CHAPTER VII

KISS OF THE FUR QUEEN
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_Kiss of the Fur Queen_ begins with a scene in 1951 with Abraham Okimassi’s victory in the “world championship Dog Derby”, a major dog-sled race. Part of the prize is a kiss from the winner of a local beauty pageant, a young white woman with the title of Fur Queen. This touch of white culture indelibly marks the lives of Abraham’s sons, Champion and Ooneemeetoo. The story in the novel follows the boys from the idyllic innocence of their Cree childhood through a forced attempt of assimilation in an abusive Residential School. The two Cree brothers growing up in Northern Manitoba are torn from their magical life, thrust into the repressive policy of assimilation promoted by the government of Canada.

In a systematic manner the two brothers are renamed as Jeremiah and Gabriel, and forced into a life of Christian belief. They are subjected to the monstrous acts of the priests and are slowly removed from their own history, language and tradition. As the two brothers struggle to cope in a world that increasingly alienates them from their past, their heritage re-enters their lives on different occasions in unexpected ways.

Tomson Highway’s _Kiss of the Fur Queen_ inaugurates a new stage in the evolution of Residential School discourse in Canada. Being a Residential School survivor himself, Highway presents an authentic picture of the Residential school and its policy of assimilation. Highway grew up in Northern Manitoba, and was forced, along with brother Rene, to attend a Catholic school. There, they were both abused at the hands of the religious teachers. Rene grew up to be a dancer while Tomson slowly evolved as a writer. _Kiss of the Fur Queen_ is a fictional narration of the author’s personal experiences as an Aboriginal young boy in Canada. Highway imports an aesthetic element to the story by adding the omnipresent Fur Queen as a fairy godmother, an angel that guides the Okimasis family through different turmoils.

The thesis offers an analysis of the ambivalent connection between the Residential school and the assimilationist policy of the government of Canada as has been examined by Highway in the novel. Highway explores the significance of the Residential schools as powerful instruments for the imposition of forced assimilation. While doing so, Highway narrates the experiences of the
protagonist in an imaginative, mythic and spiritual terms which the author claims as his own, regardless of how much the Residential school attempts to define his identity.

For over a century the Canadian government institutionalised the coercive acculturation of indigenous youth in the Residential school system. Evil practices such as, family separation, forced speaking of non-native language and propaganda of pre-contact modes of existence were the strategies used to destroy the Native culture. Highway presents an ironical situation in the novel in which Champion-Jeremiah is seen to be exposed to a picture drawn on a large paper chart in the class-room. It is the picture of heaven that has a “Substantial population of beautiful blond men with feathery wings and flowing white dresses.” Father Lafleur explains how the souls make their journey to heaven. “Among the people rising from those graves to heaven, Champion-Jeremiah tried to spot one Indian person but could not.”

The strategic pressure to deny certain ways of knowing and ways of being for the Indians had a negative impact on the young minds. The Indians are fed with ideas that in comparison to white culture, Indians lived a savage, subsistence way of life. Coleman (1993) puts the situation thus, - “For most secular as well as missionary educators ‘civilisation’ was inconceivable unless grounded in Christian – especially Protestant values.”

Residential schools were operated by the missionary societies where “the missionaries were more concerned with saving souls than with literacy education.”

The Jesuits and other missionaries, who believed that Aboriginal peoples should not be left in their “inferior” natural state, considered it their duty to replace Aboriginal cultures with Christian beliefs. To the Jesuits, their mission was a war against satanic forces. A strong and enduring component of European conceptions of the inferiority of the Aboriginal peoples was the conviction that they were heathen. Highway explains how the system of acquiring knowledge imposed by the west functions in the Native Canadian context by using the centre-periphery analogy. His own life in the Residential School has been a move towards the centre away from the periphery. The novel stresses upon the idea that knowledge that is circulated among the marginalised is the property of the alien power. Therefore, those who are in the periphery remain subjected to manipulation and planned indifference to those who are in
power. The search for knowledge therefore is synonymous to confusion and loneliness. Champion-Jeremiah faces similar situation in the classroom when the priest emphasises - “Hell, is where you will go if you are bad.” Obviously “bad” is associated with all that is Indian while “good” suggests the Christian belief. Jeremiah’s knowledge associated with power on one hand and the conflict regarding his sense of belonging with his own people on the other hand gives rise to the crisis of identity and purpose. Education in the Residential School, ironically, splits his personality, rather than offering a positive agency.

