

Review of Irene Marques's *Daria: A Novel*

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Written from within the heart of the Portuguese diaspora in Toronto, Canada, Irene Marques's *Daria: A Novel* (2021) shifts, erratically, back and forth from the author's native, ancestral Portugal and, presumably, Mozambique, to Cabo Verde and then again to Toronto. In the course of this lengthy novel, the single eponymous narrator or, perhaps, voice, is brooding over her past life and how it connects to the Lusophone world she is quite familiar with. In an attempt to capture the memories, traumas, and recollections from these places—often emanating from her interaction with some of the Portuguese-speaking people she meets in this Lusophone Canadian diaspora—*Daria* seems to share some of the stylistic and narrative techniques we often encounter in modernist fiction and, on occasion, from magic realism. My contention is that this novel makes extensive use of some of the techniques used by, say, William Faulkner (1897–1962), but within the context of contemporary ethnic and gender—feminist—studies. Within the scope of modernist stream-of-consciousness and monologue techniques, *Daria* resorts to these stylistic devices so as to express her feelings and thoughts. These either emanate from cultural shock (her adaptation to and gradual integration in English-speaking Canada), to her condition as a woman who is constrained by—but yearns to free herself from—the Portuguese culture, the gender stereotypes and limitations she has involuntarily brought to Canada, most of which passed on to her by her own mother and grandmother.

As with most modernist fiction, in *Daria* readers, too, are often challenged to cope with literary fragmentation, that is, piece together the fragments of a particular story line/episode/angle pertaining to the people (mostly men) *Daria* has met in Toronto and the places they or she came from within the Lusophone world. In this novel, these experiences are filtered through her consciousness and, hence, often conveyed to the reader as traumas or grievances, which need to be exorcised. In the essay, “Faulkner from a European Perspective,” André Bleikasten has discussed some of the characteristics of modernism which can help us understand the structure of this novel, especially the modernist narrative point of view. Briefly, modernist writers have much in common, namely, as Bleikasten (1995) notes, their “bear[ing] witness to the increasing acceleration and complexification of the ‘inward turn’ taken by the novel since the late nineteenth century”; “Whether they adopted autobiographical modes or resorted to polymodal or polyphonic arrangements,” he notes, “they all created sharply interiorized fictional spaces, in which the reader was made to feel individual psyches at work” (p. 81). According to Bleikasten (1995), the interior monologue is, after all, the “mimetic device meant to capture as truthfully as possible the uncontrolled flow of half-articulate mental processes” (p. 82). Considering that William Faulkner is regarded as the most representative American practitioner of modernism in fiction, in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) the character of Benjy is clearly the one who relies on sensory impressions and traumas which he remembers, but which have blurred through time. Interior

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monologues and streams of consciousness prevail in this novel as in those written during this phase. In my view, Marques's novel often relies on a similar technique when, for example, she tells us how after her father's passing away she "let too many voices enter my mind, my body, my soul. Those of my mother, those of Vasco da Gama and his acquaintances and many others" (Marques, 2021, pp. 71–72) or with her therapist, Ms. Gloria Bollatti, who must listen to her,

only listen and not give any opinion about what she listens to. I need to get clean, to ejaculate the filth. . . . I speak to her in tongues, sometimes my own, sometimes another's. I speak to her in short diary entries that I had written inside of me but had never put down on paper as if afraid to see what I had been carrying. . . . I am me, but I am also the many others that are in me, that have entered me and made me very heavy. (Marques, 2021, pp. 289–90)

