

Colonial Oppression and Cultural Erasure in *Indian Horse*: A Critical Analysis of the Residential School System as a Tool of Assimilation



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Abstract: Colonialism in Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse*, depicts how the narrative allows one to relate the broader historical and cultural dimensions of European colonialism affecting Indigenous peoples in Canada. This research mainly focuses on the representation of the residential school system in the novel as a central point on colonial suppression and enforced assimilation of Indigenous children through its institutes, with the determination to destroy their cultures. The current research investigates how experiences of the protagonist, Saul, presents colonialism in systemic racism, cultural dislocation, and intergenerational trauma. The struggle that Saul goes through to recover his heritage and identity is used as a medium to portray the big picture about Indigenous experiences under colonial rule. The narration plays a key role in preserving Indigenous knowledge and resilience against forces of colonialism through Wagamese's narrative structure and use of traditional culture. The research findings show Canada's ongoing legacy of colonialism and highlight engagement with Indigenous perspectives in literature, cultural preservation, and reconciliation in a post-colonial context.

Keywords: Colonial Oppression, Cultural Erasure, Residential School System, Assimilation, Indigenous Identity

Introduction

The novel *Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese is a story that communicate the effects of European colonialism on indigenous communities in Canada. It offers a story of the main protagonist, Saul, whose life was changed forever by the forces of colonialism in the residential school system. The residential schools, made by the Canadian government and Christian churches, were supposed to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture, which involved the systematic dissociating of languages, traditions, and identities from Indigenous children. Through Saul's experiences, Wagamese presents a much larger historical reality represented by many

Indigenous people today, with the consequences in the form of cultural erasure, systemic racism, and psychological trauma.

The novel presents not only Saul's journey of survival but is also significant in terms of the impact of colonialism. Through Saul's story, Wagamese depicts problems caused by colonial policies and how Indigenous peoples have lived with resilience and resistance. The novel emphasizes the cultural identity formation and the role of storytelling as a healer and a preserver of Indigenous knowledge. This study discusses how Wagamese uses the narrative to explore the forces of oppression that have traced Indigenous lives in Canada as a way of analyzing the theme of colonialism in *Indian Horse*. The broader

implications of colonialism on Indigenous identity and community has been tried to understood by this research through the analysis of Saul's experiences in the residential school system and, consequently, his efforts toward reconnecting with his cultural heritage.

Research Questions

1. How does Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse* depict the residential school system as a tool of colonial oppression?
2. In what ways does *Indian Horse* utilize traditional Anishinaabe storytelling techniques to resist colonial narratives, and how does this contribute to the preservation and renewal of Indigenous culture in the novel?

Literature Review

Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse* in relation to colonialism presents scholarly discussions on Indigenous experiences characterized in literature because it is based on the experience of colonialism in Canada. This novel represents a deep trauma caused by the residential school system, and the effects upon the identity, culture, and community of Indigenous peoples. This section focuses on the studies related to colonialism, trauma, identity, and cultural preservation in *Indian Horse* and related Indigenous literature.

The novel written by Wagamese, *Indian Horse*, is significant in terms of Indigenous literature expressing Canada's colonial history, with special importance given to residential school system. Henderson (2018) and Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) have presented the historical realities of these schools and their long standing consequences on Indigenous communities. The residential school experience serves as a central point in *Indian Horse*. Eigenbrod (2017) and Edwards (2019) have emphasized on trauma and memory in the formation of identity for the protagonist. What these scholars say is that Saul's experiences reveal the broader collective trauma of Indigenous peoples. It further highlights the intergenerational effects of such trauma on cultural and personal identity.

Another significant feature of the novel that has gained scholarly interest is how Wagamese uses storytelling as a mode of cultural preservation and resistance. According to King (2017) and Million (2018), Indigenous stories often follow traditional storytelling techniques in a way that resists colonial narratives and foregrounds Indigenous cultural sovereignty. In the novel *Indian Horse*, Wagamese employs the storytelling techniques, not only performing the function of preserving cultural heritage but also using it as a means of healing for the protagonist, as these scholars argue. Many researcher and scholars have focused on the concept of identity, particularly in the context of colonialism in connection to *Indian Horse*. Andersen, (2017) and Lawrence, (2018) highlights the way identity was formed in Indigenous characters in the context of colonialism. They are of the view that Wagamese's portrayal of Saul's struggle to reclaim his identity within the oppressing forces of colonialism shows the broader challenges faced by Indigenous peoples in reclaiming their cultural identities. The novel has also been connected to the broader discourse of reconciliation and decolonization in Canada. MacDonald & Hudson (2017), and Corn tassel (2012), highlights contributions that Indigenous literature could play in extending understandings of reconciliation and legacies of colonialism. They base their arguments on how the work of Wagamese is part of the broader movement of decolonization.

