



# A Postcolonial Study of the Love of the Nightingale by Timberlake Wertenbaker

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## ABSTRACT

*In the Love of the Nightingale, Timberlake Wertenbaker frequently presents a phenomenon of silence, including both a physical silence represented by Tereus' cutting down Philomele's tongue, and a psychological silence shown in the incommunicability between Niobe and Philomele, as well as that between Female Chorus and Procne. This latter psychological silence, when given the author's complicated cultural identity and through the frame of postcolonial theory, will offer a deeper reading of Wertenbaker's concept of "silence", not female's silence based on gender perspective only, but the act of silencing in general, including the enforced silence of the colonized by colonizer and that of a "barbarian" culture by a civilized and logical culture.*

**KEYWORDS:** *The Love of the Nightingale; Postcolonialism; silence; Niobe; Female Chorus*

## INTRODUCTION

Timberlake Wertenbaker, as one of the most influential contemporary playwrights since late 1980s, has received numerous awards such as Oliver Award, the New York Drama Critics Award and the Writers' Guild Award. But this various honor, is gained not simply for her unique insight from a female perspective, or to say her "naked feminist bias" when "using the male characters schematically" (Marowitz), but more important is her attention to the identity crisis facing the minority in post-colonial and multi-cultural context, which she witnessed and experienced personally since her childhood and throughout her whole writing career.

Born in New York, raised in the Northern Basque Country, France, as well as her later teaching language in Greek and writing career in London, Wertenbaker is cultivated and endowed with different cultural patterns. This complicated cultural background and travel experiences make her terribly feel the oppression from one strong culture to that in a weaker position. Especially during her childhood in Basque France, the French government made every effort to silence the Basque language, and by claiming French as superior and better while the Basque as inferior and backward (p4, Sophie Bush), Wertenbaker as a child was ordered to learn and speak French only.

It is since this early age that she realized the political role language can take (reported in Li's ppt). She asserts that a specific language carries on the history of a culture, and once silencing a people and depriving a culture of its language, one "will lose his or her countryside, parent and history

(Wertenbaker). This comment is very closely echoed with Frantz Fanon when he said

"To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization." (Fanon, website)

For both Wertenbaker and Frantz Fanon, language is greatly important because it plays a role to maintain one's culture and shape his/her identity. To lose one's own language means to negate one's past existence, as well as a total extinction of a culture and a civilization, which, in essence, is a psychological colonization from a strong culture to a weak one in post-colonial context. So, when described as a "British playwright of French Canadian-Basque ancestry" in an interview, Wertenbaker's reply as to "why people can't accept that you can have several cultures" simultaneously (reported in Susan Carlson, p267) also imply her great concern about cultural colonization.

She then displays this concern in her play *The Love of the Nightingale*, in which she, on the one hand, shapes Niobe as a colonized whose homeland in a small island was totally conquered by Athens as the colonizer, and on the other hand the Female chorus in Thrace defined as full of "barbarian practices" (p299, Wertenbaker) in contrast to Athens as a "civilized" (p296) nation. The common feature of these two minorities represented by Niobe and Female Chorus lies in their silence or incommunicability in face of Philomele as a master and Procne as one of superior culture. Therefore, the present paper aims to explore these two groups of figures



within a framework of postcolonial theory, by which to offer a deeper reading of Wertenbaker's concept of "silence".

### **PART 1. NIOBE V.S. PHILOMELE**

First, in terms of Niobe, she has long been regarded as one who internalizes the patriarchal cultural ideology, manipulated by it and inadvertently becomes an accomplice of sexual bias upon females (p51, Chen & Hu). She advises Philomele to "entertain his lordship (Tereus)" (p311) and let her "eat, smile and beg" (p334) when Tereus still has some affection towards Philomele. She also caters to the aesthetic standards established by masculine hegemony, claiming that it's more frightening when no one looks at her, which means she turns "pale and unseen" and "death is coming quietly" (p330). By this, Niobe is unconsciously placed herself as submissive to and dependent on males.

However, Niobe is not just a woman, but more specifically a colonized woman survived in a colonizing nation, which suggests, she, different from Philomele, has to suffer double pain and oppression from not only a patriarchal society and but also a colonizer. So, when she, throughout their journey on the sea, has been keeping silent about the potential tragedy of rape Philomele may suffer, and even claims that there is no point to tell and "Nowhere to go. It was already as good as done" (p330), it cannot be simply interpreted as her internalization of the patriarchal violence upon women, but perhaps the helplessness and paralyzation of her as a colonized.

This can be best shown in her comparing an oppressed woman to an oppressed nation through the simile "Countries are like women" (p330), a speech she made exactly after Philomele was raped by Tereus in Scene 13. She recalled how her small island was invaded and brutally possessed by Athens, and how her country could do nothing but "bowed his head" to Athens. By this painful memory, she, on the one hand, aims to parallel Tereus' rape with the invasion of Athens, or to say "the power of a man over a woman, with that of a stronger nation over weaker one" (p3, Bush), and on the other hand, shows the same futility of Philomele's refusal and rebellion as that her country ever failed. So, when she later asks Philomele not to "be so mighty", and claims Philomele is "nothing now", but "another victim like the rest of us [Niobe's nation]" (p334), she is actually implying that the only way of surviving for both her and her people in this colonizing nation is just "not be mighty", not rebelling, but forgetting all their past and be silent and submissive.

