

# **A Postcolonial Analysis of Witi Ihimera's *The Whale Rider*, Focusing on Cultural Deformity and Identity Crisis as Themes of Analysis**

**Satish**

Koneru Lakshmaiah Educational Foundation, KLEF, Vaddeswaram, Guntur- 522302,  
Andhra Pradesh, India

## **Abstract**

Postcolonial literature expresses the role of colonialism in reshaping and restructuring the already existed social structures. Suppression and marginalization are the main aspects of colonial experience. New Zealand is one of the nations which became a prey to the colonial powers. The Maori literature emerged in New Zealand only in the 1970s. It was indeed a great happening in the history of New Zealand literature. The Maori writers, through their works, showcased self representation of their lives. This article studies the impact of postcolonialism on the characters in the selected novel, *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera. All the remarkable features of the Maori community are discussed vividly in this novel. The novel chiefly discusses the need of women empowerment and the inevitability of the communion of man and nature.

**Key Words:** Marginalization, Maori, Self-representation, Postcolonialism.

Postcolonial literature gives voice to the voiceless as it is the literature from formerly colonized nations. It deals with the themes of racism, colonialism, suppression, identity crisis etc. There is a profusion of writings that vividly portrays the Maori ways of living as well as the issues faced by the Maori community as a result of European invasion. However, the limited number of research done in this area leaves a gap. So this paper is an attempt to fill the gap by analyzing one of the key works of Maori literature, *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera. Maori are the indigenous people who were migrated from Polynesia to New Zealand in the fourteenth

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century. For several centuries, the Maori remained in New Zealand without having any contact with the outer world. Thus they created a unique culture. With the emergence of colonialism which happened in the eighteenth century, the Europeans explored the land and came into contact with the Maori. This totally changed the Maori way of living. They developed their own myths which enabled them to describe and record their own past, the stories regarding their Gods, their ancestors and legendary heroes. The Maori people met in the Maori meeting houses called Marae to discuss and retell those myths and legends. After colonization, the mixing up of traditional Maori literature and European literature gave form to postcolonial Maori literature. The Maori authors wrote mostly on the themes of love for mother land, identity crisis, postcolonial effects and the relation between man and nature. Oral tradition was one of the powerful weapons used by Maori people within their community. Only during the nineteenth century, written literature emerged. Maori literature showcases the Maori cultural heritage and their own identity. The Maori language is packed with the richness of culture and tradition. The novels in Maori literature narrate on the role of man in the Maori society as well as the identity of woman in married position. The remarkable writers of fiction in Maori literature are Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Keri Hulme and Alan Duff. Witi Ihimaera's *Tangi*(1973) is the first published novel in Maori literature. This article focuses on *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera. The novel is significant in the present context as it supports female empowerment as well as the revival of the relationship between man and nature. The most remarkable feature of the Maori community, that is, the worship of nature and natural beings is celebrated in this novel. The novel gives voice to the aftermath of colonization and the postcolonial status of New Zealand. The destructive effects created by the colonial powers totally shattered the original face of Maori community and it destroyed the tradition and cultural identity of the people. These are clearly discussed in this novel.

The Postcolonial New Zealand is a mixture of prehistoric- ethnic connections and cultural combinations which were formed during the pre- colonial, colonial and post- colonial times. Maori or mauri means life force. Maori had named the land, Aotearoa, which means the land of the long white cloud. The significant contemporary Maori writers are Witi Ihimera, Patricia Grace, Alan Duff and Keri Hulme. The major themes among Maori writers are political

struggle, spiritual survival, the importance of recovering and sustaining Maori traditions, the conflict between nature and the urban environment, and the plight of family, tribe, and people in the modern society. Do postcolonial writers leave their characters to struggle with different kinds of discriminations? How far the writer is successful in portraying the inner trauma as a result of Imperialism? Does the writer emerge successful in finding a practical solution for the problems experienced by the characters? If yes, how? This article attempts to answer these questions. The objectives of the study are; to understand the influence of nature on the characters of the novel, to make out whether the impact of colonialism is clearly portrayed in the novel, to analyse the nature of myth and other related elements in the work, and finally to evaluate the quality of Maori literature in the present literary context.

