



Exploring Cherokee Identity and Culture in Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven*

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Abstract

The history of Native American identity is extensive and intricate. Native American preserve their unique identities and traditional customs despite being compelled to assimilate and endure cultural repression. Indigenous culture suffered greatly from the loss of ancestral lands and interruption of customary lifestyle. Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven* explores Cherokee identity and its cultural facets. This paper tends to explain how Native Americans retain their cultural heritage and utilize it as a source of inspiration for their daily life. In addition to shedding light on a socio-political conundrum, it also highlights the feminine solidarity that steps in to save the disoriented and fragmented person. The main objective of the paper is to present the Cherokee nation as a valuable society and to discuss the strategies undertaken by the Native American women to carry forward their lives, customs and culture.

KEYWORDS : Native American, Cherokee, Culture, Identity, Customs

The literary works of Barbara Kingsolver, such as *Pigs in Heaven*, have gained recognition for her notable examination of cultural identity. The work prominently explores the issue of cultural identity, focusing on the character of Turtle, who possesses Cherokee heritage but was brought up by Taylor Greer, a white woman. Barbara Kingsolver examines cultural identity in *Pigs in Heaven*, which is dealt with in this paper. The story's premise highlights the lack of knowledge among white Americans on Native American culture and the mistreatment of Cherokee individuals residing outside their homeland. The challenges faced by indigenous populations and the hardships they endure are of significant magnitude.

The narrative of Barbara Kingsolver expertly integrates the Cherokee belief systems, providing readers with a deep examination of spirituality, connectivity, and the significance of cultural heritage. Kingsolver sheds light on the intricate fabric of Cherokee beliefs and their significance in modern culture by introducing characters such as Turtle and Annawake Fourkiller. The core of Cherokee belief systems revolves around a profound veneration for the natural world and the interdependence among all sentient entities. The story exhibits a pervasive reverence, seen in the characters' engagements with the natural environment and the comprehension of their role within it. The young Cherokee girl, Turtle, exemplifies this bond, frequently demonstrating an instinctive comprehension of the earth and its patterns. The core principle of Cherokee spirituality is around the notion of equilibrium and concord, exemplified by the concept of "living in balance." This principle emphasizes the interdependence of all entities and the significance of upholding balance within oneself and about the surrounding environment. The journey of the Turtle, both in a literal and metaphorical sense, exemplifies her pursuit of equilibrium as she navigates the intricacies of her identity and strives for reconciliation between her Cherokee history and the surrounding world.

The oral tradition is a crucial component of Cherokee belief systems, serving to transmit information, wisdom, and cultural history over successive generations. In the novel, the characters actively participate in storytelling as a method of safeguarding and disseminating Cherokee culture. Storytelling, whether through the recounting of customary myths and tales or the exchange of personal anecdotes, functions as a potent mechanism for establishing a connection between individuals and their cultural origins, cultivating a profound sense of affiliation. The stomp dance ceremony in "Pigs in Heaven" is a profound manifestation of Cherokee spirituality. This customary practice, originating from old Cherokee traditions, represents the concepts of oneness, healing, and rejuvenation. Taylor and Turtle's involvement in the stomp dance ritual integrates them

into the Cherokee community, reinforcing their affiliation with their cultural legacy and embracing the shared essence of their forebears.

The work also portrays an additional facet of Cherokee belief systems, highlighting the significance of dreams and visions as valuable sources of direction and understanding. The dreams of the turtle function as portals into her mind, providing insights into her historical, current, and prospective experiences. The dreams possess a profound symbolism and significance, serving as a manifestation of Turtle's most profound contemplations and sentiments as she navigates the complexities surrounding her sense of self and affiliation.

The primary thematic focus in *Pigs in Heaven* revolves around the inherent conflict between tradition and modernity, explicitly emphasizing the Cherokee cultural identity. The novel depicts the difficulties indigenous communities encounter in safeguarding their cultural legacy amidst assimilation and eradicating their unique identity. Characters like Annawake Fourkiller exemplify the endeavor to safeguard Cherokee traditions and values amidst a swiftly evolving global landscape, championing the entitlements of Indigenous communities and the conservation of their cultural heritage.

In the novel, Kingsolver emphasizes the enduring nature of Cherokee spirituality when confronted with challenging circumstances. Despite the historical inequities and persistent obstacles faced by Native communities, the spiritual customs of the Cherokee people persist, functioning as reservoirs of fortitude, adaptability, and cultural esteem. In Kingsolver's work, the ongoing legacy of Cherokee belief systems and their tremendous impact on individuals and communities is celebrated by portraying characters such as Annawake and Turtle.

The government instigated the displacement of Native Americans to transform their bountiful tribal grounds into cotton plantations, with the aim of achieving economic prosperity. The Cherokee people experienced a terrible impact as a result of enclosure, which encompassed the loss of their land, communities, and means of subsistence. They experienced a loss of purpose, organization, and consistency in their life when they were forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands, where they could no longer sustain themselves via agriculture. Eventually, they found themselves in impoverished conditions in the rapidly growing urban areas. According to Coleman (84), "the commodification of land and labor - that is, the transformation of land and labor into commodities - provided much of the economic basis for that dislocation" (84). The commodification of land and labor diminishes the value of preindustrial culture and its traditions. When referring to Heaven, Sugar informs Alice that "the eastern end of the state was a reservation, and fairly prosperous. But the federal government cut up the land into small packets and gave one to each family, . . . (The Leatherstocking Tales 189).

