

Paradise Revisited: Women's Writing from Fiji

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Abstract

Like many other women of the Pacific, women in Fiji have conventionally been represented as exotic, an idealised presence in the minds and writing of Western men. The constraint of such representations effectively silences many women, and, coupled with the various oppressions of local traditions, it is not surprising that there has been relatively little poetry and prose from Fijian women writers. This essay explores the conventional representation and controls over women, and their recent challenges to these. It considers ways in which speaking from gendered experiences and their cultural positions in Fiji, several women writers have turned the demeaning, colonially influenced myths on their heads, exposed the traditionally oppressive behaviours, and written powerfully and lyrically not just of a move beyond silencing but of the self, language, identity, love and education.

The very nature of Pacific writing as it juggles orality and literacy, two or more languages, community dissemination and authorship, third world issues amid global neo-colonialism and so on, ought to make it amenable to contemporary literary theorists' (Sharrad, 1993: 4-5).

Laughs. Sings. 'It's just a little brown gal in a little grass skirt' when his wife-to-be Hina enters. Hina is the image of the beautiful South Seas maiden – young with flowing black hair, brown skin, and bare-foot. She is dressed in a grass skirt and pandanus bra...a hibiscus flower behind her right ear' (Hereniko and Teaiwa, 1993/4).

This excerpt from a play – *The Last Virgin in Paradise* - by Fijian Vilisoni Hereniko (now living and teaching in Hawaii) based on the story

by and in cooperation with Fijian Teresia Teaiwa (now living and teaching in Wellington, New Zealand) reminds us that women of the South Pacific islands have been consistently represented in literature and history (if at all) as beautiful, entertaining, virginal, a natural and simple entertaining prize for the visiting Westerner. In this play, performed in the Fiji Arts Club in Suva, Helmut, a middle aged European academic, visits Fiji and finds what he is looking for; Hina, a virgin. The play opens with Hina performing a graceful, restrained Polynesian dance to the sound of waves and music. Others in the play are a Fulbright researcher studying sexual harassment and Temanu, a history graduate from Australian National University, who has returned to Fiji. These characters act out the stereotypical encounters of history which poetry by Teresia Teaiwa consistently replays and challenges. On one magical day in 1996 Staff Developer Roger Landbeck organized cucumber sandwiches and tea for us to meet Teresia, Pio Manoa, a male poet, and Konai Helu Thaman, a Tongan born Fijian poet and then Pro Vice Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific. Staying in touch, infrequently, has helped this essay develop.

Where do these stereotypes spring from? How do women writers from Fiji question them, replace them and write, indeed, of other things entirely like relationships, life identity, and the self? How have Fijian women writers responded to the debilitating effects of the 1987 and 2000 coups? How do they write about the need for gender and racial equality? This essay hopes to explore some of the answers to those questions.

There is very little critical material available on women poets from Fiji and an equal dearth of published poetry but several names stand out, Konai Helu Thaman, Vanessa Griffen, and Teresia Teaiwa. Considering some of this work inevitably raises issues of both redressing stereotypical images and recognizing the different perspectives offered by the writers themselves. Some of the stereotypes were perpetuated in the 1950s film *South Pacific*, with its strategic love affair between an American serviceman and an innocent, beautiful Pacific maiden from Bali-hai, a fictionalized, anywhere South Pacific idyll, mediated by the Hollywood musical version of romance and scenery. The 1950s fictions and those of earlier periods capitalized on versions of island maidens which had originated in the first encounters in the South Seas. In such a first encounter one letter writer travels to a little hut with local royalty, dressed in what is described as a kilt and topknot.

Such a pretty girl came out – she was about 15 – her head and neck were a pretty prelude to a bust that Phidias might have bowed to. I put on the most attractive look of persuasive advance I could, with the usual result, – one wide-eyed glance of astonishment, then a precipi-

tate flight to some inapproachable refuge guarded by gruesome old hags who mumbled and tittered at me (Letter 4, 1883).

Zohl de Ishtar (1994) is clear about the origins of such stereotypes, cultural oppression and sidelining of the ways of Fijians:

The story of Fiji's early contact with the European world follows the same pattern as elsewhere in the region. The usual collection of explorers, blundering onto the islands as early as 1643, were closely followed by the inevitable stream of loggers, fishers, traders, beach-combers, gun-runners, planters and missionaries. Once again, economic political and cultural exploitation was the basis of European contact with the indigenous world (de Ishtar, 1994: 121).

Somerset Maugham's version of a South Pacific woman replicates early letters, producing an artificial, disempowering and heavily colonized stereotype against which writers like Teaiwa later asserted an ironic view.

You cannot imagine how exquisite she was. She had the passionate grace of hibiscus and the rich colour. She was rather tall, slim, with the delicate features of her race, and large eyes like pools of still water under the palm trees; her hair, black and curling, fell down her back and she wore a wreath of scented flowers (Maugham, 1921: 130).

Her enchanting natural beauty is comparable with the natural abundance of the islands' palm trees, still pools and hibiscus flowers. Like the natural blooms, it suggests, she is ready to be picked and celebrated by Westerners. She never speaks for herself. Ata, in *The Moon and Sixpence*, 'leaves me alone... she cooks my food and looks after her babies... She does what I tell her... She gives me what I want from a woman' (Maugham, 1919: 280). Strickland, the protagonist, denies that women have souls, claiming their predatory behaviour always 'get you' eventually.

