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# THE INVERTED PYRAMID AND ITS (READING) SPACE/PLACE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF "LEAVING LAMU" BY LILY MABURA (KENYA), "THE HOMECOMING" BY MILLY JAFTA (NAMIBIA) AND "PORCELAIN" BY HENRIETTA ROSE-INNES (SOUTH AFRICA)

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the narratological aspect of the setting as informed by the distinguishing concepts of "place" and "space" championed by the humanist geographer Tuan (2012, 2001). To explore such aspects, we chose three short stories written by African women writers that keep the African continent as the main setting: "Leaving Lamu", by Lily Mabura (Kenya); "Porcelain", by Henrietta Rose-Innes (South Africa), and "The Homecoming" by Milly Jafta (Namibia). In our close reading and comparison of the short stories, we highlight how the space described becomes a place for the protagonists. We also resort to postcolonial assumptions (Ashcroft et al., 2013) to inform the reader on the idiosyncrasies of a continent, still seen as "exotic" by many, whose subtleties, through the literary practice, become familiar, as they are, above all, humane.

**Keywords:** Space; Place; Postcolonialism; Africa.

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# A PIRÂMIDE INVERTIDA E SEU ESPAÇO/LUGAR (DE LEITURA): UM ESTUDO COMPARATIVO DE "LEAVING LAMU" DE LILY MABURA (QUÊNIA), "THE HOMECOMING" DE MILLY JAFTA (NAMÍBIA) E "PORCELAIN" DE HENRIETTA ROSE-INNES (ÁFRICA DO SUL)

**Resumo**

Este artigo enfoca o aspecto narratológico do cenário conforme os conceitos distintos de "espaço" e "lugar" defendidos pelo geógrafo humanista Tuan (2012, 2001). Para explorar tal aspecto, selecionamos três contos de autoras africanas contemporâneas que mantêm o continente africano como cenário principal: "Leaving Lamu" de Lily Mabura (Quênia); "Porcelain" de Henrietta Rose-Innes (África do Sul), e "The Homecoming" de Milly Jafta (Namíbia). Em nossa análise e comparação dos contos, detalhamos como o espaço descrito em cada uma das histórias se torna um lugar para cada uma das protagonistas. Recorremos também a pressupostos pós-coloniais (Ashcroft et al., 2013) para informar o leitor sobre as idiossincrasias de um continente, ainda visto como "exótico" por muitos, cujas sutilezas, por meio da prática literária, se tornam familiares, pois são, acima de tudo, humanas.

**Palavras-chave:** Espaço; Lugar; Pós-colonialismo; África.

## Introduction

Postcolonial studies have played an undoubtedly crucial role in recent years by making it possible for overseas readers to reconsider many views, convictions, and myths in regard to the literary productions of foreign lands. When researchers in literary studies decided to give another breath of life to the artistic production coming from Africa, many would still think that the continent indeed lacks the same opportunities offered to other places to show its intellectual and cultural richness accordingly. As part of this worldwide effort, we chose productions coming from the African continent as the object of our study not only because we aim at increasing their visibility, but mainly because they represent the voices of contemporary women writers in three different places in Africa, which may display similarities to our locus of enunciation (which is the South of Brazil). Again, trying to stay away from misconceptions, we are aware that taking the African continent as a totality is not advisable, therefore, we acknowledge that the authors chosen to be analyzed in this text come from countries that already differ among themselves - Namibia, South Africa and Kenya - , yet they help us change our mind and be open to forms of agency, identity and representativeness in a post-colonial context (Ashcroft et al., 2013, *passim*).

Regarding agency, we draw contributions from Ashcroft et al. (2013), when they claim that agency "refers to the ability to act or perform an action" (9). The authors go further by detailing that

> it hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed. Agency is particularly important in postcolonial theory because it refers to the ability of postcolonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power. (9-10)

It is, thus, especially relevant to consider agency when we choose to read and analyze short stories written by African women writers in the language of the colonizer - English. Such choice helps build their subjectivity as writers, although it does not come without dissension to the writers themselves and among critics (Gikandi, 2009, *passim*).

