

OLD MADE NEW:
A POSTMODERN INVESTIGATION INTO MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S *El Hablador*
AND THOMAS PYNCHON'S *The Crying of Lot 49*

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BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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For Baba- who always was more concerned about my well-being than anything else in the world.

For Ma-who is always by my side.

For Sal and Muddassar -without whom nothing would be possible.

For Mehj and Marz: the best friends a girl could only wish for.

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Abstract

Postmodernism is a relatively recent phenomenon that has influenced the works of many contemporary writers. This paper seeks to look at how the postmodern culture is presented in *El Hablador* by Mario Vargas Llosa and *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon. The paper will also look at how these novels observe old myths and tales to relay their stories. It will further look at how both the writers attempt to present the hybridity and chaos prevalent in the postmodern society. The paper will thus be an investigation into the postmodern themes of both the novels.

Introduction

Postmodernism is supposed to be the only movement that announces its own demise as it denies the existence of concepts, theories, ideals or rules that dictate reality and state the truth. The binaries of right and wrong, true and false, superior and inferior, are disregarded as distinctions made by certain people to establish their notion of truths. Postmodern writers, thus, aim to provide the readers with a heterogeneous view of the world that shows the diverse cultures that make up different societies. They attempt to blur the divisions between what may be truth and what may be passed on as truth, thus establishing their belief that truth and error may easily change places.

In their attempt to distort the established concepts of truth, postmodernists reject the existence of and reference to the master narratives of history and culture. Culture and history, according to most postmodernist writers, are not objective facets of any society that can be stated and believed unanimously by all people. Every person may have his or her own version of a reality that comes into being through their individual interpretations of what it may be. History, thus, is seen as a narrative of events that have happened in the past rather than as a rigid declaration that must be considered as truth by everyone concerned.

Postmodernist writers, hence, write their own versions of history that allow the readers to interpret these accounts any way they want to. There is no imposition of the

gospel truth nor is there any plea to the readers to relate to the personal truths or lies of the writer.

As the concept of truth is considered to be a personal choice, an overemphasis on meaning and sense is seen to be an unnecessary exercise. The postmodern society is a chaotic and fragmented one which does not need to be explained or defined; disorder can never actually be constrained by definitions so the pursuit of meaning is considered to be futile. Thus, the modernist emphasis on depth, meaning and representation is mocked by postmodernist writers who celebrate the chaos and meaninglessness of the society that we live in. While modernist writers like T.S. Eliot mourned the idea of a wasteland of senselessness and purposelessness, postmodernist writers like Thomas Pynchon deny the importance given to meaning as the concept in itself is paradoxical in a world of confusion, multiplicity and disorder. The forceful imposition of a normalizing order would only add to the chaos and disorder rather than creating the ideal notion of a meaningful world so craved by the modernists. The “wasteland,” therefore, becomes a thing to celebrate, not to grieve over.

Postmodernism as a movement has been in circulation since the 1870s but the actual understanding and application of it in terms of a cultural concept began only in the 1960s. The rise of postmodernism during this era is also indicative of the generation that understood its importance in the modern society. The 60s, as explained later in this paper, was a time where freedom – be it social, national or individual – was given the utmost importance. Writings from all over the world were considered as worthy pieces of

literature, and non-Anglo European musical performers like Ravi Shankar and Bob Marley gained international appreciation and recognition. The modernist faith in social and cultural unity gave way to the notions of social and cultural pluralism, which blurred national boundaries and allowed various elements of individual cultures to be accepted by whole societies.

One main reason for this shift in ideologies may be the breaking up of the colonial empires all over the world. While some colonized countries were gaining their physical independence from the imperialists, others had begun to shed the mental colonization that had occupied their spirits since their domination. The 1960s also saw the international publication of Latin American writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's influential novel, *One hundred years of Solitude*, that set the basis for one of the most significant literary phenomena's of all times – magic realism.

With the emergence of this literary movement, readers worldwide got a view of the parts of the world which were till then presented in a biased manner by writers who did not seem to understand the inherent, ingenious cultures that they were writing about. Thus, this actually led to a "plurality of voices from the margins" (John Storey: 159) that were previously ignored.

Postmodernist writers have always stressed on a heterogeneous view of the world. No culture is seen as superior or inferior. Indigenous cultures are thought to be no less important than the so-called national ones. The totalizing concept of one particular

thought, belief or lifestyle as an ideal for everyone to follow is considered to be a narrow view that does not take into account the multiplicity of cultures or societies. The notion of a “grand theory” or meta-narratives which provide totalizing explanations of history, science and culture that represent all knowledge and explain everything, is, thus, rejected as an invention of those in power. As the famous French philosopher and theorist, Jean Francois Lyotard, states in the introduction of his most famous work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on knowledge*, grand narratives that claim to state the truth – whether in the form of theories, religion or ideals – can never contain or represent the variety, diversity and incompatibility of different individuals or cultures. Postmodernism, according to Lyotard, questions this certainty and totalizing thoughts of these meta-narratives asserting that different people’s conceptions of truth are diverse and separate:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward meta-narratives. (...) To the obsolescence of the meta-narrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements--narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. (...) Where, after the meta-narratives, can legitimacy reside? (Lyotard, xxiv-xxv)

Mario Vargas Llosa's *El Hablador* or *The Storyteller* presents the postmodern emphasis on diversity quite effectively as the story itself is based on the lifestyle of an indigenous tribe of the Amazonian forests. Llosa's novel gives an unbiased look into the customs and traditions of the Machiguenga tribes, providing the readers with the myths and legends of the tribes instead of stating an objective history that could not possibly encompass their various cultures as the tales of the storyteller do. The hablador or the storyteller, thus, becomes a narrative of their history, a source through which their culture is kept alive:

I was deeply moved by the thought of that being, those beings, (...) making long journeys of days or weeks, bringing stories from one group of Machiguengas to another and taking away others, reminding each member of the tribe that the others were alive, that despite the great distances that separated them, they still formed a community, shared a tradition and beliefs, ancestors, misfortunes and joys: the fleeting perhaps legendary figures of those habladores who (...) using the simplest, most time hallowed of expedients, the telling of stories, were the living sap that circulated and made the Machiguengas into a society, a people of interconnected and interdependent beings. (Vargas Llosa: 93)

In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, on the other hand, the diversity of cultures is presented in the form of all the groups or individuals who prefer to use the secret, unauthorized mailing system called W.A.S.T.E that stands against the notions of a

standard order, structure or hierarchy. These people prefer to use this medium of communication so that they can present or convey any ideas they want without fearing the interruption or interference of the legal mailing system which may snatch their right to convey their messages; no matter how strange or bizarre they may sound to the others. Underground organizations shunned by the society, lonely men communicating with dead lovers and even members of organizations that help people overcome their weakness of falling in love – this mailing system can be used by all fearlessly and anonymously:

For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal (...). Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (...), they had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (Pynchon: 101)

In his book, *Simulacra and Simulacrum*, Jean Baudrillard states that the postmodernist culture is a culture of the present made from bits taken from the past. Thus, the postmodernist culture is more or less a renewal of old customs and norms presiding in earlier societies. As Baudrillard states:

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality...a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential. (Baudrillard: 12)

This reference to the adoption of old customs and traditions by the younger generations can be observed in Vargas Llosa's *El Hablador*, where a whole culture exists on the basis of the myths and experiences of the past to create a history of the present for the future. The stories narrated by the hablador are mostly retellings of myths and cultural instances passed onto the Machiguenga tribes through the oral tradition of restating the old stories in a new manner. Llosa as a writer seems to be conscious that this form of storytelling requires more than a knowledge of the present or the past; it requires the ability to blend the new with the old.

