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Research article

Towards resilience: intergenerational trauma and the importance of community in The Break by Katherena Vermette

Hacia la resiliencia: el trauma intergeneracional y la importancia de la Comunidad en *The Break* por Katherena Vermette

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Abstract

Introduction: Intergenerational trauma, resulting from assimilationist practices aimed at eradicating Aboriginal cultures, is a reality that Canadian Indigenous communities continue to confront since the arrival of settlers. After centuries of silence imposed by the oppressive colonial system, Indigenous voices are emerging to highlight this historically ignored and marginalized reality. Among these voices is Katherena Vermette, who wrote *The Break* trying to portray the reality of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities. **Methodology:** Using a qualitative methodology, this study will examine the specificity of intergenerational trauma management strategies and its nature by focusing on three narrators: Rain, Kokoom, and Cheryl. **Results:** The analysis will reveal ineffective strategies employed by the narrators, such as drug and alcohol addiction, and show how they manage to leave behind these ineffective strategies, finding effective methods that guide their path to healing. **Discussion:** This study will highlight the individuality and harshness of the trauma, demonstrating the

importance of community for Indigenous women. **Conclusions:** Resilience and the inner strength in Indigenous women's communities are key elements for effectively facing and confronting their trauma, allowing them to begin their journey towards healing.

Keywords: Indigenous woman; Intergenerational trauma; community; coping strategies; narrator; violence; Indigenous literature; resilience.

Resumen
Introducción: El trauma intergeneracional, resultado de las prácticas asimilacionistas implantadas para erradicar las culturas Aborígenes, es una realidad que las comunidades Indígenas canadienses continúan enfrentando desde la llegada de los colonos. Tras siglos de silencio impuesto por el sistema opresivo colonial, voces Indígenas están emergiendo para mostrar esta realidad históricamente ignorada y marginalizada. Entre estas voces destaca la de Katherena Vermette quien escribió *The Break* tratando de retratar la realidad del trauma intergeneracional en las comunidades Indígenas. **Metodología:** Utilizando una metodología cualitativa, se examinará la especificidad de las estrategias de manejo del trauma intergeneracional y la naturaleza del mismo, examinando a tres narradoras: Rain, Kokoom y Cheryl. **Resultados:** El análisis revelará estrategias ineficaces empleadas por las narradoras, como la adicción a las drogas y al alcohol, y mostrará como estas logran abandonar estas estrategias que agravan su trauma encontrando métodos efectivos que guían su camino hacia la sanación. **Discusión:** Este estudio evidenciará la individualidad y la dureza del trauma demostrando la importancia de la comunidad para las mujeres Indígenas. **Conclusiones:** La resiliencia y fuerza interna en las comunidades de mujeres Indígenas son elementos claves para enfrentar su trauma y confrontarlo eficazmente, permitiéndoles iniciar su camino hacia la sanación.

Palabras clave: Mujer Indígena; trauma intergeneracional; comunidad; estrategias de gestión del trauma; narrador; violencia; literatura Indígena; resiliencia.

1. Introduction

1.1. Indigenous communities in Canada

According to the United Nations, genocide is defined as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial group". This definition encompasses not only physical violence but also policies aimed at cultural assimilation, displacement, or eradication.

Considering that this act is normally associated with communities such as the Jews, who endured a cultural and physical extermination during the Holocaust, Indigenous scholar Steven Koptie drew a parallel between the experiences of Indigenous communities and those endured by the Jews.

He emphasised the interconnection between these two communities, noting that, despite temporal and cultural differences, Indigenous communities are not so "distant from Holocaust survivors who struggled to bear witness to the worst crimes humanity could permit" (2010, p. 122).

Consequently, Koptie underscores the importance and necessity of recognising the systematic efforts to assimilate and eradicate Indigenous cultures and identities in Canada as acts of genocide committed at first by the colonisers, and, later, by the Canadian government.

When Europeans first arrived in Canadian lands, they saw Indigenous peoples as potential allies, foreseeing profitable partnerships in the fur trade and military operations. However, unexpectedly, Indigenous peoples shifted from being allies to being perceived as obstacles and burdens who were occupying lands that had plenty of invaluable resources; thus, they became what was coined as the "Indian Problem".

For Europeans, the solution to this problem seemed to be only one or two generations away, so they focused on controlling the political activity of these peoples and tried to channel it into what they defined as socially acceptable paths (Satzewich, 1997).

Europeans consistently attempted to assimilate Indigenous communities into the white society, trying to civilise them in order to prevent any obstacle to the complete development of the upcoming Settlers' nation. To this end, numerous assimilationist practices were established, in which the implementation of Residential Schools and the enactment of the Indian Act stand out.

As for Residential Schools, they were created with the primary goal of "killing the Indian in the child", a goal that translates as an attempt to eradicate the Indigenous identity of the Aboriginal children. In fact, more than 150.000 children in 125 years were forcibly taken from their homes and placed into Residential Schools (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 2016). These schools were not closed until the 1970s, after they had proven to be useless and ineffective since Indigenous people and cultures had managed to survive.

Apart from Residential Schools, the Canadian government also enacted the Indian Act in 1876, which, according to Damm (1993) "regulates who is and who is not entitled to government recognition of 'Indian status'" (as cited in Obertová, 2022, p. 32). Notably, the publication of this document inferred that there were criteria that determined the authenticity of Indigenous ethnicity within Indigenous communities and asserted the government's sovereignty over the identity of Indigenous individuals.

