

**Raped Africa, Mother Africa, Emasculated Africa:
The evolution of the gendered national body
in the fiction of Abdulai Sila¹**

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Abstract

The exploitation and trauma of the colonised nation has often been written upon the female body, and in turn the land has been accorded feminine characteristics. European colonisers talked of their divine, patriotic mission to penetrate virgin lands in order to inseminate them with the seed of civilisation. This allegory evolved in postcolonial discourse into the figurative rape of the colonised land and the societies that inhabited them. With the figuring of the nation as family (McClintock, 1993) the innate femininity of the native land was perpetuated in African nationalists' and 'an-Africanists' romanticisation of their origins as Mother Africa.

This paper will examine the gendering of the bodies upon which the narrative of the nation is written in the three novels of the Bissau-Guinean author Abdulai Sila. *A Última Tragédia* (1995), his second published work but whose narrative sits chronologically first of his three novels, centres on the trope of the female Africa in inscribing the colonial nation upon the body of his protagonist Ndani as she symbolically undergoes the physical, psychological and cultural violations which likewise oppressed the nation. *Eterna Paixão* (1994) features the romanticisation of Africa as the loving, vital, fecund Mother, a symbolism which spills onto female bodies as the African-American protagonist's tempestuous connection with the post-colonial continent is reflected in his relationships with the homely African Mother figure and the sexually charged, morally deviant African Woman. Finally, this paper will explore and interrogate Sila's innovative evolution of the post-independence national body into the emasculated man in *Mistida* (1997). Here the male body becomes the site upon which the corruption and political violence brewing in the years preceding the 1998 civil war and their grave consequences upon Guinea Bissau's social fabric are figured in the physical disabilities, psychological scarring and social incapacities of poignantly male characters.

Keywords. Guinea-Bissau, Gender, National body, Nationalism, Post-colonialism

Resumo

A exploração e trauma da nação colonizada muitas vezes escreviam-se no corpo feminino, e consecutivamente a terra acordava-se características femininas. Os colonizadores europeus falavam da sua missão divina e patriótica para penetrar terras virgens para inseminá-las com a semente da civilização. Esta alegoria evoluiu no discurso pós-colonial na violação figurativa da terra colonizada e das sociedades que as habitavam. Os nacionalistas africanos e pan-africanistas, através da figuração da nação como família (McClintock, 1993) e na sua romantização das suas origens como Mãe-África perpetuaram a feminidade inata da terra nativa.

O presente papel examina o gênero do corpo no qual se escreve a narrativa da nação nas três novelas do autor Bissau-Guineense Abdulai Sila. *A Última Tragédia* (1995), a sua segunda obra publicada mas a que se situa primeira na cronologia narrativa dos seus romances, enfoca-se na tropa da África feminina em inscrever a nação colonial sobre o corpo do protagonista, Ndani, enquanto ela passa simbolicamente pelas violações físicas, psicológicas e culturais que também igualmente tiranizavam a nação. *Eterna Paixão* (1994) caracteriza-se pela romantização da Mãe-África carinhosa, vital, fecunda: um simbolismo que se derrama para os corpos femininos como a conexão tempestuosa do protagonista afro-americano com o continente pós-colonial reflecte-se nas suas relações com a figura caseira da mãe África(na) e com a mulher africana moralmente pervertida e sexualmente carregada. Finalmente, este papel explorará e interrogará a evolução inovativa do autor do corpo nacional pós-independência como o homem emasculado em *Mistida* (1997). Aqui o corpo masculino está o sítio na qual a corrupção e a violência política que se fermentavam nos anos precedentes à guerra civil em 1998 e as suas graves consequências na fábrica social da Guiné-Bissau escrevem-se nas invalidezes físicas, cicatrizes psicológicas e incapacidades sociais de personagens comumente masculinos.

