Tradition and Change in Recent Maori Fiction: The Writing of Witi Ihimaera

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Death and life, love and kinship, tradition and change—these are the enduring themes of which Witi Ihimaera writes. But his treatment of them is of more than usual interest. In two brief novels and a collection of short stories he captures the bewilderment and uncertainty, the hope and despair of a society in flux.[1] His focus is upon the Maori people of New Zealand; his insight is relevant to all traditional societies led to abandon old ways by the alluring siren call of "modernization."

Maori society has changed drastically since the Second World War. The predominantly rural population has been increasingly attracted to the cities; the Maoris have become more and more dependent upon the "Pakeha" (white) economy; radio and television foster scorn for old customs as they encourage emulation of increasingly familiar "Pakeha" ways; and modern values are eroding the foundations of the rural Maori community. Divisions have emerged between the young, convinced of the need to follow the "Pakeha" lead, and the old, nostalgic for a valued, fast-fading way of life. Many Maoris have had to come to grips with their failure to feel at ease in either city or village. Others have suffered opposition and misunderstanding in urban areas. Yet despite these tensions and the changes they have brought, "Maoritanga"[2] survives. Because it deals with the crucial questions of adaptation and change in a traditional society from the perspective of that society, Ihimara's writing is doubly valuable.

Waituhi and Wellington are the two poles of Ihimaera's world. On the face of it, Waituhi is a "hick town" of "wooden houses on either side of a gravelled road" (p. 10). "The houses look very old with rusted roofs and paint peeling from the weatherboards. . . . Flax and flowers grow wild in the gardens. . . . Long grass tangles in the barbed wire of falling fences" (*Whanua,* pp. 14-15). It is a drab place. But it is also home, where there is "always a sense of contentment in feeling a rhythm beneath [one's] feet" (*Tangi,* p. 158). Nevertheless, many of the young of Waituhi believe that opportunity and good times wait in Wellington, the capital city (*Whanua,* p. 14, *Pounamu,* pp. 63-67). It becomes clear, however, that loneliness and despair often accompany life in the city. Consider young Mattie Jones' last weeks there: "Refusing help. Too proud to admit to her boss why she is always late for work. Not letting Mum and Dad know about [the child] Kara. Lonely in one room. Getting the sack. Finding a new job. Borrowing money to live. Lonely. Always alone" (*Whanua,* p. 61). Although excitement and happiness can be found in the city, they are temporary benefits. In retrospect, life there is aimless and drifting (*Tangi,* p. 160).

Beneath the contrasting, superficial images and outward appearances of the two places lie the crucial differences between Maori and "Pakeha" societies. Essentially, Wellington is the "Pakeha" world in microcosm, characterized by an individualism, anonymity, and independence that contrasts sharply with the traditional Maori way. It is also the catalyst of change, transforming Maori individuals and their society (*Tangi,* p. 160, *Whanua,* p. 69). Thus, too, Waituhi is a microcosm of the changing Maori world; the tensions faced by rural Maoris today are revealed in the lives of its inhabitants.

On this canvas, Ihimaera sketches his basically simple tales. *Whanua,* which means Family, recounts the events of a single day in Waituhi; the three days of a funeral there are the core of *Tangi;* and for the most part, the stories in *Pounamu, Pounamu* deal with brief episodes in the lives of individuals from the village. Yet recollections of earlier years, and references to the traditions of the "Whanua a Kai," the people of Waituhi, extend the span of this writing back into the distant past. In this way, old and new are juxtaposed; comparisons are made, contrasts are clear; and the theme of change is always implicit.

The disruption of the rural Maori community is most clearly portrayed in *Whanua.* The novel opens with the village people returning home after a wedding. Many are drunk. Some will continue to drink through Sunday. Partying on a Sunday is not unusual in the village. There is little else to do: "From payday Thursday to work on Monday, there is always a party somewhere" *(Whanua,* p. 143). Others will pass the day in talk or at work. Andrew Whatu helps clean "Rongopai," the historic meeting house of the "Whanua a Kai." Rongo Mahana harvests his crop of potatoes. Both reflect on the local scene. Aware that it is many years since the last "hui" (assembly) at the meeting house, Andrew wonders whether it is too late for a revival of Maori tradition and ceremony: "The heart may have been silent for too long already. The family has changed too much perhaps, changed by the European way of life" *(Whanua,* p. 123). Similarly, Rongo regrets his solitary labor. Once the Mahana families had all returned for the annual planting, harvesting, and family shearing. But the demands of the "Pakeha" economy had changed all that, for ". . . it seems you need more money to live on these days. There is security in having and keeping one job, in having permanent employment. . . . You must keep working and keep working to keep up the next payment. You can't afford to take a week or two off for something as ridiculous as the family planting" *(Whanua,* pp. 52-53). Of course, Maori life had been changing since the coming of the "Pakeha." ("That was the way of things, relentless and unalterable" *Pounamu,* p. 118.) As the legends had foretold, the shadowed white stranger behind the tattooed face, "he who owns the earth," had come to alter the old way of life *(Tangi,* p. 116, *Pounamu,* p. 118). Even the "Rongopai" meeting house is a symbol of change. Eighty years before it had been decorated by young men, who shocked their elders by blending "Pakeha" scenes with traditional motifs: "Some of the panels are painted with traditional Maori designs in curling reds, blacks and whites; others with sinuous twining plants like vines curling to the roof. . . . Clustered at their bases are scenes of life known by the young men. . . . A man stands with piupiu skirt and taniko band around his head; but in his hair he wears not the traditional royal huia feather but a Scotch thistle. A painted woman, dressed in a gown with a hint of a Victorian bustle, holds a rose to her lips" *(Whanua,* pp. 123-124).

