

Artemis Riripeti Mahana In Witi Ihimaera's The Matriarch As Replica Of Hine-Matikotai

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Abstract

Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* (1986) is a historical novel written in the form of opera. It is a depiction of the pains of the principal character Artemis Riripeti Mahana. She endeavours to make her grandson Tamatea understand the importance of Maori people and their attachment with their native land. Being a very strong independent woman, she stands for the welfare of her people. Mahana expects her grandson Tamatea to take after her role as a lead fighter for her tribal group and to retain their identity. Therefore, she guides him with both physical and mental lessons. His body is honed to perfection. Her trainings would groom him into a better human being in order to enable him to sustain the future struggles of the Maori people.

Like the mythical woman named Hine-matikotai who supports and helps even an unknown wood carver Rua-te-pupuke to save his child, Artemis Riripeti Mahana in this novel plays a pivotal role in the life of her grandson Tamatea. With this lens of focus, this paper tries to justify that Artemis Riripeti Mahana is nothing but a replica of the mythical character Hine-matikotai.

Keywords: Matriarch, helper, replica, teaching, fight back, Maori life, native land, myth, woman, etc.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the word "matriarch" as a woman who is the head of a family or social group" (967). According to most of the countries around the world, women are appraised as pillars of support and encouragement for the men around them. In Genesis, the god himself puts it that "it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him (2:18)." This helper is identified as woman, the equal half of men, who have immense tolerance and are ready to go to any extent to support the men in need.

One of the famous sayings is that, "The strongest people make time to help others, even if they are struggling with their own personal problems" (Daily Inspirational Quotes). Similarly, a woman who lives among the fairies of the sea called Hine-matikotai in Maori mythology goes out of her way to help an unknown man namely Rua-te-pupuke. Rua becomes the god of wood carving after listening to the sad story of his son Te-Manu-hauturuki who is kidnapped.

In the distant past, Rua-te-pupuke is nominated as the leader or the head person of a village situated on the seashore. His son, Te-Manu-hauturuki is always willing to go for boating whenever time permits. As usual, one day when he goes for boating into the sea, he is captured by the sea god Tangaroa and is taken to the house of Tangaroa which is located deep under the waters of the sea. Tangaroa lodged the abducted Te-Manu-hauturuki among the carved images placed on the roof of his house. Then, Tangaroa and others go out to gather food for them. A woman named Hine-matikotai is left all alone at home to take care of the homestead. Meanwhile, Rua- Te-pupuke searches for his son in many areas in and around the village. Thus, he gets to know from his own friends that his son Te-Manu-hauturuki has been captured by the sea god Tangaroa and is held captive beneath the sea waters which is his house. On knowing this, Rua-Te-pupuke decides to go to the house of Tangaroa to take revenge for his act.

Rua-Te-pupuke travels under the waters of the sea and reaches the house of the sea god Tangaroa. At the entrance of the house, he finds many carved images that stand still and there is no communication between them. He meets Hine-matikotai at that homestead and tells her that his son has been abducted by Tangaroa. Though she does not know him previously, she promises to help this strange man as justice seems to be only on his side. She tells Rua-Te-pupuke that all the other beings of Tangaroa's house have gone out to gather food and they would be back home only by the evening and in the meantime, he can close all the openings in the roof

of the house. Once Rua-Te-pupuke, enters the house to close the holes, he finds the carved images inside the house of the sea god communicating to one another. When they enter the house, they are stunned to know that somebody has barged into the house. Rua-Te-pupuke, to his surprise, understands that his son Te-Manu-hauturuki has been set up as a carved image in the house of Tangaroa.

As the sun sets, all the members of Tangaroa's house come back home with the food they have collected all along the day. After having had their food, as part of their relaxation, they conduct entertaining activities like posture-dancing, cast's cradle, hand clapping, etc. As the day comes to an end, they all go to sleep to have some rest after a tiring day. The next day morning, the people inside the house do not realise that the day has come as the openings of the house are closed by Rua-Te-pupuke and hence there is no way for light to penetrate into their house. Hine-matikotai puts her effort to make them believe that it's still night and so they can continue with their sleep without getting disturbed by saying, "Sleep, O sleep! It is the long night of Hine-matikotai" (qtd. "The Story of Rua and Tangaroa. An Origin Myth: How the art of Wood-Carving was acquired by Man," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 258).

