

# The Residential School Experiences in Drew Hayden Taylor's *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

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**Abstract**—In Canada, the residential school system established in the nineteenth century remains a dark chapter in the nation's history. The schools operated under that system were one of the major instruments used by the government to assimilate Aboriginal people into mainstream Canadian society. Based on the assumption that children were easier to manipulate and control than adults, the residential school system targeted Aboriginal children. As a common theme in Canadian Aboriginal literature, residential school experiences are represented in Drew Hayden Taylor's *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. The present paper focuses on the traumatic residential school experiences depicted in the two novels as well as their long-term effects. Healing the wounds of history remains a daunting task for the Canadian government.

**Index Terms**—aboriginal children, Canada, residential schools, destruction of identity, language loss, abuse

## I. INTRODUCTION

First published in 2010, *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass* is Taylor's first adult novel. Although the novel is mainly concerned with aspects of contemporary life in the Anishnawbe community of Otter Lake, it also offers the reader an insight into the traumatic past experienced by a vanishing generation of people who attended residential school. The legacy of the residential school continues to haunt the small First Nations reserve. In his first and only novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway deals with the residential school life and its detrimental effects on students in a much more detailed way. Based on the personal experiences of Highway and his brother René the novel was first published in 1998 and provoked a stir among both Native and non-Native readers. It revolves around two Cree brothers, Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis, who manage to heal from the trauma inflicted upon them by an abusive residential school and fulfill their artistic potentials. By forcibly stripping Aboriginal children of their language, spirituality, and any other connections to their own culture, residential schools committed an act of cultural genocide, which was destructive to the transmission of Aboriginal culture to future generations. Due to a lack of government oversight, children were vulnerable to various forms of abuse in residential schools. For many of them, their traumatic residential school experiences radically changed their future lives.

## II. A HISTORY OF CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

The origins of Canada's residential schools can be traced back to the time of French colonial regime in the 17th century. After arriving with French settlers in New France, Roman Catholic missionaries constantly attempted to "civilize" First Nations people by having them adopt Christianity and the settled agricultural lifestyle (TRC, *The History. Part 1*, p.40).

In order to better assimilate Aboriginal children into white society, the missionaries opened boarding schools which offered them basic literacy and religious instruction. These boarding schools can be viewed as the earliest prototype of residential schools. The first known boarding school for Aboriginal youths in Canada was set up in 1620 by the Récollets near what is now Québec City, to which only boys were admitted. Besides, the clergy sent a number of their Native pupils back to France with the hope that they would later help to convert others in their communities. Despite these efforts, no remarkable success was achieved in westernizing First Nations children during the 17th century. In fact, the European-oriented education was widely resisted by Native children and their parents, since they did not believe at all in the superiority of European civilization (TRC, *The History. Part 1*, p.41-42). Consequently, all of the boarding schools of the French regime did not exist for a long time.

After the British conquest of New France in 1763, residential schooling was suspended until the early 19th century. During the first few decades of that century, religious orders from Britain gradually revived the idea of residential schooling. For instance, the New England Company, a British-based missionary society, began to operate the Mohawk Institute in Brantford as a boarding school for Native children in 1834. Unlike the previous boarding schools, this school was quite long-lived, remaining in operation until 1970 (p.66).

In 1847, the establishment of residential schools was recommended by Egerton Ryerson, the superintendent of schools for Upper Canada. Ryerson termed the new schools industrial schools, expecting students to engage in both the mental and physical labour during their school life. According to his suggestions, the new industrial schools provided "a plain

