

Unmasking the reality in Rolando Hinojosa

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Chicano author, Rolando Hinojosa's narrative works, *Korean Love Songs* (1978) and *The Useless Servants* (1993) depict and revive realist images of the Korean War. This present work will show how Hinojosa, through fiction, opposes the amnesty of postmodern¹ individuals who willingly loose the painful memory of the past, and forces them revive those moments. I will analyze the two war fictions in the light of Klaus R. Scherpe's "Dramatization and De-dramatization of 'the End': Apocalyptic Conscience of Modernity and Postmodernity" to show that to how the postmodern society masks its horrifying reality and how one should properly react to it.

The experience of his participation in Korean war at his age of twenty one, never left Hinojosa and in these two books of 1978 and 1993 he chose to return. These two war books are companion pieces told in different forms; the former as a collection of poems that express the horror and fear of death during the war and the latter as a day by day journal of the war that is kept by the protagonist, Rafe from July 3, 1950 until May 24, 1951. By describing the real circumstances of this forgotten war in a sarcastic and

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¹ The term "modernity" (or "modern") and "postmodernity" (or "postmodern") indicate the historical period of time whereas the term "modernism" (or "modernist") and "postmodernism" (or "postmodernist") indicate the aesthetic of that time period. The term postmodernism has been in use since 1970 in the field of literature and architecture. Appignanesi affirms, "In the late 70's deconstructionism of postmodernism was developed, when the United States of America invited poststructuralist s such as Jean François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida and officially regarded their theory as a new philosophy" (3).

subjective way through the eyes of a young Mexican-American soldier, *Korean Love Songs*, succeeds in bringing to life the physical and emotional suffering of the soldiers. Similarly, after fifteen year later, *The Useless Servants* succeeds in reviving the memory of the horror and irony of wars that humans have created and will continue to create, in the most objective way through the eyes of the same protagonist as in *Korean Love Songs*. Written in the culminated point of postmodernism, *Korean Love Songs* presents us the protagonist's various and confused emotion toward the Korean War in a fragmented manner like a pastiche and *The Useless Servants*, written in the era of the reinterpretation of postmodernism, tries to find a solution to get away from the postmodern irony and the labyrinth that postmodern era has created, by suggesting how one can actively react to postmodern reality.

The Useless Servants begins with the protagonist's participation in the War without knowing the proper reason to fight. Rafe Buenrostro, a twenty-year-old Mexican-American Sergeant from Klail City, Texas, arrives in Pusan, Korea from Japan, on July 3rd, 1950, following North Korea's invasion of South Korea. Héctor Calderón in his book *Narratives of Greater Mexico: Essays on Chicano Literary History, Genre, and Borders* affirms that "Rolando Hinojosa was born on 21 January 1929 and *The Useless Servants* is Hinojosa's personal fictional journal of his experience in Korea. Rafe, Hinojosa's contemporary, his alter ego really is the narrator assigned by Hinojosa to recall" (Calderón(forthcoming) : 302). His old friends from Klail City, Joey and Charlie also join the war, equally not knowing the proper reason for them to fight in the war. Their feelings are well characterized in Rafe's statement that they were, "Creating history (their very words) / by protecting the world from Communism. I suppose. / Useless you were there" (Hinojosa, 1978 : 10).

Rafe begins to see the irony of the war. First, he senses that they are not fighting for the territory any longer but rather to kill people in a butchering manner. Rafe expresses this sentiment when he explains that the war is becoming, "Worse: It doesn't matter when Seoul is retaken: / Now the mission is to kill; we've been told to forget the real estate. / It's people we're

after, / Not land" (Hinojosa, 1978 : 17). Rafe further questions why a Texas-Mexican such as himself must participate in this power game between the United States and Soviet Union. When Rafe's troop noticed the entrance of the Chinese into the war, his friend, Joey jokes that the Chinese soldiers must be "Volunteers just like us [them]" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 78).

As a Mexican-American, Rafe has himself experienced the discriminating attitude of the people in the army. Even his general shows a discriminating attitude toward him when the general compares the commitment of the Chinese to North Korea to that of Texas-Mexicans to the United States (Hinojosa, 1993 : 87).

