

“Unnamed Islands in the Unknown Sea” – A Blood Narrative

Dr. Bijoyini Mukherjee

The first group of human migrants reached New Zealand by canoes around the fourteenth century. They comprised of 800 Polynesian pioneers including men, women and children who sailed from Hawaiki. Their journey was the foundation of oral narratives by these migrants which later shaped their religion and identity. Every Maori individual (as these migrants called themselves) bonded with the motherland through these narratives (Haase 82). Names assigned to place or people or other migrants carried a meaning and explained a connection between the Maori and Aotearoa. The term Maori or mauri means life force, common to all Polynesians in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The first Maori migrant group named their homeland Aotearoa because the land of the long white cloud indicated clouds which guided them towards sources of water and, in turn, means to sustain life. Pakeha (European) migrants were acquainted with the existence of New Zealand by the year 1642 when print records for the European world in Dutch, French and English languages began to be circulated. The world began to recognise Maori homeland as New Zealand instead of Aotearoa. This replacement of meaning altered national identity of the Maori. Knowledge of the land that was passed on from one generation to another through the act of naming at this juncture became dysfunctional. The Maori genealogy itself depended on the ecological knowledge which is why Maori folklore is a series of blood narratives.

Here, historical narratives tied to a specific land, coupled with political neutrality in spite of cultural and spiritual leanings are understood as blood narratives (Allen 8–9). After creating an international identity the Pakeha settlers arrived in groups to New Zealand and renamed the local, regional and national Maori spaces assigning Pakeha meanings to them. As a result the Maori identity was compromised in Maori locale. “The creation of a narrative of international identity were tactical maneuvers designed to redirect power relations in the delegates’ local, regional, and national contexts and to rewrite local and national narratives of power” (Allen 198).

The European printing press guided by James Cook, the English navigator, along with his companion Joseph Banks, the naturalist, identified New Zealand as a potential woodland source and helped circulate a European international identity (Sturm 34–35). Keri Hulme relocates the Maori local, regional and national relations with Aotearoa/New Zealand in the narrative,

“Unnamed Islands in the Unknown Sea” from her short story collection *Te Kaihau/The Windeater* (1986). Through the narrative she rekindles the bond shared by Maori blood with Aotearoa through the Pakeha medium of communication — fiction.

This narrative takes place around the Breaksea Island where a journalist ventures in search of a story with McLeay, a local guide. Both the characters’ identity is ambiguous. The plot is unfolded by the journalist, a woman, whose narrative voice dominates throughout. It is clear that she remains alive after the expedition whereas McLeay does not. The police officials find a notebook deliberately left for them and try to solve the murder case joining pieces from the notebook written by the journalist, hopelessly realising that everything left as a written record is only to misdirect real information. The ambiguity of these two central characters merges the Maori and the Pakeha land perspectives brought out through their views on Breaksea Island.

Beyond all the human characters, the only one witness of the true incidents of this expedition and witness of the murder is the sea, a character with whom the police officials are incapable of communicating. Sea also acts as a chorus overpowering the journalist’s constructed reality in the notebook. Here, sea represents the omnipresent Maori God of sea, Tangaroa (Reed 16). When the journalist begins to construct reality in the notebook with her first six observations, the fourth one is, “the rocky floor. It slopes towards the sea. Did it never strike you as odd? The roof rears heavenward and all our floor tries to slip away from us, downwards, outwards, away” (163). This elaborate description is of a small house near the beach where waters touch the staircase and threatens to engulf the residence.

The roof of the house looking towards heaven symbolises Maori blood narratives where forefathers are worshipped as Gods and the floor slipping into the sea portrays Pakeha renaming of New Zealand spaces to form the centre and, like the floor its power is slipping away in the face of adversities posed by New Zealand environment. The house symbolises Aotearoa/New Zealand as a nation constructed of both Maori and Pakeha blood narratives. This description brings to light *mano wai* meaning “deep running water” or “disaster.” From describing her days in the unknown island, the journalist shifts focus on all the things they cook and eat on the unnamed island. It mentions different kinds of fish, mussels, limpets, bullkelp, etc.

McLeay waited for dying fish to return to the shores and then cooked them and advised the narrator to survive on abundant bullkelp seaweed. “You kept down the soft flesh. But it wasn’t enough. Maybe it worsened matters” (164). The narrator gives the impression that McLeay hurt himself while getting bullkelp or the seaweed was poisonous and worsened his health after he ate them. In this statement she symbolises the Pakeha ignorance of Aotearoa regional ecological knowledge and gives an indirect hint to the reader that she might be the murderer.

