



A role of family secrets and silences in Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* and Denise Harris's web of secrets: A comparative study

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Abstract

The general theme of the study could have been chosen for Caribbean literature only, so much have the family and family fictions been one of its harrowing concerns. From Vic Reid's Jamaican novel *New Day* (1949), offering perspective on the historical events of Morant Bay rising in Jamaica in 1865 through the eyes of Johnny Campbell and his family, to Lawrence Scott's *Night Calypso* (2004), there has been an unending stream of novels foregrounding the family as a prime concern. This paper seems to develop a comparative study of Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* and Denise Harris's *Web of Secrets* in the same way.

Keywords: family fictions, community, caribbean literature, subalternity, postcoloniality

Introduction

We may wonder why the flow has been so continuous over half a century. The family may have functioned first and foremost on a metaphorical and allegorical level in the independence period and to this day; it still provides a privileged articulation between the individual and the community, a vantage point on the outside world, as well as most certainly a passage between historical times and present times; above all, it has always been a sign of the burden of genealogy, ancestry and history ^[1].

Two books have recently been added to the list of Caribbean novels revolving around the axis of the family, bringing additional evidence that the family is something that tells us about the present through its concern with the past. Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*, the bigger of the two, was published in 2003, and Denise Harris's *Web of Secrets* in 1996 ^[2]. Both books are novels, and both may cast a new light on the phrase "family fictions", close to "family romance" – not so much novels taking the family as the axle of its progression, but novels examining the fictions, lies and myths, fabricated by families and their members.

Both novels are geared towards the painful formulation of the secrets and hidden truths that are constitutive of the two families involved, foregrounding "the articulation of secrets, perhaps (...) the creation of hitherto unrealized truth" (Brooks 35). Both have incest, rape, and brutalization of subaltern

women at the bottom of that tomb of silence. The backdrop of both novels is slavery and the plantation system even though they are staged in the 1950s and 1960s. In that respect, they take their natural place in a long list of books, fiction or theory, devoted to the uncovering of narratives not previously formulated nor listened to. This association of the two notions of subalternity and silence brings to mind the work of Gayatri Spivak and other critics who have responded to her since the late eighties, when the many versions of her now well-known study were published. So, after presenting simultaneously the two novels in a comparative perspective, and positioning them within the context of recent developments in the postcolonial field, I will emphasize the narrative strategies and choric devices each writer has chosen to counterbalance the weight of silence and burden of History, attempting to reclaim the past and lay it to rest through the telling of the family stories. I will endeavour to demonstrate that Clarke's and Harris's fiction offer an indirect but shrewd response to Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern speak?", adding the originality of their voice to the ongoing debate about subaltern silence.

Although *The Polished Hoe*'s background is the 1950s Caribbean – on the fictitious island of Bimshire, fashioned after Clarke's native Barbados – it still reeks of plantation days, as for instance in the description that Mary-Mathilda makes of the estate at the beginning of her narrative:

Now, where we are in this Great House is the extremity of the Plantation Houses, meaning the farthest away from the Main House, with six other houses, intervening. These consist of the house the Bookkeeper occupies; one for the Overseer [...]; one for the Assistant Manager, an Englishman, which is the third biggest after the Main House; and then there is a lil hut for the watchman, Watchie; and the reis this Great House where we are. The Main House have three floors, to look over the entire estate of the Plantation, like a tower in a castle. To spy on everybody. (4)

¹ Cf. In the *Castle of my Skin* (1953), *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1959) and other novels by Paule Marshall, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970), Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will soon come Home* (1980), Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* (1982), novels by Jamaica Kincaid and Joan Riley, Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Harriet's Daughter* (1988), Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Austin Clarke's autobiography *Growing up Stupid under the Union Jack* (1998), and Fred D'Aguiar's *Dear Future* (1997) and *Bethany Bettany* (2003).

² *The Polished Hoe* obtained Canada's top literary award, the Giller Prize, in addition to the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2003.

