

## READING INDIGENEITY IN PATRICIA GRACE'S *DOGSIDE STORY*

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### Abstract

*This paper shall attempt to analyze how the New Zealand Maori writer Patricia Grace attempts to give, in her novel Dogside Story, a perspective and a postcolonial image of a small rural Maori community in New Zealand. Writings about the indigenous community in New Zealand have, for a long time, been one-sided. This paper shall show how Grace's novel helps in the imagination, creation and celebration of difference in culture and ethnicity. It will also explore the impossibility of presenting a culture as monolithic as homogenous representation of a people or a land has a colonial taint. In writing about indigenous identity, hybridity and diversity, Grace challenges assumptions about her culture and develops a perspective.*

**Key Words:** indigenous, culture, land, representation, marginal, Grace.

The postcolonial theorist Abdul R. Jan Mohamed said “genuine and thorough comprehension of otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions and ideologies of his culture” (84). As individuals and societies are culturally formed, it is a futile task and an impossibility to try to negate or bracket the self. But attitudes and writings toward the indigenous Maori in New Zealand before 1970 had been plagued by the attempts to negate the identity and history of the Maori. This attempt echoes the idea put forth by Jan Mohamed that the one who possesses power will ‘rarely question the validity of either his own or his society’s formation and that he will not be inclined to expend any energy in understanding the worthless alterity of the [Other]’ (84). Attitudes and perspectives have to move away from this position to falsely label a land or a people as homogenous. Moreover, assuming this stance makes it impossible to see cultural and ethnic differences as the outlook it gives is limited.

The telling of stories helps in the imagination, creation and celebration of difference and distinction in culture and ethnicity. To combat the homogenous representation of a land or a people by representations which could have a colonial taint, it is necessary that a writer like Patricia Grace emerges to write about her own culture and present her own version of her own land. Bringing in her novels her own style of writing about indigenous identity, hybridity and diversity, she challenges assumptions about her culture and develops a perspective. The

Maoris were present in literature before the 1970s only as foils to the pakeha (white) imagination: “ferocious cannibals, beautiful natives, a noble and dying race; lazy picturesque dropouts emerged successfully, mostly as negatives to the clichés the Anglo-Saxons had of themselves” (Tawake 132). It is against this Patricia Grace writes powerfully about Maori identity and community, to speak and create an audience, and halt the monocultural perception of New Zealand. In a way, her writings have a collective value as they can be interpreted as an expression of individuality and culture. The individual stories become ‘necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole story is vibrating within it’ (Deleuze, Guattari 17). Every community has the right to be placed in its own historical, social and cultural environment; and writing is an important tool for expressing this.

Contestation over rights, livelihood security, and self-determination are key features in interactions between indigenous peoples, and the underlying dynamics of these struggles have evolved markedly since the later twentieth century with the ascendancy of the concept of “indigeneity”. Indigenous peoples have broadly embraced this concept and identity, using it to articulate their cultural distinctiveness and independence, justify claims to land and resources, forge wide-ranging alliances, and achieve visibility. Yet indigeneity as a concept, and project, has not been without critique, being subject to limitations, risks and appropriations, and engendering disputes over definitional boundaries, inclusivity and its performance.

The contestations between indigenous peoples (Maori) and their cultural assertion feature heavily in the writings of Patricia Grace. Recent fiction from the Pacific, including the works of Grace, embodies its postcolonial identity through the perspective it adopts, through its innovations in language use, and through its ability to transform traditional images of society and culture into images of postcoloniality. Patricia Grace’s works have been acclaimed for their depiction of Maori culture in general as well as Maori diversity. She helps give a voice to her culture and to reveal to the larger world what it means to be Maori. Her writings are often set in small coastal villages and concern community and intergenerational family relationships, revealing much about Maori life and concerns.

