

# Colonial Separation and Identity in Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

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**Abstract:** Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* depicts how Aboriginal identity in Canada is destroyed by institutionalized racism, sexual abuse, separation from family and community, and by the forced abolition of Aboriginal culture and spirituality. The story is about two brothers, Gabriel and Jeremiah Okimasis, and their forced displacement from their family into the residential school where they are exposed to the colonial indoctrination and the crudeness of Catholicism. This paper will particularly focus on the character of Gabriel Okimasis and his experience in the residential school and ultimately how his Cree identity is shattered due to the colonial and Christian indoctrination. This study will also shed light on the issues of colonial separation and on the (re)creation of Cree identity, which is illustrated by Highway through Gabriel's death.

Gabriel Okimasis' troubles and abuses in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* result from his experiences at the Birch Lake Indian Residential School. The residential school is described by Deena Rymhs as "a place where an alien language is spoken, where [the Aboriginals'] superiors dress in strange vestments, and where both [Gabriel and Jeremiah] are victims of sexual acts difficult to name" (102). Within the walls of the school, while trying to syncretize his school experience with his Aboriginal tradition, Gabriel is abused through the forceful teaching of the Western ideas about his people and also through the sexual exploitation by the church people. The racism that many Aboriginal students experience at residential schools through a strong institutionalized format makes them feel abashed about their Aboriginal origin and subsequently due to the indoctrinated notion that they are savages as they are connected to the devil, they start to develop a kind of detestation about themselves and their race (Miller 205).

At residential schools, children get disconnected from their own culture due to the brutal racial teachings that demean the children taught to them by missionaries. According to Rymhs's application of Erving Goffman, the sociologist's work, the displacement of the Aboriginal people from their own homes to the residential schools is "a systematic 'mortification,' a stripping of the subject's former means of self-identification" (qtd. in Rymhs 103). This displacement is because children at residential schools face dual separation: firstly, they are separated from their homes which is a physical separation, and secondly, they are separated from the traditions, languages and cultures of their communities which is a psychological separation. This dual separation causes the loss of the children's identities. Being exposed to racist abuse and violence on their identity, the Aboriginal children run into "prolonged battle with alcohol ... [with] severe personal and family problems, until

[they] came to grips with the perverse teachings to which [they] had been exposed in residential school” (Miller 205). The forceful colonial teaching got intensified in the twentieth-century as there was a “growing emphasis . . . on the use of residential schools for orphans, children of broken or troubled homes, and youngsters whose behaviour could not be handled in day schools” (313). However, in residential schools the children had “no adult members of their immediate family to take interest in their treatment, or to whom [they] could complain about what they considered inadequate, neglectful, or abusive supervision” (314). Furthermore, there was no community or culture that could counter the racism and abuse that took place at the residential schools.

The sexual exploitation of Gabriel at the residential school, which is a “symbolic rape of Indigenous cultures by evangelical Christianity” (McKegney 159), is clearly a violent dispossession of his innocence by the Principal of the Church, Father Lafleur. This abuse is psychologically critical for him because it is “difficult for [him] to tell [his] famil[y] . . . [about the incident as in] many cases [the Aboriginal children] had been raised by Christianized parents to regard missionaries as holy people who were there to assist them” (Miller 336-37). It would be a point to note here how Highway takes the issue of Christianization in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Highway shows how Christianization plays a role in building a gap/wall between the parents and the sons and between the brothers as at one point Jeremiah tells Gabriel that “[e]ven if we told them [their parents], they would side with Father Lafleur” (Highway 92). The aftermath of a situation like sexual abuse is noted by J. R. Miller thus: “Children who were victimized usually had no means of defending themselves or getting help from others. The child-victims often had nowhere to take the anger and hurt they felt, and all too often victims responded by taking these emotions out on themselves” (337). This point of self-harm is also noted by Neal McLeod in his essay, “Spatial and Spiritual Exile.” He argues that “[t]he [education] process [at the residential schools] amounted to cultural genocide. Once put away, in both a spiritual and a spatial sense, many children never come ‘home.’ Instead, they spent their lives ensnared in alcoholism and other destructive behaviours” (58).

