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Revisiting Maori History: A Study of Alan Duff's Once Were Warriors

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Abstract – This paper attempts to explore the long-forgotten history of the Maori tribe that Alan Duff highlights in the novel Once Were Warriors. Maoris are the indigenous people of New Zealand who settled on the coastal areas of New Zealand around 1300 A.D.Alan Duff's emphasis on the idea that the Maori are the people who once were warriors, all through the novel, has constructive and destructive inferences for contemporary Maori society. However, it gives them the power to fight the present struggles. Revisiting the past serves as a means of encouraging Maoris to look back to their ancestors and seek strength from their glorious past to fight against the modern problems.

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HISTORY OF MAORI PEOPLE

Maoris are the indigenous people of New Zealand who settled on the coastal areas of New Zealand around 1300 A.D. They named themselves 'Maori' after the arrival of Europeans to distinguish themselves from the whites and to maintain their own identity. The earlier Maori were quite peaceful in comparison to the later generations. They developed warfare culture around 1500 A.D. This age witnessed many wars amongst the tribes. Because of the harsh climatic conditions, these people shifted towards the heart of the island, and a new distinctive culture started to develop. These people would perform 'Haka' dance before the battles to intimidate their enemy. During the late 18th century, these people encountered sailors, Christian missionaries, and in 1809 they killed many sailors and passengers, which later came to be known as the "Boyd" Massacre. The incident extraordinarily decreased contact with the Europeans for a long time. However, in the 1830s, many Europeans were living among the Maoris of New Zealand. Furthermore, they brought with them diseases and weapons because of which the Maori population dropped severely. By the late 19th century, it felt like the Maori culture would dissolve into the European culture. This unique mix of Maori and European ideas and customs began in 1840 with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi when Britain first claimed New Zealand as a colony. Now only around 15% of the population is claimed by Maoris. Conventional Maori customs have their origin in the culture of Polynesian islands. Numerous accounts from Maori folklore closely resemble the stories recited across the Pacific Ocean. Polynesian ideas, for instance, 'Tapu' (sacred), Noa (non-sacred), administered ordinary Maori living. These practices stayed until the invasion of Europeans when Christianity displaced quite a bit of Maori religion and folklore.

Alan Duff's second novel, Once Were Warriors, turned out to be an immediate success in New Zealand, and it immediately established his reputation as a prolific writer after it was published in 1990. The reasons behind his success are not only his literary potentials that is his very personal style of prose and an enthralling story, but also his strength to deal with provocative Maori displacement to cities. Both future salvation and the present corruption of Maori people lies in their history. Duff presents his characters belonging to a tribe whose history and customs have been snatched away by colonization. Whereas the Pakehas(the white New Zealanders), in contrast, are "They Who Have History," and their glorious past helps them to flourish in the present. Maoris are presented to have only the history of repressed and subjugated people. In the courtroom Grace acknowledges this history of power and social progress and notes the power that the judge has in this precious damn room with all his mates up around the walls supporting him, giving him not only the law on his side but them, the ones up on the walls in their big fancy frames, the education they must have had, the head starts. History. (He's got history, Grace and Boogie Heke, and you ain't.) (Duff 29).

Merely reminiscing about the ancient Maori community becomes an essential means of fighting back colonial repression in this context, because it re-establish a history and culture wiped out by colonialism. When the chief reminds the bravery and potential of Maori warriors towards the end of the book, Beth notes that "No one taught us this at school. They taught us their history: English history"

(173). Their chief summarises the history of warriorhood of the Maori people, the betrayal of the White colonials, and the greatness and self-esteem of the Maori people who fought to defend their civilization. He underlines the valor and strength of the Maori community rather than the false traits associated with the Maoris in the present.

