

The Sense of Community in *Alentejo Blue* by Monica Ali

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Abstract: Monica Ali's "*Alentejo Blue*" intricately weaves together the disparate lives of Mamarrosa's inhabitants, both local Portuguese residents and transient foreigners, into a tapestry of displacement and longing. Through nine interconnected short stories, Ali deftly explores the emotional and geographical landscape of the fictional village, eschewing linear narrative in favor of a thematic focus on the interconnectedness of place and identity. Drawing parallels to Zagarell's analysis of nineteenth-century narratives of community, Ali captures the essence of a community in flux, where the relentless march of globalization and glocalization shapes the lived experiences of its diverse denizens. Each character, from the elderly villager João to the English expatriate writer Stanton, offers a unique perspective on the universal themes of dislocation, loss, and yearning for connection. Against the backdrop of Mamarrosa's rural tranquility, Ali deftly explores the complexities of contemporary migration and transnational identity, highlighting the ways in which individuals navigate the fluid boundaries of home and belonging. The village itself emerges as a microcosm of the global diaspora, where the search for identity and place transcends borders and cultures. Through Ali's evocative prose and multi-faceted characterizations, "*Alentejo Blue*" invites readers on a journey of introspection and empathy, urging us to contemplate the interconnectedness of human experience in an increasingly fragmented world.

Keywords: *The Sense, Alentejo Blue, Monica Ali*

Introduction

Alentejo Blue by Monica Ali is a collection of nine short stories, all of which are set in Mamarrosa, a fictional village in the region of Alentejo in the South of Portugal. The village's inhabitants are local Portuguese people, disenchanted and depressed, along with people from other countries who travel to or set up their lives in this desolate place. The most obvious string that connects the nine stories is the location where they happen, which defines the book as a short story cycle rather than a novel. The fragmentation of the collection is a response to the sense of brokenness and displacement that its characters embodied. This study aims to answer questions related to the appearance of the sense of community and human interconnectivity in the novel set and whether this embraces all characters or only some of them. Finally, it analyses how the book foregrounds the lack of connect between people.

Discussion

In general, the collection bears several similarities to the 19th century texts that Zagarell discussed in her study of narrative of community. She defines narratives of community as a genre that "ignores linear development or chronological sequence and remains in one geographic place." (Zagarell 503)

Readers may realize that there is no clear time order in *Alentejo Blue*. The focus of the book is mainly on the location where the development of its characters happens. Furthermore, the stories are loosely-interwoven with each other to characterize a disconnected community, which mirrors the nineteenth century's narrative community in which reflects the commitment to rendering the local life of a community to readers who lived in a world the authors thought fragmented, rationalized, and individualistic (ibid). Changes in various aspects of the society were a popular theme in the discussed 19th century texts. "Narrative of community represents a coherent response to the social, economic, cultural, and demographic changes caused by industrialism, urbanization, and the spread of capitalism." (Zagarell 499). *Alentejo Blue* is considered a reflection of the spread of globalization and glocalization, aspects that were not very dominant during the 80s of the previous century and of course not present in the 19th text. However, it belongs to the social and cultural change happening around the world and thus partially shares a similarity to one of the features of narrative of community.

Alentejo Blue traces a scenario of migration, in the village of Mamarrosa, where we meet a

set of transcultural characters. The book uses a complex range of voices and points of view, set in the claustrophobic atmosphere of a very small community. Its characters come from different national backgrounds and have undergone a variety of migratory life experiences. The fact that their lives are narrated alternatively from the perspective of a third-person narrator and first-person narrative emphasizes on the culture gap and the fragmentation that the book revolves around.

Individual chapters are focalized through particular characters, namely João, an old, poor villager; Stanton, an English expatriate writer; Vasco, the local café owner, a former immigrant in the US; Jay, the Potts' younger; Eileen, a British middle-class tourist; Teresa, a local young girl, who is on her way to England as an au pair; Chrissie, the mother of the Potts family; and Huw and Sophie, a young British couple on holiday. The final chapter sets aside this narrative organization, and offers a sort of grand finale where all the characters are united at a village party. Considering the diversity of narrative perspectives and the fragmented structure of the narrative, the novel pursues a surprisingly tightly knit plot (by presenting, for example, the same events from the points of view of different characters) and a confluence of motifs: a sense of displacement, loss and non-belonging governs the whole narrative.

Notably, none of the characters has a particularly close bond to the land, whether because they are not from the region, or because they have emigrated and returned, or indeed because all they want is to get away from the place. What ties these fragments together is the feeling of displacement or rootlessness of the characters, which makes them all, to a lesser or greater extent, expatriates or exiles. A good example of this is Jay's inability to recognize his own nationality. When Stanton first meets Jay, he greets him with "Hello, compatriot", a salutation that Jay apparently does not understand ("The boy grew unsure"), and Stanton has to explain: "We're both English" (Ali, 35). That Jay is at a loss about his nationality comes up in another dialogue, when he asks his mother whether he is a Portuguese. She is unsure about the answer, whereas the father, is pretty certain that he is not.