Younger brother Gabriel is hypersensitive to his childhood past of suffering. As he grows, he develops a self-imposed solitariness and sees himself as a misfit in the city. He is desperate to return to Mistik Lake as he says – “We don’t belong here.” Jeremiah tries to pacify his younger brother by saying that “Gabriel, it’s taken me over two years to get used to it. You can’t quit just like ....” This statement of Jeremiah is significant because it illustrates his failure to respond to the genuine appeal of his younger brother to go home. Gabriel’s attempt to communicate with Jeremiah is thus rejected, which makes him increasingly alienated. The novel thus focuses on the search for fulfilment of two assimilated Native Canadian young brothers by virtue of their participation in the western educational process. The central motif of the novel is the sense of isolation of the two protagonists who undergo a complicated introspection in their lives.

Highway’s novel reveals that for a people that had endured intentional misrepresentation for centuries, the Residential school system came as just another deplorable anti-Indian action of the white colonisers and their government.

“For tribal elders who had witnessed the catastrophic developments of the nineteenth century the bloody warfare, the near extinction of bison the scourge of disease and starvation, the shrinking of the tribal base, the indignities of reservation life, the invasion of missionaries and white settlers there seemed to be no end to the cruelties perpetrated by whites. And after all this, the schools. After all this, the white man had concluded that the only way to save Indians was to destroy them, that the last great Indian war should be waged against children. They were coming for the children.”

The Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott stated in
1920 that the Residential School Legislation was enacted to get rid of the Indian problem. He said,

"Our objective 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."^10

This statement of Campbell evidently bears the proof of the cultural genocidal objective of the government. The negative impact of Residential schools on the personal and cultural identities of the students was undeniable.

Many Residential schools were shut down in the 60s, yet the abuses perpetrated in these schools continue to haunt the present.

"The survivors of the Indian residential school system have, in many cases, continued to have their lives shaped by the experiences in these schools. Persons who attended these schools continue to struggle with their identity after years of being taught to hate themselves and the culture. The residential school led to disruption in the transference of parenting skills from one generation to the next without these skills, many survivors had had difficulty raising their own children. In residential schools, they learned that adults often exert power and control through abuse. The lessons learned in childhood are often repeated in adulthood, with the result that many survivors of the residential school system often inflict abuse on their own children."^11

Under such circumstances, Champion-Jeremiah’s search for locating the Indians in the picture of heaven in the class proves to be a metaphoric one. He is relieved to see finally that the Indians are accounted for on the big chart. But the image of the Indians is completely different from the one of the whites.

"These peoples revelled shamelessly in various fun-looking activities. One cave featured men sitting at a table feasting lustily on gigantic piles of food: meats and cakes and breads and cheeses. In another, women smoked cigarettes and sashayed about in fancy clothing, and in a third men and women lay in bed together in various states of undress. In another, people lay around completely idle, sleeping, doing absolutely nothing. There appeared to be no end to the imagination with which these brown people took their pleasure and this Father Lafleur explained earnestly to his captive audience, was permanent punishment."^12

This incident shows the acculturative violence that an Indian faces in the
school everyday. The school system has a horrific history because the logic behind the implementation of rules itself was flawed. While many factors came to play to explain why the Canadian Aboriginal people are where they are today, the Residential school system is definitely one key-factor that has devastated the native community, its spirituality, culture and language. The Indians fell helpless prey to the cultural genocide of the colonisers.

