



SEXIST LANGUAGE IN WITI IHIMAERA'S NOVEL *THE WHALE RIDER*

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Abstract:

This article critically analyses sexist language in Witi Ihimaera's novel *The Whale Rider*, focusing on how gender is represented through character utterances and narrative voice. Using Social Dominance Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study explores how traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideologies are reinforced or challenged in the text. Findings reveal that despite a strong female protagonist, sexist attitudes are deeply embedded in the speech of certain male characters, highlighting the tension between cultural tradition and gender equality. The article concludes that *The Whale Rider* both critiques and reflects existing gender dynamics, offering a rich site for examining how language shapes and maintains power hierarchies.

Keywords: sexist, gender, equality, language

1. Introduction

Language is not a neutral medium but a vehicle through which power, identity, and ideology are constructed and perpetuated. In literary texts, the use of language can reveal deep-seated social attitudes, including gender bias. This article examines sexist language in Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, a novel that juxtaposes traditional Māori culture with the emergence of female empowerment. Despite its central theme of female strength embodied by the character Kahu, the novel contains numerous instances where language reinforces male dominance and female marginalization. Through a critical discourse lens,

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this study investigates the ways in which sexist language operates in the text and what it reveals about gender relations in the represented society.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by two main theories: Difference Theory and Social Dominance Theory. These frameworks provided the lens for examining how gendered communication patterns in *The Whale Rider* reveal and reinforce sexism in language use.

2.4.1 Difference Theory

Difference Theory, advanced by Deborah Tannen (1990), establishes that men and women have distinct styles of communication, shaped by different social expectations and cultural conditioning. The theory breaks down these differences into six main contrasts:

- 1) **Status vs. Support** – Men tend to use language as a way of asserting status and dominance, while women use language to seek and provide support. Tannen (1990) notes that men often see conversation as competitive, whereas women view it as a means of building connections. In the novel, male speech often conveys authority, while female speech is more relationship-oriented.
- 2) **Advice vs. Understanding** – Men are more likely to offer solutions when confronted with problems, while women tend to seek empathy and understanding. This pattern is evident in the interactions between male and female characters in *The Whale Rider*, where men are more solution-driven and women focus on emotional connection.
- 3) **Information vs. Feelings** – Men often prioritize sharing factual information, while women value emotional expression and relational bonding. In the novel, male conversations are frequently task-oriented, whereas female conversations serve to reinforce relationships and social ties.
- 4) **Orders vs. Proposals** – Men are more likely to give direct instructions, while women prefer making suggestions and using inclusive language to encourage participation. This contrast is reflected in the male characters' use of authoritative commands versus the female characters' collaborative proposals.
- 5) **Conflict vs. Compromise** – Men may approach disagreements with open confrontation, while women tend to seek compromise to maintain social harmony. This is seen in *The Whale Rider* when male authority figures assert dominance, while female characters attempt to resolve issues peacefully.
- 6) **Independence vs. Intimacy** – Men often value autonomy and self-reliance, whereas women prioritize closeness and interdependence. In the novel, this is evident in the male characters' resistance to sharing power and the female characters' emphasis on collective well-being.

Tannen's framework is useful in this study because it highlights how communication differences between men and women in the novel contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality and sexist attitudes.

2.4.2 Social Dominance Theory

Social Dominance Theory, developed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999), explains how societies maintain group-based hierarchies, where dominant groups control resources, authority, and social narratives. These hierarchies are maintained through institutional practices, cultural norms, and everyday language use.

In the context of *The Whale Rider*, this theory helps reveal how male dominance in speech and decision-making reflects a broader patriarchal structure. Male characters often occupy positions of linguistic and social authority, while female characters' contributions are undervalued or dismissed. The language patterns observed in the novel illustrate how sexist discourse sustains and legitimizes unequal gender relations, reinforcing the social hierarchy.

By combining Difference Theory and Social Dominance Theory, this study gains a comprehensive perspective on how linguistic choices both reflect and reinforce sexism, making them central tools for analyzing gendered language in the text.

3. Literature Review

Sexist language has been widely explored in sociolinguistics as a form of linguistic bias that perpetuates gender inequality. In literature, such language can subtly or overtly privilege one gender over another, reinforcing patriarchal norms (Cameron, 1992; Spender, 1980). This review examines scholarly perspectives on sexist language and its characteristics, reasons for avoiding it, and the disadvantages it poses, linking them to examples drawn from Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*.

3.1 Representation of Men and Women in Literature

Scholars have long noted that male characters are often portrayed in leadership and decision-making roles, while women are sidelined (Lakoff, 1975). In *The Whale Rider*, Koro Apirana consistently rejects the idea of a female leader: "*But the leader has always been a man. That's the way it's been for thousands of years*" (Ihimaera, 2003, p. 15). This statement not only reflects his personal bias but also echoes entrenched cultural traditions that exclude women from power.

