

## *A Noite Desceu em Dezembro* — Continuity and Evolution of an Author's Depiction of His Native City

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**ABSTRACT:** The last novel by Henrique de Senna Fernandes, *A Noite Desceu em Dezembro*, was first published in its entirety in 2015, although parts of it had previously appeared in instalments in the Macao weekly, *Ponto Final*, as part of a project to resurrect the feuilleton genre and, more generally, encourage Portuguese literature in Macao. Although unfinished, this novel contains themes that are consistent with the author's more well-known works, such as the novels, *A Trança Feiticeira* and *Amor e Dedinhos de Pé*, as well as his shorter fictions. It also signals an evolution in his attitude, as a Macanese, towards the overwhelming Chinese presence in the city, as well as in his consideration of the role of females in Macao society. This contribution discusses the development of the author's treatment of such themes and includes a translation of an excerpt from the novel by way of an illustration.

**KEYWORDS:** Macao literature; War of the Pacific; Gender.

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*A Noite Desceu em Dezembro* is the last novel written by Henrique de Senna Fernandes. Published posthumously in 2015, some chapters first appeared in the Macao weekly — *Ponto Final* in 2005, as part of a programme to encourage Portuguese literature in the region by re-introducing readers to the feuilleton tradition, a serialised form of fiction popular in the press during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The novel contains themes familiar to readers of the works of Henrique de Senna Fernandes: the

hardships suffered during the war, episodes of love across social and cultural divisions, and the clash of values between generations within a traditional Macanese family. Here, however, the authority figures which are so crucial to the development of the author's most well-known novel — *A Trança Feiticeira* (1992), are absent, for Carlos and Jerusa, the parents of the Belmares siblings, have been trapped by the outbreak of the Second World War while on holiday in Portugal, and have devolved their authority to Jerusa's sister, the

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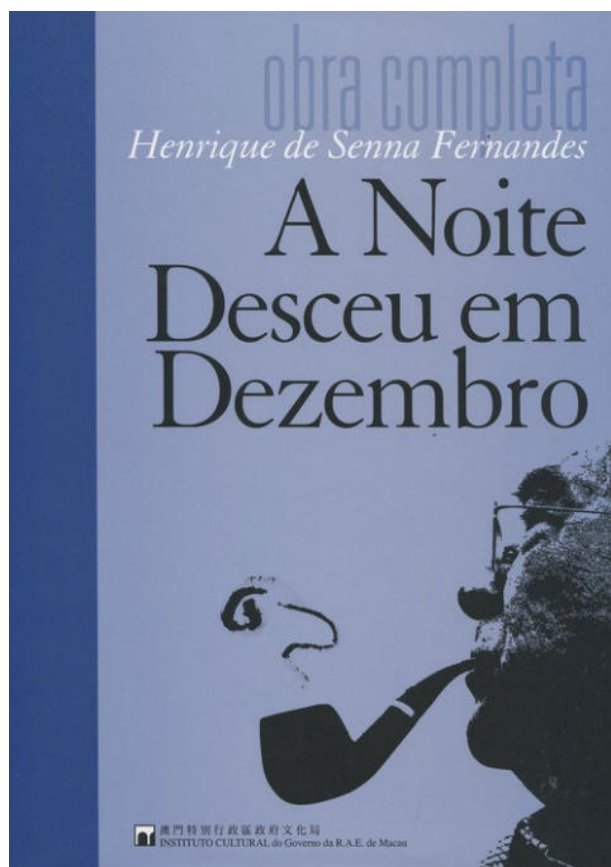


Fig. 1: Henrique de Senna Fernandes, *A Noite Desceu em Dezembro*. Macao: Instituto Cultural do Governo da R.A.E. de Macau, 2015.

hapless Aunt Albertina. She looks on in horror as the three Belmares sons, José Pedro, Nuno and Alfredo, and their two sisters, Ana Teresa and Ana Maria are swayed by more liberal, cosmopolitan influences that threaten to undermine the old order of Macanese conservative patriarchy.

