

**Exploring Personal and Cultural Taboos in Indigenous Communities: A Case Study of
Richard Wagamese's *Medicine Walk*
Imane SAIDIA⁽¹⁾ Pr. Selma MOKRANI⁽²⁾**

1- Department of Letters and English Language, Faculty of letters and languages, Badji Mokhtar-Annaba University, Mailbox 12 Annaba 23000-Algeria, imane.saidia@univ-annaba.dz

2- Department of Letters and English Language, Faculty of letters and languages, Badji Mokhtar-Annaba University, Mailbox 12 Annaba 23000-Algeria, selma.mokrani@univ-annaba.dz

Received: 17/05/2025

Revised: 28/12/2025

Accepted: 31/12/2025

Abstract

*This article examines how personal and cultural taboos in Indigenous literature can promote empathy, support, and social healing within Indigenous communities. Canadian Indigenous author Richard Wagamese's novel *Medicine Walk* (2014) depicts the challenges of Indigenous men in finding their true identity in the midst of a morally tabooed world. Hence, by means of a psychoanalytical approach, this study posits that tackling taboo subjects in Indigenous literature can foster a better understanding to deeper societal issues related to Indigenous communities. Consequentially, discussing these overlooked subjects can lead to the destigmatization of Indigenous socio-cultural practices.*

Keywords: *Indigenous, taboos, Wagamese, cultural practices.*

استكشاف المحظورات الشخصية والثقافية في مجتمعات السكان الأصليين: دراسة حالة لرواية "مسيرة التداوي" لريتشارد واغاميز

ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال كيف يمكن لدراسة المحظورات الشخصية والثقافية في أدب السكان الأصليين أن تعزز التعاطف، الدعم والتعافي داخل هذه المجتمعات. تصور رواية "مسيرة التداوي" (2014) للكاتب الكندي الأصلي ريتشارد واغاميز التحديات التي يواجهها رجال السكان الأصليين في سعيهم لإيجاد هويتهم الحقيقية في خضم عالم تحيط به المحرمات الأخلاقية. وبناءً على ذلك، ومن خلال اتباع منهج التحليل النفسي، تفترض هذه الدراسة أن تناول المواضيع المحظورة في أدب السكان الأصليين يمكن أن يساعد في فهم أعمق للقضايا الإنسانية المتعلقة بمجتمعاتهم. وبالتالي فإن مناقشة هذه المواضيع المهملة قد تقضي إلى إزالة الوصمة عن الممارسات الاجتماعية والثقافية للسكان الأصليين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *سكان أصليين، محظورات، واغاميز، ممارسات ثقافية.*

Corresponding author: Imane SAIDIA, imane.saidia@univ-annaba.dz

Introduction:

Ranging from an explicit depiction through language to addressing highly controversial topics such as, mental health, alcoholism, or trauma, taboos, in indigenous literature have always been a source of controversy, challenging readers and the society at large to confront delicately uncomfortable and often frowned-upon subjects. Echoing Michel Foucault's observation that literature speaks of taboo subjects, listens to the words of the "insane," and explores human desires as the most fascinating source of taboos and insanity⁽¹⁾. Therefore, this article explores how examining personal and cultural taboos in Indigenous literature can foster understanding and eliminate stigma surrounding these issues, ultimately promoting empathy, support, and social healing within Indigenous community. Accordingly, Native-Canadian author Richard Wagamese's novel *Medicine Walk* (2014) can be the best epitome, as it deals with the sufferings of Indigenous men in finding their true identity in the midst of a morally tabooed matrix. The novel delves deep into the experiences of the main protagonist Franklin Starlight, as he struggles with deep-seated pain, trauma and suppressed emotions along his alcoholic, dying father. These unspoken of taboos presented in the novel are often rooted in the characters' Indigenous heritage, profoundly influencing the molding of their identities. By means of a psychoanalytical approach, our research paper emphasizes the importance of shedding light on personal as well as socio-cultural taboos in Indigenous literature, as a means to rectify the inaccurate and stereotypical depictions of the Indigenous community in mainstream literature. Our present investigation culminates in a critical distinction between traditional Indigenous accounts and modern accounts found in mainstream literature. that focused primarily on exposing non-Natives' exploitative intentions and the Indigenous people's resistance, contemporary Indigenous literature, especially Wagamese's, focuses on social connectedness and spiritual as well as cultural healing.

1- Understanding Taboos in Literature:

Authors such as J. D. Salinger, Salman Rushdie, and Franz Kafka share a common trait: causing an upheaval of anger and consternation among readers and critics. These authors' works often challenge the conventional norms of artistic expression, tackling highly sensitive topics such as sexuality, rape, race, religion etc. The terms vulgar, prohibited or obscene, usually describe texts containing explicit language or taboo subjects, which challenge conventional morality. As Florin Busu suggests:

Taboo is based on the belief that the action a person is going to perform is too sacred but at the same time it is too violent to take the same step by any other ordinary person of the society. Taboo is also performed under the threat of supernatural punishment in most of the societies of the world. But everything related to term taboo exists in all nearly all the societies of world and "breaking a taboo" is usually considered objectionable by society in general. It is also believed that if taboo is broken or disobeyed, it will cause some kind of trouble for the offender⁽²⁾.

Historically, the term 'taboo' was first coined by James Cook in the 18th century during his expedition to Tonga Island where he closely observed the natives' socio-cultural practices. During his stay on the island, Cook noticed various peculiar customs for instance, Indigenous women on the island were forbidden to feed themselves if they had touched a dead body or attended a funeral before⁽³⁾. Hence, by borrowing it from the Tongan word 'tabu', Cook seems to define a 'taboo' as a sacred and spiritual prohibition that is deeply entrenched in Indigenous communities.

