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Exam Question 10: “*Discuss narrative technique (for instance, choice of narrator, time-frames, plotting) in at least two texts on your list, relating it to aspects of postcoloniality.*”

1 Introduction

The focus of this paper will be entirely on the indigenous people of New Zealand – the Maoris, drawing upon the novel *Baby No-Eyes* by Patricia Grace and the extract from the historical text *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders, vol.1* by James Belich. My main idea is to take a close look at narrative features in *Baby No-Eyes* and their postcolonial interpretation. Having done so I will try to *write* a poem which is to have the same postcolonial characteristics, followed by my own assessment of the process. In this way I will not only be examining postcolonial literature as an outsider – I will also be participating directly in the creation of it. The point is that this little exercise will serve as a real test of my understanding of Maori history, Maori culture, Maori thinking, and the postcolonial characteristics relevant to narrative technique in *Baby No-Eyes*, a work of fiction by a Maori writer. As a part of a my preparation for this exercise, I will start by providing a short overview of Maori history based partly on Belich's text, for which I will also make a short comment and draw further upon in the poem. As part of that same preparation, I will also attempt to place Maori writing within the proper postcolonial context of the overall, postcolonial framework.

2 A short overview of Maori History

New Zealand is said to have been populated by people from other Pacific islands between the early 9th century and the middle of the 14th century. Prior to Maori immigration, a dark-skinned race, the 'Moriori', of whose origin nothing is known, settled on the eastern coast of North Island. Some of these people were absorbed into the Maori population; the remainder were driven out and allowed to settle in the Chatham Islands, where the last survivor is said to have died in the mid-20th century. The Maori spread out along the coast and the rivers on both the main islands, although they were more numerous on North Island.¹

With the arrival of European whaling and trading ships in the Bay of Islands, the northern tribes were able to trade from about 1814 and on, using flax, potatoes, fruit and pigs to obtain muskets, and giving the whites or 'pakeha'² extensive land rights in return. The acquisition of firearms led to deadly wars between some neighbouring enemy tribes. Soon other tribes saw the necessity of obtaining muskets, and it was not long before all northern tribes were armed. Between 1818 and 1830 the intertribal "musket wars" and the spread of pakeha diseases led to a significant reduction in the number of Maoris and a large scale redistribution of the Maori population. At this time the pakeha and their trade were, however, seen as a resource that was even worth fighting for.³

¹ Encarta '95 Encyclopedia, "New Zealand"

² Maori word for 'European' or 'non-Maori'.

³ Belich, p.200

British interest in New Zealand had been growing since 1771 when Benjamin Franklin started contemplating projects for colonizing New Zealand, and was crystallized by the increased pressure on the British home front, mainly induced by rivalry with the French who themselves had started colonizing New Zealand. Once British initiatives towards annexation were put into motion, several British proclamations of sovereignty over New Zealand were made and this culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi⁴ in 1840 by representatives of the British Government and some, but not all, of the Maori Chieftains of the different tribes, making New Zealand a British colony.⁵

Later on, the subsequent influx of European settlers, interest conflicts, and Maori disillusionment led to “the New Zealand Wars” in the 1860s which the British eventually won due to their superior firepower. Purchase and confiscation of land by the crown continued up until 1865. However, after the war, colonial authorities pursued a conciliatory policy that resulted in the establishment of permanent peace between the European and native populations. New Zealand gained Dominion status in 1907 and achieved total independence from Great Britain by the Statute of Westminster Adoption Act of 1947.

