



# Stranding and Returning to the Sea: The Postcolonial Ecological Allegory of the “Whale” Imagery in *The Whale Rider*

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## Abstract

Witi Ihimaera’s *The Whale Rider* is a classic work of contemporary Māori literature. Through the mysterious connection between Kahu, a girl excluded by traditional succession rules, and the whales, the novel explores the possibilities of colonial trauma, cultural rupture, and cross-species coexistence. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, cross-species narrative, and trauma theory, this paper analyzes the triple connotations of whale imagery in the novel: the mythic whale, the stranded whale, and the redemptive whale. Together, these three dimensions form a complete allegorical trajectory from rupture to crisis to rebirth, revealing how *The Whale Rider* responds to colonial history through literary imagination and offering insights into the construction of a multispecies ecological ethics and cultural healing in the postcolonial era.

## Keywords

*The Whale Rider*; Postcolonial Ecocriticism; Cross-Species Narrative; Whale Imagery; Trauma

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## Introduction

In recent years, postcolonial ecocriticism has emerged as a significant turn in literary studies. This interdisciplinary field integrates postcolonial studies, ecocriticism, and animal studies, arguing that colonialism is fundamentally an ecological conquest, whose core mechanism lies in the historical and discursive entanglement of speciesism and racism. The Western binary thinking opposing “human” to “animal” and “civilization” to “savagery” not only legitimized colonial rule but also laid the foundation for the exploitation of non-human life. Therefore, genuine decolonization must interrogate the category of “the human” itself, bringing animals and the environment into ethical and political consideration.

Since Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin systematically proposed postcolonial ecocriticism, scholarship has begun to focus on how colonial history shapes the intertwined fates of humans and nature. At the theoretical level, Tiffin and Huggan

revealed the discursive isomorphism between speciesism and racism, pointing out that colonialism is essentially a form of “ecological violence”; at the level of textual criticism, scholars have examined literary writings from the Caribbean (e.g., DeLoughrey, 2007), Africa (e.g., Caminero-Santangelo, 2014), and South Asia (e.g., Mukherjee, 2010), analyzing themes such as colonial ecological trauma, animal metaphors, and the disappearance of local knowledge; at the level of critical practice, Nixon’s (2011) concept of “slow violence” has further expanded postcolonial ecocriticism’s attention to the temporality and invisibility of environmental injustice. However, existing research has largely focused on these regions, leaving the postcolonial ecological interpretation of Oceanic Indigenous literature—particularly the spiritual connection between Māori culture and whales in Aotearoa, New Zealand—insufficiently addressed, thus opening space for critical expansion.

New Zealand Māori writer Witi Ihimaera’s (1944 - ) *The Whale Rider* (1987) is precisely a text that responds to the theoretical concerns of postcolonial ecocriticism. Through the mysterious connection between the Māori girl Kahu and the whales, the novel deeply explores the possibilities of colonial trauma, cultural rupture, and cross-species coexistence. Existing scholarship has mostly approached the novel from perspectives such as gender politics and cultural identity. For instance, Visser explores how the female character Kahu breaks patriarchal rules through “inclusive resistance”. At the same time, Du Plooy points out that Apirana’s rigid adherence to tradition precisely exposes the fragility of culture after colonial impact. Although some scholars have recently engaged with ecological perspectives—such as Hsu, who draws on the Māori concept of *whakapapa* (genealogy) to explore the activation of human-nonhuman kinship, Concilio, who proposes a critical approach of “thinking with oceans”, and Canfield, who emphasizes that identity and belonging must be grounded in connection to the earth—few have placed the ecological plight of whales and the postcolonial trauma of Māori people within the same analytical framework. Therefore, this paper adopts postcolonial ecocriticism as its entry point to analyze the triple imagery of the “whale” and to excavate the ecological and cultural allegory behind the text.

