Republic of Algeria
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University of Saida, Dr. Moulay Tahar
Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts
Department of English Language and Literature

The search of home in Thomas king's Medicine River

Master in Literature and Civilization

Presented by:

Mr.T. Djellouli

Supervised by:

Dr .H. Mokeddem

Board of Examiners

Dr. S. Chekroune	(MCA)	Chair Person	University of Saida
Dr. H. Mokaddem	(MCB)	Supervisor	University of Saida
Prof. D. Benadla	(MAA)	Examiner	University of Saida

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I affirm that this submission entitled search for home in Thomas king's medicine river is my own work and that it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma at any university or institution. I also certify that the present work is entirely the result of my investigation, except where otherwise stated and properly referenced.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to all who supported me during this journey, especially my family, friends, and teachers. Their encouragement and guidance made this work possible.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the theme of identity and the search for home in Thomas King's novel Medicine River (1989), exploring how the concept of "home" functions both as a physical location and as a metaphorical, relational construct. Through the protagonist Will's return to his hometown, the novel interrogates issues of displacement, identity fragmentation, and cultural reconnection within the broader context of Indigenous Canadian experiences. By analyzing memory, storytelling, community, and land, this study argues that King redefines home not as a fixed or inherited place, but as a dynamic space cultivated through relationships, shared histories, and acts of care.

Drawing on postcolonial theory and Indigenous literary criticism, the thesis situates Will's journey within the frameworks of hybridity, survivance, and relational accountability, demonstrating how Indigenous narratives challenge colonial definitions of belonging and identity. The research further examines the roles of humor, oral tradition, and everyday practices as strategies of resistance against marginalization, illustrating how King's storytelling affirms Indigenous presence, resilience, and cultural continuity.

By offering a nuanced exploration of home as a site of personal and collective transformation, this study highlights King's contribution to contemporary Indigenous literature and underscores the potential of narrative to reconstruct identity, community, and belonging in the aftermath of colonial disruption. Ultimately, Medicine River portrays home as an evolving, relational, and culturally grounded spaceone that is actively created and sustained through memory, storytelling, and communal engagement.

Keywords: Indigenous literature, Thomas King, Medicine River, home, belonging, displacement.

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General Introduction

General Introduction

In contemporary Indigenous literature, the concept of "home" carries significance far beyond its conventional definition as a place of residence. Rather than a simple geographical location, "home" is portrayed as a complex site of identity formation, cultural survival, collective memory, and emotional connection. For Indigenous peoples across North America, home is deeply tied to land, family, oral tradition, spirituality, and intergenerational continuity. However, these dimensions of home have been profoundly disrupted by the violent legacies of colonialism. Residential schools, forced displacement, systemic marginalization, and the imposition of Western ideologies have contributed to the fragmentation of Indigenous identities and the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands and cultural practices.

In this context, literature becomes a powerful space for resistance, recovery, and reconstruction. Indigenous writers use fiction not only to tell stories but to reclaim cultural knowledge, challenge dominant colonial narratives, and reimagine home in ways that reflect their own epistemologies and lived realities. One such writer is Thomas King, whose work has significantly contributed to the field of Indigenous literature in Canada and beyond. King's novel "Medicine River" (1989) stands as a subtle yet profound exploration of what it means to search for, define, and rebuild a sense of home in the aftermath of cultural disruption. Through the personal journey of its protagonist, Will, the novel engages with key themes such as identity, belonging, alienation, community, and the transformative power of storytelling.

Thomas King, of Cherokee and Greek descent, is recognized as one of the most influential Indigenous writers and thinkers in North America. His body of work, which includes fiction, non-fiction, and scholarly essays, often critiques colonial assumptions while simultaneously affirming Indigenous worldviews and cultural practices. King's writing style is characterized by wit, irony, and narrative complexity. He deliberately avoids tragedy-centered depictions of Indigenous life, instead focusing on the everyday experiences of Indigenous characters thus humanizing and diversifying their representations. In Medicine River, King presents Indigenous life not as broken or vanished but as living, adapting, and relational. His fiction, particularly this novel, invites readers to rethink the meaning of home as something built through shared stories, communal memory, and emotional reconnection.

This thesis explores the theme of the search for home in Medicine River, arguing that King redefines "home" as a fluid, relational, and narrative space rather than a fixed geographical location. Will's return to his hometown and his gradual reintegration into the local Indigenous community represent more than just a physical relocation; they symbolize a journey toward self-discovery, cultural reawakening, and belonging. For many Indigenous individuals, especially those shaped by diasporic or disrupted family histories, the notion of "home" must be reconstructed, not recovered. King's novel reflects this reality by showing that home is not simply something one possesses, but something one creates through relationships, memory, and cultural affirmation.

The colonial impact on Indigenous concepts of home cannot be overstated. Historical events such as land dispossession, assimilationist education policies, the banning of Indigenous

languages and ceremonies, and the enforcement of the Indian Act (in the Canadian context) have contributed to a long history of displacement and erasure. The result is not only the physical separation of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories but also the emotional and psychological alienation from cultural identity and community. In this light, King's novel becomes a quiet yet powerful act of resistance it depicts the possibility of healing, reconnection, and identity rebuilding, even after long periods of absence and loss. Will's reluctance to claim his identity and his cautious re-engagement with community members reflect the complex emotional terrain many Indigenous individuals must navigate in reclaiming their cultural place.

To properly understand the significance of King's narrative, it is essential to approach the text through a postcolonial and Indigenous literary lens. Postcolonial theory, particularly the works of scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, provides useful tools for understanding identity as a negotiated, hybrid, and often contested space. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" is particularly relevant, as it highlights the possibility of cultural transformation and hybridity in the spaces between colonizer and colonized. In Medicine River, Will occupies this in-between space neither fully integrated into Indigenous life nor completely assimilated into Western norms. His gradual return to cultural and communal roots reflects the postcolonial process of negotiating identity in a world marked by historical rupture and cultural complexity.

In tandem with postcolonial theory, this study draws upon Indigenous literary criticism, which centers Indigenous worldviews, epistemologies, and narrative practices. Scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Gerald Vizenor, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argue for a decolonial approach to literature one that values Indigenous forms of storytelling, relationality, and resistance. Smith, in her groundbreaking work Decolonizing Methodologies, insists that research involving Indigenous peoples must be rooted in Indigenous values and must serve the purposes of cultural renewal and empowerment. Similarly, Vizenor's concept of "survivance" a combination of survival and resistancecan be applied to King's depiction of characters who, despite their hardships, maintain agency and humor in the face of historical oppression.

Another critical element of this thesis is the role of storytelling as a method of healing and community building. In Indigenous cultures, storytelling is not merely entertainment it is a way of transmitting knowledge, history, moral lessons, and spiritual insight. Stories are living entities, deeply tied to the land and passed down across generations. In Medicine River, storytelling becomes both theme and technique. King weaves multiple narrative threads, flashbacks, anecdotes, and personal histories, constructing a tapestry of collective identity. Will's understanding of home deepens as he listens to others, shares his experiences, and participates in the stories of the Medicine River community. Thus, storytelling serves not only as a literary device but as decolonial practice one that resists imposed histories and centers Indigenous voice and memory.

The novel also critiques dominant colonial narratives that have historically marginalized or distorted Indigenous experiences. In contrast to stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous peoples

as tragic, stoic, or defeated, King's characters are multifaceted, humorous, flawed, and deeply human. By focusing on everyday life, basketball games, photography sessions, family dinners, King presents a counter-narrative to the myth of Indigenous disappearance. His characters are not relics of fading past but active participants in their own cultural present and future. This approach redefines home not as a return to a romanticized or pre-colonial ideal but as a practical, evolving reality rooted in community and care.

In exploring these themes, this thesis addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Thomas King redefine the concept of "home" in Medicine River beyond physical space?
2. In what ways does the protagonist's search for home reflect the broader Indigenous experience of displacement and identity fragmentation?
3. How does King use storytelling as a method to rebuild a sense of community and belonging?
4. What role do memory, family, and community play in Will's journey toward reclaiming his cultural identity and finding a home?
5. How does King challenge dominant colonial narratives through his portrayal of home and Indigenous selfhood?

Methodologically, the thesis applies close reading and thematic analysis, guided by postcolonial and Indigenous theoretical frameworks. Key concepts such as hybridity, survivance, third space, relationality, and cultural memory will inform the interpretation of the text. This qualitative approach allows for a nuanced examination of the narrative structure, character development, and symbolic representations of home within the novel. Academic sources from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars will be used to support the analysis and situate it within broader literary and cultural discourses.

The thesis is organized into four main chapters. Chapter One provides the theoretical and literary background for the study, defining critical terms such as home, identity, belonging, and resistance, while situating King's novel within the traditions of Indigenous and postcolonial literature. Chapter Two focuses on Will's return to Medicine River and examines how home functions as a space of emotional and cultural reconnection. It explores how his relationships with community members gradually restore his sense of belonging. Chapter Three investigates the role of storytelling and memory in the construction of identity and home. It emphasizes how narratives function as cultural tools of survival, continuity, and healing. Chapter Four addresses how King resists colonial frameworks by offering an Indigenous reimagining of home grounded in relationality, humor, resilience, and cultural continuity.

By examining Medicine River through this lens, the thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how Indigenous literature reclaims and redefines concepts of place, identity, and belonging in the aftermath of colonial disruption. It highlights how King, through subtle and often humorous storytelling, re-centers Indigenous voices and affirms the strength of relational identities in contemporary Indigenous communities. Ultimately, the novel challenges us to rethink what "home" means in a world marked by historical loss, and how

literature can be a space where that meaning is not only questioned but beautifully reimagined.

Chapter One:

Theoretical and Literary Context

In literature produced by and about Indigenous peoples, few concepts are as emotionally charged, politically contested, and spiritually significant as "home." For Indigenous communities, the meaning of home extends far beyond the Western notion of a personal dwelling or a national identity. It is rooted in ancestral land, cultural memory, spiritual connection, and communal belonging. Colonialism through policies of forced displacement, assimilation, and cultural suppression sought not only to remove Indigenous peoples from their lands but to sever these deep relationships that define home. In Thomas King's Medicine River, the theme of home is explored not through grand political narratives, but through the quiet, personal journey of the protagonist, Will. His return to the small town of Medicine River sets in motion a process of emotional, cultural, and spiritual reconnection. This chapter lays the theoretical foundation for understanding this journey by examining the key concepts of home, identity, belonging, and memory in Indigenous and postcolonial literary contexts. It also situates Thomas King within these traditions, highlighting his contribution to Indigenous literature and the significance of his narrative choices.

1.1 Defining Home: Place, Displacement, and Reconstruction

The idea of "home" in Indigenous literature is inherently complex and multifaceted. It functions as a site of both trauma and healing, absence and reclamation. Unlike Western narratives, where home is often depicted as a static, private domain, Indigenous narratives frequently portray it as a living, relational entity tied to the land, community, language, and story.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) emphasizes that colonialism disrupted the traditional meanings of home by treating Indigenous land as empty territory to be conquered and commodified. For Indigenous peoples, however, land is not an object but a relative part of a cosmological and relational framework. As Simpson (2011) notes, "Home is not a noun. It is a verb. It is something you do through relationships with the land, with your family, with your language."

In Medicine River, Will's return to his childhood hometown is not driven by nostalgia or romanticism, but by a quiet sense of unfinished business an emotional incompleteness. His mother has passed away. His brother James is absent. His father was never present. The town itself is familiar but distant. This sense of displacement within familiarity mirrors the broader Indigenous experience of navigating both Indigenous and settler spaces, without fully belonging to either.

In postcolonial theory, this fragmented sense of home has been analyzed as a consequence of colonization. Edward Said (1993) argued that colonial displacement creates a tension between "origin" and "displacement," and that literature becomes a space to mediate this tension. However, for Indigenous peoples in settler-colonial states like Canada, the loss of home is not always about physical exile it is often about cultural and spiritual alienation in one's own land.

1.2 Identity, Hybridity, and the Third Space

In postcolonial theory, identity is seen not as a stable essence but as a construct shaped by historical forces, power dynamics, and cultural negotiation. Homi Bhabha (1994) introduced the concept of the "third space", a liminal zone where cultural identity is formed through hybridity and negotiation. In this space, individuals are not fully aligned with either the colonizer or the colonized but exist in a constantly shifting in-between state.

