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Naming the Return: A Lexicultural Analysis of the Term "Retornado" in Portuguese Postcolonial Literature

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Abstract: This study undertakes a lexicultural analysis of the term "retornado" as it appears in three contemporary Portuguese postcolonial novels: *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* by Isabela Figueiredo, *Os Pretos de Pousaflores* by Aida Gomes, and *O Retorno* by Dulce Maria Cardoso. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from lexiculture, critical discourse analysis, and postcolonial studies, the research explores how the term "retornado" functions not only as a legal and historical label but also as a culturally saturated signifier embedded with ideological, emotional, and symbolic weight. Through close textual analysis, the study reveals how the term encodes narratives of displacement, exclusion, and identity loss, while also reflecting broader societal efforts to manage Portugal's post-imperial transition. The findings underscore the role of language in shaping social realities and highlight the value of lexicultural approaches in examining the intersections of language, memory, and power in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: lexiculture; "retornado"; Portuguese postcolonial literature; language and ideology; Portuguese decolonization

1. Introduction

The term "retornado" occupies a complex and contested space within the cultural and historical memory of post-imperial Portugal. Emerging in the aftermath of the decolonization of Portuguese Africa, this designation was applied to hundreds of thousands of individuals who, following the collapse of the colonial empire, migrated—often involuntarily—from former overseas territories to the metropole. While administratively expedient, the term has proven to be semantically and ideologically fraught, encoding a dense network of meanings related to displacement, identity, and historical accountability.

This study offers a lexicultural analysis of the term "retornado" as it appears in three key works of contemporary Portuguese postcolonial literature: *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* by Isabela Figueiredo, *Os Pretos de Pousaflores* by Aida Gomes, and *O Retorno* by Dulce Maria Cardoso. These texts, authored by writers who themselves experienced the process of return, provide a rich corpus for examining how language mediates the lived realities of postcolonial transition. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of lexiculture (Galisson, 1988, 2000), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), and postcolonial theory, the study explores how the term "retornado" functions not merely as a lexical item but as a culturally saturated signifier shaped by historical trauma, ideological positioning, and social stigma.

By foregrounding the pragmatic and symbolic dimensions of the term, this research aims to uncover the ways in which language contributes to the construction, negotiation, and contestation of postcolonial identities. In doing so, it highlights the enduring power of words to reflect, reproduce, and resist the legacies of empire. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how lexicon and culture intersect in the shaping of collective memory and national belonging in post-revolutionary Portugal.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, grounded in the principles of lexicultural analysis, which investigates the relationship between lexical items and the cultural meanings they convey. A central theoretical concept guiding this analysis is Galisson's notion of "(un)shared cultural load" (*charge culturelle (non) partagée*), which emphasizes how certain words carry

culturally specific meanings that may be fully accessible only to members of a particular community. In this context, the term "retornado" is examined not only as a lexical item but as a culturally embedded expression shaped by historical, emotional, and ideological dimensions.

The corpus consists of three significant works of contemporary Portuguese postcolonial literature:

- *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* (2015; revised and expanded edition) by Isabela Figueiredo
- *Os Pretos de Pousaflores* (2011) by Aida Gomes
- *Retorno* (2011) by Dulce Maria Cardoso

These texts were selected for their thematic focus on the experience of return following the decolonization of Portuguese Africa, and for their literary and cultural relevance. All three authors personally experienced the process of return from former colonies such as Mozambique and Angola, and their works are widely recognized as key contributions to the literary representation of the "retornado" experience. Their narratives offer rich material for exploring the term "retornado" through both personal and fictionalized accounts that reflect the complexities of identity, memory, and belonging.

The analysis involves a close reading of the selected texts, with particular attention to the occurrences, contexts, and connotations of the term "retornado". The study examines:

- Lexical environments: collocations, metaphors, and semantic fields surrounding the term;
- Narrative positioning: how the term is used by different characters or narrators;
- Cultural framing: references to historical events, social attitudes, and ideological discourses;
- Pragmatic and emotional connotations: how the term functions in constructing inclusion, exclusion, trauma, or nostalgia.

3. On the Portuguese "Retorno" and the Term "Retornado"

This section presents three contextual subsections which serve to enrich the subsequent textual analysis by situating the term "retornado" within its broader historical, conceptual, and sociolinguistic frameworks.

3.1. The Portuguese "Retorno": Historical and Social Context

This subsection outlines the socio-political circumstances surrounding the return of Portuguese settlers from Africa after 25 April 1974, offering insight into the lived realities that inform the literary representations.

The Carnation Revolution, which occurred in Portugal on 25 April 1974, signaled the end of one of the longest-standing dictatorships of the twentieth century and initiated the dismantling of the most enduring European colonial empire. This empire, whose origins date back to the fifteenth century, extended across three continents—Asia, the Americas, and Africa.

