



## ARTICULATING THE SUPPRESSED VOICES OF THE INDIGENOUS: MAORI CULTURAL IDENTITY IN PATRICIA GRACE'S *BABY NO-EYES*

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### Abstract

This article examines how Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes* (BNE) amplifies Maori cultural identity. Specifically, this study discusses how the novel places Maori in the center as a way to subvert the colonial and conventional way of writing about the indigenous people. The data is collected from the novel's narrative structure, points of view, and contents. The analysis focuses on the narrative about the marginalization of Maori by the White people. The novel uses a non-linear narrative that resembles Maori's story-telling tradition, offering an alternative way of telling stories greatly dominated by modern Western linearity. The novel also employs multiple points of view, representing the egalitarian Maori tradition of giving chances to everybody in telling stories in the community hall. In terms of its contents, BNE foregrounds fundamental issues to the survival of Maori in the land that has been controlled by European descendants. These range from the issue of land rights to the contemporary life of Maori. This article argues that the novel offers a dual approach in articulating the voice of the subaltern: the narrative of resistance in the novel and the invitation for Maori to negotiate their tradition and customs in the changing world.

## INTRODUCTION

The post-colonial period in formerly colonized countries has brought about different impacts on almost every aspect of human life. In literature, indigenous writers across different countries have their own ways of fighting against the colonizers' attempts to control the production of the mainstream culture. These writers have been articulating their "commitment to the decolonizing struggle for justice, dialogue, and respect for lands and peoples" (Wilson, 1999, p. 10).

The voices of native women in the post-colonial world have been frequently silenced. In the male-dominated world, women are the party who are disadvantaged most. The marginalization of women is worsened in the post-colonial world, where the West still has its traces of domination in the production of narratives about the natives. In this context, women writers have a pivotal role in articulating the voices of women in literary texts.

Pacific women writers have also been involved in their attempts to resist the domination of the West in cultural production. Compared to other formerly colonized regions, such as in African countries, the involvement of Pacific women writers in producing the narratives of the natives is much more significant. According to Sylvie Andre, one cause of the prolificacy of women writers is their relatively high literacy level. It differs from the situation in many African countries where their rural milieu is more orientated to domesticity and herding. These are culturally considered to be the domain of women (André, 2009, pp. 201–202).

Wilson asserts that through the writings of Keri Hulme, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, and others, "the Pacific is being re-imagined and reconfigured in ways that enhance the dignity of Pacific Peoples" (1999, p. 5). The revisioning of the Pacific people by those indigenous writers results in more representative writings about Pacific people since they are written by an insider of the culture. Those writers want to redirect the representation of their own people and culture, which has been much distorted by the colonizers. Wilson further argues that in the context of "colonial damages and post-colonial renewals, one must read texts not just as literary icons but as sites of social representation and historical struggle" (p. 1). In this respect, one must read post-colonial texts as a means or medium by which the colonized resists or unsettles the existing representation of their people and culture by the colonizer.

Wilson's argument about post-colonial narratives as sites to voice the indigenous writers' resistance against the colonizer is also affirmed by Ramsay (2012), Pistacchi (2009), and Bardolph (1990). These three researchers highlight how Pacific writers, including Patricia Grace, strongly claimed their indigenous identity in their works. The three studies imply that there is an absence of negotiation or compromise in voicing the subaltern identity. According

to them, Pacific writings discussed in the studies present the imagined world predominantly from the indigenous people's points of view. Consequently, the colonizer or the white people are placed on the periphery and subordinated in the alternative binary opposition created by these indigenous writers.

