MISTER PIP BY LLOYD JONES: A POSTCOLONIALIST READING OF CHARLES DICKENS

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Abstract: Focussing on the latest novel written by one of New Zealand's top writers, the paper approaches the issues of literary tradition in the context of the contemporary colonizer-colonized relationship. Set in Bougainville, a tropical island where the horror of the civil war lurks, the novel explores the manifold readings, fictional or not, engendered by the only book existing in the local tiny school, Charles Dickens' masterpiece Great Expectations. Within the context of beautiful memories and scenes of unexpected violence, under the umbrella of great tradition, Lloyd Jones creates a microcosm of postcolonial literature, hybridizing the narratives of black and white races to achieve a new and resonant fable. His is a bold inquiry into the way we construct and repair our communities, and ourselves, with stories, old and new. Consequently, in the analysis of the novel, the paper has aimed at evincing the remarkable ability of great literature to see us through adversities and tribulations, as well as the role of inspirational teaching in people's lives. The paper also emphasizes upon the way in which the accessible narrative belies the sophistication of its telling as Jones addresses the effects of imperialism and the redemptive power of art.

Keywords : postcolonialism, hybridization,fiction, redemption.

The starting point of the present paper may be Steven Connor's study, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*, in which he argues that the transitions of the postwar period have affected the nature and possibility of historical consciousness in profound ways:

"The conditions of extreme cultural interfusion, with the meetings and conflicts of cultural traditions have combined with the growth of an ever more inter-dependent global economy to create a splintering of history in the postwar world, a loss of the vision of history as one and continuous. But these very same conditions of mutual impingement have acted to make it impossible to maintain any form of local or individual history in isolation from all the other histories, and in doing so have enlarged the scope of the conversation and the collective memory that is constructed in the narration of histories."[2, 135]

Connor, therefore, points to two distinct movements to be identified in historical consciousness, as it is reflected in the postwar anglophone writing. Firstly, we witness growing skepticism towards imperialist "grand narratives" and the proliferation of local and regional historical knowledge in their place. Secondly, the transformations and migrations of postwar cultures have led to a whole range of cultural exchanges and hybridizations as a sort of counter-movement meant to render "the idea of self-contained, nationally and ethnically defined historical consciousness somehow outdated and inadequate."[4, 14]

Moreover, contemporary writers such as Lloyd Jones have masterly managed to fuse essential Englishness into shifting lives and narratives of today's world, achieving thus the displacement and adjustment of authoritarian histories to "a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices, some of them local, many of them self-consciously hybrid and cross-cultural." [1, 5]

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On a copper-rich tropical island shattered by war, where the teachers have fled with almost everyone else, only one white man chooses to stay behind: the eccentric M. Watts, object of much curiosity and scorn, who sweeps out the ruined schoolhouse and begins to read to the children each day from Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations,* the only book left on the island. For Matilda and her classmates the story offers an escape from brutal reality, while instilling in them the strength to endure in a place where nothing is certain, not even survival. "Some of you will know Mr. Dickens when we finish this book. We could escape to another place. It didn't matter that it was Victorian England. We found that we could easily go there."[3, 5]

So begins this rare, original story, about the abiding strength that imagination, once ignited, can provide. As artillery echoes in the mountains, thirteen-year old Matilda and her peers are riveted by the adventures of a young man named Pip in a city called London, a city whose contours soon become more real than their own blighted landscape. But in a ravaged place where even children are forced to live by their wits and daily survival is the only objective, imagination can be a dangerous thing.

The story is set in the early 1990s in blockaded Bougainville(an island off Papua New Guinea) when the government of Papua, New Guinea, supported by Australia decided to take action against the traditional landowners. The local mining and political troubles that loom so large here are historical fact and villagers of Bougainville are treated in a barbaric way by the government troops wanting to know where the young men are, particularly Mr. Pip. They have evidence someone worships him as they find his name written on the sand.

In the midst of this turmoil, Mr. Watts steps forward to assume the duties of a teacher. Admitting that circumstances preclude the teaching of a conventional curriculum, he instead introduces the students to Charles Dickens's classic. From the first chapter, Matilda and her classmates identify themselves with the story of the orphan Pip, striving to relate his experiences in mid-19th century England to the harsh realities of their own. The ugly world outside cannot be kept at bay, everything is destroyed, even the book is taken away from them as it is envisaged as the main source of rebellion among natives. When the text mysteriously disappears, the children demonstrate the extraordinary degree to which they have internalized the story by their ability to reconstruct much of the novel's plot from memory.

With his fascinating novel, Lloyd Jones grippingly explores issues of faith, family, race, loyalty, tradition and rebellion. Out of the novel's complexity, however, one can identify as defining the colonizer-colonized (white-black) relation, the relation reality-fiction and, uppermost, the redemptive power of literature in an inspirational teaching. These are the issues mainly taken into consideration in the following discussion of the novel, a work that can be read as a postcolonial re-invention of Dickens' masterpiece endowed with the open-endedness of a myth.

