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Myth and Memory at Sea: Feminist Mythmaking and Oceanic Space in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract
This article examines feminist rewritings of maritime mythology and oceanic identities in three contemporary novels that reconstruct the sea as an archive of feminine memory, ecological interdependence, and mythopoetic resistance. Moving away from canonical maritime literature dominated by masculine narratives of conquest and heroism, Annie Proulx's The Shipping News *(1993), Lisa See's* The Island of Sea Women *(2019), and Witi Ihimaera's* The Whale Rider *(1987) centre female experiences shaped profoundly by water, cultural continuity, trauma, and regeneration.*

Each novel positions oceanic spaces as sites of narrative transformation, employing distinctive feminist strategies of mythmaking. Proulx's portrayal of the Newfoundland coast constructs a psychic and material shoreline where women's embodied experiences catalyse personal healing and subtle agency. See's exploration of Korea's haenyeo divers reclaims female labour and communal memory as potent forms of resistance against patriarchal and colonial erasure. Ihimaera reconfigures Māori cosmological narratives through a young girl whose spiritual and ecological inheritance disrupts established patriarchal traditions, redefining her community's mythic and cultural relationship with the ocean.

Drawing on feminist theories such as Luce Irigaray's sexual difference, Hélène Cixous's écriture féminine*, and Judith Butler's gender performativity, the study situates female embodiment as integral to narrative and symbolic reconstruction. Theoretical insights from Stacy Alaimo's material ecocriticism and Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity further frame the sea as a dynamic, relational, post–anthropocentric space. Ultimately, these narratives enact a feminist poetics that reterritorialises maritime myths, articulating oceanic spaces as arenas of ecological and cultural renewal, embodied knowledge, and intergenerational continuity.*

Keywords: *feminist theory, maritime imaginary, mythopoetics, ecocriticism, oceanic identity, transcultural fiction.*

Introduction and theoretical framework

The sea has long been a source of human fascination and fear, an immense symbolic reservoir that generates myths and metaphors shaping cultural imagination. Historically, maritime narratives have often foregrounded masculinity, featuring heroes and adventurers sailing across perilous oceans, conquering nature, and discovering new worlds. Yet, recent literary

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developments have seen a significant shift. A growing body of contemporary fiction employs oceanic space to explore feminist themes, repositioning the sea as an archive of feminine memory, ecological interconnectedness, and mythopoetic resistance. This article explores how three major contemporary novels—Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women*, and Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*—employ maritime mythologies to critically interrogate historical narratives, patriarchal norms, and ecological exploitation, and how these works engage in feminist mythmaking to reimagine oceanic spaces as sites of female agency and narrative power.

To engage more precisely with the term *myth*, this article adopts a layered understanding that reflects its various cultural and narrative functions. First, myth is approached as cosmology—a framework of spiritual and cultural origin through which societies articulate their relationship to the world, as seen in Māori oceanic ancestry or Jeju's diving traditions. Second, it operates as a literary structure or trope, shaped by recurring archetypes and symbolic motifs, such as the hero's journey or the ocean as a metaphor for transformation. Third, myth is examined as an ideological structure, in line with feminist critiques by Irigaray and Cixous, where myth operates to naturalise power and gender hierarchies. Lastly, myth is read as a form of cultural memory—a living archive through which collective trauma, identity, and belonging are transmitted across generations, drawing on the work of Ricoeur and Caruth.

This polyvalent understanding allows a nuanced exploration of how contemporary feminist writers reconfigure maritime myths. Whether they invoke ancestral cosmologies, subvert narrative archetypes, or recover submerged histories, these texts demonstrate that myth is a dynamic, contested space through which feminist agency, ecological consciousness, and intergenerational continuity are articulated.

This analysis synthesises insights from a range of theorists to examine how myths function as flexible tools for rewriting and reimagining stories. Claude Lévi–Strauss once said that myths are not just old stories collecting dust. They are alive—they evolve, and they shape the way we understand our place in the world. He puts it clearly: myths "introduce some kind of order" into human experience, and they do that by being told and retold, constantly reshaping cultural memory and identity (1978: 12–13). Joseph Campbell takes that idea in a more poetic direction. For him, mythology is "the song of the universe, the music of the spheres"—a symbolic system that helps connect what we feel individually to what society believes collectively (1988: 7). That's what makes myth such a powerful tool for feminist writers: it gives them a way to take those old, rigid narratives and twist them—to bring in the voices that were ignored or silenced the first time around.

