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Mediating Peruvian Subaltern Identities Through Literature: An Alternative Discourse?

This presentation will explore the representation of the indigenous subject in *Los ríos profundos* by José María Arguedas and *El hablador* by Mario Vargas Llosa and how this representation creates an identity and a space for the indigenous subject within a national context. Each novel exemplifies an opposite pole of the representation of this identity and produces an additional postcolonial component to be considered in which relationships of power are created, of which, violence is an inherent part. Literature represents and redefines these relationships and identities. While it is generally acknowledged that Arguedas occupies a position that allows him a different context of the nation versus the hegemonic, cosmopolitan perspective of Vargas Llosa, neither Vargas Llosa nor Arguedas is truly capable of speaking for the indigenous subject without imparting the violence that is inherent in this postcolonial relationship. At the end of this presentation, I will explore the possibility of a discourse that is alternative to the Western conception of literature that could create and manipulate national identities without this violence.

Pheng Cheah explains that literary reality is *truer* than historical reality and explains the idea of how literature creates a nation. The basis of this theory is the concept of *bildung*, the postcolonial process through which a subject creates its own identity through identification with an exterior element. For Cheah, one of the most notable elements in national *bildung* is literature. Both Vargas Llosa in *El hablador* and Arguedas in *Los ríos profundos* invite their readers to take part in the construction of identification of the protagonist, therefore creating a

national *bildung* (261). The protagonists of both novels go through an awakening of consciousness as they create and manipulate their own identity within the context of the society in which they live.

From the beginning of *Los ríos profundos*, written by José María Arguedas in 1961, the protagonist Ernesto learns quickly how to manage his place in society on the border of both worlds, that of the Quechua speakers, like the pongo, and that of the Spanish speakers, like “el Viejo”. From the first chapter Arguedas is situating the reader within his *bildung* of a national consciousness from the perspective of Ernesto, and the knowledge that Ernesto accumulates throughout the novel manifests at the end of the novel with his final decision to create his own future.

As the novel progresses, and as Ernesto finds himself more and more physically and especially emotionally involved with the plight of the chicheras, his world expands. One might say that the nation has successfully created its identity within itself and now is struggling to maintain its identity withstanding outside forces and influences. Around this time in the narration, the first person singular perspective is replaced by the first person plural. The reader becomes part of the narration and part of the creation of identity just as the chicheras convert themselves into a spontaneous comparsa. The chicheras in *Los ríos profundos* are in the process of defining and redefining their identities in this spontaneous comparsa, just as the reader, now part of the narration, joins in the nation building process.

Mario Vargas Llosa also chooses to write a story of an awakening of consciousness that involves an indigenous population also present in Peru, which is why I chose it as a point of reference. The protagonist of *El hablador* is a Jewish Limeño, Saúl Zuratas, who finds himself identifying with the culture of the Machiguenga Indians much

more than he ever identified with his own, so much so that he becomes the key part of what makes their nomadic culture a community, a storyteller.

In the first scene of the book, the narrator happens upon some photographs in a store window in a European country that is thousands of miles away from the source of the action of the story describing them in static and seemingly stereotypical way (7). This distancing is a reflection of Vargas Llosa's treatment of the subject matter. He too perceives indigenous cultures of Peru as an exotic "other", through the lens of a camera lens, far from his own reality. Vargas Llosa succeeds in a clear introduction of the place of the indigenous people within the nation for him. Right away, the reader perceives the Machiguenga as a fragile and simple people who could never have possibly survived in any globalized modern society, other than in the form of a photograph. In a word, the Machiguenga of *El hablador* for Vargas Llosa are anachronic in the national building of a modern Peru, just as are the indigenous cultures of Peru.

Vargas Llosa was conscious of his decision to not include Quechua speakers in his creation of a national identity through literature. It was not mere coincidence that Vargas Llosa and his narrator seem to share the same outlook on the future of the country. For Vargas Llosa, if the Machiguenga are to survive, they must survive in the way that the narrator so vividly describes, cutting off their hair, washing off their tattoos, and becoming mestizos.

As the storyteller speaks throughout the novel, he distinguishes the two different times as recognized in the Machiguenga cosmovision, "before" and "after", calling to the forefront the significance of their encounter with the other, specifically with Westernized culture. Whereas before, the spoken word created, now, everything already exists. For Western culture, on the other hand, written word is creating a space for the Machiguenga within its own structures of

power. Essentially, then, Vargas Llosa, creates a history for the Machiguenga within the scope of his own perspective. The ideas that existed “before” are mythological, and the history of their culture is created now through written word, not spoken. The narrator even calls attention to this. But in the end, the narration that we as readers are presented with is that same story that the narrator has struggled to write all of those years. Vargas Llosa has resolved the issue of representation by utilizing Saúl as his bridge between the Machiguenga culture and his own. The secret of the storyteller kept by the Machiguenga is still kept in silence, but little by little it is being pulled violently away from them. The fact that we as readers are witnesses to this change, as we are holding in our hands the evidence of the “after”, is proof that Westernized culture will prevail over the Machiguengas in the end.

