

Reclaiming The Human- Nature Communion: An Ecological Quest In Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch*.

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Abstract

*Maori literature focuses on the sacred communion of human beings and the mother-Nature. The disastrous effects caused by colonialism on the Maori community are vividly portrayed by the dominant Maori writers such as Witi Ihimaera, Alan Duff, Patricia Grace and Keri Hulme. The eternal urge to reclaim the lost identity is discussed in their works. Nature is given the supreme role in Maori literature. One of the appropriate instances is Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* (1986). Witi Ihimaera analyses how the ravaging effects of colonialism deformed the identity of the Maori community. This article analyses Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* and attempts to unveil the changes brought by colonialism on the environment and the efforts taken by the Maori people to reclaim the land as well as their true identity.*

Key Words: *Maori, Identity, Colonialism, Nature.*

Human beings are inseparably united with nature. Humans cannot survive without depending on nature. They consume the natural resources for fulfilling their needs. At the same time, unlike old times, human beings exploit nature for accomplishing their selfish needs. The developments that happen overtime in the Earth is as a result of destroying natural resources. The people are ignoring the fact that this act of destruction gradually leads to the very extinction of the resources and thereby becomes the major threat to human existence. The present situation of nature can be well understood by analysing poetry over years. The nature poet, William Wordsworth praised the nature as the divine source of solace to all the frets of life whereas, the contemporary poets lament over the dying nature. So, restoration of nature's beauty and vigour becomes one of the prominent themes of literary works. Numerous pieces of research related to Nature and its renewal have been produced. Researchers attempt a comparison of the past and the present in order to make the globe aware of the need to restore nature and its resources. The effort is to be taken by the inhabitants of the Earth for the wellness of the coming generations.

During the old times, the human- nature communion was intense and serene. But as a result of increase in population, the advent of industrialisation and modernisation, technological advancement, there formed a gap in the relation. The writers such as Chinua Achebe portrayed the intensity of human- nature relation. Indigenous cultures depend highly on nature. Their life activities are interconnected with nature. Their identity was defined based on their communion with natural beings. They venerated nature and natural beings as their gods. They devoted their lives to nature and its well- being. If we check the myths and legends of indigenous people, the importance they had given to the animals and greenery around them will be clear.

The Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand. The word, 'mauri' means life force that signifies the interconnection between all things in the Earth. 'Ma' means "to be connected to" (Beau Paul) and 'uri' means "All things, seen and unseen" (Beau Paul). 'Mana' or power will be absent if 'mauri' is not there. So, in order to preserve 'mauri', the preservation of environment is inevitable. The Maori were shattered by the adverse effects of European colonialism. They were not able to voice their sufferings through any medium. But, as years passed by, postcolonialism became one of the major academic disciplines and that led the academicians to focus on the indigenous countries which were ravaged by colonial rule. In the postmodern era, people have started to share their experience through literature. Writers such as Witi Ihimaera, Alan Duff, Patricia Grace and Keri Hulme focus mainly on the colonial experience. Their works also convey the need to make the Globe aware of the trauma endured by the indigenous community during the colonial rule. The fact that the impacts still persist is remarkable.

The Maori writers, through their works crave for a process of revisiting the ancient times and thereby reclaim the golden past. It is to be noted that the New Zealand government has adopted numerous projects to conserve nature. The Maori people enjoy reputable positions in the political scenario. The Maori writers studied English language in order to connect with the outer world. In Maori belief, the Earth mother, 'Papatuanuku' and the Sky father, 'Ranginui' are considered as the chief Gods. This shows the importance of nature to the Maori community. Sharks are considered as the guards of the community. The Maori used to perform various rituals for respecting the natural forces. Before they do any activities, they strictly follow rites to venerate the ancestors. Ecocriticism "defines itself as a practice of reading literature from an earth-centred perspective" (Buchanan 143) or "postcolonial criticism" (Garrard 320). Ecological imperialism tries to find out

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the changes brought by the colonisers to the nature. The 'Pakeha' or the Europeans underestimated the Maori as barbaric. The Maori creation myth, that is, the formation of the land of Aotearoa is based on the holy communion of the Maori and nature. The relation between the Maori ancestor, Kahutia te Rangi and whale in Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* perfectly portrays the communion. The destruction caused to the sea is vividly expressed by Koro Apirana's words from *The Whale Rider*, "Listen how empty our sea has become" (Rider 59).

