



Agency of Canadian Indigenous Women: Status and Community Roles in Joseph Boyden's *The Orenda*

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Abstract

Joseph Boyden's *The Orenda* offers a profound exploration of Indigenous women's agency in the face of colonial domination. Through characters like Snow Falls, Gosling, and Carries an Axe, the novel showcases women as warriors, cultural preservers, and spiritual leaders, challenging stereotypical depictions that confine them to passive roles. Despite the intrusion of Jesuit missionaries seeking to convert Indigenous peoples, Boyden emphasises the resilience of women who continue to maintain and transmit their cultural practices. The paper examines how *The Orenda* portrays Indigenous women's roles as central to both community survival and resistance to colonial forces. While Boyden occasionally relies on stereotypes, the novel ultimately underscores the complex and essential agency of Indigenous women in preserving their culture and identity amidst colonial disruption. This article highlights the importance of Indigenous women in resisting colonial narratives and contributing to the endurance of their communities.

Keywords

Indigenous women, Colonial resistance, Cultural agency, *The Orenda*, Joseph Boyden

I. Introduction

Joseph Boyden's *The Orenda* offers an insightful yet complex portrayal of Indigenous life during early encounters between Canadian First Nations and European settlers, especially the Jesuit missionaries. Set against a backdrop of violent intertribal rivalry and colonial imposition, Boyden's narrative illustrates the central role Indigenous women play in preserving cultural practices, asserting agency, and navigating a world drastically reshaped by colonial forces. By focusing on characters like Snow Falls, Gosling, and Carries an Axe, the novel depicts Indigenous women's agency through their involvement in warrior-like acts, spiritual leadership, and everyday community roles, challenging common stereotypes that restrict Indigenous women to passive or secondary roles. This exploration seeks to understand how Boyden's *The Orenda* reflects Indigenous women's agency as

both individual and collective strength, highlighting their vital contributions in maintaining cultural continuity and resisting colonial pressures. Through moments where women engage as warriors, spiritual guides, and cultural stewards, the novel reshapes the narrative around Indigenous identity, showing how women's resilience is intricately woven into the survival and resistance of their communities.

Warrior Identity and Cultural Agency of Women

Women in the novel *The Orenda* by Joseph Boyden are depicted as powerful cultural agents, yet their identity and influence are frequently shaped by the forces of colonialism, internal rivalries among Indigenous groups, and traditional gender expectations. Boyden intricately examines how the warrior identity and cultural agency of Indigenous women evolve, especially as they navigate violence, self-preservation, and cultural preservation in the face of colonial domination.

The notion of warrior identity for Indigenous women, particularly within the context of the novel, highlights how women's roles extended beyond traditional domestic spaces. For instance, the character of Carries an Axe challenges conventional gender roles when she interrupts a conversation, stating, "Not to worry...Your daughter is a better warrior than I am. She killed her first Haudenosaunee this morning" (Boyden 326). This statement reflects a significant shift in the portrayal of women, who, in the context of Indigenous warfare and survival, possess agency through their ability to fight back. Women who demonstrated the strength to defend themselves and their community through violence earned the recognition of being warriors, much like their male counterparts. The act of engaging in combat for self-preservation is significant in understanding how women's roles in warfare were integral to the survival of their communities, especially in the face of colonial pressures and inter-tribal conflict.

Women's warrior identities are also tied to their role as protectors of culture and identity. According to Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt (342), agency in many North American Indigenous



communities is intricately linked to power and the spiritual dimensions of survival. Women, in this regard, wield not only physical strength but also spiritual and cultural power. Their connection to the land and their ability to pass down traditions and teachings ensure the continuity of Indigenous cultures, even under the threat of external forces. Women's cultural agency, therefore, becomes a form of resistance, as they become the key transmitters of knowledge, spiritual practices, and cultural heritage, essential for the community's survival.

The novel presents an image of violence that is deeply embedded in the social fabric of Indigenous communities and emphasises that violence, while often portrayed as an inherent aspect of Indigenous societies, also serves as a tool of survival against external threats, particularly the colonisers. The tension between the Wendat and Haudenosaunee, as depicted in the novel, showcases the brutality of inter-tribal rivalries and the imposition of colonial powers. Madsen (217) argues that the novel depicts the "brutality of the delicate cultural balance between the Wendat and the Haudenosaunee," underscoring the complex relationships that define the social and political structure within Indigenous communities. In this context, women's warrior roles are not just symbolic but practical, serving as essential components of cultural defence.