## **1. The Mythic Whale: The “Eco-Cultural Bond” Torn by Colonial Modernity**

In the traditional Māori cosmology, there is no rigid boundary between the human and non-human worlds. Mountains, oceans, animals, and even winds and waves are regarded as living, agentive beings that share the same web of kinship with humans. In this cosmology, all things are interconnected; humans do not dominate nature but, at appropriate times, interact reciprocally with their non-human relatives. This holistic worldview constitutes the deep cultural logic underlying the human-whale relationship in *The Whale Rider*.

The novel opens with a myth, establishing the whale’s central role in the origin of the

tribe. According to legend, the Māori ancestor Paikea arrived in Aotearoa (New Zealand) riding a whale, becoming the tribe's founder. For Paikea's descendants, this myth is not merely a distant legend but a living spiritual heritage: "The legendary deeds of Paikea provide a framework for understanding the spiritual bond between humans and the natural world, and the potential that nature reveals when it is respected rather than exploited." The ancient bull whale, as Paikea's companion, carries memories across vast stretches of time, serving as a spiritual link connecting modern Māori to their ancestors. By endowing the whale with memory and emotion, Ihimaera practices a mode of "thinking with oceans", shaping the whale as an agentive being. Here, the whale is not just a character in myth but the witness of an "eco-cultural continuum"—its memory is itself the spiritual vehicle sustaining this continuum.

However, this bond has been severely torn by the impact of colonial modernity. Since European colonists arrived in New Zealand in the 19th century, Māori land, language, and cultural traditions have been systematically dispossessed, and their inter-subjective relationship with the natural world has disintegrated. Colonization and missionary work fundamentally changed the concepts, customs, and ways of life of Pacific Indigenous peoples. When mountains are no longer regarded as ancestors incarnate, and when whales are reduced from "ancestral companions" to exploitable "resources", a fundamental worldview rupture has occurred. Korean scholar Heejung Cha describes this process as colonial modernity's disenchantment of the animistic world: under the "developmental logic of anthropocentrism", nature is reduced to "an object for the realization of human will and the satisfaction of human desire", which is precisely the root cause of today's ecological crisis. This rupture is not only material but also ontological—it dismantles the kinship network that connects Māori to all life through tribal genealogy. The core operative mechanism of colonial modernity is precisely "disenchantment"—reducing natural beings with agency and kinship to objects that can be calculated, owned, and exploited. In *The Whale Rider*, this process manifests as a double dispossession: both the organic connection of Māori to land and ocean, and the ontological status of whales as "ancestral companions." In *The Whale Rider*, traces of this rupture are clearly visible. Apirana's obsessive teaching of tradition—leading boys in chanting ancient incantations and throwing spears—precisely exposes tradition's state of being "narrated". As Castellanos argues, he mistakenly believes that tradition can be saved by enforcing it unchanged. When a culture must be deliberately taught and emphasized, it is no longer a living presence flowing in the blood but a memory facing crisis, needing to be defended. Priyadarsini astutely notes that Apirana's emphasis on transmitting traditional knowledge is precisely aimed at "preserving Māori culture and identity", because this knowledge, "rooted in community practices, institutions, and rituals, is inevitably closely tied to their identity." The elder's anxiety, then, is precisely a trauma response to the rupture of the cultural bond. Meanwhile, the ancient bull whale also falls into confusion. This

confusion can be read as a form of “ecological trauma”—when the spiritual connection to humans is severed, when the ancestors’ songs no longer come from the shore, the whale too loses its place in the cosmic order.

In contrast, Kahu shares an innate, mysterious connection with the whales. She reactivates this dormant cross-species kinship through her communication with them. The novel describes: “She had already swum to the whale, her hands stroking its jaw. ‘Hello, old ancestor.’ She hugged its jaw, patting its body, gazing into its eyes. ‘Hello. I’ve come to see you.’” This connection bypasses the channels of transmission contaminated by colonial modernity and appeals directly to a more ancient blood memory. Kahu’s existence thus proves that this torn bond is not completely severed but continues to pulse in a hidden way within the depths of individual life.

