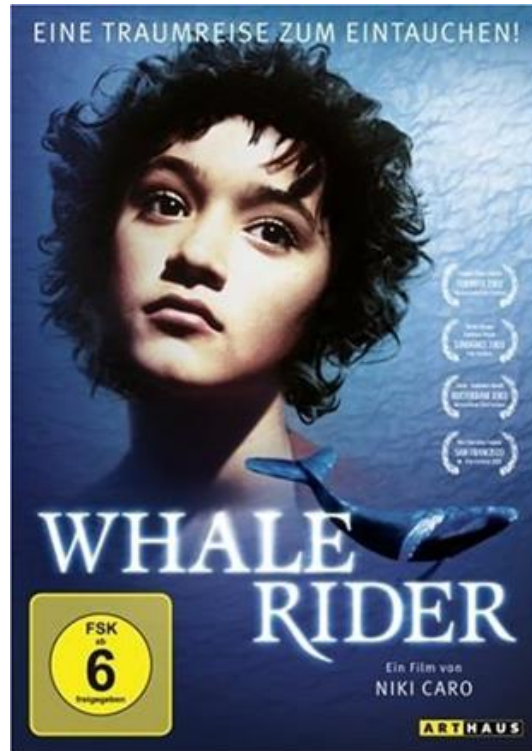


Article

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***Whale Rider* and Female Leadership: Some Leaders are Born Women**



"I don't use the word masterpiece often when reviewing a film, but for Whale Rider it's an inadequate accolade. This is one of the most moving, beautiful and powerful films I have seen in years." R.M. Stein

"A girl born to lead, fighting the odds." The New York Times

The glass ceiling, in the corporate context, is "the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements." In the general context, the glass ceiling would mean denying opportunities for social participation, education, wielding power and leading in any field based on class, caste or gender. The Mahabharata tells the stories of Ekalavya and Karna, who had to suffer throughout their life because of this. Ekalavya is outright refused as a student by Drona because he is not royalty. The same happens with Karna, though Drona initially does teach him and says no to him only when he seeks advanced

knowledge education, which gives Karna no option but to seek knowledge under a false identity from Parashurama.

Again, the epic tells us how Vidura, born of the same father as Dhritarashtra and Pandu, was never considered fit to be king even when no other person was available to sit on the throne because his mother was not royalty but a maid waiting on the queen. Born as the son of the most outstanding scholar sage of his times, perhaps of all times, Vidura was considered the incarnation of dharma – justice and righteousness. His wisdom, both spiritual and worldly, is celebrated. He was thoroughly competent, highly educated, entirely ethical, a master of raja dharma, leadership

and administration science, and committed to Hastinapura. Besides, as Vyasa's son, he was the grandson of Queen Mother Satyawati. Despite all that, the thought of crowning him did not come to anyone's mind, even when there was no one else to sit on the Bharata throne. Not even when the throne lay orphaned because of King Pandu's death, Dhritarashtra was already disqualified because of the blindness he was born with.

This is a glass ceiling

Kunti and Draupadi are two of the most competent persons whose story the epic tells. But, of course, both were women and therefore were never given any royal power.

Semitic mythology, the mythology of the ancient people who, beginning with various pagan religions, eventually gave rise to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, tells us the story of Adam and Lilith, the first man and woman according to them. Lilith's is the sad story of a woman denied equality because of her gender. The myth tells us that God created Adam and Lilith as equals, but Adam refused to accept Lilith as his equal. He insisted that since he was male and female, she should be beneath him in everything, including when they made love. Refusing to accept this, Lilith walked away, and Adam went to God and told him that the woman he, God, had given him for his pleasure had run away from him and God should fetch her back. God sent his angels, and Lilith said she had no problem returning to Adam; only he should treat her as his equal. Adam refused, and God created another woman to oblige him – Eve.

The original story, as told by Semitic mythology, says this. What is far more interesting is how subsequent tellings of Lilith's story change her character. This authentic woman who insisted on equality with her man was slowly transformed over time into the most monstrous creature imaginable: a dangerous demon of the night, sexually wanton, who drinks the blood of unborn babies in the wombs of young mothers and carries away newborn babies under cover of darkness.

Morgan La Fay, also variously known by dozens of names like Morgen, Morgaine, Morgain,

Morgana, Morganna, Morgant, Morgane, Morgne, Modron, Fata Morgana, Argante and so on, and known by many titles including the Great Queen, the Queen of the Fairies, the High Priestess, the Queen of the Otherworld, the Priestess or Queen of Avalon, was the daughter of Igraine and Gerlois, the Duke of Cornwall and the half-sister of the legendary King Arthur. She is believed to have been extremely intelligent and, because of her sharp mind, became an excellent scholar at a young age, in which intelligence and scholarship were never associated with women. And perhaps precisely for that reason, half the stories we read about her today picture her as a goddess and the other half as a sorceress, an evil witch. It is possible that she was just a brilliant and extremely beautiful woman and, specifically for these reasons, was turned into a witch in the popular imagination.

Medieval Europe would name practically every woman who showed the qualities Morgan possessed as a witch and burned her at the stake. A woman is not supposed to have power – and intelligence is power, beauty is power, knowledge is power, competence is power. This witch hunting and witch burning went on for such a long period and in such huge numbers that the meaning of the very word witch changed – from a woman of wisdom and power to an evil female monster that flew about in the night sky doing, laying curses on people and killing and drinking their blood.

And precisely the same thing happened in India too – the word dakini, which originally meant a great yogini, a woman of power and wisdom. Later the word, its form marginally altered, became dain, an evil female monster, a chudail that did exactly what the witch of later times did.

A woman of knowledge and power was not to be tolerated. Power in the hands of a woman is dangerous. All attempts should be made so that no woman attains knowledge or power.

Denial of opportunities based on birth or gender is not a new thing. It has always been there.

Whale Rider is the moving, powerful story of a brilliant little girl who is denied opportunities to lead because she is a girl, even when she is the only one – man or woman – capable of doing that, but refuses to be discouraged by total rejection, deliberate

negligence and repeated heartless rebuffs. She fights a battle in her unique way—the feminine way, if you like – against centuries-old traditions and prejudices in a world dominated by the largest creatures ever to have lived on the earth, giant whales.

One of the wisdom traditions which inspired me early in my life is the Chinese philosophy of Taoism, which I have been trying to live for more than four decades. I have also been teaching Taoism to leaders of men and organisations for almost the same period. Taoism speaks of the feminine way, also called the practice of running water, the watercourse way, etc. Lao Tzu, the Chinese saint who was a contemporary of the Buddha and is the most respected teacher of this timeless philosophy, speaks of it in his masterpiece called Tao Te Ching, The Book of the Way, which is the second most translated book in the world, after the Bible.

The leader should be like running water, says Taoism. All of us have seen how the gentle, yielding, flowing water wears away mighty rocks. For instance, on the bed of the Ganga in the Himalayas, we can find smooth, beautiful, uniquely rounded stones, tempting us to gather and collect them, each of which was a large rock up on the mountains before the water of the river worked on them. Water never fights these rocks. There is no clash with the rock, no battle, no attempt to transform or to reshape the rocks. All water does is gently flow over them. And this is easily yielding, unresisting water that assumes the shape of any vessel you pour it into and is powerful enough to transform solid rocks with seemingly effortless ease.

That is the feminine way. Also called the course of the bamboo – which bends but does not break and has its unique strength, very different from the power of the rock or the mountain, very different from the strength of the mighty teak, which the flowing water uproots and carries down to the sea as a beautiful conversation between the ocean and the river Ganga in the Mahabharata tells us.