Eliade offers another lens for looking at myth, and his ideas really deepen the conversation. He sees myth as sacred and deeply tied to time and meaning (1963: 5–10). He writes that "myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred [...] into the World," showing that these stories are not just about history—they are about spiritual and cultural renewal too (1963: 6). So, myths don't just help people remember where they come from—they help communities move forward, while still holding onto a shared sense of who they are.

This all becomes even more powerful when you think about how myths are connected to place. They are not just stories floating in space—they are grounded. They map cultural identity onto landscapes. They tie memory to location, to environment, and to a specific sense of belonging. Maritime myths are a perfect example of this. They carry the push and pull between land and sea, between what is familiar and what is fluid. They give shape to human–nonhuman relationships, and to the idea that identity is always caught in motion between stability and change.

The feminist perspectives of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous contribute significantly to understanding how myths and narratives become gendered. Irigaray's assertion that "female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (1985: 23) helps explain why feminist interventions in mythmaking are not merely revisions but radical acts of cultural reclamation. Similarly, Cixous's influential concept of *écriture féminine* posits an embodied mode of writing that challenges patriarchal structures, insisting that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal" (1976: 875).

Butler's theories of gender performativity further elucidate how gender and identity are not fixed biological realities but discursive constructs continuously enacted through cultural practices, narratives, and mythologies. As she asserts, "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." (1999: 43–44) This insight explores how maritime myths and narratives reinforce or subvert established gender roles. Her later work, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), expands on these themes, observing that "'bodies' only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" (1993: XI). Feminist literary revisionism, in this context, becomes an act of making previously marginalised identities visible, valid, and narratively potent.

Ecocritical perspectives also shape this analysis, particularly Stacy Alaimo's theory of trans–corporeality and Rosi Braidotti's nomadic

posthumanism. Alaimo argues that "the human is always intermeshed with the more–than–human world. […] the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (2010: 2), emphasising the body's porous, material engagement with ecological realities. Braidotti similarly challenges traditional humanist notions of stable, bounded identities, proposing instead a nomadic, relational understanding of identity that reflects the fluidity and interconnectedness of life, resonating strongly with maritime themes (2013: 1–8). These frameworks provide theoretical grounding for reading oceanic spaces in contemporary fiction as dynamic sites of relationality, ecological sensitivity, and post–anthropocentric imagination.

Ricoeur's seminal work *Memory, History, Forgetting* and Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* enrich the discussion by examining how literature reconstructs individual and collective memory through narrative. Ricoeur emphasises narrative as a key medium through which memories are structured, interpreted, and transmitted culturally, arguing that literary narratives create complex interactions between history and memory (2004: 21–24). Caruth expands this concept by highlighting how traumatic memories disrupt coherent narrative forms, often resurfacing unexpectedly to challenge dominant cultural narratives. Feminist mythmaking frequently engages precisely with such ruptured or marginalised memories, revising traditional narratives to accommodate previously silenced experiences.

The chosen novels—*The Shipping News*, *The Island of Sea Women*, and *The Whale Rider*—each, in unique ways, deploy these theoretical insights. Proulx's narrative reclaims the harsh Newfoundland coastline as a site of feminist resistance and emotional regeneration. See's depiction of Korean haenyeo divers illuminates feminine ecological agency and historical trauma against patriarchal and colonial erasure. Ihimaera's novel engages indigenous Māori myths of whale–riding ancestors, challenging patriarchal tradition and reclaiming a cultural inheritance through female agency. These texts illustrate feminist mythmaking as a literary or ideological stance and a culturally transformative strategy deeply embedded in memory, ecology, and identity.

This article would thus contribute to the growing critical conversation about feminist literary practices, the maritime imaginary, and the significance of myth in contemporary culture. Exploring these three novels in dialogue with feminist, mythological, ecocritical, and posthumanist theories, the present analysis aims to demonstrate how contemporary literature can profoundly reshape cultural understandings of gender, myth, memory, and the sea, opening new possibilities for feminist narrative imagination.

***The Shipping News*—Reimagining Maritime Myths and Feminine Subjectivity in Newfoundland's Psychic Landscape**

Proulx's novel, *The Shipping News*, portrays Newfoundland as a starkly beautiful yet psychologically charged landscape where myth, memory, and feminine subjectivity intertwine. Within the book, the maritime setting is not simply a backdrop but a vibrant mythopoetic space, a territory laden with symbolic and emotional significance, shaping identities and narratives of loss, healing, and transformation. Proulx's depiction of maritime space echoes Ricoeur's theorisation of memory as a creative narrative force capable of reorganising traumatic experiences into coherent, meaningful structures (2004: 56–59). Additionally, her narrative practice reflects the feminist reclamation of myths and narratives that challenge dominant patriarchal traditions of maritime literature.

