

Māori Renaissance in New Zealand: Acolonial Perspective

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Postcolonial societies have always been a significant area of study in the academic world for its complex composition. Colonisation is a shared historical memory of many countries. Some of these countries are usually analysed in unison with respect to their nature of post-coloniality. For example, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand are related to each other by their shared aspects of colonisation. Whereas, the African colonies are a separate entity altogether in the postcolonial world, though, points of similar intersection among all postcolonial countries are common.

Each of them has “a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises” (Slemon 45). The contact zone between the coloniser and colonised has been regarded as a transition period for both. Since, culture is dynamic and ever changing, the intermingling of the coloniser and colonised affects “the apparatus of institutional power” (Slemon 45). While colonial phase witnesses “colonialist oppression” (Slemon 46) the postcolonial phase “reproduces colonialist relations through the strategic development of a vast semiotic field of representations” (47) in the literary works and political writings of colonised societies.

‘Because. You younger ones, like your cousin, you’re giving our blood away. You want to make us weak. Those old things I tell you, you want to make them into nothing. There’s nothing wrong with a Maori boy,’ she said, ‘nothing wrong with a Maori,’ looking so full of sadness I could have cried (Grace 74).

The above dilemma corresponds to postcolonial New Zealand consisting of European migrants who discovered this island through colonisation, and the pioneer settlers of the island, the Māori. These culturally heterogeneous groups have gone through strategic development in the process of opposing each other, which is evident in their literature. Missionaries from Great Britain arrived in Aotearoa around 1800s. Whalers followed them from various British colonies. Māori were a nomadic tribe before settling down in Aotearoa, and naturally looked upon these migrants as traders or temporary migratories.

British imperialism came into force with the Treaty of Waitangi, 1840, which also proved Māori understanding of these migrations wrong. Several protests to the breach of this treaty finally led to Britain granting dominion status to New Zealand on 26th September 1907. During these sixty-seven odd years, beginning from the 1800s there has been intermingling between the Māori and European migrants, called the Pākehā. This *mélange* has given rise to an original body of literature in New Zealand that focusses on rebirth of the Māori values. This article concentrates on body of literature affecting cultural and political spaces in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Once the guest has eaten and drunk at your table, the guest becomes kin...beggar or enemy, friend or chief, if they knock on your door, it will open; if they seek your shelter, it will be given, and if they ask for hospitality, give them your bread and wine...for who knows when you may need the help of a fellow human? (Hulme 25)

Asian migrants are not grouped under the Pākehā in postcolonial phase. Although, the above word originally meant ‘a foreigner’ according to the Māori online dictionary, the meaning has evolved in textual, socio-cultural spaces. At present, this term specifically represents a New Zealander of European origin. This shift in word meaning is significant in relation to the Māori renaissance, brought about by Pākehā and Māori. During colonisation, the Pākehā literature predominantly pointed out, “The first necessity for the colonial writer – so runs the conventional wisdom – is to start writing of what he knows” (Lee 400).

Since they knew less about Aotearoa than their European places of origin, the deficiency reflected in New Zealand literature produced earlier, dominated by alien land imageries. “Perhaps that *was* home” (Lee 400) for Pākehā and New Zealand remained a British colony. The necessity to establish a home in the geographical space they occupied required ancient knowledge, or, at least, a system of knowledge existing in this island prior to becoming a British colony. Such a system could be provided by Māori “roots and lives and legacy” (Lee 401). Thus began the cultural renaissance in New Zealand moving backwards in history to undo the “surface alienation” (401) faced by individuals in present day.

And all of the chips from the tree would have been gathered and burnt. This would have been done in deference to the great lord of the forest, Tane mahuta, and because the debris was far too sacred to be used for any common purpose such as cooking or to be left as litter. And should any person abuse the tapu then,

lo, the penalty was death, just as surely as it had been death in biblical times for any person who touched the Ark of the Covenant (Ihimaera 255)

This discovery “of a native space” (Lee 400) by New Zealand citizens paved the path for an unattached political structure from Great Britain. The monthly External Affairs Review distributed free to individuals, newspaper editors, schools, training colleges, and universities sheds light on political awareness. This annual report encourages public interest in treaties to which New Zealand is a party (McIntosh 42). External Affairs Review supports public opinion and desires to incorporate them in the functioning of the government. Though predominantly Pākehā concentrated department functions from Wellington, the reports represent rebirth of Māori ideologies beneficial in the running of the state.

“Among other publications... in English and Māori, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, collections of international documents of special significance, and most recently, a handbook of information on the United nations” (McIntosh 42) are worth mentioning in New Zealand’s foreign policy. “New Zealand at present has 11 diplomatic posts abroad: High Commissions in the United Kingdom, India, Malaya, Australia and Canada; Embassies in the United States, France, Japan, and Thailand; a Commission in Singapore, and a United Nations Office in New York” (McIntosh 47–48). Clearly, the number has grown as the nation has expanded foreign missions; despite everything in the initial stages, commissions represented countries regarded as kith and kin by the Māori and the Pākehā societies.

New Zealand rewrites her own colonisation history re-establishing ties with Great Britain as an extended family to European citizens. This re-writing of post-coloniality in the political and cultural sphere echoes in Māori Literary Renaissance. Tentatively in the 1960s and 1970s with “notable first works by Ihimaera (first collection of short stories, first novel), Patricia Grace (first book of fiction by a Māori woman), and Hone Tuwhare (first book of poetry in English)” (Kennedy xi) embarked Māori literary renaissance. Ihimaera’s constant reiteration, interviews, editorial introductions, author’s notes of his earlier publications, and reception of the same affected the emergence of Māori fiction (25) which has now become popular as New Zealand fiction.

