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The maturation of the children and the transformation of the society in Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes*

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Abstract

Patricia Grace's novel Baby No-Eyes addresses the issues of contemporary Maori society dealing with the aftermath of the colonial heritage. The author sheds light on the past and present abuse of the Maori: harm is done to the children's and adults' bodies and their land. At the same time, attention is drawn to the Maori spirituality and beliefs. Grace also underlines the importance of regaining voice and sight by the suppressed Maori community, suggesting that it must undergo a transformation to fit the new bicultural reality. This transformation is juxtaposed with the children's maturation process.

Key words

postcolonialism, Maori people, child, Patricia Grace, *Baby No-Eyes*, abuse

Dojrzewanie dzieci i transformacja społeczeństwa w powieści *Baby No-Eyes* Patricii Grace

Abstrakt

Powieść Patricii Grace Baby No-Eyes porusza problemy współczesnej społeczności maoryskiej próbującej poradzić sobie z brzemiennymi skutkami kolonializmu. Autorka rzuca światło na nadużycia fizyczne wobec Maorysów i ich ziemi, zarówno w przeszłości, jak i obecnie: krzywdzone są ciała dzieci i dorosłych, ale też należąca do nich ziemia. Uwaga zwrócona jest również na maoryską duchowość i wierzenia. Grace podkreśla także, jak ważne jest odzyskanie własnego głosu i wzroku przez uciśnioną społeczność maoryską, sugerując, że musi ona przejść transformację, by móc wpasować się w nową dwukulturową rzeczywistość. Ta transformacja zestawiona jest z procesem dojrzewania dzieci.

Słowa kluczowe

postkolonializm, Maorysi, dziecko, Patricia Grace, *Baby No-Eyes*, przemoc

1. Introduction

Patricia Grace (b. 1937) is one the authors whose career began during the Maori Renaissance of the 1970s – a period of the revival of Maori art and culture. She was among the first artists who attempted to give voice to problems of her Maori people. Patricia Grace's novel *Baby No-Eyes* was published in 1998 and is one of her novels through which the author attempts to shed light on the conditions of Maori people in the postcolonial times. Just like Grace's other works, *Baby No-Eyes* shows the Maori community on the edge. The postcolonial world becomes overwhelming for the members of the society. They need to assert their common identity, to find their voice in the new, bicultural reality and face their repressive past. The article attempts to review this process as parallel with the

development of children characters in the novel. The analysis consists of three parts: first I compare the uncertainty of the state of the unborn child with the current condition of the society, then I point out the similarity of exploitation of the child's body and of the land paying special attention to the issue of good and evil in the novel, and finally I arrive at the conclusion about the importance of regaining voice/sight – both for the already mature characters and for the whole community.

2. Uncertainty

In her article "Suffering and Survival: Body and Voice in Recent Maori Writing", Janet Wilson provides a very accurate introduction to this, and many other novels produced in the time of the Maori Renaissance:

> The Maori today live between two cultures, the Polynesian and the European. Contemporary Maori literature is about realignment. Positioned between English and Maori languages, between the rural, pre-contact past and the urban, bicultural present, between the spiritual realm of traditional *Maoritanga* and the global world or corporate capitalism, the writers of the Maori Renaissance inscribe some of the values of biculturalism – two peoples, one nation – in a way that Pakeha[1] literature, inevitably more monocultural and eurocentric, does not. Speaking from this in-between place, their voices proclaim marginality as a contested position. The political consciousness of such writing, in foregrounding ethnic marginality, relies on a celebration of the corporeality of the body to affirm the interconnectedness between the members of the community and the common identity between the individual, *whanau* and the land. This is central to Maori identity as *tangata whenua* (people of the land). (Wilson 2008: 267)

[1] The adjective refers to non-Maori people and phenomena in New Zealand culture (www.thefreedictionary.com).

Baby No-Eyes tells the story of an unnamed girl, throughout the novel referred to as Baby, who dies during an accident. Initially her body is disposed of, and it is only when the family orders the hospital to retrieve the body for the burial rite that the body is taken out of the rubbish. Still, the body is retrieved incomplete: her eyes have been removed to serve medical research. Yet Baby dies only in the physical sense. Unable to cross the line between the living and the dead because of the lack of eyes, she is spiritually present in the world of the living – by means of accompanying her younger brother, Tawera, during his childhood and schooldays until his maturation.