Will, the protagonist of Medicine River, occupies such a space. He is of mixed heritage, raised away from traditional cultural contexts, and unsure of where he belongs. He often views himself as an outsider, even in the Indigenous community he gradually reconnects with. His career as a photographer one who observes rather than participates symbolizes his emotional detachment. Yet, through his interactions with community members, particularly Harlen Bigbear, he begins to navigate this third space and forge a new identity that is neither entirely Indigenous nor entirely assimilated, but uniquely his own.

While Bhabha's theory offers a useful lens for understanding Will's hybridity, Indigenous critics urge scholars to go beyond hybridity and third spaces, and to foreground Indigenous epistemologies. According to Daniel Heath Justice (2006), the challenge is not just to acknowledge hybridity, but to recognize the continuity of Indigenous identities even within conditions of rupture. Will does not become Indigenous by blood or heritage; he becomes part of the community through acts of care, participation, and storytelling. Identity, therefore, is enacted, not inherited.

1.3 Memory and Story: Reclaiming the Past Through Narrative

For Indigenous communities, memory is a crucial tool of survival. It is through memory especially collective and oral memory that histories are preserved, trauma is acknowledged, and cultural continuity is maintained. In Indigenous literature, memory is not confined to individual characters; it is often communal, living, and storied.

Thomas King's Medicine River uses storytelling as both structure and theme. The novel is non-linear, moving between past and present, personal anecdotes and communal histories. This narrative technique mirrors the cyclical nature of Indigenous storytelling traditions, which resist Western linearity and instead prioritize connection and context

Will often reflects on his childhood and his mother's struggles, on his brother's absence, and on moments of quiet cultural significance. These memories are not nostalgic they are part of a healing process. The act of remembering is not passive; it is active, emotional, and transformative. Through memory, Will begins to make sense of his fragmented identity and reconstruct a sense of home.

Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance" is relevant here. Survivance combines survival and resistance it rejects the narrative of Indigenous victimhood and instead emphasizes presence, resilience, and adaptation. In Medicine River, survivance is embodied in characters who, despite loss and disconnection, continue to laugh, gather, care, and tell stories. Their lives are acts of cultural persistence.

1.4 Indigenous Literary Theory and Decolonial Approaches

While postcolonial theory offers valuable insights, Indigenous literary theory brings a deeper cultural specificity and political urgency to the interpretation of Indigenous texts. Scholars like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Robert Warrior, and Craig Womack emphasize that Indigenous literature should not be subsumed under generalized postcolonial models, but should be read through the lens of Indigenous worldviews, languages, and traditions.

Simpson (2017) argues that stories are more than texts they are methods of governance, systems of knowledge, and acts of renewal. In this view, literature is not just a representation of Indigenous life, but an active participant in cultural resurgence. Stories teach, remember, critique, and imagine.

Medicine River functions in this way. While it does not center on dramatic events or historical trauma, it enacts a quiet decolonization by centering Indigenous voices, relationships, and values. Harlen's storytelling, for example, is not just comic relief it is a way of keeping the community connected, of transmitting wisdom, and of healing social rifts. King's narrative refuses to portray Indigenous life as tragic or exotic. Instead, it affirms the everyday as a site of cultural vitality.

1.5 Thomas King's Narrative Style and Cultural Politics

Thomas King is one of the most important Indigenous writers in North America, not just for his literary achievements, but for his role in shaping contemporary Indigenous thought. His writing spans fiction, non-fiction, and radio drama, and is characterized by a distinctive voice that combines humor, irony, and deep cultural insight.

In Medicine River, King avoids grand narratives of political resistance. Instead, he offers a subtle, character-driven exploration of how Indigenous identity and community are sustained in the present. His humor is particularly significant it serves as a decolonial strategy that undermines stereotypes and asserts agency. Rather than presenting Indigenous peoples as tragic or defeated, King portrays them as fully human: flawed, funny, generous, and resilient.

King's approach to storytelling also reflects Indigenous traditions. He resists Western literary conventions such as linear time, singular perspective, or plot-driven structure. His narratives are layered, dialogic, and community-oriented. In Medicine River, stories are told and retold, shared among characters, and often left open-ended. This reflects a worldview in which knowledge is relational, meaning is contextual, and truth is not singular.

As King notes in his often-quoted line from The Truth About Stories: "The truth about stories is that's all we are." This statement captures his literary philosophy: stories shape our understanding of ourselves, our relationships, and our place in the world. For Indigenous peoples, whose stories were silenced or distorted under colonial rule, reclaiming storytelling is both an artistic and political act.

1.6 Home in Indigenous Literary Traditions

Across Indigenous literatures, the theme of home emerges again and again not as a static return to the past, but as a reconstructed space of cultural affirmation. Whether it is the land itself, a reconstructed community, or a web of relationships, home is where Indigenous identities are nurtured and enacted.

Authors like Eden Robinson (Monkey Beach), Richard Wagamese (Indian Horse), and Lee Maracle (Ravensong) also explore the complexities of home as both a literal and symbolic space. In Monkey Beach, home is situated in the haunting but sacred landscapes of the Haisla Nation, where the protagonist wrestles with loss and ancestral knowledge. In Indian Horse, Wagamese portrays the protagonist's return to the land as a necessary spiritual reconciliation after the traumas of residential school. These stories emphasize that for Indigenous people, home is not something one simply inherits; it is something one must relearn, revisit, and reconstruct through connection, memory, and healing.

Similarly, in Medicine River, home is not an idealized return to origin but a slow and sometimes reluctant re-engagement with community. Will does not romanticize the past, nor does he fully embrace his place in the community at first. His journey illustrates how home can be reclaimed through incremental acts of relationality helping with basketball games, photographing community events, listening to Harlen's endless stories, and simply being present.

This idea aligns with what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes as "land as pedagogy" the concept that Indigenous knowledge and belonging are learned through relationships, stories, and lived experience in specific places. For Simpson, home is not defined by colonial borders or blood quantum, but by responsibility, relationality, and participation in a shared cultural life.

Thus, in Indigenous literature broadly and in Medicine River specifically home emerges as a space of continuity and change, memory and presence, loss and renewal. It is not static or bounded but fluid and lived. This framing challenges colonial assumptions about identity, territory, and community by centering Indigenous modes of connection and belonging.

1.7 Home as Resistance and Survivance

To define "home" in a decolonial context is also to actively resist the narratives imposed by settler colonialism, which have historically sought to marginalize, erase, or control Indigenous peoples and their ways of life. As Gerald Vizenor (1999) has argued, Indigenous literature must be approached not merely as testimony of trauma or historical suffering but as evidence of survivancea neologism blending "survival" and "resistance." Survivance is a refusal of narratives that cast Indigenous peoples solely as victims of history. Instead, it emphasizes creativity, resilience, adaptability, and the ongoing vitality of Indigenous cultures, asserting presence rather than absence, agency rather than passivity. In this framework, Indigenous stories, like Thomas King's Medicine River, are not simply records of suffering they are acts of persistence, cultural affirmation, and imaginative survival.

In Medicine River, King's characters exemplify this concept of survivance not through grand political gestures or overt confrontation, but through the quiet, everyday acts of resistance that sustain Indigenous life and culture. The novel portrays community cohesion, relational responsibility, and daily participation as forms of political and cultural assertion. Characters gather for basketball games, share meals, support one another through personal crises, raise children, and preserve stories, all of which contribute to a living, resilient Indigenous social fabric. Harlen Bigbear, despite his humor and penchant for mischief, functions as a cultural anchor and guardian, reminding the community of its collective identity and ensuring that individuals like Will, initially detached or hesitant, are drawn into relational networks of care, responsibility, and belonging. Through Harlen, King illustrates that the ordinary, seemingly mundane acts of daily life are deeply significant: maintaining relationships, sharing laughter, and participating in communal traditions become forms of resistance against historical and ongoing erasure.

Even Will, whose return to Medicine River is initially reluctant and circumstantial, gradually becomes part of this web of everyday resistance. His engagement with the community through coaching, friendships, and participation in local life demonstrates that belonging and cultural continuity are enacted through practice, not simply inherited or assumed. Will's transformation emphasizes that survivance is relational and participatory: identity and home are not individualistic constructs but are co-formed through interactions with people, land, and stories.

This focus on everyday forms of resistance aligns closely with Indigenous feminist thought. Scholar Kim Anderson (2010) emphasizes Indigenous relationality," a framework rooted in reciprocity, care, and the restoration of social and emotional networks disrupted by colonization. According to Anderson, rebuilding Indigenous homeplaces entails repairing kinship ties, revitalizing parenting practices, nurturing gendered roles within community structures, and fostering emotional accountability. In Medicine River, King subtly embeds these principles: communal gatherings, the care extended between neighbors, and the support provided to children and elders are not merely narrative details; they are deliberate illustrations of relationality as political and cultural resistance. By showing that survival is embedded in social continuity, King demonstrates that Indigenous homeplaces are cultivated through relational networks and the ethical practice of community care.

King's narrative also redefines the notion of political action itself. In settler-colonial societies, resistance is often conceptualized as direct protest, legal challenge, or overt activism. In contrast, Medicine River presents a model of "quiet politics": the sustained effort to exist, maintain relationships, and preserve cultural knowledge in daily life is itself profoundly political. Simply living, caring for others, telling stories, and fostering continuity within the community asserts a form of agency that counters colonial narratives of disappearance and dysfunction. Every act of humor, storytelling, or shared celebration becomes reclamation of space, identity, and belonging. In this sense, King's novel demonstrates that Indigenous resistance is not only visible in dramatic or confrontational acts; it is embedded in the rhythms of ordinary life and the ongoing work of cultural and relational survival.

Moreover, King situates these acts of everyday resistance within the broader historical and cultural context of Indigenous dispossession. By highlighting relational networks, communal care, and practices of memory and storytelling, he foregrounds the persistence of Indigenous knowledge systems, values, and epistemologies despite centuries of colonial disruption. Home, therefore, is not merely a physical or geographic location; it is a relational, cultural, and ethical space, continuously reconstructed through interactions, care, and memory. The characters' efforts to nurture relationships, maintain traditions, and support one another are forms of defiance against colonial erasure, demonstrating that survivance encompasses both presence and continuity.

Ultimately, King's depiction of everyday resistance in Medicine River reframes how we understand Indigenous home and belonging. Home is not simply where one resides; it is the practical and symbolic enactment of cultural continuity, relational care, and ethical presence. Through acts as simple as gathering for basketball, sharing stories, laughing together, or raising a child with care, King portrays the subtle yet profound power of Indigenous survivance. In doing so, he reclaims Indigenous identity from narratives of victimhood and erasure, asserting that the ordinary practices of daily life when grounded in relationality, care, and cultural memory are transformative acts of resistance, resilience, and enduring presence.

1.8 Thomas King's Position in the Literary and Critical Landscape

Thomas King occupies a unique position within Indigenous literary studies. His contributions are multifaceted, he is a novelist, scholar, activist, and storyteller whose works often blur the lines between genres and traditions. While Green Grass, Running Water is widely recognized as his most metafictional and structurally complex work, Medicine River is often praised for its subtlety and accessibility, especially in how it introduces key themes like community, memory, and belonging to a broad readership.

Critics have noted King's anti-essentialist approach to Indigenous identity. Rather than depicting a singular, fixed notion of what it means to be Indigenous, his characters represent a diversity of experiences: urban and rural, mixed-heritage and full-status, connected and disconnected. This pluralism reflects the realities of Indigenous life in contemporary Canada, where identity is shaped by intersecting histories of displacement, adaptation, and cultural survival.

At the same time, King insists on the specificity of Indigenous epistemologies. His storytelling draws heavily on oral traditions, humor, and communal narrative structures. In The Truth About Stories (2003), he famously asserts, "The truth about stories is that's all we are." This statement functions as both a cultural assertion and a political challenge highlighting the power of narrative not only to shape individual identity but to structure collective memory and resistance.

In this light, Medicine River can be read as a cultural intervention. It challenges colonial constructions of Indigenous peoples as tragic, static, or vanishing by presenting vibrant, humorous, and multi-dimensional characters. It also offers a model for rebuilding home and

identity outside of state-defined parameters through kinship, community events, storytelling, and relational care.

Conclusion:

This chapter has established the key conceptual and theoretical foundations necessary for analyzing Medicine River through a critical, interdisciplinary lens. Drawing on both postcolonial theory and Indigenous literary criticism, we have seen that "home" in King's novel is not a simple or nostalgic return to origins. Rather, it is a dynamic, relational, and narrative construct one that emerges through memory, community, and storytelling.