In summary, the “mythic whale” does not exist intact in the present. It is a torn, traumatized image. The violence of colonial modernity manifests not only as land dispossession and language suppression but also as the tearing of the “eco-cultural bond.” The rupture of this bond constitutes the very starting point of the story’s narrative—it is because the connection to the whales has been lost that the Māori tribe falls into a crisis of cultural transmission; it is because both human and whale have fallen into confusion that the symbolic “stranding” becomes an inevitable fate.

## **2. The Stranded Whale: Ecological Manifestation and Cultural Metaphor of Postcolonial Trauma**

If the “mythic whale” points to the harmonious coexistence between pre-colonial Māori and nature, then the “stranded whale” marks the complete rupture of this relationship. In Ihimaera’s writing, the stranding of the whale herd is by no means an accidental ecological event but a carefully crafted narrative device that juxtaposes the tribe’s cultural crisis with nature’s ecological disaster, forming a complex metaphor for postcolonial trauma.

Postcolonial ecocriticism argues that colonial violence manifests not only as land dispossession and cultural suppression but also as the fundamental tearing of the Indigenous “eco-cultural continuum”. The core logic of colonial modernity is to disenchant nature into a “resource” to be plundered—“a form of instrumental rationality that positions natural and animal ‘others’ as either external to human needs or permanently serving them”. What justified the colonizers’ plunder was precisely “the narrative of Indigenous cultures as primitive, less rational, closer to children, animals, and nature.” When this reciprocal ethic disintegrates, and the spiritual bond between humans and nature is severed, trauma ultimately manifests in the form of ecological disaster. The striking scene of whale stranding in *The Whale Rider* is precisely such an ecological manifestation of trauma. It is both a physical stranding and a cultural stranding; both a crisis for the whales and a crisis for the tribe.

The novel’s depiction of the stranding scene endows it with significance beyond a

natural event. The state of the ancient whales before stranding is described as filled with confusion and disorientation: “They were sad, because the journey to the dangerous island had already begun, and the leader was completely absorbed in his dreams of the golden master. In the long genealogies and legends of the whale tribe, the old bull whale’s heart was deeply imprinted with the golden master.” This psychological state is not accidental; it points to the deep trauma of the human-nature relationship caused by colonial history—it can be read as a form of ecological PTSD. Colonial history has wounded not only Māori but also the whales who lived in symbiosis with them. As trauma theory reveals, the essence of trauma lies in “belatedness” and “repetition”: repressed experiences do not disappear but return repeatedly in distorted forms. The stranding of the whales is precisely the traumatic repetition of colonial violence, completed in the form of ecological disaster after being suppressed for generations.

Echoing the confusion of the ancient bull whale is the elder’s powerlessness in the face of the stranded whales. When the real crisis arrives, his incantations fail and his authority crumbles. “Then the rope broke. The old man cried out in despair and buried his face in his hands.” The elder’s incantations fail not because they are “incorrect” in themselves, but because the “eco-cultural continuum” on which their efficacy depended has been torn apart—when the reciprocal ethic between human and whale no longer exists, ritual becomes an empty form. Visser points out that the elder, as tribal chief, exhibits a commitment to tradition that paradoxically exposes tradition’s crisis—he is “imprisoned by his own beliefs,” unable to see that tradition must adapt to changing times. Those incantations might still be recited, but the spiritual bond connecting them to the living whales has been severed; those rituals might still be performed, but the organic connection between them and the tribe’s everyday life has been lost.

The stranding event becomes a multi-dimensional image, simultaneously carrying ecological, cultural, and historical meanings. Ecologically, stranding means the whale herd has been torn from the ocean that sustains it, just as Māori have been torn from the land with which they coexisted for generations. “The chainsaw cut right through the whale’s lower jaw, and they laughed as they pulled it out. The whale’s jaw suddenly separated from its body, and whale blood gushed out in great spurts. They stood in the dark stream of blood. Blood, smiles, anguish, victory, blood...” The whale is no longer a being swimming freely in the ocean but a dying creature beached on the sand. Culturally, stranding metaphorically represents the awkward situation of Māori culture in a postcolonial context: the tribe is like the stranded whales, unable to return to a pure pre-colonial state nor truly integrate into the colonizer-dominated modern society. Historically, stranding is the embodied manifestation of colonial trauma—the ancient bull whale’s state of “having memory but no connection” is precisely a typical symptom of postcolonial trauma.