The history of the Portuguese Empire was marked by a series of spatial and symbolic displacements, notably the transfer of the royal court to Brazil between 1808 and 1822, and the emergence of colonial urban centers such as Luanda and Lourenço Marques (present-day Maputo), whose cultural and economic dynamism at times relegated Lisbon to a peripheral position within the imperial network. As Ribeiro (2004, pp. 15–16) argues, these shifts can be interpreted as concrete manifestations of the classical notion of *translatio imperii*—the transfer of imperial authority across space and time. Another significant displacement occurred during the decolonization process in Africa (1974–1975), when a large-scale migration of Portuguese citizens—commonly referred to as "retornados"—returned to the metropole. According to Buettner (2016, pp. 242–243), this was one of the most substantial population movements among all European decolonizations, particularly striking given that Portugal's population at the time did not exceed nine million. Estimates suggest that between 500,000 and 800,000 individuals arrived in Portugal during this period, profoundly reshaping the country's social and demographic landscape.

As Peralta (2017, p. 35) notes, the population of returnees exhibited considerable heterogeneity, encompassing individuals of diverse social classes, racialized phenotypes, genders, and age groups. Despite this internal diversity, they were homogenized under the singular, reductive label of "retornado", a designation that effaced their individual experiences and backgrounds.

A substantial body of scholarship (Kalter, 2017; Peralta, 2017; Buettner, 2016; Lubkemann, 2003; Ovalle-Bahamón, 2003) has documented the widespread hostility that greeted the "retornados" upon their arrival in metropolitan Portugal. They were frequently subjected to social exclusion and discrimination, not only by the broader Portuguese society but also within their own familial networks. Cast as colonial agents and beneficiaries of an imperial system that post-revolutionary Portugal sought to repudiate, they became symbolic repositories of a colonial past that the nation was eager to forget.

A poignant example of this dynamic is offered by Figueiredo (2018), author of *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais*—one of the literary works analyzed in this study—who recounted in an interview that her metropolitan relatives viewed her as a "retornada" who had profited from the exploitation of Black Africans. This stigmatization of the "retornado" as a scapegoat for Portugal's imperial legacy reveals a deeper contradiction within post-colonial Portuguese identity: the widespread refusal among metropolitan Portuguese to recognize their own complicity—whether direct or structural—in the colonial enterprise. As the prominent Portuguese intellectual Eduardo Lourenço (1976, p. 187) observed, most Portuguese perceived themselves as colonialists only by proxy (through

the settlers), and later as anti-colonialists for the same reason, once those settlers were reimagined as obstacles to resolving the national crisis.

During the migration influx, post-revolutionary Portugal was experiencing great political, social, and economic instability. The employment crisis contributed to migrants being seen as potential (and unwanted) competitors in the job market (Ovalle-Bahamón, 2003, p. 162). Additionally, this resentment and hostility were compounded by prejudices related to the migrants' lifestyles and social habits. They were often associated with drug use, lascivious sociability, and prostitution (Peralta, 2017, p. 35).

In general, the colonists who migrated to Portuguese Africa were perceived differently from other Portuguese diaspora emigrants, particularly those who chose European destinations (Lubkemann, 2003, p. 81). This discriminatory perception was grounded, among other factors, in the understanding that emigration to the colonies was not typically underpinned by an intention to return permanently to the metropole—unlike other Portuguese emigrants who sought employment across Europe while maintaining aspirations of eventual repatriation. In contrast, colonial emigration was often characterized by a lack of return-oriented ideology and a deliberate effort to establish permanent residence in the colonies, which frequently resulted in the severance of social and familial ties with communities left behind in mainland Portugal.

The understanding of this emigration to Africa affected how the "retornados" were received upon their arrival in their communities of origin during decolonization. As Lubkemann (2003, p. 77) argues, they were often treated as "internal strangers", that is, they were regarded as individuals who formally belonged to the *civitas*—as holders of Portuguese citizenship—yet whose inclusion within the *societas* was persistently precarious, as their legitimacy as members of a socially cohesive community was frequently contested and undermined.

Discredited alongside the empire itself and marginalized from a presumed Portuguese identity, some "retornados" chose to emigrate once again, relocating to destinations such as South Africa, the United States, the former Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), or even Macao.

Kalter (2017, p. 106) unequivocally asserts that the integration of non-white "retornados" into Portuguese society was markedly more challenging—a conclusion substantiated by the research of Lubkemann (2003) and Buettner (2016). The latter (p. 247) observes that the majority of white "retornados" gradually assimilated into the dominant white Portuguese population. This divergent integration trajectories of white and non-white "retornados" underscore the centrality of race as a structuring factor in postcolonial Portuguese society.

The factor of race was not the only determinant in the integration of the "retornado" population. Family ties, class, and education also played critical roles. Ferreira (2015, p. 98) notes that white "retornados" from higher socio-economic backgrounds—those with greater educational attainment and/or direct familial ties to Portugal—tended to experience relatively seamless integration into Portuguese society, thereby exemplifying successful reintegration. Conversely, white "retornados" from lower socio-economic strata and/or with weaker familial connections to the metropole encountered more significant challenges.