Concepts such as Bhabha's third space, Vizenor's survivance, and Simpson's relational knowledge system allow us to frame Will's journey not merely as personal healing but as part of a broader cultural and political process. King's novel resists colonial narratives that define Indigenous identity as either vanishing or essentialized. Instead, it presents identity as negotiated, plural, and deeply rooted in everyday acts of belonging.

Chapter Two:

Will's Return Home as Personal and Cultural Reconnection

The return to one's homeland is a recurrent motif in Indigenous literatures, functioning both as a literal movement and a metaphorical journey. In Thomas King's Medicine River (1989), Will's return to the small town of Medicine River serves as the central axis around which the narrative unfolds. While the novel resists melodrama or grand gestures, the seemingly ordinary act of going back becomes a profound exploration of memory, identity, community, and cultural survival.

As Will himself reflects, "I wasn't planning to come back. Not for good. But somehow, here was, setting up my photo studio in Medicine River" (King 15). This casual remark underscores how homecoming in the novel is never framed as heroic but as subtle, reluctant, and almost accidental. Yet beneath this quietness lies an exploration of how Indigenous people navigate displacement, absence, and reconnection in a colonial world.

This chapter analyzes Will's return under four interrelated frameworks: (1) the personal and psychological dimension of homecoming, shaped by loss, orphanhood, and hybridity; (2) the cultural and communal implications of re-entering Indigenous space; (3) the role of memory, storytelling, and relationality in the reconstruction of identity; and (4) the symbolic and political significance of home as resistance to colonial displacement. The chapter also situates Medicine River within broader Indigenous and postcolonial literary contexts, drawing comparisons with other works where return and reconnection function as healing strategies.

2.1 Will's Personal Motivations for Return

Will's decision to return to Medicine River is neither heroic nor intentional; it emerges as a circumstantial, almost reluctant act shaped by the absence and loss in his life. The death of his mother, the mysterious disappearance of his brother James, and the enduring absence of his estranged father leave Will unanchored, stripped of the conventional familial ties that often motivate nostalgic homecomings. In this context, the act of returning is not celebrated or dramatic it is quiet, necessary, and fraught with ambivalence. As critic Eva Gruber (2008) observes, Will's movement back embodies the "unfinished business of belonging," a sense that something essential remains unresolved between the self and the place of origin, a tether that cannot be ignored.

Will himself articulates this tension: "I didn't come back because I missed the place. I came back because there wasn't anywhere else to go" (King, 23). These words reveal a profound emotional truth: return is often driven not by desire or sentimentality but by the quiet, inexorable pull of unresolved roots. The phrasing captures the dislocation and vulnerability that shape Will's journey, making the reader acutely aware of the weight of absence, the burden of incompleteness, and the subtle longing for connection that he struggles to name. In this sense, his return is less about reclaiming a home and more about seeking a space where the fragments of his life can begin to cohere, where memory, place, and identity might converge to offer solace, however partial.

From a psychological perspective, Will's homecoming can be analyzed through the lens of trauma theory. Cathy Caruth (1996) explains that trauma often manifests as a compulsive return to the site of loss or rupture, a place that simultaneously holds pain and the possibility of understanding. Medicine River functions as such a site for Will: a landscape imbued with

memories of fractured childhood, incomplete familial connections, and persistent uncertainty about belonging. Yet paradoxically, it is within this very setting steeped in the tensions of absencethat the potential for reconnection emerges. His return enacts what Sigmund Freud terms the "repetition compulsion": a subconscious reenactment of past trauma, a movement toward a place of discomfort not for immediate gratification, but to process unresolved emotions, confront lingering losses, and tentatively reclaim agency over his own narrative.

Will's profession as a photographer further reinforces his emotional ambivalence and detached perspective. Accustomed to standing behind the lens, he observes life rather than actively participating in it, capturing the experiences of others while keeping his own distance. His reflection, "It's easier taking pictures of other people's families than being part of one" (King, 41), encapsulates the emotional barrier he maintains between himself and the world, a lens not just of camera glass but of protective separation. This detachment mirrors the hesitancy that marks his return: he approaches Medicine River with caution, partially withdrawn, wary of engagement, yet simultaneously drawn by an invisible thread of belonging. His return is thus layered: it is both an act of avoidance and a subconscious attempt at reconciliation, a hesitant step toward healing that recognizes the impossibility of total disengagement from his origins.

Beneath the quiet reluctance lies a profound vulnerability that resonates with readers. The emotional impact of Will's journey is subtle yet powerful, evoking empathy, reflection, and recognition of the universal tension between belonging and alienation. His return is not triumphant but intimate, marked by a mixture of sorrow, hope, and tentative curiosity. Readers witness a man negotiating the paradox of home: the place that reminds him of loss is also the only space where repair and reconnection might occur. By presenting Will's homecoming in this nuanced, psychologically rich manner, King allows the reader to inhabit his emotional landscape, feeling the gravity of absence, the pull of unfinished business, and the tentative promise that engagement, however hesitant, can lead to healing.

Ultimately, Will's journey to Medicine River illustrates that returning home is rarely a straightforward path. It is complex, emotionally fraught, and intertwined with unresolved pain. Yet it is precisely this complexity the blend of reluctance, detachment, memory, and latent hope that imbues his narrative with authenticity and emotional resonance. King's portrayal transforms what might appear a simple geographical return into a profound meditation on identity, loss, and the human need for connection, making Will's journey a powerful exploration of the emotional and psychological realities of homecoming.

2.2 Orphanhood, Absence, and Identity Fragmentation

Central to Will's sense of displacement is his status as an orphan. His mother's death leaves him without a maternal anchor, while his absent father epitomizes the legacies of abandonment and erasure common in Indigenous narratives. James, his brother, represents another absence choosing to distance himself from both family and community. The effect is that Will enters Medicine River already fractured, carrying what Homi Bhabha (1994) would call a "liminal identity" situated in the margins between presence and absence.

When Will recalls his father, he notes bitterly: "My father left before I could remember him. Sometimes I think he never existed at all" (King 62). The absence of paternal lineage resonates with the colonial legacy of fractured families through residential schools and assimilationist policies.

Indigenous critics such as Daniel Heath Justice (2006) remind us that orphanhood in Indigenous literature often symbolizes more than personal loss; it reflects the collective disconnection produced by colonial disruptions residential schools, foster care systems, and forced displacements. Will's personal orphanhood thus resonates with a broader cultural orphanhood imposed on Indigenous peoples, making his return symbolically significant: by reconnecting with community, he resists the colonial narrative of isolation.

Will's hybrid heritage intensifies this fragmentation. Raised in a space distanced from cultural traditions, he embodies Bhabha's notion of hybridity: neither fully belonging to settler society nor to the Indigenous community. Yet, as Indigenous scholars argue, hybridity should not be read as erasure but as a site of creative negotiation. Will's eventual acceptance into the Medicine River community demonstrates that Indigenous belonging is not exclusively blood-based but relationally enacted.

2.3 Community as the Site of Reconnection

While Will's individual narrative remains central to the novel, Thomas King makes it clear that identity is not reconstructed in isolation but emerges through relationships and community participation. Harlen Bigbear, the novel's most dynamic and influential character, embodies this communal energy, demonstrating that belonging is both enacted and nurtured through social engagement. Harlen's humor, relentless optimism, and occasional meddling ensure that Will is never left on the margins, gently guiding him into the social fabric of Medicine River and illustrating that home is not merely a physical place, but a network of relational bonds.

Harlen's role exemplifies what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) calls "relational accountability," the principle that identity, belonging, and responsibility are sustained through acts of care, reciprocity, and mutual support. By inviting Will to participate in basketball games, introducing him to local events, and incorporating him into informal relational networks, Harlen facilitates a gradual reintegration that is both relational and culturally meaningful. Participation is thus not a superficial act; it is a crucial mechanism for building trust, asserting presence, and reaffirming communal norms. As Harlen reminds Will, "You can't just stand around with a camera. You gotta play. You gotta be in the picture" (King, 89). This guidance operates on both literal and symbolic levels: Will must actively engage with the people and place around him, rather than observing from a distance, to reclaim his sense of belonging.

The novel presents these interactions as more than social niceties; they are central to Indigenous epistemologies, where identity cannot be divorced from kinship, land, and story. Western individualist models often assume that selfhood is a solitary, introspective endeavor, but King demonstrates that, within Indigenous contexts, identity is collectively shaped and socially enacted. Will's participation in communal activities, guided by Harlen's

interventions, bridges the gap between his fractured personal history and the larger cultural and relational landscape of Medicine River. In essence, Harlen transforms abstract notions of community into concrete, lived experiences that provide Will with a surrogate family and a sense of home that compensates for the absences of his biological family.

Furthermore, Harlen's efforts highlight the subtleties of Indigenous community-building. His storytelling, humor, and encouragement work simultaneously to entertain, educate, and integrate. Each story he tells, whether exaggerated, humorous, or serious, operates as a social mechanism to weave individuals into the communal narrative. By situating Will within these stories, Harlen affirms his presence, reshapes his understanding of belonging, and nurtures his emotional and social growth. This demonstrates a larger point about Indigenous communities: belonging is not automatically granted but continually enacted through participation, storytelling, and relational engagement.

In addition, King underscores that community is a source of resilience. Through shared activities, care, and relational accountability, members of Medicine River collectively resist isolation, social fragmentation, and the lingering effects of colonial displacement. The community's ordinary interactionsbasketball games, shared meals, casual visits carry profound significance: they reinforce social bonds, validate individual identities, and foster cultural continuity. For Will, these engagements gradually transform his sense of self from an isolated observer into a fully integrated participant, illustrating that home is not merely inherited or geographically defined, but relationally constructed and culturally enacted.

Ultimately, the Medicine River community, guided by figures like Harlen, embodies a model of belonging that contrasts sharply with Western ideals of autonomous selfhood. By participating in communal life, embracing relational responsibility, and responding to Harlen's guidance, Will comes to understand that identity is woven through relationships, not only personal history. King's depiction of communal integration shows that home is realized through active involvement, shared memory, and mutual care, making the community itself both the medium and the manifestation of belonging.

2.4 Home as a Site of Memory and Storytelling

Memory functions as a vital bridge between Will's fragmented past and his emerging sense of belonging in Medicine River. The novel's non-linear structure mirrors the rhythms of Indigenous storytelling traditions, in which narratives move in cycles rather than straight, linear paths. Stories are not told to achieve tidy conclusions; instead, they unfold organically, revisiting characters, events, and places in a recursive manner. Each anecdote whether it recounts Will's mother's quiet struggles, the absence of his father, or Harlen's playful interventions serves to enrich his understanding of home, identity, and relational belonging. These memories, though sometimes disjointed, gradually coalesce into a layered mosaic, reflecting the complex interplay between personal experience, collective history, and cultural continuity.

Will himself acknowledges the irregular nature of memory: "Stories come back to you in pieces. You don't always know how they fit, but after a while they make a kind of sense" (King, 102). This reflection captures the tension between chaos and coherence in memory,

highlighting how understanding emerges over time rather than instantly. The fragmented narrative structure of Medicine River resists Western literary conventions that prioritize linearity, resolution, and closure. Instead, it foregrounds an Indigenous epistemology in which meaning arises through relationality, repetition, and cyclical reflection. By structuring the novel in this way, King honors oral traditions where stories are not static but fluid, reshaped with each telling to respond to the needs, experiences, and presence of the listeners.

Memory in Medicine River is also deeply communal. Will's recollections are not private or solitary; they intersect with the memories and perspectives of others, especially figures like Harlen Bigbear, who often remind him of past events, reinterpret experiences, or infuse them with humor and moral insight. In this sense, remembering is an active engagement with the community, an affirmation that the past is inseparable from shared identity and that belonging is co-constructed through collective narratives. Indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance emphasizing resilience, presence, and continuity over victimhood aptly frames this process. In Medicine River, memory is not a tool for nostalgic longing or passive reflection; it is an act of survivance, enabling Will to reclaim fragments of his life, integrate them into communal stories, and participate in the ongoing continuity of Indigenous cultural life.

Moreover, King's technique highlights the ethical and relational dimensions of memory. By presenting stories in open-ended cycles, he resists the Western desire for closure while emphasizing the responsibilities inherent in remembering: remembering is an act of accountability to both the living and the dead, to individuals and the community. Indigenous histories disrupted by colonialism through dispossession, residential schools, and cultural erasure cannot be neatly resolved or fully recovered, and King's narrative structure mirrors this reality. Memory becomes a medium for grappling with absence, loss, and incomplete histories, acknowledging pain while also allowing space for continuity, resilience, and humor.

