

Keep Moving Forward: A Postcolonial Interpretation of Narration in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

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INTRODUCTION

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.”

--Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Barbara Kingsolver sets her classic novel *The Poisonwood Bible* during the historical Congolese Independence Movement, particularly the initial quest for liberation. Following an evangelical preacher from Georgia and his family, the novel depicts the difficult relationship between both the natives and the outside “Western” peoples and among the Congolese themselves. According to Nathan Kirkpatrick, “Kingsolver describes her Pulitzer-nominated novel *The Poisonwood Bible* as a story that ‘came from passion, culpability, anger, and a long term fascination with Africa’” (83). Since she was a child who spent a portion of her life living among the tribes in the Congo, Kingsolver understands some of the issues that the characters in her book deal with (Austenfeld 294). *The Poisonwood Bible* paints a breathtaking view of Africa and the relations between American and native cultures. The novel follows Nathan Price, his wife Orleanna, and their four daughters as they struggle to interact with the natives and understand their place in a foreign land. Nathan deeply desires to convert the Congolese people into upstanding Christians, while the native people reject the alien lifestyles that are being forced upon them. With Nathan and Africa locked in a standstill, the women of the Price family must adapt to their new situation, thus separating them from the head of the family but definitely not from Africa. The Price women, all who came to Africa with their own ideas about life in the Congo and the people there, are forced to modify their points of view in order to survive the harsh realities that are set before them. However, this modification forces them to grow as individuals, in both positive and negative ways.

The manner in which the novel is constructed conveys both the mood and the message of the piece. Rather than taking the more traditional approach of explaining a story from a single character, the novel instead tells the tale of the Price family through the eyes of the multiple female characters. The novel is broken up into seven sections, or books, each titled with various biblical references. At the beginning of each segment, Orleanna, the wife of Nathan, describes some of the history of the family both before and after they entered Africa, all from the island of Sanderling in Georgia. The date she writes these contemplations remains unknown, but clearly she is reflecting back on the relationship her family had to each other and to Africa. The rest of the novel deals with an array of narrators through a large span of time. Starting in the fictional tribe of Kilanga, Africa in 1959, the novel goes all the way to 1986 and is told by Orleanna's daughters. Each daughter provides a different view of the family's stay in the jungle. The oldest daughter, Rachel, is haughty and dignified, convinced that the family must leave the Congo immediately and rejoin American society. Leah, one of the twins, is curious about their new home, eager to learn and more accepting of their new climate. Her twin sister, Adah, gives the reader the best glimpse at life inside the family unit; as a paraplegic, Adah is an observer among the chaos both in the tribe and in their home. The youngest, Ruth May, offers a relatively innocent view of the trials of the family, giving the reader a comparatively unfiltered gaze upon which to watch their misfortunes. Each of these narrators discusses the same main event (the family living in Africa) and the consequences that follow. However, because there are so many narrators, there is a variety of viewpoints, allowing for a more comprehensive look into the Price family. The multiple narrators in *The Poisonwood Bible* convey the postcolonial tendencies throughout the novel, particularly the shift from an American to a more Congolese mindset and

the mergence of both ideologies to create a new unique understanding, otherwise known as the creation of a hybrid identity.

HISTORY AND RATIONALE

The timeline within the novel spans from 1959 all the way to 1985, which incorporates many different glimpses into the unique opinions and viewpoints of the culture. The bulk of the novel takes place in Africa, where the Price family must learn to grapple with the varying challenges found in the Congo. The ever-changing issues that are found in the novel seem to reflect the transformation the country undergoes during this time period, one of political and social unrest and rebellion. Due to the fluctuating politics and constantly warring countries, the Congo is mostly defined by its instability. This variability that took place in the Congo mirrors the changes within the Price women, and considering that their discourse takes place during the constant upheaval, it is obvious that the relationship between the two is meant to be apparent. The history of the Congo during this time is an indicator of the transformation the Price women undergo in the novel; therefore, it is beneficial to take a brief look at the history of the novel, both to get a better understanding of what the characters deal with and their surroundings, as well as see a tangible relationship within the history.

A major change that defined this time period is the split from Belgium, a country that occupied the Congo for a hundred years. The rise of Congolese independence and the installation of Patrice Lumumba as prime minister was a monumental step for the people of the Congo, but was definitely not a smooth transition. Once they were not occupied by European powers, the everyday people did not know how to be a democracy. The ability to have a say in the government either had a minimal impact on the uncaring natives or an immense realization of independence.

The newfound freedom resulted in a chaotic scramble for power, creating multiple rival factions against Lumumba and the state. Lumumba was murdered after being in office for only a short period of time, and again the government went into fluctuation. After a few years, Joseph Mobutu led a rebellion and appointed himself president. Mobutu ran the country to the brink of despair, which created an excessive amount of tension among the people. Throughout his three decades of leadership, multiple rebellious factions rose and attempted to take power from the government, terrorizing the population in the process.

While the novel does bring awareness to the plight of African culture and people groups, Kingsolver's purpose for the novel goes deeper than merely a political rally cry. The importance of the novel remains just as pertinent as when it first received critical acclaim. Austenfeld argues that *The Poisonwood Bible* "is a prime example of an established author employing new tools in the treatment of a complex socio-historical moment: the transformation of an American missionary family's modes of existence and self-perception, foregrounded against the corresponding political transition of the Congo from a colony to self-governing entity" ("The Revelatory Narrative Circle" 294). Critic Pamela H. Demory claims that Kingsolver's work is meant as a modern reinterpretation of Joseph Conrad's classic novella *Heart of Darkness*, claiming that the complex narration, plot movement, and overall themes reveal the undertones of homage to the original work on white colonization in the Congo ("Into the Heart of Light"). Nathan Kilpatrick calls the novel a "parable" or "political allegory" in an attempt to define the purpose of the work and its obvious importance in modern understanding ("Singing a New Song" 83). Critic April Morgan goes so far to argue that *The Poisonwood Bible* could be the voice that brings awareness to the struggle of international associations, not just between America and the Congo, but spread farther out to other cultures ("An Antidote for What Ails

International Relations?"). While the novel clearly provides political awareness to a fresh audience, it would be a mistake to merely categorize the work with just one viewpoint. The novel not only provides insight into the political situation around the world, but also is a historical fiction, a family drama, as well as a psychological insight into a variety of characters as a sort of coming-of-age novel. Extraordinarily complex, *The Poisonwood Bible* begs to be analyzed by utilizing a variety of theories and methodologies in order to get an idea of the full depth of its ideas and content.

KEEP MOVING FORWARD

This project intertwines both narrative and postcolonial theories to analyze the novel through a unique hybrid lens. By utilizing both theories together, a pattern can be observed through the different narrators. By using only the narration from the characters to interpret their ideological shifts, not other's interpretations of those characters, a postcolonial perspective can be charted throughout the novel. As mentioned previously, many scholars analyze the political agenda of the novel; however, merely looking at the novel on such a large and impersonal level neglects a deeper meaning. Analyzing the politics of the novel does not take a look at the characters themselves, only looking at the outside relationship between the plot and the history behind it. Orleanna mentions towards the middle of the novel, "Africa swallowed the conqueror's music and sang a new song of her own" (Kingsolver 385). This newfound "song" is what needs to be reexamined: the taking in of a different culture or society and the creation of an entirely new interpretation of a previously oppressive figure. The concept of adaptation of oppression can be looked at on a grander scheme, such as the political argument made by previous scholars, but a closer look at the characters themselves will allow for a better understand of the theories used, postcolonialism and narrative theory, as well as an idea for

application. Through the use of narratology, mainly a look at the point of view each narrator brings to the discourse as discussed by Gerard Genette, the postcolonial understanding of identity can be seen within each of the girls. Basically, the structure of the work and its narration helps to define the postcolonial tendencies that are apparent throughout. A key aspect that helps to describe the Price women throughout the novel is the use of narrator and point of view. The homodiegetic nature of the novel, or the fact that the characters are also the narrators, allows for a closer look at the merging of cultures, particularly the way the native culture affects those who came to replace it. Because the novel follows these women as they grow older (with the obvious exception of Ruth May) their progression of thought can be mapped, displaying the gradual acquisition of hybridity between two cultures.

Among the multiple narrators, each of the girls possesses a variation of a singular ideology, one that can be attributed to their childhood in America and manifest through their extremely different personalities. For such different characters, they do share similar values and beliefs, which are tied together by their life in America. Austenfeld explains, "Each of these five voices [in *The Poisonwood Bible*] has its own distinct pattern of language and angle of viewing people and events, providing a variety of focalizations or filters and reminding the reader that no person can know all" (296). Therefore, it seems logical that for this thesis, each chapter should discuss the merging of cultures within a particular character, from her initial impressions of the Congo and the natives to her moment of hybridity and the creation of liminality. The older three girls, Rachel, Leah, and Adah, each have their own chapter because their narrations continue throughout the entire work, giving the critic a better understanding of the creation of their hybrid nature. This new hybridity, cultivated by the time spent in the Congo, affects the very identity of the Price women. Identity, in the terms of this discussion, is the understanding of the self in

relation to a culture. For the Price women, their previous identities consisted of their relationship to their American culture; once in Africa, that identity is forced to shift and adapt. The creation of their new identity is much more expansive because the narrative spans through several decades, allowing the full extent of their alteration to be displayed. The fourth chapter of this project will look at the two least heard narrators, Ruth May and Orleanna, whose fates and impressions of Africa are extremely intertwined.

NARRATIVE THEORY—A LOOK AT PERSPECTIVE

The point of view in the novel helps to shape its effectiveness, or the relaying of certain meanings and messages. The women in the Price family, primarily the four youngest daughters, narrate the novel, each bringing her own perspective of their life in the Congo and their relationship with the people. Because the novel spans from their childhood well into their adult years, the reader can see opinions that the girls might have brought into Africa with them, namely American standards, and how these beliefs are ultimately shifted due to their life-altering foray into the Congolese jungle. For example, one of the daughters, Leah, begins her narration echoing her father's conviction that they bring the only correct beliefs to the Africa villagers. When a neighboring woman comes over to teach them how to plant a garden with the African soil, Nathan (and by extension, Leah) rejects her attempts to fix the garden and plants the seeds the way they would in America. Leah as the narrator comments, "Several days later, once Father had regained his composure and both his eyes, he assured me that Mama Tataba hadn't meant to ruin our demonstration garden. There was such a thing as native customs, he said. We would need the patience of Job" (Kingsolver 41). This statement displays Leah's belief that the African way of doing daily activities is not adequate compared to her American ideologies, effectively "ruining" that which she and Nathan are trying to "demonstrate." However, as the novel

progresses, Leah's thoughts and opinions on this subject begin to shift, and she starts to desire more knowledge of the African way of life. By the end of the novel, Leah entirely abandons her previous lifestyle and thought processes and adapts to an African way of life, marrying a native man and rejecting her American roots. This transformation is made visible through the use of a first person narrative and would not have been quite as noticeable with any other point of view. Looking at Leah's personal narrations allows for a deeper sense of her conversion throughout the novel, for her own awareness and analysis of herself displays her shifting mindset. Rather than allow for an outside, third-person narrator to merely inform the audience of her alterations, the first-person narration allows for a more personal look into her thoughts and feelings.

As a whole, narrative theory deals with the study of a narrative, or a complex representation of events, and focuses on the structure, or manner in which the narrative takes shape, that helps create the work. This structuralistic view of a work offers a tangible way to analyze the abstract aspects of a text, such as themes or purpose. The use of narrative theory in this context allows for a deeper look into the multiple perspectives the novel offers. The variations of point of view of the overall event (living in the Congo) and the multiple retellings of smaller events that are within this frame can be analyzed by a structuralist interpretation. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* explains, "Narratologists treat narratives as explicitly constructed systems, as representations that create and shape meaning" (327). Through this critical lens, the structure of a work helps to generate a sense of meaning in a way that no other theory can bring out; the form helps shape the message. Therefore, the text itself relays any themes or outcomes that the story might provide; there is no look at the author, the reader, or any other outside influence.

In the case of *The Poisonwood Bible*, the structure by which the reader receives information about the Price family reveals the underlying message the text sends. Gerard Genette, author of *Narrative Discourse*, is a key influence to this method of criticism. Called the father of narratology, Genette was one of the first critics to attempt to create a theory of narrative discourse that distinguished the different aspects of a narrative. By breaking down the different aspects of a narrative, Genette allowed for a more precise look at the message within a story. Genette defines several key terms that help shape narrative theory: “I propose... to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content, to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement discourse or narrative text itself, and to use word *narrating* for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place” (27). These definitions of key terms in narrative theory are crucial, for they shape the approach needed to analyze the novel and its characters. By looking at the narration of a story, or the way in which a particular event is told, the narrator, or the one relaying the tale, is placed at the forefront.

In the case of *The Poisonwood Bible*, the narrative is told by five different characters, all from their own unique viewpoint. Looking at these various points of view gives the critic multiple ways to view the overall theme of the work. The narrator is an extremely important point of reference, for the narrator is what shapes the relaying of the message. The narrator is not the author, but the one who expresses the actions and relationships within a novel, and thus is a vital piece of the work as a whole. Through the narrator (or narrators), the plot is conveyed, and this discourse helps drive forward the themes. The narrator is important because it is through his or her lens that the reader interprets the work, thus coloring the view of the events of the novel. A narration told in the first person, such as found in *The Poisonwood Bible*, creates an interesting

paradigm, since the reader is never able to see the events of the novel in a truly objective manner. In the case of this work, there are multiple first person narrations to attend to, all encouraging the reader to interpret the work in a specific way.

The Poisonwood Bible offers an excellent opportunity to utilize narrative theory, for the structure displays the human condition and the search for identity. In the novel, the unique use of multiple focalizations, or points of view, implies a variety of perspectives all centered on one singular plot: the Price family's trials in Africa. According to Austenfeld, "What readers 'see' and 'hear' in a narrative is focalized, or chosen, colored, and interpreted by the narrator as constructed by the author" (295). Being privy to an array of ideas creates an opportunity to witness the adaptation the Price girls undergo both in the tribe of Kilanga and all around the world, which helps to uncover the message the novel conveys. For example, the reader experiences the altering of Leah's perspective from her own personal narrative, observing her gradual shift from upright, American beliefs to a complete abandonment of her value for native customs and ideologies. However, Leah is not the only sister who describes her transformation in full. The conversion of each of the female members of the Price family relays her metamorphosing through her own perspective. The manner in which the narrative is told helps to place emphasis on the ways in which the women change. Genette's theory offers a base to view their ideological shifts, for it gives the tools needed in order to observe this change. The different voices give narrations of the same event, but their different viewpoints offer more than just views on the event; the manner of narration allows for a look at the narrators themselves. The more intimate method of narration gives a much better understanding of what the girls go through and how their viewpoints change, ultimately making more of the themes in the novel stronger. Interestingly, Nathan is the only member of the Price family to not get a voice in the entire

discourse. It seems plausible, from a narrative perspective, that Nathan is not entitled to his own perspective with his daughters because he, out of all the people in the family, is the only one to not undergo some form of ideological change. If anything, Nathan's personal beliefs seem to only intensify.

