Chapter IV

The Temptations of Big Bear: The Untold Stories of the Indians

The Temptations of Big Bear, perhaps the most famous novel of Rudy Wiebe, is structured around the major events of Plains Indian leader Big Bear’s life, from his refusal to sign Land Treaty Number Six in 1876 up to his death in 1888. It is an expansive novel, spanning a crucial period in Canadian history, over 300,000 square miles of prairie, and countless characters. Unable to resist the pressures of white imperialism backed by military and industrial power, the Plains Cree (The Red Indians) had their way of life destroyed in a very short period. By telling the familiar glorious story of the opening up of the West from the unfamiliar point of view of the vanquished Indians, Wiebe manages to celebrate a proud and heroic Indian culture, as well as indict the values of the conquering white culture. Though there is almost a strict chronological order at the beginning of every section, the narrative is discontinuous with its multiple voices and internal time shifts. A temporal analysis of the six sections of The Temptations of Big Bear would look something like this:

One: “Fort Pitt, September 13, 1876.” Sweetgrass signs the Treaty Number Six, whereas Big Bear refuses to sign. But this event is counter-pointed by various ‘anachronies’ (time-shifts): Rev. John McDougall’s retrospective narrative of events in 1874 and ’75,
also by Big Bear's prophetic vision of doom and the omniscient narrator's hints of future events.

Two: "Between the Forks and the Missouri, 1878-1882." This section begins back in 1877 with more treaty negotiations. It then deals with the winter of 1878-'79, the buffalo hunt, Big Bear's prophetic vision of blood, the coming of the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway), and ends with Big Bear's signing of the Land Treaty on December 8, 1882.

Three: "The Battle and the North Saskatchewan, June, August, 1884." This section begins with the omniscient narrator's retrospective view of the ten-year history of the N.W.M.P. (North West Mounted Police) and premonitions of future events. It then deals with Big Bear's Thirst Dance, his dark vision and his attempts to form an Indian confederation in the summer of 1884 for future resistance of white dominion. The section ends with another prophetic vision and Big Bear's final urging towards a confederation.

Four: "Frog Lake, April 1 and 2, 1885." This section opens back in 1884. It then deals with the Frog Lake crisis, April 1, 1885 and the Indian attack and massacre of the white, and Big Bear's inability to stop it. The section ends with the night of April 2, Maundy Thursday, as Big Bear begins to see his prophetic visions confirmed by the present disaster.

Five: "From Fort Pitt to Fort Carlton, May and June, 1885." This section opens back in April, with the journal of Inspector Dickens of N.W.M.P. and Kitty McLean's diary which records events of the whites' captivity by the Indians from April onwards. It then deals with the
battle at Frenchman’s Butte in May and the attack on the Indian camp at Loon Lake on June 3 recorded by the omniscient narrator and Kitty McLean. A Canadian Volunteer gives details of the soldiers’ retreat to Fort Pitt June 11; the Indian’s white prisoners walk into Fort Pitt on June 20; and Big Bear accompanied by his youngest son Horsechild goes to give himself up at Fort Carlton on July 1.

Six: “The Trail to the Sand Hills, September 1885; January 17, 1888.” This section opens on September 3 with charges against Big Bear referring back to April. It then deals with Big Bear’s trial and conviction for treason-felony; newspaper reports on Big Bear in Stony Mountain Prison in 1885 and 1886; and with Big Bear’s release from prison and his death on January 17, 1888.

Wiebe first became attracted to Big Bear not so much for historical or artistic reasons, but for what might loosely be called sentimental motives: his own birth place lay in the area in which Big Bear and the remnants of his band of Plains Cree had wandered half a century before. This fact prompted Wiebe to accept Indians naturally as neighbours and fellow-citizens, not as aliens set apart on reservations. In an interview Wiebe himself says, “I write about Indians because I grew up in communities where they were part of the people” (Melnyk 205).

Again Keith says that as a member of a minority ethnic group himself, Wiebe recognized the need, once he had explored the cultural history of his own people, to set the Indian in his rightful place within Canadian literature; and Keith describes it as “something resembling a cultural crusade for Wiebe” (Epic Fiction 63). Keith quotes the words of Wiebe:
"The Indian . . . must become our central, not our fringe figure, exotic, a bit mysterious perhaps, but mostly drunken and prostituted; he must become the centre of serious fiction as other groups have" (Epic Fiction 63). Once he began his investigations into the history of the Indians, he found even more compelling reasons for interest in Big Bear. Once in an interview Wiebe said of Big Bear to Eli Mandel, "I felt very strongly that here was an incredibly great man, who had never been talked about, almost totally unknown, and - well, I did all I could with that at the moment" (Mandel and Wiebe, "Where the Voice Comes From" 154).

When interviewed by Margaret Reimer and Sue Steiner, Wiebe gave an account of his hard and extensive research into the life of this unknown, but great Indian chief. He took almost six years to write this novel - four years for research and two years for the actual writing. He built a camper and with his family travelled to every place that he had heard Big Bear had been to. He even met Duncan McLean, who was a captive of Big Bear in 1885. He was then only seven years old and he is in the novel. Horsechild's youngest son died in 1952 in Saskatchewan, and Wiebe went to see his grave. He also met Horsechild's wife who lived on the Poundmaker reserve where Big Bear died (Reimer and Steiner 129). Wiebe in his essay "On the Trail of Big Bear" also deals with his meticulous research into such authentic sources as historical books, parliamentary records, calendars, old maps, photographs, newspapers, diaries, notes, speeches, personal letters, memoirs, interviews and even testimony from the only character then living, Duncan McLean. In "Bear Spirit in a Strange Land" Wiebe recounts his
pilgrimage to the Museum of Natural History in New York City (not anywhere in Canada he complains) where he finds and touches the sacred Power Bundle of Big Bear in the Plains Indian artifacts room (147-148). It seems that Wiebe was overpowered by Bear Spirit. Wiebe remembers the words of Maria Campbell who remarked that the spirit of Big Bear took over Wiebe and wrote the speeches for him (Mandel and Wiebe 151). In an interview Wiebe speaks of the challenge in writing this novel:

I call it a meditation on the past. It is my particular recreation of what happened. Usually in an historical novel you have an invented character who leads you into the historical situation. When I was working on this, it seemed to me that structurally the story was so good that it would be stupid to invent any other line, especially to invent any other characters. It was a dare to myself. Could I actually tell this story without inventing a single character? Could I dare to get inside Big Bear’s head, inscrutable as that face must have been? It’s an amazing face – there are quite a few pictures around. How could I try to get inside that head and look out through those eyes? Well, you try. (Reimer and Steiner 129)

And he concludes that interview by saying that a lot of books written in western history merely consider the Indian affair under Big Bear as small adventure stuff. They do not get underneath to find out what is really happening: “What was it like to live as an Indian during the time of treaties? That is what I try to do in this book” (130).
During Wiebe's extensive research into the official history of Big Bear, he discovered a multitude of distortions and contradictory accounts. Bob Beal, Wiebe's co-author of War in the West, explains in this book that in 1885 the natives of what was then the North West Territories had no direct access to the writing that formed the conqueror's history and their influence on the white man's pictures was virtually nil. He further says that most historical accounts of natives are racially biased and set on a background of a desire for eastern Canada to exploit the western hinterland (11). Wiebe agrees with Beal and gives a rich, intensely subjective account of the events and characters with the freedom of a writer in the novel The Temptations of Big Bear. Wiebe says:

The advantage a fiction writer has is that right from the beginning he doesn't pretend that his is the only way of looking at it; he doesn't have to pretend that he has the authentic account of what happened. He goes in and shows you, this is the way I see it, as it could have happened. Then he has this fantastic freedom, you see, of shaping that thing according to some kind of world view that he has, some kind of concept of what people are like. (Cameron 152)

And in Wiebe's hands The Temptations of Big Bear turns out to be "a blend of documentary presentation and subjective creation as well" (Lecker 333).

Wiebe de-centers the white perspective by shifting the point of view throughout and by incisively juxtaposing the white documents.
with Indian consciousness. Johnston deals in detail on this strategy in his essay “An Intolerable Burden of Meaning: Native Peoples in White Fiction,” and points out that Wiebe constructs many angles of vision on the events of the novel to be tested against each other and against the central “visionary” perception of reality in Big Bear (63-64).

