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**Revival and Resurgence: Indigenous Myth, Religion and Cultural Interactions  
in Cherie Dimaline's *Empire of Wild***

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**Abstract:** Indigenous way of living harmonises the spirit of the land, language, culture, and religion. The legends and myths that thrive in the community are a record of their way of life. The Métis are the indigenous community from Canada with unique history, culture, and ethos. As an indigenous writer belonging to Métis community, Cherie Dimaline's works present an opportunity to explore the indigenous perspectives on religion and the myths. Her novel, *Empire of the Wild* offers a contemporary world torn between the resurgence of indigenous myths and the dominant belief systems that negates those myths. Through the postcolonial lens, this paper unravels the interconnectedness of indigenous myths, spirituality, and identity. This paper explores how Dimaline weaves traditional stories with contemporary issues, illustrating both the resilience of Indigenous spirituality and the adaptations made in response to external religious pressures.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, Métis, Religion, Myth.

**Introduction:** Myths and legends in a culture suggest the underlying beliefs and value systems prevalent in that culture. The stories and folktales present within a community speak about their inherent faith in the natural world and their life experiences. Myths in indigenous communities carry the essence of their way of life and their deep connection to nature, often serving as a means of passing down traditions and teachings from generation to generation. These stories also reflect the cultural identity and collective memory of the community, shaping their understanding of the world around them and provide explanations for natural phenomena or historical events that are connected to their identity. Myths are passed down through generations, preserving the cultural heritage and traditions of the community. Through these myths, indigenous communities maintain a strong sense of cultural identity and connection to their ancestral roots, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity in their way of life. "Myth is not only a tale that is told, it is a living force that shapes the life and actions of a community, reflecting and guiding its beliefs and values" (Lévi-Strauss 25).

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Myths are crucial components of ethnic culture, helping humans evolve and maintain their origins, while also preserving the oldest system of values and shaping society's structure.

The Métis Nation are a group of distinct indigenous communities who live in Canada. The word Métis evolved from the Latin word, *mixtus* which means mixed. According to the website called Métis Nations of Ontario, "The Métis Nation is comprised of descendants of people born of relations between First Nations women and European men." Over the years, the Métis developed a unique culture, language, and way of life. Their mixed heritage places them in a unique peripheral position in the Indigenous landscape. However, the Métis have carved a niche for themselves with their identity as a community of mixed race. This distinct cultural identity has been recognized by the Canadian government, leading to the establishment of Métis rights and recognition. The Métis people have faced challenges in preserving their culture and traditions, but continue to thrive as a resilient and vibrant community. Despite facing discrimination and marginalization in the past, the Métis have persevered and continue to assert their cultural identity. Today, they play a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape of Canada. One of the ways in which the Métis have made significant contributions is through literature. Métis writers have used their unique experiences and perspectives to create powerful works that reflect their culture, history, and struggles. Through poetry, storytelling, and prose, Métis authors have shared their stories with the world, enriching Canadian literature with their voices. Their work not only serves as a means of preserving their heritage but also contributes to the diversity and richness of Canadian literary tradition.

Cherie Dimaline is a Métis writer and a member of the Georgian Bay Métis Council of the Métis Nation of Ontario who has published several novels. Her novel *Empire of Wild* was published in 2019. The novel was well received for its portrayal of Métis community. The novel depicts the story of a Métis woman called Joan Beausoliel whose husband, Victor goes missing for over a year. Her frantic search brings her close to the living legends and tales in the community. Victor's disappearance and transformation into a mythical being makes for a compelling read as well as offers an insight into the beliefs and traditions in the Métis community. The novel revolves around the central themes of environment, religion, and myth. Dimaline's novel offers a unique exploration of indigenous culture and their interactions with the dominant western religion. This paper explores the elements of Indigenous myth and religion. It delves into how these elements are portrayed in the novel and the significance they hold for the characters. Through a close analysis of Dimaline's work, this paper aims to shed light on the complexities of Indigenous spirituality and its intersection with contemporary issues. This exploration is significant, especially in understanding the cultural resurgence of Indigenous communities. It provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which traditional beliefs and practices are being maintained and adapted in the modern world. It is important to appreciate and understand marginalised communities through their writings as it fosters inclusivity and representation.

**Theoretical Framework:** This paper adopts a theoretical framework of combining postcolonialism and theory of myth. These perspectives augment our understanding of the indigenous revival and resurgence particularly when these communities are systematically made subversive to the dominant culture. Their revival is observed as a decolonizing method to assert their identity. Using Linda Tuhiwai Smith's concept of "decolonizing methodologies" this analysis foregrounds that the indigenous voices are a form of resistance against the cultural dominance. Claude Levi Strauss' theory of myth as a cultural structure offers a unique understanding of Cherie Dimaline's reimagination of the traditional myths in the Metis community, especially the myth around the mythical creature, the Rogarou. This theoretical framework enables a better comprehension of indigenous beliefs, settler colonialism and how myths and legends in a community are deeply entangled with the land and memory. These stories that are revived serve as powerful resistance towards the cultural erasure.