The description could have come out of a slave narrative, so much is the plantation replete with all the grim elements pertaining to slavery and its legacy, with Mr Bellfeels at the center of a terrorizing power wielded over the estate, embodying the whole system. Similarly, in a way that bears on the great-great-great grandchildren of slaves, the background of *Web of Secrets* is still impregnated with all the suffering of slavery times. The following passage is repeated word for word at the end of the book, in a kind of echo borne across generations:

(...) from the very moment their great great great grandparents were ambushed and violently shackled and collared and dumped together like heaps of blind coal, all chain-bound, all slave-bound, but some also fear-bound, hate-bound, suicide-bound, slaughter-bound, sullen bound, survive-at-all-costs-bound, blank-look-bound, blank-outbound, despair-bound, amnesia-bound, tractable-bound, black-outbound, run-amok-bound, word-bound, hope-bound, maroon-bound, spirit-bound, god-bound but all chain-bound, all slave-bound, bound to the point of no return on ships steered by men who lacked colour and by that very lack were given the means to be members of the human race while they, because of their stained skins, were made more visible and so sold and designated as human beasts of burden at a place that no one could ever put a name to. (21)

In *The Polished Hoe*, Mary-Mathilda brings into her narrative several characters through whom special attention is granted to all those who suffered at the hands of the slave owners, particularly enslaved women. Mary-Mathilda's mother is one of them, whose promotion from field hand to kitchen staff also involves submitting to the plantation owner's sexual demands, until her "wrinkle-up body" no longer appeals to him and he turns to someone else. Who this someone else is, and what the consequences are, is precisely the object of Mary-Mathilda's statement-cum-confession: after a few hundred pages, the reader is gradually and painstakingly told that she is that someone else. Mary-Mathilda discovers quite late in her life that her mother was, before her, the "outside" woman of Mr Bellfeels, and so, Mr Bellfeels, the father of her (Mary-Mathilda's) children, is also her own father, and her children also her own brothers and sisters. Her consequent murder of him lies at the core of her narrative although constantly pushed to the back of the text, silenced yet voiced at the same time.

The novel begins with Mary-Mathilda delivering a statement to a Constable (later replaced by a Sergeant, a former childhood sweetheart of the confessant herself), but it is only much later that the reader understands what the statement is really about – Mary-Mathilda admitting she has killed, in revenge and disgust, the plantation owner and father of her children. She will lead the Sergeant to the maimed body of Mr Bellfeels only after more than four hundred pages of a circuitous, apparently verbose and digressive confession, walking tightrope between the Legal and Judiciary (it is a statement), and the Intimate (it is a confession), a problematic field that has been brought to light by Peter Brooks in his study *Troubling Confessions*, cross-cutting as he does

between "confession according to the law and confession according to literature" (4) ^[3].

Mary-Mathilda's confession appears haunted by the traumatic moment in her girlhood when she is passed onto Mr Bellfeels by her own mother:

"The sun was bright that Sunday morning, of Easter Even. And it was in my face. So, I couldn't see his eyes. Mr Bellfeels looked so tall, like the pulpit or the water tower, that I had to hold my head back, back, back, to look in his face. And still, I couldn't see his face, clear. This man who looked so tall, and me, a little girl, in pain from wearing his own daughter's shoes that was killing me.

"The sun was playing tricks in his face, too. So, neither of the two of us could see the other person too clear. But he could see my face, because he was looking down.

"Then Mr. Bellfeels put his riding-crop under my chin, and raise my face to meet his face, using the riding-crop; and when his eyes and my eyes made four, he passed the riding-crop down my neck, right down in front of my dress, until it reach my waist. And then he move the riding-crop right back up, as if my drawing something on my body.

"And Ma, standing-up beside me, with her two eyes looking down at the loose marl in the Church Yard, looking at the graves covered by slabs of marble, looking at the ground. My mother. Not on me, her own daughter.

(...)

"That Sunday morning, in the bright shining sun, with Ma standing-up there, voiceless, as if the riding-crop was Mr. Bellfeels finger clasped to her lips, clamped to her mouth to strike her dumb to keep her silence, to keep her peace. From that Sunday morning, the meaning of poverty was driven into my head. The sickening power of poverty.

"So, this is lil Mary!" Mr. Bellfeels say.

"Yes", Ma told Mr. Bellfeels, "This is my little Mary."

"Good", Mr. Bellfeels say. (11-12)⁴

The excerpt needs to be given in all its length because it highlights one of the central aspects in the novel which is the incestuous relationship between Mr. Bellfeels and the two women, mother and daughter. It is indeed a highly traumatic moment in so far as trauma can be defined as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelmingly violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 91). Clarke's, and Harris's definition of trauma seems to "work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 61). Trauma appears indeed as an event which, in all its violence, is not comprehensible immediately and whose impact can only be felt belatedly. Mary-Mathilda as a child does not yet know all the consequences of the scene quoted above but she will need

³ For a study in depth of the constant postponing of revelation, the deferred confession and the digressions, the constant meandering being the only path to truth and the constitution of a renewed self, see: Judith Misrahi-Barak, "Tilling the Caribbean Narrative Field with Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*," a paper delivered at the colloquium "Confessions," LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, May 2004, to be published in 2005.

