

## TRANSCULTURATION IN *THE VENTRILOQUIST'S TALE*

### TRANSCULTURAÇÃO EM *A HISTÓRIA DO VENTRÍLOQUO*

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#### ABSTRACT

Transculturation is a key word in post-colonial encounters and involves the phenomena of colonial space, contact zone, cultural sites, transformation, adaptation and hybridity. In the context of the imbalances that the cross-cultural space reveals, the reaction of the colonial subject through parody, mimicry and sly civility in the novel *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1999) by Guyanese novelist Pauline Melville is discussed. European cultural hegemony represented by the adventurer, the religious and the intellectual is interrelated with a family group of savannahs Amerindians, with their mythology, culture and customs. The cross-cultural encounter shows the weakness of Western culture when the latter endeavors to other a 'primitive' community and treats its mores as subaltern and defective. The paradoxical attitudes of the Macusi Amerindians keep at bay the encroachments of disrupting Western culture, while their sly civility maintains their identity. However, this does not downplay colonial violence and the stratification policy it enforces. If the resulting hybridity ideologically reshaped colonized Amerindians, it also reveals the defeat the three European categories mentioned above suffered in the wake of their cultural encounter.

Key words: colonial encounters; hybridity; transculturation

#### RESUMO

Transculturação é uma palavra-chave no âmbito dos encontros coloniais e envolve o fenômeno do espaço colonial, zona de contato, espaço cultural, transformação, adaptação e hibridização. No contexto de desnível que o espaço cross-cultural revela, a reação do indivíduo colonial através da paródia, mímica e 'civildade dissimulada' no romance *A História do Ventríloquo* (1999), da autora guianesa Pauline Melville, é discutida. A cultura hegemônica européia representada pelo aventureiro, o religioso e o intelectual está inter-relacionada com um grupo familiar de ameríndios da savana guianesa; com seu costume, cultura e mitologia. O

encontro cross-cultural mostra a fraqueza da cultura ocidental quando o primeiro esforça-se para ‘rotular’ o outro como ‘primitivo’, tratando seus costumes como subalternos e defeituosos. As atitudes paródicas dos índios Macusi previnem as invasões da fragmentada cultura ocidental, enquanto a ‘civilidade dissimulada’ mantém sua identidade. Entretanto, isto não diminui a violência colonial e a política de estratificação que por ela é reforçada. Se o resultado híbrido reformula ideologicamente os ameríndios colonizados, também revela a falha das três categorias européias mencionadas acima, no despertar de seu encontro colonial.

Palavras-chave: encontros coloniais; hibridização; transculturação

### 1. Problematizing Transculturation

After the end of colonialism, between 1950 and 1970, we may have a pessimistic overview of its devastating results, especially for the native people who didn't gain anything by it, but just lost their own identity, especially their language and culture. In Africa, for instance, even after independence, the colonizers just took whatever they could from the territories to serve the metropolis's needs, while exploiting the native's labor; and after that, they would go away, leaving behind them misery, social and psychological chaos, disorder, frustration, instability, lack of attitude and, as a rule, a very strong feeling of dependence on the colonizers: this dependence would guarantee the European dominance a little further and then, the latter, in their astuteness, would rearrange a new strategy to keep on exploiting the natives.

As an example of this kind of exploitation we intend to analyze Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, published in 1997, which depicts postcolonial contacts between Europeans and Amerindians. The aim of this research is at transculturation aspect and the main characters involved in it are the ones responsible for reaching the hybrid encounter in the colonial frontier: the Scotsman Alexander McKinnon and his two Amerindian wives (natives from Guyana), the priest Napier and his relationship with the 'wild' Indians and, finally, the Irish nuns and the Amerindian peoples.

The story is set in South America, with Guyana as the contact zone. The two poles of transculturation are chiefly represented by Alexander McKinnon, the European, and his two native wives, Maba and Zuna, the Amerindians. Other very important colonial

encounters are extant: the priest Fr. Napier and his faithful; a British woman, Rosa Mendelson, takes the colonizer's role; she has a love affair with the Guyanese Chofoye, who is himself the descendent of Europeans and Amerindians: a good example of hybridization in the Guyanese colonial context.

### 2. The fabula of *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997)

Europe meets South America in this shrewd and enrapturing novel set in Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America, circa 1919. The novel is divided into three parts: the prologue, the story itself and the epilogue.

The story describes the life of Chofy McKinnon. Chofy is a poor farmer, aged forty, resigned to his monotonous life and marriage. When he goes to Georgetown with his old aunt Wifreda, who needs an eye operation, he meets Rosa Mendelson, an English scholar who is doing research on Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), a British writer who visited British Guyana in 1933. Rosa is delighted to learn that Chofy's aunt had met Waugh, and she is even more pleased when she realizes she can combine her literary research with a satisfying sexual relationship with the passionate Chofy. Differences in culture and background, however, prevent Rosa and Chofy from achieving intellectual as well as sexual harmony. The passages involving the above events are in chronological order and set in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana.

The second part of the story is told in a non-

chronological way because it is a flashback by Wifreda's stream of consciousness while recovering from her eye surgery. In fact, Wifreda is becoming blind, superstitiously attributed to Beatrice's curse because the former has discovered her incestuous relationship with her brother.