As far as the racial reading of the book is concerned, Lloyd Jones deliberately plays havoc with stereotypes as "the eccentric white male," or "the superstitious black woman". Having the audacity to bring an essentially "English" narrative into the lives of black children in Papua New Guinea, the eccentric Mr. Watts engenders in his students mixed thoughts and

feelings. At one point in the story, Matilda confesses: "It wasn't just for the fact that the last white man that made Pop Eye what he was to us- a source of mystery mainly, but also confirmation of something else we held to be true. We had grown up believing white to be the colour of all the important things, like ice-cream, aspirin, ribbon, the moon, the stars. White stars and a full moon were more important when my grandfather grew up than they are now that we have generators."[4] And she goes on:"We were proud because Grace was going to show the white world how smart a black kid could be. We did not know any more if she was black or white."[3, 145]

Sometimes the black-white acknowledged relation of superiority embraces new forms which tend to overturn the accepted norm. For example, when Mr. Watts invites the island mothers to share their wisdom, Matilda's mother tells of a woman who "once turned a white man into maramalade and spread him on her toast."[3, 86] Likewise, questions about their identities being a matter of blackness versus whiteness haunt the children on the island: "What it's like to be white on this island? What it's like to be black? Normal."[94] The conceptualization of "the other" as "same but not quite" and the colonial Manichaen aesthetics according to which presumed "otherness" is amenable to "sameness" through a civilizing process produces ambivalence and confusion. In Bhabha's opinion:

"Colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. It is a disjunction produced within the act of enunciation as a specifically colonial articulation of those two disproportionate sites of colonial discourse and power. Such a display of difference produces a mode of authority that is agonistic (rather than antagonistic.)"[1, 108]

The emphasis in Bhabha"s argument falls on the point of view of ambivalence, position supported also by Couze Venn in *The Postcolonial Challenge;Towards Alternative Worlds:*

"The process of mixing and recombining that are variously described as creolization, hybridization, transculturation, marking the formation of diasporas, often take place in conflictual situations in which groups of unequal power and unequal access to the means of legitimization of ways of being attempt to establish liveable spaces and identities without surrendering forms of constituting the community that preserves core elements of the original (or subaltern) cultures."[6, 19]

It is precisely this note of ambivalence and of culture intertwining that Matilda's story evinces, underlining the way in which Dickens's novel transcends the race barrier, bridging the gap between centuries as well as between differently colored skin: " It was always a relief to return to *Great Expectations.* It contained a world that was whole and made sense, unlike ours. If it was a relief for us, then what must it have been for Mr. Watts? I feel equally sure he was more comfortable in the world of Mr. Dickens than he was in our black-faced world of superstition and mythic flying fish. In *Great Expectations* he was back against white people."[3, 67]

But Dickens's book goes beyond blurring racial and cultural differences. Celebrating the timeless power of storytelling, *Mr. Pip* unites the stirring tale of a young girl's quest with a marvelous tribute paid to a Dickens classic. The manner in which a thirteen-year old Papuan girl finds refuge and comfort in an imaginary character's evolution in Victorian London speaks volumes about the power of literary tradition to wind its way into people's lives and

essentially change them. For Matilda and her classmates, Pip's story offers escape but also recognition, the power to endure but also to continue in a terrible fight for survival.

Dickens's themes of estrangement and personal metamorphosis mirror Matilda's story, granting the latter existential meaning and justification. As Pip's story unfolds, Matilda keeps hearing Mr. Watts' words: "Some of you will know Mr. Dickens when we finish this book. We could escape to another place. It didn't matter that it was Victorian England. We found that we could easily go there. This boy who I couldn't see or touch but knew by the ear. I had found a new friend."[3, 107]

The extraordinary impact of fiction on people's lives is perceived as a menace by Matilda's mother who, in her simplicity, cannot help sensing the feeling of personal freedom engendered by reading Dickens' book: "She didn't want me to go deeper into the other world. She worried she would lose her Matilda to Victorian England."[109] Like many hungry for control, the warring factions recognize the subversive power of great literature and Mr. Watt's infatuation with Charles Dickens ends in violence and tragedy. But in an emotionally powerful coda to the story, Matilda reveals how her life has been changed irrevocably by the love of literature inspired by Dickens's novel.

Mr. Watts uses Dickens' book as a civilizing educational force for the children of the island (which has the potential to be cringingly awful given a postcolonial analysis), but instead it becomes something escapist, in both the positive and negative aspects of the word. As the story unfolds, the novel brings forth themes of making something of oneself, of overcoming obstacles of birth and location quite at home in Matilda's own life: "As we progressed through the book something happened to me. At some point I felt myself enter the story. I wasn't identifiable on the page, but I was there, I was definitely there."[3, 46] The overwhelming effect of the book is also her personal estrangement from the world she knew once and her plunging whole-heartedly into the fictional one where she feels more at home: "Pip, Miss Havisham and Joe Gargery were more part of my life than my dead relatives, even the people around me."[3, 75] Confessing that, for her, Dickens's novel contains many personal touchstones, Matilda asserts: "To this day I cannot read Pip's confession-*It is a most miserable thing for me to feel ashamed of home*- without feeling the same of my island. We are deep in the book, chapter 18 to be precise, when Pip discovers there is no going back to his old life on the marshes. For me, in my life, the same discovery had come much earlier. I was still a frightened black kid suffering from shock trauma when I'd look down at the green of Honiara from the airplane, but I'd also known from that moment on there would be no return."[3, 228]

