
EXPRESSIONS OF INDIGENEITY IN WITI IHIMAERAS' *THE WHALE RIDERS*

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The general essence of indigenous feeling towards their land and the nationalised experience of the colonised people are the factors that conflate the first nation communities firmly, though they have disparate languages and cultures. Anterior to colonisation the indigenous people were not impeded and remained a sovereign nation. Poignant duress persisted within these colonised nations, the sense of community and integration which were the premise of their society were vanquished by colonisation leading them to undergo grave consequences of social, emotional and spiritual upheaval. Colonisation blighted the first nation's basic social structure and annihilated their cultural inheritance. Thereafter, the indigenous nations worldwide, have been wrangling to decolonise the past. They exert to retrieve their traditional culture, to reclaim themselves as nations of their land and to reaffirm their distinct identity. Wilmer calls this condition of the indigenous people as the “unfinished business of decolonization” (19). Indigenous people who are victims of colonisation continue to be affected as Tuhi Smith repudiates the term 'post-colonial' as it entails that colonialism is over and done and contends that it perpetuates to have fervent efficacy on the lives of the natives. She says “what is particularly significant in indigenous discourses is that solutions are posed from a combination of the time before, *colonised time*, and the time before that, *pre-colonised time*. Decolonisation encapsulates both sets of ideas.

There are, however, new challenges to the way indigenous peoples think and talk about imperialism. Where the word globalisation is substituted for the word imperialism or when the prefix 'post' is attached to colonial' we are no longer talking simply about historical formations which are still lingering in our consciousness. “Globalization and conceptions of new world order represent different sorts of challenges for indigenous peoples” (24).

Restitution of indigeneity is the pervasive impetus of the works of the first nation writers. There is a renaissance of indigenous conviction which is in progress as their writings foreground, their histories, surging issues engendered by colonisation and the need to re-determine their roots. “Everything follows from the first arrival. It establishes and makes meaning the relationship between the land and the people who live on it, and the relationship between different sections of the tribe. It explains the past, bringing it into the present, and it give the people mana.” (Orbell 43)

The Maori are the native Polynesian people of New Zealand who arrived there in the 13th century CE. For several centuries, the Maori evolved a *suigeneris* culture with their rich folklore, unique arts, language and spiritual beliefs, which were shared generation through generation without being disrupted by the outer world. However, the arrival of the Europeans to New Zealand in the 17th century brought colossal changes to their Maori way of life. By the end of the 19th century there were warfare within their coterie, they started appropriating major aspects of western society and subsequently the increase in the number of European settlers surpassed the indigenous inhabitants. The 20th century observed gradual assimilation into European culture and growing urbanisation, as many tribes left their villages in search of employment in big cities. This condition is captured by Ihimaera in the novel *The Whale Riders*.

Witi Ihimaera born in 1944 in New Zealand was hailed there as a proud Maori descent. His works surveyed Maori life, focusing on the rapid disappearance of Maori culture and the value of the dying culture. They also have autobiographical elements that dispense the rising crescendos of conflict between Maori and European cultures. *The Whale Riders* is about the successors from Paikea, the mythical

progenitor of Ngati Porou who resides in Whangara on the east coast of New Zealand. Paikea is said to have reached Hawaiki, their place of provenance, on the back of a whale.

Ihimaera vouches that the old Maorians find it onerous to break the norms of their traditions, as Koro the chieftain of Ngati Porou, hunts for a scion to the leadership of his tribe, a convention which has been severed by colonization. He is distressed because his grandson Porourangi has only a daughter and was remorseful that Rehu his daughter in law has named her daughter after Kahutia Te Rangi, disparaging their forefather's eminence. He detests Kahu from the beginning since he "could not reconcile his traditional beliefs about Maori hereditary rights with Kahu's birth," (16) and begins to be obsessed with many predicaments embedding the survival and ordeals of the Maori people and their land. He manoeuvres to conserve Maori culture, their histories and customs. Koro clings to the precept cultural rules and believes that men are pre-eminent as Margret Orbell states that in Maori society "In general, men were regarded as tapu or sacred, their actions restricted by social and religious usages. While women were noa, associated with profane, everyday concerns" (288). Koro's obsession with male hierarchical leadership, manifest through traditional schools and manhood rites, and the exclusion of Kahu from those schools of knowledge determines him to be blinded by traditional sexism.

However, the author discloses that the Maori women are individualistic in their discernment, when he shows Rehu contravening the tradition in naming her daughter by a male name Kahu, in order to manifest reverence to their heroes. While Koro is despondent about their future, Nanny Flowers his wife is sanguine and identifies Kahu as a probable beacon of hope for their lineage. She is repugnant with Koro's patriarchal deportment and claims herself equal to man, when she narrates her past, the myth of Muriwai. Her ancestors once encountered a perilous situation, when they arrived to Aotearoa on the canoe. The sea surged and the canoe heaved near the rocks menacing them to death. "So she chanted special prayers asking the Gods to give her the right and open way for her to take charge. Then she cried....Now I shall make myself a man. She called out to the crew and ordered them to start paddling quickly and the canoe was saved in the nick of time (39). Ihimaera points out that, though she encroaches the domain of cultural jurisdictions, she does so to rescue her people and thus stand as a paragon of female unconventionality, proving that Maori women are intrinsically courageous.

