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Kirsten W. Burningham
Brigham Young University, kirstenbham@gmail.com

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Exploring the Matriarchal Past to Forge a Modern Identity

Maternal Origins in Woolf and Ihimaera

Kirsten Burningham

Virginia Woolf and Witi Ihimaera ushered in new literary movements during critical moments of rupture in their personal lives and cultural worlds. Woolf led the British literary vanguard toward free indirect discourse which exposed internal musings, trivialized plot, and foregrounded the life of the mind. Ihimaera gave primal voice to the Māori mind and story—a story obscured by colonization, subjugation, and Pakeha influence, which initiated a Māori Renaissance. Though their literary styles are distinct and unique, both writers mothered into existence, or gave birth to, new literary forms by reaching back into their maternal past. Woolf’s and Ihimaera’s literary explorations, though arising more than sixty years apart on different continents, share a general modernist “mood” (disillusioned with the past and reckoning with various types of cataclysms in the present). They also share specific internal struggles: both were generally affected by the sociohistorical ruptures of modernity; and each were specifically influenced by maternal figures who shaped their emerging modern identities. Though each author was more or

less comfortable integrating maternal influences into their lives (Ihimaera more so; Woolf less so) their shared search for identity (both personal and cultural) within a modern moment of disruption and change, brings their texts—*To the Lighthouse* and *The Matriarch*—together in interesting ways that expands the canon of modernist writing. Though Woolf’s and Ihimaera’s texts and styles are “incommensurable,” as Susan Stanford Friedman says, they also contain “commensurabilities,” or literary similarities, which appear in three key features of Woolf’s and Ihimaera’s texts: (1) similar historical-biographical backgrounds and profound maternal influences that motivate creative endeavors, (2) semi-autobiographical works of fiction that explore their real-life connection to their maternal influences, and (3) maternal figures that represent national identities (Friedman, *World* 517).

Modern Moments and Maternal Influences

It is unnecessary to belabor the modern moment in which Woolf lived: a world war that pressed death and destruction to the noses of everyday Brits, changing gender roles, monarchical instability, religious disenchantment, geological revelations, and more combined to create a moment that has riveted human interest for generations. Witi Ihimaera’s modern moment was equally disruptive to individuals and the Māori society as the British modernist moment. Born in 1944, Ihimaera grew up in a world where his island culture—deeply tied to the land—was on the move. Between 1936 and 1961, around sixty percent of the Māori population had migrated from the countryside to cities, a “revolutionary” change not only for the Māori people as a whole, but also for the individual facing new problems in unfamiliar conditions (Pearce 140). This migration not only disconnected Māori individuals from the land of their history, but it also changed the constructs of authority from the “personal and traditional” toward “the vague and impersonal control of pakeha (Māori word for white colonizers) custom and law.” This change disrupted home life and created job insecurity and language barriers (Pearce 140). The social and psychological implications of these conditions most certainly qualifies as a uniquely modern moment, and Ihimaera responds in kind with his own modernist technique and vision.

Woolf and Ihimaera were deeply influenced by maternal figures. Virginia

Woolf described her feelings for her mother as an obsession. For Woolf, Julia Cameron was “the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood” (*Moments* 81). For Ihimaera, his grandmother “held [his] island, She was [his] own ariki, [his] beloved ruler” (*Māori* 1937). He admits that he has been writing about her “all [his] life,” and considering his voluminous writing output (Ihimaera has written over sixty novels, short stories, plays, and anthologies), his feelings for his grandmother may also be synonymous with an obsession (Ihimaera and Chapman, 14:12–14:40). Woolf’s obsession with her mother peaked and then subsided when she wrote *To the Lighthouse* where she was able to express “some very long felt and deeply felt emotion” (*Moments* 81). Woolf declares she “laid [her obsession with her mother] to rest” after finishing the novel, but Ihimaera continues to write about his grandmother and the profound influence her relationship and culture have and continue to have on him (Ihimaera and Chapman, 14:12–14:40). Though it is not uncommon to be heavily influenced by maternal figures, for Woolf and Ihimaera, this influence led to what Susan Stanford Friedman refers to as “creative adaptations that articulate their particular modernities” (*Planetary* 188). In my analysis, these “creative adaptations” and “particular modernities” are a maternal-like birth of distinct literary movements. In essence, Woolf, by exorcizing her mother’s influence and power over her, gave life to a new kind of woman in Lily Briscoe; and Ihimaera, by immortalizing his grandmother and mythical women of Māori legend, gave life to the Māori story and revolted against Pakeha revisionism. Understanding the significant role of maternal figures in these authors’ lives adds previously undetected insight into the semi-autobiographical nature of their texts and advances Friedman’s notion that modernist moments are not limited by time and space. Further, it encourages a closer look at exactly what kind of cataclysms might produce a modernist text, further expanding the modernist canon.

