

“New Zealand Was Maoriland Then”: A Postcolonial and an Ecocritical Reading of *Mihi and the Last of the Moas* (1943) by Lyndahl Chapple Gee

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Abstract New Zealand writer Maurice Gee would have been 11 or 12 when his mother, Lyndahl Chapple Gee (Harriet Gee’s penname), published the children’s picture book *Mihi and the last of the Moas: the Adventures of Mihi, a little Maori boy, with the very last of the Moas*, in 1943. The book is written in verse of the nursery-rhyme variety (paired quatrains in lines of somewhat irregular metre and length) and illustrated by Lyndahl herself with half-a-dozen delicate watercolours and pen-and-ink drawings. Kathryn Walls defined it as the New Zealand version of Kipling’s *Jungle Book*. The story is set in a vaguely designated location in pre-european Aotearoa, New Zealand. The only human character of the story is Mihi, a little Māori boy orphaned when his family is killed by an invading tribe, who is cared for by the creatures of the forest and befriended by the last living moa, who takes him away to live with him in his underground cave, from which, when he becomes ill, Mihi rescues him by building a raft and rowing him out through a long secret tunnel into the sun. The purpose of this article is to read Chapple Gee’s children story through postcolonial lens, analysing how the wiping out of Mihi’s family and tribe by invaders can be interpreted as a metaphor of the British colonisation of New Zealand. This is clearly evident in the representation of the happy and peaceful life of Mihi’s tribe before the invasion: “New Zealand was Maoriland then/ no white man had come, with his musket and drum/ to fight with the brown-skinned men” [1, p.5], in contrast with the murders and devastation following the arrival of the enemies. The aim of this article is also to attempt a reading of Chapple Gee’s story in an ecocritical frame. The environmental topic permeates the story and it emerges in an indirect, allegorical form, through a fable about the survival of the last moa, an extinct New Zealand native bird. The character of Mihi, the Māori boy, represents New Zealand indigenous people’s spiritual relationship with the natural environment as well as their role as *kaitiaki*, guardians of natural resources.

Keywords New Zealand Literature, Postcolonial Literature, Eco-criticism, Children’s Literature, Maurice Gee, Mihi and the Last of the Moas, Jungle Book, Lyndahl Chapple Gee

1. The Influence of Lyndahl Chapple Gee’s Stories on His Son

Most of you probably know New Zealand writer Maurice Gee, but maybe not all of you know that his mother, Lyndahl Chapple Gee (Harriet Gee’s penname) was a writer as well (even though she never became as famous as her son). She wrote two stories: *Mihi and the Last of the Moas: the Adventures of Mihi, a little Maori boy, with the very last of the Moas*, a verse adventure story for children in which Mihi, a young Maori boy, travels to the underworld to help save its ecology; and *Double Unit*, a psychological short story for adult readers. In both we can see concerns in common with Gee’s work. Kathryn Walls, in *Maurice Gee, a Literary Companion: The Fiction for Young Readers* [2], traces the influence of *Mihi* in the *O trilogy*, noting the concerns with ecology and an interest in the archetypal structure of the journey to the underworld.

Chapple Gee’s underworld fantasy will have a strong influence on Maurice Gee’s fiction, for example in *The Halfmen of O* the female hero Susan finds herself isolated in a way that is reminiscent of the child Mihi. Also the two characters Susan and Nick are helped by the assorted creatures: the Woodlanders, Birdfolk, Stonefolk and Seafolk, who inhabit the various realms of O (as well as Mihi is helped by the creatures of the forest when they hear him crying). Another influence is represented by the anthropomorphised birds: the animals represented in this children’s story speak, have human feelings and the moa even cooks dinner for the Maori boy!

2. A New Zealand *Jungle Book*

Maurice Gee would have been 11 or 12 when his mother published the children's picture book *Mihi and the Last of the Moas* in 1943. The book is written in verse of the nursery-rhyme variety (paired quatrains in lines of somewhat irregular metre and length) and illustrated by Lyndahl herself with half-a-dozen delicate watercolours and pen-and-ink drawings. The story is set in a vaguely designated location in pre-European New Zealand (however, even though the location is not specified, we get some clues about it, in particular the fact that the Moa lives in a glow-worm cave:

“Because he was used to a journey by night,
The morepork was chosen to go
To the Glow-worm caves, near the ocean waves,
Where the last of the Moas lay low” [1, p.12]

So we can guess the story is set in Waitomo, in the north island of New Zealand.

The only human character of the story is Mihi, a four-year old Maori boy orphaned when his family is killed by an invading tribe. Mihi is cared for by the creatures of the forest and befriended by the last living moa, who takes him away to live with him in his underground cave, from which, when he becomes ill, Mihi rescues him by building a raft and rowing him out through a long secret tunnel into the sun.

Kathryn Walls defined *Mihi and the Last of the Moas* as the New Zealand version of Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894). She argued that “it is similar to Kipling's *Jungle Book* but with a distinctly New Zealand flavour” [2, p.101-102]. And it is, definitely, a New Zealand story, considering that the main protagonist is a Maori boy, the creatures of the forest are all New Zealand native animals (as, for example, the tuatara, the moa and the kea) and there are NZ native plants like the kowhai tree. Also, the constellation in the sky is the Southern Cross and the story is set in a place close to a glow-worm cave. In *Mihi and the Last of the Moas*, as well as in *The Jungle Book*, the protagonist is an orphan boy adopted and raised by the animals, the only difference is that Mihi is a Maori boy raised by a moa in a NZ forest whereas Mowgli is an Indian boy raised by the wolves in a jungle in the central provinces near Seoni. Both children's books raise environmental issues: in *Mihi* a moa survives extinction, and in Kipling's book the white seal Kotick finally finds a “quiet, sheltered beach [...] where no man comes” [3, p. 170] so herself too is safe.

3. A Postcolonial Reading of *Mihi and the Last of the Moas*

Mihi and the Last of the Moas begins with the description of the happy, peaceful Maori village in which Mihi lives. It is a warm summer night, everyone sleeps, and

he is the only one who is awake. He goes up the watch tower and sees enemies arriving to his village, they will kill his family and the whole tribe, Mihi will be the only Maori to survive:

“This is a tale, a peculiar tale,
That has never been told of yore;
It started to grow, a long time ago,
When Mihi was only four.
To begin where it started, one warm summer night,
New Zealand was Maoriland then,
No white man had come, with his musket and drum,
To fight with the brown-skinned men” [1, p.5]

Reading Chapple Gee's children story through postcolonial lens, it could be argued that the wiping out of Mihi's family and tribe by invaders can be interpreted as a metaphor of the British colonisation of New Zealand. The sentence ‘New Zealand was Maoriland then’ refers obviously to pre-colonial time in New Zealand, as well as the following line: ‘No white man had come, with his musket and drum, to fight with the brown-skinned men’ has an evident political connotation. Also, the use of words such as ‘musket’, ‘drum’ and the verb ‘fight’ clearly allude to the battles between Maori and Pakeha. Thus the representation of the happy, quiet and peaceful life of Mihi's tribe before the invasion is in contrast with the murders and devastation following the arrival of the enemies. Therefore, the sufferings and sense of displacement experienced by Mihi symbolise the negative consequences of colonisation not just on one Maori child but on all Maori people. For this reason, Chapple Gee's story should not be underestimated and simply considered a New Zealand children's book, rather it is a very political story raising many issues.

Chapple Gee's book can be defined as a postcolonial text because it is centred on the conflicts caused by the cross-cultural encounter between Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand. For this reason, analysing this text requires a particular approach as well as a deep knowledge of the colonial history of the country and of its consequences on indigenous people. According to postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft, an indigenous text necessitates a form of “deconstructing reading” [4, p. 192] because it requires paying attention to the profound and complex effects of colonisation on literary production. In this case, even though the book was written by a Pakeha author, the story raises many issues in common with an indigenous text.

