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Revista Interdisciplinar de Humanidades

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estrema: revista interdisciplinar de humanidades,
número 3, Janeiro de 2014

Um projecto do Centro de Estudos Comparatistas
da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa

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Moving elephant, moving symbols Colonial discourses of translation in José Saramago's A Viagem do Elefante[1]

Nout Van Den Neste

Resumo

Este trabalho pretende estudar as maneiras em que *A Viagem do Elefante* de Saramago interage com o discurso colonial e postcolonial. A primeira parte concentra-se na evolução da personagem de Subhro através do romance. O objetivo é evidenciar as estratégias usadas pelo colonialismo para se apropriar do outro, como o de re-nomear, ou a reificação. Trata-se depois do simbolismo do elefante, que se encontra constantemente re-interpretado em relação ao poder, especificamente num nível religioso, durante sua viagem através da Europa e de diferentes sistemas de representação. O problema da representação é então levado em conta, numa análise da posição do narrador em relação com suas possibilidades de manter um discurso sobre um mundo (colonial).

Palavras-chave: tradução postcolonial, José Saramago, reificação, simbolisação religiosa, *A Viagem do Elefante*

Abstract

This essay intends to study the way in which Saramago's *A Viagem do Elefante* interacts with colonialist and postcolonialist discourses. Focusing on the evolution of the character Subhro throughout the novel, the first part concentrates on the ways of colonialist appropriation of the other caused by processes of renaming and reification. It then concentrates on the elephant's symbolism, constantly reinterpreted in relation to power, especially on a religious level, as he crosses Europe and different systems of representations. The problem of representations is ultimately considered through the narrator's position towards his own possibility of stating a discourse about a (colonial) world.

Key-words: postcolonial translation, José Saramago, reification, religious symbolism, *A Viagem do Elefante*

[1] NESTE, Nout Van Den. 2014. Moving elephant, moving symbols. Colonial discourses of translation in José Saramago's *A Viagem do Elefante*. *estrema: Revista Interdisciplinar de Humanidades* 3, www.estrema-cec.com.

> *Very generally, the figure of the exile – the unstable subject of numerous historical cases of exodus, diaspora, migration and decolonisation – represents a subject that belongs to no dialectic, that eludes the logic of identity. It is a subject for whom the origin (or home) is from the beginning a displacement and cannot thus be fixed. The figure of the migrant, nomadic in essence, begins in travel, or with a lost beginning, an essentially irreversible trajectory, and has nowhere to return, which brings us to the question of destination.* (Phillips 1999, 65)

Introduction

The goal of this essay is to argue that colonialism is a thought process which is inescapable – for either victim or enforcer. The first chapter intends to describe imperialism on the level of the individual, in this case the Indian guide of the elephant, Subhro, and his development throughout the story as he is confronted by colonialism on a very personal level. The next chapter discusses certain theories of translation in terms of culture and representation applied to the problematic identity of the elephant Salomão, a moving metaphor indeed. The elephant as a metaphor is studied in terms of the flexible, constantly shifting relationship between the signifier and the signified and the religious meaning, even consciousness imposed on the animal throughout the journey. The final chapter describes relativist linguistic discourses and how they permeate the novel on many levels, starting with the writer and how his logic and reasoning encompass the whole of the novel.

1. Colonialism and the individual

This first section discusses the effects of the colonialist processes on an individual in Saramago's novel, focusing on the inner, mental progression of the character named Subhro, who is the guide (the *mahout*) of the elephant Salomão as they travel from Lisbon to Vienna. This part tries to determine the effect which his name change has on his personality as soon as they leave Portugal. It is at the very least problematic to talk about colonialism in a novel taking place in Europe. However, what I will be focusing on are *processes* of colonization on an individual level, certain discourses or

rationalizations which approximate the dialectics of a colonized being and a colonizer or oppressor, therefore arguing that colonization is not always necessarily a fundamentally foreign experience in a distant country, it can happen within the continental, European borders where colonialist discourse and rationalization have permeated day to day interactions. Colonial discourses, especially in this book, manifest themselves in a small-scaled quotidian way, almost impossible to escape and a welcome example of how each and every case of colonization is never just a total oppression but always comes down to particular, specific interactions, dialectics and distorted, forced relationships between a colonizer and a subaltern individual.

Subhro's oppression takes place on a linguistic scale, more specifically, on the level of anthroponomy. From the very start of the story, his name is subject to discussion, most strikingly when Dom João III asks the following question: "Como se chama o cornaca, perguntou subitamente o rei, Subhro, creio, senhor, Que significa, Não sei, mas poderei perguntar-lho, Pergunte-lhe, quero saber em que mãos vai ficar salomão" (Saramago 2008, 32). His motivation for knowing the name of the *mahout* indicates simultaneously a rupture and a junction. It is a rupture of signification, where the arbitrary signifier, the name, is specifically linked to a translation of the word and the signification of this word becomes, in turn, a defining trait of the person's character. The arbitrariness of the name is completely taken away and replaced by a connection between the signification of the name and the identity or personality of its bearer. To put it differently, Subhro's name no longer works as just a name and the signification is now characteristic of his personality.