Genette's definitions regarding narration give a clearer indication of what features of narrative and narrators to look for in the novel. These markers help to create a way to understand the ideological shift within the Price women. The change within the characters is revealed through their narrations, and there are certain areas within the novel that indicate their adaptation while in Africa. Taking what Genette argues about the importance of understanding the principles of narration and the role of the narrator, the critic is able to witness the growth of the women in the novel through their own personal narration, not through another's voice. Each of the narrators addresses her own understanding of her identity throughout the novel. As her knowledge of herself and her society shifts, so does her narration. Choosing to look at an individual's narration rather than another character's description of that individual gives a more intimate look into personal identity. The character's own self-analysis gives a starting point to critique, for the search to find personal growth must come from personal interpretation. Looking at the girls' own narration rather than an interpretation of them by the other characters allows for a more complete analysis.

Assuming that the personal narration of these characters is the most direct way to witness the change in the Price women, there are certain indicators of this shift. Genette describes different aspects of narration and how they interact throughout a work; identifying areas such as tense, mood, and voice as the key aspects of narration, Genette argues that the message of a work

can be identified through these unique characteristics. Within the category of mood, Genette emphasizes the term “perspective,” which, according to Lois Tyson, “refers to point of view, or the eyes through which we see any given part of the narrative” (216). By focusing on their perspective, or the way that they view the world around them and themselves, the depth of the narration is more visible and the nature of the ideological shift is clear. Within the perspective of the Price women is personal analysis, both conscious and subconscious, which when compared throughout the entire work reveals their adaptation while in the Congo.

The intimate perspectives provided by the narrators give a detailed description of the dynamic changes these characters undergo. The main event of the novel is the overarching story of their life in the Congo, but the smaller narratives help shape both the readers’ opinions of the characters as well as the understanding of their transformations. Hans Bertens claims, “A single event may be told by different characters from different perspectives, or it may be told by one and the same character at different points in his or her life (in which case we will also expect different perspectives)” (62). In *The Poisonwood Bible*, both of these principles are visible; the narrators all discuss the same event, their time in the village of Kilanga. On a smaller scale within that frame, certain occurrences during their stay in the jungle are told by the same character several times throughout their narrative, such as the death of Ruth May. Obviously, a majority of each individual discourse differs from the others because each narrator deems different events worthy of telling. If all of the girls relayed the exact same story four different times, they would lose the individuality each focalization gives. However, there are several events throughout the novel that are told by all of the characters at different points in their narratives, all of which help shape these women throughout the novel. Genette discusses this concept in *Narrative Discourse*, stating, “The identity and therefore the repetition are facts of

abstraction; materially (phonetically or graphically) or even ideally (linguistically) none of the occurrences is completely identical to the others, solely by virtue of their co-presence and their successions, which diversify these statements” (114). The multiple repetition of a singular event, according to Genette, creates diverse examples of the different perspectives each of the narrators possess. The different personalities of the narrators create these distinctive perspectives, allowing the reader to not only get a better look into the character of the narrator in questions, but also to better understand the importance of the event to the plot and to the theme.

POSTCOLONIALISM—HYBRIDITY AMONG THE COLONIZERS

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important movements within the twentieth century was the Congolese Independence Movement from the late 1950's to early 1960's. The newfound freedom created a major controversy among the Congolese people. After years of oppression, the native people struggled to both remember their past and prepare for a future. Utilizing the democracy taught by the outside culture and voting for their own native Prime Minister, the people in the Congo seemed to be pulling themselves together as a new nation. But due to poor planning and leadership, the Congo was thrust into a power struggle, coming from both outside forces looking for a hold on the wealth of the nation, as well as from the natives themselves who disagreed on how to govern their newfound state. One of the most significant issues the Congolese nation had to deal with was the concern of national identity; some native extremists argued that the history of past oppression should be erased and the nation should revert back to a purely African culture. This search for identity among the oppressed or recently liberated people groups is a primary focus for postcolonial literature. Kirkpatrick states, “[P]ostcolonial authors and texts operate as a medium for the conciliation of power for the formerly powerless colonized subject. As a result, traditional postcolonial characters are colonized persons finding what role

they are to fulfill in a newly decolonized public space” (84). Just like the controversy within the newly freed Congo, some postcolonialist literature argues that the country and its culture should revert back to nativism, while others stress the importance of moving on.

The Poisonwood Bible is a unique example of postcolonial literature, for it creates sympathies for the colonizers, not just the colonized, thus offering a new perspective on intercultural relations. In the novel, the members of the Price family come into Africa bringing their own American ideologies with the goal to educate and enlighten the native people, starting with their own tribe of Kilanga. However, the ignorance of the Prices is highlighted as the novel continues, for they are the ones who are enlightened by the effects of their stay in the Congo. Africa remains unchanged by their attempts to “Americanize” it. *The Poisonwood Bible* is not the first novel to touch on the subject of outside relations in the Congo; a similar pattern can be found in Joseph Conrad’s classic *Heart of Darkness*. The narrator tells the tale of Marlow as he ventures into the jungles of the Congo and meets the infamous Kurtz, a man with a glittering reputation but who is overwhelmed by the Africa he tries to conquer. Kurtz dies at the end of the novel, and the jungle he so desperately tries to take over remain entirely unaffected. What is interesting about *Heart of Darkness* is that, just like *The Poisonwood Bible*, it has a postcolonial tendency while being told by a white narrator. Both novels are prime examples of postcolonial theory, or the look at the literature that depicts the situation of a colonized people both during and after colonization. However, both novels also look at how the colonizer is affected by the native culture. Both Kurtz as well as the storyteller Marlow are changed by their time in the Congo, Kurtz driven to desperation in order to tame the jungle and Marlow questioning his understanding of international relations. The change within these characters relates them strongly to a postcolonial mindset. Postcolonial authors use their work in order to explore the new

standards of relationships between the dominant culture, or the colonizers, and the suppressed culture, or the colonized. One of the main facets of postcolonial work is the struggle to find an identity among that which has been lost or redefined. This search for individuality within a previously defined culture moves the heart of postcolonial pieces of literature.

Just as in *Heart of Darkness*, *The Poisonwood Bible* deals primarily with the relationship between the native people of Africa and the invading culture, or the colonizer. Not only do the colonized, in this case the people of the Congo, get affected by the appearance of the culture overrunning their home, but so do the colonizers. Bertens argues, “The West has always been convinced that its presence overseas greatly affected the ‘natives’ (telling itself that the smartest and most sensitive of them immediately started scrambling to adopt Western ways and values), but has never been comfortable with the idea that its sons and daughters might in turn be affected by the cultures they encountered” (181). In its arrogance, the colonizing culture (or oppressing culture, to use postcolonial terms) never considers the effect its presence in another culture might have upon themselves and the people that are immersed in the native society. This thought process, not unlike Nathan’s in *The Poisonwood Bible* as he reminds Leah that the African women will figure out that his American garden is better than theirs, helps to contribute to the lost feeling many postcolonial authors attempt to convey in their works. After being oppressed for so long, a native culture tends to lose any sense of self-identity, forcing them to feel lost or unstable. The native culture must accept that there is a part of its history that involves the oppressor, and so must the outside culture understand that its identity is rooted in the existence of the native culture. Just as the oppressed must unwillingly bend their ways to adhere to the demands of the oppressor, the oppressor also instinctively is altered.

One postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha, discusses the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized extensively. One of the few critics to consider the effects on the colonizer as well as the colonized, Bhabha argues that the colonizer cannot be separated by that which he is colonizing, and therefore depends upon the relationship in a way that he might not be willing to admit. In essence, the oppressor relies upon the oppressed for his strength to subject his rule, and therein lay the need for complete control. However, the colonizer cannot escape adapting to the colonized culture, a process Bhabha terms “mimicry” (Bertens 182). The colonizer must relate in some way to the native culture, if for no other reason than to have the people submit to the new authority the colonizer hopes to convey. In Bhabha’s work *The Location of Culture*, he argues that a key aspect in “the process of identification” within colonial relations is what he calls “splitting,” or the idea of an individual temporarily leaving what is known and relating to the “Other” (64). For the native, this involves rejecting his own culture and adhering to the standards set by the colonizer, but for the colonizer, this is a bit trickier. By mimicking the native culture, even just to place a different one before it, the colonizer must understand and relate to the native culture in some way. This can be dangerous for a culture trying to suppress another, for it fosters a new awareness of identity. The merging of both cultures creates a sense of hybridity, and thus, a new type of identity emerges. The key to this concept is that hybridity can go both ways; a native can become altered by the oppressors’ culture just as the oppressor can find identity among the natives.

For the Price girls in the novel, clearly they are affected by this concept of hybridity. After coming to the Congo with their intent to change it to their likeness (or the likeness of the culture they represent), the Price family learns that a native culture is more difficult to change than they imagined. Rachel, the oldest sister, comments on their arrival at Kilanga, “We are

supposed to be calling the shots here, but it doesn't look to me like we're in charge of a thing, not even our own selves" (Kingsolver 22). Immediately, Rachel realizes their insignificance among the tribal people of the Congo, despite their somewhat honorable attempts to alter the natives' beliefs. By stating that the natives are in charge, not the outsiders, Rachel subconsciously relays Bhabha's theory. The Price family, as the representatives of the oppressive culture, is not exempt from interactions with the Other; the family is subjected to their culture just as much as natives are to theirs. Rather than accept his reliance upon the people of the Congo, Nathan (in true imperial form) refuses to bend to the identity of the Congolese. Only becoming stricter in his methodologies as the novel continues, Nathan cannot accept the fact that he relies upon the village in order to fulfill his calling; without the village of Kilanga and the "sinners and unbelievers" there, Nathan would have no one to call to Christ or baptize, an act he so desperately craves in order to show his power.

Nathan refuses to accept his reliance on the Congolese, and therefore does not adapt to his surroundings. However, the women in his family certainly do, for they are all molded, one way or another, by their time in the Congo. In order to survive in the harsh conditions they are forced into, Orleanna and her daughters merge into a new hybrid identity. Leah even envies the Congolese lifestyle, mentioning towards the beginning of their mission that she "felt a stirring of anger against [her] father for making [her] a white preacher's child from Georgia" (Kingsolver 115). Leah wants the Congolese lifestyle so badly that she resents her own culture: the one deemed by her father to be the superior society. While Leah is a bit more extreme in her desire to merge with the natives, all of the girls reflect this tendency at some point or another. The Price women grow to relate to the Congolese—some more than others—and from this act they are able

to survive. Nathan in his static state of being dooms himself to a tragic fate and dies in a moment of poetic justice, literally living out the Bible he so diligently preached.

The clear postcolonial tendencies manifesting themselves within the Price girls reflect Bhabha's views upon hybridity and multiculturalism. Critic Pelagia Goulimari claims, "For Bhabha... multiculturalism requires exploration of affinity with one's cultural others, as well as acceptance of the impossibility of full and fixed knowledge of those others" (334). Nathan fails to see that the Congolese people that he came to save have an identity of their own that he can learn from and adapt to, which causes him to fail in his mission. However, the Price women find a new identity from merging their previous viewpoints with what the Congolese have to offer. This exploration of other cultures that Bhabha perpetuates creates a new, well-balanced identity, and it is this liminality that sets the women in *The Poisonwood Bible* apart.

The markers of the growth of hybridity are the events that are told by more than one narrator and help to distinguish a new type of perspective from the girls. As mentioned previously, the death of Ruth May is told by all of the narrators, for clearly it is a critical event in the plot of the novel. This event helps to identify a tangible shift in their ideology, and is a key vantage point to witness the growth of the characters. Using Genette's claim about the creation of identity by the repeated telling of an event, the different comments regarding these repeated scenes in the discourse can analyze the speed and depth at which the narrators are merging with the native culture. There are several other moments throughout the novel other than the death of Ruth May that are told from multiple perspectives by the narrators and help mark the change among the Price women. Some of these crucial markers include their arrival at Kilanga, the attack of ants upon the village, the big hunt by the tribespeople, and the trek led by Orleana out of the jungle. Austenfeld comments, "The repeated reframing of the narrative of the ants, in

particular, moves away from the standard construction... towards a non-hierarchical shared telling, in which none of the individual narrators dominates at the top level, but rather each narrator takes up a thread of the narrative in the same place the previous narrator began, producing a more subtle layering of narratives” (296-7). This layer of narratives, to use Austenfeld’s phrasing, is a key moment of recognition in regards to the search for moments of characterization in terms of hybridity.

APPLICATION IN PRACTICE

The symbiotic nature the Price women develop is key to understanding a postcolonial identity. Kingsolver herself holds “a belief that what happened to the Congo is one of the most important political parables of the century” (Kirkpatrick 83). One of the key lessons that can be seen through this look at the structure of the novel is the importance of personal identity and individuality. One of the amazing things about the Price women is their ability to adapt and survive when put into a difficult situation, all while still holding onto what makes them unique characters. The use of narrative theory as one of the key constructs in this thesis allows for a better understanding of an individual’s personal beliefs. The focus on how the narrative is told through the array of perspectives invites the reader to consider his or her personal viewpoints and how they shape the interpretation of events. The use of narrative theory as a foundation for the search for identity reveals the postcolonial tendencies throughout the novel. Using postcolonial theory as well is also crucial to a better understanding of identity, for postcolonial theorists themselves acknowledge the search for belonging and creating of ones individuality, even while being oppressed by another. The intermingling of each of these theories allows for a greater appreciation and understanding of them independently. In order to understand how these theories can be fused together, they must be appreciated as individual entities. Once these concepts are

understood, as well as how they intertwine, they can provide a greater understanding of the work and the messages conveyed by the Price family.

Throughout this thesis, Genette's definitions of narration and the narrator are used as a lens through which to see the postcolonial themes as described by Bhabha. By focusing on the narrations of the characters, not their descriptions by the other narrators, their individual growth can be observed and monitored. Their progression into hybrid characters, or the rejection of their previous ideologies for a new, liminal perspective, is best observed through this vantage point. Throughout the following chapters, the focus on the shift within the characters through their own perspectives, while seemingly exclusively postcolonial in thought, is made available only through the understanding of Genette's view on narrators. However, the narrative framework enables one to see the benefits of hybridity, and thus impress the importance of a postcolonial perspective as displayed by *The Poisonwood Bible*.

RACHEL: A Reluctant Response to an Outside Culture

“The way I see Africa, you don’t have to like it but you sure have to admit it’s out there. You have your way of thinking and it has its, and never the train ye shall meet! You just don’t let it influence your mind. If there’s ugly things going on out there, well, you put a good stout lock on your door and check it twice before you go to sleep.”

