

María Graciela Eliggi

Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras

Facultad de Ciencias Humanas - Universidad Nacional de La Pampa (UNLPam)

ARGENTINA

e-mail: mgeliggi@yahoo.com

Address: Irigoyen 290 4° A (6300) Santa Rosa- La Pampa- Argentina

**Displacement by choice in *Moira Sullivan* by Juan José Delaney.
Diasporic dimension and self-imposed exile.**

Post-colonial theories have, along the past thirty years, accounted for the existing inequalities between those who, at different times exerted power from a metropolis and those parts of the world by them colonized. These theories that are applied to particular situations between imperial centres and their subjects around the world, in fact, describe a history that dates back to the origins of humankind: that of the imposition of power relations of ones over others, who are in conditions of inferiority to respond or oppose resistance (vertical supremacy). The literature about this topic is profuse and the circumstances that surround the lives of various ethnic, racial and religious minorities that after domination suffered processes of social identity erasure have been well documented and a matter of social and literary research.¹ Power relations *across* (horizontal supremacy) such categories as race, class, gender and religion have also been described in the existent literature, what shows that this problem is neither easy to define nor to solve. Introducing an oversimplification equivalent to saying that post-colonialism is just about the domination of the East by the West, women by men, or blacks by whites would be, by no means, an acceptable answer. This is, to be true to fact, a complex matter, as complex as human beings are.

Central to any post-colonial theory are identity issues. In his book, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, Madan Sarup, characterizes identity as “a construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices” (Sarup 11). In the process of conforming identity, Sarup considers that we must take labelling as a

¹ Among the theorists and critics that have approached issues related to post-colonialism we can mention Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1994; 1998); Anzaldúa (1987); Bhabha (1993; 1994); Bonnycastle (1987); Harvey (1989); King (1996); Loomba (1998); Mignolo (2000); Said (1985;1988); Saldivar (1997); Shields (1991); Soja (1996). Also, in Argentina, since 1995, several research groups within the Universities of Córdoba, Río Cuarto, Tucumán, and La Pampa have been doing applied research in the same field (Elguez-Martini et al; Celi, et al; Flores et al; Adamoli et al).

first step, since people attach labels to others and these labels have effects that can be interpreted as the ways in which others see us but also as how we see ourselves. The second aspect to be considered is precisely that, to understand identity construction we need to begin by localizing the process in space and time, “We apprehend identity not in the abstract but always in relation to a given place and time” (15) Then, evidence must be gathered related to the process, evidence that will undergo stages of selection, emphasis and consideration that will be organized in narrative form, like a story: “we construct our identity at the same time as we tell our life-story.”(15) This narrative will be the result of contributions received from many and various centres of culture combined with social practices: family, school, work-places, politics, and the media, among the most significant. As in a palimpsest, the effects of all the above institutions open up this “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash” (25).

Another central aspect of post-colonial theory relates to the processes of displacement and diaspora from the metropolis to the periphery and vice versa. Displaced subjects in physical and emotional movement across different geographical spaces of the world- many times completely foreign to them- will emerge as conscious or unconscious agents of cultural transmission. What is interesting to note about post-colonial theories, and in my own opinion, their most significant contribution, is their critical stance in the examination and analysis of the situation of inequality they study, combined with the possibility to perform a new reading of History and histories, from perspectives other than the ethnocentric and euro-centric ones that prevailed for so many years in the context of the social sciences. These processes of reflection and re-reading offer at the same time the chance to modify the state of affairs, to open up channels and allow for the inclusion of others to the centres of power-knowledge and decision-making, and although this is a very slow development, it is on the move, and this is, at least, a promising fact. And it is, precisely because once the debate is open, it becomes more difficult to silence voices, to avoid providing justification for given actions or to have a *de facto* attitude. The use of discourse as an element, the key element, in their struggle, has been the most valuable weapon of post-colonial theorists and critics. If, according to Jacques Derrida’s famous words at John Hopkins’ University back in 1966, “there is nothing but discourse,” the use of discourse in a strategic way may bring about certain encouraging effects.

