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Fight against Patriarchy in Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*

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Abstract:

This article attempts to analyse the gender discrimination and the change of attitude that gradually happens in the novel *The Whale Rider*. The struggle of a female to gain recognition in a male dominant tribe can be considered one of the important themes in the novel. The prominent characters Koro Apirana and Kahu can be taken as a representation of the holistic gender-discriminatory attitude that is prevalent in society. The novel contains a rich record of society's cultural beliefs and systems but this paper focuses only on the struggle of a female child to gain recognition. Kahu being the eldest granddaughter of Koro Apirana faces strong discrimination from her grandfather from the day of her birth – because of her gender identity. The equality fight is a dominant theme in most of the novels that focus on societies that disregard the contribution of women. And *The Whale Rider* is one of the novels that portray the reluctance of a male lot of the society to accept women as their equals or even think that women are also capable. It emphasizes that change is inevitable and women have in the past and will in the future rise to power. The novel records the reluctance seen in Koro to accept the obvious fact that Kahu could be the tribal chief one day as well as Kahu's fight (not literal) to get recognized by her grandfather.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Change, Tribal Chief, Discrimination

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The *Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary* defines the term *society* as, "1. people living together in an ordered community. 2 a community of people living in a country or region, and having shared customs, laws, and organizations (797). Therefore, it is clearly understood that a society is a group of people following a set of cultural and traditional norms that have been created over a period. Most societies, except for a few, are patriarchal and give little or no prominence to women. Sylvia Walby in her article "Theorising Patriarchy" uses the concept of

patriarchy as explained by Weber as, "a system of government in which men ruled societies through their position as heads of households" (214). Brendan Hokowhitu in his article "Death of Koro Paka: "Traditional Maori Patriarchy "uses Webster's definition of Patriarchy as follows:

Patriarchy is defined as "social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; broadly, control by men of a disproportionately large share of power" (Webster 2003, 908–909). Though a supposed Maori "tradition," patriarchy is primarily a historical colonial construction. (117)

The equality fight is a dominant theme in most of the novels that focus on societies that disregard the contributions of women. The above-mentioned norms are prone to change with the flow of time, but when the change takes place – conflict is inevitable. Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* is one of the best novels that explain the rise of conflict and also records the acceptance of change among the people. It is a novel that talks about the Maori mythology and their rich heritage, but this paper attempts to focus only on the women's struggle for recognition.

The Whale Rider provides the reader an insight into the convictions of the Maori tribe. Koro Apirana – the patriarch of the family and the current leader of the tribe – is disappointed at the birth of his granddaughter – Kahu, as he feels that "She has broken the male line of descent in our tribe" (10). Koro finds it difficult to accept Kahu as his granddaughter because "By Maori custom, leadership was hereditary and normally the mantle of prestige fell from the eldest son to the eldest son. Except that in this case,

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there was the eldest daughter" (12). The very reason for conflict as portrayed in the novel is the gender of the grandchild. The desire and the need for a male heir are dominant that it lies as the foundation behind the conflicts and arguments between Koro and his wife Nani flowers.

The fight against patriarchy in this novel is not literal, and of course, Nani Flowers tries her level best to instill the importance of women and the power of women in society into the mind of Koro Apirana but to no avail. She keeps reminding him that there are tribes that have had powerful women Chiefs. The following passage is one-sided argument between Nani flowers and Koro about the same:

‘Thinks he knows everything,’ she muttered, tossing her head in Koro Apirana’s direction. *Bang*, went her fists into the dough. ‘The old paka. Think he knows all about being a chief.’ *Slap*, went the bread as she threw it on the table. ‘He isn’t any chief. I’m his chief,’ she emphasised to me and, then over her shoulder to Koro Apirana, ‘and don’t you forget it either,’ *squelch*, went her fingers as she dug them into the dough. ‘Te mea te mea,’ Koro Apirana said. ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah.’ ‘Don’t you mock me,’ Nani Flowers responded. *Ouch*, went the bread as she flattened it with her arms. She looked at me grimly and said, ‘He knows I’m right. He knows I’m a descendant of old Muriwari, she was the greatest chief of my tribe. (13)

Even though it is not unknown to have women as tribal chiefs, Koro Apirana finds it difficult to accept that Kahu could become the chief of his tribe one day. But Nani Flowers is also equally adamant and she is proud that she belongs to a tribe that gives importance to women. She says, "And I am proud that Muriwari's blood flows in my veins" (15).