Within the Price family, Rachel is easily identified as the sister who relates to American culture the most. Defined by her determination to get out of Kilanga and her selfish mindset, Rachel scorns her family, their mission in the Congo, and the Congolese people themselves. As the narrative progresses, her tone and mannerisms seemingly do not advance in the same way her sisters’ do. Ignorant of anything outside of her own personal comfort, Rachel is a poor voice for the action of the family in the village, for she only narrates issues that concern her personally. Not only does her inner monologue indicate her selfish behavior, but also her actions (told by herself) display her disregard for the others around her. From complaining about having to do manual labor in order to survive to belittling her younger sisters’ plights in the jungle, Rachel seems like a thoroughly unlikable character. Once she escapes the jungle and moves to South Africa, receiving a new start in life just as she hoped, her behavior towards others does not change at all. Still self-absorbed and demeaning towards others, Rachel not only stuns her sisters with her callousness but also the reader. It seems impossible that Rachel is affected at all by their plight in the Congo, choosing to focus on the issues that, in her opinion, ruined her childhood. At first glance, it seems that Rachel does not change in the same way her sisters do. However, Nathan’s mission in the tribe alters Rachel’s character. True to Rachel’s personality, her shift towards a hybrid identity focuses on herself, not her perspective of the Congolese or those around her. Rachel’s narration reveals that her perspective of Africa and its people does not change, but Africa changes her view of herself.

In terms of Bhabha's theories on hybridity, Rachel is a subtler illustration of the oppressor altering due to the native culture. For example, the Prices' stay in Kilanga forces her sister Leah to become consumed with the Congolese plight, while Rachel remains thoroughly entrenched in the white mindset. On a superficial level, Rachel seems unchanged by her time in the Congo, displaying the same selfish perspective that she did in the beginning of her narrative. However, her personal shift comes much later in her life and is still enough to inspire change in her point of view. Towards the end of the novel, Rachel sees herself alone, an outsider to her homeland that she claims she still has affinity towards. Isolated by her own haughty perspective, Rachel begrudgingly acknowledges that she will never be the same due to her life in Africa. Even if Rachel will not admit it, she can relate to the postcolonial identity that Bhabha perpetuates. Even as her narration relays her dislike of Africa, it also shows her relation to Africa, indicating her hybrid nature. Rachel feels a victim of her past, of what Nathan did to her life by bringing her to Africa, just as a suppressed culture would. In short, she is able to relate to the plight of the oppressed, despite her disdain for the native people of Africa. Rachel does achieve a level of hybridity as Bhabha defines it, but seems unaware of her connection to natives. Continuing to separate herself from the nation she lives in, Rachel unknowingly creates her own identity in Africa, thus completing her shift into hybridity.

INTERNAL IDEOLOGY

For a story following missionaries, Rachel stands out from the rest of her family due to her ignorance and constant frustration at their lives in the Congo. From her first narration in the novel, Rachel's perspective reveals her ideology as one full of self-importance and ignorance of that happening around her. Marie Austenfeld comments, "Rachel sees the world through the eyes of a literal-minded, materialistic teenager, but she renders human relationship, material details,

conversations, and emotions with great accuracy” (295). Through her straightforward analysis of the Congo, Rachel provides a clear view of both Africa and her thoughts about it. Her understanding of her role in Africa and the family’s mission there is apparent with her first few sentences: “Man oh man, are we in for it now, was my thinking about the Congo from the instant we first set foot. We are supposed to be calling the shots here, but it doesn’t look to me like we’re in charge of a thing, not even our own selves” (Kingsolver 22). In this, Rachel differs from her zealous younger sister and her overbearing father. Leah and Nathan, ignorant of the truth of their situation, believe that they will be superior to the native people while outside of their own element; Rachel, while also believing that they are superior to the natives, is aware that their superior status is shattered within a foreign culture. Immediately able to identify how the family differs from the Congolese culture, Rachel focuses on her desire to escape the jungle more than anything. At the end of the welcome feast on their first day among the natives, Rachel comments that she “wept for the sins of all who had brought [her] family to this dread dark shore” (Kingsolver 29). Seeing no reason for their mission and putting the blame on the “ignorant” natives, Rachel laments her separation from American culture and obvious isolation from the Congolese people.

In terms of her mental awareness, Rachel partially fulfills Bhabha’s definitions of the oppressive culture through her continual focus upon herself and her personal situation. Unable to see anything beyond her own issues, Rachel’s perspective is worldly and self-centered. Clearly Rachel fits many stereotypes of American ideals. Physically, Rachel is the least like the natives, with her pale white skin and her hair, which “is so extremely fair it is prone to get stained” (Kingsolver 22-23). Several times throughout her narration, Rachel comments that she looks so foreign to the native people that they do not believe that her hair is real and try to pull it off,

further indicating her distance from the Congolese people. Beyond her physical features though, Rachel's perspective and tone reflect the mindset of the oppressor as Bhabha defines it. Excessively materialistic, Rachel dwells consistently on the American accessories that she feels entitled to. Pamela Demory argues that Rachel is "a glaring example" of "the ideology of American superiority" ("Into the Heart of Light"). Due to this perceived superiority, Rachel believes she deserves more than what the Congo has to offer. Rather than dwell upon her father's success at celebrating a Christian holiday with the natives (the very purpose they are in the Congo) Rachel laments that she is unable to buy a new Easter dress, all while surrounded by the poverty of Kilanga (Kingsolver 43). True to the traditional stereotype of the oppressor, Rachel focuses only on herself and how she is better than the Congo and the people there. Her determination to stand apart from the Congolese people through the use of material possessions strongly relates her to the stereotypical postcolonial oppressor. Elaine Ognibene claims, "Rachel's narrative is different [from that of her sisters]: her tone is one of contempt and her focus is on pragmatic issues, mainly her own gains and losses. Rachel finds herself a place among the exploiters" (31). While Ognibene believes that Rachel truly fits the postcolonial mold, there are aspects of her character that say otherwise. Rachel strays away from Bhabha's understanding of the oppressor as well. Postcolonialism literature tends to identify the oppressor as not only a character who is superior to the natives, but also wants to dominate the culture. From forcing their beliefs on the natives or simply just taking anything desirable and leaving, the oppressors in this type of literature tend to have a purpose in their actions, usually at the cost of the natives. Rachel does not fit this aspect of traditional postcolonial oppressors, for all she wants during their time in the Congo is to get out of it. Rachel sees no value in the Congo, only wishing to go back to America. Rather than coming to the tribe with the goal of evangelism such as

Nathan or Leah, Rachel does not seem to believe in their mission and its potential success. As a postcolonial character, Rachel represents American culture and perspectives more than a true oppressor as Bhabha defines it.

Because she represents American ideology, Rachel views the natives and their culture differently than the rest of the family. Through her own narration, her tone indicates her dislike for the natives and their customs. Critic Susan Strehle explains, “Like her father, Rachel expresses contempt for Africans’ intellect and competence” (“Chosen People: American Exceptionalism in Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*”). Almost every description of the Congolese people is colored with some form of disdain. During Nathan’s Easter service, Rachel describes the mixing of American and Congolese customs with exasperation, seeing the presence of the natives at a traditionally Christian event as unworthy. Unable to see the purpose of the mission, Rachel comments, “Naturally, we brought most of the food. They seem to think we are Santa Claus, the way the children come around begging us for food and things every single day—and us as poor as church mice!” (Kingsolver 47) Full of indignation at the “nerve” of the people, Rachel’s limited perspective sees only her family’s loss of status from America to Africa, not the poverty surrounding her. Not only does Rachel fail to see the truth about the natives and their situation, she actively chooses to ignore reality in order to suit her own personal worldview. When the family first meets Anatole, the village teacher, Rachel is shocked to hear about his previous work in the diamond mines. True to her nature, she considers how this news would relate to her American beliefs: “Gee, does Marilyn Monroe even know where [her diamonds] come from? Just picturing her in her satin gown and a Congolese diamond digger in the same universe gave me the weebie jeebies. So I didn’t think about it anymore” (Kingsolver 127). Once Rachel begins to understand the reality of the plight of the Congo, she rejects it in order to

preserve her own state of mind. By comparing the natives to her American ideals, Rachel is forced to acknowledge some value in the foreign culture; therefore, she refuses it.

ESCAPING AND UNDERSTANDING

Because Rachel's superficial nature dominates her character, it is difficult to identify the change in perspective she undertakes in Africa, thus displaying her shift in identity and fulfilling Bhabha's theory of hybridity. Once the family becomes more settled in the village and the realities of living in the jungle are not quite as shocking, Rachel is given the opportunity to alter her selfish point of view. While surrounded by Congolese and far away from America, it seems likely that she would adhere slightly to some form of nativism. There are slight indicators in her narration that show a potential shift in perspective. Rather than separating the cultures in her mind as she had previously, Rachel hesitantly begins to relate some aspects of the Congo that which she values in America. After being in the Congo for over a year, Rachel walks through the village with the pilot Axelroot and encounters a group of Congolese women. Rachel reflects, "The women moved slowly and gracefully, putting one foot ahead of the other, and with their thin bodies all draped in colorful *pagnes* and their heads held so straight and high—honestly, though it is strange to say, they looked like fashion models. Maybe it has just been too long since I've seen a fashion magazine. But some of them are very pretty in their way" (Kingsolver 291). By acknowledging the beauty in the African women, Rachel seems to be finding value in something other than herself and her American ideology. Unable to find the beauty in the African women on their own, Rachel relates them to her own standard of beauty, choosing to view them not by their own worth, but by her values in American culture. Rachel fails to see the appeal the women possess on their own account, comparing them to the American principles of attractiveness. While she is progressing in terms of her acceptance of the Congolese people,

Rachel cannot relinquish her American perspectives, which halts her progression as a truly hybrid character.

While the long time living in Kilanga does very little to alter her thoughts towards others, moments of catastrophe both reveal Rachel's true perspective as well as begin her real shift towards a new identity. Because her narrations tend to be shallower than her sisters', any change in point of view is revealed through her tone and inner reflections rather than her explicit words and actions; her perspective, not her outward actions, reveals her shift. The first calamity that reveals Rachel's ideology is the night the ants take over the village. When the family wakes up being eaten alive by starving ants, each narrator gives a graphic description of their individual actions and inner conflicts. For Rachel, her immediate responses display her selfish and superficial nature. While the rest of the family runs out of the house to safety, Rachel "cast around in a frenzy trying to think what to save... I only had time to save one precious thing. Something from home. Not my clothes, there wasn't time, and not the Bible—it didn't seem worth saving at that moment, so help me God. It had to be my mirror" (Kingsolver 301). In the midst of chaos, Rachel risks her own life in order to save a blatant symbol of superficiality. She sees value in "something from home," implying that America is still where she relates to, despite her previous grudging appreciation for the native women. During this trial, Rachel reverts back to her initial perspective upon arriving in Africa, finding value in aspects of America rather than anything else. Even as she escapes the house and goes towards the safety of the river, Rachel shows her selfish mindset. At the river, she is affronted to see all the natives getting into boats without assisting her: "I spotted Mama Mwanza being carried on her husband's back towards the boats. They went right past me! She did deserve help [without her legs], poor thing, but I personally have a delicate constitution" (Kingsolver 302). Relating her plight to a woman

without legs, the absurdity of her point of view is clear. Unable to help herself due to her unwillingness to relinquish her mirror, Rachel is left alone in a dangerous, foreign situation with no understanding of how faulty her perspective is.

HAUGHTY HYBRIDITY

While the attack of the ants reveals Rachel's superficiality, another catastrophe not only reveals the beginnings of a permanent change in perspective, but forces Rachel to think outside of her own personal comfort. When Ruth May dies, Rachel's immediate response focuses not on her own loss, but how it will affect the rest of the family. Rachel's perspective shifts to one of concern for her mother: "It was so quiet. And I thought: Now we have to go in and tell Mother... I fell apart when I thought of Mother in bed sleeping... still believing she had four living daughters. Now we were going to put one foot in front of the other, walk to the back door, go in the house, stand beside our parents' bed, wake up Mother, say to her the words *Ruth May*, say the word *dead*" (Kingsolver 366). Rachel is immediately concerned for her mother, not how the death of her youngest sister affects her personally. For a character so wrapped within herself, the shift towards thinking about another individual comes powerfully and abruptly. Elaine R. Ognibene comments, "For Rachel, fashion is more important than culture, politics, or moral issues that she neither sees nor understands. Ironically, however, Rachel sees truth about things that concern her" (31). Once she is forced to accept what happens to them in Africa, Rachel has a revelation about her identity and the shift that is taking place, revealed in the immediate change in her perspective.

True to her character, Rachel's inner thoughts (revealed through her narration) center on herself, but due to the sudden shift in her perspective, her awareness of her identity in Africa becomes apparent. Rachel's inner thoughts reveal the depth of her despair, for they force her to

think of how this event alters her worldview and identity. Rachel reflects, “Until that moment I’d always believed I could still go home and pretend the Congo never happened... the tragedies that happened to Africans were not mine. We were different, not just because we were white and had our vaccinations, but because we were simply a much, much luckier kind of person... I’d never planned on being someone different” (Kingsolver 367). This confession is the first time Rachel acknowledges that Africa is a part of her life, rather than view herself separate and superior. The death of Ruth May shocks Rachel into reflection, and unlike the other narrators who have a more gradual awareness, Rachel is thrust into Bhabha’s process of splitting. Through this rather violent incident, Rachel is forced into a different perspective about herself as an individual and begins to view how her time away from America alters her personally. No longer referencing America as the ideal, Rachel finally acknowledges that she is not the same person as she had been in America and is disconnected from her previous understanding of American life.

With this newfound realization, Rachel leaves the tribe with her mother and surviving sisters, but does not seem to change her impression of Africa. True to form, Rachel attempts to fight her reality, even if the reality is an altered perception due to the culture and events around her. Convincing the pilot Axelroot to fly her out of the jungle, Rachel finds herself in South Africa and living free from the restraints of her family. Rachel initially seems the same as she had been at the beginning of the novel, reveling in the “American-ness” of Johannesburg and finding value in social events and receiving copies of *Ladies Home Journal*. Seemingly back to her previous self-absorbed mindset, her split from her previous ideology appears to have been left behind in the village. Many of her old actions that defined her superficiality in the Congo continue, such as her rejection of the reality of those around her. Critic Christopher Douglas claims that Rachel views the natives as full of “African brutality,” further clarifying their

difference from herself (145). When passing a local slum while on the train with friends, Rachel comments that all she has to do is merely “look the other way...because those people don’t have any perspective of what good scenery is” (Kingsolver 424). Continuing to reject the reality in front of her, Rachel’s arrogance towards the plight of those around her seems to indicate her reverting back to her previous perspective. Rachel’s narration reveals that she chooses to ignore the reality around her, similar to how she responded to poverty in Kilanga. However, once out of the Congo, Rachel takes this practice a step farther and applies it to her family as well. Instead of remembering their time in the Congo and the misfortune that befell them, Rachel chooses to ignore the thoughts about her losses so that they do not hurt as much (Kingsolver 425). Rather than using the loss of her family as a tool for growth and self-reflection, Rachel actively chooses to ignore the shift in perspective that she learned in the jungle. Rachel’s superficiality continues as the novel follows her life, from her vanity at her successful husbands to her determination to show Leah and Adah her triumphs in the business world. While she does complete the process of splitting from her previous worldview after the death of Ruth May, it seems that she reverts right back to her selfish ways.