While James Frazer's contributions to the field of anthropology have been influential, his work emphasizes the limitations of using a single concept like 'taboo' across diverse cultures without considering cultural nuances. Frazer contends that taboos are a representation of a diversity of social and spiritual practices⁽⁴⁾. Therefore, taboos are not arbitrary prohibitions applied universally but are subjective societal norms specific to each social group; what is prohibited in one community may be allowed in another.

Moreover, Bergner suggests that literature provides a platform where taboo subjects can be addressed, which allows for the exploration of silenced narratives and the deconstruction of dominant discourses. He further explains that literature's capacity to represent the "collective unconscious", enables it to serve as a powerful tool for challenging and transforming cultural beliefs and values. Hence, literary works addressing tabooed subjects can provide opportunities to explore the interconnectedness of race, sex, and power dynamics⁽⁵⁾. Bergner's view seems to align with the arguments put forth by Canadian Métis author Maria Campbell who contends that discussing taboos and sociocultural realities through literature could pave the way for a global awareness of these underlooked concerns. According to her, this advocates for culture preservation, authenticity, and most notably social healing⁽⁶⁾.

In his book *Taboo and Transgression in British Literature from the Renaissance to the Present* (2010), author Stefan Horlacher pinpoints the seminal role of literature as a valuable medium for the depiction and analysis of phenomena such as taboos. He argues that literature, especially works that challenge conventional norms, can articulate marginalized voices by fostering their cultural resilience as well as communal values⁽⁷⁾. Thus, the exploration of taboos in literature not only does it serve as a means for preserving cultural practices of marginalized communities, but also for rectifying stereotypical misconceptions surrounding them. Indigenous authors such as Wagamese utilize cultural and personal taboos as a narrative device so as to explore, celebrate, and preserve Indigenous cultural identity in their works. Through tackling taboo subjects, these authors offer readers a window into the complexities of the Indigenous legacy, which contributes to a more authentic representation of Indigenous cultures in literature.

By addressing taboo subjects in their literary works, authors shed light on overlooked aspects of culture, debunk excruciating truths, and trigger productive discussions about sensitive topics. Hence, taboos in literature, mainly Indigenous literature, can be a means to reveal the underlying tensions and contradictions within a society. This offers readers a thorough comprehension of the cultural dynamics of Indigenous communities, while reflecting the different nuances of cultural identity and the evolving nature of societal norms. Subsequently, this paper highlights the ways in which literature serves as a potent tool for the exploration of the complex and often paradoxical nature of taboos found in Indigenous communities. Through illuminating some of the lesser-known socio-cultural practices and rituals of native people, Indigenous literature debunks modern colonial attempts to alter these practices as another form of identity obliteration and forced assimilation. For example, in Wagamese's masterpiece, *Medicine Walk* the author explores one of the less recognized spiritual practices within Canadian Indigenous communities which is the 'warriors' burial'. According to Indigenous communities, great warriors and courageous men are usually buried via a very special ritual called "the warriors' burial" throughout which the deceased is buried in a sitting position facing east. In the novel, Franklin's dying father summons him so as to be buried the warriors' way, however, as the story unfolds franklin comes to realize that his father is the anti-thesis to a valorous warrior. This contradictory presentation of Indigenous spiritual practices, is the core essence of the complex nature of taboos within native communities.

2- A Philosophical and Psychoanalytical Approach to Taboos:

In order to understand Indigenous cultural manifestations and human behavior, it is essential to understand the psychological as well as sociological foundations of symbolic language in taboos in literature. Therefore, through a Psychoanalytic critical approach, our research paper attempts to explore the multiple facets in which psychological and socio-cultural factors intersect in the creation and interpretation of literary works. A key principle of the psychoanalytic approach is that literature can be used to explore and understand the human psyche, by delving into unconscious and repressed desires and fears.

Psychoanalytic criticism enables us to explore the multiple ways characters in a story are shaped by their early childhood experiences or their relationships with their parents. For

instance, Wagamese's *Medicine walk*, is a story that interweaves the intricacies of a troubled father-son relationship. Throughout the novel, the son's relationship with his estranged father can be analyzed in terms of three seminal social taboos: silence and repressed emotions, unresolved issues, and the impact of intergenerational trauma, and personal taboos such as alcoholism and sobriety as means for healing. In his groundbreaking work, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Sigmund Freud defines taboos as a social prohibition associated with sacredness, consecration, and danger, suggesting that primitive societies set up a system of intricate rituals in to mitigate the danger associated with taboos⁽⁸⁾. He later explains that taboos were triggered by ambivalent social attitudes and in effect represent forbidden actions, for which there is a strong "unconscious inclination"⁽⁹⁾. Hence, it is safe to say the concept of taboo is deeply embedded in the collective unconscious of primitive societies worldwide, often accompanied by the fear of supernatural punishment for those who dare to defy it.

Furthermore, according to Freud, social taboos are chiefly determined by the superego, the part of the psyche embodying internalized societal values and norms. He believes that the superego is responsible for controlling our moral conscience, and thus; guiding our behavior and punishing transgressions⁽¹⁰⁾. In the same vein, critics such as Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson, and Karen Horney, who were greatly influenced by Freud, their mentor, also contributed to the understanding of social as well as cultural taboos from a psychoanalytic perspective. Jung, for instance, contends that archetypes and the collective unconscious play an irrefutable role in shaping individual behavior and societal norms. Adler, on the other hand, argues that breaking social taboos stems from an individual's sense of inferiority and desire for power and superiority⁽¹¹⁾.

