



Mariamo Miguel | 2019 | Paulo Faria (courtesy of the author)

THIS IS NOT YOUR WAR (2)

Paulo Faria

A month ago, in our first conversation, in this same cubicle in a shopping centre in Costa da Caparica, Maurício (Guinea, 1972-1974), an engineer in his civilian life, did not mention the electric chair in Bula. He told me other war stories. Lots of them. Sitting around the table with him were Marco Mané and other veterans. In that meeting, I was looking for the same thing that brought me here today: exemplary



stories. *Exemplary* in Sophia de Mello Breyner's terms, as in her *Contos exemplares [Exemplary Tales]*. Short stories that crystallize the cartography of a whole universe, a whole torment, a whole epoch. In my case, I want stories that contain within them the whole of the colonial war, the whole of colonialism. Stories like these are rare nuggets. We have to sift through a lot of grit to find them. But Maurício is a tireless raconteur. Our first meeting lasted long into the night, and he offered me a number of uncut diamonds. As the logistics and psychology officer for a cavalry battalion, it fell to him, periodically, to arrange exceptional outings.

"In Bula there was a brothel. All the prostitutes were Manjacas. The families sold them into prostitution, but they were beautiful and they had a taste for it. Every couple of months or so the doctor would tell me it was time for the inspection. I summoned a platoon, or a section at least, and, by surprise, we would surround the house in the morning. We put the prostitutes in a *Berliet* truck and took them to the barracks infirmary. The doctor and the male nurses checked them all. They had Penadur—penicillin injections—ready because all the women who had gonorrhoea... the clap... we gave them the injection straight away. In the arm? No, in the buttock. High up on the right side. But the syringe was enormous, the needle too. The injection hurt like hell. And I had to be there to keep order because some of them were screaming and shouting. And they had to open their legs, obviously. The doctor put a little device in their vaginas, a speculum. He used a little headlamp and he looked up there, and when he saw pus... Sometimes he even said to me: 'Point the light and look. See there?' Almost all of them had pus, only one or two did not. The ones who did not took some tablets, some kind of preventive thing, I don't know what."

When the stories they tell are particularly lurid, the veterans feel compelled to pass moral judgement on their own actions fifty years ago.

"They tried to escape. When we surrounded the house some of them even jumped out of the windows, and we had to take them by force. I said to them: 'We are here to do you good, we aren't here to harm you. We are here to do you good because of the soldiers, but also for your own good. We want to treat you.' And we caught them all. 'Get into the truck, the truck... Into the *Berliet*, into the *Berliet*...' When the treatments were done we took them back and that was it."

The details are repulsive, but I cannot help feeling a secret jubilation at having found yet another exemplary story of colonialism, in the broadest sense of the term "colonialism". Colonialism is doing



something to someone that *we* understand as “good”, but that the person in question feels is “bad”, all so *they* can serve *us* better. To reformulate: colonialism is the instrumentalization of the other, doing them good only to the extent that it benefits us. It’s worth noting that the exemplary character of a story almost always escapes its original narrator.

Maurício did not mention the electric chair in Bula to me, however. He just told me, after Marco had recounted various of the atrocities that he had witnessed, that in the barracks there was a prison and that sometimes, in the morning, the corporal who worked as the prison guard would call him over: “Hey, ensign, come over here. Come see this.” The walls of the cell were covered in fresh blood. Maurício asked: “But who was in here?” And the corporal said: “It was captain so-and-so, he was interrogating a prisoner. Look at the mess he left.” At this point, after emphasizing that, given the amount of blood smeared all over the walls, the prisoners doubtlessly had died, Maurício felt obliged to pass moral judgement, as if anticipating my own, which he must have guessed from my astonished expression:

“But now I want to say something. Today this is shocking, but you have to understand. Those who did that were PIDE guys and... well, guys from the army. But thanks to the information they got that way, and there was no other way to get it, they saved lots of us. I don’t know if I’m making myself understood. War is a whole set up. Because it’s like this: you do a thing that is bad in itself, but it’s done to save lives. And ten, or a dozen, or twenty men could have died, and in the end only one man died... that’s what you have to understand. If you’re there, you understand these things.”

As if to say to me: “Those who weren’t there can’t understand these things.” With this new exemplary story, Maurício showed me the basic logic of war, which is the inevitable corollary of a colonial logic: do bad to others to stop them doing bad to us. Reduced to its crudest foundations, the world is a simple place. Prostitutes open their legs when they are told to. Lives aren’t all worth the same. Information is extracted from men’s flesh like rotten teeth that have to be pulled. What we saw and locked up inside fifty years ago has become a part of us. Don’t ask us to renounce it. Don’t ask us to throw our whole lives away just because the world has changed in the meantime. Don’t ask us to switch places with the others. Even if we wanted to, we wouldn’t be able to. We didn’t lie down on a bed with our legs open. We didn’t let the doctor’s little light flash across the pus of our insides. We didn’t spray blood on the walls of the cell. Others, with more of a taste for it, did that for us.

Paulo Faria, December 2020



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Translated by Archie Davies

Paulo Faria (born Lisbon, 1967) is a writer and literary translator. He has translated Cormac McCarthy, George Orwell, Don DeLillo, James Joyce, Charles Dickens and many others. To date, he has published the novels *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* (2016, Ítaca) and *Gente Acenando para Alguém que Foge* (2020, Minotauro). His third book, *Em Todas as Ruas te Encontro* (Minotauro), will be published in 2021.

MEMOIRS is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.