As for identity, the question of space is present and while reading and analyzing African literature, we see it is closely connected to the ones of nationalism and exile, in an interactive dynamic. If we resort to Edward Said (1990), we find that the term nationalism describes "an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage" (359). The aptness of Said's description is particularly meaningful for the unpacking of exile since where there is no threat of displacement, or where the exclusionary powers of exile have not taken their toll on an individual, an assertion of belongingness in a national space may seem unnecessary. Thus, the concept of space may spark a more universal understanding; however, when it comes to reading and understanding a more

local phenomenon, that of the production of African literature, a more directed understanding is required since the concept is permeated by experiences that are still vivid, and painful to the Africans, while to the Europeans, for instance, the same historical phenomena would apparently be grasped less painfully, since the European territory seems to have been enjoying peaceful times (of course, now disrupted by Russia and Ukraine), despite some separatist movements - which end up fighting for territory (space).

The women writers chosen for our analysis which is driven by the notions of space and place come from an open "inverted pyramid", so to speak, if we consider the physical and political maps of the African continent, and this was an intentional choice. As readers and scholars of literature written in English, we acknowledge that the productions chosen are exemplary of the riches of the African continent and deserve proper attention. Thus, the pyramid has its base turned upwards and open, not for intrusion but for the possibility of reaching further and becoming known to a wider audience, even if an English-speaking one only, initially. This choice is also driven by the need to read in order to identify and raise identification.

Among the several aspects that can be of interest when considering postcolonial literature, the aspect of identity is crucial. Since it encompasses a myriad of aspects that extrapolate the constraints of a paper, we chose to focus on one aspect that is key and has not, so far, soared as fast as it should, which is the study of space and how it is portrayed in literary productions by African women writers. The aspect of space has implications to postcolonial studies in general as well as to literary studies more specifically. Even the need to write in English to be read - just like the three authors that are the focus of our attention have done - adds to this idea of belonging to a space, being it a physical space or an intellectual one.

According to Ashcroft et al.,

> the concepts of place and displacement demonstrate the very complex interaction of language, history and environment in the experience of colonized peoples and the importance of space and location in the process of identity formation. In many cases, 'place' does not become an issue in a society's cultural discourse until colonial intervention radically disrupts the primary modes of its representation by separating 'space' from 'place'. A sense of place may be embedded in cultural history, in legend and language, without becoming a concept of contention and struggle until the profound discursive interference of colonialism. (197)

This is precisely what permeates most literary productions from the African continent. Moreover, what the authors point out as "colonial intervention", which radically disrupted the primary modes of representation by separating "space" from "place", is what the Africans were left to deal with. Such distinction in the use of these concepts can be understood from the humanist geography perspective,

in which "places are centers of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation, are satisfied" (Tuan 2001 4).

Aiming at understanding the implications of such distinction between "space" and "place" further we resort to Yi-Fu Tuan's book *Space and Place* (2001), which centers on three themes that permeate culture and the human experience, namely: a) the biological facts; b) the relations of space and place and c) the range of experience or knowledge. Since a key term throughout his book and also a determining variable present in the three short stories chosen for analysis is experience, we shall focus on it by drawing excerpts from the stories to show how the notions of space and place influence the understanding of post-colonial characters that need to resignify their presence in a space that was so modified by external interference that even the language used to communicate is that of the former colonizer. However, we shall bear in mind that

> [e]xperience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality. These modes range from the more direct and passive senses of smell, taste, and touch, to active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolization. (8)

Such intervention may disrupt a sense of place in several ways: by imposing a feeling of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies; by physically alienating large populations of colonized peoples through forced migration, slavery, or indenture; by disturbing the representation of place in the colony through the imposition of the colonial language. Indeed, in all colonial experiences, colonialism brings with it a sense of dislocation between the environment and the imported language now used to describe it, a gap between the 'experienced' place and the descriptions the language provides.

Still connected to this crucial concept, Tuan claims that "experience is directed to the external world" (8), also bringing with it a "connotation of passivity; the word suggests what a person has undergone or suffered" (Tuan 9). Experience is, thus, the overcoming of perils and implies the ability to learn from what one has undergone. Moreover, experience, being quintessentially kinesthetic, is composed of feeling and thought, and can be attached to the senses, as we see explained further by the author:

> Taste, smell, skin sensitivity, and hearing cannot individually (nor perhaps even together) make us aware of a spacious external world inhabited by objects. In combination with the "spatializing" faculties of sight and touch, however, these essentially nondistancing senses greatly enrich our apprehension of the world's spatial and geometrical character. (Tuan 13)

This attachment of one's experience to the senses and to space/place may explain why, for instance, Marion, in "Porcelain", and Suelah, in "Leaving Lamu", remember the relatives that are gone whenever they get into the houses

which belong to their families for generations. This affective bond between the individual and his/her place, Tuan (2012) calls *topofilia*, a concept that the author himself considers pervasive, yet vivid and concrete as a personal experience. In a way, space and place are intrinsically anthropocentric concepts, thus, referring to the human experience to understand them is a given. We shall see these aspects as presented in the short stories, one at a time and then in comparison.