Alan Duff's emphasis on the idea that the Maori are the people who once were warriors, all through the novel, has constructive and destructive inferences for contemporary Maori society. It gives them the power to fight the present struggles. At the same time, it also valorizes their heritage of savagery and a categorized society where enslavement and domination were central. He criticizes Maoris for being drug addicts and abusers. Though it is vital to recognize and re-establish ancient Maori society, it is equally necessary not to romanticize it overly. Because the cannibalistic aspect of their tradition contributes to their present degradation. Beth emphasizes the contradictions that surface the present Maoris, which takes place because traditional Maori 'warriorhood' no longer holds the same meaning in present society as it did before colonial invasion. As she says,

And we used to war all the time, us Maoris. Against each other. . . . Savages. We were savages. But warriors, eh. It's very important to remember that. Warriors. Because, you see, it was what we lost when you, the white audience out there, defeated us. Conquered us. Took our land, our mana , left us with nothing. (Duff 41-42).

Although the warrior culture accentuates vigor and pride, in its present undermined structure, it sustains savagery and disgrace. For instance, Jake uses his heritage and lineage of warriors only to justify his beatings and violence. He targets his violence at those who are weaker than himself; for instance, his wife and children. Beth indicates that this brutality has nothing to do with Maori warriorhood for "the Maori of old had a culture, and he had pride, and he had warriorhood, not this bullying, man-hitting-woman shet, you call that manhood? It's not manhood and it sure as hell ain't Maori warriorhood. So ask yourself what you are" (Duff 22).

MAORI WOMEN

Women were usually confined to the domestic space, family lineage served to establish hierarchies, and tribal warfare laid the seeds for a male self-image based on an unconquerable warrior myth that still exists. The status of women of the Maori tribe has changed throughout the years because of the western impact and colonization. There are numerous suggestions for stability and equality between both the genders in Maori people. One example is a linguistic explanation. Language is a crucial element of every culture and can speak for the distinctive status a person has in a specific culture, be it, man or woman. She asserts and substantiates her argument, saying that both personal pronouns in the Maori language are gender unbiased and, in this way, a sign for no chain of importance of genders. Likewise, she points out that "Whenua" signifies land and is also the Maori word for the afterbirth. "Hapu" represents enormous family relationship gatherings; however, it can be likewise deciphered as "pregnant." These examples show the reliable recognition of women in the Maori culture.

Childbearing was not seen as penance in Maori culture like in Christianity. Maori ladies were exceptionally progressive and free; they could even dress like men. Any kind of violence against women was considered a sin and was highly penalized. Maori women got support from their own family/whanau, and marriage was not a transferal of property from father to the spouse of the woman. A Maori woman was always welcomed in her family even after marriage or divorce. Divorce was not considered as a felony or conveyed no disgrace.

In contrast with Christian women, Maori women were all the more free, regarded, and progressive. With the advent of the early British pilgrims and settlers, another socially explicit comprehension of the role and status of women came to the Maori land. The family/whanau - as Maori have known it previously - got annihilated, and this was terribly destructive for the Maori tribes. The English principle of individualism failed to process the conventions and the collective good perspective of the Maoris.

In 1909 the Native Land Act was set up by the Crown, and it expected Maori to undertake wedding ceremonies influenced by British ceremonies. This changed the status of Maori women in marriage. They got more dependent on her partner and got segregated at home as guardians for her family. They were required to be submissive to men, and simultaneously men became the dominating heads of the family. Moreover, gradually women lost their status completely and became victims of violence at home.For instance, In the novel, on the day of the court hearing of Beth's son, Boogie, she fails to go to court because she was beaten up by her husband. She fails as a mother. Instead, Grace, another teenager, is forced to appear at the court alone. This scene shows the messed-up home of a modern Maori family, and again Beth represents women who fail to change her own situation. The conventional roles of a family are shown to be disrupted. Beth comes up short, and her girl is the one, satisfying the obligations of a mother and housewife.