In the Pacific region with its multitude of indigenous languages, written literatures are relatively recent, but there is a long-standing oral tradition, in which women have played an important part. The lives of Pacific women vary according to the islands or island group on which they live, and the different customs and practices, but common factor has been women's subordination, some of which is historical, some developed since Western influences began. However, women carry out a large variety of essential tasks from work in the home to fishing and agriculture. Writing of their own lives, contemporary Pacific women writers question both such stereotypes and local traditions that subordinate them to male family members, unable to inherit, and in many cases sold off with a

bride price. They have developed engaged responses to counter such cultural stereotypes representing them in denigrating ways. This essay concentrates on Fijian women's writing (although not all the women writing in Fiji are of Fijian ethnicity), looking at colonial history and cultural stereotypes, exploring conditions which enable writing and publication. It considers work by several women, particularly Konai Helu Thaman, Teresia Teaiwa, Cresantia Frances, Akanete Ta'ai and other Fijian women poets Arlene Griffen, Vanessa Griffen and Kuini Vuikaba Speed, with some comments about Momoe Von Reiche, Marjorie Crocombe; all these deal with issues of cultural identity, and the roles and representation of women.

Critic and creative writer Albert Wendt highlights the legacy of misrepresentation against which these writers write, talking of:

... the hilariously romantic through the pseudo-scholarly to infuriatingly racist; from the 'noble savage' literary school through Margaret Mead and all her comings of age, Somerset Maugham's missionaries, drunks and saintly whores and James Michener's rascals and golden people, to the stereotyped childlike pagan who needs to be steered to the Light (Wendt, 1980: xiv).

European explorer/'discoverers' replaced indigenous self-representations and cultural expressions, with their own interpretations. Tiffin and Lawson characterize the process of erasure as deliberately perceiving language and behaviours as obscure, undependable, absent, vacant since 'Only empty spaces can be settled, so the space had to be made empty by ignoring or dehumanizing the inhabitants' (Tiffin and Lawson, 1994: 5). While Marjorie Crocombe states:

Denigrated, inhibited and withdrawn during the colonial era, the Pacific people are again beginning to take confidence and express themselves in traditional forms...that remain part of a valued heritage, as well as in new forms and styles reflecting the changes within the continuity of the unique world of our island cultures... (Crocombe, cited in Wendt, 1980: xiii)

When we start to consider Pacific women and the women of Fiji, to read their work and their representations of themselves, we are confronted by their rejection of exotic disempowering stereotypes. Bernard Smith points out 'European observers sought to come to grips with the realities of the Pacific by interpreting them in familiar terms' (Smith, 1985: 5). The popularizing is insulting – and ironized by Pacific women writers themselves as the mirroring of one song and various art forms suggests:

She wears red feathers and a huly huly skirt,
she wears red feathers and a huly huly skirt,
she lives on just coconuts and fish from the sea,
...with love in her heart from me.

(Popular song of the 1940s-50's)

She wears lei
around Gauginesque
blossoming breasts
sweeping brown
round and around
looping above
firm flat belly button
peeking over
see-thru hula skirt
(*not from her island-but what does it hurt?*)

.....

'Lovely hula hands' (*this line to be sung to the tune of the popular song which it appears in*)

always understands
make good island wife -for life-no strife
(Tusitala Marsh, 1997: 52)

Subramani (1985, 1992) characterizes the popular image of the South Pacific woman as idealized and romanticized, but actually, this is a construction born of the desires of western European men to find compliant women, part of the nineteenth century's export of male desire and power, and colonialism's need to define landscape as if they were women, then own them. So Pacific women tend to be depicted as 'amorous, nymph-like, with almost a childlike disposition to love. Such an image has continued to circulate in the West in order to pander to the taste of a reading public which wants women to be presented in a romantic light' (Subramani, 1992 [1985]: 84). This leaves little space for them to express their own identity and emotions and, after colonialism, to throw off the ridiculous bondage of being a fetishistic fantasy for European men – an exotic escape, a silent, loving, sensual, dark-skinned beauty who is like the earth, natural, not fussy like a Western woman.

Anna Balakian (1962: 30) also defines 'negative influence' as a response against the creation of views of Polynesian islanders by expatriate writers (from, for example, Melville to Maugham). Subramani elaborates:

It is apparent that the portrait of the islands in much of the European fiction seldom matches the reality known to Pacific islanders. There

are idealized metaphors of South Seas paradise, romantic portrayals of Polynesian Adam and Adonis, on the one hand, and racial stereotypes of cannibals and Calibans on the other. These are all distorted images. But they have had a great influence in the region as well as outside (Subramani, 1985/1992: 7).

