

Desecration of the Body and the Maori Cultural Invasion: A Perspective in Patricia Grace

¹*Sarangadhar Baral, ²Marlyn Lalnunmawii Sailo

Abstract

The subversion of patriarchal literary forms is an important aspect of postcolonial women's writing. From Patricia Grace's example, the young Maori writers somewhat present a socially subversive identity for themselves, telling stories of women who challenge social norms and female stereotypes. Their narratives reflect a strong interest in social issues – issues such as the way power is asserted and distributed in society, issues of legitimate authority, and strategies for effective management. The stories presented by Maori women in their stories are often constructed as social or cultural problems rather than as individual, personal problems. Grace also incorporates this important function of the expression, construction and exploration of a distinct identity of Maori/indigenous women in society. By challenging Western feminism's basis in liberal humanist thinking and its assumptions of a shared marginality of the gendered individual, Grace puts an emphasis on a common experience of oppression. The mutilation of a female body in her fiction projects an unholy and complicitous dynamics of the male, imperialism, power system, sex, education, and erasure of the Indigenous identity.

Keywords: *body, invasion, erasure, Maori, gender.*

Introduction

Postcolonial discourses take a turn towards the questioning of conventional forms and modes, unmasking the foundational assumptions of canonical constructions and destabilizing them (Ashcroft et al. 173). Postcolonial women writers have re-examined conventional literature and demonstrated clearly that 'a canon is produced by the intersection of a number of readings and reading assumptions legitimized in the privileging hierarchy of a patriarchal and metropolitan concept of literature' (173). In Grace's fictional text *Baby No-Eyes*, the female characters Gran Kura, Te Paania and the baby challenge stereotypical representations of women and offer points of discussion in the politics of women writing. Gran Kura recounts her childhood attending a British-run school where she and her schoolmates were all forbidden to speak their native Maori language, but instead forced to speak English. Grace narrativizes various factors contributing to this phenomenon of domination and trauma.

Invasion and Desecration

The legacy of imperial education is starkly exposed in the text through the education system that Gran Kura and the Maori children are forced to go through. Gran Kura testifies that she and other Maori children were 'afraid our bad language might come out' at school, meaning the Maori language (Grace *Baby* 33). They were taught to hate their native names and language and embrace the English language. The result of this mistreatment is felt most acutely by Riripeti, Gran Kura's younger cousin. The fear of school became too much for Riripeti that she died 'killed by school' and 'dead of fear' (38). Gran Kura internalizes this trauma, exclaiming "What an evil girl I was to let her die," pinning the shame on herself as she was assigned the responsibility of taking care of her 'teina,' her little sister, by her elders. The loss of the life of a little girl because of the effects of imperialism parallels the loss of the eyes of Te Paania's dead daughter elsewhere in the text. Te Paania's baby has her body mutilated and her eyes stolen in a hospital, an institution which represents a dominant power. The desecration of the baby's body and on a larger scale, the function of Te Paania's body can be read as an exploration of the connection between imperialism and gender violence. The female body and its functions are used as a metaphor for both the invaded geographical territory and the patriarchal incursion into women's lives. It invites an examination of the double violence endured by women who live in countries and cultures with a colonial past or present. Gayatri Spivak states in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' that

[b]oth as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (287)

In the fiction *Baby No-Eyes*, the female characters Gran Kura, Te Paania and the baby challenge stereotypical representations of women and offer points of discussion in the politics of women writing.

Grace uses the mutilation of a dead baby and the violation of Te Paania's body function to show not only the violation of an indigenous body but also an aspect of violence associated with political hegemony that affects women specifically.

¹* Professor, Department of English, Mizoram University

² Research Scholar, Department of English, Mizoram University

The double burden of dealing with prejudices against race and sex is a legacy of what M.A. Jaimes Guerrero calls 'patriarchal colonialism' (65). It indicates the impact of colonialism and patriarchy on indigenous peoples, especially on women as it manifests in the erosion of their indigenous rights. A deconstruction of patriarchal colonialism brings the understanding that it is a legacy of colonialism that brought over to a colonized land Eurocentric notions of the inferiority of other non-white and non-Western races, and of all women in general, versus the presumed superiority of the Anglicized, Euro-American male. (65)

Shannon Speed and Lynn Stephen state that 'structural forms of settler power combine with recent juridical frameworks, security policies, and economic forces structure current expressions of violence in Indigenous women's lives and the means they may use to resist them' (3). They further claim that 'gendered violence has always been a part of the genocidal and assimilationist projects of settler colonialism' (4). The European colonial project brought and imposed racial and gender tropes of the uncivilized, savage, and thus disappearing Indigenous woman (10). Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack state:

For indigenous women, colonization has involved their removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of colonial control over Indigenous communities, through the management of women's bodies, and sexual violence. (1)

The gendered violence of colonization was constitutive of the modern settler state, and the state is structured on that violence, at once generating it and normalizing it (11). Their bodies have been historically rendered 'less valuable because of what they are taken to represent: land, reproduction, Indigenous kinship and governance, an alternative to heteropatriarchal and Victorian rules of descent' (Simpson 10). These assumptions made by imperialists construct Indigenous women as the inevitable subjects of sexual violence and control. Grace fictionalizes these tropes of the Indigenous woman in the novel *Baby No-Eyes* through the experiences of the Gran Kura, Te Paania and the dead baby.

The greatest injustice done to Te Paania in the *Baby No-Eyes* is the theft of her dead daughter's eyes moments after she was born at a hospital. After inquiring the whereabouts of the baby, Te Paania's family is informed that the hospital administration is 'having trouble locating the body' and that perhaps it is 'misplaced' (61). The hospital administration initially returns the baby with its eyes missing, but when the family demands that the eyes are returned, 'the eyes were brought to them in a container inside a plastic supermarket bag (64). The defilement of the baby's body is indicative of a violation of the reproductive function of a woman's body. It is symbolic of the mistreatment of an indigenous woman's body by a dominant power manifested in the authority of the hospital administration. Brutal killing is morally allowed in a colonizer's book of power and knowledge.

The theft of the baby's eyes also grotesquely re-enacts the bodily dismemberment and ritualistic eating of the opponents' body parts, especially the eyes, to demoralize the enemy and to confer additional mana on the victor in Maori culture (Wilson 273). This dominated the ceremony of violent death. Gran Kura explains the ethos of revenge that justified such cannibalism:

It meant death, especially of chiefly people, victors giving insult to the living by cooking and eating the flesh of their chiefly dead. It meant cutting the heads off of heads to destroy tapu, the eating of the heart to demean, the swallowing of chiefly eyes – revenge turning on revenge. (Grace *Baby* 110)

This official insensitivity towards the 'Other's' dead is compounded by the suspicion that the hospital was using Baby's body for genetic material. Bioprospecting – seeking for the genetic bits of endangered peoples – is seen by Te Paania, and Makahi, an activist lawyer, as a potential threat to their autonomy and façade of dignity (187–88).

In Frantz Fanon's writing, where "every scene of violence oscillates between two discursive attractors: the instrumental and absolute," violence becomes instrumental when the colonized rises up against the colonized to challenge oppression, to "wreck the colonial world" (31). Fanon provides a framework for identifying the different uses of violence in postcolonial Maori fiction. As Patrice Wilson argues, it reaffirms a claim to a residual identity, as a symbolic act of repossession, "recreated because that identity was under threat of destruction from an imposing colonial culture" (120). Fanon presents the absolute violence of decolonization which destroys both colonizer and colonized and makes way for a new beginning. The abused, battered body of the stillborn baby in *Baby No-Eyes* can 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 psychic amendment. In suggesting the need for a new order, a change in the social sphere, these bodies appear as potential spiritual sources of agency.

Apart from violence meted out by institutions of power, Grace also broaches the topic of domestic violence through Te Paania and Gran Kura. Otto Heim observes that violence features powerfully in the structures of narrativization in contemporary Maori writing, and the use of ethnic bodies as sources of oppression or sites of subjugation is commonplace in the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s (50). Whether originating in the public or the private sphere, acts of assault and physical violation creating dismemberment, fragmentation, severance, crippling or maiming, and leading to death or near-death states, dominate. Patrice Wilson notes that violence in Grace's fiction usually occurs off-stage, and its effects are reflected in the characters' actions and attitudes (14). Te Paania is married to Shane, the father of her stillborn daughter. She finds herself in an abusive marriage even though she married out of love. She recalls the signs of violence in Shane in the early stages of her marriage, "Most of the glasses had been smashed by Shane by the time our baby began to be obvious. Pots and pans were dented and bent and windows were broken, though nothing awful happened to me" (22). It is not just Te Paania who experiences domestic violence in the novel. Gran Kura recalls the abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband Jack Hepetema. She confides in her grandmother. "I don't like my husband. He gets drunk, gets on other women and comes home putting his fists into me in places where bruises don't show" (256). The suffering endured

by Te Paania and Gran Kura highlight the plight of indigenous women who are victims of domestic violence. Their stories and experiences are symbolic of the double violence experienced by indigenous women as they are victims of western institutions and marital/domestic violence.

