

Legendary Survivors in Tomson Highway's
Kiss of the Fur Queen
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Abstract

This paper studies how the Native Canadian author Tomson Highway depicts the terrible effects that residential schools had on many Indian children who were sent to institutions where the Catholic Church and the Canadian government were carrying out the policy of destroying Native culture. A purpose of this paper is to show how the use of oral tradition determines the aesthetic and ethical qualities of this novel. The use of the ambiguous and paradoxical figure of the trickster helps Highway transform a story of suffering and abuse into a story of personal and cultural triumph. This paper also calls attention to other elements that are deeply significant for the Indian mind, such as music and dance and shows how they are woven together with myths and legends of the Cree tradition to illuminate and resolve conflicts. Finally, the paper refers to Highway's mastery in his use of the English language.

The traumatic effects of residential schooling throughout Canada was practically a taboo subject until the year 1988 when the publication of Basil Johnston's autobiographical narrative *Indian School Days* triggered an explosion of writing on the subject (Rymhs, 2003: 58).¹ Johnston's narrative is seen as subversive, not simply because it

¹ The Residential School era, according to Agnes Grant, spanned the years between 1830 and 1988. Deena Rymhs marks the beginning of this chapter of Canadian history later on, in the 1870s, and the end of it in the early 1980s.

As Superintendent of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott stated in 1920, "Residential School legislation was enacted to 'get rid of the Indian problem... Our objective', he said 'is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department'" (McKegney, 2003: 66).

was one of the first books to deal with residential schools, but because “it uses the memoir as a form of resistance” (Rymhs, 2003: 63). In a more recent compilation of stories which tell about life in Residential Schools, native women express the feeling that “the inevitable must be endured, but it must not be accepted (Grant, 2004: ix).

Ten years after the publication of *Indian School Days*, Tomson Highway, an Indian writer who belongs to the Cree Nation (Northern Manitoba), gives the turn of a trickster to the post-traumatic syndrome of residential school survivors by transforming a personal experience into the artistic form of a novel.² Highway in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* includes stories of his culture and the trickster figure of Weesageechak. In the cosmologies of First Nations all across North America there is a type of story in which cannibal figures appear. Those stories were used by parents to frighten children into coming home before dark. However, today these legends are seen and used in written literature as metaphors, in Fournier’s words, of “the predatory European society that swept into long-held First Nations territory to steal land, culture, souls and children” (Fournier, 1998: 7). In his novel, Highway establishes a parallelism between the Cree cannibal spirit, Weetigo, who feasts on the flesh of the young, and Christianity –more specifically those Catholic priests who committed sexual abuse at Residential Schools. Highway, who is also a classical pianist, compares the composition of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* to a piano sonata because, he says, his novel is both “sombre and hopeful” (Hodgson, 1999: 4).³

What makes *Kiss of the Fur Queen* unique among Residential School narratives is Tomson Highway’s deliberate use of the healing power of storytelling. As a Cree he believes in the magical power of words and uses language to create a novel that transforms the expression of some of the vilest, most loathsome instincts in human beings into a call for dignity and a cry made of beautiful feelings rising to the level of myth. Sam McKegney states that Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* “inaugurates a new stage in the evolution of Residential School discourse in [Canada]” since he “explores the ‘meaning’ of the Residential School experience not through factual regurgitation,

² The Trickster figure in Native Canadian literature is both a boundary-crosser and a boundary-creator (Hyde, 1998: 7).

³ The novel is divided into five parts. Part One: *Allegro ma non troppo*. Part two: *Andante cantabile*. Part three: *Allegretto grazioso*. Part Four: *Molto agitato*. Part Five: *Adagio espressivo*.