Palavras-chave. Guiné-Bissau, gênero, corpo nacional, nacionalismo, pós-colonialismo

From the outset of European discovery and colonisation, foreign continents were consistently imagined as ‘libidinally eroticized’ ‘porno-tropics’ (McClintock, 1995: 22); virgin and ripe for penetration by European male civilisation. This gendering of the ever-increasing geographical sphere of western enlightenment and its unavoidable connotations of sexual violence fulfilled fantasies of a feminised world literally spread out for male exploration, to be later divided and ‘deployed in the interests of massive imperial power’ (ibid: 23). This gendering of strange lands was more than a straight forward ‘symptom of male megalomania’; it was demonstrative of acute male paranoia and anxiety at boundary loss, thus the feminising of dominated land granted pioneers the reclaiming of a gendered hierarchy (ibid: 24). The concept of lands being virgin implied their passivity and emptiness in the time preceding European presence (ibid: 30). Upon penetration by white male potency, and its vanquishing of that virginity, the land in colonial discourse became fecund and expectant of insemination with civilisation. This discourse was central to the Portuguese Lusotropicalist colonial ideology, which adopted Gilberto Freyre’s vision of Brazilian racial harmony and applied his discourse throughout the colonies. Freyre promoted miscegenation as an example of Portugal’s supposed racial tolerance and the whitening of the native population as a further means of raising it from its state of perceived savagery (Peres, 2007: 37). Miscegenation formed a key pillar of colonial rhetoric in Angola and Mozambique (ibid), much more so than in Guinea-Bissau, where colonial authorities discouraged the creation of a privileged middle class through mixed marriage (Nascimento, 2012: 33). Nevertheless this highly sexualised discourse was still very much relevant in the Guinean² colonial context.

The dominant image of Africa’s fecundity was not denied in African discourse, as the trope of Mother Africa has been common in anti-colonial and nationalist struggle, not to mention its prominence in the Négritude movement (Boehemer, 2005). According to McLuskie and Innes (1988: 4) African male writers’ adoption of the trope was a replication of the ‘coloniser’s mythologizing of Africa as the Other, as Female, as

treacherous and seductive...’ and its replacement with ‘an image of Africa as warm and sensuous, fruitful and nurturing’ (Stratton, 1994: 40). This image of Africa was perpetuated by the Pan-Africanist movement as a means of encouraging respect for and faith in the African Homeland, as ‘it is virtually a literary and socio-political given that mother symbols cement national feeling’ (Boehmer, 2005: 26).

Guinea-Bissau fought a long struggle for independence, led by Amílcar Cabral and the PAIGC from 1963 to 1974. Despite being motivated by a socialist ideology typical amongst many anti-colonial movements, post-independence governance effected little change amongst the majority of the population. The decade following independence was, and indeed those beyond it have been, marked by brutal competition, personal conflicts and violent power struggles (Forrest, 1987: 96). Multi-party elections were introduced in 1994, yet the military has continued to interfere in civilian affairs, repeatedly marring democratic processes into recent years. The military drive, further to a political desire driven by power and thirst for wealth, culminated in an intensely bloody civil war in 1998-1999. It is within these decades, the mid-1960s to the late 1990s that Abdulai Sila sets his three novels, within which this paper will examine the gendering of the bodies upon which the narrative of the nation is written. *A Última Tragédia* (1995) centres on the trope of the female Africa in inscribing the colonial nation upon the body of his protagonist Ndani as she symbolically undergoes the physical, psychological and cultural violations which likewise oppressed the nation. *Eterna Paixão* (1994) features the romanticisation of Africa as the loving, vital, fecund Mother, a symbolism which spills onto female bodies as the African-American protagonist’s tempestuous connection with the post-colonial continent is reflected in his relationships with the homely African Mother figure and the sexually charged, morally deviant African Woman. Finally, this paper will explore and interrogate Sila’s innovative evolution of the post-independence national body into the emasculated man in *Mistida* (1997).³ Here the male body becomes the site upon which the corruption and political violence brewing in the years preceding the 1998 civil war and their

grave consequences upon Guinea-Bissau's social fabric are figured in the physical disabilities, psychological scarring and social incapacities of poignantly male characters.

A Última Tragédia: Raped Africa

Augel observes that in the protagonist of this first part of the trilogy Sila [*pretende*] (...) *que o drama de Ndani seja a derradeira infelicidade a abater-se sobre o povo guineense, ávido de liberdade e de justiça*' (1998: 346). Ndani represents the Guinean people as a whole and the Guinean colonial nation, abused by the imperial master under the guise of religious education as well as through physical violation and the imposition of European culture. As parallels are drawn between the subjugation of women by men and that of the colony by the metropolis, the author writes colonial injustice and abuses upon the female body and psyche.

