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Prelude and Solitude: Notes on the Female Characters in English Postcolonial Literature

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Abstract – Nella letteratura postcoloniale appaiono spesso figure di donne afasiche o mute. Si tratta di personaggi che non parlano, per scelta o per inibizione: donne che non hanno o hanno perduto l'uso della parola; ragazze dai tratti quasi autistici; inquietanti, intriganti figure femminili che rifiutano di esprimersi attraverso il linguaggio, donne tutte che vivono il rapporto con il mondo esterno come violenza. Proprio reagendo a questa situazione, i personaggi femminili dei più recenti romanzi postcoloniali iniziano a parlare: prima per lallazioni, come i bambini che sperimentano un nuovo linguaggio, poi mettendo assieme parole, in fine intere frasi. E finalmente arrivano a raccontarsi, a raccontare, la loro storia, rendendosi conto che ogni persona è la propria storia, e che la violenza più subdola, perpetrata sulle donne, è quella di metterle a tacere.

Parole chiave – Donna; Muta; Postcoloniale; Silenzio; Personaggio.

Abstract – In postcolonial literature, figures of aphasic or mute women often appear. These are characters who do not speak, by choice or by inhibition: women who do not have or have lost the use of the word; girls with almost autistic traits; disturbing, intriguing female figures who refuse to express themselves through language, all women who live the relationship with the outside world as violence. Precisely by reacting to this situation, the female characters of the most recent postcolonial novels begin to speak: first by babbling, like children who are trying out a new language, then putting together words, in the end whole sentences. And finally they come to tell us about themselves, to narrate their story, realizing that each person is his/her own story, and that the most subtle violence perpetrated on women is to silence them.

Keywords – Women; Mute; Postcolonial; Silenzio; Characters.

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*Still to be neat, still to be dressed,
As you were going to a feast;
Still to be powdered, still perfumed;
Lady, it is to be presumed,
Though art's hid causes are not found,
All is not sweet, all is not sound.*

*Give me a look, give me a face,
That makes simplicity a grace;
Robes loosely flowing, hair as free;
Such sweet neglect more taketh me
Than all th'adulteries of art.
They strike mine eyes, but not my heart.*

From Epicene, or The Silent Woman¹

The concept that women “must remain mute” is undoubtedly ancient. “Silence brings grace to women” Sophocles had written in *Ajax* (290-297), a line that became famous and was later quoted by Aristotle (1, A, 1254 b.).

In Ancient Rome, the goddess Tacita Muta² was venerated; even Ovidius speaks of her in the *Fasti* (2, 583 ff.), punished by Jupiter by having her tongue cut off because she had spoken too much and inappropriately. “For the Romans,” writes Eva Cantarella, “as for the Greeks, the word was not among the instruments that women knew how to make good use of, it did not belong to the female gender, it was not within their competence (Cantarella 12).”

It is certainly not by chance, therefore, if many figures of aphasic or mute women also appear in postcolonial female literature. The whole universe of the Australian writer Janette Turner Hospital is populated by them, from novels to short stories, from *Tiger in the Tiger Pit* (1983) to *Orpheus Lost* (2007) and the tales of *Dislocations* (1986), where characters who do not speak, by choice or because of more or less spontaneous inhibition, are always found:

¹ Ben Jonson, *Epicene; or, The Silent Woman*, Act I, scene 1. (Song). Translation from Bonnefonius. First part an imitation of Petronius, *Satyricon*.

² Tacita Muta, a Roman divinity with an obvious name, represents the goddess of silence. Honoured by the Romans on February 21, she was more precisely a goddess of the Underworld.

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women who do not have or have lost the use of the word; girls with almost autistic traits; disturbing, intriguing female figures who refuse to express themselves through language, all women who live their relationship with the outside world as violence, and who therefore do not speak or laugh, because in laughter, as in language, there is Eros. In reading their stories, one has the impression that in *Rigoletto* women are referred to as speechless, “muta d’accento”, and, what is worse, bereft of thought. The women of Janette Turner Hospital, like the mute women who flock to the cinema and the theatre – from *Johnny Belinda* (1948) to *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), from the silent Ada McGrath, the protagonist of *The Piano* (1993), of the New Zealand director Jane Campion, to Elisa Esposito, the mute protagonist of *The Shape of Water* (2017) – could never recognize the derivation of that ‘muta’ from the verb ‘to change’: for them, the image of a woman who is not thinking and silent is undoubtedly much more recognizable than that of an iridescent creature.

The rigid patriarchal world of which these anti-heroines, from novels, are the expression does not tolerate mutability; similar to the female creatures that animate fairy tales, they are girls who are not allowed to play an active part in choosing their own destiny.