The southern Māori tribe Ngāi Tahu had various uses for bull kelp, or *rimurapa*: the narrow stalk, connecting the holdfast to the blade, was fashioned into a flute; the blade was roasted and chewed; and wide blades were used as bags for preserving food. Māori made bags

called pōhā by splitting open the blades and inflating them. They produced the bags in large quantities during summer in preparation for the muttonbirding season. (Wassilieff 4).

Her attempt to create a false truth is undermined by the *kiri wai* (inner skin) of her entries. The way McLeay connects to this unnamed island is the way the first group of Maori migrants connected to the then unknown surroundings and weaved a national identity around the local meanings offered by Aotearoa. The notebook entries reveal how differently the journalist and McLeay felt about the unnamed island and every resource available on it.

Through the entries she desperately tries to convince the reader (in this case the police officials) that her perspective of the unnamed island is factual and that of her guide is romanticism. “It was a harsh place, this island you loved. A bleak volcanic terrain, serene and disordered. Some subantarctic place where the waters teemed with whitepointers and the winds never ceased” (166). Breaksea Island is part of the Fiordland National Park located in South Island which the Maori called *Te Wāi Pounamu* referring to the dark green waters of Tasman Sea. The Maori utilised stormy seas to test canoes, volcanoes were modified into hot boilers for cooking sacred food and the Maori tribes adapted to the changing terrains of Aotearoa.

To the Pakeha these ecological features different from the landscape they understood as home seemed disorderly and life threatening. When the journalist is devoid of McLeay’s ecological understanding and protection she dislikes the island more because she is lost in an unfamiliar terrain with no memory of any ancestor to guide her. Remembering R. L. Stevenson’s shipwrecked adventurous voyages does not kindle any admiration for the island in her. Her entries concentrate on the whitepointer sharks and fail to admire the bullkelp. She is incapable of following the direction of the wind, build a canoe from the resources available on the island or look for boats sailing towards the island and hope to be saved. It is in her helplessness that the Maori narratives or folklore emerge relevant and a necessity for survival in Aotearoa.

In the absence of the knowledge of such narratives the journalist is lost in the island. The police officials are equally lost in their investigation because they look at the notebook off Breaksea Sound as a potential witness and declare that the skinned corpse found at Goose Cove is of a DSIR (Department of Scientific and Industrial Research) field assistant named Jacob Morehu who has been missing for few days. In his 1773 journal, Captain Cook left five geese he brought from Cape of Good Hope and left them in an uninhabited island so that they could breed and have access to abundant food; he also named the cove after the geese (Kear 176). This is the point in the narrative where identities of the unnamed protagonists merge with the Maori-Pakeha narratives. McLeay or Morehu occupies the Pakeha narrative space after death in Goose Cove wherein, the journalist survives and by escaping from the uninhabited island becomes a part of the Maori historical/blood narrative.

In her notebook she blames an encounter with the sea leopard that kills McLeay after procrastination on bullkelp, but the officials conclude looking at the skinned body of Morehu/McLeay that he was definitely murdered. There is nothing said about the narrator’s whereabouts at the end of the notebook. “The mist pools on the rocks. We have water. The mist

makes it hard to breathe” (167). The seawater (wai tote), salty and unable to quench her thirst for a story, is where the sea leopard lives and she offers McLeay’s corpse back to the sea when wai tote transforms to wai whakaika (ritual waters) that perform last rites for Morehu.

Hulme elaborately weaves the numerous meanings of the Maori word wai (water, juice, liquid) in the narrative. Beneath the layer of Pakeha words is hidden the Maori blood/land connection. Ambiguity of identity allows the characters to connect to this Maori blood narrative irrespective of ethnic backgrounds. The author does not replace a Pakeha word, but conjoins Pakeha and Maori word meanings; retells Maori historical journey through Pakeha form of storytelling. Even the title of the narrative talks about the namelessness of the land and sea as its inhabitants. On the contrary, the narrative assigns a Maori name for all the unnamed spaces mentioned in the diary entry by the journalist. Like the real fact of Morehu’s death, these Maori meanings wait to be rediscovered by the Pakeha which is why in English language the space/place remains unnamed.

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Dr. Bijoyini Mukherjee

Freelance Content Writer and Editor