Change in the traditional economy, and in the old way of life had to be accepted. But the dilemma of the elders is that change seems to be destroying the very spirit of the Maori people. The effects of modernization cannot be restricted to the material and economic aspects of the cultural system. Time and again, the words and deeds of younger Maoris pose the question "maybe the Pakeha way, the 'you got to get on way' is right?" *(Pounamu,* p. 66). In the years after the building of "Rongopai," the aspirations of many faithful sons of Waituhi, men who still held dear to the spirit of their people, were ineluctably affected by "Pakeha" values. Rongo Mahana, whose world was Waituhi, whose son could not think of his father without recalling the village, moved away to ensure his children a good education *(Tangi,* pp. 78, 159). Hepa Walker, the proud spokesman of the Waituhi Maoris, is similarly convinced that education will be the salvation of his people *(Whanua,* pp. 34-37). The attitude is well summarized in the advice of a city-bound Maori to his

brother in Waituhi: "You got a big family. Get them educated. Boy, that's the story. My kids are going to get some brains. I want them to have better than I had" *(Pounamu,* p. 66).

Inevitably, such definition of goals by "Pakeha" conceptions of success profoundly affected the outlook of the younger generation. Many lost their reverence for Maori tradition. Jack Ropiho symbolizes the decline of respect for the Maori past among the young. Scornful of the old ways but prepared to accept the charity of the "Whanua a Kai" while out of work, he openly mocks his grandmother's concern for the wooden carvings, feather cloaks, and genealogy of her people *(Whanua,* pp. 105-106). Many of Jack Ropiho's generation find it more and more difficult to straddle Maori and "Pakeha" worlds: "The Maori part was easy to forget. Not being Maori, but what being Maori meant; the customs, the traditions, Maori aroha . . ." *(Tangi,* p. 79).

Nostalgic reminiscences grow naturally out of such a setting. Nanny Paora, the old "kaumatua" (patriarch) of Waituhi, is haunted by memories. He dreams of "a village of small wooden houses where people are still family together. [Of] a meeting house which is not decaying or falling but which still holds up the sky. [Of] a community hall which rings with family gatherings and is not yet deserted. [Of] the warmth of the village hearth before the flame had begun to grow cold" *(Whanua,* p. 168).

But his sorrow is only touched upon. He has only a small part in the Waituhi of *Whanua.* In *Pounamu, Pounamu,* however, there is a deeply moving indication of the old man's grief. Sitting in a meeting house, an old "kaumatua" regrets the disappearance of the "aroha"[3] and "manawa"[4] that formerly bound the Maori together *(Pounamu,* p. 116). Years before, aware that things were already changing, he had taught his favorite "mokopuna" (grandchild) all he knew of his people in the hope that she would retain her "Maoritanga." Lovingly he had told of how the meeting house was the body of an ancestor, and of how its carvings told the story of Whanua *(Pounamu,* p. 116). But like so many others, the child had gone away to the city and rejected her Maori past: "The world isn't Maori any more. . . . You dream too much. Your world is gone. I can't live it for you" *(Pounamu,* p. 117). Depressed by his memories, the old man makes his way home. And as he goes he sees a whale stranded on the beach, thrashing feebly in the lapping water, and already lacerated by the circling gulls. So, too, Nanny Paora is a "solitary whale stranded in [the]alien present" of Waituhi *(Whanua,* p. 41).

