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Myth, Identity, and Hybridity: Postcolonial Narratives inKeri Hulme's *The Bone People* and Related Fiction

P. Jayakar Rao

M.A., NET, SET (Ph.D) *Assistant Professor of English* Kakatiya Government College Hanumakonda – Telangana
jayakarenglish@gmail.com

ABSTRACT :

Keri Hulme's fiction—most famously The Bone People—operates at the confluence of mythic imagination, cultural trauma, and aesthetic experimentation. This paper argues that Hulme uses Indigenous Māori myth, fragmented narrative forms, and hybrid linguistic strategies to interrogate colonial histories and produce new modes of postcolonial identity. Rather than offering a simple recuperation of an essentialized Māori past, Hulme's work stages identity as relational, contingent, and emergent: a process shaped by interethnic encounter, gendered violence, and artistic restitution. Drawing on postcolonial concepts of hybridity and narrative syncretism, the analysis shows how myth functions both as a site of resistance—re-inscribing ancestral logics into contemporary life—and as a creative resource that complicates binaries (colonizer/colonized, traditional/modern, Māori/Pākehā). Hulme's hybrid aesthetics produce a literature that refuses closure, privileging ongoing repair, reciprocity, and the ethical labor of storytelling.

Keywords: Keri Hulme, The Bone People, postcolonialism, hybridity, Māori myth, identity, narrative repair, translation, trauma.

Introduction

Keri Hulme's The Bone People (1984) arrived into literary consciousness as an unruly, often controversial novel that defied conventional genre and national expectation. Its acclaim—and the debates it provoked—spring from aesthetic strategies that weave mythic elements, multilingual fragments, and a radical reworking of identity categories. In the context of postcolonial theory, Hulme's fiction is particularly interesting for how it negotiates hybridity: she uses syncretic narrative forms to expose colonial rupture and to imagine relational modes of belonging. This paper examines how myth, identity, and hybridity interlock in Hulme's narratives to produce a postcolonial ethics of storytelling that foregrounds repair over return, conversation over origin myths, and survival over purity.

Myth as Material and Method

In Hulme's work, myth is not a static repository of precolonial truth but an active material—an aesthetic and ethical tool—that shapes character and plot. Myth appears in several modalities: as direct invocation of Māori cosmology (symbolic references to taniwha, atua, whakapapa), as structural shaping of narrative cycles, and as the aesthetic logic of repetition, substitution, and transformation. Hulme reclaims these tropes from easy folkloric readings and embeds them in contemporary urban and liminal landscapes. Doing so enables myth to function as both critique and cure: it critiques colonial narratives that had effaced Indigenous presence, and it offers imaginative resources for repair and resilience.

Hulme's use of myth also dislocates Eurocentric realist expectations. Rather than offering linear causality, her narratives operate through associative logic that mirrors oral storytelling's ebb and return. Mythic motifs—water, bones, birds, and masks—resurface in different contexts, linking characters to an ancestral continuity that is not nostalgic but adaptive. This alters temporality: the past is neither erased nor frozen; it is actively reworked in the present. Such aesthetic moves position myth as a living grammar for rethinking identity under colonization.

Identity Beyond Binary Frames

A central achievement of Hulme's fiction is its refusal of fixed identity markers. Characters are often composites—racially mixed, culturally ambivalent, psychologically fractured—and their identities are enacted through relationships rather than declared as essences. These relational identities foreground care, violence, and dependency as central modes through which belonging is negotiated. Hulme therefore destabilizes binary oppositions endemic to colonial discourse (Māori/Pākehā, tradition/modernity, male/female) and replaces them with liminal, porous categories.

This relational model is crucial when considering gender in Hulme's texts. Her female characters are neither romanticized symbols of cultural continuity nor simple victims; they are agents who engage with mythic materials to articulate wounded subjectivities. Hulme stages identity as

performative and reparative: healing requires not the retrieval of an untouched origin but the willingness to engage with others through storytelling, ritual, and embodied labor.

Hybridity as Strategy and Ethics

Hybridity—understood as cultural mixing and creative negotiation—functions on multiple levels in Hulme's narratives: linguistic hybridity (interspersing Māori words, idioms, and English), formal hybridity (blending prose, poetic fragments, and visual layout), and ethical hybridity (enacting cross-cultural responsibilities rather than assimilative mimicry). Hulme's hybridity is not merely decorative; it is an epistemological stance that contests dominant frameworks for meaning-making.