In conclusion, the experience of the "retornados" reveals the multifaceted challenges of Portugal's postcolonial transition, encompassing not only questions of identity, memory, and belonging, but also the pragmatic implications of language and classification. The term "retornado", while administratively convenient, imposed a homogenizing label on a highly diverse population, obscuring distinctions of race, class, origin, and migratory intent. Its use served both bureaucratic and ideological functions: it facilitated the management of a large-scale population movement while simultaneously framing these individuals within a narrative of national reintegration—regardless of whether they had ever lived in Portugal before.

This pragmatic imposition of identity had tangible consequences. It shaped public perceptions, influenced access to resources, and contributed to the marginalization of these individuals within both society and historical discourse. Over time, the term faded from public use, contributing to the symbolic erasure of the "retornados" from Portugal's collective memory. As Smith (2003, pp. 17–18) points out, this invisibility has extended into academic inquiry, where the experiences and legacies of these communities have long remained underexplored. Yet, their stories—marked by displacement, adaptation, and contested belonging—remain essential to understanding the broader legacies of empire and the unfinished work of postcolonial reckoning. Recent cultural and academic efforts to recover these narratives signal a growing recognition of the need to critically engage with the language and frameworks through which postcolonial identities are constructed and remembered.

3.2. Conceptual and Theoretical Reflections on the Term "Retornado"

This subsection explores the conceptual and ideological complexities of the term "retornado", highlighting how its semantic framing imposes a reductive identity on individuals with diverse postcolonial trajectories, and how its lexicultural weight reveals the entanglement of language, identity, and historical accountability in post-imperial Portugal.

From a denotative perspective, the term "retornado" encompasses both a general and a historically situated definition. Lexicographic sources typically offer two primary meanings: a broad, non-specific sense referring to "someone who returns to a place from which they departed" (*Dicionário Infopédia da Língua Portuguesa* [online]), and a more narrowly defined, historically

contextualized usage denoting "an individual who, having emigrated to the Portuguese overseas territories—or being a descendant of such emigrants—returned to Portugal, particularly following the independence of those territories after the 25 April 1974 revolution" (*Dicionário Infopédia da Língua Portuguesa* [online]). While the first definition reflects the literal semantic sense of the verb *retornar* ("to return"), the second embeds the term within a specific postcolonial framework, directly linked to the mass repatriation of Portuguese citizens from former African colonies.

However, the term "retornado" also presents a series of conceptual and interpretative challenges. At its core, the notion of "return" presupposes a movement back to a place of prior belonging—both geographically and symbolically. Nevertheless, this assumption proves problematic in the context of postcolonial migration to Portugal. A significant proportion of those labeled as "retornados" were not, in a strict sense, returning. As Castelo (2017, p. 82) observes, approximately one-third of these individuals had been born in the former colonies. For them, "home" was located in Africa, while Portugal existed primarily as a distant and abstract referent—an imagined homeland constructed through mediated memories, or post-memories, transmitted via family narratives and photographs.

Given this disjunction between lived experience and imposed identity, it is unsurprising that many rejected the label "retornado", viewing it as both reductive and misrepresentative of their complex trajectories. Compounding this issue is the involuntary nature of their displacement. These individuals did not return by choice; rather, they were forcibly uprooted from the territories in which they had established their lives. Consequently, many preferred to self-identify as refugees, emphasizing the traumatic and coercive dimensions of their migration. Yet, this designation was not recognized under international law. As Kalter notes (2017, p. 114), according to the legal framework of the 1951 Refugee Convention, these migrants had not crossed an international border but had instead moved within a collapsing imperial space, as citizens of the metropole.

Beyond these legal distinctions, the terminology employed carries significant political and symbolic weight. As Kalter (2017, p. 115) and Peralta (2017, p. 36) argue, the categories of "retornado" and refugee evoke fundamentally different narratives of belonging and historical agency. To be labeled a "retornado" was to be positioned as a former colonizer returning to the metropole, thereby invoking associations with privilege, complicity, and colonial benefit. In contrast, the status of refugee would have conferred a recognition of victimhood and, by extension, a legitimization of suffering.

In linguistic terms, the label "retornado" functions not merely as a descriptor but as a discursive construct that encodes and reproduces specific ideological positions within postcolonial Portuguese society. Its semantic framing presupposes a narrative of return and belonging that often contradicts the lived realities of those it designates—particularly individuals born in the former colonies, for whom Portugal was neither home nor origin. As a performative act of naming, the term imposes identity, erases heterogeneity, and aligns individuals with a colonial past they may not have directly inhabited. The refusal to adopt alternative designations such as "refugee" further illustrates the role of language in legitimizing or denying historical agency and victimhood. Lexical choices such as this are not neutral but are deeply embedded in sociopolitical contexts, shaping how histories are narrated and subjectivities recognized.