The policy makers proceeded towards their goal in an orderly manner. The students, on their arrival are required to have their hair shaved off, an act that leads to a tremendous mental trauma of the student. Champion-Jeremiah recollects the traumatic moment when he was made to sit still as a rock. He could feel his hair falling. He struggled hard to fight the tears. “He was being skinned alive, in public; the centre of his nakedness, shrivelled to the size of texture of a raisin, the whole world staring, pointing, laughing.”

Even though the school authority has difficulty in gaining the students' spontaneous cooperation, yet the students are convinced of the fact that their choice is either assimilation or extinction. The Indian students speak their language in secret and therefore they are isolated from each other even while staying in the same school campus. Jeremiah observes how the “Cree boys small and large - some almost young men - were scattered like leaves across the yard, near and not so near.” Jeremiah’s younger brother faces a dilemma when Jeremiah comes home during summer because, “if he could speak no English and his older brother no Cree, how were they to play together.” The coloniser’s language thus threatens to severe the warmth of familial bonding by separating them linguistically.

De vos and Romanucci-Ross state that – a person is only “natural” in one language. A second acquired language never takes on the internal natural emotional richness of one’s language of nativity or childhood. The brothers in the novel, however, handle the situation in a very different manner. They start using both Cree and English though they agree that there are certain terms which can only “get away with” in Cree. The complex negotiations of living and dying in two languages are very complicated. The ambiguity and inadequacy in language symbolises the brothers’ alienation from their own culture. Gabriel struggles with words to tell his mother that he is dying. “How do you say AIDS in Cree, huh? Tell me what is the word for HIV”, little does he know that the illness does not have a parallel word for it in Cree.
Gabriel's untranslatable illness parallels an unspoken inability to transmit the reality of his sexuality to his parents, just as years before, both he and Jeremiah were unable to tell their parents of the abuse they were suffering at the hands of the priest. The boys had heard the word "machipoowamoowin" and all they knew was that it meant something like "bad blood" or "bad dream power." Gabriel asks whether "machipoowamoowin" is the word that expresses what Father Lafleur did to them at school. The fact that power remains with the coloniser's language makes the linguistic negotiation even more complicated for those who are disempowered. The unequal distribution of power between adult and child, between teacher and student, is further exacerbated by the inequality inherent in the silencing effected through the proscription of native languages.

When Gabriel first accompanies Jeremiah to Birch Lake, the priest appreciates Jeremiah for bringing Gabriel, his younger brother.

"So, Jeremiah," chortled the priest as he set Gabriel lightly down on the dock, "you've brought your little brother this time."

"Yes", piped Jeremiah in tiny, humble voice. We didn't have much choice, he would have added, if the language had been his."

Infact, this is the only response he is allowed to have, as the priests are quick to remind him that he is not permitted to speak Cree once he leaves home and steps inside the campus. This incident reflects how Jeremiah is rendered complicit by his lack of language.

In the fictional Birch Lake Indian Residential School, the authority puts strict emphasis on English to be the only language of communication. Any child caught speaking Cree in the school would be punished physically. Highway gives a vivid description of the incident when six-year-old Gabriel recreates a complex version of the crucifixion scene. The script has been written by Jeremiah wherein Gabriel is crucified against the wire mesh fence of school yard and left there by Jeremiah and his friends. When Gabriel is caught, he is not penalised for playing God the son, but for having been caught singing, 'Kimoosoom Chimasoo'. The principal unbuckled his thick black leather belt and lashed until the small boy started bleeding. "Bleed"! a little voice inside Gabriel had cried. "Bleed"! "Bleed"! He wasn't going to cry. No Sir. "