Since Mexican-Americans experience discrimination, they are able to perceive the injustice of the racism even when it is exercised on a different ethnic group. Rafe acknowledges that in the army, a majority of the soldiers are from different ethnic backgrounds, for example, Indians, Afro-Americans, Mexican-American, etc., and he noticed that there also exists a certain amount of discrimination in the army toward them. For example, the experience for Afro-Americans was the worst case; they were kept separate from the rest of the army. One soldier explains how "negroes [are] kept separate from us [them]; they have their own units" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 114) and Rafe sympathizes them by saying, "I have no idea how I'd behave if I were an Amer Negro in the service" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 114).

Rafe also perceives the US army's discrimination toward South Korean soldiers. Rafe explains, for example, that South Koreans "have none [no tanks] assigned to them: that tanks are not in their organizational charts. Also that ROK [Republic of Korea, South Korea] have little artillery; that too makes it tough for them" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 39). After talk, Joey said it was "racism on first Cav's part and that we, as Texas Mexicans, know that attitude well. How true" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 39).

In this postmodernist historical fiction, *The Useless Servants*, history and fiction exchange places, with history becoming fictional and fiction becoming historical. For example, Rafe witnesses horrifying historical happening of Nakdong Bridge being blown up on August 2, 1950. The U.S. Army had, after having crossed the bridge while they retreated south from

the North Korean army, blown it up even though it was "still full of refugees" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 35). Rafe in *Korean Love Songs* expresses the perplexed feeling in witnessing this situation where his own fellow soldiers also died in pieces together with many South Korean civilians: "The radio guys are in pieces... in pieces of meat and bone / They've been blown up and down / into small pieces... Christ, / What am I doing here?" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 26). The day after the destruction of the Bridge, chaplains and doctors do not mention anything about the refugees when they explain their action concerning the destruction of the bridge and in this way, Rafe has chance to observe how the truth disappears from history.

Furthermore, Rafe gets to see how people support them to hide this tragic reality. The Old Guys support the military action by saying "it's war, that's all, war" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 36), even after having witnessed their fellow soldiers and hundreds of civilians die on the bridge, including kids, families, animals. Also soldiers were told the same thing like, "That shit like this happens all the time. NK [North Korean] dressed as farmers, dressed as GIs, shooting our guys in the head, clubbing and bayoneting them to death, burning them, all that was war. And no, it wasn't right to kill civilians but that's what war came to. That's all that it is" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 36).

After justifying their action, the upper officers told the troops not to "dig in too deep" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 37) what has happened. Hinojosa in *Korean Love Songs*, also depicts the indifferent and vigilant attitude of the upper officer who just buried the truth in silence, "All right, now: Everyone stay in place. We'll sweat'em out. / No moving, and no *digging*... Rafe..." (Hinojosa, 1993 : 27). The upper officials, with obvious reason, start to treat the soldiers better so that none of the witnesses denounce them by revealing the truth. Rafe says, "The new firing officers leave us pretty much alone. / They know we know, and it works out well for all. / Still, they play games. They say they don't know / How long we'll be here?" (Hinojosa, 1978 : 31). In this way, Rafe witnesses all the process of how the truth disappears from history and the real happenings of the real world become puzzled.

The Useless Servants deals with this sudden and magical moment when hundreds of civilians instantly disappear from their existence with blow-up

of the Bridge. According to Klaus R. Scherpe in "Dramatization and De-dramatization of 'the End': Apocalyptic Conscience of Modernity and Postmodernity," this magical moment causes the readers a joy of knowing the truth since they sensed that the reality disguises and manipulates the truth but never had chance to experience the revealing moment of the truth. This real piece of the reality is only revealed to see in the moment that the mass massacre happens and it only lasts for the public to see until the officers make it suddenly disappear as if nothing happened. Thus, whenever this truth revealing moment happens, it calls the aesthetic sensibility to the viewer, making them think that "There was a magic in the scene which provokes profound joy whose uncontainable power was like the unmasking the devil" (Scherpe, 1988 : 358).

