**Whale Rider Discussion Questions**



1. One major theme of "Aboriginal Religions" is the close divine connection between humans and their environment- especially to the animals in your environment. Most aboriginal religions believe in the divine existence of 'spirit animals'. The idea of a 'spirit animal' is that your soul/spirit is connected to the soul/spirit of a certain animal in your environment. If you can learn to interact with your specific 'spirit animal' then it can give you divine insight and powers. However, if you neglect or harm your 'spirit animal' then it is the same thing as neglecting, harming, and even killing your soul.
2. What do you think about this idea?
3. How do you see this idea in the movie Whale Rider? Be specific. Explain at least 3 different scenes where you saw this in the movie?
4. How is this idea similar and/or different from other religions we have studied or you know about?
5. Click on this website: <https://lonerwolf.com/spirit-animal-origin/> and read more about the idea of 'spirit animals' in Aboriginal Religions. After you read this page- discuss the main ideas with your partner. What are the main ideas and what do you think about it?
6. Click on this website: <https://lonerwolf.com/my-spirit-animal/> and read more about how to find your own 'spirit animal'. After you read this page- discuss the main ideas with your partner. What are the main ideas and what do you think about it?
7. Click on this website: <https://www.worldreligionnews.com/opinion/spirit-animal-not-joke-oppression> about the problem with random people using terms like 'spirit animals'. After you read the article discuss with your partner what are the main ideas of this article and your thoughts about it?
8. Another major theme of "Aboriginal Religions" is the close divine connection between you and your ancestors. Your ancestors are constantly 'present' in your life now. Similar to the 'spirit animal', if you learn to interact with your ancestors' presence it will give you tremendous spiritual insight and power. However, if you neglect to interact with your ancestors it will cause you tremendous spiritual struggle and problems.
9. What do you think about this idea?
10. How do you see this idea in the movie Whale Rider? Be specific. Explain at least 3 different scenes where you saw this in the movie?
11. How is this idea similar and/or different from other religions we have studied or you know about?
12. To connect theme 1 and theme 2 above, another major theme of 'Aboriginal Religions" is how theme 1 and theme 2 are closely connected. In other words there is a divine connection between your ancestors and the animals/environment surrounding you. So one 'way of knowing' this idea is that your ancestors 'become' and 'infuse' the environment and animals surrounding you. As a result, if you connect with and care for your surrounding environment and animals then you are caring for your ancestors and your own soul after you die. In contrast, if you ignore or destroy the environment and animals surrounding you then you are destroying your own ancestors and your own soul.

a) What do you think about this idea?

b) How do you see this idea in the movie Whale Rider? Be specific. Explain at least 3 different scenes where you saw this in the movie?

c) How is this idea similar and/or different from other religions we have studied or you know about?

1. Changing topics somewhat- another topic we will explore will be "Feminine Spirituality". One question we will explore in the book *Burning Woman* by Lucy Pearce is to ask: "How are girls and women expected to find their own 'spiritual identity' within a patriarchal religion?" In other words- almost all the world religions we study are 'patriarchal' or controlled by men. In fact, many of these religions believe that one key to spiritual advancement is for men to separate from women because there is something inherently 'wrong' or 'evil' about women and woman's nature. As a result, many of these world religions have an attitude that women must be burned or conquered, so Lucy Pearce argues women have an innate fear of constantly being 'burned' by men. So the question is: How can girls and women find a place or spiritual identity in such a belief system?
2. What are your thoughts about this idea?
3. How do you see this idea in the movie Whale Rider? Be specific. Explain at least 3 different scenes where you saw this in the movie?
4. We are now going to read some parts from a college student's 'research paper' from a Film Studies class at University. We are only going to read the parts I copy below, but here is the entire student's website dedicated to this research project: <http://clairechoywhalerider.blogspot.com/> So start at question #9 below:
5. First read the student's INTRODUCTION paragraph and after you finish the Introduction discuss with your partner- what is the overall THESIS and main ideas of her research paper?

Here is the Introduction to read in green:

Introduction:

 In the 2002 film, Whale Rider, the director, Niki Caro created a magnificently empowering movie that serves as an inspirational tool for females. The film is based on the Whangara Maori people from the East Coast of New Zealand, who believed that their existence was purely reliant on a brave prophet, also named Paikea, who rode on the back of a whale to escape death when his canoe was overturned at sea. From that point forward, Whangara chiefs believed that the first born males are Paikea’s direct descendants (Whale Rider, 2002).

 Paikea Apirana is the female protagonist of the film. She is an 11 year old girl, who was born in the Whangara patriarchal tribe. Right from the moment of her birth she was shunned upon by the members of her tribe. This is because her mother and twin brother both died during the delivery, leaving Paikea as the unfavourable child to her grandfather Koro. She states, “there was no gladness when I was born. My twin brother died and took my mother with him. Everybody was waiting for the first born boy to lead us but he died and I didn’t” (Whale Rider, 2002). The first thing the grandfather does when he walks in is he asks where his deceased grandson is, without acknowledging his deceased daughter-in-law (who is lying dead in front of him) or Baby Paikea (Whale Rider, 2002).