Afterwards, the King gives Subhro a new name, choosing the really generic "Fritz". Naming as a means of installing power was properly pointed out by Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* as a way of bringing religious and geographical ideas together. The religious connotation evokes images of Adam in the garden of Eden naming all that he could see and thus controlling it without questioning or classifying himself (Pratt 1994, 32) whereas during colonialism, naming foreign lands, people, habits, cultures, plants, species and other things up until then unclassifiable or unseen was a way of exerting power. This linguistic exertion of power happened on two levels: naming the unclassifiable inserted them into the all-encompassing colonizer's gaze and thus became the first step in claiming the discoveries and new territory; it also implicated 'owning' a culture, a people, to label and categorize the knowledge about it, to turn the colonized into a subaltern, silent other. Said points out: "We live of course in a world not only of

commodities but also of representation, and representations – their production, circulation, history, and interpretation – are the very element of culture." (1994, 66). In other words: those who control *how* a culture is represented, control the culture and its history. Said stipulates in *Culture and Imperialism*: "thus representation itself has been characterized as keeping the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior" (1994, 95). On the level of this particular novel it means that those who rename Subhro, as the Austrians do, control his representation and therefore his very identity.

Basically, Subhro's name change into Fritz is a matter of translation, an issue central to post-colonial studies. This name change characterizes, marks and scars Subhro and Salomão in such a fundamental way that they can be seen as victims of colonial thought processes. Young points out that "[a] colony begins as a translation, a copy of the original located elsewhere on the map" (2003, 139), after reminding the reader that the original Latin meaning of translation means "to carry or to bear across" (2003, 138-9). Kiberd brings in mind another meaning: "A root meaning of 'translate' was 'conquer'" (qtd. in Loomba 1998, 101). As is apparent from the book *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice,* translation has become a fruitful metaphor in post-colonial studies:

> In this sense post-colonial writing might be imaged as a form of translation (...) in which venerable and holy (...) relics are moved from one sanctified spot of worship to another more central and more secure (because more powerful) location, at which the cult is intended to be preserved, to take root and find new life. (Tymoczko 1999, 20)

This quote is particularly revelatory in the case of Salomão, a relic who throughout his journey is constantly re-interpreted as a symbol. The move from Portugal, where the elephant together with Subhro was forgotten (Saramago 2008, 186) to the powerful Austrian nation, if only for the oppressive behavior of archduke Maximilian, is already a translation as one object or relic is moved into another culture. This quotation also bears relevance with regards to Subhro and his relocation to Austria. As soon as he falls under Austrian leadership, he is 'translated' as Fritz, an indirect assumption of the oppressor that he has now been moved to a more powerful new location where he is supposed to start a new life as one of the Austrians: "é um nome fácil de reter, além disso há já uma quantidade enorme de fritz na aústria, tu serás mais um, mas o único com um elefante" (Saramago 2008, 152-153).

In this context, I want to bring Lacan's conception of *mimicry* in mind:

> Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of being mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare. (Lacan qtd. in Bhabha 1994, 172)

Indeed, on a purely anthroponomic level, Subhro's new name causes him to be camouflaged into this Austrian society in which he is supposed to integrate flawlessly, if he wants to keep his role as a *mahout*. His new name turns him into an object of empire and imperialist discourse: "That being turned into an object, the object of a pointing finger and a deriding gaze, is only the exterior par. What also happens is that those in such situations come to internalize this view of themselves, to see themselves as different, 'other', lesser." (Young 2003, 21)

When looking at his new name, Fritz, a particularly bland or common name, there appears to be a certain continuity in the signification or translation of the Indian name he used to have, meaning white (Saramago 2008, 34). This signification of whiteness, as I have argued before, forms through his Indian name a part of his character: whiteness not in the racial sense but in a religious sense, a blank slate unwilling to make grand statements concerning the Hindu religion he was born and raised in. This unwillingness stems from a relativist attitude towards religion and its gods: "Porque tudo isto são palavras, e só palavras, fora das palavras não há nada, Ganeixa é uma palavra, perguntou o comandante, Sim, uma palavra" (Saramago 2008, 73).

