



A postcolonial perspective on Maori masculinity in *Once Were Warriors*

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Abstract. In the context of globalization, the collision between New Zealand's indigenous Maori culture and the European culture brought about by colonialism is a practical problem faced by New Zealand society. How the Maori can reconstruct and demonstrate their unique masculinity in this cultural dynamic is a challenge. This essay takes the novel *Once Were Warriors* as an example, first sorting out the historical background of New Zealand in the postcolonial era. Then it explores in detail the transformation of Maori masculinity from degeneration to adaptive reconstruction in the post-colonial context, and analyzes the coping strategies of Maori in the face of cultural conflict. Finally, it summarizes the postcolonial significance of Maori masculinity in the novel, in order to help readers better understand the gender dynamics and social structure in Maori culture, and provide valuable insights for understanding cultural conflicts and identity recognition in the postcolonial context.

Keywords: Maori, masculinity, postcolonial, New Zealand

1 Introduction

Alan Duff is a New Zealand writer who often explores the lives and challenges of Maori people, as well as issues related to Maori culture and New Zealand society, through his novels. He is known for his direct and powerful writing style. His first published novel, *Once Were Warriors* (1990), was a huge success, winning the PEN Award for Best First Novel, runner-up for the Goodman Field Watty Award, and was subsequently made into an internationally acclaimed film [1]. *Once Were Warriors* brought Duff to national attention, as did his views on Maori issues. In 2003, *Once Were Warriors* was staged as a musical across New Zealand. The book is considered a New Zealand classic for its original and powerful portrayal of Maori in New Zealand society.

This novel vividly depicts the difficulties and struggles of the Maori ethnic group in modern society, especially their marginalization and identity crisis in urban life. It presents a typical concept of masculinity through the image of the main character, Jake Heke, showcasing the cultural conflicts and social problems encountered by the Maori people in the process of modernization, as well as how they seek a new self-identity after losing their traditional way of life. The image of Maori masculinity

is portrayed in a complex and multi-layered manner. Under the illumination of the flourishing overseas research, it can be seen that there is still a huge untapped potential for Maori literary studies in our country [2]. (Liu 197) This essay will focus on the expression of the masculinity of Maori male characters in the novel from a postcolonial perspective, exploring the influence of colonial history on the loss of Maori masculinity, the adaptive reconstruction of Maori masculinity and summarize the post-colonial significance of Maori masculinity in the novel, in order to help readers better understand the gender dynamics and social structure in Maori culture, and provide valuable insights for understanding cultural conflicts and identity recognition in the postcolonial context.

2 The loss of Maori masculinity in the post-colonial context

Considering the specific historical background of New Zealand, the masculinity of the Maori people, as the indigenous people of New Zealand, is closely related to the colonial history and post-colonial reality of New Zealand. During the colonial period, the Maori people experienced difficulties such as population decline and land deprivation. The arrival of European colonists not only changed the political and economic structure of Maori society, but also brought different values. During the colonization process, the Maori were forced to adopt European culture and values, which led them to doubt and negate their own traditions and culture to a certain extent. In the novel *Once Were Warriors*, the once beautiful natural scenery has become an advertising board for external publicity. In reality, however, steel, graffiti, tattoos and bars are everywhere, which were the standard features of the "fallen tribe" of that era.

Whitehead offers an explanation of what masculinity can be: "[it] may be conceptualized broadly as manhood. Manhood captures something of what it means to be a man beyond other axes of identity such as race, class and sexuality, within patriarchal social relations" (413) [3]. Furthermore, Connell explains that "'[m]asculinity', to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (Masculinities 71) [4]. Therefore, masculinity includes ideas from body language and body image to social rules and requirements. Throughout the book, the decline of Maori masculinity is mainly reflected in four aspects:

Firstly, dependence on alcohol and violence. Harmful behaviors linked with hegemonic masculinity were also exacerbated by alcohol consumption.[5] The protagonist Jack in the novel may have been seen as a heroic figure with traditional Maori masculinity, but this masculinity gradually degenerates into dependence on violence and alcohol. Jack often goes to bars and uses his fists to prove his masculinity, even resorting to violence against his wife Beth and children. This act of maintaining dignity through violence is actually a distortion and desecration of true masculinity.