This is feminine strength; the woman's way differs from the man's.

And that is precisely how Pie, the little girl in Whale Rider, fights her battle. You are not even aware that she is waging a battle against forces far

mightier than herself, like the leviathans of centuries-old beliefs and customs, like giant living pillars of powerful ancient myths and traditions that have sunk their roots deep into the community's psyche – so soft is she, so gentle, so non-aggressive. And it is as though existence aids her – as Taoism says it would when you follow the Tao, the Way. The battle is thrilling, you feel goosebumps all over your body, and your heart dances at every step as you watch her. Pie pads, unassumingly, without stirring up storms or making waves or ripples, yet mountains are moved.

It is not that she tries to become a leader – it is by virtue of not trying that she becomes the leader. She wants to help her grandfather, the community leader, achieve his goals – nothing for herself. Except for his love, perhaps, as any child would desire the love of her people. She would have loved to have lived the life of a quiet little child, loved, petted, accepted and cared for by her grandfather. It is her longing for his love, for his acceptance, that she sinks her roots to the deepest expanses of her community's origins and, by doing so, journeys to mythical dimensions of existence. Her longing for his acceptance takes her to such fertile lands buried in the abysses of everyone's being where we communicate with the animal and the plant, making her plunge headlong into levels where we are one with all creation. Charged by that longing, she dives into worlds of magic and witchcraft – witchcraft in the original sense of the word and not in the sense in which the medieval Western world understood it and we understand it today. Into that world where, as the Chinese would say, the ten thousand things are one, heaven and earth are one, and we are all indivisible parts of a composite whole.

The magic she conjures up with such seeming effortlessness is not ephemeral but lasting. Nothing would remain the same after that. Everything will be altered. And there would be no going back.

And she does it all using strength we all have, the power that lies buried within each of us, though we rarely use them, are seldom aware of. Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, it has been said. Pie is loved – loved by many people, loved by her father, loved by her uncle, and above all loved

by her grandmother. Perhaps that is the secret of her strength.

But that is not the secret of her success.

It has been said by ancient India: *sāhase śrīh prativasati*—glory dwells in courage. More than anything else, her success – in doing what must be done if her community, her people, and she are to be saved –comes from her courage.

If strength comes from being loved, where does courage come from? From loving someone deeply, say the wise. Like a mother facing fearlessly a ferocious wolf to save her baby’s life. Like a woman pouncing upon a monster in human form to save her daughter from him. Like the man who jumped down the track of a fast-approaching train to save a life. Like the father who fights an alligator to save his son. Like the school teacher who could not drive but took control of a runaway school bus after the driver had a heart attack.

Loving someone deeply gives us courage. Superhuman courage.Or rather, indeed, human courage.

The source of Pie’s courage was her love. Love for her community and its timeless ways are threatened by the whirlwinds of change sweeping across her world. Love for the people of that tiny community whose ancestors had once braved three thousand landless miles of the fathomless ocean a thousand years ago to reach the land they have been inhabiting since. Love for individual members of that community. But above all, love for her grandfather, whom she loved with all her being, with every breath she took, with every pulse of her heart and every pulsation of the cells in her body, though he did not in the least reciprocate that love. She watched him fail repeatedly; she watched him fight a hopeless battle frequently, losing every step; she watched him sinking into the dark depths of bottomless despair, never to come up from there. And she knew she was losing him. She couldn’t let that happen to him; she loved him too much for that. She knew she had to take over from him, despite him fighting a bitter battle against his total rejection of her, his adamant refusal to let her come in, and his dogged repudiation of the hand she offered.

And she just took over from him.

Deep in her heart, unknown perhaps even to herself, she had always known she would have to do that one day. And she had been preparing herself for that.

And when the time came, she just stepped in and took over from him.

To emerge as the natural leader of the community.

And the beauty of it all is that no questions are asked. Without exception, everyone realises that centuries-old traditions have been broken, sacred ways have been violated, and what should not have happened has happened. But there are no accusing fingers, no voices raised, no angry stares. For such were her actions, so specific her steps and decisions. They collectively bow before the twelve-year-old girl, their hearts heavy with gratitude, their voices silent, as they celebrate her and celebrate themselves under her leadership.

The Whale Rider is the story of little Pie – Paikea – who walks across the movie screen with the sure steps of destiny, though she herself is unaware of her power and the awesomeness of what she is doing.

THE STORY OF THE MOVIE

The movie begins with Pie’s birth in her father’s village in today’s New Zealand. Old Paka, her grandfather and chieftain of the Maoris, has been expecting a boy to be born who would be the next chief of the tribe. His son, Porourangi, had disappointed Paka by refusing to follow the tradition and taking over from his father as the chieftain. Instead, he abandoned the ways of the tribe and followed his heart to become an artist.

“There was no joy when I was born,” says the background voice of Pie, narrating the story of the movie to us – her story. Because her twin, a boy, was born dead, and he took his mother with him, disappointing old Paka again: he needed a boy whom he could train and then hand over the torch of the tribe to lead his people.

The movie now shows us a profoundly touching and, at the same time, alarming scene. Old

Paka wants his son to get married again and beget a boy – what if this one has died? Porourangi refuses and walks away in angry disgust – he has just lost a son, his wife has just died of childbirth, and the older man has not a thought for her, not a thought for his dead son or him; her death is nothing to him, all he is interested in is Porourangi getting married again so that he can have a boy. Paka now enters the room, where we find two cribs – one with the dead baby boy and the other with the baby girl sleeping. Paka refuses to look at the girl child and, ordering her grandmother to take her away, starts chanting traditional sacred mantras over the boy's dead body.

The birth of a girl child is a reason for worry from the first day, says King Janaka in the epic Ramayana. He talks about the girl child's responsibilities – finding a suitable husband, giving her a good dowry, etc. And Ksheeradwaja Janaka is one of the most wonderful fathers imaginable – not only to his biological daughter but also to his foundling daughter Sita, whom he loves more than anyone else. In the epic, we find not a single occasion when Janaka was anything but a doting father to Sita. If such is the state of mind of a father like Janaka, no wonder the ordinary Indian girl child does not find herself in a welcome world.

Dr Sudhir Kakkar, India's leading psychotherapist, says that the Indian girl child does not belong to any home throughout her life. She is homeless – but not as the wandering monks of India for whom wherever they reached sunset became their home for one night – they were *yatra sāyamgato mauniḥ*, as they were called. Their homelessness was their own choice, and they were happy with it. But with the Indian woman, homelessness is thrust upon her. She does not belong to the home where she is born – she is constantly referred to as *parāyādhān* – someone else's property, given to their keeping for some years. In a large number of homes, she is an unwelcome gift that is thrust upon the family. And, of course, she is treated as an outsider in the home to which she goes after her marriage. Fortunately, at least in some classes, this is changing, and girl children are loved as much as boys – that is the happy answer I have got from several hundred young girls whom I have asked about this over the years–

students of the top business school in the country where I have been teaching. Maybe, in that class, it is changing, but in other classes, it remains a reality.

In Paka's case, though, it was not exactly a rejection of the girl child as such – he wanted a male child to inherit his chieftaincy: that position went from male to male, and she was, unfortunately, female, which is not to say that Paka does not show contempt for women on several occasions in the movie. He rarely misses opportunities for that – in that sense, he is a thorough patriarch. His wife, Nanny Flowers, keeps telling him that she will get a divorce and go away from him when he treats her as an inferior – though in every imaginable way, she is his equal, in many ways his superior, except for the authority he wields.