The central character, Quoyle, arrives in Newfoundland as an emotionally wounded and disoriented figure, seeking refuge after the traumatic loss of his wife and the upheaval of his personal life. His return to Newfoundland, the ancestral home, parallels the mythological motif of the hero's return, as famously outlined by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*. Yet, Proulx modifies this traditional narrative: Quoyle's "heroic journey" is profoundly anti–heroic, marked by vulnerability rather than conquest, and defined through relationality rather than individualistic achievement.

This feminine subversion of traditional masculine maritime mythologies becomes particularly visible in Proulx's deliberate focus on femininity—not only through characters like Wavey Prowse and Agnis Hamm, but also through the sea itself, which emerges as a powerful, untamable feminine force. Quoyle's psychological disorientation closely parallels his dislocation within the natural world, especially the ocean. Early in the novel, the sea is rendered as a symbol of his fear and emotional fragility: "At thirty–six, bereft, brimming with grief and thwarted love, Quoyle steered away to Newfoundland, the rock that had generated his ancestors, a place he had never been nor thought to go. A watery place. And Quoyle feared water, could not swim." (4)

In *The Shipping News*, Proulx draws a connection between Quoyle's emotional unravelling and the ocean's raw presence—a link that starts with discomfort but slowly reshapes itself. His vulnerability seems mirrored in the sea, which at first appears unforgiving. However, over time, as relationships shift and emotional ground is regained, the sea assumes a different role, shaped by what might be seen as a quiet feminist perspective. Proulx's portrayal of Newfoundland's rugged coastline carries a symbolic weight that feels both harsh and hopeful. The landscape reflects pain, but also suggests the possibility of recovery—though not in a linear or easy way.

That idea resonates with what Cathy Caruth writes about trauma. She notes that trauma rarely arrives in a clear, understandable form. Instead, "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (1995: 4–5), and it appears as "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (1995: 5). In *The Shipping News*, both memory and geography seem to behave this way. The sea does not just exist in the background—it disrupts and reflects. It becomes the terrain where unresolved pain surfaces.

Early in the novel, the ocean mirrors Quoyle's disoriented emotional state—fear, paralysis, a sense of being lost. But this changes gradually. The way Proulx writes the sea shifts. It is no longer just a threat—it begins to open up, becoming something navigable. Where once there was only danger, there's now room for clarity and even peace. The coastline, which once mirrored Quoyle's grief, becomes something he can move through. That journey—both external and internal—turns the sea into a mirror of his changing self: unpredictable, sometimes violent, sometimes still, but capable of healing.

There is also something here that aligns with Luce Irigaray's work on embodiment and narrative. She argues for rewriting stories that have erased women's lived experiences, focusing instead on desire and the body (1985: 23–24). Even though *The Shipping News* does not centre a woman protagonist, Proulx's approach to trauma and emotional recovery reflects a kind of feminist consciousness—particularly in how she uses the landscape to track emotional healing.

Even though *The Shipping News* does not focus on a woman protagonist, the way Proulx handles emotional pain, recovery, and the environment shows a sensitivity to feminist concerns—especially in how trauma and healing are narrated through place and feeling.

Although the protagonist is male, the novel's feminist sensibility is evident in how Proulx foregrounds female perspectives and alternative modes of emotional expression that challenge the hegemonic masculine ideal traditionally associated with maritime narratives. Agnis Hamm, Quoyle's aunt, exemplifies a resilient femininity deeply connected to the harsh Newfoundland environment. Her independence and ability to rebuild her life on ancestral land symbolically link female strength to the sea's regenerative power. Agnis transforms the old family home—a site of past traumas and oppressive patriarchal histories—into a space of feminist re-territorialisation, claiming both physical and narrative space for female agency. In doing so, she echoes Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, wherein feminine writing breaks from patriarchal structures by embracing fluidity, multiplicity, and embodied expression (Sellers 1994: XIX).

Similarly, the character of Wavey Prowse encapsulates a nuanced portrayal of femininity that resists reduction to mere romantic interest or symbolic maternal figure. Wavey, who navigates her history of loss and grief,

becomes central to Quoyle's emotional reawakening. Her quiet strength, patience, and intuitive connection to Newfoundland's harsh environment contrast with traditional literary representations of women as passive figures awaiting male rescue.