Secondly, lack of family responsibility. Jack, as the core pillar of the family, should have taken on the responsibility of raising children and taking care of the family, but his behavior is exactly the opposite. After losing his job, he became addicted

to alcohol and violence for a long time, ignoring the needs of his family, which led to chaos and crisis in the family. One of his sons joined a gang and the other was sent to a correctional facility because of theft, but he didn't care at all. All of these directly reflect Jack's failure as a father and husband, as well as his serious lack of family responsibility.

Thirdly, trampling on the dignity of women. Jack not only committed violence against his wife Beth, but also indirectly led to the tragedy of his daughter committing suicide in shame after being raped. In Maori traditional culture, respecting women is one of the important values, but Jack's behavior completely deviates from this, further reflecting his decline in masculinity.

Fourthly, the loss of self-identity. Jack gradually lost himself in the fog of alcohol and violence, unable to find his place and value in modern society. This kind of loss is not only reflected in his responsibility to his family and society, but also in his confusion about self-identity. He attempted to prove his existence and value through violence, but this method of proof was extremely distorted and ineffective.

After being raped by her father's friend, Grace asked her Maori friend Toot, who lived in an abandoned car, "Why is everything so black?" (Duff 94) [6] Toot responded, "Maybe that's because we're all bloody Maoris." (94) Such scenes are hard to associate with the masculinity and unique warrior spirit of the Maori tribe. Maori men have traditionally been portrayed as warriors, brave, resilient, and loyal to their families and tribes. However, under the impact of European culture, they were forced to adapt to the new social order, and this traditional masculinity gradually became blurred and complicated.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the first postcolonial theorist with a fully feminist agenda, who tried to save the subaltern from misrepresentation, pointed out that as colonized women almost go unheard within their own patriarchal culture, they are doubly unheard under a colonial regime [7]. This is vividly demonstrated in the novel *Once Were Warriors*.

The male protagonist Jack in the book undoubtedly holds a dominant position in the family, maintaining his masculinity through violence, alcoholism, and controlling women. This kind of masculinity is actually a distorted expression in a patriarchal society, which conceals the fragility and insecurity of Maori men in the postcolonial context, while also exacerbating the dilemma of feminism. They suffer from both physical and psychological abuse in their families, but are unable to seek effective help and support. This dilemma is not only an individual level pain, but also a profound criticism of the entire social structure and gender concepts.

The various drawbacks and contradictions in male society are largely based on an unequal and unjust gender relationship. As far as I'm concerned, if we face and criticize this gender relationship, strive to promote gender equality and women's liberation, we can truly solve the root problems of male society and present Maori masculinity in a way that is more in line with modern social moral and legal norms.

3 The reconstruction of Maori masculinity in the post-colonial context

Postcolonial theory focuses on how colonized people resist colonial rule and cultural assimilation, as well as how they adapt and survive in new social environments [8]. In the context of post-colonialism, the identity of the Maori people has become complex and diverse. They are both inheritors of Maori culture and members of modern society. This dual identity requires them to meet both traditional cultural expectations and modern societal norms when displaying their masculinity. In *Once Were Warriors*, the masculinity of the Maori people is reflected in their adherence to and maintenance of Maori cultural traditions, which can be seen as a response to colonial history and an expression of self orientation. Under the impact of European culture, the Maori people began to reflect and reconstruct their identity and culture. However, they did not completely abandon their cultural traditions, but instead resisted and adapted to the homogenization of European culture by reinterpreting and shaping masculinity. This reconstruction is reflected in their reinterpretation of traditional values and modern expression. They adhere to their traditional values such as loyalty, bravery, respect, etc., which form the core of their masculinity.

