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Rediscovery of Innu Past in the Contemporary Canadian Literature

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Abstract

*Since 2019, we have been observing an interesting phenomenon in contemporary Canadian literature, it is a rediscovery of the indigenous Innu past through literary stories. We cannot claim that this topic was not present before, but nowadays it is acquiring more attention and has also attracted increased interest from readers. The aim of the paper is to look deeper at a social-critical dimension and cultural memory kept in a chosen book *Kukum* by Michel Jean, and to depict a deeper layer of the Canadian cultural landscape.*

Keywords: Canadian literature, *Kukum*, identity, cultural landscape, literary landscape

Introduction

Contemporary Canadian, more precisely Quebec literature is unknown to many European readers. Until now, it has been on the margins of literary space, but since 2021 we have been observing a renewed interest in indigenous topics, and now it seems opened to a wider global audience. Already in 2011, the book of Naomi Fontaine *Kuessipan* gave a new voice to writers who deal with the Innu past. Today, in addition to her and Michel Jean, it is also authors such as J.D. Kurtness, V.P. Bordeleau or I. Picard, but also many other authors reveal the hidden aspects of cultural memory. However, the breakthrough book that helped to make autochthonous literature more visible outside of Canada is *Kukum*.

Indigenous literature

The most significant aspect of indigenous literature is that it pushes boundaries of the contemporary literature, one could say that it builds on the theme of internal exile and migration, but it is more about discovering the cultural memory of the community, lost identity, and trauma. Some call it "roman de terroir, fr." (Danard, 2023: 81), or "roman de néoterroir, fr." (Archibald, 2012: 16). Terroir is more than a territory, it is a land, a landscape composed of many cultural layers (Pecnikova, 2023). At the centre of the story is a "retour a

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la terre, fr.", i.e. a return to the land, the landscape as a space for life. It could be said that in literature we observe the discovery of a forgotten cultural landscape, a territory that was here before other cultures began to dominate.

According to Danard (2023), the Quebec indigenous literature is characterised by: the "*démontréalisation, fr.*" focused on the periphery which means to look "out of Montréal city" at the periphery; as well as on the telluric lyricism aimed at the return to the land, to specific symbols, associated with a certain form of nostalgia, or melancholy, the rediscovery and revival of the landscape. The third sign is the local (vernacular) language, associated with an emphasis on orality and linguistic variety. It is a language composed of special expressions that carry important cultural manifestations associated with identity while the title *Kukum* means grandmother in the Innu language.

"Innu-aimun is not an easy language to learn. It has only eight consonants, seven vowels, and fifteen distinct sounds, so the inflexion given to a term can change the meaning in a subtle or profound way. There is no written form, no linguist to analyse meaning. No feminine or masculine. There is only animate and inanimate. At first, I stumbled constantly and made no headway no matter how hard I tried. Eventually, I understood that it is not just a different language from French but a different way of communicating." (Michel, 2019: 53)

Even though the story of the *Kukum* is not primarily based on the traumatic past of the indigenous people of Canada, it opens and raises the question of the relationship between memory and culture. It brings a deeper look at the identity roots of the ethnic Canadian minority, made up of the First Nations, Métis and Innu. One of the descendants of the indigenous people of Canada is also the author of the book.

Michel Jean, a Quebec, autochthonous, French-speaking journalist, dedicated *Kukum* story to his great-grandmother. The success of the book may be also linked to his personality since he is one of the popular personalities in the Canadian media space. He is the holder of the *Prix Bibliothèque et Archives Canada* in 2023 for the creation and promotion of the cultural, literary and historical heritage of Canada. His great-grandmother, Almanda Siméon, who is the narrator and the main character of the novel, is a woman who married an Innu. It is her narrative voice that accompanies us through the happiness of her love story to the fatality and tragic future of people who are losing their territory

Néoterroir or neo-territory

The theory of neo-territory can be found in the work of Samuel Archibald from 2012. He claims that this is a phenomenon that we can observe in contemporary Quebec literature and is associated with a return to traditional life, to the landscape as a living space. "Indigenous territories are rehabilitated not as an inert and inanimate landscape, but as a living space,

anthropised and thus capable of hosting a diegesis⁴ (Danard, 2023: 84). It is the fact that the story is told by “une blanche, fr.”, a white woman Almada that gives the story a different perspective. The rhythm of life, which is governed by nature, the nomadic way of life associated with hunting in winter, as well as destinations such as Lac Saint-Jean or lac Péribonka create a unique scenery, a dynamic space that is also part of the plot.