English education adapted to the working farmer and mechanic” (qtd. in TRC, *The History. Part 1*, p.77). Aboriginal students attended classes in “English language, arithmetic, elementary geometry, or knowledge of forms, geography and the elements of general history, natural history and agricultural chemistry, writing, drawing and vocal music, book-keeping (especially in reference to farmers’ accounts), religion, and morals”. Meanwhile they were trained in “agriculture, kitchen gardening, and mechanics, so far as mechanics is connected with making and repairing the most useful agricultural implements” (qtd. in TRC, *The History. Part 1*, p.77). Correspondingly, this kind of residential schooling was based on the half-day system: students spent a half day studying in the classroom and a half day doing manual work under the supervision of instructors. It was assumed that instructive labour would enable students to acquire the skills necessary to earn a living and make the schools self-sufficient. However, it deserves to be noted that the half-day system soon led to the exploitation of child labour (Miller, 1996, p.157). Holding that “[t]he animating and controlling spirit of each industrial school should ... be a religious one” (qtd. in TRC, *The History. Part 1*, p.78), Ryerson emphasized religious instruction and insisted that the schools should be operated by religious organizations with government support.

With Confederation in 1867, the federal government assumed responsibility for Indian education under the British North America Act, which clearly defined Indians as wards of the federal government. In the 1870s, given the increasingly serious famine among the First Nations on the prairies caused by the failure of buffalo hunt and the decline of fur trade, it became urgent to develop a school system that would train Native people to achieve agricultural self-reliance. Viewing the US boarding-school system as an available model, the federal government appointed Nicholas Flood Davin to conduct an evaluation of American Indian boarding schools in 1879. In his report, Davin agreed with the American authorities that “Indian children were best prepared for assimilation into the dominant society if they were removed from the influences of home, family, and community” (Barman et al., 1986, p.6). Approving of the American model, he recommended that the Canadian government expand its support for existing boarding schools and establish four church-run industrial schools in Western Canada.

The proposals made in the Davin report were accepted by the federal government in 1883, with three industrial schools authorized to be built in the North-West. From then on, the government took a leading role in the establishment of Canada’s residential school system. Although the new schools were still administered by the churches, they received full funding from the government and strove to meet government policy goals rather than those of the churches. The last two decades of the 19th century witnessed a rapid development of the residential school system. By 1900, there were 22 industrial and 39 boarding schools operating in Canada (TRC, *The History. Part 1*, p.161). To ensure a stable and sufficient supply of students in the context of Aboriginal resistance to residential schooling, the federal government amended the Indian Act in 1920 to make residential school attendance compulsory for Indian children aged seven to fifteen (p.278). Aboriginal parents who refused to send their children to residential schools were subject to legal penalties, which actually denied them the basic right to foster and to educate their offspring. In 1923, the division between industrial and boarding schools was formally abandoned. In official parlance, they were all called residential schools (Miller, 1996, p.141).

The residential school system began to be challenged in the 1940s. Given the lack of government funding for Indian education during the Second World War and the expensive operational costs for residential schools, the Department of Indian Affairs shifted its focus to establishing day schools for Native children (TRC, *A Knock*, p.42). Besides, there was also rising opposition to the segregationist nature of residential schooling. In 1949, the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons on the Indian Act recommended that “wherever and whenever possible Indian children should be educated in association with other children” (qtd. in TRC, *A Knock*, p.43), which started the process of integrating First Nations students into the regular public school system. By 1960, the students staying in residential schools were outnumbered by those attending non-Indian schools. However, the pattern of integrated schooling was strongly resisted by some church organizations (p.43).

In 1969, when the government terminated its partnership with the churches and took over full responsibility for residential schools, the decline of the residential school system accelerated. In the 1970s, the remaining residential schools were gradually transferred to the control of Indian bands. The trend toward Aboriginal autonomy over their own education became increasingly irreversible. Also in the same period, the churches came to realize the negative impact of the residential school system. From 1986 to 1994, the United Church, the Roman Catholic Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Anglican Church, and the Presbyterian Church successively issued apologies to Aboriginal people (TRC, *The History. Part 2*, p.555).

In the 1990s, Aboriginal people began to publicly disclose their experiences of abuse in residential schools, which drove the residential school system toward its final collapse. In 1996, the last federally run residential school in Canada, the Gordon Residential School, closed its door in Saskatchewan (Daly, 2014, p.40-41). After the end of the residential school system, the healing movement for residential school survivors continued until today.