Exemplary, in this sense, are the female characters of Shashi Deshpande, a writer who was born and has lived in India. In her best-known novels, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and *That Long Silence*, (1989) the three female protagonists, Saru, Indu and Jaya respectively, declare a multiplied mutism through their lives, where the silence grows out of all proportion, like the bean stalk in Jack’s fable. (*Dark* 94).

In other stories, imagined by male authors such as the Australian novel *Eucalyptus* by Murray Bail (1998), we meet taciturn young girls, beautiful and secluded among the very high eucalyptus trees, who are given in marriage by their fathers in accordance with bizarre selection criteria, (the father Holland and the daughter Ellen) similar in this to the daughters of kings in fairy tales, who spend the best time of their lives in the shadows, waiting for a prince to transform them, from paternal property to marital property.

In any case we are talking about women living in the world as observers, who often only know second-hand reality, through the accounts of husbands and children, fathers and acquaintances.

This is why their reaction to everyday life and what happens outside the domestic horizons fluctuates between aphasia – the impossibility or the inability to express one’s own thought – and hysteria – the repressed anger that suddenly bursts into fury, often apparently unmotivated, against the family and the whole world.

It is precisely in reacting to this situation, in the postcolonial novels of the last generations, that other women, younger ones, begin to speak: at first, like children who are trying out a new language, then putting words together, finally whole sentences. And finally they come to tell us about themselves, to tell their story, realizing that each person is his/her own story, and that the most subtle violence perpetrated on women is to silence them or even to hide them, perhaps turning them into sleeping beauties that have to be awakened, as in a nursery rhyme by Gianni Rodari.

The female narrators of the post-colonial novels refuse to wait for a prince’s kiss, or a poet’s, to awaken their stories. They no longer want these stories to remain in silence or that others, in order to tell them, should use their own words, perhaps misinterpreting them, in an attempt to embellish them.

She Tries her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks (1989), this is the programmatic title of a collection by the Caribbean writer Marlene Nourbese Philip. Like the Ovidian Filomena, turned into a nightingale, the woman breaks an atavistic silence, “trying out” her new voice which she does not immediately recognize as her own, which moreover resonates in that English language which for her is synonymous with anguish: “english / is a foreign anguish”.

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One thing is, however, very clear: it is not important that life, or their stories, should be magniloquent, but that women, finally, manage to tell them.

In this sense, while the female characters who do not speak can be interpreted as so many dumb alter egos of the women authors, the female narrators who recount so many post-colonial stories (written both by women and men), highlight a fact whose origin is lost in the mists of time: narration is a woman.

Piero Citati writes: “Narrating is - originally - a feminine gift, a word that a woman addresses to another woman and that the man listens to” (Citati 34). Women are all, potentially, *partageuses d'histoire*, able to share history, partisans of narration, as Glissant (Glissant 112) translates into a visionary form in his novel *La case du commandeur* (1981). After all, narration is a form of creation, and women, with their generative power, are the creators par excellence, like the Nana - from the novel *The Nanny and the Iceberg* (1999) by Ariel Dorfman proudly states, raising the cazuela, the typical Chilean dish she has cooked for the protagonist, to the metaphor of female creation:

“Never forget, Gabriel, who is telling you this: a woman” the Nana said, squeezing my hand at the same time, “Which means that women know it. We have had the upper hand, we finally have the keys to the kingdom: children, pleasure, food. If you make cazuela you make the world. It's a struggle ... life, sex, everything. Women should not let men know how powerful they really are. And we like you men to be strong and also weak. That you wear the mask and then take it off for us. (188)

As happens in *La case du commandeur*, men can even be intoxicated by the stories that women tell them, or the narration can turn into a kind of contaminated power exercised by women. The ‘wedding guest syndrome’ is always lying in wait: like the wedding guest subjugated by the sparkling eye of the ancient mariner who recounts his adventures in one of Coleridge’s ballads, the listener of the postcolonial tales cannot help but get carried away in the whirlwind of the story, often in spite of himself. Thus, if postcolonial female narrators all appear, ultimately, to be transformations of Shahrazàd, the “mute” presences are feminine reinterpretations of Harùn ar-Rashid, and like him, through listening they transform and are transformed.

It could be concluded that the prototype of *A Thousand and One Nights* is the basis of all the fairy-tale postcolonial narratives, in a more or less conscious way. On the one hand, as in the ancient Arabic text, the voice of the woman storyteller compels men to contradict and deny what they have said and “opens the doors of an unpredictable universe for them” (Placido 30-31). On the other hand, in the stories that the postcolonial female authors intertwine, as in those of Shahrazàd, “narrating is revealed for what it is: a precious currency of exchange to buy segments of life” (Mariotti 2).