Having grown up in a rural area (Almor or Almores) in the Caramulo Mountain region, in the district of Viseu, it is quite understandable why some of the stories *Daria* narrates often have elements of magic realism. Tales imbued with superstitions, sorcery, and magic often go hand-in-hand with ill-education and illiteracy, a reality which has shaped the farmers there and the Portuguese people as a whole for decades during the *Estado Novo* (fascism) in the twentieth century and many centuries before. This happens, for example, when Maria Matos takes flowers to the cemetery to put on her son's grave and suddenly realizes her son, just like Christ, had risen from the dead on a Sunday morning. "The Padre," we learn, "immediately gave orders for the body to be dressed and taken to the cemetery again. . . . The parishioners obeyed the priest, and they all took action to return things to their proper places. When all was clean and Manuel's body was buried again, this time surely dead, the Sunday mass took place" (Marques, 2021, p. 77). In addition, within the story line of *Daria*, readers often come upon a plethora of references pertaining to writers, intellectuals, and names of contemporary Portuguese politicians such as: Toni Morrison and her 2008 novel *A Mercy* (p. 4); Marilyn Monroe (p. 14); the rock band U2 (p. 17); Clarice Lispector (p. 20); Oprah Winfrey and her eponymous show (p. 36); Gabriel Garcia Marquez and his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the Brazilian singer Adriana Calcanhoto (p. 47); and Frantz Fanon and his renowned study, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (p. 270), among many more references.

The story of *Daria* unfolds within this cultural and literary repository, while shifting back and forth from the country she left behind (Portugal) and the new one (Canada) she finally regards in the very last pages as her new home. The novel, however, ends with her on a flight to Porto, Portugal, a country that had just been bailed out in 2011 during the Great Recession, a time when Portugal had sold the national Electricity Company EDP to the Chinese, and the Prime-Minister, José Sócrates, associated with this period having been "thrown out and is currently studying philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris" (Marques, 2021, p. 329). *Daria* reasserts her "love" for "this country too" while stating that "I am *Daria*, looking for *Daria*. If you help me, I may succeed" (Marques, 2021, p. 329).

Although she is now living in Canada, the novel per se does not really provide a graphic description of Toronto, what the streets and neighborhoods look like, not even the Lusitanian Social Service Centre, where *Daria* started working as a translator after her interview with Vasco da Gama, the executive director. Although she is beginning to learn and understand the more cosmopolitan lifestyle in Toronto and Canadian culture and ways as a whole, she has also brought with her the cultural "baggage" from Portugal to the Diaspora. The fictional locales she alludes to in *Daria* include names such as Caramulo and its mountain, Santa Comba Dão and Viseu, the so-called Beira Alta region. Working her way from the present time—after April 6, 2011, when José Sócrates was Prime Minister and Portugal was on the brink of bankruptcy—*Daria* refers to the Troika years, the country's bailout and what many people thought about it at the time, namely her own mother: "Despite all that he did and did not do, your father still says that what we need now is another Salazar to make things work,

to take us out of the shameful debt and sinful spending that makes us look like incompetent lazy bastards who cannot govern their own households. What we need is another Salazar, not Socrates who has disgraced our house such that we are now called the PIGS of Europe” (Marques, 2021, p. 2). Rather be poor, but honest and proud people, she kept on saying: “Even though we had to divide one sardine among three of us, and we felt tired to the core at day’s end, we were proud citizens and owed nothing to no one” (Marques, 2021, p. 3). Throughout the entire novel, Marques evinces a very good, solid understanding of the *Estado Novo* and the fascist ideology (1928/1932–74) endorsed by António de Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970) and Marcello Caetano (1906–80).

Undoubtedly, *Daria*’s boss at the Lusitanian Social Service Centre—especially his name, Vasco da Gama—was not an innocent choice, but rather purposeful, since it invites readers to ponder Portugal’s historical, cultural, and economic turmoil after the Age of the European Discoveries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the country’s loss of independence after King Sebastian’s death in North Africa. From 1580 to 1640, Portugal was under Spanish rule. With the economy ruined and very few (or no) prospects for the future, the majority of the Portuguese people would live in poverty as farmers, fishermen, and colonials in its regained overseas empire (mostly in Africa and South America) or immigrants once they could flee from Salazar’s grip. In *Daria*’s words, to “this day, the country is still mourning and mourning the loss of this Golden Age, a fact that explains the country’s constant obsession with *fado* music and *saudade*, that deep, deep-seated nostalgia for what is gone and is very dearly missed” (Marques, 2021, p. 14). Whereas *Daria*’s father, a man with a third grade education, worked as a farmer to support the family, her mother was a typical housekeeper who also received some income from the fresh goat cheese she sold in the local villages. *Daria*, instead, yearns to eschew her working-class, peasant background and immigrate to Canada. Moreover, she wishes to become an independent woman and refuses being bossed around by any man. Once in Canada, she would often reminisce about the time when her father was in the hospital on his deathbed and how the doctors reacted when she questioned their attitudes:

