

## Culture and Identity in Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*

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### ABSTRACT

Joseph Boyden is a Canadian novelist, short story writer, screenwriter, essayist, and a public speaker of Irish and Scottish descent. Joseph Boyden in his works very effectively illustrates the native culture of the Cree people and their struggle to create a respectable identity. In his works, Boyden has portrayed how an individual's identity keeps on changing, based on their goals, ideas and moral values. In the novel *Three Day Road*, Boyden uses the Journey of Nishka, the head of the clan and the two Canadian soldiers, Xavier and Elijah to show how the wemistikosiw, that is the western culture, language, war and the traumatic experiences of war alters the identity of the natives, and how culture and the cultural values they hold made them a better person than others.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Trauma, Natives, Experience.

Identity is a combination of one's physical and behavioural traits which define who they are. It includes the values they hold, the choices they make and the priorities they give. An individual's understanding of identity is developed from birth and is shaped by the values and attitudes prevalent at home and in the surrounding community. Identity is influenced by several factors like family, religion, community, race, language and education etc. All these factors contribute to the development of one's identity. The notion of identity is a process that involves learning, accepting and interacting.

Culture is a collective heritage learned by individuals and passed from one generation to another. It is the way of thinking, acting, and the way of life. Pramod K. Nayar says that "Culture derives from 'Cultura' and 'Colere' meaning to cultivate. It also meant to honour and protect" (4). According to Kenneth Allan, "The term culture does cover a broad range of topics, ideas, language, recipes for action, tools, products norms, values, beliefs, arts, and so forth. The term also been used in conceptually polarized extremes referring to either material or non-material objects... or the centre of the social system" (58).

Culture is a defining factor in a person's identity, which contributes to how they see themselves in the groups with which they identify. Culture plays a major role in shaping the identity of an individual, and it affects and alters one's values, decisions and choices.

This paper "Culture and Identity in Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*" focuses on the struggle of the aborigines who are in search of their individual identity against the man-made social taboo, which like demon, possessed the people in the name of culture. It also traces how the individual identity is altered and shaped by the cultural factors like community, family and religion and how trauma controls an individual from being what they really are. This paper also deals with social isolation which results in the alteration of identity. Barker C in his book *Cultural Studies, Theories and Practices* says that, "Cultural identity is an essence that can be signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles" (220).

Joseph Boyden in his *Three Day Road* very successfully illustrates the people's internal struggle over one's identity. In his works he has portrayed how an individual's identity keeps changing based on their goals, ideas and moral values. In the novel *Three Day Road*, Boyden uses the Journey of Nishka, the head of the clan and the two Canadian soldiers, Xavier and Elijah to show how wemistikoshiw alters the identity of these natives, and how culture and the cultural values they hold made them a better person than others.

Nishka is a happy young girl who lives with her clan in the bush. Her father is a hookimav, the head of the clan. When the wemistikoshiw come into their land, there comes greed for fur. In search of it, people kill almost all the animals living in the bush, which results in scarcity of food. The natives slowly start moving to residential schools, so that they don't have to die of hunger. Even in hard times the clan tries to manage their living. But when Nishka's father performs the windigo killing, that is the act of killing a windigo who consumes human flesh out of hunger, to get rid of the evil spirit. When this happens, only the people belonging to the clan know that it is a ritual to get rid of the ill omen but for the wemistikoshiw it is killing. They think that these natives are just murderers and thieves; by punishing them they try to change their identity into a better person. After the death of the clan leader the whole group gets separated. Most of the people decide to follow the wemistikoshiw for food and shelter. But the result is that their identity is altered. They are given a new name, their hair is chopped, they are stopped from using their own language and are asked to abandon their own god and convert to Christianity.

Nishka, and Rabbit, her sister, are also dragged to the residential school by the priest. In the residential school Nishka's identity is demolished. Nishka is forced to follow the wemistikoshiw's way of living, but she refuses to alter her identity. She shows her opposition by shaving her head and escapes from the residential school, to live in the bush.

