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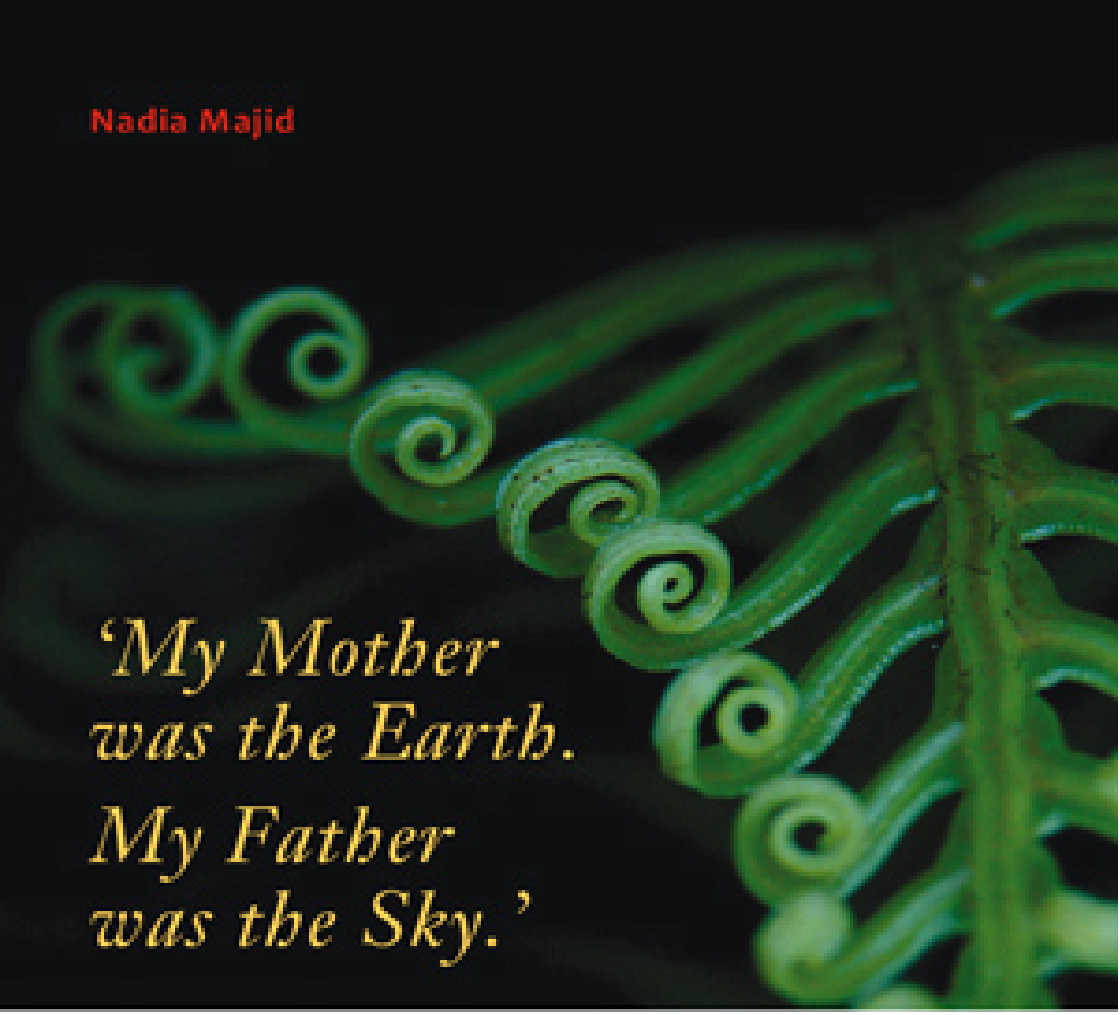


# Myth and Memory in Maori Novels in English

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CHAPTER ONE

# *He Kupu Whakataki:* Introduction

Looking in from the outside, New Zealand has a distinct identity not least because of the Maori people, their art, literature, and their continuing struggle for recognition and justice. Yet the indigenous people are still a minority in this land of immigrants. Maori resistance finds expression not only in political involvement on the streets, in courts or in government: indeed, Maori writers see literature as another useful tool that may help regain a secure place in New Zealand society and draw attention to Maori issues in a way that is both creative and real. Real, in this case, suggests that the fiction presents the Maori situation in fictional settings that do not detract from the reality of the indigenous people's actual circumstances.