Wiebe himself brings out his intention in an interview:

I think once you have taken this angle, this attitude of telling the minority story, then you drop in the majority documents and see how stupid they sound or what kinds of ironic changes you can bring on them. It’s amazing how ironic it sometimes becomes. (Neuman 230)

For Wiebe, the official records tell only one side of the story – they are invariably white records compiled for white purposes and intended for white readers. The interpretation of Big Bear that is built up in this way contrasts dramatically with the sympathetic picture of Big Bear derived from The Temptations of Big Bear as a whole (Keith, Epic Fiction 67). Wiebe subverts the white version through the narrative of Kitty McLean, a white girl captive in the Indian camp, who sees Big Bear in his natural majesty and glory as Hal Wiens sees the breeds in Peace Shall Destroy Many. She is young enough, like Hal Wiens, to see the Indian chief without the blinkers of convention that dictate the response of the older whites. Her statement that “Even Papa would never understand Big Bear’s comprehension” (286) proves it. Accordingly, around the shaping consciousness of Big Bear (for example, each section returns to and ends with Big Bear’s
symbolic perspective), Wiebe interweaves multiple viewpoints and styles, shifting between public, private, Indian and white perspectives. Although facts do exist and events have happened, the ways these are seen and the stories that are told about them can, and do, vary from speaker to speaker. So, Wiebe's presenting of different perspectives is an attempt to approach the whole truth about these events more closely than would be possible through only one perspective. From this point of view, the role of historical fiction would be to tell those untold stories, to provide glimpses of the “other side” of already narrated events, in order to come to a fuller comprehension of truth (Visser 104). And Wiebe contends that the truth must be somewhere between private consciousness and public declaration (Whaley, “Rudy Wiebe” 344). These shifting points of view capture the totality of a crucial and tragic era in a rich chorus of diverse voices. Each viewpoint advances the story forward in time and complexity. Johnston argues that in order to avoid the imposition of values from outside their culture on their Native characters, white authors must dramatize or subvert the point of view in some way. Wiebe is extremely conscious of the inadequacy of any single point of view, and by constructing many angles on events, he makes his readers conscious of the dominant white codes which baffled and hurt and exploited the Plains Cree (Johnston 56, 60, 62, 64). Blodgett observes that the characters in this novel are “perspective exercises” and “the novel as dialogue, point of view, and narrative is a huge dramatization of the problem of talking about the same thing and always meaning something else. This is the
frontier dialectically understood” (Configuration 208). The form is a deliberate turning away from traditional realism to a mix of nineteenth century historical novel form with twentieth century freedom of narrative and psychological realism. And in this aspect it is highly illuminating. In an interview, Wiebe explains that the difficult style and structure of this novel is a result of its complex and unfamiliar subject: “I am trying a different kind of thing – you’re trying to capture on a large canvas the big events in the history of your country, and you cannot do a clipped witty novella about Big Bear. The character itself precludes that.” He also says, “If I’ve got a character that’s truly great, as I think Big Bear is, I’m not going to trivialize that greatness. I’m going to make you work for it” (Bergman 168). Howells sees the novel’s design as “an elaborate counterpoint between the chronological order of history and transgressions of this order by every story-teller within the narrative” (“History From a Different Angle” 163).

Wiebe has made the historical facts lively by adding several imagined scenes, especially of the Indians: their meetings, speeches, battles, horse raids, buffalo hunts, family and community life, rituals and ceremonies, and conversations. He enters the minds of both Indian and white characters, filling the novel with imagined interior monologues. Wiebe subverts the sense of history as orderly chronology by focusing on intensely realized subjective experience; the characters are humanly limited, and the resulting dramatic irony not only makes the events and characters seem more real, but also builds tension and suspense around a story already known. The presentation of the
Indian characters in their own social and cultural context, rather than in a white world, is rare and significant. Johnston argues that by setting Indians within their own community, the Indians are given meaning in relation to their own internal values rather than out of the external White, Eurocentric ideology. This is one effective way of subverting racist symbolic codes. It also allows for the inclusion of a wider range of characters between the familiar stereotypical poles (Johnston 61).

By choosing the historical period he has, Wiebe is able to recapture the Plains Indian communal reality as it existed for centuries, even as it is on the brink of destruction for ever. Keith writes that Wiebe uses “all his resources of verbal power and constructional skill in order to make us [white readers] appreciate the Indian response – not just comprehend it intellectually but feel it inwardly, on our pulses” (Epic Fiction 70).

The imaginative leaps required to reconstruct the consciousness of a different culture from a century ago are substantial. But for Wiebe, such a process is the essence of creative writing. When Bergman asks about the process of writing, Wiebe says: “A simple answer, I suppose, is that you try to see with another person’s eye, that’s all. This is particularly essential when you write about people who are completely different from you. The imaginative leap, then, is to see with their eyes and feel with their guts and think with their minds. That’s all there is to writing” (Bergman 168). In another interview, Wiebe admits the difficulty of imagining the experience of killing an animal, something he has never done: “I have never killed an animal in my life. So I have
A lot of that stuff is totally inimical to my way of looking at the world, but it has to be done” (Reimer and Steiner 129). Wiebe captures the challenge of the artist eloquently in the following passage, borrowing a phrase from A.M. Klein’s poem “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape”:

Trusting his “quintuplet senses”; the storyteller, too, has been tutoring them, to be his guide through the maze of life and imagination. Through the smoke and darkness and piled up factuality of a hundred years to see a face; to hear, and comprehend a voice whose verbal language he will never understand; and then to risk himself beyond such seeing, such hearing as he discovers possible, and venture into the finer labyrinths opened by those other senses: touch, to learn the texture of leather, of earth; smell, the tint of sweet grass and urine; taste, the golden popular sap or the hot, raw buffalo liver dipped in gall. (“On the Trail of Big Bear” 132)

Indeed, a significant aspect of Wiebe’s Indian consciousness is the unusual attention given to all the senses, not just to eye sight alone. The novel gives special attention to the audible world as part of an overall strategy to give greater prominence to sensory details beyond the literal and visible. This unusual focus also highlights the different modes of perception between the whites and the Indians. Sensory experience is the epistemological basis of realism in fiction (Johnston 64), and the fact that Wiebe travelled the physical space of Big Bear’s
world, as well as examined his Power Bundle reveals Wiebe’s commitment to representational accuracy.

In addition to the various Indian and white voices, there is also a third person narrator whose style ranges from a fairly flat, expository style, to a brisk, journalistic account of facts, and even further to a sensual, hypnotic poetry, and even to dialogue like drama (Whaley 345). This narrator is almost always distant and ironic in tone, ranging from acerbic humour to heavy judgment of the whites. At the opening of section three, the narrator provides a rare long passage outlining the state of the N.W.M.P. in 1884, including their usefulness to “adventure romance” in the future. He outlines their basic strategy as “nerveless confrontation. As if the grandmother’s law were so impartial and serene above any mere human question or resistance that the very pronouncement of it by one of her polished scarlet-coated officers was power sufficient for any arrest, in any situation” (151). This viewpoint certainly helps us to look upon these events retrospectively and brings us certain knowledge of what followed.

Both Keith and Howells note that the form of this novel mirrors its subject: dislocation and discontinuity. The narrative, with its shifting points of view, interrupted by frequent flashbacks and flashes forward, and centered on an unfamiliar Indian subjectivity, forces the reader to “undergo a similar experience of chaos to that experienced by the characters in the fiction” (Howells 164). Keith argues that the confusing and unfamiliar Indian names and places plunge the reader into a totally different way of life, and that this immersion may help the
reader to understand the Indian’s disorientation in an alien white world (Epic Fiction 79). At a conference in Edmonton in 1979, Wiebe elaborated on the relation of his form to his subject in The Temptations of Big Bear: “It’s very important that the language should warn you at all times that you’re sort of off-base with it, because you’re dealing with a Cree world-view, and that world-view could not comprehend a lot of what was happening to it. How do you do that except by the way you handle the language?” (qtd. in Howells 169).

Wiebe also deals with the issue of authority consciously with images of perception or vision. Many of the white characters wear eyeglasses; most notably judge Richardson who presides over Big Bear’s trial. The narrator notes that “the judge had no eyes. On the motionless head the egg-shaped glasses sat glazed gold” (398). There is also the one-eyed Stanley Simpson, whose fallacious testimony against Big Bear helps convict him (365). Big Bear’s youngest son, Horsechild, who seems to have inherited some of his father’s visionary powers, dreams of putting Simpson’s round glass eye in his own eye and wonders, “how would a green hill look through a blue eye?” (304). One of the most potent metaphors of vision accompanies Big Bear’s first appearance in the novel. Lieutenant Governor Morris looks through a brass telescope across a river valley to watch the approach of Big Bear, and he feels that: “Oddly, while it drew a spot closer, the telescope seemed at the same time to push that spot back into a kind of grayish-ringed haze; the Indian swaying gently with the horse . . . as if he were very far away, barely moving in a flat, constant green circle
at the end of an unbelievably long tunnel” (14). The image reflects both the huge gap between the two cultures, as well as the nature of each culture’s mode of perception. The whites try to “capture” the new land and its inhabitants through their European, scientific lens, a straight and narrow instrument that distorts and distances the image. The Indian world, as represented by Big Bear, resists such focusing, and instead radiates in a “green circle” (TBB 14). These symbols of straight lines and circles resonate throughout the novel and will be dealt with further later. The conflicts between the two cultures are fundamental and extensive. Keith argues that for Wiebe, the prairie unrest “is not so much a struggle for power between two opposed forces or even a moral conflict between right and wrong, justice and injustice. More fundamentally, it is a tragic (because unavoidable) clash between two irreconcilable ways of looking at human beings and their environment” (Epic Fiction 69). Blodgett expresses the essence of this novel in these precise terms: “Wiebe’s importance is to explicate both the paradigm of the native and the paradigm of the white at the moment when their exchange occurred” (Configuration 214). However, the modernism of the white culture sweeps aside the traditional way of life of the Indians, virtually altering their reality. As the buffalo disappears, the Indians are forced to sign government treaties for food and clothing. Alien laws of ownership and property, and military and industrial technology, including the railway, are thrust upon the Indians destroying their nomadic ways and their ties to the natural world, the foundations of their identity. In contrast to the
Indian's organic, cyclical world, the whites suffer from the modernist obsession with technology, order, control and dominion. Keith notes:

. . . throughout the novel, Wiebe contrasts the unified sensibility of Indian living, the physical and spiritual in perfect fusion, with the "fallen," bifurcated world of technology and efficiency represented by the white people. The coming of the railroad (a separating, fragmenting mechanism for the Indian, the emblem of national unity for Sir John A. Macdonald) becomes a potent symbol – in The Scorched-Wood People as well as here – for the enormity of historical change and the enforced break-up of a traditional way of life. Against this is set one of the last Indian buffalo-runs. (Epic Fiction 72)

Guptara is harsher in judging the modernism of the white culture: "It is a terrifying vision of a new idolatry that pretends to be enlightened, liberal, tolerant, but whose reality is an embrace that suffocates and kills" (152).

Governor Morris is frustrated at Big Bear's refusal to sign the treaty. To persuade Big Bear, Morris reveals the great plan of the white for the Indian in a very evocative language:

A broad road, and all along it I see the Governor and the Commissioners of the Queen taking the Indian by the hand, saying, we are brothers, we will teach you the cunning of the white man. All along the road I see Indians gathering, I see gardens growing and houses building. I see them receiving
money from the Queen’s Commissioner’s. I see them enjoying their hunting and fishing as before, I see them living as they have always lived, but with the Queen’s gift in addition . . . (28)

But over the course of the novel, this grand plan is proved to be a lie: they are unwilling to accept and honour Indian viewpoints, they follow a strategy of divide and rule, and with the incoming of new white settlers they adopt a two-tier system of development. And towards the middle of the novel, Big Bear expresses his disappointment with the mistreatment and countless broken promises after eight years of treaty: “What are these crooked things that we see around us while we dig for gophers with sticks so we have a few bits to put in our children’s mouths?” (205). The white’s arrogant self-righteousness, uncompromising greed and paternalism are reflected in various characters and incidents throughout the novel. Sometimes, the racism is open and direct, as in Indian Affairs Commissioner Edgar Dewdney’s letter to Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald:

The Cree have two notable reputations, one concerning their low intelligence and the other their beautiful modest but by no means intractable women and from the evidence you will know I have with some pain gathered this summer . . . would judge both evaluations absolutely correct. (123)

Towards the end of the novel, Wiebe inserts a Toronto Mail article, dated February 27, 1886, describing the imprisonment of Big Bear and Poundmaker. Its biased assumptions are crystal clear in the
portrayal of Big Bear: "... a small sized wizen-faced chap, with a cunning, restless look - and I interviewed him, but without much success. He said he liked the place well enough, only they made him work, and it was evident he was constitutionally prejudiced against that sort of thing" (402). The Indians also have this type of open prejudice against the whites, which is expressed best in the words of Sitting Bull: “Yes, good men, but always white men!” (101). A little later he again affirms: “Even the best white men can at least be nothing but bad for People” (TBB 102).

However, most of the conflicts are not so open or malicious, and they are expressed through a number of levels: time, sexual relations, violence and war, law and justice, religion and spirituality, the land, and language itself. One major difference that reveals the huge gap in understanding is the different perceptions of time: the Indians see time as cyclical, dependent on natural rhythms, whereas the whites see time as linear, clock-bound and technical. Howells notes that “where the white men consult watches and diaries, the Indians consult the sun and the seasons and so have a concept of duration rather than of the significance of any specific moment” (164). So throughout the novel we see the dimensions of irritation and incomprehension that arise from these differences. In chapter one Governor Morris is irritated when the Indians keep him waiting at the treaty signing: “The Big Bear isn’t rushed.” And Morris asks with a tired voice, “It’s only the third month on this one, who’s rushing?” As a counter point to this we see that Big Bear repeatedly frustrates the white government officials by
demanding more specific details and making them wait for his signature on the treaty. He cannot understand the restlessness of the whites:

Whites were only certain in changing . . . they kept on wanting something here or there and there another and wanting to change still another forever that kept them running forever and frantic. They never had rest . . . Settlers ripping up land knocking down trees . . . It ran in his head like a sore, they were always moving though no one had died at the old place . . . one fort and then another, build this, tear that down. He had tried to unravel this desperate placelessness - they built houses they couldn't move and yet they seemed always moving placelessly - many times, and inevitably again it ran him into that hemmed-in ache. (TBB 101-102)

Neither side seems able to make sense of the other's perception. And Wiebe establishes that concepts of time, like concepts of history and language, are not universal but culturally conditioned.

Another level of contrast is sexuality in which Indian and white values clash. Wiebe presents the communal life of Indians where their gender relations are better revealed, whereas the whites are predominantly government officials temporarily in the West and therefore without families. Wiebe makes use of their sexual relations to bring out opposing values of two cultures. We see Big Bear's affection and devotion to his various wives (however, Wiebe doesn't enter the
minds of Indian females as he does with Indian males). Wiebe gives particular attention to Big Bear’s son, Kingbird, as he passes through adolescent sexual curiosity to adulthood and his relationship with his wife, Sits Green On The Earth. Several critics have outlined the white tradition of using the Indian as a figure of uninhibited and vital sexuality. The Indian in either gender is the power of Nature in human form (Johnston 53; Goldie, “Fear and Temptation” 70-71). Angelika Maeser-Lemieux makes a feminist and psychoanalytical critique of white male discourse revealing the link between sexism and racism (121). She also brings to light that the symbolic identification of Native people with Nature, instinct, primitiveness, and sexuality has allowed writers to hold up to the dominant white society a mirror of its own repressions and unconscious dynamisms (129). We find out through an inner monologue of John Delaney, the farming instructor at Frog Lake, that he has sex with Sits Green On The Earth, wife of Kingbird (231). Wiebe seems to make John Delaney’s sexual relation with Sits Green On The Earth symbolic of the rape of the Indian culture and the land itself by the repressed and desperate whites. There is much imagery in the highly stylized stream-of-consciousness passage which reveals Delaney’s unconscious. He needed an axe handle at least to pry apart his own wife’s legs (237). So he obsessively seeks the relation of a fecund, powerless, Indian woman. He thinks about the words he will say to that young woman, knowing that she does not understand any of them:
An extraordinary feeling broke up in him: to say to her “Listen!” and then talk, endlessly, as long as he dared, knowing she did not comprehend a syllable of the fly-blown obscenity he was laying over her; feeling the bones of her hand fold under his, of her beautiful shoulders, saying anything, everything, letting pour out the words he refused to know coiled and squirmed deep inside him to the give of her skull under his fingers, which he had not even recognized all the three years they were ramming up in his throat before anyone who would have understood them, plugged much of him speechless, the silken slip of hair and then the soft mould of her face in the moist cool darkness . . . (231-232)

This free expression of the thoughts of Delaney reveals that white consciousness is sterile and neurotic in its lust for control and domination. The scene of Delaney with the Indian woman, and the later monologue of Mrs. Teresa Delaney (240-41), with its images of violence (coldness, tightness, blood, claws, hooks, burning) reveal the serious repressions the white suffer. Delaney is killed afterward in the massacre. Fear of sexual assault is evident when a native woman hangs herself hearing the sound of the approaching white soldiers (322). Indians also see the life of white soldiers something unnatural: “All summer they fight and in winter they have something like women in their camps. They have holes like women but they can’t cook or have children. They just lie in their lodges and those soldiers stand in a line with presents to mount them. Then in summer they want to do the
same with our real women” (TBB 60-61). Sits Green On The Earth suffers much, but she endures with her husband and child. The Indian characters are not idealized: they are simply human.

Another basic difference between the two cultures is their ethics of war. The infamous massacre of nine white men by Cree warriors at the Frog Lake settlement in April 1885 is an undeniable act of violence. But Wiebe succeeds in subverting it by showing the role of violence within Indian culture, the increasing desperation of the young Cree Rattler warriors, the pacifist leadership of Big Bear, and, above all, the fact that the whites commit their own barbaric acts of violence using modern weapons and their cruel strategy of exerting pressure by starvation in order to divide and rule. Violence is a part of Indian culture. Man gains greatness and maturity through killing the buffalo, stealing horses from other tribes, and by killing enemy tribes. These bring pride and honour to individuals. We see King Bird (Big Bear’s son) kills a Siksika in order to steal his horse (84). Big Bear, guided by the River Cree warrior spirit of Great Parent Bear, often reminisces about his physical power, vitality and courage when he was in his prime. He recalls his heroic feats in the past battles in order to remind his young warriors of real courage “and never made certain they had no weapons before I faced them” (288). When faced with the whites, Big Bear feels that Indian way of fighting will not succeed with the whites. So he urges for negotiation and talks, and wants to meet “the white skin than whom there is none higher” (TBB 197), the Prime Minister or the Grandmother (Queen), which was never fulfilled.
He wants the whites to acknowledge and respect Indian culture rather than merely subjugate it (Monkman, *A Native Heritage* 116).