Upon their so-called discovery of apparently new continents, colonialists of all the imperial nations governed on the basis that their race granted them an inherent superiority over those they now commanded. In turn, the according status of inherent inferiority placed upon autochthonous populations justified that they be treated, initially, as animalistic and savage sub-humans. In the frank and unrelenting words of Fanon: '[T]he settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. (...) The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values' (1963: 32). Ndani's colonial conditioning begins in her own village, as the imperial reach infiltrates an otherwise purely non-colonial space via the advice of her stepmother, who has some experience of servitude in white households. The need to complete tasks exactly as the white master requires is acknowledged and accepted, as Ndani *'Decorara tudo e aprendera inclusive algumas regras do comportamento que os patrões brancos exigiam dos criados pretos, maneiras próprias de responder, gestos indiciadores de obediência e de subserviência'* (AUT 23). Indeed it is not just accepted, but Ndani takes on the role of the instigator of education, asking for lessons from her stepmother

the teacher, and also the role of willing pupil. She sees that she must be educated to meet the standards expected by the white employers, and although she does accept the social superiority of the whites, believing that '*branco pobre não existe*' (AUT 24) (Valandro 2011: 56), she does not necessarily whole-heartedly believe that they are inherently superior. Rather, she finds the whites' customs not only wholly alien but also quite bizarre and initially takes any strange action that she does not understand to be '*uma atitude talvez normal entre os brancos*' (AUT 24).

The first time that Dona Deolinda meets her new *criada* she treats her as though she is little more than an animal: she ignores her, then she sprays her with the garden hose perhaps as an attempt to scare her off, but also in a symbolic attempt to cleanse her garden of the girl's perceived inherent dirtiness: her race. In the eyes of her *patroa* Ndani is only elevated to that of another human being following the former's supposedly near-death experience whilst on a boat in stormy seas. The incident forces her to reassess her role as coloniser and through religious counsel she learns that '*os europeus vieram à África para salvar os africanos*' (AUT 40). The evolution from slavery to paternalism reflected wider, international changes in the standing of universal human rights however the desire at the core of the actions of the Portuguese colonizer in Guinea-Bissau remained unchanged. Just as the Catholic mission enforced its status of superiority by oppressing the colonised and then bolstered its appearance of benevolence by saving those same oppressed people, Deolinda's drive to save the native population through education really only serves her own pride and the perpetuation of the imperial system. It also demonstrates another facet of the coloniser's deprecation and violation of native cultures, aiming to imprint upon the mind of the colonised that she needed to be rescued from her primitive self and her savage culture. The evolution which she is expected to take is towards that of mimicry, driven by 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*' (Bhabha, 1994: 86. Emphasis in original).

Deolinda's decorating of Ndani with a crucifix necklace forms a corporeal symbol of her increasing transfer into the European world of

the church, at least in the eyes of her *patroa*. With triumph and a certain amount of affection the Portuguese woman fastens the chain around the girl's neck, the jewellery now symbolic of the colonial yoke and her new enslavement to biblical studies. It also serves to replace the protective *gris-gris* that Ndani's father had once given her to wear around her neck, and, as Valandro notes (2011: 56), a symbol of the parallel which Ndani draws between the two worlds of black and white, African and European. The position of the two female bodies at this moment forms a perfect image of colonial patronisation: the woman stands smiling with her hands on the girl's shoulders and the girl thanks her, *'falara baixo, com os olhos no chão, com muita humildade'* (AUT 41). This is how the colonised must accept the gift of education and salvation from her master. Internally, however, Ndani sees church as yet another mundane task which she has to do under boss's orders, *'como lavar prato sujo'* (AUT 54). Ndani recognises the degree of hypocrisy in the colonial religious mission where so-called salvation is imposed on the needy primarily via means of violence, and then via the purportedly peaceful process of evangelisation. Going to mass is like cleaning dirty dishes or, for the European, a dirty conscience. Indeed, from the very moment of Deolinda's suggestion that Ndani begin to attend church, the girl recognises the cultural effacement involved in this change in her circumstances, regardless of the apparently well-intentioned motivation: *'Ainda há dias estava convencida que finalmente as coisas tinham começado a correr-lhe bem, mas eis que a senhora vem com a história de ir à igreja'* (AUT 39). Ndani understands that she is not being called 'to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor' (Fanon, 1963: 32).