Traditionally, elite Macanese families sought marital alliances among their kind, although occasionally, such as had been the case of Carlos and Jerusa Belmares, a wealthy Macanese might marry the offspring of a poor Portuguese (Jerusa was the daughter of a soldier from Portugal). The compensation for this marriage was the preservation and even enhancing of a Portuguese phenotype in the next generation, along with the maintenance of linguistic

and cultural compatibilities, most importantly Roman Catholicism. In this novel, the eldest son José Pedro's affair with Veruska, a Russian *émigré*, with whom he has twin children, causes a rift within the family and a scandal within Macanese society. This is not only because of her dubious way of life (she has been a dancer and circus performer), but because she clings to her Russian Orthodox beliefs until the very eve of their marriage.

The novel begins on the eve of the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in December 1941, in the aftermath of which refugees from the Macanese diaspora arrived in Macao, bringing with them values of modernity and sexual freedom that sat awkwardly with the old Macanese elite of their ancestral homeland. This theme was already examined in all its ramifications, in the author's masterful novella, 'Candy'.<sup>1</sup> The novel ends in March 1944 as the war enters its final phase, with the Axis powers under increasing pressure from the Allies. Unlike the author's previous novels, it lacks a harmonious closure, indicating that it was unfinished. On the other hand, the novel's uncertain ending hints at future peace and leaves open the hope of a satisfactory conclusion, in particular with regard to the unresolved love matches between Nuno and Sandy, his secret Chinese lover, and Álvaro, the family's *protégé*, and Ana Maria.

In other ways too, *A Noite Desceu em Dezembro* is a novel that fits more Macao's current status as a territory governed by China, rather than its era under Portuguese administration, and this relates to the attitude towards Chinese language and culture. In Fernandes's earlier fictions, his Macanese heroes had a certain amount of fluency in spoken Cantonese as they picked up the language on the street or from domestic servants, a tool that had facilitated Adozindo's access to A-Leng, his proletarian Chinese love interest, in *A Trança Feiticeira*. In Nuno Belmares, the central male figure in this novel, we have a hero who identifies with the Chinese side of his heritage at a much deeper

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intellectual level: he takes lessons in classical Chinese culture from *Mestre Wong*, a refugee in wartime Macao, can read and write Chinese, and speaks both Cantonese and Mandarin. This integration into Chinese culture not only renders Nuno more compatible with Sandy, the daughter of an upper-class Chinese family, but also enables him to undertake dangerous missions on behalf of the Allies through the surrounding areas of China, where currently under Japanese occupation, in order to deliver messages and British military fugitives to Free China.

Fernandes's last novel also elaborates on the author's long-standing examination of what constitutes female beauty. As readers of his work are only too aware, Fernandes's fiction usually revolves around a romantic interest that is shunned by society, but comes to a satisfactory conclusion, thus reflecting an evolution towards more progressive social values. On the way to this ending, relationships are occasionally thrown out of kilter by the sin of pride, or there is an imbalance in the physical allure of the couple involved. This is not the case in *A Trança Feiticeira*, in which the handsome Adozindo, though dissolute, falls in love with the female beauty of A-Leng, enshrined in *The Bewitching Braid* of the novel's title. In Fernandes's first novel, *Amor e Dedinhos de Pé* (1986), the equally handsome Chico gradually comes to appreciate the beauty behind the wealthy but plain Victorina, whose squint he ultimately perceives as a bewitching quality. The idea of moral strength and home-making skills as compensation for lack of the obvious accoutrements of female beauty or femininity, had already been present in Fernandes's earliest published work, 'A-Chan, a Tancareira' (a story in *Nam Van*). This novel was heavily influenced by the neo-realism of the 1940s, in which the plain, impoverished boatwoman falls in love with a lonely Portuguese sailor stuck in Macao during the War of the Pacific, and with whom she has a daughter, only to be abandoned by him when he returns to Portugal after the conflict ends. In general

though, and certainly in his later works, lasting love between men and women in Fernandes's world occurs when there is no ulterior material motive for such a union. Nowhere is the contrast between the immaterial nature of true romance and love as part of a monetary transaction more apparent than in the early short story 'Um Encontro Imprevisto' (*Nam Van*). This is one of the author's rare tales that does not unfold in Macao, in which a lonely young Macanese student in Lisbon follows a woman through the city, in the mistaken belief that she might be his sought-after love match, only to discover, as they alight at the same tram stop, that she is a prostitute. The pursuit of love as a meal ticket may be the reason why, in *A Noite Desceu em Dezembro*, the romance between the skinny, plain and impoverished Macanese woman, Ritinha, and Álvaro, the *protégé* of the Belmares family, who is also attracted to their youngest daughter Ana Maria, ultimately fails. War, poverty, loneliness and pride are conditions that invite ill-matched partners to come together, and while it is true that Álvaro and Ana Maria are hardly compatible socially, he has benefited from Carlos Belmares's protection. He is a kind of poorer relative, an honorary member of the Belmares household, a feature of the Portuguese colonial extended family, in which social acceptance was conditional on the expectation of undivided loyalty to the patriarch and his inner family.