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cathartic though that may be, but through *storytelling*" (McKegney, 2003: 68). *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, he adds, "marshals a hybrid arsenal of autobiography, elegy, historical fiction, and dream narrative" (McKegney, 2003: 68).⁴

In the first pages of the novel, the part referred to as *Allegro ma non troppo*, the narrator tells us about the heroic deed of the caribou hunter Abraham Okimasis, how he becomes the world champion in the Dog Derby of 1951. Abraham receives his trophy, and he is photographed when the Fur Queen Beauty of that year is kissing him. The Fur Queen, whose skin looked "chiselled out of arctic frost", is described as "draped not only with a white satin sash but with a floor-length cape fashioned from the fur arctic fox, white as day. She had her head crowned with a fox-fur tiara ornamented with a filigree of gold and silver beads" (FQ, 9).⁵

Abraham Okimasis' personal experience, magical as it is, soon becomes a deed for which all the members of the family feel proud and gradually it grows to a mythical level that connects the Okimasis' with different aspects of the Cree culture. The Fur Queen becomes a fairy-tale godmother, her white fur cape being "the aurora borealis"; a goddess whose crown is ornamented, up in the sky, by "the seven stars of the Great Bear."

And from the seven stars on her tiara burst a human foetus, fully formed, opalescent, ghostly...The ghost child drifting in the womb of space, the wisps of winter cloud its amniotic fluid, turning and turning, with a speed as imperceptible yet certain as the rhythm of the spheres. And slowly, ever so slowly, the ghost baby tumbled, head over heels over head, down, down to Earth. (FQ, 12)

We see the progressive transformation of Abraham Okimasis' tale so that it fuses with a myth of creation. The Beauty Queen coalesces with Sky Woman, the mythical woman who fell from the sky and, with the collaboration of birds and sea animals, originated the

⁴ The novel is dedicated to his brother René who died of AIDS, with these words: *Ignani igoosi, n'seemis*, "For you, little brother" (Hodgson, 2007: 10).

⁵ The novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* will be identified in parenthetical references as FQ.

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American continent. From that moment on, the novel moves simultaneously on the two levels, the personal and the mythical. The moment of the protagonist's birth is marked by coldness: "In mid-December, in a region so remote that the North Pole was rumoured to be just over [the] next hill" Mariesis' eleventh child is born. A boy who is given the name of Champion and who has the gift of music (FQ, 22).⁶

At the age of three Champion delights his parents with his musical ability. When his father takes him to hunt caribou, the boy while playing the accordion repeatedly sings a song that he has composed to contribute to the success of the hunting: "*Ateek, ateek, astum, astum*", "caribou, caribou, come to me, come to me." Soon a herd of caribou comes in their direction (FQ, 23). Champion demonstrates that, as Penny Petrone says, "the strongest weapon in the hunt [is] the word."⁷ Some time later, his mother announces that he will soon have a brother who will "dance to [his] little caribou song" and the boy is elated. If the moment of birth of Champion had been marked by the music of the spheres that of his little brother is distinguished by the dancing presence of heavenly bodies:

Sitting side by side on the shore of dreams he and his newly arrived little brother watched as, high above their heads, the seven stars of the Great Bear sparkled from the queen's tiara. Glimmering faintly through the Milky Way, the monarch waved her wand. A spray of stars exploded across the universe, turned back, regrouped, and made a perfect, inverted dipper above the Okimasis tent. The midwife's voice intoned: "*Ooneemeetoo*"... and so the child was named: Dancer." (FQ, 35)

⁶ For the Northamerican Indian "music is the breath of life" (Highwater, 1984: 23)

⁷ The *word* carried the power to create, to make things happen. "Songs had a purpose, a function—to get hold of the sources of supernatural power, to trap the universal mystery in a net of magical words?...For example, songs not only increased the hunter's ability to hunt, they were also thought to influence the animals who freely gave themselves to him" (Petrone, 1990: 19).

