

## TANGI: A WINDOW ON MAORI LIFE

Dolors Collellmir

*Universitat de Barcelona (Divisió del Centres  
Univesitaris del Camp de Tarragona)*

Witi Ihimaera's *Tangi*,<sup>1</sup> the first Maori novel ever published, expresses the traditional Maori values and transmits many of their concepts. This is achieved in part by the novel's unusual structure. As Viney Kirpal points out in his article "What is the Modern Third World Novel?" there is an important difference in narrative technique between the modern third-world novel and the western one. In this case of the former, he says:

Its structure principle is borrowed from the indigenous narrative forms, and it is the native world view that it aspires to picture and imitate with genuineness<sup>2</sup>.

Problems naturally arise because of this difference. Witi Ihimaera, in a 1984 interview, explained that Maori writers had difficulties in publishing, mainly because of the confusion that their work caused to those who thought only within the framework of Western standards.<sup>3</sup> Witi Ihimaera himself, remaining faithful to Maori tradition and thought, had published *Tangi* supposedly with no consideration of a beginning, middle, or end. He stated, "Most of our writing is in fact circular-it doesn't begin and it doesn't end, it's just circular"<sup>4</sup> This overall circular structure reflects the Maori concept of the rhythmic cyclical continuity of life. But the presentation of *Tangi* in fact is much more complicated and coincides strikingly, with the "loose, circular, episodic, loop-like narrative technique,"<sup>5</sup> inspired by the indigenous oral narrative of the third world novel just as described by Kirpal. The oral narrative which *Tangi* reflects has also been described by Salman Rushdie in these terms:

It goes in great swoops, it goes in spirals in loops, it every so often reiterates something that happened earlier to remind you, and then takes you off again,

1.-Witi Ihimaera, *Tangi*, (London: Heinemann, 1975). All subsequent references will be to this edition. This novel was first published in 1973.

2.-Viney Kirpal, "What is the Modern Third World Novel?" *JCL* XXIII.1 (1988), p.150.

3.-Witi Ihimaera, Interview, *Kunapipi* VII. 1 (1985), p. 104.

4.-Ibid., p.104.

5.-Viney Kirpal, op. cit., p.150.

sometimes summarizes itself, it frequently digresses off...Sometimes there are Chinese boxes<sup>6</sup>

The main character of *Tangi*, Tama, is a twenty-two-year old youth, who, after his father's death, has to face life and undertake the responsibility that Maori tradition lays on him. The period of mourning, the *Tangi*, in his Maori village has just ended when the novel begins. Tama is standing on the platform of Gisborne station surrounded by his family, who are seeing him off. He is ready to catch a train that will take him back to Wellington where he has been working for four years. The purpose of this trip is to resign from his job and take leave of his friends before assuming the role as head of his family. The novel ends when Tama arrives at Wellington station. However, in alternating chapters, there is another narrative line which tells about Tama's life in Wellington the day he was told of his father's death, his car ride to the airport, and his flight from Wellington to Gisborne. Furthermore, the author breaks both of these narrative lines by the relating of memories of Tama's childhood and of his recent past.

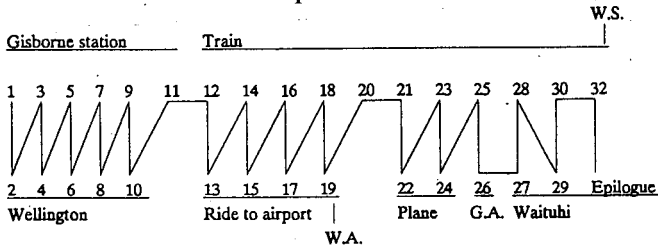


Fig.1 - Spatial structure of *Tangi* by chapters.