But at a quintessential moment in the story, Subhro turns out to be quite hypocritical compared to his previous remark. When a priest from a local Portuguese village under false premises decides to clean Salomão with holy water to rid him of a possession by the devil (Saramago 2008, 80), Subhro starts praying to the Hinduist god Ganesh (Saramago 2008, 86). When the elephant, which is the most obvious, most visible representation of his Indian heritage, origin, his identity, comes under the threat of Christian rituals, Subhro appears to do everything he can to protect the elephant and himself from disappearing in this *other* religion. In this light, the relativist remark of religion boiling down to just a matter of words suddenly becomes almost a compromising statement. Maybe not so much a clear expression of his very own, personal believes but a new conception of *mimicry*, in that his neutral stance gives him the most of opportunities to be camouflaged without completely dissolving into the background of Christianity. When the commander asks him whether he is a Christian or

not, Subhro answers: “Mais ou menos, meu comandante, mais ou menos.” (Saramago 2008, 49)

Paraphrasing Said, the vision of empire always results in victimization, no matter the capabilities or the achievements of the person who is “excluded ontologically for having few of the merits of the conquering, surveying, and civilizing outsider.” (Said 1994, 204) In the particular case of Subhro's new name, the merits are a name unfit for a Portuguese and, more importantly, the wrong religion, or rather, the wrong knowledge about or perception of religion. Whether this is because he does not want to endanger himself amidst Christian company or is too rational to subject himself to utter devotion (except in uttermost times of need), is not completely clear and it does not need to be: despite his relatively neutral viewpoint, his Indian heritage is enough for him to become a victim in an imperial discourse. The final change of his name is the penultimate victimization because the whole of his identity is reduced down to the language games so typical for post-colonial novels, the translation of one word, the transportation of one name into another culture, in this case, Austrian culture. It goes to show that “a sign is cultural and specific only because it must always be able to appear in different specific cultural contexts and each time signify differently.” (Phillips 1999, 63) The original “white”, neutral meaning of his Indian name is wholly translated into an equally neutral equivalent: the very common name of Fritz.

Before analyzing the impact of this name change, I want to look at how Subhro sees himself and how his identity intertwines itself with the elephant. Subhro and elephant Salomão appear to be each others extension. Whilst still under Portuguese guidance, his assertions about his identity are often contradictory, showcasing an inner confusion about his conception of himself as a person, probably caused by this uprooting from his home country, India. During a conversation about religion with the Portuguese commander, Subhro says: “Já não sou indiano” (Saramago 2008, 73), even though a couple of sentences before he has proclaimed that: “não passo de um indiano em terra que não é sua.” (Saramago 2008, 71)

A passage following shortly after Subhro's decision to share his concerns about the new developments under Austrian guidance with the elephant in either Indi or Bengali (Saramago 2008, 143), the narrator describes the washing of Salomão: “Orienta as operações, em que, uma vez mais, não faltam a água a jorros e a escova de piaçaba de cabo comprido, o alter ego de salomão que é o indiano subhro.” (Saramago 2008, 150) Just as he needs the elephant to be able to perform his job as a *mahout*, he also needs the

elephant in order to define his own identity. When previewing the journey over the Alpines, Subhro (whose name in the meantime was changed to Fritz) says the following to a sailor on the ship they're taking to Genua: "Se é assim, o pobre salomão vai passer um mau bocado, veio da índia, que é terra quente, nunca conheceu o que são os grandes frios, nisso somos iguais, ele e eu, que também de lá vim" (Saramago 2008, 170). Indeed, he has become Fritz, but the only Fritz in Austria with an elephant and therefore still closely connected with the traditions and cultures of India, his native land, the elephant being the only tangible connection between him and his country of origin. His destiny in the novel is similar to Salomão's, whose identity also is determined and defined by those who (re)interpret and redefine him as he moves from one place to the next, "vestindo o seu colorido traje novo (. . .) para que o país donde vinha ficasse bem visto, [os basbaques] imaginam que vai ali um ser dotado de poderes extraordinários" (Saramago 2008, 141). This lingering issue of translations of persons, customs and cultures resonates rather poignantly in Phillips' essay on post-colonialism and translation in which he argues: " Thus, post-coloniality suggests that the experience of cultural identity involves a situatedness that is always threatened by exteriority, alterity and difference as the very conditions of existence for any cultural sign at all." (1999, 69) In other words, Subhro's translation into Austrian culture actually strengthens his bonds with his Indian culture, something which in his uninterpreted years in Portugal was not possible for him.

When Subhro falls out of grace with the Austrian archduke due to his misleading action of training the elephant to kneel in front of the church of St. Anthony – the archduke thinking of him as a trickster, a cheater who does not deserve his attention – it becomes apparent how dependent Subhro is on the archduke's approval: "A realidade mostrava-o tal qual era, curvado sobre o elefante, quase invisível sob a neve, a desolada imagem de um triunfador derrotado" (Saramago 2008, 225). The irony of this situation is of course that he was forced by the priest to teach the elephant how to kneel, which he, after some practice, did at the right moment. His downfall was not caused by himself but by the (Christian) circumstances he is surrounded by. Subhro is trapped in a paradox. He is clearly not white enough to live up to the expectations of his new name and, indirectly, his expected new identity imposed on him by the Austrian empire. On the other hand, his inability to shed his Indian heritage gives him the inevitable feeling of inadequacy and low self-esteem associated with victims of imperialism and indeed, slaves.