*The Whale Rider*, authored by Witi Ihimaera was published in the year 1987. It was made into a film in 2002. Witi Ihimaera, as a writer needs no introduction to the international audience as he is one of the most prolific and widely known writers of New Zealand. He is the author of the first novel published by a Maori writer. It is remarkable that he is the only New Zealand writer to receive the Montana/ Wattie Book Award, New Zealand's highest literary prize, three times. He can be regarded as a guardian, a mentor or a supporter to the writers of the younger generation. He authored novels, short stories and anthropological texts. His works deal with the theme of the urge and need to return to the original tradition and identity. He calls *The Whale Rider*, a retelling of a Maori myth in a modern way. Actually, he gave birth to this novel as a result of his daughter complaining that his works always centers on male protagonists.

The novel is divided into four sections, a prologue, epilogue and glossary. The four sections are named after four seasons. The basic theme of the novel is man's communion with nature. Also, the novel shows the importance of women for societal development. The novel tells the story of Kahutia Te Rangi who used spears to create life on the island of Whangara. But one spear was casted into the future and that led to the birth of the protagonist of the novel, Kahu, later on in the future. Koro Apirana, Kahu's grandfather searches for a male successor to lead his tribe. But this is shattered by Kahu's birth. Koro expresses his dislike for her as she is a female. But Nanny, Koro's wife cares for her. Each section of the novel begins with the ancient bull whale lamenting his old days which it had spent with its master, Kahutia Te Rangi. The modern

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world separated the whale from human beings and this destroys the connection between man and nature. The oneness that had once existed in the old times denotes the sacredness of the old tradition, culture and Maori identity that have disappeared now. The impact of colonization and the advent of modernization adversely affected the Maori life. The indigenous culture is deformed and the Maori has lost the original identity. Like the bull whale, Koro is lamenting the sacredness of ancient glorious times of Maori community. Whereas, Nanny Flowers is ready to accept the changes made by the advent of modernity. Koro is seen trapped in the changing world. Koro insists on following the conventional rules and customs whereas Nanny moves according to the present situations. Koro is unable to accept Kahu as the chief of his people. He waits for a male successor. At the same time, Nanny tries to make Koro understand the real talent and potential of Kahu. This is evident when nanny says that Koro is not the chief, rather she is the chief. The contradiction in the characters of Koro and Nanny shows the conflict between tradition and modernity as well as the destruction of culture by modernity, that is, cultural deformity. Kahu's interest in learning Maori culture is remarkable. She successfully completes all the tasks Koro give when all the male pupils lose. For instance, she brings the stone that is thrown by Koro in the Sea. Koro refused to attend the cultural ceremony led by Kahu. He is blind towards Kahu's love for him. In the climax of the novel, the whales are seen stranded on the shore. This is a symbol that hints the upcoming disaster in the land. This throws light to the fact that the communion between man and nature is disappearing.

The novel reminds on the need of developing relationship between humanity and nature. Another character of this novel who suffers from identity crisis is Rawiri, Kahu's uncle. When Kahu is in her fourth year, Rawiri decides to travel to Sydney. There he meets some of his cousins and understands that they have embraced modernity by deviating away from Maori identity. He befriends Jeff there and both of them travel to Papua New Guinea, where Jeff's parents have a plantation. Jeff is called by his parents to run the plantation. But there, Rawiri has to experience insults mainly from Jeff's mother in the name of racism. After two years of stay, Rawiri comes back to his home town, Whangara. In *The Whale Rider*, the author tries to show the sacredness of nature and the corruption of man. The endless war between tradition and modernity, racism, cultural identity, the importance of love and affection in the modern World,

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the craving to regain the golden past, the struggle of the Maori community in the hands of Europeans, the relationship between environment and man are the key themes that the author discusses in this novel. The novel is definitely a powerful weapon against the colonial powers.

Myths are so much connected to Maori life. Myths act as guiding forces that enable the Maoris to lead their life. The Maori writers are obsessed with the art of myth making, that is, retelling the old myths in a modern way. The aim of the writers is to remind the people of their culture that is enriched with ancient culture and tradition. Myths, in the old times, taught man to choose good decisions. They indirectly play the roles of teachers who teach what is good and what is bad. The present world is out of order as well as out of control. By reviving the old myths, the writers can reintroduce them to the public again and remind them of their original identity which is now lost. Also these retellings that are written in English enable the writers to create global awareness. The sacredness, value and richness of Maori culture, tradition and rituals can be understood by the public through these fictional works. Also the destruction of culture as a result of colonization and the postcolonial status of New Zealand are clear through these works. This is the actual relevance of Maori literature in the present context.

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