

## *Film Review*

# Aotearoa New Zealand Film: *White Lies*

Ethan Oneroa

### **FILM**

*White Lies*. Dana Rotberg, director; 2013, colour, 99 mins. Distributed online through Madman Films: [White Lies - Official Trailer - YouTube](#)

### **Context of review**

*White Lies* (Rotberg, 2013) is an Aotearoa New Zealand film, which was adapted to screen from a novella written by Witi Ihimaera (Ihimaera, 2013). My review discusses the film storyline, whilst highlighting social and cultural conflict between the Indigenous Māori population and New Zealand European settlers. Directed by Mexican filmmaker Dana Rotberg, the film addresses colonial oppression in Aotearoa during the early twentieth century by focusing on three women facing their own struggles in coming to terms with their cultural identity.

My understanding of indigeneity is grounded in the lived experience of growing up within te ao Māori, the Māori world. On the social and cultural context of creating a Māori-centred perspective, Māori environmental researchers Garth R. Harmsworth and Shaun Awatere offered an explanation. The authors saw that Indigenous culture refers to peoples whom over a long period of time have developed enduring, holistic, ancestral connections to their environments and natural surroundings (Harmsworth and Awatere, 2013, p. 21).

*The Māori world view acknowledges a natural order to the universe, a balance or equilibrium.*

On a personal level, I am grateful and fortunate to have received a twenty-first century education oriented in tikanga Māori from attending kohanga reo through to being a raukura graduate of a kura Māori. This Māori education journey taught me to embrace and celebrate my indigeneity, and to express and represent my cultural heritage. Therefore, I am reading the film storyline and creating meaning around the characters' relationships from the culture-informed position of a Māori reviewer.

## Entangled relationships



*Figure 1. Paraiti.*

Source: [New Zealand Film Commission](#).

*White Lies* (Rotberg, 2013) centres around Paraiti, an older Māori woman and traditional healer who is knowledgeable in te reo Māori me ōna tikanga of her people, the Tūhoe tribe. Paraiti lives in Te Urewera ranges, showing resilience and cultural pride as she navigates a harsh, colonial society that works to oppress tribal traditions. The white settlers of the time are single-mindedly forcing European ideologies and laws, as well as the English language, onto Māori communities (Reid et al, 2019). Contrastingly,

we have two other main characters, Maraea and Rebecca Vickers. They live within the colonial society that subjugates Māori people and their language and culture, but at the same time they are desperate to acquire Paraiti's help through her knowledge of natural medicine and healing.

Maraea is the maid for the young, upper-class European woman named Rebecca Vickers who is married to a wealthy businessman. Being of Māori descent, but not wanting to associate with the culture in any way, Maraea approaches Paraiti after Mrs Vickers instructs her to find someone who can perform a secret abortion while her husband is away on business. The audience is told that the abortion is due to Mr Vickers being unlikely to take the news well. However, towards the end of the film it is revealed that Maraea is in fact Rebecca's mother, which means Rebecca is Māori by her maternal whakapapa. Maraea had bleached Rebecca's skin since "she could remember" in the hope that it would give her a chance at an upwardly mobile life in white society.



*Figure 2. Rebecca Vickers and Paraiti.*

Source: [New Zealand Film Commission](#).

The main theme of the film is the colonial subjugation of Māori culture. Hence, the storyline is deeply rooted in the pressing Indigenous issue of that period in history – social inequality and racial discrimination. As a Māori viewer, it felt important to mentally note that since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, Pākehā settlers, colonial administrators, and missionaries believed that their way of life was superior to Māori culture. When Māori people were introduced to the settler lifestyle, they were expected to leave behind their own cultural values and spiritual beliefs (Ka'ai et al, 2003). In the context of this film, Maraea and her daughter had found themselves snared in a social hierarchy of trying to prove their self-worth in a white settler world by denying their Māori heritage.

Still, Paraiti's central position in the film would be seen as culturally affirming for Māori audiences, I believe, because of her determined spirit to resist the tremendous social pressure to conform to European norms. Her cultural values eventually resonate with Rebecca Vickers, as she observes Paraiti's Māori midwifery skill and discovers the ancient practices of her ancestors. Even though she has had no prior association with Indigenous culture due to her mother willfully forcing her to pass as a white woman, she appears to find comfort in Paraiti's rituals as a form of spiritual connection.

The bond between the two is quickly severed after Mrs Vickers gives birth. She then has to decide whether to leave her wealthy European lifestyle and join Paraiti and the baby, or to stay. She elects to stay with her mother Maraea. However, the remorse and sorrow of not having her baby, Paraiti, and a connection to Māori culture in her everyday life becomes unbearable. In a dramatic end to the film, Maraea finds Rebecca slumped in a red stained bath tub. Her final decision was to take her own life.

## Closing remarks

If the principal theme is colonial subjugation, then the secondary theme is social acceptance. Maraea's character is more concerned about how she and her daughter are perceived in the settler world, without thinking of the long-term consequences that denying her Māori whakapapa and bleaching Rebecca's skin will have on her daughter's mental and physical wellbeing. Resultingly, Rebecca undergoes psychological distress

when finding herself pregnant and petrified that her child might look physically Māori, a part of her life that was hidden and shunned by her mother for so long.

*White Lies* (Rotberg, 2013) is very much a film that reflects hurtful truths about colonial New Zealand, while illuminating how the hierarchies of race and class were constructed in this era. The storyline rings true by exposing the fact that Māori traditions and customs were deliberately dismantled, and Māori people were pushed into a system of assimilation. Negative stereotypes of Māori people being likened to “savages” and indeed Indigenous peoples across the world can still be felt today. As efforts are made to heal deep wounds caused by colonisation, the trauma faced by first nations peoples in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continues to impact Native tribes, whether it be in education, employment, incarceration, or suicide rates (Reid et al, 2017).

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr Teena Brown Pulu for editing the paper and Mona Cheyenne Thomas for reviewing the final version. Ngā mihi ki a kōrua.

## About the author

Ethan Oneroa is a communications student at Auckland University of Technology. He works in the Aotearoa New Zealand screen and television industry.

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