Rafe tries not to forget the truth that he has experienced, by asserting, "For all the talk, there's nothing the Army can do about what one thinks; and one does think, and remember" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 37). This active individual who recuperates the memory of the war and revives it through his journal is the one who has the power to fight against manipulation and conspiracy of official records. In this manner, through the vocalization of Rafe, these two war fictions reveal the forgotten history in the official past of the Korean War and they uncover depth behind the official historical facts of the Korean War.

Brian McHale in *Pöstmödernist Fictiön* argues that postmodernist historical fiction tends to investigate constrained realms or dark areas of history. They highlight contradictions in the "official" historical record, by supplementing or displacing the historical record itself (95). For McHale, "One of the thrusts of postmodernist revisionist history is to call into question the reliability of official history" (96). Thus, one finds the irony of postmodern narratives: history appears as the novel, and the novel appears as history. In postmodernist fiction, "official history is presented as a form of fiction [...] conversely, fiction, even fantastic or apocryphal or anachronistic fiction, can compete with the official record as a vehicle of historical truth" (McHale, 1987 : 96).

Even though in *The Useless Servants*, Rafe resists intensely against the loss of memory or amnesty, yet within a few months, being at war has become routine for him. Rafe explains, "I couldn't remember much of the fight anyway. No idea when I ate, slept, smoked or went to the john" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 58). It happens not only to Rafe but also to everybody at war. One of Old Guys, Frazier broke into laughter at Rafe's statement and says "It does that to you. You go crazy after a while. Happens to the Os, too. Hell, it happens to us Old Guys. It's human" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 58). Being at war had lost the sense of emergency for everybody.

Although Rafe experiences the war and sees the cruel scenes, he does not conceive it as the end of the world. As time goes by, he considers being at war part of his routine life. After experiencing the emergency-states a certain number of times, people become accustomed to these sensations, and can no longer feel the danger or the expediency as one had felt at the first time. For example, as the war goes on, Rafe in *The Useless Servants* increasingly views the horrible and cruel happenings of the war. He laments, "I saw photographers and moving picture cameramen recording this: some 500 ROKs buried waist deep with their hands tied behind their backs, bayoneted, clubbed, beaten and shot. We then saw photographs of eighty-six GIs also buried the same way and in the same condition" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 76). Rafe perceives this horrible reality of war voyeuristically, and almost as if the end of the world already happened. In other words, Rafe experiences the war as if he were in a condition of the absolute absence of events.

Scherpe refers to this as "De-dramatization of 'the End.'" Scherpe argues that in the époque of post-history, "the end of the world can not continue to be a topic anymore, at least not as a dramatic topic" (349), as seen in de-dramatization of the end of world in *The Useless Servants*. In the first place, Rafe in the apocalyptic situation, never can know the present situation of the war. He only conjectures that, "We're in solid defensive position here, though. All the talks by the Os and the Old Guys (and some are pep talks) amount to the same thing: this is it. We're holding. We're holding, men, etc." (Hinojosa, 1993 : 38). Even worse than that, the soldiers do not know

their physical location. Rafe admits that when the army informs the soldiers of their position, "You've got to believe or go crazy. I wish I had a map, though. Wish I knew what Korea looks like: where we are" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 38). For the soldiers, the reality of war is not tangible but only is audible through the information of the upper officials even though they are physically present there.

The general climate is one of ignorance about the war. Mass media does not even successfully inform citizens of the war happenings. For example, in a letter, Aunt Mari claims that "she has no news about the war except for headlines" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 115). Mass media in his estimation, selects information by only revealing the news that can support the system: if the society needs the tension, mass media provides the illusion of the event and if the event happens, it pretends that everything is under control. Media follows the same pattern that led the upper part of the military to conceal the truth about the destruction of Nakdong Bridge. Jean Baudrillard explains the reason behind this phenomena of mass media by pointing out that "every scene of the public information and every mass media function only to maintain the illusion of the event, the illusion of the real actions and objective happening [...] because 'happening' is considered as a real danger, which threatens the 'system', and against 'system' " (Scherpe, 1988 : 353).