 Although approximately half of the human population consists of females, they are highly underrepresented in films. Most of the leading protagonist roles are favoured to men. Females are typically casted in a stereotypically traditional role as being the passive follower; females are the ones that obey the demands requested by the males. A great example is Mrs. Apirana, Paikea’s grandmother. Although she does voice out her disapproval and annoyance of her husband’s traditional preaching about males being superior over females, she still maintains the household and takes Paikea out of the room whenever her husband is speaking to other male members of the community. This shows that Mrs. Apirana knows her role is submissive and that she must obey the orders of her husband in order to satisfy the traditional standards that he upholds (Whale Rider, 2002). Paikea, on the other hand, is the complete opposite of Mrs. Apirana. Through the “female gaze” and “counter cinema”, Niki Caro portrays Paikea as a strong, self-assertive, relentless, intelligent, and ambitious girl, who wants nothing more than to assume the role as the tribe leader. Although her desires are shunned upon initially, the outcome of her diligence and perseverance to accomplish this goal allows her to not only gain the title as a prophet-like leader, but also gained the respect of her male counterparts. She also became an inspiring role model for females to follow in her footsteps. Through the “female gaze” this film, Niki Caro focuses on empowering women to be relentless about achieving their goals and never giving up regardless of the doubt that others may have (Whale Rider, 2002).

1. Now read some of the student's answer to this Professor's question: How is Paikea a female counter-stereotype? Use the "female gaze" theory to describe how the film and the character fit this model of the female perspective and female “voice”. Use the web link provided in Week 11 module on the Female Gaze (the Rubaiyat Hossain article, “Female Directors, Female Gaze”).

Read the student's answer in red here:

Paikea Apirana is the 11 year old protagonist of the film, and she is the exact opposite of her grandmother. She is an exemplar of a female counter-stereotype; in other words, she is not passive, weak, and submissive. In fact, Paikea is a strong headed, confident, intelligent, curious, diligent, and fearless young girl who defied the odds against her of succeeding in a male-dominated society. In many ways, Paikea exhibited characteristics that resemble the male stereotype. Paikea knew from the moment of her birth that she was not well-liked. Paikea had a soliloquy at the beginning of the film, where she states “there was no gladness when I was born. My twin brother died and took my mother with him. Everyone was waiting for the first born boy to lead us, but he died and I didn’t” (Whale Rider, 2002). Her grandfather often reprimanded her for being a girl because only boys can carry on the tradition of being the successor of the almighty Whale Rider of the Sea. Her grandfather looked down on her with contempt and viewed her as a burden because she could not fulfill this role, even though she was always trying to convince him of her superiority. For instance, when her grandfather’s boat’s rope was broken, Paikea took the initiative to tie the rope back and rev up the engine. Without acknowledging her cleverness, he dismisses her skill and tells her, “don’t do that again, it’s dangerous” (Whale Rider, 2002). Her grandfather is the perfect example of someone who idealizes male dominance and the fact that his granddaughter was able to fix the engine when he could not, he felt ashamed and of lesser value than a female. If Paikea was a male, her ability would have been greatly applauded and the grandfather would have given her more tasks to perfect on (Whale Rider, 2002).

 According to Rubaiyat Hossain’s article, “Female Directors, Female Gaze”, she states that a female “is never fully recognised as a human subject; either a Goddess, or a Whore, an animal who is only valuable because of her body parts that can give pleasure to men, procreate to continue the patriarchal kinship lineage” (Hossain, 2011, para 3). This is an example of the “male gaze” because it is based on the expectations males have of females. As a result women will adjust themselves to fit this standard. “Social and cultural myths about women transmit themselves in the main/male stream filmic representation validating and creating models for real women in the society to follow and perpetuate the myth of the man made female, creating a vicious circle. The representation of women as subsidiary characters to men in main/male stream films not only validates women's position in society as sexual objects, but women's role in the ideological realm of the masculine construct of identity and nation-state” (Hossain, 2011, para 6). This explains why Paikea was having a difficult time in obtaining the role as leader; women are only meant to fulfill the supporting role. They have the duty to become excellent housewives and mothers, whereas Paikea wanted to take over the male role and learn the chanting ritual and the stick fighting skill. She did not want to settle with staying at home and become a housewife like her grandmother, or escape the Maori grounds like her father did and pursue a different identity. When Paikea’s father asked her leave; she wanted to remain within the confines of the territory that she truly believed molded her into becoming an aspirating hero (Whale Rider, 2002).

“Today there is no 'one' type of feminist films, rather there are films made by different women, representing diverse women, depicting ranges of experiences, feelings and senses women feel -- elements that never make into the main/male stream currency of images and desire. The masculine visual economy of desire will only place women in a place from where her sexual beauty is desirable and enjoyable, and secondly place women in a place from where she is forever the secondary object, never the central human subject” (Hossain, 2011, para 8). The Whale Rider film is one element of a “female gaze” it was created to counter the idea that women cannot be the central human subject. In films created with the “female gaze”, females are given the rare opportunity of being the central role. Like Paikea, she is given the leading role because Caro wanted to use her as a success story. Just like the real world, Paikea is not taken seriously when she wants to pursue the role as leader because it deviates from her assigned role. This further shows how Paikea was a counter stereotype because she was expected to be a passive and weak person; instead, Paikea defies all odds and becomes an inspirational role model for all young girls to admire (Whale Rider, 2002).