### 3. The Redemptive Whale: Cross-Species Connection and the Reconstruction of Cultural Subjectivity

When the whales beach themselves and the elder's incantations and calls prove futile, *The Whale Rider* pushes the story toward an apparently hopeless impasse. Yet, at the very moment when everyone is helpless, Kahu—excluded by traditional succession rules—establishes a mysterious spiritual connection with the most ancient and confused bull whale. “Her face was wet with seawater and tears. The whales sped up their swimming, moving away from the beach. She glanced back quickly and saw the distant lights. She kept feeling the whale's tremors and pressed her head against its head.” It is precisely this connection, generated at the stranding site, that constitutes an immanent response to the “rupture” itself.

However, most tribe members cannot understand this connection. They still regard the stranding as an incomprehensible disaster and Kahu's unusual behavior as a girl's willfulness. “I was extremely anxious—she must have fallen into the whale's mouth. This thought made me sick. I remembered the story of Jonah surviving in the whale's belly in the Bible. If necessary, I would jump into that giant whale's belly to pull Kahu out.” This cognitive limitation is itself part of the trauma symptom: when a culture has been stripped of its capacity for intersubjectivity with nature, it loses the senses needed to understand nature's “language”.

It is precisely within the tension of this cognitive rupture that the encounter between Kahu and the bull whale ultimately leads to the climactic “riding of the whale into the sea”—an act that not only saves the stranded whales but also reactivates the tribe's spiritual bond with its ancestors. Kahu's redemptive act is both a life connection across species boundaries and a reconstruction of the fractured cultural subject. Crucially, Kahu's redemptive act is not a simple restoration of pre-colonial “tradition” but, in acknowledging trauma, a creative, future-oriented cultural practice enacted through cross-species connection.

From the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism, the gravest consequence of colonial violence is its tearing of the eco-cultural continuum in which, within the Indigenous worldview, “human and non-human mutually constitute each other”. In *The Whale Rider*, the repair of this rupture must be achieved precisely by re-establishing an ethical relationship between humans and non-humans. Canfield argues that “a solid identity and sense of belonging for any individual and community is indispensable to a connection with the earth.” Kahu's connection with the whale is the ultimate embodiment of this “connection with the earth”—through bodily, emotional, and spiritual encounter, she reactivates the eco-cultural bond severed by colonial history.

Notably, Kahu's encounter with the whale does not occur through language, nor does it depend on any established cultural ritual. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the mysterious connection between them that transcends discourse, grounded in bodily sensation and spiritual resonance: “She kept feeling the whale's tremors and pressed

her head against its head. The old whale dived again, staying underwater longer this time. Kahu found that when she pressed her face against the whale's head, the old whale would open a small passage for her to breathe." This connection cannot be taught in the elder's classroom nor regulated by any artificial traditional rules. Child points out that by presenting this extra-linguistic communication, the work practices a "new animist" worldview—seeing animals, carvings, and ancestors as agentive "persons" capable of establishing reciprocal ethical relationships with humans. Kahu's mode of communication with the whale—touch, tremor, resonance—is a fundamental rejection of colonial modernity's instrumental rationality. Within the framework of instrumental rationality, human-nature "communication" can only be a relationship of control and exploitation; in stark contrast, Kahu offers a model of future-oriented "reciprocal communication".

The climactic scene of Kahu riding the whale into the sea pushes this cross-species connection to a more culturally political dimension. Kahu's "whale riding" is not conquest but a response and accompaniment. "The old whale arched its body, preparing to dive. The sea hissed and surged around her. Its great tail seemed to stand vertically on the sea's surface, slapping the rain-soaked sky. Then they both slid into the water together." This relational model stands in stark contrast to the Western literary tradition of "human taming nature." For Māori, "the connection to the earth and all life is itself a spiritual practice, including perceiving oneself as one with the water, experiencing her vastness and boundless vitality." The key to the "whale riding" imagery lies in its simultaneous implication of "following" and "leading": Kahu follows the whale's rhythm while leading it back to the deep sea; she does not appear as a subject dominating an object but accomplishes redemption within an "inter-subjective" relationship.