Wavey, in contrast to more dominant figures in the novel, embodies what Alaimo describes as trans–corporeality—a way of understanding ecological subjectivity that is not about mastery over nature, but about being shaped by it. Alaimo explains this framework clearly:

> trans–corporeality denies the human subject the sovereign, central position. Instead, ethical considerations and practices must emerge from a more uncomfortable and perplexing place where the 'human' is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world (2010: 16–17).

Wavey's quiet presence—her unassuming but steady engagement with the land and sea—reflects this ethic. She does not force herself onto the environment. Instead, she exists within it, attuned to its rhythms. Her interactions with Quoyle, along with her relationship to the surrounding maritime landscape, challenge traditional gender expectations. Rather than dominating or resisting, she embodies resilience through relationality and rootedness—qualities that complicate standard narratives of conquest or control.

It is interesting how Proulx plays with maritime myth. She does not follow the usual blueprint of seafaring heroics, the kind we have all seen before—usually centred on men. Instead, she flips it. In *The Shipping News*, Quoyle, working for a small–town paper, ends up gathering stories—old wrecks, fishing routines, day–to–day life by the sea. But the point is not the drama. What really stands out is how quiet and vulnerable these stories are. There's no glory in them—just fragility.

That shift made me think about Eliade's take on myth. He talks about how myths are not fixed things—they are meant to change, adapt (Eliade 1963: 14–17). And that is kind of what Proulx does here. She does not just retell sea legends—she rewrites them in a way that makes space for things like grief, healing, and even uncertainty. These are not grand tales. They are closer to emotional truths, especially those that haven't always had room in the narrative—like the experiences of women, or people living on the edges of things.

It also connects, I think, to Braidotti's idea of identity being fluid. She writes about nomadic subjectivity and how we are not just one thing—we are shaped by relationships, by the world around us (Braidotti 2013: 49–53). That is visible in characters like Wavey and Agnis, but also Quoyle himself. None of them sticks to one fixed identity. They shift, change, and adapt. It is complex and unpredictable, like real life.

And the setting—Newfoundland—it is not just scenery. It seems to change with them. Or maybe reflect them? Either way, the landscape does not just sit there. It participates. Newfoundland itself almost becomes a character, changing and being changed by the lives that unfold along its edges.

It is not just a backdrop—it is a presence that shapes everyone who lives there. In that way, the island becomes almost like a character in its own right, reflecting Proulx's feminist and ecological vision: identity as something embodied, relational, and always in motion.

So, in the end, *The Shipping News* does something pretty powerful. It takes the old myths of the sea and tells them again—but differently. With tenderness, with critique, and with space for change. That is what makes it a quiet but strong example of feminist mythmaking.

Her portrayal of Newfoundland as a psychic and symbolic landscape deeply interconnected with feminine experiences of trauma, healing, and ecological relationality demonstrates how feminist literary strategies can powerfully reconfigure traditional narratives. Through the novel's vivid portrayal of characters who resist, rewrite, and reclaim mythic narratives, Proulx offers a compelling vision of maritime space as a terrain of feminist and ecological transformation, where new narratives of resilience and relationality emerge from the depths of cultural memory.

The Island of Sea Women—matrifocal communities, embodied memory, and resistance to patriarchal erasure

The Island of Sea Women offers an evocative portrayal of oceanic space through the lives of Jeju Island's haenyeo divers, an all–female collective whose history is deeply enmeshed in maritime culture. Focusing on this distinct matrifocal community, See highlights the complex interplay of feminine memory, collective trauma, and ecological consciousness, reconfiguring maritime myths traditionally dominated by patriarchal perspectives. This section analyses how See's narrative employs feminist mythmaking strategies to foreground marginalised histories, subvert patriarchal erasures, and articulate a feminist ecological vision deeply rooted in embodied memory and intergenerational resilience.

Jeju Island's haenyeo, or sea women, represent an extraordinary example of matrifocal social structure, where female agency and autonomy have historically challenged patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. In See's narrative, the haenyeo are not mere victims of historical oppression but active agents of cultural memory and resistance. This aligns with Irigaray's assertion in *This Sex Which Is Not One* that narratives must acknowledge feminine autonomy and embodiment, freeing women's histories from patriarchal constraints (1985: 23-24). Observe how these divers' lives and labour are the centre of her narrative, openly positioning female experience at the centre of,

not on the side of, cultural memory. This kind of feminist framing really shifts how we usually think about maritime history. Traditionally, it is all about men—explorers, fishermen, captains—where masculine bravery is front and centre. But *The Island of Sea Women* flips that. The novel focuses deeply on the haenyeo, the women divers of Jeju Island. Their work is not shown as heroic in the conventional sense, and it is definitely not romanticised. Instead, See gives us something more grounded: the physicality of their dives, the rituals of care between them, and how they pass skills and stories from one generation to the next.