Cree nonsense rhyme "Kimoosoom Chimasoo" and "Weeks Chiloowew", a Cree expression of joy and happiness are used by Highway throughout the novel to indicate moments of intense physical and spiritual pleasure. In the continued
presence of an unjust power relationship, the characters are placed in the novel to illustrate malleability and adaptability of cultures while making continuous attempt to re-articulate themselves. Highway portrays Gabriel’s intense desire to return home as a symbolic urge of the Native to re-root himself. Home, to the Native, according to Sabina Alissa, *comprises a set of values, a way of life, a framework of relationships that sustain the native individual’s sense of identity.*

Gabriel’s inability to return home, leaves a devastating mark on his personality. He drowns himself in alcohol and drugs. He finds himself visiting regularly the places which are known for being *“a veritable explosion of madness, drinkers.”* The two brothers are thus drifted apart from each other both mentally and physically. Gabriel is disdainful towards Jeremiah’s *“lily white finger”* and Jeremiah’s hidden desire to become a white man. Cummins (1992) observes that the ethnocentric indoctrination of the educational process leaves a far-reaching effect on the survivor’s mind that finds its manifestation in different ways of behaviour. Because one of the central goals of these schools has been to *“prepare children of subordinated groups for their status in life by rekindling shame from one generation to the next.”*

Jeremiah begins to show signs of nurturing a hidden desire to become a white man. Residential school system, thus, succeeds in bringing about a transformation in the approach of the Indian students towards life. Adams gives an account of this phenomenon: *‘Indians arrived in a state of savagism, but now returned thoroughly civilised. This has been the school’s quintessential mission, “the Indian is DEAD in you”.’*

It was believed that one could not become intellectual, cultured and civilised until the ‘Indian’ within the person was dead. Highway has shown in this novel how the attempt of killing Indianness fails to have an impact on Gabriel, who maintains a strong reverence for Indian culture and religion. In a conversation with Hartmut Lutz, the novelist remarks *“we have a mythology that is thousands and thousands of years old and which was almost destroyed or some of it obliterated, by the onslaught of missionaries and affected by Christian religion.”*

The complex linguistic negotiations both the brothers perform over the course of the novel foregrounds the ways in which language may be seen as an important site of resistance. Mark Shackleton notes in his article – *“Language
and Resistance in the Plays of Tomson Highway" that the subversion of the coloniser's language is often an act of resistance. He explains Highway's explicit subversion of English as a language and putting of Cree terms instead, is an act of defiance and resistance in the novel. The novelist uses linguistic tensions more explicitly through Gabriel's reiteration of Hail Mary as "Hello merry, mutter of Cod, play for ussiness, now anat tee ower of ower beth, aw, men." This effectively reduces "the solemnity of Christian teaching ... to surreal nonsense." This position is intensified later in the novel when Gabriel dismisses the teachings of the Church as "Catholic numbo-jumbo."

Jeremiah similarly experiences the fulfilment of desire through a fractured linguistic transaction. During his initial period of stay in the school, he has a bilingual transaction with the teacher. He uses the broken, little words he knows of English to convince the teacher of his musical capability. "Yes. Me sing it. Me sing it little song." Once he is allowed to sing, Champion-Jeremiah realises that he needs no words to support him any more. From now on, he knows, music will come to his aid. He clears his throat, wiped his lips with the cuff of his shirt, dropped his hands to his sides and puffed out his lungs. He sings his own composition, Ateek Astum, a song on caribou. Champion-Jeremiah can see a bewildered expression overpowering the priest's face. The boy now knows that he had the principal of the Birch Lake Indian Residential School squarely in the palm of his hand. Singing is the strategy, Jeremiah uses in life, for the construction of his subjecthood. The novel, however, foregrounds the ambivalence inherent in both Jeremiah and Gabriel's pursuit of western art forms. Jeremiah's single-minded determination to become the first Cree concert pianist is figured in terms of a denial of aboriginality. Gabriel's ability to dance, however, as the novel depicts, is clearly mediated through his queer body, just as the bodily expression of his queer desire is inextricably linked to movement and performance.