Koro Apirana is in constant search for the heir apparent among the tribal boys, as this son Porourangi has failed to give birth to a male child. And in the process, he fails to identify the budding leader in Kahu who is growing up just under his nose. He refuses to acknowledge

the strong signs that reveal Kahu as the future leader. The narrator says,

The first was when we discovered that Kahu adored the Maori food. Nani had given her a spoonful of fermented corn, and the next minute Kahu had eaten the lot. ‘This Kid’s a throwback,’ Nani Flowers said. ‘She doesn’t like milk or hot drinks, only cold water. She doesn’t like sugar, only Maori food.’(26)

The other incident is narrated as follows:

Trembling, he peered under the table, and so did we. Kahu was there. Somehow she had managed to crawl unobserved into the room. Koro Apirana's toes must have looked juicy to her because there she was, biting on his big toe and making small snarling sounds as she played with it, like a puppy with a bone. Then she looked up at him, and her eyes seemed to say, ‘Don't think you've left *me* out of this.’ (27-28)

Even though the above-mentioned incidents provide Koro with the signs that Kahu could hold the characteristics needed for a tribal chief, Koro remains adamant. The unrelenting attitude of Koro can be taken as the representation of the mind of most elderly men in that society. Wynn in his article “Tradition and Change in Recent Maori Fiction: The Writing of Witi Ihimaera states that "Change in the traditional economy and old ways of life had to be accepted. But the dilemma of the elders is that change seems to be destroying the very spirit of Maori people"(128). And fighting against the age-old mentality of the elders and acquiring the necessary change is a herculean task. It is Kahu and her constant love for her old paka, Sea, and the Whales that finally win the battle. And the battle is not an easy one, as we read the novel Kahu tries incessantly to make her paka acknowledge her.

The novel provides the reader with the deep insight towards the Maori culture, tradition, belief and ideologies. The tribe and their connection to the sea and the whales give us an understanding of their lives which are almost one with nature. They believe in the power of their ancestor Kahutia Te Range to control the Whales and

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they also believe that the family of Koro Apirana is the direct descendant of the supreme leader. And Kahu named after the ancestor of the village is also one of the important reasons that make Koro Apirana furious. Koro is not able to accept the fact that his son named his eldest ‘daughter’ with the man’s name, that took the name of the original whale rider himself. The following passage is from the novel that clearly states the disapproval of Koro:

But that was nothing compared to the fight that they had when Porourangi rang to say he would like to name the baby Kahu

‘What’s wrong with Kahu?’ Nani Flowers asked.

‘I know your tricks,’ Koro Apirana said. ‘You’ve been talking to Porourangi behind my back, egging him on.’

This was true...then Nani Flowers rowed out to him and said that, really, there was nothing he could do. She had telephoned Porourangi and said that the baby could be named Kahu, after Kahutia Te Rangi.

I could understand, however, why the old man was so against the idea. Not only Kahutia Te Rangi a man’s name but it was also the name of the ancestor of our village. (14)

The novel also has characters like Nani Flowers, Narrator, and a few others who are quite open-minded and are willing to accept Kahu as their future leader. Even though many characters understand and support Kahu in her struggle, Koro Apirana is a representation of the majority or at least the patriarchal belief that women cannot lead a community. But the novel ends in a positive tone, wherein Koro Apirana understands his mistake and gradually understands Kahu and her connection to the Whales and also accepts that she can be a Whale Rider irrespective of her gender.

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