

Film-making in the service of identity politics

Whale Rider, directed by Niki Caro

John Braddock
31 March 2004

The 2004 Academy Awards became the occasion in New Zealand this month for an orchestrated display of national self-congratulation. Peter Jackson's final instalment of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy—*The Return of the King*—won every category in which it was nominated; 11 Oscars in all, including best picture and best director. First-time actor Keisha Castle-Hughes became, at 13 years of age, the youngest-ever nominee in the category of best actress for her role in *Whale Rider*.

The country's business, political and "opinion" leaders were especially euphoric as they toted up the impending economic benefits from the "successful storming" of Hollywood's inner-circle. *Whale Rider* male lead Rawiri Paratene enthused on his return from Los Angeles: "We run that place!" Such misplaced hyperbole obscures the fact that New Zealand film-making's admission to the international elite has been achieved artistically with a series of works that responds to the gathering crisis of everyday life with a retreat into fantasy, mythology, mysticism and the supernatural.

While Jackson organised American money and Hollywood backing to bring his version of Tolkien's classic novel to the screen, *Whale Rider*, by contrast, is regarded in New Zealand as a quintessential "home-grown" product. It is a low budget movie from outside the mainstream, ostensibly bringing into a modern context a story of Maori mythology written by Witi Ihimaera, one of the country's foremost Maori authors.

The film has won numerous awards, including best film and prizes in eight other categories at the New Zealand Film and Television Awards. It was best feature film at the British Academy Children's Film and Television Awards and has been honoured at the Toronto, Sundance, Seattle, Rotterdam and San Francisco film festivals with a clutch of "peoples' choice" awards. It has made more than \$NZ50 million (\$US33 million) at the box office.

Niki Caro, the film's 37-year-old screenwriter and director claimed in a recent interview that *Whale Rider* had "crept into the New Zealand consciousness". In recognition of her role in one of the country's most successful cinematic endeavours, Caro was listed in the New Year's honours list for her services to the film industry, after just her second full-length film.

Whale Rider emerges from a cultural milieu that has been formed and fashioned on certain assumptions and carries with it a definite ideological agenda. Its appeal is to those who seek the answers to the problems of modern life within the "experience" of one's personal identity, mediated through gender, ethnicity, race and cultural heritage. *Whale Rider* is a film with a message—and it is an especially reactionary one.

The story revolves around a 12-year-old Maori girl, Paikea, or Pai, (Keisha Castle-Hughes) the sole daughter in a traditional Maori family in New Zealand's remote rural east coast. The family is dominated by Pai's grandfather, the tribal elder Koro (Rawiri Paratene), who is desperate for a male heir to assume leadership of the tribe. At her birth, Pai's mother and twin brother die. Her father, in defiance of the old man's strictures, names her after the legendary whale that forged links with *Hawaiiiki*, the mythical

ancestral home of the Maori in the tribe's genealogy. A carving of the whale, mounted by its rider, occupies the prime spot above the local *wharenui* (meeting house), a permanent reminder of the tribe's beginnings.

Pai's father (Cliff Curtis) escapes the overbearing expectations of Koro, and the tragedy of his wife's death, by going to live in Germany, abandoning his claim to the tribe's chieftainship. Pai's grandparents bring the young girl up. She yearns to shoulder the mantle of leadership which, according to tradition, belongs to her absent father and dead brother. But Koro steadfastly refuses to entertain the possibility that she might be the inheritor. Pai's more sympathetic grandmother (Vicky Haughton) says of Koro: "He has lots of rules he has to live by."

While Koro eventually comes to love his granddaughter, Pai is confronted with the challenge of entering adolescence within the rigid confines of the male-dominated tribal code, sternly enforced by her unyielding grandfather. At school, she becomes adept at Maori cultural performances—including leading the *haka* (a ritual dance), a role intended only for males, and begins to assert her sense of leadership over her schoolmates.

Pai's father returns to the village and offers her the chance to go with him to Germany. While he seems to be successfully making his way in the outside world using his skills as a handcraft artist, Koro contemptuously dismisses his son's work. "It's not work," he sneers, "it's souvenirs". Paikea, drawn by a deep sense of attachment to the place of her birth and upbringing, eventually chooses to remain behind.