Paka has no love for Pie – which is made clearer in the book of the same name by Witi Ihimaera, which the movie is based than on the screen – speaking of which Pie says: “My Koro wished in his heart that I had never been born.” Koro is her old Paka. The next shot shows old Paka cycling, with young Pie, now about twelve, seated on the front bar of the cycle, and we are told by Pai: “...but he changed his mind.”

The movie shows grim old Paka in a softer light. In the book, he is stern, inflexible, adamant, unyielding, and obdurate. There he rejects her totally, but then her love for him is equally stubborn, hard and determined – if such terms could be used for love. In the book, the little child has only one need – to be accepted and loved by him. She lives for it, breathes for it, eats and drinks, sleeps and wakes up for it. He is her life breath, the *raison d'être* for her existence, and there is nothing she wouldn't do for him – for a word of appreciation from him, for just a simple word addressed to her by him, a look of acknowledgement. You feel infinite pity for Pie in the book as you sense this need in her – her need for his acceptance, his acknowledgement, is that of a fish stranded on the land for water.

Many children – many girl children – in India live all their childhood with the same need.

This need is intentionally diluted in the movie because it focuses on just one thing – the emergence

of a little girl as a great leader, the community's saviour, and the link between its past and future.

Paka is supposed to be all that – but we see he is no longer what he is supposed to be.

I remember a posting on the Face Book some two years back. Someone had posted that if you are born in a Brahmin family, there is no need for you to study the scriptures, no need for you to practice austerities, no need to meditate or even worship – by your birth, you should be worshipped by all. I felt sad for the man who had posted that – I knew him. He is family. No, my friend, I wanted to tell him that is not enough. You are a Brahmin only when you have grown your roots into the wisdom of the rishis, your forefathers, and drew sustenance from the waters of knowledge they lived by and by no other means.

Recently I visited my guru's ashram at the foothills of the Himalayas – the ashram of my guru sitting at whose feet I had studied for several years, as whose informal personal secretary I had also worked for two years. The visit saddened me. They believe in jnana yoga there – which means studying and teaching the scriptures, the shastras. You don't have to do anything else. What about the rishis, then? I wanted to ask them, who spent all their life meditating, doing tapas, and practising all kinds of sadhanas, and not just memorize the words of books and discuss and debate their meanings?

Old Paka belongs to this deadly tradition. He has lost the capacity to talk to the elements, understand the sky and the earth, speaks with the ocean, and converse with the whales, riding whom their ancestors had reached the new home of the Maoris. He has lost the ability to command nature, and communicate with his spirit, as earlier chiefs could. He has no roots in those depths that sustain him and his people. He is a plant that has been pulled out from the nourishing earth. He cannot grow any more, cannot flower and produce fruits and seeds, cannot give birth to new generations of chiefs. He is just an empty shell with nothing inside. From a distance, he looks real, but there is only emptiness inside, where there was fullness in earlier chiefs, richness and immense wisdom, unfathomable powers. He is good at keeping up appearances and nothing more.

And little Pie has all these inside her. The wisdom that is timeless, the impenetrable power, languages are known only to her and existence, profound intuitions that originate in dimensions beyond the known. She hears voices that no one else hears and receives messages from worlds the existence of which only she knows.

She is a born leader. She was born to lead. Who need not have any authority, any position, who just lead by what they are—the greatest kind.

Some leaders are born women. She is one of them.

An irrepressible woman, unstoppable woman, brave, courageous, fearless, undaunted, indomitable, audacious, resolute.

The kind of woman Dr Clarissa Pinkola Estes calls Women who Run with the Wolves.

in India have had many such women in the past. The line of whom ends with Valmiki's Ahalya, Sita, Mandodari and Tara and Vyasa's Kunti and Draupadi. Yes, we have had many others since, but they pale by comparison. Which is the reason why a Sanskrit verse asks each Indian woman to begin her day by remembering them in the morning:

*Ahalyā draupadī kuntī tārā maṇḍodarī tathā
panchakanyāḥ smaren-nityam mahāpātaka-nāśanam*

A variation of this verse has sītā in place of tārā.

Little Pie, around twelve, rides with her grandfather Paka. She is seated on the front bar of his bicycle. There is a broad smile on her face. And there is a hesitant smile on his face that disappears before you see it. Deep inside him, he loves her. It is only that he is disappointed that she is not a boy and the heir. She holds on to the cycle handle with one hand, and with the other, the whalebone pendant hangs from a string around his neck.

That pendant symbolises his authority and his position as the chief. She is holding on to that. As he pedals the cycle, he does not look at her. But her eyes are constantly on his face, trying to see what she cannot see.

It is perhaps their first ride together: grandfather and granddaughter. Riding together along the rich, lush green countryside, along a path that winds among small hills, and soon we find them

by the seaside. There is joy in the air. The little girl swings her legs up and down as the cycle speeds up the road downhill. And we hear the older man's short guttural laughter. Perhaps the only time we listen to it is in the movie. No, they laugh again at the end of the ride when they are back home, as Paka tilts the cycle playfully before he stops it, forcing her to jump down to save herself from falling. She shouts at him in mock anger: "You old Paka!" And he laughs – we hear his guttural laughter. It is the laughter of peace. Of acceptance. He has accepted that she is a girl, and he can do nothing about it.

This laughter is the prelude to bitter, tense scenes soon to follow—the calm before the storm.

Bitterness is inevitable in a battle, though it has no place in Pie's heart – she is not in a battle but only helping her Koro. Tension is inevitable when such a profound transformation is about to occur, though Pie is relaxed – for her, it is not a battle for change, but her stretching out her small hands to aid her grandfather. Power is not her aim; this is not a power struggle for her.

After chasing Koro around the lawn in mock anger as he rides the bicycle, Pie enters the house, where we see an innocuous-looking scene of tremendous significance. Her grandmother and two other women are inside, sitting around a table, playing cards and smoking. "You have been smoking," she tells them. It is not a question, not an accusation, but a statement. Simple, plain. And she means them, "Maori women have to stop smoking. We have to protect our childbearing properties." There is no anger in her.

As little Pike makes that statement, we realise this is no more a child speaking. She is already a leader. She is commanding the women of the community, including her much-loved grandmother, and telling them what they have to do in the interest of the tribe. She is asking them to make sacrifices for the tribe.

This is the transitional stage in her growth into adulthood and total leadership. She is simultaneously the little girl who enjoys a bicycle ride with her grandfather and laughs in pure joy and the woman who asks the women of her community to give up

small present pleasures in the interest of their future success as a tribe.

The first picture of Pie we get to see as a leader. Greater – much, much more significant, awe-inspiring – things will come soon.

Soon we see another scene of Little Pie with Old Paka, a grandfather-granddaughter location that simultaneously is alluring and disturbing. The old chief of the tribe is trying to start the motor of a boat that stubbornly refuses to start. While he does it, Pie asks him questions about where their people originally came from, how long ago it was and so on, which Paka answers patiently while trying to wind a piece of rope around the flywheel. Eventually, he pulls the rope to start the motor, but the rope breaks, and the man goes to get a fresh piece.

As we watch the scene of Pie sitting there alone with the motor and the broken cord, the background music begins to change and soon becomes intense, making us hold our breath wondering what will happen. In a simple, effortless act, Pie picks up the two broken pieces of the cord, ties them together, winds it around the flywheel, pulls it, and the motor starts with a roar. An excited Pie calls for Paka. Paka comes; his face is stern; there is no appreciation or approval. "Don't do that again," says the old man. "It is dangerous." We get a feeling that it is not the possible danger to the little child that concerns Paka, but the fact that she succeeded where he had failed and that she is doing something a girl is not supposed to do, but only boys and men.