**Analysis:** *Empire of Wild* is a powerful narrative interconnecting myth and the impact of dominant religion on the Métis community. The novel offers a unique perspective into the systemic workings of the dominant religion to subvert the indigenous cultures and their belief systems. The novel begins with the vivid history of how the Métis people came to settle down in the town called Arcand. Dimaline's opening lines, "Old medicine has a way of being remembered, of haunting the land where it was laid. People are forgetful, Medicine is not" (1) supposedly refers to the mythical belief systems that are prevalent yet dormant in the community. The Métis are sometimes referred to as half breeds because they were born out of the union between French Voyagers and First Nations mothers. Although the Métis were Catholics by habit and prayed on their knees, they also believed in the traditional belief systems and especially in the power of the bone salt in protecting them from the evil forces. "This salt came from the actual bones of one particular Red River family, who drew their own boundaries when the hand of God did not reach down to do it for them." (Dimaline 2) The bone salt is referred to as medicine. Dimaline indirectly refers to how the dominant faith is helpless when it comes to protecting the indigenous communities from the settler colonialism.

Dimaline uses the myth of rogarou to discuss the internalized end results of colonization. The characters in the novel suffer from guilt, cultural and spiritual alienation. The central aspect of the novel is the Métis mythical story of the creature called Rogarou. It is a human turned into a wolf. His evil presence lurked wherever the Métis lived. Dimaline remarks, "He was the threat from a hundred stories told by those old enough to remember the tales." (3) The looming danger of a rogarou is ever felt by the Métis when they commit a sin. Dimaline skillfully combines the dominant religious faith and the Métis mythical beliefs when she remarks, "Broke Lent? *The rogarou will come for you.* Slept with a married woman? *Rogarou will find you*" (3). She ironically undermines the dominance of Christianity by equally placing native beliefs and myths on par. This approach challenges traditional power dynamics and encourages a more inclusive understanding of spirituality. By highlighting the value of diverse belief systems, she promotes a sense of unity and mutual

respect among different cultures. Dimaline successfully combines the Christian guilt with the Métis mythology. The central character in the novel, Joan finds her husband, Victor, serving as a religious missionary preacher, Reverend Wolff. He has no knowledge of Joan or being married to her. Dimaline skilfully intersperses her revelation of the new Victor and the old one imprisoned in an alternate dimension. Victor has turned into a rogarou and has no knowledge of his identity. Dimaline's projection of the new Victor as a Christian preacher, Reverend Wolff, can be considered as a sharp criticism of the Christianity. A deep analysis of this aspect will be made in the next section of this paper.

Métis elder, Ajean notes that any man could become a rogarou. "Being attacked by a rogarou, mistreating women, betraying your people ... that's the ones we know around here anyways," (Dimaline 69) Victor's fight with Joan over selling the ancestral land makes him dash out of his home in a fit of rage. His mistreatment of his wife and his betrayal to sell the traditional lands to outsiders cause him to become prey to the prowling rogarou. As a young Métis, Joan does not possess the knowledge to fight the mythical creature to redeem her husband. She turns to Ajean, who possesses the traditional Métis knowledge of fighting this evil creature. Ajean agrees to help Joan, teaching her the necessary rituals and practices to confront the rogarou. With Ajean's guidance, Joan prepares herself for a dangerous and mystical battle to save her husband from the curse of the rogarou. The supernatural abilities of Ajean and her traditional knowledge of the medicine assures Joan of the help she needs to rescue her rogarou turned husband. The medicine is grown on the bodies of the indigenous people. This extra osseous matter grown on the Métis bodies prove to be the excellent source of protection from a rogarou. Ajean's words, "Someone figured out if you grind them up, they make salt. And you can protect yourself with it." (Dimaline 145) talks about the traditional Métis spiritual knowledge. Sprinkling the salt around the house will ward off any evil spirit or a rogarou. Dimaline skilfully juxtaposes this traditional Métis belief system along with the dominant western religion. Ajean's comment serves as a sharp criticism on the uninteresting lives of the white community without any history or ancestral knowledge.

"Wonder if the old white people in town know anything?" she mused, then answered her question. "No, that's the problem, them - no connections, no living in their old stories." (Dimaline, 137)

Ajean's words highlight the absence of storytelling from the lives of the dominant class. Myths and stories are the life source for the Indigenous living. Stories and myths hold cultural knowledge and wisdom that are passed down through generations, shaping beliefs and values. Without these narratives, the dominant class may lack a deep connection to their heritage and history.