A feeling of internal doubleness follows shortly after the archduke renames Subhro to Fritz. Subhro describes this distortion, again, in terms of the elephant:

> em um elefante há dois elefantes, um que aprende o que se lhe ensina e outro que persistirá em ignorar tudo, (. . .), Descobri que sou tal qual o elefante, uma parte de mim aprende, a outra ignora o que a outra parte aprendeu, e tanto mais vai ignorando quanto mais tempo vai vivendo, (. . .), Não sou eu quem joga com as palavras, são elas que jogam comigo. (155)

These words not only play with him, but indeed form and define him, in the context of his new name which is involuntarily imposed on him. As Loomba argues: "One of the most striking contradictions about colonialism is that it both needs to 'civilise' its 'others', and to fix them into perpetual 'otherness'." (1998, 173), no wonder as this contradiction is fundamental to the exertion of imperial power. It becomes central to Subhro's personality. "In place of the symbolic consciousness that gives the sign of identity its integrity and unity, its *depth,* we are faced with a dimension of doubling; a spatialization of the subject." (Bhabha 1994, 71) The undermining of this unitary idea of consciousness causes a disruption within the arbitrary chosen word, the form, the signifier. Saramago, intentionally or not, explicates this process, folds it outwards. Subhro renamed as Fritz embodies the doubleness which was forced onto him by the colonial process and dynamic of making what is absent present. The image or sign represented "is always spatially split – it makes *present* something that is *absent* – and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition." (Bhabha 1994, 73) By renaming Subhro as Fritz, Subhro is constantly reminded of what is absent, namely his Indian heritage and the name he was born with. Fritz, as much as the name longs for its owner to be in the present, constantly brings him back to his very own past.

At the center lies the feeling of becoming a commodity in a large system, reminiscent of the dialectic as described by Nesbitt: "The relation between the slave and the created object is not one of absolute separation and difference. Instead, the object is in this view an objectification of the slave's subjectivity." (Nesbitt 2003, 30). The "object", in this case the elephant, is created along the way and is constantly re-interpreted and re-looked at by Subhro, as he himself constantly re-interprets and redefines his own unstable identity. Towards the end of the novel, Subhro describes himself as a parasite to Salomão when he realizes his own replaceability, that Salomão does not specifically need Subhro in order to survive, that Subhro can be just as easily replaced by another *mahout*, if so desired: "no fundo sou uma espécie de parasita teu, um piolho perdido

entre as cerdas do teu lombo, calculo que não viverei tanto tempo como tu, (…), pergunto-me que será de ti não estando eu no mundo, chamarão outro cornaca, claro"(Saramago 2008, 248).

What he stands face to face with, is a process designated by Lukács as "reification", of becoming "a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system . . . in which . . . activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative" (qtd. in Nesbitt 2003, 17). In other words, Subhro is afraid to lose his identity, he is defined by the fear of having to change positions with another *mahout* upon arrival in Vienna; the fear of becoming useless seeing as he derives most of the meaning in his life out of the elephant to such an extent that the narrator proclaims that Subhro realizes that he loved Salomão and did not wish to be separated from him (Saramago 2008, 143). The elephant becomes the defining element of Subhro's humanity quite similar to how the slave is seen as becoming more human through the work which is imposed on him: "his teleological activity proves: that he may and must become truly human, and this by transforming the world." (Nesbitt 2003, 28) Nesbitt goes on to quote Marx: "Humans distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce" (qtd. in Nesbitt 2003, 28). The elephant not only connects him with his Indian heritage and culture (which becomes more and more crystalized the further he moves away from it and himself) but also rehumanizes him in his objectified state imposed on him by colonial discourses of translation which surround him as he travels from one culture to another.

"For the victim, imperialism offers these alternatives: serve or be destroyed" (Said 1994, 204). In the case of Subhro, this quotation can be rewritten as: serve *and* be destroyed. After the elephant has been delivered in Vienna, there is no account anymore of Subhro, only a couple of meager assumptions without any sources whatsoever. Subhro was in any case a tool used to transport the elephant to his destination and take care of him in Vienna. When the elephant dies, he rides off on a mule back to Lisbon: "mas não há notícia de ter entrado no país. Ou mudou de ideias, ou morreu no caminho." (Saramago 2008, 258) The death of the elephant and the disappearance of all accounts of Subhro soon after should come as no surprise: after the completion of his task, he is erased from History. Just like his identity was played out on a purely linguistic basis, so it goes with his assumed ending. His destruction does not necessarily need to be an annihilation, but it for sure is a textual destruction, an erasure from the historical accounts shortly after the elephant has died. The narrator of this story

criticizes with gentle irony, this injustice inherent to history and the imperial prejudices and tendencies of the narrators of history:

> No fundo, há que reconhecer que a história não é apenas selectiva, é também discriminatória, só colhe da vida o que lhe interessa como material socialmente tido por histórico e despreza todo o resto, precisamente onde talvez poderia ser encontrada a verdadeira explicação dos factos, das coisas, da puta realidade. (Saramago 2008, 227)

It is however clear that the narrator himself more than once, as it will become apparent in the following chapters, succumbs to imperial and colonial discourses, as the subaltern individual so central in the novel turns out only to be a servant of the elephant (in itself a servant of the hegemony and power-hungry emperors and kings). His only job, his only relevance in this particular story is to serve the elephant and the leaders of respectively Portugal and Austria. This means that as soon as he completes his task, his life is no longer relevant anymore to the story and he again becomes the subaltern individual, this time controlled textually by the reckless, despot-like forces of the narrator who by the end of the story has written a kind of history, selective and discriminatory, which he had just criticized a few pages before.