As a consequence, the government took the liberty of assigning a new identity to each individual who had been identified as a "status-Indian", designating them to a new territory, a new community, and a new way of life. Meanwhile, those designated as 'non-status Indians' had their identity stripped away, as society determined they were not sufficiently "Indian".

This had a profound impact on these latter individuals, as they had suddenly lost the main characteristic that defined them. Thus, given the implications it had, the enactment of the Indian Act could be seen as the government's most effective solution to deal with the "Indian Problem".

Nevertheless, the Indian Act, along with the expropriation of Indigenous lands that came with it and the implementation of Residential schools seemed to be not enough, and the government implemented more genocidal practices to eradicate Indigenous communities.

Following the National Inquiry (2019), the Canadian government "used child welfare laws and agencies as a tool to oppress, displace, disrupt, and destroy Indigenous families, communities, and Nations [as] a tool in the genocide of Indigenous Peoples" (p. 355). Additionally, the government's assimilation efforts also included the sterilisation of Indigenous women, aimed at preventing these communities from growing in number and gaining more relevance.

One may ask why the government would go to such extremes to erase Indigenous identities and cultures in Canada over so many years. The answer is a combination of economic interests, a colonial mindset, and a desire for cultural assimilation.

Economically, Indigenous lands held immense value when the colonisers arrived, as they had never been exploited and were rich in many and varied resources, which, for the Europeans, translated into wealth and power. Additionally, since the arrival of the Settlers, Indigenous communities were deemed inferior to Europeans, a mindset that has persisted to the present day.

Besides, the fact that Indigenous women are still being considered as conquerable sexual objects, as evidenced in the shocking statistics that showcase the violence that they have endured for centuries, also exemplifies the persisting colonial mindset of the Canadian society. Furthermore, Indigenous traditions and beliefs have also influenced government decisions to eradicate these communities, as they often conflict with Western ideologies.

As a result, the Canadian government has attempted to implement cultural assimilation policies with the goal of eliminating Indigenous traditions and practices that, for them, are incompatible with the dominant colonial and patriarchal culture.

Nonetheless, despite all the efforts of the Canadian government to eradicate their culture and traditions, Indigenous communities have managed to survive. With the help of figures like that of the Métis writer Katherena Vermette, they are increasingly being heard by more non-Indigenous people who decide to join their fight for a Canada where these communities can live safely and in peace, in the home that Canada is supposed to be for them.

1.2 Gender and colonial violence in Indigenous communities

Among Indigenous communities, Indigenous women have been the ones that have endured the most significant hardships resulting from colonialism. This is evident, for instance, in the enactment of the Indian Act, that apart from declaring who was "sufficiently Indian", it also strictly affected women by stripping them of the roles and rights they once held in their communities.

Due to its patriarchal nature, the Indian Act represented an enormous barrier because it restricted the influence and participation of Indigenous women, even denying them the right to hold property titles.

Moreover, this legislation, barely changed since its enactment in 1876, stipulated that Indigenous women who married non-status men would lose their status as Indians—a consequence not applied to Indigenous men in similar situations.

Losing their status meant forfeiting all the "privileges" associated with being Indian and resulted in a separation from their family and community, leading to a potential loss of identity, which contributed to the development of intergenerational trauma. Importantly, it was not only the women who lost status; their sons were also not recognised as Indigenous.

As a result, the gender discrimination ingrained in the Indian Act was unmistakably apparent through measures such as the ones outlined, underscoring that its enactment was a continuation of the colonial violence that Indigenous women had been enduring since the arrival of Europeans.

Furthermore, another instance that reflects the hardships that women had had to endure is that, as Renya Ramirez argues, Europeans equated the "virgin territory yet to be explored" (1998, p. 318) of Canada with women, representing their desire to also explore and conquer them. For Europeans, conquering the land was intertwined with exploiting and abusing the bodies of Indigenous women.

Besides, since the prevailing narrative has consistently been that of the Settlers, these women, who had very different ways of seeing the world and of feeling their sexuality than those of the Europeans, were not considered as victims of abuse.

Instead, they were portrayed as excessively sexual individuals seeking relations for financial gain. This led to the creation of negative stereotypes surrounding Aboriginal women, stereotypes that persist in influencing the opinions of many non-Indigenous individuals even today. It is because of these types of misconceptions that it is crucial to acknowledge that the narrative shaped by Europeans over the years is not an accurate reflection of the truth but rather a result of the contradictions between the lifestyles of these women and the European perspectives. This clash resulted in Settlers labelling Aboriginal women as "savages" (Smits, 1982, p. 281), implying that they did not perceive these women as human beings but rather as animals.

Because the longstanding roles that Aboriginal women held in Indigenous societies had systematically vanished, their images had been distorted, their bodies subjected to abuse, and their cultures mocked, they have long been ignored and disregarded in the broader societal narrative.

They were perceived as inferior from men and not worth the attention of history. But, in response to these injustices, numerous Indigenous women have bravely raised their voices, expressing their reality, which has been consistently silenced by the colonial oppressive system in which they live. Gradually, Indigenous feminine voices are emerging to confront the persistent issues of invisibility, misrepresentation, and abuse these women have been experiencing for centuries. Among these voices, Katherena Vermette, author of *The Break*, stands out, the subject of this review.