It is also interesting to note that much of Shane's anger and disillusionment with life comes from the meaninglessness of his name. He was given the name Shane, a 'pakeha' name to fit in with his schoolmates and to make his white teachers happy – 'a name for a Pakeha, a name for Pakeha teachers to like. To make me be like them' (26). Shane condemns his name as he is clear that he will never fit in with the white children but also never able to claim his Maori-ness as he does not have a Maori name. The pain and anger that Shane feels over his pakeha name is suggestive of the extensive detrimental effects of colonialism and imperialism. The female body thus become a site of violence perpetrated by the lingering effects of patriarchal colonialism.

Brutalizing the Body

According to Linda McDowell, 'gender and cultural studies discourses on the cult of the body. . . and on body politics, conceived metaphorically, in line with early Western political theory, or as formulated by feminist movements as a woman's right to control her own body, have positioned the body as "a central object of personal concern, as well as a key social issue" (36). The feminist geographer Doreen Massey concedes that "if there is one thing which has most certainly demonstrated its flexibility in an age which as a whole is frequently accorded that epithet, it is sexism" (212). Bryan Turner points out, the control of bodies is still exercised mainly as the control of female bodies, any analysis of the body must also address issues of patriarchy and gerontocracy (233).

In the postcolonial context, analyses of the corporeal representations of female protagonists in literature are further complicated by the fact that in many countries women writers have encountered great difficulties when trying to address issues of sexuality, gender oppression and inequality (Loomba 229). Various critics have pointed to the different positioning and significance of the female body in a colonial and postcolonial context. Françoise Lionnet writes that '. . . in postcolonial literature the gendered and racialized body of the female protagonist is consistently overdetermined; it is a partial object on which are written various cultural scripts and their death-dealing blows (87).

Throughout history, women have been seen as restricted to their bodies. Their bodies can be seen as the ultimate spaces of confinement, marked by the way they are appropriated, predominantly by men but also by their own families (McDowell 36). The ambiguity of 'body' space as a site of repression but also of resistance is reflected in the female characters of Grace. In 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. The maternal, productive, nurturing body is associated with Te Paania, in particular when the birth of her second child, Tawera, is described.

Grace's powerful women figures can be identified with other images of indigenous women whose bodies are strongly situated within their environments and whose consciousness is represented as an extension of the body. These concepts of the body contrast to Western and Eurocentric depictions of white middle-class women in which the mind dominates the body or, alternatively, exists without a body. They can be approached through phenomenological theories which deny the Cartesian dualism of mind and body and focus on bodily sentience, the body's being in the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for whom consciousness is always situated in a particular location, posits that the development of conscious awareness and knowledge is grounded in the primordial coexistence between the body and the world. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he argues that the relational unity between the body, space, time and consciousness – or being in the world – is the context for human thought and knowledge: "I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them." (162)

The body is most completely situated when it is enclosed in the mother's womb. In the Prologue to *Baby No-Eyes*, the unborn infant, Tawera, reproduces the rhythmic pulsations of his mother's walk:

The first thing I knew I was bumping along, the sound of my mother's feet going lap, lap, and breath coming and going fast in and out of her nose. Lap, lap over a hard smooth surface, such as a road. (8)

Swimming in the amniotic fluid, he reproduces baby talk: [My mother ...] went to sleep while I went slow, slow swimming, hi-aa, heiaa, hi-aa, hei-aa, then curled myself and went to sleep too, karm, karm, all the way, all the day in the bus. (9–10)

The infant's immersion in the mother's body is represented stylistically in ways which resemble the Kristevan semiotic space, the prelinguistic chora that indicates a pre-verbal language of the unconscious which takes its rhythms, sensations and inflections from the movements of the movements of the mother's body, which Grace reproduces. Such extensions of the individual's material body into a space-time continuum are elaborated into the metaphoric concept of 'the centred being,' a 'bodily' image of the existence in the present moment of the oral, storytelling tradition. Through the voice of Tawera, Grace expounds a nonlinear concept of time, focussing on the motif of 'the spiral of cyclical being' to define the way stories mesh and overlap with successive retellings, becoming relevant to the lives of contemporary tellers.