The complex portrayal of women's agency in the novel also involves their authority within Indigenous cultural practices. The authority women hold in maintaining cultural traditions, despite their often-limited autonomy in the larger social and political spheres is illustrated. This is evident in the character of Gosling, the Anishinaabe medicine woman, who represents spiritual and cultural authority. As Boyden (189) writes, "I can feel the eyes of the women watching me. They can teach me some things but they can't teach me all of it," indicating that while women are teachers of tradition and spirituality, their role is confined by certain societal expectations and limitations. While women guide younger generations and keep cultural practices alive, they are often unable to fully shape their own destinies within the broader framework of the community.

In addition to cultural preservation, the role of women is highlighted through their role in agricultural and spiritual practices. The passage "THE DAYS NOW are spent with the women working the fields, the men out in the forest clearing it, or on the water fishing" (Boyden 195) highlights the division of labour between men and women.

While men are tasked with hunting and preparing for warfare, women are primarily responsible for agriculture, which is critical for the community's survival. Their role in food production signifies not just practical contributions but also a spiritual responsibility, as the land is regarded as sacred in many Indigenous belief systems. Women, therefore, wield agency through their connection to the land, ensuring the community's sustenance and spiritual well-being.

The warrior identity of women is further explored in the context of their involvement in the rivalry between the Haudenosaunee and Wendat. As Boyden notes, "With my own eyes I've seen women shooting their bows at distant targets, every bit as talented as any of the men as they try to win quill-work belts or necklaces or strings of beads" (Boyden 86). This passage emphasizes that women's engagement in warfare is not merely a passive or symbolic act but an active and competitive part of their identity. They participate in the physical challenges of warfare, often alongside men, and their abilities are recognized as being equal to those of the male warriors. The competitive aspect of women's participation in warfare, through acts such as archery and other forms of combat, is an extension of their warrior identity, which challenges the stereotypical view of women as merely passive supporters of male-driven narratives.

Despite their involvement in warfare and their prominent cultural roles, the stereotypical portrayal of Indigenous women as either victims or seductresses remains a dominant theme in literature and popular culture. As Labelle (428) points out, the portrayal of women as "innocent, male-dominated warfare prizes" or "seductive and elusive shamans" limits their agency by reducing them to archetypes that reinforce colonial views of Indigenous women. These stereotypes not only diminish the real, complex roles that women held within their communities but also fail to recognize their full agency in both resisting colonialism and maintaining their cultures. The novel, however, makes a significant contribution to reshaping the narrative by presenting a more multifaceted view of women in Indigenous societies. Boyden emphasises the struggle of Indigenous women to maintain their cultural agency amidst the violent realities of colonialism and inter-tribal conflict. The identity and agency of these women, shaped by their roles as warriors, cultural stewards, and protectors of their communities, is integral to the survival of their peoples. Their participation in warfare, agriculture, and spiritual practices demonstrates their multifaceted roles in their communities and the



significant power they held, both in preserving culture and resisting colonial domination. Through the lens of these women's warrior identities, the novel offers a more subtle and empowering understanding of their contributions to both their communities and the broader Indigenous struggle for survival and autonomy.

Colonialism and Stereotyped Depictions

The Orenda vividly explores the impact of colonialism on Indigenous communities, focusing on the encroachment of Jesuit missionaries and the resulting consequences for Indigenous women. Portrayal of Indigenous women, particularly through characters like Snow Falls and Gosling, captures both the historical reality of colonial imposition and the stereotypical representations often ascribed to these women in literature.

The Jesuit missionaries represent a powerful colonial force that seeks to transform the spiritual and cultural practices of the Indigenous people. Their mission to convert the "Indian savages" (Baskatawang 7) is framed as part of a broader effort to undermine Indigenous authority and reshape their way of life, particularly through the imposition of Christianity. The arrival of these colonial forces directly impacts the role of Indigenous women, as their traditional positions of spiritual and social influence are threatened. Women such as Gosling, a medicine woman, whose authority stems from her cultural role, find themselves at odds with the missionary objective of erasing Indigenous beliefs. However, Boyden's depiction of these women often aligns with the stereotypes that have been historically imposed on Indigenous women, which restricts the complexity of their characters and their ability to fully embody resistance.