Llosa quite effectively positions the modernist concepts of what culture and society "should be" with the postmodernist notion that culture can just be a way of life and nothing more, thus, stressing the need to stop imposing one's own ideals onto societies with different views of culture. The need to civilize societies is viewed as a means of establishing power within societies that could be colonized and dominated.

This paper will thus, investigate the postmodernist emphasis on the rejection of power and authority in Mario Vargas Llosa's *El Hablador* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. While Vargas Llosa's novel deals with the theme of rejection of the concepts of established control and power that dictate what is or is not right, Pynchon's

novel denies the very existence of an ordering system that may seek to define the disorder that embodies a society.

Both Vargas Llosa and Pynchon seem to retell old myths of collective truth and the search for something significant. While Vargas Llosa's Saul Zuratas seems to be in a search for an identity that helps him recognize himself and in effect the society around him, Pynchon's Oedipa seems to be fascinated with the idea of the quest itself.

This paper will also look at how the individual writers mix fantasy and reality while negating the search for a truth that may actually never be found and reject a superior authority that creates hierarchies and attempt to order the confusion present in every culture. It will also see how the writers use various postmodernist techniques to establish the claims that they make regarding the various notions of truth, power, culture and society.

Chapter 2

Of Tasurinchi, Kientibakori and habladores

“History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth”

– Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard: 43)

Magic realism, as the term suggests, is an amalgamation of unexplained supernatural elements and situations within the realm of reality. This mode of narration attempts to distort the distinction between the fantastic and the real, resulting into what Angel Flores calls a “transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal.” (Zamora and Faris: 113) While for many English language fantasy writers like Terry Pratchett and Gene Wolfe, magic realism is seen to be a form of fantasy fiction “written by people who speak Spanish,” (Magic Realism: Wikipedia) the term in itself suggests the difference. While fantasy fiction is set in the unreal settings or happenings, the use of magical tales or myths in the fictions using this technique is seen as the ordinary incorporated into the rational, logical world of our own. The locations and settings of the stories are not created but they exist in the natural world. Magic realism, thus, becomes an approach towards reality through its application in literature.

Even though the term had been coined by the German art historian Franz Roh to describe a visual arts movement emerging throughout Europe during the 1920s, it was first applied to a literary genre in Latin America. The Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier, one

of the first practitioners of magical realism, had claimed Roh's theory of magic realism to be a tedious expression of affectation that is "unconnected in magical content to its cultural context of production." (Ann Bowers: 35) He saw magical realism as inherent to the Latin American culture as he states:

The marvelous real that I defend and that is our own marvelous real is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American. Here the strange is commonplace and always was commonplace. (Zamora and Faris: 103)

Latin America, having diverse and unique cultures should, thus, be an ideal place where magic realism can actually be used to express its multiplicity of cultures. As magic realism promotes the concept of hybridity which is illustrated in the discordant arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, Western and indigenous and the real and the fantastic Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Isabel Allende have used the technique of magic realism as a mode of expression or narration in their successful works to relate magic realism to not only their indigenous cultures and diverse geographies, but also to the political, social, and economic upheavals of Latin America, making this style the most natural mode of expressing and describing the challenges of daily life.

This chapter will attempt to explain the postmodernist elements of magic realism as well as other postmodernist issues found in *El Hablador* written by the Peruvian writer, Mario Vargas Llosa and translated by Helen Lane in English as *The Storyteller*. It will look at how Vargas Llosa uses magic realism to present the story of an indigenous tribe that refuses to surrender to the demands of change and to a so-called civilization. The chapter will investigate how magic realism is used to tell the story of a man seeking an identity, eventually finding it as a chronicler and the voice of a people and a culture he is obsessed to preserve from the clutches of a physical or worse mental colonization. It will also show how Vargas Llosa contrasts a uniform view of culture typical of modernism with the hybridity emphasized by postmodernism basing it on his shift in ideology and style of writing.

The story is told through the alteration of two characters, the unnamed narrator, resembling Vargas Llosa himself, and his college friend Saul Zuratas, a red haired Jew with an enormous birthmark that “spared neither his ears nor his lips nor his nose,” (Vargas Llosa: 8) and thus earned him the nickname ‘Mascarita’ or mask face. The narrator, probably a representative of the stance held by the earlier Vargas Llosa, initially proves an unsympathetic audience to the stories told by Zuratas, proving to hold a concrete, homogeneous view of culture as he questions his passionate friend:

Should sixteen million Peruvians renounce the natural resources of three-quarters of their national territory so that seventy or eighty thousand

Indians could quietly go on shooting at each other with bows and arrows, shrinking heads and worshipping constrictors? (Vargas Llosa: 21)

Vargas Llosa's two distinctive heroes seem to portray his shifting focus in the form of writing that he used in his later novels like *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* (1973), *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977) and *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1985) as opposed to the technically complex and serious approach presented in his earlier novels like *The Green House* and *Conversation in the Cathedral*. Vargas Llosa's changing attitude in form and writing would probably be a change in his political outlook as well. While initially supporting the Cuban revolutionary government of Fidel Castro, Vargas Llosa gradually became disenchanted as he came to believe that the Cuban socialism was conflicting with his view of general rights and freedom. His involvement as a member of the Investigatory Commission in 1983 and the subsequent report of the commission that pronounced the indigenous Aedean villagers responsible for the killings in the internal war between the guerrilla group *Sendero Luminoso*, the armed peasant patrols, and the Peruvian armed forces, leading to a general belief – as best summarized by Micha Kokotovic in her book *The Colonial Divide in Peruvian Narrative: Social Conflict and Transculturation* – of Vargas Llosa seeing the “indigenous cultures as a 'primitive' obstacle to the full realization of his Western model of modernity,” (quoted in Mario Vargas Llosa: Wikipedia) emphasized Llosa's shift from his socialistic ideology to a firm neo-liberal stance of politics. Llosa himself provides a distinction between his earlier and later works in an interview with Raymond Weslie Williams:

The main difference I can see from those early novels- *The Time of the Hero* and *The Green House*-is my attitude about form. I was so thrilled about form that it was very visible. (...) As was the case with many Latin American novels of the sixties, for me form was almost like a theme or a character in a novel. Since then things have changed. Now I am interested in being less explicit about form in itself. I think many latin American writers, including me, hide the sstructure and the technique in the story. (...)When I wrote my first novels, I wanted very much to be modern. I wanted to differentiate myself from previous Latin American writers who didn't pay much attention to formal problems. I wanted to be different. Many Latin American writers still want to carry out a formal revolution. (Leslie Williams: 201-202)

This shift in ideology and style of writing can be seen in the individual perspectives held by the two main protagonists of the novel. While the narrator has an objective awareness of history and individual cultures, believing in a centralized knowledge with a sense of clear standard boundaries and wholeness, Zuratas seems to hold in disregard the faith in a master narrative which ignores the concept of individual and hybrid cultures as he truly believes that reality is not simply reflected in human understanding of it but is rather constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality:

He had a built-in resistance to any sort of abstract pronouncement.

