

TOURISM AND IDENTITARY CONFLICTS IN MONICA ALI'S *ALENTEJO BLUE*¹

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73

Abstract

This paper explores the problematic cross-cultural encounters in Monica Ali's work *Alentejo Blue* (2006) set in Mamarrosa, a fictional place in the Portuguese region of the Alentejo. This collection is a composite of nine stories alternately focalised by different characters, posed in an interstitial position between the polyphonic novel and short story cycle. The narrative's reluctance to fit in genre taxonomies mirrors the heterogeneous nature of the characters' perspectives, ranging from British expatriates and tourists in Portugal to the locals' views of these visitors. Such a conflation at a complex cultural crossroads favours no inspiring encounters, but rather fuels feelings of frustration, a profound sense of displacement and a tantalising incapability of solving conflicts. The paper also examines the second story in the collection, which entails the experience of British writer Harry Stanton in the Alentejo as paradigmatic of a subjective projection of the preconceptions and prejudices which most often intervene in a tourist's construction of place, and which eventually pertain to culturally erected barriers between the self and the Other.

Keywords: Monica Ali, *Alentejo Blue*, short story cycle, tourism, writing practice.

Resumen

El presente artículo explora la problemática del encuentro cultural en la obra de Monica Ali *Alentejo Blue* (2006), cuya acción se sitúa en Mamarrosa, un lugar ficcional en la región portuguesa del Alentejo. Esta colección la componen nueve relatos focalizados de manera alternativa por diferentes personajes, lo que señala a la posición liminal de la obra, a medio camino entre los géneros de la novela polifónica y el ciclo de relatos. *Alentejo Blue* se resiste a una definición categórica en términos de género literario, lo cual refleja la naturaleza heterogénea de las perspectivas de los personajes, que comprende desde expatriados británicos y turistas hasta la visión que de estos tienen los habitantes del lugar. La disparidad de estas visiones en esta encrucijada cultural no favorece encuentros inspiradores entre los personajes, sino que alimenta la frustración y un sentimiento de dislocación profunda, desvelando la incapacidad de resolver conflictos. El artículo también analiza el segundo relato de la colección, que muestra la experiencia del escritor británico Harry Stanton en el Alentejo, paradigmática en sí misma de una proyección subjetiva de las preconcepciones y prejuicios que a menudo intervienen en la construcción de lugar de los turistas, en estrecha relación con las barreras erigidas culturalmente entre el yo y el Otro.

Palabras clave: Monica Ali, *Alentejo Blue*, ciclo de relatos, turismo, escritura.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the problematics of cross-cultural encounters in Monica Ali's work *Alentejo Blue* (2006), the writer's second work of fiction after her best-selling novel *Brick Lane* (2003). Whereas the latter has been widely discussed by a large number of critics (Kral 2005; Suárez Lafuente 2007; Pérez Fernández 2009; Germanà 2011, among many others), *Alentejo Blue* has received little critical attention (Marino 2008).

Alentejo Blue is a collection of nine vignettes set in fictional Mamarrosa, a village in the Portuguese rural region of Alentejo, a place which functions as a crossroads for expatriates, ex-centric villagers and odd tourists. The characters' lives intersect at this particular spot, where their shared sense of frustration is fuelled by their own feelings of displacement and by their inability to experience any onward movement, or to bring about any productive change to their lives.

Formally speaking, *Alentejo Blue* alternates first and third-person narratives, emphasising the cultural gap between the locals' vision of the village and of their homeland and the way tourists apprehend and assess life in Mamarrosa, whose remote

location mirrors the spiritual isolation of all its inhabitants. The reader's initial impression of the collection as a motley composite of heterogeneous voices, disparate recollections, assessments and materials is in tune with a pervasive sense of dislocation and with a profound feeling of alienation and dissatisfaction, a point where all characters converge despite their many differences. In this paper I will be focusing on the relevance of the tourist's sight and on the nature of his or her gaze, which Rojek defined as "a spatial location which is distinguished from everyday life by virtue of its natural, historical or cultural extraordinariness" (2005: 52). The tourist's gaze, his or her initial attraction to a particular destination and his or her assessment of it springs from a realization of difference, and of its deviance from ordinariness. However, and as will be argued in what follows, such a distinction is culturally constructed, and it brings about an ideological assessment of place, people and culture which ultimately pertain to notions of identity, nationhood and to a sense of belonging.

Departing from this premise, this article will subsequently examine the collection's second narrative, which focuses on the experience in Mamarosa of English writer Harry Stanton, drawn to what he perceives as a primitively remote and isolated place where to find the necessary inspiration to write his artistic masterpiece. Stanton's exemplifies a particular experience of the tourist's gaze which Urry has defined as a "shrine to nature that individuals wish to enjoy without others being present in solitude", as a "'romantic' form of the tourist gaze, in which the emphasis is upon solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze" (2002: 43).