One of the central stereotypes in the novel is that of the victimised Indigenous woman, seen in the character of Snow Falls. As both a captive and a prize in warfare, Snow Falls is defined largely by her victimisation, reduced to an object of male competition. While her escape and survival highlight her resilience, her story largely revolves around the violence inflicted upon her. This portrayal reflects a historical reality where Indigenous women were often seen as spoils of war, but it also limits Snow Falls' agency, reducing her identity to that of a passive victim. Gosling, on the other hand, represents a more mysticised version of the Indigenous woman. As a medicine woman, her power is closely tied to the sexualized and mystical image of the "other" often found in Western depictions of Indigenous peoples. While Gosling is

a key figure in maintaining the spiritual health of her community, she is also depicted as a figure of sexual allure, which, as Labelle notes, reduces her complexity by tying her power to her sexuality (428). The stereotype of the "mystical" Indigenous woman is a common trope in colonial narratives, where women's power is often framed as mysterious, exotic, and dangerous. While Gosling's role as a spiritual leader is significant, it is still confined within the bounds of a stereotype that undermines her agency and depth. Boyden's portrayal of Gosling risks reinforcing these tropes, diminishing her as a fully realized character with autonomy beyond her mysticised role.

Boyden's reliance on these stereotypes of Indigenous women reflects the broader historical reality of colonialism, where Indigenous women were often either marginalized or objectified. The arrival of Jesuit missionaries in the novel not only undermines Indigenous spiritual practices but also imposes a rigid patriarchal structure that limits women's roles. The missionaries' efforts to "civilize" the Indigenous peoples reflect a broader colonial agenda that sought to disempower women by relegating them to passive, subservient roles. By casting women like Snow Falls and Gosling into these stereotypical positions, Boyden reflects the historical forces that sought to strip Indigenous women of their agency, but he also risks reinforcing these stereotypes in his narrative.

However, despite the constraints imposed by colonialism and the stereotypes that shape their portrayal, the women in *The Orenda* are not entirely passive. Boyden's characters, though often portrayed through the lens of victimhood or mysticism, still embody forms of resistance. Snow Falls, in her escape from captivity, asserts a degree of autonomy and agency that allows her to survive and navigate the violence of her circumstances. Similarly, Gosling, as a medicine woman, resists the missionaries' efforts to convert her people by continuing to uphold her spiritual traditions. These acts of resistance, though limited by the stereotypes Boyden employs, suggest that Indigenous women played a crucial role in preserving their culture and asserting their agency in the face of colonial domination.

The tension between Boyden's portrayal of these women as both victims and resisters underscores the complexity of Indigenous women's roles during the colonial period. While they were subjected to violence and marginalization, they also played active roles in maintaining their communities' cultural integrity and resisting colonial ideologies. Boyden's depiction of Snow



Falls and Gosling highlights the unique forms of resistance that Indigenous women embodied, both within their communities and against the forces of colonialism. However, these portrayals are also hindered by the limitations of colonial stereotypes, which reduce the depth and complexity of their agency. Boyden's work, while powerful in its historical depiction of colonialism's effects, serves as a reminder of the challenges faced by Indigenous women in both resisting colonial power and resisting the limitations imposed by colonial portrayals.

Characters like Snow Falls and Gosling reflect the historical realities of colonial subjugation, they also align with certain stereotypes that restrict the depth of these women's characters.

Spirituality, Land, and Cultural Stewardship

Boyden explores the profound connections between Indigenous women, spirituality, land, and cultural stewardship in the novel. These elements form a critical part of the narrative, illustrating how women navigate their agency to preserve the cultural integrity of their societies. Through the novel, Boyden highlights the role of Indigenous women as stewards of both land and tradition, emphasizing their responsibility in maintaining the spiritual and cultural practices that define their communities.

Indigenous women in the novel serve as central figures in the stewardship of the land. In many Indigenous cultures, the land is not merely a resource for survival but a sacred entity, central to spiritual beliefs and communal identity. Women's roles in agriculture and land cultivation are emblematic of their responsibility to care for and maintain these connections. In the Wendat community, women are described as responsible for working the fields, cultivating the land, and ensuring the community's survival. Boyden describes the division of labour between men and women: "THE DAYS NOW are spent with the women working the fields, the men out in the forest clearing it, or on the water fishing" (Boyden 195). This illustrates the essential role women play in food production, which is not only a physical necessity but a spiritual act, ensuring that the land remains productive and that the cultural ties to it are preserved.

In *The Orenda*, spirituality is intricately linked to the land, as is typical in many Indigenous belief systems. The novel reflects the Indigenous understanding that humans are not the masters of the earth but its caretakers. As one character reflects, "We are not the masters of the earth. We are the servants" (Boyden 162). This notion speaks to the

reciprocal relationship between the people and the land, where survival and spiritual well-being are intertwined. Women's work in agricultural activities is thus framed not only as a necessary task for sustenance but also as a sacred duty to the Earth. This deep connection to the land is a cornerstone of the Wendat and other First Nations cultures, and women's agency in preserving this bond is a key aspect of their spiritual and cultural leadership.