This ties in closely with what Cixous means by *écriture féminine*, where body and story blend together. It is through that blend that feminine identity gets woven into culture (Sellers 1994: XIX–XX). One scene really makes this point land: "'Every woman who enters the sea carries a coffin on her back,' she warned the gathering. 'In this world, in the undersea world, we tow the burdens of a hard life. We are crossing between life and death every day.'" (14) That hits hard. The body is not just flesh here—it is memory. It stores trauma, knowledge, and everything these women have endured and learned.

The haenyeo's diving—without oxygen, in unpredictable conditions—is more than survival. It becomes a kind of presence, an act of resistance. In that way, the novel does not just celebrate these women. It challenges old sea myths by putting their lived, bodily wisdom at the centre of the story.

Another key aspect is how See deals with memory. It is not treated as something passive or internal. It is active. It moves. It lives in the body, in the repeated motions of diving, in the shared rituals. It is not just what they remember—it is what they *do*. That fits with Ricoeur's thinking in *Memory, History, Forgetting*—he argues that memory is shaped not just by thought, but by the body and the way stories get lived and passed on (2004: 21–24). The haenyeo's practices reflect this: memory is not abstract—it's physical, lived, and felt.

The haenyeo's bodily scarring, diving practices, and rituals act like living archives of cultural history, inscribing trauma, survival, and resistance in body form. See powerfully depicts the trauma endured by Jeju's women, especially during historical upheavals such as the April Third Incident (Jeju Massacre). Drawing upon Caruth's insights into trauma narratives, wherein traumatic experiences disrupt linear storytelling and demand new narrative forms, See illustrates how the traumatic memories of Jeju women repeatedly interrupt conventional history, asserting alternative truths that challenge dominant patriarchal and colonial narratives (1995: 5-7). Through vivid storytelling, the novel reclaims and honours these suppressed memories, situating them within a broader feminist narrative that refuses erasure.

See's narrative also engages explicitly with ecological consciousness and feminist environmental ethics. The haenyeo's practices reflect a

sophisticated understanding of sustainable resource management and ecological interdependence, aligning closely with Alaimo's theory of trans–corporeality. She argues that bodies are permeable and interconnected with environmental systems, thus emphasising human–nature interdependency (2010: 2-4). The haenyeo's relationship with the sea and marine life represents more than subsistence—it speaks to a deeply embodied ecological consciousness. Their connection to the ocean resists extractive, capitalist frameworks by modelling a form of living grounded in respect, balance, and mutual reliance. Daily practices, shaped by both tradition and survival, reflect an ethic of reciprocity and care that stands in contrast to exploitative approaches to nature.

This ethos echoes Braidotti's idea of nomadic feminist posthumanism, which shifts away from notions of human dominance and instead promotes an interconnected, relational ontology. In this view, the haenyeo are not simply harvesters of the sea, but stewards of it—individuals whose labour is attuned to the well–being of the wider ecosystem (Braidotti 2013: 49-53). The novel positions them as figures of quiet resistance, embodying a lifestyle that prioritises environmental harmony and communal responsibility.

Their ecological ethic is not abstract or theoretical—it is lived. Without the aid of modern diving equipment, they depend on their own breath, bodies, and timing, synchronising with the ocean's natural rhythms. This interaction brings to life Alaimo's concept of trans–corporeality, described as "a style of subjectivity that demands human and non–human natures' permeability and mutual construction" (2010: 3). Their survival is not dependent upon dominion over nature, but upon attuning and adapting to it. The sea is not something to be conquered—the object of dominion—something they belong to.

Braidotti's description of the posthuman subject supports the position similarly by underscoring a fluid, mutually–constitutive relationship between human life and the world beyond the human. The life of the haenyeo, bonded by such relations, takes strength in the form of a robust ecological and feminist stance—of resisting dominant discourses of severance, control, and hierarchy.

The haenyeo world is relational to the very core, not governed by hierarchy but by mutual dependency and vulnerability. And in doing so, their practices are not just connected to tradition—philosophically radical, hinting at other ecological modes of living that challenge hegemonic narratives centred on the human. The haenyeo, far from seeing themselves as separate from nature, live within it as kin. Their work, rituals, and worldview reflect this—placing marine life not as resources, but as relatives.

As Braidotti describes, this perspective promotes "an enlarged sense of inter–connection […] including the non–human" (2013: 48). Their cultural lens coincides with Haraway's concept of "making kin," a way of forging ethical

relations among species grounded in care, interdependency, and co–survivance (2016: 103).