### III. FORCED SEPARATION FROM HOME AND FAMILY

Early in both novels, the compulsory nature of residential schooling is clearly revealed to the reader. There are vivid portrayals of emotional blows experienced by Aboriginal children who are forced to attend distant residential schools as well as their family members. It is inevitable that the geographical dislocation of the children breaks family ties and severs their connections with their home communities.

In the prologue of *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*, Lillian tells Nanabush, the trickster from Ojibway mythology who emerges as a young Native boy, that she has no choice but to go to a residential school far away from home. According to Lillian, this will be her “first trip anywhere,” for she has never been “more than a few hours’ walk from home”. It is obvious that she feels sad and helpless about her imminent departure as she wipes her eyes, “I don’t want to go...” (Taylor, 2011, p.7). Despite her parents’ previous efforts to prevent her removal from home, nothing can be changed, since “[White people] don’t take no for an answer” (p.4). The belief in Manifest Destiny, the narrator states, leads the Canadian government to remove school-aged Aboriginal children like Lillian from their families and place them into residential schools to receive Western education. Given the low quality of instruction in local on-Reserve schools, the federal government justifies the building of residential schools, believing that “[Native children’s] welfare would be better maintained [at residential schools] than on a Reserve” (p.5).

The residential school system made many Native parents feel sad rather than happy about their children’s growth, as evidenced in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. When Jeremiah is about to reach the age of seven, his mother Mariesis begins to sink into sadness since she knows her son will soon leave home to attend residential school. Unwilling to send her son out to school alone, she asks her husband Abraham if it is possible for Jeremiah to wait two years until his younger brother Gabriel could go with him. In this scene the mandatory nature of school attendance is reflected in Abraham’s response: “‘Soonie-eye-gimow’s [Indian Agent] orders, Father Bouchard says. It is the law’” (Highway, 2000, p.40). Obviously, the Okimasis parents have no voice in determining the educational matters of their children. If they delay sending Jeremiah to the church operated residential school, they would be subject to legal punishment. The novel also touches upon Native parents’ suspicion about the benefit of a residential school education, as Abraham “wondered out loud, to other long-faced parents on the priest’s old dock, what on earth their son was going to get ‘down there’” (p.47).

In contrast to Lillian, Jeremiah is too young and naïve to realize what his departure to the residential school really means. With the childish belief that he would return home the next day, Jeremiah only feels excited about his first flight. The fact, however, is that he is forcibly taken away from his beloved parents and siblings. Although his two sisters Josephine and Chugweesees are with him in the same school, he is completely separated from them. In the fictional Birch Lake Indian Residential School, the strict gender segregation makes it almost impossible for boys and girls, even brothers and sisters, to communicate with each other. Girls are “on the other side of the giant building, out of sight, away from the view of lusty lads who might savour their company” (Highway, 2000, p.63). Normal interaction between Aboriginal boys and girls, which occurs daily in their home communities, is irrationally sexualized by school authorities. The separation of boys and girls is also referred to in *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*: “The boys, situated at the opposite end of the building, were not allowed to talk to the girls. Brothers weren’t allowed to interact with sisters, cousins and so on” (Taylor, 2011, p.9). It is undoubted that the gender divisions in the residential schools severely damage the bonds between siblings. In fact, even for siblings of the same sex, their interaction is constantly monitored and restricted in the schools. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah and Gabriel are given beds far away from each other, which effectively discourages them from having close bedtime talks. When Jeremiah goes over to Gabriel’s bed in the night to comfort his crying younger brother, he is eventually ordered by Father Lafleur to return to his own bed. Despite being together, the Okimasis brothers can no longer be as close as they used to be.

Forced to leave home for residential school, most Aboriginal children felt very lonely and homesick. There were often attempts made by some of them to run away from school. But if they were caught and brought back, they would be severely punished. The residential school system resulted in an irreparable disconnect between Aboriginal students and their families at home, which can be observed in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. When Jeremiah and Gabriel return home after finishing school, they face a communication gap with their parents. Being thoroughly unaware of their children’s abusive experiences at school, the Okimasis parents sometimes say something that annoys the two brothers who are nevertheless not prepared to share the painful truth. For instance, Gabriel gets inwardly angry when his father asks him if he will miss the Birch Lake School. After suffering many years of abuse in the Catholic residential school, Gabriel is disgusted with Christianity. Thus, his feelings of estrangement from his father naturally intensify when Abraham speaks highly of the Catholic Church in front of him, which even leads him to the conclusion that “there was no place for him in Eemanapiteepitat or the north” (Highway, 2000, p.109). Besides, due to cultural differences, it is not easy for the returning brothers to find parallel words in Cree to explain certain Western terms such as “concert pianist” and “university” to their parents.

