

Re-Discovering the Power of Native Wahine: Women, Nature and Mythology in Disney's Animation Film *Moana*

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Abstract

In a world where Native women are pictured as victims of colonization, there is a common tendency to forget what these women actually possessed or stood for in the ancient Indigenous societies. The victimized female was a result of the collective Indigenous memory corruption imposed upon the Indigenous people. This paper aims to restore the importance of the traditional Native women by portraying the role and importance that they were entitled with in their communities by analyzing Nature and Mythology in the animated film, *Moana*. The Indigenous Polynesian culture, particularly the Māori become the focus of the movie through the life of the protagonist, Moana. The paper analyses the powerful female characters in Māori mythology, the female characters portrayed in the movie and their role in the traditional Māori society. Nature becomes a key aspect in the movie for portraying its importance in the Indigenous life and mythology. The paper thus focuses on how women became the central part of Māori existence.

Keywords: Indigenous, mythology, wahine, Māori, Maui, Nature

1. Introduction

Moana, an animated movie released in 2016 by Disney Productions, invites the viewers to the island of New Zealand by portraying the Indigenous Māori life, its legends, Gods and worldviews through the story of the Māori girl, Moana. Moana, is a Māori girl, who resides in Motunui (meaning large island in Māori language) island, a place in Taranaki of New Zealand. She is the daughter of the Chief Tui, and thus the next chief of the community. Her father wants her to be a great chief by learning everything about the island and their past. But Moana from a very young age wanted to sail across the ocean. She played and talked with the ocean and its beings from a very young age. She was inspired by the tale that her grandma told her and wanted find Maui and thus restore the heart of Te Fiti to save her Island. Yet, she kept this as a secret from everyone, even her grandma. Her father was against this idea as he believed that the ocean was dangerous and they could be only safe within their island.

2. Significance of The Study

The study brings out the role and the significance of women in Indigenous communities. Women is often regarded as the second gender which denies them of their full potential due to the gender stereotyping. The traditional Indigenous communities regarded and respected the power of women and this is evident through the women characters portrayed in their mythological stories and legends. The study also brings to light the relationship between women, Nature and mythology.

3. Review of Related Studies

Adrian Baker writes in his article, “The Cultural Significance and Symbolism of the film Moana” that,

At the beginning of the movie, Moana, even from an extremely young age is given the “Heart of Te Fiti”, which is a relic from the Island deity known by the same name. This relic was previously stolen from her by the Demigod Maui so that Humans would gain the power of creation and life-giving. The ocean entrusts Moana with the “Heart” because she is the “chosen one” and will restore the balance to the world to the world by taking the “heart” back to Te Fiti. However, when the Ocean tries to give Moana the heart when she is a baby, she drops it on the beach, seemingly losing it forever. (Adrian)

In the article, “Gender stereotypes in Moana (2016): A film analysis of the main character” by Yogi Zanualdy Ramadhan, “Moana has been portrayed as someone who possesses the following traits: brave, adventurous, ambitious, rebellious, smart, self-reliant, fearless, assertive, and decisive. Additionally, she is also portrayed as loving, nurturing and tender” (208). According to Viska Tri Cahya,

In Moana movie there are several conflicts including human vs. human, human vs. society and human vs. self. In this film, Moana had to fight to convince Maui to restore the heart of Te Fiti and Moana with Maui fighting against Te Ka. Consequently, the event was a human vs. human form. The second problem, Moana had to face her father, Tui, as a chief of village and the Motunui community. They assume that no one of their can sail past the reef because it is descending rule from their ancestors. The last problem is human vs. self. Moana must be able to fight her insecurity. Moana assumed that she was not worthy of being Chosen Person to restore the heart of Te Fiti. (51)

4. Objectives of The Study

- To re-discover the power of the Native women through the women characters portrayed in the movie.
- To trace the Indigenous Māori myths that are portrayed through the movie.
- To find out the significance of Nature and Mythology in Indigenous Māori lives.

5. Hypotheses of The Study

- Māori women play a crucial role in their respective communities.
- Women were regarded as powerful in Native communities.
- Nature and Mythology played a significant role in the daily life of the Māori people.

6. Analysis and Interpretations

The movie *Moana* begins with a story by the grandmother of Moana about the ancient legend of Maui. The grandma Tala narrates,

In the beginning, there was only ocean until the mother island emerged: *Te Fiti*. Her heart held the greatest power ever known. It could create life itself. And *Te Fiti* shared it with the world. But in time, some begin to seek *Te Fiti's* heart. They believed that they could possess it, the greatest power of creation would be theirs. And one day, the most daring of them all voyaged across the vast ocean to take it. He was a Demigod of the wind and the sea. He was a warrior. A trickster. A shape-shifter, who could change form with the power of his magical fish hook. And his name was Maui. But without her heart, *Te Fiti* began to crumble. Giving birth to a terrible darkness. Maui tried to escape, but was confronted by another who sought the heart, *Te Ka*, a demon of earth and fire. Maui was struck from the sky, never to be seen again. And his magical fish hook and the heart of *Te Fiti*, were lost to the sea.