Pacific Islanders have been cast as victims of the European need to believe in primitivism and lost innocence, in organic communities and the simple innocent life, which affects versions of the Pacific Islanders, particularly the women, onto whom have been loaded Europeans' desires and fears for the exotic and the innocent – and a sense of guilt, an example of the virgin and whore dichotomy, and he searches for an ideal simple virginal woman who will adore (as in Hereniko and Teaiwa (1993/4) *Last Virgin in Paradise*). So, in much Western writing about the Pacific, women are coy, attractive, teasing, exotic, stunning, and ultimately dangerous; will rob you of your soul and your westernized cultural development by appealing to your baser instincts while not themselves developed enough in terms of intellect or morality (not civilized, still 'primitive savages' at heart) so involvement is exciting but an ultimate betrayal of those civilized characteristics. Man is helpless against woman the enchantress. One of the main strategies for women writers of the region is to expose these fantasies as the 'Othering' identified by Said (1978) as Orientalism and by Kristeva (1982) as leading to abjection. In Said's arguments, the West constructs an Oriental other which is exotic, exciting, alluring, born of their own dreams and fears. On this Other is placed both what attracts because different, and what repels. Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982) and *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991) adds the gendered element to the argument, pointing out that identity theory suggests that men in particular abject that which is not them as a developmental move in infancy. The first object abjected is their faeces, followed by that Other clearly not 'me', the mother, and then in pathological cases, some or all women, and foreigners, anyone not me whose difference would challenge identity wholeness. This is a simplification, since neither of these ways of constructing, representing, idealizing and rejecting another are necessarily conscious acts. However, the implications of these psychoanalytically analyzed 'turns' noted by Said and Kristeva are extensive for imperial and colonial rule over a constructed subordinate Other, particularly a female. Kristeva's work goes on to point out that the Other, being a construct born of the self and its insecurities, needs to be embraced and recognized.

Speaking – out, back and about other things

our director of education
 supports vernacular studies
 for other people's children
 (Thaman, 1993: 55).

Thaman's poem directly confronts issues of identity, cultural values and tensions between recuperation or retention of the traditional ways and expressions, and the management of Westernized influenced transitions, some of which are just no more than colonial impositions. She and other Pacific women writers negotiate positions which enable them to critique both the problems of their home islands, such as wife bashing, and the disempowerment of colonialism's legacies. Latterly, several Pacific women writers are less worried about the ideas of those who would denigrate them and more concerned with establishing their own identities, speaking out and talking either about such psychological and representational (as well as political and economic) oppression, and writing also of life, love, families, social position, nature – moving beyond the need to talk back to the colonizer in their heads. In this respect we find among the poetry of South Pacific women both a redressing of the imbalances and infidelities of Western representation of them as exotic Others, and a reclaiming of the right to write about their own lives and lands. In another context, black British (Glaswegian-Nigerian) Jackie Kay moves through much the same trajectory. In her early work, 'So you think I'm a mule' (1984) which concentrates on a dialogue between a white and a black British woman, the white woman's inquisitiveness about origins springing from a sense of cultural superiority particularly in relation to the main speaker's mixed race heritage, following 'where do you come from?' with 'but you aren't pure', countered by 'pure what? White? ugh what a plight!' (Kay, 1984: 202). This is a direct challenge. Later Kay notes that she no longer has to address the white woman in her head asking her these questions and can write about other things – whatever she wishes (Open University, *Literature in the Modern World*, TV programme, 1991). In terms of postcolonial theory, Kay (1984) is indicating her ability to have completely left behind any sense of being Other; any destructive legacy of colonialism. So too Fijian women poets and other women poets of the Pacific region variously expose the oppressive behaviours of Westerners, and men in particular whether Western or from their homeland, establishing their own perspective and concerns in their writing, telling of their own lives, and moving on to write of families, society, their own feelings.

With deft linguistic play and irony, several women writers of the islands have taken the destructive denigrating results of these stereotypes to task, and also found time to write about everyday life, change, themselves and relationships, from their own points of view. Among others, Thaman has directly reacted against the stereotypes in European writing. Thaman uses the patterns of the Tongan oral tradition in her work, which challenges stereotypes about who one should marry, how to behave, etc. Oceanian literature is a literature governed by the connections between identity, culture, politics and gender, and women's writing is affected by the oral literature in the region such as Polynesian legends and matriarchal tale telling (Buck, 1993: 181).

History and context

The deeper historical origins of the literature of the region are in the writings and encouragement of the missionaries. When the missionaries arrived in 1835 they abolished polygamy and regulated customs so that women worked the land and assumed domestic and medical responsibilities whilst men were decision makers. Although missionaries introduced education for all, girls were not encouraged to pursue it into further and higher levels. Tradition is important, but might restrict women's freedoms, and their ability to express or respond to a whole variety of potentially oppressive cultural practices, based on the understanding that 'Tradition and culture are very much alive in Fiji custom. It is a must for every Fijian person to know their culture' (Buretini, 1989, in de Ishtar, 1994: 129). Although colonialism placed women second to men, Rusula Buretini (1989) asserts that Fijian women have always been strong, and that those in the towns, where they have more opportunity for schooling, and contact with women's issues, are beginning to retrieve their power, working together for women's advancement.

It's true, men are more dominant than the women, especially in the villages, but women have grown up with it, it's part of their lives that men should be superior. The women believe that they are there to listen, they do not take part in the decision making. That is the men's role. It is their belief that it should be that way, they have grown up with it. It is not that the men keep saying, "You listen to me, I am the man". It is just in their hearts that this is the way life is (Buretini, 1989, in de Ishtar, 1994: 129).

Women in Fiji play important roles in their families, but their profile is kept low, as Jessie Tuivaga comments:

Traditionally women are seen and not heard despite their contribution to the family's welfare and economy. While women are responsible for the cleanliness of the home and cooking and the general comfort of the family, they are also involved in wage employment for the financial maintenance of the family. Sometimes they are the sole income earners (1988: 1).