Problems always presented themselves to him concrete form: what he'd seen with his own eyes, and the consequences that anyone with an ounce of brains in his head could infer from it. (Vargas Llosa: 22)

The narrator, on the other hand, fails completely to understand his friend's fascination with the Machiguenga tribe as his concept of progress is one based on the summative explanations of history, science and culture. He truly seems to be a representative of the modernist thinking which believes in the unity of all societies and cultures, having a clear base for what it considers to be a unified identity:

Hadn't Marx said that progress would come dripping blood? (...) If the price to be paid for development and industrialization for the sixteen million Peruvian meant that those few thousand naked Indians would have to cut their hair, wash off their tattoos, and become mestizos- or to use the 'ethnologists' most detested word, become acculturated-well there was no way around it. (Vargas Llosa: 22)

Saul, while being tolerant with his friend's ignorance of the tribe, is determined to show why the unique culture of the Machiguengas should be treated with respect instead of scorning their rebellion at assimilation with other societies and the large "civilization." He argues that a society that is not based on one particular culture does not need to explain itself to others just because of its diversity. Their customs and traditions display

their intrinsic understanding of nature and the world in which they exist. He has a deep understanding of the culture that he admires so much; he comprehends shortcomings of the people who practice it along with the factors that set them apart from the rest of the world. His criticism of the idea of colonizing the Machiguenga tribe is thus a balanced one as he states to his friend:

(...) that's the way they are and we should respect them. Being that way has helped them to live in harmony with their forests for hundred of year. (...) Do our cars, guns, planes and Coca Colas give us the right to exterminate them because they don't have such things? Or do you believe in 'civilizing the savages,' pal? How? (...) By forcing them to change their language, their religion, and their customs, the way the missionaries are trying to do? What's to be gained by that? (...) Making them zombies and caricatures of men, like those semi-accultured Indians you see in Lima. (Vargas Llosa: 26)

The Machiguenga tribes that Saul is so obsessed with preserving, had always been described in a manner that exoticized them; a manner that not only made them alien in the eyes of others but also showed them as a people in desperate need of civilization. Their history, customs, cultures, beliefs are considered backward and unacceptable in the 'normal' society that they are expected to immerse in. The civilized notion of the tribes is best portrayed by the book written by Dominican missionary, Fray Vicente de Centiagoya as he seems to have a unified description of all the cultures and customs of

the various tribes. Even while praising their “honesty, their respect for their given word, and their gentle ways,” the Dominican scholar essentially views them as “savages,” criticizing their society and their beliefs in magic and sorcery which he terms the tribes’ “nocturnal Sabbaths.” (Vargas Llosa: 103) The Summer Institute of Linguistics is another ‘civilizer’ that aims not only to study the dialect and languages of the Amazonian tribes but also to acclimatize them into the collective society of “regular” people:

The ultimate purpose that had led them to study primitive cultures was religious: translating the Bible into the tribes’ own languages so that those peoples could hear God’s word in the rhythms and inflections of their own tongue. This was the aim that had led Dr. Peter Townsend to found the Institute. (Varga Llosa: 87)

The attitude of the missionary and the linguists towards the Machiguengas and their culture does not only reflect their bias and ignorance but also show, as Edward Said and Michael Foucault suggested, how “truth” is constructed by those in power. While the description of the Machiguengas by Centiagoya is based more on a constructed knowledge of the tribes than on actual familiarity with their cultures, the Institute also seems ignorant of the people that they so desperately want to civilize. Thus, it seems as if the linguists do not merely learn the language in order to instill their own faith into the hearts of the Machiguengas but to use the language and the mode of discourses they have learnt to “wield their power through a process of definition and exclusion.”(Vargas Llosa: 92) Their main mission of bringing Christianity to the people of these tribes, thus, seems

to be nothing more than an excuse to gain hegemonic power over these people through the instillation of the knowledge that they see as the universal and timeless reality:

They were backed by economic power and an extremely efficient organization which might well enable them to implant their progress, their religion, their values, their culture. Learn the aboriginal languages! (...) What for? To make the Amazon Indians into good Westerners, good modern men, good capitalists, good Christians of the Reformed Church? Not even that. Just to wipe their culture, their gods, their institutions off the map and corrupt even their dreams. (Vargas Llosa: 97)

Hence, the customs and traditions of the Machiguengas seem to be under the threat of a colonization process whereby colonial discourses set to define the realities and the myths of these tribes. The stories narrated by the unknown *hablador*, thus, become a means of recounting the history of the Machiguenga tribes, illustrating the norms and values in a manner that places these extraordinary stories within common settings. Vargas Llosa, therefore, makes use of magical myths of the Machiguengas within real contexts of the tribes to demonstrate the reason why these people preferred to follow their custom of walking instead of giving into the seemingly easier life offered by colonial missionaries, ethnographers, anthropologists and linguists

The cosmogony of the Machiguenga tribes is divided into five segments; the highest one being the *Inkite*, the residence of “the all-powerful, the breather-out of

people,” (Vargas Llosa: 10) *Tasurinchi*, after whom all the males of the tribes were named. The second region is the *Menkoripatsa*, the region of the clouds, while the *Kipacha*, or Earth, exists in the center of the cosmos, where the Machiguengas dwell. The land of the dead comes beneath the *Kipacha* and finally comes the Gamaironi, the land of the chief demon Kientabakori, the “creator of all filthy things.” (Vargas Llosa: 106)

The Machiguenga tribes seem to have a simple distinction between themselves and the rest of the alienated world; they view themselves as the ideal people of *Tasurinchi*, the men who walk and those who don’t. They believe in constantly moving, thus leading a nomadic existence, in the faith that the sun will not fall, causing them the sufferings that are bound to be greater than their constant change of residence:

So as to live walking, they had to travel light, stripping themselves of everything that was theirs. (...) They kept what was essential and started walking. Was their march through the forest a punishment? No, a celebration, rather like fishing or hunting in the dry season.” (Vargas Llosa: 39)

The Machiguengan concept of the necessity to move on is quite effectively depicted in the story of a child who had died. After the death of the son of a Machiguenga couple, the boy’s mother and blind father go to the good sorcerer, the *seripigari*, to find out what had happened to him. They discover that the child had moved on to the next world and had grown up and would soon have a house and a wife ready for him. The

description of the child's journey into the land of the dead is explained in an extremely natural manner as if to emphasize the Machiguengan belief that one has to move on even when existence in this world is over. This practical wisdom of the Machiguengan tribe seems to disprove the views that consider the presence of supernatural or magical beliefs in a culture to be primitive and inferior compared to European rationality.

The worst fear of the Machiguengan people is the terror that one day they may have to resign to the pressures of the colonizers and give up "being men." In one of the stories narrated by the till now unidentified *hablador*, a description is given of the people who had assimilated the culture taught to them by the colonial missionaries and linguists. These people seemed to have been well fed and well provided with weapons and tools to harvest and fish. When some of them come to meet one of the Machiguengas, Tasurinchi of Mitaya, the "ones who had been men" tell him about their prosperity and success as inhabitants of the "civilized world" and persuade him to come with them to the camp where they were recruiting more men from the indigenous tribes. Tasurinchi, the man who walked, could sense the danger that awaited him if he gave in to the pressures of these men as he views the recruiter as a *kamagirini*, a small demon, after the recruiter sneezes thrice, changing his appearance into a frightening one. Through this small action, Tasurinchi remembers the terror of another intruder who, with his sneezing had brought about illness and disaster which prevented his tribe from being able to walk for a long time. The *hablador* here seems to stress the fact that the ones these men "who can walk," need to fear the most are these colonizers who seek to destroy their individuality and right to a diverse culture. When the *hablador* recounts the tale of another Tasurinchi who

believed that his wife was a bad sorcerer, a *machikanari*, as she only gave birth to dead babies, Tasurinchi of Mitaya, demonstrates the wisdom of his tribe by stating:

Next time you visit Tasurinchi, remind him that it's the man who goes
ahchoo! who's a devil and not the woman who gives birth to dead children
or wears many bright colored necklaces. (Vargas Llosa: 52)

The *hablador* narrates yet another tale to illustrate to the group of Machiguengas sitting before him and listening to his every word, the aftermath of a colonial takeover of their cultures and practices. He recounts a story that he had heard from a *seripigari*, about a man who appeared to the men who walked and persuaded them to adopt his lifestyle and start following *Kashiri*, the moon, instead of letting the sun guide them thus leading to chaos and mayhem in the tribes. They did as the man, who turned out to be a *kamgarini* of the devil, told them to do. They worked in the night and slept in the day, becoming "men of darkness." (Vargas Llosa: 63) They had grown accustomed to their way of life until everything began to fall apart with all the confusion and the changes in their being as people began transforming into all kinds of animals and their existence seemed to come under question:

They were helpless with fear and blind, but they didn't know it. Once
again, wisdom had been lost. "We are about to disappear," they moaned.
(...) And then, amid all the confusion, the Mashcos fell upon them and
there was a great massacre. They cut off the heads of many and carried off

their women. It seemed that there would be no end to the catastrophes.