3.2 Gender-Biased Language

Gender-biased language often centers men as the default, relegating women to secondary positions (Mills, 2008). Ihimaera's narrative reflects this bias in Koro's insistence on finding a male heir, even when Kahu exhibits leadership qualities: "*When the boy comes, he will be taught all the ways of the ancestors*" (p. 20). The use of "*the boy*" as the assumed heir reinforces male-centered succession norms.

3.3 Characteristics of Sexist Language

Key features of sexist language include male-as-norm, sex-marking, and the invisibility of women (Pauwels, 1998). A clear example of male-as-norm appears when Koro

dismisses Kahu's abilities: "*Girls can't be chiefs*" (p. 24). This categorical statement erases the possibility of female leadership within his worldview.

3.4 Points against Sexist Language

Avoiding sexist language is essential because it perpetuates inequality and limits opportunities for women (Hellinger & Busmann, 2001). In the novel, Koro's exclusionary language not only marginalizes Kahu but also discourages the community from envisioning alternative leadership models. His comment — "*It is the way it has always been*" (p. 27) — shows how tradition can be used as a linguistic tool to justify exclusion.

3.5 Disadvantages of Sexist Language

One of the greatest disadvantages of sexist language is the invisibility it casts over women's achievements (Spender, 1980). Despite Kahu's heroism in riding the whale and saving her people, her grandfather's earlier remarks had effectively rendered her invisible in leadership discussions. For instance, when she excels, Koro attributes the event to "*fate*" rather than her capability, revealing the dismissive undertone of his earlier views.

The literature and textual analysis above illustrate how sexist language is not merely descriptive but also prescriptive, shaping societal expectations about gender roles. Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* offers a poignant case study of how language sustains patriarchal structures and how challenging such language is essential for promoting gender equality.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing textual analysis as the main method. Utterances by characters in *The Whale Rider* were carefully selected and categorized based on their relevance to gender representation and sexist ideologies. The frameworks guiding the analysis include:

- Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999): to understand how social hierarchies, including gender, are maintained.
- Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001): to uncover hidden ideologies in language use.

The data were extracted manually from the novel and grouped into thematic categories such as "*male dominance*," "*female exclusion*," and "*resistance to patriarchy*."

5. Research Findings, Analysis, and Interpretation

5.1 Male Dominance and Gender Stereotyping

One of the most prominent examples of sexist language appears in Koro Apirana's repeated dismissals of Kahu's value as a potential leader due to her gender. He states, "*She's of no use to me*," a blunt rejection that reduces Kahu's identity to her femaleness.

This statement reflects both individual and institutionalized sexism embedded in traditional leadership roles.

Such language aligns with Social Dominance Theory in that it explicitly maintains the hierarchical structure favoring male leadership. The repetition of these sentiments throughout the novel normalizes the exclusion of women from power and perpetuates the myth of male superiority.

5.2 Language of Exclusion

Language also functions to exclude women from sacred or meaningful cultural spaces. For instance, Koro insists that leadership training is only for boys, even when it is evident that Kahu has unique talents. Phrases like “*This is not a place for girls*” and “*You’re just a girl!*” carry strong exclusionary connotations, reinforcing the idea that women are outsiders in their own culture.

These utterances serve as linguistic gatekeeping, where cultural legitimacy is constructed through verbal codes that women are denied access to.

5.3 Subversion and Resistance

Interestingly, while much of the novel contains sexist language, it also showcases resistance to such discourse. Kahu’s silence and emotional persistence challenge patriarchal definitions of strength. Her final act of saving the whale represents a symbolic and linguistic subversion of male dominance. Even though she rarely speaks, her actions become a form of counter-discourse.

Through metaphor and narrative voice, Ihimaera subtly critiques the patriarchal values that oppress Kahu. The omniscient narrator’s admiration of Kahu positions her as a hero, challenging the idea that leadership must be expressed through traditional masculine language.

6. Conclusion

Witi Ihimaera’s *The Whale Rider* is a complex narrative that both reflects and challenges sexist ideologies through language. While some characters uphold traditional gender hierarchies through exclusionary and belittling language, the novel ultimately endorses a vision of gender equality. Kahu’s journey illustrates that female strength and leadership are not only possible but essential for cultural survival.

This article has shown that analyzing sexist language in literature reveals much about the ideologies at work in both fictional and real-world societies. Through the lenses of Social Dominance Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, it becomes clear that *The Whale Rider* is not just a story of cultural identity but also a critique of gender oppression.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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