“Every stroke of the paddle distanced me from one life and pulled me deeper into another. As someone who found it easy to talk. I was learning to listen to this world, both new and old, and become one with it. Rivière Péribonka runs almost due north. The red and yellow leaves injected touches of colour into the screen of greenery that boxed the river in. As the temperature dropped, the water took on dark-blue hues.” (Michel, 2019: 35)

The landscape has an important place in the story, it is not only the space in which the action takes place, but it itself is an important part of it. The land operates in two axes. The first axis of the plot is the story as such, which adapts to the movement of the heroes; the second axis is equally important, it is the trajectory of the Innu people over the years, marked by changes in the territory they consider their home. The story helps us uncover the heritage of a territory that becomes a literary landscape. This literary space (*espace littéraire*, fr.) is very realistic thanks to the storytelling style. The author uses allofiction (Pecnikova-Rackova, 2023) that supports the telluric lyricism.

The loss of landscape is the key point of the story. “A cultural landscape can be perceived sensually or spiritually. Connecting a land with art, memory, and identity opens the possibility of a new perception of a certain place as a cultural landscape.” (Pondelikova-Tokolyova, 2023: 75). It is a turning point that disrupts a peaceful flow of the story. The cultural landscape for the Innu does not mean land ownership, as we know it, and it is not important. From their perception, the earth is the place to which they belong, which nourishes them, forms their culture, symbolism, and roots. That is why the loss of Innu identity is associated with uprooting from the territory, which has had tragic and traumatic consequences.

“My children were born in the woods. My grandchildren grew up on a reserve. The former were educated on the land, the latter in a residential school. When they returned, they spoke French. The white priests forbade them from speaking Innu-aimun and even punished those who did. Another tie had been severed between the generations. They thought that by robbing our children of their language they would make them white. But an Innu who speaks French is still Innu. With yet another wound.” (Michel, 2019: 172).

The plot of the story brings an authentic view on the life of the Innu, the poetics of the story is maintained through language and the use of words in the language Innu-aimun, so the reader can see the world of the Innu also through language. Again, it is the land and the territory that dominates the words in this language. The lifestyle of the Innu was filled with danger, hunting, processing of animals, difficult living conditions in a real nature. But their

⁴ Quote in the original version: Les territoires autochtones sont réhabilités non pas en tant que paysage inerte et inanimé, mais en tant qu'espace de vie, anthropisé et ainsi susceptible d'accueillir une diégèse.

culture, storytelling, dancing, and eating together helped them maintain community, traditions, and rituals.

"I loved listening to those epic tales since they helped me understand both nature and the world. The characters could be either funny or frightening, and the stories often changed depending on the person who told them." (Michel, 2019: 113)

When looking at the scientific literary analysis of the work, we observe a lack of methodology or other scientific-critical texts, as the main topic goes beyond postcolonial methods (Smith, 2012). An equally new approach is to define a neo-territory as a return to a certain way of livelihood associated with the cultural landscape. The Innu had an entire culture based on a lifestyle associated with land, but not with its ownership. Their identity was symbolically linked to the space, to which they attributed certain, unknown to us, values.

It is precisely the fact that *Kukum* brings us to territories that no longer have their original form but have been preserved in the memory of the author's hero, that he is able to reinterpret this space associated with the disappeared culture of his ancestors. The power of the work is complemented by the narrative of a woman who observes changes and reacts to them, in the spirit of the culture she has embraced.

Almanda

In the second part of the paper, we focus on the main character of the book, Almanda, and her perception of the literary cultural landscape, which depicts the finding and loss of Innu identity.

Almanda was an orphan who was raised by her uncle and aunt. They lived a very modest peasant life. Almanda went to school, where she had good grades, and she learnt to read. She also attended church and helped with housekeeping and farming. One day, she met Thomas, sailing on the river. After a brief acquaintance, she decided to marry him and accepted his culture. She was only 15 years old; Thomas was 18.

"Have you gone mad, Almanda?" My aunt was a humble, hard-working woman. I had never before heard her raise her voice as she had just done. "You are not going to marry an Indian. Do you know what it's like for them? They have a hard go of in the woods. You are not used to that kind of life. It makes no sense, my girl." (Michel, 2019: 19)

Despite the opposition of her foster parents, Almanda married Thomas. They went to live with Thomas's family by the Péribonka River. They lived in a tent from there they went hunting. Apart from the fact that Almanda did not speak the language, she did not know how to hunt with a rifle or clean hunted animals. Nevertheless, the story is written with enthusiasm. The reader has the feeling that Almanda has fallen in love with the new environment and territory.