75

2. Liminal Positions: Novels and Short Stories

As stated above, *Alentejo Blue* is a composite of nine vignettes posed in a liminal position in terms of genre classification between the polyphonic novel and the short story cycle. I will argue, however, that *Alentejo Blue* sits more comfortably in the short story tradition: unlike Ali's first work, *Brick Lane*, subtitled by the author "A Novel", *Alentejo Blue* is given no such a category, being vaguely termed by its author as "a work of fiction" in the postscript to the collection, where the author emphasises the fictional nature of the book, thus divergent from factual or historical approaches to place, as commonly entailed by "history books" or "travel books" (2006: 227).

The pre-eminence that still exists today of the novel over the short story would explain the relatively frequent categorisation of *Alentejo Blue* as a choral novel, as well as the adverse criticism of the work's fragmentary structure which would allegedly make of it a failed novel, "a let down" (Walter 2006) and a "disappointment" (Taylor 2006) after the expectations which Ali's first work had raised:

Alentejo Blue is a frustrating novel, for page by page it is well written and often entertaining. But the book is structurally more akin to the linked short-story collections recently in vogue than a fully-fledged novel. Each set piece on different denizens of Mamarrosa has its merits, and many of these chapters could stand on their own as stories; strung together, they fail to form the arc that makes the form of the novel so rewarding. (Shriver 2006)

But in the general context of the collection, the narratives' apparent lack of cohesion and disparate nature may respond to the characters' sense of loss and dislocation, thus bringing to the fore the idea of failure and entrapment which permeates their lives, all of which eventually addresses the issue of how formal concerns influence interpretation (Ferguson 2003: 166). The interconnectedness of these stories in terms of theme and narrative strategies suggests the pattern of a short story cycle, famously defined by Forrest Ingram in 1971 as a set "of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit" (15). In his influential definition of the genre, Ingram also highlights the author's emphasis on the narratives' interconnectedness, which appear arranged in a larger unit, as well as on the reader's "*successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole*", which significantly modifies his or her experience of its "*component parts*" (19; emphasis in original)². Likewise, Robert Luscher also foregrounds the intentionality of the author of a short story cycle in organising the stories in a particular collection in which the reader "successively realises underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme". As Luscher sees it, the volume as a whole "becomes an open book, inviting the reader to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact" (148). Both Ingram and Luscher seem to underline the reader's active participation in the creation of the sequence of cycle, and idea which has more recently informed Suzanne Ferguson's reassessment of the short story cycle, whose nature largely depends on the reader's construction of the narratives' relationship to wholes (2003: 115). Significantly, Ferguson understands the short story cycle as "oxymoronic", since the brevity and concentration of the short story are somehow contravened by the stories' integration in a larger fictional entity (2003: 103), an idea which connects with the heterogeneous and even paradoxical nature of the characters' disparate views of Ali's *Alentejo Blue*.

In this sense, *Alentejo Blue* delicately addresses the balance between the individuality of each character's experience and a shared sense of dislocation enhanced by the lack of communication and moral isolation which defines all characters in the stories, regardless of their individual particularities. In the "typical pattern of recurrent development" (Ingram 1971: 13) which characterises short story cycles, the reader gradually perceives here a rising sense of isolation,

emphasised by the repetition of particular motifs which largely pivot around this theme. In the particular case of *Alentejo Blue*, the short story cycle seems to be especially suited to address the characters' disparate lives and concerns, since the form itself is singularly plural: whereas each story in the cycle is independent in terms of meaning, it also partakes of the plurality of the whole through connections and overarching concerns with the other stories and with the collection as a whole, thus expressing in form as much as in content a view of experience which is "discontinuous, contingent, and incoherent" (Weiss 2009: 88). Furthermore, and as will be discussed, the short story cycle offers the possibility of giving expression to a particular community due to its polyphonic nature and multiplicity of perspectives.

3. The Alentejo: A Sense of Place

The collection's title, *Alentejo Blue*, works as a preliminary signal of the interconnectedness of its nine stories, as Monica Ali herself has explained:

I'd planned to write a completely different book, set in London and in the north of England [...] [But] when I would sit down at my desk in London, I would still have all these images and thoughts of Portugal, and stories and characters kept inserting themselves into my mind. I resisted for a while. I was a bit annoyed because I'd planned something else. I never really bought the idea that the material chooses you rather than you choosing it, but it turns out that it does. This was presenting itself to me, and the obvious thing was to go ahead and write it. (Mudge 2006)