Central to this conversation, the haenyeo are not simply knowledge bearers or culture bearers. They actually do something other than that—mediate the human and the non–human worlds and provide a model of marine–based ethics that challenges patriarchal power and anthropocentrism head-on.

See makes this point clear in her portrayal of Jeju's matrifocal culture—a culture that has long been marginalised by colonial and patriarchal systems. From Japanese occupation to modern–day industrial development, external forces have tried to suppress the autonomy of the haenyeo. Yet they endure, not passively, but by continually reshaping cultural myths and rituals that highlight women's resilience, independence, and environmental stewardship. Through her feminist narrative strategies, See explicitly centres women's perspectives, thereby disrupting dominant colonial and masculine modes of knowing.

This narrative thread intersects with Judith Butler's theory that gender identity is not fixed, but performatively constructed and open to both conformity and resistance (1999: 25–30). The haenyeo embody identities shaped through matrifocal traditions and actively push back against imposed gender roles. Their communal practices—whether in singing, storytelling, or diving—become more than routine. They form a living feminist mythology, one that questions, resists, and ultimately reframes what it means to be women in a world shaped by both human and non–human forces.

See further underscores the significance of intergenerational continuity, wherein mythmaking becomes a vital cultural transmission from older to younger women. Drawing on Eliade's conception of myths as structures that bind communities to their cultural heritage, See highlights how stories and rituals passed between generations of haenyeo maintain the collective memory of Jeju Island's women (1963: 14–17). The novel treats intergenerational exchange as far more than mere tradition. It frames it as a vital, transformative force—one that equips younger women to face modern realities by grounding them in stories shaped by resilience, hardship, and care.

Young–sook emerges as the embodiment of this intergenerational bridge. Her role transcends symbolism: she becomes the keeper of inherited pain and survival, carrying forward a collective ethic rooted in solidarity and endurance. Through her voice, the haenyeo's feminist legacy takes form—reaching forward into the future while anchored in the past. In this way, the novel suggests that feminist mythmaking is not static. It lives and breathes, evolving with each retelling, shaped by memory, ritual, and lived experience.

Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women* offers a compelling vision of feminist mythopoesis. Through a rich and grounded depiction of Jeju Island's haenyeo

community, the novel highlights the power of embodied memory, ecological relationships, and matrifocal strength. By centring this society, See reclaims seaborne mythology from patriarchal narratives and reshapes it through a feminist lens—one that values continuity, environmental ethics, and cultural preservation across generations.

The haenyeo's everyday practices—their dives, their stories, their rituals—do not just safeguard history; they actively revise it. These are not fading customs, but evolving myths, reimagined through the experiences of women who have lived them. In doing so, the novel positions female connection to the ocean not as background, but as the very heart of an ongoing literary and ecological conversation.

The Whale Rider—indigenous feminism, mythic reclamation, and ecological continuity

Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* blends Indigenous cosmology, feminist narrative, and ecological awareness in a manner that rewrites conventional sea myths. Based in Māori understandings of the world, the book does not merely position Kahu—a little girl—at the narrative's centre; it positions her as a symbolic agent of both culture revitalisation and ecological harmony. The sea in this narrative is richly more than physical surroundings—it is a living, narrative presence laden with ancestral memory and sacred substance. It provides a location in which history, spirit, and feminine power intersect.

In this section, I examine how *The Whale Rider* helps in feminist mythmaking by intentionally subverting patriarchal frameworks, recovering Indigenous myths, and highlighting relational ecology as central to feminine identity and cultural survival. In Kahu's narrative, Ihimaera reframes myth to demonstrate that culture preservation not only involves the respect for the past, but also the re-centring of those—such as the land and women—who have long borne the brunt of exclusion in mainstream narratives.

Ihimaera places his story in the vibrant history of Māori cosmology, specifically the legend of Paikea, the ancestor who came on the back of a whale and established the Whangara community. Traditionally, the legend encapsulates masculine heroic bravery and patriarchal inheritance. Yet, Ihimaera's retelling of the legend from a feminist standpoint makes Kahu, a female child and direct descendant of Paikea, the protagonist of the novel, and essentially subverts feminine absence from spiritual and cultural leadership roles. By making Kahu the inheritor and legitimate leader, Ihimaera openly challenges and critiques gendered exclusions inherent in traditional legends, much like Butler's theoretical observations on the performativity and subversion of gender ideals (1999: 25-30).