From a theoretical perspective, the term "retornado" exemplifies how language operates as a site of power and ideological production. Drawing on Foucault's (1972) concept of discourse, the label can be understood as part of a broader regime of truth that constructs and regulates knowledge about postcolonial identities. It does not merely describe a demographic reality but actively shapes the social and political meanings attached to those it names. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic power is instructive here: the imposition of the term "retornado" reflects the authority of dominant institutions to define legitimate identities and to naturalize social hierarchies through linguistic classification.

Furthermore, Fairclough's (1992) framework of critical discourse analysis highlights how such lexical choices are embedded in wider socio-political structures and serve to reproduce existing power relations. The refusal to recognize "retornados" as refugees, for instance, is not a neutral bureaucratic decision but a discursive act that denies them access to narratives of victimhood and protection. In this sense, the semantics of "retornado" function as a mechanism of symbolic exclusion, reinforcing a post-imperial national identity that disavows colonial complicity.

This dynamic can also be understood through the lens of lexiculture, a concept developed by Robert Galisson (1988), which emphasizes the cultural content embedded in lexical items and the way words carry shared social imaginaries. The term "retornado" is not only semantically charged but lexiculturally saturated—it evokes a collective memory of empire, displacement, and contested belonging. As such, the politics of naming in postcolonial Portugal reveals the entanglement of language, memory, and power in the ongoing negotiation of historical accountability and collective identity.

3.3. Reflections on the Institutionalization and de-Institutionalization of the Term "Retornado"

This subsection examines the institutionalization and subsequent de-institutionalization of the term "retornado", demonstrating how legal discourse in post-revolutionary Portugal functioned as a mechanism for identity construction and the shaping of social realities.

The term "retornado" was not only a product of public discourse but also a linguistic construct institutionalized through a series of political and legal mechanisms in post-revolutionary Portugal. Its formalization illustrates how language—particularly in its bureaucratic and legal registers—functions as a performative tool of statecraft, shaping social categories and legitimizing specific narratives of identity and belonging. In response to the mass influx of Portuguese citizens from the former African colonies, the government enacted Decree-Law No. 169/75 of 31 March, which established the *Instituto de Apoio ao Retorno de Nacionais* (IARN)—the Institute for the Support of the Return of Nationals. This institution coordinated logistical support and also played a central role in codifying the term "retornado" as an official identity marker.

The creation of the Secretariat of State for the Returnees under Decree-Law No. 584-B/75 of 16 October further reinforced the discursive authority of the state in defining who qualified as a "retornado". The Council of Ministers Resolution of 5 May 1976 provided a more precise legal and linguistic framing of the term, establishing a set of criteria that conferred this status. Accordingly, the designation of "retornado" would apply to any individual who was a Portuguese citizen with habitual residence in one of the former colonies and had returned after 1 September 1974. This resolution operationalized the term administratively while also encoding, at the semantic level, a narrative of national reintegration.

From a linguistic perspective, this process exemplifies what Austin (1962) termed a performative utterance—language that does not merely describe reality but enacts it. The legal designation of "retornado" functioned as an illocutionary act in Searle's (1969) taxonomy, producing real-world consequences by assigning identity, rights, and obligations. In this context, Fairclough's (1992) theory of critical discourse analysis is once again particularly relevant: legal and institutional language is not neutral but deeply embedded in power structures, shaping social relations and reinforcing dominant ideologies. As a lexicultural unit, the term 'retornado' goes beyond its role as a legal category to serve as a cultural signifier, indexing broader narratives of national trauma, nostalgia, and denial.

This discursive framework, however, was relatively short-lived. In 1981, the dissolution of the IARN marked the de-institutionalization of the "retornado" category. With its disappearance from official discourse, the term gradually faded from public use, contributing to the symbolic erasure of these individuals from Portugal's collective memory. This trajectory—from legal codification to bureaucratic silence—underscores the role of language in both constructing and dissolving social identities.

Ultimately, the case of the 'retornado' illustrates how legal and administrative language produces social realities as much as it reflects them. It highlights the entanglement of lexicon, law, and power in the postcolonial state's efforts to manage historical rupture and national identity.

4. Results

This section presents a curated list of excerpts drawn from the three primary works examined in this study. The passages are organized according to the order in which they appear in the following section. Each excerpt engages, either explicitly or implicitly, with the term "retornado", collectively forming a corpus that is particularly rich for a pragmatic and lexicultural analysis of the term. All translations of the selected passages are my own.