77

Ali, who owns a house in the region of the Alentejo, has often explained how the place not only works as an organising strategy to unify disparate experiences, but also emerges as the real protagonist of the book: "The driving impulse of *Alentejo Blue* was the place itself. I soon realized that I would have to develop some kind of choral range in order to give voice to the character of that place" (Mudge 2006). Significantly, one of the most celebrated cultural practices in the Alentejo is a certain type of polyphonic music, *Cante Alentejano*, a two-part singing performed by amateur choral groups which encompasses a strong sense of identity and belonging. Ali playfully recalls this in the choral structure of her collection, as well as in its title, which combines musical expression with an intense feeling of human loneliness, which all characters partake of. The collection's title is actually retrieved from the sixth story, where Teresa, a young Portuguese woman, fantasises with the idea of leaving her homeland to work as an *au pair* in London, disenchanted with her country's state of spiritual and economic stagnation: "Alentejo Blue. There she was, in a picture, in a moment, setting out for the rest of her life" (2006: 131). Teresa's reflection in the mirror echoes the collection's

focus on particular fragments of the narrowness of the characters' lives which are however illustrative of their whole life experience.

The choral range of diverse experiences which make up the collection appears in tune with one of the characteristics which Paul March-Russell has attributed to postmodern short stories: "Undecidability not only dissolves specific meanings within a text but it also throws the text off-balance: it becomes decentred" (223). Ali's characters in *Alentejo Blue* become a token of displacement and alienation and by doing so the writer powerfully challenges the dichotomy centre/periphery, at the heart of her writing impulse, as she has recurrently argued: "For VS Naipaul, 'finding the centre' has been an important part of his journey as a writer. Taking my first steps as a writer, I could argue, has involved the inverse process: seeking out the periphery" (Ali 2003). As such, each story simultaneously offers an independent vision of the characters' world while also composing a continuum of an alternative, peripheral notion of European identities which the locals, tourists and expatriates in Mamarrosa represent, as Bauman explains:

Integration and fragmentation, globalization and territorialisation are mutually complementary processes; more precisely still, two sides of the same process: that of world-wide redistribution of sovereignty, power, freedom to act. It is for this reason that [...] it is advisable to speak of *glocalization* rather than globalization, of a process inside which the coincidence and intertwining of synthesis and dissipation, integration and decomposition are anything but accidental and even less are rectifiable. (Bauman 2001: 304)

78

The narrative's ex-centric and decentred perspectives eventually tackle what Boehmer has termed "the rise of economic, political and cultural transnationalism" (6), while challenging received assumptions that ultimately pertain to nationhood and subjectivity, as the disquisitions of the protagonist of the sixth story show:

Anyway, she was going to London [...] What was the point, though, really? Why was she going there? Those children with their Indian headdresses and their thoughtless expectation of love. Who would she be in London, and who would be there to see? She would be there and the writer [Harry Stanton] would be there, and the tourists would come or they wouldn't, Marco Afonso Rodrigues went and was coming back, and Telma Ervanaria was in Paris and Vasco was in Provincetown, and Mãe was lost in Brazil and everyone was going around and around and it didn't make one bit of a difference, as far as she could understand. They come here and I go there. Around and around. (2006: 141)

Despite the fact that a large number of characters in the different stories are, or have been in the past, tourists, expatriates or immigrants —the English writer Harry Stanton, the bar tender Vasco, Teresa's mother and her own aunt Telma Ervanaria and the mysterious local businessman Marco Afonso Rodrigues— they are all characterised by a futile effort to move forward, by a feeling of entrapment

and by an inability to establish empathy and communication with those around. In that sense, the indifference with which Rui's suicide is received in his community (after all his years of suffering and resistance against Salazar's regime) casts a doubt over any real possibilities of successful communication among villagers. As such, Teresa's thoughts unconsciously undo powerfully-erected dichotomies between home and abroad, local and immigrant, centre and periphery by undermining difference through shared experience. In *Alentejo Blue*, both locals and tourists suspiciously gaze at each other, blocking any possible enabling of inspiring cultural encounters: "Being a friend, or being an enemy, are the two modalities in which the *Other* may be recognized as another *subject* construed as a 'subject like the self', admitted into the self's life world, be counted, become and stay relevant" (Bauman 2001: 289).

Locals and tourists in Mamarrosa coexist in what could hardly be called a community, since the characters' moral isolation prevents them from establishing bonds and empathising with others. The disparaging nature of such portions of the characters' experience is suggested in narrative terms by the alternation of narrative voices in the collection —locals and foreigners, first and third-person narrators— who in fact share a large number of similarities, but which all emphasise as unsurmountable differences. All the characters physically gather together in the final section of the narrative, a multifocal story that works as a corollary of previously introduced themes and characters. This event coincides with the celebration of Mamarrosa's *Festa* on 25 November 2003, a disastrous experience which brings to the fore the characters' inability to empathise, tolerate, accept difference and undergo a harmonious experience.