Auntie Wifreda starts to remember her past life in the Waronawa region, and everything that happened in her Indian village. Wifreda is Mamai Zuna's daughter. Maba and Zuna are full sisters and they are married to the same white man: Alexander McKinnon, a lean and energetic blue-eyed Scotsman in his 30s.

McKinnon arrives in the Indian village via Jamaica where he was raised. On the way he feels ill and is abandoned by the Indians in the middle of the forest. He finds the Wapisiana river village and Maba takes care of him, teaches him the Wapisiana language, and marries him. Photography is his great passion and pastime.

McKinnon married Maba and later Zuna, her sister. After having many children they still cohabited in a peaceful way since McKinnon appreciated that wild style of life. Beatrice and Danny, sister and brother respectively, had an incestuous relationship and a baby was born. They ran away from the tribe and after being found they were separated forever. She went to Canada and he married a Brazilian girl. The baby was left to Wifreda and one day he mysteriously disappeared.

After more than two decades, McKinnon decides to leave the village and returns to Scotland. He abandons his wives and the children. Later on, it is said that he married a Scotswoman and 'reshaped' his European personality to erase his previous life among Amerindians.

Wifreda continues to live with her husband and children and raising people's children in her husband's village. Chofoye returns to his wife after seeing his son, Bla-Bla, killed by a bomb explosion in an accident caused by the American who were invading the territory for oil. After that, all the McKinnons fly back to the Rupununi. Auntie Wifreda recovers her sight. In the meantime, Rosa returns to England and feels terrible without Chofy beside her. However, life in the Rupununi goes to normality again.

### 3. Transculturation Theory

The word *transculturation* was coined in the 1940s by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz and it has been used in a postcolonial context as a term to refer to the many different cultural encounters between colonized native people and colonizers from the metropolis in a colonial space: it is the *contact zone* (Pratt, 1992). The contact zone allows a very close contact among different peoples and this is something which causes the unbalance of power originating a cultural, political, educational, racial and other forms of *hybridity* (a mixing result). The *transcultural site* or the relations of domination and subordination are set by the foreign oppressors facing the oppressed ones in their homeland and frequently in the attempt of balancing their own society; they may be reshaped forever - material and ideologically speaking (Loomba, 1998).

What is necessary to have a transcultural episode?

First of all, there must be a colonial space in which the colonizers (in this case Europeans) are about to explore. After invading this space, all changes and shifts may happen because, once there is the transcultural experience, the colonial space will never be the same. When a colonial encounter occurs, it is impossible to return to the pure origin of being a native or a colonizer, or rather, the native will grasp something from the colonizer and vice-versa. These adding shifts, unpredictable and permanent, positive or negative, might occur on the basis of every single area, but especially in the psychological field, changing subsequent generations forever. For instance, the grandparents will behave and think in a different way from their parents but, at the same time, they will transmit all their knowledge to their children, adding their experience to their knowledge and so on, as in a life cycle. According to Pauline Melville 'it takes more than a life to make a man.' Therefore, every generation will be different from the previous one, in a constant change, because the contact zone is responsible for this kind of mixture, shifting and adding differences, which in the long run, are supposed to be balanced.

Through constant changes between natives and

foreigners in the contact zone, both sides, but mainly the exploited, try to adapt themselves to the new reality. The *transformation* and lack of identity in their homeland is terribly cruel once they do not hold economic power. Facing this *adaptation* process, the natives invent new strategies of survival, trying to regain their identity or reform it in order to survive in the colonial space. Bhabha calls this strategy *sly civility*: when, for example, the Amerindians wear the 'mask' of the Europeans through subterfuges to resist the colonial environment; they appear to be politically correct rather than rebellious, or rather, they arrange things to outlive the European imposition and diminish the impact of European imperialism.

Through the natives' strange questions it is possible to see, with historical hindsight, what they resisted in questioning the presence of the English as religious mediation and as cultural and linguistic medium... To the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, then mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. When the words of the master become the site of hybridity - the warlike sign of the native - then we may not only read between the lines, but even seek to change often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain (Bhabha, 1985, p. 42).

According to the above, it is possible to say that the transcultural phenomenon is ever-lasting and unchangeable because the hybrid, originated in the contact zone, is, in a sense, pure in itself and will bring more hybridity in a cross-cultural site and pureness in the process of creation: the more mixing shifts, the better for subsequent generations. This includes the power of *synergy* which joins the best qualities of both races, resulting in an 'improved being': that is why the contact zone is extremely important, because it is the setting place in which everything mentioned here effectively occurs.

*Transculturation* means in a way reciprocity, because there are reciprocal influences and changes involving A and B in the colonial encounter. 'Both sides appropriate and inscribe aspects of the *other* culture, creating new ideas and identities in the process. The line that separates inside and outside, the *self* and the

*other* are not fixed, but always shifting' (Loomba, 1998, p. 71).

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 4).