⁴ All emphases mine.

all her life to heal the wound inflicted on her at that precise moment.

The novel shows forcefully how relationships inherited from slavery times have endured well into the 20th century, shaping family structure and permeating all the physical and verbal exchanges. The physical exchange is first and foremost established through the gaze; the girl looking up, Mr Bell feeling down at the girl, the mother looking down and away, to the ground, as well as through the use of the riding-crop, a phallic object metonymic of male strength. As for the verbal exchange, it is mostly silence that predominates: the silence of the girl who does not say anything, the very few words uttered by Mr. Bell feels over Mary-Mathilda's head and body to the mother of the girl, and the girl's mother, voiceless, dumbstruck by the treachery she is committing in her desire to protect her daughter from poverty and want while handing her over to the same fate as her own^[5].

One can read into Mary-Mathilda's reminiscing all the pain passed on with in the same family, from one generation to the next, through gesture and the absence of gesture, words and the absence of words. The different ways in which the family history is transmitted, or rather, not transmitted, form the backbone of Austin Clarke's novel, quite in keeping with Spivak's words for whom "[if], in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow..."(28). The associated powers of patriarchy and colonialism appear as so repressive and absolute in the text quoted above that only violence and silence can be felt brushing past. And yet, Mary-Mat Hilda's narrative is that very attempt to put into words what has so far remained silent: "I was telling you of a narrative told to me by Ma, which she heard from her mother, Gran, who I am sure, heard it told by my great-great-gran, and finally handed down to me. These narratives are the only inheritances that poor people can hand down to the iroffsprings" (Clarke 355). Whereas Spivak has often been accused of "deliberate deafness to the native voice where it can be heard" (Parry 39), Clarke's and Harris's novels tend precisely to throw light on female agency and the sense of self-empowerment through the choice of one's own words, via the confessional mode. One can also note how, in the excerpt given above, that key moment in the narration is represented through a dialogue within the main dialogue taking place between Percy and Mary-Mathilda, as if the foregrounding of a vocal expression had to be performed twice, in order to counter the alienation and erasure of self. And indeed, bearing in mind one of the questions repeatedly brought up by Spivak, is not direct speech also a symbolic way chosen by the writers to enable the oppressed subjects to speak for themselves instead of being spoken for, an attempt at recovering the "irretrievable consciousness" of the oppressed (28)?

Among the many critics who have been concerned with the

⁵ In one of the last sentences of the passage quoted above, Clarke's art of writing is made palpable. Even dead metaphors and colloquial phrases, like to strike somebody dumb, speak the truth of violence combined with silence, a silence that seeps through so many words in that sentence and becomes so loud. Not surprisingly, the word dumbstruck is also used in *Web of Secrets*: "I told [Kathleen Harriot about Arabella. I told her how dumbstruck Arabella had been after she was sent here without choice to this house" (167).

female voice, the representation and the erasure of the female body, and the status of the self, bell hooks has a particularly interesting way of formulating the necessity to reconstruct black female subjectivity through a renewed emphasis on dialogue and confession. For her the confessional moment is viewed as "a moment of performance where you might step out of the fixed identity in which you were seen, and reveal other aspects of the self (...) as part of an overall project of more fully becoming who you are" (Hooks 6). This performance, this revelation of self, beyond the repeated trauma and through words said to an Other, is precisely what is at stake in the two novels dealt with here.

If the elderly Mary-Mathilda is at the centre of the narrative web, spinning her own reminiscing, it is fourteen-year old Margaret who is the narrative consciousness of *Web of Secrets*, entangled within her own family's secrets and silences, with nobody telling her anything openly and directly:

'Hello... I am Margaret Saunders, the eavesdropper, sister of Adrienne and Guy Saunders, daughter of Stephanie Sheila Saunders and Charles Arm enius Saunders, niece of Eileen Henrietta Gomez(...), once married to the late Stephen Herman Gomez, grandniece of Irma Augusta Chase once married to the late Frank William Chase, and also grandniece of the late Iris Ethel Robertson, the late Stanley Ian Robertson... Christopher Michael Robertson now residing in America... and Percival Matthew Robertson also residing in America, granddaughter of Kathleen Maud Harriot and the late John Albert Harriot, great granddaughter of the late Albert Fred Robertson and Hope Amelia Robertson, great great granddaughter of the faded-out Robert Gerald Hinckson and Cecilia Margaret Hinckson....' (Harris40)