79

4. Autumn, 2003: A Sense of Time

Ali's fictional portraits in *Alentejo Blue* eventually tackle what Boehmer has termed "the rise of economic, political and cultural transnationalism" (6), while challenging received assumptions that are ultimately related to nationhood, gender and subjectivity. A sense of such cultural transnationalism is also suggested in the collection's deployment of chronological time. The narratives are set in the autumn of 2003 during the invasion of Iraq, which is tangentially referred to by a number of characters in the stories: "What do you think of this war in Iraq?" (2006: 25) is the question that most characters have in mind, but is explicitly formulated only by Vasco, the village bartender, who asks the English writer Stanton his opinion on the issue. Of course the Iraq invasion brings to the fore issues pertaining to colonisation, violence and fear of the racial Other, as Vasco implies: "Oh, they make the Empire, these Americans'. And I tell them, 'Shut up, what do you know?'

Of course they make the Empire. United States of America will not be threatened. We had a big empire too—’ Vasco turned purple and began to wheeze, tears in his eyes. It dawned on Stanton that he was laughing. ‘Five hundred years ago’” (2006: 25).

However, in the collection this seemingly casual reference appears subtly entangled in several other passing comments on armed conflicts which have touched, either directly or indirectly, some of the fictional characters, such as Jay’s recollection of a shell-shocked soldier in a World War II film in the fourth story: “It was black and white, and it was about World War II and this pilot who’d been shot down over Germany and taken prisoner. He escaped and got back to England, but he kept staggering around the streets thinking everyone was an enemy and talking in this crazy way” (2006: 70-71). Similarly, Stanton unintentionally hums Peter Gabriel’s “Biko” (“You can blow the candle but you can’t put out the fire”) (2006: 48), a song written by Peter Gabriel as homage to Steve Biko, the South African apartheid activist murdered in 1977. In fact, the collection opens with the memories of an old revolutionary, Rui, who recalls these years during Salazar’s government:

80

VALEU A PENA LUTAR! The struggle was worthwhile! Fifty years ago men died for the right to say so. Even those who remained alive died a little. What did the young ones think? What did they think when they looked at Rui, his squashed nose, his whiskery ears, the humble bend in his back? Of course they never looked; and the struggle belonged to them now, and it was not of a kind that João could understand. João lifted his eyes. “What do you think?” he asked Rui. “Shall we say this, as our last rites, that it was all worthwhile?” (2006: 9)

These seemingly banal comments on war and on different ways of exerting violence also cast a shadow over the characters’ conception of place, which radically varies depending on their provenance: for the locals Mamarrosa is a place of economic and spiritual stagnation which exerts a negative influence on its inhabitants and from where they are, however, unable to escape, with one notable exception: Marco Afonso Rodrigues embodies the local myth of success, “a very big name in the tourist industry [...] Luxury resorts in Thailand and Singapore. So I have been told. I believe he also has interests in London, Tokyo and Macau [...] And he is coming back to Mamarrosa. Imagine that” (45), Vasco explains to Stanton.

Significantly, Vasco’s comment on Marco Afonso Rodrigues also introduces into the collection tourism as a cultural practice, backbone of some central narratives in *Alentejo Blue*. Tourists in Mamarrosa fall under the romanticised appeal of the idyllic countryside, warm weather and nice food. Most notably, many of them regard the Alentejo as an example of a primitive, naïve and exotic culture which emphasises a sense of difference: “Tourists revel in the otherness of destinations, peoples and activities because they offer the illusion or fantasy of otherness, of

difference and counterpoint to the everyday. At the same time the advantages, comforts and benefits of home are reinforced through the exposure of difference" (Craik 2005: 114). As an example, the English tourist in the fifth story, Eileen, describes the Portuguese sidewalks as "chunky cobblestones in black and white laid into diamonds and squares and zigzags" to immediately point out the different ways it might be done in her own country: "In England, I expect, there'd be lawsuits" (2005: 79).

To some extent, Mamarrosa represents what Urry and Rojek have designated as "glacial time" (2005: 15), or the tourist's perception that the place is attractive since it has not been ravaged by time, "the feeling that this place has endured and will persist as a distinctive entity even though the world around may change" (2005: 15). This is at odds with the author's insistence on the narrative's particular location in terms of time, and which gives way to an ironic friction between the course of international events and the tourists' perception of time in the rural Alentejo, which signals the Other as primitive, exotic and different.