On the other hand, deculturation is not a fair attitude since the parties (A and B) are not equal. The result is the occurrence of hegemonic power and dominance by the European, imposing his religion, language, culture, law, rules, education and other factors. Therefore, the native Amerindians only deculturate themselves, losing their identities and formation, which may cause, according to Loomba (1998, p. 139), a rising insanity among the colonized people when they are unable to cope with change: colonial fears of loss of control. Frantz Fanon explains that resistance to colonial rule is routinely 'attributed to religious, magical, fanatical behavior' (apud Loomba, 1998). So, the closer colonial encounters occur, the more drastic deculturation is.

Acculturation is a 'collateral damage' in the contact zone as well. When the individual merely acculturates himself, his own identity is being lost to receive a foreign one and in this way the imperial regime is imposed. Here the European hegemonic power and predominance are really explicit, from the colonial encounters strategies to the effective domination. The colonizer's role is very clear, almost a synonym for imposition and domination. The differences between the colonizers and the colonized are then enlightened through the outcomes they originate. Pratt reiterates the importance of the *colonial frontier* which she calls the contact zone, defining it as 'where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (apud Loomba, 1998, p. 68). Césaire is even stricter when he says 'colonialism did not place

civilizations in contact'; he also emphasizes it that 'there was no human contact, but relations of domination and submission' (apud Loomba, 1998, p. 69).

On the whole, deculturation and acculturation are much more negative than transculturation, because the latter enables a shifting movement. Of course, frequently this shift is oriented or controlled by the Europeans, but it is, at least, reciprocal in order to maintain the natives' survival.

### 3.1 Transculturation and *The Ventriloquist's Tale*

#### 3.1.1 Encounter between McKinnon and wives Maba and Zuna

The first contact zone and, perhaps, the most important one in *The Ventriloquist's Tale* is exactly the encounter of the Scotsman McKinnon with Maba and Zuna, in the interior of Guyana. Maba and Zuna are two sisters from the Wapisiana tribe married to the same white man, Alexander McKinnon, a lean, energetic and blue-eyed Scotsman in his 30's who was saved by Maba when he lay sick and almost dying of fever in the jungle. Marriage with Maba produced Danny, Beatrice, Alice and Freddie; with Zuna only Wifreda.

Although McKinnon has a European education, he settles for the traditions of the Wapisiana people, although photography and reading are still his favorite pastimes. In fact, he is eager to keep a steady intellectual life, although it is very tough to do so in the interior of the forest. However, people from the city avoid and dislike him because he is a mixture of 'civilization along with wilderness'. On his rare visits to Georgetown, he always returned with books for his library and with photographic equipment.

He was aware that Maba and Zuna and the others on the settlement tolerated with good humor his efforts to be innovative because he often saw them catching each other's eyes and giggling when he suggested a new scheme. He wondered why they were never surprised or disappointed when each fresh idea of his failed and gradually he came to realize that they laughed at the idea of progress, despised novelty and treated it with

suspicion. Novelty, in fact, was dangerous. It meant that something was wrong with the order of things. Maba, particularly, treated his enthusiasm for innovation with squeaks of light-hearted derision.

It was confusing to McKinnon. He settled in to the life well at one level, but every now and then he caught a glimpse of a world he did not understand at all. [...] It was an illusion behind which lay the unchanging reality of dream and myth (Melville, 1999, p. 98-99).

Turning native brought advantages to McKinnon, inconceivable in Western society: he has two wives. Although by Western standards, polygamy is a crime, among Amerindian tribes it is not. On the other hand, he wants to introduce some innovations by showing the natives that what he knows is good if adapted to Indian reality and his knowledge would make wild life easier. However, the natives do take him seriously and only admit the 'intruder' in their quiet routine, without questioning or understanding very much.

There are losses and gains for a foreigner in this situation, and as he is European, usually more benefits than drawbacks exist. For instance, the practice of polygamy without punishment is a gain, because there is a sense of total freedom, without rules or laws, acting only by one's own instincts. In Scotland everything would be different and he would probably go on trial. The impression is that the colonizer is feeling so free in the new territory that for him everything is possible, neither obstacles nor bureaucracy stand in the way, while limits are unnecessary.

Imposition is a constant when a European colonizer arrives in Amerindian society, since, as a rule, Europeans do not easily accept what they find in the tribes. They think they know more about everything, humiliating the tribe's ancient knowledge and traditions. McKinnon is a good example of the colonizer: he builds a ranch house and substitutes the native thatched huts. He makes beds instead of hammocks. In both enterprises he fails because no native will approve of his 'inventions'. However, he becomes a kind of leader because he is different and determined. The natives take advantage of the European knowledge and the colonizers use the natives' hard and cheap labor.

Isolation in the forest brings few advantages for

a civilized man and his talents may become atrophied for lack of opportunities. The invasion of a European in a 'primitive' society may lead either to total imposition and domination by the European or the adaptation to Amerindian society and to a different way of life. When there is this adaptation, little by little, the civilized man starts losing his identity as well, because he cohabits with non-European people, causing a deep rift in culture and experiences. There will certainly be the objectification of the native; however, since the European accepts the native as a subject in some cases, especially when love affairs 'bridge' the gap, the objectification will be lessened. Consequently, one of the two (European or Amerindian) will lose more his identity since the process is never equal or balanced for both sides.