Highway’s focus on Cree spirituality in the novel throws light on Gabriel’s identity. To Gabriel, this identity (reality) is based on his sexual and cultural abuses at the residential school. Gabriel becomes addicted to drugs and dangerous sexual behaviors and as a result suffers from serious health hazards. It could be argued that his addiction to drugs and dangerous sexual activities are the result of his failed attempt to reconstruct a dignifying image of himself following his experience of sexual abuse at the residential school and in his own terms to find himself in a situation where he can assume and think of himself as the controller of his behaviors. The idea that Gabriel might be trying to control his own body by transforming the sexual abuses through his dangerous sexual activities corroborates Henderson’s insight on sexual practices on individual behavior: “Sexual practices with an overtly performative dimension that risk the repetition of scenes of sexual abuse through, for example, relations of dominance and submission, set in motion the power of ritualized repetition to effect differentiations and to transform earlier scenes of violence” (189). Being an active participant in sexual encounters, Gabriel is now with a sexual identity which signifies his celebration of his body as alive as he says to Jeremiah at one point that “[a]t least my body is still alive” (Highway 207). His liveliness is also noticed by Sylvie Vranckx who in “The Ambivalence of Cultural Syncreticity in Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Van Camp’s *The Lesser Blessed*” notes that “[Gabriel] takes advantage of his new lifestyle to emancipate himself from his fundamentalist Catholic upbringing, to understand the colonial process, and to learn about Native spiritualities” (294). So, Gabriel searches the meaning of certain complexities that deter the Aboriginal people from understating the meaning of their own identities.

In a sense, Gabriel’s sexual behavior is a kind of paradox as it is self-inflicted but at the same time it is what keeps him feeling alive. In the sexual encounters, usually he is the seducer and his awareness of being the seducer makes “Gabriel Okimasis to know the mouth-watering Father Vincent Connolly in a way that had him yodelling ‘weeks’chiloowew!’ by nine that evening” (Highway 185). His upper hand in the sexual encounters, although dangerous, gives him a kind of space to handle his sexual abuse and the trauma he has experienced at the residential school, and also makes him the controller of his sexuality. Henderson in “‘Something not Unlike Enjoyment’: Gothicism, Catholicism, and Sexuality in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*” reads Gabriel’s violent sexual behavior as a counter of the trauma he has suffered in school: “[W]hile Gabriel’s adult sexuality is indeed framed in terms of repetition, this repetition is more creative than compulsive. It is much less about repression that it is about the fetish as a vehicle for sexual activity that attempts to counter victimization and loss

of memory” (191). But his dangerous sexual encounters result in his contraction of HIV and he dies eventually without being recuperated from the abused experience. Yet, one question we have to ask given Gabriel’s irremediable experience is whether Highway uses Gabriel to advance a notion that sexually abused residential school students lack the capacity to be healed, redeemed and reunited with their communities.

Gabriel’s incapability to reunite his identity and his culture is questionable as it could be argued that through his death Gabriel really attains Cree spirituality. Although it could be argued that like Jeremiah, Gabriel is not successful in transcending his trauma to be reconnected to the Aboriginal culture and community, Gabriel’s curiosity for Aboriginal community and culture is noticeable all through the novel. He is found speaking in Cree language while staging Catholic plays. His strong position for Cree spiritual beliefs subverts Catholicism, and his eagerness to learn the Aboriginal cultural history is an indication of his desire for a strong tie to his community and culture. However, it could be argued that he finds it difficult to communicate with his parents, but again there is no word for ballet dancer or AIDS in Cree. So, Gabriel’s death could be indicative of a notion that there could be some abuses literally almost impossible to get over, but what about Gabriel’s attained spirituality at the end of the novel? Does his spirituality not reveal that an understanding of the colonial forces and the shocking impacts could help construe Cree culture more successfully? And has Jeremiah received nothing from Gabriel’s death, at least in relation to the future teaching about the sufferings of the Aboriginal people?