This introduction to post-colonial thought and identity matters will serve as the necessary starting point for the analysis I intend to carry out in reference to the construction of the identity of the main character in the novel *Moira Sullivan* by Argentine

writer Juan José Delaney. The novel turns around the life of Moira Sullivan, third generation of Irish immigrants in Pennsylvania, U.S.A, and member of a typically catholic family: father dedicated to the mining and banking industry, mother in charge of the household and children, brothers and sisters with whom she had a distant relation, which ended when she moved to New York. Moira is a silent movies script writer from 1924 until 1927, year in which the advent of the sound-movies disrupts everything that she has achieved in her short career. Her life bears the indelible mark of her family, what she transfers in a symbolic manner to her film scripts. The narrative opens with the following sentence, which becomes the key to the whole text: WHAT MATTERED was silence² (Delaney 9) prompted by her reading in the Buenos Aires Herald of an obituary concerning the death of a silent movies American actress in the city of Chicago, an actress that Moira had met in the past. The same piece of news that Moira reads in the newspaper in English, appears in the epigraph of the first page of the novel as published by Clarín, another Argentine newspaper in Spanish, on December the 1st 1982. Thus, a journey begins along the life of this character, which is related to the Irish diaspora toward the U.S.A. produced in the second half of the XIX century as a result of The Great Famine suffered by Ireland in the 1840s.

Moira's life seems to be signalled by this silence that she anxiously longs every night, and especially on Sunday evenings, when her roommates at the old people's home in the city of La Plata, where she lives, receive visitors that Moira will certainly never have, fact that emphasizes even more her state of loneliness. This journey along her life will allow the reader to know the reason for Moira's presence in Argentina. Following her ancestors' destiny, even though in absolutely different circumstances, Moira becomes a particular variety of what can be called a diasporic subject. After the death of her lover, Konrad, a German musician who lived in New York and another traveller in search of a better future, Moira marries Cornelius Geraghty, a young executive of All America Cables Inc., son of Irish immigrants too, whom the company transfers to Buenos Aires. Thus, Argentina develops into Moira's opportunity to escape an unfortunate present, although without much hope to find for her the growth that her husband seeks for him.

According to Martin Buber, human beings alone are able to objectify the world by setting themselves apart, and they do so by creating a gap, a distance, a space. It is in this sense that spatiality is present at the origin of human consciousness. Yet, to be human is not only to create distances, it is also to attempt to cross them, to transform distance

² in Spanish "*LO IMPORTANTE ERA el silencio.*"

through intentionality, emotion, involvement, attachment (in Soja 132-33). In this way, human consciousness implies both distancing and relation, our being-in-the-world implies a detached look on things that will show our point of view of the world. This interplay of receding to observe what is around will help, in turn, to establish identity. This analysis leads to considering another important and related aspect: if distancing is a source of our being, it can also bring about alienation; entering into relations with the world is a search to overcome that state of estrangement. However, none of the above mentioned steps occurs in Moira's case, whose only interest lies in engaging in a journey that will take her away from her mother country, from her family, and that maybe will help her soothe the deep pain caused by Konrad's unexpected death.

Moira embarks in the South American adventure and she will soon learn and experience what Homi Bhabha and others have described as *unhomeliness*, a feeling of estrangement produced as a result of living between two cultures, a feeling of not belonging to any, and the consequent state of personal identity crisis. In relation to this, Sarup (16, 17) maintains that especially immigrants; tend to reinvent their past and themselves privileging certain areas of recollection for their own satisfaction. That Sunday evening, as the memory of the silent movie *Far from Paradise* bursts into her thoughts Moira wonders "HOW HAD SHE COME to that?"³ (Delaney 12), to the show business: first playing a role in that film, later as a script writer. And as a result of the memory, the character begins a journey to the past in search of the few moments of happiness she can recollect. Her first trip to New York, the first time she left home, and the shocking experience of incarnating the role of a girl who discovers her adulterous mother. Something that only as time went by she can explain as a revelation. The patriarchal tradition that ruled her family house worshipped silence. Although her mother is described as a very talkative person she "had advised Moira to be like the old and wise owl; the more he sees and hears, the less he speaks."⁴ (14) And that is what Moira chooses for her, to become a silent witness of various kinds of events since, either due to her own nature or to the heavy burden of her family upbringing and school education, lack of communication, repression of feelings and emotions and the imposition of guilt as a life practice "the occasions on which she judged she had something important to communicate, she could not find the right words, she would not be understood."⁵(14) All this places Moira on an

³ in Spanish "¿CÓMO HABÍA LLEGADO a eso?"