Jeremiah's story illustrates the tension between dominant cultural practices on those from subordinated social groups. This has been illustrated by Jeremiah's hidden desire to enter into the white space. He pursues his passion for classical music and achieves accolades in the dominant society at the cost of losing connectivity with his own community. Highway narrates in the novel the protagonists' experiences of navigating in two worlds and the
constant struggles and reminders that they are not really free to be in either world.

The double consciousness of the protagonists has been reflected metaphorically through Gabriel’s homosexuality. Highway’s novel depicts Father Lafluer’s unGodly sexual appetite in dream like terms.

*The notes of the song lined up and up and up until they reached the silver angel at the top of the Christmas tree, making her wings shimmer and undulate. For all the priest knew, Jeremiah Okimasis himself had sprouted wings and was flitting about like a warbler or a finch, landing sparkling light to each golden ball, each silver bell, each piece of tinsel.*

The repetition of the subverted lyric “holy infant so tender and mild” further emphasises on the victim position of the boys, - physically, mentally and spiritually. Jeremiah severely represses the memory of the past but Gabriel expresses it through promiscuity and homosexuality.

Gabriel’s mother Meriesis’s inadvertent assumption of a link between queerness and city life illustrates how feminine in man stands in sharp contrast to the Native masculinity. Highway depicts an incident in the novel where Gabriel is confronted by several drunken youths at a bush party. *Gabriel looked into their eyes, and was taken completely by surprise. For where he had anticipated hatred, what he saw, instead, was terror.* Their terror positions Gabriel, the queer, the dancer, as a monstrous hybrid, something which they can not comprehend or accept. The novel figures their terror as stemming from the incorporation of male and female aspects together. It is a function of the way in which Gabriel’s body incorporates the western identity of queer ballet dancer, which in their eyes, is a rejection of everything Native and masculine.

Gabriel’s homosexuality adds a new layer to his character for the fact that he would not only have to overcome barriers as a minority because of his race but because of his homosexuality as well. Within an already marginalised community, homosexuals are further marginalised. Gabriel’s homosexuality renders him the complete outsider, made up of a mixture of identities. The mixture of identities that spans, transgresses and blurs borders, illustrates a fluid, fragmented state of consciousness. Gabriel, thus, has been portrayed in the novel to be celebrating a non-identity as identity. When his brother rejects him for his sexuality, the mainstream Canadian culture rejects him for his skin-colour. He finds himself navigating between identities. He is a border-crosser.
where every moment of his life is spent in negotiating borders of various identities, none of which fits him very well.

Jeremiah’s double consciousness, on the other hand, has been illustrated in the novel in a different manner. His unconditional surrender to western music which is completely different from anything Native, is based on a fragile ground. After putting in several years of devotion, Jeremiah is not recognised as a pianist unquestionably. He is still accepted as an exotic exception to the rule.

There is a vivid narration of an incident of Jeremiah’s life in the novel. After winning a major music competition, Jeremiah flees to a local bar in North Winnipeg. He places the trophy on the table while sipping beer. He meets three females, each of whom personifies the various kinds of violence that have historically been inflicted on native women. Jeremiah points towards the trophy, and says with pride in his voice – “I won it, playing the piano, see”? Madonna of North Main stands before him and says – “you make me so proud to be a fuckin’ Indian, you know that”? Jeremiah’s desperate urge to be accepted as a sophisticated pianist by his own people looks to be valueless. The irony of the situation is presented through the portrayal of Madonna of North Main, who personifies the struggle of the Natives for their survival in the mainstream culture. Moreover, in this turf also, Jeremiah is held apart and positioned as the exceptional “other” for having expertise in western music. He becomes vulnerable as a target of praise, envy and so on. Jeremiah’s character portrays how as a marginalised subject, he enters the white space, risking loss of his own community. The novel depicts, how the quest for Jeremiah’s construction of identity becomes fraught with tension.

There is another incident in which Jeremiah’s expertise in piano is dismissed when the guests in the Ojibway house reject Chopin as “Whiteman’s music” and ask for honky tonk. This experience leads Jeremiah to question not only his, but every Indian’s relationship with western classical music.