Throughout the first two chapters of the novel, in which Sila's female protagonist is working as a *criada*, she is referred to as 'Ndani, aliás Daniela.' This repeats Dona Deolinda's mishearing of the girl's name and failure to be able to repeat the sounds, suspiciously taking it as 'a communist name' such as Tânia or Dânia (AUT 31). As one of the founding members of NATO, Portugal was avidly anti-communist and, moreover, communism was often equated with anti-colonialist movements, there-

fore these two concepts were to be jointly feared by Portuguese settlers in Africa. This repeated doubling of the girl's names reflects the internal confusion that the renaming causes within her, confusion brought about because she is denied the agency to name herself and the right to her own, African name. This in turn reflects that which Fanon (1967) explains as the removal by the coloniser of the colonised's right to self-define: any existing status or definition being wiped out and replaced with the imposed inferiority and fixed identity brought with the arrival of the European coloniser. It also firmly places, as per the colonial setting, the Portuguese version of the girl's name, and therefore the Portuguese culture, as superior to and preferable over the African (Valandro, 2011: 53). This forced mimicry and denial of Africanity is spread further into physical appearance, as Deolinda is strict about Ndani not having braids in her hair for church, demanding she brush it out to look less '*indígena*' (AUT 46).

Whilst Deolinda is, whether consciously or unconsciously, ignorant of the connotations of the religious machine which she helps to fuel, her more educated husband, meanwhile, appears to understand that there was nothing remotely religious or realistically benevolent about the colonial presence in Africa. Senhor Leitão represents the unashamedly and overtly violent side of the colonial machine and its mark on the national body. Unlike his colonisation of the country, his physical colonisation of Ndani occupies no more than a few sentences of the novel; nevertheless the brevity of the rape's narration does not indicate any lesser impact on the girl's life. This event in the novel is, of course, of accurate literal historical and social relevance as rape has long been, and still is, used as a weapon of war and oppression of populations as a whole and women in particular, and the colonial period was no different. As we have seen, further to the rape being 'the master trope of colonial discourse' (Karamcheti, 1999: 125), Lusotropicalism converted colonial occupation and war into a sovereign mission and within that mission rape became an '*acto de dadiva e partilha*' (Santos 1985 in Ribeiro 2002: 167). In the sexual, physical assault of her female body by the hyper-masculinized white male

patriarch, Ndani performs most obviously as a symbol of the feminised African land.

The narrative crisply echoes the imperial patriarchal rhetoric and blames Deolinda's marital neglect for the rape: '*As exigências da missão e os sucessos contínuos da sua acção afastavam-na cada dia mais do seu lar. As suas preocupações pelas almas a salvar levaram-na a esquecer um vício antigo do marido: violar criadas.*' (AUT 66). For Phillip Rothwell, Deolinda's neglect is an attempt to step out of the European woman's place in history, by the hearth, in the role of a reproductive object, and into man's time, where history is written and starred in (Rothwell, 2004: 74). Deolinda's straying from her proper place brings about the 'eruption of the rape' as 'the system cannot cope with the lapse in the colonial gender code' (ibid). However one must consider Leitão's own agency and consider that there is more to his motivation to rape than feeling neglected by his spouse. Fanon scrutinises the colonial myth of the black man's virility and sexual superiority, placing a white thirst for sexual revenge as the fundamental purpose of lynching (1967: 159). From this emerges the idea that white rape of the black woman could also be performed as sexual revenge, as the white man acts upon his need to prove that he has ultimate (sexual) power. Therefore, Leitão's rape of Ndani stems from his innate insecurity as a representative of the ultra-masculine colonial machine which must constantly reassert its power in every way possible in order to maintain it. The fact that the rape occurs at the same time that Leitão is hoping for a promotion up the ranks of this machine, as well as his wife contending his status as head of the family with her own work, furthers the significance of his need to assert his power over the female corporeal nation.

Eterna Paixão: Mother Africa

The second novel in the trilogy begins in the USA, the homeland of the protagonist, Daniel Baldwin, a young civil rights activist and agronomist who moves to a highly romanticised Africa to work in a recently independent country. The remaining narration unfolds around his life

there, his relationship with his wife Ruth and his growing appreciation for the simpler, more traditional way of life of rural communities, instigated by his somewhat filial relationship with his former housekeeper, Mbubi.

Via Dan's representation of Mbubi, Ruth, and the African continent itself, the author exposes his hero's slipping into 'the idealization of women and motherhood in the Negritude vein – woman as supermother, symbol of Africa, earth as muse' (Boyce Davies, 1986: 15). The Négritude movement, in a strategy adopted by many nationalist and pan-nationalist struggles, attempted to replace colonial images of Africa as savage and treacherous with positive images of warmth, sensuality, fertility and nurture by using the black woman as the embodiment of African culture (Stratton, 1994: 40). However, according to Stratton (*ibid.*), this went no further than to replicate conventional colonial modes of representation and reproduce stereotypical images of Africa from Western discourse. Moreover, this perpetuated the conventionally patriarchal trope of the male speaker/agent and the female listener/object and reinforced the African woman's aesthetic objectification (*ibid.*: 41).