1960s Guyana, just like 1950s Bim shire, still smells of slavery and toils under the silence shrouding it. The first thirty pages of *Web of Secrets* are told from what seems to be an external focalizing perspective, through an apparently heterodiegetic voice, telling us about the difficult situation in which the Saunders find themselves — Margaret's grandmother, Kathleen Harriot, seescracks everywhere in her house, and speaks to people long dead, while Margaret has such an "overblown imagination" that her parents have considered sending her away. Then, at the end of chapter two, Margaret actually reveals herself: "I moved my eye away from the crack in the wall and quietly replaced the picture over it. My sister Adrienne was still asleep. I could hear my brother Guy tossing about in his bed. My mother was getting up. I could hear her. I am Margaret Saunders...Call me the eavesdropper" (30). The reader realizes then that the perspective adopted in chapter two is that of the narrator-focalizer, Margaret herself, who then switches to an overt homo diegetic narration and internal focalisation, now and then delegating her narrative responsibilities to other characters.

The symptom of the discomfort, to use a euphemism, experienced by the Saunders family, is described by the first apparent narrator, a neighbour and family friend, Gladys — who is, as the reader understands later, overheard by Margaret: "(...) as I see it, Kathleen Harriot imagining she was seeing cracks was in fact ambushed by memories that

were thought to be dead and buried and in fact were only lying low, so they resurfaced and then things started happening...” (7). The same word “ambushed” is also used later on in the novel to refer to enslaved Africans, “ambushed by white men,” thus making obvious the link between past and present troubles. Dietetically speaking, that coming to the surface is in fact prompted by the return of Margaret, Kathleen Harriot’s daughter, twenty years after her going to America.

After the first introductory chapter, the rest of the narrative is the consequent analepsis, starting off Margaret’s investigation and prying, launching into the spiral back into the past that will enable all the other family members to “see something else” – but everybody has yet to become convinced that “[a] place without a name can’t come to terms with itself” (15; 14).

Climbing down the spiral, hanging off the web, that is what the reader is in for when reading *Web of Secrets*. This is the same as in *The Polished Hoe*, when the revelation that Wilberforce is at the same time the brother and the son of Mary-Mathilda comes only at the end. The central secret of Denise Harris’s amazing novel is formulated by Kathleen Harriot only on the penultimate page: “Yes, I am not ashamed to confess that Compton whom I cherished...cherished... had been an incestuous child... the child of my sister... Iris... and my brother... Stan” (174). This is not the only secret that Margaret’s eavesdropping and Kathleen’s seeing of cracks will bring up to the surface: Margaret was never told about her father emigrating to America, nor about him being killed in Brooklyn by one of his jealous lovers, nor about her mother dying of cancer. Only hiding under beds and in cupboards (literally searching for the skeletons there); only eavesdropping will take Margaret closer to the truth, and force the other members of the family to accept to come closer to the truth as well and be free from the ghosts of the past. As Margaret puts it: “Now if [my mother] told us more it might help her and us and it would also save me a lot of trouble, for then I wouldn’t have to snoop around the way I do, trying to pick up the crumbs of their conversations. The crumbs only whet the appetite, I would like to tell you” (46). That metaphor of the incomplete meal, of the crumbs of conversation, of the “little bits and pieces they leave scattered here and there,” is to be found throughout the novel as a leitmotif (60). Be it for her father’s departure, her father’s death or her mother’s cancer, Margaret is always left to her own devices, never being told anything directly, always having to eavesdrop on and interpret the adults’ conversations. But only she will be able to understand why her grand-mother sees cracks in the walls and why nobody believes her: “Out of the blue Grand-mother claimed she saw a crack and each morning she claims she sees another one and no one believes or listens... she’s now telling my dead grand-father that the cracks are beginning to spill out all kinds of things...” (74).

