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**Voicing the Maori issue:  
Patricia Grace's *Small Holes in the Silence:*  
*Short Stories***

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**Abstract**

Patricia Grace is one of the authors whose career began during the Maori Renaissance, attempting to voice the problems of Maori people. Similarly to her previous works, the short stories included in the collection *Small Holes in the Silence: Short Stories* provide an overview of the human condition in the contemporary world, with special attention paid to Maori society. Grace provides the readers with a glimpse of the lives of ordinary Maori people in precarious situations. Her stories are pervaded with silence. The use of omission and understatement is combined with the introduction of passive characters whose worlds are filled with the secret, the unknown or the void.

**Key words**

communication, Patricia Grace, Maori, short story, silence

**Głos w kwestii maoryskiej:  
*Small Holes in the Silence* Patricii Grace**

**Abstrakt**

Patricia Grace należy do autorów, których kariera rozpoczęła się podczas renesansu maoryskiego. Podobnie jak w przypadku wcześniejszych prac, opowiadania Patricii Grace opublikowane w zbiorze *Small Holes in the Silence: Short Stories* przedstawiają zarys kondycji człowieka we współczesnym świecie, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem społeczności maoryskiej. Opowiadania napisane przez Grace przepełnione są ciszą. Użycie pominięcia i niedopowiedzenia spletają się z wprowadzeniem biernych postaci, których światy wypełnione są tym, co tajemnicze, nieznanne lub puste. Grace pozwala czytelnikom rzucić okiem na życie zwykłych Maorysów znajdujących się w sytuacjach zagrożenia.

**Słowa kluczowe**

cisza, Patricia Grace, komunikacja, Maorysi, opowiadanie

Patricia Grace's career started during the Maori Renaissance – a period of the revival of Maori art and culture in the 1970s (Sinclair 1992: 283, Williams 2006: 208). The movement itself was an important part of the Maori struggle for their own voice, as until then Maori writers had not produced any substantial written texts and the native culture had taken the oral form (Binney 2004: 203-204, Simms 1978: 223). From the period of colonisation until the Maori Renaissance, Maori culture was suppressed and the dominant discourse was that of the Western colonizers:

Until 1970, most of the fiction about the Pacific and Pacific Islanders was written by people living outside the Pacific. It was written from a Eurocentric perspective that depicted Pacific Islanders as exotic, peripheral, "noble," heroic and primitive. That

fiction tended to marginalize Pacific Island peoples and to present them in the roles of spectators and objects of European desires. (Tawake 2000: 155)

According to Mark Williams, “In bicultural New Zealand/Aotearoa Ngata’s legacy has been caught up in debates about the appropriate strategies to adopt towards the dominant culture and the meaning of the ‘Maori Renaissance’” (2006: 208). It was only in the 1970s that Maori writers, including Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera, decided to (re)gain their voice, attempting to deal with the theme of cultural oppression and addressing the issues of Maori people:

The Maori Renaissance was animated exactly by the spirit of “imaginative rediscovery and coherence”, which enabled Maori to see their political stances as legitimate and their view of human experience as a viable alternative to the hegemonic view. It did not cherish a return to a pristine essentialist past, rather a reconsideration of the present that values their heritage and takes into account their own narrative of historical circumstances. (Della Valle 2010: 94-95)

In her various works published from 1975 onwards, Patricia Grace presents the lives of Maori people, their relationship with Pakeha (Europeans) and their struggles with the reality in which they must live. Her position of both a Maori descendant and a writer enables her to present a unique perspective on the condition of Maori people:

Pakeha writers are considered as individuals, but Grace and Ihimaera, much to their individual consternation, are seen as Maori who write rather than as writers who are Maori. Their position as writers allows them to stand aside from the action, while as Maori they can, with some confidence, present the insiders’ point of view. (Sinclair 1992: 284)

In view of the ongoing debate as to who can speak as “the other”, i.e. who can claim the right to call their perspective that of

an insider (see: Stead 1985, Fee 1995), the paper follows the understanding of Margery Fee, who proposes that “writing must somehow promote indigenous access to power without negating indigenous difference” (1995: 245).