In fact, an essential question in the analysis of the messages of Chapple Gee's children book is of course that of the narrative perspective. Through whose eyes do we view the action and, hence, with whom do our sympathies lie? Chapple Gee was an acute observer of both Pakeha and Maori cultures. In *Mihi and the Last of the Moas* the narrator seems to tell us the story through a Maori perspective, though she looked at New Zealand society through Pakeha eyes. In the light of this, we can

hypothesise that Chapple Gee is trying to identify herself with a Maori voice. However, to enable an outsider reader to fully understand the issues emerging from this children’s book, the text also needs to show that, in New Zealand, two different peoples and cultures- two different voices- coexist, that is to say Maori and Pakeha.

4. An Ecocritical Reading of *Mihi and the Last of the Moas*

The purpose of this article is also to attempt a reading of Chapple Gee’s story in an ecocritical frame. The environmental topic (in particular the extinction of a NZ native bird, the moa) permeates the story. The character of Mihi represents New Zealand indigenous people’s spiritual relationship with the natural environment as well as their role as *kaitiaki*, guardians of natural resources. Mihi, in fact, is concerned about the survival of the last of the moas and fights for protecting it and saving its life:

“I am coming to you, oh! Great faithful bird,
 You shall never die, while Mihi is by,
 Oh, last of the Moas on Earth!” [1, p.30]

From a Maori point of view, the environment is important, not only for sustaining a tribe economically, but also as a cultural and spiritual reference point. The spiritual relationship between Maori people and the environment can be encapsulated in a saying of Ngati Tūwharetoa: “Ko Tongariro te maunga, ko Tūwharetoa te iwi” [5, p.241], translated as: ‘Tongariro is the mountain, Tūwharetoa the people’, an expression that refers to the idea that the environment and Maori people are bound together.

According to contemporary Maori scholars [5], only Maori people can be *kaitiaki* and exercise *kaitiakitanga*, because they are *tangata whenua*, the original inhabitants of the land. The current role of *kaitiaki* is to respond to exploitation, threats to the environment and local mismanagement of natural resources. In Ngāti Kahungunu terms, *kaitiakitanga*, as defined by Pita Sharples, Minister of Maori Affairs in the foreword to *Maori and the Environment* [5], means to seek balance in sustaining natural resources as the basis for people’s well-being, rather than as limitless commodities to use at their will. *Kaitiaki*, then, playing the vital role of guardians of natural resources, protecting New Zealand flora and fauna for the benefit of future generations, come to share many of the concerns of contemporary ecological movements.

Chapple Gee, in her children’s picture book, provides a fictional representation of a *kaitiaki* through the character of the Maori boy Mihi. Here environmental perspectives emerge in an indirect, allegorical form, through a fable about the survival of the last moa. The book draws on the rich story-telling traditions of folk tales, nursery rhymes and fairy tales. *Mihi and the Last of the Moas* also shares similarities with Aesop’s *Fables*, in particular the use of a

short allegorical tale as a means of conveying a political message and in the use of anthropomorphised animals for illustrating the moral of the story. The fact that Chapple Gee represents NZ animals as interconnected with each other again argues for the Maori spiritual relationship with the environment. In Maori tradition, people are the descendants of the environment itself, nature’s children; therefore, the personification of NZ birds in this children’s book does not simply echo fairy tales, rather, it expresses Maori environmental perspectives.

Mihi and the Last of the Moas shows Maori people’s spiritual relationship with the natural environment and, at the same time, demonstrates the educational potential of NZ fiction with respect to environmental responsibility. In this sense, it could be argued that Chapple Gee’s children’s story might well be included in the field of environmental education which, according to William Stapp, one of the founders of this field, aims at “producing a citizenry that is knowledgeable concerning the biophysical environment and its associated problems, aware of how to solve these problems, and motivated to work towards their solution” [6, p.30].

UNESCO defined the goals of environmental education in the *Tbilisi Declaration* at the Intergovernmental Conference held in Georgia in 1977. According to this definition, the principal objectives of environmental education are: “Awareness: to help social groups and individuals acquire an awareness and sensitivity to the total environment and its allied problems [...] Attitudes: to help social groups and individuals acquire a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment and the motivation for actively participating in environmental improvement and protection”. [7]

The increased concern about environmental issues has influenced literary and cultural studies, leading to the recent insurgence of ‘ecocriticism’, defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, professor of literature and the environment at the University of Nevada, as “the study of the connections between literature and the physical environment” [8, p.XVIII]. This literary critical movement originated within the American Literature Association, whose members founded the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment and published an academic journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*. Ecocritics argue that there is a point of intersection in the apparently diverging trajectories of literary studies and environmental studies. Consequently, the humanities can make a significant contribution to the goal of adjusting individual lifestyles and encouraging sustainable use of natural resources.