When McKinnon isolates himself to read the old newspapers, the fact means that somehow he is getting tired of the natives 'ignorance'. Although isolated he may get in touch with the 'civilized world' again, regaining strength and nurturing his intellect, which are marks of his European education.

On the other hand, for Maba and Zuna there are only few advantages in living with a white man because they are ordinary women who live a domestic life and they are so matter-of-fact about it. In fact, they keep on living in their Amerindian style after their 'marriage', which guarantees their subjectification. They are agents of their lives because they do not accept the European style; sometimes even mocking it for lack of understanding. For instance, they do not see any reason for reading newspapers, they think photography is something evil, they are not used to sleeping in beds and wearing shoes. Struggle within colonial space is something gradual and intense. Surely, they start depending on the European's novelties and utensils like steel tools, kitchenware, clothes, equipment, although they have lived till then in a very simple way, without any manufactured products. The natives simply 'roll on the punches', and behaving like this, they open the way for the European conquest.

Sexism is not deeply focused in the novel nor are they subdued sexually because the Amerindian women are free to take their decisions, to give their opinions, to work as the men, sometimes even more. The women seem to have strong personalities. They

are aware that it is necessary to be strong to live such a 'wild' life with no comfort, no facilities, almost no help, only supported by their Amerindian extended family. In fact, Maba and Zuna are agents in the story and shun being subalterns. They even order McKinnon to do things; frequently they teach him how to do things, while they have the right to deny or accept his inventions. They also show cleverness about nature and the weather, trying to advise him that sometimes people may not impose things against nature, because it is much more powerful. It is interesting the way the women from the village help each other in their manual works, and sometimes react unusually or unexpectedly, as if they knew the other's purposes and needs.

The sisters are typical Amerindian women, who accept the foreigner in their lands, treat and help him, get sexually involved with him, have children, live a typical Indian life and usually accept the fact that this foreigner will vanish one day, without leaving them anything: only the children as the result of this colonial encounter. In a civilized society this man would have to help his wife to take care of the children, support them, follow them in life, or rather, he would be forever involved with this woman and the children. This does not happen in Amerindian society, because there are no official laws to enforce the male to do so. The Europeans take advantage of the situation and, when they are tired of 'wild life', they go away, usually return to their homelands, and simply forget what and who was left behind, just like McKinnon does.

The native women feel and say openly that Western knowledge does not combine with their beliefs and cultural traditions. They do not make any effort to understand things, but only try to accept them. Sometimes they are afraid of what is new; then they get accustomed to the idea; frequently they try to accept without questioning or only ignore what happens. Every situation is seen and faced in a different way, according to the moment and what it involves. The passage on the savannah eclipse clarifies this idea.

As soon as the moon began to encroach on the sun in the middle of the morning, everybody came out of their thatch houses at Waronawa and began to bang pots and utensils together and started shouting to frighten the two celestial bodies apart.

Auntie Bobo's husband fired two shots into the air with his gun. Some of the men fired off arrows towards the eclipse.

Mamai Maba stood outside the house shouting: 'No, No.', in a loud voice, as if she was deeply offended by something. Too terrified to look up at the sky, she kept her head averted from the sun while continuing to bang two metal pots together with her powerful arms. Zuna, her hollow black eyes full of anxiety, made a great racket by clashing ladle and metal bucket together. [...]

'It's the slime from the eclipse'; panted Mamai Maba. 'It will get into everything and poison us' (Melville, 1999, p. 206-207).

It seems that some material change occurs in the tribe due to McKinnon's efforts. However, the subjectivity of the Amerindian women is so deep and their culture pervades their life so much that when their husband returns to Scotland, their comments indicate an agency perhaps uncommon in colonized societies.

### 3.1.2. McKinnon children and resistance to European civilization

The Scotsman Alexander McKinnon lives over twenty years in the Waronawa village, and from his relationship with Maba and Zuna he begets ten children. The most important are Danny, Beatrice, Alice, Freddie and Wifreda. As time goes by he understands that his children should get Western education, just like he had in the past. In a way, one would interpret this decision as one that diminishes Amerindian culture and demonstrates that, in his view, the Amerindian manner of educating children is not the proper one. In fact, McKinnon shows through his actions that he has a feeling of superiority with regard to his own education and origin. The Amerindian way of living does not seem to be sufficient for someone whose origin hails from a white and 'civilized' society. That is why he sends his children to Georgetown: he perceives it would be unfair to forbid them to be introduced to the knowledge of 'white' superior society. He wants them to have a 'civilized' education, as if the natives' education has many 'gaps', and they can only be 'filled' by the white educational system. As a matter of fact, McKinnon's attitude shows his real feelings. It is clear that he considers

Amerindian culture and education inferior to the European's; otherwise he would not send them to the capital city. As for him, the Amerindian civilization is not enough for his children since they also have Western blood.

He decides to send the oldest of them to the capital city, Georgetown. European ideology and hegemony is very present in his decision, as if he would have liked to say: 'My children are not pure Amerindians, so they will not be educated like this'. Eventually, the girls are sent to a convent run by Irish nuns and Danny to a family in order to improve his flimsy knowledge of English, to attend technical courses and to be introduced to European ways of living, with all their social rules and mores. He goes to Queens Town. They would not see each other for three years.