As a Maori descendant, Patricia Grace has access to the indigenous world. To use the words of Sandra Tawake, she is “see[ing] with [her] own eyes”, “looking at the world through indigenous eyes” (2000: 156). And indeed, this new perspective has been a breakthrough for the Maori community: Patricia Grace has become the eyes and the voice of the Maori.

Yet, the voice that Patricia Grace is given results in a discourse full of understatement, void and silence. This paper attempts to present the various uses of silence in Grace’s stories included in her latest collection titled *Small Holes in the Silence: Short Stories*, published in 2006. The multitude of the forms that silence takes in the collection, paradoxically as it may seem, enables the Maori community to find their voice.

The title of the latest collection of Patricia Grace’s short stories is a tribute to a Maori poet, also a prominent figure of the Maori Renaissance, Hone Tuwhare (Williams 2006: 206). The exact words “small holes in the silence” are a quotation from a poem titled “Rain” by Tuwhare (Jones 2007: 7). Just like the rain evoked in Tuwhare’s poem, Patricia Grace’s short stories create “small holes in the silence” by narrating the lives of various people. The stories provide a deep insight into a number of basic human feelings. As Lawrence Jones states in his review of the collection, “[Grace’s] stories present a full range of Maori experience” (2007: 7). Rachel Nunns characterizes Grace’s previous collections of stories as “expressing recurring themes and concerns”. According to Nunns, Grace’s stories “inform readers at an emotional, imaginative level with the sense of what it means to be a Maori” (in Jones 2007: 7).

The stories mostly take the form of first-person narrative, although some are told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. The stories told in the first person provide the readers with a sense of orality of storytelling. For instance, one of

the stories, "Stranger Danger" starts with the words "You won't like this story" (Grace 2006: 88). Regardless of the narrative mode, all the stories contain apt observations of the surrounding world.

The observations focus on the precarious conditions of ordinary people, mostly members of the Maori community. In "Reading Patricia Grace", Christina Thompson claims that "[Grace] has always been a quiet but active commentator on social issues relevant to her community and her life" (2009: 38). The stories in the collection indeed focus on such social issues. For instance, the story titled "Curlytop and Ponytail" pictures two girls attempting to care for their irresponsible mother.

Another story focusing on social problems is "Until We Meet Again". It is written in an elliptical style and begins with a woman joining the narrator on the bus and speculating about the intentions of a couple that she is observing. Her true aim, however, is to verbalise the story of rape and abuse that she was a victim of. She demands to be convinced that she is responsible for the death of her oppressor. It seems that she simply wants to be heard, to make people see that violence is a real problem. Some information is omitted, as the character does not express anything explicitly, therefore the reader is supposed to fill in the unrevealed details. As Raylene Ramsay observes in "Indigenous Women Writers in the Pacific: Déwé Gorodé, Sia Figiel, Patricia Grace: Writing Violence as Counter Violence and the Role of Local Context," "Grace's short stories and novels thus touch lightly, allusively on intimate family violence as on the humiliation in women's daily lives" (2012: 6).

Indeed, the difficult situations of women are what Grace attempts to shed light on. In "Headlights", a depressed woman leaves behind her harsh life of a single mother. She abandons her family and sets out on a journey without saying a word, trying to convince herself that "there was nothing behind her.

There was nothing back there at all” (Grace 2006: 126). The woman is devoid of emotions, she feels her life has been lost.