Gleamed all their muskets bare,
Fright’ning the children there;
Heroes to do and dare,
Charging a village, while

Maoridom wondered.
Plunged in potato fields,
Honour to hunger yields,
Te Whiti and Tohu,
Bearing not swords or shields,
Questioned nor wondered,
Calmly before them sat,
Faced the Twelve Hundred (Mackay 31).

“Ihimaera and Don Long co-edited the first anthology of Māori writing edited by Māori, *Into the World of Light* (1982)... The anthology is focused on consolidating Māori renaissance and sovereignty imperatives” portraying a significant body of Māori literature before Witi Ihimaera (Kennedy 26). Due to lack of alphabets, Māori writers chose to write down Māori ethics in English language, therewith elaborated in such anthologies. The cultural and political upheavals had also proven Māori ethics accepted as ancestral ethical values by the Māori and the Pākehā cultures. In accepting the coloniser’s language as a mode of native expression, New Zealand proves her “profound belief in collective security” (McIntosh 32) by deconstructing colonial binaries.

The most interesting aspect of this body of literature is its legacy carried on by part-Māori and part-Pākehā writers simultaneously. This is visible in *Once Were Warriors* (1990) by Alan Duff, son of Oliver Duff. He chooses to share the darker side of his lineage in creative work. His dual identity portrayed in the mindscape of the protagonist Jake Heke, stranded as a Māori warrior in a Pākehā social structure has a healing effect on successive creators. “Thus a Māori-warrior ethos may circulate indiscriminately from nineteenth-century land wars in New Zealand to Michael’s grandfather in Crete, France, Syria, and Egypt, or Sam in Vietnam” (Kennedy 131).

Alan Duff’s fiction “embraces radically different forms and functions of colonialist oppression and radically different notions of anti-colonialist agency” (Slemon 51). Through his character’s, Duff problematises the notion of coloniser’s imprints in postcolonial society. De-imprinting is depicted by Tuwhare, Grace, Ihimaera, and Keri Hulme in their works too. Critics have often pointed out that Hulme is not Māori enough by blood, but indeed her contribution along with Ihimaera and Grace “played a key role in establishing the Māori literary genre in the 1970s and 1980s” (Kennedy 33).

Duff and Hulme also prepared the way for other part-Pākehā writers to be a part of renaissance movement that was soon to result in the rebirth of New Zealand literature. “All the rich structures of language were present, but the currents that animated them were not home to the people who used the language here” (Lee 399) in the colonial period. English language becoming mandatory in government and education institutions; the coloniser’s rule surfaced as a medium of expressing native views for New Zealand citizens instead of acting as a dividing factor.

Keri Hulme winning the Booker Prize for *the bone people* (1984), Witi Ihimaera’s *The Matriarch* (1986) in quick succession with *The Whale Rider* (1987), and Elizabeth Knox’s *The Vintner’s Luck* (1998) reflecting Māori culture on an international scale established New Zealand/Aotearoa literary genre (Kennedy 115). Not to forget, the growth of *Kohanga Reo* movement (Māori pre-school movement) had resulted in 416 *kohanga* throughout the country in 1985, increasing to 765 in 1996 (Moon 26) hand in hand with the literary movement. The release of the films, *Whale Rider* in 2002, *The Piano* (1993), set in New Zealand and *Once Were Warriors* in 1994 created a new academic canon in world literature besides becoming New Zealand classics (Kennedy 115).

Joy for the brother sun chesting over
the brim of the land, and for the three
young blokes flaked out in the back seat
who would make it now, knowing that they
were not called to witness
some mysterious phenomenon of birth on
a dung-littered floor of a stable

but simply call
on a tired old mate in a tent
laid out in a box
with no money in the pocket
no fancy halo, no thump left in the old
ticker (Tuwhare 280)

This movement is an ongoing process in New Zealand and the beginning alone is exemplified here. “In the footsteps of Ihimaera’s earlier anthologies, *Into the World of Light* (1982) and *Te Ao Mārama* (1990–96), the biennial Huia Publishers short-story collections (1995–) continue to provide a forum for new Māori writers....” (Kennedy xi). Creative writers are not required to be Māori by blood, but by thought and nationality. In fact, Māori political,

cultural, and, literary renaissance began to re-relate the Māori and the Pākehā in terms of New Zealand citizens rather than colonised and coloniser, victim and oppressor, pioneer settlers and conquerors.

“Education had become one of the main tenets of this new phase of development” (Moon 31). Pākehā English language education gifted Māori language with a script and Māori ancestral learning process through *Kohanga Reo* gave the Pākehā a history of New Zealand prior to colonisation. Dissolving the binaries, this movement provides a fresh perspective on post-coloniality that can be adopted by other postcolonial nations. It is worth mentioning that this perspective is because migratory individuals or groups inhabit fairly all of New Zealand, as it was one of the last nations occupied by human civilisation. “The foundations for a recovery had been dug deep, and would not easily be shaken” (Moon 31) by any external forces, in respect to Māori-Pākehā relations.

There is a part of me that will not change, and it is buried under a ton of earth in a deep gully. The ngaio tree will age and die. Or perhaps it will not age. Perhaps the wind will have in spite of its protectors, or perhaps it will be in the way and will go under the axe one day. But the stone with both life and death upon it has been returned to the hands of the earth, and is safe there, in the place where it truly belongs (Grace 9).

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