In the convent, the girls try to resist the Irish nuns imposition to speak English, to wear shoes, to behave like white girls. They are aware they have entered 'enemy' territory. Why? The girls know they may be destroyed by Western civilization since the nuns will try to change them in every single aspect, in their customs, beliefs, culture and finally their own identity. Actually, at this point, Amerindian culture is very much at stake. Their culture will be on the brink of extinction if they passively accept European rules. They will be facing the Western way of living, or what is said to be a 'civilized' world. Everything they will see or live belongs to the European pattern of living. They have no way out, so something must be done in the attempt of resisting such a strong domination on unprotected young teenagers.

At the beginning they feel ill at ease in the convent due to constant supervision by nuns and classmates. Beatrice is even depressed because she is forced to wear shoes. She also suffers a lot from racial prejudice; the white girls do not 'classify' her as one of them because Beatrice is neither white nor black. Once, the white girl Nella Hawkins argues with Beatrice, humiliating her because of her color and accent. Beatrice feels so bad that she faints when she hears the other girl exclaim: 'Get off my foot, dirty buck girl' (Melville, 1999, p. 141).

Attempting to survive in 'hostile territory' and to soften her sisters' sufferings of loss of identity, Beatrice plots a very clever attitude and dichotomy. They will

play a game: their passage in the convent will be nothing except a long game. It is a spy game: the Wapisiana girls are supposed to be the spies from Rupununi. So, every time it is possible they meet to speak in the Wapisiana language, feeling superior at being agents at that moment, since nobody else can understand them.

The convent smelled strangely of polish and disinfectant. Beatrice peeped into the large rooms, which reminded her of empty, unused caves. Although afflicted by shyness at first, she managed to speak English more confidently after a while. Wifreda remained reticent – ‘as closed as the Japanese art of paper-folding’ was how one of the nuns described her, ‘a real buck girl’. Alice the youngest had to struggle to prevent herself bursting into tears whenever she caught sight of one of her sisters and begged to go home. Beatrice soon found a way of surviving and consoling her sisters. She convinced herself and them that they were Wapisiana spies. One morning after prayers, she grabbed both of them to explain in Wapisiana that they were all on special mission and had been sent to learn the secrets of an enemy camp. Their task was to learn about the coastlanders and report back to the Rupununi. They would have to be brave and careful because they were in hostile territory [...] they must merge in with their surroundings, copy the coastlanders while somehow keeping themselves intact (Melville, 1999, p. 138).

As a rule, they have to infiltrate enemy territory and learn to live with the enemy. Thus they will be able to live with them and send information to the Rupununi, but they can never let any message from the Rupununi reach the convent; they have to protect themselves against city people’s cunningness. Although at the beginning they felt inferior because of the differences in the environment, they now try to maintain their identity. They walk in lines as if they are still in the middle of the forest. Actually, it is a weird reaction, but the girls maintain their ideology as well as their superiority. After a while, they feel proud of being Amerindians, with their own culture intact. They are really agents when they refuse to accept the European objectification and persistence of making them different people when they seem to be very normal.

The nuns watched bemused as the three sisters walked, always in single file, through the grounds, a habit from following the narrow trails of the savannahs.

‘This life here will be like a shell,’ said Beatrice, ‘that will hide us but that we can take off when we leave.’ They called themselves the three turtles – keepers of the secret (Melville, 1999, p. 139).

On the other hand, there is the nuns’ behavior. They represent the European hegemonic power and eagerness to conquer ‘the unknown and the different’. For the nuns the Americas are still new territories to be explored, subdued and taught. It is a known fact that Europeans do not take much into account what and who they meet in foreign lands; consequently every place is anonymous, nameless and ready to be settled on, according to their point of view. The nuns are not different. They behave in exactly the same way one may predict for European individuals, or rather, they follow the stereotype: the natives must always adjust themselves to Western ideology and culture, never the contrary.

Beatrice has compared their lives in the convent ‘like a shell’, they are pearls in the shell. In fact, the girls are aware it will be a long period and during the time they spend there, they have to accept the ‘enclosure’ as an experience to get stronger in mind, resisting Western dominance and nurturing their own origins. It is a shell, because, as soon as they leave the place, they will be free for good, leaving the ‘broken’ shell behind; their lives in the convent will be forgotten, erased from the girls’ minds. Everything they wish is to blend in with the village again. They are not influenced by the convent years, with the exception of their language skills, because the rest, mainly their personalities, remains the same.

They were all overjoyed to be back. Beatrice leaned over the side of the cart to feel the breeze on her face. [...]

As soon as she had discarded her shoes and put on a cotton dress, Beatrice ran over to see her cousin Gina.

Everything was as she remembered it. [...] ‘I’m married now,’ said Gina, nodding over at the boy.



‘He lives with us now. His hammock is next to mine at home.’

Hammock, the symbol of marriage. Beatrice felt both jealous and dislocated as if she had been left behind in the march of things, as if convent life had retarded her in some way. No one asked her what the convent was like. No one was interested (Melville, 1999, p. 158).