However empowered women might seem to be in their homes, domestic violence ('wife-bashing') is a serious problem. In 1984 the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre opened, helping with counselling and informing the community about violence against women. The Women's Wing of the Fiji Trades Union Congress, established in 1984, had the objective of equality between men and women in the workplace. Women of Fiji also argued back against political silencing and marginalization.

Writing has been for both genders an expression of the fight for identity and equality set against the legacy of colonialism:

The new South Pacific literature coincides with the desire for independence. The literature drew sustenance from wide-spread anti-colonial sentiments in the region... Colonialism will not be an easy subject to abandon... Colonialism also means the negation of the writers' individuality; his efforts to free himself of his colonized self is part of the real process of becoming a person. Paradoxically in this process he also frees himself of his ancestral culture (Subramani, 1985/1992: 76).

However, women did perceive both colonialism and male power to be problematic and fit subjects for writing. Writing by Pacific women, like that of men, began appearing in the late 1950s, encouraged in the University of Papua New Guinea and then the University of the South Pacific writing groups. Vanessa Griffen and others began the University of the South Pacific Arts Centre (UNISPAC) with the aim of promoting creative writing, and in 1973 Marjorie Crocombe set up the South Pacific Creative Arts Society. They published in *The Pacific Islands Monthly* and eventually in their own journal, *Mana*, founded in 1973 ('Mana' means power or force concentrated in objects and persons). Much of the contemporary writing of Pacific women has largely been enabled by the development of the University of the South Pacific's Institute of Pacific Studies, from where poets and prose writers have initially been published. The work of Ulli Beier (1978) was a catalyst in Papua New Guinea, and that of Cook Islander Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe and Samoan Albert Wendt in the smaller Oceanic islands.

Fijian Vanessa Griffen is known for her critical work and short sto-

ries, frequently about women. They are ‘distinguished by a conscious grasp of the social and economic pressures which govern their lives’ (Subramani, 1992: 85), and in considering the everyday details of peoples’ lives and emotions, addresses the conventional stereotypical versions of women’s lives in the Pacific as represented in European texts by Maugham, etc. In her short story ‘The Concert’, her character, Miss Renner takes her Fijian students to a concert in town, which they do not enjoy. However, when they break into Fijian song on the homeward journey she cannot fully enjoy the song for itself because it is Fijian - viewed as second-rate. ‘Miss Renner realized that their singing was beautiful. But then, she thought, again with the same feeling of regret, they’re only Fijian songs’ (Griffen, 1973: 12). Subramani (1992) characterizes her short stories as lyrical, relying on subject and tone rather than plot. She avoids first person narrative, withdraws behind her fictional world and captures fleeting moments. Suva is her usual setting and she concentrates on Fijians and Europeans or part-Europeans. In her story ‘The New Road’ Griffen depicts a place resonating with past beauty. An outsider looking into a departing culture, she captures it in fleeting moments, particularly in the early tales ‘Marama’ ‘The Conscript’ (1972), ‘The Concert’ and, latterly, ‘The New Road’ ‘Candles Glowing Orange’ and ‘One Saturday Morning’ Her work initially appeared in the magazine of UNISPAC from 1972 onwards.

The Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre has been at the forefront of moves to improve the social environment for women. Created to care particularly for the needs of both Melanesian and Indian Fijian women, it has provided services in the absence of adequate provisions by the government. During and since the coup its importance increased, as Shamima Ali (1986), instrumental in establishing the centre explains:

In 1983, a group of women got together because there was a spate of nasty rapes. Women had been accepting rape as something they couldn’t do anything about, but they started saying, “Something’s got to happen, it’s getting worse”. They formed a collective and in August 1984 opened the doors. We help women who have suffered rape, and also victims of incest and child or marital abuse....

When we challenge traditional attitudes to women, some people say, “Oh, but our identity – we mustn’t lose our identity”. So we have to tell them that some things like wife-beating are not Fijian, they happen all over the world. And also that some traditional things have been accepted, others rejected, depending on whether they develop or improve our society (Ali, 1986, in de Ishtar, 1994: 130).

Relatively recent changes to their status and freedoms have also affected what women want to and can write about, since for some the various coups set their struggles for equality and recognition back several steps and for others it enabled an investment in cooperative activity. Vanessa Griffen (1988) explained the impact of the coup on women: 'The coup has brought women, of all cultures, together, sharing a common determination for justice for their people, their nation' (Griffen, 1988, in de Ishtar, 1994: 127). As a direct result:

One of the obvious ways women were affected by the coup was the increased violence generally, which led to more violence against women... So, for some women it's a matter of participating in progressive organizations. There has been a cross-fertilization of work and action.

These women are now being told that this is not the way Fijian women act. Except for a few women in the elite, this new Fiji is not going to be a place where women can speak, it will be reactionary for women. The return to tradition means losses for Fijian women, in terms of political rights, decision-making power and personal freedoms. The church-going mother and supporter will be the ideal image of Fijian women promoted (Griffen, 1988, in de Ishtar, 1994: 127).

For many, history of the 1987 coup confuses personal events. Arlene Griffen mourns the loss of GJ, her Dad, in 'Bringing Home the Ashes' (Griffen, 1997: 412-3). Attending the funeral, the retrieving of the ashes of Dad GJ following the Fiji coup, the speaker makes a space in a sultry Sydney day for the children to play, the death to be remembered and celebrated and the day to go on while the family open a bottle of his favourite beer, play his music, comparing this retrieval of the ashes of the dead to those gained in a Test match for the winner, so among the children playing she and others toast the brave deceased beloved in a way he would have wanted:

With a tear in my eye I drank a toast.