The character of Gabriel can be associated with Weetigo, which is usually a fearful spirit in Cree culture. The way Gabriel’s character represents Weetigo is a bit complex, because in the novel he is not found hurting others in the community as Weetigo often does. Instead, Highway shows how Gabriel receives Weetigo as a damaging force to himself. Nevertheless, Gabriel does not stop his sexual activity even after his HIV diagnosis and at this point it could be argued that he is hurting other people in the community and he is doing that consciously as he knows about the disease. Yet, his act could be explained as an act of his addiction since he has been with such addiction for so long as a way to escape from the mental trauma of his residential school experience. Although we can further ask whether this seemingly intentional act of infecting others with HIV poses an active violence or not from Gabriel, the point of avoiding trauma however does confuse the argument and to some extent dismisses it as a potentially active violence. Gabriel’s resemblance to Weetigo results from his traumatic experience with the colonial forces like the residential school and also from the sexual abuse he is exposed to at the school. So, Gabriel’s identity is necessarily grounded on the traumatic Aboriginal identity inflicted upon him by colonialism on dual levels: individual and societal. It is predictable that a lot of people who are forced to go to the residential schools have been abused and are unable to overcome the abasement they have suffered all through their lives. Highway’s Gabriel is a personification of the negativities of the legacy of residential schools on Aboriginal peoples, their identities and their communities.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Weetigo is associated with Catholicism at least from a symbolic perspective. Cynthia Sugars in her article “Weetigos and Weasels: Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Canadian Postcolonialism” argues that “an encounter with the Weetigo functions as a metaphor for self-knowledge” (78). Yet, by extending Sugars’ “metaphor for self-knowledge,” Highway might have projected the Weetigo with its connections to the priests. Sexual abuses in the novel signify the violent abuse of Gabriel and Jeremiah, inflicted by the colonial system of the Catholic Church. So, in the novel, Weetigo as a sign of colonial institution embodies a threat to Aboriginal communities, by exploiting the volatile situation that it has engineered in the communities to its own colonial advantages. In the novel, the first missionaries appear in Eemanipitipitat at a time of famine and it is at that time an individual is seen to become a Weetigo and is threatening the community. Gabriel’s unhealthy sexual behaviors which ultimately cause his death could be a manifestation of Weetigo illness. His uncontrollable desire for sex matches with the Weetigo’s unquenchable and damaging hunger for flesh (Sugars 79). According to Rock Cree mythology, the Weetigo feeds on its own body; in like manner, Gabriel is also found representing the same inclination of self-damage through his dangerous sexual desires.

The association between the Catholic Church and the Weetigo is evident throughout the novel. When Gabriel consumes “the raw meat dangling from [the priest’s] fingers ... [a]nd savoured the dripping blood as it hit his tongue” (Highway 181), he bursts into laughter at a pun “so ludicrous, the sham so extreme” (181). This might be an example of Gabriel’s resistance to Catholic shows in church in front of the priest as the “dripping blood” and

“raw meat” could be symbols of cannibalism and could be connected to the cannibalism related to the Weetigo. Highway here is scathing enough to regard religion as cruel/brutal and thus further establishes more strongly the connection between the Catholic Church and the Weetigo. Through Gabriel’s thoughts on war that “[e]very war in the history of the world has had religion at its root” (183) and on “those guys who beat their wives while the host is still melting on their tongues” (183), Highway shows the hypocrisy of Catholicism. It seems that Gabriel is totally informed about the violent nature of the Catholic religion as he regards the cross as “an instrument of torture” (184) and challenges “Christianity [that] asks people to eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood ... eating human flesh, that’s cannibalism” (184). Through this connection between the Weetigo and the Catholic Church and Gabriel’s self-inflicted sexual behavior, Highway shows how the Christian religion affects Cree identity, culture, and community and how difficult it is to disrupt such effects.

The sexual abuse Gabriel suffers at the hands of the priest is cannibalistic in nature as the priest is “the Weetigo feasting on human flesh” (Highway 79). Gabriel could also be identified with another feature of Weetigo, that is, the sexual identity, which is apparently connected to his experiences at the residential school. At the residential school, Gabriel understands the relationship between pleasure and pain which might have shaped his sexual experiences as Highway comments thus: “‘Bleed!’ a little voice inside of Gabriel had cried. ‘Bleed! Bleed!’ He wasn’t going to cry. No sir! If anything, he was going to fall down on his knees before this man and tell him he had come face to face with God, so pleasurable were the blows” (Highway 85). About this connection, Henderson argues that “Gabriel’s intention to express pleasure may be a planned ruse, a means of resisting a punishment that seeks to weaken him. However, at the same time there is the suggestion that he has learned this complex posture of agential masochism through an identification with Jesus” (185-86). Gabriel is always prone to play the role of Jesus in the novel. Nevertheless, his role play as a Catholic figure in showing sorrow and pain is problematic as he often uses Cree language and song like “*Kimoosoom chimasoo*” (Highway 85) to register his resistance against Catholicism. Henderson notes that it is such resistance from Gabriel that results in his sentences and enjoyments eventually merging “the distinction between Gabriel’s spirit of revolt and his enjoyment of a pleasure that is predicated on the very prohibitions he rebels against” (186).