Beth Heke's struggle in "Once were Warriors" is the representation of the Maori women, battling with the loss of the patronage of their family and tribe.Nevertheless, she is the only character who hopes to revalorize their long lost warrior tradition. Most of the criticism of Maori society comes from the

females, either Beth or her daughter. The Maoris are "going-nowhere nobodies" (7), and although she loves them, Beth feels ashamed of her people and ashamed yet again for feeling that way:

Feeling like a traitor in her midst because her thoughts so often turned to disgust, disapproval, shame, and sometimes to anger, even hate. Of them, her own people. And how they carried on. At the restrictions they put on themselves (and so their choice-less children) of assuming life to be this daily struggle, this acceptance that they were a lesser people; and boozing away their lives and the booze making things all distorted and warped and violent. (Duff8)

Her daughter Grace seems to follow the same path, but she has refused to compromise, to go on living in such conditions. Beth diagnoses as part of the problem the fact that urban Maori society is not literate; it does not value learning and improvement: "Bookless. Bookless. We're a bookless society." (Duff10) Early in the story, Beth is worried about her children's future but alone can do nothing. The course of the events will see her transformation, but only with the backing of the elders who come to her in her need: "What can a woman do about their future, their education? It ain't in my hands. Not on my own. [...] It's all of us; we need to get together– talk and try and sort ourselves out. Before it's too late." (14) With dramatic irony, this premonition points to the fact that they have already lost Grace and Nig. The circumstances remain the same. Since colonization is a continuous process, women, despite everything, battle with the social and cultural change brought about by the colonization. Also, Maori women are deprived of any help from their families. This sort of separation is not just physical but cultural and social as well. Numerous Maori women experience the consequences of exhausting work, abusive marriages, and psychological trauma.

Jake and his mates do not care about the coming generation, for they live for the moment, from hand to mouth. Beth knows that Pakeha children have a head start because their parents discipline them, help them with their homework, make them see the importance of it. Not like the Maoris, where the father and even the mother are more likely to be at the pub (34), as Grace thinks while at the Children's Court: "Man, if I had a head start like they do I could be a magistrate too." (34) She feels "massively deprived" compared to the Trambert girl (86). Because she sneaks up to look into their window, she can see the visible difference between their socio-economic levels and their lifestyles. The young men think that their only hope lies in becoming a member of one of the urban gangs. But belonging to a gang is not the answer as the gang members take up the path of violation in the name of warriorhood. However, it is necessary to belong to a collective, and one cannot have an identity in isolation. Beth is taken back to her home village by the elders to give Grace a decent and meaningful funeral. Wainui pa is described as if with a stranger's eyes. The 'Brown-fist' gang, like Jake, which overtly draws on traditional Maori customs, including its facial tattoos, speaks of degenerated old ways. The Brown Fists encourage cruelty without the ideas of honor or splendor that was once associated with warriorhood in conventional Maori society. Jake realizes his mistake only after Beth has thrown him out that Jake recognizes how much he depended upon her. He thinks it is not masculine to be dependent or to be intimate and learns the hard way.

Ironically, the fact that Boogie has got into trouble has saved him, for as we see at Grace's funeral, he has been transformed at the Reformatory into a responsible young man, proud of his Maori heritage, without having to be violent. Beth is aware that her people are losing their culture, and hence, their identity. Although it costs her a beating from her husband, she harangues and chides his friends for not caring about it. However, she has put her finger on the wound:

You call yourselves Maoris? [...] Can any of us in this room speak the language? No reply. What do we know of our culture? [...] She told them the Maori of old had a culture, and he had pride, and he had warriorhood, not this bullying, man-hitting- woman shet, you call that manhood? It's not manhood, and it sure as hell ain't Maori warriorhood. So ask yourselves what you are." (28)

Duff emphasizes, the Maoris no longer have any pride in their country. He insists that there is good and bad alike in both Maori and Pakeha (103), but there is undoubtedly an element of blame on the side of the white man. The system allows very few Maori New Zealanders to get to the top of the socio-economic ladder. The opera singer Kiri TeKanawa is singled out as an example of one who has made it. But there is resentment when she is compared to the character Mavis Tatana, who has got no further than singing in McClutchy's bar, on account of her Maori shyness 64). It is suspected that Kiri TeKanawa was brought up "posh", and is not likely to be addicted to beer like Mavis. Not only have the Pakeha taken away the language of the Maoris, but also their history. The history that is taught in school is the white man's history (178). The Treaty of Waitangi has been broken. So how far is the white man to blame? The government pays unemployment benefit to alleviate poverty, for Maori unemployment is "much higher than their white counterparts. It was because they were less skilled." (21) But the effects are worse than if the men were meaningfully employed because these schemes gave them money to drink at the pub the whole day and while away their days -drinking and doing crimes instead of working.