> Excerpt 1: "*The employees don't want us here and don't like to serve us. They believe that the blacks kicked us out because we exploited them, we lost everything but it was our fault and we didn't deserve to be here in a five-star hotel being served as we were there*." (Cardoso, 2011, pp. 91–92)

> Excerpt 2: "*I had been stealing from the blacks. Did I think they were going to wash my little feet with rose water?! This wasn't Africa!*" (Figueiredo, 2015, p. 171)

> Excerpt 3: "*(…) all that was paid for by the state (…)*." (Gomes, 2011, p. 30)

> Excerpt 4: "*(…) it seems that in this land there isn't even floor to wash, it's just that they won't give it to us. It's as if we had leprosy, what kind of people these are.*" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 177)

> Excerpt 5: "*(…) if I had ever thought this could happen to us… your father worked so hard, years and years without a single day of vacation, and now we don't have a single escudo [Portuguese currency at the time].*" (Cardoso, 2011, pp. 149–150)

> Excerpt 6: "*Being in the metropolis is even worse for the girls, the boys here don't want to date the retornadas. If it's for fun it's okay but for dating no, the boys here say that the retornadas there were with the blacks. And the girls here don't want to be friends with the retornadas so they won't be talked about, the retornadas have a bad reputation, they wear short skirts and smoke in cafés.*" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 143)

> Excerpt 7: "*No one is born knowing, and what one does not know must be learned; habits vary from place to place.*" (Cardoso, 2011, pp. 68–69)

> Excerpt 8: "*I know perfectly well that you didn't live in the jungle; I would never call anyone a savage.*" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 69)

Excerpt 9: "*(…) this is not the jungle, it is not like where you come from, here there are rules... there you could ride lions but here you have to have manners (…).*" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 139)

Excerpt 10: "*Damn you, Silvério, bad time for us to be family (…). I dictated letters to you to uncle Perdigão, may God have him. You rarely responded.*" (Gomes, 2011, p. 141)

Excerpt 11: "*My grandmother was visited by neighbors who (…) came to buy livestock, by people who felt sorry for her, for being an old woman, almost blind, whose son had fled to Africa, sending a postcard with vague news when the ship docked at one of the Canary Islands. The truth, which she did not tell the neighbors, is that she had refused all her son's requests to join him in Lourenço Marques (…).*" (Figueiredo, 2015, p. 185)

Excerpt 12: "*Being a hotel retornado is also bad because it means that there isn't even a relative who likes us enough to want us at home.*" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 124)

Excerpt 13: "*(…) breakfast, refrigerator, bus, breaks, instead of matabicho, cooler, machimbombo, freebies (…).*" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 150)

Excerpt 14: "*I would not return to that place [Mozambique], which, being my land, did not belong to me. My land never came, after that, to be a precise piece of ground—a plot of which one could say 'I belong here'.*" (Figueiredo, 2015, p. 136)

5. Discussion

In this section, I elaborate a lexicultural approach to analyze exemplary cases of the pragmatic meanings associated with the term "retornado" as manifested in the three aforementioned works of contemporary Portuguese postcolonial literature. This analytical framework allows for a nuanced exploration of how language and culture intersect in the representation of "retornados", revealing the sociohistorical tensions and identity negotiations embedded in post-imperial narratives. By foregrounding the pragmatic dimensions of the term, the analysis seeks to uncover the implicit ideologies and cultural resonances that shape its usage within these literary texts.

A close reading of the literary works analyzed in this study reveals that the term "retornado" encompasses a wide range of pragmatic meanings that extend far beyond its denotative definitions. One particularly salient connotation portrays the "retornado" as a figure associated with the exploitation of Black populations in the former African colonies—a representation that recurs across all three novels. This perception is articulated through the voices of narrators and characters who reflect on how "retornados" were received and judged upon their arrival in Portugal. For instance, in *O Retorno*, the adolescent narrator Rui recounts the hostile reception his family and other "retornados" faced at a government-assigned hotel: "The employees don't want us here and don't like to serve us. They believe that the blacks kicked us out because we exploited them, we lost everything but it was our fault and we didn't deserve to be here in a five-star hotel being served as we were there" (Cardoso, 2011, pp. 91–92). Similarly, in *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais*, the narrator internalizes the accusations of exploitation directed at her by metropolitan Portuguese society: "I had been stealing from the blacks. Did I think they were going to wash my little feet with rose water?! This wasn't Africa!" (Figueiredo, 2015, p. 171). These passages illustrate how the term "retornado" is not merely a demographic label but a lexiculturally charged construct, embedded in narratives of guilt, complicity, and postcolonial reckoning.

These two passages also underscore another pragmatic dimension of the term "retornado": it becomes the visible embodiment of a colonial legacy that post-revolutionary Portugal is eager to suppress or disavow. In the collective imagination of metropolitan Portuguese society, "retornados" are positioned as the face of colonialism—an identity from which the metropole seeks to distance itself. Although metropolitan citizens were themselves implicated in the colonial project, often in indirect or "organic" ways, they tend not to perceive themselves as colonizers. In this context, the term "retornado" functions as a discursive boundary marker, distinguishing between those from the metropole and those from the former colonies, and effectively casting the latter as scapegoats for the nation's colonial past. As Ovalle-Bahamón (2003, p. 166) aptly puts it, "if blame for colonialism was to fall on anyone, it would be the retornados". Thus, within the broader framework of decolonization, the term "retornado" carries an implicit stigma—connoting complicity in, and responsibility for, the colonial enterprise.