In his influential work *Propaganda* (1928), Edward Bernays perceives taboos differently, suggesting that they are subjective, even though they can cause controversy and discomfort, taboos can be manipulated through skillful propaganda techniques to alter public opinion and acceptance of previously taboo concepts or practices⁽¹²⁾. In this context, euphemism or euphemistic conceptual metaphors could be an example for the propaganda techniques Bernays implies. Through euphemisms one can render taboo words less derogatory and more acceptable, for instance, in describing the native inhabitants of a certain place, words like 'savages' and 'primitive people' are replaced by more neutral ones such as 'Indigenous people' to attenuate the offensiveness of the original words.

Moreover, in psychoanalytic theory, family is a fundamental factor in the shaping of an individual's sense of self in society, for individuals are shaped by the roles they assume within their family. In other words, the formation of the unconscious is influenced by one's perception of their place within the family one grows up in. According to Freud's theory of the Oedipal conflict, family ties, especially the relationship between parents and children, are crucial in shaping an individual's identity. In *Medicine Walk*, Franklin's perception of the world around him is bound by his relationship with his father. As a child, Franklin was abandoned by his father who left him in foster homes. Hence, growing up, Franklin has struggled to reconcile with his father's past mistakes, and it was difficult for him to trust others in his life too. By exploring the myriad ways both characters manage to reconcile with their past and overcome their traumas, this breaks a very sensitive taboo within Indigenous communities that is intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma is among the most under-looked social taboos within Indigenous communities. Thus, it is quite essential to tackle such an important theme so as to promote healing and emotional support for these communities.

Finally, psychoanalytical theory approaches literary texts as manifestations of the author's unconscious mind, which is shaped by his repressed desires, fears, and traumas. For example, in *Medicine Walk* Franklin, the main protagonist, seems to share so much in common with the author Wagamese, who, just like Franklin, had faced all sorts of injustices and forced assimilation by the Canadian government. Like many other Indigenous children of his generation, Wagamese was also separated from his roots and compulsorily put in residential

schools and foster care undergoing a process aimed at erasing his identity. Therefore, by expressing his own deeply rooted personal taboos through his protagonist, Wagamese seeks healing and relief from past traumas.

2-1- Wagamese's Own Journey towards Healing:

Wagamese is an Ojibwe author whose works are greatly influenced by his personal experiences as well as the significant challenges he faced as an Indigenous child, which was marked by a continual transition between diverse foster homes. As a child, Wagamese experienced beatings and abuse in foster care which led him to flee at the age of sixteen, seeking to reconnect with his native culture. As he vividly recalls in his essay *One Story, One Song* (2011) "There had been moments when the pain and the confusion were so intense I felt as though my skin was peeling off." The traumatic childhood experiences that Wagamese endured ultimately led him to seek refuge in the streets, where he found consolation in drugs and alcohol abuse⁽¹³⁾. However, amidst his grimmest moments of defeat Wagamese realized that reading books and writing were his only chance for healing and the best way to transmit his communities' Indigenous legacy to the world.

In his works, Wagamese showcases a remarkable talent for addressing very sensitive topics ranging from spirituality and Indigenous social practices as in *Keeper n' Me* (1994), to abuse and trauma as depicted in his masterpiece *Indian Horse* (2012), to alcoholism and drug abuse as portrayed in *Medicine Walk* (2014). Critic Joanna Croston clearly describes her awe and admiration of Wagamese's gift for storytelling, mainly when discussing taboo topics, stating:

Wagamese is an expert weaver of threads of memory and emotion. He creates a tapestry of grace, reconciliation and hidden truths. His uncanny ability to discuss taboo issues like alcoholism, domestic violence, and child abuse within the everyday conversations of his characters is the secret element that pulls the reader into the story and refuses to relinquish its hold until all has been revealed⁽¹⁴⁾.

Throughout history, a multitude of research has been conducted in the field of Indigenous literatures, dealing with diverse topics such as acculturation, decolonization, and forced assimilation. However, little attention is paid to the exploration of personal and cultural taboos in Wagamese's works. Similarly, considerable theoretical writings have focused on concepts such as land/space and environment in relation to the Indigenous community. In her article "Contemporary Adult Canadian Books for Strong Teen Readers" Margaret Mackey contends that, most of Wagamese's works emphasize the unbreakable relationship between Indigenous people and their land, as she depicts it while describing *Medicine Walk*: "He (Wagamese) is often lyrical about the appeal of the land, but he is hardnosed about ways in which people abuse their relationship to that land, and this book pulls no punches"⁽¹⁵⁾.

Furthermore, in her article "Story Words: An Interview with Richard Wagamese", Canadian scholar Blanca Schorcht highlights that Wagamese's writing, both fiction and nonfiction, explores what it means to be human within the context of an often-complicated cultural diversity and oppressive history⁽¹⁶⁾. In the same vein, scholars Ben J. Milton and J. Sundarsingh both assert that Wagamese's novel *Medicine walk* explores the complex relationship between an estranged father and son⁽¹⁷⁾. As the novel progresses, Franklin and Eldon's relationship undergoes series of epiphanic moments that challenge and eventually strengthen their bond.

In her article "Métis and first nations autobiographies as a means of healing in: *Mémoires canadiennes*" Scholar Eszter Szenczi affirms that Wagamese's works, and mainly *Medicine Walk* are a part of a new phase of Aboriginal literature in Canada with less need for resistance. Instead, it focuses on consolidation and healing as a way towards transformation. Furthermore, while most of traditional indigenous works primarily focused on themes such as resistance, land preservation, and indigenous heritage, contemporary works written by indigenous authors such as Wagamese's, rather focus on the healing process of the indigenous community, as Szenczi's observes: "Regarding their themes, the more recent these books are, the less harsh they point to past injustices. Instead of chastising the non-Natives for the

Natives' miseries, these novels consciously search for healing"⁽¹⁸⁾. Hence, one might conclude that by intricately weaving his narrative, Wagamese aspires to find some healing and relief from his past traumas. As explained in Margaret Mackey's words: "Wagamese never overplays his hand, never reaches beyond the confines of the personal for larger meaning. It reads like a conscious choice, as if we need reminding that every trend, every sociological movement, is, at its heart, the stories of individual people, individual choices, individual losses"⁽¹⁹⁾.