However, tourists in Mamarrosa find that their expectations and prior constructions of both the country and its inhabitants are rebuffed, especially in what relates to their assessment of the Other as a naïve, unsophisticated, apolitical subject. In fact, the collection opens by offering a bitter reflection on the recent historical past of Portugal during the years of Salazar's dictatorship, which destabilises subsequent romanticised and ideologically biased perceptions of place as held by foreign eyes. In what follows I will be tackling the opposition between "identification" and "difference" by exploring the expectations and preconceptions that tourists invest in the place and in their inhabitants, which ultimately reveal deeply ingrained ideological assumptions. As Urry has explained, "the concept of the gaze highlights that looking is a learned ability, and that the pure and innocent eye is a myth" (2002: 2).

81

5. The Fact of Difference: The Tourist's Gaze

In the process of looking and examining with one's eyes, the individual is invariably conditioned by particular ideas, expectations and desires, in turn determined by social class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, age and education. More importantly, in seeing a place from a particular perspective, "we establish a relation between things and ourselves" (Berger 1972: 9) and invest such a place with some characteristics which are, in fact, our own construction. On several occasions Ali herself has explained (2011) how *Alentejo Blue* entails a reassessment of place —and of the often romanticised expectations which such a place may convey in prior conceptions of it. My reading of the tourist's gaze in Ali's collection is mostly informed by

Zigmunt Bauman's (1994, 2001), John Urry's (2002) and Chris Rojek and Urry's (2005) thorough examinations of tourism as a major cultural practice.

Generally speaking, the tourist's expectations often involve "the notion of departure, [the] limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life [...] allowing one's senses to engage with a set of stimuli that contrast with the everyday and mundane" (Urry 2002: 3). However, as Urry further explains, the fact of difference can be enlightening and help discern the elements of the wider society with which that society is constructed (2002: 3). As a result, the construction of the tourist gaze may reveal how the tourist's "normal" society works. In what follows I will be examining the particular perception of place and culture as perceived through the eyes of an outsider, the English writer Harry Stanton in the second story. Not only do his views of the Alentejo reveal a colonial vision which pertains to power relations and superiority, but they also lay bare his own preconceptions and shortcomings, which tellingly also provide a commentary on his position as an outsider in his own society.

In fact, the tourists in Mamarrosa project their own fantasies, desires and concerns in their construction of the place, and actually see what they choose to see, the focus of their gaze thus becoming revealing of their own anxieties, desires and frustrations. Thus, the fifth story of the collection focuses on the first-person narrative of Eileen Mowatt, a prototypical British tourist attracted by Portugal's promise of sun, food and the beauty of rural, unspoiled landscape: "I could be one of those Englishwomen with fat ankles and capillaried cheeks and hair coming down from under a tattered hat who set up in places like this, to keep bees or grow runner beans or save donkeys" (2006: 82). Eileen's construction of place — derived from tourist leaflets and from prejudice in particular constructions of the "exotic" Other— stands at odds with her bleak yet real motives for taking a holiday: the failure of her marriage, the physical and psychological effects of the menopause (2006: 90), her inability to come to terms with her son's homosexuality (2006: 84) and her own social inadequacy, which all adds to her feelings of alienation and frustration.

Similar motivations stir Huw and Sophie's imagination in their choice of Portugal as a tourist destination in the book's eighth narrative. As in the previous example, their holiday will soon prove disappointing, since Mamarrosa fails to meet the couple's expectations: "I'm sorry about the weather. It's not what I asked for when I booked" (2006: 173-174), Huw explains in an apologetic manner. As the narrative progresses, the reader learns that the couple have actually travelled to Portugal in order to have a break from the tensions which the organisation of their wedding entailed. Their experience of place, and most notably, the choice of their tourist gaze, will reveal what they dare not tell each other: the certainty that their

decision to marry is a terrible mistake. Looking at an elderly couple of local peasants, Huw realises that he is unable to imagine a whole lifetime with Sophie:

He thought about the old couple at the side of the road and how their expressions had not changed, unaltered, it seemed, through the centuries. In their sturdy boots and frayed sweaters, they worked side by side, and he imagined the understanding between them ran deeper than the well. He tried to swap places with them, he and Sophie forever in the field and the others passing through, but he could not. (2006: 164)

The passage is enlightening in several ways: firstly, because Huw projects his own feelings for Sophie onto the aged Portuguese couple, which fails to be convincing, since Huw persists in his arrogant sense of superiority over the peasants —whom he defines as “picturesque” (2006: 164)— thus echoing Stanton’s romanticised construction of place in the second narrative. If Stanton models his relationship with the surrounding environment according to William Blake’s poetics (as will be subsequently explained), Huw’s alleged admiration for the old couple, for their rustic lifestyle, and for the nature of the unknown song they are producing ironically mirrors William Wordsworth’s aesthetic approach to the Other in “The Solitary Reaper” (1803): “He thought about growing old with Sophie, about being old with Sophie, and that was real, he thought, Yes, we are not so far apart, we are not always passing through, and he felt something for the old couple, gratitude, love, that made him cough and begin to sing tunelessly along with the unknown song” (2006: 164).

