

*The Whale Rider: Women's Empowerment  
and Environmental Protection in the Contemporary Age*

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The fundamental core of ecofeminist thinking holds that the same ideology that endorses dominance over nature also supports oppression based on gender, sexuality, origin, social class, and species. In particular, it states that the oppression of women and the destruction of the natural environment have a common social and psychological denominator in the structures of male power, namely patriarchy (Bianchi 2012: 1). Traditions can be, in some situations, a reflection of men's repressive tendencies against women and are frequently unfair and violent acts in a world where men have held authority from the dawn of time. The list of potential examples is very long; suffice it to name arranged marriages and infibulation.

The foundation of *The Whale Rider* is male tyranny manifested via tradition: Koro Apirana, the protagonist's grandfather and the head of the Maori community at the center of the novel, refuses to accept that his heir is female. This is why the grandfather rejects his granddaughter throughout the novel, even going so far as to treat her coldly and, at times, forcefully, because tradition dictates that the heir to the group's leadership must be a man. Kahu, the granddaughter, is loathed for being a woman and, as such, is seen unsuited for a position of power.

Grandfather's contempt for women is evident in several passages of the novel: "‘Sit down!’ A chief had yelled, enraged. Because women were not supposed to stand up and speak on sacred ground" (Ihimaera 2005: 65). Moreover, again, "I don't give a hang about women [...] You still haven't the power" (Ihimaera 2005: 63). This contempt drives Kahu herself to wish she were male, to feel wrong in her being female: "‘It's not Paka's fault, Nanny,' she said, 'that I'm a girl'" (Ihimaera 2005: 69). Grandpa's ignorance, like the patriarchy's, in seeing women as passive subjects unfit for authority and lacking the requisite strength to perform significant societal positions is problematic. In the novel, this prejudice disguised as tradition prevents Koro Apirana from recognizing that what he spasmodically seeks, namely the true heir of Kahutia Te Rangi, the first Whale Rider, is right in front of him, embodied in his granddaughter.

However, it is necessary to specify that tradition does not always bring patterns of oppression of women; there exist indeed also 'healthy' traditions in this sense. There is a hint of a different, more equitable form of legacy in the novel, as expressed by Nanny Flowers, the grandmother of the young

heroine Kahu: “He knows I am a descendent of ancient Muriwai, and she was the greatest chief of my tribe” (Ihimaera 2005: 13).

In general, the book explicitly depicts how the West and patriarchy abuse nature and indigenous peoples: for example, when, for economic reasons, some people slice up beached whales that were still alive. The behavior of the Papua New Guinea landowning family is another instance where the subject of racism also comes into play. They showed their disrespect for some types of human life by refusing to rescue an indigenous man that they accidentally ran over. Similarly, throughout the book, we see that contemporary society crushes the Maori people forcing them to adapt and abandon their traditions.

What is worth noting is that cultural survival is dependent on more than just preservation. Some characters experience specific personal issues throughout the novel, which are between tradition and modernity. Rawiri explores the world, unsure whether to abandon his Maori identity or embrace it. Due to traditional rules, Kahu's expression is constrained by her gender. Koro reluctantly recognizes that he must compromise with the contemporary world, even though he frequently employs ‘Western’ tools (the motor boat, for example).

What will lead to the preservation of Maori culture is a compromise with the pace of time, with the acceptance that everything changes and traditions must sometimes soften. In this view, perhaps indigenous identities will have to be preserved through a compromise with the West and the technologies it delivers.

I can speak from personal experience in this respect. When I first visited the Amazon Rainforest, I saw how the Huni Kuin, an Amazonian tribe in Acre, Brazil,<sup>1</sup> continue to fight for cultural survival by using social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram and by hosting events on their territories that are accessible to the (Western) public. This involves a flow of knowledge from the inside out, enabling the world to understand, interact with, and learn about these people's identities. At the same time, resources flow from the outside world to the tribe. Thanks to this, these people can support themselves, buy their ancestral lands and protect them while not having to migrate.

More generally, it will perhaps be necessary to find a compromise between technological advancement and the preservation of nature for the well-being of the ecosystem and the human population. The answer, perhaps, does not necessarily lay in "stepping back" from a technological standpoint, in the nostalgic and romantic search of a past that cannot be integrally replicated since the cycle of time is something we cannot avoid. This does not mean blindly conforming to a myopic destructive purpose, nor does it mean rejecting modernity.

The “Ocean Cleanup”<sup>2</sup> is an example of a project that harnesses technical power in the shape of a flourishing business that is integrated in capitalism's logics. Boyan Slat, the company's creator, established a start-up with the great idea to rid the oceans and seas of garbage and plastic through engineering methods. This ideal modern compromise aims to protect the environment while utilizing the power of technology and social media. It is an example of a business that, while not rejecting contemporary society's processes, participates in it via the accomplishment of noble deeds and the dissemination of ideas that result from thoughtful consideration for preserving the natural world. I feel this is what we should strive towards; it is vital to join the contemporary society and speak its language to act decisively in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hunikuin.org>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://theoceancleanup.com/>.

Parallel to the narration of the events of the Maori group is that of a pod of whales, the leader of which is an old whale that was allied with the ancestor Kahutia Te Rangi. The telling of this story is crucial because it links with how Kahu will prove her leadership skills to the whole group, especially to her grandfather. Not only that, it is through these whales that Kahu will manifest her great affiliation with nature, her shamanic imprint, and, at the same time, her destiny as a woman in power. The indisputable sign of her power is found precisely in the spiritual and communicative union Kahu has with nature.

At this point, the reversal of the traditions becomes evident, and the misunderstanding of what was there at the beginning also emerges, perhaps: to be the heir of Kahutia Te Rangi is it necessary to be male or to be able to communicate with whales? This question emerges forcefully at the end of the narrative when it becomes clear that Kahu is an emanation of the magical spear that Kahutia Te Rangi hurled, in his time, into the future. It can be assumed that the ancestor knew that Kahu would be a woman and therefore it can be concluded that the tradition that wanted male leaders was a rule established after the origin of the Maori group.

In conclusion, I would like to include the following ecofeminist reflection:

Le donne devono rendersi conto che per loro non ci può essere liberazione né ci può essere soluzione alla crisi ecologica all'interno di una società il cui modello fondamentale di relazioni è quello del dominio. Esse devono unire le rivendicazioni del movimento femminile con quelle del movimento ambientalista per proporre una radicale riorganizzazione delle relazioni socioeconomiche fondamentali e rivedere i valori della moderna società industriale. (Ruether 1975, quote in Bianchi 2012).

Kahu exemplifies this idea, for she does not only prove herself to be equal to the role of leader, but more importantly, that she is able to do so by saving the whale herd. Therefore, female power in *The Whale Rider* becomes unmistakable in this mission to protect nature.

## **Works Cited**

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