Indigenous women also play pivotal roles as cultural stewards, transmitting spiritual and cultural teachings to younger generations. They are responsible for preserving and passing down knowledge about the natural world, cultural rituals, and community practices. Boyden depicts women as the primary bearers of cultural wisdom, whose roles extend beyond the household to include the spiritual education of their people. In a powerful moment in the novel, one character reflects, "I can feel the eyes of the women watching me. They can teach me some things but they cannot teach me all of it" (Boyden 189). This line speaks to the depth of knowledge that Indigenous women hold—knowledge that is not only cultural but also deeply spiritual.

Women in *The Orenda* are portrayed as powerful figures whose spiritual authority is expressed through their connection to the land and their cultural practices. Characters like Gosling, the Anishinabe medicine woman, exemplify the strength and spiritual depth that women in these societies possess. Gosling's role as a shaman underscores the importance of women's spiritual leadership. As a healer, she not only possesses the ability to cure physical ailments but also acts as a bridge between the human world and the spiritual realm. Boyden's portrayal of Gosling emphasizes that women's power in Indigenous societies is often connected to their role as caretakers of the earth and its spiritual energy.

However, the novel also explores the ways in which colonialism threatens this agency. The Jesuits, representing colonial forces, impose Christianity on the Indigenous communities, seeking to replace their spiritual beliefs with European religious practices. Boyden uses the character of Snow Falls, the Haudenosaunee captive, to show the devastating impact of this forced conversion. While she symbolizes the complex dynamics of Indigenous women in warfare and captivity, Snow Falls is also a victim of the colonial imposition of Christianity, which seeks to undermine the spiritual practices that women like her would otherwise have preserved (Boyden 228). This narrative illustrates the colonial



disruption of women's roles in spiritual stewardship and cultural transmission.

The introduction of Christianity by the Jesuits is framed as a cultural erasure, one that marginalizes Indigenous spiritual beliefs. Boyden contrasts the Jesuit teachings with the Indigenous worldview, particularly the belief that "humans are the only ones in this world that need everything within it" (Boyden 162). In this philosophy, humans are seen as stewards of the earth, which is a belief that aligns with the role of women in nurturing the land and ensuring its continued fertility. The colonizers, however, view this spirituality as backward and unworthy, seeking to replace it with their own doctrines, which highlights the power imbalance between the Indigenous peoples and the colonial powers.

Despite the imposition of colonial ideologies, the women in *The Orenda* continue to embody their cultural and spiritual roles. They resist the imposition of foreign beliefs through acts of spiritual preservation and cultural resistance. The women's agency is not solely about individual power but also about protecting the collective identity of their communities. Boyden depicts this through the ways in which women like Snow Falls and Gosling navigate their roles as both spiritual leaders and cultural protectors, often in the face of violence and colonial pressure.

Boyden also addresses the internal conflicts among Indigenous communities, particularly the rivalry between the Wendat and Haudenosaunee. While these conflicts often place women in positions of vulnerability, they also highlight women's resilience and agency in navigating these complex power dynamics. The rivalry between the Wendat and Haudenosaunee often leads to women being captured or subjected to violence, yet they continue to play central roles in the spiritual and cultural practices of their people. Boyden illustrates this through the example of the Wendat community, where women's spiritual and cultural practices remain vital to the survival of the community despite the ongoing conflict with other Indigenous groups and the encroaching colonial forces.

Despite the challenges posed by colonialism, Indigenous women in the novel are portrayed as resilient figures who continue to protect and preserve their culture. Through these depictions, Boyden underscores the significance of women in the survival and preservation of Indigenous traditions and their ability to resist colonial forces through the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices.

II. Conclusion

In *The Orenda*, Joseph Boyden presents Indigenous women as key figures in the survival and resilience of their communities. Through their warrior-like spirit, cultural roles, and spiritual stewardship, women demonstrate agency that both challenges colonial domination and preserves their cultural identity. Although Boyden's narrative sometimes reflects stereotypes that can limit the depth of these characters, his depiction ultimately highlights the essential role of Indigenous women in navigating and resisting the dual pressures of intertribal conflict and colonial imposition. By capturing both the resilience and complexity of Indigenous women's roles, the novel becomes a powerful testament to their agency, illustrating how they serve as vital anchors in the preservation of their culture amidst an era of profound upheaval. This exploration of Indigenous women's agency provides a deeper understanding of their significance not only within their communities but also in the broader historical narrative of resistance against colonial forces in Canada.

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