In linking Kahu with the Paikea legend, Ihimaera signals the flexible and shape-shiftable nature of the mythic structures and underpins Lévi-

Strauss's argument that myths are extremely flexible narrative structures, continuously interpreted for the service of the culture in question (1978: 35-37). Kahu's connection with ancestral space is spiritual and physically inscribed through the ritual of returning her birth cord to the land. Despite Koro Apirana's resistance, Nanny Flowers insists: "'She is of Porourangi's blood and yours,' […] 'It is her right to have her birth cord here on this ground.'" (Ihimaera 1987: 15) This act symbolises cultural reclamation and feminist resistance, positioning Kahu within the sacred continuity of whakapapa and Māori cosmology. The novel explicitly foregrounds the subversive power of feminist narrative practice to rewrite traditional narratives, enabling new forms of cultural expression and identity formation that break from patriarchal norms.

Central to Ihimaera's feminist reinterpretation is the novel's explicit connection between female embodiment and mythological knowledge. Kahu's intrinsic affinity with whales and the ocean symbolises her embodied inheritance of ancestral wisdom. The book portrays her ability to communicate with whales as a profound, intuitive connection, reflecting Irigaray's argument that feminine subjectivity must reclaim embodied knowledge as a valid epistemological stance against patriarchal structures (1985: 23-24).

Kahu's deep, intuitive bond with whales sharply contrasts with the rigid views held by her grandfather, Koro Apirana, who initially refuses to see her worth—simply because she is female. This tension becomes a central axis of the novel's feminist critique. Through Kahu, Ihimaera highlights the significance of embodied experience as a form of resistance, aligning closely with Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine*. Cixous talks about how stories that focus on women's bodies and desires can interrupt the usual, male–dominated ways of telling things (Sellers 1994: XIX–XX). In *The Whale Rider*, Ihimaera builds something like that through Kahu's connection to the sea—and especially to the whales. It is not just that she understands them; it is more than that. Her knowing feels physical, emotional, and spiritual. The book does not present her insight as just correct. It is shown as something much deeper—something that carries cultural and spiritual weight.

There is also this larger point the novel seems to make: that feminism and ecology do not sit apart—they intersect. The story offers a kind of worldview where human identity does not stand outside of nature. It is tied to it. Memory, especially the memory of ancestors, seems to live in the land and sea. The whales—one of the novel's most important symbols—represent both family and environmental guardianship. Kahu and the whales are drawn to one another, not just in a mystical sense, but in a way that speaks to what Alaimo calls trans–corporeality—that idea that humans and the more–than–human world are not separate but entangled (2010: 2-4). So, Kahu's connection with the ocean is not just emotional—it is ethical. It is how she knows.

Ihimaera also makes a bold choice with how he writes the whales. They are not just background or symbols. They think. They remember. They matter to the story. That choice feels deliberate. It's moral, in a way. And it reflects Braidotti's posthumanist feminism, which challenges the whole idea that humans sit at the top of some species hierarchy (2013: 49-53). Instead, it is about seeing all life—human and not—as part of a shared world, where care and connection matter. In doing so, the novel expands our ideas of community and care. It asks us to rethink identity—not as human-centred, but as shared across all forms of life.

In *The Whale Rider*, the posthuman feminist vantage point opens for more profound cultural and ecological interaction, underscoring mutual vulnerability and interdependence among human societies and sea life. At the heart of Ihimaera's feminist vision lies a negotiation between trauma and healing—both cultural and environmental. Koro Apirana's strict traditionalism in *The Whale Rider* feels bigger than just personal stubbornness—it echoes wider cultural rifts tied to both gender and ecological imbalance. For Kahu, her journey is not about fitting in, but about facing inherited trauma head-on.

Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not something fixed; it shifts when we tell the story, reshaping what is inside. That is precisely what happens in Kahu's narrative. She does not deny her pain—she holds it, sits with it, and in doing so, turns it into a collective purpose.

The scene where Kahu rides the ancestral whale is not just the story's high point. It is a turning point. In that act, generations of silence and exclusion turn into a powerful claim of presence. The feminine becomes essential, not peripheral. Ihimaera's storytelling reframes past wounds and offers repair—not just personally, but intergenerationally, and between people and the earth.

Underneath it all, the novel traces a line of generational continuity. Kahu does not discard her culture—she reshapes it. That is what myths are for, as Eliade suggests: alive, dynamic, and working on memory. Kahu becomes mythic—not by discarding her roots, but by transforming them.

When Koro finally accepts her, it becomes less about an individual breakthrough and more about cultural transformation. That's the quiet, powerful shift the novel offers—a step toward female authority, ecological reverence, and the idea that true strength lies in connection, not dominance. Through Kahu, myth, memory, and environment don't just coexist—they converge to offer healing and regeneration.