My argument in this study challenges the arguments of the three studies. Despite articulating the agency of the Maori in resisting the domination of European descendants in their land, Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes (BNE)* opens a room for negotiation with white people (Pakeha). This slightly ambiguous approach differentiates the novel from other strongly political Maori writings. The dualistic approach of the writer in amplifying the agency of indigenous people is the main rationale for conducting this study. This article attempts to analyze ways through which Grace amplifies Maori cultural identity and subverts the domination of white people in the novel. Its post-colonial nature is discussed in terms of its literary and socio-political aspects.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Several studies on the writings by Maori writers highlight the ideological function of these narratives to challenge dominant representations of indigenous people. These representations are mainly shaped and produced by colonial discourse that is biased and Western-centred. These studies include the works of Ann Katherine Pistacchi (Pistacchi, 2009); Raylene Ramsay (Ramsay, 2012); and Michelle Keown (Keown, 2013). In the three studies, Maori writers, including Patricia Grace, use their writings as ideological sites to counter the narratives about indigenous people that have usually been told from the perspectives of Pakeha (white people).

Through this type of writing, indigenous writers in Australia and New Zealand express their agency. Rather than foregrounding their marginality, these writers challenge the domination of white supremacy in representing their subaltern position. In other words, these writers promote the notion of "the South" as a socio-cultural entity whose existence does not depend on the more economically superior North (Brewster et al., 2019, p. 90).

Although located geographically in the southern hemisphere, New Zealand is socio-culturally constructed in the North. Like Australia, white people in New Zealand have dominantly shaped the cultures and norms of the country. Pakeha has greatly impacted the socio-cultural landscape of the land. This results in the marginalization of its indigenous people, the Maori. The harsh life of indigenous people was portrayed in the works of Maori writers as mainly the impacts of colonial exploitation (Kroplewska, 2017).

The portrayal of the marginalization of Maori is the dominant theme of Maori writers belonging to the early Maori Renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s (Evers, 2020). Patricia Grace, who actively wrote fictions in the 1980s, can belong to this group. The early Renaissance writers, according to Evers, wrote stories that were not listened to (p.13). It means that the writings by Maori writers in this period were used to articulate the indigenous people's muted voices. The repression and muteness of the Maori were mainly caused by the domination of white people in representing them.

## **METHOD**

In examining how *BNE* articulates its anti-colonial resistance, the data is collected from the formal elements and the content of the novel. The formal elements investigated are the narrative structure and the points of view. Meanwhile, the novel's contents examined are related to socio-political issues of the domination of Maori people by white people.

The narrative structure is examined in terms of how it challenges the narrative structure of Western modernity associated with linearity and singularity. In a modern Western mode of writing, the narratives are normally structured in a linear way. Rather than narrating in a cyclical mode using flashbacks, linear narratives follow a chronological path that tells what happens from one point of an event to the next.

In examining the cyclical nature of the text, this study identifies specific narrative strategies employed in *BNE* to amplify its subversive mission. In addition, this article discusses the ways those strategies reflect Maori customs and traditions. The socio-political aspects of the novel are discussed in relation to a number of key issues for Maori. These include the Treaty of Waitangi and the marginalization of Maori identity.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Literary Aspects**

The plot or narrative structure of *BNE* is not a linear one. Unlike conventional novels, which have a beginning and ending, *BNE* does not have this sense of linear continuation. The novel begins with the prologue spoken by Tawera, who is still a foetus inside his mother's womb. Then, the narrative goes back hundred years of time through Gran Kura's point of view, telling stories of her past experiences. The story goes forward and backward again until it reaches around the time near today. This way of telling stories resembles how old Maori people retell stories. Gran Kura, who represents the older generation, uses this way of telling stories:

“There is a way the older people have of telling a story, a way where the beginning is not the beginning, the end is not the end. It starts from a centre and moves away from there in such widening circles that you don’t know how you will finally arrive at the point of understanding, which becomes itself another core, a new centre.” (Grace, 1998, p. 28).

Patricia Grace, in an interview with Liz DeLoughrey and Susan Hall, also acknowledges this circular nature of story-telling in her novel. She says that she has a strong sense of writing or telling which is started from a center and reaches out and draws in from there (DeLoughrey & Hall, 1999, p. 14). She thinks that “writing is like a weaving in the way these different forms of story-telling cross each other, and the strands become woven together” (p.14). It implies that Grace does not just retell different stories of different people without any purpose. What she tries to achieve is a coherent unity from those seemingly disintegrated sub-stories. Indeed, Grace has successfully achieved her purpose.

