

# **THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES**

## **Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse*: A Critique on Racism against Native Indians in Canada**

**Parvathy U.**

Research Scholar, Department of English  
Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

**Abstract:**

*Racism can be simply defined or understood as the ill- treatment of certain groups of people on the basis of their race. Racism originates from the ideologically constructed belief in society that certain racial groups are superior and others inferior. This baseless belief has been utilized by many groups to dominate, control and exploit the so- called inferior racial groups throughout the history. Europeans have always regarded themselves superior to other groups and have employed this self-proclaimed racial superiority to dominate others in the society. The colonial powers have exploited and marginalized Native Indians in Canada on the basis of their race and ethnicity. The Europeans, who invaded their lands, employed various discursive agencies to propagate their racial superiority and inferiority of the Native Indians. Their covert political aim was to make the natives despise their racial and cultural heritage and to adapt them to European ways and accept colonial rule as a benign civilizing act.*

*Literature is an important weapon used by native writers to bring forth the truth behind such civilizing acts of colonizers. The native writers now employ the influence of literature in society to portray the marginalization and exploitation they face as a result of racism. Richard Wagamese (1995- present) is an important author and journalist from Ojibway Wabasseemoong First Nation in Ontario, Canada. Keeper'n Me (1994) , One Native Life (2008), Indian Horse (2013) and Medicine Walk (2014) are some of his important novels . Richard Wagamese is one such Native Indian writer, who employs the influence of various literary genres like novel and poetry to uphold the voice of Native Americans, to inform outside world the political, racial and cultural exploitation faced by Native Indians and to deconstruct the wrong notions created by white settlers about native culture and society. The present paper titled “ Richard Wagamese's Indian Horse: A Critique on Racism against Native Indians in Canada “ tries to show how far Richard Wagamese is successful in portraying the exploitation and marginalization faced by Indians at the hands of white people who boasts about civilizing and assimilating Indians into the mainstream society.*

**Keywords:** Native Indians, Discourses, Race, Racism

Racism refers to the prejudice and hatred towards certain groups of people simply on the basis of race and ancestry. Racism originates from ideologically constructed belief that some racial groups are superior and others inferior. Encyclopedia Britannica , defines racism as “the theory or idea that there is a casual link between inherited physical traits of personality, intellect or culture and combined with it, the notion that some races are inherently superior to others”’. For the better understanding of ‘racism’ it is essential to understand the concept of ‘race’, its origin and scientific validity.

Race refers to a group of people who share the same physical characteristics such as skin tone, hair texture, and facial features. Human beings are divided into different racial groups according to their physical features. We usually speak of Europeans as one race, Asians as another and Africans as the third group on the basis of skin tone. “In popular language, race is synonymous with ‘colour’. Everyone can differentiate between the physical characteristics of the major racial groups. This ability to differentiate between different human groups on the basis of physical appearance has strengthened the notion that races possess an objective reality” (Malik, 1996 p. 2)

The differentiation of human beings on the basis of race is not a scientifically valid fact. “Every population is highly variable and whatever external physical signs there may be- such as skin colour - genetic features do not absolutely define one population and distinguish it from another. Geneticist, Steve Jones has observed’ modern genetics does in fact show that there are no separate groups within humanity (although there are noticeable differences among the people of the world)” (Malik, 1996 p.4).

The concept of race and racial differences justifies slave trade and colonization of various countries. The European colonizers constructed false notions about the race of native people in colonies and propagated such notions through various discursive agencies. The colonizers regarded the racial features of the natives as inferior and related racial inferiority with ethnical and cultural inferiority. According to them racially inferior people will be ethnically and culturally inferior i.e.; uncivilized. They

themselves declared as the saviors who can help and civilize these inferior groups. Such ideologically fabricated notions influenced the colonized people and made them to regard themselves racially and culturally inferior, who can achieve a culturally and religiously superior position only with the guidance and support of European colonizers.