The reader will find a number of characters, of different origins and nationalities, mingling with the Portuguese native rural population, but with no sense of community ties. The sense of displacement and deterritorialization is clearly felt most acutely

by those who have established themselves in Mamarrosa, like Stanton, or the German Dieter, or the Potts. When Chrissie is charged with murder for taking her daughter Ruby to hospital for an abortion, her conversation with the police is translated by her son and she is made aware that she is, as she states, "the bloody foreigner" (206). This experience leads her to draw a parallel between her situation and that of Asian women in England:

I was thinking about when you see the Asian kids translate for their mums. The mums wear saris or baggy coloured pyjamas or sometimes a big black bag that covers everything except their eyes, so you don't really expect them to understand anything much. I was thinking, I'm like that now, I'm the bloody foreigner. (206)

The feeling of displacement, however, is also part of the lives of those Portuguese people of Mamarrosa who have experienced emigration themselves. Indeed, the novel suggests that mobility characterizes life in our globalized world to such an extent that not even remote places like Alentejo can escape it. When China ironically states that Alentejo was the "poorest region in the poorest country in the European Union [...] until all them eastern monkeys climbed on board" (120), he is highlighting that, in many respects, this, too, is a region that is subject to the processes of globalization. This accounts, for example, for the way the native people of the village, stuck as they are in desolate poverty, project hope on to the return of Marco Afonso Rodrigues, who they expect will set up a luxury hotel in the region – a scheme that will make everybody rich. The hotel appears as an iconic place of transience, the epitome of global processes that rely mainly on impermanence.

The village of Mamarrosa may thus be taken as a metaphor for the sense of displacement felt by millions of diasporic people all over the world. When Teresa thinks about going to London, she ponders on the act of moving to another place, and about the impact this has on people's identities:

Who would she be in London and who would be there to see? She would be there and the writer would be here, 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 round and round and it didn't make one bit of difference as far as she could

understand. They come here and I go there. Round and round. (192)

A sense of deterritorialization is expressed here by the enumeration of the characters' different migratory experiences, but is also present in the lives of those like Teresa's mother, who have never left their homeland. In this way, our attention is drawn to different aspects of current processes of globalization. When Teresa states that her mother is "lost in Brazil", she is pointing to forms of cultural deterritorialization that affect even those people who have never physically migrated, but whose apprehension of the world includes forms of mediated transcultural experience. This is the case with Teresa's mother, a widow, whose life is spent either working as a cleaning lady or watching Brazilian soap operas on television every evening. At the same time, the opening of a cyber café in the village constitutes another form of opening up to yet another different kind of transcultural experience. Thus, the village of Mamarrosa, despite its traditional and rural way of life, does not lie outside the constructions of modernity that permeate the global world.

Alentejo Blue is deeply imbued with such "work of the imagination", which is transnational and transcultural in several ways, not least because, constructed as a novel of many voices and many perspectives, it refuses to make a clear-cut distinction between an external and an internal perception of the reality of Mamarrosa. In doing so, the characters are presented as subjects in a globalized world, where emigration/immigration is clearly constructed by "the work of the imagination". Hence, Teresa is forced to emigrate in order to run away from the desolation of her native village, and projects her desire of modernity onto London:

Teresa imagined herself on an aeroplane, a mile high in the sky; she thought of herself in London, coming out of a restaurant or nightclub; she saw herself on an escalator, travelling through a department store that reached nearly as high as the plane. (147)

In the same manner, Vasco, the obese café owner who had been working in restaurants in Provincetown in the USA, but returned to Mamarrosa 22 years ago, continuously talks about America as if he were still there and keeps his travel brochures in a drawer, though he knows "he will never go back to America. He does not even want to" (85). On the other hand, all the other seemingly purposeless tourists and foreign inhabitants of Mamarrosa are driven by a desire to

get away from their own stifling lives in the places they come from: when Dieter, the German who keeps speaking badly of the Portuguese, is asked why he does not go back to Germany, he states, peremptorily, that "if I never see that country again so long as I may live, so much the better for me." (67). China, the English alcoholic and drug addict living in Mamarrosa, knows that the reason they have come there is that they are all, in one way or another, "on the run" (63).

Conclusion

As has been shown, *Alentejo Blue* displays a plurality of voices from different nationalities and backgrounds. It is located in a rural landscape in a non-English country where ways in which they deal with aspects of emigration/immigration and cosmopolitan visions in the contemporary global world become evident. It places great emphasis on questions of migration and transnational identities that are contemporary concerns in British and European societies.

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