



Indigenous Identity and Cultural Resistance in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed*

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Abstract:

The diverse Native American tribes have seen the worst bloodsheds since the day one of their encounters with the colonizers. The sharp cultural distinction between the white and the others continue even today, which ultimately result in the literary creation. The indigenous American literature is the counter narrative that resists the cultural imposition. Brandon Hobson is a prominent Native American writer of the present times. His uncompromising works and shorts stories have created great impact of in the Native American literary arena. *The Removed* (2021) a novel is written by Brandon Hobson. He is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. The novel explores grief, memory, identity, and Indigenous spirituality through the experiences of a Cherokee family and its dealing with loss. The novel centres on the Echota family, who struggle with the death of their son Ray-Ray. He was shot and killed by a white police officer. Every year, the family gathers to remember him on the anniversary of his death. During one such gathering, each family member confronts their grief and unresolved trauma. Throughout this novel, Hobson writes about the indigenous identity and cultural trauma faced by natives due to the false American identity. This paper attempts to explore Native American trauma and indigenous identity in *The Removed* by Brandon Hobson.

Keywords: Native American, Cultural imposition, Cherokee nation, Trauma, indigenous identity

1. Indigenous Identity and Cultural Resistance in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed*

America has long been characterized by a rich diversity of cultures, languages, traditions, and landscapes that exist even before the arrival of European settlers. However, with the beginning of European colonization, the sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and identity of Indigenous communities come under constant challenge. Native American literature is not created by writers from a single ethnic group or by people who speak the same language. Instead, it comes from hundreds of different ethnic groups within the Native American population, each speaking various tribal languages. This literature has existed since ancient times. However, during the pre-Columbian era, it mainly consist of poems, songs, and stories that were passed down orally from generation to generation. Unlike European literature, it did not have a written tradition.

Europeans in the Americas recognized only written works as literature and did not regard oral traditions as literature until about a century ago. They considered Native Americans to be savage and uncivilized. Because of this viewpoint, Europeans were unable to acknowledge oral traditions as a legitimate form of literature. An important critic of Native American literature, Arnold Krupat, states the following,

...western auto biographers like Denial Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and William F. Cody ("Buffalo Bill), all ultimately loyal to white "civilization", nonetheless fashioned themselves and their books on models deriving in varying degrees from Indian "savagery". But this particular tension never operated in definition of an American literature generally for the simple reason that Indians, who did not write, were not regarded as actually possessing a "litera-ture" that might be studied and imitated. (Contemporary Literary Criticism, Krupat, 441)

The white invader - settlers of the American did not acknowledged the Native American songs, poetry and stories as literature, and rather they have called the oral tradition of America as near satanic or nothing more than gibberish. During the first half of the 19th century, attempts have been taken to translate the Indian poems. Henry Timberlake, a young Virginian, initially translated Cherokee poems into English. His translated poems have been found in his *Memoirs*, it is considered to be a notable poem. However, Timberlake has not taken much effort in transcribing the original Cherokee, instead he has just made a scholarly reproduction of the Cherokee poems in English.

The Cherokee are an Indigenous people of North America. Although the passage above states they originally lived in the American Southwest, historians generally recognize that the Cherokee traditionally lived in the Southeastern United States. Their language belongs to the Iroquoian language family. By the 19th century, American settlers had identified the Cherokee as one of the Five Civilized Tribes because they had adopted several European-American customs. They practiced agriculture, lived in permanent towns, and developed their own writing system, known as the Cherokee syllabary. There are several theories about the origin of the name Cherokee. Some believe it was derived from the name of a neighbouring tribe, such as the Chake, while others suggest it came from a Creek word meaning people of different speech.

The Cherokee originally called themselves Aniyunwiya, which means "Principal People." They speak an Iroquoian language and created their own writing system, known as the Cherokee syllabary, in the 19th century. This unique system was developed by the renowned Cherokee leader Sequoyah. Anthropologists and historians have proposed two main theories about the origins of the Cherokee. One theory suggests that they migrated to the Southern Appalachian region during late prehistoric times from areas around the Great Lakes, as part of the movement of Iroquoian-speaking peoples. Another theory proposes that the Cherokee first lived in what is now Texas or northern Mexico, later moved to the Great Lakes region, and eventually settled in the mountains and valleys of the Appalachian region. Ethnographers who lived among Native American communities studied their languages, traditions, and histories to gain a deeper understanding of the Cherokee people's migration and cultural development.