In 1975 the Waitangi Tribunal was established to hear Maori grievances, inquire into claims of unjustly acquired land under the Treaty, and make recommendations to Parliament for resolving disputes. Today the Maoris make up around 15% of New Zealand’s population.⁶

Before moving on to the next chapter, I feel obliged to say just a few words about Belich’s text. Belich, a New Zealander of Yugoslav descent, is a prize-winning historian - celebrated for significantly reinterpreting nineteenth-century New Zealand history, especially Maori/Pakeha relations.⁷ Belich’s text is a historical text in the Western sense of the word, and thus has limited opportunity to use strong textual effects asserting postcolonial themes and points of view, which can give way to complex, postcolonial interpretations. Belich’s ‘reinterpretation’ is based on focussing on events that, when highlighted, present an alternate view of history. We see examples of this in the extract when Belich highlights Maori ingenuity⁸, and Maori victim hood/humiliation⁹. As it will become clear in chapter 4.2, there are, however, other more creative ways of reinterpreting history.

⁴ “*The Treaty of Waitangi*”

⁵ Belich, p.179-198

⁶ “*Maori Population – 2001 Census Results*”

⁷ “*Belich, James*”

⁸ See also discussion of Maori trench warfare, Belich p.209-211.

⁹ See for example Belich’s description of the humiliating capture of ‘Te Rauparaha’; Belich, p.206.

3 Maori Writing – Postcolonial, neo-colonial or 'none of the above'?

Prior to making any sort of comment on or analysis of Patricia Grace's novel *Baby No-Eyes*, I find it very important to place the Maori writers of New Zealand in the proper postcolonial context.

One of the dangers of postcolonialism is its generalising nature. Though contributing to the general applicability of the term, this feature renders it vulnerable to a number of criticisms¹⁰. One point of criticism, which is often employed by modern postcolonial critics¹¹, concerns the potential failure of postcolonialism to differentiate between different, relevant contexts such as the actual degree of colonization/decolonization, the nation and people in question, and the historical and cultural differences between different nations whose literatures can be called 'postcolonial'.

These problems become all too apparent when trying to place the Maori writers of New Zealand in the proper postcolonial context. Even though 'postcolonial' does not only mean historically 'after colonialism', it is, as far as I can see, most often (*and* most effectively) applied to countries that *have* achieved political independence. This notion is neatly illustrated by the way in which the apparent interest within the field of postcolonialism in the terminological duality of 'decolonization' with both practical and psychological reference, is seemingly based on the idea that although a country *has* been decolonized, the minds of its people *have not*.

How does this distinction apply to the Maori writers of New Zealand? In my opinion it does not apply at all. As we learned from the previous chapter on the history of New Zealand, the Maoris of today are a marginalised minority in their own motherland and as a result thereof, they can not be said to have achieved independence or gone through actual decolonization. As Boehmer also notes in her work *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*: "...they see themselves as still-colonized, always-invaded, never free of a history of white occupation."¹² Furthermore, they also generally believe that full political autonomy is not for them an option.¹³ Maori writers might be able to identify with some of the visions and objectives of other postcolonial writing, such as the quest for racial, cultural and personal identity, self-definition through writing and emphasis on historical reconstruction, but they rightly remain wary of other implications of the *postcolonial*¹⁴.

With this in mind, one could be tempted to shift the treatment of interpretations of Maori writings into a more 'neo-colonial' context, but here we find that the term mainly applies to relatively newly

¹⁰ An account of various criticisms of postcolonialism can be found in McLeod, chpt 8: 'Postcolonialism and the critics'

¹¹ McLeod, p.15

¹² Boehmer, p.229

¹³ Boehmer, p.231

¹⁴ Boehmer, p.228-232

(and once again) independent states; namely those that for some reason remain under the influence of the former colonizers, as appears to be the case with several African countries.¹⁵

In the case of New Zealand the situation is altogether different¹⁶, and I am left preferring the reading strategies and postcolonial context presented by Boehmer in the final chapter of *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* called “Postcolonialism and Beyond”. Here she describes the strategy of the indigenous writer as one of focussing on “revising the language, narrative styles, and historical representations of the colonialist invader”¹⁷, but also of accentuating hybridity by writing indigenous stories using ‘white forms’ like the novel and embracing biculturalism as a way of preserving a sense of Maori cultural difference.

