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Decolonising Feminism and Patriarchy in Aotearoa

1. Introduction

Aotearoa/New Zealand[1] was the first country in the world to give women the right to vote in 1893, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was widely celebrated for her response to Covid-19 (Roy, 2020), and the country, despite having experienced a swing towards the right in the 2023 general election (Corlett 2023), is generally seen as one of the most progressive (McDonald, 2020). But does the situation of Māori women paint a different picture? It is important to look at numerous additional difficulties Māori women face compared to Pākehā[2] women. Statistics show that Māori women are significantly overrepresented in prisons (Adair, 2023) and are much more likely to be unemployed than all other demographics (Reilly, 2019). According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a leading Māori scholar on Mana Wāhine theory (1992), Māori women face a double jeopardy of oppression for being both a woman and Māori. To understand their situation, it is essential to examine what role colonialism plays in this oppression. In this essay, I explore how colonialism has shaped the struggles Māori women face, and how they respond to it through Māori feminisms, – more specifically, through the concept of Mana Wāhine[3]. I start by describing how colonialism is a gendered process that brought patriarchy to Aotearoa, and how this colonial encounter shaped interactions between white and Māori feminists, an encounter that is marked by misconstructions of distinct realities that are assumed to be the same. I move on to Indigenous feminism in Aotearoa by categorising Mana Wāhine as a decolonising Māori form of feminist theory and tying it into transnational efforts before finishing with a conclusion. I find that the colonial encounter lastingly shaped the situation of Māori women in Aotearoa by introducing Western binaries, gender norms and patriarchy. Furthermore, the lens of colonisation distorted Māori culture to present it as sexist. The only way out of thisdouble bind for Māori women is therefore an approach that takes their oppression as both women and Māori into account.

2. Effects of colonialism on Māori women

British settlers landed in Aotearoa on the 9th of October 1769 (Moewaka Barnes and McCreanor, 2019), and the relationship between settlers and Indigenous populations was regulated through the Treaty of Waitangi, or Te Tiriti o Waitangi, in 1840 (Mutu, 2019).). The Treaty recognized Māori authority whilst giving the British Crown governance over settlers (Mutu, 2019). English and Māori versions of the text contained differences, which contributed to different expectations of future relations (Mutu, 2019). Since 1840, the British Crown has committed several treaty breaches resulting in injustices against the Māori population and, as Mana Wāhine Kaupapa Inquiry shows, specifically against women (Waitangi Tribunal, 2023). As part of this inquiry, the Waitangi Tribunal is hearing claims alleging that the Crown's systematical prejudice and denial of Mana Wāhine has serious impacts on wellbeing of Māori women

2.1. Patriarchy as an imported Western concept

To see how colonialism changed understandings of gender and brought patriarchal violence, it is helpful to first look at what gender relations were like before colonialism. The traditional view on gender stands in line with a broader Māori concept, the notion of balance amongst all things (Mikaere, 1999). It acknowledges that both men and women have intrinsic value and bring essential qualities to the community (Mikaere, 1999). In Māori narratives and cultural traditions, the feminine is celebrated for its nurturing essence, drawing inspiration from Papatuanuku, or Mother Earth, and her female

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[1] From now on referred to as Aotearoa, the Māori name for New Zealand

[2] Pākehā is a Māori word referring to any New Zealander not from Māori descent

[3] The spelling "Mana Wahine" is also possible, I use "Mana Wāhine" in line with Mana Wāhine Kaupapa Inquiry

descendants who are recognized as indispensable contributors to the creation and sustenance of all life forms, including children (Yates-Smith, 2006). Furthermore, the idea prevailed that women's sexualities are what make them powerful, which led to women living more sexually liberated lives compared to Pākehā women in those same times, who were generally seen as property of fathers and husbands (Mikaere, 1999). In Māori culture, differences between genders exist, however, there is no hierarchy amongst genders (Simmonds, 2011). It is essential to understand that despite women being seen as having a more nurturing role, they still held important spiritual, leadership, and caretaking positions within the whānau,[4] and their nurturing qualities did not devalue them (Gabel, 2013). Society was not organised through the traditional nuclear family structure of mother, father, and children but a more extended community, so there was no strict distinction between private and public (Mikaere, 1999). This, as Western feminism found out many decades later, is essential for women to live liberated lives (Zinn, 2000). With the colonial encounter, an oppressive gender binary was introduced that had not existed in Māori culture and language before, an insight that goes against the widespread misconception that Māori names are gendered (Pihama, 2020). In fact, gender is a concept within Māori culture that goes beyond traditionally Western binaries of male – female (Pihama, 2020). This is shown, for example, in Māori language that does not differentiate between male or female pronouns, with 'ia' meaning both he and she (Smith, 1994 in Simmonds, 2011).