The state of Baby is uncertain – she is neither alive nor dead. As Jen Crawford explains in "Spaze: Void States and the Mother-Child Relationship in *The Matriarch*, *The Dream Swimmer*, *Cousins* and *Baby No-Eyes*", this state is a "transitional realm" referred to as the *wheiao* in the Maori tradition (2005: 268). Cleve Barlow defines the *wheiao* as "that state between the world of darkness and the world of light" (quoted in Crawford 2005: 268). As Crawford claims, this realm "traditionally encompasses a number of earthly and supernatural processes, including both birth (from the onset of labour to the child's first breath) and death (from the departure of the spirit to its arrival in the spirit world)" (2005: 268). But Baby is not born through the power of nature, she is taken from her mother and deprived of her eyes. Neither is her death fully realised since she cannot go to meet her ancestors. As Crawford asserts:

> [Baby's] spirit is lodged first in the consciousness of her mother, and then of her brother Tawera, after medical interference with her body delays her departure to the spirit world […]. [The child] is suspended in this space due to a disruption of the natural progression of the soul from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. […] The disruption [is] due to incompletions or violations of accepted ritual process, and in particular the process of acknowledging and giving due respect to all life, not matter how embryon-

> ic. [This] disruption [occasions] the presence of the *wheiao*. Where the conditions of characters' lives had led to a loss of identity as created or affirmed through ritual, the *wheiao* transcends those conditions, enclosing the disembodied and dissipated child identities in a containing narrative. (2005: 269-270)

Baby is a *kehua*, a ghost child and she is present in the life of her family and community. She asserts her identity by dwelling in the consciousness of her mother, and then accompanying her younger brother. Crawford confirms Baby "participates in mundane life through her living sibling's consciousness" (2005: 271). Indeed, she is inseparable from her brother. They play together, participate in lessons, and act in a school play. The relationship between Tawera and his sister is very deep and, at the same time, disturbing. Reina Whaitiri comments on the relationship in her book review:

> Tawera carries his sister inside him. Dead she may be, but far from lifeless, she is rather highly animated and vociferous. Being older, she dominates her brother, making demands and giving orders, at times physically attacking and bullying him. Nothing makes her angrier than being ignored. (2000: 555)

Crawford views the *wheaio* state of Baby as an organic metaphor for "invalidated identity of both culture and individual" (2005: 271). The process of development and maturation of both Tawera and Baby are paralleled by the arising consciousness of the Maori people and their persistent fight to regain their land:

> The threats to individual children that appear in [this novel] do so in the contexts of the novel ['s] concerns with the survival of Maori people and culture within the colonised world. The struggles for land rights and for the maintenance of cultural heritage are consistently foregrounded. These movements respond to conditions of cultural and material depletion, which in the [novel] are seen to have negative impact on individual children. (Crawford 2005: 272)

The negative influence that Crawford mentions is visible not only in the tragic state of Baby, but is also to be noticed in the story told by Gran Kura. After sixty years of suppressing memories, she decides to reveal the story of her younger cousin Riripeti, who died because of maltreatment at school. In "The trauma of goodness in Patricia Grace's Fiction", Irene Visser comments on the parallelism between the situation of the children and the state of the community:

> *Baby No-Eyes* continues Grace's interrogation of hegemonic repression, injury and eventual destruction of the selfhood of vulnerable schoolchildren and brings it to a conclusion. [...] The hospital setting accentuates the inhumanity of medical procedures and adds force to Kura's insight of evil parading as goodness to her subsequent narrative of the traumatic legacy of the colonial system and its memories of shame, obedience, numbness, and complicity. (2012: 308)

Visser goes even further in her analysis of the novel's political stance. In her view,

> *Baby No-Eyes* denounces the practices of Western academic and scientific appropriation of Maori knowledge and identity in no uncertain terms, equating the imperial practice of land expropriation (the "old business" of taking land) with late twentieth-century genetic research among Maori (the "new business" of taking eyes to collect indigenous genes). (2012: 298)