This is an important moment in the story. The young girl asks her father to stop the car soon after they leave the village together. On a cliff overlooking the coast, she senses a force—represented by the whale—calling her to stay. The attachment to home and tribe appears as a mystical bond between the girl and the whale. In the organic connection between the two, the tribe's history and responsibility for its fate pass into her consciousness. The audience becomes aware that Pai has a "destiny" to fulfil, underpinned by her growing spiritual presence, which her grandfather entirely misses.

Koro begins to train the local boys in the "old ways", from which Paikea is systematically excluded. She is given the choice of remaining in the back row of the traditional formalities, or leaving. Nevertheless, encouraged by her grandmother and aided by her uncle, she begins to practice the use of the *taiaha*, or fighting stick, in secret, and becomes adept in its use. When Koro discovers this, he upbraids the girl for breaking the *tapu* (sacred traditions), a matter which, in Maori lore, can bring dire consequences.

These soon come to fruition. A pod of whales beaches itself—a portent of the tribe's failing fortunes. Koro makes it clear that he holds Pai responsible. He banishes her from the rescue efforts and dismisses her contemptuously, saying: "Haven't you done enough already?" The villagers unsuccessfully try to pull the whales back into the sea, but, sensing the task of saving them is doomed, turn sadly away.

Pai, however, mounts the lead whale as it lies dying in shallow water. She marshals her supernatural powers and finds herself able to “speak” to the whale, coaxing it back to life. She mounts the whale—at last assuming her rightful place—and guides it back into the waves. Pai’s spiritual connection with the whale, and thereby with nature itself, miraculously ensures her survival as she rides it out to sea. Koro is finally forced to the realisation that Pai is, indeed, the leader in waiting.

The film ends with the launching of a *waka* (canoe), which had been part carved by Pai’s father, but stood half finished above the beach and left to rot—igniting Koro’s frustrations at the failure of his son to adopt the role he had intended for him. The canoe’s launching is a sign of the spiritual and physical regeneration of the tribe—underscored by Pai, now ensconced mid-canoe, having realised her destiny, calling the paddlers. A final, lachrymose voiceover declares her confidence that: “Our people will keep going forward—all together, with all of our strength.”

Whale Rider rests upon a body of work by Maori writers and artists, cultivated from the late 1960s, which has come to form the basis of the so-called Maori “cultural renaissance”. It purports to tell the stories of the oppressed and disenfranchised Maori people through their own voice. The prevailing outlook promoted by this layer is that an understanding of the social position of Maori—their past, present and future—must be presented as a search for lost “origins” and “identity”, not through coming to grips with the historical and social conditions imposed by capitalist society.

Caro herself subscribes to the ideology prevalent in New Zealand artistic circles (as with Jane Campion and her 1994 film *The Piano*) that only women artists can accurately depict the lives of women, and so with race and ethnicity. “Being *Pakeha* (i.e. European or Caucasian) and ... being female and taking on the great creation myth in Maoridom—for some people that’s always going to be transgressive.... I think there’s a lot to be discussed about who can tell Maori stories”, she declared. Caro had approached the task as an “outsider” coming to the film by “listening to the right people” and winning their “blessing”.

In other words, Caro has set out in *Whale Rider* to explicitly reinforce the basic conceptions of identity politics. In this case, it is the entirely false proposition that an understanding of the profound contemporary problems facing Maori people can only be understood from the subjective experience of immersion within their “own” culture.

The film itself is an adaptation of a 1987 novel by Witi Ihimaera, one of New Zealand’s prominent writers, and is set in his home, Whangara. It was written in 1986 when he was a diplomat in New York—a post that was bestowed upon him in recognition, not only of his literary work, but also as part of his elevation into the ruling establishment.

Ihimaera is one of the leading purveyors of the Maori nationalist outlook. His first collection of short stories, *Pounamu*, *Pounamu* (1972) and early novels *Tangi* (1973) and *Whanau* (1974) attempted to portray aspects of Maori life and identity in the traditional rural *marae* of which he was a product—much as he did with *Whale Rider*. They were, on the whole, overly simplistic, sentimental and idealised. His works were soon taken up as a major contribution to New Zealand literature, winning national awards and included in English literature curricula for schools and universities.