Although fiction does not develop strategies for coping with global climate change (a responsibility of specialised disciplines such as ecology, public policy and law), it can be an important instrument of cultural policy, contributing significantly to the understanding of environmental degradation and increasing awareness that the protection of

natural resources is vital for present and future generations.

As education scholars, Stephen Bigger and Jean Webb point out, “reading stimulates attitude formation and personal agency in readers, with regard to social and environmental responsibility” [9, p.3]. In light of this, we could argue that, since fiction can play a key role in social changes, it can be used to encourage environmental engagement. New Zealand fiction, in particular, shows a high educational potential for teaching environmental responsibility. Witi Ihimaera’s fiction and Patricia Grace’s fiction, for example, raise environmental issues, helping readers to acquire an awareness of contemporary societies’ habit of wasting natural resources and it also encourages active participation in environmental protection [10].

Chapple Gee’s story as well demonstrates the educational potential of NZ fiction with respect to environmental responsibility as traditional Maori teaching. More generally, it points to the way in which literature can play an important role in stimulating awareness in readers’ attitudes towards the environment. The character of Mihi symbolises the deep spiritual interconnection between Maori people and the natural world. The ‘eco’ aspect of Chapple Gee’s book is also deeply entwined with New Zealand colonial history and, at the same time, integrated with representations of Maori resistance to the dispossession of their lands. In this sense, it could be argued that her book provides an example of the intersection between postcolonial and environmental texts.

5. A Utopian Story

Mihi and the Last of the Moas can be seen as a kind of utopian story through which the author gives voice to her concerns at the exploitation of New Zealand’s natural resources. The story ends like a typical fairy tale and it seems to suggest that the two main characters, the Maori boy Mihi and the last of the moas, will live happily thereafter:

“ ‘Tis here that we leave the two faithful friends
To work out their health-giving spell;
No doubt you will guess that the sun’s warm caress
Made the Moa quite magically well!
And indeed if it did, as ‘tis right to suppose,
The bird might be living still,
And the Maori boy too, since he also knew
The secret that we never will!
So if ever you go for a roam by the sea,
Or over far headland or range,
Don’t be afraid, if by seashore or glade,
You fancy you see something strange!
It may be a cloud shadow slipping away
For they take most mysterious shapes,
And flee with no sound, across water or ground,
Like witches in billowing capes!
And again is ‘tis there by the stream’s fronded bend

Where a tall something stands in a veil,
Be sure to look twice or possibly thrice,
And you might see the end of this tale!
Of course you may say with a toss of your head,
“ ‘Tis only a tree-fern bowed!”
Yet all that you see is not all that *can be*
In The Land of the Long White Cloud!” [1, p.34-35]

Being a children’s story, there is a happy ending, so the last of the moas survives and apparently still lives in NZ with his friend Mihi, even though, of course, this cannot be real, there are no more moas in NZ. For this reason, Chapple Gee’s story raises many issues, considering that many archaeologists, as Steven A. Le Blanc [11], for example, attributed ecological irresponsibility to Maori people, arguing that their overhunting caused the extinction not only of the moa but also of other flightless native birds of NZ. So in a way the description of a Maori character protecting a moa and trying to save its life can be seen as a contradiction. However, *Mihi and the Last of the Moas* is doubtless a utopian story, because it represents an ideal world in which men live in harmony with the natural environment. Also, the utopian theme lies in the fact that, at the end of the story, the moa survives so the species is not extinct as it is in reality. For this reason, it could be argued that Chapple Gee represents two survivors: Mihi, the Maori boy, is the only survivor of the colonisation of New Zealand as well as the moa is the only one which survived extinction.

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