#### IV. LOSS OF IDENTITY

A common feature shared by all residential schools is that they stripped students of their identity. Upon arriving at the schools, Aboriginal children were forced to have their hair cut. As depicted in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, all the boys get their heads shaved bald and all the girls get a short bob. Like haircutting in the army and prison, the compulsory haircuts removed the children’s individuality. By imposing European-style haircuts on the children, school administrators intended to erode their Native identity.

In Aboriginal culture, hair represented a special spiritual significance of one’s life and spirit. Associated with pure thoughts, long hair was revered and considered sacred. The threefold braid, which was a traditional hairstyle for Native people, symbolizes the unity of body, mind, and spirit (Florence, 2015, p.17). Therefore, the act of cutting one’s hair was generally viewed as insulting. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the experience of having their hair cut is very traumatic and

humiliating for Aboriginal children. In Jeremiah's case, the forced haircut is like a cruel "slaughter". To avoid crying in front of other boys, he "straightened his back and called forth every ounce of courage" (Highway, 2000, p.52). With his hair falling, Jeremiah gets into a state of powerlessness. When his hair is completely cut off, he feels he has no strength left and cannot help bawling. During the painful process of losing his hair, Jeremiah wishes he could go back to his family. Under great emotional stress he feels that he "was being skinned alive, in public; the centre of his nakedness shrivelled to the size and texture of a raisin, the whole world staring, pointing, laughing" (p.53). Unlike Jeremiah, Sammy Aandeg in *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass* vigorously resists the haircut by biting a nun who attempts to shave his head.

Besides, children were required to wear European-style school uniforms in place of their Aboriginal clothing. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Aboriginal boys at the Birch Lake School are all dressed in "sky-blue denim shirts and navy denim coveralls" (p.55). The imposition of school uniforms is also described in *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*. On the first day at school Lillian is made to wear the same clothes as other girls. Unfortunately the uniform is of a poor quality; the clothes are "hot and itchy" and do not "fit well at all" (Taylor, 2011, p.9). The children's loss of their own clothes signifies their loss of personal identity. Like the forced haircut, the school uniform makes them resemble White children in appearance, thus further destroying their sense of belonging to their own people.

Another identity-stripping tactic employed by the school authority was to replace children's Native names with white Christian names. In *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*, Lillian undergoes the loss of her own name in the residential school. Christened Lillian by Sister Agnes, she is not allowed to use her Anishnawbe name "Mizhakwan" anymore, which was given to her by her grandmother. Similarly, in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah's Native name "Champion" is considered invalid by Father Lafleur. The boy is told that his name should be Jeremiah according to the baptismal registry. Defeated in his attempt to shield his name, Jeremiah cannot help but shed painful tears. For Jeremiah's sister Chugweesees, the replacement of her illustrious name with the plain Christian name "Jane" is rather annoying, since it leads the others to identify her with "the unfortunate halitosis-stricken Jane Kaka McCrae, the most slovenly woman in Eemanapiteepitat" (Highway, 2000, p.71). It is apparent that in the re-naming process the school administrators take no account of the children's feelings.