“Pa Wars” tells of a woman who decides to conceive a child without being emotionally involved with its father. The story contains the woman’s monologue directed at one of her old friends, in which she reveals her plans. The man then volunteers to become the father. “Manners Street Blues” is an account of how brutally a Maori female student is treated by the police only because she protests against the maltreatment of her cousin. The story titled “To Russia with Love” is concerned with the loneliness of an old woman who rents her flat to tourists from New Zealand. The guests are not eager to talk about the past and remain silent about Communism or the Iron Curtain, but they do touch upon the issues of poverty and homelessness. What connects these stories is the focus on women’s harsh lives, problems of the contemporary world that they have to tackle, but also the apparent loneliness in facing their difficulties.

A homeless man is also a character of another story, titled “Toasted Sandwich”. The man is seen by the narrator when he tries to help a lost girl return to her mother. People pass him by, not reacting to his calls. The narrator helps to walk the girl back to her mother. Moved by the man’s reaction, the narrator invites him for coffee. The man is silent, he does not respond to any questions. The conclusion of this story is that actions reveal more than words, which seems to be an overall principle underlying the collection. The man’s act of kindness is contrasted with his slovenly appearance. He does not say much, but it is his action that makes the narrator want to stop and help both the girl and him.

The lives which Grace allows us to glimpse are pervaded with silence. This concerns not only the economy of words that she uses and the elliptical character of her storytelling, but also the description of the characters. Some of them are presented as lacking any past, not being able to identify with any story or history, struggling to find their identities. One of such

characters is the grandfather from “Stepping Out”. When the grandma rescues him on the shore, he knows little about himself: only his name and that he is able to work. In “Love Story”, the main character is Willie, a young boy wishing to discover a story that he could relate to. Upon a visit to a marae, a small urban meeting house, where a wise man, genealogist Te Wera Kapi encourages the students to create a relationship between the stories of the carvings and their personal stories, Willie becomes infatuated with a statue and thus finds a way to learn about his past:

Willie didn't know his true name or his story either, so there's a coincidence. And really, all of this falling in love was related to his uncertainty about who he was and where he came from and whether or not he was lovable. He wanted to know that he was lovable, but he hadn't been parented by anyone for long enough to be certain about that. (Grace 2006: 68)

The characters of the story “Stealing Mark” also have difficulties finding their true identities. Mark used to be the narrator's teacher, telling entertaining stories about his past. During the lessons, he described how he was stolen from his family three times: at the time of his birth, then from the hospital and finally his body is stolen after his death. Mark is treated as an object, a trophy to be won by his family. The narrator identifies herself with Mark's story:

I too had been stolen at birth and therefore must have proper parents somewhere in the world who were young and nice. I now understood why I was so white compared to my brothers and sisters, why I was fat while they were thin, and why my pale hair frizzed and their dark hair did not. (Grace 2006: 157)

Grace shows that in the contemporary world, it is not only Maori people who face identity problems. Both Mark and his student lack a sense of belonging. Other people have decided about their future, so they are not able to gain control of their

own lives. Mark's grandparents do not let him live with his parents, then his sons decide upon collecting him from the hospital to finally relocate his body after his death.

Silent and passive characters are also to be found in the story titled "Tommy". The title character "never said much" (Grace 2006: 168) and did not take any action when his wife, Tia, abandoned him for another man. Tia is described as a character who "never discussed anything" (Grace 2006: 169), "couldn't be bothered doing anything" (Grace 2006: 171). She is passive and incapable of developing feelings:

She did act kind of pleased, a bit self-satisfied, but wasn't bursting with anything the way any one of us would have been if we'd been in the centre of Tommy's attention. "He's nice to me," was all she would say, which to us was lukewarm, half-hearted, insufficient and quite maddening. I mean Tommy was nice to everyone. (Grace 2006: 172)

This passage shows that it is not only women who suffer, as good-natured men may also become victims. Tommy is neglected and hurt by his wife, yet he still does not develop negative emotions towards her.