Rua-Te-pupuke secretly comes into the house with a stone to guard himself and he takes his position to attack them the moment they get up. As and when they get to realise that there is somebody inside the house, Rua-Te-pupuke starts to attack them. The folks like Kanae (mullet), Maroro (flying fish) and Kokiri (trigger fish) try running out of the house to escape from there. But then he captures all the members, locks them inside the house and sets aflame as the means of his revenge. When they all are burning in the fire, they sing:

O Rua-te-pupuke!
Dive down into the ocean, that your fish
May be destroyed on land, a gurnard, a shark;
Gasping in the midst of the flames
hu! hu!

Alas! Fear assails us. Alas! (qtd. "The Story of Rua and Tangaroa. An Origin Myth: How the art of Wood-Carving was acquired by Man," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 259).

After this song, they die. Rua-Te-pupuke leaves all of them dead and he goes from there with all the remaining muted carved posts and his son Te-Manu-hauturuki. As he brings all the carved images into the world from under water, from that day onwards the carved posts never had a voice for themselves and Rua-Te-pupuke is labelled as the father of wood carving as he launched this art to the world. It is also believed that another figure from mythology named Tawhaki, who is connected to lightening, has also come there at the same time to seek revenge on the Ponaturi or the sea fairies as they had killed his father Hena. He seems to have destroyed them by exposing them to the sunlight.

Witi Ihimaera identifies Artemis Riripeti Mahana as the representative of Hine-matikotai in the life of her grandson Tamatea. She is well equipped in the skill or martial art of taiaha and she feels that this would help one to be brave and bold. So, she decides to teach the nuances of this art to her grandson Tamatea. As it is just a practising session, she tutors it with the help of a broom. When grandfather questions about their activity, she says, "This mokopuna needs to know how to defend himself. He's too soft" (TM 131). She guides him in his positions, the movement of his hands, his concentration, tricks, etc. When he makes mistakes, she hits him badly with the same broom in which they are practicing to learn taiaha. Moved by severe pain, he starts to shed tears and wonders why even his father, Te Ariki did not come to save him even after noticing him suffering with pain. Then, the stubborn grandmother shouts "Fight back, you soft kid. No good just standing there, mokopuna. 'No good crying. Start defending yourself. Be alert" (TM 131). The pain caused by the bruises and her rage increase the anger of the child. He gathers all his strength together and attacks his grandmother. Afflicted with pain, she falls down to the ground. His father yells at him telling him not to hurt his grandmother. Though struck with pain, the grandmother is happy to see that Tamatea reacts to anger and he succeeds in it. So, she gets up and appreciates him by telling him "Don't cry, boy. Don't cry. Nothing to cry about. You won" (TM 132).

The Matriarch attends various meetings to voice out the importance of the land for the Maori people. Tamatea accompanies his grandmother wherever she goes. In one such occasion, they go to attend a meeting that is scheduled between the Prime Minister and all the leaders of the tribal groups at Wellington. The main focus of this meeting is to groupthink about the land of the Maori people. They attend the meeting only on its third day. The mindset of the Maori people is so narrow that they can never imagine a woman as a leader. This paved a way for a double oppression on a meeting between the Maori and Pakeha. As the Matriarch is a Maori as well as a woman, she and her group are made to wait for an hour before they could enter the gathering. When they discuss among themselves, she says: "We looked up to heaven and before we knew where we were there was no land left...all gone" (TM 73). The Pakeha think that without asking their permission they can continue occupying their land. Finally, when her turn comes to speak about the problems they are facing, the Prime Minister is ready to leave from there. "Tamatea, remember. Always fight. Never give up. Your mana will help you. Fight fair if you can. But if you must, use whatever devices are at hand. Remember" (TM 31). So, the courageous Matriarch asks him to stay back there to listen to their issues and then she addresses the gathering.

After describing their issues they are facing, the grandmother and Tamatea get back home to Waituhi. At night the child questions her querying if they have achieved what they wanted by attending and voicing their needs in the meeting. After going through deep thinking for some time, she says: “We did it for the land and the people” (TM 121).

Another meeting for discussion about land is arranged between the leaders of the Maori tribal groups and the Pakeha Prime Minister. This is planned to be held at Whare Runanga or the University of Maori. People belonging to both the groups gather in the surrounding areas of the Maori University and settle down in various temporary tents. Tamatea who is sleeping during that time, dreams about spiders. He is deeply disturbed because of this ominous dream. Artemis “calmed him with a soft kiss” (TM 402) and consoles him by telling that “You have just had a dream, e mokopuna. A very bad dream. She began to stroke his forehead, smoothing away his anxieties” (TM 403) and takes him back to her tent to help him hit some sleep.