Furthermore, the unique Aboriginal identity of children was erased through forced Christian indoctrination. Upon entering residential schools, as evidenced by the two selected novels, children were forced to learn Christianity and perform Christian rituals. As a result, they lost their connection with Native spirituality. From *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the reader learns that many children just blindly followed the Christian rules and customs without a real understanding of the religion. It is also worth noting that the Christian curriculum was designed to make children feel ashamed of their Aboriginal identity. In one lesson, Father Lafleur shows the children a large chart illustrating heaven and hell. On the chart, heaven is populated by "beautiful blond men with feathery wings and flowing white dresses" (p.59), in which Jeremiah can nevertheless not find a single Aboriginal person. By contrast, hell is pictured as the only place where Aboriginal people belong. Obviously, the curriculum is marked by racist derogation of Aboriginal people. The association of Aboriginal people with punishment-deserving sinners is bound to lead some of the children to reject their Aboriginal identity and dream of becoming as white as possible.

The loss of identity directly caused many Aboriginal children to experience an identity crisis later in life, as reflected in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. The assimilation process at the residential school makes Jeremiah desire to become a white man. To enter the white world, he strives to become the first Cree concert pianist. However, despite having won a major piano competition, he still cannot integrate into white society. In fact, Jeremiah is only regarded by the public as an exception. Meanwhile, unfortunately, his musical achievement is not valued by many of his own people. Consequently, he is confused about his identity. He cannot truly fit in either the dominant society or his own Aboriginal society. In this sense, he has to face discrimination from both sides.

## V. LOSS OF LANGUAGE

The prohibition of Native language use is clearly illustrated in *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*. At the residential school Lillian attends, "words other than English or Latin were unchristian and those who used them were punished severely" (Taylor, 2011, p.10). Due to his refusal to give up his Native tongue, Lillian's cousin Sammy Aandeg suffers constant physical abuse from school staff, as John/Nanabush recounts Sammy's miserable experiences: "They beat him practically every day. I think to the point it made him kinda crazy" (p.172). When Sammy translates the plays of Shakespeare into Anishnawbe, his own Native language, he greatly irritates Father McKenzie. For the teacher who strives to "civilize the Native people," it is completely intolerable that "this young Indian boy would dare to corrupt what he considered the most beautiful words ever written, by speaking them in a filthy bastard language" (p.171-72). This mirrors the widespread colonialist view which sees Native languages as inferior to English. For fear of punishment, other students only dare to speak their Native language when there are no teachers in earshot. While Lillian secretly visits Sammy, who was locked into a shed by Father McKenzie, she is afraid of being caught speaking Anishnawbe with him, and thus switches several times quickly back to English.

Similarly, Aboriginal children in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* are not permitted to speak their own language once they leave home and enter residential school. When Jeremiah tries to comfort Gabriel, who is terrified on his arrival at the school, by speaking to him in their Native tongue, he is immediately instructed by Father Lafleur to stop doing that. Submitting to the language ban, Jeremiah "felt a choke breaking against his throat" (Highway, 2000, p.70). The two brothers have no

alternative but to walk together to school in silence. The proscription of Native languages disempowered Aboriginal children in that it hindered them from fully expressing themselves, as reflected in the following dialogue between Jeremiah and Father Lafleur:

‘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 a tiny, humble voice. We didn’t have much choice, he would have added, if the language had been his. (p.70)

Stripped of his own language, Jeremiah is unable to speak out his mind clearly. As a result, he appears complicit with the school authority.

The novel also presents the use of physical punishment for those who continue to speak their Native tongue. After being caught singing the Cree song “Kimoosoom Chimasoo,” Gabriel is ferociously lashed by Father Lafleur. In order to effectively stop children from speaking their own language, the school authority in the novel implements a contest in which “the boy who acquired the greatest number of tokens from other boys by catching them speaking Cree was awarded a toy at month’s end” (p.63). Such a contest causes students to monitor and compete with each other, which destroys their mutual trust and solidarity.

During their long period of stay in the English-speaking school environment, many Aboriginal students gradually forgot their Native language. The loss of Native language is explicitly evidenced in the character of Jeremiah in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. When he returns home after his first year at residential school, he loses his ability to speak Cree for a brief time. The loss of the Cree language alienates him from his family. Fortunately, he unexpectedly recovers his Native tongue shortly afterwards. Many years later, after Jeremiah finishes residential school and moves to Winnipeg, he can nevertheless not even understand the basics of Cree. It can be imagined that the loss of Native languages caused by the residential schools will continue into future generations. In several places in *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*, Taylor mentions that most of the younger generations in Lillian’s community do not speak their traditional Anishnawbe language. Lillian’s grandson Virgil, for example, belongs to a generation “whose knowledge of Anishnawbe was weak or non-existent” (Taylor, 2011, p.150). Given that Aboriginal culture is usually passed on orally, the loss of language is destined to cause enormous cultural losses to Aboriginal communities.