Many postcolonial female narrators tell stories, like the princess in *A Thousand and One Nights*, to save their lives. Others intertwine their hurried words with the end. They all narrate to exorcise, postpone, and forget death.

In *Banana-Flower* (1999), by Bulbul Sharma, four generations of women, dead and dying, alive and unborn, meet at the bedside of Monimàla, an eccentric centenarian in a coma who, unbeknownst to her daughter Neelima who cares for her, exchanges stories with the ghosts of long-dead relatives, like the spirits of her mother Shamili, or of her very old sisters-in-law Mejo and Sejo, and with her still-living descendants, besides her daughter Neelima, her American great-granddaughter Pia, and Maya, the embryo of the great-granddaughter she will never see alive.

Myth, magic, fantasy and dreams are found in the visions and stories of the old woman, addressed to those who float in space and time and are not afraid to live many parallel lives. The narration arises as the desire to delay the end, to witness for a little longer the

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vicissitudes of others, but little by little it becomes a cage for the female narrator, who comes to implore her deceased mother to come and take her, to take her beyond the horizon, where we live on the other side, on the side of the dead. The last story told to the embryo no longer threatened with abortion (as was the case at the beginning of the novel) is a story about time, whose moral is that “we must live every life that unfolds, proceed, follow carefully the path that has been assigned to us” (Mariotti 2).

It is evident that the theme of the comatose female narrator is not only connected with Shahràzad’s classic fairy tale prototype, but also to the no less popular one of the sleeping protagonist, made famous in the West by fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty* by Charles Perrault or, in more recent times, *Rip Van Winkle* (1919) by Washington Irving.

These are stories in which a character, due to some spell, falls into a deep sleep at a young age to wake up only after a very long time and find the world in front of him/her changed. Unlike what happens in the fable, however, the epilogue of the novel is not an awakening, but death, or the end of the dreams that accompany the coma.

In fact, the stories the dying old woman tells in Bulbul Sharma’s novel and that only non-living characters can hear, are perceived by others as incomprehensible dreams. In this regard, the daughter of the dying woman notes:

Mummy dreams all the time ... In dreams you are never alone, all the people you have known, living or dead, come to talk to you, in dreams. They are all so kind and friendly, they have so much time. They are not in a hurry, they do not rush you. (74)

In a 1988 English novel, *Mother London*, by Michael Moorcock, a young woman emerges in a coma from a bombing (the famous bombing of London by the Germans in 1940) in which she lost her home and her husband, and for fifteen years she does not awaken from a sleep that takes place in an “upper world”, the Land of dreams, inhabited by figures from her past and famous personalities from the world of entertainment: when she wakes up, the woman, who in her coma miraculously preserved her youth, however, often finds herself incapable of separating reality from vision, of distinguishing what happens in everyday life from the events of the Land of dreams, and is haunted by voices that come from her fictitious inner world. Closer to the fairy-tale sleeping beauties than to Bulbul Sharma’s old Indian woman, the protagonist of the Western novel passes unscathed through a long and difficult period of English history, without being in the least affected physically or morally. It is not by chance, that Mary Gasalee (this is her name) awakens to open up to the love of two men, both patients of the nursing home for mental disorders where she is staying: a mature actor, whom she will end up marrying many years later, and an adolescent who she will initiate in the pleasure of sex. Mary, like Rip Van Winkle, does not know (and does not understand) anything about what happened after the coma: similar to the American character, her dream could be interpreted as a metaphor for the historical amnesia to which Westerners abandon themselves in an attempt to erase the traumatic or shameful periods of their past.

On the contrary, the dreams, the narrations, of the strong-willed matriarch of *Banana-Flower* are expressions of a determination to remember beyond the end and a desire to participate in reality for as long as possible. Through the stories, hers and those of the ghosts that surround her, the old woman clings to life, trying to decipher its meaning. The stories she is surrounded by are all feminine, just like the ones recounted by another old woman on her deathbed, Ouma Kristina from *Imaginations of Sand* by André Brink (1996). A few months before the elections that will bring Nelson Mandela to power in 1994, Kristina returns from London to watch over her dying grandmother, and finds Ouma physically destroyed but mentally very alive, obsessed by the fear of not being able to transmit the family history to

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her granddaughter, and with it South Africa's history, which for decades she has kept in her memory.