4 Narrative techniques in ‘Baby No-Eyes’ and their postcolonial Interpretation

Within the context set by the two previous chapters I will now examine the narrative techniques which Patricia Grace employs in her novel *Baby No-Eyes*; this includes looking at structure, narration, the time-frame, plotting, language use, and at the duality of the novel as being both a work of fiction and of history.

4.1 Structure and Narration

One distinct narrative feature of Patricia Grace’s novel *Baby No-Eyes*, which any reader cannot help but notice, is the way in which the heading of each chapter is named after the narrator, or in strictly literary terms ‘the narrator-agent’, who speaks in that particular chapter. According to the findings of the third chapter of this paper, an obvious interpretation of this feature is that Grace is trying to make the ‘white’ literary form of the novel her own, by ‘changing the rules’ but staying within the overall framework of the novel by numbering these chapters in the traditional manner and sticking to the general format of the novel. Most Western readers would expect chapter headings that describe the content of the chapter rather than the identity of the speaker, and in this way Grace is not only making pakeha readers aware of cultural difference; she is also accentuating the hybridity of Maoris as a people set in a bicultural context¹⁸, thus employing a mixing of cultural perspectives, typical of indigenous writers. One should, however, be aware of the way in which Grace puts complete focus on Maori thoughts and feelings, never looking into pakeha experience of the events of the novel – this in itself a postcolonial trait.

¹⁵ “*The Implications of Neo Colonialism...*”

¹⁶ See also chapter 2: ‘A short overview of Maori History’.

¹⁷ Boehmer, p.229-230

¹⁸ More on this in chapter 3: ‘Maori Writing - Postcolonial, neo-colonial or 'none of the above'?’

Another implication of Grace's way of naming chapters is that special emphasis is put on the narrators and their role in the 'grand narrative'. Carefully they are each made to take part in weaving together a story of Maori experience through a number of interrelated stories and events with the characters and their interpersonal relations as the tie that binds it all together. Though the characters are not all directly related, it seems clear to me that they are one family – bound together by their common struggles and their mutual cultural and racial origins. By structuring her novel in this way, Grace manages to incorporate the notion of an *oral* history into the framework of this *literary* work of fiction. Each character participates in 'telling the story', and Maori readers will notice that the narrative technique of Grace adheres, with a few deviations, to the tradition of Maori storytelling where the eldest start telling the story and the youngest finish it. This is seen in *Baby No-Eyes* where the last three chapters are told by the youngest character 'Tawera'.

4.2 Fiction or History?

The concept of storytelling as an important part of Maori oral history, also paves the way for my theory that Grace is trying to present much more than just a work of fiction to the reader. The 'story' incorporates a number of issues and events which are far from fictional. As Grace writes in the *author note* of *Baby No-Eyes*: "The events, as described in the book, that take place in the pathology department of a hospital, are a description of actual events, occurring in 1991 in one of this country's hospitals." This indicates that the story is more than mere fiction, and there are also other 'real' issues that are treated in *Baby No-Eyes*. One of these is the issue of Maori claims to land rights to "Anapuke"¹⁹ which is a central struggle in the book, and which is very topical indeed²⁰. The Maori people see themselves as everlastingly connected to the land, and the importance of the issue of Maori claims to the piece of land called "Anapuke" should not be underestimated – a notion supported heavily by the fact that the German title of *Baby No-Eyes* is: "Anapuke, Berg der Ahnen"²¹ which means: "Anapuke, mountain of the ancestors". Another topical issue is that of "bio-piracy" which is also treated in *Baby No-Eyes* with its inherent criticism of the objectification of the stillborn baby by the white hospital staff, and the seeming inability of the predominantly white New Zealand government to realise the actual importance of, and show respect for, the sanctity of those areas which have served as burial grounds to the Maori for generations.

A typically postcolonial interpretation of all this could be that Grace is rewriting history with a Maori perspective through inter-textual storytelling, carrying out that well-known, postcolonial tradition of 'counter-representation', but personally I would say that this would be somewhat of an oversimplification. I *do* think that Grace is partly rewriting history with a Maori perspective through inter-textual storytelling, but simply placing it within the category of 'counter-representation' would

¹⁹ I have not been able to verify the existence of an area by this name.