## VI. ABUSE AT RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

As can already be seen above, physical abuse was rampant in residential schools. Corporal punishment was frequently dished out to children to ensure their obedience and compliance. In *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass* and *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the forms of physical abuse include beating, lashing, and close confinement. Since beating and lashing are obvious forms of physical abuse, attention will be paid here only to close confinement, which occurs as a disguised form of physical abuse in *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*.

At the residential school in the novel, a special shed is used like a jail for locking up “Indian boys and girls who misbehaved” (Taylor, 2011, p.11). Among them, Sammy Aandeg is the most frequent visitor to the shed. Once, when he is locked there by Father McKenzie, he is forced to recite all the monologues in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to obtain his release. The shed is cold, dark, and dirty, in which there is neither bed nor food. Only by placing the book just right is Sammy able to read it in the moonlight. It can be easily imagined that he endures boredom and loneliness during his confinement. Locking children in such a place for a long period of time is actually an indirect way of abusing them.

For Aboriginal children who are as naturally rebellious as Sammy, continued physical abuse provoked their resentment and prompted them to think about running away. For other children, frequent physical punishment, experienced or witnessed by them, caused them to become numb to violent acts and lose empathy for their victimized peers. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the violent recreation of the crucifixion scene reflects the children’s indifference toward brutality. Empowered to take a dominant position in the fictional abusive situation, Jeremiah and his friends become abusers themselves. After “crucifying” the almost naked Gabriel, they rush off to supper, leaving him alone in the schoolyard. Feeling deeply hurt, Gabriel vows to revenge himself on Jeremiah. The formerly close bond between the two brothers is greatly undermined.

While both of the selected novels address the topic of physical abuse, another horrific type of abuse, namely sexual abuse, is portrayed only in Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. The foreshadowing of sexual abuse can be seen in Jeremiah’s first encounter with Father Lafleur. Placing a hand on the boy’s thigh, the principal says, “‘There, there. You’ll be happy here with us’” (Highway, 2000, p.54). His words and behavior seem to carry a deep sexual undertone. Later in the novel, Highway gives a detailed account of Gabriel’s sexual abuse at the hands of Father Lafleur. When the boy becomes conscious of the priest’s molestation, his reaction reveals his fear, innocence, and confusion: “He didn’t dare open his eyes fully for fear the priest would get angry; he simply assumed, after a few seconds of confusion, that this was what happened at schools, merely another reason why he had been brought here, that this was the right of holy men” (p.78). In this scene, Gabriel is assaulted not only by the lascivious priest, but also by the seemingly “living, breathing” Christ. At this point, I agree with McKegney that the scene offers “an almost clichéd illustration of the symbolic rape of Indigenous cultures by evangelical Christianity” (2005, p.89-90). As McKegney points out, “Christ endeavors to force himself into the sanctified space of the boy’s mouth, presumably preparing him to pay lip-service to the ‘true’ religion while renouncing the legitimacy of Cree spirituality” (2005, p.90).

Happening to witness Gabriel's rape by Father Lafleur, Jeremiah associates the sexual abuser with the cannibalistic Weetigo, a terrifying monster in Cree mythology. He is so powerless that he cannot speak or react to protect his younger brother. Deeply traumatized, Jeremiah feels that "some chamber deep inside his mind slammed permanently shut". Indeed, he struggles to deny the cruel reality: "It had happened to nobody. He had not seen what he was seeing" (Highway, 2000, p.80). Near the end of the novel, the reader finds out that Jeremiah is also a victim of sexual abuse when his repressed memory of the traumatic experience returns in a reverie. Like Gabriel, he is brutally raped by Father Lafleur on one night, who only gives him a chocolate bar as payment for the abuse. It is nevertheless a sad fact that many students were unwilling to disclose their abuse, as also shown in the novel. Believing that their parents will not help them and even "side with Father Lafleur," Jeremiah and Gabriel choose to keep silent about their abuse.