As can be seen in the first graph (Fig.1), the narrative, thus, shifts by chapters between two settings and two periods of time, giving a zigzag pattern which is regular for eleven chapters. In chapter eleven Tama is on the train but still at the station. When the chapter ends the train has just left the station. From chapter twelve to chapter twenty, the alternating continues by chapters in a regular pattern, but the change in setting is back and forth from the train to the automobile which takes him to Wellington Airport. From chapter twenty-five to twenty-seven, the shifting is between the train and the aeroplane. The setting of chapter twenty-six is Gisborne airport. From chapter twenty seven to thirty the alternating is between the Maori village of Waituhi and the train. Chapter thirty-one, less than a page, stands apart in the sense that it recounts a conversation from the past outside the setting. It is a

6.-Salman Rushdie, Lecture Interview, *Midnight's Children and Shame* Kunapipi VII.1 (1985), p.7.

conversation that appears several times in the novel between Tama and his father in which Tama's father reminds his son of his duties and, along with its philosophy, gives him a convincing purpose in life. Chapter thirty-two goes back to the train, which at the end of the chapter arrives at Wellington station. In the Epilogue, the setting is the site of the father's grave where Tama and his family give the final farewell.

Following the chronological sequence of the facts narrated, we see that a circle is indeed described (Fig.2). The structure of the novel is more complex, however, because moments of Tama's childhood are recalled in flashbacks or loops in time "I may look back to that happy time when a boy laughed with his father" (p.2) Childhood experiences and conversations with his father were important for him because his father was "The axis of (his) universe "and "the sun giving light to (his) days " p.144. His thoughts in chapters three, thirty, and thirty-two also retrace some experiences that Tama had during his three days of mourning in his village, Waituhi, and his future plans to leave Wellington permanently, return to his village, and take care of his family.

In the following graph (Fig 2), the outer circle shows the chapters which relate the chronological sequence. The next circle represents the near past (thus, chapters 3, 30, and 32 recount what Tama has experienced recently). The next most inner circle shows those chapters in which there are memories of childhood or the remote past. Chapter 31 in the center of the graph, is, as stated above, the chapter which gives meaning to Tama's life and is, so to speak, from the indefinite past and not restricted in time.

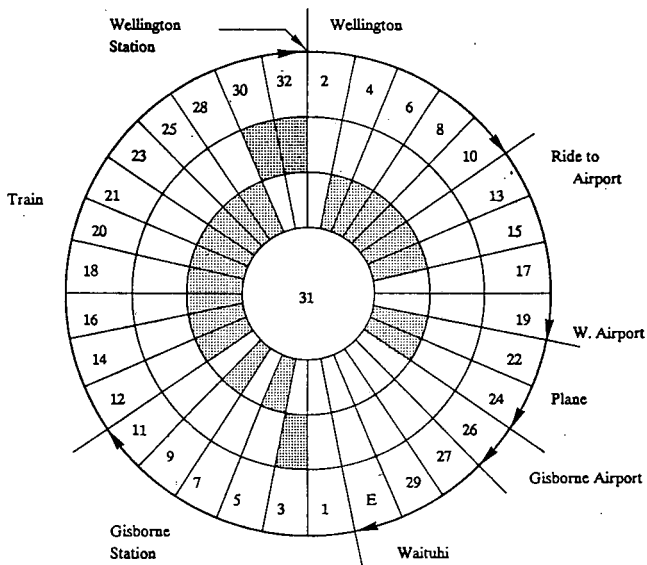


Fig.2 - The relation of time and chapters in *Tangi*.

By remembering his life with his father and being able to feel and value the love and solidarity of his relatives during the days of mourning, Tama's identity as a Maori becomes reinforced. The words that his father had repeated on different occasions to remind him of his duty as a Maori now acquire their full meaning:

You're the eldest, Tama. if anything happens to me, you come home straight away. The eldest always looks after the younger ones of the family. I was taught that as a child; I teach you the same thing now. (p. 21)

Tama is repeatedly presenting different aspects of Maori culture and philosophy in his memories. We learn about their origin, myths and legends. Especially, once immersed in the *tangi* that takes place in the *marae* (an open space associated with a meeting-house and used for community assembly) at Waituhi, we read about their mourning rituals and songs. One of these songs provides an image that helps us visualize what is occurring in Tama's mind during the trips. The song runs: "Memories rise in the still air. Like smoke from many fires."(p.137)

The first sentence of the novel: "This is where it ends and begins" (p.1) reflects the Maori way of looking at life, that is, whenever there is an end there is also a new beginning. When Tama pronounces these words he is about to leave for Wellington but his intention is to return very soon as he says: "But I will leave my heart here, to be reclaimed when I return" (p.2). This means that a new life as a Maori is beginning for him. But Tama is also right in saying that at that moment something is ending because the painful span of time which began in Wellington the day of his father's death, and that Tama himself defines as his "journey into the underworld,"(p.20) ends there.

