

Interpreting and Power: Re-articulating Colonial Memories in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

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Abstract: This article investigates the damage enforced on interpreters in colonial and postcolonial settings. It explores the subordination of an African interpreter working for an American missionary in the Congo, as presented in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998). This is an unexplored area in the novel, and the article shows how the interpreter falls amongst the subaltern groups. The intertwined narratives about the colonization of the Congo and the oppression of women parallel the marginalization of the interpreter. The latter evokes former colonial memories of the subjugation, even the enslavement of translators in the former Portuguese Empire. Theoretically, the article is underpinned by Micheal Cronin's ideas on translation and power and Lawrence Venuti's poststructuralist views, which devalue symmetrical approaches to translation. Finally, this work argues how translation can be a means of subordination by the oppressor and empowerment by the oppressed. Ultimately, the interpreter's independent voice becomes a symbolic revelation of the means marginalized groups should use to overcome dominance and imperialism.

Keywords: American literature, Barbara Kingsolver, colonial interpreting, postcolonial translation theory, translation and power

1. Introduction

This work is inspired by Michael Cronin's call for evaluating the portrayal of translators and interpreters in literary texts, films, historical narratives, etc., and the implications of their 'imaginary' depictions in wider cultures past and present. In his book, *Translation and Identity* (2006), Cronin draws "on a wide range of materials from official government reports to Shakespearean drama to Hollywood films" to demonstrate that "translation is central to the negotiation of identity and power in a fractured world" (Cronin 2006: 5). Cronin highlights the precarious position of interpreters on the ground, their domination, marginality, and vulnerability while being trapped on the borders of conflicts with their "divided loyalties," bringing them "fatal consequences" (ibid: 78). Cronin's evaluations demonstrate that "in every area of human activity from politics to migration to literature to warfare and emergent systems, translation is one of the 'lowest phenomena' which becomes a gateway for the 'development of higher things'" (ibid: 143). This article is a legitimate response to Michael Cronin's call to highlight the demeaning treatment of interpreters in high-pressure political settings. It investigates the representation of an African interpreter working in the service of an American missionary, as presented in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood*

Bible (1998). The article is an acknowledgement of the authentic and productive role of translators in intercultural communication. It is a starting point in a long-term project aimed at rethinking and re-evaluating the negative depiction of translators and interpreters in literary texts related to intercultural encounters.

The political implications of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* could not be more relevant to the investigation of the vulnerable status of the African interpreter. Each of Barbara Kingsolver's novels, as Thomas Austenfeld states, "foregrounds a political, social, psychological, religious, or environmental state of affairs" (5). *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) generates a spectrum of widely politicized issues and themes, including women, patriarchy, social change, disability, and religion. The novel's message and attack upon cultural and political hegemonies have drawn a wide range of readers and critics who point out the novel's significant feminist and political implications. Thomas believes, "It is difficult to separate Kingsolver the feminist from Kingsolver the political writer" (2005: 130). *The Poisonwood Bible* fits within both categories. Anne Salvatore's description of the novel as "against Platonic authority" (2006: 155-69) is justifiable. Nathan Kilpatrick describes the novel as a "political allegory," in which its author interprets "the historical events in parable form" (2011: 83). Likewise, White believes that the novel is "an ambitious critique of the white patriarchal tradition that authorized Western colonization of Africa and legitimized the subjugation of women" (2009:131). Héloïse Meire compares *The Poisonwood Bible* to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and points out that Kingsolver "crystallizes the principal themes that have raised debate on Conrad's novel—race and gender" (2010: 72). Religion is also discussed within the political context of the novel to shed light on the relationship between religious hypocrisy and colonialism. Ognibene shows how Kingsolver aimed at revealing "the hypocrisy of religious rhetoric and practice that sacrifices the many for the good of the few in power, drawing a clear parallel between a missionary's attitude and colonial imperialism" (2003:13). On the other hand, the novel, which is described as "so big, so important, and so engrossing" (Norman 1999: 59), has not impressed some reviewers and critics. Reisman remarks, "With *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver ventured into riskier territory," for the novel is "an indictment of American foreign policy" and "an exposure of the stupidity, the insensitivity, and the hypocrisy of Christian evangelical missionaries" (2010: 44). Carolyn Williams maintains that *The Poisonwood Bible* "has come under fire" because of the negative depiction of the Baptist priest and the missionary profession. "The religious title of the book, Nathan's actions and several of the daughters' subsequent losses of faith" drove some to "label" the book "as hateful and disgraceful" (2010). It is even argued that the intent of Kingsolver in writing *The Poisonwood Bible* is to demonize Christians (ibid).

The Poisonwood Bible arouses continuing scholarly interest. Most of the studies are centered on the character and actions of the Baptist missionary priest in the novel. The present work, however, focuses on a minor character named Anatole, who works as a schoolteacher of English and French and as an interpreter in the service of Belgian and American missionaries in the colonized Congo. The article shows how his peripheral position is linked to imperialist and colonialist ideologies

and intentions. The study critiques the unequal relationship between the priest and his African interpreter. More importantly, these rough examples from the novel illustrate how Anatole's inferiority is enhanced by those strategies adopted in translating biblical parables and sermons. Theoretically, the article incorporates the political opinions of Michael Cronin in his book *Translation and Identity* and the poststructuralist views of Lawrence Venuti on the issues of domestication and dynamic equivalence both within the contexts of translation and power and translation and violence in intercultural encounters.