The novel portrays the struggle and exploration of Maori men between tradition and modernity, culture and identity through rich plot and character portrayal. The adaptive reconstruction of Maori masculinity in the postcolonial context is mainly reflected in the following four aspects.

3.1 The return and reinterpretation of traditional culture

The Maori people believe that war dance is a medium of connection between ancestors and descendants, through which they convey culture, history, and courage. War dance is not only an artistic performance, but also a continuation of faith, a surging force in the blood. "The dancers not only show the courage of warriors in their dance, but also invoke the protection of ancestral spirits through physical movements and prayers." (Men 31) [9]

The male characters, such as Jack's two sons Nig and Boogie, reframe their identity and masculinity by returning to traditional Maori culture, such as participating in Maori war dancing and learning traditional skills. This process of cultural root-finding not only enhanced their cultural self-confidence, but also allowed them to find a new path to integrate with modern society.

3.2 Redefining the role of family and community

In the post-colonial context, family and community have become important places for Maori men to reconstruct their masculinity. As the Maori community did not experience the same shift toward the individual that marked a change in European thought and literature in the nineteenth century, one individual's relation to their community remained essential in the construction of their very self [10]. (Singeot 10) In the nov-

el, Nig is initially dissatisfied with his family, joins a social gang, shirks family responsibilities, and refuses to go with his family to visit his brother who is sent to a reformatory. After his sister Grace committed suicide out of self-humiliation, he began to return to the family and assume the responsibility of the eldest son in the family, he realized that the true masculinity is not only reflected in the toughness and struggle, but also reflected in the love for the family and the responsibility for the community.

3.3 Self-reflection and growth

In the novel, Boogie is sent to a reformatory for stealing, and he punches the window in protest. The teacher at the reformatory told him: "The British used to think that bayonets were the deadliest of all hand-to-hand combat weapons until they met our fighters, who used taiaha (Maori War Spear)." You think your fist is a weapon? When I teach you, you will understand that your mind is. You will pick up your inner taiaha." (Duff 186) In the reformatory center, through education and psychological counseling, Boogie realized his past mistakes and limitations, learned how to control his emotions, and how to solve problems in a non-violent way. He began to examine his own behavior and values, and this self-reflection and growth not only helped him break free from the cycle of violence, but also enabled him to face life's challenges and dilemmas with a more mature and rational attitude.

In the novel, the Maori begin to receive a modern education and strive to integrate into modern society while retaining a traditional warrior spirit. They express their recognition and respect for their culture by adhering to their own language, traditional customs, religious beliefs, etc. The Maori strive to combine traditional warrior spirit with modern values, displaying masculinity that both respects tradition and conforms to modern aesthetic requirements. This attempt not only reflects the Maori people's respect for traditional culture, but also reflects their exploration and identification of their own identity in the context of globalization.

3.4 Respect for Maori women

The female characters in the book, such as Jake's wife Beth, show the influence of feminism on the reconstruction of masculinity. Beth is a strong woman who takes on the responsibility of caring for the children and supporting the family. She stood up to her husband when he failed and became the pillar of the family. Beth's portrayal challenges traditional gender roles and shows the strength and independence of women. Through the contrasting roles of Jake and Beth, the novel reveals the changing and reshaping of gender roles in Maori society. Men are no longer just protectors of the family and breadwinners, and women are no longer solely dependent on men for their existence. This transformation and reconstruction of roles reflects the adaptation and transformation of Maori society in the face of the challenges of modernization.

A good example in the novel is Nig, the eldest son of Jake and Beth. He rejected his father's masculinity based on alcohol and violence and instead sought a more balanced and respectful approach that focused more on the well-being of his family and

respect for Maori women. At first, he left his family because his mother refused to give him money. Later he realized the contributions his mother and sister had made to his family, appreciating them a lot as well as feeling ashamed. When Jake wanted to punch Beth again like before, Nig bravely protected his mother; before each meal, Nig gathered his siblings together to pray and thank their ancestors under the leadership of their mother. Overall, the novel shows the process of reconstructing Maori masculinity in modern society by depicting the struggles and growth of Maori male and female characters. This process is not only a challenge to traditional male roles, but also a reassessment and definition of gender roles and expectations. Through this process, the novel calls for a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of masculinity, as well as an identification with gender equality and the diversity of gender roles.

