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Modernizing Genre: Subversion of the Epic in Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*

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Is Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* an epic narrative or a novel? There is no straitjacket answer. As Chatman explains, no work of literature is a perfect representation of a certain genre (18). The decision to classify a piece of literature under a given genre depends on the tendency of that piece to exhibit features of a certain genre. In other words, classification is part and parcel of the reading process and indeed a matter of judgement. For instance, the novel is a very fluid genre (Mwangi, 42). It can encompass aspects of epic, drama, poetry etcetera. The purpose of this paper is to argue that *The Whale Rider* is basically an epic narrative only that the genre has been subverted by the author's modernist/progressivist agenda targeting his Maori community of New Zealand. While doing so, the discussion will look at how the story has been weaved in general and characterization of the protagonist.

The epic is usually defined as a long narrative that deals with a hero and his exploits (Wanjiku, 19). The use of "his" is appropriate because most epic heroes are men. From the likes of Emperor Shaka of the Zulu, Liyongo of the Swahili, Sundiata of the Mandinka and Beowulf of the Anglo-Saxons, the concept of community heroism largely revolves around masculinity and particularly military prowess. One reason behind this scenario is the fact that many communities in the world have been patriarchal since time immemorial. Human endeavours that could fit the terms "heroism," "greatness" were provinces of men. The feeling that what a man can do, a woman can also do (or is it better?); is, really, a modern concept propelled by egalitarian movements such as feminism and democracy. This is what Witi Ihimaera's story espouses. It details the exploits of Kahu, the Maori heroine who demonstrates that greatness no longer lies in leading one's tribe to war but the ability to solve modern problems facing your people. Her Maori community is at cultural crossroads. The people have been used to a traditional lifestyle oblivious of social-cultural and economic changes taking place around them. Their leader, Chief Apirana is dismayed that the sea as their source of livelihood is no longer rich in fish. Maori youth like Rawiri now prefer new pastimes such as films. They also want to venture out, visit faraway lands like Australia and Papua New Guinea beyond the confines of Maori culture. There is, therefore, an urgent need for cultural re-adjustments if the Maori have to survive. It so happens that the person who can guide the community on this path is Kahu, a small girl anointed by Paikea and Tangaroa (Maori ancestral leader and God respectively). The very act of the Maori accepting a woman as their leader is a mark of cultural progress because chieftainship has always been reserved for firstborn males in Paikea's lineage.

Epics relive the remote past of communities or civilizations. They are repertoires of people's customs in form of traditional values, beliefs and practices (Wanjiku, 16). This feature actually raises them above ordinary folk tales. Reading them is like raising a curtain off a community's cultural history. Through *Beowulf* for example, life in ancient Britain is revealed. We learn that the Anglo-Saxons were pagans who believed in demons like Grendel who terrorized the Danes.

They then converted to Christianity and that is why the story of Cain is alluded to in the poem (Kate et al, 40). We see how the Zulu loved power of the muscle through military endeavours depicted in *Emperor Shaka*, and how the Mandinka of Mali revered magic, kept slaves, horses and snakes in *Sundiata*. Witi's story on the other hand qualifies as a modern epic because it is set in the present. The cultural dilemma facing the Maori community is clearly a current problem facing many other communities. Readers are able to learn more about a host of Maori customs and artefacts. We admire Paikea's statue in the community's meeting house; the way Maori protect the sea and its creatures (environmental concern); we laugh at the belief that someone's birth cord must be buried in his ancestral land, and even wish to taste their foods like fermented corn. But much as the story is a celebration of Maori culture, it is an indictment of its retrogressive tendencies as well. This is how it breaks ranks with traditional epics. It seeks to interrogate Maori culture and ensure it conforms to the demands of modern life. One cultural belief that is contested is the one that bars women from pursuing higher education. Kahu, though a Maori traditionalist, defies this belief by taking her studies seriously and aspiring to join university in future. She serves a beacon of cultural progress in the story. Embracing modern education is most likely to be one of her clarion calls to the Maori as she assumes leadership.

Because epic heroes are born in a lineage of kings/chiefs, epic compositions deal with the high class and not ordinary people. *Sundiata* and *Mwindo* were sons of a king and chief respectively. What we see in most epics is an age-old concentration and perpetuation of power not only in a certain family but also gender. Among the Mandinka, the leader was a man (a king); the Nyanga also had a man in the name of a chief like *Mwindo's* father. Witi has created a different epic all together. Kahu is born in Chief *Apirana's* family which is also the lineage of *Paikea* but then Maori culture demands that a chief must be male. *Apirana* is right to believe that a boy should be found to take over chieftainship because he is a custodian of the community's culture. He has a duty to ensure Maori culture is upheld. Due to unknown reasons, however, it so happens that none of the eligible males is gifted enough to inherit chieftainship like the small girl. So the opposition Kahu encounters is not based on mere jealousy like *Sundiata's* and *Mwindo's* cases but contravention of Maori culture. These developments are couched in a progressivist gender equality agenda the author is pushing for among the Maori. It is very likely to be the reason why the girl has another royal but dissenting ancestry to *Apirana's*. Her great grandmother, *Nani Flowers* and her mother *Rehua*, both hail from the family-line of *Muriwai*, a great lady chief of their *Apanui* tribe. It is this gender-sensitive background that motivates *Nani* to support the girl and agitate for cultural change among the Maori.