Examining Woolf’s and Ihimaera’s creative endeavors side-by-side “defamiliarizes each” and as Friedman says, “generates a perception of similarity” (*World* 517). Though their styles remain incommensurable, I perceive similarity in their methods and themes. Woolf memorably writes that “we think back through our mothers if we are women,” and in *To the Lighthouse*, she looks back on her mother through the prism of mind and memory (*A Room* 75). Similarly, Ihimaera writes, “if you want to know about me, first you have to meet my ancestors . . . another way of viewing this phenomenon is to say that Māori walk backwards into the future” and that backwards walk led him to

his grandmother, his mother, his aunties, the many women who influenced his Māori identity (*Māori* 154–155). I believe it is from the depths of these deep maternal rivers that Woolf and Ihimaera’s general literary works draw water and specifically from which *To the Lighthouse* and *The Matriarch* flow. Though more investigation is needed, it could be that when faced with a modern world in which your identity and reality *must* be refashioned, it is instinctive to look back on that first identity that forms in a child born to a mother.

Semi-Autobiographical Fiction Exploring Maternal Figures

In their own words, Woolf and Ihimaera contend that strong maternal influences motivated their literary craft. Woolf lost her mother at age thirteen, and she suffered nervous breakdowns from that time forward (*Moments* 91–92). Writing *To the Lighthouse* was part catharsis—assuaging the loss she felt for her mother—part homage, part exploration of technique and talent, and part justification for her life as an artist (Hill 181). Ihimaera, in the prologue to *The Matriarch*, suggests that, “all families are somewhat like jungles. So it is with mine, but I have made it even more of a jungle by mingling fiction with fact, like saprophytic vines twining the trunks of an already dead tree” (Ihimaera). Ihimaera frequently explores his Māori past as a way to honor and defend—for the first time in written English—the Māori ways in face of colonization, to reminisce about the beauty of his childhood, to reflect on his divergence from the Māori ways (though that divergence was less by choice than in Woolf’s case), and to practice his unique blend of myth and realism.

With the Women’s Rights movement sounding in the background, Woolf set to writing a novel that would silence the “Angel in the House[’s]” (vividly represented in the descriptions of Julia Cameron, Woolf’s mother) ghostly whisper of trying to subdue her own mind and opinion to patriarchal forces and the man’s world of writing (*Collected* 154). Drafting *To the Lighthouse* was exactly that for Woolf, an exercise in developing a “mind of her own” unfettered by Victorian expectations handed down to her and restricting the very pen in her grasp (*Collected* 155). Even though *To the Lighthouse* is a fictional work, Katherine Dalsimer asserts that there “can be no doubt, however, that it was her

mother, fictionally rendered as Mrs. Ramsay, who came to command the center of the work” (714). When Virginia Woolf’s sister Vanessa read *To the Lighthouse*, she declared it “more like her [mother] to me than anything I could ever have conceived possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead” (Bell 317). In a similar way, Ihimaera’s writings are centered on the maternal figure of his grandmother. Ihimaera describes *The Matriarch* as an exercise in displaying the “tap root” of Māori culture and his personal life; the tap root being the primary or central root in a system (Ihimaera and Chapman, 11:26–12:25). In Māori society, “the overall structuring principle . . . is the extended family or *whanou*” (Sundararaghavan 76). Further, the central pillar of that *whanou* is a relationship between grandmother and grandson, a relationship woven into the center of his novel (Ihimaera and Chapman 11:25–12:00). The novel’s protagonist, Tamatae, is trying to unwind his Māori/Pakeha identity, and like Ihimaera “feels a deep urge to go back to the happenings of his childhood in order to understand his own strivings, his own psyche” (Sundararaghavan 79). Tamatae’s wife describes the force of Māori expectations, “Your family is larger than life. It is a law unto itself. It’s ruled by complete obedience by all to the clan. There’s no such thing as being disloyal” (42). The matriarch is the center of this larger-than-life family force for Tamatae and Ihimaera: “ah, that is Riripeti, the matriarch indeed, commanding and at her most imperious” (29). In resonant language, Mrs. Ramsay is described as someone who “wish[ed] to dominate, wish[ed] to interfere, making people do what she wished” (60). Though expressed in distinct ways, Woolf’s and Ihimaera’s fictional narratives of maternal power and influence demonstrate not only their unique literary craft but also internal musings on their lived past and identity.

Maternal Figures as National Figures

Mrs. Ramsay and Riripeti (the matriarch) represent nations and movements much larger than themselves. One scene in *To the Lighthouse* describes Mrs. Ramsay, as seen by Charles Tansley, atop the stairs as she “stood quite motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter” (17–18). Placing Mrs. Ramsay on the same level as Queen Victoria, especially so early in the novel, nods a connection to the reader; Mrs.