3- Taboos as Cultural Markers of Indigenous Heritage:

Taboos play a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of Indigenous peoples. Taboos are often deeply rooted in the core of indigenous heritage, encompassing sacred beliefs, principles, and rituals passed down through generations over centuries. By adhering to taboos, indigenous communities strengthen their cultural distinctiveness and maintain a connection to their ancestral legacy. Therefore, taboos help define acceptable behavior, protect sacred knowledge, and preserve the spiritual and ecological balance within indigenous societies. Consequently, reinforcing taboos allows indigenous peoples to safeguard their heritage, assert their individuality, and demonstrate resilience against external influences and modernization

Taboos are an essential aspect of indigenous cultural heritage, shaping their social norms and practices. These taboos often come with strict adherence expectations. Moreover, violating a taboo can lead to social consequences such as shame or punishment, and the severity of these consequences varies depending on the taboo, the culture, and the specific context of its violation. For instance, in a number of North-American indigenous communities it is believed that after death, the human soul reincarnates in plants, trees, animals, or birds, imbuing these natural elements with sacredness and awe. As a result, actions such as killing, consuming, or even touching these elements are strictly prohibited.

Ray B. Browne intriguingly likens taboos to a 'camera-aperture' which, according to him, allows light and action to imprint on the film of social and cultural development. He extends the metaphor, noting that both the camera and taboos act as cultural conservators, capturing the past and parts of the present while often resisting much of the future⁽²⁰⁾. Hence, while the word taboo is almost always associated with past actions and attitudes pertaining to ancestral communities, it is crucial for contemporary indigenous generations to revive taboos in daily practices to safeguard their culture and traditions.

In addition, throughout history, globalization is among the primal reasons leading indigenous people to face numerous challenges in adjusting to societal norms, causing significantly drastic changes in their traditional lifestyles, customs and rituals resulting in social exclusion and marginalization. Despite their strong sense of belonging and attachment to their own land and cultural heritage, indigenous people has always been struggling to stay connected to their own roots as taboos such as historical trauma, discrimination, geographic isolation and obliteration of cultures and traditions further hindered their adaptation. Indigenous groups have also been subject to a myriad of health disparities, food insecurity, violence, and poverty, rendering their social and cultural re-connectedness almost impossible. Hence, it is of vital importance to explore these tabooed, disregarded matters so as to provide healing and resurgence for the indigenous communities.

Furthermore, through the use of authentically indigenous words, labels and names through language, indigenous writers are able to convey their cultural heritage to the world, and hence; challenge dominant stereotypical narratives by normalizing taboo subjects and reducing stigma. By integrating taboo words and expressions into their narratives, these authors can celebrate the richness and diversity of their indigenous culture, offering readers a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage. In literature, this variability can be depicted through character dialogues or the narrative style reflecting the different attitudes each community member has towards taboo language. For instance, younger characters may use taboo words more comfortably as a form of rebellion against conventional norms, while older characters may adhere strictly to cultural norms and prohibitions. This intergenerational

dynamic highlights the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity within indigenous communities.

Taboo language often involves terms related to sacred beliefs, and socio-cultural taboos surrounding sexuality, death, and spirituality. For indigenous writers, taboo words are not mere linguistic artifacts or figures of speech; but they also represent the complexities of their cultural identity and linguistic heritage. Hence, through the incorporation of taboo language, indigenous writers can evoke a sense of authenticity and connection to their cultural roots, allowing readers to partake in the nuances of indigenous worldviews. The deliberate use of taboo words in literature can also be employed to recover narratives historically marginalized, erased, or misrepresented in Western dominated discourse. As pointed out by Rahmayani and Fitrawati (2018): “One of the essential functions of taboo words, in which verbal obscenity provides to its user, is to provide catharsis”⁽²¹⁾. Similarly, the cathartic power of taboo language in indigenous literary narratives lies in its ability to restore authentic accounts of indigenous identity.

4- The Nuanced Manifestations of Taboos in *Medicine Walk*:

Medicine Walk by Richard Wagamese is a groundbreaking work of literature that follows the journey of Franklin Starlight, a First Nations teenager, who leaves his rural foster home to embark on a life-changing journey along with his dying father, Eldon, a chronic alcoholic. Upon his father’s request, Franklin leads a forty-mile journey through the wilderness of Canada in order to bury him in the Ojibway tradition, known as “the warrior way”⁽²²⁾. According to the Ojibway or Anishinaabe tradition, burying the deceased through the warrior way embodies a spiritual rite throughout which the deceased, dressed in traditional clothing, is buried in a sitting position facing East, so as to glorify and honor his brave accomplishments and help him reincarnate in the spirit world. Throughout their journey both characters experience a profound exploration of identity, indigenous heritage, and most importantly of one another’s relationship as estranged father and son.

Throughout the novel, and through highly nuanced language Wagamese ingeniously explores a multitude of cultural and personal taboo themes pertaining to the indigenous community, such as resilience, reconciliation, alcoholism, intergenerational trauma and healing. Wagamese's lyrical prose engenders the essence of the natural world and the profound spiritual connection between the characters, immersing readers in a rich tapestry of cultural diversity. As Margaret Mackey contends “Eldon’s is a resolutely small story, intimately told, but with ripples to the larger world, echoes and iterations of the journey of so many First Nations men through the twentieth century.”⁽²³⁾.