Both Gabriel and Jeremiah’s areas of expertise are figured as, if not culturally antithetical, at least culturally irrelevant to the native people. Music is very often about exclusion and inclusion of social subjeadh. Every social space has its manner of regulating and policing behaviour. Therefore, in the colonial white discourse, music is often used to maintain the boundaries of white space so as to keep the “other” outside, disenfranchised and fixed in a degenerate space. Highway’s novel is a case in point where the story tracks in
richly nuanced ways of how the protagonists become drawn towards western music. By way of dismantling the hierarchy the two brothers enter the white space. Their social location allows them to have an access in the realm of dominant culture. But their subject formation is not determined by their social location. Highway’s protagonists are portrayed to have possibilities for agency, resistance and transformation within discourses. In describing the nature of agency as a part of subject formation, Bronwin Davies writes:

*Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognise that constitution and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognise multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one’s identity. And agency is never autonomy in the sense of being an individual standing outside social structure and process. Autonomy becomes instead the recognition that power and force presume subcultural counter-power and counter-force and that such subcultures can create new life forms, which disrupt the hegemonic forms, even potentially replacing them.*

For Jeremiah, as a child, music has been the only alternative through which he could ignore the tormenting environment of the residential school. Gabriel becomes a ballet performer not only because he is a natural dancer but also because he wants to drown his sorrows for being lonely in an alien place. As the story proceeds, the two brothers reconcile and transform themselves with their previous experiences in the field of music and dance into syncratic fusion of Cree theme in western style. This denies neither their heritage nor their art form. Highway describes the transformation in Gabriel’s expression as he watches Royal Winnipeg Ballet performance.

*Beat by beat, step by step, the dance had seduced and then embraced Gabriel .... The arms were sea of moving antlers, And Gabriel Okimassis, three years old, was perched on a moss-covered rock, the warm breath of a thousand beasts rushing, pummelling, the zigzagging of their horns a cloud of spirit matter, nudging him, licking him as with a lover’s tongue. And whispering : “Come with us, Gabriel Okimassis, come with us ....”*

Moreover, dancing to the pow-wow heartbeat drum, Gabriel recognises the physical limitations of his training which has not prepared him for this type
of dancing. He “saw a people talking to the sky, the sky replying. And he knew he had to learn this dance. Someday soon, he may need it.”

In their first collaboration, the grand piano recital of Jeremiah undergoes a metamorphosis into a pow wow drum when he uses a traditional drumstick to beat on the strings of the instrument. The theme of their collaborative work increasingly draws on Cree myths and legends, argued by the work Jeremiah does in teaching Cree children the language and stories of his people, including the story of the son of Ayash.

Jeremiah’s development is symbolically articulated through the mythic struggle between the heroic son of Ayash and the dreaded monster Weetigo who was killed by Weesageechak disguised as Weasal in the novel, while the trickster figure of the Fur Queen looks on and smiles benevolently. The novel is about the reconciliation of the brothers with each other, and with themselves as Cree. In the whole process Cree language, music and dance offer up resistance to decolonise the tormented selves. The son of Ayash myth has been introduced to the story by the protagonist’s father, who narrates the tale to his sons on his deathbed:

"My son ‘The world has become too evil. With these magic weapons, make a new world,’ said the mother to the hero, the son of Ayash.”

The symbolic story of the son of Ayash establishes the broad opposition between Cree and Christian spiritual systems in the novel. The son of Ayash is found to be engaged in a battle against the monster who eats human flesh. While witnessing the sexual molestation of Gabriel by father Lafleur, Jeremiah imagines as if “A dark hulking figure hovered over him, like a crow. Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honey-comb, or the weetigo feasting on human flesh.” The priest is here associated with Christianity and the rape of Gabriel to the symbolic rape of native religion and culture. It is also the Polo Park Mall which has been associated with the Weetigo to suggest a conspiracy between the forces of Christian religion and the capitalist consumerism with an evil design to assault on native culture.