"I tried as best as I could to describe the feeling of freedom that had washed over me the minute we set our canoe in the water. My sister-in-law saw the happiness on my face and in her

brother's eyes. Love is something everyone can understand, no matter the language in which it is expressed." (Michel, 2019: 40)

Almanda fully adopted the life of the Innu. Even though it is a hard life that requires a lot of physical and mental resilience, the identity of the Innu is portrayed in detail in the story. It is based on many symbols, and stories that are passed down from generation to generation. Almanda had to deal with Thomas's long hunts when it was not clear whether he would return. She had to reconcile with the loss of a child to later bring another one into the world. Her life was completely determined by the rhythms of nature, sun, snow, and rain.

What she did not expect, was the dramatic arrival of a civilisation that started harvesting trees around their territory. Regardless of the destruction of natural resources, a destruction of a unique culture started. The author does not criticise but describes the tragedy and trauma of the Innu community, whose space was taken away. The story is not again the modernisation, but it is the way and tools that are not appropriate. Suddenly, the Innu were moved to places where they didn't know what to do. Their children were taken away for re-education, and many disappeared forever. No one was able to treat them socially equally. Many Innu began to drink alcohol excessively, and domestic violence increased. People who used to survive in the harsh conditions of nature had lost the meaning of being.

Almanda could not stay non-active, and as an old lady took the bold step of going directly to the Prime Minister to tell him how they live. It was a cry into the dark, from a woman who was not born as an Innu but became Innu. Many of her children were already accepting a new life, but she fought resolutely for the world that was disappearing.

"Many sought refuge in alcohol. Can you blame them for wanting to numb the pain? Some tried to farm the surrounding fields. They made for strange farmers. Some worked as guides for outfitters. Like Thomas, Daniel, and my sons on a luxurious property in Parc des Laurentides. Helping rich strangers bring hunting trophies back to Chicago, New York, or somewhere in Michigan was humiliating work, but at least they were out in the woods. Others got hired onto lumber camps, where they were given small, poorly paid jobs that boiled down to helping the very loggers who had dispossessed them. Those men came back broken." (Michel, 2019: 158)

Almanda could not change the course of the world, but she helped to pay attention to issues related to the status of the Indigenous population of Canada.

Allofiction

As we reported in our study in 2023, where we focused on literary creation with elements of autobiography in the novel written by Amélie Nothomb, the concepts of autofiction and allofiction are quite new in contemporary literary studies. Autofiction as a term has appeared in contemporary literary studies since the late 1970s and is seen as a universal literary phenomenon.

Autobiographical traits in novels are often an important part of stories (Javorčíková-Zelenková, 2020). If the story is written by another author, who is related to the main

character, and tells the story, we speak of allofiction. *Kukum* is a retrospective novel, the narrator is a great-grandmother of the author. He gave the voice to her story. It may contain fictional features, but for the reader, the task of distinguishing reality from fiction is not important and remains a mystery.

The allofiction in the novel goes beyond conventions with very authentic language, and the book also contains photographs that support the factual character. A story of family, which has been marked by the transformation of society, may sound like a memento or rather a reminder of the importance of preserving diversity. Especially nowadays, when many societies tend to stereotype and prejudice. The allofiction style can also highlight the missing memory of the place and people.

Kukum means grandmother in the Innu language. She was a woman of importance with her experience. She was the one that told stories about a world that no longer exists. The one that became Innu. Unlike the others, she was one of the few who could read and wanted her children to be able to read as well. She was not against progress, but she was against the way in which and how insensitively that progress was made.

The author wrote a tribute to a woman from his family but also looks at broader social problems. Progress caught Innu unprepared, and took in the land, the meaning of life. He draws attention to discrimination, to the fact that many found themselves completely at the bottom of society, violence was spreading, children were transported for re-education, and the life of the Innu was worthless. However, the story was also full of enthusiasm, leading to the understanding that the land is much more than just "space". And despite life circumstances that they cannot influence, it is up to them how they create their own identities.

Conclusion

Literature that deals with the indigenous population and returns to the landscape is something that pushes the boundaries of current literary trends. The relationship between memory and landscape is presented in the identity of descendants and is a topic that goes beyond the borders of Canada. Although it is a novel whose primary goal is not to criticise society, it is rather a side effect of reading the story. The authenticity of the story is guaranteed by the narrative voice of a woman who writes through her great-grandson, her story full of fatality, love and tragedy. She could survive in the wilderness, the cold in a tent, or the death of his loved ones, but she could not watch the end of the Innu culture, connected to the landscape.

It is a return to the land, the neo-territory that is therefore one of the very valuable images that the story brings. A land that has more than physical meaning, a land that no one must own. And how it turns into a source of finance and wood before her eyes. It is also a deep insight into a kind of cultural landscape that is taking on a literary form.

However, it is also an allofictional book, we do not want to add factual or documentary value to it. The language, the style and the content make it very realistic, and its relevance lies in the fact that it brings a dignified place for the identity of those who faced prejudice and discrimination.

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