2. Discussion

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver (b. 1955) retells the story of the Belgian colonization of the Congo, which lasted from 1908 until the 1960s and highlights the American imperial involvement in the politics of this country towards the end of the colonial era. In this particular novel, Belgian colonists and American imperialists are both profiteering from the Congo's abundant natural wealth of "cotton or diamonds" (Kingsolver 1998: 9). Kingsolver draws special attention to how the domination of the Congo is masked with good intentions and is facilitated by missionary work. In the novel, missionaries not only impose Western religion but also enforce Westernization by exploiting indigenous interpreters. Adah Price, daughter of the priest, remarks sarcastically that colonists and missionaries move to Africa "[i]n the service of saving Africa's babies and extracting its mineral soul" (ibid: 530). Eleanor Roosevelt, the former First Lady of the United States, declares in the novel: "[W]e ought to come forth with aid and bring those poor [Congolese] children into the twentieth century" (ibid: 95-6).

The Poisonwood Bible is set in a Congolese town called Kilanga during the final years of Belgian colonial rule. An American priest named Nathan Price moved with his family in a complementary undertaking to the small Kilanga town in 1955. Nathan's mission starts towards the end of Belgian rule, which indicates that American imperialism, as Edward Said points out, is a legacy and continuation of European colonialism (Said 1993: 9).

The novel shows how, throughout its history, the Congo has witnessed the arrival of many Western missionaries who come successively to help the "heathen" natives (Kingsolver 1998: 130) convert to 'respectable' Christians. Kingsolver introduces a foil missionary character to Nathan Price, called Brother Fowles, who marries a Congolese woman and is referred to by the people as Reverend Santa because of his kindness. Despite this, the novel is centered on other missionaries who see themselves as adjuncts of colonialism, such as the Belgian Underdowns and the American preacher. Leah, Nathan's daughter, notes sarcastically, "They [the Belgian missionary family] are leaving tomorrow to go to Belgium, and we're [the American missionary family] going back to Kilanga to hold the fort until another family can come" (ibid: 182). Etymologically, the expression "hold the fort" is military jargon; according to Dictionary.com, it "has been traced to an order given by General William Tecumseh Sherman in 1864, which was repeated as 'Hold the fort [against the enemy at Allatoona] at all costs, for I am coming.'" Leah's expression exposes the multifaceted interconnection between missionary

work and colonialism. There have been conflicting views on the role of missionaries in Non-Western countries during the colonial times. Anna Johnston outlines how Western missionaries are often perceived, saying: “Some still celebrate them as introducing ‘civilized’, ‘modern’ practices to indigenous cultures. Others see them as the benign side of imperialism, providing a kind of moral justification for British expansion” (2003: 2). *The Poisonwood Bible* embodies the latter view, which stresses the complicity of missionaries in the colonial project. Albert Tricomi points out that Kingsolver’s novel belongs to a “sub-genre in American literature” called “the missionary novel.” He describes it precisely as the “angry anti-missionary novel” (2011: 8).

Nathan Price’s task in the Congo extends beyond mere peaceful preaching and becomes forcefully aimed at subjecting the natives to Western rule by virtue of religion. Shortly after he arrives in Kilanga, the preacher appears as a colonial archetype who is very authoritative and even antagonistic towards the local people. He presents himself to his Congolese interpreter conceitedly, with clear hegemonic language: “ ‘I am a messenger of God’s great good news for all mankind, and He has bestowed upon me a greater strength than the brute ox or the most stalwart among the heathen’ ” (Kingsolver 1998: 130). Nathan does not conceal his racist thinking about the natives and their culture and judges them by Anglophone standards. He champions the West’s supposed ‘progressive’ ways of thinking and places emphasis on the Congolese ‘inferiority’: “I fail to see how the church can mean anything but joy, for the few here who choose Christian-ity over *ignorance and darkness*” (ibid: 128). The novel presents the priest as fanatical, hypocritical, violent, and ethnocentric. His humiliating attitude towards the natives parallels the racism of earlier colonists in the Congo. Kilpatrick (2011) believes, “Kingsolver creates a novel that uses the religious mission of the fundamentalist preacher Nathan Price as a metaphor for the domination of the Congo” (84); see also Paauwe: 2010; Ognibene: 2003). The priest asserts that he has come for “the salvation of the Kilanga” (Kingsolver 1998: 96), and that his task is moral. This rationalization evokes the memory of the Congo’s extended colonial past, which, as the author suggests, is still present through the imperial involvement of the US in that country to carry on the West’s alleged claims of civilizing the unprivileged natives.

