

The Māori Matriarch in Keri Hulme's "Hooks and Feelers"

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Abstract

One of the most prominent women writers of Māori literary renaissance in New Zealand, Keri Hulme is well known for her fiction and short stories. Her portrayals of women stand apart from the conventional representations in present New Zealand patriarchal society. Descending from a mixed ancestry, Keri Hulme is part Māori, part Orkney Island Scottish and partly of English parentage.

Māori is a collective term attributed to the many tribes from different parts of Polynesia who arrived in New Zealand before British. Several tribes amongst Māori are believed to have followed a matriarchal social order, while some others followed patriarchy. Presence of both administrative policies provided queer gender equilibrium in their social/cultural manifestations.

*With British colonial invasion, the patriarchal system dominated Māori society washing away its matriarchal lineages and disturbing the former gender balance. In her collection, *Te Kaihau: The Winderater*, Hulme resurrects those Māori matriarchs in modern women of New Zealand society by breaking English patriarchal stereotypes about women in general and Māori women in particular. I have taken into account the story, "Hooks and Feelers" from Hulme's collection for my analysis, which also bagged her Katherine Mansfield Memorial Award in 1975.*

English literature began to be adopted as a mode of expression by New Zealand Māori writers in the 1970s. Peter Beatson categorises Māori English literature produced since then, into two phases. The traditional first phase covers publications during post-war period revolving around nostalgia of Māoriland, or Aotearoa [as New Zealand was named by Māori]. The modern phase during 1980s and 1990s addresses problematic relationships of Europeans/Pākehā [Māori word for foreigners] and Māori in New Zealand postcolonial society (Moura-Kocoglu, n.pg). This last phase is also popularly known as the Māori literary renaissance. Writers like Patricia Grace, Witi Ihimaera and Keri Hulme belonging to this phase were pioneers in re-establishing Māori literature in/through English language.

A group of island hoppers arrived New Zealand shores by canoes around AD 800 from different parts of Polynesia. They are said to be the first human settlers in this

Newfoundland. Exact number of tribes that arrived during this migration is unknown. Though each tribe spoke in a different tongue and followed diverse rituals, their tribal chiefs predominantly descended from a common Polynesian lineage. These farmers, hunter-gatherers and warriors collectively began to be known as Māori. Māori tribes consisted of a mixed social order with some following matriarchal structure and others patriarchal in nature. British colonisation upset the earlier gender equilibrium by ushering in homogenous patriarchal society in New Zealand.

Māori matriarchs lost means and forms of communication prevailing in previous social unit after colonisation. Keri Hulme, belonging to a mixed ancestry of Orkney Island Scottish, British and Māori cultures generates the colonised viewpoint in coloniser's language. Māori rituals and traditions being part of her identity, she elicits the important position women held in Māori family and society. Also, the writer, having gained knowledge of both Pākehā and Māori cultures, seems to objectively evaluate the eminence of women in olden times in comparison to colonial and post colonial New Zealand. "Hooks and Feelers" from her collection of short stories, *Te Kaihau: The Windeater* (1986) subtly paints a Māori matriarch in New Zealand post colonial patriarchal society.

This story is about a nameless family compromising man, woman and child. It is through the man's narration that we come to know about his wife and son's innermost emotions. The whole narrative is a flashback of events before an accident with in between peeks into the present. One evening the woman bangs their car door in anger fighting over spilled peanuts. Her child's hand stuck between is noticed with his shrill cries of agony and this shock ruins mother-son relationship afterwards. Family ties are shaken up with this disaster as well as new insight is gained by each member tied to the family web. In the end of the story, when bonds begin to re-strengthen between son and mother, the man reveals to the readers that his wife is afflicted with cancerous growth in her breast and may not survive to experience future joys with her husband and son.

The story begins with the husband recollecting his wife's hands filled with "grey, soft" (77) Charleston clay one morning. She had talked of moulding it into "tall fluted goblets" (77) glazed blue as the sea in which father, mother and son would drink red wine together bringing to mind the Holy trinity of God, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. That same evening she slams their car door without noticing her son's hand trapped against its side. This family relives the mishap from each character's perspective: husband/father, wife/mother and son/physically wounded. The story is told by the husband/father; nevertheless, he and the son/physically wounded orbit around wife/mother which makes her the central character in this narrative.

In spite of being the one to have inflicted wound on her own son inadvertently, she is looked upon as the centre of meaning for existence by both her husband and son. Her thoughts are not voiced in coloniser's patriarchal language, but her silence penetrates a reader's mind.

Pottery allows her silence freedom of speech and imagination. In her shed she finds a silent room of her own which her family acknowledges, despite the fact that conventional societal norms might deny her the same. She wants to expiate her sin in a way chosen by her and a mode of her choice instead of society making the choice for her. Here, the woman realizes her societal and personal responsibilities devoid of self pity.

Her husband pictures her full of life that misfortunate morning represented by the colours blue and red in her imaginative goblet/chalice. Biblical reference to the Holy Grail is found in her musings. She is portrayed happy with her womb conveyed by artistic creation of the chalice. Nature's darkness mingles with gloom in their lives after the son loses his hand elbow down being pinned to the car door. After few weeks, father brings back the son from hospital and goes to meet his wife in the shed; "Make a coffee,' she says brusquely. 'I'm tired'" (78). She begins to decline from joys of life, husband's affection, as she has denied her child a normal hand like other children and practice simple childhood joyfulness.