While Matilda's coming of age closely parallels Pip's, one cannot help noticing another similarity between their respective experiences, namely the status of the emigrant, the status of in-betweenness which marks the two fictional characters. When she leaves the island for good, Matilda feels encouraged and comforted by Pip's similar situation: "I knew all about departure. I knew from Pip about how to leave a place. I knew you don't look back. Pip is an orphan. He's like an emigrant. He is in the process of migrating from one level of society to another."[3, 70] Identifying her predicament with Pip's, Matilda further remarks: "Pip's experience also reminds us of the emigrant's experience. Each leaves behind the place he grew up in. Each strikes out on his own. Each is free to create himself anew. Each is also free to make mistakes."[3, 90]

From this perspective, the novel becomes a sample of the contemporary view according to which a migrant lives at the intersections of histories and memories, experiences a constantly challenged identity and is perpetually required to make himself/herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present. If the latter has become a common-place assertion, hardly ever before has one witnessed this type of identification, at double remove, between two fictional characters belonging to such different worlds in time and space. Once again, Jones's novel testifies to its uniqueness, giving this example of the manner in which a Victorian character's evolution parallels that of a contemporary young girl caught in the grips of two distinct systems of values. Once again, tradition works its way into the present, shaping and modifying it. As Andrew Smith explained in a recent essay, "migrancy becomes the name of the condition of human beings as such, a name for how we exist and understand ourselves in the twenty-first century." [5, 27]

If literary tradition influences the present, shaping it, one cannot help noticing the way the present itself works its way into tradition, consequently modifying it. In this respect also Lloyd Jones's novel provides an illuminating example, since the moment Dickens's book is lost, the children start recreating it through their personal experiences. Mr. Watts convinces the children that it is their duty to save "Mr. Dickens's finest work from extinction"[3, 147] and so they are each required to bring their own contribution to the recreation of the novel. The bits and fragments they remember ingeniously mingle imagination with memory, so that the re-writing of the book becomes a new work in itself, telling more of the children's lives than of Victorian England: "I won't try and mimic here any more than what I've done so far. But the bones of his story remain with me, what I've come to think of as his Pacific version of *Great Expectations.* As with the original, Mr. Watts' version was also serialized, parceled out over a number of nights with a deadline in mind."[3, 175]

Making one's contribution to the re-writing of a classic is tantamount to openly acknowledging the decisive role literature plays in people's lives. For Matilda, this re-writing equates the re-writing of her life under the liberating force of her newly-found identity. In this respect, the final section of the book may be considered a genuine piece of postmodern, postcolonial metafiction. In an attempt to forge the literary tradition into the postmodern, fragmented present, Matilda explains the grip Dickens's novel holds on her: "People sometimes ask me: Why Dickens? Which I always take to be a great rebuke. I point to the one book that supplied me with another world at a time when it was desperately needed. It gave me a friend in Pip. It taught me you can skip under the skin of another just as easily as your own, even when that skin is white and belongs to a boy alive in Dickens' England. Now, if that isn't an act of magic I don't know what it is."[3, 231]

The influence of the book on her is twofold. Firstly, it prompts her into that type of inspirational teaching which has been handed down to her from her encounter with Mr. Watts. She senses and she also translates into practice the model of a teacher able to touch children's hearts and decisively influence them. This is the model teacher provided by Mr. Watts: ": "He was whatever he needed to be, what we asked him to be. Perhaps there are lives like that- they pour into whatever space we have made ready for them to fill. We needed a teacher, Mr Watts became that teacher. We needed a magician to conjure up other worlds, when Mr.Watts became that magician. When we needed a saviour, Mr. Watts had filled that role. When the

redskins required a life, Mr. Watts had given himself."[3, 245]. This is the teacher who can transform literary tradition into new values that children are encouraged to follow and to creatively enhance by using the uniqueness of their own personality.

On the other hand, *Great Expectations*, this sample of Englishness, prompts the dark-skinned girl into one final journey, that in which she tries to complete and correct Pip's destiny. The novel ends as follows: "In the worshipful silence I smiled at what else they didn't know. Pip was my story, even if I was once a girl, and my face black as the shining night. Pip is my story, and in the next day I would try where Pip had failed. I would try to return home."[3, 256] The quest comes thus full circle, the literary tradition has accomplished its mission and its redemptive function. What has been demonstrated is that, once more, fiction proves its enduring role in contemporary life and performs both formative and correcting functions, bridging gaps and surmounting obstacles formerly impossible to destroy. In this lies the value of this postmodern story which is so much dependent on a traditional one and the homage paid to tradition by the author is impossible to neglect.

Consequently, in the analysis of the novel, the paper has aimed at evincing the remarkable ability of great literature to see us through adversities and tribulations, as well as the role of inspirational teaching in people's lives. The paper also emphasizes upon the way in which the accessible narrative belies the sophistication of its telling as Jones addresses the effects of imperialism and the redemptive power of art.

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