The image of the centred, strong mother also emerges in the figure of the kuia or koroua, i.e., the grandmother, a source of wisdom and ancestral lore in Maori fiction. In *Baby No- Eyes*, Gran Kura assumes this title. Powerful mythic mothers and grandmothers who are repositories of knowledge, who collect and hoard memories in order to foster ancestral links with the precolonial past, feature in other works by indigenous women writers. In *Baby No-Eyes*, Grace creates an unbroken link with the past through Te Paania, her husband's grandmother Kura and the deceased baby herself, who

returns to haunt the family. The chain of being is completed by the deceased baby as a liminal, ghostly presence. Together they create an unbroken link with the past, drawing on spiritual forces in order to unlock its traumas. The maternal domain of power stretches over three generations connected by kinship and marriage. Female solidarity emerges from the grandmother, Gran Kura, her granddaughter-in-law Te Paania and Te Paania's stillborn daughter.

Lorraine Bethel comments, "Women have defied the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self affirming rituals" (176). Such writing also insists on its otherness by introducing elements of magic, myth, and the supernatural, and by using disjunctive, non-linear narratives which are nevertheless grounded in the historical past. The supernatural interventions in the strongly realized real worlds of Grace are presented in ways that demand acceptance of both modes, so that neither takes precedence over the other. In the polyphonic narrative structure of *Baby No-Eyes*, Grace conveys the collective response of the community to events, implying that what is experienced by one is shared by all. The process of recuperation, founded in a contemporary politics of resistance, depends on another domestic image, that of the broken and maimed body. Through the image of wounding, the spiritual forces which the wise, intuitive but maimed child embodies, are able to intervene in the symbolic sphere.

Conclusion

Apart from highlighting transnational agendas, postcolonial women writers have kept the conversation of postcolonial nation going with an awareness of their position in it. The narratives of the lived experiences of women have conventionally been regarded as secondary in defining national myths. Postcolonial indigenous writer like Grace counters this mode of narrative by exploring the intricate interconnection of personal lives often of women with the nation's official history. Cixous pointedly states, "Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history" (882). Grace's writings often reveal how women occupy different spaces that diverge from a male-dominated homogenous space of the nation while sometimes overlapping with it. The space that thus arises as a result of the overlap marks an important shift in women's writing. Amidst the impersonal forces engendered by globalization which confines rather than amplify women's agency, the nation emerges as validated sites of political opposition where women can form solidarities to counter such forces. While being critical of the policies of their homeland, women writers value their nations as a space for cultural, ethical and emotional recovery amidst the impact of globalization. Grace's writing in this does bring the female space to a center stage.

Works Cited

1. Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 2004.
2. Bethel, Lorraine. "'This Infinity of Consciousness Pain': Zora Neale Hurston and the Black
3. Female Literary Tradition". *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, edited by Barbara Smith, Gloria Hull and Patricia Bell Scott. Feminist Press, 1982. Pp. 176-89.
4. Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa". *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875-893, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3173239
5. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin, 1990.
6. Lionnet, Françoise. *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*. Cornell UP, 1995.
7. Guerrero, M.A. Jaimes. "Patriarchal Colonialism and Indigenism: Implications for Native Feminist Spirituality and Native Womanism". *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2003, pp. 58-69, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3811011
8. Huhndorf, Shari M. and Cheryl Suzack. "Indigenous Feminism: Theorizing the Issues."
9. *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*, edited by Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perreault, and Jean Barman. U of British Columbia P, 2010. Pp 1– 17.
10. Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Routledge, 1998.
11. Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place, and Gender*. U of Minnesota P, 1994.
12. McDowell, Linda. *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Polity, 1999.
13. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Psychology Press. 2002.
14. Simpson, Audra. "The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty." *Theory and Event*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2016, pp. 1-30. *Project MUSE*, www.muse.jhu.edu/article/633280.
15. Speed, Shannon and Lynn Stephen (eds). *Indigenous Women and Violence*. U of Arizona P, 2021.
16. Turner, Bryan S. *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. Sage, 1996.
17. Wilson, Janet. "Suffering and Survival: Body and Voice in Recent Maori Writing". *Bodies and Voices: The Force-Field of Representation and Discourse in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Merete Falck Borch, Eva Rask Knudsen, Martin Leer and Bruce Clunies Ross. Rodopi, 2008. Pp. 267-285.
18. Wilson, Patrice. "Patricia Grace's *Potiki*: Diminished Violence". *World Literature Written in English*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1997, pp. 120-30. Taylor and Francis Online, doi.org/10.1080/17449859708589279