Gabriel connects sexuality with Jesus/the cross and Catholicism just after his sexual encounter with Father Lafleur when the “naked Jesus Christ ... rub[s] his body against the child’s lips, over and over and over again” (Highway 78). Moreover, this sexual encounter could indicate a connection between the cross and the Weetigo as Highway says:

And the body of the caribou hunter’s son was eaten, tongues writhing serpent-like around his own, breath mingling with his, his orifices punctured and repunctured, as with nails. And through it all, somewhere in the furthest reaches of his senses, the silver cross oozed in and out, in and out, the naked body pressing on his lips, positioning itself for entry. Until, upon the buds that lined his tongue, warm honey flowed like river water over granite. (168-9)

Here, the image of the cross and Christ’s “body pressing on his lips” signify the damaging characteristics of such sexual encounters. Gabriel’s sexual abuse positions him as a sacrificial victim of colonialism and residential schooling as Rubelise da Cunha argues thus: “Although living [Gabriel’s] homosexuality also represents a choice to overcome the trauma of sexual abuse, his masochistic experiences, which lead him into prostitution and self-destruction, point to the negative consequences of the violence undergone at residential school” (108). It is true that Gabriel’s dangerous sexual encounters result in HIV infection and eventually he dies, yet, his death could signify that the ones who are exposed to sexual abuse at residential schools get traumatized and it is not easy to overcome those traumatic experiences. But, Gabriel enters into the spiritual territory with the help of the Fur Queen – the spiritual guide of Gabriel and Jeremiah, although he is physically dead. His death “challenges the idea of defeat, since dying contradictorily brings promises of survival” (Cunha 101). It is important to note here that although Gabriel is connected to Weetigo, and Jesus/Catholicism, he is finally, especially after his death, identified with his Aboriginal ancestral spirituality. He is not in the promised Catholic heaven but rather in the Cree spiritual community where he reunites himself with his Cree community and culture. Through the long struggles related to identity, sexuality, self-inflictive behaviors of Gabriel, Highway shows how a real sustainable identity could be created, and what is important in Gabriel is his celebration of his body and life even through dangerous sexuality and dancing.

The Aboriginal community's refusal of Gabriel has its root in the community's conceptualization of sexuality and gender based on a Western perspective. The Western ideology of gender and sexuality is traced out as a problem by Wendy Person who in the essay, "How Queer Native Narratives Interrogate Colonialist Discourses," argues that "[t]he imposition of a foreign system of understating sex/gender and sexuality has threatened the most intimate levels of First Nations lives" (179). About this connection, Sam McKegney in "From Trickster Poetics to Transgressive Politics: Substantiating Survivance in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*" argues that "[b]y initially failing to break out of the ideological system imposed on them by the forces of evangelical Christianity, the brothers are not yet able to unlock the empowering capacity of traditional Cree thought" (166). How the Aboriginal communities act on Western ideas and consequently harm their own people and communities can be found in the treatment of Gabriel by the Aboriginal communities in the *Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow*. There, Gabriel is not only dismissed by his community as homosexual, but also his brother Jeremiah feels "embarrassed to be caught in cahoots with a pervert, a man who fucked other men ... [o]n an Indian reserve, a Catholic reserve" (Highway 250). The community's and Jeremiah's reactions to Gabriel could be the result of the erosion of the Aboriginal spirituality due to the exposition to the Western belief systems which is done through the institutionalized oppression of the Catholic Church.

Gabriel is dismissed by the Aboriginal community due to not complying with the proper gender roles (culturally constructed through the Western ideas) of masculinity and femininity. He is disliked perhaps due to his feminine characteristics which could be seen in his ballet dancing and sexual encounters. And Highway shows how misogyny when imposed by the systematic oppression of colonialism could destroy the Aboriginal communities as Highway traces terror in the eyes of the men in the novel: "The fact that the flesh of the mother had formed their flesh, female blood ran thick inside their veins ... Terror that the emotion of a woman, the spirit of a woman, lived inside them" (Highway 251). The problem is that these Aboriginal men are offered the conceptualization of "femininity without reference to either Cree or Ojibway traditional teachings" (McKegney 169), and Highway indicates that this kind of conceptualization takes place due to the adherence to the Western perspective of sexuality and gender, and so the problem (which might raise the identity problem of the Aboriginal) lies within the home, and within the community as well. So, in that sense, Gabriel's death also signifies the failure of community. Healing does not necessarily lie on individual effort; it also needs support from the community one belongs to, whereas in Gabriel's case the Aboriginal community fails to provide the help necessary for his recovery from the abuse he experiences at the residential school. However, Gabriel's death could be a guidance for Jeremiah to reflect upon the impacts of colonization on his community and on his community's failures to heal the abuse of its children. He realizes that it is difficult to unlearn the colonially imposed misogyny in the Aboriginal peoples' efforts to (re)create their identities without accepting the significance of the feminine in Cree spirituality and Cree culture.