2. Method and materials

Hence, this article serves as a call to action aimed at raising awareness about the harsh reality these communities and particularly these women face daily. It also serves as a recognition of the suffering of these communities, which have had to undergo unparalleled challenges and yet still have to keep facing them because their situation has not yet been properly addressed.

To achieve these objectives, an analysis of three narrators in Katherena Vermette's novel *The Break* will be conducted to examine the characteristics of the intergenerational trauma experienced by these narrators, their trauma management strategies, and how they ultimately succeed in overcoming it through the usage of effective healing strategies showcasing the inner strength and resilience of Indigenous women. A qualitative methodology of content analysis is applied, unpacking the work through the categories that are of interest to us.

2.1 Katherena Vermette, a Métis writer

Born in Winnipeg in 1977, Canada, Katherena Vermette is a Métis woman who, in recent years, has emerged as a celebrated Métis writer and filmmaker because of her numerous and varied written and audiovisual works. With her first published poetry collection, *North End Love Songs*, she received the Governor General's Literary Award in 2013, the most prestigious literary award in Canada. Subsequently, in 2016, she published *The Break*, the focal point of this paper and the first volume of The Strangers trilogy that continued with *The Strangers* (2021) and with *The Circle* (2023), which marked its conclusion.

Additionally, she has also written numerous children's books, drawing from her background as a kindergarten teacher. Among these, the *A Girl Called Echo* saga and the illustrated book *The Girl and The Wolf* (2019) have received significant attention, with the former delving into the history of the Métis nation and the latter depicting the journey of an Indigenous girl in a determined quest for her Indigenous identity.

Considering her wide literary repertoire, it can be stated that Vermette is a multifaceted author who has found in literature her primary medium to express her concern for the situation Indigenous women are currently experiencing in Canada. In fact, she claimed that "my perspective of writing, it really centers around Indigenous experience, particularly my own story" (Hanson, 2016, p. 170), evidencing that all her works contain pieces of her life story as a Métis woman living in Canada.

Nevertheless, during a symposium in Salamanca (12 April 2024), she argued there was a main difference between her poetry and her narrative writing. She claimed that while her poetry serves as a memoir in which she always includes autobiographical aspects of her life as an Indigenous woman, her fictional stories do not aim to be autobiographical; instead, she writes the stories of others, even though they, inevitably, contain traces of herself.

This distinction is significant as it emphasises that the novel analysed in this article, *The Break*, should not be understood as a reflection of Vermette's own life or personal experiences, but rather as the story of someone else, in this case, the Traverse women. In this regard, when she was asked about her reasons for writing a novel as painful and harsh as *The Break*, she mentioned that she wrote it because she wanted to emphasise her Indigenous legacy by portraying the importance of her community and demonstrating how Indigenous people rely on one another, always providing strength and support (Vermette, 2024).

More specifically, in an interview she did with Aubrey Jean Hanson, she further explains that "when I write stories, I write primarily about Indigenous women, Métis women, who are inner-city residents, who have all of these things that are familiar to me" (2016, p. 180). Therefore, her work transcends her own personal narrative and extends to the representation of many Indigenous women who have always been denied a voice, ensuring that their perspectives are not only acknowledged but also given a platform for wider recognition and understanding.

Because of this work of representation she does, Vermette remains consistent with her declaration at the symposium, where she asserted that "I am not escaping my story" (2024). In fact, by writing stories about her reality as an Indigenous woman, she fulfils what she considers her primary responsibility as an Indigenous person: "We are here to honor our ancestors and prepare our children" (2024). Thus, Vermette uses literature and her works as tools to raise her voice, highlight her experiences as an Indigenous woman, and challenge the patriarchal and colonial norms that still seem to govern the Canadian society.

Besides, also in her role as a Métis writer, Vermette is not only representing the reality of her community but also presenting non-Indigenous readers with Indigenous worldviews and traditions raising their awareness of a culture that greatly differs from theirs. Therefore, considering her contributions, it can be argued that she is "a representative of the Métis Nation no matter what" (Hanson, 2016, p. 181).

Through her writings, she showcases a different but equally valid reality to non-Indigenous readers, urging them to recognise the value inherent in Indigenous communities. Vermette acknowledges, however, that this literary discourse is still in its initial stages for non-Indigenous readers (Hanson, 2016, p. 176). It is only now, after enduring years of suppression and oversight, that Indigenous voices are receiving the deserved attention they earn.

In this way, it can be argued that literature serves as a means for Indigenous women to narrate their struggles as acts of resilience and survival so that they can heal from past traumas but also acknowledge these traumas as integral parts of their current reality. In the case of Vermette, for instance, this takes special significance as in her first poetry collection, *North End Love Songs*, she included a poem that describes the disappearance of a young Indigenous man and how authorities dismissed the case based on his race.

When considering her documentary, *This River*, in which she recounts her personal experience after losing a loved one, this poem gains profound significance, as readers understand that it is deeply rooted in Vermette's personal history, recounting the 1991 disappearance of her brother. The police indifference at that time led to assumptions related to alcohol or him staying with friends. Nonetheless, they were wrong, and six months later, his body was discovered in Manitoba.