You felt like that Portuguese doctor was a masculine authoritarian bastard who did not like you to argue with him. You thought of your old days there. You thought of the types of men that you had encountered there. Then you thought you were in fact lucky that you no longer lived in that country, that you did not have to constantly put up with arrogant pigs like him who keep perpetuating gender and class lines as if they were living in medieval times when kings received their powers directly from God. (Marques, 2021, p. 56)

Without a doubt, this comment substantiates the author’s awareness—and critique of—Portuguese doctors who view themselves and often act as “untouchables” or quite difficult to prosecute for any malpractice.

With recurrent, abrupt shifts in time in *Daria*, it might be quite difficult for many readers—especially if they do not have a clear historical timeline of Portugal’s history and culture—to follow their way through this narrative of over 300 pages. The reference to the song “Grândola Vila Morena,” which was broadcast on the radio at midnight of April 25, 1974, was the cue that would launch the Democratic Revolution on that day, a sign that the soldiers and their tanks should start moving towards Lisbon to topple the regime by detaining the leading politicians, especially Marcello Caetano. It would not be long before the winds of political change would reach “the island of Santiago and then went even farther to Luanda, Maputo, and many other places” to also reach “Galinha’s Island in Guinea Bissau and liberated all the political prisoners held there” (Marques, 2021, p. 246).

Within the context of Diasporic Studies, most of the narrative crux of *Daria* centers on gender issues, while making a strong plea for the emancipation of women from patriarchy. *Daria* abhors women being treated as sex objects, harassed and often raped. Bluntly, she says that when most

women “see Strauss-Khan and Berlusconi on TV,” their “first reaction is to say PIG in big capital letters” (Marques, 2021, p. 19). Daria, however, is caught between leading an independent, self-reliant life but cannot easily toss aside the mental, gender “baggage” she brought to the diaspora with her. She recalls older women (mostly her mother and grandmother) warning her about keeping her virginity until marriage and being faithful to her future husband. “I do not want any whores in my house,” she recalls her mother saying to her, “You keep your legs tightly shut, and if they come to you, you kick them right in between the legs with all the force that you have” (Marques, 2021, p. 37). Daria resented her mother’s comments when she “spent an entire day calling me names because I was wearing a skirt above the knee, because I went to a party and came back in a car with a boy she did not know” (Marques, 2021, pp. 41–42). After years of listening to these comments, Daria just “wanted to go away and find another world, other men, another type of life that I could call my own, where I could be free, where I could be clean, cleansed, and walk under a dancing abode without bad names pulling me to the dirt” (Marques, 2021, p. 42). Often returning to Portugal to visit her parents—especially her father who had been hospitalized—she always returned to Canada telling herself that she did not want to look like or replicate the life of her own mother, whose “big swollen body and veins on her legs,” were “on the verge of bursting” (Marques, 2021, p. 46). While in Almor for a spell, she witnessed *in loco* the lives of most women there, who reminded her that she “was not born to give birth to boys and girls and repeat that cycle of blood and plasma wounds” (Marques, 2021, p. 46).

Having been, herself, a single mother, Daria’s grandmother once told her the “shameful story of Albertina de Azulis, a woman who died at the age of ninety-seven” (Marques, 2021, p. 79). One of her grandmother’s best friends had once said that:

Albertina had confided to her that she came from a long line of strong women and that she had remained single all her life because she wanted to enjoy the company of as many men as possible. According to her friend, Albertina had said that no religion had the right to put a chastity belt around her crotch. She was following in the footsteps of her ancestor, a fiercely independent Muslim woman from the sixteenth century who pretended to have converted to Catholicism during the Inquisition so that she could stay in Almores. She did not go back to Tangiers with the rest of her family, who refused to convert and had to flee to avoid being burned at the stake. She stayed because she wanted to escape the very unfair Muslim custom of polygamy, which allows one man to have several women but does not allow one woman to have many men. (Marques, 2021, p. 81)