Gabriel as "the sacrificial victim" (Cunha 107) of colonialism must die in order to show Jeremiah and other Aboriginals a way out from the impacts of colonialism on their lives, in order for them to live freely with the renewal/recovery of their Cree cultures and traditions as Cunha notes, "Gabriel's sacrificial death ... [like] Jesus' crucifixion [shows how] to save humans from their sins" (112). Highway depicts Gabriel's illness as not only an individual illness but also the community's illness, and in order for the community to recreate and reclaim their Cree culture which in turn will help them to own their identities, they should know how to heal their illness and counter their colonial legacies. Highway's story is ultimately optimistic and that is why the *Fur Queen* – the *Weesageechak* – helps Gabriel to enter into the spiritual realm, casting off the *Weetigo* where the possibility of the (re)creation of a Cree tradition is envisioned. However, this possibility is not without complexity as Diana Brydon observes thus: "[it is] an invitation to complicity, an ironic acknowledgement of doubleness. The priest and his God have been outwitted. Cree perspectives survive, but in *reconstituted* and *ambiguous* forms" (emphasis added, 21). However, as Cunha puts it, "[this] ironic message of doubleness ... shows that Cree knowledge can survive in Canadian culture [although that could be] through *adaptation*" (emphasis added, 112). And I think that the issues of reconstitution and ambiguity that Brydon is concerned with and adaptation that Cunha mentions could be understood if we look into the reasons for Gabriel's entrance and acceptance into the Cree spirituality after his death. He is not refused in the Cree's spiritual world because his ancestors might have not recognized the issues of gender and sexuality according to the Western understanding, and here it might also

be argued that the spiritual realm has accepted his perceived femininity which is refused by the Aboriginal community while he is alive.

Gabriel's death is not only a loss but also a lesson for the Aboriginal people. His death is symbolic of how the failure of communal ideals to responsibly heal its damaged children could lead to tragic consequences of loss. Gabriel's death however becomes a lesson for the community to meditate upon the problems facing it as a result of its past and present colonial subjugation. Gabriel's death, like a messianic symbol, is powerful. Highway's epigraph from Squamish is insightful on this point: "For the dead are not powerless," and surely Gabriel's death has something to teach Aboriginal people regarding how to counter the forces of colonization that continue to subdue them. At the same time, his death teaches them how to recognize the impacts of the forces within the community. As Cunha notes, "[a]lthough he dies, the trickster Fur Queen works as a magic weapon that makes his death not an end, but a sacrificial rite to defeat the evils of colonialism" (110). The optimism by the end of the story is also noted by Brydon who argues that "the novel must be read as a complex engagement with personal and social history, an engagement that locates the personal experience within a specific colonial context, and that seeks to carry the force of that personal anguish back into the public sphere to find appropriate forms of redress and progress" (23). So, Gabriel's death signifies a renaissance for his people to re-engage their identity as Aboriginal peoples. Jeremiah realizes this need thus: "'There's a man dying in here!' ... We're Indians! We have a right to conduct our own religious ceremonies, just like everyone else!" (305), which is a sign of his renewed understanding of Cree identity and ritual.

Gabriel's death in part is the result of the sexual abuse he has experienced at the residential school and also due to his separation from and refusal by the community he belongs to. He turns the abuses onto himself and fails to recover his Aboriginal identity due to the traumatic experience he has been exposed to at the residential school. His self-damaging sexual behaviors lead him into the abyss of his traumatic past, away from his people's therapeutic spiritual heritage. Yet, what he fails to find in life, he finds in his death. Even though his community rejects him, the community's spirit finds and heals him in death. However, Highway, through Gabriel's death, shows the different layers of complexities that exist within Aboriginal communities and he advocates for a community rather than individual effort to engage the ailing trauma that besets members of Aboriginal communities and to get the Aboriginal identity recreated, reinvented and reconstituted.

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