Moreover, beyond her personal traumatic experiences, Vermette also uses her fictional literature to portray the collective traumatic experiences that her community has endured. In *The Break*, Vermette uses fiction to narrate and give voice to the atrocities that Indigenous women have experienced over the centuries, capturing in a realistic manner how her characters confront intergenerational trauma.

This article will focus on examining three of those characters, analysing the intergenerational trauma they experience and the strategies they use to cope with it. To achieve this, I have employed a qualitative methodology. First, I analysed the characteristics that define and differentiate these characters, with particular emphasis on features that make them identifiable to real Indigenous people.

Subsequently, I examined the nature of the intergenerational trauma they endure and analysed the specific strategies each character uses to overcome the trauma and begin their healing journeys. Finally, I explored examples of experiences depicted in the novel that closely resemble real events suffered by actual Indigenous individuals. I believe that these examples are quite relevant as they connect fiction with reality, demonstrating that *The Break* is not a mere work of fiction but a narrative that reflects a reality that is currently taking place in Canada.

3. Results

The results of this review are presented for the three characters analyzed, taking as categories the intergenerational trauma, they experience and the strategies they use to cope with it. They are organized into three main thematic sections.

3.1. Intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities: A study of narrators

Because of the collective trauma experiences endured as a result of the process of colonisation, Indigenous communities have been affected by what is termed as intergenerational trauma. Notably, this trauma is not something that uniquely affects Indigenous individuals but also survivors of similar experiences. However, the intergenerational nature of this trauma affects all survivors of traumatic experiences in diverse and unique ways, as evidenced, for instance, by the differences between the descendants of Holocaust survivors and Indigenous populations. Even though, as previously mentioned in the introduction, both groups have faced genocidal experiences, their responses and the nature of their intergenerational trauma differ significantly, as do their methods of coping with it.

These differences stem from the diverse traditions and cultures that these two communities have. For instance, the concept of community and connection to nature are defining characteristics of Indigenous communities specifically. These defining features explain why the government considered Residential Schools an effective assimilationist practice for this community in particular and why it was such a traumatic experience for Indigenous people.

These individuals were forcibly separated from their communities, preventing them from growing and supporting each other, a practice that was an integral part of their identity. Additionally, another defining aspect of Indigenous populations compared to other communities is the experience of colonization. Their lands, ways of life, and languages were colonised by Europeans, who appropriated all of their valuable resources, and raped and conquered Indigenous women.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the way in which each individual copes with trauma varies from community to community, influenced by the community's traditions and cultures. Additionally, it should also be considered that the impact of this trauma and its consequences also vary from generation to generation within the same community, affecting individuals in distinct ways as the nature of the trauma evolves over the years.

In this regard, according to O'Neill et al. (2018), each generation of Indigenous individuals copes with intergenerational trauma in distinct ways. For instance, they identified the first generation of children as those who survived traumas resulting from Residential Schools or the Sixties Scoop period (1960s-1990s). During the Sixties Scoop, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their reserves without their parents' consent and placed with distant non-Indigenous families (Bombay et al., 2009, p. 14).

This first generation experienced a profound loss of control, connection, and cultural identity, leading to symptoms such as anxiety, hyper-vigilance, and mistrust (O'Neill et al., 2018). Moreover, due to this mistrust, they were afraid of sharing their stories and struggled to control their emotions. Consequently, enduring the weight of these atrocities perpetrated against them without the ability to address them resulted in a significant proportion of this generation suffering from depression, substance abuse, and challenges in maintaining relationships, particularly regarding sexual intimacy (O'Neill et al., 2018).

As for the second generation, they too experienced trauma, as they were raised by parents who had undergone traumatic experiences, which resulted in disconnection and communication problems (O'Neill et al., 2018). Furthermore, they also dealt with challenges such as low self-esteem, inhibition and struggles to control their aggressive behaviour (O'Neill et al., 2018). Lastly, regarding the third generation, consequences linked to the trauma experienced by the first generation of children have been observed.

Following O'Neill et al. (2018, p. 181), survivors of the first generation often choose to share their experiences with their grandchildren rather than their children, suggesting a necessary two-generation gap to address the nature of the trauma. Remarkably, this process of intergenerational transmission of stories and coping mechanisms between the first and third generations has been observed to empower the third generation as they face their own experiences of trauma.

In *The Break*, Vermette depicts the effects of trauma and the distinct coping mechanisms employed by different generations through its main narrators, who are predominantly members of the Traverse family—an Indigenous family of women. The author highlights the ongoing effects of past traumas on present-day Indigenous individuals and communities, particularly focusing on the individuality and harshness of trauma stemming from the sexual abuse that Emily, the youngest Indigenous family member, suffers at the hands of another Indigenous girl.

Vermette consciously employs the technique of the multiplicity of voices to capture the complex reality of intergenerational trauma and its varied impact across different generations in Indigenous communities. This article will specifically focus on three of those narrators, Kookom, the eldest family member; Cheryl, Emily's grandmother; and Rain, Cheryl's daughter.

3.2. Violence against Indigenous women: Lorraine Lynn Charles

Lorraine Lynn Charles, commonly referred to as Rain, is the only narrator who is not alive in the narrative. This distinctive aspect explains why her chapters are distinguished from those of the other characters by specific features: they consistently appear at the beginning of each of the novel's four parts, they have a distinct font style, and the narrator's identity is not revealed beforehand, as it happens with the others.

