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The Humanization of the Monster in Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*

“ Even Canada's monster does not have a fixed identity, for monstrosity is a label that has moved fluidly from centre to margin, from an individual subject to a national body” (Edwards p. 112)

The novel *Monkey Beach* by Eden Robinson depicts tragic episodes of sexual violence and lateral violence in the lives of the narrator, Lisa Hill, and her brother Jimmy Hill, who are members of the Haisla community. Both Lisa and Jimmy are victims of lateral violence, since they have been harmed by members within the Haisla community that they trusted. Lisa is a direct victim of sexual violence when she is raped by her friend Cheese at a local party, whereas Jimmy is an indirect victim of sexual violence when his girlfriend Adeline (nick-named Karaoke) is sexually assaulted by her uncle Josh. Consequently, the sexual abuse and lateral violence that Lisa and Jimmy experience are influenced through settler colonial practices that reinforce themes of sexual violence and gendered violence against indigenous women. In addition to that, the intergenerational trauma and systematic racism that Lisa and her family members experience are influenced through the role of the absent referent and the creation of residential schools. The absent referent portrays Lisa and her family members as colonized victims that are inherently visible and innately victims, while non-indigenous societies are

invisible and are not held responsible for perpetuating the colonial abuse and ethnic cleansing that took place at residential schools. In the novel *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson demonstrates the dire and negative impacts of western social constructions in indigenous communities through the role of the absent referent. Specifically, Lisa is mistreated by a non-indigenous society that is not held accountable for the physical abuse, institutional racism, and sexual exploitation that she experiences throughout her adolescence. The novel *Monkey Beach* highlights themes of gendered violence, which are influenced through rigid western social constructions that continue to undermine the actions and behaviours of a non-indigenous society.

Lisa experiences physical violence as early as grade two when she is bullied and beaten up by her male classmates. In particular, Lisa asserts that her childhood tormentors, Frank and his gang of friends, were known for harassing other children that they did not like and she claims that if Frank did not like someone then that person would be “in trouble” (Robinson 64). For this reason, Lisa recalls the time when her cousin Erica was pursued by Frank and his friends who decided to pull her cousin’s dress up and tease her for wearing pink underwear, which earned her the nickname of “[p]issy-missy” (Robinson 65). In a similar way, Lisa is pushed down into the ground by Frank, who tries to run over Lisa with his bike (Robinson 65). Lisa refuses to be made into a victim like her cousin Erica, so she decides to stand up for herself. She expresses her rage through punching Frank in the face and biting Frank’s buttocks to the point where she can “taste his blood through his shorts” (Robinson 65). Lisa’s courage in standing up to Frank and her male classmates suggests that Lisa is not confined to rigid social constructions of gender that are influenced through the belief systems of a non-indigenous society. Incidentally, Lisa’s decision to get into a physical fight with Frank disrupts traditional western gender roles that categorize women into subordinate and submissive roles. With that in mind, Lisa refuses to

apologize to Frank on his mother's insistence (Robinson 67). Lisa's refusal to apologize to Frank suggests that Lisa expects to be treated in an equal manner as Frank. For this reason, Lisa's rejection of patriarchal practices emphasizes the importance of gender complementarity, which is a term that Jo-Ann Episkenew and Kim Anderson employ to describe the balanced and equal roles of gender within indigenous communities prior to settler colonization. The impact of western social constructions on indigenous communities has weakened the role of indigenous women who are no longer perceived as warriors that can be equal company to men.

Lisa experiences the negative effects of settler colonial influences when she is called an "evil little monster" by Frank's mother, who is insulted by Lisa's crude remarks about the behaviour of her son. The fact that Frank's mother calls Lisa monster is crucial because Frank's mother is ignoring the physical abuse that her son inflicts on Lisa. Equally important is the hurt and insecurity that Lisa feels from being branded a monster. Incidentally, Lisa feels as if nobody like her and she seeks reassurance from her uncle Mick, who tells Lisa that she is his "favorite monster in the whole wide world" (Robinson 67). Evidently, the role of the absent referent is present during Lisa's childhood because her childhood tormentors are not held responsible for the bullying and taunting that they cause her.

