www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 7.825

The Sea, the Stone, and the Self in Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the symbolic interplay of the sea, the stone, and the self in Keri Hulme's*The Bone People* (1984), arguing that these elemental motifs function as metaphors for trauma, isolation, and the possibility of spiritual and communal healing. Drawing on Māori cosmology and postcolonial literary theory, the study explores how Hulme uses landscape and natural imagery not merely as setting but as an extension of her characters' inner lives—particularly Kerewin Holmes. The sea emerges as a symbol of both connection and danger, reflecting emotional depth and ancestral memory, while stone signifies silence, emotional hardness, and withdrawal, encapsulated in Kerewin's tower, a "*lovely one-off thing, with no past and no future*." Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how the movement from stone toward sea parallels Kerewin's gradual re-engagement with human relationships and cultural belonging. Ultimately, the novel suggests that healing the fragmented self requires reconnection—to land, to people, and to whakapapa (genealogy). By foregrounding elemental symbolism, Hulme challenges Western individualism and proposes an Indigenous model of identity grounded in relationality, place, and spiritual continuity.

Keywords: Keri Hulme; *The Bone People*; elemental symbolism; sea and stone; Indigenous identity; Māori cosmology; trauma and healing; relational selfhood; landscape and place; postcolonial New Zealand literature

Keri Hulme's*The Bone People* (1984) occupies a singular place in New Zealand literature for its experimental form, Indigenous worldview, and profound engagement with trauma and healing. Written outside mainstream publishing structures and initially rejected for its refusal to conform to conventional narrative expectations, the novel ultimately won the Booker Prize in

1985, signaling a major shift in the recognition of postcolonial and Māori-inflected voices. At its core, *The Bone People* is a deeply symbolic text in which landscape, elemental imagery, and inner psychology are inseparable. Hulme does not treat nature as a passive backdrop; instead, land and seascape actively shape identity, memory, and the possibility of redemption.

This paper focuses on three interrelated motifs—the **sea**, the **stone**, and the **self**—to explore how Hulme articulates fragmentation and healing within the novel. These elements are most powerfully embodied in the character of Kerewin Holmes, an isolated artist who lives alone in a stone tower by the sea. From the opening pages, Kerewin is associated with hardness, enclosure, and emotional withdrawal, describing herself as "*a rock, impermeable*," while simultaneously being drawn to the sea's movement and sound. Her physical environment mirrors her psychic state: the stone tower reflects her self-imposed isolation, while the sea gestures toward depth, connection, and ancestral presence.

The sea in *The Bone People* functions as a complex symbol. It represents both danger and sustenance, echoing Māori cosmological understandings of the ocean as a site of origin, travel, and spiritual continuity. For Simon, the mute child, the sea is linked to trauma and loss, while for Kerewin it becomes a space of confrontation and eventual transformation. Hulme's treatment of the sea resists romanticization; it is "*never tamed, never passive*," embodying emotional turbulence and the persistence of memory. In contrast, stone symbolizes stasis, silence, and emotional petrification. Kerewin's tower, which she calls "*a lovely one-off thing, with no past and no future*," reveals her desire to exist outside time, relationship, and responsibility.

The "self" in Hulme's novel is therefore not a stable, autonomous entity but a fractured and relational construct. Characters are shaped by violence, abandonment, and colonial histories that disrupt family structures and cultural continuity. Hulme challenges Western notions of individualism by proposing a model of identity rooted in connection—to land, to others, and to whakapapa. Healing in *The Bone People* does not occur through personal will alone but through painful re-entry into community and acknowledgment of shared suffering.

By analyzing the symbolic relationship between the sea, the stone, and the self, this paper argues that *The Bone People* presents healing as an elemental and spiritual process. Hulme suggests that only by moving away from stone-like isolation toward the fluid, relational space symbolized by the sea can the fragmented self begin to mend. This study contributes to existing scholarship by foregrounding how elemental symbolism functions as a narrative strategy for articulating Indigenous identity, trauma, and renewal in postcolonial Aotearoa New Zealand.

This study employs **a** postcolonial Indigenous framework informed by Māori cosmology, trauma theory, and spatial criticism to analyze the symbolic significance of the sea, the stone, and the self in *The Bone People*. Keri Hulme's novel resists classification within Western literary traditions, necessitating a theoretical approach that accounts for Indigenous epistemologies, colonial history, and alternative constructions of identity and healing. Rather than reading the text solely through Eurocentric critical models, this framework foregrounds relationality, place, and spirituality as central to meaning-making.