Pie's brows knit, and darkness descends on her bright face. As Paka goes away and Pie sits there, you feel her pain, hurt, disappointment, and loneliness.

Little Pie's real name is Paikea – Pie is short for Paikea. Against the strongly expressed disapproval of her grandfather, she was named after that legendary male ancestor of the tribe. One wonders if that naming has anything to do with what she becomes. For, if the old Paikea is the past of the Maoris, young Pai is their future.

Our names do have a significant influence on us. A male name given to a girl does affect the girl in certain ways.

We see a carved wooden statue of Paikea intermittently throughout the movie, inscribed on the bow of the boat that rises high into the sky against the background of the clouds or placed on top of the community home of the Maoris. Very lonely up there. That founding father of the Maoris in New Zealand must have been a lonely figure, travelling three thousand miles across a landless sea.

The loneliness of the long-distance runner. Pai hasn't reached such loneliness. But she is headed in that direction, we already see.

Pai's father has been away in Europe, and he now visits his home. But as in the past, he has no interest in Maori affairs. He is busy with his photography, painting and the woman he has in Germany who will soon deliver his baby. He just wouldn't accept the Maori torch. In an angry conversation between the father and the son, Pourorangi, Pai's father, tells his father, "Look at me, Dad, for once in your life. Go on... Ah, you don't even know who I am." And the old man responds, "I know whom you are meant to be, whom you are born to be."

India has a beautiful word – swadharma. Swadharma means your essential nature, your swabhava, which says what you are born to be. Until you become that, you will never find peace in life, will feel your life energies coursing through you as they should, and will instead feel like a wilted flower. It is for this reason that Krishna says in the Gita advising Arjuna: swadharme nidhanam śreyah, paradharmo bhayāvahah – death in a life lived in tune with your swadharma is indeed noble; a life lived following what is not your swadharma is terrible indeed.

Pourorangi was not born to be a leader – he is held to be an artist. His life energies need the life of an artist. He will flourish only in that life. They will dry up if he tries to be a leader – he is not meant to be that. And little Pai – her very essence is leadership. That is what she is born to be. She will find satisfaction, contentment, joy, and self-actualisation in no other life.

Old Paka fails to see this truth about Pourorangi. All Paka sees is what he believes Paororangi is born to be – the leader of the

community, the next chief because he is the chief's son. That is why Pourorangi tells his father, "Look at me, Dad, for once in your life. Go on... Ah, you don't even know who I am."

And old Paka fails to see the truth about little Pai. Every breath of her screams that she is born to be the community's leader, their chief. It is as though every iota of energy, every cell in her body proclaims to the whole world that she is born to be the community leader; that is the only way she would find contentment in life, satisfaction, joy, and self-actualisation. But her grandfather is deaf to those screams, those proclamations.

Because she is a girl.

As an aside, I want to add here: I strongly feel half the suicides in our country could be avoided if our parents opened their eyes and saw what each of their children is born to be. Not all are born to be engineers, doctors, or MBAs. And if our parents do not force their children in what Krishna calls *paradharma*, what is not one's *swadharma*, these children will grow up to be healthier, happier, and more wholesome adults; our society will be far saner than it is today – why, it will be a dream society, the kind of society in which life will be an *utsava*, a celebration, every day a festive day.

Coming back to the Whale Rider, the old man is sure that just as his eldest son can still be his successor, his saviour, the prophet they have all been waiting for, the prophet who will lead them all from darkness to light if only he gives up his 'stupid ideas' and accepts that position, Pai cannot be. How can she be? She is a girl, and the prophet has to be a boy.

In an angry moment, Old Paka explodes and asks Pourorangi to take his daughter away with him to Europe because she is useless to him. Pai overhears this conversation and runs away to the solitude of the boat on the bow of which Paikea is carved. Her father follows her there, and there is a powerful, intimate conversation between them in which the father and his young daughter share their rejection by Paka and their disappointment that neither of them can be what Paka wants them to be. They weep together in silence, the father hugging his daughter. He suggests that she goes away with him, which, after much thought, she accepts.

Before she goes away, Paka gives her a few rounds on his bicycle. Pai has a touching parting with Paka, her grandmother and her uncle – Pourorangi's younger brother, who too was found unfit to lead the community because, among other reasons, he was not the eldest son.

As she leaves with her father in his car, Old Paka tells his wife, Nanny Flowers, that he is going to need all the first-borns among Maori boys. That's where they would find the answer.

As the car moves on, we are given glimpses of the beautiful seaside country through which their car is passing, the green hills and vast stretches of the sea. Some distance away from home, Pai, who had been pensive all along, suddenly asked her father to stop their car. She had been watching the sea and had just seen a giant whale underwater, leisurely gliding along.

Little Pai is in communion. In instant communion with the whale. With the sea. With the Maori past. With Paikea, their ancestor. With the land, she is moving away from. And with all that is sacred to the Maoris. "Stop the car," she asks her father. It is not a request but a command. Not an arrogant command, but the command of a little girl who has been taken over by powers far greater than herself. When her father stops the car, Pai opens the door and runs to the sea just a few feet away from them, where she stands still, looking at the vast waters. "Can we go home now," she asks. She means if they can go back home. And Pourorangi asks why. Her answer is, "I have to go home." "Why?" "I just have to."

As I write these lines, I still experience the goosebumps I felt all over me as I heard those words. Yes, she just has to. There is no way to do it. She doesn't know why. It is not a decision she took. It is a decision taken for her by others. By others she cannot name, she doesn't even know.

She has no answer for her father. In those moments, she is not his daughter. But someone much larger. As large as life itself. She is the prophet of her people, the prophet they have all been waiting for. Those words belong to the prophet in her – "I have to go home. I just have to."

No shouting, no screaming, no dramatics. Pai is never dramatic. Unlike the prophets, we are used to being onscreen in the movies. She is quiet. Still.

A study in stillness as she stands facing the sea, the wind from the sea playing with her hair.

I first encountered K M Munshi's masterpiece Krishnavatara in seven volumes in nineteen seventy-two. I am familiar with the tone in which Pai spoke those words. Calm, serene, stated, plain and simple. That is how the boy Krishna says in Munshi's classic tale of the emergence of our land's greatest leader. It is the voice of destiny – the unalterable destiny of Providence. You don't shriek them out. Just state, that's enough. They have a power greater than that of thunder and lightning and a power greater than that of earthquakes and tsunamis.

"I have to go home. I just have to."

As simple as that.

Back home, she announces to her grandfather, "Paka, I am back."

The old man doesn't give a hoot about that statement. She repeats it, says it a third time, and his response is pretending nothing has happened; she does not exist except as a nuisance that wouldn't leave him alone. He believes things had started going wrong with her birth, and he thought that with her gone, he could start afresh. And now she is back!

But little Pai is a girl – a little woman. She bends, but she does not break.

She is running water. She would flow over the rock gently, and the rock would turn smooth, the rough edges would disappear, it will grow smaller in size, and one day you would find that the mighty Himalayan rock lying at the bed of the Ganga downstream a finely polished, small, rounded, shining, smooth stone. Perhaps just a pebble.

Like water, she would persist. Like water, she would choose the path of least resistance.

"Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished," says the Tao.

She would not hurry, and yet everything will be established.

She would be as careful as when you cook small fish. She wouldn't spoil things with too much poking.

She would not force or interfere with things but let them work in their way to produce results naturally. And whatever needs to be done will be done.