2. Recontextualizing the meaning of the elephant

Upon arrival in Genua, Salomão is awaited by a curious public who has never been face to face with an elephant before. The narrator describes the elephant as “negro”, and his tusks as powerful forces of arms “antes de chegarem a transformar-se, como inevitavelmente sucederá, nos cruxifixos e relicáros que têm coberto de marfim trabalhado o orbe cristão.” (Saramago 2008, 177) Here the narrator points out with a very general remark concerning the usage of the elephant's tusks, something quite specific to his story about Salomão. Just like the ivory tusks of the elephant have been used for Christian relics and crucifixes, so it goes with Salomão. Throughout his journey, he turns out to be *more* than just an elephant, not because of anything special he himself does, but because of how he is interpreted by observers, by-standers, priests, and even Subhro. They all transform the elephant as it manifests itself as a non-referential concept (the elephant, unobserved, uninterpreted). They force him into a referential concept and consequentially, a symbol which, as the story moves from one place to another also shifts in meanings according to the people they come across.

In this sense, the elephant brings to mind the portrait of the unknown, exotic "other" who is cristalized and conceptualized in Western historical, empirically driven discourses. Such is also one of Said's main points in *Orientalism*:

> When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis, research, public policy . . . the result is usually to polarize the distinction – the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western – and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies. (qtd. in Loomba 1998, 45)

Moreover, as already stated, colonialism is paradoxical in the sense that it both wants to "civilize" the other, and define him into "otherness" (Loomba 1998, 173). This "civilization" can happen in many ways but in Salomão's case, it is clearly a sense of religious civilization. We are never told whether Salomão is his original name nor whether he even *had* a name before he came to Portugal. The narrator mentions the biblical connotation enclosed in his name when reciting a banal quotation from the biblical king Salomon (Saramago 2008, 97).

The second major conceptualization or rather (mis)translation of the animal takes place during a night camping when Subhro tells the soldiers of Hinduism and its symbols, including also the story of Ganesh, the god with the head of an elephant who, after being accidentally beheaded by his own father Shiva, receives an elephant head instead, bringing him back to life (Saramago 2008, 71-72). This particular connotation and obvious reference to Salomão on Subhro's part is not just a contingency in a conversation about elephants, it is also a way for Subhro to claim power over Salomão which simultaneously serves and will re-humanize him. The very same night when Subhro recounts the story of Ganesh, some servants from the camp run to the nearby village to speak to the local priest about this elephant. In their misinterpretation of the story they proclaim the following: "Senhor padre, o que nós ouvimos, com estes ouvidos que a terra há-de comer, é que o elefante que aí está é deus" (Saramago 2008, 79-80), a grave misinterpretation indeed. Instead of interpreting the elephant as a symbol which will occur throughout the rest of the novel, instead of seeing the elephant Ganesh as a generic one not directly linked to Salomão, they envision that this elephant is a animalistic presence of God. Not only is this a serious case of mistranslation and misrepresentation, it also brings to the surface the philosophical deficit of colonial discourses of representations of otherness. Depicted in this scene is a fundamental part of the process of colonialism which Bhabha has analyzed thus:

> Colonial authority requires modes of discrimination (cultural, racial, administrative...) that disallow a stable unitary assumption of collectivity. The 'part' (which must be the colonialist foreign body) must be representative of the 'whole' (conquered country), but the right of representation is based on its radical difference. (1994, 158)

When we apply this particular theory to the case of Salomão and his misrepresentation it does shed some light on what happens. The elephant is the foreign body over which there is physical control in terms of guiding it and bringing Salomão collectively from one place to another; in a metaphorical way however, there is no control over the elephant and this has to do with a fundamental aspect of colonial discourse where the part, an elephant, a foreign "body" indeed unbeknownst to most Europeans, becomes representative of the whole, in this case not a conquered country, but Hinduism. The scene ends with a farce of a baptize as the priest pretends to use holy water (while it is water which he has never blessed) to exorcise the devil out of the elephant. The attempt fails as the priest gets a gentle kick from Salomão upon which the priest exclaims that Salomão knew all along that he was lying, that it was a punishment from heaven and he would, according to the narrator, never have anything negative to say anymore about elephants. It is also in this scene when, as I referred to in the previous chapter, during Salomão's "baptizing" that Subhro starts praying to Ganesh (Saramago 2008, 79-87).