Is "Maoritanga" indeed a noble creature in its death throes? The question is implicit in all Ihimaera's descriptions of contemporary Maori life. Although he clearly understands the causes of change in the Maori community, and regrets the cultural disruption that has produced rifts between young and old, his vision of the future is not without hope. If idleness, drunkenness, and disrespect for tradition are the darker side of Maori society today, there is, too, a brighter cast to the picture. Despite the lure of the "Pakeha" way, and the ostensible desire of many younger Maoris to escape the limiting ties of older ways, Ihimaera suggests that the basic values of traditional Maori society will not entirely disappear. *Tangi* clearly affirms the vitality of "Maoritanga."

Summoned back to Waituhi from Wellington on the sudden death of his father, the grief-stricken Tama Mahana returns to a community lamenting in the traditional manner the loss of one of its members. During the "tangi" he realizes

that Maori "aroha" will never disappear *(Tangi,* p. 79). Although his visits to Waituhi have been brief and infrequent during his four years in the city, Tama immediately finds himself completely accepted by the villagers. From the depths of his grief he reflects: "It is sweet sadness to press noses in the hongi. It is sweet sadness to mingle my tears with the tears of my people, my family. I am more than my father's son. For these people I am son, friend, father too. They are to me in turn, my sons, daughters, fathers and mothers. That is the Maori way: not to talk of one family for we belong to each other, not only family living but family dead" *(Tangi,* p. 30). Tama resolves to return to the village to run the Mahana farm. As he contemplates the difficulties of the unaccustomed way of life, the theme of communal togetherness is reiterated in his uncle's observation: "Tama, you seem to think you're alone. But you're not. Don't worry too much about the future" *(Tangi,* p. 171). "Aroha" will never disappear. Facing up to his responsibilities as head of the Mahana family, Tama vows to teach his younger brother and sister of Maori "aroha," "so that they will never be alone if some day they leave Waituhi and go to the city. I will teach them open heart and open life, as Dad would have done, and the humour to laugh if the values of the Pakeha are too strong for them" *(Tangi,* pp. 79-80). *Tangi* is "an account of death, but also an affirmation of life" *(Tangi,* Preface). When Tama arrives in Wellington to settle his affairs before returning to Waituhi, he reflects: "This is the end of my journey but it is also my journey beginning. It is a journey out of the upheaval of the tangi. The tangi is over. The hands of the clock stand at the beginning of another hour" *(Tangi,* p. 194).

Ihimaera's evocation of rural Maori life similarly suggests that Maori culture may have moved beyond its twilight years to stand at a new beginning. The theme is clearly evident in *Whanua.* While working at "Rongopai," Andrew Whatu dreams of and hopes for a renaissance of Maori culture and Maori values. Paradoxically, it seems, growing "Pakeha" interest in the country's past may be a vital agent in the revitalization of Maori pride. Not until "Rongopai" was declared an historic monument by a "Pakeha" from the city did the "Whanua a Kai" begin to restore the long neglected building. Now "Rongopai is beginning to breath again. With each new breath it takes, its people are gradually reviving their deep Maori spirit. As the meeting house beats out loud its heart, so will the village blood renew itself" *(Whanua,* p. 120). Whatever the reasons behind the revival, it appears that the turning point for the fortunes of "Maoritanga" may be in sight. "People thought the Maori was going to die out a long time ago" Charlie Whatu tells his son. "We might've been bought off our lands with a coupla blankets once, but we haven't sold our souls yet" *(Whanua,* p. 69). "Aroha" and "manawa," love and sympathy, kinship and compassion, the human values that formed the basis of the traditional Maori community will persist. Maori society will change, but Ihimaera expresses the hope that the spirit of the people will not die.

It behoves the "Pakeha" to ponder Ihimaera's vision of Maori life. As one reviewer of *Pounamu, Pounamu* pointed out, the majority of New Zealanders understand the Maori much less than they think they do.[5] *Tangi,* in particular, is a notable attempt to bridge the gap between Maori and "Pakeha" cultures.[6] And Ihimaera's writing undoubtedly opens the way to imaginative participation "in some feelings and customs that [most New Zealanders have] previously only been able to observe and, to a limited degree, sense."[7] Moreover, it also raises larger questions of considerable importance.

NOTES

[1]Witi Ihimaera, *Pounamu, Pounamu* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1972) Witi Ihimaera, *Tangi* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973) Witi Ihimaera, *Whanua* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1974) *Tangi* is the first novel published in English by a Maori writer.

[2]Maoritanga = "Maoriness" or the cultural aspects of Maori identity.

[3]Aroha = English lacks a direct analogue of "aroha" which implies yearning and compassion as well as love.

[4]Manawa = "heart" or "breath"—but the full meaning of the term is complex and varies with the context.

[5]Ray Grover, "Participating," *Islands,* 2 (1973), 213.

[6]See the review of *Tangi* by H. Winston Rhodes in *Landfall,* 108 (1973), 348-351, for an elaboration of this idea.

[7]Grover, "Participating," p. 213.