Postcolonial theory provides a foundational lens for understanding *The Bone People* as a response to the cultural fragmentation produced by colonialism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Scholars such as Bill Ashcroft and Helen Tiffin emphasize that postcolonial texts often challenge dominant narratives by re-centering marginalized voices and reimagining identity beyond colonial binaries. Hulme's work exemplifies this resistance through its hybrid language, nonlinear structure, and refusal to privilege Western realism. However, while postcolonial theory is useful, it is insufficient on its own, as it can overlook the specificity of Indigenous worldviews.

An Indigenous Māori framework complements and complicates postcolonial readings by emphasizing whakapapa(genealogy), whanaungatanga (relationships), and wairua(spirituality). In Māori cosmology, identity is inseparable from land (whenua) and sea (moana), both of which are understood as living ancestors rather than inert spaces. The sea in *The Bone People* can thus be read not merely as metaphor but as a spiritual entity that holds memory, trauma, and the potential for renewal. This perspective allows the novel's elemental symbolism to be interpreted as culturally grounded rather than abstractly symbolic.

Trauma theory, particularly as articulated by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, offers insight into the psychological fragmentation experienced by the novel's characters. Trauma disrupts linear temporality and coherent selfhood, a disruption reflected in Hulme's fragmented narrative style. Simon's muteness and Kerewin's emotional withdrawal exemplify trauma's silencing effects, while Joe's violence reveals cycles of unprocessed pain. The "stone-like" self—closed, hardened, and resistant—can be read as a defensive response to trauma.

However, this paper departs from purely Western trauma models by integrating Indigenous understandings of healing. In *The Bone People*, recovery is not achieved through individual confession or therapy but through reconnection with people, land, and spiritual traditions. Trauma is communal and historical as much as personal, and healing requires relational engagement. This approach aligns with Indigenous trauma scholarship, which emphasizes collective memory and restorative processes over individual pathology.

Spatial theory further informs this analysis, particularly Gaston Bachelard's concept of intimate spaces as reflections of inner life. Kerewin's stone tower functions as a physical manifestation of her psychic isolation. Built apart from society and resistant to intrusion, it embodies her desire for autonomy and emotional impermeability. Yet Hulme subverts the Western notion of the home as a site of comfort; the tower is protective but ultimately destructive, reinforcing loneliness rather than safety.

Elemental criticism allows for a focused reading of stone and sea as opposing but interconnected forces. Stone represents permanence, silence, and emotional stasis, while the sea signifies movement, depth, and relational continuity. Importantly, Hulme does not frame these elements in a simple binary. The sea can be violent and overwhelming, just as stone can offer shelter. The self emerges in tension between these forces, suggesting that identity is formed through negotiation rather than resolution.

Central to this framework is the concept of the relational self, which contrasts sharply with Western individualism. Hulme portrays identity as something constituted through relationships—with others, with ancestors, and with the natural world. The movement from stone

toward sea symbolizes the painful but necessary dissolution of isolation and the acceptance of vulnerability. Healing, therefore, is not a return to wholeness but a re-entry into relational networks that acknowledge damage while allowing continuity.

By integrating postcolonial theory, Māori cosmology, trauma studies, and spatial symbolism, this theoretical framework enables a nuanced reading of *The Bone People*. It recognizes Hulme's novel as a text that demands culturally responsive criticism and affirms that the sea, the stone, and the self are not merely literary motifs but foundational elements of an Indigenous philosophy of being.

In *The Bone People*, the sea functions as a living, dynamic force that embodies memory, emotional depth, and spiritual continuity. Hulme repeatedly links the sea to both danger and belonging, reflecting Māori understandings of the ocean as a site of origin and return. For Simon, the sea is associated with loss and trauma, as he is found drifting after a shipwreck, his past swallowed by water and silence. The sea thus becomes a keeper of memory, holding what cannot be spoken. Hulme writes that the sea "*keeps its secrets well, rolling them over and under, grinding them smooth*," suggesting both concealment and transformation.

For Kerewin, the sea is initially something to be observed from a distance rather than entered. She listens to it from within her tower, describing how "*the sea mutters and sighs below, never quiet, never still*." This constant movement contrasts sharply with her emotional immobility. The sea's sound penetrates the stone walls of her tower, symbolizing the persistence of connection despite her attempts at isolation. It is a reminder of a wider world that refuses to be shut out.

As the novel progresses, Kerewin's encounters with the sea become increasingly confrontational. During moments of emotional crisis, the sea reflects her internal turbulence: "*The sea is grey and snarling, flecked with white like spittle*." The violent imagery mirrors her rage and confusion, suggesting that emotional healing requires facing, rather than suppressing, pain. The sea's unpredictability thus becomes a necessary force of disruption, breaking the illusion of control embodied by stone.