Augel posits that the two female characters are representative of two very different faces of Africa: Ruth is figuratively the post-independence continent once brimming with ambition and a certain hopeful purity but now crumbling to corruption, whilst Mbubi is representative of maternal, fertile Africa, the retainer of ancestral knowledge and the traditional female bosom at which Dan finds solace (1998: 338-39). Thus the two women form the oft-repeated and opposed female stereotypes in African fiction as explored by Schipper (1987:45): Mbubi as the good: traditional loving mother/Mother Africa, rural; and Ruth as the bad: modern, evil, vicious, beautiful, urban girl.

As Stratton (1994: 41) critiques the négritudian worship of the African female physical form, one may critique Dan for his repeated tributes to Ruth's body, as his attraction to explore it is positioned alongside his desire to discover the African landscape. As Boehmer argues, 'the woman (...) figure stands for the national territory and for certain national values: symbolically she is ranged above the men; in reality she is kept below

them' (2005: 29). When Dan thinks back to the moment when he first met Ruth, in an Atlanta hotel following the conference at which he won his first trip to Africa, her sexualisation is as apparent as ever, but it is also imbued with Dan's equally problematic objectifying of her as the universalised African Woman:

Nunca tinha estado com uma moça africana e nunca lhe passara pela cabeça que podia existir algo do género da atracção que sentia naquele momento. Seria essa atracção uma virtude da mulher africana, um dom natural que a sua africanidade lhe atribuía? Significava isso que todas as moças africanas eram tão sensuais e atraentes como aquela que tinha naquele momento à sua frente? (EP 44)

Within this first meeting Ruth does very little talking, and her inclusion in the narrative of this scene mostly consists of her figuration in Dan's gaze as he observes and notes his response to her every move, visually devouring her like prey: 'A seguir, viu-a dar um, dois, três mais passos em sua direcção, com toda a sua elegância e com o seu sorriso sedutor.' (EP 59); 'Ainda viu a ponta da língua preguiçosamente abandonada entre os lábios. Uns lábios carnudos que haviam tomado a dianteira...' (EP 60) Even when Ruth does talk, Dan pays no attention to what she says but focuses instead on the intoxicating effect of her speech upon his body and senses.

Russell Hamilton validly argues that the implied author's delineation of Ruth focuses on her European rather than typically African features or behaviours and thus in her is manifest 'the threat of neo-colonialism and the novel's condemnation of an African elite' rather than a particular message of race (1996: 76). Through Ruth it is implied that Western assimilation is representative of a 'lack of nativism and, by extension, patriotism and pan-Africanist commitment' (ibid). However, as the quotes above and below establish, in assuming Dan's early perspective her simultaneous objectification as The African Woman is difficult to deny. It acquires a non-sexual connotation when they relocate to the continent, as the emotion he expresses in thinking of her is one that limits her to the

symbolism of her race and gender, and its significance to his work. She is, to some extent, a trophy wife: *Lembrou-se das emoções e do profundo orgulho de ter a namorada africana ao lado durante os comícios públicos em que discursava longamente, (...) d[o] “Espírito de Dignidade do Africano” (EP 64)*. The combination of memories which Dan relates here is also significant. Juxtaposed in his thoughts are the first time they made love and their landing on African soil, which he describes as *‘o clímax de um acto que começara com um simples olhar numa suite do Mariott em Atlanta’ (EP 64)*. He sees his arrival in Africa as a continuation of his consummation of love for and with an African woman. Returning to the Mother Africa trope, this sexual metaphor can be extended to imply a conception followed by a re-birth upon arrival in Africa and Dan’s consequent sensation of coming back to his human ancestral origins, to Mother Africa.