Even children in Oklahoma are raised to be caretakers of the environment. Their lifestyle is oriented around the environment, which might be likened to the lifestyle of white Americans in the novel. Kingsolver refrains from criticizing any civilization, instead emphasizing the significance of conserving nature through visually appealing facts. The culture in question imparts the significance of nature in conjunction with it. An illustrative instance from the narrative is:

A woman in the Oklahoma Welcome Station told him that school kids take up collections of pennies to buy the wildflower seeds. Cash had thought wildflowers just grew. He considers this now as he drives and decides maybe they just tell the kids they use their money for wildflowers. So, the little ones can look out the car window and think they did all that with their pennies (175).

The novel prominently features the depiction of the Cherokee community, emphasizing the profound connectivity and reciprocal assistance among its constituents. The Cherokee characters constitute a closely interconnected group united by a common past, cultural legacy, and a shared sense of self. This community functions as a reservoir of resilience and unity for its members, helping during adversity and commemorating moments of happiness.

The characters in *Pigs in Heaven* are significantly influenced by their family, whether biological or chosen. Taylor and Turtle's relationship surpasses mere biological connections, encapsulating the deep-seated connection of affection and familial ties that characterizes the concept of family. In her role as Turtle's adoptive mother, Taylor has a strong sense of protectiveness towards her daughter, demonstrating a willingness to take extensive measures to safeguard her welfare and contentment.

In the Cherokee community, the notion of family transcends conventional nuclear arrangements and encompasses a more expansive complex of relatives and kinship connections. The broad concept of family is apparent in the connections between characters such as Annawake Fourkiller and her extended family, who unite to provide mutual assistance and preserve Cherokee customs.

The literary work also delves into the thematic exploration of belonging and identity within the familial and communal framework. Turtle, who has Cherokee ancestry but was brought up in a non-Native American setting, faces a significant challenge in defining her identity and finding a feeling of belonging. By engaging with individuals from the Cherokee community, Turtle initiates a process of reestablishing a connection with her cultural heritage and attaining a feeling of inclusion within her group.

The Cherokee community depicted in *Pigs in Heaven* exhibits biological and chosen family ties and a notable emphasis on collective duty and intergenerational wisdom. The elderly population holds a highly esteemed position within the community, assuming the roles of knowledge custodians and custodians of cultural heritage. Through their mentorship and sagacity, they transmit invaluable teachings to succeeding cohorts, safeguarding the continuation of Cherokee culture and principles.

Kingsolver emphasizes the significance of community and family in moulding personal identity and cultivating a feeling of inclusion throughout the work. The Cherokee community in *Pigs in Heaven* demonstrates the lasting power and ability to recover from collective unity and mutual support, whether through acts of kindness, moments of shared delight, or the comfort of familial relationships.

A Cherokee girl adopted and raised by a white mother, grapples with the intricacies of living in two distinct cultures. The individual's Cherokee history holds significant importance in shaping her identity. However, she also confronts the cultural norms and expectations prevalent in the primarily non-Native American society in which she resides. Kingsolver examines the intricacies of cultural identity and the influence of adoption on the formation of an individual's self-perception, as viewed from Turtle's point of view. Taylor's adoption of Turtle adds intricacy to her identity as she grapples with the conflicts between her Cherokee background and her upbringing in mainstream American society.

The work additionally explores cultural legacy as a means of fortitude and interconnectedness. Turtle's Cherokee heritage gives her courage and pride despite the difficulties she encounters in harmonizing her cultural identity. By engaging with fellow Cherokee characters and delving into Cherokee customs, Turtle gradually regains her cultural heritage and establishes a feeling of inclusion within her tribe.

In her analysis, Kingsolver explores the intricate interplay between cultural identification and broader social and political concerns, with a specific focus on the rights and sovereignty of Native Americans. Individuals such as Annawake Fourkiller, a lawyer of Cherokee descent, actively promote the safeguarding of Turtle's cultural legacy and the entitlements of Indigenous communities. Their endeavours underscore the persistent challenges encountered by indigenous groups in safeguarding their cultural customs and asserting their autonomy under historical inequities and systemic subjugation.

Kingsolver delves more into the concept of cultural identification and how individuals navigate their feeling of belonging in diverse cultural settings through the figure of Taylor Greer. Taylor's transition from a young woman residing in a small town to a mother who must navigate the intricate dynamics of adoption and cultural identity is a poignant illustration of the overarching concepts of cultural diversity and the profound impact of love and acceptance.

Another notable conflict in the novel is the legal dispute around Turtle's custody, representing more significant concerns about Native American rights and autonomy. In the context of Turtle's involvement in a custody case that poses a significant risk of displacing her from her sole familial unit, certain characters, such as Annawake Fourkiller, assume the role of fervent proponents for Turtle's cultural legacy and the rights of Indigenous communities. Kingsolver's endeavours illuminate the systemic inequities and obstacles encountered by indigenous people in their pursuit of establishing their autonomy and safeguarding their cultural heritage.

Taylor Greer's path also exemplifies the concepts of fortitude and individual development. From her modest origins as a youthful woman who aspires to transcend her rural existence, Taylor transforms into a dedicated maternal figure who exhibits unwavering resolve in safeguarding her offspring. Despite encountering several challenges and failures throughout her journey, Taylor's steadfast affection for Turtle

and her resolute commitment to prioritize the well-being of her family exemplify the indomitable nature of the human psyche.

Pigs in Heaven is a moving story about challenges and fortitude, emphasizing the profound impact of persistence, affection, and cultural identity in surmounting hardship. Barbara Kingsolver presents a captivating depiction of the human ability to persevere, adjust, and prosper in the midst of life's difficulties, as demonstrated by characters such as Turtle, Taylor Greer, and Annawake Fourkiller.

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