Another issue that Grace addresses is human impenetrability. According to Jones,

[t]wo stories set in Russia, "Doll Woman" and "To Russia with Love", raise the question of "all that we cannot know of each other". A New Zealand tourist muses on a woman seen on the street and sympathised with but not understood. A Russian woman (who has hosted New Zealand tourists) ponders the New Zealand calendars they have sent her but "cannot truly imagine [...] where the people live, or how they live, in such a faraway place" and projects onto the pictures of the birds the sense of danger and uncertainty that she has experienced in her own life. (Jones 2007: 8)

Indeed, no one is thoroughly transparent and we are not able to fathom what people bury deep inside. Faced with the unknown, we tend to create stories to fill in the gaps, hence the



stories about the past of the main character in “Eben” or the game of guessing in “Until We Meet Again”. In the story titled “The Kiss” a rugby player visiting Florence is struck by the view of a woman whose partner rejects her after a kiss. He later finds that it was all pretended as what he saw was only a shooting for a commercial and the affection that he thought the woman felt for the man was only an illusion.

In the collection, there are two stories that deserve further attention in the discussion of silence. One of them is “Busy Lines”. This story focuses on the loss that an old woman suffered when her husband died. The death of the man is only mentioned implicitly, through a metaphor: he went to “stardom” and became a star observing his lonely wife.

The setting is described as empty. As the woman grows older, the appliances gradually disappear:

It could be her husband looking in – fifteen years since he’d gone off to be a star – and if so he would notice most of the furniture had gone. Piece by piece she had given away the big bed, the bedside cabinets, the tallboy and dressing table. It could be him. One small bed and a set of drawers were enough for her. (Grace 2006: 7)

By giving out her goods, she disposes of all material things, thus preparing herself for the moment when she will not need anything. At the end of her life, the woman is surrounded by nothing but silence and stagnation:

She listened this morning, as she waited for daylight under one star observation, for sea sounds, but there were none. There was no movement at all out there, the water being stretched to its edges, she thought, like a whole, black, drum-tight skin. She was certain there were fish in the weed and among the rocks but knew they would not cause a ripple on this still morning. There would be no one coming at daylight – as there had not been anyone for months now, or was it years – row, row in an aluminium dinghy to disturb and entice them, to snatch them and fry them. (Grace 2006: 8)

The world around her becomes quiet, foreshadowing the fate that is to come. The woman's stagnant life is based on a certain pattern: she follows some rituals in her life. She looks after the house and prepares her meals – all to idle away the time.

With a broom you could dawdle away half a morning and before you knew it was time to sit down with a cup of tea and a ginger-nut biscuit. A gingernut biscuit took a bit of time, was no easy swallow, and it was the same with double-decker cabin bread. She could gnaw away for some time on one of those, sitting in her chair by the window with the heater going in cold weather, or out on her step on warm days wondering what there was to think about or if anything was going to happen. (Grace 2006: 9)

The woman is certainly lonely, as no one comes to visit her any longer and she does not receive any help with the broken appliances. She spends time by herself and is so overwhelmed by the silence around her that she even waits to “become part of silence” (Grace 2006: 9). She longs for human contact:

Sometimes on the way up from the beach with her backpack she would hear the telephone ringing but could never think who might be phoning her. She would hurry up to the house, leaving the backpack on the step, opening the door only to find that the ringing had stopped, or perhaps had never been. It was difficult to tell. [...] Sometimes she thought she could hear chitter-chatter and the dinghy being pulled down to the water, sliding through sand and tumbling over stones. But on looking out she would see that it was tipped over against the fence just where she had left it the last time she's tried moving it. (Grace 2006: 10-11)

With the passage of time and the change of seasons, the woman approaches her own inevitable destiny. Eventually, the readers are presented with a symbolic scene of the woman's death:

In the dark of early morning she opened her eyes to find that the stars had entered her room. There were pinpricks of them all around, one on the end of her bed, other dotted over the walls and ceiling. They winked like scales caught flying in sunlight. They flickered and hummed and began to move, swapping from one spot to another as in a game of Corners. Soon they freed themselves from walls and ceilings and began to swarm and spin and dance in all the spaces of the room, alighting on the bed, on her face, her hands, her hair, resting on her eyes. (Grace 2006: 14)

The woman's death is as calm as her whole life. At this moment she accepts her fate, just as she did throughout her life. She dies unnoticed and alone.