Every time she was kicked, she would bounce back. Resilient, like green bamboo, which straightens up every time you let go of it after you pull it down. Her way is the way of the running water, the way of the green bamboo. Mridu, soft, as we say in Sanskrit. *Nāsādhyam mṛdunā kimcit, tasmāt tīkṣṇataram mṛdu:* There is nothing impossible with softness. Therefore the soft is the hardest.

Old Paka starts a school for the firstborn Maori boys. Pai, too goes there, but Koro wouldn't let her sit in the front with the boys; she is a girl and has to sit behind the boys. When she silently refuses, as her grandmother's eyes approve eyes watching on silently, Koro asks her to leave, which she does, her body rigid as she walks away, refusing to obey a command that does not make sense to her. She has been hurt. Hurt deeply.

But she is not angry with her Koro. He has been hurting her since birth, for she had disappointed him by not being born a boy. She understands.

She is soft, but she is not without strength. She is determined. And, as Sita tells Rama about herself in Valmiki's Ramayana, nothing in the world can change her once she has made up her mind – *nāham śakyā mahābhāga nivartayitum udyatā.*

Koro wouldn't have her anywhere near the school. That is if he could. But he wouldn't be able to do that. Pai listens to all his teachings from outside the window, hiding there, occasionally peeping into the classroom.

Koro shouts at her for wanting to learn only what boys should learn, asking her to confine herself to women's jobs, but Nanny Flowers consoles her and tells her other people can teach her the Maori ways if old Paka wouldn't – Nanny's second son, Rawiri, would teach her, he knows. And it is from him that Pai learns things Paka wouldn't teach her.

And then, one day, a boy of Paka's school – her friend – in a moment of anger and humiliation caused by others, picks up his Maori fighting stick – taiaha – and attacks Pai with it behind Koro's classroom. But Pai is more than a match to him with

her taiaha, and both fight to win. Hearing the sound of a stick clashing against the bar, Old Paka comes out of the school, by which time Paik has beaten the boy, and his taiaha is lying on the ground. Paka gets into a violent temper and, shouting furiously, asks her if she knows what she has done and does she want to defeat him, Paka defeat the boys and humiliates them. He makes her repeatedly apologise for what she has done – violating the sanctity of the only place where Maori ways are still completely followed, the school.

Paka is in a hurry to choose his successor from among the boys he teaches and trains. One day he takes them deep into the sea on a boat and tells them on their way, "You have all done very well. You've shown me that you have courage, are strong, and can learn. But there can only be one. So there is one final test, a test of your spirit."

With that, Paka removes his whale tooth pendant from his neck and throws it into the deep sea, asking the boys to return it. Searching for the badge of the chief underwater and bringing it back would be the final test. The boys try their best, but the deep sea is scary, abounding in giant underwater vegetation, and you cannot hold your breath too long. One by one, they come back empty-handed. A devastated Paka accepts his defeat and withdraws into a shell of gloom. Back home, he confines himself to his bed, not communicating with anyone, wailing in Maori. He is wailing not only for his failure but for the death of his tribe and their sacred ways, which he sees doomed before his closed eyes. Wailing, he calls for the ancient ones, but they do not listen.

So little Pai tries.

Standing alone on the terrace of her uncle Rawiri's home, where she has been taken by Nanny Flowers, who wanted to leave Paka alone for a while. She stands alone there one night and calls the ancient ones in Maori chants, and we see ancient whales appear in the sea, swimming majestically, their movements underwater purest poetry.

The ancestors have heard her.

One day we see Pai in a boat deep in the sea with her uncle Rawiri, his girlfriend and two of their friends. "Uncle, is this where Paka lost his reputation," she asks Rawiri. The others do not know what reputation means – the whale tooth pendant Paka wears on his

neck as the badge of his position. Rawiri points out a place some distance away, and before anyone can say anything, Pai dives into the sea with the words, “I’ll get it.”

Once again, simple words. No assertion, aggression, raising of the voice, boasting, shouting and yelling, nothing. Just a simple statement, “I’ll get it.”

A very long time passes—much more time than anyone can stay underwater. And then Rawiri’s girlfriend starts worrying, and soon Rawiri himself becomes restless and leaps into the sea in search of her. A long search ensues, everyone holding his breath. Suddenly a large lobster lands in the small boat, dropped by a small hand, and then we see a happy, broadly smiling face beside the ship – that of Pai. “For Paka’s tea,” says the little girl, and then she adds, “And I found this,” holding up the reiputa in her hand.

The reiputa all the boys taught by Paka had failed to find. He was finding which the finder would have become the successor of Paka and the head of the tribe to pass it down his family line for all times. Later, as Rawiri hands over the reiputa to his mother, with tears ready to roll down his eyes, he asks her, “Are you going to tell him?” And Nanny Flowers, with the same joy, sorrow and pride in her eyes filled with silent tears, says, “No. He is not ready yet.”

That Pai has recovered the chief’s badge from the sea will remain their secret until the right time comes.

Time passes.

One day little Pai and Nanny come to their home to see Old Paka. They have been living with Rawiri and have come to invite him to Pai’s school consort. As Nanny waits in the front room, Pai pads into Paka’s room, where she finds him in bed, silent, non-communicative, facing the wall, the space in darkness. She sits in the chair next to the bed and, placing the invitation for the consort beside him on the bed, says, “It’s for my school consort... You are my guest of honour.” She gets up and kisses Paka on his cheek – we now see his eyes are open though he does not respond to her in any way. “So I’ll see you there, Paka,” she says. As she leaves the room, the camera is still for a long time, focused on Paka. He

does not move, he does not turn around, he does not blink. It is as though he is dead.

A front chair is left vacant for Koro in the consort hall. In the next chair are Nanny, beside her, Rawiri and his girlfriend. The function begins, the children stage one by one item, and we see the resigned face of Nanny, pained by the knowledge that he would not come. At home Paka gets up from his bed, dresses, come out of the house, pauses and listens... In the school, the teacher appears on the stage and announces the last item of the evening. The chair for Paka remains vacant.

“Now, to finish,” she says, “we have something very special. One of our students has won our school speech contest and the East Coast Area Schools’ as well. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome MsPaikeaApirana.” As Pai gets up on the stage, Nanny turns to Rawiri and asks him in a choked voice, “Did you know this?” And Rawiri says, “She said she has a surprise...” and after a pause, he adds, “for him!”

Pai begins his speech after a few words of chant in the Maori language, saying, “This speech is a token of my deep love and respect for KoroApirana, my grandfather.” The chair for him is still empty, and Pai swallows hard, her voice choked, with tears in her eyes. There is complete silence in the hall as she pauses to wipe her eyes.

And you feel unable to breathe as the little child struggles with her emotions, visibly crying on the stage, though she is fighting her emotions, refusing them to overpower her.

Still struggling within herself, Pai manages to say, “My name is Paikea Apirana...”

We see tears falling from her eyes.

“And I come from a long line of chiefs, stretching back to Hawaiki...where our ancient ones are...the ones that first heard and sent a man. His name was also Paikea. And I am his mo... most recent descendant...”

“But I was not the leader my grandfather was expecting...and by being born...I broke the line back to the ancient ones...”

“It wasn’t anybody’s fault. It just happened.”

The camera takes us to the beach where Paka, fully dressed in formal clothes, strolls about. All of a

sudden, he drops his walking stick, and we see him approaching a whale stranded on the beach. As he crouches next to it and looks around slowly, we see whales stranded all around.

Pai finishes her speech in the school by saying everyone must be strong, non-leaders, and leaders. Sometimes leaders too can get tired – as their ancestor Paikea was when he was lost in the sea. And then he sang a song to the ancestors, asking for their help. She was going to chant his chant.
“And I dedicate it to my grandfather.”