Stone is most powerfully symbolized by Kerewin's tower, a structure that reflects her desire for autonomy and emotional impermeability. She takes pride in its isolation, calling it "*a lovely one-off thing, with no past and no future*." This statement reveals her rejection of history, genealogy, and relational responsibility. The tower's circular, fortress-like design reinforces her withdrawal from human connection and social obligation.

Kerewin repeatedly associates herself with stone imagery, describing her emotional state as "*hard, flinty, unbreakable*." Stone becomes a metaphor for survival through emotional numbness. Yet Hulme gradually exposes the cost of this self-protective hardness. The tower, while offering safety, also becomes a prison, echoing Bachelard's notion that spaces can both shelter and confine. Kerewin acknowledges this contradiction when she admits that the tower "*keeps everything out, even what I need*."

Stone is also linked to silence, particularly in relation to trauma. Simon's muteness parallels Kerewin's emotional inarticulacy; both are forms of petrification. Hulme describes silence as "*a weight, pressing down like stone on the chest*," emphasizing how unspoken pain immobilizes the self. Stone, in this sense, is not strength but stagnation, a refusal—or inability—to change.

The self in *The Bone People* is presented as fractured, unstable, and deeply relational. Kerewin's sense of self is shaped by loss, illness, and cultural dislocation. She repeatedly defines herself through negation, asserting, "*I am nothing, I belong nowhere*." This declaration reflects both personal trauma and the broader effects of colonial disruption on identity and belonging.

Hulme challenges Western notions of the autonomous self by portraying identity as contingent upon relationships. Kerewin's gradual involvement with Joe and Simon forces her to confront the limits of isolation. Despite her resistance, she acknowledges that "*you can't live without people, even when you want to*." This reluctant admission marks the beginning of her transformation from stone toward fluidity.

The breaking of Kerewin's tower is a pivotal symbolic moment. Its destruction represents the collapse of her stone-like self and the necessity of vulnerability. Hulme writes that after the

tower's fall, Kerewin feels "*raw and open, like skin without bone*." The imagery suggests pain but also possibility; without stone, the self becomes capable of feeling and connection. The "bone people" of the title thus emerge as beings stripped to their essentials—wounded, exposed, yet still alive.

Healing in *The Bone People* is not linear or complete but marked by movement toward relationality. The novel's conclusion gestures toward a reimagined community grounded in balance rather than dominance. Kerewin's reconnection with land and sea signifies her acceptance of a self that is porous rather than sealed. She reflects that "*the sea doesn't ask you to be whole, only to keep moving*," encapsulating Hulme's vision of healing as ongoing and adaptive.

By intertwining the sea, the stone, and the self, Hulme constructs an elemental grammar of identity and recovery. Stone must crack, and the sea must be faced, for the self to re-enter the world. Through close textual engagement, *The Bone People* reveals that healing is not the erasure of trauma but the courage to remain in motion—to live, like the sea, in constant relation to others.

Critical responses to *The Bone People* have been wide-ranging, reflecting the novel's complexity, formal experimentation, and ethical challenges. Scholars have engaged with Hulme's work through postcolonial, Indigenous, feminist, trauma, and ecocritical lenses, offering valuable insights into the symbolic structures this paper examines—particularly the relationship between landscape, identity, and healing.

Many critics situate *The Bone People* within postcolonial New Zealand literature, emphasizing its challenge to dominant Pākehā literary traditions. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin argue that postcolonial texts often disrupt linear narratives and stable identities in order to expose the cultural violence of colonial histories. Hulme's fragmented structure and hybrid language exemplify this disruption, resisting what Ashcroft terms the "normative authority" of colonial discourse. However, several scholars caution against reading Hulme solely

through postcolonial theory, as such approaches can obscure the novel's Indigenous philosophical grounding.

Mark Williams contends that *The Bone People* must be understood as a text shaped by Māori cosmology, particularly in its treatment of land and sea as active presences rather than symbolic abstractions. He notes that Hulme's work "re-centres place as a source of meaning and identity," aligning with Māori concepts of whenua and moana as ancestors rather than property. This supports the present paper's argument that the sea in the novel functions as a site of memory, genealogy, and spiritual continuity, not merely as a metaphor for emotion.

Critics have consistently emphasized Hulme's use of landscape as a means of articulating inner life. Lawrence Jones observes that in *The Bone People*, physical spaces "externalize psychic states," with Kerewin's tower serving as a visible manifestation of her emotional isolation. Drawing on spatial theory, Jones suggests that Hulme subverts the Western domestic ideal by presenting the home as a place of both protection and harm. This reading aligns with the analysis of stone as a symbol of emotional stasis and defensive withdrawal.