Importantly, memory functions as a tool of self-reconstruction. Will's identity is fragmented by orphanhood, cultural disconnection, and personal absence, but the act of recalling, contextualizing, and sharing memories allows him to reconstruct a sense of self that is relational, embedded in community, and rooted in a living past. Memories of his mother's sacrifices, his absent father's failures, and Harlen's interventions collectively provide him with a framework for understanding belonging as something enacted, not inherited. Memory is not a static archive but a dynamic process: it is a way for Will to negotiate identity, reconnect with the Indigenous community, and participate in the rhythms of everyday life that constitute home.

King's emphasis on open-ended storytelling also subtly critiques Western notions of narrative control, authorship, and closure. In the Indigenous framework that informs Medicine River, stories are not meant to be finalized or fixed; they are living, relational, and cyclical. Each telling offers new interpretations, layers of meaning, and emotional resonance. For Will, memory is less about achieving definitive answers than about learning to inhabit a space of relational continuity, where the past informs the present and where the self is understood

through ongoing engagement with others. In this sense, King's narrative demonstrates that memory is both a personal and collective act: it preserves cultural knowledge, affirms social bonds, and sustains identity across time.

In sum, memory in Medicine River operates on multiple levels: as a bridge connecting Will to his personal history, as a medium for communal identity and survivance, and as a mechanism through which Indigenous cultural continuity is enacted and celebrated. Through memory, King redefines the notion of home: it is not simply a physical location but a relational and temporal space constructed through storytelling, reflection, and shared experience. By expanding the emotional and cultural significance of memory, King enables readers to grasp the deep interconnections between individual identity, community, and history, illustrating how remembering itself becomes a profound act of belonging, healing, and resilience.

2.5 Gender, Family, and Reconstructed Belonging

Will's relationships with women in Medicine River further illuminate the novel's exploration of home as a relational and constructed space rather than a fixed, inherited one. His friendship with Louise Heavyman, a single mother, is particularly significant, as it exposes the dynamics of non-traditional family structures within Indigenous communities and demonstrates that familial bonds are often forged through care, trust, and mutual support rather than biological connection. Through his interactions with Louise and her daughter, Will begins to understand that home and belonging are enacted through everyday acts of attention, responsibility, and emotional presence.

As Will reflects, "I wasn't anyone's father, but every now and then, Louise's little girl would take my hand like I was" (King 117). This seemingly small gesture carries profound symbolic weight: it signifies the creation of a surrogate familial bond, a chosen kinship that validates Will's presence and participation. Here, King emphasizes that belonging is a performative and relational process, one that can heal previous absences and fractures in identity. By participating in Louise and her daughter's lives, Will is gradually woven into a micro-community, learning to embody the responsibilities, care, and attentiveness that constitute home.

Indigenous feminist scholarship provides additional insight into the significance of these relationships. Kim Anderson (2010) highlights that restoring Indigenous homeplaces requires the reconstruction of relational networks disrupted by colonial interventions, which often imposed patriarchal and nuclear family models alien to Indigenous social structures. Louise's role as a strong, independent mother exemplifies this restoration. She embodies resilience, agency, and relational authority, demonstrating that Indigenous women play a central role in nurturing community and sustaining cultural continuity. Her strength challenges colonial stereotypes that have historically depicted Indigenous women as dependent or marginalized and subverts Western assumptions about family, authority, and care.

Moreover, Will's connection to Louise and her daughter is not simply about forming emotional ties; it also illustrates the active, lived process of creating home. Unlike inherited or legally defined spaces, home in *Medicine River* is cultivated through ongoing interactions,

attentiveness, and responsiveness to others' needs. Will learns, through his engagement with Louise and her child, that inclusion and belonging require effort, empathy, and reciprocity. Each shared meal, conversation, and small act of care reinforces the social and emotional scaffolding that constitutes a home, highlighting that relational practice, rather than static definition, determines belonging.

These relationships also serve to decolonize traditional notions of home and family. Colonial paradigms often assume that home is defined by bloodlines, property ownership, or rigid familial hierarchies. King counters this assumption by illustrating that Indigenous homeplaces are flexible, adaptive, and relationally grounded. Will's bond with Louise and her daughter embodies a non-hierarchical, supportive, and emotionally attuned family structure that privileges care over inheritance. In this sense, home becomes a space where cultural continuity is enacted and where individuals are integrated through relational networks rather than imposed frameworks.

Additionally, Will's experience with Louise and her child underscores the emotional and ethical dimensions of relational belonging. His participation is not passive; he learns to respond to the needs, joys, and vulnerabilities of others, reflecting what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) describes as "relational accountability" the principle that identity and belonging are maintained through responsibility, care, and active participation in the lives of others. By stepping into this role, Will begins to reconcile his fractured past, integrating his personal history with the shared experiences of those around him. In doing so, King emphasizes that the reconstruction of home is inseparable from the reconstruction of self, achieved not in isolation but through meaningful engagement with community and kin.

Furthermore, this relationship highlights the intergenerational aspect of home. Through interactions with Louise's daughter, Will participates in a form of cultural continuity that connects past, present, and future. He becomes a witness to the child's growth, a mentor figure, and a stabilizing presence roles that reinforce his sense of belonging while simultaneously supporting the child's development. This intergenerational dimension reinforces the idea that home is not merely a physical or temporal location; it is a living, evolving network of care and responsibility that sustains the social fabric across generations.

In sum, Will's connection to Louise and her daughter exemplifies Thomas King's broader vision of home as relational, enacted, and culturally grounded. It demonstrates that belonging is not determined by biology or legal status but is continuously cultivated through care, responsibility, and mutual support. Through these relationships, King challenges colonial notions of family and home, foregrounds the ethical and emotional labor necessary for community building, and emphasizes the central role of women in sustaining Indigenous homeplaces. Will's journey illustrates that home is not a static inheritance but a dynamic, participatory practice, forged through love, attentiveness, and the active reconstruction of relational networks.

2.6 The Land as Emotional and Cultural Anchor

Although King avoids overtly romanticizing the landscape, the Medicine River setting carries profound symbolic and cultural weight throughout the novel. For Indigenous peoples,

land is not merely a passive backdrop for human activity; it is deeply relational, serving as teacher, guide, and spiritual anchor. The land embodies memory, history, and the continuity of community life, shaping how individuals understand themselves and their place in the world. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) emphasizes, colonialism sought to sever Indigenous peoples from this relational ontology by treating land as a commodity, reducing it to property to be owned, bought, or sold. Through this commodification, colonial powers attempted not only to displace Indigenous peoples physically but also to undermine the spiritual, emotional, and cultural connections that sustained Indigenous communities over generations.

King resists this colonial erasure by grounding Will's reconnection in the tangible geography of Medicine River. The landscape is intricately woven into the fabric of daily life, providing continuity amidst change and serving as a constant reminder of home. Community basketball games, funerals, storytelling circles, and even Will's photography sessions unfold against the backdrop of this land, demonstrating that the sense of home in King's narrative is inseparable from place. The physical environment is thus not neutral; it shapes relationships, facilitates memory, and enables cultural survival. Will's reflections on the river highlight this connection: "The river always seemed the same, even when everything else changed" (King, 135). This line captures the enduring presence of land as a stabilizing force in the midst of personal and communal transformation.

Furthermore, King emphasizes that the land itself participates in the storytelling process. The river, the trees, the town's streets all bear witness to the lives, struggles, and celebrations of the community. They hold memory and continuity, connecting past generations with the present. For Will, returning to Medicine River is not simply a matter of stepping back into a physical space; it is an engagement with a landscape that embodies the history, resilience, and identity of his people. In this sense, the land functions as both literal and symbolic scaffolding for the reconstruction of home, providing a spatial and cultural framework within which relationships, memory, and belonging are renewed.

King's depiction of Medicine River aligns with broader Indigenous epistemologies, where land is inseparable from identity, culture, and community. Home is thus experienced not only through social ties but also through engagement with the natural environment that sustains and witnesses communal life. The river, hills, and open spaces of Medicine River are silent participants in the story, shaping Will's journey of reintegration and offering a continuous, nurturing presence that contrasts with the dislocations imposed by colonial history. By situating Will's return within this relational landscape, King underscores the inseparability of place and cultural survival, revealing that reconnection with land is central to the broader processes of healing, identity formation, and the reclamation of home

2.7 Comparative Perspectives: Return in Other Indigenous Narratives

Will's journey can be contextualized by comparing it with other Indigenous narratives of return. In Richard Wagamese's Indian Horse (2012), the protagonist's healing begins only when he reconnects with the land after years of trauma in residential schools. Similarly, in Eden Robinson's Monkey Beach (2000), return is framed as a confrontation with ancestral knowledge and unresolved grief.

What distinguishes King's novel is its subtlety. Unlike the overtly traumatic returns in Wagamese and Robinson, Medicine River emphasizes everyday reconnection through humor, community, and small acts of participation. This ordinariness is significant: it challenges the expectation that Indigenous narratives must revolve around spectacular suffering. Instead, King affirms that survivance also occurs in the quotidian rhythms of community life.

2.8 Humor as a Strategy of Homecoming

Thomas king's novel places humor at the heart of his exploration , humor is far more than a decorative element or light entertainment; it functions as a central mechanism through which Thomas King reshapes notions of home, belonging, and Indigenous resilience. Within the novel, humor is deeply entwined with relationality, community, and survival. Indigenous communities have historically used humor as a strategy to navigate oppression, respond to trauma, and sustain cultural identity. Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance aptly captures this dynamic: humor is an act of refusal against being confined to narratives of victimhood, a creative affirmation of life, and an assertion of presence in the face of historical and ongoing colonial pressures (Vizenor, 1999).

Harlen Bigbear exemplifies this principle. His humor is multi-dimensional—it entertains, instructs, and subtly shapes social and communal relations. In a moment of playful admonition, he tells Will, "You're too serious, Will… one of these days you'll die of it" (King, 1989, p. 148). Beyond the surface laughter, this statement functions as relational guidance: it encourages Will to loosen his emotional rigidity, participate in the community, and recognize that belonging is not simply inherited through blood or heritage but actively enacted through connection, shared experiences, and responsiveness to others. In this sense, humor becomes a medium through which Will learns to navigate the social and emotional contours of Medicine River.

King's strategic deployment of humor also carries profound cultural and political weight. Through wit, irony, and gentle exaggeration, the novel subverts colonial narratives that have historically framed Indigenous peoples as tragic, passive, or disappearing. By saturating the narrative with lively, relatable, and humanizing portrayals, King asserts that Indigenous life is ordinary, dynamic, and resilient. Humor here is inherently political it destabilizes imposed stereotypes, undermines narratives of inferiority, and affirms the agency, creativity, and vitality of Indigenous communities. In this way, laughter is not merely entertainment but a form of resistance, a refusal to be defined by loss alone, and a subtle tool for reclaiming narrative space within both the story and the broader literary landscape.

Moreover, humor in Medicine River is inseparable from relationality and community building. Harlen's jokes, playful exaggerations, and storytelling function as instruments of inclusion, drawing Will from the margins into the social and cultural fabric of the town. Through humor, Harlen constructs pathways of belonging: he uses laughter to ease tension, mediate awkward social encounters, and cultivate solidarity. By embedding humor in everyday events from basketball games to casual conversations, King illustrates how ordinary actions, amplified by shared laughter, enact and sustain communal life. In this sense, humor becomes a practical form of relational accountability: it not only entertains but also

strengthens bonds, affirms social roles, and negotiates responsibilities within the Indigenous community.

King also demonstrates that humor has a therapeutic dimension. Will, burdened by personal loss, hybrid identity, and fragmented familial connections, experiences moments of alienation and internal conflict. Humor, particularly through interactions with Harlen, allows him to navigate these emotional challenges. It provides relief, reshapes painful memories, and reframes difficult experiences in a manner that integrates them into communal life rather than isolating the individual. This aligns with Indigenous epistemologies, where storytelling, humor, and ritual often function as mechanisms for processing trauma and fostering resilience. By laughing together, the characters in Medicine River collectively resist the fragmentation imposed by colonial histories and personal losses.

Finally, humor in the novel operates as a bridge between individual and community, memory and present, and resistance and continuity. It transforms ordinary, everyday actions into sites of cultural affirmation and political significance. In teaching Will that home is not merely a place or a lineage but an enacted set of relationships and shared experiences, King emphasizes that humor is both a social and cultural tool. Laughter, jokes, and playful stories become integral to the process of reintegration, healing, and cultural survival. It affirms that Indigenous home like Indigenous identity is relational, participatory, and continually negotiated through acts of care, creativity, and connection.