(Vargas Llosa: 64)

It is only when they realized that by “changing their way of life they had upset the order of the world,” (Vargas Llosa: 65) that they begin to push out the demon that had seeped into their very being and corrupted them with the illusion that a loss of their culture and the absorption into another one would be much more profitable for them. It is only then that these men could start walking again. Through the use of magic realism, Vargas Llosa shows how an attempt at hegemonic control could not only distort the beliefs and the ways of living of these indigenous tribes but could also lead to a disorder that may eventually lead to a disappearance of a people.

This fright of losing one’s identity within a society of harmonized civilization is not baseless as the aftermath of the mission to “integrate them into national life” (Vargas Llosa: 161) seems even more terrifying than the hunger and the violence that the Machiguengas had to previously endure. The Pucallpa village that the narrator remembers from his earlier visit was a settlement which had just started to adjust to the life they adopted from the “white fathers.” But twenty years after his first visit, there are signs that the village had gone through a period of a boom and a depression and, by the time the narrator returns to the place, it is in the initial stages for a growth in the trafficking of illegal drugs. With some of the Amazonian tribes stepping into the civilization preached by the linguists and missionaries, changes in their society, norms and system of law and order are inevitable. The Machiguenga tribes that had always

rejected hierarchy and centralized control now had a *cacique* or a governor controlling and representing each tribe. With the translation of the Bible into Machiguenga language and the merging of different tribes, the threat of the disappearance of the indigenous customs and culture that set them apart from the rest of the world seems to actually become a reality. The narrator now seems to voice Saul's concern as he questions himself whether it really does seem a better option to enslave these tribes into a caricatured, automated life instead of their naturally free, if fragmented, existence. With the sense of confusion and disorder that now dwells in the hearts of these tribes, one is forced to ask whether the linguists were actually able to destroy the notion of diaspora within the tribes that they had managed to acculturate or did they just instill a sense of non-belonging as these tribes now could neither belong to the group of the men who walked, nor would they ever be able to completely fit in with their adopted society and culture.

Thus, in order to demonstrate why and how the culture and customs of the Machiguengas were as superior as those preached by the missionaries and the linguists, Vargas Llosa uses magic realism to show how the anecdotes narrated by the storyteller form part of the everyday lives of the Machiguengas. Their religion lies in their beliefs in *Tasurinchi* and their mistrust in *Kientibakori* and his creations. This belief is illustrated with the binaries created by them that distinguish the good from the evil. While the sun is seen as the protector of the men who walk, his father, *Kashiri*, is seen as his nemesis, "a half man," who had been shamed to his fate on the Earth, thus forcing him to leave for the *Inkite*. Two varying stories are given to explain the marks on the face of the moon, thus emphasizing the postmodernist "lack of absolute historical truth," (Ann Bowers: 77)

as the cultural history of the tribes is linked with the different stories dealing with a single being. While one story tells of how a jealous girl in the village rubbed his face with her excrement in order to stain and shame him into leaving *kipacha*, the other version told by a *seripigari* puts the blame on Kashiri as the moon could not control his desires and had made a girl pregnant which led to her death during childbirth. This led to the wrath of the Machiguengas as they forced him to eat the corpse of the dead woman:

At last, weeping bitter tears, he split open his wife's belly. There was the baby, twinkling. He pulled it out and it came to life, it seems. (...) Kashiri, on his knees, began swallowing his wife's body, starting with the feet. "That's all right, you can go now," the Machiguengas said when he'd reached her stomach. Then the moon, hoisting the remains onto his shoulder, went on his way, back to the sky above. There he is still, looking at us. (...) The stains that show on him are the pieces he didn't eat.
(Vargas Llosa: 116)

These different versions of an important aspect of their beliefs are a clear distinction from the homogeneity that the narrator associates with the linguists from the Institute. The Institute seems to represent a unified entity where each individual echoes the others appearance, sentiments, aims and view-points in contrast to the multiple, conflicting identities of the Machiguengas and their culture:

(..) The linguists whom we met and interviewed, (...) appeared to be the

identical twins of the ones I remembered. The men had close-cropped hair and the athletic, healthy appearance of people who exercise daily,(...) and take neither coffee nor alcohol and the women, encased in dresses as plain as they were decent,(...) exuded an over-whelming air of efficiency. Men and women alike had the cheerful, imperturbable look of people who believe (...) and who know for certain that the truth is on their side.

(Vargas Llosa: 161)

The *hablador*, who is an inherent part of the lives of the Machiguengan tribe, becomes a subject of fascination with the narrator as he seems to seek parallels with his work as a writer and the responsibility of the teller of Machiguengan tales, relating to their common mission to establish the discourse with the community of listeners or readers through the fables, tales and stories. While the storyteller is a recounter of the magical myths of the tribes, the narrator writes with a literary rationality and consciousness. The narrator seems to hold this teller of tales in high regard, admiring his position as the cultural consciousness of his people:

The Machiguenga habladores had lived with, intriguing me, disturbing me, that since then I had tried a thousand times to imagine them as they wandered through the forest, collecting and repeating stories, fables, gossip, tales they'd invented, (...) borne on the current of adversary. (...) For some reason I found hard to pin down, the existence of those storytellers, finding out what they were doing and what importance it had

in the life of their people, had been, for twenty-three years, a great stimulus for my own work, a source of inspiration and an example I would have liked to emulate. (Vargas Llosa: 173-174)

The narrator's obsession with the *hablador* as the preserver of the Machiguengan myths, customs and traditions becomes more than mere curiosity when he finds out that one of the storytellers that Edward Scheill was talking about may actually be his long lost friend, Saul Zuratas. The identity of the man was till now a secret for the readers as well as the narrator and with this realization, one can not only understand the narrator's fixation with the photograph in the gallery at the beginning of the novel but also the Machiguengas' reluctance to disclose much regarding the mystery surrounding the storytellers. Zuratas, who never seemed to have belonged anywhere before, seemed to have found his people, his society and his destiny when he became one of the men who walked:

The people who walk are my people now. Before, I walked with another people and I believed it was mine. I hadn't been born yet. I was really born once I began walking as a Machiguenga. That other people stayed behind. (Vargas Llosa: 215)

The emphasis on movement in order to preserve one's existence and individuality on this Earth can also be related to Saul's endeavor of seeking an identity for himself. From the beginning of the novel, Saul seems to be on a search for an existence and a

reality that he can relate to. Saul's distinct physical appearance as well his half-Jewish, half-Creole heritage, seems to have instilled in him a feeling of not belonging to any particular culture. Saul's mother, a Christian Creole from Talara, could never persuade the Jewish community of Lima to accept her in their society even though she had "received instruction from the rabbi in order to fulfill all rites necessary for conversion," (Vargas Llosa: 11) stressing the point that forcing oneself to adapt to a separate, alien culture does not always guarantee the acceptance that is sought.