4-1- Taboo of Alcoholism in *Medicine Walk*:

Indigenous communities in British Columbia and North America in general, are known for their voracious alcohol consumption. Aboriginal youth are two to six times more likely to consume alcohol than non-Aboriginals⁽²⁴⁾. Using alcohol as a means to cope with past traumas, the injustices, and the cultural erasure inflicted by the Canadian government. In the novel, alcohol abuse is a repetitive taboo that’s associated with deeply-seated psychological issues. For instance, Eldon, Franklin’s father is an alcoholic man who’s frequently unconscious or intoxicated. Eldon's alcoholism symbolizes escapism and a coping mechanism for unresolved psychological conflicts, as it is described by the narrator “Eldon has learned to deal with the guilt of painful memories by pushing them deeper inside learning too late that this place of ‘no reminders’ doesn’t really exist; it can only be faked through drinking.”⁽²⁵⁾.

Similarly, most of the novel’s characters are weighed down by their own personal losses and agonies, yet each character seems to have his own coping mechanism. Among Eldon Starlight’s numerous losses that pushed him to immerse himself into a serious alcohol addiction are his estrangement from his mother as a child, his harrowing experience in the Korean War after having to kill his own friend, and also for feeling responsible for the death of the love of his life, Angie, in childbirth, due to his absence and negligence. To cope with the guilt and grief of his losses, Eldon turned to alcohol as his only chance for oblivion “After

Eldon killed his friend Jimmy during the Korean War, his drinking grew worse: He sought a place that carried no reminders, believing that a place existed that was barren of memory and recollection.”⁽²⁶⁾ Franklin was then raised by Bunky, his non-indigenous step-father whose coping mechanism, unlike Eldon's, was to take care of her son after losing Angie was by choosing to take care of her son, since Eldon was too unconscious to raise his own child.

After years of reluctant rupture, Franklin visits his father Eldon, upon the latter's call. Franklin felt pity for his father's deteriorating health condition caused by alcohol. Being a curious kid, Franklin wondered why Bunky did not turn to alcohol despite also suffering the loss of his loved ones, but Bunky explained to him that he was wise enough to comprehend that escaping the past through such a lethal poison could mean losing the present:

“He smells funny,” the kid said.

“He's been rinsed through pretty good.”

“With that whisky?” the kid asked.

“Yes, sir. Some men take to it. I never did.”

“Why not? Does it do bad things?”

The old man looked at him over his shoulder. “Keeps varmints away,” he said.

“Savvy what a varmint is?”

“Yeah,” the kid said. “Pests. Things you don't want around.”

“Well, whisky keeps things away that some people don't want around neither. Like dreams, recollections, wishes, other people sometimes.”⁽²⁷⁾

Eldon's drinking problem initially sparked when he was at a very young age, when he used to witness his mother being violently abused by her companion. “Love an' shame never mix,” he tells Frank. “One's always gonna be runnin' roughshod over the other. Lovin' her. Feelin' guilt an' shame then gettin' angry as hell at myself.”⁽²⁸⁾ Finding himself stuck in a vicious cycle of pain, regret and lots of alcoholism, Eldon's health got gradually weaker as he got older and even more bitter by the painful memories that perpetuate to haunt him. Therefore, as a means for redemption to his past sins Eldon requests Franklin to accompany him on a journey in the ragged landscapes of British Columbia in order to bury him the Warrior way which is a burial tradition in indigenous culture. Throughout their walk together, both Eldon and Franklin come to terms with their past conflicts, each confiding to the other his deepest sorrows and darkest fears. As a way to justify his drinking addiction, Eldon explains to Frank, “The dark [...] always sucked me back into drinkin'. I woke up to the belief that I'd always lose or destroy them things or people that meant the most to me cuz I always done that.”⁽²⁹⁾

Among Eldon's very rare instances of sobriety occur when he meets Angie, Bunky and Frank. For him these are the moments that require his full presence and consciousness, “Eldon's drinking often connects to the personal shame he feels, but he sobers up after meeting Angie and Bunky.”⁽³⁰⁾ Therefore, Eldon chooses alcohol as an escape from the judgmental society he lives in. While people constantly point out his foibles and past mistakes, Angie and Bunky are the exceptions; they see the good in him, allowing Eldon to feel free from self-shame and disgrace. When sober, Eldon tends to be more present and less numb, as his sobriety re-awakens his senses and clarifies his perception of the the world around him. The narrator provides the following is a description of Eldon's unique state of sobriety:

It was the feel of the land at his back when he slept and the hearty, moist promise of it rising from everything. It was the feeling of the hackles rising slowly on the back of your neck when there was a bear yards away in the bush and the catch in the throat at the sudden explosion of an eagle from a tree. It was also the feel of water from a mountain spring. Ice like light splashed over your face. The old man brought him to all of that.⁽³¹⁾

4-2- Taboos Surrounding Trauma and Mental Health in *Medicine Walk*:

Trauma is a prevalent mental health condition in Indigenous communities, particularly in Canada, as Peter Menzies explains “many of the mental health conditions Aboriginal people are suffering from are a direct result of the relationship Aboriginal people have had

historically to the Canadian government.”⁽³²⁾. At a very young age indigenous children are forcibly snatched away from their indigenous families, and put into Canadian residential schools and foster homes so as to annihilate their cultural identity, leading these children to face severe consequences including trauma and chronic mental health challenges. In *Medicine Walk*, for instance, the characters’ traumas are reflected in their shared experiences with losses, emotional abuse, cultural obliteration and death.