What changed when settlers colonised Aotearoa? The early colonial discourse had major impacts on how the world sees Māori people and how they see themselves. In early colonial accounts, Māori culture was viewed through a Western, patriarchal, Christian, and racist lens, which has had terrible consequences for Māori people in general (Johnston and Pihama, 1994).

These accounts led to a shift in how Māori women are viewed: from active and powerful beings to merely passive receivers of the male sperm (Pihama, 2020). A striking example of misinterpretation that resulted from the superimposition of Western frames onto a Māori context is the false claim by a French ship crew about a group of Māori women showing their private parts (Johnston and Pihama, 1994). The crew interpreted this interaction as proof of the promiscuity of Māori women, whilst it was actually a gesture of contempt and disdain towards the Europeans (Johnston and Pihama, 1994). This distortion of feminine sexuality exemplifies a wider process of downplaying the importance of Māori women, it entails a robbing of their importance in spirituality and Māori cosmology through a lens of male-centred Christianity (Simmonds, 2011). Furthermore, it changed the position of Māori men, who through colonial and patriarchal discourses were placed higher above in the hierarchy than Māori women (Tuhiwai Smith, 1992). Māori men were the ones that the settlers fought against in wars, and they were integrated into the capitalist economy as workers, compared to Māori women who were confined to the home (Tuhiwai Smith, 1992). This led to very gender specific experiences of colonial oppression that hurt Māori men and Māori women in different ways (Tuhiwai Smith, 1992).

2.2. Misunderstanding of Māori culture and ignorance of different contexts

When Western colonists arrived in Aotearoa, they misread what they saw (Tuhiwai Smith, 1992). One example of this are Māori greeting rituals, which lead them to portray Māori women as overly sexualized (Johnston and Pihama, 1994), but also as the "Other"; beings that are savage and immoral (Tuhiwai Smith, 1992).

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[4] Whānau is Māori and translates roughly to community or extended family

This shaped the interactions between Pākehā women and Māori women. There have been instances of cooperation between these two groups, for example when Mira Petricevich, a Māori woman, was part of the New Zealand delegation to conferences of the Pan-Pacific Women's Association in the 1950s (Paisley, 2006), or through alliances between Pākehā lesbian feminists and Māori women (Dominy, 1990). However, when Māori women tried to integrate into Pākehā feminist movements, like the suffragette movement, they were forced to give up parts of their Māori identity such as the moko kauaue, a traditional face tattoo, as this was seen as "barbaric" (Pihama, 2018). Furthermore, Māori culture has often wrongly (see section 2.1) been called patriarchal by Pākehā feminists, who use the example of speaking time on the marae ātea[5] as supposed evidence of sexism while ignoring the complexities of the issue at hand (Irwin, 1992). The gatherings at marae ātea are highly ritualised procedures of welcome with up to eight different ceremonies, some of which are traditionally practised by men, some by women and others by men or women (Irwin, 1992). Because women were not doing exactly what men were at marae ātea, Pākehā feminists claim that this is a blatant denial of women's rights that clearly shows sexism within Māori communities (Irwin, 1992).

So, this relationship between Māori and Pākehā women is primarily marked by tension. Even though white feminism can explain "Othering" of the female part of their identity, Māori women fear that these theories can further perpetuate oppression and "Othering" of the second part of their identity, their Indigeneity (Tuhiwai Smith, 1992). Tuhiwai Smith (1992:50) states that for Māori women: "to lose control of that struggle [to white feminists] is to lose control of our lives". This comes into play when Western liberal feminists claim that women who take over unpaid care roles are worth less than those who break into the traditionally male sphere of paid work. There is a danger of assuming that every single woman sees freedom in the same way: applying Western hierarchies to Māori women and their whānau, who come from a cultural context where this hierarchy of work did not exist, pushes Western colonial narratives upon them. Māori ideas and stories might lead Māori women to conceptualise freedom differently than their Pākehā counterparts, and it should not be assumed that they aspire for what a white liberal feminist aspires for (Mahmood, 2005:12ff).