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Champion soon teaches Dancer to move like a young caribou, but a life of beautiful co-operation with nature comes to an end when Champion and, three years later, Dancer are sent to “Birch Lake Indian Residential School” located 300 miles south of their reserve. Residential Schools endeavoured to destroy Native cultures by altering Native identity among the young. Their names were changed, their language prohibited, and they lost traditions and innocence. In Tomson Highway’s novel we learn about the suffering of boys under the control of depraved priests. Champion, now called Jeremiah, and his little brother called Gabriel are among those who suffer sexual abuse by Father Lafleur. Each of the two brothers internalises the trauma differently and in their adult lives we see that only one of the two Okimasis brothers is a true physical and spiritual survivor. While Jeremiah’s passion for playing the piano channels, to a certain extent, his conflictive feelings during his school period, Gabriel cannot experience the cathartic benefit of his dance until he leaves school and moves to Winnipeg where Jeremiah then lives. Dancing is for native people “iconic of human expression of being” (Hodgson, 2007: 3).⁸

Just before Jeremiah is going to go to school for the first time, there is a scene in which the boys are caught by surprise when a herd of caribou is advancing in their direction: “One hundred, two hundred caribou—it could have been ten thousand, their sound was so massive.” (FQ, 44)

After the herd has passed, the Okimasis brothers are “glowing with triumph”, Champion had succeeded in protecting his little brother from the wild beasts, but unfortunately at school he finds himself unable to protect Gabriel from the attack and the grip of Father Lafleur. Great pain and sense of guilt accompanies Jeremiah all his life for not having been able to protect his little brother as he had promised his mother that he would.

⁸ The first epigraph in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is an edict from Superintendent General of the Department of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott (December 15, 1921) instructing his bureaucrats “to dissuade the Indian from excessive indulgence in the practice of dancing.”

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At school, Jeremiah soon discovers one night: “A dark, hulking figure hovered over [Gabriel], like a crow, visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honey-comb, or a weetigo feasting on human flesh” (FQ, 79). The images that Highway chooses are revealing of dark, abusive instincts. The reference to the honeycomb will reverberate whenever there are references to sexual harassment in the book, and the allusion to Weetigo, the Cree cannibal spirit, which also recurs through the novel, is a sure image of cruelty and abuse. Gabriel is six when he suffers the first assault and the perplexity and helplessness of the child are described with devastating words: “He simply assumed after a few seconds of confusion, that this was what happened at schools, merely another reason why he had been brought here, that this was the right of holy men” (FQ, 78).

Eventually, after his school years, Gabriel joins his elder brother in Winnipeg. Jeremiah introduces Gabriel to the life of the city and the author uses this opportunity to compare the life styles of the native reserve and the city. The consumerism of the Western culture is reflected in the seduction that the shopping mall exerts on the two brothers. The shopping mall is seen as the Western counterpart of the trickster story of the cannibal monster Weetigo. As Margery Fee says, “the shopping mall becomes symbolic of the cannibal culture that’s eating us all” (2007: 2).⁹

The estrangement that the youths feel in Winnipeg is mitigated, in the case of Jeremiah, by his strong wish to become a pianist. Gabriel, on the contrary, shows regressive tendencies, which foreshadow his tragic end: “Suddenly, a terrible need came over him, to run into his mother’s arms and hide, crawl back into her womb and start over” (FQ, 126). When the two brothers go to the Jubilee Concert Hall the dance “beat by beat, step by step” touches Gabriel’s artistic soul (FQ, 144). He starts ballet classes but it is too late to overcome the harm done to him and soon falls into a world of drugs and prostitution. Margery Fee observes that for “the bronze Cree Angel”, as he is now referred to, “sex is an act of revenge” (2007: 2).

⁹ Sam McKegney explains: “In this metaphorical equation, the brothers become trickster figures while the mall becomes the Weetigo, complicating the earlier connection between the Weetigo and Christianity to suggest capitalist consumerism’s implication in the cultural rape of indigenous people in this country” (2003: 71).