By displaying these different sub-stories, she has also incorporated some values and elements considered to be important by the Maori people. Crucial elements of Maori life, such as land and family genealogy, have been foregrounded through these sub-stories. Through the stories of Gran Kura, readers can be more aware of the importance of genealogy for Maori people. In one of her stories, Gran Kura tells about her biological mother, Rebecca, who is actually not the wife of Gran Kura’s father. She is her mother’s sister, who gave birth to Gran Kura and her brother. Kura’s own mother is childless, and Rebecca’s big family asks her to help her childless sister. The family asks Rebecca to bear children with Rebecca’s husband. It is done to preserve the family’s genealogy and the genealogy of the sister’s husband. Rebecca’s husband sadly agrees to consent since he realizes he has no right to refuse. He is a man of no land and no property, and by marrying Rebecca, he has taken her away from her family.

The sense of combined effect and cohesion from those sub-stories can be felt if one reads carefully at the prologue and epilogue of *BNE*. The prologue is introduced by Tawera, who is still a foetus in her mother’s womb. Grace can skillfully depict the way he explores the world outside him. Since he never knows the outside world, he observes the world naively. He cannot name precisely the place on which he and his mother walk. He is not exactly sure whether the place is a boulevard, street, or road:

It was black – with – rain boulevard where we bumped along at drizzly dawnbreak. High wet trees. Houses of white stucco, stained wood, blond and brown brick, wrought iron and Decramastic tile.  
Boulevard?  
All right, road. Straight, wide and tree – line, with fine gates and front fences.  
Magnificent gardens.  
Haw.

Let me think...It was grand.  
But anyway, road. Street...(Grace, 1998, p. 7).

Tawera describes the street, or whatever the name is, as how he sees it. He is certainly unaware that the juxtaposition of “houses of white stucco, stained wood, blond and brown brick” might imply a different perception for an adult observer. An adult can possibly associate this juxtaposition with the juxtaposition of Pakeha and Maori. However, in the epilogue, Tawera becomes a mature artist who is fully aware of the world around him. As an artist, he is now able to explore things around him in a different way from the way he explored the world when he was a child. He is able to make the invisible visible and explore other alternatives and things that people might never try. The notice that says “try opposite” between two concrete buildings awakened his awareness of seeing the world differently. It can also imply how Grace has cut the edges by trying to use a different way of telling stories—different from the established and conventional narrative structure. As Robinson affirms, although the speakers in Grace’s novel speak differently, “the combined effect is of cohesion rather than confusion, of narrational unity rather than metafictional disintegration” (1993, p. 25). Tawera is an example of a character who can comprehend all the happenings within his family. He starts the novel as a naïve foetus and ends it as a mature artist. Readers can also feel the combined effect of those different stories through the re-emergence of Tawera as an artist who can now paint his long-dead sister. He is able to make the invisible visible.

Regarding points of view in the novel, there are four different narrators that tell their own stories. It differs from conventional novels, which are usually told from a single perspective. Those narrators are Gran Kura, Te Paania, Tawera, and Mahaki. Gran Kura tells her past stories and memories; her accounts are often about her and her family’s trauma. Te Paania is the mother of the stillborn baby and Tawera. She can represent the present generation of Maori women who must survive in contemporary Aotearoa. Mahaki is a gay lawyer who is also Tawera’s substitute father. These multiple narrators add to the complexity of the novel. Yet, A’Court (1998) argues that they actually constitute a single Maori voice. It contradicts what Nelson Wattie argues about the intrusion caused by different narrators in the novel. Wattie asserts that constant intrusion can confuse readers (Wattie, 1999, p. 15).

Nevertheless, all the narrators speak of common ideas shared by other Maori people. They talk about their rights to land, their dispossession of the land, and their marginalized cultural identity. By reading the novel, readers can get a sense of how the past has haunted the present and that past trauma determines the outlook and behavior of the future generation. Crowl (2002) argues, “Grace may be saying that we need to appreciate just how much the

contemporary struggles over land are not merely the result of treaty abused and misunderstood but also the result of damaged lives in the past affecting lives in the present.”