Ajean helps Joan find the buried medicine of Joan's grandmother, Angelique. While unearthing the medicine from the ground, Ajean invokes a special magic to preserve the potency of the medicine. "We just need the right hands to free it. We need the right words to sing it back. Magic is patient like that." (Dimaline 140) Ajean leads Joan into this spiritual

journey to unearth her roots and the traditional Métis knowledge system. Ajean's contempt of Joan's disbelief in the myth of the bone salt asserts the resurgence of the Métis spirituality. A simple way to disarm a rogarou is to remind his human life under the facade of the monster. Symbolically, Dimaline critiques people who forget their cultural roots as turning into rogarou. The Métis, forgetting their cultural heritage and roots, are alien to their own people. Dimaline uses the rogarou as a metaphor for the loss of cultural identity and connection. By emphasizing the importance of remembering one's roots, she highlights the consequences of cultural amnesia within Indigenous communities. As suggested by Ajean, the Elder of the community, a simple way to disarm a rogarou is to remind them that it is in fact a human underneath the skin of the monster. Likewise, a person who is out of sync with his or her cultural roots is a human turned monster and needs to be reminded of who they are. In her article, Julia Siepak argues

“Hence the biological resurgent potential of Indigenous people is conceivable only through the practices of traditional storytelling. Salt bone stories passed on by Elders to the younger generations facilitate the medicinal use of biological matter.” (Siepak 166)

Let's discuss the religious aspect present in the novel. Dimaline skilfully weaves the Métis mythical story of rogarou in the contemporary world, wherein the dominant western religion has taken a stronghold on the indigenous people through systemic violence of the body and mind. This juxtaposition highlights the ongoing struggle for cultural preservation and spiritual autonomy faced by Indigenous communities. Dimaline's exploration of religion in the novel sheds light on the complexities of identity and belief in a post-colonial society. Dimaline's projection of Victor as a Reverend who brings the straying flock back into the fold is a critique on the metaphor of a pastor. His words showcase the hypocrisy of the western religion of preaching than following,

“My friends, as Indigenous peoples, we are uniquely positioned. As stewards of our land, we are burned with an evil that is buried within it, but also gifted with the blessed good of it all.” The people nodded in response. “This evil that lies in wait has been called into being by the decisions that our forefathers made to turn away from the Lord, to shun His word, to renounce Him and all He stands for.” (Dimaline, 119-120)

Dimaline unmasks these words when we discover the agenda behind this religious resurgence. The indigenous communities refrain from selling their land to companies. Mr. Thomas Heiser, the man who controls the rogarou in Victor and a consultant for the energy companies found success when he sold the religion to buy the land that indigenous people owned.

“He'd vastly improved his odds by bringing the word of Jesus into the territories he had to sway towards resource projects. Once God was in there, especially as

portrayed by the beautiful Reverend Wolff - one of their own - people were less worried about protecting their traditional lands.” (Dimaline, 175-176)

Victor’s grave error in trying to sell the traditional lands makes him a rogarou. His betrayal of his people continues with the aid of Mr. Heiser, who makes his living by facilitating land deals between the indigenous people and the companies. Victor’s transformation into a rogarou symbolises his descent into greed and corruption. Mr. Heiser’s exploitation of the situation only further exacerbates the betrayal felt by the indigenous community. The dominant religion is only used as a tool to hypnotise people into selling their own faith in the indigenous culture. This manipulation of beliefs and values highlights the power dynamics at play in the exploitation of traditional lands. The cycle of betrayal and greed perpetuated by Victor and Mr. Heiser ultimately serves to erode the cultural identity and heritage of the Métis indigenous community. Further, Reverend Wolff derides, “And my friends, that wrong worship, that pagan way of life, is exactly what laid me to waste - what has led our people, our *good* people, to waste.” (Dimaline, 120) Even after years of manipulation and hypocrisy, the dominant western religion is still able to maintain a strong influence over its followers. Dimaline’s novel calls for a revival and resurgence of the indigenous faith systems to truly decolonize and liberate the minds and spirits of her community. Ajean’s storytelling about the bone salt and Joan’s encounter with the monster revives the indigenous faith system in the contemporary world. This awareness of the indigenous spirituality is fuelled by the presence of Ajean and Joan’s grandmother, Mere. Though the old women were a part of the church group, their meetings were always about the Métis community’s resurgence.

**Conclusion:** Indigenous communities across the world today are faced with indigenous social movement wherein their indigenous epistemologies and traditional knowledge are viewed with renewed interests. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “The movement developed simultaneously out of the survival strategies and cultural systems which have nurtured people, their values and their beliefs within their own communities, reserves, tribes and nations for over 500 years” (107). Literature has served as a powerful means of recording the traditional knowledge of indigenous communities. The revival and resurgence of indigenous narratives marks the reclamation of the rightful place of these communities who have been faced with systematic cultural erasure in the past and present.

Cherie Dimaline’s *Empire of Wild* is a strong narrative of the Métis spirituality and the myths that bind the community together. Interactions with the dominant western religion offer a unique perspective into how the indigenous religious sentiments combine with Christianity. Through her novel, Dimaline offers a critique of the colonial imposition of the dominant religion on the indigenous communities. She demonstrates how this imposition has lasting impacts on the culture and identity of the indigenous people. Dimaline’s storytelling and effective use of myth serves as a tool for resistance, resilience and marks an urgency for decolonizing land and indigenous bodies. Ultimately, the narrative reminds us that the future of the indigenous cultures depends on the revival of indigenous past.

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