At Grace's funeral, Beth feels an outsider for not understanding the Maori language. The meeting house is described, and we see the role of art and craft in the religious rituals of a culture (121). Chapter 10, "They Who Have History II," is the description of Grace's funeral. TeTupaea, paramount chief of the tribe, gives a speech. He starts with his genealogy and the need for history. The whakapapa is described. He talks of life and how precious it is. Then the ritual proceeds to the waiatatangi, the lament for the dead. This gives importance to Grace, even in death, even in her lack of fulfilled potential. TeTupaea gives an example of collective responsibility and guilt over the death of a child. Burdens should not be shouldered in isolation, thus through the funeral rites, Beth finds not only consolation in her loss and her feelings of guilt at having failed her daughter, but also "a resurgence of fierce pride, a come- again of a people who once were warriors." (127) The description of the haka or peruperu, performed by thirty men and women, is a wake-up call to Beth, which he will pass on to others: "Like your ancestors'd sent a sign, eh? A sign to you, those of you who don't know your own culture, you better get your black arses into gear do sumpthin about it. Before it's too late." (128– 9). In Jake Heke we have a tragic figure who is neither a hero nor a villain, while his wife Beth does prove herself a heroine, but only after she has "betrayed" her children and her Maori heritage. They both have an inner struggle, but Beth's childhood, albeit in a patriarchal society, has fitted her better. She may have lost the physical battle against her husband, but she has moral strength. Some critics have objected to the "happy" ending, opining that Beth's transformation into a Maori cultural heroine is unlikely. But Duff has written the seeds of her transformation into the character from a very early stage. And this way, he gives hope to his readers that there is always a way. He inspires them to stand against the evil in themselves. Seeing herself as a member of the "Other" race of New Zealand, secondary to the Pakeha, Beth has felt the need to question the reasons for this status, and has always seen herself on a stage, acting out her role and explaining herself to her "audience" of Pakeha, which we may see as a sort of chorus, as I discussed earlier:

They're my audience. I tellem what's wrong with this world, with my world, with the MAORI world –Yep, the MAORI world, in big capital letters like that. I tellem like that because it's a big problem being a Maori in this world. We used to be a race of warriors, O audience out there. You know that? And our men used to have full tattoos all over their ferocious faces, and it was chiselled in and they were not to utter a sound. Not one sound. The women, too, they had tats on their chins and their lips were black with tattooing. But I think they let us cry out when it was being done; I spose they thought us women are weak anyway, though we aren't. Now where was I and what was I saying? Oh who cares?

CONCLUSION

Though at the beginning, Beth feels excluded and detached from their traditional Maori Culture, she is the one who, at the end, seeks to revisit the past. She encourages her people to look back to their glorious past and seeks courage and inspiration from their ancestors. Furthermore, she says, "Gonna do my best to give you kids your rightful warrior inheritance. Pride in yourself, your poor selves. Not attacking violent pride but heart pride."(Duff 161) Revisiting the past with this prospect serves as a means of encouraging Maoris with a sense of their own strength to resist and reject the colonial ideology. Duff also suggests that the Pakehas might have caused the problems in the first place, but they are more adapted to the modern world, and, as in the survival of the fittest, the Maori have to adapt or die out. The quality of toughness is not intrinsically wrong, says Duff, but it must be redirected. Duff offers such revalorization of traditional Maori culture and history as a means of liberating the Maoris from their present degradation.

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