Ecocritical scholars further highlight Hulme's refusal to separate human identity from the natural world. Cheryl Lousley argues that Hulme's writing anticipates Indigenous ecocriticism by portraying nature as relational and ethical rather than scenic. The sea's agency—its ability to comfort, threaten, and remember—reinforces the idea that healing must occur in dialogue with the environment. Such criticism strengthens the argument that movement toward the sea represents a reorientation of the self toward relational existence.

One of the most contentious areas of secondary criticism concerns the novel's depiction of violence, particularly Joe's abuse of Simon. Trauma scholars such as Susannah Radstone note that Hulme represents violence not as isolated cruelty but as cyclical and historically embedded. Joe's actions are framed within his own experiences of loss, cultural dislocation, and emotional repression. Critics argue that this does not excuse violence but situates it within a broader context of intergenerational trauma.

Judith Dale and other feminist critics have expressed discomfort with the novel's resolution, questioning whether Hulme's emphasis on forgiveness risks minimizing the harm inflicted on Simon. Conversely, Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that the novel's ending should be read through an Indigenous restorative framework rather than a Western moral lens. From this perspective, healing is incomplete, painful, and provisional—consistent with the sea's ongoing motion rather than a return to stability. This debate underscores the importance of culturally responsive criticism when interpreting the novel's ethical dimensions.

Several scholars focus on Hulme's challenge to Western individualism. Simon During suggests that *The Bone People* rejects the liberal humanist notion of a self-contained subject in favor of a relational identity shaped by community and place. Kerewin's journey, according to During, is not toward self-fulfillment but toward "the relinquishing of isolation." This reading directly supports the present paper's argument that the movement from stone to sea symbolizes the dissolution of rigid selfhood in favor of relational being.

Feminist critics also highlight Kerewin's resistance to prescribed gender roles, noting that her isolation is both a rejection of social expectations and a response to emotional injury. Lydia Wevers argues that Hulme presents female autonomy as deeply ambivalent—necessary for survival but ultimately unsustainable without connection. Stone, in this sense, is both refuge and barrier.

While existing scholarship has addressed landscape, trauma, and identity in *The Bone People*, this paper contributes to the critical conversation by foregrounding the interdependence of elemental symbolism—specifically the sea and the stone—as a narrative structure for understanding the self. By synthesizing postcolonial criticism with Māori cosmology and trauma theory, this study emphasizes that Hulme's novel does not resolve fragmentation but reimagines healing as motion, relationality, and spiritual continuity.

Through engagement with secondary criticism, it becomes clear that *The Bone People* demands interpretive frameworks that honor its cultural specificity and ethical complexity. The

sea, the stone, and the self-emerge not only as literary motifs but as critical coordinates through which scholars continue to negotiate the novel's enduring power and controversy.

Conclusion

Keri Hulme's*The Bone People* presents a profoundly Indigenous vision of identity, trauma, and healing through its elemental symbolism of the sea, the stone, and the self. This paper has argued that these motifs are not decorative or incidental but form the novel's symbolic architecture, structuring both character development and ethical meaning. By embedding psychological and cultural struggles within the natural world, Hulme dissolves the boundary between inner life and landscape, insisting that identity is relational, spatial, and spiritually grounded.

Stone, as embodied in Kerewin's tower and emotional hardness, represents withdrawal, silence, and the illusion of self-sufficiency. While stone offers protection, it ultimately enforces stagnation, cutting the self off from whakapapa, community, and historical continuity. The sea, by contrast, is fluid, ancestral, and unsettling—holding trauma as well as the potential for renewal. Hulme refuses to romanticize either element; instead, she presents healing as a painful movement between them. The destruction of the tower signals not triumph but necessary loss, marking the end of defensive isolation and the beginning of vulnerability.

Central to Hulme's vision is a rejection of Western individualism. The self in *The Bone People* is fragmented by personal and historical trauma, yet it cannot be healed in isolation. Kerewin's journey demonstrates that survival through emotional petrification is ultimately untenable. Her gradual re-entry into relationship—however incomplete and fraught—affirms an Indigenous model of selfhood rooted in connection to people, place, and spirit. Healing is not depicted as resolution or moral closure but as ongoing motion, akin to the sea's ceaseless tides.

By integrating close textual analysis with postcolonial, Indigenous, and trauma-informed perspectives, this study has shown that *The Bone People* articulates healing as an elemental process: stone must crack, silence must break, and the self must risk exposure to remain alive. Hulme's novel ultimately suggests that wholeness is neither possible nor necessary. What

matters instead is the willingness to remain in relation—to move, like the sea, despite pain. In this way, *The Bone People* continues to challenge readers and critics alike, offering a vision of identity and survival grounded in endurance, relationality, and spiritual continuity.

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