She finishes the song, tears rolling down her cheeks, her voice repeatedly choked, with long pauses that her emotions force upon her, to thunderous, wild applause from the audience.

The seat reserved for Paka is still vacant.

On the beach, a forlorn Paka is hugging a stranded whale. He asks, “Who is to blame?”
Pai has been taken to her uncle’s home after the school programme, and while the exhausted little girl is taking a nap, Rawiri comes running to his mother, tears rolling down his eyes, and asks her to come bego and take a look.

On the beach lie several whales stranded, and Paka is with them. As Nanny comes to him and hugs the sad man, he asks again, “Who is to blame?”

Back home, we see Pai waking up, restless and tormented from her nap. Her eyes are feverish. As Pai stands looking out of the window, we hear the voice of the narrator – little Pai’s voice: “I called, and they came... But it wasn’t right. They were dying.” And we see several people, primarily men but also many women, gathered around the whales, trying to do whatever they can to save the situation – covering them up with clothes and gunny bags, pouring water over them to cool them and so on. Rawiri moves about among them and guides them in their work. A whale dies.

In the distance, we can see Pai standing alone in a boat – a solitary, sad figure, entirely still, almost unreal, looking into the distance. We also see Koro walking alone towards one of the stranded whales – a giant whale lying alone, half in water and half on the sand. And we hear Pai’s thoughts: “Koro knew what it meant. Paikea’s whale was sent to us because we were in trouble.”

Paka crouches down beside the giant whale, chanting Maori mantras in mourning tones and wailing simultaneously. Pai is standing with her uncle Rawiri, who asks her to remain where she is as he walks towards his father, sitting motionless with his hand on the whale. “We have to turn them around,” says Paka as Rawiri comes near.

As Pai, repentant and silent, approaches and tries to touch the whale, Paka forbids her sternly. “Leave it,” he tells her. “You’ve done enough.”

The voice of old authority forbids emerging new leaders from taking any steps to save them from disaster. He wouldn’t tolerate it. The girl can only harm. She has already done enough harm. By being born a girl, to begin with. By violating traditions. By refusing to remain within the bounds, sacred tradition has set for her and by learning the Maori martial arts meant only for men, by beating the most promising boy in them. Communicating with the whales and bringing about the greatest disasters for the entire tribe.

He does not know yet that she has procured the whale tooth badge of the chief from the bottom of the sea, where he had thrown it to be picked up by the one who would be the next leader of the tribe. Nanny hasn’t told him. Nor has anyone else. He is not yet ready for it. How can a girl be the chief? Chieftom went to men. And so long as he is alive, so long as he is the chief, that is how things will be.

Old Paka cannot see that Pai has no desire for chieftom. All she wants is to help her grandfather. Out of endless love for him. She can see his loneliness, his helplessness, and she wants to be his strength. And she can see where the community is headed. And deep in her heart, she knows only she can stop them from being ruined. Perhaps not consciously, but unconsciously. She knows she has the strength, the power. Knows not in so many words but in deep inner silence.

Tradition can be your strength. But more often, tradition becomes your greatest weakness. Tradition gives you tunnel vision. Blinds you to the living truth of the now. It trains you to look at things one particular way and, by doing so, makes you blind to all other possibilities.

As the old man prays by the whale, little Pai walks quietly away, obeying his wish.

We see the community men tying huge ropes around the stranded leader whale so that, with the help of a tractor, they can turn it around and make it go into sea. Once it goes, the other whales would follow.

Pai watches it all, a solitary figure, standing still in the distance, unwanted, exiled, with beach grass, a bush and a tree forming her background. She is part of the vegetation of the place. As helpless as the vegetation is to help the community, to turn the whales around, lead them back into the sea. She has been rejected. She has no power, no strength.

A tractor pulls ropes, trying to turn the whale around so that it will swim into the sea. The whole community together pushes the whale back into the sea. We can hear Nanny Flowers chanting sacred words to the whale, loud and clear, her voice rising above the roar of the sea.

Pai is still standing in the distance. Motionless, still, her unblinking eyes fixed on the scene, only her hair playing in the wind and the tall marsh grass in her background.

The rope snaps.

The whale refuses to move.

“He wanted to die,” we hear the narrator – little Pai – saying. “There wasn’t a reason to live anymore.” His death is the death of the community. Of the Maoris. Their annihilation. There would be no future.

It is late in the evening. Nanny leads a defeated Paka away. The men and women walk with their heads bent, silent, defeated by the stubborn determination of the giant whale not to go back to the sea. They give up, deciding to try later.

All alone on the beach, wearing a sea green pullover and dark pants, her hair wet, little Pai approaches the solitary whale. She touches him gently, her hands moving along his ancient skin. What is she communicating? We do not know. A prayer, perhaps. Love, perhaps. Supplication, perhaps. Her determination, perhaps. Maybe all of these.

You sense the magic of the moment. Powerful magic. Something extraordinary is happening, which

you sense but do not find words to describe, even to yourself. The language of existence itself. The language of love. Preverbal.

She touches the whale with her nose and forehead – how the Maoris greet each other. Keeps her forehead there in silence. For a long time, communicating to it, communing with it. After all, he is her ancestor’s whale. He is Paikea’s whale. The same whale that brought Paikea from Hawaiki, three thousand miles across the vast sea, to his new home, the new home of the Maori’s.

Paikea is communing with Paikea’s whale. Paikea is communicating with Paikea’s whale. Timeless communion. Timeless communication. The two of them are in a world where time does not exist. Individuality does not exist. Two do not exist.

They are one now.

Not one word is spoken. It resembles how a moored boat rocks in shallow water to the tune of the moving waves.

A little girl perched on the back of a giant whale. Pai climbs onto the back of the giant whale. She caresses it with her tiny hands.

Her eyes show no determination, no decision. She is not doing anything. She is letting things happen. She is flowing with things.

She is in a deep trance. In some other world. In some different dimension. One with differentia’s whale. Where no one will take decisions, but decisions will be taken, events will happen and come into being, as decided by powers greater than herself, greater than even the giant whale.

She has surrendered her will to it. The future of the tribe to it. Everything to it.

To that power. To that power that knows everything. Understands everything. Decides everything.

She is just a little girl perched atop a giant whale in an endless sea, rolling eternally to the timeless music of existence. A little girl dressed in a sea green pullover and dark trousers on the black whale.

Two words come out of her. No, she does not speak them. They just come out of her. “Come on!”

And she gently kicks the back of the whale with her petite bare heels. The way a rider kicks a horse prompts it to move.

The whale moves. Gently, gently. Gently, gently. She turns around, making waves in the sea, as she perches over it, her soul one with it, her eyes intent, motionless on it.

The Whale Rider

It is Mawiri who senses it first. He is with the people still walking away, downcast, lost in thought, despair, and suffering for their failure. He stops, turns around, looks, and announces: “It’s gone!”

Nanny stops and looks back. “Where is she?” are the words that come from her. A question asked like a silent shriek.

And the question is repeated, again and again, “Where is she? Where is my moko?”

Moko means grandchild.

The whole crowd stops and turns around to look back.

“P...a...i!” Wails the old woman aloud as her legs rush towards the place where the whale was momenta ago, towards the sea.

There is not one whale stranded on the beach. And the sea is full of whales swimming on the surface, floating on the waves, and creating a marvellous dance.

Old Paka is seen looking into the sea from another place, with a green hill forming his background.

In the far distance, the camera shows us little Pai still perched on the back of the giant whale, facing the front of the whale and moving deeper into the sea. Her head turned towards the shore.

