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TRACING THE INDIGENOUS MEMORY AND BICULTURAL IDENTITY
THROUGH CHARACTER FORTIFICATION IN KERI HULME'S '*THE BONE
PEOPLE*'

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Abstract

The best of the literature from any post-colonial nation involves itself in representation of a very dynamic culture that is spaced out from the greater canon of what constitutes World Literature. The use of Maori and Pakeha by Keri Hulme in "The Bone People" in a very inter-twined manner, has served the ethnic propriety in a manner that critics have often wondered whether the indigenous cultural appropriation is innate or absorbed by identification at a later stage by Hulme. Thus in the middle of such a question, the characters that she has portrayed with the likes of Joe, Kerewin and Simon are representative of a very individual culture that goes through changes over years and yet retains their originality. The idea of the use of "ancestors" as a symbol of tracing history to its roots, making the lineage synonymous with the fortitude, patience, endurance and healing is all beautifully shown through the passage of memory in the very novel. Thus memory formulates itself sometimes as abuse, sometimes as

music and sometimes as story that takes the reader in the journey along. The memory and the bicultural identity helps in establishing a past- that of Aotearoa or New Zealand, that is narrated in the form of individual stories of past and associations of the same in the present by means of various characters, that we will explore in this paper.

Keywords: Maori, Aotearoa, ancestors, identity, abuse

Introduction

The Bone People is a novel about the rediscovery of Maori spirituality and ultimately its resurrection as a part of a bicultural New Zealand society. Maori identity is centred around the *whanau*, or extended family and their tribes- *hapu* or *iwi* where 'iwi' literally means 'bones'; hence the title of her novel 'The Bone People' which is derived from the Maori idea that bones represent ancestors. The Maori believe that their ancestors are spiritually present in their physical

RESEARCH ARTICLE

environment and, humans and their ancestors are linked through descent. Thus all things in the present come from the past and the past is anticipatorily reflective of the present. In a conversation with John Bryson at the Melbourne Writer's Festival in 1993¹(cite) she says that in the Maori tradition, one is a part of a continuum of ancestors. Through ancestors one has access to what the former experienced, did, thought, felt and in some way or the other this is manifested in daily life. She translates the term for this into English as-

“Carrying your ghosts on your shoulders” which denotes that despite feeling lonely or alone, one never quite actually is so. Hulme further suggests that humans are “nothing more than people”, in that they are only links in a genetic chain. Tribes are made up of all living, dead and future members, and their causes and interests remain alive in their descendants.

Hulme explores this concept of ancestors as spiritual helpers through their intervention in Kerewin's illness. Kerewin has been detached from her family but she must face the “secrets that crept and chilled and chuckled in the marrow of her bones”²(cite) and the “skeletons in the closet”³(cite) which represent her estranged family via the bone symbolism. Finally, she becomes one with the earth's pattern of life and death after she is healed at the end when she claims she has no bones left and

that they are dissolved in the earth. The intermingling of the past and present- as memory, as a cycle of life and as a metaphoric-esoteric time-scape is thus achieved, as prevalent in the Maori tradition. In this manner family is dealt as a source of destruction and healing, pain and joy, alike. She writes- “A family can be the bane of one's existence. A family can also be most of the meaning of one's existence...”⁴(cite) and hence the families we are born into are largely linked with spirituality and emotionality. Her familial ties exist not only by blood but mostly as those that are extra-biological and nurtured by her imaginary vision. This is expressed in her presentation of Joe and Kerewin's partnership without sex, parenthood between Joe and Simon although the former was not the birth giver of the latter. Her families without actual ties form stronger bonds and better families than the ones formed by blood relations that are strife with tensions and problems.

Ancestry inevitably points to the past and Hulme's characters all conceal their pasts, which are causes of immense trauma for them. Joe is debilitated by Hana and Timote's death while Simon dreads the drug-induced darkness. Kerewin isolates herself in her tower. Ultimately all this proves to be self-destructive because severing oneself from the past and heritage of the family is not only detrimental to oneself but also disrespectful to one's

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ancestors. Hence the multiple use of the concept of “ghost” which is but the haunting past that cannot be denied. These ancestors reached Aotearoa by canoes and tribes would gather around canoes to offer respect to them, thus making canoe a symbol of migration, livelihood, war, and transport for the dead into afterlife and is also the medium for gods. The canoe is a symbol of creation in Maori myth, and in the novel, Hulme uses it as symbolic of Joe’s protection from his painful past. This canoe contains the secrets of the god that is the country’s soul-*mauriora*, and symbolises past origins, ancestral authority and also the consolidation of New Zealand spiritually.

Indigenous groups associate and identify with land and so the land and individual relations to the land are very important among them as well as Hulme. Akin to the ancient Greek oracle or priestess Maori traditions have wise persons in their myths who live solitary lives and brings together all mysteries- to decode them and give life its true meaning. They are called *kaumatua*. One such character in the novel is that of Tiaki Mira who Hulme employs to represent the spiritual world that all the characters are part of either willingly or otherwise. The *kaumatua*’s presence denotes the loss of land and power and resultant shift away from the spiritual world that has tarnished the Maori-ness of people. So the *kaumatua* repeatedly asserts- “I am

tied irrevocably to this land”⁵(cite). In the nineteenth century competition for land rose as the Europeans, in this context outsiders- *pakeha*, desired to use resources from lands belonging to Maori tribes. These tensions led to economic alliances between the two culminating into the Native Land Act in 1865. Before further comment about the Act and Maori-European negotiation and its relevance to the novel, native history becomes important in this context.