However, “the very ways the Indians want to perpetuate, will not let them fulfill his dream of unity and survival” (Moses 266). The first section of the novel opens with the declarations that one of the Cree chiefs, Sweetgrass, had signed the treaty (19). His loyalty and gratitude to Governor Morris is evident in his words: “My heart rises like bird to see you once more” (17). Section two opens with the scene of Blackfoot chief, Crowfoot, signing the treaty (68). But for years Big Bear refuses to sign the treaty conditions. He refuses to take up a reservation. He once dared to say: “We want none of the Queen’s presents. When we set a fox-trap we scatter pieces of meet all around, but when the fox gets into the trap we knock him on the head. We want no bait; let your chiefs come like men and talk to us” (15). With a still higher vehemence he refuses the temptation to violence advocated by his own people. Sioux chief Sitting Bull says, “There is only one way: kill them or get rubbed out” (104). Wandering Spirit, the bitter war chief, vows: “I will never again look at a whiteskin except along the barrel of this gun!” (283). Chief Poundmaker, the adopted Cree son of Crowfoot, reflects the general attitude of the Indians when he tells Big Bear that “fighting toward death is better than being dragged there by hunger” (TBB 187). The Métis and Cree warriors including Big Bear’s son, Little Bad Man, are all in favour of violence. But Big Bear does not yield.
At times Big Bear feels himself in a dilemma. He sees the practicality of fighting, but he is unwilling to do it. “It is strange, unless we shoot someone nobody hears us: whenever somewhere there is killing, suddenly doors with food behind them open and open. That is strange” (227). At the same time he sees a divine plan in the coming of the whites: “The spirit must have sent these whites to us so we must find the way. He wants us to live with them” (105). Born under the warrior spirit, Big Bear’s pacifism comes not from fear or reluctance when faced by war, but from his deep respect and fellow feeling for all people, whether white or red, for they all are the creation of The Only One. He considers killing in hunts manly, but never so while one kills other men (TBB 105). This is a much more civilized culture. His keen political strategy and foresight admonish him to refrain from violence. He realizes that an open fight against the white can bring only further destruction, and that the Indian ways of fighting can never win over the more terrible specialized war strategy of the white (Monkman 118). The Indians wonder at white soldiers, “who never have women or children with them, and do nothing but fight” (60). Wandering spirit sees it very strange that the white soldiers fight wearing all their best cloths as if they are dancing for their women, and as if there is no difference between a war and a war dance (299-300). But Big Bear is fully conscious of the reality when he says: “If we fight soldiers or police we will be wiped out because there always seem to be more of them, with endless bullets” (103). So he is firm in his decision, “I won’t let that happen to my People” (105). However, Wiebe has no false
assumption that the Indians are altogether a harmonious, peaceful people. Several tribal wars, Frog Lake massacre and the pillaging of Fort Pitt are recounted in horrible detail. The great suffering of white women who watch their husbands slaughtered is also given in detail (TBB 259-260). At the same time the Indians treat well the white captives. Kitty McLean in her diary writes well about the Indians (in chapter two of section five of the novel). In his attempt for a compromise, Big Bear stands out as a unique hero with greater moral and spiritual integrity than any of his contemporaries. It is true that he failed to stop the young violent warriors of his band from committing the Frog Lake massacre. Keith identifies Big Bear as a tragic hero because his decline parallels the decline of his people; a man of peace caught in a web of violence; a noble individual destroyed by a clash of cultures (Epic Fiction 63).

The white never lag with regard to violence and they always have the backing of law. Once constable Thomas McClennan of N.W.M.P. killed an Indian and “cut off an ear, looped a rope around the head and, with it tied to the saddle of the terrified black, whooping dragged the body back and forth on the rocky moonlit prairie along Pipestone Creek . . .” (295). Here Wiebe undermines the historical notion that Indians are inherently more violent or barbaric than whites. More than individual instances of violence, Wiebe focuses his attention on the systematic, structural violence carried out by whites which endangered the relations between two cultures. The white followed a well worked out policy of bribing the Indians with food and supplies,
and then slowly limiting the supply leading to a starvation, and thereby to crumple and force the Indians to sign the treaties and choose reserves. Dewdney informs the Prime Minister that "It is fortunate he [Crowfoot] seems to blame only the Americans for the shortage of food; if he saw as clearly as Big Bear, we would be sending more than sugar to the North West" (116). Robert Jefferson, the farm instructor, who married Poundmaker's sister, is an Indian sympathizer. However, he is none other than "a dog sitting guard at the door of Government" (175); but he feels depressed in his duty to "keep numbers of every hoe and seed" and to "dole out food . . . exactly measured to how little a man can get and still survive to work" (175). Dewdney even takes pride in debilitating Indians by the supply of flour and salt bacon: "Debilitation is not of course all bad, for it checks their desire for fighting" (111). The hidden violence comes out in clear terms when Dewdney writes to the Prime Minister:

Everything about Sitting Bull is bad and I can see our only policy is to continue pressuring him, he must go back. Walsh's handling on the spot is good: keep them from complete starvation but offer no hope for land and at the slightest misdemeanor of any Sioux make the arrest and give him a public trail and always jail him if the offence in any way allows. (TBB :11-112)

However, what happens is just the opposite. The oppressed and desperate Indians resort to violence. They take food by threat and force. Once Little Bear and He Speaks Our Tongue with a group of
others "held their weapons in their right hands and reached over the shoulders of the seated whites for bread and bannock and bacon with their left" (247). This episode effectively shows the accumulating tension between the hungry Indians and the rigid white officials. Big Bear is still powerful enough to control his band. But when oppression has broken all limits, not even Big Bear's word holds his band back, and the whole matter ends up in Frog Lake massacre of nine whites and taking other whites captives. Through this incident Wiebe establishes the fact that violence never happens in a vacuum, that people are very often pushed to it, and that there is a huge price to pay for deliberately creating such situations. Dewdney advises the Prime Minister that as the Plains Indians will not choose reserves until all hope of buffalo is gone, "we must make it harder and harder for them now to receive the annual payments or any supplies unless they choose and settle" (TBB 122). In the end, Big Bear is compelled to sign the treaty as he realizes he cannot feed his people any more. But before that he tries his best to unite the Indians, but in vain.

Canadian government is afraid of an Indian confederation, and so tries to prevent the alliance forming between the various Indian tribes and the Métis. Dewdney sees such a possibility: "We might now be facing all the Plains Indians and also the half-breeds under Dumont as one front united in their demands" (116). The policy of divide and rule has been used effectively throughout history all over the world. The strategy works particularly well when it exploits traditional rivalries, as Wiebe shows in Big Bear's failure to achieve a Plains Indian
confederation with the Sioux chief Sitting Bull and Blackfoot chief Crowfoot. Big Bear knows well that unless the Indians unite under one voice, whites will continue to “use them against each other” (96). There is already a Blackfoot confederacy consisting of Siksikas, Bloods, Piegons and Sarcees because as Big Bear says, “a man makes peace with his enemies because a greater one is pushing him” (98). Big Bear then warns the big chiefs that the old days will not return “Unless we all together make a life circle with our hands and face the Whiteskins as one” (99). In a council speech Big Bear makes a compelling appeal regarding the need and necessity of a confederation in a very rich and evocative language:

We are small here, we are smaller there, and who hears us? Who stirs in his sleep when a single buffalo runs? But when a herd moves, ahhh -- we too must shake the ground, we must speak with one thundering voice, we must have one huge reserve for us all, for our hunting, for our life where we will live as the treaty says we can: as we always have but also with grain and food growing as the Government will help us. Then when we move every white skin will lay his ear to the ground so he won’t get trampled. (203)

However, neither an Indian confederation nor an alliance with the Métis is formed. Crowfoot believes that the buffalo will return, and he is tempted by white promises. All the chiefs, including Big Bear, distrust Louis Riel, the Métis leader, because he is not a “person” and he “prays only to the white spirit” (TBB 108).
Wiebe has also inserted in the fifth chapter of section five a Canadian Volunteer account about the military campaign to capture Big Bear and his band. This Volunteer gives a cynical, crude and at times humorous critique of the ineptitude of the N.W.M.P. and the army which are weakened by internal rivalry and poor leadership. Wiebe here subverts the machine-like efficiency of the white soldiers, and brings out the absurdity of the situation – the Indians force the heavily armed white soldiers to chase them around the prairie as if engaged in an animal hunt. The heroism and glory of white soldiers fade into mediocrity. At the same time the Canadian Volunteer is also not free from unthinking crude racism typical of the white. In the first paragraph of his narrative, this Volunteer complains that “the degraded and undisciplined savage, you know, has disregarded the most common courtesies of war” (315) because they have decamped. A little later he writes, “The noble red man, you must be aware, seems to have sadly degenerated since the days of Fenimore Cooper” (317). Again as his troop comes across an Indian corpse hastily buried, he writes: “He is a disgusting object, our friend of the filthy slit blanket and little feathers, and we think of the Frog Lake settlers and are glad; he is a good Indian now” (321). The malicious bantering of the character acquires a savage force at the end of this section when he states that he has caught and sexually assaulted the Métis, Pierre Blondin. The Volunteer recalls:

His cloths are flying in shreds and when he breaks out, screaming, he’s mother naked. He’s fast but he hasn’t a
chance, we've got him headed for the river... Towards the river he stops sounding off, suddenly, just runs bloody and his moccasins are too much for my boots so I dive at him, feet legs belly I've got him and the boys working his head and some his legs while I'm peeling him apart in the middle wherever my fingers can get in, then I've really got him where he'll never forget it... (328)

The Volunteer also thinks of himself as a preferred being because he has been formally educated, and this becomes another ground for violence against the native (TBB 319). Throughout his section, probably in the entire novel, the Volunteer adopts a double standard, that is, the natives are supposed to act according to white law, but the whites need not return the civility.

Moreover, the depiction of violence also occurs in the discourse itself. Sherriel E. Grace in the article “Structuring Violence: “The Ethics of Linguistics” in The Temptations of Big Bear” distinguishes two types of discourse: the horizontal narrative of contiguity and the vertical narrative of substitutions. The first is European, and the second Native. Grace writes about their distinctive characteristics:

A language of “proposition” is a language of nomination and denotation relying heavily upon syntactic order, contiguity, relations of cause and effect – in short, on metonymy. A language of “parable,” by contrast, implies something very different, something suggestive, allusive, and alogical, something paradigmatic, arising from analogy and relations
of similarity – in short, from metaphor. As might be expected, in The Temptations of Big Bear the horizontal narrative of contiguity presenting the white story is heavily metonymic whereas the vertical narrative is highly metaphoric. (14-15)

Both discourses embody distinct ideologies and this bipolarity of narrative discourse makes one unintelligible to the other leading to a situation of violence.

These conflicting views of war and violence get mixed with concepts of law and justice in Big Bear’s trial for treason-felony towards the end of the novel. He surrenders to the Canadian Government on July 1, 1885, appropriately the “Dominion Day.”

When Richard Burton Deane, Superintendent of the N.W.M.P., levels charges against Big Bear in the court, he does not understand them. He has already distrust for white law. When Governor Morris says that the law is the same for red and white, Big Bear retorts, “That may be. But itself, it is only white” (31). This proves to be true in the trial sessions. When Big Bear repeatedly says he feels the rope around his neck, it is not an omen of personal hanging, but as Dewdney explains the picture language refers to “the much wider claims of the whole white law against the Indian” (TBB 113). The image is of suffocation, deprivation of vital air and freedom, and in “Bear Spirit in a Strange Land,” Wiebe notes that the Cree believe that the soul resides along the back of the neck (148). The biased attitude is evident from the very beginning of the trial when D.L. Scott, the Crown Prosecutor, explains
to the jury that it is not necessary to go in detail into the circumstances connected with the rebellion "because the whole matter from beginning to end is now almost a matter of history. The circumstances are just as well known to you, in fact better known to you, than you will hear from evidence today" (358). Here one may reasonably doubt the need of questioning the witnesses. Further, the defense lawyer, Robertson, fails to convince the court that Big Bear really endeavored to prevent violence by speaking to his band, on the ground that oral evidence is not permitted; and in bewilderment he asks, "Are we to pretend in this court that Indians habitually communicate by written orders, by letters of intention!" (376). However, Big Bear's association with or presence in the Cree camp, the central point of the treason-felony charge, is not a sufficient reason to convict Big Bear:

... you cannot draw the same inferences from the conduct of an Indian as from a white man, a white man accustomed to live under our forms of Government. A white man knows he can move easily because the law protects him, that anywhere in the country, however large, he may find a home. But the Indian, apart from his little band, cannot live. He is not free, when he sees mischief done, to say, I will leave here, go among other people. (382)

But the jury is not convinced of this fact, and concludes that Big Bear actually aided and supported rebellion during his association with his band. The self defense of Big Bear that he is obviously innocent of contributing to the 1885 Indian uprising because he did not even wear
war paint during the turmoil. and his explanation of the situation –

"I heard war cries, but I knew little before that happened. I never called a councilor to a council. The angry warriors in my band did not listen to me and they poured out the blood of people I wanted to protect” (395) – all go unheeded in the court. Even the benefit of doubt is not granted to him. Judge Richardson pronounces the judgment: “Now, grey-haired as you are, you cannot be excused from all responsibility for misdoings of your band. You have been found guilty . . . That you be imprisoned in the penitentiary of Manitoba at Stony Mountain for the period of three years” (TBB 399). Although pardoned before the end of his sentence, prison life drained the life from the old chief, and he died soon after he was released. Wiebe puts to question the avowed impartiality of white law and justice.

Religion and spirituality are always major concerns in native stories, and The Temptations of Big Bear is not an exception to it. Wiebe, in fact, makes these concerns the main area of contrast between the White and the Native. Throughout the novel, Wiebe is critical of modern mainstream Christianity, and favours a broader sense of religious values based on the fundamental Mennonite theology and the traditional Indian beliefs and customs. As such he sides with the thriving pagan spirituality of the Indians against the empty and materialistic Christianity which most white characters exhibit. Wiebe makes a clear break with the usual white Christian tradition of portraying Natives as evil heathens who need to be converted or killed. Instead he takes a positive approach to bring
out the real spiritual in the Natives. He opposes and regrets the assimilation of the Indians into the mainstream of the Christian European culture. As Terrence Craig writes, Wiebe is concerned with the Indians' "full humanity in the face of white Christian greed and imperial arrogance and racism, qualities which essentially limit the humanity of the whites" (103). In an interview Wiebe claims that this novel is "totally non-religious in a formal sense, and in another way it's fantastically religious, because once you get to know what Indian people of that time were like, they were and are more religious than you can ever imagine a white man being" (Cameron 158). Wiebe once became very excited when asked about the religious life of Indians, and gave a long speech on it:

Everything they did was related to something beyond them – some spirit, some divinity, something. When they killed a buffalo they thanked the spirit. When you read the negotiations for the treaties and so on, the white man comes along and he's mouthing all these fine things about the Great Mother under the Great Spirit, all this stuff, and you sort of feel, yeah, that's the way he talks, that's the way Victorian people talked, it was the standard way of talking, everybody talked that way. But the Indians say that, too, and then they stand and pray, you know? They talk about it, and they really do it: they smoke the sacred pipe and, most literally, pray, before they sign treaties and stuff. It's a revelation. You suddenly see a community, a people, who truly see things
religiously, who don’t see things only in terms of the here and now. (Cameron 158-159)

Wiebe points out that, in the penitentiary records, Big Bear’s religion is officially recorded as “None” (“On the Trail of Big Bear” 137). Keith remarks that the Indian’s religiosity went unrecognized by the whites because it was not in accordance with the standard nineteenth century versions of Christian thought, and also because it was lived and not divided into separate compartments (Epic Fiction 74). Throughout the novel Wiebe provides rich detail about the intimate awareness and relevance of spirituality in everyday River Cree life, including smoking ceremonies, prayers asking and thanking “The Only One” for blessings, and the elaborate Thirst Dance ritual. Just before death, Big Bear thinks, “It was time now. To lie down, to finish the long prayer to The Only One that was his life . . . (414). Then he makes a real prayer thanking his God for all the blessings, and asking for pity for himself and his people:

You only Great Spirit, Father, I thank you. I thank you for giving me life, for giving me everything, for being still here now that my teeth are gone. So now I have to ask you this last thing, and I think it’s like the first thing I asked but may be you’ll forgive that, since you have already known for a long time how hard it is for me to understand and learn anything, even in all the time you gave me. I ask you again. Have pity. (TBB 414)
The power of his prayer is not the might-is-right ethic of the white man, but inner strength which he derives from The Only One. The whites may speak platitudes about God’s goodness and about their belief, but their belief has no effect in their daily lives. But the Indians always live in an intimate awareness of The Only One (Allan Dueck 184). Just like Frieda Frieser’s stoic acceptance of all things in Peace Shall Destroy Many, Big Bear accepts even evil in a religious sense. He says, “It is good in one way that I am cheated, for now I begin to understand what great good The Only One had given me. Now I can truly worship the kindness of That One” (TBB 196). Wiebe, perhaps, is presenting Big Bear as the Only True Christian in the novel. However, the whites demonstrate themselves as anti-Christian by their coarse and profane language and manners, their blatant deceit in altering the terms of the treaty and theft of the land, and their genocidal machinations that sweep away the Native culture.