From the inside, there is the sense of a loss of identity. The predominance of *Pakeha* notions of culture, knowledge, and identity ultimately inhibit the existence of other ethnic identities within the same community. As a result, the question of identity – first, its distillation and construction, and subsequently its preservation – comes to the fore in reality as well as in fiction. In this context, this study brings together three areas of interest that are able to shed light on Maori experience from the point of view of writers of Maori descent: myth and memory as influential factors in the construction of identity.

The majority of Maori writers incorporate myths that hark back to the distant or recent past, thereby creating and recreating memories, drawing attention to lost details of their culture or maintaining the most commonly held beliefs in their fiction. Thus proving their validity today as guides for the future, myths and legends are key features underlying Maori literature in all genres as significant parts of memory. Therefore, myth and memory are two primary aspects of Maori identity in particular and New Zealand identity in general.

The question of identity is ever changing and complex, a necessary construct evolving from the interaction of past, present, and expectations for the future. The state of the search for a national identity suggests the importance of a literary quest for Maori identity in particular and New Zealand identity in general. Therefore it is necessary to understand the continual interaction of past, present and future as perceived by Maori to form an underlying notion of identity as a flexible construct. Places such as the New Zealand National Museum Te Papa Tongarewa are aware of this and present a variety of perspectives to the public in changing exhibitions. Te Papa does not try to present a definitive view of history. Instead, its exhibitions are chosen and arranged in such a way that they "challenge our audience to explore, celebrate and question different viewpoints of New Zealand's past" (*MoNZTPT* 1993: 6). The exhibitions

> [...] were not designed to identify or suggest to the public any *single* distinct version or idea of New Zealand's identity – another illustration of changing museological practice, as museums no longer attempt to spell out definitive stories or historical interpretation. Put in another way, they no longer tell their visitors what is right or what to believe. Instead, museums often now encourage people to debate and explore different interpretations of history and to come to their own conclusions. [...] In other words, the history exhibitions were created to help people question the notions of national identity. (Gore 2007: 8)

The number of ethnic groups shaping the face of the country enhances the complexity. New Zealand is not only the land of *Pakeha* and Maori; instead, it consists of immigrants from all over the world, especially the Pacific Islands and Asia. Thus, finding a single definitive national identity is bound to be problematic. In this context, Jock Phillips, former Chief Historian and Conceptual Leader in History at Te Papa, observes that "identity is the sum of immigrant cultures, identity comes from interaction with a distinct environment, identity is a construct of the mind" (Phillips 2001: 149). In his 2003 presentation *Kiwi Myths and New Identities*, Phillips further illustrates that national identity is necessary for three reasons. Firstly, every nation requires common values and symbols that join its people; secondly, in the face of globalisation New Zealand needs to be more prominent as a country with a distinct identity; and thirdly, a national

identity will be yet another step of decolonisation (Phillips 2003: slide 3). In the course of his paper, he identifies the paradox that even though there is a greater demand for a national identity, there is also greater disagreement as to what this identity might be and how to define it. Due to the country's diversity, coming to a satisfactory, all-encompassing definition is a challenging task, which leads him to the conclusion that a national identity – however necessary – is impossible since it eliminates diversity (*ibid.* slide 23–4). The rigid notion of a national self-image should be replaced by common themes deriving from the people's origin as "boat people" who came to the country and contributed to its diversity (*ibid.* slide 24), and from New Zealand as an immigrant nation as he already suggested in 2001, as Belich also notes:

> Four centuries after the death of Jesus Christ, two migrant ships pushed through dangerous seas. Strong men and women tended oars and sails; children crouched amidst livestock and household goods. Each crew valued kin above all, walked with live gods – Tu and Thor, Woden and Tane – and lived and died for weregild and utu. Each crew headed for a place of which little was known, and a great deal hoped. Too much can be made of their similarities, but they did have one thing in common: both were forebears of the New Zealanders. (Belich 1996: 13)

Still, the relationship between Maori and *Pakeha* is an issue, as Charles Royal's paper, delivered to the symposium Concepts of Nationhood in 2007, confirms. Like Phillips, Royal suggests moving away from rigid concepts of identity and focusing on the inappropriateness of the term *Pakeha* that carries with it certain colonial connotations. Royal (2007) has suggested that new ways of constructing and articulating identity must be found that will be better suited to represent Maori diversity today. His main criticism that the old but well-known Maori/*Pakeha* paradigm no longer reasonably reflects current developments is justified as it gives a restricted view of identity in both cases. In fact, the paradigm is another of those binaries that postcolonial literature tries to resist and undo: it is an artificial classification, something that was created out of necessity in the nineteenth century, but which no longer applies to the complexities of cultural identity in a multicultural society today.