Saul, on the other hand, seems to have finally become one with his destiny, finding the identity that he was in search for by becoming a chronicler of the history and the myths of the Machiguenga tribes. Even the Machiguengas who are extremely private about allowing intruders into their society have accepted this alien *srigorompi*, an eccentric being, as one of their own, trusting him with the enormous responsibility of preserving their traditions and customs from the sure eradication that seems to await them proving that one can go beyond national boundaries and limits if one finds one's identity in a culture that he or she was not born with. Saul did not merely respect the Machiguenga tribes but loved their cultures, their norms, their values with a passion that he could not associate with anything else in his life.

Through his use of the techniques of magical realism and dual narration, Vargas Llosa in *The Storyteller* does not merely express the history of a people but shows how the conceived notions of history and cultural unity are contrived illusions constructed and misused by a group of people. Through the Machiguenga tribe and their *hablador*,

Vargas Llosa seeks to show how a sense of fragmentation and the decentered self can actually lead to the establishment of an identity and an existence that may be lost with the interference of a unifying mission, thus emphasizing the postmodernist focus on a hybridity that blurs the boundaries of what constitutes as cultural authenticity and the truth.

Chapter 3

To project or not to project the world

“Who claims Truth, Truth abandons.”

-Thomas Pynchon (*Mason & Dixon*)

Postmodern writers and theorists believe that it is not possible to explain or understand the modern society as, according to them, a particular system of order and control is non-existent. Instead of believing in the never-ending pursuit of meaning, postmodernist writers tend to disdain the notion of a possibility of the meaning and structure in a chaotic world thus assuming that the establishment of a traditional authority is false and corrupt. The concept of absolute truths and definite terms or boundaries is also absent in postmodernist writings as writers deny the existence of totalizing notions which tend to explain everything for everybody. In order to emphasize the insignificance of the quest for meaning, postmodernist writers like Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon often parody this search using literary techniques such as irony, humor and playfulness thus highlighting the absurdity of the unnecessary interpretations of the meaningless.

Postmodernist writers further disregard the modernist focus on depth, meaning and content by disrupting the dichotomy of high culture and low or popular culture by mixing them into a hybrid cultural form, thus encouraging a “new pluralism following the supposed collapse of the distinction between high and popular culture.” (John Storey,

Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction: 147) The division between popular culture and high culture is completely denied as postmodernist writers make abundant use of popular cultural references in their works eliminating the elitist view of culture as defined by Mathew Arnold as the “best of what has been said and thought,” preferring instead Raymond William’s anthropological definition of culture as a “whole way of life.” (John Storey: 157) According to Andy Warhol, the concept of high culture or high art had been created by the bourgeois class who viewed art and culture as worthy only when it could not be understood by and was not available for the mass audience. This view is criticized by the postmodernists as they consider commercial culture to be as worthy of acclaim and value as the “real” culture. The postmodern theorist Lawrence Alloway writes:

We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as a fact, discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically. One result of our discussions was to take Pop culture out of the realm of ‘escapism,’ ‘sheer entertainment,’ ‘relaxation,’ and to treat it with the seriousness of art. (Quoted in John Storey: 157)

This blurring of distinctions between high and low culture is achieved by the use of pastiche which means a tongue-in-cheek merging or “pasting” of multiple elements of earlier genres and styles of writing to create a new narrative voice that seems to represent the chaos and diversity of the postmodern society, thus re-establishing the postmodern

notion that a pursuit for meaning in this confused and disorganized world would only be a pointless exercise. Pastiche, thus, is used by postmodern writers to depict their suspicion and rejection of a master narrative for history or culture while they instead opt for local narratives which are free to combine materials, forms, motifs, etc. from different sources leading to a creation of a potpourri culture.

Postmodernist writers consider the modernist search for a utopian world which is based on a faith in meaning, unity and order as absurd as they view the hunt for an apparent existence of controlling establishments that may attempt to regularize the chaos and disorder of society can only either lead to a false feeling of security or a sense of paranoia caused due to the fear of not being able to find the coherence that is so desperately sought. This sense of paranoia is evident in the works of many postmodernist writers, such as Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon, as they effectively present characters who insist on either finding a meaning or a message that justifies the significance of the responsibilities placed on them or believe in the existence of a world-wide conspiracy.

This chapter will attempt to explain how Thomas Pynchon uses irony, humor, pastiche, paranoia and other postmodernist themes in his seminal novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. This chapter will also look at how Pynchon distorts the dichotomy of high and low culture as this novel seems to celebrate the mixture of various forms of culture which can be understood from the numerous popular cultural references in the novel. The chapter will further look at Pynchon's clever use of language, word play and

unusual sentence structure which represent the fragmented, confused plotline of his novel.

Written in 1966, *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to represent the counterculture of the 60s era. The Swinging Sixties, so called because of the hedonistic outlook that appeared during this decade, saw the emergence and rise of diverse political and cultural issues such as race relations, sexual mores, experimentation with psychedelic substances and drugs, women's rights, "pop" music and re-interpretations of the American Dream regarding consumerism and a perfect society. These issues seemed to strongly represent the youth culture's emphasis on change and experimentation, as there seemed to be a marked difference in the opinions of the 60s era and the ones preceding it. As this era was characterized by the concept of individual freedom as rigid, uncompromising cultures broke free of the social restrictions placed by the earlier ages through an intense departure from what was considered standard customs and norms. Pynchon's novel draws on the outbreak of the various cultural happenings of this era while depicting a radically fragmented society encompassing the strong sense of chaos that distinguished the 60s from other ages.

The novel, set in the early 1960s, tells the story of Oedipa Mass – a young housewife wife living in the small town of Kinneret in the state of California – who one day receives a letter that names her as the executor of the estate of Pierce Inverarity, an ex-boyfriend of hers. She decides to carry out this last wish of a dead former lover and plans to travel to Pierce's hometown, San Narciso, to perform the duty entrusted to her.

After receiving the letter and while reminiscing of the past with Inverarity, she remembers a painting by the Spanish artist Remedios Varo, entitled *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* – Embroidering Earths Mantle, which she had seen in a painting exhibition:

(...) in the central painting of a triptych, titled “Bordando el Manto Terrestre” were a number of girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun gold hair, prisoner in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void. (Pynchon: 11)

This painting arouses within her an unexplainable desire to escape from the “Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl” (Pynchon: 10), as she had hoped to achieve some sort of a getaway through her relationship with Pierce. However, she never could escape and does not even completely realize what exactly it is that she so badly wants to run away from. Oedipa clearly remembers the painting probably because she can relate to the imprisoned girls but she still is unable to explain the reason behind her desire to seek for an escape so desperately. One needs to also note that while describing the picture Oedipa seems to only concentrate on the girls in the tower, being quite oblivious to a key part of the painting. The painting also depicts a mysterious, hooded guy in the background, who oversees the women as they weave the embroidery of the world’s mantle. The women themselves seem absorbed in their work, unaware of the fact that they do not have their own individual viewpoints of the world as they are being guided by someone else.