As it has been shown, the plot of the story contains various references to silence. Yet, silence in the text can also be found in the narrative mode. The story is related as a third-person account, by means of external focalization. The woman is never given any voice of her own and her actions are constantly narrated using the camera eye technique. The entire text is descriptive and lacks any dialogue or even monologue. The woman is also unnamed; hence she is devoid of any particular identity. In this manner, Grace makes her character represent the multitude of old and lonely people. According to John B. Beston,

[i]n depicting her Maori characters, Grace is concerned most of all with establishing their common humanity. The activities she characteristically shows them engaged in are cyclic ones associated with the phases of life, familiar to all human beings: pregnancy and birth, schooldays, adolescence, courtship and marriage, aging, dying and death. (1984: 42)

Grace also addresses the omnipresent issue of the disruption of human communication. The title of the story evokes busy telephone lines, supposed to establish a connection between people. But these people reject contact. The phones that the woman hears ring only in her imagination, as none of her relatives wish to maintain contact with her.

Another story deserving analysis here is “Eben”. Jones considers “Eben” to be “the strongest story in the volume” (2007: 8). And indeed, the story provides a compelling account of the life and death of a misshapen, rejected boy living in an orphanage. As not much is known, people invent stories about the reasons of his disability. Nobody is willing to help him, but Eben eventually finds a home with a woman called Pani:

Pani [...] had spent twenty years living in the same orphanage. It was the only place she had been able to call home, and though not all memories of it were good she had some affection for the place and knew what it meant to have someone visit now and again. She found in this crooked boy, who had been named George by those who had registered him, a kind of kindred spirit. The name George, she thought, was disrespectful to the boy, being given to him because of the death of the king at the time he entered the orphanage. Staff sometimes referred to him as King George, and knowing the ways of some people of the institution, she knew the name had been given to him as a joke. (Grace 2006: 45)

Pani’s story seems to parallel that of Eben’s, just as in “Stealing Mark” the narrator’s story is compared to Mark’s fate. Despite having been given a proper name, Pani describes herself as being “left, not chosen” (Grace 2006: 46). Full of compassion for the maltreatment of the boy, Pani decides to steal Eben and escape with him to another town. The boy is considered a burden for any institution, so they are not sought. Eben is mute, he does not possess the ability to speak, yet he is a brilliant listener and he gradually develops a passion for music. After his foster mother dies, Eben starts performing in the streets – he attempts to dance, but his movements are ridiculous and the passers-by either laugh or stare at him. Eventually, Eben dies similarly to his whole life – in silence:

One Saturday morning, just as the market was closing down prior to the regular shops opening, Eben fell dead curled round his transistor. Stall holders were taking down canopies, lugging box-

es, loading trucks and vans, filling bags, folding tables, piling roof-racks, starting motors, driving off. No one noticed Eben until the shopkeeper, whose doorway Eben was curled in, came to open up his shop. He had to step over the dead man in order to get inside and use the telephone. (Grace 2006: 57)

As in “Busy Lines”, the character dies unnoticed by anybody. Death, according to Grace, is thus not viewed as an important event in the contemporary world. Life is no longer a precious value to be cherished, as people have stopped caring about each other.

However, not all the stories presented by Patricia Grace are kept in the realistic mode. In the collection, Grace relies not only on New Zealand mythology, but also on Maori beliefs. With the use of a distinctly Maori mode, Grace draws the readers’ attention to the Maori issue even more persistently. As Adrienne E. Gavin claims, “[Grace] weaves Maori mythology and storytelling into a contemporary plot that contrasts old Maori ways with the new” (2008: 419). According to Jones, “Moon Story” and “Flash Story” “translate the traditional tales of Rona and the moon and of Tuwhaki [sic!] into contemporary idiom and concepts” (2007: 8).