## "Everything was abuzz" - on the first encounter with a(n) (im)possible dream

The first-person narrator in "Leaving Lamu" (2012), by Kenyan writer Lily Mabura, introduces the setting of the story, in the "high-walled streets of Lamu", "so narrow that a car could not drive through" (43). The time is also set quite soon in the story, since "it was on the eve of Maulidi", when Kenyans celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, thus October 6th. The streets were buzzing. The narrator is reminded by the atmosphere of some chants, mix of Swahili and Indian bhangra, when she sees a person in the street - Fatima Bakari, "renowned for her talent not only in Lamu, but on the mainland as well" (Mabura 43).

The narrator progresses describing the encounter with the elder sister, Naima, soon to be married, and who is "weaving a basket from coconut raffia" (Mabura 44) and the feeling of sadness for missing the sister already, while walking "into the coolness of the house" (Mabura 44). As opposed to the buzzing streets, full of people and activities, the coolness of the house is welcoming and shows that the place was already turned into a place. Nevertheless, while inside the house, the narrator describes it as "a long series of long and narrow dark rooms, like the streets outside" (Mabura 44), showing, thus, that even the so-called home can resemble the outside world at times. The description continues with the narrator reporting the place as being supplied with "a large water cistern for the toilet" (Mabura 44) where fish were kept to eat the mosquitoes. The description adds one more layer to the understanding of the place: "This is the way things had been for ages" (Mabura 44). Also, the smell of dinner being prepared, more specifically "rice with coconut milk, already boiling in the pot on the charcoal stove standing on the balcony" (Mabura 44), while the protagonist's mother was "garnishing fish with cloves, chili and *dhania*" (Mabura 44-45), intensifies the home-like atmosphere previously envisaged.

We are informed that the narrator had met no other house until she started working as a chambermaid at the Lamu Palace Hotel, replacing her uncle's wife, Zowala, in that occupation at the hotel upon her request. We are also informed that the narrator's name is Suelah, "a daughter of questions" (Mabura 45) when she is sent by her mother to go buy some cooking oil. The reader also learns that Suelah enjoys going on errands, "it was freeing" (Mabura 45). She could see old boats anchored in old moorings, a sight that never tired her, and possibly even dream of leaving Lamu onboard one of them. While in the store, she begins a short conversation with the shopkeeper that asks, as if for himself, who leaves

Lamu. To such a question, Suelah answers that it is Fatima Bakari, the singer/performer. The shopkeeper looks closer at her as if trying to figure out when it is that she, Suelah, will also leave Lamu. The reader is left with this possibility of Suelah leaving the place, of the protagonist possibly heading towards a new space to make it her place. Bringing Tuan's words,

> space is a common symbol of freedom in the Western world. Space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action. On the negative side, space and freedom are a threat. [...] To be open and free is to be exposed and vulnerable. Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. (54)

This could be connected to the feeling of freedom that Suelah experiences when running errands, for instance. Again, according to the author, "compared to space, place is a calm center of established values. Human beings require both space and place. Human lives are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom" (54). Such a notion is more clearly seen when we consider Marion, the protagonist in "Porcelain", as we shall describe in the following section.

## "And broken as it already was, she in turn could do the vase no further harm" - on the debris left by colonialism

In the short story entitled "Porcelain", by the South African writer Henrietta Rose-Innes, many topics are brought to discussion, such as the importance of acknowledging how mental issues in the family can represent challenges in the identification of certain behaviors and choices in life. In this short story, Marion is on the beach in the South African coast (indeed, there is no clear specification as to which beach is the setting of the story), gathering "cracked pieces of fine old porcelain" (Rose-Innes 39) and other "high-tide debris of the Indian Ocean" (Rose-Innes 39) that had been brought ashore such as "rubber flip-flops and sand-frosted bottlenecks" (Rose-Innes 39). The young woman collects these pieces of porcelain for her aunt to assemble them into new pieces of pottery. Aunt Amelia is the one who keeps gluing and fixing vases from the chips she collected from the beach: "[...] she would construct an armature of chicken-wire, vase-shaped, onto which she would fasten the broken bits of Chinese porcelain with Prestik - a lark here, a pagoda there, two lovers on a bridge. So fragile, these ghostly vases, more air than porcelain" (Rose-Innes 40-41). It is a clear reference to the debris of history left by the colonizers and a metaphor to the pieces that are missing and are found out of order in both the individual's history as well as in an African nation's (if not in the whole continents') history.