In turn, Sophie seeks to engage herself in a similarly uplifting spiritual experience which would soothe her present state of mental disturbance, and significantly chooses to visit the *Capela dos Ossos* [Chapel of Bones] in Évora, whose walls and pillars are decorated with bones and skulls reminding the traveller of the transitory quality of life: “*Nos ossos que aqui estamos pelos vossos esperamos*” [We bones that are here, for yours we are waiting] (2006: 169). Revealingly, the character’s particular choice of place brings to the fore Sophie’s own sense of uncertainty about the future, along with the re-enactment of unpleasant memories from the past, paramount to the emptiness and superficiality of her own life experience. Most notably, and as the narrative unfolds, Sophie’s visit to the chapel triggers the revelation of the character’s troubled psyche as a result of her severe mental depression:

There was a hollow cave in her stomach. She wanted to curl around a pillow and never get out of bed. It will pass, she told herself [...] When she was twenty-one, after she had graduated, she spent some time in the hospital. There was no reason for it. It was just a chemical imbalance. Nothing happened to make her depressed, no crisis apart from the inability to get out of bed. She spent a lot of time crying. She didn’t even feel sad. But crying was something to do, a kind of achievement, and she noticed her mother preferred it to when she sat and stared into space. (2006: 175)

Interestingly, the tourists' gaze and their projections over the Alentejo are counterbalanced by the narrative's editorial design, which alternates the foreigners' perception of place with the more realistic vision of the locals, who had however also undergone a similar process of spatial (mis)recognition, since they had also been, or will be, tourists, expatriates and immigrants in different parts of the world. All these migratory fluxes signal the nature of the increasingly mobile society of postmodern times moved by the horror of being bound and fixed (Bauman 1994: 26), as China, one of the characters in the second narrative, explains to Stanton:

"When I was really big on control, know what I mean, and I controlled a patch of Yarmouth, ran nearly over to fucking Cromer, know what I mean, and what I said" —he slammed his glass on the table— "went". My muse, thought Stanton, stabbed through with resentment. "What brought you out here, then?" China smiled, loose-lipped, slack-jawed. "Mate", he said slowly, as if to comfort a dying man. "Mate. What brought any of us here? On the run, ain't we? On the fucking run". (40-41)

84

Most of these issues are dramatized in the second story of the collection, a third-person narrative focalised through the vision of English writer Harry Stanton, recently arrived in the Alentejo seeking the tranquillity, peacefulness and solitude required to write what he expects to be his artistic masterpiece. In fact, Stanton's romanticised attraction for the Portuguese countryside may partly derive from his disappointment with a modern, technologized contemporary society, characterised by urban architecture, rigid social intervention and an impersonal way of life, which eventually responds to the romantic notion that one's authentic self can be discovered in the solitary contemplation of nature while emphasising a close and spiritual relationship with the natural environment (Urry 2002: 43).

However, Stanton is having serious difficulties in finding the required concentration to do so, which makes him sink into a deep state of frustration which he partially relieves by turning to heavy drinking:

"Another drink?" Stanton looked at his watch. "Why not?" The day was ruined anyway. He would go back, tussle briefly with the computer, develop a fever, prescribe an afternoon of research, spend a listless couple of hours with his books, go for a walk to clear his head, and return in time for sundowners. Each stage would develop inevitably into the next, all with equal futility. (15-16)

Stanton's growing frustration, fuelled by his increasing addiction to alcohol, virtually signals a number of unfulfilled expectations. Stanton has chosen the rural landscape of the Alentejo as his destination in pursuit of an aesthetic parallel to the Romantic sublime, thus expecting to establish a poetic bond between his subjectivity and what he construes as a remote natural spot. Such a state of spiritual and aesthetic communion, Stanton hoped, would allegedly fuel his imagination in

order to produce his work of art. In fact, and revealingly, Stanton is researching on William Blake's life and work, although these books are of little help to his concerns:

It was possibly the worst book he had ever tried to read. He decided this and instantly felt bloated with research. He was like a sumo wrestler stepping into ballet shoes and hoping to pirouette. What more, in any case, could he learn about Blake? If he knew *less* about him, it would be easier to write the novel. Hell, he might even be able to make some things up. (18)