The emptiness of Nathan’s debilitating form of missionary zeal is particularly inscribed in the act of baptism. His arrogance evokes an etymological encounter with earlier chapters of Western colonialism in the Congo. Reverend Nathan devotes his time and efforts to the baptism of Kilanga’s children. His desire to wash the ‘darkness’ of the Congolese people resembles the behavior of former colonial missions which, as Frantz Fanon points out, sought “to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness” (1963: 211). The missionary believes that he is a goodwill ambassador of his religion when, in reality, he exploits Christianity to facilitate the subordination of the natives. His insistence on baptism rather than the essence of religious practice appears in the novel as paradoxical. During his twelve-month stay in the Congo, Nathan’s mission to baptize Kilanga’s children turns into obstinacy and obsession even though he has received clear warnings. Kilanga’s chief, Tata Ndu, warns his “people away from the church”

because Nathan is resolved to baptize the children in the dangerous Congo River. Anatole tries in vain to explain to the priest that the local people fear baptism because the river is infested with crocodiles. The priest's wife reports, "Nathan felt it had been a mistake to bend his will, in any way, to Africa" (Kingsolver 1998: 97). Héloïse Meire (2010) argues that, like Kurz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Nathan is an "extremist who is convinced of being entrusted by a superior power to carry out his mission" (77).

As the novel progresses, the irony of the missionary's zeal becomes paramount. Nathan keeps his Congolese congregation, his own family, which contains only women and a local interpreter under firm control to carry on with his "baptismal fixation" (Kingsolver 1998: 96). The Price females narrate intertwined tales about their suffering under the rigid rule of the 'committed' priest and disclose subtle and blatant forms of patriarchal and colonial oppression. This narrative style, which Anne Marie Austenfeld describes as "the revelatory narrative circle" (2006: 294), allows the author to fuse and affirm a different conceptualization of the Congo's past and present.

The narratives reveal that Nathan Price is a hypocrite who does not care about the salvation of the natives. His relentless effort to stay in the Congo despite the escalating anarchy and even after the death of his daughter, Ruth May, is driven by a personal desire. Nathan stays to compensate for a former disgraceful experience in the Philippines, where he was serving as a soldier. Orleanna says her husband lives "hounded by what happened in the Philippine jungle." Literally, he is haunted by memories of cowardice (Kingsolver 1998: 96). Nathan's personal goals are masked with good intentions, as are the multitude of cases with the interests of colonial and imperial projects hidden under the guise of philanthropy. The Price females show solidarity with other marginalized groups in the novel to reinstate themselves in the face of patriarchy and imperialism. Apart from Rachel, who rebels against her father but still adheres to American material culture, the women ally with the indigenous people. The local interpreter becomes their source of enlightenment about the atrocities Western colonial powers committed in the Congo and other African countries. In a clear manifestation of solidarity with the subjugated natives, Leah, Nathan's daughter, marries her father's interpreter and rejects all forms of domination and patriarchy. She states, "I have damned many men to hell. President Eisenhower, King Leopold [of Belgium], and my own Father included" (ibid: 421).

The semiotic weaving of the repressed women in the African continent reveals the true face of Western aspirations for democratization and equality in Africa. The author reflects the natives' voice in the narratives of the repressed females to highlight the plight of American policies and way of life. The novel shows how this Western imperial state is still plagued by rigid hierarchies inside and out. Orleanna denounces all forms of domination and patriarchy, saying: "Whether it's wife or nation they occupy, their mistake is the same" (ibid: 384). Kingsolver utilizes the interrelated stories of Orleanna and other subalterns who reinforce each other to focus on challenging the hegemony of racist and sexist discourses that refuse to change.

The repressed women decide to defy Nathan's patriarchal authority by leaving the Congo because they resent all forms of domination. Even though their experiences in the Congo have been painful, they have also been transformative in an epistemic way. The mother and her daughter Adah, who suffers from a neurological disease and a limp, are delivered to the United States on board "a hospital plane full of UN workers and sick white people" (ibid: 411). Orleanna is forced to leave Leah under the care of the interpreter, who promises the distressed mother to send her back home after she overcomes her malaria sickness. The Congolese setting of the novel has an emotional significance related to Barbara Kingsolver's early childhood. She states in an interview that she briefly lived in the Congo as a child after her "parents abruptly moved there" so that her father can provide "health care to people who badly needed it." Kingsolver describes this time as "the formative moment" in her "lifelong sense of place, belonging, and point-of-view" (Wilkinson 2014: 39). The Congo has left "a stamp" on her writing and "psyche" (ibid: 40). She remarks, "I felt as if I'd taken an apple from the tree of knowledge, and gotten myself thrown out of the garden." Kingsolver has gradually become more intellectually and spiritually enlightened over the years and interested in "everyplace and everything." More importantly, she has "made friends with other people who didn't quite fit in" (ibid: 40). Croisy discusses how various characters in *The Poisonwood Bible* respond when they "get exposed to otherness and difference while living in a Congolese community." The Baptist priest remains "trapped in a history of religious fanaticism and violence," while his wife and daughters "grow through intercultural exchanges" and gain "a new sense of self (both cultural and individual)" (2012: 222). As a result of their constant communication with Anatole, the interpreter, who is presented as having keen intelligence and erudition, the Price females (apart from Rachael) have become aware of the imperialistic plots that brought only devastation to the Congo. Leah sobs at what she calls "the American disgrace", violating a peace treaty by bringing "a huge shipment of guns to an opposition leader" (Kingsolver 1998: 502). She adds, "It's thirty million dollars, Anatole told me recently, that the U.S. has now spent trying to bring down Angola's sovereignty" (ibid: 502-3). The interpreter says that the scenario of turmoil in the neighboring country of Angola is a replica of the anarchy kindled by American politicians in the Congo: "Murdering Lumumba, keeping Mobutu in power, starting it over again in Angola-these sound like plots" (ibid: 502). Such are moments of epiphany revealed to the women who leave the Congo distressed by Nathan's patriarchy and shocked by the horrors of their country's imperial capitalist projects, especially the foreign "plastic explosives and land mines" (ibid: 503), which killed many African civilians.