In sum, Thomas King presents humor in Medicine River as a multifaceted strategy: relational, therapeutic, political, and cultural. Through Harlen Bigbear's wit and the community's shared laughter, the novel demonstrates that home is enacted, identity is reinforced, and belonging is cultivated not through inheritance alone but through lived, embodied, and communal practices. Humor is a form of survivance, a declaration of presence, and a gentle yet powerful method of reconnecting individuals to their community, their past, and the ongoing story of Indigenous life. It is in these acts of laughter, shared understanding, and playful intervention that King reveals home not as a fixed space but as a dynamic, relational, and resilient construct.

2.9 Home as Resistance to Colonial Narratives

To define "home" in a decolonial context is also to resist the narratives imposed by settler colonialism. Colonial ideologies have historically positioned Indigenous peoples as "homeless" in two senses: dispossessed of their ancestral lands and excluded from the settler definition of belonging. The doctrine of terra nullius, which regarded Indigenous land as empty and therefore available for colonial occupation, attempted to erase Indigenous relationships with place, memory, and kinship. To reclaim home, then, is to dismantle the very structures of thought that sought to erase Indigenous presence.

Thomas King's Medicine River participates in this reclamation by portraying home not as a nostalgic return to an untouched past, but as a lived practice of resistance against colonial definitions of space and identity. King resists the colonial narrative that Indigenous life is tragic, vanishing, or dysfunctional by focusing instead on the vibrancy of everyday communal life.

Scenes of basketball games, community events, shared meals, and endless storytelling may appear ordinary, but within a decolonial lens, they function as radical affirmations of cultural continuity. These scenes enact Vizenor's survivance: the active presence and creative persistence of Indigenous peoples who refuse to be reduced to victims of history.

Harlen exemplifies this quiet yet profound resistance. By making sure that no one is left outside the circle whether by inviting Will to basketball, helping friends in trouble, or telling stories that bind people together he asserts a vision of home as collective belonging.

This emphasis on the ordinary as resistance challenges Western understandings of political struggle, which often privilege overt acts of protest. As Kim Anderson reminds us, re-establishing kinship networks and sustaining everyday life are themselves deeply political acts when they occur in contexts shaped by colonial erasure. In Medicine River, the act of raising a child, of neighbors helping each other, or of gathering for a game becomes a counter-narrative: each instance affirms that Indigenous life is ongoing, complex, and resilient.

2.11 Conclusion

Will's return to Medicine River encapsulates the complexity of homecoming in Indigenous literature. It is at once personal and communal, nostalgic and forward-looking, painful and healing. Through Will's journey, King demonstrates that home is not simply a place but a processa dynamic reconstruction of memory, identity, and belonging enacted through relationships.

By expanding the concept of home beyond geography, Medicine River illustrates how Indigenous communities resist colonial erasure through everyday acts of survivance. Will's reintegration underscores that belonging is not inherited by blood alone but enacted through participation, care, and storytelling. In this way, King offers a quiet yet powerful vision of Indigenous resilience, one that challenges colonial constructs while affirming the vitality of Indigenous life in contemporary Canada.

Chapter three

Storytelling, Memory, and Community

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In Medicine River, Thomas King does more than tell a story he reclaims storytelling itself as a cultural and communal practice. The novel is not structured around a linear plot or dramatic conflict; instead, it unfolds in "vignettes, memories, and conversations" that echo the rhythms of oral tradition. Through this form, King constructs home not just as a physical place but as a "narrative space," shaped by relationships, shared histories, and the act of remembering together. Storytelling, as King presents it, is inseparable from identity and belonging. It functions as a medium through which the past resurfaces, the community holds itself together and individuals such as Will find a place in the circle.

The episodic structure mirrors the circular and non-linear patterns of Indigenous storytelling, where events are revisited, reframed, and connected across generations. Each anecdote or memory contributes to the community's shared knowledge and moral framework, reinforcing relational bonds rather than isolating individual experience. By presenting the narrative in this way, King challenges Western literary conventions of plot-driven storytelling, privileging instead the communal and participatory aspects of narrative as a form of cultural preservation. The fragmented narrative invites the reader to engage actively, piecing together the story much like the characters themselves negotiate memory, history, and identity within their community.

Moreover, this non-linear style reflects the way home itself is experienced in Medicine River. Home is not a fixed point on a map but a fluid and evolving construct, sustained through stories that connect people to each other, to the land, and to their shared past. Each vignette, whether humorous, nostalgic, or reflective, functions as a small act of home-making a way to weave fragmented experiences into a coherent sense of belonging. King's emphasis on dialogue, anecdote, and communal memory shows that home is maintained not by walls or property but by active participation in the ongoing narrative of the community.

This narrative strategy also underscores King's commitment to the principles of survivance, as articulated by Gerald Vizenor. By foregrounding storytelling as a communal practice, King resists the erasure of Indigenous voices and history. The act of recounting everyday life, recalling minor events, and sharing personal memories becomes a subtle form of cultural and political resistance, asserting that Indigenous identity continues to thrive outside colonial narratives of tragedy or disappearance. For Will, these stories provide a scaffold for understanding his own fragmented past and for reintegrating into the social and emotional life of Medicine River. They serve as both instruction and comfort, teaching him the norms, humor, and ethics of the community while simultaneously giving him a sense of rootedness that goes beyond physical location.

In addition, the vignettes and conversations highlight the multiplicity of perspectives within the community. King allows different voices to narrate parts of the story, reflecting a diversity of experiences and emphasizing that belonging is negotiated collectively. This polyphonic approach mirrors real-life community interactions, where identity and memory are co-constructed through shared dialogue and attentive listening. In this way, King illustrates that storytelling is not just a literary device but a social practice: it shapes relationships, regulates social behavior, and sustains the cultural lifeblood of the community.

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Ultimately, King's approach in this opening section positions storytelling as both a method and a metaphor. It is a method because it structures the novel and conveys essential knowledge about characters, place, and culture. It is a metaphor because it embodies the central theme of the thesis: that home is not simply a physical location but a relational and narrative space, continually constructed through shared memory, communal care, and cultural expression. The novel suggests that to belong is to be present in the stories of others and to have one's own stories acknowledged, thus turning narrative itself into a form of home-making.

This chapter explores how storytelling functions as a method of identity reconstruction, cultural continuity, and community building, particularly through the voices of Will and Harlen, and how memory becomes a foundation for belonging. It does so by analyzing: (1) the novel's non-linear, oral-style narrative structure, (2) Harlen Bigbear as storyteller and cultural anchor, (3) memory as a tool for belonging and healing, and (4) storytelling as resistance and survival in a colonial context.

3.1 The Narrative Structure: A Non-Linear, Oral Style

Thomas King's Medicine River stands out for its unusual narrative structure. Unlike many Western novels that follow a linear trajectory beginning, middle, climax, and end King shapes his story as a series of memories, anecdotes, and conversations. This non-linear, episodic style closely reflects Indigenous oral storytelling traditions, where stories are told in circles, not in straight lines. Instead of asking the reader to wait for a single dramatic resolution, King allows meaning to emerge gradually, through repetition, interconnection, and reflection. This deliberate structure mirrors the lived experience of memory, where events are recalled according to emotional significance rather than chronological order.

The novel frequently shifts backward and forward in time without warning. One moment, Will is describing his present life in Medicine River; the next, he recalls a scene with his mother or a moment from childhood. For example, Will remembers his mother's struggles to raise him and his brother alone, yet these memories are not presented sequentially but arise in response to triggers in the present. Will reflects, "Things don't always come in order. Sometimes they just come when you need them" (King 18). This emphasizes the natural, often unpredictable flow of memory and aligns with the cyclical nature of oral storytelling, in which stories return when they are most needed rather than when they are most logical.

King's method prioritizes relationships over plot. The reader follows Will not for suspense or drama but for the intricate web of connections between people, places, and events. A vignette about basketball may lead into a story about Will's mother, which in turn may connect back to his friendship with Harlen or to the community at large. These links, while sometimes subtle, create a sense of continuity through shared voices and recurring themes. Just as in a traditional storytelling circle, the purpose is not to rush toward an ending but to immerse the listener or reader in the collective experience.

By adopting this circular, fragmented form, King resists colonial literary conventions that favor order, hierarchy, and closure. Western novels often prize neatly organized plots and

definitive conclusions, whereas Indigenous storytelling emphasizes fluidity, relationality, and openness. King demonstrates that stories are living entities: they grow, shift, and return. As one critic observes, "Medicine River reads less like a novel and more like a conversation you might have in a kitchen or at a basketball game" (Fee, 1999, p. 84). This conversational quality is intentional; it invites the reader into the community as if they are sitting among the characters, listening to stories being passed from one person to another, reinforcing the communal nature of memory and belonging.

The effect of this non-linear style is that the novel itself becomes a kind of "home." Each vignette, memory, and digression constructs a narrative space where voices are preserved, relationships are highlighted, and the past is continuously woven into the present. For Will, this means that his personal journey of identity and belonging is inseparable from the stories and lives around him. The community itself becomes part of his process of homecoming, and his understanding of self is inseparable from his engagement with collective memory. For the reader, the novel exemplifies that home is not a final destination but a lived, interactive space created through listening, remembering, and sharing.

Ultimately, King's narrative structure affirms that storytelling is not about delivering a single truth or achieving a conclusive ending. Instead, it creates space for multiple truths, diverse voices, and layered ways of understanding and remembering. Memory, humor, relationships, and anecdotes all converge to construct a sense of belonging. In Medicine River, home exists not at the end of the story but within the act of telling itself, where narrative, community, and identity are intertwined in a living, evolving tapestry.

3.2 Harlen Bigbear: The Storyteller as Cultural Anchor

Among the many memorable and dynamic figures in Medicine River, Harlen Bigbear stands out as one of the novel's most influential and transformative characters. Far beyond being simply Will's friend, Harlen embodies the multifaceted role of storyteller, mediator, and cultural anchor, demonstrating the relational power of narrative in Indigenous communities. Through his constant weaving of stories sometimes exaggerated, sometimes humorous, and sometimes deeply insightful Harlen does far more than entertain: he creates bonds, preserves communal memory, and gently guides Will toward a sense of belonging within Medicine River. King presents Harlen as the embodiment of a living tradition, where storytelling functions simultaneously as social glue, cultural continuity, and ethical practice.

From the very beginning, Harlen ensures that Will is not left on the periphery of community life. He actively pulls Will into social and communal activities, including coaching the women's basketball team, attending local events, and visiting neighbors, using stories as both encouragement and explanation. These narrative interventions are subtle but powerful; they often stretch the truth or employ playful exaggeration, yet their purpose is relational rather than manipulative. For instance, when convincing Will to coach basketball, Harlen insists that the women "really need him" (King, 1989, p. 52). While the statement is partly an embellishment, it serves to motivate Will and embed him within the network of community obligations and interactions. Through this approach, King emphasizes the ethical and relational dimensions of storytelling in Indigenous communities: stories are a tool for participation, accountability, and mutual care, shaping social roles and fostering inclusion.

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Harlen also maintains Will at the center of the community's narrative consciousness. He repeatedly recounts Will's achievements, embellishes his contributions, and reframes ordinary actions as meaningful participation in communal life. Even when Will is reluctant, Harlen's stories situate him firmly within the shared memory of Medicine River, preventing him from remaining an outsider. This demonstrates an important Indigenous epistemological principle: identity is not solely self-defined but is co-constructed and sustained through the narratives of others. Harlen's storytelling highlights that belonging is relational, achieved not only through personal recognition but through the collective acknowledgment and reinforcement of community memory.

A crucial aspect of Harlen's storytelling lies in its ability to transform personal and painful histories into shared understanding and resilience. When Will contemplates his father's absence or his mother's struggles, Harlen reframes these experiences with humor, perspective, or moral reflection, not to diminish their significance but to integrate them into a broader narrative of collective endurance. These interventions illustrate the communal function of storytelling as described by Indigenous scholars: stories carry not only personal truths but also collective wisdom, converting individual suffering into shared survivance. By participating in this narrative process, Will begins to navigate and reconcile the fragmented aspects of his past, gradually reconstructing a sense of self that is inseparable from the community around him.

Moreover, Harlen's storytelling operates as a form of resistance to colonial narratives. Colonial representations often portray Indigenous communities as fractured, tragic, or culturally stagnant. In contrast, Harlen's stories overflow with humor, creativity, and vitality, challenging these stereotypes at every turn. His playful exaggerations, endless jokes, and irrepressible optimism serve as acts of cultural affirmation. As Gerald Vizenor (1999) notes in his concept of survivance, Indigenous narratives thrive when they refuse victimhood and emphasize active presence and resilience. Harlen embodies this principle fully: his stories are not passive recollections but living acts of survivance that assert the complexity, humor, and resilience of Indigenous life. Through his storytelling, King foregrounds the idea that joy, wit, and creativity are as central to cultural survival as memory and tradition.