The Whale Rider is a powerful example of feminist mythmaking through an Indigenous lens. Drawing on Māori cosmology and sea-bound legends, it questions male-dominated traditions and gives voice to feminine strength. Kahu's character weaves together feminist and ecological wisdom, showing how the body, identity, and ancestry all play a part in keeping cultural memory alive and helping communities heal.

The novel's careful weaving of feminist theory, Indigenous knowledge systems, and ecological awareness reveals just how powerful feminist storytelling can be. This is not just about reinterpreting myths—it is about reclaiming them. These texts do not merely retell—they transform. In doing so, they create space for new ways of thinking about identity, belonging, and sustainability. What emerges is a vision of cultural and ecological futures grounded in care, connection, and transformation.

Conclusion: feminist mythmaking and oceanic re-imagining

This essay has explored how contemporary sea fiction participates in feminist mythmaking by revising dominant narratives around gender, nature, and cultural memory. Through close readings of Proulx's *The Shipping News*, See's *The Island of Sea Women*, and Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, and by drawing on feminist theory, ecocriticism, myth studies, and memory studies, I have shown how fiction can act as a force of narrative disruption—challenging patriarchal mythologies and suggesting alternative, more relational futures, where feminine and ecological agency shape the path forward.

From the icy coastlines of Newfoundland to the volcanic shores of Jeju and Aotearoa, these novels reposition oceanic space as a site of feminist energy and renewal. They resist classical sea myths built around male conquest by placing women at the narrative core—figures whose connections to the sea are shaped not by dominance, but by sensory knowledge, memory across generations, and ecological attunement. Thinkers like Irigaray and Cixous offer frameworks to help us understand this shift: feminine experience becomes not only valuable, but transformative—a means of reshaping cultural values and ways of knowing.

Across all three texts, trauma and memory don't just recur as themes—they operate as foundational currents. These experiences seem etched into the sea itself: shifting, vast, unpredictable. And through this watery metaphor, each novel gestures toward healing—not through erasure, but through acknowledgement, embodiment, and re-connection. Caruth says again and again that trauma most often is not something coherent or chronological—it comes in pieces.

Meanwhile, Ricoeur's work helps us understand how narrative attempts to bring those fragments into something livable. In these texts, trauma acts like a current beneath the surface—shaping characters, landscapes, and the stories they carry. The sea absorbs it—grief, confusion, even moments of clarity that speckle the vast waters. Quoyle, Young-sook, and Kahu bear inherited wounds—not detached but lived. They do not so much overcome it as reconfigure it—binding meaning to the past and to others. Healing does not shout. It hums in margins, where pain meets quiet emergence.

Nature is not static here; it is a participant. Especially the sea—it reflects and responds, sometimes guiding the narrative. Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality fits: bodies, land, water, all entwined. Braidotti's posthumanism further shifts the view: humans are not the centre. These novels offer a more interwoven vision.

Think of the haenyeo divers and the ocean—with deep reverence, not conquest. Quoyle learns to read the land like language. Kahu has an intimate, almost spiritual bond with whales. These stories are ecological as much as emotional or cultural. They suggest that real healing demands connection: across generations and species, between humans and earth.

Still, it is not uniform. Proulx's novel nods toward feminism, but the tale remains male-centred: the protagonist grows in the orbit of women's influence, without fully inhabiting feminist space.

By contrast, See and Ihimaera embed female agency in mythology itself. *The Whale Rider* particularly layers in decolonial strength by weaving Māori cosmology into a feminist narrative, expanding how myth interacts with identity and resistance.

These novels illustrate that feminist mythmaking does not follow a single script—it adapts to culture, history, and place. All three affirm that myths are not relics—they are tools, echoing Lévi-Strauss: dynamic, evolving, reflecting societal shifts.

They also stress intergenerational continuity—a nod to Eliade's idea that myth binds communities across time. The storytelling here resists erasure by passing on ecological wisdom, cultural identity, and communal care. That makes myth not just a mnemonic device, but a living strategy for connection and healing.

By reframing oceanic myth, these authors offer counter-narratives to patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist logics. They place embodiment, reciprocity, and relational ethics at the centre. In doing so, their novels do not just add to feminist literary criticism—they embody it. They challenge traditional epistemologies and propose more inclusive, sustainable ways of imagining culture and community.

Ultimately, these works model how feminist mythmaking can reshape our inherited stories—and spur us toward telling new ones fit for more relational futures.

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