Despite returning back to her original mannerisms from her first arrival in Africa, Rachel does reveal that she has created a new identity for herself while living in Africa that permanently shifts her point of view. While her actions display contempt towards Africa and the culture, Rachel’s inner thoughts show the altered perspective she has from her initial viewpoint, emphasizing the importance of personal narration. Out of all the sisters, Rachel is the only one to never go back to America, despite being so insistent that she loves America and its values. During her final narration at age fifty, Rachel explains why she cannot go back home, the place she longed for so fervently during her time in the jungle: “I had my bags packed more than once.

But... I was always afraid... scared I wouldn't be able to fit back in. My high school friends would still have been whining over boyfriends... and now here comes Rachel with stained hair and one dead sister and a whole darn marriage behind her already, not to mention hell and high water. Not to mention the Congo" (Kingsolver 513). During her reflections on her life, Rachel admits that the Congo changed her life in a way that is irreversible. Susan Strehle comments, "Ruth May's death cancels Rachel's belief that she can return to a carefree, fortunate destiny in America. It demolishes her illusions that Americans are a different 'kind of person' from Africans: a privileged, exceptional breed, as her father and her homeland have implicitly promised, who will be excepted from the miseries and tragedies of the world" ("Chosen People: American Exceptionalism in Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*"). After the death of Ruth May, Rachel cannot explain away the tragedies that befell her family and forces herself to accept that they are a part of her past. She reflects, "You can't just sashay into the jungle aiming to change it all over to the Christian style, without expecting the jungle to change you right back. If it was as easy as they thought it was going to be, why, they'd be done by now, and Africa would look just like America with more palm trees... Whereas, if you think about it, the Africans are running all over America right now" (Kingsolver 515). Unwittingly, Rachel summarizes Bhabha's theory of hybridity as she also exemplifies it. Strehle comments, "The most complex of the expatriate children, Rachel appears to remain her father's quintessentially American daughter, but can neither go back nor believe in the national myths any longer" ("Chosen People: American Exceptionalism in Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*"). Because she cannot go back to the lifestyle that she dreams of, Rachel remains in Africa, haughty and full of disdain towards the natives, yet unaware that she has made Africa her home as well.

At the beginning of the novel, Rachel seems to be the archetypal oppressor. Nevertheless, she does become a hybrid character, for Africa colors her understanding of her own identity. While it seems that her opinions of the native people do not alter, Rachel begrudgingly accepts that she has been affected by her time in Africa and never returns to her homeland in fear of having to face her reality. While she is not the best example of hybridity, Rachel nevertheless creates a mixed identity from her time in the Congo. Hiding behind her superficial agenda, Rachel is a prime example of the inescapability of Bhabha's hybridity.

LEAH: A Search for Balance within the Extremes

“If I could reach backward somehow to give Father just one gift, it would be the simple human relief of knowing you’ve done wrong, and living through it. Poor Father, who was just one of a million men who never did catch on. He stamped me with a belief in justice, then drenched me in culpability, and I wouldn’t wish such torment on a mosquito. But that exacting, tyrannical God of his has left me for good. I don’t quite know how to name what crept in to take his place.”

Out of all the daughters of Nathan and Orleanna in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah is the most obviously altered by the Congolese lifestyle. Leah begins the novel as her father’s most devoted daughter, depicted by her sisters as his “apostle” on several occasions. However, as the novel continues, Leah’s admiration for the Congolese and their lifestyle creates a rift between her previous understanding of herself and the individual she would like to become. Through key moments in the Price family’s stay in the jungle, Leah further distances herself from her father and his lifestyle until she is utterly disenchanted with his “American” point of view. Critic Christopher Douglas describes her as “the pious Leah whose faith crumbles and who learns to embrace the culture she has arrived in” (“Multicultural Graft”). While Leah does fully embrace the Congolese culture, she struggles to achieve hybridity. In her search for a new identity, Leah actually overcorrects her attempt to separate herself from her nationality and tries to become entirely African.

As she embraces her adopted heritage, Leah tries to discard her roots. Through the process of rejecting her past, Leah comes to realize that she must accept herself for what she is: a white woman living among the Congolese people. Leah’s situation can be applied directly to Bhabha’s theory of hybridity; without that acceptance of self, Leah cannot find peace, even among the people whom she chooses to live with. Once Leah acknowledges herself as a hybrid individual, she then finds balance and achieves a healthy liminality. The manner in which she portrays her shifting perspective gives a distinct view of Leah’s liminality. According to

Austenfeld, “What readers ‘see’ and ‘hear’ in a narrative is focalized, or chosen, colored, and interpreted by the narrator as constructed by the author” (295). Leah’s narrations in the work allow the reader to watch her long quest to find meaning within the cultures she loves, the one her father perpetuates and the one she adopts as her own. Her inner monologues provide a clear look into her shifting mindset, providing a look into where she started, her dramatic postcolonial adjustment, and her drifting into balance and liminality.

Leah’s leap into Congolese culture adheres greatly to Bhabha’s theory of mimicry within hybridity. Bhabha argues that the colonizing culture—that which Nathan represents—must acknowledge the need for the native one, if for no other reason than to project will onto it. In this process, however, Bhabha claims that the oppressive culture will then take on at least some elements of the native culture, showing the symbiotic relationship. It is this progression that creates a hybrid identity—something that all of the characters wrestle with in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Throughout the novel, Nathan fails to release his grip on his worldview while Leah overcompensates for Nathan’s failures with her rejection of her previous ideology. Bhabha perpetuates the idea of adapting to a new environment, taking in a different culture and applying it to an existing one, but never propagates the complete rejection of a past identity. Bhabha argues for the merging of two unique cultures to create a new type of hybridity, thus creating a new identity. Since Leah attempts to remove herself entirely from the culture she naturally is a part of, clinging to a foreign identity that does not fully accept her, she cannot become a truly liminal figure. Through her perspective revealed in her narration, the critic can see how Leah’s denial and then begrudging acceptance of herself, her past, and her altered identity relays Bhabha’s understanding of postcolonial relationships. Leah’s dramatic shift from an American to a native ideology reveals the need for balance in a truly hybrid perspective, for while she cannot

find peace in the extremes of both mindsets, she is fulfilled when she acknowledges some value in both.

AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

Towards the beginning of the novel, Leah comes to Kilanga with the intent to evangelize the native people. Her understanding of their role in Africa, however, is marred by her acceptance of her father's viewpoint. Through Leah's narration, her opinions of Nathan and his mission in the jungle are prominent. Her tone and manner of discussing her father's mission in the Congo are almost worshipful, relaying her deep desire to serve and understand him and his ideology. Leah comments, "With all my soul I coveted the delicious weight of goodness he cradled in his palms," making it seem as though her father actually holds tangible truth and value (Kingsolver 37). Leah hopes to learn from her father, and through Leah's narrations of their discussions, the ignorance of the Price family—Nathan in particular—is clear. Leah never questions her father or his mission, seemingly the perfect daughter, and her view of her father initially alters her narration, for in her point of view, her father holds the truth, even in the Congo.

Leah's perception of her father might color her understanding of him, but she cannot ignore the truth about his character. Nathan's attitude towards the natives and their lifestyle portrays his ignorance. According to one critic, Leah "captures Nathan's destructive behaviors in her narrative... via unconscious irony that grows into conscious knowledge" (Ognibene 24). Through Leah's watchful gaze, her father's ignorance and arrogance become clear, even as she wishes to be more like him. Modeling herself after his beliefs in both perspective and action, Leah is clearly determined to follow in Nathan's footsteps. Leah acknowledges that she is unlike her father, despite her desire to be in his image, and her first person narration of him and his

actions display her separation from him. If not for her dedication to and perception of Nathan, her initial ideology and curiosity would not be as prevalent.

While her sisters tend to follow their mother around the house, Leah chooses to work with her father outside the house creating a “demonstration garden” for the Congolese people (Kingsolver 35). The very idea of coming to a foreign land and immediately believing it can be tamed by outside understanding displays the arrogance of Nathan, and by extension, Leah. By attempting to implement American farming techniques while in an African country, Nathan and Leah completely disregard the land itself. They do not know the African soil, and when a helpful neighbor comes and tries to show them their folly, Nathan quickly overrules her attempts to aid them. When the woman comes back and fixes their garden to the African standard, Leah records Nathan’s patronization of her attempt to help them: “He assured me that Mama Tataba hadn’t meant to ruin our demonstration garden. There was such a thing as native customs, he said. We would need the patience of Job” (Kingsolver 41). Leah’s voice as the narrator portrays the condescending tone that Nathan gives towards this act of generosity, despite her worshipful point of view. Nathan and Leah do not believe they need African assistance, for they are there to teach the Africans the “right” way, not learn new information about the existing culture of the Congolese. Ironically enough, their “demonstration garden” does not grow, and Nathan and Leah’s failure with their garden foreshadows their unsuccessful attempts at altering the Congo. Leah is unable to see anything beyond Nathan’s view until Nathan fails in the Congo, and his inability to succeed in something as trivial as a garden shakes her confidence in him. Immediately after this incident, Leah comments in her narration, “I sensed that the sun was going down on many things I believed in” (Kingsolver 80). At this tangible rejection of what Leah deems to be right, she acknowledges that her ideologies are rooted in what she was taught by her

father. Ognibene comments, “To Leah, Nathan’s failed efforts contradict his theory of balance and rewards, and his words about cause signify nothing” (25). In her attempts to adhere to his standards, Leah subconsciously begins to understand the folly of her father’s perspective in the Congo. However, she has yet to openly speak against his point of view, continuing to look for truth in what he believes.

Because Leah’s understanding of the Congo is colored by her father’s teaching, her manner of narration and the tone she utilizes in the beginning of the novel show her American perspective, even when she is not discussing Nathan in particular. Outside of her adoration of Nathan’s teaching, Leah muses over their mission and her understanding of the purpose of evangelism. While dwelling on the last missionary to live in their hut, a man who entered into “unconventional alliances with the local people,” Leah describes him as a man who “had gone plumb crazy” and had “backslidden” (Kingsolver 38-39). Leah clearly rejects the idea of mingling with the natives, not interacting with them. Interacting with the natives is necessary, for she concludes that there is no other way to teach the American beliefs she came to spread. It is the relationship between the missionary and the natives that Leah rejects, based on the principles that her father instilled in her. Because Nathan is so against any intimate relationship between the Price family and the natives, Leah is also leery of any potential bond. The fact that Leah comes to these conclusions while not in her father’s presence is telling, for it displays how deeply his ideology is rooted within her. Her conscious thoughts continue to relay Nathan’s messages, reinforcing his American standards and strict methodology. The attitude that Leah and Nathan portray during these beginning chapters of the book adheres to Bhabha’s definition of the oppressor/oppressed relationship. Leah’s highbrowed mindset and insistence that her culture is

superior reflects Bhabha's understanding of the colonizer identity and makes her an ideal character to display the nature of hybridity.

A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

While Leah is clearly the most outspoken advocate among the Price daughters for Nathan's evangelical mission, she is also one of the first to begin to question her father and what they are attempting to do to the natives. Austenfeld explains that Leah, "abruptly removed from the innocence-protecting atmosphere of highly religious 1959 Georgia, USA and deposited in a Congo ravaged by political and cultural flux, finds herself forced to refashion her identity in order to make sense of what is happening" (301). This refashioning is the creation of a hybrid identity. While Leah tries to hold on to the perspective her father promotes, she cannot escape the situation he put her in and what it does to her personal perspective. What had previously been subconscious understanding of their status as outsiders becomes conscious thought, and she dislikes her sudden awareness of it. Instead of the missionaries being the dispensers of wisdom and knowledge, as she believes in the beginning of the novel, Leah acknowledges the family's ignorance in some matters. Compared to the native people and their superior knowledge of the Congolese land, the Price family is ignorant indeed, and Leah begins to acknowledge how out of place they really are. This is a huge revelation, for it displays her shift towards hybridity. The African landscape and culture fascinate Leah, but while she is still under the strict tutelage of Nathan, she only observes from afar. Because Nathan insists on such a separation from the natives, Leah initially is not able to learn and understand the Congolese culture, the first steps in Bhabha's hybridity. The longer she lives in the Congo, however, the more jealous she becomes of the natives and their lifestyle. The clear lines that Nathan and his American ideologies emphasize quickly become blurred. Leah comments, "I always believed any sin was easily

rectified if only you let Jesus Christ into your heart, but here it gets complicated... our family always seems to know too much, and at the same time not enough” (Kingsolver 103). The questions that Leah begins to ask herself, revealed through her first-person narration, display her shifting mindset. Her identity begins to change, betrayed by her questioning about the family’s role in the tribe.

Leah continues to alter her point of view as the novel continues, displayed through her inner narration of the events within the tribe and her shifting perspective. As each disaster strikes both the people of Kilanga and the Price family, Leah continues to question her father and the mission she once espoused so vehemently. One critic explains that Leah “wonders about God’s responsibility for the destructive floods causing dysentery among the children, an ant plague which devastates the countryside, or the malaria and other diseases that kill many, and slavery” (Douglas). Many of these indicators that Leah is gaining a new point of view are not explicitly mentioned in her actions, but are evident through her narration. Due to the first person narration, the audience hears Leah’s inner thoughts about the family and the natives rather than just being told about an ideological shift. The manner in which Leah discusses her father or the native people shows her newfound appreciation for something other than Nathan’s ideology. For example, Leah begins to comment more about how the natives are able to teach her fundamental truths rather than Nathan. When a neighbor brings the starving family some extra food, Leah comments to herself, “Whenever you have plenty of something, you have to share it with the [less fortunate], she said. (And Mama Mwanza is not even Christian!)” (Kingsolver 206-207) Leah’s amazement at the discovery of a Christian value among the natives is monumental, for she begins to realize that Nathan and his American standards are not the only ones that can dispense truth. Her narration reveals her growing fascination with the Congolese, and is more

telling than any sort of explicit statement. Compared to her initial understanding of the Congo, colored by Nathan's superior attitude, Leah's amazement at Mama Mwanza and her "Christian" actions (something that Leah and her family consider to be an American standard) displays the beginnings of her altered perspective. This narration reveals her splitting from her native culture and beginning to discover her own identity.

Her admiration for Congolese culture morphs into more than just appreciation; Leah begins to actively reject her own culture. The more she finds value in what Africa has to offer, the less morality she sees in the American standards she came with. During Leah's ideological shift, Anatole, the tribes' schoolteacher whom eventually she marries, comments on the over-mining of diamonds in the Congo. When Leah asks, "Did we do something bad?" Anatole replies, "Not *you*, Béene" (Kingsolver 229). Leah's immediate reaction to being set apart from her native culture indicates her relief: "Not me, not *me!* My heart rejoiced at that, though I couldn't say why" (Kingsolver 229). Unconsciously splitting from her previous ideology, Leah does not understand why she is so thrilled at being looked as something other than white, and her response coincides with her shift into a postcolonial perspective. She openly finds comfort in being connected to something other than her own culture. Leah does not want to be associated with her own heritage, and thus rejoices at the idea of separation. Leah finally acknowledges her doubt in a particularly poignant chapter through her narration: "All my life I've tried to set my shoes squarely into [Father's] footprints, believing if only I stayed close enough to him those same clean, simple laws would rule my life as well. Yet with each passing day I find myself farther away... His decision to keep us here in the Congo... has opened up in my heart a sickening world of doubts and possibilities, where before I had only faith in my father and love for the Lord" (Kingsolver 244). Leah finally voices her disbelief in Nathan, solidifying her

separation from the values that she came to the Congo with, including Christianity. Her acceptance of Nathan's failures displays her awareness of her shift in nature. While much of the change in perspective is easily understood through her tone and reactions, this is the first time in her own narration that Leah states the alteration of her beliefs, identifying her shift in perspective. Her hybrid identity is revealed not only to the audience, but also to Leah herself, who consciously states her rejection of her previous ideology. The hybridization of her ideals begins to define her narrations, and she becomes aware of herself and her shifting change of mind.