In the immediate aftermath of the April 25 Revolution, many "retornados"—particularly those arriving via the airlift—reached Portugal in a state of material destitution. In response, the Portuguese government implemented a series of support measures aimed at facilitating their reintegration into metropolitan society. However, these initiatives were often met with resentment by segments of the local population, who perceived "retornados" as beneficiaries of undue state assistance. This tension is illustrated in *Os Pretos de Pousaflores*, where the recently returned Silvério enters a café in his hometown and overhears patrons remarking that he was wise to avoid the hotels designated for "retornados", as "(…) all that was paid for by the state (…)" (Gomes, 2011, p. 30). Such remarks reflect a pragmatic association of the term "retornado" with a prejudiced notion of social parasitism.

From the perspective of the "retornados" themselves, however, this perception was experienced as deeply unjust. Many felt stigmatized and discriminated against by their metropolitan counterparts, particularly in the labor market. As the narrator Rui notes in *O Retorno*, "retornados" were frequently accused of "stealing jobs" from locals (Cardoso, 2011, p. 189), while metropolitan citizens themselves were often unwilling to employ them. This sentiment is echoed in a bitter outburst from Rui's mother: "(…) it seems that in this land there isn't even floor to wash, it's just that they won't give it to us. It's as if we had leprosy, what kind of people these are" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 177). The sense of injustice is further underscored in another moment of despair, when she laments: "(…) if I had ever thought this could happen to us… your father worked so hard, years and years without a single day of vacation, and now we don't have a single escudo [Portuguese currency at the time]" (Cardoso, 2011, pp. 149–150). Beyond exposing the emotional and material precarity of the "retornado" condition, these testimonies bring to light the symbolic violence embedded in the term's everyday usage. As lexicultural theory suggests, such terms are not merely referential but culturally saturated, carrying what Galisson (1987) defines as a *charge culturelle*, often unshared or contested across communities. In this sense, "retornado" functions as a lexiculturally marked item whose pragmatic meanings—rooted in postcolonial memory, social stigma, and ideological positioning—extend far beyond its denotative scope.

Emerging from a conservative metropolitan view, the term "retornado" acquires pejorative connotations, particularly when applied to women, where it becomes synonymous with perceived promiscuity and socially deviant behavior. This gendered and moralizing discourse reflects broader anxieties surrounding postcolonial identity and the reintegration of former colonial subjects into the metropole. The following observations by the character Rui in *O Retorno* offer a revealing insight into these dynamics:

> "*Being in the metropolis is even worse for the girls, the boys here don't want to date the retornadas. If it's for fun it's okay but for dating no, the boys here say that the retornadas there were with the blacks. And the girls here don't want to be friends with the retornadas so they won't be talked about, the retornadas have a bad reputation, they wear short skirts and smoke in cafés.*" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 143)

This passage encapsulates the gendered dimension of the stigma attached to the term "retornado", particularly as it intersects with racialized and moralizing discourses prevalent in post-imperial Portuguese society. The association of "retornada" women with sexual deviance and social transgression reflects a broader anxiety about the destabilization of normative gender roles and racial boundaries in the aftermath of decolonization. Rui's commentary reveals the internalized prejudices of metropolitan youth while also highlighting how the figure of the "retornada" becomes a site of contested identity, marked by exclusion, suspicion, and symbolic violence. Such representations are emblematic of the broader lexicultural dynamics at play, where language functions as a vehicle for the reproduction of colonial hierarchies and the policing of postcolonial subjectivities.

At the hotel, the standardization of behavior demanded by the manager from the "retornados" also reveals a stereotypical perception of their conduct. Implicit in her insistence is the assumption that these individuals lack the capacity for proper behavior, as she repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of adhering to rules. At one point, she even suggests that the new guests, due to their contact with the African context, require re-education in matters of "civilized" behavior: "No one is born knowing, and what one does not know must be learned; habits vary from place to place" (Cardoso, 2011, pp. 68–69). This prejudiced view is further underscored by another of the manager's remarks: "I know perfectly well that you didn't live in the jungle; I would never call anyone a savage" (69). In this instance, as Angelini notes (2013, p. 55), the comment—far from subtle—appears to reinforce the very stereotype it seeks to deny.