To the best of captains
And a bloody good innings....

His precious ashes brought home. (Griffen, 1997: 412-3)

The theme of response and reaction to the violence and destruction of the coup in terms of its erasure of the normality and every day of Fiji is the subject of Speed's (1997) 'My Innocent Country' when she notes:

They talk about the government,
 Guns, soldiers and takeovers.
 But my country is:
 The noisy bus stand by the market,
 The Indian sweets cart and Fijian women
 Selling boiled corn, *kai, tavioka* and sweet bananas.
 It is the Chinese café by the taxi stand,
 Serving dry sponge cakes and hot sweet tea (Speed, 1997: 130).

While politicians argue, soldiers shoot and governments are voted in and out in a strangely circular motion bemusing the everyday folk, there is still a vibrant multiracial energy and community support between Hindus driving buses and greeting Fijians. A Hindu tobacco grower helps a Fijian family with an adopted Chinese son, and there are village choirs, vibrant churches and bustling markets. Life, in other words, continues in a vibrant, multicultural country. Fiji is represented as only understandable by its violent action and the changes in governments. This is a very politically engaged poem but also one which is typical of women's writing as such, since it engages with the everyday, the domestic, the nurturing, and ends on a positive note which asserts the importance of celebrating the everyday, the normal and the caring.

Six years in government. No one knows
 Who these politicians really work for.
 Our streets are not safe, some protest:
 Burglary, rape, violence. Official corruption,
 But this is still my country:
 Listen to the spirit of the river, sea and land,
 Hear the natural rhythm of the dance:
 The innocent and soulful dance of all God's children
 (Speed, 1997: 132).

Responding to gender issues after the 2000 coup, Imrana Jalal establishes the importance of the race, gender and colonial heritage intersection.

If you ask most women in Fiji what defines them most they will say in response, it is our race first then our gender.... This presents huge and sometimes insurmountable problems for women who are trying to mobilize as feminists around a feminist agenda.

In order to understand the political arena in which feminists in Fiji engage it is necessary to first have a basic knowledge of our political contexts. As in most countries women in Fiji are not defined only by

their sex and gender but by many forces and the interplay between them. In Fiji these forces include the consequences of colonization and the British divide and rule policy of our colonial masters, the loss of democracy and the vulnerability to the coup cycle phenomenon, social and economic class, ethnicity, poverty, religious rightism (fundamentalism) and race (Jalal, 2002: 1).

Reaction? or moving on?

Of what do Pacific and particularly Fijian women want to write? Initially perhaps they choose to confront colonization and its effects, then sexism and the power that language has over representation identity and cultural hierarchies. But they also want to move on and write about their own lives, shaking off the white person in their head either reasoning with or questioning them.

Not everything traditional is good nor is everything imported and translated bad. Since early poems published by Islanders appeared during political independence in Pacific countries many poems were political and anti-colonial, concerned with the losses to traditional culture (Maka'a and Oxenham, 1985: 7). Those could lead to naïve nostalgia for a golden age but also search for identity and writers tread the difficult route to avoid idealizing the unspoilt traditional ways of the past (a parallel to constructing an exotic idyll in Western eyes and writing) and merely bowing to the Westernized inherited ways. Samoan Albert Wendt notes:

Like a tree a culture is forever growing new branches, foliage, and roots. Our cultures, contrary to the simplistic interpretation of our romantics, were changing even in pre-papalagi times through inter-island contact and the endeavours of exceptional individuals and groups who manipulated politics, religion, and other people. Contrary to the utterance of our elite groups, our pre-papalagi cultures were not perfect or beyond reproach (Wendt 1976: 52).

Penelope Schoeffel (1994: 372-3) illustrates how ideologies such as *kastom* ('custom', 'our tradition'), and the *fa'a Samoa* (the Samoan way), 'the Pacific Way', or 'the Melanesian Way' could disguise and perpetuate inequality, marginalizing those who would criticize flaws in the politics and culture although pride in past traditions, idealized or otherwise, also enable a sense of collective dignity, uniqueness, and community:

The faa-samoa is perfect, they sd
from behind cocktail bars like pulpits
double scotch on the rocks, i sd

.....

their imported firstclass whisky
 was alive with corpses: my uncle
 and his army of hungry kids,
 malnourished children in dirty wards,
 an old woman begging in the bank,
 my generation migrating overseas
 for jobs, while politicians
 and merchants brag obesely
 in the RSA, and pastors bang
 out sermons about the obedient
 and righteous life – *aiafu**
 all growing fat in
 a blind man's paradise

*sweat-eaters

(Wendt cited in Schoeffel, 1994: 372-3)

There are tensions but one question is whether it is possible to pursue interpretative analysis of Pacific literary culture and specifically that of Fiji without confrontation?

This itself is highly limiting – a lasting effect of colonialism which imports a negative version of the colonizer from which they cannot escape and which causes the subject of escape to be foregrounded for them – a second trap. In a worldview which identifies the Other as primitive this too can be entrapping: 'Sometimes narratives about primitive societies become allegories of modernization that resist seeing themselves or presenting themselves as allegories' (Torgovnick, 1990: 244).