NATIVE NARRATIONS

After Leah's criticism of Nathan and his beliefs moves from subconscious awareness to conscious understanding, she misses Bhabha's definition of hybridity and attempts to become purely Congolese, a mutation on hybridity. Once Leah openly acknowledges her variation of mindset, her attitude towards her father, his beliefs, and American ideology becomes wildly negative. Through the telling of several key events that transpire during the end of their mission in Kilanga, Leah displays her altered state of mind and her rejection of her previous beliefs. Ognibene states, "Each [catalyst] drives Leah to break the order of 'Our Father' and join with 'the inhabitants of this land' that she is coming to love" (25). One such occasion is when the ants invade the tribe. Leah joins the masses of people headed towards the river without a glance at how her family fares against the attack. Leah berates herself for her selfishness once she is safely on the river: "I was still waking up and it struck me now with force that I should have been looking out for my family. I'd thought to worry about Mama Mwanza but not my own crippled twin" (Kingsolver 300). Leah's concern immediately focuses on the natives, not her own family which propagates American values. Leah's reaction to this traumatic event reveals her true

mentality. The reality of the situation causes her to prioritize, and her first-person narration reveals how she places the Congolese in higher esteem than her own family. Her conscious thoughts go to the Africans with whom she now relates, not the family which reminds her of the faulty American ideology she once adhered to. Once she realizes that her family is safe, Leah acknowledges the power this singular event has upon her life, calling it “the night God turned his back on me” (Kingsolver 311). In reality, it seems that Leah rejects the religion of her father, choosing to find herself within the native culture. Leah also has a similar reaction when her sister Ruth May dies. Leah is the first of the narrators to report on Ruth May’s death, and while she clearly is distraught by the event, she still compares her family to the natives: “All of them had lost children before, it dawned on me through my shock. Our suffering now was no greater than theirs had been, no more real or tragic. No different” (Kingsolver 370-371). Leah sees a kinship within the Congolese, for what she experiences is something that the natives understand, not her previous home or family. Her perception of her father is only negative; Leah finally sees her father clearly. Ognibene writes, “Father, Leah observes, continued his biblical oration without any clear idea of what was going on... deaf to the truth just as he is deaf to the language nuances of the Congolese culture” (26). While her previous point of view would find comfort in his determination to hold onto the Bible, Leah only finds solace only in the knowledge that the family can relate to the Congolese. The only times she discusses Nathan are merely to acknowledge his ignorance as opposed to her previous glorification of his beliefs and methodology.

When Orleanna finally takes her daughters out of the village and strips them of all superficialities, including the American items that they brought with them, Leah finally is able to truly connect and relate to the Congolese people. Released from the grips of America and

Nathan's grasp, Leah clings fully to the native culture and tries to rid herself of her previous ideology. Leah's narration reveals her horror at what she and her father, as well as her nation, have done to the country she adopts as her own. As she reaches this point, Leah chooses to let go of her reliance on other cultures and create her own path. Leah decides to stay in the Congo, thinking to herself, "I would walk in no one's footsteps now. How could I follow my mother out of here now, and run away from what we'd done?" (Kingsolver 394) Dismayed at their previous attempts to alter the culture, Leah adapts to the extreme, actively rejecting her past and trying to adopt a culture that is not hers.

While Bhabha would agree that identifying with another culture is a healthy postcolonial tendency, Leah takes it to the extreme. Leah definitely achieves the act of "splitting" as Bhabha terms it, but her attempts to erase her past are a different type of suppression. Her hatred of her "whiteness" creates an unhealthy bitterness, and she does not merge her past identity with her new one, but tries to take on a new persona that she cannot fulfill. She desperately wants to be African, but her own body betrays herself. Once she marries Anatole, Leah realizes the danger she puts him and their future family in. Leah contemplates, "My whiteness could bar him outright from many possibilities, maybe even survival, in the Congo" (Kingsolver 401). While it is true that their relationship could cause some strife in the war-ridden country, Leah tries to overcompensate in order to be accepted by a people in a way that is impossible. Leah unthinkingly announces that she would fight amongst the Congolese natives in their war against the Americans and Belgians if they would let her in. Her friend tells her, "It's not your place to fight with the Simbas, even if you were a man. You're white. This is their war and whatever happens will happen" (Kingsolver 421). While Leah's narration reveals that she thinks of herself as a Congolese, she fails to see the truth; she is an outsider in a foreign culture and the fight is

not hers. The first person narration allows for a deeper look at her understanding of her character, for while she does not admit to herself (or the audience) that she has rejected her previous identity, the fact that she wishes to fight against her past ideology displays her altered state of mind. Bhabha encourages the relinquishing of a past identity while in a foreign culture, but he does not promote a complete rejection of it. Once again, Leah's subconscious understanding of herself pushes through her talk about wanting to be Congolese. She has not completed Bhabha's concept of splitting because she has not applied aspects of a foreign culture to her culture; she tries to find her individuality amidst a previously created identity that she cannot fit into, thus alienating her even more.

Within this failed attempt at identification, Leah does not find peace; it takes the creation of an entirely new identity, one that accepts both parts of herself, in order to accept her life and who she is. Only liminality and a hybrid identity can fulfill her both in the Congo and back on American soil. When her husband Anatole is arrested, Leah is forced to face the reality of what she is. She says in her narration, "For so many years now I've had the luxury of nearly forgetting I was white in a land of brown and black... Cloaked in my *pagne* and Anatole, I seemed to belong. Now, husbandless in this new neighborhood, my skin glows like a bare bulb" (Kingsolver 472). Leah's grief at the loss of her husband forces her to realize that there are some things that cannot be changed. Her life in Africa surely changes her perceptions, and she willingly makes that transition at the expense of her previous identity. However, she must finally come to terms with her liminality, thus creating a new identity rather than adopting another, a hybrid mix of both cultures. Ognibene argues that Leah's time in the Congo teaches her "that there is no justice in the world, but she sustains her belief in a certain kind of grace," an almost Christian grace that she had turned her back on when she rejected Nathan (26). In her final

narration, Leah accepts that while the God that Nathan preached might not exist, a simpler, almost African God can still be in control. Leah takes something that Nathan believed in, an American ideology, and merges it with African simplicity, indicating the joining of both ideologies and the completion of a hybrid self. Her willingness to accept a version of both viewpoints shows her new identity, one with parts from both cultures that creates a healthier balance than an outright rejection of both.

While rejecting a negative point of view might seem to be beneficial, what Leah comes to realize about herself and her identity is that it is not as easy to remove as she hoped. While still entrenched in American culture, Leah's perspective shows nothing but her father's ideologies. Once she rejects him and his beliefs, she attempts to become a true African, unaware of the impossibility of her desire. Leah tries both extremes, but since they are not "hers," she is unsatisfied as an individual. In order for her to really understand herself as an individual, she needs to accept her past and apply it to her adopted culture, thus becoming a true liminal figure and adhering to Bhabha's postcolonial theory of hybridity. Neither a true American nor Congolese, Leah can find peace only when she accepts what she is. This journey through her mental acceptance of self is vividly displayed by her personal narration and shifting perception in the novel, for only through her focalization can the extent of her search for identity really be understood.

ADAH: Disillusion among the Disfigured

“We are the balance of our damage and our transgressions. He was my father. I own half his genes, and all of his history. Believe this: the mistakes are part of the story. I am born of a man who believed he could tell nothing but the truth, which he set down for all time in the Poisonwood Bible.”

While Leah and Rachel both have fairly obvious shifts in their mindsets, displayed by both their narrations throughout the novel as well as their corresponding actions, Leah’s twin sister Adah is a bit more difficult to analyze. Deformed since birth and unable to speak clearly due to her disfigurement, Adah offers a more internal and intellectual perspective on the Price family in the Congo. Adah characterizes herself as an outsider among her own family, set apart by her physical disfigurement as well as her differences in opinion. Austenfeld comments, “Sardonic, palindrome-spouting Adah complements Leah’s narrative by showing the world through the eyes of a physically handicapped, but intellectually gifted young person” (296). Because she does not relate to the rest of the Price family, Adah gives a more open perspective of her family members, tending to provide the most description of the Congolese people and their surroundings without the taint of American ideology that her sisters carry. Ognibene argues, “Unwilling to engage in ‘the politics of forgetting,’ Adah tells the hard truth in her own poetic way” (29). A silent but permanent figure in the household, Adah witnesses all while remaining out of sight, a trait of hers that she actively prefers. Intellectually, Adah excels beyond the rest of the family, continually alluding to classical literature, mathematic equations, and other scholarly references, further setting her apart. In her own narrations, Adah claims to see the world through her “Adah eyes,” which manage to see people and situations both poetically as well as literally (Kingsolver 30). Not only does she give a good viewpoint through her perspective to see the rest of the characters, but she also ponders who they are, what their actions mean, and their overall purpose in the Congo and in the world.

From the viewpoint of a postcolonial critic, Adah already does not fit the stereotypical colonizer. While she does bear the taint of American materialism (nothing to the extent of Rachel of course), Adah is already an outsider to her own culture. Several times, Adah comments on how her deformity makes her unwelcome within the society of Bethlehem, Georgia. Within her town, her unique disability makes her stand out, an outsider while still perpetuating American beliefs. Even though she is not accepted by her hometown, Adah knows no other perspective and therefore relates herself to the standards of the society she is rejected by. Critic Mark Jeffreys explains that disability is “a cultural condition, a marginalized group identity that has a history of oppression and exclusion, a stigmatized category created to serve the interests of the dominant ideology” (qtd. in White 131). Due to her physical deformity, Adah fails to truly fit into her own society, giving her a more unique perspective than the other narrators who fit the cultural mode. Getting stared at and mocked regularly, Adah takes note of these occurrences and expects no different. Her intellect also separates her from the rest of the white people in the novel. Due to their undisputed admittance into the culture, many of the characters of the novel do not openly question their role and how they should interact with the world around them. Adah’s excessive reading and altered view of those around her cause her to question the manner in which society interacts with others. Austenfeld explains, “Adah’s social marginalization by both society and family leaves her free to ponder the wonder of the natural world, the absurdity of the human-made world, and the currents of language, biology, and political intrigue flowing around her” (296). Because she is so different from the rest of the colonizers, Adah isolates herself from their worldview and considers herself alone. It is only when she arrives in the Congo and witnesses other people deformed like herself that she finds her own worth; the way the tribe of Kilanga accepts people who are different emphasizes the disunity within her own culture.

Adah utilizes aspects of her unique personality, such as her slowness, her “slanted” view of people (as she calls it), and her literary background to get an in-depth analysis of the Congolese. Adah’s slowness allows for a better view at the natives and their perspective, making her more aware of their similarities and differences. Her particular slanted view causes her to see people in a different light, which allowed her to see the truth about their role in Africa sooner than her sisters. With these unique tools, Adah discovers that she has more in common with the native people than she does with her whole family. In terms of Bhabha’s theory on hybridity, Adah has a unique transformation, because she was never a part of the collective whole in American society. Her time in Africa both defines her viewpoints and reveals her own unique identity, neither American nor African. Adah’s hybridity comes from her identification of herself through the Congolese; she takes aspects of the Congolese society and uses them to help identify herself. It is through the lens of the Congolese that Adah truly finds herself, and even when she returns with Orleanna to America and loses her deformity, this point of view continues to shape her perspective. The implantation of the Congolese mindset creates a new viewpoint for Adah, thus permanently altering her perspective while emphasizing her own self worth. Even when she wishes to return back to who she was before she split from her original perspective, Adah cannot, perpetuating the strength of Bhabha’s theory of hybridity.

AMERICAN INADEQUACIES

In her first narration in the novel, Adah establishes herself as a unique voice among the throng of her sisters. Adah is hemiplegic, which means that she has half the use of both her brain as well as her body. With half of her brain unable to function and a physical handicap that requires her to constantly drag the right side of her body while she walks, Adah very obviously is set apart from the rest of the characters. However, this physiological alteration makes Adah a

unique narrator. Claiming to see the world through her “Adah eyes” (Kingsolver 30), Adah immediately establishes herself apart from a traditional narrator. Due to her deformity, Adah categorizes that which she sees into various points of view; not only does she see the whole of something, she also instantly breaks it down into more tangible pieces. Her initial description of the dirt road through the village displays her unique focus: “A wide red plank of dirt... continuous in theory from here to somewhere distant. But the way I see it through my Adah eyes it is a flat plank clipped into pieces, rectangles and trapezoids, by the skinny black-line shadows of tall palm trunks. Through Adah eyes, oh the world is a-boggle with colors and shapes competing for a half-brain’s attention. The parade never stops” (Kingsolver 30). Not only does Adah acknowledge that the road has a larger purpose, she also breaks it down into the root of itself. This ability that Adah displays to see both sides of something is the same ability she has to see more than one purpose for something.

Adah interprets the world differently than the rest of her family, and she also is forced to consider actions more often than they do because she has such a difficult time accomplishing the same things. One of the side effects of her condition is that she has physical limitations. Unable to walk and forced to limp around after her sisters, Adah takes in their new world of the Congo at a much slower pace, and thus has more time to interpret what she sees and compare it to her worldview. Adah also finds it difficult to speak, only speaking a handful of times during their entire stay in Kilanga. Because she is forced to be silent and slow, Adah views the world from a “slant,” as she puts it, and from this perspective, she observes much more than any other. According to White, “For Adah, her ‘slant’ is more than a physical unevenness in her walk; it is at the heart of her sense of self and at the center of her story” (139). Adah sees more than the rest of her family, and because she is able to acknowledge more than one perspective, she explains

that while “the Price family passes its judgment... Adah unpasses her judgments. I am the one who does not speak” (Kingsolver 32). Relating her inability to speak with her ability to pass judgment, Adah not only feels unworthy to criticize those around her, but also understands that it is not her place to bring judgment. Unlike Leah, who brings a missionary’s righteousness to the jungle, or Rachel, who scorns all of the Congo, Adah comes with nothing but her slant perspective. Adah appreciates her unique opportunity to observe more than the rest of her family: “Silence has many advantages. When you do not speak, other people presume you to be deaf or feeble-minded and promptly make a show of their own limitations” (Kingsolver 34). By being thought to be unintelligent by most people, Adah puts herself in the best position to observe what they are inadequate in, thus able to see the truth about them as a person. Jenna Fusion White says, “It is through Adah’s disability that Kingsolver enables her to resist a myriad of cultural narratives that threaten to ‘cripple’ her, choosing silence, atheism, and love for her slanted body” (132). White emphasizes the fact that Adah’s disability isolates her from the rest of her society, but opens her up to a different perspective—what Adah deems her “Adah eyes.” It is this unique lens that gives Adah’s narrations such a different depth, as well as allows Adah’s personal transformation to happen so candidly and quickly.

