

College of Western Idaho

Stagnant Waters

Whale Rider and Tradition in Women's Empowerment

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Stagnant Waters: *Whale Rider* and Tradition in Women's Empowerment

The stories told by a culture are living, breathing connections to the past. The spirit of founding principles is not disparate from allowing their growth and adaptation. Past guidelines must embrace evolving roles or risk losing relevance. Imparting necessary change without alienating the traditionalist viewpoint can be done by respecting traditional values for what they were and finding the intention behind them, by dedication to the changes that need to be made, and through respect and self-empowerment.

In *Whale Rider*, a tribe called the Maori tells the story of their cultural origin through the tale of an ancient warrior called Paikea. He rode to the new land of Whangara on the back of a whale, and the history of the Whale Rider is an important lesson in bravery and faith to the Maori, and the myth's depiction of a male hero is the founding tenet of the Maori's patriarchal values. Only the first-born son of the descendants of Paikea can become chief, but that tenet is threatened when the heir is stillborn and survived by his twin sister. The main conflict in *Whale Rider* is the decision of the Maori people to break tradition in one of two ways: allow the leadership of a woman, or find a new bloodline of males to lead. Both choices disrupt the traditional passage of leadership; yet the current chief chooses to continue the patriarchy rather than a woman's leadership. If the Maori people are to thrive, they must evolve their values and embrace a female leader. To increase the acceptance of female leadership, cultures must raise awareness of the efficacy of women as leaders, tell the powerful stories of women alongside the stories of men, and understand that everyone is hurt by the repression of women.

Women in leadership roles have four advantages over men in the same position: they are more persuasive, they understand rejection based on gender and the perseverance required to succeed despite the rejection, they have an inclusive, team-building style of problem solving and

decision making, and they are more likely to ignore rules and take risks (Mehta 9). *Whale Rider* portrays all of these qualities in protagonist Pai's journey to becoming chief. She is able to persuade other characters in the film to her visions, she has internalized rejection as part of her relationship with her grandfather and his disapproval of her ambitions, and she is able to unite people by her example, and does not adhere to her grandfather's rules forbidding her to learn the Maori stick fighting. She admonishes women smoking, as the tribe needs women to be healthy to produce future generations. She is forward thinking and cares about the future of her people, all advantages that she possesses because of who she is, and aided by her gender.

The choice of the retelling of a foundational myth with the central character recast as a female is an excellent choice. Storytelling that revolves around heroic female characters help root the importance of the feminine perspective in the minds of the audience. As Caron states, "Women's stories must be told. Women's voices must be heard in all aspects of life, culture, politics, and religion. Women must be able to go deep within and to articulate freely the concerns, experiences, hopes, and fears that are real" (qtd. in Northup 56). The gender inversion of the heroic character draws attention to Pai's demonstrative abilities to lead and the rejection of her leadership based solely on her sex. Pai's marginalization is an injustice that occurs in the limited binary opposition of "normative sexual hierarchy in which the woman is conveniently reduced to sex and/or gender" (Shaw 38). The qualities of leadership are central in *Whale Rider*. In an interview with Ms. Magazine, the director, Niki Caro, said, "Stories about girls Pai's age tend to be about sexual awakening. I wanted to tell the story of how Pai awakens to her own strength and power. I was more interested in raising the question of what makes a great leader and how these leadership qualities show up in the heart, mind and spirit of a young girl" (Stutkin). The empowerment of women as shown in films like *Whale Rider* can have a positive

impact on the attitudes of the people who watch them about nontraditional female roles, as training in awareness has had success in attitudes of acceptance (Reilly 21).

In contrast is the story of Pai's uncle, Rawiri. He is the second born son of Koro, and that status makes him as ineligible for leadership as Pai because of her gender. As a second born son, Rawiri is like his niece Pai in that no one will recognize him as viable for the role of chief. Rawiri is charismatic and empathetic and educated in the ways of the tribe, and is a former expert in the stick fighting that the Maori people prize. While Pai carries on with her life and strives to greatness without the approval of her grandfather, Rawiri crumbles. He turns to drinking, drugs, and a life of aimlessness. If Pai were not such an incredible young woman, she may have followed a similar path. Rawiri could have been selfless and done whatever he could for the tribe, but he chose to wallow in depression and substance abuse. Rawiri shows the damage that affects everyone in discrimination, not just women.

Pai has opposition at almost every point in her day-to-day existence. Her grandfather, the boys at school, the townspeople in general all are dismissive and outright rude. But she never gives up on herself, and her determination is what changes perceptions. The opposition to the rise of the subjugated will never disappear. Pai embodies the feminist concept of "eve empowerment," or the overcoming of the belief and practice of patriarchy (Rawat 43). The people who believe in themselves enough to withstand the blowback are the people who change the world, despite several centuries' worth of traditions. Traditions can be a compass for maintaining direction, but they are also a time capsule. They provide guidance, but from a time in the past that may no longer be relevant. Many of the original principles in a culture have great value, but directions must change as values do. The best direction in the present is towards gender equality and women's empowerment. The progression towards gender equity helps

everyone: the patriarchs in charge, the women that would thrive in leadership, and the people who would follow. Women, like Pai, will have the most success by finding the values of the past that work, and having the self-empowerment to change the ones that do not. Following her example is the best way to broaden the acceptance of women's rights in the future while including the traditions that have brought cultures to their current place.

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