In some sense, to maintain her living, Niobe seems to wear a "white mask" claimed by Frantz Fanon. In an attempt to be as "Athenian" as possible, she has to adopt its values and practices and rejects her own culture. And this "donning white masks over black skins", as Fanon claims, will result in a duality and further leads to schizophrenia. Niobe is no exception. In scene 7 when Philomele talks about her sister Procne with Tereus on the ship, Niobe, unexpectedly, has been interrupting their dialogue by repeating "sisters, sisters", kind of devoted to her own soliloquy

Niobe: Sisters, sisters.

Tereus: If Procne were

Niobe: I had sisters.....

Philomele: Procne.

.....

Niobe: Yes, I had many sisters.

.....

Niobe: They died

Philomele: Niobe

Niobe: .....I'll be quiet now, very quiet.(p314)

The "sisters" here refer to Niobe's dead people on the island, who she pitied and missed very much. But the fact is, besides her comment on "women are like countries" as mentioned above, this is the only time she refers to her past, in an unconscious and schizophrenic way, only during which she can take off her "mask" and disregard her masters. However, there is no doubt that this story of her past, will neither be listened to by Tereus nor by Philomele, and she has to one more time keep "very quiet" and "silent".

### **PART 2 FEMALE CHORUS V.S. PROCNE**

Similarly, in this play *The Love of the Nightingale*, Wertenbaker intentionally creates two choruses, a Female Chorus and a Male Chorus, which are considered to perform "two functions", have "two voices", and present "two ways of approaching the distant past" (p1, Gaspar) or to say interpreting history. Among them, the Female Chorus fulfills the more traditional Greek choral role as a narrator, or as is stated in scene five as a sort of voice for the playwright and often the audience. But the Female chorus is different. In contrast to anonymity of the Male Chorus, Female chorus are introduced by Wertenbaker in scene 4 as "Procne's companions" named Hero, Echo, Iris, June and Helen. In other words, they are not only a body that "exists out of the world of the play" to narrate, but also "real women who exist in Procne's life" (website, no author).

For this purposeful adaptation, some scholars hold that Wertenbaker aims to make the female chorus ponder on the same female topics of women's lack of power and words that these Thracian women share with Procne together, as well as the universal questions like what they ask in scene 20,

Why do countries make war?

why are races exterminated?

Why do white people cut off the words of blacks?

Why do people disappear? The ultimate silence (349)

But in addition to that similarity, the more significant may be that Wertenbaker subtly presents a sense of incommunicability between Procne and Female Chorus, either by the former's disregarding the voice of the Female Chorus or totally silencing them. This can be seen from the

very beginning in scene 4 when they go on stage. Procne, longing for her sister Philomele's company and an intimate talk, repeatedly asks the question as to where the words have gone (p297). She felt lonely, not just because she has "nothing to talk to" her husband and son (p299), but also because in her eyes these Thracian chorus with "barbarian practices" for whom "truth is full of darkness" can never really talk with her as an Athenian who admires philosophical thinking and finds "logic and happiness lies in the truth" (p299). So, throughout this scene, as told by the female chorus, Procne has been turning away her head from them, instead of face to face, thus bridging a big communication barrier between the two. That's why June laments "she [Procne] is not one of us [them as Thracian women]" (p298).

Similarly, whenever Procne is unwilling to listen to them, she will simply say "Go" (p300) away or "what are you women muttering about this time" (p316). Even when the chorus attempt to imply any danger of her dear sister Philomele, she totally disregards and cries out "Enough of your nonsense. Be silent" (p318). And thus, only frequent silence is left.

"This silence...this silence..." (p300)

Helen: Silent

Echo: Silent (p318)

Even in the case of Echo, as Laura discovers, frequently she can only utter either fragmentedly or repeat the words of others, the loss of whose ability to speak clearly, to certain degree, implies a loss of identity.

Procne: Where is she now? Or is she silent too?

Echo: Silent, Procne, who? (p299)

Echo: Tereus.

Echo: Tereus (p300)

The silence here, is by no means the silence of females as whole under the oppression from patriarchal power, but a silence of people defined as "barbarian" in face of those defined superior to them, or to say, this silence results from the oppression of Thrace as a weak culture by Athens as a strong culture. Just like what Edward Said has interpreted in the book *Orientalism* that, the Western, usually the colonizers, historically constructed the East or the Orient as exotic, strange and dangerous, here in this play, despite no existing colonization between Thrace and Athens, its method is the same, defining "sportsman" and "philosophers", "barbarian" and "civilized", a low and a high, simply based on a binary

principle, by which to silence one culture psychologically and further achieves its potential aim of colonization and even imperialism.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, when resisting a one-dimensional feminist reading of her works and claiming that she is actually "thinking about the violence that erupts in societies when they have been silenced for too long", Timberlake Wertenbaker is also offering a new way for her audience (readers) to perceive the "enforced silenced" state of those colonized either physically or psychologically in postcolonial context. They are silenced and confused about their own identity. No matter for Niobe, who are paralyzed and silent in face of her master Philomele, or for the Female Chorus who are not listened to by Procne, representative of the civilized and superior culture, especially Echo who is even deprived of speaking a complete sentence, they are not simply standing for the females as a whole who suffer, but more important are the epitome of all those passively deprived of a voice.

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