*Dogside Story* is set in a rural Maori coastal community. The main protagonist is Te Rua, a one-legged young man, and he lives at the edge of his Dogside community. His role in his community is to provide fresh fish and cray. He battles for the custody of his daughter with his aunts and this battle threatens to split up the community. The custody battle and the reaction of the community throw a light on familial relationships and the Maori community. In the novel, Grace engages with contemporary issues which make her an active commentator on social issues relevant to the Maori community. Her novels present a culture (Maori) from the inside, insisting on its rational organization and the coherence of its worldview. The characters represent voices that seek to account for Maori identity as raising consciousness is a necessity for them.

Keeping in mind the necessity of a representation, *Dogside Story* must be examined from a more complex perspective than that of a simplistic insider-outsider dichotomy. This is because there can hardly be such a thing as an essential inside that can be homogeneously represented by all insiders. A writer's loyalty to his or her people and the authenticity of his/her representation of a culture could be questioned. When the magic of essences ceases to impress and intimidate, there no longer is a position of authority from which one can definitely judge the verisimilitude value of the representation because "I" is not unitary and culture has never been monolithic (Minh-Ha 218). Differences do not only exist between outsider and insider, they are also at work within the outsider or the insider.

The reality of contemporary Pacific writers' experience illustrates the complications inherent in claiming privilege for their voices because they are native. Not a single one of the writers of recent fiction from the Pacific is positioned "inside" a single fixed cultural community. Patricia Grace herself is of mixed heritage. In no real sense can she be considered simply an insider or native voice who speaks for her people, and it would be careless to assign her to one and only one category.

An alternative to the insider-outsider dichotomy is available within the framework of postcolonial literary theory as a perspective from which to examine *Dogside Story*. With this alternative to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural contexts of the novel, it is possible to examine Grace's treatment of the consequences of colonization: displacement, hybrid cultures, fragmented selves, and marginal voices. The postcolonial perspective assumes that place of residence or nationality or native language does not produce privileged or complete understanding. No simple binary distinction of native-nonnative, home-away, same-different can adequately express the decentered reality of postcolonial literatures, because such distinctions stem from the discredited hierarchical colonial structure of Self-Other, which is based on the view that the colonizing presence emanates from the center of power, culture, and civilization, while the colonies are outside, on the periphery of that centre.

The account of life in *Dogside Story* that emerges from Grace's novel is an account that presents sights, sounds, memories, verbal expressions, and awakenings from a young man's experience growing up in a Maori village. The story behind the name of the village is told at the start of the novel. There were two sisters- Ngarua and Maraenohonoho who fought bitterly over their brother's love and affection. When their brother died, he left behind a canoe which the sisters fought over. Maraenohonoho launched a heavy piece of wood and struck and destroyed the canoe while Ngarua was trying to escape with it. In anger, Ngarua swam to the other side of the river and never returned. Her husband, children and other villagers eventually joined her and they settled on the south side of the river. The northsiders and southsiders held one another in disdain because the northsiders thought themselves the stayers, the originals, the ones who stayed where their ancestors' bones were buried; and the southsiders in turn thought themselves adventurers, movers, changers and seekers. A number

of churches were built on the north, which led to it becoming Godside; while the number of dogs on southside led to it becoming known as Dogside. The novel becomes one-sided as it favours Dogside.