Research Methodology

This research follows qualitative approach to analyze the theme of colonialism in Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse*. The study uses a combination of literary analysis and thematic analysis to analyze the impact of colonialism, Colonial trauma, and the preservation of Indigenous identity and culture. The primary method for the research is literary analysis, which focuses on how Wagamese shapes his narrative to show how colonialism has affected Indigenous communities. This literary analysis focuses the elements:

Literacy Analysis

Character Development: It mainly focuses on

the protagonist of the story, Saul, and how his character develops due to the colonial forces that become the recognized influence of his life. It also investigates in what ways Wagamese used the experiences of Saul to represent the greater experience of the Indigenous under the rule of the colonies.

Narrative Structure: The research is also related the structure of the novel, especially the use of flashbacks and nonlinear time, that allows Wagamese to link the personal history of Saul with the collective history of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Symbolism and Imagery: The research also studies the symbolism and imagery in the novel. Some examples are frequent motifs, such as hockey, nature, spiritual elements, and so on. These symbols have been explained as representing loss and resilience in the Indigenous culture.

Language and style; It studies how Wagamese uses language and other choices regarding style along with his storytelling style in challenging dominant colonial narratives. It analyzes how those elements produce a critique of colonialism and promote cultural preservation in the novel.

Thematic Analysis

Literature analysis has been accompanied by thematic analysis, which identifies major themes in the text in relation to colonialism in *Indian Horse*. Major themes that have been analyzed are:

Colonial Oppression and Cultural Erasure: The theme shows how the novel represents residential schools as part of colonialism, aimed at assimilating Indian children and leading to their cultural erasure. Here, the study studies how Wagamese expresses the psychic and cultural effect of this oppression on Saul.

Trauma and Healing: In this study, the concept of trauma has been analyzed, especially how intergenerational trauma is depicted in the novel, executed on Indigenous peoples out of colonialism. This analyses also considers how ideas of healing and identity reformation are attached together around Saul.

Resistance and Resilience: This theme looks into how Wagamese presented the resistance of Indigenous people to the forces of colonialism through survival of their culture and telling of stories. The focus in this analysis is on the manner in which the novel describes storytelling as a way of cultural resilience, referring essentially to the process of holding on to identity during colonial oppression.

Analysis

This research analysis focuses colonialism in Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse*, aiming on how the novel depicts the residential school system as a tool of colonial oppression, the resulting trauma, and the resilience of Indigenous identity and culture. The analysis includes literary and thematic analysis.

Literary Analysis

Character Development of Saul

The character of Saul personifies the individual and collective struggle of indigenous people under colonial powers. Characterization is a key to understanding further influences of the effects of colonialism depicted in the novel. The writer carefully develops Saul's journey, from his early life in his native community before residential school to times afterwards. In his early childhood, Saul is very close to his cultural heritage, through which he gets the ability to learn the traditions and stories of his people. But that is brutally taken away, as he is abducted to a residential school. Wagamese offers it as a center of cultural genocide where Indigenous children were stripped of their language, tradition, and spiritual beliefs. Saul's identity is systematically taken away as he has to conform to Euro-Canadian norms, which imply the general erasure of an Indigenous culture under colonialism.

The experiences of Saul while in the residential school leads to deep psychological trauma, manifested in various ways later in life. He is emotionally detached and try to deal with feelings of alienation and loss. Wagamese's portrayal of the inner feelings of Saul is a representation of the long-term effects of colonial oppression upon Indigenous

individuals. The character of Saul represents resilience even in the face of such challenges. His journey toward healing and the reclaiming of his identity finally unfolds with the resilience of Indigenous peoples in colonies.

Narrative Structure

Wagamese's use of a non-linear narrative structure in *Indian Horse* shows the dislocation and fragmentation that Saul, and through him, Indigenous people, have undergone due to colonial experiences. It is narrated by Saul himself, who is first introduced as being admitted to a rehabilitation center while his life flashes before his eyes. This is in fact setting the storyline in a flashback in his life. Moving between different periods in the life of Saul further makes it clear how trauma is so shocking, given the way problems persist. Saul's recalling is not coherent and linear; rather, it is an assembly of detached pieces of occurrences driven by an experience of hurt and suffering.

Symbolism and Imagery

Wagamese presents symbolism and imagery to convey the themes of colonialism, trauma, and resilience throughout *Indian Horse*. Certainly one of the most significant symbols in the novel was the game of hockey. For Saul, hockey was first a form of escape and identification from his cultural past during residential school. But in the procession of his career, in terms of alienation and racism, places him on the larger map of a colonial experience of being a minority in a Euro-Canadian society.