Pacific societies are still subjected to Western influence, ways of thinking, colonialism which whether British or German, French or American, Christian or unchristian reduced many of us to a state of passivity, undermined our confidence and self-respect, and made many of us ashamed of our cultures, inducing in us the feeling that only the foreign was right and proper and worthwhile (Wendt, 1990: xv).

But reaction against this is not the only answer – indigenous people seem to be caught in a cleft stick, they challenge Westernization but it is problematic to question the established way of life however denigrating it might be. On the one hand there are flaws in the established way of life where it suppresses people, and on the other recuperating it in the face of Westernization is described as just nostalgic or naïve.

Applying the arguments of Homi Bhabha (1994) to this situation, and this can be seen in literary expressions as a merging of forms, a new hybridity, of a dialogic nature dialoguing between the culturally traditional but repressed, and the western is however possible. Hereniko sug-

gests: 'New alignments encourage new positions of articulation of Pacific cultures based on the folk narrative structures and the structures of feeling imposed by the modern novelistic discourses appropriated by Pacific writer scholars' (Hereniko, 1997: 78-113). As Homi Bhabha puts it, a 'non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division' is likely to develop (Bhabha, 1994: 80-1). Of course, the writer as reader might develop a sense of disjunction, a split self rather than a new hybrid self – a split consciousness where in the narrative form fragments of culture, language and society are presented as different. Indeed, evoking such differences are, we might say, common places in the politics of discriminations, and hence also in the many contemporary struggles for identity (Chatterjee, 1993). Updating and moving forward however, 'all creative and disciplined selves converge in the production of a knowledge that is based on a Pacific culture in modern times' (Hereniko, 1995: 608-9). Thus in post-colonial conditions writers and intellectuals continually struggle to liberate themselves.

The Pacific writers aware of their struggles insist on a strategy that is both discursive and redemptive, though not completely free from nostalgia or revisionism. This recognition of difference informs the strategies of the Pacific writer scholars in unwriting the notion of Oceania as a monolithic idea of cultures and peoples (Waddell, et. al., (1993).

One writer who moves on and explores the intersection between politics, gender, race and the personal is Teresia Teaiwa. Born in Honolulu, and raised in the Fiji Islands, Teaiwa is of mixed heritage, mainly African American, Banaban and I-Kiribati. Her first collection of poetry, *Searching for Nei Nim'anoa* was published by Mana/South Pacific Creative Arts Society in 1995. In 2000, Elepaio Press and Hawai'i Dub Machine released a CD of spoken word featuring her work, titled *Terenesia: Amplified Poetry and Songs by Teresia Teaiwa and Sia Figiel*. Teresia has performed in Santa Cruz, California; Suva; Honolulu; Niue; Guam; Auckland and Wellington; New York City; at the 11th International Festival of Poetry in Colombia, and some of her poetry has featured on BBC, Australian Broadcasting Commission, and Radio New Zealand International radio programmes (<http://othervoicespoetry.org/vol3/teaiwa/>).

Teaiwa tackles the issue of representation of Pacific women from within the frames and discourses of a colonizer. Her poetry plays with perspectives, language and labels, unpicking, exposing and recasting

meanings to enable self-representation from within the slippages of definitions and against the limiting definitions of white Europeans (males). Her work deals with issues of islander travel, hybrid cultural identity, feminism, anti-colonialism, identification with nature and the elements, love, language and play. One of her sets of poems plays on the word 'niu'. She says 'in most Pacific languages 'niu' refers to the coconut, so in these poems I am exploring the possibilities of rethinking 'nudity' (the bane of our existence as Pacific islanders), a richer, more subversive kind of 'nudity' (email discussion, Teaiwa and Gina Wisker, 1998). Rather like HD, the modernist poet, Teaiwa uses conventional, rather disempowering images, exposes, questions and reverses them, seizing them for herself, exploring their implications. While HD recuperates and transforms flower images conventionally connoting women's gentle, ornamental, natural delicacy, and absence of intellect, Teresia transforms the image of the coconut (niu), and that of niu/nudity. The play on words with 'niu' which sounds like 'new', and reminds us of the Niu Waves Writers' collective in Suva, of which Teaiwa, Thaman and others are members, enables her to make it new, to critique the colonialist and tourist constructions of islander women as pretty, natural, exotic playthings. The development of the word 'nudity' from 'niu' rejects the construction of women positioned as objects in an exchange system whereby they are the consumed. The idea of being turned into a coconut was negative in myth, but Teaiwa seizes it as an escape, a metamorphosis which enables the individual to avoid disempowering roles. Being turned into a coconut allows one to adopt a mask, and effect an escape, rather than construction and consumption under an imperialist male gaze. In a prose poem, Teresia re-scripts and redefines 'nudity' for a potential (ironic) forthcoming edition of the *Penguin Dictionary of Oceanic Verse*.

'Nudity 111' (1999)

Nudity--n.

1. A state of being turned into a coconut, and not being recognized as oneself; as distinct from being naked, in which case one is without clothes and is immediately recognized as oneself; for example 'Neither the hero nor the evil sorcerer recognized the heroine because of her nudity'. (And because the hero had been nude, the heroine had a hard time recognizing him, too, at first, but she did in the end.)
2. A form of clothing, a disguise or filter mask or husk; for example 'And so, since they didn't recognize her, the heroine in her nudity went on her merry way and left the evil sorcerer and the hero to their own devices'.

3. A song, often an expression of joy or relief; for example 'And as she went she sang a sweet nudity... a nudity of freedom, of liberation from men, a nudity of independence, and of being single... a nudity for singular women wherever they may be'.