⁴ in Spanish "...le había aconsejado que fuera como el viejo y sabio búho que cuanto más ve y escucha, menos habla".

⁵ in Spanish "...las veces que tuvo algo que ella juzgó importante para comunicar, no había dado con las

island, isolates her from others for the greatest part of her life. The silent movies will, in Moira's view, embody the perfect vehicle for her to communicate with others and also to achieve self-knowledge; however, together with the flow of people in diaspora all over the geographical space of the U.S.A of beginnings of the XX century, a flow of capital is produced making the silent movies industry also part of the exodus toward the west.

It may be interesting to note that just because it did not rely on language but on images, this form of art constituted an element of reunion for large numbers of immigrants. It is possible to establish a connection at this point with Mary Louise Pratt's idea of contact zone, defined as the attempt to achieve a co-presence of subjects who had been previously separated by geographic or historic dilemmas, and whose present lives intersect. This can also be applied to Moira and Konrad's relationship, not based on fluent verbal communication but on a series of situations that bring them together as inhabitants of a diasporic space, having many more things in common than it could be expected. In spite of the fact the languages they speak might act as a border that separates rather than unites, the linguistic problem will not be such. Both of them constitute a variety of exile; Konrad escaping from the European post-war period, Moira fleeing a life full of dissatisfaction and assuming a position of self-imposed exile. Both interested in different forms of art coinciding in one point: their disregard for words. When they decide to share their life and move together, the readers learn that it was because "they had discovered the many things that brought them together: the same vision of the world, a similar conception of man, their worship of silence and their trust in the infinite possibilities of art..."⁶ (Delaney, 25), and to the list we may even add their virginal state for love and passion. But these ephemeral moments of fulfilment would not last for long, and both Konrad's death and the advent of sound films put an end to Moira's short-lived happiness.

Going back to Buber's idea of the possibility to construct individual identity on the basis of the interaction with others, in Moira's case, it can be observed that from the moment she experiences these two important losses, she initiates a process in which there is no hint or visible intention on her part to establish a relation that will connect her again with the world. On the contrary, the character deepens its progressive distancing. In her attempt to recover and treasure everything that could have belonged to Konrad, she focuses on the reading of his diary written in German. The translation of her lover's diary poses a

palabras adecuadas, no había sido comprendida"

⁶ in Spanish "...habían descubierto que mucho los unía como para vivir separados: una misma visión del mundo, una similar concepción del hombre, el culto común al silencio, la confianza en las posibilidades infinitas del arte..."

challenge that Moira accepts, though suspicious of the betraying condition of all translations; her task implies another type of journey across cultures and languages. Going through the yellowish papers, she disentangles the soundless meanings hidden in Konrad's words until she discovers something that both had once discussed and agreed upon "in every one of us there is at least two"⁷ (32), in reference to the multiple selves that are part of everyone's being, a self that speaks empty words, another one that writes words full of emotion, and still another that locks those emotions in the intimacy of the mind. Moira, whose prevailing inner self belongs to the third group, is destined to be absorbed in her own thoughts. Their moving to Buenos Aires, another space which presents a vast combination of immigrants from many parts of the world, does not constitute a matter of anxiety or fear for Moira, since she considers it as the way to turn her life into that of an 'ordinary' woman; a good wife enjoying a privileged socio-economic position and little worries, as seen from the perspective of her mother. Moira does not have great expectations regarding her life in the new country and has made a decision in relation to the new language she would need to fit the new context: not to learn it. The words of the character are clear about this when she says she feels "twice an immigrant, maybe three times"⁸ and prefers to adopt a behaviour of auto-marginalization and become "just a tourist, an amazed and surprised tourist" (104)⁹ Thus she develops into a mute reporter of everything that happens in Buenos Aires of the 1930s, providing a description of the others, of their customs, which she does not understand, full of marked contrasts with her own country and her way of living and conceiving the world. Through the irony of several fragments the reader can get an insight of Moira's attitude towards Argentina and Argentineans that, by means of oppositions helps to describe her. There are not many coincidences, except for the violence that gave rise to the wars of independence.