From a lexicultural perspective, the manager's discourse illustrates how language not only reflects but also reinforces cultural hierarchies and colonial legacies. The term "retornado", while ostensibly neutral, becomes embedded in a semantic field charged with assumptions about civility, modernity, and belonging. The manager's remarks mobilize a civilizational lexicon that positions the "retornados" as culturally deficient subjects in need of correction, thereby reinscribing colonial binaries between the "civilized" metropole and the "uncivilized" periphery. Her language operates performatively, constructing the "retornados" as Other through a discourse of normative behavior and cultural superiority. Beyond social practices, this lexicultural dynamic reveals that postcolonial identities are deeply shaped by the ideological weight of words and expressions embedded with historical and cultural sediment.

This civilizational bias is further echoed in the educational context, where similar semantic prejudices are deployed. The metropolitan perception of the "retornados"—particularly children—is shaped by the assumption that their exposure to African cultures, deemed inferior, has rendered them uncivilized or socially deviant. This is exemplified when school staff admonish Rui: "(…) this is not the jungle, it is not like where you come from, here there are rules... there you could ride lions but here you have to have manners (…)" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 139). The hyperbolic imagery of "riding lions" functions not only as a rhetorical device but also as a lexicultural marker that encodes the "retornado" identity with

primitivism and savagery. In this context, the term "retornado" becomes a discursive tool through which metropolitan institutions assert cultural dominance, framing the returnees as subjects in need of moral and behavioral domestication. Such representations underscore the enduring power of colonial imaginaries in shaping postcolonial social relations and linguistic practices.

Unlike other forms of emigration directed toward various parts of Europe, colonial emigration was often characterized by a deliberate intention not to return to the metropolis. As I previously mentioned, many settlers in the colonies severed ties with Portugal entirely, to the extent that they would not even return to visit close family members. This rupture frequently generated deep resentment among those who remained behind—parents, siblings, and extended kin. In *Os Pretos de Pousaflores*, this emotional fracture is evident in Marcolina's bitter reproach of her brother Silvério, who had emigrated to Angola with no intention of returning: "Damn you, Silvério, bad time for us to be family (…). I dictated letters to you to uncle Perdigão, may God have him. You rarely responded" (Gomes, 2011, p. 141). A similar sentiment surfaces in *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais*, where the narrator's grandmother subtly conveys to her neighbors that her son had abandoned her:

> "*My grandmother was visited by neighbors who (…) came to buy livestock, by people who felt sorry for her, for being an old woman, almost blind, whose son had fled to Africa, sending a postcard with vague news when the ship docked at one of the Canary Islands. The truth, which she did not tell the neighbors, is that she had refused all her son's requests to join him in Lourenço Marques (…)*" (Figueiredo, 2015, p. 185).

These passages reveal that the pragmatic meaning of the term "retornado" extends beyond its geopolitical or historical referent, acquiring a distinct lexicultural dimension. It evokes the figure of one who has severed familial and affective ties—someone perceived as having abandoned their roots. This perception of abandonment significantly shaped the reception of "retornados" by their metropolitan relatives, often resulting in emotional estrangement and social exclusion. In *O Retorno*, Rui articulates the pain of this rejection with poignant clarity: "Being a hotel retornado is also bad because it means that there isn't even a relative who likes us enough to want us at home" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 124). The semantic layering of the term thus contributes to its stigmatizing potential, as the return of the "retornado" reactivates unresolved emotional and cultural tensions, positioning them as both insiders and outsiders within the national imaginary.

From the perspective of the "retornados", the notion of loss emerges as a central semantic and experiential dimension associated with the term itself. This loss is multifaceted: it encompasses the forfeiture of material possessions—often the result of a lifetime of labor—the dispossession of a land they had come to regard and love as their own, and, perhaps most profoundly, the erosion of a coherent sense of identity. In the aftermath of decolonization, many "retornados" felt compelled to efface their colonial past and suppress their African experiences in order to assimilate into the perceived cultural homogeneity of the metropole.

A paradigmatic example of this identity erasure is embodied in the character of Milucha, Rui's sister in *O Retorno*, who, at school, conceals her "retornado" status and adopts metropolitan Portuguese vocabulary in place of Angolan terms: "(…) breakfast, refrigerator, bus, breaks, instead of matabicho, cooler, machimbombo, freebies (…)" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 150). This linguistic shift is not merely a matter of lexical substitution; it is a lexicultural strategy of self-effacement, driven by the desire to belong to what Anderson (2013) terms an "imagined community". Milucha's linguistic choices reflect an internalized pressure to conform, to erase the markers of difference that might betray her colonial past.

From a lexicultural standpoint, this act of linguistic assimilation reveals the performative power of language in negotiating identity and belonging. The suppression of African-derived vocabulary in favor of metropolitan norms illustrates how language becomes a site of cultural negotiation, where the "retornado" subject attempts to overwrite the traces of otherness inscribed in their speech. As Bauman (2003, p. 85) aptly observes, assimilation entails "stripping the 'others' of their 'otherness'"—a process that, while promising inclusion, exacts the cost of cultural and personal erasure. Thus, the term "retornado", in its pragmatic dimension, conveys more than displacement; it also encodes the loss of identity traits and the silencing of plural affiliations.