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Jeremiah's and Gabriel's life styles in Winnipeg are in no way similar to life on the reserve, but their artistic inspiration is definitely rooted in the landscape of their homeland and in their family and Cree mythologies. Jeremiah eventually becomes the first Indian to win the Crookshank Memorial Trophy (FQ, 214). His performance is a fusion of music, sounds of nature, and rhythm of the cosmos:

Jeremiah played a northern Manitoba shorn of its Gabriel Okimasis, he played the loon cry, the wolves at nightfall, the aurora borealis in Mistik Lake; he played the wind through the pines, the purple of sunsets, the zigzag flight of a thousand white arctic terns, the fields of mauve-hued fireweed rising and falling like an exposed heart. (FQ, 213)

At this point the reader has difficulties separating dream from reality, wishes from accomplishment, and actual characters from mythical ones. This is Part Four of the novel, which corresponds to the part of the sonata *Molto agitato*. In his feverish passion and enthusiasm, Jeremiah barely sees “the Fur Queen herself, smiling from the great dome of space, holding out the legendary silver chalice” (FQ, 214). On Mistik Lake, he finds himself talking with the Arctic Fox, the trickster who this time has chosen to take the appearance of a woman. After that dream-like experience, “all Jeremiah was left with was the sound of the north wind, slow, persistent, moaning, the most beautiful song he had ever heard” (FQ, 234).¹⁰

In Part Five of the novel, *Adagio espressivo*, the two brothers begin to produce musical works that use Cree culture to reveal the history of colonization in Canada. The other side of some stories is now available for them. They learn that Chachagathoo was not an evil woman, as they had been told. On the contrary, she was “the last shaman in that part of the world, the last medicine woman, the last woman priest.” She, at the arrival of white priests, was accused of witchcraft and imprisoned (FQ, 247). The Europeans imposed their own culture, but the American Indian culture was not lost. In the words of Tomson Highway, the reason for that was that the trickster

¹⁰ According to Indian thought, north wind calls to action.

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Weesageechak did not leave the continent, he/she continued being present among them and providing spiritual health.¹¹

In the first part of the novel the language is poetic, but realistic, while in the last part it is more and more obscure and disconcerting. Highway wants us to be aware that English is a difficult medium in which to write the Cree heart. The two brothers are allies in their artistic effort; the author uses the magic power of their stories, their music, and dance and, like the trickster, he is able to create a new world. The denouement of the novel comes fast. Practically at the same time that we learn that Gabriel has AIDS we are reading of his success on the stage impersonating Misigoo, the eagle, in his fight against the monster Weetigo. Gabriel's fight against death in real life is thus sublimated on stage where he symbolically destroys the monster that had corrupted him and was the direct cause of his mortal disease. Gabriel's agony is transformed into a beautiful race which fuses with that of his father. Like Abraham Okimasis, Gabriel sees the Fur Queen who is to receive him at the finish line.

But the real destroyer of the monster is Jeremiah, the elder brother. Jeremiah claims an identity characterized by "creativity, not violence" (McKegney, 2003: 73). He consciously decides to help other children who have been abused instead of becoming and abuser himself. He therefore can be compared to the legendary Son of Ayash who destroyed Weetigo. In the novel the legend of the Son of Ayash is given a special significance, almost sacred, because it is told by Abraham Okimasis when he is in his deathbed. Abraham tells his children: "The Son of Ayash took the weapons and, on a magic water snake, journeyed down into the realm of the human soul, where he met...Evil after evil...the most fearsome among them the man who ate human flesh" (FQ, 227).¹²

The last scenes of the novel, the dream-like agony of Gabriel, depicted as a race, connects with the first scenes of Abraham's victory

¹¹ In Tomson Highway's play *The Rez Sisters* we read "Some say that Nanabush [Weesageechak] left this continent when the white man came. We believe he is still here among us...without him —and without the spiritual health of this figure— the core of Indian culture would be gone forever" (xii).

¹² Tomson Highway worked for seven years with Native Organizations throughout Canada.

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in the Dog's Derby, but instead of simply closing a circle, the narrative makes a big loop that embraces a new generation. Highway ennobles his last challenge by blurring the line that separates myth and reality, facts and wishes, duty and art, and he does it with the final turn of a trickster because through art, music, dance, and literature he makes it possible that both Jeremiah and Gabriel be worthy of the same type of trophy and heroic story as their father, the legendary caribou hunter Abraham Okimasis.

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