Whaitiri asserts that the narrative structure of *BNE* follows Maori custom, giving the oldest a chance to go first and the youngest last (2000, p. 55). The first chapter is told from the perspective of Gran Kura as the oldest in the family, and the novel is ended with a chapter told from the perspective of the youngest in the family, Tawera. Whaitiri further asserts that the way different characters are given a chance to speak is similar to Maori tradition in which everyone, regardless the status, gender, and age, is allowed to stand and speak in wharenuui or community hall (p. 55). Grace also confirms this point. In an interview with Tausky, she explicitly states that story-telling and the narrator are highly respected in the Maori community (Tausky, 1991, p. 99).

By allowing each character to speak and tell his or her own stories, Grace also implies the importance of stories for an individual. By telling their stories, people can show who they are and what happenings in the past that make them who they are in the present. Grace personally acknowledges that people or characters, rather than the storyline or plot, interest her more. She thinks telling about people and their relationship is interesting since events occur because of the people (Wilson, 1999, p. 70). Although different people tell different stories in the novel, the characters represent a Maori voice. Thus, by reading their different stories, readers can comprehend how Maori people are and what events have happened to them. These events shape the way Maori people are now.

### **Socio-Political Aspects**

*BNE* explores several issues related to the relationship between Pakeha and Maori in the past and present times. Those issues include land claims and the Treaty of Waitangi, the marginalization of Maori cultural identity, including the banning of the Maori language in schools, biotechnology, and genetic engineering.

Baby no-eyes, later known as Baby, is the name given to Tawera’s older sister, who is stillborn in an accident. During an autopsy in the hospital, the baby’s eyes are removed, and her body is discarded into a waste bin. For Baby’s family, this is very insulting since, for Maori people, a dead body must be respected and buried properly. This event shows a gap that has not been bridged between Maori and Pakeha concerning the importance of a dead body. Pakeha’s lack of knowledge about the issue makes Maori people insulted.

Another issue that causes misunderstanding between Maori people and Pakeha is the issue concerning land rights. Maori consider the land where they live now sacred because it keeps

the continuation of the genealogy. A piece of land belonging to a certain big family must be respected. Respecting the land means respecting the ancestors living before them. Through the stories of *Gran Kura*, one can know how Maori people in the past considered marriage a way to consolidate lands. On the other hand, Pakeha considers lands economic assets that can be traded to get money. They cannot understand why Maori people are struggling hard to get their lands back if they do not use the lands for economic reasons. The never-ending dispute over land rights between Maori and Pakeha seems rooted in this misunderstanding.

Grace is seemingly concerned with the incomplete communication between the two parties concerning those issues. Through the characters' stories in *BNE*, Grace attempts to achieve complete communication between Maori and Pakeha. McRae argues that "a primary social value for Grace is an obligation to reciprocal exchanges of talk or of the stories of our lives, through which we may achieve "complete communication" (McRae, 1993). She also asserts that a failure to share exchanges is also a problem between Maori and Pakeha. The absence of stories that are told and shared can cause silence, false talk, and misunderstanding (Grace, 1999, pp. 67–68). It is time to share those stories which have been silenced. In this context of the absence of mutual exchanges, Grace seems to bridge the gap. Through *BNE*, she tries to articulate Maori's views concerning the issues.

Grace helps to rewrite the narrative of colonization by creating a Maori world in *BNE*. Readers are invited to visit the world dominated by Maori people. All main narrators are Maori, and Pakeha characters are only peripheral. She has subverted the narrative that has been long established in the mainstream tradition. In the context of her subversion, Eagleton affirms that "if "New Zealand" is the master narrative – an open-ended epic of colonization and after – then storyteller Grace is helping rewrite the narrative to include "Aotearoa," legitimizing the marginal"(1992, p. 40). Clearly, her narrative is a revisioning narrative that reshapes an old narrative in a new way.