VALIDATION THROUGH VARIATION

While Adah is looked down upon by American standards, the aspects of herself that make her so undesirable in her native culture reveal her similarities with the Congolese people; through her observations, Adah comes to realize that what she had always been shunned for is considered normal in the Congo. White explains, “Many of the villagers bear the scars of illness and injury, but they remain unmarked because their community accepts a range of bodily conditions as ‘normal,’” including Adah’s deformity (132). Adah is already an outsider in her

own culture, and thus not the clearest example of American identity. However, it is impossible for her to not bring American standards in some way. While Adah knows that she is more intelligent than the rest of the people around her, she still has certain aspects of her personality and manner of thinking that reflect her upbringing, such as her subtle implications that the American standard is better suited for her family. When she gets to the Congo, Adah's open perspective allows for her to make certain realizations about the family's role in the tribe more quickly than the other characters. She is quick to identify the manner in which her family is different from the natives, indicating the colonizer/colonized relationship found in postcolonial theory. By unconsciously separating the two groups of people, Adah proves that she carries traces of American understanding. Adah is the first of the daughters to consider whether or not they should morally be trying to "better" the native people. While discussing Nathan's inability to control the pet parrot that came with their missionary house, Adah comments, "Curiously exempt from the Reverend's rules was Methuselah, in the same way Our Father was finding the Congolese people beyond his power. Methuselah was a sly little representative of Africa itself, living openly in our household. One might argue, even, that he was here first" (Kingsolver 60). Comparing the parrot to the people of the Congo, Adah not only acknowledges that Nathan's authority seems to be failing in a foreign setting, but that the African culture has more right to be in power than the American society does. In her ironic fashion, Adah already questions their purpose in the Congo—Nathan's goal is to subject the natives to what he believes to be the right way, but Adah disapproves of his methodology as well as his motives for being in Africa in the first place.

With the idea that what they might be doing in the Congo is not as clear-cut as the rest of her family believes, Adah looks at the native people not as projects but as people; the result is

that she sees aspects of herself in the native culture that are not present in her own society and finds herself identifying with the Congolese. Even while they are still in the village, Adah already knows that they are all changing due to their mission. While discussing Nathan's failure as a preacher in the tribe, Adah comments, "Ruth May is not the same Ruth May she was... None of us are the same... only Nathan remains essentially himself, the same man however you look at him. The others of us have two sides. We go to bed ourselves and like poor Dr. Jekyll we wake up changed" (Kingsolver 278). Adah is already conscious of her change in the Congo, bringing a new sense of awareness to Bhabha's theory of hybridity. While Bhabha does not discuss whether or not the conquerors are aware and accepting of the changes that happen as they split from their native cultures, Adah clearly understands the principle. While not fully blending together both cultures at this point, Adah's perspective reveals that she knows her family is not the same as when they arrived in Africa except for Nathan, the one member of the Price family who refuses to alter his methodology at all in order to relate to the natives. The rest of the family, Adah included, find new aspects of themselves in the Congo, thus beginning to create their new identities.

In relation to Bhabha's claims about splitting from an original culture and relating to another, Adah actually becomes a more accepted part of the native society than her twin sister Leah, who is so determined to be a part of the Congolese culture. Adah is aware of Leah's growing fascination with the Congo, and comments that while Leah isolates herself from her family and becomes an object of interest among the natives, Adah is more appreciated for who she is in the Congo: "[Leah] is beginning to be looked upon in our village as bizarre. At the least, direly unfeminine. If anything, I am now considered the more normal one. I am the *bënduka*, the single word that describes me perfectly: someone who is bent sideways and walks slowly"

(Kingsolver 278). Adah is shocked at finding out that she has become more accepted within the community in comparison to Leah, whom she previously calls her “hunt-goddess twin”

(Kingsolver 278). Having been compared to Leah her entire life in America and been told she was less, the idea that Leah is the outsider of the family is an entirely new concept to Adah.

Rather than being set apart and scorned, Adah begins to find her place in the Congo. White explains, “Because their culture does not impose a rigid standard of normalcy, the villagers do not experience disabling social exclusion... it might be argued that *disability* does not exist in Kilanga because neither the concept of social exclusion based on impairment, nor the concept of medical restoration of some idealized ‘whole’ conditions the culture’s response to the body”

(137). As further proof that she is accepted in the village, Adah finds a word that describes her ailment, not as a disease or something to be discussed with sorrow, but just a matter-of-fact part of life. This phrase begins to define Adah’s understanding of herself, for just as she feels that she has two parts of herself, the word has a double meaning. Adah muses, “In darkness when all cats are equally black, I move as gracefully as anyone. *Bënduka* is the bent-sideways girl who walks slowly, but *bënduka* is also the name of a fast-flying bird, the swallow with curved wings who darts crookedly quick through the trees near the river. This bird I can follow. I am the smooth, elegant black cat who slips from the house as a liquid shadow after dark” (Kingsolver 295). In the Congo, Adah is not defined just by her ailment as she is in American culture; she is something more, which appeals to her as she seeks to find her place in her family and in the tribe. Rather than being a burden, she is powerful, strong, and aligned with the darkness (a clear reference to being in the “Dark Continent”). Looking at herself through both definitions of the word, Adah’s inner thoughts show that she comes to understand that she is a new person: “In that other long-ago place, America, I was a failed combination of too-weak body and overstrong will.

But in the Congo I am those things perfectly united: *Adah*” (Kingsolver 343). By rejecting what she defined herself as while in America, Adah completes the process of splitting from her previous identity and forges a new one based on her new understand of herself through the Congolese methodology.

Once she creates her new identity by utilizing the Congolese standards, Adah begins to shift her perspective on everything around her in a manner that goes against the traditional American point of view she is used to, even through her own personal slant. While she always views the world based on her own unique worldview, Adah understands that she has more in common with what the Africans believe than with what her own family espouses. When the tribe is forced to burn down a large section of the forest in order to hunt more food during a drought, Adah watches the people work and comes to a realization. She comments, “On the day of the hunt I came to know in the slick center of my bones this one thing: all animals kill to survive, and we are animals... we, even if we had no meat or even grass to gnaw, still boil our water to kill the invisible creatures that would like to kill us first... the death of something living is the price of our own survival, and we pay it again and again. We have no choice” (Kingsolver 347). Suddenly aware of the death around her, Adah’s new understanding of herself forces her to realize the hierarchy of the world. While Nathan and his traditional point of view believes in his own superiority, Adah looks beyond. Man is not just “man;” he is an animal as well, and is also subject to her new determination to find a duality within her reality. The realization that man is part of nature is a concept brought through her new African perspective, and that concept finalizes her transformation from her “otherness” in America to her acceptance of herself in Africa.

APPLICATION IN AMERICA

While Adah clearly creates a new identity for herself while in Africa and believes in her new point of view, she is forced to apply her new mindset back in her homeland. In Africa, Adah finds acceptance within the people as well as a new way of applying her “slanted” view on the world. However, the transition back to America and the society that she never felt related to is not easy, for she brings her new ideologies back with her. Before going to the Congo with her family, Adah felt inadequate among the people around her; while in the village, Adah split from that perspective and forged a new identity, one that does not align with American ideologies. Upon her homecoming with Orleanna, Adah comments that “it is impossible to describe the shock of return... even though I was outdoors, I felt a peculiar confinement” (Kingsolver 411). Back within the culture that suppressed her, Adah is forced to find new ways to apply her new perspective in her old society, for she has a hard time identifying with the Americans over the Africans again. While describing Orleanna’s new home, Adah mentions that her mother “tot[es manure] home daily like a good African in two balanced bushel pails” (Kingsolver 408). Comparing herself and her mother to Africans living in America, Adah makes it clear that she identifies with her new African self rather than regressing back to her previous understanding of herself. It is only in Africa that she learns “the balance of power” and how it applies to her life (Kingsolver 412).

Being back in America puts pressure on her new identity, particularly the part that made her unique in the first place; while in medical school, Adah becomes part of an experimental treatment and is cured of her physical ailment, thus “normalizing” her and making her more socially acceptable within the American culture. When Adah learns that she can “lose her slant,” she questions who she is without her deformity: “I was unprepared to accept that my whole sense of *Adah* was founded on a misunderstanding” (Kingsolver 439). When she fixes her physical

deformities, Adah wrestles with her understanding of herself again. After years believing that she is permanently set apart from everyone else, being counted “normal” puts pressure upon her identity. Through her shifted mindset, Adah believes herself to be both aspects of *bënduka*, the crooked girl as well as the sleek bird. Once she is not crooked, she is half of the whole she was in Africa. While dealing with this attack on her ideas on her own personal duality, Adah comments, “It has taken me so long to believe I am saved. Not from my crookedness; I am still to some extent crooked and always too slow. But saved from the abandonment I deserved” (Kingsolver 440). The feeling of being set apart within her society takes its toll, but when the physical thing that isolates her is taken away, Adah has a hard time feeling accepted in her culture, particularly with her new ideology from Africa. Understanding who she is without what set her apart is her biggest concern: “Will I lose myself entirely if I lose my limp?” (Kingsolver 441) Adah found herself in Africa based upon her deformity; the acceptance of both sides of herself helped to create her identity. Without half of that self, Adah fears the loss of her hard-won individuality.

While questioning her loss of her self-awareness, Adah comes to see aspects of Africa all around her, coloring her thought processes as well as her future. Adah becomes a doctor when she gets back to America, but struggles in relation to her newfound perspective on humanity. Having decided that humanity is just as much an animal as the rest of the life forces on the globe, she questions her right in saving a life or even killing a disease. Unable to take the Hippocratic Oath due to her confusion on the sanctity of life, Adah doubts the morality of saving people at the expense of the rest of the world. Wrestling with her doubts, Adah comments to herself, “Africa has slipped the floor out from my righteous house, my Adah moral code. How sure I always felt before, how smug... Adah the bridled entitled, Adah authorized to despise one and all... what I carried out of the Congo on my crooked little back is a ferocious uncertainty about

the worth of life. And now I am becoming a doctor. How very sensible of me” (Kingsolver 443). Adah’s African perspectives, while seemingly eccentric, define her as an individual. Even without her slant, Adah still deals with her altered point of view. Strehle comments that by Adah rejecting the “American dream” of becoming a doctor, she “undoes and inverts” her American ideology, coloring her decisions by her African perspectives (424). It is this questioning of herself that determines that Adah is permanently changed by her new hybrid nature. While she is changed by her time in Africa and lost part of her American identity, splitting from her previous ideology, who she became while in Africa is so strong that even immersing herself back into American culture cannot alter her perspective again. Adah’s American point of view was more fragile than her new African alteration; the power of her new mindset is so intense that it infiltrates every aspect of her life in America, despite going back to Africa only one more time.

Adah struggles with her new self, questioning whether or not she should miss her old point of view; however, the person that she has become is permanently engrained in her very being and cannot be ignored or replaced. Just as she had while in Africa, Adah considers how the rest of her family has changed because of Nathan’s mission. She says of herself, “Personally, I have stolen an arm and a leg. I am still Adah but you would hardly know me know, without my slant... oddly enough, it has taken me years to accept my new position. I find that I no longer have [my old identity.] ...Sometimes at night, in secret, I still limp purposefully around my apartment, like Mr. Hyde, trying to recover my old ways of seeing and thinking... but it never lasts” (Kingsolver 492). Who she was as a person and the way that she saw the world and herself cannot be taken back, despite the occasion attempt to force it. Therefore, Bhabha’s postcolonial identity, the merging of two cultural backgrounds into one new identity, proves itself, in Adah’s perspective, to be stronger than a singular point of view before being the act of splitting. The

duality of the new identity is so much greater than what was originally there, and cannot be changed, only added onto and applied. It is this new point of view that forces Adah to leave her job right before she becomes a doctor—because she cannot get past her belief that all of creation is equal and has a right to life, which she learns while in Africa. Adah explains, “Out of sympathy for the Devil and Africa, I left the healing profession. I became a witch doctor” (Kingsolver 528). By identifying herself by an African profession, Adah proves the inescapability of her altered state. Rather than stop the progressing of disease and bacteria, who have just as much of a right to live as humans do in her eyes, she studies them instead. In her final narration of the novel, Adah explains, “I am the one who quietly takes stock, I suppose. Believing in all things equally. Believing fundamentally in the right of a plant or a virus to rule the earth. Mother says I have no heart for my own kind. She doesn’t know. I have too much. I know what we have done, and what we deserve” (Kingsolver 531). Still aware of her alteration from the Congo, Adah identifies her hybridity and knows that she cannot change her new nature.

Vastly different from the rest of her family, Adah provides a unique look at an already marginalized character in a post-colonial context. Isolated from her Americanized family, Adah enjoys the silence and separation her birth defects give her. Able to see truth through her “slant” vision, Adah gives the best example at the power of Bhabha’s transformative hybridity. Aware of the duality in the Congo, Adah witnesses her own alteration due to the way she interprets the people in America as well as in the Congo. By finding her true identity through Congolese principles, Adah splits from her previous identity and creates a new one, which she defines as her “whole.” The only daughter to move back to America, Adah has a difficult time transitioning back to her homeland, particularly with her new point of view, indicating the permanence of a hybrid identity. Even when her physical ailments are (for the most part) healed, Adah’s new

point of view defines her as a character and proves the tangibility of the creation of a new identity through hybridization of an individual.

RUTH MAY & ORLEANNA: Oppression in Ideology and the Ultimate Hybridity

“That’s exactly what I want to go and be, when I have to disappear. Your eyes will be little and round but you are so far up there you can look down and see the whole world, Mama and everybody. The tribes of Ham, Shem, and Japheth all together. Finally, you are the highest one of all.”

The final two narrators in the novel prove to be the hardest to analyze, both in the brevity of their voices as well as the complexity of their identities. Orleanna, Nathan’s wife, has only five chapters in the whole piece, all at the beginning of different “books” the novel is broken up into. In terms of the rest of the narrators, Orleanna’s chapters stand out. While the daughters write their narrations throughout the span of their lives, thus displaying the shift of their mindsets as the story follows their maturation, Orleanna’s narrations come from a place of reflection looking back on her whole life. All of her chapters take place on Sanderling Island, Georgia, well after her return to America after she left the Congo (although the dates are not specific). Austenfeld explains, “In the narrative structure, Orleanna’s voice is retrospective, while those of the girls are contemporaneous” (“The Revelatory Narrative Circle” 299). Because she is reflecting on her past, her transition into a hybrid character is not as prominent, since the perspective she speaks through is not the one she had while actually living in the Congo. Any insight into her life in Africa is supplied through her own analysis of herself, which is both a help and a hindrance in the analysis of her identity. Being self-aware of who she was and how she changed is useful in determining the alteration of her perspective; on the other hand, the critic must rely on Orleanna’s own analysis, raising the question of whether or not she is a reliable narrator. However, it is possible to look through these potential issues and identify her alteration. Overall, Orleanna’s awareness of her own limited perspective does help to chart her path as a hybrid character.