The troublesome tendency of American Pan-Africanism to romanticise the tropes of Mother Africa and the essentialised, primarily sexual Africa Woman is critiqued by Sila in the concurrent, gradual shift in Dan’s relationships with the land and with his wife. The image of the African man characterised by justice and solidarity convincingly constructed by Dan’s close friend Mark Garvey is crumbled piece by piece the more time that Dan spends in the city and involved in government. He discovers a different Africa, and struggles to put into writing its depiction, which will shatter the Africa in which Mark believed and preached:

[A África] com cara cruel, que reprimia barbaramente, (...) com mãos sanguinárias, que assassinava nas prisões; (...) de olhos vedados, perdida na corrupção (...) Como é que iria convencer Mark (...) que naquela África que tão apaixonadamente pregava e cujas virtudes tanto enaltecia, que naquela mesma África, se investia mais na repressão que na educação? (EP 71-2)

Simultaneously, his relationship with Ruth breaks down on multiple levels. His initial faith in his wife sharing his ethos, based upon her education, her being an agriculturalist and her African Woman physicality,

is broken as she becomes partisan to the very profit-over-welfare politics with which is he so disillusioned. She aligns herself with both corruption and the persecution of those who disagree with the policies of the nation's leaders (Augel, 1998: 335). Moreover, as Dan suffers with depression and frustration that *'aquele fogo que antes ardia e irradiava tanto calor, já não existia mais'* (EP 96), Ruth appears to radiate success and power. His uncharacteristically violent reaction upon discovering that she has been having an affair with his apparently corrupt colleague David results in his imprisonment. The disproportionate punishments and torture which he suffers there, in which David has indirect input, are the culmination of Dan's admonishment with the reality of Africa as a troubled continent and African women as equally as heterogeneous and multi-faceted as any other imposed category. Thus Sila to some extent rebukes both the real and fictional Mark Garveys' idealisation of the continent and simultaneously warns of the societal complications of the male-driven Mother Africa trope and its restriction of women as individuals, explained by Mariama Bâ: 'Social pressure shamelessly suffocates individual attempts at change. (...) We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who, in his anxiety man confused with Mother Africa' (quoted by Schipper, 1987: 47).

Mistida: Emasculated Africa

In narrative chronology the third of Sila's novels, in *Mistida* the author exposes deep seated discontent with the governance of Guinea-Bissau since independence. A source of much popular chagrin in the immediate post-colonial period were the economic policies pursued by the governments of Luiz Cabral, Amílcar's half-brother, who ruled from independence in 1974 to 1980, and that of João Bernardo Vieira, popularly known as Nino, who deposed Cabral in a bloodless coup in 1980 and ruled until he lost power in a further coup during a year-long civil war in 1999 (Galli 1990; Forrest 2002). Pushing the ruling class away from the populace even further was corruption at various levels of an ever-inflating

state bureaucracy (Galli, 1990: 57; Forrest, 2002: 244). Furthermore, Forrest (2002) denotes the post-independence period as becoming politically defined by a personalised and factional form of politics, where rules and institutions were swept to the side and the sway of personal power networks took precedence. Despite Vieira's claim that he would clean up the misleading and corrupt nature of Luiz Cabral's politics, his own regime became increasingly authoritarian and the man himself came to represent the stereotypical sub-Saharan African autocrat (Forrest, 2002: 252). Apparent throughout these decades was the suffering of the population, who shouldered the burdens of poverty, corruption, state violence, inadequate infrastructure and minimal healthcare and education services.

Augel (1998: 352) notes that throughout *Mistida* street rubbish, *lixo*, performs as a symbol for the widespread presence of corruption and malgovernance which has hindered Guinea: a living, physical representation of the putrefaction of the state. It haunts people, obstructs their daily routine, ruins the landscape and even takes on the characteristics of a supernatural villain. That putrefying *lixo* is one of many symptoms used by Sila in his narration of a national disease which hampered post-independence Guinea-Bissau in the lead up to the civil war, a disease which is most prominent in the list of physical disabilities and psychological traumas which he writes upon male bodies. Whereas, we have seen, in his first two novels Sila had written his country's history and its tropes onto the female body, in *Mistida* it is male bodies who bear not only the physical and psychological scarring of the anti-colonial war, but also the physical manifestations of the post-independence disillusionment from which they are prevented from moving on. Be this a willing and intentional removal of male agency on Sila's part or an unintentional one, in *Mistida*, male bodies and minds are not permitted escape from the collective punishment for the system which their gender is posited as being responsible for. The author's fallen heroes function as the antithesis to and the social fallout of the nationalist heroes who '[ranged] across the wide terrain of African literature of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s' (Boehmer, 2005: 23).