The ethical dimension of hybridity in Hulme resists celebratory multiculturalism that erases power imbalances. Instead, hybridity in her fiction acknowledges historical violence and complicity; it insists that mixedness is always marked by asymmetrical histories. Hulme's hybrid characters therefore carry memory as a material burden, which requires ongoing practices of reconciliation. This is why her narratives emphasize repair—of bodies, families, languages—rather than triumphant syncretism. The mixed self must also be a responsible self, attentive to restitution and to the narrative tasks of repair

Narrative Form: Fragmentation and Repair

Hulme's formal choices—fragmentation, non-linear sequencing, and collage—mirror the psychological and cultural fissures created by colonization. Fragmentation becomes a formal expression of trauma: broken sentences, dislocated dialogues, and abrupt shifts mimic the ruptured sense of self that colonial histories produce. Yet those same fractured forms do not leave the reader in despair; they open spaces for repair. Repetition and ritualized motifs act like sutures that bind the parts into emergent wholes.

Hulme's use of visual and typographic elements (poetic lines, epigraphic inserts, and unconventional punctuation) also participates in the project of decolonizing narrative authority. By refusing a single, sovereign narrator, the text allows multiple voices to surface—Māori, Pākehā, male, female—each with partial knowledge. This polyphony models a more democratic form of storytelling where truth emerges dialogically, rather than through authoritative pronouncements.

Language: Silence, Naming, and Translation

Language is a contested terrain in Hulme's fiction. The interplay of Māori and English—words that resist direct translation or that carry cultural weight not reducible to English glosses—highlights how colonial languages can both erase and enable. Hulme often leaves Māori terms untranslated, thereby demanding that readers confront their own linguistic limits and make space for cultural difference. Silence, pauses, and unspoken histories become as significant as named events; the gaps in narrative become ethical prompts to attend to what has been suppressed.

Translation in Hulme's work is thus not a technical operation but a moral one. The act of giving voice to ancestral terms while retaining their specificity resists assimilation. It refuses the flattening of cultural difference into accessible categories and insists instead on a literature that preserves the strangeness and integrity of Indigenous signifiers.

Violence, Trauma, and the Possibility of Healing

Any discussion of identity and hybridity in postcolonial literature must confront the reality of violence. Hulme's narratives do not shy away from physical, sexual, and cultural trauma; they put these violences front and center to avoid sentimental reconciliation. Importantly, Hulme suggests that healing is not about forgetting but about integrating trauma into communal practices of care. The rituals of storytelling, the reconfiguration of family ties, and the reanimation of mythic forms all work together to create infrastructures for survival.

Hulme's ethical imagination envisions healing as a collective task: it is enacted in small domestic acts, in shared narratives, in the mutual recognition of harm and responsibility. This communal repair is the heart of Hulme's postcolonial aesthetics—an insistence that sovereignty and survival come from relational practices rather than from the recuperation of lost purity.

Critiques and Tensions

Hulme's approach is not without contestation. Debates have arisen around authorship, appropriation, and the risk of romanticizing indigeneity. Critics ask whether hybrid forms inadvertently exoticize Māori culture for non-Indigenous readers or whether the author's own positionality complicates claims of cultural authority. These critiques are important and must be acknowledged: hybridity carries ethical risks if it absolves the dominant culture of responsibility or if it transforms Indigenous forms into mere stylistic flourishes.

Yet Hulme's work anticipates and responds to such concerns by foregrounding accountability: hybridity in her narrative is never presented as a neat, apolitical mixture but as an ongoing negotiation that demands moral labor. The tension—between artistic freedom and cultural stewardship—is an ingredient of Hulme's aesthetic rather than a failure of it.

Conclusion

Keri Hulme's fiction stages a complex postcolonial project where myth, identity, and hybridity intermingle to produce new narrative possibilities. Her use of myth revitalizes ancestral logics without succumbing to nostalgia; her depiction of identity refuses stable essences and emphasizes relationality; her hybrid aesthetic unsettles colonial hierarchies while demanding ethical engagement. Hulme's narratives therefore offer a model for postcolonial literature that privileges reparative action, plural voices, and the moral work of storytelling. In a world still marked by the aftershocks of empire, her fiction reminds us that hybridity is not merely a condition to be described but a practice to be enacted—with humility, responsibility, and radical imagination.