Wagamese’s *Medicine Walk* explores a variety of taboo-related themes, including personal and social taboos, particularly the impact of psychological trauma on the characters’ lives. In the novel, the characters’ traumatic experiences are passed down from one generation to the next creating what is known as intergenerational trauma. However, each character copes with his or her perpetuating pains, and traumatic experiences differently. While Eldon turns to alcohol as a way to numb his pain, his son, Franklin, handles his trauma more introspectively, analyzing his father’s actions and attempting to understand his motives. Despite being completely traumatized by his father’s drinking problem, and his abandonment at a very young age Franklin did not hate him, instead, he chose to confront his fears and seek answers to the lingering questions surrounding his relationship with his estranged father.

Franklin’s inherited trauma is manifested in his introspection and reticent nature. Unlike Eldon, who copes with his trauma outwardly through alcohol abuse. For Franklin “he’d grown comfortable with aloneness and he bore an economy with words that was blunt, direct, more a man’s talk than a kid’s. So that people found his silence odd and they avoided him, the obdurate Indian look of him unnerving even for a sixteen-year old.”⁽³³⁾. One of the reasons behind Franklin’s wise and mature conduct in handling his sorrows is Bunky, or the old man, a white non-Indigenous man who loved Franklin’s mother, Angie, so dearly that he adopted her son after her passing. The old man was Franklin’s role model as he instilled in the latter noble moral values such as the value of hard work especially farm work and the importance of nature as an undeniable source for peace and harmony.

Another form of trauma in the novel arises from the characters’ experiences with the loss of their mothers. Both Eldon and Franklin were distanced from the nurturing warmth of their mothers. Each was separated from his own mother for different reasons: Eldon by physical abuse and Franklin by death. The absence of the mother in both characters’ lives has a deep impact on their psychological development and the accumulation of trauma. Frank’s lack of a mother figure in his life, results in his sense of disconnection and lack of belonging. Thus, feeling unable to fill the void left by Franklin’s mother, Eldon left his son. Instead, he immersed himself in a whirlpool of alcohol to forget his helplessness and despair, as he describes it “All’s I could do was walk away because I guess I come to know right there that some holes get filled when people die. Dirt fills ‘em. But other holes, well, ya walk around with them holes in ya forever and there weren’t nothin’ in the world to say about that. Nothin’.”⁽³⁴⁾.

5- Taboo Destigmatization through Language and Storytelling:

In his groundbreaking work *Medicine Walk*, Richard Wagamese destigmatizes taboo topics related to the Indigenous community through a carefully crafted language. The author’s construction of a powerful narrative, blending precise diction, figurative language, and dialogue, paves the way for a deeper understanding and empathy toward the characters’ experiences. The novel’s title *Medicine Walk* serves as a metaphor for the journey, both physical and emotional, that Eldon and Franklin undertake. This journey ultimately leads to the healing of their strained relationship. Moreover, the journey, referred to as a ‘medicine walk,’ symbolizes the importance of communication in a father-son relationship, and its healing effects on their psyches, as they approach their destination, the characters gradually open up, sharing their fears and reproaches with each other.

Furthermore, Wagamese utilizes storytelling as a vital tool through which he tackles taboo topics. Woven into the mold of everyday conversations between the characters, the story looks into the intricacies of the human relationships. Thus, this normalization of sensitive

topics through natural dialogue helps to destigmatize them. For example, the sharing of stories between Eldon and Frank helps repair their relationship, fostering understanding, and promoting healing. Eldon's tendency to tell stories of his past stems from his own childhood memories when his own mother used to share stories of her own past. This transmission of stories across generations embodies the Indigenous people's efforts to preserve their cultural heritage through oral tradition and storytelling.

Throughout their dialogue the tone of conversation for both characters' changes, ranging from a mockingly satirical tone to a more serious and emotional one. At the beginning of their journey Franklin mocked his father's sudden interest in him, stating "Guess you're doing your Father thing now?"⁽³⁵⁾ Yet, as their conversation gets more and more serious and deep, Franklin seems to gain more empathy towards his father's motives especially when the latter expressed sincere remorse for his past actions, hence the tone of the conversation changes, marking a positive shift in their relationship. Thus, it can be inferred that both characters' relationship stages can be tracked by the fluctuating dynamic of their conversational tone.

Angie, Frank's mother, is another character that's associated with storytelling. For Angie storytelling is a cathartic process that cleanses people's souls from their past sorrows and pains. Upon his return from the Korean war where he experienced traumatizing moments, including the moment he had to end Jimmy's life after being shot by the enemy, Eldon developed a post-traumatic stress disorder, which is a disorder that develops in people who have experienced traumatic events resulting in feelings of depression, melancholy and constant distress⁽³⁶⁾. To help her husband overcome his depression "Angie persistently pesters Eldon with questions, stubborn in her attempts to break through his walls constructed by PTSD." So as to compel Eldon to open up Angie addresses him saying "Watching you, you're like a kid with a stick making circles in the sand because you don't know how to shape words yet."⁽³⁷⁾ Hence, Angie's efforts to break the taboo of communicating mental health issues are evidence of the importance of storytelling as a means of psychological healing.

In indigenous culture, names are of paramount importance. When indigenous babies are born spiritual ceremonial acts should be performed by wise elders so as to decide their names, for according to them, not only does a person's name represent his identity but it also foreshadows his fate and role in indigenous community. Accordingly, in the novel, the name Starlight, which is the family name of Eldon and Franklin, bears a great symbolic significance. While discussing the origins of their family name, Eldon addresses Franklin saying "I never even knew where my name came from. Never Thought to ask." Eldon's ignorance of the origin of his own name clearly epitomizes his displaced sense of identity. It was only through his friend in the Korean War, Jimmy, who told him what his name meant "Starlight's a teacher's name. Jimmy told me that." Then he continues to explain "He (Jimmy) said that a man oughta know why he's called what he is. You oughta know that too, Frank."⁽³⁸⁾ Despite his ignorance of his own lineage, through telling this story, Eldon emphasizes to Franklin the necessity of knowing one's cultural heritage and identity.