The symbiosis between the local interpreter and Nathan's wife and daughters springs from common grounds of subjugation and reveals yet another unexplored expression of imperialism:

Anatole was born up around near Stanleyville, but at a tender age with his mother being dead got sent to work on the rubber plantations near Coquilhatville [...] he told us his personal life autography at dinner. He also spent some time at the diamond mines down south in Katanga, where

he says one-quarter of all the world's diamonds come from. (Kingsolver 1998: 126-7)

Being a bright intellectual and a multilingual schoolteacher, Anatole becomes the private Congolese interpreter of Nathan's "sermons" and "words of the Bible" (ibid: 130). However to use Spivak's words, he too becomes "a subaltern of imperialism" (2003: 325), as will be shown in the latter part of the article.

The interpreter appears as a paradoxical character whose significance in the political and cultural encounters in the novel is contradicted by his marginalization at the hands of Western missionaries. Simon believes that "translators, as cultural and economic intermediaries, are often members of marginalized groups. Historically, they occupy socially fragile positions," standing "on the fringes of power" (2000: 12-13). Nathan's daughter, Rachel, reveals that after Anatole's "family all got killed in some horrible way during colonial days," the orphan was taken care of and reared by a Belgian missionary family who saw him as a "project" with immense potential for missionary groups. Rachel states that the Belgians "saved him from the famous diamond mines and taught him to love Jesus and how to read and write. Then they installed him as the schoolteacher" of imperial languages (Kingsolver 1998: 127). Anatole "speaks French, English, Kikongo and whatever all he first started out with" (ibid: 126). The American priest also saw the native interpreter as a project, taking advantage of his exceptional multilingualism. The Western missionaries' exploitation of the African interpreter re-articulates repressed memories of the indigenous interpreters' oppression and enslavement in the Congo and other colonies of the Portuguese Empire over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, history repeats itself. Kingsolver blends the past with the present to address and expose the usurpations and legacies of colonialism. In her article "The Role of Interpreters, or *Linguas*, in the Portuguese Empire During the 16th Century," Dejanirah Couto (2003) discusses "the different categories of interpreters (lingoas), the forms of their recruitment and the strategies of their use in the Portuguese Empire in Asia in the first half of the sixteenth century." She confirms that a heterogenous corps of interpreters were "recruited during expeditions and military operations." The majority of these consisted of "former renegades and captives, natives and converted slaves, Jews and new Christians, adventurers and convicts" (1). Couto argues that the colonial interpreters enjoyed a "paradoxical status" resulting from their great significance to the Portuguese Empire and "the general mistrust they engendered." They were kept under firm control because they knew government secrets. Bouchon (1985) asserts that Afonso de Albuquerque [Portuguese colonist, 1453-1515] closely watched his interpreters. "In 1512, he had his *lingua* Francisco de Albuquerque put in irons for five months, accused of knowing his secrets" (210). Worse still, the colonial interpreter "was suspected of having his soul corrupted, being contaminated by 'the other side' (*outro lado*), because employing other languages necessarily implied the use of the thought mechanisms of the Asian world" (ibid). The roles and status of indigenous interpreters in the Portuguese colonies expose the interpreters' oppression by the colonial authorities. In addition to translating and negotiating

with the rival governments in the colonies, native interpreters were forcibly assigned other tasks, including collecting military and political intelligence for the Portuguese colonial authorities. Couto maintains that these tasks “were incompatible with the prestige and social position and yet the political responsibility of those the interpreter served” (2003: 2).

In Africa, the situation was no less grim than that in Asia. Jackson-Eade confirms that a large system of slave interpreters developed alongside the Iberian expansion during the fifteenth century and was closely connected to the slave trade, as travel accounts and historical chronicles reveal:

The system was in theory quite simple: after capturing indigenous people of a territory that was yet to be further explored, the expeditions would bring these captives back to Iberia (or to the Iberian settlement they were staying in), baptize them, and get them to learn their language. Once these slaves could speak Castilian, Portuguese, or any other Romance language sufficiently to make themselves understood, they were sent on a new expedition back to their respective homelands. There, they would be used as guides and interpreters, and act as go-betweens with the indigenous populations that they supposedly belonged to (Jackson-Eade 2018: 6).

Pérez maintains that as soon as the Portuguese colonist Diogo Cão set foot in the Congo at the end of the fifteenth century, he realized the need for ‘reliable’ interpreters to expedite the settlement. Therefore, he took “four [C]ongolese hostages to Portugal to teach them the language and culture” (2023: 102). After some years as interpreters, Cão brought them back to the Congo to fulfill his country’s strategic conquest of the Congo. Diogo Cão’s act and the growing need for interpreters spurred other Portuguese settlers into exploiting Congolese children by sending some to Portugal because “they learn faster and better than adults” (ibid).