The question arises then, as to what type of literature is capable of faithfully representing indigenous culture. Alberto Moreiras proposes that critical transculturation will inevitably collapse as it goes to the end of itself, as it tends to do through its logic (190). It is difficult to look at the literary phenomena present in *Los ríos profundos* as a project that is doomed to implode as Moreiras does, especially when the author concludes the book with such hope. By looking at the novel as a *bildungsroman* that symbolically builds a nation through the growth of its protagonist, we can see that Arguedas’s notion of the future nation of Peru did exist, contrary to what Moreiras’s “implosion of meaning” would suggest. Arguedas creates a new Andean ideology not contingent on the program of transculturation. The reader of *Los ríos profundos* is left with an image of the protagonist, Ernesto as he looks towards his own future. As he looks back on his coming of age experiences, he decides not to take the path that was established for him by others who exercise power over him. If we consider that this established path is the path of the concept of transculturation in the modern (Western) sense, then Arguedas essentially

creates a new concept of the identity of a Peruvian nation through Ernesto's choice to create his own path.

This creative future contrasts profoundly with the last images that we are left with in *El hablador*. At the end of this novel, the protagonist is seen just as he is seen at the beginning of the novel, evidencing the cyclical production of identity in the Peruvian nation in the author's distanced and static perspective, exemplified by the portrayal of the protagonist in a photograph, and emphasized by the dubious nature of his real identity. For Vargas Llosa, the future looks toward modernity and progress, and anything outside of this definition is not part of the future. He, like Moreiras, continues to use the same epistemology of transculturation and modernity, and therefore is not able to conceive of anything outside of that concept.

As we have seen, Arguedas is looking towards a new future for Peruvian national identities that does not include any of the current Western epistemology, but the question remains as to whether or not this new future will also carry the violence with it that is inherent in a postcolonial relationship of hegemony and subalternity. Arguedas is still speaking for the subaltern indigenous subject instead of allowing it to speak for itself. The use of literature in the Western tradition of its definition implies power, and ultimately violence over those who are being spoken for. I am interested though, in the inverse of this concept, in the possibility of a creation and transformation of the subaltern identity without violence. In my perspective, even though Arguedas is writing from the space of "border thinking" and he exemplifies the concept of "linguaging" coined by Mignolo (226), he still inflicts violence upon the subaltern subject through his use of literature as representation in the Western definition of the term.

We must open up the concept of literature to alternative discourse that may not inherently signify a postcolonial relationship, and therefore violence of the hegemonic powers over the subaltern in its representation. Arguedas alludes to a possible alternative discourse in *Los ríos profundos* in the creative and transformative importance he places on collective musical performances, specifically the spontaneous comparsa initiated by the chicheras, the act that also incorporates the readers into the creation of the identity of this new “Arguedian” nation through its collective nature.

Zoila S. Mendoza argues that the performance of danzas during patron saint fiestas is a key public context in which identity is defined (4), and she proves that the activities associated with the comparsas not only reflect social changes but also actively transform society (6). Dancers explore and rework the relationship between the practical embodiment and the ideological aspects of hegemonic and subaltern identities (11). It seems as though Mendoza’s study of Andean comparsa performance exemplifies all of the elements of a nation-building text in Cheah’s definition of the term, but Mendoza notes that “danza performance has been a site of confrontation and negotiation of identities since the beginning of the Andean colonial period in the sixteenth century...They entered a dialectic that emerged from ruling elite effort to curb and control the... expressive forms of subordinated groups. This dynamic has ... shaped their individual and group identities (5)”. Therefore, just like the Westernized concept of literature in Latin America, comparsa performance also emerges out of a violent colonial relationship.

Gisela Cánepa Koch focuses on the use of masks in comparsa performances in the Peruvian Andes and arrives at a similar conclusion. The use of the mask not only

confirms previous fixed identities, but also becomes a strategy of “conquest”, negotiating the position of identity in wider social context, such regional and national contexts. It is used in a ritual context as a mediator between two identities: the person who wears the mask retains their own identity, but the mask helps to redefine this identity. The mask, for Cánepa Koch, is ambiguous, and therefore possesses the capacity of mediation and transformation to form identities in a social order. It is significant that she attributes the quality of creation of identity to an object instead of to the Andean indigenous/mestizo subject, because by doing this, she is taking away the agency of the Andean subject. In this instance then, it is the Westernized perspective of postcoloniality that takes away the agency of the subaltern in this discourse.

Does there exist then, a literary discourse or alternative literary discourse that provides a space for the creation and transformation of identity without inherently enacting violence upon the subaltern subject? Can nation building through literature exist without a subaltern identity? While Arguedas is generally considered to occupy a border position that allows him to create a different notion of nation from this perspective, in comparison to the hegemonic, cosmopolitan perspective of Vargas Llosa, neither Vargas Llosa nor Arguedas can speak for the indigenous subject through literature, nor can they represent them through literature, without assuming a hegemonic position, that because of its intrinsic relationship with postcoloniality, signifies violence in its representation. Just as *Los ríos profundos* and *El hablador* create and transform identities that are symbolic of the creation of a national Peruvian identity, so do comparsa performances in the Peruvian Andes. Although at first glance it may seem that these representations of indigenous identities may be able to escape the postcolonial violence that comes with

representation through literature or similar alternative discourses, these performances also encounter the inevitability of representational postcolonial violence. Just as Walter Mignolo suggests, it is imperative that we open up the possibility of a future epistemological breakthrough. The consideration of comparsa performance is just the first step in the direction of finding a literary discourse outside of a hegemonic/subaltern system.

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