6- Reconciliation as a Key to Healing:

Franklin and Eldon's journey can be interpreted as a rite of passage, marking significant milestones in their evolving relationship as father and son. As Eldon gradually opens up to Frank, sharing his stories and fears, their relationship undergoes a transformation. Frank gains empathy and understanding for the challenges Eldon faced and the reasons behind his past actions. Therefore, the novel highlights the undeniable power of empathy and forgiveness in building resilience and healing from past trauma. Only through reconciliation and empathy can individuals gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world at large. This understanding enhances their ability to process emotions, paving the way for peace and personal growth. Throughout their journey, both characters express their deepest feelings and pains to one another, fostering mutual understanding and reconnecting on a deeper level. Despite his reticent nature, Franklin finally confides in his father: "I ain't never had no hurt

like that. But I think I get it now.” Amazed by his son’s extraordinary capacity for understanding, Eldon responds: “I’m surprised you don’t hate me outright.”⁽³⁹⁾

During his final moments, Eldon comes to the realization of his past sins, repeatedly apologizing to Franklin “I’m sorry... I’m sorry.”⁽⁴⁰⁾ Eldon’s urgent need for forgiveness demonstrates that despite his past mistakes, he is willing to change, and to reconcile with his son. On the other hand, Franklin’s eagerness to listen to his father’s stories throughout their journey reflects his capacity to forgive and let go of negative feelings, as well as his desire to move beyond the need for punishment for his father’s past failings. Moreover, Eldon’s heart-wrenching sense of guilt over abandoning his son leaves Franklin feeling empathetic and willing to let go of their past hostility. After listening to his father’s stories and understanding the motives behind his actions, Franklin addresses his father with a mix of blame and understanding: “You shoulda told me the whole story a long time ago.” Eldon responds, “I don’t know that I coulda.”⁽⁴¹⁾ By reproaching his father for not reaching out sooner, Franklin shows that he has always been open to forgiveness and reconciliation with his estranged father. Additionally, this conversation between Eldon and Franklin reveals Eldon’s long-standing desire to reconnect with his son, though his efforts were hindered by fear and shame.

The novel’s title *Medicine Walk* is an acknowledgement of the therapeutic effects the natural environment has on human beings. For the journey undertaken by both characters in the bosom of nature exhibits a symbolic quest for reconciliation and healing. In indigenous culture, nature holds a quite sacred position, its where spiritual ceremonies and rituals are usually performed. In the same vein, following the traditional Ojibway burial practices, Eldon’s last wish was to be buried the warriors’ way, according to Ojibway traditions, warriors and brave men are buried in nature, in which the deceased faces east while in a sitting position as if he is still alive and watching from afar his victories looming from the horizon. Hence, by choosing this type of burial, Eldon finally reconciles with his past, and is no longer guilt-ridden. Eldon’s self-perception shifts from seeing himself as a helpless alcoholic, to a hero. This mirrors the positive transformation of his relationship with his son and being able to accept his past and gain Franklin’s forgiveness, Eldon was finally able to die in peace. On that account, “the medicine walk” both characters embarked on is ultimately crowned with healing to their emotional wounds and a resuscitation to their relationship.

Conclusion:

In their literary works Indigenous authors use personal and social taboos as a potent tool to explore and depict cultural identity and heritage, fostering healing and resurgence within these communities. By incorporating taboo topics, words and ideas into their narratives, these authors can dig into the intricacies of indigenous values, and beliefs, offering a better understanding of their cultural heritage by redressing mainstream worldviews and misconceptions regarding the indigenous community. Therefore, taboos serve as a lens throughout which authors can address a plethora of topics deemed to be highly sensitive, such as historical and intergenerational trauma, cultural erasure, alcohol abuse, among others. While in the meantime highlighting the resilience and indefatigability of indigenous people.

Throughout his masterpiece *Medicine Walk*, Wagamese manages to challenge stereotypical narratives, and celebrate the richness and heterogeneity of his Indigenous culture. By integrating taboo themes and topics into the narrative, Wagamese aims to provide readers with a close look at the nuances of indigenous people’s experiences, the impact of intergenerational trauma, and the importance of storytelling in offering insight into their traditions and identity by redressing mainstream worldviews. Moreover, through showcasing the characters’ interactions with taboos, and with one another, Wagamese discloses the resilience and strength of Indigenous communities in the face of their multiple hardships. To conclude, indigenous authors use personal and cultural taboos to probe, celebrate, and preserve heritage, contributing to a more authentic representation of their culture in literature.

Endnotes:

- 1- Foucault, M. *Madness and civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, p. 27.
- 2- Florin Bu u, A. “Taboo In Language And Literature.” pp. 323-333