The abuse suffered by residential school students had some devastating effects on their future lives. A good number of former students had to cope with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder such as insomnia, eating disorders, panic attacks, uncontrollable anger, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual inadequacy or addiction, and the inability to form intimate relationships (Steckley and Cummins, 2001, p.193). Such is the case in both of the selected novels.

For Sammy in *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*, his repeated experiences of abuse at residential school make him suffer from "a form of shell-shock" for the rest of his life. Decades after he leaves, he is still tortured every night by nightmares about life in the school. As Taylor writes, he is "locked in a bygone era, unable to process or cage the memories" (2011, p.254). In the futile process of erasing memories of his abusive experiences, Sammy has become strongly dependent on alcohol, which confirms a direct correlation between alcoholism and residential school abuse.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the Okimasis brothers' violation by Father Lafleur causes them to deviate from normative sexuality as they enter young adulthood. Associating sexual activity with sin and shame, Jeremiah initially chooses to lead an asexual ascetic life. He uses classical music as a coping strategy to deal with his abuse and immerses himself in playing the piano. Due to the sexual abuse he suffered at residential school, Jeremiah has a strong aversion to homosexuality and cannot understand his brother's homosexual lifestyle at all. Later while engaging in heterosexual intimacy, Jeremiah can only derive sexual gratification from pain and violence. His abusive past directly results in his sadomasochistic tendencies.

By contrast, Gabriel embraces promiscuous homosexuality. According to Buzny, "Gabriel's abuse is the genesis for the affective states of his future sexual encounters" (2011, p.8). Having been raped by the head priest of the residential school, Gabriel associates sex with power and control. Refusing to be a passive victim of sexual abuse, he tries to regain his lost power and control over his own sexuality by actively participating in sexual encounters with different men. In this process, he actually re-enacts his abuse. Deeply influenced by his abusive past, Gabriel even chooses a priest and a priestly mentor as his lovers. His promiscuity eventually leads to his contracting AIDS. Even after discovering his HIV-positive status, he cannot stop repeating his abuse. There is no denying that Gabriel's sexual abuse profoundly shapes his perverse adult sexuality. For him, sex is a mere coping mechanism for his memories of abuse, which enables him to feel that "[his] body is still alive" (Highway, 2000, p.207).

## VII. CONCLUSION

This paper explores how residential school experiences find their expression in Drew Hayden Taylor's *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. The residential schools depicted in the above works of fiction severely estrange the characters from their Native roots and inflict tremendous anguish on them. It is remarkable that the traumatic experiences of the characters have lifelong repercussions on them.

By forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families, the residential school system effectively broke their family ties. In both novels, such a separation is an experience of sadness and helplessness. It is noteworthy that the removal of Aboriginal children from their homes impedes their later reentry into their families and communities. Both Taylor and Highway address Aboriginal children's loss of identity in the residential schools. Subject to a regime of forced assimilation, Aboriginal children in the selected novels undergo the process of losing their individuality and Aboriginal identity. The residential schools' complete denial of their culture inevitably influences them to reject their Native heritage.

The loss of one's Native language is another painful aspect of the residential school experience. In both novels, children are forbidden to use their Native language and only allowed to speak English. Any violation of the language ban would result in brutal corporal punishment. Stripped of their own language, children become unable to communicate and express themselves effectively. In the long term, they lose another important connection with their family and heritage. The loss of language caused by the schools usually has a multigenerational effect on Aboriginal communities.

In the fictional residential schools, child abuse is a commonplace phenomenon. Aboriginal students are constantly at risk of falling victim to physical and sexual abuse. They are so brutalized, humiliated, and isolated that they refuse to speak openly about their sufferings. The painful memories of abuse usually haunt residential school survivors for the rest of their lives and lead them to adopt destructive coping methods.

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