What lurks in the cracks are all the untold family secrets and accumulated lies, and the house is finally throwing up all that its walls have absorbed, particularly the archetypal great-great-grand-parents’ secret – Cecilia Margaret Hinckson was probably raped by a white planter, which is the reason why Margaret’s great grand-mother, Hope Amelia Robertson, could pass for white. It is because of slavery’s legacy and the internalized colour hierarchy that Hope Amelia’s parents

Robert Gerald Hinckson and Cecilia Margaret Hinckson did everything they thought was best for their daughter, including erasing themselves:

(...) for were they not proof of her history and was not this proof to be blanked out at all costs? And so for the sake of their daughter’s future marriage, for the sake of future generations, they, from that moment, gradually began to erase themselves from her memory slate, leaving her in the hands of an old servant woman. They must have faded fast, she told her children later, for in a short while they became so inconspicuous that one could bump into them anywhere and normalize. (21-22)

Since Margaret, our diegetic narrator-focalizer, was named after that great great grand-mother, Cecilia Margaret Hinckson, uncovering secrets is a question of self-protection and survival. This is also an aspect of trauma that Caruth focuses on in her study, in a very interesting way: if the incomprehensibility of the ordeal one went through marks an event as traumatic, it is also one’s survival to the ordeal that appears incomprehensible. In order to establish her survival process, reclaim the past and lay it to rest through the telling of her family’s stories and history, Margaret is given the power to listen, just as Kathleen is.

Indeed, in *The Polished Hoe* and *Web of Secrets*, listening is as vital as speaking out, and both novels rely on a dialogic definition of self, along lines defined by Mikhail Bakhtin when he speaks of the “interdependence of consciousness that is revealed during confession. I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another” (Problems 287) ⁶. Both narratives are indeed confessions, and strive towards the emergence of more confessions. In *The Polished Hoe*, Mary-Mat Hilda delivers her confession in the shape of a police statement, but her confession is multi-levelled – she has murdered Mr Bell feels, admits to the murder, but it is also a plea for self-defense: she is the victim turned murderer who fought on behalf of the thousands before her.

In *Web of Secrets*, Margaret confesses her thoughts to the mysterious Arabella, a good part of the narrative being addressed to her. Arabella’s identity is unclear at first. Most of what Margaret discovers is narrated through this interpolated listener, who never interrupts the girl’s monologue, so much so that the reader wonders who or what Arabella is. The ambiguity is artistically maintained as late as possible, almost as late as the revelation of the central secret, until the reader is finally made to realise Arabella is neither a doll nor amute child: she is a bird, a parrot or a macaw, brought back from South America, a place that Margaret refers to as El Dorado, a transparent allusion to Denise Harris’s father.⁷ Instead of

⁶ One can also of course refer to Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), and particularly the chapter “Discourse in the Novel” for a detailed analysis of dialogism and heteroglossia.

⁷ I am grateful to Hena Maes-Jelinek for having emphasized the numerous similarities between Wilson Harris’s and his daughter’s works, among which would be the relationships between human beings and animals, particularly birds (*The Dark Jester*), or the bringing back of the dead and the on-going dialogue that ensues (*Jonestown*; *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, *Carnival Trilogy*). H. Maes-Jelinek also mentioned that the passage when Margaret strikes Arabella and “she seemed to spurt into a

repeating the words people try to teach her, Arabella only remains mute, echoing the silence that is the Saunders' mother tongue, and Margaret's words to her are left to reverberate on her muteness.

Arabella plays a determining role in the novel: first, she is the only living being, apart from Kathleen Harriot, who listens to what Margaret has to say. Second, she is Margaret's alter ego on two levels: Arabella has been wrenched away from her native environment, probably "ambushed" like the enslaved African peoples, and she has not been told or even consulted about anything. Margaret establishes the comparison in a striking way:

Do you know, Arabella, my mother never told me about my father, my own father that he was leaving for good? Were you told that you would be sent into town, to Kathleen Harriot's house, a place you never knew or dreamt of, not in your wildest dreams? Did they tell you or were you just sent without much notice? (58)

At the end of the novel, when Margaret is sent to America, the link not only with enslaved Africans but also with herself is quite clear: "I thought how you came here without any choice, the same way I am being sent without any choice (...) but perhaps I'll meet someone in America who'll talk to me the same way I've talked to you. Who knows? Someone to help me come to some kind of understanding..." (162). Transported beings understand each other.

The second level is when Arabella keeps quiet, Margaret asks her: "... or perhaps you've been hushed up...that's it... Perhaps someone slapped you whoosh right across your mouth and told you to hush up... It's either one or the other... tongue-tied or hushed up... right" (38)?⁸ Arabella's silence is of course symbolical of all the family's silence, ironically underlined by the fact that Aunt Eileen brings back a parrot as a present for Margaret... What is the parrot exactly supposed to repeat when nothing ever gets said?