Orleanna's youngest daughter, Ruth May, also has a smaller role as a narrator in *The Poisonwood Bible*; however, this limited narration is not due to the distance of time as much as the hands of fate. Ruth May, only five years old when the family moves to the Congo, provides a different perspective on their role in the tribe. As a young child, she is unaware of the cultural stereotypes she espouses, as well as the impact of the actions going on around her. Interpreting her world around her, Ruth May states the reality of their life in the Congo with a humorous innocence, all while divulging information about the plot of the narrative and the state of the family. Unfortunately, Ruth May does not survive their mission to the jungle, and dies of a snakebite in front of her horrified sisters. Her death, while tragic, marks a catalyst for all of the narrators, who are forced to see the way they have adapted to the Congo and their own hybrid natures. Ruth May herself begins to split from the American ideologies she learned from her father before she died, indicative of the power of Bhabha's hybrid identity. Curious and precocious, Ruth May is the first of the daughters to make friends in the village, discover the truth of white relations in the Congo, and learn about the native customs, religion, and culture, all while totally ignorant of the large shifts in her identity.

Obviously, after her death, Ruth May does not give any more narrations, but she is still a crucial voice among the remaining Price women, particularly Orleanna. Openly admitting that Ruth May was her favorite child, Orleanna's few chapters seem to address her "uncaptured favorite child, wild as the day is long" (Kingsolver 7). While never explicitly stating that she is writing to Ruth May, Orleanna's chapters indicate that what happened in Africa to her youngest daughter haunts her even years later. While it seems likely that Orleanna addresses Ruth May, she also seems to be writing to Africa itself, complicating her audience and its representation. Because she was forced to leave Ruth May in Africa, Ruth has become Africa—at least to her

distraught mother. This merging of identities is a literal representation of Bhabha's theory, and can be seen in the final chapter of the novel, where an unnamed narrator describes the aftereffects of the Congo on the remaining Price women. Calling itself "*muntu* Africa, *muntu* one child and a million all lost on the same day... your bad child now gone good," (Kingsolver 537) the narrator seems to be both Orleanna's lost child as well as the voice of Africa, indicating that Ruth May has become Africa itself. In the sense of Homi Bhabha and his theory of hybridity, Ruth May becomes the ultimate hybrid character, physically becoming a part of the landscape itself. Having lost any previous American ideologies, Ruth May as the voice of Africa relays African wisdoms and knowledge, all while not forgetting who she was while living. She both retains her previous identity while taking in another. Bhabha explains his theory as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (*The Location of Culture* 122). The ultimate hybrid identity, Ruth May is both herself and Africa, fulfilling Bhabha's definition. Her power as the definitive hybrid character is shown through her complex relationship with Orleanna. The intricacy in their relationship requires them to be analyzed together, for it is the death and subsequent transformation of Ruth May that pushes Orleanna to adapt to her situation in Africa and create a hybrid identity of her own. The death of her favorite child, the act of burying her in the ground, is what gives Orleanna the courage to leave Nathan and go back to America. While it seems that by returning to America, she is reverting back to her original ideology, the dramatic loss of her favorite child is more than enough to permanently alter her to a more African mindset.

INNOCENT UNDERSTANDINGS

Ruth May's initial understanding of her family, the Congo, and herself are extraordinarily clear, for her youth and curiosity give her an open avenue for relaying the American perspective.

At only five years old, Ruth May offers a unique perspective, for she has little understanding of what is happening around her and within her family. Austenfeld comments, “Baby sister Ruth May, who sees with the all-observing eyes and limited comprehension of a five-year-old, offers us a broad sample of all she sees, hears, smells, dreams, and feels. Her voice is perhaps the most straightforward and positive one” (“The Revelatory Narrative Circle” 296). Most of what she takes to be truth are just opinions and beliefs told to her by others, making her a good vehicle to hear the ideologies of the other characters. The beginning of her first narration starts with her conveying her misunderstanding of her father’s biblical lessons: “God says the Africans are the Tribes of Ham. Ham was the worst one of Noah’s three boys... Ham found his father Noah laying around pig-naked drunk one day and he thought that was funny as all get-out... When Noah woke up he got to hear the whole story from the tattletale brothers. So Noah cursed all Ham’s children to be slaves for ever and ever. That’s how come them to turn out dark” (Kingsolver 20). Looking beyond her skewed attempts at repeating the biblical story of Noah and his sons, Ruth May’s declaration about Africans reveals her personal perspective. Humorous as she may be, many of her declarations about Africa, her family, and herself are merely a misrepresentation of other people’s ideologies. Ognibene explains, “[Ruth May’s] words are few, but her naïve voice reveals the prejudicial attitudes shaped by her father and a religious rhetoric of white superiority and biblical truth. Her statements about African people in general, her tales about parental conflict, and her political comments are never completely correct, but they illustrate well the outcomes of discrimination” (“The Missionary Position” 29). What she knows about the world around her is openly colored by what other people tell her, mainly the American ideology she learns from her family and her home.

While clearly the other characters relate the mindsets they learned in America, because of Ruth May's age and innocence, this pattern is much clearer in her than in the others. In terms of her perspectives on the natives, she comes to the Congo expecting nothing other than the false stories she heard in America. She comments, "In Sunday school Rex Minton said we better not go to the Congo on account of the cannibal natives would boil us in a pot and eat us up... Our Sunday school teacher Miss Bannie told him to hush up. But I tell you what, she didn't say one way or the other about them boiling us in a pot and eating us up. So I don't know" (Kingsolver 21). Beyond the entertaining tale of Sunday school in the deep South, Ruth May's story also reveals her lack of a sturdy self identity; what she knows about the Congo and its people are merely stories told to her by others around her. Ruth May unknowingly perpetuates American stereotypes. Hearing a doctor and her father debate about the civil unrest and rebellions across the nation, Ruth May's only thought relays the simplicity of her mindset as well as her innocent point of view: "I was glad nobody wanted to cut off *my* hands. Because Jesus made me white, I reckon they wouldn't" (Kingsolver 121). Aware at a young age that her white skin sets her apart from the Africans, Ruth May repeats the ideologies that her father teaches her with very little regard to her own personal beliefs. Ruth May's perspective is merely parroting the viewpoints of others.

Because she is so young, Ruth May repeats whatever she hears with very little understanding of its implications; however, her ability to reiterate the beliefs of those around her also applies to the Congolese society as well. As the family settles into the village, Ruth May continues to respond to their situation with the childlike innocence, taking in what goes on around her and just accepting it as truth. Rather than see the implications of the conversations around her, Ruth May merely repeats the scene to her audience. For a young child, this is

expected, but it makes Ruth May more susceptible to influence outside of her parents and sisters. After the family befriends the town schoolteacher, Anatole, he sends them a teenage boy to help them with some manual labor, Nelson. While her older sisters do school work, Ruth May spends most of her time with Nelson, and through these interactions, gains a deeper awareness about the Congolese than the rest of her family. Taking his lessons as fact (just as she did with her father's teachings), Ruth May learns native customs and traditions and applies them to herself, both in action and perspective. Nelson not only teaches Ruth May Congolese customs and rituals, but also informs her about the political unrest and other important events, all with her being truly unaware of the magnitude of their discussions. As a child, she has no indication that what Nelson teaches her goes against what her father believes; she just accepts his truth and applies it to herself.

Not only does she take in aspects of her father's point of view, but Ruth May clearly adopts certain Congolese religious beliefs, and up to her final days, she actively mixes together both cultures that she has been taught in order to create her own personal understanding. In terms of her hybridity, this taking in of the Congolese culture is extremely important, for she is actively choosing to do so. Her relationship to the Congolese influences her so much that she does not just blindly take in their beliefs as truth as she had previously, but she openly applies it to her own ideology. Ironically, the daughter of the strict Baptist preacher is surprisingly open to African religious beliefs and customs. When Nelson tells her about African gods and their religious rites, Ruth May does not respond the way her older sisters or her parents would. When Nelson tells her that the tribespeople believe that "everybody's got their own little God here to protect them, special African ones that live in the little tiny thing they wear around their necks... called a *gree-gree*," Ruth May's only response is to tell him that "Jesus is way too big to ride

around in a *gree-gree*. He is big as a man, with long brown hair and sandals, size extra-large” (Kingsolver 154-5). Not rejecting the premise of gods living in talismans, Ruth May just comments that the only god she knows, Jesus, probably will not fit in the box. She does not replace one belief with another, as one would expect her to, based on her previous mimicry. Basing her understanding of Jesus on the American stereotype of the deity, Ruth May applies what she knows about religion to what Nelson tells her about his beliefs. Not rejecting either one, Ruth May merely merges them together, indicating her splitting from her previous ideology and creating both a hybrid religion as well as the beginnings of a hybrid identity. Kilpatrick explains, “Ruth May constructs a revised spirituality that results from her identification with the Congolese experience. The spirituality is a new understanding of the divine because it syncretizes the Christianity of Nathan with her Kilangan experience” (“Singing a New Song” 90). For a young child, this creation of a new identity does not startle or bewilder her as it does her older sisters, but is just accepted as an addition to her burgeoning belief system.

When Ruth May contracts malaria, her reliance on her new form of religious views become tantamount, putting her new hybrid point of view at the forefront of her narration. The disease gives Ruth May a different lens, one colored with the fever of the illness, which makes her muse on the different cultures impressing upon her and question their validity. Once she begins to choose for herself, she begins to question. During the peak of her malaria, Ruth May comments, “I know the meek shall inherit and the last shall be first, but the Tribes of Ham were last. Now will they be first? I don’t know” (Kingsolver 238). This line of questioning reveals her altered mindset; as opposed to separating the two cultures as she had previously, relying on her “whiteness” in a “black” culture, she merges both societies together and does not have the belief of another to fall back on. Ruth May is creating her own belief system, indicating the furthering

of Bhabha's hybrid identity. Taking the ideas and principles she learned in America, Ruth May applies them to the Congolese people, portraying her altered point of view. The biblical lessons her father teaches her are applied to everyone, not just white Americans.

In the same regard, Ruth May also takes aspects of the Congolese culture and applies them to herself. While fighting malaria, Nelson comes to her and teaches her one final Congolese lesson. Giving her a box filled with various entities blessed by the town witch doctor, Nelson tells her that if she puts her spirit in the box, "[she] won't die, [she] will just disappear for a second and then turn up someplace else, where it's safe. Instead of dead [she'll] be safe. But first [she has] to think of that place every day, so [her] spirit will know where to run away to, when it's time" (Kingsolver 239). Armed with Nelson's Congolese magic, Ruth May accepts his gift and completes the magic ritual with him, thus putting her faith in African religion rather than her father's biblical teachings. Arguing that Ruth May's rejection of the religion of her father is prompted by her fear of his tyranny, critic Elaine Ognibene argues that her acceptance of Nelson's magic implies a rejection of "civilization" ("The Missionary Position" 30). By accepting Nelson's magic to save herself, Ruth May proves her acknowledgment of the Congolese culture as well as her adherence to a new ideology. In her last narration before she dies, Ruth May discusses her understanding of life after death: "If I die I will disappear and I know where I'll come back. I'll be right up there in the tree, same color, same everything. I will look down on you. But you won't see me" (Kingsolver 273). Foreshadowing herself as a green mamba snake, the very thing that kills her later in the novel, Ruth May's final words in the discourse indicate her complete faith in the ritual she completed with Nelson. She has split from relying solely on Nathan's claims and creates an understanding of her own, mixed with a foreign ideology. Accepting that she will be transformed by his magic, Ruth May relates herself not only

to African magic, but also a piece of Africa itself, an animal that is only found there. Altering her understanding of religion and the afterlife, Ruth May's narrations reveal her splitting with the beliefs of her father, beliefs that she merely repeated and did not truly understand, and the acceptance of Congolese beliefs.

REGRETFUL REFLECTIONS

While Ruth May's narrations reveal more about the people around her and their beliefs rather than her own personal analysis, her mother's brief comments display her internal struggle between her need to justify herself and her desire for forgiveness. Written as a reflection of the past, Orleanna's chapters describe her inner personal struggle more than any plot or dialogue while in the Congo. Ognibene explains, "[Orleanna's] narratives focus upon the family, their desire to have dominion, on their limited knowledge of almost everything, and on the unnamable guilt she still carries with her" ("The Missionary Position" 22). Her remorseful musings about her family's role in the Congo and their dramatic exit reveal her altered mindset, for not only does she consider what happened to her family in Africa, but also contemplates her own alteration as a wife and mother based on her marriage to Nathan, the lives of her children, and her understanding of herself while in the Congo. Looking at her own analysis of herself, her shift in identity comes from the influence of Africa upon her family, giving her more fuel to create her hybrid character. Colored with regret, Orleanna's chapters are both a plea of forgiveness from her lost daughter and the continent she helped to conquer as well as a defense for her role in the family's misfortunes by an explanation of who she was and who she became.

Wishing to sacrifice her enlightened state of mind in order to regain her daughter, Orleanna resents her new Congolese perspective because it reminds her of her lost daughter as well as her oppression under Nathan's jurisdiction. It is obvious throughout the novel that

Orleanna, as well as the rest of the women in the Price family, is under the command of the patriarch. Orleanna talks about Nathan's iron domination from the beginning of their marriage: "I encountered my own spirit less and less. By the time Ruth May was born, we'd moved into the parsonage on Hale Street and Nathan was in full possession of the country once known as Orleanna Wharton" (Kingsolver 200). Nathan's overpowering persona dominates much of the family's relationships, and Orleanna's reminiscing analyzes his role in their initial American ideologies. Susan Strehle argues that Orleanna sees her husband as the example of American exceptionalism, and openly rejects both the American ideology as well as him ("Chosen People" 417). Their only understanding of Africa and its people previously came from Nathan; life in the Congo provides a much different interpretation. Claiming that she was "swallowed by Nathan's mission, body and soul... occupied as if by a foreign power" (Kingsolver 198), Orleanna uses this sense of loss of self to relate to the Congo itself, a nation colonized by an outside, more powerful force. Commenting that "Nathan felt it had been a mistake to bend his will, in any way, to Africa" (Kingsolver 97), Orleanna notes that while Nathan refused to split from his own beliefs to graft into African culture, she was overwhelmed by the Congo, which had been prepared "to roll over us like a river" (Kingsolver 98). Taken over by Nathan, Orleanna has no room as an individual to create a new identity.