- 3- In an attempt to discover the Northwest Passage between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific coast of North America James cook set sail to find himself in a different route that is Tonga island or as he named it the “friendly island”, in which he made contact with the native inhabitants. Later Cook extended his stay to better explore the natives’ costumes, practices and traditions.
- 4- Frazer, J. *Taboos and the Perils of the Soul*, p. 92.
- 5- Bergner, S. *Taboo Subjects: Race, Sex, and Psychoanalysis*, p. 136.
- 6- Campbell, M. *Halfbreed*, p. 127.
- 7- Horlacher, S. *Taboo and Transgression in British Literature from the Renaissance to the Present*, p. 92.
- 8- Freud, S. *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, p. 55.
- 9- Ibid. p. 56.
- 10- Tyson, L. “Psychoanalytic Criticism. In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*.” p. 127.
- 11- Tarzian, M. Ndrio, M., et al. “An Introduction and Brief Overview of Psychoanalysis.” p. 9.
- 12- Bernays, E. *Propaganda*. p. 45.
- 13- Slotnik, E. “Richard Wagamese, Whose Writing Explored His Ojibwe Heritage, Dies at 61”, p. 15.
- 14- Croston, J. “Book Review: ‘Medicine Walk’ by Richard Wagamese”. p. 6.
- 15- Mackey, M. “Contemporary Adult Canadian Books for Strong Teen Readers.” p. 23.
- 16- Schorcht, B. “Story Words: An Interview with Richard Wagamese.” Pp. 74-91.
- 17- Milton, J. Sundarsingh, J. “Prudentia: An Analysis of Select Novels by Richard Wagamese”. p. 48.
- 18- Szenczi, E. “Métis and first nations autobiographies as a means of healing”. Pp. 7.
- 19- Mackey, M. “Contemporary Adult Canadian Books for Strong Teen Readers”. p. 14.
- 20- Browne, Ray B. *Forbidden Fruits: Taboos and Tabooism in Culture*. p. 2.
- 21- Rahmayani, D. P., & Fitrawati, F. “Analysis Types and Functions of Taboo Words in the Wolf of Wall Street Movie”. p. 3.
- 22- Wagamese, R. *Medicine Walk*. p. 23.
- 23- Mackey, M. “Contemporary Adult Canadian Books for Strong Teen Readers”. p. 20.
- 24- Health Canada. “A second diagnostic on the health of first nations and Inuit people in C anada”, p. 5.
- 25- Wagamese, R. *Medicine Walk*. p. 18.
- 26- Ibid., p. 21.
- 27- Ibid., p. 18.
- 28- Ibid., p. 35.
- 29- Ibid., p. 87.
- 30- Ibid., p. 101.
- 31- Ibid., p. 32.
- 32- Menzies, P. “Intergenerational Trauma from a Mental Health Perspective”, p. 64.
- 33- Wagamese, R. *Medicine Walk*. p. 140.
- 34- Ibid., p. 204.
- 35- Ibid., p. 78.
- 36- PTSD: stands for post-traumatic stress disorder, is a psychological disorder that affects people having experienced traumatic events in their lives such as military exposure or a strong personal distress which will lead them eventually to behave in quite defensive and tense manners.
- 37- Wagamese, R. *Medicine Walk*. p. 196.
- 38- Ibid., p. 185.
- 39- Ibid., p. 245.
- 40- Ibid., p. 234.
- 41- Ibid., p. 246.

References:

- 1- Bergner, S. (2005). *Taboo Subjects: Race, Sex, and Psychoanalysis*. University of Minnesota Press.
- 2- Bernays, E. (1928). *Propaganda*. Simon & Schuster.
- 3- Browne, Ray B. (1984). *Forbidden Fruits: Taboos and Tabooism in Culture*. Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- 4- Campbell, M. (1973). *Halfbreed*, Halifax, Goodread Biographies.
- 5- Cook, J. Beaglehole, J. (1962) *The Journals of Captain James Cook: The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure* (vol.2). Cambridge University Press: UK.

- 6- Croston, J. (2016). "Book Review: 'Medicine Walk' by Richard Wagamese". Banff Centre for Arts and creativity. Accessed: February 2024.
- 7- Florin Bu u, A. (2023). "Taboo in Language and Literature." In E. Soare, & C. Langa (Eds.), *Education Facing Contemporary World Issues - EDU WORLD 2022*, vol 5. European Proceedings of Educational Sciences (pp.323-333). European Publisher.
- 8- Foucault, M. (1988) *Madness and civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Vintage books.
- 9- Frazer, J. (1911). *Taboos and the Perils of the Soul*. Macmillan: London.
- 10- Freud, S. (1913). *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Translated by Abraham Brill and James Strachey, Beacon Press.
- 11- Health Canada. (1999). "A second diagnostic on the health of first nations and Inuit people in Canada." Ottawa: Supply and Services. Accessed: March 2024.
- 12- Horlacher, S. (2013). *Taboo and Transgression in British Literature from the Renaissance to the Present*. Cambridge University Press: UK.
- 13- Mackey, M. (2006). "Contemporary Adult Canadian Books for Strong Teen Readers". Edmonton: University of Alberta School of Library & Information Studies.
- 14- Menzies, P. (2010). "Intergenerational Trauma from a Mental Health Perspective". *Native Social Work Journal*, Vol 07, Toronto.
- 15- Milton, J. Sundarsingh, J. (2020). "Prudentia: An Analysis of Select Novels by Richard Wagamese." *Solid State Technology*, vol.63 (2020).
- 16- Schorcht, B. (2008). "Story Words: An Interview with Richard Wagamese." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol.20: 74-91.
- 17- Slotnik, E. (2017). "Richard Wagamese, Whose Writing Explored His Ojibwe Heritage, Dies at 61". *New York Times*. nytimes.com. Accessed: October 2023.
- 18- Szenczi, E. (2018). "Métis and first nations autobiographies as a means of healing." Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, France.
- 19- Tarzian, M. Ndrio, M., et al. (2023) "An Introduction and Brief Overview of Psychoanalysis." *Cureus*. 2023 Sep 13;15(9) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10575551/> Accessed: April 2024.
- 20- Tyson, L. (1999). "Psychoanalytic Criticism. In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*." New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- 21- Wagamese, R. (2012). *Indian Horse*. Douglas & McIntyre.
- 22- Wagamese, R. (2010) *Keeper'n Me*. Vintage Canada.
- 23- Wagamese, R. (2014). *Medicine Walk*. Milkweed editions: Canada.
- 24- Wagamese, R. (2011). *One Story, One Song*. Douglas & McIntyre: Vancouver.