The prophetic visions of Big Bear are the clearest expressions of his intense spirituality. He inherits this power from his Power Bundle, Chief’s Son’s Hand, given him by the Great Parent of Bear, the most powerful spirit helper known to the Cree (TBB 113, Wiebe. “Bare Spirit in a Strange Land” 148). The visions reveal his metaphorical perception of the world, and also foreshadow the events to come. The visions are real, and not an invention by Wiebe, as documented in War in the West. Beal and Wiebe document Big Bear’s vision of a spring of blood shooting up from the ground and spurting up between his fingers as he tries to smother it (War in the West 46). This vision is
recounted twice in this novel (130, 226). It foreshadows the Frog Lake massacre and the bloodshed of his people that followed. Big Bear also has recurring visions of six of his River People hanged (TBB 65, 165, 410). On every recurrence this vision gathers force and significance and serves as a sign to Big Bear of the quickening approach of destruction (Howells 116). And it proved to be true as the leaders of the Frog Lake massacre are executed by the state. Big Bear’s visions are the authentic signs of his spiritual integrity; they give his voice its authority because they bear witness to his direct relationship with the metaphysical forces that govern human existence.

Further, Wiebe admits a similarity between Big Bear and the prophets of the Old Testament in their “sense of heritage sold out,” and he adds, “they felt they spoke directly from god. They didn’t speak out of the smallness of man but out of the greatness of all that man can comprehend and not only in connection with themselves but also with the spirit that made them” (Mandel and Wiebe, “Where the Voice Comes From” 152, 155). Jeffrey points out that the prophetic voice of Big Bear carries “an authority of greater moral force than that of the outside temporal authority which finally crushes” him (“A Search for Peace” 199). Further, Keith and Neuman argue that Wiebe bestows a Christ-figure on Big Bear. Keith identifies a sacrificial victim in Big Bear (Epic Fiction 76-77), and Neuman sees in Big Bear a scape-goat figure analogous to Christ (234). Big Bear’s speech in parables and metaphors, his visions, his pacifism, his temptations (marked in the ritual Thirst Dance where he offers up his sacrifice of thirst
and hunger), and his martyrdom [Big Bear tells his warriors, “I will have to lift what you did at Frog lake; my back will have to carry what you did at Fort Pitt . . . I felt the rope around my neck long ago” (TBB 288) and James Simpson tells Big Bear: “. . . now this affair will all be in your name, not your young men. It will be all on you, carried on your back” (Beal and Wiebe 58)], all seem to support the statements of Keith and Neuman. Further, the very title of the novel, The Temptations Big Bear, inevitably suggests the temptations of Christ. The basic temptation of Christ is to yield to the promises of Satan, and Christ comes out victorious. Big Bear also resists the temptation to yield to the temptations of white culture, but meets with a tragic end. Again the imagery of rock (TBB 314, 315, 415) reminds us of Psalms 18.2, “The Lord is my rock and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,” and of Christ’s words to Peter in Matthew 16.18, “. . . on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” Glenn Meeter describes Big Bear as “the Christ like Man, the Disciple” (57). His Christ like qualities are more purely inner and spiritual in nature, as he has no Christian tradition. But he derives them from a conscious following of his own tradition for which Wiebe finds Scriptural authorization in the book’s epigraph from Acts (Meeter 57). Bessai remarks that behind Big Bear is Wiebe’s vision of a Mennonite patriarch, and behind this is his vision of the lost Old Testament world (Bessai and Jackel 213). Jeffrey argues that the Bible is a sort of “absent text” throughout Wiebe’s fiction and the Bible provides Wiebe not only with allusions and plots,
but also provides him, more significantly, "with a design – a hermeneutical model which yields up both the deep structure of his creations and the methodology in terms of which he “translates” the histories he writes" (“Biblical Hermeneutic and Family History” 100). All these inferences of critics are countersigned by Wiebe by his epigraph to this novel, a citation of Acts 17.24-28:

> God who made the world and all that is in it, from one blood created every race of men to live over the face of the whole earth. He has fixed the times of their existence and the limits of their territory, so that they should search for God and, it might be, feel after him, and find him. And indeed, he is not far from any of us, for in him we live, and move, and have our being.

Big Bear’s “paganism,” as we see in the novel, continually interconnects with Christian belief and symbolism. So Susan Whaley comments that “The heathens ironically turn out to be more Christian than the White Man, an inversion almost cliché by now in literature about historical confrontations between two races” (“Narrative Voices in The Temptations of Big Bear” 147)

Some critics are also of opinion that while working against the negative symbol of the Native heathen, Wiebe has indulged in another symbolic code of idealization. Where Christianity and European civilization are subjected to criticism, the Natives are seen to represent an alternative, more natural and purer form of spirituality (Johnston 54). Moreover Wiebe portrays Natives as intuitive monotheists who
believe in The Only One. Craig observes that the Natives of Wiebe are not so much Indians or Métis as they are religious people, and Wiebe’s interest in history is a religious interest. Craig even charges that in emphasizing the religious instead of the ethnic functions of Native peoples in his work, Wiebe endangers realism (111). Keith also admits the possibility that some of Wiebe’s own religious views have transferred themselves to Big Bear (Epic Fiction 77). Allowing room for these criticisms, we also note that Wiebe treats the Christian conversion of the Indians critically. Wiebe doubts the sincerity of the Methodist missionary, John McDougall, who, though he sympathizes with the Indians, collaborates with the colonizers by encouraging the Indians to sign the unjust treaties. Furthermore, Big Bear is perplexed by the disparities in the white’s God between the Catholic and the Protestant versions, and he strongly resists conversion (23). It is only on his death-bed he accepts Catholic Last Rites (TBB 408). His pacifism is also not merely religiously motivated, but it is an insightful political strategy to deal with an entirely new enemy. Allan Dueck remarks that the intense awareness of transcendent reality and the strong sense of peoplehood and equality possessed by the Natives suggest “not that they are thinly disguised Mennonites, but that Wiebe recognizes the validity of other varieties of religious experience than his own” (185). However, in The Temptations of Big Bear Wiebe succeeds in showing that the Indians had a thriving, spiritual culture which was crushed by a nominally Christian materialistic empire.
Land becomes an object of fundamental dissension and conflict between two cultures. And this is the central issue of the novel: controversy over the land. At the court Big Bear claims: “This land belonged to me” (398); but the judge dismisses Big Bear’s claim saying that the land never belonged to him, but to Queen (399). The Indians have a spiritual intimacy and reverence for the land and sees land as “Mother Earth” (TBB 23). Keith observes that the Indians perceived land in religious terms whereas the whites perceived land primarily in commercial and economic terms (Epic Fiction 69, 74). The white man sees the land as something to be neatly measured out according to the surveyor’s mathematical rules: “straight lines had squared up the land at right angles” (TBB 409). Though the whites claim to be God-centered, they are actually property-centered. Blodgett refers to the change of pattern from the Old West to the New West as a change of economic vision, which implies a change in the vision of land (Configuration 199). Indian’s intuitive vision of land as sacred common possession is replaced by white’s technological vision of possession and division of land as real estate. Blodgett rightly remarks that paradoxically the opening of the West was its closure in the sense that the whites imposed a radical discontinuity on the land, contradicting and destroying the pastoral world it claimed to create (Configuration 210-12). This fundamental conflict is worked out at different levels.

The commercial and economic view of the whites towards the land is evident from their eagerness to make the Indians sign
the treaties. The first sentence of the novel is, “Sweetgrass had signed the treaty.” This simple sentence itself suggests the simplicity and straightforwardness of the Natives. But soon the crooked hidden agenda of the whites comes out through the thoughts of Governor Morris:

... the several hundred thousand square miles to which he had finally and forever extinguished, as the Prime Minister liked to say it, all native rights. In his four years they added up to something a little over three hundred and fifty thousand; these final one hundred and twenty thousand – who could tell exactly, larger than the entire British Isles – won with no more than a few embraces endured and shots fired in celebration, rolling wood and prairie land lying as it seemed now at his booted feet. Who could imagine so much land? ... that despite everything done in the name of brotherhood, the Queen, the Great – thank God others would have to concern themselves with the continuing justice of it, thank God ... Who would sign away such land? As if they had a choice. (9-11)