More recently she has looked at issues of cultural change and identity in Fiji, focusing on race ethnicity and colour noticing a kind of fusion of culture and colours.

in melanesia/the islands/are not/black/
but/the people are/unlike polynesians/
they believe/in/democracy/they've inherited/
dreadlocks/from ancient/ancestors
contemporary caribbean/music causes waves/raves/
reggae plays/all over the pacific
(Teaiwa, 'black in the blue pacific (for mohit and riyad)', 2004,
<http://othervoicespoetry.org/vol3/teaiwa/>).

One of her former students, Akanete Ta'ai, a Tongan by origin, set up a working collective in Tonga. She plays with words which others might use to denigrate her. Her first poem 'Tiller in the Blue' deals with the relationship of the tiller – the proletariat to the blue, the nobility. In referencing a country, Tonga, where only nobility are allowed still to marry nobility and rules governing conduct are very strict, this poem was followed by one called 'Finemotu'a', which is a derogatory term with different values in relation to whom the term is addressed.

Calling a single woman a *finemotu'a* is like calling someone a bitch or a slut! It has the same connotations of the unclean woman, the prostitute...it has three meanings. First it could mean an unmarried woman who is not a virgin; second, it could mean a married woman who is definitely not a virgin or third, it could refer to when a woman humbles herself to those of higher power or rank (Ta'ai, 1997).

Ta'ai's other poems look at, for example, the handing over of Hong Kong to mainland China ('The Monsoon Moment'), 'Leda and the Swan', based on Yeats' poem and about passive acceptance. She uses the strategies of Tongan oral traditions and while she questions the oppressive nature of many of these traditions she also celebrates her own community. So, too, Teaiwa (1995) in 'Searching for Nei Nim'anoa' wishes to link up with her people and her origins, using imagery of journeying, sailing and personal response:

I will pick up the pieces
of my broken Gilbertese.

Gather the remnants of
my broken heart.
And use them to chart my course. (Teaiwa, 1995).

If Teaiwa's poems are sometimes erotic and sensual as well as political so too are those by a newer voice on the Fijian women's poetry scene, Cresantia Frances, who also addresses the confusions of covert racism, in her poem 'Ethnocentrics Dream':

Ethnocentrics dream in black
and white |
To see the world
As only you can ~
Would mean
+ climbing C
Into your blind spot.
I can't do that. (Frances, 2005).

This is a response to 'Ethnocentrics dream in black and white', by Marlene Dutta.

To see the world
As only I can ~
Would mean
+ coming out
of your closet C
you can't do that. (Frances, sent by email, October 2005)

Here, the inability to see beyond the differences of colour, black and white, are compared with a fear of recognition of one's secularity and misinterpretation, marked by two blots and X's, which echo or mimic the blind spots, the lack of insight and perspective, of ability to see the world from another's different point of view. In her poem 'The Mothers of Wisdom': For the strong brown women who surround me with their love', Frances writes in a celebratory fashion of nurturing imaginative women who advise her and sustain her, comparing their words to fruit, dreams and all thing natural.

Words of wisdom
Fall like tears
Curve like songs
Swim like fish
As the women gather
To thread dreams

Words and silences
 Into stories and stones
 Of love
 That will sing,
 Condensing on the palate
 Cemented in memory born
 When there is nothing
 But sea and sky. (Frances, by email, October 2005).

She also writes gently eroticised verse with accompanying images, which celebrate women's bodies and unity with others, and use experimental forms, not only the combination with images but also layout, the creative use of typesetting and pauses, dashes, slashes, to hint at experiences and reflection, and accompanying sound. The most experimental of the young Fijian women writers currently, Frances engages with the issues of love, relationship and self.

Tonga and Fiji

Konai Helu Thaman's poetry 'marks a critical stage in the region's emotional history. It represents a shift towards a more open consciousness where traditional culture is no longer an immutable reality' (Subramani, 1992: 57). Her poetry including *You, the Choice of My Parents* (1974), *Langakali* (1981), *Higano* (1987), *Kakali* (1989), *Songs of Love* (2004) shows an ambivalence towards both traditions and colonial and post-colonial change, interrogating conventional assumptions of women's roles and Pacific Islander behaviours. She questions the erasure of local women's needs. At a personal level she deals with ways of developing self identification, seizing a version of self not overwhelmed by filth and cultures,

I see myself dying slowly
 To family and traditions;
 Stripped of its will and carefree spirit,
 Naked on the cold and lonely waters
 Of a strange family shoreline
 Alienated from belonging truly (Thaman, 1974).

Thaman writes of personal relationships and permanence. 'You, the Choice of My Parents' is a long poem, engaging with the double oppression of race/colonialism and gender.

Briar Wood (1998) sees Thaman's role as a translator of cultures,

which includes her identity as a teacher, a supporter of new writers, and as mediator both of the relationship between public and private selves, and the tensions inherent in writing in English. Wood argues that ‘Thaman’s poetry performs shamanistic healing as well as acting as a repository for historical narratives’ (Wood, 1998: 7).

In ‘My Blood’ she writes:

My brother...

My problem is not ‘exploitation’

Or unequal pay, or unawareness:

My problem is that I

Have been betrayed and tramped on

By my own blood, (cited in Borofsky, 2000: 339).