Even in the early 1970s Ihimaera’s writing depicted a way of life that, for the overwhelming majority of Maori, no longer existed. A whole generation had been forced to quit their rural villages to move into the cities and provincial towns, entering the urban working class in large numbers—mainly into its most intensive concentrations: the meat industry, forestry, transport and various manual occupations. This was a period of rising class struggles in New Zealand and Maori workers very quickly emerged as a powerful, militant force at the heart of the working class.

Yet there were other factors at work in the arena of Maori social struggles. An emerging middle-class layer of tribal leaders and youth, radicalised in the late 1960’s, intervened to abort the development of a

unified class consciousness within the working class as a whole. Encouraged by the Labour Party and union bureaucracy, they turned Maori workers instead towards the struggle for “indigenous rights”—in particular land rights—and the rediscovery of tribal identity. Ihimaera articulated the aspirations and outlook of this layer.

When he finally focussed, in *A New Net Goes Fishing* (1977), on the lives of urbanised, working class Maori, Ihimaera singularly failed to examine the class nature of what was a brutal and complex historical process. While there was some attempt to present personal struggles in a direct way, the underlying themes centred on the loss of an innocent, traditional lifestyle and its replacement with the perceived stresses of rejection or acceptance by a hostile “*pakeha*” (white people’s) environment. The processes by which Maori were incorporated into the working class—and what this meant, psychologically, politically and socially—were ignored or rejected.

The limitations of this outlook have played a deeply constricting role in New Zealand cultural and artistic endeavours—in so far as they deal with Maori themes—for an entire period. The whole of social life has been reduced to questions of race and ethnicity.

In *Whale Rider*, there is a brief appearance by the young, urbanised Maori. Several men appear from somewhere in a souped-up car, eyes obscured by sunglasses, to visit one of their long-abandoned sons. They are shifty, threatening representatives of the lumpenproletarian Maori gangs, entirely devoid of feeling and all sense of family duty. This is typical. The 1994 film *Once Were Warriors*, based on the Alan Duff novel, highlighted more emphatically than most, the harsh extremes of contemporary Maori life. Again the most oppressed, violent and alcohol-driven elements were presented as archetypal of the Maori urban working class.

Expressed here is a certain fear of and hostility towards the working class itself. It is also a deeply distorted view of Maori workers—encompassing only poverty and deprivation, backwardness, brutality, violence, misery and despair. Not surprisingly, following the publication of *Once Were Warriors*, Duff, now an opinionated “self-made” Maori celebrity, was given a prominent newspaper column which he used for weekly diatribes against society’s most vulnerable—welfare beneficiaries, single mothers, the unemployed, prisoners.

Whale Rider presents Maori as “one people”. There is no attempt to concretely examine, from a critical perspective, the social system and class oppression that determine the daily realities of ordinary Maori. Their future is conceived in an entirely utopian manner—as the rediscovery of tribal roots and assertion of cultural traditions and “spirituality”—separated entirely from that of the working class as a whole.

There are a few glimpses of reality, of life in impoverished rural communities such as Whangara. Some of the characterisations also ring true. While Paratene plays the part of the grandfather with a degree of stiffness, a number of the minor characters, particularly Pai’s irreverent grandmother and her circle of wisecracking, card-playing friends exude authenticity. Castle-Hughes has a depth of character and displays considerable maturity in presenting the struggle of a young woman trying to break the very real restrictions of traditional expectations.

Whale Rider, however, is part of a body of work that contributes to suppressing the real source of Maori oppression. In the name of “bi-culturalism” certain Maori traditions, including compulsory religious observances, have been reinflated, absorbed into the operations of the state, and imposed throughout society. Yet, at the same time, Maori workers who have been at the centre of assaults on jobs, living standards and social rights remain among the poorest, most oppressed, ill-educated and imprisoned layers of the population. Links with tribal origins are tenuous or non-existent, particularly among the 80 percent of urban-based Maori, whose conditions of life are determined, like those of the rest of the working class, by the demands of the profit system.

There is an overwhelming need for artistic endeavours that consciously seek out a serious engagement with the real world. One hopes that the uncritical celebration of a narrow, nationalistic outlook will, sooner rather than later, begin to give way to a more thoughtful and deepgoing probing of the real complexities and contradictions of New Zealand society.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact