colonial imaginary'. In this milieu the narrator recounts an extraordinarily rich set of events and crises, and within the condensed bounds of the novella form, time itself and the trajectory of the narrator and her family's fate is accelerated. I found that the book was so strong in affect and emotion I suspended my analytic reading of the book's postcolonial insights. While lyrical, the story is grounded in history and facts, because extraordinary research went into telling the story.

The book accurately invokes the impact of Portuguese colonisation on Africa at an everyday and 'ordinary' level, for example in the narrator's observations of the class differences between herself as a speaker of Portuguese, and speakers of the native Angolan languages (of whom one can say they are subalterns who can speak). Without melodrama, the story shows that colonial power does not always erase the pre-colonial culture, that language remains intact despite colonialism, as the market-women and servants hold on to a kind of agency and influence over the young narrator. The story also brilliantly depicts the epistemic violence of the Portuguese Catholic church with its convent school system operating as a propaganda machine.

What I most love about *Saudade* is the narrator's extraordinary ability to empathise with those who surround her – from the family maid, her parents, a young anonymous soldier, to her first love, Andrea, who is notable for being white and privileged and for spurning the girl's approaches. As the girl matures she falls in love with Miguel, a son of white peasant farmers from the Azores. Miguel is contemplating joining an anti-government resistance movement. For the narrator and Miguel, their awkward and different positioning in Angolan colonial hierarchy colours their relations at every turn with ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty.

The narrator's portrayal of colonials can be cutting, for example, her asides about her school friend, Andrea, who has a crush on their history teacher, and in turn Andrea's mother, a Dutch immigrant incapable or unwilling to understand the repressive colonial situation. Through the force of the girl's own desire and love for both colonials and their discontents, political and class barriers do seem surmountable. But no amount of trauma and adversity can normalise the narrator's existence or erase her ambivalence, especially after the Angolan revolution forces her family to re-settle in Goa.

The narrator recounts how the cyclone of colonialism creates, distorts, and destroys bodies and minds. Children are orphaned doubly, by separation from state and from parents, and babies are still-born (like the narrator's brother, whom I interpret as a trope for the unviability of colonial 'hybrids'); there mothers are deemed 'barren'.

With its extraordinarily long reflective sentences, *Saudade* allowed me to pause so often, that I would find myself grieving for the characters, (or perhaps grieving for myself – for I too am a child of a colonial past) for the book truly did bring me to a state of Saudade – 'a lostness, a feeling of not having a place in the world'. It is a state that leaves one in a condition of being mute. It is an effect of the diasporic, of being a migrant, and of being adopted by another country. One feels Saudade for oneself and for others who are not at home. Saudade is the state that stateless people experience, the sorrow of the orphan for lost parents, the tragedy of being caught between, and complicit with, the oppressive colonialists.

Perhaps the sadness is a result of the narrator's inability to find a place with her revolutionary lover, Miguel, who decides to leave for Lisbon. Sadness overcomes her when she realises that their fates, like their personal histories, are divergent and unequal, however entwined; that Miguel will be part of a peaceful revolution in Portugal, whereas Caetano, her family's servant, who had come to Angola as an orphan from Mozambique, will stay to fight, kill and be killed by others in the War of Independence to come. Her own future is contingent and unknown.

Saudade it seems must be experienced and suffered if one hopes to remake home. To become happy and at home one must have been at one time lost and sad.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough, so luminous, and as a novella so perfect in form, style, and tone and care, its quality as a Giramondo book which I will continue to read over and over again.

Adam Aitken's last books were *One Hundred Letters Home*, and *Archipelago*, shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize in 2018.