Harlen also plays a critical role as a cultural mediator, bridging the gap between Will and the Medicine River community. As someone of mixed heritage and long estranged from his roots, Will initially experiences feelings of alienation and hesitation. Harlen interprets communal norms, introduces him to key figures, and frames events in ways that Will can understand, accept, and participate in. This mediation extends beyond mere social facilitation; it conveys cultural knowledge, relational responsibilities, and ethical practices embedded in Indigenous concepts of home and community. Through this lens, storytelling becomes a form of cultural instruction, subtly guiding individuals to engage with, respect, and sustain communal bonds.

Finally, Harlen's storytelling highlights the adaptability and living nature of oral traditions. His narratives are never fixed; they shift depending on the audience, context, and immediate needs. This fluidity underscores the relational epistemology central to Indigenous storytelling,

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where knowledge and memory are not static but dynamically responsive to community life. Stories are a medium for creating presence, reinforcing values, and sustaining collective identity in the moment rather than merely preserving the past. By centering Harlen in the narrative, King demonstrates that oral tradition is not simply a method of recording events but a living practice that actively constructs, sustains, and celebrates community life.

In sum, Harlen Bigbear is far more than a comic, secondary, or ancillary character; he is the narrative heartbeat of Medicine River. Through his tireless storytelling, he ensures that Will is never isolated, weaving him into the collective memory, identity, and rhythms of Medicine River life. His narratives function on multiple levels: they construct identity, facilitate healing, resist colonial erasure, and affirm the resilience and vibrancy of Indigenous existence. Harlen exemplifies how home is not a physical space but a relational and narrative construct, a living network of stories, humor, and shared memory through which belonging is continuously enacted. In *Medicine River*, King affirms that storytelling, embodied in characters like Harlen, is both the medium and the message: a demonstration of how identity, culture, and community are maintained, celebrated, and transmitted across generations.

3.3 Memory as a Tool for Belonging and Healing

In Medicine River, memory is not a passive recollection of the past but an active force that shapes Will understands of himself, his family, and his place within the Medicine River community. King structures much of the novel around moments of remembering, suggesting that identity and belonging are created through acts of recollection. These memories become a bridge between Will's fragmented past and his potential for healing in the present, demonstrating how the reconstruction of home is inseparable from the reconstruction of memory.

Will's memories of his mother, in particular, play a central role in the novel. Through flashbacks, the reader learns about her strength, independence, and quiet dignity in raising her two sons despite the absence of their father. For example, Will recalls: "My mother never said much about my father. She just got on with things, raised us, worked hard" (King, 1989, p. 23). These memories serve as more than nostalgic reflections; they affirm the resilience of Indigenous women and provide Will with a moral and emotional anchor. In remembering his mother, Will begins to reclaim a sense of continuity and identity that colonial disruptions such as paternal abandonment and cultural alienation had fractured. Memory, in this sense, becomes an act of honoring and re-centering Indigenous familial strength.

Will's relationship with his brother James also resurfaces through memory. James often teased Will, and their sibling dynamic was not always easy, but these recollections emphasize connection and shared experience. The fragments of their childhood, told through Will's perspective, remind him that he is not entirely rootless. Even in moments of tension, the act of remembering James helps Will recognize that his identity is not isolated but intertwined with kinship bonds. In this way, King illustrates how memory functions as a thread tying Will to family, even when physical presence is absent.

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The novel also presents memory as a communal process, not just an individual act. Harlen often remembers events differently than Will, sometimes exaggerating or reshaping them, and in doing so he situates Will within the community's collective memory. These dynamic highlights an Indigenous worldview in which identity is relational: we know ourselves not only through our own recollections but also through how others remember and speak about us. As Harlen insists on retelling stories about Will's contributions such as his supposed importance to the basketball team Will is gently drawn into belonging. Even if Will resists these narratives, they nonetheless weave him into the fabric of Medicine River's social memory.

King's use of memory also has a therapeutic function. Will often recalls painful experiences, such as the absence of his father or the racism he encountered as a child, yet these memories are not presented as sources of despair. Instead, they are integrated into the larger narrative of his return home, illustrating what Gerald Vizenor terms "survivance" the active presence and endurance of Indigenous identity despite trauma. Remembering painful histories becomes a way to acknowledge loss without being defined by it, allowing Will to begin healing through connection rather than isolation.

Furthermore, memory in Medicine River is often triggered by stories. A casual conversation with Harlen, a photograph from Will's professional work, or a moment at a community event can open a door into the past. This narrative technique reflects Indigenous storytelling traditions, in which memory is not linear but layered, and the past coexists with the present. As King demonstrates, "the past is alive within us," continually shaping our understanding of who we are and where we belong. For Will, each remembered fragment whether of his mother's sacrifices, James's jokes, or Harlen's companionship contributes to the slow process of reconstructing a sense of home.

Finally, memory becomes a form of cultural survival. In colonial histories, Indigenous voices were often silenced, and their experiences erased. By placing memory at the center of the narrative, King resists this erasure and emphasizes the authority of Indigenous experience. Will's personal memories, when placed alongside Harlen's communal retellings, create a counter-archive that challenges dominant histories. This archive is not written in official documents but in lived experiences, humor, and stories passed from one person to another

In this way, King demonstrates that memory is not simply about the past it is a living force that sustains identity, nurtures healing, and anchors individuals to community. For Will, remembering is the first step toward belonging. By reclaiming his past, he begins to imagine a future in which home is not defined by absence but by connection, continuity, and shared story.

Scholarly concepts "like Vizenor's "survivance"

A stronger "connection between memory, identity, and community".

3.4 Storytelling as Resistance and Cultural Survival

In a postcolonial Indigenous context, storytelling is never neutral. It functions as a form of resistance against erasure, as a survival strategy, and as a way of affirming cultural presence

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in the face of colonial narratives. For centuries, colonial systems sought to silence Indigenous voices through policies such as residential schools, the banning of ceremonies, and the suppression of Indigenous languages. Against this backdrop, King's Medicine River can be read as a deliberate act of cultural recovery: it's very structure, grounded in oral traditions and communal memory, is a challenge to colonial definitions of literature and history.

King's choice to frame the novel around personal anecdotes, communal stories, and fragmented memories is deeply political. Instead of presenting a single, authoritative narrative, he constructs what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls a "third space," where multiple voices coexist and meaning emerges in between. By refusing the linear, "beginning-middle-end" structure of Western novels, King undermines colonial literary norms and affirms Indigenous modes of storytelling, where truth is relational and meaning is created through community.

At the same time, King uses storytelling to push back against stereotypes. Too often, Indigenous peoples in Canadian literature and media have been reduced to tropes of tragedy, stoicism, or disappearance. In contrast, Medicine River is filled with humor, irony, and ordinary life: Harlen's matchmaking schemes, the community basketball games, and Will's awkward but caring relationships. These stories resist the colonial demand for narratives of suffering by affirming Indigenous vitality. As Gerald Vizenor (1999) explains in his concept of survivance, storytelling enacts "an active presence, the renunciation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry." King's novel embodies survivance: its stories are not about vanishing but about living, laughing, and continuing.

Harlen Bigbear plays a key role in this resistance. His endless stories are not just entertaining; they reshape reality to sustain community. When he exaggerates or invents tales, he is not lying but practicing what Daniel Heath Justice (2006) calls "communal truth" a narrative strategy that ensures people feel connected, included, and accountable. For example, Harlen constantly tells stories about Will's supposed importance to the basketball team or his relationships, pulling him into the community narrative whether Will wants it or not. Through this, Harlen asserts that no one is allowed to remain isolated; storytelling becomes a way to bind people together and resist fragmentation.

Moreover, storytelling in Medicine River functions as a counter-history. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that decolonization requires "reclaiming our stories," since colonial histories often misrepresent or erase Indigenous experiences. By grounding his novel in oral storytelling, King offers a history that is not written in official archives but carried in memory, laughter, and voice. The stories about Will's mother, his absent father, and the Medicine River community create a counter-archive, one that insists on Indigenous presence in the Canadian landscape.

In this way, storytelling in Medicine River achieves three interrelated goals:

1. Resistanceit subverts colonial literary forms and stereotypes.
2. Cultural survivalit preserves memory, humor, and continuity in the face of erasure.

3. Community buildingit binds individuals like Will into a web of relationships that redefines "home" as relational rather than geographical.

Ultimately, King demonstrates that to tell a story is to survive, and to survive is to resist. Storytelling itself becomes home: a dynamic, communal space where identity is remembered, shared, and continually renewed.

3.5 Conclusion

In Medicine River, storytelling is more than a literary technique it is the very foundation upon which identity, community, and belonging are built. By structuring the novel in a non-linear, conversational form, King mirrors Indigenous oral traditions and resists colonial expectations of narrative order and closure. The fragmented yet interconnected stories remind us that meaning emerges not from chronology but from relationships, repetitions, and shared voices. As Fee (1999) notes, King's novel "reads more like a conversation than a conventional plot," inviting the reader into a communal space rather than positioning them as distant observers.

Harlen Bigbear embodies this communal storytelling. His exaggerations, inventions, and persistent narratives may not always be factual, but they function as what King calls "relational truths" stories told not for accuracy but for connection. By placing Will at the center of these stories, Harlen gently insists that Will belongs in the community, even when he resists. In this sense, Harlen becomes a cultural anchor, demonstrating how storytelling weaves individuals into the larger fabric of Indigenous life.

Memory, too, plays a crucial role in this narrative process. For Will, remembering his mother, his brother, or moments from childhood is not simply private reflection but a pathway toward healing. Memories are shared, interpreted, and retold by others, reinforcing that identity is not an isolated possession but something constructed through community. As Will reflects on fragments of his past, these memories are reclaimed and reframed within Medicine River's collective narrative, turning absence and loss into continuity and belonging.

Finally, King's novel demonstrates that storytelling is a form of resistance as well as survival. By privileging oral traditions, humor, and everyday life, King challenges colonial stereotypes that reduce Indigenous experience to tragedy or disappearance. Instead, he affirms what Vizenor (1999) calls survivance the active presence and resilience of Indigenous peoples. Through stories of basketball games, friendships, and laughter, Medicine River insists that Indigenous life is ongoing, dynamic, and rooted in community.

In sum, Chapter Three shows that storytelling in Medicine River is both method and message: it heals, it connects, and it resists. Home is not found in a single place or event but in the act of remembering, retelling, and listening. By reclaiming storytelling as an Indigenous literary practice, King demonstrates that narrative itself is a home a space where community, memory, and identity converge, ensuring that belonging is always possible.

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Chapter Four:
Resistance, Belonging, and Redefining Home.

General Conclusion

While Medicine River is gentle in tone, its message is quietly radical. Through humor, everyday life, and an insistence on community, Thomas King challenges dominant colonial narratives that have historically distorted or erased Native identities. The novel refuses to present Indigenous life as tragic, vanishing, or mystical. Instead, it portrays Indigenous existence as complex, ordinary, and resilient. In this chapter, I explore how Medicine River redefines home as a space of resistance, relationality, and cultural specificity. King subverts colonial constructs of space, identity, and representation, offering instead a vision of home grounded in shared responsibility, lived experience, and the power of storytelling.

4.1 Challenging Colonial Notions of Space and Belonging

In colonial societies such as Canada, the idea of "home" has often been defined by ownership, borders, and legal recognition. This way of thinking comes from European traditions that value possession and control more than relationship and belonging. The Indian Act in Canada is one example of this system: it classifies who is legally considered "Indian" and who is not, reducing identity to a bureaucratic category. As Edward Said explains, colonialism constructs "geographies of power" Culture and Imperialism, 1993), where space is drawn on maps, divided into borders, and controlled by laws. Within this framework, home is treated as property to be claimed, not as community to be lived.