She is still in that trance.

There is no triumph in her eyes. No joy of victory. No claim of achievement. Nothing. They are vacant. At most, there is a quizzical expression—curiosity about what will happen. Whatever happens, is welcome.

She sees old Paka on the beach. “It’s okay, Paka,” she whispers, more to herself than to her grandfather, as the whale gently carries her deeper into the sea.

The whale dives underwater and comes up again. Pai looks up to the clouds in the sky, and we hear the narrator Pai’s soft voice, “I wasn’t afraid to die.”

What we see next is Pai underwater, still clinging to the whale, as it moves beneath the waves. She is struggling for breath.

A loudly, openly wailing Nanny turns away from the sea where you can see whales no more, where there is no Pai, and looks at Paka standing still in the distance. As she approaches him, she takes out the whale tooth insignia of the chief from her pocket and places it in Paka’s hand. Paka looks at it confused and asks, “Which one?”

Which one has brought it back? Which one of the boys he has been training has brought it back? There is a volcano inside Nanny as the still-as-death woman asks after a long pause, “What do you mean which one?” and then turns around and walks away from her husband.

I had to stop here, as on many other occasions, because my choked breath wouldn’t let me continue, as Paka, now shaken thoroughly, his eyes finally open to reality, to the truth, to Pai, to little Paikea, stares into the empty sea, his whole body shaking with the power of the emotions storming through him.

You want to slap the old man, kick him. He disgusts you. But it is a pity that you feel for him. Not anger, but pity.

There is nothing more left of the man. What remains is the remnants of what was once an adamant man who deeply loved his tradition, clung to it tightly and stubbornly refused to take a single step away from it.

It is not that he did not love his grandchild. But she was born a girl.

In the distance, the camera shows us whales quietly moving deep underwater, their movements more stillness than motion.

There is no Pai with them.

You hear mournful music.

And then, after what feels like an eternity, we see Pai again. Perched on the leader whale, the whale of her ancestor Paikea, the whale perhaps her ancestor Paikea, ready to explode into a thousand shreds

underwater, so long as she remained without air in her lungs.

She lets go of the whale.

Maybe they are unable to hold on any more. Unable to hold her breath anymore.

On the beach, we see standing Nanny Flowers, Rawiri and his girlfriend, and old Paka, all weeping silently.

And then we see a scene of what looks like a couple of days later. A scene from Paka's home. He is lying on bed in a dark room, with no life except that he breathes—the phone rings. Now we are shown a hospital scene. Pai's family and their friends are waiting outside a hospital room. Inside is Paka with little Pai, who is deeply asleep, with the chief's whale tooth insignia on its string around her neck. Against soulful music, we hear Paka's words, "Wise leader, forgive me, I am just a fledgling new to flight."

Who is the wise leader he is talking to, asking forgiveness from?

Little Pai?

The leader whale – their ancestor's whale? Their ancestor himself?

We are once again shown whales moving quietly underwater. The giant ancient whale and a young one.

Little Pai wakes up from her drug and exhaustion induced slumber and slowly opens her eyes. Paka looks at her with a soft smile on his lips. Pai goes slips back to sleep again.

Some days later...

On the beach, men are moving a large new ornamental boat into the sea on rollers, a festive boat, perched on the bow of which is the statue of a dynamic Paikea, the ancestor, looking as though he would leap into the sea any moment. As the boat moves into the sea, rowed by scores of hands, we see little Pai standing on the beach beside her grandfather. Pushing the boat into the sea along with other sturdy men is Pourorangi, little Pai's father. And standing on the beach, encouraging them are Maori women, men and children, dressed in traditional Maori costumes, chanting Maori chants. Nanny Flowers smiles contentedly. As we watch, she breaks into chanting traditional mantras,

accompanied by conventional gestures. She has the chief's badge around her neck, the whale tooth.

Little Pai is the chief now, the priestess of the community, their leader, their inspiration, their strength.

Paka gently holds her, drawing her to him with a happy smile. Pai looks at him and smiles back as she continues to chant.

And then we hear the voice of the narrator, of little Pai. "My name is Paikea Apirana," she says, "and I come from a long life of chiefs, stretching back to the Whale Rider." After a pause, she adds, "I am not a prophet, but I know our people will keep going forward... all together, with all our strength."

We hear joyous Maori chants from the men rowing the boat into the deep sea. Triumphant, exultant, jubilant, celebratory chants.

SUMMING UP

Speaking of how the novel *Whale Rider*, on which the movie is based, came to be written, author Witi Ihimaera shares with us many versions of the legend of the original Whale Rider who rode from the Hawaiki islands a thousand years ago to what is now New Zealand – it is the story of his ancestor, he has descended from him. He does not remember exactly how old he was when he stood gazing at the statue of the Whale Rider at Whangarain, New Zealand and heard the story of his miraculous voyage across the vast ocean. But by 1956, when he was twelve, the story had become an obsession with him. He speaks of how on weekends, he would cycle the twenty-seven kilometres to Whangara to stand gazing at the sculpture. He asked questions like how far the Hawaiki islands were – the distance his ancestor had travelled on the back of a whale – and do you kick the whale to make it move, as you do with a horse, and so on. One of the answers that amazed him was that Hawaiki was a vast three thousand miles away! It never crossed his mind that the story of Paikea could be just a myth – for him, it was true, and nobody could convince him otherwise.

And then, one day, after seeing several movies with him during the holiday season, his daughter Jessica asked the author, "Daddy, why are

the boys always the heroes and the girls so hopeless? All they do is yell, “Save me, save me; I’m so helpless!””

Sometime after this, all of America, where the author had been living, was agog with excitement because a whale had swum up the Hudson River in New York. Witi Ihimaera sits down to write *Whale Rider* and completes the book in six weeks, and when Jessica and her sister visit him next, he gives it to them to read – it was written for them. Ihimaera takes it as a message for him from the *Whale Rider* and the whales of New Zealand – that he hasn’t been forgotten though he is on the other side of the world. The first edition of the book was published in New Zealand in 1987. The movie is based on the adaptation by the screenwriter Niki Caro, the movie’s director.

Niki Caro is the director of another brilliant movie which won him several awards – a Holocaust movie by the name *The Zookeeper’s Wife*.

There are significant differences between the novel *Whale Rider* and the movie. As it should be, the film is far more focused than the book. It is almost entirely centred around Pai, where the novel gives us a lot of Maori myths, has pages and pages on Pai’s uncle Rawiri’s life in Australia, where he spends a couple of years, and much more about the whales in the deep sea and so on. While these things are fine in a novel and valuable, in a movie, they would have been distractions. Niki Caro has eliminated them, speaking of which Witi Ihimaera says: “Niki created a marvellous transformation, and she updated the story so that it is very relevant beyond the year 2003. It’s not just about a community facing a particular problem of ancestry and succession; it’s also about women and how they must find and make their way in society. Pai has become this iconic young girl desperately trying to seek her sovereignty and destiny in a male-orientated world.”

While all the actors have given excellent performances, I found the performance of the two central female characters most outstanding – Keisha Castle-Hughes, selected from among 10,000 children for the role of Pai and Vicky Haughton, who played Nanny Flowers. The embittered, authoritarian Koro’s

role is played by Rawiri Paratene, who does a great job of it too.

Two of the best aspects of the movie are its photography by Leon Narbey who succeeds totally in capturing the lyrical beauty of the New Zealand village of the Maoris and the boundless expanses of the magical sea with giant whales who glide underwater with what seems effortless ease, and the music by Lisa Gerrard. While Narbey’s camera captures in their entirety the surreal stillness of the movements of these much-misunderstood sea giants who look softness itself through his eyes, Lisa Gerrard’s music adds depth and power to them as well as to the rest of the movie. There are moments when the music touches you so profoundly that it chokes you with the emotions it draws up deep within you.

