

The Dominance of Modernity over Tradition in A.M. Klein's Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga

A. Praveen Samuel

2421316021003

Research Scholar,

Department of English,

Scott Christian College,

Nagercoil, TamilNadu,

India.

Abstract

A.M. Klein's 1945 poem *Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga* stands as one of the most poignant elegies in twentieth-century Canadian literature, offering a devastating critique of the cultural erosion experienced by Indigenous peoples under the expanding footprint of modern Western civilization. Set in the Mohawk reserve of Caughnawaga near Montreal, the poem captures a stark historical transition: the retreat of an ancient, organic, and ecologically harmonized tradition before the encroaching, mechanical, and capitalist structures of modernity. Klein, a prominent Jewish-Canadian writer who brought a deep personal sensitivity to themes of cultural displacement and historical marginalization, constructs a multi-layered narrative that contrasts romanticized childhood imaginations of Indigenous grandeur with the grim contemporary reality of reservation life.

I. INTRODUCTION

To fully dissect the mechanics of this cultural shift, this study aligns Klein's poem with Postcolonial Theory, focusing specifically on Antonio Gramsci's foundational concept of Cultural Hegemony and its subsequent expansion by thinkers like Homi Bhabha and Edward Said. Through this theoretical framework, the paper demonstrates that the interaction between modernity and tradition portrayed in the poem is not an accidental, neutral process of social evolution or passive fading. Instead, it represents an active, systemic subjugation. Modernity operates as an aggressive hegemonic force that reduces a once-sovereign Indigenous heritage to a state of economic dependency, spiritual disenfranchisement, and cultural spectacle. By analyzing Klein's imagery, spatial metaphors, and mournful

tone, this paper argues that *Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga* exposes how modern capitalist hegemony neutralizes traditional cultures by turning sacred identity into commodified relics, transforming lived heritage into mere “fauna in a museum kept.”

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Hegemony and Postcolonial Subjugation

To rigorously analyze how modernity exerts dominance over tradition in Klein’s text, one must employ a theoretical apparatus that accounts for both economic domination and cultural erasure. Postcolonial Theory provides the primary lens, specifically utilizing Antonio Gramsci’s theory of Cultural Hegemony as articulated in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci posits that a ruling class maintains control over subordinate groups not exclusively through overt physical force or state coercion, but through ideological supremacy—establishing its own values, economic models, and worldview as the universal “common sense” of society. When applied to settler-colonial dynamics, cultural hegemony explains how the dominant modern power gradually dismantles indigenous ways of life by rendering them obsolete, primitive, or anachronistic, thereby forcing the colonized group into a state of structural and cultural submission.

In his seminal postcolonial text *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha expands upon this dynamic by examining how the dominant culture compels the marginalized subject into modes of “mimicry” and economic servitude. Under the pressure of hegemonic modernity, colonized subjects are often stripped of their traditional socio-economic agency and forced to operate within the capitalist margins dictated by the oppressor. Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* further reinforces this by demonstrating how imperial powers rewrite the geography and history of colonized spaces, reducing complex civilizations to static, manageable, and exotic representations.

In *Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga*, this theoretical dynamic is precisely what unfolds. The modern settler society does not need to wage active war against the Mohawk population; rather, it uses the quiet, totalizing machinery of capitalist modernity to encircle, isolate, and commodify them. Tradition, once characterized by autonomy, spiritual communion with nature, and distinct linguistic authority is subjected to the economic and cultural logic of the modern city. The theoretical alignment reveals that the tragedy in Klein’s poem is structural: modernity asserts its dominance by denying tradition its living reality and converting it into a profitable, trivialized artifact.

The Childhood Myth versus the Modern Reality

The poem’s structural and thematic journey begins with a profound juxtaposition between romanticized memory and contemporary disillusionment. Klein opens the text by recalling a childhood perspective, a time when the young

speaker conceptualized Indigenous identity through the vibrant, mythic iconography found in schoolbooks and popular lore:

Childhood, that wished me Indian, hoped
that one after-school, I'd leave the classroom chalk, the varnish smell,
...
And find the monosyllabic chief who spoke with his throat?
Where are the Tribes? the feathered bestiarities? (Klein)

In these initial lines, the speaker invokes a idealized vision of tradition a world populated by heroic figures like “Chief Running Deer, Black Bear, and Old Buffalo Head.” The child’s desire to escape “the classroom chalk, the varnish smell” represents an instinctual yearning to flee the sterile, regimented institutional structures of modern civilization in favor of an imagined, wild freedom. The traditional Indigenous chief is remembered as an archetype of stoic dignity, an individual who existed in harmony with nature, where human identity was inextricably tied to “Aesop's animals” and the natural world.

However, as the poem transitions from the speaker’s childhood memory to the adult observer’s gaze, this mythic vision is brutally shattered by the reality of the Caughnawaga reservation. The “monosyllabic chief” and the “feathered bestiarities” no longer exist as living, autonomous entities. Modernity has intruded upon this romantic landscape, dismantling the historical conditions that once sustained Indigenous sovereignty. The shift in tone from nostalgic wonder to elegiac despair highlights the absolute power of modernity to erase traditional modes of being. The poem makes clear that the grand, noble tradition envisioned by the child was not merely lost to time; it was actively dismantled by the encroaching infrastructure of modern settler society.

Spatial Confinement and the “Grassy Ghetto”

Modernity’s dominance over tradition is vividly articulated through Klein’s use of spatial metaphors. In postcolonial geography, space is never neutral; it reflects power dynamics. The dominant power defines boundaries, assigning the colonized subject to restricted, marginal zones. In “Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga,” the reservation itself is depicted not as a sovereign sanctuary where tradition can flourish, but as an artificially demarcated prison a space defined by its confinement and separation from the surrounding modern world.

Klein epitomizes this spatial subjugation with the haunting phrase: “This is a grassy ghetto, and no home.” By pairing the word “grassy”, evoking nature, open plains, and traditional connection to the land with “ghetto,” a term historically signifying forced segregation, poverty, and systemic oppression, Klein encapsulates

the paradox of the modern reservation. The traditional land, which once represented infinite scope and uninhibited freedom for nomadic hunting and communal self-determination, has been constricted into a spatial anomaly. It is an “anachronism” surrounded by asphalt, industrial machinery, and the economic expansion of nearby urban centers like Montreal.

Furthermore, Klein describes the reservation’s inhabitants as existing in a state of static confinement: “And these are fauna on a museum kept.” Here, the spatial logic of modernity completes its victory over tradition. Tradition is no longer a dynamic, evolving culture that moves through space and time; it is immobilized, contained behind figurative glass walls for the observation of the dominant society. The reservation functions as a living museum, and its people are treated as biological specimens “fauna” rather than sovereign human beings. This spatial imprisonment demonstrates how cultural hegemony works: modernity isolates tradition within strictly defined geographic and institutional boundaries, ensuring that it poses no economic or political challenge to the broader modern state.

Commodification and the Spectacle of Tradition

The most severe manifestation of modernity’s dominance in Klein’s poem is the conversion of sacred tradition into capitalist commodities. Under Gramscian cultural hegemony, the dominant economic system seeks to absorb and instrumentalize all alternative cultural forms. What cannot be eradicated is commercialized. Klein captures this degradation with painful precision as he describes how the material and spiritual symbols of Mohawk culture are reduced to cheap tourist souvenirs. In the middle stanzas, Klein presents a catalog of traditional items that have been stripped of their original cultural, ceremonial, and practical significance.

...the beaded shoes,
the sweetgrass basket, the papoose,
...
trophies and scalpings for a traveler’s den.
(Klein)

The moccasin, which once represented quiet movement, survival, and a harmonious connection to the forest floor, is now mass-produced as a novelty item. The sweetgrass basket, once woven through sacred communal practices, becomes a disposable trinket sold for pocket change. The deeply sacred elements of identity are reduced to decorative novelties destined to sit on the mantelpieces of white, suburban “travelers.”

This economic subjugation reaches its tragic climax when Klein addresses the performance of traditional rituals:

Sometimes, it's true, they dance, but for a bribe;
after a deal don the bedraggled feather
and welcome a white mayor to the tribe.

Here, traditional dance historically a solemn, communal, and spiritual invocation is degraded into a paid performance. The sacred feather is described as "bedraggled," reflecting the physical and moral decay brought about by economic desperation. The performance is not enacted to sustain cultural identity or honor ancestors, but "for a bribe," performed on command to entertain visiting white political dignitaries such as a city mayor. This ritualized subjection illustrates Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry and performance: the colonized subject is forced to put on a caricature of their own heritage to survive within a monetary economy controlled entirely by the colonizer. Modernity does not simply suppress tradition; it forces tradition to perform its own debasement for profit.

The Severance of Generational Memory and Language

A critical dimension of any living tradition is its intergenerational transmission, the passing down of language, oral history, spiritual rituals, and communal pride from elders to youth. In "Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga," Klein reveals how modernity systematically severs this continuity, leaving the younger generation culturally stranded between a dead past and a hostizing modern present.

Throughout the poem, the elders are presented as silent, broken figures whose connection to their heritage has been fractured. They no longer speak with the authoritative voice of the "monosyllabic chief." Instead, their presence is marked by stillness and defeat. The traditional language has been overwhelmed by French and English, the dominant tongues of the Canadian settler state. The adoption of modern French names and European clothing among the reservation residents signifies a forced cultural assimilation. They have taken on the external markers of the dominant society without receiving its full economic or social privileges, leaving them in a liminal space of disenfranchisement.

Even more devastating is Klein's depiction of the reservation's youth. Rather than being initiated into the sacred warrior traditions or hunting lore of their ancestors, the children are shown engaging in impoverished, trivialized activities:
...the children pitch
their pennies in the dust...

The image of children playing for pennies in the dirt near church doors serves as a metaphor for the total erosion of cultural inheritance. The vast, rich heritage of the Mohawk nation has been replaced by the literal pursuit of copper coins thrown by visiting tourists. The youth do not look to their elders for ancient wisdom; they look to the ground for the scraps of modern capitalism. This generational disconnect ensures the permanent triumph of modernity over tradition.

When the young no longer possess the language, rituals, or pride of their ancestors, tradition ceases to be a living, breathing force and becomes entirely historical.

The “Better Hunters”: Evolutionary Darwinism and Colonial Triumph

In the final stanzas of the poem, Klein elevates his critique of modernity to a broader historical and philosophical level, utilizing extended hunting metaphors to analyze the conflict between the colonial settler state and Indigenous populations. Klein frames the triumph of modernity through a grim, pseudo-Darwinian lens:

The better hunters have prevailed.

The game, loose-chested, with its bloody tongue...

...

Bleached are their living bones...

By referring to the colonizers as “the better hunters” and the Indigenous people as “the game,” Klein highlights the brutal, predatory nature of modern industrial progress. The terminology evokes a cold, social-Darwinist reality in which modern technology, capital, and organizational power ruthlessly overwhelm traditional, agrarian, or hunter-gatherer societies. However, Klein’s tone is deeply ironic and critical; he does not celebrate the victory of these “better hunters.” Rather, he exposes the moral bankruptcy of a civilization that equates technological superiority with human or moral progress.

The Indigenous people, once master hunters who lived in sustainable equilibrium with nature, have themselves been hunted, cornered, and subdued. Their “living bones” are described as “bleached,” signaling a total drain of vitality, passion, and autonomy. They have become, in Klein’s words, “living ghosts” individuals who physically survive but are spiritually and culturally extinguished.

Watching over this scene of devastation are what Klein calls the “pious prosperous ghosts” the white, middle-class modern observers who look upon the reservation with a mixture of detached curiosity, false pity, and hypocritical piety. These “prosperous ghosts” represent the beneficiaries of modernity. They enjoy the material wealth generated by industrialization and territorial expansion while remaining completely insulated from the human cost paid by those whose lands and traditions were sacrificed. Through this striking imagery, Klein demonstrates that modern prosperity is built directly upon the cultural and physical grave of traditional societies.

Synthesis: Klein’s Ambivalent Position and Modernity’s Complete Victory

To fully understand the theoretical depth of “Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga,” one must also consider A.M. Klein’s unique perspective as an outsider-insider. As a Jewish-Canadian writing in the post-World War II era, Klein

belonged to a community that had itself experienced centuries of displacement, ghettoization, and cultural marginalization. This background imbued Klein with a profound empathy for the Indigenous experience under settler-colonial rule. He recognized in the Caughnawaga reservation the same tragic patterns of spatial isolation, loss of language, and pressure to assimilate that had threatened Jewish traditions throughout European history.

However, Klein also writes from the position of an educated, urban intellectual operating within the forms of Western poetry. This duality allows him to capture the totalizing scope of modernity. He does not offer a naive or easy solution to the crisis facing the Mohawk community. He does not suggest that tradition can simply be restored to its pre-colonial purity through a romantic return to nature. Instead, the poem remains unflinchingly realistic about the permanence of modernity's triumph.

Modernity, in Klein's vision, is an unstoppable, all-consuming force. It controls the roads, the economy, the political institutions, and the very terms of cultural representation. Tradition, stripped of its material power and spatial freedom, cannot mount an effective counter-hegemonic resistance. It is reduced to surviving in the crevices of the modern state as a souvenir, a performance, a tourist attraction, and a memory. The dominance of modernity over tradition is thus depicted as complete, systemic, and irreversible.

II.CONCLUSION

A.M. Klein's *Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga* remains an extraordinary, unsettling critique of modern civilization and its devastating impact on traditional Indigenous cultures. Through its rich poetic imagery, spatial metaphors, and elegiac tone, the poem systematically documents the process by which a vibrant, organic tradition is subjugated by an aggressive, industrial modernity. By framing this literary work through Postcolonial Theory and Antonio Gramsci's concept of Cultural Hegemony, this paper has demonstrated that the erosion of tradition in Caughnawaga was not a natural, passive decay, but the direct result of a totalizing capitalist and colonial apparatus. Modernity asserts its dominance not merely by physically confining Indigenous peoples to a "grassy ghetto," but by attacking the very essence of their cultural identity. It strips sacred objects of their spiritual meaning, reduces ceremonial dances to commodified spectacles for tourist pennies, severs intergenerational memory, and replaces autonomous self-determination with economic dependency.

Ultimately, Klein's poem forces the reader to confront the profound ethical costs of modern "progress." It challenges the dominant narrative that equates industrial expansion, urbanization, and capitalist growth with universal human advancement. By showing how modern prosperity is constructed upon the spiritual

and cultural exhaustion of ancient traditions, Klein leaves us with a haunting vision of a world where tradition has been transformed into “fauna in a museum kept” a world where the rich, living complexity of human heritage is sacrificed to the relentless, unfeeling engine of modernity.

III. REFERENCES

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
2. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
3. Klein, A.M. “Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga.” *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein*, compiled by Miriam Waddington, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974, pp. 245-246.
4. Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 1993.