Sometimes Subhro grants himself a certain amount of liberty and almost literally becomes the elephant's mouth, speaking for the elephant and therefore, *translating* him, as it happens in the following passage when a substantial part of the crew goes home. Subhro has organized for the elephant to greet everybody who goes away and sitting on top of Salomão, he gives the following speech:

> E não tenham medo, salomão está triste, mas não está zangado, tinha-se habituado a vocês e agora descobriu que se vão embora, E como o soube ele, (...) Creio que na cabeça de salomão o não querer e o não saber se confundem numa grande interrogação sobre o mundo em que o puseram a viver, penso que nessa interrogação nos encontramos todos, nós e os elefantes. (Saramago 2008, 120)

Whether or not the elephant is aware of what is happening, let alone grasps a human concept as saying goodbye, is completely irrelevant. This passage most importantly showcases the complicated relationship between Salomão and Subhro, which I have already discussed in the previous chapter. "It is the relation of this demand [for an external object] to the place of the object it claims that becomes the basis for identification." (Rose qtd. in Bhabha 1994, 63). To put it more simply, a quote like this harkens back to the dependency relationship of a master and a slave, where the slave wants to take the place of the master, simultaneously with the master, throwing an

objectifying glaze of either desire, hatred or misunderstanding. In this case, Subhro climbs atop of the elephant, thus controlling the force which he had been obliged and forced to follow, as it is king Dom João III who has decided to send this elephant to Vienna. It reminds of how the master himself exerts and follows the discourses of a power much higher and stronger than him. In paraphrasing, in translating what Salomão feels and thinks, Subhro maybe can gain control not only over an immense, but mostly silent force of nature and more importantly gain control over that which normally controls his fate (and therefore giving him the feeling of being a parasite as has been pointed out in the previous chapter).

What follows is a constant symbolization of the animal as they travel through Spain, Italy and to Austria. The number of contingencies is too complex and of too great a number to analyze here, but the most important translations of the elephant as a moving symbol are the following: Salomão's name change into Solimão by the Austrian archduke (again parallel to Subhro's experience) (Saramago 2008, 130-131); when Salomão performs the wonder of kneeling before the church of St. Anthony, after a priest comes up to Subhro to ask him if he can learn the elephant to kneel (it's not so much asking as *obligating* him) (Saramago 2008, 188-194) causing a, as showcased before, disturbed relationship between Subhro and Lutheran archduke Maximilian; when Salomão arrives in Vienna he performs one last miracle by rescuing a little girl from being trampled under his feet during a parade and this would turn out to be the wonder for which he would become famous (Saramago 2008, 253-255). There is a heavy religious connotation implied in this passage, injected with force by the narrator describing the girl as resurrected.

The narrator too crystallized the elephant, often writing about him with attention to religious symbolism or stories or even, like Subhro assuming human emotions in an elephant: “Não obstante as incertezas, sempre presentes quando se falam idiomas diferentes, parece justificado admitir que o elefante salomão tenha gostado da cerimónia do adeus.” (Saramago 2008, 123) All of these different, disparate re-imaginings of Salomão the Indian elephant, reminds of Robert Young's criticism of Said's work *Orientalism*, that which he neglects

> is the extent to which Orientalism did not just misrepresent the Orient, but also articulated an internal dislocation in Western culture, a culture which consistently fantasizes itself as constituting some kind of integral totality, at the same time as deploring its own impending dissolution. (Young qtd. in Phillips 1999, 67)

It appears that the religious connotation of Salomão's name defines his role in the story, much in a similar way as Subhro's white, neutral connotation is in coordination with his fading into the background of forces which are superior to him. The constant emergence of translation throughout the novel showcases that *A Viagem do Elefante* is an excellent sample of travel writing, which by its very nature "raises urgent questions about the politics of representation and spaces of transculturation, about the continuities between a colonial past and a supposedly post-colonial present" (Duncan 1999, 1). This novel, like so many travel accounts finds itself preoccupied by the idea of translation, whether in the form of the translation of names, be it Subhro into Fritz or Salomão into Solimão or the constant retranslation of an Indian elephant into Europeanised, Western, Christian religious concepts, language games in general, the very essence of travel writing: "In representing other cultures and other natures, then, travel writers 'translate' one place into another, and in doing so constantly rub against the hubris that their own language-game contains the concepts necessary to represent another language-game." (Dingwaney, Asad and Dixon qtd. in Duncan 1999, 4). To put it diferently, when Subhro stipulates that the words are playing with him, a quote which I have interpreted according to his own name change, it can also be read as a reference to Salomão's fate; to the people who constantly re-*translate* the animal; to the narrator who as much as everyone else in the novel interprets and translates Salomão's behavior. Salomão is an elephant on the move, geographically crossing countries, linguistically, textually crossing constant new boundaries of meaning and implications.