Later when Crowfoot signs the treaty, Governor David Laird too takes pride in having cheated the Natives and was happy to make the Annual Report of 1877: “Not quite $53,000 for a bit more than fifty thousand square miles of grass and hills. A down payment actually, but complete with rivers, valleys, minerals, sky – everything forever” (69). The acquisitiveness of the whites is contrasted with Big Bear’s wonder and incomprehension of concepts such as land ownership
and property. He declares, “No one can choose for only himself a piece of the Mother Earth. She is. And she is for all that live alike” (28). There is a communal sense in their ideology, and what they share is land. It cannot be owned and so Big Bear cannot understand the concept of land belonging to the Queen and of receiving private ownership from her. So he asks, “What can it mean . . . Who can receive land? From whom would he receive it?” (TBB 29). John Moss remarks that the property rights mean limited access and limited movement for the nomadic and nature dependent Indian, and this means virtual cultural genocide (“Genocide” 268). As the “head and soul” (112) of all Plains Indians, Big Bear has an extraordinary intelligence and intuitive vision which helps him to take a strong stand to maintain their heritage based in the land. Unlike other chiefs, Big Bear has already recognized, even in the beginning, that the land treaties are unjust and unfair. While Governor Morris negotiates with Big Bear, Big Bear feels a rope around his neck, and before proceeding further, as a true band leader, he says, “I must see my people before I can say more” (27). Like Sweetgrass and Crowfoot he is never a fool to take a quick decision without considering the pros and cons of the matter. So he refuses to sign the treaty. And later he convenes the chiefs and tells them, “We must talk with one voice to their headmen and the Grandmother herself so she will change the treaty” (104); further he makes a great appeal to them, “We must be all together, with one voice. We must change the treaties. They take too much the spirit has giver, and return nothing” (105). During the
central council speech, Big Bear clearly depicts the pitiable situation of the Indians: “... and all that was promised, I can’t see the half of it” (199). He feels as if choked as he is not even allowed to walk out of his piece of land without the permission of some Farm Instructor (199). Later he mocks the cheating strategy of the whites:

They bring everything crooked, they take our lands and sell them and clap their hands on their hips and call themselves men. Men! Years before the treaty we heard that the Hudson’s Bay Company had sold the land to the Government. When, from whom had they ever received it? I know that they sold what was not theirs for more money than all the People have received after eight years of treaty, and besides that the Company still has more land than all of our reserves together. (204)

However, with the support of the white law, the cunning white strategy succeeds in establishing their concept of land. And Big Bear submits to it and makes a very sincere and sympathetic appeal in the court:

No doubt these handsome faces I admire will know how to care for the land. No doubt better than I. Perhaps they will also be able to care for my people, now that I am gone... I plead with you, chiefs of the white law, have pity! Pardon the outcasts of my people... This land belonged to me... But you have taken our inheritance, and our strength. The land is torn up, black with fires, and empty. You have done this. And there is nothing left now but you must help us. (397-98)
And Judge Richardson before sentencing Big Bear tells him: “This land never belonged to you. The land was and is the Queen’s. She has allowed you to use it” (TBB 399) – an almost exact transcription of the actual words of the judge as documented in War in the West by Beal and Wiebe (176).

Throughout the novel, Wiebe connects metaphorically Big Bear, and through him all the Natives, to Nature. At the moment of his birth itself, Big Bear gets a deep connection with Nature. He recalls his birth. He is born under a spruce tree. A bear has been sleeping under that spruce tree, and he is born into something left behind by that bear and since then he has always something big with bears. The Great Parent of Bear gives him his name, and a song. And he wears His Hand – the Power Bundle (206). Big Bear’s face is described as earth-like, and he has a “crushed-stone face,” and his voice seemed “to growl up from the earth itself” (400). He says, “The stone is my people” (20). He is also linked to the water of the earth, “Big Bear stood half-turned against a bush, an arch of golden water curving from him in the sunlight, joining him to the creek” (290). He also tells the story of rock which gives them pipe by which they pray to The First One, and this rock is the grandfather of all, the first of all being as well as the last (314-15). And the novel aptly ends as Big Bear follows the “Trail to the Sand Hills” and literally metamorphoses into rock:

He felt the granular sand joined by snow running together, against and over him in delicate streams. It sifted over the crevices of his lips and eyes, between the folds of his face and
hair and hands, legs; gradually rounded him over until there was a tiny mound on the sand hill almost imperceptible on the level horizon. Slowly, slowly, all changed, continually into indistinguishable, as it seemed, and everlasting, unchanging, rock. (415)

Big Bear is also connected to the sun, the focus of life in the Indian world. He often appears in silhouette with the sun’s rays surrounding him (22,129). When Kitty McLean, a white captive in Indian camp, declares, “I want to be more like you. A person,” the reply of Big Bear is, “The Sun will warm you” (313). And “Sun devoured her warmer and warmer until she was suffused. Herself, completely; open and radiant” (314). Later, at the trial scene the last red edge of the sun slashes across Big Bear’s closed, monolithic, face (388), and at death he sees the red shoulder of Sun at the rim of Earth (TBB 415).

The references to the circle are abundant because it represents the holistic quality of Native life where everything is unified. It describes the relation between human beings and the land on which they live. When Big Bear kills a buffalo, the narrator states that “In the circle of sun and sky and earth and death he stood complete” (129). Big Bear’s spiritual beliefs are founded on the principles of the circle of the earth and of all the realms associated with and connected to the central sphere. The confusion and disorder of the white world are estimated when the chief tells himself to “come back to the circle of the earth” (62). He remembers his father’s voice telling him that “All living has soul and the greatest of all living is Sun. It is good to pay respect
when he comes back to the circle of Earth to rest” (49). Big Bear has internalized his ancestor's beliefs. Wholeness is attained when the circle completes itself as in the revolutions of the sun in the continuous cycle of the four seasons. The circle also represents unity within the community which is the source of strength for the River People. Big Bear tells the tribal chiefs that their only hope of survival lies in making “a life circle with our hands” to face the whites (TBB 99). Big Bear thinks that unity created by the life circle will allow the Natives the opportunity to preserve their way of life. He defies the ideology of imperialism which aspires to create empires by dividing the indigenous people, turning them against one another and then conquering the land. So he wants his people to stand in life circle with one voice.

The circle becomes destructive in the hands of the white. It is depicted as the noose of the hangman's rope which is the new method of imposing death on the Natives under white law. So Big Bear decides to tell the Governor, “There is something that I dread. To feel the rope around my neck. It is not given to us by The Great Spirit that Redmen or Whitemen should spill each other's blood” (25). The Governor does not understand the meaning of “the rope around the neck,” and so labels Big Bear a coward (TBB 25). The circle of the noose, as it becomes smaller, obstructs the air passages and it suffocates the individual. In the novel the Natives die because they no longer have any breath. But it is also a symbol of oppression as Deborah Bowen argues:
When the white men do not understand the significance of Big Bear’s image of the rope, it is because they are thinking metonymically – that is, they associate “rope” only with the larger concept linked to it in kind. Big Bear is using “rope” metaphorically, to refer to the larger concept of suppression and subordination which is linked to “rope” imagistically. (64)

This image also implies the loss of breath and the loss of voice and sound. When Big Bear hears of his son’s death, he says that “he has choked out his breath; my son has ridden to the Sand Hills without breath. Without breath, without breath” (349). Speaking of Poundmaker who was strangled, the narrator writes that “there he was choked. He died too because he had no breath” (408). Big Bear has a prophetic vision of his River People being hanged, “I could see the circle like a burn around each crooked neck and their faces were swollen thick full of blood” (TBB 65). Circle, representing the holistic Native culture, becomes a symbol of oppression and death in the white hands.

As circles represent Indian culture, lines represent white culture. Big Bear sits “in the sky’s circle on Bull’s Forehead Hill,” but below him is “a white land” and “something was wrong with it.” The wrong things that we see are: the snow drifts are “angled,” islands are “pointed,” and the rivers’ buttes are perceived as “folded down like frozen blankets.” The increasingly rigid images culminate in a telling picture of the “Whiteskin” settlement: “a giant blade was slicing through the earth, cutting off everything with roots, warping everything
into something Whiteskin clean and straight” (91). And it is the railroad
that is “nailed down straight . . . devouring the last of them” (127). In
its wake it leaves a wasteland, a world slit open with unending lines,
squares, rectangles, of bone and between the strange trees gleamed
straight lines of . . . white buildings. Square inedible mushrooms burst
up under poplars overnight; but square” (TBB 409). Here the white
man’s presence is seen as poison, his new settlements as gardens of
death (Lecker 336). So we see Wiebe equating the white man with
things that are black, evil and hellish. Dewdney is shown elevated
“against the night sky” and “he seemed gigantically black in arranged
columns” beneath “the thick tall column of his hard hat” (145). The
men building the railway are “So covered with smoke they seemed
black” (136). The cells in prison in which Big Bear is confined to are
the “black tunnels” of the white men; and he is weakened by the “iron
dge” of prison bed. Further the “X” sign of Sweetgrass on the treaty is
a symbol of the clear victory of the Governor’s point of view (9), and
stands as a symbol of his need to establish lines, both on paper and
on land. Paradoxically, this “X” which is given as a sign of assent also
announces the death of Cree culture. The “fallen ink bottles”
symbolize the fall of Indians, and “the pen dripping with excessive
care” symbolizes the white efficiency (TBB 11). The end is reflected in
the very beginning of the novel. Blodgett also identifies the central
semantic opposition of the novel as between circle and straight line.
The circle symbolizes Native culture, with the buffalo as the main
figure, and the straight line and square symbolize white culture, with
the locomotive as the main figure (Configuration 209). As the whites succeed in encroaching the prairie land, Big Bear begins to see “the sun no longer looks round. It’s starting to look as if it had four corners” (TBB 93). And Blodgett describes the European conquest as squaring a circle (Configuration 210).