This story focuses on descriptions of the African space, in this case, the beach, thus indicating that there will probably be a conflict between different spaces and places in the country. For instance, the contrast between the beach and the forest is full of color, and representative of the richness of the landscape

- and the peoples that decided to explore it, in a way accurately recovering an important historical episode in South Africa's formation in a few words:

> The beach sloped up quite steeply from the water, then flattened out into this broad stretch of sand before entering the low milkwood forest. [...] Not a few old sailing ships had come to ruin off this part of the coast - Dutch, Portuguese, British, journeying eastwards or hurrying home, laden with fancy goods. (Rose-Innes 39)

Indeed, the use of the verb "ruin off", in connection to the peoples that colonized the place, which had a very important harbor - and that is why we tend to infer that the story takes place in Cape Town - composes the conflicting South African mosaic, emphasizing the exploration of the territory and the fact that all those colonizing processes are not forgotten, and above all, need to be constantly remembered. As a crucial aspect in the story, the need to remember is in a way stressed by the amount of information being disclosed to the reader while s/he progresses in the narrative. In addition to the damaging presence of the ships, other events help create the damaging ambience in this story, coming from the place: Celia is Marion's mother and the youngest sister of Aunt Amelia and Aunt Belle, and she had committed suicide when Marion was only 11, as informed in "Celia had been just strong enough to make her own exit" (Rose-Innes 42). Celia's story is then told, highlighting her brilliance:

> [a]nd how the city lured her away from where they lived: Celia had floated away to the city. There she'd studied drama, sung cabaret, had love affairs, produced a child. She'd return to the beach house every now and then - always sparkling, always bringing too many gifts. But the soft sea mists had dimmed Celia's shine. (Rose-Innes 42)

Later, depression is described, being compared to the sea, as seen in the following:

> In the city, with its late nights and loud days, its electric light and shadow, Celia had started to separate. Her highs had become towering, her black lows abysmal, until there had been little left in between. Gradually she got lost in the troughs and ridges, the heavy waves of her illness. An illness that had probably always been present in her, but that her sisters had not recognized until Celia was far, far out on a dark sea. (Rose-Innes 42)

Also, the fact that Celia leaves for the city helped conceal everything, and in a way worsened the situation, as cities are usually seen as sinful by African writers – in some of Buchi Emecheta's and Chimamanda Adichie's stories, for instance, we can find such ideas.

Marion realizes how much she resembles her mother with extreme changes in her mood and temper, her "fits of laughter and tears" (Rose-Innes 42). Because of that, her aunts keep an eye on her, and advise her to avoid the inhospitable space, which is the city, given the past experience with her own mother, Celia:

> While she's combing Marion's hair, Belle asks: "Why do you want to go back to the city, sweetheart? The sea air is good for you. Look at the color in your cheeks" (p. 43) [...]. And also "What's in the city? Greed and grief, that's what. Greed and grief". (Rose-Innes 43)

The space of her aunts' house, passed on through generations, acquires some kind of possibility of becoming a place to Marion, as she admits that she finds the affection that welcomes over there with her aunts: "Marion did indeed feel safe - in the warmth of her aunts' affection, in this house that her grandfather had built for his daughters. She wanted to be in here with them, not out in the storm. Perhaps it might be possible to stay for good this time" (Rose-Innes 43). It is in this space-turning place that Marion and her aunts try to make sense of the debris found on the beach. It is aunt Belle who claims: "Spoils of empire, that's what they are. Flotsam of greed and conquest!" (Rose-Innes 43)

They discuss the origin of the chips and Belle asks Amelia why she does not collect local pottery instead of foreign. This instance may be understood as a sign that there are options: one may value what is close, what is near, instead of insisting on gathering the debris of others (of the colonizers, in this case) or one may resort to what was left by the colonizer. It also resembles what Thiong'o (2012) defends as being part of the *globalectics* sense of individuals:

> They see patterns and connections that their mind helps coalesce into something that transcends the individual particular objects of their senses into a kind of universality in which readers of different ages, climes, and gender can see themselves and the world in which they live, differently. (16)

It is as if by assembling broken pieces, Marion's aunt is helping herself and others to retell history, hers and her people's ones. Then Belle insists again on the fact that Marion should not go back to the city:

> 'Don't go back to the city, darling child', Belle sighed, laying a hand on Marion's smoothed hair. Marion knew that she was thinking of storms and disaster, greed and grief. But her aunt sounded resigned, as one is resigned to history. (Rose-Innes 44)

It was after a fit that Marion herself had experienced - an attempted suicide too - that she went back to the peace of her aunts' house as if looking for shelter, a soothing atmosphere, a more reassuring environment. However, in the end, she decides to go back to the city, but with the idea of going back to the village on the beach, as she will go on helping Aunt Amelia mend the pots.