This "journey" lasts three days because in Maori culture after a person dies there are three days of mourning before the corpse is buried and thus embraced by mother earth or Papatuanuku. At the end of this period Tama's father, like all Maori dead, is supposed to make his last journey to the promontory of Rerengawairua and wait there for the sun to set. Then:

He will descend Akakitereinga, the Root to the underworld, to a rocky platform on the edge of the sea.

And suddenly, a deep hole will appear, fringed with floating seaweed. The way across the sea. A shadow will leap...The waves will flow in. The seaweed will sweep over the hole. The platform where he was standing will be empty...(p.73)

During these three days of purification, tribal rites are held and family ties strengthened so that all the members feel that they form a whole that has survived and that as such they have a future. This concept of an uninterrupted flow of life held by Maoris is symbolised by *te taura tangata*

(the rope of man). In that particular rope "are woven all the generations of man from creation to the present day, " and it can never be broken.

Tama's three-day period of mourning is an example of the "Death-Rebirth" archetype. He wanders in pain and feels lost without his father: "I am a nightwalker, searching for another sun . Alone in a twilight world, I seek another day" (p.161). But after these three days of suffering, he emerges as a new man: "This is the night of my own life beginning. Father is dead and I am at once a man" (p.130).

Nature, in this novel, is not seen merely as a model and a teacher. Maoris seek a perfect harmony and identification with it since they consider themselves the children of Nature. Their first parents, according to their mythology, were Rangitane (the Sky), and Papatuanuku (the Earth). These two statements: "My mother was the Earth" and "My father was the Sky" are repeated throughout the novel as a kind of *leitmotif* that reminds the reader of the origin of Maori people and Tama's need to reintegrate.

It is not strange then that, as their tradition says, it always rains when a Maori dies because the Sky, their father, is sad(p.90) and, since there is this communion of feelings with nature and nature itself is sad and cries, they as individuals see no shame in crying in front of their relatives. The rain additionally serves to unite sky and earth in a kind of embrace that acts out the first embrace, which was the origin of their people. Tama and his Uncle Pita also in full understanding link in an embrace, this time to indicate that, although a string of the rope has been lost, it is strongly woven again. Tama says, "We embraced and closed a gap in the world" (p.198). Finally, the falling of rain can be seen as a symbol of continuation because the sky fertilizes the earth and life sprouts out again from it. Likewise, Tama can say, looking at his youngest brother and sister, , "Father is gone but the family remains" (p.150). Tama's relationship with his father had been so rich and complete that when he refers to his childhood he defines it as "the greenstone years of a boy with his father" (p.50). And the author tells us:

Greenstone is our most prized possession. It's such a beautiful, luminous, glowing stone and I've used it to symbolize Maori culture.<sup>7</sup>

Tama feels the presence of his father to the point of addressing him and asking him questions ("Where were you, e pa?...E pa, this is a different road now...Don't go away, e pa." p.103) and therefore his recollections of joyful moments acquire immediacy and vividness.

Although essentially childhood was indeed a happy time for Tama, he also remembers that there were "many desolate beginnings," (p.35) that is,

7.-Witi Ihimaera, *Kunapipi*, p.106.

when they had to move from place to place because his father did not have a permanent job. Their moving about finally ended in Gisborne where they stayed for four years until they bought a farm some miles away at Waituhi.

Tama's first step beyond his family circle and outside Maori culture was taken when he started schooling at the age of six. Then he realized for the first time that "even (his) Dad hadn't the power to shield (him) from all disappointments" (p.77). As he progressed upwards in his studies, there were fewer and fewer Maori boys at school, which caused Tama to feel more lonely. Looking back on his school years, he remembers that he considered himself successful in spite of the difficulties ("Somehow, I managed to stride both worlds" p.78).