A key theme in Orleanna's narration is that of oppression; relating herself to Africa, Orleanna argues that she was just as much a captive by Nathan as Africa was by his white supremacy. Austenfeld explains, "In the course of her narratives, Orleanna compares herself to the Congo: colonized, stripped of valuables, and to the earth itself" ("The Revelatory Narrative Circle" 298). By comparing herself to Africa, Orleanna acknowledges her relationship and bond to the Other, the foreign identity, implying that she relates to a different perspective from her

initial mindset. Since her chapters are written as a reflection, it makes sense that she acknowledges this; the shift has already occurred. Claiming that she “was afflicted with Africa like a bout of a rare disease, from which [she has] not managed to make a full recovery” (Kingsolver 9), Orleanna notes her reluctance to graft into Africa, comparing it to an unwanted illness that she cannot escape. Unable to lose the effects that her time in the Congo had on her, Orleanna is forced to live the rest of her life looking at herself through her hybrid lens—a perspective that she does not particularly appreciate. Enlightened by the knowledge the Congo gave her, Orleanna sees her own ignorance, condescending behavior, and silent compliance that both allowed Nathan such power and (in her opinion) caused the death of her favorite daughter. She comments, “Maybe I’ll even confess the truth, that I rode in with the horsemen and beheld the apocalypse, but still I’ll insist I was only a captive witness. What is the conqueror’s wife, if not a conquest herself?” (Kingsolver 9). Attempting to justify her role in the destruction of her family, Orleanna compares her husband’s journey into the Congo with the end of the world and implies that she was his first successful occupation.

Interestingly, Orleanna applies her hybrid perspective to a time even before she was in the Congo. Comparing her plight to the fate of Africa, Orleanna finds companionship with the entire continent, displaying her enlightened mindset. Orleanna explains, “We aimed for no more than to have dominion over every creature that moved upon the earth. And so it came to pass that we stepped down there on a place we believed unformed, where only darkness moved on the face of the earth. Now you laugh, day and night, while you gnaw on my bones. But what else could we have thought? Only that it began and ended with us” (Kingsolver 10). Orleanna explains that she came to the Congo with a traditional colonist mindset, aiming to dominate that which she was taught to see as lesser; the reality she learns to see is that it was Africa who took

over her and continues to have power. Rather than maintain her “conqueror’s” understanding of Africa, Orleanna willingly sympathizes with the oppressed continent and by doing so, displays her understanding of it and its people.

Unlike her children, Orleanna wishes to let go of the taint of Africa that has become a part of her, hoping to reverse her hybridization and gain some closure. However, just as she cannot get Ruth May back, she cannot get rid of her hybrid state of mind. While expressing her indignation at how she cannot escape the memories of Africa, Orleanna comments, “The sensation [of remembering Africa] rises up from inside me and I know you’re still here, holding sway. You’ve played some trick on the dividing of my cells so my body can never be free of the small parts of Africa it consumed... It seems I only know myself, anymore, by your attendance in my soul” (Kingsolver 87). Accepting what happened to her in the Congo as part of her identity, Orleanna is horrified that she cannot escape her past. The inability to revert back to the initial state of mind implies the permanence of hybridity. Who Orleanna was cannot be retrieved, just like her youngest daughter. Lamenting to herself, Orleanna says, “Oh, little beast, little favorite. Can’t you see I died as well?” (Kingsolver 89) Ultimately, the stress of life in Africa peaks when Ruth May dies, and Orleanna violently splits from Nathan and his mentality, shifting to a more independent mindset, one very similar to the newly independent Congo.

Orleanna’s final chapter outlines her sudden awareness of her American mindset after the death of Ruth May as well as the shift in herself and her daughters due to their time in Africa. After completing Ruth May’s burial shroud in Kilanga, Orleanna comes to realize the truth about her predicament; by continuing to move forward and grow as an individual, she finds some comfort and acceptance in what happened to her and her children. Orleanna comments, “Nathan [and his mindset] was something that happened to us... with our fate scarred by hell and

brimstone we still had to track our course. And it happened finally by the grace of hell and brimstone that I had to keep moving. I moved, and he stood still” (Kingsolver 384). Leaving Nathan in his unchanging mindset, Orleanna leaves the jungle in order to save her remaining daughters, and by doing so, she rejects him and his methodology, relying solely on Africa and its principles. Claiming that her rejection of Nathan is what saved her, Orleanna mentions, “His kind will always lose in the end. I know this, and now I know why. Whether it’s wife or nation they occupy, their mistake is the same: they stand still, and their stake moves underneath them” (Kingsolver 384). By stating that Nathan’s failure was to adapt to the Congo, Orleanna proves the importance of hybridity. Failing to accept Africa and standing up to Nathan’s steadfast colonial mindset, Orleanna paid the price with the death of her daughter. It is only the act of moving away from a past identity, growing and adapting to a new ideology, that allows survival.

MUTUAL RESPONSES

While all of the narrators experience hybridity, the relationship between Ruth May and Orleanna is undeniably intertwined within this shift, for it is the death and transformation of Ruth May that prompts her mother to embrace a new ideology. Ruth May’s death put an obvious halt on her own narrations, but it is not the end of her voice in the novel. Her transformation into hybridity is more dramatic than that of the other Price women, and inspires growth and adaptation in others around her, both leading her daughters in the trek out of Kilanga as well as the application of their new hybrid states of being. Since her last living narration reiterates her faith in the Congolese idea of saving the spirit after death, it stands to reason that the last chapter of the novel, one written by an unidentified narrator, is Ruth May in her new form. What makes this chapter so important in the terms of Bhabha’s splitting and hybridity is the complete alteration of the character. Believing in Congolese faith rituals and adhering to native customs

does more than just indicate an alteration in Ruth May's identity; her spirit *becomes* Africa after she dies, making her both Ruth May Price as well as the voice of Africa. This characterization—that of a white Baptist girl who becomes the very spirit of Africa in the novel—solidifies the power of hybridization upon individuality. Calling herself the “forest’s conscience” and “all that is here,” Ruth May becomes more than her previous identity (Kingsolver 537). Even in her altered state of being, Ruth May is aware of her impact upon her mother and how her grief changed her. Encouraging the shift in identity, the enlightened Ruth May comments, “Mother, you can still hold on but forgive, forgive and give for long, as long as we both shall live I forgive you, Mother... Slide the weight from your shoulders and move forward. You are afraid you might forget, but you never will. You will forgive and remember... Move on. Walk forward into the light” (Kingsolver 543). Reassuring Orleanna that her hybridization was a positive thing and that shifting her identity in order to grow was necessary, Ruth May recognizes the role her death played on her heartbroken mother.

Ruth May's tragic end is the catalyst for hybridization, and it seems that through both Ruth May's transformed consciousness (even in death) as well as Orleanna's remorseful reminiscing, their entangled relationship reveals their hybridity. As previously mentioned, it seems as though Orleanna is addressing her lost daughter, but she also is addressing the entire continent of Africa. Attempting to apologize for all of her sins, to both Ruth May as well as the Congo, Orleanna talks to them both as if they are the same individual: “If you are the eyes in the trees, watching us as we walk away from Kilanga, how will you make your judgment? Lord knows after thirty years I still crave your forgiveness, but who are *you*? ... Are you still my own flesh and blood, my last-born, or are you now the flesh of Africa? How can I tell the difference when the two rivers have run together so?” (Kingsolver 385) Aware that Ruth May has become

more than just her youngest daughter, Orleanna confesses her guilty heart as well as acknowledges the transformation that Ruth May underwent. It is this transformation, or the descent into true hybridization, that forces Orleanna to alter her own perspective of herself, from merely Nathan's quiet wife to a fierce woman who needs to keep altering her understanding of herself in order to escape her grief.

The complicated relationship between Ruth May and Orleanna creates the most unique narrators as well as transformations into hybrid characters. From a youthful child of five to the very spirit of Africa, Ruth May grows from a mouthpiece for her father's American beliefs to actively accepting Congolese belief systems as her own, even to her deathbed. Due to her true belief in Africa ideologies, she grafts her own identity with that of Africa itself, creating the most dramatic hybridization in the novel. Ruth May's death and transformation are what prompts her mother into her own altered state; from her own analysis of her identity shift, Orleanna reflects that her character was forced into action after dealing with the death of her favorite child. Rejecting Nathan and his ideologies for the sake of her children, Orleanna rapidly shifts her mindset as a means of penance, but regrets that it had to happen at the cost of one of her children. The intertwined relationship between Ruth May and Orleanna, although complex, relays the deepest instances of hybridization, allowing the process to be seen at a whole new level.

CONCLUSION

“My little beast, my eyes, my favorite stolen egg. Listen. To live is to be marked. To live is to change, to acquire the words of a story, and that is the only celebration we mortals really know. In perfect stillness, frankly, I’ve only found sorrow.”

The Poisonwood Bible relays a story of religion, politics, relationships, but most importantly, individual growth. Faced with adversity and oppression, the female narrators of the novel persevere and adapt to their situation and surroundings. Individually coming into the Congo with their outside mindsets, the Price women all go through the same ideological process, continuing to unify them. Despite coming with unique personalities and wishes for their lives in the Congo, all five of the narrators are altered by the foreign nation, indicating the power of another culture and the permanence of change within an identity.

Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity clearly and succinctly applies to these five women, for his postcolonial viewpoints help identify the effects of the colonizer/colonized relationship. One of the few well-known postcolonial theorists to actually consider the aftermath of colonization on both the natives as well as the oppressors, Bhabha is right to claim that both cultures are inescapably affected. By labeling a different culture as an “Other,” or an alien and uncivilized community, a society must subject itself to being affected by that culture in some way. Despite all attempts to belittle or demean them, the adaptation of another culture is inescapable. The level of intimacy required to subject one culture onto another leaves room for impressions on both. The act of leaving a certain culture and immersing one’s self into another, even if it is just to subject it to another’s will, is called “splitting,” and this action leaves room for the mutation of both cultures into something greater. The result of this transformation is a hybrid culture, a brand new society that has taken on certain aspects of both viewpoints and morphed them together in order to create a stronger, more unified body. The concern within a hybrid

culture is the permanence of the society itself; a culture that has been fused together in order to create a new one is both impossible to replicate perfectly as well as impossible to get rid of. A hybrid society is irreversible, whether that is appreciated or not.

As far as *The Poisonwood Bible* is concerned, hybridity is a key feature that drives the message of the novel. However, the novel focuses on hybridity within the individual narrators, allowing for a more personal understanding of the depth of the transformation. The importance of the transformation within the individual is paramount, for the personal adaptation creates a clearer understanding within both the character as well as the reader. The power of a hybrid nature is much easier to observe within an individual, for the manner of change that the character undergoes is drastic enough to be witnessed.

The hybridity found within the characters would not nearly be as drastic if it were not for the style of narration. Utilizing narrative theory, more specifically Gerard Genette's theories on discourse and focalization, the importance of the first person narration in the novel is evident. The manner in which the discourse is told is what relays the postcolonial tendencies within the characters, and their shifts into hybridity would not be as clear in any other manner. Looking at their narrations, not their actions, allows their ideological shift to be clear. The multiple focalizations around the same large event gives depth to the story, as well as allows for a better understanding of the idea of transformation within an individual. The use of a first person narrative creates a more intimate understanding of the transformation within the characters, and makes it much easier to chart their progress into hybrid characters. The five different narrators are all given a voice within the novel in order to track their ideological changes; Nathan, stubborn and unwilling to change even to save his family, is not given a voice in the novel, mainly because he does not fit the standards of hybridity.

Applying both concepts together into a hybrid theory of their own, the critic gets a deeper glance into the shift within the Price women and their alteration due to their time in the Congo. Following their trek into the jungle and their journeys beyond, the critic can chart the postcolonial tendencies in each individual as they emerge. Despite having such different opinions and mindsets regarding their lives in the Congo, all of the narrators undergo the same type of transformation, just in different ways. Rachel, haughty and prideful, never loses her longing for her homeland, even though she never returns back to America. Unwilling to part from her materialistic sentiments, it takes the shock of the death of her youngest sister in order for her to split from her previous identity and adapt to her a different one. Even after she makes the split and takes in a part of African ideology, Rachel still struggles with living in the Congo. Subconsciously aware that she has been changed by her time in the jungle, Rachel fears returning to America, for she knows that she cannot rejoin her previous culture in the same manner that she left due to her ideological shift.

Her sister Leah, pious and devoted to her father, has a different approach to the Congo; wishing to minister to the natives and apply her own ideology to their lives, Leah promotes her father's outside perspectives to an extreme measure. However, when she witnesses Nathan's failure in the Congo and contemplates his power in the foreign society, Leah struggles to find any value within the beliefs that she came to promote. Rejecting them entirely, Leah clings to African culture, marrying a native and trying to fit into a society that she cannot truly relate to. However, she is unable to find peace, for by losing her previous identity, she has nothing to mix together with the Congolese culture. Leah is able to accept herself only when she claims her previous identity and merges it with her new Congolese perspective, thus creating a hybrid identity.

Her twin sister, Adah does not have such a straightforward transition into hybridity. Disfigured, silent, and skeptical, Adah struggles to see herself as a member of the family, yet she still perpetuates their American ideologies. Viewing the world from her own personal “slant,” Adah is quickly able to identify the differences between her family and the people in the village. What surprises Adah the most about the people of Kilanga is that they accept her for who she is, unlike the judgment and scorn she received in America. Finding her place among the natives, Adah adopts their viewpoint that all life is equal to another, which signifies her split from her past perspective and the creation of a new identity. This new point of view is groundbreaking for her, and she struggles with its application once she gets back to America and is healed of her disfigurement. Overall, both Leah and Adah’s transformations display the power of hybridity, as well as the need for balance of both opposing cultures.

The last of the five narrators, Ruth May and Orleanna, display an interesting type of hybridity, for it is Ruth May’s adaptation of Congolese customs, death, and transformation into a hybrid being that inspires the completion of Orleanna’s transformation. The youngest of the Price women, Ruth May begins the novel merely repeating the lessons and ideals that her father perpetuates. Unaware of the true meaning of her beliefs, Ruth May knows only what she has been told by others. When she arrives in the Congo, she both repeats the claims that she previously heard from her father while also taking in Congolese beliefs. The difference is that once Ruth May is given two unique ideologies, she actively chooses to merge them together, creating a new perspective that she firmly believes in up to her death. The ultimate example of a hybrid identity, Ruth May fuses into the spirit of Africa itself, literally living out her personal adaptation. Her death, however, sparks the postcolonial shift within her mother. Orleanna, distraught at the death of her favorite daughter, splits suddenly and violently from the oppression

perspective of her husband and creates a brand new point of view to live by. While her narration is told as a reflection once back safely in America, Orleana still is able to identify her change in character due to their time in the Congo and the effects of what Africa did to her.

These five characters give detailed descriptions about their transformation within the Congo, both while still living in the village of Kilanga and beyond. The potency of postcolonial thought and a hybrid nature is inescapable while entrenched in a foreign culture, and despite their individual desires, the Price women effectively display the transformation of an identity at the hands of an outside society. Of course, while these women are all affected in dramatic ways, Africa remains unchanged by their attempts to “Americanize” it, relaying the power of the colonized culture, even while being subjected to the colonizer. The importance of adaptation, both on a larger scale and at an individual level, is paramount within *The Poisonwood Bible*, and it encourages the critic to accept the idea of transformation and to keep moving forward.

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