It becomes evident that for the "retornado" characters populating the literary corpus under analysis, the term "retornado" evokes a constellation of pragmatic meanings: abandonment, orphanhood, forced exile, deterritorialization, and loss. These affective resonances align closely with the notion of "amputation" described by Pinto and Faria (1996, pp. 106–107) in their sociological study of the "retornados". Much like the irreversible severing of a limb, the experience of return is marked by a sense of irretrievable loss. As the narrator of *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* pungently reflects: "I would not return to that place [Mozambique], which, being my land, did not belong to me. My land never came, after that, to be a precise piece of ground—a plot of which one could say 'I belong here'" (Figueiredo, 2015, p. 136). This sentiment echoes Said's (2000, p. 173) meditation on exile, where he writes that "the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever". In other words, the passage illustrates a diasporic sensibility born of a violent process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization—a condition that Cohen (1997) defines as the

experience of inhabiting a particular space while the mind persistently excavates both space and time in search of an elsewhere. Ultimately, the term "retornado" functions lexiculturally as a dense and affectively charged signifier—one that encapsulates the trauma of dislocation, the violence of cultural erasure, and the enduring search for a place of belonging.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the term "retornado", far from being a neutral or merely descriptive label, functions as a lexiculturally saturated signifier within contemporary Portuguese postcolonial literature. Through a close reading of the selected texts, it has become increasingly clear that the term "retornado" encapsulates a complex web of pragmatic meanings—ranging from guilt, complicity, and social stigma to abandonment, identity loss, and cultural dislocation. These meanings are not fixed but emerge through the interplay of language, memory, and ideology, shaped by both individual experience and collective imagination.

6. Conclusions

Despite political efforts to formalize both the concept and terminology of "retornado", the term remained entangled in the political, cultural, social, and economic configurations shaped by widespread societal representations. As Galisson (2000, p. 50) reminds us, words are "powerful accumulators of culture", and it is precisely through language that cultural tensions and historical legacies are encoded, transmitted, and contested. In this sense, "retornado" operates as a lexiculturally marked item whose unshared cultural load—that is, its culturally embedded meanings not universally shared across speaker communities—contributes to its potential for misunderstanding, stigma, and symbolic violence.

The lexicultural approach adopted in this analysis has allowed for a deeper understanding of how language mediates the experience of return, exile, and belonging. Whether through the gendered stigmatization of "retornadas", the civilizational discourse imposed by metropolitan institutions, or the internalized erasure of colonial identity, the term "retornado" reveals itself as a prism through which broader post-imperial dynamics are refracted. Ultimately, the literary representations examined here underscore the enduring power of language not only to reflect but also to shape the lived realities of those marked by historical rupture and cultural displacement.

These conclusions align with and extend the findings of other academic works that have explored the cultural and symbolic weight of the term "retornado". For instance, Ferreira (2015) highlights how *O Retorno* and *Os Pretos de Pousaflores* portray the "retornado" as a figure caught between complicity and marginalization, reflecting the ambivalence of postcolonial identity. Similarly, Ribeiro and Fonseca (2022) emphasize how the term continues to carry a sociocultural stigma in contemporary media discourse, reinforcing the idea that its meanings are lexiculturally charged and historically sedimented. While these studies focus primarily on narrative and sociopolitical dimensions, the present analysis foregrounds the linguistic and cultural mechanisms through which such meanings are constructed and contested. In doing so, it reinforces Galisson's (1991, 2000) insight that words—like the term "retornado" that I have analyzed here—are not merely referential but are embedded with (un)shared cultural loads—cultural loads that are often invisible, asymmetrical, and ideologically fraught.

Given the relative scarcity of studies that approach the term "retornado" through a lexicultural lens—particularly in relation to literary texts—this work contributes meaningfully to the field by offering a nuanced and interdisciplinary perspective. It not only bridges literary analysis with sociolinguistic theory but also highlights the importance of examining how language encodes and perpetuates postcolonial tensions. As such, this study affirms the relevance of lexicultural analysis as a critical tool for understanding the cultural sedimentation of contested terms within national and literary imaginaries.

Finally, this study may open new avenues for research in the fields of language education and Portuguese as second language acquisition, particularly in the teaching of literature to learners in multilingual and multicultural contexts. In regions such as Macau, where Portuguese is taught as a second or foreign language, a lexicultural approach to literary texts can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool. By unpacking the cultural and historical layers embedded in key terms like "retornado", educators can foster more informed and contextually grounded interpretations among learners. As Zarate (2003) and Kramsch (1993) have argued, beyond enhancing linguistic competence, the integration of intercultural and lexicultural awareness into language teaching fosters deeper engagement with the cultural dimensions of meaning. In this light, the present study contributes not only to literary and postcolonial scholarship but also to the didactics of Portuguese language education in global contexts.

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