3. Trauma to body, trauma to mind, trauma to land

Chris Prentice in his article "From Visibility to Visuality: Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes* and the Cultural Politics of Decolonization" agrees with Visser's idea of the similarity between the expropriation of land and the genetic research on humans, adding that "land and bodies figure [as] sites of colonial expro-

priation, exploitation, and violence" (2009: 322). Following this line of thought, Wilson explains:

> The abused, battered bodies of the children at the centre of [...] *Baby No-Eyes* can, on the one hand, be interpreted as metonymic of the disintegration of the essential, indigenous tribal body under colonial rule. On the other hand, desecration of the body's autonomy calls for recuperation: physical healing and physical amendment. In suggesting the need for a new order, a change in the social sphere, these bodies appear as potential spiritual sources of agency. (2008: 275)

Wilson proposes yet another role for the figure of Baby. In her opinion, Baby's role is symbolic: "She comes to represent those lost figures who were rendered invisible during colonization, but who are now summoned up through the artist's act of will" (2008: 277).

Similarly to the nation's complicated in-between state, Baby dwells in the aforementioned *wheiao* state, a "specifically Maori mode of existence" (Crawford 2005: 269). According to Crawford this state is "complex in being simultaneously an affirmation of a particular cultural reality, and a representation of the internal and external dangers that threaten cultural identity" (2005: 269). The inclusion of a character set in *wheiao,* or, as Crawford calls it, "a void state" (271) draws attention to the in-between state of post-colonial New Zealand/Aotearoa. Moreover, the political and social relevance of the novel is underlined by the fact that the plot is based on true events. As Paola Della Valle claims, "the fate of the unborn baby in *Baby No-Eyes* was inspired by an incident recorded in the media" (2010: 159).

The parallel between the land and body abuse is an important motif in Grace's novel. Young members of Maori community decide to retrieve the land that once belonged to them and they decide to occupy a part of the town in order to attract public attention. Exploitation of land becomes an important theme in the novel consistently interwoven with the main plot,

where medical research and land exploitation are asserted as equally urgent problems in the postcolonial Aotearoa.

The postcolonial heritage is also connected with the problematic and complex relationship between good and evil presented in the novel. As Visser asserts,

> Goodness, as a legacy of the colonial situation, is revealed as a trauma: a poisonous force that undermines, weakens, and even destroys life. [...] In *Baby No-Eyes* this process is dramatized most poignantly in narratives that confront the memory of the paradoxical imprint of goodness-as-evil. (2012: 301)

The aforementioned settings of hospital and school should be safe places, proving help and care. Yet, paradoxically, they are the places in which traumatic experiences take place. Visser observes:

> In Grace's fiction the trauma of goodness, which leaves as its aftermath an insidious 'nervous condition,' is incurred in the settings of school, orphanage, and hospital – institutions normally associated with care rather than woundings. In primary school settings, the concept of goodness is contaminated to the extent that it becomes indistinguishable from evil, not only in its guise as good behaviour that is inimical to children's cultural and racial identity, but also in the children's felt sense of self. (2012: 301)

Gran Kura considers her cousin Riripeti to be too good to understand the school situation: "Riripeti was too good to guess what to say, too good to know what lies to tell, too good to know what to do" (Grace 1998: 33). According to Della Valle, the primary aim of the repressive school was not to teach, but to "erase the identity of Maori children through the suppression of their native language" (2010: 162).

The mother figure plays an important, yet again ambivalent, role in the novel. According to Crawford, "Kura's interpretation [of reality] is consistent with a pattern of representation that appears in [the book], in which mother figures are neither vic-

tims nor innocents; though they may provide life and support for life, they also hold the potential to inflict great damage on their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren" (2005: 273). At some other point, Crawford also comments that

> [s]urvival of or liberation from the mother as void is an intimate task for the struggling child figure; their images evoke a very close and very early coupling of the processes of identity formation and destabilisation. (2005: 70)

Yet Grace manages to counterbalance this destructive power of the mother with the care and love that Tawera's mother, Te Paania, offers to her child/children. Since the novel abounds with references to the body, the image of the female body is also endowed with special meaning. Wilson claims that

> [i]n Patricia Grace's work, the most powerful body is that of the pregnant woman: active, whole, and fertile, she functions as a natural principle of unity because her body is anchored within a space and time continuum (2008: 269).