Role of women and men in patriarchal British culture has been altered in this domestic space. "Women clearly supported the political ambitions of their men and their communities...." (Rendall 231) in Pākehā societies, whereas, here is a man supporting his woman's emotional and creative ambitions going against the grain of occidental stereotype. Moreover, the husband is not mentioned to be linked with a religious or political community subconsciously guiding his understanding of and conduct towards his wife. Most importantly, the imagery of chalice, regarded crucial in considering a woman sacred from the Christian/Pākehā perspective is deconstructed by the male narrative voice. Instead of putting his wife on a heavenly pedestal and crucifying her for having committed one sin, the husband chooses to look upon her as a human capable of going wrong as himself.

Colonial power synchronised the minds of colonised in such a way that, "Maternal love, part of the divine law of nature, was to be the instrument by which women might take up their civilising mission" (Rendall 123) in respect to the uncivilised colonies. Since the coloniser's definition of civilisation stands dissimilar to that of the colonised, women's social duties are varied in these cultures. In this case, Pākehā/European perception of women's role in the domestic and communal sphere is evaluated solely on basis of her motherhood which is at par with her womanhood. While, from Māori viewpoint, matriarchal societies deemed women's role in familial and social spaces utmost essential and patriarchal ones believed women to be sacred, parallel to mother earth, from whom all the tribes emerged. Heterogeneous Māori society expected wildness in women as is present in nature.

For the reason that they were perceived as sacred, women were the centre of family, extended family and tribe at large taken care by patriarchal men. As one can see, responsibilities – familial and social were distributed amongst men and women uniformly whether matriarchal or patriarchal Māori order. Women alone were never expected to be nurturing in the former system of government, neither the one to be idolised in latter case.

Patriarchal Māori shouldered entire responsibilities on men who were to take care of their women's physical, psychological, social and economical welfare in the role of a father, brother, husband and son. Nurturing, then, was a part of manhood as much a part of womanhood in Māori traditions unlike Pākehā systems. Hulme paints a nurturing husband/father who stands in high esteem in either Māori way of life, although, appears to be just the opposite in Pākehā cultural subconscious. "The division of labour and the hierarchy between men and women, therefore, began to be accorded a cultural character ..." (Delphy 59) in course of colonisation and deconstructing this hierarchy becomes a weapon for decolonising one's mind.

The mother imposes penitence on herself projected by a crucifix [sign of patriarchy] "covered with black cloth" (81) in her shed. As she has destroyed her son's hand, she does not view herself capable of creation and by being disintegrated from the family feels bereft of her artistic self. Deliberately, she crucifies her art to further punish herself and integrate her inner self into the family circle. Change of colours from life giving red to life sucking black is shown in her psyche leading on to the next occurrence – a failed attempt to drown in the deep blue sea. This frantic deed integrates her back to being centre of family responsibilities. Sea, overwhelming with complex hidden creatures establishes itself as a faultless replica of the mother's mindscape where she has drowned after the misfortune. She opens up doors to her mind only to her husband who enjoys the warm sound of her breathing and is in love with her existence irrespective of the calamity.

In an attempt to eradicate her traumatic existence she sees the long awaited change taking place in her son/physically wounded. He forgets his physical trauma having experienced for few moments the absence of his mother before he saves her from drowning. Suicidal attempt by his mother puts to death his anger against her forever and in his pardoning she paves her path towards reintegration of the family bond. Her art shapes up into "large, shallow wine cups" (86) once again revealing the long dead desire to be alive, to create, to nurture. As a result she undermines the Christian concept of 'sin and redemption' by posing a bigger question of who defines a sin.

She finds it easier to forgive herself once her victim and her son discontinues retaliating. Keri Hulme ingeniously dents the western stereotype of a ruthless matriarch by sketching an intellectual mother susceptible to human frailties. Her passions are baited by the husband and son and in turn she baits her son's forgiveness. Womanhood is defined by her subsistence, not the world's; and charmingly understood by her husband and son. She is feminine and strong, temperamental and devoted at the same time towards her family. Under the guise of anonymous identity, Hulme stresses on Māori lineage allowing the mother feminine expressions in daily life suggesting "... that structural shifts in forms of governance affect more people more directly than imaginative shifts in critical

methodologies” (Gandhi 56). Keri Hulme’s choice of words such as hooks and feelers used for fishing are also a sign of un-gendered Māori occupation.

Violent imagery of birds of prey comes forward in the title, but absence of violence in the narrative language is obvious. Mention of the woman’s mother-in-law holding her responsible for her grandchild’s decaying hand shows family’s focal authority is passed from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, one woman to another. Cause of the mother-in-law’s anger being this mother/daughter-in-law/wife not living up to her responsibilities. Her son, the husband/father is the only passive character here, indicative of Māori men less involved in decision making be it home or the world. As he does not snap at his mother for being rude to his wife, it is difficult for him to understand his son’s aggravation towards his wife for a human inaccuracy. In traditional societies parents have an ultimate verdict gracefully honoured by children and, here, parenting is bestowed on women whose judgements are definitive for humankind.

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