Her own flat in the city is a space where she needs to face her fears: she breaks her porcelain plates, she cuts her skin supposedly out of curiosity, and then finds the vases there - one which makes her think of her childhood with her mother - and the brand new now which is actually made out of many pieces. The message perhaps that this story brings is that, out of broken pieces that we

leave here and there, we can find strength to make a brand-new pot, constructed with many bits of broken pieces of china coming from different experiences in different places. Immigration might play a role in this, too, as well as the forced exodus from the countryside to the city as we shall see further in "Homecoming". And this possibility of coming up with a beautiful vase, with each of its pieces as a token to remind of his/her story and showing that we can overcome traumatic experiences with the help of relatives - in this case, it might be a daughter (treated as a stranger); or aunts who care for their sister's daughter, fearing that she might have the same fate. It is emblematic also that in this short story the aunts' house had been passed from one generation to the following one. Moreover, it now shelters the broken pieces of china - as a token of the European colonizer, as a metaphor that shows the colonized must make sense of the remains, since the landscape is so changed after the colonizer's intrusion. And forced changes is what the former colonies and their people are left with. We shall see this aspect further exemplified in the following section with "Homecoming".

## "You set the pace; I will follow you." - on returning to someone's own place

In "Homecoming" (2012), Namibian writer Milly Jafta shares with the reader the experience of going back to one's birthplace but being welcomed by descendants. The journey narrated is from Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, to an unnamed place, but specified as being located in the North part of the country. The first-person narrator inevitably shares her sense of guilt and hopelessness, as time passes and things change: features, bodies, behaviors. She is there, being welcomed by Maria, her daughter, and it is at this moment when she considers herself, aged 57 with three children, an old woman who goes back home without the look forward which marks the boldness of a 17-year-old that had to leave her place: she is now "with her eyes fixed on the ground" (Jafta 294).

She shares with the reader her experience in a foreign land, indicating that the whole process was indeed harder than expected:

> So this was it. My homecoming. What did I expect? The village to come out in celebration of a long-lost daughter who had come home? How long had it been? Forty years? It must have been about forty years. How I have lost track of the time. How could I be expected to keep track of the time when I could only measure it against myself in a foreign land? When I planted seeds but never had the chance to see them grow, bore children but never watched them grow... when I had to make myself understood in a foreign tongue... had to learn how an electric kettle works, how and when to put the stove off, that doors are not opened to strangers, and that you do not greet everyone you meet with a handshake. (Jafta 293)

The narrator goes on telling her story, by signaling her experience with the family that had employed her in Swakopmund, in the coast of Namibia:

> One December I saw a large picture like that, only it was of a giraffe. I remember standing there, looking at it and for a moment longing to smell the fields after the rain. But I was in Swakopmund with my *miesies* and her family as she needed the rest. It was holiday time, family time, but I was without my own family, just as I was for the rest of the year and for most of my adult life. (Jafta 293)

She was a house maid for another family. The experience narrated gives us the impression of being quite traumatizing, since we notice the character's startlement, towards the end of the story, with the kindness coming from her daughter's words and thoughtfulness, by asking whether she was walking too fast. The inference here is that those simple acts of kindness had been missing in her life of possible labor (and human) exploitation in Namibia and possibly somewhere else. In connection to this sense of belonging and of usefulness, the final statement signals that:

> I never felt more content, more at peace. I looked at the stranger and saw my daughter. Then I knew I had come home. I did matter. I was together with the fruit of my womb. I had grown fruit. I look down at my wasted, abused body and thought of the earth from which such beautiful flowers burst forth. (Jafta 294)

It is also possible to read this traumatizing event in the protagonist's life as being representative of a brutal displacement, the kind of displacement that happened to thousands of African people owing to reasons as varied and as violent as natural or human-made disasters, such as wars, enslavement or infrastructure and agricultural projects (Williams, 2015, *passim*; 1987, *passim*).