It is not clear why her grandmother told her this story. What the reader comes to realize is that it left an enormous imprint on Daria’s mind. This story may have stirred her to the point of believing there were, after all, additional options available for women other than that of becoming a wife/mother. Sensing she could not fully live a life of complete freedom in her village (or country), this story may have catapulted Daria into immigrating to Canada, to Toronto, a city where she would not be “labeled,” denigrated or psychologically oppressed for wishing to enjoy or settle down with whomever pleased her mind. Daria had always envisioned living among strong, liberated, independent-minded women such as Albertina. The ambiance in Almor was too confining, stifling even, to suit her taste.

Daria ends with its eponymous protagonist/speaker passionately crying out to the world at large that she refuses to emulate her mother’s life, especially the “long line of children that she had, and I would repeat to myself: My body will be mine first, first and foremost, and then I will give it to others, to men, to children, to the world” (Marques, 2021, p. 316).

Faithful to her libertarian principles, in Toronto, Daria first meets a sexual predator, Vasco da Gama, a married man who was half-Indian and half-Portuguese, thinking that he was really in love with her. At the end of the story, Daria comes to the realization that what he really wanted to

discover—not a sea route to India as his namesake actually accomplished in 1498 for the Portuguese Crown—but map and chart her body with his own penis. A rapist, he first began by enticing her with his flattering rhetoric, telling her how adorable, how unique she was, while she slowly let herself fall into his grip: “You know, Daria, that what men most crave is scents – pure, raw, inebriating scents. And I smell those scents in you. You know, Daria, that my homologue, Vasco da Gama went to India because he was profoundly dissatisfied with the old scents of Europe. He went all the way there in a fleet of three ships and a little caravel, facing monsters and titanic waves at sea because he could no longer stand his stale life and the air he was breathing” (Marques, 2021, p. 92). On the road of the “dating game,” she often felt “uncomfortable and ashamed. She felt as though she were naked, nothing but prey before the eyes and teeth of a ferocious undeserving beast” (Marques, 2021, p. 94). When da Gama found out some time, afterwards, that she was dating Francisco Magno Motumba, a Mozambican, his “disappointment turned into a rage, and he pushed her down onto the floor and did to her what depraved or lost men do to women” (Marques, 2021, p. 255). She decides to go to the local hospital and be examined so as to press charges against him. The nurse recommended that she speak to the police

right away and that, given the gravity of the assault, Daria would be entitled to a lofty sum as compensation. Daria felt strange, confused, and uncomfortable when the nurse mentioned monetary compensation. She thought of how her mother had always told her never to accept money from any man, advice that Daria had always followed. She thought that if she were to accept money from Vasco, she would feel like a prostitute; she would feel dirty, and her mother would surely think the same even in these circumstances. *A puta*, her mother would say in her crude and direct way. (Marques, 2021, p. 257)

Unaware that in Canada and other Anglophone countries reparation is usually made with money, she interprets this as a confirmation of what her mother had always said along the way, that in situations like these women/her own daughter had prostituted herself—and this was a stigma she did not want to bear.