Where even now, thousand years later, *Te Ka* and the demons of the darkness that will continue to spread, chasing away our fish, draining the life from island after island until everyone of us is devoured by the bloodthirsty jaws of inescapable death! But one day, the heart will be found by someone who would journey beyond the reef, find Maui, deliver him across the great ocean to restore *Te Fiti's* heart and save us all. (Moana, 2016)

The story is symbolic of the original ancient Māori legend of the mythological hero and demigod Maui, who is known to be a trickster in Māori mythology. The tales of Maui is innumerable. He is known for robbing the fire from Mahuika, the goddess of fire and gifting it to the humanity. It is believed that, Maui pulled up the North Island (*Te Ika-a-Maui*) of New Zealand from the great ocean with his powerful fish hook and his waka (canoe) became the South Island (*Te Waka a Maui*). He is also known for slowing the movement of the sun, so that people got enough time for their daily activities. This story that the grandma narrates is from the legend where Maui steals the heart of *Te Fiti* (*Tahiti*), a jewel or green stone (*pounamu*).

Like Moana, Chief Tui was also adventurous in his younger days and wanted to explore the ocean. Once when he tried to sail through the ocean with his friend, the sea turned tumultuous and took the life of his friend. This incident had a tragic impact on his mind as he couldn't save his friend. Moana's love for the ocean rekindled his fear and he believed that he should at least save his daughter as she was not only his daughter but his successor and to-be-chief of his people. But her grandma believed that the legends were true and that only by restoring the heart, the fury of the gods can be controlled. But her father takes her to the mountain known for being the place of the chiefs, where all the chiefs had placed their stones as per the tradition to continue the legacy as a chief.

The plants in the island are infected by some disease and this is the result of the wrath of the gods for stealing the heart of *Te Fiti*. The sea even denies fish to the island's people denying them of their sustenance. Moana believes that going far into the sea can make them fetch more fish, but her father denies it. So, she decides to place her stone on the mountain and accept her legacy burying within her the wish to go beyond the reef. She is stopped by her grandmother who is aware of Moana's heart and takes her to a cave and promises her that she will find answers to all her

questions within the cave by beating the drum there. After beating the drum inside the cave, Moana is astonished by the spectacle that she observes. She beholds huge canoes and the past where her ancestors used to be adventurous seafaring people who used to voyage across the ocean. She realizes that seafaring was in her blood. Her grandma then takes her to the ocean saying that one has to travel across the reef to restore the heart of *Te Fiti* to bring balance to the world or else everything would perish. At that moment a wave from the ocean washes over Moana prophesying that she is the selected one. Her grandma makes her realize it as an omen from the Nature. Torn between her responsibility as a daughter and her inner will to sail across the ocean, the confused Moana runs back to her home.

When Moana talks about voyaging to the sea to restore the heart, her father decided to burn the canoes. At the same time there comes news of Moana's grandma being seriously ill. Grandma Tala gives the green stone to Moana and compels her to set out on the journey immediately to find Maui and restore the heart of *Te Fiti*. She even instructs that the fish hook in the form of stars and the ocean will guide her to find Maui. Accepting her beloved grandma's death wish, Moana sets out on the journey and as suggested by her grandma the sea and stars guides her through the ocean even though it creates a tough time for her. In the darkness of the tumultuous sea, her canoe is struck by a thunder and she gets shipwrecked on an island. In the morning, when she opens her eyes, she scolds the ocean for wrecking her boat, but to her surprise the waves signal that this is the place where she would find Maui. She finds Maui but he does not have faith in what Moana says about restoring the heart.

He denies her request but Moana convinces him by saying that only after restoring the heart and saving the world, he could get his hero status back. This makes Maui accept her proposal and they set sail to find his fishhook first without which they couldn't go past *Te Ka*.

The fish hook of Maui has a great mythological significance. According to the Polynesian mythology, the fish hook of Maui was made of the jaw bone of his grandmother, *Murirangawhenua*. Some believe that it was a gift to him by his grandmother. The fish hook gave him numerous powers including the power to shape shift.