Despite her attempts to celebrate Maori identity in her novel, Grace also tries to depict the lives of contemporary Maori. Her novel shows the survival of Maori in the dual world, the world of Maori and Pakeha. Grace also tries to portray how Maori people negotiate with the changing world. Concerning arranged marriage in the past, Grace shows that Maori parents are now abandoning the practice, and they hope their children can get married to Pakeha. It happens to Gran Kura, whose marriage is not arranged anymore.

"There'd been no arrangement made for me because in those days we wanted to follow our hearts. Also our parents wanted us to marry Pakeha, so that we would be rich and get on in the world, and so that we would not be so dark and ugly. They wanted our children to be fair" (Grace, 1998, p. 255).



The quotation implies that marriage with Pakeha is one way Maori can fit in and get on in the world. That the world is now changing is also described by Grace through a sister who bears a child to her childless sister. This is openly practiced in the past to preserve the family's genealogy. Now, however, this is practiced secretly since Maori people are now afraid of Christian sin: "Now times had changed, which is why our parents went about this matter somewhat secretly, not family to family in the old way. They were aware of Christian sin" (Grace 1998, p. 162). In some ways, Maori traditional customs have been replaced by Christianity. Dealing with the survival of living in the two worlds, Eagleton argues that Grace has revealed the tattooed face of the Maori, the face of dual heritage (1992, p. 40). According to Eagleton, Grace "has fused Christian ideals of duty, responsibility and care towards others with the collective ideals of the Maori world" (1992, p. 40).

The presence of Tawera as a grown-up artist, who ends the narrative, also symbolizes the survival of the Maori world. His father is Pakeha, and his figure represents a contemporary Maori figure. The contemporary Maori figure is also represented by Mahaki, a gay radical lawyer who sacrifices his ideals to help his people regain their land rights. His status as gay is also an interesting issue. Grace seems to incorporate this phenomenon to have a thorough picture of contemporary Maori life. Mahaki is also described as having a nurturing characteristics. He has become the substitute father for Tawera. Grace has subverted another commonly-held notion of nurturing traits. People have culturally believed that only women have this characteristic.

The prologue of *BNE* also signals the changing of time and the world. In his mother's womb, Tawera observes the silence of the street where they pass by. The street is very silent as if the inhabitants had been taken out to outer space:

I've heard of that. People get taken, whole streets, whole towns of people. After a time they're sent back to earth but now are inhabited by other beings who are going to take over the world. These people, the returned ones, don't like to be inhabited. They want to be how they were before instead of how they are now, because they still have some memory of that, but there's nothing they can do (Grace, 1998, p. 8).

The situation applies to contemporary Maori life. Pakeha has taken over their world. They actually do not like the situation, but there is nothing they can do. What they can do to survive is fuse these two cultural values without losing their own cultural identity.

The novel is about connecting the past and future and two worlds. It is not only about the relationship between Pakeha and Maori that Grace is revisiting. She also tries to connect the deceased with the living through the relationship between Tawera and his dead sister. Baby has

become the other half of Tawera, and he can communicate spiritually with the spirit. She gets upset if Tawera ignores her, and the family gives her a special place on the dining table. The spirit is not presented as a spooky and scary character. Rather, it is the spirituality of Maori people that is being foregrounded.

## CONCLUSION

Regarding literary and socio-political aspects of the novel, Patricia Grace has eloquently enhanced her cultural identity as a Maori. She has successfully incorporated and revived Maori tradition and values, such as the importance of story-telling and genealogy, into the novel. Her narrative technique of using different points of view subverts the mainstream narrative technique employed by the established tradition. At first reading, this may disturb the joy of reading a linear narrative. After careful reading, however, readers can have a thorough picture of how Maori people are. The narrator's different stories have formed a cohesive narrative of the Maori people, told from a Maori perspective.

The sub-stories in the novel can make us aware of the importance of stories in shaping our personalities. Stories can make us what we are now. For Maori people, their past contributes greatly to their present and future. What Patricia Grace has displayed is in accordance with other indigenous writers' commitment to articulate their own voices and cultural identities. The novel has also successfully opened up the space between Pakeha and Maori so that they can have more space to negotiate and reciprocate.

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