Danny arrives in his home village some months after the girls because he had to finish his basic Mechanics course. He reacts in a very unusual way when he returns to the tribe. He keeps quieter and quieter, he says nothing about his experience and is only fond of hunting with his uncle.

Danny arrived back. He said nothing and just nodded to his sisters but his eyes shone with pleasure of being home. Maba noticed that he was taller than most of the other young men of his age in the settlement. That must be the European in him, she thought critically. [...]

Somehow Danny had managed to slide through his schooling without being touched too much by it. His teachers considered him to be agreeable enough – if rather on the silent side. [...]

He seemed to settle in as if he had never been away, fishing and hunting with increased confidence, handling his father’s guns as well as his own arrows and bow (Melville, 1999, p.158-159).

It seems that he wants to isolate the town experience of his life. He wants to forget it and to be the same as he was before leaving Waronawa country. What is the reason of Danny’s silence and passivity? Isolating himself and not speaking does not necessarily mean that Danny is mute. On the contrary, he may be resisting European domination. He is silent but he acts. His silence is a form of not propagating white education he had been taught at school in Georgetown. Through his silence he wishes to erase the Western civilization and regain his own culture and identity. On his return to the Rapununi he dives deep into Amerindian culture and wild life. Danny’s attitude is closely related to an attempt of maintaining his own identity as well. The less he reveals himself, the more difficult to be objectified. From the very first moment Danny acts as a subject.

He is neither easily cheated nor persuaded by white people. He goes to Georgetown because his father advised him to; otherwise he would never have done so.

At this instance the novel makes an allusion to the Bible story of Daniel and the lions. The biblical Daniel is thrown into a cave full of lions and he manages to survive unhurt. Danny faces a similar situation, although the lions are not animals but greedy human beings ready to exploit and modify him. Danny is successful because he also leaves ‘the cave’ uninjured, intending to keep himself away from imperial eyes. He survives the traps of domination. Danny is a subject and agent; he owns his actions and he is responsible for them in a form of keeping or regaining his ideology and identity. Being so wild and isolated brought the survival of Amerindian traditions and also his subjectification. Silence is Danny’s strategy to keep his wildness and security.

The McKinnon children’s appropriation of Western culture is an asset. They improve their English and learn other languages during the time they are in Georgetown. It is extremely important because they can know and live in enemy (colonizer) territory while the Europeans cannot speak and understand their native language. So it is a strategy of survival within white society even when newcomers or colonizers invade the Wapisiana territory. They can isolate themselves while speaking Wapisiana, they can plot against the Westerns without being discovered, whereas the Europeans are not able to do the same, because they think the native’s language is inferior and worthless to be learnt. Language means power; it is a code which reveals a certain group, usually with similar characteristics and ideology. Subjectivity involves and is intimately related to the individual and his language since it implies ideology, discourse and language. ‘Subjectivity is the subject’s existence, one’s identity within the expectations of the social group in which the subject is inserted’ (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998).

It reminds us of Spivak (1998) when she argues that colonized people can’t speak since they have never been given the right to use their own voice. When they try, they borrow the accent from their masters or some intellectuals represent them. The author sees Marxism and Feminism as attempts to amplify the voices of the oppressed, although Spivak thinks it is impossible to

recover the voice of the subaltern or the oppressed subject. She mentions that Foucault says the subaltern may speak for himself because he does not know the repressive power of colonialism. She claims that if there is no power or influence it is impossible for the colonized to speak. According to the same author, only the intellectual represents the subaltern, although it is possible to see a different perspective in Danny's character because he is an agent even when using the 'masters' language or when he is silent. Being silent or speaking the colonizer's language may also mean a question of survival and one of the most fruitful strategies to keep a native identity alive without being corrupted by the imperial power. Voice and muteness sometimes may be similar because when Danny is not speaking he is protecting his people and culture.

### 3.1.3. Father Napier and religious colonization

Father Napier comes from England in 1905 in order to evangelize the Amerindians living in the interior of Guyana. He is under the authority of an easygoing bishop who delays the priest's mission for almost five years and keeps Fr. Napier in Georgetown training a choir. Finally, in November of 1909, the bishop permits Father Napier to go to the interior to evangelize the natives, whose beliefs and rituals are considered 'uncivilized'. At Zawira he meets Alexander McKinnon who will be an obstacle in his mission, once he is a freethinker. From the start Father Napier reveals the eagerness of his religious domination when he sees the colonial subject in a small boy.

Whenever Father Napier looked at him, he was flooded with a fierce joy that he attributed to an overflow of Christ's love through him and into the boy. There was a particular thrill in bringing Little Ignatius to Jesus.

And it was through Little Ignatius that he found a way to destroy Indian beliefs. The boy explained to him that all animals had a master or owner who protected them on earth as well as in the sky. [...] With this information, Father Napier, subtly, like a cancer virus mimicking the workings of a cell it has entered, gradually introduced to the Indians the idea of his own all-powerful master (Melville, 1999, p. 150).