In order to create this illusion of happening, the images and enigmas of war, with which the literature of the end of the twentieth century seems to challenge the conscience of the safety and the pragmatic conscience, cause a large aesthetic fascination toward the representation of the "emergency-states." Scherpe finds in deconstructionism the reason there is a special aesthetic fascination within postmodernism toward terrorism, threat and nuclear dissuasion: The deconstructionism in postmodernism is expressed through, "the destabilization of the significant and signifier, with the destruction of the symbolic order" (Scherpe, 1988 : 352). In the same way, postmodern thought is based on the destabilization of the ontological certainty of the reality, which is, in postmodern era, "only perceived voyeuristically" (Scherpe, 1988 : 352).

The major reason that Rafe becomes desensitized of the feeling of the end of the world is because he has already seen too many deaths during the war. Rafe confides, "I don't want to look at the Chinese dead. / There are hundreds of them out there. They died in the city, / They died in the fields and in the hillsides. / They died everywhere" (Hinojosa, 1978 : 17). This statement succinctly expresses Rafe's numbness with death. One does not need to dramatize the end of the world anymore since after having seen myriad dead bodies, one feels that the end of the world has already happened. As Baudrillard confirms, "everything [the end of world] has already happened" (Scherpe, 1988 : 354). Baudrillard in the same sense, explains that there is no room for narrative dramatization of the end of the world and also "nuclear war will not happen; because it already happened" (Scherpe, 1988 : 351).

In *The Useless Servants* the soldiers see "many CCF [Chinese Communist Force] along the way, so many almost stepped on them. It was thick with dead in some spots. Enough to drive anyone nuts. Some of the bodies were frozen stiff" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 122). Yet, Rafe's report of that fact has no drama attached to it. There are countless instances where truths such as, "our soldiers have counted 4000 confirmed. CCF dead. Their offensive here is broken for now (Voice is matter-of-fact; no dramatics)" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 122), are reported in a strikingly natural manner.

Since the war lasts for long time, not only the soldiers but also the local people learn to live with the war and take the end of the world situation as normal. Rafe notices how "Twenty miles from here it will be quiet. Farmers will be working plots [...]; the Korean women will be cooking; the kids will be playing inside the huts and no noise of war over here. War, Hat said, is always localized" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 125). War can be local because of the human tendency toward desensitization and amnesty. Everyone, even though they face the real danger of war, lives this situation as normal since in this hiper-reality, the reality is not tangible anymore and only can be perceived voyeuristically. The postmodern reality is conceived as a pastiche of various different realities and so it is hard to know which world one is living in, in other words, the postmodern reality is ontologically unstable

and undetermined. In the same way, its individuals are also epistemologically uncertain, they do not know how to interpret his ontologically instable world and therefore it get harder for them to have a strong political and social agenda. Rafe, just like the other postmodern individuals, looses agenda to fight back to this reality that hides truth.

However, following the death of Charlie, Rafe's attitude toward this reality changes. Through the death of his friend, Rafe learns to suffer from the loss of the people and to really begin to question the meaning of killing people in war. Rafe expresses the meaninglessness of dying in war: he says "We've come, Joey and I have, Charlie, / To pay you our last respects again, / we've only just learned / You've been dead these past three months. And buried around here, / Some place, (Hinojosa, 1978 : 23). Rafe says "I have no idea how long I'll be able to sit and write about what goes on here; words fail when I write the word 'horror' and the word itself means little unless one speaks of bodies that are torn, burned and unrecognizable" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 134). As an act of respect to the dead, Joey and Rafe ride in the truck with the dead from the army base.

Joey and Rafe start to develop, what Ernst Jünger calls "the Second Conscience," which one can use to react properly against this hiper-reality. According to Jünger, "the second conscience is always an aesthetic conscience that makes people believe that they are in militancy over the civil realms where they observe voyeuristically the battle field" (Scherpe, 1988 : 357), in order for each individual to possess attentive and critical observation to the postmodern society in the purpose of alerting and revealing what the visibly or invisibly catastrophic era tries to hide from the public mass.