3. Narrator, writer, translator

When the Portuguese commander goes to search for oxen in order to accelerate the journey through Portugal, Subhro discovers a village for which the Portuguese commander, of course, takes credit. More relevant however is the speech this commander gives to an innocuous inhabitant of one of the houses where he wants to borrow the oxen from. The inhabitant feels quite reluctant to give the oxen away to him to which he eventually, patriotically, replies:

> Nunca a viste, perguntou o comandante, lançando-se num rapto lírico, vês aquelas nuvens que não sabem aonde vão, elas são a pátria, vês o sol que umas vezes está, outras não, ele é a pátria, vês aquele renque de árvores donde, com as calças na

> mão, avistei a aldeia nesta madrugada, elas são a pátria, portanto não podes negar-te nem opor dificuldades à minha missão. (Saramago 2008, 61)

This particular stance offers a discourse quite similar to that of colonialism: the exaggerated indulgent symbolism of a fatherland, the eternal, inescapable presence of it *because of* its very naturalness: the fatherland *is* the sun, the trees. When looked at it in another way, it can also be said about this particular fragment that the imperial discourse played out here becomes some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Said has a few words to say about this in his work *Orientalism* (qtd. Bhabha, 1998). He argues that colonies and the knowledge about them are interconnected, as I have already argued in the previous paragraph. Any empire worth its salt will have the power to impose this particular world view on anybody that they meet, threatening any possible rebellion with (the idea of) violence. Fatherland, the empire, Portugal, although it does not necessarily need to be so in order to understand the fragment above, any country with a certain military, economical, political, cultural power or influence with a discourse steeped in the Romantic idea of the natural aspect of the nation can appear to attain indeed their self-proclaimed status as a part of nature, part of the cosmos through the exertion of their power. However, and this is crucial to what follows, what actually becomes natural and inescapable, what becomes a part of the world the subsequent powerless, the dominated inhabit, is not so much the empire but the discourse. In other words, the empire desires to establish itself as a force of nature, something that is just *there*, for no reason, is superior as the sun (even though it is not always necessarily visible). This fatherland does not necessarily establish itself so just because it wants to, but it does make this particular discourse and the politics, consequences of fear, violence, dislocation, subalternism and so on, *natural* and *inevitable* through the very exertion of the power they establish.

As I have pointed out many times before, this faulty discourse of colonialism permeates the novel on many levels, too many to discuss and analyze them all in the short space given here. However, one of the most influential levels through which this discourse functions is the level of the narrator. It goes to show that "the awareness of the interconnectedness of all matter and the role of the observer/narrator in collecting data leads the contemporary travel writer to literally and metaphorically connect himself to the world, since he sees that the world is, in fact, himself." (Blanton 26) The narrator also assumes the role of translator, or rather someone who deals with the problems of translation and representation, as showcased in his comment on history and its random

exclusion policies (which he then, accordingly, applies himself to Subhro). It is also visible in his appropriation of Salomão (although this can also be interpreted as part of a process to lessen his otherness and try to humanize him instead), and it becomes clear in banal metaphorical passages. A good example is an extensive description of ancient quantity and distance measures, because of the problems that might rise out of that if the narrator were to continue to use these measures, whereas the regular modern reader does not know what they stand for. So the narrator proposes to leave them out and replace them with modern day quantity measures. This fragment speaks about language problems on various levels:

> No fundo, será, como se num filme, desconhecido naquele século dezasseis, estivéssemos a colar legendas na nossa língua para suprir a ignorância ou um insuficiente conhecimento da língua falada pelos actores. Teremos portanto neste relato dois discursos paralelos que nunca se encontrarão, um, este, que poderemos seguir sem dificuldade, e outro que, a partir deste momento, entra no silêncio. Interessante solução. (Saramago 2008, 40)

In this context, I also want to mention one very peculiar element in the story where a man becomes separated from the group. After having heard Salomão calling him three times, like a religious calling awakening him from the dead, he finally disappears, and as the narrator suggests, dissolves into the fog (Saramago 2008, 88-94). About his dissolution the narrator proclaims: "O maníaco dos barritos começou a perder constistência e volume, a encolher-se, tornou-se meio redondo," and goes on to talk about how long it would take if he were to describe the whole disappearing process of the man so instead suggests the following alternative: "Fez plof e sumiu-se. Há onomatopeias providenciais. (. . .) Plof." (Saramago 2008, 94) While it is an interesting argument for the influence the narrator has on the story and his unreliability, this particular element does not get any more attention or explanation not even a reference throughout the rest of the story. It is like it has never happened, he is not missed and no one talks about his mysterious disappearance. However, this could mean that the deadpan silence after his disappearance can also be very intentional, as this person is one individual lost from the pack (like an animal), lost outside of the collective experience and disappears as an individual in the fog.