Appearances can deceive in other ways in Fernandes's world of Macao, where men and women follow certain traditionally prescribed roles that are somehow what society expects of them. Often, when they fail to follow such roles, they take on the characteristics of the other gender. In the short story 'A Desforra dum China Rico' (*Nam Van*), the opera singer and actor, Wong, who seduces his wealthy female patrons, plays both female and male roles, and his physical allure as well as behaviour reflect in his daily life the duality of the parts he plays on stage. In another story 'Yasmine' (*Mong-Há*), the beautiful

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Indian girl who becomes the obsession of an English 'China hand', turns out to be a man. As Fernandes's works evolved, his characters sometimes became more theatrical and unpredictable. Rather than suggesting some version of gender dysphoria among the men and women portrayed, it may well be that the author was becoming attracted to the enigmas of Orientalism, in which characters are not what they appear to be, and are capable of causing chaos, while upsetting the binarism of European beliefs. Or it may be that the author is playing with the readers' own prejudices, regarding the role and appearance of women in a society struggling to come to terms with modernity. In *A Noite Desceu em Dezembro*, Sandy, the 'forbidden' love interest of Nuno Belmares, is a young Chinese woman from an upper-class nationalist family, destined for marriage to a man of her own kind chosen by her stern father. For much of the novel, she is referred to by the nickname, 'Second Boy', given by the local Macanese males because of her perceived pride and arrogance and her short hair (a more modern coiffure than A-Leng's traditional 'bewitching braid'). Sandy does not respond to their advances, or succumb in a way expected of poor Chinese girls, and therefore earns the reputation of being haughty, and even a lesbian. In this, his final novel, Fernandes, through the androgynous beauty of Sandy, seems to be playing with male prejudices towards female behaviour in a Macao that is still dominated by racism and misogyny.

Finally, in writing *A Noite Desceu em Dezembro* as a feuilleton, Fernandes was elaborating on a convention that had characterised his earlier writings, most notably its theatricality and qualities of suspense. Nuno's sporadic forays into the Chinese mainland in the service of the Allies give the novel the additional quality of a spy thriller, while his elder brother's business dealings with the Japanese, along with his elder sister's brief romance with a Japanese military officer, provide a tension that underlines the perils of neutrality in a rapidly evolving international political situation.

All this at a time when the tiny territory of Macao was a beacon of peaceful survival surrounded by the brutalities of war. It is no coincidence that Fernandes wrote cinema reviews for the Macao press, saw two of his initial novels successfully transitioned to the silver screen, and harbored a strong desire for the adaptation of his wartime novella, 'Candy', into a motion picture. In this, his final novel, the fast-moving changes of scene, along with the suspense left at each chapter ending, lend themselves to the jump-cut and scene shifts of the world of film. The following translated excerpt illustrates some of the themes discussed above.

[Translation by author] *In the absence of their brothers, the Belmares sisters felt defenceless. Alfredo alone was not enough to fill the emptiness of a huge house. The Vila Jerusa was a gloomy old mansion. They had already gotten used to the absence of José Pedro, who had moved to the other residence permanently. But Nuno's departure accentuated their feeling of abandonment.*

*Aunt Albertina now spent most of her time confined to her bedroom. Claiming some endless indisposition, she had lost her grip on the domestic life of the household. She had failed in the mission she had promised her sister to look after her nephews and nieces and keep them together under one roof. No one obeyed her, their respect for her had dissolved and she had fallen into a state of depression, viewing herself as some old relic from a time that would never come back.*

*'How could we have sunk to this level?' Alfredo pondered, distraught.*

*Military service had removed him from daily life at the Travessa do Bom Jesus, he was too young and had not accompanied the events that had*

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*transformed his brothers' lives. Each one had his problems, but instead of communicating their concerns among themselves, they had shut themselves away from one another in isolation like strangers.*