Grace even portrays the movements of the unborn child in the mother's womb, thus underlining "[t]he infant's immersion in the mother's body" (2008: 270).

Following the corporeal imagery, the leading metaphor of the novel is that of eyes which, however paradoxical it may seem, do not provide sight. In this way the relationship between seeing and knowing, or seeing and believing is subverted, as argued by Paloma Fresno Calleja in "Imag(in)ing the nation through Maori eyes/I's":

> In *Baby No-Eyes*, Baby's blindness triggers a series of narratives which focus on multiple deprivations but which transcend their mere physical consequences. The young victim, from then on called Baby No-Eyes, according to the Maori custom of naming children after events surrounding their births, is made to endure her physical disability as a trade mark, a real blindness which is

> extended to the rest of the family members, who in turn are confronted with different types of what might be called 'cultural blindness'. (2003: 28-29)

After the intervention of the family, Baby's eyes are sewn in her stomach. She cannot see the world around her, but "her stomach-eyes become the reminders of cultural loss and intercultural misunderstandings, while acquiring a deeper meaning, since they stand for cultural insight, rather than mere physical sight" (Fresno Calleja 2003: 38).

4. Maturation: sight and voice retrieved

The trauma of goodness, with its subverted meaning, is still an issue with the Maori people in the novel. Their sight needs to be restored – more metaphorically than literally, though. Fortunately, storytelling retains its curative force (Visser 2013: 311). This is true not only for Kura, who tells about the trauma of the past in order to compensate for her own silence and inaction, but also for the whole novel which becomes yet another step in the revival of Maori culture.

In asserting Maori identity, voice plays an equally important role as sight. Oral culture characterized Maori community until the time of the Maori Renaissance, so the orality of storytelling is underlined in the novel and serves as a tribute to the achievements of the ancestors. Hence, the novel, just as a number of other texts by Grace, has a polyphonic form. Grace allows a variety of speakers to present their points of view and in this way she allows for a holistic representation of the Maori society, allowing minorities to speak for themselves. Such a multitude of perspectives is also crucial for achieving the effect of blending past and present as well as the mythical, mythological and metaphysical with the real (so that the novel may be viewed in terms of magical realism; Crawford 2005: 269). Gran Kura's voice is the most important part of this po-

lyphony as she is viewed as the link between the old world and the new practices:

> The Maori world of the past is described in *Baby No-Eyes* in the chapters narrated by Gran Kura, interspersed among the other stories set in the present. Gran Kura draws upon the memories of her childhood or events reported to her. She is the living book of the *whanau*, the repository of its history and its stories, which must be passed on according to the oral tradition. (Della Valle 161-162)

According to Fresno Calleja, it is the story told by Gran Kura that "[allows] her family to look back in their past, to keep their eyes open to the future and to speak out against historical and contemporary injustices as they manage to articulate their identity in present-day Aotearoa" (2003: 30). Wilson claims that by telling the whole story of the past, Grace creates a scheme for Maori survival by establishing a link between the past and present (2008: 276). The brutal treatment of Maori pupils in English schools in the past is contrasted with the present state of education, as Tawera attends a bilingual school where Maori cultural heritage is cherished and cultivated, as argued by Paola Della Valle in her book *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Maori Literature* (2010: 162).

Allowing a variety of narrators to tell their stories provides a frame for recounting events from the past and comparing them with the present, and in this way showing the progress that the society has made towards regaining its rights:

> [The plot in the novel develops] as a jigsaw puzzle, each piece adding to the complete picture and representing a different point of view. The overall story of [the] book is therefore composed of many interlinked stories, as well as by many narrative perspectives, which may be read as an assertion of the notion of history as an essentially fictionalised story and consequently subject to multiple interpretations. (Della Valle 2010: 163)

But Della Valle also asserts, as has been already mentioned, Grace's reference to the old ways of storytelling, with special attention to the "ritual of *whaikorero* (oratory), where different orators speak in turn on the *marae* articulating individual points of view on the same subject" (2010: 163-164).