Brandon Hobson, an important contemporary Native American writer, has totally a different view about Cherokee culture and indigenous identity. In his novel, *The Removed*, Hobson clearly portrays his character through the Cherokee culture. He is basically a novelist and short story writer. His third novel *Where the Dead Sit Talking* (2018), gives wide range fame and received a wider attention in the Native American literary circle.

The Removed (2021) is the fourth novel of Hobson, which created a wave in the Native American literature because of its brave attempt to speak about the controversial subject of Cherokee culture and identity. Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* explores the theme of Indigenous identity and cultural resistance through the experiences of the Echota family. The novel reflects the broader historical struggles of Native American communities who have faced cultural displacement, marginalization, and assimilation. Through the family's grief and resilience, Hobson highlights the continuous effort of Indigenous people to preserve their traditions, beliefs, and cultural identity in a society that often threatens to erase them.

Fifteen years earlier, on September 6, our son Ray-Ray rode his motorcycle to a mall where he evidently got into an altercation with two other guys. Someone fired a gun, and Ray-Ray was shot in the chest by a police officer. The Indian kid. Afterward, when the police officer gave his statement to the press, he swore he thought Ray-Ray had been the one who shot the gun, but it had been a white kid. The officer was temporary placed on administrative leave. After months of investigation, the police department declared that the officer's behaviour was justified in the shooting, so it never went to trial. (*The Removed* 10-11)

The death of Ray-Ray, who is killed in a white police shooting, becomes a central moment in the novel that exposes the vulnerability of Indigenous lives within contemporary society. However, the family's response to this tragedy also reveals their cultural strength and resilience. Rather than allowing grief to sever their connection to their heritage, the Echota family turns toward their cultural traditions as a way of honouring their loss and reaffirming their identity.

Their preparation for the annual bonfire ceremony on the anniversary of Ray-Ray's death becomes a powerful symbol of remembrance and cultural continuity. In *The Removed*, the death of Ray-Ray deeply affects the Echota family and changes their emotional lives and relationships. Each family member responds differently, but all experience grief that weakens their sense of stability and connection. Maria, the mother, feels the strongest impact. She experiences intense grief that overwhelms her and causes emotional instability. She often sees visions and memories that blur the line between reality and imagination. This shows how deeply a mother suffers after losing a child and how trauma affects her identity. Ernest, the father, handles grief in a quiet way. He does not openly express his emotions and instead tries to keep the family stable. Although he appears calm, he carries deep pain inside. His behaviour shows that grief can also exist in silence and responsibility. Sonja, the daughter, struggles to understand her brother's death. She becomes emotionally distant and engages in self-destructive behaviour. She feels confused about her identity and disconnected from her family. Her reaction shows how trauma affects young people and leads to instability. Edgar, the grandfather, responds through memory and storytelling.

He connects the family's present pain to their cultural and historical past. His role highlights the importance of remembering and maintaining cultural identity. Overall, Ray-Ray's death breaks the emotional unity of the family. However, it also brings attention to their shared history and Indigenous identity. Their grief becomes both personal and collective, reflecting larger experiences of Indigenous trauma. The bonfire incident represents Sonja's inner struggle. She participates in risky behaviour influenced by peer pressure and drugs. The chaotic fire reflects her

emotional state. This moment shows how she uses harmful actions to escape grief. It also represents her disconnection from family and cultural roots.

Only in the past few years have we finally started acknowledging the anniversary of ray-Ray's death. Now, every September 6 we built a small bonfire, and each of us shares a memory. Ernest and I decided it would be a good way to get the family together, because we were never all together anymore. (*The Removed*, 12)

This ritual reflects the importance of communal traditions in sustaining Indigenous identity and resisting cultural erasure. Maria, the matriarch of the family, represents another important dimension of Indigenous identity. As she suffers from Alzheimer's disease, her fading memory symbolizes the fragility of cultural knowledge when traditions and histories are disrupted. Her condition can be interpreted as a metaphor for the cultural disintegration experienced by Indigenous communities when their histories are suppressed or misrepresented. Despite her illness, Maria struggles to remember Cherokee words, stories, and traditions. Her efforts to recall and share these memories demonstrate the emotional and cultural importance of preserving ancestral knowledge. Even in fragmented form, these recollections represent acts of resistance against the loss of cultural identity. Ernest, Maria's husband, also embodies cultural resilience through his connection to Cherokee spiritual traditions. In the face of personal grief and social marginalization, he finds strength in the practices passed down by his ancestors. His preparation of the bonfire is not merely a ritualistic act but a reaffirmation of cultural heritage and spiritual continuity. Through this act, Ernest reinforces the family's connection to their past while ensuring that these traditions continue to exist in the present. Storytelling plays a crucial role in sustaining Indigenous identity throughout the novel.

