

Postcolonialism and Disability: A Study in Special Reference to Patricia Grace's 'Potiki'

Paper Submission: 15/02/2021, Date of Acceptance: 26/02/2021, Date of Publication: 27/02/2021

Abstract

Postcolonial literature is a literature of resistance. It is a renaissance against the stigma of inferiority complex. It's a weapon against oppressing powers and a medium of self enlightenment. Disability and postcolonialism are two important and inter-related discourses. Potiki, a novel written by Patricia Grace, is a masterpiece of literature of resistance against postcolonial powers. The struggle of Maori community to survive against power, politics and progress (?) becomes a symbol of decolonization. Toko, Mary and Manu are three disabled characters in the novel who connect themselves with the idea of resistance with their physical and psychological disabilities. The fragrance of Maori community and its history spreads in a wider note with these disabled characters in the novel. It seems that the theme of defeating the colonial powers from the common disabled characters has been kept with the aim to express the emotions strongly. The postcolonial writers many times give voice to the silenced characters of contemporary society. Similarly, this novel looks at disability from a larger perspective and describes the tradition of being connected to the roots of a tribe in New Zealand's coastal area.

Keywords: Disability, Postcolonialism, Resistance, Maori community, Toko, Mary, Manu, History, Roots, Culture, Tradition, Power.

Introduction

Cultural identity, nation, gender, history, folk, family, myth, nostalgia, memory, body, spirituality, race, ethnicity etc are the most important ingredients of Postcolonial literature. Struggle to carry one's identity against the colonial powers undoubtedly remains in the centre of postcolonial writing. History and cultural identity are two important points of such writings. Patricia Grace who belongs to New Zealand's Maori community (a community which resides on coastal areas) is a novelist who is famous for postcolonial themes in her writings.

Potiki, a novel written by Patricia Grace, has a great blend of postcolonialism and disability in it. Certain important characters in the novel are disabled and through them Grace shows the fighting spirit of Maori community against colonial powers. Characters like Toko, Mary and Manu become symbols of resistance, cultural identity and spiritualism and become a mouthpiece of Grace to stand with the history and identity of Maori community against oppressing powers. Through the medium of these three disabled characters, specially of Toko, we will try to look into the theme of postcolonialism and disability in Potiki.

Potiki is the second novel by Patricia Grace. It was published first in 1986 and awarded with the New Zealand's distinguished 'Fiction Award' in 1987. Along with imagery and symbolism, the history of Maori community and its roots is beautifully illustrated in the novel.

Talking about the title of the novel, it means the 'youngest child' who is Toko in the novel. Toko is a disabled character and it can be said that he also exists as one of the most prominent characters in the novel. Grace has divided the story into various chapters. The characters in the novel carry out the task of carrying forward the story from their respective perspectives. A total of nine chapters are narrated by Toko's character and are very important from the point of view of the essence of the novel. With all the ingredients of postcolonialism the novel is also important to see the scenario and proceedings with the eyes and experiences of disabled characters. Characters of Toko, Mary and Manu are disabled. Mary is



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Toko's mother who is mentally disabled. Even when she gives birth to Toko, she does not mentally realize that she has given birth to a child. She considers it a strange thing and goes to the ocean to throw it. This child is rescued when seen by Roimata and is named Toko after the child's ancestor by Grandma Tamihana. Similarly, Manu is the youngest child born to Roimata. Manu means small bird in Maori language. Manu is also a mentally disabled character who does not remember things and who leaves school because there is 'nothing to be taught.' In the novel, it can be seen that never considering disability as a misfortune, the disabled characters have been described as culturally and socially a prime part of the Maori community. If Manu's character is seen as an example, when he talks about leaving school, his mother and the whole family agree that the house is in fact the most suitable place for him to learn. Mary, who is the sister of Hemi cleans the wharenuui. "...Hemi's sister Mary goes to Wharenuui everyday with her brush and polishing cloths to clean and shine." (p.15)

Wharenuui which is a traditional Maori meeting house, is a symbol of history, culture and roots of the race. It's a place to meet for both happiness and sorrow. Mary, who is mentally disabled, loves to go to Wharenuui and this shows how even being disabled she is strongly connected to the roots of the Maori community. Mary's character also symbolizes the innocence of ethnic grace and bond of this community and also shows its distance from external influences.