The stranded whale herd represents the "stranded" state of Māori culture under the impact of modernity. Kahu's act of guiding the whales back to the sea symbolically responds to this predicament. She opens not a path of "returning to the past" but one of "moving toward the future with trauma." At the novel's end, the voice of the ancient mother whale speaks: "Child, your tribe's people are waiting for you. Return to the kingdom of the human god, Tangaroa, and fulfill your mission." The sea resounds with the beautiful music of diving whales. Kahu's triumph lies in her proving herself "through the mission of protecting nature." This mode of self-validation—protecting rather than conquering nature—is a fundamental subversion of colonial modernity's instrumental rationality.

Kahu's cross-species alliance with the whale ultimately gives rise to a new communal imaginary. The elder's eventual recognition of Kahu signals that his rigid conception of "tradition" must loosen and reconstitute itself in the face of vibrant life force. "He began to pray, asking the spirits to forgive him. Kahu moved her body. Oh, my great-granddaughter. Wake from your long sleep and return to the tribe." This is perhaps the novel's deepest implication: genuine cultural revival cannot be achieved

solely by clinging to the past. It requires a life force capable of crossing species boundaries, transcending gender hierarchies, and connecting ancestors to the future. Kahu summons precisely such a life force. The whale, as the bearer and witness of this life force, completes its entire narrative function in the novel—from mythic bond to symbol of crisis to medium of redemption.

#### 4. Conclusion

Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* was written in the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of the Māori cultural renaissance in New Zealand. During this period, with the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal and its review of historical land claims, Māori began to re-examine colonial history and reassert their cultural identity and discursive rights. The publication of *The Whale Rider* responded precisely to the demands of this era—it is both an allegory of the crisis of Māori cultural transmission and an attempt to reconstruct cultural subjectivity through literary imagination.

Yet the deep logic of colonial modernity has not truly disappeared with the rise of the cultural renaissance movement. As this paper has revealed, the gravest consequence of colonial violence lies not only in land dispossession and cultural suppression but also in its tearing of the Indigenous eco-cultural continuum in which “human and non-human mutually constitute each other.” The mythic whale witnesses the torn bond; the stranded whale reveals the double trauma; the redemptive whale leads toward symbiotic rebirth. The whale's trajectory from “ancestral companion” to “marine resource”, and the Māori's fate from masters of the land to marginalized “natives” awaiting assimilation, both point to the same instrumental logic that objectifies life and naturalizes nature. This logic did not end with the colonizers' departure—it continues, through internalization, to shape contemporary understandings of nature and tradition. Thus, the “stranding crisis” belongs not only to the whales, nor only to the Māori, but to all life trapped on the “beach” of modernity.

As a Māori writer, Ihimaera writes in English yet is deeply rooted in Māori oral tradition; he is both a member of the modern world and an inheritor of an ancient culture. Internally, he provides Māori with imaginative resources for cultural revival, allowing the silent whales and the silent Māori alike to reclaim the right to speak their histories. Externally, he tells the world a story about trauma and healing, rupture and rebirth, making the stranding crisis a global warning and the possibility of redemption a cross-cultural revelation.

*The Whale Rider* ultimately tells us: genuine cultural revival is not a simple return to the past but, in acknowledging historical wounds, a creative reactivation of tradition, allowing it to flourish anew in a different era. The whale herd returns to the deep sea carrying the memory of stranding, but that memory does not disappear; the tribe continues forward carrying the lesson of the crisis, but that lesson is not forgotten. Traumatic memory is woven into a more resilient cultural network; the stranding

crisis becomes the starting point for cultural revival. This is literature's most unique power: it is not a recorder of history but its "re-enactor"—in each act of reading and interpretation, it returns the stranded whales to the sea, reconnects the severed bond, and lets silent voices be heard once more.

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