Maori literature is one way to contribute to native culture by bringing some of its key elements to the readership. Texts set in an indigenous context convey beliefs and customs which may encourage knowledge and confidence in one's heritage. What is more, there is a strong sense of urgency in Maori literature that expresses the active part Maori people play in the nation's development in all areas. "Maori people," Royal succinctly summarises this point,

> want to contribute to New Zealand and to the world in ways that are meaningful to us. We want to be independent and decrease our reliance upon Government and other external agencies. We particularly seek to overcome perceptions that power, real power, exists outside of ourselves and hence, we want to increase our experiences of creative *mana motuhake* [separate identity, or autonomy]. We want to build sustainable cultural enterprises of mana that our nation can be proud of and we seek peace and understanding with our fellow New Zealanders by being Maori (or its successor) and New Zealanders at the same time. (*ibid.* 7)

The way to make this happen, he says, is by being creative. In fact, he emphasises the importance of creativity in all enterprises as the best way to contribute significantly to New Zealand and the world. Creativity is ideal because it allows for innovative developments that do not restrict Maori in any way. Being able to contribute, Maori people can use their originality not only to uphold their identity as a complex cultural group, but also to encourage progress in all aspects of national and global development.

Free to express themselves in any way that Maori *tikanga* (customs and practices) allow, writers are able to become important contributors to the Maori and New Zealand future. Their fiction captures their cultural past in the form of expressed belief systems, each work portraying an image of Maori identity in its time, be it the angry, violent, but powerless Maori in Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors*, the self-reliant, but isolated Kerewin of Keri Hulme's *the bone people*, or the passionate young activist of Ihimaera's *The Uncle's Story* (*US*). The novels reflect Royal's claim that there is great diversity within the Maori community, supporting his demand for a move away from binaries such as Maori/*Pakeha*. Though ethnicity cannot be ignored, it is not the end all and be all: the diversity within cultural groups

belies generalisation, and this is what Maori writers express in their work and find reflected in their personal experiences.

The writers featured here create innovative constructions and reconstructions of identity. Memory is crucial: without a memory of the past, identity can never be whole. Like Keri Hulme's mysterious Simon in *the bone people*, the person without a past is broken and incomplete. At the same time, this image of brokenness is symbolic of the many Maori who struggle in a non-space between cultures, or, as Homi Bhabha (1994) has termed it, the third space. They seize this third space and make it their own, and it is not merely an amalgamation of cultures. It is in this third space that a new culture develops from the known two, a culture that has its roots in the Maori and the *Pakeha* world, but which grows into something of its own.

In this study, I intend to demonstrate that Maori fiction has become a third space in its own right. The novels suggest that identity can only be found by combining the knowledge of Maori history and spirituality with certain aspects of *Pakeha* society. Choosing just one of the two cultures leads to a loss of self and even to physical and mental illness, as depicted in Patricia Grace's *Mutuwhenua* (*M*). If Maori fiction is the site where writers practice the creation of something new, it would follow that the revival of memory, the re-education of the readership, and a relocation to the third space are major concerns in the featured novels.

Inevitably, dealing with the present and trying to create the future requires an evaluation of the past. In the novels, this can be seen in the many references to myths and legends, the importance of genealogy, and Maori values that have persisted through the years. Given that Maori culture was primarily oral, the importance of memory should not be underestimated. Memory in fiction is twofold, however: on the one hand, the stories often hark back to tales of the past that are mythic in nature, recounting events that are already known. On the other, the novels take an active part in the shaping of memory by selecting those tales, events or objects worth remembering for a specific reason. Thus, identities are created, deriving from a particular collage of memories that may have been reinterpreted to suit a purpose. Ann Rigney (2005) closely examines the link between