Maui realizes that his fish hook will be with the Giant Crab, *Tamatoa*, who collects exotic things from beings after defeating them. Due to this habit that he possesses, this fictional character is given the name *Tamatoa*, which means 'trophy' in the Māori language. Moana and Maui have to enter the realm of the demons to meet *Tamatoa* and get back Maui's fish hook. Here also Moana outshines by tricking *Tamatoa* and restoring his fishhook back to Maui. Every time that Maui tries to push Moana out of the canoe into the ocean, the waves bring her back to the canoe carrying her in their arms. This shows Moana's connection with the ocean and how the ocean wanted her to be the one to restore the heart to *Te Fiti*.

Every time Maui loses faith in himself, Moana reinsures him of his strength and what he is destined to do.

This gives him the strength to take the chance of fighting the lava demon, *Te Ka*. They fight *Te Ka*, but miserably fails the first time even almost breaking the fish hook of Maui. Maui tries to dissuade Moana by saying that they should return as he couldn't help her without the fish hook. But Moana

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reassures Maui that he is a hero even without the fish hook. At this point, the spirit of her grandmother appears to give her strength, and thus Moana gives up the idea of going back. She recognizes that *Te Ka* is *Te Fiti* herself, who has become the monstrous lava demon because of her anger and pain of losing her heart. Through her love for Nature, she is able to lure the lava demon and make her realize who she was originally and restore the heart to bring back *Te Fiti* with her whole beauty and elegance. *Te Fiti* impressed by the love and courage of Moana gifts her a beautiful canoe to return and also forgives Maui. There are two scenes of Moana greeting *Te Ka* and *Te Fiti* through the traditional Māori way of greeting one another called Hongi, where two people greet each other by their noses or foreheads with one another. Through this act of Moana, *Te Ka* comes to realize her love for her and the good aim with which Moana had come. Just before parting, Moana and *Te Fiti* again perform the traditional hongi. Just as Moana returns to the *Motonui*, the plants are cured from the disease and is in full bloom. Her parents happily welcome her and her father realizes her power of being more than a chief. She decided to keep the stone upon the mountain, to accept the legacy of her tribe, but instead of a stone, she places a beautiful shell, which is symbolic of her relationship to the Nature.

Throughout the film, the *wahine* (Māori word for woman) i.e., female characters as goddess or human are given a greater importance. *Te Fiti*, the Mother Island that had the power of creation is referred to as the one responsible for prosperous environment that becomes the habitat for humans and other beings. On the other hand, when she wronged, she becomes the most dangerous one *Te Ka*, ripping the world of its resources, and thus cursing the humanity. Here, the extreme power of the feminine of Nature is portrayed, she can be the life giver and preserver and can also be the destroyer. In the human world, the major female characters are Granma Tala and Moana. Grandma Tala works as a messenger of the Gods by transferring the legends of her tribe to the next generation. She realizes the language of Nature and entrusts Moana with the task of restoring the heart of *Te Fiti*. She is the one who makes Moana realize her legacy and save the humanity. Even after her death she watched over Moana and reinsures her of the strength within her. Moana not only takes the most adventurous quest, but also lures Maui and *Te Fiti*. It is her love for the Nature, the legends, her parents and her people that helps her to accomplish her quest. Thus, she becomes the most deserving Chief and successor to her father. "Prakriti is a concept from the ancient Indian Vedic Tradition. It is the feminine aspect of nature or the goddess or mother earth. Shakti on the other side is the goddess of strength which is present in all women. This power of nature as well as the power within women blend both women and nature together" (Santhosh). Therefore, this merging of the two powers in the Native women become the essence of the movie.

7. Recommendations

- More focus should be given to the role of Indigenous women in novels and films so as to enlighten the society about how women were treated in traditional societies.
- Rather than mixing stereotypes into Indigenous life, studies and works made on their life should be portrayed in the real form
- Conducting interviews and surveys in Indigenous societies can bring out the real nature of their societies and their way of living.

- Indigenous stories and legends should not be treated as mere myths but their history and reality.

8. Conclusion

Moana is an inspired movie from Witi Ihimaera's novel, *The Whale Rider*. There are various parallels between the two stories. Both the stories deal with Māori life and mythology where ocean becomes a major character. The protagonist is an Indigenous Māori girl who has the power to communicate with the ocean and its beings. Both the stories attempt to glorify the adventures that protagonist undertakes to restore balance in the world. Last but not the least, both become the most deserving Chiefs of their community. The quest of Moana can be seen as a voyage to fix the relationship between the Nature and the humans which was lost by the act of Maui. According to Anjitha, "The native perception about nature is not dualistic, it does not view man as superior or different from nature, rather it enables people to live in harmony and reciprocity with nature" (8128). The cultural landscape portrayed through the movie with coconut trees, vast seashores with sand, turtles and shells, pigs, hens, exotic beings add to the Māori landscape and the importance of Nature to the Māori people.

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