Nature is a major recurring symbol throughout this novel. The link that Saul holds to the land is a significant part of his own self-identity. Wagamese uses the imagery of the natural world to contrast the constricted, oppressive environment of residential school with the freedom and spiritual connection Saul has experienced in the wilderness. In many ways, this contrast shows the impact of colonialism in separating Indigenous peoples from traditional lands and culture. Other significance symbols are spiritual elements as Saul's visions, along with his ties to his ancestors. Wagamese uses these spiritual experiences to emphasize the strength of the Indigenous identity, a height

through which cultural and spiritual connections cannot be eliminated due to colonialism.

Language and Style

In the novel *Indian Horse*, Wagamese does not separate his language and style from the critique of colonialism. He has skillfully presented the bitterness of Saul's experience in a more unique way to presents such a story to readers. He does so by incorporating the indigenous words and their variants in the text. This acts as a form of resistance to the colonial imposition of the English language on the indigenous people and a preservation of Indigenous culture.

The storytelling aspect of *Indian Horse* is aligned to the oral traditions in indigenous culture. His style, with an element of repetition, circularity, and communal storytelling, reflects the traditional ways in which knowledge and history are passed down in native communities. The elements do not just honor indigenous traditions but are a part of cultural resistance in asserting validity and importance on the indigenous ways of knowing the self against the colonial narration.

Thematic Analysis

Colonial Oppression and Cultural Erasure

Indian Horse represents the role of the residential school system as a tool in colonial oppression to erase Indigenous cultures. Wagamese represents the residential school as a place of violence, where Indigenous children were taken far from their families and exposed to a severe discipline motivated by the aim of destroying their cultural identities. The novel represents these schools as part of the overall colonial project: the assimilation of Indigenous people into Euro-Canadian society by the erasure of language, traditions, and spiritual practices. Saul and his peers were not allowed to speak their own language, practice any of their custom, or identify themselves culturally. Wagamese indicates how this assimilation enforced upon them, creates loss and disorientation from their culture. In the end, the suspension from their culture has broad implications as far as their identity is concerned.

The theme of cultural extinction is father

developed in the novel through the analysis of bigger social attitudes toward Indigenous Peoples. Wagamese represents a society where attitudes toward Indigenous cultures are that of inferiority and they need to be "civilized." This is the reason Saul encounters in his efforts to develop his talent as a hockey player in this adverse situation. The novel thus criticizes a prevalence of colonialism which is very treacherous and that aims at the domination of Indigenous Peoples as well as the destruction of their cultural identity.

Trauma and Healing

Trauma is a dominant theme in the novel *Indian Horse*, as Wagamese depicts the deep psychological impacts by the residential school system and colonialism. At a broader level, Saul's trauma is losing his family, being abused at the residential school, and being a target in racist society. Wagamese indicates trauma as a personal and collective result, reflecting the effects of colonialism in the Indigenous communities.

This novel presents long lasting effects of this trauma on Saul that depresses, and alienates him from both his cultural roots. Wagamese describes this struggle as suggestion of the hegemony of colonialism that leaves many indigenous peoples and their communities dealing with its intergenerational effects of cultural erasure and systemic oppression.

Resistance and Resilience

Indian Horse is a story of healing and resilience. Wagamese represents Saul's healing journey as one of the reconnection between culture and heritage. This journey is only made possible by his return to the land and the normalization of his interaction with the native practices. Wagamese states the human spirit can heal from colonial trauma but that it takes a reformation of Indigenous identity and connection to cultural and spiritual traditions. Wagamese also presents a theme of resistance and survival. This novel shows how indigenous people have resisted the colonial attempts to abolish their culture and identity. One major form of resistance advocated in the novel is storytelling. Wagamese follows indigenous storytelling traditions. It is through

the acts of narration that Saul is able to reclaim his identity and reconnected himself to the cultural roots, showing the power of narrative to survive and resist culture.

The novel also depicts resilience in colonial oppression. Saul was finally represented as a person with strength through his connection to his community and heritage, despite the trauma and cultural erasure he has gone through. According to Wagamese, Indigenous peoples are resilient through adaptation and survival in their connection to cultural roots.

Conclusion

The study is mainly concerned with the issue of colonialism in Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse*. The analysis highlights that the novel provides a subtle critique of colonialism, showing the residential school system as a tool for cultural eradication and subjugation. Linking the analysis with the exploration of themes of colonial trauma and cultural erase, characterized in a real historical context, the study presents these issues through the character of Saul. Wagamese shows the traumatic consequences of colonialism and the strength of Indigenous identity and culture.

The novel represents not just the devastating effects of colonialism; it also shows the need to protect culture and storytelling as resistance. *Indian Horse* is at once a witness to the suffering of Indigenous Peoples and a celebration of their strength and resilience facing ongoing colonial challenges. The study contributes to the discussion on Indigenous literature and post-colonial studies regarding how *Indian Horse* presents trauma, identity, and cultural survival in the process of reconciliation and decolonization underway in Canada.

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