3. Mana Wāhine: a decolonising Māori form of feminist theory

Instead of explaining the situation of Māori women through a Pākehā framework based on Western ideas, traditional Māori culture must be considered. According to Pihama (Pihama. 2020:355), "the articulation of Mana Wāhine theory [...] is essential in countering the impact of over 170 years of colonial gendered practices." As with most Māori terms, it is hard to find a direct English translation of the concept (Simmonds, 2011). Acknowledging that this definition cannot encompass the complexity of the concept, "mana" is about authority and about power, it is central to interactions between people, but it goes beyond the human, referring to spiritual and cosmological elements and the connection to land (Waitere and Johnston, 2009). The meaning of "wāhine" goes beyond the simple translation of woman, as it refers to only one of the times and spaces that Māori women move through in the course of their lives (Pihama, 2001 in Simmonds, 2011). Mana Wāhine is more than simply "feminism", it is a "decolonizing Indigenous/Māori form of feminist theory" as Tuari Stewart (2022:457) puts it. Above all, this Māori feminist framework provides a space for Māori women to explore and redefine what it means to be a Māori woman today,

[5] Meeting points within communities in Aotearoa

whilst drawing on what it meant to be a Māori woman in the past (Simmonds, 2011). It is situated within a wider movement for decolonisation, Māori sovereignty and reclaiming the pre-colonial past, but extends that concept to the intersection of what it means to be both Māori and a woman (Pihama, 2020; Simmonds, 2011). This is essential since decolonisation can only work when the mana of women is taken into account, especially considering how many of Māori women´s ancestors have continually been silenced (Pihama, 2020). This is not exclusive to the context of Māori women (Spivak, 2010). Irwin argues that since Māori men and women experience oppression differently, we must highlight and focus on the specific needs of Māori women, who are for example paid less and are more likely to face health problems (Irwin, 1992). It is crucial to recognize that Māori women are not a homogenous group, since lived experiences of Māori women differ depending on class, tribal affiliation, sexuality, age, and other factors (Irwin, 1992; Tuhiwai Smith, 1992).

Mana Wāhine theory can be situated within a wider context of Indigenous feminisms. Pihama (2020) draws a link between Mana Wāhine and Hawaiian Indigenous feminism, stating that the need for theories that centre Indigenous women's perspectives is shared in both contexts. Pākehā or white feminism is not enough to capture the multiple oppressions that Indigenous women experience and fight against. Their voices have too long been silenced both by the dominant culture but also by Indigenous men, and having theories that centre their experiences is essential to bringing their submerged perspectives to the surface in an effort to decolonise (Gómez-Barris, 2017). Gómez--Barris formulates a decolonial femme method (2017) that relies on situated knowledge to explain effects of colonialism, moving beyond extractive epistemologies which tend to reinforce colonial power relations. To do this she draws on Tuhiwai

Smith's ideas. This is one example that shows the interconnected and transnational struggle of Indigenous women across the world, fighting for liberation from oppression on the basis of their Indigeneity as well as from patriarchy. As Simmonds (2011:112f) puts it: "It is important, therefore, to locate our struggles [those of Māori women] within an international context".

4. Conclusion

As I have shown in this essay, the colonial encounter in Aotearoa has lastingly shaped the situation of Māori populations, specifically those of women. Māori culture has continually been misrepresented because it was distorted through a Western, Christian, and white lens. Patriarchy is a hierarchical concept that did not exist in Aotearoa before settlers colonised the islands. With that came a depreciation of women´s power in respect to both their sexuality but also of their spiritual importance and in their role as nourishers. Since the situation of Māori women is shaped by colonialism, a Pākehā feminist approach will not liberate them from their oppression by both patriarchy and colonial systems. To combat this, there has been a focus on Mana Wāhine as a theory to centre the experiences of Māori women and to create a space for them to redefine what being Māori and a woman means today and has meant in the past.

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