In Kingsolver’s novel, the evangelical priest tells his family at the beginning of his mission that the interpreter is “our only ally in all this” (Kingsolver 1998: 127). However, the women disclose that Nathan Price neither accepts nor trusts the local interpreter to carry out his mission. In one of Anatole’s attempts to persuade Nathan of his fidelity, he says, ““Reverend Price, do I not stand beside you in your church every Sunday, translating the words of the Bible and your sermons?’[...] If you are counting your enemies, you should not count me among them, sir” (ibid: 130). The interpreter’s desperate appeal to confirm his loyalty is ignored, for the doubtful and fearful priest “did not exactly say yes or no to that, though of course it was true” (ibid). Consequently, Nathan attempts to learn Kikongo as he becomes more suspicious of his interpreter: “More and more, mistrusting his interpreters, he tries to speak in Kikongo” (ibid: 276). He also speaks French occasionally in front of his Congolese congregation to limit the interpreter’s role. However, his daughter, Adah, remarks that her father’s attempts to speak French and Kikongo in front of the local worshippers are both terrible:

The church service lasts twice as long now because the Reverend has to say it once in English, and then the schoolteacher Tata Anatole repeats it all in

Kikongo. Our Father finally caught on, nobody was understanding his horrible stabs at French or Kikongo (Ibid:130).

Sugirtharajah presents an in-depth study of biblical interpretation and the three phases it underwent in the so-called 'Third World.' The interesting part addresses the question of native interpreting of the Bible during the colonial times. It also reveals the opposition of some Western missionaries to the translation of the Bible into African languages, negatively claiming that the fundamental teachings of the Bible can never find natural "verbal counterparts in (the inferior?) indigenous languages" (2001: 58). Nathan acknowledges these racist claims. He becomes a narcissist who believes in his ability to overcome all linguistic and cultural obstacles. The dedicated priest speaks French during his sermons and uses English to ensure that the message he preaches is as equivalent as possible to the translation. Poststructuralist and emancipatory translation theorists reject symmetrical approaches to translation, such as equivalence and fidelity, because they believe they enhance the translators' invisibility (See Venuti 1992: 12; Arrojo 2004: 32). Nathan insists on symmetrical translation methods, which only assert his ethnocentrism and dominance and marginalize the interpreter who does his best to act as a bridge to no effect.

Frances Karttunen describes interpreters and translators in colonial or postcolonial settings as "conduits through which information flowed between worlds in collision" (1994: xi). She uses the metaphor "unfamiliar bridges between their own world and another" (ibid: xiv). Postcolonial translation theorists believe that to think of interpreters as bridges or mediators is, in fact, deceptive. In colonial and imperial contexts, indigenous interpreters are subjugated, especially when they are recruited to aid missionaries and military men. Corbett criticizes the representation of interpreters as *bridges* between cultures and "draws on dialogic strategies as an alternative to essentializing and universalizing discourses of mediation" (2022: 28). Ruano also reveals the problems posed by this representation. She observes that translators in colonial settings are not used in peacekeeping or bridging gaps between conflicting sides but in "facilitating invasion, conquest, or subjugation of territories and communities if translations (and bridges) are taken control of and used by colonizing people or occupying forces" (2021: 337). Likewise, it is the exact case of the Congolese interpreter in *The Poisonwood Bible*. When Anatole attempts to intermeditate between the chief village, Tata Ndu, and the American priest, the latter rejects the reconciliation, saying: " 'Anatole, do you now not sit at my table, translating the words of Tata Ndu's bible of false idolatry'" (Kingsolver 1998: 130). Nathan suppresses the learned interpreter with his "colonizing religious rhetoric," as (Kilpatrick 2011: 85) puts it. He says that he prays for "patience" in leading Tata Ndu to the church, and "perhaps" he "should pray for Anatole as well." The interpreter tells Nathan that the people of Kilanga put their trust in Tata Ndu, also a minister. However, the priest discards Anatole's words, saying proudly that he does not "*fear* any man in Kilanga" (Kingsolver 1998: 130). Anatole's mediation efforts fail because Nathan has never been inclined to accept or listen to the other. He also denies the significance of interpreters in conflict situations to "ensure a reduction in those

degrees of separation that make other parts of the world seem remote or irrelevant” (Cronin 2006: 141). The priest ends the conversation abruptly by dismissing Anatole “from the [dinner] table and this house” (Kingsolver 1998: 133) because he (Nathan) misinterprets the actual role of translators in facilitating intercultural dialogue and understanding.

Nathan’s suppression of the interpreter is the most critical evidence of his extremism and imperialism. An interpreter is a *speaker* who provides oral translation between people of different languages. Ironically enough, the priest speaks in front of the Congolese congregation throughout the sermons. Nathan tries to keep the interpreter as voiceless as possible, even though he has not mastered the native language. (Kingsolver 1998: 276). Cronin draws links between translation, eloquence, and power by discussing how the Romans exploited translation to appropriate the ‘copiousness’ of the Greek civilization and increase their persuasiveness and power. He states, “If eloquence is related to the exercise of power, then translation is related to power in that it is a mechanism that allows politically stronger cultures to appropriate the ‘copiousness of matter’ that is to be found in cultures annexed by or subordinate to empire” (2006: 95). In Kingsolver’s novel, the priest also exhibits his power through exploitation, expropriation, reappropriation, and eloquence. Anatole is portrayed in the novel as a competent interpreter and real mediator (peacekeeper) who can translate “the rage of a village into one quiet sentence” (Kingsolver 1998: 393). His wife, Leah, points out, “A person like Anatole, has so much to offer his country” (ibid: 466). Despite this, he is subordinated by the hegemonic priest, who realizes the significance of loud speaking to expropriation and power. In this respect, Cronin maintains, “Those who speak well not only move their audiences to action but also move others out of places previously occupied, and expropriation through eloquence further enhances the power and position of the speaker” (Cronin 2006: 95-6).

