

## Cultural Significance of Maori Land

**B. Deva Shanthini**

Assistant Professor, Mary Matha College of Arts and Science, Periyakulam East  
Theni District, India

### Abstract

This present study portrays the Cultural Significance of Maori Land. The problem of the Maori tribes is not money but culture and identity. The land and the sea are their universe about which there are stories of great deeds and relationships enough to tell for a lifetime. Patricia highlights in her novels that their land is as good as any other land in the universe and counsels her country men to stand for their basic rights.

**Keywords:** culture, identity, Maori Land, forest

Maori Land, the present New Zealand is eulogised as *God's Own Country*, with great love, longing and awe. Colin MacInnes writes in *Australia and New Zealand: The Long White Cloud*, "For the average man New Zealand is a utopia. In all areas of life, the Kiwis [Maori] have made sensible decisions" (81). Earth means many things to the people who live on it. To a farmer, earth is rich soil, to a road builder, earth means mountains of hard rock and for a sailor earth is water as far as his eyes can see. But for the Maori land is their core - mother, self, soul, subsistence, culture and identity. This paper pictures the cultural significance of Maori land with reference to the novels of Patricia Grace, a living icon of New Zealand.

The Maori tribes boast that, they descended from Sky father and Earth mother, popularly known as Rangi and Papa. The Maori word for land is *whenua* (placenta). Maori myths give different stories about land. One myth sees all life, as being born from the womb of Papa, under the sea. The lands that appear above water are placentas from her womb. They float forming islands. Maori cosmogeny myth says that the earth remained in a close embrace with the sky, and numerous children were born to them in the darkness. All the children gave birth to the various species of flora and fauna, rocks and rivers, and all other nonliving things in nature. They affirm that all things are interrelated. Their relationship with land is not 'ownership of land' but a strong sense of 'kinship' which is intimate, ancestral and sacred, "Land does not belong to people, but people belong to the land" (*Potiki* 110). Elsdon Best and W. H. Goldie speak about a Maori tradition in, *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute* - 1904:

At birth the *whenua* (placenta) and *iho* (umbilical cord) are buried and a young sapling is planted over them; either a *ngaio*, a *karaka*, or *kahikatea*. As it grows, it is a sign of life for the child. Land and people sustain one another. As land protects its child, the child in turn is committed to safeguard the land. (100 - 01)

In another concept, the external world is a reflection of an inner sense of security and foundation. Maori children grow in an enclosure of land and its love, and an enclosure of people and their love of security and foundation. They see their family land as a spiritual sanctuary and a strong hold for all. "... earth was a strength ... earth strengthened them all. Care for it and it cares for you. Give to it and it gives. Through it you shoulder your pain" (*Potiki* 176). They consider trees, mountains, rivers and waterways as persons, claim a relationship, and express the internal sense of foundation till this day:

People were trees, with trunks and arms and leaves. You could get up against a tree. Put your arms around a tree, push up against, up against, a tree... Or trees were people, with bodies and arms and you could climb up and into, where you could find a place, where you could straddle and hold. You could hold the tree. It could hold you. You could rock. It could rock you. (*Dogside Story* 87-8)

The forests of the northern regions of New Zealand are the home of the kauri, one of the world's largest trees. They are the sentinels of the forest. "It was with these lands of giant trees that Maori ancestors identified themselves" (*Ned and Catina* 227). Trees and rocks are models for the behaviour of the tribes. So felling of forests, flattening the hills and the widespread loss of land are apocalypse for the loss of their spirituality and self-determining existence. Further it is the loss of their foundation and stability, and the loss of the nurturing principles of Papa.

The title character of the novel *Tu* sees Mount Casino in Italy during World War II. He feels quite nostalgic for the mount Taranaki of his nation, where he spent his childhood days and identifies himself with that through genealogy, "I think of my own home mountain, Taranaki, who is a lovely mountain indeed. I am my mountain, because my mountain is my ancestor, and by my mountain I am identified" (112). Wati Longchar echoes the indigenous people's pantheistic spirit and their dilemma in *Returning to Mother Earth: An Indigenous Perspective*:

When the mountain disappears what will be our identity? If we leave our ancestral village, what will be our culture and spiritual identity? If you do not allow us to cultivate what will we eat? ... If you don't allow us to fish, how can we send our children to school? If you do not allow us to practice shifting cultivation, what will be our religion, identity - our religion and identity are centred on the soil! How can we worship God? When all the trees have been cut down where will the

animals breathe can we and birds find home? When all the waters are polluted, what will we drink? When all the air is unsafe to buy air? (28)

Maori tribes who live by Te Awa Tupua, the third longest river, in New Zealand, revere the water as a person. They had been fighting to assert their rights over it since the 1870s, the longest legal dispute in the country. It has been recognised by

their Parliament as a “legal person”, in a move believed to be first in the world. The river has been formally declared a living entity under legislation passed on 15 March 2017. The Attorney-General, Chris Finlayson announces in, “New Zealand River Gets Legal Status as a Person”:

It will have its own legal identity with all the corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a legal person... This legislation recognises the deep spiritual connection between the Whanganui iwi (tribe) and its ancestral river... In practical terms, it means the river can be represented at legal proceedings with two lawyers protecting its interests. (*The Hindu*. 17 March 2017:18)

Land is an archive which contains the stories of the Maori’s cultural history. “There were their stories. There was their language” (*Potiki* 65). Land gives them ethics, rules and laws for their life. Transformation of land will destroy their stories for their children and fracture their history. The cultural significance of their land was utterly unknown to the British colonisers. They took all the good land for development and “the island was in a state of devastation, its former infrastructure practically demolished. Many villages had been destroyed, many cities and towns were in ruins... Many people were impoverished, homeless and without a livelihood” (*Ned and Catina* 238). *Potiki* portrays the imperial government’s plans to have an amusement park in the sea with water sports, underwater zoo, animal circus and to line the shore with palaces, castles, souvenir shops, and rotating restaurants above the sea. Dolman, a White officer negotiates with Hemi, a farmer:

It is development, opportunity... First class accommodation, top restaurants, light club, recreation centre with its own golf links - eventually, covered parking facilities... and then of course the water amenities... best in the country and will attract people from all over the world... launch trips, fishing excursions, jet boating, every type of water and boating activity... your shark tanks... trained whales and seals... you get off-season patronage... it’s not just a tourist thing... a much needed amenity... (88 - 9)

Deforming the landscape means moving forward for the White men. But for the natives, the sea has to be conserved to retain their indigenous ethos and traditions. They love to enjoy swimming and fishing in the natural way; to see the seal, dolphin, sting ray and whale moving in the sea naturally anytime, and not at particular times paying the British. Hemi explains, “The land and the sea was our whole life, the means by which we survived and stayed together. Our whanau [life] is the land and sea. Destroy the land we destroy ourselves. We might as well crack open our heads, take the seed, and throw it on the flame” (99). Mussels and eels are their daily bread feed and cray fish is an attraction in wedding feasts, “A wedding without crayfish on Southside? Nah, too shame... government is selling its cray quota to our own fishermen for seventeen dollars per kilo. Yeh making money for themselves”

(*Dogside Story* 24).

Maori cemetery is a sacred place with much spiritual significance. "...the earliest generations co-exist for Oceanic populations, because Our dead are woven into our souls like the hypnotic music of bone flutes... If the soul of the Pacific has had little political exigency in the regions colonialist history, its spiritual power has, in some way, been operative and omnipresent" (cited by Fuchs 10). But the settler government ignores their spiritual significance and demand their land for development. In *Baby No Eyes White* scientists and pharmaceutical companies carry on a rough business of making medicines with the remains of the dead in their sacred site and to make money:

... they are finding new bits and pieces in isolated communities... Their genetic bits are about to become some scientist's big discovery... your bits being taken and altered or reproduced, transferred into plants or animals, kept in labs long after you're gone, things like that, dead and live both at once... Looking for the big answers, or the cure-all for God knows what. (187)

Te Paania, an anthropologist and authority on sacred sites objects the research on behalf of her people:

This research interferes in a highly sacred domain of indigenous history, survival and, commitment to future generations... Genes are the ancestors within us... Stop targeting remote communities just because their genes may have something different to offer... people don't like the idea of their life patterns being taken away and owned by someone else... don't want the essence of themselves being altered or disposed of, or transferred into plants or animals or other humans. Stop pretending that indigenous people will benefit from this research. (280)

The problem of the Maori tribes is not money but culture and identity. The land and the sea are their universe about which there are stories of great deeds and relationships enough to tell for a lifetime. Patricia highlights in her novels that their land is as good as any other land in the universe and counsels her country men to stand for their basic rights.

## References:

Grace, Patricia. *Potiki*. Auckland: Penguin Books Ltd,1986. Print.

---. *Baby No-Eyes*. Auckland: Penguin BooksLtd,1998. Print.

---. *Dogside Story*. Auckland: Penguin BooksLtd,2001. Print.

---. *Tu*. Auckland: Penguin BooksLtd,2004. Print.

- . *Ned and Katina*. Auckland: Penguin BooksLtd,2009. Print.
- Finlayson, Chris. "New Zealand River Gets Legal Statusasa Person". *The Hindu*. 17 March 2017:18, Print.
- Fuchus, Miriam. "Reading Towards the Indigenous Pacific: Patricia Grace's Potiki", Web. 8 Nov 2009.
- Goldie, W. H. and Elsd on Best. *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*–1904,Web. 12 Nov 2009.
- Longchar, Wati. *Returning to Mother Earth: An Indigenous Perspective*, 1964. Print.
- MacInnes, Colin. *Australia and New Zealand: The Long White Cloud*,2013. Print.
- Reed, A. H.&A.W. *Mythsand Legends of Maoriland*. Illus. George Woodsand W. Dittmar. London: George Allen andUnwinLTD,1950. Print.