As Gabriel flies off to Toronto with his lover on the night of Jeremiah’s piano concert.

“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.”

But even as he plays this, his vision mutates and he sees, instead of his father’s sled dogs, naked young men, his brother among them, hitched to the sled, and “the maw of the weetigo insatiable man-eater, flesh-devourer, following his brother in his dance.” This serves the purpose of a turning point in Jeremiah’s life. He rejects his musical training and turns, instead, to working as a social worker for the Winnipeg Indian Friendship Centre. Although his life history has included the complex and often violent interaction with disparities, Jeremiah chooses his own codes of self-definition. He re-conceptualises his life in terms of Cree spirituality to defeat the weetigo of his past.

Trickster figures are found in many Native cultures. Of the multiple subjects to be communicated through indigenous narrative, the ethics of resistance to domination emerge as a central theme, particularly through the trickster stories. This resistance is locally situated and contextualised through the use of local languages, those languages replete with community commitments, values and knowledge.

... we have from the unremembered time a character in our traditional oral narratives who speaks to us about how we may travel the path into knowing the unknown .... The old ones, above all, knew the character of the trickster and his capacity to assist with self-actualisation.

There are various such definitions of the Trickster available in Native Canadian culture. Tomson Highway, for example, prefaces all his published works with “A note on the Trickster” which ends “without the continued presence of this extraordinary figure, the core of Indian culture would be gone forever.” He characterises the Native Trickster as “Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, his role is to teach us about the meaning of existence on the planet Earth.” In Kiss of the Fur Queen, the Trickster tale has been manipulated to establish an intellectual and spiritual, if not physical, turf in a dominant space, with the purpose of resisting cultural genocide. Jeremiah and Gabriel jointly construct the story of the Weesaqeechak, which they had heard from their aunt, Black-eyed Susan. Weesaqeechak comes down to Earth disguised as a Weasel. The Weasel kills the cannibalistic monster the Weetigo by crawling up his anus, eating his entrails and exiting in the same fashion as he entered. The Weasel’s white fur was now covered with shit, so God dips him in the river, holding him
by the tail. Thus the Waesel’s coat is white apart from the black tip of the tail.

Highway contextualises and explores the culture clash in the novel. Jeremiah says “you could never get away with a story like that in English” to which Gabriel replies – “Bumhole is a mortal sin in English. Father Lafleur told me in confession one time.” The boys heard the story from aunt Susan, a fearless opponent to Christianity and their reconstruction of the tale is indicative of their desire to reroot themselves.

Within Highway’s fictional context the tale of the Trickster’s conquest of the Weetigo has multiple meanings. Father Lafleur who has sexually abused the boys, has earlier in the novel been depicted as a “Weetigo feasting on human flesh.” At the end of the novel, Gabriel’s death by AIDS, a disease which eats flesh, again alludes to the Weetigo. The brother’s joint telling of the tale also foregrounds the importance of Native language and identity.

The resistance of the protagonist of the novel can be interpreted to have a symbolic coincidental association with the occupation of the Blue Quills Residential School in north-eastern Alberta in 1970. This was the first direct confrontation in Canada over Indians’ control of education. The local Indians occupied Blue Quills Indian Residential School, resulting in the establishment of the first Native administered school in Canada. To understand this transformation, it is necessary to look back at the changing Indian consciousness during the late 1960s and also the school’s history during the previous four decades. It became obvious that Indian resistance to educational imposition by the church and the state, as occurred at Blue Quills, was not a sudden phenomenon, but rather a persistent theme in Indian education in Canada. Diane Persson observes, “This is particularly true when the past is examined not only from the official record but also from the perspective of the participants themselves through the technique of oral history.”