The Matriarch is one of the prominent novels written by Witi Ihimaera. It deals with the life and mission of Riripeti, the Matriarch and her grandson, Tamatea. In the novel, Witi Ihimaera deals with a handful of myths related to the human-nature association. In the prologue to the novel, there is a comparison that, "Father Blain said that all families are somewhat like jungles. So it is with mine, but I have made it even more of a jungle by mingling fiction with fact, like saprophytic vines twining the trunks of already dead trees. I think the Matriarch herself would have approved of this. After all, she was the one turned my own life into fiction from fact" (*Matriarch* 1). Riripeti tells Tamatea about the need to love one's own land. "And because this is your land, you must know it like it knows itself, and you must love it even more that it loves itself" (*Matriarch* 95). There are episodes in which Tamatea gets excited by the architecture of the ancient Ramaroa hill while he climbed it. Riripeti took Tamatea all over Waituhi when he was a child. He revisits the land after years and is disappointed by the changes that happened to the land due to the advent of modernisation and industrialisation. He realises that the good old times are not possible to recover. Riripeti's uncle, Wi Pere compared the Pakeha to "a great big shark" (*Matriarch* 314) who swallowed the land of the Maori. Till the colonial invasion, the people used to offer a part of their cultivated products to their chiefs as a mark of their respect. But after, the invasion, instead of the chiefs, the Queen started enjoying all the benefits.

The changing face of Waituhi is shown through Tamatea's own words, "The world was changing, the juggernaut of progress rumbling across land, seas and skies, with an inevitability which threatened the realms of dragon, or sea serpent, mermaid or siren, giant or ogre, winged horse or unicorn, phoenix or other legendary beast. The cities spread across the lands were once had been enchanted forests and fabulous kingdoms. Aeroplane and dirigible airships droned the skies, scattering the winged horses with their metal blades and thrusting through the clouds which once had known dragonflight" (*Matriarch* 437). Riripeti expresses her hatred towards the Pakeha by telling that "He is the Devil, the devourer of souls and land" (*Matriarch* 176). These words are enough to make the outer world understand about the cruel nature of the European colonisers. Riripeti's dream was to restore the human-nature communion by saving her land from the colonisers. But she could not accomplish her mission. Thus, she assigned the task to her grandson, Tamatea. Tamatea, at first, becomes attracted towards the luxury of European nations. But he is reminded of his real life mission and returns to his native land. Riripeti told Tamatea that, "This was our land. This was our life. It's your life and land now. It has been yours even before you took your first breath..." (*Matriarch* 6).

Frantz Fanon, in his *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) stresses upon the need to embrace the native culture in order to escape from colonial shackles. The British transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson had the belief that nature controls human life. Majority of the Maori novels deal with the sole aim of regaining the lost values of the Maori community. The eternal craving of the Maori to escape from the control exerted by the European colonisers is exhibited in most of the Maori works. The intension of the Maori authors is to share the trauma of the colonised using the language of the oppressors. That is why, English language is used by the Maori authors. Thus English becomes an effective tool to fight against the cruelties of the colonisers. The Europeans tried to impose western culture on the Maori. Some of the Maori were attracted by the immense opportunities offered by the western world. But some of them firmly stood for preserving their real culture. But the colonial rule marred the original identity of the Maori and thereby deformed the identity. That led the Maori to engage in an unending conflict of existentialist dilemma. Tamatea in the novel is haunted by identity crisis. He marries a Pakeha woman, Regan. But interestingly, towards the end of the novel, Regan decides to stay in Maori land. She wishes to educate their children in Maori school. This shows the richness of the Maori tradition. Colonisation resulted in treating lands as mere commodities. The land was separated from the real inhabitants. The Maori, like other indigenous communities lived in groups rather than living like the western nuclear families. The Maori people in the contemporary age are still haunted by the adverse impacts of colonialism. They still try hard to get over the situation. The New Zealand government has established numerous programmes to preserve the Maori tradition and language. The sites of heritage are preserved. Measures are taken for the conservation of nature and natural beings. The Maori rituals are followed by the people even now. The traditional Maori tattooing, 'moko' and the traditional war dance, 'haka' have got global acclaim. Thus the paper analyses how Witi Ihimaera portrays the colonial experience of the Maori community and the need to restore the tradition that is long lost.

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