The *Comandante*, feeling so hopeless in the face of the ongoing conflicts, governmental decay and betrayals of a regime he fought in good faith to install, effectively blinds himself by refusing to open his eyes in order to escape the world around him: ‘*Cada um está é a roubar*’ (M 19); ‘*Este mundo é cheio de hipocrasia... E de maldade... é o que há mais*’ (M 21); ‘*Há cinicismo a mais*’ (M 25). Given that his mission, which he still refuses to abandon despite repeated reminders from his young companion that the colonial war is long since won, is that of manning a watch tower, ‘*Até o dia em que definitivamente regressarem o orgulho e a dignidade na nossa terra*’ (M 20), his loss of sight impedes him from carrying out his self-imposed duty to his nation, his very *raison d’être*.

In the *Tribunal de Redenção*, a famous former political commissar has internalised the guilt of not being able to fulfil his word to his students of all that he had promised during the war, ‘*um país forjado na luta, onde reinaria a fraternidade e a justiça social; um país sem lixo, sem corrupção, sem violência; um país onde todos seriam irmãos e camaradas*’ (M 47). Should his personal anguish over this post-independence utopia which never came to fruition not be enough, he internalises responsibility for the disappointment of his pupils, representative of a generation of young men and women who hoped, as the rest of the nation, that they were being led towards a brighter and more promising future. The burden is such that he completely loses that tool which was so important in his role of building national hope: his voice. Whether he chooses to silence himself or the effect of the experience is such that he loses the capacity to talk, the limitation imposed on the former capabilities of his body and spirit is the same. The title of the novel, a word without exact translation into either English or Portuguese, is not explained in the book so it is with thanks to Moema Parente Augel (1998: 349-50) that we might understand its weight and Sila’s playing with its versatility. It can carry the meaning of some responsibility or duty; a personal purpose or aim; or a need, desire or wish. Each character here has some *mistida a safar*; a task to complete, desire to quench or purpose to fulfil. Just as the *Comandante*’s capacity to *safar a mistida* is ruined by his blindness, so disillusionment prevents

the Commissar from contributing to society with his own gift when he becomes mute.

Each day the other prisoners in the *Tribunal de Redenção* take turns to share their individual stories, why they are in prison, the suffering they have experienced on their journey at the hands of both the colonial regime and its successor, governed by their compatriots who continue the programme of oppression, and the physical and psychological suffering which continues to haunt them all individually and as a collective. It is not they who are in the dock but they are confessing these disgraces on behalf of their persecutors. Through considerable difficulty the men have brought themselves to verbalise the abuses wrought upon their bodies by those who oppress them, and thus the author denounces the abuses inflicted upon the nation. Life becomes that bit more digestible by shaming those who have tortured, maimed, humiliated and incarcerated them. Despite the alleviation sought and found in these confessions by proxy, the reclaiming of self-narrative and assertion of free-will which they represent, the prisoners are nonetheless confined bodies and they have no liberty beyond the decision to tell these stories to each other. They are subject to the whims and contradictory regulations of the undemocratic, corrupt regime which has slipped quite neatly into the boots of the imperial power which they had driven out, and with not much recognisable difference between the two. Indeed, Asumane Mané's rebels, whose rising partly instigated the civil war in 1998, openly compared their struggle against the Vieira government to that fought against the Portuguese (Forrest, 2002: 256). The prisoners in the *Tribunal de Redenção* are physically incapable of contributing to the construction of the Guinea-Bissau for which they fought, and any space they had for public intellectual contribution, a loss doubly allegorised in the Political Commissar's muting, has been confiscated.

The repercussions of the colonial war and its aftermath on these men are referred to in chapter III '*Sem Sombra de Duvida*,' which narrates one veteran's case of post-traumatic stress disorder that drives him to alcoholism. He is haunted by the memory of the first *tuga*,⁴ Portuguese man,