Encyclopedia Britannica notes that no official record exists of when the country of New Zealand came into being and who its initial inhabitants were, except that it was Polynesians from the central Pacific region who sailed in canoes to settle in New Zealand in the 13th century, who formed the Maori tribes. The first European to arrive in New Zealand was a Dutch sailor named Abel Janszoon Tasman, who sighted the coast of West-land (northwestern South Island) in December 1642 after which British naval officer and explorer James Cook in 1770 circumnavigated the two major islands, had violent encounters with the Maoris and gradually paved way for proper European colonisation. Initial newcomers or outsiders termed *pakeha* were welcome as long as the tribes suffered no harm. But gradually the Maori were drawn into economic activities with the Europeans, such as buying provisions and supplying trade goods for whaling, musket and rum. Inter-tribal warfare led the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Europeans to settle colonies at various places and the early to mid-nineteenth century witnessed more traders accompanied by Christian missionaries come in and start conversions.

All these affected Maori life tremendously in that wars were reduced and also diseases, but the values, daily operations and over all Maori way of life was influenced and drawn into Christian religious beliefs and capitalist, economic ventures. Maori lands were, one after another, taken away for trade purposes and finally in 1839 British naval officer William Hobson was given the task to annex the land completely. In 1840 the Treaty of Waitangi was signed by the Maoris by which they submitted sovereignty- *kawanatnga* to the British Crown in return for protection by the Crown and ownership of their own lands. It also had a clause that the Maori could only sell land to the Crown. Increased settlements and economic activities alarmed the Maori and chiefs like Te Rauparaha began to oppose further British settlements in the 1840s. The British generals were repeatedly defeated until Sir Thomas Grey took charge in 1845 and won over. In the 1850s relationships between settlers and Maoris soured as all promises of guardianship were forgotten by the colonisers. By the Native Land Act of 1962 private land transactions between individual settlers and Maori tribes were legalized and

finally by the Land Act of 1865 a majority of Maori land was confiscated and distributed between the European settlers. This was not just a material loss of land for the Maori, but a loss of home, identity and power and most importantly, the spiritual bond with land so distinct among them. They were rendered alienated and powerless in their own country.

Hulme asserts that bonding with the land is not erased through time or by colonisation and still continue to be the foundation of stories that define the people. The connection prevails, as Hulme states- “domination by another culture does not mean that erstwhile love/cherishing/treasuring of the place stops you remember, according to your ability to remember, how appearances were.”⁶(cite)

Thus memory, land and cultural survival are interlinked. One’s “ability to remember” determines the response to the past and present alike and if memory or remembering is kept alive it can survive the domination of other cultures. This remembering is twofold- to recall the past in order to keep the present alive, and to remember as better inhabitants of a diverse society.

Hulme unfolds a narrative of individual history and trauma that coincides with that of Aotearoa or New Zealand and

RESEARCH ARTICLE

this narrative relies highly on the proper functioning of memory. The narrative builds inroads to the refracted memories of Simon, Kerewin and Joe and shows the importance of constructive responses to the past so as to create the present and initiate healing. This historical reflective inquiry, Hulme suggests, occurs on both individual and national levels. The process of remembering is evolutionary and it coalesces past with the present so that each character can accept the story of his or her life.

In Joe and Kerewin we see memory as operative with associations to ancestors, that, finally, assists them to re-member their Maoritanga. Simon harps on individual memory in order to turn around the “terrible silence”- physical, because he is mute, thus devoid of language and symbolic because of his past traumas, that shadows his life. His powerful memory looms as a shadow and terrorizes his present. What he cannot express with words, he does with emotions and these gaps are filled by memories. Memory supplies the sense of what is unsaid, and serves as a bridge between pain and hope. Simon initiates the process of remembering that kicks off the other characters’ recuperation and healing. It is understandable from the novel that Simon knows where he has come from and Joe and Kerewin fail to understand him as their own spiritual quest and search for roots is deliberately ignored by them. This evasion

and fear of the past has created, in Kerewin’s words, a stasis, a hell in itself which is unchangeable. While the two adults silence their memories, their responsibility to their ancestral past is forgotten.

The function of memory within Simon is twofold. It creates a web of music and language composed by his recent memory- that of his union between Joe and Kerewin. Simon is also disturbed by the horrors of his earliest memory of torture and abuse since he was a child. Through the narrative where in the beginning there was darkness, we enter into the recesses of Simon’s mind, which harbours scenes of terror, helplessness and torture, yet is characterized by the presence of words-“In the memory in the black at the back of his eyes, there are words...”Yet this language is of no avail to him as it provided no hope or solace. Simon’s visions and auras give insights to the lives of the others. Through language and music, he weaves a web to entrap the readers, who are also co-opted in the activity of discovering the pasts of the characters and become companions in the path of healing. The memories are craftily and intricately fortified within the web and needs creative attention to be unfurled.

Thus the characters with their individual memory, losses and insecurities maintain the balance of the novel’s ecosystem and it is imperative that for a

RESEARCH ARTICLE

harmonious working of the society at large, the characters must come to terms with all that contributes to their weakness. The indigenous language and the beautiful amalgamation of the cultural differences for working towards a global literature. Benediktsson mentions that though the novel with the cultural density is difficult for outsiders in the first instance, the placing of the characters within the periphery of the similar human emotions, bruises, language gaps and the magical realism in everyday life that will help in integrating a whole new New Zealand that thrives upon the Maori sub-culture even

today. Thus the acceptance of the readers must come after these usual challenges.

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