Despite being one of the main narrators, Rain does not discuss her life experiences in her chapters. Notably, it is through the perspectives and experiences of other characters, especially those of Stella, her daughter, and Cheryl, her mother, that the reader learns about Rain's life.

Rain's life experiences, and more concretely, the way in which she died, are representatives of the harsh realities that Indigenous women face and that Canadian society often ignores or fails to adequately address. These realities are illustrated by the fact that "Native Americans are raped at a rate nearly double that of rapes reported by all races annually– 34.1%" (Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, 2012). Because of these facts, Indigenous women are raised knowing "what to do when they are sexually assaulted, not if they are sexually assaulted" (Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, 2012, p. 10).

Some of them soon find their own effective ways of coping with this reality, while others, like Rain, this reality leads to an unbearable trauma that ends up with them relying on harmful substances like drugs or alcohol to try to live with it, "[a]s a grown-up, Stella knew her mum was an addict and that pull was everything she thought she needed" (Vermette, 2016, p. 264).

Rain, who symbolises the struggles faced by Indigenous women dealing with addiction, attempted to overcome her addiction and start a new life in the Bush—the reservation where she was raised, in which she deeply connected with nature and her Indigenous roots, "[h]er mom was happy out there too. For a while. But they never stayed long enough. Rain would want to go home, as though she was being pulled back to the city" (Vermette, 2018, p. 264).

For Rain, as for many Indigenous individuals, the Bush represents more than just a physical environment; it embodies a profound connection to their traditional roots, ancestors, and identity. In fact, within this natural setting, real Indigenous individuals, who can relate to Rain, find comfort and security, which are crucial mechanisms for overcoming trauma. However, despite Rain's acknowledgment of her problem, the necessity of forgetting and avoiding confronting trauma proved stronger, not allowing her to overcome her addiction.

This addiction made Rain incapable of providing Stella with the necessary level of attention, resulting in her daughter developing a form of trauma where she continually felt insufficient, "Stella only knew her mum needed something she could not give" (Vermette, 2018, p. 264). This feeling reflects a longstanding struggle within Indigenous communities, often referred to as the "Theory of Indigenous Deficiency".

According to Daniel Justice (2018), this theory asserts that Indigenous people are consistently depicted as insufficient, perpetually burdened by addictions, and lacking in responsibility and dignity. Furthermore, because of this feeling of inadequacy, they often experience a sense of culpability for not meeting society's expectations, which exacerbates the insecurities imposed upon them by societal norms.

For Stella, the feeling of inadequacy intensified when her family did not disclose the truth about her mother's death, as they believed she could not bear the emotional burden of understanding why Rain had died. When Stella tries to read about her mother's death in the newspapers, her grandmother takes the news away from her, consciously hiding the truth from her, "'Oh, Stelly, give me that'. Kookom took the page and folded it closed" (Vermette, 2018, p. 271).

Aligned with the "Theory of Indigenous Deficiency", Stella interpreted this silence and concealment as evidence of her perceived lack of courage or intelligence to confront or understand the gravity of the situation. However, her relatives did not comprehend that the way in which Stella coped with the trauma of her mother's death involved actively investigating and exploring the circumstances surrounding it.

This investigative process allowed her to gather clues from her family and the media, that allowed her to confront the reality of her mother's death. Through this process, Stella empowered herself, demonstrating to her family and herself that she was able to handle the truth, an approach that made her capable of overcoming grief and reclaiming a sense of agency in her own life and narrative.

Nonetheless, the truth involving Rain's death along with the feeling of insufficiency she had internalised made her believe that "her mom was dead, and it was all her own fault" (Vermette 2018, p. 272). Because she lived in a society that had consistently blamed Indigenous women for the injustices perpetrated against them by colonial and patriarchal forces, Stella internalised blame for her mother's death. She felt responsible, believing that she had not been enough to support her mother through her challenges or to give Rain a reason to stay and overcome her addiction.

Nonetheless, Stella was far from being the one to blame, as Rain's death was the consequence of the inherent racism that is present in Canadian society. The night that Rain died, she had snuck out of the house after stealing some money that Kookom, her mom, had hidden, a behaviour that was not unusual for her (Vermette, 2018, p. 269). After that, she went to a bar and "danced with the wrong fella.

He was mean to her, Stella" (Vermette, 2018, p. 271). This man took her into his truck, and then hit and abused her, "he said it was consensual and she was crazy. He had hit her, but he was sorry" (Vermette, 2018, p. 272). This man thought that Rain was "crazy" because she dared to assert her opinions and defend her rights as a woman and a Métis individual. In this situation, Rain refused to conform to the passive stereotype often imposed on Indigenous women, and for that, she was labelled as "crazy".

After he brutally beat her half to death, Rain, nearly losing consciousness, wandered to a hospital, asking for help. The hospital staff, instead of doing their job and taking care of her, dismissed her, assuming that she was drunk and had injured herself. After waiting for hours, Rain went outside to pee in an alley, where she died after losing consciousness and freezing to death.

Therefore, Rain's death can be attributed to the prevailing prejudices against Indigenous people within Canadian society, which are still a reality, as evidenced by the experience's numerous real-life cases, such as those of Yvonne Johnson and Brian Sinclair. Yvonne Johnson is an Indigenous woman who was sexually abused by her father and brother when she was a child, and subsequently by strangers, resulting in traumas that led her to attempt suicide, as she relates in her book *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*.