In late adolescence Tama met with the crisis that finally led him to Wellington. Tama remembers, "Life kept opening out... opening and opening outward" (p.160), and confides, "I took a firm step forward into Pakeha (European-like) world" (p.78). Tama explains the attraction that the big city exerted upon him and his urge to go forth at the age of eighteen in this way:

I saw my friends leaving Waituhi and I envied them. It was not easy to remain at home when it seemed that all the friends of my generation were going away. I wanted to go with them too...I suppose the bright lights of Wellington attracted me.(p.159)

At that moment, Tama's father did not try to prevent the boy from going to Wellington; he merely reminded him of his important duty as a Maori:

You walk away from me, that is all right. But don't walk away from your family. You're a Maori. Never walk away from that either. I don't mind how far away you go. Just remember you're the eldest. The eldest always looks after the younger children. If I should die, you remember that. (p.99)

Now that his father is dead, Tama feels remorse for having left him alone with all the work at the farm at Waituhi. His guilt makes him more eager to comply with his father's command and return to his Maori village, the *heart* of the Whanau A Kai (his big Maori family), a place that once stood for paradise:

This river, for me, is like the river which once flowed through Eden. And this place, Waituhi, is my Eden. (p.115)

Once again the symbolism of Paradise is associated with the innocence and joy of childhood. Usually the longing to return to the physical setting, but the present circumstances are different, something is missing. He,

then, expresses a wish that is unattainable: "If I could, I would turn back the clock...If I could, e pa, if only I could" (p.114).

Tama's return to Waituhi, the Maori world, closes a circle, but this does not mean he can retrieve time because life progresses in cycles, that is, there cannot be a beginning if there is not an end and, therefore, "dying is a part of life" (p.139). Tama had not been very aware of the passing of time ("My father never seemend to age" 96), yet it was precisely his father who had taught him that "everything in this world decays and falls" (p.116).

On one instance, it is said that "Waituhi was timeless" (p.161), which supports the tenet that what really counts is the survival of the Maoris as a people. Thus, Witi Ihimaera as Maori is not basically concerned with characterisations of individuals, but in portraying "an unfolding of culture through the years." <sup>8</sup> Tama's fulfilment now depends entirely on his remaining family:

My heart is their heart. And their heart is mine. I am their father, son and friend. They too, are my mothers, fathers, sons and friends. Away from them I feel lost. Away from the heart I am lonely. (p.121)!\$

Consequently, Tama's concern is to be able to answer his younger brother and sisters when they ask what a Maori is and what being Maori means. Tama does not feel confident as to whether he will be able to teach them much Maori culture or *Maoritanga*. On the other hand, he does think he will be able to teach them *Maori aroha*, the love the Maoris hold for one another, because "that will never disappear" (p.79).

In the last ten pages of the novel the author focuses on the image of the train, as if to trace Tama's recent experiences and give us an outline of a life. We read that: "The train leaves the platform." "The train curves into the dark bleakness ahead". Then it "speeds across the night." At some moment there may be a brief or a brusque stop at a station, but soon the train starts moving again. Finally, the train gets out of a tunnel and Wellington Harbour comes into view. It is then that "the train comes slowly to a halt"(pp.194-203). But since Wellington is not Tama's destination, his mind muses, "Nobody will be here to meet me...My life is in Waituhi. To Waituhi I shall return"(p.203).

In consequence, when the train in which Tama is travelling reaches Wellington, Tama's spatial journey is ending, as well as his journey into his mind and back in time. It is also a return where his "journey into the underworld" began. But it is mainly the acceptance, on Tama's part, of his

8.-Ibid.,p.106.

future as a Maori which is beginning. That is why after saying that in a short while his journey will be over, he specifies:

I am Tama Mahana, and my father is dead. This is the end of my journey but it is also my journey beginning. It is a journey out of the upheaval of the tangi. The tangi is over. The hands of the clock stand at the beginning of another hour. (p.194)G H