We frequently see in the novel that the imageries of trains, guns, telescopes and survey lines penetrate and conquer the sun’s radiance, the round earth, the cyclical rhythms and the buffalo. Initially the buffalo roam the prairies, but slowly with the white domination buffalo give way to the railroad, and Big Bear receives a vision: “He saw then that straight lines had squared up the land at right angles . . . the world was slit open with amending lines, squares, rectangles . . . ” (TBB 409). Allan Dueck considers this change from buffalo to railroad as an extended metaphor of the destruction of the Plains Indian culture and the advance of the whites across the prairie (187). The land has been raped by the steel. For Big Bear buffalo is a symbol of dignity. So when Kingbird suggests raising buffalo like the whites raise cattle, Big Bear replies that the buffalo “eats and runs and bellows anywhere, he is angry and can’t be talked about like a castrated thing that’s tied up as soon as it drops from its mother and won’t move unless you beat it with a club” (125). Wiebe recreates a buffalo hunt in rich detail (126-130); and Big Bear feels that this will be the last hunt, only sixteen, everything for the moment, but he sees a dim, dark future as “the iron road crawled steadily between him and where he was born, nailing another straight line behind the Grandmother’s straight police
to fence him in, square him . . .” (127). Wiebe successfully subverts Canada’s legendary emblem of national unity and the glory and pride of the Canadians – the CPR (Canada Pacific Railway) – by presenting the Indian perspective of train as “something unearthly shrieking in spasms” and moving like “a huge worm” stiffing up something from its head as it crawled along (135). Further, obscene humour is used to convey the Indian’s perception of the train. When Kingbird jokes to the other warriors, “I shot it in the penis. That slippery thing near the ground going in and out, just like a man doing it”, Miserable Man says, “Yeh, I saw that, but there wasn’t any to itself?” Big Bear then explains sardonically, “The bullet didn’t stop it. Whiteskins can do anything, even to themselves” (136). Big bear finds it difficult to describe the parts of that “huge black thing belching smoke and shrieking and moving itself by its fire” to the women. He remembers that sometimes it “shuddered horribly, as if it would tear itself to pieces . . . There seemed some burning devil frothing in it” (TBB 137). CPR, the celebrated Canadian symbol of unity turns out “into a sinister monster, permanently dividing and destroying the natural habitat of man and buffalo” (Schafer 83). Edgar Dewdney wonders at the vastness of the prairie and sees railroad as a way of civilizing the prairie land and so he says, “It is all so vast, so laid out in unending curving lines that you can begin to lose the sense of yourself in relation to it . . . To control, to humanize, to structure and package such a continent under two steel lines would bring any engineer headier joy than the lyric prospects of heaven” (114). But at the same time he admits that
“Old Big Bear has lived into his own understanding of that land . . . it may in the end, last much longer than steel” (TBB 115). However, the intriguing problem is mutual incomprehensibility. Bowen recognizes that the “basic problem, then, is that the holistic world of the Indian will not translate into the linear terms of the white man, nor can the white man’s propositional images be translated into the Indian’s organic ones” (65).

Language also becomes a main point of contrast between two cultures. The conflicting attitudes of white and Indians are embodied in their language, in their distinctive modes of speech as well as narrative style (Keith, Epic Fiction 71-73). The Indians are often presented in a poetic, sensuous, rhythmic and metaphorical language as in their Thirst Dance in which the repeated phrase “Big Bear was dancing” reverberates like a chord (TBB 163-64). Whaley remarks: “Only with the Indian does the voice spring from the self” (“Rudy Wiebe” 348). Their language reflects their organic and mythic way of life. The whites, on the other hand, are primarily presented in their official roles, and so they use bureaucratic and statistical details, unimaginative and literal language. In the court: the white language becomes “one long snore running together in Big Bear’s head” (TBB 356). At several points in the novel, Big Bear declares that he does not understand. The failure to find words in each language for the essential experiences of the other culture is a serious problem. Blodgett comments that “the impasse of two civilizations is projected as an impasse of speech”
(Configuration 208). One central misunderstanding is about the abstract concept of treason-felony, the charge laid against Big Bear. In English it is a conspiracy and rebellion against the “Crown” of the Queen. But in Cree there is no word for “Crown,” and so the best translation provided is “throwing sticks at the Queen’s hat” or “stealing the Queen’s hat.” F.W. Spicer of N.W.M.P in War in the West recalls the response of Big Bear: “These people all lie. They are saying that I tried to steal the Great Mother’s Hat. How could I do that? She lives very far across the Stinking Water, and how could I go there to steal her hat? I don’t want her hat and did not know she had one” (Beal and Wiebe 175). Wiebe has incorporated Big Bear’s response almost verbatim into the novel, and Kitty McLean is shocked by the communication gap (TBB 388).

The trial is deeply ironic because the one voice that should have been listened to is silent for most of the proceedings. Instead, the defense lawyer speaks for him, and everyone talks about him “as if he were a child and not sitting there” (382). Throughout the novel we listen to his powerful speeches. Even the whites do admire his voice as Dewdney attests in his letter, “... it is his voice, and his perception, which draws more and more people to him. His voice would be unbelievable in Parliament” (113). He further compliments: “... in argument the mind of this stubby native seems as logical, almost civilized as any Oxford debater” (114). However, the first words of Big Bear in the novel, at the first meeting with Governor Morris, are “I find
it hard to speak" (TBB 19), and thereafter at several points he talks of being chocked or deprived of air as the white culture inexorably suppresses the Indian way of life.

Nevertheless, Big Bear puts his trust in the profound power of words to overcome cultural conflict. But at the same time he becomes deeply aware of the duplicitous nature of the whites' written words as he finds that only missionary words are translated into Cree script (144) and that from written treaties "half the sweet things were taken out and all the sour left in" (200). So Big Bear distrusts the written word. The incongruity of the white world is transferred through words into paper, and in Big Bear's view, words lose all meaning when written because the words of the first copy of the treaty, which they believed to be static, were changed and modified by the government without consulting the tribal chiefs (200). Further, there is a clear domination of the white literary culture over the oral Indian culture, a pattern repeated in all over the colonized world. Despite his distrust of white words, Big Bear believes that problems can be solved only through negotiation and discussion. He says that only words can stop violence, and he proves it true as he settles through negotiations the problems that have arisen after the farm instructor incident. But unluckily his great voice shouting "Tesqua, tesqua! Stop! STOP!" goes unheard at Frog Lake (258). During the central council speech he tells his band:

The sun works every day, why? To enlighten the world.

We must do the same, our spirit must work constantly to
enlighten every one for there is a large meaning in every word we say. Why keep it here, among ourselves? Why do we keep turning the same word over and over among ourselves and then swallowing it again? Only a sick dog eats again what has once spit out. Our word is for all, especially for the white man who never hears us speak as one voice with power. (201)

He instructs Kitty that “words are not just sound” (TBB 314) for they carry meaning and power. This is, in fact, an important message which Wiebe conveys through this novel. In War in the West Wiebe points out that while Gabriel Dumont, the real war leader of Métis, was pardoned in exile, Louis Riel, their intellectual and spiritual leader with powerful words, was executed. Wiebe writes:

But words are more lethal than bullets, and in 1885 Canada’s greatest state trial proved that words written down on paper are the most deadly of all. For word makers like Riel there can be no pardon, there is only hanging. The Plains Cree chief Maskepetoon, one of the first of his people to learn to read his own language, was dead right when he said, “We should have understood that it was not the Whiteman’s gun or disease that would end our living as we did, no, no, it would be his words that would destroy us.

(Beal and Wiebe 10)
Wiebe again speaks of Dumont and Riel in *The Scorched - Wood People* which carries a close resemblance to *The Temptations of Big Bear* in chronological setting and religious vision, and of Maskepetoon in his later novel, *My Lovely Enemy*.

Wiebe, thus, presents this novel as a critique on the danger of accepting history uncritically and offers his own revised version of history. Words are never neutral, and white words in history and literature have been the damaging weapon against the Indian culture. But in the hands of the right writer and reader, words can do a lot good too. And Wiebe makes it clear through Big Bear that the discovery of common words, whether oral or written, offers the only hope for understanding and respect between cultures. At the end of the trial, Big Bear tells the court, “A word is power, it comes from nothing into meaning and a Person takes his name with him when he dies. I have said my last words. Who will say a word for my people” (398). And after he was sentenced, he asks the court, “… to print my words and scatter them among White People. That is my defense!” (TBB 400). Clearly, Wiebe brings out the power of language to bridge cultural and historical gaps.

In *Temptations of Big Bear* Wiebe, thus, focuses on the untold stories of the Indians from their perspective to redeem the distorted official histories, and to depict how and why Western Canada evolved to its present state. Thus out of the past, Wiebe weaves new myths and images of Indians, and reclaims the lost voices of the vanquished Plains Cree, especially of Big Bear.