After this attempt, her family took her to the hospital, where the doctors did not seem content about Yvonne's failed attempt because they stated, "'Another Indian trying to kill herself?' 'Too drunk to do it right, she's just a mess'" (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998, p. 185). This lack of empathy and humanity resembles the treatment that Rain received in the hospital and demonstrates another reality, that "the most prevalent stereotypes about Indigenous persons in BC's health care system are that they are 'less worthy' of care, have substance use issues (are alcoholics or drug seeking), are 'bad parents', are incapable or non-compliant, and 'get stuff for free'" (Turpel-Lafond and Harmony, 2021, p. 9). Yvonne and Rain's stories are reminders of the inherent racism that is still present in the Canadian Health System and the ongoing marginalisation that these communities suffer.

Additionally, Brian Sinclair's death further exemplifies this systemic racism, as highlighted by Halimah Beaulieu in her thesis (2020, p. 128). Sinclair, who was an Indigenous man, passed away in a Winnipeg emergency room after enduring over 24 hours of neglect while he remained in his wheelchair without receiving medical attention. Despite Sinclair's concerns regarding the urgent need to change his blocked catheter, the hospital staff dismissed him, assuming he was homeless and intoxicated, viewing his medical needs as a mere excuse to seek shelter.

This disregard for Indigenous patients' health is not unusual, as Indigenous individuals are disproportionately more likely to receive inadequate treatment or leave hospitals without proper medical advice (Turpel-Lafond and Harmony, 2021, p. 11). Individuals like Rain, Yvonne, and Sinclair were dehumanised by hospital workers who continue to have negative preconceptions and prejudices against Indigenous people and continue to devalue their lives. These incidents show that white supremacy still remains and that individuals who are deemed "outsiders" will always be considered to belong to a lower status if nothing changes and racism continues to determine the way our society is structured.

Although these real-life examples emphasise the inherent racism against Indigenous communities, Canadian society refuses to acknowledge it as it is easier to blame Indigenous women, "[s]he wouldn't have died if she hadn't been drinking […] if it hadn't been winter, if she would've waited, if she hadn't been so stupid" (Vermette, 2018, p. 273).

The circumstances or the context do not matter, Indigenous women are the ones who will be held accountable for the atrocities that have been committed against them since the arrival of the Europeans. It will be said that these women were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but Canadian society will never admit that they are the ones having a real problem, as they choose to consistently ignore reality and avoid assuming responsibility for the genocide that is being committed against these women. Therefore, the ones to blame are those who force these women to live in a society that rapes and kills them and then does nothing to help them.

In *The Break*, Vermette underscores that Rain's death was not her own fault, but rather the result of the actions of the "wrong fella" who could not tolerate an Indigenous woman expressing her opinions without fear. His inherent racism and negative stereotypes towards Indigenous women prevented him from accepting a woman who refused to be submissive and spoke her truth. Like the Settlers who sought to conquer Canadian lands, this man thought he had some kind of ownership over Rain's body, believing he could do whatever he wanted with it.

Hence, this unnamed man, characterised only by his white skin, turns into a representation of Canadian society itself, which historically viewed Indigenous women as possessions to be exploited until they were worthless. Hence, Rain's death took place because she dared to challenge Canadian society by speaking out, raising her voice, and sharing her truth. In other words, she died because she had the courage to confront the colonial forces that wanted to erase her culture and traditions, demonstrating the ultimate outcome of the colonial violence that Indigenous women endure.

3.3. Home and the connection to the land: Flora Marie St Cross Charles and Cheryl Marie Charles Traverse

When exploring the culture and tradition of Indigenous communities, it is essential to delve into their relationship with the land, as it sheds light on various aspects of their lifestyle and behaviour. As Lowman and Barker point out, "Indigenous identities are based, historically and in the present, on living, dynamic relationships with land" (2015, p. 50). Consequently, their identity and traditional knowledge are deeply connected with their interactions with the natural world.

This connection is evident in many of their narratives, such as that of the Haudenosaunee's creation story, where the interaction between a woman descending from the sky and a turtle gives rise to the earth, making the land an extension of their being, symbolising a deep connection with nature since the beginning. Moreover, this strong relationship with the land can be seen with the Inuit story of Uvajuk, the first people/mountains, which describes how giants transformed into significant natural landmarks, embedding their essence into the land itself (Pelly and Crockatt, 1999). This story not only illustrates the deep bond between the Inuit and their environment but also highlights how land is an integral part of their cultural identity and spiritual existence.

Therefore, Indigenous knowledge and worldviews are based on the consideration of the land as an extension of oneself, connecting it with its own agency and, therefore, as something that deserves complete respect. On the contrary, Settlers held a distinct perspective, viewing the land as a commodity that could be bought, sold, and exploited for profit (Atleo and Boron, 2022, p. 2). Hence, these differing perspectives on nature and land make it challenging for non-Indigenous individuals to comprehend that Indigenous communities rely on specific and powerful relationships to the land that shape and foster the creation of collective identities (Lowman and Barker, 2015, p. 50).

Despite the sacred value that Aboriginal communities held for nature, Europeans conquered, destroyed, and violated Indigenous land without regard or respect for Indigenous worldviews (Bianchini, 2023, p. 266). As a consequence, Indigenous cultures have begun to reclaim portions of the land that Settlers appropriated through various practices, trying to reclaim their sovereignty over them and protect their traditions and knowledge, "[e]very piece of North America is Indigenous land regardless of whether it has a city on top" (Simpson, 2016, as cited in Bianchini, 2023, p. 266).