Stanton's experience of the place and his emulation of a Romantic attitude towards nature as a prospective starting point for spiritual enlightenment is, ironically enough, far removed from an idea of authenticity, since it is a recognisable tourist practice often offered to the upper-middle class in our contemporary consumerist society. In this sense, wild, remote natural spots are often tamed by the tourist industry in order to offer the contemporary consumer an unspoiled and authentic experience of nature and its joys. Stanton's visit to the Alentejo could correspond to what Urry has defined as the "romantic" tourist gaze (2002: 43), as earlier argued, with an emphasis on solitude, privacy and an intensely felt relationship with nature which in itself eventually embodies that quest for authenticity that Urry dubs as a modern version of the sacred (2002: 7). However, and unlike Blake in the Sussex countryside, Stanton is unable to find in the Alentejo the inspiring vision which had triggered the publication of his first novel nearly twenty years ago, *Paradigms in Eight Tongues*: "He had reached the part of Blake's life that he called the country interlude, a three-year stay on the Sussex estate of William Hayley, the poet's patron. Stanton invented a milky-skinned maid with startled eyes and gave her to Blake as an experiment in passion that exceeded all visions" (2006: 27). Furthermore, Stanton's work falters (27), possibly because he fails to establish a successful relationship with his surroundings, which he uses solely as a means to produce, thus completely disregarding its idiosyncrasies and true worth by making the world obedient to his wishes as a tourist, as Bauman explains:

The tourists want to immerse themselves in the strange and bizarre element (a pleasant feeling, a tickling and rejuvenating feeling, like letting oneself be buffeted by sea waves)—on condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever they wish. They choose the elements to jump into according to how strange, but also how innocuous, they are [...] In the tourist's world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no more frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety. This makes the world seem infinitely gentle, obedient to the tourists' wishes and whims, ready to oblige; but also a do-it-yourself world, pleasingly pliable, kneaded by the tourists' desire, made and re-made with one purpose in mind: to excite, please and amuse. (Bauman 1994: 29-30)

Stanton not only misuses the natural scenery which he imagines “obedient” and “kneaded” to his aesthetic desire; he also uses and abuses the people he meets in the Alentejo. He hardly communicates with the locals towards whom he shows an arrogant attitude of superiority: “Portuguese women —Stanton had decided years ago and confirmed it many times since— were not beautiful. Even the best-looking ones had something wrong, some fatal flaw: bad teeth or eyebrows that met or a figure that would be perfect save for the pigeon toes” (25). Shortly after his arrival Stanton meets his compatriots, the Potts, a dysfunctional family who live close to his cottage. China, a former drug-dealer, and his wife Chrissie completely neglect the upbringing of their teenage daughter Ruby —the villagers’ major object of gossip due to her sexual promiscuity— and young Jay, who daily misses school and wanders through the village unattended. Stanton starts an affair with Chrissie only because his sexual excitement brings about periods of relative productivity in his writing practice. After having made love to Chrissie, Stanton returns to his cottage and, for the first time in weeks, is able to write: “He went straight to his notebooks and flicked back and forth to find the place where he had listed Blake’s quotations, all those he thought he might be able to use. Here it was, on the fourteenth page: *Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires*. He poured a drink, turned on his computer, and worked long into the night” (34).

Revealingly, Stanton fails to completely understand the significance of Blake’s quote from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), a caveat against those “unacted desires” which Blake often addressed in his poetry, as is the case of “The Sick Rose” in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). In this poem Blake deals with the dangers of a “dark secret love” fuelled by sexual desire, which eventually leads to the soul’s corruption and to physical destruction. When Chrissie no longer satisfies Stanton’s sexual desire and consequently his creative powers, he turns to her daughter Ruby and begins an affair with her.

In this way, Stanton eventually exhausts his relationship with both the environment and human beings. He is, as Bauman suggests, a “systematic seeker” of a particular sort of experience that could entail difference and novelty, yet one which ceases to allure and appeal when it becomes familiar (1994: 29). In so doing, Stanton is unable to develop any real bonds of affection with those he relates to, thus promoting “a distance between the individual and the Other and cast[s] the Other primarily as the object of the aesthetic, not moral evaluation; as a matter of taste, not responsibility” (Bauman 1994: 33). In this way, the tourist’s experience often entails a “postmodern” life strategy which tends to “render human relations fragmentary [...] and discontinuous”, reducing human relations to function and service (Bauman 1994: 33). It is for this reason that Stanton finds no satisfaction either in the physical environment or in his neighbours, and when China discovers

his morally objectionable sexual behaviour Stanton is forced to be “on the run” once more. After failing to become inspired by his particular construction of the Alentejo, or by the sexual relationships he has experienced, Stanton considers leaving Portugal and heading towards “somewhere cold and preferably Teutonic where writers met in cafés with notebooks and grievances and discourse flowed on the meaning of life and death. He rather fancied a road trip. He hoped to make it as far as Prague” (2006: 225). Stanton’s pattern of behaviour will prevent him from enjoying satisfactory and fulfilling human relationships, and will compulsively repeat the same moves whereas his addiction to alcohol increases and continues to fuel his intense sense of frustration and emotional alienation set on a one-way route to vagabondage:

The movements of the vagabond are unpredictable; unlike the pilgrim the vagabond has not set destination. You do not know where he will move to next, because he himself does not know or care much. Vagabondage has no advance itinerary —its trajectory is patched together bit by bit, one bit at a time. Each place is for the vagabond a stop-over, but he never knows how long he will stay in any of them; this will depend on the generosity and patience of the residents, but also on news of other places arousing new hopes. (Bauman 1994: 29)

87

In his touristic endeavour, Stanton “picks and chooses” according to a combination of prejudice and preconceptions. Stanton privileges one particular perception of the Alentejo, namely a romanticised vision of its scenery hoping this might match his mental picture as a correlate of Blake’s Sussex landscape. However, his efforts prove futile since his preconceptions signal an arrogant attitude of superiority which prevents him from establishing any fruitful emotional bond, either with the inhabitants of the place or with the natural environment itself, which resists Stanton’s objectification. The English writer does not perceive the Alentejo with an open mind, but invests the place with his own fantasies and attempts to commune with a mental projection that turns out to be unsuccessful and fruitless.

6. Conclusion

The proliferation of “global diasporas” has extended the range, extent and significance of all forms of travel which, as happens in the Stanton story, could be open-ended in terms of temporality (Urry 2002: 159), which has led recent commentators to refer to the “nomadic” quality of contemporary social life pertaining to the blurring of boundaries between “home” and “away”. In a sense, all characters in *Alentejo Blue* share this nomadic quality: the two old revolutionaries, Stanton, Vasco, the Mowatts, the Potts, Teresa, Huw and Sophie and of course the mysterious Marco Afonso Rodrigues, who is mentioned by all locals in the

collection either as an example of personal growth and economic success or of corruption. Despite their similarities concerning a nomadic subjectivity, the characters in the collection (both tourists and locals) fail to bridge their cultural gap by providing a discourse to empathise with a gaze different from their own.

As Marino suggests (2008: 52), Ali encourages the reader to consider the same phenomena from different points of view: Stanton's relationship with the Potts child and his family and Jay's and Christine Potts' own perception of it; or Vasco's reflections on his customers and how in turn they consider the bartender. By doing so, Ali displaces the centre and powerfully undermines the concepts of "centre" and "periphery". And Portugal is actually a country where these two notions sit uncomfortably: having been a former colonial empire, now the country's many tourists "bury the dining-room table with maps and leaflets and brochures and books" while planning "the invasion strategy" (2006: 113), succinctly suggested by the various references to the Iraq war in the collection. *Alentejo Blue* presents a collective experience of place structured in terms of identification and difference which is, as a result, conflicting and contradictory. Most notably, the collection emphasises a general sense of displacement and frustration which all characters share and which the heterogeneous quality of the narrative itself mirrors.

In the collection's powerful reflection on the processes which intervene in the construction of subjectivity which inevitably entail an encounter with the Other, Stanton's narrative emerges as paradigmatic of the collection as a whole. Like the rest of the characters in *Alentejo Blue*, Stanton unsuccessfully tries to overcome his spiritual stagnation, as well as his artistic frustrations and shortcomings by establishing a bond with his own particular construction of the place as a remote, unspoiled natural spot which ultimately embodies the tourist's search for authenticity and spirituality. However, Stanton fails to establish a satisfactory relationship either with the Alentejo or with the local community, since the real place and its inhabitants resist and deviate from his own cultural and ideological construction of it. Stanton shares with all characters in the book a biased construction of place, which actually reveals itself as a subjective projection of his own preconceptions and prejudices which could mirror Monica Ali's reflections on her own writing practice. Just as Stanton's plan to write a second novel after his literary debut fails, so Ali's project to set her second novel in the North of England was temporarily discontinued, and what she produced instead was a composite of human sketches set in Portugal that pre-empt the unifying novelistic design. Yet, whereas Stanton's attempt becomes eventually sterile, the unexpected result of Ali's creative efforts is a truly original work in which alienated existences and formal fragmentation mirror each other and ultimately invite the reader to reconsider culturally erected barriers between "us" and "them".

Notes

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² More recently, Susan Garland Mann (1988) and Dunn and Morris have discussed the nature of short story cycles and their relevance in different literary traditions. Dunn and Morris termed these interconnect-

ed collections of short fiction as "composite novels" which they understand as literary works "composed of shorter texts that — though individually complete and autonomous — are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (1995: xiii). As Lauro Zavala has explained, the hybrid and fragmentary nature of short story cycles "reveal the gradual relativization of the genre's canonical forms" (2012: 282), including the various ways in which readers may approach the text, either as isolated narratives or as a sequence.

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