*'I don't understand how we've come to this...'*

*He bemoaned José Pedro's estrangement. He sympathised with Veruska, she had convinced him of her qualities. They should ignore her past, rehabilitate her. In spite of everything, José Pedro had established a family and there were the twins. They were Belmares too. The large, silent house needed children to fill it with joy.*

*The situation was beyond dispute. He wished he could intervene in order that the family might accept Veruska, for this would be the only way to persuade his elder brother to return to the family fold. But he was the youngest, and above him he had to contend with Ana Teresa's and Aunt Albertina's almost blind aversion to the 'Russian woman'. He was now terrified at the prospect of the visit to Chinese territory by her and his brother, at the invitation of the Japanese. Utterly foolhardy. In a country at war, one never quite knew what might happen, regardless of the escort that might be provided. And if some disaster struck José Pedro, how would the family manage, given that their livelihood relied mainly on the firm? Who could take his place? One couldn't count on Nuno, who hadn't been born to be a trader, and, besides, was more involved in some mysterious activity, where no one dared to interfere for fear of compromising him.*

*Alfredo knew his brother had fallen for a Chinese woman. And she wasn't just any Chinese woman from the streets, or one of the*

*many who sold themselves in the vicinity of the Inner Harbour, the heart of the red-light area. He had been bewitched by a girl from a good family, which was complicated, the coveted Second Boy no less, who was the object of the lewd dreams of so many young boys and grown men. They had been caught having supper in a broth shop, sitting side by side in the Capitol Movie House, and strolling together in the darkest corners of the Tap Seac Garden. But never in the stark light of day, openly, for everyone to see. This was what folk claimed. Whether their relationship had developed into something deeper, he did not know. Whether it was Second Boy or someone else, some girl or other had radically changed him. He had recently lost his naturally joyous, spontaneous manner, his thoughts far from the conversations around the dinner table, his air heavy and preoccupied, sometimes pitiful, as he tried to conceal what was gnawing away inside him. His request that they should not go looking for him in that remote corner of Coloane revealed the intenseness of such a relationship and his jettisoning of his responsibilities.*

*He wished he could seek Álvaro's advice, but he had distanced himself permanently from the neighbourhood of Bom Jesus. His was a name one could not mention in the house, without Ana Maria going into an almost tearful sulk, and attracting bitter comments from Ana Teresa and a brush-off from Aunt Albertina. As far as they were concerned, Álvaro had been expunged from the bosom of the family. In the words of Aunt Albertina, he was ungrateful, and had forgotten the affection and support he had always received from the Belmares. If these days he was someone, it was thanks to the family's protection, which he had forgotten, now that the opportunities*

*offered by the war had made him rich from the smuggling of goodness knows what. For Aunt Albertina, this was murky business, and she crossed herself.*

*Alfredo did not agree with his sister's attitude. The reasons for her anger seemed to him to be trivial, a fit of sulking by a spoilt child denied her wish, and which she had exaggerated. He had always been sympathetic to Álvaro, he considered him a trustworthy friend of the family, honest and firm in his feelings. Now, it was too late. Ana Maria, through silliness or petulance, had rushed headlong and precipitated a situation that had no remedy. Contrary to what anyone*

*believed he would do, Álvaro had invited her rival into his home, a piece of trash, the daughter of a jobless drunkard stumbling along the streets, and he was living with her as his mistress and as his household servant.*

*As for Ana Teresa, she had declared that she was going to ask José Pedro for a position in the firm so that she could have a job to distract her from her boredom. She had no idea what she would do, but she would learn. The time had come for her to help her brother, for she also had an interest in the prosperity of the family trading company. For Aunt Albertina, this was just another example of blatant shamelessness.<sup>2</sup> RC*

## NOTES

- 1 'Candy' was published in Senna Fernandes's first collection of stories, *Nam Van: Contos de Macau*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition (Macao: Edição do Autor, 1978). It appeared in English translation in the anthology, cf. David Brookshaw, *Visions of China: Stories from Macau* (Providence RI/Hong Kong: Gávea-Brown/Hong Kong University Press, 2002), and a revised

- translation featured in Henrique de Senna Fernandes, *Nam Van: Tales of Macao* (Macao: Praia Grande Edições, 2020).  
2 Henrique de Senna Fernandes, *A Noite Desceu em Dezembro* (Macao: Instituto Cultural do Governo da R.A.E. de Macau, 2015), 421–423.

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