With the Second Conscience, Rafe starts to sense that this reality that he is living is not normal anymore and likewise questions the justifiability of wars after Lt. Bradkey's suicide. Rafe claims to have "no idea why he shot himself. [...]; most of us here are half crazy anyway" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 154). Even facing this strange event, people de-dramatize this situation. Dumas and Frazier say "suicide is normal in this situation, both said that was a crazy thing to say, and they admitted it, but then went on to say that

war itself is crazy, so it's a wonder and a miracle most people don't kill themselves" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 155).

Despite of the de-dramatization of the rest of the people, Rafe keeps developing the Second Conscience until the revealing moment of truth arises when Joey dies and Rafe gets hurt by the rocket hit. He recalls that Joey "caught it in the chest and face, and he died instantly, as did Frazier and Hat. At the instant of burst, I was lying on the ground steadying the binocs against a tree stump [...] the blast tore the binocs from my hands, which along with the left side of my face, were then peppered with dust" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 166), and Rafe thought he would lose his sight. That was the final act of the North Korean guerrillas who surrendered peacefully; they had but one rocket and fired it from "some beat up launcher that could just as easily have blown them up in the firing" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 166).

Jünger says, "The starting point of the Second Conscience is always a catastrophic vision in which 'the death attack to the public mass' becomes tangible" (Sherpe, 1988 : 357). After this personal experience of death attacking the public mass, Rafe starts to perceive clearly the irony of war. He says "These must've been the guys that killed our guys [...] A fluke. That's all. Irony, too, and Joey would've laughed at that. And now? Charlie Vallalón died sometime in December; Joey this April, and I'm still here" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 167). Like Jünger says the starting point of Rafe's epiphany of the truth was to witness the catastrophic vision of the death attack to all the soldiers. Rafe sadly remembers that Joey once said to Charlie and to him, "if anybody was going to make it alive out of this damned war, it was going to be the three of us" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 99-100).

Hinojosa shows how easy it is to forget the pain when one can not constantly and visually see the proof of war. Rafe observes a lightly wounded soldier, Mosqueda and his crying, then says, "If Mosqueda had lost an arm or a leg or an eye, a nose or an ear, / He'd not forget it nor would others let him, but / One man's meat is not another's souvenir, / And so, Mosqueda will forget; / If not, he'll become a bore, and another, or a public nuisance" (Hinojosa, 1978 : 36-37). Rafe also compares Mosqueda's situation to Joey's and thinks how ironic it is that the unhurt survivor has

every right to scream and cry out his pain but the dead can not even say a word and has to remain silent. Rafe says, "Joey Vielma, a casual visitor who came calling, / But this proves little except, perhaps a law of probabilities. / [...] / Joey Vielma caught it in the chest and face, / But Mosqueda was unhurt... (Hinojosa, 1978 : 37). Then Rafe laments on people's forgetting this moment of pain: "And although he [Mosqueda] swears he'll never forget it, / he will / As we all do, as we all should / and do" (Hinojosa, 1978 : 36).

Jünger insists an aesthetic of pain and fear, to promote both dramatization and de-dramatization of aesthetic objectivities, which are related to each other. At the beginning of this aesthetics, it achieves "an unconditional stylization of the reality in which the sudden intrusion of horror and violence in a normal situation without happenings, produces a moment of terror which is intensified to the happening" (Scherpe, 1988 : 357). In the same way, in *The Useless Servants*, Rafe tastes the real sorrow of loosing somebody after the experience of the rocket hit, and this way he physically experiences the bitter reality, which before he only observed voyeuristically. Rafe feels "angry and sad and tired" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 167), not because of feeling guilty of being alive alone but because of a sense of loss since Charlie, Joey and Rafe were like brothers. Rafe remembers, "Joey and I quit the next year when Charlie was kicked off the team" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 167).