Hobson integrates Cherokee mythology, oral traditions, and ancestral histories into the narrative, emphasizing the importance of storytelling in preserving cultural memory. For Indigenous communities, stories are not simply forms of entertainment but essential means of transmitting knowledge, beliefs, and historical experiences across generations. Within the Echota family, storytelling becomes a way to educate younger members about their cultural heritage and maintain a living connection to their ancestors. Tsala appears as a powerful spiritual presence in the novel. She protects the land and maintains balance between humans and nature. She represents Indigenous beliefs where the land is alive and sacred. Tsala shows that nature, spirit, and people are deeply connected. She also connects the physical and spiritual worlds. Her presence shows that life and death are not completely separate. This idea supports the family's belief that relationships continue even after death. Tsala represents cultural strength and continuity. She challenges Western ideas that treat land as property and instead emphasizes respect and balance. Her role shows that Indigenous spirituality remains active and meaningful.

In the novel, human suffering and imbalance in nature are connected. Just as the family experiences grief, the land also needs protection. Tsala suggests that healing comes through reconnecting with land, culture, and spirituality. Overall, Tsala symbolizes Indigenous identity, cultural survival, and the sacred connection between people and the natural world.

... Ernest's friend Otto, who told Cherokee stories drunk: "listen, Chooch," Ray-Ray said in Otto's low drunken voice. He pretended to smoke an imaginary cigarette. "You know the story of Tsala, who was killed for refusing to leave the land? Let's go get another Whiskey". (*The Removed 2*)

The presence of the Cherokee ancestor Tsala further reinforces the continuity between past and present. Tsala's recurring presence suggests that ancestral history remains an active influence in the lives of the characters. By blurring the boundaries between historical memory and contemporary experience, Hobson emphasizes that Indigenous identity is deeply rooted in collective memory and ancestral connections.

In *The Removed*, Tsala is portrayed as a historical Cherokee figure who sought to protect his family during the Trail of Tears by hiding them in caves within the sacred Cherokee mountains, resisting their forced removal from their ancestral homeland. Despite his efforts, he, along with his wife and two children, was executed in 1838, a tragic event that reflects the devastating violence and displacement inflicted by colonial expansion. However, Tsala's presence transcends death, as his spirit remains deeply connected to the land, symbolizing both the enduring trauma of forced removal and the lasting power of ancestral memory.

The connection between Tsala's spirit and the Native American land is central to the novel's Indigenous worldview. Within Indigenous epistemologies, the land is not understood as an inert or commodified space but as a living, relational entity imbued with spirit, history, and cultural significance. Tsala's return in the form of a hawk a recurring symbol of vigilance, protection, and ancestral continuity reinforces his role as a guardian whose presence animates and safeguards the landscape. For Tsala, the land functions as both a repository of ancestral memory and a medium through which intergenerational identity is sustained, resisting the erasures of colonial violence.

The novel also highlights the strong relationship between Indigenous identity and the natural world. The land is portrayed not merely as a physical setting but as a sacred space that holds cultural and spiritual significance. During the preparation for the bonfire ceremony, the land is treated with reverence, reflecting the Cherokee belief that nature is alive and interconnected with human life. This relationship between people and land reinforces the ecological foundations of Indigenous identity and demonstrates how cultural traditions are closely tied to the natural environment.

Ultimately, *The Removed* portrays Indigenous identity as something sustained through memory, ritual, storytelling, and spiritual connection. Despite the pressures of assimilation and the trauma of historical and contemporary injustices, the Echota family continues to uphold their cultural traditions. Their resilience illustrates the enduring strength of Indigenous communities and their determination to resist cultural erasure. Through the preservation of stories, rituals, and ancestral knowledge, the novel emphasizes the importance of cultural continuity in maintaining Indigenous identity across generations.

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