Film as a Mirror: Redefining Witi Ihimaera’s The Whale Rider

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Abstract
This article attempts to discuss the cultural and comparative analysis between the visions in the novel The Whale Rider and the cinematic adaptation of the same. The novel and the cinema concentrated on the central character in the film Paikea and her struggles to break out of the hyper masculine orthodox visions of her grandfather Koro. It would then try to understand the implications of the cinema and its visions on gender and its reverberation and how it resonate the modern world in the cultural and political landscape of the present New Zealand and modern people. Maori culture of New Zealand also plays a big role in this novel and cinema. It connects its people both with each other and with the land. In the cinematic version we can see the traditional story is incorporated into the modern setting. The film used so many strategies, these includes extending the myth, re-applying it, or subverting it. But both film and the cinema tries to convey the main social issue the function of woman in a world controlled by men.
Witi Ihimaera is one of the Maori writer who introduced Maori culture and traditions in his writings. He is a Maori writer whose novels and short stories explore the clash between Maori and Pakeha (white, European-derived) cultural values in his native New Zealand. In 1987 Ihimaera wrote the novel The *Whale Rider* which was later adapted into a movie in 2002 by Niki Caro which created an interest to Maori culture throughout the world. Ihimaera himself said his novel to be a retelling of a Maori legend creating the central figure as a female in response to his daughters complaining about the boys always being the hero. Portraying women in non-traditional roles is a central theme of Witi Ihimaera’s *The Whale Rider*. While Koro Apirana, grandfather of the central character Paikea, searches vainly among boys for his ‘successor’ to lead his people, it is his granddaughter Pai who has the necessary qualities, but she is a girl. However, it is she through her love, courage and struggle against traditional gender barriers, who ultimately brings her people salvation. When this novel adapted into film it captured New Zealand’s beauty and Maori culture.

We can trace a relation between film and literature over the last few decades. It became a topic of interest and increased attention among the practitioners of both the art forms. Both film and literature have a common intention. One may, make us see visually through the eye and, the other imaginatively through the mind. While literature is intended to absorb through mind’s eye, her film directly engages with various senses. The novel and the film have been the most popular narrative modes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, it is perhaps not surprising that film makers have sought to exploit the kinds of responses excited by the novel. Film and literature and mutually connected. When Charles Dickens’s novel *David Copperfield* adapted to cinematic version, the demand for the book was so great, that Cleveland Public Library ordered 132 new copies. Like that more copies of *Wuthering Heights* have been sold since the novel was screened. Considering the current...
abundance of literary adaptations today, it can be said with some degree of certainty that dependence of film on literature will continue.

Whale Rider is a mythical film that simply retells a traditional myth. The film is unwilling to articulate the original story as the religious myth of a particular people the way the book does. We are told that New Zealand was ‘empty’ and had a longing for one to arrive that would be leader of a new people and that the ancestors in the land heard the land’s cry and ‘sent’ Paikea there. There was Paikea’s chant; his Canoe sinks and he calls on ancestors for help. It is more of an emotional image of loneliness that could be assuaged by about any leader and any people. In the novel we can see in the beginning the description of the whale, and its self identification with its people remains mysterious even at the end. But the movie reduces the myth and shows how the people came to the land with a larger corpus of founding myth. The movie is much concentrated on relationships. It works through multiple tensions of the love that grandfather has for his granddaughter, the resentment a leader feels toward someone he perceive is sapping the potential of his adolescent girl to restore her mastery of tradition despite the obstacles. In the novel narrator is Rawiri, Pai’s uncle but in the film it is Paikea. When the film starts we hear the voice of the main character Paikea, who tells the history of her people. In the beginning of the film Paikea is born with a twin brother, but he dies, and she lives, and this causes her grandfather great distress. Her innocent voice is deep with wisdom and we see her reactions to her grandfather’s hurtful rejection of her. In the novel Pai isn’t surviving twin. That never is a dead twin brother in the novel. But in the film it made so attractive of the use of twins. It is something magical and mystical-a boy and a girl-the girl is the one who triumphs. It is the prelude to the end, a prelude to the theme of the film and book as a whole; a girl coming to save her people because the men are “dead” in the sense. In the film, Paikea wonders if she is both herself and her brother at once. In the book, Pai is only ever Pai; her power is her own, and her grandfather’s rejection of her for
being a girl is entirely because she is a girl, and it is not connected to any grandson that could have been.

In the book, the narrator is Rawiri. He is the part of a motorcycle club, he takes the charge more than his elder brother from the beginning of the film. He moves away from his home but he comes back when the film moves on. He was very fond towards Pai and he mentors her. In the film Rawiri’s life is more connected with travelling which focuses sometimes out of New Zealand, and away from Koro, Nanny flowers and Pai. In the film, Paikea secretly learns the lessons that her grandfather Koro is teaching the boys. In the novel, we see that she sneaks and wants to learn, but we do not ever see her side of things. We donot see her side of persistence. Nanny Flowers both in the novel and film consistently holds her female power, pushes Pai to be what she is meant to be, and rebukes Koro for his neglect of his granddaughter. But in the novel it is mostly Nanny Flowers who takes the spotlight for being a powerful female figure.