According to Aschcroft et al., the term displacement

> is more often used today in conjunction with dispossession to describe the lot of those (usually hunter-gatherer) indigenous peoples displaced by the encroachment of colonizing and invading agricultural societies. The displacement, removal from traditional lands, relocation in reserves or missions and consequent familial, social and cultural fracturing of indigenous peoples has become the major cause of indigenous pathology. (87)

Displacement is not a one-time experience; it is rather a multi-faceted problem that leaves scars, both in the land and in the individuals, as is the case of the traumatized 57-year-old woman who did not see her children grow. Moreover, we identify the claim that space in the foreign land was never hers since she "planted seeds but never had the chance to see them grow, bore children but never watched them grow" (Jafta 293). According to Tuan,

> space is a resource that yields wealth and power when properly exploited. It is worldwide a symbol of prestige. The "big man" occupies and has access to more space than lesser beings. An aggressive ego endlessly demands

> more room in which to move. The thirst for power can be insatiable — especially power over money or territory since financial and territorial growths are basically simple additive ideas that require little imaginative effort to conceive and extrapolate. (58)

We can understand the displacement of African people as a search for more space to be turned into place for European nations. One may also remember the Berlin Conference, in 1884-1885, which discussed the partitioning of Africa and established the rules to amicably divide the resources of the African continent among Western countries at the expense of the African peoples. It is safe to state that no European ever consulted any African on such matters.

Back to the short story, and as if that moment represented an epiphany, she listens to her daughter saying that she should walk in front, so as to set the pace to be followed by the younger one, and then the movement of her look changes: from the fixation on the ground back to the old boldness of the 17-year-old that had left, full of dreams: "my back straight and my eyes looking forward. I was in a hurry to reach home" (Jafta 294). This is the final line of the short story, which tells us - or at least leaves room for reflection on - many aspects of the lives of these women in Namibia: mother and daughter, with several issues to catch up on. As mentioned before, the feeling of guilt and helplessness pervades the reading, as the older woman says: "I realized that she must have been waiting for an answer or a reaction of some sort. I was so lost in my thoughts that I had no idea what she was waiting for. But then, I never had any idea what my children's actual needs were" (Jafta 294). Her confusion and overwhelmed attitude resonate with the ones of others who were plucked from their land, their means, their ways to serve other people's purposes elsewhere.

Although this idea of "going elsewhere" can be understood as an opportunity nowadays, as is suggested in "Leaving Lamu", such leaving does not come with only positive outcomes, as we could see in "Porcelain" and "Homecoming", especially whenever the departure was not the individual's choice. Moreover, in the three short stories the main characters are women, which leads us to another relevant aspect shared by the stories. The few male characters are only incidentally mentioned and do not really take an active role in the actions portrayed in the stories. A possible explanation for this can be more mundane and attributed to the leading role the female characters play, especially in regard to the confined and familiar spaces of the houses. Another reason, which draws from the historical roots of the African continent and its many conflicts, is that there are not many men left since the ones who went to war or were kept in concentration camps, as was the case in Kenya (Elkins, 2014), left their children and women to their own fate. With this absence in the stories, the writers call the readers' attention to the fact that real life permeates fictional life and the conflicting 20$^{th}$ century left more than scars – both physical and mental – , debris and the will to find a better life.

## When you leave a place, you may never find the same porcelain upon homecoming: final remarks

In the three short stories, the main female characters experience - in various modes - the space turned into place by knowing and constructing their realities through their senses. Suelah ("Leaving Lamu") recognizes the inside of her house as well as the streets, especially through sight, hearing, and smell, just like Marion ("Porcelain"), who also adds touch to the learning experience. The unnamed 57-year-old protagonist of "Homecoming" also refers to the senses of sight and hearing when she mentions what she finds upon returning home. It is, thus, through varied experiences and senses that these women construct their identities, although such a process is not definitive as they are open to further scrutiny and understanding from different perspectives.

The three short stories chosen for analysis had in common the fact that they were written by female African writers who come from former British colonies and thus use English as their language for writing. Also, in the three short stories, the leading roles are performed by women, and no male character exercises any significant role.

Moreover, even the order of display of such stories may be seen as a reading of what occurred to the African continent: several Africans were allured to leave their homeplaces, go abroad and earn a different living - by force or by will - and not many made their way back home. The ones who managed to return could not resist the puzzling feeling of displacement, of not recognizing their own place, so changed they were as well as the original places. They were also victims of power, in the sense explained by Adichie, "as the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (3). The danger of a single story. We do acknowledge such danger and wish to make no contribution to it.

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