When Daria met Francisco in Toronto, a Black man who worked at the general consulate of Mozambique in Canada, she immediately sensed that he “made her body boil and her mind get dizzy, and she knew it was time to give away her virginity. And then, as she discovered more and more about his past, she became slavishly enamoured, entangled in his grand life story, the story of a poet, a soldier, a man of the world. She felt sure her virginity had been kept until then only to give to Francisco Magno Motumba” (Marques, 2021, p. 103). Estranged from his wife who, like he, had been taken to the Tarrafal detention camp in Cabo Verde to be tortured by Salazar’s PIDE secret/political police in hopes of disclosing the modus operandi of Mozambican anticolonial movements, the reader gets a very thorough grasp of pro-independence movements and their contribution to the toppling of fascism in Portugal and, consequently, the independence of Portugal’s former overseas colonies. In this lengthy, detailed section, readers get to observe the dynamics of colonialism and fascism from a myriad of perspectives and nuances: the torturing and confessions of political prisoners; references to the anti-colonialist writings of Agostinho Neto, Amílcar Cabral, Che Guevara; Mozambican activists trained in the USSR and their readings of Tolstoy, Karl Marx, etc.; António de Oliveira Salazar’s connivance with the Nazis during World War II (selling wolfram); Salazar’s cousin, Arsénio de Oliveira, Director of the Tarrafal concentration camp; Mozambique after independence and its Marxist régimes; the Civil War—Renamo and Frelimo Civil War casualties; and Renamo polygamy and misogyny among hybrid Mozambicans/Africans/African intellectuals and writers who have imbibed Eurocentric perspectives and ideas; African men who are for maintaining female circumcision, etc.

When *Daria* meets Abassi Izuora Mbembe, readers are invited to ponder an African continent completely free/immune from the presence/colonialism of white colonizers. Is there, argues Abassi, such a reality as a pure, pristine African culture or literature “unspoiled” or “uncontaminated” by white, Eurocentric biases? As with both former lovers, *Daria* was immediately drawn to Abassi, especially what he had to say about Africa and Africans. *Daria*, we learn, when speaking to herself:

You became deaf to the rumours; you became obsessed by his own voice, beard, skin; and you kept reading Africanists like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Agostinho Neto, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Aimé Césaire. These writers talked about mother Africa incessantly, yearning and calling for a return to pre-colonial African values; to a place where justice, equality, and mystical consciousness existed—all those things that made human beings feel truly alive. You kept reading and reading beautiful poems that create, in stunning language, that Africa of the past—so how could you not want Abassi? (Marques, 2021, p. 285)

On occasion, *Daria* often reads as a personal memoir whose story/stories is/are rendered through several voices while taking on traits akin with the *bildungsroman*. Her awareness and painful epiphanies come about through her interaction with the three men she meets/has an affair with in Canada. From her rural past marked by poverty, widespread illiteracy/basic education, and parochialism, *Daria* evolves into a young woman who, in the Canadian Diaspora, must learn how to fend for herself and deal with misogyny, male sexist language and attitudes, becoming a sexual prey to Vasco da Gama and Francisco Motumba, to finally speaking her mind after her ordeal. After realizing she had been looking for attention, acceptance, and love in the wrong men, she finally speaks her mind in court:

Despite all the hardships, the difficulties in being heard, I felt proud to be up there telling my story. I felt proud that I was facing Vasco and Francisco. I felt like I had had to withhold my voice too many times before and that this time the bag was full so I had to take everything out, I had to scream the scream that would allow me to continue living in this world without feeling that I was to blame, that I had asked for it—like I often had felt when I passed by a group of men who said dirty things, or like I felt when that woman in Portugal opened the door to me only to condemn me with her old words, stale verbs pulled from a priest’s pockets. (Marques, 2021, p. 309)

With gender issues and stereotypes being the foremost themes around which this narrative spirals, there are additional ones which obviously make this a riveting work worth reading. Although the setting in *Daria* takes place in the Portuguese diaspora in Toronto, Canada, during the second decade of the twenty-first century, most of the occurrences hark back to an earlier time when the Portuguese started to immigrate in greater numbers to Canada in 1953. António Palavreiro, the “current mayor of Toronto” (Marques, 2021, p. 8) and “whose real name is António Salgado” (Marques, 2021, p. 300) is a *bona fide* example of the acculturated or native-born Canadian of Portuguese descent. Moreover, a substantial portion of this narrative attempts to capture Portuguese colonialism in Africa, especially Mozambique and Cape Verde during the *Estado Novo*, represented by Arsénio, Salazar’s cousin, who was in charge of the Tarrafal concentration camp on the island of Santiago, and Francisco Magno Motumda, who fought against it in Mozambique. Once, Francisco told *Daria* that Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique amounted to extracting resources and wealth and leaving it with very little:

Francisco had also added that the Portuguese colonial government had never been interested in developing the infrastructure of Mozambique or in teaching Black people how to run an independent country since only a handful of them had become *assimilados* and had had access

to the colonial education system. He said this was to blame for the current inefficiency in record keeping. The colonialists, he had gone to say, trying to give Daria a history lesson, were only interested in taking out the country's wealth and bringing it to their own nation to enrich and develop it. Daria smiled and said that, yes, many of his points about colonial history were well taken, but she did not quite agree with this last statement because no infrastructure was ever really developed in Almores either, since the village still had no central sewage system or running water in most of the homes. (Marques, 2021, p. 261)

In addition, notes Francisco, “since the Portuguese also practiced the politics of transport and in fact benefitted a great deal from it—and an ugly transport it was. They were, after all, the fathers of the transatlantic slave trade” even if “African chiefs had also sold their own people to the European slave traders and had been slave traders themselves” (Marques, 2021, p. 262). As noted earlier, *Daria* invites a reflection on colonialism and how much it affected psychologically both the colonizers and the colonized. In addition, Francisco notes, it is also about healing and moving on: “My therapist tells me that I suffer from PTSD and that all I really need to do is face the pain that I endured in the past and let my mask go. All I need to do is open my soul and my heart to the wounds that Salazar and his counterparts, and all his ancestors since Vasco da Gama, have inflicted on me. All I need to do is deal with this trauma, which he calls colonial trauma” (Marques, 2021, p. 269).

Ana Magalhães, Francisco's wife, was also captured by the PIDE, in Mozambique, when she was 25 years old. She, too, was taken to the Tarrafal detention center. Since Arsénio de Oliveira could not extract any relevant information on the *modus operandi* or whereabouts of her husband, he “forced her to perform oral sex on him and swallow whatever came out of him, adding that he was a clean man and that she should be honoured to get so intimate with him, to get so close and personal with him” (Marques, 2021, p. 141). This passage may have been inspired by Marques's reading of Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, published in 1987, in which we learn that Paul D, at the time a slave, was working on a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, where prisoners were forced to fellate white guards every morning. In my view, structurally, stylistically and even thematically, both novels have much in common.

As in many American and/or Portuguese-American writings in which the Portuguese have been depicted as an “invisible minority,” a common belief in the United States several decades ago, as the sociologist M. Estelle Smith (1974) has pointed out, Marques, instead, has shown in *Daria* that the Portuguese in Toronto have worked their way out of this classification even if they, too, in the early 1950s or 1960s were, in fact, invisible. This is conveyed through an interior monologue, in which Daria is asking herself the following question: “Daria, you think you are the unknown underdog. You think you have personally been a victim of maltreatment, misunderstanding, harassment, and discrimination on several occasions. You think your people, your community, are not represented sufficiently in positions of power in Canadian society because they are not visible minorities” (Marques, 2021, p. 8). “The current mayor of Toronto” (Marques, 2021, p. 8), Palavreiro, is a confirmation of how the Portuguese community in Toronto has, in the recent past, eschewed this tag or stereotype from the past even if they have only been living there for about seventy years (when Salazar started to loosen his grip on the Portuguese people after World War II and Canada also started to admit prospective Portuguese immigrants). In the United States, nonetheless, this “tag” lasted much longer considering Azorean harpooners had started to immigrate to Massachusetts since the late eighteenth-century to work in the whaling industry. Compared to the pioneer immigrants arriving in Canada, said Vasco da Gama when interviewing Daria (who had applied for a job as a translator at his office), noted that “he had had great difficulty finding people in the community for the job. He added that the Portuguese community in Canada had very little education, and that certainly she was a blessing that had come to him when he least expected” (Marques, 2021, p. 95). His lusting after her started right there and, for sure, the men in *Daria*, who befriended the story's protagonist, do not

come across as typical medieval, chivalrous knights in shining armor rescuing the poor damsel in distress, but, instead, as vultures, rapists and misogynists who have not progressed much beyond their basic, primitive instincts. As for Daria, even if she loved and cherished her Portuguese ancestry, the novel ends with her roots digging deeper into the Canadian soil.

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