Kingsolver reproduces a monolithic picture of subordination. In her novel, Africans appear linguistically and materially overpowered. The interpreter’s relegated position evokes the remnants of an earlier era of colonization. It arouses the traumatic memory of the ‘supremacy’ of Westerners over indigenous peoples and the hierarchal relationship between missionaries and their local interpreters. Nathan, convinced of the colonial lies and distortions of African cultures, becomes suspicious of all Congolese natives throughout his mission in the Congo. His doubts drive him to keep the interpreter in the shadows despite the latter’s competence and blind faithfulness. The interpreter’s symbolic voicelessness under the hegemony of the white missionary is a manifestation of the dogged claims of imperialism and Western centrism:

‘*TATA JESUS IS BĀNGALA!*’ declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermons. More and more, mistrusting his interpreters, he tries to speak in Kikongo. He throws back his head and shouts these words to the sky, while his lambs sit scratching themselves in wonder (Kingsolver 1998: 276).

Cronin explains how the Romans and, similarly, the British during the Renaissance “make of the eloquent orator one of the most significant voices of authority in the

Western tradition” (2006: 95). Kingsolver demonstrates how the shouting of the ethnocentric priest “to the sky” (ibid), his oratory style, and the silencing of the interpreter after exploiting his multilingualism, all stem from the missionary’s awareness of the significance of loud-speaking and eloquence to the seizure of power.

History appears to be filled with repeated contradictions and abuses, and the novel assimilates the past into the present to reveal the analogous tactics of colonialism and imperialism. Kingsolver traces Nathan throughout his sermons, acting as a “white man” who acknowledges his “burden” quite well. He repeats his sermons slowly and loudly in front of the Congolese people, summoning the prideful call in Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem, “The White Man’s Burden” to expel the ignorance of the natives “by open speech and simple/A hundred times made plain” (lines 13-14). After Nathan marginalizes the interpreter, he speaks Kikongo in his own poor way and shouts in front of the “dark” congregation: “*TATA JESUS IS BĀNGALA!*” (Kingsolver 1998: 533), meaning to preach that Jesus is “precious and dear” (ibid: 276). Nathan’s realization of the significance of loud speaking, his doubts about the interpreter, and his insensitivity to the Kikongo language all lead him to mispronounce the word *bāngala*. “[T]he way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree” (ibid). His daughter, Adah, makes a sarcastic note that after all these months, her father was unknowingly preaching the destructiveness and poisons of the Bible to the Congolese natives. His shouts in Kikongo: “*TATA JESUS IS BĀNGALA!*” caused them to fear the Scripture and inculcated fear in their hearts. That is why they stare at the priest in shock and bewilderment while he preaches. Nathan’s linguistic mishap explains Kingsolver’s use of the word “poisonwood” in the novel’s title. Adah says: “Praise the Lord, hallelujah, my friends! for Jesus will make you itch like nobody’s business” (ibid). Natalie Wallace maintains, “In her mocking commentary, Adah alludes to the poisonwood tree’s capacity to induce extreme rashes and itching when it comes into contact with skin—Nathan has unintentionally assigned this property to Jesus” (2014: 49) out of his ignorance of Kikongo and his mistrust of the African interpreter. The missionary spends months teaching the Congolese parents the significance of baptism for their children, first with the help of Anatole, then through his poor knowledge of the native language. During his sermons about the practice, the priest *domesticates* the word baptism into *batiza* to influence the Congolese congregation effectively through their language. The word *batiza*, Adah learns through the interpreter, has two meanings in Kikongo. If pronounced correctly, “with the tongue curled,” *batiza* means baptism. “Otherwise, it means ‘to terrify’” (Kingsolver 1998: 214). In trying to speak in the local language, Nathan fails miserably and therefore alters his message. His daughter Adah remarks that her father’s “punishment is the Word, and his deficiencies are failures of words—as when he grows impatient with translation and strikes out precariously on his own, telling parables in his wildly half-baked Kikongo” (ibid: 213). The priest’s feeling of “exceptionalism,” as Susan Strehle puts it (2008: 419), leads him to suspect the

African interpreter. Worse yet, he fails to notice that Kikongo is a well-structured language. Thus, instead of teaching the Congolese people the significance of baptism, the priest shows them its terror. Adah says, “Our Father could not seem to accept what seemed clear enough even to a child: when he showered the idea of baptism—*batiza*—on people here, it shrunk them away like water on a witch” (Kingsolver 1998: 73). The consequent misunderstanding and fear of baptism on the part of the new believers in Kilanga are the logical outcomes of the the missionary’s informal imperialism, ignorance, and disrespect for the local language.