Not only because of the crack of the hiper-reality caused by the rocket hit, but also since Rafe is Mexican-American from a marginal group of the society, it is possible for him to realize this disguising hiper-reality. The one who is in the center cannot perceive the ontology of his reality; Only the one who can be inside and outside of the society at the same time can conceive the wholeness of the reality. Borges once commented on the preeminence of the Jewish culture in the Western society because the Jewish people "act inside of the culture and at the same time do not feel attached without any special devotion to this culture. So it's always easier for the Jewish to innovate the western culture than a non-Jewish westerner" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 160).

After experiencing the rocket hit, Rafe stays in the hospital for the recovery of his vision and there visits the psychiatrist Dr. Perlman and explains him what is being a Texas-Mexican. He argues:

Dr. Perlman doesn't know about us, about home, Texas. I explained that we were different; that that part of Texas is home, our home. We're not like the rest of the guys in our outfit; they can go live anywhere in the United States, and many of them talk about moving to California, wherever. We can't, and we don't want to, either. That some of us leave for a while, but that we have to come back. Home. And so on. I finally said, "Dr Perlman, you're a Jew. You should know this better than anyone." No reaction from him. Nothing (Hinojosa, 1993 : 167-8).

After seeing Dr. Perlman not reacting to what he said, Rafe realizes that the world is a full of de-humanized and indifferent people under the disguise of being professional. Rafe now with the strong Second Conscience, rejects to accept that reality as normal and negates to be a part of them. He cries, "I will not trust anyone who doesn't react, who doesn't feel happy or sad or rejected or angry. If this is called 'being professional' in the psychiatry business, then psychiatrists miss what living is about: people, people who do or don't do things, who act and react and are not given to mere observation" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 168).

Rafe goes back to war as if nothing has happened, but now Rafe is different from the one before the experience of the rocket hit. Since then, Rafe starts to copy every name that he encounters, saying, "I copied down faithfully as if I were some big time reporter instead of who and what I am" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 184). Rafe says, "It's expected of me to be light-hearted and gay, / But I can only manage a smile" (Hinojosa, 1978 : 46), and shows his resolution to be the one who remembers everything that has happened and that the reality tries to hide.

On June, 1951, Rafe finally goes back to his home. Rafe expresses his appreciation of being Mexican-American from Texas, from the Rio Grande Valley, "who learned to love this land / Which Sonny Ruiz, with increasingly good reasons, / Calls home" (Hinojosa, 1978 : 46). He expresses the relief of being free from war and shouts, "home to Texas, our

Texas / That slice of hell, heaven / Purgatory and land of our Fathers” (Hinojosa, 1978 : 53). Now Rafe remembers the “Mass of Septuagint Sunday, 1949- when Chaplain [...] quoted Luke 17:10 to us: 'well, will we then be like the useless servants who did nothing more than that which was commanded of us?'" (Hinojosa, 1993 : 184) and how Joey, Charlie and he joked about that sermon, and sadly reflects that more than “the useless servants,” what they could be in war. Once more Rafe expresses his resistance toward the de-humanized and commended official records and insists in doing something that is more than that which is commended of him, which, in this case, is remembering and reviving the moment of sorrow and agony of war. Rafe says, “In time, the U.S. Army will tell us how many men / It lost here; for now / I'll tell you how many friends I lost” (Hinojosa, 1978 : 53).

Hinojosa’s works, *The Useless Servants* and *Korean Love Songs* in this way revive the memory of war to fight back the amnesty of postmodern individual. These books become more important specially in the present situation of after the “War on Iraq” when the society de-dramatizes again the notion of war, to still enrich the already rich and to make another tragedy of history, not only to the enemy but also to ourselves since in the end we will all be victims of his war: soldiers as useless servants, sent to kill and be killed and the civilians who will be sacrificed. Therefore, Hinojosa’s works *The Useless Servants* and *Korean Love Songs* which revive the painful memory and the irony of war should be read spreadly to make people realize what we have done and are doing in the critical present moment.

Abstract

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Key Words: Rolando Hinojosa, Korean love songs, The useless servants, The
 Korean War, Mexican-American (Chicano) / ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? , ? ?
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