Another thing that adds a magical dimension to the movie is the frequent use of Maori words. This happens during intensely emotional scenes or when an intimate scene has to be used. The Maori language - *Te Reo* – is also used for all chantings, bringing a mythical depth to the occasion, as when the rowers row the boat into the deep seas when Paka’s school for Maori children is being inaugurated and so on.

It has been said that authentic leaders are self-aware and genuine, mission-driven and focused on results, lead with their heart and focus on the long term. In *Little Pai*, we see all these qualities. As an emerging leader, she does not believe in being aggressive – instead, she chooses to flow through paths of least resistance, as the Tao teaches a leader should. She is flexible – but that does not mean she does not take stands. She does it quietly, exactly as the whales move underwater, and is persistence itself. Humiliate her, hurt her, punish her, throw her out, do everything to destroy her, and yet she bounces back every time and, like the phoenix, is born again more robust than before. It is not her desire for power and position that brings her back every time, but her love for her grandfather, her concern for him and his concerns, his cares, and his responsibilities. It is these that give her boundless strength, the strength needed to wage a quiet battle against that very man whom she loves more than her own life but who wouldn’t have her do anything because she is born a girl and has

broken a thousand-year-old tradition in which a son has always carried the torch of leadership for the community.

Vajrād api kathorāṇi, kusumād api komalāni, says a subhashita in Sanskrit about great minds: they are more complex than the diamond and, at the same time, more tender than a flower. That is precisely what little Pai is.

Some people are born with a destiny – they are destiny’s children. Nothing can stop them from reaching that destination. Pai is one such child. And their whole existence is with her in her journey to what she was born to be so that no force on earth can stop her from reaching there.

It has been said: “A strong woman feels deeply and loves fiercely. In her essence, a strong woman is a gift to the world.” Little Pai is a strong woman. She feels deeply and loves fiercely. And, in her essence, she is a gift to the world. A priceless gift. For ancient India, which has spent more time studying leadership and given more space in its literature than any other culture, the ultimate leadership ideal has always been feminine. Speaking about leadership, the Mahabharata says that a great leader should be like the pregnant woman who forgets herself and her interests altogether, living for the baby growing in her womb: yathā hi garbhiṇī hitvā svam priyam manasonugam garbhasya hitam ādhatte tathā rājñāpy-asamśayam vartitavyam.

This is what we find little Pai doing throughout Whale Rider.

Feminine leadership, which is slowly being perceived as the ideal form of leadership, in a world wherein femininity is sadly undervalued and disappearing, and women who have joined the rat race are trying to become men in high heels, forgetting their precious womanhood, is characterised before anything else by empathy, which is the ability to feel and understand others as if we are experiencing their feelings ourselves. It requires we step outside our world and into the other’s to share and understand how the other is feeling.

Another central characteristic of feminine leadership is compassion, born of experiencing our human situation profoundly and with understanding, living our pains and pleasures intensely and with full

awareness. Compassion – karuna, which the Buddha repeatedly emphasised, calling it the highest human virtue – helps us give unreservedly of ourselves to others, even when the other is unwilling to receive it, even when the other hurts us for our giving, as the scorpion stings the monk who tries to save it from drowning every time the man pulls it out of water.

A third seminal characteristic of feminine leadership is intuition – the ability to understand people, processes, events and things– past, present and future – at a level that transcends reason – a competency that has been called an essential characteristic of the highest kind of leadership, the one single difference between the greatest of leaders and the stars even among them. As much as compassion, as much as empathy, if not more than these, this is the hallmark of feminine leadership, which helps the feminine leader – man or woman, it does not matter – to reach conclusions even when facts are not fully known, perceptions vague and hazy. The gut feeling that tells you where to go, and you take that path and soon realise you were absolutely right to do so. Had you not taken that path, disaster would have been the result.

Right-brain thinking.

Yet another characteristic of feminine leadership is that it is marked by the ability to be in tune with natural forces, with the boundless energy that exists in all of us and links us with one another – sūtre maṇigaṇā iva, as the Gita puts it: like the thread that runs through the pearls of a necklace. The ancient wisdom of India had a beautiful name for this harmony with the world, with its ebbs and tides, changing seasons, and rhythms: ṛtam, which they considered the highest virtue, the higher truth, satyasya satyam, an integrity from which arose Truth itself. The Chinese called this the Tao and said the only meaningful way to live is by following the flow of this universal energy, the source of life itself – sink your roots into the Tao, be centred in it, and everything else falls into place, becomes as beautiful as an orchestra formed of a hundred different musical instruments. Surrender to the Tao, flow with it, draw sustenance from it, let it nourish you, they said, and everything will become as it should.

The essential virtues in little Pai are empathy, compassion, intuitiveness and rootedness in the forces of nature more significant than life. Along with courage – boundless courage, total fearlessness, not blind recklessness but the ability to risk everything for your goal because you know deep in your guts that you are right, without which there is no victory, no glory, no greatness, and no leadership at all, but just a living within your comfort zones, mere mundane existence, meaningless, bland, empty.

Whale Rider is the ultimate lesson in feminine leadership. And in leadership, as such, feminine leadership alone qualifies as authentic leadership, which sustains, nourishes, rejuvenates and empowers, connects you with the whole and makes the living juices of the universe flow through you – leadership not of expediency but of substance.

And little Pai, the ultimate leader.

As a thrilled reviewer of the movie put it: Pai will be my leader!

Writing about the movie in 2003, its year of release, Roger Ebert, the movie reviewer who became an institution in himself, says: "Whale Rider arrives in theatres already proven as one of the great audience-grabbers of recent years. It won the audience awards as the most popular film at the Toronto and Sundance film festivals, played to standing ovations, and left audiences in tears. I recite these facts right at the top of this review because I fear you might make a hasty judgment that you don't want to see a movie about a 12-year-old Maori girl who dreams of becoming the chief of her people. Sounds too ethnic, uplifting and feminist, right? The genius

of the movie is the way it sidesteps all of the obvious clichés of the underlying story and makes itself fresh, observant, tough and genuinely moving."

Reviewing the movie under the title "A Girl Born to Lead, Fighting the Odds", the New York Times had this to say about the film: "The stoic mysticism of Niki Caro's cool-handed charmer "Whale Rider" -- in which the young Pai must overcome resistance as she tries to assume her destiny as the leader of a tribe on the New Zealand coast -- is wickedly absorbing. Much of the film's power comes from the delicate charisma of Keisha Castle-Hughes, who is making her acting debut as Pai.

"Ms Castle-Hughes lacks the traditional resources of an actress and instead communicates her feelings through a wary hesitation. It doesn't matter that her voice makes her sound a little lost, still trying to find her way into a world that disdains her. Her intelligent, dark eyes are so expressive that she has the piquant confidence of a silent-film heroine."

WHALE RIDER

Written and directed by Niki Caro, based on the novel by Witi Ihimaera; director of photography, Leon Narbey; edited by David Coulson; music by Lisa Gerrard; production designer, Grant Major; produced by Tim Sanders, John Barnett and Frank Hubner; released by Newmarket Films. Running time: 105 minutes. Rated PG-13 for scenes of emotional cruelty that may be a bit upsetting for younger viewers.

Cast: Keisha Castle-Hughes (Pai), Rawiri Paratene (Koro), Vicky Haughton (Nanny Flowers).

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