²⁰ See also chapter 2: 'A short overview of Maori History', concerning The Waitangi Tribunal.

²¹ Found at amazon.de, searching for "Anapuke".

be incorrect. In this regard I would like to quote Boehmer's chapter on the characteristics of indigenous writers within the postcolonial framework:

"...Indigenous writers focus their energies on revising the language, narrative styles, and historical representations of the colonialist or invader. Again, their aim is not to replace white with black. Rather it is to accentuate hybridity..."²²

So instead of *counter*-representing pakeha history, I would say that Grace is trying to run parallel to it, making us aware of the fact that Maori historical experience is perceived and consequently related differently. In *Baby No-Eyes* 'Te Paania' tries to record the stories of 'Gran Kura' on an array of tapes and put them to paper. The act is symbolic of what Grace is doing in her novel, and constitutes a literary microcosmic metaphor for the structure and narrative technique of the novel which itself is also a collection of interrelated stories which draw a larger picture of Maori history and culture.

4.3 Time-Frame and Plotting

The time-frame of the story is also significant in this respect. By including the old stories of 'Gran Kura' which stretch all the way back to when there were but a few whalers and other pakeha on New Zealand²³, as well as focussing on the current and very topical events and issues mentioned earlier, Grace manages to connect the past with the present. According to the Maori view of time, often depicted as a spiral coming up from the past, coiling in to a central point, which is the present moment, before changing direction and spiralling up into the future, the past has a much more direct impact on and natural causality with present and future events, than is the case with the pakeha linear view of time, and this is also seen when studying the plot of *Baby No-Eyes*. The mistakes made by 'Gran Kura', who all too late finds out that 'pakeha goodness' is actually bad, go on to affect 'Shane', then the baby and then the entire 'family'. In this way the plot also reflects the Maori view of time and its inherent causality. As Grace writes at the end of the third chapter of *Baby No-Eyes*:

"There's 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."²⁴

²² Boehmer, p.229-230

²³ Grace, chapter 11

²⁴ Grace, p.28

4.4 Language Use

In terms of narrative technique it would also be useful to look at the language and vocabulary which Grace employs in *Baby No-Eyes*. One interesting feature is that Grace sporadically uses actual Maori words in her novel, and this without any explanation of the meaning of those words other than that which can be deduced by the reader by looking at the context within which the Maori word is used. This is also a typical trait of postcolonial literature, and can serve to alienate and disempower the white reader. Though this is partly the effect it has in *Baby No-Eyes*, I think that Grace merely wants to make pakeha readers aware of the fact that there is much of Maori culture that they just do not understand, and at the same time to reinforce the sense of a rich and still-independent culture. Some examples of actual Maori words used in *Baby No-Eyes* are “hei pounamu”²⁵, “rapaki”²⁶, and “Ponaturi”²⁷. Furthermore, the names of all the characters in the story are Maori names, and that also has the effect of making the text a little less accessible for pakeha readers. I myself had a hard time really getting who was who upon commencing my reading of *Baby No-Eyes*, and found this confusion comparable to the racial blindness some Europeans can experience when trying to tell different Asian people or perhaps black people apart. But the use of Maori words and names is not the only way in which Grace makes the English language ‘her own’. Grace also makes use of onomatopoeitic repetitions like “Lap lap lap, lappity lap”²⁸ and Maori exclamations of emotion such as “hi-aa hei-aa”²⁹, and she uses sentence fragments to give the reader a feeling of being able to look at the uncensored thoughts of the speaker. At times Grace almost elevates this stylistic feature into poetry:

“We stood in the middle of it.

Escapes.

Stars.

*Boom boom.”*³⁰

The dialogues are very authentic, clearly deviating from standard English, and the language also changes with each chapter/narrator-agent. For example, when we have ‘Gran Kura’ as the narrator, she is often telling someone else’s story – an older story, and the language is less fragmented with more of a feeling of reporting to it. ‘Tawera’ who is somewhat of an artist uses more imagery in his narration, and so on. Again, this all supports the notion of ‘storytelling’.

²⁵ Grace, p.28

²⁶ Grace, p.190

²⁷ Grace, p.193

²⁸ Grace, p.8

²⁹ Grace, p.294

³⁰ Grace, p.132

5 Constructing a Poem - An Exercise in postcolonial, literary Parallelism

5.1 Devising a Strategy

Having laid out the means by which Grace manages to make *Baby No-Eyes* a postcolonial³¹ work of literature, I can begin to contemplate on how these can be put into use when writing a poem that is to have the same postcolonial characteristics.

The structure of the poem should certainly deviate from that of traditional poetry, but should stay within the overall framework of this literary genre. Any sort of deviation might, however, be rather problematic since poetry, and this applies in particular to modern poetry, is such a free form and a generic literary genre that it is difficult to 'step out of bounds' so to speak. I will try to solve this problem by partly using rhyme and meter sporadically instead of systematically.

The time-frame of the poem should stretch far back into New Zealand's history, but should also address the same topical issues as those Grace touches upon, presenting an alternate view of history. This I will do by making references to both past and present events relevant to the Maori view of history within the framework of the poem.

Finally, the language of the poem should incorporate actual Maori words, which should not necessarily be explained in any great detail, but which I will comment on in order explain my choice of these words within the context of this paper.

³¹ The use of the term 'postcolonial' should be seen as used within the contextual framing of chapter 3: 'Maori Writing - Postcolonial, neo-colonial or 'none of the above'?'

5.2 The Poem

I, A Frog³²

Körero maumahara körero nehe!³³
Spoken lies closer than written:
Paper is so thin...

Ancestors coming back from Te Papatuanuku³⁴ to tell it,
Not to dismiss the paper story – but parallel it:
To end is to begin.

Thinking back to when I had a rock in my pocket – in my flesh,
An old dream or a memory:
How to give what you do not own? How to take it, sell it, steal it?
Who can *make* a stone?³⁵

White picket fence – bought at my expense so I axed your flagpole.³⁶
Forced to play your paper games;³⁷
I raise my hands and scream the names of those whose bones you probe³⁸,
And mourn the new me – a xenophobe³⁹.

Face like a frog – I, a frog, pinned and cut open;
I, a frog, looking right at you – squirming,
I, a frog, lost son of Apakura⁴⁰ – squirming!
I, a frog, without mana⁴¹; much unspoken.

With the old stories as ropes I am rappelling,
Jumping like a frog down the side of the mountain of telling.
Approaching but never reaching a place to stand,
Fighting to define my frog self – reaching out a hand.

Click-click-clicky-click hitting keys now though really speaking;
Two grand narratives I am telling... two of them together weaving.

Te mutunga hipa – te tīmatanga āmua⁴²,
That is where we all are – tahi rerekē⁴³

³² Consult the appendix for a list of resources used for working with Maori words and phrases.

³³ Maori for "speak the memory of history/the spoken".

³⁴ Maori for "the earth mother", known from Maori mythology.

³⁵ Metaphor for how Maoris had no real concept of "land ownership", upon arrival of pakeha settlers and colonizers.

³⁶ An important event of the New Zealand wars was the cutting down of the British flagstaff by the disillusioned Maori chiefs 'Heke' and 'Kawiti' – see also Belich p.203-207.

³⁷ "paper games" here refers to pakeha law and bureaucracy, with reference also, of course, to the Waitangi Tribunal.

³⁸ Reference to the issue of 'bio-piracy' and Maori burial grounds – see also chapter 4.2: 'Fiction or History?'

³⁹ Psychological term for "one who is afraid of strangers".

⁴⁰ A goddess honoured by the Maori; one of the mythological mothers who shaped their sons for excellence and glory.