Thomas King directly resists this colonial model in Medicine River. Instead of showing home as a fixed place tied to ownership, he presents it. While Medicine River is gentle in tone, its message is quietly radical. Through humor, everyday life, and an insistence on community, Thomas King challenges dominant colonial narratives that have historically distorted or erased Native identities. The novel refuses to present Indigenous life as tragic, vanishing, or mystical. Instead, it portrays Indigenous existence as complex, ordinary, and resilient. In this chapter, I explore how Medicine River redefines home as a space of resistance, relationality, and cultural specificity. King subverts colonial constructs of space, identity, and representation, offering instead a vision of home grounded in shared responsibility, lived experience, and the power of storytelling.

as something fluid, relational, and built through care. Medicine River, the town itself, is neither a reservation nor a purely settler space. It is a hybrid place, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous lives cross, where contradictions and change are part of daily life. Will observes that the town is "just there, not famous, not important, but full of people who got on with things" (King, Medicine River p. 7). This simple but powerful line challenges the expectation that Indigenous spaces should be either sacred and untouched or damaged and tragic. King insists on ordinary, living communities that are full of humor, relationships, and resilience.

This view also disrupts colonial binaries that divide space into "civilized" versus "savage," urban versus rural, or center versus margin. In Medicine River, those opposites collapse. The basketball court, the local diner, or Harlen's many phone calls carry as much meaning as sacred lands or official institutions. These everyday spaces are important because they are where belonging is created. They are the locations where people come together, support one another, and form identity. By centering ordinary community life, King shows that Indigenous cultures and belonging are not frozen in the past or tied to rigid ideas of authenticity. They survive and adapt in changing, hybrid contexts.

Belonging in the novel is therefore not based on blood quantum, government recognition, or ownership of land. Instead, it is grounded in participation, responsibility, and relationship. Harlen embodies this vision more than any other character. For him, the community is not about who is "pure" or legally recognized, but about who contributes and who cares. He sees Will as part of Medicine River not because of ancestry but because of involvement. Leanne Simpson (2017) calls this "relational accountability" the idea that belonging comes from responsibility to others through care and reciprocity. Will's slow acceptance into the town shows this clearly. Though he begins as an outsider, disconnected from his roots, his decision to coach basketball and take part in community life gradually makes him part of the place.

By presenting home in this way, King makes a subtle but radical argument. He rejects colonial definitions of home that rely on ownership, borders, and exclusion. Instead, he shows that home is not a possession but a process something created through shared memory, storytelling, and everyday acts of care. In Medicine River, to belong is not to own, but to participate and to connect. This challenges colonial ways of imagining geography and opens the door for a different vision of belonging: one rooted in relationships rather than control.

4.2 Humor and Voice as Resistance

One of the most striking features of Thomas King's Medicine River is its use of humor and everyday voice to resist colonial stereotypes. On the surface, the novel seems quiet and anecdotal, but beneath its gentle tone lays a radical political strategy. By filling the story with irony, wit, and ordinary characters, King undermines the colonial images of Indigenous peoples as tragic, silent, or vanishing. Humor, for King, is not just entertainment it is a way of resisting erasure, reclaiming voice, and redefining home.

For centuries, colonial discourse has reduced Indigenous peoples to rigid roles: the noble savage, the tragic victim, or the mystical guide. These stereotypes erase Indigenous complexity and deny their everyday humanity. Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance directly challenges this, emphasizing presence and resilience over victimhood. King's novel embodies survivance by making laughter central to his characters' lives.

Humor often comes through Harlen Bigbear, whose exaggerations and meddling continually disrupt Will's quiet detachment. When Harlen insists that "everyone in town" wanted Will to coach the basketball team, the claim is clearly inflated, but it works to pull Will into the community. These humorous manipulations are less about deception than about building ties. In this way, laughter becomes a relational act, knitting together people and stories.

King's choice to emphasize humor also challenges the assumption that Indigenous narratives must dwell only in trauma. Pain and loss are present in Will's memories, yet they are balanced by irony and laughter. This balance demonstrates survivance: Indigenous life defined not solely by colonial damage but by continuity, resilience, and joy.

King further subverts stereotypes by creating characters that are ordinary rather than symbolic. Will, the narrator, is not a warrior or victim but a quiet photographer with personal

insecurities. Harlen is not a mystical elder but a cheerful meddler whose wisdom lies in his ability to connect people. By refusing colonial roles, King shows that Indigenous identity cannot be flattened into clichés.

This ordinariness is itself a form of resistance. As Daniel Heath Justice argues, insisting on Indigenous humanity is a powerful political act. By showing Native people cooking meals, coaching basketball, and sharing gossip, King challenges portrayals that freeze them in the past or render them invisible in the present. Home, in this sense, is not a symbolic site of tragedy but the everyday place where relationships are lived out.

Will's narrative voice, understated and ironic, reinforces this sense of everydayness. His dry humor reflects both distance and tentative belonging. For example, when describing Harlen's endless plans for him, Will jokes that Harlen probably expected him to be "mayor of Medicine River" by now. Such moments prevent the story from being consumed by loss and instead highlight the messy, humorous process of reconnecting with community.

Colonialism often silenced Indigenous voices, replacing them with stereotypes or anthropological accounts. King resists this by centering Indigenous voices filled with wit and warmth. Harlen's exaggerations and Will's irony are not distractions; they are cultural practices that create connection. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, storytelling in Indigenous traditions is not only about information but about strengthening relationships. Humor in Medicine River embodies this, keeping community ties alive.

Laughter also helps Will rebuild a sense of home. His past is marked by absence his father's abandonment, his mother's struggles, and his brother's distance. Yet through Harlen's stories and the community's humor, these absences are placed within a larger web of belonging. Healing comes not through solemn reflection but through shared laughter, which makes inclusion possible.

Finally, humor in Medicine River is deeply political. By refusing tragic or stereotypical portrayals, King undermines colonial authority and asserts Indigenous self-definition. Homi Bhabha's idea of the "third space" is useful here: humor creates a hybrid cultural space where dominant narratives are subverted and new identities can emerge. King's Indigenous characters do not conform to colonial categories; they define themselves through laughter, storytelling, and ordinary acts of care.

At the same time, humor destabilizes colonial seriousness. By making Indigenous life funny, vibrant, and ordinary, King refuses the solemn, tragic scripts often imposed on Native peoples. Humor here is a form of survival and resistance, showing that Indigenous presence endures not despite colonial history but in creative defiance of it.

In Medicine River, humor and everyday voice are not secondary elements but central strategies for resisting colonial stereotypes. Through characters like Harlen and Will, King reclaims Indigenous voice, emphasizes ordinary humanity, and shows how laughter fosters community. Humor creates space for healing, challenges oppressive narratives, and redefines home as a process of relational belonging rather than a fixed or tragic origin.

Ultimately, King's humor affirms survivance: a way of living, telling, and laughing that refuses erasure. In this light, Medicine River demonstrates that the path home is not only through memory or land, but through the simple, powerful act of laughing together.

4.3 Community as Everyday Resistance

In Medicine River, Thomas King shows that resistance does not always take the form of protests, uprisings, or grand political gestures. Instead, it is often woven into the quiet, ordinary practices of community life. Acts of care, storytelling, and everyday participation become powerful strategies of survival against erasure. By focusing on these subtle forms of resistance, King challenges colonial assumptions that Indigenous resilience must be loud, visible, or militant. In his world, simply living, laughing, and building relationships is an act of defiance.

One of the most consistent motifs in the novel is Harlen Bigbear's role as a community builder. Harlen is constantly drawing people into each other's lives, whether by pushing Will to coach the basketball team, finding players jobs, or simply keeping everyone updated on local events. At first, Harlen's meddling seems intrusive, but it gradually becomes clear that his actions hold the community together.

For example, when Harlen insists that Will take up coaching, he does more than give Will a role; he gives the community a reason to gather, to cheer, and to celebrate themselves. Will recalls that Harlen "never told the truth when a good story would do," but Harlen's exaggerations are less about facts than about fostering bonds. His care is political in its quiet insistence that Native people belong together in the present, not just in the past. By making people visible to one another, Harlen resists the colonial erasure that often casts Indigenous communities as broken or disappearing.

Storytelling in Medicine River is never individual; it is always social. Harlen's stories, though embellished, connect people to each other and to a larger sense of belonging. When Harlen retells events, he places individuals within a shared narrative, ensuring no one is forgotten. In this sense, storytelling functions as what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls a "decolonizing methodology": it affirms presence and identity in a world that sought to erase them.

Will himself becomes part of this process. Though he begins as an outsider, reluctant to engage, he is slowly drawn into Harlen's storytelling circle. By listening, remembering, and eventually contributing, Will resists the isolation of his past and steps into the continuity of community life. Memory here is not about nostalgia but about connection. Each story becomes a thread of resistance, tying individuals into a collective that cannot be erased.

What is most striking about King's vision of resistance is its ordinariness. Unlike narratives that portray Indigenous resistance through battles or legal struggles, Medicine River locates it in basketball games, shared meals, and gossip. These daily practices are political because they affirm continuity. They insist that Indigenous life is not confined to the past or to cultural stereotypes, but is ongoing, dynamic, and communal.

Take, for example, the basketball team. On the surface, it seems like a recreational activity, but for the Medicine River community, it becomes a symbol of cohesion. The team is not about winning championships; it is about gathering, supporting each other, and asserting presence in a society that often marginalizes them. Even Will, who is ambivalent about his role, realizes that the team connects him to people in ways he had not experienced before. The simple act of showing up becomes a form of resistance to disconnection.

Similarly, the community's informal networks finding jobs, supporting single mothers, helping neighbors may appear ordinary, but they counter the structural fragmentation caused by colonialism. By making sure everyone has a place, however small, the community resists the narrative of vanishing.

Resistance in Medicine River is also embodied in laughter. As critics like Vizenor remind us, humor is a tool of survivance: it refuses victimhood by affirming life. When Harlen spins exaggerated stories or when characters tease one another, they are not just entertaining themselves; they are reaffirming their ability to define themselves outside colonial scripts. Laughter in the community functions as a shield, a reminder that joy can persist even under conditions of marginalization.

Will experiences this when he gradually becomes included in the community's humor. Initially, he is the target of Harlen's schemes, but over time, he learns to laugh with others. That laughter signals his belonging. In this sense, humor is not only a coping mechanism but a cultural practice of resistance, asserting that Indigenous communities will not be defined by colonial tragedy but by their own vitality.

4.4 Home as a Collective and Relational Process

Through these everyday practices, King redefines home. Home is not private property or an individual possession but a collective process of being present for one another. Will comes to understand that belonging does not depend on ancestry or land titles but on shared acts of care, storytelling, and humor. This redefinition directly challenges colonial models that tie home to ownership and exclusion.

By the end of the novel, Will is no longer a detached observer but an active participant in community life. His transformation demonstrates King's central message: to resist erasure, one must belong to something larger than oneself. In Medicine River, that "something larger" is the living fabric of community, sustained not by laws or borders but by relationships.

King's portrayal of everyday resistance is both quiet and radical. By centering small acts of care, storytelling, and humor, he reveals that resistance is not always about confrontation but about survival, continuity, and relational belonging. Community itself becomes the strongest form of resistance against colonial fragmentation, ensuring that Indigenous presence endures.

In this vision, home is not an inheritance or a territory but a collective achievement. It is built in the ordinary rhythms of life on basketball courts, around dinner tables, and in the laughter shared between friends. Through this, King reimagines resistance not as anger or violence but as the quiet, powerful act of living together.

General Conclusion

Thomas King presents home not as a fixed location or inherited possession but as a dynamic, evolving process shaped by relationships, memory, and participation in community life. Unlike colonial or Western notions of home, which often emphasize ownership, property, or lineage, King frames home as relational something one enacts through care, connection, and ongoing engagement with others. This vision is deeply tied to Indigenous epistemologies, which understand belonging as inseparable from kinship, land, and storytelling.

By the end of the novel, Will's presence in Medicine River demonstrates that home is made through engagement rather than birthright. While he physically inhabits the town, it is his actions coaching basketball, listening to others, participating in storytelling, and caring for community membersthat transform his presence into belonging. As King said, "Home isn't something you find; it's something you are part of" (King, Medicine River, 1989, p. 112). This notion emphasizes that home is not a static destination but an active, participatory process.

King's focus on ordinary acts laughing with friends, attending community events, helping others reveals that home is constructed in the rhythms of daily life. Will's interactions with Harlen Bigbear, Louise Heavyman, and the broader Medicine River community exemplify relational belonging: each relationship contributes to the collective sense of home. By participating in these small but meaningful acts, Will moves from being an outsider to someone whose identity is intertwined with the social and cultural life of the town.

King also emphasizes that home is culturally specific. The Medicine River community is not a romanticized or stereotypical depiction of Indigenous life; rather, it reflects contemporary realities, blending tradition, humor, and adaptation. Practices such as storytelling, communal meals, basketball games, and neighborhood gatherings are culturally embedded ways of asserting identity and continuity. These practices reinforce that home is inseparable from the cultural norms, values, and histories of the community that creates it.