Remedios Varo: *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*: "Embroidering Earth's Mantle"¹

¹ <http://turingmachine.org/remedios/picture11.html>

Pynchon seems to deliberately leave out this detail from Oedipa's recount of the memory of the painting, thus giving the impression that Oedipa, like the girls in the picture, might actually not even be aware of what exactly is holding her back. This recollection, thus, foreshadows Oedipa's difficulty in accurately perceiving and understanding what is real and what is created in the legacy left behind by Inverarity.

San Narcisco, a place "less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts," (Pynchon: 13) establishes a setting for cultural chaos and diversity that provides the readers with the central themes of the novel. While checking into the hotel she meets the young manager, a member of a music band named "The Paranoids." Pynchon, who had himself adopted some of the aspects of hippie and beat countercultures during the 1960s, seems to admire the cultural multiplicity that this generation encouraged as opposed to a sense of cultural "monomania," while he also uses humor and satire to mock the southern Californian culture of the mid 1960s. In this novel, Pynchon makes various references to the pop culture of the 1960s ranging from the rising significance of pop music to the regular use of hallucinogenic drugs like LSD by a whole society. Probably the most noteworthy reference to the rising importance of pop culture is the allusion made in the novel to perhaps the most successful and critically acclaimed music group of the era, The Beatles. "The Paranoids" are probably a direct reference to The Beatles as the American members of this band don't only share the Beatle hairstyle but also sing their songs with an English accent. Pynchon effectively uses humor to show the youth culture's reverence to anything popular which can be seen when Serge, one of the members of the pseudo-English band, almost causes a number of collisions while driving his car as he is unable

to see through his hair. The band's fervor towards music is further parodied when Serge's girlfriend runs away with Metzger, Oedipa's co-executor and short-time lover and he still is able to write a song regarding the whole incident:

What chance has a lonely surfer boy
For the love of a surfer chick,
With all these Humbert Humbert cats
Coming on so big and sick?
(...) Well, as long as she's gone away-yay,
I've had to find somebody new,
And the older generation has taught me what to do-
I had a date last night with an eight-year-old
And she's a swinger like me. (Pynchon: 121)

The allusion to Humbert Humbert is clearly directed towards Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* which was published in New York in 1955. *Lolita* has since become an icon of pop culture as a reference to the concept of the modern "nymphet," as a sensual, sexually precocious young girl. Pynchon himself refers to this idea of the modern nymph when describing the statue decorating the foyer of Echo Lodge as one that could look classy and sensual at the same time, thus re-establishing the postmodern disregard of separating the concept of superficial sensuality from the notion of natural beauty:

The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermillion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker's but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either. (Pynchon: 16)

These references to popular culture figures in the novel are set off with an allusion to the famous fictional character of the defense lawyer Perry Mason, whose popularity was transmitted from the novels to a widely heard radio series and the most successful and longest-running television law series. In every episode of the series, Mason is able to single-handedly solve cases, usually by getting the guilty party to break down and confess to their crimes by the end. While the fictional character makes this entire process of law look very easy, Oedipa's lawyer, Roseman, considers this view of law and order to be inaccurate and trivial. His dislike toward the character is mounted into a hypothetical case called *The Profession v. Perry Mason, A Not-so-hypothetical Indictment*, created by Roseman:

(...)Roseman had also spent a sleepless night, brooding over the Perry Mason television program, (...) toward which Roseman chereished a fierce ambivalence, wanting at once to be a successful trial lawyer like Perry Mason, and since this was impossible, to destroy Perry Mason by undermining him. (Pynchon: 9)

Roseman's search for the presence of a proper representation of the truth of the practice of law in a fictional program can actually be an indication of Oedipa's future quest for an answer that would solve the mystery that Inverarity may have left for her. While attempting to regulate the chaotic affairs of Pierce's possession, Oedipa seems to seek for the order and system that she thinks may help her end the captivity in the tower which has imprisoned her. Perhaps it is this search for an answer that would help her in breaking free that leads Oedipa to feel so desperately about the existence of a mystery and a meaning to the uncertainty of this mystery.

One day while out on a date with Metzger to a bar called The Scope, Oedipa with Mike Fallopian, a member of the Peter Pinguid Society – Pinguid is a fictitious-historical Civil War captain – and is introduced to the symbol that more or less provides her with the quest she seems to look for. In one of the bathroom stalls, Oedipa sees a symbol containing a line segment running tangent to a circle, with an isosceles triangle at one end and a small trapezoid attached to the base of the triangle that seems unfamiliar to her and under which the acronym W.A.S.T.E is written. Even though Oedipa does not know this the first time sees it but the symbol actually depicts a muted horn that keeps recurring in her future.

Oedipa's trip out to Fangoso Lagoons to find Lake Inverarity, one of Pierce's major land-holdings, leads her to find out about stolen human bones used by her ex-lover to make unique filters for cigarettes. When learning of a Jacobean revenge play called *The Courier's Tragedy* that deals with a similar concept of stolen bones, Oedipa decides

to see the play for herself. A part of the play seems scarily similar to the story of the bones stolen for Inverarity's Lake but this ceases to interest Oedipa when she hears of another word that holds her captive till the end of the play and for the rest of the novel:

No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,
Who's once been set his tryst with Trystero. (Pynchon:58)

Oedipa's obsession with this word leads her to an informal interview with the show's director, Randolph Driblette, where her questions have nothing to do with her original concern regarding the bones but only with her recent introduction to Trystero, a secret, private mail distribution company that apparently rivaled Thurn and Taxis, a German postal system. Pynchon might actually be satirizing Oedipa's interest in a system that may or may not be of importance as opposed to an illegal bone conspiracy that was a matter of actual importance. Oedipa seems to forego the quest for solving a real conspiracy for the sake of an uncertain one, thus leading to a change in the novel's direction towards the absurd desire to place a meaning on the meaningless:

I don't care what Beaconsfield uses in its filter. I don't care what Pierce
bought from the Cosa Nostra. I don't want to think about them. Or about
what happened at Lado di Pieta, or cancer... (Pynchon: 59)

This fixation with something that may not even be there is criticized by Driblette who scorns her for focusing too much on the significance of words and their meanings:

You don't understand, (...) You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. (...) You could fall in love with me, you can talk to my shrink, you can hide a tape recorder in my bedroom, see what I talk about from wherever I am when I sleep. You want to do that? You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several, about why characters reacted to the Trystero possibility the way they did, why the assassins came on, why the black costumes. You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth. Wharfinger supplied words and a yarn. I gave them life. That's it" (Pynchon, 80).

Driblette's anger seems to be well placed but does not make any difference to Oedipa's resolve to crack the mystery which becomes even stronger when she gets to know that some stamps from Inverarity's collection have a muted post horn as a watermark. In a stockholders meeting of Yoyodyne, she notices a young employee, Stanley Koteks, doodling the post horn that had haunted her ever since she had viewed it in the washroom stall and later learnt was a sign for the Trystero mailing system.

Pynchon here introduces us to the idea of entropy, a major theme of the novel, which in terms of thermodynamics, is the tendency of things to disorder themselves over time into chaos. This is opposed to the concept of perfect order represented by Maxwell's demon, invented by the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell, as the hypothetical machine separates and sorts out molecules of different heat, thus, bringing about an order

and systemizing the chaos explained by entropy and the second law of thermodynamics. The demon is the basis for the Nefastis machine within the novel, which relies on a certain amount of mental ability to function and according to its creator, John Nefastis, can only be operated by a "Sensitive," who would be able to separate the heat molecules with his or her ability to move the molecules with the help of their mind and concentration. This machine seems to be a symbol of the novel's main theme of a search for an apparent explanation of disorder based on the attempt to impose order onto chaos, which is an impossible task. The fact that it can only be operated by certain people also makes one question its validity and genuineness as the machine itself relies on other's people conception of chaos and order, thus, relying on a completely subjective perception of truth.