Dialogically speaking, it is quite amazing Denise Harris succeeds in characterizing Margaret through and against Arabella, a tongue-tied character who is not even human but still exists as a character nonetheless; Margaret is made to define herself against the linguistic absence of that other character. As Mary-Mathilda would not exist without Percy when turning her confession in to a locus of control, Margaret does not exist without Arabella. The silence of the listener only makes the words of the speaker more resonant; both are closely interdependent, each validates the other – the construction of both narratives can be said to function along dialogical lines.

The apparently secondary characters also play an active part in the way the main protagonists are perceived by others and define themselves. For instance, *Web of Secrets* opens with

flame of colours" is reminiscent of W. Harris's "incandescent bird" in *The Dark Jester* (private email correspondence, November 23, 2004).

⁸ That whoosh used here by Margaret when speaking to Arabella is echoed elsewhere in the novel through other onomatopoeias – slap slap when her mother is struck by her second husband; or when Kathleen is slapped across her face because she is believed to be hysterical; slap slap again when Margaret tries to bring her mother back to life, a moment that is reactivated later on when she strikes Arabella into freedom, forcing her out of her cage.

Kathleen's friend, Gladys, speaking to a friend of hers. Other chapters are composed of the neighbours' or friends' voice stalking about the Saunders, raising the volume of surrounding voices but paradoxically making the overall silence better heard, and all the more resonant. Absent people are out there somewhere too, and sometimes come back; Gladys's husband who spent five years in England, finally comes back. Dead people talk, and are talked to: whole chapters are made up of dialogues between Kathleen and John Harriot, her late husband; Iris haunts the nights of her sister Kathleen, obsessing her about the incestuous and seemingly adopted child. In *The Polished Hoe*, other voices are brought in, mingling with the three dominant voices of Mary-Mathilda, Percy and the narrator, the voices of characters who all played their parts however insignificantly. The text uses the whole range of narratological possibilities, direct speech, reported speech, free indirect speech, stream of consciousness; even the singing voices of Ella Fitzgerald or Paul Robeson are overheard. Each in their own ways, both novels weave webs of secrets into webs of voices.

Thus, the very construction of both novels functions through patterns of echoes and resonances. We have just seen how the silences of one character help define the linguistic, psychological and mental constitution of another character—both novels are based on the interplay between silences and voices. Through Mary-Mathilda's and Margaret's homo diegetic voices, it is all the unheard voices of enslaved, transported, displaced and abused people that are being heard – all those unspeakable things unspoken to borrow Toni Morrison's words, which sound "like a sea of voice" as Kathleen Harriot says (Harris 164). It is also all the words that have not been spoken out to the generations of the victims' descendants that are here given the opportunity to be heard; Percy never heard about slaves on the island of Bimshire; nobody told Margaret about her great-grandmother's story, nor about her great-great-grandparents "who had faded fast with no record of burial," somehow "blinking out the memory slate" (169).

If Edward Said's *Orientalism* was often felt by his critics as laying too much stress on "a totalising and unified imperialist discourse" (Gandhi 77), almost giving "a disabling one-sided account of the colonial encounter" (81), Spivak's theory of subaltern silence was also often perceived as not allowing the emergence of self-formation and agency, of "dynamics of power and resistance" (Lomba 233). Gandhi even concludes her presentation of Spivak by saying, "Meanwhile, in the wings, Spivak's 'gendered subaltern' silently awaits further instruction" (93).

They do not need to await further instruction any longer. By lending ink and paper existence to characters like Margaret and Mary-Mathilda in *The Polished Hoe* and *Web of Secrets*, Harris and Clarke, through fiction and literature, provide a resounding response to the convolutions of theory. Because neither Mary-Mathilda nor Margaret have been told about what constitutes the mass human beings, they will not let themselves be cast in the role of the silenced subaltern any longer. They appear in both books as the ones who tell, the ones who speak and make themselves heard and listened to. The "winding, if not circuitous" journeys of Mary-Mathilda and Margaret come to an end once they have revisited the

silenced past, and exorcised the “bondage to the terrors of the witch-craft of the past...” (Harris 174). Only the polyphonic web of voices and words can counter-balance the iron curtain of secrets and silences.

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