Ramsay is much more than a mother, she is a woman who embodies the ideals of the Victorian era and the Victorian expectations for women's role (Hill 182). She is endlessly focused on marriage, saying "people must marry; people must have children" (63) and silently mocks Lily's painting ambitions (21). Riripeti, the grandmother in *The Matriarch*, similarly represents the Māori nation and their ideals. Tamatae says, "he looked up at the matriarch, He knew she was an important woman in Waituhi. People were very respectful to her not only because of her status but also because she was like a goddess" (34). Further, the mythical elements in the novel surround a meeting in which Riripeti represents the Māori nation in front of the Pakeha Parliament leaders, and as she does, she taps into supernatural powers to convince the audience of Māori rights and her power (59–65). While these maternal figures represent something intimate and important to the authors, Woolf and Ihimaera also craft them as national symbols, which highlights not only the individual struggle (as examined through the semi-autobiographical elements) but also as a national struggle.

Friedman's planetary scale for modernism means that "post-colonial modernism is less a 'writing back' to Empire" than it is an author reflecting on the "particular modernities of their position in a relational imperial system" (*Planetary* 188). I see Woolf's and Ihimaera's texts as exactly this kind of articulation with the words *relational* and *imperial* becoming particularly salient. First, because Woolf and Ihimaera represent a gender and ethnic minority relationally and imperially oppressed, their resulting modern moments are similar (Young 4–5). Second, the similarity in the "relational imperial" system induced a similar type of literary outlet or pushback against the detached, patriarchal forces holding them down. What kind of similar pushback is evident in Woolf and Ihimaera? Their authorial responses signal a turn toward more persuasive, feminine sources of strength and identity making their matriarchal past ideal for study.

Frederic Jameson has daringly asserted that "the story of the private individual destiny is *always* an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (69, emphasis added). Though audacious, I agree with Jameson—to a point. He goes on to say that because first world literatures have moved beyond the "nightmare of history" authors have become stuck in the "psychologism and the 'projections' of private subjectivity" (85–86). These accusations could surely be applied to Woolf—a first world author intensely focused on the private mind and a harbinger of psychological inquiry—however, she wasn't merely just deep diving into psychologism. Lois Cucullu argues

that “under the guise of perfecting the experimental fiction in the 1920s, this female modernist [Woolf] systematically destroys the Victorian household that helped produce her and next refashions the domestic novel into modernist art . . . transgressing . . . the social authority of the household and [making] the modernist intellectual a key player . . . responsible for reproducing the social order” (58–59). The Victorian household embodied in Queen Victoria and her family-focused image was the national symbol of the 1800s, but as Cucullu aptly states, Woolf redesigned that national symbol toward modernist ends, in which she is, ultimately, a redesign of the nation both relationally and imperially. And if that is attributing too much to Woolf, at the very least she was speaking to her nation about what life could look like for women in the new era. Ihimaera’s writing operates as a clear national allegory but, like Woolf, addresses private subjectivity as well. Suzanne Romaine declares that *The Matriarch* “can lay a strong claim to being *the* novel of Aotearoa New Zealand” (31). While Graeme Wynn posits that Ihimaera’s writing is “doubly valuable” because it addresses “the crucial questions of adaptation and change in a traditional society *from the perspective of that society*” (Wynn 127; my emphasis). In other words, *The Matriarch* is a national allegory and a private, subjective journey into one modern Māori’s mind: it is relationally and imperially focused. What might this mean about modernist writing and first and third world literatures? Perhaps first world literature can be a national allegory, and third world literature may hold the duality of national allegory and “private subjectivity” (Jameson 85). Sarah Lincoln confirms this, suggesting that modernist writing analyzes from the inside out, “from close proximity” and “reveals the fissures and contradictions that may not be apparent from a further vantage” and is an attempt “to make sense of often confusing and alienating circumstances” (250). As Lincoln’s analysis shows, this can happen anywhere in the world. This belief is what motivates Friedman’s efforts to seek out modernisms on the planetary scale. Reading Woolf and Ihimaera together with these concepts in mind, confirms Lincoln’s and Friedman’s hypothesis: modernist ruptures happen all around the world and while the stylistic elements of the resulting creative modernist texts may remain incommensurable (in no way am I asserting that Woolf’s and Ihimaera’s styles are similar), their motivations, their private inquiries into maternal origins, and their struggle for national and individual identity, hold similarities that are hard to ignore.

Conclusion

To find two texts written decades and continents apart that each belie an obsession with maternal figures, expose internal struggle, and that are fictional but autobiographical in nature was striking. While their techniques and styles remain unique, I believe Woolf and Ihimaera wrote under similar psychological and historical conditions which led to commensurabilities in their texts that suggest a planetary scale to modernism. I might next ask, *are maternal origin stories repeated in other modernist writing?* A cursory scan certainly reveals a possible trend: James Joyce, Toni Morrison, and Ocean Vuong each write novels whose themes wind in and out of fiction and personal experience. If digging deep into maternal origin stories does prove to be a modernist theme, the next stage of research would require questions such as, *Why? What role do maternal figures play in the development of a modernist mind? How do modern conditions invoke inquiry into the maternal past?* Such questions may be carried along with us as we continue to mine the archives of modernist moments to find an expanded spatiotemporal plane in which modernist writing is born.

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