The Native Indians in Canada is one such group of people who face racial, cultural and political marginalization in society. European colonizers imposed their rules and regulations to control and restrict Native Canadians. Certain acts passed by white government made natives culturally and politically subservient to their rule. Through Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 and Indian Act of 1876 government tried to assimilate natives into their culture ie; to make the natives more like Europeans and to make natives accept their rule. Attempts were made to isolate natives from their land and cultural traditions. As a result the social and political institutions of natives were systematically destroyed by the colonizers.

Race is merely one of the ways in which people are popularly classified. The distinction made between different races is not naturally given but is socially defined. 'Through the influence of modern science and biology, this clarification has taken a quasi-biological form. In recent centuries this presumed biological content has been gradually combined with other traits which have nothing to do with biology such as language, religion, social and cultural characteristics' (Issac, 2006 p.34).

Richard Wagamese novel *Indian Horse* (2013) deals with the up and downs in the life of a Ojibway, Saul Indian Horse, a talented Ice Hockey player in Canada. Saul himself narrates the story. Saul tells how racial prejudice prevailing in Canada destroyed his sports career and life. During his childhood the government officials separate Saul from his parents. Saul witness and faces himself severe cruelties and punishments by the Catholic priests and nuns at St. Jerome Residential School where he is admitted. With the arrival of Father Leboutilier he is given opportunity to practice Ice Hockey. Saul becomes the school team's best player through his hard work and dedication. Soon a native hockey team "Moose" owned by Fred Kelly hires Saul. With Saul in the team Moose won many games even against white teams. The racially prejudiced people are not happy with this. They ridiculed, mocked and harassed the Moose team members in different ways. Based on his performance a white hockey team hires him. Saul faces utter humiliation, disgrace from both the white players and audience. The opposite team members try to hurt him and his team mates isolates him. Saul is suspended from match for playing dangerously and hurting opposite team members. Frustrated and humiliated he leaves the team. As a result of these incidents Saul turns to alcohol to gain freedom from the humiliation and prejudice he faces for being born as a Native Indian.

Richard Wagamese through the novel tries to give a clear picture of the pathetic situation of natives under European colonial powers through his novel *Indian Horse*. He has shown how colonizers deconstruct the native cultural traditions by employing various discursive agencies like educational institutions and religion. In the novel the horrible condition of native children in the Residential schools is well portrayed. As a part of assimilating natives into white culture, native children were forcibly taken away from their parents.

In the novel, Benjamin, Saul's brother is first taken away to a residential school at Kenora. Their mother is mentally shaken by this incident. The mental agony of both the parents and the separated children are well portrayed in the novel. After separated from grandmother Saul is admitted in St. Jerome Indian Residential School. He has to face many problems and agonies there Saul speaks about his mental condition at school in the first chapters. I was sore inside. The tearing away of the bush and my people was like ripped flesh in my belly. Every time I moved or forced to speak, it roared its incredible pain. And so I took to isolation"(Wagamese,2013p.16).

Native children were affected by diseases like Tuberculosis, Pneumonia and influenza. Due to loneliness and sadness many of them committed suicide. Many others who tried to escape from the school were cruelly punished or even murdered and no one was there to question these atrocities or support children. The physical and mental tortures forced on the children were horrible. They were sexually exploited in these schools. Most of the inhabitants in Residential schools including Saul and Fred, Saul's Coach in native Ice hockey team were sexually exploited. The novelist successfully presents the shock and frustration on suffered by the victims over such exploitations.

The aim of school authorities were to make these native children leave their native culture, languages and traditions and to train them the European life style. It was not to assimilate them to white society but to make them subservient to the colonizers. The children were not allowed to talk in their native languages. They were severely punished if they were found speaking in their language. Saul remembers about this in the novel – "Most of them had been pulled from the deep north and knew only Ojibway. Speaking a word in that language could get you beaten or banished to the box in the basement the older ones had come to call the Iron Sister. There was no tolerance for Indian talk. On the second day I was there, a boy named Curtis White Fox had his mouth washed out with lye soap for speaking Ojibway. He choked on it and died right there in the classroom" (Wagamese, 2013 p. 17).