Nathan’s inability to apply common sense and show sensitivity to the Kikongo language is contrasted with his wife and daughters, who realize that Kikongo is a carefully structured language. Orleanna explains how Nathan leads his family and the Congolese congregation to sing “*Tata Nzolo*” after him in church without knowing that the word *nzolo* can mean different things “depending on just how you sing it” (ibid: 96). Adah mentions that *nzolo* can mean: “‘most dearly beloved.’ Or it is a thick yellow grub highly prized for fish bait. Or it is a type of tiny potato that turns up in the market now and then, always sold in bunches that clump along the roots like knots on a string” (ibid: 172). Nathan domesticates the word *nzolo* by using the word *Tata* in front of it, so that the worshippers sing “our most dearly beloved Father.” Orleanna says, “*Tata Nzolo*” can also mean “Father of Fish Bait” (ibid: 96), or “god of small potatoes,” as Adah remarks, while pointing out the consequences of Nathan’s obstinacy and “scared ignorance”:

And so we sing at the top of our lungs in church: “*Tata Nzolo!*” To whom are we calling? I think it must be the god of small potatoes ... “*Tata Nzolo!*” we sing, and I wonder what new, disgusting sins we commit each day, holding our heads high in sacred ignorance while our neighbors gasp, hand to mouth (Ibid: 172).

Susan Strehle argues that Nathan stands for “the American exceptionalist convinced of his own righteousness” (2008: 419). The attitudes of supremacy, exceptionalism, and extremism eventually bring Nathan’s downfall at the hands of the Congolese natives.

Not only does the priest attempt to speak the native language, Kikongo, during his sermons, but he also tries translating from English into Kikongo to subdue his fears and doubts and marginalize the interpreter completely. His act of translation is a reminder of the “active role” that translation has played “in the colonization process” (Munday 2016: 210). Worse yet, his translation methods can be seen as a means of exploitation. The control of translators and interpreters and their ‘resistance’ during conflicts and colonial settings expresses how translation can, by choice, be a means of domination (by the oppressor) and a means of empowerment (by the oppressed). In a review of Michael Cronin’s book *Translation and Identity*, Lane-Mercier observes, “Interpreting (and the absence of it) is a powerful political tool that, alternatively, can facilitate interaction between equals, support linguistic hegemonies through intimidation or manipulation and symbolize resistance” (Lane-Mercier 2008: 245). Postcolonial translation theorists

confirm that the attitudes towards the colonized people are also manifested in the methods and strategies of translation. In her book, *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context*, Tejaswini Niranjana maintains, "Translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism" (1992: 2). In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the Western missionary attempts to keep himself superior and hold his religion in power; he spreads his influence by preaching the Scriptures to the Congolese natives using every possible means. Taking great advantage of the native interpreter, the priest *domesticates* the biblical concepts in his sermons to the Congolese people to make them assimilate the new religion naturally. In Schleiermacher's words, domestication or naturalization in translation means: "Training the target language [receptors] to accept, even to crave, translations steeped in the foreign flavor of other originals" (Quoted in Robinson 1997: 225). Lawrence Venuti draws a parallel between domestication and imperialism because domestication, he believes, releases "the ethnocentric violence of translation" (1995: 20).

Domestication is similar in concept to the principle of dynamic equivalence, which is proposed and favored by the American translation theorist Eugene Nida, who worked with The American Bible Society for over sixty years to produce Bibles in translations worldwide. In the novel, in addition to domestication, the priest follows this translation strategy to ensure the usage of the most natural equivalence and create a similar effect on the Congolese congregation. Nida considers transparency, naturalness, and 'the same-effect' principle essential to a successful translation, which entails creating "the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message." This, if heard by "a bilingual and bicultural person," he or she "can justifiably say 'that's just the way we would say it'" (Nida 1964: 166). Nida rendered many biblical concepts using the methods of dynamic equivalence and domestication. An illustrative example is his translation of the biblical metaphor "Lamb of God" into "seal of God" to receptors who live on an island and have never seen lambs before (ibid: 166-67). Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere agree with Nida's principle of naturalness of expression when seeking cultural equivalence (Yang 2010: 79). However, before adopting a translation method such as domestication and the dynamic equivalence to maintain an equivalent effect, "the needs of the target audience" are to be observed (Bassnett and France 2006: 53). In contrast, Lawrence Venuti opposes such approaches to translation because they are receptor-oriented only and are, as he argues, "enlisted in the service of Christian humanism" of Anglo-American cultures (1995: 21).

On several occasions, Venuti attacked Nida's dynamic equivalence and the domesticating approach to translation (Shureteh 2015: 78-92). Nida believes, "The task of the true translator is one of identification. As a Christian servant, he must identify with Christ; as a translator, he must identify himself with the Word; as a missionary, he must identify himself with the people" (quoted in Venuti 1995: 23). To Venuti, seeking dynamic equivalence in translation is "an imperialist appropriation of a foreign text (1996: 204). It is an act of deception, for it leaves the receptors with no choice but to assimilate the principles of the foreign culture and

religion naturally, “enacting an imperialism that extends the dominion of transparency with other ideological discourses over a different culture” (Venuti 1992: 5). According to Venuti, Nida’s translator is not a communicator of language and culture, but a zealous missionary. He argues that “Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence in Bible translation goes hand in hand with an evangelical zeal that seeks to impose on the English language [receptors] a specific dialect of English as well as a distinctly Christian understanding of the Bible.” Venuti states, “Both the missionary and the translator must find the dynamic equivalent in the target language to establish the relevance of the Bible in the target culture” (1995: 23).