The first thing he does when setting up a mission on the spot is the *naming process*: he substitutes the Indian name Zawira by the Christian name of Saint Ignatius. The changing of names by the European is really a very strong form of imposing imperial power. It has been common practice for Europeans to invade new territories and suddenly start renaming natives, places, things with European or English names, simply forgetting the native's origin, mores, identity and everything else. The tradition of naming is very important for all different cultures and peoples. Names mean a lot; they carry someone's personal history and identification. This is really serious because the priest simply ignores the natives' identity and traditions, as if the name of Zawira is worthless and only a Christian name is suitable or acceptable to him. 'Immediately, Father Napier suspected that McKinnon was trying to subvert his evangelical purpose. (...) Within weeks, Father Napier had set up a mission and changed the name of Zawira to St Ignatius' (Melville, 1999, p. 111).

Besides the *naming process*, *worlding* (Spivak, 1995) is extremely relevant in post-colonial discussions. When colonized space is 'brought into the world by the European', *worlding* occurs. It is the existence of something as part of the world, created by Eurocentrism, when the unknown is revealed to Western society. The process of worlding is first made by mapping the spaces, then naming and finally controlling them. If places are named, they are known and it becomes easier to control known territories. It is exactly what Father Napier starts doing in the interior of the savannah; little by little he maps and controls more and more places, building churches. *Worlding* is thus a new territory presented to Europe and different from it; somewhere it will make part of the whole since it has already been known. Whether being accepted or not is not the matter, the point is the existence revealed to the world.

It is possible to verify that Fr. Napier not only renames natives but also exploits them, using the Amerindian boys' labor for his own and his religion's advantage.

He brought three boys from the nearest villages to live with him. They helped him with the chores and trained them in the ways of God. They also helped him to build the first Catholic church in the

Rupununi, a simple construction of adobe, wattle-and-daub and palm thatch.

Father Napier developed an intense crush on one of these boys, *whom he called Little Ignatius*. Little Ignatius was slow, serious and shy. When Father Napier praised him, he lowered his eyes and flushed, not knowing how to respond. The priest saw this as a charming sign of humility in the boy and saw him as a symbol of the advent of real Christianity to the savannahs, rather than the Protestant heresy that had already been established at Yupokari. [...] There was a particular thrill in bringing Little Ignatius to Jesus (Melville, 1999, p. 149-150). [My italics]

The boys are not paid to work for the priest, they build churches and make all the ordinary chores for Fr. Napier, being convinced by the priest that the reward will be their salvation in heaven. It is very similar to his opinion about Little Ignatius humility, because to belong to Jesus, according to Father Napier, people have to be extremely humble and pure of heart. Needless to say, the Christian ideology is always highlighted in these passages, as a background for Napier's attitudes.

Fr. Napier's attitudes show a contradictory behavior for a churchman since he shows despotic actions when he invades the territory without any license and starts changing everything in the Amerindian savannahs concerning the religious matter: he is not prudent enough to listen to the native people's opinions. The first action he takes as a priest is the baptism of McKinnon's children. At the beginning, the natives suspect of the newcomer's words, especially the McKinnons. Sometimes they even confront him and his obstinacy in establishing new churches.

When Father Napier enquired about Maba and Zuna, McKinnon replied *provocatively*: 'Oh, it's too late for them to change. They believe in a wonderful tree, you know, that has all the fruits of the earth on it. It was chopped down by two brothers, Tuminkar and Duid – the Macusi call them Macunaima and Chico. Anyway, a huge flood sprang out of the stump. I think I rather prefer that story to the story of Noah'. [...] The priest could not afford to *antagonize* him (Melville, 1999, p. 114). [My italics]

McKinnon replies to Fr. Napier in a provocatively way because he wants to show him that he is not welcomed in the tribe, that the natives do not need his Christian teaching, that they already live in peace and harmony. Napier's presence disturbs and annoys the normality of the Amerindian's life because his activity means instability in their organized social group. McKinnon is ironic as well in his attempt to demonstrate to the priest that his beliefs may also be untrue: it is only a question of believing in one of the above 'similar' stories: Noah's Ark and the Macusi Myth on the flood. The Macusi myth mentioned in the quotation above is an allusion to the biblical story of Noah's Ark. McKinnon irritates the priest by saying he prefers the Indian myth to the Bible story and through his audacious response he proves to Napier that he is there in order to represent the native's leadership since they are usually peaceful and naïve. Napier cannot afford to antagonize McKinnon because he is a strong and witty leader in the tribe as well as very trustworthy for the natives. The priest prefers him as a partner rather than an enemy.

During the baptism celebration, Father Napier uses music to convert the natives. He plays the violin. However, when he is playing, it reminds the Amerindians of a giant grasshopper. It is a funny event because the natives even act in a naïve way and, at the same time; Napier is totally convinced he will convert them. Fr. Napier is so absorbed in and blinded by his evangelization modes that he develops a delusory impression of things. He misinterprets events because the natives do not understand the ritual. They just admire the musical performance without questioning, whereas Napier is certain that he is converting them when, in fact, the natives are mocking him.