At the school they were not taught lessons but how to work. "They called it school, but it was never that. Most of our days were spent in labour. Even the youngest of us had to work. The girls were busy in the kitchen, where they baked bread to be sold in town, or in the sewing rooms, where they made our clothing out of the heavy, scratchy material the school got from army. The boys mucked out the stalls of the cows and horses, hoed the fields, harvested the vegetables or worked in the carpentry shop, where they built the furniture the priests sold to the people of White River. We spent an hour the classroom each day to learn the rudimentary arithmetic and English that would enable us to secure manual labour when we graduated from the school"(Wagamese,2013 p.25). This shows that the authorities are not really concerned about the future of children. They were trying to make benefits out of them.

They were also converted to Christianity at school. They were regularly taken to church masses at school. They were taught during the masses that only Christianity can purify their soul and give them salvation. Native Religions despised by them. "Father Quinney said a mass in Latin. At the end he pronounced the greatness of the Catholic God.' We brought you here to save from your heathen ways, to bring you to the light of the salvation of the one true God. What you learn here will rise you up, make you worthy, cleanse your body and purify your spirit" (Wagamese, 2013 p. 25)

.The attitudes and prejudice of whites on natives due to their racial features are also well portrayed throughout the novel. Comparing to that of Europeans, the physical features of Indians especially skin tone were regarded as inferior. The nuns cut shortened his long hair when Saul reached school. He was then taken to bath. "Then a pair of nuns scrubbed us with stiff-bristled brushes. The soap was harsh. They rubbed us nearly raw. It felt like they were trying to remove more than grime or odour. It felt as though they were trying to remove our skin" ( Wagamese, 2013 p.15).

The racial prejudice and hatred against natives were not limited within the residential schools. The whole white society possessed such prejudice. The sports career of Saul declined as a result of such prejudiced people. The white people were never ready to accept the fact that Native Indians can also play well. They never gave native players equal status or support as they give to white players. The native players were ridiculed, mocked by the white players and audience on the basis of their skin color and culture. The native team Moose won many matches against the white teams. The whites were not able to tolerate defeat at the hands of natives. Once after a match against whites Saul along with his teammates went to a restaurant at a white majority area. Some white men were not ready to accept this. They asked them to leave the restaurant and that natives are not eligible to eat along with whites. Saul's team mates were cruelly beaten by these men for entering the restaurant.

Saul was later invited to play in a white team because of his good performance. Saul was not but accepted by the other team members. They were never friendly with him. Saul was always an "other" for them. The opponent team always tried to mock and hurt him. Even his team mates never helped him. His racial features isolated him from others. When he scored goals the white audience was not at all happy. They tried to ridicule him and call him names. They showered glasses and bottles at him. At a particular the audience even spat on him. This at last shattered the spirit of the boy. Such incidents forced him to leave the team. Most of the players of opposite team would not remove their hockey gloves to shake the hands of the native players. They were not ready to make a skin contact with natives.

The prejudice was not only affected by native players. This affected the native audience also. Natives and whites were always separated in the gallery. The natives were not allowed to sit together with the white people." I started to notice things after that I started to see a line in every arena we played in. It showed itself as a stretch of empty seats separated the Indian fans from the white ones. Police were stationed at the separate entrance they shunted our people through"( Wagamese, 2013 p.36).

Thus Richard Wagamese is successful through his novel *Indian Horse* in bring out the real, pathetic situation of Native Indians in Canada under the white authorities who always boast of civilizing and protecting the natives.

#### References

1. Frederickson, George. M. (2002). *Racism: A Short History*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
2. Issac, Benjamin. (2006). *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
3. Malik, Kenan. (1996). *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society*. New York: New York University Press.
4. Wagamese, Richard. (2013). *Indian Horse*. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre Publishers.