One of these practices is highlighted in *The Break* when Stella gives name to a specific area of land, the piece of land where Emily's abuse takes place. By naming that piece of land under the name of "The Break", she is reclaiming the "reassertion of control over lands that are and have always been Indigenous at heart and at the same time another way of showing how deep is the connection that their people have with any kind of space they inhabit" (Bianchini, 2023, p. 266).

Remarkably, the choice of the name "The Break" for both the land space and the title of the novel holds significant symbolism because it suggests that the land that has been conquered and exploited by Europeans is itself broken. Besides, the name does not only refer to the land but also to the Indigenous culture and community, both broken because they cannot recognise their sacred land in such a manner, treated with such little respect (Bianchini, 2023, p. 267). The brokenness of the land is further underscored by the fact that Emily's abuse occurs in this specific area named "The Break".

This abuse not only breaks Emily herself but also profoundly affects the women in her family, who must deal with the consequences of the intergenerational trauma that stems from the abuse. Consequently, "The Break" not only symbolises the personal brokenness experienced by an Indigenous individual in such circumstances but also the collective brokenness of the Indigenous community, which has been broken for centuries due to the ongoing consequences of colonialism.

Notably, even though the novel begins in "The Break", where everything seems to be broken and fragmented, it concludes in the Bush, where the characters reconnect with nature and their traditional roots. It will not be until they are all together at the end of the novel, reunited in the Bush, that the Traverse women will understand that healing and reconciliation from the implications of Emily's abuse can only come through reconnecting with nature and their Indigenous roots, joining together what was broken. This lesson echoes the wisdom of Flora Marie St. Cross Charles (Kookom), the eldest member of the family, who had been subtly conveying this message through her words and actions throughout the novel, although the other women did not consciously realise it.

Kookom, Emily's great-grandmother, exemplifies the crucial role that Elders have always played in Indigenous communities. According to Gladys Rowe et al. (2020, p. 165), Elders, as traditional knowledge keepers, guide and advise their community, passing down wisdom, values, and traditions to younger generations. They are the ones who make sure that the cultural heritage of these communities is preserved through teachings in language, ceremony, land knowledge, and practical skills, contributing to the resilience and strength of Indigenous identity (Rowe et al. 2020, p. 165).

Moreover, they also have the role of addressing past traumas while focusing on healing and promoting well-being for their family. Thus, when the abuse occurs, Kookom serves as the primary support not only for Emily but also for the other women in the family, who are also struggling with their own traumas stemming directly from what has happened to Emily.

Hence, it is also through the teachings, advice, and storytelling of their Kookom that the women of the Traverse family are going to cope with trauma. Throughout the novel, Kookom is the one who is continually trying to unite her family in overcoming the challenges they face, and it is only when she makes sure that the others have understood that "as long as they hold on to each other, they will always be okay" (Vermette, 2018, p. 335), that she peacefully passes away, leaving her legacy to Cheryl, her daughter.

Cheryl grew up under her mother's example, who continuously fought to reclaim her legacy as an Indigenous woman, emphasising their resilience. As it has been outlined, the arrival of the Settlers marked a period where Indigenous women faced continual rejection and were imposed gender roles that did not align with their initial cultural identity. Nevertheless, in *The Break*, instead of rejecting those roles and using them to differentiate the genders, the main characters celebrate them because they serve as empowering mechanisms that allow them to heal and overcome their traumas (Obertová, 2022, p. 84).

This is illustrated through Kookom's experiences with her husband, Joseph Traverse. Through the comments that Kookom makes about him, readers infer that he did not treat her with respect: "'Woman!' he'd say to me. 'Youse a Horror to me!'. He'd get all deep in his voice like a preacher. 'Youse a Horror, Woman!'" (Vermette, 2018, p. 331). Such sexist treatment was not proper of Indigenous men, as their traditions had traditionally honoured the roles and worth of women. Nevertheless, due to colonial and patriarchal influences, Indigenous men began to view Indigenous women as mere objects that existed to serve their needs, just as Settlers did. However, Kookom inculcated in the women of her family the belief that they do not have to be submissive simply because they were Indigenous and women.

Instead, they had to be resilient and brave, ready to fight all forms of racism and sexism and defend their culture and rights, "[u]ntil one day I finally said, 'You want a Horror, Man? I'll give you a Horror!' And I gave it to him, the big frying pan right in the groin" (Vermette, 2018, p. 331). By confronting her husband, Kookom also challenged patriarchal norms, demonstrating that Indigenous women have never lost their agency. With her actions, Kokoom asserted that they have always and will continue to fight to uphold their dignity and integrity in a society that has continuously disregarded them.

Following her mother's example, Cheryl assumed her mother's role after her death because "they still have so much to go through, so much cleaning to do" (Vermette, 2018, p. 345). Still, to truly embody the essence of a "real Kookom" and turn into a better version of herself, Cheryl had to confront and overcome something that had been with her since the death of her sister Rain: her alcohol addiction.