Auntie Bobo's body stiffened and jerked as she clamped her hand over her mouth to prevent the laughter bursting out. [...] Moved by the idea that he was introducing these people to the classics for the first time and convinced, even as he played, that the awed silence proved how entranced they were by the music, Father Napier felt his eyes fill with tears.

Everyone else in the room, except McKinnon who was just amused, watched with a sort of horror as, before their eyes, the priest turned into a giant,

buzzing, savannah grasshopper (Melville, 1999, p. 119).

The more time passes, the more he builds churches, converts whole villages in the interior of Guyana and goes on to new missions. He takes note in his private diary on everything he undertakes as if he is undergoing an experience. 'They do not like people who shout and they have no memory for dates!' He wrote in his diary' (Melville, 1999, p. 150).

Said (apud Bhabha, 1998) describes the control of wisdom in the priest's diary as a *synchronic panoptical vision of domination* which is in tension to the diachrony of history. Napier's panoptical vision permits him to record the natives' ordinary life and put the natives' knowledge under his control when he writes down everything in his diary as if he is the 'superior' one in charge of noticing and judging. Through this kind of organized evaluation, Napier has an easy form of control because by doing so he is capable of advancing his conquests since he gets to know the differences and mysteries of the new territory. When he gets mad because of the poisoned beans, the priest loses his diary when wandering on the savannahs. This loss means that from that moment on he is not in touch with the place and people anymore. It is a kind of rupture between the father and the natives, or rather, a struggle between the Amerindian colonized people and the European colonizer representing the religion institution.

When the narrator tells the priest's exploitation of Little Ignatius, the parody of the Biblical, and thus foreign, concept is highlighted. One day Father Napier decides to celebrate a mass on top of Mount Roraima. Climbing the mountain is a very difficult task for the young boy. 'Father Napier pushed the boy hard. He made him carry on his back all the equipment for mass, as well as his own camera, a prospecting bag and kitchen utensils' (Melville, 1999, p. 152). It is a parody on the biblical story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Eventually, Fr. Napier compares himself to Abraham taking Isaac for the sacrifice and mountain Roraima replaces mountain Moriah. God orders Abraham to kill his son Isaac and because of his faith is prompt on doing it. At the precise moment, God forbids the sacrifice and replaces Isaac for a ram. In the novel, ironically and hypocritically, the boy dies due to the

difficulties experienced in the climbing. The parody is enhanced Abraham is informed by faith and Fr. Napier by ambition and foolishness.

Colonialism under the guise of religion may be seen in Fr. Napier's increasing number of churches and his fixed idea of evangelization. A perfect city inhabited by a pure Christian society will be built in the savannahs.

*Nothing deterred him.* As soon as one mission was complete and the Indians had received the basic instruction and could chant and pray, he started out on the next, criss-crossing the savannahs. If the rivers could not be forded, he would get men to make a woodskin. If there were no trees to make a woodskin, he would get them to make a raft. When he could not find the right materials, he improvised.

[...]

People noticed that father Napier's eyes, when he spoke to them, seemed to be *increasingly fixed* on something distant, an imaginary citadel (Melville, 1999, p. 155). [My italics]

In the end, nothing saves him from the curse of colonialism. In the wake of eating poisonous beans as the revenge of Beatrice caught in an incest affair with her brother Danny, Fr. Napier begins to hallucinate. He wishes he could build the Pope's railway from Georgetown to Roraima. He sets fire to his own things, and roams, almost naked, through the savannahs. Danny takes him to Georgetown and from there he goes definitely to England. In Edinburgh he spends the rest of his life.

Sometimes he forgot why he needed to go there so urgently and then he would remember, of course, to build the Pope's railway. [...]

*The villagers ignored Father Napier*, turning away from the voltage of his blue eyes. No one would give him anything to drink. He asked for cassiri. They told him it was finished. He begged for something to eat. One by one they all disappeared into their houses. In counterpoint to the ecstasy he had experienced during his night's walk, he now felt a groundswell of unease (Melville, 1999, p. 253, 254-255). [My italics]

#### 4. Conclusion

Spivak states that the subaltern has no voice within events caused by the European invader. That is not absolutely true since the native is capable of retort. On one hand, this reaction against imperial domination may boil down to silence, albeit stronger, as it occurs in Danny. On the other hand, it may be more turbulent and painful, as in Beatrice who abandons the tribe.

Once colonialism is established, the natives' way of life will never be the same. The 'imperial eyes' are always present, observing them, to punish, explore and grasp all kinds of advantages from it. That fits Father Napier's behavior: his constant observation recriminates the native culture and imposes the European tradition, which suffocates the Amerindians in their own territory. The lack of freedom makes them feel inferior and subjugated to a strange and nameless power. Although they do not accept it, there are few ways to struggle against the European forces. Consequently, the Amerindians use the few strategies available: mimicry and sly-civility. These two 'tools' are often used when the natives are in a direct contact with the colonizer. This is what happens to the Macusi girls when they are in the nun's convent in Georgetown. In the contact zone, the first colonial clash may even be different and appalling; but with time, the differences in cultures appear and the bonds become feeble, as it happened with Chofoye and Rosa. Even though relationship was

fated, it shows that real bonding is possible; the equivalence among people should not be utopia.

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