Indigenous scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) stresses that relationality and care is central to Indigenous life. In King's narrative, these principles are embodied in everyday activities: Harlen's persistent efforts to involve Will in community life, the way neighbors support one another, and the humor that circulates among townspeople all contribute to a living, breathing sense of home. By presenting these ordinary, culturally grounded practices, King offers a model of belonging that is resilient, adaptive, and meaningful.

A central aspect of King's conceptualization of home is that belonging is relational rather than purely hereditary. Will's hybrid heritage and fragmented upbringing might initially mark him as an outsider, yet his eventual integration into the Medicine River community demonstrates that home is not determined by ancestry alone. Indigenous belonging, as King presents it, is enacted through relational accountability: one becomes part of home by contributing, participating, and sustaining connections.

This approach challenges colonial narratives that tie home and identity to rigid notions of bloodlines, property, or legal status. Instead, King reaffirms that home is flexible, inclusive,

and shaped by mutual care. Will's acceptance into the community illustrates that home can be rebuilt even after displacement, erasure, or fragmentation a critical theme for Indigenous experiences affected by historical and ongoing colonialism.

While King avoids overly romanticizing the landscape, the physical setting of Medicine River remains integral to the sense of home. Land, in Indigenous thought, is relational: it sustains, witnesses, and shapes the lives of people who inhabit it. Scenes of community gatherings, basketball games, and storytelling are inseparable from the town's geography, reinforcing that home is simultaneously social, cultural, and spatial. King's narrative demonstrates that relational engagement with land contributes to identity and belonging: being part of home requires presence not only among people but also within place.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes, colonial frameworks sought to sever Indigenous peoples from their lands, portraying territory as empty and erasing relational ties. In contrast, King situates home within this very land, suggesting that reclaiming space through lived experience, memory, and connection is itself an act of resistance. Will's daily interactions with the landscape, though subtle, affirm continuity with culture and community, reinforcing the dynamic and relational nature of home.

King's portrayal of home is also inclusive. The community accommodates difference, hybridity, and personal history. Will, Louise, her daughter, and other town members all occupy spaces of belonging without conforming to rigid roles. By highlighting the fluidity of identity and the adaptability of relationships, King challenges both colonial and Western assumptions about who qualifies as "home" and what constitutes belonging.

Moreover, home is not static; it evolves alongside individuals and communities. Will's journey demonstrates that home is an ongoing process of negotiation, care, and engagement. Belonging is maintained through repeated acts of participationlistening, telling stories, laughing together, and supporting one another. In this way, King presents home as a living concept, one that grows, adapts, and strengthens with each interaction.

4.5 Conclusion

In Medicine River, Thomas King reconceptualizes home as dynamic, relational, and culturally specific. Belonging is not inherited, bought, or imposed; it is enacted through care, participation, and connection. Through Will's reintegration, the novel shows that home is created in the ordinary, everyday practices of community lifethrough storytelling, shared laughter, care for others, and engagement with place.

King's vision directly challenges colonial constructs that define home as property, ancestry, or legal recognition. Instead, home is a process, a network of relationships, and a cultural practice embedded in both community and land. By presenting home as inclusive, flexible, and evolving, King affirms that Indigenous peoples can reclaim and rebuild belonging even in the face of displacement, erasure, and historical trauma. In doing so, he offers readers a transformative understanding of home: not as something one inherits or finds, but as something one actively creates together.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

Thomas King's Medicine River is far more than a narrative about a man returning to his hometown; it is a profound exploration of what it means to seek, reconstruct, and inhabit a sense of home in the context of Indigenous identity, cultural disruption, and colonial history. Throughout this thesis, we have examined how King redefines home as a dynamic, relational, and culturally embedded concept, moving beyond Western or colonial notions of fixed geography, property, and lineage. By tracing the journey of Will, the novel's protagonist, and analyzing the broader social and cultural frameworks in which his story unfolds, this study demonstrates that home is neither a simple destination nor a static state, but a process of engagement, memory, and community participation.

From the outset, Will's return to Medicine River signals more than a physical relocation; it represents a complex negotiation of personal and cultural identity. His orphanhood, hybrid heritage, and fragmented familial connections situate him in a liminal space, reflecting Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" in which identity is negotiated between multiple cultural influences. Will's initial ambivalence and emotional detachment illustrated through his professional role as a photographer, his cautious reintegration, and his reflective interiority highlight the challenges faced by individuals whose sense of belonging has been disrupted by colonial histories and social marginalization. Yet, as the novel progresses, King demonstrates that the act of returning is not only a confrontation with absence and loss but also a proactive engagement with possibilities for connection, healing, and relational belonging.

The thematic centrality of storytelling in Medicine River further underscores the novel's innovative approach to the reconstruction of home. King employs a non-linear, episodic narrative structure, echoing Indigenous oral traditions, to reflect the cyclical and layered nature of memory. The vignettes, conversations, and anecdotes that populate the text do not merely recount events; they function as mechanisms of cultural continuity and relational accountability. Characters such as Harlen Bigbear serve as cultural anchors, mediating the transmission of communal knowledge and weaving Will's personal story into the larger social tapestry of Medicine River. Through humor, exaggeration, and shared narratives, Harlen illustrates how storytelling operates as a tool for inclusion, connection, and emotional sustenance. In this context, home is constituted as a narrative space, built through words, memories, and relationships rather than bricks or territorial markers.

Memory itself plays a critical role in Will's journey and in King's conceptualization of home. Memories of family, childhood, and community are not mere recollections of lost past but active sites of survivance a term used by Gerald Vizenor to capture the resilience and agency of Indigenous peoples in the face of historical erasure. By engaging with personal and collective memory, Will is able to reconstruct his fragmented identity and participate in a communal understanding of belonging. This act of remembering, particularly when shared with others, demonstrates that Indigenous identity and home are relationally produced: identity emerges in interaction, negotiation, and the continual reinterpretation of lived experience. King's treatment of memory as both personal and collective affirms that home is a space of cultural persistence, where continuity and adaptation coexist.

The novel also highlights the centrality of community in establishing and sustaining a sense of home. Will's integration into Medicine River is mediated through relationships with figures such as Harlen, Louise Heavyman, and other townspeople. These interactions exemplify Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's concept of relational accountability, in which identity and belonging are maintained through acts of care, reciprocity, and mutual engagement. The community functions as a surrogate family for Will, compensating for the absence of biological connections and supporting the reconstruction of cultural identity. By situating home within the relational and social sphere, King challenges Western individualist paradigms and emphasizes that belonging is enacted rather than inherited.

Humor emerges as another defining characteristic of King's vision of home. Far from being a mere stylistic flourish, humor operates as a social and political strategy: it fosters inclusion, resists colonial stereotypes, and sustains communal resilience. Through Harlen's playful exaggerations, jokes, and interventions, King shows that laughter is a form of relational labor, an expression of survivance, and a tool for bridging personal and collective histories. Humor becomes a language of belonging, transforming ordinary interactions into sites of cultural affirmation and everyday resistance.

King's work further challenges colonial constructs of space, identity, and belonging. The Medicine River community itself subverts stereotypical and romanticized images of Indigenous life, presenting a hybrid, contemporary, and vibrant social environment. The novel rejects the colonial binary of civilized versus savage, center versus margin, or tradition versus modernity, offering instead a nuanced portrayal of Indigenous life as adaptive, relational, and enduring. Home, in King's narrative, is not restricted by legal status, ancestry, or property rights; it is produced through shared experience, care, and ongoing participation in the life of the community. This redefinition situates home as both a political and cultural act: everyday practices such as coaching, storytelling, communal gathering, and even casual conversation function as subtle but potent forms of resistance to historical and ongoing marginalization.

The relational and culturally specific nature of home is reinforced through the novel's treatment of land. While King avoids overt romanticization, the landscape of Medicine River remains a critical component of belonging. Land is not merely a backdrop; it is relational, imbued with memory, history, and cultural significance. Will's interactions with the town's geography, however understated, reinforce the idea that home is inseparable from place. By engaging with land, individuals participate in the cultural and spiritual frameworks of the community, maintaining continuity and asserting Indigenous presence against colonial erasure.

Comparative perspectives further illuminate King's contributions to Indigenous literature. Works such as Richard Wagamese's Indian Horse and Eden Robinson's Monkey Beach also depict the reclamation of home through reconnection with land, family, and culture, often framed around trauma and displacement. What distinguishes Medicine River is King's emphasis on the ordinary the quotidian rhythms of life, humor, and relational engagement as sites of healing and resistance. This approach affirms that Indigenous survivance is not

limited to dramatic acts of rebellion or confrontation but is enacted through the persistent, everyday cultivation of community, memory, and identity.

Through these thematic explorations, the thesis addresses the research questions posed at the outset. King redefines home beyond physical space, framing it as relational, narrative, and culturally embedded. Will's search for home reflects the broader Indigenous experience of displacement and identity fragmentation, demonstrating that belonging must often be actively reconstructed. Storytelling functions as both a method of cultural transmission and a means of creating communal belonging. Memory, family, and community emerge as central to identity reclamation, while King's subversion of colonial narratives challenges dominant assumptions about Indigenous life, emphasizing resilience, humor, and continuity.

Ultimately, Medicine River presents a vision of home that is at once personal, communal, and political. King affirms that home is not inherited, bought, or legally defined; it is actively created and maintained through participation, care, and engagement with both people and place. In doing so, the novel offers a model of Indigenous identity and belonging that resists erasure, asserts cultural continuity, and celebrates relationality, humor, and everyday resilience. King's narrative demonstrates that home is a living, evolving construct, sustained through stories, relationships, and acts of care, offering a subtle but powerful blueprint for understanding the ongoing search for selfhood and belonging in Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, Thomas King's Medicine River is a masterful examination of home as a process rather than a static condition. Through Will's journey, storytelling, memory, humor, community, and land, the novel demonstrates how Indigenous peoples reclaim and reconstruct belonging in the aftermath of colonial disruption. King's work challenges readers to reconsider conventional definitions of home and identity, emphasizing that true belonging is enacted, relational, and culturally grounded. The novel affirms the resilience and agency of Indigenous communities, presenting a vision of home as a space where identity is continually negotiated, stories are shared, and cultural continuity is maintained. In doing so, King not only enriches Indigenous literature but also provides a framework for understanding the broader dynamics of home, community, and selfhood in postcolonial contexts.

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Summary

Summary

This thesis explores the theme of home in Thomas King's Medicine River, emphasizing how the novel redefines home, belonging, and identity within an Indigenous and postcolonial context. Unlike conventional Western narratives, Medicine River employs a non-linear, oral storytelling style that mirrors Indigenous traditions. Through memories, anecdotes, and community interactions, King constructs a narrative space where identity and belonging are relational, dynamic, and culturally grounded.

The study begins by situating the novel within Indigenous and postcolonial literary theory, highlighting how King challenges colonial assumptions about space, identity, and representation. Home is not presented as a static physical location but as a social, cultural, and narrative construct shaped by relationships, memory, and communal participation.

Harlen Bigbear emerges as a central figure in this context, acting as a cultural anchor and storyteller who draws Will, the protagonist, into the communal fabric of Medicine River. Through Harlen's humor, storytelling, and interventions, the novel illustrates how Indigenous communities enact belonging and continuity. Similarly, Will's gradual reintegration into the community demonstrates that identity is co-constructed through relational accountability and participation rather than inherited lineage or blood ties.

The thesis also emphasizes the role of humor and everyday life as forms of resistance. King uses wit and irony to subvert colonial stereotypes, portraying Indigenous people as resilient, joyful, and capable of agency rather than as tragic victims. Everyday acts such as coaching basketball, sharing stories, and caring for others are framed as quiet but powerful forms of cultural survival, or "survivance," which affirm Indigenous presence and vitality in the face of historical and ongoing colonization.

Memory plays a critical role in the reconstruction of home. Through non-linear storytelling, Will reconnects with his past, integrates fragmented experiences, and finds belonging within the community. Memory is not nostalgic longing but a practice of survivance, preserving communal knowledge and sustaining relationships.

Ultimately, Medicine River challenges conventional notions of home, belonging, and identity by presenting them as fluid, relational, and culturally specific. The novel demonstrates that home is created through participation, care, and shared narrative rather than through property, ancestry, or legal status. Thomas King's work offers a quietly radical vision: home is a living, evolving process, enacted through stories, humor, and the everyday practices that sustain community and cultural memory.

Keywords: Thomas King, Medicine River, Indigenous literature, home, postcolonialism.