Toko's character is etched as the lead character in the novel. Toko has the power to visualize the future. In the story, he senses the burning of Wharenuui and the collapse of Urupa. This aspect of Toko's character is a part of the myth underlying the characterization of postcolonial literature in which elements such as spirituality, rituals, tradition, and history related to the myths of the Maori community can be seen. Toko's being seen as a father figure even after his young age is a symbol of the traditions of Maori community. He himself explains, "I was always given time to speak even though speaking is mostly done by those who are old." (p. 154)

In order to resist Dollman which represents Colonial Power, the Maori community stays by its roots and takes shelter in the lap of nature. Toko's character has an exception in its own identity. In chapter 6 he himself explains, "My making father could be a ghost, or a tree, or a tin-can man that used to visit here once, but it does not matter. I have Hemi who is father to me." (p. 42) the bond somehow sweeps out the question of Identity.

In fact Toko's character gives Grace the opportunity to demonstrate the traditional nature of Maori culture and the acceptance of a disabled character in this community, separate from the external world. With his abilities Toko does not lag behind in fighting. He is also an exceptional character in the novel and his mental capacity is superb despite his inefficient body:

"My understanding was more than ordinary for a person who was five. Well that's what I have

been told. Given in place of a straight body, and to make up for almost drowning - nobody has told me that but I think it might be so." (p.55)

Toko's catching a big fish in the sea and his urge to go to the mountains to save *Urupa* tells the story of his determination and mindset to help the people who are removing waste there. This Fighting Spirit somewhere represents Maori culture, history and tradition and shows its firmness to fight against the colonial powers.

Toko represents wisdom, knowledge and strength of ancestral roots with his 'special knowing' and many times becomes a mouthpiece of Maori community. His impaired legs can't stop him from being resistant. In fact Grace tries to show that the power of memory, history and cultural identity is transferred to the new generation. In chapter 21 Toko, elaborating re-making of destroyed carving house says, "Gradually the new figures emerged from wood, and these figures were not new in name because ancestry remains, but they were new in appearance. What was brought forward this time, from trees, came forward under different eyes and from under different hands." (p.144)

In the new building, the new Wharenuui which is built after destruction, a special ramp and special door which opens or closes from one side are made especially for Toko. It is made for his wheelchair and for ease of movement. This shows that individualism or individual needs can be mixed with the needs of the group and society. It represents the idea of togetherness which is an important quality to stand against the idea of 'imposed progress' of Dollman. It is quite visible that despite all the shortcomings, almost everything useful for life is available to the Maori community and despite all the false assurances and lures of money given by Tradesmen, they are not ready to give their lands. The traditional wealth is more valuable for them and mother nature has everything to feed them. This race of coastal areas of New Zealand shows its unity, perseverance and liveliness to fight against Power. They work hard in their land and gardens and stand despite all the shortcomings. Most importantly, throughout this process, the disabled characters of the novel show the same high level of resistance while standing with their community.

In fact these characters are not marginalized in any case as an identity. They have their own distinct identity and are mixed in society in general. With the help of cultural and literary narratives Patricia Grace shows that a disabled character or an exceptional child like Toko can also be an agent of culture and can be a normal successor of socio cultural identity of a race or even a nation. In his book *Literature and Disability*, Alice Hall writes, "Disability studies and postcolonial studies share concern with silenced populations." (Hall, p.47)

Disabled characters may be silenced populations for others, but Patricia Grace considers them to be voices of resistance in her novel.

Aim of the Study

My objective in this paper would be to show how the disabled characters like Toko, Mary and

Manu (specially Toko who is one of the central characters) have emerged as power of resistance in the process of decolonization. The paper, through the medium of Patricia Grace's *Potiki*, shall also focus on inter-related discourses of Postcolonialism and Disability.

Conclusion

Grace, through her novel, explores how voices of disabled characters are also the voices of the Maori community. It can be said that the sense of collective resistance, which is required to fight against such forces, disabled characters like Toko, Mary and Manu has been used by the novelist to prove the stronger resistance in his community. The novel is named as *Potiki*, which means the youngest child who is Toko, is also unique when Roimata's character too describes several chapters in the novel.

Potiki is a masterpiece of Patricia Grace which shows the importance of civilization, history and the uniqueness of nature. It's a resistance against the colonial ideology of progress. This shows how the colonial powers nurtured the tradition of destruction in the name of development. At the same time it gives a

serious message that with the strength of unity and groundedness, such powers can be fought with vigor. The identity of a community or nation can remain intact only by staying connected with its culture and ideas. And this identity itself is an important element of postcolonial literature.

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