Trystero starts becoming the center of Oedipa's very being, turning into her personal Maxwell's Demon, as she begins to heavily depend on it in her search for naming and explaining the chaos that she lives in. She begins to believe that Inverarity might have left her a legacy of a meaning and a system that could actually bring about the order that she seeks so very badly:

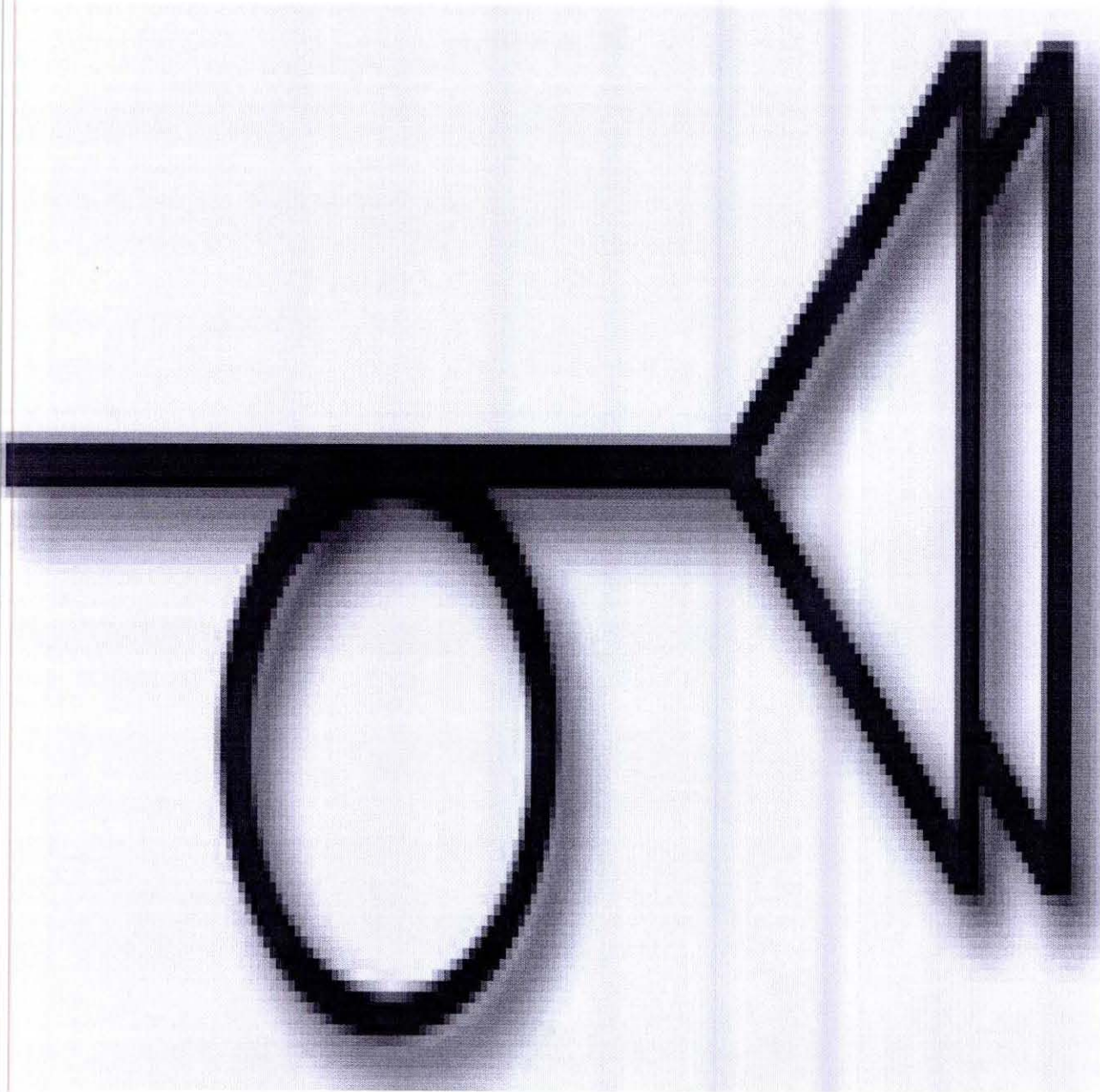
If it was really Pierce's attempt to leave an organized something behind after his own annihilation, then it was part of her duty, wasn't it, to bestow life on what had persisted, to try to be what Driblette was, the dark machine in the center of the planetarium, to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning, all in a soaring dome around her? (Pynchon: 82)

Oedipa gradually learns that W.A.S.T.E is actually an acronym for “We Await Silent Tristero Empire” and the muted horn with one loop is a symbol used by Trystero to silence the function of the monopoly of the Thurn and Taxis mailing service, which used a postal horn as its symbol. Trystero, thus, becomes a force working against traditional authority, encouraging certain unique underground groups and individuals to use this secret mailing service instead of relying on the official postal service of the country, which would intercept and interfere with their means of communication. As the story progresses, Oedipa’s obsession with Trystero deepens and she starts seeing this symbol all around her. She starts to blur the distinctions between the real and the created as her quest leads her to a illusory state where she seems to imagine a world-wide conspiracy involving various groups operating secretly with the help of the W.A.S.T.E mailing system, people who seek their individuality and freedom to break away from the rigid norms of the establishment and even children who seemed to know about the post horn and had a rhyming game using the symbols and words that so fascinated Oedipa:

You used only one image and it was a jump-rope game, a little girl explained: you stepped alternately in the loop, the bell and the mute, while your girlfriend sang:

Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three,

Turning Taxi from across the sea.. (Pynchon: 96)



The muted post horn symbol used by the W.A.S.T.E mailing system

Oedipa's trance-like hallucinatory state shows her trouble in maintaining her sense of real and the imagined as she begins to doubt her belief in the existence of the quest but is reluctant to give up on it, leading to a sense of paranoia which starts to envelope her into an entwining circle. Oedipa gradually comes to believe that her dead ex-lover and a whole society of people may actually have co-opted into a conspiracy embodied by Trystero. She even starts suspecting Trystero of getting rid of all the people who may have helped her out of this self-created mess but can still not stop herself from supposing the existence of the system as she wonders if "there really was a Tristero then and that she had come on it by accident." (Pynchon: 179) She seems to be in a paradoxical state of mind as she has a strong suspicion of the entire search being a wild-goose hunt that she nevertheless wants to carry out:

This night's profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication, was their way of beating up. They knew her pressure point, and the ganglia of her optimism, and one by one, pinch by precision pinch, they were immobilizing her. (Pynchon: 101)

Oedipa herself seems very unsure of what exactly she wants from this quest that she had set for herself. She does not seem to know whether she wants a definite answer to this riddle that may aid in her escape from the mental captivity that she imagines herself to be in or whether the meaning that she is searching for will lead her into an even more complex encapsulation of mind, body and spirit. This idea of complete hopelessness as a

result of postmodern paranoia can be best explained by Louis Mackey in his essay, "Paranoia, Pynchon and Preterition" as he states:

The paranoid-it figures- can't win. He is doomed either to destruction or dissolution. One or the other. Destruction if his paranoid faith (that is, fear) is warranted, dissolution if his anti-paranoid hope (that is, anxiety) is confirmed. (Mackey: 22)

Pynchon makes effective use of such linguistic features as irony, humor and pastiche to rend the sense of hybridity of the 60s society and the futility of placing meaning on the meaningless. He effectively mixes elements from detective fiction, discoveries of science, war stories and pop-culture references. He effectively merges well-known, vague, and fictional historical reality, placing fictional characters such as John Nefastis and The Paranoids side by side with real historical figures like James Clerk Maxwell and The Beatles. Even the primary system of Trystero, an obscure organization, about the existence of which nothing can be said with sureness, is pitted opposite Thurn and Taxis, the actual European postal monopoly.