In the novel the power of resistance reaches its culmination in the form of rejection of catholic rituals during the last few moments of Gabriel’s life, when he dies of AIDS in a hospital in Toronto. Even though the two brothers make a strong attempt to prove the supremacy of their Cree culture, their mother Mariesis shows her belief in the Christian philosophy. When Gabriel insists on having a Cree ceremony performed for him, Mariesis disapproves of it and wants to have a Catholic ceremony instead. She says to Jeremiah, “Let the priest in or I’ll kill you.” These words are symbolic in a way that represent the letting in of
the anti-Cree way of life. However, Jeremiah expresses his refusal of Christian belief by the symbolic slamming of the door. "He shoved the midget priest away, pulled Mariesis inside and slammed the door" and hence, the door of assimilation.

When Gabriel dies, the room has burning sweet-grass, and Ann-Adele, the medicine woman sitting by his bed and the trickster figure of the Fur Queen. Jeremiah keeps the priest away from the room as wished by Gabriel. Gabriel tells Jeremiah about his last wish as he says, "I want Mom to be allowed her Catholic numbo-jumbo. But I do not want priests anywhere near my bed." Thus Jeremiah "allows Gabriel to die free from the hypocrisy of the church, finally out of the shadow of the sexual abuse both he and Jeremiah suffered as children in church run residential schools." This has been Jeremiah's protest against the western evils, he could not save his brother from earlier. "Rising from his body, Gabriel Okimasis and the Fur Queen floated off into the swirling mist." The novel ends with a positive note that Native spirituality can be embraced as a survival strategy even in the contemporary world. While analysing the intriguing nature of power relations negotiated in the novel, Susan Knabe makes an attempt to reposition "the body as a site of local resistance and cultural reconciliation, mainly because this is the site where histories and geographies, both micro and macro, continue to operate and continue to proliferate complex power relations."

The central theme of Highway's novel is the circular nature of the world and how one event is destined to repeat in life. The novel starts with the narration of an incident in which Abraham Okimasis is kissed by the Fur Queen after he wins the dog race. The same thought is repeated in the middle of the book (page 214) only with Jeremiah's name inserted in. Later, in the final chapter as Gabriel dies, the thought appears again, only with Gabriel's name in it this time. The theme of circular destiny which is a concept that ties men together across generational, personal, cultural and sexual differences has been reflected in Highway's novel.
Notes and References

15. Ibid, p. 67.
29. Lutz, Hartmut : Contemporary Challenges : Conversations with Canadian Native Authors, Saskatoon, Fifth House, 1993, p. 90.
32. Ibid, p. 299.
33. Ibid, p. 66.
34. Ibid, p. 66.
35. Ibid, p. 66.
37. Ibid, p. 139.
38. Ibid, p. 66.
40. Ibid, p. 216.
41. Ibid, p. 216.
42. Ibid, p. 257.
Weetigo is the name of the cannibalistic monster of Cree and Métis legends.

Weesageechak, the name of the Cree Trickster is written in many ways in English such as Weesageechak, Wee-sa-kay-jack or Wesakaychak. In this paper, the spelling favoured by the author Highway has been adopted.

Tomson Highway prefaces all his published work with a “A note on the trickster” which ends: “without the continued presence of this extraordinary figure, the core of Indian culture would be gone forever.”


The powerful conflation of the violence of the bodies of the Native women and Children (specifically Jeremiah and Gabriel) with the violation of Native beliefs and lands operates to literalise the metaphor “Penetration”, as Jeremiah writes down in high school note book, began in “1492” p. 122.


This figure of the powerful medicine woman is woven through the novel where it functions to offer a critique of the ways in which native history and spirituality have been rewritten. The priest’s version of the story constructs an evil chachagathoo as bogeyman and sets up native spirituality and medicine (particularly as practised by women) as a
powerful form of evil. Later in the story, Ann-Adele Ghostrider, herself a medicine woman, attempts to set both Jeremiah and Gabriel straight about what happened with Chachagathoo, the last Shaman who was sent to prison in Winnipeg where, accused of witchcraft, she hung herself.