Xavier is Nishka's nephew. He is born in a residential school. His mother never cares about him. Rabbit abandons him due to her addiction to alcohol. "The talk was that she was the drinker of wemistikoshiw rum and had abandoned her only son to be raised by the nuns in that residential school" (Boyden 197). Though he is born and brought up in the residential school he always believes that he belongs to the bush and wants to escape from the clutches of the nuns and live a peaceful life in the forest. He never considers himself a wemistikoshiw. Nishka cultivates in him a strong Cree culture. It is this strong root which makes him cling on to his original identity wherever he goes.

Elijah has a traumatic past, which is the main source for his broken identity. Even though he is a Bush Indian by birth, he is brought up in the residential school without having any knowledge of his roots. He is given the wemistikoshiw name, education, culture and God. But he never accepts that he is a wemistikoshiw. When he is a small boy, his mother dies, and he is unable to accept his mother's death. "He continued to talk to her, picturing her in front of him" (Boyden 306). When Xavier introduces Nishka to him for the first time he stops talking to his dead mother. His longing for his family, identity and acceptance make him develop a complex personality. When he gets a chance to live with Nishka and Xavier, he excels in hunting and shooting but never has the identity of a Native Canadian. It is this broken identity that makes him seek acceptance from the wemistikoshiw.

In the residential school, the natives follow all the rules and regulations forced on them. People like Elijah excel in them, yet they are never accepted as one of them. They are always treated as animals. At one point, almost all the natives want to be recognized by the wemistikoshiw. During the world war, Xavier and Elijah take part in the war to showcase their skills. When they go to the war camp the natives are not treated properly, their skills used but not recognized.

Boyden makes one realize that, if one is true to his identity, he can have self-control and self-discipline. If he fails to hold on to his identity or tries to deny his own identity and accepts some other

identity, he will lose himself in the process. At one point, Nishka forgets her identity as a hookimav and wants to be with the French man. This leads her to lose all the power that culture and her identity has given to her. Similarly, Elijah denies his identity as a bush Indian and wants to be recognized by wemistikoshiw as one of them. To get their recognition, he starts speaking in English with British accent, starts to kill as many people as possible in the war field and starts using morphine like Grey Eyes. The result is that he starts losing himself. He starts scalping the soldiers whom he kills in the battlefield, enjoying his killing. These are the signs of him becoming a windigo.

But Xavier is so devoted to his culture, that in the madness of war he tries all possibilities to hold on to his cultural identity. Xavier is a true hunter. When Xavier finds it difficult to rest with all the soldiers in a small room, he very happily sleeps under the tree. Even though he can speak English, he speaks in Cree most of the time. Whenever he gets the opportunity to be with nature, he spends time with animals. He does not use morphine to get rid of pain. Whenever he is supposed to kill, he kills only for survival and at the end he accomplishes the task of becoming the windigo killer by killing his own friend who has become a windigo.

Just like Elijah, Xavier also wants to be accepted by the wemistikoshiw. When he is named X by the higher officials, he is proud of himself and feels relieved that no one would call him a bush Indian anymore. "It strikes me then. None of these who are here today can call me a useless bush Indian ever again. They might not say it loud but they know now that I have something special" (Boyden 100).

But Elijah does not have the hunter inside him. To impress the other soldiers and the higher officials he starts killing people like a predator. His attraction towards killing increases, when he is appreciated by other soldiers. To take his attraction to the next level, he starts scalping the dead soldiers and collects scalps as a trophy.

When people get to encounter some new culture, they should assimilate the positives adopted from the new culture. People should not lose their own culture and cultural identity in the process. If it happens, people must face disastrous effects. Boyden has created the characters skilfully and shows that those who can control themselves and stick to the roots like Nishka and Xavier survive. He also shows characters like Rabbit and Elijah, losing themselves in the process of adapting to new culture.

Cultural identity challenges the individual's rootedness to its origin. It is determined by how an individual reacts to a new culture and the wellbeing it gives in terms of satisfaction. It can give either positive or negative wellbeing. The intercultural contacts offer the possibility for intercultural interaction, which provides access to promote value-based activity and attitudes. At the same time, it can affect one's own values and traditions. Depending on the conflict, the outcome may be positive or negative. Assimilation can be a better solution in this situation. At the same time, preserving cultural distinctiveness may pave way to lead a better life.

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