Or think of the stories (from which all these narratives seem to derive) of the successful Mexican novel *Mujeres de ojos grandes*, (1990) by Angeles Mastretta, in which a mother tells the fantastic stories of her ancestors to delay the death of her seriously ill daughter. And if the novel by André Brink, an authentic tour de force all written in a feminine perspective by a male author, is a complex digression on the theme of 'famous last words', the spiritual viaticum left by a male or female dying progenitor, Angeles Mastretta and Bulbul Sharma face the far from insignificant theme of the end with incredible lightness, leaving the stories that hover around the comatose characters to mark the epilogue of their earthly journeys. The outcomes of their novels are only apparently different: the old Monimala eventually dies, while the little Mexican girl who is ill heals, but both get what is most desirable for them, and reach it only after having known the example of their fairy-tale female progenitors. In this sense, the many 'aunts' that populate the novel by Angeles Mastretta and the female deceased who hover around Monimala's deathbed function as donors and magic helpers of fairy tales: with their stories they help the 'sleeping beauties' to wake up, to leave their dreams to go towards life or to slip definitively into death.

The "little girl with big eyes" in a coma, can only be awakened by the act of love of the maternal narration, like the little girl Saira from *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), by Vikram Chandra. Here Parasher, a spirit trapped in the mortally wounded body of a monkey, re-emerges from the phantasmagorical regions of unconsciousness to tell his story, sitting at a typewriter. This is the contract made with Yama, Lord of Death, who has come to visit him again. His only way to safety is to keep the listeners enthralled for at least two hours a day. Hanuman, the best of the monkeys and patron of poets, offers him protection and suggests a small stratagem: the pact does not specify who the narrator should be, so in the role of Shahrazad he can be alternated with Abhay, the boy who wounded him. When, after seven hundred and forty-seven pages, that is, at the end of the novel, the monkey is about to die, in what by then has become a crowd of listeners a riot breaks out. The movement of the sea, the archipelagic community that participates in the game of narration, is replaced by the violence produced by an ideology according to which "... there must be only one idea, one voice, one thing, one, one" (Chandra 738). The little girl Saira, who has been present in the story from the beginning, lets go of the hand of the monkey Sanjay and descends into the crowd to placate the tumult, but a bomb falls from the sky. Saira is hit and goes into a coma, a sleep similar to death makes her silent, and the monkey Sanjay, who had decided not to speak anymore, breaks the silence and with a trembling finger traces a word on Abhay's wrist.

- Help her.
- How?
- Tell her a story (739)

If it is true, as Benjamin states, that every narration acquires authority from death, the postcolonial is based on the very idea of death, understood as loss of identity, - of the earth, of language, of God. The postcolonial subject can only start from loss, from castration, because the Westerner has castrated him. The Western illusion of omnipotence is not given to him. But his own loss, and the ensuing emptiness, are experienced by the postcolonial author "through the logic of hallucination, of the dream, of the exotic", which makes his narration "a discourse of overturning, an overturning beyond the playful and the satirical, and it is precisely here, rather than in the exorbitant political process, that its most genuine strength lies" (Putner 108). This is the way in which the postcolonial narrator works through his bereavement in order to survive, thus transforming his weakness into strength. After all,

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every narrative is born from working through a bereavement: the narration is, first of all, against death as the death of the soul. And the story merely circumscribes the emptiness left by castration, loss, and death. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), the protagonist's grandfather after the loss of his faith literally lives with a hole in his stomach that marks the void created by the absence of divinity.

Telling stories is a way to inhabit the surrounding void. Ouma Kristina, in Brink's *Imaginings of Sand*, says:

In the Talmud (...) it is said that God had created men to tell Him stories; but then, unfortunately, they forgot about Him, they forgot to be, themselves, nothing but stories told for the first time by God. And since then (...) men and women tell each other stories. To fill the void created after the Great Narrator had fallen asleep. (Brink 117)

It is an often forgotten truth, which Tahar Ben Jelloun had already expressed in his novel *La Nuit de l'erreur* (1996): "... telling stories is not a trivial thing, it is terrible, it disturbs, it is very serious ... If you make them reflect, you become a danger to those who want nothing to move" (273).

In this sense, from Katherine Mansfield's *Prelude* (1918) to the *Solitude of a White Female Writer* (1990), this is the title of a beautiful interview of Nadine Gordimer, the postcolonial stories, intricate and intertwined, fantastic and vulgar, magical and banal, also appear as a test bed for the reader's willingness - and the critic's, of course - to accept the challenge of the new, to move from their own entrenched positions and change their attitude.

I would like to conclude these notes on female figures in English-language literature, by imagining the reader, and even more so the critic, among the few not to run away terrified in front of the Pandora's box that every postcolonial female character offers with her story: myth recounts that men, first enraptured by the very beautiful creature, were horrified by the worries, pains, and deaths that came from her box.

Only those who know the true nature of female mutability, and therefore never completely yield either to seduction or terror, can realize, even in solitude, that at the bottom of the box there is the greatest feminine gift: hope.

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