The novel then concentrates on the life of Rua, a twenty four year old man who is embroiled in a bitter custody battle over his daughter Kiri with his aunts – Amiria and Babs. Kiri is the daughter of Rua and Atawhai, who are cousins and conceived Kiri when they were only fourteen. This revelation of Kiri's paternity shocks the community. Atawhai had run away immediately after giving birth to Kiri, placing Kiri in the care of Amiria and Babs. The reaction of the village elders to Kiri's paternity could perhaps subtly raise doubts about the notion of justice towards women within their customary polity. Keeping aside their mistreatment of Kiri, Amiria and Babs were expected by the elders to hand over the custody of Kiri to Rua, because he was the father. Amiria and Babs refuse to give Kiri up, hired a lawyer, and went to court which greatly angered the village elders. In this instance, the complementarity of the masculine and the feminine should be questioned as the system imposes cultural loyalty on women that prevents any expression of resistance to patriarchal values practiced within their culture. The women – Amiria and Babs are forced to 'defend a tribal nationalism that ignores sexism'. Therefore, this custody battle brings to light that there is a deep-rooted oppression of indigenous women where, as long as race, tribal nation, law and gender are discriminatory links (Ramirez 25) culture, sovereignty and self-determination are unreal for native women. Going to court and not accepting the elders' decision, express their deep anxiety at the self-determination demands that extend into customary legal domains, which are not always gender equal, and essentialise patriarchal values in the cultural interpretation of justice.

The principles of governance in an indigenous nationhood are determined by a spiritually interpreted and culturally executed 'lived experience of nature' whereby laws, customs, beliefs and cultural practices have an interlocking relational structure of politics and codes of cultural jurisprudence. The connection of culture with nature as core to the indigenous politics of sovereignty emphasised the underlying complementarity of culture-nature that encompasses the masculine-feminine relationships (Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan 289). It is seen as a complementary philosophy that 'harmonises and converges the human with the natural world, the feminine and masculine phenomena of human existence with elements of nature that are attributed to either the feminine or the masculine' (289).

But the subtleties of customary politico-legal institutions are such that it promotes patriarchal values to the extent that indigenous women find it impossible to get justice when abused by their own men (Eikjok 41). Indigenous sovereignty movements were largely led by indigenous men who 'often mirrored dominant patriarchal values' (41). The subjugation of women is believed to be a white colonialist behaviour directly and indirectly infused in

indigenous male consciousness. Indigeneity in this context is undisputed and need not be claimed; it is just performed and reproduced.

Running parallel to the story Rua and his fight for the custody of his daughter with his distant aunts, is the community of Dogside's plan to build a new whareniui, a meeting place. The village elders of Dogside call a meeting and decided that they needed money from the outsiders if they were to build a good whareniui. They decided to open up their community and offer foreigners and outside people an experience of an indigenous community, specifically to see the first sunrise of the new millennium, from their village in return for money. The community would play hosts to tourists so they earn money and build a meeting place. This brings to focus an indigenous peoples' participation with the outside world. In the socio-economic practices, at least, this brings out questions about what 'indigeneity' means, in the integration into and in the resistance of the outside world. The author explores how engagement with the world has opened up spaces for questioning fixed notions of indigenous identities and their role in representing, re-imagining, and developing alliances and relationships.

In terms of land and land ownership, colonisation and post colonisation constructs of nationhood, rights and citizenship are in conflict with that of the indigenous peoples. Native peoples situate their sovereignty in alternate visions of governance and political constructs that are often beyond the imagined locations of nation-state structures of modern societies (Waters 20). Hence, indigenous sense of ownership critiques the white settler's legitimacy of 'citizenship and the nation-state, through a focus on indigeneity, colonial logics of gendered oppression, decolonisation and the sovereignty of the original inhabitants' (20). In *Dogside Story*, the custody battle has another dimension added as it is discovered that the main reason why Amiria and Babs did not want to give Kiri up was because the deed of their land was to go to whoever had guardianship of Kiri. But the village elders step in and decided to burn the papers because all it was legal, and it didn't mean anything, and that the villagers were the witnesses of their ownership. Land had a sense of timelessness to them, and in their village there was plenty for everyone. It is where they buried their ancestors, and a piece of paper a law has made meant nothing.

The sensibility of the author in writing *Dogside Story* filters reality and produces new meaning, as she examines island scenes and experiences, and navigates the lives in a small rural community. The treatment of differences and diversity within a community develops a perspective. This perspective is the representation of the Maori community as heterogeneous, varied and diverse with the ability to empathize with cultural differences.

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