One of the pivotal scene in the film is the scene in which Paikea has invited her grandfather Koro to her school’s recital. He refuses to attend, his chair sits empty even as she goes to accept her award for writing a brilliant essay about the pride she carries for her heritage and people and grandfather. She gives her speech through tears and stops and starts and tears run, but still she continuous her essay about her strength and pride. This heart touching scene in the film is haunting because it vividly portrays a little girl struggling with the fact that her gender is what has caused this seemingly irreparable chasm between her and her grandfather. Here we can see she is trying hard to fight through her tears to give this speech about her pride in her ancestry. In the novel also the same seen occurs. Here Pai is upset but she makes it through her speech and together everyone rejoices for her triumph in the end.
Maori culture plays a vital role in the film and novel. It tries to connect people both with each other and with the land. For Whangara, whales are seen as the mythical creatures that form a direct link back through their ancestors. Because of this reason whales hold a secret reverent place in society. Some tribal groups believed that they can communicate with their ancestors through whales. Whales also played a central role in Koro’s most personal adornment, the whale tooth necklace he wore that signified his status and leadership in the tribe. Maori culture centres around the performing arts, both through oratory and haka, haka means an active, chanted dance demonstrating fitness, agility and life force. The tradition of haka is depicted in Whale Rider at Koro’s school for boys, when he teaches the village boys the art of the performance. He insists the boys remove their shirts and convey aggression by pounding their chests and sticking out their tongues. In one scene Koro instructs the boys that when you extend your tongues, you are saying to your enemies I am gonna eat you. Other characteristics of the dance including rolling eyes back so only the whites are shown, stomping and using the whole body to enhance movement and performance. Women are more active in the recitation of chanted poems, which is also considered as a part of the oral tradition. In Whale Rider, Pai is frequently seen at school alongside her female classmates reciting poems in the native Maori language, through this we can see he tries to uplift her culture. When Koro decides to open a boys only school to teach the young men in the village the ways of the ancestors at that time Pai and her grandmother Nanny Flowers are only allowed to participate by recite poems as a part of the opening ceremony. Towards the end of the film, Pai’s school conducts a speech contest, where she is granted permission to participate as a female orator. Pai wins the contest and she performs the speech in honour of her grandfather, whom she loves and respects deeply, despite the friction in their relationship caused by his traditional views on women’s roles in the tribe.
As a female, Pai also excluded from learning about weaponry which is the another important aspect of Maori culture. In Maori culture weapons are treated more than just objects to use in fighting but serve as an important indicator of status and prestige. Koro refused to allow Pai to participate in learning martial skills at his school. Throughout the film, Pai consistently outperforms her male classmates in one challenge after the next, but Koro’s traditional beliefs will not allow him to see beyond the rigid gender stereotypes engrained in their culture. It requires an incident of mythical proportions to capture Koro’s attention and force him to finally realise that Pai has been chosen one all along.

Towards the end of the film both Pai and Koro feel frustrated and helpless. Koro feels powerless that his attempt to find a new leader failed and he thinks the ancestors can no longer hear him. Pai is hurt by her grandfather’s treatment towards her, but deep down she still loves and respect him and wishes for a path for them to move forward together. She also knows how upset Koro is that the ancestors are not responding to his calls. So Pai tries to reach out instead. Throughout the film, there are several instances where Pai is seen near the ocean and the image cuts to whales swimming below, signalling a connection between Pai and the whales, and thus a connection between Pai and her ancestors. She identified a particular whale that was once her ancestors had ridden many years ago. She greeted the whale and climbed on its back, and the whale immediately began swimming out to the sea. Her entire village looked on in awe as she rode on the whales back, just as the ancestor had done before her. In that moment Koro finally understands how wrong and narrow minded he had been, and he knows Pai is chosen one to lead their people. Koro ask forgiveness from Pai and the ancestors for his misguided thinking and he gives Pai his whale tooth necklace as a symbol of her rightful leadership.

Whale Rider shows emotional experience of a young Maori girl, who struggles to gain the approval of her grandfather and her people. At the beginning of the film we see that Koro
genuinely cares for his granddaughter, but his disappointment about her gender is evident. Whale Rider shows deep levels of character development. Pai is just a young girl in the beginning of the film, and a leader in the end. Whale Rider is a great example of problems that many cultures and families are facing around the world.

The main social issue brought up by the film and novel is the function of the woman in a world controlled mostly by men. The theme that dealt by both is female empowerment is not unique, but the context in which it is presented is very interesting and unusual. Thus, the novel and film tried to capture the cultural elements in the Maori community. The 21st century has seen the Maori people of New Zealand struggling for land rights, fighting the impoverishment of their communities, and resisting the influx of urban ideologies that have permeated their culture. Whale Rider offers a story of hope to those Maori who desire cultural preservation, equality of treatment for both males and females, and a cultural identity that is cohesive with, yet independent from, the dominant culture of the country in which they live in. The film and novel also offers the word an opportunity to discover an indigenous female fight for legacy, and also imparts a compelling push for the preservation of local traditional cultures that is significant not to the Maori in New Zealand, but globally.
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