The characters in the novel undergo various processes of transformation. The first and most important is the one concerning Baby just after her birth. She is supposed to pass from the world of the living to the world of the dead. She even describes the experience of this passage to her brother, Tawera:

> There's a road. If you were dead you'd see it... You'd be walking along the roadway and you'd see all the different people gathered at their houses, all the different houses – people gossiping, laughing, playing games, laying out cards, decorating themselves while they waited. You'd hear singing and dancing. There'd be people having turns up in the lookouts where they keep watch day and night – except that there's no day and night, there's perfumed light and weightless air. (Grace 1998: 222)

Unfortunately, Baby does not arrive to meet those people as she is suspended in the *wheiao* state. Crawford comments on Baby's description of the passage to the dead, claiming that Baby's vision of neither the reality of the dead nor that of the living is fully hers:

> Turned back from this road by another spirit, Baby is lodged first in her mother's consciousness, then her brother's; her experience beyond this turning back until the point of her final departure to the spiritual realm is a limited, neophytic version of the reality her 'host' characters experience. She struggles to participate more fully in that reality, but as she grows (the development of her consciousness is a shadow version of the normal development of a living child) she feels the limitations of her ethereal state more acutely, until her existence in the realm of the living is no longer tenable and she finally departs for the spirit world. (2005: 271)

In "Words against death" Irene Visser asserts that death and life are inseparable and interconnected (2010: 284). The final passage of Baby to the world of the dead where she belongs is possible only through the death of Gran Kura:

> [o]n her deathbed Kura asks Tawera to let the ghost accompany her, and he realizes that his sister belongs more to his great grandmother than to himself. (Wilson 2008: 276)

Kura's death and the parting with his sister mark another crucial transformation process, that is, Tawera's maturation. When Tawera is born, his family perform a ceremony during which they bury his placenta. Also, upon his birth, Te Paania informs Tawera of his deceased elder sister. Yet Tawera enables the dead one to live, by accepting her as a part of his own consciousness. His decision to let her go marks his growth into independence. In a more metaphorical sense, Gran Kura is also transformed: her rebirth as a social activist fighting for the revival of the Maori language is only triggered by the death of her cousin, which she recounts years after the incident (Visser 2010: 284). Te Paania's process of development is an equally important example of transformation:

> Te Paania makes a [...] painful life-passage. Sent away from home at the age of fifteen to attend school in Wellington for three months, she stays there for three years, making the crossing from childhood to maturity largely on her own. Her de-ruralization course teaches her that her speech, customs, even her clothes 'were all wrong' (Grace 101). Once she has learnt this, she moves on, knowing that she must get a job and provide for herself, and 'keep my mouth shut'. Her passage to maturity progresses when she attends night classes and when she protests against discrimination at work. Learning to speak up for herself and to live independently, Te Paania, however, also absorbs the dominant society's individualism. (Visser 287)

The transformation of all the characters: Mahaki who decides to fight for his land, Kura who acknowledges the need to re-

gain her native language, Te Paania who becomes a self-assured mother, Tawera who finally renounces the dominance of his sister and becomes a fully-realized artist – emphasize the theme of transformation which the novel presents as a necessity in personal and social development.

To conclude, Patricia Grace's novel serves as a medium to (re)present the Maori culture. By giving voice to a variety of Maori speaking and by recounting both true and fictional events from Maori reality, she provides the reader with an insight into the lives of the Maori. As Fresno Calleja asserts,

> Grace manages to 'reverse the mirror', to go back to Beatson's words, and to make non-Maori readers see through different eyes/I's, amplifying the meaning of physical vision and transcending its limitations so that we gain insight, rather than mere sight, of relevant notions of Maori cultural identity. (2003: 13)

Michelle Keown in "Maori or English? The politics of language in Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes*" concludes that the novel is a field of "a continual process of linguistic deterritorialization, and Grace's use of narrative polyphony enacts a form of collective enunciation" (2003: 422). But the role of the novel is more complex. By producing a new cultural text Grace attempts to revive what has been long forgotten and suppressed. By simultaneously showing two types of development: the individual maturation of children and the transformation of the society, Grace attempts to prove that these two are equally natural and necessary to occur. Her novel seems an attempt to help in building the new Maori identity for the postcolonial times and in acquiring a consciousness of the inhabitants of a bicultural world.

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