whom he killed in combat, in the physical form of a shadow that weighs around his neck and prevents full, free use of his body. Manifest in this man's mental torment and confusion are many signs of the post-war age: the ruining of two great men into blindness and muteness; the pessimism and misfortune of his country, '*nesta terra duas coisas boas não acontecem juntas*' (M 62); the driving of his people into political passivity, '*A melhor coisa que de facto uma pessoa pode fazer nos tempos de agora é ouvir passadas*' (M 63); and the lack of response from anyone to the oft-posed question, '*Mas o que é que está a acontecer neste país?*' (M 75) The shadow of neo-colonialism plays an important role in this mentally-painted picture of contemporary Guinea-Bissau as the veteran has nightmares of a visit by bailiffs from Bretton Woods, the monetary system established by industrial nations in 1944 which later bore the International Monetary Fund,⁵ a clear euphemism for Sila's views of the IMF's development programmes. A comrade attempts to wake the protagonist up to his reality, '*Eles é que estão a mandar outra vez na nossa terra! Já corromperam todo o mundo, não reparaste ainda? ... Estamos a ser outra vez escravos deles*' (M 73). International agencies had a significant part to play in the attempted reconstruction and development of Guinea-Bissau, therefore they are attributed their share of the blame for its failure, alongside the politicians who are seen to have opened the door to them only for their own personal gain. In Sila's narrative, he shows that within the national imagination the IMF and World Bank, among other so-called neo-colonial agencies, morphed with the retreating shadow of the Portuguese colonial ruler to form a monolithic, homogenous, white western 'they', driven by profit and fuelled on the exploitation of the African 'we'.

Yem-Yem, 'the executioner', is similarly psychologically and spiritually tormented by the current state of his country's governance and a deep mistrust of a political sphere which '*Estragou amizades, estragou casamentos, estragou a confiança e agora até queria estragar a terra. Só porque todos queriam mandar e ninguém queria deixar*' (M 171). Drunk and aggressive at his usual spot in a local bar, he experiences something akin to a self-led exorcism of aggression and his military uniform is trans-

formed into a clean, white *bubu* (a traditional Islamic tunic), he appears to inhale peace and announces that something must change in the country. As he steps out into the street he is promptly murdered, his body filled with bullets from all directions. Nevertheless he reappears in the final chapter of the novel as comrade to the diabolical and grotesque Amambarka, who leads a blood bath of the other veterans and notaries, and cuts out the Commissar's tongue soon after the once-acclaimed speaker had recovered his voice to speak of freedom. On Yem-Yem's leaving the scene the narrator informs us of something he has forgotten, '*um pormenor fatal, um erro que ele viria a lamentar para o resto da sua vida*' (M 208): inside a pocket of his ammunition belt is the Commissar's tongue. The author posits that even those men who choose to reinvent themselves by breaching their position within the military machine to become proponents of progression and call for a cleaning up of national politics cannot escape the violence of their own gender tradition.

In Abdulai Sila's three novels he has presented readers with his observations and commentary on the socio-political condition of Guinea-Bissau and the experiences of its people over his lifetime, many of which are common among peoples of former European colonial rule. These national reflections appear in his novels as narratives of physical or identity violence acted out symbolically on individual bodies and, as this paper has shown, those bodies are distinctly and significantly gendered. Whilst the author repeats the colonial allegory of the female colonised land in exposing colonial cultural and sexual violence, and perpetuates this female national embodiment in the Négritudian romanticisation of an Africa as both mother and sexual fantasy, his narrative of a corrupt post-independence age writes the trauma of the period onto male bodies. The struggle of a nation striving for stability and social justice at the end of the twentieth century, brimming on the edge of civil war, is figured as a disfiguring disease written specifically onto weakened, beaten and traumatised male bodies. The author's reason for this change in gender symbolism may be open for some speculation, if indeed it was intention-

al at all. Regardless of intention, its effect is to delegitimise patriarchal power, thereby making way amongst the incapacitated male nation for the female who is no longer objectified, and for women's political input. No clearer a metaphor is needed as the trilogy concludes with women gathering to sweep up the ashes floating from a pyre of male corpses, to meet a crowd of children who sing of peace, to 'mostrar[-lhes] o caminho que devem seguir' (M 212).

Notes

¹ Material in this article is reproduced from two of the chapters of the author's Master's thesis *Gendering the Nation: Women, Men and Fiction in Guinea-Bissau* (2014).

² Throughout this article Guinean is used to mean from Guinea-Bissau. No reference is made to the Republic of Guinea.

³ From this point on quotes from the novels shall be referenced as *A Última Tragédia* (AUT); *Eterna Paixão* (EP); *Mistida* (M).

⁴ A Guinean Crioulo word, originally denoting a Portuguese soldier, today more commonly used as an adjective for any Portuguese or white person. From *(Por)tuga(l)*. (Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa Contemporânea, 2001).

⁵ Schifferes, Steve. *How Bretton Woods reshaped the world*. BBC. 14 Nov. 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7725157.stm> Accessed 8 Oct. 2012.

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