Substance abuse, including alcohol, is unfortunately prevalent in Indigenous communities as a means to cope with trauma, "[a]s a result of confusion and loss of identity, many Aboriginal people […] have turned to alcohol to help ease the pain of these issues" (Smillie-Adjarkwa, 2009, p. 3). Nonetheless, many Indigenous individuals are turning towards spiritual and healing practices to overcome addiction, recognising that embracing their culture is integral to achieving sobriety (Smillie-Adjarkwa, 2009, p. 5).

Cheryl chooses to undergo one of these spiritual practices in order to continue supporting the women of her family and gain the strength and wisdom needed to successfully fulfil her mother's legacy. Therefore, as for Cheryl, it is spirituality that leads to her being able to cope with trauma and, eventually, overcome it. This ceremony, held in the Bush, is commonly referred to as "The Sweat Lodge" and it aims "to purify the body, mind, and spirit so that a new sense of self may be present" (Smillie-Adjarkwa, 2009, p. 5).

It is only after the ritual that Cheryl can consider the idea of quitting drinking, "But she thinks a minute, the idea of not drinking suddenly feels freeing and scary. But Good. Warm" (Vermette, 2018, p. 348). Consequently, the ritual she has undergone has helped her to heal and start to leave that trauma behind with the help and support of her family and her passion, art.

Throughout the novel, it is her passion for art that allowed Cheryl to momentarily escape from her reality and forget about the traumas that continually haunted her. However, the frustration and helplessness she often experienced due to her inability to finish her artwork as she desired led Cheryl to turn to alcohol, using it to stop her pain. The paintings she cannot finish belong to a series entitled "Wolf Women", a project in which she initially thought of drawing all the faces and wolves that her late sister Rain would have had if she had not been killed. Nonetheless, her project grows bigger, and now she has decided to add other faces and wolves of the "strong women" she is related to, including her two daughters, Lou and Pauline.

The symbolism of the wolf holds particular significance in Cheryl's paintings and in the narrative as a whole. Apart from appearing on the back cover of the novel, this animal also embodies the strength and resilience of the Indigenous women in the story. This inner strength, depicted through the wolf, is evident in Cheryl's artwork, dreams, and thoughts. "Cheryl breathes out and tries to give her granddaughter strength. Wolves teach humility — they teach that we are all in this together, all a part of the same whole" (Vermette, 2018, p. 118).

Cheryl seeks to convey to the reader that the Traverse family women are akin to wolves, united in their fight, like a pack, protecting each other regardless of the challenges they face. Hence, when she undergoes the purifying ritual, she emerges as a new woman, ready to carry on her mother's legacy, complete her painting series, and offer her family the strength and unity needed to resist the patriarchal society in which they live, much like wolves fighting together in a pack, knowing that their strength lies in their unity.

4. Conclusion

In this article, my primary aim has been to highlight the harshness and individuality of the intergenerational trauma that Indigenous women endure in Canada by analysing three of the resilient characters in Vermette's novel, *The Break*. To achieve this, I have carefully examined and outlined the main characteristics that differentiate them from the other narrators and analysed the individual trauma management strategies used to effectively cope with trauma. Thus, by exploring the subjective perspectives of these three women, I have aimed to challenge the notion of a unique and presumably impartial narrative, such as that imposed by the Settlers in relation to the process of colonization. Therefore, the analysis carried out in this paper illustrates how important it is to consider different points of view when aiming to achieve an accurate portrayal of a story.

Moreover, by looking at the stories of each woman individually, the article also aims to confront the experiences of generalisation and dismissal that have historically marginalised these women when labelled under simplistic labels such as "Indigenous women" or "Murdered and Missing Indigenous women". These labels, while drawing attention to important and relevant issues, can also diminish the gravity of the atrocities committed against them by reducing the lives of these women to mere statistics.

In this regard, instead of merging her protagonists into a single narrator, Vermette opted to give each woman a voice, enabling them to share their stories for all of those who were silenced. As a result, I have considered it to be of crucial importance to analyse their roles individually, acknowledging their unique experiences, realities, and the inherent value of their lives.

In this context, this article has demonstrated how the essence of The Break lies in its portrayal of resilience, showcasing how it empowers Rain to confront the colonial forces that have aimed to eradicate her community, Kookom to teach the women of her family about the inner strength of their community and the importance of unity, and Cheryl to face and overcome intergenerational trauma at the end.

In this way, each protagonist develops her own coping strategies, underscoring that healing is possible through unity, resilience, and personal growth. *The Break* emerges as a symbol of hope for Indigenous women who may find themselves in similar situations, illustrating that despite adversity, the women of the Traverse family ultimately manage to overcome the challenges emerging from the colonial intergenerational trauma through mutual support and resilience.

In conclusion, Vermette's *The Break* depicts a narrative with characters that exemplify the power and resilience of Indigenous women who persistently fight against the patriarchal and colonial forces who have consistently and continually attempted to eradicate them. Through the portrayal of these three characters, Vermette demonstrates the inner strength of Indigenous women, underscoring their determination to remain united and overcome the numerous challenges posed by the oppressive colonial system in which they live.

Just as the characters of the book do, real Indigenous women will always "make sure they are all safe and ensconced somewhere. Cheryl does this too, but only with her girls and their kids" (Vermette, 2018, p.246). The emphasis that Vermette does on unity and resilience highlights the crucial importance of these qualities within Indigenous communities, particularly among groups of Indigenous women, in their ongoing fight for survival and justice.

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