When the translator naturalizes biblical concepts into domestic and dynamic equivalents for easier understanding and assimilation, the translator presupposes the ignorance of the receptors. Also, such strategies deceive the receptors, who in Kingsolver’s novel are the Congolese natives, into enjoying hearing the foreign concept through their own language. Venuti calls domestication a “narcissistic experience” because it “performs a labor of acculturation which domesticates the foreign text, making it intelligible and even familiar to the target-language [receptor], providing him or her with the narcissistic experience of recognizing his or her own culture in a cultural other” (1992: 5).

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Nathan strives to perform the complicated and controversial acculturation process. By adopting the methods of domestication and dynamic equivalence, the priest presents the Christian concepts to the Congolese people as naturally as possible, as though they were part of their culture. He makes the natives feel that the new culture is not remote from their native culture but one that can embrace it naturally. In Nathan’s sermons, baptism becomes “*batiza*” (Kingsolver 1998: 296), and Father Jesus becomes “*Tata Jesus*” (ibid: 533), just the way the Congolese would say them. The missionary leads the natives deceptively into “this narcissistic experience of recognizing their culture in a cultural other” (Venuti 1992: 5). Adah describes how her father was, one morning, “spinning” the biblical tale of Susanna and her rescuer, Daniel, in front of the worshippers. In the parable, Nathan refers to Daniel as “‘*Tata Daniel*’ to make him seem like a local boy” (ibid: 71). *Tata* is used in Kilanga before a name as a respectful form of address. Adah means that with this procedure of domestication, the biblical parable of Daniel can pass into the culture naturally, and the natives can assimilate it easily. Nathan’s translated sermons and biblical parables provide the natives with plenty of these experiences, which are mere deception and veiled imperialism directed at enacting the hegemony of foreign policies and desires.

3. Conclusion

This article shows how the translator falls among marginalised groups in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*. The assessment of the interpreter’s status is a legitimate response to Michael Cronin’s call for evaluating the representation of translators and interpreters “in cultural or imaginary artefacts” (Cronin 2006: 116) to understand and appreciate their productive roles in cultures and societies. The article confirms that the effects of translation strategies, including domestication and dynamic equivalence, on the receptors of the target language message need to

be assessed thoroughly, especially in political and colonial settings. In this work, these strategies have been shown to help the ethnocentric missionary enforce “the relevance of the Bible” (Venuti 1995: 23) on the colonized Congolese natives.

Barbara Kingsolver’s historical and allegorical novel deconstructs various rigid formations of dominance and centrism. Imperialism, patriarchy, and other forms of entitlement inside and outside of the American culture are challenged by subaltern groups in the novel. Towards the end of their narrative, the females overthrow domination and transform themselves in the face of patriarchy and imperialism. The novel’s exceptional treatment of rebellion is, however, exemplified in the Congolese interpreter, who sums up the argument and the cure. The analysis shows that the translator clearly expresses repressed colonial memories. His subjugation by the hegemonic missionary features remnants of the colonial past when indigenous interpreters were oppressed and enslaved by Portuguese colonists.

Kingsolver eventually reconstructs the translator’s voice and “kindred spirit” (Kingsolver 1998: 410) to overthrow domination and hierarchal power relations. Similar to Orleanna, who is a “garden waiting” to bloom (ibid), and like the natives who rise against the colonial and imperial plots and set the colonial Belgian tower on fire together with the missionary, the interpreter rises against his subjugation. Anatole listened to the missionary’s sermons and was continually contradicted and silenced because the fearful priest had no faith in all indigenous subjects. However, the learned interpreter realizes that “Translation is not merely a transmitter of culture, but also of the-truth” (Newmark 1988: 7). Therefore, he exposes the imperial plots of the United States in the Congo, above all replacing “one white king with another. Only the face that shows is black” (Kingsolver 1998: 433). Leah, Anatole’s wife, explains why he becomes a revolutionary: “He despises being useless, sitting still while war overtakes us” (ibid: 419). Eventually, Anatole rejects the hegemonic silencing by the ethnocentric priest and starts “talking to people and organizing something large” (ibid: 396) for his country. The interpreter’s gradual revelation expands into a rejection and a revolt, pushing the boundaries and insisting that one voice cannot dominate and validate a discourse no matter how repressive and criminal imperialism might be.

Kingsolver’s novel demonstrates the ability of underrepresented groups to reject domination despite the vast conspiracies of imperialism. The case of the repressed females might seem to take a great deal of the novel. However, this article shows that the translator draws greater attention to the interests, condemnation, and mutilation of African imperialistic missions. The article utilizes the black interpreter’s symbolic domination and the whites’ fears and doubts in the narrative to remind readers of the disgraceful colonial past. The ideological practices of Western missionaries are revealed as evidence of a world of slavery and a dialectic that the subjects cannot digest. However, the article reveals the instability of the colonial and imperialistic discourse to consolidate its racist claims through the exploitation of religion and interpreters.

The political implications of *The Poisonwood Bible* continue to draw great scholarly interest. This article focuses on an unexplored field. It uses the hierarchal

relationship between the American missionary and his African interpreter as breaking grounds for a reinterpretation and re-evaluation of translators' roles in high-pressure political situations. The article suggests further critiques on the sociology of translators and how they are depicted in literary texts related to cross-cultural communication.

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