Apart from being born in a royal family, strange happenings usually characterize the birth, childhood and adult life of an epic hero. No one can doubt from the onset that the hero is an extra ordinary, larger than life personality supported by nature and God. *Mwindo* was born with a knife and already talking like an adult. *Sundiata* suffered stunted growth and clocked seven years without having learnt how to walk. That made the father to start doubting whether the poor boy was really the prophesised king of the Mandinka. He even married another woman hoping to get a better son. But when he visited a blind foreseer in a bid to authenticate his doubts, the old man assured him that the prophecy would indeed materialize. For the case of Kahu, she is born outside Whangara, her home island. Her birth cord is brought back home for burial as per Maori customs. The narrator says immediately after the burial ceremony, a spear-like creature is seen flying in the air, the moon shines suddenly and a whale is heard booming in the sea (18). We see her later staying in the sea with whales for three days just like *Beowulf* went to the floor of a lake

to kill Grendel's mother. The strange events in Kahu's life involve modernity in contrast to the ancient heroes. For example, she is born in a modern hospital; news of her birth is relayed home via telephone. The aunt who brings her birth cord from South Island uses a plane. Even when she is found floating in the sea after disappearing for three days, she is rushed to hospital. She is truly a modern heroine.

Due to their gifted nature, epic heroes are usually envied and hated by their family members. Greatness even today, comes with problems from unexpected quarters such as one's parent. Mwindo's father ordered his killing immediately after his birth fearing competition from the boy (although he wanted people to believe that his decision was influenced by the boy's strange nature). The enmity Sundiata faced from his step-mother and brother arose from their knowledge of his heroic endowment. Living in exile hence becomes part and parcel of many an epic hero's life. What Kahu's great grandfather utters immediately he is informed of her birth can be understood in this light. He expresses his disappointment by arguing that "she has broken the male line of descent" (10) in the tribe. Perhaps it is God who intervenes by causing the death of her mother, a misfortune that leads to her "exile" in her mother's family (they decide to take care of her in the meantime). There is a veiled modernist message underlying this episode that a child is a child no matter the gender. Feminists, for instance, may cheer Nani Flowers' argument while supporting the girl that: "Girls can do anything these days." (63). In view of this situation, it is reasonable to conclude that when Witi creates an epic girl poised for leadership in the patriarchal Maori society, he is doing so not so much to celebrate her fantastic deeds but agitate for gender equality as a modern approach to life.

Perhaps what raises an epic hero/heroine to the level of a god is the fact that his/her fate is tied to that of the society. All communities are constantly fighting against threats of extinction and annihilation. Epics as reflectors of antiquity demonstrate to us that this phenomenon has characterized human life right from the beginning. Since God is merciful and cannot allow His people to perish, someone exceptional must rise every time a threat crops up to ensure survival of the community. Therefore, success of an epic hero and by extension the community is, by and large, a case of unfolding destiny.

Beginning with Sundiata, we realize that his emergence as a great king of the Mali Empire was prophesized by a hunter who paid homage to King Maghan, the father. The Mandinka were under a threat posed by King Sumanguru, a neighbour who used both military and magic power to conquer other kingdoms. Sundiata was the only king's son gifted with knowledge of the occult and hence in a position to deal with Sumanguru. Indeed when Dankaran-Tuman (step-brother) ascended to the throne through unorthodox means, Sumanguru overran the territory. It took seven years for Sundiata to mature in exile and launch a successful military onslaught against Sumanguru. This victory is what restored the Mandinka nationhood. The threat facing the Maori community is not the traditional tribal warfare like the former case but a tussle between progress and conservatism. All signs are there to show that Paikea foresaw this problem. The Maori myth featured in the prologue says that when he first came to Whangara, he threw magical spears everywhere, some turning into pigeons, others into eels. But the last one refused to leave his hand. He then prayed for it to "flower when the people are troubled and it is most needed" (5). *The Whale Rider* basically presents how Kahu happens to be that last magic spear.

The aging Chief Apirana is on the conservative side while youthful Kahu is for progress. For instance, he is nicknamed "Super Maori" (30) due to his tooth and nail fight to keep Maori

culture pure. Even though Paikea did not mention the name of the saviour, the chief is aware that restoration of the community's relationship with God and sea creatures is the solution to the escalating cultural crisis. God then sends several signs to the chief and the community indicating that the spear and whale rider is Kahu. Take the example of a fundamental test a future Maori chief must pass. It involves an elder throwing into the sea a special carved stone and whoever manages to retrieve it is automatically the one. Apirana administers this test on a group of boys in his quest to identify a suitable future chief but none passes. Interestingly, the girl is very easily able to dive to the sea floor and get it. The fact that she is assisted by dolphins means she is in harmony with large sea creatures, another hallmark of Maori leadership. There is strong suspense/anticipation that something serious is on the way because after every such incident, the phrase "let it be done" is voiced (it is actually repeated eight times). But like the Egyptian pharaoh, Apirana refuses to accept that Kahu is the anointed chief until the ultimate sign. This incident takes place in winter. In literature, winter symbolises the end of a cycle (Petrova, 13) and in this case, the end of Apirana's opposition to the girl. The sacred bull whale accompanied by hundreds others come to the shore to die. Apirana immediately warns that "if it lives, we live. If it dies, we die." (94). The whole village is marshalled to push it back into the sea without success. It is only Kahu who is able to talk to it, sit on its head and persuade it to swim away followed by the others. Progress has won and Apirana has no option but to accept the girl as the new Maori leader, something he does as soon as she returns from the sea. The task before the new leader is to craft a new life order, to show the Maori how to live in the wake of social-cultural and economic developments taking place around them.

In conclusion, *The Whale Rider* is a totally new approach to the epic genre. Human values have changed a great deal since the days of Shaka, Beowulf and others. The hero of today may still be mystical like Kahu but must address modern concerns of society. As Kahu demonstrates, these are none other than cultural synthesis as opposed to conservatism, excellence in academic work and selflessness. There could be no better way of vindicating Aristotle's claim that literature reflects life which, of course, evolves.

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