The problem however with such a relativist linguistic discourse, interesting as it is though, is similar to that of Bhabha's post-colonial critical work:

> In making the point that 'there is no knowledge – political or otherwise – outside representation' Bhabha reduces colonial dynamics to a linguistic interchange. Or as Benita Parry puts it in a detailed critique of Bhabha's work, 'what he offers us is The World

> according to The Word'. And this 'Word' seems to lie largely with the colonizer. (Loomba 1998, 179-180)

The same thing can be said about the narrator's work. At the very end of the novel he seems aware of the consequences of his own relativist, linguistic discourse during the description of the landscape of a mountain pass and the inadequacy inherent in words to describe what can be seen:

> é ter de fazê-lo com palavras que não são nossas, que nunca foram nossas, repara-se, palavras que já correram milhões de páginas e de bocas antes que chegassem a nossa vez de as utilizar, palavras cansadas, exaustas de tanto passarem de mão em mão e deixarem em cada uma parte da sua substância vital. (Saramago 2008, 243)

Towards the end of the novel, the writer realizes that he took his relativist stance too far, to such an extent that he becomes very much aware of the limits of his own world view. When any kind of discourse continuously becomes reduced to a discourse of words, ultimately the words more and more start to refer to themselves and replace the reality which they are supposed to refer to, therefore becoming increasingly inadequate to describe any sort of reality, even a simple landscape. In this context, Nesbitt's remarks concerning *simulacra* proves particularly enlightening: "A simulacrum has replaced the real individual who posed for this image" (Nesbitt 2003, 11). To paraphrase, "palavras", to which the narrator refers to no longer have a connection with the world outside. They have become their own reference points, announcing a deficit not only of words but of any kind of discourse. Inherently relying on words to exist, these discourses are no longer based on anything manifested in reality but are, at their very best, referring back to previous, other discourses. At their very worst however, they are referring back to themselves, creating an endless loop in which all meaning eventually gets lost.

This is the price the narrator pays for forcing himself as a character into the story. He becomes enormously self-conscious and aware of the short comings of language due to his much too heavy burden of subjectivity. This is a dilemma depicted as an effort to control his own fragmentation (simultaneously chronicling and writing) and ironic tendencies, something which the narrator is very conscious about, to the extent that he realizes that he might have changed certain details to his own accord: "Reconheça-se, já agora, que um certo tom irónico e displicente introduzido nestas páginas (. . .) Não que fosse essa a intenção nossa, mas, já sabemos que, nestas coisas da escrita, não é raro que uma palavra puxe por outra só pelo bem que soam juntas" (Saramago 2008, 175-176). As Alan Wilde points out: "The self, in other words, whether or not intentionally,

endows the world with all of its value and meaning; and it is the enormity of the task imposed upon it that accounts for the various modernist evasions and failures" (Wilde qtd. in Blanton 2006, 22). To paraphrase and apply it to the narrator in Saramago's novel, his relativist view permeates throughout the novel and reverberates through his characters, most prominently Subhro and Salomão. Indeed, the enormity of this, the recurrence of his own words and ideas (or so it seems at least) throughout the novel appears to be his own undoing or at least offers him a glimpse of the senselessness of what he is doing. He is, in a certain sense, the representation of an imperialist discourse which he throughout the novel very often subtly, ironically criticizes and finally attacks when talking about historical discrimination. In other words, the imperialist discourse and its implications take over throughout a major part of the novel in an assumed attempt to erase Subhro's otherness, to assume certain feelings or thoughts or even impose them on the elephant.

The story is littered with religious metaphors, which can easily be misinterpreted for misguided, hypocritical religious asides but for their extremely ironical tone. When talking about Jesus, it is obvious that the narrator is mocking the incredible stories which are told about him: "basta que recordemos a peremptória afirmação daquele famoso jesus de galileia que, nos seus melhores tempos, se gabou de ser capaz de destruir e reconstruir o templo entre a manhã e a noite de um único dia." (Saramago 2008, 70). The whole point of this irony harkens back to his relativist discourse in which he tries to show that words and stories of religion only refer to their own words and texts, not to real persons or contingencies. It is however a discourse imposed, not necessarily rationally argued by a narrator who, as he has proven is not always trustworthy and not afraid of fantasizing about an unlikely contingency like the whole dissolution of a man into the fog himself. The imperialist discourse which he often ironically criticizes, turns out to be inescapable for the narrator, who like the sun is sometimes seen and sometimes not, and even when he's not seen, is still there.

Conclusion

In this essay I have essentially tried to argue the following reading of *A Viagem do Elefante*, namely that the narrator is mostly governed by a relativist, linguistic, even postmodern discourse – represented in the idea that words lose their meaning and become self-referencing simulacra. This discourse penetrates the novel on every

possible level. Subhro seems to have relativist tendencies even though it is not clear to which extent he believes in them, he becomes a word (white) himself and is translated into another culture as Fritz, causing him to feel degraded and dependent but simultaneously more than ever connected to his Indian origins through the elephant Salomão. Salomão himself is a walking, moving symbol, crossing Europe and representations as he is constantly translated, reinterpreted and re-imagined by priests, by-standers, the writer, Subhro himself. Also Salomão in this sense has become a word, a relic from a foreign culture now re-interpreted into a westernized context. These issues of translation do not necessarily have to be specific to this novel, they also showcase problems and complications which we still deal with today.

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