Her memory of the white and silent screen that no longer needs her brings about a comparison Moira establishes between the screen and her present life: white and barren. Her married life is practically inexistent, limited to everyday domestic practices and social activities that complement her husband's duties. Nevertheless, she acknowledges this is merely her own decision, to be a silent witness (to see and listen rather than to engage in conversation). There is something that she does in Buenos Aires, though, that manages to get her interested: taking German lessons with a native speaker, another exile that shares

⁷ in Spanish "en cada uno de nosotros hay por lo menos dos".

⁸ in Spanish "... dos veces, inmigrante, quizá tres."

⁹ in Spanish "...apenas una turista, una extrañada y sorprendida turista".

with Moira part of her European past. According to Abdelmalek Sayad, diasporic subjects live with the mixed feelings of a temporary condition that is willingly and indefinitely postponed and even when stability in the adopted land is achieved, it is with a sense of that state being provisional.” (in Zuntini 5) Moira lives in Buenos Aires and despite she has not developed feelings of attachment to this new land and its inhabitants it is not within her plans to return to her own country even after Cornelius death; she prefers the ‘provisional state’ that living in Argentina implies to a return to a country that far from being her own appears as distant and foreign to her. Related to this and to the situation of immigrants Sarup says that the search for roots and the possibility to become firmly established is what moves human beings in general and migrants, in particular, since “it is assumed that a sense of place or belonging gives a person stability” (1). Closely connected to this is the notion of home, a concept that is generally taken for granted, though, in fact, difficult to define since its meaning varies according to every culture. Both home and identity are concepts that relate to each other but that are limited by boundaries that signal both a state of hostility and/or of welcome. Avtar Brah, for her part, posits

“home” has a paradoxical significance in the diasporic imagination: it is a mythic place of desire (a place of no return even if there is the possibility of visiting the geographical territory) but it is also the lived experience of a locality (the sounds and smells...) where everyday social relations are experienced (in Zuntini 6)

Moira prefers to find refuge in the loneliness of her anonymity in Argentina rather than to return to a country which she does not consider hers any longer. Gradually she develops an interest for tango, which she inevitably associates with rag music and Konrad. She begins to appreciate the sounds and smells of Buenos Aires and in so doing she meets Lucio, a seven-year-old child born with Down syndrome. Moira will attempt to cross the borders of her solitude and establish a relation with the child in spite of the complexity that their communication might imply. She feels that both of them have a handicap, a disability that isolates them from the rest of the world, as she and Konrad had once been. Moira and Lucio would walk the streets of Buenos Aires, learning together, accompanying each other, without many words to induce communication, until Lucio dies, too, and abandons Moira to her own end. The child’s death prompts Moira’s moving to the old-people’s home in La Plata, to which she takes just a few belongings such as Konrad’s diary, Lucio’s glasses- through which she had a slight glimpse of life- some books, a useless telephone and the old

letters that she had written along her long life, some unfinished, absolutely all of them never posted.

Michel Foucault had stated that the body “exists in space and must either submit to authority (through incarceration or surveillance in an organized space) or carve out particular spaces of resistance and freedom- “heterotopias” -from an otherwise repressive world. Space is for Foucault, a metaphor for a site or a container of power which usually constrains but sometimes liberates processes of becoming” (in Harvey 213). Moira finds her place of safety in silence, the chance not to surrender to progress, which she does not admit as such and cannot accept. In silence, she had managed to construct her identity of self-exile in her own country, resisting the change introduced by the sound film industry, and later by isolating herself not only from the American-Irish-Argentine community in Buenos Aires, but also from her home community in the USA to which she does not feel attached-had never been- and where she has never longed to return. Moira has chosen to be a cast-out, to hide behind the mask of foreigner who does not speak Spanish with the sole purpose of, from that position of silent and displaced observer, document the selected sequences of her life in her own silent movie. She is a special variety of diasporic subject, not one escaping famine, political persecution or in search of better opportunities. Nevertheless, the character is part of a self-imposed displacement that distances her from her land and also from her own personal balance. Of all the words and ideas that had for years crowded and inhabited her mind without being released, the minutes previous to her death, these ones flow “There is no end” (Delaney 154). Moira accepts the reality of the words and her destiny they signal with relief. She shows a docility that had been unusual in her behaviour and that had earned her the marginality in which she had always lived. Her identity has been built upon a silence that contained all the feelings, all the emotions and all the words that Moira has never needed to utter, to expel out of her being, and that she has preserved until the end she has for many years expected. An end, that would reunite her, also in silence, with the world of her affections.

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