Lisa becomes a victim of racial oppression when she is forced to read a book about how "Indians on the northwest coast of British Columbia had killed and eaten people as religious sacrifices", which makes Lisa furious and indignant towards her teacher (Robinson 68). For this reason, Lisa refuses to participate in her class discussions that dehumanize and degrade indigenous people as bloodthirsty cannibals, and she challenges her teacher's authority by declaring that the book is "all lies" (Robinson 69). In this situation, Lisa is forced to acknowledge herself as a racialized other, who is of a lesser status than her teacher who is not

racialized. Accordingly, the absent referent is present in Lisa's experience of racism in the classroom because her teacher and the educational materials which are supplied to her class fail to acknowledge the structural abuse and intergenerational trauma that was produced by colonial practices and residential schools.

Racism and the dehumanization of indigenous people has been an integral part of the creation of residential schools for many indigenous people of Canada. Ward Churchill reports that residential schools were "total institutions" that were designed to assault the cultural identity of indigenous people (19). In particular, Churchill claims that the young boys and girls that attended residential schools were perceived as "dirty indians" that needed to be cleansed with alcohol and kerosene by the staff of these oppressive institutions (19). In addition to that, Churchill addresses the humiliation and cultural genocide that residential schools imposed on the cultural-identities of indigenous children who were forced to have their long indian hair cut (19). Essentially, the goal of residential schools was to blame and shame indigenous children for their status as indians and to assimilate them into a eurocentric culture.

The sexual exploitation and racism that Lisa experiences throughout her adolescence inferiorizes her position as an indigenous woman in non-indigenous society. For instance, Lisa is labelled a "feisty little squaw" when she stands up to a bunch of white men who are sexually harassing her cousin Erica at a parking lot in a strip mall in Terrace (Robinson 250). The fact that Lisa is labelled a squaw by the white men is problematic because the term squaw is a derogatory word that describes indigenous women as promiscuous individuals that can be taken advantage of. Lisa is reduced to sexualized object when she is called a squaw by the white men; however, Lisa does not relent to the racial slurs that the white men utter at her in their pursuit of degrading and silencing her. In retaliation, Lisa refers to the white men as "cowards" that

“ gotta pick on girls [in order] to feel like men” (Robinson 250). Lisa impinges the self-worth and manhood of the white men that threaten to gang rape her. The hostile actions and aggressive behaviours that the white men want to perpetrate on Lisa escapes the gaze of the people in the parking lot that are either purposely or mindlessly choosing not to intervene in the situation. Western society fails to hold the white men responsible for the victimization and harm that is inflicted on Lisa as a racialized indigenous woman. This is further evident when Lisa is scolded by her aunt Trudy for not being careful. Aunt Trudy stresses that members from the non-indigenous community will not be bothered about the victimization that Lisa experiences because Lisa is not a white girl and is perceived as a “mouthy indian” and a “born slut” (Robinson 255). Lisa’s status as an indigenous woman makes her a prime target of sexual violence and gendered violence.

Eden Robinson’s novel *Monkey Beach* depicts the dire impacts of western social constructions in indigenous communities through the function of the absent referent, which stipulates that the colonial harms done to indigenous peoples are seen, while the perpetrator remains invisible. The physical abuse, institutional racism, and sexual exploitation that Lisa experiences are highly noticeable, but rather than identify these as settler colonial practices, characters in the novel perceive Lisa as a troublemaker by nature. Rather than blaming a monstrous colonial system, the victim is judged to be inherently a victim. Lisa is branded a monster for standing up to the physical violence that her male classmates inflict upon her, and she is criticized for breaking away from traditional western social constructs that continue to justify patriarchal systems and the subordination of indigenous women. Frank’s mother aligns herself with racist and gendered practices of a colonial society in calling Lisa a monster, which is meant to stigmatize and marginalize Lisa into a monstrous other. However, Lisa’s courage and

pride help her survive against the horrific impacts of settler colonialism and render her as not monstrous but proudly indigenous, while the novel uses the absent referent to identify settler society as the underlying perpetrator of the victimization that Lisa endures.

Works Cited

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