This use of language is even better examined with the names that Pynchon provides to his characters. While the naming process may actually substantiate the writer's emphasis of a meaninglessness society, it may also parody the concept of placing too much value on the names of characters. The names of Mucho Mass, Dr. Hilarius and Mike Fallopian, for example, may not even imply any meaning but have nevertheless

been successful in creating a number of curious investigations into their significance. The language of *The Crying of Lot 49* refuses to take itself and its powers seriously, thus, confirming Pynchon's view that searching for meaning where it is not available is a ridiculously amusing concept. As Richard Poirier states in his essay, "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon," the writer does not use language to only parody cultures and characters but also to mock at the notions of self, importance of and emphasis on one's own works as well as the concepts of history, theories and systems:

Joyce, for example, (...) was a great innovator in that he pushed literary parody to the point of literary self parody, showing how the available conventions, styles, forms of literature were insufficient as a breakwater of order and elegance against the tide of life (...). Pynchon extends this perception from literature not only to science, to pop culture, to the traditions of analysis, but even to the orderings of the unconscious, to dreams themselves. (...) It is as if human life in all of its *recorded* manifestations is bent towards rigidification, reification and death. (...) Pynchon seems to say not only that history is in itself a form of repression, but so, too, is the human impulse to make or write history. (Poirier: 155)

One however notices that some of the names used by Pynchon are actually puns or word plays that may show how a story, legend or myth can be related to inherent parts of the novel. The name of the protagonist, Oedipa Mass, for example, does not seem like a common one that can be heard on roads and day-to-day conversations. "Oedipa"

sounds like the female form of the name "Oedipus" – the hero of the Theban Cycle, a series of three plays by the Greek dramatist Sophocles. Like Oedipa, who seems to be on a pursuit for a system and an order that could explain the chaos she lives within, Oedipus too was in a quest related to his parentage. While Oedipus is successful in his search, it leads him to a far more troubled and cursed existence than before. Oedipa, on the other hand, does not find a solution to her search even by the end of the novel but is left with a sense of confusion and isolation that threatens to overpower her. Both the characters, thus, fail to find the meaning and order that they hoped their search would lead to.

Another such pun that Pynchon makes use of while identifying his characters seems to be with the moniker of San Narcisco, the hometown of Pierce Inverarity. Narcisco seems quite similar to the name of Narcissus – a beautiful boy who fell in love with his own reflection. This may be an indication to Pierce as he seems to be quite obsessed with himself and also owns half of the town. It may also be a reference to the self-obsession of the 1960s culture which emphasized on the pursuit of self-pleasure and need over everything else.

The name of Pierce Inverarity probably alludes best to the concepts of truth and meaning present in the novel. The name Inverarity, with its echo of *veritas*, suggests something other than the truth, perhaps even the elusiveness of truth. As Inverarity is the first key to the mission of discovery of "truth" taken on by Oedipa, this would suggest his relation to the concept of Oedipa finding nothing – no meaning or truth – in her search.

Pynchon, well known for his conscious avoidance of the media and absence from the public spotlight, stated that the term “media-shy recluse” (Brian Joseph Davis, *The endangered literary 'recluse*, The Globe and Mail) used when referring to him was an invention of the media, thus suggesting that a refusal to publicize one's image and reveal everything about oneself, leads to a kind of an obsession and paranoia within the society, which is reflective of the suspicious, fractured culture that Pynchon writes about in this novel. Oedipa's insistence on placing significance on something that is essentially futile and meaningless seems to render to her increased confusion and loss of a sense of coherence that she had before embarking on this mission of discovery of meaning.

Pynchon, through his characters and plot line, is successful in creating an ironical view of the people of the fragmented society, who, in their obsession with defining and explaining realities, become even more muddled up and confused as they gradually become unable to even distinguish between what may be real and what may be imagined. Thus, Pynchon effectively portrays a postmodern society and characters whose search for the establishment of certainty and security leads them to an even more uncertain and disturbed existence than they had before beginning their impossible quest.

Conclusion

While both *El Hablador* and *The Crying of Lot 49* deal with various postmodern themes, the themes are used differently by the two writers. While Vargas Llosa looks at the themes from a Latin American point of view, exploring the different ways that an indigenous culture is misinterpreted by superior cultures, Pynchon is more concerned with the basic concept of interpretation itself.

Vargas Llosa's *The Hablador* looks at the fragmented journey of a man in search of an identity that he finally finds within a society that is shunned by most of the civilization. Saul Zuratas or the storyteller seems to accept his sense of alienation from the rest of the civilized society as a tradition that cannot be fought against. He only seems to react mildly when his friends taunt him on the topics that he is most passionate about. His concept of an ideal society is presented by the Machiguenga tribes amongst whom he feels at home and with whom he can relate to.

Vargas Llosa makes effective use of magic realism to show how a society based on myths can actually be even more real than the so-called normal society. The norms and traditions of the society, though criticized by a majority of the people who consider them to be backward and out of sorts with the rest of the age, is celebrated by Vargas Llosa's *hablador* who is more concerned with preserving their uniqueness and in effect their existence, rather than forcing them to assimilate within the "civilized" society.

Magic realism is used in narrating the myths and cultures of the Machiguenga tribes, establishing their unshakable belief in the rituals and norms that more or less dictate their society.

Vargas Llosa, thus, presents a postmodernist view of the world as a hybrid of different cultures while celebrating the concept of uniqueness and indigenouness of individual cultures.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon also observes this mixture of different cultures presented by the 60s era while celebrating the meaninglessness that surrounds our societies. While parodying the concept of a search for profundity, Pynchon makes effective use of humor and irony to show that such a search can only lead to more confusion.

This sense of a paradoxical effect can also be seen in Vargas Llosa's *El Hablador* in the form of the process of civilizing of the indigenous Machiguenga tribes by the various societal institutions. Instead of enabling them to think for themselves and create a sense of order and cohesion, this only leads to a worse sense of confusion and self doubt leading not only to a near extinction of a people but also to destruction of a sense of self pride and confidence that the people have in themselves.

Thus, through their views of the different cultures, both Vargas Llosa and Pynchon is able to provide the readers with two of the greatest postmodern works that

reaffirm the postmodernist premise of literature as not just being a reflection of a plot or a story but a presentation of an amalgamation of ideas that can relay different viewpoints and stances while being able to laugh at itself. As the famous postmodern theorist, John Barth states:

My ideal Postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century Modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back. Without lapsing into moral or artistic simplism, shoddy craftsmanship, Madison Avenue venality, or either false or real naiveté, he nevertheless aspires to a fiction more democratic in its appeal (...) The ideal Postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction. (Postmodern Literature: Wikipedia)

I would like to conclude the paper by relating Barth's view of a postmodern writer to Vargas Llosa and Pynchon as both these writers don't just lapse "into moral or artistic simplism" but rather create an original world of their own that reject the traditional concepts of system and order as they celebrate the chaos and multiplicity that are predominant features of a postmodern society. Thus, with the help *El Hablador* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, both Mario Vargas Llosa and Thomas Pynchon are actually able to discard the differences between "realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure

and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction,” and create their own versions of reality and history in their novels that denies the existence of such barriers and blur the binaries that claim to explain the whole entity of humanity.

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