

Reclaiming Voice: Storytelling as Survival

The text *Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese is a profound exploration of the trauma, memory, and healing journey of the life of one of the characters namely Saul Indian Horse. Taken away, fissioned and taken out of his culture and family and brought to the nightmares of St. Jerome Residential School, Saul endures abuse, rejection and continuous attempts which deprives him of the Anishinaabe identity which is his real identity. Although the event of the discovery of hockey, initially, brings relief and significance, the unsolved wounds of childhood make a profound influence on his relationships, his emotional world as well as his further descent into addiction. Still, the outcome of the novel is not a despair, but the hopeful one, and the power of narration is the alternative of the change. Wagamese puts the entire novel in Saul written and spoken testimony during the time he visits a treatment system which makes the novel take the form of storytelling where narration becomes an element of the healing. This framing restates one of the main messages, namely, the concept that the healing process begins the moment the Indigenous survivors regain their voice and deal with the trauma caused by the colonial institutions on them (Robinson 88). In *Indian Horse*, storytelling is the means of silence to self-realization, and, in the future, Saul will be able to begin put together fragments of his personality, which he has been denied. Saul can be interpreted to be explaining the power that the trauma forces him to confront with regaining of the dignity, identity and hopeful capabilities of healing, not only to him but to all the survivors whose experiences have been ignored or suppressed.

The novel itself is written as the testimony by Saul, and is only begun to be written when Saul joins the alcoholism treatment. This form is important: it reveals the fact that the narration of his storyline is the first place, when Saul admits that his pain is preconditioned not by his

failure, but by the violence that Saul had to struggle against being a boy. At the early ages of treatment, Saul narrates that to heal well, he must be able to see into a thing he could never see (Wagamese). This appreciation is a very crucial shifting ground of denial to confrontation. The physical abuse, sexual violence, erasing the culture, isolation, and fear that happened in the residential school were not the result of years of the fields of silence and alcoholism. Wagamese highlights, “They buried him in the graveyard that crept up to the edge of the bush” (38). Wagamese demonstrates that these memories are continuing to live and control Saul as long as these memories are not mentioned.

Saul begins sharing his experience at St. Jerome, which divulges the reason behind his unhappiness. He remembers that the priests attempted to disrupt native children by punishing them on speaking Ojibwa, chopping off their hair, and saying that their culture was a sin. He remembers how the children have disappeared together with the murder of them, their torture as well as their impunity measures. The silence is referred to by most of the survivors of residential schools and the fact that Saul is unable to be emotionally numb even a long time afterwards is associated with that. This is critically explained by Wagamese since the trauma is deceptive to the memory: Saul remembers things, feelings, or visual images but not the actual reality of all things over the years of his memory (Robinson 93). The pieces begin to come back together to create a whole narrative only in the narration. This has been explicitly highlighted in, “If we want to live at peace with ourselves, we need to tell our stories” (6) It is because of this that storytelling does not involve passivity of reflections, but resistance. Naming the trauma challenges the colonial regime where the Native voice was to be suppressed. Through his narration, Saul does not want to live with the shame that he had been taught to embrace within himself. In this way, Wagamese demonstrates that the agency is something that can be restored

only in terms of working with trauma through storytelling. The story of Saul happens to be a declaration that the carnage Saul experienced was real, unjust, and not his not wanting to be left to wont alone.

Another significant aspect of healing process is the fact that Saul realizes that it is not a personality defect that has brought about his traumas in adulthood like anger, addiction and lack of connection; it is only a raw trauma. It is with telling his story he begins to realize how the patterns of residential school went on with their chase in his adulthood. To start with, hockey gives Saul a sense of belonging, identity and the sense of mastery. Wagamese elaborated it, “I have been lifted up and out of this physical world into a place where time and space have a different rhythm” (6). It is a comforting space, a place that he feels powerful and free. Even in the ice, Saul is not exempted by the effects of trauma. The insults and the violence introduced against him are the facts of evidence that among the white population, his worth is conditional and he would be accepted as long as he works. It is in the narrating that Saul comes to the acceptance that his meek escalating on ice is corresponding to the impotence that he once felt at St. Jerome. The trauma that was never resolved recurs on the basis that he has never addressed the cause of such a trauma.

It is also only revealed on the point where he examines the trauma behind his alcoholism. He gets intoxicated so as to forget the memories that he has never mentioned. It happens when he opposes to falter in his treatment where he is told to write his story, in fact, it is habitual with his years of survival. Nevertheless, he can clearly find that violence of residential school was the gateway to all his relationships, the concept of self, and even his downward swirling descent into addiction as he writes (Wiese 59). The narration gives Saul words about what he has experienced in life. Narrating stories helps Saul to re-focus in his life, to be free of shame because he sees

himself as an innocent individual rather than severely condemning him. Wagamese thus shows that knowing how to remember what they had done in their past is far much better than understanding what goes on in the present, identifying the patterns and producing the emotional clarity that can be applied to the patient.

As it is proved by the final scene of the novel, the narration of stories is not only the method of confronting with the trauma but also the method of restoring the identity and getting back to the community. After writing out his story Saul returns to the land of his ancestors when he begins to reenact his spiritual relationship with the surrounding world. The resurrection of Saul begins when he goes to the tomb of the St Jerome. Saul is lamenting and free standing in the rubble of the scene of his destiny (Wiese 62). The process of remembering is the semblance of going back of the story that he tells. He is regaining a literal and emotional base that he had been aware of all along as something which hurt him. By narrating his narrative Saul can take charge of what the places will allude to him again.

Additionally, narration helps Saul to integrate into the society. He will no longer be alone after he decides to share his memories with the people in treatment and subsequently the Kelly family. The need to speak his truth is an opening door to people who love him since his barrier had long been his silence in his entire life (Wagamese 72). The Kellys who were now prepared to give him a home were repelled by his not saying to Saul that of his sufferings. Storytelling restores that relationship once more and he can go back not a devastated kid but a child in pursuit of knowledge. Indigenous cultures are associated to identity in terms of storytelling. Wagamese applies this tradition showing that Saul must practice such cultures to be healed. It is through storytelling that Saul is finally capable of understanding himself as a survivor indeed, though one capable of healing, and coming back to his people.

In *Indian Horse*, Richard Wagamese illustrates how storytelling is important as a healing process. When Saul narrates his memories of the residential school, he struggles with the post-traumatic condition of resulting into his adulthood, and begins to associate with the other members of the community and recognize his self-identity again. Storytelling is a voice that has been recovered following decades of forced silence, a tool of slowly transforming the trauma into knowledge, and a means of reclaiming competencies which were ripped away in the colonial violence. The recovery of the Indigenous survivors begins with the narration of their stories as the novel by Wagamese suggests that in the process of this narration, the Aboriginal enters the possible strength to possess the dignity and the identity given to them not by the oppressors. It is very personal and, at the same time, very political, in the fact that Saul has made himself narrator of his own story; it is the outcry of the survivor, and it is the proclamation that the voice of the survivors is heard. In such a manner, *Indian Horse* confirms the truth, that the storytelling is not only a narrative but also a healing, resisting, and rebirth process.

Works Cited

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