The enduring tension between an austere and versatile cognizance of rule is the vitality that is fundamental to the strife between Nanny and Koro over Kahu's potential to lead her tribe. Koro is resistant to contort any of the traditional values, perhaps clenched between the cultural quintessence of male leadership and the empirical certitude of only having female descendant, feels estranged in the transitional world. Kahu subjected to Koro's perpetual hatred towards her, finds herself ambushed by traditional gender roles and gender identity and thus becomes introspective of whether she will be able to accomplish her Nanny's aspirations by breaking through the shackles of gender norms. Nevertheless Nanny reinforces Kahu throughout her pursuit of identity and in turn Kahu bestows all her verve in preserving the Maori tradition.

The characters in the novel also undergo many disputations within them while deciding on the choice of the identity to embrace. This conflict is well exemplified in the experience of Rawiri, the narrator. When Rawiri leaves Whangara and travels to Australia, he is challenged by a series of trials like racialism, drudgery, and isolation and is also pervaded with many circumstances to become a city man, remote from his land and conventions of his Maori culture. He ponders whether he could settle in the city as a new man with different cultural identity, since his cousins have changed a great deal already, altering their names, demeanour and way of life. Eventually, Rawiri vanquishes his challenges and resolves that he belongs to his roots and he cannot renounce his Maori identity. Koro too does not want to repudiate his traditional identity as a male chieftain of his clan and believes that he can emancipate his people only by male ascendancy.

Ihimaera through Nanny makes it explicit that men cannot avow ignorance of the substantial

tradition of women acting in solemn roles. When Paikei's ancient whale haul up onto the beach in Whangara, Koro is perplexed and wants to rescue the whale from the dreadful storm. He calls only the men to toil and to extricate the whale, but Nanny Flowers poignantly says "If I think you need help, well I shall change myself into man...Kahu also, if she has to..."(113). Ihimaera manifests, how the rigid commitment of Koro proves ineffective and even dangerous when he unfortunately rejects the help of the women and progresses with the men to rescue the whale, but in vain fails deplorably.

However, ultimately Koro comes to a cessation that it is insane to neglect the hands of the women folk during crisis, therefore sends Rawiri to tell Nanny Flower that "it is time for the women to act the men"(121). When Koro cries out saying that "Our ancestor wants to die...The people who commanded it is no longer here". (124) Nanny understands that it is time for Kahu to lead the men, so emboldens her to join them. Kahu, the saviour moves through the crushing waves, greets the whales and identifies herself as Kahtia Te Ragi. The whale in shocked ecstasy accepts Kahu as his old friend and dives in great bliss. "And the whale herd sang their gladness that the tribe would also live because they knew that the girl would need to be carefully taught before she could claim the place for her people in the world"(126).

After this penultimate sequence in the novel Koro for the first time expresses his love for his granddaughter and accepts Kahu as a representative of the Maori renaissance, who is sure to restore the people to the promise of their original collective mission in the world. Koro who was always filled with a sense of ancestral providence now feels proud that the Maori tribes will continue to be the people of their land and the land will always belong to them. He resists and rebels but finally gets reconciled with reality. He realises the leadership potential of Kahu, when she rides the head of a pod of beached whales to safety, emulating the feat of her valiant ancestors. This gives Koro innate redemption.

Conquest and colonisation has denounced to divest the indigenous communities dignity and identity as natives of the land as well as their indispensable rights of self-determination. The indigenous societies that had their own system of order was spurned as Albert Memmi eloquently points out some of the renunciations "that they were underdeveloped, that their customs are oddly changeable and their culture outdated" (22) and they were also "declared insensible to ethics, he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values" (Fanon 41). Indigenous people till date try to rise above these erroneous assertions and are concerned with preserving their land, culture and their traditional way of life that gives them a sense of belonging.

Witi Ihimaera in *The Whale Riders* vehemently indicates that the indigenous people have rich culture that is established on a profound spiritual relationship with their land. Their social and political institutions are based on their beliefs, values and customs, which also define their own forms of governance as well as their laws and norms. Their erudition that is entrenched in community practices, institutions and rituals is inevitably linked to their identity. Koro therefore place a great deal of importance on passing their ancient traditional knowledge onto the future generations, not only for the sake of conserving them, but also to uphold their Maori culture and identity. Even though Rawiri undergoes the pressures to assimilate, he comes back to his home land which indicates the resurgence of indigeneity.

Witi Ihimaera makes it evident that the female characters by rebelling against customary norms are not trying to embrace the modern liberal culture, but are being upright and free to secure their own rights, as they are doing this within their existing structure of Maori culture. He undoubtedly celebrates the Maori women as leaders who bring a positive change that can be made with a sense of justice in order to perpetuate their peoples' heritage in the changing world that is losing ground to modernity.

The influence of modernity do not prove to be over powering and overwhelming to the extent of curbing their inherited native feeling of the people. Witi Ihimaera profess to show the hope of the Maori tribes who desire cultural preservation, equality of treatment for both men and women, and a cultural identity that is cohesive with, yet independent from the dominant culture of the country which they live in.

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