Meanwhile, everybody including the supporters and non-supporters of the Pakeha start assembling in the Whare runanga for the meeting. A priest and the Matriarch’s personal advisor namely Tamata Kota happily announces that, “The time has come to begin the meeting about our land, our Earth Mother, Papatuanuku” (TM 403). The organizers instruct that all the Maori people who have come to attend the meeting must assemble in the meeting hall well in advance and “once the Prime Minister is inside the doors will be closed” (TM 406) as their “plan had been to have all the people assembled in the whare runanga before the Prime Minister himself entered” (TM 405). Accordingly, the emissaries take all those who had gathered there into the hall immediately.

Artemis remains in the tent looking after her grandson who is asleep and she refuses to go into the meeting hall without her grandson Tamatea. Tamati Kota and few other Maori people are also there in the tent with them. Initially as the people are assembling into the hall, a messenger comes to inform them to assemble in the gathering hall before the Prime Minister comes in. When Tamati Kota conveys this to the Matriarch, she looks at Tamatea and says, “I need him to help me, to give me his strength” (TM 404). So, they decide to remain there in the tent waiting for the child to wake up. When the Prime Minister is expected to arrive there at any time, a messenger comes and tells them that the doors of the meeting hall will be closed if they do not enter into it before the arrival of the Prime Minister.

The Matriarch refuses to go anywhere without her grandson Tamatea and she says they will not close the doors of the hall until they get into the meeting hall. When the child wakes up, she sits beside him and she starts telling him traditional Maori prayers. She also motivates him by telling that “We have passed many tests. There are still some ahead but with God’s help we will be victorious” (TM 405).

When the Prime Minister comes into the entrance of the Whare runanga or the Maori University, as decided earlier, the doors of the hall are closed. The Matriarch, her advisor, Tamatea and the other leaders finish their prayers and then they go to the meeting hall to find that the doors have been closed. The courageous Matriarch asks for an axe to break open the door and to everybody’s surprise she summons a lustrous greenstone which is in the shape of an axe by singing the song which details about the birth of this greenstone in a place called Hawaiki. When looked at its direction, as the novelist narrates,

The boy could see something undulating, like a Silver Star swimming, swimming, swimming through the flaming river. And as the star came nearer it began to shimmer and to dissolve into a lustrous green fish which took its final appearance in the form of a beautiful greenstone. (TM 442)

This greenstone is very much similar to an axe. With the help of this stone, she opens the door and gets into the gathering with full pride and Tamatea by her side. She places this stone on a feather cloak and leaves it at the meeting hall. As she says: “Oh, my grandson, take care for the butcher lest he plunge his knife into your heart” (TM 249). Also, she tells Tamatea about two important figures Te-Kooti Rikirangi and Te Turuki Wi Pere, and events like The Maori land March, the treaty of Waitangi, etc. All these incidents show how she inculcates the importance of the Maori land and their stubborn fight for it through the pages of history into Tamatea’s thoughts.

After telling and teaching him all these the grandmother Artemis thinks that she has taught him everything that she knows and now her grandson Tamatea can defend for himself and his tribal clan at any situation that is proposed before him. He is enlightened on how to fight for their rights and beliefs and to help his people hold back their land when he grows up. Before she could relax getting fully satisfied with these thoughts, it gets through her head that she has not warned him regarding the attitude of the Pakeha and the best secretive way to handle them. Then she tells her grandson Tamatea that,

I have taught you to be a Maori and to fight in a Maori way. But there is another lesson which you must learn. E mokopuna, Whakarongo mai. I have taught you how to fight the Pakeha. But I had forgotten that to fight the Pakeha you must learn to be like him. You must become a Pakeha, think like him, act like him and, when you know you are in his image then turn your knowledge to his destruction. (TM 427)

These incidents throw light on how the Grandmother Artemis Riripeti Mahana or the Matriarch has been a guardian angel in Tamatea's life. She has almost become an indispensable person in the memories of the narrator Tamatea. Being a woman, Artemis takes the entire burden in helping her grandson shape his own life and turn into an independent and confident individual. Hence, the Matriarch or Artemis Riripeti Mahana can be identified with the Maori mythical character called Hine-matikotai who is pinpointed as the perfect example for a selfless helper.

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