Her poetry ‘represents the place of women in traditional culture as one that is no longer unchallenged’ (Buck, 1992: 181). Interviewed by Wood, Thaman (1997) says that in America she was not reading feminist but anti-colonial literature. Latterly she has become aware that her upbringing by her mother and two maiden aunts was not feminist and that the relationships between men and women in Tonga are ‘complimentary’:

Even though Tonga was and still is a patriarchal society it never occurred to me that there was anything the boys could do that I couldn’t do... Our vernacular language itself isn’t sexist... my grandaunts were feminists before the word feminist became part of my vocabulary (Thaman, 1997: 7).

In her poems Thaman emphasizes the importance of finding ways to ask questions about what seems taken for granted.

Women talk a lot among themselves. There are things they would never talk about in mixed company, which again is something that development workers could pay more attention to. Because they’re usually foreigners, they go in there and they see with their foreign eyes using their foreign observation tools and what they see is women who are subordinated, who cannot say anything, when in fact it isn’t like that.

The line between the elders and children is breaking down. Tonga is a spiritual place based on the beliefs of hierarchies, knowledge. In Tongan society they were felt to have souls, which matched Christian beliefs. The women made garlands, a process called ‘tui’, of flowers divided into two types: *kakala hingoa* – the chiefly *kakalas* – and the more recently introduced non-fragrant *kakala verde*. A layered garland

contains both sorts and everyone wears *heilala* (garlands). Preservation of established ways is important, particularly now with nuclear families split off from elders and so culture – Tongan studies – is taught in schools.....culture changes but I think what I'm trying to do with the curriculum is to get students to be conscious that they have a culture, that it is not something you just discard, because one day it might come in handy (Thaman, 1997: 8-9).

Thaman also acknowledges that she adopts a persona in her poetry to speak out, like the tradition of metaphorically clowning and putting on a mask. Thaman's poetry looks clearly at the realities of post-colonialism, mourning the ways in which twentieth century and popular culture have erased the vitality of the past. 'Island Fire' vividly explores these themes using a mixture of images:

Embers
 Of a once blazing
 Fire
 Sleep through an
 Endless night
 fraught with the din of
 billiard balls
 Hollywood violence
 Rock 'n' roll music
 And the slow turning of
 Foreign text book pages
 The embers wait
 Perhaps never to be
 Rekindled by
 Dry coconut leaves
kerosene is easier. (Thaman, 1985, in Subramani, 1992: 56)

A foreign culture's music, easy access to kerosene, and imported language have taken over from the once blazing fire of the community and the past (Subramani, 1985: 56). Focusing on ways in which Pacific poets deal with tourism, the land, changing customs and identity, William C. Clarke (1999) locates the importance of poetry as a vehicle to engage with and speak of such changes, the reaction against them, ways to move on from them. He speaks of:

rich traditions of oral poetry, chanting, and songs in pre-literate times. These traditional forms were often marked, as much oral literature has been, by a strong affiliation with the local environment, with meaningful places, with features of the landscape, the names of places, and a

commemoration of local history and past people (Piianaia, 1980; Schieffelin, 1976: 178-89; Weiner, 1991). Among the elaborate myth and metaphor of the traditional poems was often a frequent reference to sacred or fragrant plants, a practice carried on by the contemporary Tongan poet Konai Thaman in much of her writing, notably the collection entitled *Kakala*. The Tongan word 'kakala' means sacred or fragrant plants use in garlands and to send coconut oil, and which are commonly referred to in Tongan legends, songs, dance and poetry, as a symbol of respect and love... (Thaman, 1993: 91) (all cited in Clarke, 1999: 188).

Frequently Thaman writes of relationships. In the most recent collection *Songs of Love* she dedicates a poem to her husband, Randy called 'Living Among the Trees' (Thaman, 2004). This explores the grounding nature of a long lived relationship using images of ground, trees, clear skies and a hand held out to support or as for support:

Nineteen years
Is a long time
By today's standards
Perhaps the ground
Made it possible to live among the trees. (Thaman , 2004)

And finally:

Among plants insisting on growing
I can see you clearly
Holding out your hand (Thaman, 2004)

Some recent discussion of her work can be found in Selina Tusitala Marsh (2000), who focuses on four women poets, Jully Makini (Solomon Islands), Grace Mera Molisa (Vanuatu), Momoe Malietoa Von Reiche (Western Samoa) and Thaman (Tonga and Fiji). In the same volume Tamansailau Suaalii (2000) focuses on critiquing exotic images of Pacific women and Thaman explores that fusion or tension for which she is known, the 'bittersweet marriage' woven from the present complex mix of bitterness and sweetness on the family and her culture (Thaman, 2000b).

Conclusion

Pacific women writers explore their lives, gender oppression, wife beating, difficult social times, and the legacies of colonialism. Among their contemporaries, both Teresia Teaiwa and Konai Helu Thaman en-

gage with issues of misrepresentation and recuperation, emphasizing the role that language and historical colonial myths have had to play. Change, they suggest, should be ushered in a negotiated way where what is good in traditional ways can be preserved like herbs, and the best of new western influenced ways can be translated into something owned by the people themselves, underpinned by equality.

Pacific Islands are no longer for experimentation, abuse and importation of Western ways. Instead, a negotiation between the best of the past and the present is needed.

... come with me sister
 Let's take a chance and make the break.
 After all, we cannot all go back
 To the land (Thaman, 1987: 1).

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