Maori culture is unique and rich, and their exploration and realization of their identity in the framework of globalization is reflected in its diversity and complexity. It is a recognition not only of their own culture and traditions, but also of their own place and role in modern society. In the novel, different Maori show different masculinity. Some adhere to the traditional warrior spirit, while others are more concerned with the values and ethics of modern society. Maori masculinity takes many forms, whether it's cheering themselves up with a Maori war dance or leading the family in prayer before eating to thank their ancestors for giving them a hearty meal, which retain the essence of Maori tradition while harmoniously adapting to modern society.

In the novel, Toot praised his brother Nig's handsome tattoos. When Nig asked him if he wanted a tattoo like his, Toot said, "I wear mine on the inside." (Duff 187) At the end of the novel, Beth left Jake with some meaningful words: "Our people once were warriors. They were people with mana, pride, and spirit. If my spirit can survive living with you for 18 years, then I can survive anything." (194) The core of masculinity lies not in physical force, nor in external things like tattoos, but in an inner spirit of loyalty to one's own ethnic tribe when facing foreign aggression, and calmness and perseverance when facing personal difficulties.

4 Conclusion

Exploring Maori masculinity in the New Zealand novel *Once Were Warriors* from the perspective of post-colonialism, we can find that this work not only deeply reveals the evolution of Maori masculinity in the historical and contemporary society, but also contains rich post-colonial significance.

The colonial history brought not only political and economic oppression to indigenous peoples, but also profound cultural and psychological effects. The struggles and sufferings of the Maori represented in the novel stem in part from the traumas of the colonial past. However, *Once Were Warriors* does not dwell on the level of criticism of colonialism, but further explores the reconstruction and transformation of Maori masculinity in the post-colonial context. The Maori in the novel have to both resist the negative effects of colonialism and adapt to the demands of modern society. This duality reflects the exploration of how the colonized seek their own development and

liberation under the new historical conditions in the post-colonial period. Maori expressions of masculinity in the context of globalization also reflect a deep understanding of the relationship between local and global cultures. While seeking to maintain cultural identity in the process of globalization, they are also exploring the interaction and integration with global culture. In the novel, through its insightful portrayal and analysis of Maori masculinity, we not only glimpse the complexity and diversity of Maori identity in a post-colonial context, but also witness the resilience and rebirth of individuals and communities in the face of cultural conflict and integration.

Through the tragic story of Jack's family, the novel shows the struggles and resistance of Maori men in the face of domestic violence, poverty and social marginalization. At the same time, the novel also conveys a new understanding and expectation of Maori masculinity through positive characters and plots, such as Grace's kindness and Boogie's rehabilitation in the reformatory. These characters and plots show that despite the deep traumas and dilemmas inflicted on Maori men by colonialism, they still have the capacity to rebuild their masculinity and identity through self-reflection and action.

In a post-colonial context, *Once Were Warriors* reminds us of the uniqueness and diversity of colonial culture, against the hegemony and repression of Western mainstream culture. At the same time, it also inspires us to look at the differences and conflicts between different cultures with an open and inclusive mind, and seek common development and prosperity through dialogue and exchanges. In today's context of globalization, this post-colonial perspective is particularly important to help us break down cultural barriers and prejudices and promote understanding and respect among different cultures.

To sum up, Maori masculinity in *Once Were Warriors* is not only a profound reflection and critique of history and today's society, but also a positive outlook and expectation for future cultural exchange and integration. Through this work, we can more deeply understand the connotation and significance of post-colonialism, and contribute to the promotion of global cultural diversity and inclusion.

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