⁴¹ Maori word meaning "authority", "control", "influence", "jurisdiction", "power", or "prestige".

⁴² Maori for "The end of the past - the beginning of the future", referring to the Maori view of time – see also chapter 4.3: 'Time-Frame and Plotting'.

⁴³ Maori for "together different".

5.3 Process Evaluation

As I hope readers will agree, my efforts towards constructing a poetic parallel to Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes*, in terms of postcolonial characteristics and effects relevant to narrative technique, have been relatively successful. I managed to utilize the strategies devised in chapter 5.1 and to convey some of the same messages and ideas as those presented in Grace's novel. Carrying out this little exercise has, however, made me realise something that I was not fully aware of earlier – namely that in her novel Grace deals with these themes in a very gentle way, illustrating her main points by her shaping of the story, or *stories*, almost never blurring out her points of view directly. She should be commended for the way in which she manages to do this. I tried preserving this subtlety in my poem and found it nearly impossible. This of course also has something to do with the fact that such a short literary form as that of a poem does not allow the same 'working around things'. For this same reason, Grace's way of letting the characters do the storytelling was also difficult to preserve in the poem, where the speaker is more of a 'voice of the Maoris', which was the closest I could get to Grace's family of storytellers within the framework of a single lyrical text of limited length.

6 Conclusion

The short overview of Maori history in the 2'nd chapter served as general knowledge which is essential when trying to understand Maori experience and points of view, and together with the theories of Boehmer⁴⁴ it laid the foundation for the 3'rd chapter: "Maori Writing - Postcolonial, neo-colonial or 'none of the above'?", which illustrated some important distinctions to be aware of when making postcolonial analyses of Maori literatures. Most important of these was the fact that the Maoris see themselves as still-colonized because of their status as a marginalised, indigenous people and that they do not really believe that full political autonomy for them is an option, and as a result, their strategies as postcolonial writers are more aligned with the idea of asserting cultural difference by accentuating hybridity and biculturalism, than with the idea of asserting cultural autonomy through counter-representation.

The theories presented in chapter three also seemed to apply well when looking at "narrative techniques in *Baby No-Eyes* and their postcolonial interpretation" in chapter four, where we saw how Grace takes a 'white form' like the novel and makes it her own through choice of structure, narration, and language use – letting a family of storytellers paint a picture of Maori experience through their interwoven stories which together underline the Maori tradition of an oral history, and this within a time-frame wide enough to connect their past with the present.

⁴⁴ Boehmer, p.228-250

The original idea of writing a poem, which was to acquire postcolonial characteristics and employ postcolonial strategies and textual effects similar to those found in *Baby No-Eyes* when looking at narrative techniques and their postcolonial interpretation, was that it would serve as a real test of my understanding of the Maori perspective. That it did, but as I had hoped from the outset of writing this paper, there were also other lessons to be learned. For one, I gained a new appreciation of the subtlety with which Grace manages to present the Maori perspective and employ different postcolonial strategies. I also found that it is difficult to deviate from conformity within such a generic literary genre as poetry, and that this can limit the ways in which writers can employ postcolonial strategies based on structure when writing poetry.

Finally, the way in which writing the poem allowed me to participate in the *creation* of postcolonial literature, rather than just being a passive, analysing observer, challenged and stimulated my understanding of the Maoris and of postcolonial theory to such an extent, that I am inclined to advocate the incorporation of this type of exercise into any teaching programme of postcolonial literature which as a field of study is as beset with inherent difficulties as the term itself.

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* Extract from Copenhagen University Compendium of Colonial and postcolonial literature: "Colonial & Postcolonial Literature & History".

8 Appendix

-List of resources used for working with Maori words and phrases:

Glossary of Maori - English words at:

<http://history-nz.org/glossary.html>

English-Maori Word Translator at:

<http://kel.otago.ac.nz/translator/>

Encyclopedia Mythica - Polynesian mythology at:

<http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/oceania/polynesian/>

The Aroha Way website at:

<http://www.thearohaway.com>