Hossain questions, “should female directors, in order to represent their female protagonist as a 'human being' and not a sexual object, defeminise the protagonist, strip her of her female beauty, a beauty which may in many ways overlap with the male/main stream cinematic representation?” (Hossain, 2011, para 10). The answer to this question is yes, female directors must defeminise the female because the “feministic standard” was created by males and it is solely based on the male expectation. Often times, if role reversals are implemented, a female is capable of accomplishing many of the tasks expected of men. The assigned tasks are unjust and discriminatory. It always favours men to succeed and females to fail. A female is never given the opportunity because she is predicted to fail. The female’s perspective is that her abilities are hidden because society condemns her of her abilities when she overtly reveals them. For instance, when Paikea reveals her ability to fix the rope to the boat engine for her grandfather and also, when she defeats Hemi in a stick fight, she is scolded by her grandfather because in a patriarchal society, females are not allowed to defeat males (Whale Rider, 2002). The male is supposed to be the stronger one; he is the one who takes charge and protects the female from harm. In ancient times, males were once regarded as the hunters and females were the gatherers. Men went out to seek for food and defended their territory from potential intruders; whereas women stayed home and ensured future generations would survive with food and loving nourishment. In Paikea’s case, she was stripped away her own gender assignment; she was not the female that everyone wanted her to be. She defeminised herself in order to succeed. Even though mainstream films would have favoured a sexually pleasing female protagonist, Niki Caro chose a female tom boy who did not show any skin throughout the film and she is forever remembered for her ability to overcome the suppression of male dominancy. Her ability came from within and not her superficial appearance, otherwise that would be an example of a “male gaze” film.

 “Hossain’s second question is “if women's economy of desires has been created by the patriarchal masculine episteme, then how do we know what is our real desire as women and what has been imposed on us?” (Hossain, 2011, para 13). Films like Whale Rider help women to differentiate what is expected of females in a patriarchal dominated society and what females can truly accomplish without the oppression from male induced female stereotyping. Niki Caro teaches us that our real intended desires come from within, as evidenced by Paikea. When we listen to what others expect of us, that is just a reflection of what others want from us, but it does not genuinely mean that is what we want for ourselves. However, if females look deep inside and pursue endeavours they truly want themselves, such as when Paikea wanted to join the boys and learn the ancestral teachings of her tribe, that is a true reflection of what she wanted. A female’s voice is often neglected and dismissed as unimportant, as Paikea’s grandfather would do to her. Hence, the female voice is often portrayed as a silent or nonexistent one. Deep down inside, every female wants to voice out what she wants, but fears the punishment of going against preset societal standards. The female voice is suppressed and silent, if given the opportunity females will be heard, and this does not mean that females must speak to get the message across. For instance with Paikea, when she rode the dying whale back into the waters, her courageous and fearless action spoke louder than words; the message was clear, she wanted to take the torch from her grandfather. She disregarded her obligation to be a female and assumed the role of a male because using the “male voice” enabled her to reveal her underlying talent of being a capable tribal leader (Whale Rider, 2002).

After you read everything in read discuss with your partner what are 5 different main ideas you just read about in red and what are your thoughts about it?

1. Let's analyze the movie Whale Rider a little more deeply now with these ideas in our mind….
	1. How are the majority of male characters in the movie portrayed? What does this symbolize?
	2. In sharp contrast how is the grandfather portrayed? What does this symbolize?
	3. How are the majority of female characters in the movie portrayed? What does this symbolize?
	4. In sharp contrast- how is the girl Paikea portrayed? What does this symbolize?
	5. Let's watch some scenes and focus on how the characters are portrayed and their EYES and GAZES. How are they different? What does this symbolize?

Watch this clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HW4TKawKfiQ>

1. So it is clear the director of the movie wants to portray the girl Paikea as DIFFERENT from everyone else. How else does she make Paikea different?
2. Again- let's watch some scenes. How is Paikea different? Focus on her eyes and GAZE. What does this symbolize? Also look at some of this student's further analysis of the movie and how every single scene is full and rich with symbolic meaning:

Watch this clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeEZitSBgDQ>

1. Now let's watch 2 of the final scenes from the movie and try to do your own analysis of all the incredible symbolism you see in each scene. After you watch this clip discuss all the symbolism you see:

Watch this clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKBR9IgmDms>

1. Let's relate all this back to World Religions and Question #7 above about Female Spirituality. How does the Director portray the girl Paikea as a role model of a 'spiritual warrior' for all girls and females?
2. What is Paikea's approach to developing her own spirituality and challenging and changing her grandfather's views (= changing the patriarchal religious system that surrounds them?) Give details of how Paikea embarks on her spiritual journey within the system but changes it at the same time?
3. What is the larger "lessons" here for "Female Spirituality"? How can you apply Whale Rider to how girls and women should approach their own spiritual journey and struggles to not only find their spiritual identity but perhaps even change patriarchal religious systems?