“Moon Story” is set soon after a conflict between two tribes. The women are busy restoring the households when Rona decides to bring water. On her way, she trips and falls down. She curses the Moon for her accident, as a consequence of which the Moon kidnaps Rona and places her in its window. The story presents the manner in which Maori people understand the occurrences in their lives – be that good or evil – as a natural part of their lives. Rona accepts her fate, so does her family, in a way all Maori do.

“Flash Story” is a parable abundant in magical elements. It tells of Tawhaki who cannot find his place in the world because of his being different: “[i]t was really the underarm lightning which caused him problems from the time when he was a child, marking him out as being different and not quite belonging, someone who must be from another realm” (Grace

2006: 186). The story is based on the myth of Ponaturi, hostile goblins, who killed the father of the adventurer. At the end of the story, Tawhaki understands that he is the only person to decide about his life and find his own place of belonging.

As Jones notices, also the story titled “Stepping Out” evokes the idea of “the odd, the weird, or the supernatural” as a part of Maori lives (2007: 8). The grandfather is described as having a double self:

It was when she let go of his feet that she saw the other one of him, rising up, standing tall and naked and glistening. This other one began stepping backwards on high-stepping feet, tipping his head from side to side, widening his eyes at her, eyes which gleamed like shells. (Grace 2006: 23)

Apparently, the grandmother saves the man from dying upon their first meeting as the double self is also visible at his death as an old man.

Paola Della Valle offers a commentary on the use of supernatural elements, underlining that it is a prominent characteristic in Grace’s writing. In her opinion, the elements of the extraordinary emphasise the Maori reliance on spirituality as a binding force for the community. As she claims, Grace’s fiction is

[e]voking a paradigmatic world where humans, nature and inanimate objects interact and are all attributed spiritual qualities. The account of dreams, premonitions and extraordinary events is seen as the character’s ability to communicate with and participate in a larger spiritual reality. (Della Valle 2010: 108)

To conclude, Patricia Grace’s collection of stories titled *Small Holes in the Silence: Short Stories* is a poignant overview on the condition of humanity. Grace’s stories allow the reader to encounter a variety of human problems and present a world where silence and voice intertwine.

After years of colonial repression of the Maori voice, Grace attempts to show Maori community as diverse, defying unification and objectivisation. As Jones claims, “[t]he stories focus on Maori life as subjectively experienced, not as conceptually analysed” (2007: 7). Grace’s voice is a voice from the inside, even if her stories take the form of third person narration – the narrator comes from within the community.

The lives of Maori people are still pervaded with silence, as they retain a memory of colonial exploitation. The stories titled “To Russia with Love” and “Doll Woman” are meant to underline the parallelisms of the repressive situations in the countries where people’s voice was silenced. The violence that is shown in “Until We Meet Again” is also aimed to underline the need to take revenge for the past abuse. The collection itself reminds of the abuse, of the silencing of Maori people who still remember their humiliation.

“In the oral form of telling history, the narrative belongs to the narrator” (Binney 2004: 210). As Grace’s collection evokes the sense of orality of the stories told/written in it, Binney’s assertion is valid for this work, too. The stories conform to the principles of Maori tradition: the history of Maori people is remembered by means of retelling the personal stories of specific characters, very often endowed with magical attributes. Even if they provide subjective accounts of a person’s life, the stories still serve as examples of general rules governing the Maori world and can be seen as universal.

Interestingly, even if the story itself is not set in New Zealand, characters that Grace focuses her attention on are mostly native inhabitants of New Zealand. The short stories are set in a realistic mode, but also contain elements of the supernatural, which adds to the complexity of the presentation of Maori experience. It is the issues of this society in particular that Grace attempts to shed light on, enabling the indigenous people of New Zealand to be heard about.

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